

ACT TWO
WALPURGISNACHT

George, by himself. Nick reenters

NICK. *(After a silence.)* I ... guess ... she's all right. *(No answer.)* She ... really shouldn't drink. *(No answer.)* She's ... frail. *(No answer.)* Uh ... slim-hipped, as you'd have it. *(George smiles vaguely.)* I'm really very sorry.

GEORGE. *(Quietly.)* Where's my little yum yum? Where's Martha?
NICK. She's making coffee ... in the kitchen. She ... gets sick quite easily.

GEORGE. *(Preoccupied.)* Martha? Oh, no, Martha hasn't been sick a day in her life, unless you count the time she spends in the rest home ...

NICK. *(He, too, quietly.)* No, no; my wife ... my wife gets sick quite easily. Your wife is Martha.

GEORGE. *(With some rue.)* Oh, yes ... I know.

NICK. *(A statement of fact.)* She doesn't really spend any time in a rest home.

GEORGE. Your wife?

NICK. No, yours.

GEORGE. Oh! Mine. *(Pause.)* No, no, she doesn't ... I would; I mean if I were ... her ... she ... I would. But I'm not ... and so I don't. *(Pause.)* I'd like to, though. It gets pretty bouncy around here sometimes.

NICK. *(Coolly.)* Yes ... I'm sure.

GEORGE. Well, you saw an example of it.

NICK. I try not to ...

GEORGE. Get involved. Um? Isn't that right?

NICK. Yes ... that's right.

GEORGE. I'd imagine not.

NICK. I find it ... embarrassing.

GEORGE. *(Sarcastic.)* Oh, you do, hunh?

NICK. Yes. Really. Quite.

GEORGE. (*Mimicking him.*) Yes. Really. Quite. (*Then aloud, but to himself.*) IT'S DISGUSTING!

NICK. Now look! I didn't have anything ...

GEORGE. DISGUSTING! (*Quietly, but with great intensity.*) Do you think I like having that ... whatever-it-is ... ridiculing me, tearing me down, in front of ... (*Waves his hand in a gesture of contemptuous dismissal.*) YOU? Do you think I care for it?

NICK. (*Cold — unfriendly.*) Well, no ... I don't imagine you care for it at all.

GEORGE. Oh, you don't imagine it, hunh?

NICK. (*Antagonistic.*) No ... I don't. I don't imagine you do!

GEORGE. (*Withering.*) Your sympathy disarms me ... your ... your compassion makes me weep! Large, salty, unscientific tears!

NICK. (*With great disdain.*) I just don't see why you feel you have to subject *other* people to it.

GEORGE. *I?*

NICK. If you and your ... wife ... want to go at each other, like a couple of ...

GEORGE. *! Why I want to!*

NICK. ... animals, I don't see why you don't do it when there aren't any ...

GEORGE. (*Laughing through his anger.*) Why, you smug, self-righteous little ...

NICK. (*A genuine threat.*) CAN ... IT ... MISTER!

GEORGE. ... scientist.

NICK. I've never hit an older man.

GEORGE. (*Considers it.*) Oh. (*Pause.*) You just hit younger men ... and children ... women ... birds. (*Sees that Nick is not amused.*) Well, you're quite right, of course. It isn't the prettiest spectacle ... seeing a couple of middle-aged types hacking away at each other, all red in the face and winded, missing half the time.

NICK. Oh, you two don't miss ... you two are pretty good. Impressive.

GEORGE. And impressive things impress you, don't they? You're ... easily impressed ... sort of a ... pragmatic idealism.

NICK. (*A tight smile.*) No, it's that sometimes I can admire things that I don't admire. Now, flagellation isn't my idea of good times, but ...

GEORGE. ... but you can admire a good flagellator ... a real pro.

NICK. Unh-hunh ... yeah.

GEORGE. Your wife throws up a lot, eh?

NICK. I didn't say that ... I said she gets sick quite easily.

GEORGE. Oh. I thought that by sick you meant ...

NICK. Well, it's true ... She ... she does throw up a lot. Once she starts ... there's practically no stopping her ... I mean, she'll go right on ... for hours. Not all the time, but ... regularly.

GEORGE. You can tell time by her, hunh?

NICK. Just about.

GEORGE. Drink?

NICK. Sure. *(With no emotion, except the faintest distaste, as George takes his glass to the bar.)* I married her because she was pregnant.

GEORGE. *(Pause.)* Oh? *(Pause.)* But you said you didn't have any children ... When I asked you, you said ...

NICK. She wasn't ... really. It was a hysterical pregnancy. She blew up, and then she went down.

GEORGE. And while she was up, you married her.

NICK. And then she went down. *(They both laugh, and are a little surprised that they do.)*

GEORGE. Uh ... Bourbon *is* right.

NICK. Uh ... yes, Bourbon.

GEORGE. *(At the bar, still.)* When I was sixteen and going to prep school, during the Punic Wars, a bunch of us used to go into New York on the first day of vacations, before we fanned out to our homes, and in the evening this bunch of us used to go to this gin mill owned by the gangster-father of one of us — for this was during the Great Experiment, or Prohibition, as it is more frequently called, and it was a bad time for the liquor lobby, but a fine time for the crooks and the cops — and we would go to this gin mill, and we would drink with the grown-ups and listen to the jazz. And one time, in the bunch of us, there was this boy who was fifteen, and he had killed his mother with a shotgun some years before — accidentally, completely accidentally, without even an unconscious motivation, I have no doubt, no doubt at all — and this one evening this boy went with us, and we ordered our drinks, and when it came his turn he said, I'll have bergin ... give me some bergin, please ... bergin and water. Well, we all laughed ... he was blond and he had the face of a cherub, and we all laughed, and his cheeks went red and the color rose in his neck, and the assistant crook who had taken our order told people at the next table what the boy had said, and then they laughed, and then more people were told and the laughter grew, and more people and more laughter, and no one was laughing more than us, and none of us laughing more than the boy

who had shot his mother. And soon, everyone in the gin mill knew what the laughter was about, and everyone started ordering bergin, and laughing when they ordered it. And soon, of course, the laughter became less general, but it did not subside, entirely, for a very long time, for always at this table or that someone would order bergin and a new area of laughter would rise. We drank free that night, and we were bought champagne by the management, by the gangster-father of one of us. And of course, we suffered the next day, each of us, alone, on his train, away from New York, each of us with a grown-up's hangover ... but it was the grandest day of my ... youth. (*Hands Nick a drink on the word.*)

NICK. (*Very quietly.*) Thank you. What ... what happened to the boy ... the boy who had shot his mother?

GEORGE. I won't tell you.

NICK. All right.

GEORGE. The following summer, on a country road, with his learner's permit in his pocket and his father on the front seat to his right, he swerved the car, to avoid a porcupine, and drove straight into a large tree.

NICK. (*Faintly pleading.*) No.

GEORGE. He was not killed, of course. And in the hospital, when he was conscious and out of danger, and when they told him that his father *was* dead, he began to laugh, I have been told, and his laughter grew and he would not stop, and it was not until after they jammed a needle in his arm, not until after that, until his consciousness slipped away from him, that his laughter subsided ... stopped. And when he was recovered from his injuries enough so that he could be moved without damage should he struggle, he was put in an asylum. That was thirty years ago.

NICK. Is he ... still there?

GEORGE. Oh, yes. And I'm told that for these thirty years he has ... not ... uttered ... one ... sound. (*A rather long silence; five seconds, please.*) MARTHA! (*Pause.*) MARTHA!

NICK. I told you ... she's making coffee.

GEORGE. For your hysterical wife, who goes up and down.

NICK. Went. Up and down.

GEORGE. Went. No more?

NICK. No more. Nothing.

GEORGE. (*After a sympathetic pause.*) The saddest thing about men ... Well, no, one of the saddest things about men is the way they age ... some of them. Do you know what it is with insane peo-

ple? Do you? ... the quiet ones?

NICK. No.

GEORGE. They don't change ... they don't grow old.

NICK. They must.

GEORGE. Well, eventually, probably, yes. But they don't ... in the usual sense. They maintain a ... a firm-skinned serenity ... the under-use of everything leaves them ... quite whole.

NICK. Are you recommending it?

GEORGE. No. Some things are sad, though. (*Imitates a pep-talker.*)

But ya jest gotta buck up an' face 'em, 'at's all. Buck up! (*Pause.*)

Martha doesn't have hysterical pregnancies.

NICK. My wife had *one*.

GEORGE. Yes. Martha doesn't have pregnancies at all.

NICK. Well, no ... I don't imagine so ... now. Do you have any other kids? Do you have any daughters, or anything?

GEORGE. (*As if it's a great joke.*) Do we have any *what*?

NICK. Do you have any ... I mean, do you have only one ... kid ... uh ... your son?

GEORGE. (*With a private knowledge.*) Oh no ... just one ... one boy ... our son.

NICK. Well ... (*Shrugs.*) ... that's nice.

GEORGE. Oh ho, ho. Yes, well, he's a ... comfort, a bean bag.

NICK. A what?

GEORGE. A bean bag. Bean bag. You wouldn't understand.

(*Overdistinct.*) Bean ... bag.

NICK. I *heard* you ... I didn't say I was deaf ... I said I didn't understand.

GEORGE. You didn't say that at all.

NICK. I meant I was *implying* I didn't understand. (*Under his breath.*) For Christ's sake!

GEORGE. You're getting testy.

NICK. (*Testy.*) I'm sorry.

GEORGE. All I said was, our son ... the apple of our three eyes, Martha being a Cyclops ... our son is a bean bag, and you get testy.

NICK. I'm sorry! It's late, I'm tired, I've been drinking since nine o'clock, my wife is vomiting, there's been a lot of screaming going on around here ...

GEORGE. And so you're testy. Naturally. Don't ... worry about it. Anybody who comes here ends up getting ... testy. It's expected ... don't be upset.

NICK. (*Testy.*) I'm not upset!

GEORGE. You're testy.

NICK. Yes.

GEORGE. I'd like to set you straight about something ... while the little ladies are out of the room ... I'd like to set you straight about what Martha said.

NICK. I don't ... make judgments, so there's no need, really, unless you ...

GEORGE. Well, I want to. I know you don't like to become involved ... I know you like to ... preserve your scientific detachment in the face of — for lack of a better word — Life ... and all ... but still, I want to tell you.

NICK. (*A tight, formal smile.*) I'm a ... guest. You go right ahead.

GEORGE. (*Mocking appreciation.*) Oh ... well, thanks. Now! That makes me feel all warm and runny inside.

NICK. Well, if you're going to ...

MARTHA'S VOICE. HEY!

NICK. ... if you're going to start that kind of stuff again ...

GEORGE. Hark! Forest sounds.

NICK. Hm?

GEORGE. Animal noises.

MARTHA. (*Sticking her head in.*) Hey!

NICK. Oh!

GEORGE. Well, here's nursie.

MARTHA. (*To Nick.*) We're sitting up ... we're having coffee, and we'll be back in.

NICK. (*Not rising.*) Oh ... is there anything I should do?

MARTHA. Nayh. You just stay here and listen to George's side of things. Bore yourself to death.

GEORGE. *Monstre!*

MARTHA. *Cochon!*

GEORGE. *Bête!*

MARTHA. *Canaille!*

GEORGE. *Putain!*

MARTHA. (*With a gesture of contemptuous dismissal.*) Yaaaahhhh! You two types amuse yourselves ... we'll be in. (*As she goes.*) You clean up the mess you made, George? (*Martha goes. George speaks to the empty hallway.*)

GEORGE. No, Martha, I did not clean up the mess I made. I've been trying for years to clean up the mess I made.

NICK. Have you?

GEORGE. Hm?