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The Psychopathology of Everyday Life

A Comedy in One Act by

Fred D. White
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
by Fred D. White
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 spattering 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?

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

MEL
Tell you what: we’ll skip the dancing; let’s just hop into bed.
(Flirtatiously) Dancing makes good foreplay, darling.

JULIA

And why is that?

MEL

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

JULIA

You are such an exhibitionist!

MEL

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.

MEL

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!!
(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!

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.

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.
Maybe we never should have become parents.

Mel! What an awful thing to say.

I know.

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

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

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.

Yeah, for something a lot more dangerous.

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

I just want my little girl back!

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

Have you guys seen Nance?

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

—while disowning her parents in the process.

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

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, uh, 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!

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…

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!
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?

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.)

MEL

Okay. I’ll talk to you.

JULIA

Answer my question.
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—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!

You bet your life you are!

MUELLER
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!

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.

(START scribunizes 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.

And who might that be?

FREUD
Whom do you suppose?

MUELLER
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 “Stellaaaaa!” with greater anguish.)

MEL
I need helllllllp!!

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