

GENERIC THRILLER

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FADE IN:

INT. BARE STAGE - DAY

MRS. FARMER wipes her hands on her apron.

MRS. FARMER

I remember as though it were  
yesterday. The farm. Mom and Dad.  
They struggled desperately but  
couldn't get ahead. They'd finish  
paying for the thrasher then they'd  
need a new tractor.

STEVEN, brainy, whiny yet enormously likeable, enters and  
strides briskly toward Mrs. Farmer.

MRS. FARMER (cont.)

(sensing him coming she hurries)

Who knew that a shadow, a  
kind of foreshadowing, really,  
a sort of storm cloud gathering  
at the horizon, would cross -

STEVEN

(exasperated)

This isn't your story.

MRS. FARMER

The story belongs to whoever  
has the gumption to grab it.

STEVEN

Whomever.

MRS. FARMER

Just because you're the author  
doesn't mean you decide everything.  
Film is a collaborative medium.

STEVEN

This is a play.

CUT TO A WIDE SHOT OF THE STAGE

Enter SIGMUND FREUD.

He speaks with a silly, bad German accent.

FREUD

You are not a vell voman. You have vhat psychiatry calls ze "Lucy Complex."

MRS. FARMER

The what?

FREUD

Characterized by a marked lack of talent and pronounced tendency to sneak into the chorus line of Ricky's show.

STEVEN

Now get off this stage and stop directly addressing the audience.

MRS. FARMER

The camera. It's a camera and I'm ready for my close-up.

STEVEN

I warn you, I'm not in the mood for this.

MRS. FARMER

It's the plight of the American farmer!

Steven draws a pistol and shoots her dead.

STEVEN

(to Freud)

She was fictional, so it's not like I'm a bad person, right?

FREUD

Whatever you want me to say, I will say.

Exit Freud.

STEVEN

(to her corpse)

They have to do what I say. I'm  
the writer.

MR. FARMER runs onto the stage. He ignores Steven and the  
gun.

MR. FARMER

(with genuine, powerful grief)

Ruth! My sweet Lima bean! What have  
they done to you? If I ever find  
the man who did this...I'll kill  
him!

Steven looks at the audience - YIKES! - and hides the gun as  
Mr. Farmer drags Mrs. Farmer away by her feet.

Steven waits until they're off stage and speaks.

STEVEN

(to audience)

Forget any of that happened. The  
play starts now. It's an exciting  
thriller. No farmers. I hope you  
enjoy it. I want only to please  
you. But not in a pathetic way -  
in a thoughtful, considerate...  
not-clingy way.

SOUND: A SCREAM.

PAN TO: A TV REPORTER clutching a microphone.

TV REPORTER

This just in: police report another  
rape-murder - what appears to be  
the third in a series of brutal  
attacks. All we know is that he  
strikes in the South Bay, and his  
victims have blonde hair. Only  
blondes. He kills blondes. Blondes.  
Yellow-haired sirens. And that's  
not all there is to the pattern.  
Witnesses on the scene - an alley  
behind the Hair Today Beauty Salon  
on South Third Street -- report

REPORTER (cont.)

that, once again, the victim has been mutilated. In what way? Police ask us not to release that information. But they offer women advice on how to cope with the situation. They recommend that you dye your hair some other color and obliterate your true self. But that's good advice, even under ordinary circumstances.

(her manner becomes suddenly perky)

And now this!

CUT TO WIDE SHOT:

INT. BARE STAGE - NIGHT

Steven places the last detail - a vase of flowers - onto a rudimentary "sorority bedroom" set.

MARY BETH, a sweet, blond sorority girl in a cheerleader uniform, lies on her bed, crying.

LAUREN ROSENTHAL, a sorority sister and roommate, also blonde and in a cheerleader uniform, enters.

LAUREN

Mary Beth, what's wrong?!

MARY BETH

Mom lost her job. I can't afford to stay in school.

LAUREN

One disaster at a time. Can you cover next month's room and board?

MARY BETH

I'm too stupid to be in college anyway. I should just get a boob job and hook some nice, rich guy.

Mary Beth starts crying again. Lauren hugs her.

LAUREN

Mary Beth - if you're waiting for  
a man to save you, you'll wait  
till you're dead.

FLASHING SUPERIMPOSITION: "FORESHADOWING... FORESHADOWING"

Lauren fills in a check.

MARY BETH

No.

LAUREN

If I don't spend daddy's money  
he'll just waste it on some bottle  
blonde whore.

Lauren sets the check on Mary Beth's bed.

MARY BETH

I'm too stupid for college anyway.

Lauren pushes the check toward Mary Beth.

MARY BETH (cont.)

Lauren, you don't know how much I  
appreciate that you're willing to  
do this. But I'm from Indiana.

Mary Beth tears the check in half. A pause.

LAUREN

What'll you do?

MARY BETH

My arms aren't broken. There's no  
reason I can't get a second job.

KNOCK-KNOCK at the pretend door.

Lauren pretend opens it. It's PETER HERRING, a hunky frat  
boy.

MARY BETH

Oh, wonderful. Peter Herring. How  
did you get in?

PETER

Everybody must be at the Omega mixer  
cause the front door was just hanging.

LAUREN

Did you close it?

PETER

I assumed it was open for a reason.

LAUREN

Don't you know there's a serial  
killer on the loose?

CU on Peter.

PETER

(quiet menace)

What are the chances he'll walk  
in here?

WIDER ANGLE: Lauren is gone. Peter plops down on the bed next  
to Mary Beth.

PETER

Hi.

He starts fondling her.

MARY BETH

Not now.

He continues.

MARY BETH

I said "No!"

Peter, suddenly furious, bangs his palm on the headboard.

PETER

Damn it -- you're 20 years old, and  
you act like you're 12. What's this  
fear of sex?

MARY BETH

You're a pig.

PETER

OK - fine. Later.

Peter stalk off. He doesn't slam anything but we hear a door slam anyway. Mary Beth buries her head in a pillow and cries.

STEVEN enters and addresses the audience, as Mary Beth continues to cry, sob, wail, beats her pillow and so on.

STEVEN

(to the audience)

Already this isn't working. For one thing, one doesn't have characters cry. They cry, the audience doesn't. That's a rule.

LARRY, youngish, creepy, with a very ripped body and wearing a wife beater undershirt and apron, enters and awaits his cue, maybe doing muscle poses or pumping dumbbells.

STEVEN (cont.)

(distracted)

Even worse, Lauren and Mary Beth and Peter are just a subplot. Here I've spent this long scene on them and I haven't even introduced the leads.

(more focused)

I suppose I should introduce myself. I'm Steven. I'm a writer. Well, I'm really a theatre history professor, but I've always wanted to write a play and I've taken lots of classes and read lots of books and now I'm going to do it. I really want to write this play. I suppose I'm trying to prove something to myself. Also, I have these two actress friends who teach acting and they're awfully good and they don't get much work. So I'm writing parts for them. You haven't met them yet. I'm having trouble introducing characters as early as I should. Please be patient. I'm writing a thriller. Because thrillers

STEVEN (cont.)  
really hold the audience's  
attention.

As Steven talks, a rudimentary HEAVENLY BURGER fast food restaurant set (card table, folding chairs, that kind of thing) is set up behind him by SIX AFRICAN TRIBESMEN, carrying spears, dressed in grass skirts and grass masks that entirely obscure their faces.

Steven exits.

Mary Beth knocks on the "door" of Heavenly Burger.

Larry answers.

MARY BETH  
I wanted to be the first to apply  
for the job.

LARRY  
You have the blondest hair.

MARY BETH  
I'm a junior at State, a theater  
major so I know how to deal with  
the public, and I'm very responsible.

LARRY  
Fill this out. Don't forget to  
check whether you're an A, B, C  
or D cup. I'd say a large B.

She picks up a pen and writes.

Larry removes his apron.

LARRY (cont.)  
So, I guess all your girlfriends  
are rooting for you to get the  
big job.

MARY BETH  
(to the audience)  
Why tell anyone I'm coming over  
to apply when I may not get the  
job?

LARRY

(to the audience)

So no one knows you're here? You're here all alone and no one knows where you are? Your whereabouts are unknown and if you were, say, to go missing for one reason or another, no one would be able to trace you to this hamburger stand?

Mary Beth stops writing, looks up.

MARY BETH

(smiling sweetly)

That's right.

LARRY

Jesus. When you said in the opening scene that you weren't very bright, I thought maybe you were just being self-deprecating or had low self-esteem or something.

MARY BETH

You saw the first scene? Did I cry convincingly?

MUSIC: THE DANGER THEME.

MARY BETH (cont.)

What's that music?

LARRY

(lying badly with secret evil delight)  
Music?

The music gets louder.

MARY BETH

That! That!

LARRY

I don't hear anything.

MARY BETH

I must be imagining it.

AUDIENCE MEMBER is a young, good-looking black man who is very confident and always suspicious of being conned. He becomes increasingly exasperated as the play goes on, but right now he's just into the story. He leaps from his seat.

AUDIENCE MEMBER

(a frantic warning, yet somehow ritualized or zombie-like)

Don't go in the basement! Don't go in the basement! He's in the house! He's in the house! He's calling from inside the house!

He sits back down with a calm, self-satisfied air.

Mary Beth shows no sign of having heard, yet...

MARY BETH

I think I'd better come back later.

She stands up. So does Larry.

LARRY

Why?

MARY BETH

I forgot something.

LARRY

You heard that guy in the audience.

Mary Beth edges toward the door.

MARY BETH

No - I forgot a French test today. In French. I hate French because there's so much memorization. I must have blocked it out. Because I didn't want to take the test so I just forgot all about it. Gee, I'm late already. I'll come back later.

He grabs her wrist.

LARRY  
Finish the application.

MARY BETH  
That hurts.

LARRY  
Does it?

MARY BETH  
You know it does.

LARRY  
How can anybody know how anybody  
else feels?

He pulls her closer and POW! Mary Beth turns into a wildcat - screaming, twisting, clawing, biting. She puts up a hell of a struggle, but Larry is powerful and he forces her to the ground and wraps his fingers around her neck. He strangles her to death.

He produces a HUGE SAW.

CU on Larry's face as we hear sounds of SAWING and see blood splashed up onto his face.

LARRY  
(purring)  
Oh, baby, you look so beautiful  
tonight. Are you glad to see me?  
Is that why you look so beautiful?  
Your hair is so blond.

MARY BETH  
(overlapping)  
Ouch! Ouch! You're killing me! Ouch!  
Stop killing me!

CUT TO WIDE SHOT OF BARE STAGE:

STEVEN  
OK. We introduced the killer.  
Now what? I have no idea. Should  
I have done an outline or something  
before I started?

Smoke fills the stage and harp music plays.

A marvelous apparition, THALIA, MUSE OF COMEDY, appears at the corner of the screen, floating in a DIGITALLY-CREATED BUBBLE.

She always rides around in The Bubble, which appears and disappears along with her.

Her manner can be gracious, with sweetness bordering on saccharine, but she can turn on a dime and be coldly vicious.

STEVEN

Who are you?

THALIA

I'm Thalia, Muse of Comedy. And pastoral poetry. Now mostly comedy.

STEVEN

Why are you riding around in a bubble?

THALIA

Your budget won't support a '52 Buick Roadmaster Convertible lowered from the fly space but don't worry, I'm still *ex machina*.

STEVEN

Am I going crazy?

THALIA

Americans love their artists crazy. They think you're not really an artist until you cut off your ear or drink yourself to death. Americans like to romanticize. Go crazy!

STEVEN

You look just like Mrs. Brody, my 8<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher, who told me I'd never be a writer, that Nick Pulaski, he was the writer.

THALIA

I am not Mrs. Brody and I happen to know that Nick Pulaski now sells tires.

STEVEN

I think I'm going to like you. So, Thalia, O Great Muse of Comedy, why have you deigned to visit our humble play?

THALIA

I'm here to give you inspiration. And to criticize you. And to give you writing tips.

STEVEN

Great! What should I do? Next.

THALIA

*You still have to come up with the ideas. You have to write it, I just...facilitate an open airing of the issues.*

STEVEN

That doesn't sound very definite.  
(a little irritated)  
Could you be more definite?

THALIA

You mean definite like when I ordered the Corybantic priests to identify with the goddess Cybele by castrating themselves?

SOUND: THUNDER.

STEVEN

What I'd really like is someone to tell me what happens next in the play, just a hint, but without castration, and if you're too busy I totally understand.

THALIA

You're in act one, which many writers feel is a good time to introduce characters.

(a little contemptuously, under her breathe)  
Duh.

STEVEN

Yes. Of course. Immediately, your  
Demi...goddess...ness.

PAN TO:

A woman sits at a desk. On it, a SIGN: SARA CARNEGIE,  
REFERENCE LIBRARIAN.

SARA CARNEGIE is attractive brunette, maybe late thirties or  
early forties. She wears glasses, no make-up and looks  
pinched, but it's clear that with a sweeter expression and a  
little work she could be a knockout. She's very nervous.  
Impatient. Everything's an ordeal.

Peter enters.

PETER

I need to know about this Italian  
guy Pirandello.

Sara strides off briskly and Peter trails behind.

SARA

Pirandello was a great playwright.  
He blurred the line between stage  
and reality. Interestingly, despite  
his artistic radicalism, Luigi  
Pirandello was an ardent supporter  
of the Italian fascist dictator  
Benito Mussolini, otherwise known  
as Il Duce, or, Hitler's best friend.

PETER

You're obviously spreading  
disinformation. Everyone knows  
all artists are whiny liberals.

SARA

Many great artists were fascists.  
W.H. Auden. Leni Reifenstahl.  
Charlton Heston.

PETER

Back to Pirandello.

SARA

(seething)

You'll want to start with the online card catalogue, the subject file, under *Pirandello*. It's alphabetical. There's also a file of unpublished master's theses -

PETER

(overlapping on "master's")

Whoa! Just give me one book that has it all. Like Cliff Notes.

SARA

(pointing)

The Encyclopedia Britannica is that way.

She heads back to her desk.

HECTOR MENDIAS, another librarian, is Cuban and somewhat courtly. His English is excellent.

Also, he's played by the same actor who plays Steven, but with a corny little Cesar Romero mustache.

HECTOR

(reading from the paper)

"Killer of Blondes Strikes Fourth Time. State University Coed Found Mutilated."

SARA

Hector, cover for me for 20 minutes?

HECTOR

Sure. What's up?

SARA

I can't bear these beastly little brats.

HECTOR

You mean that little undergrad you were helping, who looks like he majors in pleasure boating?

SARA

A demon from hell. This job is like a nightmare from which I cannot awake. I've just got to get something with a lot of fat grams in it. A milkshake.

HECTOR

You're going to Heavenly Burger?

SARA

Yes.

HECTOR

Bring me fries?

A pause. Sara sighs.

HECTOR (cont.)

God, Sara, it's just an order of fries. I mean, I'll give you the money.

SARA

No, no, that's not it. Just - I've got to get out of here.

HECTOR

I'll cover the desk.

Hector gives Sara a little kiss on the forehead.

HECTOR

Don't pig out. Remember Vertigo is making dinner.

Sara pulls on a hat that covers all of her hair.

SARA

OK, OK.

Sara exits.

AUDIENCE MEMBER

Hey! You're the same guy from before!

HECTOR/STEVEN

(to the audience)

I'm a completely new character.

(pause; drops the accent)

OK, I'm not really Hector. Hector was invented as a mouthpiece for the author. I've disguised myself as an anticommunist Cuban homosexual. I don't know why, since I am neither Cuban nor particularly anti-communist. I based the character on an anticommunist Cuban homosexual theater critic, who's going to review the play. I wonder if he'll recognize himself.

Sara returns, milkshake in hand.

SARA

I've lost my wallet.

STEVEN/HECTOR

(still to the audience)

At last, a plot development.

(to Sara, back to the accent)

Did you leave it at Heavenly Burger when you went out and forgot to get my fries, while greedily remembering to get a big, thick shake for yourself?

SARA

Maybe. I don't know.

HECTOR

Call them.

SARA

They were closing when I left.

HECTOR

Suppose it is lost. What's the worst that can happen? Just cancel your credit cards.

SARA

Where could it be? This is a nightmare!

HECTOR  
Sara, we're late for dinner.

SARA  
I can't leave without it.

Hector dials the phone as Sara dumps the contents of her purse onto the desk.

HECTOR  
(to operator)  
Heavenly Burger on Rose.

Hector dials the phone and hands it to Sara.

HECTOR  
Maybe someone is cleaning up.

SARA  
(listening to the phone)  
It's an answering machine.  
(leaving a message)  
I'm Sara Carnegie. I was in your restaurant this afternoon. If you find my wallet, please, please, call me as soon as possible. My number is on my checks.

Sara hangs up.

HECTOR  
Do you want to cancel your credit cards?

SARA  
No. No, I don't want to. Oh, I don't know WHAT I want.

HECTOR  
We have to go - now!

PAN TO: The lights come up on another part of the stage; a COUCH and chairs. Sara and Hector enter.

VERTIGO, a boyishly handsome lad in his early 20s, sits on the couch. No one comments on the fact that his entire costume consists of a pair of white Jockey shorts.

Next to Vertigo is GLENDA, a gorgeous, polished brunette "of a certain age" with an English accent and a very waspish manner.

HECTOR

I'm home!

VERTIGO

Thought you were dead.

HECTOR/STEVEN

Sorry, sorry, sorry.

(to the audience)

That line is from "Sunday, Bloody Sunday." Lots of the lines in this play are stolen from other things. How many can you spot?

VERTIGO

Are you over boring the audience?

HECTOR/STEVEN

(to Vertigo)

Almost.

(to the audience, as Steven)

Vertigo's not a great actor. I cast him because I want into his pants. So I wrote this part based on my old boyfriend, whose name actually was Vertigo, and whom I dated because he reminded me of my seventh grade teacher - who was named Mr. Vertigo. I keep trying to turn man after man into Mr. Vertigo. It reminds me of this Hitchcock movie I once saw. It starred Jimmy Stewart and Kim Novak, but I can't remember the title.

He turns to Vertigo, but then remembers something and addresses the audience one more time.

HECTOR/STEVEN

Barbara Bel Geddes was in it.

(to Vertigo)

Now I'm done. Do the exposition.

VERTIGO

(to Hector)

I don't know what the hell you're talking about. Ever.

(to his guests, accenting the first syllable of "salon")

Guess what happened today at the salon.

GLEENDA

What?

VERTIGO

The killer's latest victim was found in the alley next to the shop.

SARA

Did you see the...?

VERTIGO

No. But there was a chalk outline on the ground where she was found. He'd chopped off her arms and legs, so it was just this sort of stumpy outline of a torso. My shampoo girl found the corpse but the police told her not to tell anyone the details. So don't tell anyone if you think they might be the killer.

HECTOR

The killer knows.

VERTIGO

You're right.

(to Glenda)

Tell anybody you want.

GLEENDA

It's all so horrible. Why do I feel like laughing?

HECTOR

Schaden-freude. You're brunettes,  
so you have nothing to worry  
about. And now my character wants  
a drink.

(to audience)

It's really just tea but it looks  
like whiskey and I can pretend to  
get drunk.

VERTIGO

I'd better check my sauce.

HECTOR/STEVEN

He's really coming out to make sure  
I don't pour too large a drink.

Vertigo follows Hector out.

The lights go down on the "living room" and come up on the  
"kitchen."

Vertigo and Hector pantomime fussing with dinner and fixing  
the cocktails. Their cooperation in the tiny space is a  
little ballet.

When Vertigo talks he goes right ahead with whatever he's  
doing, while Hector tends to stop and strike a pose.

VERTIGO

What's with Sara?

HECTOR

What's ever the matter? Anything  
is an occasion for suffering.

VERTIGO

What tonight?

HECTOR

Tonight she lost her wallet. Tomorrow  
it'll be, "I hate myself, I drank too  
much wine last night." There's always  
some reason to suffer. She is the  
logical conclusion of Protestantism.  
They have no mechanisms of forgiveness.

VERTIGO

The answer to her problems is between  
a man's legs.

The camera scrutinizes Vertigo's face as Hector/Steven  
addresses the audience:

HECTOR/STEVEN (V.O.)

(very tenderly)

I know. He doesn't seem very bright.  
But he's smarter than he looks. He's  
very shrewd about getting what he  
wants. He doesn't seem to be doing  
anything, yet ends up with his way.  
And isn't that a better kind of  
intelligence than the intellectual  
kind that writes book reviews for a  
75 bucks a pop but ends up poor  
and alone? The kind of smart that  
works in schools is overrated,  
mostly because it's schools that  
dominate the smartness-rating  
business. I don't want to be alone.  
I just adore him. I've never wanted  
anyone or anything so much.

(to Vertigo, aloud)

Why is it that men, straight or  
homosexual, confronted with a nervous  
woman, invariably say that what she  
needs is a good screwing?

VERTIGO

Because she does?

HECTOR

In your case it's projection.

VERTIGO

Ooo. Does that mean I'm getting it  
tonight?

HECTOR

She has money - she doesn't have  
to work at a job she hates. She's  
good looking - she doesn't have  
to be stuck in a hopeless affair  
with a married man.

Hector takes a swig of his drink.

VERTIGO

You think you can run her life better than she can. But before you met me, your love life was at least as crummy as hers.

HECTOR

There's a difference. Men can have promiscuous sex without getting emotionally involved. Women get enmeshed even when they tell themselves they won't.

VERTIGO

I know what would cheer Sara up.

HECTOR

What?

VERTIGO

A complete makeover. I mean, new clothes, new makeup, - the works! She'd look great as a blonde!

HECTOR

Blonde?

SUPERIMPOSITION: FORESHADOWING...FORESHADOWING...

HECTOR (cont.)

I don't think she'll go for it.

VERTIGO

Can I ask her? I mean, to a hairdresser, Sara is like a lump of clay waiting to be molded into a work of art.

HECTOR

Don't bring it up. She'll take it as criticism.

VERTIGO

Yes, Dad.

HECTOR

Now - let's "do it" right here  
in the kitchen.

VERTIGO

No way!

HECTOR

Why not?

VERTIGO

I don't feel that way about you.  
And "doing it" is not in the script.

HECTOR

*It will be in the very next draft.*

In the "living room" Sara and Glenda look angry.

SARA

I'm not the one having an affair with  
a student.

GLEND A

No, you're the one having affair  
after affair with married men.

Hector enters with drinks for the girls.

HECTOR

Ladies! Tigers! Behave. Or I won't  
feed you.

(to audience, as Steven)

This isn't working at all!

LIGHTS up.

Hector hands off the drinks to Vertigo, who looks annoyed.

STEVEN (cont.)

Here I am, trying to write a thriller,  
and we're on page 24 and still the  
heroine isn't in jeopardy. I try to  
make it be a thriller - I do! - but  
I keep veering off into chitchat!

VERTIGO

Yeah - this is all talk!

HECTOR

(ignoring Vertigo)

And that prissy little snotnose  
Vertigo - see if I ever work with  
him again. That's what you get  
for inventing characters simply  
because you want to bone them.  
Somebody should have told Joe  
Eszterhas that before he wrote  
"Showgirls." Anyway, I apologize.  
There'll be more murder and  
jeopardy and pointless death  
as soon as I can turn this doomed  
Titanic of a narrative around.

(as Hector)

So - how 'bout that serial killer,  
huh?

The LIGHTS come down a little.

GLENDA

All men are like the killer.  
Women must be altered to fit  
men's fantasies. Our idea  
of female beauty is chopped to  
fit a picture in a man's head -  
like the blonde-killer chops up  
his victims! Don't like the  
nose? Chop it up. Don't like  
the breasts? Chop *them* up!

HECTOR

(as Steven, muttering to himself)

Character! Theme! Everything but plot!  
It's like they're doing it to spite me!

(to the other actors)

OK! Cut! This isn't working at all.

LIGHTS UP. He rips off his mustache. It hurts a little.

SARA

It was fine. Glenda was good.

GLEENDA  
(surprised and coy)  
Oh, no. I was terrible.

STEVEN  
Acting is never the problem. The  
problem is always the writing.

GLEENDA  
It seemed fine to me, especially  
the stuff about how the killer is  
really just an extension of society's  
desire to alter women's bodies.

STEVEN  
It's supposed to be a plot-driven  
thriller, but the characters keep  
talking it into the ground! Blah  
blah blah! That's all characters  
want to do, really.

GLEENDA  
So get back to the plot.

STEVEN  
I'm trying! But it doesn't compel  
me. The characters compel me.

SARA  
Maybe they'll compel the  
audience, too.

STEVEN  
(indicating the audience)  
Look at them. Do they look  
compelled to you?

A pause, during which the CAST all stare at - rudely  
scrutinize - the audience (the camera).

GLEENDA  
No. Just anxious.

STEVEN  
Like they're wondering how early  
they have to leave to beat the rush  
to the parking structure.

SARA

Where do you think it went wrong?

STEVEN

I think I'm trying to impose the conventions of the thriller genre on a bunch of characters who really just want to chatter aimlessly, have sex, and sort of let their characters unfold. And now we're rambling. Who cares about that whole last scene? The only crucial piece of information in it is that Vertigo wants Sara to have a makeover.

SARA

Why is that so important?

GLENDA

The killer kills only blondes but if you have a makeover...

SARA

(scared)

I get killed?

STEVEN

(with a glance at the audience)

I really don't think we should give that away on page 27.

SARA

Do I get the makeover early in the story or late?

STEVEN

What's the difference? It's fiction.

SARA

Tell me this: should I - should my character - make out a will.

STEVEN

(annoyed)

I don't know. I don't!

VERTIGO

Don't you plan all this before  
you start writing?

STEVEN

I was busy.

VERTIGO

Doing what?

STEVEN

Smoking. Masturbating. Drinking  
alone with the TV on and all the  
lights turned up bright. And don't  
forget our love scene is coming  
up.

GLEENDA

Steven, do you think you could  
stick to the point? If not in the  
play itself, then in discussing  
the play?

STEVEN

I'd stick to the point if I  
could remember what it was.  
This all makes me very nervous.  
I'm sick with worry that I'll  
never get this play written.  
I may just have us all run over  
by a bus right now.

VERTIGO

Hey, wouldn't it be cool if you  
had yourself run over and you died  
in real life? Like "The Twilight  
Zone!"

STEVEN

Or like the 1913 German film  
"The Golem," where a Rabbi -

Vertigo rolls his eyes.

GLEENDA

(overlapping on "rabbi")  
 Point! Not sticking to it! The  
 point! - is that you need to get  
 this thriller on the road.

STEVEN

(overlapping on "thriller"; whiny)  
 I can't. I'm stuck. I don't even  
 know why I'm writing it.

Thalia's bubble pops into view.

THALIA

(soothingly)  
 There, there, Steven. Chill. No  
 one says you have to write the  
 play at all. The *world* certainly  
 doesn't care. And you'll never make  
 a nickel. There are maybe 50 people  
 in the whole country who make their  
 living writing plays and it's  
 crazy to think you'll be one  
 of them. Art is a terrible way  
 to get money. If you just quit  
 right now, it's doubtful anyone  
 will notice. So why bother?

STEVEN

I know I'm not special. That  
 I'm no better than anybody else.  
 But I believe that each of us  
 comes into the world with a purpose.  
 Some people are meant to rear  
 children, and some people are  
 meant to be doctors and cure  
 people and everyone loves them  
 and they get Mercedes Benzes.  
 Well, I've got a purpose. I think  
 I was put here on earth to  
 create beauty and to tell truths.  
 And writing plays is how I want  
 to do that. I feel it will bring  
 meaning to my life. It's a way of  
 making all my studying of theatre  
 mean something. Without meaning,  
 what's life?

CUT TO: Larry pumps a dumbbell.

LARRY

A desperate struggle for some scrap of satisfaction, some respite from agonizing pain, and in the end the universe smashes you like a cockroach.

CUT TO:

STEVEN

Exactly. So I want the play to be beautiful, and I want it to be truthful. And I want it to be done. It's odd. Writing is actually fun, but while I'm doing it all I can think of the pleasure of having written.

THALIA

You should live more in the moment. Steven?

STEVEN

Did you say something? I'm sorry, I was thinking of something else.

THALIA

(loud and over-articulated, like he's deaf)  
I said, "So, you want the play to be finished."

STEVEN

Yes.

THALIA

And you want the play to be good.

STEVEN

Yes.

THALIA

Cutting always helps. Hitchcock said cinema is life with the boring bits cut out.

AUDIENCE MEMBER

(calling out)

He must have packed the boring bits in a box and sent them all to you.

STEVEN

I can't cut the *next* scene. It's plot. And I won't cut the last scene because it's one of Sara's best scenes.

SARA

Really? That's so nice of you.

STEVEN

Well, you know, I'm writing these parts for you.

SARA

I think that's sweet. We *have* known each other a long time. And we do take care of each other.

(to Glenda)

You know, it's funny. It's like Steven wants to write parts for us, but he also sort of wants to write our lives. He's always trying to sort of plot our lives in a way that'll lead to happiness. And now, by writing these parts for us, he's sort of rewriting our careers as actresses.

GLEND A

I suppose.

STEVEN

What?

GLEND A

It's just that why do I play this - I mean I'm a catty slut having an affair with a man young enough to be her son. It's actually insulting.

SARA

So what? They're just parts. I play a neurotic librarian who has affairs with married men.

GLENDA

(not convincing)

Well, your part isn't flattering either. It's nothing like you at all.

STEVEN

Do you know what fiction is? Resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

GLENDA

(oh, sure)

Right.

STEVEN

Oh. So I write parts for you, my old friends, because I like your work, and the thanks I get is you get mad me.

GLENDA

It's one thing to write parts *for* us, another to write characters *based* on us.

STEVEN

They're not based on you. They're within your range. The part is *for* you, it's not *you*.

(to Sara)

OK, time for your scene with Larry.

GLENDA

I hope he doesn't kill you.

SARA

You have a point there.

STEVEN

She has no point at all.

SARA

What about that cheerleader in act one?

STEVEN

She was acting. She's fine.

SARA

Oh? So where is she?

STEVEN

Sara, I don't have time for this. Glenda's just blurring the line between stage and reality.

GLEENDA

As do you.

STEVEN

But *you're* being *malicious*, while *I'm* just *confused*.

GLEENDA

I see. And that's better.

SARA

What if you get confused right in the middle of my scene and Larry really kills me?

STEVEN

He's not going to kill you.

GLEENDA

You said on page 27 she gets killed.

STEVEN

I didn't. I *said* it was too *soon* to reveal whether she does or *not* and besides, if there's one piece of exposition that was firmly established it's that he only kills blondes! You couldn't be safer.

SARA  
(to Glenda)  
He has a point.

Steven CLAPS twice and there's a BLACKOUT as though the lights were on The Clapper.

LIGHTS UP.

SARA curls on a chair beside a GIGANTIC, MUCH LARGER THAN LIFE-SIZE BLACK TELEPHONE.

She's wearing a blonde wig.

An intercom BUZZES. Sara picks up the phone.

SARA  
Yes?

LARRY (V.O.)  
Is this Sara Carnegie?

SARA  
Who is this?

LARRY (V.O.)  
My name is Larry Burger. I found your wallet.

SARA  
That's...wonderful!

LARRY (V.O.)  
I'm at your front door.

SARA  
Can you come up?

LARRY (V.O.)  
Sure.

SARA  
It's on the second floor.

A KNOCK at the "door."

Sara checks herself in a mirror, sees she's wearing a BLOND WIG, and looks a little confused and alarmed.

She quickly pulls it off, throws it on the ground and answers the door.

SARA  
I was in a panic.

LARRY  
I bet.

SARA  
Where did you find it?

Larry notices the wig on the floor where she tossed it.

LARRY  
You better make sure everything's  
OK.

Sara inspects the wallet.

SARA  
Good. My credit cards are all  
there. That was my big worry. That  
and having to get a new license.

LARRY  
I better go.

SARA  
At least come in for a cup  
tea.

LARRY  
I wouldn't want to bother anyone.

SARA  
You won't. I'm all alone.

He enters.

STEVEN  
Cut!

SARA  
(to Steven)  
What's with the wig?

STEVEN enters.

STEVEN  
I knew you'd take it off before  
you answered the door. That's why  
I wrote in the mirror.

Audience Member raises his hand.

AUDIENCE MEMBER  
Author! Author! I have a question.

STEVEN  
What?

AUDIENCE MEMBER  
Is this a rehearsal, or a performance,  
or is the play still being written?

STEVEN  
Obviously, the play has been written.  
You're watching it.

GLEENDA  
(under her breathe)  
Such as it is.

STEVEN  
(out of the side of his mouth)  
I blame you for egging on Sara.

AUDIENCE MEMBER  
I have another question. How can I  
be certain that the relationship,  
in the play, between the parts the  
actresses play and the actresses  
themselves is the same within the  
play as in reality?

STEVEN  
Huh?

AUDIENCE MEMBER

I mean, are the actresses really  
in real life the way they are  
when they...when they..

STEVEN

Break character?

AUDIENCE MEMBER

Huh?

STEVEN

That's what it's called.

AUDIENCE MEMBER

I mean, I mean how can I tell  
if this is true?

STEVEN

You know, I can't remember writing  
dialogue for the audience.

(yelling)

Cast! On stage now! Get in a straight  
line.

Sara, Glenda, Vertigo, Lauren, Peter, and Larry line up.

STEVEN

We're way behind, so I'm going to  
cut some scenes and just tell the  
audience what happened in them.

GLENDA

You can't do that! This isn't a  
novel! You can't summarize! That  
defeats the whole purpose. Novels  
have scene and summary, plays only  
have scenes.

STEVEN

How would you like me to write you  
a scene where you eat dog poo?

GLENDA

You're no John Waters.

STEVEN

You're no Edith Massey!

(pause; he realizes he's lost the exchange)  
All right then. Larry, the killer,  
leaves Sara's house and kills  
more women. Then Peter, Mary Beth's  
boyfriend, hooks up with Lauren  
and they decide to solve the crime  
themselves.

Steven moves the actors around as he explains, pushing Larry  
off stage, handing Lauren and Peter a magnifying glass and a  
Sherlock Holmes hat.

GLEENDA

Lauren is going to look for the  
killer?

STEVEN

Yes.

GLEENDA

Why not have me or Sara look for  
the killer? We're the characters  
who supposedly interest you! We're  
the supposed leading lady and  
second lead! You wrote the play  
for us. Wouldn't it be more logical  
for us to be given something to do?

STEVE

I would love to. But you have no  
motivation. Lauren does. Revenge!

LAUREN

Larry killed my best friend.

GLEENDA

She's an undergraduate!

STEVEN

(strained patience)  
Are you saying a graduate student  
should look for the killer?

GLEENDA

It's customary for the police to look for the killer.

STEVEN

They aren't doing enough. They're not taking her seriously.

GLEENDA

You mean she knows something but the police don't take her seriously?

STEVEN

Exactly.

GLEENDA

"The police don't believe her so she has to look for the killer herself." That's in every Hitchcock film. It's a cliché.

STEVEN

I prefer the term "convention of the genre." Besides, your character is too self-absorbed to try to solve the crime yourself.

GLEENDA

But Lauren the sorority girl would?

STEVEN

Why not? She's not based on anybody, I made her up out of whole cloth, so she can do anything I want her to.

GLEENDA

In other words she's a an artificial construct with no human soul. A shape to fill a dramatic void. Can't you go deeper?

STEVEN

Depth is nice. Artifice is much more cheerful.

Glenda just looks at him.

Pause.

STEVEN

I can't stand this anymore. I'm leaving. I'm gonna sharpen some cigarettes and smoke a pencil. I may not even write any more today.

Steven and all but Sara exit. Sara walks to the edge of the stage and addresses the audience.

SARA

Did you catch that business with the wig? I'm onto him. He thinks he's so smart. Ha! He's not even a good writer. Have you ever heard of him? Of course not. If he were good, you'd have heard of him. If he were good, he wouldn't be trying to write a stupid thriller. If he were good, he's write about the triumph of the human spirit.

Glenda, on her way out, joins Sara

GLENDA

If he were good, he'd show me truthfully instead of distorting me beyond all recognition.

They nod, once, emphatically, at each other and start walking away, but stops and fires a parting shot that Sara can't hear.

GLENDA (cont.)

(whispering to the camera)

As for Sara, he's got her just right.

PAN TO: The TV Reporter.

TV REPORTER

This just in - police suspect there's a second killer on the loose. The so-called Torso Killer, named for the manner in which he mutilates his victims, may actually be *two* men - the original killer, and a copycat - which is to say a double or a kind of *doppelgänger* if you will. Police have reason to suspect that the copycat is a student at State University.

CUT TO:

INT. GLENDA APARTMENT SET - NIGHT

CLOSE UP: Peter, "ringing" the door bell.

Glenda, looking luscious in her filmy negligee, quickly lights the candles on the table.

Champagne cools in a nearby bucket.

The doorbell rings again. She opens the door and, rather absurdly, acts as though she's surprised it's Peter.

GLENDA

(drunk)

Peter! What a delightful surprise!  
Have a seat.

Steven enters.

STEVEN

Cut!

GLENDA

What?! I just started!

STEVEN

I wrote this scene with no bra.

GLENDA

And?

STEVEN

You're wearing a bra.

GLEENDA

A Wonderbra.

STEVEN

A bra, nonetheless. The script says, "No bra. Braless. Bare-breasted. Breasts free to bounce wherever they like."

GLEENDA

But that's not how I'm playing it.

STEVEN

Why not?

GLEENDA

I don't think it's right for my character.

STEVEN

(exasperated)

You're telling me about the character? Who did you think *invented* your character. Here's a hint: me!

GLEENDA

Character? The only reason to have me braless is to pander to THEM!

(she points accusingly at the audience)

Specifically...

(she goes all coquettish)

...the men. If you were straight you'd understand that a woman should have some mystery. That which is veiled is more interesting than that which is revealed - in love *and* in art.

STEVEN

You must know different straight men than me. The straight men I know want to see everything revealed. They wouldn't mind if all women walked around completely nude

STEVEN (cont.)

all the time. They would prefer it.

GLENDA

So you admit you're using my tits for cheap exploitation!

STEVEN

You'd think selling tickets were a crime. But my main purpose was to provide you with an acting challenge.

GLENDA

My breasts are not actresses.

STEVEN

Look, it's my play, my vision, and I see you without a bra.

GLENDA

Oh, no. I'm not going to be a mere image imprisoned in a male text. The only one who constructs me as an object of male desire is me! I will construct the identity of my breasts! I'm not showing you my tits.

AUDIENCE MEMBER

Boo! Boo!

STEVEN

(to Audience Member)

I tried.

(to Glenda)

Just play the damn scene.

Steven exits.

GLENDA

I wanted to give you some private tutoring. You weren't paying very close attention in class today. You seemed distracted.

PETER

In fact, I was sleeping.

GLEENDA

Tut-tut-tut! Very bad. Very naughty. It's almost as though you wanted to be punished. Hold out your palm.

He does so. She whacks his palm smartly.

PETER

Ouch! That kind of hurt!

GLEENDA

We'll review today's lesson. I lectured on Ruskin. "Taste is the only morality," he wrote. "Tell me what you like and I'll tell you what you are."

PETER

The thing is, I'm dropping the class.

GLEENDA

I don't know what you mean.

PETER

I like you Dr. Cooper - but at my age I should be dating around.

GLEENDA

(shocked)

Peter, don't do this to me.

PETER

I mean, Glenda let's face it, you're much older than I am.

GLEENDA

My body is still beautiful.

PETER

Even if I wanted to get married I'd pick someone younger. Probably a blond.

GLEENDA

You've always been a spoiled brat.

PETER

Glenda, what would people say?

GLEENDA

Conceited. Smug. You wanted to be pampered and I pampered you. Now I regret it.

PETER

I better go.

She blocks the door.

GLEENDA

Of course you're a baby, and I suppose that's why you have no idea how to satisfy a woman.

There's a pause.

Peter is suddenly cold and calm.

PETER

Get out of my way.

GLEENDA

Peter - I didn't mean it - you hurt me. And I'm drunk!

PETER

Just... move away from the door.

GLEENDA

(screaming absurdly)

Help! Help!

Peter looks around guiltily, as though worried about the neighbors.

PETER

What are you screaming for?

Glenda falls to the floor, hugging Peter's leg.

GLEND A

Please - please - Peter - I know  
this is all my fault - but let  
me change - let me be anything  
you want!

Peter exits, dragging her along and she still clings to his  
leg.

STEVEN

CUT! PRINT!

GLEND A

Number one, this isn't a movie.  
Number two, that scene couldn't  
have been more melodramatic. Number  
three, it has nothing to do with my  
life.

STEVEN

It's fiction. It's not about life,  
it's about Life. Capital L.

GLEND A

But is it about MY life?

STEVEN

It's my interpretation...of Life.

GLEND A

My life?

STEVEN

Even if the character of Glenda  
were based on a real person, I  
couldn't discuss it. There are  
legal ramifications. Besides -  
I don't want to discuss the play,  
I don't want to critique the play,  
I want to *finish* the play. But  
I'm horribly lost. I need help  
and you're not helping. I need  
inspiration.

On cue, Thalia appears.

THALIA

Did someone mention inspiration?

GLEENDA

Tell him to write a scene that's  
about me!

CUT TO:

SARA

Tell him not to kill me!

CUT TO:

LARRY

Tell him more murders.

CUT TO:

AUDIENCE MEMBER

Special effects and car chases.

CUT TO:

STEVEN

(to Thalia)

Tell me what to do.

THALIA

The nature of inspiration is fugitive.  
It cannot be bidden but rather,  
comes unbidden when you've opened  
your mind to it. So don't ask me  
your questions, ask them of yourself,  
and if you make quiet the yak yak yak  
of the critical inner voice, often  
I'll help. If I feel like it.

STEVEN

(a little disappointed)

OK.

Glenda lets go of Peter's leg and stand up.

GLEENDA

I want a scene I can get my teeth into! I know you're somehow basing this inappropriate romance on my inappropriate romances. But it wasn't like this. It was different! Tell the truth! Why can't you just tell the truth!?

STEVEN

I wasn't there! I don't know the truth.

GLEENDA

Then who needs you? We can write our own plays.

STEVEN

So do!

GLEENDA

Plays full of nothing but truth.

STEVEN

And what about entertainment?  
I want to entertain the audience.

AUDIENCE MEMBER

(hotly and quickly)

I wish you did, but I have a feeling you're trying to "disturb" us or, even worse, to "improve" us. You presumptuous ass! What do you know about life? How much do you make a year? I paid for a generic thriller and that's what I want.

STEVEN

Anyone who thinks he can do a better job can write all the scenes he wants!

GLEENDA

Fine! I will! I'll show what really happened.

The lights go back to how they were in the Peter/Glenda break-up scene, but Peter and Glenda are suddenly dressed for a Jane Austin adaptation.

Peter enters again. They act it all quite melodramatically, maybe with some tinny, silent-movie piano in the background.

GLEENDA

Peter! I told you not to come.

PETER

How could I stay away from you when the alternative is my stupid, boring wife who isn't nearly as beautiful?

Glenda places the back of her wrist on her forehead.

GLEENDA

You must go. Our affair can only mean tragedy for me once Victorian society discovers our shameful secret.

PETER

I can't live without you. The way you talk about art transcends mere physical...ness, and puts our love onto a spiritual plane.

GLEENDA

You must.

PETER

(confused)  
Must what?

GLEENDA

Give me up.

PETER

I dreamt we would live happily ever after at my house. Howard's End.

GLEENDA

Would that we could, but we  
shouldn't - mustn't! Our love  
can never be.

PETER

Wait. Never be what?

GLEENDA

Be! Exist.

PETER

But what will you do?

GLEENDA

I shall live out my days in a  
nunnery, embroidering your name  
on innumerable pillow cases.  
Farewell.

Peter grabs her by the shoulders and shakes her.

PETER

If I can't have you, nobody will!

SIGMUND FREUD enters.

FREUD

Vait!

GLEENDA

Vat? I mean - What? Who are you?

FREUD

I'm Sigmund Freud and your problem  
is your relationship mit your  
vater.

GLEENDA

My water?

FREUD

Your vater. You desire intercourse  
mit ze vater, and so you must  
punish yourself by entering into  
relationships that are doomed to  
fail.

GLEENDA

Ah! I see! It's as though the sun  
has burst through a bank of clouds.  
I'm well! Well!

STEVEN

Cut! See how bad that was?

GLEENDA

But you wrote it!

STEVEN

According to your specifications.

GLEENDA

You're still writing me, only now  
you're pretending it's a Merchant  
Ivory production. Me write the  
scene! I present myself! I control  
my own representation, you paternalistic  
white male bastard! Once again  
the male gaze traps the female in  
its poisonous aspic.

STEVEN

It's my play, so I'm writing it! Only  
one person can write the play!

GLEENDA

Who says!?!

STEVEN

(sputtering...after a thunderstruck silence)  
Why...tradition!

GLEENDA

How it's been is how it always must  
be? So we should still have slavery.

STEVEN

No...but the work has to be...unified!

THALIA

Actually, the great Jacques LeCoq did some important work wherein the drama was created by the acting ensemble.

GLENDA

LeCoq is better than you. I love LeCoq.

Steven faces the audience.

STEVEN

(to the audience sarcastically)  
Listen to her. Do you want a play with that kind of filth in it? Vote for me for writer of the play.

GLENDA

Stop doing that, you white, male bastard.

STEVEN

What?!

GLENDA

Direct address of the audience! Those asides, designed to secure identification, to establish yourself as the central intelligence, to make them your confederates against me

STEVEN

(huffy)  
I have no idea what you're talking about. If you're hearing voices, you must be schizophrenic!

He stoops down at the lip of the stage, glances back over his shoulder, and lowers his voice.

STEVEN

(to audience)  
The people on stage can't hear me when I do this.

As Glenda strides toward the lip of the stage..

GLEENDA

(to audience)

I can hear him perfectly well.  
What's more, I can address the  
audience all I want, thus making  
them identify with ME. Now *I've*  
addressed the audience, *I'M* the  
hero.

AUDIENCE MEMBER

I'm confused. Why aren't there  
any black people in this movie.

STEVEN

(to Glenda)

You don't do it right. You have to  
seduce the audience.

(to audience, ingratiating)

I love you, audience. I love you so  
much.

GLEENDA

Now you sound like Jerry Lewis, in  
which case the audience could love  
you only if they wear berets and  
read Genet. Genet! There's another  
writer who's better than you are.

THALIA

He adored LeCoq.

STEVEN

I'm the writer of this play! Cut!  
Kill the lights!

Nothing happens.

THALIA

The movie "Tootsie" had 23 writers.  
It was a big hit and everyone  
loved it.

STEVEN

Et, tu, Thalia?

THALIA

Don't blame me. I'm just a dramatic device. A big, obvious metaphor for your disintegrating artistic personality. You invented me. You're in control. Don't forget that.

CLOSE UP: Steven.

STEVEN

(a light dawning)

That's right! I am! So all I have to do is take what's rightfully mine!

As Steven speaks, Mrs. Farmer crosses behind him, gives him a viciously dirty look, and continues out of the frame.

STEVEN (cont.)

Seize control! For example, with a few clicks of my computer keys I can put Glenda into a straitjacket and one of those big gags with a ball on it that sado-masochists use. The characters are there for me to manipulate as I please.

WIDER ANGLE: Mrs. Farmer is gone, and Glenda's in a straitjacket with a ball gag.

THALIA

Mmmm, yes and no.

STEVEN

What do you mean "no?"

THALIA

In one sense you can do whatever you want, but the question is whether the audience will accept it.

STEVEN

Go on.

THALIA

Even in a piece that *breaks* the rules, there have to be rules. The universe you present has to be consistent. The rules you have established say that fictionalized characters can assert their wills independently outside of the play-within-a-play. If you change that now, just because you feel like it, it would be as if Superman just invented new superpowers every time he came up against a tough problem. The audience would feel cheated.

STEVEN

(to Audience Member)

Is that right?

AUDIENCE MEMBER

Superman has too many powers as it is. I like the guys in Marvel comics, who have only one power. That's better.

STEVEN

Thank you. You may sit down.

AUDIENCE MEMBER

You know, I've always thought I'd make a good actor.

STEVEN

No.

AUDIENCE MEMBER

(a pause)

I want my money back.

STEVEN

No refunds. But you're perfectly free to go. I care nothing for the approbation of the mob.

Audience Member sits and pouts.

AUDIENCE MEMBER

I paid my money, I'm staying to the bitter end. You advertised a thriller and I better see one or I'll sue you.

STEVEN

Good luck collecting. You're aware I'm a teacher, right?

GLEENDA

This is a mess. It's all falling apart. Look, I quit, OK?

STEVEN

Please, Glenda, I understand your desire to protect your privacy, and I understand your wish that the play conform to a more modern view of women than that of Freud, who was, I agree, a paternalistic white bastard.

FREUD (O.S.)

I beg your pardon?

INSERT SHOT: side of the stage from whence his voice came: Freud's back as he quickly retreats.

STEVEN

However, if we can just get back to my thriller, I think you'll see that it's an *examination* - a *critique*, if you will - of male violence toward women.

GLEENDA

It's about a psycho who mutilates pretty girls.

STEVEN

No, no, it's really about how women participate in their own mutilation - how they mutilate themselves when they distort themselves physically in order to fit into male fantasies.

GLEENDA

You wish.

She starts to leave but Steven restrains her.

STEVEN

Wait! Just -- look, let's take a break. I'll... have a cigarette and when I come back, this will be a tautly plotted thriller, full of jeopardy and thrills and whammies. I might even come up with an explosion or two! It'll be a hit and will run forever, like "The Producers," and we'll all make a bundle and quit our jobs and be profiled in the Lifestyle section of the newspaper, OK?

GLEENDA

Ten minutes?

STEVEN

Fifteen at the most.  
 (addressing all)  
 Everybody, let's take a break.  
 Back in fifteen.

The cast wanders off-stage, audibly muttering "peas-and-carrots" as they go.

Vertigo lies down for a nap.

EXT. THEATRE - DAY

Everybody but Vertigo is outside and they all puff away furiously on cigarettes at the stage door, including a dog who seems to have wandered into the movie.

Steven carefully crushes out his cigarette and puts it in the trash.

STEVEN

I'm going back in to study my script. Don't hurry.

SARA  
(helpfully calling after him)  
At least you opened out the play.

MRS. FARMER  
(darkly)  
It's a movie.

INT. BARE STAGE - DAY

Vertigo still naps.

Steven enters and snuggles next to him.

Vertigo wakes up.

VERTIGO  
What are you doing?

STEVEN  
Taking a nap?

VERTIGO  
There are nine million stories  
in the naked city, but they're  
all the same story.

STEVEN  
Don't you want to sleep your way  
to the top?

VERTIGO  
You're the top?

STEVEN  
(slyly)  
Oh, I'm the "top."

VERTIGO  
Look, I'm not interested in you  
and there's nothing you can do  
for me, OK?

STEVEN  
Your part could get bigger. But  
that would be contingent on one  
of my parts getting bigger.

VERTIGO

I wonder why you have this need  
to humiliate yourself.

STEVEN

Isn't that what being an artist  
means?

CUT TO: Glenda. Pan with her as she walks toward Steven.

GLEENDA

Being an artist means making art!  
Creating literature. Not trying  
to bang the whole cast.

STEVEN

I'm not trying to "bang the whole  
cast." I'm not trying to bang you.

VERTIGO

Get off.

Steven does so.

GLEENDA

Steven, you have to make decisions  
about this play. You're confused.  
Why did you start it in the first  
Place?

STEVEN

(movingly)

One morning I was reading the, uh,  
New York Times, and I saw an  
article about a man, uh, a neo-Nazi,  
who murdered a hair colorist and a  
plastic surgeon for - quote - giving  
women the power to destroy men -  
unquote. So I had the idea of writing  
a play that would explore the paradigm  
at the nexus of the trope without,  
uh, conflating -

GLEENDA

(overlapping on "without")  
You're making this up, right?

STEVEN

It's just something I thought  
would sound intelligent.

GLENDA

It smelled phony.

STEVEN

I made it up to say to reporters  
if they ever asked me why I wrote  
the play. I mean, they wouldn't  
mind. They're entertainment  
writers. They prefer you to lie.

GLENDA

I don't think you have to worry about  
the critics because at this rate  
you'll never *finish* the play.

STEVEN

(sighing)

I know.

GLENDA

So really. Why do you want to  
write a play?

STEVEN

(little boy voice)

I want everyone to say what a  
clever boy I am.

GLENDA

Why?

STEVEN

Because Mommy and Daddy didn't pay  
attention to me, and by putting on  
a play I'll get all the attention  
in the world.

Thalia appears.

THALIA

Mm-hm. Show business is diabolical, my darlings. It unfailingly attracts the people who most need love, attention and reassurance, and it provides them with more neglect and rejection than any other field of endeavor.

STEVEN

That's not fair.

THALIA

Life is not fair. Not even for kings and queens. But hey, if you think you've got it so bad, I know people who can give you polio.

GLENDA

What a mean suggestion!

THALIA

Oh, grow up. I'm a muse, not a fairy godmother.

Glenda backs away from Thalia and looks at her with some alarm, as though just realizing what she's capable of, and then turns back to Steven.

GLENDA

Why a thriller?

STEVEN

I like thrillers.

CUT TO: Larry, pumping iron.

LARRY

So get going! How about I kill Sara now, and then you invent some more characters for me to kill later. Blondes.

GLENDA

Nobody writes thriller plays.

STEVEN

"Deathtrap." "Sleuth." And "Night  
Must Fall."

GLEENDA

They're old.

STEVEN

But they were thrillers and big  
hits!

GLEENDA

You just want to write a thriller  
because you think it'll sell!

STEVEN

(pause)

You can't know that. You can't know  
my motivation.

GLEENDA

Of course I can! You're writing me.  
So I'm you. So I know what you know.  
So, I'm saying what I'd say if I  
knew what you know.

VERTIGO

I feel dizzy.

STEVEN

Vertigo, you need to lie down. Let  
me help you to the dressing room.

VERTIGO

Nice try.

GLEENDA

See! You're just writing so you  
can get sex! Freud was right!

FREUD (O.S.)

I always am!

GLEENDA

Everything would be fine if you stopped trying to write this contrived, plotty thriller and just did a sincere character study about me.

STEVEN

Yeah, well, it so happens that audiences hate character studies.

GLEENDA

But -

STEVEN

(ignoring her)

I admit it. I want to please the audience. Is that immoral? Is it terrible to love to tell stories? If there's a more compelling kind of narrative than the thriller please tell me what it is. I know, you think it's not Art if it doesn't experiment with the form.

JUMP CUT TO:

STEVEN

But if you ask people their favorite movies, it's always something with danger or love or funny gags. I adore thrillers.

THALIA

You adore 19<sup>th</sup> century British novels. That doesn't mean you should write one.

STEVEN

You know, as a muse. You're supposed to provide helpful inspiration. But all I get from you is guff.

SOUND: THUNDER.

Steven clutches his gut.

STEVEN

Ah! What happened?!

THALIA

I'm so sorry. You've developed an ulcer.

STEVEN

I wonder what caused it.

THALIA

You worry too much.

STEVEN

Of course I worry! I have an insoluble problem: the characters I'm interested in - Hector, Glenda, Sara and Vertigo - they aren't really important to the plot.

GLENDA

Not important to the plot! Well, thank you very much. And whom, may I ask, *is* important to the plot?

STEVEN

Lauren, the college girl who's trying to solve the crime. She's active. She has a goal. And Larry, he's important, because you need a villain.

Sara, who has wandered in, speaks.

SARA

I think Sara's story could be very interesting. She's a woman living with a killer and she doesn't know it.

STEVEN

I see. Similar to "The Lodger," the 1928 silent film by Alfred Hitchcock.

VERTIGO

(to the audience)

He's so pedantic. No wonder I don't have sex with him.

STEVEN

(to Vertigo)

I heard that. Now can it or I'll tell the audience you've never seen a movie with subtitles or even one that's black & white.

(to Sara)

You know, I was going to cut the whole undergraduate plot and just concentrate on Larry and Sara, the killer and the woman he lives with, but as you saw in act one, I don't know what happens between them. I wasn't there!

SARA

Make it up!

STEVEN

Easier said than done. I feel like I'm being tortured to confess but I have nothing to confess!

SARA

You wouldn't have that problem if you'd just write from the heart.

STEVEN

(annoyed)

You're not in this scene.

SARA

I'm not my character, I'm me - your friend! The actress! You wrote me this part. Well, maybe not this part of the part, but - oh, I'm all confused.

(to the audience)

I hate these things where you don't know whether it's supposed to be reality or not. Ambiguity should be clear.

STEVEN

I know!

SARA

Just throw the rules away and write whatever you feel like writing! Be free! There are no rules.

STEVEN

Thrillers have rules. It's a very precise genre.

SARA

Then don't write a thriller. Write a character study.

GLENDA

Yes! Then we can say whatever we feel like saying! We can speak the truth! We'll improvise!

Audience Member stands.

AUDIENCE MEMBER

I have a question.

STEVEN

(exasperated)

Yes?

AUDIENCE MEMBER

This part here - is this the truth?

STEVEN

It's all truth with a capitol T. It's higher truth.

AUDIENCE MEMBER

I mean is it true like real life is true?

STEVEN

Is real life true?

AUDIENCE MEMBER

Sure.

STEVEN

Why?

AUDIENCE MEMBER

Because we real life people are saying what we really say.

STEVEN

Do you mean you're always telling the truth?

AUDIENCE MEMBER

What?

STEVEN

You real life people - do you ever lie?

AUDIENCE MEMBER

Of course not!

STEVEN

Liar! Real life people tell an average of seven lies a day. But my characters hardly ever lie. You real people lie to avoid conflict.

As Audience Member listens to Steven, Larry slowly, menacingly, suspensefully rises behind him.

STEVEN (cont.)

Mary says, "Do you like my dress?" In real life, John lies because he wants to avoid conflict. He says, "Why, it's lovely." But in drama, we WANT conflict. So John tells the truth. He says, "Mary, that dress makes your butt look as wide as an ax handle." And that leads to conflict. So you see, if people don't tell the truth, you have no conflict. You have no drama. You have a film that never makes it

STEVEN (cont.)  
past the festival circuit. Now sit  
still.

Larry places a blond wig on Audience Member's head.

Audience member pulls it off, gives Larry a look, and turns  
back to Steven.

AUDIENCE MEMBER  
Can I be in the play?

STEVEN  
No!

Audience Member sits.

SARA  
Steven, do you remember why you  
started this piece?

STEVEN  
Because I had a free weekend?  
Because I can't get dates?

THALIA  
I remember. He wrote this play  
because he wanted to write parts  
for two actresses. Two superb  
actresses who weren't getting work.  
And for personal glory.

SARA  
He wanted to write something for  
me and Glenda because he loves  
us and wants us all to share our  
creativity.

STEVEN  
Yeah!

SARA  
So why not write a character study  
instead of a thriller? That way  
you could really concentrate on  
the people.

STEVEN

But how would I write a character study?

SARA

You know how you're cutting all the scenes with the characters just talking, and keeping the thriller scenes where people kill people and all that? Why not cut the thriller plot, and just keep the scenes where the characters talk?

STEVEN

I can't! I'm afraid! What if I have nothing to say? No, I have to write a thriller.

VERTIGO

Why not write a movie instead of a play? Plays are boring. Nobody likes plays. Young people don't go to plays. Only old people - people so old nobody sleeps with them.

CUT TO: THE WINGS

MRS. FARMER

It's already a movie.

CUT TO:

GLENDA

Actually, a movie isn't a bad idea.

SARA

(indicating Glenda)

She'd love being in a movie. Then she could go out front and applaud herself.

GLENDA

What!?

SARA

I was just kidding. I didn't mean it.

(points to Steven)

HE made me say it.

Audience member stands.

AUDIENCE MEMBER

This is boring! I want some of that don't-go-in-the-basement stuff. What's that called?

STEVEN

Suspense.

AUDIENCE MEMBER

Yeah. Suspense. I bet you don't even know how to do that.

STEVEN

I do so! You show the audience the danger that lies ahead without showing it to the heroine. You show the bomb under the table, the man with a knife lurking around the corner, the bridge that's out.

AUDIENCE MEMBER

Well, if you know how to do it - then do it!

GLENDA

He would but he doesn't want to. That's just craft. Not art, as a character study would be.

CUT TO:

Larry points a gun at Thalia's bubble. Her bubble trembles.

THALIA

(scared, but a grand announcement)

This is all very interesting but Steven has an inspiration.

STEVEN

I have?

THALIA

Yes. He feels that while what you have to say is very stimulating, he'd rather go ahead and write a thriller.

(with a sidelong glance at the gun)

A very bloody one in which many blonde ones cross the River Styx.

SARA

I saw this coming.

STEVEN

I'm not so sure now. I mean, thrillers are so...plot driven. But a character study lets me go wherever I want. I can meander.

THALIA

Forget all that. You must have unity and order. All the great playwrights understood that. That's why Pirandello supported Mussolini - Il Duce made the PLAYS run on time.

STEVEN

OK, I'm tired of arguing. A thriller.

CUT TO: Freud in the wings.

FREUD

Nein! A psychiatric drama!

CUT TO: Mrs. Farmer in the wings next to Freud.

MRS. FARMER

An exposé of the problems of the American farmer.

CUT TO: Mary Beth, covered in blood.

MARY BETH

A cheerleader who comes back from the dead.

CUT TO:

STEVEN

Enough! We'll just jump ahead to  
the third act. Of the thriller.

Larry lowers his pistol and smiles.

VERTIGO

Won't you skip a bunch of scenes?  
How will the audience catch up  
with what they missed?

STEVEN

(defiant and expecting opposition)  
I'm bringing out the French maid.

Steven starts setting up a table with a French phone.

GLEENDA

The what?

THALIA

(to Glenda)

It's an expository device. *She's*  
an expository device. She answers  
the telephone and tells whomever  
is on the other end everything  
the audience needs to know.

(to Steven)

It's the creakiest expository  
device in the book. It would be  
one thing at the beginning of act  
one, but three-fourths of the  
way through the narrative -  
shocking!

STEVEN

I'm a desperate playwright!

THALIA

You know very well that exposition  
is most gracefully handled through  
scenes of conflict.

STEVEN

I say clunky, dull, and overly explicit exposition is better than no exposition at all.

(shouting off)

Cue maid.

The lighting changes to indicate we're in the play within the film.

THE FRENCH PHONE RINGS.

A cute, sexy, very blonde FRENCH MAID prances onto the stage. Her "maid uniform" looks to have been bought at Frederic's of Hollywood.

GLEENDA

I knew he'd get tits into this one way or another. He doesn't even *like* tits!

STEVEN

Shhh!

The maid answers the phone. As she speaks, characters tentatively align themselves on stage in accord with her dictates.

FRENCH MAID

Allo? Oh, Fifi! I cannot talk long, the mistress will be 'ome in a moment. So much has happened! As you know, Larry has moved in with Sara and she is so in love with heem. But she does not know he is a killer!

STEVEN

Now, be sure to tell them that he won't sleep with Sara because he only kills blondes. Blondes! He loves them, he hates them.

FRENCH MAID

(nods to Steven and speaks into the phone)  
He loves and hates the blondes.

She sees something and screams.

It's Larry with a gun. He fires.

She drops dead, but...

FRENCH MAID

(gasping her last words)  
He...hates...zee blondes.

OVERHEAD SHOT: A pool of blood slowly spreads from under her artistically arrayed corpse.

Larry dashes off.

Steven crouches by the French maid and checks her pulse.

STEVEN

(shocked, grief-stricken and very dramatic)  
She's dead. Do you hear me?  
She's really dead.

Lights up. Steven rises.

STEVEN (cont.)

NOW who'll play the part of the maid?  
On such short notice!?

Audience Member leaps to his feet.

AUDIENCE MEMBER

I will! I will!

Steven carelessly drags the dead French Maid off stage by one leg.

STEVEN

Well, I suppose you could be  
Saffron, the black maid. A sassy  
black maid who tells home truths  
to the really important white  
characters. Or better yet, Uncle  
Rochester, the old family retainer

STEVEN (cont.)  
whose calm folk wisdom makes life  
on the plantation that much  
more gracious.

AUDIENCE  
Hell, no. If I play Saffron or  
Uncle Rochester, that's racist.  
But if I play the French maid -  
that's non-traditional casting!

STEVEN  
I will not have my serious play  
turned into a campfest with  
characters in drag.

AUDIENCE MEMBER  
(correcting him)  
In costume.

STEVEN  
(high dudgeon)  
My show is not a farce. There  
is nothing lower than comedy.  
You'll play Uncle Rochester or  
you'll play nothing.

AUDIENCE MEMBER  
In other words, my choice is to  
play an anachronistic and demeaning  
stereotype, or not break into  
show business.  
(pause)  
I'll be right up.  
(to the camera)  
Why should I have it better than  
the Arabs?

GLENDA  
And the women.

Audience Member climbs onto the stage.

THALIA

(to Steven)

Look, you'd better let him play the French maid. You don't want a lawsuit. Besides, we already have the costume. We have nothing for "Uncle Rochester." And you know how touchy the costume ladies get when you spring something on them.

STEVEN

Oh, all right then - go get in costume. But later you have to sleep with me. All the guys in this cast have to sleep with me.

AUDIENCE MEMBER

So I not only have to play the demeaning stereotype, I also have to sleep with you?

(pause)

But I get to be in show business?

Steven nods once.

Audience Members shrugs and dashes off.

Silence.

VERTIGO

What's up?

STEVEN

What do you mean?

SARA

(looking around; with existential angst)  
He means what happens now?

Spooky wind whistles across the stage.

STEVEN

What do you mean what happens now?

GLEENDA

In the movie! Suddenly nothing  
is happening.

STEVEN

We're waiting.

GLEENDA

For what? Christmas? Godot?

STEVEN

For Audience Guy to change into  
the French maid costume.

SARA

(starting to have a panic attack)  
Couldn't you have written something  
to cover the change?

STEVEN

Look, I'm making this up as I  
go along. No one could have foreseen  
this. We need his exposition before  
we can go any further.

THALIA

Yes, but do something. Tell a joke  
or repeat a warm-hearted anecdote you  
saw in the Reader's Digest. Life in  
These United States.

VERTIGO

Humor in Uniform.

STEVEN

Well, I suppose I could read from  
the preface to the published version  
of the play.

GLEENDA

Then do!

Steven takes a page from his pocket, unfolds it, and clears  
his throat.

STEVEN

I began the play -

Audience Member stumbles back on stage wearing high heels and the sexy French maid costume. He looks kind of hot in it. He carries a script.

AUDIENCE MEMBER

Thank God I'm black and have masculinity to spare.

STEVEN

Let's proceed.

AUDIENCE MEMBER

Hey - now that I'm blond, won't Larry kill me?

SARA

Probably!

STEVEN

No, because you're really a guy and -  
(he speaks off left, loudly)  
it would be really, really gay for Larry to kill you.

The phone rings.

AUDIENCE MEMBER

(no accent, but phonetic)  
Allo? Oh, Fifi. Well, as I was sayeeng, Larry - he loves blondes, he hates blondes - he has been murdering zem as he lives with Sara. She has become obsessed with him and has broken off all contact with the outside world. Meanwhile, Glenda the English one has been stalking Peter, the fraternity boy, who wants nothing more to do wiz her because he is in love wiz Lauren.

GRAPHIC: As Audience Member explains all this, graphics with the faces of the characters in question appears on screen and dotted lines illustrate the various connections.

GLEENDA

You just obliterated my best scenes  
with a line of exposition.

STEVEN

OK, places everybody for Hector's  
visit to Sara's apartment.

Everybody exits but Sara.

Hector RINGS an imaginary DOORBELL. His mustache is on  
crooked, he bothers less than ever with the accent, and at  
first he rushes through his lines in a perfunctory way.

Sara mimes opening the door but stands in Hector's path.

HECTOR

My dearest, I don't care if you  
spend six days or six months or  
six years shackled up with this  
guy. Who cares? But don't you  
think it's rude not to tell us  
when - or if - you're coming  
back to work?

SARA

Yes.

HECTOR

And moreover, you've never been  
the kind of woman who drops her  
old friends just because she has  
a new boyfriend.

SARA

That's because I never *have* a  
boyfriend. If I'd had boyfriends,  
I'd have been dropping my old  
friends all the time.

HECTOR

Seriously - it's rude.

SARA

It's just - I haven't - you'll say  
he's "inappropriate." And I think  
I'm - just give me some time.

Larry enters, wearing his usual "wife beater" undershirt and toting a video camera.

LARRY

Oh!

HECTOR

Hello.

SARA

Uh, Larry, this is my friend Hector.

HECTOR

Hi! How ya doin'! Nice day, huh?  
Are your muscles cold in that  
shirt?

Larry looks at Hector with suspicion and concern. He takes a tape out of the camcorder and slips it in his pocket.

LARRY

I'll be back later.

Larry exits.

HECTOR

(grinning)

Mmmmmhmmm. I see.

SARA

(grinning despite herself)

Shut up.

HECTOR

Just do me one favor. Decide what you're going to do and call the library and tell them. Either quit the job or give them some idea if they need to hire a temp, but this day to day has to stop. Just for my sake. Nobody believes I'm not in daily contact with you.

FADE OUT:

FADE IN:

HECTOR (back in accent, mustache straight), VERTIGO and GLENDA have cocktails.

HECTOR

So I stalled and stalled, finally the guy walked in.

VERTIGO

Was he sexy?

HECTOR

Very butch. He had this - I don't know. This extra-male quality about him. I mean, if you were in prison and you wanted some guy to defend you and be your husband, you'd want the type with an extra male chromosome. That was this guy. XYY.

GLENDA

Uch!

VERTIGO

I can't picture that with Sara.

HECTOR

I make it a policy never to be surprised by anyone's boyfriend or girlfriend.

VERTIGO

So now you feel better.

HECTOR

Much. Now that I've seen the secret lover, I have a feeling she'll keep in touch.

GLENDA

God. A live-in love slave. Just like a man would have.

HECTOR

What about your little Ken doll? The dreamy little frat boy?

GLEENDA

(suddenly sounding a little drunk)  
 There's nothing little about him.  
 Pour me another.  
 (breaking character and rising suddenly)  
 This is intolerable.

Lights up.

GLEENDA (cont.)

Now I'm not only a slut, you've  
 made me a lush, belting back  
 the booze while I make bitterly  
 cynical cracks.

STEVEN

It's the character talking. Not you!

GLEENDA

I don't want to be the character -  
 I want to be me! I want to be me  
 but a little thinner and a little  
 younger and a little funnier, like  
 someone who immediately comes up  
 with the witty retort that real  
 people don't think up until the  
 next day. That would be an honest  
 portrayal. That's how Noel Coward  
 would write me. If you'd write me  
 the way I am, you'd write me the  
 way Noel Coward would.

(becoming hysterical)

But you - you're - you're -  
 you're fictionalizing me again.

(she pauses)

You're STILL fictionalizing me.

She pauses and takes one step to the side, as if to escape herself.

GLEENDA (cont.)

You've fictionalized me again. You're  
 fictionalizing me as we speak!

(She runs in circles.)

STOP FICTIONALIZING ME!

STEVEN

(calmly removing his mustache)  
I can't help it! It's inherent in  
the process. To write you is to  
fictionalize you. I fictionalize  
me, too.

GLENDA

Yes, but when you fictionalize you,  
you win! You give yourself the leading  
role! The funniest lines!

STEVEN

The big penis.

GLENDA

And I get heavy drinking, rejection,  
inappropriate partners.

STEVEN

Do you want the big penis?

GLENDA

I don't want the inappropriate partners.

STEVEN

You have to get inappropriate partners.  
The theme is the ways in which women  
participate in their own victimization.

GLENDA

It's a sexist theme!

STEVEN

It's daring.

GLENDA

I'm sick of white, liberal men  
thinking it's their duty to speak  
for the blacks and the women and  
everybody else.

Steven sloppily slaps his "Hector" mustache onto his upper  
lip.

STEVE

I'm Latino. Or Hispanic.

GLEENDA

If you really cared about us you'd help us to depict ourselves, to make our own movies, instead of doing us the "favor" of "exploring" our problems.

STEVE

So I can't have any female characters?

GLEENDA

You're exploiting us!

STEVE

You're ruining my play!

GLEENDA

(a pause, then smugly)

I did you a favor! I made you post-modern.

STEVEN

I don't need that. I need jeopardy!  
A man, a gun, and a woman in danger.

Glenda pulls a PISTOL from her pocket and points it at Steven.

GLEENDA

How about a WOMAN, a gun and a MAN in danger? It's a real gun with real ammo and I'm the real me and I really hate you.

She fires into the air over their heads.

STEVEN

(calmly)

Glenda. You are a fictional construct. You cannot harm me. But you can harm yourself. And I'm afraid you have become, shall we say, a liability to the narrative. I'm sorry, Glenda. We'll all miss you.

As Steven speaks this previous speech, Glenda slowly and with astonished fear in her eyes, turns the pistol to point at her own temple.

THALIA

Are you sure this is a good idea?

At this, Glenda's left hand grabs her right wrist and she tries to wrestle the gun away from herself.

STEVEN

What do you mean?

THALIA

You think Glenda should kill herself?

Glenda continues this struggle with herself, crashing about the stage violently.

STEVEN

It seems an expedient solution.

THALIA

I see two problems. One - what's her motivation? I mean, she hasn't been despondent, she hasn't even hinted she's feeling suicidal.

STEVEN

In the next draft I'll go back and add a line. "Oh, I'm feeling so blue, sometimes I think I should end it all because Steven is so mean to his characters."

THALIA

OK, but there's a second problem. The audience won't let you do it.

STEVEN

What do you mean, they won't let me do it? I'm the writer! The writer is god! Maybe not in movies, but certainly in theatre! My authority is absolute.

THALIA

Well, yes and no. You still need the audience, and the audience won't buy Glenda just killing herself for your convenience.

STEVEN

Why not?

THALIA

The audience hates when things happen for the convenience of the author. They are remarkably unconcerned with the author's convenience and completely obsessed with their own pleasure.

STEVEN

So I should just let her kill me?

(sinking into despair)

This script isn't working. I quit. I quit! I no longer want to be a writer. I resign.

INSERT SHOT: a basket of adorable puppies act cute to cheesy music for about 10 seconds.

INT. BARE STAGE - DAY

Their positions have been slightly rearranged.

STEVEN

Or, there'll be a terrible fire and everyone burns up.

(pointing at the camera)

The whole theater.

Glenda still wrestles with herself and the gun.

THALIA

I don't think that's necessary. Glenda can put down the gun, but she *can't* do it merely because it's convenient for you. She has to *want* to put down the gun. Someone has to persuade her that it's in her own best interest to

STEVEN (cont.)  
put down the gun. After all, drama is persuasion. All those lovely speeches in Shakespeare, they're mostly about persuading someone of something. By the way, I know Shakespeare.

STEVEN  
Yeah?

THALIA  
(bucking him up)  
You remind me of Shakespeare.

STEVEN  
Because I write like him?

THALIA  
No, because he wrote plays mostly so he could meet guys.

STEVEN  
Hooray for our side! OK, so now we have to persuade Glenda to put down the gun because it's in her own best interests and she *wants* to.

THALIA  
Right.

Steven looks out at the audience and smiles.

STEVEN  
Oh, Glenda. Would you like to come back over here and point the gun at me?

GLENDIA  
I certainly will. And then kill you!

STEVEN  
Yes, of course. Go ahead.

Glenda takes aim at Steven's head and cocks the pistol.

Freud enters.

FREUD

Wait!

GLENDA

Vut? What?

FREUD

Don't do it! You'll ruin your life!

GLENDA

Oh, look, it's Dr. Freud. Now he's going to psychoanalyze me and I'm going to remember a childhood trauma and that's going to free me from madness. Just like in "Three Faces of Eve" and other psychiatric melodramas of the 1950s.

FREUD

No, Glenda. Zat's old hut. Nowadays ve know zat digging into your traumatic past can sometimes increase its grip on the present.

GLENDA

Really?

FREUD

Abzolutely. Even after the trauma has been exposed, there remain negative habits of thinking that punish you every moment of your life.

He's poking her head with his index finder for emphasis.

GLENDA

What can I do about them?

FREUD

Cognitive therapy!

GLENDA

Cognitive therapy?

FREUD

It teaches you to examine your own thinking, to become conscious of the distorted and irrational messages we send ourselves, then to rewrite those messages and thereby stop creating our own unhappiness.

GLENDIA

But I don't have time for long, drawn-out therapy.

FREUD

Cognitive therapy works in twelve to 24 weeks, or even less! Come, Glenda. Happiness is your birthright.

He gently takes the gun and offers his arm. She takes it.

GLENDIA

I have always depended on the kindness of people who are paid to be kind to me.

FREUD

It is the only dependable form of kindness.

As he escorts her off the stage he pauses to address the audience.

FREUD (cont.)

Cognitive therapy - the key to a better life. Ask for it by name!

They're gone.

STEVEN

Well, that was a bit didactic, wasn't it?

THALIA

Or was it polemical? I'm never sure.

CUT TO:

Glenda speaks from the wings.

GLEENDA

Of course, if the therapy doesn't work, I'm coming back to kill you.

CUT TO:

STEVEN

OK, French Maid, set up the thrilling climax! The audience is going to love it.

AUDIENCE MEMBER

(still dressed as the French maid)  
You know, I'm concerned there are so few minority cast members in this show. I mean, seeing how well I'm playing the part of the French maid, perhaps non-traditional casting would work for other roles as well. For instance, you could be played by an old Korean woman.

STEVEN

Did you know we're not paying the cast?

AUDIENCE MEMBER

What?!

STEVEN

It's something called an "Equity Experimental Film contract." They only get paid if the film makes money. And the film never makes money. The distributor sees to that.

AUDIENCE MEMBER

If I'm not going to be paid, I'm not going to be in your damn show.

STEVEN

I can certainly appreciate that.

AUDIENCE MEMBER

I quit.

STEVEN

I quite understand.

AUDIENCE MEMBER

I'm keeping the outfit because I find it oddly exciting.

Audience Member heads back into the audience.

STEVEN

Now, if no one has any further objections, let's finish this thriller. Places everyone!

CUT TO:

Sara and Larry lie in bed together.

SARA

Larry, where do you go at night?

(pause)

Sometimes you're gone for hours.

(a long pause)

Is it a woman?

LARRY

No.

SARA

Put your arms around me, Larry.

He pushes her away.

SARA

Why, Larry? We live here together. Make love to me!

LARRY

Later.

SARA

Larry - don't you like women?

LARRY

Of course I do.

SARA  
Then touch me.

LARRY  
Later.

SARA  
Why? Why can we only make love  
in sick ways? Why?

Larry abruptly gets up and fetches his jacket.

LARRY  
Leave me alone.

SARA  
But why, Larry? Why won't you?

LARRY  
I'm going out.

SARA  
I'm a woman!

LARRY  
You're not a blonde! Blondes are the  
only women worth killing -  
(looks at the audience - oops!)  
I mean loving.

SARA  
Then get out, Goddamn you! Get out,  
you leach! I'm sick of being your  
maid!

LARRY  
Fine! I'll come back for my shit  
later.

He leaves and SLAMS the door.

CU ON SARA as his words echo in her ear:

LARRY (VO)  
(amplified, echoing.)  
You're not my type! You're too plain!  
You're not my type! Too plain! Not  
my type! Not my type! Not my type!

It's an orgy of sound, a parody of a German expressionist  
sound effect. Have fun with it.

SARA  
(calling off)  
Larry! Come back!

Larry enters

SARA  
I'm sorry I yelled. Don't leave.

LARRY  
You're better off without me. I'm  
dragging you down. I drag everyone  
down. Everyone hates me in the end.

SARA  
There's time! We'll both change!

LARRY  
Nothing's going to change. I'm -  
I like you Sara. But you don't  
have what turns me on. Maybe it's  
better this way.

SARA  
Go out for a while, Larry. Go out  
and come back in three hours.

LARRY  
Why?

SARA  
I'll have a surprise for you.

LARRY  
OK. I'll come back later tonight.  
But only tonight. It's time I moved  
on. This city's worn out for me.

He exits.

She picks up the phone and dials. On the other side of the stage, at the Hair Today Beauty Salon, Vertigo picks up.

VERTIGO  
Hair Today!

SARA  
Vertigo?

VERTIGO  
Sara? You sound weird.

SARA  
It's nothing. Only - do you  
remember offering to do a  
makeover?

VERTIGO  
Of course!

SARA  
Can you do it right now?

VERTIGO  
It's the middle of the night! I  
only came in to do the books.  
How about tomorrow?

SARA  
It has to be right now!

VERTIGO  
OK. Come on over.

Sara walks across the stage as Vertigo and Hector enter with a beautician's chair and a TRANSLUCENT SCREEN OR CURTAIN.

Vertigo clips Sara's hair behind the screen.

VERTIGO  
You see, on a woman over 30, long  
hair draws the face down. You have  
to have a certain - I don't know -  
"up" thing -

HECTOR

- buoyancy -

VERTIGO

- buoyancy, to keep the face from being dragged down. I think a blunt cut that almost brushes the shoulders with a perm will also give the illusion of thicker hair.

Hector takes a deep swallow from his glass of red wine.

Vertigo finishes cutting.

VERTIGO

I knew she'd look good, but - wow.

HECTOR (O.S.)

You're a genius. Is there any more wine?

(he becomes Steven and speaks to Sara)  
Now, go get into your wig for the climax.

She hurries off stage.

CUT TO:

Steven helps set up Sara's room as he speaks.

STEVEN

OK, when Sara gets out, she's going to look for her grandmother's pearls, but she's going to find a videotape and watch it on TV. And she's going to make a shocking discovery at the most dramatically opportune moment.

SARA enters, ravishing in a floor-length negligee, combing out her newly-blonde hair. She looks radiant.

She looks in a MIRROR, notices a STRAY HAIR and snips it off, setting the VERY LARGE SCISSORS on the nightstand.

SARA  
 (suddenly smiling)  
 Pearls! Grandmother's pearls!

Sara searches a chest of drawers and a jewelry box. Nothing. Then she remembers!

She gets a chair and climbs up to the top of the ARMOIRE and finds a video tape. She's confused. She puts it in the VCR.

The tape is a record of one of Larry's murders.

VICTIM ON TAPE (VO)  
 Don't kill me. Ouch! That hurts!  
 Stop killing me! Ouch! Ouch!

LARRY (VO)  
 I'm not going to hurt you.

VICTIM ON TAPE (VO)  
 Ouch! You're killing me! Ouch!

LARRY (VO)  
 The windows are all closed. No one can hear you scream.

VICTIM ON TAPE (VO)  
 Ouch!

Sara stops the tape with her remote control. We hear the BUZZ of static.

Sara crosses to the telephone and dials, not bothering to turn off the TV, which continues to BUZZ.

SARA  
 9-1-1? I'd like to report a murder.

Larry walks in and sees Sara. Her back is to him. She's a vision in blonde.

Their encounter is dreamy and slow, as though underwater. Wind rustling her negligee would be a nice touch.

LARRY  
 Sara.

SARA

Larry.

LARRY

You're blonde.

SARA

I did it for you.

LARRY

For me.

SARA

Yes, Larry. For you. I want you  
to take me.

LARRY

To take.

SARA

I have yearned for so long for a  
man who would ask me to sacrifice...  
everything...to prove my love.  
I have so much to give you. Now.  
At last. I'm yours.

Larry indicates the TV, still emitting its low, static BUZZ.

LARRY

You've been watching TV.

He turns it off.

SARA

Why, yes, Larry. Where else is  
a woman to get her ideas about  
sacrificing everything to a man?

LARRY

You found the tape on the...where  
I hid it?

SARA

The armoire.

LARRY

I meant to hide it better.

SARA

Too late.

LARRY

I don't know why I do this. I really don't. It happens in slow motion. I can't stop it. Afterwards I feel so scared. I could get caught!

SARA

Poor Larry.

LARRY

I only do it when I'm depressed. I get very tense.

SARA

I know.

LARRY

I wish it didn't have to be this way. I loved you - more than any of the others.

SARA

And I loved you.

LARRY

If you were blonde...

SARA

Now, I am.

LARRY

Now you are.

She extends her arms. He walks toward her.

Outside, the sounds of a SIREN and COMMOTION - a police car arriving.

He comes to her - they embrace.

The camera circles them as they kiss deeply and rotate through the room. They end up in the bed, Sara on the bottom.

LARRY

So blonde. So beautiful.

They embrace and kiss on the bed.

Larry's embrace turns into a stranglehold.

Sara stretches to reach the scissors on the nightstand but they're just beyond her grasp. Kissing, strangling, reaching, the music swells to a crescendo as Larry speaks.

LARRY

If only you hadn't been so nosy!  
If only you had stayed the same!  
If only -

She stabs him in the back.

He screams in agony, twists off the bed and gyrates around the room, trying to reach the scissors and pull them out, but he can't.

LARRY

I'll never trust another woman.

He falls to the floor.

Steven and the others enter.

Sara turns to him.

SARA

(quite cheerful)  
So. That's it. You've finished the play and I'm proud of you. Wasn't that smart of me to plant the scissors? I knew which way it was going when you had me try on the blond wig. Now we can all go home. Right? Steven? Right?

STEVEN

I still think it needs - something.

THALIA

Only a denouement.

SARA

Oh, like where you take care of  
loose ends?

THALIA

Right. So, what are the loose ends?

STEVEN

Glenda? Whether her cognitive therapy  
works? Whether our friendship will  
survive?

Thalia nods, smiles sweetly.

SOUND: HARP.

Glenda enters - with Peter.

GLENDA

Darlings!

(she hugs Steven and Sara)  
I'm back and I'm much more good-  
natured. I went into cognitive  
therapy just as you said. You've  
always wanted to write my life,  
and now that I've let you do so  
I'm completely contented! I'm  
happily married to Peter. Very  
happily. The age difference  
doesn't matter to us at all.  
In fact, we play a game called  
"Dynasty" where I dress up like  
Joan Collins.

THALIA

Good. You'll be happy forever.

GLENDA

Because I dress like Joan Collins?

THALIA

The fixity of dramatic characters.  
You see, even though we've  
pretended you're an actual  
actress with an existence independent  
of this work, in fact you exist

THALIA (cont.)  
 only within the boundaries of  
 the piece. So, however you are  
 at the end, that's how you remain.  
 Forever. Therefore you end not  
 just happily, but...

GLENDА, STEVEN AND THALIA  
 (nodding to each other)  
 Happily ever after.

GLENDА  
 How splendid!

THALIA  
 And that's only ONE of the reasons art  
 is better than life!

STEVEN  
 Will the audience buy it?

THALIA  
 Oh, yes. Glenda's sins have not  
 been great and she deserves happiness.  
 Audiences are very just. A little  
 vengeful, but it's only that they  
 like to see people get what they  
 deserve. That's why they like  
 fiction. If they wanted to see  
 evil rewarded and goodness punished,  
 they'd read the newspaper or go  
 to work, or attend movies more  
 serious than this one.

Suddenly, Larry leaps to his feet. The scissors are still  
 stuck in his back.

LARRY  
 But what about me? I don't deserve  
 what I got. I only killed blondes  
 because of my childhood. My mother  
 was blonde and she ignored me.

STEVEN  
 (explaining with forced patience)  
 That was after you killed her!

LARRY

I was an orphan!

STEVEN

Yes, but you were an orphan because you had -

LARRY

(overlapping on "you")

I've never had much happiness. I heard that stuff about the fixity of dramatic characters and I don't want to be dead forever and ever. I think comedy lady should give me a happy ending, too. Did you ever see "Halloween?" The psycho-killer seems dead, but suddenly he jumps up again and he's alive. And I'll kill again! I'll wait in the parking lot and kill members of this very audience.

Larry flees the stage.

THALIA

We're ruined! By that I mean, you're ruined! No one will ever produce a play where characters kill the audience after the show. That's too interactive even for a generation reared on video games.

Steven gives her a look. He's a little sick of her.

Then, he calmly walks to the lip of the stage and addresses a comment over the heads of the audience.

STEVEN

Sound man? Give me a crash.

SOUND: Very big car crash.

STEVEN (cont.)

(dry)

Oops! Too bad for Larry. He died before he could repent his sins, so I'm afraid he'll burn in hell forever and ever.

(to Thalia, a little sarcastic)

Will the audience like that?

THALIA

Larry was cruising for a bruising.

STEVEN

So - what haven't I sorted out yet? What else is the audience waiting to know?

THALIA

What they always wait to know: does love triumph?

STEVEN

You mean do I, uh, go to Brokeback Mountain with Vertigo.

Thalia nods.

STEVEN (cont.)

OK. Everybody clear the stage. Except for Vertigo.

They do so.

Vertigo enters.

There's a pause.

VERTIGO

Look, I just don't think it would work. You only like me because I remind you of Kim Novak. I mean, because I'm like her in that Alfred Hitchcock movie. I mean, I don't look like Kim Novak, obviously, but I remind you of an image in your head.

STEVEN

Yes, but that's why anybody likes anybody. That's what romantic love is. We've all got this movie in our heads of the perfect love and the perfect love story. That's normal. That's what sexual preference is. People who don't have that are kind of dead inside. And when we meet somebody who's perfect casting, who fits the movie in our heads, that dream everybody has - well, that's why we date and even marry people whom we wouldn't even have dinner with under other circumstances. Because the person is the movie in our heads.

FREUD (OS)

Ironically, this whole thing is movie in your head.

STEVEN

(stern)

Sigmund! I'm busy!

(back to Vertigo)

Vertigo, you must have the movie in your head. Don't you? Don't you have a type?

VERTIGO

Actually...

STEVEN

Yes?

VERTIGO

I tend to go for older guys who think they're smarter than they are.

Steven turns to camera and smiles ecstatically.

STEVEN

I love fiction!

(to Vertigo)

Come here, you fictional construct.

STEVEN (cont.)

I'm going to objectify you. Tonight.  
Repeatedly.

They smooch. The camera TILTS down to see Vertigo's leg flip up into the air a la a 40's Hollywood movie-ending kiss.

The camera PANS to Mrs. Farmer.

MRS. FARMER

(to the camera)

Obviously, a movie.

Music up.

As the CREDITS ROLL, Audience Member, still in his French maid outfit, stands and loudly cries, "Bravo! Bravo! Author! Author!"

Long after the house lights are up, he keeps applauding.

As he walks out of the theatre, stumbling on his high heels, the "Generic Thriller Theme Song" plays.

CHORAL GROUP

(sings)

We hope you had a lovely time  
After all it's not a crime  
To like a story with a killer  
A nice Generic Thriller

Why shouldn't you like a story  
If it's racy and a little gory  
A story that's sexy! A story with guts!  
We know you're just a bunch of narrative sluts

We hope you had a lovely time  
After all it's not a crime  
To like a story with a killer  
A nice Generic Thriller

You only have to just sit there  
You don't have to even leave your armchair  
Nibble your date or you can fondle your snacks  
While thrilling to the killings of the maniacs

FADE OUT: