

The Amazing Brenda Strider
By Al Austin

ACT I
SCENE 1

The CURTAIN RISES on a hospital room with two beds, each furnished with a dresser and chair. The beds are parallel, six feet apart and face downstage. The bed on stage right extends just over center stage. It's late morning. In the bed on stage left is **GENE MCLAIN**, 33. **JERRY GRIFFITH**, a 44-year-old in jeans and sport jacket, stands by the second bed, which is empty.

GRIFFITH

I was coming back from New York last winter when it hit me. We were already halfway to the West Coast, right over the Poconos, and that beverage cart was nowhere in sight.

He approaches **MCLAIN'S** bed.

GRIFFITH

Here I was at 200,000 feet dying for a drink, knowing that when the cart finally gets to me, I'm going to have to pay four bucks for my drink, and the flight attendant won't have the change. *I'll come back with your change in a moment, sir.* But she never does. She disappears into the fuselage. So, I'm thinking, why can't I carry one of those little bottles? Save four bucks, instant service.

He takes out a miniature bottle and lofts it in triumph.

GRIFFITH

Then I'm thinking that usually on a coast-to-coast flight, I like to have two or three, maybe five or six drinks. Can you imagine carrying a six-pack of those little bottles? Then, like a flash of lightning, the solution came to me.

From his inside jacket pocket, he pulls out a half-pint of vodka, refills the miniature bottle, screws on the cap, takes a hit on

the half-pint bottle, then puts
both bottles away.

MCLAIN

Umm.

GRIFFITH

So, you're really going through with this, huh?

MCLAIN'S NURSE, BETTY, a no-
nonsense woman in her forties,
pushes a wheelchair into the room.

BETTY

It's time, Mr. McLain.

GRIFFITH

Hey, I just got here!

BETTY

Mr. McLain is due in surgery.

GRIFFITH

Another minute, huh?

BETTY moves toward **MCLAIN**.

GRIFFITH

Thirty seconds?

BETTY

I'm counting.

GRIFFITH lifts the edge of **MCLAIN'S**
hospital gown.

GRIFFITH

Did they shave your groin? Old Spice, right? Cheap bastards

MCLAIN

You talked to Pushkin, right Jerry?

GRIFFITH

Yeah, sure...

MCLAIN

Yes?

GRIFFITH

Yes!

MCLAIN

So you got the extension?

GRIFFITH

No.

MCLAIN

No?

GRIFFITH

New Angle needs the script. And these Russian guys are not to be jerked around. You know what Pushkin told me? These guys will pull that hundred thousand advance right out of our ass. Right out of our—you know where they're from? Novomoskovsk! I hear that name and my balls freeze. We've just got to do it. We've got to get busy, man.

(Pause.)

You know that we haven't had one discussion about the story in two months?

MCLAIN

Do you know what I'm in here for?

GRIFFITH

Yeah, sure.

MCLAIN

Cancer.

GRIFFITH

Cancer? Hey, everybody's got cancer. I thought it was serious.

MCLAIN

Sorry to disappoint you.

GRIFFITH

Listen, you get this over. You take a few days to *unwind*, and then we go like gangbusters on the script.

BETTY

... twenty-nine, thirty.

BETTY helps **MCLAIN** into the wheelchair.

GRIFFITH

So it's settled, right?

MCLAIN doesn't respond.

GRIFFITH

Listen, buddy, I know this is going to be a piece of cake. But just in case, you know that Swiss Army knife of yours that I always liked, the red one with the titanium corkscrew? I mean, *if* you don't make it...

BETTY

(Adjusting the wheelchair.)

There you go.

MCLAIN

Jerry?

GRIFFITH

Yes?

BETTY pushes the wheelchair toward the door.

MCLAIN

Get the extension.

BETTY pushes the wheelchair out of the room. **GRIFFITH** pulls out a pack of cigarettes. He looks at the cigarettes and with his free hand fingers his neck. **A BEARDED MAN** in a doctor's jacket, wearing a knee brace and carrying a clipboard enters. He glances around the room, shakes his head, makes a notation on the clipboard, and then exits. A few seconds later, a **WOMAN** enters. The **WOMAN** is blond, well-dressed and beautiful. She looks around the room, ignoring **GRIFFITH**, who drops his hand from his neck and takes her in.

GRIFFITH

Can I help you?

WOMAN

I was looking for my husband.

GRIFFITH

Maybe he's still in surgery.

She turns to the window.

GRIFFITH

Ironic. That's what it is.

WOMAN

Excuse me?

GRIFFITH

I smoke two packs a day, drink. I'm forty-fo-

(Catching himself.)

--forty years old. I don't take vitamins. I devour red meat and haven't been sick a day in my life. My partner, Gene, is thirty-three, doesn't smoke, avoids red meat, rarely drinks and gobbles vitamins like candy. Right now he's having a biopsy. Got a tumor the size of a golf ball in his chest. What can you say?

WOMAN

They've got the best surgeons in the world here ... or so they tell me.

GRIFFITH

He says it's routine. He'll be fine.

WOMAN

(Not quite sincerely.)

As long as they get it early.

GRIFFITH

That's it, isn't it?

WOMAN

Sure.

She turns away again.

GRIFFITH

(Looking up at the television.)

I wonder if it's on?

WOMAN

Excuse me?

GRIFFITH

A movie I wrote is playing this week.

He pushes the remote control buttons. *African Queen* is playing. SOUND: A few seconds of DIALOGUE between BOGART and HEPBURN. SOUND FADES.

GRIFFITH

There, that's it.

WOMAN

Yeah. And I'm Katharine Hepburn.

GRIFFITH

Actually, mine's called Blind Spot. A mystery.

WOMAN

You cheated me.

GRIFFITH

What?

WOMAN

It ended ambiguously. Either woman could have been the killer.

GRIFFITH

You missed the clue.

WOMAN

Which clue?

GRIFFITH

I'm Jerry Griffith.

He extends his hand. She hesitates, then extends hers. On her other hand is a wedding band.

WOMAN

Brenda.

GRIFFITH

The pantyhose. Leo was wearing pink pantyhose in the greenhouse.

Not blue?

BRENDA

Pink. I wrote it.

GRIFFITH

Is it hard?

BRENDA

I beg your pardon?

GRIFFITH

Writing.

BRENDA

It has its rules.

GRIFFITH

I have some ideas.

BRENDA

I'll bet they're good ones.

GRIFFITH

Don't patronize me.

BRENDA

I'm serious.

GRIFFITH

Don't you know that a woman is more impressed when a man tells her she has no ideas?

BRENDA

There, that edge.
(As much to himself as Brenda.)
Anger. Passion. Fear. That's the womb of creativity.

GRIFFITH

You see all that?

BRENDA

Sure.

GRIFFITH

She looks at him, then looks away, and then looks back. Finally, she looks at her watch.

BRENDA

I have to go.

GRIFFITH

Let's talk about those ideas sometime.

He takes out his business card. **BRENDA** ignores it as she gets up and walks toward the door. She stops, looks back and smiles, then vanishes out the door. He follows a few seconds later.

The LIGHTS DIM, when LIGHTS come BACK UP, **MCLAIN** is in bed, sleeping. Seated beside the bed is **JOY CHANG**, an attractive, well-dressed Asian woman in her late-twenties. **GRIFFITH** comes into the room. As he approaches **MCLAIN**, he stumbles and has to grab the bed's rail to get his balance.

GRIFFITH

How long has he been out?

JOY

An hour.

GRIFFITH

Damn.

(Tapping **MCLAIN**.)

Hey, buddy, how are you?

JOY

Let's let him rest, okay?

GRIFFITH

Sure. Sure.

(**MCLAIN** opens his eyes.)

Hey, he's awake. How are you, man?

MCLAIN stares dumbly. **JOY** takes **GRIFFITH'S** arm.

JOY
May I talk with you?

JOY guides GRIFFITH away from the bed.

JOY
Are you drunk?

GRIFFITH
Hell, no.

(Pause.)
Not le-gally. And who the hell put you in charge anyway? Where does it say a man's ex-wife ranks above a man's partner?

JOY
We still live under the same roof.

GRIFFITH
Yeah. Explain *that* to me.

JOY
Jealous?

GRIFFITH
What's that supposed to mean?

JOY
I don't think I have to explain anything to you. Don't you realize what he's just gone through?

GRIFFITH
Sure. He had a biopsy. They take out a McNugget of flesh.

JOY
They took out two of his ribs.

GRIFFITH
What?

JOY
It was malignant.

GRIFFITH
Bullshit!

JOY

Please, not so loud.

GRIFFITH

You want to hear loud?

JOY turns away.

GRIFFITH

He's going to be all right, isn't he?

JOY

(Fighting back tears.)

I don't know.

MCLAIN

Joy?

JOY rushes back to **MCLAIN**.

GRIFFITH

Guess I don't get that Swiss army knife.

MCLAIN

Forgive me for being impolite. But would you please leave.

BLACKOUT

ACT I

SCENE 2

Hospital room several days later. **BETTY** is adjusting the IV in **MCLAIN'S** ARM. **GRIFFITH** stands on the other side of the room examining the items on **MCLAIN'S** hardly-touched luncheon tray. A vase of flowers is on the table by the bed. The overhead TV is on with the SOUND LOW.

MCLAIN

(To **BETTY**.)

Why aren't you wearing sterile gloves?

BETTY

Excuse me?

MCLAIN

The other nurses wear sterile gloves.

BETTY

(Finishing.)

There you go.

BETTY gets **MCLAIN'S** chart and makes a notation.

MCLAIN

You didn't answer me. Why aren't you wearing sterile gloves?

BETTY

It's not an invasive procedure.

MCLAIN

The other nurses are paranoid then, or should I say overly cautious?

BETTY

We all take the proper precautions, Mr. McLain.

BETTY does a final check on the IV apparatus and exits.

GRIFFITH

I'll bet you're their favorite patient.

MCLAIN

Do you know they stick their fingers up the rectums of the quadriplegics to start their bowel movements?

GRIFFITH

(Picking up a food item.)

So, how did you like your lunch?

MCLAIN

They won't say how long I have to be in here. Five days. A week. A month. You'd think they would have had enough practice.

GRIFFITH

You're complaining? You got a view, a nice bed, plenty to read, television.

GRIFFITH picks up the remote control and **URNS UP THE SOUND.**

REPORTER

... but reputed mob boss Victor Gallo did not show up for his indictment... Locally a hand was found in Trancas Canyon—

MCLAIN grabs the control and TURNS OFF the TV.

GRIFFITH

How come you didn't tell me?

MCLAIN

Tell you what?

GRIFFITH

About this—your operation. You made it sound like—like you were getting a tattoo removed.

MCLAIN

In our organization, Mr. Griffith, we operate on a need to know basis.

GRIFFITH

Well, I damn well need to know.

MCLAIN

Well, I damn well didn't feel like telling you.

GRIFFITH

Oh, he didn't feel like it. We've got a relationship. It's like a marriage. In health and sickness...

MCLAIN

Close. In sickness and health.

GRIFFITH

It was just off the top of my head. Big deal.

MCLAIN

Yes, it is a big deal. Getting these details correct is what it's all about. Sickness *before* health, and why? Because the author of the vows wanted to emphasize the condition that demanded *sacrifice*. So he put *sickness ... first*. A sense of sequence should be your seventh sense, sensitive scribe. So instead of the top, try using the middle or lower depths of that head sometime. You may encounter that seventh sense.

GRIFFITH

(Upbraided but unbowed.)

Let's get back to the point, which is we have a relationship and my future is tied into that relationship.

MCLAIN

(Softly.)

I'm not your future.

GRIFFITH

For the screenplay we're committed to turning in, you are my future, which is why you should have told me about the seriousness of this operation.

MCLAIN

Well, at this point it's carcinoma under the bridge.

GRIFFITH

Right.

(Pause.)

Important thing is they got it all.

MCLAIN

Yes. That is the most important thing.

(Pause.)

I'm sorry I was rude the other day.

GRIFFITH

Forget it.

MCLAIN

How long did you have to wait?

GRIFFITH

Went down the street for a beer.

MCLAIN

I didn't know you were familiar with the drinking establishments in this area.

GRIFFITH

Asked one of your doctors for a recommendation. Two blocks away—the Moonlight Café. That's where he had his morning triple shooters.

MCLAIN LAUGHS, then grabs his chest in agony.

GRIFFITH

You okay?

MCLAIN

Nothing that a little morphine wouldn't relieve.

GRIFFITH

Should I get the nurse?

MCLAIN

So how many did you have? Who was more anesthetized—you or me?

GRIFFITH

Actually, I've cut back on my drinking. Remember how I used to wake up in the middle of the night and have a couple of beers? No more, not since the Zoloft, anyway.

(Pause.)

Three.

MCLAIN

Any babes?

GRIFFITH

Let me think.... Oh, just a woman I met here at the hospital.

MCLAIN

Coincidence or fate? Let the audience be the judge.

GRIFFITH

She'd actually seen Blind Spot.

MCLAIN

She admitted to it? Was she tanked?

GRIFFITH

She thought it ended ambiguously. She thought Leo had been wearing blue pantyhose in the greenhouse.

MCLAIN

Blue? Really? How odd. She was wearing blue. They changed the color to pink during editing. Interesting. What did she look like?

GRIFFITH

Blond. Blue eyes. Flawless, creamy skin. Lithe. Slender. Nymphlike. Thighs that don't quite touch....

MCLAIN

And drinking in a bar at noon.

GRIFFITH

She was meeting her husband at the hospital.

MCLAIN

How old was she?

GRIFFITH

Early-twenties.

MCLAIN

And the husband is what, fifty-five? Sixty? In the hospital for a cardiac test?

GRIFFITH

(Playing along.)

Amazing, Holmes.

MCLAIN

So what did you two talk about while I was having my sternum ripped open?

GRIFFITH

She's a budding writer.

MCLAIN

Umm. And you offered to give her a few lessons.

GRIFFITH

Didn't go that far. Besides, she's married. If I have one rule, it's never fool around with married women.

MCLAIN

I thought it was women over twenty-nine?

GRIFFITH

Oh, yeah, maybe that was it.

MCLAIN

(Noticing the flowers.)

Why did Pushkin send the flowers? I didn't mention anything about going into the hospital.

GRIFFITH

I told him.

MCLAIN

Did you tell anyone else?

GRIFFITH

Took out an ad in Variety.

MCLAIN

It you told Pushkin, you may as well have.

(Pause.)

Did you get the extension?

GRIFFITH

Not exactly.

GRIFFITH picks up the briefcase, opens it and pulls out a laptop computer. He sits down on the second bed, sets the computer on his lap and turns it on.

GRIFFITH

Just like the old times. Jerry at the keyboard. Gene on the vocals.

MCLAIN

Put that thing away.

GRIFFITH

Let's go over what we've got so far. The story begins—

MCLAIN

There is no story. End of conversation.

GRIFFITH

Gene, do you understand the position you're putting me in? My credit cards are tapped out. I'm two months behind with the rent. I've got to park my car three blocks from the front door to avoid the repo man.

MCLAIN

Budget.

GRIFFITH

What?

MCLAIN

The first rule of sound financial planning is to put yourself on a budget and stick to it, young man.

GRIFFITH

What's the second rule?

MCLAIN

Buy in bulk.

GRIFFITH

Umm...

MCLAIN

I've never understood how you could spend money so quickly.

He keys in several commands on the laptop.

GRIFFITH

Let's just take a shot at getting the beats down for the first act.

He puts down the laptop and stands up.

GRIFFITH

Okay, here's the setup. Jack's a forty-something ex-cop down on his luck. Divorced, alcoholic and out of a job. A guy staring into the void.

(He stares into the void.)

He's spent his last two bucks on a Starbucks double latte, which he's about to spike from a pint of vodka...

He slips out his vodka bottle and takes a sip.

GRIFFITH

...when he spots—

MCLAIN

I can't. I can't, Jerry. I just...

GRIFFITH

Can't? Why?

MCLAIN

You wouldn't understand.

GRIFFITH

Sure I do. You're an artist. You'll write when you feel like writing. You'll think when you feel like thinking. The world can kiss your cancerous ass.

MCLAIN

Don't go overboard on your sympathy.

GRIFFITH

This is no different than the crap you always give me. The setting has changed but the attitude remains.

MCLAIN

Let's move on.

GRIFFITH

Sorry? All right. Sorry. Fine. Forget the two hundred thousand. We'll just pay back the one hundred thousand dollar advance. I'll just have to sell my rare stamp collection...

MCLAIN

You're a philatelist? I didn't know.

GRIFFITH

Charged but never convicted.

(Pause.)

Suppose I did take a shot at it myself? A rough draft. I mean it wouldn't be as strong, naturally, but it would get them off our backs.

MCLAIN

If you decide to do that, take my name off the project and prepare to receive a letter from my lawyer.

GRIFFITH

Should I take that as a vote of confidence?

MCLAIN

You know the rules.

GRIFFITH

Your rules.

MCLAIN

Have you ever written anything by yourself that two weeks later you didn't think was a piece of crap? *Calling Missoula Collect?* A cat with a metallic thorn in her paw? And when your

compassionate hero pulls the thorn out of poor pussy's paw,
what does he find it contains? Microfilm. *Microfilm!*

GRIFFITH

Yeah, well...

MCLAIN

Do you want to get taken apart again? Go ahead. Leave. Go
write. Set yourself up to get knocked down again.

GRIFFITH

By you, right? By you, you sonofabitch. I don't need you to
hold my hand. I could, I could—

MCLAIN

Yes?

GRIFFITH

(Looking away.)

You're not some god that breathes life into me.

He picks up the knife from the
lunch tray and looks at it.

GRIFFITH

She's a rather unusual woman.

MCLAIN

Who?

GRIFFITH

Brenda.

MCLAIN

Colorblindness strikes one out of ten.

GRIFFITH

No. I mean really unusual.

MCLAIN

Umm, I'll bet...

The LIGHTS GO DOWN on **GRIFFITH** and
MCLAIN and COME UP on **BRENDA** as she
walks into the room, stage right.
GRIFFITH scrambles over to her. A
SOLITARY LIGHT REMAINS on **MCLAIN** as
he WATCHES and LISTENS. In this and

in **GRIFFITH'S** subsequent encounters with **BRENDA, MCLAIN** will be **AWARE OF AND REACTING TO THE INTERACTION.**

GRIFFITH

You don't make it easy for a guy to follow you.

BRENDA

Who said I wanted you to follow me?

GRIFFITH

I must have not heard you right.

BRENDA

Maybe you heard what you wanted to hear.

GRIFFITH

Maybe.

BRENDA

What do you want?

GRIFFITH

We never got to talk about your ideas.

BRENDA

They're no good.

GRIFFITH

Let me be the judge.

BRENDA

I told you...

GRIFFITH

Why don't you have a seat? I'll buy you a drink.

They sit side by side on the second bed.

GRIFFITH

You sure you don't want to go someplace else?

BRENDA

This will be fine.

BETTY enters. She's dressed in a short frilly waitress skirt and carrying a couple of menus.

BETTY

We got Philadelphia cheese-steaks on special.

BRENDA

Just a glass of white wine.

GRIFFITH

Make that two.

BRENDA

(To **BRENDA**.)

I have to see your ID.

GRIFFITH

Come on.

BETTY

We card everyone who looks under 26.

BRENDA

It's okay.

BRENDA takes her wallet from her purse. **GRIFFITH** fishes for his wallet, but **BETTY** waves him off. **BRENDA** extracts her driver's license and hands it to **BETTY**. She looks at it then looks at **BRENDA**.

BETTY

This has to be fake.

GRIFFITH

What's the problem?

BETTY

You ain't 43 years old, honey.

GRIFFITH snatches the license from **BETTY**.

BRENDA

Something the matter?

GRIFFITH

This can't be right.

BRENDA

You think I carry false ID?

GRIFFITH

Of course not, I meant—

BRENDA

My husband's a plastic surgeon.

BETTY

Lucky you.

As **BETTY** scurries away, **GRIFFITH**
hands the license back to **BRENDA**.

GRIFFITH

You could pass for 22.

BRENDA

How do you feel about me now?

GRIFFITH

What do you mean?

BRENDA

You know.

BETTY returns with the wine,
handing **GRIFFITH** and **BRENDA** each a
glass. **BETTY** glances admiringly at
BRENDA, then exits.

BRENDA

You probably wouldn't look twice at a woman over 40, would you?

GRIFFITH

I'm looking.

BRENDA

Yeah. Any second now I'll start to age before your eyes.

GRIFFITH

Why do you say that?

BRENDA

Just being realistic, that's all.

GRIFFITH

If you're beautiful, it doesn't matter how old you are.

BRENDA laughs. **GRIFFITH** can't resist laughing.

BRENDA

Well, Mr. Screenwriter, maybe you're different.

GRIFFITH

Not so much.

BRENDA

Do you have a cigarette?

GRIFFITH gives her a cigarette and lights it.

BRENDA

How old was your wife when you left her?

GRIFFITH

She was 24 when she left me.

BRENDA

Sorry to hear that. What happened?

GRIFFITH

She got sick of my jokes.

BRENDA

I haven't noticed any yet.

MCLAIN APPLAUDS.

BRENDA

Okay, how many middle-aged women have you dated?

GRIFFITH

I've never been labeled a creep so quickly.

BRENDA

Oh, I hardly believe that.

MCLAIN LAUGHS. **GRIFFITH** gets up.
She grabs his sleeve.

BRENDA

I'm sorry.

GRIFFITH

This is supposed to be a compliment, so don't take it the wrong way—he must be a great plastic surgeon.

BRENDA

He's had plenty of practice. When I was 25, he gave me new lips. And when I was 33, he made me 18.

GRIFFITH

That's a guy who knows how to pick a present.

BRENDA

You think so?

GRIFFITH

You're not happy about it?

BRENDA

I'm so happy, I could cry.

GRIFFITH

Let's have another drink.

He motions for **BETTY** to bring them two more. She brings them over. **BETTY** studies **BRENDA** once more, then glides off with the money.

GRIFFITH

I'm confused. You don't like looking the way you do?

BRENDA

I'm an illusion, Jerry. I'm the lady the magician has cut in half. But the magician knows it's only a trick and down deep he hates that.

She touches **GRIFFITH'S** face, running her finger almost clinically down his jaw.

GRIFFITH

You mean they really don't cut her in half?

BRENDA LAUGHS, but the LAUGH dissolves into tears.

GRIFFITH

Hey, come on.

OFFSTAGE: SOUND OF A CAR DOOR SLAMMING. A **MAN** in a business suit enters.

BUSINESSMAN

(Spotting Brenda.)

Brenda?

He walks over to the bed.

BUSINESSMAN.

Brenda, how are you?

He kisses **BRENDA**'s cheek.

BUSINESSMAN

We haven't seen you and Glen around the club in months. I guess the accident has slowed him down, huh?

BRENDA

Oh, yes.

BUSINESSMAN

Tough to ballroom dance in a brace. We'll at least know some of us other couples will have a chance at a trophy.

The **BUSINESSMAN** notices **GRIFFITH**.

BRENDA

This is my friend Jerry. Jerry, this is—this is Jack Kenton.

BUSINESSMAN

Kemper.

BRENDA

(Lifting her wine glass.)

One more and I'd forget my own name.

GRIFFITH extends his hand, which is taken by **JACK**, who gives a knowing smile to **BRENDA**. **BETTY**, now in her

nurse's uniform, returns to the room. The LIGHTS COME UP on **MCLAIN**.

BETTY

Visiting hours are over.

BRENDA and the **BUSINESSMAN** exit the room.

MCLAIN

So, Kemper knew Brenda better than Brenda knew Kemper?

GRIFFITH

Kenton. His name was Kenton.

MCLAIN

You said that Brenda got it wrong. She said Kenton at first.

GRIFFITH

Let me think.

BETTY

Sorry, sir, but visiting hours are over.

GRIFFITH

Couldn't I just stay—

BETTY

Mr. McLain needs his rest.

BETTY ushers **GRIFFITH** out of the room.

BLACKOUT

ACT I

SCENE 3

Hospital room, days later. **MCLAIN** is sitting up in bed. The IV is attached to his wrist, but he looks stronger. He pairs his nails with a SWISS ARMY KNIFE and leafs through a stack of newspapers on the bed. On the bedside table is an untouched tray of food. **GRIFFITH** is propped against the wall.

MCLAIN

So, what did you, Brenda and Dr. Strider's country club pal-Kenton-Kemper talk about?

GRIFFITH

Brenda shot out of there.

MCLAIN

Sensible. But then again she's a mature woman.

GRIFFITH

That's the beauty of it. A twenty-two-year-old with forty-three years' experience.

MCLAIN

So, she just disappeared down Topanga.

GRIFFITH

That's right.

MCLAIN

And no one fired a warning shot? No one tried to throw a scare into you?

GRIFFITH

That is so weird! Someone did. I followed her outside, but she got in her car and took off. So I'm standing there when behind me I hear this roar and tires squealing. I turn around and this car's coming straight at me with its highbeams on.

OFFSTAGE: A ROARING ENGINE,
SQUEALING TIRES. He jumps sideways
as if avoiding a car.

GRIFFITH

I jump in the bushes to get out of his way, the son-of-a-bitch! Idiot could have killed me!

MCLAIN

Did you see him?

GRIFFITH

Who?

MCLAIN

The driver.

GRIFFITH

Hell, no, I didn't see him. Saw two halogens, that was it.

(Pause.)

That's how I got this.

GRIFFITH touches his forehead.

MCLAIN

Got what?

GRIFFITH

This scratch.

MCLAIN

You haven't always had that? I thought it was a wrinkle.

GRIFFITH

It's a scratch.

MCLAIN

Not a wrinkle?

GRIFFITH

A *scratch*.

BETTY enters.

BETTY

Still not feeling hungry?

MCLAIN

They made a mistake. This order was supposed to go to Valuejet.

BETTY

Is he always this disagreeable?

GRIFFITH

Disagreeable? My little pussycat?

BETTY checks **MCLAIN'S** IV.

MCLAIN

It's fine. Why don't you just leave it alone before you do any more damage.

BETTY

Just let me—

I said—

MCLAIN

He grabs her arm.

It's ... fine.

MCLAIN

BETTY twists her arm from **MCLAIN'S** grip.

BETTY

All right.

BETTY exits.

GRIFFITH

Being kind of hard on her, aren't you?

MCLAIN

It's just so funny. Acting like they care about each poor slob who comes in here with his body wasting away. They probably go home and have a good laugh. What they're really thinking is, "Oh, get away!"

GRIFFITH

I can't see that.

MCLAIN

Try my perspective.

MCLAIN drops his head, closes his eyes and taps his fingers against his forehead.

MCLAIN

Dr. Strider, you said?

GRIFFITH

Yeah.

MCLAIN

A staff physician?

GRIFFITH

Consulting.

MCLAIN

What's he look like?

GRIFFITH

Bearded guy about my size with a brace.

MCLAIN

A brace?

GRIFFITH

That's why she's schlepping.

MCLAIN

The beard?

GRIFFITH

The brace.

MCLAIN

Well, what's the difference?... The mysterious and beautiful Brenda Strider walked out of your life. I mean, you don't intend to see her again, do you?

GRIFFITH

Maybe I've seen her already...

MCLAIN

What happened?

GRIFFITH

Well, you know, I-

(Pause.)

Can I ask you something?

MCLAIN

You may.

GRIFFITH

Does your family know about this?

MCLAIN turns his head. He looks abstractedly at the far wall.

GRIFFITH

I mean like your mother or father?

MCLAIN

Let's get back to Brenda.

GRIFFITH

Sure. Sure. It's funny, though. You don't talk about them, do you? Remember how I told you about how my old man used to take me fishing in that crappy old boat he found? Thing leaked like a sieve. He'd be sticking a worm on my hook with one hand and bailing with the other...

(Laughs to himself.)

You ever go fishing with your father?

MCLAIN

No.

GRIFFITH

Oh. Well. Sailing?

MCLAIN

Why would you want to know?

GRIFFITH

Well, because we're partners, friends.

MCLAIN

It would help you to understand how I ... tick.

GRIFFITH

Sure.

MCLAIN

And tock?

GRIFFITH

Tick and tock.

MCLAIN

I prefer my ticks and tocks remain private.

GRIFFITH

Fair enough.

SILENCE.

MCLAIN

So what happened?

GRIFFITH

You got any brothers?

MCLAIN

Did you see her again or didn't you?

GRIFFITH

Sisters?

MCLAIN

Siblingless.

GRIFFITH

Oh? No brothers. No sisters. That's a start.

MCLAIN

Well?

GRIFFITH

Well, you know, I saw her address on her driver's license. 756 Manson Drive, way up in the hills off of Malibu Canyon. So I thought, what the hell, why not drive by the place? It's maybe eight o'clock when I get up there. They've just pulled into their driveway and are getting out of their car—a Jaguar. So I pass by. In the mirror I see Strider get out of the passenger side and limp toward the house.

MCLAIN

The brace.

GRIFFITH

Right. The brace. So anyway, I cruise down Manson another half mile, then turn back. It's starting to get dark. I pass by the house again. The curtain's pulled back on the picture window, and I see them going at it.

MCLAIN

Explain.

GRIFFITH

Arguing. I mean, I could hear them shouting. So I pull over and watch in the rearview mirror. They separate for a second, then Strider runs across the living room, grabs her and throws her to the floor. Next thing I know, Strider comes storming out of the house carrying his physician's bag. He jumps in the Jaguar and takes off.

MCLAIN

Hmm...

GRIFFITH

I had to see if she was all right.

MCLAIN

And?

GRIFFITH exits the room and **BRENDA** walks on. **MCLAIN** nibbles at a cookie and watches her. OFFSTAGE: A KNOCK.

BRENDA

Who is it?

GRIFFITH

Jerry.

BRENDA lets **GRIFFITH** into the house.

BRENDA

How did you know my address?

GRIFFITH

Your driver's license.

BRENDA

Do you know the term stalking?

GRIFFITH

I just drove by. I just wanted to make sure you were okay.

BRENDA

Well, I'm okay.

GRIFFITH

Where did he go?

BRENDA shrugs.

GRIFFITH

I saw him hit you.

BRENDA

No...

GRIFFITH

I saw him through the window.

BRENDA

You didn't see anything.

GRIFFITH

I just want to help you.

BRENDA

Go away.

She pushes him out of the house.

GRIFFITH

(OFFSTAGE.)

Brenda!

OFFSTAGE: BANGING on the door. Looking agitated, **BRENDA** walks over to **MCLAIN'S** bed. She bends down and extracts a handgun from under the mattress. She SLAPS the gun against her hand several times and exits.

GRIFFITH

(OFFSTAGE.)

Brenda!

GRIFFITH enters the room

GRIFFITH

Brenda?

GRIFFITH hunts desperately through the room. OFFSTAGE: A CRASH. He exits and **BRENDA** enters clutching a bloody cloth to her hand and a can of Band-Aids. **GRIFFITH** returns to the room.

GRIFFITH

Brenda!

(He rushes to her.)

I heard—I thought...

BRENDA

It was stupid. I tried to do two things at once. I broke a bottle. I'm bleeding.

GRIFFITH

I saw you though the window. You had a gun...

BRENDA

Don't be crazy. It's for protection.

GRIFFITH

Wow. I'm in your house. I just walked into your house.

BRENDA

Would you help me put this on?

GRIFFITH helps her with the Band-Aid.

GRIFFITH

You may need stitches.

BRENDA

It's tight.

GRIFFITH adjusts the Band-Aid.

GRIFFITH

Why were you arguing?

BRENDA

Nothing. Money.

GRIFFITH

Money?

BRENDA

Yes, money. It always starts with money.

(Rubbing the Band-Aid.)

One lousy check, the creep.

GRIFFITH

What did you buy? Diamonds? Furs?

BRENDA

Pupfish.

GRIFFITH

Pupfish?

BRENDA

Those poor itty bitty-

She wiggles her cut finger.

BRENDA

Pupfish.

GRIFFITH, confused, wiggles his
finger.

GRIFFITH

Oh.

BRENDA

I sent a donation to the Death Valley Fund.

GRIFFITH

That's *my* favorite charity!

BRENDA smiles and touches his cheek
with her bandaged finger.

BRENDA

You're sweet, Jerry.

She rises.

BRENDA

At night it's so still and quiet, then the wind will come up,
like a man's cool hand running down your throat. I get
goosebumps every time I think of it.

(Pause.)

The desert, I mean.

He runs his hand across his lips.

BRENDA

But then they show up and everything changes.

GRIFFITH

Who?

BRENDA

By the thousands, Jerry.

(Pause.)

Dune buggies. Motorcycles. Thousands of them. It's like this
cloud of-cloud of, you know, insects?

GRIFFITH

What, gnats?

BRENDA

No. Oh, you know, from the movie, with the seagulls.

MCLAIN

Locusts.

GRIFFITH

Locusts.

BRENDA

Locusts. That's it. They come like locusts. And they just take over the desert. I mean, it's like this roaring that gets louder and louder. And those big ugly tires. And oil and—it's like rape, you know?

GRIFFITH

I know. I know.

BRENDA

And all the little animals that live in the desert pay the price. But the one that pays the most is—the pupfish.

GRIFFITH

Tell me again about the pupfish, Brenda.

BRENDA and he sit down on the second bed.

BRENDA

Well. The pupfish live in caves in natural pools of water. Living in total darkness, they're completely blind. But there's nothing to see anyway, you see.

GRIFFITH

I see.

BRENDA

Existing entirely on a diet of bat droppings, the pupfish go through a five-year life cycle.

BRENDA draws a circle with her finger on his chest.

BRENDA

In their third year, they grow to their full length—

BRENDA drops her hand to his leg.

BRENDA

Two and a half inches.

(Pause.)

Although some—

GRIFFITH

Yes?

BRENDA

(Breathlessly.)

Grow much larger.

They stare into each other's eyes.

BRENDA rises and walks away.

BRENDA

But then they come with their flashlights and buckets. Right into the pupfish's home. Scooping water by the gallons for their overheated engines. Bucket by bucket they empty the pool, leaving the little pupfish—

She can't finish. She's CRYING. He moves to her consolingly.

GRIFFITH

Hey, it's okay.

She lifts her sweatshirt sleeve to dab her eyes.

BRENDA

Blood. I've got blood all over me.

She tugs at the sweatshirt. He helps her get it off. She's wearing only a lacy bra. He drops the sweatshirt and embraces her.

MCLAIN

Watson, you're in deep *do do*.

They slowly break their embrace.

BRENDA picks up her sweatshirt and,

as **MCLAIN** and **GRIFFITH** watch ,
exits.

MCLAIN

So you forced entry into a house, had sex with its occupant and for good measure carted away the silverware. Go on.

GRIFFITH

Something tells me I've told you too much already.

MCLAIN

Did you think of him? The cuckolded husband?

GRIFFITH

The guy's an asshole.

MCLAIN

There once was a man with a brace,
Who hobbled from place to place.
He beat up his wife,
Within an inch of her life,
And left at a remarkable pace.

GRIFFITH

So he finished his therapy.

MCLAIN

Umm.

GRIFFITH

What?

MCLAIN

Nothing. How did he injure his leg?

GRIFFITH

That didn't ... come up.

MCLAIN

When are you seeing her again?

GRIFFITH

Who says I'm seeing her again?

(**MCLAIN** smiles)

You think you know me, don't you?

MCLAIN

I know what it means when you describe a woman's body like that.

GRIFFITH

If it were just her body... She's deeper than that, Gene. There's this sensitivity, compassion—

MCLAIN

Ah, yes, that trendy environmental cause of the month. What was it? Heal the catfish?

GRIFFITH

Save the pupfish.

MCLAIN

Where's my checkbook?

GRIFFITH

She's special. You know how I know that? When I'm with her I feel smart, strong—almost invincible.

(Pause.)

That doesn't come along too often.

MCLAIN

Getting in a little deep, aren't you? Why don't you go away for a while? Take a vacation. Give up this mad infatuation with a woman old enough to be your wife.

GRIFFITH

Right. Go away. We've got a goddamn script to turn in.

MCLAIN

It was certainly convenient. Leaving the back door open.

GRIFFITH

Let's just get started.

MCLAIN

You'll make your contribution.

GRIFFITH

When?

MCLAIN

She's got something in mind for you. She's going to ask you to do her a favor.

GRIFFITH

A favor?

MCLAIN

She's going to ask you to use your special skills to get something.

GRIFFITH

How can you possibly know that?

MCLAIN

How can you not know that? Why do you think she's coming on to you? She figures you as someone who can work his way through the densest maze. In other words, she's got you completely wrong.

GRIFFITH

(Seething.)

How the hell I ever hooked up with you, I'll never know.

MCLAIN

You were drowning.

GRIFFITH

Drowning?

MCLAIN

Like Alice drowning in her own tears, you were drowning in your own half-baked ideas.

GRIFFITH

Why, you sonofabitch—you liked those ideas.

MCLAIN

I laughed.

GRIFFITH

Because you thought the funny ideas were funny ideas. You were supposed to laugh.

MCLAIN

I laughed at their audacity.

GRIFFITH

There, you see.

(Pause.)

At least I wasn't so damn anal that I couldn't commit an idea to paper.

MCLAIN

It's called refining an idea.

GRIFFITH

Refining, my ass. You were afraid, afraid your brilliance wouldn't be recognized. That's why you came to me.

MCLAIN

You're suffering from memory impairment. You came to me.

GRIFFITH

Absolutely not. I'll bet you don't even remember where we met.

MCLAIN

Pushkin's Christmas party, December 20. You were drunk and had forgotten where you parked your car. I volunteered to help you find it.

GRIFFITH

Never happened.

MCLAIN

After 45 minutes of exploring the mid-Wilshire district, we found your vehicle at Temple Beth Torah in Rabbi Elfman's spot.

GRIFFITH

No way.

MCLAIN

I drove you home, parked your car and took a taxi back to Joy's.

GRIFFITH

(Remembering.)

I knew it! I never park parallel to the curb.

(Pause.)

Thanks.

MCLAIN

Don't mention it.

GRIFFITH

But you *have* forgotten something.

MCLAIN

Yes?

GRIFFITH

The stabbing.

(Pretending to wield a knife.)

Over or under!

MCLAIN

Refresh my memory.

GRIFFITH

It was earlier in the evening. We got into a discussion of the most effective way to stab a man. You said over and I said under.

MCLAIN

I didn't say under?

GRIFFITH

No. You insisted it was from above. Force of gravity crap or something. But I knew. Oh, I sure knew that.

MCLAIN

Your Army training. God bless America

GRIFFITH

I served, man.

MCLAIN

And we're all so appreciative.

GRIFFITH

Yeah. Well, the bottom line is a couple of days later you called me to talk about ideas.

MCLAIN

Now that I think about it, you're right. So I did.

GRIFFITH

Ah hah. You came to me, the guy who put in his time in the trenches.

MCLAIN

I came to you because of something Pushkin said.

GRIFFITH

That's better.

MCLAIN

He said there was a streak of brilliance in you.

GRIFFITH

Ah.

MCLAIN

He said you were a genius ... *typist*.

GRIFFITH

A what?

MCLAIN

A brilliant *typist*. Fast and error free.

GRIFFITH

Bull.

MCLAIN

He said it amazed him. Despite your being a hack and a drunk, you played that keyboard like a Rubinstein.

GRIFFITH

You little--he never said that.

MCLAIN

What's the difference?

GRIFFITH makes a fist. He glares at
MCLAIN.

GRIFFITH

(The knife.)

Over or under. Over or under.

MCLAIN

It worked out. Next installment.

GRIFFITH

Screw that, man. I'm out of here.

GRIFFITH exits.

MCLAIN

Jerry?... Jerry?

MCLAIN BREATHES HEAVILY and with difficulty.

MCLAIN

Jerry?...

BLACKOUT

ACT I
SCENE 4

Hospital room a week later. **MCLAIN** is propped up in his bed. He breathes with some effort and appears weaker. **GRIFFITH** sits on the second bed holding a stack of fresh newspapers.

MCLAIN

Jerry?

GRIFFITH

(Not making eye contact.)

Yeah?

MCLAIN

The knife. You were right about the knife.

GRIFFITH

(Looks at **MCLAIN**.)

Thanks. That's something.

He gets up and sets the papers on **MCLAIN'S** bed.

GRIFFITH

The Washington Post was sold out.

MCLAIN

Thank you.

GRIFFITH

Sure. How are you feeling?

MCLAIN

Chipper.

GRIFFITH

Chipper?

MCLAIN

Yes. Chipper.

He takes in **MCLAIN**. He's not convinced.

GRIFFITH

Gene, is there anything—

MCLAIN

So, have you seen her again? Brenda, I mean.

GRIFFITH

(Long pause.)

Yeah. Maybe.

MCLAIN

And?...

GRIFFITH

Look, I don't know if I should be...

(He shakes his head.)

Okay, okay...

OFSTAGE: COUNTRY WESTERN MUSIC. The LIGHTS GO DOWN on **MCLAIN**, leaving him under a SINGLE LIGHT, and COME UP on **BRENDA** as she enters the room and is met by **GRIFFITH**. **BRENDA** drops down on the second bed. **GRIFFITH** caresses her.

BRENDA

Did you park down the street?

GRIFFITH

Yes. How long have we got?

BRENDA

Don't get over confident.

(Pause.)

I'm sorry.

She extracts herself from **GRIFFITH** and rises. A SLOW SONG comes on the radio. **GRIFFITH** puts his arm around her waist.

GRIFFITH

Like to dance?

BRENDA

No.

GRIFFITH

Come on.

BRENDA

No, I really can't, Jerry.

He takes her hand and moves her to the MUSIC.

BRENDA

You're crazy.

They dance awkwardly. She nuzzles him.

BRENDA

Umm. I want to melt...

She lifts her head to kiss his lips. He starts to kiss her but stops. He stares at her eyes.

BRENDA

What?

GRIFFITH

Your eyes.

BRENDA

Yes?

GRIFFITH

They're two different colors. The right one is blue. The left is green.

BRENDA cups her left hand over her left eye, but quickly shifts to the right, pressing the edge. She drops her hand. She looks around the floor.

BRENDA

Damn. I think I lost it.

GRIFFITH

You're wearing contacts?

BRENDA

Damn. Damn. Damn.

(Pause.)

Well, what did you think?

GRIFFITH

For a second there, I thought it some sort of-

BRENDA

Some sort of new eye?

GRIFFITH

You seem upset.

BRENDA

Well, it's my last tinted pair, and they take so long to order...

She smiles, moves to **GRIFFITH** and embraces him.

BRENDA

Jerry, I want to ask you a favor...

GRIFFITH

Damn.

BRENDA

What?

GRIFFITH

Nothing. A favor?

BRENDA takes **GRIFFITH'S** hand and leads him across the stage.

BRENDA

Can you open this door?

GRIFFITH

Sure.

BRENDA smiles and kisses him.

GRIFFITH

What's the combination?

BRENDA

Don't tease.

GRIFFITH

Brenda, it's an electronic combination lock. There are millions of possible combinations.

BRENDA

I thought you could figure out this kind of thing. Why would you make me think you could if you couldn't?

GRIFFITH

Brenda, come on....

He bends down, studying the lock.

GRIFFITH

Does he go in here much?

BRENDA

A half-dozen times a day.

He touches one of the numbered keys.

GRIFFITH

Jack Cricket.

BRENDA

What?

GRIFFITH

Jack Cricket was the main character in a story I wrote. Calling Missoula.

MCLAIN

Collect.

He glances at **MCLAIN**.

GRIFFITH

He got a phone number this way...

BRENDA

What way?

GRIFFITH bends down farther.

GRIFFITH

The numbers that are used all the time should be a little worn down. Like *four*.

BRENDA

(Breathlessly.)

Four.

GRIFFITH

Seven, Two...

(Pause.)

Eight.

BRENDA

Four. Seven. Two. Eight. You're so clever! Try it. Go ahead, try it. Four. Seven. Two. Eight.

GRIFFITH

Seven. Two. Eight. Four.

BRENDA

No. Four. Seven. Two. Eight.

GRIFFITH

No. It doesn't have to be in that order. There are—four times three times two ...twenty-four possible combinations.

BRENDA

That's not so many, is it?

She leans against him and smiles adoringly as he continues to work through the combinations.

BRENDA

How's your friend?

GRIFFITH

Gene? Oh, he's fine. He's, well he's...

BRENDA

Yes?

GRIFFITH

He doesn't like me talking about it. He doesn't like it getting around that he's sick, was sick.

BRENDA

I'm not going to tell anyone.

GRIFFITH

Ah, you don't know Gene.

BRENDA

Are you close to him?

GRIFFITH

Porcupine close. Just close enough to feel the sting of his quills.

(Pause.)

He really pisses me off sometimes. He's so, so—
(Searching.)

BRENDA

Controlling.

GRIFFITH

Controlling. Exactly.

BRENDA

Like Glen. Puppetmasters.

GRIFFITH

Puppetmasters. Exactly. Always pulling the strings. Dance, you dumb puppets!

MCLAIN

Marionettes.

GRIFFITH

What?

MCLAIN

Marionettes have strings. You manipulate puppets by sticking your hand up their ass.

GRIFFITH jabs in combinations.
Nothing happens.

GRIFFITH

One left.

(Pause.)

Two. Four. Seven. Eight.

The lock CLICKS.

BRENDA

Oh!

GRIFFITH pushes open the door.

BRENDA

Two. Four. Seven. Eight. Two. Four. Seven. Eight.

GRIFFITH and **BRENDA** walk OFFSTAGE,
then walk back ONSTAGE.

BRENDA

You did it. You're amazing, Jerry.

GRIFFITH

It's his office, isn't it? An operating room and everything.

BRENDA walks over to **MCLAIN'S**
dresser and searches through the
drawers.

GRIFFITH

What are you looking for?

BRENDA

Nothing.

GRIFFITH

Sure. Nothing.

BRENDA pulls out several letters. As she shuffles through them, one drops to the floor. **GRIFFITH** picks it up. He reads from the envelope.

GRIFFITH

Zimmerman and Eisel, Attorneys at Law. It's addressed to you.

BRENDA snatches the envelope, withdraws the letter, and reads it with growing excitement.

GRIFFITH

Something interesting?

BRENDA

Nothing.

GRIFFITH

Sure. Nothing.

BRENDA

(Contritely.)

It's a letter from my lawyer. He hides things from me.

GRIFFITH

Why would your lawyer hide things from you?

BRENDA

Not my lawyer. Glen.

BRENDA returns the letter to the drawer.

BRENDA

We have to get out of here. If he catches me...

GRIFFITH

What? What will he do, Brenda?

BRENDA

You don't know him, Jerry. That bastard.

GRIFFITH

Why don't you leave him, Brenda?

BRENDA

Do you know the story of Shangra-La, Jerry? While you stay there, you're forever young. But once you leave, you turn into an old hag, a penniless, powerless, old hag.

GRIFFITH

Not if someone loves you.

As they embrace, **JOY** enters, unnoticed for a few seconds by **MCLAIN, GRIFFITH** and **BRENDA**.

JOY

Am I interrupting something?

BRENDA detaches herself from **GRIFFITH** and steps aside. She studies **JOY** uninterestedly, like someone passing time. **BRENDA** will remain in the room, listening and watching but without reaction.

MCLAIN

You're early.

JOY

If you want, I can come back.

MCLAIN

No, that's fine. But wasn't the appointment at three? It's only—

MCLAIN looks at **GRIFFITH**, who checks his watch.

GRIFFITH

One thirty. Hello, Joy.

JOY

Hello, Jerry.

(Pause.)

They get a lot of cancellations. I was hoping that we might be able to get an earlier appointment.

MCLAIN

(To **GRIFFITH**.)

I'm getting my picture taken for the hospital yearbook.

GRIFFITH

Most likely to bite the head off of a nurse.

JOY

It's an MRI.

GRIFFITH

Oh?

JOY

Do you mind? Going early, I mean.

MCLAIN

Mind? Why it's like getting to unwrap a present on Christmas Eve. I'm delirious with anticipation. Let me get my clothes on.

MCLAIN rolls out of bed. He secures his hospital gown.

MCLAIN

Your high-level meeting would be at what, four?

JOY

(Rubbing her forehead.)

The affiliate just showed up this morning and demanded a meeting. They gave us no notice, no-

MCLAIN

No explanation necessary. Give me five.

GRIFFITH holds up his hand to accept a high five. It's lame and he knows it. **MCLAIN** smiles and exits the room.

GRIFFITH

What's he need an MRI for?

JOY

Jerry, please.

GRIFFITH

What?

JOY

This isn't a game.

GRIFFITH

Hey, all I asked was—

JOY

Are you an imbecile?

(She shakes her head.)

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

GRIFFITH

Like they didn't get it all or something?

JOY

Are you blind, Jerry?

GRIFFITH

What the hell are you talking about?

JOY doesn't respond. He steps aggressively toward **JOY**. **MCLAIN** returns dressed in street clothes.

MCLAIN

Off to the belly of the beast.

GRIFFITH

What, what if no one cancels?

MCLAIN

We'll take a tour of the power plant.

GRIFFITH

I'll take you over there.

JOY

That's very thoughtful, but—

GRIFFITH

Hey, like I've got something to do? Let's stick to the three o'clock appointment.

JOY

I'm taking him, Jerry, okay?

GRIFFITH

You're gonna be sitting around the waiting room—

JOY

Right. Right. Like you know any—

MCLAIN

Now, children, let's not quarrel.

(Pause.)

Jerry may be right, for once. Let's let him take me.

JOY

That's what you want?

MCLAIN

I'll get my MRI. You'll make your meeting. And Mr. Griffith will be kept out of the bars for an extra hour or two. Winners all around.

GRIFFITH

Damn. I forgot happy hour.

JOY

Well...

JOY nods. She looks away, her lips trembling. She sniffs, takes a deep breath and smiles gamely.

JOY

All right. Okay. It's very nice of you, Jerry.

GRIFFITH

Ah...

JOY crosses her arms over her chest.

JOY

Well, I guess I'll let you get back to...

She shrugs, walks over to **MCLAIN**. She goes to kiss his lips, but he offers her his cheek, which she gently kisses.

JOY

I'll see you later.

She pats **MCLAIN'S** arm, turns and smiles at **GRIFFITH**, then exits.

MCLAIN

Not if someone loves you.

GRIFFITH

What?

BRENDA moves toward **GRIFFITH**.

MCLAIN

You were in Dr. Strider's surgery. Brenda had just synopsized Shangra-La, and you responded to her with, "Not if someone loves you."

GRIFFITH

Oh.

BRENDA embraces him, but he doesn't respond.

GRIFFITH

That MRI. What exactly—

MCLAIN

Not if someone loves you.

GRIFFITH

Listen, Gene, I'd just like to know—

BRENDA

What's the matter, Jerry?

GRIFFITH

The matter. The matter is—

BRENDA runs her hand down his chest.

BRENDA

We shouldn't be here. He'll be home soon.

As **BRENDA** leads him from the room, **GRIFFITH** pulls away. He bends down behind the second bed and brings up **STRIDER'S** brace.

GRIFFITH

Why do you drive him to work?

BRENDA

Jerry, stop.

GRIFFITH

Dos he need it at all?

BRENDA

It's an insurance thing. There was an accident.

GRIFFITH

Insurance? He's a plastic surgeon. What's he need insurance money for?

BRENDA

Please, Jerry. Don't ask me anything else.

She grabs the brace from him and throws it down. She kisses him.

BRENDA

Isn't this enough?

STRIDER, the bearded doctor, enters.

STRIDER

(Venomously.)

Hello, Brenda.

The stage goes DARK. **BRENDA** and **STRIDER** exit. **MCLAIN** LAUGHS, stifles it, then LAUGHS LOUDLY. The SPOTLIGHT comes up on **GRIFFITH**, who is seated in a chair, craning his neck. FROM OFFSTAGE will come the imperious voice of a **MEDICAL TECHNICIAN**.

GRIFFITH

You see something?

TECHNICIAN

It has to be interpreted.

GRIFFITH

You see something wrong?

TECHNICIAN

I'm not a doctor. I'm a med tech.

(Pause, then annoyed.)

Would you please?

GRIFFITH

Oh, sorry.

TECHNICIAN

Uh, oh. *Poor bastard.*

BLACKOUT

ACT II
SCENE 1

MCLAIN'S hospital room. An IV tube attached to **MCLAIN'S** wrist runs to a CONTAINER OF GREEN LIQUID hanging from an IV stand. **GRIFFITH** stares at the green container.

MCLAIN

Vincristine. They cut it with Adriamycin.

GRIFFITH

What does it do?

MCLAIN

It's supposed to destroy the cancer cells, unfortunately it kills the healthy cells at the same time. It's a delicate balancing act—too little and the cancer cells gain, too much and—

(Sighs deeply.)

The nurse said I'll start to feel pain in my hands and feet, my jaw. I'm not sure they know what they're doing. It's like those booths in carnivals where the object is to knock down the toy cats with the balls. But they're weighted. You can hit them with the kitchen sink and they won't go down.

GRIFFITH

This shouldn't be happening to you.

MCLAIN

No? Well, my mother died of cancer.

GRIFFITH

I didn't...

MCLAIN

Twenty-eight years old.

(Sighs.)

You'd think it would work like a plane crash. You know if the plane before yours crashes, the odds are astronomical that the next one will crash. So you can skip across the tarmac. But whoever figured out this stuff had a good sense of humor. You live in its shadow. The first time she went in they told her they were doing a biopsy. She woke up minus a breast. They still do that, you know. They figure that while you're down they might as well do the job right. Only they didn't do it quite right.

MCLAIN points to the bedpan, which **GRIFFITH** hands to him. **GRIFFITH** turns away as **MCLAIN** gets sick. **BETTY** enters.

BETTY

It's nothing to be alarmed about.

MCLAIN

Right. I love to puke over myself. See what's become of my toast?

(Grabs his head.)

Oh, man...

BETTY

I'll get you something that will help the nausea.

BETTY exits. He throws off the bedclothes, pushes himself violently from the bed and gets to his feet.

MCLAIN

I didn't do anything to deserve this! Don't tell me I did something, because I didn't do anything!

GRIFFITH

Nobody said-

MCLAIN

I don't want this! Do you understand? I don't want this! This, this this—

MCLAIN falters. **GRIFFITH** puts his arm around him.

GRIFFITH

Take it easy, Gene.

GRIFFITH helps **MCLAIN** back into bed.

MCLAIN

I don't want to. I don't—

GRIFFITH

You're all right now...

BETTY comes back into the room carrying a glass of water and some pills. She gives **MCLAIN** the pills. She unhooks the IV and leaves.

GRIFFITH

You were telling me about your mother...

MCLAIN

She died of cancer. Let's leave it at that.

GRIFFITH

Sure, Gene. I understand.
(Soto voce.)

I understand.

He walks over to the suitcase.

GRIFFITH

What's this?

MCLAIN

Joy had to clear my stuff out of the apartment.

GRIFFITH

Why?

MCLAIN

Her family will be visiting.

GRIFFITH

But I thought you were going home after the first round of chemo?

MCLAIN

Plans have changed. It would be awkward, that's all.

GRIFFITH

Awkward? I'll say it's awkward. Kicking you out when you're, when you're—

MCLAIN

It's just for a couple of weeks.

GRIFFITH

Where will you stay?

MCLAIN

Joy's found me a nice little nearby bungalow. Well kept. Quiet. Formerly occupied by a Kato something... Unless, of course, the Striders have something available...

GRIFFITH

You can't stay by yourself... Man, it's stuffy in here. Should I open the window?

MCLAIN

So Strider holds onto her like a lion with a fresh kill, then suddenly he's invited the jackals to come eat.

GRIFFITH

Actually, I've got a little extra room at my place.

MCLAIN

Describe it to me again...

GRIFFITH

Well, it's nothing fancy. It's a two bedroom apartment with one-and-a-half—

MCLAIN

Strider finds you with his wife, so naturally he invites you back for drinks on the weekend.

MCLAIN LAUGHS, then grabs his chest in pain.

GRIFFITH

You all right?

MCLAIN

Never better.

(Trying not to laugh.)

Of course, you had a perfectly legitimate reason for being there.

(Mockingly.)

Ah, yes, Glen. I *always* schedule my screenwriting classes at midnight.

GRIFFITH

It was *ten o'clock*.

MCLAIN

We were *just* getting into exposition.

GRIFFITH

Listen. I remember reading this article about chemotherapy. It was about how to reduce the—

MCLAIN

Please, Jerry? It takes—

(Grimacing.)

It helps, it...

GRIFFITH hesitates, then walks over to the second bed and sits down.

STRIDER enters and sits down in the chair. **BRENDA** enters carrying three drinks on a serving tray. She hands a drink to **GRIFFITH**. Then hands a drink to **STRIDER**.

STRIDER

I'm glad you could stop by, Jerry.

GRIFFITH

I really can't stay long. I've got a sick friend that I have to-check in on.

STRIDER

A sick friend? Yes, yes, that's right. Brenda mentioned that. Well, here's to your friend's speedy recovery.

STRIDER raises his glass, which gesture **GRIFFITH** mirrors. They both

drink, then stare silently at each other for a few seconds.

STRIDER

So, how much is my wife paying you?

GRIFFITH

Excuse me?

STRIDER

For the acting—I mean, the *writing* lessons?

BRENDA

Glen, please.

STRIDER extracts a bottle of pills from his pocket, unscrews the cap and takes one of the pills. He washes down the pills with his drink.

STRIDER

Do you get paid by the hour, Jerry, or is it by the evening?

GRIFFITH

We haven't decided what the arrangement will be.

STRIDER shakes the bottle.

STRIDER

We have no one to blame but ourselves.

GRIFFITH

Excuse me?

STRIDER

A non sequitur. Do you follow?... I have a mild heart condition. I should have chucked it all in and moved to Fiji ten years ago... If my wife had given me a little encouragement, I might have, too. Ah, there I go again, blaming it on someone else.

He strokes **BRENDA**'s arm.

STRIDER

She's very beautiful, isn't she? As beautiful as on the day I met her. But with an inner beauty, too. A love of simple things, Flowers in the spring. A fish in a pool of water.

He CHUCKLES. **BRENDA** breaks away.

GRIFFITH

What's stopping you ... from going away?

STRIDER

The plot.

(Pause.)

I'm working on a story, too.

GRIFFITH

No kidding?

STRIDER

Yes, a mystery. But I've come to an impasse with the plot. And, you see, I don't think I can move forward in my life until I've gotten over that hurdle.

BRENDA

Ready for another beer, Jerry?

GRIFFITH

I really can't stay long.

STRIDER

Don't you want to hear about my plot?

GRIFFITH

Oh, sure, but...

STRIDER

It's one of those triangular stories. Two men and a woman. One of the men is the woman's husband, the other, her lover.

GRIFFITH

Yeah, well, *that's* never been done before.

STRIDER

(Imperturbable.)

Now, the lover thinks he's pulling the wool over the husband's eyes, but actually the husband knows all about the affair.

BRENDA COUGHS.

STRIDER

In fact he approves of it.

GRIFFITH

Not jealous?

STRIDER

(Smiling.)

I didn't say he wasn't jealous. So what do you think? I mean, from a writer's point of view?

GRIFFITH

Well, I'm sure there's more to the story than what you've told me...

STRIDER

No, that's it.

GRIFFITH

There doesn't seem to be much—conflict.

STRIDER

It's not the plot then?

GRIFFITH

Well, without conflict, there is no plot.

STRIDER raises his glass.

STRIDER

There. You've hit it right on the head. That's my problem, isn't it?

GRIFFITH glances at **BRENDA**, who keeps her eyes averted.

GRIFFITH

I really should take off.

STRIDER

Whatever it is my wife is paying you, I'll make you a better deal.

GRIFFITH

I'm not sure I understand.

STRIDER

Mine's an unusual story, Jerry. I don't want any conflict in my plot. I want all the characters to be ... happy. You see in my

story, the husband just wants his wife to ... remain with him. To be by his side in-in health and sickness.

GRIFFITH

(Soto voce.)

Sickness and health.

STRIDER taps his fingers together.

He is nervous and embarrassed.

BRENDA steps toward him.

BRENDA

Are you all right, Glen?

STRIDER

(Nodding. A little desperate.)

How would you like those bags removed from under your eyes? Maybe smooth out your forehead?

GRIFFITH touches his forehead.

STRIDER

Just continue the lessons with Brenda ... here.

GRIFFITH

And for that you'll give me a face lift?

STRIDER

An evening's work could make you ten years younger.

BRENDA

That's ridiculous.

STRIDER

Don't be angry with me.

BRENDA

I don't mean that. I mean the whole idea... Jerry's fine. Just, just the way he is. Jerry is.

STRIDER rises. He walks over to **GRIFFITH**, bends down and examines his face. He places his hand against **GRIFFITH'S** jaw.

STRIDER

I think I could really do something here.

GRIFFITH

I don't know. I-

STRIDER

I just need to take a few photos... Hold on, let me get my camera.

STRIDER exits.

BRENDA

Jerry, leave right now.

GRIFFITH

But he just said-

BRENDA

I'll tell him you were feeling sick. You had to-

STRIDER returns with a camera. He snaps a picture. **GRIFFITH** freezes at the FLASH. **STRIDER** and **BRENDA** exit. **MCLAIN** smiles, tilting his head toward **GRIFFITH** in an expectant manner. **GRIFFITH** looks away, then slowly looks back.

MCLAIN

Something's missing. He's basically turning down the sheets and putting a mint on the pillow for you.

GRIFFITH

I've told you he's an asshole.

MCLAIN

Aren't you somewhat curious where Strider dashes off to on those nights when you're banging his wife?

GRIFFITH pulls out his pocket flask. He looks at it, but shoves it back in his pocket.

GRIFFITH

No.

MCLAIN

No?

GRIFFITH

Maybe a little.

MCLAIN

You've never asked her?

GRIFFITH

All right. Okay. What do you want me to do? You want me tail him? I'll tail him.

MCLAIN

I don't think that's your line of work.

GRIFFITH

You think it's out of character or something? I've tailed people before.

MCLAIN

Nazi war criminals?

GRIFFITH

Ha. My wife, for one. Tailed her from LA to Big Sur. Right down to that rocky beach where the surf breaks two ways. Spreads like a pair of legs.... There's nothing so pure as looking through a pair of binoculars to see your wife giving some guy a ...

HE sighs.

MCLAIN

You never said anything.

GRIFFITH

No? I thought I told you all my stories.

MCLAIN

Not that one.

GRIFFITH

Well, now you've got that one, too....

MCLAIN

What was she like. I mean, your wife.

GRIFFITH

Oh, a big redhead. Bucktoothed. Beer guzzling. Loud.

MCLAIN

She resembled Brenda, didn't she?

GRIFFITH

I don't know. Maybe a little...

(Pause.)

You can't stay by yourself.

MCLAIN

Don't.

GRIFFITH

Oh, you thought I was going to offer you my place?

MCLAIN

I can remember my mother pushing me on a swing. I can remember her smell, the color of her hair. The texture of her dress. She was very beautiful.

GRIFFITH

When did your father die, Gene?

MCLAIN

He died the year I graduated college. He was fifty-five.

GRIFFITH

That's not very old.

MCLAIN

It is in my family.

GRIFFITH

I'm sorry... We're you close to him?

MCLAIN

No. I think he was under the impression that when my mother died, I died with her. At least that's the way it seemed to a nine-year-old. And so it was a relief when he died.

GRIFFITH

You don't mean that.

MCLAIN

No?

GRIFFITH

When your father dies you hurt.

MCLAIN

You hurt, not me.

GRIFFITH

We're not that different.

MCLAIN

No? Each morning when I wake, I have a little man sitting on my chest. Since I was nine years old, that little man has sat on my chest, and he has spoken to me every day of my life. The little man's name is death. How melodramatic, huh?

GRIFFITH

We're all scared, Gene.

MCLAIN

Umm. Where does he go? Where the hell does Strider go?

GRIFFITH shrugs.

MCLAIN

(Angrily.)

Get out of here.

GRIFFITH

What?

MCLAIN

You're fired, Watson.

GRIFFITH shakes his head. He pushes way from the bed and starts out of the room. At the door, he stops and stands for a few seconds with his back toward **MCLAIN**. He turns.

GRIFFITH

If you come back to my place when you get out of here, I'll find out where Strider goes. Deal?

MCLAIN

Umm.

(Pause.)

Do you remember Shrift?

GRIFFITH

Sure. The private detective slash scrip consultant slash bit-part player.

MCLAIN

He'd do it.

GRIFFITH

Do—oh, Strider I said I'd do it.

MCLAIN

No offense, but we need a professional.

MCLAIN

For Christ's sake, Gene, you are blowing this way out of proportion.

MCLAIN

Get Shrift.

BLACKOUT

ACT II
SCENE 2

Hospital room. A week later. **MCLAIN** is sitting up in bed. **GRIFFITH** leans against the wall. **SHRIFT**, a small man in a big coat, sits in a chair tapping on the keyboard of a laptop computer.

SHRIFT

Do you like Microsoft Word or WordPerfect?

MCLAIN

Either is fine.

STRIDER

Mac format or Dos?

GRIFFITH

What's the difference?

STRIDER

Well, I'm going to give you the report on disk and I want to be sure you'll be able to download it.

MCLAIN

Why don't you just give us the report verbally and we'll decide the format later.

GRIFFITH

Gene, he's a *professional*.

MCLAIN

Your report, Mr. Shrift.

SHRIFT taps a few more keys.

SHRIFT

Wednesday, seven p.m. Strider leaves his residence at 756 Manson Drive. Driving a 2001 Ferrari, license plate-

GRIFFITH

Yeah, yeah, that's fine. Where does he go?

SHRIFT

101 east.

GRIFFITH

That's something. Then what?

SHRIFT

405 north. Drives in the number three lane at-

GRIFFITH

Cut to the chase, Mr. Shrift.

(Grins.)

I've always wanted to say that.

MCLAIN

My partner isn't big on details.

SHRIFT

Right.

SHRIFT turns off the power on the computer and sets it down. He unbuttons his coat.

SHRIFT

Saugus.

GRIFFITH

Saugus? Where they have the stock cars? Strider went to a funny car race?

SHRIFT

Not even close.

MCLAIN

Continue.

SHRIFT

I followed Strider to DeSalvo Road, which dead ended at an old gate surrounded by an avocado orchard. Strider opened the gate, drove in and went into the house.

MCLAIN

Did someone let him in or did he have a key?

SHRIFT

He had a key all right. I parked my car, waited about ten minutes, then took a stroll into the orchard. I couldn't see much, so I hopped the fence. No sooner did I hit the ground than something comes flying at me out of the dark.

GRIFFITH

Guard dog.

SHRIFT

Peacock.

GRIFFITH

Peacock?

SHRIFT

Two of them. Well, they don't bother me, so I don't bother them.

GRIFFITH

My attitude.

SHRIFT

So I make my way over to the house and take a peek in one of the ground floor windows. Inside, there's a bunch of old people in wheelchairs. Then I see Strider come in. He heads for a staircase. A few seconds later a light goes on in a second story window. Only I don't have a good angle on it. I can't see in. So I go out to the backyard where there's a big old eucalyptus tree. I climb it.

GRIFFITH

At your age, Mr. Shrift?

SHRIFT

You'd be surprised. So I look in the window and Strider's talking to another old guy in a wheelchair. Strider's giving the old guy candies, soft candies. He's there maybe 15 minutes, pats the old guy on the back and leaves. Drives back to Malibu.

MCLAIN

Sounds like he visited a nursing home.

SHRIFT

Right.

SHRIFT picks up his laptop smartly and taps a few keys. He scans the screen.

SHRIFT

The V. Bulow Convalescent Home.

GRIFFITH

That's it? That's all you found out?

SHRIFT

(Indignantly.)

Day two.

SHRIFT rolls his shoulders and pushes the sides of his jacket back. He taps some of the keys on the computer and reads.

SHRIFT

Thursday, six p.m. Strider leaves his residence at 756 Manson Drive. Driving a 2001 Jaguar—

He pauses. The nuances of his profession aren't appreciated. He sets down the laptop.

SHRIFT

He drives out to LAX and takes a flight to Vegas. I bought a ticket on the same flight. Sat three seats behind.

GRIFFITH

So you followed the plastic surgeon to Las Vegas where he met his honey from the Folies Bergere and they played passionate Keno.

SHRIFT

Not even close.

MCLAIN

Continue.

SHRIFT

I followed Strider up to the Galaxy Hotel, where he checks in. But instead of going up to his room, he zips over to the hundred-dollar blackjack tables. He's down about a thousand, when this big guy in a sharkskin suit comes up and taps him on the shoulder. Strider doesn't look happy, but he gets up all the same. So the big guy escorts Strider over to the elevator. Naturally, I don't follow them on, but I can see by the floor indicator that they go straight to the penthouse. So I get off on the floor beneath the penthouse. I figure, what the hell. I find the stairwell and climb up one floor, but the exit is locked. So I climb up another floor to the roof.

GRIFFITH

I would have paid to have been there.

SHRIFT

You know why I was on the roof?

GRIFFITH

The view.

SHRIFT

Skylights. All those penthouses in Vegas have skylights.

MCLAIN

Umm.

SHRIFT

So I crawl over to the skylight and look down inside. Sure enough Strider is down there with the big guy and another guy in a silk bathrobe. And guess who it is?

GRIFFITH

Elvis.

SHRIFT

Naw—the invisible man,

GRIFFITH

Claude Rains? I thought he was dead.

SHRIFT

What I mean is that the guy's head was completely bandaged. So Strider takes out a pair of scissors from his bag, snips at the bandage and starts to peel it off.

(**SHRIFT** imitates the action.)

Slowly. So I see an inch of forehead, then another inch, then eyebrows, a nose—and the face is starting to get familiar. I'm thinking I know that face. Cheekbones, lips—a weak chin.

(**SHRIFT** taps his chin.)

I do know that face.

(Pause.)

It's yours, Mr. Griffith.

GRIFFITH

What?

MCLAIN

Why would anyone want his face?

GRIFFITH

My face?

SHRIFT

He could have passed for your twin brother, Mr. Griffith.

MCLAIN gets out of bed.

SHRIFT

But the weirdest thing is that the big guy shows bathrobe a mirror. So bathrobe looks in the mirror, throws it to the floor and grabs Strider by the lapels. Strider yells something about giving him the gallows. "Give me the gallows!" Strider's shouting. So, I'm leaning closer to the glass to hear better, and wouldn't you know my cell phone falls out. Baam!

MCLAIN

And what did you do?

SHRIFT

I got the hell out of there.

MCLAIN

Very wise. Thank you, Mr. Shrift. You may go.

SHRIFT gathers his computer.

MCLAIN

Oh, one more thing, Mr. Shrift. Brenda Strider is represented in some matter by the law firm of Zimmerman and Eisel, Century City. Would you see if you could obtain some details?

SHRIFT

Sure thing, Mr. McLain.

As **SHRIFT** exits, he gives **GRIFFITH** a long look. **MCLAIN** closes his eyes, taps his head, then walks over to the chair. He lifts the newspaper and flips through it. He stops on a page, scans it and smiles. He looks up, hands the paper to **GRIFFITH** and taps the top of the page.

GRIFFITH

(Reading.)

West Coast Mafia figure under indictment.

(Stabbing his finger at the picture.)

Victor Gallo has disappeared.

MCLAIN

Not "Give me the gallows," Forgive me, Mr. Gallo!"

BLACKOUT

ACT II

SCENE 3

Hospital room, a few days later.
MCLAIN is sleeping. **BRENDA** enters, followed by **STRIDER**. **BRENDA** is agitated and angry. She glances at **MCLAIN**, but he is sleeping.

BRENDA

You bastard!

STRIDER

I just didn't think—

BRENDA

You've been lying to me all this time!

STRIDER looks at **MCLAIN**.

STRIDER

Please don't shout. It was for your own good.

BRENDA

Don't patronize me. You think I'm just some dumb trophy wife? I want my questions answered.

STRIDER

Take it easy.

BRENDA

How long has he got?

STRIDER

That depends... Weeks, maybe a month.

BRENDA

Weeks? A month? Yoo, hoo, Brenda! I think there's something you might want to know! When the hell were you going to tell me this?

BRENDA pushes **STRIDER** out of the way.

BRENDA

With or without your permission, dear doctor, I'm going to see him right now.

STRIDER

Brenda, listen, it wasn't me. He's the one who's afraid that you might—

BRENDA storms out of the room, followed by **STRIDER**. **MCLAIN** opens his eyes and sits up. It's clear that he has heard the conversation between **BRENDA** and **STRIDER**. **GRIFFITH** enters. He struts over to **MCLAIN**.

GRIFFITH

Wait until you hear this! Shrift got chummy with a paralegal over at Zimmerman and Eisel.

GRIFFITH sits down on the edge of the bed. **MCLAIN** listens attentively, but impatiently.

GRIFFITH

Zimmerman and Eisel handle the trust fund of one Jack Coperski, an uncle on the maternal side of Brenda Strider. Jack Coperski's trust fund is worth thirty-seven million dollars. And when Coperski dies, guess who gets the entire trust? Brenda Strider. No wonder Strider wants her to stick around. She's his meal ticket.

MCLAIN

He has weeks to live.

GRIFFITH

Excuse me?

MCLAIN

Brenda's uncle is near death.

GRIFFITH

How do you know that?

MCLAIN

They were in here. Brenda and her husband.

GRIFFITH

In here? No way.

MCLAIN

They stepped in to talk. They thought I was asleep.

GRIFFITH

You sure you weren't asleep? You must have dreamed it.

MCLAIN

I didn't dream it. They were here.

GRIFFITH

Sure. Sure. You saw them here.

MCLAIN

I heard their conversation. I didn't want to open my eyes because I thought they'd stop talking.

GRIFFITH

But if you didn't see them—

MCLAIN

Why the skepticism? For Christ's sake, Jerry, she drives him every day to the hospital. I mean, you met her here in this room, didn't you?

GRIFFITH

Right. It's just, well, with you, such a coincidence.

MCLAIN

Ergo, the word.

GRIFFITH

So. What else did you *hear*?

MCLAIN

I don't know if you've been completely accurate in your description of Brenda. She had a rather combative air. She called Strider a liar, and she made it clear that she was going to see Uncle Jack despite Strider's or *Uncle Jack's* objections.

GRIFFITH

Uncle Jack's objections?

MCLAIN

Apparently, Uncle Jack is afraid of Brenda.

GRIFFITH

But why would...

GRIFFITH shakes his head in confusion. He looks at **MCLAIN** uncertainly. He looks away, grins, then spins back toward **MCLAIN**.

GRIFFITH

I know what you're doing.

MCLAIN

Yes?

GRIFFITH

You're trying to take over. It's like when we're writing a story. You're trying to guide things. That's it, isn't it?

MCLAIN

What are you talking about?

Astonished but amused, **MCLAIN**
LAUGHS.

MCLAIN

While undergoing chemotherapy, a startling alteration of McLain's brain cells endowed him with the power of telekinesis. At first, he could barely make bedpans rattle, but he soon developed his ability to the point where he could will Griffith's friends into his chambers.

MCLAIN LAUGHS again, but this time
it degenerates into a FIT OF
COUGHING.

GRIFFITH

You okay?

MCLAIN

Yes. Fine.

MCLAIN drops his head.

GRIFFITH

I'm sorry, I-

MCLAIN

It's nothing... When are you seeing her again?

GRIFFITH

Tomorrow. Tomorrow night.

MCLAIN

You'll ask about Gallo?

GRIFFITH

Sure.

MCLAIN closes his eyes. **GRIFFITH**
strokes his forehead.

MCLAIN

And Uncle Jack?

GRIFFITH

(Softly.)
And Uncle Jack.

MCAIN closes his eyes. The LIGHTS DIM, then COME UP ON **BRENDA** as she enters. **GRIFFITH** walks over to **BRENDA** and embraces her. **MCLAIN** opens his eyes. At first disoriented, he becomes alert as **BRENDA** and **GRIFFITH** interact. **BRENDA** slips away from **GRIFFITH**. She paces.

GRIFFITH

What's the matter?

BRENDA

Nothing. Nothing. I'm a little *tense* that's all.

GRIFFITH

Has something happened?

She shakes her head and tries hard to smile.

BRENDA

I—
(Softly.)
—can't.

GRIFFITH

I know what your husband's doing.

BRENDA

What do you mean?

GRIFFITH

Your husband does work for wise guys.

BRENDA

No. No.

GRIFFITH

That's why he took my picture, isn't it? A model for the next job. It was Victor Gallo, wasn't it?

BRENDA claps her hands over her ears.

BRENDA

I don't want to know. It's none of my business. It's so *dangerous*, Jerry.

GRIFFITH

They don't know I know.

BRENDA

If they –

GRIFFITH

They don't.

BRENDA

Maybe that's why Glen...

GRIFFITH

What?

BRENDA

Nothing. Nothing.

With a strained, worried look, she turns away.

GRIFFITH

How is your Uncle Jack?

BRENDA turns back to **GRIFFITH**. Her anger and disappointment grow as his words sink in.

BRENDA

Have you been following me, Jerry? I thought I could trust you.

GRIFFITH

You can.

BRENDA

How can I trust you if you've been following me?

GRIFFITH

I – we followed Glen, not you.

BRENDA

But you saw my uncle.

GRIFFITH

Someone heard you speaking with Glen.

BRENDA

Speaking, oh.

(Pause.)

He's not doing so well. My uncle... How much more do you know, Jerry?

GRIFFITH

I know why Glen wants you to stay.

BRENDA

You do. You know that?

GRIFFITH

Uh huh...

BRENDA

(Bitterly.)

It took *me* awhile.

GRIFFITH

But now there's no reason for you to stay.

BRENDA

You've forgotten this.

She takes his hand and presses it
to her cheek.

GRIFFITH

It's not you skin, it's your soul.

He kisses her.

BRENDA

Can I really leave, Jerry? Where would be go?

GRIFFITH

Mexico. Australia. There's a million places.

BRENDA

Yes. A million places.

GRIFFITH

Go pack your bags. We'll leave here right now.

BRENDA

Yes. Right now...

GRIFFITH

I won't let him ever hurt you again...

BRENDA

You're not pretending, are you, Jerry? You're not pretending to love me? Because if you're pretending to love me—

GRIFFITH

I love you.

GRIFFITH embraces **BRENDA** and they kiss passionately. **STRIDER** enters unseen.

STRIDER

She tastes like that exotic fruit that you ate once and so long ago that you no longer know its name. But well you remember how sweet.

STRIDER smiles benignly. **BRENDA** clings to **GRIFFITH**.

BRENDA

I'm leaving, Glen. I know what's going on. I'm through being your wife.

STRIDER

This is the wrong time, Brenda.

BRENDA

Jerry knows. He knows about the money.

STRIDER

That's not his business.

STRIDER moves threateningly toward **BRENDA**.

BRENDA

You going to hit me? Are you going to smack me around again until, until...

GRIFFITH

She's leaving with me.

STRIDER

I need her.

GRIFFITH

Sure you need her. You need her to get her Uncle Jack's money.

STRIDER

No. I just ... need her.

BRENDA

That's total garbage, Glen. You hid things from me. How could you love me and hide those things?... When my Uncle—when I come into the money, I'll give you enough to pay off the gambling debts.

STRIDER

You think that's it?... I've paid them off with his face. It's a face that blends in with every crowd. A monotonous face. One that won't attract any attention. Only, I'd watch out for that face, Jerry. You might see it coming out of a crowd in your direction. Perhaps two such monotonous faces are too much for the world.

GRIFFITH

Brenda likes it enough.

STRIDER

I'll allow her all the happiness she needs, as long as she stays with me.

GRIFFITH

Happiness at the end of a chain....

BRENDA

How much do you want, Glen? Just tell me and I'll give it to you.

GRIFFITH

Don't make it too easy on him, Brenda. Are you helping Uncle Jack along, Glen? Something extra in those soft candies?

STRIDER

You're over your head, Jerry.

STRIDER holds his hand out to
BRENDA.

STRIDER

Just give me a few days. We've gone through a lot together, Brenda. All I'm asking is a few days. Just to talk. Just to sort things out. If after that, you and Jerry want to, want to... I won't try to stop you.

GRIFFITH draws **BRENDA** closer, but after an instant of hesitation, she gently pushes away from him and goes to **STRIDER**, who follows her off stage.

BLACKOUT

ACT II
SCENE 4

JOY is alone in the hospital room.
GRIFFITH enters

GRIFFITH

Where's Gene?

JOY

I don't know. The nurses don't know.

HE nods, looks around the room, then glares at **JOY**.

GRIFFITH

How can you do it?

JOY

What?

GRIFFITH

Throw him out that he's that sick?

JOY

I don't think it's any of your business.

GRIFFITH

Tell your family this is America. Men and women marry and separate. Then they get divorced and stay together. That's the American way.

JOY

I'll remind my parents that they're Americans.

GRIFFITH

Okay. Okay. But what about Gene? He has to get well.

JOY

Are you afraid that you won't sell any more scripts?

GRIFFITH

I'm going to ignore that.

JOY

Why do you hate me, Jerry? Do you think it was my fault that the marriage didn't work?

GRIFFITH

You knew what Gene was like.

JOY

I fell in love with him because I didn't know what he was like. I couldn't predict what he would say from one moment to the next of what he would do. He was a mystery. We all like mysteries.

GRIFFITH

Yeah.

JOY

But I thought that by marrying him, by sharing his bed, I would solve the mystery. I thought that if I loved him enough, he would have no reason to hide his heart, his soul, from me. But I was ... wrong. There were nights when I was sleeping with him and I felt his body next to mine. I felt the heat, the skin, the bones beneath. But nothing else, just darkness, emptiness. And I thought that I must know this person, but I didn't and couldn't. He doesn't want to be known.

GRIFFITH

Then why the pretense of living together at all? Why not just sever the ties completely?

JOY

He's on my health insurance policy, Jerry. As long as we cohabitate, his medical bills are taken care of....

It takes a few seconds for **GRIFFITH** to absorb that.

GRIFFITH

Then when he's well-

JOY

He's-not-getting-well. It's metastasized, Jerry. The cancer is all over the place. They can't kill it without killing him.

GRIFFITH

He's not dying.

GRIFFITH picks up the pad of writing paper by the phone. He holds it up to the light. **MCLAIN** enters. He's wearing a hooded sweatshirt with the hood up and carrying a paper bag.

JOY

Where did you go?

GRIFFITH

Ace Liquors.

MCLAIN

(Setting down the package.)

H'mm...

GRIFFITH

There was an impression on the pad.

MCLAIN

You're catching on, Watson.

MCLAIN pulls out a four-pack of Guinness Stout from the package, then takes the knife from the drawer. He opens the bottles and hands one to **JOY**, then another to **GRIFFITH**. He opens a third for himself and takes a sip.

JOY

How are you?

MCLAIN

(Sitting down.)

Great. You've got everything out?

JOY

I think so.

MCLAIN

If you find any socks or underwear just toss it in the trash, or perhaps you can tell them you've taken up cross-dressing.

JOY

You're angry, aren't you?

MCLAIN

Well, quite frankly, they weren't sure they were going to release me, anyway.

JOY

I'll tell them.

MCLAIN

What?

JOY

I'll tell my parents you're still living with me. I'll just tell them and that's that.

JOY picks up the suitcase.

MCLAIN

Put that down, Joy.

JOY

No. It will be all right, really.

MCLAIN

The apartment's too small. Your father would be doing his Tai Chi and your mother would be getting into her lotus position and there I'd be dragging around my Vincristine, bumping into them. I can't see it.

JOY sets the bag down.

JOY

Do you really think you should be drinking with your chemotherapy?

MCLAIN

It's useless.

GRIFFITH

What?

MCLAIN

Another operation.

GRIFFITH

That's what your doctor said?

MCLAIN

It's not that I would deny him the money for the operation—I mean he has to keep up the payments on the yacht, but I'm finished with the circus.

MCLAIN pulls down his hood.

MCLAIN

Do you find it repulsive?

JOY

No.

MCLAIN

I remember once a waiter spilled a pot of boiling hot tea on your hand. You didn't say a word. You just stared at your hand.

JOY

It wasn't that hot.

MCLAIN

No.

(Sipping his beer.)

Not quite the way I remember it. Not quite nectar of the gods... I'm the Irishman who doesn't drink. There's a joke in that. Maybe that's why I got the big C. I ignored my heritage, always perilous, always...

GRIFFITH

You shouldn't be drinking.

MCLAIN

The battle's over. I lost. I drink to the victor.

MCLAIN goes over to the radio/tape player and presses a button. An IRISH DIRGE PLAYS. **MCLAIN** drinks more beer. He HUMS to the music.

MCLAIN

(To Joy.)

Let's dance.

JOY

No.

MCLAIN

Oh, come on.

JOY

I really can't, Gene. You shouldn't be dancing, either.

MCLAIN

I just want to dance.

GRIFFITH

Hell, I'll dance with you.

GRIFFITH gets up. **MCLAIN** puts his arm around **GRIFFITH'S** waist and begins to circle to the music.

MCLAIN

Do you know what an Irish faggot is?

GRIFFITH

No.

MCLAIN

He likes his women more than his whiskey.

GRIFFITH

(Laughs.)

Funny. I've never danced this well.

A JIG comes on. **MCLAIN** separates from **GRIFFITH** and dances the jig. He moves lightly, dancing well. He stops and returns to the bed. He sits down, his face pained, his hands trembling. **GRIFFITH** sits down. **JOY** reaches across and

touches **MCLAIN**. He stares at her hand.

MCLAIN

Have you seen her?

GRIFFITH

No.

JOY

Who?

MCLAIN

The amazing Brenda Strider.

GRIFFITH

(Cautioning.)

Gene, there's something I have to tell you.

JOY

Who's Brenda Strider?

MCLAIN

A woman who's grown young before her time.

JOY

Is this like a riddle?

GRIFFITH

Just script talk.

JOY

Are you going to let me in on it?

GRIFFITH

(Nervously.)

We painted ourselves into a corner with the script.

MCLAIN

Rover has got himself into a jam.

GRIFFITH

Hey, come on.

MCLAIN

What's the matter?

GRIFFITH

You know what's the matter.

JOY

You won't tell me, will you? You and Jerry have this little secret club that I can't join because I don't know the password. Or should I say I don't have the password.

MCLAIN

It's not much of a club.

JOY

Go to hell.

GRIFFITH

There's a woman that's in trouble. I'm in love with her.

JOY

In love?

GRIFFITH

That's right. I love her. Something wrong with that?

JOY

It's just—no. I don't know. I'm confused. I don't, I don't belong here.

JOY bends down to kiss **MCLAIN**. He turns slightly away from her but then offers his cheek. She kisses him and exits.

MCLAIN

Indian women throw themselves on the pyre that consumes their dead husbands.

GRIFFITH

Not any more.

MCLAIN

There's something to be said for the old ways.

(Pause.)

When are you seeing her?

SHRIFT enters. He tips his hat.

SHRIFT

Mr. McLain. Mr. Griffith.

GRIFFITH

Oh, hello, Shrift. Just passing by?

SHRIFT

I never *just* pass by.

MCLAIN

A worthy credo.

SHRIFT

I have information to report.

GRIFFITH

Don't stand on ceremony, Shrift. Out with it!

(Grins.)

I've always wanted to say that.

MCLAIN

Please.

SHRIFT

Mr. Jack Coperski, residing at the V Bulow Nursing Home in Saugus, California, is ... *dead*.

GRIFFITH

Uncle Jack's dead?

SHRIFT

Died in his sleep 48 hours ago.

GRIFFITH

But then Strider must have known.

MCLAIN

We have to go to her.

GRIFFITH

Gene—

MCLAIN

She's in danger.

MCLAIN attempts to dress.

GRIFFITH

Gene, take it easy.

MCLAIN

I should have known. I should have—

MCLAIN stumbles weakly. **GRIFFITH** rushes to him, supporting him.

MCLAIN

You must go to her. Quickly!

GRIFFITH helps **MCLAIN** back into bed. **STRIDER** enters. He leaves **MCLAIN** and approaches **STRIDER**.

STRIDER

Hello, Jerry.

GRIFFITH

Yeah, hi. Would you tell Brenda I'm here.

STRIDER, eyes downcast, smiles crookedly.

STRIDER

Brenda, Jerry's here!

STRIDER lifts his head as if waiting for **BRENDA**'s response. There is no response.

STRIDER

(Hushed.)

She would be putting on her makeup.

GRIFFITH

Try again.

STRIDER

Why don't you try?

GRIFFITH

Brenda. Brenda!

He steps away from **STRIDER**. **MCLAIN** is listening intently.

STRIDER

She can't hear you, Jerry.

GRIFFITH

Brenda!

STRIDER

She's left.

GRIFFITH

Brenda left? When?

STRIDER

(Sighing.)

Yesterday.

GRIFFITH

When is she coming back?

STRIDER

She's not coming back. She's left forever.

GRIFFITH studies **STRIDER**, then
nods.

GRIFFITH

Did she leave a message for me?

STRIDER

I'm afraid not.

GRIFFITH turns to leave.

STRIDER

She's way out of range, Jerry.

GRIFFITH freezes.

STRIDER

Brenda's—*dead*. She ... died yesterday.

GRIFFITH turns back to **STRIDER**.

GRIFFITH

You mean Uncle Jack died.

STRIDER

Uncle Jack died. Then Brenda died.

GRIFFITH grows frantic as the possibility sinks in. He charges at **STRIDER**, who remains impassive.

GRIFFITH

You lying sonofabitch! Brenda's not dead!

STRIDER

Dead she is.

GRIFFITH shakes his head despairingly.

GRIFFITH

Brenda. It can't be. It—

He lunges at **STRIDER**.

GRIFFITH

You killed her, you sonofabitch!

STRIDER

I didn't kill anyone.

As **GRIFFITH** tries to grab him, **STRIDER** pulls out a gun.

STRIDER

Yet.

Pointing the gun at **GRIFFITH**, **STRIDER**, backs him off.

GRIFFITH

I'll, I'll—

STRIDER

Now get out of here before I call the cops!

Dumbfounded, **GRIFFITH** backs toward **MCLAIN**. **STRIDER** exits.

GRIFFITH

Someone's taken my heart, Gene. That's what it feels like, you know.

MCLAIN

The end. The story's over, isn't it?

MCLAIN sinks. **GRIFFITH** is lost in reverie for a moment. **MCLAIN** closes his eyes, draws into himself. **GRIFFITH** takes a tissue and cleans a smudge from **MCLAIN'S** face.

GRIFFITH

What the hell do they pay these nurses for?

MCLAIN

To love strangers.

GRIFFITH

Yes. Yes.

(Staring at **MCLAIN** in wonder.)

She was right. If she ever left him she would die and get old.

MCLAIN

Get old and die.

GRIFFITH

Yes, of course. Old and die.

MCLAIN

Words fail me...

GRIFFITH

I can still see her *blue* eyes staring at me...

MCLAIN

Blue and green eyes.

GRIFFITH

No. Blue. Brenda's eyes were blue.

MCLAIN raises his head from the pillow.

MCLAIN

So she replaced her lost blue contact?

GRIFFITH

No. Brenda's eyes were naturally blue. She lost a green contact.

MCLAIN

Naturally blue? You're sure?

GRIFFITH

Yeah. In every photograph in the house, she had blue eyes.

MCLAIN

(Sitting up.)

Which eye did she cup?

GRIFFITH

What?

MCLAIN

The night when she lost the contact lens. Which eye did she cup?

GRIFFITH

(Thinking.)

I don't know. She cupped one, then the other.

MCLAIN

What was the *sequence*? Did she cup the blue eye first or the green?

He cups his own left eye, then his right. He repeats.

GRIFFITH

The blue eye. No, wait, the green eye. The left, right?

MCLAIN

The sequence, Jerry!

GRIFFITH

The left eye! The green eye! She cupped her left eye first!

MCLAIN

The eye that had lost the contact. She had green eyes, but she wanted the world to think they were blue.

GRIFFITH

I don't get it. If she had green eyes—

MCLAIN

Blue? Blue! When you first met her, you said she thought Blind Spot ended ambiguously. She thought Leo had been wearing *blue* pantyhose in the greenhouse. Do you remember that I reminded you that on set Leo was wearing blue? They changed the color to pink during editing.

GRIFFITH

That's right! But how could Brenda have known that. Unless—

MCLAIN

(Pointing to a box in the corner.)

There's a videotape of Blind Spot in the box. Play it.

GRIFFITH opens the box, takes out the video, sticks the tape in the room's VCR and turns on the TV.

MCLAIN

Fast forward to the crowd scene at the greenhouse.

(**GRIFFITH** fast-forwards.)

There, that's it.

GRIFFITH

Like something straight out of Victor Hugo.

MCLAIN

It was *out* of Victor Hugo.

GRIFFITH jumps up. He hits the stop button. He rewinds.

MCLAIN

What is it?

GRIFFITH

Brenda! One of the women in that crowd was Brenda!

GRIFFITH stops the tape, then hits play, then stop. **MCLAIN** gets out of bed. He stands behind **GRIFFITH** and looks up at the TV.

GRIFFITH

I don't believe it!

MCLAIN

You're sure?

GRIFFITH

(He taps the screen.)

Right down to the green eyes. This is crazy.

MCLAIN

When you asked her if she liked to dance, she said *no*. You said she was a clumsy dancer. But here's a woman who'd won trophies with her husband for dancing.

GRIFFITH

The brace!

MCLAIN

Of course a lame Strider would avoid the country club dances. But it wasn't Strider that couldn't dance. It was his wife.

GRIFFITH

But—

MCLAIN

Brenda's not dead.

GRIFFITH

Brenda's not dead?

MCLAIN

A young woman, an actress, comes into Strider's office for some minor surgery. To his astonishment he sees a woman that's a dead ringer for his wife—minus 20 years or so. He talks to the woman and finds out she's a little desperate. Well, she's an actress. He cultivates the relationship. His wife is going to come into money soon, money that he desperately needs to pay off his gambling debts, which has already got him doing business with criminals. But before Uncle Jack dies, something happens to Brenda.

GRIFFITH

Strider kills her!

MCLAIN

Perhaps. But however it happens, she's dead, and Uncle Jack's money will go to some foundation. So Strider has to keep his wife alive until Uncle Jack dies and the trust passes over to Brenda. In the next few days, Strider lets it get around to his

friends and associates that he's going to lift Brenda's face again. He's going to do the surgery at home. In steps Miss X, your Brenda. Strider tells Miss X to make public appearances, but not too many, just enough to establish that Brenda is still alive.

GRIFFITH

That's too wild.

MCLAIN

Miss X meanwhile starts getting bored. Starts wanting out of the deal, especially when she sees where it's leading. But still she's had a taste of the good life. And then she meets you.

GRIFFITH

(Self-mockingly.)

And falls in love.

MCLAIN

She needed a confidant. Someone who could help her unravel the mystery.

GRIFFITH

Strider didn't tell her about his wife?

MCLAIN

Oh, he probably gave her some story that she ran off with a younger man, and that he needed Brenda to keep up appearances.

GRIFFITH

But Uncle Jack lingered...

MCLAIN

So must Brenda.

GRIFFITH

Until Uncle Jack died.

MCLAIN

Channeling the \$37 million inheritance to Brenda.

GRIFFITH

Which meant that Strider had the money.

MCLAIN

So he pays off Brenda Number Two and she disappears.

GRIFFITH

Brenda's *not dead*. Brenda is not dead. Oh, man, that's so—I don't know, I ... my heart feels so light... But then—*Brenda's not Brenda*. Who is ... she?

THEY look up at the TV.

MCLAIN

Casting would have the information.

LIGHTS GO DOWN. When LIGHTS COME BACK UP, **GRIFFITH** is sitting by **MCLAIN**. They are looking at a photo of **BRENDA** and several forms.

GRIFFITH

(Reading.)

Emily Ormand. Get this—during the production a light fell over and hit her in the face. She had to go to emergency for sutures, followed by minor plastic surgery.

MCLAIN

Yes, I wonder who the plastic surgeon was?... Did you check out the Hollywood address?

GRIFFITH

Moved out a year ago.

MCLAIN

(Reading.)

In case of emergency, contact Stanley Orman, care of the *Death Valley Fund*, 2345 Vista, Bakersfield.

MCLAIN reaches for the phone.

GRIFFITH

I tried. Disconnected.

MCLAIN

Take a ride out there.

GRIFFITH

Bakersfield?

BLACKOUT

ACT II
SCENE 5

The Hospital Room. The LIGHTS COME UP on a **YOUNG MAN** as he enters the room. The **YOUNG MAN** is dressed in ill-fitting ruffled clothes. His head is upraised and his face is contorted as he stares in bewilderment and fascination at some point in the sky. He tugs at his clothes and continues to stare in a slow-witted fashion as the LIGHTS COME UP on **GRIFFITH**, who approaches the **YOUNG MAN**. **MCLAIN** watches from his bed. **GRIFFITH** carries the photo of **BRENDA**, with the face turned down. **GRIFFITH** follows the **YOUNG MAN'S** gaze, but can see nothing of interest. The **YOUNG MAN** finally turns his attention to **GRIFFITH** and smiles.

YOUNG MAN

Hi.

GRIFFITH

Uh, hello. I wonder if you could help me?

YOUNG MAN

Sure.

GRIFFITH

I was looking for 4321 Vista.

YOUNG MAN

Won't find it.

GRIFFITH

No?

YOUNG MAN

Ain't any. Never has been. Somebody gave you the wrong address.

GRIFFITH

Jeez. Came all this way and I've got the wrong address. Listen, could I use your phone?

YOUNG MAN

Sure. Only we just had it disconnected. We're moving out.

GRIFFITH

Could I get a glass of water?

YOUNG MAN

How about a Diet Coke?

GRIFFITH nods, but the **YOUNG MAN** doesn't move. He turns up the face of the photo. The **YOUNG MAN** points.

YOUNG MAN

That's my sister Emily.

GRIFFITH

Pretty girl.

YOUNG MAN

You should see her now. Became an actress.

GRIFFITH

Where you moving to?

YOUNG MAN

Emily says it's gonna be a surprise. We're going someplace where the wind don't blow. I kind of like the wind.

GRIFFITH

Emily. That's a pretty name.

YOUNG MAN

Pretty face, too. Don't know why she had to change it at all. But that's Hollywood, like Emily says.

GRIFFITH

I'd love to see what she looks like now.

YOUNG MAN

That's easy enough done. Here she comes.

BRENDA enters. She stops beside **MCLAIN'S** bed.

YOUNG MAN

Well, I've got to do some more packing. Bye.

GRIFFITH

Bye.

He gazes at **BRENDA** as the **YOUNG MAN** takes a step backward.

YOUNG MAN

Bye Bye.

GRIFFITH glances at him.

GRIFFITH

Yeah, bye.

GRIFFITH dismisses him with a wave. The **YOUNG MAN** returns the gesture.

YOUNG MAN

Bye.

GRIFFITH glances sidelong at the **YOUNG MAN**, but doesn't respond. The **YOUNG MAN** drifts away. **BRENDA** walks to **GRIFFITH**. She's in jeans and a T-shirt and her hair is braided. The T-shirt is smeared with a streak of dust, as is her face. She smiles at him.

BRENDA

Right where you're standing there's buried treasure.

He looks down.

BRENDA

A whole coffee can filled with pennies. I buried it when I was 13-years-old.

GRIFFITH

How can you be sure it's still there?

BRENDA

Who's gonna dig it up?

GRIFFITH

(Looking around.)

Yeah.

BRENDA

He promised me a quarter million dollars.

GRIFFITH

It wasn't enough.

BRENDA

It was only temporary, he said. But then he kind of got used to me. And when I found out what happened to Brenda and what his plans were, well... He was going to have me killed if I tried to leave.

GRIFFITH

What did I do to you?

A GUST OF WIND. They turn their faces and step closer.

BRENDA

I didn't fake it, Jerry. That's the one thing I couldn't lie about. Isn't love just using the other person, anyway?

GRIFFITH

I loved you.

BRENDA

And you used me, too... All I ever had was a coffee-jar full of pennies... and my brother.

(Pause.)

Now...

GRIFFITH

I want to go with you.

She puts her hand against his face and draws his mouth to hers. They kiss. She pulls away.

BRENDA

You have to stay here and guard my treasure. Then one day we'll come back and dig it up together.

She backs toward the house.

GRIFFITH

Brenda—I mean, Emily.

BRENDA

Yes?

GRIFFITH

Just for the record. How old are you?

She just smiles and exits. **GRIFFITH** walks over to **MCLAIN**.

MCLAIN

What exactly did she mean by *digging up the treasure together*?

GRIFFITH

She's coming back.

There's a COMMOTION at the door. **BETTY** enters. She's addressing SOMEONE behind her (OFFSTAGE).

BETTY

I'm sorry. There are no single rooms available on the floor at the moment. Your husband will only be in her temporarily.

WOMAN

(OFFSTAGE.)

That's bullshit. My doctor assured me that he'd be along.

BRENDA walks into the room. Taken aback, **GRIFFITH** stares at **BRENDA**, who is haranguing **BETTY**.

BRENDA

My husband just had a triple bypass operation, for GOD'S SAKE!

BETTY

Mrs. Bloom, would you please wait out in the hall?

BETTY exits. **BRENDA** looks toward **GRIFFITH**, who shifts his eyes evasively.

BRENDA

Do I know you?

She walks over to **GRIFFITH**.

BRENDA

Jerry, right? The screenwriter. We met a few months back.
(Brenda.)

Brenda.

GRIFFITH glances at **MCLAIN**.

GRIFFITH

You must be—

BRENDA

And this is your partner?

GRIFFITH

(Hesitating, then forcefully.)
Yes. This is my partner.

BRENDA smiles at **MCLAIN**.

BRENDA

We never got to talk about my ideas.

GRIFFITH

No, no we didn't.

BRENDA

Do you have a card?

As **GRIFFITH** gets out his business card, **MCLAIN** watches dreamily.

MR. BLOOM

(OFFSTAGE.)

Brenda?

BRENDA turns in the direction of the VOICE.

MR. BLOOM

(OFFSTAGE.)

Those assholes haven't killed me yet, huh?

BRENDA

Don't excite yourself, darling.

(Pause.)

My husband. He just came out of surgery. I've got to find a single room for him.

(Loudly.)

COMING, DEAR.

BRENDA takes the card, flicking it against her cheek. She walks to the door. She stops, turns around and meets **GRIFFITH'S** eyes. She exits. While **GRIFFITH** continues to stare at the door, **STRIDER** enters. He's wearing his brace, a doctor's uniform, and carrying a clipboard. He looks around the room.

STRIDER

Is there a Mr. Bloom in here?

BETTY enters.

BETTY

His wife just wheeled him off to another room, doctor.

STRIDER

That damned woman will—

Shaking his head, **STRIDER** exits. Staring after **STRIDER** for a second, **GRIFFITH** then turns to **MCLAIN**. They study each other, but neither is willing to give the sign that that the game's up. **GRIFFITH** looks at **MCLAIN'S** IV. He taps the IV.

GRIFFITH

Is this thing working? I don't see anything going through it. Let me get the nurse.

MCLAIN

Have you got it down?

GRIFFITH

Yeah.

MCLAIN

It's good.

GRIFFITH

Really?

MCLAIN

Yes.

GRIFFITH

Half the story's yours. Well, 49 percent.

MCLAIN

Jerry...

GRIFFITH

It's rough, of course.

MCLAIN

No, no...

GRIFFITH

Some big gaps you'll have to fill.

MCLAIN

Gaps? No. Maybe some fine tuning in spots... a plot hole here and there.

(Pause.)

We're up against it with time, of course.

GRIFFITH

Hell, I forgot to tell you. Time's no problem. I got the extension. We've got another six months.

MCLAIN

Six months?

GRIFFITH

Yeah. More if we need it.

MCLAIN

Jerry?

GRIFFITH

Yeah?

MCLAIN

Would you do something for me?

GRIFFITH

Anything.

MCLAIN

With the money we get from the script. I want you to take it all, go off some place and write something.

GRIFFITH

Me? Write something by myself?

MCLAIN

Something from your heart.

GRIFFITH

It wouldn't, uh, well, it, uh, wouldn't-

MCLAIN

It could be good, you know.

GRIFFITH

You're messing with me, right?

MCLAIN

Down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid...

GRIFFITH

Raymond Chandler.

MCLAIN

Write it, Jerry.

GRIFFITH

But, hell, first we've got stuff to do together. I've got an idea for our next project. It's big.

MCLAIN

Titanic Two?

GRIFFITH

Bigger. Here's the setup. There's a woman.

MCLAIN

Yes.

GRIFFITH

Beautiful. Intelligent. Cultured. Married to this incredible guy. Good-looking, successful, gentle, devoted. They have kids, perfect kids. A beautiful house. A beautiful life. Perfect. Except ... she's-

MCLAIN

-missing something.

GRIFFITH

Exactly. Missing something. Once upon a time, under a mimosa tree, she kissed a boy. And that kiss burns in her memory. Haunts her. Inhabits her. She wants that kiss, with that boy again. And she will sacrifice everything to get it. But ... who was he? A stranger. A strange boy who came and went. How will she find him?

MCLAIN

She needs someone to dig into her past. A private detective.

GRIFFITH

Exactly. A shamus who will find her *lost kiss*.

MCLAIN

But in the process turns the world upside down. Umm. Where did you meet her?

GRIFFITH

The Moonlight Café. You know, the place where your surgeon gets his morning triple shooters.

MCLAIN

It's, it's ... not bad.

GRIFFITH

Yeah? So anyway, the private dick, a forty something ex-cop, down on his luck, divorced, broke, has turned to drink to relieve the pressure. So when she comes to him he's battling the bottle- No. No. That's such a goddamn cliché. He's-

MCLAIN shivers. He looks around blankly.

MCLAIN

Jerry-

GRIFFITH

Yeah, Gene. I'm right here.

MCLAIN

I was ... real, wasn't I?

Real? **GRIFFITH**

Yes, real. Here and *real*. **MCLAIN**

Real? Of course you were real. **GRIFFITH**

Good. Real. Real. **MCLAIN**

Gene? **GRIFFITH**

Yes? **MCLAIN**

Why ... me? **GRIFFITH**

You don't know? **MCLAIN**

No. **GRIFFITH**

Because I ... because you, you—were a *genius typist*. Fast and error— **MCLAIN**

MCLAIN'S body arches and his eyes roll back.

—free. **MCLAIN**

Nurse! Nurse! **GRIFFITH**

BETTY enters. She calmly looks at the monitors, but then stiffens.

Oh, shit. **BETTY**

GRIFFITH

What the hell. Do Something!

BETTY rushes to **MCLAIN**. She adjusts the IVs. She presses a button, triggering an ALARM. **GRIFFITH** leans over **MCLAIN**.

BETTY

You'll have to leave, sir!

GRIFFITH doesn't move.

BETTY

Sir! You have to leave.

GRIFFITH

You don't understand. This is my partner.

BETTY takes him by the arm.
GRIFFITH jerks away. He leans over **MCLAIN**. **BETTY** relents and exits.

GRIFFITH

The story begins, the story begins—rain. It's raining in Los Angeles. Raining like it hasn't rained in a hundred years. The ground is saturated. The streets are rivers. On the hillsides, trees topple over. Topple—Gene, open your eyes. Gene. Fight it, Gene. Got to keep going. Fight him, Gene. Over or under. Doesn't matter. Over and under. Fight him, Gene.

GRIFFITH touches **MCLAIN'S** cheek.

GRIFFITH

Over ... under. Over...

BLACKOUT

ACT II
SCENE 6

Hospital Room. **JOY** is standing beside the empty bed. **GRIFFITH** stands by the second bed. **BETTY** approaches **GRIFFITH**.

BETTY

There was something he wanted me to give you.

BETTY reaches into her pocket and takes out **MCLAIN'S** Swiss Army Knife and hands it to him.

BETTY

I'm sorry.

She hugs him, smiles and exits. He pulls out a blade.

JOY

You made it all up, didn't you?

GRIFFITH

What?

JOY

Brenda Strider. Your wild affair. The murderous plastic surgeon.

GRIFFITH tries to speak, but can't, as if he's unsure of the answer.

JOY

Jerry Griffith in love?... Well, he always said you were clever.

GRIFFITH

No kidding?

JOY

Just once, I would like to have gone there...

GRIFFITH

Where?

JOY

That place.

(Looking around.)

Even here ... in this room.

GRIFFITH

That's different.

JOY

No. It's not different. It's not ... different.

(Pause.)

I wanted to love him, but he wouldn't let me. He let you love him. He let you fool him. He let you into that place.

JOY exits. He looks at the remaining bottle of Stout. He picks up the bottle and opens it with **MCLAIN'S** knife. He goes over to the tape player and turns it on. The IRISH MUSIC COMES UP. He executes a clumsy imitation of the Irish jig **MCLAIN** did.

Shrugging at his gracelessness, **GRIFFITH** stops and listens for a moment to the music. **MCLAIN** enters the room. He's holding a Guinness. **GRIFFITH** slowly becomes aware of his presence. **MCLAIN** raises his Guinness. **GRIFFITH** raises his. **MCLAIN** dances to the music. **GRIFFITH** follows the steps. Together they dance the jig perfectly. **MCLAIN** dances closer to **GRIFFITH** and lifts his arm as if to interlock it with **GRIFFITH'S**. But as **GRIFFITH** lifts his arm, **MCLAIN** smiles impishly, runs past **GRIFFITH** and exits. **GRIFFITH** follows.

THE CURTAIN FALLS

Performance rights must be secured before production. For contact information, please see the *The Amazing Brenda Strider* information page (click on your browser's "Back" button, or visit www.singlelane.com/proplay/amazing.html)