

ACT I

Night. A room in the Algonquin Hotel in 1959. A bed. A couch. A desk and chair. A door to the hallway, right, and one to the bathroom, left. A closet door upstage. Whatever else is needed.

The walls are framed, but open, giving a sense of space, even vastness, surrounding the room.

(Fran, early forties, sits at the desk behind a portable typewriter, smoking a cigarette, perusing her notes, waiting. She checks her watch... sighs smokily... butts out her cigarette... then hears footsteps in the hall outside... and a key fumbling in the lock.)

FRAN

About time.

(More fumbling, as Fran takes out another cigarette. The door finally opens, and Preston Sturges enters. Sixty years old, with a wild mass of grey hair, he's paunchy, out of shape, the effects of booze and late nights showing on his face... but he's still bursting with energy.)

PRESTON

Sorry sorry sorry... I met an old actor buddy on the street. Dave somebody. We ducked into a Blarney Stone for a couple of beers.

(holds his guts)

Oooh! And I ate a quart of this lousy cole slaw.

(beat)

Did you do something new with your hair?

FRAN

No.

PRESTON

You look different.

FRAN

It's the beers.

PRESTON

You should be married.

FRAN

I was... twice.

PRESTON

You're just a beginner.
(paces around)
Do we have any mints?

FRAN

Mr. Sturges, I get paid whether you show up or not, but I'd prefer to be working.

PRESTON

So let's quit jawing and shoot this bear... Did anybody call?

FRAN

Nope.

PRESTON

Nobody?

FRAN

(beat)
Call your wife. I'll wait.

PRESTON

No no no no, it's too late.

FRAN

Not in Los Angeles--

PRESTON

The boys will be asleep.

FRAN

(checks watch)
It's only nine o'clock--

PRESTON

Long distance, Fran! Gotta save those pennies. So let's cut the gab and get to work!

FRAN

Fine.

PRESTON

Where were we?

FRAN

Chapter Six. You were just--

PRESTON

(belches painfully)
Pardon.

FRAN

Just--

PRESTON

You know what the trouble with this business is?

FRAN

Which business?

PRESTON

The being famous and writing your memoirs business.

FRAN

What?

PRESTON

It's embarrassing.

FRAN

Talking about yourself?

PRESTON

No no, I love talking about myself. It's the remembering... what a complete jackass you were... how young... and oblivious.

FRAN

Mr. Sturges, you're procrastinating again.

PRESTON

Fran, you're the best assistant I've had... since Bianca.

FRAN

(keen on this)

So tell me about her.

PRESTON

(changing the subject)

How many pages shall we do tonight?

FRAN

Didn't she come out to Hollywood with you--?

PRESTON

Eight! We'll set a new record.

FRAN

And live with you--?

PRESTON

Eight before breakfast! Eight By Eight--Hey, not a bad title!

FRAN

And--?

PRESTON

Eight Before Eggs! Even better!
(MORE)

PRESTON (Cont'd)
(holds his chest, in pain)

Umm!

FRAN

You all right?

PRESTON

Sure.

(burps)

So... where were we? Still in Paris?

FRAN

Your third play had just flopped on Broadway, and you were about to head...

(pointedly, pen ready)

West... with Bianca.

PRESTON

(snaps his fingers)

I just remembered the name of the headmaster at that private school in Lausanne.

FRAN

Mr. Sturges--

PRESTON

Aukenthaler! Doctor Max Aukenthaler! He was a funny little man, obsessed with sporting events--

FRAN

Mr. Sturges, you keep going *backwards*!

PRESTON

It's my favorite direction. Besides, my childhood was the juiciest part. The tragic tale of a red blooded American lad dragged across Europe by his wacky Bohemian mother in the thrall of the great and perpetually impoverished...

FRAN & PRESTON

Isadora Duncan...

PRESTON

Forced to don a Greek tunic, dance barefoot on the lawn at...

FRAN & PRESTON

Bayreuth..

PRESTON

And fidget and squirm through every insidious form of highbrow artistic torment ever devised by the...

FRAN & PRESTON

Depraved European mind...

(She sighs, tosses aside her pad and pen.)

PRESTON

Despised and ignored by a montage of daddies, whose romantic life span in Mater's affections barely exceeded that of the California fruit fly... My God, how I longed for a paper route, a fishing pole, and a dog named King.

FRAN

Oh, cut the crap! You met the rich and famous, went everywhere--and you had a *great* father.

PRESTON

True.

FRAN

You were the most successful fucking director in the business!

PRESTON

Language.

FRAN

You owned a nightclub, ran your own studio--in '47 you were the fourth highest paid guy in America!

PRESTON

Third highest paid--

FRAN

What the hell happened? What went wrong? That's what the public wants to know--that's what your publisher wants to know...

(hands on hips, in his face)

And that's what I want to *fucking know!*

PRESTON

(gazing at her for a long moment)

What a delicious shade of red.

FRAN

(turns away)

Sorry.

PRESTON

(sexily)

You remind me of Bianca... just a little...

FRAN

(pleased)

I do?

PRESTON

Same firey temperament... even your looks... not quite pretty...

FRAN
Gee, thanks...

PRESTON
But irresistibly sexy.

FRAN
I'm... forty-three years old.

PRESTON
Forty-three, an excellent year... Come here.

(He pulls her into his arms and kisses her.)

FRAN
(pulls away)
Mr. Sturges... you're married.

PRESTON
A mere... biblicality.
(pursues her)

FRAN
They warned me about this.

PRESTON
But you took the job anyway, didn't you? Come on, Francie,
let's...
(catches her, pulls her close)
Loosen the muse.

FRAN
It's loose enough... This is so... inappropriate.
(She kisses him passionately.)

PRESTON
Welcome to Hollywood.
(They merge in a kiss... A *knock* at the door.
They freeze.)

PRESTON (Cont'd)
(in a whisper)
Hold that thought.
(releases her, calls out)
Entrez!

(The door opens and Billy, a young bellhop,
enters.)

BILLY
Mr. Sturges?

Um-hmmm.
PRESTON

BILLY
This just came for you, sir.
(hands him a telegram)

PRESTON
(examines it)
From my pals at the I.R.S... Guess they need more blood from
the stone.
(hands off to Fran)
File this.

BILLY
Mr. Sturges, my name's Billy. I'm the new night guy.

PRESTON
Welcome aboard. I work nights myself.

BILLY
So I see... If you need anything, anything at all, just give
a holler.

PRESTON
Will do... You're not... an actor, are you?

BILLY
No, sir!

PRESTON
Thank God.
(tips him)

BILLY
And I love your pictures!

PRESTON
(very pleased)
Really? I thought all my fans were old... or French. You're
not French, are you?

BILLY
No, sir! Irish/German.
(turns to go)

PRESTON
So, William... which is your favorite?

BILLY
Huh?

PRESTON
Of my pictures.

BILLY
Oh... I like 'em all.

PRESTON
But which one... sticks to the pan?

BILLY
(floundering, clueless)
Oh... uhhhhh...

PRESTON
(disappointed)
Don't strain yourself.

BILLY
So... what are you... working on now?

PRESTON
My life story.

BILLY
Who's going to play you?

PRESTON
Barrymore.

BILLY
Isn't he dead?

PRESTON
That's why he's perfect for the part.

BILLY
I get it.
(turns to go)
Don't worry, Mr. Sturges. I'm gonna take good care of you.

PRESTON
We'll see.

BILLY
(starts out, stops)
Wait! The one where Jimmy Stewart dies, and the angel shows him how rotten things were without him. Was that yours?

PRESTON
(darkly)
No.

BILLY
Well... it should have been. It should have been!

(Billy exits.)

PRESTON

Capra... that organ grinder, but he's still out there working, the hack... and I'm dead broke.

(Expecting to take up where they left off, Francine moves in to be kissed, but he pushes her away.)

FRAN

Hey!

PRESTON

Sloshing through my memoirs... scared to death that I'll finish them... and nobody will give...

(breathing hard)

A rat's ass.

(Looking pale and unsteady, Preston loosens his collar.)

FRAN

(concerned)

Preston? Are you all right?

PRESTON

I'm fine!

(He suddenly convulses in pain.)

FRAN

Oh my God! Oh my God!... Lie down! Lie down!

(He flops on the bed, in excruciating pain.)

PRESTON

Son of a bitch!

FRAN

Oh my God!

PRESTON

Sandy... Sandy!

(Fran just stands there, unsure what to do.)

PRESTON (Cont'd)

OH!

FRAN

I'll... get help!

PRESTON

Sandy!

(She runs out the door... as Preston goes into spasms of pain, writhing on the bed.)

PRESTON (Cont'd)

"Everytime... a bell rings... an angel... gets his wings."
I'd blow... my brains out... before I wrote... a line like that! OH!

(He convulses and goes still... A moment or two passes. A woman's voice is heard outside the door.)

WOMAN'S VOICE

Preston... Preston!

PRESTON

(sits up)

Hmm! Forgot her key.

(belches, feels better)

WOMAN'S VOICE

Preston!

PRESTON

Hold your horses, Fran.

(goes to door, opens it)

Did you bring me a bromo?

(A short, plump, dark haired woman wearing a Greek tunic *dances* into the room, wafting a leafy branch in the air. She is Mary Desti, Preston's mother.)

PRESTON (Cont'd)

(beat)

Mother.

MARY

Hello, Darling.

PRESTON

What... are you doing here?

MARY

Dancing!

(twirls)

PRESTON

But you're...

MARY

Ethereal--yes, I know. Darling, Isadora's prepared a new ballet for the children. Rape of the Sabine Women...

PRESTON

Oh brother.

MARY

And everybody's flocking to see it!

PRESTON

Everybody?

MARY

Nietzche and Rodin and Mr. Lenin... even Plato and Aristophanes!

(holds out a small cloth bundle)

So put on your tunic and come along... You're dancing First Rapist!

PRESTON

(turning away, holding his guts)

Oooh, no no no...

MARY

Darling, don't be a pill. You know how Isadora gets.

PRESTON

Mother, you are just a nasty case of indigestion... and I'm busy.

MARY

(intrigued)

With what?

(He doesn't answer.)

MARY (Cont'd)

What is it? What are you up to?

PRESTON

(hesitates)

My... autobiography.

MARY

Oh, Preston! How thrilling!

(beat)

Give me a pencil.

PRESTON

"Auto" biography, Mother. That means written by me. Self authored. Get it?

MARY

Darling, no one is self authored. It's biologically impossible. If it weren't for me, you wouldn't exist...

PRESTON

Or I might have been born a Rockefeller...

MARY
Or a pineapple...

PRESTON
Or a fierce Zulu king!

MARY
Or one of those squiggly little once celled things. Did you include the episode where Isadora and I posed in the nude for that Hungarian photographer?

PRESTON
No!

MARY
Preston! What about the time I danced for Isadora, and she was so insanely jealous of my extraordinary natural talent that she forbade me to ever perform again?

PRESTON
What are you doing here, Mother?

MARY
I'm here... to fetch you.

PRESTON
Hmm!

MARY
Darling... this world is just an illusion... a fantasy... Past, present, and future are all as interchangeable... as husbands. It's just like one of your silly movies--the characters all running around, looking for meaning and love, and falling over things--

PRESTON
Darling, it's a hoot to see you, but I've got two hungry little boys and a young wife to feed, not to mention a teenage son, an ex-wife, a drunken half brother and his brood, and several departments of the Internal Revenue Service. I'm broke...

MARY
But--

PRESTON
And I've got to finish this damn book. Now scoot!

MARY
All right, Darling, have it your way... Just don't... skimp on me.

PRESTON
You're absolutely...

(MORE)

PRESTON (Cont'd)
(kisses her)
Unskimpable.

MARY
Did you remember my dying words?

PRESTON
"The tragedy is not to die... but never to have lived."
(Thrilled, she dances toward the door...)

PRESTON (Cont'd)
Mother?
(She stops, looks back.)

PRESTON (Cont'd)
How's Dad?

MARY
(beat)
Which one?

PRESTON
Never mind.

(Mary dances out the door.)

END OF SAMPLE