

DOUBLE BULLDOG

**A play in two acts by
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ACT ONE

(A suburban living room. Probably mostly unimaginatively furnished: gold shag carpeting, glossy veneer furniture, etc. There are at least two doors, one that leads to the kitchen and one that leads directly outside [the kitchen also has an exit to the outside]. A wrapped present sits on a coffee table. Denny Davis, a man in his late thirties/early forties, hurries in. He dresses as he enters, maybe taking off a tie and putting on a sweater vest. He picks up a remote and aims it at the TV [probably unseen]. He looks at the screen, perplexed.)

DENNY

What the...? Two...four...two...four. *(Calling offstage)* DENISE!

DENISE

(Offstage)

Ye-e-e-ss?

DENNY

Would you come in here, please?

DENISE

Honey, I'm making the pie!

DENNY

I need you in here! Two...four...I can't find channel three! Honey, please!

DENISE

Okay, okay, I'll be right in.

(Denise appears in the kitchen doorway, then pauses to take off her apron and toss it back into the kitchen. Denny sees the gift sitting on the table)

DENNY

Oh, geez... *(He grabs it and stuffs it under the couch just as she walks in)*

DENISE

Now what's wrong?

DENNY

I can't get channel three! You were messing around with this thing the other day and now I can't get channel three. It has to be on channel three to run a video and it just keeps skipping right from two to four! Look: two...four...two...four—it doesn't make sense!

DENISE

I don't know what you want me to do. I'm trying to get your pie ready.

DENNY

But I *need* this! Boyd wants to do some kind of video presentation. (*Denise shrugs helplessly*) But...what did you do? You were the last person using it!

DENISE

I didn't do anything. I recorded a show.

DENNY

Look, just walk me through what you did, ok?

DENISE

It's going to be a short walk. I put it on channel three...

DENNY

Which has mysteriously vanished...

DENISE

I put in a tape. I pushed "record." When it was done, I took out the tape.

DENNY

But...it doesn't make sense! How could a whole channel disappear?

DENISE

toward the kitchen)

I don't know what to tell you. The pie is...

(Heading back

DENNY

Denise, please!

DENISE

What? You're the expert, aren't you? I'm not supposed to touch the precious thing. I'm such a threat to technology you won't even teach me for three damned years, and now it won't work, of course it's my fault.

DENNY

What was it?

DENISE

What?

DENNY

The show you recorded.

DENISE

(Pause, then

vaguely)

Oh, something for Connie.

DENNY

What was it? *(She stares at him)* What?

DENISE

(Rolling her eyes

in frustration)

A special, ok? It was the Oprah Winfrey special on...domestic abuse.

DENNY

What?

DENISE

Like when husbands beat up their wives. Battered women.

DENNY

I know what it is, Denise.

DENISE

She needs it. For a class. Sociology.

DENNY

That's what you were recording?

DENISE

I don't see how it makes a difference *what* I was recording. I mean, it's not like...the devil entered the TV set and stole channel three...

DENNY

When was I going to get to see it?

DENISE

I didn't know you were so interested in Oprah Winfrey.

DENNY

Come on. We had an agreement, I thought. We sat right here, held hands and agreed that I would get to preview anything my family watches. Especially if my child...

DENISE

Child? Oh, for... Look, it's on top of the TV—rewound for your viewing pleasure. Have fun. *(She picks up her purse and starts out)*

DENNY

Where are you going?

DENISE

The pie needs to come out soon. Keep your eye on it. Can you do that much?

DENNY

Are you going somewhere?

DENISE

Out. I'm going to campus to pick up Connie and we're spending some time together.

DENNY

Oh.

DENISE

Shopping, all right? There are about a hundred sales today and we all need summer clothes, and... Look, I just feel like we need to spend more time together. Mother/daughter, you know?

DENNY

Seems to me like you've been spending a lot of time together.

DENISE

So? Is there something wrong with that?

DENNY

No, of course not. It's just... Nothing. Go on.

DENISE

(Stops, sighs)

What? *(Pause)* You're doing it again.

DENNY

Doing what?

DENISE

Just...picking fights over nothing. The last couple of weeks, you've been so...

DENNY

It's just that I was hoping you'd be here at the start. Today. Today, of all days.

(Beat)

DENISE

Are you going to sit there and talk to me in code? Because she's waiting...

DENNY

Honey, I was made...president. A couple of weeks ago they voted me in. But today's the first official day. I've been wanting to tell you.

DENISE

(Kisses him)

Well, great.

DENNY

Yeah. Great.

DENISE

No honey, I'm sure it's wonderful. But I mean how excited do you want me to get if you won't even tell me what it is you're president *of*?

DENNY

Yeah, I know. But I can tell you it is a big deal. And to be honest, I'm a little worried I'm going to look like an idiot, what with the VCR, and you not being here with the pie.

DENISE

But Connie's already waiting for me. She said she'd be waiting out front, and I can't call her, 'cause I've got the cell, and...I can't leave her sitting out there all day. You know?

DENNY

Yeah, you're right.

DENISE

Hey, I know, why don't you make one of them serve the pie? Now that you're president and all. Make Boyd serve it.

DENNY

I know that was a joke.

DENISE

(Looks at her watch)

Oh my. Gotta go, see ya.

DENNY

Denise, are we okay on this tape issue?

DENISE

Tape issue?

DENNY

Are we still in agreement that I will be deciding what is appropriate viewing fare for the family?

DENISE

“Viewing fare?” You see? That’s right out of the church brochure. You don’t talk like that.

DENNY

Denise.

DENISE

What?

DENNY

This isn’t domestic abuse we’re talking about, this is the Lord’s word. We agreed. This one is right there in black and white, right there in...

DENISE

Ecclesiastes. I know. I’ve read it.

DENNY

We may not always like it, but we can’t just twist around scripture to suit our own...

DENISE

We do that anyway, Denny! (*Slight pause*) I mean...don’t we? Connie was talking to me about that, and honestly, I think she made quite a good point. She said there are so many things our Savior asks us to do that we just ignore, but then some...guy in Dallas decides that his wife talks back too much and suddenly men are all hugging each other in football stadiums and everyone’s quoting Ecclesiastes. It just seems a little...crazy.

DENNY

(*Shocked*)

Crazy? You think *we’re* the ones who are crazy?

DENISE

Denny, honey, I agreed, all right? We have an agreement. I’m on your side, all right?

(*Slight pause*)

DENNY

Okay. Sorry.

DENISE

(Starts out, then stops)

See? That's what I mean. That there. I mean, who are you trying to convince?

DENNY

What's that supposed to mean?

DENISE

So strange. You're just not yourself lately. And I know when it started, too. Weekend before last. Right after your little excursion with Boyd and the boys...

(Denny looks stricken, then recovers quickly)

DENNY

What excursion?

DENISE

How should I know what excursion? Like you're going to tell *me* anything? I hear Jerry's truck outside at three a.m., Boyd hootin' and hollerin', then you come in and just sit there on the bed, staring at your dresser for the next two hours. And you been doing it ever since. Just staring into space—that is, when you aren't picking fights about religion. What's going on? Honey? I know you got some notion about protecting me or something, but after all, *I'm* supposed to be the one you can tell anything to, right? I mean, if I'm not....

DENNY

Denise, I.... *(He shrugs helplessly)*

DENISE

(Sighs)

I know. You can't tell me. I've got to get Connie. Enjoy your special day, Mr. President.

(Pause. She heads into the kitchen, then something occurs to him)

DENNY

Oh, wait! Honey! Denise! *(She appears in the doorway)* "Special day," you said. Is that what this is all about? *(Relieved)* You think I forgot. You think I forgot *our* special day. Well, I didn't. I never forgot it.

(Slight pause)

DENISE

No, I didn't think that. *(Crossing over and kissing him again)* Well, it might have crossed my mind.

DENNY

Trust me, this is the one special day a man is going to remember.

DENISE

(Giggles)

I suppose that's true. Are you sure this is right? I mean, aren't anniversaries supposed to celebrate the day you got *married*? What would the Reverend think of our little holiday?

DENNY

I honestly can't imagine a reason for telling him. So, uh, I know Connie is just getting home, but when you get back could we...

DENISE

...get rid of her? *(They both laugh)*

DENNY

Yeah.

(He pulls her into his lap and they kiss again)

DENISE

Well, well, well. My little lamb of God is really a wolf. *(Denny breaks the kiss and looks at her)* It's a joke, Denny!

(She stands up, exasperated)

DENNY

I know. I'm...sorry.

DENISE

Look, I got to run—really this time. There's just one thing: those cigars. Boyd's cigars. Every time he lights one up, the whole house smells like the back room at Smalley's Bar and Grill. It takes me a week of open doors and windows just to get the stench out.

DENNY

Oh now, *stench* is an exaggeration. *(Denise stares at him)* Denise, I don't think I can do that... *(Groping, frustrated)* As president, I have to...project a certain... The boys have to feel comfortable here...

DENISE

Well, okay. I want them to be comfortable, too. All I'm asking is that when Boyd pulls out that cigar, you could maybe ask him to take it outside. Can't you do that one little thing for me? For your "helpmeet?" *(He looks at her, shifts uncomfortably)* I didn't think so.

(She exits through the kitchen door. We hear an outside door slam)

DENNY

(Stares at the TV for a second, then points the remote at it)

Two...four. Two...four. Two...four.

(Peyton Auslander pokes his head through the living room door. He is slightly disheveled, maybe still has grease stains on him from his job as a mechanic)

PEYTON

You doin' exercises?

DENNY

Huh? Oh, hi Peyton. No, I... It's the darndest thing. Channel three seems to have up and disappeared on me.

PEYTON

Huh. I heard of that.

DENNY

Really?

PEYTON

Yep. You know Bernard Merling? One day he comes downstairs and his whole coffee table's gone. Never could figure out a reason for it. Doors locked, burglar alarm on.

DENNY

But...this is just the channel that's gone.

PEYTON

That's what I'm saying. Just like Bernard. Wasn't anything else missing in the entire house. Just the coffee table. Makes you think. *(Slight pause)* Strange times we're living in.

(Beat)

DENNY

Where's your brother?

PEYTON

Parking. He dropped me off first. He's going to start parking on Oak Street now.

DENNY

Oh. Why?

PEYTON

So nobody sees our cars, like in the same driveway. Says we got to start acting more discreet.

DENNY

Hmm. Well, you can't be too careful, I guess. How's his apartment-hunting going?
(*Peyton just stares*) Is that a sore subject?

PEYTON

(*Shrugs*)

Ask Libby. She's about ready to kill him.

(*Roger Auslander enters through the living room door. He is a little older and portlier than Peyton and Denny. There is a fussiness about him, as if he doesn't quite know what to do with his hands*)

DENNY

Hey, Roger. Come on in. You guys want some pie, as if I need to ask? (*Peyton grins*)
Oh wait, I'd better check on it.

(*He heads toward the kitchen*)

ROGER

Was that Denise just left?

DENNY

Yeah, she had a...uh, church meeting.

ROGER

That woman never stops, does she? You're a blessed man, Denny—I hope you know that.

DENNY

I...uh, yes I do. Just a second. (*He holds up one finger and darts out. Peyton and Roger stare at nothing. After a couple seconds, Denny comes back*) It's okay. Sorry about that.

PEYTON

What kind?

DENNY

Huh? Oh, I don't know. I'm sorry, Peyton. I don't know what kind.

ROGER

How's Connie?

DENNY

Fine, just fine, thank you for asking. She's coming home this week for a while. Rest up before finals.

ROGER

Well, that's a good thing, I expect. I'm glad to hear that.

DENNY

Yes. Uh, how do you mean?

ROGER

Oh, just...you know. University's a pretty wild place. Now don't get me wrong—I admire you letting her go up there alone. It takes a man of courage to let her walk through Babylon every day and come out unscathed. Says a lot about her upbringing. But I think it's good she comes back here all she can. Sort of, uh, what was it Libby called them, Peyton?

PEYTON

I don't remember.

ROGER

Pit stops—spiritual pit stops, that was what she said. She said Connie can't have too many of them.

DENNY

She said that, huh?

ROGER

Yeah, she's a clever one, that... Oh, not that they sit around talking about Connie...

DENNY

Oh no, of course not.

(Boyd Painter appears in the doorway. A little older than Denny, but larger and fitter)

BOYD

Yoo-hoo!

(The atmosphere changes upon Boyd's entrance. Everybody becomes alert, deferential. Maybe paunches are pulled in. Everyone ad-libs greetings, which Boyd accepts one at a time, shaking hands with everyone)

BOYD

'Lo, Roger. Peyton, how're things? *(He saves his biggest smile for Denny)* Dennis, Dennis, Dennis. Or should I say "Mark Moseley?" *(He makes a kicking motion with his leg.)* BOOM! *(The others, with the exception of Denny, laugh)* Good to see you, my friend. What is it that smells so delicious?

DENNY

Oh, it's pie, as usual. I'm not sure what ki...

BOYD

"Pie, as usual." Listen to him! *(Roger and Peyton laugh)* You know, I have been thanking the Lord for our brilliance in electing you president. If meetings were at my house, we'd be eating sardines on Ritz crackers. Karen may be many fine things, but a baker she is not. *(Everyone laughs)* Speaking of, where is that princess among women you married?

DENNY

She went out. *(Slight pause)* Church meeting.

BOYD

Is that so? On a Sunday afternoon? *(Pause)* Hmm. I'm going to have to talk to the Reverend about that. I mean, what is he always preaching on? The Sanctity of the Family, right? Well, this is the most sacred time a family has together, especially in this day and age, when everybody is rushing off to his or her own thing...

PEYTON

We're meeting.

BOYD

(Shoots Peyton a look, which gives him a barely perceptible flinch)

Right you are, Peyton. We are meeting on Sunday afternoons, aren't we? You have to get up pretty early in the morning to get one past old Peyton. I guess, Peyton, that I consider what we do to be along the lines of a noble sacrifice. We're giving up our sacred time, our day of rest, to do something important. Something a little more important, in fact, than anything they might do in those gossipy ladies worship groups, am I right? Of course, I don't want to assume anything, Peyton. Maybe you don't share my feelings about what we do.

PEYTON

No! I mean, yes. I didn't mean that, Boyd. I just...

BOYD

Oh come on now, Peyton. I'm just giving you grief. I'm just bringing a little needless grief into your life, old buddy. But hey, why don't we all have seats, gentlemen? *(Everyone sits)* Where's Jerry? Is he coming?

DENNY

Oh, he phoned to say he'd be late. Didn't say why.

(Pause. Boyd shakes his head in disgust)

BOYD

Late. Today of all days. Whatever, whatever. I guess we've got enough for a quorum, and that's all that's important, isn't it?

DENNY

A quorum? I've got the agenda right here, and it doesn't look like there's anything to vote on this week. I have your video presentation, but that's...

BOYD

The agenda's changed. We have something to vote on now.

(Pause)

DENNY

Oh. Well, okay, but you know, you really are supposed to let me know at least a...

BOYD

I know, I know, and I apologize, Dennis. There wasn't time. I've been burning the midnight oil getting this thing together, and we are finally ready to go, but it didn't happen until the last minute. Literally.

ROGER

Couldn't we put it under "New Business," Denny?

DENNY

Yes, I guess we could, but it sounds big...

BOYD

(Smiling broadly)

Oh, it is. In fact, I'm wondering if we couldn't just switch the order of events and discuss this before "Old Business." You see, it kind of fits in with my homily...

DENNY

Uh, Boyd, I sure don't mean to be so argumentative this afternoon, but I think I have the homily this week. At least, according to my schedule...

BOYD

Yes, I wanted to talk to you about that. I've got a special one prepared, and I wonder if you might consider switching. Besides, it seems kind of funny to me, and wrong, that the president, on top of all his other duties, has to worry about putting together a speech...

DENNY

I don't mind, and I already did it...

BOYD

I know, and I'm sure it's very inspiring, as usual. But I'm asking you to do the switch this one time, as a favor.

DENNY

Okay, sure, we can switch the homilies, but with the other thing, I just don't know. I mean, we've been agreeing that without the rules...

BOYD

"Without order, we are criminals. Without rules, we are terrorists." Yes, I know. Our most important clause. Of course I know it—I wrote it. But occasionally we need flexibility, too. Without flexibility, we are Soviets. (*Peyton pulls a folded sheaf of paper out of his back pocket and starts to open it*) It's not in there, Peyton, I just said that one.

ROGER

Hey, I know what, men. Why don't we keep "Old" and "New" business right where they are, and just switch the homily to right before "New Business?" Mr. Roberts doesn't have anything to say about homilies, I don't believe.

BOYD

(With an effort at good cheer)

Fine. A compromise. What do you say to that, Mr. President?

DENNY

Uh, yeah, that would work.

BOYD

Wonderful. Then maybe we could call this meeting to order.

PEYTON

What about the verses?

BOYD

My mistake. Of course. Let's do the verses.

ROGER

The president's got to announce the verses.

BOYD

(Nearly jumping out of his skin, but keeping as cool as he can)

Yes! By all means, Mr. President, pardon me!

DENNY

(Chuckling, distributing Xeroxed copies)

No problem, Boyd. Let us now read the verses, which this week come from psalm 31. Boyd, would you like to take the first verse?

ROGER

But the president is...

DENNY

I know. It's okay. Boyd?

BOYD

(Nodding at Denny)

In thee, O Lord, do I seek refuge; let me never be put to shame. In Thy righteousness deliver me!

ROGER

Take me out of the net which is hidden for me, for Thou art my refuge.

PEYTON

Thou hatest those who pay regard to false idols; but I trust in the Lord.

DENNY

Blessed be the Lord, for He has wondrously shown his steadfast love to me when I was beset as in a besieged city.

BOYD

Yea, I hear the whispering of many—terror on every side—as they scheme together against me, as they plot to take my life. But I trust in Thee, O Lord; I say, Thou art my God.

ROGER

My times are in Thy hand; deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors!

PEYTON

Let lying lips be dumb, which speak insolently against the righteous in pride and contempt.

DENNY

In the covert of Thy presence Thou hidest me from the plots of men; Thou holdest me safe under Thy shelter from the strife of tongues. This is the Word of the Lord.

ALL

Thanks be to God.

(They bow their heads in prayer. Then Boyd raises his head and speaks the following additional verses from memory)

BOYD

The face of the Lord is against evildoers, to cut off the remembrance of them from the earth. Evil shall slay the wicked, and those who hate the righteous will be condemned. The Lord redeems the life of His servants; *none* of those who take refuge in Him will be condemned.

(Pause)

DENNY

That isn't 31, is it? What's that from?

ROGER

That is 52, if I'm not mistaken.

BOYD

(Smiling contentedly)

It's 34. I thought we could all use a little 34 this afternoon.

(Pause)

DENNY

All right, then Thank you.

BOYD

You're welcome.

DENNY

So, uh, Old Business. I have an agenda item from Jerry. It has to do with establishing a petty cash account. But that's the only item I have. Is there anything else?

(They all shake their heads)

BOYD

No.

ROGER

What was the suggestion? He never told me. Shouldn't that have gone through the treasurer?

DENNY

Well, yes, point taken, Roger. But it is now, in a sense. You'll have the chance to address any concerns you have with the idea during "discussion." I think he makes a good point. He thought we ought to have something on hand to cover incidental expenses during missions. For instance, the last time, Jerry had to buy gas. Gassing up the truck is expensive, and he had to use a credit card, and it was kind of near the site. *(Boyd buries his head in his hands)* So there are security concerns as well as financial

DENNY (cont.)

ones. Maybe we should move to discuss—I'm getting the distinct feeling that Boyd wants to move on to discussion.

(General laughter, except Boyd)

BOYD

No, I do not want to discuss. I want to table the damn thing. For one thing, Jerry's not here to argue for his own agenda item, so it's proper to table it, isn't it?

DENNY

Right you are, Boyd. That is absolutely true. I thought he might come in any minute...

BOYD

And anyway, "petty cash?" PETTY cash? I mean... Petty is right! What are we doing here, anyway? What are we...? *(Sees everyone is staring at him)* All right, I move to table this undeniably crucial, all-important, earth-shattering agenda item until Jerry is present to argue for it, okay?

(Pause)

PEYTON

Second.

BOYD

Thank you, Peyton! May we vote, Mr. President?

DENNY

All right. All those in favor of tabling this agenda item, please signify by saying "aye."

ALL

Aye.

DENNY

Okay, let's move on to...

PEYTON

Why do we always say that?

DENNY

What?

PEYTON

"Aye." We sound like pirates or something. Why don't we just say "yes?"

DENNY

That sounds like more of a question for Roger. I've never really thought about it, truth be known. But we should probably move on...

ROGER

Actually, Peyton, there's a very interesting story...

BOYD

(Roaring)

GENTLEMEN! Might we please move on to matters of actual importance?! There is nothing in Roberts' Rules of Order that says we have to stop and explain every damn thing to Peyton! Now, may I please proceed with my homily?

DENNY

Yes, of course, Boyd. Gentlemen, let's, uh, proceed with Boyd's homily. Boyd, I give you the floor.

BOYD

Thank you, Mr. President. *(He takes a long pause, staring thoughtfully at the floor, then looks up)* My friends, I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that...

(An alarm sounds)

DENNY

Oh, no!

(Smoke is visible in the kitchen doorway. Denny jumps to his feet and races into the kitchen)

PEYTON

What's that? Is that the pie? Denny, is that the pie?

(He runs in after Denny. After a second, Roger joins them. Boyd sags into a chair, rubs his face. Denny enters, holding the pie with oven mitts, Peyton close behind them)

PEYTON

I think it's still okay, Denny. Couldn't we just scrape off the top?

DENNY

Oh, darn, darn, darn! I don't know, Peyton!! *(Roger comes out, waving a piece of newspaper with one hand and holding the top of the smoke alarm with the other)* We need something to set it down on. Roger, could you find something?

ROGER

Can do, can do. What do you want me to do with the smoke alarm?

DENNY

Oh, just set it down on the counter, then grab a...

(Boyd grabs the pie pan and oven mitts from Denny's hands, runs to the doorway and throws it outside, where we hear it shatter. A stunned pause.)

DENNY

Hey, what the...? What did he...? *(Boyd turns back into the room)* Boyd, that was Denise's best...

BOYD

(Sticking his finger in Denny's face)

I WILL GET HER ANOTHER ONE, DENNIS!

(Everyone is stunned into silence. Boyd breathes through his nose, taking a moment to recover)

BOYD

I'm sorry, everyone. I apologize for my outburst, and Dennis, I surely apologize for the pie dish. I was serious about getting another one—Karen will drop it off tomorrow, all right? It's just that we've got some important business to attend to and it won't wait. *(He checks his watch)* In fact, I'd say we have about forty-five minutes, if that.

DENNY

(Confused)

Boyd, what...

BOYD

(Holding up a hand for silence)

Please. Sit down.

(They all slowly take seats, except for Peyton, who wanders over to the door and looks out)

BOYD

The homily for today, Sunday, April 29th. *(He looks from one to the other)* Gentlemen, have we surrendered? *(Pause)* Hmm? Have we surrendered? I know, it seems like a strange question to be asking of you men, of all people, but then again, maybe it isn't. Because everybody else has surrendered. Right? Now, there's that whole, big secular world out there, we don't even need to talk about them. They were born surrendered. They're sated with their false idols. They'll be sitting there watching their 350 porno channels, laughing up their sleeves at people like us until judgment day, when they get their big surprise. We all know this—this is yesterday's news. And then of course there's the armchair Christians: be nice to everybody, stay away from drugs and God'll sort out the rest. The ones that have turned their other cheeks so far they can't see what's in front of them any longer.

ROGER

I like that. That's good.

BOYD

I thought of that last night.

ROGER

What is it? Their cheeks have...

BOYD

I said they turned their other cheeks so far they can't see what's in front of them any more. Yeah. Now, as I think we agree, some of them may be in for a surprise as well, 'cause if you ask me, they've definitely surrendered. They're just sitting back, relaxing in that holy glow they think they're feeling. But again, old news. We talked this one up one wall and down the other, blah, blah, blah. But *my* question is this: what about us? (*Slight pause*) "Us," you say? "No! You can't be talking about us! We're righteous. Soldiers of God. Taking our children's futures into our own hands." But what have we done? What have we really done? (*Roger raises his hand*) No, bear with me, Roger—I know literally what we did. We splashed our red paint and scattered our doll parts around at the baby abattoir, okay. Fine. And yesirree Bob, we sure scared the janitors that came in the next morning—for about five minutes—but what did we do? Did we actually succeed in taking any evil out of the world? I mean, I timed it—the liberal media gave us thirty seconds. Thirty seconds!! What does that tell you? And then that last...thing. "Operation Course of Nature." No offense, Roger, it was a good name, but again, what did we do? What did knocking down a couple queers and dykes do to restore the proper course of nature? Nothing. We did nothing. Our activities have been pathetic, embarrassing. And look at us, slapping each other on the back, pleased as punch with ourselves—that's the most embarrassing thing of all. (*Silence. Again, he looks from one man to the other*) So, I submit to you that YES, we have surrendered. You, me, all of us, are guilty of the worst kind of sin of all. We have cleared our conscience by pretending to do God's work, pretending to be Christ's warriors, when we aren't...doing...anything...at all.

DENNY

Well, Boyd, I think we're doing the best we can. That's all God asks of us...

BOYD

(*Moving suddenly to Denny and taking his hand*)

Don't say that. I will not let you say that. I have too much love and respect for Dennis Davis to ever accept that we have seen his best. That these...fumbling fiascos are all you are capable of. I saw you, Dennis, I saw you when you had that thing on the ground, that woman-who-walked-as-a-man. You didn't know it, but I strolled up and watched you through the fence. I saw what you did, I saw how brilliantly you acquitted yourself, and I said "This man, this Dennis Davis, is capable of better things. Deserves better things. Are we really going to waste a Dennis Davis on 'Operation Course of Nature?'" No.

No, Dennis, watching you during our last operation got me thinking. I've been thinking ever since.

DENNY

What...are you thinking?

BOYD

(Smiling and nodding at the group)

Yes. Let's get to that. Gentlemen, if I could give us a way of making a difference, of truly making a difference in the lives of our children, of all the children in this country, and doing it today, would you take it?

ROGER

Yes, yes we would.

DENNY

You know we would, Boyd.

BOYD

What about you, Peyton?

PEYTON

(Still by the door)

I think it was blueberry. *(Sees everyone looking at him)* Huh?

(Pause)

ROGER

He's in, Boyd. I know my brother, and I can tell you he's in.

BOYD

Heck, I know that. I know I can count on old Peyton. I know all of you, and I know in my deepest soul you won't disappoint me. I want you all to take my hands. All of you. And look at me. Can we do that? We're going to pledge together. Is that all right?

DENNY

Yes, of course, Boyd, but...pledge what?

BOYD

Here's what. We're going to take a pledge that has two words to it: No. More. *(Pause. He looks from one to the other)* No more. No more surrender, no more shallow self-congratulation, no more worthless, hollow pride. Today, we act.

No more flailing around the edges of the problem. Today we make this nation a much better place.

No more futile little pinpricks in the dragon's hide. Today, we are going to drive a sword right through his black, foul-smelling heart.

No more toiling in anonymity. From now on, let the unbelieving cringe at our name. No more. All it will take is those two words from all of you: no more. Can you say it with me? (*Almost pleading*) Can you? Try it. No more! No more! Come on!

ALL

(*A little tentatively, out of unison*)

No...more. (*Boyd shakes his head impatiently and urges them on again, and the second time they are more confident*) No more!!

BOYD

That's it! Again!

ALL

(*With growing fervency*)

No more!! No more!!

BOYD

(*Relaxes his hold on their hands*)

Men, I am so proud of you today.

ROGER

What is it, Boyd? What are we going to do?

BOYD

You know we're all good fathers. Aren't we? We take care to make sure our kids are reading the right things, watching the right things on TV—I know, what right things could he be talking about?

(*They all chuckle*)

DENNY

I thought you must be getting some channel I didn't have.

BOYD

But seriously, in some ways our very protectiveness makes us lousy guardians. Because we don't really pay attention to what's out there. We close our eyes to it. And make no mistake, friends, some of what is out there is just pure evil. Let me ask you something. When was the last time any of you sat down and watched a music video? I mean on one of the secular channels. Huh? (*No response*) Anyone? Ok, how about listening to the radio, the rock and roll stuff, like that station out of College Park? The campus station? No? Well, if you haven't been paying attention, chances are you never heard of group called "The Flying Tongue."

(*Pause*)

ROGER

The what?

(Peyton bursts out laughing. Denny joins him, then Roger. Boyd remains deadly serious.)

BOYD

They're called "The Flying Tongue."

PEYTON

(Still laughing)

I guess they was out of the room when they handed out the good names.

BOYD

They are, apparently, "rising stars," a group on the verge of becoming one of the most popular bands in the country. College campuses love them. The station I listened to played four songs—if you could call them that—in one afternoon. MTV played them three times in one evening. I have a little packet of information here. *(Reaches into his bag)* First, here's a copy of the college newspaper. Listen to this. According to this...person, The Flying Tongue's music is quote "a postmodern mishmash of surreal lyrics, exuberantly grotesque theatrics and bone-crunching power chords." Unquote. And this is supposed to be a good review. Here, take a look. *(He hands it to Peyton, then pulls out a video and CD)* This video—it made me want to wash my mind out with soap and water. Literally too repellent for words, though I'm sorry to say we probably will have to watch it later. But for now, I'll just tell you what's on it. It's called "Live Tongue," being a collection of pieces from their live performances. Pieces in which, for instance, they walk around in leather...attire, including giant, artificial penises, with which they pretend to...sodomize each other. During one tune—their hit single, which they call "Miracle Crack"—there is a giant, floor-to-ceiling...vagina. It sings a solo. *(Peyton giggles)* Here's their CD. Don't bother listening to it, you won't be able to make out any of the words, but have a look at the cover. *(Denny takes it)* As you can see, their logo is a tongue, apparently ripped out by the roots, with little wings attached. Do you see what's on the cover?

DENNY

It's a girl.

BOYD

Yes, a girl. A young girl looking up at the sky. Longingly, I'd say. And the album is called...

DENNY

"Waiting for the Tongue."

(Peyton cracks up again. Boyd nods.)

BOYD

Yes, that's right. That's what we're supposed to do. Laugh it off. Laugh at the absurdity. It's, what do they say, "ironic." It's "*post-modern*"—can you believe that word? I looked it up. Nobody seems to know what it means, but of course that doesn't stop a lot of pointy-heads from throwing it at us. It's the "post-modern condition," they keep saying. What is the post-modern condition? Well, I guess it's just: take drugs and fornicate your life away, and if you have a baby, slaughter it. After all, it might get in the way of the drugs and the fornication. And if you feel bad about slaughtering your baby, go to your therapist and she'll give you more drugs 'til you don't feel bad anymore. And you're not *going* to feel bad anymore, because who cares anyway, because the world is, after all, just a bad TV show, isn't it? Everything is ironic. Meaning? Eternal law? Those things never existed, they're telling our children at every university in the country. Don't bother with those things. We're not waiting for the Word any longer. We're not waiting for our Savior. We're "Waiting for the Tongue." What does that mean? Who cares? It's ironic. It's a "goof."

(Pause)

ROGER

Amen, Boyd, amen to that.

DENNY

You are just the master of suspense this afternoon.

BOYD

(Beaming)

Yes. Terrible, aren't I?

PEYTON

(Still looking at the newspaper)

Hey, The Flying Tongue is playing at the University! Today! Can you beat that, Boyd? I mean, what kind of coincidence is that?!

BOYD

Peyton, you've kind of stolen my thunder. Yes, indeed. The Flying Tongue is...are?...is?—are they just one collective tongue? I don't know, but they are indeed playing tonight at the University. Their warm-up acts are "Naked Snail" and "Bang Bus."

PEYTON

(Again bursts out laughing)

Bang...what?

BOYD

Bang Bus. I tried to research them, too. They're nobodies. Nobodies who, tonight, will just happen to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. *(Silence. He reaches out his*

hands to them again, trying to hide their shaking, and they join again in the hand-holding circle.) The face of the Lord is against evildoers, to cut off the remembrance of them from the earth. Evil shall slay the wicked, and those who hate the righteous will be condemned. The Lord redeems the life of His servants; *none* of those who take refuge in Him will be condemned. Tonight, gentlemen, we will cut out The Flying Tongue, cut off remembrance of them from the earth. We shall slay the wicked, and none of us will be condemned. Tonight, my dear friends, a large amount of fertilizer armed with an incendiary device will demolish the back of the university performing arts center and scorch this pestilence from the face of the planet. Welcome, gentlemen, to “Operation Lake of Fire.”

(Silence. All stare wide-eyed.)

ROGER

Oper...Operation...

BOYD

Operation Lake of Fire. Nice ring to it, huh?

PEYTON

What are you saying? What are you...? Oh, wait. Okay, okay. Pulling Peyton’s leg again. You almost got me, too.

BOYD

Nobody’s pulling anything, Peyton. It’s here. Our day of redemption is here.

DENNY

Now, wait...

PEYTON

Are you...? What are you...?

ROGER

This doesn’t make sense. How...how can we...?

BOYD

We can’t. Not without help. But we have help. I am pleased to announce that I have secured the services of a...spiritual comrade-in-arms. A professional. I’ve convinced him to come here. Today. And so it’s going to happen.

DENNY

Boyd, are you sure?

ROGER

(Crosses in a daze)

I can't believe it. Are we...? Are we...? *(He hugs Boyd)*

PEYTON

(Laughing like a child)

Is this real? Can somebody tell me if this is real?

BOYD

It's real, brother.

PEYTON

Are we really doing this, Boyd?

BOYD

Yes, we are really doing this. Today. Right now. Something wrong, Roger?

ROGER

My hands are tingling.

BOYD

I know, I know. Me too. Breathe. Oxygen, Roger. You already did the brave part. You pledged. You said "no more." All that's left now is to step forward and take your place in the pantheon of American heroes. That all right?

ROGER

Yes. Lord, yes, it's all right.

(Roger and Peyton begin to dance, high-five, etc., in the background.)

BOYD

How about you, Dennis? How are you doing?

DENNY

Fine, Boyd. I'm doing...fine.

BOYD

Well, that's fine, my friend. You look...pensive. You've heard of Doubting Thomas? Well, this is Pensive Dennis.

DENNY

No, I...you said national TV?

BOYD

(Grinning)

Our friend's idea. I called in an anonymous tip to the three major news outlets. Something to the effect that there's going to be a massive protest against the concert at 7:30. There're going to be cameras all over the place when our flaming sword cleaves the sky.

PEYTON

Boyd. Thank you.

ROGER

He's right, Boyd. You deserve thanks. For believing in us. For not letting us surrender.

BOYD

You want to thank me, here's how: by making my vote of confidence look like the vote of a sane man. When the time comes, do your jobs quickly, with commitment and confidence. Behave like professionals, in every word and deed, when this gentleman arrives here. I don't need to go into details about how I arranged this, but suffice it to say it took negotiations that would make Yalta look like a game of checkers. One thing I will tell you: he is going to walk in here fully expecting a professional outfit. We can't disappoint him. And most immediately, as per our rules, I need you to formally approve. But I don't think that's going to be a problem. *(Smiles at Denny)* Mr. President, would you do the honor of bringing this vote to the floor? Wait! When I remember this moment, I want it to look just like this. *(He holds out his hands. Roger takes one on one side and Peyton the other. Roger and Peyton each take one of Denny's hands.)* Yes. Like this. Mr. President?

DENNY

Um, okay. I...um...we...

BOYD

I make a motion...

DENNY

I make a motion...

BOYD

That we approve the immediate implementation...

DENNY

That...that...

BOYD

That we approve the immediate...

DENNY

Wait. (*He disengages his hands*) We can consider the motion to be on the floor, but we haven't discussed it yet.

BOYD

I'd say we've discussed it. Don't you think so, men?

ROGER

That's what we've been doing, Denny. (*Takes Denny's hand*)

PEYTON

We've been doing it all afternoon. Let's vote. (*Takes Denny's other hand*)

BOYD

It's just a formality, Dennis. Come on.

DENNY

Look, I agree. There's no problem here, it's very exciting, but I don't think what we did constitutes a discussion. (*They all stare at him.*) I mean, we need a few more details...and maybe work out the... ramifications.

BOYD

Ramifications? I think we have worked them out. I know I have. I've done nothing else *but* work out ramifications, twenty-four hours a day, from the moment this thing was conceived. You ready? Here they are: the liberal elite's newest spiritual polluter will be stopped from rotting any more young hearts. College students will wonder if it's the first attack of many, and will have to stop and think each and every time they decide to attend one of these affairs, stop and think about what we did. And what we might do. Get it? How about some more ramifications? Okay. Compatriots everywhere will be emboldened, and will finally understand who their targets should rightly be, and will possibly be inspired to even greater acts of heroism. Isn't that enough, Dennis? Do we need any more ramifications?

DENNY

That's not exactly what I meant. I meant negative ones.

BOYD

Negative ones. Such as?

DENNY

Such as...who dies? Who are we going to hurt?

ROGER

The Flying Tongue!! The Snails on the Bus!! We're going to blast them to pieces! Haven't you been listening?!

DENNY

Yes, but who else? That's what I mean.

BOYD

Okay. (*Starts counting off on his fingers*) The three bands—that's a given, as Roger points out—and that would also include roadies, I suppose. Also, we could count on losing some facility support staff and administration: the people who brought the Flying Tongue to our children. Also, I won't lie to you, we would almost certainly lose some of the concertgoers. Maybe a lot of them. Possibly some passers-by, but I doubt it. Satisfied?

DENNY

Yes, sure but...does that mean we're going to be killing...college students?

BOYD

Yes, I suppose it does.

DENNY

But...aren't these the young people we're trying to protect?

BOYD

These people.

DENNY

Yes.

BOYD

Well, uh, no. I'd have to say no, they really aren't, not these young people. They're already fallen, Dennis. Every one of them. These are the people choosing to worship at the most profane of altars. And, I'd even say that by cutting off a life of sin before it has a chance to spread and grow, we might even be saving them. Now, I know it's hard, it's one of the hard choices that we're always going to face, and I have to say that's what I love about Dennis Davis is his attention to detail—the way he crosses all his "t"s and dots all his "i"s—but I must insist we get on with this vote. It's very important that we have all this bull manure taken care of when our friend arrives. I can't stress that enough. All right? (*Mildly exasperated*) This is what we've been working for, Dennis. This is what it's all been pointing to. Don't you understand that?

(*Slight pause*)

DENNY

Yes, I do understand that.

BOYD

Good man. All right, everybody?

ROGER

I'm ready. You ready, Peyton?

PEYTON

I guess. (*Takes a deep breath, shudders*) Who makes the motion?

BOYD

Anyone can make the motion. Here, I'll do it. I move that we approve the imm...

DENNY

WAIT! (*They all look at him*) Discussion isn't really finished yet. I still have more questions, and I'm sorry about the time factor, but Boyd, that's why we have the rule about twenty-four hour advance notice for agenda items. Now, I can sense we're all in favor of this, but listen: we can't vote on a motion without proper discussion. Is there anybody who disagrees with that? Anybody who will tell me that isn't written in our rules of procedure? (*No one says anything*) All right, then. And proper discussion means anybody who wants to get to ask questions, or raise points. I want to.

(*Boyd regards Denny curiously*)

ROGER

Denny, what are you doing?

BOYD

Let's not argue with Dennis. He's right about the procedure, and I think arguing is just going to eat up even more time. Ask your questions and raise your points, just please try to do it quick.

DENNY

Thank you. I guess I have to respectfully disagree with Boyd. Not everyone who attends a sinful event is themselves sinful. There are people who wander in by accident. And even the ones who went there willingly, most of them are just kids. They don't know what they're doing yet...

BOYD

Oh, I see. They're not responsible for their actions. I can't believe I'm hearing that argument from you, Dennis. We've talked about this before. You know, in our grandfathers' day, people that age would be considered fully responsible adults. But no, we just keep raising the age limit for being responsible. And we wonder why we're living in a state of siege, having our cars taken away by children with automatic weapons... (*Denny starts to object*) But hey, if it will ease your mind, I'll tell you what we can do: we'll hold a special prayer session for any unintended victims. A vigil, even, a candle-light vigil that lasts all night. Would you vote for that, men?

ROGER

Sure we would, Denny. It's a good idea.

PEYTON

I like it. Good thinking, Denny.

BOYD

It's the best we can do—but I think it's pretty darn good. That satisfy you?

DENNY

Well, what if there really IS a protest? What if...what if Campus Crusade for Christ shows up? Some of those youngsters come down and end up getting hit by flying bricks or something.

BOYD

(Shaking his head and chuckling)

Campus Crusade for Christ. You are something, Dennis.

DENNY

You know, we...we've got to think about all the possibilities. Now I could be wrong, but I think we even have a rule about harming the innocent, don't we? Roger?

ROGER

Nope. Not the innocent, per se. We talked about that early on, but I don't think we ever agreed on what "innocent" meant. There is one that says we can't harm members of the group, or spouses or children of members of the group. That's the closest thing. And even then, there's a codicil that allows us to reconsider that rule in the case of disloyal members of the group...

DENNY

(Looking at him, startled)

What do you mean by that, Roger?

ROGER

I don't mean anything. I'm just telling you what's in the rules.

DENNY

Do you think I'm disloyal? Just because I...

BOYD

Now, now, Dennis, nobody thinks you're disloyal. I have to assume you don't yet understand how you are jeopardizing this operation with all these delays, but I'm sure you have your reasons—you're a smart man. You're also a compassionate man, and we appreciate your concern for these people, but if I might speak for the group I must also say that we are offended by your implication that we are not just as compassionate. We recognize the ramifications as clearly as you. It's just that we also understand that in any war there are going to be unfortunate casualties. When Ike Eisenhower made the decision to storm the beaches of Normandy he knew he would lose thousands of GIs in the process, and I mean *knew* it—no doubt in his mind. Did those men deserve to die?

Of course not. But what if he had said “Stop! We can’t risk sacrificing any of these fine young men!”? I’ll tell you what: if he had said that we’d all be worshipping some damn Norse gods and singing “Deutschland Uber Alles” before baseball games. So with all due respect, kindly dismount from your high horse, Mr. Davis, and join us in making the hard decision we are obligated to make. (*Silence*) I move that we approve the immediate implementation of Operation Lake of Fire, to be commenced at 7:30 p.m. this evening. (*Roger raises his hand to second*)

DENNY

Connie might be there.

(*Everyone freezes*)

BOYD

What?

DENNY

Connie might be there. She goes to the university, she studies...sociology, she might be there. And until we know for sure, we can’t vote yes, because we have a rule against harming the children of members of the group.

BOYD

(*Staying calm with a great effort*)

Now why on earth would you think there is any chance in the world that Connie might be at a Flying Tongue concert?

DENNY

Maybe she’s...observing people for a paper or something.

BOYD

Sure, Dennis, she might be there, doing research for her sociology paper. There is that chance. There is also the chance that Our Savior himself has come back as the percussionist for Bang Bus, but it’s not very damn likely, IS IT?! Now, are we really going to let this opportunity pass because we’re sitting around fretting about...mathematical possibilities? With all due respect—however much is still due—I have to point out that we do not technically need your vote, Mr. Davis. A motion is on the floor and the rest of us are ready to vote on it! Do we have a second?

PEYTON

I second.

ROGER

I already seconded.

PEYTON

No, you did not. You raised your hand, but you never said it.

ROGER

All right, I second.

PEYTON

I ALREADY seconded...

BOYD

SHUT UP!! (*Boyd stares at Denny*) Now, I believe we have a way around this impasse. Mr. Roberts says, correct me if I'm wrong, Roger, that if the discussion becomes fruitless, if we're just running around the gerbil wheel on something, an immediate call for a poll of all likely voters can be made. Is that true?

ROGER

Yes, that is true.

BOYD

Then I hereby call for an immediate poll of all likely voters on the grounds that this discussion is a worthless waste of our time! May I see hands on an "aye" vote?

ROGER

Uh, Boyd...

BOYD

May I see hands on an "aye" vote?

ROGER

Boyd, I...

BOYD

A VOTE! Am I speaking English to you fucking pumpkinheads?

ROGER

Boyd, what I'm trying to say is that while a call to vote can be made, it can only be made by the president. Of course, Mr. Roberts says the chair, but in our case, as you know, the chair is the president...

BOYD

(*Wearily*)

Shut up.

ROGER

And I should mention, there's a definite rule in the bylaws about inappropriate language. You wrote it.

BOYD

(Looks at Denny for a long moment)

What's your game, friend?

DENNY

(Quietly)

I'm a father, Boyd. Just let me make a phone call to Denise—one quick phone call—to make sure my child isn't going to get hurt, and you can have my vote. *(Slight pause)* Okay?

BOYD

Okay. *(Smiles)* Of course, okay. Make your call. We'll wait.

(Denny picks up the phone. The others watch him. He punches a few buttons, then puts the phone down on his lap.)

DENNY

See, the thing is, this isn't the only thing I have to talk to her about. It's ...well, it's a little embarrassing, but today is kind of a special day for us. It's sort of an anniversary.

BOYD

I was at your wedding, Dennis. It was in December.

DENNY

That's the thing, it's not so much a wedding anniversary, as a, uh, celebration commemorating...*(The others show signs of impatience, and he hurriedly finishes)*...the first time we...you know.

(They stare at him, then Boyd grins, and the others follow suit.)

BOYD

Dennis Davis.

PEYTON

Kinky. We got a...kinky guy here.

DENNY

So we're sort of making plans for tonight. After the operation, we will be making a...victory toast in our own way, you could say.

BOYD

So much for the candle-light vigil. *(Denny shrugs helplessly)* So what you're trying to tell us is that you want to talk to her alone.

DENNY

If you don't mind. I really appreciate it.

(Silence, then Boyd gets up, and the others follow wordlessly. Peyton winks at him as he leaves. Boyd is the last one out. He pauses in the doorway.)

BOYD

(Sadly)

I really hope we can settle all this as soon as we come back. Reassure me.

DENNY

Consider yourself reassured. It's, like you said, it's a mathematical possibility, that's all. I'll just eliminate it.

BOYD

I'm giving you three minutes.

(He exits. Denny watches him go, then frantically dials a number.)

DENNY

Frederick, Maryland. It's a UM-Frederick listing. Campus Crusade for Christ. CHRIST, as in Jesus. Yes, thank you. *(He mouths the number, furtively glancing out the door, then punches it in.)* Yes, hello, I...damn! Recording! *(He pauses for a moment, considering, then punches in another number with trembling hands)* Denise! Look, I don't have long to talk. No, just listen! I'm asking you a favor, and this one time I am begging you to just do it and not ask me any questions. I need you to...I need you...I need...oh, God. I need you to go back to the University. Go to the Performing Arts Center. By 7:30. Earlier, if you can. Look for TV cameras, and this is important: make sure you get on those TV cameras! Someone's got to see you going into that building! And this is important, too. Don't come out! Not until it's over. I can't say anymore, Denise. Just do this, I'm begging you. If you love me, do this. Please. Now turn off your phone. That's right! Off! Please, just do it! Bye, honey. *(He hangs up. He hears a step in the next room, and says the next few lines as Boyd enters.)* I can't believe it. Now Denise, don't question me, you just go in there and get her out! Don't you bother yourself about why—JUST DO IT! Do you understand me? Good. We'll look for you. Goodbye. *(He hangs up again, looks up at Boyd. Roger and Peyton filter in behind him. Boyd gives him a grim smile and slowly sits.)*

BOYD

All right. Let's hear it.

DENNY

You're not going to believe this...

BOYD

I'd say there's a good chance of that.

DENNY

I just talked to Denise, and she said Connie called her a little while ago. Said she's changing her plans, don't pick her up. You'll never guess why! Said she's going to some kind of event tonight.

BOYD

Event.

DENNY

Yes, and she got the impression it was an on-campus thing. And I don't know, but seeing as how it's the beginning of finals week, I don't think there's a lot of other things going on. So, I think we have to consider the strong possibility that Connie might be in that audience.

PEYTON

Wow. You called it, Denny. You called that one.

BOYD

That's a pretty amazing coincidence.

DENNY

You know, I was thinking about that, and maybe it's not a coincidence at all. You know, it was so weird the way I suddenly thought of Connie at that concert, and you know how sometimes you hear something and you don't really register it? Well, that's what must have happened, you know? She told me the last time we talked, I bet, and it just went in one ear...

BOYD

You're babbling.

DENNY

No, I'm not! I'm trying to tell you I have a solution, I think. The cameras. I told Denise to get on the cameras. That does two things, Boyd. It tells you I'm not lying to you, and more important, we'll watch her go in, and then we'll watch them come out, see? When she gets Connie out, we'll be able to proceed as usual!

BOYD

Are you going feeble-minded on me, Dennis? The cameras aren't going to be on the place all night long. It's a sound-bite, not a telethon, especially when they see there isn't any damn protest. And anyway, by then it will be too late. The truck has to go in with the roadies this afternoon, you idiot! Oh hey, I'm sorry. I don't mean to call you an idiot, Dennis. You're no idiot. You know exactly what you're doing.

DENNY

I don't know what you mean by that, Boyd.

PEYTON

Will somebody please tell me what is going on?

DENNY

We need to have a vote, Peyton. I move we suspend “Operation Lake of Fire” indefinitely until we can establish beyond a doubt that no spouse or child of a member will be hurt by it...

BOYD

And I move that we declare Dennis Davis a liar, a traitor, a Judas, thereby removing his spouse and child from the protection of the clause. If they are indeed at this concert, it is because they *deserve* to be. Now, we need a second. Somebody give me a second! Peyton! (*He grabs Peyton by the arm, hard*) Give me a second!

PEYTON

Oww! Second!

ROGER

Wait! We can’t make a motion—there are already two on the floor!

BOYD

Both of which were put forward by a traitor, who is seeking to filibuster us, to undermine us from within, and so they are completely worthless and irrelevant!

ROGER

Actually, the first one was yours, Boyd.

PEYTON

That’s right.

BOYD

Then goddamn it, I move to revoke my own motion to make way for a new one!

ROGER

But only the president can take a motion off the floor.

BOYD

(*He sits heavily. Silence. He grabs a cigar from his pocket and with trembling hands lights it*)

Fuck the president! And fuck you! Fuck, fuck, fuck!

ROGER

(*Shocked*)

Boyd...

DENNY

(Quietly)

There's no smoking in the house.

BOYD

What?

DENNY

No smoking in here anymore. Denise doesn't want your cigars in here anymore, so you'll have to go outside.

BOYD

Who are you?

(Overlapping)

DENNY

Please. Put it out, Boyd.

C'mon, I'm asking you...

Just...put it out.

C'mon now, put it out!

Put out the cigar!

NOW, BOYD!

I said...
Don't make me...

BOYD

Who am I looking at?

Who are you?

I don't even know.

Who the... Fuck you.

Fuck Denise, too!

Here you go, Denise *(Begins blowing smoke around room)*

Some fucking Cuban air-freshener for you!

DENNY

Put out the GODDAMN CIGAR! *(He grabs the cigar from Boyd's mouth and stubs it out on the coffee table. Roger and Peyton gawk at them. Boyd is in shock and pale with fury. He takes a menacing step toward Denny, who moves awkwardly to defend himself. The door flies open and Jerry bursts in, panting.)*

JERRY

Did we vote on my petty cash amendment yet?

(They stare at him. Blackout.)

END ACT ONE

ACT TWO

(Setting is the same as Act One. Denny, Roger, Peyton and Jerry are all onstage, though all except perhaps Jerry look considerably more ragged than before. And now, sitting in the center of the room is a man in sunglasses and a trucker's cap. After a moment of silence, apparently uncomfortable to everyone except the man, Boyd enters with a steaming cup of tea. He gives the tea to the man, waits for a thank-you that doesn't come, then takes a seat. Silence.)

BOYD

What should we call you?

MAN

(Slowly turns his head to Boyd)

Steam.

BOYD

Steam?

STEAM

Know why? Because at 7:31, this is me. *(He blows on his tea, making a cloud of steam rise off it.)* I never existed.

BOYD

Perhaps I should introduce us all...

STEAM

If you do I'll kill you. *(They freeze, look at him. He sips his tea)* Listen to this. I'm only saying it once. You have no identities. You're not real. You are made-up people. I invented you for this job, and when I disappear, you will disappear, too.

BOYD

I think I understand.

STEAM

I don't care.

PEYTON

Uh. *(Everyone looks at him)* How will we know who we're talking to?

STEAM

(Looks at Peyton, then aims a finger at him)

Tweet.

PEYTON

Tweet?

STEAM

(Points at Boyd)

Puff. *(At Roger)* Spud. *(At Jerry)* Wiggly.

BOYD

(Pointing at Denny)

What about him?

STEAM

(Seeming to notice Denny for the first time, he takes him in.)

Elmo.

BOYD

Elmo. Okay, Mr. Steam, what we need to...

STEAM

Steam. Not Mr. Steam. "Mr." implies an identity. I don't have one.

BOYD

Okay, Steam...

STEAM

"Mr." is an honorific. I'm a murderer.

(Silence. No one knows quite what to say to that. Only Steam appears to be comfortable, serenely sipping his tea.)

BOYD

I, uh, got your video. *(Slight pause)* The one you requested? *(Slight pause)* The Flying Tongue, uh, highlights?

STEAM

Yak, yak, chitter-chatter.

DENNY

(Stands)

Steam. I'm... *(Steam looks at him)* I'm the President of this organization.

STEAM

Is that so?

DENNY

And, um... Well, there's a...there's been a...

JERRY

I got a question.

STEAM

President Elmo has the floor, Wiggly.

DENNY

No, that's okay. He can go first.

STEAM

That's very generous, Elmo.

(He turns to Jerry)

JERRY

Why do we have to have such stupid names?

STEAM

Are you questioning me, Wiggly?

JERRY

No! I mean, yes, it's a question, but I'm not... I'm not...I mean...

STEAM

What do you care what your name is? You don't even exist. *(He smiles)*
At 7:31 you can call yourself Phil Smith or Stan Jenkins or Harley Harkelhinger. But until 7:31, you're Wiggly. And that's the last I'm going to hear about it. Now, Elmo, you have a problem with your name, Elmo?

DENNY

I don't care what you call me.

STEAM

There now. You hear that? That is the proper attitude. I can tell I'm going to like you, Elmo. *(Pause)* Is that what you wanted to tell me?

BOYD

(Hastily)

I believe Elmo is anxious to hear some of the details of the operation, especially regarding the kill radius of the blast, the level of destruction, factors such as that.

STEAM

Is that right, Elmo? *(Denny says nothing, which Steam interprets as assent)* Eagerness. Enthusiasm. A student of the craft. Well, Elmo, it depends somewhat on where we are able to park the truck. If we can secure access to the central loading dock, which I believe we can, then we should be able to turn the rear of the auditorium into something resembling a half-eaten slice of watermelon. The bricks of the exterior wall will act as a kind of shrapnel, sweeping through the scene shop, blowing out the cinder block of the back wall of the stage. The cinder blocks will add their own fragments to the mayhem. And so I'd say anybody backstage or in the dressing rooms will leave this earth as a red vapor in the first nanosecond. Anybody *on* that stage would be very, very lucky to be alive. That the kind of thing you're talking about, Elmo?

PEYTON

(Laughs

suddenly)

Harley Harkelhinger. *(Everyone looks at*

him)

BOYD

What about *in* the audience? Is what

Elmo was asking earlier, I believe.

STEAM

(Shrugs)

Mosh-guys in the front row are sure to get their recommended daily allowance of shrapnel. Probably a number of rows behind that. Beyond that, I don't honestly know. Depends on the structural integrity of the building. The whole place might well go down, for all I know. It's not rocket science, Elmo, it's blowing things up.

ROGER

(To Boyd)

Wow, that sounds like a lot of fertilizer,

Boy..., uh, boy.

STEAM

(Turns to Roger and Boyd) Fertilizer? Who said anything about fertilizer? Fertilizer is for cross-eyed ragheads who can't even blow up a parking garage. Fertilizer is for hayseeds who don't even have the wits to put a license plate on their car before they leave the site. This is C-4, chum. A king-size block of the finest Belgian charnel-cheese. Detonated remotely, of course. Unless you'd rather I wired it to some fucking alarm clock, Spud. Is that what you want, Spud?

ROGER

No.

STEAM

(Turning back to

Denny)

Does that answer your questions, Elmo? I mean, keep in mind, I'm not an engineer, I'm just a humble murderer.

BOYD

Do you... Do you have to keep saying that? We don't like to think of it as murder.

STEAM

Really? What do you like to think of it

as?

BOYD

We...consider ourselves more, well,

avengers. Or protectors, I suppose.

STEAM

(Pauses for a

moment, then gives Boyd a big smile)

Well. Are we done with questions here?

DENNY

Uh, no. Actually.

STEAM

I'm all ears.

DENNY

The thing is, we follow a pretty strict set of rules.

STEAM

Mmm.

DENNY

And one of them is we have to formally ratify any...motion to do an operation such as this. And we haven't been able to do that yet.

STEAM

Do tell.

BOYD

It's just a little formality. We have to finish the discussion on the motion. *(Laughs nervously)* Committee stuff, you know.

(Long pause. Steam stares long and hard at something in the distance.)

STEAM

I think I'll go out to that driveway out there and finish my tea. Have a smoke. Maybe two. *(He stands)*

BOYD

We'll be all done when you get back, I promise. I...apologize, and I am grateful to you for giving us the time.

STEAM

(Stares at him)

I like to smoke first. Take some time to get quiet in my head. I'm not giving you anything, Puff.

(He walks out. Everyone sits still for a moment, then they erupt into movement)

PEYTON

Oh man, oh man. That guy scares me!

BOYD

That's what the professionals look like, Peyton!

ROGER

(At window)

Hey, is that his rig? He drove the truck *here*?

BOYD

How did you think he got here, Roger? Particle-beam transporter?

ROGER

But...it's right in the driveway! I wouldn't even park my car here! Does that have the...the...you know inside it?

BOYD

I said he's a professional. He knows what he's doing!

JERRY

(Sits down, holding his head in his hands)

Oh, I'm confused, I'm confused.

BOYD

Of course you're confused, you tardy piece of crap! How dare you!

JERRY

I didn't know! The audition ran late, and

I was on foot...

BOYD

Audition!?

JERRY

At the community theatre.

(Boyd shakes his head in disgust)

PEYTON

What's the play?

JERRY

It's that musical about Snoopy. But not the original, I don't think. It's a sequel.

PEYTON

Oh, yeah?

BOYD

GOD DAMN IT!! PULL IT TOGETHER!! We've got a matter of minutes to get on the same page on this thing! Now, Dennis, it's all in your hands, Mr. President—tell us what we are going to do!

DENNY

I don't see we have a choice, Boyd. We've got to postpone. We've got to vote to postpone, if we're following our rules, until we know there's no family members...

BOYD

about family members!
STOP IT! Just stop with this bullshit

JERRY

going to blow something up?
Is this really happening? Are we really

DENNY

Look, that's another thing. I know it's Jerry's fault he came in on the tail end of this thing, but we need to give him time to process this, you know? It's not fair to...

BOYD

Process? Are you...process? He doesn't care about Jerry's process. He's going to kill us, Denny. All of us. You saw him—do you have any doubt!? (Pause) He has a Luger in his belt. I saw it when I met him at the door. He made sure I saw it. We vote to *postpone*, none of us are going to leave this house alive. Don't you understand that?

ROGER

He's right, oh he is right, Denny. We're in trouble here. Let's do this, Denny, before he gets back.

PEYTON

I second.

ROGER

(Hurls a pillow at him)

Damn you, Peyton, it's not a motion! Oh, man! Can't we just vote, Denny!

DENNY

No, I don't think we can.

BOYD

Roger, get the book, and get the damn bylaws! I absolutely refuse to believe that the Chair gets to keep a motion in discussion indefinitely while everything the group stands for withers and dies! That he gets to sit there with a smug look on his face while he signs our death warrants! Get moving, Roger! Stick that little parliamentarian nose of yours in there and find us a goddamn loophole! GO! Shit, I hope he smokes 100s.

DENNY

It doesn't matter, Roger. The rule about family is ironclad.

BOYD

Oh, come on, Dennis. We're not the morons you think we are! None of us believe that bullshit story about Connie somehow wandering in there.

PEYTON

It's not true?

BOYD

Of course it's not true!

DENNIS

It is true, Peyton. Connie's going to be there, and so is Denise. But Boyd's right: they didn't wander in. They're going to be there because I told them to be there. When I called her. I told her to make sure she is at the performing arts center at 7:30, and I told her to shut her phone off, so we can't call her back.

(Pause. They stare at him, stunned.)

PEYTON

I don't get it.

ROGER

Denny. Why would you do something like that?

BOYD

Men. I need you to go outside for a minute. Give me a little time with Dennis.

PEYTON

Outside? With him?

JERRY

Are you out of your mind?

BOYD

In the kitchen, then, and if he starts to come in, you got to stall him.

ROGER

How the heck are we supposed to do that?

BOYD

I don't give a flying crap! Just do it! Do it, or you're going to die—get it?! Get out of here! NOW! *(They all head out the door. As Roger passes Boyd, Boyd takes him by the arm and mutters:)* Keep looking. *(Roger nods and leaves.)* Now, Dennis. Dennis,

Dennis, Dennis. Do you remember those talks we used to have? Sunday nights on my porch.

DENNY

I do.

BOYD

I loved those talks. They were important to me, maybe the most important thing in my life. And you know something? This group came directly out of that. Those nights on my porch. You helped create it...heck, you're the main reason it exists.

DENNY

Really?

BOYD

Oh, yes. In you I felt like I'd found a...theological soulmate, if you will.

DENNY

I always thought of myself as...more of a sounding board.

BOYD

Huh. Touché, I guess. God knows, I can be a gasbag, but I always felt like you listened with such sincerity. Like you really cared.

DENNY

I did. I did care. I do.

BOYD

I could feel it. And you caring was important to me. Oh lord, you don't know how important. I knew, somehow, that if there were two of us that cared, then there had to be more, and if there were more, we could eventually do more than just talk. On a porch. Nothing's changed, Dennis. The stakes are even higher now—and I know you realize this. This whole world has built its house upon the sand, and that sand is washing away by the minute—by the *minute*, Dennis. And what's funny is there's a whole bunch of people sloshing buckets of water under there, trying to get it to wash away faster. But what they don't seem to realize is: there is nothing else underneath us. Nothing. It's just a black pit. (*Slight pause*) The only hope we have, if it is a hope, is people like us. People like us are shoveling that sand back in, grain by grain, trying to sneak in the occasional piece of rock. It's a pathetic effort, maybe, but it's the only hope we have. You believed that once. Do you still?

DENNY

I think so.

BOYD

Yes, I hope so. Oh, I pray so. Because it's truer than ever. Look at us. We don't look like much, do we? But we can't let that stop us. We've got to be superhuman, Dennis—we've *got* to be. There's no choice. We've got to believe we can be like...that little boy with his finger in the dike. Holding back that entire sea of...venality, wants to wash us all into the pit.

DENNY

Interesting choice of words.

BOYD

What is?

DENNY

The past two weeks, it's all I've been thinking about. That girl.

BOYD

What girl?

DENNY

You know, at first, when we were driving around, you and Roger were yelling at those...gay guys, Peyton hit that one guy with the car door, but I just sat there. I couldn't figure out what to do. I just sat there wondering what was wrong with me. Everybody's hooting and hollering and all intense about the mission, and I might as well have been watching it on TV. I couldn't...I couldn't get into it. Then I saw her. First I thought it was some construction worker stopped at that bar by mistake. But then I realized...and something snapped. I just couldn't *believe* any woman would look like that. Men's clothes. Gray crewcut. What did Roger say? She looked like a "sperm whale wrapped in flannel," or something like that. (*Boyd chuckles*) And suddenly I felt like I understood our mission, finally I was a *part* of it. (*Slight pause*) An abomination, I thought. I understood, I think for the first time, what people meant when they said that word: something so...wrong, it just deserved to be erased from this earth. That's what I thought.

BOYD

That's right. You were right when you thought that.

DENNY

So, when everybody got back in the car, I had to...run back and deal with this thing. I had to do it. (*Peyton pokes his head in. Boyd waves him back. The sound of Steam's voice is audible in the kitchen*) When I ran at her, I thought I was going to get my bell rung good. It'd be like tackling John Riggins. But she was so surprised, she went right down. I don't think she was used to fighting. And I kicked her. I haven't kicked anybody since second grade, but I kicked and kicked that girl, 'til it felt like I was breaking my foot.

BOYD

I saw. That's a hell of a leg you got on you. But I must say I think it's very charitable the way you keep calling it a girl.

DENNY

I kept thinking she was going to get up. Rip my head off or something. Or at least curse me. But she didn't. She just started crying. She cried. *(He begins to cry himself)* This big, beefy, crew-cut dyke, she...began to cry like a little girl. And when she did that, all that...other stuff just kind of melted away. And I could see what she looked like as a child. And I thought, this is somebody's little girl. That's all, just somebody's little girl. Somebody just like me once changed her diapers, sang to her, loved her. Maybe he still loved her. And I thought...maybe I should love her, too. Isn't that what Jesus called us to do? Isn't it? Not...not...blow up boys and girls...

(Boyd embraces him, and Denny falls sobbing into his arms)

BOYD

I'm sorry. You poor man. Oh, I'm so sorry. You poor, poor man. This is what you've been wrestling with? I'm supposed to be your friend, and I never even knew. Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you tell your friend?

(Roger comes running in, book in hand)

ROGER

Boyd, I found something! I found...

BOYD

SHUT UP! *(He knocks the book out of Roger's hands.)* And get back. Get the hell into that kitchen. *(There is something quite intimate in the way Boyd talks to Denny now, with a preacher's intensity, but accompanied by stroking Denny, holding his face, etc.)*

"When I say 'my bed will comfort me, my couch will ease my complaint,' then thou dost scare me with dreams and terrify me with visions, so that I would choose strangling and death rather than my bones. Behold, I cry out 'violence!' and I am not answered. I call aloud, but there is no justice. He has walled up my way, so I cannot pass, and he has set darkness upon my paths." You remember the man who spoke these words? Yes, you do. You remember how close he was to despairing, to giving up all he had worked for, to wasting all the sacrifices he had made. Ah, but remember there was a wise man there, a wise man who said "If you will seek God and make supplication to the almighty, if you are pure and upright, surely then he will rouse himself for you." And that wise man was right. Surely he will rouse himself for you. Not maybe he will. Not probably he will. Surely. Faith. You've got to find that faith now. For me. For your friends. You've come too far to lose it now. Sure, you're afraid. But I want to tell you that it is *right* to be afraid; it is *right* to fear the cleansing fire of God. It is an awesome power to behold, an even more awesome power to wield. But it is to you the Lord saith: "Do not call conspiracy all that this people call conspiracy, and do not fear what they fear, nor be in dread. But the Lord, Him you shall regard as holy; let Him be your fear, and let Him be

your dread. And He will become a sanctuary.” You have been chosen, friend, *chosen*. Don’t waste this power, dear friend, with tears shed for the fallen. Save those tears for the children. The shiny, the new, the unspotted. Take this wondrous power in your heart, this mighty compassion that I do so admire, and use it to light the way for countless generations ahead of you. Shed your tears for those millions of innocents who will fall right down into that black pit of nothingness unless you put out your loving arms and lift them back into the light and warmth of the sun! It’s you, friend, it’s you who will do this. Take a look at these faces around you, these faces bright with hope and faith in their leader. Can you let them down?

DENNY

(Weakly)

No. No, I can’t. *(He begins to cry again)* I can’t. Oh, my friends. What have I done? What have I done? I ruined everything...

(Steam walks in, Peyton and Jerry making helpless gestures behind him. Steam stares at Boyd and Denny, no emotion visible on his face)

STEAM

Very educational afternoon, Puff. Did you know that the Snoopy sequel is actually better than the original?

BOYD

I’m sorry, Mr. St...I mean, Steam. We’re pretty much done here. *(Back to Denny)* You’ve done nothing of the sort, my friend. There’s still time. Everything can go just the way it was planned.

DENNY

But my wife, my child...

BOYD

Hey. At this point, God’s hand is in everything we do. Every decision we make, no matter how perverse it might seem, has God behind it, pulling the strings. When He made you to lose your faith, only to have you regain it in a blaze of light. When, through you, He called your wife and daughter to that concert, delivered them unto the Flying Tongue...

DENNY

What...what are you saying?

BOYD

I’m saying there’s a reason they’re going to be at that concert. We can’t divine it, but there’s a reason. Accept that.

DENNY

You mean you want me to...

BOYD

Make the motion. Launch the operation. That bylaw can't be binding, after all, if the committee member in question will let us off the hook.

(A tense silence. Roger stares at Denny feverishly. Peyton and Jerry are nearly in a state of shock. Steam is intrigued. He turns a chair backward and sits in it, watching and waiting for Denny's answer like a spectator at a sporting event.)

DENNY

voice)

(In a choked

Do you realize what you're asking me to do?

BOYD

What God asked of Abraham. Nothing more. Nothing less.

DENNY

Boyd, please, please...

BOYD

You need to do it. Right now, friend. Right now.

DENNY

Could *you* do it? Could *you*?

BOYD

He didn't call me to do it. He knows what He is doing. He called the one who is strong enough to do it. "He who is able to receive this, let him receive it."

DENNY

I'm not. I'm sorry, I'm not strong enough, I'm not strong enough...

BOYD

Oh, yes. You are. Leaning on God, you are. And you'll prove it by saying the words. Say them, and you'll prove it. Say them.

DENNY

Oh, God.

BOYD

Yes, that's it. Lean on Him. "I move that we approve..."

DENNY

I mo...move...that we...we...

BOYD

Yes, you see? “That we approve the immediate...”

DENNY

That we appro...that we appr...appro... *(Stops, drops his arms to his side and glares at Boyd)* Fuck you. I’m not doing it. So you’re just going to have to kill us, Steam or Smoke or whatever the hell your name is, just *kill us*, just do it, just go ahead and...

(Boyd hits Denny, hard. Denny slumps to the floor, stunned.)

JERRY

BOYD! *(Steam draws a pistol from his belt and sights it on Jerry.)* OH!! I mean, what is it?! P-P-P-... No, wait! Puppy! Porky!

BOYD

It’s Puff!

JERRY

PUFF! That’s it! Puff!

BOYD

What?

(Pause)

JERRY

I...don’t remember.

BOYD

Spud! What have you got? Spud! *(Whacks Roger in the head)* That’s you!

ROGER

Oh! I found this. Listen: “If any officer engages in behavior which goes beyond their duties as defined in the bylaws, including but not limited to misconduct at meetings, fraud, corruption...”

(Steam begins to grow impatient)

BOYD

Cut to the chase, god damn it!

ROGER

Uh...uh... “then any member of the group can make a motion to censure the offending officer.” I know we already have a motion on the floor, but if the president’s misconduct consists of *refusing* to bring a motion to a vote, then we should be allowed to censure him, re-elect a president, then make a new...

BOYD

Excellent, Spud! I move to censure Den—Elmo on the grounds that he has misconducted the meeting, perpetrated fraud, shown evidence of moral corruption, and so on and so forth. Spud?

ROGER

I second.

BOYD

All in favor. Aye. (*Roger says “Aye” simultaneously*)

(Steam begins to carefully polish his pistol)

PEYTON

(Almost tearfully)

Aye.

JERRY

Abstai...I abst... (*Looks at Steam’s pistol*) Aye.

BOYD

Fine. What’s next.

ROGER

Then we say: “Mr. President, you have been censured.”

STEAM

Then you walk around him counterclockwise shaking your brooms at him three times.

(Roger and Boyd laugh uncertainly)

ROGER

Actually, then I think we vote him out of office.

BOYD

You think?

ROGER

Technically, a censure is a *warning*...

BOYD

Mr. President, will you call the original motion to a vote?

DENNY

If I could be allowed to...

BOYD

No? Then I move that the President, currently known as Elmo, having ignored the warning contained in his censure, be removed from office immediately.

ROGER

I second! Oh, I second! That works!

BOYD

All those in favor of the motion, please signify by...

STEAM

Shut up.

BOYD

Shut...? But we're seconds from sewing this thing up. Just let us...

STEAM

Shut up. Get in that kitchen. And stay there.

(Everybody is frozen for a moment, uncertain)

BOYD

Look, before you do anything...he's a good man. Deep down. This is what you might call a temporary wavering of the faith...

STEAM

You still here, Puff? Never known a non-existent person to be quite so annoying.

BOYD

I'm sorry, I'm just asking...

(Steam places the barrel of his pistol in Boyd's nostril and raises him up on his toes)

STEAM

Would you look at yourself? I go to all the trouble to invent you, and here you are getting stuck on the end of my gun.

BOYD

I'll go. I'll be happy to go now. Steam.

STEAM

(Sighs)

Yes. *(He takes the gun out and turns back to Denny)* Any more imaginary voices out there? *(Jerry starts say something, and Boyd shushes him. They all start to move out the door.)*

JERRY

(Mostly mouthed)

I'm sorry, Denny...

(Steam cups his hand to his ear and leans toward Jerry. Jerry hurries out and closes the door. Steam regards Denny. For a time, neither says anything.)

STEAM

Well, now.

DENNY

Yeah.

STEAM

Do you know what a hollow-tip bullet is? I hope that isn't an insulting question.

DENNY

Isn't that the one that like blows up inside you?

STEAM

Not quite, but that's the idea. It splays out upon impact, so that when it exits it leaves a much larger wound than where it entered. Virtually anyplace you hit something with one of these bullets can end its life, especially at forty-five caliber and above. Even hitting the extremities can do it. Causes something called hydrostatic shock—like a tidal wave of blood slamming into your heart and brain, short-circuiting everything. But that's chancy, I suppose—the direct approach is best. When I aim this bullet point-blank at your chest, the splayed head of the bullet will tear a big, ragged path through the skin and muscles, the viscera, even more fragile bones such as ribs before it leaves that raw, gaping hole in the back. And that's basically going to be all she wrote. Oh sure, the electric impulses sizzle, still trying to do their various jobs. They'll pump the

STEAM *(cont.)*

heart a few times, they'll twitch the arms and legs while the brain tries to formulate an appropriate response to the invasion. Of course, it's much too late. There is no logic to the brain's actions now. It's trying to do too much, trying to figure out why the blood flow is taking such new and unpredictable routes, trying to send out antibodies to attack a chunk of metal that already left the building 1.8 seconds ago. Still trying to figure out whether to go with "fight" or "flight" at a time when both options are decidedly lost causes. It's been overloaded, like an air traffic controller trying to deal with 400 simultaneous collisions, so all it can do is send out this electrical primal scream, this huge salvo of random, broken signals. Just a wave of tics and twitches and nonsense noises. It never really gives up, the brain, never willingly lets go of life. But this forty-five caliber, hollow-point bullet, this little piece of semi-fragmented metal, it is heartless and it is unstoppable. It tears life from the brain, rips the life right from its clutches. And so, willing or not, finally the brain stops. Maybe there's one last spark. Some final SOS, maybe, from some deep, buried part it hasn't used since it hunted mammoths in Greenland. Then it's gone. It's nothing. All those dreams, those memories. Laughter. Relationships. Soul, consciousness, everything, leaking out of this anonymous sack of meat and liquid and making a puddle on the floor. Gone forever. Nothing. It never existed.

DENNY

I don't accept that. You're wrong.

STEAM

Sometime in all of this, within a half-second, give or take, of the brain ceasing, the bowels release, and the bladder. The flesh, the organs, the brain, all of it now sits in a steaming pile of waste. It's *all* waste now. Everything that once made up a man, that once screamed and fought for food and pussy and discount designer products, everything that once imagined it sat at its rightful place at the center of the universe, is now nothing more than an unpleasant stain. Something that has to be steam-cleaned off a carpet before the next asshole moves in.

DENNY

That's not true! That's not how it goes!

STEAM

(Looks closely

into his eyes.)

I've seen it too many times, friend, and I'm sorry to tell you that's exactly how it goes. I always look for what you're talking about. That moment of epiphany. The eyes twinkling like Christmas lights before they close. Oh, I want to see that. I want to see souls flying upward into the light. But they never do. You know why? I'll tell you why. Because the average

STEAM (*cont.*)

soul is flabby and weak. It's out of shape. It can't fly any longer—it just sinks back into the sewage and dies with the all the rest. And so the eyes, they don't twinkle a bit—they just cloud over like a dead dog's. Trust me, when you're this close to it, you can see it plain as day.

DENNY

I'm going to meet my Creator, Steam. I'm going to sit at the right hand of Jesus.

STEAM

(*Standing astride*

him)

Well, I'm excited to hear that. But in the meantime what you're going to have to do here is hold the barrel. Yeah, like that. Hold it steady against your heart. Cleanest that way. Less time, you see. For the brain to spasm and panic and flail around. Less time—that's the best I can offer you now. Now I hope you don't mind my staring. I'm going to keep a special watch on you, you being so sure your soul is going to soar into the ether with a host of angels and all. You ready? Here we go. Off into the wild blue yonder. (*Slight pause*) Hey. You scared? I don't know why, what with Jesus warming your seat for you and all. Hey, tell you what, if you think about it, maybe you can do me a favor. Maybe after, you can come back down to earth in a blaze of heavenly glory and tell me if Jesus is really a mau-mau. That's what they're saying now, isn't it? Jesus is a mau-mau? Blacker'n coalie's asshole, that's what they're saying about the man, isn't it? I mean, it doesn't matter to me one way or another—you're the one has to eat next to him—I'm just kind of curious is all. Okay, let's get ready. Are you ready? (*Denny makes an inarticulate sound*) Hmm? I didn't get that. Oh, maybe you're worried about the wall-to-wall. All that exit-wound talk before. Now, don't you worry—I'll try not to mess up this fine carpeting of yours too much. Your heart's going to be blastin' backward in six or seven good size chunks, but the way I'm angling it, your spine and your back ribs ought to catch most of it. Anyway, what do you care, right? In 2.4 seconds, you're going to be singing with the heavenly host. Right, Elmo? Right? (*Cocks gun*) Now hold that thought.

DENNY

I...

STEAM

That is, if there *is* any singing going on up there. 'Cause I hear there's a terrible shortage, you know, too many babies dying before they reach cherub age, you know what I mean? And the ones that make it up there,

all they know how to sing is “Miracle Crack.” Aw, but hey, enough of the chitter-chatter, let’s get this done. Here it is, you ready? This’ll be quick. Before you know it, friendly law enforcement agents will be here to scoop

STEAM (*cont.*)

you up in a shovel. They’ll like you, too, ‘cause they won’t even need a buzzsaw to get into your chest cavity—they’ll just reach in and peel those ribs back like French doors. Hey, you’re looking kind of green there. Now, why is that? This pile of shit-soaked carnage won’t have anything to do with your *soul*, will it? Naw, your little Casper soul will be frolicking with its holy playmates for all eternity! Oh, wait—maybe I depressed you with all my talk about the music up there. C’mon, you know there won’t be much time for music, anyway! Half those children make their way up there, they’re going up as junkies, aren’t they? No harp lessons for them, no sir! They’ll be spending all their time sneaking around, stealing manna from God’s change-purse, inhaling Holy Spirit, mainlining the Blood of Christ in some celestial toilet stall... But here I go digressing again. Now, hang on, you’re going to feel a pinch...

DENNY

Oh, God...

STEAM

(*Slaps him*)

Don’t talk to God! Haven’t you been listening to me? Do you think he has time for *you*? What with a nigger son and bunch of sweaty-faced cherubs shaking and puking all over the place, singing Flying Tongue medleys, I’d say our Holy Father is just (*slap*) a trifle (*slap*) BUSY!! (*Hard slap*) But what do you care, Elmo? I’m not going to burden you with God’s problems, since it’s obvious you don’t give a shit about Him! You are selfish and weak and it is going to be a pleasure watching your eyes go all milky like a dog’s.

DENNY

Please...

STEAM

Please what? “Please, Steam, send me on my way?” “Please, Steam, spare my life?” Please what? What?! You don’t even know! Live/die/live/die. Make up your mind, Elmo! I’m not going to let you hang around halfway in between any more! You see, that’s your problem, right there! It’s why you’re just a sobbing, whining wreck. You know you’re not going to get a whiff of heavenly immortality because you never, ever once in your soft, fat life ever made a hard decision about anything! Just dithering around, feeling sort of bad for the condition of the world, but sort of good you got a warm house and warm pussy *in* the house. Sort of bad the government outlawed God, but sort of good they

gave you a tax refund this year. Sort of bad, sort of good, sort of bad, sort of good, well you know what, you are A *SORT OF PERSON!* And I tell you now, God doesn't even notice sort of people! As far as he's

STEAM (*cont.*)

concerned, you don't exist! You're nothing. Just a squatter on his earth he'll never even bother to look at. And you know something, you don't exist to me either. If you did, maybe I'd let you keep on existing, but you don't. You're just scraps on the butcher shop floor. You were born the dog's leftovers, chum. No more talk. No more bullshit. This is where it ends, Elmo.

DENNY

(*Weakly*)

No.

STEAM

No, what? No, you don't exist? I know that, Elmo, I just said that. Goodbye.

DENNY

I do. I do exist.

STEAM

What's that? Are you forming words? Are you saying something to me?

DENNY

Please. I exist.

STEAM

What's that coming out of your mouth? What?

DENNY

I exist!

STEAM

LOOK AT *ME!* God can't see you, Elmo! You're too small, you're too scared, you're too weak, you little squirming organism! I'm the only one in the universe can see you right now, just *ME*, and I'm getting pretty fucking sick of the view! Now, let's try one last time...

DENNY

I exist I really exist!!

STEAM

Oh, pathetic! (*Slaps him*) You got to do better than that! People who exist *do* things, Elmo! They *do* things! Those people, people who

STEAM (*cont.*)

actually do things, they are the real immortals, Elmo, because immortality resides in *deeds*! You want to exist, you got to do things. Can you do things? Are you ready to do things, Elmo?

DENNY

Yes!

STEAM

Oh, bullshit! Look at you: you can't do things—you can't even make a real word! That wasn't a yes. Not even close. You better dig down there as deep as you can, you reach right down there or I'm going to send a bullet to do it for you! You reach in and drag out a goddamn yes!

DENNY

Yes!

STEAM

Yes, what!

DENNY

Yes, I exist!

STEAM

Yes, what what what what what?!!

(Slapping him on every "what")

(Denny screams and leaps to his feet, shoving Steam away from him with a maniacal burst of strength.)

DENNY

I EXIST!! I will DO THINGS! I will DO THINGS! I WILL! I EXIST!
I EXIST! I EXI-I-I-I-ST!

(Silence. Denny stands there, panting. Steam smiles and nods as he watches him)

STEAM

What do you know? You found the place. (*Slight pause*) Did you see that rig out there? (*Pause. Then Denny nods.*) Brand new Peterbilt. Top of the line. Everybody wants one, everybody who's anybody. You admire it? (*Denny nods again*) I don't know why. It's a piece of shit. It's borrowed, just for the weekend. I wouldn't own that junk for nothing.

Now, *my* rig, there's a machine to admire. 1964 Kenworth, a thing of beauty. I keep it as clean and as shiny as the day God set it on this earth, and there hasn't been a truck half as good built since. I'll give you an example. Everybody knows there isn't anything more powerful than first gear on a good semi. That Peterbilt out there, it has a first that'll drag you through just about anything. But on my rig, you see, my rig's got a gear

STEAM (*cont.*)

below first gear. *More* powerful. It's called "bulldog." You got to dig down and grind around for awhile to find it, but it's there. You're hauling logs in the winter and you have to stop halfway up a snow-covered hill, this is what's gonna get you moving again. You find this gear, it's like the hand of God pushing you forward, against all odds and laws of man and nature. But you know something else? (*Reverential, almost whispering*) My rig, it even has *another* gear, down below that first one. Yes. In my rig, you're stuck on the side of a frigging Alp, you grind down two spots and you'd think you're in central Kansas. Can you imagine that? (*Laughs*) Of course you can. That's what you found, just now. You're in that gear, and nothing is going to stop you ever again. What's your name?

DENNY

Denny. Denny Davis.

STEAM

(*Tastes the words*)

Denny. Davis. Well, Denny Davis. So pleased to meet you. I know that's just an habitual form of greeting, but in the case of you and me you don't know how true it is. I'm so pleased. To meet you. I can't remember the last time I met someone who existed.

DENNY

(*He looks at his hands, flexing them and marveling as if it's the first time he's seen them*)

I feel...weird.

STEAM

Of course you do. Those aren't the same hands. Those ones are real. That whole body. You got a real one now. With that one, you could run up the Matterhorn with five tons of scrap iron on your back.

DENNY

Yes. (*Laughing in disbelief*) Yes, that's how I feel.

STEAM

I knew it. Oh, I knew it. I feel the same way. Oh, you can't imagine, Denny. I'm ashamed to tell you. But I was getting tired. Oh, yes. So tired. So much of the same, meeting with the same imaginary sad-sacks in

the same imaginary living room—no offense. Doing the same jobs, hearing the same lame-ass jokes, seeing the same nothing in the same eyes. Just O.D.'d on same. Till I...oh, this is a confession, Denny. (*He sits*) I was getting so I couldn't tell where those imaginary people ended and I...began. I started to feel...don't let this get around...I started to

STEAM (*cont.*)

feel...just a little, mind you now...like I might not be existing quite so much. That's right. Me. Feeling sort of "sort of" myself. I couldn't believe it. But it was an undeniable fact. Sinking into that same swamp of nothing with everybody else. Every day, another inch. Every job, another foot. Then I hear about this job, a big one. Yeah, I'll be honest with you, Denny, none of them other jobs had quite the set of balls hanging off 'em this one does. Thank your friend Puff for that much. So it should have at least gotten the antennae twitching, made some little sparks run down my nerves. But it didn't. Nothing. Not a good sign, I'll tell you. But then, I come here and find you. Denny Davis. (*Laughs again*) You see, what you're about to do, it's the first real thing I've seen in so long. I look at you, I feel so much *real* pumping in my veins, I just... Thank you. Thank you. Denny Davis. (*He puts out his hand for Denny to shake. Denny takes it. A moment between them.*)

DENNY

Thank you, Steam. What's your real name?

STEAM

(*Looks at his watch.*)

Hey. It's 4:30. We need to be on our way toot-suite. Hey. Denny.

DENNY

Yeah?

STEAM

It's a good plan. You want to hear about it?

DENNY

Yes. Yes, I do.

STEAM

All right, then. (*He crosses to window and looks out*) I like this. I like everything about it, starting with this house as a base of operations. End of a quiet cul-de-sac, only two neighbors and neither of them seem to be at home.

DENNY

They go to the mall on Sundays.

STEAM

Yeah well, that doesn't much surprise me. Not you, though, Denny Davis. You stay at home and do what needs to be done. An infiltrator living within the walls of Sodom. *(Slight pause)* All right. Here it is. We're going to load into the truck in about fifteen minutes, and we drive right

STEAM *(cont.)*

over to your local high school. It's deserted today, and it's got a bigass parking lot. Now, I hope you realize I wouldn't be stupid enough to blow up the very same truck that's sitting out in front of your house. That's more raghead bullshit. The real vehicle, with the ordnance, is *inside* the truck. It's a van, no serial numbers anywhere, stolen so long ago it stopped existing. But it's got a swanky new blue paint job, and a really nifty Flying Tongue logo on the side. And it's in certified tip-top mechanical condition. So we go to the high school, we unload the van, cross over to an access road that takes us right to about a half-mile from the performing arts center. At that that point, we sail through security—if you can call it that—and park the van. Then we walk back around the building and get into one of your friend's cars, to which by this time we've attached a pair of completely legal, up-to-date California license plates. Then, when we reach the access road, you are going to take this. *(He removes a black plastic device with an orange button from his pocket.)* You're going to arm it, like so; remove this safety, that's the orange part, like so. *(He demonstrates)* And you are going to push this little red button. *(Denny looks at him)* Yes. You. Of course. It has to be you. Don't you think? This whole thing...it wouldn't make any sense otherwise. Would it?

DENNY

takes the device.)

(Nods slowly and

No. It has to be me.

(Steam stares at him for a second, then an involuntary shudder seems to run through him, kicking one arm out one way, a leg out the other. It becomes a brief, spastic dance, which Steam ends by shaking himself like a wet dog.)

STEAM

God damn! *(He nods slowly)* All right, then. Shall we rally the troops?

DENNY

I'll do it. Let me.

STEAM

Of course you, pardner. That's what I'm talking about.

DENNY

Men! Everybody! Get on out here! *(They file out cautiously)* Come on, let's move! We're on a schedule here! Grab a seat, but don't get too comfortable. *(They do so, giving various startled looks to Denny)* Okay, first order of business, I would like to move that we approve the immediate implementation of the operation.

ROGER

Really?

PEYTON

Whoa!

BOYD

(Stunned)

"Operation Lake of Fire?"

DENNY

Cute nicknames don't mean shit, Boyd. We all know what operation we're talking about. Don't we?

BOYD

Yes, but...I mean...I mean...I...I second.

(They are all sagging with relief now)

PEYTON

Me, too.

DENNY

All those in favor...

JERRY

Den...I mean, whatever your name is...

STEAM

Denny Davis. *(The others look between Steam and Denny uncertainly)*
That's his name.

JERRY

Okay. Denny, are you sure?

BOYD

Shut up, Wiggly!

DENNY

No, it's okay. It's okay—he's right to question me. Come here, buddy. Come here. (*Jerry moves to him*) Look in my eyes, and tell me if I look sure. (*They hold eye contact for a long moment.*)

JERRY

You look sure. You look...different.

PEYTON

You were pulling our legs, right? Before? You just made up that stuff about Connie and Denise being there, right?

(*Pause*)

DENNY

Something like that.

STEAM

"Something like that." (*Softly, in awe*) God damn.

BOYD

Mr. President, I believe you were in the middle of conducting a vote.

DENNY

(*Smiling at Steam*)
Eagerness. Enthusiasm. All right, all those in favor, signify by saying "aye."

ALL

Aye.

PEYTON

(*Hugging Jerry*)
Aye, aye, matey.

STEAM

Dandy. Now. We're about to move out. There's just one item of business left here. Little ritual, you might call it. Puff, you got that video I asked for?

BOYD

Right on the table there. The Flying Tongue in concert. It's called "Live Tongue."

STEAM

Good. That ought to put a little jet fuel in the bloodstream. A little reminder of what we're doing here. Our reason for existence, as it were. Those of us who do. Want to do the honors, Denny?

DENNY

Yeah, let's do it. *(He picks up the tape, then stops)* Wait a minute. The VCR is acting funny. I couldn't get channel three to come on this morning.

BOYD

Let me do it.

STEAM

No. That was this morning, Denny Davis. You try it now.

DENNY

You mean, you think...?

STEAM

I don't think—I like to spend my time knowing. Try it now.

(Denny goes to VCR, picks up remote. He turns on the TV and presses a button, then turns to Steam, startled.)

DENNY

It worked. Channel three.

STEAM

(Nods at the TV)

Go ahead now. Put it in there.

(Denny is about to slip the tape in the VCR when the phone rings. Everybody freezes, stares at the phone, then at Denny. It rings a second time, then a third. Finally, Denny picks it up and moves upstage with it.)

DENNY

Hello. Hi, honey. *(Steam moves closer to Denny, looks him in the eye as he talks. Denny holds the eye contact, unflinching.)* Are you there? You are, aren't you? I can hear the crowd. How do they look? *(Pause)* I said, what do they look like? *(Pause, then smiles)* Freaky. Scary. Young. That's what I thought. You okay? *(Pause)* Yeah, I'm okay. *(Pause)* I know. I know I do. I *am* different. *(Pause)* I can't tell you, honey. I wish I could, but I can't. Hey. I wish...we were together for our anniversary. *(Pause)* I know we will be...soon. But I wish we were now.

(Pause) You want me to what? I can't hear you real well. *(Pause)* My present? Why...should I open it now? *(Pause)* Okay. It's under the TV table. *(Jerry goes and gets it, hands it to Denny. Denny moves away from Steam)* Okay, I've got it. I'm opening it now. *(As he removes the wrapping)* It's okay. I don't care if it's different than usual. Believe me, I don't care about that at all. I'm opening the box now. *(He reaches in and pulls out a glass sculpture of a bird)* A...bird. *(Pause. He stares at the bird for a long moment.)* What? I'm sorry, what honey? No. I love this. I do. It's the...best present I've ever had. The best one. I love this, honey, I really do. I love you. *(Pause)* No. Stay there. I need you to

DENNY *(cont.)*

stay there. Okay? *(He makes eye contact with Steam again)* I told you, I can't explain. You're just going to have to trust in God, and trust in me, and know that this is the best place for you to be right now. Okay? Thank you. One day, I hope I can...I hope I can... *(He starts to break, and Steam steps in as if to take the phone, but Denny waves him away)* Bye, honey. I love you, too. *(He hangs up the phone and puts it down, then stares at the sculpture. Everyone else stares at him. Suddenly, he takes purposeful strides toward the kitchen and shatters it on the kitchen floor)* Well. We ready for that video? *(He moves downstage to the VCR, kneels down, then seems to collapse for a second, dropping the tape on the floor.)*

JERRY

Denny, you okay?

(Denny holds up a hand for silence, then picks up the tape and puts it in. He backs up, pointing his remote at the TV.)

DENNY

Steam, here, I owe a lot to him. He showed me something I didn't want to see. Something Boyd was trying to tell me, and I didn't want to hear. I'm sorry about that, Boyd.

BOYD

(Softly)

No problem, Denny.

DENNY

You see, there are sometimes that talk just isn't enough. Sometimes you can just debate and dilly-dally and intellectualize about things forever and a day. Make everything into a shade of gray, 'til the whole world's gray and you're just another smudge in the middle of it. And God can't see you then. He doesn't even know you exist. So there comes a time when your heart—if it's lucky enough to have other strong hearts around it, giving it more strength—your heart won't let you stay gray. You got to choose

black or white. You got to reach down inside you, get that '64 Kenworth humming and do something so pure that...that... *(He starts to break, then catches himself)* Some of you may not understand why I'm doing this. I think especially Jerry, Peyton—innocents, I think, and friends. But you see, sacrifice is at the core of all this. Steam understands this. No one truly *existed* like Abraham did that moment on the mountain, about to plunge the knife in. *(He removes the detonator from his pocket)* That's why he chose me to press this button today. But...but it's hard to find that gear sometimes. Oh, God it's so hard, 'cause God knows it could never be

DENNY *(cont.)*

pure if it isn't hard. Again, Steam understands this. He understands everything. *(He points the remote at the TV)* So he has a ritual. Remind us of why. Give us the strength to be pure. To exist. So join me now in watching this. We all are going to need it.

(He clicks the "Play" button. They all turn and give it intense focus. Music comes on: jazzy, happy music, with a cheering audience. Then the voice of Oprah Winfrey:)

OPRAH

To love and cherish. Of all the promises we make to each other, this may be the most sacred, the most important of all...

(The men all squint at the TV and mutter in confusion. Behind them, unseen, Denny arms the detonator and peels back the safety covering. Men may ad-lib a little more than the lines indicate, if necessary.)

BOYD

OPRAH

Hey, this isn't my...

ROGER

What the...?

STEAM

this?
going to start by showing you

But every day—once every three minutes to be exact—men are violating their promise to love and cherish in the most horrific way possible. By subjecting their loved ones to daily violence and terror, in what is

supposed to be the sanctity of their own What in God's name is homes. I am

some pictures, and I have to warn you...

(Steam lunges forward and slaps the power button off.)

STEAM

I don't know what you... *(He turns and sees Denny with the detonator. His eyes widen. Everybody turns to see what he's looking at, and when they see, they freeze.)* What are you doing with that? Are you crazy?

DENNY

(Nods)

Sort of.

(With a gesture of savage determination, he presses the button, and the stage goes black as an explosion of loud rock music—"Miracle Crack"—fills the air.)

END