

(Not to be copied without author's permission)

Three on a Couch

By Carl Djerassi

A play in 9 scenes

Carl Djerassi
Department of Chemistry
Stanford University
Stanford, CA 94305-5080
Tel. 650-723-2783

e-mail: djerassi@stanford.edu

1101 Green Street, Apt. 1501
San Francisco, CA 94109-2012
Tel: 415-474-1825; Fax: 415-474-1868

URL <http://www.djerassi.com>

25 Warrington Crescent,
London W9 1ED, U.K.
Tel. 44-20-7289-3081

Cast of Characters

STEPHEN MARX, famous novelist, approximately 50 years old.

MIRIAM MARX, his wife, in her late thirties to early forties.

SHRINK (Dr. Theodore Hofmann), indeterminate middle aged.

Time: New York City, the present.

SHRINK'S consulting room. Desk and comfortable desk chair on the left, Freudian couch covered with oriental carpet in center with low, relatively long rectangular coffee table in front. Another comfortable chair behind head of couch; right upstage door is exit from consulting room.

SCENE 1.

Shrink's consulting room. STEPHEN MARX lies on couch, with SHRINK (with tie, coat, and perhaps even vest) sitting behind him. STEPHEN is silent for 1 - 2 minutes, long enough to make audience uncomfortable. The manner in which this handled (including STEPHEN's opening speech) is left to the director and actor, with an optional scenario being the following: SHRINK occasionally glances at his watch and at STEPHEN on couch, who lies silently, eyes wide open, staring at the ceiling. Occasionally, STEPHEN raises his head slightly as if he were listening to something. Suddenly he jumps up, follows the movement of a flying insect, snatching at the bug. Opens his hands, then drops them. Continues in the direction of Shrink and again claps his hand firmly—this time very close to Shrink's face who rears back. STEPHEN opens his hands.

STEPHEN: Gotcha! (*Goes back to couch and lies down*).

SHRINK (*Looking at his watch*): I charge by the minute, you know... not by the word.

STEPHEN (*After long pause*): How much time have I left?

SHRINK (*Again looks at watch*): Six minutes... going on five. So, if there's anything else...you'd...um...

STEPHEN: A question.

SHRINK: Hmm... progress.

STEPHEN: A legal question.

SHRINK: I don't offer legal advice.

STEPHEN (*Points with fingers toward Shrink, then to himself and back to Shrink*): How confidential do you keep this?

SHRINK: If you went to church for confession, would you ask a priest that?

STEPHEN: I'm not here to confess. This is different.

SHRINK: Therapy and confession aren't really that different. Call what usually happens here an unburdening.

STEPHEN: In that case I could've saved a bundle by going to see a priest.

SHRINK: Ah! But the difference is that we don't absolve... we help you understand yourself. That takes much longer....

STEPHEN: And that's what you charge for?

SHRINK: Well... if you're looking for bargains... perhaps you should go to church... but lying on a couch is easier on your knees. (*Pause*). Just imagine how sore they would be after a full course of therapy. Right now, this is only your 4th or 5th session—

STEPHEN: Fifth!

SHRINK: And while you'd certainly benefit from therapy... by now it's clear to me that you came with something else in mind: some kind of justification... but packaged in the form of a private confrontation.

STEPHEN: And why would I come to you for justification?

SHRINK: If I knew all of the answers, this would probably be your last visit. But you also appear to need assured confidentiality. You could have gotten that from a lawyer... but he would have charged more... and listened less.

STEPHEN (*Impatiently*): Okay, okay! But you tell no one what we talk about? No exceptions?

SHRINK: There are exceptions to everything. If you told me you had a gun in your pocket and were about to murder somebody, I'd call the police. I'd have to.

STEPHEN: What about suicide?

SHRINK: There is nothing I take more seriously than suicide.

STEPHEN: Suppose I told you I was thinking of killing myself?

SHRINK: I'd do my utmost to persuade you not to do that.

STEPHEN: Of course you would. But suppose you later learned that I'd actually done it?

SHRINK (*Taking it very seriously*): I'd feel terrible for not having prevented it. Personally... and professionally.

STEPHEN: But would you tell someone about the conversation?

SHRINK In none of our sessions so far has the word "suicide" even crossed your lips. Are you telling me now that you are contemplating—?

STEPHEN (*Interrupts*): Please! Just answer the question!

SHRINK (*Impatient*): I might... if you left a suicide note—

STEPHEN I thought confidentiality is an absolute term. There is no in-between situation.

SHRINK There is... when dealing with suicide. Suppose you asked that I contact a close survivor... for instance your wife? (*Anxious*). But Stephen—

STEPHEN (*Interrupting*): No note... nothing.

SHRINK: Then I probably would not.

STEPHEN: You'd keep mum?

SHRINK: Mum.

STEPHEN: Good. (*Pause*). In that case, let's continue.

SHRINK (*Looks at his watch*): Given the sudden shift in direction of our conversation, we really need more time than we've got left today.

STEPHEN (*Rises*): Well... if our time's up, I might as well take off.

Shrink beats Stephen to the door.

SHRINK: Be sure not to miss next week's session.

STEPHEN: Rent coming due?

SHRINK: No jokes, Stephen. This is important.

The two men stare at each other. Finally Stephen smiles, patting Shrink on the shoulder.

STEPHEN: I'll see whether I can convince myself of that.

Shrink reluctantly stands away from the door as Stephen exits.

SCENE 2.

Same location, following week. Exactly same position of the two characters as in Scene 1.

SHRINK: You aren't really thinking of suicide?

STEPHEN (*Breezily with a shift in tone*): You... of all people... must be used to that sort of talk: Suicide... justification... interpretation of the uninterpretable... unburdening. Pay your money, pick a neurosis. I might even paraphrase Descartes: "I'm analyzing myself, therefore I am."

SHRINK: Exactly! Analysis is the key to self-knowledge. At least that's how I—

STEPHEN (*Suddenly angry*): Do you think I need to come here to find out who I am? I can do that for \$9.99 down at Borders! (*As if reading his own dust jacket spiel*): Stephen Marx, author, misanthrope, genius, literary star, and winner of the Pulitzer Prize! National Book Award! blah blah blah. Voted Best Dressed Middle-Aged Man! Wearer of velvet jackets! Most Featured Writer in Women's Magazines! Pick a tagline Dr Hoffman. Pick a blurb! Everyone else does! Stephen Marx: great author who will be remembered for generations to come? Or a smart con man who peddles phrases for money? Am I an original thinker? Or is it all an act so I can entice female groupies at book launches? Do you think therapy can answer these questions, Doctor?

SHRINK (*Quietly*): Yes.

STEPHEN (*Taken aback*): Doesn't that smack of overconfidence?

SHRINK: No, it's plain vanilla confidence. But it also assumes that the analysand is willing to cooperate... meaning you, Stephen.

STEPHEN So you're hedging your answer.

SHRINK: An analyst is mostly a guide. It's the analysand who ultimately must deduce his present circumstances from his past history. If you want to call it hedging, so be it. (*Beat*). But how did the idea of... suicide... come into your head?

STEPHEN: Everybody thinks of suicide... sometimes. (*Pause*). I even wrote about it.

SHRINK: An article?

STEPHEN: A novel... (*Dismissive*). I don't do articles. (*Suddenly manic*). Did you

know that Hemingway read his own obituary?

SHRINK: No.

STEPHEN: He was in a small plane in the middle of Africa that crashed. Everyone thought he was dead. (*Pause*). But he blew it: he reappeared too soon.

SHRINK: Perhaps he needed medical attention.

STEPHEN: He had a marvelous time reading the newspaper obituaries. It was everything he wanted to hear. But what if he'd managed it better? (*Leans forward, excited*). If he'd waited?

SHRINK: All right, let's take that question and apply it to you. How long would you have waited? (*Raises his hand*). No, let me rephrase it. Why would you've waited longer?

STEPHEN: Have you never dealt with people whose self-esteem depends on the opinion of others? Haven't you ever stopped to think how it must feel to work in a field where success isn't something you can quantify? How much uncertainty that involves? How much insecurity? Even James Joyce was obsessed with reviews. I call it productive insecurity.

SHRINK: Well put!

STEPHEN (*With irony*) So now I'm getting complimented? Is that part of therapy?

SHRINK Call it encouragement rather than compliment.

STEPHEN (*continues ironic tone*) At this stage, I'll accept either one. Unfortunately... compliment or not...productive insecurity simultaneously nourishes and poisons us.

SHRINK: Ah, yes! Scientists have that problem all the time... peer recognition is all that counts. But you... a hugely successful best-selling author? Of thirteen novels?

STEPHEN (*Quickly*): Fourteen!

SHRINK: All right... fourteen! But surely a writer's success is based more on the opinion of the book-buying public. Reviewers and critics are not essential to make the best-seller lists.

STEPHEN: You're confusing selling thousands of books for a couple of years

followed by the oblivion of the remainder bins... with still being read decades later. I want the latter.

SHRINK: And you're talking about dying for it?

STEPHEN: Not in the sense that Roland Barthes meant.

SHRINK (*Not having the foggiest idea who Barthes is*): Who?

STEPHEN: French guy. Lived with his mother. Wrote "*Death of the Author*." He said it was the text, not the author that counted.

SHRINK (*Interested in Freudian sense, but still struggling to keep up*): He lived with his mother?

STEPHEN: What do you do when you've gone as far as you can go? What can another novel tell me about myself that I don't already know? What concerns me is (*deliberate tone*) whether I enter the canon.

SHRINK: Surely you can't know that until it happens.

STEPHEN (*Lying back on the couch*): The opinion of real critics writing about my work in depth. The literary afterlife.

SHRINK (*Looks at his watch*). Now we're getting to something we can work with.

STEPHEN: When you're dead, you're likely to learn things you'd never find out otherwise.

SHRINK: When you're dead, you're unlikely to enjoy it.

STEPHEN (*Ignores Shrink's comment*): Stephen Marx has gone as far as he can go. Its time he's put on the shelf to begin his grapple with history.

SHRINK: Then why not simply retire?

STEPHEN One can always come out of retirement.

SHRINK: You're trying to control events that are simply beyond your control.

STEPHEN (*Sits up*): In order to live on in literary history, one first must be dead. Nothing improves the quality of a reputation better than death.

SHRINK Stephen! Just reflect for a moment: why did you tell me all this in the first place?

STEPHEN: Didn't you tell me it was for justification?

SHRINK: That's only part of it. Even if you don't know it yourself, Stephen, you want me to stop you.

(Stephen slowly sits down again.)

STEPHEN *(A glimmer of humor in his eyes.):* Okay. So why should Stephen Marx stay alive?

SHRINK: Surely you should be able to answer that yourself.

STEPHEN: I've already told you, my career has no meaning any more.

SHRINK: So you're going to jump off a building?

STEPHEN *(Slyly):* No. I've always preferred the idea of drowning myself. *(Eying the Shrink with irony).* If you climb to the top of a building someone can always talk you down.

SHRINK: I don't believe you'll do it. Suicide doesn't go with your psyche.

STEPHEN: Is that your diagnosis?

SHRINK *(Is pushed into saying something even he won't believe he's said):* This is only our sixth session... generally much too short for a diagnosis. But with you, I'm prepared to risk it: yours is a case of pure, unadulterated narcissism... and that may be untreatable.

STEPHEN: Isn't that your job? To shrink big heads like mine down to normal size?

SHRINK: Next week then?

Stephen heads for the door.

STEPHEN: We'll see.

END OF SCENE 2

Scene 3.

One month later. SHRINK sits behind the couch. MIRIAM MARX lies on the couch. Through their discussion she will fidget about, stealing glances at the office and SHRINK.

MIRIAM I'm standing in a white room. Everywhere there are chrome saucepans shining in a harsh white light. I'm making a soufflé... and then I see him, his face, lifted in the egg white, with two yokes for eyes. Or I see him gasping for air in a... in a vat of... lobster bisque. Then he's turned into a fish, deboned... all floppy, spent and moist, laid out on a bed of creamed spinach. (*Pause*). It's so horrible! If anyone found out, they'd have me committed.

SHRINK: Not necessarily. Just consider what dreaming in images of food might mean. Freud would say that food is a primal expression of your desire to consume your grief... to literally eat it so that it... no longer has the capacity to hurt you.

MIRIAM (*Deadpan*): I run a catering establishment.

SHRINK: I see.

MIRIAM (*Suddenly composed*): It's called "Edible Art." I'm also working on a book by that title.

SHRINK: And your artwork gets eaten?

MIRIAM: First photographed. It's too expensive to be consumed without a record. Some customers even frame the photos. (*Looking around her, while pointing at the barren walls of his office*). I can arrange one for your office if you'd like. Something based on *Chipirones en su Tinta* might work well.

SHRINK: What?

MIRIAM: Squid in its ink. It's a Basque dish. But I could use it on a bed of Tagliatelle and make it look like a Rorschach inkblot.

SHRINK: I think we're getting off on a tangent... not that I don't appreciate your offer to improve the appearance of my office. But let's return to your thoughts about your deceased husband.

MIRIAM: You are so right... I shouldn't digress. Sometimes when I think of what he went through, I... I... It sounds terrible but I chuckle. I can't help myself doctor. To chuckle at the death throes of your husband. Is that... normal?

SHRINK: Normal is not a word we use here. Call it a denial of guilt or a failure to

come to terms with a huge loss.

MIRIAM: Any death is a loss, huge or not.

SHRINK: Of course... *(Pause)*.

MIRIAM *(Fidgets before continuing)*: I need to admit that what I wanted to talk to you about doesn't really concern me as a patient, as such.

SHRINK Everything that is brought up here does, in fact, concern the patient. Sometimes, a surrogate is used as an excuse—

MIRIAM I don't really know where to start.

SHRINK: Don't worry... just let it happen. Do you want to start talking about your husband?

MIRIAM: For one, we had been talking about divorce. But we only talked... for months on end, without taking the next step.

SHRINK Whose initiative was the idea of divorce?

MIRIAM: Mine.

SHRINK: Would you care to talk about the reasons?

MIRIAM: Why not? Now, it's irrevocable history.

SHRINK Nothing... other than death... is irrevocable.

MIRIAM *(Ironic)* Is that so? *(Beat)*. My husband was a writer. At one time, I thought his writing was wondrously clever... turning phrases inside out, upside down, back to front. I felt like his partner. I critiqued his first drafts... I typed the final ones... I was part of the creative process... or so I thought. And I considered the money his writing earned our money. But as his success brought in some real dough, he decided to get what he called a "writing pad" elsewhere. He showed me fewer and fewer drafts... and eventually just the completed manuscripts. That's when I started reading his books from the outside... like any other curious reader.

SHRINK: Meaning?

MIRIAM: Looking for hidden autobiographical details.

SHRINK: That must have been a difficult adjustment.

MIRIAM: Living with a writer isn't easy. (*Beat*). Have you ever heard about Fernando Pessoa?

SHRINK Doesn't ring a bell.

MIRIAM: My husband had introduced me to Pessoa's poetry years ago and for a while, even I was hooked, but he then became obsessed with Pessoa's heteronomy ideas. Do you know what that is?

SHRINK Not exactly.

MIRIAM: Writing as different authors with different personalities and styles... not just under a different name. I took it as a special form of intellectual polygamy from which I was automatically excluded. It got so that when he was working on a book, I felt I had become a discarded wife living with a stranger. That's when I became jealous of his inner life.

SHRINK: Jealousy is man's most common burden. We all show it in one way or another.

MIRIAM: I thought that any jealousy of mine was solely related to my sense of autonomy.

SHRINK: Could you expand on that?

MIRIAM: After my husband started to write elsewhere, I was stuck in the house with time on my hands but none of my own income. Then, when I became financially independent through my booming catering business, it dawned on me that time without money is worth much less than money without time. Suddenly, I had very little spare time, but I wanted that to be quality time. That's when I realized how little quality was left in our relationship...

(Long pause)

I've been going through my husband's papers... his files. How does one go on with one's life when the days are filled with endless reminders of a dead man's existence? When I think about the end... how he must have struggled in the water... fighting to break the surface... gasping for air....

SHRINK: Sorry... Mrs. Engels, how did your husband die?

Miriam turns to look at Shrink. She turns away, uncomfortable now.

MIRIAM: He drowned.

SHRINK: Drowned? How?

MIRIAM: In a sailing accident. He should never have gone out in that weather.

SHRINK: This was when?

MIRIAM: About a month ago.

SHRINK: Who was your husband? What was his name, Mrs. Engels?

MIRIAM (*Sits up to face him*): My name isn't Engels. I made it up as a dig at my husband's student politics. His name is Stephen Marx.

SHRINK (*Severely*): Mrs. Marx, I'll have to ask you to leave.

MIRIAM: What?

SHRINK: Therapy involves trust, Mrs. Marx. Not just the patient's trust in the doctor, but my trust that the patient has come in good faith. I don't know what you're doing here, but you certainly didn't come in good faith.

MIRIAM: I came because I need help...

SHRINK: You need to leave.

MIRIAM: You're kicking me out?

Shrink walks toward the door. Miriam slowly follows him.

What kind of a doctor are you?

SHRINK: One who takes his responsibilities seriously.

They're both at the door now, eye to eye.

This is not a catering service. When I make a mistake, there are consequences.

MIRIAM (*Turns around as she opens the door*): Food poisoning kills more than a hundred people a week in New York alone! (*Exits*).

END OF SCENE 3

Scene 4.

Two days later.

MIRIAM: I know I was wrong to lie about my name. And I respect your concern about trust. But this time, please hear me out. I couldn't be sure you'd even see me if I'd said I was coming for information about one of your patients. I needed to learn what Stephen told you.

SHRINK: What's said in this room, between doctor and patient, is absolutely confidential.

MIRIAM: Do you know what it's like to live as the widow of a famous man... of Stephen Marx, the best-selling author of thirteen novels?

SHRINK: Fourteen... at least according to him.

MIRIAM: Why would he say fourteen? He's only published thirteen.

SHRINK (*Shrugs his shoulders in dismissal*): Why did you come the other day... using therapy as pretense? In fact, how did you know that your husband had been my patient? Had he told you that?

MIRIAM: It's amazing what you learn when you go through a person's checkbook. When I saw several checks written to you, I looked you up and discovered who you were. (*Pause*). Even your Freudian leanings.

SHRINK: Surely it doesn't say that in the Yellow Pages.

MIRIAM: That I only discovered when I arrived. Couches aren't used all that much today. Maybe it's one of your selling points.

SHRINK: Maybe I'm old-fashioned.

MIRIAM: Is that why you're wearing a tie?

SHRINK: This specific tie (*finger it*)... or in general?

MIRIAM: Both.

SHRINK: It's my conservative nature.

MIRIAM: Rather than the image you wish to project?

SHRINK: I think you better get to the point.

MIRIAM: So tell me: how many of your patients don't even inform their spouses that they're seeing a shrink? (*Seeing him frown*). I guess you don't approve of that word. I shouldn't transfer my irritation at my husband's behavior onto you. Especially when I came to ask you an embarrassing question.

SHRINK: Embarrassing for whom?

MIRIAM: Me, for one.

SHRINK: Go on.

MIRIAM: When I first realized my husband was seeing you I couldn't believe it. It was so unlike him. He was too self-centered and too secretive. I can't imagine him opening up... the way people do in therapy.

SHRINK (*Nodding*): He certainly was self-centered.

MIRIAM So you are prepared to talk about him?

SHRINK (*Smiling*) No, I'm not prepared to talk about him. I was just agreeing with you.

The phone rings. The Shrink snatches it up. Speaks into phone:

Can I call you back? (*Brief pause*). Sorry, I can't talk right now. (*Puts phone down firmly.*) Sorry about that.

MIRIAM: I'm disturbing you.

SHRINK No, no. I usually have the answering machine on when I am with a patient.

MIRIAM Which I am not.

SHRINK Precisely... and thus the reason for this interruption.

MIRIAM An answering machine? How quaintly charming. Is this another manifestation of your conservative nature? These days, people don't use phones with clunky answering machines.

SHRINK Perhaps therapists are the exception. But I dislike cell phones. With a passion. They assume that one is accessible all the time. Besides, they are exceedingly rude.

MIRIAM (*Reaches into her bag for her cell phone and ostentatiously turns it off*). Thank God mine didn't ring just now. (*Beat*). I promise not to take much more of

your time. (*She fidgets a bit before suddenly blurting out*). Did he talk to you about our... physical relations?

SHRINK: You're asking something very inappropriate.

MIRIAM: Are you suggesting we did something bizarre?

SHRINK: Bizarre is a word I use very rarely. I just meant that it was inappropriate asking confidential details about one of my patients.

MIRIAM: Even if he is my husband?

SHRINK: Or was.

MIRIAM: Meaning?

SHRINK: Professional confidentiality generally has no time limit. Dead or alive.

MIRIAM: Without exception?

SHRINK: Interesting... your husband once asked the same question.

MIRIAM: And?

SHRINK: There are exceptions for everything.

MIRIAM: In that case, let me encourage you to make one by providing you with some posthumous insight into one of your patients.

(Miriam produces a bundle of letters from her bag and offers them to Shrink).

When Stephen died he also left this. And don't worry, you're not in breach of anything. Stephen surrendered the right to privacy when he left these lying in the bottom drawer of his filing cabinet.

SHRINK (*Assumes increasingly shocked expression as he leafs through them*):
What a terrible thing for you to have to find.

MIRIAM: Now you understand why I came. It wasn't so much grief as anger that brought me here. Women don't write such letters after a one-night stand! Not even after a three-night stand!

(Miriam becomes progressively angrier, with sarcastic and even hysterical overtones.)

But there weren't just letters! There's a poem too. Did you notice it was a goddamn sestina! (*Steaming*). Tell me... have you ever gotten a sestina from a lover?

SHRINK (*Attempts to calm her down by humoring her*): No sestinas.

MIRIAM: Not even a haiku after an affair?

SHRINK: I have no affairs.

MIRIAM: Of course, you don't... you're a therapist. But what about a limerick... from a patient?

SHRINK: No limericks.

MIRIAM: Flowers?

SHRINK: Once... a cactus. (*Points to cactus on his desk*). It flowers once every seven years.

MIRIAM: And has it yet?

SHRINK (*Shrugs*): It's only been 4 years.

MIRIAM (*Grins*): Life's too short to wait for years for some ephemeral pleasure. I'd suggest an instant high and go for a limerick. How about... "There was a shrink from St. Paul/Whose sessions were sometimes a ball/He couldn't avoid/Always thinking of Freud/'Time's up'... he panted... 'for now that's all.

SHRINK (*Smiles*): You couldn't have made this up just now.

MIRIAM: I didn't. I had brought it with me... just in case.

SHRINK In case of what?

MIRIAM Ease the tension. But I guess it's not in the best of taste, given the circumstances.

(She picks up the letters and starts putting them away. Suddenly she starts sobbing. He produces a tissue and she blows her nose, composes herself.)

I'm sorry.

SHRINK: It's okay.

Shrink looks rather ostentatiously at his watch, which she notices.

MIRIAM: I guess my time is up. (*Rises*). But before I go, may I make another appointment?

SHRINK: Of course. I want to help... if I can.

MIRIAM: In that case, let's make it tomorrow.

SHRINK (*Goes to his desk and shuffles through his appointment book*): How about Friday... ..3:00 o'clock?

MIRIAM: Twelve o'clock.

SHRINK: 1:00 o'clock.

MIRIAM: Deal.

END OF SCENE 4

Scene 5.

Next day, evening. SHRINK (in shirt sleeves or sweater) lies on couch, shuffling through some notes. Suddenly, the phone rings.

SHRINK (Reaches for telephone): Hello? (Pause). Yes, this is Dr. Hofmann. An emergency? (Pause while he listens). Yes... I suppose so. (Pause, astonished). Now? (Pause). You're where?

(Goes to door and shortly thereafter returns with Stephen, who wears dark glasses, a hat, and a long coat).

STEPHEN (Removes hat and glasses): TADA!

SHRINK: Jesus Christ almighty!

STEPHEN (Grinning): Not quite!

SHRINK: It's you!

STEPHEN: Aren't you going to congratulate me?

SHRINK (Angry): Are you totally mad?

STEPHEN (Triumphantly): Stephen Marx has been laid to rest.

SHRINK: But—

STEPHEN: Died in a tragic boating accident. (Stephen laughs. Continues almost manically regardless of the Shrink's outrage). I often sail by myself during the middle of the week. It's... where I get my best ideas. So, a month ago, I pick a lousy, windy day when nobody else is on the water. I tell the Yacht Club, I'm off for the day on Long Island Sound and I'll be back by five. The next morning they find my drifting boat, it still has my life-vest in it, but no Stephen Marx! I even cut the safety belt and then frayed it to get that worn-through effect. Genius! Naturally they assume I'd drowned. No crime and of course, no body. (Pause). Isn't that what you read in the papers?

SHRINK (Angry but controlling it): I read about a man I thought had taken his own life. Yes.

STEPHEN (Oblivious): You want to know how I got to the shore, right? I mean it's early November... a man without a life jacket won't survive beyond half an hour in that water. Let's just say it involved a rubber raft, a miniature outboard... and a dose of daring quite untypical of Stephen Marx! It was pure James Bond...Theodore. You don't mind me calling you Theodore, do you?

Theodore...you should've seen me. Surrounded by the blackness of endless water at the moment of rebirth... absolutely exhilarating!

SHRINK (*Sarcastic*): I'll be sure to suggest it to some of my other patients.

STEPHEN (*Manic*): So what about the obituaries, eh? You read 'em?

SHRINK (*Acid*): You must be triumphant now that the floodgates of praise have opened.

(Stephen produces a vast bundle of newspaper articles from his bag. He starts flicking through them ostentatiously)

STEPHEN (*Reading*): "Tragic loss of one of America's great men of letters... literary world in mourning for one of nation's great talents." (*Pause*). Or listen to this: "his legacy will live on for generations to come." (*Pause*). And then this one I love: "J. D. Salinger gives rare interview on Stephen Marx"...

SHRINK: Your ego must be soaring.

STEPHEN: It's good to see you! You know, I've been starting to miss human contact in a way...

SHRINK: I should ask you to leave.

STEPHEN (*Chuckling*): Just when things are getting interesting.

SHRINK (*Suddenly furious*): For heaven's sake man... I thought you were dead!

STEPHEN (*Defensive*): I killed Stephen Marx... not myself.

SHRINK (*Staring at Stephen as if he were a specimen*): Have you no conception of what effect your actions have on other people? For weeks I tried my best for you and suddenly you were dead! (*Beat*). I tried to figure out what happened – where I went wrong. A few days ago, I even looked at your home page. And you know what I found? Your obituary... posted there."

STEPHEN Can you think of any more perfect obit than to write one yourself? A new genre: auto-obits!

SHRINK And when did you put it there? Before your demise?

STEPHEN What's the difference? But how did you like it?

SHRINK An unusual concoction... to put it mildly.

STEPHEN: Oh?

SHRINK For instance, the sort of book review excerpts you quoted.

STEPHEN (*Enjoying himself, curious*) You remember which one caught your fancy?

SHRINK I've printed it out. (*Goes to his desk, opens the drawer and takes out some pages. Flips through them and then starts reading*). "None of his thirteen novels contained four-letter words of the "F dot dot dot" and "S dot dot dot" variety—

STEPHEN: You can say "fuck" and "shit." No one is listening.

SHRINK I didn't know that about your writing.

STEPHEN: I would've thought you'd have noticed.

SHRINK: Literary research on my clients is not included in my fee. (*Continues reading from page*). Or this one? "And a striking paucity of explicit sex." (*Puts down paper*). Why?

STEPHEN: I'm the author... it was my choice.

SHRINK: That's not what I meant. Why mention it here?

STEPHEN: Because the conventional obits are unlikely to say so.

SHRINK Do you realize that your appearance tonight turns me into a potential accomplice? And if I keep it a secret, then into an actual accomplice? So why did you come?

STEPHEN: I've discovered that keeping it all to myself is more difficult than I'd imagined. You are my lifeline... my accomplice... at least in spirit... and besides I trust you.

SHRINK: A lifeline... like a bridge... connects as well as separates. Give me one reason why I shouldn't just focus on separation... permanent separation!

STEPHEN: Curiosity... for one.

SHRINK: And you think you can keep that up?

STEPHEN So, are you pleased I'm not dead?

SHRINK (*Exasperated*): Do you even know that a world exists outside of

yourself?

STEPHEN (*Fighting back*): That's what this is all about: the outside world!

SHRINK: This is the outside world Stephen! For once, you'll have to accept my being judgmental. I realize that for a psychoanalyst that is out of bounds, but then... so is dying and running around perfectly fit. You'd rather make a name for yourself among sterile critics and college professors than be true to the people who care about you? What monumental irresponsibility!

STEPHEN: Let's analyze my irresponsibility.

SHRINK: You resisted analysis for all of our earlier sessions. What would be the point doing it now? (*Shift in tone*) Does your... wife know you're up and about?

STEPHEN: Of course not.

SHRINK: Have you considered what impact your (*draws quotes in the air*) "suicide" might have had on her?

STEPHEN (*They trade glances*): You think I should *contact* her?

SHRINK (*Cutting tone*): How can you even ask such a question? Of course you should!

STEPHEN (*Sensing the Shrink is right*): After so many years of barely communicating... to finally reach out, now that I'm dead... seems... absurd. Besides, she wouldn't understand.

SHRINK: What makes you so sure?

STEPHEN: Believe me, I know Miriam's limitations.

SHRINK: If it weren't so utterly beyond the pale, I would grant that your antics are of potential clinical interest. Staging one's death in order to read one's own obituaries! The root is... Oedipal, but who is the object of hostility? You are very successful. But Miriam now also has a very successful career... at least that's what you told me in our very first session. I even deduced a touch of jealousy. All of which leads me to conclude that... she is the father you are seeking to destroy. It's perfectly clear. It was staring me in the face! (*To Stephen*) You are envious of your wife's independence!

STEPHEN: Theodore. I'm not the first writer to disappear. What about Agatha Christie? (*Beat.*) Her motive was revenge.

SHRINK: Revenge for what?

STEPHEN: Against her husband, who was about to leave her. She arranged her disappearance quite carefully, but she didn't devise a plausible way of returning. In the end, all she claimed was temporary amnesia... rather clumsy, I'd say.

SHRINK: So that's what you want? Revenge for Miriam wanting to divorce you?

STEPHEN (*Unsettled*): Now how did you know about the impending divorce?

SHRINK (*Suddenly flustered*): From one of our earlier sessions.

STEPHEN Impossible! I barely talked about her.

SHRINK Then ascribe it to the therapist's acumen. (*Trying to change the subject*): What has she done to you to merit this kind of treatment? (*Shrink becomes aware he is overreacting*). I mean...er...purely from the clinical standpoint, er...do you think subconsciously you are motivated by hostility towards her...?

STEPHEN: This has nothing to do with her.

SHRINK: I see. You have the adoration of the literary establishment. Soon you'll be on every university syllabus in the Western world. They'll name a journal after you. There'll be a statue of you in the quad by the literature department of whatever university you attended.

STEPHEN: Pigeons will shit on it.

SHRINK (*Unthinking*): Pigeons will sh(it)... what?

STEPHEN: They tend to do that.

SHRINK: When do you plan to return?

STEPHEN: Maybe that's not on the agenda.

SHRINK: I see. (*Pause*) In that case, don't ask me to play along with your fake suicide. Because I won't do it.

STEPHEN: Why call "living elsewhere under another identity" a suicide?

SHRINK (*Angry*): Social suicide, then. That's even worse... consciously perpetuating a cruel hoax on the survivors. It's vicious!

STEPHEN: Not if you're a writer and continue writing under another persona. Then it's a rebirth—a second life! Can't you see a positive side to all this?

SHRINK: And you came to tell me all that now?

STEPHEN: You're my shrink—

SHRINK (*Cuts him off*): I was your therapist-

STEPHEN: You still are.

SHRINK: I don't deal with dead people.

STEPHEN (*Angrily*): Then why don't you try to persuade me to return?

SHRINK: Persuasion is not a therapist's function. It's to help you persuade yourself not to do something. (*Finally losing his patience*). But you can't pull it off for innumerable reasons. What about something as trivial as your insurance? It would be fraud if they paid—

STEPHEN (*Interrupts*): Miriam and I have no insurance, no children, no mortgage. And my wife runs her own business.

SHRINK (*Completely disgusted*): What about a new social security number? Trivial... but even more indispensable for a second life. You can't even open a bank account!

STEPHEN (*Bragging tone*): That's the first problem I took care of. I went to the Death Records office and looked for death certificates of men born some 16 years ago. Can you guess why?

(SHRINK looks ostentatiously at his watch but says nothing):

STEPHEN: Never mind... you wouldn't have guessed. Most young men of that age would already have a Social Security number, but too few benefits for the death to be reported to the Social Security office. I just copied the name, date, and place of birth from the death certificate of a man born elsewhere, preferably in another large city. I then wrote to that Department of Vital Statistics for a new birth certificate. Once I got it, I mailed that copy to the Social Security office in my new city asking for a new Social Security card, which I had supposedly lost.

SHRINK: Wouldn't they want to see you in person?

STEPHEN: If you're below 18 years of age, you can order a card by mail, provided you enclose a birth certificate. Simple, isn't it

SHRINK: Oh yes. It's simple all right... and surely illegal.

STEPHEN (*Waving it off*): I haven't told you the whole truth—

SHRINK: And you will now? Isn't it too late for that?

STEPHEN: When I first came to you it wasn't for therapy—

SHRINK: And now you need it?

STEPHEN: To find out what I need, I first had to do what I did.

SHRINK (*Impatiently*): So what is it you need?

STEPHEN: To find out how to live in the future.

SHRINK: Your literary afterlife is pretty well assured!

STEPHEN: I want more. Have you ever heard of Fernando Pessoa?

SHRINK (*Suddenly turns wary*): Should I have?

STEPHEN (*Spells it slowly and deliberately*): P E S S O A.

SHRINK (*Sarcastically*): Now you're going to tell me who he is.

STEPHEN: The greatest Portuguese poet of the last century... if not the last three centuries... but he didn't just write poetry... he wrote poets.

(SHRINK rolls his eyes or shakes his head or some gesture of impatience)

STEPHEN (*Impatiently*): He created alter ego authors... at least three of them... who wrote in totally different styles!

SHRINK: Lots of authors write under pseudonyms.

STEPHEN: Not pseudonyms. Heteronyms. (*Pause*). One person... living simultaneously in different personalities... the heteronyms he developed.

SHRINK: Psychiatrists have a term for that syndrome.

STEPHEN (*Ironic*): Don't they always? For me, he's a hero. And an integral part of my ongoing experiment. Can you imagine the literary freedom Pessoa enjoyed?

SHRINK: He sounds like a candidate for life-long therapy.

STEPHEN: Implying that he needs to be cured? How about emulated?

SHRINK: To accomplish what?

STEPHEN: Simple: to travel through space and time... forward to self-perpetuation... and simultaneously backward to self-immolation. I shall achieve what was always beyond Stephen Marx's reach. Imagine the glory of not just being a "great writer," but several? Imagine what people will say in the history books when they realize I was a literary genius—not just once but time and time again, but under a series of different names, styles... even personalities. Perhaps the public will never find out.

SHRINK: You don't want to be *part* of the canon; you want to be the entire canon. I think you may be certifiable.

STEPHEN: But you are intrigued, aren't you? Some small part of you wants to know whether I can pull it off. Come on, admit it!

SHRINK (*Actually intrigued*): You're delusional.

STEPHEN: Which leads me to my reason for being here? I have a proposal.

SHRINK: I can't wait.

STEPHEN: This is the first proper conversation I have had in a month and already I feel more human. Theodore, I need someone to talk to...spontaneously, openly...

SHRINK Just "someone"? Or specifically a therapist?

STEPHEN The life I have chosen is to surround myself with heteronyms. They are real persons... in every sense of the word... but they are all creatures of my imagination. I need one living person... someone I can trust not to let the secret out... someone who has another voice than mine. I don't have anyone else but you. I propose that we continue our sessions... mostly by phone.

SHRINK: Now why on earth would I agree to collude in such an act of fraud?

STEPHEN: Because I am the most fascinating patient you ever had.

SHRINK: Megalomania is more common than you may think.

STEPHEN (*Suddenly nasty*): Because the ethics of patient confidentiality forbid you from revealing what passes between us. Because your professional duties require you to continue our sessions in order to prevent me from going over the edge. You just said I was certifiable. Well... certifiable people need shrinks!

SHRINK: You think you can blackmail me into seeing you? That's unspeakable!

STEPHEN: Not as unspeakable as deserting a patient in need!

SHRINK: Get out!

STEPHEN: I only meant—

SHRINK: Out Stephen, out! Or I'll call the police.

STEPHEN: You wouldn't.

SHRINK: Oh no? You once asked about exceptions to professional confidentiality. Well... you're about to find out. (*Points to the phone*).

STEPHEN: You'll regret this.

SHRINK: Go ahead and die!

(Stephen slowly leaves the stage. After he's gone the Shrink puts down the phone. Initially angry (e.g. pounding fist into hand), he finally sits down slowly on the couch and puts his head in his hands.)

END OF SCENE 5

Scene 6.

Two days after scene 4. SHRINK paces the floor occasionally looking at his watch. Clearly waiting for something. There is a knock at the door. The Shrink smoothes his hair quickly. His nervousness is clear. He heads to the door, then thinks again and sits down at his desk trying to look like he is in the middle of working.

SHRINK *(Clears his throat)*: Come in!

(Miriam enters. She is carrying a stylish picnic basket. The Shrink can't stop himself from getting up and going to her.)

MIRIAM: Greetings.

SHRINK: Hello! *(Points at the basket)*. Is that a... pet? I should just say I am terribly allergic to cats.

MIRIAM: Relax. My pets are larger and don't come in baskets.

SHRINK *(Laughs)* That's reassuring. *(Beat)* You're very punctual.... 1:00 o'clock on the dot. But—

MIRIAM "But" isn't the most encouraging word to start a session.

SHRINK You're right. So let me explain what prompted the "but." Last night—

MIRIAM *(Interrupts)* Before you continue, let me ask a question. *(She lifts the picnic basket)*. Have you had lunch?

SHRINK I don't usually have lunch.

MIRIAM You mean you had nothing since breakfast?

SHRINK I had an apple and a glass of milk. *(Looks at his watch)*. About an hour ago.

MIRIAM In that case, this will be something new for both of us.

(She puts basket on the floor in front of the couch and sits down).

How about a picnic on the couch?

Miriam opens the basket. Starts laying out a tablecloth and various dishes.

SHRINK *(Taken aback, but also amused)*: Well... a picnic here would certainly

be a first.

MIRIAM: Consider it a form of pastoral homage to a kind therapist for allowing me to unburden myself the other day.

SHRINK: It's what I do here.

(The Shrink sits down next to her somewhat awkwardly.)

MIRIAM: Still... there really was no excuse for the way it all started. *(Handing him a plate of food).*

SHRINK *(Forced enthusiasm):* Why there's bread, cheese, cold meat and some type of... olive...

MIRIAM: If you're going to compliment the cuisine, at least get it right. *(Pointing to the dishes.)* Homemade focaccia, unsalted Pecorino, smoked reindeer, and caper berries! *(She holds up a berry on a stem).*

SHRINK *(Cautiously tastes one caper berry):* Rather assertive.

MIRIAM: Sometimes you need food that talks back. Besides, I dislike blandness.

SHRINK: In food... or in general?

MIRIAM: I don't tolerate it in food... but "in general?" There, I simply withdraw. *(Points to food).* But you seem to have expected something more elaborate.

SHRINK *(Looking at her, grins):* Well... maybe something more photogenic.

MIRIAM: This time, it's taste I'm after rather than appearance. After all, I didn't just come for distraction... *(Beat).* Why are you looking at me like this?

SHRINK: I just noticed that subtle touch of asymmetry in your face.

MIRIAM *(Holding his gaze somewhat seductively):* We cultivate it in food design. Asymmetry, that is.

SHRINK *(Gulps):* Why not? It draws attention.

MIRIAM *(Flirtatious):* Thank you Theo. I can call you Theo, can't I? I mean it's not as if...

SHRINK *(Somewhat stiffly):* We may be in my office but this can hardly be called a therapy session, so Theo is fine.

(They both eat for a while. The Shrink starts to enjoy it.)

It's certainly not bland.

MIRIAM (*Reaching into the basket*): I brought one more thing.

(Miriam produces two more dessert plates and two peculiar 3-pronged forks—the central prong three times as long as the two side ones with none of them curved. She holds them up against the light—providing ample opportunity for the audience to notice them—before wiping them carefully and then putting them to the left of their respective plates).

SHRINK (*Points to the forks*): Is that for a scientific experiment?

MIRIAM: They're for mangoes.

SHRINK (*Reaches over to lift one of the forks*): It looks lethal and so Freudian!

MIRIAM: In what sense?

SHRINK: The Freudian triad of the human psyche: Id... Ego... and Superego. And never equal. (*Speaking nervously yet assertively*): The Ego... the conscious part of our psyche... controls thought and behavior Whereas the Id... the unconscious part... is driven by the primitive needs for satisfaction... much of it libidinous. At any given moment, it's difficult to know which is in control. And then the superego... the internal censor... comes into play.

MIRIAM (*Suddenly remembering*): I forgot the wine! How silly of me. (*Miriam reaches for the basket and hands the shrink a bottle of wine and a corkscrew.*) Would you do the honors?

SHRINK I don't normally drink on the job.

MIRIAM: What about *in vino veritas*? Isn't that what you always look for in this office? Veritas?

(She pulls the cork out swiftly and pours some in the two glasses that she produced from the basket.)

What do you think?

SHRINK (*Tastes wine timidly while speaking slowly*): Seems well-structured... a generous palate... certainly a boldly exotic nose. What's your opinion?

MIRIAM (*Tastes it after first swirling and inhaling, then mimes tongue-in-cheek wine taster's slowly delivered judgment*): Passionately entwined pepper and

black currant flavor... caressed ... (*long pause, while she takes another sip*) by just the faintest whiff of horseshit—

SHRINK (*Who had taken a sip, chokes*): What?

MIRIAM: The usual winespeak term is "barnyard." Anyway, the wine is just right for my toast. (*Clinks his glass*). To... revelations!

SHRINK: To revelations!

MIRIAM: By the way... you are single, aren't you?

SHRINK: Is that relevant to our lunch... or related to the toast?

MIRIAM: I'm just testing my intuition.

SHRINK: Your intuition is faultless... so far. Yes, I'm quite unattached.

MIRIAM: Are you a bachelor or an ex-husband?

SHRINK: Ex.

MIRIAM: In that case, may I ask the same question you'd asked me? Whose decision was it to divorce? Yours or hers?

SHRINK: Neither.

MIRIAM: What other alternatives are there?

SHRINK (*Long pause while he hesitates*): I think we've discussed this sufficiently.

MIRIAM: I wouldn't want to pry, but I know nothing about you. You don't even have a home page on the web. In fact, you are practically not googleable.

SHRINK Well? That itself should tell you something about me.

MIRIAM In the absence of any personal information, I'm still faced by the usual analyst-patient relationship. I'm down here (*makes appropriate hand gestures*) and you up there.

SHRINK: My former wife and I married for the wrong reasons.

MIRIAM: So do many couples...

SHRINK: Ours was loneliness... which marriage did not resolve.

MIRIAM Was she one of your patients?

SHRINK Didn't I just hear you say that you didn't want to pry?

MIRIAM You can't be the first one who's failed in his marriage.

SHRINK: So you see? We do have something in common.

MIRIAM: Could we analyze that common ground?

SHRINK: Pretend we're in a restaurant.

MIRIAM All right. Restaurant chit chat then. *(Beat)*. *(Reaches into basket to produce a mango)*. Let me show you how to use a mango fork.

(Miriam takes a mango with her left hand. She places mango fork in his right hand and with her right hand takes his hand and guides it so that the fork carefully penetrates the pit with the long middle prong, until it has entered sufficiently that the two outer prongs enter the flesh.)

The tall one... penetrates. Only then do the other two fulfill their function of holding the object in place.

SHRINK *(Very turned on, but nervous)*: And then?

MIRIAM: You mean Freud didn't take a stand on mangoes? Well... first you strip it...

(Takes mango, now supported on mango fork, holds it up vertically, takes the cutting knife and quickly peels the fruit so that the skin droops down like four petals leaving the naked fleshy part of the mango upright).

And now that the ripe flesh is exposed... *(Hands mango supported on its fork to Shrink)* then comes... consummation. Start eating... but suck as you bite down... or, maybe just nibble to tease out every drop of that tongue-licking juice. *(Pause)*. Otherwise you're going to get sticky.

SHRINK *(Carefully takes a very small bite)*: Like... that?

MIRIAM *(Laughs)*: Not so timidly. Try again... but a bit more aggressively. What other fruit is so swollen with juice? The taste will pucker your memory. *(Watches him take a bigger bite)*. That's better. And now, let's multi-task while you continue consummation. Can you talk while you suck? *(Seeing him nearly choke after he has taken a big bite)*.

SHRINK I can try.

MIRIAM Last time we met I showed you some letters that my husband had received from various women. And that poem... that sestina.

SHRINK: That poem really bothered you. Why?

MIRIAM: Because it raised the emotional level of intimacy one notch further. So were these affairs a subject of discussion in your meetings with my husband?

SHRINK: You know I shouldn't answer that question.

MIRIAM: Do I hear another "but" coming?

SHRINK: No buts... and no ifs.

MIRIAM (*After an uncomfortable silence*). Did he discuss us?

SHRINK: He barely talked about you.

MIRIAM: And you didn't find that surprising?

SHRINK: Omissions are often more significant than admissions. You had to go through his checkbook to find out that he'd been seeing me.

MIRIAM (*Nods*): True. But what about... you know...

SHRINK: The subject of sex hardly ever came up.

MIRIAM (*Sarcastic*): In other words it did.

SHRINK: Now we're crossing a boundary.

MIRIAM: I don't think you realize how important this is to me. Officially, I'm now single. But I've got to get the past out of my system. (*Calmer*). Did he tell you why he went with all those women? (*Increasingly emotional*). Did he say it was my fault? (*Pause*). That I drove him to it? (*Her tone turns desperate*). Just a simple "yes" or "no." I won't ask for anything else!

SHRINK: Now you've gone too far.

MIRIAM (*Even more upset now*): Who's to know? Just nod or shake your head. Did he screw them because he loved them? Or because he was just following his goddamn "Id"? Did they mean nothing? (*Brief pause as the Shrink moves slightly*). Hah! (*Points at him triumphantly*). You nodded! (*Pause*). Ever so slightly... but you nodded!

SHRINK (*With emotion*): If it helps, I can tell you one thing: there's no doubt in my mind that he admired... and respected you.

MIRIAM (*Sad, yet sarcastic*): "Admire and respect." (*Pause*). But for sex he went to other women.

SHRINK (*Leans forward to touch her lightly on her hand*): You should not blame yourself for his infidelities.

MIRIAM (*Sarcastic*): I'm relieved to hear that. But what about this? (*Drops sarcasm*). Stephen Marx, the author who was famous for hardly ever writing explicit sex scenes in his first twelve novels, suddenly made one salacious exception in his thirteenth. I'd always wondered where he got that inspiration, because it didn't come from his devoted wife, who prides herself on her steamy imagination. Having come across that cache of letters, I now know where that exception came from. Do you remember Andrew Marvell's poem, "To His Coy Mistress?" (*Quotes, while looking into the distance*): "The grave's a fine and private place, /but none, I think, do there embrace. / Now let us sport us while we may." (*Pause, then looks at SHRINK*). "So tell me, have you ever made love in a cemetery

SHRINK (*Slightly embarrassed, laughs self-consciously*): Nobody has ever asked me this... professionally... or personally.

MIRIAM: That question wasn't addressed to you.

SHRINK: Oh.

MIRIAM: In Stephen's thirteenth novel, he has a woman ask that question of a famous writer... after first quoting Marvell. Typical Stephen: always quoting someone you should know, but never quite do.

SHRINK: I think I'd like to read that novel sometime.

MIRIAM: For prurient or professional reasons?

SHRINK: In my profession there are times when the two cannot easily be distinguished.

MIRIAM: Lucky man! But if it's for prurient reasons, I can spare you the trouble. The next sentence reads, "Within forty minutes, he had made love to the tallest woman he had ever met, upright, her back against the stone figure of an angel. She had drawn the line at assuming a supine position on a stone slab."

SHRINK: Rather clinically put.

MIRIAM :Clinical? (*Heavy sarcasm*). It wasn't a prescription for treating a slipped disk... that's for sure. I wanted to convince myself that the scene was fiction—one of his sailing inspirations—the result of nautical... not amorous cruising.

SHRINK: What is the real source of your outrage? His fantasy of making love in a cemetery or encountering a real woman that suggested it to him?

MIRIAM: What's the difference? What's important is that the letter was dated six months before the novel came out. The scene must have been based on fact!

SHRINK: I see.

MIRIAM: I'm almost too embarrassed to admit what I once tried during the period covered by that correspondence. Do you want to hear it?

SHRINK Only if it helps you come to term with this sordid tale.

MIRIAM Culinary history is full of aphrodisiacal foods.

SHRINK: And?

MIRIAM: Not only did I incorporate some into my domestic culinary repertoire, but I even went a step further. I arranged them in phallic and vaginal shapes... subtly of course. I still remember serving a carefully skinned ripe peach with some lines by D.H. Lawrence: "Why the groove?/ Why the lovely, bivalve roundness?/Why the ripple down the sphere?/ Why the suggestion of incision?"

SHRINK: Wow!

MIRIAM: But it didn't work.

SHRINK: Perhaps you were too subtle.

(Long Pause)

SHRINK: And that's when your marriage started unravelling?

MIRIAM: It's a topic I've refused to raise with others—even my girl friends.

SHRINK That's what therapy is for.

MIRIAM So you say.

SHRINK Well... I hope in time you'll say the same.

MIRIAM (*Looks at him for long time and then away*): You said that nothing is irrevocable except for death. Well? Let's take his presumed accident. You must have been one of the last persons to have seen him. But since you hide behind the curtain of professional confidentiality—

SHRINK: That isn't fair!

MIRIAM: Perhaps not. But hear me out. My husband was a cautious, contemplative sailor... not a competitive one. He always sailed alone, but only when the weather was good... and he always told me before he took off. In other words... when it came to sailing, he had no secrets from me.

SHRINK: I know what you're going to ask.

MIRIAM: Of course you do. So why would he leave on such a terrible day... in November of all months... in the afternoon? Without telling me? (*Bitterly*). Why? He was not the suicidal type.

SHRINK: How do you know that?

MIRIAM: He was much too preoccupied with himself.

SHRINK: In our business, we call it narcissism.

MIRIAM (*Derisively*): Even those outside your "business" call it that. And suicide does nothing for a narcissist. So do you think—?

She is interrupted by the phone ringing and then the answering machine picking up.

STEPHEN (*Voice over*): Theodore, this is Stephen. Listen, I've been thinking about what happened yesterday. I should never have done that to you. Believe me when I say that I've got to talk to someone... and by that I mean you. I'm calling to tell you that I've got to see you. I know you have my number... but don't bother calling back. I'll just drop in. (*Stephen hangs up*)

MIRIAM (*Jumps up*): You bastard! The two of you! And you have the gall to hide behind professional ethics! You looked me in the eye, you started to eat my mango... and then you lied to me!

SHRINK: Miriam... please! I can explain. Try to understand! I can't betray a patient's...

MIRIAM: Bull shit! You're worse than he is! At least Stephen had the balls to fake his own death!

SHRINK: Miriam! Please—(*The Shrink tries to hold her by the arm*).

MIRIAM: Don't touch me!

*(With that Miriam stalks off stage, leaving the picnic basket behind.
SHRINK crosses to the couch. FADE OUT*

Scene 7. *Some minutes later. Firm knocking is heard at the door. The SHRINK jumps up from his desk, thinking MIRIAM has returned. He rushes to the door to find STEPHEN standing by the door taking off his hat, coat and dark glasses (his disguise from his earlier visit to the Shrink's office).*

SHRINK (*Startled, gasps*): It's you!

(As STEPHEN steps in, SHRINK steps partly out to look whether someone else is there then returns and closes the door. Remains standing by the door.)

Did you bump into anyone as you came up?

STEPHEN: No.

SHRINK: Thank God. (*Walks toward the couch and almost collapses on it*).

STEPHEN: (*Still standing, walks to the couch*): Are you okay?

SHRINK: Must be something I ate.

STEPHEN: Perhaps you should lie down on the couch.

SHRINK: Of course not. (*Recovering from his shock, stands up*). What are you doing here? Get out!

STEPHEN: Please hear me out.

SHRINK: Out!

STEPHEN (*Moves to couch, but just sits, rather than lies on it, while SHRINK remains standing*): Look, I realize I put you in a terrible position.

(The SHRINK notices a mango-fork lying on a nearby surface. Flustered, he hastily picks it up and slips it in the desk drawer without STEPHEN seeing it, but in full view of the audience.)

SHRINK: Which you are continuing to do by coming uninvited and then not leaving.

STEPHEN Why don't you at least sit down.

SHRINK I shall remain standing until you depart!

STEPHEN: Listen to this. (*Lies back on the couch, clearing his throat before reciting*).

*The poet is a faker. He
Fakes it so completely,
He even fakes he's suffering
The pain he's really feeling.*

(Back to ordinary tone). It's from Pessoa's poems "Autopsychography." (*Laughs*). A shrink's poem... wouldn't you say? (*Pause*). But my current heteronym is doing rather well... living the simple life.

SHRINK: As monastic as your Portuguese obsession?

STEPHEN: I'm not attempting to become Pessoa. What interests me is the Pessoa phenomenon. (*Urgently, passionately*). To start from scratch... each time with a blank canvas! To turn into your own creation and continue living as that person. I don't know of anyone that has truly managed it in fiction. Let alone anyone who has employed such a method in order to enter the canon repeatedly as two, three... four different authors!

SHRINK: You're unstoppable, Stephen.

STEPHEN: Lustig

SHRINK: Pardon?

STEPHEN: My current heteronym is (*pronounces it slowly and emphatically*) "T. H. Lustig." But you can call me "T. H." Subtle homage to Dr. Theodore Hofmann.

SHRINK: I suppose I should feel flattered.

STEPHEN: But only initials... no indications of gender.

SHRINK: T. H. is a baffling case: a narcissist who sheds his identity.

STEPHEN: Why not? What are we, Doctor, but the constructs we build around ourselves? What happens when we shed them? What are we at our core? That is what I'm discovering... that's where the real work... real literature... gets done. (*Pause*). A new work by Stephen Marx would only be compared to what came before. To pull this off... to live T. H. Lustig... to create a text unrecognizable as the work of Stephen Marx, but standing and maybe soaring in its own right... that's a real accomplishment. I'm testing the ultimate limits of productive insecurity. Raising the ante... surpassing the last success... but as another person, not just another name!

SHRINK: And in the process destroying everyone around you?

STEPHEN: Whom? (*Pause*) My fans? The public loves a tragic death. The only one losing out is my former editor. He'll have to find himself some new talent.

SHRINK: You're spending too much time alone.

STEPHEN: Most of the time, I feel freer than I have in years. But you're right: there are days when I crave some company. Communing solely with my heteronyms... real as they seem... doesn't make up for.... (*Pause*)... what shall I call it... the frisson of truly human engagement? But I do compensate in other ways. (*Pause*). I've even taken up cooking. Last night I had red snapper... in a white wine sauce. With grilled asparagus. Little fat... not too many calories... I'm becoming a true Californian.

SHRINK: Wait till the novelty of eating alone wears off. Believe me... (*interrupting himself*) You live in California? Did you just fly in?

STEPHEN: Marx went to California, but Lustig now lives in upstate New York... three hours away from you... by car... and an old one at that. Initially, I went to California for my social security number and a cell phone. I like their food and the fact that Californians don't smoke... but that's about it. Earthquakes make me nervous. Besides, New York isn't just Manhattan... upstate there's some spectacular countryside and plenty of privacy. Impressed?

SHRINK: Tell me, T. H. Who else do you know who cooks and lives within a 3-hour commute of you?

STEPHEN: Don't bring in Miriam.

SHRINK: Don't you think she deserves some kind of consideration? You may have thought the relationship was over. But what about her? (*Stephen looks taken aback*). What if, after your disappearance, she discovered you'd been talking to a therapist... say through something like a... memo or a... check stub even, made out to me? (*Pause*). It's a thought, isn't it? And what if that caused her to suspect you had been depressed for some time? A period, which could... for all she knows... span much of your marriage, and which ended in your "suicide." Don't you think it possible that she might start to... blame herself? What if she began to think that your entire marriage had been based on... lies?

(The phone starts ringing, whereupon the Shrink snatches it up.)

SHRINK. (*Into phone, shocked*): Who? (*Pause*) Oh, I see. (*With hand on mouthpiece, to Stephen*). Just one moment. (*Pause*). Don't worry (*Shrink looks at things that are left behind*). There is no need for that. (*Pause*). Right now? Impossible. (*Pause*). I said "impossible." Hello... hello? Listen... (*Hangs up*).

STEPHEN (*Who had not been paying much attention suddenly in bantering tone*): A hot date. Maybe I should hide in a closet.

SHRINK: Wait. Let me explain..

(Sudden strong knocks on the door).

It's not... what you think....

STEPHEN (*Grabs his coat and hat and puts on his dark glasses*): You can tell me later. I don't want to meet any stranger who might have seen my picture somewhere.

(Walks quickly to the door and opens it)

MIRIAM (*dressed warmly in a long overcoat and scarf, steps in, shocked to see Stephen facing her*): Stephen!

STEPHEN (*Even more taken aback*): Miriam! What the hell are you doing here?

MIRIAM (*With increasing fury to Stephen*). Bastard! Bastard!... (*Turns to Shrink*) God damn bastards!

SHRINK: Let me explain.

STEPHEN and **MIRIAM:** Shut up!

STEPHEN: What are you doing here? Are you sleeping with him?

MIRIAM (*Furious*): That's the first thing you've got to say to me? You... who's supposed to be dead... who was hopping in and out of beds... and I'm not referring to our chaste connubial one... are asking me whether I'm sleeping with Theo?

STEPHEN: Oh, so it's Theo, is it... not Dr. Hofmann or even Theodore?

MIRIAM (*Outraged*): You goddamn lying asshole! You're asking me that? Huh? How about telling me instead what you and that lying Shrink have just been up to. Figuring out how to continue making a total fool out of me? Was that it?

SHRINK: Will you both just calm down!

MIRIAM (*Resuming control*): I'm perfectly calm...

STEPHEN Well I'm not. I want to hear from you (*points to MIRIAM*) what's been going on between you and the shrink.

SHRINK: Will you just listen—

(STEPHEN grabs SHRINK by the arm, twists it behind his back and propels him toward the door.)

STEPHEN: I was asking Miriam—not you.

(Pushes him out, slams the door and closes it with the dead bolt. Turns to Miriam)

MIRIAM: Don't tell me you're jealous?

STEPHEN: Have I ever been jealous with you?

MIRIAM: Have I ever given you a reason?

STEPHEN: I guess I have no right to be jealous now.

MIRIAM: Damn right!

STEPHEN *(Growls furiously)*: Did that hypocritical son of a bitch tell you I'd been seeing him?

MIRIAM: No... I figured this out all by my little old self.

STEPHEN: And how did you manage to do that?

MIRIAM: Remember... you were supposed to be dead. So why would your grieving widow not go through your papers?

STEPHEN *(Muttering)*: Damn! I should've thought of that. And then what? You looked him up?

MIRIAM: Wouldn't you have?

STEPHEN: And that's when he told you I was still alive?

MIRIAM: He told me nothing of the sort. Instead of telling me the truth, he wanted to lead me down some therapist's garden path.

STEPHEN *(Sobered)*: I see...

(An awkward silence. They speak at the same time.)

STEPHEN: Look I... **MIRIAM:** I suppose...

STEPHEN: You first.

MIRIAM: I was going to say I suppose there's good news and bad news in seeing you.

STEPHEN: I hate that cliché! But start with the good news.

MIRIAM: The good news is that you aren't really dead. (*Pause*). The bad news is that according to the newspapers, you are.

STEPHEN: I'm relieved you didn't put it the other way around.

MIRIAM: That's nasty... even for an undead person.

STEPHEN: Would you define "undead" for me?

MIRIAM: "In limbo," which can refer to a half dead as well as a half-living person. (*Pause*). The point is, whether you like it or not, you've left me in an impossible position. When the body of a presumed dead person is missing... five years must pass ... unless I place ads in the newspapers.

STEPHEN: And?

MIRIAM: I want to lead my own life and not remain in limbo for 5 years.

STEPHEN: I fail to see why my actions are stopping you from leading a normal life.

MIRIAM: Without your corpse... and I'm certainly not demanding that... at least not yet... I've got to wait five years before this in-limbo wife becomes a widow!

STEPHEN: What's keeping you from divorcing me?

MIRIAM (*Shudders*): To me, there's something cheap and brutal about announcing openly that I'm seeking a divorce from a supposedly dead husband... especially one whose wife now knows that he's not dead.

STEPHEN: I'm sure some lawyer can handle that.

MIRIAM: Not for the first time are you confusing legality with morality.

(A more conciliatory tone comes over them.)

STEPHEN: What are you demanding?

MIRIAM: Resolution... from limbo.

STEPHEN: Miriam... be reasonable.

MIRIAM: Reasonable? Right now I'm mad enough to serve your balls up on a bed of linguini.

STEPHEN: Another recipe for your book? *(Pause.)* Well, I can't send you my corpse. And I can't come back. *(A pause while Miriam digests this.)*

MIRIAM: So you're not planning on a resurrection?

STEPHEN: I wouldn't choose such a grandiose word. But... no. No return.

MIRIAM: I see. *(Pause).* And what's Theodore's role in all this?

(The telephone starts ringing)

You think it's him?

STEPHEN *(Goes to the phone and rips the cord from the wall socket, and throws the phone on the floor):* He was my lifeline to an earlier existence. At least until today.

MIRIAM: I'm hot. *(Unwraps her scarf and takes off her coat).*

STEPHEN: You look well Miriam... in fact, very well.

MIRIAM: You mean anger becomes me? What a left-handed compliment, coming from a dead husband!

STEPHEN: It was meant ambidextrously.

MIRIAM: I see you haven't lost your touch with words

(Long pause, with both looking away).

(Quietly and sadly) We lived together for eleven years.

STEPHEN: Eleven and a half years.

MIRIAM: Precise... as usual. But then you decided to die—

STEPHEN: I didn't die.

MIRIAM: You did.... Why did you pick him for a lifeline... rather than me?

STEPHEN: We were heading for a divorce.

MIRIAM: Meaning we irrevocably sever all further contact? Meaning that I wasn't even entitled to a warning... let alone explanation... for what you were about to do? Meaning that you could ruthlessly expose me to the pain of your supposed drowning and then... even worse... to the uncertainty of whether it might all be fake? Do you have any idea...?

STEPHEN: I had no choice.

MIRIAM: What a revolting thing to say. You informed your shrink... so why not your wife?

STEPHEN: If I had told you ahead of time, you'd either have spilled the beans—

MIRIAM: You think I would have done that?

STEPHEN: I couldn't take that risk. But even if you had sworn on a stack of cookbooks to keep that secret, think of the burden I would've left you by turning you into a perpetual accomplice.

MIRIAM: How considerate of you! But now that I've seen you in the flesh, you've made me... willy-nilly... your accomplice. (*Pause*). Tell me: why should I be willing to conspire with you? (*Accusingly*). You... who never gave a thought to my pain... thinking you had died?

STEPHEN: Miriam... I did think about it.

MIRIAM: For how long?

STEPHEN: Longer than you obviously give me credit for. Certainly long enough to realize that that sort of pain passes with time. Keeping a secret for life becomes more painful.

MIRIAM: So you went to a shrink?

STEPHEN It sounds like you lost no time in doing the same! Just what the hell is going on between you two anyway?

MIRIAM: That is none of your concern. (*Pause*). Where are you living now?

STEPHEN (*Mocking her*): That is none of your concern.

MIRIAM: I'm still your wife. Either I always know how to get hold of you... or I'll blow your secret sky-high. (*Pause*).

STEPHEN: California.

MIRIAM (*Derisive*): That limits it to about 150,000 square miles.

STEPHEN: San Francisco Bay area.

MIRIAM (*Reaches in her bag for notebook and pencil*): What's your phone number?

STEPHEN: 650-723-2783.

MIRIAM: What city?

STEPHEN: Palo Alto

MIRIAM (*Sarcastic*): Oh, of course! And right next door to your shrink in New York City! How do you visit your east Coast lifeline...over two thousand miles away from California?

STEPHEN (*Heavy sarcasm*): In case it has escaped you... provided you fly steerage and buy non-refundable tickets weeks in advance, commercial airlines these days are more than delighted to fly you cross-country for a pittance.

MIRIAM: And you do that weekly?

STEPHEN I've only done it once before: specifically last week.

MIRIAM And I'm supposed to believe that.

STEPHEN In that case, ask Theodore.

MIRIAM You don't trust him. Why should I?

STEPHEN: You're impossible to satisfy.

MIRIAM: Not true! There was a time...

STEPHEN: I'm talking about the present.

MIRIAM: So am I. But what are you doing in Palo Alto?

STEPHEN: Writing.

MIRIAM: You did that for a quarter of a century right here in Manhattan. What's different now that you've drowned?

(Long pause before he answers)

STEPHEN Let me start with one of those good news/bad news clichés.

MIRIAM My, my! But if you do that, I might as well quote my undead husband by saying "start with the good news."

STEPHEN The good news is that your sudden appearance prevented me from telling the Shrink a secret, because heaven only knows what he would have done with that information.

MIRIAM (*Shakes head in puzzlement*) In that case, what's the bad news?

STEPHEN That I am now taking the monumental risk of telling it to you.

MIRIAM And why are you risking that?

STEPHEN To explain to you why I had to kill your husband.

MIRIAM Are you about to shower me with tenderness?

STEPHEN I am about to tell you the truth.

MIRIAM This better be good.

STEPHEN I finished my fourteenth novel, "*Obsession*."

MIRIAM: Is that the title... or a fact?

STEPHEN: Both.

MIRIAM: Congratulations.

MIRIAM: Nobody has seen "*Obsession*" except for the publisher. It's been accepted! And in record time. (*Triumphantly*). I knew it would be. Territory I had never before thought I'd be able to handle.

MIRIAM (*Taken aback*): You've sent this to your publisher? But they think you are dead. Or am I the only person who thought so?

STEPHEN: Don't be silly, Miriam. Of course to a different publisher. No one must ever connect that new novel with Stephen Marx's oeuvre.

MIRIAM: And you've written all this in the last couple of months?

STEPHEN: Most of it was written before I drowned. I was well on my way before taking my final step. Not just deleting that novel from Stephen Marx's hard drive,

but deleting him from the world (*Beat*). Remember when we used to read Pessoa together?

MIRIAM How could I've forgotten that? We always tossed a coin to decide who'd read whom.

STEPHEN: You liked his non-sentimental shepherd, Alberto Caeiro, best.

MIRIAM: He was the only sensual and passionate of all his heteronyms. You chose the man who fled to Brazil... what was his name?

STEPHEN: Ricardo Reis... the doctor.

MIRIAM: A rather frail aesthete. Sex wasn't exactly his cup of tea.

STEPHEN: Miriam. I need to know whether I can pull it off. "Obsession" will be the test.

MIRIAM And the author's name?

STEPHEN: Lustig. T.H. Lustig.

MIRIAM Sounds German.

STEPHEN It is German. It means jovial... jolly... merry—

MIRIAM None of which applies to you.

STEPHEN Exactly! We are dealing with a heteronym... not me.

MIRIAM (*Musingly*): It would be quite a coup... we thought so then. Of course then, it was only a fantasy. But now? (*Pause, then in a warmer tone*). Maybe we could manage it.

STEPHEN: "We?"

MIRIAM: Consider it the royal we. Your accomplice could help you... if I were persuaded to continue in this role. Maybe I could even help induce you to return to your earlier life.

STEPHEN: Sorry, Miriam... but from now on it's all in the first person singular.

MIRIAM: I see.

(There is an awkward, painful pause as it sinks in.)

STEPHEN: No more lifelines.

MIRIAM (*Angry*): So you keep saying. (*Beat*). In that case... (*She reaches into her bag to produce a flash camera. She takes two or three flash photos of him*).

STEPHEN: Hey! What the hell is that for?

MIRIAM: (*Smiling cruelly*) A memento of my dead husband... in case he's foolish enough to think of changing his phone number without informing his accomplice. An edible food artist who's never without her digital camera. (*Malicious grin while quickly inspecting the image on the back of the digital camera*). You know (*lowers camera*) this gives me an idea for my next culinary masterpiece: a wild boar's head... lying on a bed of nettles. (*Pause*). Just the ticket in my present mood.

(*STEPHEN grabs his coat and hat and heads for the door*)

MIRIAM (*mockingly blows him a kiss*) Don't forget I'll be calling you... at least once a week!

END OF SCENE 7

Scene 8.

Shortly after STEPHEN exits, the door is opened cautiously with the SHRINK peering in. As he sees MIRIAM pacing slowly up and down, he enters and closes the door behind him. Miriam stops to face him.

SHRINK This was the first time in my life that a patient has ejected me from my own office.

MIRIAM (*Starting to put on her coat*): It's also likely to be the last time. I can't imagine Stephen ever wanting to see you again and I don't think you will see me ever again either.

SHRINK (*Pleading*): Miriam, there's nothing I want more than to take away any doubt and pain you may be feeling. But please don't keep challenging my professional ethics! That's all I've got to hold on to. How could I have told you that he had reappeared a few days after you first came to see me?

MIRIAM: Oh come on! Doesn't mango foreplay on the couch constitute a breach of ethics? After all we now both know that legally, I'm not yet a widow.

SHRINK: Operationally you are.

MIRIAM: You pedant! (*Pause*). Sucking on an operational widow's mango? Where was your goddamn superego then? Otherwise indisposed? Or had it popped out for a bit? Oh... don't tell me, I know: it had recently drowned in a freak boating accident!

SHRINK: Miriam, you're putting me in an impossible position.

MIRIAM (*Calmer*): Okay then... let's see whether I can put you into a less impossible position. Because things have changed just now in your office.

SHRINK: What happened?

MIRIAM (*Sarcastically*): Marital confidentiality prevents me from disclosing that.

SHRINK: I see. (*Pause*). So why you did you come?

MIRIAM It wasn't for the picnic basket and the mango forks. I came for some unfinished business. But I'm not here to talk about the women in those letters.

SHRINK: Good. At last you're moving forward.

MIRIAM: I'm just moving sideways... meaning I'll handle that later by myself. Right now I've got to focus on something much more important.

SHRINK (*Worried*): All right. But before you ask me anything, let me say one thing: I can't violate Stephen's right to privacy, but there are other ways I might be of help.

MIRIAM (*Relenting*): For instance?

SHRINK: By talking about you... we may discover something about Stephen that he may not have discussed with me.

MIRIAM: But then it would only amount to speculation.

SHRINK: Virtually all I do here (*waves hand around the room*) is speculation.

MIRIAM: All right. Let's speculate... but snappily.

SHRINK: When we had lunch in this office, we started to talk about your marriage.

MIRIAM: I think we've exhausted that subject.

SHRINK: But what kept you together so long?

MIRIAM (*Sighs, a pause*): I suppose... it was tact. Stephen could be a pompous ass, but he had tact. At least I thought so until I came across cemetery trysts and sestinas.

SHRINK (*Taken aback*): Tact? There you are! Right away, you gave me an answer I would never have expected. That brings me to a question I've wanted to ask you before. Why didn't you have kids?

MIRIAM: The usual reasons: no immediate urge... the two of us too busy working on Stephen's career... and then I got even busier building my own. (*Long pause.*)

SHRINK: Any regrets?

MIRIAM: You know how it is. Some women are born mothers. I'm not. Some grow into it. I didn't. And some have motherhood thrust upon them. (*Pause.*) Is this getting us anywhere?

SHRINK: Just keep going with this. Do you still have feelings for Stephen?

MIRIAM: The question is what kind of feelings? A few minutes ago, they ranged

from incipient homicide to something bordering almost on sympathy. (*Shakes her head*). Right now, I'm not so much hurt as deeply angry after what he's done to me for just a clever career move.

SHRINK: "Career move?"

MIRIAM: Remember Pessoa?

SHRINK: Yes...

MIRIAM: He wants to out-Pessoa Pessoa.

SHRINK: You may be right.

MIRIAM (*Stands up to face Shrink*): I am right. And that's why I'm here. Tell me the real answer to Stephen's remaining puzzle... something only you know.

(Shrink sighs, shakes his head)

Why did Stephen feel he needed a shrink?

SHRINK: You're now asking for a monumental violation of professional confidentiality.

MIRIAM: So you're not willing to make any exception, even though you admitted there are exceptions to everything?

(Very long tortured silence on the part of the SHRINK)

MIRIAM (*Goes for her coat and starts putting it on*): In that case, good night... Theodore.

(She exits. The Shrink stands there, bereft before the lights fade out.)

END OF SCENE 8

Scene 9

Seven months later, Sunday, late morning. The Sunday issue of the NEW YORK TIMES is spread all over the coffee table. The SHRINK (wearing coat and tie, similar to scene 3) is sitting on the sofa, impatiently browsing through the newspaper. The buzzer sounds. He gets up releases the door. A moment later MIRIAM enters, whereupon he jumps up to greet her.

SHRINK: Miriam! It's wonderful to see you... It's been months.

MIRIAM: Almost seven months. But as I wrote in my note, I felt like I owed you this visit. I've been doing a lot of ...searching...

STEPHEN And found what you were looking for?

MIRIAM I wasn't sure what I was looking for but I kept rummaging around on Stephen's computer hard-drive. I hit real pay dirt when I went through his computer trash. It's like reading the contents of someone's wastepaper basket... you learn more about a person from what he discards than what he retains.

SHRINK: Does what you found have anything to do with this? (*Points to newspaper on coffee table*).

MIRIAM (*Triumphantly*): How could you even ask? The cover of the TIMES Book Review! "Obsession," a posthumous novel by Stephen Marx. What did you think of the review?

SHRINK: It was such a rave, I went out and bought the book last night. I couldn't put it down. (*Points to book on table*). What a marvelous read! (*Pause*). Well?

MIRIAM (*Disingenuously, while sitting down*): Yes?

SHRINK: So, did the two of you get back together?

MIRIAM: And made up? You must be kidding. We stayed in touch... but it's more like a probation officer checking on the parolee. He volunteers nothing... unless I ask point blank. (*Pause*). But then... why should he? Volunteering information is not exactly a forte among the men I've met recently.

SHRINK: So why did you come today?

MIRIAM: Theo, what's the most powerful motive in life?

SHRINK: That depends.

MIRIAM: Stop stalling.

SHRINK: Some would say "love."

MIRIAM: An attractive answer... quite romantic... for the lucky few...

SHRINK: There are all kinds of love.

MIRIAM: Instead of love, what about revenge?

SHRINK: I'm sorry you feel that way.

MIRIAM: I thought twice about coming to see you. I didn't want you to see me at my worst. You can take that as a compliment, because it meant that I had planned to see you again... once I'd worked out my problems by myself. But not for therapy... at least not the garden variety you seem accustomed to dispense!

(Walks over to coffee table, rummages among the newspapers and picks up the Sunday Book Review).

How did this gushing review of *Obsession* end up on the front page of the Sunday *TIMES Book Review* section? *(Pause)*. Easy! I sent the manuscript to Stephen's agent and told him that I found it among my dead husband's papers. The publisher rushed it into print.

SHRINK: Good Lord. I wonder how Stephen will take it?

MIRIAM: I've left him with one choice. Stay dead forever... or return as Stephen Marx and claim credit for the novel I just released. But whatever choice he makes... it releases me from uncertainty.

SHRINK: You know... he may not yet have seen that review.

MIRIAM: Fat chance! The Sunday Book Review is on line by Friday... even you saw it early.

She starts looking around and suddenly notices a ceramic mug on his desk containing two mango forks.

Mango forks! *(Intrigued)*. Those aren't mine. How come you have some here?

SHRINK *(Embarrassed)*: I bought them.

MIRIAM: Where? They aren't easy to find.

SHRINK: On the web. E-bay.

MIRIAM I'm glad you're web-savvy even though you stick to conventional phones and answering machines. (*Warmer*): Do you still eat mangoes in your office?

SHRINK: I did... once... and never forgot it.

*Suddenly peremptory knocks on the door, which startle both of them.
SHRINK walks to the door and opens it. Stephen stands in the doorway
but does not enter.*

MIRIAM: So you've decided to face the music?

STEPHEN (*Enters room, heading toward coffee table, picks up various parts of the Sunday NEW YORK TIMES and throws them on the floor*): You bitch! How could you?

MIRIAM: You're dead! I exercised my function as your literary executor. After all, you never changed your will. Still leaving me to take care of the family crap? Well... I took care of it. (*Pushes the newspaper on the floor with her foot*).

STEPHEN (*Addressing Shrink*): Do you know what I did last Friday? (*Pause*). I committed hara-kiri. (*Beat*). The literary kind. Less bloody than the conventional disembowelment... but much more painful and longer lasting.

(SHRINK puts finger over his lips to caution Miriam from interrupting)

Did you know that a new publisher had accepted my novel?

MIRIAM: Of course! Out of your own mouth!

STEPHEN: I was talking to the shrink... not to you.

(Turns to SHRINK)

As my loving wife knew so well from her stupidly confiding husband, "*Obsession*" was supposed to come out in another couple of months. But two days ago, T. H. Lustig had to write his publisher and withdraw the manuscript... before being openly accused of plagiarism. And if that's not literary hara-kiri, what is? (*Mordant chuckle*). Actually an interesting legal point: can I... T. H. Lustig... be accused of plagiarism if I admit that I'm Stephen Marx... and that "*Obsession*" was submitted without my knowledge to my former publisher? Submitted by my wife, who knew that I was still alive? Can I force them to withdraw that book... have them pay me damages... and let Lustig's publisher release it?

MIRIAM: I am talking about resolution in my life... not legalistic quibbling.

SHRINK: Stephen, remember "productive insecurity?"

STEPHEN: That's what it was all about.

SHRINK: Don't you mean, "is" all about?

STEPHEN: Was all about.

SHRINK: Unless you misled me... or I misunderstood you completely... you planned on a new literary life.

STEPHEN: No, living a new literary life.

SHRINK: Okay, okay... "living" it. So the author of "*Obsession*" was your first heteronym. The *TIMES* called the novel a new literary Taj Mahal. What greater praise do you want?

STEPHEN: This Taj Mahal is being credited to Stephen Marx... not to me as T. H. Lustig! But what is much worse... in fact unforgivable ... are the graffiti on its walls. Graffiti that cannot be erased or deleted because they are in every copy of that novel. Who will recall and then destroy them?

SHRINK: Stephen... the name of Stephen Marx... instead of T. H. Lustig on the cover... is no graffiti.

STEPHEN (*Screams*): Fuck the cover! Fuck Stephen Marx! I'm talking about the graffiti in the book... graffiti that only I and the mutilator can see. The ultimate desecration! (*Pause*). Miriam!

MIRIAM (*Disingenuously*): Yes, Stephen.

STEPHEN: Why did you have to resort to this unforgivable... deeply humiliating act?

MIRIAM: First, when did you notice these so-called graffiti?

STEPHEN: After reading the review and then driving for an hour to the closest bookstore to buy my own book!

SHRINK: How come you only saw the book on Friday?

MIRIAM (*Annoyed*): Don't interrupt! What do you mean "driving for an hour to the closest bookstore?" You can find one within five minutes of any location in the San Francisco Bay Area.

STEPHEN: I don't live in California.

MIRIAM: Excuse me? I called you every week. Area code 650.

STEPHEN: You're talking about my cell phone, which for very good reasons happens to be registered in California. I'm talking about where I live.

MIRIAM: One more lie!

STEPHEN: At best a minor fib. I was blackmailed into agreeing not to change my phone number without notifying you... and I stuck to that bargain. I didn't see why I should risk your pounding on my door one morning. Since Stephen Marx's death, I've only done one thing: writing, writing... and writing... in other words, practicing productive insecurity. I don't go out to bookstores. I don't even read newspapers... on occasion I browse the web. (*Pause*). So why did you do it? (*Points to newspaper*).

MIRIAM: Revenge!

STEPHEN: For not informing you that I was still alive? I ask you again, how deeply... and for how long... could you grieve for a husband whom you were about to divorce?

SHRINK: How can you be so callous—?

MIRIAM (*Cuts him off, annoyed*): Would you please let me handle this! (*Addresses Stephen*). So you left me in limbo without another thought? Well I took your limbo... your self-designed limbo... from you. I wanted to remind you that Stephen Marx still exists. That an escape into the wonderland of heteronyms is a luxury I'm not prepared to grant you forever.

STEPHEN: Why?

MIRIAM: When I went through your papers... I came across deeply humiliating material.

STEPHEN: I've never humiliated you.

MIRIAM: Is that so? After your death I found out that you fucked... sorry... I meant carnally embraced... (*assumes heavy sarcasm while pointing with her palm toward the ceiling*) a female basketball player... at least that's how she appeared to me when I read that she was the tallest woman you had ever encountered... in a cemetery

STEPHEN (*Dismissive*): Come on! Doing it in a cemetery isn't a capital offence. We did it once... and it was her idea.

MIRIAM (*Sarcastic*): Oh... you poor victim of a seductive woman's guile!

(*Angrily*). And the other women? Natalie, Kyle, Meredith... and that crummy poet named Felicity.

STEPHEN: She wrote great sestinas!

MIRIAM: Are these just companions for your heteronymic escapades?

STEPHEN (*Vicious tone*): You think I am indulging in escapades? (*Pause*). Miriam, do you remember the line "*What would you use to commit suicide?*"

SHRINK: Stephen!

STEPHEN: Stop interrupting all the time!

MIRIAM: Yes.

SHRINK (*Wounded, to Miriam*): You think I'm interrupting all the time?

MIRIAM (*Dismissive*): Just most of the time. (*Points to Stephen*): I was responding to him.

STEPHEN: Well? Do you still remember the answer?

MIRIAM: Cyanide.

STEPHEN (*Exaggerated approval*): V e r y g o o d. (*Resumes ordinary tone, addressing Shrink*). It's from one of my novels. (*Turns back to Miriam*). You'd be surprised how easy it is to buy cyanide. Scandalously easy! So when I embarked on what you so lightly dismissed as my heteronymic escapade, I put in a supply.

MIRIAM: You did not!

STEPHEN: I shall refer you to the same impeccable source from which we both quoted. "*But you aren't serious?*" asked one character, whereupon the other replied: "*About wanting some cyanide? Dead serious. But not about committing suicide. I only want some... just in case.*"

SHRINK: You're playing an obscene game!

STEPHEN: You again? But what you call a "game" was my insurance. From the day I left New York, I decided that if I was incapable of slipping out of Stephen Marx's skin... if I couldn't create the heteronyms I aspired to live with... I needed a final option.

SHRINK: Stephen... Stephen! Listen! Listen carefully! This new book is a masterpiece.

STEPHEN: Of course it is! T. H. Lustig wrote it. (*Pause*). But Miriam murdered him... my first heteronym and my only companion. Even worse, she violated that book. Murder and rape... those are capital offences... in contrast to a single dalliance in a cemetery.

SHRINK (*Irritated*): What on earth are you talking about.

STEPHEN: She'll tell you... if you'd stop interrupting.

MIRIAM: I made some changes... here or there... before submitting the manuscript to his agent. Small changes... noticeable to the careful reader... of which there was only one.

STEPHEN (*Screams*): Small? You call those desecrations "small"?

MIRIAM: Except for the one the *TIMES* picked up... and since they had no way of knowing that these were a woman's graffiti... it's obvious that I hit a literary home run.

STEPHEN (*Still screaming*): Home run! How dare you?

MIRIAM (*Picks up the BOOK REVIEW and starts reading in fake precious tone*): "Among the many attention-drawing features of this remarkable masterpiece"—

STEPHEN (*Outraged*): Remarkable masterpiece? "Tainted masterpiece" is what it said in my issue of the *TIMES*!

MIRIAM (*Still bantering but mean*): Really? Let me see. (*Pretends she is checking the text and then pretends surprise*). Oh... why yes... it does say tainted.

SHRINK (*To Stephen*): You learned that review by heart?

STEPHEN: So would you... after staring at it for three days.

MIRIAM: Let's start over again. (*Resumes precious reading tone*). "Among the many attention-drawing features of this (*emphasizes next word while looking at STEPHEN*) tainted masterpiece, one needs emphasis: the recurring... exquisitely erotic... female visions—"

STEPHEN (*Outraged*): Where does it say "exquisitely?"

MIRIAM (*Grinning*): My editorial comment. (*Resumes precious reading tone*)... "so totally out of character for a male author... especially one like Stephen Marx... whose earlier signature weakness—"

STEPHEN: God damn you! It says "whose remarkable signature strength!

MIRIAM (*Enjoying herself*): Whatever. (*Resumes precious reading tone, but louder*). ... "was the virtual absence of any sex scenes. Had he left his sexual labyrinth unexplored... only to now lay it bare in such a spectacular orgasmic fashion?"

STEPHEN (*Loud, but ice-cold*): "Distasteful orgasmic fashion" is what he wrote! (*Cutting tone*): Fucking in my Taj Mahal... openly having orgasms there... that's what you were doing... and do so every time someone opens my book.

MIRIAM (*Interrupts, in faked sweet tone*): My dear husband... "erotic female visions" in your Taj Mahal do not represent "fucking"... as you so crudely put it.

STEPHEN: Is that so? Are you finished reading?

MIRIAM: Sure. Just because you chose not to explore your sexual labyrinth hasn't kept me from finally getting out of the barren one that you had me in for some years. As the *TIMES* confirmed, I am well on my way to emerging with my fantasies intact. All that's still missing is... consummation.

STEPHEN: And in the process permanently defacing Lustig's masterpiece? (*Points to TIMES*). Why didn't you continue reading? (*Picks up Book Review section and pounds it furiously as he recites*): "What could have been Marx's opus magnum has thus become just a superior addition to his oeuvre. Instead of a perfect diamond, we're left with an imperfect jewel. Are we to attribute all that detailed sexual fantasizing on the part of the heroine solely to political correctness? If so, then at least this reviewer considers it an unfortunate blemish in a book traversing such new literary territory that nobody would have associated it with Marx's. Bravo!... but not quite bravissimo!"

(*Proceeds to tear it up*).

(*To Shrink*): So it's not graffiti? (*To Miriam, viciously*): Tomorrow is my 50th birthday. I know how to celebrate it... by pushing you... who craves certainty... into the purgatory of perpetual uncertainty. Here... look at this. (*Takes a cellophane envelope filled with white solid out of his pocket and places it on the desk*). I brought some cyanide just to prove that I'm not bluffing.

MIRIAM: How dare you threaten me like that?

STEPHEN: If you think it's fake, feed it to your pet Dalmatian. As for me, you'll never find out what happened, because I've plenty more where this sample came from. (*Beat*) Here, catch the goddamn phone...

(Takes cell phone out of his pocket and tosses it to Miriam).

it's dead. I've had it with lifelines... for good!

(Starts heading for the door).

SHRINK: Wait! You can't do that to her!

STEPHEN: Says who? *(while rushing toward the door)*

MIRIAM: Wait! I'm not going to let you get away with that!

She rushes forward, but Stephen quickly steps out and slams the door in her face. Miriam follows, opens the door and runs after him).

(Frantic voice from the corridor) Wait Stephen! Wait!

The Shrink stands alone in his office, shaking his head while looking around. Looks at the New York Times strewn around the office carpet, picks it up, puts the Book Review section on his desk and throws the rest into the waste paper basket. Then stands erect, looking around the office, and eventually straightening some furniture or adjusting some other aspect of disorder. Suddenly, the telephone rings. He is about to pick it up, but then stops and listens to the answering machine.

MIRIAM'S VOICE: The bastard ran away! What now? *(Pause)* Theo? Theo! Are you listening to this message or have you left?

(Shrink is about to pick up the phone, but then changes his mind).

Listen, Theo. Please call me as soon as you get this message. *(She hangs up)*

After a moment Shrink picks up the phone and is about to dial. Then changes his mind. He activates the answering machine and speaks into it.

SHRINK *(Lifts phone and records new message):* "This is Dr. Hofmann. My office is closed until further notice."

Finally, he wipes his hands as a gesture of dismissal, heads for the door, opens it, turns out the light, and leaves.

END OF PLAY