

SWEEPS
a full-length play

Synopsis

Panic is in the air at local TV stations when a sweeps month descends for fixing advertising rates. For newscasts, sweeps months mean emphasizing sensational stories at the expense of hard news, to the point of contriving ludicrous “exposes” for drawing bigger audiences. *Sweeps* is a full-length black comedy that deals with the impact of a sweeps period on a local TV news operation --- specifically, on its news director, weatherman, sportscaster, and three reporters. The only thing more ludicrous than the news they present is the homicidal web of their personal and professional relationships.

Sweeps calls for only one basic living room set, with different props identifying the various characters living there.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Nina	TV news reporter, 35
Lester	TV sportscaster, 40
Wendy	TV news reporter, 25
Lowenstein	TV news editor, 45
Buddy	TV weatherman, 40
Beulah	Buddy’s wife, 35
June	TV news reporter, 25

The stage is in darkness. Gradually, a spectral light illuminates the center of the stage. NINA stands in the light holding a microphone and speaking toward the audience as if addressing TV viewers.

NINA: This is Nina Norris. It's that time of year again, Ladies. You know the time I mean. *Any* time when you look into the mirror and don't like what stares back at you. You can't wait to run down to the salon to change that image in the mirror. But be careful! We have it from the highest police sources that some of those innocent looking manicurists, pedicurists, and hair dressers represent the latest recruitment center for terrorist organizations in the Tristate area. You may walk into those salons confident of becoming younger and more attractive. But when you walk out again, you may have lost more than a few wrinkles on your face and gray streaks in your hair. You may have become an unwitting accomplice to terror! Stay tuned.

NINA goes off stage. The spectral lights is soon filled by LESTER, who also wields a mike. He has a control booth hookup in his ear.

LESTER: Lester Lewis here. Hey, bang the drums, ring the bells! For once we have a positive sports story. No steroids, no multi-million-dollar-contracts, no assaults on lap dancers, no wives going after straying husbands with baseball bats and golf clubs and lacrosse sticks and pool cues. This one is from the heart. You all know Lance Madison from his exploits on the playing field. But the other day I had the opportunity to accompany Lance on what he calls his "humility visit." Run tape, guys.

There is a moment's hesitation as a video is presumably being run. As soon as LESTER goes off camera, he pulls a script out of his pocket and begins reading what he has written.

LESTER: The site of Lance's humility visit is the Children's Hospital for Enigmatic Diseases. That's a fancy way of describing illnesses that have defied research for causes and methods of treatment but still kill kids every day of the week. Your kids. My kids.....Excuse me. Not my kids.

He listens for a moment to off-camera instructions.

LESTER: All right, all right.....Your kids. My kids. Lance's first visit is to Jenny, a patient at the hospital for almost a year. When Jenny was admitted, she weighed 135 pounds, already a red flag for a seven-year-old. But now Jenny weighs in at 321 pounds despite a strict diet of Rice Krispies and vegetable soup and the best pharmaceuticals available. As he has done before, Lance can only promise a home run for Jenny to her face, then walk away shaking his head.....

He drops his script, shaking his head dolefully. What follows is a lot of slapstick bumbling to get back to the place where he left off reading.

LESTER: This is Wally. Wally does nothing but kick people. You say "Hello, Wally" and you get one in the shins. You say "Happy Birthday, Wally" and you'll be lucky to get kicked just in the shins. For Lance, though, it's just another challenge, like standing in the batter's box and trying to hit a 100-mile-an-hour fastball. There goes Wally.....and Lance just avoids that shot! He jumped right out of the way at the last second and down Wally goes!.....And now look. He bends over to pick Wally up. To reassure him. Wally listens. He wants to believe he'll get better.....But boom! There's another kick from Wally and Lance is down!

LESTER hastily re-pockets the script as the camera returns to him.

LESTER: As we were leaving the hospital this afternoon, Lance turned to me in agony. But he was still able to smile. "I want to do something concrete for these poor kids," he told me. Lance Madison --- a real champion. On and off the field.

LESTER exits. His spot in the light is soon filled by WENDY.

WENDY: This is Wendy Williams. If you haven't seen a ghost lately, you're in the minority. A new poll says that 93.3 percent of Tristate area residents believe in ghosts and that more than 60 percent of those people have actually seen one. And that takes in all walks of life and educational levels.....

WENDY hesitates, then gives the CUT signal to her invisible cameraman.

WENDY: That can't be right.

She listens to an inaudible response.

WENDY: I'm sorry, I don't believe it. Get Mike down here.

WENDY paces impatiently until LOWENSTEIN, wearing headphones, walks into the light with her. He is very familiar with her.

LOWENSTEIN: What's the problem, love?

WENDY: Spook City, that's the problem! 93.3 percent of the city says it's seen a ghost?

LOWENSTEIN: Not 93.3 percent of the city. Of the Tristate area! And that's the number that believes in ghosts, not actually saw one. The ones who saw one are only 60 percent of the 93.3 percent. What's that come to? *(to invisible crew)* Anybody got a calculator?

WENDY: I don't think that's the point, Mike. All these numbers are incredible. What proof do we have of any of this?

LOWENSTEIN: Do you honestly think I'd stick you out in front of a camera without double-checking the research?

WENDY: Well,.....

LOWENSTEIN: Sales and Research have been over these numbers for days. I didn't believe it, either, but there's no mistake.

WENDY: You know how Sales gets during sweeps periods.

LOWENSTEIN: Why I triple-checked everything. Don't worry about it. Go get a coffee. *(inspects her eyes)* And maybe a little less mascara.

WENDY: You're sure?

LOWENSTEIN: Absolutely. You don't want to look like a raccoon.

He kisses her on the head. She exits from the light. He sighs deeply to himself, then

addresses the invisible crew.

LOWENSTEIN: Where the hell are the pole dancers? Do I have to do everything around here myself? This is news, boys and girls. Now, now, and more now. You want to work on a reality show, go talk to the network.

The lights go down completely. There is a long moment of darkness on the stage. When the lights come up again, they do so weakly and are on a living room. LOWENSTEIN is sprawled out on the floor center stage.

LOWENSTEIN: Fire! Fire!

A telephone rings twice, then clicks into a machine. The machine delivers a recorded message.

LOWENSTEIN: (OS) This is Mike. This better be an emergency.

The machine clicks over to the caller.

NINA: (OS) It's Nina. Where are you? I've got to talk to you about the City Hall press conference. Forty minutes to airtime!

The machine clicks off. The lights come up fully to show LOWENSTEIN sprawled out on the floor after a stroke. The living room is that of a bachelor who barely uses it. The couch sits center stage. Newspapers laden a coffee table, all but burying a TV set there. The telephone sits on an end table. A small bar is stage right. A door stage right leads to the rest of the apartment. The entrance door is stage left.

LOWENSTEIN: Fire! Fire!

The phone rings again. The message comes on again.

LOWENSTEIN: (OS) This is Mike. This better be an emergency.

The machine clicks over to the caller.

BUDDY: (OS) It's Buddy. We're going to need a network clearance for Hurricane Gwen. She's turning into a heavyweight's fists. Station breaks, night crawlers ---

we're going to need everything. Call me!

The machine clicks off.

LOWENSTEIN: Swell. Just swell.

The phone rings again and clicks into the message machine.

LOWENSTEIN: (OS) This is Mike. This better be an emergency.

The machine clicks over to the caller.

LESTER: (OS) It's Lester. Why do I have to hang around the stadium for the wraparound? I'll freeze my ass off! Call me on my cell.

The machine clicks off. LOWENSTEIN makes a strenuous effort to push his inert body closer to the phone. He runs out of energy halfway there.

LOWENSTEIN: Swell. Just swell.

The phone rings again and switches over to the message machine.

LOWENSTEIN: (OS) This is Mike. This better be an emergency.

The machine clicks over to the caller.

WENDY: (OS) Hey, Mike! You have a stroke or something?

LOWENSTEIN: Thank Christ!

LOWENSTEIN suddenly sits up completely healthy and grabs the phone.

LOWENSTEIN: (in phone) At least one reporter with a nose for news! Get the hell over here right now!

Even before he hangs up, WENDY comes through the front door stage left. She carries a shoulder bag. He gets up as though nothing bothers him.

WENDY: You really did have a stroke?

LOWENSTEIN: I'm on the floor more than five hours, but nobody else even bothered to ask. All they're worried about is their goddamn deadlines.

WENDY: That's the way you trained them, Mike. Nothing's more important than the story they're working on.

LOWENSTEIN: Yeah, yeah. Bring a notebook?

WENDY: You want a secretary, put an ad in the paper.

LOWENSTEIN: C'mon, Wendy. This is an emergency.

She takes out a notebook and pen and hands them to him.

WENDY: Emerge.

LOWENSTEIN: You spent too much time in that journalism school.

WENDY: The Wasted Years!

LOWENSTEIN: What's that mean?

WENDY: Nothing, nothing.

He sits on the couch to make notes.

LOWENSTEIN: So what do we have for a top story?

She points to the TV set.

WENDY: What they have. That cop shooting.

LOWENSTEIN: Now we're taking our ideas from them?

WENDY: Then turn them off.

She starts to turn off the TV set, but he stays her hand.

LOWENSTEIN: Never mind that. Cop got shot?

WENDY: Cop did the shooting.

LOWENSTEIN: Yeah? And?

WENDY: What *and*?

LOWENSTEIN: You, too? Shoot a cop, everybody hates the shooter, feels bad for the cop's family, wants to see all the blue uniforms and white gloves outside the church. A cop doing the shooting, you get ambivalence. Everybody hates cowboy cops, but then again maybe the perp deserved it. But then again why are all these cops allowed to parade around with howitzers in their holsters? But then again let's not forget 99 percent of our men in blue are decent joes putting their lives on the

line every day. But-then-again, but-then-again, but-then-again. Too much then-again for a top story. Especially for a sweeps month.

WENDY: I'm pregnant, Mike.

LOWENSTEIN: Never knew you without an idea. Spit it out.

WENDY: Pregnant as in pregnant. You know --- a little thing turns into a big, bigger, and biggest thing? And all right here? Whoom!

LOWENSTEIN: How do you know?

WENDY: *(points to TV)* They told me! How do you think?

LOWENSTEIN: Wow!

WENDY: That said it for me, too. For about three seconds.

LOWENSTEIN: We don't panic. What're our options here?

WENDY: I've got a line on mine. Tell me yours.

LOWENSTEIN: Well, assuming you're not imagining.....

WENDY: Strike that option.

LOWENSTEIN: Okay. That seems to leave having it or not having it.

WENDY: Good.

LOWENSTEIN: And if you decide to have it, whether you want to have it by yourself or with me. Living-wise, I mean. Afterward.

WENDY: Very good.

LOWENSTEIN: Of course there'd be my feelings about it. Do I want to think of it as our love-child? Do I want to use it as an excuse to end our relationship? Do I want to go halfway --- maybe show up at the hospital with flowers after you've delivered and keep in touch with you over the years? Maybe send presents to the kid for 10 or 11 years, that kind of thing?

WENDY: And maybe if you tried that, I'd report you as a stalker.

LOWENSTEIN: Yeah, you'd have that option, too.

WENDY: I still haven't heard yours.

LOWENSTEIN: You're saying you're open to anything?

WENDY: I'd like to hear your choice before I tell you how I'm leaning.

LOWENSTEIN: There's got to be something besides this cop shooting.

LOWENSTEIN suddenly staggers and falls. The lights dim as he assumes his initial position on the floor. WENDY gets down on the floor with him.

WENDY: Cop shootings. Ghost sightings. Terrorist hair dressers. They're not enough to live on, Mike.

LOWENSTEIN: I warned you when I hired you: The job isn't about what they told you at school.

WENDY: I never had illusions about that.

LOWENSTEIN: You fool me sometimes.

WENDY: People who talk to ghosts?

LOWENSTEIN: All right, all right. If you want, I can talk to somebody at the network. Get you into national or international.

WENDY: I need more than national or international.

LOWENSTEIN: What's that?

WENDY: Nothing job-related.

LOWENSTEIN: Oh. You want a family?

WENDY: There's a thought!

LOWENSTEIN: You could always have a baby without the husband.

WENDY: Is that your answer?

LOWENSTEIN: I just want you to keep your options in mind.

WENDY: (*stands*) Right.

LOWENSTEIN: Where you going?

WENDY: To think about my options.

LOWENSTEIN: There's plenty of time for that.

WENDY: No, there isn't, Mike.

WENDY exits stage right.

LOWENSTEIN: Swell. Just swell.

LESTER hurries in from the front door.

LESTER: It's crazy me hanging around the stadium all night! I catch a cold, you'll have to fill in for me all week!

The lights come up full as LOWENSTEIN gets to his feet and returns to the couch and the notebook on the coffee table.

LOWENSTEIN: I'm trying to put things together here, Lester.

LESTER: Little late for that, isn't it?

His glance keeps wandering to the TV screen.

LOWENSTEIN: Get me the top story and the rest will follow.

LESTER: Why ask me? I just know sports.

LOWENSTEIN: I'm asking, Lester.

LESTER: Me?

LOWENSTEIN: Okay, okay. You think I've always taken you for granted. But don't you see the compliment in that? Why hover over somebody who's always had his shit together?

LESTER: You really think that, Mike?

LOWENSTEIN: I've said it a hundred times. You know what a sports guy like you is to me, Lester? A pro's pro. You're an Ed Murrow counting goals instead of the German bombers over London.

LESTER: I never thought of it that way.

LOWENSTEIN: Am I right or am I right?

LESTER: The beat can be anything. It's the reporting.

LOWENSTEIN: Exactly.

LESTER: You don't know what that means to me, coming from you.

LOWENSTEIN: Great. Now what about a top story?

LESTER: Okay. Let me think.

LOWENSTEIN: I'm on the clock here, Lester. And it's sweeps month.

LESTER: How about this? How about if I told you the owner of one of our favorite teams was a bagman for the Ukrainian mob?

LOWENSTEIN: Something outside sports.

LESTER: That's not sports, Mike.

LOWENSTEIN: He's the owner of what? Oh, you mean one of those professional athletic organizations that puts its logo on caps and T-shirts? The logo that would be right over the anchor's head as he's telling us all about this dirty money?

LESTER: You use the guy's picture!

LOWENSTEIN: And who the hell would know who he was?

LESTER: You tell people!

LOWENSTEIN: A suit is a suit. You need the logo.

LESTER: Then go with the logo!

LOWENSTEIN: Right. And as soon as you do, the viewer thinks, "Oh, if they're leading with a sports thing, nothing too important could've happened today." You know how that viewer feels, Lester? Trivialized!

LESTER: Maybe you underestimate people.

LOWENSTEIN: I'm talking top story here. When all the cooks making supper in the kitchen banish the microwave to the corner of their eye while they stare at us for two, maybe three seconds.

LESTER: That's all?

LOWENSTEIN: That tiny little movement up here. More than that the Evening News doesn't have a right to ask.

LESTER: There's got to be more than that.

LOWENSTEIN: It's enough for me.

LESTER: You must have wanted more. If not now, once upon a time.

He is distracted by something in particular on the TV.

LOWENSTEIN: What?

LESTER: You must have wanted more than that back when.

LOWENSTEIN: Sure. When I wanted Everything.

LESTER: There you are!

LOWENSTEIN: But then I wised up. Everything comes in different sizes, Lester. Just like Clorox. Small Everything. Medium Everything. Jumbo Everything. I guess I have Medium Everything.

LESTER: You've always got an answer, don't you?

LOWENSTEIN: It's my job.

LESTER: Know what I've always wanted, Mike? More than anything else?

LOWENSTEIN: What's that?

LESTER: To stump you.

LOWENSTEIN: That's nice.

LESTER: Nobody's ever admired you more than I have. You're the pro's pro. You set the standard, and we should all be striving to reach it. But some day I'd also like to say something you had no answer for.

LOWENSTEIN: We still need our top story here.

LESTER: Did you know I once killed somebody?

LOWENSTEIN throws down his pen, stands up, and goes over to the bar table to make himself a drink.

LOWENSTEIN: Your war experiences won't do the job.

LESTER: I wasn't in any war.

LOWENSTEIN: Want a drink?

LESTER: The person I killed was right here in the city.

LOWENSTEIN: Run him over?

LESTER: No.

LOWENSTEIN: A gun went off accidentally.

LESTER: No.

LOWENSTEIN: I know! When you were a kid, you and some buddy went swimming. He wanted to go back to the beach, but you challenged him to go another five minutes, and a riptide got him.

LESTER: No.

LOWENSTEIN returns to the couch with his drink.

LOWENSTEIN: So you accidentally threw him out of a roller coaster. You want a drink, it's right there.

LESTER: There was no accident. It was murder.

LOWENSTEIN: You don't say.

LESTER: I think I've done it! I've stumped you!

LOWENSTEIN: I haven't got time for bullshit, Lester.

LESTER: No bullshit. I've even told Sally about it.

LOWENSTEIN: Who's she?

LESTER: My wife! And I'm going to tell my kids someday, too. Before they learn about it some other way.

LOWENSTEIN: I'm starting to think you're serious.

LESTER: Make a great top story, wouldn't it? One of the station's own reporters a murderer?

LOWENSTEIN: I'd need a few more details before going that far.

LESTER: Sorry. You're not family.

LOWENSTEIN: You're going to leave me hanging like this?

LESTER: I told you: I just wanted to see something you didn't have a glib answer for.

LOWENSTEIN: Oh, great! And meanwhile there's a human life out there that's no longer human because of you! He.....He?

LESTER: I'm trying to get through to you, Mike. On a personal level.

LOWENSTEIN: We don't do Personal News, Lester, we do Local News. Now who did you kill?

LESTER: Nobody you'd know.

LOWENSTEIN: Introduce us.

LESTER: I feel sorry for you, Mike. You have no room in you for people.

LOWENSTEIN: Maybe for one more. What was his name?

LESTER: Even when that sad day comes when I have to sit down with my kids and tell them what I did, I'll be better off than you.

LOWENSTEIN: Unless one of them wants to be a cop.

LESTER: Goodbye, Mike.

LOWENSTEIN: If you ever want to get out of sports, Lester, you're blowing your shot!

LESTER: Why should I want to get out of sports? It's taught me how to recognize a loser when I see one.

LESTER exits stage left. LOWENSTEIN starts after him, but then he staggers. As

the lights dim, he collapses on the floor in his stroke position.

LOWENSTEIN: Swell. Just swell.

WENDY enters stage right striking matches and tossing them on the floor.

WENDY: Really think he murdered somebody?

LOWENSTEIN: He wouldn't know how to make it up.

WENDY: So find out who.

LOWENSTEIN: With what budget? What the hell you doing with those matches?

WENDY: When all else fails.....

LOWENSTEIN: Of course! A fire!

The lights come up full as he stands, once again completely healthy.

LOWENSTEIN: A-Bomb mushrooms billowing up out of factories! From one split-level to the next, orange flames spouting up from Hell! A Mississippi of hose water running down the gutters and flooding the sewers! Van Gogh couldn't do it better!

She stops lighting matches and tosses the rest of the book on the floor.

WENDY: Well, you better settle for Vincent tonight because you still don't have your top story.

LOWENSTEIN: Like I need to be reminded.

He goes over to his notebook on the couch. She picks up one of the discarded matches from the floor.

WENDY: What do you remember from this one?

LOWENSTEIN: Nothing.

WENDY: C'mon. Try.

LOWENSTEIN: We've got sweeps, Wendy. I haven't got time.

WENDY: That's why you should try to remember. Lowenstein's Greatest Hits. What worked once could work again.

LOWENSTEIN: Short circuit in an office building?

WENDY: A tenement. Fourteen people burned to death.

LOWENSTEIN: You sure?

WENDY: I covered it. And the worst part was when the EMS was carrying out one of the corpses and they hadn't quite zippered up the body bag.

LOWENSTEIN: Saw how charred the body was?

WENDY: No, I just saw a space under the zipper. A black space. It might've been part of the victim's body or just exactly that --- a space between the body and the body bag that looked black. They'd become the same thing. How dead is that?

LOWENSTEIN: And you wonder why fires make the best top stories?

WENDY: I don't think that was my point.....

LOWENSTEIN: And you put your finger on something else --- why ghost stories always go over big. When you or the guy next to you isn't sure about what you're seeing, you're part of the biggest club on earth. What number did Sales say about believing in ghosts? 93.3 percent? All those doubts about what your eyes are telling you! TV news at its most basic!

She clutches at her stomach in pain.

LOWENSTEIN: Okay. My option is let's have the baby and get married.

WENDY: Why?

LOWENSTEIN: I probably could use a little humanizing.

WENDY: But you'd want it for itself too, right?

LOWENSTEIN: That goes without saying.

WENDY: No, it doesn't! Say it!

LOWENSTEIN: I want him or her for itself, too.

WENDY: Because you had it with me.

LOWENSTEIN: Because I had it with you.

WENDY: That's good, Mike.

LOWENSTEIN: What's your answer?

WENDY: Give me a minute.

She exits stage right.

LOWENSTEIN: I want to know your answer when you come out!

WENDY: Before that! I promise!

He gets up from the couch and starts picking up the matches she has burned. He studies them in his hand.

LOWENSTEIN: She's right. I should remember them. Lives were lost. People were scarred forever. (*concentrates on one match*) That hamburger place. Has to

be. Dozens of people trapped inside when the stickup guys doused it with gasoline. Just dumb luck one of them had a video camera. But, hey, you don't look a gift horse in the mouth. *(concentrates on another match)* The mattress factory when the whole block burned down. I'd bet on it. The fabulous zooming helicopter shots through the smoke clouds! Like those *Star Wars* spaceships zeroing down on the target! Zap-zap-zap!

A toilet flushes offstage. He looks toward the sound in horror.

LOWENSTEIN: No, Wendy! No!

The lights dim as he collapses again to stroke position on the floor.

LOWENSTEIN: Swell. Just swell.

The phone rings and clicks over to the machine.

LOWENSTEIN: *(OS)* This is Mike. This better be an emergency.

The machine clicks over to the caller.

NINA: *(OS)* It's Nina again. We're down to a half-hour and I still have to talk to you about the press conference.

LOWENSTEIN: Screw your press conference.

NINA: *(OS)* Uh, oh. Mikey having another psychodrama with Wendy?

LOWENSTEIN: I need to talk to somebody.

NINA: *(OS)* You mean you want to get your self-pity laid.

LOWENSTEIN: What's wrong with that?

NINA: *(OS)* Would you have to be there, too?

LOWENSTEIN: I never am, according to some people.

NINA: *(OS)* Let's keep it that way.

The receiver is clicked down. A moment later NINA comes through the front door and begins dragging LOWENSTEIN over to the couch. By the time she gets him there, he is completely healthy again and the lights have returned full force. She kisses him.

LOWENSTEIN: What do you mean "let's keep it that way?"

NINA: Your self-pity's your most attractive quality.

LOWENSTEIN: Like hell!

NINA: You only spoil it by bringing in other vibes.

She lifts his hand to her breasts, but he pulls it away again.

LOWENSTEIN: I need a top story.

NINA: And what am I trying to give you?

LOWENSTEIN: I guess there's always Buddy's hurricane.

NINA: Oh, for Christ sake, Lowenstein!

LOWENSTEIN: Why not?

NINA: Palm trees bending? Waves hitting the rocks? John and Ethel Dingle with their big fat asses boarding up their windows?

LOWENSTEIN: You have something better?

NINA: Maybe.

LOWENSTEIN: The mayor put his foot in his mouth again?

NINA: He's got so many shoes in there already he could open a Florsheim's.

LOWENSTEIN: Then what?

NINA: You.

LOWENSTEIN: You here to be helpful or not, Nina?

NINA: I mean it. You've had this stroke. You're a name. Vaguely.

LOWENSTEIN: Vaguely.

NINA: A bigger one when I get out there and tell everybody how important you were to the profession and how we'll never fill your void.

LOWENSTEIN: Is that what you'd say?

NINA: Little Wendy isn't the only one who can keep a straight face in front of the camera.

LOWENSTEIN: I never compared you to her.

NINA: Jesus, no! I haven't even been on the radar screen!

LOWENSTEIN: Not now, okay? I'm running out of time here.

NINA: And I'm serious about my idea.

LOWENSTEIN: Thanks, but it's too local.

NINA: Earth to Lowenstein! That's what we do --- local news!

LOWENSTEIN: Not that local.

NINA: Local is local!

LOWENSTEIN: How long you on the job? Local as in Local Somewhere. We don't live in Italy, but we can show the lava coming down Mount Etna because that's local for some Italians. *Capisc*?

NINA: And you're local here!

LOWENSTEIN: Don't kid a kidder. I'm croaking, Nina. I don't have to fool myself anymore. I'm not local anywhere. Mike Lowenstein isn't here or in any of the markets of our sister stations. He's nowhere. You of all people should know that.

NINA: It seemed like a good idea.

He kisses her on the cheek.

LOWENSTEIN: And I appreciate the thought. But I'll never be lava coming down from Etna and rolling over all those huts.

NINA: There were no huts, Mike.

LOWENSTEIN: Shacks. Shanties. Whatever they were. Just creeping down over the mountain like.....

NINA: Yeah, okay.

LOWENSTEIN: I'm not that important, Nina. Admit it.

NINA: I admit it.

LOWENSTEIN: I'm not saying you couldn't argue the opposite.....

NINA: Do you want to do it or not?

LOWENSTEIN: I told you: I'm not a top story. Our ratings are bad enough without getting into ego trips.

NINA: Your ego wouldn't be around.

LOWENSTEIN: No!

NINA: *(stands)* Your call.

LOWENSTEIN: Where you going?

NINA: I don't know. Try to fill your void somewhere else, I guess.

LOWENSTEIN: I'm grateful for the thought, Nina.

NINA flounces a leg at him and exits stage left. The lights begin to flicker.

LOWENSTEIN: No, not now, not now! I'm thinking!

The lights stop flickering. WENDY enters stage right as he goes through the newspapers on the coffee table.

LOWENSTEIN: You had no right dumping our family in the toilet.

WENDY: It seemed like the best option.

LOWENSTEIN: For you!

WENDY: Who else was involved?

He stops going through the newspapers.

LOWENSTEIN: Nina says I should be the top story.

WENDY: Right to the end --- telling you what you want to hear.

LOWENSTEIN: She meant it!

WENDY: I'm depressed, Mike.

LOWENSTEIN: Think I'm having a good time here?

WENDY: Maybe I should kill myself. What do you think?

LOWENSTEIN: Calm down. Just stay calm.

WENDY: It'd be a better top story than you. You're just a name on the crawl every Friday. People know my face.

LOWENSTEIN: Don't go melodramatic on me.

WENDY: You, they'd say, "Mmm, he went out a little young, didn't he?" Me, they'd say, "Oh, what a tragedy! And she always looked so happy asking people on the street what they thought of drunk teenagers plowing their car into the river."

LOWENSTEIN: You're just upset over the baby.

WENDY: That's good, Mike.

LOWENSTEIN: You're not thinking clearly.

WENDY: I could give you your top story. Your very last one.

LOWENSTEIN: I couldn't ask you to do that.

WENDY: Sure you could. Ask.

LOWENSTEIN: What kind of a prick do you think I am?

WENDY: How many species are there?

LOWENSTEIN: You will not kill yourself just so I can have a top story. Am I making myself clear?

WENDY: Ask.

LOWENSTEIN: Wendy. Please.

WENDY: I mean, if my wrists were already cut and my stomach was already filled with pills.....

LOWENSTEIN: I don't think that's the case.

The phone rings. WENDY starts off stage right.

LOWENSTEIN: We're not through agonizing over this yet!

WENDY exits stage right. The phone clicks over to the machine.

LOWENSTEIN: (OS) This is Mike. This better be an emergency.

The machine clicks over to the caller.

BUDDY: (OS) It's Buddy! Gwen's come ashore in Puerto Rico! Telephone poles are buckling all over the island! You got to see it, Mike! The power lines are snapping over the highways like crazed snakes!

LOWENSTEIN: Shut up, Buddy.

The machine clicks off. BUDDY comes charging in the front door.

BUDDY: It's a natural for the top story!

LOWENSTEIN: Wind and water.

BUDDY: But sparks, too! Sparks all over the place!

LOWENSTEIN: And how long will they last in all the wind and water?

BUDDY: You're missing it, Mike. Gwen's already making the last two storms look like showers.

LOWENSTEIN: You say that every hurricane.

BUDDY: How many Puerto Ricans do we have in the city pulling out their hair because they can't get through to relatives sitting up on the top of trees?

LOWENSTEIN: Cell phones work in trees, too.

BUDDY: And what about the guy who had this eerie premonition getting on his plane to San Juan and decided at the last minute to take the next flight? There's got to be somebody like him around. Put some people on it.

LOWENSTEIN: I'm thinking about looking into myself right now, Buddy.

BUDDY: What?

LOWENSTEIN: The real me. Nina says that should be our top story.

BUDDY: Who cares about that?.....I mean, in a news sense.

LOWENSTEIN: Yeah, that's what I told her.

BUDDY: You can't expect the big picture from Nina.

LOWENSTEIN: Of course not. But the fact is, she got me thinking. I've always had hidden mes. I bet you didn't know that.

BUDDY: No.

LOWENSTEIN: I'm not saying that makes me unique. I'm sure you have hidden yous, too.

BUDDY: I don't think so.

LOWENSTEIN: Know what I always wanted to be, Buddy?

BUDDY: We're getting down to the wire here, boss.

LOWENSTEIN: Guess.

BUDDY: I don't know. A weatherman like me?

LOWENSTEIN: A dancer! I wanted to be a tap dancer!

BUDDY: Great.

LOWENSTEIN: What did you ever want to be besides a weatherman?

BUDDY: Nothing.

LOWENSTEIN: I mean when you were a kid.

BUDDY: Nothing.

LOWENSTEIN: There's more to life than weather, Buddy!

BUDDY: Try to do without it.

LOWENSTEIN: Well, I wanted to be a dancer. Gregory Hines. Gene Kelly.

Remember Gene Kelly and the cartoon mouse?

LOWENSTEIN breaks into a few tap steps.

BUDDY: We need a decision here, Mike.

LOWENSTEIN: I'm telling you nice things about me.

BUDDY: Maybe you would've been shitty at dancing.

LOWENSTEIN: That's not the point!

BUDDY: Like hell it isn't! Who's always been the first one to come up to me after a newscast? "Hey, Buddy, it's wonderful you're telling the audience the Tristate area is going to have a blizzard, but why are you pointing to Nova Scotia on your map while you're telling them?" Don't tell me being competent isn't the point. I've learned from the best.

LOWENSTEIN: The real me, Buddy. Not the news director.

BUDDY: The real you, my friend, is a pro who expects to work with pros. So let's have a decision on Gwen.

LOWENSTEIN: Screw your hurricane. There were a dozen of them last year, there'll be a dozen more next year. There's only one Mike Lowenstein.

NINA enters stage left practically in a swoon.

BUDDY: *(to NINA)* You hear this?

NINA: I'm already a puddle!

BUDDY rushes past NINA to exit stage left.

NINA: I just love it when you're feeling sorry for yourself!

She charges him and drives him onto the couch, covering him with kisses.

LOWENSTEIN: I'm serious!

NINA: I know, I know!

LOWENSTEIN: There's only one Mike Lowenstein!

NINA: And what god do we have to thank for that?

LOWENSTEIN: You make sure you tell everybody, too!

NINA: There's only one Mike Lowenstein!

LOWENSTEIN: Go ahead, go ahead.

She continues kissing him.

NINA: And he'll never be missed! They're already lined up to take his place! And who's going to notice any change?

LOWENSTEIN: That's right.

NINA: I'm telling you, Mikey: It'll be the exclusive of exclusives.

He wards off her embraces.

LOWENSTEIN: Hold on. There's something missing.

NINA: And that's what's so great!

LOWENSTEIN: Something important.

She goes at him again. He repels her again.

LOWENSTEIN: Could we be a little professional for a second? Could we just focus here?

She assumes a mocking pose of concentrating.

NINA: Focus, focus, focus.

LOWENSTEIN: Just dying isn't enough. Everybody dies.

NINA: But you still like my idea.

LOWENSTEIN: Focus.

NINA: Focus, focus.

The two of them concentrate in silence for a moment --- he seriously, she in the same ironic way as previously.

LOWENSTEIN: What could you possibly say?

NINA: C'mon. You know I'm a pro. If Adolf Hitler had a stroke, I'd find something to say about him.

LOWENSTEIN: There'd be no problem if it was Hitler. He ran countries, continents, concentration camps. He'd have to be the top story. I'm talking about me right now.

NINA: Tougher than Hitler?

LOWENSTEIN: Tougher than Hitler.

NINA: Focus, focus.

He watches her a moment, then grunts and polishes off his drink.

LOWENSTEIN: What I figured.

He gets up and goes to the bar for another drink. She watches him go, then rolls up one of the newspapers from the table into a microphone, and stands to practice some TV lines.

NINA: Good Evening. Grave news today.

LOWENSTEIN: It's not about a hike in the electric bill!

NINA: Grave news today for the Evening News staff.

LOWENSTEIN: Too inside.

WENDY enters stage right, holding her hand in front of her as though speaking into a microphone. Her bag hangs over her shoulder.

WENDY: Grave news today for the nation.

LOWENSTEIN: Really think Montana gives a shit about Mike Lowenstein?

BUDDY enters stage left.

BUDDY: But New York doesn't know that! If New York thinks Montana's grieving, it'll grieve, too.

LOWENSTEIN: And when the tears don't come in either place, what then, Buddy? We tell them to keep an eye out for Mike Lowenstein dying again next week?

BUDDY: Or somebody like you.

LESTER enters stage left.

LESTER: Like it or not, Mike, there's always next year.

LOWENSTEIN: But a next year without Mike Lowenstein!

LESTER/NINA/WENDY/BUDDY: *(chorus)* Right!

LOWENSTEIN: And none of you can change that.

LESTER/NINA/WENDY/BUDDY: *(chorus)* Right!

LOWENSTEIN takes in the four of them. The phone rings and clicks into the message machine.

LOWENSTEIN: *(OS)* This is Mike. This better be an emergency.

The machine clicks over to the caller, but there is nothing but a dial tone. LOWENSTEIN finally clicks it off.

LOWENSTEIN: That's it, then.

LESTER/NINA/WENDY/BUDDY: *(chorus)* Right!

LOWENSTEIN: I think I should get a last request. From each of you. I think I'm entitled to that.

BUDDY: Fine. But hurry. I've got Gwen blowing in.

LOWENSTEIN: Seriously, Buddy. Even for a minute when you were 12 years old, what did you want to be besides a weatherman?

BUDDY: Maybe there was one thing.

LOWENSTEIN: What?

BUDDY: You'll laugh.

LOWENSTEIN: I swear I won't.

BUDDY: Well.....I wanted to be the weather.

LOWENSTEIN: The weather.

BUDDY: I wanted to be hot spells, cold snaps, turbulence, calm, blizzards, torrential rains, fog, just good old humidity. I wanted to be every kind of front you could imagine. I wanted to be the air everyone breathed. Fantasies you have when you're a kid, I guess.

LOWENSTEIN: I guess.

BUDDY: I didn't get that far, Mike, but I'm grateful to you for getting me as close to it as I had any right to expect.

BUDDY exits stage left.

NINA: Poor puppy.

LOWENSTEIN: Tell me what you'd say.

NINA: (*nods to WENDY*) Only what you'd want to hear, according to her.
LOWENSTEIN: Tell me.

NINA rolls up another newspaper as a microphone and takes the position of a reporter addressing the camera.

NINA: Grave news for Mike Lowenstein. He died thinking of the top story for you and me. He was a pro to the end.

LOWENSTEIN: But what was it??!!

NINA: I don't know. What do you want to hear?

NINA exits stage left, giving him another leg kick.

LOWENSTEIN: She meant you, Lester. Who did you kill?

LESTER: You're not family. I can't tell you.

LOWENSTEIN: You know you want to. You know you will. It's in your DNA. You tell me the scores, you tell me who you killed. C'mon.

LESTER thinks about it a moment, then goes over to the telephone and puts it in his pocket.

LOWENSTEIN: What're you doing?

LESTER: Still want to know? Just for you? Not for the Evening News?

LOWENSTEIN: I have a responsibility.....

LESTER: Just for you, Mike. Yes or no?

WENDY nods to LOWENSTEIN.

LOWENSTEIN: Yeah, yeah. Just for me.

LESTER goes over and whispers into Lowenstein's ear.

LOWENSTEIN: Oh, Jesus!

LESTER: Goodbye, Mike.

LESTER exits stage left. LOWENSTEIN starts after him, then begins staggering in his final throes as the lights flicker more insistently.

LOWENSTEIN: He forgot about you. Give me my notebook. I'll scribble out the

lead.

He falls to the floor. WENDY goes over to the notebook on the coffee table, closes it, and puts it in her bag.

WENDY: It's my notebook.

LOWENSTEIN: Just a few lines for an opening. You can adlib from there. I've always counted on you for that.

WENDY: Know what I always wanted to do, Mike?

LOWENSTEIN: Later. The top story first.

WENDY: You don't care?

LOWENSTEIN: Face it, Wendy. I've lost you. I know it's all my fault. I wasn't there when you needed me most. Not just the baby. Everything. I didn't even take your depression seriously. But look at the facts, will you? We want different things. I've got my job. You've got.....whatever it is you've got.

WENDY: I always wanted to be a dancer.

LOWENSTEIN: What?

WENDY: A dancer!

She does a soft shoe tap.

WENDY: A dancer! Like all those long-legged women in the old musicals! Ann Miller, I think she was my favorite.

LOWENSTEIN: No!

She dances a little more, then stops.

WENDY: But maybe you're right. You would've never understood that.

She dances off stage right.

LOWENSTEIN: No! No!

WENDY exits dancing. LOWENSTEIN falls back to his stroke position on the floor. The lights dim as LESTER enters stage left. LESTER returns the phone to the coffee table.

LESTER: I can't take this away from you. It'd be cruel.

LOWENSTEIN: Lester.....

LESTER: I don't want you thinking I'm cruel. Even if that means everybody finds out, I'd rather not be cruel like you.

LOWENSTEIN: Come here, Lester.

LESTER goes down to the prone LOWENSTEIN. LOWENSTEIN points to the book of matches on the floor.

LOWENSTEIN: Give them to me.

LESTER: You don't give up, do you?

LOWENSTEIN: Give them here.

LESTER: It's too late, Mike. *(looks at watch)* We're practically on the air.

LOWENSTEIN: And tomorrow? What about the top story tomorrow? We'll still be in the sweeps, won't we?

LESTER: Well.....

LOWENSTEIN: You know it's true. I can't just lay here forever. This way we kill two birds with one stone.

LESTER: You're asking a lot, Mike.

LOWENSTEIN: Nobody would ever have to know.

LESTER: I'd know. And I'd have to tell my family.

LOWENSTEIN: One day. And until then you could go around high on the fact that you killed somebody. A man's man! An athlete's athlete!

LESTER: A pro's pro.

LOWENSTEIN: Exactly! Come on. Give them here.

LESTER gets the book of matches from the floor and puts them on LOWENSTEIN's chest.

LOWENSTEIN: Now get out of here.

LESTER: Mike.....

LOWENSTEIN: Go! Go! They're waiting for the scores!

LESTER scurries out stage left. LOWENSTEIN struggles to light a match.

LOWENSTEIN: Swell. Just swell.

The lights go down. A match is lighted in the darkness.

LOWENSTEIN: Fire! Fire!

The match goes out. There is a long moment of total darkness. Then a single light comes up on the stage, as earlier in the initial scene. NINA stands in the light. She has no microphone as she addresses fellow employees.

NINA: I didn't want the job this way, and I only hope you all know that. But last night --- and I know some of you will laugh --- Mike appeared to me. What was left of him, anyway. And he said, "Nina, we're still in a sweeps month, and you have to take over the helm of the ship. At least until the end of the month." I hope some of you can appreciate that seeing him there as just charred remains was one of the most daunting experiences of my life. One day he's the gold standard for your career, the next day..... Well, he isn't that anymore. But it wasn't just a daunting experience. It was also empowering. Before he appeared, I had been as confused and miserable as the rest of you. What do we do without Mike Lowenstein? How could such a tragic, horrible thing have happened to the person who defined professionalism for all of us? What did his gory end mean for us? Was it worth getting up tomorrow morning and --- at best! --- running out the groundball? I know. I can hear it in your minds even now. But once Mike --- our Mike --- appeared to me last night, I had no more doubts. And I don't have them with you here today. Let's be clear --- I'm not leaving at the end of the month! I intend making this promotion more than temporary and more than a small success. So let's drop those funereal pusses and get to work the way Mike would want us to. We need ratings. We need ads. Most of all, as Mike Lowenstein is whispering to you right now, we need me.

The light goes out briefly, then comes back on. BUDDY approaches NINA as she puts aside her mike.

NINA: How do you think it went?

BUDDY: Direct.

NINA: Uh, oh. Nina committed a Buddy sin.

BUDDY: No, I thought you were very forceful.

NINA: I didn't ask you for the temperature, Buddy. You can come right out and tell me what you think. Not the usual, "Well, it may be 75 degrees, but be careful. Take an umbrella, a parka, and a bathing suit if you're going out."

BUDDY: That's not fair, Nina.

NINA: So what?

BUDDY: Oh.

NINA: In fact, one of the other things Mike said to me.....

BUDDY: C'mon. You know you didn't see Mike last night.

NINA: Oh? Were you there?

BUDDY: It's just not possible.

NINA: And that's because why? You're one of that small minority in the city that doesn't believe in ghosts?

BUDDY: It's no small minority, for god sake!

NINA: I see. We say 93.3 percent do believe, but you say no. And you've researched this where exactly?

BUDDY: C'mon, Nina. It's one thing to tell our audience this crap, another to start believing it ourselves.

NINA: Really.

BUDDY: Really.

NINA: And why would we pitch *crap* if we didn't believe it ourselves?

BUDDY: I don't know. It's the business, I guess.

NINA: The business. We tell people ghosts exist even though we know we're lying. That what you're saying?

BUDDY: I know what I know.

NINA: Well, that makes one of you. Fortunately for our paychecks, the rest of the viewers in the Tristate area depend on us for information. Maybe you should set up your own Buddy Network so everybody can know what you know. What do you think?

BUDDY stalks off. NINA watches after him until the lights go down on her. After a long moment, the lights come up on Buddy's living room. It has no particular flavor, but is generally structured like the Lowenstein room seen earlier. The front door is stage left, an exit stage right leads to the rest of the apartment. A couch and coffee table dominate center stage; a telephone and an ashtray brimming with cigarette butts sit on the table. There is space stage right for a makeshift bar and a photograph of Beulah. BUDDY enters through the front door with an attache case and newspaper.

BUDDY: Hi, honey! I'm home!

BEULAH enters from stage right.

BEULAH: Get my butts?

BUDDY: Oh.....

BEULAH: Out! Out! Get two packs for when you forget tomorrow.

BUDDY: I want a drink first.

BEULAH: You can't. You're in a hurry.

BUDDY: (*goes to phone*) Soon as I check something.

BEULAH: You don't have to call ahead. They have cartons and cartons behind the counter.

He goes through an extended telephone routine: punching out numbers, listening to a recorded message, punching out more numbers, etc.

BUDDY: They really need somebody to look into the telephone system.

BEULAH: Maybe we'll just have leftovers tonight.

BUDDY: Great.

BEULAH: From breakfast. There's still some Cheerios in your bowl.

BUDDY: (*in phone*) This is Buddy. Where's Gwen now?.....Good. The lower the better. But be careful. She looks twisty. She could shift on you any minute, and we don't want to be the last ones to notice..... Right. I'll be home all night.

BUDDY hangs up.

BUDDY: I wish I could trust Jack more.

BEULAH: Nobody's as good as you, Buddy.

He goes over to the bar to fix two drinks.

BEULAH: Where you going?

BUDDY: We'll have a little taste, then I'll get your cigarettes.

BEULAH: What good's a drink if I don't have a cigarette?

BUDDY: Gwen's trouble. I can just feel it. She'll be blowing outside Jack's window before he sees her.

BEULAH: A drink without a cigarette, it's like you have one hand naked.

BUDDY: Stanton --- the floor manager? He thinks he's being funny today. Says to me, "You guys won't be satisfied until you pick up a Gwen as she's passing Pluto." You know, the planet Pluto? "Then you weather guys 'll have an orgasm," Stanton says. Know what I said to him?

BEULAH: Don't talk dirty?

BUDDY: I said, "Why not, Stanton? Someday the technology will be there."

BEULAH: Near Pluto?

BUDDY: I was exaggerating. To make a point. I skipped the little part where Pluto isn't even considered a planet anymore. Why embarrass the guy?

He goes to the couch with the drinks as she ferrets through the ashtray for a cigarette butt.

BEULAH: I hate it when you're being smug. You know it all, so Stanton's a fool for thinking a hurricane can come down from Pluto and destroy Florida.

BUDDY: Hurricanes don't come from Pluto, Beulah.

BEULAH: It was your example.

BUDDY: Why do you always insist on talking about something you know absolutely nothing about?

She finds a butt, but not a match. She begins looking everywhere for a match, including under the couch.

BEULAH: Because I didn't go to Weather school?

BUDDY: Anybody who's taken an hour of physics knows the winds around Pluto can't come down here to start a hurricane.

BEULAH: Until it happens the first time.

BUDDY: I don't need one of these conversations right now. Where you talk nonsense and I have to answer it.

BEULAH: It won't be nonsense if it happens.

BUDDY: Stop running around like that!

BEULAH: Got matches?

BUDDY: No.

BEULAH: Silly me. Why would you be helpful?

BUDDY: Oh, you mean in case I see some healthy human being who can't get his cigarette going and I'm the only one who can help him get cancer?

BEULAH: It's called social intercourse. There must be some in the kitchen.

She exits stage right.

BUDDY: What I'm trying to say is that there's nothing wrong with perfecting technology. The more time we have to prepare for a storm like Gwen, the more lives we save, the smaller the damage. Strengthening our anticipation --- that's all technology really does.

There is a loud crash offstage.

BEULAH: (OS) Shit!

BUDDY: What you see coming, you can steel yourself against.

BEULAH: (OS) The goddamn drawer was stuck!

BUDDY: When I get the cigarettes, I'm sure Mr. Kim will give me some nice

matches, too.

BEULAH appears stage right still holding the unlighted butt.

BEULAH: I don't like that tone, Buddy.

BUDDY: I was talking about being prepared. Something important.

BEULAH: To you.

BUDDY: That's one possibility in here, yes.

BEULAH: Sarcasm again. Something happen down at the station today?

BUDDY: I'm prepared. Believe me, I'm prepared.

BEULAH exits stage right.

BEULAH: At least the stove works.

BUDDY: I'm not Jack. I see things coming.

BEULAH: (OS) Jesus Christ!

BUDDY: Maybe not all the way up from Pluto, but early enough before it gets to me.

BEULAH enters rubbing an eyebrow. Her butt is lighted.

BEULAH: Almost took my eyebrow off.

BUDDY: But you have it going, right?

BEULAH: I think something really bad happened to my Buddy down at the station today.

BUDDY: I told you. I don't like leaving Jack in charge overnight.

BEULAH: He was in charge for the last one.

BUDDY: Exactly! And Francis was already dead off Cape Hatteras before he noticed. The goddamn cartoon channel beat us to updates!

BEULAH: That sounds like an accusation.

BUDDY: At least if we'd had a TV, I might have seen what was going on and called in a heads-up.

BEULAH: Don't start with that again.

BUDDY: But it's my work, Beulah!

BEULAH: Work is out there. Beulah is in here.

BUDDY: Meet me halfway. We could turn it on just for weather reports.

BEULAH: Spend all that money for what you can see out the window?

BUDDY: Okay. A movie once in awhile. The Super Bowl.

BEULAH: You're already doing it! Before you know it, the damn thing will be on 24 hours a day! No more Buddy and Beulah, a *menage a trois*!

BUDDY: I'm talking about a little black-and-white set.

BEULAH: No, you're talking about a lifestyle. And we agreed you'd keep this technology of yours outside the door. But now suddenly this doofus Jack is giving you second thoughts. Get rid of the loser.

BUDDY: I'd love to.

BEULAH: Good, that's settled. Now go get my butts. And when you come back, I'm going to have a real surprise for you. I spent the whole day thinking it up. Want to guess what it is?.....You're not guessing.

BUDDY: The problem at the station, it's not just Jack.

BEULAH: There's more than one of him? What kind of *schnook* staff do you have down there?

He drains his glass and starts on hers.

BUDDY: That's what Nina wanted to know today. She's taken over down there like Mussolini and she doesn't think it was just Jack's fault the cartoon channel beat us on Francis.

BEULAH: She blames you?

BUDDY: I'm the one who hired Jack.

BEULAH: But Nina wasn't the news director then. She was too busy giving blowjobs to the crew!

BUDDY: Exactly! Upward mobility!

He chuckles.

BEULAH: Buddy made a joke.

BUDDY: My point is that now she's the new gunslinger in town. Looking for any excuse at all to get rid of the old and bring in her new.

BEULAH: She actually threatened to fire you?

BUDDY: Nina doesn't make threats. It's just there in the air. And one morning you breathe it in like pollen, you start sneezing, and before you know it, you're out. You don't get fired, you get an allergy.

BEULAH: Don't lose this job, Buddy.

BUDDY: Think I want to?

BEULAH: I'm used to the way I live.

BUDDY: Who wouldn't be?

BEULAH: What's that supposed to mean?

He drains her glass, then goes to the bar to pour a couple more.

BUDDY: Tell me about your day.

BEULAH: Same as always.

BUDDY: No complaints?

BEULAH: If you want to hear gratitude, I'll be a lot more sincere about it if you go get my cigarettes first.

BUDDY: Then we'll have the surprise?

BEULAH: Steak. A new recipe.

BUDDY: Something you got from a cook book?

BEULAH: Why are you quizzing me like this?

BUDDY: You wanted me to guess, I'm guessing.

BEULAH: No, not from a book. I thought it up myself.

BUDDY: So you didn't have to waste any energy turning pages! You spent the day just thinking!

BEULAH: You're going at that stuff pretty hard, Buddy.

BUDDY: Don't worry. I'll still stagger down for your cigarettes.

BEULAH: I'm talking about ruining your appetite for my surprise.

BUDDY: Salisbury Steak, I bet.....Oh, did I ruin your surprise?

BEULAH: You didn't have to guess.

BUDDY: Why not? So you could go on thinking you were original? Fact is, Beulah, you've gotten damn predictable.

He goes back to the couch with two more drinks.

BEULAH: So what do you want to do about it?

BUDDY: I haven't figured that out yet.

BEULAH: How about I walk out that door and never come back?

BUDDY: Just be more original, that's all.

BEULAH: Ah, Buddy's not ready for a showdown, is he?

BUDDY: No reason to go critical yet.

BEULAH: Lose his job, lose his Beulah. A fresh slate all around.

BUDDY: I didn't say I was losing my job.

She sneezes mockingly.

BEULAH: There must be pollen in the air.

BUDDY: No way Jack's going to screw this up for me. If I have to call the station every half-hour, I'm going to track Gwen all night.

BEULAH: Call him now.

BUDDY: Too soon.

BEULAH: Because Gwen couldn't possibly have flexed a little muscle two minutes ago?

He picks up the phone and goes through the same protracted routine as before. She ferrets in the ashtray for another butt.

BUDDY: It's really a crime when technology slows you down instead of hurries you along.

BEULAH: Pay attention to your friend Jack.

BUDDY: *(in phone)* Jack? It's me again. I forgot to warn you about Lassiter at the Weather Bureau. He has a real blind spot for the dew point hygrometer readings.....I don't know. Maybe he had bad teachers. Where's Gwen now?.....What do you mean "more or less?" There's no more or less in meteorology, Jack. That "more" could wash away homes from Georgia to Rhode Island.....Then say that. We have a few million people relying on us for accurate information.....Half a million.....Jack, I don't care what the overnight ratings are! If there's just one viewer out there who's.....

BEULAH: Got a bad heart.

BUDDY: *(in phone)*.....who's got a heart problem and hears you saying "more or less," you could be exposing him to fatal consequences.....Okay, okay. I'll be here. If Gwen shakes her booty, give me a call.

He hangs up. She finds another butt in the ashtray. She then goes through the exact same movements as before in searching for a match.

BEULAH: "Shakes her booty?"

BUDDY: One of the kids at the station says it all the time.

BEULAH: Turn you on?

BUDDY: She's barely out of high school!

BEULAH: Oh. So she doesn't have all her parts yet.

BUDDY: Please.

She exits stage right.

BUDDY: You're not going to the stove again??!!

BEULAH: I've used up all the matches Mr. Kim gave you.

BUDDY: She's cute when she says that. "Shake your booty."

BEULAH: (OS) Jesus Christ!

BUDDY: Bad enough I have to worry about Jack. Now there's Lassiter at the Weather Bureau. What a team! The two of them must've been on the job the night of the Johnstown Flood.

BEULAH enters holding another singed eyebrow. The cigarette is going.

BEULAH: You have to do something about that stove.

BUDDY: Me? You sit around here all day just thinking. Take a break from it once in awhile.

BEULAH: That Neanderthal downstairs doesn't take women seriously.

BUDDY: Oh, right!

He picks up the receiver and mocks speaking to somebody.

BUDDY: (in phone) Lincoln, that you? Come on up to 6A. The stove shoots out this rocket fire whenever we light up our butts.....Oh, good idea!

He hangs up the phone.

BUDDY: Lincoln says we won't have that problem if we don't turn on the jets full blast and then stick our faces into the flame.

He gets up with his drink and goes over to the photo. He picks up the photo and peers at it intently.

BUDDY: You were really beautiful, weren't you?

BEULAH: Beulah just had a sexy thought. But if I can't have a brand new cigarette after, what's the point of having sex?

BUDDY: No point.

He puts down the photo, drains his drink, and pours another.

BUDDY: You hear Nina, I should be out inventing the weather. Make up something exciting the other stations don't have.

BEULAH: Maybe a little different emphasis here and there?

BUDDY: There's no need of that! If she'd think for a second, she'd realize I'm a lot more than technology. I'm entertainment, predictability. I can pick up a Gwen in the Caribbean and follow her day by day, hour by hour, as she comes north. Build up the anticipation like a soap opera. And the budget's a miracle. I just need a couple of maps. By the time the whole thing has died down to nothing, we'll have gained thousands of viewers.

BEULAH: What else could anyone want?

BUDDY: If you're Nina, somebody new.

BEULAH: You're pretty wrapped up in yourself tonight, Buddy.

She stalks off stage right. The phone rings. He answers it.

BUDDY: *(in phone)* This is Buddy!.....What isobar we talking about?.....Sure, sure. Channel 4. I have it on.....No, Jack, you tell me what it is you think you see.....Yeah, I think you're right.....And the altocumulus?.....You're kidding!.....Of course I can see it! I just don't

want to believe it.....When you going on with this? (*looks at watch*) The downside of having a popular sitcom, Jack. Channel 4 can interrupt the crap it has on whenever it wants.....Okay. I'm here.

He slams down the phone.

BUDDY: I've got to get a TV set!

BEULAH enters wearing only a teddy.

BEULAH: Going on that little errand for me now, big boy?

BUDDY: Gwen's about to explode.

BEULAH: And what about Buddy?

BUDDY: I'm getting a TV tomorrow, Beulah. It's ridiculous I can't follow what's going on out there.

BEULAH: Beulah's going on.

BUDDY: I won't lose my job just because of a promise in a weak moment.

BEULAH: Weak moment!?!? Beulah being sick?!?!

BUDDY: You're not sick anymore.

BEULAH: You got down on your knees next to that couch, you took my hot hand, and you slobbered you'd never let the weather come in here again. Tidal waves could wash away entire cities, you said, but as soon as you walked through that door to your Beulah, you wouldn't give them another thought. That's what you promised.

BUDDY: And I meant it. Then.

BEULAH: Nina would never fire you.

BUDDY: Give me one reason why not.

BEULAH stands speechless. BUDDY takes out a pocket address book and looks up a number.

BUDDY: That's what I thought.

BEULAH: You can't be responsible for the weather 24 hours a day, Buddy.

BUDDY: Face it, Beulah. You never shared my interests.

BEULAH: Not at the moment, no.

BUDDY: Ever.

He finds a number and punches it out.

BEULAH: Get my butts and you'll feel better.

BUDDY: *(in phone)* Hi, it's Buddy. What're you up to?.....What show's that?.....No, I've never seen it. They sound like a lively crew. All shaking their booties, I guess.

BEULAH: You bastard!

BUDDY: *(in phone)* Yeah, maybe I'll turn it on after I hang up.....No, it's in the other room. Only one set. I don't like having all those Botox anchors in every room. Gives me the creeps.

BEULAH: How can you be talking to her like this!

BUDDY: *(in phone)* Well, I may be Mister Technology around the studio, but I like a home to be a home. The fewer the gadgets, the more space you have to be human.....Well, I don't think that's especially original.....Okay, if you want to write it down. "The fewer the gadgets, the more space you have to be

human.....”

BEULAH begins a seductive, Salome-like dance.

BUDDY: (*in phone*) I'm sure other people have said it better.....No, I don't remember, either.....Okay, it's my saying. From me to you.

BEULAH gradually works herself up to a furious dance.

BUDDY: (*in phone*) But listen, when can we do this closer than the phone?.....Why else? I'd like to see you. You're not involved with anyone, are you?.....Then think of me as the eye of the hurricane. You can get your head together waiting for the next front. And we might have some laughs.....Friday's great. We can decide when and where between now and then.....Great. Go back to your show. Good Night.

He hangs up. BEULAH stops dancing.

BEULAH: Talk about deluding yourself!

BUDDY: She's 24. That doesn't make me her father.

BEULAH: Her father's institutionalized brother.

BUDDY: Know what I like about her, Beulah?

BEULAH: Gee, let me think!

BUDDY: Things excite her. Maybe what we consider idiot things, but she's always turning a corner and getting surprised by what she sees. Me, I've been standing on the corner waiting for the light to change.

BEULAH: You didn't kill me, Buddy.

BUDDY: I'm getting hungry.

He opens his attache case and takes out a box of frozen food.

BUDDY: Last Salisbury Steak they had.

BEULAH: Bring the weather back in, Buddy, and it'll all have been for nothing. If you keep it out, I won't blame you anymore.

BUDDY: You'll always blame me.

BEULAH: No, I won't.

BUDDY: It doesn't make any difference what I do. You'll always say it was my fault. So I have nothing to lose getting on with my life, do I?

She gets down on the floor and pantomimes sticking her head in an oven.

BEULAH: You don't get away that easy. Who am I, Buddy?

BUDDY: The odor's not there. I can see it, but I can't smell it anymore.

BEULAH: Try harder. Beulah the pot roast. Remember?

BUDDY: Beulah the pot roast was a coward.

BEULAH: I was sick!

BUDDY: You were a coward and you've been making me one.

BEULAH: I was sick!

BUDDY: For Christ sake, Beulah, the whole world's got a tumor. Knock on any door in this building. Half the people who come to the peephole have a lump they don't want. But they don't all go sticking their heads in the oven.

BEULAH: Maybe they don't all have husbands who work 14 hours a day, then come home just to change underwear and watch the Weather Channel.

BUDDY: I tried making that up to you.

BEULAH: After I got sick.

BUDDY: I was home every night at a reasonable hour. I got rid of the TV. I held up my end. You couldn't even hold your chin up on the oven door.

She gets up from the floor and searches the ashtray for another butt.

BUDDY: Together we could have beaten it, Beulah.

BEULAH: Make your uterus the playing field and we'll talk.

BUDDY: You had more to live for than scrounging for another smoke.

BEULAH: But that's all you can remember now?

BUDDY: Your career.

BEULAH: It was a job.

BUDDY: Yourself. You could have lived for yourself.

BEULAH: That's not what you really mean.

BUDDY: Me! You could've lived for me!

BEULAH: You weren't going to cure me, Buddy. And I would've shrieked both of us insane.

BUDDY: So I should pay for it the rest of my life?

BEULAH: I think that would be fair, yes.

BUDDY: I'm getting a new life, Beulah.

BEULAH: You mean you're hoping to get laid. Of course she may be too busy writing down all your gems even for that much.

She finds a butt, then starts once again into her rote search for a match. He suddenly swipes the ashtray off the table.

BUDDY: No more!

BEULAH: What have you done?

BUDDY: What I should've done a long time ago. Go out to that kitchen again, you can keep going.

BEULAH: Nina's upset you. You're different tonight.

BUDDY: And you're history.

BEULAH: Out into the weather like everybody else?

BUDDY: Like everybody else.

BEULAH: You'll miss me.

BUDDY: Give me a chance to!

He lurches up off the couch and back over to the bar and the photo. Once again he peers intently at the photo.

BEULAH: I was your anvil, Buddy.

BUDDY: My thunderhead. My squall. My heat. My ice. My everything.

BEULAH: And now I'm just supposed to be no more?

BUDDY: Patterns change, Beulah. That's why they need people like me. If it was the same thing day in and day out, even Jack could handle it.

BEULAH: You'll change your mind when you wake up sober tomorrow.

BUDDY: Maybe.

He pours himself another drink.

BEULAH: One last time?

BUDDY: Why not?

BEULAH: So say it.

BUDDY: Blow, Beulah, blow!

She begins pantomiming a howling hurricane.

BEULAH: Here comes Beulah! Batten down the hatches!

BUDDY: Batten down your hatches!

BEULAH: Put all those guard rails up!

BUDDY: Put all those guard rails up!

BEULAH: Down go the palm trees and power lines!

BUDDY: There they go!

BEULAH: Whoosh, whoosh, whoosh, here come the breakers!

BUDDY: And there go the beaches!

BEULAH: The houses go sliding into the ocean!

BUDDY: Blow, Beulah, blow!

BEULAH: Buddy sees Beulah coming?

BUDDY: Buddy sees Beulah coming.

BEULAH: Buddy feels Beulah coming?

BUDDY: Buddy feels Beulah coming.

BEULAH: Buddy explodes with Beulah?

BUDDY: Buddy explodes with Beulah!

They calm down. BUDDY starts to drink, then stops himself.

BUDDY: Beulah's dead. Blown out. Expired.

BEULAH: You're sure?

BUDDY: I did all the readings myself. You're dead. Goodbye.

The phone rings. BUDDY goes to answer it with slightly more stagger in his step. BEULAH drifts stage right.

BEULAH: You'll change your mind when you wake up sober.

BUDDY: You always say that. One of these days you'll be wrong.

BEULAH exits. BUDDY picks up the phone.

BUDDY: *(in phone)* This is Buddy!.....Oh, Jack. Yeah, great stuff. I couldn't have done it better myself.....Well, maybe one thing.....No, I don't mean your jacket.....Jack, when they start noticing only your jacket and tie, it's too late. I'm talking about something else. Sometimes you stand in front of that radar and you come across like you're just delivering a weather forecast. People want more than that.....Like what? Well, like a sense of anticipation.....

BEULAH: *(OS)* Jesus Christ!

BUDDY: *(in phone)* Excitement about what tomorrow will bring. You want to keep them glued to their sets day after day.....

BEULAH: *(OS)* Jesus Christ Almighty!

BUDDY: *(in phone)* What? Nina?.....Sure. Put her on.....Hi, Nina. I didn't know you'd be in the trenches with the foot soldiers tonight.....Oh, Jack's the best. You got the right man on the scene there.....

BUDDY sneezes.

BUDDY: *(in phone)* And a *Gesundheit* back to you.....No, it's not a cold. I don't know what it is.....Allergy to something, I guess.

The lights come down. After a long moment they come up again on JUNE. She is addressing viewers with a mike.

JUNE: This is June Jivaro. For more than 40 years The Golden Crow has been synonymous with fine dining in our city. Going there for lunch or dinner had been a sign of affluence, of having made it in the big town. Ninety dollars for a hamburger? Fifty dollars for a bowl of chicken noodle soup with only two noodles? Diners at The Golden Crow would rather cut off their subscriptions to the *Wall Street Journal* than complain about such inflated prices. But The Golden Crow also has its secrets. And there.....goes one of them!

She jumps back, then bangs her foot on the floor.

JUNE: Vermin!.....And there's another one!

She bangs her foot on the floor again.

JUNE: Not just the occasional verm, but vermin, plural. Armies of them. Of every conceivable species. Animal, insect. If there were vermin minerals, they would have a home at The Golden Crow. And what does the Board of Health have to say about all this?

She extends the mike toward an invisible interviewee, holds it out for a few seconds, then pulls it back.

JUNE: That's right. Not much.....But what about the regular patrons of the restaurant? What do they have to say?

She extends the mike in another direction. She nods to herself as she listens, then pulls the mike back to herself.

JUNE: So are you shocked and traumatized?

She again extends the mike out to the invisible interviewee. She nods through the reply, then pulls back the mike.

JUNE: So this comes right out of the blue for you? A thunderbolt from the sky? Leaving you shocked and traumatized?

Again she extends the mike and nods through an answer.

JUNE: So you won't be going back soon?

She listens through an answer she doesn't want to hear.

JUNE: But are you shocked and traumatized?

The lights begin to dim as the invisible interviewee answers again. When the stage goes completely black, she is still asking:

JUNE: But are you shocked and traumatized?

There is a long moment of darkness on the stage. When the lights come up again, they do so on Nina's apartment. With a few minor differences, the apartment set is the same as for Lowenstein and Buddy. One major difference is that there is a TV set (turned away from the audience) on the coffee table and a second one up on the bar. Another is the woman's clothing thrown around on the floor and on the couch. At the bar there is also a bowl of stale pretzels. NINA enters after a day of work.

NINA: Hi, honey! I'm home!

She throws her bag on the couch, kicks off her shoes, turns on the TV set atop the coffee table, then goes over to the bar to turn that one on, as well. The sets give off a murmur of being on.

NINA: Ask me about my day! I dare you!

There is no reply.

NINA: Smart move!

She takes in the clothes strewn around the room.

NINA: Nice clean-up job! If I didn't know better, I'd think you were hinting I should stay home all day!

She grabs a few of the clothes and carries them offstage through the kitchen entrance. Offstage there is a slam of a hamper, then a moment later the sound of a refrigerator door being opened and slammed closed. There is a third murmur and an offstage light indicating that a third TV set has been turned on in the kitchen. She enters again from the kitchen with a bottle of white wine. She grabs a wine glass from behind the bar. She takes a handful of pretzels from the bowl atop the bar as she concentrates on what is on the TV. She does a double take as she chews the first pretzel.

NINA: Like you, Buddy --- stale!

She discards a couple of the other pretzels she took and walks her bottle and glass over to the couch. She flounces down, pours herself some wine, and sits back to watch the newscast. She doesn't like what she sees on the screen.

NINA: Jesus Christ!

She puts aside her wine glass and grabs a notebook and pen from her bag. She

makes a note about what she has just seen.

NINA: Welcome to the Moron Hour!

LOWENSTEIN enters from the kitchen.

LOWENSTEIN: Not as easy as you thought, is it?

She ignores him and takes another note from what she sees on the TV.

LOWENSTEIN: Is it?

NINA: Tell me who would've been better at this job.

LOWENSTEIN: On the planet? In this apartment? Where?

NINA: Not your precious little Wendy.

LOWENSTEIN: She wasn't interested.

NINA: Right. She aims higher. Unemployment.

LOWENSTEIN: Vermin!

He jumps as though he has spotted a roach and bangs at it with his shoe. She jumps with him. He laughs at her reaction.

NINA: Not funny.

LOWENSTEIN: Tell that to your new girl.

NINA: Exactly --- she's new. No Wendy yet, but how many of us are?

He drifts over to glance at the bar TV set. She goes back to her notes.

LOWENSTEIN: You'd see more with a plasma screen.

NINA: So would 80 percent of our audience. But they don't have one, so I like seeing what they see.

LOWENSTEIN: Good for you.

NINA: Not *all* your instincts were wrong.

For a moment both of them are glued to their separate sets.

NINA: Did you see what he just did?

LOWENSTEIN: Hard to miss.

NINA: So tell me why you left him for me to get rid of.

LOWENSTEIN: I'm sentimental. He once held the elevator for me.

She takes another note more aggressively.

LOWENSTEIN: Mind a drop of advice?

NINA: Would you have listened to it in my place?

LOWENSTEIN: Listen, yeah.

NINA: Go ahead.

LOWENSTEIN: Think of your staff as you. They won't necessarily believe in what they're doing, but they'll do it because that's what they're good at and they want to stay good at it.

NINA: That's how you saw me?

LOWENSTEIN: Was I wrong?

NINA: A little belief can't hurt.

LOWENSTEIN: (*shrugs*) Help, hurt. Just keep the wagons moving --- that's what counts.

NINA: (*reacting to something on the screen*) Jesus, if her dress ran up her neck any higher, it would cover her face! She does have skin, doesn't she?

LOWENSTEIN: I might've been misunderstood if I'd told her that.

NINA: I won't be.

She takes another note.

LOWENSTEIN: You're afraid, and they can all see it.

NINA: I'm not afraid.

LOWENSTEIN: Give me "edgy?"

NINA: (*shrugs reluctantly*) Edgy.

LOWENSTEIN: Why? It's not about you.

NINA: Weird how I should be in the middle anyway.

LOWENSTEIN: It's about the product, nothing else.

NINA: That's what I'm focused on.

LOWENSTEIN: No, you're focused on being a hard ass. You're imposing yourself. But sweetie poo, hard ass, or anything in between, you don't exist. If they could've replaced me with a robot, they would've done it years ago. Anyone has to think about you instead of the job, you're failing at it.

NINA: Because they won't respect me?

LOWENSTEIN: Who cares if they do or not?

NINA: How about something called self-worth?

LOWENSTEIN: That's for your memoirs. The bottom line now is you're polluting the studio with Y-O-U. In the long run that means lower ratings.

NINA: You *are* a robot!

LOWENSTEIN: Focus, focus, focus. Remember?

NINA: Yeah, that really worked out for you last time.

LOWENSTEIN: We got great overnights.

NINA: (*nods*) The best.

LOWENSTEIN: So there you go.

NINA: Sorry. I'm not into self-immolation.

LOWENSTEIN: So find something as good. If not, you'll be on the street with a lot of *what ifs*.

He starts toward the kitchen.

NINA: I miss you, Lowenstein.

LOWENSTEIN: You always did.

NINA: I mean miss miss. Now.

LOWENSTEIN: Oh, c'mon.

NINA: No Wendy crap. Just me about you.

LOWENSTEIN: Don't get blubbery on me, Nina. The position you're in, you can't afford it.

NINA: Just for a second? Off the grid? (*he shrugs*) I've always admired, almost

worshiped, it.

LOWENSTEIN: What?

NINA: Your two worlds. How you kept sliding back and forth between them so smoothly. The personal

LOWENSTEIN: Never personal. Local.

NINA: The local. Just for me.

LOWENSTEIN: Just for you.

NINA: And the social.

LOWENSTEIN: The national. The international.

NINA: The national. The international.

LOWENSTEIN: Where you don't count as much.

NINA: We had our moments.

LOWENSTEIN: Moments. No more. Why was that enough for you?

NINA: Ask a shrink.

LOWENSTEIN: I'm asking you.

NINA: I didn't need more.

LOWENSTEIN: I'm still asking.

NINA: More of my self-worth problem?

LOWENSTEIN: I told you: I'm asking you, not a shrink. Don't ever let your interview subject slither away from you. How many times have I told you that? Again: Why was that enough for you?

NINA: I'm one of the 93.3 percent. I've always believed in ghosts. There had to be

more than

LOWENSTEIN: What you could see locally?

NINA: (*nods*) And now I guess I've got you where I wanted. You're dead, and only I can see you.

LOWENSTEIN: Okay, then.

NINA: Okay what?

LOWENSTEIN: Love --- that's always a good sweeps theme.

He exits through the kitchen. She watches him go for a second, then fires her pen across the room. She sits in frustration for a moment. Then the cell phone in her bag rings. She takes the phone from the bag and answers.

NINA: (*in phone*) Hello.

She sits more erect at the voice of authority on the phone.

NINA: (*in phone*).....Well, it seemed to work the last few years. That's why Mike thought it would work again.....No, I realize he's not.....Yes, I see your point. (*nervous laugh*) You've seen one ghost, you've seen them all, I suppose.....Still, we do have a practical problem. Wendy's already announced.....No, all I'm saying is that if we just drop the series, we'll get complaints. Wouldn't it be wiser to play the whole ghost thing out this time and then forget about it for the next sweeps?.....No, of course not. If you feel the concept is so been-there done-that.....But I thought you just said.....I don't follow. What else is there? You see ghosts, you see.....Excuse me?.....Yes, that would certainly be different. None of the other stations.....You think he would be better than Wendy? He's so identified with sports.....Yes, I guess that's true. I mean, it *is* true. I guess I'm just not sure of the win-win part. It's certainly an outrageous idea, but.....Of course. I'll sleep on it tonight.....No, not literally. I'll get right on it, make some phone calls.....Yes, Good Night.

She turns off her phone and stares at it for a moment. Then she refills her wine

glass and takes a big slug of wine. She lets the wine go down as LOWENSTEIN enters from the kitchen.

LOWENSTEIN: Everything runs its course. Even ghosts. Guess you don't have me where you want me anymore.

NINA: They're insane.

LOWENSTEIN: Why? Once you assume you're playing for idiots, you can change the rules of the game whenever you feel like it. Who's going to protest? The idiots watching you?

NINA: They're not idiots!

LOWENSTEIN: Because you depend on them for making a living?

She jumps up from the couch and goes over to the bar for the stale pretzels. She shoves several into her mouth. He smiles at her.

LOWENSTEIN: Oh, Christ, that little imp is still in there, isn't it? The one holed up in the back of your brain insisting you're in the information business.

NINA: Don't bother, Lowenstein. You're not going to convince me you were doing it all these years just for entertainment.

He points to something on the bar TV screen. They look at it together for a moment before she turns away.

LOWENSTEIN: Anticipation, Nina. Getting your audience to wonder what's next. It's got to be better than what's around now, right? Who the hell would ever want just the now? It's not called the *olds*, it's called the *news*. What you haven't heard before. Even a ghost is news. Who knows where it's been? What tales it can tell us?

She goes back to the bottle on the coffee table and pours another big drink.

NINA: You underrate people.

LOWENSTEIN: Local experience.

NINA: What are you talking about?

LOWENSTEIN: That was always my attraction to you, too. I just *had* to be more than what you saw. The next thing. Whatever was around the corner. Whatever was more than what you saw me as.

NINA: Crap!

LOWENSTEIN: So sure?

NINA: I know it.

LOWENSTEIN: Then get off on me right now. (*to her look*) Just you and me. Work up that old sense of anticipation you clung to with me.

She takes another drink.

NINA: I'm not in the mood.

LOWENSTEIN: Nothing erotic. Just self-pity. You know. Like the way you said you liked me.

NINA: I'm busy.

LOWENSTEIN: Couldn't be that I'm just dead to you now, could it?

NINA: I told you I missed you.

LOWENSTEIN: Before that phone call you probably did.

NINA: You're pushing me away again.

LOWENSTEIN: I'm gone. Been there, done that.

NINA: No!

LOWENSTEIN: Then prove it.

NINA: (*nods to the phone*) They're insane.

LOWENSTEIN: No, they're in control.

NINA: We'll be laughing stocks of the trade.

LOWENSTEIN: And on your watch, not mine.

NINA: The audience isn't idiots. There has to be *some* limit.

LOWENSTEIN: Then I should still be here for you. Just a harmless ghost. People have seen ghosts for centuries. They write fairy tales about them. Goofy, but within limits.

NINA: Exactly. It's folklore. Nobody takes it seriously. I mean, *really* seriously. It's Dickens. *A Christmas Carol*.

LOWENSTEIN: *Macbeth*.

NINA: *Macbeth. Hamlet*.

LOWENSTEIN: Casper the Friendly Ghost.

NINA: Nothing wrong believing in that stuff. Nothing wrong making fun of the people who do. That's not the same as what they're asking me to do now. No reason not to go on with the ghosts like we do practically every sweeps.

LOWENSTEIN: Well, one reason. I'm not here anymore. I'm gone.

He starts toward the kitchen.

NINA: No!

LOWENSTEIN: Then keep me here. Show me I'm still enough for you.

She starts toward him. He steps back.

LOWENSTEIN: Start without me. Maybe I'll come.

NINA: You prick!

LOWENSTEIN: You used to like that. Or is that another part of what's over? It's okay. I understand. Forward march. But be honest about it.

She gets rid of her glass and, not taking her eyes off him, sprawls out on the couch. Tentatively, reluctantly, she begins to pleasure herself. He doesn't move. She keeps staring at him.

NINA: Mike?

LOWENSTEIN: I'm not there for you, Nina.

NINA: Yes, you are.

LOWENSTEIN: The ghosts are gone. The fantasy about ghosts is gone. You need a lot more to keep going. It's your time now. Mine is over.

He exits into the kitchen. She immediately stops masturbating. She collects her wits for a second. She looks at the TV set in front of her. She picks up her cell phone and bangs out a number.

NINA: *(in phone)* Lester? It's Nina. They have a new idea and they want you to do it.....

The lights come down on the living room. After a moment, the lights come up again on LESTER at center stage with a mike. He addresses the viewers.

LESTER: One of the blessings of covering sports is to realize how truly religious our greatest athletes are. If you're like I was before I got to know them, you just saw them pointing to the sky after some heroic feat on the field or maybe crossing themselves before they took a foul shot or, every once in awhile, prostrating themselves on the ground in thanks to their superior Being for scoring a touchdown. But you know what? That's the least of the synergy between religion and professional sports. Would you believe that 99.5 percent of our professional athletes believe in a God? And can we just write it off to coincidence that the other

.5 percent are sitting on a disabled list as I speak to you now? But even that's not the most amazing aspect of this spiritual synergy. The more you talk to these athletes, the more they open up to you, and once you've established that trust with them, they'll admit things they would otherwise keep out of the sports pages. And I know of no confidence more astonishing than the fact that so many of them not merely believe in God, but have actually seen God!

The lights flash off. After a moment, they come up again on LESTER and NINA, who are going over some copy.

LESTER: A little long for a set-up, isn't it?

NINA: You do the reading, I'll do the counting.

LESTER: That disabled list thing.....

NINA: A bit much?

LESTER: Well, yeah.

NINA: Good. Now how many of these have you lined up for the camera? The ones who've had visions?

LESTER: (*shows on the copy*) Him. Her. Him.

NINA: And you're sure they'll come right out and say it.

LESTER: A couple of them might be a little reluctant.....

NINA: We don't need reluctant, Lester. We need yes, this is what I saw and I don't care how many people want to ridicule me for it.

LESTER: Him, definitely. He's a wack job.

NINA: You're not getting with the program here, Lester. We don't need some sweaty freak who sees the Virgin Mary in his Gatorade. We need Mister College All-American or Mister Super Bowl MVP or Mister Batting Champion who one night has unexpected company in his living room and gets to ask 20 questions

about the alternate universe.

LESTER: Her. Definitely her. And him. For sure.

NINA: Good. All right, you firm up shoot times with them. I want to get all this done by tomorrow.

He starts away.

NINA: Oh, and Lester! *(to his look)* Don't let my tone get to you. Sometimes my bark doesn't know it's barking.

LESTER: *(smiles)* Don't worry about it. We're a team. No *I* in *team*.

NINA: But there is in *Nina*.

LESTER: Right.

NINA: We're on the clock, Lester.

He continues away. She watches after him, then addresses the darkness.

NINA: Lowenstein?

There is no answer. The lights come down on her as she stomps her foot in frustration. There is a long moment of darkness as she continues stomping before the lights come up again accompanied by a movie musical tune like "There's No Business Like Show Business." The set is Wendy's living room. Although structured exactly like the rooms seen earlier, it is close to bare. There is nothing on the coffee table. The bar contains little more than a CD player, the source of the music, and a shoulder bag. WENDY is dressed in a leotard and going through some of the dance steps in high-heeled tap shoes she did for Lowenstein earlier. Her steps segue smoothly from Nina's stomping. She couldn't be freer as she goes through her routine; this is her moment when she is all she wants to be. She gets a step wrong, then starts again. She is more satisfied with the results. There is a knock at the door. She ignores it to keep dancing. Then the doorbell rings insistently. She has to stop dancing and go over to the bar to turn off the music. She goes to the front door to reveal a very drunk LESTER.

WENDY: Lester!

LESTER: Hi, honey! I'm home!

WENDY: I don't think so.

He almost falls down, but she catches him at the last second.

WENDY: Whoa!

LESTER: My thought exactly.

WENDY: To what do I owe this thrilling surprise?

He lurches past her in his drunken state.

WENDY: Lester?

LESTER: In the lineup! Right here!

She has little choice but to close the door after him. He takes in the bareness of the apartment.

LESTER: I missed the sale!

WENDY: Just eliminating a few things.

LESTER: Eliminate! Eliminate! Good for the soul!

He staggers over to the couch and flops down on it.

WENDY: What's the occasion?

LESTER: Celebrating.

WENDY: That much I can see.

He takes her in with some difficulty.

LESTER: We miss you down at the station.

WENDY: That's what you're celebrating?

LESTER: (*shakes his head*) Hardly.

WENDY: I think you need some coffee.

LESTER: Nothing better?

WENDY: You wouldn't taste it if I had it.

LESTER: That sounds vaguely witchy, Witchy Wendy.

WENDY: Be good while I put on some water.

LESTER: I don't want to interrupt.....

WENDY: What?

LESTER: Whatever Witchy Wendys do by themselves.

She starts toward the kitchen.

LESTER: Wendy?

WENDY: Ummm?

LESTER: It's not the same at work without you there.

WENDY: And I in turn am flattered your vodka thoughts turned to me.

LESTER: Scotch. But I mean it. It's not the same at work without you there.

WENDY: Sure it is. It's the same, just without me there.

She exits into the kitchen. He parses back what she has said.

LESTER: *(to himself)* What sense does that make?

He comes to no satisfactory answer for himself, then starts looking around the room more curiously. He addresses the air.

LESTER: This was a mistake, wasn't it?

There is no answer, but he nods.

LESTER: If you say so. I just feel like a jerk.

The empty space appears to reply.

LESTER: You could've let that one pass.

Again he looks around the room. He tries to raise himself for a closer inspection, but then topples back into the couch. He addresses the air.

LESTER: Thanks for reminding me.

WENDY reappears from the kitchen.

WENDY: I only have instant. You caught me off-guard.

LESTER: At what?

WENDY: The coffee!

LESTER: The coffee. Right. You don't have a TV?

WENDY: In the bedroom.

LESTER: Ah!

WENDY: “Ah?” What does that tell Sherlock?

LESTER: You haven’t cut off all contact with the wretched working classes. You still watch us.

WENDY: Sure I do.

LESTER: And?

WENDY: An awful lot of new faces. Just about everybody’s gone from when I was there. Except you. You’re all over lately.

LESTER: That’s me. They call me Lester All-Over. You think it’s because I have good hair, because I’m so innocuous, or because.....? There must be another possibility.

WENDY: I hope they’re paying you more.

LESTER: Sally tells me not to complain, so I don’t. My wife is very wise when it comes to complaints. Scientific, almost. Ten complaints about me for every one about the world at large. She’s worked out the proper proportion between me and mankind. Her specialization, really.

WENDY: Be sure you tell her that.

LESTER: I do. All the time. (*takes her in*) Who you kidding?

WENDY: Excuse me?

LESTER: You watch us. You know you do.

WENDY: I think I just told you that.

LESTER: You did? Was I listening?

WENDY: So tell me what the celebration’s about.

LESTER: New sweeps period coming up tomorrow.

WENDY: And you're celebrating this because.....?

LESTER: Because I'll be all over it. Lester All-Over is Nina's sweeps guy. Who better than me to understand the importance of winning and losing? That's what she says.

He hiccoughs. She points off stage right.

WENDY: If you need the bathroom, it's in there.

LESTER: Don't worry. One thing I can do is hold my liquor. *(takes in her attire)*
Been exercising or something?

WENDY: Something.

LESTER: I approve. Just because we get our bodies for free doesn't mean we shouldn't maintain them. Suppose we took that attitude toward a house we inherited from our in-laws? You'd have weeds and termites all over the place. You don't want weeds and termites all over your body.

WENDY: No, I don't.

LESTER: That's what I'm saying.

WENDY: Do you remember where the bathroom is, Lester?

LESTER: Did you tell me?

She points stage right again.

WENDY: Second door.

LESTER: I think you're repeating yourself.

WENDY: Guilty.

He takes her in to the point of making her uncomfortable.

WENDY: Yes?

LESTER: I owe you an apology. That's what I'm really celebrating --- I've finally gotten up the nerve to come here to apologize.

WENDY: For what?

LESTER: You know. You just want me to say it.

WENDY: I'm afraid you'll have to.

LESTER: You know why! You're playing dumb with me. You in those sexy tights of yours.

WENDY: If you mean that God stuff, that wasn't my turf, Lester.

LESTER: Yes, it was.

WENDY: It was sports.

LESTER: Just started out that way.

WENDY: All right, it just started out that way.

LESTER: I'm not denying sports is the world. It really is, you know.

WENDY: I'll take your word for it.

LESTER: Sports is life writ large. Or small. Or something.

WENDY: No question.

LESTER: But that series was still your turf.

WENDY: Listen, I know exactly how it went down. Nina came to you and told you you were doing it and don't think twice about me, I was her problem, not yours.

LESTER: That's right.

WENDY: So that was that.

LESTER: I could've said no.

WENDY: Did you?

LESTER: No. I'm not a go-to guy.

WENDY: It was an opportunity. In your place I.....

LESTER: Ever think of me like that? If you were on *Jeopardy* and the category was Go-To Guys, would you ask for the \$200 answer and say the question was Lester?

WENDY: You're being silly.

LESTER: No, I'm apologizing.

WENDY: Okay. Apology accepted.

LESTER: Really?

WENDY: Really.

LESTER: I never intended to force you to quit.

WENDY: You didn't.

LESTER: Your nose is getting bigger.

WENDY: You didn't force me to quit.

LESTER: If you say so. What're you doing these days?

WENDY: Mainly looking at my options.

He looks around at the bare room.

WENDY: Cable, maybe.

LESTER: It'll be the same, you know. Smaller audience, smaller paycheck, but the same job.

WENDY: I would hope not.

LESTER: You're being superior. You've always had a little of that.

She goes over to the bar to lean on it for taking off her heels.

WENDY: Just taking a breather.

LESTER: Looking over your options.

WENDY: You bring me one?

LESTER: Maybe. I owe you.

WENDY: You don't owe me anything, Lester.

LESTER: I was at least a little responsible for you quitting.

WENDY: If thinking that makes you feel better.

LESTER: Maybe more honest with myself.

WENDY: It was a bad time for me. A lot of different pressures.

LESTER: You mean Mike.

WENDY: Including that. Let me get the water.

She starts toward the kitchen.

LESTER: I owe you an apology for that, too.

WENDY: (*curtly*) No, you don't.

She exits into the kitchen.

LESTER: (*shouts after her*) Yes, I do!

He is left alone in his drunken adurance. While offstage kitchen sounds indicate she is getting the coffee ready, he again addresses the air.

LESTER: She's never going to accept it.

There is a pause while the air responds.

LESTER: Look at this place. The next stop is some convent cell where she can flagellate herself all day. She still doesn't want to share the credit.

The air replies.

LESTER: Okay, *credit* isn't the word. You know what I mean. I should've never listened to Nina and taken that assignment.

He takes a pack of cigarettes and a book of matches out of his pocket. He addresses the air as he lights a cigarette and looks around for an ashtray.

LESTER: I don't mean you. I'm talking about the me part of it.

The air addresses him.

LESTER: No, I *didn't* deserve it.

The air addresses him.

LESTER: That's generous of you. But facts are facts.

WENDY returns from the kitchen. She carries a tray with a cup of coffee and a sugar bowl.

WENDY: You can have sugar, but no milk. Black is best. (*sees the cigarette*) I could really do without that, Lester.

LESTER: I just bought them for tonight. It seemed like something to do. Remember when you were a teenager and you bought cigarettes to go with your Friday night beers? (*to her glare*) Okay.

He looks around again for an ashtray. She takes the saucer out from under the cup and puts it in front of him. He extinguishes the cigarette on the saucer. But he dawdles over the matchbook in his hand. She stares at it, too.

LESTER: There's something else, Wendy.

WENDY: Drink your coffee.

She jumps nervously as he tosses the book of matches on the coffee table.

LESTER: With Mike.

WENDY: I'd rather not.....

LESTER: He intimidated me. I could never say anything he didn't have some glib answer to. You ever feel that way with him?

WENDY: No.

LESTER: That's right. You had a different.....Anyway, I was intimidated. And I always wanted to say something --- anything --- to him that would wipe some of that superiority off his face.

WENDY: That doesn't matter now.

LESTER: Funny, but I think you have some of his superiority. Like you got it from him during sex. Superiority sperm. Know what I mean?

WENDY: Lester.....

LESTER: No offense. But anyway one day --- *that* day --- I told him the only way he should go out was to burn himself to death.

She looks at him in horror.

LESTER: We were just talking over coffee in the cantina. I didn't think I was being serious, not seriously serious. And I know he wasn't because it was me he was talking to. Make a great top story some day, I told him, if he ever landed in an oxygen tent watching the beeping numbers going along on the monitors. He wouldn't have to feel bad about leaving the rest of us in the lurch by waiting for the beeps to flatline and him just fading to black. Torching himself would be a final gift to his staff --- a real top story.

WENDY: Lester, I don't want to hear this.

LESTER: I was just trying to be a newsroom wise guy. You know. The jaded man-of-the-world. "Hey, Mike, I can be as unfeeling as you." That kind of macho horseshit. He gave me this very weird look. But for once he really had no smart comeback. I never thought he would take my advice.

WENDY: Will you please stop?

LESTER: But I couldn't have killed him any more than if I'd put a gun to his head and pulled the trigger.

WENDY: Shut up, you asshole!

Stunned silence falls between them. Finally, she breaks it.

WENDY: I didn't mean that.

LESTER: Yes, you did.

WENDY: Yes, I did.

LESTER: And you're right. And that's what I'm going to have to confess to my kids some day. "Your Dad's an asshole, kids. You may as well hear it from me before somebody else wises you up. One time I was so much the asshole I killed an old boss of mine."

WENDY: I think you should go.

LESTER: (*nods*) I don't always like being in the same room with me, either.

WENDY: I'd really like to be alone right now.

LESTER: Then I saw him.

WENDY: Saw who?

LESTER: I don't mean Mike.

She marches to the front door and opens it.

WENDY: I'm really busy, Lester.

LESTER: No, you're not. (*consults with the air*) He insists I explain myself.

WENDY: *He.*

LESTER: Close the door. Some neighbor will be running down to the coop board to get you kicked out for entertaining drunks at ungodly hours.

WENDY: Lester.....

LESTER: Believe me. I know how cowards work. They'll be accusing you of having orgies in here. You're even dressed for the part. Don't I look like I know what I'm talking about?

She glances out into the hall anxiously and reluctantly closes the door. He gets up from the couch. He's unsteady but keeps his balance.

LESTER: What are the odds? You do a dozen assignments a week for years and

years and at the end of it you have --- what? A handful of pickups you felt were special? When you were doing the man-on-the-street stuff, how many times did you say to yourself, “Now, that’s actually interesting what that guy just said, I’m going to make a mental note of it?”

WENDY: I’m not following you.

LESTER: The assignment that changed my life!

WENDY: The assignment that changed your life.

LESTER: You heard of Ramon Perez, right? Not important. But when I went to talk to him during the last sweeps, he tells me that whenever he’s about to climb in the ring, he takes a peek at who’s sitting ringside. If he doesn’t see God there, he knows he’s got to box, keep weaving in and out, stay away from his opponent.

He starts shadowboxing and almost knocks himself down.

WENDY: Be careful!

He recovers his balance before she has to help him.

LESTER: But when he sees God sitting there, he tells me, he knows he has to go right for it. Opening bell in the opening round --- charge right in, left, right, left, right, level his opponent.

He does a modified demonstration so he doesn’t knock himself out.

WENDY: You’re going to hurt yourself!

LESTER: A week later I’m at the Garden. Perez against Sonny Brown. I watch Perez as he’s coming down the aisle. Just as he’s about to go through the ropes, he looks down at the front row where all the officials are. And this angelic smile comes over his face! Something from a stained-glass window. I knew what it meant right away. He’d seen God!

WENDY: You’re talking about a punch-drunk.....

LESTER: Then *I* saw him!

WENDY: Saw who?

LESTER: What Perez saw! He was very.....nondescript, really. You couldn't even be sure about what he was wearing because as soon as it seemed to be a sports jacket or a windbreaker or a T-shirt or anything else, the clothes just kind of dissolved. If the guy mugged me, I wouldn't know what to tell the cops. Tall? Short? He *seemed* tall, but that was before he seemed short. Eyes? I guess he had them. But they weren't colors I recognized. And sorry, all you feminists, unisexers, and Buddhists out there. He was more man than woman..... Sort of.

WENDY: In other words, you really didn't see what you saw.

LESTER: Exactly!

WENDY: And this has been since.....

LESTER: The Perez-Brown fight. And Ramon was right. He went directly after Brown. One-two, boom, fight over.

WENDY: You've been drinking, Lester.

LESTER: Don't you get it? How wonderful a feeling it was to do that series? For the first time I wasn't selling storm windows! I saw exactly what Sales said our audience saw! We were all on the same plain! Nobody was lying to anybody! I didn't have to feel like a conman just so we could pile up bigger numbers than the other stations!

WENDY: Great.

LESTER: You don't believe me.

WENDY: I'm hoping you don't believe you.

He motions to space.

LESTER: I don't have much choice.

WENDY: There's nobody there, Lester.

LESTER: That never bothered you when it came to those 93.3 percent who believed in ghosts.

WENDY: No, it didn't.

LESTER: And you told yourself it was just the job, it wasn't important as long as you yourself didn't believe what you were saying.

WENDY: I'm not proud of it.

LESTER: But now all that's behind you.

WENDY: I'd like to think so.

LESTER: But all those people out there who tuned in to you! The ones who think they saw their great-grandmothers in the hallway last night. The ones who feel left out because they never see anybody. We can't just write all that off as Wendy's yesterday career. Just fold your tent and take off because you suddenly have principles? It's not that easy.

WENDY: You can't accuse me of anything I haven't accused myself of.

LESTER: Shouldn't you be led into a public dock to account for your crimes?

WENDY: Like seeing God?

LESTER: That's different.

WENDY: Why's that?

LESTER: Because it's the truth!

WENDY: Okay, then. You have it, I don't. Call it a draw?

LESTER: I can tell when people are humoring me, you know. Your old boy friend was good at that. When he could bother to bring himself to it.

WENDY: Whatever you came here for tonight, Lester, I can't give it to you. You're better off with your invisible friend.

LESTER: He's not a friend.

WENDY: Check. Meanwhile, I think I'll take a chance on my reputation with the coop board.

She starts toward the front door. He grabs her by the arm. Too tightly.

WENDY: Let go of me!

LESTER: I don't mean to come off as judgmental. I hate that in people. Mike was always that way. So is Nina. We should be able to have thoughts without having opinions, don't you think?

WENDY: Sure.

LESTER: Objectivity at all times.

WENDY: At all times.

LESTER: And I admire you for getting out when you did. I still think you should confess your crimes, but at least now you've stopped telling people what they're supposed to have seen knowing they haven't.

WENDY: Whatever.

LESTER: If we can't tell the truth, let's at least keep our lies private.

WENDY: Right.

He lets go of her and looks around the room.

LESTER: And I respect what you're doing here, too. We bury ourselves in things and objects and facts and scores. And not only don't we see anything, we can't believe anyone else does, either. That's sad, don't you think?

He is suddenly overcome, close to tears. She hesitates about continuing on to the

door as she rubs her arm.

LESTER: I just wish you'd take the next step with me and see there's more to it than getting rid of furniture.

WENDY: If the job is getting to you that much, maybe you should quit, too.

LESTER: Sally and the kids depend on me.

WENDY: Maybe they should depend on you a little less.

LESTER: Thank you, Ms. Wendy. What else is in the Style section today?

She looks at the empty space.

WENDY: What does your friend think?

LESTER: Stop calling him my friend! He's God!

WENDY: Is that what God says --- stick it out?

LESTER: Damn right.

WENDY: A practical God.

LESTER: You really do sound like Mike. No wonder you had your little thing together. He had the ideas, you didn't resist them. Even though you knew they were bullshit. I think you'd still be there if he hadn't died.

WENDY: You really needed all that scotch to come here to say that? Excuse me for saying it, but it's a little pathetic.

He picks up the matchbook and begins playing with it in his hands. She freezes at the sight of it.

LESTER: No argument on that score. But I'd hoped you would be able to see my situation, that you'd be the first to understand some of the most routine things we've been doing suddenly one day become very old. We can't do them anymore. Maybe we're the parasites, maybe it's others who have been feeding off us. But

enough is enough.

WENDY: Who we talking about, Lester?

LESTER: People.

She looks at him more suspiciously.

WENDY: Why have you been drinking, Lester?

LESTER: Oops! The reporter's nose!

WENDY: Were you working late tonight or are you coming from home?

LESTER: What difference?

WENDY: I can't imagine Sally letting you out in that condition.

LESTER: You met her what --- at some Christmas party with Santa Claus? How would you know when she'd let me out?

She looks around for her telephone, realizes it is in her bag on the bar. She goes over and gets it from the bag.

WENDY: Why don't we tell her you're on your way home?

LESTER: She won't answer.

WENDY: Why not?

LESTER: Tell me something honest, Witchy Wendy. Honest and sincere.

WENDY: For what?

LESTER: *Touche*. You mean why waste it on Lester. The only thing I never figured out was if that's your attitude to all sports guys or just to me.

WENDY: I think we should call. She's probably worried about you.

LESTER: I use Direct Deposit. The check was in the bank yesterday.

WENDY: What's the number?

LESTER: That's what you mean, isn't it? Why waste something honest and sincere on old Lester?

WENDY: I didn't say that.

LESTER: I'd trust you if you did. I'd even give you the number.

WENDY: Okay, that's what I meant.

LESTER: Thank you. (*to the air*) I told you she was a soul sister.

WENDY: The number, Lester.

LESTER: 99.9 percent.

WENDY: What?

LESTER: I got the word from Nina yesterday. They're not content to leave it at God at 99.5 percent. Somebody in Sales pulled out all these surveys saying that wasn't the most popular demographic, that we should be reaching higher for a 99.9 percent audience.

WENDY: Of what?

LESTER: I'm a spiritual person, Wendy. They sing the National Anthem before ballgames, I don't think of a flag, I think of souls --- American souls.

WENDY: I understand.

LESTER: (*looks at the air*) And I can't just throw Him away because of some goddamn Sales Department surveys. 99.9 percent!

WENDY: And what is it people are supposed to see more than God?

LESTER: I could have used some of that tone with Nina. I could have even used it with Sally when I told her I wasn't really up for their new expose. But you know me. Not your go-to guy.

WENDY: You misheard Nina. 99.9 percent don't see anything.

LESTER: Be a helluva potential number if they did, right? And I'd be fronting it. Five nights a week.

WENDY: How about I call Nina for you and straighten that out?

LESTER: No, let them do it! The important thing is we don't believe it!

WENDY: That's make-believe.

LESTER: *Now* you worry about that???!!!

He wrests the phone away from her.

LESTER: Too late, Witchy Wendy. Too late.

WENDY: Give me back the phone.

LESTER: To talk to more voices only you can hear? Why is it so easy to believe in them but not in what stands right here in the room with us?

WENDY: There's nobody here!

LESTER: But there is out there? Since when? All I've ever seen are numbers. Ratings. Scores. Deposit amounts. You can believe in that just so long.

She starts to back off toward the front door.

WENDY: Okay.

LESTER: We've got to believe in more than numbers.

WENDY: Agreed.

LESTER: Where are you going?

WENDY: You're not leaving, so I am.

She makes a bolt to the door. He grabs her before she can get it open and begins throttling her.

WENDY: Lester, you're choking me!

The lights begin to dim as she struggles against his choke hold.

LESTER: Not even seeing God is good enough!

WENDY: Lester.....!

LESTER: They're never satisfied! Never! Never!

The lights go down as they struggle. After a long moment the spectral light comes on. JUNE appears with a mike, addressing the home viewers.

JUNE: This is June Jivaro. When we look out the window in the morning, what do we see? Other houses? Stores? Traffic? People hurrying along the sidewalk on their way to work? Whether we're in suburbia or urbia, most of us see those things. But what just about all of us --- 99.9 percent of us! --- see is the weather. Nothing special about that, you say. Who even notices it? It's just there. If it wasn't raining or snowing, we couldn't even swear to that much. It looks like just a lot of air. But the truth isn't so simple. In fact, according to secret intelligence reports obtained by this station in exclusive, the number one terrorist threat to the Tristate area is to be found in the weather we take so much for granted. Time for a wake-up call?

She extends the mike into the darkness and listens for a moment to what the invisible interviewee tells her.

JUNE: And you have no doubt it was the weather you were seeing?

She sticks out the mike for another reply.

JUNE: And when did you feel yourself in danger?

She sticks out the mike for another reply.

JUNE: It must have been a stunning and traumatic experience.

She nods through the answer.

JUNE: Yes, I'm sure it was.

She turns with her mike in another direction for another interview.

JUNE: And what was your experience?

She listens for the answer.

JUNE: That must have stunned you.

Answer.

JUNE: I can imagine how traumatic.

She turns to a third interviewee. As she does, the lights dim.

JUNE: When did you first become suspicious of what.....?

The lights come down completely. After a long moment they come up again on Buddy's apartment. It looks much seedier than when previously seen, a room that has been allowed to fend for itself and with grim results. Even seedier is BUDDY himself, who sits on the floor playing cards on the coffee table. Seated with him around the table are BEULAH, LOWENSTEIN, LESTER, and WENDY. Since they are all dead, they are not as seedy looking as BUDDY. The game under way is gin rummy. A score pad and pen rest near Buddy's place. As the scene goes forward, the five players go through the motions of the game. NINA comes through the front door, which has been left ajar. LOWENSTEIN sees her first.

LOWENSTEIN: Uh, oh. She's here for you, Buddy.

NINA: Buddy?

BUDDY: (*barely acknowledging her*) What do you want?

NINA: I'd like to talk.

LESTER: Thank you, Beulah. Just what I was looking for.

NINA: (*edging closer to the table*) What are you doing there?

BUDDY: Playing gin. What does it look like?

NINA: By yourself?

WENDY: Out of mind, out of sight.

LESTER: We're not good for her ratings anymore.

BUDDY: Why not? Anybody can play solitaire alone.

NINA: I'd like to talk to you.

BUDDY: You said that.

NINA: About the next sweeps.

LOWENSTEIN: What else!

BUDDY: That's station crap. I don't work at the station anymore.

NINA: What would you say if I wanted to hire you back?

BEULAH: Fuck you I hope.

WENDY: Don't do it, Buddy.

NINA: Buddy?

BUDDY: I don't care about the station. You made me not care about it.

BEULAH: Good for you, Buddy.

NINA: I made a mistake.

LOWENSTEIN: Always that damn personal note!

BUDDY: That's nice.

NINA looks around askance.

NINA: It's not easy for me to come here and admit that.

BUDDY: We all have our crosses. Some people burn themselves to death. Some stick their heads in ovens. Some murder their families and their colleagues and then jump off a bridge. You have a problem apologizing.

WENDY: Beautiful, Buddy.

BEULAH: My God, is this my Buddy!

NINA: I deserve your skepticism.

BUDDY: Thank you.

NINA: I'm prepared to perk your salary.

BEULAH: Talk about ships that have sailed!

BUDDY: Why you suddenly need me so badly?

NINA: Honestly?

LOWENSTEIN: No, he wants to hear a lie.

NINA: You've seen the series on the weather we've been doing?

BUDDY: No.

NINA: Let's just say the material is there but not the people for driving it home. They're trying their best, but.....

BUDDY: You shouldn't have fired the rest of my staff with me.

NINA: Humble pie, Buddy. What more can I say?

BEULAH: How about *Goodbye*?

NINA: Everything is in place except the authority figure we need. Somebody who can stand out there and make it clear why, when 99.9 percent of the population in the Tristate area is directly affected, we have a situation.

BUDDY: Who's holding out?

NINA: What?

BUDDY: The other .1 percent.

LOWENSTEIN: Gin!

LOWENSTEIN lays down his cards to general moaning.

LESTER: You never get tired of it, do you?

LOWENSTEIN: Should I? Okay, everybody, tote up for Buddy.

The other players start counting the cards they have been left holding. BUDDY is keeping score on the pad.

WENDY: Who can count so high? Forty-two.

BUDDY: Who's missing from the 99.9 percent?

NINA: I don't remember.

BEULAH: (*throwing in her cards*) Eleven.

LOWENSTEIN: Eleven she says. (*retrieves the discarded cards and counts them*) Plus the other twenty you missed.

BEULAH: I was never any good at math. Buddy thought it was just one more limitation among so many. Tell him, Buddy.

BUDDY writes down her amount.

BUDDY: You sound like you don't care who they are.

NINA: When we've got them, we'll brand them.

LESTER: Whoopee, aiye!

BUDDY: You mean, when I help you get them.

NINA: Why should we stop now? Don't see you how close we are? Nobody in the history of the industry has ever been able to say they appealed to a perfect 100 percent demographic.

BUDDY: And that matters to you.

NINA: I was mentored by the best.

WENDY: *(to LOWENSTEIN)* She's still saying what you want to hear.

BUDDY: I'm no miracle worker. People don't want to see the weather, they won't see it. *(counts his cards)* Seventeen for me.

NINA: They'll see it if they see you.

BEULAH: Don't fall for it, Buddy.

BUDDY: Me?

NINA: Ask anybody in the Tristate area. You *are* the weather.

LOWENSTEIN: Christ, she's gotten good!

NINA: Even if they don't personally see the threat we've uncovered, they'll see you and know you wouldn't mislead them. They trust you, Buddy, Your 100 percent credibility is equal to the threat.

BUDDY: Last I heard, I was telling people not to go outside without their umbrellas, parkas, and sun tan lotion.

BEULAH: That's right. That's what she said.

NINA: I was exaggerating. I'd just taken over and I was under a lot of stress. It wasn't easy replacing Mike, you know.

BUDDY gathers up the cards to shuffle for a new deal.

LOWENSTEIN: *Succeeding* is the word you're looking for, love.

NINA: I didn't understand your genius. You were covering all the bases just like Sales does. It took me awhile to see that.

LESTER: Don't go for it, Buddy. God wasn't good enough for them. Why the hell would you be?

BUDDY: (*snaps*) Maybe because atheists see the weather, too!

NINA: Excuse me?

BUDDY: Nothing.

BEULAH: Be happy with what you have, Buddy. You can still see your Beulah and all your friends, can't you?

BUDDY tosses away the cards and jumps up from the floor to get away from the others. He goes to the bar for a drink, but discovers only empty bottles.

NINA: You don't need a drink, Buddy. You need to get back to work.

BUDDY: The weather's been doing just fine without me.

BEULAH: Like I always said!

NINA: You don't believe that. And I certainly don't.

WENDY: She's going to tell him what he wants to hear.

NINA: A few months ago, I would have said the same thing. What's one talking head from another? But you have that special something.

BUDDY: What's that?

NINA: That.....*je ne sais quoi*. You recognize it only when it's not there. How else can I say it? You're a more important absence than ghosts, gods, or anything else, and that's why you're so sorely missed.

WENDY: Run that one by me again.

LESTER: There's no end to the disrespect, is there?

BEULAH: It's just another kind of blowjob, Buddy. Don't fall for it.

BUDDY: (*to BEULAH*) If you're against it, how wrong can it be?

NINA: Focus, Buddy. I'm making you an offer.

BUDDY looks at all the ghosts, one by one. Each turns away from him.

BUDDY: I would have conditions. I'm not saying yes, mind you. But if I did say yes, there would be conditions.

BEULAH groans.

NINA: Tell me.

BUDDY: No more seeing God. When you start in with all this ding-dong about seeing God and then throw it over to me, I may as well be giving the weather in some revivalist tent.

NINA: Okay. No more visions of God. They didn't give us the bump we were counting on, anyway.

BUDDY stares over at LESTER.

LESTER: How could I have ever believed.....?

WENDY: I told you, Lester: It was sports.

LESTER: But all those human lives.....

WENDY: You made a mistake.

LOWENSTEIN: Move along, Lester.

LESTER stands up from the floor and exits through the kitchen. BUDDY follows his exit until his gaze falls on BEULAH.

BUDDY: We don't need ghosts, either.

BEULAH: Buddy!

BUDDY: You want somebody to give you the forecast from a haunted house, get another meteorologist.

NINA: No ghosts. Been there done that.

BEULAH: Have a drink, Buddy.

BUDDY: Go!

NINA: Who are you talking to?

BUDDY: Somebody who used to be a ghost.

BEULAH reluctantly rises from the floor and makes the same exit as Lester.

NINA: Anything else?

WENDY: Don't sell yourself cheap, Buddy.

BUDDY: What else do I want?

LOWENSTEIN: What else is there?

BUDDY: Nothing.

LOWENSTEIN: Then you're set.

LOWENSTEIN rises to exit like the others. WENDY doesn't move.

WENDY: Think, Buddy.

NINA: I'll go back to the office right now and draw up a contract.

WENDY: Buddy?

NINA: What's the problem?

BUDDY: One more thing.

WENDY: Good man!

NINA: I've already made a lot of concessions.

BUDDY: This won't be just for me. You want the cast to be better, right?

NINA: Of course.

BUDDY: Build up that sense of anticipation night after night so they can't wait to tune in?

NINA: That's what we'd be counting on you for.

BUDDY: Maybe get viewers beyond the Tristate area?

NINA: That's always a bonus. You know that.

LOWENSTEIN: Good, Buddy. Everything is local somewhere.

BUDDY: Mike taught me that.

WENDY: Did he ever!

BUDDY goes over to the scratch pad and writes down something.

BUDDY: Here's what I'll need.

He rips off the pad page and hands it to NINA. She glances at it.

NINA: This.....

BUDDY: This is the deal breaker.

LOWENSTEIN: My work here is done.

LOWENSTEIN exits through the kitchen. WENDY lingers to see Nina's reaction. Only when NINA nods and sticks the scrap of paper in her bag does WENDY stand and follow after the others into the kitchen.

WENDY: You could have held out for more, Buddy.

BUDDY: I'm no quitter.

WENDY exits. The lights come down on the room. After a long moment, the single light comes up again on NINA. She is addressing the TV audience.

NINA: We here at Evening News have suffered a number of tragedies recently. Involving not only on-air personnel familiar to you, but also their families, including wives and children. That old axiom about the show having to go on never seemed more insensitive than it does to us here right now. And yet the show *does* have to go on because life itself has to go on and you depend on us for helping you live it. To you, Buddy!

The lights shift over to BUDDY, who stands before an aerial map in full weatherman mode. Throughout his presentation he makes reference to various areas of the map, which is in fact of the cosmos. He is all bubbles.

BUDDY: Thank you, Nina! And don't you look wicked this evening! Well, as Nina has hinted, we have recently uncovered a pattern that is sure to create a great deal of misery in all our lives. The joker in the deck, of course, is that you have been aware of it for quite some time and maybe only now want to admit what you are looking at. You don't have a choice anyway since we are showing it to you

here. This new threat has been dubbed Nothing by the creative boys and girls at the Hurricane Center. Nada, for those of you with another lingo over the dining room table. Now the first thing to understand about Nothing is that it is an alien creation. Most experts agree it began life near Pluto --- up here. And as long as it stayed there, what did we care? Different systems for different species, and all that. But then Nothing got tired of its orbit around Pluto and broke down on a straight line toward the Tristate area. And that's where *we* come into the story!

The lights dim as he begins tracing a path on the map.