

Emergency Exit

due atti di Manlio Santanelli

ACT I
Scene 1

Total darkness covers the stage.

ANGELO (as if he were praying). Behold the birds of the sky: do they worry about what they eat? No. For the Lord provides for their nourishment. Behold the lilies of the field: do they worry about what they wear? Of course not. For the Lord provides them with clothing. In truth, in truth I say unto you: blessed are the poor, for they will be rich before God. Blessed are those who thirst for justice, for their thirst shall be quenched.

The set is gradually lit, as Angelo's voice rises.

Blessed are they who mourn, for they shall be consoled. Blessed are the hapless, for they shall be happy. Blessed are the homeless, for they will see Heaven! Blessed are we all, except for you, you snivelling, milk-livered cuckold! (Shouting) Burn, you will, burn in hell for all eternity, up to your mouth in bubbling boiling oil! Your puny ass stuck to a frying pan! I'll see you fried, deep fried, like fritters or polenta, and the Devil and his madam, with a pitchfork sooo big, they poke holes in you to collect every drop of surplus oil! And he gives you that sinister look of his: "What'd ya do to them two miserable souls! What'd ya do?"

By now it's clear that Angelo is haranguing someone. Upstage left, he stands motionless by the window, his back to the audience. An anxious precariousness pervades the set, emphasized by numerous cracks in the walls. Two poles support the ceiling and divide the space in three. At each end of this "tryptic" is a bed. One, unmade, is empty; the other is bulging with a seemingly lifeless heap.

(Without pausing) And you say: "Mercy, mercy, oh Evil One!" And the devil: "What'd you do? First you gotta tell me: what'd you do to them two!" And you, you play dumb: "What two? I really don't remember. I'm kinda empty upstairs." "Angelo and Martino!" and he whacks his pitchfork over your skull, right where it's empty! And you feel a chill come over you. Yes sir. Even in the hellfire. Even in the frying pan. Even in the boiling oil! You think I'm lying? That's the beauty of hell! That's why I like it! So then you tell him: "I sent the housing inspector over!" "And what else?" "I sent the eviction notice!" "And what else?" "I sent the earthquake and the sizamississity to kick them outta my house! But now I repent! Mercy! Mercy, Beelzebub! Mercy!" And the devil thinks it over. He looks at his nails, scratches his head, sighs, and then, being merciful, he reaches for a measuring cup and pours just a little bit more oil into the frying pan! D'you like the parable? Now stop screwing around with us and go 'way! We're busy! We got things to do! We can't waste no more time on you. And you listen to me: Don't go sending no more of your emissaries, tax collectors, inspectors, hypocrites, spindly spooks, maggots and faggots d'you hear? 'Cause we'll drag them outta the temple by the ears, understand! (Pause) Still, I like to know what you do with all your money! And with our money too! Spend it all on women, eh! On those four whoring bitches, I bet, which includes your mammas! Spend it all on clothes and furs, eh! You think that hides your shame? Don't kid yourself! You no can hide what you got between your legs. You see it and it stinks! (Sounding again like an evangelist) And I say again, the lilies of the field do they worry about what they wear? No! 'Cause the Lord provides them with clothing!

MARTINO (emerging from under the covers). It must be His Holiness speaking from the balcony of St. Peter's!

ANGELO (not responding). And don't beat your breast when you're in church. You won't make it to heaven! In fact, don't even think it! For it is more easy for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven! It's been said, it's been written. And if you read good you find it even in today's paper!

MARTINO (calmly). That's where you're wrong. The way things are these days, a rich man makes it easily through the eye of a needle. He gets the needle made to order and screws us both. And your camel is left dreaming about heaven!

ANGELO. Bravo! Still half-asleep and already doubting the Word of God! Already starting with the blasphemy! I better cross myself, Padre Figlio e Spirito Santo! Listen: if you're starting out the morning this way, I'm going out, understand?

MARTINO (unfazed). Go ahead, go.

ANGELO. Why? You think I'm afraid to?

MARTINO. I said go ahead, go. I'm not stopping you, am I? Well, am I? Am I stopping you? Go!

Angelo hesitates, then turns back.

MARTINO (mocking). "Wilt thou be gone? It is not yet near day. It was the nightingale and not the lark that pierc'd the fearful hollow of thine ear. Nightly she sings on yond pomegranate tree."
Romeo and Juliet, Act 3, scene 5.

ANGELO (takes another step toward the door, then turning). And what are you pontificating like that? You saying then that camels aren't God's creatures too? You saying they can't get to heaven? What kinda justice is that? Those poor beasts were born with the misfortune of a bump. Sometimes two bumps even!

MARTINO (with authority). The word is hump, not bump!

ANGELO (hesitating). Huh?

MARTINO. Look, the camel in your Gospels is a kind of rope. You think it means the animal. It doesn't.

ANGELO (taps the side of his head as if to signify: "You're out of your mind."). Pazzo!

MARTINO. So don't believe me. (Matter-of-factly) Do you really think a writer like St. Matthew, who was inspired from on high, would have written something so ridiculous? What does an animal have to do with a needle? He would have had to be out of his mind, St. Matthew, to make so absurd a comparison!

ANGELO (defiantly). I like it more the way I know, O.K.? And don't go putting on airs. 'Cause in the long run, 'tween you and me and the one downstairs... (Crooning) "Birds of a feather will flock together!"

MARTINO (ignoring the gibe). Who was it anyway? The landlord?

ANGELO. Him. Or his brother. Or some other smelly asshole. I couldn't tell from up here. Plus the sun was in my eyes.

MARTINO. Let me get this straight: you stand there ranting like a madman and you don't even know who you're talking to? Did you at least hear what he was saying?

ANGELO (embarrassed). When I looked out the window, already he turned the corner.

MARTINO. Ah! Now I get it! You were busy preaching even though St. Peter's Square was empty. But so what? The important thing is to spill your guts, voice your opinion urbi et orbi! Let everybody know what you think. Even if no one is listening. Even if the neighborhood is deserted. Of course, your books spell it out: "Vox in deserto clamans!" A voice crying in the wilderness!

ANGELO. You saying is my fault everybody left this place?

MARTINO. Of course not! You may be a royal pain in the ass, but that's stretching it!

ANGELO. Is my fault this damn sizamississity attacked us?

MARTINO. Seis-mi-ci-ty, Angelo. Seis-mi-ci-ty! Now calm down. Nobody's saying it's your fault if the earth rises and falls. For once, you're blameless. (Pause) But it is your fault that we came to live here!

ANGELO (exploding). Ecco! I knew it! I was just saying to myself: what time is? This late and no poison spilling from his mouth yet? So tell me: you were maybe breast-feeding when we come to live here? I bring you here by the hand maybe? And if the Good Lord, in His infinite mercy, maybe left you tongue-tied that day, could you no shake that little head of yours? (Shakes his head "no") No?

MARTINO. Hold on! Hold on! I remember very well what happened! Like it was yesterday, Angelo! Are you going to deny that it was you who stopped me on the street after we hadn't seen each other for more than ten years?

ANGELO (honestly). No, no.

MARTINO. Saying: "Marty, you look terrible. What on earth happened to you?"

ANGELO. No, no.

MARTINO. Do you have any idea what it's like, after ten years, to hear somebody blurt out, "My God, you look terrible!" You remember what I said? What did I say?

ANGELO. That you'd left home and were losing it 'cause you could no find a place.

MARTINO. Bravo! And then what did you say?

ANGELO (bluffs an effort at memory). I really can't remember!

MARTINO. Can't remember, eh? But I do, I remember it all very clearly. You said: "So what's the problem? Naples is rocking with empty houses."

ANGELO. Well, is not the truth?

MARTINO. Not exactly. It's the empty houses that are rocking and crumbling. And not only the empty ones either. Then you said you'd discovered a neighborhood! (Gestures to show the magnitude of the discovery)

ANGELO. That's right, a secluded neighborhood! Why? Is not that true?

MARTINO. Evacuated, not secluded! There's a difference!

ANGELO. How was I supposed to know it was evacuated? I only figure it out when the building next door collapse! You remember, Marty? That was scary, no?

MARTINO (solemnly, celebrating the memory). Our first seismic shift! (Pause) What fools we were! As if those empty buildings were waiting for us! What lamebrains! What idiots! (Almost laughing) Walking up and down the street, noses in the air. All bedazzled as if we'd reached the promised land!

ANGELO. Sure was! And our eyes they sparkle too, 'cause we were so happy! "I take that building there!" "No, that's mine!" "Says who?" "Says me! I saw it first!" It be like swimming in gold! Then we decide to make a home, a kitchen, and you, you move in. Who knows that beneath it all was that seismic stuff? Tell the truth, though, I sense something... strange... I don't know... like something it's missing.

MARTINO. People! That's what was missing! People! What idiots! Pazzi! Just like those fools who having drunk their fill at the well, lie on their backs and let out a deep sigh of satisfaction. And then they see the sign: POISONED WATER.

ANGELO. If I could I'd smack myself silly!

MARTINO. It's no time for regrets. What happened, happened.

ANGELO. But you just say was all my fault!

MARTINO. O.K., O.K. I'll shoulder part of the blame, for hav- ing supported the idea. But it is totally your fault that we haven't left yet. Yes, yes, I know. We're waiting for the official notice. Once it arrives - in a week maybe, or maybe tomorrow, or maybe even tonight - we'll gather up all our furnishings, all our riches... (turns and observes the room around him)... all our prized possessions... and cart this royal household off to Xanadu. (Pause) In the meantime, while we're waiting for the notice, I'll go make myself a cup of coffee.

Martino gets up and moves toward the storage space that serves as a make-shift kitchen. Angelo, left to himself, goes to make his bed. He looks at it, caresses it tenderly.

MARTINO (shouting, offstage). Why haven't you got rid of this shit yet? You've gone and preserved it in alcohol!

Martino reappears holding, with one hand, a jar full of alcohol and, with the other, by the tail, a dead goldfish - which until then had been in the jar.

ANGELO. Put that down! I told you I have to stuff it!

MARTINO. Birds get stuffed, not fish!

Angelo runs to grab the two objects out of Martino's hands. The two men stare at each other. Martino then turns away and heads for the kitchen; Angelo reproaches him with a routine, infantile gesture. He then returns to his corner to put the strange fetish back in place. Offstage, Martino is heard whistling. Angelo, after putting everything back in order, begins pacing anxiously up and down the room.

ANGELO. Martino? (Martino remains silent.) Marty? (Martino answers with a grunt.) What d'you say? Should I do it or no? (NOTE: Angelo, who has essentially remained a child, has problems with his morning bowel movements.)

MARTINO (poking his head out). Please don't start! Or I'll be the one to go out! (He goes back into the kitchen.)

ANGELO (pauses, then timidly). So, what do you say, should I?

MARTINO (reappears). I get it, you want me to go out!

He moves towards the door. (Note: One should keep in mind that these feigned exits appear all the more preposterous if one considers that both characters are dressed in robes, if not in nightshirts.)

ANGELO (mimicking Martino at the beginning of the act). Go a- head, go! Get out! Let me see you try! Am I stopping you? Well, am I?

Martino hesitates, then turns back.

"Well, art thou going? That was the duck singing in the pomegranate!" Juliet and Romeo, Act 5, scene 3! Go on, leave! As if I didn't know you too never go out no more.

MARTINO. Says who?

ANGELO. Gesù, I stay home, I don't go out. So I see, you don't go out. If I stepped out, then I might think: He stepped out too! But I don't go out.

MARTINO (convinced by the argument). You've got a point.

He goes back to the kitchen. ANGELO. What you doing? You not going out?

MARTINO (offstage, from the kitchen). I'm going to have my coffee first. Wouldn't that be convenient: I go out and you sip my freshly brewed coffee!

ANGELO. For your information, I drank mine already. (Pats his Belly) So, if is what's stopping you, be my guest.

MARTINO (after a time, reappearing). The street's one big crater, my shoes'll get dusty, and my pants'll get all mucky.

He returns to the kitchen.

ANGELO (insisting). You still no answer me, and I am here hanging!

MARTINO (from the kitchen). And I've got no intention of answer- ing you. For all I care, you can hang till you're dead!

ANGELO (whining, he thinks out loud). 'Cause if I do it now, when I don't really want to, it could really hurt me - all over! Damage my heart even! But then, holding in all that poison could be worse.

MARTINO (still from the kitchen, singsong). "Poison... turn to me and I'll just answer poison."

ANGELO. Marty, you and me, we don't communicate anymore!

MARTINO. "Poison... resist your kisses and I'll die of poison."

ANGELO (bursting out). What it cost you anyway? I want some advice is all!

MARTINO (reappears with his coffee). I don't give no shit advice!

ANGELO. Just wait till your turn! Am I going to have fun!

MARTINO (sits at the table). When it's my turn, I'll take care of things myself, without making a federal case of it. And if this is your idea of fun, it goes to show that you are still a baby.

ANGELO. Look who's talking!

MARTINO. Angelo, don't start: you are still a baby! For you the shitpot is everything. It's like... like... toy land! But will you get it through your thick skull that I'm not your mamma! Whether you go, or stall, big or small, hard or soft, just get off my back! (He goes to sip his coffee, only to push it away in disgust.) Satisfied? Another cup of coffee poisoned!

ANGELO (close to tears). All you want is me to explode!

MARTINO (calmly). Hah! At least then last night's dream would come true.

ANGELO (casting a menacing look). Not again!?

MARTINO (solemnly). Yes again!

ANGELO (hysterically). Why don't you dream dreams of your own dead people? I no understand. Why you get stuck on me. I ever hurt you, for you to spill my living blood every other night in your dreams? (He calms down.) Other people, when they snuggle up, at the foot of the bed they find lotsa pretty dreams waiting, one more nice than the other.

MARTINO. Must be I put up with so much, so very much, during the day, that when night comes, I take the pebble out of my shoe! Must be my patience is tried so much, so very much, when I'm awake, that when I close my eyes, you simply...

He gestures to signify passing over to the next life.

ANGELO. No, you playing with my head!

MARTINO. You want me to swear?

ANGELO. I want you to die! You and all your kind!

MARTINO. But why are you so frightened of death? You of all people: Catholic, apostolic, Roman. Goodness! You've served more masses than all the other sextons in the city combined! And that drawer of yours is filled with membership cards for every Catholic Youth Organization in the diocese! You even speak the language of every angel buzzing around us. If one of them stops and says "Kyrie eleison," you can easily spit out the password - and you'll be cleared.

ANGELO. And what if they don't say that?

MARTINO. So they'll say something else. What do you care? You know the Bible by heart. You even know the prayer for a happy death. Who better than you! Believe me, Angelo, you can die in peace!

ANGELO (desperately). But I no wanna die! I no wanna, I no wanna, I no wanna... (Under his friend's merciless gaze, Angelo goes into a frenzy and suddenly he leaps at Martino and grabs him by the throat.) Now tell me what you dream last night, you hear! I want every single little detail!

MARTINO (gasping). What I dreamt? Well, I dreamt that this house was beautiful. Brand new, like they'd just finished building it. (Angelo's face lights up, but...) But you and I, we... weren't happy... together. Your belly had swelled up, this big! (He gestures accordingly.) And you were complaining... and crying... and screaming for help.

ANGELO. And you?

MARTINO (pretending not to understand). Me? Nothing, my belly was fine. The same old belly I have every day.

ANGELO. Yes, but what were you doing?

MARTINO. What was I doing? Pacing up and down the room saying "What do we do now? What do we do now? What do we do now?" I just kept pacing: "What do we do now?"

ANGELO. Keep going! Then what?

MARTINO. Then we called the doctor. But he didn't come, and your belly just kept getting bigger and bigger!

ANGELO. But then he came, no?

MARTINO. Yes, yes.

ANGELO (relieved). Whew! And when he came what happen? Come on, hurry up!

MARTINO. He started pacing around the room saying: "What do we do now? What do we do now?"

ANGELO. Him too?

MARTINO. That's when I figured it out. He wasn't the doctor, he was the landlord!

ANGELO. Bastardo! You never make him croak, do you? What then?

MARTINO. Then he examined you and said: "I thought you two were faking it to avoid getting evicted. But it's true!" And then he smiled at me and asked: "Are you the father?"

ANGELO. The father?

MARTINO. Yeah, the father! That's what he said. I didn't get it. "Congratulations!" he said, still smiling. Then I finally got it!

ANGELO. Well, give it to me too!

MARTINO. He was smiling because you were pregnant! You know, in a family way, like some lovely little faggot sissy.

ANGELO. Faggot you and him! And then?

MARTINO. Then he gave me a sort of syringe, with a prick a mile long. "Stick him! It could be an hysterical pregnancy!" "Will it hurt him, doctor?" I asked. "Oh yes!" he said, and he left. "Oh yes! Oh yes!"

ANGELO. You bastard, Marty!

MARTINO. "To dream's no sin, no fault of mine." Anyway, che sarà, sarà. All I did was follow orders. And no sooner did the syringe enter your belly when - whoosh! - this whistling sound just came out. No, it was more like a dreadful wind actually! A kind of cyclone! The windows and doors started slamming! Uh-uh! Me, I had to hold onto the bed frame for dear life! Everything in the room went flying: chairs, rugs, paintings, sculptures! Then the wind stopped, and you were all deflated. But the house, this house, was the wreck it is now, cracks and all!

ANGELO (after a bit, recovering from the shock). Me, I no believe in dreams. Once I dreamed they make me pope. Me, of all people. From a hundred cardinals! Can you imagine me wearing a mitre?

MARTINO. You never know.

ANGELO. Yeah, right! As if they'd elect me. I don't even know Latin!

MARTINO. If I were you, I'd keep the faith. You already pray for so many things anyway, so what's one more on the list? In the meantime, start studying Latin.

ANGELO (self-satisfied). In which case we solve our housing problem too! Vatican City, here we come! A hundred rooms! Fifty each! Of course, you must attend five o'clock mass all the mornings!

MARTINO. Ah, well, you can stay a sexton!

ANGELO. What's your problem with Mass anyway? It never did you no harm, did it? Somebody crack you one in church, for you to hate it so much? Or maybe you swallow a bad host, or a poison one maybe?

MARTINO. The poison's a more insidious one. But you wouldn't understand. Still, I can't see why you get so upset. If you were still a sexton, it would make sense. I'd be stepping on your turf. But now?

ANGELO. Once a sexton, always a sexton! A priest can get defrocked, but a sexton? Never! But you would not understand. You were ruined by the theater. That is right, the theater. And that two-bit theatrical profession of yours!

MARTINO. Don't push your luck with me, Angelo. Without a prompter, there is no theater! Didn't know that, did you? You think it's like being a sexton in church, setting up chairs, blowing out candles. Hah! The prompter, Angelo - le souffleur in French - in his hands rests the script! And unless he talks, the actors, they don't speak a single word, and the audience, there's nothing for them to hear! Next day, the newspapers, they've got no reviews! Got that? The prompter, when he holds the script, he's the Law! The Word! He's St. Mark! (Speaking like Angelo) Can you understand that at least?!

ANGELO (provocatively). Your theater is full of whoring bitches and faggot pettyphiles!

MARTINO (normal speech). Such mediocrity! (Pause) You are so pedestrian, Angelo! And so obsessed with the sins of the flesh! There's no talking with you! What good is it? Any dialogue between us ended over two hundred years ago, with the French Revolution. That's right, because you, you're nothing but a church lackey! Whereas I, I am a child of '89!

ANGELO. What's the 89? A gambling casino?

MARTINO. Need I say more? Mediocrity personified! How can I even bear to look at you, let alone take all your bullshit? Out! Begone with you from la commune!

ANGELO. Dreams don't always come true, you know, so don't wait for me to croak, 'cause I won't, even if there is an earthquake!

As if to highlight Angelo's remark, a rod wedged into the wall (as a makeshift indicator of seismic activity) crashes with a thud. There is a momentary, tension-filled pause.

MARTINO. I wouldn't be too sure if I were you.

ANGELO (gritting his teeth). Madonna mia santa! The crack, it's growing! And it's all your fault! For talking all that shit!

MARTINO. Me? What did I do?

ANGELO. Yes, you! You! Is not just what you say, but what you think! Inside, your soul is rotten to the core! And the good Lord, he punishes you and he gets me too - just for living under the same roof!

MARTINO. This lord of yours, isn't he a little heavy-handed? I mean, why destroy an entire neighborhood to punish just one sinner?!

ANGELO. You think we mean anything? "Dust ye are, and unto dust ye shall return!" The end has arrived! St. John, the Apocalypse! "Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and poured it on the earth, and there followed thunder peals, rumblings, lightning flashes and earthquakes!"

MARTINO. Shut up, don't make things worse!

ANGELO. We'll end up like dogs!

MARTINO. It'll serve you right, the way you complain about bitches all the time! (Pause) Do you realize, Angelo, that a thousand years from now, when they come to dig us up, it'll be just like Pompeii! Just think, you and me, all petrified. I can see it now. Here they come with shovels and hoes and chests, and all the rest of the modern paraphernalia! There's an archaeologist directing the excavations: "Here!" he says, and points to where we're buried. The workers start to dig, and they dig, and they dig... and the rubble they uncover has fused with the roots of trees, and the mud of centuries... and they dig and they dig and... you know what I think? As soon as they find you, they cover you right back up!

ANGELO (overcome with fear). Is time we get out! Now, understand? Not one minute more! (His voice levels out.) We gotta decide where to go.

MARTINO. Now there's the essence of the Apocalypse! (Pause) But, excuse me, weren't we waiting for the notice?

ANGELO. I no understand! You want us to die?!

MARTINO. Listen to me! First, if it's a matter of some 'heavenly score' that's being settled, why don't you leave, and then everything can fall on my head. Second, it's better you go alone. I'm tired of living hand-to-mouth. Even somewhere else, what's the guarantee? Unless we moved to another town. But still, even there... everything seems... so... precarious... like... it's all hanging... by a thread. So what's the use of any effort? All things being equal, I might as well stay here, where at least I know what to expect. And I'll save myself the moving expenses.

ANGELO (after reflecting at length). If that's the case, I stay too. Where'm I gonna go by myself? I cannot be alone. Know what? Let us move the beds. That way we avoid the avalanche! There's got to be safer spots somewhere in this room. We find them, and the problem it's solved!

MARTINO. You know something, you're right! That's a great idea! Come on, Angelo, let's get a move on!

A sort of pantomime begins to take form within the scene itself, an exercise resembling a mining exploration, or a speleological adventure, made all the more evocative thanks to the cumbersome presence of the poles at the center of the set.

Using their knuckles, the two characters tap methodically at the walls, listening carefully for any resonances. They then proceed to heap their furnishings and personal belongings onto their respective beds.

Lights should be progressively dimmed until the scene is aqueous, barely perceptible. It is in this diaphanous, unreal atmosphere that each of the characters latches onto his cot, as if it were a little wagon or shopping cart, and begins to move around the room.

What ought to be communicated is an allegory of nomadic life, the image of a wandering tribe.

As the lighting is increased, we see that nothing has changed, except for the fact that Martino and Angelo have changed places!

ANGELO (enthused). There! Now this is what I call an improvement! Isn't it?

MARTINO. Let's hope so. Considering all the work we did.

Exhausted, they sit on their respective beds.

MARTINO. Come to think of it, this place is not that bad.

ANGELO. You no kidding! I got its picture stamped on my mind!

MARTINO (provocatively). You obviously never fully appreciated it.

ANGELO (threatening to reclaim his old place). Oh really?

MARTINO (harshly). No. No! What's done is done, Angelo!

Angelo gives up trying to reclaim his former place, while Martino becomes familiar with his new accommodations. He dumps his belongings and tries to stretch out, experiments with various positions. Angelo, on the other hand, is busy putting things away; then, with great difficulty, he starts to turn over his mattress.

MARTINO. What are you doing?

ANGELO. Turning it downside up.

MARTINO (subtly). Why?

ANGELO. 'Cause there's a lump right... there, right there against my kidneys. This morning was so bad, I woke up like a stiff.

MARTINO (feigning interest). Keep that up, and it's your kidneys that will be downside up. Here, let me help.

He starts to move towards Angelo. ANGELO (clearly over-reacting). No! No! I do it by myself! I need nothing from nobody! Stay away!

MARTINO. So protective of your litter! That's another one of your quirks I'll never understand.

ANGELO. There's nothing to understand. Is my bed, and I see to it myself! You not my mamma, you say so yourself. And I ain't no baby either!

MARTINO. Whatever you say. I've got better things to do with my time. (Returning to his place) So, here we are. Finally! (His satisfaction is shortlived.) Except now I've got to start all over again. You know, it's not easy getting a feel for a place that's entirely different, studying one by one each and every stain on the ceiling. These here, they're nothing like the old ones. Not at all. It's nothing like the ceiling you got.

ANGELO. So now you want my ceiling stains? Come on, you carry a stick over here. We then see what we can peel off.

MARTINO. Go ahead. Make fun! You think it's easy? Looking up and finding a totally different image, a different picture, over your head? After all that staring, all that pondering. You're not used to what you see anymore! It's like somebody moving to Australia. When he looks at the sky, instead of the North Star, he finds the Southern Cross! (Long, tense pause) And then, when you get out of bed, you even have to remember to roll the other way!

ANGELO (amused). And you still will forget and bang your head against the wall!

MARTINO. All the better! That way we'll demolish this hovel once and for all! A single head butt, that's all it'll take! (He puts away some more things, then sits on the bed and opens a knapsack.) It reminds me of when we toured with the company! Back in the days of la Grande Signora! We played all the big towns, you know. Everywhere, a huge success! The house was sold out every night. Standing room only. But what a miserable life! Milano: Hotel Flora! Bergamo: Hunter's Lodge! Ascoli: wait, it'll come to me... yes, that's it: Hotel della Patria! What a pigsty! Couldn't wait to leave that port. I've slept in more beds in my life... To the point that I craved my own house, which might have been a pigsty too, but at least I could get a handle on things there, get organized. And I remember, when we'd come back from a tour, every time the same feeling, every time my heart would tremble. Until I saw the first houses, always the same feeling! I always felt that if I found this city where it belonged, it would be by sheer coincidence... been here for twenty-five hundred years, and still I get the impression that it's going to move somewhere else. There's always this anxiety, you know, that a king, a saint, or maybe some rabble-rouser will get up one day and say: "Fold your tents! Let's pack it up! It's time!" Then, of course, there's always the chance that nobody shows. But coming back - after being away - there's nothing worse! I was never a bedouin, of course, or a desert rat, and yet I know exactly what they must feel when they're only one dune away from closing in on their camp. The tip of the stomach gets tied up in knots - right here - and you think: "I bet they've left. I bet there's nothing there!" Yes! That was the sensation I had every time I saw Vesuvius surge against the horizon! Which is why, at a certain point, I started to resent going on tour. And then la Grande Signora died. The theater fell on hard times. So I retired. Started binding books, work I could do at home. Anybody wants me, they know where to look. Otherwise, screw them. (Angelo, meanwhile, mocks him.) Don't kid yourself, Angelo. That's how things are. This city, it's a refugee camp. So what if it has lasted twenty-five centuries? It's still only a camp the Greeks set up. An old, tattered camp that's changed hands one too many times.

ANGELO. Me, I never had that impression coming back from Church. You know why? "With Jesus I walk, with Jesus I sleep, with Jesus there's no fear to keep."

MARTINO. You were never a traveling sexton, that's why!

ANGELO (after reflecting at length). I make up my mind: I'm gonna do it!

He heads solemnly towards the bathroom.

MARTINO. It's about time the prognosis got... unloosened! Tell you what: if that's the case, you can drop one for me as well. One less thing for me to worry about.

ANGELO (stops in his tracks). You wanna go first?

MARTINO. Are you kidding? With all the time it took for a verdict, why retry the case? Go ahead! Go, go. And may St. Anne be with you.

ANGELO (whining). You see what you do! You think St. Anne should accompany me in there?

MARTINO. Ah, right, three is a crowd. I forgot about your guardian angel!

ANGELO. You pissing me off. Now I am losing my inspiration!

MARTINO (pushing Angelo) Never! Please! You hold onto that inspiration! The Sistine Chapel awaits you! 'Cause if you don't do the frescoes, we'll have to hire Michelangelo! And you know how expensive he can be!

He shuts Angelo in the bathroom and then, left to himself, walks around the room looking for his bookbinding instruments. He fails to find them. As he's searching...

MARTINO. Maybe I can finish that dictionary job for the professor. Speaking of which, two months and not a sign of the man. I wonder what's happened to him. He never did have much luck. Then again, his head's in a cloud! So absent-minded! Now the glue's missing, too. Try finding it in this mess - in this dump! (Calling out). Angelo! Have you seen my glue?

ANGELO (from inside the bathroom). Keep looking! It's gotta be there! (Concerned) Just keep your paws off my stuff, 'cause I no take anything. And watch it, you. I can see every move you make from over here!

MARTINO. Don't worry! Relax! (Still searching) Every time something gets lost in this house...

At this point he has crossed the dividing line and moved into Angelo's territory.

ANGELO (suddenly, again from the bathroom). Where you going?

Martino raises his hands as if to surrender and returns to his corner.

MARTINO (muttering). Last time I used it, I put it right here somewhere.

ANGELO (hearing everything). Then is where it is!

MARTINO (still searching). Angelo, how does the Bible explain the mystery of Creation?

ANGELO. How stupid can you get, Marty? In the beginning was the Word, right? So the Word all things pulled out of chaos, and put them back in order.

Martino pulls up a chair and sits down calmly, facing the entrance to the apartment.

ANGELO. What you doing now?

MARTINO. Can't you tell? I'm waiting for the Creation!

Blackout
Scene 2

Lights up. Angelo is staring out the window.

MARTINO. On guard, sentry! Oh, right! You're waiting for the notice! And, of course, the notice needs help up the stairs. The way you stand guard by that window all the time, you look like you're expecting trouble. Any second now you'll start screeching, "The Turks are coming! The Turks are coming!"

ANGELO. Go on, make fun! Meantime, I really got this nauseous feeling that any second now, that turkey landlord is gonna show and raise the rent - for improvements costs.

MARTINO. I wouldn't put it past him! Wasn't it just barely one month we were here, and he came knocking for a security deposit? He should be paying us, for our courage, for our fearlessness in the face of danger!

ANGELO. Astronauts get medals for going to the moon. At least they can give us metal buttons!

MARTINO. Hear, hear, Angelo! You read the headlines: "Confined to the cockpit of the space capsule." Big deal! Are we any better off here? At least up there they've got all the comforts: espresso! hot chocolate!

ANGELO. But they eat synthetic food.

MARTINO (weighing his words). As for that, we might well...

ANGELO. We might well what?

MARTINO (perfidiously). Be headed in the same direction.

ANGELO. What is it you trying to say?

MARTINO. Oh nothing, nothing.

ANGELO. Don't you nothing me!

MARTINO (decisively). Angelo, those meatballs you made last night were pretty close to synthetic. Only thing missing was the sugar-coated capsule!

ANGELO (approaching Martino menacingly). Now you listen up, Marty. The money 'round here is all gone! You sure don't give me none. So no dough, no bread! Plus the grocery boys don't wanna deliver here no more, not for only two people, when a window can come crashing down on them or, even worse, a cat can attack! Bottom line, is no food. Finito! Starting tomorrow, you wanna eat, you be the one to go out and shop!

MARTINO (calmly). Ah! So the specter of famine pops up again!

ANGELO. That's right! Is famine all right!

MARTINO. As if I didn't know you've got stuff stashed away, just to jack up the prices, so you can screw me with your black market.

ANGELO. Me?

MARTINO. Well, not me! You think I forgot the time you sold me a quarter-pound of salami for ten mil? Ten thousand lire! I could have bought myself the whole pig almost.

ANGELO. It was Friday.

MARTINO. Oh, of course. No salami on Fridays. It's a mortal sin! Didn't stop you, though, from peddling the stuff! No, you gave me your papal dispensation, and boy did I pay through the nose! It's the old story of indulgences. Just a homespun version of the Church's classic propensity for simony!

ANGELO (embarrassed). Things were different then. Now there's really nothing left.

MARTINO (staying calm). Then how do you explain all this.

He goes to the cupboard where bags of flour and other groceries are stashed.

ANGELO. Don't touch that! Is for the pastiera! You forget is almost Easter?

MARTINO. And since when do you need thirty kilos of flour for a ricotta fruitcake?

ANGELO. I like to make sure there's plenty! Plus is my recipe and none of your business! Go play with yourself! Otherwise, here, you run this shack! You put on the apron! I no need it anymore, capisc'? Think I enjoy this crap? Think I'm stuffing my pockets maybe? Is that what you think? Come on, tell me. Is it?

MARTINO (in a conciliatory tone). Ecco! Here we go. There's no room for discussion with you. You're so negative, my friend! You're like those horses who see straw in their water and refuse to drink! I was kidding!

ANGELO. No, you was not kidding! You really mean it! And now I got it stamped on my heart: "Straw in the water... Horse won't drink!" Easy for you to say, especially when the water's full of your piss. I dare any horse to drink it!

MARTINO. Vulgarity, thy name is Angelo!

ANGELO. Just watch your step! You watch where you going, buster!

MARTINO. Are we going there together?

ANGELO. No, alone! You going alone!

MARTINO. Well, then, the trip won't be so bad.

ANGELO (turning his back to Martino). Get outta here! You hear me, get outta here?! You got all the blood gushing to my head! (He pauses.) You know what I say? When there's no more mutual respect, is better people go their own way!

Dumbfounded, Martino approaches Angelo and turns him around. Angelo's eyes are downcast.

MARTINO. Angelo, are you really serious?

ANGELO (sinister). I pick you up off the street! Took bread outta my mouth to feed you!

MARTINO (exploding). Basta! That's enough! Anybody hearing you talk would think I was a whore! You should have been an actor! No, better yet, an opera singer! A tenor! (Announcing) Ladies and gentlemen, it's Mr. Alfredo Germont in La Traviata! It's Chevalier De Grioux! Just look at our Chevalier! But I am not your Manon! (His tone of voice changes.) In my life there was only once I was thrown out, kind of! You're getting a little too melodramatic, aren't you? But then I should have expected it when I accepted your hospitality! I should have know that sooner or later you'd throw it in my face! It's in your nature!

Martino goes to sit down; then, out of frustration, he pushes a deck of cards off the table and onto the floor. One card travels so far as to fall at Angelo's feet. A long pause follows.

MARTINO (to himself). As if I'd stuff my face with bread from his mouth!

Angelo slowly picks up the card.

ANGELO (still coming forward slowly). How 'bout a game?

MARTINO (sternly). Go play with yourself and stop screwing me around!

He turns his back to Angelo

. ANGELO. I will. Solitaire I play! (Shuffling the cards, he starts to sing.) "Rock-a-bye baby... on the treetop... when the wind blows... the cradle will rock... When the bough breaks... the cradle will fall... and down will come baby... cradle and all!" Ace! Four! (He lays out the cards one by one). Queen! (Meaning to provoke Martino) You see, Marty, with me, the women they just roll off my fingers. You know why? 'Cause I never pay them no mind! Except for Mammà, God rest her soul.

MARTINO. Wouldn't you know, la mamma!

ANGELO. That's right, la mamma! You got something to say about that?

MARTINO (after taking his time to answer). Me, my mother, she'd tie me in knots.

ANGELO. Hold it right there! You no talk about your mamma like that!

MARTINO (continuing). I'll never forget it! I was young then. I'd be going out with my friends, and every time the same story. I'd tell her, "Mammà, don't wait up, I'm eating out tonight." And she went, "Oh, Marty, what a shame! Just tonight I prepared... this dish... and that dish... and another dish... especially for you!" It was always something... extraordinary! Something indispensable to

my health, so indispensable I had to eat it right away if I wanted to live till the weekend. That's how she would foil my escapes! Ecco, that was my mother!

ANGELO. Always exaggerating!

MARTINO. So don't believe me! Then, the morning after, she'd bring me my coffee in bed. "Marty, you've no idea what you missed: stuffed peppers! Che delizia!" - and here I'd been out with a woman - "what a shame, and eggplant parmigiana! I saved you some, but the cat snuck in last night and feasted on it!" Ecco, that was my mother!

ANGELO. You all twisted, Marty! Is no affection in you, not even for your mamma, who of all women is the most beautiful in a man's life! La più bella. Obviously later...

MARTINO (quick to respond). Obviously later what?

ANGELO. Nothing. Never mind.

MARTINO. No, say what you were going to say! Obviously later what?

ANGELO (hastily). Obviously later you no get along with your wife! That's what!

MARTINO. I knew you were leading up to that!

Angelo, pitiless, bursts out laughing. He laughs and laughs, unable to control himself. The more he tries, the more he risks choking.

MARTINO. Come on, let's hear what else you've got to say. If you're going to choke, spit it out!

ANGELO. What if you get pissed?

MARTINO. I'll choke you myself. But I promise not to make you suffer too much!

ANGELO (still laughing). I was thinking of the time you come back from on tour and could not find your own house! You were thinking you would not find the city! Always exaggerating, Martino mio! The city, it stayed put! Nobody touched the city! But your house, how can I put it? (Laughing) Your... home... it got... messed with!

MARTINO. Given the circumstances, you'll pardon me if I don't find all this funny.

ANGELO. And you think you're so smart, Marty! You think you know the world! And still you get screwed like that! San Martino of the Afflicted Heart, finds his wife's become a tart! If it was me in your shoes and I got kicked out, what would I do? I'd lay somebody out on the bed... a pretty lady, bella... stiff, stiff as a board! Even a baby would do like me!

MARTINO. You think I didn't think about it? I thought about it, don't worry! I left somebody in the bed, that morning I went on tour... (struggling to tell the story)... which turned out to be the last. That person - you know who she was - I kissed her on the forehead. "Ciao," I said, "I'll miss you," and I left, but that person in my absence saw fit that another person should enter her bed. And fate would have it that he was the landlord.

ANGELO (demonically). Probably wanted to be sure she no get evicted!

MARTINO (tolerant). You're probably right. And when I came home - a day earlier than expected - just like in the best of scripts... "Heavens, it's my husband!" "Heavens, it's the landlord!" Of the two of us, I don't know who was more afraid! You know the rest.

ANGELO. Still, I like to hear you tell it again! (Roguishly) Come on, Marty, tell the story.

MARTINO (staring at Angelo). Do you have any idea, Angelo, just how pernicious you are? You're not just some amateur, you're a real pro, with at least two degrees: one in bad faith and another in dicking people over! And you know why you're like that? Because you hate women, yes. You hate them! Even if they've never done anything to you! Me, on the other hand, I don't hate them, even if they did do me wrong. Come to think of it, the poor thing had every reason. I'm no saint. I sucked the life out of her... when I wasn't busy whoring around.

Forgetting himself while telling his story, Martino has drifted towards Angelo's bed.

ANGELO (pushing Martino away). You don't hate them 'cause you exploit them.

MARTINO (surprised by both the gesture and Angelo's words). I do what?

ANGELO. You heard me! You make money off them! That's why you don't hate them! You exploit them, you exploit them!

MARTINO (astonished). I exploit women? Just listen to him! And whom might I exploit, pray tell?

ANGELO. Your wife! You think I never noticed? You pimp! You bloodsucking pimp!

MARTINO. Stop it, you hear, or I'll bust your face!

ANGELO. No, I won't, 'cause, 'cause the whole world's gotta know! You, you've sucked more blood than a baby sucks milk!

MARTINO. I have no idea what you're getting at. But if you're looking for me to lose my patience, forget it. I will not give you the satisfaction!

ANGELO. Then how you make your living? Where you get money when you no work for a year?

MARTINO (with an air of superiority). From my bookbinding business.

ANGELO. Hah! Listen to him! He put covers on the National Library! You know what? You no even finish your first book, 'cause you don't know where even to slap the glue!

MARTINO. Don't you worry! I'll learn in time! (After a pause) Plus I had some savings put away, and you immediately assume it's exploitation! You see evil everywhere. (He turns in a circle.) Even under your own bed!

ANGELO (Martino's words have hit the mark). You keep my bed outta this. Is you with the guilty conscience! Is you gotta answer for something.

MARTINO (theatrically). But Your Honor, I've already answered! Savings, put aside throughout years of honest "promptings."

ANGELO. Oh really? Then explain me my dream last night! 'Cause last night, Marty, I dream of knockings at the door and the mailman arriving with a money order from your wife, for you! "This is from the missus," he says, "she's sorry she can't do more!"

MARTINO. You don't know how to dream, Angelo! It shows all over your face you're making it up. Look me straight in the eye! You didn't see that paper in your dreams but when you were wide awake!

ANGELO (deceitfully). Aha, so it's true! But I swear to you that...

MARTINO. Don't swear! Every time you swear falsely, it's another shot at your kingdom of heaven! Every time, Angelo, bang-bang! (He makes the sound of a gunshot.) And another saint falls! It's the story of your life: a veritable massacre! A carnage of saints! (Turning serious) But tell me now: when did you stick your claws in my drawer?

ANGELO. What you talking about?

MARTINO (gives Angelo a shove, then moves away). And to think you did it under my very eyes! How did I ever miss it?

ANGELO (timidly). You were in the john!

MARTINO (menacingly). O.K.! Just wait till you go to the john. Sooner or later, you'll have to! I'll wait. (He takes a chair and sits down by the bathroom.) I'll sit right here and wait! Ten days even! Then, when you finally decide not to explode... (begins speaking more like Angelo)... that's when I make my move. Straight for you compartment there, for that litter you protect so much. I strike a match and watch it burn! (Returns to normal speech) A beautiful purifying fire, Angelo! I'll make a pyre, Angelo! I'll make a pyre!

ANGELO (livid). You no dare, 'cause this is my house!

MARTINO. It's precisely 'cause it's your house that I'll do it! Since the verdict's already in that I'm a pimp and a scumbag, and that I stop at nothing!

ANGELO (after a pause). I wanted to help you. You were looking so worried.

MARTINO (depressed). What a lovely fraternity, you and me! What a great mutual aid society! And what a life! I cannot turn my back one second without you stabbing me from behind! (Again like Angelo) I gotta face you all the time, is all there is to it. I no can even afford to blink.

ANGELO. But you was not coming outta there!

MARTINO (back to his normal speech). See? That's my point! Anybody else in your shoes, anybody with a conscience would have said: "Maybe he's not feeling too well," or "Maybe he fainted." But not you, you were hoping I'd never come out! What you did was low, Angelo, way below the belt. And you know why? 'Cause you were planning it all along. Probably before I ever even thought of locking myself in there, before it had even crossed my mind, you, in the shadows, you were busy plotting! Thinking, in that monstrous little brain of yours: "Just as soon as he goes in..."

ANGELO. No. Is not true, I swear! I never knew you were going in there! All I knew is, you were not coming out!

MARTINO (intrigued by the sophistry). Hold it. I must be missing something. For me to come out, Angelo, I would first have had to go in. Otherwise how would I ever come out, right?

ANGELO. How would I know?

MARTINO. Ah, santa pace! Did you ever see someone come out of a place without entering it first?

ANGELO. Me, I only came out of my Mamma's belly.

MARTINO. Yes, but before you came out, something else that wasn't you made it in there before you. Or do you think it was all by the grace and virtue of the Holy Spirit? Although, come to think of it, maybe even the Holy Spirit...

ANGELO. Don't start with your blasphemies, O.K.?

MARTINO. Anyway, back to us. What's the question? You want to know whose money that is? Well, I'll tell you: it's mine. So now you can rest easy. It was money of mine that my wife had kept, money she now pays back a little each month. Because she says it isn't right for me to pay financially as well! And if she doesn't pay me back, I walk out of here and sue her!

ANGELO. You walk out - you?

MARTINO. That's right! You think I'm scared? I walk out all right! I put on the crappiest pair of pants, cross that threshold, head right down the stairs, and I'm practically out the door. (Pause) And if not, I write a letter to the commissioner, and when you step out, you can mail it! (Pause) But the fact remains that you're a shit!

ANGELO. Is not me, I tell you! Is the suspicion thing that blinded me! I was spinning out of my mind! I was thinking: "I bet any minute now they come and arrest him! How am I ever gonna face the neighbors? The police, here, in my house!"

MARTINO. Don't worry. The police, they've got better things to do. They're not going to waste their time looking for me. Unless, that is, they've got reason to come up here, for someone else!

ANGELO. I got no record!

MARTINO. Who said anything about you? Sure, you've got no record. But come to think of it: you never leave the house. You don't even go to church anymore!

ANGELO. I told you: is closed for restorations!

MARTINO. But you keep getting invitations from all sorts of church organizations: "Dear Brother in Christ," "Dear Child of Our Holy Mother," "Beloved Nephew of the Sacred Heart," "Esteemed Acquaintance of Saint Sebastian" - acquaintance only, mind you, because it is the last group you signed up for and relations with St. Sebastian are still somewhat formal.

ANGELO. They after my money! Is one year I no pay. But when the church open again, I be set with a couple of masses!

MARTINO. A couple of collection baskets, and the con artist here turns the miracle! (Obscene gesture) And you wonder why the African babies say: "Those Italians, they're not so warm-hearted anymore." But enough about all that, Angelo. And you're the last person to give me lessons. So do me a favor and just shut up!

ANGELO. Only if you promise you won't think bad of me.

MARTINO. Don't worry, I don't think badly of you. But I will have to work at it! Now let me get back to the job for the professor. Even if he doesn't show his face, even if something has happened to him - doesn't have much luck, you know, he seems cursed, but he might still show up. Between curses!

Martino picks up and fingers the dictionary. Then, yet again, he starts to look for the missing glue.

MARTINO. And now to find that glue! Why does it always run away? I'm going to have to fix a bell to it, like they do to cats.

ANGELO. Your glue? I took it.

MARTINO. Aha! And what on earth do you want with my glue? Are you an aspiring bookbinder or something?

ANGELO. I used it for the fish.

MARTINO. Angelo, it's books you bind, not fish! Now let's get me back my glue.

Martino starts towards Angelo's side of the room. ANGELO (leaps across to stop Martino in his tracks). Don't you bother! I get it for you!

Martino looks at him with suspicion.

ANGELO (justifying himself). Was me who took it, I return it. What's right is right.

Angelo goes to his corner of the room and returns with the can of glue. Then, in the center of the room, a kind of minuet takes place over the glue changing hands, in which Angelo and Martino get cute with one another. This goes on until Martino abruptly ends the farce with a "Bah!" that alarms Angelo and leaves him at a loss for words. Martino then returns to his corner and resumes his work.

ANGELO (with tension in his voice). Marty... I would... like to get confessed.

Martino, whistling, ignores him.

ANGELO. You know we got no secrets, Marty.

MARTINO. No, I don't. (He keeps on whistling.)

ANGELO (emphatically). Then you should know, 'cause that's the way it is. I cannot hide anything from you. Which is why I feel, I feel a lump, right here!

MARTINO (he turns around). Where?

ANGELO (pointing to his stomach). Here.

MARTINO. Your stomach? It's nothing. Probably some pill of yours that didn't dissolve. Just wash it down.

ANGELO. Marty, you know perfect what I mean. Is a moral lump. Marty, I'm sick! I'm sick I tell you! I'm spinning out of my head! And I gotta let it out.

MARTINO. Not with me you don't! (He points towards the window.) Go over there, with the throngs of St. Peter's. The whole square is waiting for you, wondering: "How come Angelo has yet to let it out?"

ANGELO. No, Marty, this no something I can call out in the streets! Is something I can only tell a friend, a true friend! Marty, I wanna get confessed! It hurts, Marty, it does really. You no have to do anything. Just listen.

MARTINO. Which is precisely what I don't want to do! You got a lump? Live with it! (Again speaking like Angelo) I got enough lumps of my own. (Normal speech) Listen to me, do like the Protestants do and confess directly to God!

ANGELO. I could not do that!

MARTINO. Right, how could you? You'd miss out on the chit-chat. No priest to talk shop with. Plus, you never know what God might say if called on directly!

ANGELO. Marty, I'm in real pain, in great pain!

MARTINO. Then do like the Muslims do: just kneel on a carpet. Better yet, know what you can do? Go up to the terrace. O.K., so there are no turrets in the vicinity; no palm trees either. But it's plenty deserted. (Again speaking like Angelo) So maybe you go up to the terrace and let out a litany!

ANGELO. And who is gonna hear all the torment I got inside? I need you to be judge!

MARTINO (his normal speech). I am one severe judge, Angelo! It wouldn't be in your best interest! Me, I show no leniency for your kind! You might say: "Martino, I stole a candy bar!" And I would answer: "Then hang yourself! Steal a candy bar and it's off to the gallows!"

ANGELO (after a long pause). My mother, when I was a kid, she never let me play with the boys!

MARTINO (to himself). How trite!

ANGELO. And the only time I went to a cathouse, I had to run! I felt all choked!

MARTINO. Was the gas left on?

ANGELO. It was not the gas. The lighting was bad. And when me and the gracious young lady entered the room - and she turns around - she's just like Mammà! The same nose! The same hairdo exactly!

MARTINO. Sounds like your mother was a pretty common type. Even in those quarters!

ANGELO (lets the insinuation slide, preferring to ignore it). And so woman's always remained a mystery to me! (Mystified, he shrugs his shoulders.) Ah!

MARTINO. Let me get this straight: are you telling me that, at your age, you've never known a woman?

ANGELO. Completely, never!

MARTINO. What! With all those churchgoing spinsters around you?

Angelo nods.

MARTINO. So then, you... practically... never...

ANGELO. With somebody else?

MARTINO. Of course.

ANGELO. A few times. Except that, how can I say... (embarrassed) We always was dressed. (Now Martino too is embarrassed.) I meet her one year in May, the month of the Virgin. She was in the choir - before she stop coming. We grab for each other in the little room for the bells. But she was always in a rush. And she never want to let me up to her house.

MARTINO. Must not have been any bells up there.

ANGELO. But sometimes I think me and her could be happy... in time, maybe. I feel... that nervousness, maybe I lose it... the fear that grabs me when I get near a woman! 'Cause you know that, when I get near a woman, the blood - it all gushes to my head. And I sweat. And I start to shake. And is like a hammer banging right here. (Points to his temples) Then all I can do is run! Except my legs, is like they slip out from under me! So I try not to look! But still my eyes end up in the same place! And they start to spin, and then my whole head spins out of control! Like you stick your head from a sixth floor window, or on top of a mountain! You think is serious?

MARTINO. For a mountain climber, yes.

ANGELO. And there's more!

MARTINO. Please, don't stop now!

ANGELO. But then you'll despise me.

MARTINO. So then don't tell me.

ANGELO. But then everything will lump together here (points to his stomach).

Martino looks to the sky, then goes to sit on the edge of his bed.

ANGELO (having caught up with Martino, he inadvertently kneels down). Marty, I sinned I tell you. A big, big, mortal sin!

MARTINO (sighing). So I must've done it too. . .

ANGELO. That's why I never leave the house, why I never go back to the church! (He cries and overdramatizes his despair.) Marty, I'm a monster, a degenerate, a piece of shit! They oughta put me in jail! Cut my ears! The guillotine! Is what I deserve, the guillotine! Maybe then I find peace!

MARTINO (indicates that this would give him some peace too, then...) And what might this hideous deed be?

ANGELO (hoarse). I defiled the innocence of childhood!

Martino eyes him for a long time, not knowing whether to believe him or not. But he is a little concerned. Angelo, nodding, reaffirms what he's just said, then goes off to sit down.

ANGELO. It happened during a baby girl's baptism. Father Iginio tell me: "You prepare everything: the water, the salt, the clean tablecloth."

MARTINO. Were you going to baptize or eat the little thing?

ANGELO (rushes on). Basically, get things ready for the ceremony. So I put everything in place, 'cause they were rich people, and I figure they slip me something! So in any case, all of a sudden there's a problem with documents. Seal is missing or something. So Father Iginio goes back to his office. And the parents and the godmother, they all follow the priest. And the little thing, the poor little thing, she is left in my arms!

MARTINO. Imagine, abandoned on the day of her baptism!

ANGELO. So then, the baby sees that I no look like her father or her mother...

MARTINO. Or even the godmother.

ANGELO. ... and starts crying and crying, and she cries till she all red in the face! So then I calm her down and the little thing, she smile at me. She was so pretty! And she was so happy she wet herself! So that's when I think: she can not keep this diaper on, she needs to be all clean and dry, or she catch cold, pneumonia even. So I unwrap her. (He covers his face with his hands.) And I see her naked! (Pause) Don't think bad of me, Marty! But it was stronger than me! I had to see her! I just had to see how she was made! (Pause) I always want to see how woman was made! But I always been too scared, Marty, 'cause I always feel something bad will happen to me, just like that, like a trap will snap at me, or the ground will open and swallow me up! But there everything was so nice. 'Cause when a woman's a baby, she cannot hurt you! (He pauses to wipe the sweat from his brow.) But then I feel like scum, you know, real scum! "I could be her father, her grandpapa!" I keep thinking in my head. And then like a voice comes to me and it says: "See this child? She's yours! Take her! Run, take her home with you!" And my heart, it beats real fast. And I see like a hundred doves flapping in front of my eyes! So I grab the thing, wrap her up best I can, and I am all ready to go! And then Father Iginio, he comes back with the little creature's father and mother! "Stop that man! He take our baby! Scoundrel! Gypsy! Crib-snatcher!" Ever since, I have not the guts to show my face there! And, I be so upset, I wrapped Father Iginio's eyeglasses in the dirty diaper!

MARTINO (after a lengthy silence, feigning a tribute to Angelo, he claps his hands slowly, deliberately, then...) Bravo! Nice punch line. Well constructed. And all the right breath stops. As la Grande Signora would say: "The dust of every theater of every age, the world over, from Epidaurus to Buenos Aires!" And you were actually convincing. Except that you're not going to bullshit me! That's not to say that your fantasy isn't credible, but it's what you wanted me to hear. And for someone like you, without even being asked, to string together such a cock-and-bull story, who knows what's eating away inside!

ANGELO. You want me to swear?

MARTINO. Angelo, this is just the tip of the iceberg, the part jutting out from the water! Who knows what's still beneath the surface!

ANGELO (impulsively). So you want my blood to burst, eh? But I no give you that satisfaction. No sir! I will not, you hear! I'm not gonna! You think I will croak for you? I show you. Know what? I'm gonna drag you down with me! (Martino looks on in silence.) We in the same boat, you know. We both desperate! So we might as well call it a life: us two, together! (He looks at Martino.) You wanna make like you don't care? Eh? (Angelo starts looking around). We soon see how much you care! (He walks to one of the two poles.) This Gehenna here, I shake it right to the ground, I will! If God Almighty don't do it, I see to it myself! (He grabs the pole.) And you know how? Like Samson and the Philistines. (At this point, he stops.)

MARTINO. You don't scare me, Angelo! You don't scare me! (Again speaking like Angelo) I give you a hand even!

Martino goes to the other pole, ready to pull at it. The two men study each other at length, as if in a duel.

ANGELO. No, for you is a liberation! No way! You think you have no sin, that your conscience is squeaky clean, that you have nothing to repent? So you make fun of me for all the nails stuck in my brain? I give you a nail right in the middle of yours! (He goes to the window.) I am jumping out!

He opens the window and is greeted by a relentless yowling of cats.

MARTINO (normal speech). Shut that, will you? It'll get cold in here.

ANGELO. I'm jumping out, I tell you! I'm jumping out! 'Cause you don't believe me!

MARTINO. So jump then! Jump away! Tell me: will you be jumping head first, or coffin style? And remember that once you jump, that's where you'll stay - with the cats. Because I'm not coming to pick you up! Not like this, I'm not coming! (He pauses.) The street's one big ditch, my shoes'll get dusty, and my pants'll get all mucky!

ANGELO. I'm jumping all the same! Is on your conscience I throw myself, Marty!

MARTINO. Well, let me move my conscience out of the way. (Again speaking like Angelo) And you can fall flat on your face.

ANGELO. Is what you wanted, Marty!

At that very moment another of the rods wedged into the wall to assess seismic activity crashes with a thud. There follows an exceptionally long, tension-filled silence.

ANGELO (his normal voice again). The crack!

MARTINO (normal voice). The crack!

Both men leave their places and converge at the point where the wall is crumbling. There they stop and, as if frozen, fix their eyes on the wall. Like robots they then return to the center of the room and sit down at the table.

ANGELO. You thinking about what I said before?

MARTINO. What is it you said? I forget.

ANGELO. What do you mean you forget? About the baptism! How I looked to see how the baby was made.

MARTINO. Stop hounding yourself. It's no big deal. Something similar even happened to me.

ANGELO (extremely interested). Really?

MARTINO. Except the babe was thirty-two and instead of a baptism it was a wedding.

ANGELO. You are a cynic! You got no respect for nothing! I be a sinner maybe, but you, your sins are the worst! Why you no respect my torment? Why we even live together? You and me, we are so different... What keeps us together anyway?

MARTINO. The ancients used to say: "Neither with you nor without you can I live!" For you and me, that's probably going too far. Let's just say, what keeps us together is a feeling... of mutual repugnance. That's it: mutual repugnance. That's a feeling too.

ANGELO. One that takes years off my life! What you really want is to bury me. You wanna watch me die a painful death!

MARTINO (almost abstractly). Ecco... That's perhaps the purpose of our living together. A dream... a vision... a word. Whether you die now or later, easily or painfully, may well depend on me.

Blackout

ACT II

Scene 1

Same as in Act 1. The first exchanges are uttered in the dark.

MARTINO. Couldn't you have waited till tomorrow morning? Was it so urgent? Would it have killed you not to do it tonight?

ANGELO. Yes, it would.

MARTINO. But in the middle of the room of all places? Couldn't you have done it over there, to the side? Now if someone comes to visit us, just think of the impression we'll make!

ANGELO. If someone comes to visit, we offer him some too! But don't kid yourself, Marty, nobody will visit us!

MARTINO. You old crackpot!

ANGELO. Oh, is my house, and don't you forget it! I do it where I want! And anyhow, this puts us closer. If we want, we can talk easier.

The lights brighten. Angelo has claimed the table in the middle of the room where, covered with flour, he is kneading dough. The flour hangs suspended in the air. Over in Angelo's corner, the holy pictures are all draped in purple, as is the custom during Holy Week. Martino, stretched out on his bed, now turns to Angelo.

MARTINO (singing). Ridi pagliaccio... (He coughs.) This room's become a construction site! I can't even tell whether it's the flour for the pastiera or dust from the walls. If the house starts to crumble, we won't even have the chance to realize it in time. The TV will make the most of it though: "Two people dead in the collapse of a fruitcake!"

ANGELO. You see, is always you! Messing things up! For a while I forget everything! Has been a half-hour since I thought about it!

MARTINO. Oh right! For you, even some silly trinket does it - something to turn in your hands. Reality disappears. No matter how dramatic, it just vanishes - like that! Poof! (Speaking like Angelo) A cup of flour, a spoonful of butter, some rose water, a fistful of grains... (normal speech) and life is a splendiferous thing! Sometimes I envy you, Angelo. I do, because you haven't the slightest notion of your own disaster! You just hop on the first baking tray, and you're off, into childhood, into mindlessness, into myth.

After indulging Martino, Angelo gustily lets loose a big, fat fart.

ANGELO. Ppprrr!

MARTINO. Lout!

ANGELO. You really crack me up, Marty, and you don't know it even, when you act the dickhead professor! (His rage begins to surface.) Is grown-up, him! He, he has a notion of disaster, him! Spits on childhood! Hell, you no better than me!?! Go out at least! Go ahead, get out of my sight! Nothing! You just lie on that bed like a soggy string bean waiting for the end!

MARTINO. The end of the world or the end of the pastiera?

ANGELO. The end that comes to you and your kind! You forget already is Holy Week, and today is Good Friday?

MARTINO. How could I ever forget? (He points to the covered holy pictures.) You've laid everything out, it's like a holy tomb in here! So what?

ANGELO. So the pastiera, it's gotta get done! Is devotional like.

MARTINO. "It's gotta... it's gotta..." The very the burden of tradition! Slavery, that's what it is! Ball and chains! The Babylonian captivity! Angelo, try to understand! It could get done. It doesn't gotta get done. Or by chance did the police come by with a warrant: "You, Angelo, son of Pasquale and Concetta Whatchamacallit, in the name of the Italian people, you gotta prepare the pastiera!"

ANGELO. Drop dead! No sir, the police, they were not here, so relax! You really obsessed with those police!

MARTINO. So now he goes and gets pissed! (To Angelo) You understand that I'm doing this for you, don't you? For your own good? To deliver you from slavery? From your shackles?

ANGELO. But you eat my slavery, no? Stuff your face with my shackles! Last year, you even got up in the middle of the night and gobbled up my portion.

MARTINO. Aren't we reproachful this evening! More so than usual! I admit, I like your pastiera, but it's got nothing to do with Easter. It's a question of palate, the calendar is irrelevant. And you know what? Come Christmas, I will go out and order not one but two pastieras! Two, Angelo! It'll give me a chance to get some air.

ANGELO. You a pagan, Marty, a real pagano! Martino Pagano! Christmas is for struffoli, not for pastiera! You wanna flip-flop the two?

MARTINO. No. Nossir. Christmas is one thing and Easter's another. But what does either have to do with pastries? So you say I'm the pagan, eh? According to you, if at Christmas instead of struffoli you make pastiera, the good Lord will smell the pastiera... (speaking like Angelo) get all mixed up... (normal speech) and instead of the stable... (speaking like Angelo) look for the cross, eh?

ANGELO. Padre, Figlio e Spirito Santo! Aaamen! These distinctions, they are for humans, and not for God! God, He knows how is supposed to behave, men no!

MARTINO (normal speech). Men like you that can't survive without order, without injunctions from on high, without discipline, without that slayer of the imagination known as dogma! Angelo, this is what happens to those who've forsaken the imagination. Open your eyes! I bet that if you were a sculptor, you'd put Garibaldi on a horse and have Paganini hold a violin.

ANGELO (hesitating). Why, is no good?

MARTINO (snobbishly). Ecco! You've got no imagination! Even as a sculptor, you're dull, pedestrian and predictable.

ANGELO. Then why, in the middle of all the squares in the world, the most famous sculptors, they got monuments of Garibaldi and Paganini just like I said? Huh? Why?

MARTINO. Because, like you, they have no imagination.

ANGELO. I tell you why! 'Cause people's used to it that way. People with their heads screwed on right! Who got no reason to change things!

MARTINO. You see? You're not free. You and all those people with their heads screwed on right! I should be a sculptor, I tell you! Then Garibaldi would have a violin and Paganini I'd plop on a horse! And see if I don't do it!

ANGELO (spitefully). And is not possible!

MARTINO (matching Angelo's tone of voice). And why not?

ANGELO (losing his composure). Why not? 'Cause the people they freak out! Nothing make sense! They break appointments! They unarrange marriages. Brothers are at each other's throats! "Me, I went to Paganini!" "No, you went to Garibaldi!" The buses, they stop. The traffic is bottled! The whole city is up to its neck! And then you have revolution! Why you not understand?!

MARTINO (increasingly provocative). If it's just a matter of a few blockheads lacking in imagination, then there's no problem. At the base of the monument you write: "Paganini on Garibaldi's horse," and "Garibaldi with Paganini's violin!"

ANGELO (losing all control). Go fuck yourself, you, the horse, the violin, Garibaldi and Paganini! (Pause) But then you wanna make me go crazy! Is better I don't answer you! (He starts to sing.) "When the bough breaks, the cradle will fall, and down will come baby, cradle and all!"

MARTINO. Ecco! The only fantasy he can come up with: a sordid lullaby where innocent babies and cradles come crashing down from treetops to the sound of ninna nanna! The most abominable atrocity set to music! What an evil imagination, Angelo. But I know why you're so evil. Because you're a man of faith. But your faith knows no joy!

ANGELO. You got something to say about my faith: Say it, come on! Spit out a little more poison from your mouth.

MARTINO. There is no joy in your faith, Angelo! Nor in your sense of duty.

ANGELO. You, how do you know?

MARTINO. I know, Angelo, I know. I know because I was in the same boat. At least until a certain age. I can still see those green-faced saints staring down at me accusingly, stripping me of my childhood. I tried to enjoy an impure thought now and then, but there they were, saying: "How dare you! Here I am bleeding from my mouth, bleeding from my side, bleeding from my hands! Here I am, a martyr! Upon whom life never smiled! And you, what did you want to do with that little hand of yours?" Not to mention how I obsessed over Holy Communion! "Beware! for the host must not touch one's teeth! lest we cause our Lord Jesus great suffering!" And so, during what should be a moment of mystical exaltation, of ecstatic pleasure, I was busy prepping my mouth with saliva, terrified at the prospect of what awaited me, thinking: "Is it enough?" And, on cue, the devil would whip his tail into action, and the host would never go down, and I'd be forced to swallow three, four, even ten times, until I started coughing! Then, when it was all over, when everything should be calm and peaceful, I would get obsessed, and I'd torture my brain with thoughts like: "I took a bite out of Jesus Christ! Who knows where I got Him!" Please, don't even make me think about it. That's why, after a while, I never took communion again.

ANGELO. You not even know how to take communion!

MARTINO. Go on, laugh! But these things, they leave their mark! And even when you decide, by an act of will, to rid yourself of them once and for all, still they stay with you, and for a long time! Imagine this: I was about thirty-three when I started not to feel well. I felt all anxious, like something was oppressing me! A sense of ill-being - I couldn't figure it out. Then one day, out of the blue, I understood. It seems like yesterday. We were putting on a show in Savona. An actor on stage said: "Thirty-three, the age of Christ when he died!" It was like an illumination! I was living longer than Jesus Christ! And I felt guilty, Angelo! When it finally hit me, I burst out laughing. But in the meantime I had been sick an entire year!

ANGELO. Tut, tut! Thank the Lord they chucked the Inquisition, Martyr, or right now they would already have dragged you in the middle of a piazza and lit you up like a Roman candle! Those were the days! If was now, I be sitting by the stake, first row, just like here! Taking in the show, getting myself all roasty-toasty! Martino the sinner, kindling for the winter!

MARTINO. I know, I know. And if someone kicked you out, I even know how you'd answer: "How dare you! I'm entitled to a complimentary ticket! I'm a friend of the Roman candle!" Get out of here, you bastard! (He pauses.) Angelo, just imagine! Make an effort! One Easter, just one, without your pastiera! Don't make it! You're finished with slavery! You're a free man, Angelo! Breathe! Isn't it marvelous? (Angelo looks at him perplexed.) Listen to me: it's now or never. Grab everything and throw it all out the window!

All Angelo can do to answer is to begin kneading the dough furiously, singing all the while.

ANGELO. "When the bough breaks, the cradle will fall, and down will come baby, cradle and all!"

MARTINO (approaching Angelo). Bravo! Bravo! What I like most is your sense of purpose. You knead with an air of divine majesty, of supreme wisdom, of primal love! Of course, that's your way of partaking in the mystery of creation! "And God took a fistful of earth, and breathed into it!" Angelo, this pastiera, we should name it "Adam"!

Angelo looks at Martino hatefully.

MARTINO (returning to his bed). And with the dough that's left over, we'll make Eve!

Angelo quickly grabs a piece of dough and hurls it at Martino, who barely manages to avoid being hit.

ANGELO. I get you sooner or later!

Martino removes the traces of dough and flour from the wall and from the bed, then gets up and heads toward Angelo. Angelo watches Martino and starts singing through clenched teeth.

ANGELO. "When the bough breaks, the cradle will fall..."

MARTINO. It's for you I'm saying it too, you know! You'll ruin your hands! (He takes one of Angelo's hands, but with a sense of mild disgust.) Look! Look!

Angelo lets him continue.

MARTINO (cruelly). You don't take enough care of yourself. Have you seen yourself lately? Come on, come look in the mirror.

He leads him to a small mirror hanging on the wall. Angelo lets himself be led like a robot. He seems helpless.

MARTINO. Look at yourself! Just look at yourself! Bags under your eyes, apron smeared and crusty, flour in your hair. You look like some decrepit old kitchen hand! And you look ten years older than you are! Your church lady, if she could see you now, she'd be crossing herself at the sight of you! Listen, do me a favor: if the professor comes, get out of here! Don't show your face! It's better that way!

ANGELO (gloomily, breaking free). Leave me alone, or I spit in your face! (He returns to the table and wearily starts kneading. Perturbed, he speaks through clenched teeth.) Damn you! And me too! "Ten years older! Decrepit old kitchen hand!" Is this the thanks I get? All my life I never complain! But still it throws me lemons! If I knew I end up this way, then I...

MARTINO. Listen, Angelo, we've all got our regrets. You think I don't regret things? You should be inside my head when I start mulling over my life, what it was and what it could have been! Ah, if only la Grande Signora hadn't died! Or at least not so soon! You think I'd be binding books and squabbling over desserts? Who knows what heights awaited me! Instead, look how low I've fallen.

ANGELO (offended). Oh really? So what can you do! Resign yourself, Marty! Life, it is full of ups and downs. Is one big sizamississity!

MARTINO. Stop teasing, Angelo. Anyway, what happened happened. But for the record, I had a good future! I was on the right track! And there was no stopping me either!

ANGELO (back to his role as a provocateur). A future? But make me understand, what future can have one who is all crunched up in a coffin, in a box that stands on end under a stage, running a finger across a script? Go on, don't make me laugh! Why I even listen to this!

MARTINO. Angelo, you are extremely ignorant, you know? But what can you expect from a layman! (He pauses, then begins to explain.) Angelo, the prompter - how many times do I have to tell you - is like a conductor! And the actors, basically, are like the orchestra! Better yet, they are the instruments! All they need to do is open their mouths! The prompter blows into them, and they play! Is it clear now, finally? Prompter! In French: souffleur! Me, I had such great breath control I could blow even Aida. And la Grande Signora, she knew it! That's why every year, when the company regrouped, she wanted me, and only me.

ANGELO. And what was she like, this Grande Signora? Was she beautiful?

He goes to sit in front of Martino, as if in a theater.

MARTINO (radiantly). Words cannot describe her!

ANGELO. Was she stacked? Was she stacked?

MARTINO. Angelo, tell me the truth, you're dying to know if I...

ANGELO. I did not ask you anything!

MARTINO. You've even set yourself up in the front row! Start clapping and maybe the curtain will go up! (He pauses.) Angelo, a gentleman does not feed the curiosity of the common herd with the details of his personal life, especially when a lady's honor is at stake!

Angelo hesitates, looks around, then asks explicitly.

ANGELO. Nice and simple, you bone her, yes or no?

MARTINO. I knew it! You can spoil just about anything! But there are some things you want to do, some things you want to touch with those oily, greasy, lardy hands of yours, those hands smeared with the fat of vulgarity, that refuse to be soiled! They continue to shine! To sparkle and dazzle! And one of them is the memory, my memory, of la Grande Signora! I can still hear her voice in my ears. Voice? What am I saying? It was music, magical music from another world.

ANGELO. From the land of the dead!

MARTINO (annoyed). Ecco! You want to play the fool? I won't tell you a single thing! Curtain!

Martino mimes the curtain being dropped.

ANGELO. No, please, I'm sorry. I won't interrupt no more. Go on, I like to listen.

MARTINO. If only you knew! She didn't call me Martino, no. She called me mon petit souffleur! (By-play of Angelo pretending to look for a cat.) "Mon petit souffleur, where is he?" "Cherchez mon petit souffleur!" "Have him come to me." (He pauses.) Then one night, before the show, I stopped by her dressing room as usual, to see if she had any instructions for me - a scene to cut, maybe, or a cut to work back in. I knocked. But she didn't answer! I walked in and there she was, sitting in front of the mirror, still without her make-up, looking dazed. Next to her, almost empty, was a bottle of cognac! She was drunk as a skunk. And she told me, between laughter and tears, that her lover had left her! A poet! A surrealist! He'd written her a letter that was totally baffling, except for the ending: "I'm returning to Paris! Don't look for me! Adieu!" (He pauses.) "What's the house like?" she murmured. I told her it was standing room only as usual. "Good, tell the manager to send everyone home. I'm not going on tonight!" I turned white as a sheet. It was a special performance: ambassadors from no less than three foreign countries were in the audience! "I can't remember a single line! I just can't! I have to protect my reputation!" she said. "So do I!" I exclaimed, mustering every ounce of courage I had. "My dear Signora, you will say your lines! From beginning to end. You will recite every word! Leave it to me! All you need to do is keep your eyes on me the entire time!" That night I surpassed myself! With voice, gesture, facial expressions, I kept her from missing a single line! What an enormous success! At the curtain call, la Grande Signora's face was beaming! And I had the distinct impression that one of those radiant smiles was meant for me alone! When the ritual of receiving the dignitaries in her dressing room was over - ambassadors were everywhere - she went back on stage, thanked everyone in the company, and gave instructions for the next day's performance. Then, while everyone was filing out, I heard my name called: "Mon petit souffleur!" I stopped. "Wait!" she said. She even dismissed the stage door man: "Leave us the keys, we'll close up." He left and we were alone. I stood looking at her... puzzled... "Turn on all the lights!" I turned them on. "The house lights as well!" I turned them on too. The theater glittered like one huge crystal! Then she sat me on the edge of the prompter's box, down front, center stage. "Stay there and don't move!" The Signora walked to the stairs that led to the box overlooking the stage. I still didn't understand. When she reappeared, she had taken off her gloves! For a few moments she stared at me, which felt like an eternity. Then she disappeared again! When she reappeared in the next box over, box number two, her hat was off and her long hair was down, draping her shoulders!

In box three she'd taken off her jacket! In four, her shoulders were completely bare! Then came five... and six... and seven... and eight... until she reached the royal box. There, beneath the huge decorative crown, fully lit!, she appeared to me like Venus stepping forth from the foam of the sea! Then, for the first time, she called me by my true name! "Martino," she said! I knew then that I could go to her. That I was to go to her. And there, in the royal box, I loved her. She loved me. We loved one another!

Vividly impressed, Angelo remains silent.

Afterwards, I was careful never even to hint at what happened. And she really appreciated that. Much as she'd appreciated the work I'd done for that memorable performance! By now I had become for her the prompter par excellence. "Mon petit souffleur," she'd say to me, "just give me time! I'll have your name entered in the Theatrical Encyclopedia! Under 'prompter, in French, souffleur!'" (He pauses.) And that, Angelo, is all!

ANGELO (beginning to stir from his amazement). I like it, Marty, when you tell me these stories! On the other hand, you make me want to smack you!

MARTINO. Because I want to help you grow up.

ANGELO. Because you too different from me. Me and you are like dogs and cats.

MARTINO. You're wrong. I'm not as different from you as you think. It's just that I've understood some things that you've yet to understand, that you refuse to understand. You're just like I was up until... well, up until I was fifteen. Like I could still be, if I'm not careful. If I stop reasoning things through. That's basically the situation. But if you'd listen to me...

ANGELO (returning to himself). I already told you, Marty! You gonna end up a heretic, burned at the stake! Don't you tempt me! Get back, Satan! Vade retro!

MARTINO (eyeing Angelo at length). O.K., O.K. I'll step back! You'll never understand anyway. (He goes back to his bookbinding.) At least let's get some pages straight. Page nineteen hundred seventy-five... seventy-six... seventy-seven... seventy-eight... eighty-one... eighty-two? What happened to page nineteen hundred seventy-nine - eighty? Oh, Padreterno! They were all here together!

He searches.

ANGELO. What you lose?

MARTINO. Page one thousand nine hundred eighty! (Speaking like Angelo) If he hears about it, the professor! Mamma mia! (normal speech) The volume must now surely be depreciated. Of course it is! (Reading) You get to the bottom of page nineteen hundred seventy-eight... (He reads.) "Simony - from the Latin >simonia, after Simon Magus: sinful commerce; the buying or..." and you never know how it ends!

ANGELO (continuing where Martino left off). "... selling of a church office or ecclesiastical preferment; also, the corresponding sin." (He dusts off some flour from the table.) "Falsehoods, theft and simony" - Dante, Inferno, Canto XI, verse 59.

MARTINO (amazed). Where did you learn that?

Angelo waits, hesitates before showing the flour-covered page.

ANGELO. I read it right here.

Martino almost faints.

MARTINO. You reckless, irresponsible madman! You'll be my downfall! You're more of a danger than this house ever was! (speaking like Angelo) And now what I supposed to do? Change page nineteen-hundred eighty with your mother's fruitcake?

ANGELO (conciliatory). You need the page like it was before? Don't worry, I take care of it. I wash and iron it.

MARTINO (still speaking like Angelo). Since when a sheet of paper is a shirt? Give me that!

ANGELO. I told you I take care of it. My mistake, I pay!

MARTINO (normal speech). Drop it, will you! You'll pay! Don't make me laugh! Your need for expiation doesn't convince me one bit! It's that faith thing again. Which you keep harping on so you can feel freer to do wrong! (Hinting) If you haven't already!

ANGELO (giving Martino a mean look). What you trying to say?

MARTINO (without batting an eye). Who said anything?

ANGELO. You did! And I heard you! But your little zingers, they don't scare me, 'cause me, I got no secrets. And I ain't done no wrong! Understand?

MARTINO. Is that so? I guess I'll just go stretch out on your bed then.

ANGELO. Why mine? You got your own.

MARTINO. I do, but it's dirty from the pastiera.

ANGELO (decisively). Some people, they don't like their noses touched. Me, I don't want nobody touching my bed!

Martino makes his way towards Angelo's bed.

ANGELO (brandishing the rolling pin). You get near that bed and I crack your skull! And that evens the score!

MARTINO (surprised). What's that? Evens the score? What score? You'll have to explain. I don't understand.

ANGELO. You understand all right, let's not waste time!

MARTINO. But we are wasting time! Did I ever threaten you with a stick?

ANGELO. You don't stop at threats, and you know that!

MARTINO. Oh mamma mia! You mean I actually cracked your head open?

ANGELO (pointedly). Not mine, but...

MARTINO. Whose then? Talk!

ANGELO. Someone from your deep dark past! Do not deny it, Martino, is useless! I got a letter in the mail! A 'nonymous letter!

MARTINO. Really?

ANGELO (goes to his corner and returns with a sheet of paper). Precisably, a 'nonymous letter, all signed, sealed and delivered! Lookie here! with stamps stuck in all the right places! (He reads.) "Esteemed Angelo!" You hear that! Esteemed Angelo! "I have always regarded you to be a rightful and good-hearted person!" You hear? When d'you ever get a letter like that! But listen to the next: "industrious, and capable of noble sacrifices in the name of true friendship. But it is precisely..."

MARTINO (surprised). Precisably?

ANGELO (with confidence). That's right, precisely! Just listen: "... because of your reputation for honesty, that I am amazed at your cohabitation with the ig-no-mi-ni-ous Martino!"

MARTINO. Ignominious? I see. Standard language for anonymous letters.

ANGELO (all revved up). And is not all! Just listen! "At this point, if you, esteemed Angelo, are cohabiting with the ignominious Martino, it means that you are ignorant of omnia!"

MARTINO. Omnia? But that's Latin!

ANGELO (simply). Could be... so... "... ignorant of omnia. And in truth, in truth it is said that the right hand ought not to know what the left hand does. But lest the latter be so wretched, perhaps you should shed some light. And that is why I am writing to you, as a friend and... Fiat lux! Consider spying on your house mate regarding what he has done with his spouse. Has he locked her in a suitcase? Or has he rented her an efficiency at the bottom of the sea! Or has he maybe found her a "pied-à-terre" in a sub-sub-sub-basement? Whatever the case, we are dealing with a homo non dignus, of cohabitating sub unico tecto vobiscum. Et cum spirito vostro! etc. etc.

MARTINO. Still more Latin.

ANGELO (hastily). "You have now been advised... Fate vobis! Amen!" Signed: "A 'nonymous Neapolitan!" So what d'you say? What d'you say?

MARTINO (eyeing Angelo). Angelo, would you permit me to take a peek?

ANGELO. Read it yourself! You think I'm trying to bamboozle you?

Martino takes the sheet of paper.

MARTINO. "... precisely... in truth... lest the latter be so wretched... fate vobis." My compliments! (He looks at Angelo.) An anonymous letter spiced with all the sacraments! Some piece of work!

Angelo seems satisfied, almost proud of himself.

MARTINO (calmly). Not to mention that the 'nonymous informant is also rather cultured. Bravo, Angelo! You found yourself a rat that's educated, an intellectual - who can write Latin no less! And then, what patience! Gluing so many little pieces of paper together takes a lot of time! I, for one, know something about glue. Only, like all men of culture, this person is somewhat distracted! Yes, because he didn't realize that in the little snippet here... (He points to the paper.) He left in a note that's - how can I put it? - off key, that throws off his entire score: "From the letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians"!

ANGELO (perturbed). Is not possible!

MARTINO. Read it yourself! You think I'm trying to bamboozle you? (He shows the letter.) So it's one of two possibilities: either this letter's meant for the Corinthians, but I don't see what that's got to do with you, you're not a Corinthian, are you?

ANGELO (wasting no time to reply). Me? No! how could I 'av come this far from Corinthia?

MARTINO. In point of fact, you couldn't. Which only leaves the other possibility: there's no way around it, Angelo, this masterpiece is yours!

ANGELO. Mine?

MARTINO. Yes, yours, yours! And since you're a shithead, you left signs of shit everywhere in plain view! It's almost like you signed it!

ANGELO (hamming it up). Oh sure! Like I had time to waste!

MARTINO. Angelo, why deny the evidence? You'd used up the newspaper and needed other words, so you resorted to the vocabulary of Holy Mother Church! And cut out some of your favorite passages! I have seen "nonymous" letters before, but never one that was signed like this! Here, take your little Easter letter!

ANGELO (trying to regain the advantage). But I saw you when I was reading! Your face, it turned real red, Martino, and you were shaking all over!

MARTINO. Bravo! Hamlet, act 3, scene 2. "While the players recite, not for a second does the Danish prince lose sight of the tyrant!"

ANGELO (in a passion). I don't know no recitals! What I know is you kill her! Yes, yes! You kill her! You kill your wife!

MARTINO. You poor madman!

ANGELO. You a good faker, Marty! So then, that dress for woman, in your suitcase, is for what?

MARTINO (outraged). You rummaged through that too!

ANGELO. You kill her! Yes, you kill her! Is why you on the run! Why you hide in this place! You kill her and chop her into little pieces. And who knows where you stash her! But you keep the dress, or else they recognize it, and put you in jail!

MARTINO. You've gone mad, Angelo! Poor fool, you're delirious! You've lost your marbles!

ANGELO (beside himself, but still putting on a show). You kill her! And I don't wanna share the same roof with no pimping murderer assassin! Get outta here!

MARTINO. That much you can count on! I'm leaving all right! Sooner or later. Except it won't be for you kicking me out! (He pauses.) So I killed my wife? That woman oozes health from every pore! From every pore, Angelo! That's right! You'd think she'd share some of it with me. But that's quite another matter.

ANGELO. Dare you say I make it up, the dress in the suitcase?

MARTINO. You're just dying of curiosity, eh? You want to determine what the dress is doing in my suitcase. So must the reason be murder? If you had asked me outright, I would have been spared a life sentence. (He proceeds with patience.) The dress was a gift I got her years ago in Rome. And when I left the house I took it to remember her by. Nowadays, I cling to it because - how can I say it? - it might still serve as a peace offering, or an excuse to see her. Sure, I know it's foolish but I start thinking that, just like I left that morning, who knows, maybe one day I'll wake up and feel that everything's easy, even leaving this place, even going home. (He pauses.) But not without first thanking you for your generous hospitality and boundless trust!

ANGELO (unmoved). That dress, it has a bloodstain on the front. (He points to his chest.) Right here!

MARTINO. That too can be explained, Your Honor. Like I said a minute ago, it was a gift from way back. One night we went out for a stroll and she wore it and she dropped some ice cream, strawberry ice cream. (He points to his chest.) Like a bullet mark, right here.

ANGELO (prickly). You don't blackmail people for a strawberry ice cream!

MARTINO. Who ever blackmailed her?

ANGELO. Don't you pretend nothing! You the one being blackmailed! And you even pay up, every month! And for you to pay up, it means you a hangdog and is lying heavy on your heart! Marty, in your things I find a receipt and a money order! A money order addressed to Post Office Box one thousand nine hundred eighty.

MARTINO. You imbecile! That's the number of the page you covered with pastiera!

ANGELO. O. K., so was maybe another number, but I read it with these eyes, so you better not deny it!

MARTINO. More snooping from the infernal bloodhound! I'm tired of this! You know what you can do? Arrest me and be done with it! I only ask that we postpone everything till tomorrow morning, because I am about to collapse.

ANGELO. You figured you more smart than me, right? Well, you figured wrong, Marty! Church life teaches you lots, most of all to deal with the devil!

MARTINO. You want to play inquisition? Fine! That post office box belongs to my wife. That's right, she regularly sends me the money she owes, and I regularly send it back, with the help of the grocery boy, who gets me the money orders. Or did get them until he stopped coming. No, don't even ask why I behave this way! I don't know myself! Maybe because I heard the other guy had left and she was having a rough time. Or maybe it's a way of staying in touch, of not losing contact, while waiting to find a different kind of courage. Maybe. All I know is that right now our relationship is via money order.

ANGELO. You love her still!

MARTINO. Don't go dredging up any big words! It wouldn't be appropriate.

ANGELO. But when you came here to live, you said was all over!

MARTINO. And that's the truth. But there's nothing to stop something new from starting. Even with the same person. There's more to life than love. There's caring, solidarity, emotional stability. Which you can even get in a stable - as long as it's more stable than this one.

He scans the room.

ANGELO (after pausing, speaks decisively). If you hurry, you will find her still awake.

MARTINO (staring at him). You've got to be kidding!

ANGELO. G'on, g'on! I give you a hand even.

Angelo starts to collect Martino's things.

MARTINO. You are one hopeless madman!

ANGELO. I can never stand agonized goodbyes. I could never accompany nobody to the station! If you gotta leave, pack your bags and get out quick, quick! "All aboard!" The whistle of the station master and the train, it leaves! Buona fortuna!

MARTINO (continuing his previous thought). Or maybe you're not mad after all. You want to send me away, don't you!

ANGELO (ever the evangelist). "If your left eye offend you, pluck it out post haste!" Gospel according to St. Matthew! "If your housemate's a hangdog, thou must not cohabitare!" Gospel according to St. Luke.

MARTINO. Bravo! Now you're falsifying the gospels too! And that proves me right. You want to send me away! I don't know why, but I can feel you want to send me way. You've been behaving strangely for several days now! Please, don't get me wrong, you've always been a shithead. But now there's something different.

ANGELO. My feelings, they are offended! That seems strange to you?

MARTINO. Leave your offended feelings out of it! I don't know what to think, but I have the distinct impression there's something suspicious connecting you, your mattress and the goldfish. Like some sordid trinity that...

ANGELO (resentfully). Leave the Trinity out of it! Don't touch it!

MARTINO. Not to mention the many times I've come from the kitchen, or walked out of the bathroom, or even just turned around all of a sudden, and caught you - not just rummaging through my things, which would have been more normal, mind you, considering your meddlesome nature and the mysteries of your sextonship - no, I've seen you at the window, waving your arms, gesticulating, making all kinds of strange signals!

ANGELO (promptly). Was praying! Was making the sign of the cross! For the salvation of your soul!

MARTINO. Think of your own instead. And let me finish! You were making strange signals, exactly like a station master. But it wasn't to send off a train. No! It looked to me like this was one you wanted to stop! As if you were saying: "You can't enter the station until this other train here has left!" And I'm sure it was me you were referring to!

ANGELO (hysterically). Ecco! Is the thanks I get, is my reward after all these years of sacrifice! After I served you like a priest at the altar! Was right the poet when he said: "Gratitude is a grand ingrate!" (He pauses.) But now you must leave, go on! I really cannot stand you being here! And if you don't get out, know what I do? I take that suitcase, and throw it out down there!

He makes for Martino's bed.

MARTINO. You just try and I'll throw out all your stuff! (He threatens to do it. Angelo freezes.) What's the matter? Not a fair trade? (Speaking like Angelo) Clipped your wings, haven't I!

Angelo returns to the table, sweating and panting.

MARTINO (normal speech). There we go! Bravo! That's it! Go back to your pastiera, to the fodder for the Easter feast. Symbol of domestic peace!

ANGELO (grabbing the tablecloth by the four corners). Peace is something I make with the alley cats!

He goes to the window, opens it. As always, the cats yowl.

ANGELO. Here, eat! Stuff yourselves!

He lets everything drop. The cat's yowling seems to lessen.

MARTINO (startled). The page from the dictionary!

ANGELO (to the cats). Eat that too! Eat and learn!

MARTINO. Pazzo! Madman! They ought to lock you up. And throw away the key!

ANGELO (shutting the window). There! Done! Ite missa est!

MARTINO (rattled). I can hear the professor now! I know just what he'll say: "I gave you X number of pages, and if you expect to be paid I want every single one of them bound. Not one page less." And he's right! So now what am I going to tell him? If I could at least remember all the words, maybe I could write out the page by hand. What's after "simony"? I can't remember! I can't remember! Total amnesia! (to Angelo, speaking like Angelo) You and that crazy head of yours! (Normal speech) So now what do I tell the professor? That page nineteen hundred seventy-nine got eaten by the cats? No, I'd be shamefaced. I'll tell him you ate it!

ANGELO (calmly). If you hurry you'll still find it.

MARTINO. What do you mean?

ANGELO. I mean if you hurry you still find it.

MARTINO (surprised). You mean go downstairs?

ANGELO (nodding in assent). Uh-huh!

MARTINO. With the cats?

ANGELO. Uh-huh!

MARTINO. You threw it, you get it!

ANGELO (spitefully). I can live very good without that page. You need it, you get it!

MARTINO. You really are such a spiteful child! But this is one I won't forget!

Martino stands in the middle of the room. He doesn't know what to do.

ANGELO (diabolically). They probably already licked up all the ricotta and strips of dough and probably right now they tearing at your page, which is not so tasty, but has the same aroma. When you hungry you hungry!

Martino continues to hesitate. Then, clenching his teeth, he crosses the threshold into the unknown! Left alone, Angelo runs to the door to make sure Martino has gone downstairs. He then returns to his bed and disappears behind a folding screen.

Pause. The stage is empty, except perhaps for the intensified yowling of an occasional cat. Martino returns with the page in hand. Clearly unraveled, he closes the door behind him and slumps into the first chair he sees. He is panting, as if he'd just swum through rapids or escaped his pursuers in a chase.

MARTINO (flustered). Among the beasts he sends me! (He holds out the page.) Fifteen cats on one single page!

Angelo comes out from behind the screen. He is wearing Martino's wife's dress, with a foulard wrapped around his head.

ANGELO (strutting, as if in a fashion show). What d'you say, honey, how do I look in the holy remains?

MARTINO (looking up, quivers with rage). You bastard!

ANGELO (pushing his imitation of the woman). Honey, you buy me an ice cream? I got a desire for strawberry!

MARTINO. You take that dress off right now!

ANGELO. Hey! You getting too fresh! We just met!

MARTINO. Take off that dress, I said!

ANGELO. If you really cannot resist, you come yourself and take it off me!

MARTINO (barely controlling himself). You're asking for it!

ANGELO. What a nasty personality you got, Marty! But, you're going on tour, no? Don't forget to wear your horns!

He mimes the cuckold's horns. Martino lunges at Angelo and tears at the dress.

ANGELO (pretending he's wrestling to free himself). What's the hurry! Who d'you think I am? These dirty games, you play them with sluts from the theater, not with me!

MARTINO. You freaking piece of shit faggot!

ANGELO. Ahh, your hands are so cold! Cold hands, flaming heart!

Martino has managed to tear off from Angelo the last shred of dress. Grieving, he carries it back to his suitcase.

ANGELO (intoning the song dolefully, quietly and passionately). "When the bough breaks... the cradle will fall..."

MARTINO (after a very long pause). You're going to pay for this! As God is my witness!

ANGELO (trying to re-establish a dialogue). But I thought you do not believe in God?

MARTINO (drily). It's you that will pay! You believe in him, you pay! You mark my words!

ANGELO (trying to buy time). I wanted to help you. I was doing it for you. To make you not make another mistake. But if you still want to leave, go! The door is open. But listen to me, don't go back to that woman! Leftovers ain't worth much, 'specially when they already been reheated by another.

MARTINO. That's my fucking business! Get your nose out of it!

ANGELO. As you wish.

Angelo gets ready for bed. He pulls down the sheets, fixes his pillows. Martino is busy doing the same on the other side of the stage.

ANGELO. Good night, Marty!

Martino doesn't reply. He looks at his watch as he gets comfortable.

MARTINO. Another day gone by.

He turns out the light. In the half-light...

ANGELO. Did it fall down far?

MARTINO. What?

ANGELO. Page nineteen hundred eighty.

MARTINO (after a pause). Luckily no.

Blackout
Scene 2

Nighttime. Martino and Angelo are asleep, or pretending to be asleep. At one point Martino gets up to go to the bathroom. He turns on the light and locks the door.

No sooner has he done so than Angelo worms out of his bed. He checks to make sure that Martino is in the bathroom. Then he goes toward Martino's bed, where he starts to rummage through his personal belongings!

Busy spying, Angelo is startled by the sound of a toilet flushing. A few seconds, however, are enough for him to scoot back to his bed and pretend he's sound asleep! Sleepy-eyed Martino wobbles back to his bed and gets under the covers. It's then Angelo's turn to make for the bathroom. But before locking the door, he stops at his friend's bedside to check if Martino is asleep. Then...

MARTINO (from beneath the covers). Lock yourself in! What are you afraid of? I've no need to spy. Me, I just fall asleep and see things in my dreams!

The lights go to black again as Angelo is overcome with rage!

When the lights come up again, it is daytime.

Angelo is ruffled over something. He is pacing up and down the room and throws an object against the wall! The ceiling answers in kind, as a tile comes loose and barely misses him!

Martino is in the middle of the room, still in his pajamas. He is calm and relaxed, in the middle of a story.

MARTINO. So here I was walking down the street, when all the buildings opened their windows like so many mouths, saying: "So what's the story? Why doesn't Angelo come around anymore? Doesn't he go out?" So I answered: "You mean you don't know? Haven't you heard the news? He's sick!" "Ohh, poor thing! Is he suffering?" they asked. "Oh yes! Oh yes! Oh yes!" "What's he have that's so serious?" "He's caught the Midas bug!"

ANGELO (his back to Martino, he turns his head). The Midas bug? What's that?

MARTINO. Ah, so now you want to know! You just said you weren't interested in my dreams. You didn't even want to hear them!

ANGELO. That's right! So shut your trap!

MARTINO. You see, the Midas bug is a virus that enters the bloodstream when a person's been to too many churches and then suddenly stops going! Which is why a person wakes up one morning and...

ANGELO. I told you I do not wanna hear it!

MARTINO. I'm explaining it to the buildings, whose windows are open and hanging on every word I say! It's a virus. When you wake up in the morning and touch your foot or your leg, you find it's turned to gold, or silver! Just like those votive offerings people hang on altars in exchange for a miracle. They're in every church. (Looking sternly at Angelo, then speaking like Angelo) As I'm sure you know!

Angelo avoids his gaze.

MARTINO (he continues, normal speech). "Gesù! Gesù!" the buildings said, "that means he can't even move!" "Of course he can't move! And there's more: he's scared to death at the thought of the amputation! Can you imagine! Sawing off a leg of gold, replacing it with a wooden peg! Some deal!"

ANGELO. Dreams are the dreamer's problem!

MARTINO. So then you have nothing to fear. What do you care?

ANGELO. So then, according to you, how would this illness develop?

MARTINO. So you do care?

ANGELO. No, not me. Is the buildings want to know!

MARTINO. How does it develop? Simple. At the start, a person always goes to church, and we know why. Then all of a sudden he stops. (Hinting) And this we don't know why! Then somehow he doesn't go to the bathroom for a week, for fear of being spied on!

Angelo automatically rubs his belly.

MARTINO. So then all the poisons end up in the bloodstream, the skin starts to yellow, and it turns the color of gold! Then slowly but surely it keeps getting darker, until the color turns...

ANGELO (interrupting). And the buildings? What did the buildings say?

MARTINO. What could they say? "Oh, we're so sorry! Oh, poor Angelo!" Some of them were crying, with tears washing down their rain-spouts! But the building that seemed most affected was your old church, where you used to serve.

ANGELO (betraying his anxiety). My church? You went there?

MARTINO. It's easy to lose your way in a dream. I ended up right in front of it! Was she ever crying! She said to me: "Angelo doesn't come around anymore! He doesn't love us anymore! Did we do something to lose his affection? It used to be he'd swing from our church bells! And the bells would ring and ring!" That's when I had to explain everything to her, and she said: "Oh, really? Then tell him one of these days I'll stop by to visit! (Menacingly) When he least expects it!"

ANGELO (trying to laugh). Oh sure! The church will come up here! How will she get in? How she get through the door?

MARTINO. The dream is mine, and I let her in!

ANGELO. And then? Go on!

MARTINO. And then just like that you were dead! (Eyeing Angelo) Did you hear me, Angelo? You were dead!

ANGELO. You don't scare me anymore! According to you, I been dead and resurrected a hundred times already! Here, look! Healthy as an ox!

He rubs his belly.

MARTINO. I wouldn't call it health! Anyway, the dream continues. Act two: you were dead, and I was accompanying you to the cemetery. But, how can I say it, ours was not a cheery procession.

ANGELO. So you expect a party maybe?

MARTINO. It wasn't cheery because we were alone: you in the hearse and I behind on foot! Us two alone and that's it. Basta. Not even the coachman. And I wondered how the horses were managing without a guide! Or maybe there were no horses!

ANGELO (unable to contain himself). E madonna santa! (Mumbling as if to say, "I'll get my revenge") You is going to die, Marty!

MARTINO (sincerely). You realize: a funeral with only one person in the procession, a funeral where the number of dead people equals the number of the living, I'm not sure if it's sadder for the one who's gone or the one who's left behind. But back to the dream. So we were winding through the streets, singing the De Profundis.

ANGELO. We were singing? Wait, you mean me, I was singing too?

MARTINO. Uhn hunh, you too! Come to think of it, it was only you! I wasn't singing. The spirit didn't move me.

ANGELO. Padre, Figlio e Spirito Santo! A dead man who sings the litany for himself! Is the first time!

MARTINO (hinting). Does it surprise you? You've always done everything alone... (Speaking like Angelo) so why make a fuss about a song now! (Normal speech) Stop it! Basta! While we were passing through the streets, the buildings all turned and eyed me suspiciously: "Young man, who died?" "Angelo, he died!"

Angelo pretends to be unfazed, but no sooner does Martino turn away than he begins to gesticulate wildly and obscenely as a kind of exorcism.

MARTINO. "So where are you taking him?" "To the cemetery." (Speaking like Angelo) "We are coming with you!" (Normal speech) So the buildings stood up on their steps and foundations and started to follow us! And soon they were singing too! And at that point the funeral turned into a party, with all the buildings singing and dancing behind your hearse! Imagine, Angelo, even the church straightened up on its columns to come to the cemetery! But at the gate the gatekeeper said: "Kyrie Elieson!" Suddenly I was lost! I couldn't remember the response and was mumbling all sorts of mumbo jumbo! But you stuck your head out of the casket and prompted me: "Christe Eleison! Christe Eleison!" I repeated it right away and the gatekeeper let us in. "Avanti," he said, "but only you and the deceased. The buildings must stay outside... (Speaking like Angelo) they not allowed! We cannot have buildings parading 'round here! A cemetery is one thing, a city is another!" (Normal speech) So then a big discussion got started. In, out. Yes, no. Suddenly the notary appeared: "Stop it, everyone! We will now open the last will and testament!" We all looked at each other in amazement: "Last will and testament? He didn't even have a pot to piss in!" "That's what you say!" replied the notary. (Speaking like Angelo) "You forget about his mattress?" (Martino points to the mattress and speaks normally) And that's when I woke up!

ANGELO (peevd). You're fixated with my mattress. Always, you end up there. What do you think I keep in there? The riches of a queen? The treasure of San Gennaro?

MARTINO. I don't know. But from the way you guard it...

ANGELO. But how I make you understand there is nothing in there! *Niente!* How I make you believe me? Set it on fire maybe?

MARTINO. In the absence of any exculpatory evidence!

ANGELO. So you force me to play Nero? I give you Nero! Is you that wanted it!

Angelo takes a sheet of paper from the table, makes it into a torch and lights it with a match.

MARTINO (*turning purple*). Page nineteen-hundred eighty! You bastard!

ANGELO. I warned you I'm gonna play Nero!

Martino grabs him, shakes loose the burning page and stomps it out. He picks it up and tries to read it.

MARTINO (*reads*). "Simony... the selling of a church office or ecclesiastical..." It's no use: the work is fatally beyond repair! And to think I even went downstairs to save it from the cats!

ANGELO (*mortified*). I'm sorry, I did not do it on purpose!

MARTINO. Shut up, will you!

ANGELO (*more aggressively*). Look, I did not do it on purpose! Is the truth!

MARTINO (*insisting*). And I said shut up!

ANGELO. *Madonna!* Martino, calm down! It's not that we ruined the Holy Scriptures!

MARTINO (*eyeing him with hate*). So, you want war? Then war it is! And all the worse for you!

Martino goes for Angelo's jar, takes the goldfish out by the tail, then, with sadistic determination, opens the window and throws the fish to the cats. Angelo lunges at Martino, but he's too late. Offstage, the usual wild yowling of cats!

ANGELO (*raising his fists*). You just pray to God that the cats they don't like alcohol!

He runs downstairs.

MARTINO (*alone*). You old crackpot! But that's it! *Basta!* We've fooled around long enough! I'll see you straight to the slammer! (*He runs over to Angelo's mattress, drags it to the center of the room. There, using scissors, he begins to cut into it.*) We'll see if he can lie in the face of evidence! (*Loudly, towards the door where Angelo exited*) Dreams do come true, Angelo: the church has come to visit you after all! And since she's here, know what? She's taking back everything you filched from her! (*However, as he gradually empties the mattress and clusters of wool are spread all over the floor, his excitement turns into disappointment.*) The treasure's not here! I don't get it! It's got to be here! This is where he hid it! (*His disappointment grows as his chances of locating the stolen goods decrease; he's perplexed.*) But, then, all his lies. And he'd get so scared when I got too close to his bed.

Martino's disappointment now turns into anger. He starts throwing the wool over his shoulder, haphazardly, making for an incredibly dirty snowfall!

ANGELO (*from the stairs*). *Dio mio!* They gobbled it all up, with the alcohol! (*Entering, he sees the havoc.*) Oh my God! Oh my God!

He stumbles backwards and is about to fall. Martino gets up, totally embarrassed. He is stuffing bits of wool into his pockets, and trying to push what's left of the mattress under the table. All he can manage is a poor excuse for a lie.

MARTINO. I thought I'd air out your mattress.

ANGELO (*crushed*). My poor mattress, in a sea of wool!

MARTINO. It can be fixed. It's nothing really. I'll sew it back together myself. Ten minutes and it'll be like new! A needle, and thread.

Angelo presses his hand to his heart, as if something inside him had been broken forever.

MARTINO (*aggressively, so as to defend himself*). How was I to know you really were crazy, you

and all your mysteries?! You mean to tell me that your obstinate refusal to let anyone touch, or even approach your bed, was nothing but a pretense, a fixation and that's all? (*He pauses.*) Well, if that's the way it is, what can I say? I was totally mistaken, and I'm sorry! Forgive me! The truth is I was sure you had the church's gold in there! Gold you'd stolen from the church, which was why you didn't go anymore, why you'd come to hide in this house! And to cover it up, you invented the story about the restorations, about the work being done. I was wrong. Forgive me.

ANGELO. Martino, forget it. What happened happened.

MARTINO. But why? Why did you behave like that? I don't get it! *Cristo*, I must be losing my mind! Do you realize, at least, how suspiciously you behaved? I bet you that anybody in my shoes, after putting up with your mysteries, your excuses, your suspicions - and the lies! one lie after another! - I bet you anyone would have thought the worst!

ANGELO (*bitterly*). Anyone, but not you! You should not have! 'Cause that hurts worse than the cats eating my fish and my mattress shredded all around the floor.

MARTINO. And you're right. But can you at least explain?

ANGELO. What's to explain? If I can explain things, then maybe I get some peace. But no! I gotta keep going, every day, with a hundred fears inside me. Gotta keep telling lies, a hundred lies for every fear inside I was born with! Sure, now and then I feel like the grip is more loose, like something is getting right. I begin to breath like I'm free and not oppressed! Then, from one minute to the next, it starts again! Is like my chest. (*He looks around.*) Is like inside my chest is one of those rafters. (*He points to the rafters overhead.*) And it starts to shake, then comes loose, and inside of me it all crashes down!

MARTINO (*after a long pause*). But then, those signals you were making at the window, if they weren't for some accomplice of yours, who were they for? You're not going to claim I dreamt it all!

ANGELO. What can I say? One time I was really making the sign of the cross. Another time was when I thought I saw that woman walking by. The church lady, remember? And I tried calling her, but she did not see me. Or maybe it was not her. Maybe it was nobody. Is nobody around here, never. Nobody comes visit us, never!

MARTINO (*after a pause*). What about your fear of the police? Did I dream that up too?

ANGELO. The law is the law, Marty, and scares everybody! And maybe even more, men of honor!

Angelo heads for the bathroom, holding the jar of alcohol where he used to keep the fish.

MARTINO. What about the notice you were expecting?

ANGELO. The notice, that's true too! The request for a new apartment, I really made it. And any day now I expect an answer. But I believe it and I don't believe it. Like they gonna answer me! And even that scares me to death, 'cause in the form, in the married box, I put "crippled wife in wheelchair"! If they come wanting to see her, where I will find her?

He starts to exit.

MARTINO (*stopping Angelo*). Wait! And the church?

ANGELO. The church? The church and me, we don't understand each other for a long time now.

He exits. Martino does his best to repair the damaged mattress.

MARTINO. *Ecco qua.* There we go. Now, needle and thread and a nice job of invisible mending. We'll patch it up so you'll never notice! Even better than before! You know what, Angelo? After I finish yours, I'm going to redo mine as well. Mattresses need a good airing out every now and then!

Angelo reappears holding his belly.

MARTINO (*noticing Angelo*). No, Angelo, please! Anything you want, but not this. Call me rotten! Call me a cuckold! Even ram your fingers down my throat! (*Demonstrates by putting two fingers in his mouth.*) But don't go starting with your doubts again, should you do it or shouldn't you! Please, not after everything that's happened. This is not the time!

ANGELO (*after a long silence*). I drank it... all of it!

MARTINO (*not understanding*). Drank what?

ANGELO. The jar of alcohol!

MARTINO (*tense*). That's not funny!

ANGELO. I'm not being funny!

Martino runs into the bathroom. He returns, frazzled, with jar in hand.

MARTINO. But why? Why? No, I must be dreaming. This can't be!

ANGELO (*haltingly*). First one rafter, it falls, then another falls, then another, and then all the dust and dirt gets in your eyes so you can't see nothing no more!

Feeling like he's going to vomit, Angelo writhes horribly in pain.

MARTINO. Damn you! You are insane, you really are! (*He pauses.*) And I'm crazy too for not understanding! For not realizing in time! (*He holds up Angelo.*) Come on. Come here. Lie down on my bed. Nothing to worry about. I'll prepare some hot water. It'll make you throw up, and you'll see, you'll feel better right away.

ANGELO. Hurry up!

He writhes in pain.

MARTINO. Does it hurt a lot, your belly? The hot water, I tell you...

Martino starts to move away but is held back by Angelo.

ANGELO. No! Do not leave me alone! Wait! Come more close! (*His voice deepens.*) Tell me you don't despise me!

Martino helps Angelo stretch out on the bed.

MARTINO. I don't despise you, Angelo, don't worry.

ANGELO. But you said always you did not want to talk with me. That you no talk with people like me since '89.

MARTINO. Why do you go remembering that! People say all sorts of things!

ANGELO (*he continues*). You said always you did not understand me. That I disgust you.

MARTINO. You don't disgust me, Angelo. And if you want to know, I'm even beginning to understand you.

ANGELO. *Bravo!* Thank you! I was sure of it, Marty! You are so intelligent! You were always better than me.

MARTINO. Cut the crap, please! Between you and me, you're the better by far. Or let's say the less bad. Me, what do I do? I play the sophist. I want reasons for things, explanations, consistency. And in the long run, what do I resolve? I criticize, protest, make grand pronouncements, always nitpicking, never sparing anything or anybody! And then I go and accept life fully. I roll with the punches! I give in, without fighting back! I slurp up every minute of the show! And you know why? Because I haven't the guts to stand up and leave! Not you! You do the only sensible thing! If you can't stomach the show, you get up and leave! And if the doors are shut, you don't think twice. You smash through the emergency exit. Angelo, there's not much I can say, but of the two of us, I really think it's you who's figured things out.

Having held tight thus far, Angelo is now overcome by violent spasms.

MARTINO (*concerned*). You're suffering a lot, aren't you? I'll go prepare the hot water.

ANGELO (*again holding Martino back*). Wait! Stay here! (*He pauses, trying to muster his strength.*) Marty! Will you swear something?

MARTINO. Angelo, you know I never swear.

ANGELO. Then make me a promise. (*He has another spasm.*) But remember that a promise made to a dying man, it means more than just swearing.

MARTINO (*embarrassed*). I'll go get the hot water. You'll throw up, and you'll be all better. It could be just a bad upset stomach.

He tries to move away again.

ANGELO (*hanging on to Martino*). Marty, that promise!

MARTINO. What promise?

ANGELO. Marty, promise me that, before I die, me and you, we... we get married!

Martino, astonished, is taken aback. For a moment he holds onto the headboard of the bed, then...

MARTINO. I'll go get the hot water.

ANGELO. Yes, Marty, you gotta promise me that if I get worse, if I go into the final agony, you will call a priest. No, not Father Iginio! Another priest, who does not know me. And we get married *in extremis!*

MARTINO. But that just can't be!

ANGELO. Life is full of things that can't be and are!

MARTINO (*scratching his head*). But I tell you it can't be!

ANGELO (*after letting out a moan*). Marty, please, don't make me die in sin!

MARTINO. But, Angelo, what sin?

ANGELO. Marty, promise me!

MARTINO. Your head never was of much use to you. Now it's even worse! I'm going to get the hot water.

ANGELO. But what it costs you? If I get better, we don't do it. If I enter into the final agony, I die. So will you promise?

MARTINO (*after taking a moment to think*). O.K., I promise.

ANGELO (*bolting miraculously from his bed*). Hah! As if I marry you! Listen here, is not yet born the man who gonna tie my knot!

Dumbfounded, Martino stares fiercely at Angelo.

ANGELO. *E già!* So you do wanna marry me, eh? You even think about it! Can you imagine!

MARTINO (*foaming with rage*). Me? But it was you who...

ANGELO. Marty, what's said is said! I was only having fun, but you was doing it for real! So now who is the faggot, huh? Tell me: 'tween me and you, who is the faggot?

MARTINO. I'll spill every drop of your blood! That blood that's black and wormy like your soul!

ANGELO. You fall for it, Marty, admit it! Faggot! Faggot!

Martino jumps him, when suddenly, out of the blue, mysterious and metaphysical, a telephone rings! The two men stop, astonished, stupefied. The telephone continues to ring.

ANGELO (*whispering*). Is the phone!

MARTINO. They're calling!

ANGELO. They looking for us!

MARTINO. They want us!

ANGELO (*almost terrified*). Who can it be?

MARTINO (*the voice of reason*). Someone calling us.

ANGELO (*hazards a guess*). The professor wants his book, maybe?

MARTINO. Why not your church lady?

ANGELO. Could be also your wife.

MARTINO. Or Father Iginio to tell you the church reopened.

ANGELO. Or maybe is a theater company that wants you for a tour?

MARTINO. Or perhaps those people about the new housing.

ANGELO (*after a pause*). God bless the telephone!

Just then the telephone stops ringing.

ANGELO (*waiting*). So what now, why'd it stop?

MARTINO. What did you expect, if we don't answer!

ANGELO (*desperately*). So now what we do?

MARTINO. You were so busy blabbing, the thing just got tired of ringing.

ANGELO. Me? So this too is my fault! While the goofball sticks his head in the clouds!

MARTINO. How could I know the phone was still connected?

The phone starts to ring again.

MARTINO (*in a frenzy*). It's them again! Answer the phone!

ANGELO. Where is it?

He looks for the phone.

MARTINO. Last time I saw it, it was on the shelf.

ANGELO. Yes, but then we put it on the cupboard, since no one was calling no more.

MARTINO. So that's where it must be! (*He runs to the cupboard.*) Get up there! Get a chair and get up there!

The phone keeps ringing. Angelo climbs onto the chair. Martino helps him. Angelo reaches up and feels blindly on top of the cupboard. He pulls out a variety of objects. Standing below him, Martino

curses. Finally Angelo finds the receiver!

ANGELO. Hello! Hello!

He passes the receiver to Martino.

MARTINO (*frantically*). Hello! Hello!

He passes the receiver back to Angelo.

ANGELO. Hello! (*Pause*) Vincent de Paul? One minute, please, I will check. (*To Martino*) Are you Vincent de Paul?

MARTINO. Give me that, you idiot! (*Into the telephone*) Who is it you wish to talk to? Vincent de Paul? No. No. He's not here at the moment. No, not with us. We don't have one. He's missing. Yes, in the sense that we can't come up with him right away, but if you'd like, maybe with a little time. We could find out, of course. No, this is not the wrong number, because, I'm sorry... We're here. Yes, us. Martino and Angelo! Angelo and Martino! Anytime you need anything. Wait, please, wait, let's talk for a moment! As I was saying, instead of this Vincent de Paul you might prefer someone else. We are entirely at your disposal. *Signora*, wait! (*Pause*) Hello! (*Pause, then to Angelo*) She hung up!

ANGELO (*ripping the phone from Martino*). Hello! Hello! This is Vincent de Paul! Hello! (*To Martino*) She go away!

Martino goes to sit down in the center of the room.

ANGELO (*coming down from the chair*). You made her go away!

MARTINO. Me? She said she had the wrong number.

ANGELO (*with venom*). We have one phone call, and you, you make it go away!

MARTINO. Jesus, can't you understand? She had the wrong number!

ANGELO. Was a woman. Of course. I could tell from her voice.

MARTINO. Woman, man. What difference does it make?

ANGELO (*refusing to drop it*). I mean, you did not know how to say you were what's his name, Vincent de Paul? You did not know how to invent a lie?

MARTINO. And then what? If she asked me something, how would I answer?

ANGELO. Another lie.

MARTINO (*contemptuous*). They should have named me Angelo!

ANGELO. Oh sure! This man, he no tell lies! This man, lies make him sick! This man, he is without sin! This man, he need explanations! Consistency! He spares nobody, not even his own *mamma*! Not even *Gesù Cristo*!

MARTINO (*controlling himself*). Angelo, listen carefully now: don't you provoke me!

ANGELO (*pushing his luck*). And meanwhile that woman, that lady, she dumped you! She did not wanna talk to you! Is your fate: women always dump you. Saint Martino of the Afflicted Heart, when they see him, women fart!

Martino trembles, but stays in control of himself.

ANGELO. *La Grande Signora!* The grand fuck in the royal box! That *Signora*, you killed her too - that *Signora*, Marty! She croaked from the shame of spreading her legs for you!

MARTINO (*grabbing a pair of scissors*). Angelo, if you don't stop, I'm going to slit your belly! Just like I did the mattress! Although I already know you're empty! Just like your mattress was empty!

ANGELO (*devilishly*). My mattress was empty when you opened it!

MARTINO (*enraged*). Still at it, huh? Still with the lies? Even now? I'll strangle you yet! You maggot!

Martino lunges at Angelo, who tries to wrest himself free. Suddenly, a huge chunk of plaster crashes onto Martino's bed. The two men stop. Martino looks towards his bed in terror. In total symmetry, another chunk plummets onto Angelo's bed. He too turns around to look. The two now have their backs to one another, as each man stares at the collapse of his corner. Very slowly, they both step backwards, until their backs touch. Offstage, the yowling of cats.