



Carl L. Williams

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BIG DOG PUBLISHING

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“Nobody ever went broke
by underestimating the taste
of the American public.”

–H.L. Mencken

Authors Anonymous

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Authors Anonymous premiered at Branch County Community Theatre, Coldwater, MI, March 2-4, 2006: J.R. Colbeck, director.

CHARLOTTE ASCOTT: Jennifer Colbeck

WALLACE CRANDALL: Carl D. Rifenburg

ROSCOE DRAKE: David Winn

T.Y. MYERS: Tammy Smith

MEREDITH MCCOY: Christina Dafnis

PORTER REMBERT: Gustavus Winston

DORIS DOWNWEAVER: Irene Grimes-Butdorf

Authors Anonymous

COMEDY. When four authors meet at the country home of a reclusive heiress to compete for a \$100,000 grant, it becomes painfully clear that it's going to be tough choice—that is to find an author worthy of the money! There's Roscoe Drake, a writer of booze, broads, and tough-guy detective fiction; Charlotte Ascot, a writer of wine-sipping, candle-lighting, moon-gazing romance novels; T.Y. Myers, writer of cold corpse-laden murder-mysteries; and Wallace Crandall, whose high-brow literary work about an ineffable, alienated heron leaves everyone speechless. But in the end, it could be the writers' real lives that prove stranger than their fiction.

Performance Time: Approximately 90 minutes.

Characters

(3 M, 4 F)

ROSCOE DRAKE: Mickey Spillane type; wears a loud sports coat.

T.Y. MYERS: Prim, conservatively dressed mystery writer.

WALLACE CRANDALL: Serious-minded writer of little-read literary fiction.

CHARLOTTE ASCOT: Flamboyant romance writer with tacky elegance.

MEREDITH MCCOY: Shy, attractive assistant to Miss Downweaver.

PORTER REMBERT: Literary critic and poet.

DORIS DOWNWEAVER: Cantankerous and a little dotty.

Setting

The living room of the Downweaver estate in Litchfield, CT. The room is decorated with old-fashioned furniture. Small piles of books lay about the room. There is a coffee table with a large bowl that holds bottled water. Next to it are plates of raw mini carrots and wheat crackers. There is a front door SR, a door to the library UC, and a door SL leading to rest of house.

Synopsis of Scenes

ACT I

Scene 1: Living room, Friday evening.

ACT II

Scene 1: Living room, Saturday afternoon.

Scene 2: Living room, late Saturday afternoon.

Props

Small piles of books
Large bowl
Flask
Bottles of water
Cane
Chair
Coffee table

Plate of baby carrots
Plate of wheat crackers
5 Folders
Cell phone
Reading glasses, for Roscoe
Envelope

Sound Effect

Doorbell

ACT I

(AT RISE: *Living room of the Downweaver estate. Roscoe Drake, Charlotte Ascot, Wallace Crandall, and T.Y. Myers sit/stand around the room, casting appraising glances at one another.*)

ROSCOE: So you're T.Y. Myers.

T.Y.: I am.

ROSCOE: Could've fooled me.

T.Y.: I suspect that isn't very difficult.

ROSCOE: A big-time mystery writer like you. I wasn't expecting a dame.

T.Y.: My sex surprises you?

WALLACE: Your gender.

T.Y.: What?

WALLACE: It's your gender that surprises him, not your sex.

CHARLOTTE: Yes, dear, if given the opportunity, we might all be surprised by your sex.

T.Y.: (*Nervous, evasive.*) I don't know what you're talking about.

WALLACE: The simple, technical difference between sex and gender.

T.Y.: Writers. You can't say a word without being picked apart. Give me a good honest cop anytime.

ROSCOE: A good honest cop is hard to find.

CHARLOTTE: Ah, Mr. Drake...aren't you so hard-boiled? Just like your fiction.

WALLACE: That pot was left boiling too long.

ROSCOE: Not like that wimpy stuff you write, huh, Wally?

WALLACE: The name is Wallace. You've read my work?

ROSCOE: No, but I heard about it. "*Literature.*"

T.Y.: Another word for high art and low readership.

WALLACE: At least my work has value.

CHARLOTTE: Mr. Crandall, value is like virtue. As long as you still have it, what good does it do you?

T.Y.: Royalty checks are the measure of value, not a bunch of la-de-da literary awards.

WALLACE: I wouldn't call \$100,000 "la-de-da."

ROSCOE: You haven't won it yet, kid.

(Meredith McCoy enters from SL and timidly searches for a chance to break into the conversation.)

WALLACE: I can't see Roscoe Drake—purveyor of guns, booze, and broads—winning the prize. Or for that matter, T.Y. Myers. Mystery novels are barely one step up from what Drake churns out.

T.Y.: I beg your pardon, but an intricate mystery is a far more creative literary form than Mr. Drake's tough-guy drivel.

(As they talk, Meredith steps one way and then another, ineffectually raising a hand to interrupt.)

WALLACE: Speaking of drivel, that brings us to you, Miss Ascot.

CHARLOTTE: Call me Charlotte. Insults are so much kinder among friends.

WALLACE: No disrespect intended, but really...romance novels don't even count as writing. They're merely typing.

(Meredith moves forward.)

CHARLOTTE: I type very fast, darling, and spend even faster.

WALLACE: My point is, what all of you write is...
(Contemptuous.) ...genre fiction.

T.Y.: And what you write, Mr. High-and-Mighty, is indefinable.

ROSCOE: Not to mention unreadable.

MEREDITH: Excuse me! Oh...I'm sorry.

CHARLOTTE: Don't be sorry, Miss McCoy. Unless you've done something scandalous. And then be happy!

MEREDITH: I'm not...I haven't...I mean...

ROSCOE: What do they call you, anyway, besides Miss McCoy?

MEREDITH: My name is Meredith.

CHARLOTTE: A pretty name. I used that name for my heroine in "Orchids in My Heart."

ROSCOE: How the heck does an orchid get in somebody's heart?

CHARLOTTE: It grows there...planted by love, watered by kisses, blooming by night.

T.Y.: Oh, please.

CHARLOTTE: No, don't ask me to go on. You'll have to buy the book.

WALLACE: You certainly won't find it in the library.

MEREDITH: What I wanted to say was...Miss Downweaver will be joining us soon. I'm sorry you've had to wait.

ROSCOE: As long as we're waiting, I don't figure you'll mind if I...have a little libation? *(Pulls out a flask, takes a swig.)*

WALLACE: Libation. I'm impressed. You know a word with three syllables.

ROSCOE: How'd you like me to send your head up to the ceiling?

CHARLOTTE: Red-pencil that line, Roscoe. We're not in a barroom.

T.Y.: Or a bedroom, Charlotte.

CHARLOTTE: Careful. You'll start my creative juices flowing.

ROSCOE: Hey. Don't talk dirty in front of the doll. *(Indicates Meredith.)*

MEREDITH: We have bottled water if anyone else is thirsty, along with some wheat crackers and carrots.

CHARLOTTE: Doesn't it all look...yummy.

T.Y.: Perhaps Miss McCoy could elaborate on what's expected of us.

WALLACE: Yes. We really don't know much about your employer. *(Takes a bottle of water.)*

ROSCOE: Doris Downweaver...never heard of her till I got the letter.

CHARLOTTE: But what a great opening paragraph. A \$100,000 grant offer. That'll grab a reader's attention.

ROSCOE: Faster than a slit skirt in a high wind.

T.Y.: So what's her story, Meredith?

MEREDITH: Her story?

T.Y.: What motivated her to do this?

MEREDITH: (*Hesitates.*) Her love of reading. She's always been a compulsive reader. Some time back, she inherited quite a bit of money...a fortune, really.

CHARLOTTE: Including this country house, I presume. Did you come with the estate?

MEREDITH: Me? Oh, no. I'm...just her secretary. I watch over her. She's rather dependent on me.

WALLACE: What is she? An invalid?

MEREDITH: On the contrary. She gets around quite well. Almost too well. She does use a cane. You must watch out for the cane.

ROSCOE: So what about the dough? The hundred "G"s.

MEREDITH: She decided to become a patron of the arts...specifically, to encourage writers. But not novices. She wanted to subsidize writers who had shown they could be financially independent...working writers who were skillful in their craft but struggling to make ends meet.

T.Y.: My ends are hardly on speaking terms, they're so far apart.

WALLACE: Why us? How did we get selected?

MEREDITH: For one thing, she was already familiar with your writings.

CHARLOTTE: A fan!

MEREDITH: And she had learned, from various and independent sources, about your financial setbacks. For example, your interview, Mr. Crandall, in the "Times," where you stated the economic difficulties of pursuing a serious literary career.

WALLACE: The days of making a living from short stories disappeared with Scott Fitzgerald.

MEREDITH: And your unfortunate reversal in the stock market, Miss Myers.

T.Y.: No mystery about that. I might just as well have taken my money to Reno.

ROSCOE: I know a couple of joints in Reno with the old-fashioned slots, not those fancy new machines. I'll loan you my lucky magnet. I picked it up there on my first honeymoon.

MEREDITH: Miss Downweaver was sorry to hear about your latest divorce, Mr. Drake.

ROSCOE: Magnets don't work on some things.

MEREDITH: The settlement, the community property, the alimony...it all added up, didn't it?

ROSCOE: More like a case of subtraction.

MEREDITH: And then, Miss Ascot...there was that libel suit that went against you.

CHARLOTTE: An outrageous miscarriage of justice! How was I to know there was a real person named Bunny Rumpus? And that she had three South American lovers in a row, just like my character in "Passion on the Pampas?"

MEREDITH: Quite an unfortunate coincidence.

CHARLOTTE: Now she's spending my money on all her gigolos!

WALLACE: You could take a month and write another novel.

ROSCOE: A month! (*To Charlotte.*) It takes you that long?

T.Y.: It takes me a full year to get through a book.

ROSCOE: Slow reader?

T.Y.: Your sense of humor is not appreciated.

WALLACE: Like his writing.

ROSCOE: Somebody must appreciate it. I got 17 titles in print.

CHARLOTTE: I have double that number.

T.Y.: Quality counts more than quantity.

WALLACE: The quality of what? Stock characters and worn-out plot devices? In every whodunit there's always a dead body found lying around.

CHARLOTTE: The bodies lying around my books certainly aren't dead.

ROSCOE: I got bodies all over the place...bullet wounds, stab wounds, broken teeth from biting on a knuckle sandwich...

MEREDITH: (*Jumping in.*) The point is—! That is to say...Miss Downweaver likes all different kinds of books.

T.Y.: You mean she's an indiscriminating reader.

MEREDITH: In the best sense of indiscriminating. She finds something worthwhile in everything.

WALLACE: In other words, she's bereft of critical faculties.

MEREDITH: I wouldn't say that. But it does bring us to the explanation for this delay in her appearing. We're waiting for one more person to arrive.

ROSCOE: That's all we need. Another pencil jockey.

MEREDITH: This one's not a writer. At least not a fiction writer. Miss Downweaver has invited Porter Rembert.

WALLACE: (*Impressed.*) The critic?

T.Y.: He's coming here?

ROSCOE: So who is this guy?

CHARLOTTE: Just another man with an opinion.

WALLACE: Not just another man, and not just an opinion. Porter Rembert is the premier literary critic at the "Times."

MEREDITH: Do you know him?

WALLACE: No, but I've read his articles. Very perceptive. When he reviews a book and likes it, the writer is made. I can't wait to meet him.

T.Y.: Why was he invited?

MEREDITH: We've established that Miss Downweaver has indiscriminating tastes. Therefore, in deciding who will be the recipient of the grant, she has enlisted the aid of Mr. Rembert.

ROSCOE: I'm sunk.

CHARLOTTE: Like the Titanic. We all are.

WALLACE: (*Smug smile.*) Oh, I wouldn't say that.

T.Y.: I wouldn't either. I write a thinking man's mystery.

ROSCOE: Yeah? We'll see what the thinking man thinks of it.

CHARLOTTE: How's he going to judge us? By our accumulated work? By a single book? I don't understand.

MEREDITH: All that will be explained in good time.

WALLACE: I'm glad I've taken care with my work and not just rushed it out. I spent three years writing my last novel.

ROSCOE: What'd you have? A case of writer's block?

WALLACE: Not at all. I write every day. Something finely crafted is worth the effort. Unlike pulp fiction, my writing will last.

CHARLOTTE: Of course your books will last, sweetheart. Because no one wears them out by reading them.

(*Doorbell.*)

MEREDITH: That must be Mr. Rembert. (*Goes to the front door.*)

T.Y.: A moment of suspense. A stranger waits outside the door.

ROSCOE: Or maybe somebody dumped a body on the doorstep.

(*Meredith opens the door.*)

MEREDITH: Yes?

(*Porter enters.*)

PORTER: Hello. I'm Porter Rembert.

MEREDITH: (*Surprised, flustered.*) Oh. Well...all right...come in, then.

PORTER: You were expecting me, weren't you?

MEREDITH: Yes, of course. It's just that...somehow I pictured you as being older.

PORTER: I'm sure I will be someday.

MEREDITH: You must have started very young.

PORTER: At the paper? Or in general?

MEREDITH: *(Laughs nervously.)* I'm not sure what I mean.
Please...come meet our other guests.

(Wallace eagerly approaches Porter and shakes his hand.)

WALLACE: Mr. Rembert, it's an honor to meet you. I'm
Wallace Crandall. *(Pauses, looking for recognition.)*

PORTER: That's fine. Good to see you.

WALLACE: I wrote "When Giants Awake."

PORTER: *(Vague.)* Yes...yes.

WALLACE: You've read it?

PORTER: Could be I did.

(Porter walks past Wallace. Roscoe bulls forward past T.Y. to meet Porter.)

ROSCOE: Roscoe Drake. Love your stuff in the "Times."

PORTER: Thanks. I get a kick out of it myself.

MEREDITH: *(Introducing.)* T.Y. Myers and Charlotte Ascot.

PORTER: Ladies.

T.Y.: I hope you enjoy a good mystery.

CHARLOTTE: The mystery is why people like mysteries.

T.Y.: As opposed to overly perfumed pornography.

CHARLOTTE: There is nothing pornographic about love.

WALLACE: *(To Porter.)* You called them "ladies." You might
want to revise that.

MEREDITH: Perhaps you could all have a seat? I'll run tell
Miss Downweaver we're ready.

(Meredith exits SL. They sit down. The writers stare at Porter, who shifts self-consciously in his chair.)

PORTER: I hope I wasn't too late.

CHARLOTTE: Not at all. You made a perfect grand entrance.

WALLACE: Or a perfectly grand entrance, depending on the intent.

ROSCOE: He came into the room. Period.

T.Y.: Would I be out of line to ask why a critic of your repute would agree to judge this...whatever it is...competition?

PORTER: The idea intrigued me. It struck me as a literary challenge. A chance to examine contrasting styles of writing. And of course there was a certain honorarium involved.

ROSCOE: A little jingle for the judge. A little swag for the swami. A little moolah for the mullah.

CHARLOTTE: A little less color in the commentary, Roscoe.

WALLACE: Purple prose.

ROSCOE: Purple like a black eye, or somebody looking for one.

T.Y.: More tough-guy talk from the poor man's Mickey Spillane.

CHARLOTTE: I thought Mickey Spillane was the poor man's Mickey Spillane.

WALLACE: Such erudite conversation. If all of you aren't careful, Mr. Rembert is going to get the right impression about you.

T.Y.: Oh, what the heck, Roscoe—go ahead and punch him.

(Meredith enters with Doris Downweaver, who carries a cane but doesn't use it much to walk.)

MEREDITH: Here we are.

DORIS: *(Cantankerous.)* I know where we are. *(As the men rise.)* What? Are they leaving already?

MEREDITH: They're standing up because they're gentlemen.

DORIS: I've seen a lot of men on their feet who weren't gentlemen. *(Points her cane at Charlotte.)* You. You're in my chair.

CHARLOTTE: I didn't realize.

(Doris impatiently pokes Charlotte in the ribs with the tip of her cane.)

DORIS: Up. Up.

CHARLOTTE: Oh! *(Hastily vacates the chair.)*

MEREDITH: *(Embarrassed.)* Miss Downweaver—

CHARLOTTE: *(Flustered.)* All right, then. Where would you like me to sit?

DORIS: Any place but here.

(Doris settles into her chair. Charlotte moves to another seat.)

MEREDITH: Please, gentlemen, sit down. First, why don't we all get acquainted?

DORIS: Get on with it.

MEREDITH: Yes, well...this is T.Y. Myers, the mystery writer.

DORIS: Mysteries give me a headache.

T.Y.: Pleased to meet you, Miss Downweaver. *(Makes a motion to the carrots and crackers.)* May I pass you something?

DORIS: *(Looks at the snacks.)* Yuck!

T.Y.: Later, perhaps.

MEREDITH: And you've already met—after a fashion—Miss Charlotte Ascot, the romance writer.

CHARLOTTE: Charmed.

DORIS: You write all that romance stuff from experience?

CHARLOTTE: For the sake of my reputation, I'd prefer not to be too specific.

DORIS: You must be worn to a frazzle by now.

MEREDITH: And here we have Mr. Roscoe—

DORIS: *(Interrupting, points to Porter with her cane.)* Who's he?

MEREDITH: Our adjudicator, Mr. Porter Rembert, the esteemed literary critic.

DORIS: What does a critic do, anyway?

PORTER: He reads books and complains about them.

DORIS: Ha! I like this one.

MEREDITH: And this is Mr. Roscoe—

DORIS: (*To Porter.*) Say something else.

PORTER: I think you're a bit of a live wire.

DORIS: (*Amused.*) Live wire! Been ages since I heard "live wire."

MEREDITH: Now I'd like to present Mr. Roscoe—

DORIS: I hope I'm a live one. I'd hate to be a dead one.

MEREDITH: Mr. Roscoe Drake, Miss Downweaver. Mr. Drake is known for his hard-as-nails detective fiction.

ROSCOE: Hard as nails. That's me. Been around, seen a lot. I put it down on the page. Make the story move. Make it jump. Make it growl.

DORIS: (*To Meredith.*) He's not going to start barking, is he?

WALLACE: If he does, we'll give him a chew toy.

MEREDITH: Bringing us to Mr. Wallace Crandall, who writes literary fiction.

WALLACE: Stories that actually make you think.

DORIS: I don't like to think. Every time I think, I think of something I don't like.

WALLACE: May I say, I feel privileged to be invited here by such a magnanimous patron of the arts.

DORIS: (*To Meredith.*) He's a suck-up, isn't he?

MEREDITH: Sooo...now that we all know who we are, let's get a little housekeeping out of the way.

DORIS: No dusting. It makes me sneeze. I don't like to sneeze. It rattles my gizzard.

MEREDITH: I meant just a few preliminaries, Miss Downweaver. I trust you all got settled into your rooms in town. It's not a four-star hotel, but it's the best we had to offer.

PORTER: It's fine.

ROSCOE: I've been in worse.

T.Y.: How about you, Charlotte? You're the one with the most experience in hotel rooms.

CHARLOTTE: A room without a man is just a room. Is that the sort of thing you wanted me to say?

T.Y.: If you were saving that line, you should've saved it a while longer.

WALLACE: Oh, I don't know. It sounded pretty ripe to me.

MEREDITH: (*Asserting herself.*) About this evening.

DORIS: What about it?

MEREDITH: I was just about to explain to everyone how we're going to proceed. Miss Downweaver and Mr. Rembert and I, together, will interview each of you individually. The purpose of the interview is to learn your goals for the future, pertaining of course to your literary careers. We'd like to hear what you hope to achieve and how the grant money would help you in your efforts.

DORIS: And you better make it good.

MEREDITH: Miss Ascot, why don't we start with you?

CHARLOTTE: And end with me, if you'd like.

MEREDITH: Will the rest of you please wait in the library, right through there. (*Points to door UC.*)

(*Roscoe, T.Y., and Wallace head for the library.*)

ROSCOE: The library. More books.

T.Y.: The object is to read them, Roscoe.

(*Doris takes a swipe behind T.Y. with her cane, and T.Y. hurries on.*)

DORIS: Go!

MEREDITH: We'll call each of you in turn.

WALLACE: The library is fine with me. If I'm not writing, I'm always reading.

ROSCOE: I got a Racing Form you can read.

(*T.Y., Wallace, and Roscoe exit UC.*)

DORIS: Good. They're gone. Too many people.

PORTER: Something of a recluse, are you?

DORIS: (*Confused, looks at Meredith.*) Am I?

MEREDITH: Miss Downweaver could be another Emily Dickinson...that is, if she wrote poetry.

PORTER: Interesting you should mention poetry. I'm especially fond of it.

DORIS: Bah. Silly stuff. Bat, rat, cat...this and that. Bunch of foolishness.

PORTER: Well...poetry doesn't necessarily have to rhyme.

DORIS: Then it's not poetry!

CHARLOTTE: *(Recites.)* "There was a young man from Kildare..." *(Gets a look from the others.)* Perhaps not.

PORTER: But Miss Downweaver, don't you think poetry has a beauty and a power that is unique among the literary forms?

(Pause as Doris seems to be considering.)

DORIS: *(Abruptly.)* No.

(Meredith picks up a folder.)

MEREDITH: Mr. Rembert, did you bring along the file I sent you on our four writers?

PORTER: What? Oh, I...uh...forgot and left it at the office. Sorry.

MEREDITH: That's all right. With Miss Downweaver's permission, I'll guide the interview along. But, please, Mr. Rembert, do join in at any time.

PORTER: Only if you stop calling me Mr. Rembert. Call me Porter.

MEREDITH: Very well...Porter.

PORTER: Remember this procedure is all new to me, so I'm starting cold.

MEREDITH: Now, Miss Ascot—

CHARLOTTE: Oh, call me Charlotte.

MEREDITH: *(Looks in the folder.)* You've had quite a career. At least two books a year, sometimes three, for the last 14 years.

CHARLOTTE: I'm a very hard worker. Extremely productive.

PORTER: The joke I heard is that you're *reproductive*.

CHARLOTTE: I beg your pardon?

PORTER: Referring not just to the carnal activity between your characters, but also to the redundancy of your plots.

DORIS: *(To Meredith.)* He warms up pretty fast.

CHARLOTTE: People who say such things don't understand the attraction of romantic fiction.

MEREDITH: You don't care for romance novels, Mr...I mean...Porter?

PORTER: My personal tastes aren't the issue. The question is, does Miss Downweaver like them?

DORIS: I like the covers. Half-naked sweaty men with big muscles and long hair. Hot stuff!

CHARLOTTE: I don't do the covers.

MEREDITH: Having discussed these matters with Miss Downweaver on other occasions, I believe what she means to convey is her appreciation for the fantasy aspects of the form, combined with the more adult and very natural longings of both men and women.

DORIS: Yeah. Hot stuff!

CHARLOTTE: I'm glad you respond so positively. Some people don't. *(Gives Porter a sharp glance.)*

MEREDITH: Do you have a family, Charlotte?

CHARLOTTE: A family? Why do you ask?

MEREDITH: Just a means of getting to know you.

CHARLOTTE: I'm divorced...isn't everyone? Husbands are so restricting.

MEREDITH: Children?

CHARLOTTE: No, thanks, I've had some. *(Laughs uncomfortably.)* Really, I find domestic issues distracting. I'm a woman of the world, you know. Certainly not confined to household affairs. Though affairs outside the house are perfectly acceptable!

PORTER: Meredith mentioned goals and achievements. You've had some popular and financial success already. Ten years from now, what would you like to look back on as your greatest accomplishment?

CHARLOTTE: Twice as many books in print, with millions more readers. And a few movie adaptations.

PORTER: But regarding the work itself. What do you want it to say?

CHARLOTTE: I don't want it to say anything. I want it to scream! Go for love! Find it! Embrace it! Don't be afraid of it! Love, love, love, love, love. Passionate, wine-sipping, candle-lighting, moon-gazing romance. That's what my readers dream about. That's what they want to find. And if I can give it to them, even for just a few hours between the covers of a book, then I will have achieved my goal.

(Pause. Porter nods and Meredith smiles.)

DORIS: Who does the covers?

MEREDITH: Do you have anything else to ask our guest, Miss Downweaver?

DORIS: Nah. Get the next one in here.

CHARLOTTE: I take it I'm dismissed?

MEREDITH: Porter?

PORTER: I have nothing more.

MEREDITH: In that case, we thank you, Charlotte. Please have a seat in the library, if you will.

(Charlotte rises.)

CHARLOTTE: Of course. Miss Downweaver. *(Nods respectfully to her.)*

DORIS: What?

CHARLOTTE: I was merely taking my leave of you.

DORIS: Then take it. Take it. *(Waves with her cane.)*

MEREDITH: *(To Charlotte.)* And would you send in Mr. Drake?

CHARLOTTE: My pleasure...to be anywhere Mr. Drake is not.
(Exits UC.)

MEREDITH: *(To Porter.)* What do you think?

PORTER: About Charlotte? She knows what she wants to do, and she's doing it. You can't ask for much more than that.

DORIS: Fine. Give her the money and let's go home.

MEREDITH: You are home, Miss Downweaver. And to be fair, we must interview the others.

DORIS: Yeah, yeah.

PORTER: Frankly, I'm still unsure of what I'm supposed to be doing.

MEREDITH: Simply evaluate the writers on their approach to their work, then apply your instincts.

PORTER: My instincts.

MEREDITH: Your critical instincts. To find worth, even where worth may not be obvious.

(Roscoe enters from UC.)

ROSCOE: Somebody want to see me?

DORIS: Who? Who wants to see you?

ROSCOE: I thought you did.

MEREDITH: Have a seat, Mr. Drake. And begin, please, by telling us your philosophy of writing.

ROSCOE: Philosophy? What's that got to do with writing?
(Laughs, then stops.) Only kidding. Philosophy...let me see.

PORTER: In other words, why do you write?

ROSCOE: To make money.

PORTER: But why do you write the type of fiction you write, as opposed to, say, children's stories?

ROSCOE: Ah! Gotcha. I never liked all the sissy stuff you see around. Me, I go for the gut. There's a guy after something, and he goes through ten kinds of hell to get what he wants. And if anybody gets in his way...pow!

PORTER: I'll be sure to warn the other contenders for this grant.

MEREDITH: So it's a quest. Hero or anti-hero, the protagonist encounters obstacles and overcomes them with particular courage. He attacks them directly in a way the average person can't, either because of societal constraints or personal inhibitions.

ROSCOE: That's the ticket. You nailed it.

PORTER: Miss Downweaver, what are your thoughts on the subject?

DORIS: What subject?

PORTER: Roscoe's blend of guns, knives, and fists, mixed with booze, broads, and bad guys.

DORIS: Action! I always liked action. Couldn't ever stand sitting around. (*Sudden thought.*) Wait a minute! Of course I couldn't stand sitting around. If I was sitting around, I couldn't stand, could I?

ROSCOE: That's a very good point.

MEREDITH: Your main protagonist, Jake Irons, never seems to commit himself to any one girlfriend. Is there a reason for that?

ROSCOE: Sure. He's a private detective. Gets involved with dames in all his cases. A steady girlfriend would slow him down. Slow down the story. It's an adventure. It ain't life.

PORTER: More fantasy fiction, this time from the male perspective.

MEREDITH: Yes, that's how I see it, too. And Miss Downweaver was quite accurate in distilling it down to the term "action."

ROSCOE: You're a smart one, Miss Downweaver.

DORIS: (*Winks broadly at him.*) Takes one to know one.

ROSCOE: You and me, we get along.

MEREDITH: Speaking of getting along...perhaps we should do just that. Mr. Drake, could you return to the library and send out Miss Myers?

ROSCOE: Sure thing. Be glad to. I'm your boy. Action!

DORIS: (*Raises her cane.*) Action!

(*Roscoe exits UC.*)

MEREDITH: Your assessment?

PORTER: Violence is the easiest way to establish conflict in a story, and the easiest way to resolve it. It isn't pretty, but it's effective. Just not very admirable. Appealing to man's baser nature doesn't elevate the man.

MEREDITH: You believe all literature should elevate?

PORTER: Ideally, yes.

DORIS: I got stuck in an elevator once. Took a heck of long time to get me out. Had to make a run for the restroom.

PORTER: Action!

DORIS: (*Cackles.*) You watch out for this one, Meredith. (*Pokes at Porter with her cane.*) Watch out for this one.

(*T.Y. enters from UC.*)

T.Y.: Am I interrupting something?

PORTER: Hopefully.

(*Porter rises for T.Y., then sits elsewhere, out of range of the cane.*)

MEREDITH: (*To T.Y.*) Did the others tell you what to expect?

(*T.Y. sits.*)

T.Y.: They didn't tell me anything. Charlotte said, "I'll let it be a mystery," which she apparently thought was amusing.

MEREDITH: What do you like about writing mysteries?

T.Y.: Whenever we say "mysteries," we really mean murder-mysteries. What other mysteries are there? So someone gets killed. Who? And for what reason? Who had sufficient motive to take a life? What could that motive be? How was the murder committed? What clues were left behind? Who

is going to investigate? And how is he or she going to solve the crime? All these elements figure into a mystery, and they all keep it interesting...for me, and for the reader.

MEREDITH: A mystery, then, is driven essentially by questions.

PORTER: But they're always the same questions, rearranged by circumstances. Don't they become formulaic?

T.Y.: Maybe so, but the formula works. Besides, the character details are what really make the story. I'd like to believe that's what distinguishes a T.Y. Myers mystery.

DORIS: I want to ask something.

MEREDITH: What is it, Miss Downweaver?

DORIS: What is what?

MEREDITH: What is it that you want to ask?

DORIS: Oh, yeah! What does it stand for?

T.Y.: What does what stand for?

DORIS: The "T.Y."

T.Y.: (*Confidentially.*) Can you keep a secret?

DORIS: No.

T.Y.: I'll just have to tell you anyway. It doesn't stand for anything. T.Y. Myers is a pen name. My nom de plume. Or rather, my nom de laptop.

MEREDITH: How did you choose that particular name?

T.Y.: Now, that really will have to remain a secret.

PORTER: It's an anagram. Rearrange the letters in "mystery" and you get "T.Y. Myers."

T.Y.: How did you guess?!

PORTER: Words are my profession, too, remember.

MEREDITH: I'm very impressed. And embarrassed I didn't think of it myself.

DORIS: You're always getting embarrassed about something or other.

MEREDITH: I am not.

DORIS: Now you're embarrassed about being embarrassed!

T.Y.: The source of our embarrassment is another type of secret. And we all have secrets, don't we? Things we

conceal. The mysteries of our own lives. Things that made us what we are, and things that are making us what we'll someday be. The appeal of the murder-mystery is that the mystery always gets solved. There's a resolution, and a satisfying one, with the assurance of justice being done.

PORTER: No matter how convoluted the process. You've been criticized for some rather unbelievable, if ingenious, plot twists. Especially in your Geoffrey Kaiser series.

T.Y.: I reject the criticism. As a retired police detective, Geoffrey has an eye for murder. After his wife died, he retired from the force and took to traveling, which he always wanted to do. Everywhere he goes, he runs into a knotty murder case that no one else can unravel.

PORTER: All well and good, but what about those exploding candles in "Father Carlyle's Last Confession"?

T.Y.: It was the waxy residue on the corpse that led to the arrest of the bitter young priest. That's when Geoffrey "collared" him. *(Laughs at her own joke.)*

MEREDITH: I believe the point Mr. Rembert was making had to do with whether such plot devices are feasible.

T.Y.: It only has to be feasible in the book, not in real life. Who cares about real life? If my readers wanted real life, they wouldn't be reading.

PORTER: Then you concede you write escapist fare.

MEREDITH: Escapism can be an art.

DORIS: Houdini! Greatest escape artist who ever lived!

PORTER: I take it, Miss Downweaver, you had no problem with the exploding candles?

DORIS: Never did. Only trouble I had with candles was blowing them out on my birthday cake.

MEREDITH: On another subject, Miss Myers...are you married?

T.Y.: I only found enough time to write, not to fall in love. How about you?

MEREDITH: *(Embarrassed.)* Me? No...oh...oh, no.

T.Y.: Why not? You're very pretty.

MEREDITH: No...really.

DORIS: Of course you're pretty. Stop being embarrassed about it.

MEREDITH: We're not here to talk about me.

PORTER: But if we were, I'd make that a unanimous opinion.

MEREDITH: Enough...all right? Any more questions for Miss Myers?

DORIS: What's your real name?

T.Y.: The one I've chosen is my real name. I discarded the old one long ago. Some things are better disposed of.

PORTER: Have you ever wanted to kill someone in real life?

T.Y.: Many times. But I'm a coward. That's why I like to write. On the page I can do whatever I want, with no shame and no fear of capture.

MEREDITH: Thank you, Miss Myers. Would you please take a seat again in the library and ask Mr. Crandall to join us?

T.Y.: Certainly. *(To Doris.)* I hope I haven't disappointed you.

DORIS: I've been disappointed for 30 years.

T.Y.: Then I won't feel guilty about it. *(Exits UC.)*

PORTER: May I ask what has disappointed you the most?

DORIS: Getting older. People ought to be born old and grow younger! Then Meredith would be older than I am.

MEREDITH: An interesting notion, Miss Downweaver.

PORTER: It would turn the aging process turvy-toppsy.

DORIS: *(Looks toward the library.)* Where's the next one? I'm getting older just sitting here.

MEREDITH: He'll be out directly.

PORTER: As opposed to circuitously.

MEREDITH: You like to play with words.

PORTER: Words and the way we use them tell us most of what we know.

MEREDITH: Most, but not all.

PORTER: No. Not all.

(Wallace enters UC, leaving the library door open.)

WALLACE: My turn? I've been looking forward to this.

MEREDITH: And we're looking forward to hearing from you.

(Wallace takes a seat.)

DORIS: But not for too long!

MEREDITH: How would you describe the way you approach your work?

WALLACE: Seriously. Because what I write about is life, and life is serious. It's the ongoing struggle to discover what's at the very foundation of our being...our motivating origins...our demons and our angels...our aspirations and failures and triumphs and the self-perception we so often never achieve as we live and love and suffer and wonder, living entire lifetimes in a moment, because the moment has meaning and consequences that endure and change us forever.

DORIS: What's he talking about?

PORTER: You realize, of course, so-called "serious" literature doesn't have much of a following.

WALLACE: That says more about the modern reader than it does about the writer or his work.

MEREDITH: Do you get discouraged by the lack of commercial success?

WALLACE: Naturally. And I find it incomprehensible. I have good reviews and a prestigious small-press publisher, yet any dimwitted actress with a book about her love life can go on a talk show and sell more copies in a day than I sell in a year. H. L. Mencken said, "Nobody ever went broke by underestimating the taste of the American public." We could use a lot more Menckens.

DORIS: Menckens? Menckens? Dorothy and the wizard and the Menckens!

MEREDITH: I believe you're thinking of Munchkins.

DORIS: *(Frowns, in thought.)* H. L. Munchkin.

PORTER: I'm assuming you want your work to be remembered—perhaps even taught in literature classes.

WALLACE: That would be the ultimate. But more than anything, I'm driven to explore the inner ache of existence from which we all seek relief, first through understanding, and ultimately through acceptance...a reconciliation with who we are.

MEREDITH: That requires a great deal of introspection, I would think.

WALLACE: I can't tell you the number of nights I've spent working out the private torments of my characters' lives and examining how they intersect with and illuminate my own.

PORTER: Very admirable in its way, but tough to market when your competition is a punch to the jaw, a half-naked woman, or a mysterious body in the back yard.

WALLACE: The reading public doesn't actually read anymore. They just watch television between the covers of a book.

DORIS: I'd like to get a TV like that. I'd watch it in bed.

WALLACE: That's about all TV is good for...to put you to sleep.

MEREDITH: Novels that have something to say and make you think should be appreciated more than they are.

PORTER: There's been an appreciation depreciation.

MEREDITH: Not in this house. We appreciate books of every description. Isn't that right, Miss Downweaver?

DORIS: Books. Everywhere. Whole stacks. I trip over books!
(Prods one of the stacks with her cane.)

PORTER: In that case, I hope they have soft covers.

MEREDITH: You can't resist it, can you? Having fun with language.

PORTER: Does it bother you?

MEREDITH: On the contrary, I enjoy it. *(A shy moment.)*

(Voices in argument rise from the library. Through the open door, Roscoe, Charlotte, and T.Y. are seen walking back and forth.)

ROSCOE: That's a load of hooley!
CHARLOTTE: You're a load of hooley! And if I weren't a lady, I'd call you more than that!
ROSCOE: You're not a lady, so feel free!
T.Y.: Will you both shut up!? Nobody said you had to talk to each other.
ROSCOE: Stay out of this, Ty.
T.Y.: It's T-Y, not Ty!
CHARLOTTE: He doesn't know the difference. He's semi-literate!
T.Y.: You overestimate him.
ROSCOE: What's that supposed to mean?!
CHARLOTTE: I take it back. You're completely illiterate!
DORIS: (*Excited.*) Fight! Fight!
MEREDITH: It's not a fight. It's just a misunderstanding.
(*Heads for the library.*)
ROSCOE: If you two broads weren't broads, I'd lay you out flat!
CHARLOTTE: You couldn't lay me anywhere!
ROSCOE: Oh, yeah?!T.Y.: You're all mouth and no muscle!
MEREDITH: (*At the door.*) Hello? Hello? Excuse me... (*Exits UC, closing the door.*)
WALLACE: That's what passes for an intellectual conversation among those three.
PORTER: You're all writers. You should have at least a few things in common.
WALLACE: They do. Please don't include me with them.
DORIS: (*Peers toward library.*) I wonder who won?
WALLACE: Not their readers, unless they killed each other in there.
PORTER: You're not a very happy guy, are you?
WALLACE: What is there to be happy about? Life is a long, arduous journey through jungles of confusion and mountains of despair, all leading to a desert of the soul.

DORIS: Can I go now?

PORTER: It's your house, Miss Downweaver. If you wish to retire, we'll understand.

DORIS: Retire from what?

PORTER: I meant, if you're feeling tired, we'll excuse you.

DORIS: What did I do?

PORTER: You didn't do anything.

DORIS: Then don't excuse me!

WALLACE: Jungles of confusion.

(Meredith enters UC and steps to the side, allowing Charlotte, T.Y., and Roscoe to enter like scolded, sullen schoolchildren.)

DORIS: Nobody got beat up?

MEREDITH: Of course not, Miss Downweaver.

ROSCOE: You just wait and see what I do to them in my next book.

T.Y.: *(Glares at Roscoe.)* I know who my next corpse will be.

CHARLOTTE: Fortunately, I only write about beautiful, charming people.

WALLACE: There goes your autobiography.

MEREDITH: *(Becoming a touch angry.)* Forgive me for asking, but would you all still be acting this way if there weren't \$100,000 dollars at stake?

(Pause. The Writers glance at each other.)

ROSCOE: Sure I would.

CHARLOTTE: Me, too.

T.Y.: They admit it.

WALLACE: Leave me out of it.

PORTER: I can't say for sure, Miss Downweaver, but I suspect this evening isn't going the way you expected.

DORIS: Me? I didn't expect anything.

MEREDITH: Miss Downweaver likes to be surprised.

T.Y.: A good surprise is what makes a story interesting. For example, who knows how many of us in this room aren't what we appear?

PORTER: What do you mean?

T.Y.: If we looked behind the masks, how many impostors would we find?

MEREDITH: Impostors? In what sense?

ROSCOE: Yeah, what are you talking about?

CHARLOTTE: She's just spinning yarns. Maybe she's the impostor.

T.Y.: Maybe I am. We all have things to hide, don't we?

PORTER: Those secrets you were talking about earlier.

DORIS: (*Excited again.*) Who's got secrets? I love secrets.

WALLACE: Maybe you have some of your own, Miss Downweaver.

DORIS: (*Cackles.*) Oh, yes. I have secrets.

MEREDITH: Secrets are best when they're kept.

CHARLOTTE: I disagree...from a literary viewpoint. Secrets are best at the instant they're discovered, like walking in on your best friend making love with your fiancé. Everything is revealed.

T.Y.: In your books, graphically.

CHARLOTTE: (*To T.Y.*) And in your books everything is revealed in the last two pages, with outlandish explanations about who did what and why and how.

PORTER: For example, the killer priest turns out to be the abandoned, illegitimate son of the older priest. He went through seminary just so he could be appointed to his father's parish and plot his revenge. Talk about unbelievable.

CHARLOTTE: He's right, dear. That story had more stretch marks than a mother of twelve.

WALLACE: I'm glad I never read it.

T.Y.: Fifty thousand other people did. I believe your last book had a print run of 3,000?

WALLACE: It was 5,000. And mine were hardcover.

ROSCOE: Kid, you're an amateur compared to us. We write stuff people want to read. When Jake Irons swings into action, my readers know the fur's gonna fly.

WALLACE: "The fur's gonna fly." You must keep a book of clichés handy when you write.

MEREDITH: Let's not start arguing again.

DORIS: The fur's gonna fly!

PORTER: The fur has flown.

MEREDITH: We need to move on with the grant process.

CHARLOTTE: Quite right. We mustn't forget the reason we came here.

MEREDITH: Miss Downweaver, would you like me to explain the next stage of the evaluation?

DORIS: Sure, sure. Help yourself.

MEREDITH: When you return to your hotel rooms, you will find that we have furnished you with all the writing tools you need. Pads, pens, pencils, typewriters, laptop computers...whatever your preference. Your overnight assignment is to write something new in your own personal style, demonstrating your literary abilities for Miss Downweaver.

T.Y.: A homework assignment?

ROSCOE: No sweat.

CHARLOTTE: Rather unorthodox.

WALLACE: You expect us to create on cue?

T.Y.: You said you write every day.

WALLACE: But not just anything.

PORTER: I'm glad it's your assignment and not mine.

MEREDITH: *(To Porter.)* Your assignment is to critique each piece of writing.

PORTER: I get to be the bad guy.

DORIS: Who's the good guy?

PORTER: Apparently whoever I say it is.

MEREDITH: Miss Downweaver, naturally, will make the final decision regarding the grant. But she will be guided significantly by your evaluations.

PORTER: Anything you'd like to add to that, Miss Downweaver?

DORIS: Nope. Can I go to bed now?

MEREDITH: If you'd like.

(Doris rises and heads toward door L.)

CHARLOTTE: Goodnight, Miss Downweaver.

WALLACE: Thank you for having us here.

T.Y.: We'll see you tomorrow.

PORTER: Goodnight.

ROSCOE: Don't let the bedbugs bite.

DORIS: Ain't nothing bit me in bed for years. *(Exits SL.)*

MEREDITH: Miss Downweaver gets a little cranky when she's tired.

CHARLOTTE: Stays tired a lot, does she?

ROSCOE: You got a tongue on you.

CHARLOTTE: It came as original equipment.

WALLACE: You've gotten remarkable mileage out of it.

ROSCOE: Good one.

T.Y.: What time are we due back tomorrow?

MEREDITH: Not till afternoon, so you'll have all morning available to work. I've arranged for a van to take you back to your hotel. It's waiting outside.

WALLACE: *(To Porter.)* Are you coming with us?

PORTER: I came in a rental car.

MEREDITH: Please stay a few minutes, Porter. The rest of you are free to go.

CHARLOTTE: Free to go to work, you mean.

(The Writers head for door R.)

ROSCOE: What's the matter, Charlotte? You had something else planned for tonight?

T.Y.: I don't imagine writing is her normal activity in a hotel room.

CHARLOTTE: Whatever I do, wherever I do it, is none of your business.

WALLACE: I'm very grateful for that.

(The Writers exit SR.)

MEREDITH: Thank you for coming! *(Closes the door.)*

PORTER: Quite a group. A real assortment.

MEREDITH: Eclectic, you might say.

PORTER: In keeping with Miss Downweaver's tastes.

MEREDITH: *(Hesitates.)* Porter...I have something to ask you.

PORTER: Yes?

MEREDITH: When I first corresponded with you at the "Times," you didn't answer right away.

PORTER: Oh...that. Well, I get so much mail, and I have a slow assistant. I'm sorry if it took longer than it should have to get back to you.

MEREDITH: Then when you called, you didn't sound anything at all like I imagined you'd sound.

PORTER: Really? How should I have sounded?

MEREDITH: I don't know. Older, grayer, more pipe-and-tweedish. That's how I expected you to look. Then when I saw you...

PORTER: I hope you weren't disappointed.

MEREDITH: No. Not disappointed. Surprised.

PORTER: Pleasantly?

MEREDITH: After the initial shock.

PORTER: I have various effects on people, but rarely shocking.

MEREDITH: I may have used the wrong word.

PORTER: We all use the wrong words at times, or the right words in the wrong order.

MEREDITH: You're a very quick thinker. That's good. It'll help you with the task ahead of you tomorrow.

PORTER: I'll need all the help I can get. About Miss Downweaver...

MEREDITH: Go on.

PORTER: She's...a bit eccentric?

MEREDITH: So people say. And of course they're right. We all have our weaknesses, don't we? Our secrets, as Miss Myers suggested.

PORTER: True enough.

(Awkward moment of silence.)

MEREDITH: You remember the way back to town?

PORTER: Yes, I can find it. Goodnight, then, Meredith.

MEREDITH: Goodnight...Porter. *(Porter exits SR. Meredith closes the door.)* You make a most charming Porter Rembert...whoever you really are.

(Blackout.)

[END OF FREEVIEW]