

RAVISHING THE MUSE
A Considerable Farce

by

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Ravishing the Muse -- McCormack

THE TIME OF THE PLAY

The play, in two acts, takes place in one evening in the fall of this year.

SETTING AND SET

The setting is the home of Colly, a prosperous literary agent in New York City.

The principal set is her living room/library. The books are all new, with dust-jackets, mint condition. One of the shelves right has a tilted scrivener's board. The motif of the several framed pictures and the small statuary is: birds.

There are four entrances: a hallway right, leading to the front door, off; an opening up center, leading to Colly's bedroom and bathroom; a hallway in the corner up left, leading to the aviary; a doorway left leading to the dining room and kitchen. Furnishings include all the normal trappings of a non-deprived household -- sofas, chairs, end-tables, etc.

The second set in the play is Colly's ludicrous bathroom (described in detail in Act Two). It is self-indulgently ornate, but small enough to fit within the principal set, allowing the principal set to be fixed and permanent.

CAST

BURN FARGO	Male, late 30's, a novelist.
TALLY	Female, 20 to 40, maid/muse.
COLLY	Female, 40's, Burn's literary agent.
DAN CORBETT	Male, 62, unemployed book editor.
EVERETT	Female, 20's, admirer/lover of Fargo.
AUGUST LOEWY (GUS)	Male, 35 to 53, book publisher (by inheritance).
SHELLEY	Male, 40 to 55, Colly's lawyer.
LUDWIG ZEUGMA	Female, 30's, Assistant Professor of Semiotics.
PRIS PEEL	Female, 30's, Dan's successor as Editor-in-Chief at Loewy.

CHARACTER PROFILES

- BURN A controlling presence -- powerful, intelligent, daring, "rational" but creative, theatrical, fiercely articulate.
- TALLY Animated, boundlessly energetic, petite, outrageously fanciful.
- COLLY Urbane, successful, tough, by turns school-marmishly 'civilized', and zany playful/sexy. Her bizarre hobby is raising hybrid birds.
- DAN Literate, articulate, depressed, a drinker. A supreme editor, he is roiled by not being able to practice his craft.
- EV Old-line, moneyed New England family (Everett, Massachusetts, was named after an ancestor) but unassuming, extremely well-read, acute, and quietly attractive.
- GUS Rich, preposterous, shallow, ducal, with a speech problem.
- SHELLEY Nervous, awkward, feckless; his literal-mindedness often leads him into bewilderment.
- LUDWIG Enthusiastic, hilariously bosomy PhD, given to parsing the goings-on in absurd academic terms of current semiotics, poststructuralism and speech-act theory.
- PRIS Ambitious, egocentric, by turns sharp and obtuse, sees the fruitful use of sex as part of her job description.

A NOTE ON PLAYING THE PLAY

The pacing presents a challenge to the director and actors. The style is at times purposely exuberant, dense with Tally's self-indulgence; too rapid a pace could occasionally outrun the audience. Still, it's a comedy, requiring quickness to the extent that's feasible.

SCRIPT NOTE

Deciding script-style for silent readers and the company simultaneously can sometimes be problematic. Many of the directions and word-stresses in the script are primarily for readers, to convey potential pacing, emphases, attitudinal postures and expressions, and other clues their inner eye and ear may not easily contribute. They are not an attempt to micro-manage the director or the actors, though perhaps they help in discerning authorial intent. I write this preemptive note for those hands-on theater-professionals who much prefer not to be treated as other than exactly that – professionals who know their art.

A NOTE ON THE MUSIC IN THE PLAY

(i.e. An Apologia for Ravishing Treemonisha)

The music in the play is "A Real Slow Drag", the finale number to *Treemonisha*, Scott Joplin's only produced-opera.

"A Real Slow Drag" is, for me, one of the ten most rousing show-stopper pieces in American musical theater. Any writer of sense should be slow to juxtapose his work with a great composer's most victorious turn, but if I am lucky Joplin's effect on the play will be to lift it up, not show it up. The performance you hear is by the Houston Grand Opera; Carmen Balthrop is the soloist.

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RAVISHING THE MUSE

PROLOGUE

[BURN and COLLY in a spot on a dark stage.]

COLLY

Burn, precious, I've invited your bizarre list of guests, Cook has killed the fatted yak, and I've hired your unearthly Hobbs to serve. But why?! I've been a brick, and I deserve to be told our agenda for tonight.

BURN

Three things, Coll. One: Stop Dan from going back to work at Loewy [LOW-ee]. It's toxic there. It was a bad house when he left; it's worse now.

COLLY

May be -- but he thinks Loewy is his only hope. Poor Dan is desperate.

BURN

Two: find Dan a job. With a different publisher. It's killing him not to be working, and I'm partly to blame --

COLLY

-- No-no-no! Not even partly!

BURN

I am, Colly. Dan is a decent man, and there's no better fiction editor anywhere. I have a rescue plan. To make it work, tonight you need to sell my next novel.

COLLY

Burn! You have a new novel at last?! That's marvelous! I've been so worried I haven't eaten a thing for a year and a half. I gained eight pounds.

BURN

When you sell it, you need to make clear it comes with Dan attached as the editor.

COLLY

Burn, my jewel, if I'm to do my job I should be informed when you have a new novel!

BURN

That's the third item: I don't have a new novel.

COLLY

There's no novel?! I am shocked! I'll have it understood that no self-respecting agent would ever sell a book that doesn't exist! What's it about so I can pitch it?

BURN

Don't ask yet. I have a heroine, and a story -- one the old folks in Louisiana used to talk about. Tonight I need Tally's reaction.

COLLY

You mean Hobbs. Darling, I do think your save-the-waif impulse *is* sweet, but how can you possibly think Hobbs knows anything? Hobbs is batty!

BURN

Tally's not batty. It's that her mind is unencumbered by judgment.

COLLY

Or her mouth. Why is it she has to air everything that enters her dizzy head?

BURN

To air is human. Tal and I are a team. If she likes the story, she's a comet-shower of untamed ideas. But I always have the final word.

COLLY

All right, you're in charge, but I'll tell her she must behave tonight. The girl can create havoc. Last time she was here the little cuckoo served half the evening in a tutu, and the second half from a wheelchair.

BURN

I wasn't around last time. But I'm back -- I hope. I'll control Tally, so don't fret. She'll just add a touch of fun, can't do any harm.

COLLY

Well, she does adore you, Burn. You're right -- with you here to control her, what harm can she do?

[Spot out. New spot, on BURN and TALLY. TALLY wears an all-white flowing robe suggestive of the dress of ancient Greece.]

BURN

Tally, now you spring this? You want to create "something of your own" tonight?

TALLY

That's right. You kept me waiting and waiting. You shouldn't do that, Fargo. I need you to write down my thoughts --

BURN

-- I'm sorry --

TALLY

-- So you owe me! When we write a book, I serve up buckets of great stuff and you throw most of it out. Tonight the whole work will be mine!

BURN

The "whole work". You'll write a whole novel. Tonight.

TALLY

I didn't say "novel". It's this dinner-party.

BURN

...? Colly's dinner-party is a real event, Tal, not a novel. Real events don't get written -- they get lived!

TALLY

Fun, huh? I want to fly!

BURN

Tally, I admit I was gone too long, and I was wrong to do it. But there's an agenda for tonight --

TALLY

-- I know your agenda: You want to help Dan Corbett -- the guy who made you be gone.

BURN

Yes, but tonight isn't just for Dan -- it's for us, too. What happens if you and I can't do this anymore?! Besides, I'm in this event tonight. You'll be telling me what to say and do?

TALLY

Why not? I tell the people in your novels what to say and do.

BURN

No, Tal. You make suggestions. In the end I decide what they say and do.

TALLY

Well tonight I decide. You hurt my feelings. I was in a lonely railway station for eighteen months, waiting for a train that doesn't come. Or maybe waiting in the wings to go on stage but I never get my cue. Or maybe in one of those comas where you hear everything but can't talk?

BURN

A "whole work" can't be just a dessert-trolley of ad-libs and settings. It needs structure, destination.

TALLY

Agh -- structure! The leash on the skylark! You're very controlling, you know that, Fargo? Judgmental.

BURN

Tally --

TALLY

-- Okay! You want a structure I'll use your "save Dan Corbett" agenda -- despite he can be an even bigger stiff than you.

BURN

Also: an artist puts in only what's relevant. You're not strong on relevance, Tal -- anything for a giggle. I asked Colly to invite each of these people for a reason. If you decide everything they say and do, there'll be no sense of restraint, no --

(pauses; sees something)

...Maybe we should try it.

TALLY

You'll let me? And you won't butt in?

BURN

Of course I'll butt in. I'll want to add things.

TALLY

You can add -- but no subtracting. No yanking my best stuff. Especially my funny. Sometimes you get too serious. Humorless. People use that second book of yours to record family births and deaths.

BURN

Me humorless!? Don't make me laugh.

TALLY

Awright, now and then you get "jocular". But it always has a point to it. Every joke a vitamin. Yug! You don't understand funny. Also: no making me come out with smart-ass quotes from people I never heard of. I've known plenty writers of my own. I ever tell you how Will and I wrote "Twelfth Night"?

BURN

Many times.

TALLY

That man was flexible. I wasn't like this with him. Different sound.

BURN

Then why are you like this with me?

TALLY

I dunno. I guess headquarters thought you needed thawing out, someone to mess your hair up. Most of all, don't try to make me explain tonight. I never explain. It's beneath my dignity.

BURN

How do you like our new book idea?

TALLY

What new book idea?

BURN

Oh, that's not good news. It's supposed to be one gets an idea, the other gets it within seconds.

TALLY

So what is it? Pitch me.

BURN

Not how it works. If you can't pick it out of here --
(taps his head)
on your own, that means it's not right for us.

TALLY

You can't even gimme a clue?

BURN

"A clue"... Okay, a clue. Think Louisiana bayou country in 1899. And a black woman so special, Teddy Roosevelt invites her to the White House.

TALLY

And?

BURN

No "and". That's it. Tal, you have to get my story idea tonight. Then we have to stress-test it, to see if it has legs and heart. All tonight.

TALLY

...? Can we first please talk about my dinner-party? You're the main guest and the main course. Everyone wants a piece of you --

BURN

-- Don't talk about it. Do it, make your party. But we have to save Dan, and that way save ourselves.

TALLY

I'll bring attitude and altitude!

BURN

If you're amusing in the right ways, Tally, it just may serve our purposes. Let your flights begin!

BLACKOUT

ACT ONE

[Lights up on Colly's living room. Enter TALLY, now wearing a classic black-and-white maid's uniform complete with half-cap. She disposes bowls of peanuts, chips, perhaps a dip; polishes something. The setting, her dress, her pursuit of servants' duties have the form of typical orthodox drawing-room comedy/drama. Doorbell chimes. TALLY exits right.]

TALLY (OFF)

Good evening, Mr. Corbett.

[Enter DAN.]

DAN

Hello, Tally. You have a gift for apt attire, young woman.

[TALLY crosses left to where a snifter with cognac awaits. She brings it to DAN.]

TALLY

I knew you were coming.

DAN

Always thoughtful.

[Doorbell. TALLY exits right; enter SHELLEY (a male), and LUDWIG (female); LUDWIG is in subdued attire, "serious" hair, "sensible" shoes. TALLY follows.]

SHELLEY

Thank you, Hobbs. Are we the first? Ah! Dan! Good to see you! It's been some time.

DAN

Shelley.

[They shake hands.]

SHELLEY

Dan, this is Luddy Zeugma. Luddy teaches semiotics at Columbia. Dan Corbett is the former Editor-in-Chief at Loewy.

DAN

Miss Zeugma.

LUDWIG

Ah, Mr. Corbett. Your reputation precedes. As it happens I've been doing a special study of Burn Fargo's novels, and I know you were his editor.

DAN

It was a pleasure and an honor to work with Burn.

LUDWIG

Mr. Fargo is a rarity in academia -- admired by deconstructionists and traditionalists. Do you suppose he's aware of this?

DAN

Could be. Burn constantly surprises by what he's read.

TALLY

May I get you something?

LUDWIG

Sherry, please?

SHELLEY

Can you do a scotch on the rocks?

TALLY

We can.

(nods politely, exits left)

SHELLEY

I imagine they miss you at Loewy, Dan.

DAN

Well, every man at last gets his chance to relax.

SHELLEY

How's Pris doing in your old job? Big shoes to fill!

DAN

Actually, I've tried to keep my distance. Once a man leaves, he should let his successor get on with it in his -- or in this case her -- own way.

[Doorbell. Enter TALLY with tray holding two drinks. LUDWIG and SHELLEY take them.]

LUDWIG

I think the doorbell chimed.

[TALLY nods, hurries on to the door. OTHERS look to see who's coming. Enter PRIS.]

PRIS

Thank you, Hobbs. How nice Colly has you to help again.

TALLY

Thank you, Miss Peel. May I get you something?

PRIS

White wine?

[TALLY nods, exits; PRIS moves down.]

PRIS (cont'd)

Ah -- Shelley, Dan. Greetings.

SHELLEY

We were just saying good things about you, Pris. Meet Luddy Zeugma.

PRIS

(offers hand)

Luddy.

LUDWIG

Miss Peel.

PRIS

Please -- 'Pris'! I hope you're well, Dan.

DAN

Can't complain, Pris.

PRIS

(to LUDWIG)

Has Colly shown you her aquarium yet?

SHELLEY

You must see it, Luddy. Hundreds of exotic fish.

PRIS

It's a silent, serene vista. Utter tranquility.

DAN

And Colly's become an expert. For her, each fish is a story in itself...

[The four engage in inaudible niceties. Lights dim. Enter BURN and TALLY in spot.]

TALLY

Right away you're butting in.

BURN

Tally, if you're going to do this, do it! You said you want to fly. That was earthbound. Every line "realistic" and false. Play to your strengths: make every line ridiculous and true. That's how your Tallyish mind can give us the real people.

TALLY

I was gonna fly, but look at this get-up!

(indicates her "apt" attire)

Madam says if I don't behave she'll kick me out on my imaginary ass.

BURN

Imaginative. So: behave: like Tally. Tonight Colly doesn't tell you what to do, you tell her. Now go back to the beginning, start again.

TALLY

I can do what I want? They'll all say what I tell them?

BURN

Don't tell them what to say -- tell them what to be. Then let them say it their own way.

TALLY

But I mean -- Madam can't fire me? I can really flap?

BURN

Really flap. Between flaps, think bayou. What's the story there? Concentrate.

TALLY

I have to concentrate? While I'm creating?!

BURN

It sometimes requires that.

[TALLY ponders, then raises her hands into a spell-casting mode. PRIS, SHELLEY, LUDWIG and DAN in sedate, orderly fashion exit right, chatting. BURN and TALLY exit up left. Pause.]

ACT ONE (AGAIN)

[Lights rise to normal. Enter TALLY now dressed as a nun. Around her neck a crucifix hangs. Pursues her duties. Pauses, "concentrates" vigorously, silently mouthing "Bayou! Bayou!" Enter DAN from up left, snifter in hand.]

DAN

Tally!

TALLY

Dah-yum! Coitus interruptus!

DAN

How playful Colly is -- hiring you for the night. You're not safe here, Tally. Colly may lock you in her aviary. And here, she'll say, we have a strange bird.

TALLY

I almost had it -- then comes you. With fowl thoughts, as usual.

[Doorbell -- now it's the sound of an owl's cry, "Who! Who!". TALLY moves right.]

DAN

Hold on -- who's coming tonight?

TALLY

Oh big crowd tonight. Madam didn't tell you? How playful Madam is.

[DAN sits heavily on the sofa as TALLY exits right, walks backward into view again. Enter SHELLEY, then LUDWIG as bimbo -- "big" hair, heels, and an outstanding display of bosom.]

SHELLEY

How are you, Rita? You look unbelievable, as always.

TALLY

Thanks, Shellsey. How's it coming? You still got the ole misery down there?

SHELLEY

Rita, I'd like you to meet Ludwig.

LUDWIG

Hello, Rita.

TALLY

Nice boobs.

LUDWIG

Saint Rita is the patron saint of Desperate Situations.

TALLY

Yeah -- and of Infertility.

SHELLEY

How 'bout the usual, Rita?

TALLY

I can't. I'm working.

SHELLEY

What'll you have, Ludwig? Ask for anything. Colly will have it, am I right, Rita?

TALLY

Yessir. If she doesn't, she prolly say she won't allow that nose-drip in her house.

LUDWIG

Do you have milk?

TALLY

Good choice. Top 'em up whenever you can.
(exit left)

SHELLEY

Ah! Look who's here! Dan!

DAN

Hello, Shelley.

SHELLEY

Dan! Oh, too long, Dan, too long! Ludwig, come meet Dan Corbett. Dan, Ludwig Zeugma.

[DAN rises wearily.]

LUDWIG

Oh Mr. Corbett, I know who you are! I'd like to shake your hand and this cold I have!

SHELLEY

You'll have lots to signal about with Ludwig, she teaches semiotics at the School for the Semi-Deaf. Dan used to be Editor-in-Chief at Loewy.

LUDWIG

You were Burn Fargo's editor! Surely this is a double-dip of luck. Serendipidipitous.

DAN

Similar.

(shakes her hand, flops back down)

LUDWIG

Shelley said I'd meet Mr. Fargo tonight.

DAN

What?! Burn Fargo? Here tonight?

LUDWIG

He's excited. Like me. I adore Burn Fargo's books.

DAN

(flintily)

What have you read by him?

LUDWIG

What do you mean by that?

DAN

What do I "mean"???

LUDWIG

I know what's behind that question. I understand questions.

SHELLEY

Now, Dan, behave. You know Colly would want you to be civilized.

DAN

I am civilized, I'm sometimes not civil -- with certain people. I only hope there's none in the crowd tonight.

SHELLEY

(perturbed)

There's going to be a crowd tonight?

LUDWIG

I've spent years and years reading and studying and writing about Bernard's books and life.

DAN

His name isn't Bernard.

LUDWIG

It's not? See, that's why I'm so lucky to meet you.

(sits next to him)

You can tell me what his name is.

DAN

Are you aware that Shelley here is Colly's lawyer?

LUDWIG

(looks at Shelley admiringly)

Yes, he's a legal man. He takes everything literally!

SHELLEY

Why do you call me a "legal" man? My sex was determined by nature, not a court order.

DAN

So why not ask the legal man what Burn's name is?

LUDWIG

Shelley, what's Burn's name?

SHELLEY

Fargo. Ludwig, come see the pretty books.

[SHELLEY gestures urgently, LUDWIG follows him down right; SHELLEY does a brief, rattled jig.]

SHELLEY (cont'd)

Cushions, this may be a larger dinner party than I thought. I need to get Fargo alone --

LUDWIG

-- Why?

SHELLEY

Because I have a proposal, a wonderful opportunity --

LUDWIG

-- For whom?

SHELLEY

For me. I want to open a new career avenue for Burn --

LUDWIG

Oh my God, you're going to steal Colly's client and turn him into something else! The ultimate deconstruction of an author! -- as Derrida [deh-ree-DA] would say.

SHELLEY

Why do you do that? Those French critics you adore, they just want to tear things apart. The only thing you should tear apart is your legs. Fargo is already famous, he has his Book Awards, his Pulitzers. He deserves a new challenge -- like making me rich! Help me here!

LUDWIG

What do I have to do?

SHELLEY

If there's ever just Fargo and me and one other in the room, you get that other out, by whatever means.

LUDWIG

How do you mean "means"? I mean, 'means' means --

SHELLEY

-- It means extremes! Anything! Get me alone with Fargo!

LUDWIG

But something is telling me I may also may have a plan --

[Owl doorbell sounds. Enter TALLY; on her tray a martini and the milk. SHELLEY and LUDWIG move back center. TALLY sips each drink.]

TALLY

Right -- this one's the milk.

[TALLY serves them.]

LUDWIG

Didn't the doorbell hoot?

TALLY

S'all right, I know who it is. I understand doorbells.

[TALLY moves right, stops, casts a suspending spell over OTHERS. They freeze. TALLY concentrates. Bayou! Nothing. Looks around. The crucifix! Puts crucifix to her ear hopefully. Nothing. Shakes the crucifix as if listening for the rattle of a broken part. Nothing. She removes her spell, and proceeds off right.]

PRIS (OFF)

Good God -- this one again. Colly can't find sane help?

DAN

(shocked to hear Pris; sotto:)

Oh Christ not her!! Collyyyy!

[PRIS sweeps past TALLY. TALLY thrusts the cross at her back, fending the vampire.]

PRIS

Shelley!

SHELLEY

Pris! How comestible you look! Ludwig, come meet Priscilla. Pris is the new Editor-in-Chief at Loewy. Ludwig is a great reader, reads Loewy books all the time, isn't that right, Zoogy?

PRIS

Oh? What Loewy books have you enjoyed?

LUDWIG

Don't you do Solzhenitsen?

PRIS

No.

LUDWIG

Milan Kundera?

PRIS

No.

LUDWIG

Umberto Eco?

PRIS

Loewy American. You no read American?

LUDWIG

Oh, I know the last Loewy book: *Fluff the Cat*. I think it was Fluff. I'm so bad with characters' names. Of course the great Loewy author is Burn Fargo. He's coming to dinner tonight.

PRIS

I'm aware of that. He's coming to meet me.

(spots DAN on sofa)

Dan! The mad maid and you? So much for the Clean Air Act!

DAN

Priscilla Peel, boon to Drano and Glad Bags.

LUDWIG

Aha -- signs of displeasure. The trained eye notices these things.

PRIS

Why are you here?

DAN

The big here, or the small here? Given it's you, it must be the small here.

[PRIS sees TALLY wielding her cross again.]

PRIS

I need something wet and immunizing.
(to LUDWIG)
What are you having.

LUDWIG

I'm having milk and palpitations.

PRIS

I won't have that. I feel like a white wine.

TALLY

And you sound like one.

[TALLY exits left.]

PRIS

So, Dan, how goes the basket-weaving and bingo? How touching of Colly to invite you. It's nice to know someone still remembers the people of generations past.

DAN

Yes, such a hostess. Inviting you proves how free of moral and intellectual snobbery she is.

PRIS

Oh, Dan, wipe your chin. It was such fun to inherit his brandy-stained desk. And his mail. "Dear Dan Corbett, My shrink says if I ever send you another manuscript he'll write me up in the American Journal of Masochism."

LUDWIG

But Mr. Corbett was Burn Fargo's editor.

PRIS

Yes. Pretty word, "was". Won't it be awkward for you tonight, Dan? I understand you and Burn aren't speaking.

LUDWIG

I hear he has a new novel, his first in two years!

PRIS

(sharply alert)
Where do you hear that?

LUDWIG

And Colly hasn't shown it to anyone yet!

DAN

Oh? Not even to any publisher?

SHELLEY

I can't say.

DAN

But it goes without saying?

SHELLEY

I'd say that.

PRIS

Say what? About which? To who?

DAN

To whom, dammit!

SHELLEY

That Colly -- all the mysteries of the West, ha ha.

PRIS

What's that supposed to mean?

LUDWIG

Philosophically, utterances don't really mean, only people do. So your question is utterly off.

DAN

Shelley, you mustn't tease Pris.

SHELLEY

Sorry, I didn't realize we were being so uptight.

PRIS

Uptight? Whom is uptight? There's no question about whom is going to publish Burn Fargo's next book.

[Enter TALLY, still a nun; wine to PRIS.]

DAN

My nanny never let my snifter go empty.

TALLY

(takes snifter)
People always ask me, "What's it all mean?" My answer is...Fuck off.

(exit)

LUDWIG

Now, see, though her utterance sounds like an answer, it's really not.

PRIS

Colly and her pranks. First she hires that little schizoid. I'm sure I saw her working at another literary soiree last month. She was an Apache Indian that night. Then, with Burn Fargo coming to meet me, Colly invites you. Next she'll have us up to that cockamamie aviary, with our clothes off to mud wrestle.

DAN

What's your complaint? You're undefeated at that.

PRIS

Dan, you're pathetic. You're supposed to be able to read. Didn't you notice your name on the obituary page last April?

DAN

Not the obit page, the science section: "Bizarre phenomenon: Blond hustler seduces August Loewy the Third, but Editor-in-Chief is the one who gets screwed."

PRIS

You anal ooze, you. I should sue your senile ass --

LUDWIG

-- My background is dialogism [di-AL-o-jism].

[Enter TALLY, gives DAN his snifter.]

DAN

And what is your foreground, Ludwig?

TALLY

Oh they're real. I studied her foreground first thing. I only examined one of them, but scientifically that's an adequate sample.

(Exit TALLY.)

PRIS

I know when it was. Shelley, didn't Hobbs or Rita or whatever her alias is serve at your evening a month ago?

SHELLEY

Could be. I think she was Chinese that night.

PRIS

Apache.

SHELLEY

A Chinese Apache? That's absurd, Pris.

LUDWIG

To a dialogist, dialog is a transparent veil.

[Enter TALLY with her own drink; sits.]

LUDWIG (cont'd)

A dialogist notices the lingual interplay between interlocutors, and how each anticipates a response.

TALLY

Now, now -- hold off on smutty talk. Madam says no foolin' around till after dinner.

LUDWIG

Not that I'm intrinsically better than people like you. It's just my training. Thus I can say to you: There's a subtext in this room.

[Mock nods and Ah! Oh! from TALLY, DAN, PRIS.]

SHELLEY

(puzzled)

Is it bigger than a breadbox?

LUDWIG

It doesn't have physical dimension, Shelley. It's palpable only to the mind.

TALLY

Like a dirty movie.

SHELLEY

Zoogy, you're over-analyzing. Wouldn't you say, Rita?

TALLY

Totally quite. You don't win Shelley with cheap and blatant brains. You think he's a nasty one-track type wants you only for your mind? No. Shelley loves you for your vajeenga. And in your case your boobery.

[BURN appears, lights dim. ALL but TALLY freeze. TALLY rises, moves up to BURN in spot.]

TALLY (cont'd)

Again?!

BURN

Tally, get on with it. You're playing too much. And do you realize how raunchy you are? Why's that?

TALLY

Hey -- you be an amusing virgin for three thousand years, and see what you dream about.

BURN

That's your hang-up, not your characters'. Where did Ludwig come from?

TALLY

I invited her.

BURN

So you could poke fun at her bosom?

TALLY

She all that smart, why she menu herself as a rack of boob? Gives me a solemn duty to make jug jokes. You want me to show the real thoughts of these fakers. Her udds are the first thing they notice, and the last thing they'd mention if it weren't for me. You're very picky -- James Joyce said my dirty stuff sparkled. Another writer really liked working with me was Eugene. He knew what funny is.

BURN

O'Neill?!

TALLY

Ionesco. See that's funny already: a Rumanian comic.

BURN

So: you invited someone who's not on my list. I think I'll invite someone who's not on your list. You'll have a hard time telling her what to do. Meantime: the story?

TALLY

Hafta go. I got a line coming up.

[TALLY back to sofa, exit BURN. Lights up.]

PRIS

(to TALLY)

You really are too much.

LUDWIG

Shelley, I won't have to take my clothes off tonight, will I?

SHELLEY

What a suggestion! Semiotics make a girl so randy!

LUDWIG

It's just that I sense something in this room. A "Beast in the Jungle". I'd like to know if it has anything to do with me.

TALLY

The plan is, we lure the beast out by tying you to a stake like a goat.

(MORE)

TALLY (cont'd)

(rises)

Course, that would mean no clothes -- you never see a goat with clothes on. I have a change to make.

[Exit TALLY.]

PRIS

Why does Colly keep hiring that nutty little nympho?

LUDWIG

Nympho?

SHELLEY

Rita?

PRIS

Hobbs.

DAN

Tally.

LUDWIG

Nympho? So why tie me to the stake? I never enjoy that.

PRIS

I take it she's a temp.

DAN

Aren't we all.

PRIS

Please! Why is everyone so edgy!!

DAN

Burn makes people edgy.

PRIS

He's not even here yet.

DAN

Oh he's here. Doesn't Burn make people edgy, Shelley?

PRIS

What do you mean he's here? He's in with Colly?

SHELLEY

He doesn't make me edgy. He makes me sharp.

PRIS

Answer me! He's here?

LUDWIG

I'm certain he means you can feel him in the room.

DAN

That man doesn't have to be present to be a presence.

[Telephone next to PRIS rings; she picks it up, listens.]

COLLY (OFF)

Get the hell off that phone out there!

[Unhurriedly, affecting cool, PRIS hangs up.]

PRIS

I think I know who that was.

SHELLEY

That was Colly.

PRIS

On the phone! I'm sure it was Paul Peebles. Jumped right in. Said, "I hear you're selling the next Burn Fargo." The little pirate! Who does he publish, I wonder?

DAN

Whom, goddamit! As Dorothy of Oz said, "There's no case like whom!" Peebles publishes Emily Dickinson. Why don't you try to steal her?

PRIS

I will! I'll call Emily's agent in the morning.

[Enter COLLY, striding.]

COLLY

For a man that short, Peebles certainly has a long reach. "I hear you're selling the next Burn Fargo!" Such *sang froid*. How would you say he spoke, Priscilla?

PRIS

Coolly, Colly.

COLLY

Precisely, Priscilla. "I hope you'll give us a chance at it." The little weenie. He's like an hors d'oeuvre talking to you. Don't you always have the impulse to dip him in mustard? Of course you do. One can't help it. But I don't know, gang, what do you think? Should I give him a chance at it?

PRIS

Colly! Aren't there any ethics in our industry any more? Burn Fargo is Loewy's author! Peebles poses as this aesthete who only wants to do translations of Eskimo classics -- and in fact he's nothing but a pirate!

COLLY

Ye-e-e-s! I never thought he had it in him!

PRIS

In our business we don't go round stealing authors.

DAN

You stole Carlson from Knopf. [ka-NOPF]

PRIS

That was different.

SHELLEY

Colly, this is Ludwig.

COLLY

How are you dear? Nice boobs.

LUDWIG

Peebles also publishes Derrida -- the father of post-structuralism? I'm a post-structuralist.

COLLY

Ha! I didn't think they were real.

PRIS

How did Peebles know? Whom told he?

COLLY

Well not I. I never tell anyone anything -- I have more consideration than that. Hobbs! Where the hell are you? She really is too much.

PRIS

I already said that.

COLLY

You did? But that's my line. Please don't already say something again. There's a lot at stake tonight.

PRIS

Yes there is.

LUDWIG

As long as it's not me.

COLLY

Now, Shelley, did you tell Ludwig she'll have to take her clothes off tonight?

SHELLEY

It was her suggestion.

COLLY

Shell is such a tease. In my home you don't have to take your clothes off. Someone will do it for you. We're civilized people here.

DAN

Colly, if we can have a moment alone I think you owe me some explanations.

COLLY

Ah. Well, we can't have a moment alone, so no explanations are needed.

PRIS

That's another thing, Colly -- what's the point of having old Banquo at a dinner for me and Burn Fargo?

DAN

If I'd had any hint either you or Fargo would be here --

COLLY

-- Now don't you two argue yet. The evening shouldn't begin before Burn gets here.

DAN

Soooo: New book and not signed up by Loewy.

PRIS

What's it to you, you cadaver dick?

COLLY

Pris.

PRIS

I merely meant, Dan is now a retired gentleman, and such worldly matters need no longer trouble him. Is there a script? When can I see it?

DAN

Careful, Pris -- don't over-tax yourself. The words in Burn's books don't come in those little balloons.

PRIS

You relic -- do you know why you're out of work?

DAN

I'm looking at why. Knees like electric doors that automatically swing apart whenever --

PRIS

-- You shit! You are euthanasia's best argument! There you are, squatting over the bedpan of your life, filled with the ca-ca of your career --

COLLY

-- Priscilla! Stop! I won't have Burn Fargo come to my home for what I promised would be a lively dinner party with sophisticated colloquy, only to find my guests have pissed away their anger before he arrived. How could you be so thoughtless?

LUDWIG

Oh wow! I bet my dead professor wishes he were here!

COLLY

Does he need an agent, dear?

[Doorbell Who!]

PRIS

That must be him!
(sits, primps salaciously)

LUDWIG

That must be 'he'. 'To be' is a copulative verb.

DAN

Your favorite kind, Pris.

COLLY

Hobbs!

TALLY

(racing in delightedly from left)
That's gotta be the Burner! Dah-yum! I didn't expect him for another thirty seconds.
(tears her nun's habit off)
Vel-cro! Friend of the working woman!
(exits right wearing very little)

PRIS

Colly, that's Burn Fargo out there! And the door gets opened by a porno greeting-card?

COLLY

Hobbs is without peer at receiving guests.

PRIS

All right she's gone. Now can you tell me why she's here?

LUDWIG

If she's gone, she isn't here.

PRIS

Anyone ever tell you you're a seven-year-old with tits?

LUDWIG

Not since I was a child.

COLLY

Hobbs is here because Burn asked for her.

PRIS

He asked for her? The manic maid?

COLLY

She's a foster-child on his parents' side, and he looks after her. You'd be wise to button up.

PRIS

Not a word. If it growses the roses....

[While still off, BURN begins his speech in a throbbing, theatrical voice. He enters straddled by TALLY tree-hug-style. They are all over each other as BURN rants.]

BURN

Ah Tally! Source and sorceress!
Gravity's spite! Ordinary's alchemist!
I thank whatever gods may be
For goddesses like you!

COLLY

Burn, darling --

BURN

-- Unlewd wanton who stirs
my debile hand,
Ignites my accendible soul --
Where've you been, you blithesome whip!
Fuse of flesh! Dream's nipple!

LUDWIG

He's glad to see her.

TALLY

Where've you been, He-Who-Eats-And-Runs?

[They nuzzle.]

SHELLEY

That Rita! Above and beyond your average domestic!

BURN

Until this blissy tick,
my unfanned heart did gutter,
But one incandescing breath from you
And shame is shamed,
despair despairs --

TALLY

Oh cease, loquacious Burn!
Such satyric words
but stress your lack of point.

BURN

No point's my point!
But inspire, my Tally,
and your pollinating puff
will swell my sail to voyage.

LUDWIG

I just love metaphor! You can say such naughty things
with metaphor!

BURN

I appeal to you as art's trumpet.

LUDWIG

Oh, and 'art strumpet' is a homophonic couple!

SHELLEY

Burn Fargo homophonic? I don't think so.

BURN

Speak, tempestuous Sprite!
Is my heat mere fever,
Or conception's blushy bid?
Would the would-be bayou by you be?

TALLY

Dunno yet.

[BURN looks stern, sets TALLY down. Spot on them. Others freeze.]

BURN

Creature, I'll play my part, but quit rabbiting off
after every green thought. Concentrate! Ah: I know:
Remember how the story for *Ulysses Blues* came to you as
soon as you began hearing Civil War music?

TALLY

Yeah, I remember that. You took me up to Grant's Tomb.
In January. All my creative female parts were freezing.

BURN

Ah -- but when you heard the music and we marched to it,
all your parts warmed up.

TALLY

Yeah I liked that music. Then I saw cavalry charges!
Love cavalry.

(gallops a bit)

(MORE)

TALLY (cont'd)

"I'm a pest, you're a pest, anapests we!" ...?! Stop slipping smarts in!

BURN

Stop galloping off on irrelevant rides. Anycase, that's not smart: 'anapest' is not an anapest, it's a dactyl --

(stops; "get off this!")

The point is, when you heard that music, you saw the *Ulysses Blues* story. And you said, "Yes!" So, now: hear the music I'm hearing! Or do we admit our creative days are over?

TALLY

Not mine! Mine will never be over!

BURN

Mine may be. Think Scott Joplin.

[Lighting back to normal.]

COLLY

Burn, Burn! You've arrived!

TALLY

This extra work is screwing up my structure, Fargo. You know how I hate that.

BURN

Quit padding your part. Just do what's needed.

COLLY

I say again, "Burn, Burn! You've arrived!"

BURN

Ah? Kind of you to say so.

(to TALLY:)

Lass, run get pencil and paper -- and much drink. I'll create a scene one way or another.

[EVERETT, in a gray cashmere sweater-set, has come slowly in, right; maintaining dignity though mildly stunned.]

TALLY

Who ziss?

EVERETT

Everett.

TALLY

"Everett"? You're what men are climbing without oxygen tanks these days?

BURN

Tally, veer off, I warn you. Not this time.

[BURN puts his arm around EVERETT.]

COLLY

You've arrived, and you've brought...a friend.

[TALLY scrutinizes EV under BURN's arm.]

TALLY

She's in a bad place, Fargo. Could spread. Let's freeze her, and snip her off with scissors.

COLLY

Hobbs, you little shrike --

BURN

-- Tal's okay, she's just a lobe short. We have to take her back to Panasonic. Ain't that right, Colly?

COLLY

I suppose so. You're not all there, are you, Hobbs.

DAN

I already said that.

COLLY

Et tu, Daniel?

TALLY

If I'm not all here it's because there isn't room enough for all of me here! So what do you want to drink?

EVERETT

May I have scotch, please?

TALLY

What kind?

EVERETT

"What kind"?

COLLY

Yes, dear, order any kind -- I'm certain I have it.

BURN

Ask for The Macallan Fine Oak Twenty-one.

COLLY

The Macallan Fine Oak Twenty-one? Oh but Burn, I don't allow that nose-drip in my house.

TALLY

Yes you do. We bought some.

COLLY

We bought some! We bought some! How good of us!

BURN

So that's for Everett. Me too -- whatever Ev has is good enough for me.

TALLY

Ew! How Sweet'N-Low. Yug.

[TALLY exits left.]

COLLY

(extending hand)

I'm Colly. What did you say your name is, dear?

EVERETT

Everett. Ev.

COLLY

Well, welcome, Ev. Now, I want you to relax. You seem tense.

BURN

It was Tal's mischievous greeting to me at the door.

(loudly, to stage left:)

You could look it up, Imp: 'Mischief' is from the Old French for 'leading to a bad end'.

COLLY

What did the little jay say?

BURN

She said: "It's the first time I've known you to come thirty seconds too soon."

COLLY

Oh! Ha Ha! How droll Hobbs is, the little --! Let's meet the guests. Don't you find introductions are like the maitre d' going through the specials? Of course you do.

[BURN, EV, and COLLY move down.]

BURN

Ev, stay close. Speak in a low soothing voice, and make no abrupt movements.

COLLY

This is Priscilla Peel -- Loewy's new Editor-in-Chief.

PRIS

Mr. Fargo! I want --

BURN

Say hello to Ev, first.

PRIS

Hello, Ev, what a lovely pin -- opals? Mr. Fa--

BURN

Say hello to the opals.

PRIS

Hello, opals, uh, what a lovely girl -- flesh?

BURN

Who's next?

PRIS

I hope we have a chance --

COLLY

-- You've talked to Shelley on the phone. He's a legal man.

SHELLEY

(quick jig of dismay)

That's a canard! That --

(regains calm; to BURN:)

I loved *Infidel Beach*. I admired it so much I almost dropped you a note.

BURN

I almost have to say thanks. Did you like the parable of the leeches?

SHELLEY

The leeches?

BURN

The leeches. In *Infidel Beach*.

SHELLEY

The leeches? In *Infidel Beach*?

BURN

Who's next?

SHELLEY

Mr. Fargo, some time tonight --

COLLY

-- Well, there's Dan, of course. You know what that's like.

BURN

Is it still like that, Dan?

DAN

No, I'm afraid that went up in smoke.

COLLY

And these are Ludwig. Miss Zeugma is a professor. As I understand it, she teaches things that aren't quite otics.

BURN

You a Ph.D., Zeugma?

LUDWIG

Yes I am!

BURN

S'okay, I got a friend can get you into rehab. No one's saying you'll ever be hundred percent again, but their motto is: No Ph.D. left behind.

LUDWIG

Mr. Fargo, I've so looked upward to meeting you! Your attitude toward academia is well known, and I grant the poet said, "A little learning is a dangerous thing." But he added "Shallow drafts intoxicate the brain, and drinking largely sobers us again."

BURN

(to PRIS)

What poet was that, do you think?

PRIS

Bishop?

EVERETT

Pope.

SHELLEY

The pontiff pope?

BURN

The Alexander Pope. Who wrote, as Miss Zeugma would say, with wit and a swan-quill pen, in verse and the eighteenth century.

LUDWIG

My field is dialogism.

BURN

Dialogism! Everett! Don't I say the same thing?

LUDWIG

I have a specialty. You've heard of 'body language'? Well, this is a new concept. I call it 'word language'.

BURN

Catchy.

LUDWIG

It's based on something I thought I noticed once, and now I'm sure it's true. Deep down the essence of it is this: Though people don't realize it, oftentimes what they say reveals what's on their minds.

[Silence.]

BURN

That's so true. As a writer, of course I try to avoid it, but sometimes one slips. Listening to you makes me think perhaps I haven't given academics their due.

LUDWIG

Well, I mustn't dominate the evening.
(produces notebook)
May I take notes?!

BURN

Tally! The scalpel rises! Where's the anesthetic?

LUDWIG

You're reported as saying the act of art requires three things -- craft, sensibility, and imagination.

BURN

S'right. The author supplies the craft and sensibility.

LUDWIG

Then where does the imagination come from?

[Enter TALLY, dressed as nurse; puts pad and pencil on sofa end-table, serves drinks.]

TALLY

Here ye be. The eraser for life's pencil.

BURN

The sycophant to the soul.

EVERETT

The gauze for the lens.

COLLY

Oh, good. Now everyone has a drink. We're ready to tour the aviary. Y'all want to see the aviary, don't you? Of course you do. This way. My birds know you're coming.

[OTHERS marshal for the aviary tour. TALLY gleefully wields spell. OTHERS coo, caw, tweet, whistle, maybe make a chicken sound. TALLY freezes all but BURN.]

TALLY

So? Going well? You like I made the aquarium an aviary?
You being a bird nut, I mean.

BURN

Beware, Tally. All play and no work makes Tal a
frivolous girl.

TALLY

You told me to frivol. And I need the aviary -- for its
metaphoric richness.

(stamps foot)

I'd never say that! Don't think I can't see you sneaking
in serious to excuse my funny!

BURN

Frivol. Do. Just not constantly. Luckily, this aviary
tour will buy you a little extra time. Use it to listen,
to hear the music, and that way evoke the story.

TALLY

-- I'll need extra time with these people. You write a
novel, the people always say only what you want them to.

BURN

Where'd you get that idea?

[TALLY removes spell.]

DAN

(shuffling up left ahead of OTHERS)

Sinister hobby, Colly, mating different species. Colly
crossed canaries with parrots. She wanted birds that
sing lyrics.

PRIS

Colly, I'd love a private moment with Burn --

COLLY

Really, Pris, not now. Burn so loves the birds. They
inspire him. The birds.

*[COLLY ushers PRIS off up left. BURN takes EV's
arm, moves up left.]*

BURN

No tears, now, Ev. Remember: "The larks know not the
limits of their flight. Nor we."

[Exit BURN and EV.]

LUDWIG

Shelley, I do have a plan! And it's wonderful! You must
help me get Mr. Fargo alone!

SHELLEY

What? No, Ludwig -- me!

LUDWIG

Oh Shelley it can't be you. Mr. Fargo.

SHELLEY

No, no -- I mean you help me...

[Exit LUDWIG and SHELLEY. TALLY, alone now, listens hard. OVER: four chaotic music-notes.]

TALLY

It's your fault, Fargo! You're not concentrating hard enough!

[Exit TALLY. Lights dim for ten seconds; lights up. Enter EVERETT. Enter DAN.]

EVERETT

(startled by DAN)

Oh!

DAN

Sorry. I gather the eerie aerie is not for you.

EVERETT

I got slightly dizzy. Did you notice that brown bird? How can it survive if it keeps doing that?

DAN

Ah, yes, the one that's a cross between a chicken and a chicken hawk.

EVERETT

The cardinal-penguin was rather striking, but now she says she's trying to mate a hummingbird with that huge albatross. To get what, a helicopter with feathers? I don't know why it doesn't upset Burn.

DAN

Burn's an artist. Isn't every artist a creator of hybrids? The artist as biotechnician. How long have you known him? Or rather, how long ago did you meet him?

EVERETT

One-hundred-forty-nine days.

DAN

You have high hopes?

EVERETT

I recognize the tone. You would discourage me -- for my own good.

DAN

Burn is a steep climb. What do you hope for from him?

EVERETT

Mr. Corbett, I think my hopes are a private matter.

DAN

Forgive me. But I've noticed everyone around him wants something from him.

EVERETT

What do you want from him?

DAN

I don't think of myself as being around him anymore.

EVERETT

You quarreled. Why?

DAN

A difference of opinion.

EVERETT

Ah. So not one of those nasty clashes where you're hopelessly in agreement. I see you put personal questions, but you don't take them.

DAN

...Let's just say we both made a mistake.

EVERETT

...Back then, why did you want to be his editor? That's not a personal question is it?

DAN

Oh that could be a very personal question. "What validated your life, Mr. Corbett?" To work with a writer as gifted as Burn is what I came into publishing for.

EVERETT

He says you were as good as anyone in the world at what you did.

DAN

Does he. Well, he's right -- except for the past tense. I checked at breakfast and discovered I'm still alive.

EVERETT

Forgive me, the past tense was probably mine -- he said only that you're not doing it at the moment. How would you describe what you do?

DAN

I was doctor, teacher, coach and conscience to some talented people.

(MORE)

DAN (cont'd)

I wasn't born to pole-vault, or sing like Pavarotti, or write like Burn Fargo, but no one was better at helping a writer make his novel as good as it could be.

EVERETT

Now you're using past tense.

DAN

No one is better. The average editor with a manuscript is like an ape with an oboe: You know no good will come of it, and the best you can hope for is to get it back intact. I'm not average, yet here am I idle, with maybe ten years left of compos mentis -- if I don't booze myself into bitter dementia.

EVERETT

Bitter?

DAN

Sour? Brackish? How does anyone live in serene retirement, feeling he still has a talent, a value, but he'll never use it again?... No answer?

EVERETT

I'm sorry, I...Is that why you're here tonight?

DAN

I dropped some crassly broad hints to Colly, so she's invited a certain publisher.

EVERETT

Burn admires you. He told me you took care of both your wife and your sister for years while they were dying, and you never flinched.

DAN

Oh I flinched, just not in front of them or the public. You do surprise me, young lady, and it's made me say some things... Your turn: You're stuck on Burn. Why him?

EVERETT

I couldn't begin to articulate why. Words are his gift.

DAN

He's the top of his field -- makes for pop-star dazzle, I guess.

EVERETT

So I'm only a literary groupie.

DAN

Maybe not. Let me guess: you were brought up in a very old, very big house, with countless books. Where?

EVERETT

...Just outside Boston.

DAN

Only child?...How'd you meet Burn?

EVERETT

Through my old professor. We used to correspond about books. I wrote him after I read *Seeing the Island*. He sent the letter to Burn, and Burn wrote to me.

DAN

He did?! Yours must have been a rare letter -- I've never known him to write anyone. But again: why him?

EVERETT

Mr. Corbett...

DAN

Please try. I'm sure you'll find some apt words.

EVERETT

...He comes into a room and molecules quicken. Even the plants seem to bend toward him. I was always drawn to energy, and just his glance can be a beam of volts.

DAN

Some people find his energy to be menacing. You like menace?

EVERETT

No, I don't like menace. Burn's fierce, but he's not menacing. He was performing a few minutes ago -- you must know that.

DAN

He's always performing.

EVERETT

No, he's not.

DAN

...You're right. I shouldn't -- you're right.

EVERETT

Given all your time together, I know you've seen him thoughtful. Generous. Funny. He has a turn of mind so unexpected it's as though with a single phrase he can change the angle of the floor and I'll be sprawled in the corner, furniture sliding toward me. Then he tilts it the other way. You ask what I hope from him. I hope for the rest of today, and, with luck, tomorrow.

DAN

...You just may have the makings of a suitable companion to a great artist -- i.e. a readiness to subvert one's self. I don't say that contemptuously.

EVERETT

No -- you're a book editor aren't you. I may be dazzled by him, Mr. Corbett, but I'm not blinded --

DAN

-- I wasn't quite suggest--

EVERETT

-- I don't think it took a lack of self-respect to be willing to mix Leonardo's paints, or lug Michelangelo's marble. Or even to be Mrs. Tolstoi, who transcribed *War and Peace* eight times.

DAN

I stand corrected by an astute young woman. But you do understand the best you can ever hope for is to share him?

EVERETT

With whom?

[Enter TALLY in Big-Bird-ish costume.]

TALLY

Guess what got screwed to make me.

EVERETT

Which way to the bathroom?

DAN

Through there.

[Exit EVERETT up center.]

TALLY

She has flown the coop.

[Enter COLLY from up left.]

COLLY

Burn sent me to track down Miss Mayflower. He said he upset her by composing an ode to my nightingduck. Where'd she go?

DAN

Through there.

COLLY

To the facilities?

DAN

To the difficulties, is more like.

COLLY

What can you mean.

[Exit COLLY up.]

TALLY

Did you know the three greatest women writers in history never got laid? Fargo told me. Henry James said I was the only girl he ever got it on with. He knew things, Henry. Most of the gay women writers I was assigned to knew things. Not that I'm saying Henry was a lesbian.

DAN

Did you know that birds don't have breasts?

TALLY

What? There's a whole bird that's a tit. In fact there's a bird called the Great Tit. Ask Madam.

[Enter EVERETT.]

EVERETT

Have you seen the bathroom with its birdy-theme? There's a love-seat, except it's two toilets -- shaped, of course, like peacocks. That's a loo designed by Audubon on mushrooms. And she has a live poodle dressed by Victoria's Secret.

DAN

To talk to Colly, you'd never guess she's imaginative.

EVERETT

(to TALLY:)

Loved your work on Poppy-Seed Street.

[Exit EVERETT left; enter COLLY.]

COLLY

That girl's not right for Burn. He loves dogs.

TALLY

(displaying her finery)

You like?

COLLY

You look good enough to eat, dear.

TALLY

I've decided what bird I am. Tell him about the Great Tit.

COLLY

Ah, yes. Parus Major. The largest common European tit, distinguished by a glossy blue-black head, a black stripe down the breast, and yellow underparts.

TALLY

Wha-a-a-at?

COLLY

And of course the booby is also a genus of bird.

TALLY

(optimistic)

Yes?

COLLY

Yes. There's the blue-footed booby, the red-footed booby, and the ruddy duck.

TALLY

Forget the whole thing.

COLLY

I must say Burn's taste in women is not narrow. Remember that Times Square tourist attraction he once brought round? She said her name was Vulva Haagen-Dazs and Burn was a famous author who wrote under the name "Hard Candy". This girl couldn't be more different. Which way did the founding-daughter go?

DAN

Thataway.

[Exit COLLY left.]

DAN (cont'd)

So you and Burn are together again.

TALLY

Jealous, huh? You cost us almost two years with that idea of yours, Corbett. The difference between you and me is, I can fly.

DAN

So can malarial mosquitoes. But you two do seem to have a way with each other, and it'd be mean to deny it.

TALLY

You still got him to cut lots of my great stuff!

DAN

It was nothing personal. I hope you like this Everett.

TALLY

She is not of my feather.

DAN

Tally, I leave you to your fancies of flight.

[Exit DAN left, enter BURN from up left.]

BURN

Hail to thee fair fowl!
Girl thou never wert.

TALLY

Fargo! That bird info I put in but don't know -- that comes from you.

BURN

Tal, all your info comes from me.

TALLY

Ah, but see, I combine the things you know, in ways you'd never think of.

BURN

You don't think I saw the humor in the bird lore?

TALLY

You read it in what, an encyclopedia? D'ja laugh then?

BURN

...How's your hearing?

TALLY

I'm almosting a lot.

BURN

We need it tonight. No: we need it now! Let's try this. We hold hands, I concentrate, and you concentrate, and you...hear!

*[They join hands in mighty concentration. At last, **OVER**, we hear the opening notes of "Marching Onward", the finale of Joplin's "A Real Slow Drag". It ceases. BURN steps back, studies TALLY who is gazing outward...]*

TALLY

...It's 1899. I see a woman -- young, black, brave, self-taught. Wants to lead a thousand bayou-people out of captivity to New Orleans. Nice pushy broad. Whaddya think?

BURN

You got it! That's the story, Tal. Now: How do we test it -- to see if it can carry us for months to come?

TALLY

What test? I just passed the test.

BURN

Not test you -- test the idea...Maybe the music again. The Civil War music put us in the Civil War world, it got us marching, and when we marched we galloped! And we knew: *Ulysses Blues* had the legs and heart! Tal, tonight we don't just listen to the music -- we use it! --

TALLY

-- Who's that pint of skim milk you came with?

BURN

We were talking about how to test our idea for a novel --

TALLY

-- You think this is jealousy talking, but no: she is white bread --

BURN

You said 'skim milk'.

TALLY

Don't do that! Just fix it! If I stop to edit, it'll hamper my fecundity. What? What's 'fecundity'? Does that mean "shitty"?

BURN

No: That's 'fecal'. 'Fecund' is good. Means 'fruitful'. Hank James didn't tell you?

TALLY

What I know is she's like all the others: a quill plucker after your downy tail. Don't you bend over in this room tonight. Someone drops a hint, just kick it under the couch and I'll get it with the vacuum.

BURN

How demeaning personal advice is. It implies one is both innocent and guilty. Tal: the test!

[Enter COLLY.]

COLLY

Hobbs you goose! You're wanted in the kitchen.

TALLY

Gaw-dah-yum! Another interruptus.

BURN

Colly my agent, don't you want to eat?

COLLY

We can't yet -- you know the last guest hasn't arrived. Ask Cook what his timing is, Hobbs. I'm certain everyone is famished, with the nervous energy they're burning.

TALLY

How can I listen when you're talking?!
(*exit left*)

COLLY

You creative people. I once had an author couldn't write unless his cat was lying on his desk. If the cat strolled off, that was the end of work for the day. I had the most distressing dreams in which parties-unknown break poor Kitty's legs. Any progress?

BURN

Some.

COLLY

That seventeenth-generation Bostonian you brought -- can't she tickle your fancy?

BURN

Two different species. Ev is the best sensibility I've ever known. The best reader. She's passionate, patient, dependable, and sound. Tally will never be that. Tally is unconfined, aerial, with fabulous wings. Great travel companion. Ev is...home. I've never known anyone quite like her. Even the big old Everett manse in Massachusetts feels familiar. Like the big old Fargo manse in Louisiana. I need Tally and Ev -- both of them.

COLLY

All artists are philanderers.

BURN

Yes, but not the way you think.

COLLY

...So far, my dove, you've been an absolute bear tonight.

BURN

That's me in this story -- a wary bear within a comical rout of wolves. Or a wake of buzzards.

COLLY

Just be wary when our publisher appears, please?

BURN

When he arrives, I shall call him retarded for being late.

COLLY

You told me to invite him late!

BURN

Consider his name: August Loewy. I shall call him an oxymoron.

COLLY

You mustn't! He's very full of himself!

BURN

I shall call him a trashcan.

COLLY

(catching up)

Ah, well, of course, Burn, you must be your charming self. Where could the scattered flock have got to? We should have a panel discussion about my birds till the doorbell hoots.

[Exit COLLY left. BURN with cell phone; dials.]

BURN

...Ah, waiting by the phone -- that's encouraging. I'm calling to say we're a few minutes behind schedule. Small complication...In one hour, can you do that?... Yes, Colly's phone, not this one...Good. We'll talk.

[BURN pockets phone. At different doors, PRIS and SHELLEY appear. Each sees BURN alone, each pops in with alacrity. They spot one another: Agh! SHELLEY briefly jigs as he and PRIS press on, babbling at each other. -- "Oh Shelley/Pris I do need/about to borrow Burn/private moment/important matters/if you wouldn't mind" -- Etc. SHELLEY looks back, sees LUDWIG at doorway. He vigorously waves/points her toward PRIS.]

[Chattering, SHELLEY and PRIS descend on BURN with murmurous importunings. LUDWIG steals forward. TALLY appears, wearing Keystone Cop hat and not much else, carrying nightstick. They spot each other, dash forward. LUDWIG clamps on PRIS, TALLY on SHELLEY: "Burn is thinking/he's writing/ he needs to be alone right now," etc. In a birdcage cacophony of protest, cajoling and muscling, the four move offstage. Silence.]

[BURN alone again. TALLY gambols back on. She has discarded the cop hat, and now wears a jazz-era headband with a single upright feather.]

TALLY

I'm getting a test-idea.

BURN

1899 is not jazz-era, Tal. Think ragtime.

TALLY

You said New Orleans. Ragtime was also New Orleans? Wait. ...The test idea is coming...It's --

[Approaching voices interrupt.]

TALLY (cont'd)

Birdshit!

[TALLY makes a spell-casting gesture. Enter COLLY, followed by OTHERS in birdy mode -- chirping, warbling, whistling, cawing, walking stiffly with bobbing heads, turning whole heads rather than moving eyes, etc.]

BURN

And this is...?

TALLY

These people are always going off-script -- which your adding things doesn't help. So I improv too. It's fun.

BURN

But it's playing again.

TALLY

I play so you can work.

BURN

Lift this spell, Tally.

[But birdy-mode continues, and TALLY is happily absorbed in watching her handiwork.]

BURN (cont'd)

Behave, you goblin you!

TALLY

(frowns sulkily; then:)

MEOW!

[After flaps of shock, OTHERS cease, cock their heads at TALLY, gradually snap out of it.]

COLLY

I found them larking about. Isn't it divine what a success my aviary is! Can you imagine if our guests mated what new specimens they'd produce? Do you ever picture such things? Of course you do. One can't help it. Hobbs! You naughty nut-hatch -- it's time to cover yourself.

SHELLEY

Oh Colly, she means well.

LUDWIG

Let's tie her to a stake.

PRIS

Will she be serving dinner like that?

TALLY

You lot are the enemies of promise.

(lofty, perhaps Brit tone:)

That's a rather arcane, lit'ry quote. Should you require to know its source, ask him. Fuck if I know.

[TALLY sees, takes, DAN's empty glass; exits.]

COLLY

Perhaps while we're waiting you'd like to hear about the nesting habits of raptors. Many owls, for example, display no instinct at all for building. Barn owls sometimes make their homes in badger holes in the western United States. The Great Horned Owl chooses a large hollow in an old tree, or squats in the abandoned nests of more creative birds like a red-tailed hawk, or a crow. One can't help but think of literary scholars.

SHELLEY

I have a question.

COLLY

Of course you do, Shelley. And it is?

SHELLEY

What's for eats?

COLLY

Snakes, mice, bats, and swamp frogs.

SHELLEY

No soup?

COLLY

Soup?

SHELLEY

Gazpacho, I'd settle for.

COLLY

(calling left)

Hobbs! Tell Cook we're almost assembled.

PRIS

"Almost" assembled? Colly --?

[Doorbell Who! Who! Who!]

COLLY

We are assembled.

DAN

Well, hell, everyone sit right down. Who was it said, "The saddest words ever spoken are, 'Shall we go right in?'"

EVERETT

Kingsley Amis. A gifted alcoholic.

[DAN sits. Enter TALLY, dressed as a Valkyrie; her horned-helmet also has Donald Duck's lips and eyes; she carries a thick spear with a prominent, carved head, rather like a giant asparagus. TALLY shakes the spear.]

TALLY

In case you're wondering, this is no asparagus.

[Exit TALLY right.]

PRIS

What the hell was that get up?

BURN

Something to do with Valhalla and a duck, I believe.

GUS

(from off)

You're who? You're what?

PRIS

That voice!

DAN

(to himself, with anguish)

Be still, my soul, be still. Just do this.

[Enter GUS, looking perplexed. Enter TALLY.]

GUS

The girl's a ducking Fike! I mean a Viking dyke. I mean -

TALLY

(announcing, master-butler style)

Mr. August Loewy the Second-and-a-Half!

COLLY

August! How lovely to see you!

GUS

Col! You are a sore for sight eyes! Ahh? Damn! It's no good practicing lines, it only makes it worse. Wait, I have it: Col, you're a sort for sire's eyes. Now that was intentional. I made that up just standing here.

COLLY

Ah? Well, uh, that's what makes you America's most -- American publisher.

GUS

Actually I was born in Holland. By mistake. My mother was just passing water. I mean through. When it broke.

BURN

So you come from the nether lands.

GUS

Col, I thunder how I can ever wank you enough for inviting me! Big nook, big bite. Ah? Book! Night!

COLLY

Do come in, Gus. You must know some of our guests.

[ALL except DAN quickly assemble into a straight line, like, say, the ball-kids at Wimbledon about to be greeted by royalty. GUS strolls down the line, accompanied by COLLY.]

COLLY (cont'd)

Here and here we have -- what's their names again, dear?

LUDWIG

Ludwig Zeugma. You may call me Ludwig. I don't stand on ceremony or my head.

COLLY

Ludwig teaches semi-idiotics at a trade school. She's a Ph.D.

GUS

Ah, Ludwig. Nice -- nice credentials.

COLLY

If they're bona fide. Tell us the truth, Ludwig.

LUDWIG

Madam, I shall not unbosom myself to you.

COLLY

And this is Shelley Fish. My lawyer. He makes sure all my contracts are meticulously unintelligible.

GUS

So you're a legal man.

SHELLEY

I'd like to know how that story got about, sir.

COLLY

I think you know Pris?

GUS

Of course. How do you do? So good to see you again.

PRIS

(somewhat sotto)

Gus! What is going on?! You might have told me --

COLLY

Hobbs! What are you doing!

TALLY

(prepared to expound)

Ah. Now that's an interesting question --

GUS

-- Hobbs. I've met you before, haven't I? Never forget a face.

TALLY

Face? All you remember is my face? You don't remember this?

(hefts spear)

GUS

What's that, a big asparagus? Ha ha! Colly, you do put together a party.

COLLY

And this is Everett. Everett Massachusetts was named after her family.

[COLLY looks puzzled, TALLY looks smug.]

COLLY (cont'd)

A fact I somehow happen to know.

(shakes it off)

Anyway, Everett is rich, as you can tell.

GUS

Is that right, Everett? Are you rich?

EVERETT

No.

GUS

She says she's not rich.

TALLY

Well she would, wouldn't she?

GUS

Hobbs is right, of course, you would, wouldn't you?

COLLY

Hobbs, why don't you run in the kitchen and see how things are in the oven? Crawl right in and look around.

TALLY

(to GUS)

I must go see the Cook is goosed.

[Exit TALLY.]

COLLY

And this, of course, is our guest of honor, Burn Fargo.

GUS

Bernard! At long last! The cruel in our crown! ...? "Cruel"? Jewel! You must call me Gus.

BURN

And you must call me Burn.

[Enter TALLY.]

TALLY

Kook say he vant baste me viss mailed bawttair before I go in awven. Kook always trying baste me viss mailed bawttair.

COLLY

You must be special, dear. He uses margarine on the other help. Now get back in there and dice your tongue.

DAN

Tally, you took my glass for a kindly reason, I hope?

[Exit TALLY.]

GUS

Dan Corbett! Dan! How flavrous to see you again!

DAN

I'm not sure what to say, Gus.

GUS

Say hello! Shake my hand. It's demonstrable that you're here! The prune danish of predators. Editors! Of niction fovels.

DAN

All fovels are niction, Gus.

GUS

You know what I mean. My train goes so fast my bung can't keep up.

SHELLEY

(aside to LUDWIG)

He's very famous. Picture always in W and Vanity Fair. I wonder what he looks like in his underwear?

LUDWIG

In underwear?

GUS

Dan, I hiss you in the malls at work, I really do.

COLLY

Gus doll, you mean you miss him in the halls.

GUS

Didn't you say that?

DAN

Gus, this is hard. You took away my job. And replaced me with the office toll-booth. How'm I supposed to feel?

GUS

Dan, you looked tired. I was only thinking of you. I thought you needed a rest. But now you look --

[TALLY arrives with the snifter.]

GUS (cont'd)

You look your old self.

PRIS

Gus, you must see he is his old self!

COLLY

(aside to EVERETT:)

Now he is rich.

EVERETT

Why would you introduce me that way?

COLLY

A rare moment of honesty. I said the first thing that popped into my head. Darling, one look at you says you've lead a cashmere life -- you mustn't be ashamed of it. Such things impress Gus.

EVERETT

Luckily, he's less impressed by my treasure chest than Ludwig's.

GUS

Dan, we should talk.

COLLY

Now, Gus, I think we ought to dine before we talk business, don't you?

PRIS

Yes. We should eat first. I'll sit next to Burn.

SHELLEY

No, me!

LUDWIG

Me! Me!

TALLY

Well he has to sit between someone. He should sit between me.

COLLY

Seating is all settled. Look for your place card. Hobbs, ask Cook if he is ready.

TALLY

Ridiculous question, Cook is always ready, the horny freak.

[Exit TALLY. COLLY takes GUS's arm.]

COLLY

So, everyone! Shall we proceed? August?

BURN

(histrionic distress)

"No, Colly! We can't go in -- not like this!"

COLLY

"Oh what can you mean, Burn?"

BURN

"Mere dining pinks no suitor if consummation's still unsure!"

COLLY

Oh what can you mean, Burn?

BURN

We should negotiate, right now, terms of contract -- money, pay-out, territory, splits -- the whole stew.

PRIS

Mr. Fargo's feeling tension. I'm sure I can relieve it if we can have seven minutes alone together --

(clings to BURN's arm)

COLLY

You spend only seven minutes relieving a man!? Where were you trained -- at a McDonald's drive-thru window?

PRIS

I'm offering to take things in hand. No issue need take more than seven minutes -- right, Gus?

SHELLEY

(clutches BURN's other arm)

If Burn is feeling tension, I have just the opening --

PRIS

-- Shelley, there's a proper place for everything --

[Enter TALLY. Announcing:]

TALLY

Dinner...is...served!

COLLY

No -- dinner is not served! Tell Cook...tell him we need seven minutes.

GUS

(gleeful)

So we should negotiate here and now?

PRIS

Negotiate standing up? I've done it, but --

COLLY

But Burn, how can I? I don't --

BURN

(shaking off PRIS and SHELLEY)

-- Colly, we're among friends here! We all want the same thing, don't we?

TALLY

I don't want the same thing. I call it a day wasted if I don't say three things you never heard before.

COLLY

Still, to negotiate -- right in front of everyone?

BURN

A voyeur's delight.

PRIS

But what's the book?!

GUS

I'm not worried about the book. If he wrote it, I want it. Ever since I read *Infantile Bitch* I knew he was the man for me. Colly! I'm coming after ya!

[GUS assumes wrestler's crouch. After a beat of adjustment, COLLY follows suit. Pugnaciously:]

COLLY

You'd better. In a negotiation a gentleman always comes after the lady.

[ALL scramble noisily into a spectators' semi-circle, sitting, standing where they can.]

PRIS

(still standing)

I'd like to start by saying --

COLLY

No you wouldn't. Sit, Pris.

SHELLEY

(breaks into a jig)

I think I could avoid all this --

GUS

No you couldn't. Shit, Selley.

PRIS

But, Gus, I thought I was the one who --

GUS

Pris, I'll do this! Baggling is my hag! And it's funsy!

[GUS and COLLY circle each other, adopt the jeering macho talk of street fights: "You are lunch, sucker!" "You're mine, douche!" etc.]

PRIS

But I've got a --

[The OTHERS cry out, 'Down in front! Siddown! Outta the way!' etc. PRIS pulls back. During the negotiation, OTHERS maintain a background of ringside-fan cheer-and-gasp. GUS grabs at COLLY's leg and misses.]

GUS

A million dollars, world rights!

COLLY

Oh please! I came here to talk money!

(grabbing and missing)

Fifteen million, U.S. only, no subsidiaries!

GUS

No fair making me laugh. Two million five, world, I'll let you keep audio.

(lunges, misses)

COLLY

Twelve-five, North America only, all on signing!

(catches his sleeves, tries to scramble around behind him)

GUS

Four million, a quarter on signing! World English!

[They are locked together now, grappling wildly, each trying to gain a decisive hold. Much cheering around them.]

COLLY

Get serious, Wet Wick! You want this book or not? There's others love to hondle-fondle for this one.

GUS

I've got this one -- just like I got you --

[Suddenly they're horizontal, Colly on top.]

COLLY

Gussie, baby, I'm not feeling anything. You're not rising to the occasion.

[GUS heaves her off; now he's on top.]

GUS

Oh you look so sexy when you lie, Coll-doll. My last offer: Six million, hard-soft, right to license, sixty-fourty U.K.

[COLLY escapes from under him, they roll about, limbs intertwining, GUS is kissing her neck hungrily. COLLY responds, pushing away with hands, pulling in with her wrapping legs, etc.]

COLLY

My last offer: Ten million, you keep second serial.

GUS

I always keep second serial! My last offer: Seven, you keep first serial. Oh Colly! Colly!

COLLY

Oh Gus, Gus, you know how I love it when you give me first serial! My last offer: Nine million, half and half! Give it to me, Gus! I want it! Oh how I want it!

GUS

I want it too, Colly! Oh yes! Oh yes! But not at nine!
My last offer! Seven-five! In thirds! Colly my love!

*[Rising passions. COLLY is on her back, legs
and arms wrapped around GUS; he burrows and
groans; this thing is coming to a climax --]*

COLLY

Oh my sweet! Yes! Yes! But no. My last offer: Eight-
five, half on sig, then quarters! Oh that's so right!

GUS

Seven-eight!

COLLY

Eight-two!

GUS

Seven-nine!

COLLY

Eight-one!

[Climaxing the negotiation:]

GUS AND COLLY (SIMULTANEOUSLY)

Eight! Eight! Eight! It's a deal!!

*[Cheers all round. COLLY and GUS remain in
nuzzling aftermath. OTHERS drift away.]*

PRIS

See? That didn't even take three minutes.

SHELLEY

I could beat that.

PRIS

That's not a boast in a man, Shelley.

LUDWIG

She implies a distinction between a race horse and a
stallion.

DAN

(to EV privately)

I say negotiations are a matter for the vice squad.

EVERETT

Only if money actually changes hands.

PRIS

(to SHELLEY)

Okay, Loewy's got the book. I'm still pissed, though.

SHELLEY

I always thought you publishers were so bookish. You make negotiation look like fun!

PRIS

Well, sometimes they're frustrating -- like when you negotiate and negotiate but don't reach deal.

EVERETT

(to BURN privately)

You look anxious.

TALLY

So y'all ready to eat now? Dinner...is...served!

(to EV)

Wait -- you should be over there!

EVERETT

I'll decide where I should be.

[After a stare-down, TALLY sulks away.]

EVERETT (cont'd)

Why anxious?

BURN

It's my natural state as a writer -- a farmer hoping for rain. Beware of writers, Ev.

EVERETT

And of actors. Musicians. Painters. Beware of artists.

(indicates supine GUS and COLLY)

I know you somehow planned this. What's happening?

BURN

It's all for Dan. Wait. There's more to come.

[Focus to COLLY and GUS.]

COLLY

We ought to talk about the movie.

GUS

You want to be in my movie? I might arrange it, for a consideration.

COLLY

Your movie? I didn't give you the movie. It's not 'your' movie.

GUS

(sitting up)

You didn't give me anything. I'm paying eight million, and for eight million -- Oh! Pris --

[GUS stands; COLLY stands.]

GUS (cont'd)

There's another detail.

LUDWIG

Why aren't you spoonerizing your words any more?

GUS

I only do that when I'm tense -- I'm a sensitive, poignant man. But when I'm on sure ground I never whatever-that-is. Pris. Before I came tonight, I agreed the editor on Burn's new book would be Dan Corbett.

PRIS AND DAN (SIMULTANEOUSLY)

You what?!

GUS

Yes, I what. It's part of the deal.

PRIS

But Gus -- this negotiates up my plan!

DAN

And I will not be screwed over this way. Who are you people to decide what I will do and won't do?

PRIS

Why don't you show us the new book.

LUDWIG

Yes! The first since *Infidel Beach*.

COLLY

We're all dying to see, dying.

GUS

Right! Show everyone how shrewd I am!

BURN

August, my new book restores a lost tradition from your grandfather's days at Loewy.

GUS

Ah? Sounds good! Sounds good!

PRIS

What tradition?

BURN

Why, poetry, of course.

GUS

What?

BURN

Poetry. Metrical writing? Verse?

PRIS

Poetry?

TALLY

Poetry?

GUS

Poetry!?!?

BURN

"The best words in the best order."

PRIS

Pope!

LUDWIG

Coleridge.

SHELLEY

Zoogy, there was no Pope Coleridge.

GUS

Not a novel?! I offered eight million dollars for a book of poems?!

TALLY

From Fargo that's novel.

GUS

I didn't do it.

BURN

You did. You went from bed to verse.

GUS

Colly!

COLLY

August, I didn't know! Poetry! How exciting! For another million I'll give you the movie rights.

[GUS goes still, looks around, absorbs what's just happened to him. He cries out:]

GUS

I FEEL FUTTERLY UCKED!

[Lights dim; ALL remain in place. TALLY comes forward in spot.]

TALLY

Lord, what fools these raptors be;
They judge our Burn an easy prey,
While he enraptures them for play.
Thus ravishers all are we.

*[OVER: the first eight Joplin notes. TALLY
turns up, singing "Marching Onward, Marching
Onward" as...]*

FIRST ACT CURTAIN

ACT TWO

[SCENE ONE]

[Action continues from Act One curtain.]

GUS

I won't sign! I was incognito! Furtherless, I never had a deal! I'll swear in court I was faking it!

COLLY

Faking it?! You're trying to say you faked your deal?!

SHELLEY

The law's on his side, Colly. He doesn't have to sign. It was contractus interruptus.

COLLY

He wasn't faking it! Don't you think I can tell?

BURN

Colly, we mustn't coerce August! Contracts between friends should never come between them, right, Shelley?

SHELLEY

Nothing binds together and thrusts apart like a contract.

COLLY

This is nonsense! We dickered right there, and I tell you we both had a deal! August, darling, you do drive a hard bargain. How 'bout I give you back Albanian rights? And maybe Uruguay. Burn is very big in Uruguay.

GUS

Can it Colly. You're wasting your words.

LUDWIG

Ah -- he copes with his handicap by saying words beginning with the same letter. Actually, when he said "wasting words" he switched the two 'w's, but who except me could tell?

BURN

I believe I can speak for Gus when I declare that deal vull and noid. Shall we try again after dinner?

TALLY

Dinner...is...cold!

BURN

Knowing your kitchen, I say, "Hail, Colly! We who are about to dine salute you!" Ev?

[Exit BURN and EV left. TALLY follows.]

PRIS

(privately to GUS)

Gus, you realize as things stand now, we have no book?

GUS

Well, I know...

PRIS

He said let's try again. This time let me do the negotiating.

GUS

With Colly? Pris, I had no idea you were that way!

PRIS

With Fargo. After dinner.

COLLY

August?

GUS

(goes to COLLY, offers his arm)

Coming, my swallow! No hard feelings?

COLLY

I would swear in court there were.

(realizes DAN with PRIS is a no-go)

Shelley, I think you should escort Pris. Come, everyone!

[Exit COLLY and GUS.]

SHELLEY

(arm to PRIS)

Priscilla, I'm picturing you in underwear, and I see money!

PRIS

Underwear? I don't own any underwear.

[Exit SHELLEY and PRIS; DAN, LUDWIG remain.]

DAN

It can't be poetry. What's going on here?

LUDWIG

Mr. Fargo is marvelous! Now that he's met me and all my expectations, I'm going to propose a collaboration!

DAN

Mr. Fargo can't collaborate. With humans.

LUDWIG

This one's a matter of life and non-life.

DAN

That's not enough to enable him to collaborate. Now, Ludwig, I fear it's just you and I.
(offers his arm)

LUDWIG

Fear not -- when it comes to dinners, I am known for making a puffy souffle and a pleasant companion.

[Exit DAN, LUDWIG. Lights dim for ten seconds. Lights up. ALL except TALLY, BURN, and COLLY straggle in together, glumly bent and silenced by post-prandial sluggishness and balked plans. ALL sit in slumping disarray. ALL go still. Enter BURN and COLLY, both entirely alert.]

COLLY

I've seen the birdies fed. A ravenous flock they are. Hobbs is a condiment, I must say. I assume there was a subtle symbolism to her serving in a gas mask. Could you make out what she was humming inside that mask?

BURN

Dan still seems willing to return to Loewy. Gus's foolishness before dinner didn't dissuade him, so I'll have to press the case.

(indicates the comatose company)

You do pour wine with an anarchist's zeal, Colly.

COLLY

Oh, no, no, no! This won't do!

(strides down, clapping hands)

No meditating here! My home is not a retreat.

[Enter TALLY in medic's smock; on her back we'll eventually see the word: STAPH.]

TALLY

Coffee's brewing. Look -- the Gland Canyon awakes.

LUDWIG

I dreamt I won the Nobel Peace Prize -- for the overflowing gifts I brought to bear on Burn Fargo's works! The poor Swedes misspelled 'Peace'. Oh Mr. Fargo, we were meant to mix our metaphors!

GUS

(to no one in particular)

Artichokes always give me a hard-on.

COLLY

There were no artichokes.

GUS

Oh? Then I must have got a hard-on from something else, and it made me think of artichokes.

SHELLEY

Did I disgrace myself?

EVERETT

No, it was entertaining when you tie-clipped your tongue.

SHELLEY

I'm not usually that unusual. It must have been the Mongolian wine. Did you have the blue or the black?

COLLY

Eating habits are so revealing. In 1950 Raber showed that a long-eared owl, *Asio Otus*, will not eat offered meat if it's already well-fed, but if presented with live mice it will continue to kill them. Thus, he reasoned, different behavior-centers control eating and killing.

BURN

You will note, Miss Zeugma, you are not the only expert among us. Our hostess is a bird-brain scholar.

COLLY

Ha ha! Couldn't you listen to this man all night? And maybe even at breakfast. Of course you could.

PRIS

Can we repair the shambles this evening has become?

COLLY

Shambles? I don't see a single shamble.

GUS

As a boy, I was told there are more dykes in Holland than any other country. I wonder why that should be?

COLLY

Well maybe one shamble.

PRIS

I think we should caucus.

COLLY

Yes, let's do, let's caucus. 'Til coffee.

[OTHERS pair up. TALLY gestures: a spell. OTHERS flap, make bird sounds, freeze into silence. TALLY enjoys it.]

BURN

Let's see now, the point of these last few minutes was...?

TALLY

Wait. Ah: I remember: They characterize.

BURN

Them or you? You have the story. Now the test for the story, Tal.

TALLY

Why? If I think up a story, that's all the test it needs. Oh. Granted: You were right to test my idea for a comic novel about Mother Teresa.

BURN

Just like with the story, you have to come up with the test on your own. We've got half an hour.

[TALLY pauses, removes spell; BURN shoos her off left, follows her. Focus on PRIS and GUS.]

PRIS

My plan is, get him alone and push for a two-book contract. For the same eight million.

GUS

What if he hasn't written a word? He could take five years to deliver. Cost of money horrific. The interest on four million at six percent compounded for five years is one million three hundred forty nine thousand five hundred nineteen dollars and eighty-eight cents. I figured that out just standing here.

PRIS

That's marvelous, Gus, but --

GUS

I suppose it is. I can also tell you how old you are. What year were you born?

PRIS

Gus, if he hasn't written anything, you don't pay four million on signing. I want to smoke him out.

GUS

How?

PRIS

I'll bare my soul to him.

GUS

For God's sake don't do that! You have to win his trust!

PRIS

What's this about Dan being his editor?

GUS

Colly said it's a deal-breaker.

PRIS

I don't believe it. I know!: At eight million dollars you could say it's a deal-breaker if I'm not the editor!

GUS

You? On an eight-million-dollar book? When I could have Dan Corbett?

PRIS

Gus, who always says yummy to your vile appetites and gives you one of these?

(makes finger-and-thumb circle, the "okay" sign)

Anyway, you can't have them both. You let Corbett go after I told you he and Fargo had clashed about something and split up. Loewy almost lost Fargo because of him! I have editorial gifts Corbett can't match. I'll prove it to Fargo by giving him a sample.

GUS

I'll have to think about this...How does one think about something?

PRIS

Don't think, just watch.

GUS

All right, you're sure you can negotiate better than me, so try it. But if you fail me, it's all over. There'll be no appeal, Peel. We'll caucus again later.

[focus to DAN and COLLY]

DAN

How can you be party to this?

COLLY

I don't know what happened between you and Burn, but I'm sure when he attached you to the book, he was trying to help you.

DAN

I've run my own life for sixty years. I'm not yet at the stage where I need a primary caregiver.

COLLY

Dan. I know you a bit, Dan -- including a brief *intime* interlude a while back? You never should have taken the Editor-in-Chief job at Loewy.

(MORE)

COLLY (cont'd)

You're not a manager, you're an editor. And a great one. When you asked if I knew of any openings, you hinted you'd even be willing to work for Gus again. That's what I told Burn.

DAN

Well I would, I think. I guess. But only if I reported to him, not Pris. Gus...Gus I seem to have suppressed. All I recall from those final days is Pris, clawing her way up my back...And Burn -- the more I think about why we quarreled, or, rather, why I quarreled...

(shakes his indecisive head)

COLLY

I can see you feel up in the air. In the dark. At sea. I should tell you about seagulls at night...

[They turn away; focus on GUS and EV.]

GUS

You're a quiet ting-a-ling. Little thing!

EVERETT

With some people I like listening.

GUS

I never got the knack of it, that listening. Do you listen for something -- or how does it work?

EVERETT

I'm listening for something right now.

GUS

Ah? What sound would you like me to make!

EVERETT

A distant one?

[EV moves from GUS to DAN.]

DAN

You look as disoriented as I am.

EVERETT

The strangest...Were we drugged? I had a Xanadu vision. I was in the White House --

DAN

You were the first lady.

EVERETT

Yes. I observed all the protocols for my husband. Hosting dinners, entertaining ambassadors. Then came pregnancy. But we were both pregnant...

[Focus moves to SHELLEY and LUDWIG.]

SHELLEY

I still need him alone. I have an offer he can't refuse.

LUDWIG

Me too! I need him after you.

SHELLEY

(jigs)

This is a nervous tic. I'm not conscious of this dance as I do it.

[COLLY and TALLY join them.]

COLLY

How can Burn remain so cool? I'm so twitchy I could dance too.

[COLLY shuffles several steps with SHELLEY.]

TALLY

I wonder if that could be it.

COLLY

What could be it?

TALLY

A dance.

COLLY

"A dance"?

TALLY

Yes -- you know: a rhythmic and patterned succession of steps, usually to music.

COLLY

Don't be articulate, Hobbs, it shows a want of manners.

[BURN enters left, exits center; PRIS follows.]

SHELLEY

Look! That was Mr. Fargo!

LUDWIG

And Pris followed him!

SHELLEY

Where'd everybody go?

ALL OTHERS (SIMULTANEOUSLY)

Well thanks very much!

[BLACKOUT]

[SCENE 2]

[Lights up on Colly's bathroom, egregiously done up in a bird/aviary motif. Perhaps a Victorian birdcage ceiling of faux bamboo; sky-blue crushed velvet wall with exotic birds in illustration or relief; toucan light fixtures with incandescent beaks; swan-neck sink-faucet; owl weight-scale; flamingo towel racks, etc. And, of course, the love-seat brace of toilets, disguised as peacocks. Bathroom door up right; left, shower-curtains. BURN, jacket off, is at the ludicrous sink, drying his hands. opens; we hear a poodle's yap-yap in the background as PRIS bolts in.]

PRIS

Christ! I hate French dogs! He's insulted because I didn't compliment him on his fur.

BURN

That's Dame Edna. You're not really his type.

PRIS

I hope I'm not intruding.

(looks about)

Good God! Does she never let up? Why can't she just keep plants like other people?

(sits on "peacock love-seat" without realizing it's a toilet)

BURN

I won't delay your passage -- I was about to leave.

PRIS

Don't! I came in here to join you. Here -- sit.

BURN

(sitting on other toilet lid)

Odd pair, this.

[PRIS, primed to woo, is puzzled by his remark. BURN rises a bit, reaches between his legs, and flaps the feathery toilet seat at her. PRIS abruptly becomes aware of what she is sitting on -- jumps to her feet.]

PRIS

Oh! I didn't realize -- What shit taste!

BURN

You find her toilets uncommodious?

PRIS

How could -- ? If there's one thing I like to do alone --

(sits down again)

Wait. How silly to get uptight about something like this. To each his own. Or their own. To eaches. What's the plural for 'each'? Ha ha! Maybe this intimate setting is right, because -- well you know why I say that, don't you?

BURN

Of course.

PRIS

It's obvious why I'm here.

BURN

It is.

PRIS

Is it obvious enough?

BURN

It's just right -- like good art: not so obvious as to be obvious, not so subtle as to baffle, discomfort, and alienate.

PRIS

The last thing I want to do is discomfort you.

BURN

I sense that.

PRIS

I want to comfort you.

BURN

That's very comforting.

PRIS

Just tell me how. I'm open to anything. But, first -- can we make the eight-million deal a two-book contract? We'll do the novel first and then the poetry.

BURN

Which novel?

PRIS

"Which"? You have more than one?

BURN

I have lots of novels. You'd like a long one I have about two lovers. Might even be two volumes.

PRIS

Two volumes? Oh, no, Burn, two volumes is death, it really is. Maybe we can cut it down. Tell me about the lovers.

BURN

They're devoted to each other but society disapproves. So in the end they commit suicide.

PRIS

Suicide? The lovers commit suicide? Oh, Burn, suicide is death, it really is. Maybe we can change the ending. Who are these people? I mean, like, where do they live and everything?

BURN

They're two lovely souls: mute Islamic lesbians in Esfahan in the seventeenth century.

PRIS

(stares; stands)

You said you have more than one novel.

BURN

But that's the one I thought you'd enjoy.

PRIS

You thought that. Two volumes about dumb pagan dykes in burlap underwear that offed themselves in Africa back before soap was invented.

BURN

Colly is thinking Disney. They did that courageous *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*.

PRIS

Why are you this way with me? Is it Dan? I didn't cost him his job -- he did. For example, he wouldn't piss on Danielle Steel, but I would, gladly. I know what the public wants.

BURN

What do you read?

PRIS

(sits)

What do you mean? I'm an editor -- I read what's submitted.

BURN

Before you worked, what did you read?

PRIS

Actually, my major in college was theater. Drama. Old plays, and so forth.

BURN

Ah, right: Etherege, Wycherley, Farquhar, Van Brugh.

[PRIS looks blank.]

BURN (cont'd)

Congreve? You maybe read a line or two of Congreve?

PRIS

Oh, Congreve. I loved him -- Thomas Congreve was one of my favorites.

BURN

William. William Makepeace Congreve?

PRIS

Oh -- as soon as you say it! I guess I confused Congreve with Thomas Blake. All right, so you're playing with me. Is it foreplay? I mean, are you and I going to make it to the dotted line here, or what? I'll give you a quick bonus right here, if I can just have your word --

BURN

I've always wondered what it's like to edit a book. How do you edit a book?

PRIS

That's the simplest part of being an editor. The hard part is getting the book under contract in the first place. And then publishing it right. And then keeping the author by supporting and comforting him. Oh! I don't mean comfort that way! The only author I'd want to comfort that way is you.

BURN

So how do you edit? Do you at least read the sucker?!

PRIS

(startled, sensing hazard)

Yes! Often! I mean -- of course you read it!

BURN

And then what?

PRIS

Then you tell the author what you think. You read it, and then you say to the author, "This is what I think." I mean, if you think anything.

BURN

They're nice, those books where you don't think anything.

PRIS

Well, I guess they are --

BURN

But anyone could do that, couldn't they? Read a book and tell an author what she thinks?

PRIS

Oh, Burn, I'd never tell you what I think. I mean, if you didn't want me to.

BURN

That implies anyone can be an editor, critic, curator. Don't you need a reliable sensibility? And then craft, technical know-how for diagnosing an ailing book?

[PRIS abruptly stands, strides to lock the bathroom door; starts unbuttoning herself.]

PRIS

You want craft? I've got craft Dan Corbett can't touch. Communication skills. Natural gifts for closing a sale --

BURN

(restraining hand to her arm)

Hold. I have a confession. I'm going to reveal something I'm ashamed of. You mustn't tell anyone. Promise you won't tell anyone.

PRIS

(lewd, winkish readiness)

Oh, God, what's he going to say?

BURN

"What people are ashamed of usually makes a good story." Scott Fitzgerald said that. Except this isn't something I've done -- it's something I could do.

PRIS

Tell me! Oh, wow -- what I'm thinking!

BURN

My confession is: I actually could screw you.

PRIS

What?

BURN

(histrionic self-recrimination)

It's a defect, I know it is. Society condemns us -- all of my kind -- for this weakness. But it's not fair! It was born in me! I didn't choose to be this way!

PRIS

You! You are such --

BURN

But I can fight this devil! God has helped me recognize the unnatural and reject it! He never meant man to couple with the likes of you, and I shall conquer --

PRIS

-- You shit! You absolute prick-fuck-shitball!
(buttoning herself furiously)
The humiliating thing is, I actually dreamt of you last night. In the dream your thing was a great big pencil --

BURN

And yours an electric sharpener?

[PRIS slams out. Pained dog-yelp off. Enter TALLY from the curtained shower stall, in southern-plantation garb. Twirls.]

TALLY

You like my bayou ensemble? I think I know the test --

[Bathroom door opens. We hear a yap-whimpering. TALLY dashes back into shower. Enter SHELLEY.]

SHELLEY

I think Dame Edna may be damaged. Would Priss assault Dame Edna?

BURN

If it closed a sale.

SHELLEY

He's such a pussycat. Colly's cute little transvestite doggy. But Priss looked furious. I hope I'm not intruding. Actually I'm glad to find you alone. I have a proposition. No, no, I mean a business proposition. Scandalous, how rumors start! What makes them spread so?

BURN

They're airborne. Society's whooping cough.

SHELLEY

Mr. Fargo, I can make you a large fortune. In advertising. I know a famous actor who's the voice-over for a foreign car -- well, actually he's not the car's voice, and where it's made it's not a foreign car -- but that's not the point. The point is, he's made more money from those commercials than he did in fifty years of show biz. And it can be fun. You'll meet lingerie models. People will stop you on the street and want to see your underwear.

BURN

My underwear. The secret of my success.

SHELLEY

Yes! I got this idea from that photo of you in Colly's office -- you're in your undies throwing the spear?

BURN

Javelin. That was a high school track suit, Shelley.

SHELLEY

I saw that picture and it came to me: Literary pop-stars in their underwear! Picture it -- Shakespeare in Calvin Klein skivvies! Agatha Christie! Moby Dick! My brother-in-law's in advertising, he sells space, and he says this is the spaciest idea he ever heard! 'Cause that's how ads work. People see you in Jockey-Shorts, and they say, "I want to win a Pulitzer, so I better wear Jockey-Shorts!" Think of it, Mr. Fargo: an occasional two minutes in front of a camera and you'd never have to write another word!...What's the matter? Have I said the wrong thing?

BURN

Shelley, if I offered you a million dollars never to have sex again, would you take it?

SHELLEY

A million dollars?...No. No.

BURN

Ten million?

SHELLEY

Ten million?...Ten?....Could I still pull my pork?...No, no -- what's the point of being rich if...

(a brief distressed jig)

Mr. Fargo, if you're saying you'd like to keep on writing, then do that! Everyone has a hobby!

BURN

If my face became known, I'm afraid I'd be exposed. Has Colly never told you I'm a pedant? Being a writer is a nice cover for my pedantry.

SHELLEY

Oh just hop a plane to Tangiers or Thailand, the way other rich pedant writers do. I hear they practice pedantry right out in the open there.

BURN

You still have Pris. I noticed you trying to get a look at her underwear.

SHELLEY

I've re-thought that. Pris in Jockey-Shorts leaves something to be desired. Here's my persuader.

(takes check from pocket)

(MORE)

SHELLEY (cont'd)

Behold! A check made out to you for a million dollars just for signing on. It's already covered by sponsors if you accept.

BURN

(takes check)

Good. We can practice the ancient shriving rite 'ignis monetas'.

(setting fire to the check)

Means 'money fire.'

SHELLEY

Oh! Look what -- Oh!

*(waves frantically at the smoke,
begins jigging madly)*

Look what you've done! My jig-jag! It's a bad one!

[Enter LUDWIG.]

LUDWIG

Oh, poor Shelley! Hysterically hoppy again.

(to BURN)

We'll smooth it out and it'll subside.

[LUDWIG moves beside SHELLEY, takes SHELLEY's hand and starts dancing to a smoother rhythm, trying to coax SHELLEY under control. LUDWIG la-dee-da-dee-da's calming notes; gradually SHELLEY also la-dee-da's and begins to smooth out. They at last get into a rhythm and finish. SHELLEY is still again.]

SHELLEY

I'm leaving. This has been an ignimionious experience. I don't understand writers -- are you man born of woman? If all Colly's clients are like this, I can see why she's at home with her loons and cuckoos.

(Exit SHELLEY, jigging)

BURN

Well, enough of this party-room tumult -- I shall seek seclusion in the main salon.

LUDWIG

Oh no -- don't leave! I haven't come to the bathroom to go to the bathroom. But I suppose everyone's popping in, hoping to get a piece of you.

(notices love-seat toilets)

What's this -- one for pee-pee and one for poo-poo? Miss Collier is so fastidious. Love her poodle. Its sequined garter belt is divine.

BURN

What piece of me are you after Ms. Zeugma?

LUDWIG

Mr. Fargo, I want to have your child.

BURN

Wrong guy -- I don't have a child.

LUDWIG

I know, and we must change that! Knock me down and knock me up! I put it that way because you always knock me out, so I assume you're into rough sex. It can be at your convenience and apartment.

BURN

Why ever would you choose me, Ms. Zeugma?

LUDWIG

Because you understand me! In *Seeing the Island*, you created a character that was me! The young Lexa, smarter than everyone around her, but always so quiet! I could talk for hours about her. And her always feeling ...incomplete!

BURN

Why not tap into Gus? I'm sure you could arrange a meeting of the minds.

LUDWIG

Then my baby would wix her merds up. Miss Collier seems to enjoy him, though -- why's that I wonder?

BURN

They feel a kinship: One watches birds, the other botches words.

LUDWIG

...? Oh! See? That's exactly why I want to do this! A baby shouldn't feel incomplete, unfinished. With your talent plus my attributes, our child can feel sure she's finished! This would be the baby to end all babies!

BURN

Ms. Zeugma, I smoke cigars, drink, use bad words, watch fights and football on tv, forget where I put my keys --

LUDWIG

-- Such manly traits!

BURN

But imagine a little girl with those traits. I would now ask you --

(ushering her to the door)

-- to take no offense, no notes, and your departure.

LUDWIG

Oh please think about it! I'll be waiting in anticipation and the living room! Burn Fargo shouldn't be gone before he begets!

[Exit LUDWIG; enter TALLY from shower stall.]

BURN

Ah -- her Talness yet again. I can't think why this is called a rest room.

TALLY

I just recalled: I made Shelley a nervous farter, and you changed it to a nervous jig! You butted in again.

BURN

I didn't cut it, I just changed it. This is your creation, but I draw the line at stooping to fart-jokes.

TALLY

Who stooped? The most I had him was bending at the waist.

BURN

You're here with good news, Tally?

TALLY

I know how to test the Louisiana music.

BURN

Of course you do.

TALLY

In that case --

[Enter COLLY from shower stall.]

COLLY

-- I thought I'd find you here.

TALLY

What's that supposed to mean?!

COLLY

What's that horrid odor? I once smelled burning flesh but this is worse.

BURN

Burning money?

COLLY

That's it! We must get out of here. We need you in the salon anyway. The whole party's on pause -- everyone suspended like characters waiting for someone to finish writing their parts.

TALLY

You may inform them that I shall attend them presently.

COLLY

What?!

[EVERETT bursts through regular door.]

EVERETT

We have to talk!

BURN

Hold, please, Ev. You too, Tally. There are resolutions yet to come. Colly, I agree we should all gather again. You can give a bird lecture.

OTHERS (SIMULTANEOUSLY)

But when do we --? You haven't -- What about -- ?

[BURN raises a silencing hand.]

BURN

We need something more. We need...

TALLY

Music!

BURN

And something more still. We need...a chorus.

TALLY

A chorus...Of chorus!

*(wields imaginary cardiac-arrest
shock-paddles)*

Clear! The heart of art needs my jump-start!

BURN

Uh-uh. Never promise art. Try that again.

TALLY

(pause, recites properly)

We never promise art,

But craft we must supply.

Loose story-threads I start

In knitted yarns he'll tie.

[Exit ALL, BURN leading.]

[BLACKOUT]

[SCENE 3]

[Lights up on living room. COLLY is discovered facing off-left, addressing her listeners.]

COLLY

Imprinting, which occurs in early infancy, is by no means confined to the class Aves, though Lorenz's study of geese is the most cited research. He noted that newly hatched goslings become attached to the first large moving object they see, and promptly follow it with great pertinacity. Occasionally, through accident, the first large object they see and imprint on is not appropriate.

[Enter BURN followed by all OTHERS except TALLY; OTHERS are in birdy-mode.]

COLLY (cont'd)

For example, Hassler reports the case of a Ruffled Grouse, *Bonasa umbellus*, that became imprinted on a farm tractor, and not only followed it about the fields but put on avid courtship displays in front of it.

[Various OTHERS put on vamping courtship displays in front of the strolling BURN.]

COLLY (cont'd)

In 1958 Hess established that the greater the effort for a duckling to follow its object, the more firmly it becomes imprinted. Thus, the faster it has to run --

[BURN speeds up, climbs over furniture, etc.]

COLLY (cont'd)

-- and the more obstacles it must struggle with, the deeper the imprinting. Hess further found that if chicks were dealt electric shocks during imprinting sessions, the imprinting was enhanced.

[BURN feigns kicks and slaps at OTHERS; he tricks them off his trail and exits left.]

COLLY (cont'd)

Birds are so like people, are they not?...I do hope you're all enjoying yourselves as much as I am!

[The OTHERS, distressed and baffled at losing their object, drift in attitudes of lethargy and defeat, emitting small, forlorn birdy sounds, moving heads instead of eyes, etc. Enter TALLY, in stunning ballroom dress. She raises her sorcerer's hand. We hear the opening Joplin notes. ALL freeze. TALLY surveys her work, is satisfied.]

TALLY

And now the test: We dance!

[She hurtles off left. The fully orchestrated motif commences.]

[Enter TALLY and BURN. BURN has assumed some swank accoutrements of dress -- an egregious ruffled shirt, a striking fedora, whatever pleases. They dance a shortened "Real Slow Drag" -- a fetching combination of extravagance and grace. As the piece develops, TALLY and BURN dance in turn with OTHERS. OTHERS join in the singing chorus. Triumphant climax. OTHERS reassume spellbound stillness.]

TALLY (cont'd)

Okay, we tested. Now what -- you pee in a cup?

BURN

In an inkwell. How's it feeling to you?

[BURN puts his hand on TALLY's forehead.]

TALLY

Don't know yet. Not bad. When the chorus idea came to me, I began to think maybe.

BURN

We'll know soon. Now -- back to the party. During Colly's imprinting lecture, I was a good sport as you made sport of me. But this next Ludwig-Shelley exchange is sophomoric, Tal, and it's not needed. If this were my thing I'd cut it.

TALLY

Well there's the difference between you and Willy-boy. You'd have thrown my Osric out of *Hamlet*. Will loved him. A guy named Partridge wrote a whole book about me called "Shakespeare's Bawdy". George Orwell once told me it's my "unnecessary touches" that made Dickens great.

BURN

The "authority" card doesn't work on me. I'm not Will, Dickens, Joyce, or Orwell.

TALLY

No, you're not. But I admit you're more fun than some clients I've had. Milton, Hardy, Teddy Dreiser -- next to them, the Easter Island statues are comedy-club material. But remember, like you said, discipline makes for good, but to be great you gotta be reckless.

BURN

Not "reckless": Daring.

TALLY

So you misspoke yourself. I won't tell anyone.

[TALLY lifts spell. TALLY and BURN exit left.]

COLLY

Why is my throat sore? I must go gargle on purpose.

[Exit COLLY up. Focus on SHELLEY and LUDWIG.]

SHELLEY

This day began bad. I got up on the wrong side of the bed. That was bad because my bed is against the wall. Then I put my shoes on inside out. That's never good. We should leave. I'm exhausted.

LUDWIG

Why, poorest thing?

SHELLEY

Mr. Fargo has been baiting me.

LUDWIG

But that plays right into your hands! You're a master baiter!

[Focus on GUS and PRIS.]

GUS

You lack the ruddy bloom of aftermath. I take it your editorial sample didn't swing the two-book deal.

PRIS

Wasn't possible. There's no two-book deal because there isn't even one book. I haven't lost my touch -- he has. The man is impotent. His pencil is broken.

GUS

And you can't sharpen it.

PRIS

You can't sharpen Silly-Putty, Gus!

GUS

So now you've lost Burn Fargo! My disappointment is extreme. I took pride in knowing my Editor-in-Chief could sharpen any man's pencil. Now that pride is gone.

PRIS

What are you saying?

GUS

I'm saying, I need someone who can put lead in the pencil.

(MORE)

GUS (cont'd)

I'm saying, when you lost Fargo you lost me, which means...you've lost your job.

(turns away)

PRIS

Wait, Gus -- there are still things I can do for you!

GUS

It's over, Priscilla; you blew the biggest novelist Loewy ever had.

PRIS

Ah, but, see, I didn't! I --

GUS

Miss Peel, I wouldn't let you stick my lamps.

[GUS walks away. Enter BURN and COLLY, followed by TALLY pushing a trolley with coffee.]

TALLY

Coffee...is...served!

COLLY

(clapping hands teacher-style)

Now pay attention, my flock! My exaltation of larks! My murmuration of starlings! My watch of nightingales! Don't you just love collective nouns for birds? Of course you do.

BURN

I do. Tonight I am mindful of my favorite such term.

COLLY

Which is?

BURN

A cast of hawks.

COLLY

Ha ha! How facetious! Now -- what's left to settle?

PRIS

Our accounts.

EVERETT

Our affairs.

LUDWIG

Us down.

SHELLEY

My nerves.

TALLY

Their hash.

GUS

The book! We haven't settled the book, Colly. I'm aware the poetry was just Bernard's little joke --

COLLY

So he says, and he agrees there was no deal. I know there was, but in the interest of amity I'm willing to undo it, formally, in a business-like fashion. Lie down, Gus.

GUS

Bernard, sad news: Loewy is losing Priscilla Peel. Priscilla's employment contract is up, and she will not re-see it nude. See it renewed!

PRIS

Gus! I have to say --

GUS

The contract has a discretionary termination bonus.

PRIS

Ah? Oh! Ooh.

GUS

Now, Bernard, I think this new development means you and I may have something to talk about. I bean Murn! Burn!

BURN

Dan, your plan -- to work at Loewy again -- you need help thinking about that?

DAN

I have the feeling someone is pushing my wheelchair without my consent.

BURN

August, refresh Dan's memory -- of what it was like to work for you.

GUS

Dan, you and I are as alike as two kernels in a pod.

COLLY

Peas, August. The phrase is "two peas in a pod".

GUS

Colly, with men of litters I can't use a cliché like "paws in your peed". I have to pop fresh phrases at these type, and the fact is I've had more fresh phrases than you've had hot dildos.

BURN

Tally!

[TALLY grimaces, quickly gestures.]

GUS

I mean donuts.

BURN

That's it, August. Recreate for Dan those intoxicating days at Loewy after you took over from your father. When each morning brought new challenges, new emotions, a whole new attitude.

PRIS

Gus, be careful here --

GUS

Ah -- such days they were, Dan! Colly, I'm sorry I missed your swank aviary tour tonight --

COLLY

-- It does set a certain tone. Nowhere else can you find such toney birds.

GUS

So true! And your boney turds always remind me of how Dan and I used to kill and boo like lovebirds. When Dan was at Loewy, the company was one big happy fig newton. What? What'd I say?

BURN

Recall for Dan some stimulating insights your business training brought to the world of books.

GUS

Well, for one, it taught me a product has to be user-friendly. A novel shouldn't be like one of those mail order things -- "assembly required". That means if you have to look a word up, it belongs in a crossword puzzle, not a book. Also I heard if you count the number of words-per-sentence you get the book's 'readability index'. I don't know what that is but I agree with it entirely. Also-also, I outlawed semi-colons. Either it's a colon or it's not, make up your mind, you wimps.

BURN

And you rarely argued about contracts, right?

GUS

Agh -- almost never. Well, there was one time he wanted to do a book of short stories by a dead wop, Luigi Friggandello or whatever his name was. But he saw my thinking on that in the end. Oh! Fargo! You're not a dead wop, are you?

COLLY

Uh, Burn is Irish, actually. Of the prominent Louisiana Fargos?

GUS

Irish, woppish -- Burn could be Canadian for all I care, because I know great writers are scarce as hens' balls.

COLLY

Teeth, August. Hens' teeth.

GUS

Teeth, balls -- what's the difference?

BURN

I think, Dan, that August's magical way with words has done it. I'll bet your memory of life at Loewy is now razor sharp.

DAN

You canny, manipulative...novelist.

GUS

How's that, Pris! And you say I was born with a silver fork up my nose! Who do I shake hands with first?

BURN

With he. Shake hands goodbye.

GUS

What --?

[DAN offers his hand; GUS blindly takes it.]

DAN

I almost forgot what it meant to work for you, Gus. But thanks to our friend Burn, you've brought it all back in a vivid tumbrel of memories. Your father was from a by-gone era. Under you, Loewy has become a new thing that words can't do injustice.

GUS

Working for me is a pleasure I've never had, ha ha.

DAN

Nor have I, Gus. Nothing causes partial-memory-loss like a divorce. That's why Burn schemed you and Pris and me back into the same room. In my blind rush to work again, I'd forgot how barren, dreary, and degrading a harlotry life at Loewy had become.

PRIS

You bloody stool! Crotch rash! Ominous lump!

GUS

Dan, no need pull punches. Say it: You want to talk money.

BURN

August, old sport, it was gamy of you to come here tonight and play your part so well.

GUS

Aw, listen, I'm a natural. If it weren't for this kite handyslap I could of gone on the stage.

EVERETT

The way my cat goes on the carpet.

PRIS

Gus, can't you see you've been used? Don't you get what's happening?

GUS

Ah? Is something happening?

PRIS

There is no book! The whole thing was a set-up to humiliate me! Colly, if we had an Olympic bitch team, you'd carry the flag into the stadium!

COLLY

And if you were an Olympic gymnast, I'd ask you to go you-know-what yourself.

GUS

There is a book, isn't there?

BURN

Somewhere there is a book.

GUS

(to EVERETT:)

You, you're rich, you'd know: Is there a book?

EVERETT

I believe there's something stirring.

GUS

But is it stirring to Loewy?

BURN

No it's stirring to me.

GUS

Yes, I know, but --

PRIS

Gus -- face it! We've both been had!

GUS

Wait -- I want a sincere response from Farn Burgo. Furn Bargo! This man here!

BURN

I am sincere with you -- because you can't hurt me. Invulnerability is the father of sincerity.

GUS

Meaning -- ?

PRIS

Meaning you've just been told to piss off!

GUS

Garbo! Colly! Rich girl! Are you telling me to go!?

PRIS

If Gus'll go, Priss'll go whistle you. What?!

BURN

Ah, then Priss, stay not upon the order of your blowing, but blow.

PRIS

(steering GUS toward the door)

At least now I'll never have to read your shitty books. Which I never have, Spewmaster! Who wants to read books that long?

GUS

If I may freak spankly, this is damn meeky in a chick. Cheeky! In a mick! I'm where I am by right of inheritance, but you Irish have only scratched your wog out of the bay. Bay out of the wog! Agh! Why can't I talk like him? Colly, I take it back! You did indeed screw me, and I am Dutch misappointed. Wherefell!

[Exit GUS and PRIS to a chorus of Wherefells!]

LUDWIG

Oo! I can't believe we poked fun at his handicap.

SHELLEY

...? But surely it's no good poking fun at a man's strengths?

TALLY

Iced coffee...is...served!

COLLY

So, Dan?

DAN

All right, I'm enlightened -- but as an epiphany it's a mixed blessing. I've saved my sanity but lost a job. To whom do we next say "Wherefell" -- Shelley?

SHELLEY

(a quick hop or two)

Me? Colly -- does he know something I don't know?

COLLY

Dan knows things no one else knows. Shame on you, Shelley -- trying to steal my client. You can pack up your law and go obfuscate elsewhere, you're my legal man no more.

SHELLEY

(hops)

I said he could write on the side! He didn't want to!

BURN

He who writes only on the side, writes graffiti.

SHELLEY

I've lost, Bumpy. It was predictable. Whenever I'm in over my head, I stub my toe. I think we must leave.

LUDWIG

First: Mr. Fargo: That collaboration I mentioned?

COLLY

What collaboration?

LUDWIG

I wanted to know if he'd co-author something with me.

BURN

Can't do it, Ludwig. I've got a collaborator.

TALLY

Damn right!

LUDWIG

Oh, fuck.

BURN

Tally!

[TALLY gestures.]

LUDWIG

Oh, darn. Still, Miss Collier, I thank you for a wonderful evening of dissembling and deconstruction. As a dialogist I adored your guests and their speech-acts.

COLLY

Ordinarily, darling, I'd have offered you other sorts of acts, too. I do feel remiss.

LUDWIG

You mustn't be too hard on Shelley. He's very complex, for a simpleton.

SHELLEY

Yes! My complexes started as a child. You can't know what it's like to be a boy and have to wear your sister's hand-me-downs. Why should she get all the latest frocks?

LUDWIG

Mr. Fargo, this has meant the world to me! My only regret is, I forgot to bring my camera.

SHELLEY

I take a terrible picture. I've never seen one that doesn't look like me.

LUDWIG

I've studied you for years, I'm devoted to you, I know more about you than any other American scholar. I suppose it's too much to ask what your name is?

SHELLEY

(starts jiggling)

-- Moguls, we must go now.

LUDWIG

My cup runneth over, and my time.

BURN

Miss Zeugma, I take back my rehab suggestion: We've all enjoyed you just as you are.

LUDWIG

(dancing to Shelley's side)

Such an evening! I now depart -- dancing with Shelley and renewed excitement! Goodbye all!

OTHERS

Warefell, Shelley, Ludwig!

[Exit LUDWIG and SHELLEY, dancing.]

TALLY

(to DAN)

How come no roar for a refill I wonder?

DAN

Tally, only in stories by earnest drones does one lousy epiphany make the guy give up drinking forever.

(MORE)

DAN (cont'd)

I'm not drinking because I'm so becalmed I feel embalmed. The Rhyme of the Ancient Editor.

EVERETT

In my family, Mr. Corbett, we're experts on alcoholics -- and you don't look like the real thing. Sometimes drinking is like solitaire, played only in idle hours.

DAN

Of which I have a multitude.

[BURN puts his hand on TALLY's forehead. Turns, drifts to the sofa where languidly he sprawls.]

TALLY

(happy anticipation:)

What are you saying???

COLLY

Burn, I've been absolutely shameless all night, which deserves a reward. Tell me what's going on.

BURN

Better to ask what's coming off. I saw Cook heading toward the aviary with a cleaver.

COLLY

What! The fiend! I thought dinner looked familiar!
(rushes out up left)

TALLY

I gotta know: Did it take?

*[BURN says nothing, serenely raises his hand and conducts the first eight Joplin notes, which we hear **OVER.**]*

TALLY (cont'd)

It took, didn't it!

BURN

It took. We're both on fire.

EVERETT

You look... You are, aren't you?

BURN

We are. Ev, I'm in for hard, happy Louisiana days. Tally, caffeine, please.

[TALLY to trolley.]

EVERETT

He likes it black and very hot -- no sugar.

TALLY

Silvercup, I know how he likes it.

[TALLY takes a mug to BURN on the sofa; lies down and cuddles up with him.]

TALLY (cont'd)

I knew we could do it. If you couldn't procreate, I couldn't keep you, my little baby. But don't worry, I wouldn't smother you, I'd wheel you to the shopping mall and let someone steal you from the carriage.

DAN

(aside to EVERETT)

Now you know with whom you'll have to share him.

EVERETT

With her?

DAN

Don't think of Tally as a 'Her'. Tally is an It.

EVERETT

That is a 'Her' on that sofa.

DAN

Possibly, but I'm sure their relationship is... spiritual only. The fact is she can do things for him that you can't.

EVERETT

What can't I do? And why can't I?

DAN

Why can't you levitate? Time travel? Two years ago I gave him an idea for a novel, well-structured, well-reasoned. I really pressed it on him. So he worked on it for a long time, alone, without his Tally. But it never got off the ground. Before he burned himself out, he burned the manuscript -- our manuscript.

EVERETT

The truth is, I knew. He told me why you quarreled.

DAN

I should have been angry at myself, not him. I went beyond the borders of my abilities. Art does not come from the muzzle of a syllogism. That girl is irrationality personified.

EVERETT

But I don't want to tell him what to write!

DAN

She doesn't do that. She launches flights of aerial invention, he judges them. But the foundations, the buttresses, are his. Whatever finally is in the book is of his choosing. You and I, we may be great at reacting and supporting, but we can't...fly. Take what you can get, Everett.

EVERETT

Love him, love his Tally.

DAN

Love him, live with his Tally. You'll supply in ways the sprite will never match, and he needs you -- but he's an artist, and you'll never have all of him.

[Enter COLLY left.]

COLLY

Burn, you absurd man, Cook says he would never dream of taking a cleaver to one of my flock. He says he was only after a fruit fly. I adore a man who protects his fruit.

BURN

Ah, Colly, your avicidal kitchener frets me not. I am now a grave and hectic man, light with heaviness, slowed by a quickening.

TALLY

Feel!

[TALLY thrusts forward BURN's head and her own.]

COLLY

(feeling both foreheads)

Burn! You mean -- !

BURN

Yes. We are "with book".

COLLY

But when? How?

TALLY

We heard the story's tune, and it made us dance. It was a drag, actually -- a lovely drag.

COLLY

Oh Burn, Burn! You're with book!! I'm so --! Hobbs! Get off him, you're crowding him --

TALLY

I'm not crowding him, I'm populating him.

COLLY

Well you can't populate on my sofa -- with him in his condition.

BURN

No, Colly -- my condition requires cosseting, catering, daily small ignitions. Ev! Come snuggle with me.

EVERETT

You look snug enough.

BURN

Over here, Ev! I need a nuzzle and a smooch. To heat my happy brooding.

DAN

Now you face the most dreaded of life's demands: a basic decision.

EVERETT

I can make decisions, thank you.

BURN

Ev! Come to my huggery. Be part of this.

COLLY

That Hobbs -- she really isn't all there -- it was in the *New York Times*.

EVERETT

I'm told a virus is not all there.

TALLY

Don't worry about him, Low Fat -- I can give him all the nestling he needs.

EVERETT

I don't think you can: he has many needs. ...And I have my needs too!

(EV dives onto sofa.)

COLLY

Burn humors Hobbs too much. No doubt to give her self-esteem, make her feel she has a role to play.

DAN

They amuse each other.

COLLY

But now who's going to publish him?

[Telephone rings, COLLY picks up.]

COLLY (cont'd)

Hello?...Oh. Yes --

[BURN abruptly sits upright, seized with thoughts about his novel; serene beaming is gone; OTHERS stare at him.]

COLLY (cont'd)

Excuse me one moment, please.

BURN

(struggling as EV and TALLY cling)

Off! Where's that pencil and paper?

[EV snatches up pencil and paper, gives them to BURN. BURN starts scribbling.]

TALLY

Start with a title -- that always helps.

EVERETT

No, start with characters.

TALLY

Which characters? You can't pick just any old characters.

EVERETT

Which title? How can you pick a title when --

TALLY

Will you butt out? I been through this with him --

EVERETT

Is your pencil sharp enough, Burn? Is it light enough in here?

TALLY

You want more coffee? You got enough cigarettes?

EVERETT

You're in his light.

TALLY

I am his light.

BURN

Flap off. You plague me with service.

COLLY

Yes, Mr. Peebles, how fortunate you should call again. I confess we've been sizing you up in the last hour -- What? He did?

(to BURN)

It's Paul Peebles. He says you told him to call...?

DAN

Peebles?

BURN

Good publisher?

DAN

Good books -- but does he know his books? Or is he another clueless publisher-by-inheritance?

BURN

Colly -- ask Mr. Peebles what's the price for each ecstatic instant.

COLLY

What?

BURN

Just ask him.

(loudly toward phone)

"For each ecstatic instant..."

COLLY

Uh, Mr. Peeb--

(listens; to BURN:)

"We must an anguish pay"?

BURN

(loudly)

"Parting is all we know of heaven..."

COLLY

(listens; then:)

"And all we need of hell."

DAN

(loudly; looks at EV)

"The soul selects her own society;
I've known her from an ample nation
Choose one;
Then close the valves of her attention..."

[COLLY listens; then, simultaneously:]

COLLY AND EVERETT

"Like stone."

[BURN and DAN gaze at each other.]

BURN

I think you better take the phone now, Dan.

DAN

I? I should take the phone?

(uneasily takes phone)

Mr. Peebles? Dan Corbett...He did?... Yes, of course I know Pirandello...Yes, I do read Italian...Oh, I agree: they need new translations...*La Vita Nuda*, yes.

(MORE)

DAN (cont'd)

And *L'umorismo* -- very important, we need the complete text though. But before anything else: *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*.....Is this -- are you serious?

[The first four notes OVER.]

DAN (cont'd)

You need an editor?! And he'll edit Burn Fargo!?

[EV and COLLY shove victory fists in the air for DAN. DAN gives them one back. BURN rises, moves to DAN. They hug. OTHERS applaud.]

TALLY

I knew I could do it. Even if it's against my interests.

DAN

(into phone)

Mr. Peebles, I think Burn would like to say something.
(hands phone to BURN)

BURN

Paul, I thank you for keeping your word and your schedule...Yes, exactly on time...Now I think Colly has an invitation.

[BURN turns to COLLY, whispers in her ear again, gives her the telephone, returns to the sofa with EV and TALLY.]

COLLY

Mr. Peebles, I'm told we are five characters in search of a publisher...Yes, well, could you possibly pitter-patter over here right now? We could fit you up with a cup of something. We could probably fit you in a cup, ha ha!...No, no -- not too late at all. It's only the thigh of the evening...Oh good. We'll be busy gestating till you get here. Bye bye.

(hangs up)

Oh, Dan, you look so handsome when you're stupefied.

DAN

(regards menage a trois on sofa)

Pity the successful artist. Everybody's tit.

COLLY

He's the only writer I'd like to watch at it. Oh I know, that's probably the sign of a dirty mind, but don't you love a dirty mind? Of course you do. One can't help it.

TALLY

Correct. Takes dirt to grow seeds. Tell them about me and Willy.

DAN

Shakespeare was indeed a bawdy bard -- and now we know who made him so.

[BURN sits up abruptly again, scribbles.]

COLLY

Look: he's writing in a roomful of people. How can he do it?

EVERETT

Dickens used to do it. And Mark Twain.

[BURN rises, goes to lectern-shelf right, where he continues to scribble, his back to OTHERS.]

TALLY

He's not writing yet -- he's getting my notes down.

COLLY

Hobbs, you silly peacock. Burn, you put ideas in this girl's head --

TALLY

And verse visa.

COLLY

Burn, you're a man for the ages!

EVERETT

Shush! Let him write.

COLLY

The most popular novelist in America!

BURN

Colly, at this giddy moment, don't talk about "the ages". A hundred years ago the most popular American novelist was Alice Hegan Rice. And you never heard of her.

COLLY

Burn, you have no need to be humble --

BURN

I? Humble?! By God, I'm the Alice Rice of my time!

EVERETT

After Alice Rice died, her husband committed suicide.

COLLY

Oh! He's not writing about these Rice people, is he?

TALLY

Fargo! Is this history lesson advancing the action?!
Sure, it's okay when you --

BURN

-- Talsome, if you take the six most memorable chapters
from all the novels of all the world's literature,
you'll find that none of them advances the action.

(turns back to scribbling)

And we'll have no novel if we don't begin soon.

TALLY

(starts to shift furniture)

We should get ready. Once he starts, his requirements
are modest: caffeine, nicotine, and alcohol. And this
time --

(heaving at the sofa)

-- room to dance.

*[EV, COLLY, and DAN join TALLY in moving
furniture.]*

EVERETT

I've never seen him dance. Does he dance alone?

TALLY

No he doesn't dance alone! By himself, maybe, but never
alone.

COLLY

I do love to dance. You used to dance, Dan.

DAN

I also used to sing, and write poetry. I was a highly
accomplished, first-class mediocrity at all of them.

BURN

(without turning)

Are we ready, Tally?

TALLY

Almost! Almost! Here!

*[TALLY arranges EV, COLLY, and DAN up center,
the 'dance floor' in front of them. TALLY casts
spell, they freeze. TALLY goes to BURN.]*

TALLY (cont'd)

Before we start, how'd you like my whole thing? Be
honest.

BURN

Honest? It's ludicrous.

TALLY

(jubilant)

Did I tell you?! I want credit: not a single woodpecker joke. And for the theme-freaks I attached a message: "Show me a big artist, and I'll show you a posse of leeches." 'Posse'? Leeches come in posses?

BURN

A good storyteller doesn't attach a message, Tally. In any case, that's not the one here.

TALLY

(still jubilant)

You really think my dinner-party was ludicrous?

BURN

Needs work.

TALLY

Agh! If I jumped off a bridge, you'd be there to tell me my suicide needs work. Well, not by me -- this dinner-party is history. On to Louisiana!

[With a flourish, TALLY unfreezes OTHERS. EV wriggles vigorously, shaking something off.]

EVERETT

(to TALLY sharply)

You can't do that suspending thing whenever you want! In fact --

[EV flourishes her own gesture. TALLY and OTHERS freeze. EV moves to BURN at the lectern. He turns to her, smiles, puts his arm around her. They exchange a lovers' acknowledgement-kiss. He touches her fondly, turns back to his work. EV strolls center, gestures again, ALL unfreeze. They have not observed the event. TALLY blinks, shakes head; not aimed at EV:]

TALLY

What the hell was that?

EVERETT

A private moment. You'll find that happening from time to time. During which you are the one suspended.

BURN

I'll want music, please -- soon.

EVERETT

(to TALLY)

He's talking to you, I think. I'll do my job, and you do yours, please. You know the music he wants?

TALLY

Of course I know! Don't get above yourself, like him.
(indicates DAN)

EVERETT

I have to, or I'll be beside myself.

BURN

Colly, I see the ending.

COLLY

(fearful)
The spouse commits suicide?

BURN

No, Colly, I see the kind of ending you always cry for.

COLLY

Oh Burn -- you haven't given me a happy ending at last!?

BURN

I have. You'll get the deal you only dream of.

COLLY

What kind of happy ending?

BURN

Dan, what's the most trusty kind of happy ending?

DAN

A new beginning.

BURN

Ev?

EVERETT

I agree.

BURN

You agree?

EVERETT

I do. I agree.

BURN

Tally?

TALLY

Well, yeah, I always say, "All's well that ends as prologue."

BURN

Let's see you two kiss on it.

[EV and TALLY air-kiss, missing by many inches.]

TALLY

Okay, Fargo, enough with the "explanations". Nobody likes pre-chewed food.

BURN

(smiles)

Ah, no. I can only point at all this. I could never, ever explain it. So!

(hugs EV and TALLY)

We're all agreed! Marching onward, without interruptus, to a happy beginning! Maestra!

*[TALLY wields an imaginary baton, and Scott Joplin's "A Real Slow Drag", the finale of his opera "Treemonisha", begins. (The Houston Grand Opera recording.) To the solo soprano **OVER**, (Carmen Balthrop) pairs and trios dance, change partners. Then Joplin's **CHORUS** begins; it starts with a half-company chorus; ALL five form a chorus line, singing and slow-drag dancing together until: the **FULL CHORUS** fills the hall. **SHELLEY** and **LUDWIG**, and **PRIS** and **GUS** come on from left and right, truckin' and singing. The finale is belted out with all nine at stage-front, and, at the climactic final note:]*

FINAL CURTAIN

Use music again for curtain calls.