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Wise Guys

A Philosophical Comedy in Three Acts

by

Lawrence Cahoone

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Wise Guys

by Lawrence Cahoon

CHARACTERS

7F / 11M / 2 either M or F
Doubling Possible

MICHAEL: *Mid-30's; white male philosophy professor*

KAY: *Late 20's; female graduate student*

DONNA: *60's; Jewish female philosophy professor*

SANTOS: *Late 30's Latino male philosophy professor*

CONNIE: *Early 30's; black female philosophy professor*

HOWARD: *60's; male philosophy professor*

KARL: *40's; male philosophy professor*

JOHN: *40's; white male philosophy professor*

RUSSELL: *50's; male philosophy professor*

ERNESTINE: *30's; female philosophy professor*

RUDY: *Mid-30's; male philosophy professor*

JENNIFER: *20's female graduate student*

TOM: *50's white male philosophy professor*

DEAN: *50's; male professor/administrator*

PRESIDENT: *50's; female professor/administrator*

FRANÇOIS: *Later 20's; French male graduate student*

MARIA: *40's; Latina cleaning woman*

ITS: *Male undergraduate student*

VEGAN: *Female undergraduate student*

GRAD REPORTER: *Graduate student*

UNDERGRAD REPORTER: *Undergraduate student*

Wise Guys
by Lawrence Cahoone

ACT I: SCENE ONE

(AT RISE: September; near a major Midwestern public university. DONNA, a plump woman in her mid- sixties, sits in a high-backed chair in her home office; big perm, pantsuit, sensible shoes. She plays with a cat on her lap. A graduate student, JENNIFER, sits in a chair in front of her desk.)

JENNIFER

I'm sorry to keep you from the party, Professor.

DONNA

That's alright, Jennifer. What can I do for you?

JENNIFER

You know I've been working hard to finish my dissertation on Hegel with Howard this year. Would you be willing to be my second reader?

DONNA

It's not my area. Don't you already have other readers lined up?

JENNIFER

I haven't formalized anything. I just thought you would be very helpful.

DONNA

How is an Aristotle and Hume scholar going to be helpful with a dissertation on Hegel?

JENNIFER

Well, I'm doing Hegel's early work. Hume's just about the same era.

DONNA

Only in calendar years. They hardly have anything in common. I don't see it.

JENNIFER

(Brief silence) Professor... I could really use your help.

DONNA

Then tell me the real problem.

JENNIFER

Okay. At first Howard seemed happy with my proposal, but now it's a year later, the dissertation is two-thirds written, and suddenly he finds the whole project implausible.

DONNA

Do you have any idea why?

JENNIFER

It may be because my dissertation doesn't make much use of his book on Hegel. Just between us, I don't find it very helpful. I leaned on another recent book on Hegel.

DONNA

Whose book is it?

JENNIFER

As I found out later, it's by a guy who wrote a negative review of Howard's book. Ever since Howard saw that chapter, he's been distant and critical. I offered to rewrite it, but nothing satisfies him. Professor, I was hoping to go on the market for a job this winter. For that I need to be able to tell schools that I'll be finished with my Ph.D. in the spring. I can't start over again with a new advisor. It would set me back years. (*Tearing up*) I, I just can't...

DONNA

Jennifer, I'm sorry to hear this. But it's not my area.

JENNIFER

Well, I... I thought you might be helpful even though it's outside your specialization. I thought—

DONNA

You mean you thought that I could make Howard let up on you.

JENNIFER

Well, perhaps. I mean... yes.

DONNA

(*Shaking her head; putting down the cat*) Jennifer, what have I done to make you disrespect me this way? You've been in our program five years. You never took one of my seminars. You never inquired about my work, never asked me to lunch or to introduce you to prominent people. When I suggested a dissertation topic, you said you would rather do something else. And now, with a dissertation mostly written, you come to me and want me to be your friend.

JENNIFER

I'm sorry. I was...afraid.

DONNA

You mean you were afraid to be in my debt. I understand. As a child you were always the best reader and writer in your class. In college you took philosophy and fell in love with the gentle dance of ideas. You decided you didn't want to waste yourself climbing the corporate ladder. You thought that philosophy wasn't like that, that professors are seekers of truth, the ultimate case of what you know, not who you know. You trusted that your talent and love of ideas would be rewarded. But now you see that you can't even get up to bat unless your work

DONNA, *Continued*

promotes somebody's agenda, that with no financial bottom line to define success, who you know matters more, not less. So you discover that you need a friend like me.

JENNIFER

I'm...I'm sorry.

DONNA

Don't worry. I will do you this favor. But this means that someday – and that day may never come – I will ask you for a favor in return. For myself or for my people. Right?

JENNIFER

Yes, yes Don.

(JENNIFER stands. DONNA offers one hand, JENNIFER shakes with both of hers.)

But I don't want to make Howard mad, I need a decent letter of recommendation from him or I'll never get a job.

DONNA

That's my business. Leave it to me.

JENNIFER

But what will you do?

DONNA

Jennifer, don't worry about it.

JENNIFER

But I don't see how—

DONNA

Hey. I'm gonna make him an argument he can't refute.

(LIGHTS DOWN.)

ACT I: SCENE TWO

(AT RISE: Behind DONNA's house; a lawn party in progress. Younger faculty and grad students mill about, including ERNESTINE, FRANÇOIS, TOM, and RUDY. Large table with drinks and food stage left with HOWARD, KARL, JOHN, RUSSELL seated. A late 20-something woman walks center stage, picks up wine glass. She is approached by a clean shaven, white thirty-something male.)

MICHAEL

You look lost.

KAY

This is the Philosophy Department party, isn't it?

MICHAEL

Yes it is.

KAY

Then I'm not lost.

MICHAEL

I'm Michael. I teach in the Department.

(They shake hands.)

KAY

Kay. It's a pleasure to meet you.

MICHAEL

You're a new student? Where are you from?

KAY

Wisconsin. I did my bachelor's at Marquette.

MICHAEL

You'll do well here.

KAY

How can you tell?

MICHAEL

Like Marquette, we're pretty strong in continental philosophy.

KAY

I see. Uh, what's that?

MICHAEL

Well, "continental" means recent philosophies from mainland Europe, especially French and German. Goes back to Hegel, then Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida. The sexy stuff. Well, I mean, if you like that sort of thing.

KAY

I've read some of those philosophers, but I didn't know they were "continental." Does that mean everybody else does island philosophies? Or are they just all wet?

MICHAEL

Didn't they tell you that puns are prohibited in graduate school?

KAY

I must have been sick that day. So what's not continental?

MICHAEL

Well, the dominant school in England and America is "analytic" philosophy, names like Bertrand Russell, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Willard van Quine. They think the best hope of resolving philosophical questions is to clarify logic, science and language. They use a scientific kind of rationality. The continentals try to describe how meaning is constructed by the human spirit and culture, as an alternative to the modern scientific worldview. Both schools are dubious of traditional philosophy and religion. But, uh, you really should know some of this already if you're about to start graduate school.

KAY

I'm not in your Department. I took quite a few philosophy courses as an undergrad. I thought I knew a fair amount, but the way you're describing them isn't familiar.

MICHAEL

That's because I'm talking graduate school philosophy. In college your teachers explained what Plato and Kant said. What you didn't know was that each of your teachers was from a particular school, so you actually learned so-and-so's Plato, somebody-or-other's Kant. In graduate school you go behind the curtain and learn the conflicts between the professors' standpoints. But if you're not a philosopher what brings you here? Not that I mind you Department-crashing.

KAY

I met a philosophy student at orientation and she invited me. I'm actually a first year grad student in Religious Studies.

MICHAEL

Well, the good news is that the people in Religion Studies are nicer than people in Philosophy. The bad news is they're boring.

KAY

Are all philosophers so patronizing?

MICHAEL

Just the honest ones.

KAY

Then I guess you were right about the good news. So who are all these people?

MICHAEL

Well, that fellow is our junior analyst from Pittsburgh, next to him is a senior continental philosopher from Yale, over there—

KAY

Wait, wait. I was wondering about their names. Do you philosophers pigeon-hole everyone?

MICHAEL

Pretty much. But you make it sound so cold and impersonal. The labels I was using are, well, families.

KAY

Hugging, loving, living-together families?

MICHAEL

Scheming, feuding, hiring-each-other families. Dysfunctional, but then, most families are.

KAY

Mine wasn't. Mine's the regular kind, you know, like the birds and the bees? Where do your "families" come from?

MICHAEL

Graduate school, where they make new Ph.D.'s. A faculty member and her dissertation students form a nuclear family. When you pick a dissertation topic and an advisor you join a professional family, like an apprentice joining a guild. Professors have relations at other schools, like with cousins, making extended families, on up to the big clans, like analytic and continental. The cousins review each other's books, publish each other's papers, invite each other to conferences. They bring their favorite students along with them. The old protect the young, the young honor the old, like in feudal times, power based on personal service. We don't wear medieval robes at graduation for nothing. The most important thing is that the old have to get the young jobs and then tenure. When it works, the whole family rises together, more prominent publications, better jobs, money and fame.

KAY

So that's what the game's all about? Jobs, money, fame?

MICHAEL

Well that, and the fact that the clans loathe each other. Analysts think the continentals make stupid logical errors. They suspect they're really historians, or worse, literary writers. The continentals think the analysts are uncultured soul-less technicians. Forty years ago, it was real apartheid. Today people try to be respectful, at least in mixed company, like the Hatfields and McCoy's at a dinner party. But any conflict and the tribal animosity comes right out.

KAY

So which are you, Mr. Hatfield or Herr McCoy?

MICHAEL

Neither, actually. I do classical American philosophy, "pragmatism." People like John Dewey and William James. Americanists see everything in the context of social action. We're more open to traditional philosophy and religion. But we're much smaller than the other two clans. The analysts think we're as dumb as the continentals, but not enemies of reason. The continentals think we're philistines but not a threat. Both see our work as a benign muddle. Sorry to drone on.

KAY

That's alright. You drone very informatively.

(Enter SANTOS and CONNIE, coming towards them.)

Who's the big guy?

MICHAEL

Impressive, isn't he? That's Santos. He was an offensive lineman in college. He's a made guy.

KAY

Pardon?

MICHAEL

Made. Straightened out. Got it made. Tenured.

SANTOS

(Approaching) What's up, Mike?

MICHAEL

Kay, this is Santos, newly tenured analytic ethicist extraordinaire, and Connie, junior continental and environmental philosopher, in all things extraordinaire.

(All shake hands.)

KAY

(To CONNIE) Just what do environmental philosophers do?

CONNIE

Oh, moral questions about environmental policy, plus I do continental theories about our concept and experience of nature.

KAY

Sounds like fun. And you Santos?

SANTOS

History of ethics, applied ethics, business ethics. I do a seminar on Kant's moral law, you know, the categorical imperative. Also meta-ethics, like whether morality is all relative, that kind of thing. But my main job is applied ethics.

MICHAEL

Kay is a first year in Religious Studies.

SANTOS

Well, there's good news and bad news about that—

KAY

I got that message already.

MICHAEL

Uh-oh, we've got company ambling this way.

(Enter TOM who zigzags his way towards them.)

SANTOS

More a slow roll than an amble.

CONNIE

(To KAY) His name's Tom. Used to be big; a major player. Continental, but he worked up his own religious philosophy. Philosophers weren't sympathetic, but religious studies people made him such a star that the philosophers had to give him respect.

SANTOS

He's a Texas boy. Very colorful. But working with him is impossible. After two drinks, you'll want to shoot him.

CONNIE

And he's always had more than two drinks.

TOM

Como esta, amigo?

SANTOS

Buenos, Tom

TOM

And Connie, my dear. What's happenin' girl?

CONNIE

Same ol' same ol', Tom.

TOM

(Toward KAY; takes her hand) Well, what an attractive young lady.

CONNIE

Tom, this is Kay. Kay, Tom.

TOM

What philosophy do you do, my dear?

KAY

I'm in Religious Studies. But I am interested in using Heidegger's philosophy of experience to study Native American religion.

TOM

Ooh, not bad. Phenomenology's okay. But what you need is some hermeneutics, a little theory of interpretation. Then sprinkle in some postmodernism and you'll drive 'em crazy. *(Puts arm around KAY's shoulder; gestures into the distance)* It's simple, little lady. Find a hot, cutting-edge method, apply it to something new. Build bridges for the people who already use it so they can conquer new territory! Do that in your dissertation, they give you a job. Do it in your first book, they give you tenure. Do it once more, they'll hand you the keys to the empire! None of these goddamn pedants will tell you, but that is how it's done. But you know, May—

KAY

Kay.

TOM

As I was about to say, May, there's only one real question.

SANTOS

(Whispering to CONNIE) Here it comes.

TOM

Are you a woman?

KAY

I'm sorry?

TOM

Are you a WOMAN?

KAY

(Frightened; aside to MICHAEL) What does he mean?

MICHAEL

(Quietly) He means, are you a real woman, a strong, primordial Earth mother, with...you know, hips and...things.

TOM

Yes, that's it, by God, a WOMAN! Well, are you?

SANTOS

(Putting his hand on TOM's shoulder) Kay's a first year student, Tom. Maybe you should take it easy.

TOM

(Releases KAY, takes up CONNIE's hand) Now you, my dear, I have no doubt that you are a WOMAN!

CONNIE

Sure thing, Tom. I carries my babies outs to the fields all day, shakes my booty all night.

TOM

(Laughing) God, you're wonderful! Isn't she wonderful? But I couldn't keep up with you. So, where are the rest of the goddamn WOMEN?! Where? Wait! There, that might be one now!

(TOM zigzags and exits.)

SANTOS

(To CONNIE) Was he playing the race card?

CONNIE

(Wiping her hand) He was drooling all over the race card.

SANTOS

Yeah. A randy guy. At least part of him works. Biggest name in the Department. Later we'll be digging him out of the bushes.

MICHAEL

Tenure is wasted on the old.

KAY

You know, I have to say that all this fuss you professors make over tenure seems a bit, well, wimpy.

MICHAEL, CONNIE, SANTOS

(In unison) Pardon me?!

KAY

Well, nobody out there in the real world has a lifetime guaranteed job.

MICHAEL

But, if you don't get tenure, you're fired! Up or out! You know how many job openings there were last year in the whole country for the kind of philosophy I do? Six, and two hundred people applied for each one.

CONNIE

(Putting hand on MICHAEL's chest) You'll have to excuse Mikey. He's up for tenure as we speak.

KAY

I never would have guessed. Alright, so who are the hip looking people standing around the big table?

SANTOS

Those are your core continentals, your H-H-N'H people.

KAY

Come again?

SANTOS

They study the three German H's, Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger, with Nietzsche for added flavor. The guy in the tweed is... (*Turning to MICHAEL*) Michael, why don't you tell Kay who that is?

MICHAEL

(*Stuttering*) Well, that man is, uh, he's, uh... Huh-Huh—

CONNIE

(*To KAY; patting MICHAEL on the back*) Howard, our senior Hegelian and German Idealist.

MICHAEL

He's a... serious philosopher, but a difficult person. Not that I don't admire him. What I'm trying to say is—

SANTOS

You know, they told me before I got tenure, but I didn't believe it.

CONNIE

What?

SANTOS

That junior faculty stammer. I really notice it now. What Michael means is, Howard is bucking to be the fourth H. Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger, and Howard.

MICHAEL

Huh-he just gave me a paper of his to read, last week. Lots of un-translated German and French, and Greek quotations, in the original Greek letters. I, I think maybe it's a, a test.

SANTOS

(*Enjoying this*) Yea, Howard can be a jerk in many languages. Mike's afraid of him.

KAY

But why?

SANTOS

Because Howard just hates... uh Mike, what's that philosophy you do again?

MICHAEL

Pragmatism!

SANTOS

Right. Howard hates pragmatists. Thinks they're the negation of everything profound and deep in philosophy. Says they reduce truth to "whatever works." Right, Mike?

MICHAEL

No, no, that's not right. We, I mean, I, or rather Dewey said—

CONNIE

Let's move on and let Mikey recover. Next to Howard, the well-scrubbed guy in the business suit is Karl, our senior political philosopher. He's a Straussian, a family sired by Leo Strauss, a European historian of political thought. Continental, but a family unto itself. Strauss said there's an inherent conflict between politics and philosophy: philosophy makes people doubt their beliefs, but politics needs people to be true believers. So political philosophers have to talk out of two sides of their mouths – tell citizens to believe the virtuous things they should, while admitting to philosophers they're dubious. Karl's a good scholar, but politically hard to figure.

SANTOS

Next to him, in the turtleneck, is John. He started out doing Husserl and Heidegger. Used to make everyone call him Johan. But since he was denied promotion to Full Professor he's been getting into French semiotics – the theory of cultural signs – and postmodern studies of pop culture. Now he wants to be called Jean. [*French pronunciation: "Jean"*] Some senior faculty call him "Gene" just to annoy him.

KAY

I've heard of postmodernism but I don't really understand it.

SANTOS

You're in good company.

CONNIE

It's a sub-clan of continentals who think everything is signs, language, culture. When you talk about something you're really talking about the signs we use to describe it. Most pomos think validating truth-claims about reality is impossible. Truth and objectivity are actually tools used for political repression. Philosophy becomes the creative re-writing of cultural texts to fight that oppression. They make pop culture a legitimate topic.

KAY

Sounds interesting.

SANTOS

Not usually.

CONNIE

We've got some students doing it. Most notably, François. That's him. (*Points*)

KAY

Whoa.

CONNIE

Easy on the eyes, huh? An exchange student from Paris. Studies with John. He almost makes me wish I were a postmodernist.

KAY

Who's that short-haired woman all in black he's talking to? Is she a grad student?

CONNIE

No, a professor. Ernestine, junior continental. Does the sexy French stuff; psychoanalysis, structuralism, French feminism. But still a pretty traditional scholar.

KAY

So, where are your analysts? I mean, besides you, Santos.

SANTOS

(Pointing) See the older man in jeans and a work shirt? That's Russ. He does contemporary logic and philosophy of mathematics, definitely hard-core analytic. Classic Enlightenment rationalist liberal. Decent guy.

KAY

Who's the younger man next to him with the big belt buckle? Does it say... TRUTH? Is that where the truth is, I mean, in there?

CONNIE

According to rumor, no, not even the appearance of truth.

MICHAEL

That's Rudy, our philosopher of science. I think his parents named him after the positivist philosopher Rudolf Carnap.

CONNIE

Or maybe it was the reindeer.

MICHAEL

Rudy's one of the few remaining positivists in captivity, still thinks logic and science are going to put all philosophical problems to rest. Did his PhD in Pittsburgh, a top program for his area. Donna and his mentor went to Chicago together, so he's a connected guy. A friend of ours.

KAY

Who's Donna?

CONNIE

She's the boss, Chair of the Department. This is her house. By the way, where is she?

SANTOS

Inside doing business.

MICHAEL

She's also the head of our little family.

KAY

But you're an analyst, you're a pragmatist, and you're continental. Didn't you just tell me—

SANTOS

Yeah, we're a rarity, a little pluralist family. Donna heads it. We survive because of her contacts, and because she's the Chair. *(Clapping MICHAEL on the back)* So hopefully my boy Mikey here has a chance at tenure. Speaking of which, we should get a drink and make the rounds of the grown-up table. You coming Mike?

MICHAEL

(Glancing at KAY, then at SANTOS) I, uh...

SANTOS

You should.

MICHAEL

(To KAY) You want to come?

KAY

No, I think I'll wander for a while.

MICHAEL

(To SANTOS) Uh, you go ahead, I'll be along in a minute.

CONNIE

Nice meeting you Kay. *(Sarcastically)* Bye Mikey.

(SANTOS and CONNIE walk over to the table stage left.)

KAY

I like your colleagues.

MICHAEL

So do I, despite the fact that they love to bust my gonads. Connie's already published a book, a year before she comes up for tenure, so she should be okay. Santos got tenure, but it was a dogfight. Some senior faculty were lukewarm, and a couple voted against. Donna was just able to push him through. He's Donna's right hand man.

KAY

So what's this boss of yours like?

MICHAEL

An historian. Has books on Aristotle and Hume, and an anthology on the Enlightenment. The people doing the current, hot stuff find her work uninteresting, but she has a solid reputation. She's got the President's ear and the Dean is afraid of her. That's why our Department does so well. In fact, we're supposed to get two new tenure-track lines next year.

KAY

Is that good?

MICHAEL

Beating out other departments for university resources? That is The Good, my dear, of which Plato wrote. No resources, no life of the mind, or at least, no life of very good minds. (*MICHAEL sees SANTOS staring at him.*) Uh, maybe I should get over there.

KAY

You go ahead. I wouldn't want to keep you from your business.

MICHAEL

I hope I'll see you later.

(*KAY exits right, MICHAEL walks to table stage left, where KARL, JOHN, HOWARD, ERNESTINE, RUSSELL sit. MICHAEL, SANTOS, CONNIE, RUDY stand about.*)

KARL

Michael, join the august circle of philosophical wisdom.

JOHN

(*Drunkenly*) Right! Enter the apex of our profession, here at the center of culture. Harvard, Chicago, Princeton, who needs them!

RUSSELL

(*Shaking his head*) Take it easy, Jean. The students might hear you.

JOHN

You think they don't know they're in a second-rate program?

HOWARD

I resent that. I've seen far better work come out of this Department than the so-called top programs. John, you ought to have read my book on the Bildung tradition of Germanic education and its relation to ancient Greek paideia. It would have saved you from much silliness. And, uh, speaking of education, what did you think of my paper, (*Turns suddenly*) Michael?

MICHAEL

Oh, uh, yes, Huh-Howard. It was...marvelous. Very clever and beautifully written. A genuine pleasure to read.

(There is an awkward silence.)

Well-written? HOWARD

Very. Very well-written. MICHAEL

And clever? HOWARD

Uh, yes, very clever. MICHAEL

So, after forty pages of scholarship and argumentation, you say I write well. HOWARD

Howard, I'm, I'm complimenting you. MICHAEL

(Angry) You're saying I'm somebody who gets by on clever phrasing and wit, who convinces with style rather than substance? That I'm a rhetorician? HOWARD

No, no, that's not what I meant— MICHAEL

What then? HOWARD

What I meant to say is that I think— MICHAEL

You think! That's reassuring. HOWARD

I don't mean— MICHAEL

Just what do you mean? Do you know what you mean? HOWARD

I don't understand why you're so upset. MICHAEL

HOWARD

(Loud) Because I wrote a philosophy paper, not a short story! We're philosophers here, or haven't you noticed that yet? When I ask for your opinion I don't want to know if you think I write well, which is evidently what pragmatists care about. I want to know whether you think my argument is right, whether my claims are insightful. But instead you tell me you found it entertaining.

MICHAEL

I just—

HOWARD

Is that what I am to you, an entertainer? You're saying I amuse you? I just want you to explain to me how it is that you find me so fucking funny!

SANTOS

(Rising to stand between them) Howard, I just remembered, I wanted to ask your opinion about that new book on Heidegger. But in the meantime, can I borrow Michael for a moment? *(Leads MICHAEL away; whispers to RUDY)* Fill their glasses, will you?

(RUDY quickly pours; SANTOS and CONNIE walk MICHAEL stage right and upstage near the bushes.)

MICHAEL

Sonny, I...

SANTOS

Shut up! *(Turns to CONNIE)* I've got to take him in to see Donna. I'll be back later. Can you keep an eye on things? *(CONNIE nods; SANTOS remembers something.)* Oh, by the way Connie, when you get a chance... *(Pulls back lower branches of the bushes revealing the soles of two shoes.)* Take Tom home, will you?

(LIGHTS DOWN.)

ACT I: SCENE THREE

(AT RISE: DONNA's home office, DONNA seated, SANTOS leans in the doorway. She looks up.)

SANTOS

Michael got into something with Howard. Told him his work was "clever" and "well-written."

DONNA

Oh boy. Send him in, but don't go too far.

(SANTOS exits; MICHAEL enters.)

MICHAEL

Donna...

DONNA

Michael, have a seat.

(MICHAEL sits; she is suddenly angry.)

Have you lost your goddamn mind? Why are you messing with Howard of all people? He heats his study with tenure applications!

MICHAEL

I...I—

DONNA

That man doesn't believe he's the best philosopher on Earth, he believes he's the only philosopher on Earth. He writes a chapter a year, on paper with a quill pen. "The way Hegel wrote," he says. Anyone who publishes more or faster is an unreflective charlatan. He locks it in a fireproof safe until Christmas break, suns himself on a beach while his wife types it into a laptop in the hotel room. Last year she had cancer, so he's a year behind. Now she's in remission, and he's waiting for the semester to end so she can type two chapters. And you want to tangle with him, the guy who wouldn't give tenure to Moses because the first five books of the Bible are written in only one language!

MICHAEL

He asked me what I thought of his work. I couldn't avoid it.

DONNA

You're up for tenure and still don't know these things? How many times did you take him out to lunch last year? None, probably. Look, when he asks your opinion you praise his work and ask him to clarify one of his points without suggesting there's anything wrong with it. So he gets to enjoy explaining his thoughts, which for him are the most interesting things in the world.

MICHAEL

I thought I ought to tell him my real opinion, so he'd respect me. But I was afraid to, so I said, well, what I said.

DONNA

What do you think, Howard wants to know your opinion? He doesn't give a damn what you think. He wants two things: to be stroked and to know if he can use you, rely on you. Never tell anyone outside the family what you're thinking again. At least not before tenure. Now go back and flatter him.

MICHAEL

I can't! I'm too embarrassed. Besides, it's transparent and pointless. He'll think I'm a shameless toady trying to curry his favor. And what's worse, I will be!

DONNA

Oy. You still don't get it. Howard likes shameless toadies. It doesn't matter if your praise is said out of fear, because that shows how much power he has. To Howard, sucking up is the highest form of human relationship. Now go back there and show him your rump.

MICHAEL

God, I hate that pompous son of a...

DONNA

Don't get mad, get tenure. This is business, not personal. Now go. Oh, and in the future, would you please dress a little better? You're starting to look like a physicist. Now send Santos in.

(MICHAEL exits; SANTOS enters and sits.)

DONNA

We need to do something about Howard. Jennifer's having trouble with him and after this scene with Michael... When the party winds down, tell him you'd like to come over and see his current work. When you get there, ask to have some brandy, make sure he has a couple... Do you mind a late night?

SANTOS

Not if you need me. I'll call my wife.

DONNA

Good. I have need of your expertise in applied ethics. Business ethics in particular.

(LIGHTS DOWN.)

ACT I: SCENE FOUR

(AT RISE: MICHAEL, very drunk, sitting alone at table, KAY enters.)

KAY

Contemplating?

MICHAEL

Of course. About what, I am not prepared to say.

KAY

Maybe I should give you a ride home. I'm leaving soon.

MICHAEL

Oh no. No problem. Sonny said he'd come back for me. *(Standing, wobbling)* So, was your first philosophy party fun? Nothing quite like rational animals at play.

KAY

Yes, but I don't understand all your complaints. From where I sit it looks like a great life. For four years after graduation I worked as a paralegal. But I eventually realized I had to come back to academia, to find a way to make ideas my work. Now I've got a teaching assistantship in a good program to study and talk about fascinating ideas. What could be better?

MICHAEL

Sounds, uh, lovely. But I think you may be too nice a person to make it in this business.

KAY

There's one thing you haven't told me yet.

MICHAEL

What's that?

KAY

(Whispering) How tenuous is your tenure?

MICHAEL

Very. The continentals and the analysts don't think much of me. See, I'm an orphan. I started out continental, then switched to American. I don't have a nuclear family that does the same philosophy I do. Donna adopted me. It's the same with Connie and Sonny, just not as bad. Their own advisors weren't very strong, their main interests are kind of marginal to their clans, so Donna adopted them. But I'm not into the back room deals, the family business, like Sonny is, like Connie will be. I'm a bit on the outside. That's why they bust my, you know, gonads. My gametes. My gonadotrophins. My—

KAY

Your whatever. Sounds like you kept your independence, though.

MICHAEL

Santos keeps telling me there's no such thing. You've got to join to survive. It's like in prison, if you don't belong to a mutually protecting gang, you're going to get—

KAY

Disadvantaged?

MICHAEL

Quite. Now that I'm up for tenure some of the faculty will want to free up my line to hire somebody from their own clan. It's like living with friendly wolves. One day they start seeing you as food. Only Donna can keep me from being somebody's lunch.

KAY

God, this philosophy business is nasty.

MICHAEL

Well, that's life for wise guys.

KAY

“Wise?”

MICHAEL

We are the only field with sophia in our name. Greek for wisdom, you know.

KAY

So I’ve heard. All I can say is thank God, or religious studies, that I didn’t decide to do graduate work in philosophy.

MICHAEL

As the philosopher Quine said, there’s no fathoming the pre-doctoral mind. Anyway, would you like to get together sometime? For coffee, or dinner, or something?

KAY

Are you asking me and my pre-doctoral mind out?

MICHAEL

Is that wrong? Am I creating a hostile work environment for you?

KAY

I’m not working now, and if I were working, you wouldn’t be in my environment. So the answer is, no, not yet.

MICHAEL

I’m not always like this you know. Drinking this much. Talking non-stop to any woman I meet.

KAY

You’re a professor. You’d talk non-stop to a lamppost. What’s the matter? No grad students of your own to enthrall?

MICHAEL

Uh, maybe. But the real reason is, you’re different. No, I mean it. You speak your mind, you’re not begging for approval. That’s unusual for a first year student. Or an advanced student. Or a junior professor.

KAY

It must be that you put me at ease. After all, impressing you wouldn’t do me much good, would it?

MICHAEL

(Ruefully) Thanks for the reminder. So, would you like to get some dinner tomorrow night? We can go to a local café.

KAY

You’re asking me on a date, Professor.

MICHAEL

Not a date. No, I just figured you'd get hungry sooner or later, that you don't know the local fare... I'll be completely sober by then and I promise to utter nothing but sincere questions about your fascinating self and virtuous interests.

KAY

Is that the choice with you, harassment or boredom?

MICHAEL

I'll find the Aristotelian mean. I promise. Since we're in different Departments, I think we're cool. You don't feel an oppressive power relation between us, do you?

KAY

Are you asking me if I feel power emanating from your person? Will you be disappointed if I say no?

MICHAEL

(Holding his head in his hands) This conversation is too complex for me.

KAY

Well, we shall see, Professor. We shall see.

(KAY exits. MICHAEL remains alone, swaying.)

MICHAEL

Not a yes, but not a no. The lonely search for truth goes on. *(Calling offstage)* Sonny! Sonny! Where are you, you big goddamn ethicist! What's he up to? Sonny!

(MICHAEL exits. LIGHTS DOWN.)

ACT I: SCENE FIVE

(AT RISE: Early next morning; lights slowly up. HOWARD waking in bed, realizes sheets are wet. Looks at his hand. It is black. Pulls up the sheets to see his bed is a pool of ink. In the deepest part of the pool, a sheaf of papers. He looks across room to see a safe with its door open, empty. He grabs the dripping papers.)

HOWARD

Ahhhh! Ahhhhhh!

(Continues screaming as LIGHTS DOWN.)

ACT II: SCENE ONE

(AT RISE: November; faculty meeting in the Chair's large office. Big table stage left/center with chairs, coffee table stage right with three chairs. SANTOS, RUSSELL, MICHAEL, JOHN, HOWARD, KARL, RUDY, TOM, ERNESTINE and CONNIE at big table, with DONNA at its head, near stage right.)

DONNA

Well, if that's all, thank you. Since Thanksgiving is in two weeks, and December is so short, we won't meet again until January. I hope everyone has a wonderful holiday.

KARL

By the way, did anybody hear Sloan's paper at the Western Philosophy Conference last week?

RUSSELL

I did. The commentator took him apart.

RUDY

Who was it?

RUSSELL

The guy from Illinois, with the book on the philosophy of quantum mechanics? Everybody in philosophy of physics is afraid of him, even the Pittsburgh and Harvard people. He showed Sloan was wrong on every point. When he was done there was nothing left. Just Sloan's remains littering the room.

TOM

Being in a dry climate they had to dig a hole out in the prairie.

(The SENIORS chuckle. The JUNIORS look quizzically at each other.)

RUSSELL

We won't be hearing from him anymore.

KARL

(Chuckling) Talk about "Where do you want it?"

TOM

Yessir. Right in the bloody career!

JOHN

It's about time. He's been coasting on his early work for two decades. And that stuff was overrated.

SANTOS

The Princeton people propped him up. They'll have to cut him loose now.

RUDY

Since when do the Princeton people “have” to do anything? They’re not just at the top, they’re at the tippy-top.

DONNA

But that means they have more to protect. They can’t afford to carry dead weight once it’s been exposed. The families at the other top analytic schools would get bolder. Rutgers, Harvard, NYU, even Pittsburgh would start muscling in on their territory.

KARL

Philosophers abhor a vacuum.

DONNA

Fewer visiting professorships, editors will think twice about their book proposals, their students won’t be automatic hires at top schools. No, it’s bad for business. They’ll drop him.

MICHAEL

How do they “drop” him? He’s a made guy.

(The SENIORS murmur; roll their eyes.)

KARL

Difficult, not impossible. First everybody stops inviting him to give papers at conferences or to contribute to anthologies. They forget his name when talking to editors and conference organizers. They email their cousins at other schools to do the same. That in itself is enough to take him out of the loop.

RUSSELL

Then a few casual in-house remarks – he’s not interesting, he doesn’t know the current work, people think he’s all wet – and the grad students will stampede from his courses like rats from a sinking ship. Now his days as a wise guy are over. If they actually want him to disappear, they take the gloves off. He never gets to teach his pet seminars, his courses are scheduled at the same time as a more popular teacher’s, the Chairman stops approving his travel funds, no more merit raises. Early retirement begins to look very attractive.

ERNESTINE

That’s so brutal. Thank God I don’t teach in an analytic Department like Princeton!

SANTOS

You think continental departments are more humane? They’re just more insane. I interviewed with one for a position in Contemporary Ethics. They only asked me about Nietzsche. The only ethical writer they knew was somebody who’s against ethics!

RUSSELL

One of the major continental programs advertised for a philosopher of physics last year. Somebody must have told them it would be good for business. Anyway, they hired a guy who does Aristotle’s physics! Their grad students must still think the sun orbits the Earth.

HOWARD

Well, Aristotle's physics is very interesting.

RUSSELL

I rest my case.

CONNIE

But don't you admit the analytic programs are narrower than the continentals? I interviewed at an analytic school for a job in German philosophy. One guy asked me in private who Hegel was and when he lived. And he had tenure!

JOHN

The top analytic programs act like the Victorian English, they think theirs is the universal culture. Anyone who speaks a different language is a colonial. "The analyst's burden."

RUSSELL

But some of these new continentals reject truth altogether. I heard this pomo guy last year, doing a "reading" of some other philosopher. I asked him if he thought what the philosopher said about the world was true. He gets frustrated and says to me "I don't care." Says it right out loud. I couldn't believe it.

HOWARD

Analysts and their journals are over-specialized into tiny research programs. There's an important question, A. Somebody proposes an answer, C. The analysts spend whole careers on B1, B2, B2', B2'', B2'''', and never get to C. What's your field? "I'm a B2-triple-prime expert." They know more and more about less and less until they know everything about nothing.

RUDY

(Scandalized) These are great departments you're talking about, doing important philosophy.

ERNESTINE

But do you think they would tolerate a philosopher like me?

RUSSELL

No, you're right. They'd think you're an idiot.

ERNESTINE

Uh, thank you.

SANTOS

But the analysts don't hate you. On the other hand, the continentals, mostly closed out of top schools, hate the analysts. They feel like victims. A lion eats a lamb without a touch of animosity. It's the lamb that hates the lions.

KARL

Well, it's small consolation if the lion stops munching on you long enough to say, "By the way, it's nothing personal."

SANTOS

(Smiling) Granted.

DONNA

The bottom line is the same for everyone. Everybody's got to run in place to stay at the head of their clan. We have to run in place too, to be one of the best pluralist programs. But the difference is, we don't make one approach the approach. We don't do methodological cleansing here. Right? *(A mixture of vigorous and half-hearted nods)* Thank you for coming. Good luck with the end of your semester.

(All stand. JOHN and RUDY look expectantly at DONNA, while SANTOS, CONNIE, and MICHAEL collect to chat. JOHN remains behind the table. All others exit. RUDY approaches DONNA.)

RUDY

Donna, may I talk to you?

DONNA

(To JOHN) Can you wait a minute before we meet?

(JOHN nods. RUDY and DONNA step away.)

DONNA

Rudy, what can I do for you?

RUDY

Well, you've got me down for teaching Logic again in the spring. I was hoping to teach a seminar on Carnap.

DONNA

I know Rudy, but you're the only one who can do the Logic next semester. Also, a Carnap seminar is a bit esoteric for us. A broader course in the whole Vienna Circle, including Carnap, that could work. I promise you'll get your seminar soon.

RUDY

Connie's already had a Heidegger seminar, and Michael's gotten to do his Dewey seminar.

DONNA

Now, Rudy, Heidegger and Dewey draw more students than Carnap would. Besides, you know how it works in pluralist departments: the junior analyst gets the job of teaching Logic. I realize it's a chore, but I'll remember you did me this favor.

RUDY

(Moving closer, lowering his voice) Donna, I just don't feel I'm growing the way I should be here. The opportunities, the colleagues, they're not what I hoped. I did go to Pittsburgh, after all. I can learn from Russ. But Santos, Connie and Michael, applied ethics, environmentalism and pragmatism—that's not real philosophy. Sometimes I think I have more in common with Howard and Ernestine, at least they ask serious questions, even if I can't understand their answers.

DONNA

(Very deliberate) Rudy you're the student of an old friend of mine, and I like you. But don't ever take sides with anyone against the family again.

RUDY

I, I'm sorry. I didn't mean anything...

DONNA

Next year you'll get your seminar. I promise. But Vienna Circle, right?

RUDY

Yes, Don.

(RUDY exits. DONNA returns to the papers on her end of table. JOHN enters the knot of MICHAEL, CONNIE, and SANTOS.)

JOHN

Connie, there's something I've been meaning to suggest to you.

CONNIE

What's that, Jean?

JOHN

Next year you should do something at the Critical Studies conference on critical race theory.

(SANTOS and MICHAEL look at each other, raising their eyebrows.)

CONNIE

Uh, why is that?

JOHN

Well, I, uh, just think you're well-suited to do it.

CONNIE

But Jean, I don't do critical race theory. I do environmental philosophy.

JOHN

Connie, it seems like a natural area for you. It would make people notice you, and our Department too.

CONNIE

I'm just not familiar with that kind of work.

JOHN

Would you consider teaching a course in it?

CONNIE

It's really not my field.

JOHN

Well, just a thought. I was only trying to help.

(JOHN crosses to chat with DONNA.)

CONNIE

(To MICHAEL and SANTOS) Jesus.

SANTOS and MICHAEL

(Quietly singing in unison) "On a cold and grey Chicago morning, another little baby child was born. In the ghett-oh".

CONNIE

Shut up. You know, it's not enough to do good work – coming from where I come from...

SANTOS

I hear you sister. Had to work part time in the kitchen at Exeter, did you?

CONNIE

Get stuffed. It's not enough to do good work, they expect me to do the right kind of work. Last year I gave a talk on the reintroduction of the wolves to Yellowstone. You remember the conference, Michael?

MICHAEL

All too well.

CONNIE

Thirty people showed up! All the other junior speakers were getting five or six people, talking to their friends from graduate school. But for my talk all these...well, let's face it, all these white people showed up to hear the black girl.

SANTOS

The horror!

CONNIE

Alright, alright. I can accept good fortune even if it comes for bad reasons.

SANTOS

After all, who are you to be picky?

CONNIE

Damn right. But I could feel the whole room waiting for me to stop talking about wolves and ecosystems, and give them some racial angle. The comments were basically, “We really like you, but why aren’t you talking about something else?” I guess I should have put in a conclusion about the persecution of the wolf as a metaphor for the oppression of African-Americans.

SANTOS

Well, wolves are pretty dark, aren’t they? I mean, they ain’t polar bears.

CONNIE

Hey, I’ve got it! What about a reading of “Little Red Riding Hood” as a racist bedtime story! (*Speaks to audience, the boys behind her*) It’s the cautionary tale of an innocent redheaded girl who strays from the straight and narrow path...

MICHAEL

...into the deep, dark forest of the inner city...

SANTOS

... and is stalked by a big, bad, black wolf...

CONNIE

...who lies in wait to gobble up white girls. The wolf tries to pass as Grandmama...

SANTOS

But his facial features give him away.

CONNIE

He tries to eat the girl...

MICHAEL

But Little Red is saved by a simple woodsman... the heavily armed member of a local militia.

CONNIE

It’s a classic example of racist allegory. In fact, recent scholarship has discovered the original title was...

(*MICHAEL AND SANTOS lean in to listen.*)

Little Red Riding Through the Hood!

SANTOS

The persecution of the wolf was based on its identification with the black man! Shooting wolves is racist! Dude, this is a career-maker!

CONNIE

I could have been a contender.

DONNA

Sonny!

(CONNIE and MICHAEL exit. SANTOS crosses towards DONNA.)

JOHN

(Impatient) Donna, can we start?

DONNA

Yes, of course. We'll get right to it. *(ALL sit around coffee table.)* Okay, what can I do for you, Gene?

JOHN

That's Jean.

DONNA

Excusez-moi.

JOHN

(Sighing) If I may recap my hiring proposal, I'm hoping to bring in two people. They're very well known in Critical Studies. Both are real targets of opportunity for special appointments. The administration has said they might give us two more lines. This would save us from going through two laborious searches. They could form the core of a very interesting program inside the Philosophy Department, an interdisciplinary Critical Studies Program, with myself, one or two of the faculty already here, plus some associated faculty from other departments, including, with his literary background, the Dean himself, which would help sell it. For this, Donna, we would obviously need the support of the administrators and board members you carry in your pocket like so much loose change.

DONNA

You have cv's for the two prospects? I'd like to see their publications.

(JOHN hands her documents.)

Hmmm... "Psychosexual Stages of Republican Development," "Walmart's Onto-Theology of Domination," "The Covert Racism of Beanie Babies," "Vertical Metaphysics in the Films of Johnny Wad: The Seminal Years." *(Gives a weary look)* John...

JOHN

Donna, these are very serious analyses of the oppressive semiotic processes taking place in our culture. They are risky, subversive papers done by thinkers who do not hide behind disciplinary facades! This kind of work is exactly what we need to speak to a sizable constituency in contemporary thought. And one of them is a woman!

DONNA

Well, be that as it may, what is the interest for my family?

JOHN

The Critical Studies Association needs a venue for its meeting in two years. I could bring it here. As Chair you could be host and give an address. As editor of the Critical Studies Journal I could publish an essay of yours, perhaps on Hume's relation to postmodernism. Santos could give a paper at the conference. Michael could teach a course in the new program on Peirce's theory of signs. I was hoping Connie could do something on environmentalism and race.

(SANTOS rolls his eyes.)

DONNA

(Pauses, thinking) An interesting proposal. But I must say no to you, and I'll give you my reasons. It's true I have friends in the administration and on the board. But they wouldn't be my friends much longer if I started dealing in postmodernism – *(JOHN tries to interrupt; she cuts him short.)* – It doesn't matter to me what a philosopher does for a living, you understand. Relativism and nihilism, these things are old, even traditional. And the French structuralists who inspired your kind of work were serious thinkers. But this postmodernism of yours is a little dangerous. The board will look at it as a bunch of irrationalists out to destroy Western civilization. Or worse, destroy the intellectual reputation of the university.

JOHN

Donna—

DONNA

John, I wish you luck with your conference, which you are welcome to bring here. If you do, the Department will help any way it can.

(They rise and shake hands, JOHN exits. DONNA and SANTOS sit.)

DONNA

I'm a little worried about this Critical Studies business. That was too easy. John hardly whined. Something else is going on. I want you to call some of our friends about those pomos he's pushing. And get one of your grad students to do a little research for me.

(A KNOCK AT DOOR: SANTOS opens the door and JENNIFER enters.)

DONNA

(To SANTOS) I'll talk to you later. *(SANTOS exits.)* Jen, come in and shut the door.

JENNIFER

(Entering; closing door) Donna, Howard's come around! He said that on second thought, my dissertation is on the right track and that I should be finished in a couple of months!

DONNA

Very good news. And I'm sure he'll give you constructive criticism, and write you a fine letter of recommendation.

JENNIFER

Yes, I believe he will. How is he, though? He looks shaken. I heard a strange rumor about some kind of trouble at his house.

DONNA

Oh, the poor man. Evidently one of his chapters was destroyed and he somehow misplaced another. But don't worry about him. With his letter and the phone calls we'll make, you'll have a good shot at a job offer this spring. *(Stands, looking through papers on her desk)* I'm sure his missing chapter will turn up then.

JENNIFER

Why "then"?

DONNA

(Distractedly) What?

JENNIFER

Why did you say his chapter would turn up "then"?

DONNA

Oh, did I say that? I don't know... Spring cleaning, maybe.

(LIGHTS DOWN.)

ACT II: SCENE TWO

(AT RISE: Faculty dining club; KAY enters. She spies MICHAEL sitting at a table alone with his plate of food, and with a second plate and second cup of coffee on the table.)

KAY

Hello, Michael.

MICHAEL

(Rising) Kay, I'm sorry but I can't have lunch with you today. A problem came up, I couldn't reach you. There's something I have to do.

KAY

(Looking at the other plate and coffee) You mean have lunch with someone else? Sounds like a real crisis. Which is it, Michael, afraid of commitment or afraid of no commitment?

MICHAEL

This isn't about us, Kay. I'm having lunch with Santos. Donna is going through a nightmare. We heard from the Dean's office that two graduate students have filed grievances against her for using sexist and ethnically offensive language!

KAY

What is she supposed to have said?

MICHAEL

It was in her Aristotle seminar. Aristotle wrote that women and non-Greeks can't do philosophy. In her seminar, after reminding the students about Aristotle's claim, Donna said "Right?" with a question mark. Two students claim she said "Right." with a period. It's pretty serious. The students have hired a therapist, a lawyer, and a publicist.

KAY

Doesn't it matter that Donna's a non-Greek woman?

MICHAEL

All that matters is that one of the students is working with Rudy and the other with John. The reason it matters is that John and two other philosophers have petitioned the Dean to set up a new Department of Critical Studies! The others were Ernestine, and of all people, Rudy! If it's approved, their grad students will shift to the new Department, taking their teaching assistantships with them. Plus they would get the two new Philosophy lines. Some of our other faculty will request to move over. This would gut the Philosophy Department!

KAY

I know you're upset, Michael. But so what if they secede? Doesn't that just mean some of the people that don't like you will be gone? You'll still have a job, and the senior faculty that are left will be more likely to give you tenure. No?

MICHAEL

But what kind of Department will it be? They're doing an end run and pulling the rug out at the same time. It's all to undermine Donna, and we depend on her. If they secede, what's left of the Philosophy Department will be a tiny nub with no resources. The remaining members of Philosophy will retire and not be replaced. Then someday the "Critical Studies Department" will be renamed "Philosophy and Critical Studies" or something like that. They'll own it all. Wait. (*DONNA enters; MICHAEL sees her.*) Kay, I have to talk to Donna. I'm sorry.

KAY

(*Smiling*) Don't worry. It's not a deal breaker, Professor.

(*KAY exits. MICHAEL intercepts DONNA.*)

MICHAEL

Donna. How are you? What's going on?

DONNA

I can't stay, Michael. I'm just passing through.

MICHAEL

Wait a minute! I want to know what's happening. Tell me, who is siding with John? Why is Rudy, a positivist, going along with a postmodernist? It makes no philosophical sense.

DONNA

Junior faculty are not famous for political savvy. I'm sure John and the Dean promised Rudy something. Maybe they'll let him teach Carnap's "The Logical Syntax of Language" as a postmodernism seminar. That would do it. He'd roll right over and let them rub his tummy. There's no fathoming the pre-tenured mind.

MICHAEL

I thought Quine said there was no fathoming the pre-doctoral mind.

DONNA

He was too optimistic.

MICHAEL

But what's going to happen?

DONNA

Ernestine has to follow John, like it or not. Howard would accept anyone in power, because no sectarian battle is worth damaging Western civilization's greatest mind. Karl I'm not sure about, but he'll probably follow the other senior continentals.

MICHAEL

What about Tom? And Russ?

DONNA

Tom's in detox. As for Russ, he's a tenured liberal rationalist. When he lowers his attention from the realm of logic and math, he only descends far enough to see American imperialism, patriarchy, and environmental destruction. One of the pomos is a woman, so Russ will have no great objection. If I were a whale, he'd save me. I may be overweight, but a whale, I'm not.

MICHAEL

Isn't there any loyalty in this business?

DONNA

Our people are business people. Their loyalty is based on that. And right now, business isn't so good.

MICHAEL

So what are we going to do?

DONNA

We? Michael, better you shouldn't get involved.

MICHAEL

But at least tell me what's going to happen.

DONNA

Alright. I've been sent for.

MICHAEL

What do you mean?

DONNA

I have to meet with the President in three days, on Friday.

MICHAEL

(Confused) So?

DONNA

Well undoubtedly, it's about my continuing as chair.

MICHAEL

The President's always supported you in the past.

DONNA

Everything's different now. Before, I was the only game in town. The administration wanted to be able to say they had a slick Philosophy Department, not flashy, but good for the money. I could keep my ducks in a row. But now I'm the duck, a lame one. Everybody above me will shift, ready to back whoever emerges as the potential leader of the Department. Even if I stop John, the President will put Philosophy in limbo, waiting until some new group has the power to push its own vision of the Department's future. Until then no new lines will be filled, retirements won't be replaced. She'll take away some graduate assistantships, give them to a hot department.

MICHAEL

But isn't she an old friend, from back when she was in the History Department and you and she did that anthology on the Enlightenment?

DONNA

This isn't personal. It's strictly business.

MICHAEL

But you're old colleagues—

DONNA

Look, you little dope. In our thing, when you get sent for, you go in alive, you come out dead, and it's your colleague who does it.

MICHAEL

Is there anything I can do?

DONNA

Yes, your job. Otherwise keep your head down.

(DONNA exits. SANTOS returns with his covered hot lunch. He and MICHAEL sit.)

SANTOS

So, Mike, what did you want to talk about?

MICHAEL

I want to talk about Donna, and what I can do to help.

SANTOS

Mike, we appreciate it. But the Don doesn't want you getting into this. You don't know what's involved. Things may get rough.

MICHAEL

I want to get rough, Sonny. I want to get them for what they're doing to Donna.

SANTOS

(Chuckling) You're taking this too personal, Mike. What do you want to do, pull an Amy Bishop?

MICHAEL

Pardon me?

SANTOS

Amy Bishop. Shot three of her colleagues in Biology at the University of Alabama after she was denied tenure. Or a Canadian professor at Concordia, Val Fabrikant, shot four colleagues when he was denied. Then there's Ted Strelski, a math Ph.D. student at Stanford. They were going to terminate him after he worked on his degree for nineteen years, so he beat his advisor to death with a ball-peen hammer. And Fred Davidson at San Diego State. He shot his whole committee at the start of his Master's thesis defense.

MICHAEL

Seems like overkill for a Master's.

SANTOS

Now you're being reasonable. The point is to calm down. This is business, not personal.

MICHAEL

Alright then. This is my business, the business we've chosen. The Don is my family. I want in, Sonny. Look, do you want to save her or not?

SANTOS

Actually there is something. I'm not sure anyone else can do it.

MICHAEL

Let's have it.

SANTOS

(Leaning in) We need to send someone to sit down dinner with John and the Dean tomorrow night. They're too wary of me. I could use Connie, but she's awfully vulnerable. You, they underestimate. You're not an analyst, not continental, not a historian, not a postmodernist. You're a, a –

MICHAEL

(Annoyed) Pragmatist.

SANTOS

Right. They don't think you're a player. I wanted to get this done before Donna sees the President, but I didn't know how. I can set it up right away.

MICHAEL

Does it have to be dinner?

SANTOS

Keep your friends close and your enemies closer. Take your friends to lunch and your enemies to dinner. So can you do it?

MICHAEL

Yes, of course. But what do I do?

(SANTOS's cell phone buzzes.)

SANTOS

(Pulling out phone) Just a minute. *(Answering)* Santos... Yeah... Can you come up to the faculty dining room right now? It'll just take a second... *(Hangs up; to MICHAEL)* I've got a place in mind, off-campus, good wine, small portions. Lots of style without much food – they'll love it. You're going to act like you want to negotiate a truce. Just represent Don's interests, and be who they expect you to be. Loyal, naïve, non-threatening, simple, unsophisticated—

MICHAEL

You can stop now.

SANTOS

Put them at ease. Have some wine. But before the entrée you say you have to go to the bathroom. There'll be something taped behind the toilet tank.

MICHAEL

What do you mean?

SANTOS

(Grinning) Just a little ammunition. I'll explain later. Now, Michael, there's one more thing. After you do this, you need to disappear for a while. Do you have any plans for the holidays and intersession?

MICHAEL

No. I was going to stay here.

SANTOS

(Shaking his head) I'd rather you were someplace remote, but safe, where we can keep tabs on you. It so happens there's a conference run by a friend of ours. He can invite you to moderate a session, and put you up until spring classes start. We'll get you travel funds.

MICHAEL

What's the conference about?

SANTOS

Rationalism versus Empiricism, Realism versus Anti-Realism, paper versus plastic... Does it matter?

MICHAEL

I guess not. Where is it?

SANTOS

It's better you don't know. *(MICHAEL tries to object.)* Look, we don't—you don't want anyone to know where you're going until this is all over. After you hand in your grades you'll be taken to the airport. You'll find out there. This is the way it has to be. Are you up for this?

MICHAEL

Yes.

SANTOS

Good. You'll have a fine winter break. Just, uh, dress warmly.

(JENNIFER enters and walks to the table.)

JENNIFER

(To SANTOS) I've got what we talked about, Professor.

SANTOS

Very good. You got somebody to deliver it late tomorrow afternoon? Somebody reliable?

JENNIFER

Second-year student. A switch-hitter; does Russell and Husserl. Wrote a nice paper on Hume and the phenomenological reduction for Don. A friend of mine.

SANTOS

Good. You know what to do. The Don will be grateful.

(JENNIFER exits.)

Well, now that's settled, can we finally eat our food?

(SANTOS raises the metal cover off his lunch. He looks down at his plate and freezes.)

There's something under my fish.

MICHAEL

(Reaching across to lift the fish with a fork) It looks like...It's a book!

SANTOS

Damn. They must have somebody in the kitchen. Remember a couple of years ago when the food service staff went on strike, and some of the philosophy faculty joined them on the picket line? That was smart. We dropped the ball on that one.

MICHAEL

But what is it doing here?

(MICHAEL watches SANTOS lift up the fish.)

SANTOS

It's Connie's book. On environmental ethics.

MICHAEL

Sonny, what does it mean?

SANTOS

It's a message. She's been re-assigned to Marine Sciences. To teach the ethics of aquariums and aquatic theme parks.

MICHAEL

How do you get that from this plate?

(SANTOS hands MICHAEL the book with the fish on it.)

SANTOS

Connie teaches with the fishes.

(LIGHTS DOWN.)

ACT II: SCENE THREE

(AT RISE: The next evening, in a pleasant little bistro off campus; JOHN and the DEAN sit at a table with bottle of wine. They stand as MICHAEL enters.)

JOHN

Hello Michael. You know the Dean?

MICHAEL

(Shaking hands) Yes, of course. It's good to see you.

(They sit.)

JOHN

We took the liberty of ordering an excellent merlot. Would you like a glass?

MICHAEL

I'd prefer a beer.

JOHN

But of course.

DEAN

This is a pleasant little place, Jean.

JOHN

Yes, the food is excellent. Real elegance of preparation. They pay attention to the little things.

MICHAEL

They'd better. All their entrees are little things.

JOHN

I'm sorry, Michael. I know you Americanists prefer those "All you can eat" places where you choose your own steer.

DEAN

Gentlemen, let's not squabble. We're all colleagues here.

JOHN

You're quite right. Especially when I so much wanted to express my condolences to Michael.

MICHAEL

Condolences? About what?

JOHN

About Santos. "Sonny," you people call him. They found him.

MICHAEL

What do you mean they found him?

JOHN

You didn't hear? Well, evidently when Sonny boy got home last night he came upon a male grad student en flagrante with his wife! You know, that good looking fellow, always wears a leather jacket, doing a dissertation on George Bataille and the theory of eroticism? François. His work's quite good.

DEAN

Evidently Sonny's wife thought so.

(Both snicker.)

JOHN

The young man works both sides of the street, I hear.

DEAN

Well, practice makes perfect.

(Louder snickers.)

JOHN

But Sonny was less than appreciative of his work. He performed a rather scathing critique of the young man's position. *(Guffaws)* His wife thought Santos was going to kill the boy. Say, hasn't Sonny written against the death penalty? Inconsistent, don't you think?

DEAN

She called the police, Sonny ran off. They found him in a bar near campus, drunk, cursing in Spanish, and asking the bartender over and over how his wife could have violated Kant's categorical imperative.

JOHN

Several times, apparently. *(Huge guffaws)*

DEAN

Seriously, Michael, we just can't have this sort of thing. I mean, a philosophical felon! He's on administrative leave pending trial.

JOHN

François will be covering his Ethics courses. Well, somebody has to cover them. So Michael, just what did you want to talk about?

MICHAEL

I want you to back off. I want you to call off the war.

JOHN

Michael, do you think we had something to do with the tragedies befalling your friends? Those appear to be self-inflicted.

MICHAEL

I'm warning you John—

JOHN

Warning me! Fiche-toi you little piece of merde. You don't warn me, I warn you. Warning me? Don't make me laugh. Who are you? Nobody. I'm known all over the world. You go to any Critical Studies conference, any pomo venue, I'm known. You little... And your family doesn't even have the muscle anymore. Donna's in trouble, Sonny's gone, and Connie, well, she's all wet.

MICHAEL

How could you do this to Connie?

JOHN

I gave her a chance. I offered to help her. She refused. A refusal is not the act of a friend.

MICHAEL

You may have exiled her, but Connie's very well-regarded. Her book's being reviewed. She's a shoo-in for tenure.

DEAN

You surprise me Michael. If anything in this life is certain, if history has taught us anything, it's that you can deny anyone's tenure. The Marine Sciences people won't care about her writing, the philosophers will think her Marine Sciences teaching is a joke. She's history.

MICHAEL

(Furious) You... You...

JOHN

The well-known pragmatist command of language.

DEAN

Michael, take it easy. This is business, kid. It does no good to take it so personal.

MICHAEL

(Controls himself) Look, what I really want, what matters most to me, is a guarantee that Donna won't be hurt.

JOHN

What can I guarantee? I'm the hunted one. The philistines and conservatives are constantly attacking my work. I'm not happy about the rough stuff. I'm a pacifist. Ask anyone. But Donna forced me to it. With all due respect, she's been slipping. Could I have gotten to her four years ago? Did you read her last book? Substances, final causes. I mean, she takes

JOHN, *Continued*

Aristotle seriously, for Christ's sake. We have to push the Department into the twenty-first century.

DEAN

Mike, pluralism is fine in theory, but in today's market it's a recipe for disaster. Today you can only make a splash if you specialize. Students don't want to be pluralists, they want to do what's hot. How do you advertise pluralism? *(Spreads hands in air as if outlining a marquee)* "Come study with us, We Don't Do Anything In Particular"? No, no. Donna has had her day in the sun.

JOHN

You can't advance partout, only in a direction. Oh, that means "everywhere," "all over." French, you know, Michael.

MICHAEL

(Glares at JOHN) I have to go to the bathroom.

DEAN

(Suspicious) Well, don't be long.

(He watches MICHAEL rise and exit through bathroom door.)

DEAN

So what's Donna's next move?

JOHN

(Taking a drink) Aristotelians have no moves, they just circle eternally. Believe me, Donna's got nothing. She's down to using this uncultured pragmatist. Sorry, that was redundant.

DEAN

What about the others in the Department?

JOHN

Several will jump on our bandwagon once they see we're winning. The rest will go along with any move that avoids a prolonged war. It's in the bag.

DEAN

You know, John, perhaps it wasn't a good idea to get rid of Connie. Santos, yes. He was too dangerous. But to destroy Connie, a young person, when it might not be necessary...

JOHN

(Shrugging) Why take a chance?

DEAN

True enough. Still, we want to contain this. The President wants a quick resolution. Let's wrap it up. *(Picks up menu)* So, what are you going to have?

JOHN

The veal. It's excellent.

DEAN

I'd join you but since I did that course – that very popular course – on animal rights and literature last year, I've become a vegetarian. I admit it hasn't been easy. I was hoping to teach it regularly in some department. (*Leaning in; quietly*) If I'm going to keep legitimacy in the faculty's eyes, I need a new departmental home. As you know, things kind of soured for me in the English Department.

JOHN

Well, I think Critical Studies can do that. Yes, we can make the case for needing animal rights. It will fit right in.

DEAN

A universal ethics of objectively valid animal rights doesn't conflict with the postmodern spirit of your program?

JOHN

No, not at all. The program's Critical Studies, isn't it? Your animal rights course is critical of something, isn't it? Whatever attacks The Hegemon!

DEAN

Excellent. By the way, just between us, what is "The Hegemon"?

JOHN

Well, such questions are already flawed, because the search for clear and distinct definitions is itself part of The Hegemon. But, let's just say it's... Them.

(DEAN and JOHN raise their glasses and clink them together.)

DEAN and JOHN

To the new Philosophy Department!

(The bathroom door opens. MICHAEL crosses to the table but remains standing, holding up a manila envelope.)

MICHAEL

Well, where do you want it?

JOHN

I don't know as I want it at all. What is it?

MICHAEL

(Takes out contents, slaps them on the table) Say hello to my little friend!

DEAN

What the hell is this?

MICHAEL

You recognize these, don't you?

(DEAN and JOHN leaf through the papers.)

Two graduate student papers, with the original dates. You each published one as your own work in "Critical Studies Journal". Plus the emails the students wrote complaining, before they got other pieces of theirs accepted a year later. Quite a journal you're running there, Jean.

JOHN

There was no wrongdoing in any of this! And if you think this stunt will save you and that bitch—

DEAN

Jean, calm down.

JOHN

But this is transparent blackmail! You little pragmatist shit! I'll tear your career inside out. I'll rip the Dewey right out your—

DEAN

(To JOHN) Fuggedaboutit! (To MICHAEL) Well, the Don still has some friends, doesn't she? Okay, sit down. (MICHAEL sits.) But let me tell you something. If you're going to play this kind of crap, you better have done all your homework. Have you?

MICHAEL

I think so.

DEAN

(Takes a long sip of wine) We'll see. For now, whaddayou want, kid?

(LIGHTS DOWN.)

ACT II: SCENE FOUR

(AT RISE: The PRESIDENT's office; door stage right, elevator door stage left. Coffee table and upholstered chairs stage right. PRESIDENT is chatting with DEAN. Then JOHN and KARL enter by elevator, shake hands and sit. Finally DONNA enters by elevator. All stand. The PRESIDENT immediately walks over to DONNA.)

PRESIDENT

Good to see you, Donna.

(They shake hands.)

DONNA

Madam President, Dean, John. A lovely meeting room.

PRESIDENT

Thank you.

(DONNA notices KARL)

KARL

(To DONNA) I thought a senior philosopher who wasn't one of the principals to the dispute ought to be here. The President was kind enough to allow me.

PRESIDENT

Well, why don't we get down to business.

(All sit.)

JOHN

Madam President, the issue is simple. I proposed diversifying our Department, for its own good and the good of the university as a whole. But the Chair has refused...

PRESIDENT

(Interrupting) Donna, why did you oppose the two appointments?

DONNA

They're just not good enough for us. I think you would agree.

PRESIDENT

Perhaps if we broadened the pool.

JOHN

But those candidates are top-notch—

KARL

John, despite their quality, perhaps we could find two other postmodernists that would be a better fit.

JOHN

(Pointing at DONNA) The real issue is her opposition to diversity.

DONNA

When have I ever opposed diversity? You all know me here. When? Just this one time. And that was because I believe this postmodernism is going to be the ruin of our Department. It's not like critical theory, or skepticism, or even Nietzsche. The board members who find those

DONNA, *Continued*

philosophies unappealing but part of any adequate program, are not going to help us when it comes to postmodernism. I believed that then and I believe that now.

JOHN

Trying merely to ensure the future of the Department, I have been subjected to Gestapo tactics—

KARL

We've all been acting in good faith. I too deplore the conflict we've experienced. But I do think we need to move forward and to add new perspectives. It's the best way to keep the peace. And that's what matters, peace. We are all reasonable scholars here.

DONNA

Well, as a reasonable woman I am willing to do anything necessary to assure the orderly future of our Department.

PRESIDENT

Then we are agreed. We will hire two postmodernists, but not the two in question. There will be no split; they will teach in the Philosophy Department. We'll have to have a national search. It's too late for this year. But I'll approve the searches for next fall.

JOHN

But, Madame President, this isn't really an adequate solution to our underlying problems—

KARL

However I do think it may be the most reasonable solution, John.

PRESIDENT

Oh, on an unrelated matter. Donna, as I've been telling everyone, I can't believe there is anything substantive in the charges against you.

DONNA

No, there isn't.

PRESIDENT

Of course not. I don't know how such absurdities get started. We must of course allow the statutory mechanism to proceed. But I wouldn't worry about it.

DONNA

There is just one more thing. I lost two of my younger faculty in this business. I say now that I forgo any vengeance over those losses. But I have selfish reasons. Another of my junior people is away while we sort these matters out. He'll be coming back soon. But I'm a superstitious woman. If some accident should befall him when he returns, if he should be denied tenure, or be accused of sexual harassment, or get unfavorable teaching evaluations, then I'm going to blame some of the people in this room. But, that aside, I swear on the careers of my PhD students that I will not be the one to break the peace we've made here today.

JOHN

But what about my position?

PRESIDENT

Feel free to remain in it. Thank you all for coming.

(As the others exit, the PRESIDENT signals DONNA to stay behind.)

PRESIDENT

I thought that went well.

DONNA

As well as it could.

PRESIDENT

I was meaning to ask you, Donna, what are your plans, your personal plans, for the future?

DONNA

What do you mean?

PRESIDENT

I'm sure you'd like to get back to your scholarship, and put these administrative duties behind you. Wouldn't we all!

DONNA

I, uh, hadn't been thinking about that.

PRESIDENT

You've done an admirable job with a difficult Department. You've prepared it for the future. Michael's up for tenure isn't he? That will help secure your legacy. He seems a reasonable sort, not offensive to anyone. The tenure decisions will come down just before spring classes begin. Perhaps then he could help lead the Department in the right direction.

DONNA

You think so?

PRESIDENT

Yes. So I believe you should look on your Chairmanship with a great deal of pride as a job well done.

DONNA

Perhaps you're right.

PRESIDENT

We'll chat soon. Especially about the 18th century. I'd like to hear what you've been thinking about.

(They shake hands.)

DONNA

Until then.

(PRESIDENT exits door. DONNA walks to the elevator and waits. It opens; MICHAEL steps into room.)

MICHAEL

Are they gone? Is it over? What did she decide?

DONNA

First things first. You turned in your final grades?

MICHAEL

This afternoon.

DONNA

Are you packed? Got your tickets?

MICHAEL

Yes, yes, I'm all set.

DONNA

Did you bring warm clothes?

MICHAEL

(Irritated) Yes, Mom! Jesus, will you tell me what happened?

DONNA

Hey, watch your goddamn language! I may not believe in Him, but I'm in no position to take His name in vain! Neither are you.

MICHAEL

Sorry.

DONNA

Okay. The secession is over. Everybody will stay in the Department. The charges against me will quietly go away. We have to hire two pomos, but not the ones John wanted.

MICHAEL

That's excellent! So the President saw through John?

DONNA

John couldn't organize a syllabus, let alone a coup. But I never knew until today it was the Straussian all along.

MICHAEL

Karl? I don't understand. I thought it was pomos.

DONNA

No. It was the smart move. The Straussians were always smarter. Karl can be committed to making his clan win even while he doubts its truth. For him the conflict of theory and practice is a sign of sophistication. What other people call hypocrisy he calls wisdom. Tough cookies, those Straussians.

MICHAEL

God, all this maneuvering. We've fallen a long way from the ancient Greeks.

DONNA

(Chuckling) Are you kidding? The Greeks were brutal. At least today we don't actually get whacked like Socrates. After his teacher was clipped, Plato got the ear of the dictator of Syracuse to protect his family by getting control of a state. The philosopher-king strategy. It eventually worked in Rome, when Marcus Aurelius became emperor. Then we were at the top. We lost the crown, came back as court advisors, first in priestly robes, then as secular writers. Machiavelli, John Locke, Adam Smith, Hegel, and Marx pretty much designed the modern state. But then the world grew up. A few philosophers still tried for the brass ring: Gentile wrote Mussolini's speeches, Heidegger joined the Nazis. That didn't work out too well. Now we're purely academic, we only destroy people professionally. Except for the odd underwater sabbatical. But, uh, I can't talk about that.

MICHAEL

So what are we going to do?

DONNA

We are doing nothing. You are taking a trip. I'm going to do what they want and then resign.

MICHAEL

What!?

DONNA

I've had it. I'm out. But don't worry, you'll get tenure in January before classes start. Then the President will ask you to be interim Chair.

MICHAEL

Whoa, slow down! What do you mean? How can I be Chair? And how can you know any of this?

DONNA

Let's just say I know.

MICHAEL

You cut a deal with those clowns, didn't you? How could you do that? And why? I'm not ready to be Chair.

DONNA

I thought that too, but the way you handled John and the Dean when things got tough, that showed me something. Underneath that naïve grad student act of yours, you've got practical sense. After all you're a... a... —

MICHAEL

(Wearily) Pragmatist.

DONNA

There you go. If you're going to be a real wise guy you got to take on responsibility, not kibitz like a clever onlooker.

MICHAEL

But I don't want to be in that hot seat. Not in this political swamp. It's snake eat snake over here.

DONNA

I know you don't want it, but it'll be okay. Of course, the seniors will go behind your back to the Dean, maybe even the President. But they would do that whether you're Chair or not. Bottom line, it's a little harder to destroy a Chair. Look at it as a short-term insurance policy.

MICHAEL

Are you telling me that you gave up the Department, gave up your job...for me?

DONNA

Don't flatter yourself. Look, I was going to lose the Chair and all my power anyway. I'm getting too old for this. So I made the best deal I could, got something I wanted, and that's that.

MICHAEL

Don, I...

DONNA

I am leaving you with unfinished business. Like Howard and Jennifer.

MICHAEL

I know, I know. I'll handle it.

DONNA

I don't know if there's anything you can do about Connie. Or Sonny. And their grad students—

MICHAEL

I said I'll handle it, I'll handle it. What's the matter?

DONNA

(Turning away, then back) I never wanted this for you, Michael. Sonny, I knew he would have to go through it. All these years I fought for my family, for a Department a little more pluralistic than most. And I refused to be a fool, dancing on the strings held by all those big shots. I don't apologize, that's my life. But I never wanted this for you. I hoped that by the time you and Connie came along you could do your work without dancing on strings. There just wasn't enough time, Michael.

MICHAEL

Maybe someday... Will you retire altogether?

DONNA

Not yet. I want to teach a couple more years, maybe on a reduced schedule. And I've got another book in me. I'll call in a favor, get one last position.

MICHAEL

Where will you go?

DONNA

Someplace warm, someplace good for wise guys.

MICHAEL

But where?

DONNA

I dunno... UNLV?

(LIGHTS DOWN.)

ACT II: SCENE FIVE

(AT RISE: Spring semester, Chair's office; MICHAEL stands by his desk shuffling papers. KARL enters.)

MICHAEL

Hello, Karl.

KARL

Hello Michael. Do you have a minute?

MICHAEL

Barely, I'm afraid. The examination part of Jennifer's defense is over, so she's cooling her heels in the hallway while her committee deliberates. I should get in there.

KARL

I just wanted to say that was a very good meeting this morning.

MICHAEL

Thank you, Karl. I try to keep things moving.

KARL

You're a quick study. Just a couple of months as Chairman and you already have a steady hand at the helm. Most of all, Michael, you've helped us heal the wounds and come together.

MICHAEL

I appreciate that, Karl.

KARL

I must admit when you disappeared at the end of last semester, and didn't show up until after the tenure decision, that was mystifying. And the announcement of your interim Chairmanship was a bit of a shock. Some of us weren't sure what to expect.

MICHAEL

I can understand that. The travel opportunity came up suddenly. The College of Nome is quite a place. It's amazing how much writing you get done with twenty hours of darkness each day. And the appointment was as much of a shock to me as to you.

KARL

I'm sure it was. Anyway, I'll let you go. I just wanted to give you my sincere thanks.

(KARL exits. JENNIFER waits in the hallway. MICHAEL crosses to meet her.)

MICHAEL

Jennifer, is this the longest wait of your life?

JENNIFER

Well, it's just been ten minutes. So the answer is yes!

MICHAEL

I'm going in. It'll be a few minutes. Why don't you get some coffee from the office? I'll be out to get you shortly.

(JENNIFER exits. MICHAEL joins HOWARD, ERNESTINE and JOHN at a long table where they are discussing JENNIFER's dissertation. He sits.)

MICHAEL

Well, gentlemen, and Ernestine, how does it look?

(Others turn towards HOWARD.)

HOWARD

Jennifer did quite well. Strong scholarship, articulate, good eye for the philosophical issues. Not entirely in control of her sources, some are rather suspect. Nonetheless, a nice little contribution to Hegel scholarship. She defended it well.

JOHN

I suppose so. But there are conceptual problems with her whole perspective, as she should know. She ought to have dealt with the newer approaches to Hegel, say why she isn't using them.

HOWARD

Oh really?

JOHN

I mean, there's a lot of other material I would have wanted to see.

HOWARD

Such as?

JOHN

For example, much of this flies in the face of recent work in semiotics.

HOWARD

True. But irrelevant since recent work in semiotics is mostly bullshit.

JOHN

It's well-known today that the interpretive process is inherently conflicted and ambiguous. We are trapped by the structures of our signs. Meaning is indeterminate.

HOWARD

Well, it's indeterminate if you completely ignore the hermeneutical situation, and the dialectic of the tradition, a dialectic that, Hegel showed, is metaphysical, not just semiotic. Meaning is about reality.

JOHN

Today we've abandoned those foundationalist aims. There is no "transcendental signifier," no Santa Claus in the sky to decide meaning. We are just left with signs. I'm afraid you're not familiar with the current work, Howard.

HOWARD

And I'm afraid you're not familiar with your own ass! Are you saying a dissertation which I advised is not finished? It's finished when I say it's finished. And I say it's finished!

MICHAEL

(Smiling) Gentlemen, please! Ernestine, what do you think?

ERNESTINE

Well, uh... *(Turning toward JOHN)* I do have problems here and there, but... *(Turning toward HOWARD)* ...it's clear Jennifer's a strong candidate who's been well-taught and advised, even... *(Turning toward JOHN)* ...if there are other perspectives she hasn't taken into account. Nevertheless, on the whole... *(Turning back to HOWARD)* ...I'm favorably disposed. *(HOWARD is expressionless.)* In fact, very favorably disposed. *(HOWARD smiles.)*

JOHN

I still think some of this should be revised.

HOWARD

(Still angry) Are you saying—

JOHN

Well, there are some typos and other corrections necessary.

HOWARD

Typos? Fine, of course. That's copyediting, not revising. I couldn't care less about that.

MICHAEL

So, a unanimous pass with no substantive revisions?

JOHN

(To MICHAEL) If you will check the corrected copy when she submits it, and be responsible for the clean-up.

MICHAEL

(Nodding and pushing a paper forward) You all need to sign. If you'll excuse me, I have to do one thing before I bring her in. I'll be right back.

(MICHAEL exits through the door.)

JOHN

Well, this is what we've come to.

HOWARD

(Angry) I fail to understand—

JOHN

I don't mean the dissertation. I mean our Department. I mean our *(Finger quotes)* "leadership." Notice that Michael didn't say a word about the dissertation. He probably couldn't understand it! You and I may disagree, Howard, but we're both serious scholars. All three of us are serious continental scholars.

(Nodding to ERNESTINE.)

HOWARD

Yes. Yes, we are.

JOHN

Michael's not a real philosopher. He's got the depth of a bird bath. The only reason he got made is politics. You wouldn't believe the dirty tricks he pulled last semester to get the Chair. He's a common thug.

HOWARD

(Quietly) Really? I heard some rumors about that.

JOHN

It was revolting, believe me. I'll tell you about it sometime.

HOWARD

But this is the Department we have. And the leader we have.

JOHN

Perhaps not for long.

(MICHAEL enters leading JENNIFER.)

MICHAEL

Colleagues, I give you the woman of the hour! Jennifer, it is my pleasure as Chairman to speak for your committee in saying, congratulations!

(All exchange handshakes.)

ERNESTINE

Jennifer. How does it feel?

JENNIFER

I don't know yet! It's taken almost six years to get here. How long will it take for me to stop feeling like a graduate student?

ERNESTINE

Several weeks. Then you'll wake up one morning and think "I don't have to write my dissertation!" Later in the day you'll think, "For the first time since I was five years old, I'm not a student anymore!"

MICHAEL

I recommend that before you go out to dinner tonight to celebrate, you make reservations under the title Doctor.

(After congratulations, JOHN and ERNESTINE exit. As MICHAEL, HOWARD, and JENNIFER remain chatting, MARIA wheels in her dolly with wastebasket and trash bags to tidy up.)

MICHAEL

Have you heard anything since your on-campus interview?

JENNIFER

Not yet, but I'm hopeful. It's between two other candidates and myself. It would be an excellent school to teach at.

MICHAEL

We're all pulling for you, Jenn. Aren't we Howard?

HOWARD

We certainly are.

(As they prepare to leave, MARIA approaches HOWARD with some papers.)

MARIA

Excuse me, Professor. When I cleaned your office, I found these papers behind the bookcase. I guess they fell down there or something.

HOWARD

My missing chapter! This is wonderful. Michael, my missing chapter!

MICHAEL

Amazing how things work out.

HOWARD

Yes, uh, amazing. You know, Michael, about some of the things I said to you before—

MICHAEL

You mean, before I became your Chair?

HOWARD

Uh, yes. I didn't understand. I thought—

MICHAEL

That I was an idiot?

HOWARD

Well, uh, yes. But I was all wrong. The constant pressure of my writing, you know, it sometimes makes me misjudge—

MICHAEL

Already forgotten, Howard. My sole concern is our future.

HOWARD

Thank you, Michael. Thank you. *(Crosses to the door)*

MICHAEL

But it does seem that good things happen to good people. Jah, naturlich?

HOWARD

Uh, yes, Michael. Naturlich.

(HOWARD exits. MARIA stops working, catches MICHAEL's eye, then makes a face at the door after Howard. She and MICHAEL chuckle.)

MICHAEL

Gracias Maria. You were a big help. By the way, how is your daughter enjoying her work-study job in the Department office?

MARIA

Oh, she likes it very much. And you please say hello to Santino for me? He's a nice boy.

MICHAEL

I surely will. Next week on visiting day.

(MARIA wheels out the door and exits stage right.)

MICHAEL

So Jennifer, a great day!

JENNIFER

Yes it is, but now I have to get a job.

MICHAEL

First things first. I know an editor, a friend of Donna's, that would like to publish your dissertation.

JENNIFER

Michael, that's wonderful! That would really help. You've been so supportive. I appreciate it very deeply.

MICHAEL

Now, as you know, someday, and that day may never come, I might ask you a favor. But until then, well, accept this as a gift on the day you received your PhD.

(MICHAEL extends his hand; she shakes it with both of hers.)

JENNIFER

You have my loyalty, Michael. The same I gave to Donna.

MICHAEL

I know. That's why I also know you'll go far in this business.

(LIGHTS DOWN.)

ACT II: SCENE SIX

(AT RISE: The Chair's office; end of a faculty meeting near the end of Spring Semester. MICHAEL remains at the head of table as RUSSELL, JOHN, HOWARD, MICHAEL, and ERNESTINE exit. KARL stays behind.)

KARL

Michael, that was another good meeting.

MICHAEL

Thank you, Karl. I wanted to finish off the semester well.

KARL

Some of us were wondering if we should meet once more, after grades are in, to address a few things. The searches are coming up next year, for one. It might be useful to reach a consensus now, before summer break.

MICHAEL

We can do that, if you think it's necessary.

KARL

The only problem is, several of us are leaving the area soon after graduation.

MICHAEL

Well then maybe we can meet late on graduation day. Shall I send out an email?

KARL

Very good. Once again, Michael, you've really done a fine job. *(Starts to exit)*

MICHAEL

Perhaps next year I will be able to do better. I have some ideas that might help us in our mutual endeavors.

KARL

(Controlled) Interesting.

MICHAEL

Perhaps we could discuss them at the meeting.

KARL

Perhaps.

MICHAEL

Of course, I am assuming I'll continue as Chairman. The President and Dean seem to expect me to. But they haven't sent me an official letter. I realize I'm only interim, but no one has suggested otherwise or stepped forward yet.

KARL

Of course, each academic year is de novo, a new beginning. As I'm sure you'll agree, we always must be prepared to adopt those policies that benefit our own community at the time.

MICHAEL

No doubt. I also had hoped that next year we could restore Connie to her rightful place.

KARL

Certainly what happened to her was terrible. Alas, sometimes what is done cannot be undone. As philosophers we should particularly be disposed to recognize that. If Connie listens to her better self, she may realize that any further trouble wouldn't be in the best interests of the Department. It may be that we all have a moral responsibility to accept, and move on.

MICHAEL

(Repeating as if in admiration) A moral responsibility to move on. Karl, there is always such maturity, even wisdom, in your advice. I appreciate that.

KARL

Thank you, Michael. I try to be helpful.

(KAY enters.)

KARL

Hello, Kay. How are you?

KAY

Fine, thank you Karl.

KARL

Religious Studies treating you well?

KAY

Well enough.

KARL

What are you studying?

KAY

The modern Protestant theologians, a course in indigenous religions, and one on Heidegger and death-of-God theology.

KARL

Heidegger, very good.

KAY

I hope to use his work to analyze Native American religion.

KARL

Very interesting. Remember, Kay. The Philosophy Department is always eager to get a student of your quality.

KAY

I'll keep that in mind.

KARL

Well, I'll be leaving. You both have a nice evening.

(KARL exits. KAY fills MICHAEL's arms.)

KAY

Ah yes, Mr. Chairman.

MICHAEL

You're attracted to men with power, are you?

KAY

I don't know. I might be. But what does that have to do with this situation?

MICHAEL

In males there are two key organs, which are directly connected. A deflationary effect on one will naturally have a deflationary effect on the other. One of them is the ego.

KAY

This other organ, is it the extra foot you store in your mouth?

MICHAEL

Do you have a healthy disrespect for all faculty, or just me?

KAY

Let's just say you bring out the best in me. *(They release one another.)* So, what's the current beef in your herd?

MICHAEL

I didn't think it possible, but they're getting worse.

KAY

The faculty?

MICHAEL

Your puns. Regarding the faculty all is congenial on the surface. But I just found out, they're preparing to dump me.

KAY

Really?

MICHAEL

They accepted me as Chair because they figured I'd be weak. Now, after a semester of rest and regrouping, they're ready to make their move. They certainly don't want me in charge during those pomo searches next fall.

KAY

I thought after last fall they were finished.

MICHAEL

John's "Critical Studies Department" is finished. But since the President cleared Donna out of the way, the field has tilted in their favor. They're playing downhill. Karl let John take the heat before, but now he's point-man. John, Rudy, Howard, and Ernestine will back him, the rest will follow whoever is pack leader. After all, who should they support? Me, lone pragmatist, orphan adopted child of a departed Don?

KAY

(Shaking head) Michael, I don't understand how you can court those people when you know they despise you.

MICHAEL

Most of them don't really think so poorly of me. It's just that they think so highly of themselves.

KAY

You know what I mean. They're your enemies.

MICHAEL

Well, I keep my friends close and my enemies—

KAY

Yeah, so I've heard. How are they going to come at you?

MICHAEL

They want to meet with me after the students are gone. Less blow-back. Then they'll explain that we face problems I can't possibly address. They'll allude to mistakes I've made without spelling them out, so they can't be rebutted. The other faculty will follow their lead. The Dean will back them and the President will agree. So at that meeting I'll be replaced.

KAY

By who?

MICHAEL

I don't know. Karl maybe. But he might be too smart for that. John would jump at it, but Karl knows he's not respected. My guess is Howard or even Tom. They're vain enough not to realize they'd just be figureheads for the crew.

KAY

Michael...so what? Why do you want to stay Chairman? You have tenure. Like they say, "Tenure means never having to say you're sorry." Teach and write. Forget them. Why do you want this job?

MICHAEL

Because with one of their own in this office they can remake the Department. They'll force the seniors to support their decisions and hire clones at the junior level. They'll rub out all evidence that our family, Donna's family, ever existed.

KAY

I don't know how you can stand this philosophy business.

MICHAEL

Kay, the problem is the bloodshed. If people would only do business the right way, there's plenty of philosophy for everyone. You said yourself it looked like a great life.

KAY

Yeah, right! That's before I knew anything.

MICHAEL

Actually, you know Kay, I was hoping you would consider transferring into our Department. You've not only got the brains, but the independence of mind. You'd clean up over here.

KAY

(Getting upset) Me? A philosopher? I wouldn't last a week. I'd say something honest to the wrong person. There's no way, Michael, no way I could make it in your world. *(About to cry)* And that's not all. Look at what it's doing to us, Michael. Things aren't the same as in the beginning. You have no time with this pointless chairmanship. And you're different. All the maneuvering warps your soul. As you fight them you become more and more like them.

MICHAEL

(Hands on her shoulders) Kay, if I play my cards right, someday this Department could be totally legit. No blood. Real pluralism. Just colleagues teaching and doing their own work.

KAY

(Pulling back) You think so? I don't. Sometimes I think it's philosophy itself. There's something...unholy about this business of thinking you can reason your way through all the ultimate questions. Maybe in religious studies people aren't as interesting, but at least they're humble, they're trained to respect people's beliefs. You're trained to rip them to shreds. *(Pauses)* Michael, inside I've known, for a long time, that we'd never have a chance, because you'd never be free. Not with this tradition of yours, this philosophy thing that's been going on for twenty-four hundred years. Sometimes I think, our relationship can't go on, because, *(Throwing her arms out)* because this, this must all end!

MICHAEL

(After a pause) Leaving the world with what? Sociology?

KAY

(Suddenly calm) Don't get ridiculous.

MICHAEL

Listen, Kay. You want to work with ideas. We're the kings and queens of ideas. You know what I'll be writing about next year? No, and neither do I. Philosophers have the freedom to think and write about anything. And there's no reason this has to keep us apart. In fact, with these flexible hours, philosophy's great for raising a family.

(KAY freezes. A long pause. MICHAEL smiles. KAY frowns.)

KAY

Don't say it.

MICHAEL

Say what?

KAY

(Shaking her finger) Don't you dare say it!

MICHAEL

(Pause) Was that a pregnant pause?

KAY

(Punching his tricep) I told you not to say that!

MICHAEL

Ow! What's the matter, you the only one allowed to pun around here? It was just a thought.

KAY

That wasn't a pun, or a thought. That was a threat! There was no pregnancy in that pause. Not even a tiny bit. Nor will there be in any future pauses!

MICHAEL

(Stepping toward her) Kay—

KAY

(Backing away, pointing to his groin) Keep that away from me.

MICHAEL

I thought you liked it?

KAY

I do, I do like it. It's very nice. But if you're going to start dropping words like "family," well, it puts that in a whole different light. I mean, I'm happy to deal with the delivery system, but if you're going to talk about the payload, that's a whole other thing!

MICHAEL

Kay, there's no reason to be upset. Don't you ever think about us that way? Don't you know how I feel about you? I love you, Kay. I think maybe you love me too.

KAY

Maybe. Maybe I do. But feelings don't get me a career and a job.

MICHAEL

Since when is that all that matters?

KAY

Since I've seen what academia is all about. Listen Mr. Man, (*Pokes him in the chest with each of next four words*), Mister Doctor Tenured Man! You may be ready for pasture, ready to graze on philosophy and raise a pack of little Deweyans, but I'm still out here in the race, living on an assistantship, pushing thirty, looking for a career! I've got other priorities, if you've forgotten. I can't let you lure me into thinking about... you know...muh, muh—

MICHAEL

Marriage?

KAY

Yes, and ch, ch—

MICHAEL

Children?

KAY

Right. Them. You would have to bring them up. Look, let's just calm down, and talk about rational things. (*Lowers voice; smooths hair; puts on sweet smile*) So, what are you going to do to those bastards?

MICHAEL

The meeting will be late on graduation day. I've decided to speak at the Department graduation ceremony. I'm a young interim chair, so what could be more natural than for me to want to enjoy my brief moment in the sun?

KAY

Will your colleagues come to listen?

MICHAEL

Most won't. They have moral objections to ceremony unless it's in their honor.

KAY

And then?

MICHAEL

(Looking out the window, very seriously) Before graduation day is over, they'll answer. For Sonny, for Connie, for Donna. For everything.

KAY

What are you going to do?

MICHAEL

(Fuming) They think they're such great philosophers. They think their work is so hot. They've been pissing all over us. All over me, for years. Now they're going to pay. Pay for it all.

KAY

(Fearful) Michael, what's come over you? What are you going to do?

MICHAEL

Nietzsche said he philosophized with a hammer. Now it's my turn. Let's see them try and refute some of my arguments.

KAY

This sounds awfully personal.

MICHAEL

(Smiles) Don't worry, Kay. It's not personal. It's strictly business. The search *(Grimly)* for truth.

(Kay isn't reassured. LIGHTS DOWN.)

ACT II: SCENE SEVEN

(AT RISE: Split stage with alternating scenes, light and dark. STAGE RIGHT: MICHAEL at a lectern speaking to the audience at the Philosophy Department Graduation. STAGE LEFT: Bedroom in Graduate Student dorm.)

(LIGHTS UP RIGHT: MICHAEL at lectern. STAGE LEFT REMAINS DARK.)

MICHAEL

Parents, family members, friends, and above all, our graduating philosophy majors. It's my great pleasure to congratulate you on your achievement. It is also my pleasure to congratulate your parents on the end of tuition payments. I know it's been a long day, and you've already sat through the university graduation ceremonies. My remarks will be brief.

(LIGHTS DOWN RIGHT/UP LEFT. Graduate dorm room; two people asleep under the covers, the door slightly ajar. AN UNDERGRADUATE REPORTER enters with pencil and notepads.)

UNDERGRAD REPORTER

Greetings, Professor!

JOHN

(Sits up in bed) Who the devil are you?!

UNDERGRAD REPORTER

I'm from the student newspaper. I write the Christian Life column. The LGBT reporter was supposed to be here too, but she couldn't make it. So I'm taking notes for her too.

JOHN

What the hell are you doing here?

UNDERGRAD REPORTER

We got an email from you offering us an interview, saying the door would be unlocked and to come right in!

JOHN

Get out of here! This is a complete abuse of my privacy!

(A MALE groans from under the covers.)

UNDERGRAD REPORTER

Speaking for Christian Life: Professor, I had no idea you were a sodomite!

JOHN

I, I am not a damned sodomite!

UNDERGRAD REPORTER

Speaking for LGBT: Professor, I had no idea you were a bigot!

JOHN

I'm not! On the contrary, I love homosexuals...collectively, that is. This is a not a homosexual affair. I affirm the polymorphous sexuality of all individuals, rejecting any logic of distinctions enforced by repressive patriarchy. Therefore I am not homosexual. Nor am I...heterosexual.

UNDERGRAD REPORTER

(Looks quizzical; then tentatively) So you're... bisexual?

JOHN

That category too is a mechanism for the suppression of difference!

UNDERGRAD REPORTER

But speaking for both columns: it is newsworthy!

(UNDERGRADUATE REPORTER exits; scribbling.)

JOHN

Merde! As soon as this gets out, they'll connect me with your little performance over at Santos's house last fall. This evening I'm going to get two calls, one from the Dean and one from my wife, each saying the same thing, "John, we're finished!" My life is over!

(A handsome young man's face pops up from the bedcovers.)

FRANÇOIS

You mean, your name isn't Jean?

(LIGHTS DOWN LEFT/UP RIGHT.)

MICHAEL

(At lectern) I know when your child said one day, "I'm going to be a philosophy major," you tried to be supportive. You tried not to say "What are you going to do with that?" You tried not to say, "I'm paying for a philosophy degree?" But I hope you can now see what your support has accomplished. Your sons and daughters have learned to think. They've learned to value the stronger argument, good reasons, clarity. They've learned to care about truth, especially the hidden, commonly unrecognized truth. They know how to listen for reasons, to hear through the noise and glitz and go to the heart of the matter.

(LIGHTS DOWN RIGHT/UP LEFT: The local Tasty Burger counter; people standing in line to order. The DEAN, dark glassed, fedora pulled low, collar high, receives a greasy bag from the COUNTER GIRL. A YOUNG WOMAN walks up behind him.)

VEGAN

Dean, I got your email, saying you wanted to meet me here.

DEAN

Uh, I didn't email you. No, I didn't. And if you'll excuse me I really can't talk now, with graduation and all. *(Turns to exit)*

VEGAN

I thought it was strange that you wanted to meet here. But I still owe you a paper on animal rights, so I figured you wanted me to come here and experience the horror first hand.

DEAN

A very good idea. I myself was forced to come here to meet some of the parents—

VEGAN

But, uh, what's in the bag?

DEAN

What bag? Oh, this bag! This is for my secretary. Yes, she's a carnivore, but I'm working on her.

VEGAN

(Stepping closer; peering at his face) Are those bacon bits?! You taught us how pigs are treated on industrial farms! I don't understand how you could—

DEAN

(Wiping his mouth) No! Are these real pork? They told me they were soy bacon bits!

VEGAN

We were going to ask you to be the advisor of the Vegan Student Union. We were all going to take your course. You were our last hope on the faculty. But now... now... *(Begins to walk off in tears)*

DEAN

You know, every now and then it's important to recapture one's sense of disgust. It renews one's determination to fight the... The... Hegemon!

VEGAN

(Stops and turns) The what?

DEAN

The...oh, never mind.

(VEGAN exits. DEAN slumps in a chair and takes a bite. LIGHTS DOWN LEFT/UP RIGHT.)

MICHAEL

(At lectern) Whatever we decide to do with this world and this society of ours, we must decide it with the skills they have learned. Not that truth is everything. If you held out a happy family in one hand, and truth in the other hand, and I couldn't have both, I'd choose the former. But that happy family can't live, can't deal with its problems, without truth. And then there is faith. But faith only shows us the target, the great and precious thing. To guide us toward it, to decide which path to it is the best, which road signs to follow and which are misleading, we need the skills your children, our graduates, have acquired.

(LIGHTS DOWN RIGHT/UP LEFT: A university owned apartment living room; a computer on desk. KARL is getting dressed to go out. There is a knock at his door. He opens it to find a male undergraduate, ITS.)

ITS

Hi Professor! I, uh, need to speak with you.

KARL

I don't really have time...Who are you, anyway?

ITS

I work for ITS. I helped set up your office computer last year. And, uh, I took Intro with you a couple of years ago.

KARL

Well, come in. We can talk while I get ready. *(Walks about; ITS stands inside the doorway)*
So what's the problem?

ITS

We got reports from your Department that you needed some work done on your computer.
That one over there. *(Points to computer on desk)*

KARL

I don't remember asking, but I could use an upgrade.

ITS

Well, like I said, your Department said it needed work. Since it's a university apartment, one of the other kids and I came over, and the super let us in to check it out.

KARL

You came in without me being here?

ITS

Well, they said you'd be out, that the computer was messed up, that you needed it fixed right away, so...

KARL

So, what did you find?

ITS

Oh, the computer's fine. No problem. A-okay!

KARL

Alright, no harm done. So, you came to tell me that?

ITS

What we did find was all those downloads... *(Takes a piece of paper from his pocket and reads)* ...from a website called Professors in Pain, where "Bad professors are humiliated by undergraduate girls in field hockey skirts who disparage their writings and force them to submit." I, uh, I had to give a copy of the files to the Director of ITS.

KARL

(Screams) You did what?!

ITS

I didn't want to, Professor. But with the other student here and all, it's like a rule that we have to report weird stuff on university computers. And man, that stuff was pretty weird! Some of that equipment I'd never seen before. And what the girls' did to that professor with a copy of Plato's "Republic"! Well, that's a pretty thick book, and I never thought you could—

KARL

(Pushing the student out) Alright, alright! Just shut up and get the hell out of here.

ITS

I'm real sorry, Professor. But, it's been, uh, educational!

(Door closes. LIGHTS DOWN LEFT/UP RIGHT.)

MICHAEL

(At lectern) Communication is the process in which truth appears. Only with communication that is open, inclusive, respectful, and willing to endure criticism, can we search for it. Socrates could not think without other people, and he knew it. Truth, or as much of it as we can know, lives in the self-critical, inquiring community, in dialogue. Our students, your sons and daughters, have learned that. I have seen it in class, in the way they deal with their teachers and with each other. They know how to agree, and disagree, in the cooperative search for truth.

(LIGHTS DOWN RIGHT/UP LEFT: PRESIDENT on dais with lectern facing audience; GRAD REPORTER further left with notepad in hand.)

PRESIDENT

And so, again, I thank you, our treasured alumni, for your past generosity. I pledge that we will work without distraction to make you proud of your alma mater, and to deserve your continuing support. Thank you. *(Applause)* Now, if you have any questions?

GRAD REPORTER

Madame President. University Free Press here. Sources reveal that you have invested thirty percent of the university's endowment in an experimental biotech firm which is not expected to generate a product for ten years. Can you confirm this?

PRESIDENT

Well, this is really time for questions from alumni. *(Gestures at audience)* But I can say we have a very diverse portfolio. I really can't quote the figures from memory. Next question?

GRAD REPORTER

Follow-up. Is it true that your husband is one of the major stockholders on the board of that firm?

PRESIDENT

If that is true, which I'm not sure it is, it's an accidental coincidence. Anyone is free to invest—

GRAD REPORTER

Isn't the firm's main research program the development of cochlear implants for the Deaf? And isn't their planned marketing slogan, "If you're not Dumb, why be Deaf?"

PRESIDENT

That's absurd. I have great respect for the Deaf community.

GRAD REPORTER

We asked these questions of the Chairman of the University's Board of Directors. His response was, (*Holds up his notes to read*), "Shit." He declined to say whether you still had the Board's support. Would you care to comment?

PRESIDENT

(*Puts her hands over her ears*) I can't hear you.

GRAD REPORTER

Madame President!

PRESIDENT

(*Hands on ears; running from dais; exiting*) I can't hear you!

GRAD REPORTER

(*To himself, facing audience*) Was she symbolically expressing solidarity with the Deaf? Naah!

(*GRAD REPORTER exits, scribbling: LIGHTS DOWN LEFT/UP RIGHT.*)

MICHAEL

(*At lectern*) It is in that moral relation among learners, among colleagues, coworkers, friends, teachers and students, that we find real philosophy. Mutual respect, honesty, mercy, tolerance, and forgiveness, these are the hidden message of philosophy, the values reinforced by the collaborative search for truth. With your children, those virtues are safe for another generation. I congratulate them, and I extend you our gratitude for allowing us to teach them. Thank you.

(*Applause: MICHAEL's cell phone rings. He steps away from the lectern to answer.*)

(*Into phone*) Yes... Good... Tell them their assistantships are guaranteed... No, I have one more stop to make. I've been looking forward to it. I have to say goodbye to someone.

(*Closes the phone. LIGHTS DOWN.*)

ACT II: SCENE EIGHT

(*AT RISE: RUDY and ERNESTINE sitting in the coffee shop near campus. MICHAEL and JENNIFER enter. MICHAEL approaches them. JENNIFER sits at nearby table.*)

MICHAEL

Rudy! And Ernestine. What a pleasant surprise.

ERNESTINE

How are you, Michael?

RUDY

Hi, Jennifer.

(MICHAEL sits at their table.)

MICHAEL

Ah, my favorite pastry.

RUDY

Uh, do you want some? They're very good.

MICHAEL

No thanks.

ERNESTINE

(Nervously) I'm, I'm sorry I wasn't able to attend your graduation speech this afternoon, Michael.

RUDY

Me too. Jennifer, I heard your defense was a little rocky.

JENNIFER

It was fine.

MICHAEL

Jennifer's future is a bright one. Which is more than I can say for some people here.

RUDY

Well, I have a few things to do before our faculty meeting... *(Starts to rise)*

MICHAEL

Sit and relax. The meeting's been cancelled.

RUDY

(Sitting back down) Really? Why?

MICHAEL

It's Graduation Day, Rudy. Endings and new beginnings... You have to answer for Donna.

ERNESTINE

(Standing) I think this is a private conversation.

MICHAEL

Be comfortable, Ernestine. We have no secrets here. Do we Rudy?

(ERNESTINE sits.)

RUDY

I don't know what you're talking about, Michael.

MICHAEL

John, Karl, the Dean, the President – they've all gotten theirs. Today I settle all family accounts. Now it's your turn, Rudy. Time for some truth-functional propositions. You remember them?

RUDY

Michael, I told you I don't know—

MICHAEL

You gave them your grad student to finger Donna last fall, didn't you? Your own Don. Who approached you?

RUDY

Really, Michael—

MICHAEL

You're all alone now Rudy.

RUDY

Michael, I don't know—

MICHAEL

(*Angry*) Every time you say that your career gets shorter! Now tell me before I tear your body of work into little pieces.

RUDY

Alright, alright. It was Karl. He said Donna was ruining their plans. He needed one of my students. He said in Critical Studies I could teach all the Carnap I wanted. I could be the first to treat Carnap as a postmodernist. He told me that my students would be cute postmodern girls, all dressed in black, and skeptical of conventional morality! I, I couldn't help myself! Please, Michael.

MICHAEL

(*Forgiving tone*) Rudy, Rudy. Don't worry. Your mentor is Donna's oldest friend. What am I gonna do, fire you? You can stay.

RUDY

Thank you Michael. Thank you. You won't regret this.

MICHAEL

In fact, I'm going to make your job easier. From now on you'll only have to prepare one course.

RUDY

What, uh, what do you mean? Just my Carnap seminar?

MICHAEL

No, Rudy. No. We need a little more than that from you. I'd love to let you, but you know, we need to cover more than a seminar.

RUDY

Of course, Michael. Anything you say.

MICHAEL

"Anything"? Good. We need Logic, lots of Logic: introductory, symbolic, and advanced. This way you'll really maximize your expertise in that area. Specialize, Rudy, specialize. This could cement your reputation. You'd like that wouldn't you, to have your reputation in cement? Better than your feet, huh? (*Chuckling*)

RUDY

But Michael, I hate teaching Logic.

MICHAEL

No. I'm shocked, shocked to hear it. Well, I don't know what we can do about that. I'd hate to lose you, Rudy. But come to think of it, I know that ICVTCC is looking for someone.

RUDY

ICV...?

MICHAEL

Inner City Vocational Technical Community College. Downtown, right off the interstate, that big industrial building? Lovely school. I know the Chair. You're a good teacher, so six courses per semester won't bother you. You won't be burdened with grad students, philosophy majors, or advanced courses. They only teach Intro to Philosophy, Ethics, and, oh, Logic again. Simple.

RUDY

But—

MICHAEL

Your choice. Logic 24/7 here, or I can give you that recommendation. You don't have to decide now. Take your time.

RUDY

(*Looking sick, stands*) I...I... I've got to go.

(*RUDY exits.*)

MICHAEL

(Shaking his head) Mixed up kid, that Rudy. *(To ERNESTINE)* Well, Ernestine. What to do with you? *(Looks at her; long pause— she is frightened.)* Want a job, Ernie?

ERNESTINE

Yes, Michael. Yes I do.

MICHAEL

Good. You know Ernestine, I always thought you would fit into our family. We'll talk soon.

ERNESTINE

(Rising to shake MICHAEL's hand with her two hands) Thank you Michael. Thank you.

(ERNESTINE exits.)

MICHAEL

(Rising) You know, Jennifer, I think this is going to be a very fine summer vacation.

(They turn to leave.)

Oh... *(Pointing back)* Take the cannoli.

(JENNIFER gets the cannoli. They exit. LIGHTS DOWN.)

ACT II: SCENE NINE

(AT RISE: MICHAEL at his desk in office. KAY enters.)

KAY

Michael?

MICHAEL

Kay! I've been wondering when I would see you.

KAY

You've been hard to get on the phone.

MICHAEL

I'm sorry. A lot to do. But now that graduation is over, I was hoping we could get away.

KAY

I have to ask you something first. What happened this weekend?

MICHAEL

(Sitting behind desk) We had a very nice graduation ceremony.

KAY

(Angry) Michael, the President of this university resigned! I heard awful things about the Dean, Karl and John, and Rudy. Everybody's talking about it. What happened?

MICHAEL

That was bad, wasn't it. Embarrassing. A lousy set of circumstances. What more do you want me to say?

KAY

You know damn well what I'm asking. What did you do?

MICHAEL

(Stands, paces behind his desk) I had nothing to do with it. It was between the people involved.

KAY

It was vicious, Michael. People were ruined...

MICHAEL

No one said the search for truth was going to be pretty.

KAY

Search for truth? It was a bloodbath.

MICHAEL

I've told you, Kay. Don't ask me about my business.

KAY

Michael—

MICHAEL

Don't ask me—

KAY

Michael, what did you do?

MICHAEL

(Yelling) No! *(She stares; he calms down)* Alright. Just this once. Ask and I'll tell you.

KAY

Did you have anything to do with what happened?

MICHAEL

(Staring into her eyes, shakes head once) No.

KAY

Michael, really?

MICHAEL

(Steps over; they embrace) That's right Kay. No.

(After a pause, KAY steps back and holds MICHAEL at arm's length.)

KAY

Professor, you are one lousy liar.

(KAY exits. LIGHTS DOWN. END ACT II.)

ACT III: SCENE ONE

(AT RISE: September; CONNIE unpacking boxes in her Philosophy Department office. KAY enters.)

KAY

Connie!

CONNIE

Kay!

(CONNIE emerges from behind her desk. They hug.)

KAY

It's good to see you, Connie.

CONNIE

It's good to be seen.

KAY

Are you glad to be back?

CONNIE

Yes I am. *(They sit.)* I've been moving my stuff from Marine Sciences. They do have a much cooler building. Nice people too. But none of them has any idea about how we do things. Because I do environmental, we share the same politics. But we'd go out for drinks, and I'd be pointing out flaws in their arguments, even for things I agreed with. That's my job. But they saw me as an undependable ally. It was a lesson. If you're a wise guy, you're a wise guy. If you're not, you're not.

KAY

That's kind of depressing. Especially since I'm a Philosophy student now.

CONNIE

I heard. And I'm glad. But just how did that happen?

KAY

I realized religious studies is mostly anthropology and literary history. Nobody believes in God over there. They just study the discourse about God. And then, well, some people contacted me.

CONNIE

(Suspiciously) I take it you don't mean Michael.

KAY

No. Well... it was actually Howard, okay? He said that there was an opening in the incoming class, and a fellowship, so I wouldn't have to teach or assist in some professor's class.

CONNIE

Excellent. But, uh, what about you and Michael?

KAY

(Shaking her head) That's over.

CONNIE

Really? Really over?

KAY

(Standing and pacing) It's got to be, Connie. I can't date the damn Chairman of my Department. Anyway, Michael's changed. I can't handle what he does; the dishonesty. I've got to think about myself for once.

CONNIE

He was just being strong for his family, Kay.

KAY

Well I'm not in his family, am I? I don't want one of these mind-screwing clans for a family. I've got my own plans for my own future... But, uh – *(Hesitates)* – how is he, Connie?

CONNIE

He seems okay. Last May the Provost, as acting President, gave him a regular two-year appointment as Chair. The few Philosophy faculty who bothered to respond to the email didn't object, and the ones who would have objected weren't answering their email! So that was that. We've chatted a couple of times since then, but Michael keeps to himself. I can tell he misses you, but he won't talk about it. You know, Kay, you can't avoid him.

KAY

I know, I know. I've just got to get myself together first. I do miss him though.

CONNIE

They can grow on you. But then, so can fungus.

(Both laugh. Footsteps are heard, then JOHN walks past the door.)

CONNIE, *Continued*

Speaking of fungus.

(More footsteps; KARL stops at door.)

KARL

(Smiling) Hello Connie. It's good to have you back.

CONNIE

(Very insincerely) Thank you, Karl.

KARL

And Kay, I'm very happy to hear that you've joined us.

KAY

Thank you, Karl. I, uh, I'm looking forward to your seminar.

KARL

Well, it will be better for having you in it.

CONNIE

Is that seminar on Plato's "Republic"? You need to borrow a copy? Yours might be worn out.

KARL

(Icily) As a matter of fact I haven't worked on the Greeks for some years.

CONNIE

(Smiling) What about under them?

KAY

Well, I have to get going. Nice to see you Connie, Karl.

(KAY exits.)

KARL

(To CONNIE) Enjoy your semester, Connie.

CONNIE

I intend to have an excellent semester, Karl.

KARL

Well. The morrow is promised to no one. We'll see.

(KARL exits. LIGHTS DOWN.)

ACT III: SCENE TWO

(AT RISE: The Chair's office; MICHAEL at his desk. HOWARD enters.)

MICHAEL

Hello Howard. How was your summer?

HOWARD

Very good, Michael. Got a lot of writing done. Another chapter.

MICHAEL

Marvelous. When will we be able to see the masterwork?

HOWARD

It's still some ways off. And your summer, Michael?

MICHAEL

Chairmanly business, I'm afraid. This will be a busy year. We've got the searches coming up. And this is Connie's tenure year. So we'll have an evaluation report to do.

HOWARD

I suppose so.

MICHAEL

In fact I wanted to talk to you about Connie's report. I'll do her teaching and service, but could you write an evaluation of her research?

HOWARD

Well, you know, environmental philosophy is not my field.

MICHAEL

I know, Howard, but she's operating from a phenomenological perspective, so we need a continental philosopher.

HOWARD

Doubtless, but as I said it's still not my forte.

MICHAEL

(Annoyed) That's always true, isn't it? If it was someone else's forte besides hers we would have no use for her.

HOWARD

Well, it seems closer to what John or Karl do. Maybe even Russ.

MICHAEL

Ahh. Well, think about it, will you? We'll talk again.

HOWARD

Very well, Michael. Have a good day.

(HOWARD exits. MICHAEL back to his desk. Momentarily KAY enters.)

KAY

Hello Michael.

MICHAEL

(Turning) Kay. Come on in, please. And have a seat.

(She sits. He walks past her, closes the door, then sits down.)

It was a long summer. How was Wisconsin?

KAY

It was good. I read, saw old friends. Did some work for my family.

MICHAEL

Uh-huh. And how are your courses now? Better or worse than in Religion?

KAY

Oh they're very interesting.

(Silence.)

MICHAEL

It kind of came as a shock when, after hearing nothing for two months, I got your papers in August applying to transfer.

KAY

You were right. Religious studies isn't what I thought. That's one of the things I figured out this summer. Thank you for getting me the fellowship on such short notice.

MICHAEL

My pleasure. Actually, it wasn't difficult. Your application materials to Religious Studies, and your grades from last year, made it an easy sell. I was afraid my colleagues would object. But no—Russ, Tom, Howard – even John and Karl – all agreed immediately.

KAY

That's good to hear.

MICHAEL

(Doodling on a pad) In fact, when I asked them in August I got the impression they already knew about it. Before I did.

KAY

Well, after all, I had to talk to some of them about what I would be doing if I transferred in.

MICHAEL

Really? They contacted you?

KAY

It's not like I didn't know them already.

MICHAEL

I see. *(More silence: pained)* Kay, why did you suddenly disappear the week after graduation? Without a word?

KAY

I needed time to think.

MICHAEL

Without one word, Kay.

KAY

Michael, don't put it all on me. A nuclear bomb exploded here in May, and you set it off! Don't bother denying it. I didn't know if I wanted to study here anymore. I didn't know what I wanted to study. And I didn't know about us. Especially about you. I...I just wanted to get away.

MICHAEL

I noticed you're working with Howard and Karl this semester.

KAY

I had to work with somebody. It couldn't be you. Not with our history. I'd be a joke. I'm inevitably going to do continental. So this summer I talked to, uh, some people. Yes I did. They said there was something in it for me, on my own, independent of you. It's not personal, Michael. It's strictly business.

MICHAEL

I know I haven't called you, Kay. When you left I figured you wanted to be left alone. Then I hear from the Graduate School that you're switching Departments. I didn't know what the situation was. The wheels seemed greased, so I went for it. Then with you coming into Philosophy, I was afraid it would be improper for me to contact you. So I waited. I was hoping you'd drop by. *(Pause)* So, what about us, Kay? What are your feelings? You remember those, don't you? Feelings?

KAY

(Angry) I know what feelings are. Were you thinking about your feelings for me in May? Anyway it's this business – the business you suggested I join! – that doesn't know anything about feelings. So now I'm here to do as the philosophers do. This is the business we've chosen, you said. If I'm going to have a philosophy career I have to do what I have to do.

(She gets up to leave.)

MICHAEL

You didn't answer my question, Kay. About how you feel now.

KAY

(Stops; turns back) I know. I know, Michael.

MICHAEL

That's wise, I guess.

KAY

Then I guess we're both wise guys now.

(KAY exits. LIGHTS DOWN.)

ACT III: SCENE THREE

(AT RISE: Coffee shop near campus; KAY sitting at a table. JOHN and KARL enter.)

KARL

Kay! How are you?

KAY

I'm fine, Karl. Hello John.

JOHN

Hello, Kay. Are you waiting for someone?

KAY

Yes, as a matter of fact. Howard asked me to meet him here to talk about a paper.

KARL

Well, actually Kay, Howard asked us to say he couldn't make it. We were wondering, if you had a few free minutes, we three might chat.

KAY

Uh, that's fine. Please sit down.

(KARL and JOHN join KAY at her table.)

JOHN

Kay, I just wanted to tell you again how happy we are to have you in the Department. I am sure you will do very well.

KAY

Thank you, John.

JOHN

(Lowering his voice) Kay, not to put too fine a point on it, you do know what's going on. Don't you?

KAY

Maybe I do. It would depend on what it is, wouldn't it?

KARL

The Department will start searching for two new positions in a few weeks. In postmodernism. Now, we wouldn't usually bring up issues like this with a graduate student, but this is a special circumstance, Kay. I think, despite your past feelings for Michael, you can understand me when I say that he just is not the man to run those searches.

KAY

Karl, I'm a student. I'm grateful for your support. Really. Grateful to both of you. But what does this have to do with me?

JOHN

Kay, our Department is undergoing what Heidegger called a *Kehre*, a turning.

KAY

(With a smile) I thought that *Kehre* had been interrupted?

KARL

That's right, an interruption. But only an interruption. The turning is going to continue. Michael cannot stop it. When that turn is completed, you will still be here, in a Department better able to serve the needs of our students, including you.

KAY

Maybe.

KARL

We are all part of the same institution and it needs all our efforts. You could help. In fact, the future of continental philosophy in this Department probably hangs on what you do.

KAY

On what I do? How is that?

JOHN

Michael's philosophical position is untenable.

KAY

Uh, you disagree with it?

JOHN

No. I mean it's untenable. Not just shouldn't, but can't be maintained.

KAY

(Puzzled) You're saying he has to abandon his position?

KARL

But he won't. We know that, you know that.

KAY

Probably. So?

KARL

That position, with which he is identified, must cease to be.

KAY

You're saying...

KARL

He must go on, well, leave.

KAY

Leave? Go on a leave? Okay, but why are you telling me this? His leaves are his business. Or yours. But not mine, I'm a student.

JOHN

You are a special case, Kay. That's why we had Howard call you this summer. Then we saw to it that you received a fellowship instead of a teaching assistantship, so you can do your work with maximum freedom. You can even travel a bit, disappear for a few classes, no one would complain.

KARL

And what's more. Only you can get close enough to Michael.

KAY

(Stiffening) Close enough for what?

KARL

To make the argument that he ought to go on leave. To ensure that he does.

KAY

Why should he listen to me?

KARL

You underestimate yourself. We think he will.

KAY

So, you want him to go on a semester's or a year's leave? Doesn't he have a year's leave coming whenever he wants, since he got tenure last year?

JOHN

That may not be sufficient...

KAY

Not sufficient? You mean, not long enough? *(Pause. JOHN and KARL smile.)* You are talking about a very long leave, aren't you? *(Pause. They keep smiling.)* A leave of... maximum length?

KARL

You understand. *(To JOHN)* She understands. *(To KAY)* We knew you had a maturity that can't be found in other students. You'll go far in this business.

JOHN

In fact, we have a gift. Something to support your, uh, argument. Something befitting a student of your caliber.

(JOHN takes a small paper bag containing something heavy, pushes it across to KAY.)

We suggest that you present him with your argument near water.

KAY

(Looks in the bag, shocked) You must be kidding! I can't whack Michael!

(Both men laugh nervously, look around the café.)

JOHN

(Loudly) Funny. Very funny. That's one of those mob terms, right? Ha-ha. *(Quietly to KAY)* Well, we don't have to put it that way.

KARL

Kay, we think you have the talent to do whatever you put your mind to. And afterwards, after a short vacation, you'll be protected by a grateful Department. Not that anyone but us will know the details. We'll make sure that all know how indispensable you will have been, a soldier for philosophy!

JOHN

A kind of Jeanne d'Arc!

KAY

(Shaking her head) I can't whack him. I...I love him!

KARL

When you were alone and unknown, a kid from Wisconsin, he was there for you. Alright. And you helped him when he was losing Donna. But who helped whom more? I think, Kay, it was he that needed you. The question now is, what do you need and what do you want? Is he helping you, or hurting you?

JOHN

Love requires a meeting of souls, Kay. Does Michael have one? He's just a shallow pragmatist manipulator. His philosophy belongs in "Popular Mechanics". You deserve much better, someone who explores the depth of thought! I also happen to know that François, my graduate student, finds you very attractive—

KARL

Kay, this way you can have the career that you were meant to have, born to have, that we will ensure! You want to study continental philosophy, the most profound questions. You want your mind to fly! You can do that with Tom, Howard, Jean and I. You want a woman to study with? There's Ernestine. She'll come back with us once this is done. You can be part of an extended family networked across the country! Philosophy is your future, Kay. Michael's your past. Do you think he cares for you as much as for his so-called "family"? What would he do if he had to choose between you and them? In fact, hasn't he chosen already?

JOHN

I can give François a call—

KAY

(Grabs the package and points it at JOHN) Will you shut up?

JOHN

(Freezes; loud whisper) Kay, that gift is loaded.

KARL

(Smiling) You really are an exceptional young philosopher, Kay.

(KAY lowers the package and puts it in her lap.)

KAY

(To KARL) You shut up too. *(Looks down for a long time)* How many years can I get this fellowship I'm on?

JOHN

It can be renewed up to four more years. Of course you might not need four years to complete the program, not with your background and, uh, special skills.

KAY

(Staring at him) Can be renewed?

JOHN

(Hesitating) Uh, will be. Must be.

(KAY continues to stare at JOHN.)

KARL

Already has been?

(KAY rises, puts paper bag in her backpack, glaring at JOHN, then KARL, and exits.)

JOHN

You know, if she does this, she'll have something on us. Permanently.

KARL

That child? She'll be an orphan. With nowhere to go but us.

(LIGHTS DOWN.)

ACT III: SCENE FOUR

(AT RISE: Two months later; MICHAEL reading in his library carrel at a small desk. CONNIE knocks, enters; closes the door.)

MICHAEL

What's up, Con?

CONNIE

Michael, something's going on. Karl and John have been awfully smug lately. At the beginning of the semester John was a whipped dog. Wouldn't dare make eye contact. Karl was stronger, of course, but I assumed he was just talking brave. Now they're all perky. I see them with Howard a lot. They're up to something.

MICHAEL

That's the problem with tenure. They're weak but not dead. I could get them fired, but everything from last May would go public. That would embarrass the university. So we're stuck with them.

CONNIE

What do you think they're planning?

MICHAEL

I don't know. Howard's been acting a bit independent too. As if he thinks there's somewhere else to go besides me.

CONNIE

There's something else, Michael. *(Hesitant)* Whatever they're doing, it involves Kay.

MICHAEL

(*Cross*) What do you mean?

CONNIE

Howard and Karl were raving about her mid-semester papers. In public. Like they want to build her up and let everyone know she's theirs, not yours. Kay and I talked at the beginning of the semester, but now she won't say more than "Hi."

MICHAEL

What are you saying?

CONNIE

I like Kay. But she's a player now. Have you thought of how valuable she would be to them? Either as a member, or as a contractor? She could do some serious damage.

MICHAEL

Connie...

CONNIE

She's strong, Michael.

MICHAEL

I know...

CONNIE

That means she's dangerous. We have a family to protect here. It's my tenure year, remember?

MICHAEL

I know, Con. I know.

CONNIE

Jennifer belongs to you now, and she'll need support. So does Ernestine. Sonny will be back soon. We've got graduate students. We're a family.

MICHAEL

I know that. What do you want me to do?

CONNIE

You're the Don. Should I have to tell you?

MICHAEL

(*Stiffens*) No. I can't. Not Kay.

CONNIE

Michael, you can't let anything personal get in the way of family business. Too many people depend on it.

MICHAEL

(Shaking his head) You're right. If she rolls their way she tips the whole game. *(Takes his head in his hands)* I'm all mixed up. I love her Connie, but I don't know what to do about her. Do I clip her, do I marry her...?

CONNIE

Michael, look at me. You have a family. We are the only people who will ever understand you. Your blood. Women and marriages come and go. But you're a philosopher forever, and you'll never have another philosophical family. Isn't that true? *(MICHAEL nods.)* So Michael, where is your loyalty?

MICHAEL

(Sighing) Where it has to be.

CONNIE

I'm just reminding you what you already know. Is there something you want from me?

MICHAEL

No. This is business, but it's my personal business. Just tell Russ to come see me.

(CONNIE pats him on the shoulder and exits.)

MICHAEL

Every time I try to get out, they pull me back in.

(LIGHTS DOWN.)

ACT III: SCENE FIVE

(AT RISE: MICHAEL stepping off a dock into a rowboat with a fishing rod. He hears something, looks offstage.)

MICHAEL

Kay!

(KAY enters.)

KAY

Michael.

MICHAEL

(Standing in boat) Kay, I'm happy to see you. How did you know I'd be here?

KAY

(Walks up the dock) I have my sources.

MICHAEL

I'm sure you do. How are you, Kay?

KAY

I'm working out my salvation with diligence, as the Buddha counseled. Do you mind that I came by?

MICHAEL

Of course not. We can drive into town and go to the café, if you like.

KAY

Oh no, I wouldn't want to come between philosopher and fish. Why don't we talk on the boat?

MICHAEL

You'll have to endure my boat's metal benches.

KAY

No problem. I'm young, remember?

MICHAEL

Remember? It's seared into my neurons.

(MICHAEL helps her into the boat. He sits near bow, she stern.)

It's going to be warm out there in the sun on the metal. You might want to take your jacket off.

KAY

I'm fine.

MICHAEL

Kay, it'll be scorching.

KAY

Michael, I'm fine.

MICHAEL

Okay, okay.

(MICHAEL starts rowing out.)

KAY

This place is lovely.

MICHAEL

I started renting in June. I think someday I can get the owners to sell. How have your first two months of philosophy been?

KAY

Not as difficult as I thought they would be. Things are going pretty well actually. How about you?

MICHAEL

Oh, taking care of business.

KAY

Michael, was it all worth it?

MICHAEL

You mean last May? Of course. Connie's back, Ernestine's with us. Sonny will be out in a year. The Department is in one piece. The Don's legacy will survive, at least for now.

KAY

What about the unfinished business, the pomo appointments?

MICHAEL

I should be able to hold the line so that they'll be respectable people who can work well with others, instead of John's bozos.

KAY

You mean, junior people the Chair can manage? (*Michael smiles*) But you don't have the votes. You know it, they know it.

MICHAEL

I can still stonewall them, if they're not too well-organized.

KAY

Michael, don't you know they're desperate? You put their backs up against the wall. Now they're ready to do anything.

MICHAEL

Should I be scared? You think I should resign the chair?

KAY

With the old lady gone, won't you have to? They have the numbers. Let them have their stupid Department. You've got tenure.

MICHAEL

Kay, just why did you come here today?

(*MICHAEL puts on a tool belt, stands up, picks up his rod and casts.*)

KAY

(Sees something dangling from the belt) What's that?

MICHAEL

My fishing knife. *(Pulls it out; shows her its long blade)* Can't fish without a knife. Has a heavy handle too.

KAY

What, uh, do you do with that?

MICHAEL

Gut them and clean them. I can even throw it... *(Holds it up and flicks his wrist)* ...if one's trying to get away.

KAY

Fish, you mean?

MICHAEL

(Smiling, puts knife in belt) So, Kay, again, just why did you come here today? Are you trying to get me to change my mind, or trying to save me from myself? Or did you come here to—

KAY

Let's say it's business but not strictly business.

MICHAEL

Well, I'm glad to hear that.

KAY

So maybe you should go on leave. You're due a sabbatical.

MICHAEL

Yeah. But do you mean, I should take a long one?

KAY

That's not what I want. Maybe just a little tiny one. Take your year. Then when you come back, and you're not Chair, then...

MICHAEL

What?

KAY

Things would be different. Maybe better.

MICHAEL

Better for whom? You mean, better for us?

KAY

Yes, among other things. Better for us.

MICHAEL

(Turning his back to her) Well, of all the tempting offers. But I can't do it, Kay.

KAY

Why not?

MICHAEL

Donna retired so I could be Chair. Connie has to get tenure, Ernestine too, and Sonny reinstated. Then there are their grad students. I can't give up my family. You understand, don't you?

KAY

(Sighing) Yes, unfortunately I do, Michael. *(Suddenly smiling)* But not fishing. I do not understand fishing. That remains a mystery to me.

MICHAEL

You know my secret for catching fish? I incant a passage from Dewey. A kind of nature prayer.

KAY

Because Dewey was a naturalist the fish are going to jump into the boat at the sound of his words? I'd like to see this.

MICHAEL

Okay, let me just cast in the right spot.

(MICHAEL recasts, his back to her, in silence.)

Kay, did you come here to make me an argument I can't refute?

KAY

Michael, don't you remember? My arguments you can never refute.

(KAY unbuttons her jacket. MICHAEL puts the rod in his left hand, rests his right on his knife. A long moment passes. KAY reaches inside her jacket.)

MICHAEL

Of course I remember. It's my colleagues' memories that aren't so good. Yours too, I think.

(KAY's hand pauses inside her jacket.)

KAY

What do you mean?

MICHAEL

You've probably forgotten who I made Associate Chair last week.

KAY

Associate Chair?

MICHAEL

Yeah.

KAY

Uh...

MICHAEL

I imagine most people never really noticed the email. After all, an Associate Chair doesn't do much. But he takes over if I can't continue as Chair. John and Karl probably forgot all about it.

KAY

(Annoyed) So who is it?

MICHAEL

Our esteemed senior analyst.

KAY

Russ?

MICHAEL

He would do very well as Chair, if need be. Our interim President, you know, is a mathematician. Russ knows him. The President has read some of Russ's papers on mathematical logic. Has great respect for him. So Russ could push Connie's tenure through and he'd welcome Sonny back. The only problem with Russ is he's awfully suspicious of continental philosophy.

KAY

(Loudly but to herself) Russ!

MICHAEL

And postmodernism. To him it's an attack on reason. A crime, really. If Russ were Chair, we'd never hire the postmodernists.

KAY

(Shaking her head, takes empty hand out of her jacket) Well, I guess you've refuted my argument.

MICHAEL

(Turning around) Arguments? Not between us, Kay. Let's get comfortable.

(MICHAEL props his pole up on the bow, line in water, and takes off his tool belt. KAY takes off her jacket.)

MICHAEL, *Continued*

Kay, look behind you. See that cord. Pull it up.

(KAY looks behind, reaches down and pulls up a net bag with bottles of beer.)

KAY

Is that your cache of the day?

(KAY passes MICHAEL a bottle and takes one herself. He pulls opener from his pocket, opens his, then tosses it to her. She opens her bottle and they drink.)

MICHAEL

You know, I hadn't realized until now how much I'd missed them.

KAY

Beer?

MICHAEL

Your puns. *(Each takes a sip.)* Kay, John and Karl are finished. Dead but too dumb to lie down. Howard supports them out of habit. There's no power there.

KAY

You just said you don't have much either.

MICHAEL

But I don't need much, just enough to block them. As long as I stand between the anti-continental analysts and the anti-analytic continentals, and neither has enough muscle to take over, my family's safe and so is a pluralist Department. Just keep triangulating the sons of bitches.

KAY

Your point being?

MICHAEL

You can do Heidegger with Howard, Connie, or Ernestine. You can do philosophy of religion with Tom. Kay, you're a natural born pluralist. You don't have to study with me to join the family.

KAY

So, you're saying I should kiss your hand and make up?

MICHAEL

Actually, I was thinking more about your hand. And whether you'd give it to me. Permanently.

KAY

What?

MICHAEL

Kay—

KAY

Michael, are you asking me to marry you?

MICHAEL

I'm trying to.

KAY

That's crazy!

MICHAEL

I thought you liked crazy.

KAY

Well, uh, sometimes.

MICHAEL

So?

KAY

Don't you see, Michael, I can't possibly marry you! I'd be a joke, not just the Chairman's girlfriend, the Chairman's wife!

MICHAEL

Having an affair with the Chairman makes you suspect. Actually being married is different.

KAY

But the point is, when I look for a job, they'll be saying, "Her husband gave her a PhD"!

MICHAEL

Kay, think about it. Connie's getting tenure. Sonny will be back. Add Ernestine. Russ will side with us. Tom and Howard will go along. Next year we'll have to hire an analyst to replace Rudy. As for the two pomo lines, I've been talking to the President about making one of them somebody analysts or pragmatists would accept. So they'll balance each other. Sonny can succeed me as Chair. By your dissertation time I won't be any part of your pedigree.

KAY

But I'll need good letters from people, some of them angry at you. And so they'll be angry at me.

MICHAEL

We'll have the muscle to make them re-evaluate.

KAY

But with marriage comes—

MICHAEL

Plenty of time for children after you're done with your degree and find a job. And tenured fathers have lots of time to take care of the kids while their wives are building a career.

KAY

This is awfully sudden.

MICHAEL

Are you saying you don't love me anymore, Kay?

KAY

Michael...

(KAY looks away.)

MICHAEL

Are you?

KAY

(Turning back) No. You know I'm not.

MICHAEL

Everyone would know you're connected. No one could mess with you. *(Pauses; takes her hand)* But what really matters, Kay, is that I've loved you from the beginning. That I care for you. That we have a life together.

KAY

(Looking over the water) Michael...

MICHAEL

Kay, will you marry me?

KAY

Michael, I... What about my fellowship?

MICHAEL

Fuggedaboutit! Guaranteed. And after me, Sonny will renew it. It's done.

KAY

(Looks into distance, then back) Okay, Michael. I'll do it. I'll marry you.

(They lean forward and kiss. MICHAEL sits back in the bow. KAY moves to the stern to get beer. Then she turns around, standing, to face him.)

KAY

Just one more thing I want to know. Is this personal or is it business? You're not marrying me because you want to keep me on your side, are you? To make sure I don't try to make any arguments you can't refute? To secure your family?

MICHAEL

I've loved you from the beginning, Kay. Never stopped.

KAY

I know, I know. And I love you. But there is love without marriage, Michael. Why do you want to marry me? I mean, is it because you want a life partner or a business partner?

MICHAEL

Kay, you know—

KAY

I want to hear this once and for all from your own mouth. Tell me. Do you want to marry me for the sake of business?

MICHAEL

Either way you look at it, Kay, it's family.

KAY

(Sighing) Either way, huh? I suppose you're right. *(Puts the beer down)* But it's getting chilly after all.

(KAY puts her jacket on and sits. Michael's rod bends.)

Michael, look!

MICHAEL

(Turns, stands up with rod, starts reeling) This is a big one. I hope I can land it. And I didn't get a chance to say my Deweyan prayer.

KAY

(Reaching inside jacket) A Deweyan prayer might not do it, Michael. This time you might need a real one.

This is Not the End of the Play
Ending Intentionally Omitted for Security Purposes