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Product Code A0805-SP

The Psychopathology Of Everyday Life

A Comedy in One Act by

Fred D. White

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The Psychopathology of Everyday Life

by Fred D. White

CAST OF CHARACTERS

MEL, *a bookseller; late forties*

JULIA, *his wife, a painter; late forties*

NANCE, *their daughter, 17*

BOYD, *Nan's boyfriend, 17*

MUELLER, *Mel's psychiatrist, late fifties*

SIGMUND FREUD, *a ghost*

SETTING

Scene 1: Mel & Julia's NYC Studio Apartment

Scene 2: Mueller's Psychiatrist Office

The Psychopathology of Everyday Life

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A Comedy in One Act

SCENE 1

(AT RISE: Mel & Julia's studio apartment. Clothes are strewn about. Stage left; the bed is unmade, red scarves tied to the rails. Stage right; an easel with paintings propped along the wall. JULIA, in an artist's smock, is splattering paint onto a canvas with a fierce abandon that makes it hard to tell if she's in the throes of creative ecstasy or mad at the world. MEL, wearing heart-adorned boxers and an undershirt is singing "Call Me Irresponsible" as he sifts through the pile of clothes. He sustains the high note, agonizingly off-key for an agonizingly long time.)

JULIA

Are you in pain?

MEL

I wasn't planning to audition. Have you seen my pants?

JULIA

Did you look under the blankets?

MEL

I couldn't have been *that* impulsive.

JULIA

You're right. Try looking under Fifi.

MEL

You're joking. *(Pause)* No, you're not joking. Here, kittykitty!

(MEL crosses off; after a moment we hear a cat shrieking. MEL re-enters, sniffing his trousers. He shakes them out, sneezes, and puts them on.)

MEL, *Continued*

What could have motivated Fifi to sleep on my good slacks? I'll be itching all day! *(Pause)*
Now for the next big challenge: finding a shirt.

(MEL returns to the pile of clothes, retrieves a spiked collar [he rubs his neck from a sudden memory], fur-lined handcuffs, a cat-o-nine tails, and a vibrator, which he scrutinizes with awe, and then places on a pillow and covers gingerly.)

MEL, *Continued*

Honey, it looks like the Marquis de freaking SADE slept here!

JULIA

I should be so lucky.

MEL

I don't remember the vibrator.

JULIA

I do.

MEL

I'd say we're fodder for *The American Journal of Psychopathology*. (Finally retrieves a shirt, puts it on, and sniffs the sleeves curiously) Julia, did you accidentally drop one of my shirts in Fifi's litter box?

JULIA

You're the one who put her litter box next to the washing machine.

MEL

That does it. (*Removes his trousers*)

JULIA

What do you think you're doing?

MEL

I'm not going.

JULIA

Excuse me, but that sounded like you said "I'm not going."

MEL

Why be a phony about it? I don't want to go, I loathe the very idea of going, and you know that I don't want to go. Now, why would you want to go anywhere with someone who has such a bad attitude?

JULIA

You have . . . (*Setting the alarm on her watch*) . . . five minutes to find fresh clothes, put them on, grow a new personality, and be ready to walk cheerfully out the door.

MEL

Have you no compassion?

JULIA

Four minutes and fifty-five seconds.

MEL

Let me approach this from a more persuasive angle. Do you see these two feet, my love?

JULIA

Yep. Two left ones.

MEL

I rest my case.

JULIA

That's why we need to leave now, so we can take advantage of the free group lesson before the actual dancing begins.

MEL

You can't be serious. Those group lessons are worse than useless.

JULIA

(Shaking a brush in MEL's face) I refuse to argue with you about this!

MEL

(Pause) You've just splattered periwinkle blue all over my litterbox-laundered shirt.

JULIA

No wonder I've taken to abstract expressionism! *(Softening)* Mel, won't you do this for me? For the sake of our marriage?

MEL

Do you really think our marriage is on such shaky ground?

JULIA

In all honesty? *(An awkward silence)*

MEL

Oh, Julia, of course I'll go.

(He is about to embrace her, but after regarding her paint-spattered smock and the brushes she is holding, he thinks better of it. JULIA, simultaneously, is about to reach out to him, but likewise changes her mind.)

MEL, *Continued*

Consider yourself embraced.

JULIA

Look, I know how you feel about dancing . . . and about singing, and about sex . . . and about—

MEL

I get the picture! *(Pause)* But you're right: I'm one uptight dude, as Nance would say. I guess I should have my head examined.

JULIA

But you *are* having your head examined, darling—did you forget? In fact, Dr. Mueller called while you were out. He agreed to postpone your next session until tomorrow. And he asks that you return the favor by bringing him a bulb of garlic.

(MEL, distracted, moves toward the center of the room and tentatively tries out a dance maneuver—the fox trot. We hear him muttering, “Slowww-quickquick; slowww-quick quick, SLOWWW-quickquick...”)

MEL

(JULIA’s words finally soak in) What did you say he asked me to bring?

JULIA

Garlic. *Garlic!*

MEL

What does that lunatic want with a bulb of garlic?

JULIA

It’s for his wife—she wants to prepare a garlic chicken casserole. Dr. Mueller claims she always forgets something whenever she shops; this time it was the garlic. *(Pause)* Oh, baby, I can see that you’re really going to be one dapper fox-trotter.

MEL

(As if to spite himself) SLO-O-WWW-quickquick . . . SLO-OW-OW-OWWW-quickquick. I feel like a freaking windup toy.

(He trips, quickly recovers, swaying his arms as if to compensate for his gaffe.)

MEL, *Continued*

Fred Astaire, eat your heart out.

JULIA

Hey, don’t go dislocating your bones. I need you to be limber . . . for all sorts of things.

MEL

If I get any more limber I’ll be ready for a circus side show, not a ballroom.

JULIA

And will I be your main *ball*-room attraction afterwards?

(JULIA pulls off her smock and begins unbuttoning her blouse.)

MEL

Tell you what: we’ll skip the dancing; let’s just hop into bed.

JULIA

(Flirtatiously) Dancing makes good foreplay, darling.

MEL

And why is that?

JULIA

Don't you know? Because I like it better when you caress and twirl me and hold me tight, and enfold me...in public.

MEL

You are such an exhibitionist!

JULIA

Yes, and it's high time you became one too.

MEL

Sorry, the less I'm noticed, the happier I am.

JULIA

Dance with me!

(She grabs his hands and for a brief moment they dance, what by some stretch of the imagination, might pass as a fox trot.)

JULIA, *Continued*

Hey-y-y...Fred Astaire ain't got nothin' on you, babe.

MEL

Yeah, right.

JULIA

Oh, come on, you need to eat up the bullshit once in a while.

MEL

I resent that crude scatological metaphor.

JULIA

Of course you do. Okay, then: Be *playful*. Is that better?

MEL

I...don't know how to be playful.

JULIA

(No longer in a dancing mood) I actually believe you mean that...

MEL

(Hastily, realizing his mistake) But I can learn to be!

JULIA

Oh yeah? Prove it.

MEL

I love you more than the universe.

JULIA

I had no idea the universe loved me at all; but keep up the sweet talk, buster, and I might just *cancel* your psychiatrist's appointment.

MEL

(Pause; feeling awkward; finally gestures at the easel) So, Mrs. Kandinsky, how is your new commission coming along?

JULIA

I thought you'd never ask. *(Retrieves the canvas; hoists it up)* It's part of a triptych. This is going to be the middle panel.

MEL

It's, uhm, jolting.

JULIA

Why, thank you! Is it sufficiently erotic?

MEL

How can abstract expressionism be erotic?

JULIA

Mel, what has gotten into you? Or should I say, what has leaked out of you? Can't you really see the erotic elements? Does it not titillate your libido as you're caught up in its ochre and violet swirls?

MEL

Uhm... *(Peers more intently at the painting)* Hmmmm...

JULIA

No titillated libido, huh?

MEL

It...takes me awhile.

JULIA

Yeah, I've noticed.

(MEL is clearly hurt by this; he starts to say something but desists.)

MEL

(Paragon of self-control) Who did you say is commissioning it?

JULIA

I did not say. But it's the Outré Gallery.

MEL

Never heard of it.

JULIA

The owner is just getting established. I sort of knew him in art school. He purchased my last painting because he said it aroused him to the point of—

MEL

You know, come to think of it, it does make me want to put my arms around you. Is that a sufficiently erotic response?

JULIA

Coming from you? I'm feeling giddy.

(Theatrics: MEL catches her in a swoon; they embrace. On impulse, he leads her in a waltz, humming a few bars from "On the Beautiful Blue Danube." After a moment, NANCE knocks, then enters—and freezes.)

NANCE

Oops—wrong family.

JULIA

Nance, honey, welcome to our loving home.

NANCE

I don't believe it. You two are actually *touching* each other.

JULIA

(As MEL twirls her) Isn't love wonderful?

NANCE

You're on something, right Dad? It's okay; you can tell me.

JULIA

(Disengaging from MEL) Is there something you want to tell us, sweetie?

NANCE

Yes, but please don't stop dancing. I may not see this again in my lifetime.

MEL

You just like watching your old dad waddle around like a goose.

NANCE

It's more appealing than your rock-of-Gibraltar imitation, Daddy.

(NANCE sashays up to him, extends her arms, but he doesn't take them.)

NANCE, *Continued*

Well, I guess the Rock of Gibraltar wins out.

(She twirls solo around the room.)

JULIA

(To NANCE) The answer is no.

NANCE

(Continuing to twirl about) But I haven't asked for anything.

JULIA

After five minutes of your not asking, I already know what you want, and my answer is no.

NANCE

It isn't like I want your permission to join a sex club or anything.

(She suddenly notices the scarves on the bed, inspects them with exaggerated movements, then looks at JULIA, then MEL, then back to JULIA, a wide grin forming.)

NANCE, *Continued*

Surely I'm dreaming. It looks like you two have already *started* a sex club.

JULIA

Make it "you *one*."

NANCE

Daddy...?

MEL

We are not going to have this conversation. Now tell us what you really came to see us about.

NANCE

Very well: May I have your permission to join the Air Force?

JULIA / MEL

(In unison) NO!!

NANCE

(Pause) I guess that means no.

JULIA

Sweetie, what on earth made you decide to—

NANCE

Nothing “on earth” actually; the Air Force is going to be my ticket to NASA.

MEL

NASA!

JULIA

But Nance, you don’t even like riding in elevators.

NANCE

The very thought of piloting a plane at Mach 2, or—or breaking free of earth’s gravity, is so *arousing*.

MEL

Honey, if I dance with you, will you change back into my little girl?

NANCE

I know you think you’re joking, Dad, but I can sense the underlying regret. You can’t bear to think of me as grown up, as a woman.

MEL

Why rush it? Five years from now, you’ll be praying for the passing years to slow down.

NANCE

You just don’t get it! If I were your son, you’d be patting me on the back and saying, “Go for it, big guy. *Ad astra!*”

MEL

That’s not true. I—I’d want him to keep on being my little boy.

JULIA

It isn’t easy for parents to see their kids turn into adults so fast.

NANCE

(Forcing a laugh) So fast?!

JULIA

Why is that funny?

NANCE

Have you forgotten what it was like waiting until you were old enough to be on your own? Didn't you and Dad elope before you turned-twenty-one? What was the hurry? (*Turning to MEL*) Huh? Did you knock Mom up, Daddy? Was that the reason?

MEL

I—

NANCE

It had to be. You two got married—eloped—in May; I came along in January... (*Counting the months on her fingers*) Eight months! Shotgun! I was your love-child!

MEL

But I—

NANCE

Go ahead, 'fess up. It won't traumatize me. In fact—

MEL

I'm the one being traumatized here.

NANCE

I am so sick of your double standards.

(*NANCE storms off slamming the door behind.*)

MEL

(*Addressing the slammed door*) But I was in love with . . .

JULIA

(*Pause*) Correction, Casanova, you were in *lust* with me.

MEL

But I love you now.

JULIA

I'll settle for *lust* now.

MEL

(*Eager to change the subject*) I think our daughter just accused us of being phonies. Are we phonies, Julia?

JULIA

I don't know what to think.

MEL

Maybe we never should have become parents.

JULIA

Mel! What an awful thing to say.

MEL

I know.

JULIA

Maybe we're both over-reacting. *(Pause)* Imagine our Nance-kins, our baby, piloting a fighter jet—or the Space Shuttle.

MEL

God forbid. One is downright suicidal. The other is...downright suicidal.

JULIA

Look at it this way: she'll be thoroughly trained to deal with any dangers. And besides, NASA retired the Shuttle fleet [three] years ago.

MEL

Yeah, for something a lot more dangerous.

JULIA

You know what, Mel? You're suffering from a particularly virulent strain of cynicism.

MEL

I just want my little girl back!

(A knock at the door; JULIA gets it and BOYD enters, out of breath.)

BOYD

Have you guys seen Nance?

JULIA

He's the guy; I'm the gal. Nance just took off for the Delta Quadrant.

MEL

—while disowning her parents in the process.

BOYD

Did she say when she'd be back? It's pretty urgent.

MEL

Were you planning to propose to her this evening, or what?

BOYD

Huh? Oh no, this is about her—what she proposed—I mean, brought up—or rather, *formulated*—today, in physics. Mr. Bullock was so flabbergasted that he rang up a physicist at M.I.T, just so they could, uhm, you know, validate her idea—her *theory*, and—

MEL

Listen, Boyd, why don't you sit down, catch your breath, and then try to tell us what happened in physics class today, preferably in coherent English.

BOYD

You'd be incoherent too if you found out what I just did about your daughter.

JULIA

We're incoherent enough. Now give us the big scoop.

BOYD

You know, there are reasons why teenagers run away from home. Or elope!

MEL

Ah, so you do want to propose to her.

BOYD

What would be the point? She's going to apply to the Air Force Academy, and eventually join NASA. If I really cared about her, she said, I would enroll with her or wait patiently for her to finish—

JULIA

On second thought, Boyd, why *don't* you propose to her? Seriously! Do it. Do it today, in fact. In fact, elope with her? You could both lie about your ages. I hear that it's easier than ever to get your birth certificates forged.

MEL

Julia!

BOYD

I only came over to tell Nance the good news, and that she's a genius. Man, did she dazzle those professors at M.I.T. (*Pause*) Well?

MEL

Well what?

BOYD

You're supposed to ask, "*What* did she do that dazzled the professors at M.I.T.?"

JULIA

Just tell us.

BOYD

You're no fun at all.

MEL

If it has anything to do with piloting fighter jets, I won't be impressed.

BOYD

Fighter jets? (*Momentarily confused*) No, no—the “what” I'm referring to is a loophole in the cosmic speed limit. It seems that Nance has found one!

MEL

Found what?

BOYD

A loophole!

MEL

I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about.

JULIA

Wait—are you telling us that Nance got a speeding ticket?!

BOYD

(*Edge of patience*) I am telling you that Nance has apparently unlocked one of the most profound secrets of the universe. She's a genius! Do you know that she has the entire Periodic Table memorized? Right down to the atomic weight of Lawrencium!

MEL

To tell you the truth, she doesn't ever talk about—

BOYD

Hey, I bet I know where I can find her. She's pissed off at you guys, right?

JULIA

Try livid with rage.

BOYD

Okay! That means she's gone to the park—she likes going inside the gazebo to sulk.

JULIA

That's where *I* go to sulk!

BOYD

I can't wait to tell her the good news! (*Rushes off*)

MEL

Wait, Boyd—you haven't— *(Pause; then to JULIA)* Whatever you do, do *not* cancel my psychiatrist's appointment.

JULIA

I was planning to set up a session for myself.

(Silence.)

MEL

Are we scrubbing the ballroom adventure?

JULIA

Yes, Casanova, you can look forward to an exciting evening between the pages of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*.

MEL

I was merely asking. I promised we would go dancing, so let's go.

JULIA

I'm no longer in the mood.

MEL

Well...then! Let me get you back in the mood!

JULIA

(Looking intently at MEL) All these years we've been married...

MEL

Yes?

JULIA

And I still don't know you. How is that possible?

MEL

I could say the same thing about you. *(Gesturing at the bed)* I mean, where did all of this come from?

JULIA

All of this what?

MEL

You know...

JULIA

You can't even *say* it anymore. Sex toys! Say it!

MEL

Right...

JULIA

(Rolling her eyes) Some of it came from Frederick's of Hollywood. As for the fur-line handcuffs, I had to order those from—

MEL

What I started to say, Julia, was what made you want to...you know...?

JULIA

You mean, when did it dawn on me that I rather like uninhibited, free-range, no-holes-barred *sex*? When did it dawn on me that I've been *repressing* things for the past eighteen years?

MEL

But a woman your age...

JULIA

Gawd, you make it sound like I'm in my seventies. I'm only forty-eight, for God's sake. Better make that a high-priority topic when you see Dr. Mueller—assuming that *he* understands women, dyed-in-the-wool Freudian that he is.

MEL

I shouldn't have to get help from a shrink to learn how to satisfy my wife...Should I? *(Pause)* That wasn't a rhetorical question!

(JULIA does not answer. Instead, she returns her attention to her painting. MEL watches her, tries to catch her gaze, but she keeps her gaze riveted on her painting.)

MEL

I get the feeling there's something you're not telling me.

JULIA

Oh?

MEL

Will you step out from behind your barricade and talk to me?

(JULIA throws her brush down, wipes her hands with a rag, throws that down and emerges, defiant.)

JULIA

Okay. I'll talk to you.

MEL

Answer my question.

JULIA

I don't like your confrontational attitude.

MEL

I'm not trying to be confrontational. I simply asked you if—

JULIA

Yes!

MEL

Yes what?

(JULIA loses her composure, turns away to the bed, clasping the rails.)

MEL, *Continued*

Yes what?

(They stare at each other for a somber moment.)

MEL, *Continued*

You're unhappy.

JULIA

(Not looking up; barely audible) No, dear, I am not unhappy. I am *miserable*.

(Silence. After a moment MEL impatiently picks up a book, is about to toss it aside, thinks better of it, opens it, and then sits down to read it in earnest. JULIA, suddenly infuriated, starts to cry and flings herself onto the bed. After a few seconds she lifts her head, curious, and retrieves the vibrator from under the sheets. MEL is now reading with rapt attention. JULIA holds the vibrator up to the light. After a moment she slides it between her breasts and tosses her head back.)

(BLACKOUT.)

End of Scene 1

SCENE 2

(AT RISE: MUELLER'S office; complete with a psychiatrist's couch, a chair, and a table. Posters of Groucho Marx and Sigmund Freud hang on the wall. MUELLER rushes in and paces back and forth across the room Groucho-style [long, gliding strides with knees bent]. He places a notebook and pen on the table, checks his watch, waddles over to the wings to see if anyone is coming, mutters something under his breath, sits down, gets up again, takes out a cigar, changes his mind and puts it away. He checks his watch again, and then waddles downstage to address the audience.)

MUELLER

If you ask me, people who practice psychiatry ought to have their heads examined. *(Pause)* Well, that's my opinion even if you *don't* ask me. *(Pause; turns to the Groucho poster)* How did you do it, you nut case? Maybe it was the way you jiggled those ridiculous eyebrows. Or that mischievous glint in your eye combined with your leering expression and nasal voice. *(Checks his watch)* Ten minutes late. Technically I could charge him for the time, and he knows it—but he also knows that I won't do it. Is that gall or what? He thinks of me as a friend—not good; there has got to be professional distance! “Listen, Mel,” I tell him, “someday, after the treatment is over, then maybe we can be friends, and you can invite me over for a hot pastrami sandwich and we can discuss existentialism and the inevitable death of the universe. But right now, you're the patient and I'm—”

(PHONE RINGS; MUELLER grabs it.)

MUELLER, *Continued*

Yes? Well, hallelujah, it's about time. Tell him to come in.

(He whips out a comb, runs it through his beard, and goes to the door just as it swings open, knocking him in the head.)

MUELLER, *Continued*

Idiot! Can't you be more— *(Catching himself)* Welcome, Mel. How is my favorite patient this afternoon?

MEL

Don't patronize me. This isn't a pleasure cruise for me either.

MUELLER

You're looking good, Mel. Honestly. The ghostly pallor has intensified. Have a couch.

MEL

If you don't mind, I'll sit in the chair. Lying on a psychiatrist's couch is so—*trite*.

MUELLER

(Wriggling his eyebrows) Then try telling the truth on my couch.

(Pause. MEL stares at him morosely.)

MUELLER

Stop staring. All right, so I don't have a future in comedy. *(Pause)* Sit. Sit down already. *(With a flourish)* Ze clock of ze head-shrinkah eez running!

(MEL shakes his head and sits. MUELLER pulls a cigar out from his lapel pocket.)

MUELLER, *Continued*

Mind if I smoke?

MEL

I must not have told you—

MUELLER

(About to light up) Eh?

MEL

—that the smell of cigar smoke makes me want to *strangle* people.

(MUELLER considers this carefully; he returns the cigar to his pocket.)

MUELLER

Did you remember the garlic?

MEL

The what?

MUELLER

The garlic! The bulb of garlic!

MEL

What are you talking about?

MUELLER

I asked if you would do me a small favor, one tiny favor for someone who postponed your appointment at the last minute, costing me good money; one tiny favor for someone who is trying to save your brain—to bring me a bulb of garlic for my favorite dish, garlic chicken paprika. My wife ran out!

MEL

Your wife ran out on you?

MUELLER

My wife ran out of garlic! Do you have a screw loose?

MEL

Me? A screw loose? How could you think such a thing?

MUELLER

Did you bring the garlic or not?

MEL

This is all Julia's doing.

MUELLER

No, it was my wife's doing. Or not doing.

MEL

I'm talking about seeing a shrink. I'm not going to go through with this. *(Rises to leave)*

MUELLER

Where do you think you're going?

MEL

No head-shrinkage for me today—or ever. It's hopeless. I'm afraid I'll just have to learn to live with my insanity.

MUELLER

Sit back down; you're in no condition to leave.

MEL

(As he sits) You're right. I need to talk—to someone. Anyone.

MUELLER

Hah.

MEL

What do you mean, "Hah"? What is that supposed to mean?

MUELLER

It means talk! What do you think it means? Talk! What else? No, dance the jitterbug for me instead.

MEL

(Leaping to his feet) Do NOT utter the word "dance" in my presence.

MUELLER

One more outburst from you and I'm certifying you for the happy house. *(Pause)*

MEL

Don't you mean "funny farm"?

MUELLER

What? Yes, of course—what was I thinking? Happy? Funny? That must have been a slip of the tongue! Yes, I just made a Freudian slip!

(MUELLER grabs his notebook and sits on the couch and begins taking notes.)

MEL

In any case, I probably am certifiable for the happy hou—funny farm.

MUELLER

(Distracted from his note-taking) Em?

MEL

I'm referring to why I blew my cork when you mentioned dancing.

(MUELLER keeps on writing. MEL waits with growing impatience.)

MEL, *Continued*

I'm paying you two hundred dollars an hour so you can psychoanalyze yourself, is that it?

MUELLER

I'll give you an extra few minutes. Don't blow a fuse. *(Returns to his notes)* This can't wait.

MEL

(Walking over to the posters of Groucho Marx and Sigmund Freud) How am I supposed to take all of this seriously with Sigmund Freud leering at me?

MUELLER

Groucho is leering at you; Freud is admiring his cigar.

MEL

What kind of lunatic psychiatrist hangs a poster of Groucho Marx in his office?

MUELLER

I heard that.

MEL

Are we going to have a session now or what?

MUELLER

Soitenly!

MEL

“Soitenly”?

MUELLER

Wait—that was Curly from the Three Stooges—never mind. *(Clears his throat)* So, my unstable friend, why do you hate to jitterbug?

MEL

I hate to *dance*. Any kind of dance. I hate the *idea* of dance. I hate the *word* “dance.”

MUELLER

Such hostility. Why should the mere mention of—of you know what—do that to you?

MEL

Do you really want to know? It’s a long story.

(A la Groucho, MUELLER salaciously strokes the length of an imaginary cigar.)

MUELLER

The longer the better.

(MEL starts to speak but something catches in his throat. He leans forward, head in hands, and starts crying.)

MUELLER, *Continued*

Ah! Now we’re getting somewhere.

MEL

You call this getting somewhere? I’m an emotional wreck!

MUELLER

You bet your life you are!

MEL

My life is a shambles. Do you have any idea what it’s like to suddenly realize your life is utterly worthless?

MUELLER

You’re asking me? Or is that a rhetorical question?

MEL

(Ignoring him) —to suddenly realize that your life could end this minute and nobody, not anyone, not even your wife or your daughter, would give a damn? That your half century on earth has amounted to one thing only: offspring.

MUELLER

That’s what you think of your gifted and beautiful daughter? As “offspring”? You make her sound like a broken slinky.

MEL

I love my daughter more than my life—don't go twisting my words. I'm talking about her feelings toward me—filial love, yes, for all that's worth. But nothing more. Aside from that I'm irrelevant.

MUELLER

Why do you place filial love so low on your totem pole, if you'll forgive the phallic pun?

MEL

She wants to pilot jets. She wants to go to Mars.

MUELLER

Do you think she'd be having those dreams if she hadn't been raised in a way that encouraged her to dream about such possibilities?

MEL

(Getting up and pacing for a moment) This is going to sound awful.

MUELLER

I'll brace myself.

MEL

I'm jealous!

MUELLER\

Of me? Oh, tut.

MEL

Of my daughter! Of my wife!

MUELLER

Ah.

MEL

My wife gets commissioned for her erotic expressionistic triptychs! My daughter is unlocking the secrets of the universe!

MUELLER

That should make you feel proud.

MEL

Of course I feel proud; that's not the point. I need to fulfill my potential too!

MUELLER

You own and manage a bookstore, yes?

MEL

Unfortunately, yes. I'm an anachronism. I can only imagine what my wife really thinks of me.

MUELLER

Tell me.

MEL

You really want to know?

MUELLER

No, I really only want your money.

MEL

Sorry, dumb question.

MUELLER

(Whipping out a pocket calculator) Based on two hundred dollars an hour, that dumb question cost you...one dollar and thirty-five cents.

MEL

I devoted myself to helping Julia advance her artistic career. I quit college to take over my grandfather's bookshop so she could go to art school. I—

MUELLER

Loving wives show such devotion to their husbands, so why shouldn't loving husbands make that kind of sacrifice for their wives?

(PHONE RINGS.)

MEL

I'm not complaining about that. I'm just saying—

MUELLER

Excuse me a moment. *(Answers phone)* What is it? Oh, hello dear. What? I can't hear you. I can't compete with *The Days of Our Lives*. Turn down that god-forsaken— *(Pause)* That's better. What? Again with the garlic? I don't know! I can't get a straight answer out of him. Wait—wait. I'll try again. *(To MEL)* Did you remember the garlic or not?

MEL

No.

MUELLER

(Pointing emphatically to the receiver) Say it louder!

MEL

NO!!!

MUELLER

No what?

MEL

What do you mean, “No what?”

MUELLER

No, you didn’t forget the garlic, or no, you didn’t *remember* the freaking garlic?

MEL

I didn’t remember—I mean, I forgot. Won’t you forgive me? I forgot!

MUELLER

(Into the receiver) There, did you hear that? So stop blaming me. I tried! *(Hangs up)* God, how I tried!

MEL

It’s not the end of the world, for Christ’s sake. You can stop and get a bulb of garlic on the way home. What’s the problem?

MUELLER

The problem, mister know-it-all—the problem is that I don’t pass by any grocery store on the way home. I catch the bus directly outside this building and I get off directly across the street from my apartment.

MEL

What are you telling me—that you can’t go a few blocks out of your way? Not even to save your marriage?

MUELLER

No!

MEL

And I’m supposed to be the one who’s mentally disturbed.

MUELLER

You want to hear the truth? I’m a doctor, not an errand boy. I’m not supposed to be the one scrounging around for groceries. I’ve got a medical degree, a private practice. So many years have gone down the toilet, and now that I have a chance to make something of myself, I’m supposed to be combing the streets of Manhattan for garlic? Do you know what that makes me look like...in *bed*?

MEL

Like a loving and devoted husband? I thought women found that sexy.

MUELLER

It makes me feel dickless.

MEL

Who would ever guess that garlic could do that to a man? *(Rising)* Look, I think you'd better lie down; you're in worse shape than I am.

MUELLER

Don't be ridiculous. *(Pause)* You think so? *(He lies down.)* Oh my...this does feel good. Thank you.

MEL

(Pause) So, you were saying, you think you've wasted a big chunk of your life...

MUELLER

Don't get me started.

MEL

Yet you've succeeded in establishing yourself in a difficult and competitive profession.

MUELLER

Distinguished!

MEL

You sound bitter.

MUELLER

Don't get me started, I said.

MEL

Sorry.

MUELLER

(Rising; crosses to Freud poster) Think of what *he* accomplished years before he reached my age!

MEL

Tell me.

MUELLER

It was extraordinary. Miraculous. *The Interpretation of Dreams! The Psychopathology of Everyday Life!*

FREUD

(Stepping out from behind the poster) Not only those books, Herr Mueller, but dozens of papers, not to mention lectures. And I had *disciples*: Ettington, Rank, Abraham, Jones, Ferenzetti, Sachs.

MUELLER

Rub it in, why don't you.

FREUD

Of course I'll rub it in. Transfer all your self-loathing to me!

MUELLER

Be careful, Dr. Freud: you may absorb more self-loathing than you can handle.

FREUD

There's nothing a ghost can't handle. (*Notices MEL*) Who are you?

MEL

Okay. I'm not really seeing this. That's why I'm here, right? I'm out of my gourd?

FREUD

Quite the contrary. You see what you were meant to see. Exactly what your psyche needs.

MEL

Dr. Freud?

FREUD

Yes?

MEL

You're really real?

FREUD

As real as any ghost.

MEL

But I don't believe in ghosts!

FREUD

Ah, but "there are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are –"

MEL

Oh please, don't quote Hamlet to me; he was crazier than a loon.

FREUD

I rest my case.

MUELLER

What Dr. Freud means, Mel, is that it takes a bit of lunacy to see beyond this dull, drab veil of tears.

MEL

Well, who am I to argue with the two of you? (*Extending his hand to FREUD*) What a pleasure! My name is Mel; I'm one of Dr. Mueller's patients.

FREUD

(*Shaking MEL's hand; then, in a Groucho manner*) This yokel has patients? You can't be serious. And if you are serious, you're probably out of patience.

MEL

Oh no, you too?

FREUD

I beg your pardon?

(*FREUD removes a cigar from his vest pocket, snips off the end with a pocket knife, and is about to light up*)

MUELLER

I wouldn't do that if I were you.

FREUD

Do what?

MUELLER

Mel throws a fit when he smells cigar smoke.

FREUD

(*To MEL*) I advise you to take a deep breath as I light up and think peaceful thoughts.

MEL

You look like Sigmund Freud, but you sure don't talk like him. In fact, you remind me of—

FREUD

I don't want to be reminded of people that I remind you of, young man.

(*FREUD lights his cigar.*)

MEL

Come to think of it, I rather like the idea that the great Sigmund Freud was influenced by a slapstick comedian.

FREUD

Groucho Marx was in many ways a mentor to me.

MEL

You admit it?

FREUD

(Wriggling his eyebrows) When you've been dead for more than seventy years, young man, you can admit to anything. *(To MUELLER)* Come to think of it, I've been dead a whole lot longer than you've been alive.

MUELLER

What has that got to do with anything?

FREUD

I'm still rubbing it in.

MEL

Do you—do the two of you do this often?

MUELLER

Confer?

FREUD

On the contrary, we prefer to dis-confer.

MEL

You know, I'm starting to see how humor can be good therapy.

FREUD

Good self-therapy, too. If I were still alive, I'd write joke books, not psychoanalytic tomes. I would have been much happier. I'd rather tell jokes than anal-ize them.

MUELLER

Ah-hah! The great elucidator of the Freudian slip has just made a Freudian slip!

FREUD

Mein Gott—I said anal-ize when I meant to say analyze. What an extraordinary slip of the tongue.

(He takes out a notepad and begins scribbling.)

MEL

Excuse me, Dr. Freud—

FREUD

Wait...wait. *(Continues scribbling)* Why do you think I got mixed up in this screwball profession in the first place? For my health? *(Pause)* Yes! You thought I was employing a hyperbole. Yes, *natürlich*, for my health! For my psychological health. The dreams I was having then...*mein Gott!*

MEL

Ah, yes, I recall reading somewhere that you were obsessed with your own Oedipal—

MUELLER

What is this nonsense? Have I been so absorbed in my own woes that Freud himself is obliged to rise from the dead and take over my practice?

FREUD

I knew that I could be of help.

MEL

I'm the patient here.

FREUD

(As if noticing him for the first time) How may I be of help?

MUELLER

Never mind, Sigmund. I'll deal with my own patients, thank you.

MEL

Look, I don't care which of you takes care of me, but I need to be taken care of now. I'm losing it.

FREUD

(To MUELLER) What does he mean, "Losing it"?

MUELLER

Contemporary American slang, Herr Doktor. He is saying that he's in danger of losing control of his rational faculties.

FREUD

Ah, *verstehe*.

(FREUD scrutinizes MEL as if examining a specimen under a microscope.)

MEL

Well? Aren't you going to ask me?

FREUD

Ask you what?

MEL

Why I'm losing it. *Why* I'm losing control of my rational faculties.

FREUD

Very well, I shall ask.

MUELLER

So, you're assigning yourself to my patient after all?

FREUD

I am the mentor, yes? Observe a master at work. Now dim these infernal lights; I'm a ghost, after all. It's as if the sun itself is blazing away inside this room.

MUELLER

It's called fluorescent lighting.

FREUD

Unheimlich! (As MUELLER dims the lights.) Ah, *danke*. I believe that a direct relationship exists between the intensity of illumination and the ability of the latent consciousness to articulate itself, *ja?* Now then—Mel, you say your name is? Tell me, Mel, why you are, as you say, “losing it”?

MUELLER

He can't deal with authority, including conjugal authority.

FREUD

Stumm! This is between the patient and me. You had your chance. (To MEL) Is it that you prize self-sufficiency highly?

MEL

I don't want to be held accountable to anyone.

FREUD

What about to an employer?

MEL

I own a secondhand bookshop that I inherited twenty-five years ago from my grandfather.

FREUD

A successful business, I take it?

MEL

Are you joking? Who can make a living dealing in books in this technology-crazed day and age, let alone used books?

FREUD

So how do you manage?

MUELLER

How do you think he manages? His wife, of course. She's a successful artist and art teacher. Important galleries on both coasts exhibit her work. She gets commissions from—

MEL

Nothing I do is marketable. Nothing! I'm an anachronism.

FREUD

But your work does satisfy you, *ja*?

MEL

That is true. I love my book-cluttered shop. I read constantly while I'm there. I encourage customers to browse as long as they wish. I invite them to sit down on one of my threadbare chairs and read, maybe share with me some of their daydreams, their fantasies. Many of my customers are aspiring writers, bursting with stories to tell. "Stay a while," I tell them. "What's the hurry? Here is a better place to be than out there in that texting, tweeting cyber-jungle." I always play soft classical music to make them forget their woes. Bach, mainly: perfect for contemplation. And Chopin, of course—especially the *Ballades*. I just wish they'd buy more books from me; I have two rents to pay! But I never push. I hate people who push and finagle!

MUELLER

Listen to him. A life of intellectual indolence he craves. Not on this planet, Melvin Albert!

MEL

Don't call me by my middle name. I'm a disgrace to my namesake.

FREUD

And who might that be?

MUELLER

Whom do you suppose?

FREUD

Queen Victoria's husband? *Wunderbarish* cigars! No? Albert Schweitzer, then? King Albert of Belgium?

MUELLER

Even more famous.

FREUD

(*Snapping his fingers*) Albert Einstein! *Natürlich!* I met him once.

MEL

(*To MUELLER*) Didn't you ever hear of doctor-patient confidentiality?

MUELLER

Why should being named after Einstein be confidential? (*To FREUD*) The man has serious inhibitions, as you can see. It may be impossible to treat him.

FREUD

All is possible with psychoanalysis. I've staked my reputation on that belief.

MEL

I'm relieved to hear that.

FREUD

But I can't treat you by myself. Herr MUELLER! You must take charge; I shall assist, but only as an advisor. I don't know enough about your modern world to treat this poor fellow.

MUELLER

Poor fellow my backside. He's a *qvetch*, is what he is. (To MEL) You're a *qvetch*! So don't go saying that I talk behind your back.

MEL

I'm not a *qvetch*, I'm a nervous wreck.

MUELLER

No, I'd say you're manic-depressive.

FREUD

Hmm, that seems excessive. I'd say his temperament's...repressive.

MEL

No, my problem's that I'm much too passive. My wife is so assertive! I might even say aggressive.

MUELLER

She thinks you're too submissive!

MEL

At least I'm not dismissive.

MUELLER

But you aren't sufficiently seductive!

MEL

But I've always been protective!

MUELLER

His personality is fundamentally regressive.

FREUD

One needs to be . . . comedic!

MUELLER

This is going nowhere fast. Labels are useless. Relationships are meaningless unless there's empathy, respect, compassion. A—

MEL

But I—

MUELLER

What about *passion* along with the compassion?

FREUD

Stop interrupting!

(FREUD starts pacing about, affecting a Groucho walk, but doing it wrong.)

FREUD, *Continued*

A bloated ego can destroy harmony.

MUELLER

Sigmund, that isn't how Groucho does it.

FREUD

How can you be so sure?

MUELLER

Trust me. You're not the only one afflicted with Groucho-envy.

(MUELLER demonstrates the Groucho walk; FREUD watches, nods, and then follows suit. For the next minute or so FREUD and MUELLER strut about the stage—first separately, and then in tandem, to the rhythm of Groucho's theme song—either via their own humming or to an audio recording. Finally they are interrupted by MEL's agonizing cry for help; Brando could not have cried "Stelllaaaa!" with greater anguish.)

MEL

I need hellllllp!!

FREUD

(Thoroughly enjoying the promenade) Don't have kittens. I'm thinking about paying you, despite my better judgment, a house call.

MEL

Would you really?

FREUD

(Jiggling his eyebrows) What better place to observe the patient than with the missus, at the scene of the crime. *(To MUELLER)* Will you accompany me as an advisor?

MUELLER

Of course, but I warn you: this lunatic will exhaust your resources.

FREUD

I graciously accept the challenge.

MEL

You may want to revise your *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* after you've finished with me.

FREUD

Pah! I'm done with writing. I want to meet people! Maybe even dance a little! (*Rubs his hands in anticipation*)

MEL

(*Covering his ears*) Aargh!

MUELLER

We could take this act to the Catskills!

MEL

Excellent suggestion! We'll laugh our hang-ups away up there!

FREUD

Vaudeville will live again!

MEL

I'll bring my wife! I'll bring my daughter!

MUELLER

Splendid idea! There's nothing like a week of revelry and ribaldry to unshackle the psyche.

(*PHONE RINGS; MUELLER answers.*)

MUELLER

Yes? . . . Why yes! This is most fortuitous! Yes, invite them in! (*To MEL*) Your wife and daughter are here! They need to tell you something urgently.

MEL

What can be so urgent?

FREUD

I should like very much to meet the women in your life, Mel.

(*JULIA and NANCE enter; JULIA ceremoniously hands MUELLER a bulb of garlic.*)

JULIA

My absent minded husband forgot—

MUELLER

Bless you, my dear!

(Kisses her hand—then tries to embrace her, but she backs away, wagging a finger.)

This is Not the End of the Play

Ending Intentionally Omitted for Security Purposes