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Remediating Ripper

Re-me-di-ate: v. To improve or correct faults or deficiencies.

A Comedy in Two Acts by

Randy Hugh Wall

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Remediating Ripper

by Randy Hugh Wall

CHARACTERS

JACK T. RIPPER; *mid 30's, English professor at a small college*

EDWIN; *English department chair, early 30's, Jack's boss*

KEISHA; *blind female, early 20's, angry African-American student*

RAY; *20 year-old male student, slacker, still living at home*

JOPLIN; *17 year-old female student, home schooled, cute, Hippie appearance*

RUTH; *female student, mid 20's, former exotic dancer*

SETTING

A small community college. All scenes are set in the cluttered, eclectic office of English professor Jack Ripper.

TIME

Summer; The present. The play takes place over the course of six weeks.

SCENES

ACT 1

Scene 1.....Jack's office.....Friday, a week before classes

Scene 2.....Jack's office.....The next Friday afternoon

Scene 3.....Jack's office.....The following Friday afternoon

Scene 4.....Jack's office.....The following Monday morning

Scene 5.....Jack's office.....That afternoon

Scene 6.....Jack's office.....The following Friday afternoon

ACT 2

Scene 1.....Jack's office.....Friday, two weeks later

Scene 2.....Jack's office.....Friday, the following week

Scene 3.....Jack's office.....Friday, last day of class

Remediating Ripper

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ACT I; SCENE ONE

(AT RISE: The scene opens on the office of JACK THEODORE RIPPER, professor of English at a small college. His office has a slightly schizophrenic atmosphere —filled with hundreds of novels, plays, and texts. A few posters for literary journals and conferences are tacked to the walls. But there are also dozens of toys and curiosities scattered across the desk and bookcases: a wind-up duck riding a bicycle, battery-operated statues of Rodney Dangerfield and Louis Armstrong, a Mr. Potato Head massager, a neon clock that says “Ripper’s Bar and Grill,” and several dozen PEZ dispensers scattered around. Except for the PEZ dispensers, the exact props don't really matter here; we're going after eclectic. It's a small office which, in addition to an L-shaped desk and bookcases, is filled with a recliner beside the desk, a sofa against one wall, and a short, uncomfortable looking stool for a guest chair. The sofa is littered with books and papers, leaving no room for anyone to sit.)

(JACK is dozing in the recliner when the phone rings. HE stretches across the desk to answer it by pushing the speaker phone button.)

JACK

(Loudly) You've reached the office of Jack T. Ripper. I'm sorry I'm not in the office, but we're between semesters. If you need advice regarding summer registration or the English department, call Edwin Penny, Department Chair, at extension 4624. Thanks for calling Canyon Lakes College and good-bye.

(JACK flops back into his chair. HE kicks off one shoe, takes the Mr. Potato Head massager off the corner of the desk and begins to use it on his foot when a head sticks in through the doorway.)

EDWIN

I'm glad I caught you, Jack. I heard you weren't in.

JACK

Just prepping for class, Edwin. And who said I'm not in?

EDWIN

Said you. At least look at caller ID before you go into your answer phone impersonation.

JACK

So what's the reason for this unwanted pleasure? You didn't actually come by to say you finished your dissertation? What's it been – ten years? Is there no statute of limitations on crimes against the English language?

EDWIN

It's been two years. Serious work takes time. We can't all write a semi-pornographic best seller to get a Ph.D. in creative writing ... like you.

JACK

Well, thanks for stopping by.

(JACK leans back and covers his face with a magazine.)

EDWIN

Jack, I need a favor.

JACK

No.

EDWIN

I'm not asking. As Department Chair, I'm requesting.

JACK

(Tosses the magazine on the desk) Same here. As a tenured professor and the only Ph.D., semi-pornographic or otherwise in this room, I'm asking you to go away ... and requesting you let me get back to class prep or massaging my foot, whichever strikes my fancy.

EDWIN

(Points to the stool) May I take a seat?

JACK

Sure, take it and leave. It's uncomfortable, but I'll need it back when classes start. It keeps student visits mercifully short.

EDWIN

(Ignores him and sits) I'll make this simple. I need you to work with some Quad Zero students.

JACK

What the hell are Quad Zero students? And no matter what they are, the answer is "no."

EDWIN

They're new students who didn't pass the writing entrance exam, so they can't take other courses without being enrolled in developmental English.

JACK

What's that got to do with me? I don't do remedial.

EDWIN

It's been called "developmental" for the last ten years, not remedial, but hear me out, Jack. As Department Chair it's my job to make teaching assignments whether you like it or not.

JACK

What about Judith? Isn't she our remedi ... developmental specialist? I'd never intrude in her area of expertise.

EDWIN

Judith's taking the summer off to stay home with the babies.

JACK

Judith had a baby? I thought she was just retaining water ... a couple hundred gallons more than usual.

EDWIN

She had babies ... twins.

JACK

(Hopefully) Siamese?

EDWIN

Look, we have four students that need developmental English. Four isn't enough to make as a class, so when that happens we assign them to English 0000, Quad Zero, where they're tutored by a developmental English teacher ... normally Judith.

JACK

Only Normally Judith had Siamese triplets.

EDWIN

Twins.

JACK

Triple zeros, double zeros – what's the difference? Zeros are zeros. Are you sure she's not making this up to get the summer off? Have you actually *seen* these remedial creatures she allegedly spawned?

EDWIN

I visited Judith at the hospital. Besides, she e-mailed pictures to everyone.

JACK

It looked like Spam...as in the lunch meat.

EDWIN

I *need* you to work with these students, Jack. It's only for six weeks.

JACK

Six weeks, six days, six hours, six minutes, six seconds ... NO.

EDWIN

That's your final answer?

JACK

Let's see. I said "no" when you walked in, I'm saying "no" now, and if you'll head for the door, I'll give you my final answer then.

EDWIN

It's your call. But the dean's asking me to recommend a faculty liaison for the college's ten-year internal evaluation. It's the dean's baby so to speak, and that lucky faculty member will belong to him for the next year-and-a-half or so. They become like Siamese twins from what I hear ... and you know what name comes to mind? (*Long pause*) Jack...Theodore...Ripper...P...H...D.

JACK

Six weeks? Four students? Do I get paid for this privilege?

EDWIN

Four hundred per student.

JACK

Sixteen hundred to babysit? Judith has quite a racket going.

EDWIN

The college will pay you sixteen hundred to improve the students' writing skills and help them pass the placement test.

JACK

And if they don't?

EDWIN

You're off the hook either way. They take Judith's developmental class in the fall if they fail the retest ... and you're their hero if they pass.

JACK

How many times do I have to meet these four zeros?

EDWIN

Normally, Judith meets summer Quad Zero students once a week, for two hours, in the conference room that adjoins my office.

JACK

That's fine for Normally Judith. But how about once every other week, for thirty minutes, in the bar down the road from my apartment for me?

EDWIN

How about once every week, for an hour and a half, in a classroom?

JACK

How about once a week, for seventy-five minutes, here in my office?

EDWIN

Deal.

JACK

Only I'll need chairs brought in. You know I don't let people sit on my couch or recliner.

EDWIN

And exactly why is that?

JACK

Backsides.

EDWIN

Backsides?

JACK

Like they say in your boring 17th Century Lit class – "arses." I actually *use* that couch and this chair. And I have no intention of letting anyone – be they remedial, gifted, or still working on a doctorate after seven years – lay his or her arse where I rest my head.

EDWIN

Suit yourself. I'll have maintenance drop off chairs, but I don't know where you'll put them. The Testing Center has a list of the students' names and numbers. Get with the students to set up a time. It's good to see you on board with this, Jack. Team player and all. *(Exits)*

JACK

What a pain in my team-playing arse.

(LIGHTS DOWN ON SCENE.)

ACT I; SCENE TWO

(AT RISE: It's almost time for the first meeting of JACK'S Quad Zero class. JACK has covered his sofa and recliner using heavy-duty plastic sheeting and duct tape. HE's finished the job by piling books and papers across both pieces of furniture. Four metal folding chairs are crammed into the remaining space. JACK is talking on the phone and misting a pathetic looking potted ivy.)

JACK

I know this is my weekend, Sarah. I'm not going to be that late, a couple hours ... tops. *(Listens)* I'm sorry if it delays *your* romantic weekend to wherever the hell you and Phil are going. *(Listens)* Phil ... Bill ... who cares about his name other than Phil or Bill?

(Jack listens while he opens a desk drawer, pulls out a bottle of whiskey, slops some into a coffee mug, and takes a sip.)

No, I'm *not* at a bar drinking ... I'm at the office ... *(Softly, away from the phone)* ...drinking. *(Full voice again)* I told you, they're forcing me to tutor four students this summer and today's my first of six lucky days ... no I'm not lying. Ask Edwin the Weasel. It's all his fault. How about cutting me some slack and putting Alex on the phone if it's not too much trouble?

(JACK has another sip from the mug and then taps impatiently on the desk with a pen.)

JACK

Hey, baby. How you doing? ... I'm still at the office, but I'll be there soon ... I promise. We're going to have a great time this weekend. *(Listens)* No, I'm not at a bar ... and tell your mother she can kiss my ... precious daughter a few extra times for me before I get there.

(There's a knock at the door behind JACK. A young black girl in sunglasses appears in the doorway. JACK doesn't turn around.)

Hang on. Someone's at the door. *(Still with his back turned)* Yes?

KEISHA

(With attitude, in a low, slurred voice) Ripper's room?

JACK

(Calls out) End of the hall. Last door on the left.

KEISHA

Thanks.

JACK

I'm back. Just somebody looking for the restroom. Anyway, I'll see you soon. Bye, baby.

(JACK downs the rest of his whiskey and turns to face the door. There's a knock and two students enter: RAY, a male about 20 and JOPLIN, a young girl of 17 with purple streaks in her hair, a camouflage t-shirt, and no shoes.)

RAY

I'm Ray. Is this where the class meets?

JACK

The class for college students who couldn't write an essay at a ninth-grade level?

RAY

Yes, sir. That's the class.

JACK

Take a seat ... in a chair. *(To the young girl)* And you are?

JOPLIN

Joplin.

(There's another knock. EDWIN is holding the arm of the black girl. For the first time, we see she's holding a white cane.)

EDWIN

(Furious) Jack, I'd like you to meet one of your students, Keisha Turner. She was mistakenly sent to the restroom at the end of the hall.

JACK

I believe Keisha and I met on the phone last week. *(To KEISHA)* But you didn't tell me you were blind.

KEISHA

I'm not blind on the damn phone. I see every bit as good as you do there.

JACK

(Walks around his desk and over to KEISHA.) So have a seat.

(KEISHA reaches out with her cane, hits a couple chairs, then the couch.)

KEISHA

Is there any place to walk in here?

EDWIN

The conference room is still open.

JACK

Nonsense. And lose this intimacy?

(Jack takes KEISHA'S arm and steers her to a chair.)

Sit, Keisha.

KEISHA

Don't I get no reward?

JACK

A what?

KEISHA

You know ... a treat ... a cookie for the blind girl that sit on command.

JACK

So stand.

(Keisha remains standing.)

EDWIN

This certainly seems to be going well. I'll leave you to your students.

(EDWIN exits. JACK returns to his desk and sits. KEISHA continues to stand. JACK gives her a long look and starts to say something but chooses to ignore her. Another student, RUTH, taps lightly on the door. She's a knock-out ... tall, well-proportioned, with a natural grace about her.)

RUTH

Hi. Am I late?

JACK

I wouldn't think that's possible. *(Glances at a sheet of paper on his desk)* You must be Ruth.

RUTH

Guilty.

JACK

Grab the chair beside Keisha ... but only if it pleases you. Keisha seems to have a case of lock knee. Seldom terminal, but a real pain to people sitting behind her at the movies I'm sure. We should pray it doesn't last long in her case ... and now, since everybody's here, I suppose we can get going.

(JACK pauses, clearly not sure where this is going since he's planned nothing. EVERYONE stares at him, waiting.)

Okay. Maybe we should begin with each of you introducing yourself, telling us a little bit about your life, and what you hope to get from this class. Who wants to begin?

(JACK waits, and waits, but there's nothing but silence.)

JACK

Anyone? *(Pause)* Anyone? *(Pause)* Bueller? *(More silence)*

KEISHA

Why don't *you* go first, Doctor Professor? Maybe *you* could introduce *yourself* and tell us a little bit about *your* life and what *you* hope to get from this class.

JACK

Fair enough. I'm Jack Theodore Ripper. I go by "Jack" or "Ripper." My name's the one thing I got from my father before he took off after my mother died during delivery. It was his parting gift ... not a boy named "Sue" but a boy named Jack Theodore Ripper. I'm divorced, two years now. I have a daughter, Alex. She's nine and the best thing I got out of the marriage. I also have a diabetic, twelve-year-old Yellow Lab named Curly who should probably be put down, but that's not going to happen anytime soon if I can help it. Curly's the best thing I got out of the divorce. I've taught here for seven years, but never remedial students. And what do I want out of this class? I don't know. I didn't want to teach this class any more than you wanted to take it, but I'm here. I'll do what I can to teach you to write. It's the one thing I actually know how to do...write. At least I used to be able to. But there's been a lot of whiskey under the bridge since then.

(There's stunned silence.)

Who's next? Ruth? How about you?

RUTH

Do I need to stand?

JACK

Why don't we let Keisha decide? Keisha, should Ruth sit or stand? Are you getting lonely up there?

KEISHA

She can do what she want ... stand, sit, lay on the floor for all I care.

JACK

Big decision, Ruth. What'll it be?

RUTH

I'll sit. I've spent plenty of time on my feet ... and maybe that's why I'm here. I'm so tired of dancing. My mother owns a dance studio. She just knew I'd dance for the New York City Ballet someday. While other kids played after school, I went to her studio. Ballet, tap, jazz. Five afternoons *and* nights a week, Saturday and Sunday ... for sixteen years. By the time I was four, I already hated it. I'd cry, pretend to be sick, but it didn't matter. The show went on ... and I was her show dog. I moved out three days after I graduated high school. A week later, I took my first paying job as a dancer. I wanted my mother to see her training hadn't gone to waste. I even sent her an invitation to my professional debut, but she didn't come. That's the last time we talked, and I've been dancing ever since. The money's been good, but it's time. I've saved enough to pay for college, so I guess I'm now semi-retired.

JACK

You gave up a professional career to come to Canyon Lakes College? What ballet company were you with? Was it in New York?

RUTH

I never quite made it to New York. In fact, I never made it out of this town. And it wasn't ballet. I branched into a few new dance areas ... mostly pole, table, and lap ... at the Shangri-La Gentlemen's Paradise.

RAY

You're a stripper?

RUTH

We prefer the term "exotic dancer."

RAY

I never knew any exotic dancer before. I think I'm going to like this class.

RUTH

Sorry ... I intend to wear clothes here ... but if you're good, I might let you tuck a dollar bill in my backpack.

RAY

Man, that'd be great. Just let me know when.

JACK

Ruth, why don't you tell us what you want to get from this class.

RUTH

Mostly, I hope this class is a fresh start. I'd like to be judged on this ... (*Taps her head*) rather than these ... (*Cups her breasts*) for a change. I'd like to get a degree in psychology and maybe eventually a doctorate. I have a friend, a customer at the club actually, who

RUTH, *Continued*

inspired me to try college. And I'd also like to see my mother again, just to talk. But somehow I think it all starts here.

JOPLIN

Wow. That's one great story. I've got no great stories.

JACK

Everyone has great stories, Joplin. But thanks, Ruth. Who's next?

RAY

Can I go?

JACK

Take it away.

RAY

Now I don't know what to say. I never do. Maybe you could ask me questions and I could answer them.

JACK

I don't see why not. Questions anyone?

KEISHA

So Ray, tell us what *you* gonna get from this joke of a class.

RAY

You are so ... intense. I don't understand why you keep standing. There's gotta be a good reason. And I don't exactly get your question. What do I want to get out of this class? Just that. I want to get out of this class. Isn't that what everyone wants in school? And why *do* you keep standing? Why don't you sit down like the rest of us?

KEISHA

Because I'm not like the rest of you ... thank God.

RAY

Well, I know there's some reason, and probably everybody here knows it but me.

KEISHA

I'm mad. That's why I'm standing.

RAY

I sure wouldn't have guessed that. I *never* stand when I'm mad. In fact, standing for a long time makes me mad. That's why I dropped out of choir in 7th grade. What are you mad about?

KEISHA

Our professor.

RAY

What'd he do?

KEISHA

He think he so funny ... send the blind girl to the outhouse instead of telling her this his damn office. Wonder how funny he think it be if he the one talking to a toilet.

JACK

That's what this is about? Do you even remember what you said when you came to my office?

KEISHA

I didn't say no "Where's the restroom?"

JACK

So what did you say?

KEISHA

I don't know ... "Ripper's room?" maybe.

JACK

No wonder you're in this class. Did you ever hear of a verb? Given that, your sentence could actually have become "Is this Mr. Ripper's room?" And to that, I would have said "yes." But "Ripper's room" can be, and was, heard as "restroom," and the answer to that is "end of the hall, last door on the left." You think I sent you to the toilet as some kind of blind person joke? I *assumed* you needed to use the facility. Apparently I was wrong.

KEISHA

That's for sure. And what's with this woe-is-me act you been laying on us?

(She lowers her voice to imitate JACK.)

Poor Jack the Ripper. My name sucks. My life sucks. My mama died. My daddy hauled ass. My wife divorced me. My dog's dying, I got a drinking problem, and I can't write no more. And we pay for this?

JOPLIN

Stop it! Just stop it. If this is what school is like, I'm glad I never went.

(There's total silence.)

JACK

I apologize. To you, Joplin ... to Keisha ... to all of you. And no, this isn't what college is like. So Ray, let's get back to you. Tell us a little about yourself.

RAY

I don't think so. You people get mean really fast.

JACK
Simple question, Ray. What do you want to be?

RAY
An engineer.

JACK
So you like math?

RAY
I hate math.

JACK
But engineering *is* math.

RAY
You're saying I need $A - 27 = B + A - 12$ to be an engineer?

JACK
Exactly.

RAY
To drive a train?

JACK
A train? A railroad engineer?

RAY
You bet. I love trains. Have you ever noticed that where one car hooks to the next looks like the jaws of a snapping turtle? I'm going to major in engineering and someday drive a train.

JACK
Have you met with an advisor to work out a degree plan?

RAY
No.

JACK
Maybe I'd better set you up an appointment. (*A pause*) But for now let's move on. Joplin? You said you're glad you never went to school. Yet you're about to start college?

JOPLIN
I don't much talk about my life. People look at me like I'm the home school freak.

JACK
Lots of students are home schooled. That doesn't make you a freak. But you also don't have to talk about anything that makes you uncomfortable.

JOPLIN

No, I'd better get okay with it. Only for most people, home- schooled student has something to do with the words "student" and "schooled." But I was sure no student, and I sure wasn't schooled at home.

RUTH

Isn't that against the law?

JOPLIN

Yes and no. Mostly no. In this state, parents don't have to do much to home school. Agree to teach reading, spelling, math, and citizenship ... but nobody ever checks. There's no minimum number of days or amount of time a day. So my parents pretty much didn't do anything.

JACK

How did you learn to read and write?

JOPLIN

They at least taught me that much. And for a few years, there was a little boy about my age next door. I loved to go over there and his mother would read us stories. But mostly I taught myself.

RAY

They left you by yourself when you were little?

JOPLIN

I didn't stay home by myself until I was eight. That's also when we got a computer and everything changed. I've mostly learned what I know off the Internet — algebra, biology, history, literature ... porn. Now *that's* when I really started to get home schooled. Talk about an eye-opener. When I turned 17, I bought a home-school diploma off the Internet and here I am.

KEISHA

Your parents belong in jail, with mine.

JOPLIN

My parents really aren't that bad. Just different. They think school turns kids into fascists. They may be the last hippies on the planet. My dad believes that anything I need to know, the earth will tell me.

RAY

I guess the earth didn't tell either of us enough to pass the placement test.

JOPLIN

(Laughs) I guess not. But he's right in a way. The earth won't teach you algebra or Shakespeare, but it does have a lot of to say.

JACK

How do your parents make a living?

JOPLIN

My dad's a Jack-of-all-trades. He trims trees, hauls junk, patches roofs, fixes stuff. He's good with his hands. My mother sells T-shirts, bongos, sandals made from old tires ... '60s crap at the flea markets. You've probably seen her. What's funny is they were both born in the '70s. The only thing they know about the '60s is what they've read.

JACK

So what interests you?

JOPLIN

Everything. I've got a lot of catching up to do and I need to start now.

RUTH

What do your parents think about you going to college?

JOPLIN

Are you kidding? I haven't told them.

JACK

Well, I'm glad you decided to come here, Joplin.

(There's a general murmuring of agreement from the others.)

Okay, before we hear from Keisha, can you do me a favor, Ray? Would you close the door and turn out the lights?

RAY

But it'll be dark.

JACK

Exactly.

RAY

You sure about this?

JACK

Absolutely. At least for a few minutes, we'll all be in the same boat with Keisha.

(RAY walks the few feet over to the door. He closes it and then flips off the lights. JACK was right; it's total darkness. There's a small crash.)

RAY

Darn.

(Another crash)

JACK

You okay?

RAY

From the shins up.

(There's a little more noise.)

JACK

Okay, your turn, Keisha.

(A small spotlight is placed on KEISHA. The others are dimly visible.)

KEISHA

Well, I haven't always been blind. I used to see, so I know what I'm missing.

JACK

(Softly) Were you in an accident?

KEISHA

(Speaking extremely fast) It wasn't no accident, that's for sure. I went blind for a lotta reasons. My daddy was usually nowhere to be found and my mama held a bottle better than she held a job. But I really went blind cause I was stupid. I thought it was just gonna get better ... like a lousy cold. But mostly I went blind cause I was ashamed to tell anybody I was going blind.

(There's a long pause as Keisha tries to catch her breath from the explosive outburst.)

RUTH

So what happened?

KEISHA

Sometimes I wish it *had* been an accident and I just woke up this way. It started when I was 14, in 8th grade. I needed to turn my head more and more to see what was on the side. I didn't think much about it since nothing hurt. Then I started having trouble seeing the board. I sat closer and closer to the front. By the end of 9th grade I couldn't hardly read a book.

RAY

Why didn't you tell somebody?

KEISHA

Wasn't nobody to tell. And even if I did, there wasn't money to get whatever was wrong fixed. I dropped out on my 16th birthday. Happy birthday to me. I was failing everything anyway, and I couldn't barely see enough to get to class.

RUTH

What did you do then?

KEISHA

Stayed home. Mama was always too wasted to notice a damn thing anyway. Before long, I could barely make out things. Then one day we get evicted. We're taking stuff to the car and I trip. Break my arm. Didn't take the ER long to figure out on top of a broke arm, I was pretty much blind. Only I'd waited too long, wasn't much they could do. A year later, there wasn't nothing but shadows and shapes.

(KEISHA laughs sarcastically.)

Course, blind ain't all bad. The State got into it, set me up with rehab, bought me some blind people equipment. And there's a little money coming in cause I'm *officially* disabled. Last year I finally pulled my sorry self up off the couch and got my G.E.D. Now I'm here and that's about all the pissed-off blind girl's got to say. Except ... I'm sorry ... everybody. Some days it don't take much to get me mad. Today was one of those days ... Ray, you can turn the lights back on if you want.

(There's more stumbling around in the dark by RAY. Suddenly, the lights burst on. Everyone is seated — including KEISHA.)

JACK

Well, I'd say we know each other a little better now, that's for sure. *(Laughs)* Same time, same place, next week, folks. I want each of you to write a paper between now and then. The topic is "The Best Day of My Life."

(LIGHTS DOWN ON SCENE.)

ACT I; SCENE THREE

(AT RISE: It's 20 minutes before the weekly Quad Zero class begins. The scene opens on JACK at his desk, misting his sickly ivy. HE glances at his watch.)

JACK

5:40 in New York. I'm late.

(JACK opens a drawer and pours whiskey into his coffee mug, takes a sip, and resumes misting. JOPLIN pokes her head in the doorway. SHE's wearing cut-off shorts and a tie-dye tank top. No shoes.)

JOPLIN

Dr. Ripper?

JACK

Hi, Joplin, come in. And call me Jack ... or Ripper.

JOPLIN

I like Ripper ... I just wanted to say thanks.

JACK

For what?

JOPLIN

For not looking at me like I was the sideshow act of the week.

JACK

You're not. You're a smart, beautiful young woman.

JOPLIN

You think so?

JACK

I mean it. Clearly you have a lot of desire and potential.

JOPLIN

But to do what?

JACK

Whatever you want. You're the one who says she wants to learn "everything."

JOPLIN

Can I ask you a question? Do you believe in free love?

JACK

(Taken aback) Well ... not really. I'm guess I'm a little old-fashioned, a one-woman man.

JOPLIN

My parents sure believe in it. My mother says the only thing better than chocolate is sex, but unlike chocolate you can have all the sex you want. Is that true?

JACK

I wouldn't know. I don't have much of either.

JOPLIN

When I was 13, my parents told me I should go on the pill since I was old enough to start enjoying sex.

JACK

Surely you're joking.

JOPLIN

Surely I'm not.

JACK

So ... so did you?

JOPLIN

First, there weren't a lot of cute boys in my home school classes. Come to think of it, there weren't any classes. And second, since my parents thought it was a good idea, I assumed it wasn't. So, no.

JACK

Thank goodness.

JOPLIN

But I'm not 13 now. I'm 17 ... and a half. Do you think it's time I had sex? I think it's time I had sex. How do you feel about virgins?

JACK

I'm not sure this is something we should talk about.

JOPLIN

Good. That means you're a doer, not a talker. I need a doer.

JACK

At the moment I don't want to be either.

JOPLIN

Of course not at the moment. That would be crazy. We have class in a few minutes. So you're saying "later."

JACK

That's absolutely *not* what I'm saying.

JOPLIN

Do you have a girlfriend?

JACK

That's none of your business.

JOPLIN

So ... no. Did you cheat on your wife? Is that why you're divorced? Have you ever watched that show *Cheaters*? I don't want to mess around with anybody married. You weren't ever on that show were you?

JACK

Look, why don't we talk about you getting an education?

JOPLIN

Where have you been? That's what I *am* talking about. In some cultures there's a village elder, sort of like a witch doctor gigolo, who teaches all the young girls the ins and outs of lovemaking. No pun intended. I read about it on the Internet. How old are you, anyway?

JACK

Old enough to be your father. I'm 34 ... and a half.

JOPLIN

That's the perfect old age to be my village elder love teacher. I'm not asking you to marry me. Just a little extra tutoring. What's really wrong with that?

(JOPLIN extends one leg, runs her hands down it and rests her foot and calf on JACK'S desk. Then SHE does the same with her other leg.)

JACK

Everything's really wrong with that.

JOPLIN

Wrong with what? With my legs? What's wrong with my legs? Are my calves too skinny?

JACK

Your legs are fine. But how about putting them somewhere else?

JOPLIN

That's what I'm trying to do if you'd only cooperate.

JACK

Put ... your ... feet ... on ... the ... floor ... now! Someone could walk in here and how would I explain....

(Jack points at her toes which she promptly wiggles.)

....those.

(JOPLIN slides even more of HER legs onto JACK'S desk.)

JOPLIN

You could always say you're getting a thorn out of my paw. After all, you are a doctor.

JACK

I'm begging you. I stay in enough trouble around here. Your legs are half my age. The last thing I need is someone to see me with two seventeen-year-old legs on my desk. They'd have to be blind not to see what's going on here. I mean they'd have to be blind not to see what's not going on here.

(There's a loud knock and JACK lets out a startled gasp. JOPLIN glances over her shoulder and slowly slides her legs off the desk. KEISHA is standing in the doorway.)

JOPLIN

(Softly) What do you know, Doc? Looks like you got your wish.

KEISHA

(Clearly enunciating each word) I'm sorry to have frightened you, sir. Could you possibly tell me ... is this the rest room?

JACK

(Still quite flustered) What? The restroom? I don't think so ... Oh, Keisha. You're being funny. That's quite funny.

(JACK starts to play the game at last.)

No, this is the office of Jack the Ripper. Can I entice you to come in, perhaps have a seat?

(JACK walks toward KEISHA. As HE does, JOPLIN pinches him on the rear. JACK jumps and slaps her hand away.)

KEISHA

I'd be delighted.

JOPLIN

Hey, Keisha. It's me ... Joplin.

KEISHA

I'm pretty good at voices, but hi.

JOPLIN

You want to sit by me?

KEISHA

Sure. If I can get through this rat maze without killing myself.

(JACK cautiously steers KEISHA toward the chair while keeping a wary eye on JOPLIN. JACK hurries back behind his desk.)

JOPLIN

So Ripper, why all the plastic? How come we can't sit over there? Then you wouldn't need to cram all these chairs in ... and besides, that couch could be handy ... if you know what I mean.

JACK

The painters are coming any day now. I covered the furniture for them. And the springs are really shot on that couch; it can barely support one person ... if you know what I mean.

(RUTH and RAY walk in.)

RAY

Hi everybody.

JACK

Hi, guys. Grab seats and let's get started. Did everyone bring the assignment?

(There's a chorus of "yes.")

Okay. Who's first?

(The students start pulling out their papers. There's another knock at the door. It's EDWIN.)

EDWIN

Sorry to interrupt.

JACK

Then don't.

EDWIN

I wanted to see how things were going and meet these fine students of yours.

JACK

We're busy here, Edwin, so make it fast. This is Ray and you met Keisha and this is...

(RUTH has been digging in her backpack and paying no attention. SHE finds her essay, turns around, and screams with delight.)

RUTH

EDDIE!

(Absolute horror on EDWIN'S face)

It's me ... Ruthie. What on earth are you doing here? I'd think you'd be out crop dusting.

EDWIN

Excuse me? Have we met?

RUTH

Eddie, quit kidding around. You don't recognize me with my clothes on?

EDWIN

You've clearly mistaken me for someone else. I'm E. J. Penny, English Department Chairperson.

RUTH

(To JACK) For real? He's not a crop duster?

JACK

Definitely not a crop duster, but at least he impersonates a department chair. That's for real. So ... Fast Eddie ... is this why the old dissertation is taking forever? A few too many evenings at the Shangri-La?

EDWIN

I've never been to the Shangri-La in my life. Not once.

RUTH

You're right about "not once." More like a couple hundred times. And I thought we were friends. I always looked forward to seeing Eddie the Crop Duster walk in the door. You're the one who told me to get an education. If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't be here. Say what you want ... I know who you are, but obviously you don't.

EDWIN

It's been a pleasure meeting all of you, but I really need to get back to my office.

(EDWIN hurriedly exits.)

RUTH

(Choking back tears) Eddie's the best friend I ever made at the Shangri-La. He always treated me like a person there, but obviously here, I'm some low-life stripper.

(RUTH runs from the room. EVERYONE sits there in shock.)

JACK

I know we're just getting started, but why don't all of you take a few minutes to stretch your legs outside? I want to go check on Ruth.

(The students stand, still in shock, and exit. JACK pulls out the bottle of Jack Daniels. HE pours some into his coffee mug, takes a drink, and exits.)

(LIGHTS DOWN ON SCENE.)

ACT I; SCENE FOUR

(AT RISE: The scene opens on Jack's office. HE pours whiskey into his mug, picks up the phone, and punches in a number. As he waits, he mists his plant.)

JACK

Ruth? Thank goodness. It's Jack Ripper. I got worried when you didn't come back. *(Listens)* You did what? This morning? Look, Ruth. Eddie the Weasel is no reason to drop out. *(Listens)* Do me one favor. Come see me this afternoon. *(Listens)* No, I promise, Eddie won't be here. Come in the back. You won't even have to walk past his office. Can you be here at three? *(Listens)* Okay, I'll see you then.

(JACK puts the receiver down and throws a PEZ dispenser against the wall. HE picks the phone back up and angrily punches in another number.)

JACK

Pick up the damn phone!

(JACK slams the phone down. He exits the office and about five seconds later we hear him pounding on a door.)

(JACK OFFSTAGE; SHOUTING)

JACK (O.S.)

Open the door you weasel! I'm going to have maintenance take this door off the hinges and if I find you in there, you'd better be dead if you know what's best for your health, Eddie!

(JACK reenters his office. Now HE'S really mad. HE stomps over to his desk, picks up the phone, and pounds in the number.)

(Quietly, with seething anger) Listen good. Ruth dropped out this morning and if you think that's the end of your problem, think again. You have fifteen seconds to get here before I e-mail every employee at this college and every member of the Board of Regents. That e-mail is going to start with where Eddie the Crop Duster spends his

JACK, *Continued*

evenings and end with what he did to one of our students last Friday. You can't imagine what's in between. I'm going to

(EDWIN barges in.)

EDWIN

You wouldn't dare. I'll sue you for slander and libel and defamation and anything else I can think of.

JACK

That's a laugh. Close the door, Eddie.

EDWIN

Stop calling me Eddie.

JACK

Just close the door.

EDWIN

What are you going to do?

JACK

Are you afraid I'm going to hurt big bad Eddie the Crop Duster? Close the door if you don't want this broadcast up and down the hall.

(EDWIN shuts the door but stays by it.)

EDWIN

(Clearly scared) I'm not scared of you, Jack.

(JACK opens the drawer and pulls out the bottle of Jack Daniels along with a second mug. HE pours some into one, then the other, and shoves one mug across the desk.)

JACK

(Wearily) Come here, Edwin. Have a seat at the bar.

EDWIN

I don't drink at work. And I certainly don't drink in the morning.

JACK

Maybe it's time to start. Drunk, you might actually come close to being human.

EDWIN

(Takes a large gulp and grimacing) Look, Jack. I've got a lot at stake. You may have given up on your career, but I haven't.

JACK

(Raises his mug in a toast) Cheers ... so why'd you do that to Ruth? Did you fool her into thinking you were human? You made her feel like trash in front of everybody. Who did you think you were fooling with that "My name is E. J. and I've never seen you before in my life" crock?

EDWIN

(Drains what's left in his mug) Ruthie was the last person I expected to see in your office. I panicked. I'm Department Chair, for Christ's sake. I'm not supposed to hang out in strip clubs.

JACK

Is that in your contract?

EDWIN

(Reaches for the bottle) It's certainly in my unwritten contract. *(Slops more into his mug)* Do you mind?

(EDWIN downs the whiskey and then gestures at the bottle to see if he can have more. JACK nods. EDWIN pours for both of them.)

I wish Judith were back. I never had problems when Judith worked with these damn remedial students. Can't you just leave me alone? My love life is none of your business.

JACK

Love life? You're actually in love with Ruth aren't you?

EDWIN

(With speech slightly slurred) What are you talking about? A Department Chair in love with a woman who removes her clothes for a living? That's prepos ... prepost ... ridiculous.

JACK

What's ridiculous is that you care what anybody thinks.

EDWIN

You can get away with that eccentric, creative b.s. but I can't. *You* can go to class half crooked and everybody just thinks you're the rebel, the genius of the English department.

JACK

I'm the rebel? You should give yourself more credit. I'm no Eddie the Crop Duster, exotic dancer romancer, the man with two lives. You're a walking T.V. movie.

EDWIN

It *was* pretty outragus, wasn't it?

JACK

You want to know what was really outrageous? What you did to Ruth.

EDWIN

Can't we just be drinkin' buddies? Do you have to keep talking 'bout that?

JACK

Afraid so ... buddy. How could you do that to someone you love?

EDWIN

Will you please stop saying that? I'm not in love with Ruth. I was merely a patron at that establishment and she was an employeree.

JACK

Say what you want, but here's the deal. If Edwin the Department Chair wants to continue in his position, he's going to do two things.

EDWIN

(Pours more whiskey) Maybe I will and maybe I won't.

JACK

Maybe you'd better shut up and listen. First, after Edwin the Department Chair stumbles back to his office, he's going to call the Registrar's office and have Ruth reinstated. Second, Edwin the Department Chair is going to come back down here this afternoon and apologize to Ruth. That's when Eddie the Crop Duster is going to admit that he's really Eddie the Crap Duster. If not, I send that e-mail to everyone on campus.

EDWIN

You're a very mean man.

JACK

And you're a very drunk man.

EDWIN

(Giggles) However ... to misquote Churchill, tomorrow I'll be sober but you'll still be a very mean man.

JACK

Look, either you make things right for Ruth or this very mean man makes things very wrong for you.

EDWIN

There's no way I can ever look Ruthie in the face again.

JACK

Apparently there are plenty of other places on her body for you to look. Pick another spot. Think of yourself as just another customer.

EDWIN

But I'm *not* just another customer.

JACK

Yeah, yeah ... I know. You're Eddie the Crop Duster. You're special.

EDWIN

Damn right.

JACK

You're a nitwit.

EDWIN

I'm a nitwit in love with a stripper.

JACK

I thought they were called exotic dancers.

EDWIN

(Whispers) They are. Don't tell anybody, but I'm a nitwit in love with an exotic dancer.

JACK

My lips are sealed.

EDWIN

(Takes a drink from his mug) Thank God mine aren't. This is great stuff.

JACK

Let's make sure we're on the same page. You'll take care of Ruth's reinstatement and you'll apologize to her this afternoon, right?

EDWIN

Posilutely. But I don't have to look at her face, okay?

JACK

No. In fact, whatever you do, *don't* look at her face. Only people in love look at each other's faces. For you, neck to knees only. Let's keep this professional.

EDWIN

Ruthie has great knees.

JACK

Atta boy. Focus on those knees.

EDWIN

You don't think that means I have a knee fetish do you? Knee peepers may seem unique, but they're really just run-of-the-mill perverts, and I'm no run-of-the-mill pervert.

JACK

No, you're certainly no run-of-the-mill pervert. You're a very special pervert.

EDWIN

Damn straight.

JACK

Go back to your office, Edwin. I need you to call the Registrar and then I want you to close your door, lie down on the floor, and take a nap until I call you to come back down here.

(JACK takes a piece of paper and writes in bold letters "GONE FOR THE DAY" on it.)

Put this on your door so no one bothers you.

EDWIN

Which side?

JACK

On the outside of your door ... with the words facing out.

EDWIN

Okay, but couldn't I take my nap on your couch?

JACK

No.

EDWIN

My floor is so hard.

JACK

But your head's soft. Together, they'll be just right.

EDWIN

You're so darn smart. I should probly sleep on the floor more often. Registrar, sign on door, nap, apology, neck to knees, anywhere but the face. *(Picks up the Jack Daniels bottle and puts it under his sport coat)* Do you mind if I borrow this? Sometimes I have trouble falling asleep. A nightcap might help.

JACK

Consider it a gift.

EDWIN

(Choked up) A gift? Oh, Jack. Thank you, thank you.

(EDWIN wipes away some tears.)

I'd better go before I get emotional. I've never felt this close to you before.

(EDWIN exits. JACK picks up the plant mister and gives the ivy a couple squirts.)

JACK

Sweet dreams, nitwit.

(LIGHTS DOWN ON SCENE.)

ACT I; SCENE FIVE

(AT RISE: The scene opens on JACK'S office. JACK is on the phone.)

JACK

Rise and shine. Ten minutes. Be here.

(Jack eats several PEZ from a nearby dispenser. There's a soft knock at the door.)

JACK

Ruth. Come in.

RUTH

Jack, my mind is made up. I'm not coming back to school.

JACK

Let's just talk.

RUTH

Why?

JACK

Why not?

RUTH

Because it's a waste of time.

JACK
I agree completely.

RUTH
Then why am I here?

JACK
Beats me. You could be busy getting naked. At least for a few more years ... until gravity wins.

RUTH
I don't need this from you.

JACK
I assume that means you don't need the truth. Of course, now you won't have to waste that money you saved for college on something stupid like college. You can spend it on implants and a tuck here and a little Botox there. Maybe extend that great career you've got going until you're 35. Hell of an investment.

RUTH
Why are you doing this to me?

JACK
Doing what to you?

RUTH
Never mind. I'm out of here.

RUTH turns to leave. EDWIN is standing in the doorway. His hair is a mess, sticking up everywhere, and his clothes are wrinkled. EDWIN looks like HE just awakened from a drinking binge, which is exactly what HE has done.)

EDWIN
(Stares at RUTH'S knees) Ruthie.

RUTH
Go to hell, Eddie.

EDWIN
(Looking at her knees) Please Ruth. Hear me out.

RUTH
Too late. Way too late. And what on earth are you looking at?

EDWIN

(Still looking at her knees) Your knees.

RUTH

Why?

EDWIN

I like your knees and Jack told me to look at them. But mostly because I can't look you in the face.

RUTH

Look any place you want. That's what I'm for. But I'm leaving. I'm no longer a student here.

EDWIN

(Finally looks at RUTH'S face) Actually, you are. I had the registrar reinstate you.

RUTH

Who said you could do that? If I want to drop out, that's my right.

EDWIN

It's your right, but it's wrong.

RUTH

What's wrong is lying about who you are. What's wrong is telling me to quit my job and go to college when what you meant was any college but the one you apparently work at.

(There's a knock. It's JOPLIN.)

JOPLIN

Is this a bad time?

JACK

This is a terrible time.

JOPLIN

I'll come back.

RUTH

No, come in, Joplin. I'm not staying.

EDWIN

You can't leave. I haven't apologized. Then you can't leave.

RUTH

I don't want your apology.

EDWIN
You're damn sure going to get it.

RUTH
I'm damn sure not.

(RUTH attempts to shove past EDWIN but HE blocks her way.)

JOPLIN
This sure *sounds* like I came at a bad time.

RUTH
For there to be a bad time now, there had to have once been a good time.

EDWIN
There were good times and you know it.

RUTH
Oh, yeah. You shoving a twenty in my G-string, that was always a swell time. I used to go home and write about it in my diary.

JACK
What say I leave you two love birds alone?

JOPLIN
What about me?

JACK
What say I leave you alone too?

JOPLIN
Is there something wrong with me? I don't understand why we're not having sex on that couch right now ... aside from the fact that they're here and all that plastic and the crud you've got piled on it.

EDWIN
You're having sex with one of your students?

JACK
You're one to talk. And no, I'm not.

JOPLIN
If you were half a teacher, you would be.

RUTH

(*To EDWIN*) You're not even half a pest control technician. Eddie the Crop Duster. What a joke.

JOPLIN

I've got a possible case of terminal virginity here and none of you seem to care.

JACK

Virginity isn't exactly up there with cancer. I don't see millions donated at the annual March of Virgins Telethon.

RUTH

What's the point of this?

EDWIN

(*Gesturing wildly*) The point is I care about your well-being.

JOPLIN

My well-being? I don't even know you.

EDWIN

Not *your* well-being. Ruthie's well-being.

RUTH

You made it clear last Friday that you don't care about me *or* my well-being.

EDWIN

I care.

RUTH

About yourself.

EDWIN

That's not true. I hate me.

RUTH

At least we have that in common.

JOPLIN

I'm getting lost here. Who hates who?

EDWIN

That's who hates whom.

JACK

(To JOPLIN) The very fact that Who hates Whom is all the more reason to keep your virginity. Give your virginity to the wrong pronoun and you'll certainly end up hating either Who or Whom.

RUTH

What does Joplin's virginity have to do with any of this?

JOPLIN

Beats me. I just stopped by to have sex with Ripper, although I could also be in love with him, but I haven't made up my mind about that yet, and *I* don't hate anyone. Except maybe Who and Whom.

EDWIN

I love you.

JOPLIN

You love me?

EDWIN

Of course not you. How could I possibly be in love with you?

JOPLIN

I'm that unlovable? First Ripper and now you?

EDWIN

You look extremely lovable.

RUTH

You sorry two-timer.

JACK

I don't think someone can be a two-timer if the other timer is a virgin.

JOPLIN

And that's my fault? I'm trying my best here to change the status quo.

RUTH

You don't love me. Besides, I've got to go. I perform at five.

EDWIN

The hell you do.

RUTH

The hell I don't.

JACK

Why don't you both get the hell out? This was a big mistake.

EDWIN

I'm Department Chair and we'll get the hell out of here when I say we're getting the hell out of here.

RUTH

Do what you want, but *I'm* getting the hell out of here.

(EDWIN drops to his knees.)

EDWIN

Oh, please don't go back to the Shangri-La, Ruthie.

RUTH

Why not?

JACK

Good question. There's no business like show business I always say. The world needs exotic dancers a lot more than it needs college graduates.

JOPLIN

You might still work out as my sex guru, but I'm starting to question you as a choice for serious romance.

(EDWIN gets up off his knees.)

EDWIN

I'm getting more confused by the minute. Did you ... have you ... done her or not, Jack?

JACK

Not.

JOPLIN

(Quickly) Yet.

JACK

Never.

JOPLIN

(Quickly) Say never.

EDWIN

So, never?

JOPLIN

I said not to say that.

RUTH

This is college? I left stripping for this?

EDWIN

You left exotic dancing for me.

RUTH

I don't think so. I clearly don't even know you and you sure don't know me.

EDWIN

I may not know you, but I know I love you.

JOPLIN

(To EDWIN) Okay. You're *absolutely* not talking about me, right?

EDWIN

Absolutely not.

JOPLIN

Good. Because I *sure* don't want to lose my virginity to you.

EDWIN

I love *you*, Ruth.

RUTH

Why should I believe you? You're a lying creep.

EDWIN

Because I'm *your* lying creep, and I really do love you.

RUTH

So you love me. Big deal. Who cares?

JOPLIN

As best I'm following this, he does.

EDWIN

I do.

(RUTH pauses for several moments.)

RUTH

You know, as much as I hate you, Eddie, which is a lot, a whole lot ... I think I might love you even more. And maybe, just maybe, I could eventually learn to hate you less. But I wouldn't count on it if I were you.

EDWIN

Somewhere in there, did you just say that you love me?

RUTH

It sort of sounded that way, didn't it?

(EDWIN and RUTH slowly, tentatively embrace and kiss, a long, lingering kiss.)

JOPLIN

So this is what happens when you go to a real school.

(LIGHTS DOWN ON SCENE.)

ACT I; SCENE SIX

(AT RISE: The scene opens with JACK on the phone in his office. HE's got his mug nearby and HE alternates between taking sips, eating PEZ from a dispenser, and misting his now nearly dead ivy.)

JACK

Sarah, I'm sorry to hear about you and Phil. *(Pause)* Bill... Phil. Now his name really doesn't matter. You got rid of him, and I have to be honest, I never liked your sorry boyfriend.

(There's another pause. JACK takes a drink and eats several more PEZ.)

I know I never met him, but anyone who would cheat on you before he even marries you should have his head examined. *(Pause)* Look, I may have lied, been rude to your mother a few hundred times, thrown up during your office Thanksgiving luncheon, stayed drunk the last three years we were married, and told your sister at her wedding to stay clear of the candles or people would forget the Hindenburg Disaster ever happened – but at least give me credit for something. I never cheated on you. *(Pause, drink, PEZ)* You're very welcome. *(Glances at his watch)* You may find it hard to believe, but this class hasn't been too bad. I actually look forward to it. Tell Alex I'll see her in a couple hours. Ask her to decide where she wants to go eat. You wouldn't care to join us by any chance? ... just thought I'd ask. Since you're now unattached. Yeah, I know. Been there, done that.

(JACK hangs up and pulls out the bottle of Jack Daniels. HE starts to pour some into his mug, hesitates, pushes the cork back in, and puts the bottle away.)

JACK

Who am I kidding?

(JACK opens the drawer, grabs the bottle and pours some into his mug. Then HE eats a few more PEZ, plays with some of the toys on his desk, drums impatiently on the desk with his hands.)

JACK

Where *is* everybody? The least someone could do is have the courtesy to show up early.

(Pause, drink, drums on the desk, another sip, more PEZ, more drumming. KEISHA and RAY appear in the doorway.)

JACK

(Happily) Hi, you two.

KEISHA

Hi. Are we the first ones here?

JACK

Afraid so.

KEISHA

You're not going to believe what I just did!

JACK

So tell me.

KEISHA

You tell him, Ray.

RAY

I'm not the one who did it. You tell.

KEISHA

I drove Ray's car on the way over here.

JACK

You what?

KEISHA

Not the whole way, of course. Ray picked me up for class. But he let me drive from one end of the K-Mart parking lot to the other and back ... and then back again!

JACK

You have got to be kidding me. You might have killed someone, Keisha. You could have run over a customer.

RAY

Gosh, I don't think so. It was K-Mart. She could have driven down the aisles and not hit a customer.

KEISHA

Besides, you said that life was about not being afraid to take risks.

JACK

I said that? And when did *you* start listening to me?

(JOPLIN enters.)

JOPLIN

Hey, guys. What's up?

KEISHA

I drove Ray's car, that's what's up.

JOPLIN

How totally cool. Did you do any parallel parking?

KEISHA

I don't think so ... but I did make a few blind turns.

JOPLIN

Well, parallel parking takes practice. I'm still terrible. If you want to get good, you'll have to work at it.

JACK

Am I the only sane person here? Parallel parking? Next, you'll be advising her to do donuts.

RAY

(To Keisha) Donuts are great. The key to good donuts is to not be afraid. And since you can't see, there's no reason for you to get scared.

KEISHA

Why should I be scared of a donut? I'm not fat am I? I don't feel fat.

JACK

Different donut. The kind your friend Ray is talking about is the kind where you spin in circles while going really fast and burning half the rubber off your tires.

KEISHA

Great. Can we do donuts on the way home?

RAY

Sure. I don't see why not. You're already pretty good on the straightaway.

JACK

Have you all gone mad? I don't have enough money to bail the lot of you out of jail.

(RUTH enters.)

RUTH

I probably do. But what would I be bailing the lot of you out for?

JACK

Ray let Keisha drive his car in the K-Mart parking lot. Now they want to go back after class so she can do donuts.

JOPLIN

I'm telling you, don't forget to practice parallel parking. Not if you want to pass your driver's test on the first try.

RUTH

It's the K-Mart parking lot. It's not like she's going to hit anybody. So what's the problem with the kids having a little fun?

JACK

The problem is Keisha's blind!

KEISHA

Can't put nothin' past you, Jack Ripper.

JACK

It's against the law for blind people to drive for God's sake.

RAY

You're afraid Keisha will run God over? Surely God's fast enough to jump out of the way.

JOPLIN

Besides, I seriously doubt that God shops at K-Mart.

RUTH

You run God over, the bail might be more than I can come up with. Keisha, avoid hitting God at all costs. Eyes wide open.

JACK

All of you need to be committed.

RAY

I thought you said it was important to be committed.

JACK

There's committed and then there's rubber-room committed.

(EDWIN enters. No one notices.)

EDWIN

Excuse me.

(EDWIN is still ignored.)

KEISHA

Well, I'm committed to donuts after class today. Who wants to ride with me?

RUTH

I'm more the spectator-from-afar type in this.

JOPLIN

I'll pass, too. I'm hoping to meet with my tutor later. Donuts and tutoring might not be the ideal mix.

RAY

I'm in. I love donuts. Besides, it's my car.

EDWIN

(Loudly) Excuse me, everyone! I know the best place in town for donuts. Would you mind if I went along?

JACK

That's wonderful, Edwin. You *should* do more with our students. This would be like a field trip.

EDWIN

Only I see no reason to wait until after class. We could be there and back in five minutes. Besides, there's something I want to say to everyone. Apologies and donuts go hand-in-hand.

RUTH

Are you sure this is a good idea, Eddie?

EDWIN

It's a great idea. Donuts get such a bad rap. I mean they shouldn't be an everyday thing, but I don't see what's wrong with a few donuts once in a while.

RUTH

Do you know what kind of donuts we're talking about?

EDWIN

Don't worry. I'll get something for everybody.

RUTH

I think I'll go after all. This sounds too good to miss.

EDWIN

You're sure this is going to be all right with you, Jack? I hate to interfere with your class, but this is my treat for everyone.

JACK

I can't imagine a better treat for me than this, Eddie. Not only do I not mind, I insist. Now, shoo. All of you.

(EDWIN, KEISHA, RAY, AND RUTH all exit.)

JACK

I probably should have gone, but I faint at the sight of blood.

JOPLIN

That's comforting news to a virgin.

JACK

Joplin, tell me this. Have you ever even gone out on a date?

JOPLIN

Well ... no.

JACK

You say you want to learn everything, but you want to skip having your first boyfriend, holding hands, learning to kiss, fooling around at the drive-in, breaking up, getting back together, meeting the right person, wanting to make love to that person when that person and the time are right.

JOPLIN

I should have done all that long ago. I don't have time for it now.

JACK

Then you're making a big mistake. We don't live in a culture with a village elder gigolo. We live in a culture of screw-ups and trial-and-error and fumbling around until we fumble our way into the right person.

JOPLIN

Did you fumble into the right person?

JACK

I got lucky. I did.

JOPLIN

Then why aren't you still together?

JACK

I fumbled it away.

JOPLIN

How?

(JACK sits very still for a few moments. Then HE opens the desk drawer, pulls out the bottle of Jack Daniels, pours some into his mug and puts the bottle back in the drawer.)

JACK

This is how.

JOPLIN

But why?

JACK

If I knew why, I wouldn't have let it happen.

JOPLIN

You know why. Listen to the earth. That's the one thing my father told me that was true. The earth knows why and you're a part of the earth. So you know why.

JACK

Cosmic b.s.

JOPLIN

Cosmic truth. Just close your eyes.

JACK

Around you? I don't think so.

JOPLIN

You're Jack the Ripper. Don't be scared. Close your eyes.

(JACK reluctantly closes his eyes.)

JACK

Now what? Will I see a light at the end of a tunnel? Should I be wearing Birkenstocks?

JOPLIN

This isn't a joke. But Birkenstocks might help.

(JACK opens his eyes.)

JACK

If this works so well, why don't you use it on yourself? I'd say you could use some answers.

JOPLIN

How do you think I knew to come to this college? This was no accident. The earth was talking to me.

JACK

So what did the earth tell you about me? If the earth told you I was going to be your Doctor Love, it was mistaken.

JOPLIN

The earth can't tell me about you. That's not the way it works. The earth will only tell *you* about you. I decided you'd make a good love teacher on my own. And I still think I'm right.

JACK

You smoked way too much of your parents' dope.

JOPLIN

I could have ... but the earth told me not to. I may have gotten a little second-hand buzz on occasion, but I'm not sure that counts.

(JACK closes his eyes again.)

JACK

So when can I expect to hear from the earth?

JOPLIN

The earth is always ready to talk. But not until you're ready to listen.

JACK

I'm not hearing anything. Does the earth whisper? (*Loudly*) Oh, earth! Tell me why you sent me this idiot child who thinks I'm the Virginator. (*Pause*) What's that? (*Pause*) A little louder, please. I'm partially deaf in one ear. Give me the answer.

(*JACK opens his eyes.*)

I don't think the earth and I are on the same frequency.

(*EDWIN bursts through the doorway followed by RUTH, KEISHA, and RAY. THEY are all a mess - hair in disarray, clothes crushed and rumped. EDWIN is the worst. One of the lapels on his sports coat is ripped, his shirt is out, and his tie is turned around, hanging down his back. EDWIN is carrying an enormous box of donuts.*)

EDWIN

(*Screams*) Whooo! Whooooo! I've donutted with death, and death can kiss my adorable arse! Whooooooo! Did you know there's a completely different definition of the word "donut?" And we did some serious donutting.

(*EDWIN grabs KEISHA, gives her a big kiss.*)

EDWIN

This is God's gift to drivers. This is the Donut Queen. This is Richard Petty and the Wright Brothers rolled into one. This woman is pure excitement – a flaming bag of dog poop on the front porch, a wasp trapped in your boxers. I now know the truth ... blindness isn't a handicap ... it's the jelly filling in the donut.

RUTH

Take a breath, Eddie.

EDWIN

I hadn't lived until the car went up on two wheels and I thought I was going to die. It doesn't get better than that ... at least I didn't think it could until we hit that row of shopping carts. That was *absolutely* the best.

JACK

You could have all died.

RAY

That's for sure. But Keisha's good. She accidentally began doing reverse donuts and spent more time on two wheels than she did on four. Employees came out and started cheering her on. The manager wants to know if she'll come perform every weekend.

EDWIN

It was great! I felt like a kid again. No, that's not true. I felt like a kid for the first time. I was never a kid when I was a kid. I was kidding myself.

RAY

It was bitchin' wasn't it?

EDWIN

Bitchin' doesn't begin to describe donuts. It was ... bitchin'. I like that word. I don't think I've ever called anything bitchin' in my life. What a perfect word. Bitchin' is a bitchin' word.

RUTH

You need to try to calm down some, Eddie. You're going to have a bitchin' heart attack.

EDWIN

That would be a bitch. See how great that word is? It's a word for every occasion. And the best part is that we stopped for these bitchin' donuts after Keisha got through donutting K-Mart.

(EDWIN sets the donuts on a chair and opens the lid of the box.)

Just look at these babies.

JACK

If anyone's interested, we've got a class this afternoon.

RAY

I may be a little too pumped to talk about writing.

KEISHA

Me, too. Essays seem sorta lame at the moment.

EDWIN

Take the afternoon off, Jack. Relax. Try not to take work so seriously.

(EDWIN makes a big production of yawning and stretching his arms.)

As for me, I'm going to kick back and ... chill.

(EDWIN flops down in the chair holding the box of donuts. EDWIN slowly stands and strains to look at the back of his pants, which are a sticky mess.)

EDWIN, *Continued*

You know what this means? Donut run! My car this time. I drive a Volvo wagon. Safest car on the planet, and I'll bet a month's pay it can do donuts till the Swedes come home.

KEISHA

You sayin' what I think you're sayin'?

EDWIN

Only I'm saying I get a turn this time. Just because you're blind doesn't mean you get to have all the fun.

RAY

Round two?

EDWIN

Round two it is.

RUTH

Wasn't there something you were going to say to everyone this afternoon, Eddie?

EDWIN

Oh gosh, I nearly forgot.

(EDWIN smoothes his hair and does his best to look presentable.)

Maybe you've already guessed this, but I lied to all of you last Friday. From here on out, I'm telling nothing but the truth. Ruthie here is more than just a former exotic dancer. She's *my* former exotic dancer and I love her. I'm also going to marry her someday ... provided she's willing to marry Edwin the Department Chair instead of Eddie the Crop Duster. *(Pause, then speaking to KEISHA)* But first, Eddie the Donut King is going to show everybody how donuts are really done.

(EDWIN, KEISHA, and RAY exit. JACK stands there, eating a smushed donut. RUTH reaches over and takes one from the box.)

RUTH

I think he really does love me....that's bitchin'.

(RUTH takes a bite. LIGHTS DOWN ON SCENE.)

ACT II; SCENE ONE

(AT RISE: The scene opens on JACK'S office. EVERYONE is there – RUTH, KEISHA, RAY, and JOPLIN are all seated in the folding chairs. It's nearing the end of class.)

JACK

So passing the placement essay is like a game, only the people who evaluate them are, by and large, morons. The scary part is they don't know it, but you can use that to your advantage. They love big words. Use one or two big words correctly in your introduction and you're home free. So who can correctly use some of the words I taught you in a sentence? Ray?

RAY

The didactic value of doing death-defying donuts is intrinsically whimsical.

JACK

Do you have a clue what you said?

RAY

Doing donuts teaches me to laugh at danger?

JACK

Sounds good. Keisha?

KEISHA

That sycophant ho may say my derriere look good, but I damn sure know what she up to.

JACK

Excellent. Just make sure you also put "ho" and "damn" in italics along with "derriere." The readers will think you're writing almost entirely in French. Academics love anything French. Joplin?

JOPLIN

The dichotomy of me wanting to make a friend and wanting that friend to do me has been a trifle discombobulating, if you know what I mean.

RAY

I don't know what you mean. To do you how?

KEISHA

For God's sake, Ray. I'm blind and I know she mean to do somebody naked.

RAY

Oh, what a great sentence. I never would have dreamed it was dirty.

JACK

Ruth, your turn.

RUTH

There's a certain degree of hubris involved when someone wants you to become someone you're not, resulting in a cacophonistic outpouring of pedantic, hypocritical, moralistic manure.

JACK

I take it there might be a problem between you and Eddie?

RUTH

There's Eddie ... and there's me.

JOPLIN

You broke up?

RUTH

I didn't say that, but he's driving me crazy.

RAY

I thought you were in love.

RUTH

I don't know what we are. We aren't on the same page. I know that.

JACK

Then maybe it's time to turn the page on Eddie.

RUTH

I'm not ready to do that. I've barely cracked the cover, but lately I'm not sure I like what I see. Eddie is smothering me. My shorts are too short, my tops are too tight, the way I walk is too sexy.

RAY

You're his girl. It makes sense to me.

RUTH

Eddie the Crop Duster accepted me for who and what I was. Edwin the Department Chair wants someone I'm never going to be.

JACK

Would it help if I talked to him?

RUTH

That might make it worse. I don't even think he likes me being here in this class anymore. He says the chairs are too close together.

JACK

Okay, I won't talk to him, but there's got to be a middle ground between being Eddie and Edwin. It may take him some time to find it. *(Pause, glancing at his watch)* We've got about five minutes left today, so why don't we just talk. Anybody?

JOPLIN

I've got something I *really* need to talk about.

JACK

(Nervously) And?

JOPLIN

I got asked out on a date.

JACK

That's great!

JOPLIN

That's *not* great. You know I've never been on a date.

RAY

So who's the guy? I mean ... it is a guy, right? Not that going out with a girl wouldn't be okay if the guy turned out not to be a guy but a girl instead of a guy.

JOPLIN

(Laughs) It's a guy ... he's in my algebra class. He wants to go eat and then see a movie tomorrow night.

JACK

And you said "yes," right?

JOPLIN

I said I had an eyelash in my eye.

JACK

So?

JOPLIN

So I went in the restroom and sat on the toilet for ten minutes, only he was still standing there when I came out. I didn't know what to say, and like an idiot, I said "yes."

RUTH

Is he cute?

JOPLIN

I guess so. That's not the problem. The problem is what to do. I said "yes." And now I don't have the nerve to text him and say I can't go.

JACK

Why on earth would you want to back out?

JOPLIN

What if he puts his arm around me at the movie? What if he wants to kiss me? What if he wants to do more than kiss me? What if he asks me about my life? This is the worst thing that's ever happened to me.

RUTH

If you didn't have all these worries, would you want to go out on the date?

JOPLIN

If I was normal like everybody else, sure.

KEISHA

What's normal? You think you're the only person never been on a date?

JOPLIN

Maybe we could go on a double-date, Keisha.

KEISHA

I'm not going as no chaperone for you.

JOPLIN

Ray ... are you busy tomorrow night?

RAY

I'm never busy tomorrow night.

JOPLIN

Please do me this one favor. Both of you come with me. Then it's really a double-date.

KEISHA

I don't know about this. I just got a feeling Ray might be butt ugly. You butt ugly, Ray?

RAY

Maybe. I guess it depends on the butt you compare my face to. Some butts can be pretty nice to look at ... like yours.

KEISHA

You think I got a nice derriere?

RAY

Primo. And I don't think I'm saying it because I'm some "sycophant ho," whatever that is.

KEISHA

So what movie?

JOPLIN

You can pick.

KEISHA

Nothing with subtitles. They kind of leave me in the dark.

RAY

You like movies? But you can't see.

KEISHA

Baby, you haven't seen a movie 'til you hear one blind. It's a whole new world.

RAY

Maybe I'll watch with my eyes closed then.

JOPLIN

I'll pay for everything as long as you guys come.

RAY

(Indignant) I can pay for my own date.

KEISHA

I thought you didn't have a job.

RAY

Not anymore. I'm a working man now.

KEISHA

Since when?

RAY

Since tomorrow morning. I got a job ... as an engineer, in fact. I start my training in the morning.

JACK

That's great ... but as an engineer?

RAY

At Funland. They were hiring for the summer, so I applied. I had a choice between running the Tilt-A-Whirl, the Octopus, or the miniature train. It was a no-brainer choice.

KEISHA

That's great, Ray.

JACK

(Looks at his watch) I really hate to break this up, but I need to get out of here. I've got some business to take care of.

(EVERYBODY stands and starts packing up to go. There's idle chatter as they do so. EVERYBODY says good-bye and they all exit. JACK pours a huge slug of whiskey into his mug, picks up the phone, and punches in a number.)

JACK

Hi ... Sarah? *(Pause)* I know it's not my week-end. But I need a favor, and you're the only person I could think of to call.

(JACK pauses to gather himself. HE'S on the verge of tears.)

Curly's in really bad shape. He's having trouble standing and the insulin doesn't seem to be helping much anymore. I've got to have him put down, but I'm not sure I can do it, at least not by myself. *(Pause)* You would? *(Pause)* I need tonight to say good-bye. I'll call the vet and set it up for tomorrow morning if that's okay ... You'll bring Alex by tonight? That would be great ... just great. I'll be there.

(JACK hangs up and pours the whiskey in his mug into the trash can. HE is doing his best to hang on. There's a KNOCK at the door. It's EDWIN.)

EDWIN

Got a minute?

JACK

No.

EDWIN

Jack, I'm losing Ruthie.

JACK

Good. You don't deserve Ruth.

EDWIN

What can I do?

JACK

Did you ever have a dog?

EDWIN

No.

JACK

Get one. Then we can talk. Then you might have a chance of keeping Ruth. But for now, please get out. I want to be alone.

(EDWIN exits. LIGHTS DOWN ON SCENE.)

ACT II; SCENE TWO

(AT RISE: The scene opens on JACK entering his office. HE is carrying an urn. JACK sets the urn behind his desk.)

JACK

Stay ... good dog.

(JACK sits in his chair and eats a few PEZ. JACK pours whiskey into his mug. JOPLIN'S head pops in the doorway.)

JOPLIN

Hey, Ripper.

JACK

Come in.

JOPLIN

I'm early.

JACK

That's never good news.

JOPLIN

You don't have to worry about me anymore. I'm no longer stalking your ... you know ... your....

JACK

That's a relief.

JOPLIN

I realize now ... you're too old. *It's* probably too old.

JACK

I've been trying to tell you that all along. You need to find a ... you know ... something a little closer to your age.

JOPLIN

It was kind of fun while it lasted though, wasn't it?

JACK

If bungee jumping without a bungee is kind of fun, then yes.

JOPLIN

Friends?

JACK

Of course.

JOPLIN

So if we're friends, how come you never told me who you are? You're J.T. Ripper ... *that* J.T. Ripper.

JACK

Jack Theodore Ripper. What's new?

JOPLIN

J.T. Ripper wrote *The Next-to-Last Gas Station on Planet Earth*. You're that J.T. Ripper.

JACK

You read it?

JOPLIN

Yesterday. Your picture's on the back cover. And according to the front cover, two million other people read it.

JACK

Great. So you're one in two million and one. That makes you exceptional.

(JOPLIN reaches into HER backpack and pulls out a tattered copy of the novel.)

JOPLIN

My parents think this is the best novel ever written, and now I do, too.

JACK

So stupidity runs in your family.

JOPLIN

Make jokes, but when they found out you were the teacher I *wasn't* having sex with ... well, I don't think they've ever been more disappointed in me. It crushed them. Would you mind writing something in this for them?

(JOPLIN slides the book across to JACK. HE takes it and stares at the cover, then turns it over and looks at his picture.)

Just make it out to Horace and Louise.

JACK

(Incredulous) Your free-love hippie parents are named Horace and Louise?

JOPLIN

Afraid so.

JACK

(Picks up a pen) And what should I say to Horace and Louise? *(A pause to think)* How about, "Sorry I didn't do your daughter, but I'm old and the sun don't rise every day. Better luck next time ... Jack the Ripper." *(Pause)* Or maybe, "If all the remaining hippies on Planet Earth were laid end to end, Horace and Louise would be the Alpha and the Omega ... and everyone in between." *(Pause)* One more. How about....

JOPLIN

How about why you stopped writing? I looked you up on the Internet. You were compared to Roth, Salinger, Updike. Then you disappeared.

JACK

You found me. I'm not exactly a well-kept secret. Everyone at the college knows who I am. Everyone in the publishing world knows where I am and what I'm not doing.

JOPLIN

I just don't get it.

JACK

Look ... I was 25. I wrote the novel for my Ph.D. in creative writing. I never expected a best seller.

JOPLIN

That's no answer. Why'd you stop writing?

(JACK takes a long drink from the mug.)

JACK

Maybe I don't have anything left to say.

JOPLIN

Maybe you don't have anything to say because of what you're always drinking out of that mug.

JACK

I drink, therefore I am.

JOPLIN

And what are you?

JACK

I'm a well-oiled teacher at a third-rate college who hit the literary equivalent of the lottery once upon a time. Do you know the odds of hitting the lottery twice?

JOPLIN

I know the odds if you don't play the game ... zero.

JACK

But the odds of writing a second novel that stinks are also zero if you don't write it.

JOPLIN

And not writing makes you happy?

(JACK pours a generous slug of whiskey.)

JACK

No, this makes me happy. This makes my life tolerable.

JOPLIN

I don't believe you. I don't think your life is even close to tolerable, and I don't think all the whiskey in The Next-to-Last Liquor Store on Planet Earth will fix that. You're worried people might not love what you write? And you make fun of Eddie for caring what other people think? What's the difference?

JACK

That's not exactly apples to apples.

JOPLIN

Why? Am I being unfair to Eddie? At least he's trying with Ruth. He's taking a chance.

JACK

You're seventeen. You don't know a damn thing.

JOPLIN

I may be seventeen ... but I'm not stupid. You're scared to death that if you put away the whiskey, you might lose your excuse for not writing.

JACK

Maybe I truly don't have anything left to say.

JOPLIN

You'll never know unless you find something to drink out of that mug other than whiskey.

JACK

Answers come easy when you're seventeen.

JOPLIN

Does age change the truth?

(There's a KNOCK on the door. RUTH enters. SHE looks great, wearing heels and a stylish, low-cut dress.)

RUTH

Hi. Am I interrupting anything? I'm a bit early.

JOPLIN

Wow ... look at you!

RUTH

Eddie and I are going to the Department Chair dinner tonight.

JACK

I take it things are better between you.

RUTH

We'll see how it goes tonight. Eddie's picking me up here after class if that's all right with you. We're going out for drinks first.

JACK

Whether I like it or not, Fast Eddie seems to have become a part of this class. Not that he doesn't fit with the rest of the Remedialites.

RUTH

You don't like Eddie, do you?

JACK

Actually, I'm growing rather fond of Eddie. It's Edwin I detest.

RUTH

Same here. We'll see who shows up tonight. *(To JOPLIN)* So how was your date?

JOPLIN

He sweated a lot. I think Keisha made him nervous. And I'm not sure he knew what to make of double-dating with a guy who drives a miniature train and a blind girl who kept standing up and shouting at the movie.

(ENTER RAY and KEISHA)

KEISHA

That creep don't like miniature train drivers and shouting blind women, something wrong with him. We the backbone of this country. Shoulda took him to K-Mart, teach him a thing or two about the visually challenged.

RUTH

So are you still working on your driving?

KEISHA

Not enough. I may have to buy my own car. No law against a blind woman owning a car is there, Professor? I'd only drive it after midnight, when everybody's drunk and nobody can see where they going anyways.

JACK

Keisha, do you ever listen to what you're saying?

KEISHA

You sounding like Joplin's date. Next thing, you be telling me to shush, like he had the gall to. I told him where he could put his Milk Duds. *(To JOPLIN)* You not going out with him again are you? You do, count me out. I had enough white bread fraternity boy to last me awhile.

JOPLIN

Are you sure he was white? Maybe he was black.

KEISHA

Aside from his snowball voice, ain't a black family in America mean enough to name no boy child of theirs Ian. What the hell kind of name is Ian? It's a sound, not a name. It's most likely what his mama said when she felt his ugly face coming outta her for the first time. So ... you going out with EEEEE UN again or not?

JOPLIN

I think you scared him off. He hasn't called and he won't look at me in class.

KEISHA

Good thing. That peckerwood probly got a STD named after him. Ianorreah.

JOPLIN

It doesn't matter. I've got a date tonight ... and tomorrow. A boy in my government class asked me out, and another guy playing his guitar at the Student Union did too.

JACK

You're kidding. You really should start wearing a bra to school more often.

JOPLIN

Apparently not everyone finds me repulsive.

KEISHA

And what are these two princes' names?

JOPLIN

So you can make fun of them?

KEISHA

So I can save you, girlfriend. Names matter. Ray ... Jack ... good names. Man names. These boys better not be no Crispin and Todd.

JOPLIN

They're not. It's Frank and Joe.

KEISHA

You too much. First you go on a date with a boy got a sound for a name. Now you double-dipping the Hardy Boys. They may be hope for you yet.

RAY

You met The Hardy Boys? You're going out with The Hardy Boys? Oh, man ... I love The Hardy Boys. Did you read *The Secret of the Old Mill*? That's my favorite. I still don't know how they got out of that one alive.

JOPLIN

These are different Hardy Boys. In fact, these aren't Hardy Boys at all.

RAY

Too bad. I was going to see if we could double-double-date with you.

JACK

I know how fascinating it is to talk about all your love lives, but you've got the retest in the morning. Don't you think we should be talking about writing?

JOPLIN

Absolutely.

(JOPLIN reaches across the desk and picks up JACK'S novel. SHE tosses it to RUTH.)

Take a look on the back.

(RUTH turns the book over and looks at the cover.)

RUTH

That's *you*. You wrote this?

JACK

No. Look at the picture. That guy is clearly younger.

RUTH

This says you're "The freshest new voice on the literary landscape" and "*Next-to-Last Gas Station* is an irreverent masterpiece."

KEISHA

Ripper wrote a famous book?

JOPLIN

Hard as it is to believe, our college writing teacher actually knows how to write.

JACK

Knew how to write.

(RAY takes the book from RUTH and stares at it.)

RAY

You must be rich. This sold a whole lot of copies.

JACK

I get by. Enough stupid teachers keep ordering that stupid novel for their stupid students to keep me afloat.

(JOPLIN takes JACK'S mug and sniffs.)

JOPLIN

It isn't the teachers keeping you afloat.

JACK

Whiskey doesn't deserve all the credit. Don't forget the PEZ. PEZ is a wonder fuel. Everything not in the food pyramid rolled into tiny nutritious bricks.

KEISHA

How come when we told our life stories, you forgot to mention you're famous?

JACK

Because I'm not. I wrote a book once. Now I teach. And my job as a teacher is to make sure you're ready for the placement test in the morning.

RAY

I'm as ready as I'm ever going to be.

JACK

That's what's got me worried.

RUTH

We really are ready, Jack.

JOPLIN

We know the big words. And please, no more talk about thesis statements or topic sentences. No more structure and unity. Just let us go do what you taught us to do. Ray's right. We're as ready as we'll ever be.

JACK

So what do you want to do if we're not going to work on writing?

RAY

I've got something to show you.

(RAY digs in his backpack and pulls out a sheet of paper.)

JACK

What's that?

RAY

I met with a counselor. She downloaded me a job application for Union Pacific Railroad. Did you know this college doesn't teach that kind of engineering?

JACK

I'm afraid I did, Ray. I should have told you.

RAY

That's okay. What matters is I don't need a college degree to drive a train. If they hire me, I'll start at the bottom, as a switchman or a brakeman, but I can work my way up.

KEISHA

You're not staying in college?

RAY

Not if I get hired.

KEISHA

You can kiss my derriere.

RAY

You're mad? I thought you'd be happy.

KEISHA

Well, I'm not.

RAY

I sure didn't want to make you mad. When you're mad you stand up ... and you don't sit back down for a really long time.

KEISHA

I've changed. I can do mad just fine when I'm sitting.

RAY

On your splendiferous derriere.

KEISHA

Sycophant.

RAY

You use that word a lot. What's it mean?

KEISHA

Somebody say you hot but don't really mean it. A two-faced flatterer in your case.

(RAY puts the application in his backpack.)

RAY

Just forget it. Do you want to go waterskiing with me sometime?

KEISHA

Water skiing? Where that come from? You got that ADD or something?

RAY

I was going to surprise you, but I'd better just tell you because it seems like you're getting madder by the minute. There's no law against blind people waterskiing is there?

KEISHA

I can't swim. You want to drown me?

RAY

You don't need to swim to water ski. When you crash, the life jacket usually keeps you alive. And even if it doesn't, your dead body will pop back up. You won't die of drowning, I promise. I can maybe even teach you to jump off a ramp. Donuts are nothing compared to air under your skis.

KEISHA

This is sounding better.

JACK

You both give morons a bad name.

RUTH

I'm not so sure. This sounds safer than Keisha driving a car. Maybe not the ski-jumping part, but the rest actually seems possible.

KEISHA

Giving me a chance to kill myself don't make up for the fact you're leaving to work for some railroad.

RAY

I'll be based here. I won't be moving. Maybe out of my parents' basement, but not out of town. I'm thinking of getting my own apartment soon. We'd still be friends, and you could still drive my car whenever you want.

KEISHA

You gonna get an apartment *soon* on what you make driving the toy train at Funland? Besides, you only been working there a week.

RAY

But I've been getting an allowance since I was three. I've pretty much saved it all since my parents pay for everything. My folks are sort of loaded.

KEISHA

Ooh baby, a high roller. You gonna rob the piggy bank?

RAY

I don't keep it in a piggy bank. That would be ridiculous. I keep it in boxes in my closet.

RUTH

A couple shoeboxes of quarters probably won't get you into an apartment, Ray.

RAY

(Crestfallen) Actually, they're big boxes, but I sure thought twelve-thousand would get me an apartment.

JOPLIN

You've got twelve-thousand dollars in your closet?

RAY

Maybe more. I haven't counted it in a while.

KEISHA

You maybe the dumbest white man I ever met. The least you could do was put it in T-bills or low-risk muni's.

JACK

You know about Treasury bills and municipal bonds?

KEISHA

I'm majoring in finance. What did you think I was studying – photography? I don't intend to be blind *and* poor all my life.

RAY

So I do have enough money to get an apartment?

KEISHA

Enough to get a nice two-bedroom apartment close to campus.

RAY

What do I need with a two-bedroom apartment? And I don't see why it's got to be close to campus if I get the job with the railroad.

KEISHA

Who gonna water your plants when you out riding the rails? Who gonna keep an eye on your car? Who gonna be there to make sure nobody breaks in while you out gallivanting around in a boxcar? Who gonna get your money invested right? Ain't no shoebox interest. You gonna need a roommate, a smart roommate, and that's why you gonna need a two bedroom apartment cause that roommate sure ain't gonna be no sex toy.

RAY

I don't have any plants.

KEISHA

Everybody knows people give plants as housewarming presents. You gonna have plants out your derriere.

RAY

There's more to this than I thought. I might need a roommate.

KEISHA

And you don't need no loser roommate neither, no Ian. You need somebody steady, like a college student who gets a monthly check and gets college paid for. That kind of steady.

JACK

And just who on earth could that somebody be?

RAY

Beats me. I guess I could put an ad in the paper.

KEISHA

You dumb as a rock. *I'm* the damn roommate!

RAY

You're the damn roommate?

KEISHA

You can leave the "damn" part off, but yeah. I'm perfect. Only I mean it, I'm not talking no sex toy. I *could* be a sex toy if I wanted to be ... but that's a long way off and probly not in your lifetime.

RAY

The counselor told me becoming an engineer might seem like it was a lifetime away, but if I worked hard, it would happen before I knew it.

KEISHA

What on earth you talking about now?

RAY

The point I'm making is that if you really work hard at it, you can probably be a sex toy before you know it.

KEISHA

Listen up, Alfalfa. There's rules. I'm not living in a dump. And I want an apartment within walking distance of the campus ... with a pool. If I gonna start water skiing, I best learn to swim.

RAY

So are you still mad at me?

KEISHA

Ain't no silver medal in the hundred-meter stupid-dash for you. Nothing but gold.

(KEISHA reaches out toward RAY.)

Where's your face?

(RAY takes HER hands and places one on each side of HIS face. SHE runs HER hands lightly over HIS forehead, cheeks, and chin, stopping at HIS lips. KEISHA leans forward and gives RAY a long, lingering kiss.)

That feel like mad?

RAY

That feels like roommate of the year.

KEISHA

Don't get no ideas. That was a roommate kiss. That wasn't no sex toy kiss.

RAY

I'm glad. I don't think I could handle one of those sex toy kisses. I might have to work up to that.

(EDWIN KNOCKS at the door. There are some significant changes to his usual attire. Instead of a sport coat, EDWIN is wearing an old leather flight jacket. HE has on his usual tie and starched shirt, but HE'S also wearing jeans and tennis shoes. EDWIN is carrying an enormous box of donuts, a bouquet of flowers, a bottle of whiskey, and a wrapped present.)

EDWIN

Mind if I intrude?

JACK

You already have, but for once, no I don't.

(EDWIN starts piling everything on the sofa.)

EDWIN

I brought a few things.

JACK

Beware of Geeks bearing gifts.

EDWIN

Almost Virgil. 19 BC.

JACK

My point exactly. Good to see you're still on top of your egghead game in spite of that outfit.

(EDWIN turns around for everyone to see.)

EDWIN

You like?

RUTH

That's the Eddie jacket. You wore that a lot to the club, only not when it was 102 outside ... like today.

EDWIN

I'm making a statement tonight and I can't worry about how hot it is when I'm making a statement.

JACK

What's the statement and to whom are you making it?

EDWIN

The statement is "Here's the new Eddie, and Eddie has got one great looking girlfriend." (To RUTH) Nice dress. Just the right amount of cleavage to drive all those stuffed-shirts crazy ... and *that's* who I'm making the statement to. It's to every last person at the Department Chair dinner.

(EDWIN looks over at the sofa. HE grabs the Jack Daniels and hands it to RIPPER.)

This is for you. I wouldn't be the man I am today if it weren't for two Jack's ... Daniels and Ripper.

JACK

Same here. Thanks, Edwin.

EDWIN

Call me Eddie. That's what my parents have always called me. That's what Ruthie calls me. From here on, that's who I am.

(EDWIN reaches over, picks up the box of donuts and sets them on the desk.)

These are for everybody. I'll do my best not to sit on them this time.

(EDWIN reaches for the flowers and hands them to RUTH.)

And these are for you.

(EDWIN leans over and picks up the wrapped gift.)

I got you a little something else.

(RUTH sets the flowers on JACK'S desk. SHE takes the package nervously. SHE slowly removes the paper, opens the box, and gasps. RUTH takes out an emerald necklace.)

RUTH

It's ... it's ... beautiful.

EDWIN

It matches your eyes. I thought you might like something new to wear tonight.

(RUTH puts the necklace on.)

RUTH

So? How does it look?

EDWIN

Not half as good as you.

(EDWIN is suddenly startled; HE'S remembered something.)

I forgot! There's one other thing. Jack's always talked about his dog, and the other day he told me I should get one ... so I did!

JACK

You're kidding.

EDWIN

Not at all. Your dog is a Yellow Lab, right? I found an ad in the paper for some Yellow Lab puppies. I got the next-to-last one in the litter. A little girl. Maybe our dogs could play together sometime.

JACK

I wouldn't count on it.

RUTH

That's great, Eddie.

EDWIN

I want all of you to see him. He's out in the car.

JACK

You left a dog in the car on the hottest day of the year?

EDWIN

I couldn't exactly bring him in. Dogs aren't allowed in the building.

JACK

It never dawned on you that your new puppy might end up a little bit dead if you left him in the car in this heat?

EDWIN

Goodness, Jack. I left the car running with the A/C on high and the stereo playing. He seems to like country music. I guess I can get used to it.

RUTH

So what are we waiting for? I want to see him.

(Excited, EVERYONE but JACK exits the room. JACK picks up the urn with Curly's remains and holds it as LIGHTS DOWN ON SCENE.)

ACT II; SCENE THREE

(AT RISE: The scene opens on JACK as HE enters his office. HE'S carrying a carafe filled with water. HE pours the water into a brand new coffee maker behind his desk and starts brewing coffee. JACK looks at his watch.)

JACK

(To HIMSELF) Move it.

(JACK folds up the temporary chairs and takes them out into the hallway. JACK starts grabbing all the books and papers off the sofa. HE shoves stuff in drawers and places some on bookcases. Then HE does the same with the recliner. Finally JACK tears the plastic off both pieces of furniture. It's a lot of plastic and HE'S not sure what to do with it. Finally HE settles on the file cabinet and gets it all shoved into it, even though HE has to step in the drawer a couple times to do so. HE pats the sofa and chair, trying to air out the material. Satisfied, JACK sits behind his desk and opens up the classified section of the newspaper. HE runs his finger down one page, grabs a pen, and circles one of the ads. The PHONE RINGS and JACK picks it up.)

JACK

Ripper here ... You've got the essay scores? Great. Can you give them to me? By the way, what's passing? *(Pause)* Got it. How did Ruth Benson do?

(JACK writes something down.)

Ray Parker?

(JACK listens and writes.)

You're kidding. No, okay. What about Keisha Turner? *(Scribbles)* And Joplin Holmes?

(JACK writes down the last of the information.)

Thanks a lot ... I'll break the news to them.

(JACK hangs up and looks over at the ad. HE picks the phone back up and punches in a number.)

I'm calling about the Yellow Lab puppies. A friend told me you might have one left. *(Pause)* You do? A male? That's great. Look, I've got a class to teach in a few minutes, but I can come by as soon as it's over. Could you not sell him to anyone else? I promise I'll be there. This is important, really important. *(Pause)* The name is Jack ... J. T. Ripper. *(Pause)* As a matter of fact, I *am* that J. T. Ripper ... and I'm glad you loved it. *(Pause)* Sure, I'd be happy to autograph it for you when I get there.

(JACK hangs up and turns in his chair. HE'S pouring a cup of coffee as JOPLIN enters.)

JOPLIN

Oh ... My ... God. What are you drinking? And what happened to your furniture?

JACK

(Proudly) I just did some house cleaning. But who cares about that? I bought a coffee maker at K-Mart. The earth told me to get one. What do you think?

JOPLIN

I think your body may go into shock. You'd better go easy on that stuff. It looks pretty potent.

(JACK opens a drawer and gets out a second mug.)

JACK

How about joining me for a cup? Over on the couch.

JOPLIN

Are you sure you can trust me on the sofa? I used to have erotic dreams about it.

JACK

I'll take my chances.

(JACK pours a second cup and hands it to JOPLIN. THEY walk over to the sofa and sit. JACK raises his mug.)

A toast.

JOPLIN

To what?

JACK

To our last class together. You've served your time in remedial prison. I hear the warden is going to let you out.

(JOPLIN bursts into tears.)

JOPLIN

But ... but I don't want to be let out. Don't you dare say that. Why do you want to get rid of me? You've wanted to get rid of me since the day I walked in. Look ... I'm here on the couch with you and ... and ... nothing's happening. I don't want this class to end ... ever.

JACK

That's sort of the way college works. You take a class. It comes to an end. Then you take other classes and they come to an end. Finally, after you've paid the college a lot of money, you get a piece of paper of questionable value that says you don't have to take any more classes. That piece of paper is called a hunting permit. It gives you the right to go hunt for an entry-level job that you'll hate.

(JOPLIN does her best to stop crying.)

JOPLIN

This is no joke. I don't care about other classes ending. I care about this class ending. If I never see my algebra teacher again, that'd be just great. But I can't stand the thought of not seeing you anymore. I love you. We all love you.

JACK

I'll still be here. This isn't the only English class I teach.

JOPLIN

It won't be the same.

JACK

You're right. It won't. Maybe it'll be even better. We'll always be friends. And my sofa is always open to you ... for sitting and talking.

JOPLIN

Ripper, would you mind if I kissed you? Just once.

(JOPLIN wipes her face and takes a deep breath.)

I've never kissed a famous writer.

JACK

(Looking nervously around) I've never kissed a home-schooled virgin hippie. No tricks.

JOPLIN

A farewell kiss. That's all. I promise.

(JACK and JOPLIN both set their coffee on the floor. THEY lean forward, touch their lips together tentatively, and then THEY part.)

JOPLIN

And *you* were going to be my sex guru? I sure dodged a bullet on that one.

(JACK reaches out and pulls JOPLIN to him. HE kisses HER ... and kisses HER ... and kisses HER. Then HE lets HER go and leans back on the sofa.)

JOPLIN

That was ... that was ... splendidiferous. *(Pause)* You wouldn't maybe like to reconsider on the tutoring would you?

JACK

Lesson's over.

JOPLIN

I can't imagine taking the whole course.

JACK

Someday you will ... just not with me.

(There's a cough from the doorway. EDWIN is standing there.)

EDWIN

It's a good thing I'm so open-minded. I'd think the Canyon Lakes College sex guru was sitting on his couch making out with one of his students if I didn't know any better.

JACK

So it's a good thing you don't know any better.

EDWIN

Is Ruthie here yet?

JACK

(Glances around) Yeah, she's hiding under the desk ... waiting her turn with the sex guru.

(EDWIN cranes his neck to look.)

EDWIN

You'd better be kidding.

JACK

Sorry, Eddie. I wish I were. *(Calls out loudly)* Come on out, Ruth. Eddie knows what's up.

(RUTH has come up quietly behind EDWIN.)

RUTH

There must be something in the water around this place. You're *all* the dumbest bunch of white men I ever met. Keisha was right.

EDDIE

I knew you weren't hiding under Jack's desk.

KEISHA

Keisha's right about what? Has Ripper started doing Ruth now?

(EVERYONE turns around, startled. It's KEISHA and RAY.)

JACK

This is how rumors get started.

KEISHA

This is how legends get started. The new-and-improved Jack the Ripper strikes again.

RAY

I started this class not knowing what was going on and that's apparently how it's going to end.

KEISHA

I'll explain it to you later ... back at the apartment.

RUTH

You two got an apartment? That's great.

RAY

Only nobody brought us a plant.

(JACK reaches over for the sad-looking ivy HE'S always misting.)

JACK

Here go. This is Hector. I want you to have Hector as a housewarming present.

KEISHA

Who's Hector?

RAY

Hector is a plant ... I think.

KEISHA

Then Hector got a place in our home. Thank you, Jack Ripper.

JACK

It's the least I could do.

JOPLIN

That's for sure.

EDWIN

There's actually a sofa in here ... and a chair. Are you letting people sit on them?

JACK

What the hell. You can cuddle up on the couch with your girl. But leave room for Keisha and Ray. (*To JOPLIN*) The recliner is special. I'm the only person who has ever sat in that chair. You can be the second. Everybody get comfortable. I've got some news.

(EVERYONE gets settled, with JACK behind his desk.)

I talked to the Testing Center earlier today. Your scores are back.

(A nervous tension grips the room.)

They're in the mail to you even as we speak.

JOPLIN

You don't have them?

JACK

I didn't say that.

EDWIN

So? Are you going to tell us?

JACK

Bad news, Eddie ... you're the only Remedialite I didn't get a score for ... but I got scores for everyone else.

RUTH

And?

JACK

Do you want me to tell you privately or in front of everybody?

RAY

We started this together....

KEISHA

.... so I say we end it together.

(There is a chorus of agreement.)

JACK

Okay then, in no particular order ... Ruth?

(RUTH nods nervously.)

This is Not the End of the Play

Ending Intentionally Omitted for Security Purposes