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THREE ON A COUCH

By Carl Djerassi

A play in 2 acts and 8 scenes

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Cast of Characters

STEPHEN MARX, famous novelist, approximately 50 years old.

MIRIAM MARX, his wife, in her late thirties to early forties.

SHRINK, (Dr. Theodore Hofmann) indeterminate middle aged.

Time: New York City, the present.

SHRINK'S consulting room. Desk and comfortable desk chair on the left, Freudian couch covered with oriental carpet in center with low, relatively long rectangular coffee table in front. Another comfortable chair behind head of couch; right upstage door is exit from consulting room.

SCENE 1.

Shrink's consulting room. STEPHEN MARX lies on couch, with SHRINK (with tie, coat, and perhaps even vest) sitting behind him. STEPHEN is silent for 1 - 2 minutes, long enough to make audience uncomfortable. SHRINK occasionally glances at his watch and at STEPHEN on couch, who lies silently, eyes wide open, staring at the ceiling. Occasionally, STEPHEN raises his head slightly as if he were listening to something. Suddenly he jumps up, follows the movement of a flying insect, snatching at the bug. Opens his hands, then drops them. Continues in the direction of Shrink and again claps his hand firmly—this time very close to Shrink's face who rears back. STEPHEN opens his hands.

STEPHEN: Gotcha! (*Goes back to couch and lies down*). That noise drives me crazy.

SHRINK (*Looking at his watch*): I charge by the minute, you know... not by the word.

STEPHEN (*After long pause*): How much time have I left?

SHRINK (*Again looks at watch*): Nine minutes... going on eight.

STEPHEN (*Dodging subject*): You know, I always wonder who lies here before me. (*Sniffs couch ostentatiously*). What's she like?

SHRINK: Men are known to use cologne....

STEPHEN: You, for instance. (*Sniffs*). This smells different. Though why you wear cologne, when you never leave this place is quite beyond me. Come on. It's a woman, isn't it?

SHRINK (*Shocked*): What are you implying!?

STEPHEN: Nothing. Reminds me of my wife's Chanel.

SHRINK: We are here to discuss your case... not...(shifts gear). I'm afraid we've got just eight minutes left. So, if there's anything else...you'd...um...

STEPHEN: A question.

SHRINK: Hmm... progress.

STEPHEN: A legal question.

SHRINK: I don't offer legal advice.

STEPHEN: About our relationship. Our little folie-a-deux.

SHRINK (*Cautiously*): You'd better elaborate.

STEPHEN (*Points with fingers toward Shrink, then to himself and back to Shrink*): How confidential do you keep this?

SHRINK: Forgive me for answering a question with a question, but, if you went to church for confession, would you ask a priest that?

STEPHEN: Forgive me for answering a question to a question with another question, but why would I be surprised at a shrink answering a question with a question?

SHRINK: What?

STEPHEN: I'm not here to confess. This is different.

SHRINK: Therapy and confession aren't really that different. Call what usually happens here an unburdening.

STEPHEN: In that case I could've saved a bundle by going to see a priest.

SHRINK: Ah! But the difference is that we don't absolve... we help you understand yourself. That takes much longer....

STEPHEN: And that's what you charge for?

SHRINK: Well... if you're looking for bargains... perhaps you should go to church... and kneel rather than lie on a couch. (*Pause*). After all... this is only your 4th or 5th session—

STEPHEN: Fifth!

SHRINK: And while you'd certainly benefit from therapy... it's clear to me that you didn't come for that. So why expect me to behave like a therapist?

STEPHEN: So why did I come?

SHRINK: For some kind of justification... but packaged in the form of a private confrontation.

STEPHEN: And why would I come to you for justification?

SHRINK: Because you also appear to need assured confidentiality. You could have gotten that from a lawyer... but he would have charged more... and listened less.

STEPHEN (*Impatiently*): Okay, okay! But you tell no one what we talk about?

SHRINK: This really is important to you, isn't it?

STEPHEN: No exceptions?

SHRINK: There are exceptions to everything. If you told me you had a gun in your pocket and were about to murder somebody, I'd call the police. I'd have to.

STEPHEN: What about suicide?

SHRINK: There is nothing I take more seriously than suicide.

STEPHEN: Suppose I told you I was thinking of killing myself?

SHRINK: I'd do my utmost to persuade you not to do that.

STEPHEN: Of course you would. But suppose you later learned that I'd actually done it?

SHRINK (*Taking it very seriously*): I'd feel terrible for not having prevented it. Personally... and professionally.

STEPHEN: But would you tell someone about the conversation?

SHRINK: Why? Why are you...?

STEPHEN: Please! Just answer the question!

SHRINK (*Impatient*): I might... if you left a suicide note...and depending to whom it was addressed. (*Anxious*). But Stephen—

STEPHEN (*Interrupting*): No note... nothing.

SHRINK: Then I probably would not.

STEPHEN: You'd keep mum?

SHRINK: Mum.

STEPHEN: Good.

(Stephen contemplates this for a moment, as the Shrink gets more anxious.)

SHRINK: But surely you aren't thinking of suicide?

STEPHEN (*Breezily/ a shift in tone*): Being a shrink you must be used to that sort of talk.... Suicide, justification, interpretation of the uninterpretable, unburdening. Pay your money, pick a neurosis. I might even paraphrase Descartes: "I'm analyzing myself, therefore I am."

SHRINK: That's rather a helpful analogy. Analysis is the key to self-knowledge. At least that's how I—

STEPHEN (*Suddenly angry*): Do you think I need to come here to find out who I am? You can do that for 10.99 down at Borders! (*As if reading his own dust jacket spiel*): Stephen Marx, author, misanthrope, genius, literary star, and winner of the Pulitzer Prize! National Book Award! blah blah blah. Voted Best Dressed Middle-Aged Man! Wearer of velvet jackets! Most Featured Writer in Women's Magazines! Pick a tagline Dr Hoffman. Pick a blurb! Everyone else does! Stephen Marx. Great author who will be remembered for generations to come? Or a smart con man who peddles phrases for money? Am I an original thinker? Or is it all an act so I can home in on female groupies at book launches? Do you think therapy can answer these questions, Doctor?

SHRINK: I might as well let you in on a trade secret.

STEPHEN: Does that come out of my time?

SHRINK (*Smiles*): I'll throw this in for free. We therapists have one problem: we have difficulties dealing with VIPs.

STEPHEN: And you consider me one?

SHRINK: Most people... you especially... would concur.

STEPHEN (*Nods*): So what's your problem?

SHRINK: Envy of the entitlements you celebrity types take for granted.

STEPHEN: Meaning?

SHRINK: That the usual rules don't apply to them.

STEPHEN: For example?

SHRINK: Well, for instance... rejecting an expert's authority... even in a field... such as therapy... in which VIPs have no expertise whatsoever.

STEPHEN: That sounds just a little defensive.

SHRINK: I am attempting to show you why we're impatient with VIPs... the ultimate failing of a therapist.

STEPHEN: I accept that apology.

SHRINK (*Getting very flustered*): No...no...no! I was explaining why you are having trouble responding to therapy... not apologizing. (*He tries to recover his equilibrium*). But why did the idea of... suicide... come into your head?

STEPHEN: Everybody thinks of suicide... sometimes. (*Pause*). I even wrote about it.

SHRINK: An article?

STEPHEN: A novel... I don't do articles. (*Suddenly manic*). Did you know that Hemingway read his own obituary?

SHRINK: No.

STEPHEN: He was in a small plane in the middle of Africa that crashed. Everyone thought he was dead. (*Pause*). But he blew it: he reappeared too soon.

SHRINK: Perhaps he needed medical attention.

STEPHEN: He had a marvelous time reading the newspaper obituaries. It was everything he wanted to hear. But what if he'd managed it better? (*Leans forward, excited*). If he'd waited?

SHRINK: Why you are so interested?

STEPHEN: Have you never dealt with people whose self-esteem depends on the opinion of others? Haven't you ever stopped to think how it must feel to work in a field where success isn't something you can quantify? How much uncertainty that involves? How much insecurity? Even James Joyce was obsessed with reviews. I call it constructive insecurity. It simultaneously nourishes and poisons us.

SHRINK: Ah, yes! Scientists have that problem all the time... peer recognition is all that counts. But you... a hugely successful best-selling author? Of thirteen novels?

STEPHEN (*Quickly*): Fourteen!

SHRINK: I beg your pardon... fourteen! But surely a writer's success is based more on the opinion of the book-buying public. Reviewers and critics are not essential to make the best-seller lists.

STEPHEN: You're confusing selling thousands of books for a couple of years followed by the oblivion of the remainder bins... with still being read decades later. I want the latter.

SHRINK: And you're talking about dying for it?

STEPHEN: Not in the sense that Roland Barthes meant.

SHRINK (*Not having the foggiest idea who Barthes is*): Who?

STEPHEN: French guy. Lived with his mother. Wrote "*Death of the Author*." He said it was the text, not the author, that counted.

SHRINK (*Interested in Freudian sense, but still struggling to keep up*): He lived with his mother?

STEPHEN: What do you do when you've gone as far as you can go? What can another novel tell me about myself that I don't already know? What concerns me is (*deliberate tone*) whether I enter the canon.

SHRINK: Surely you can't know that until it happens.

STEPHEN (*Lying back on the couch*): The opinion of real critics writing about my work in depth. The literary afterlife.

SHRINK (*Hopes this is a chance to regain his equilibrium*): Now we're getting to something we can work with. (*Looks at his watch*). Yes, indeed. A little late... but still...

STEPHEN: When you're dead, you're likely to learn things you'd never find out otherwise.

SHRINK: Umm... I think, when you're dead, you're unlikely to enjoy it.

STEPHEN (*Ignores Shrink's comment*): Stephen Marx has gone as far as he can go. Its time he's put on the shelf to begin his grapple with history.

SHRINK: Then why not simply retire?

STEPHEN One can always come out of retirement. (*A buzzer sounds.*) But I think I've taken my eight minutes.

Stephen sits up.

SHRINK (*Urgently*): No, not by my watch, this is important. We're coming to something.

STEPHEN: Is that so?

SHRINK: You're trying to control events that are simply beyond your control.

STEPHEN: That's what you think.

SHRINK: Whereas you think the answer is to disappear?

STEPHEN: No. (*Pause*). In order to live on in literary history, one first must be dead. Nothing improves the quality of a reputation better than death.

Stephen turns to leave the stage. The Shrink moves in front of him to block his way.

SHRINK (*Is now losing control in a big way*): Stephen! Just reflect for a moment: why did you tell me all this in the first place?

STEPHEN: Didn't you tell me it was for justification?

SHRINK: That's only part of it. Even if you don't know it yourself, Stephen, you want me to stop you.

(Stephen slowly sits down again.)

STEPHEN (*A glimmer of humor in his eyes.*): Okay. So why should Stephen Marx stay alive?

SHRINK: Because... you have so much to live for...

STEPHEN: I've already told you, my career has no meaning any more.

SHRINK: So you're going to jump off a building?

STEPHEN (*Slyly*): No. I've always preferred the idea of drowning myself. (*Eying the Shrink with irony*). If you climb to the top of a building someone can always talk you down. (*Pause*). I thought Freudians were meant to get rid of guilt... not trade in it.

SHRINK: I don't believe you'll do it.

STEPHEN: Well, if you hear reports of my death, be sure not to exaggerate them.

SHRINK: Stephen, suicide doesn't go with your psyche.

STEPHEN: Is that your diagnosis?

SHRINK (*Is pushed into saying something even he won't believe he's said*): We've only had five sessions... generally much too short for a diagnosis. But with you, I'm prepared to risk it: yours is a case of pure, unadulterated narcissism... and that may be untreatable.

STEPHEN: Isn't that your job? To shrink big heads like mine down to normal size?

Stephen heads for the door.

SHRINK: Next week then?

STEPHEN: I won't make it next week.

Shrink beats Stephen to the door.

SHRINK: I want you to promise that you'll not miss next week's session.

STEPHEN: Rent coming due?

SHRINK: No, Stephen. This is important. I want you to promise me... right now... that you'll be back.

The two men stare at each other. Finally Stephen smiles, patting Shrink on the shoulder.

STEPHEN: Sorry Doc... but I've never been good at promises.

Shrink reluctantly stands away from the door as Stephen exits.

END OF SCENE 1

Scene 2.

One month later. SHRINK sits behind the couch. MIRIAM MARX lies on the couch. Through their discussion she will fidget about, stealing glances at the office and SHRINK.

MIRIAM (*As if describing a dream*): I'm standing in a white room. Everywhere there are chrome saucepans shining in a harsh white light. I'm making a soufflé... and then I see him, his face, lifted in the egg white, with two yokes for eyes. Or I see him gasping for air in a... vat of... lobster bisque. Then he's turned into a fish, deboned... all floppy, spent and moist, laid out on a bed of creamed spinach... and I think of how he looked after our wedding night. (Pause). It's so horrible! If anyone found out, they'd have me committed.

SHRINK: Quite remarkable. That you should always dream in images of... food. I wonder what this means. Freud would say that food is a primal expression of your desire to consume your grief... to literally eat it so that it... no longer has the capacity to hurt you.

MIRIAM (*Deadpan*): I run a catering establishment.

SHRINK: I didn't know that.

MIRIAM (*Suddenly composed*): It's called "Edible Art." I'm also working on a book by that title.

(The Shrink eyes her a little suspiciously.)

SHRINK: And does your artwork get... eaten?

MIRIAM: First photographed. It's too expensive to disappear without a record. Some customers even frame the photos. (*Looking around her, while pointing at the barren walls of his office*). I can arrange one for your office if you'd like. Something based on *Chipirones en su Tinta* might work well.

SHRINK: What?

MIRIAM: Squid in its ink. It's a Basque dish. But I could use it on a bed of Tagliatelle and make it look like a Rorschach inkblot.

SHRINK: I don't know if my patients would understand it.

MIRIAM: Isn't that the point with Rorschach?

SHRINK: Well... not strictly... Let me show you some images. Tell me what you see.

(The Shrink produces some Rorschach inkblots—all of them wild messes of ink on large pieces of white card. He flashes them at Miriam one after the other.)

MIRIAM: A stallion.

SHRINK: And...? (*next card*)

MIRIAM: A bodybuilder. You see the broad shoulders there? Pectoral muscles... three of them. (*Shrink shows next card.*) A very large naked... elf? (*Next card*) Oh my God! That looks exactly like a fountain! Look at its great spurting... (*Quickly Shrink produces the next card*). Now that one is definitely a pair of very tight buttocks...

SHRINK: Yes... well, I think we can see from that brief use of Rorschach that you are still in the grip of intense grief. Let's get back to your thoughts about your dead husband.

MIRIAM: Yes. Sometimes when I think of what he went through, I... I... It sounds terrible but I chuckle. I can't help myself doctor. To chuckle at the death throes of your husband. Is that... normal?

SHRINK: Normal is not a word we use here. (*Clears his throat*) Call it a denial of guilt or a failure to come to terms with a huge loss.

MIRIAM: Any death is a loss, huge or not.

SHRINK: Of course... (*Attracted to her*) Would some sessions with me be of help? I do have a vacancy if you would like a regular appointment.

(Miriam suddenly looks worried)

MIRIAM: Well, before we... continue with the session, I should say that what I wanted to talk to you about doesn't really concern me as a patient, as such. (*Pause*). I've been going through my husband's papers... his files. (*Mock sobbing again*). How does one go on with one's life when the days are filled with endless reminders of a dead man's existence? When I think about the end... how he must have struggled in the water... fighting to break the surface... gasping for air....

SHRINK (*Now very suspicious*): Sorry... Mrs. Engels, how did your husband die?

Miriam turns to look at Shrink. She turns away, uncomfortable now.

MIRIAM: He drowned.

SHRINK: Drowned? How?

MIRIAM: In a sailing accident. He should never have gone out in that weather.

SHRINK: This was when?

MIRIAM: Four weeks ago.

SHRINK: Who was your husband? What was his name, Mrs. Engels?

MIRIAM: My name isn't Engels. I made it up as a dig at my husband's student politics. His name is Stephen Marx.

SHRINK (*Disappointed and cross*): Mrs. Marx, I'll have to ask you to leave.

MIRIAM: What?

SHRINK: Therapy involves trust, Mrs. Marx. Not just the patient's trust in the doctor, but my trust that the patient has come in good faith. I don't know what you're doing here, but you certainly didn't come in good faith.

MIRIAM: I came because I need help... (*sobbing*) I'm a grieving widow!

SHRINK: You need to leave.

MIRIAM: You're kicking me out?

Shrink walks toward the door. Miriam follows him..

What kind of a doctor are you?

SHRINK: One who takes his responsibilities seriously.

They're both at the door now, eye to eye.

This is not a catering service. When I make a mistake, there are consequences.

MIRIAM: Food poisoning kills more than a hundred people a week in New York alone! (*Looking Shrink in the eye*). Okay. Let's cut the crap. How sure are you that Stephen died in an accident? (*Gauges his reaction*). Aha! Neither am I. (*Pause*). Look... I know I was wrong to lie about my name. And I respect your concern about trust. But please hear me out. I couldn't be sure you'd even see me if I'd said I was coming for information about one of your patients.

Shrink sighs and gestures Miriam back into the office. She walks to the middle of the room, lost in thought. He watches her from the door.

SHRINK: Why don't you have a seat?

They each take a seat.

MIRIAM: What did he tell you?

SHRINK: What's said in this room, between doctor and patient, is absolutely confidential.

MIRIAM: You won't tell me? Do you know what it's like to live as the widow of a famous man... of Stephen Marx, the best-selling author of thirteen novels?

SHRINK: Fourteen... at least according to him.

MIRIAM: Why would he say fourteen? He's only published thirteen.

SHRINK (*Shrugs his shoulders in dismissal*): I've no idea. But why did you come today... using therapy as pretense?

MIRIAM: It's amazing what you learn when you go through a person's checkbook. When I saw weekly checks written to you, I looked you up in the phone book.

SHRINK: And?

MIRIAM: And discovered who you are. (*Pause*). Even your Freudian leanings.

SHRINK: Surely it doesn't say that in the Yellow Pages.

MIRIAM: Couches aren't used that much today. Maybe it's your unique selling point.

SHRINK: Maybe I'm old-fashioned.

MIRIAM: Is that why you're wearing a tie?

SHRINK: This specific tie (*fingers it*)... or in general?

MIRIAM: Both.

SHRINK: It's my conservative nature.

MIRIAM: Rather than the image you wish to project?

The Shrink is stumped.

MIRIAM: So tell me: how many of your patients don't even inform their spouses that they're seeing a shrink? (*Seeing him frown*). I guess you don't approve of that word. I shouldn't transfer my irritation at my husband's behavior onto you. Especially when I came to ask you an embarrassing question.

SHRINK: Embarrassing for whom?

MIRIAM: Us.

SHRINK: (*Embarrassed*) Umm... You and me?

MIRIAM (*Amused*): Really, Doctor... Come on! Do we have anything to be embarrassed about?

SHRINK (*Flustered*): Of course not. Please, go ahead.

MIRIAM: When I first realized my husband was seeing you I couldn't believe it. It was so unlike him. He was too self-centered and too secretive. I can't imagine him opening up... the way people do in therapy. (*Pause*.) Did he talk to you about our... physical relations?

SHRINK: You're asking something very inappropriate.

MIRIAM: Are you suggesting we did something bizarre?

SHRINK (*Bantering tone*): I wasn't as it happens... but (*stops himself quickly*) no, no... I just meant that it was inappropriate asking confidential details about one of my patients.

MIRIAM: Even if he is my husband?

SHRINK: Or was.

MIRIAM: Meaning?

SHRINK: I already told you... professional confidentiality generally has no time limit. Dead or alive.

MIRIAM: Without exception?

SHRINK: Interesting... your husband once asked the same question.

MIRIAM: And?

SHRINK: There are exceptions for everything. *(Awkward long pause while Shrink looks at her with undisguised attraction. Miriam starts to respond flirtatiously at which point the phone rings. The Shrink snatches it up. Speaks into phone:)* Can I call you back? *(Brief pause).* Sorry, I can't talk right now. *(Puts phone down firmly.)*

MIRIAM: I'm disturbing you.

SHRINK: Yes. *(Immediately corrects himself).* I mean no! It's... I mean... I just noticed that subtle touch of asymmetry in your face.

MIRIAM *(Holding his gaze somewhat seductively):* We cultivate it in food design. Asymmetry, that is.

SHRINK *(Gulps):* Why not? It draws attention.

MIRIAM: Precisely. But I need to tell you something else. When Stephen died he also left this.

(Miriam produces a bundle of letters from her bag and offers them to Shrink).

And don't worry, you're not in breach of anything. Stephen surrendered the right to privacy when he left these lying in the bottom drawer of his filing cabinet.

SHRINK *(Assumes increasingly shocked expression as he leafs through them):* What a terrible thing for you to have to find.

MIRIAM: Now you understand why I came. It wasn't so much grief as anger that brought me here. Women don't write such letters after a one-night stand! Not even after a three-night stand!

(Miriam becomes progressively angrier, with sarcastic and even hysterical overtones. She sits on the couch and the Shrink sits down next to her. He's awkward, almost puts his arm around her.)

But there weren't just letters! There's a poem too. Did you notice it was a goddamn

sestina! (*Steaming*). Tell me... have you ever gotten a sestina from a lover?

SHRINK (*Attempts to calm her down by humoring her*): No sestinas.

MIRIAM: Not even a haiku after an affair?

SHRINK: I have no affairs.

MIRIAM: Of course, you don't... you're a shrink. But what about a limerick... from a patient?

SHRINK: No limericks.

MIRIAM: Flowers?

SHRINK: Once... a cactus. (*Points to cactus on his desk*). It flowers once every seven years.

MIRIAM: And has it yet?

SHRINK: It's only been 4 years. (*Shrugs*). I'm patient.

MIRIAM (*Grins*): Life's too short to wait for years for some ephemeral pleasure. I'd suggest an instant high and go for a limerick. How about... (*starts making up a limerick, reciting it with increasing hysteria*): "There was a shrink from St. Paul/Whose sessions were sometimes a ball/He couldn't avoid/Always thinking of Freud/'Time's up'... he panted... 'for now that's all."

SHRINK: Ouch... that hurt!

MIRIAM: I was just trying to be funny.

(She picks up the letters and starts crying. He produces a tissue and she blows her nose, composes herself.)

I'm sorry.

SHRINK: It's okay.

MIRIAM: I should get out of your hair.

SHRINK: Listen. I want to help. If I can. If you'll let me?

MIRIAM: Thanks.

(The phone rings again. The Shrink looks at his watch. Phone stops ringing.)

SHRINK: Why don't we continue this conversation at another time.

MIRIAM: Okay.

SHRINK: Good.

MIRIAM: How about lunch?

SHRINK: Well, I don't know if... um... When?

MIRIAM: How about Friday?

SHRINK: That would work.

MIRIAM: Fine. But in addition to lunch, you will also provide some needed reassurance. Deal?

SHRINK: Deal! May I... May I call you Miriam?

MIRIAM: Sure... Ted. Or is it Teddy?

SHRINK (*Stiffly*): Well, actually I prefer Theodore.

MIRIAM: Just like my husband. No "Steve" or "Stevie" for him... it was always "Stephen." But why not? "Theodore" has a nice... formal ring.

SHRINK: Any preferences for food or locale?

MIRIAM: Let me think about it.

SHRINK: Do it soon, please, I want to choose a place you'll like.

MIRIAM: Make it spicy.

SHRINK: Ah! In that case, what's your preference: Korean? Mexican? Thai?

MIRIAM: Your choice.

SHRINK: I'd like to defer to yours—

MIRIAM: I adore deference.

SHRINK: In that case, why not tell me—?

MIRIAM (*Interrupts*): A typical shrink's answer... asking somebody else to make the decision. But I'm not your patient... at least not yet. By the way (*points to bare wall*)... my *Tagliatelle a la Rorschach* really would do something for your wall. And just in case you were wondering, I really did see all those abs and pecs and glutes and things... See you on Friday... (*grins*) Theo!

END OF SCENE 2

Scene 3.

Same day, evening. SHRINK (in shirt sleeves or sweater) lies on couch, shuffling through some notes. Suddenly, the phone rings.

SHRINK (*Reaches for telephone*): Hello? (*Pause*). Yes? An emergency? (*Pause while he listens*). Yes... I'll see you. (*Pause, astonished*). Now? (*Pause*). You're where?

(Goes to door and shortly thereafter returns with Stephen, who is heavily disguised as an elderly woman complete with headscarf and stick).

STEPHEN (*In disguised voice or accent*): Terribly good of you to see me without an appointment.

SHRINK (*Has no idea it's Stephen*): How did you know you'd find me here... at this time of night?

STEPHEN: I was told you practically live in your office. In fact, that you hardly have a private life. Is that true?

SHRINK: In this place I ask the questions. Anyway, so who told you that?

STEPHEN: An unimpeachable source. (*Points to sofa*). May I?

SHRINK: Go ahead.

STEPHEN: Thanks. (*Hands stick to Shrink who takes it somewhat awkwardly. Stephen turns around, quickly tears off the disguise and turns around*). TADA!

SHRINK: Jesus Christ almighty!

STEPHEN (*Grinning*): Not quite!

SHRINK: It's you!

STEPHEN: Aren't you going to congratulate me?

SHRINK (*Angry*): Are you totally mad?

STEPHEN (*Triumphantly*): Stephen Marx has been laid to rest.

SHRINK: But—

STEPHEN: Died in a tragic boating accident. (*Stephen laughs. Continues regardless of the Shrink's outrage*). I told you I often sail by myself during the middle of the week. It's... where I get my best ideas. So, a month ago, I pick a lousy, windy day when nobody else is on the water. I tell the Yacht Club, I'm off for the day on Long Island Sound and I'll be back by five.

SHRINK (*Interrupts angrily*): Get to the point!

STEPHEN: The next morning they find my drifting boat, it still has my life-vest in it, but no Stephen Marx! I even cut the safety belt and then frayed it to get that worn-through effect... Genius! Naturally they assume I'd drowned. No crime and of course, no body. (*Pause*). Isn't that what you read in the papers?

SHRINK (*Angry but controlling it*): I read about a man I thought had taken his own life. Yes.

STEPHEN (*Oblivious*): You want to know how I got to the shore, right? I mean it's early November... a man without a life jacket won't survive beyond half an hour in that water. Let's just say it involved a rubber raft, a miniature outboard, ... and a dose of daring quite untypical of Stephen Marx! It was pure James Bond, Christ, Theodore. You don't mind me calling you Theodore, do you? Theodore...you should've seen me. Surrounded by the blackness of endless water at the moment of rebirth... absolutely exhilarating!

SHRINK (*Sarcastic*): I'll be sure to suggest it to some of my other patients.

STEPHEN (*Manic*): So what about the obituaries, eh? You read 'em?

SHRINK (*Acid*): You must be triumphant now that the floodgates of praise have opened.

(Stephen produces a vast bundle of newspaper articles from his bag. He starts flicking through them ostentatiously)

STEPHEN (*Reading*): "Tragic loss of one of America's great men of letters... literary world in mourning for one of nation's great talents." (*Pause*). Or listen to this: "his legacy will live on for generations to come." (*Pause*). And then this one I love: "J. D. Salinger gives rare interview on Stephen Marx"...

SHRINK: Your ego must be soaring.

STEPHEN: It's good to see you! You know, I've been starting to miss human contact in a way...

SHRINK: I should ask you to leave.

STEPHEN (*Chuckling*): Just when things are getting interesting.

SHRINK (*Suddenly furious*): For heaven's sake man... I thought you were dead!

STEPHEN (*Defensive*): I killed Stephen Marx... not myself.

SHRINK (*Staring at Stephen as if he were a specimen*): Have you no conception of what effect your actions have on other people? For weeks I tried my best for you and suddenly you were dead! I thought I'd failed you!

STEPHEN (*Sober*): I guess I owe you an apology. Remember what we said? Mum's the word! And no nonsense about Oedipus. So, are you pleased I'm not dead?

SHRINK (*Exasperated*): Do you even know that a world exists outside of yourself?

STEPHEN (*Fighting back*): Weren't you listening to me those five sessions? That's what this is all about: the outside world!

SHRINK: This is the outside world Stephen! For once you'll have to accept my being judgmental. I realize that for a psychoanalyst that is out of bounds, but then... so is dying and running around perfectly fit and healthy dressed as Mrs. Doubtfire. You'd rather make a name for yourself among sterile critics and college professors than be true to the people who care about you.

STEPHEN: Perhaps we can talk about that this session. My irresponsibility.

SHRINK: What would be the point? (*In a sly tone*) Does your... wife know you're up and about?

STEPHEN: Of course not.

SHRINK: Have you considered what impact your (*draws quotes in the air*) "suicide" might have had on her?

STEPHEN (*They trade glances*): You think I should *contact* her?

SHRINK (*Cutting tone*): It's up to you.

STEPHEN (*Sensing the Shrink is right*): After so many years of barely communicating... to finally reach out, now that I'm dead... seems... absurd.

SHRINK (*Biting tone*): Besides, what if she blew your cover to reveal your scam.

STEPHEN: Exactly! (*Realizes Shrink's sarcasm*). Well in any case... she wouldn't understand.

SHRINK: What makes you so sure?

STEPHEN: Believe me, I know Miriam's limitations.

SHRINK: If it weren't so utterly beyond the pale, I would grant that your antics are of... clinical interest. Staging one's death in order to read one's own obituaries! The root is... Oedipal, but who is the object of hostility? You are very successful. But Miriam also has a very successful career. All of which leads me to deduce that... she is the father you are seeking to destroy. It's perfectly clear. It was staring me in the face! (*To Stephen*) You are envious of your wife's penis!

STEPHEN (*Outraged*): What kind of a penis is that supposed to be?

SHRINK: A symbolic one.

STEPHEN: Theodore. I'm not the first writer to disappear. What about Agatha Christie? No penis envy there. (*Beat.*) Her motive was revenge.

SHRINK: Revenge for what?

STEPHEN: Against her husband, who was about to leave her. She arranged her disappearance quite carefully, but she didn't devise a plausible way of returning. In the end, all she claimed was temporary amnesia... rather clumsy, I'd say.

SHRINK: So that's what you want? Revenge for Miriam's infidelities?

STEPHEN (*Unsettled*): I didn't say that. I was merely—

SHRINK (*Interrupts angrily*): What has she done to you to merit this kind of treatment? (*Shrink becomes aware he is overreacting*). I mean...er...purely from the clinical standpoint, er...do you think subconsciously you are motivated by hostility towards her...?

STEPHEN: This has nothing to do with her.

SHRINK: I see. You have the adoration of the literary establishment. Soon you'll be on every university syllabus in the Western world. They'll name a journal after you. There'll be a statue of you in the quad by the literature department of whatever university you attended.

STEPHEN: Pigeons will shit on it.

SHRINK (*Unthinking*): Pigeons will sh(it)... what?

STEPHEN: They tend to do that.

SHRINK: Right. My point is: When do you plan to return?

STEPHEN: Maybe that's not on the agenda.

SHRINK: I see. (*Pause*) In that case, don't ask me to play along with your fake suicide. Because I won't do it.

STEPHEN: Why call "living elsewhere under another identity" a suicide?

SHRINK (*Angry*): Social suicide, then. That's even worse... consciously perpetuating a cruel hoax on the survivors. It's vicious!

STEPHEN: Not if you're a writer and continue writing under another persona. Then it's a rebirth—a second life! Can't you see a positive side to all this?

SHRINK: So that's what this is about? Why tell this to me in the first place?

STEPHEN: You're my shrink—

SHRINK (*Cuts him off*): I was your therapist-

STEPHEN: You still are.

SHRINK: I resign.

STEPHEN: No! Don't. Instead, try to persuade me not to go through with it!

SHRINK: Persuasion is not a therapist's function. It's to help you persuade yourself not to do something. (*Finally losing his patience*). But you can't pull it off for innumerable reasons. What about something as trivial as your insurance? It would be fraud if they paid—

STEPHEN (*Interrupts*): Miriam and I have no insurance, no children, no mortgage. And my wife runs her own business.

SHRINK (*Completely disgusted*): What about a new social security number? Trivial... but even more indispensable for a second life. You can't even open a bank account!

STEPHEN (*Quietly*): Is that all you can offer? That's the first problem I took care of. I'll spare you the details, but it involved somebody else's death certificate, a duplicate birth certificate and a false identity. Simple.

SHRINK: Oh yes. It's simple all right... and surely illegal.

STEPHEN (*Waving it off*): I haven't told you the whole truth—

SHRINK: And you will now? Isn't it too late for that?

STEPHEN: On the contrary. You were right. When I first came to you it wasn't for therapy—

SHRINK: And now you need it?

STEPHEN: To find out what I need, I first had to do what I did.

SHRINK (*Impatiently*): So what is it you need?

STEPHEN: To find out how to live in the future.

SHRINK: Your literary afterlife is pretty well assured!

STEPHEN: I want more. Have you ever heard of Fernando Pessoa?

SHRINK (*Impatient*): Who?

STEPHEN (*Spells it slowly and deliberately*): P E S S O A.

SHRINK: Now you're going to tell me who he is.

STEPHEN: The greatest Portuguese poet of the last century... if not the last three centuries... but he didn't just write poetry... he wrote poets.

SHRINK (*Ironic*): Whatever that means!

STEPHEN (*Impatiently*): He created alter ego authors... at least three of them... who wrote in totally different styles!

SHRINK: Lots of authors write under pseudonyms: George Orwell... George Eliot... John Le Carré—

STEPHEN: Not pseudonyms. Heteronyms. (*Pause*). One person... living simultaneously in different personalities... the heteronyms he developed.

SHRINK: Psychiatrists have a term for that syndrome.

STEPHEN (*Ironic*): Don't they always? But for me, he's a hero. And an integral part of my ongoing experiment. Can you imagine the literary freedom Pessoa enjoyed?

SHRINK: He sounds like a candidate for life-long therapy.

STEPHEN: Implying that he needs to be cured? How about emulated?

SHRINK: To accomplish what?

STEPHEN: Simple: to travel through space and time... forward to self-perpetuation... and simultaneously backward to self-immolation. I shall achieve what was always beyond Stephen Marx's reach. Imagine the glory of not just being a "great writer," but several? Imagine what people will say in the history books when they realize I was a literary genius—not just once but time and time again, but under a series of different names. Perhaps they'll never find out!

SHRINK: You don't want to be *part* of the canon; you want to be the entire canon. I think you may be certifiable.

STEPHEN: But you are intrigued, aren't you? Some small part of you wants to know whether I can pull it off? Come on, admit it!

SHRINK (*Actually intrigued*): You're delusional.

STEPHEN: Which leads me to my reason for being here. I have a proposal.

SHRINK: I can't wait.

STEPHEN: This is the first proper conversation I have had in a month and already I feel more human. Theodore, I need someone to talk to. Someone I can trust not to let the secret out. I propose that we continue our sessions.

SHRINK: Now why on earth would I agree to collude in such an act of fraud?

STEPHEN: Because I am fascinating. I am the most interesting patient you ever had.

SHRINK: Megalomania is more common than you may think.

STEPHEN (*Suddenly nasty*): Because the ethics of patient confidentiality forbid you from revealing what passes between us. Because your professional duties require you to continue our sessions in order to prevent me from going over the edge. You just said I was certifiable. Well... certifiable people need shrinks!

SHRINK: You think you can blackmail me into seeing you? That's unspeakable!

STEPHEN: Not as unspeakable as deserting a patient in need!

SHRINK: Get out!

STEPHEN: I only meant—

SHRINK: Out Stephen, out! Or I'll call the police.

STEPHEN: You wouldn't.

SHRINK: Oh no?

(Shrink picks up the phone. About to dial.)

You once asked about exceptions to professional confidentiality. Well... you're about to find out.

STEPHEN: You're gonna regret this.

SHRINK: Go ahead and die!

(Stephen slowly leaves the stage. After he's gone the Shrink puts down the phone. Initially angry (e.g. pounding fist into hand), he finally sits down slowly on the couch and puts his head in his hands.)

END OF SCENE 3

Scene 4.

Two days after scene 2. SHRINK wears an open shirt with an ascot. He paces the floor occasionally looking at his watch. Clearly waiting for something. There is a knock at the door. The Shrink smoothes his hair quickly and checks his armpits. His nervousness is clear. He heads to the door, then thinks again and sits down at his desk trying to look like he is in the middle of working.

SHRINK *(Clears his throat):* Come in!

(Miriam appears looking even more glamorous than before. She is carrying a stylish picnic basket. The Shrink can't stop himself from getting up and going to her.)

MIRIAM: Greetings.

SHRINK: Hello! *(Controls enthusiasm)* I was just... finishing some notes.

MIRIAM: Is this a bad time?

SHRINK: Not at all. Please.

(Miriam comes further into the Shrink's office. The Shrink eyes the basket in fear.)

Is that a... pet? I should just say I am terribly allergic to cats.

MIRIAM: Relax. My pets are larger and don't come in baskets. *(She puts basket on the floor in front of the couch and sits down).* How about a picnic on a couch? *(Miriam opens the basket).*

SHRINK: I thought we're eating out.

MIRIAM *(Starts laying out a tablecloth and various dishes):* Next time. *(She passes him a bottle of wine and an opener).* Would you do the honors?

SHRINK: Well... a picnic here would certainly be a first.

MIRIAM: Consider it a form of pastoral homage to a kind shrink for allowing me to unburden myself like that the other day.

SHRINK: It's what I do here.

(The Shrink sits down next to her somewhat awkwardly.)

MIRIAM: Still... there really was no excuse for my behavior. *(Handing him a plate of food).*

SHRINK *(Forced enthusiasm):* Why there's bread, cheese, cold meat and some type of... olive...

MIRIAM: If you’re going to compliment the cuisine, at least know what it is. (*Pointing to the dishes.*) Homemade focaccia, unsalted Pecorino, smoked reindeer and caper berries! (*She holds up a berry on a stem.*)

SHRINK (*Cautiously tastes one caper berry*): Rather assertive.

MIRIAM: Sometimes you need food that talks back. Besides, I dislike blandness.

SHRINK: In food... or in general?

MIRIAM: I don’t tolerate it in food... but “in general?” There, I simply withdraw. (*Points to food*). But you seem to have expected something more elaborate.

SHRINK (*Looking at her, grins*): Just more photogenic.

MIRIAM: It was taste I was after rather than appearance. After all, I didn’t just come for distraction... but also for some information.

SHRINK: Anyway... it’s delicious.

MIRIAM (*Flirtatious*): Thank you Theo. I can call you Theo, can’t I? I mean it’s not as if...

SHRINK (*Somewhat stiffly*): We may be in my office but this can hardly be called a therapy session, so Theo is fine.

(They both eat for a while. The Shrink starts to enjoy it.)

It’s certainly not bland.

MIRIAM (*Reaching into the basket*): I brought one more thing.

(Miriam produces two more dessert plates and two peculiar 3-pronged forks—the central prong three times as long as the two side ones with none of them curved. She holds them up against the light—providing ample opportunity for the audience to notice them—before wiping them carefully and then putting them to the left of their respective plates).

SHRINK (*Points to the forks*): Is that for a scientific experiment?

MIRIAM: They’re for mangoes.

SHRINK: I didn’t know there was such a thing as a mango fork.

MIRIAM: Chalk it up to a new experience.

SHRINK (*Reaches over to lift one of the forks*): It looks lethal... especially that long middle prong... and so Freudian!

MIRIAM: In what sense?

SHRINK: The Freudian triad of the human psyche: Id... Ego... and Superego. And never

equal.

MIRIAM: Well... we all know what this one stands for (*sticks up middle finger in typical Italian fashion*).

SHRINK (*Wags his head*): Too simplistic.

MIRIAM: What other choice is there?

SHRINK: It depends on the person.

MIRIAM (*Takes mango-fork from his hand*): In that case, let's take Stephen. My husband was a cautious, contemplative sailor. He always sailed alone, but only when the weather was good... and he always told me before he took off. Why would he leave on such a terrible day... in November of all months... without telling me? (*Raises her fork*). So with what you know about Stephen, what's this one? (*Points to central tine*).

SHRINK: I...er... didn't see him often enough to make a good judgment ...

MIRIAM (*Pretends to joke*): What the hell... give it a Shrink's try (*gestures with fork as if it were a fencer's foil*).

SHRINK: The superego is the internal censor that represses the urges of the Id. That's (*points at middle tine of fork*) what I'd pick for a cautious sailor.

MIRIAM (*More serious*): But suppose he decided to throw caution to the wind on that blustery November day? What then?

SHRINK: An excess of the "Id" or... of the "ego"... depending on what part of his mind was in control at the time.

MIRIAM (*Laughs*): I want commitment... not equivocation.

SHRINK (*Speaking nervously yet assertively*): You may be asking for too much... too soon. The Ego... the conscious part of our psyche... is driven by the primitive needs for satisfaction.... Whereas the Id... the unconscious part... controls thought and behavior... much of it libidinous. At any given moment, it's difficult to know which is in control.

MIRIAM (*Puts fork back on table*): Are we still talking about Stephen? (*Suddenly remembering*). I forgot the wine! How silly of me. (*Miriam hands the shrink a bottle of wine and a corkscrew.*) Would you do the honors?

SHRINK I don't normally drink on the job.

MIRIAM: Don't worry... I won't tell. *In vino veritas.*

(The Shrink pulls the cork out swiftly and pours two glasses.)

MIRIAM: I should say I haven't tried this vintage yet. I'd be interested to know what you think.

SHRINK (*Tastes wine timidly while speaking slowly*): Seems well-structured... a generous palate... certainly a boldly exotic nose. What's your opinion?

MIRIAM (*Tastes it after first swirling and inhaling, then mimes tongue-in-cheek wine taster's slowly delivered judgment*): Passionately entwined pepper and black currant flavor... caressed ... (*long pause, while she takes another sip*) by just the faintest whiff of horseshit—

SHRINK (*Who had taken a sip, chokes*): What?

MIRIAM: Just checking whether you were paying attention. The usual winespeak term is "barnyard." Anyway, the wine is just right for my toast. (*Clinks his glass*). To... revelations!

SHRINK: To revelations. A charming toast! Is that why you are here? To learn my secrets?

MIRIAM: What else? By the way... you are single, aren't you?

SHRINK: Is that relevant to our lunch?

MIRIAM: I'm just testing my intuition. Otherwise... why would you wear an ascot and no jacket?

SHRINK: Your intuition is faultless... so far. Yes, I'm quite unattached.

MIRIAM (*Seductively*): Have you met anyone recently? Or are you saving yourself for someone truly special?

SHRINK: I... well I'm not exactly saving myself as such, no...

MIRIAM: Are you a bachelor or an ex-husband?

SHRINK: Ex.

MIRIAM: How long?

SHRINK: Nearly a year.

MIRIAM: Whose decision was it to divorce? Yours or hers?

SHRINK: Neither.

MIRIAM: What other alternatives are there?

SHRINK (*Long pause while he hesitates*): For instance, suicide.

MIRIAM: Oh my God! Theodore I'm terribly sorry.

SHRINK: You had no way of knowing. But now that you know?

MIRIAM: I wouldn't want to pry.

SHRINK: Suicide is usually a message to the survivor. That is why most people committing suicide also leave notes. When there is none, the survivors must create their own. (*Pause*). My wife left none....

MIRIAM (*Compassionate*): Oh, Theodore.

SHRINK: We married for the wrong reasons.

MIRIAM: So do many couples... sex for instance.

SHRINK: Ours was loneliness... which marriage did not resolve. What an admission for a shrink!

MIRIAM: You can't be the first one who's failed in his marriage.

SHRINK: At least, we do have something in common. You're also facing a missing message.

MIRIAM: Which I'm now trying to reconstruct. (*Pause*). But compared to you I haven't suffered at all.

SHRINK (*Quietly*): Who knows? (*Pause*.) What about you? You said you'd been thinking of divorce. Whose decision was that?

MIRIAM: Mine.

SHRINK: Why?

MIRIAM: At one time, I thought his writing was wondrously clever turning phrases inside out, upside down, back to front. I felt like his partner. I critiqued his first drafts... I typed the final ones... I was part of the creative process... or so I thought. And I considered the money his writing earned our money. But as his success brought in some real dough, he decided to get what he called a "writing pad" elsewhere. He showed me fewer and fewer drafts... and eventually just the completed manuscripts. That's when I started reading his books from the outside... like any other curious reader.

SHRINK: Meaning?

MIRIAM: Looking for hidden autobiographical details.

SHRINK: That must have been a difficult adjustment.

MIRIAM: Living with a writer isn't easy. At best you get half. Did he tell you about Fernando Pessoa?

SHRINK (*Surprised*): Yes... he did mention him.

MIRIAM: Stephen introduced me to Pessoa's poetry years ago and for a while, even I was hooked, but Stephen then became obsessed with Pessoa's heteronomy ideas. It got so that when he was working on a book, I felt I was living with a stranger.

SHRINK: Fascinating.

MIRIAM: For a shrink... but less so for a wife. That's when I became jealous of his inner life.

SHRINK: Are you the jealous type?

MIRIAM: Until I found the letters I showed you, I thought that any jealousy of mine was solely related to my sense of autonomy...

SHRINK: That's pretty cryptic.

MIRIAM: That comes from having a picnic in a shrink's office! I'm even beginning to sound like one.

SHRINK: Pretend we're in a restaurant.

MIRIAM: Okay. So after Stephen started to write elsewhere, I was stuck in the house with time on my hands but none of my own income. Then, when I became financially independent through my booming catering business, it dawned on me that time without money isn't worth as much as money without time. I had very little spare time. I wanted that to be quality time. That's when I realized how little quality was left in our relationship.

SHRINK: And that's when your marriage started unraveling?

MIRIAM: I suppose it must have been. But enough about my revelations. Let's turn to yours. I hope you can talk while eating your mango.

SHRINK: I'm rather good at multi-tasking. Most therapists are.

MIRIAM: Good! *(Reaches into basket to produce a mango)*. Let me show you how to use a mango fork... without Freudian mumbo jumbo.

(Miriam takes a mango with her left hand. She places mango fork in his right hand and with her right hand takes HIS hand and guides it so that the fork carefully penetrates the pit with the long middle prong, until it has entered sufficiently that the two outer prongs enter the flesh. Miriam emits a sigh as the penetration is completed.)

The tall one... penetrates. Only then do the other two fulfill their function of holding the object in place.

SHRINK *(Very turned on, but nervous)*: And then?

MIRIAM: You mean Freud didn't take a stand on mangoes? Well... first you strip it...

(Takes mango, now supported on mango fork, holds it up vertically, takes the

cutting knife and quickly peels the fruit so that the skin droops down like four petals leaving the naked fleshy part of the mango upright).

And now that the ripe flesh is exposed... (*Hands mango supported on its fork to SHRINK*) then comes... consummation. But before you get off again on Freudian symbolism, start eating... but suck as you bite down... or, maybe just nibble to tease out every drop of that tongue-licking juice. (*Pause*). Otherwise you're gonna get sticky.

SHRINK (*Carefully takes a very small bite*): Like... that?

MIRIAM (*Laughs*): Not so timidly. (*Takes mango fork holding the mango from him and takes a big bite, then elaborately licks sticky mango juice from her lips before handing it back to him*). Try again... but a bit more aggressively. What other fruit is so swollen with juice? The taste will pucker your memory. (*Watches him take a bigger bite*). That's better. And now, let's multi-task while you continue consummation.

SHRINK (*Shocked back to reality*): Right...

MIRIAM: Can you talk while you suck? (*Seeing him nearly choke after he has taken a big bite*). Okay, I'll let you slowly get into the swing of it while I ask you some more questions. And if you feel like commenting in a way that doesn't compromise your ethical position then you can do so. Okay?

SHRINK (*Putty in her hands, grunts*): Okay.

MIRIAM: Last time we met I showed you some letters that my husband had received from various women. And that poem... that sestina.

SHRINK: That poem really bothered you. Why?

MIRIAM: Because it raised the emotional level of intimacy one notch further. So were these sexual affairs a subject of discussion in your meetings with my husband?

(She waits for an answer while taking a bite from the mango, then offers it to him).

SHRINK (*Guiltily takes a nibble as he crumbles*): You know I shouldn't answer that question.

MIRIAM: Do I hear a "but" coming?

SHRINK (*Stalls by taking another nibble from the mango and then answers in low voice*): But the answer is... "no."

MIRIAM (*Takes a napkin, leans over quickly and wipes his mouth*): Thanks, Theo. (*Uncomfortable silence*). Did he discuss our sexual relations?

SHRINK: He barely talked about you at all.

MIRIAM: And you didn't find that surprising?

SHRINK: Omissions are often more significant than admissions. You had to go through his checkbook to find out that he'd been seeing me.

MIRIAM (*Nods*): True. But what about sex in general?

SHRINK: The subject of sex hardly ever came up.

MIRIAM (*Sarcastic*): In other words it did.

SHRINK: Now we're crossing a boundary.

MIRIAM: I don't think you realize how important this is to me. Officially, I'm now single... and... just as you are... unattached. But I've got to get the past out of my system. (*Calmer*) Did he talk about us? About our sex life? (*Silence.*) Did he tell you why he went with all those women? (*Increasingly emotional*). Did he say it was my fault? (*Pause*). That I drove him to it? (*Her tone turns desperate*). Just a simple "yes" or "no." I won't ask for anything else!

SHRINK: Really, Miriam... now you've gone too far.

MIRIAM (*Even more upset now*): Who's to know? Just nod or shake your head. Did he screw them because he loved them? Or because he was just following his goddamn "Id"? Did they mean nothing? (*Brief pause as the Shrink moves slightly*). Hah! (*Points at him triumphantly*). You nodded! (*Pause*). Ever so slightly... but you nodded!

SHRINK (*With emotion*): If it helps, I can tell you one thing: there's no doubt in my mind that he admired... and respected you.

MIRIAM: He did?

SHRINK: But now we must get off the subject.

MIRIAM (*Sad, yet sarcastic*): "Admire and respect." (*Pause*). But for sex he went to other women.

SHRINK (*Leans forward to touch her lightly on her hand*): You should not blame yourself for his... mistakes.

MIRIAM: When my husband didn't find me desirable any more.... Look, he's probably told you, so what's the difference? It's been nearly four years!

SHRINK: But that is much more common than you might think. In my experience, psychic erectile dysfunction--

MIRIAM: Oh, you men! Such tactful words when it comes to your performance, while we women are either "frigid" or "hot." I would even have preferred it if his (*sarcastic tone*) "psychic erectile dysfunction" was not about being bored with me... that maybe he'd simply turned gay!

SHRINK: Because you learned he had sex with other women, but not his wife?

MIRIAM: Not just because of that. Stephen Marx, the author who was famous for never writing explicit sex scenes in any of his thirteen novels, made one exception. I'd always wondered where he got that inspiration, because it didn't come from his devoted wife, who prides herself on her steamy imagination. Having come across that cache of letters, I now know where that exception came from. Do you remember Andrew Marvell's poem, "To His Coy Mistress?" (*Quotes, while looking into the distance*): "The grave's a fine and private place,/but none, I think, do there embrace./ Now let us sport us while we may." (*Pause, then looks at SHRINK*). "So tell me, have you ever made love in a cemetery?"

SHRINK (*Slightly embarrassed, laughs self-consciously*): Nobody has ever asked me this... professionally... or personally.

MIRIAM: That question wasn't addressed to you.

SHRINK: Oh.

MIRIAM: In Stephen's penultimate novel, he has a woman ask that question of a famous writer... after first quoting Marvell. Typical Stephen: always quoting someone you should know, but never quite do.

SHRINK: I think I'd like to read that novel sometime.

MIRIAM: For prurient or professional reasons?

SHRINK: The great thing about my profession is that sometimes the two cannot easily be distinguished.

MIRIAM: Lucky man! But if it's for prurient reasons, I can spare you the trouble. The next sentence reads, "Within forty minutes, he had made love to the shortest woman he had ever met, upright, her back against the stone figure of an angel. She had drawn the line at assuming a supine position on a stone slab."

SHRINK: Rather clinically put.

MIRIAM :Clinical? (*Heavy sarcasm*). It wasn't a prescription for treating a slipped disk... that's for sure. I wanted to convince myself that the scene was fiction—one of his sailing inspirations—the result of nautical... not amorous cruising.

SHRINK: But which is it? The fantasy of making love in a cemetery or encountering a real woman that suggested it?

MIRIAM: What's the difference? What's important is that the letter was dated six months before the novel came out. The scene must have been based on fact!

SHRINK: I see.

MIRIAM: I even toyed with the idea of slipping him some Viagra.

SHRINK: And?

MIRIAM: It was too chemical for me... food is more romantic than Viagra. Culinary history is full of aphrodisiacal foods... but I even went a step further. I arranged them in phallic and vaginal shapes... subtly of course. I still remember serving a carefully skinned ripe peach with some lines by D.H. Lawrence: "Why the groove?/ Why the lovely, bivalve roundness?/Why the ripple down the sphere?/ Why the suggestion of incision?"

SHRINK: Wow!

MIRIAM: But it didn't work.

SHRINK: Perhaps you were too subtle.

MIRIAM: With that poem... and with fruit that is so juicy... and fleshy... and peachy-sweet...?

(She grins and he smiles. The atmosphere is again assuming erotic overtones. She takes another bite of the mango)

SHRINK: Perhaps you should've picked a mango instead of peaches? *(Also takes a bite of the mango).*

MIRIAM: Especially since mangoes come in so many shapes. Nearly round reddish ones... like nubile breasts... and then the yellow Asian crescent ones... like thighs, which have a ridge you can follow with your tongue.

SHRINK *(Mock complaint in voice):* No ridge in this one.

MIRIAM: It's the wrong season for thighs from India. This one comes from Peru.

(As they alternately nibble on the same mango, they move closer together. A kiss looks imminent.)

MIRIAM: Would you look at that! *(Points to the partially eaten mango).* After biting, licking, sucking... after all that pleasure... that's what's left.

SHRINK: Most pleasurable activities are untidy.

MIRIAM *(Laughs):* It's the only untidiness I tolerate.

SHRINK: That's good to know.

(The Shrink moves towards her. As he does so, Miriam slides lower onto the couch.)

MIRIAM: I'd like... to see you again.

SHRINK: I'd like that too.

MIRIAM: In that case, how about another limerick for the next time? "There was a shrink from St. Paul/Who took his patient to a ball/When tasting a mango/He wanted to tango/

SHRINK (*Quickly continues*): "Don't stop'... he panted... 'for that's not all!"

The phone rings and then answering machine picks up.

STEPHEN (*Voice over*): Theodore, this is Stephen. Listen, I've been thinking about what happened yesterday. I should never have done that to you. Believe me when I say that I've got to talk to someone... and by that I mean you. I'm begging you... a needy patient... to call. You can reach me on 650-723-2783. (*Stephen hangs up*).

SHRINK: I can explain.

MIRIAM (*Jumps up*): You bastard! The two of you! And you have the gall to hide behind professional ethics! You looked me in the eye, you started to eat my mango... and then you lied to me!

SHRINK: Miriam... please! Try to understand! I can't betray a patient's...

MIRIAM: Bull shit! You're worse than he is! At least Stephen had the balls to fake his own death! But you're dead even though you don't know it!

SHRINK: Miriam! Please—(*The Shrink tries to take her in his arms*).

MIRIAM: Don't touch me!

(With that Miriam stalks off stage, leaving the picnic basket behind. SHRINK crosses to the couch. FADE OUT)

END OF SCENE 4

END OF ACT 1

Scene 5.

A few days later. Same setting as in Scene 3 with STEPHEN standing by the door while taking off the outer woman's garment (his standard disguise for visits to the Shrink's office) and wig. SHRINK sits at his desk.

STEPHEN: It's very good of you to continue seeing me.

SHRINK: I lost my temper... a real no-no in my profession.

STEPHEN: I put you in a terrible position.

(The Shrink notices a mango-fork lying on a nearby surface. He hastily picks it up and pockets it without Stephen seeing, but in full view of the audience.)

SHRINK (*Flustered*): My primary patience should be to my loyalty. I mean patients. That is, my loyalty is to my pat—

STEPHEN (*Rises partly from couch*): Are you okay?

SHRINK: Must be something I ate.

STEPHEN: Would you like the couch?

SHRINK (*Eying the couch warily*): Er... no... I feel fine. I'll stay in the chair. (*A moment*) So?

(Stephen lies down on the couch. He sniffs it tentatively.)

STEPHEN: That reminds me of something... This patient's perfume smells like...

SHRINK (*Panicking*): Perhaps we should start by discussing the nature of your new existence. What's it like living with your heteronyms?

STEPHEN (*Sits up*): You looked up Pessoa?

SHRINK: So far, I just googled him on the web. Hundreds of entries... even a Pessoa Revival Society. Rather impressive.

STEPHEN: Forget about the web... it's unfiltered and undigested. Why not read him... or one of his heteronyms? Here... listen to this. (*Lies back on the couch, clearing his throat before reciting*).

*The poet is a faker. He
Fakes it so completely,
He even fakes he's suffering
The pain he's really feeling.*

(Back to ordinary tone). It's from his poem, "Autopsychography." (*Laughs*). A shrink's poem... wouldn't you say? (*Pause*). Yes... my current heteronym is doing quite well... living the simple life.

SHRINK: As monastic as your Portuguese obsession?

STEPHEN: I'm not attempting to become Pessoa. What interests me is the Pessoa phenomenon. (*Urgently, passionately*). To start from scratch... each time with a blank canvas? And turn into your own creation as well as living it? I don't know of anyone that has truly managed it in fiction. Let alone anyone who has employed such a method in order to enter the canon repeatedly as two, three... four different authors!

SHRINK: Still this obsession with the literary afterlife? You are an interesting case, Stephen Marx.

STEPHEN: Mann.

SHRINK: Pardon?

STEPHEN: My current heteronym is (*pronounces it slowly and emphatically*) "T. H. Mann." But you can call me "T. H."

SHRINK: What does T. H. stand for?

STEPHEN: Subtle homage to Dr. Theodore Hofmann.

SHRINK: I suppose I should feel flattered. But why not a full name?

STEPHEN: In my present existence, even the gender must not be disclosed.

SHRINK: T. H. is a baffling case: a narcissist who sheds his identity.

STEPHEN: Why baffling? What are we, Doctor, but the constructs we build around ourselves? What happens when we shed them? What are we at our core? That is what I'm discovering... that's where the real work... true literature... gets done. (*Pause*). A new work by Stephen Marx would only be compared to what came before. To pull this off... to live T. H. Mann... to create a text unrecognizable as the work of Stephen Marx, but standing and maybe soaring in its own right... that's a real accomplishment. I'm testing the ultimate limits of constructive insecurity. Raising the ante... surpassing the last success... but as another person, not just another name! And I'm well on my way to achieving it.

SHRINK: I can see the creative side. But must you destroy everyone around you?

STEPHEN: Oh please! Whom have I destroyed? I've already explained about my wife. (*Pause*) My fans? The public loves a tragic death. The only one losing out is my former editor. He'll have to do some real work for a change. Find himself some new talent.

SHRINK: You're spending too much time alone.

STEPHEN: On the contrary. I feel free for the first time in years. (*Pause*). I've even taken up cooking. Last night I had red snapper... in a white wine sauce. With grilled asparagus. Little fat... not too many calories... I'm becoming a true Californian.

SHRINK: Wait till the novelty of eating alone wears off. Believe me... (*interrupting himself*) You live in California? Did you just fly in?

STEPHEN: I live three hours away from you... by car... and an old one at that. I went to California for my social security number and a cell phone. I like their food and the fact that Californians don't smoke... but that's about it. Earthquakes make me nervous. Besides, New York isn't just Manhattan... upstate there's some spectacular countryside and plenty of privacy. And I'm still within commuting distance to my shrink. Impressed?

SHRINK: Tell me, T. H. Whom else do you know who cooks and lives within a 3-hour commute?

STEPHEN: Come now, Theodore. I'm not that obvious.

SHRINK: That's what you think. We should talk about her. Don't you think she deserves some kind of consideration?

STEPHEN: I came to you to talk about my affairs... not hers.

SHRINK: Hasn't it occurred to you that with you gone, but no body, your wife may find herself in a terrible position?... She can't live her life like a normal person. Besides, you may have thought the relationship was over. But what about her? (*Stephen looks taken aback*). What if, after your disappearance, she discovered you'd been talking to a therapist... say through something like a... memo or a... check stub even, made out to me. (*Pause*). It's a thought, isn't it? And what if that caused her to suspect you had been depressed for some time? A period, which could... for all she knows... span much of your marriage, and which ended in your "suicide." Don't you think it possible that she might start to... blame herself? What if she began to think that your entire marriage had been based on... lies?

STEPHEN: Why all this concern about someone you don't even know? (*Beat*.) Look Theodore, I don't want to talk about her... but I may want you to contact her.

SHRINK (*Completely taken aback*): What did you say?

STEPHEN: I may want you to... find out something for me. (*Pause*). That novel. The fourteenth. Mann's debut. "*Obsession*."

SHRINK: Is that the title... or a fact?

STEPHEN: Both.

SHRINK: So what are you asking of me?

STEPHEN: Nobody has seen "*Obsession*" except for the publisher. It's been accepted! And in record time. (*Triumphantly*). I knew it would be. Territory I had never before thought I'd be able to handle.

SHRINK (*Taken aback*): You've sent this to your publisher?

STEPHEN: No, a different one. No one must ever connect that novel with Stephen Marx's body of work.

SHRINK: And you've written all this in the last couple of months?

STEPHEN: Of course not. Most of it was written before I drowned. I was well on my way to taking my final step. Not just deleting that novel from the hard drive, but deleting Stephen Marx from the world. But while I did erase the copy on the hard disk, I made one unbelievably stupid mistake: I forgot to empty the recycle bin.

SHRINK: There are no perfect crimes.

STEPHEN: I have not committed any crime.

SHRINK: A highly dubious conclusion.

STEPHEN: That's a debate for another time. Look... unless someone emptied the trash, there is still a copy of "*Obsession*" on that computer. (*Pause*). I need you to find out whether Miriam has been through my files.

SHRINK: Are you serious? Just phone her out of the blue and say, "Mrs. Marx, your husband... your late husband... asked me to contact you?"

STEPHEN: You could ask whether she's related to that famous writer, Stephen Marx. You could claim you're an avid reader of his novels. (*Awkward laugh*). By the way... are you?

SHRINK: I've skimmed a couple of your paperbacks.

STEPHEN (*Disappointed*): I see. Still... you could always pretend. (*Pause*). The next question... "Are there unpublished manuscripts to look forward to?" would then be quite natural.

SHRINK: What if she says there are?

STEPHEN: Then you shall inform me immediately. I don't want her to get any ideas about meddling with a dead author's work.

(The phone starts ringing, whereupon the Shrink snatches it up.)

SHRINK (*With hand on mouthpiece, to Stephen*): Sorry, I forgot to put on the answering machine. (*Into phone, shocked*): Who? (*Pause*) Oh hi. How good of you to call. I enjoyed our... picnic a great deal. (*To Stephen*). A friend.

STEPHEN: Can't you tell them to call back?

SHRINK (*Into phone*): Can you call me back? (*To Stephen*). No, sorry. (*Into phone*.) Your things? Don't worry... everything's quite safe.

STEPHEN: That sounds intriguing.

SHRINK (*Into phone*): At this hour? You're in the neighborhood? Sure... by all means... But not within the next... ten minutes. (*Pause*). I'm not alone.

STEPHEN: Tell him to come in half an hour.

SHRINK: (*Into phone*): No... not a patient... not at this time of the night. (*Pause*). Of course not... a man. (*Pause*). In thirty minutes? Okay... okay... of course...

STEPHEN: I just need to tell you how to reach Miriam.

SHRINK: What? (*Into phone*): Sorry, I was interrupted. (*Pause*). Impossible! (*Pause*). No, no. Believe me... it would be awkward if you came now. (*Pause*). Not even for a minute. (*Covering phone, to Stephen*). You want to tell me how to contact your... wife?

STEPHEN: Yeah. How about pretending you're having some big dinner event. You could ask her about her catering service.

SHRINK (*Into phone*): What about the catering service? (*Realizing what he just said to Miriam*). Sorry I didn't mean... oh really? I'm so glad business is going well. (*To Stephen with hand over mouthpiece*). My friend also runs a catering service.

STEPHEN: I wonder whether he knows my wife?

SHRINK: I beg your pardon?

STEPHEN: Ask him if he's ever come across Miriam Marx.

SHRINK (*To Stephen*): I'm sure they know each other.

STEPHEN: Let me talk to him.

(*Stephen holds out his hand expectantly*).

SHRINK: I don't think that would be a good idea.

STEPHEN: Oh come on. There's no way he'd recognize my voice.

SHRINK (*Holds on to phone*): You may be wrong. My friend is a great... fan of your work and went to your book launches.

STEPHEN: A fan. Great.

SHRINK (*Into phone*): Look, I really must hang up. (*Pause*). Of course I still have your mango forks.

STEPHEN (*Recognition suddenly dawning upon him*): Mango forks?

SHRINK (*To Stephen*): She forgot them.

STEPHEN: She?

(Shrink quickly puts hand tightly over mouthpiece)

STEPHEN (*Screams*): Is that Miriam? That's her logo! Mango forks. Give me that phone!

(The Shrink hangs up)

SHRINK: It's not... what you think....

STEPHEN: You meddling head shrinker! Have you been sleeping with my wife?

SHRINK: Talking with her... not sleeping! She's depressed. She's very concerned, she...

STEPHEN: I should punch you in the mouth!

SHRINK: She came to my office. She'd found a check stub.

STEPHEN: A check stub. Right. I thought there was something fishy about that detail. You goddamn—

SHRINK: She was concerned about you, that's all, so I....

STEPHEN: Have you told her? Does she know I'm alive?

SHRINK: She had her suspicions from the outset. That's why she came to me for reassurance and that's when she happened to hear your message.

STEPHEN (*Furious*): She heard the phone message? (*Screams*). And when had you planned to tell me that?

SHRINK: Inform a supposedly dead husband of my meetings with his very much alive wife?

STEPHEN (*Jumps up*): Fuck you and your professional ethics! There's a hole big enough to drive a truck through! That's the last you'll see of me. I'll never trust you again.

(Stephen, grabbing woman's dress and wig without taking time to put them on, rushes out)

END OF SCENE 5

Scene 6.

Two minutes later. Dim light, front door outside SHRINK'S building. MIRIAM, dressed warmly in a long overcoat and scarf, stands in the shadow as STEPHEN, wig on crooked, dress put on clumsily, rushes out of the door, partially disguised. MIRIAM, stepping out of the shadow, intercepts him.

MIRIAM (*With increasing fury*). Bastard! Bastard!... God damn bastard! How could you?

STEPHEN (*Completely taken by surprise, rears back*): Miriam! Jesus Christ! (*Tears off wig*). What the hell are you doing here?

MIRIAM (*Outraged*): You goddamn lying asshole! You're asking me that? Huh? Thought you could just fade away and leave me to pick up the pieces! You and that lying Shrink making me look like a total sucker!

STEPHEN: Will you just calm down!

MIRIAM (*Resuming control*): I'm perfectly calm...

STEPHEN: Oh yeah! What are you doing here? Are you sleeping with him?

MIRIAM (*Fury ignited once again*): That's the first thing you've got to say to me? You... who's supposed to be dead... who was hopping in and out of beds... and I'm not referring to our chaste connubial one... are asking me whether I'm sleeping with Theo?

STEPHEN: Oh, so it's Theo, is it... not Dr. Hofmann or even Theodore?

MIRIAM: Don't tell me you're jealous?

STEPHEN: Have I ever been jealous with you?

MIRIAM: Have I ever given you a reason?

STEPHEN: I guess I have no right to be jealous now.

MIRIAM: Damn right!

STEPHEN (*Growls furiously*): Did that hypocritical son of a bitch tell you I'd be seeing him tonight?

MIRIAM: No, I heard it out of your big mouth... screaming into my cell phone.

(Quickly pulls phone out of her overcoat pocket).

STEPHEN (*Sobered*): Ah...

(An awkward silence. They speak at the same time.)

STEPHEN: Look I... **MIRIAM**: I suppose you...

STEPHEN: You first.

MIRIAM: I was going to say I suppose there's good news and bad news in seeing you.

STEPHEN: I hate that cliché! But start with the good news.

MIRIAM: The good news is that you aren't really dead. (*Pause*). The bad news is that according to the newspapers, you are.

STEPHEN: I'm relieved you didn't put it the other way around.

MIRIAM: That's nasty... even for an undead person.

STEPHEN: Would you define "undead" for me?

MIRIAM: Sure. In limbo. (*Pause*). The point is, whether you like it or not, you've left me in an impossible position. When the body of a presumed dead person is missing... five years must pass ... unless I place ads in the newspapers.

STEPHEN: And?

MIRIAM: And I want to lead my own life.

STEPHEN: I fail to see why my actions are stopping you from leading a normal life.

MIRIAM: Without your corpse... and I'm certainly not demanding that... yet, I've got to wait five years before this in-limbo wife becomes a widow!

STEPHEN: What's keeping you from divorcing me?

MIRIAM (*Shudders*): To me, there's something cheap and brutal about announcing openly that I'm seeking a divorce from a supposedly dead husband... especially one whose wife now knows that he's not dead.

STEPHEN: I'm sure some lawyer can handle that.

MIRIAM: Not for the first time, you're confusing legality with morality.

(A more conciliatory tone comes over them.)

STEPHEN: What are you demanding?

MIRIAM: Resolution... from limbo.

STEPHEN: Miriam... be reasonable.

MIRIAM: Reasonable? After what you did to me? Right now I'm mad enough to serve your balls up on a bed of linguini.

STEPHEN: Another recipe for your book? (*Pause*.) Well, I can't send you my corpse. And I can't come back. (*A pause while Miriam digests this.*)

MIRIAM: So you're not planning on a resurrection?

STEPHEN: I wouldn't choose such a grandiose word. But... no. No return.

MIRIAM: I see. (*Pause*). And what's Theodore's role in all this?

STEPHEN: He was my lifeline to an earlier existence. At least until tonight. (*Shivers*). It's cold out here... Can we go inside somewhere?

MIRIAM: I'm hot. (*Unwraps her scarf*). I prefer the fresh air.

STEPHEN: You look well Miriam... in fact, very well.

MIRIAM: You mean anger becomes me? What a left-handed compliment, coming from a dead husband!

STEPHEN: It was meant ambidextrously.

MIRIAM: I see you haven't lost your touch with words.

(Long pause, with both looking away).

Isn't it sad? We lived together for seventeen years.

STEPHEN: Seventeen and a half years.

MIRIAM: Precise... as usual. But then you decided to die—

STEPHEN: I didn't die.

MIRIAM: You did... in my eyes and everybody else's.

STEPHEN: Not everybody's.

MIRIAM: I stand corrected. Not in your shrink's eyes, which makes it all the more demeaning... and sadder. Why did you pick him for a lifeline... rather than me?

STEPHEN: We were about to get divorced.

MIRIAM: Meaning we irrevocably sever all further contact? Meaning that I wasn't even entitled to a warning... let alone explanation... for what you were about to do? You ruthlessly expose me to the pain of your supposed drowning and then... even worse... to the uncertainty of whether it might all be fake? Do you have any idea...?

STEPHEN: I had no choice.

MIRIAM: You had no choice! What a revolting thing to say. You informed your shrink... so why not your wife?

STEPHEN: If I had told you ahead of time, you'd either have spilled the beans—

MIRIAM: You think I would have done that?

STEPHEN: I don't know... but I couldn't take that risk. But even if you had sworn on a stack of cookbooks to keep that secret, think of the burden I would've left you with: becoming a perpetual accomplice.

MIRIAM: How considerate of you! But now that I've seen you in the flesh, you've made me... willy-nilly...your accomplice. (*Pause*). Tell me: what's in it for me to remain your accomplice? (*Accusingly*). You... who never gave a thought to my pain... thinking you had died?

STEPHEN: Miriam...I did think about it.

MIRIAM: Oh yeah? For how long?

STEPHEN: Longer than you obviously give me credit for. Certainly long enough to realize that that sort of pain passes with time. Keeping a secret for life becomes more painful.

MIRIAM: So you turned to the shrink?

STEPHEN I thought I could trust him... one of my biggest misjudgments. In any case it sounds like you lost no time in "turning to him" too! Just what the hell is going on between you two anyway?

MIRIAM: That is none of your concern. (*Pause*). Where are you living now?

STEPHEN (*Mocking her*): That is none of your concern.

MIRIAM: I'm still your wife. If I need to divorce you, I must always be able to contact you. Besides, what choice have you got? Either I always know how to get hold of you... or I'll blow your secret sky-high. (*Pause*). So where do you live?

STEPHEN: California.

MIRIAM (*Derisive*): Oh thanks. That limits it to about 150,000 square miles.

STEPHEN: San Francisco Bay area.

MIRIAM (*Reaches in her bag for notebook and pencil*): What's your phone number?

STEPHEN: 650-723-2783.

MIRIAM: What city?

STEPHEN: Palo Alto.... South of San Francisco.

MIRIAM (*Sarcastic*): Oh, of course! And right next door to your shrink in New York City! How do you visit your east Coast lifeline...over two thousand miles away from California?

STEPHEN (*Heavy sarcasm*): In case it has escaped you... provided you fly steerage and buy non-refundable tickets months in advance, commercial airlines these days are more than delighted to fly you cross-country for a pittance.

MIRIAM: And you do that weekly?

STEPHEN: You are impossible to satisfy.

MIRIAM: Not true! There was a time...

STEPHEN: I'm talking about the present.

MIRIAM: So am I. But what are you doing in Palo Alto?

STEPHEN: Writing.

MIRIAM: You did that for a quarter of a century right here in Manhattan. What's different now that you've drowned?

STEPHEN: Remember Pessoa?

MIRIAM: I was wondering when you'd finally bring him up. Have you forgotten how we tossed a coin to decide who'd play whom in our Pessoa readings?

STEPHEN: You liked his non-sentimental shepherd, Alberto Caeiro, best.

MIRIAM: Naturally. He was the only sensual and passionate of all his heteronyms. You chose the man who fled to Brazil... what was his name?

STEPHEN: Ricardo Reis... the doctor.

MIRIAM: A rather frail aesthete. Sex wasn't exactly his cup of tea. So what about Pessoa?

STEPHEN: Miriam. I need to know whether I can pull it off.

MIRIAM: It would be quite a coup... we thought so then. Of course, it was only a fantasy. But now? (*Pause*). Maybe we could manage it.

STEPHEN: "We?"

MIRIAM: Consider it the royal we.

STEPHEN: Sorry, Miriam... but from now on it's all in the first person singular.

MIRIAM: I see.

(There is an awkward, painful pause as it sinks in.)

STEPHEN: No more lifelines.

MIRIAM (*Angry*): So you keep saying.

STEPHEN: Miriam, I'm sorry but...

MIRIAM: OK. In that case... (*She reaches into her bag to produce a flash camera. She takes two or three flash photos of him*).

STEPHEN: Hey! What the hell is that for?

MIRIAM: (*Smiling cruelly*) A memento of my dead husband... in case he's foolish enough to think of changing his phone number without informing his accomplice. An edible food artist who's never without her digital camera. (*Malicious grin while quickly inspecting the image on the back of the digital camera*). You know (*lowers camera*) this gives me an idea for my next culinary masterpiece: a wild boar's head... lying on a bed of nettles. (*Pause*). Just the ticket in my present mood.

(Miriam turns to leave. Stephen looks at her departing figure, then goes off in the opposite direction.

END OF SCENE 6

Scene 7.

The next evening, SHRINK'S office. MIRIAM paces slowly up and down while SHRINK stands, clearly anxious. Miriam stops to face him..

MIRIAM: A few days ago, you could've bet your bottom dollar you'd never set eyes on me again.

SHRINK (*Anxious tone*): Did the betting odds change because you had remembered the mango forks?

MIRIAM: The forks were a pretext. What brought me here was the realization that there must be a piece of missing information only you could provide.

SHRINK (*Pleading*): Miriam, there's nothing I want more than to take away any doubt and pain you may be feeling. But please don't keep challenging my professional ethics! That's all I've got to hold on to.

MIRIAM: Oh come on! Doesn't mango foreplay on the couch constitute a breach of ethics? After all we now both know that legally, I'm not yet a widow.

SHRINK: Operationally you are.

MIRIAM: You pedant! (*Pause*). Sucking on an operational widow's mangoes? Where was your goddamn superego then? Otherwise indisposed? Or had it popped out for a bit? Oh... don't tell me, I know: it had recently drowned in a freak boating accident!

SHRINK: Miriam, you're putting me in an impossible position.

MIRIAM (*Calmer*): Okay then... let's see whether I can put you into a less impossible position. Because things changed last night.

SHRINK: What happened?

MIRIAM: I waited for Stephen to come out of your office when I heard him scream into my phone.

SHRINK: I see. (*Pause*). So that's why you didn't turn up?

MIRIAM: Yes. But I'm not here to talk about the women in those letters.

SHRINK: Good. At last you're moving forward.

MIRIAM: I'm just moving sideways... meaning I'll handle that later by myself. Right now I've got to focus on something much more important.

SHRINK (*Worried*): All right. Miriam, before you ask me anything, let me say one thing: I can't violate Stephen's right to privacy, but there are other ways I might be of help.

MIRIAM (*Relenting*): For instance?

SHRINK: By talking about you... we may discover something about Stephen that he may not have discussed with me.

MIRIAM: But then it would only amount to speculation.

SHRINK: Virtually all I do here (*waves hand around the room*) is speculation.

MIRIAM: All right. Let's speculate.

SHRINK: When we had lunch in this office, we started to talk about your marriage.

MIRIAM: I think we've exhausted that subject.

SHRINK: But what kept you together so long?

MIRIAM (*Sighs, a pause*): I suppose... it was tact. Stephen could be a pompous ass, but he had tact. At least I thought so until I came across cemetery trysts and sestinas.

SHRINK (*Taken aback*): Tact? There you are! Right away, you gave me an answer I would never have expected. That brings me to a question I've wanted to ask you before. Why didn't you have kids?

MIRIAM: The usual reasons: no immediate urge... the two of us too busy working on Stephen's career... and then I got even busier building my own. (*Long pause.*)

SHRINK: Any regrets?

MIRIAM: You know how it is. Some women are born mothers. I'm not. Some grow into it. I didn't. And some have motherhood thrust upon them. All I can say to that is, "Thank God for the silly man who created the Pill." (*Pause.*) Is this getting us anywhere?

SHRINK: Just keep going with this. Do you still have feelings for Stephen?

MIRIAM: The question is what kind of feelings? Last night, they ranged from incipient homicide to something bordering almost on sympathy. (*Shakes her head*). Right now, I'm not so much hurt as deeply angry after what he's done to me for just a clever career move.

SHRINK: A clever "career move?"

MIRIAM: Remember Pessoa?

SHRINK: Yes...

MIRIAM: He wants to out-Pessoa Pessoa.

SHRINK: You may be right.

MIRIAM (*Stands up to face Shrink*): I am right. And that's why I'm here. Tell me the real answer to Stephen's remaining puzzle... something only you know.

(Shrink sighs, shakes his head)

Why did Stephen feel he needed a shrink? *(Pause)*. And if you won't answer that...out I go and you'll never see me again.

SHRINK: You're now asking for a monumental violation of professional confidentiality.

MIRIAM: So you're not willing to make any exception, even though you admitted that there are exceptions to everything?

SHRINK: I'll make one... because I do want to see you again.

MIRIAM: And?

SHRINK: When I saw him last, he wanted me to find out something from you.

MIRIAM: How were you supposed to do that... without lying... again?

SHRINK: Through a silly subterfuge.

MIRIAM: And what was he after? To find out whether I am so angry with him, that I might give his secret away?

SHRINK: Whether you had looked through his files.

MIRIAM *(Dismissive)*: Stupid question. You already knew the answer. Of course, I have—

SHRINK: Wait! What about his computer?

MIRIAM: I looked through it.

SHRINK: How carefully?

MIRIAM: Superficially.

SHRINK: I thought so. That's why I'm about to make a giant exception.

MIRIAM *(Leans forward, excited)*: Yes?

SHRINK: Spend more time on his computer.

MIRIAM: What do you mean?

SHRINK: I can't say more.

MIRIAM: Can't... or won't?

SHRINK: I'm afraid it's both.

MIRIAM *(Goes for her coat and starts putting it on)*: In that case, good night... Theodore.

C. Djerassi "EGO" or "THREE ON A COUCH" (King's Head version 21)
3/15/04

SHRINK (*Rises*): Will I see you again?

MIRIAM: I could give you the same answer you just gave me... but I won't.

SHRINK: So what is it?

MIRIAM: It depends on what I find.

(She exits. The Shrink stands there, bereft before the lights fade out.)

END OF SCENE 7

Scene 8.

Seven months later, Sunday, late morning. The Sunday issue of the NEW YORK TIMES is spread all over the coffee table. The SHRINK (wearing coat and tie, similar to scene 2) is sitting on the sofa, impatiently browsing through the newspaper. The buzzer sounds. He gets up releases the door. A moment later MIRIAM enters, whereupon he jumps up to greet her.

SHRINK: Miriam! It's wonderful to see you... It's been months.

(He attempts to kiss her on the cheek but she deftly deflects it without, however, displaying any hostility).

MIRIAM: Almost seven months.

SHRINK: Weren't my invitations discreet enough? You could have accepted at least once. You were the first woman... after my wife's suicide... that I wanted to... how shall I put it?... truly get to know. I thought you noticed that....

MIRIAM *(While taking off her coat):* When I picked up the taste of horseshit in the wine, I wanted to see how long it would take before you'd open up. If a wine is to develop it takes time... and so I thought would you.

SHRINK *(Interrupts):* You postponed... so often I thought you were just being polite.

MIRIAM: This time, I invited myself... so here I am. And you know what? I've been busy. Thanks to you, I've been rummaging around on Stephen's computer hard-drive. I hit real pay dirt when I went through his computer trash. It's like reading the contents of someone's wastepaper basket... you learn more about a person from what he discards than what he retains.

SHRINK: I suppose this is why you've come? *(Points to newspaper on coffee table).*

MIRIAM *(Triumphantly):* The cover of the TIMES Book Review! "Obsession," a posthumous novel by Stephen Marx. What did you think of the review?

SHRINK: It was such a rave, it persuaded me to get hold of the book last night. I couldn't put it down. *(Points to book on table).* What a marvelous read! *(Pause).* Well?

MIRIAM *(Disingenuously, while sitting down):* Yes?

SHRINK: The last time we met was just after you had seen Stephen. I thought perhaps you'd got back together.

MIRIAM: And made up? You must be kidding. We stayed in touch... but it's more like a probation officer checking on the parolee. He volunteers nothing... unless I ask point blank. *(Pause).* But then... why should he? Volunteering information is not exactly a forte among the men I've met recently.

SHRINK *(Warily):* Let's change the subject.

MIRIAM: Let's.

SHRINK: So why did you come today?

MIRIAM: Theo, what's the most powerful motive in life?

SHRINK: That depends.

MIRIAM: Stop stalling.

SHRINK: Some would say "love."

MIRIAM: An attractive answer... quite romantic... for the lucky few... as well as saints—

SHRINK: There are all kinds of love. Take parental...

MIRIAM: Neither one of us knows much about that sort of love. But how about revenge?

SHRINK: Revenge?

MIRIAM: I know I might sound like a cold-blooded cruel bitch...but frankly, that's how I was feeling for some months. A reason why I thought twice about coming to see you. I didn't want you to see me at my worst. You can take that as a compliment, because it meant that I had planned to see you again... once I'd worked out my problems by myself. I'm not after therapy with you... at least not the garden variety you seem accustomed to! (*Walks over to coffee table, rummages among the newspapers and picks up the Sunday Book Review*). How did this gushing review of *Obsession* end up on the front page of the Sunday *TIMES* Book Review section? (*Pause*). Easy! I sent the manuscript to Stephen's agent and told him that I found it among my dead husband's papers. The publisher rushed it into print.

SHRINK: Good Lord. I wonder how Stephen will take it?

MIRIAM: I've left him with one choice. Stay dead forever... or return as Stephen Marx and claim credit for the novel I just released. But whatever choice he makes... it releases me from uncertainty.

SHRINK: How will you find out? Call him?

MIRIAM: I won't have to. (*Looks at her watch, mysteriously*).

SHRINK: You know... he may not yet have seen that review.

MIRIAM: Fat chance! The Sunday Book Review is on line by Friday...

She starts looking around and suddenly notices a ceramic mug on his desk containing two mango forks.

Mango forks! (*Intrigued*). Those aren't mine. How come you have some here?

SHRINK (*Embarrassed*): I bought them.

MIRIAM: Where? They aren't easy to find.

SHRINK: On the web. E-bay.

MIRIAM (*Warmer*): Do you still eat mangoes in your office?

SHRINK: I did... once... and never forgot it.

Suddenly peremptory knocks on the door, which startle both of them. SHRINK walks to the door and opens it. Stephen stands in the doorway but does not enter.

MIRIAM: So you've decided to face the music?

STEPHEN (*Enters room, heading toward coffee table, picks up various parts of the Sunday NEW YORK TIMES and throws them on the floor*): You witch! How could you?

MIRIAM: You're dead! I exercised my function as your literary executor. After all, you never changed your will. Still leaving me to take care of the family crap? Well... I took care of it. (*Pushes the newspaper on the floor with her foot*).

STEPHEN (*Addressing Shrink*): Do you know what I did last Friday? (*Pause*). I committed hara-kiri.

MIRIAM: Oh please!

STEPHEN (*Peremptorily*): Sit down... (*points to couch*)... both of you... and pay attention to what I've come to say... in person.

SHRINK: What did you mean by hara-kiri?

STEPHEN: The literary kind. Less bloody than the conventional disembowelment... but much more painful and longer lasting.

(SHRINK puts finger over his lips to caution Miriam from interrupting)

You knew that a new publisher had accepted my novel.

MIRIAM: You never told me that!

STEPHEN: I was talking to the shrink... not to you. But I'm surprised he didn't inform you. What precisely did you two discuss in this office? Or was it all nonverbal... just humping and grunting?

SHRINK: Stephen... that is totally inappropriate.

STEPHEN (*Sarcastic*): In this hallowed place... where people come to unburden themselves of the inappropriate?

(Turns to MIRIAM)

As my shrink could've told you... if he were not so piously professional... "*Obsession*" was supposed to come out in another couple of months. But two days ago, T. H. Mann had to write his publisher and withdraw the manuscript... before being openly accused of plagiarism. And if that's not literary hara-kiri, what is? (*Mordant chuckle*). Actually an interesting legal point: can I... T. H. Mann... be accused of plagiarism if I admit that I'm Stephen Marx... and that "*Obsession*" was submitted without my knowledge to my former publisher? Submitted by my wife, who knew that I was still alive? Can I force them to withdraw that book... have them pay me damages... and let Mann's publisher release it?

MIRIAM: Cut the baloney! I am talking about resolution in my life... not legalistic quibbling.

SHRINK: Stephen, remember "constructive insecurity?"

STEPHEN: That's what it was all about.

SHRINK: Don't you mean, "is" all about?

STEPHEN: Was all about.

SHRINK: Unless you misled me... or I misunderstood you completely... you planned on a new literary life.

STEPHEN: No, living a new literary life.

SHRINK: Okay, okay... "living" it. And I still remember your references to Pessoa who did it in various guises.

STEPHEN: The word is "heteronyms."

SHRINK: Whatever. So the author of "*Obsession*" was your first heteronym. The *TIMES* called the novel a new literary Taj Mahal. What greater praise do you want?

STEPHEN: This Taj Mahal is being credited to Stephen Marx... not to me! But what is much worse... in fact unforgivable ... are the graffiti on its walls. Graffiti that cannot be erased.

SHRINK: What are you talking about?

STEPHEN (*Suddenly screaming*): Graffiti that cannot be deleted because they are in every copy of that novel. Who will recall and then destroy them?

SHRINK: Stephen... pull yourself together! The name of Stephen Marx... instead of T. H. Mann on the cover... is no graffiti.

STEPHEN (*Screams*): Fuck the cover! Fuck Stephen Marx! I'm talking about the graffiti in the book... graffiti that only I and the mutilator can see. The ultimate desecration! (*Pause*). Miriam!

MIRIAM (*Disingenuously*): Yes.

STEPHEN: Why did you have to resort to this unforgivable... deeply humiliating act? Or do you want our shrink to leave before you answer that question?

MIRIAM: He doesn't know what you're referring to, but he will understand my response. But first, when did you notice these so-called graffiti?

STEPHEN: After reading the review and then driving for an hour to the closest bookstore to buy my own book!

SHRINK: How come you only saw the book on Friday?

MIRIAM (*Annoyed*): Don't interrupt! What do you mean "driving for an hour to the closest bookstore?" You can find one within five minutes of any location in the San Francisco Bay Area.

STEPHEN: I don't live in California.

MIRIAM: Excuse me? I called you every week. Area code 650.

STEPHEN: You're talking about my cell phone, which for very good reasons happens to be registered in California. I'm talking about where I live.

MIRIAM: One more lie!

STEPHEN: At best a minor fib. I was blackmailed into agreeing not to change my phone number without notifying you... and I stuck to that bargain. I didn't see why I should risk you pounding on my door one morning. Since Stephen Marx's death, I've only done one thing: writing, writing... and writing... in other words, practicing constructive insecurity. I don't go out to bookstores. I don't even read newspapers... on occasion I browse the web. (*Pause*). So why did you do it? (*Points to newspaper*).

MIRIAM: Revenge!

STEPHEN: For not informing you that I was still alive? I ask you again, how deeply... and for how long... could you grieve for a husband whom you were about to divorce?

SHRINK: How can you be so callous—

MIRIAM (*Cuts him off, annoyed*): Would you please let me handle this! (*Addresses Stephen*). So you left me in limbo without another thought? Well I took your limbo... your self-designed limbo... from you. I wanted to remind you that Stephen Marx still exists. That an escape into the wonderland of heteronyms is a luxury I'm not prepared to grant you.

STEPHEN: Why?

MIRIAM: I'm not finished yet. When I went through your papers... I came across deeply humiliating material.

STEPHEN: I've never humiliated you.

MIRIAM: Is that so? Let me ask you a blunt question: When did we fuck the last time?

STEPHEN: Miriam. There are limits to bluntness.

MIRIAM: Excuse me, my sensitive husband. So when did we last carnally embrace?

STEPHEN: Do you think this is a subject to be discussed in the presence of—

MIRIAM: A shrink? What else are shrinks for? Besides, I had discussed it with him.

STEPHEN (*Outraged*): You two talked about that?

MIRIAM: Why not? You and I never did. I swallowed years of abstinence because I thought it was mutual abstinence. (*Turns to Shrink*). Why not tell him what disarmingly discreet term you have for that condition. (*Back to Stephen while rising to her full height*). But after your death I found out that you fucked... sorry... I meant carnally embraced... (*assumes heavy sarcasm while pointing with her palm toward the ground*) some itsy-bitsy midget... or was it a teeny-weeny pygmy? At least that's how she appeared to me when I read that she was the shortest woman you had ever encountered... in a cemetery. Considering your own size, have you now turned into a contortionist?

STEPHEN (*Dismissive*): Come on! Doing it in a cemetery isn't a capital offence. We did it once... and it was her idea.

MIRIAM (*Sarcastic*): Oh... you poor victim of a seductive woman's guile! (*Angrily*). And the other women? Susan, Kyle, Meredith... and that crummy poet named Felicity.

STEPHEN: She wrote great sestinas!

MIRIAM: Are these just companions for your heteronymic escapades

STEPHEN (*Vicious tone*): You think I am indulging in escapades? (*Pause*). Miriam, do you remember the line "*What would you use to commit suicide?*"

SHRINK: Stephen!

STEPHEN: Stop interrupting all the time!

MIRIAM: Yes.

SHRINK (*Wounded, to Miriam*): You think I'm interrupting all the time?

MIRIAM (*Dismissive*): Not all the time. (*Points to Stephen*): I was responding to him.

STEPHEN: Well? Do you still remember the answer?

MIRIAM: Cyanide.

STEPHEN (*Exaggerated approval*): V e r y g o o d. (*Resumes ordinary tone, addressing Shrink*). It's from one of my novels. (*Turns back to Miriam*). You'd be surprised how easy it is to buy cyanide. Scandalously easy! So when I embarked on what you so lightly dismissed as my heteronymic escapade, I put in a supply.

SHRINK: You're playing an obscene game!

STEPHEN: You again? But what you call a "game" was my insurance. From the day I left New York, I decided that if I was incapable of slipping out of Stephen Marx's skin... if I couldn't create the heteronyms I aspired to live with... I needed a final option.

SHRINK: Stephen... Stephen! Listen! Listen carefully! This new book is a masterpiece.

STEPHEN: Of course it is! T. H. Mann wrote it. (*Pause*). But Miriam murdered him... my first heteronym and my only companion. Even worse, she violated that book. Murder and rape... those are capital offenses... not a single dalliance in a cemetery.

SHRINK (*Irritated*): What on earth are you talking about.

STEPHEN: She'll tell you... if you'd stop interrupting.

MIRIAM: I made some changes... here or there... before submitting the manuscript to his agent. Small changes... noticeable to the careful reader... of which there was only one.

STEPHEN (*Screams*): Small? You call those desecrations "small"?

MIRIAM: Except for the one the *TIMES* picked up... and since they had no way of knowing that these were a woman's graffiti... it's obvious that I hit a literary home run.

STEPHEN (*Still screaming*): Home run! How dare you?

MIRIAM (*Picks up the BOOK REVIEW and starts reading in fake precious tone*): "Among the many attention-drawing features of this remarkable masterpiece"—

STEPHEN (*Outraged*): Remarkable masterpiece? "Tainted masterpiece" is what it said in my issue of the *TIMES*!

MIRIAM (*Still bantering but mean*): Really? Let me see. (*Pretends she is checking the text and then pretends surprise*). Oh... why yes... it does say tainted.

SHRINK (*To Stephen*): You learned that review by heart?

STEPHEN: So would you... after staring at it for three days.

MIRIAM: Let's start once again. (*Resumes precious reading tone*). "Among the many attention-drawing features of this (*emphasizes next word while looking at STEPHEN*) tainted masterpiece, one needs emphasis: the recurring... exquisitely erotic... female visions—"

STEPHEN (*Outraged*): Where does it say "exquisitely?"

MIRIAM (*Grinning*): My editorial comment. (*Resumes precious reading tone*)... "so totally out of character for a male author... especially one like Stephen Marx... whose earlier signature weakness—"

STEPHEN: God damn you! It says "whose remarkable signature strength!"

MIRIAM (*Enjoying herself*): Whatever. (*Resumes precious reading tone, but louder*). ... "was the absence of any sex scenes. Had he left his sexual labyrinth unexplored... only to now lay it bare in such a spectacular orgasmic fashion?"

STEPHEN (*Loud, but ice-cold*): "Distasteful orgasmic fashion" is what he wrote! (*Cutting tone*): Fucking in my Taj Mahal... openly having orgasms there... that's what you were doing... and do every time someone opens my book.

MIRIAM (*Interrupts, in faked sweet tone*): My dear husband... "erotic female visions" in your Taj Mahal do not represent "fucking"... as you so crudely put it.

STEPHEN: Is that so? Are you finished reading?

MIRIAM: Sure. Just because you never chose to explore your sexual labyrinth hasn't kept me from finally getting out of the barren one that you had me in for some years. As the *TIMES* confirmed, I am well on my way to emerging with my fantasies intact. All that's still missing is... consummation.

STEPHEN: And in the process permanently defacing Mann's masterpiece? (*Points to TIMES*). Why didn't you continue reading? (*Picks up Book Review section and pounds it furiously as he recites*): "What could have been Marx's opus magnum has thus become just a superior addition to his oeuvre. Instead of a perfect diamond, we're left with an imperfect jewel. Are we to attribute all that detailed sexual fantasizing on the part of the heroine solely to political correctness? If so, then at least this reviewer considers it an unfortunate blemish in a book traversing such new literary territory that nobody would have associated it with Marx's. Bravo!... but not quite bravissimo!"

(*Proceeds to tear it up*).

(*To Shrink*): So it's not graffiti? (*To Miriam, viciously*): Tomorrow is my 50th birthday. I know how to celebrate it... by pushing you... who craves certainty... into the purgatory of perpetual uncertainty. Here... look at this. (*Takes a cellophane envelope filled with white solid out of his pocket and places it on the desk*). I brought a sample just to prove that I'm not bluffing.

MIRIAM: How dare you threaten me like that?

STEPHEN: If you think it's fake, feed it to your pet Dalmatian. As for me, you'll never find out what happened.

(*Takes cell phone out of his pocket and tosses it to Miriam*).

Here, catch the goddamn phone... it's dead. I've had it with lifelines... for good!

(Starts heading for the door).

SHRINK: Wait! You can't do that to her!

(Picks up cellophane envelope, reaches into desk drawer, takes out two paper cups, quickly tears open the envelope, pours its content into one of the cups and pours water into it from a water bottle on his desk. Grabs one of the mango forks on his desk and holding it by the middle long prong uses the flat bottom part to quickly stir the contents of the cup. Pours half the contents into the second cup and turns to STEPHEN.

STEPHEN (*Startled*): Wait a minute! I said... try it on your dog... not the pet shrink!

SHRINK: I'm calling your bluff—

STEPHEN: You don't think its cyanide?

SHRINK: It probably is. (*Cautiously sniffs contents of cup*). It smells like it. But you're bluffing about using it. (*Pause*). So go on... (*Waits until STEPHEN hesitatingly picks up the second cup*). Here's to revelations! (*Turns to Stephen as he gestures with his cup*).

MIRIAM (*Screams*): Are you crazy?

Shrink holds his cup high, while STEPHEN holds his somewhat lower. They are facing each other, eyes locked, for a prolonged time.

SHRINK: Well? Shall we toast each other?

MIRIAM: I can't take that! (*Rushes forward and knocks the cups out of their hands, with contents spilled all over the floor*).

MIRIAM (*Clearly shaken, to Shrink*): How could you think of taking such a chance?

SHRINK: He's bluffing.

MIRIAM: How can you be so sure?

SHRINK (*To Miriam*): Think about it. (*To Stephen*). You would've pulled off the T. H. Mann heteronym... had it not been for Miriam's so-called graffiti... (*Pause*). So why would you stop creating others now? (*Dismissive, but to Miriam*). The cyanide stunt was just to trump your revenge.

STEPHEN (*Furious*): You cocksure asshole!

SHRINK (*Raising one palm in benedictory gesture*): Pace, Stephen! (*Turns to Miriam*). You too, Miriam. *Pace!* You've both given each other enough pain.

(Miriam picks up tissues from the Kleenex box on his desk, bends down to the floor, and carefully picks up cups with the tissues before depositing them in the wastepaper basket. Suddenly, takes another tissue and carefully wipes some drops of spilled cyanide from Stephen's shoes. Finally wipes her hand carefully

with further tissues):

MIRIAM: In some things I'm more cautious than you.

SHRINK: Whereas in others matters, I've turned into a gambler.

(Walks toward the container with the remaining mango fork, picks it up and then reaches with his other hand for hers).

Come on, Miriam... let's go buy a mango.

(As they depart, STEPHEN slowly walks over to the desk and picks up the other mango fork. Inspects the central tine carefully as he turns the fork slowly in some ambiguous manner—perhaps testing the sharp point or suddenly jamming it angrily into table top—as the LIGHT FADES).

END OF PLAY

CARL DJERASSI, novelist, playwright and professor of chemistry emeritus at Stanford University, is one of the few American scientists to have been awarded both the National Medal of Science (for the first synthesis of an oral contraceptive) and the National Medal of Technology (for promoting new approaches to insect control). He has published short stories (*The Futurist and Other Stories*), poetry (*The Clock runs backward*) and five novels (*Cantor’s Dilemma; The Bourbaki Gambit; Marx, deceased; Menachem’s Seed; NO*)—that illustrate as “science-in-fiction” the human side of science and the personal conflicts faced by scientists—as well as an autobiography (*The Pill, Pygmy Chimps and Degas’ Horse*) and a memoir (*THIS MAN’S PILL: Reflections on the 50th birthday of the Pill*).

During the past seven years he has focused on writing “science-in-theatre” plays. The first, *AN IMMACULATE MISCONCEPTION*, premiered at the 1998 Edinburgh Fringe Festival and was subsequently staged in London (New End Theatre in 1999 and Bridewell Theatre in 2002), San Francisco (Eureka), New York (Primary Stages), Vienna (Jugendstiltheater), Cologne (Theater am Tanzbrunnen), Munich (Deutsches Museum), Sundsvall (Teater Västernorrland), Stockholm (Dramaten), Sofia (Satire Theatre), Geneva (Theatre du Grütli), Tokyo (Bunkyo Civic Hall Theatre), Seoul, and Los Angeles (L.A. Theatre Works). Lisbon and Singapore productions are planned for 2004. The play has been translated into 9 languages and also published in book form in English, German, Spanish and Swedish. It was broadcast by BBC World Service in 2000 as “play of the week” and by the West German (WDR) and Swedish Radio in 2001; NPR in the USA will do so in May 2004.

His second play, *OXYGEN*, co-authored with Roald Hoffmann, premiered in April 2001 at the San Diego Repertory Theatre, at the Mainfranken Theater in Würzburg in September 2001 through April 2002 (with guest performances in 2001/2002 in Munich, Leverkusen and Halle), at the Riverside Studios in London in November 2001, and subsequently in New Zealand (Circa Theatre, Wellington), Korea (Pohang and Seoul), Tokyo (Setagaya Tram Theatre), Toronto, Madison, WI, Columbus, OH, Ottawa, Bologna (Italy) and Bulgaria (Sofia Satire Theatre). Both the BBC and the WDR broadcast the play in December 2001 around the centenary of the Nobel Prize—one of that play’s main themes. It has so far been translated into 10 languages and has already appeared in book form in English, German, Spanish, Italian, French, Portuguese, Chinese, and Korean.

His third play, *CALCULUS*, dealing with the infamous Newton-Leibniz priority struggle, has had staged rehearsed readings in Berkeley, London (Royal Institution), Vienna (Museum Quartier), Munich (Deutsches Museum), Berlin (Brandenburg Academy), Dresden (Semper Oper) and Oxford (Oxford Playhouse). A full production opened in San Francisco (Performing Arts Library and Museum) in April 2003. A music version (composed by Werner Schulze) will open in Zurich in April 2005. It has already appeared in book form in English as well as German. His first “non-scientific” play, “*EGO*,” premiered at the 2003 Edinburgh Festival Fringe; its themes are further explored in “*THREE ON A COUCH*,” which opened in London (King’s Head Theatre) in March 2004. A German translation has already appeared in book form and the WDR will broadcast a radio version on June 20, 2004.

Djerassi is the founder of the Djerassi Resident Artists Program near Woodside, California, which provides residencies and studio space for artists in the visual arts, literature, choreography and performing arts, and music. Over 1300 artists have passed through that program since its inception in 1982. Djerassi and his wife, the biographer Diane Middlebrook, live in San Francisco and London.

(There is a Web site about Carl Djerassi’s writing at <http://www.djerassi.com>)