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SUICIDE CLINIC
BY SEAN DEVINE

The First Act

SCENE ONE: PROLOGUE

A great boat sails on a waterless sea. Mist and obscurity. Deep below deck, four slaves sit chained to dark smoky corners, moaning as they row the giant oars. Next to each slave is a lunch pail. Perched above, an angel strums her bow across her carpenter's saw, keeping spirits high, while a pleasant voice gives advice over the P.A. system.

VOICE: Nothing beats a tall glass of cool lemonade,
But isn't it bad to feel so good?
Self-determination is evil,
So never go out without putting on a little touch of shame.

The rest period will begin in three more cycles.

Don't look a gift horse in the mouth,
Cause thou shouldn't covet thy neighbor's ass.
Ask not what your Chief can do for you,
But what you can do for your Chief?

The rest period will begin in two more cycles.

Everything you do is taken into account.
But love shall set you free.
Self-love, however, is a sin of desecration.
Creation is all that matters.

The rest period will begin in one more cycle.

Those who stick it out get their just reward.
You know, there are far worse places that you could be.
So if you can't say anything good,
Then don't open your mouth.

The rest period starts now.

A whistle blows. All work ceases. The angel stops playing. The slaves start to feed.

SLAVE1: Throw out the anchor.

SLAVE2: Throw out the anchor!

Somewhere else another slave screams as he is thrown off the ship.

SLAVE1: Prepare to be boarded.

SLAVE2: Prepare to be bored!

SLAVE1: Boarded.

SLAVE2: Bored!

A spotlight comes up inside the circle of slaves. They turn in with their lunches. Then, as the angel plays the opening bar of "The Entertainer", a rope ladder slowly makes its way down into the light.

DIRECTOR OF HUMAN RESOURCES: *(after the bar)* Ah, fuck it.

Music. Jumping in on the kazoo, the DIRECTOR OF HUMAN RESOURCES enters down the ladder, a bitter and disgruntled man. His grey pinstripe suit carries a long-held grudge. His face and hands are hallowed white from constant exposure. His hair is the result of infinite punishment. He's trying his best to be jolly, but everyone's in a crappy mood, and it shows. Mid-way down the ladder he stops, waves good-naturedly to one of the slaves, and is answered back with a depressed moan. He takes a calming breath, and then gets on with it. He makes a big show of getting caught in the ladder, crashes to the deck floor, laments his pain on the kazoo, looks to the slaves for a laugh, and gets two more depressed moans. He gets up and gestures for the angel to stop. For a moment he is still. Then he speaks to the slaves.

DIRECTOR OF H.R.: *(deadpan)* Thank you, thanks so much, yeah... Once again, your reception dumfounds me, and on that note, shall we begin. Hoo-boy...Well, here we are, back together, hey? All my friends. All my lovely friends. New faces. Old faces... Very old faces. A veritable melting mot, yesss? *(deep malice)* I'm so

honored you all could make it.

A slave moans.

DIRECTOR OF H.R.: Hey, it's a pleasure for me too, pal... But I coulda done worse, hey?.. Didn't get off so bad... Director of Human Resources, easy enough. Every once in a while, pop on down, entertain the troops, tell a few jollies' reminisce, various other duties, no questions asked, strings attached, not so bad, hey?

One of the slaves tosses a lunch-fish, smacking the DIRECTOR OF HUMAN RESOURCES in the face.

DIRECTOR OF H.R.: *(beat, poised)* Yeah, not so bad that ya can't live with it... But I'm here to tell ya that tonight's gonna be a little different, yes it is... In lieu of me performing -- a change in the program I'm sure will disappoint no one -- **I've** arranged a little surprise, hey?... Just before the Chief and I started out tonight, I said to him, "Chief," I said...

Moans of torment.

DIRECTOR OF H.R.: Now there's no need for that. Let's all just try to be... *(more moans)* Alright, c'mon, let's have some respect for the Chief, hey? *(more moans)* He's not deaf, you know. He's only gonna make things worse for everyone!

He gets smacked by another fish.

DIRECTOR OF H.R.: *(moving tight along)* "Chief," I said. "What these people need is more than I am capable of! What these poor sods deserve is complete distraction! Something to carry them away from the plodding drudgery of their everyday blah-blah-blah!" And I say blah-blah-blah because that's about as far as I got before the old fellow tuned out. There's an attention deficit, you see. I'm never able to fully grasp it. But he's a beautiful man, hey? Just a little thick. And it must've gotten through somehow, cause he jumped right into that head of his and he's shut up ever since. So with no further ado, here's something so spectacular, so out of this world, the likes of which I haven't got the foggiest idea, cause he hasn't told me yet. Cause he never tells ya anything to begin with. Cause then ya can't second-guess him. That's just his way. And one day it'll all come tumblin' down

From above, an envelope hooked onto a string drops down.

DIRECTOR OF H.R.: *(to the Chief up above, private)* You just don't make anything

easy for anyone, do ya.

The string bounces twice. The DIRECTOR OF HUMAN RESOURCES unhooks the envelope. The string sails back up.

DIRECTOR OF H.R.: *(slightly better mood, waving the envelope)* So, what's the Chiefs got in store, hey? What's the big surprise? Is everyone excited?

All the slaves moan.

DIRECTOR OF H.R.: *(subdued)* Fine, let's just get it over with, then. You can't stand me, I can't stand you, just screw it all to Hell.

He opens the envelope and pulls out a card.

DIRECTOR OF H.R.: *(reads the cover)* "A Live-Action Docu-Drama." *(to the slaves)* Fancy, fancy. *(reads more)* Blah-blah-blah "enjoy this new work", yadda-yadda-yadda "interesting narrative structure", wank-wank-wank "morally ambiguous". Oh, yeah. *(pointing up)* Him, morally ambiguous.

Another fish, this time from above.

DIRECTOR OF H.R.: *(beat, opens card, reads quick/y)* "Behold ye Life, Nature's cruel poet. Behold ye torment, for surely you know it. The very world is indeed at stake, but what do you care, you're all dead as cake." *(grimace)* "So sit back and enjoy a refreshing tonic, as we present: A Suicide Clinic."

The DIRECTOR OF HUMAN RESOURCES stops in shock.

DIRECTOR OF H.R.: *(beat, to the slaves)* One moment, please. *(to the Chief, polite)* Chief, what is this? *(in conversation, calm)* Urn-hm. Uh-hm. I see. Have you lost it completely?...This is your idea of entertainment. *(indicating the slaves)* For them? Them?!... Well, no, I haven't given it much thought, I'm just going by the title alone...No, I don't think I'm jumping to conclusions, I think you've gone and flipped.

He starts climbing back up the ladder.

DIRECTOR OF H.R.: *(still conversing)* Oh, I'm not trying to stop you. Who am I to stop you? But you know what? You've finally outdone yourself. This is worse, yes, even worse than what you tried way-back-when with the flood victims. Forty days and forty nights watchin' "Noah's Long Voyage." Oh, that was a spectacle. You

couldn't even get towels for the drippin' bastards. Well, they won't put up with it much more, I tell ya. One day they're just gonna up an' stop listening, and then where you gonna be, you incompetent boob.

The DIRECTOR OF HUMAN RESOURCES disappears. The rope ladder is pulled a way.

SLAVE1: Lift anchor.

SLAVE2: Lift the anchor.

The slaves start moaning and rowing. The angel resumes playing.

Roll the film.

SLAVE2: Roll the film!

Mist and obscurity.

SCENE TWO

JOHN DOW gets up on a platform. He searches the audience, looking for what to say. Somewhere in the darkness, the angel plays.

DOW: I'm leaving.

I've made my decision.

I'm getting out. Moving on.

Packed up my bags, heading down the highway.

Don't ask why, I ain't so sure myself.

I'm just searching for greener pastures.

Here's a little note to inform you.

How could I not tell you, it's all because of you. *(he sings)*

"You make me want to stay, but you're driving me away."

You've never been told this before, but when I think of you

My mouth gets dry. It's quite a feeling.

You're as beautiful as any thing can be,

You are maple syrup poured on top of sweetness,

You're everything to me.

You are life. You've got it all.

If it wasn't too late I would tell you that I love you,

Dow: But I know we'll never work,
It's the nature of our relationship. (pause)
Last night you left a message on my answering machine.
I received it loud and clear.
As to your request, the problem's taken care of.
But you forgot to ask me how I'm doing.
Allow me to tell you before I take flight...
Peppered with occasional flashes of manufactured gaiety, life is not all bad.
Some would say it's good. Some people say a lot,
But they don't know jack.
And they don't see me playing the comedian before the mirror
To protect myself from my true disabled spirits.
It may sound silly to you, but only this morning,
Your message played back for the ninth and final time,
I was lingering in the bathroom.
Lost in a daydream,
I took my Boy-Scout issue pocket-knife
Cut amateur gashes up and down my arm,
Such ridiculous little slices
Due to chronic blood-squeamishness and lack of blade-sport savvy.
The clean-up wouldn't need more than a mop and a couple band-aids
To wipe the shameful red trickles from the white-tile floor.
What you must think of me. Even my dream wounds are superficial.
Suddenly roused from my dark but harmless reverie
I chastised my subconscious for not having had the common sense
To have selected one of the fine carving blades from the kitchen,
Only seven dream-steps away. (pause)
Well that is all for now, my dear.
Should you wish to change history you'll find me on Traveller's Bridge
At ten o'clock this morning. Should you feel otherwise, then all the best.
I remain your devoted one, always. Johnny Dow.

He takes an egg out of his pocket, and places it inside his mouth. Lights up on the angel, playing her saw, and the DIRECTOR OF HUMAN RESOURCES, who's singing the blues.

DIRECTOR OF H.R.: It's about being convinced, or at least extremely curious,
That there's someplace, somewhere, better.
But if it's just worse, or even nothing at all
Well, at least it'll be something new.

The music stops. As the lights fade, JOHN DOW lifts one foot forward. In the dark, someone makes a phone call.

MISS HIGGENZ: *(in a state)* Oh, my. Oh, my. Hello? Is this the police? Oh, it's Miss Higgenz, the landlady, from 289 Twelfth Avenue. Oh, my. It's terrible. One of my tenants, Mister Dow, oh, my, he's jumped off a bridge!

Splash.

SCENE THREE

A small room. Inside a white bathtub lies HERMAN ULLSTEIN. Behind the tub is an observation window, with horizontal blinds drawn down. An ATTENDANT, dressed in white, enters pushing a wheeled serving cart, with varied items on it. She walks the cart over to the bath.

ATTENDANT: More warm water?

HERMAN: *(cheerful)* That would be wonderful.

THE ATTENDANT pours hot water into the bath, then prepares a cigar.

ATTENDANT: And how is everything, Doctor Ullstein?

HERMAN: *(stretching out)* Everything is splendid. *(looking up)* Quite something, that skylight.

ATTENDANT: You can almost forget it's winter.

HERMAN: Yes.

She gives HERMAN the cigar, and lights it.

ATTENDANT: Your children are here.

HERMAN: *(sitting up)* Good.

The ATTENDANT moves to the window and lifts the blinds. The

DAUGHTER and SON knock on the glass and wave.

DAUGHTER: *(muted)* Hello!

HERMAN waves back, then shows off with a little splashing.

ATTENDANT: *(returning)* Smart-looking.

HERMAN: Aren't they.

ATTENDANT: Shall I ask them inside?

HERMAN: Not necessary.

ATTENDANT: I can turn on the P.A. system

HERMAN: In a while.

THE ATTENDANT takes a menu from the serving cart.

ATTENDANT: Would you care to make your musical selection now?

HERMAN: *(scans it)* I knew this would be a difficult choice...Ah, yes. Number Three.

ATTENDANT: Very good. *(to someone else)* Number Three. *(to HERMAN)* It'll just be a moment.

HERMAN: It's my wife's favorite.

ATTENDANT: Then it's perfect. Shall I prepare your meal?

HERMAN: You may.

HERMAN looks over at his children and holds up three fingers. The DAUGHTER hods her hands to her heart. The SON gives a "thumb's up". The ATTENDANT starts cooking a flambe.

HERMAN: A flambe! Why, that's --

ATTENDANT: Your favorite.

HERMAN: Yes.

ATTENDANT: Your children were very thorough in their arrangements.

HERMAN: They've always been.

Joyful music is piped into the room.

HERMAN: *(wistfully)* There it is. *(up to the skylight)* There it is, darling. Just for us.

HERMAN hums and waves his cigar like a conductor's baton. THE DAUGHTER holds her hands up against the glass. THE SON starts chewing gum.

HERMAN: Could you switch on those speakers now?

ATTENDANT: Of course. *(to someone else)* Speakers on. *(to HERMAN)* Go ahead, Doctor.

HERMAN: *(beat)* Children?

DAUGHTER: *(amplified)* Yes, Daddy?

HERMAN: Did I ever tell you how I met your mother?

SON: *(after a couple slow chews, amplified)* No.

HERMAN: A wheel came rolling towards me one cloudy summer day, on a road where I was sitting on a crate, hitchhiking my way to the city to find my fortune. The wheel simply appeared over the crest of a low hill, and passed me by so slowly, it were as if it had been set in motion by the smallest child. But it had such a certainty to its flight, such a destined determination, that I decided to pick up my bag and follow this wheel, wherever it went, like a disciple. Walking behind, as it made its way up and over each hill in its path, I believed more with each step that this event was of mystical importance to my life, and that the wheel was actually leading me somewhere. Then, after what seemed like the longest mile, the wheel began to slow. My heart raced. The wheel started to tip. I held my breath. And then, it fell.

SON: *(anxious)* ...And there was Mother?

HERMAN: ...And there was nothing. Not a twig. Not a stone. Utterly dejected, I sat down on the wheel, my head in my hands, and wept. That's when I felt her hand touch my head. I looked up into the sun and there she was. My fortune. It was she that had set the wheel in motion, to see where it would lead her. She later told me that had I not gotten off my crate and followed the wheel as I had, I would not have merited even a passing glance. (pause) I would like to eat now.

DAUGHTER: It's your favorite, Daddy.

HERMAN: You can turn that contraption off now. But let the music play.

ATTENDANT: (to someone e/se) Speakers off.

HERMAN eats a bite of flambe.

HERMAN: (gravely) Very good. My compliments to your chef.

ATTENDANT: I'll pass them on.

SON: *(muted)* Father?

HERMAN: *(setting the fork down)* That will be all. I am ready.

ATTENDANT: Yes, Doctor.

THE ATTENDANT goes to the window and draws down the blinds. The SON and DAUGHTER crouch to catch a final glimpse. The ATTENDANT returns to the cart, and passes HERMAN a metal box.

ATTENDANT: I'll be leaving now.

HERMAN: Understood...Thank you.

The ATTENDANT exits. The room goes dark, except for a spotlight directly over the bath. HERMAN notices the change, smiles, then opens the box and removes a gas mask. It's a curious contraption, just large enough to cover the mouth and nose, with a valve attached to one side of it. HERMAN spends a moment observing the mask. He

then takes one last puff on his cigar, and pulls the mask on over his head. As the music continues to play, HERMAN's humming and breathing are heard, amplified through the mask. He turns the valve, and then relaxes, still conducting with the cigar as he rests deeper and deeper into the tub. His breathing and humming start to get labored. Finally, the cigar drops out of his hand onto the floor, HERMAN's head falls back over the tub, and he dies. The music fades. Pause. The ATTENDANT re-enters the room, no longer dressed all in white. She is now DOCTOR HILDA BAILEY. She approaches the tub.

HILDA: Herman? ... Herman?

She presses a finger against HERMAN's neck. He springs to life and screams. Blackout.

SCENE FOUR

Spalsh. Lights up, below the bridge. Marine horns blow in closer proximity. Waves lap up against the rocks. MISS HIGGENZ, beside herself in grief, is talking to DETECTIVE FITCH, from Special Task Force. FITCH holds the suicide note and her police notebook. Nearby on the ground sits a wide police evidence briefcase. Offstage is heard more splashing and grunts of complaint.

MISS HIGGENZ: I always suspected Mister Dow had feelings for me, but to such lengths, oh my, I never knew. We rarely conversed. At least, not with words. But a woman knows these things. Even if it's only glances up a stairwell, she knows. Oh, if only he'd told me, the dear thing. But he was too sensible man. He knew it couldn't possibly be. He said so himself. "It's the nature of our relationship." How could a respectable proprietor involve herself with a tenant? What would the others think? Oh, how he must've yearned for me. To drive himself to this.

DETECTIVE LANKOWSKI drags in JOHN DOW's soaked and lifeless corpse from the river. LANKOWSKI's pants are wet up to the knees, and a cigarette dangles from his lips. DOW's suit drips wafer, and his skin is blue from asphyxiation by drowning.

MISS HIGGENZ: There he is, oh my. Don't make me look at him.

FITCH: Miss Higgenz, why don't we step over here.

MISS HIGGENZ: I've never seen a dead body before. You're used to this sort of thing, what with just about everyone popping themselves off these days.

FITCH: Yes, now --

MISS HIGGENZ: What's the city come to, I ask, when our own Mayor has to commission a Suicide Task Force? It must be hard on you detectives. To see all that horror.

FITCH: Uh-huh.

MISS HIGGENZ: People used to live in this city. Now they just die here.

FITCH: Miss Higgenz, I have a few questions I'd like --

MISS HIGGENZ: Questions?

FITCH: As the discoverer of the body. It's routine.

MISS HIGGENZ: *(grave/y)* Yes, I discovered him.

FITCH: So Mister Dow gave you his letter this morning at... *(checks her notes)*

MISS HIGGENZ: At around a quarter to ten, that's when it came. I remember the time because the mail doesn't come until well after noon, lazy government, oh my. It only took me a few seconds to get to the door to see who it was, but by the time I opened it the corridor was empty and Mister Dow was on his tragic way, oh my.

LANKOWSKI leaves the body lying on its back, then goes to sit on his briefcase. He buffs out his cigarette, then removes his shoes to let the water out.

MISS HIGGENZ: I read the letter right away, of course. First I didn't know what to make of it. Such a sudden admission. And then to read that he was leaving so immediately, well, I just had to come right away, didn't I. Didn't even leave me time to dress properly. I truly didn't know what to expect when

I got here, but it wasn't to find him floating in the river, oh my!

MISS HIGGENZ dries her eyes on her sleeve.

FITCH: I'm very sorry, ma'am.

MISS HIGGENZ: Thank you.

FITCH: So you rarely spoke with the deceased.

MISS HIGGENZ: Only because we were familiar with the limitations of everyday discourse. But even through our closeddoor communiques, I could always detect a certain pining in his tone. He was in pain, Detective. I remember once, saying to him "Good morning." Do you know what his answer was? "We'll just have to see about that, Miss Presumptuous." But there was a smile on his face.

LANKOWSKI gets a flash camera from the briefcase, and starts taking photographs of the body.

FITCH: Did Mister Dow know any of your other tenants?

MISS HIGGENZ: *(watching LANKOWSKI)* No.

FITCH: You know that for certain?

MISS HIGGENZ: *(bothered"* Well, perhaps Doctor Bailey, but I doubt it.

FITCH: Doctor Bailey?

MISS HIGGENZ: Hilda. She and Mister Dow share the same floor, but I wouldn't say that she knew him. Not like I did. She's not his type. A very cerebral woman. It's in her eyebrows. *(indicating the letter)* I was the one he trusted.

FITCH: Yes. Now, in the letter...

MISS HIGGENZ: Detective Fitch, could I have one of those photographs?

FITCH: No.

MISS HIGGENZ: You were saying, then, about the letter?

FITCH: He says he got a message from you on his answering machine.

MISS HIGGENZ: (grave) Yes. The final straw.

FITCH: How's that?

MISS HIGGENZ: Please don't arrest me.

FITCH: For what?

MISS HIGGENZ: (with difficulty) Last night, you see, I telephoned Mister Dow, and asked that he vacate his apartment for a few days, because I was having it fumigated. Why, it must have felt like a slap in the face. Such debasement. But; to his dying breath, my very wish was his command. And so he vacated, and left me to fumigate in my misery.

FITCH and LANKOWSKI exchange a look. LANKOWSKI returns the camera to the briefcase, sits down, and lights another cigarette.

FITCH: You needn't worry, ma'am. I'm sure you meant no harm.

MISS HIGGENZ: (to herself) Clarice...

FITCH: Beg your pardon?

MISS HIGGENZ: If only I'd told him my name. It could've all been so different. (pause) Am I needed any further, Detective?

FITCH: Not for now. Thank you.

MISS HIGGENZ: Then I should be get back to my building. The other tenants will be hearing about this sooner or later. They'll probably be expecting me to drum up some sort of newsletter.

FITCH: Alright, then.

MISS HIGGENZ: Will you be examining Mister Dow's apartment?

FITCH: Sometime this afternoon.

MISS HIGGENZ: Fine. Can I have the letter back now?

FITCH: Pardon?

MISS HIGGENZ: The letter. You'll be giving it back now.

FITCH: (beat) We'd like to hold on to it, if you don't mind.

MISS HIGGENZ: Why?

FITCH: Because that's what we do.

MISS HIGGENZ: I see. Just let me know when you're through dissecting all I have left to remember him by.

MISS HIGGENZ walks over to the body.

FITCH: Uh, you really shouldn't be doing --

MISS HIGGENZ kneels down and lays a gentle kiss on MISTER DOW's cold, blue lips.

HIGGENZ: *Au revoir, mon prince.*

MISS HIGGENZ slowly walks away, dragging all her sorrow behind her. LANKOWSKI gets a mini-cassette recorder from his briefcase.

LANKOWSKI: There goes a character.

FITCH: Oughta be in Hollywood.

LANKOWSKI: (tapping his head) Think she already is. (butts out his cigarette) Let's get to work.

As FITCH reads the letter, LANKOWSKI goes to the body, and searches for MISTER DOW's wallet.

LANKOWSKI: Here we go.

He takes out a piece of identification, and starts recording.

LANKOWSKI: The present time izzz: ten fifty-five ay-emmm. Subject: Dow, John Thomas Edmund, Mister. Age: twenty-ninnne.

LANKOWSKI pockets the wallet, then pokes DOW's face.

LANKOWSKI: Medium levels of crystalization to the skinnn, due to elemental exposure, due to frigidi-tee. Considerable discoloration to the bo-dee, due to underwater asphyxiationnn. Am checking for rigor mortis.

He lifts up one of the body's semi-stiffened arms, then lets it go. The arm starts to fall back down, then stops in mid-air. LANKO WSKI nudges it back to the ground.

LANKOWSKI: Rigor mortis has begun. Roughly one hour's worthhh. Estimated time of death: ten ay-emmm, consistent with indications in the deceased's suicide note, and witness corroborationnn.

LANKOWSKI turns off the recorder. He lays his ear against the dead man's chest and pushes down on it with both hands.

LANKOWSKI: Just like listening to the ocean.

LANKOWSKI returns the recorder and MISTER DOW's wallet to the briefcase. He takes out a cellular phone and dials a number.

FITCH: You believe her story?

LANKOWSKI: Who?

FITCH: Higgenz.

LANKOWSKI: You think she has something to hide?

FITCH: Not really.

LANKOWSKI: Then ya can't call it a story, can ya? *(on phone)* Yeah, Lieutenant. It's Lankowski. Me an' Fitch is just about done here. When's the wagon comin'?...Uh-huh.

He nudges the body with his shoe.

LANKOWSKI: Yeah, right off Traveller's Bridge. Hey, so how'm I doin' in the pool?... C'mon, you can say. What's the total with Mr. Belly-Flop here?... I don't wanna wait 'til the end of the month. Gimme the numbers. I need the numbers...Yeah, go check the total. (to FITCH) He's checkin' the total. What was your bet?

FITCH: For what?

LANKOWSKI: For the pool.

FITCH: What pool?

LANKOWSKI: Total number of self-inflicted mortalities over the course of thirty days.

FITCH: I didn't get in.

LANKOWSKI: You didn't get in.

FITCH: Didn't get in.

LANKOWSKI: Then you're missin' out. Everybody puts in fifty bucks. That'd be a nice bonus, huh?

FITCH: Is it just for Montreal?

LANKOWSKI: And the suburbs.

FITCH: South Shore?

LANKOWSKI: You know, I suggested that. But it's out of our jurisdiction, so no can do.

FITCH: It's a tough bet.

LANKOWSKI: You're tellin' me. These days, it's anybody's guess. That's why we're thinkin' of makin' it a monthly thing. **(back on phone)** Yeah, I'm here, Lou. So what're we at?...Uh-huh. Then I'm still in...Hey, you know me. I take the police radio out of the car at night so's I can keep tabs on developments. Better than baseball, huh?

LANKOWSKI hangs up and pockets the phone. FITCH lights a cigarette.

FITCH: Ambulance on it's way?

LANKOWSKI: Be about ten minutes... I guess we hafta wait, huh?

FITCH: I think that would be professional.

LANKOWSKI: Cops on TV never hafta wait.

He nudges the body again.

LANKOWSKI: Must be scary.

FITCH: What?

LANKOWSKI: Dyin'.

FITCH: I s'pose.

LANKOWSKI: 'Specially when ya know it's comin'. When ya do it yourself. It must be scary.

FITCH: *(beat)* Why?

LANKOWSKI: *(beat)* Well, you got all these notions in your head of what's next, you know? Whether it's this, or whether it's that, it's what you've prepared for. Maybe you got no expectations at all. But it's that last moment. Just before the end comes. It'd be a terrible time to have doubts.

FITCH: That's why people have faith.

LANKOWSKI: Pff. Faith.

FITCH: What's wrong with faith?

LANKOWSKI: Did I say somethin' was wrong with it?

FITCH: Some people depend on it.

LANKOWSKI: For what?

FITCH: To get them through life.

LANKOWSKI: Yeah, but then what? There ain't no guarantees after that.

FITCH: That's what faith depends on. The absence of any guarantees.

LANKOWSKI: Then that, my friend, is a risky venture.

LANKOWSKI walks to his briefcase and picks it up.

LANKOWSKI: Where's an ambulance when ya need one?

FITCH notices something on the body.

FITCH: Hey, you see this?

LANKOWSKI: See what?

FITCH: I think there's somethin' in his mouth. *(prying it open)* Man, is this thing ever shut tight.

LANKOWSKI: *(moving closer)* Whatta you doin'?

FITCH: I'm investigating.

LANKOWSKI: You're defacing public property.

FITCH: *(finding something)* Whoa.

LANKOWSKI: What? *(edges closer)* What is it?

FITCH pulls out the egg-

LANKOWSKI: Sweet Jesus, it's an egg.

FITCH: It's hollow.

LANKOWSKI: Sweet Jesus, it's a hollow egg.

FITCH: What's he doin' with an egg in his mouth?

LANKOWSKI: It's a symbol.

FITCH: Symbol of what?

LANKOWSKI: I don't know. But it's pretty symbolic.

FITCH: (looking up) How high would say that bridge is?

LANKOWSKI: *(looks up)* I would say fifty feet.

FITCH: Fifty feet...So he didn't die from the impact.

LANKOWSKI: No.

FITCH: He jumps from the bridge, with this egg in his mouth. He survives the impact.

LANKOWSKI: Okay.

FITCH: He's underwater. It's cold. Maybe he's calm at first, who knows? After thirty seconds, though, whether he wants it or not, the instinct to survive kicks in.

LANKOWSKI: Yes, it does.

FITCH: He starts to panic. He's thrashing. He breathes in water, voluntarily. The lungs become hydrated, there's no more oxygen, he enters a state of bliss. His brain stops functioning, the muscles contract, then relax, and finally he dies.

LANKOWSKI: Uh-huh.

FITCH: But this guy, through all that, manages not only to hold an egg inside his mouth, but keeps it from withstanding even a crack. (beat) What does that tell us?

LANKOWSKI: I'm sure you're gonna tell me.

FITCH: It tells us that this is one special egg.

LANKOWSKI: Yes.

FITCH: So what's it mean?

LANKOWSKI: It's a symbol.

FITCH: It's a clue.

LANKOWSKI: I see.

FITCH: Some clues are intentional.

LANKOWSKI: Yes.

FITCH: Like a message.

LANKOWSKI: The egg is a message.

FITCH: But what is the message?

LANKOWSKI: And who is it meant for?

FITCH: Who received the letter?

LANKOWSKI: The landlady.

FITCH: And how do we know that?

LANKOWSKI: That's what she told us.

FITCH: Who gave her the letter?

LANKOWSKI: The dead guy.

FITCH: How do we know that?

LANKOWSKI: That's what she told us.

FITCH: How does she know he did?

LANKOWSKI: Maybe she doesn't.

FITCH: Maybe that's what she wants to believe.

LANKOWSKI: Maybe the letter wasn't meant for her.

FITCH: Maybe somebody else gave it to her.

LANKOWSKI: She never saw nobody.

FITCH: She never saw nobody.

LANKOWSKI: **So** who was the letter meant for?

FITCH: Whoever dropped it through the slot.

LANKOWSKI: And that person is?

FITCH: We don't know yet.

LANKOWSKI: **(beat)** That's one special egg.

FITCH: I think we should pay a visit to this other tenant. (checking her notes) Doctor Bailey.

LANKOWSKI: Hilda.

FITCH: With the eyebrows.

LANKOWSKI: **Why?**

FITCH: Maybe she knows about the egg.

LANKOWSKI: Maybe she doesn't.

FITCH: **We** can ask her.

LANKOWSKI: **You** wanna ask her about an egg.

FITCH: I find it curious.

LANKOWSKI: (wary) Oh, no.

FITCH: What?

LANKOWSKI: You got that look.

FITCH: What look?

LANKOWSKI: That look you get.

FITCH: I get a look?

LANKOWSKI: Whenever you get curious, you get that look. And that's when I start gettin' one of my headaches.

FITCH: I got some aspirin in the car.

LANKOWSKI: I don't like your aspirin. I like the candy-coated ones.

FITCH: Then we'll getcha some.

The ambulance is heard approaching.

LANKOWSKI: About time. Let's get outta here.

FITCH: So we'll go talk to the Doc?

LANKOWSKI: No, first we go see Dow's apartment.

FITCH: Fine.

The Detectives start exiting.

LANKOWSKI: Then I wanna get some lunch.

FITCH: Then we talk to the Doc.

LANKOWSKI: What about lunch?

FITCH: The cops on T.V. don't eat lunch.

LANKOWSKI: Sure, they do. During the commercials.

Fade to black.

SCENE FIVE

tights up on the office of DOCTOR HILDA BAILEY. There is a desk, a sofa, and a tall metal cabinet. On the desk are a telephone, the gas mask, and an egg in a metal stand. HILDA sits behind the desk. HERMAN lies on the couch, fully dressed and deep in grave-like thought.

HERMAN: "Oh my black sould, now thou art summoned
By sickness, Death's herald, and champion;
Thou art like a pilgrim, which abroad hath done
Treason, and dares not turn to whence he has fled,
Or like a thief, which till Death's doom be read,
Wishes himself delivered from prison.. ."

HILDA: "But damned and haled to execution,
Wishes that still he might be imprisoned." *(beat)* Shall I go on?

HERMAN: *(turning to her)* Why, Hilda, I had no idea you were familiar.

HILDA: John Donne's *The Holy Sonnets*. Number Two, I believe. I've got all of them locked in here somewhere. I learned them in high school.

HERMAN: A little dark for high school.

HILDA: Catholic school.

HERMAN: *(conceding)* Aha.

HILDA: Our English teacher reserved an entire month of the curriculum for a series she called "Redemption, and How to Meet your Maker." Sister Francis of Assissi. Utterly fixated.

HERMAN: *(hands up in mock prayer)* "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change." Which, for starters, would be the tyrannical and

oppressive practices of your whole beloved Church. (he sits up) What time is it, Hilda?

HILDA: Almost noon.

HERMAN: Good.

He crosses to the desk and extends his open palm.

HERMAN: If you would be so kind as to indulge me.

HILDA gives him a key. He crosses to the metal cabinet, opens it, and takes out a liquor bottle and a glass.

HERMAN: I'd invite you to join me, but I know how you feel about matinees. You know, Hilda, one of these days you should let me trick you into having a copy of this key made.

HILDA: But then I would have one less power over you.

HERMAN: *(placing the bottle on the desk)* I wouldn't worry, when you have so many. *(raising his glass)* To you, Mister Donne, and your haunting meditations on The Last Judgment, which are, in my opinion, secular.

HILDA: To better days.

HERMAN: Pardon?

HILDA: I'm toasting without a glass.

HERMAN: To better days? I hadn't realized it was already a bad one.

HILDA: It must be for someone, somewhere.

HERMAN: *(pause, raising glass)* To better days.

He drinks.

HERMAN: So are you going to ask me or not?

HILDA: Ask you about what?

HERMAN: Come now, it's written all over your face.

HILDA: What is?

HERMAN: May I give you some advice, Hilda? Take a few acting lessons. A little camouflage would mask your tactics brilliantly.

HILDA: What tactics?

HERMAN: You want to know about my dream.

HILDA: Do I?

HERMAN: You're practically screaming it out.

HILDA: Herman, if you want to tell me --

HERMAN: Oh, stop being such a psychiatrist!

HILDA: But I am a psychiatrist.

HERMAN: Aha!

HILDA: What?

HERMAN: I have no idea!

HILDA: Have another drink.

HERMAN: I'm way ahead of you!

HERMAN picks up the bottle and puts it tight back down.

HERMAN: Alright, if you're going to force it out of me! *(simply bursting)* It was such a dream! So chillingly real. The porcelain bath. The fine cigar. A skylight yielding to the becoming heavens. A favorite piece of music from my adolescence. I even had a wife. Oh, the story of how we met. It was certainly interesting how I was addressing her soul, which should lead me to question

a great many things, but that's a conversation best left to the real philosophers. What else? Oh, I had two children! I watched them bid me farewell as they wept, although I thought the boy was suspect. There was even a flambe!

HILDA: A flambe.

HERMAN: Hilda, everything was perfect. Right down to the final meal. Everything went precisely as I envision the patient's experience should. Respectable, decent, and without pain...But I still couldn't help being absolutely terrified. Which I suppose we'll never be fully prepared for... I put on a brave front, though. For the children, for my wife. Never found out any of their names. Oh, you were there.

HILDA: Really?

HERMAN: You were some kind of orderly.

HILDA: How menial.

HERMAN: In fact, you were the one who gave me the gas mask.

HILDA: How interesting.

HERMAN: Yes, and then you came in and woke me up.

HILDA: It's a pity I interrupted such a fascinating dream.

HERMAN: Well I was dead by then, so I didn't miss much...What are you doing here, anyway?

HILDA: Don't I work here?

HERMAN: Not on Sundays. I don't pay you that much.

HILDA: And you're not paid anything at all. So what brings you here today?

HERMAN: You mean last night. But the real question is how did I end up asleep on your sofa?

HILDA: Not that it's of any concern of mine.

HERMAN: Hmp. Touche... Well, I just wandered in, you know, to check how the preparations were moving along.

HILDA: Everything is right on schedule, Herman.

HERMAN: Oh, of course they are. I'm sorry. I never meant that at all. If you have anything, Hilda, it is my complete trust in you.

HILDA: Thank you.

HERMAN: I suppose the truth is that I came because I was looking for something.

HILDA: (beat) What?

HERMAN: I don't know. I didn't find it. Had a good nap, though.

HILDA: With a gas mask on your face.

HERMAN: And don't even try to comment on that.

HILDA: I wouldn't know where to begin.

HERMAN picks up the mask off the desk.

HERMAN: It's quite the device, though, isn't it?

HILDA: Yes. And I wouldn't have had to wake you if that weren't the prototype we're considering. I needed the serial number off the back for the requisition forms. I want to get the order out through the courier early tomorrow morning.

HERMAN: (pause) I'm sorry...requisition forms?

HILDA gets a folder from the cabinet. HERMAN studies the mask.

HILDA: Yes. The lab sent back the test results yesterday. They're here somewhere. That model proved to be the best, by far. Here we go. *(brings over the folder)* When you look at how poorly the second-best model fared, there's no option really. It just wouldn't be safe. Except for the intended user, of course. In that respect it'll be frighteningly effective. You turn this valve

here, and depending on the patient and their individual reaction times --

HERMAN: I understand.

HILDA: **(beat)** Yes. **Now**, they're considerably more expensive than what you'd budgeted for, but I'm sure we can get the manufacturer to cut us a deal. After all, we will be serving as the test-market, if all goes well. **(pause)** Herman?

HERMAN: I'm listening...The masks. Too expensive, you say?

HILDA: No, I said more expensive --

HERMAN: Than I'd budgeted for, yes. Well... Perhaps we can look around a little more, then. There's no need to rush things, is there? We can save up for all our rainy **days**.

HILDA: Herman?

HERMAN: Yes?

HILDA: It's not the money, is it?

HERMAN studies the mask in silence.

HERMAN: Just one turn of a valve. A whole life, reduced to one little gesture.

HILDA: **(beat)** Only after a great deal of thought.

HERMAN: Are we completely oblivious to what we are doing? What we are hoping to do?

HILDA: Herman, it's only natural for one to be questioning --

HERMAN: A haven for potential suicides? Damned right, it's natural. Oh, I've got questions. Money to spend and questions to burn. Answers, though? Not one. Conundrums. Moral ambiguities. The spectre of eternal infamy. That's what I've got.

HILDA: Everything is still in the theoretical stage.

HERMAN: **Where** do you see that? You've got funding. You're sitting in an office. You've got a death chamber waiting for the ribbon to be cut. You've got prototypes! Aside from the fact that our legality is being pondered by the courts as we speak, we are anything but theoretical! We may as well distribute flyers!

HILDA brings the folder back to the cabinet.

HILDA: **You** should've told me all of this sooner, Herman. If you are having doubts --

HERMAN: Dammit, aren't you?! *(pause)* Oh, Hilda, if it weren't for your solidity of conviction.. . *(he chuck/es)* I wish I could commission an artist to sculpt it...But right now, right now I simply desire you to shake, shiver and cry, for what we have embarked upon --

The telephone rings, startling HILDA. She makes no move to answer it

HERMAN: Are you expecting a call?

HILDA: *(beat)* Could you answer it, please?

HERMAN answers the phone.

HERMAN: **(to caller)** Yes?...Yes, she is here. May I ask whom is calling?... Because today is Sunday, and these are not Doctor Bailey's working hours... Thank you. *(to HILDA)* It's your landlady.

HILDA pauses, then takes the phone. HERMAN takes the egg from the desk and sits on the sofa, tossing the egg into the air and catching it

HILDA: Miss Higgenz, hello. Is there something the matter?...Have I heard what? *(detached)* Oh...Why, yes. It is terrible... No, I wasn't aware... I understand...Thank you for calling.

HILDA hangs up the phone.

HERMAN: Everything alright?

HILDA: (beat) Hmm?

HERMAN: Is there something wrong at home?

HILDA: No. (beat) She thought she smelled gas.

HERMAN: Ask her if she was dreaming.

HILDA: Yes.

HERMAN: How did she obtain our number?

HILDA: (beat) I suppose I gave it to her.

HERMAN: I see.

HILDA: I should be getting back home.

HERMAN: Of course, dear. Make sure everything's alright.

HILDA: (beat) How about a drink first.

HERMAN: Now?

HILDA: If the invitation is still open.

HERMAN: Well, allow me, then.

HERMAN goes and fixes two drinks. HILDA sits down on the sofa.

HERMAN: I worry for nothing, don't I. A year from now, my friend, you and I will sit back and commend each other for the good we've done for this world. Whole families will remember our names gratitude. And if there is such a thing as a soul, as I am known to question, then we will have granted a peaceful and dignified passage to those departed ones, where before there was nothing but torment and shame.

HILDA: Quite right.

HERMAN: A toast, then. To the complete and utter fool that is myself.

HILDA: No. To two pioneers.

HERMAN: Soon to be ravaged by the claws of history.

HILDA: Soon to be admired.

HERMAN: Quite right. To the clinic.

HILDA: (pause) To the clinic.

They drink as the lights fade.

SCENE SIX

In the dark.

DOW: Open the gates!!

Lights fade up slightly on JOHN DOW, still dead. His condition, however, has taken a turn for the worse. He's standing in front of a closed chain-link fence.

DOW: Open the gates!! You hear me, open the fucking gates!!

A bright spotlight shines in DOW's face. A voice booms over a loudspeaker.

DIRECTOR OF H.R.: State your name.

DOW: *(in agony)* Open the gate, please.

DIRECTOR OF H.R.: What do you want?

DOW: Let me in!

DIRECTOR OF H.R.: Do you have proper authorization?

DOW: What?

DIRECTOR OF H.R.: Do you have proper --

DOW: OPEN THE GATES!!

DOW grabs the fence and shakes it violently. There is a loud zapping sound as he is electrocuted off the fence, with sparks and fire. DOW falls down.

DOW: *(writhing)* Arxxx! **YOU FUCKTHAT HURT!!**

The spotlight extinguishes. The DIRECTOR OF HUMAN RESOURCES stands inside the fence, holding a lantern.

DIRECTOR OF H.R.: Of course it did. That's what it's designed to do.

DOW: *(on the ground, shivering)* What kinda goddamn place is this?

DOW walks back to the fence.

DOW: What's happened to me?

DIRECTOR OF H.R.: Well, my guess would be that you died.

DOW: I'm dead? *(pause)* Okay. *(pause, he points thru the fence)* Then this place must be —

DIRECTOR OF H.R.: Quite different than what you expected.

DOW: Let me in.

DIRECTOR OF H.R.: First things first.

DOW: Who are you?

DIRECTOR OF H.R.: I am the Director of Human Resources. Who are you?

DOW: Of what?

DIRECTOR OF H.R.: Human Resources.

DOW: Fuck you. Lemme talk to who's in charge!

DIRECTOR OF H.R.: You want to talk to the Chief.

DOW: Yeah. Lemme talk to the Chief!

DIRECTOR OF H.R.: And just whom shall I say is calling?

DOW: John Dow! John Dow!

DIRECTOR OF H.R.: Alrighty.

The DIRECTOR OF HUMAN RESOURCES takes out a notebook and passes the lantern to DOW.

DIRECTOR OF H.R.: Hold this, would you? Thanks. *(checks his notes)* Dow, Dow... Let's see, I have a Mister Dottin, Mister and Mrs. Dover...Ah, here we are. Dow.

DOW: Good.

DIRECTOR OF H.R. *(still in notes)* Benjamin Dow, Edwina Dow, George Dow.. . What, was there some mishap at a family reunion?

DOW: *(still in pain)* I don't have any family.

DIRECTOR OF H.R. Of course you don't, you're dead. Ah, here we are. John Dow.

DOW: Now lemme in!

DIRECTOR OF H.R.: *(still in notes)* Oh, wait.

DOW: Why?

DIRECTOR OF H.R.: I see.

DOW: What? You see what? I wanna talk to the Chief.

DIRECTOR OF H.R.: *(pockets notebook)* The Chief is unavailable at the present moment.

DOW: Unavailable?

DIRECTOR OF H.R.: Sorry.

DOW: When's he gonna friggin' be available?!

DIRECTOR OF H.R.: Considering your particular circumstances...

DOW: Yeah?

DIRECTOR OF H.R.: I'm afraid he will not be.

DOW: Huh?

DIRECTOR OF H.R.: He won't see you.

DOW: (beat) I don't understand.

DIRECTOR OF H.R.: Neither did I.

DOW: What?

DIRECTOR OF H.R.: (*personal*) Life requires but two things of all creatures, Mister Dow. That we die, and that we live until we die. You and I have failed at both of them.

DOW: (*beat*) What do you mean?

DIRECTOR OF H.R.: (*beat*) Your sin is unforgiveable, Mister Dow.

He takes back his lantern.

DIRECTOR OF H.R.: Good day.

The DIRECTOR OF HUMAN RESOURCES turns and walks away, leaving DOW at the fence, with lantern light fading.

SCENE SEVEN

Darkness. Music plays loudly. HILDA turns up a dimmer lamp. She's in her apartment. There's a comfortable lounge chair, with side table and lamp. Over to one side is a stand with reel-to-reel tape machine playing music. She has a cup a tea. She lowers the volume on the tape machine, then goes back to her chair and sits. She gets out of her shoes, sips some tea, and raises the light level with the dimmer switch. She then rests back and closes her eyes. Stillness Suddenly, the lamp lights fades on its own power. HILDA opens her eyes, looks at the lamp, then turns the light back up again. She rests. Stillness. Then, the music stops. The reels keep on turning, but all that comes out is a low hum. HILDA looks at the machine, then gets up. She starts to walk over to it, when she hears a voice come over the machine, unnatural, stopping her in her tracks.

DOW: *(electronically altered, deep and spooky)* H ILDA... I SAW YOU.

The music resumes. HILDA walks slowly to the machine, and stops the music. She rewinds the tape, and starts it again. It plays as normal, and without interruption. She laughs, just a little. Then, her lamp shuts off. HILDA lets out a small gasp. Then laughs again, a little more. In the dark she crosses back to the lamp.

HILDA: Hilda, Hilda, Hilda.

She turns the lamp back on. JOHN DOW stands behind her.

DOW: Rolls off the tongue, doesn't it.

HILDA screams. Blackout. End of Act One.