

AR 25445

1/4

Leo Kerz Collection

1970

Dürrenmatt, Friedrich

The Meteor

American version by Leo Kerz

THE METEOR

A New Comedy in Two Acts

by

Friedrich Dürrenmatt

Translation by

James Kirkup

American Version and
Copyright © 1970,
Leo Kerz

The play is the exclusive property of Leo Kerz. It is fully protected for a professional production in the United States and in Canada by the various terms of appropriate written agreements with the author and his lawful agents.

333 East - 69th Street
New York, N.Y. 10021

UN1-0610

CHARACTERS

WALTER SCHWITTER	Nobel Prizewinner
OLGA	his wife
JOCHEN	his son
CARL KOPPE	his publisher
FREDRIC GEORGEN	leading critic
HUGO NYFFENSWANDER	artist
AUGUSTA	his wife
EMANUEL LUTZ	parson
THE GREAT MUHEIM	building contractor
PROFESSOR SCHLATTER	surgeon
MRS. NOMSEN	businesswoman
GLAUSER	superintendent
MAJOR FRIEDLI	of the Salvation Army
INSPECTOR SCHAFROTH	of the police

ACT I

A furnished studio, upstage, a recess with a slanted skylight of which a trap window is open. Sky, tenements are visible outside. It is summer, the longest day, afternoon about 4:30, oppressive, sultry. A ray of sun hits a baby carriage. In front of a recess an easel. Inside the recess trestles with paints, brushes and other artist's equipment. There is only one door in the studio and it is the only means of entrance. Against the wall an old chest of drawers, a painting of a nude, hanging over it. Against the opposite wall a bed set parallel to the stage opening, two old chairs on either side of the headboard. Behind the bed a folding screen, above it another nude. More paintings of nudes are hanging or standing about. In the centre of the studio an iron stove which also serves for cooking: it has a stove-pipe which after making a fantastic number of twists and turns crosses to the wall through which it disappears. Several washing-lines hung with diapers. With its back to the chest of drawers, a rickety old armchair, with raspberry-plush upholstery; next to it an old, lop-sided table and next to that another chair. An artist, NYFFENSWANDER, with open shirt and cigarette hanging from his lips, is standing at the easel working on a nude. The model, AUGUSTA NYFFENSWANDER, his wife, is lying naked on the bed with her back to the audience.

Someone knocks at the door.

NYFFENSWANDER

Come in.

(The door opens. SCHWITTER enters. Unshaven. Despite the murderous heat HE is wearing an expensive fur coat. The pockets are stuffed with manuscripts, HE carries two suitcases full to bursting. HE has two enormous candles jammed under his left arm. HE gazes carefully about the room.

NYFFENSCHWANDER goes on painting)

NYFFENSCHWANDER (Continued)

Yes, what is it?

(No answer)

Keep still, Augusta.

(Notices SCHWITTER)

Yes?

(Recognizes him)

But -- but you -- aren't you

SCHWITTER

I am. Walter Schwitter.

(His eyes running over the studio)

In person.

NYFFENSCHWANDER

Excuse me. But you are -- I mean -- you are supposed to be --

(Confused, HE drops his cigarette to floor and stamps it out)

SCHWITTER

Dead.

NYFFENSCHWANDER

That's right.

SCHWITTER

That's right.

NYFFENSCHWANDER

But Mr. Schwitter -- if it's you -- if it's you --

SCHWITTER

Then I'm not dead. Right again. Could you help me with these candles, please.

NYFFENSCHWANDER

Yes, of course, Mr. Schwitter.

(Takes the candles from him)

And the suitcase -- let me --

SCHWITTER

(Barks)
Hands off!

NYFFENSCHWANDER

I beg your pardon, sir.

SCHWITTER

Lovely weather. Would you mind closing the window?
Exceptional summer. The longest day, too. But I feel
cold.

NYFFENSCHWANDER

Of course.
(Stands glued and stares at SCHWITTER)

SCHWITTER

I say, would you mind closing the window?

NYFFENSCHWANDER

(Shuts the window, then the door)
-- Those pictures in all the papers, heartbreaking!

SCHWITTER

The Nobel Prizewinner in the Clinic, the Nobel Prizewinner
inside the oxygen tent, the Nobel Prizewinner on the
operating table, the Nobel Prizewinner in a coma. My
illness is of international concern.

NYFFENSCHWANDER

Your death is a national tragedy, sir.

SCHWITTER

But I gave them the slip. Caught a bus and here I am.
(Sways)
I must sit down. The effort was --
(Sits on his suitcase)

NYFFENSCHWANDER

May I --
(Tries to be helpful)

SCHWITTER

Don't you touch me. Never touch a dying man.
(Stares at the NUDE MODEL reclining
on top of the bed)
Funny thing. You know you are a physical wreck and you
also know that you have only a few minutes left before
you are carted off and suddenly you sit in front of a
naked girl and you see golden breasts, a golden belly,
golden thighs and golden moss --

NYFFENSCHWANDER

My wife.

SCHWITTER

A lovely woman. God, if one could just one last time --
a body like that.

NYFFENSCHWANDER

Augusta, get dressed.

(SHE disappears behind the screen)

SCHWITTER

It's my euphoria -- er -- by the way, what's your name?

NYFFENSCHWANDER

Nyffenschwander. Hugo Nyffenschwander.

SCHWITTER

Doesn't ring a bell.

(Takes another look round)

Forty years ago I lived here in this very place. I too
was a painter. Then one day I burned my canvases and
started to write.

(Walks over to armchair and sits
in it)

The same old ricketty, impossible armchair.
(His throat rattles)

NYFFENSCHWANDER

(Horrorified)

Mr. Schwitter --

SCHWITTER

It's starting.

NYFFENSCHWANDER

Augusta! Water!

SCHWITTER

Death isn't all that tragic.

NYFFENSCHWANDER

Hurry!

SCHWITTER

Don't fuss, please. It'll be over soon.

NYFFENSCHWANDER

You should go back to the Clinic, Mr. Schwitter.

SCHWITTER

Don't be silly.

(Takes a deep breath)

I am renting the studio.

NYFFENSCHWANDER

The studio?

SCHWITTER

Just for fifteen minutes. I want to die here.

NYFFENSCHWANDER

Here?

SCHWITTER

Dammit, what d'you think I climbed up here for?

(AUGUSTA, dressed, brings glass of water)

AUGUSTA

Water, Mr. Schwitter.

SCHWITTER

Water? I never drink water.

(Stares at AUGUSTA's bosoms, which her half-bent position helps to disclose)

Even with your clothes on you do something to me, Augusta. May I call you Augusta?

AUGUSTA

Please do, Mr. Schwitter.

SCHWITTER

If I didn't have one foot in the grave, I would draw up your dress madam and make violent love to you. Forgive me for speaking to you like that, but in the light of eternity --

AUGUSTA

Why of course, Mr. Schwitter.

SCHWITTER

(Still to AUGUSTA)

My legs are beginning to feel numb. Let me tell you Nyffenschwander, dying is a wild experience. Wait till you get your chance, then you'll know what I mean. The ideas you get! Inhibitions just fade away -- the things that suddenly dawn upon you! Incredible experience. But now I don't want to bother you any longer. Leave me alone for fifteen minutes. When you come back, call this number

(HE gives NYFFENSCHWANDER a business card)

My undertaker.

(Pulls out his pocketbook and gives him a bill)

A hundred.

NYFFENSCHWANDER
Many thanks, Mr. Schwitter. Very generous.

SCHWITTER
Not making out too well, are you?

NYFFENSCHWANDER
Well, you see, a revolutionary artist --

SCHWITTER
I know. I had a rotten time of it myself in this studio. Nobody gives a damn about a painter without talent who chucks his brushes out of the window and decides to become a writer. I had to bluff my way through life, my dear fellow! Bluffed it all the way.
(Opens his fur coat)
Can't breathe.

NYFFENSCHWANDER
Shouldn't I call the Clinic --

SCHWITTER
I am going to bed.

AUGUSTA
I'll just change the sheets, Mr. Schwitter.

SCHWITTER
Why? I'll die between your sheets Augusta, still warm from your body.
(Rises and puts another banknote on the table)
Another hundred. So close to one's final exit, one gets to be very open hearted.
(Takes manuscripts from various pockets and hands them to NYFFENSCHWANDER)
Here. My last manuscripts. Burn them.

NYFFENSCHWANDER
I'll bring them to your publisher --

SCHWITTER
Into the stove, I said.

NYFFENSCHWANDER
Yes, Mr. Schwitter. Into the stove.
(Stuffs them into the stove)

SCHWITTER
Burn them. Right now.

NYFFENSCHWANDER
Very well, Mr. Schwitter.

(Puts a match to them. SCHWITTER takes off his fur coat, lays it carefully over the armchair, slips off his shoes, places them with equal care beside the armchair. HE is standing in his pyjamas. His feet are bandaged)

NYFFENSCHWANDER (Continued)

They're burning, Mr. Schwitter.

SCHWITTER

I'll lie down. It's only a matter of minutes now.

(AUGUSTA offers to help him)

You must leave me alone, Augusta. The last few moments of my life should be devoted to something more fundamental than a beautiful woman.

(Wanders to bed)

I don't want to think about anything.

(Lies on bed)

Simply fade into oblivion behind some white cloud.

(Lies motionless, face up)

Goddamn bed. Same hard mattress.

(Tries to pull up cover with one hand)

Same hole in the same fucking place, hideous stove-pipe makes the same ridiculous contortions. Augusta!

AUGUSTA

Mr. Schwitter?

SCHWITTER

Cover me.

(SHE puts something over him)

AUGUSTA

How is that Mr. Schwitter?

SCHWITTER

Set up the candles, Nyffenschwander! A touch of ceremony goes well with dying. When the final hour strikes, we are all romantics.

NYFFENSCHWANDER

The candles-- yes, Mr. Schwitter.

(Puts the candles on the chairs on either side of the bed)

SCHWITTER

Light them!

NYFFENSCHWANDER
 Certainly, Mr. Schwitter.
 (Lights the candles)

SCHWITTER
 Draw the curtains, Augusta!

AUGUSTA
 Yes, Mr. Schwitter.
 (Draws the dark curtains. The
 studio is now only lit by
 the candles)

NYFFENSCHWANDER
 All right?

SCHWITTER
 All right.

AUGUSTA
 Like Christmas.
 (The PAINTER and his WIFE form
 an adoring group. Silence.
 SCHWITTER doesn't move. The
 PAIR bend over him)

Hugo --

NYFFENSCHWANDER
 Augusta?

AUGUSTA
 He stopped breathing.

NYFFENSCHWANDER
 Popped off.

AUGUSTA
 Good God.

NYFFENSCHWANDER
 That's that.

AUGUSTA
 What do we do now?

NYFFENSCHWANDER
 I don't know.
 (Pulls out the card SCHWITTER
 gave him)
 Call the undertaker.

AUGUSTA
Shouldn't we call the superintendent --

NYFFENSCHWANDER
Bloody shit.

(Long pause)

AUGUSTA
Hugo --

NYFFENSCHWANDER
Yes, Augusta?

AUGUSTA
He's opening his eyes.

NYFFENSCHWANDER
I'll be damned.

SCHWITTER
(Without moving)
All nudes. Don't you paint anything except your wife
in the nude.

NYFFENSCHWANDER
I paint Life, Mr. Schwitter.

SCHWITTER
No fooling. You can actually paint Life?

NYFFENSCHWANDER
I try, Mr. Schwitter.

SCHWITTER
Leave.

AUGUSTA
I'll just take the twins out.

SCHWITTER
Twins?

AUGUSTA
Irma and Rita. Six months.

SCHWITTER
(Still not moving)
Leave them.

AUGUSTA
But the diapers --

SCHWITTER
 They don't bother me.

AUGUSTA
 They're still dripping.

SCHWITTER
 Doesn't matter.

NYFFENSCHWANDER
 Come on, Augusta.

AUGUSTA
 Mr. Schwitter -- if you should want me, I'll be just outside the door.

SCHWITTER
 Augusta --

AUGUSTA
 Yes, Mr. Schwitter.

SCHWITTER
 You are wonderful.

AUGUSTA
 Thank you, Mr. Schwitter.

(HE feebly waves goodbye to her.
 The PAIR move towards the door)

SCHWITTER
 Nyffenschwander.

NYFFENSCHWANDER
 Sir?

SCHWITTER
 You look like a Belgian minister.

NYFFENSCHWANDER
 (Bewildered)
 Yes, Sir.

(The PAIR leave the studio. SCHWITTER is alone. HE lies motionless with folded hands. A long silence. Suddenly HE gets out of the bed and opens one of the suitcases. In his pyjamas, and on his knees, HE begins to stuff the contents into the stove. Enter PARSON EMMANUEL LUTZ. A friendly, almost child-like appearance, out of breath. HE is forty, slender, short and

blond, wears gold-rimmed spectacles,
and dark clothes, in his
left hand a broad-brimmed black
hat)

LUTZ
Mr. Schwitter! Almighty God.

SCHWITTER
Get out!

LUTZ
Praised be the Lord Zebaoth.

SCHWITTER
I don't want any sacred stuff.

LUTZ
You're alive.

SCHWITTER
Get lost, scram.

LUTZ
I am Parson Emmanuel Lutz of the Jakobus Church and I
rushed here straight from the Clinic.

SCHWITTER
I don't need a parson.

(Lights up what HE has stuffed
into the stove)

LUTZ
Your wife called me to your sick-bed.

SCHWITTER
She would.

LUTZ
I was embarrassed at first. You, that great man of
letters, and I a simple parson without experience of
modern literature.

SCHWITTER
There, it's burning.
(Pokes stove)

LUTZ
Can I be of any assistance?

SCHWITTER
If you'll just hand me those papers --

LUTZ

Certainly.

(Puts hat on table, kneels also
and hands him papers out of
suitcase)

You were lying there in a coma and I was rendering the
Ninetieth Psalm: Lord God of Hosts, thou hast been our
dwelling-place in all generations.

SCHWITTER

Blazing.

LUTZ

Thou turnest man to destruction, and sayest, Return, ye
children of men -- Getting hot!
(Wipes sweat from face)

SCHWITTER

Stuff burns well.

(AUGUSTA peeps in from behind door)

AUGUSTA

Mr. Schwitter?

SCHWITTER

Yes, I'm still here.

AUGUSTA

All right, Mr. Schwitter.
(Disappears)

SCHWITTER

More.

LUTZ

(Handing papers)

Here you are.

SCHWITTER

By the way how did you know where I was?

LUTZ

The nurse told me.

SCHWITTER

The nurse?

LUTZ

The one with protruding teeth. You hallucinated and in
your fever you kept muttering something about getting
back to your old studio and -- Mr. Schwitter!

SCHWITTER

Yes, what?

LUTZ
This is -- this is -- this is money. What we are burning
here is --

SCHWITTER
Well?

LUTZ
It's all money.

SCHWITTER
Correct.

LUTZ
A fortune.

SCHWITTER
One and a half million.

LUTZ
(Aghast)
One and a half --

SCHWITTER
Earned by writing.

LUTZ
One and a half million. But your heirs? Your heirs,
Mr. Schwitter.

SCHWITTER
I don't give a damn.

LUTZ
An enormous sum. One can feed children with this,
train nurses -- and you are burning it.

SCHWITTER
Fire's getting low.

LUTZ
If I might at least have one thousand for our
Unwed-Mothers-Lying-in Fund --

SCHWITTER
Definitely not.

LUTZ
Or for our Home for Blind Mohammedans --

SCHWITTER
Out of the question. I was pennyless when I lived here,
and pennyless I will die here.
(Stokes up again)

LUTZ

Die?

(Gets up)

You?

SCHWITTER

The moment my money's gone up in smoke I'll go to bed and die.

LUTZ

You can't die Mr. Schwitter. You have already done that.

SCHWITTER

I did?

(Kneeling in front of the stove, HE
stares at the PASTOR)

LUTZ

As I was rendering the Ninetieth Psalm, you raised yourself up and -- passed away.

(Pause.)

Softly)

It was very inspiring.

(SCHWITTER stuffs more notes into the
stove, stands up and bellows)

SCHWITTER

Augusta!

(AUGUSTA opens door and looks in)

AUGUSTA

Yes, Mr. Schwitter?

SCHWITTER

Cognac! Hop! Bring the bottle!

AUGUSTA

Yes, Mr. Schwitter.
(Disappears)

SCHWITTER

Help me into my coat.

(PASTOR helps him)

SCHWITTER

I died, eh?

LUTZ

The Lord took you unto his bosom.

SCHWITTER

The Lord did not take me unto his bosom, sir. I passed out, and when I came to again, I was lying there, alone, with my jaw tied up.

LUTZ

That is the customary procedure.

SCHWITTER

The bed was covered by layers of flowers, and there were candles burning.

LUTZ

You see.

SCHWITTER

I crawled out from under, took a bus and came here. That's all.

LUTZ

I beg to differ, sir. That is not all.

SCHWITTER

The plain facts.

LUTZ

The plain facts are that Professor Schlatter pronounced you dead. Personally. At eleven hours fifty, a.m.

SCHWITTER

Wrong diagnosis.

LUTZ

Professor Schlatter is a leading authority on --

SCHWITTER

Leading authorities make mistakes.

LUTZ

Not Professor Schlatter. No, sir.

SCHWITTER

Now look here -- I am alive.
(Involuntarily feeling his body)

LUTZ

You are alive -- again. You have arisen from the dead, sir. You have given science a staggering blow from which it will hardly recover. Chaos has broken out in the clinic. The strongholds of disbelief are trembling. My head is swimming with the joy of it all. Perhaps if I might perhaps sit just for a moment.

SCHWITTER

Do.

(PARSON sits next to table)

LUTZ

You must excuse me. The miracle, the excitement, the immediate presence of the Almighty. I am literally beside myself. The gates of heaven have opened, His glory is all around us. May I loosen my collar just a trifle --

SCHWITTER

Make yourself at home.

(Opens the other suitcase)

Resurrected! Me. Very funny.

LUTZ

Holy! Holy! Holy! Lord God of Hosts!

SCHWITTER

Once and for all cut out the holiness shit.

LUTZ

You were chosen, Mr. Schwitter, that the blind might see and the ungodly believe.

SCHWITTER

Come on, man! Stop the platitudes.

(Goes on burning papers)

LUTZ

Your immortal soul --

SCHWITTER

I have no soul. There wasn't enough time. If you want to finish a play every year, you stop fooling around with soul. But all of a sudden, Parson Lutz is here and wants to know about your soul. Here one is quietly disintegrating into components -- water, fat and minerals -- and you come along and start yelling about God and miracles. I don't want to be God's choice. I don't want to confirm you in your faith. I want to die an honest death. No fairytales no literature. All I want is to experience once more the purity of time -- Just another moment of reality, of total Now.

(Walks over to stove)

It's gone up in flames. I am a poor man.

(AUGUSTA, out of breath, appears in doorway)

AUGUSTA

The cognac, Mr. Schwitter.

SCHWITTER
Over here.

AUGUSTA
Yes, Mr. Schwitter.
(Brings the bottle to him)

SCHWITTER
Out. Hop!

AUGUSTA
Yes, Mr. Schwitter.
(AUGUSTA disappears.

HE gazes after her)

SCHWITTER
Sexy octopus, isn't she?
(Sits in armchair. Opens bottle,
drinks)
Ah, makes you feel good.
(Takes hat from table and hands it
to PARSON)
Your hat.

LUTZ
Thank you very much.
(Takes hat but makes no attempt to
leave)

SCHWITTER
Very kind of you to help me dispose of my one and a half
million --

LUTZ
How could I refuse --

SCHWITTER
Toddle along now, like a good fellow.

(PASTOR LUTZ puts hat back on table
and remains seated)

LUTZ
Mr. Schwitter. I am only forty, but I am not a well man.
I am in the hands of the Lord. I should have returned long
before now to my pastoral duties: I have not even pre-
pared my evening service. But all of a sudden I feel so
bereft of strength, so fragile, so unspeakably weary --
perhaps if I might just lie down a little -- just for
a moment --

SCHWITTER

Of course, go ahead.
 (Drinks)
 I don't think I can get up now anyway.

LUTZ

The excitement was too much for me.
 (Totters to bed, sits)
 Maybe I ought to take my shoes off.
 (Begins to unbutton his shoes)
 Just for a moment. Until the circulation is restored
 somewhat --

SCHWITTER

Make yourself comfortable.
 (Presses his hands to his chest)
 My heart is stopping.

LUTZ

Be of good cheer!

SCHWITTER

Why not -- I can't breathe, that's all.

LUTZ

Our Father, which art in heaven --

SCHWITTER

(Hisses)
 Cut it out.

LUTZ

(Horrorified)
 I am sorry.

SCHWITTER

I'm dying.
 (Drinks)
 In this fucking chair.
 (Drinks)
 Sorry Parson, my resurrection's a washout.
 (Laughs)

There was a parson came to see me once before and I felt
 sorry for him too. My second wife, daughter of a big
 industrialist, had swallowed a pound of sleeping pills --
 our marriage had become sheer torture -- well, I needed
 money, and she had it, I don't want to complain about that
 now -- but she did drive me out of my mind. Well, she
 lay there, white and silent, and the parson was deeply
 touched. He had come while the doctor was still busy
 with the corpse and before the public prosecutor turned up.

SCHWITTER (Continued)

He wore a dark suit like you, Parson Lutz. He was about your age, too. He stood there beside the bed and wouldn't take his eyes off my dear, departed wife. Later I saw him sitting in the hall with his hands folded in prayer. He looked up as if he wanted to say something, but then he said nothing. I went to my room for my eighth cognac and wrote a story about a young school teacher who was beaten to death by his class of children in a village school and a farmer driving a tractor over the teacher's dead body to hush up the crime. On the village green. In front of the schoolhouse. And everyone looking on. Even the sheriff. It turned out to be my best bit of prose. Toward morning, exhausted, I staggered into the hall but the parson was no longer there. Pity. Not much of a parson.
(Drinks.)

PARSON LUTZ has meanwhile taken off
his shoes and is lying on the bed)

LUTZ

I'm not much of a parson either. When I preach, my congregation falls asleep.
(Shivers)

SCHWITTER

Maybe he wasn't a parson. Maybe he was my wife's lover. Maybe she had lots of lovers. Funny I never thought of that until now.
(Drinks)

LUTZ

It's cold all of a sudden.

SCHWITTER

Yes, I'm quite chilly too.

LUTZ

God was so near a moment ago. Now He's far away.

SCHWITTER

I came here to take my leave with a certain measure of dignity -- I got drunk unstead.
(Drinks)

LUTZ

You do not believe in your resurrection.

SCHWITTER

I was in a state of suspended animation.

LUTZ

You want to die.

SCHWITTER

Have to.

(Drinks. Sets the bottle hard on the table, and sinks back into armchair)

LUTZ

May God be gracious unto you.

(Pause. PARSON LUTZ clasps his hands in prayer)

I believe in your resurrection. I believe that God performed a miracle. I believe that you will live. The Lord of Zebaoth knows my heart. It's difficult to preach the gospel of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection and to have no other proof but faith alone. With all due respect to the disciples, they had it much easier. Our Lord lived and performed miracle upon miracle before their very eyes. He healed the blind, the lame and the leper. He walked upon the waters and awakened the dead. And when the Son of Man arose from the dead, Thomas, who still doubted, was able to put his hand upon the wound. It was not hard to believe then. A long time has passed since then. The Kingdom of Heaven that was promised us never came. We lived in darkness with nothing but hope to sustain us. Hope alone nourished our faith. That was too little; Lord. But today you have shown us your mercy and I perceive Thy radiance. Please show mercy also to those who are not yet able to perceive thy splendour, for they are confounded by Thy invisibility.

(Silence. Door slowly opens. AUGUSTA peeps in)

AUGUSTA

(Softly)

Mr. Schwitter.

(Silence.

Somewhat louder)

Mr. Schwitter.

(Silence.

AUGUSTA hesitantly enters the studio.
NYFFENSCHWANDER peeps round door,

Loudly)

Mr. Schwitter!

NYFFENSCHWANDER

Well?

AUGUSTA

No answer.

NYFFENSCHWANDER

Go and look.

(AUGUSTA goes to armchair, bends over SCHWITTER. The superintendent, GLAUSER, appears in doorway -- a fat, jovial man, sweating)

GLAUSER

Well?

NYFFENSCHWANDER

My wife's checking.

GLAUSER

I saw the fellow go up, Nyffenschwander. He looked suspicious to me right away. Well, I mean -- a fur coat in this heat and two whopping candles under his arm. You should have called the police right away.

(AUGUSTA straightens up)

AUGUSTA

Hugo.

NYFFENSCHWANDER

Dead?

AUGUSTA

I think so.

NYFFENSCHWANDER

At last.

(GLAUSER startled)

GLAUSER

There's another one.

(Goes to bed)

Nyffenschwander, there's something going on here.

NYFFENSCHWANDER

Another one!

AUGUSTA

Parson Lutz!

NYFFENSCHWANDER

Popped it.

GLAUSER

Nyffenschwander, something's going on here. I am the superintendent. It's my job to keep things under control. Now I find two dead strangers in your studio.

(SCHWITTER in the armchair opens his eyes)

SCHWITTER
I just remembered, the Belgian minister also painted in his spare time.

(HE gets up)
Damned uncomfortable chair to die in.

AUGUSTA
Mr. Schwitter --
(Stares at him)

SCHWITTER
Take me to bed, Augusta. Hop!

AUGUSTA
(Embarrassed)
It's -- I can't Mr. Schwitter.

SCHWITTER
Why?

AUGUSTA
Because -- because the parson Mr. Schwitter -- because the parson is in it, and he's dead.

(Pause. SCHWITTER goes to bed, looking gloomily down at the PARSON)

SCHWITTER
So he is.
(Goes back to armchair and sits down again)
Remove him.
(Pause)

GLAUSER
Mr. Schwitter.

SCHWITTER
Yes? Who are you?

GLAUSER
The superintendent, Mr. Schwitter. Now first of all, the police has to be --

SCHWITTER
I am about to die, Sir.

GLAUSER
Yes, but this one is a completed case of death -- and it's got to be reported to the authorities.

SCHWITTER

Now just hold it. I have a right to be in that bed, that corpse does not.

GLAUSER

I'll lose my job Mr. Schwitter.

SCHWITTER

Don't care. I rented the bed. I am a Nobel Prizewinner. First we move, then we report. Clear?

(Pause)

GLAUSER

All right. It's your responsibility. Let's move the parson into the hall.

NYFFENSCHWANDER

Give us a hand, Augusta.

(The THREE strain to move the body, in vain)

GLAUSER

Incredible!

NYFFENSCHWANDER

Doesn't budge.

AUGUSTA

Too heavy.

GLAUSER

Perhaps if you would give us a hand, too, Mr. Schwitter --

NYFFENSCHWANDER

The four of us should do the trick.

(Pause)

SCHWITTER

I'll not touch the parson.

NYFFENSCHWANDER

It can't be done then.

GLAUSER

All right, I'll call the police --

SCHWITTER

I'll help.

(Rises)

GLAUSER

You grab the legs with the lady, Mr. Prizewinner sir,
we'll take the top end. Ready?

NYFFENSCHWANDER

Ready.

AUGUSTA

Ready.

SCHWITTER

Ready.

(THEY carry the parson toward the
hall)

AUGUSTA

Careful!

NYFFENSCHWANDER

Gently does it!

GLAUSER

(Outside)

Put him down here, for the time being)

(Studio empty, AUGUSTA leads
SCHWITTER back)

AUGUSTA

There, Mr. Schwitter. The bed is all yours again.
Shouldn't I just change the sheets --

SCHWITTER

No.

AUGUSTA

What about taking your fur coat --

SCHWITTER

No.

(Still wearing the fur coat, HE
throws himself on the bed)

Out!

AUGUSTA

But the twins -- they should be --

SCHWITTER

Out!

AUGUSTA

Yes, Mr. Schwitter.

SCHWITTER

Augusta, I find you more and more attractive.

AUGUSTA

Yes. Mr. Schwitter.

(AUGUSTA goes.)

SCHWITTER lies motionless with folded hands. Suddenly HE leaps out of bed) God damned pictures.

(Turns the nude round on the easel, then some other pictures. Clambers from armchair onto chest of drawers and tries to turn the massive nude round which hangs over it. The door opens. MUHEIM stamps in, a vigorous eighty-year-old real estate agent, building constructor and property owner)

MUHEIM

Hey! Anybody home?

(Sees SCHWITTER on chest of drawers)

Hey! There's a body outside your door!

SCHWITTER

I know.

MUHEIM

Does he belong to you?

SCHWITTER

No.

(Still trying to turn the picture round)

MUHEIM

Then what's it doing outside your door?

SCHWITTER

He was on my bed. I need it for myself.

MUHEIM

Do you mind explaining --

(Roars)

For crying out loud, man, who the hell is it?

SCHWITTER

A parson. He died of over-excitement.

MUHEIM

That, sir, might very well happen to me too.

SCHWITTER

Please! No!

(Climbs down from chest of drawers)

Can't do it.

(Goes to bed, takes off his coat,

throws it on bed and gets in)

You are Muheim the Great -- landlord of this flophouse
and others. Owner of these lousy sticks of furniture and
this fucked up bed -- you are all I needed.

MUHEIM

(Surprised)

You know me?

SCHWITTER

I lived here with my first wife forty years ago. She was
big, brawny, sensual, red-haired and uncivilized. I
painted her.

MUHEIM

Don't recall --

SCHWITTER

We were poor, Muheim. Muheim the Great.

MUHEIM

My wife was interested in art.

SCHWITTER

Artists!

(Pause)

MUHEIM

Just a second now, just a second.

(Brings chair from behind table and
sits in the middle of the studio)

What's this supposed to mean?

SCHWITTER

Nothing.

MUHEIM

Come on, let's have it, man.

SCHWITTER

If you insist. I used to pay your wife the rent every
first of the month. We'd climb into bed together. When
I left, she always gave me back the money.

(Pause)

MUHEIM

She did.

She did. SCHWITTER

(Pause)

Every month? MUHEIM

Every. SCHWITTER

How long? MUHEIM

Two years. SCHWITTER

My wife died fifteen years ago. MUHEIM

Condolences. SCHWITTER

(MUHEIM rises, goes to chest of drawers
and turns picture to wall)

Females are hard to paint. MUHEIM

Please, the others too. SCHWITTER

(MUHEIM turns the other pictures round,
then bellows)

Shit! Man, are you telling the truth? MUHEIM

Why lie? SCHWITTER

(Pause)

Who are you? MUHEIM

Walter Schwitter. SCHWITTER

The Nobel Prizewinner? MUHEIM

Right. SCHWITTER

MUHEIM

But on the twelve o'clock news, they announced that --

SCHWITTER

Premature release.

MUHEIM

Followed by one hour of symphony music.

SCHWITTER

Sorry about that.

MUHEIM

But how --

SCHWITTER

I slipped out and came here -- to die.

MUHEIM

You came here -- to --
(Looks around)

I need a drink.

(HE finds a glass and pours himself
from SCHWITTER's cognac bottle)

It's the banality of the whole thing.

(Drinks and stares straight ahead)

Every month.

SCHWITTER

We'd have died of hunger.

MUHEIM

For money!

SCHWITTER

You would never have let me off with the rent.

MUHEIM

I don't let anyone off with anything.
(Drinks)

SCHWITTER

My wife found out about it, the bitch. All along she'd
been screwing the butcher and I swear I've never been
eating better steaks.

(Laughs)

I married another three times. And every time more
refined women. Huheim, that was a mistake. In the end
I married a call-girl. She was the best of the bunch.

MUHEIM

Another three times.
(Drinks)

SCHWITTER

Why don't you leave? Just looking at you puts new life
into me.

MUHEIM

So what.

(Drinks)

Schwitter, I'm eighty.

SCHWITTER

Many happy returns of the day.

MUHEIM

Fit as a fiddle.

SCHWITTER

I bet you are.

MUHEIM

I started from the bottom. My father was a peddler. I had to tramp along with him. I used to sell shoelaces, Schwitter, shoelaces, before I made it in demolition and scrap iron and later as a big building contractor. I admit I was never the warmhearted type. But after all it wasn't my ambition to become an apostle of the oppressed. Now I'm top dog. I've got the politicians eating out of my hand. My enemies fear me, and I have many enemies. But my private life --

(Takes a cigar)

Without a happy marriage there is no big business. Without affection at home you can't swindle your way to the top. Without feelings for the finer things you can't be ruthless.

(About to light the cigar)

SCHWITTER

No smoking while I'm conking out.

MUHEIM

Of course not, I beg your pardon.

(Puts cigar away)

But, you know, the women kept after me like crazy. But I never got hooked. I never cheated my wife, even after she died, and that's the truth I'm telling you. I'd have killed her if I'd known what I know now, and you, too, Schwitter, I'd have -- and I still would -- if you weren't --

(Sits down again)

How can you kill a dying man?

SCHWITTER

Don't stand on formalities.

MUHEIM

I could tear you apart.

SCHWITTER

Be my guest.

MUHEIM

Kick the living day lights out of you.

SCHWITTER

So kick me. If it makes you feel better.

MUHEIM

My God, how often do you suppose she deceived me?

SCHWITTER

I'd estimate a dozen lovers, minimum.

(MUHEIM stares before him)

MUHEIM

She must have been insatiable.

(OLGA enters, nineteen, beautiful,
dressed in mourning, out of breath
-- SCHWITTER's fourth wife. SCHWITTER
sits up in horror)

SCHWITTER

The call-girl.

OLGA

Schwitter.

SCHWITTER

Everything's going wrong.

OLGA

You're alive!

SCHWITTER

Yes, I know. It's embarrassing.

OLGA

Outside -- the parson --

SCHWITTER

Heart failure.

OLGA

I closed your eyes.

SCHWITTER

Thank you.

OLGA

I folded your hands.

SCHWITTER

How very nice of you.

OLGA

I ordered flowers and a wreath.

SCHWITTER

I saw the arrangement when I came to.

OLGA

I kissed you goodbye, Schwitter.

SCHWITTER

Darling, what can I say?

(Pause)

OLGA

Forgive me for getting here so late -- I -- I fainted, when I saw you had suddenly disappeared -- Professor Schlatter would not permit me to come straight away --

SCHWITTER

I understand.

OLGA

It's going to be all right now.

SCHWITTER

Sure.

OLGA

I'm staying with you.

SCHWITTER

My dear Olga. For one full year now we've been saying last farewells to each other in one hospital after another. Again and again, this past year, I've been saved at the last minute. Darling, I've had it. I've taken refuge here from that hord of quacks. I want to be left alone and die in peace without a thermometer sticking out of me, without being strapped to some contraption and without people. So run along. We've been saying final goodbyes to one another so often -- at least a dozen times -- it's getting to be ridiculous. So please be reasonable and get the hell out of here.

(Pulls sheet over his head.)

MUHEIM rises)

MUHEIM

I'm off.

(Bows to OLGA)

I am Muheim. Muheim the Great.

(Goes to door and leaves)

I would break his neck but, as a matter of principle, I don't want to interfere with a dying man.

(Exit. Pause. SCHWITTER's head emerges from under sheet)

SCHWITTER

(Furious)

Still here!?

OLGA

I am your wife.

SCHWITTER

My widow.

(Sits up)

I can't bear this solemnity shit any longer. Open the curtains.

(SHE does. The studio is bathed in harsh sunlight again)

Open the window!

(SHE does)

The parson's shoes!

(Climbs out of bed, grabs PARSON's shoes and his hat from table)

The parson's hat!

(Throws shoes and hat out into the hall)

That parson -- left everything lying around.

(Slams door shut)

Blow out the goddam candles.

(SHE does)

It's this funeral parlor atmosphere that puts new life into me. I need the sun to die. I want to suffocate in the blazing beams of his white heat. I want to burn out and shrivel up.

(About to sit in armchair, HE notices his shoes)

I don't need them any more either!

(Throws them out of window, and sits.)

It's ridiculous. I keep landing in this armchair!

(About to drink)

Empty.

(Puts bottle back on table.)

The TWINS begin to squeal)

Augusta!

(AUGUSTA appears in doorway)

Mr. Schwitter.

AUGUSTA

SCHWITTER
The twins are screaming! Hop!

AUGUSTA
Right away, Mr. Schwitter.
(Rolls the baby carriage out)
Hush, Irma, quiet Rita.
(Stands in doorway)
Shall I also take the diapers down?

SCHWITTER
Out! And cognac! Another bottle! Hop.

AUGUSTA
Yes, Mr. Schwitter.
(Disappears)

OLGA
Do you want the coat?

SCHWITTER
No.

OLGA
Are you still in pain?

SCHWITTER
No.

OLGA
It was all a bad dream. I shouldn't have trusted those doctors.

SCHWITTER
We didn't have any choice, darling.

OLGA
A year ago, they told me you would die.

SCHWITTER
I've meanwhile become convinced of that also.

OLGA
They told your son too, and he passed it on to every bartender in the city. While you were debating your case with the specialists, every one of your male friends treated me as if you were already dead: they fell upon me as though I were a whore --

SCHWITTER
Well, you were.
(Pause)
Your damned humility kills me.

OLGA

Sorry.

SCHWITTER

I hope you didn't, out of mistaken respect for me, deny yourself to any of my friends?

OLGA

I have given myself to no one. I remained true to you.

SCHWITTER

I never asked you to remain true to me. You were supposed to tell me the truth.

OLGA

I was afraid.

SCHWITTER

I was afraid too. This vulgar fear. I didn't want to know the truth or I could have guessed it myself.

OLGA

I could not help you. I saw you growing weaker and I saw how the doctors were badgering you. I couldn't interfere. I felt paralyzed so things simply took their course. This morning when I was standing by your bed and the parson was praying and the doctor bent over you and listened with the stethoscope and straightened up and said you were dead, I didn't even cry. -- I was brave, because you had been brave -- But now you're alive again.

SCHWITTER

Now, don't you start with that drivel.

OLGA

If I had to lose you again, Schwitter, I couldn't go on.

(AUGUSTA, out of breath, appears in doorway)

AUGUSTA

The cognac, Mr. Schwitter.

SCHWITTER

What took you so long?

AUGUSTA

Mr. Schwitter, --

SCHWITTER

Open it.

AUGUSTA

Would you like a clean glass --

Balls. SCHWITTER

Yes, Sir. (Pours) AUGUSTA

Up to the rim. SCHWITTER

Yes, Sir. AUGUSTA

Now fizz off. Hop! SCHWITTER

Yes, Sir. (Disappears) AUGUSTA

SCHWITTER
The only creature I can still bear to have around.
(Drinks)
Go on, time to get lost.

I'm staying here. OLGA

You make me nervous. (Drinks) SCHWITTER

You drink too much. OLGA

One for the road. SCHWITTER

(In the doorway appears MAJOR FRIEDL
of the Salvation Army in uniform.
HE stares at SCHWITTER)

(Screams) FRIEDL
He liveth! He liveth! He liveth!
(Disappears)

Lunatic! SCHWITTER

That horrible hospital, this creepy studio, the dead
parson -- please, Schwitter, let's go home. OLGA

SCHWITTER

I am home, I am going to die here.

OLGA

No, Schwitter, you are going to live. I know it.

SCHWITTER

Sorry, angel, living turns my stomach. I was free as the wind when I began to write. I had nothing in my head but ideas. I was anti-social and I drank. Then came success, awards, honours, money and luxury. My manners improved. I filed and polished my fingernails and my prose. My first wife screwed a tailor to get me a blue suit but the next two gave themselves exclusively to literature, organized my fame and held court, while I broke my neck to become a classic. The Nobel Prize put the finishing touch to it. A writer who is embraced by this society is corrupted for good. That's why I picked you up. Out of anger.

(Drinks)

Anger against myself, anger against the world. An old man who was determined to join the rebels again. You inspired me, Olga. You did a magnificent job. For a couple of months, it was marvellous. Suddenly and without warning I was on my arse and on the operating table. Finis. So why don't you pack your things and practice what you learned. The oldest profession, the most honourable there is. Please, do me the favour and get back to your trade. Our marriage made you famous, your picture was in all the magazines. Nude pictures of you flooded the market, your price would be astronomical. You are the gift I leave to posterity. Caesar bequeathed his gardens, I a whore!

(JOCHEN SCHWITTER, thirty-five, comes into studio)

JOCHEN

Papa! Well what do you know. Risen from the dead!

OLGA

(Reprimanding)

Jochen!

JOCHEN

Hi, Step-mom. Nice to see you.

SCHWITTER

What do you want?

JOCHEN

My one and a half million.

SCHWITTER

Your one and a half million?

I am your heir.

JOCHEN

Maybe you are.

SCHWITTER

By law, old boy.

JOCHEN

You would know, of course.

SCHWITTER

I studied law for 2 semesters, remember? Step-Mom here is only marginally involved.

JOCHEN

Well, what do you know.

SCHWITTER

Now! Where is it?

JOCHEN

In the bank.

SCHWITTER

Not true.

(Wiggles his finger at SCHWITTER)

You should be ashamed of yourself. And with one foot in the grave.

(Pause)

I was at the bank. It isn't there any more. You took it with you to the Clinic and it isn't at the Clinic.

(Pause)

Surprise, eh? You didn't think I'd find out.

SCHWITTER

Smart boy.

JOCHEN

Look at him. My mother lost her life because of him. The breaking of her, the making of me.

SCHWITTER

You think so?

JOCHEN

I do.

(Takes cigarette)

OLGA

Jochen, you can't smoke here.

SCHWITTER

Now, at last it will be easy to die.
 (Rises, takes a few dancing steps)
 Fantastic. I'm in absolutely dazzling form.

JOCHEN

Only a little glow left.

(NYFFENSCHWANDER peeps round door)

NYFFENSCHWANDER

Mr. Schwitter --

SCHWITTER

I'm loaded. Nyffenschwander, gloriously tipsy.

NYFFENSCHWANDER

The police just picked up the parson.

SCHWITTER

(Shouting)
 Mopping-up operations!
 (Leaps on bed, tears down diapers)
 Down with the nappies! Down! Down!

NYFFENSCHWANDER

Yes, Mr. Schwitter.
 (Disappears, horrified)

SCHWITTER

Down! They remind me of life, of copulation. Down with
 the filthy rags! I'm tired of smelling damp kiddy-caca
 and wee-wee. I need deterioration, the odours of the
 tomb, I want the vapours of eternity!
 (Tears down more diapers, then seats
 himself majestically, like a Buddha,
 on the bed)

JOCHEN

Dust and ashes.
 (Rises, hands full of ashes)
 One and a half million.

SCHWITTER

They made a lovely blaze.

JOCHEN

Why did you burn it? I counted on it.

SCHWITTER

Yes. I did not want you to have it.

JOCHEN

I get it.
 (Pause)

JOCHEN (Continued)

You don't even hate me. I am a matter of complete indifference to you. You don't care if I go to the devil.

SCHWITTER

Well, that's where I'm going. To the devil.

JOCHEN

Then go.

(Goes towards door)

Do me that favour, old man. For the first time in your life, keep your promise. Die and be done with it. Because while you are around, I don't exist.

SCHWITTER

You're leaving already?'

JOCHEN

Yessir, daddy, old man. I just
(Laughs)
remembered. I still have your royalties.
(Disappears.)

SCHWITTER turns to OLGA)

SCHWITTER

Still here.

OLGA

I'm going.

SCHWITTER

(Thinks)

I drank too much.

OLGA

Two bottles of cognac.

SCHWITTER

(Beaming)

Not bad.

(Gazes thoughtfully at OLGA)

Was I awful?

OLGA

No.

SCHWITTER

I was awful.

(Pause)

Because I'm dying.

OLGA

Because you're living again.

SCHWITTER

You must look out for yourself, my pet.

(Laughs)

I have no money left.

OLGA

I've put some away.

SCHWITTER

I bet you have.

(Laughs)

It was beautiful, darling. For a little while anyway.

OLGA

Oh, yes.

SCHWITTER

We laughed so much, the walls shook.

OLGA

Yes. The walls shook.

SCHWITTER

We drank so much, the rafters bent.

OLGA

The rafters bent.

SCHWITTER

We made love so much, the earth quivered.

OLGA

The earth quivered. It was wonderful.

(Tears run down OLGA's face as SHE goes.)

SCHWITTER lies as if dead.

AUGUSTA peeps in)

AUGUSTA

Mr. Schwitter.

(Silence,

Louder)

Mr. Schwitter.

SCHWITTER

Augusta.

(Stares up at window)

AUGUSTA
The diapers are all over the place.

SCHWITTER
Sorry about that.

AUGUSTA
That's all right Mr. Schwitter.
(Brings basket from behind folding
screen and collects diapers in it)
You have a beautiful wife, Mr. Schwitter.

SCHWITTER
Had.

AUGUSTA
She was going down the stairs crying.

SCHWITTER
She's nineteen.

AUGUSTA
May I ask you something, Mr. Schwitter?

SCHWITTER
Ask.

AUGUSTA
Real talent for painting Hugo hasn't got, has he?

SCHWITTER
None.

(AUGUSTA puts basket on table)

AUGUSTA
I've picked up the diapers.

SCHWITTER
Lock the door! Hop!

AUGUSTA
Yes, Mr. Schwitter.
(Locks the door)

It's locked.

(HE is still staring at the window)

SCHWITTER
Come over here!

AUGUSTA
Yes, Mr. Schwitter.

(SHE goes calmly to him. Outside
NYFFENSCHWANDER begins to rattle
at the doorknob)

Augusta. NYFFENSCHWANDER

Closer. SCHWITTER

Yes, Mr. Schwitter. AUGUSTA

(NYFFENSCHWANDER knocks)

Open up! NYFFENSCHWANDER

I'm cold. SCHWITTER

Should I put the fur coat -- AUGUSTA

Take your clothes off. SCHWITTER

Yes, Mr. Schwitter. AUGUSTA

Open the door, Augusta! Open the door!
(Hammers on door) NYFFENSCHWANDER

Lie down beside me. SCHWITTER

Yes. Mr. Schwitter. AUGUSTA

(While SHE is undressing, NYFFENSCHWANDER
is hammering and rattling at door)

Open the door! Open the door! NYFFENSCHWANDER

CURTAIN

ACT II

Nyffenschwander's studio one hour later. Schwitter, finally deceased, is on the bed, covered with wreaths. Standing round the bed are various gentlemen in black, among them the leading critic, Fredric Georgen. Left, in arm-chair, Carl Conrad Koppe, Schwitter's publisher, sixty-five, clean-shaven, elegant. In the background, Nyffenschwander and Glausner. Augusta, at first beside the death-bed, is gradually edged into the background by new arrivals. A few gentlemen of the press are still flitting about the room taking flashlight photographs. The curtains of the recess are closed again and the candles are burning once more.

GEORGEN

-- hard to accept the fact that Walter Schwitter is dead. The nation, indeed the entire world mourns with us, for it is poorer today by one man who made it richer. His mortal shell lies beneath these wreaths. The day after tomorrow it will be born to the grave in solemn, stately splendour as is fitting for this celebrated artist. -- But we, his friends, must mourn less pretentiously, and with more restraint. We cannot insult the greatness of the deceased by rendering cheap praise or uncritical admiration. We are guided by love and knowledge. His death was staggering. The fact that we are gathered here in this -- this -- unusual place, his old studio, indicates the tragedy. It is ironic that he who rejected tragedy, who thought that the most absurd thing about life was death, should have been trapped in such end. But it is in this somber light that we can see him perhaps for the first time in sharp focus. He saw nothing except naked reality. It caused him to pant for justice and the brotherhood of man. He was willing to bloody everyone's head for that, including his own. All in vain. Failing to accept the injustice of this world as inevitable, to which one becomes reconciled, he fought one senseless battle after another. And failing to see the luminous meaning of reconciliation within the dark complexity of life, he lost faith. He became a rebel within a vacuum. Schwitter's work become the mirror of a labyrinth within himself, not a mirror of life. His theatre was grotesque but life is not. Herein lay his limitation. His art did not heal, it wounded. We who love him and

GEORGEN (Continued)

admire his art must now rise above it, so that it may become a necessary step towards affirmation of our society that our friend, our good friend, found unacceptable and whose sublimity and harmony he has now entered.

(KOPPE rises and shakes GEORGEN's hand)

KOPPE

Fredric Georgen. Thank you.

The OTHER GENTLEMEN bow to the corpse and move on and out; continuous flashlights)

GEORGEN

You are his publisher, Koppe. My sympathies.
(Bows)

KOPPE

Will your speech be in the morning papers?

GEORGEN

Evening edition tonight I think.

KOPPE

That's powerful stuff. Moralist without a faith -- rebel in a vacuum. His theatre is grotesque, but life is not. Brilliantly defined and spitefully expressed.

GEORGEN

Not badly meant, Koppe.

KOPPE

Very badly meant, Georgen, and very cruel too.

(Puts one hand on his shoulder)

Monumental impertinence. Oh how piously you pulled good old Schwitter on his death bed to shreds. The man is finished. From the literary point of view. One luxury edition short of oblivion. A great pity, really. He was more genuine than you think. And another thing, between you and me -- with all respect to your profound remarks, Georgen -- your speech was just so much rubbish. Schwitter was never in despair: A good steak and a drop of the right stuff and he was happy. Let's go. This place gives me the willies. I've got to get hold of Schwitter's family: I have a funny feeling something's happened.

(BOTH exit. AUGUSTA, NYFFENSWANDER and GLAUSER remain)

GLAUSER

That's over with. Fresh air.

(Opens curtains and window. Still
bright daylight outside. GLAUSER
blows out candles)

How much did you get for the party?

NYFFENSCHWANDER

Two hundred and from the publisher twenty.

GLAUSER

How shabby can you get. Well, goodbye, Mrs. Nyffenschwander.
The body should be out of here soon. When it's hot they pick
'um up real quick.

(GLAUSER exits and NYFFENSCHWANDER
turns pictures round again)

NYFFENSCHWANDER

The bloody nerve! As if I were a beginner. All these guys,
critics and publishers climbing up the stairs to my studio
-- to goggle over a corpse -- and they never even notice my
paintings. You work and sweat for years and --

(Climbs on a commode to turn another
picture round. Suddenly HE has an
idea)

Augusta!

(His eyes light up)

Take your clothes off! I'll paint you in front of the
deathbed. Life and Death. A living, breathing body and
funeral wreaths.

AUGUSTA

No.

NYFFENSCHWANDER

Augusta --

(Looks at her in astonishment)

AUGUSTA

(Quietly)

I don't want to.

(NYFFENSCHWANDER sits bewildered
on the commode)

NYFFENSCHWANDER

You never refused before to act as my model.

AUGUSTA

Oh shut up.

(Pause)

NYFFENSCHWANDER

But Life, Augusta -- I only want to paint Life -- outrageous,
almighty, colossal Life --

I know.

AUGUSTA

NYFFENSCHWANDER

(Anxiously)

Augusta, I was hammering at the door for half an hour. You didn't open.

I know.

AUGUSTA

NYFFENSCHWANDER

The door was locked.

I know.

AUGUSTA

NYFFENSCHWANDER

When you finally opened, he was dead.

AUGUSTA

(Indifferent)

He died in my arms and I had to get dressed.

NYFFENSCHWANDER

(Not comprehending)

Get dressed?

AUGUSTA

I slept with him before he died.

(Pause)

NYFFENSCHWANDER

But --

(Helplessly on the commode)

AUGUSTA

I am proud to have been his last lover.
(SHE begins to pack her things)

NYFFENSCHWANDER

You couldn't have done it, Augusta, you couldn't have done it.

I did.

AUGUSTA

NYFFENSCHWANDER

With a dying man!

AUGUSTA

He was a man.

Aren't you ashamed?
 NYFFENSCHWANDER

No.
 AUGUSTA

(Schreaming)
 NYFFENSCHWANDER
 But I only wanted to paint Life! That's all I wanted!

AUGUSTA
 I'm sick and tired of your painting.

NYFFENSCHWANDER
 But you believed in me, didn't you, Augusta? In all the wide world you were the only one who believed in me, we stuck together even when things were tough.

AUGUSTA
 I was nothing but a model for you. -- We're through, you and I.

(NYFFENSCHWANDER still sits on the commode)

NYFFENSCHWANDER
 But that's impossible!

AUGUSTA
 I'm leaving.

NYFFENSCHWANDER
 The children --

AUGUSTA
 I'm taking them with me.
 (Stands for a moment by the death-bed)

NYFFENSCHWANDER
 You can't do this to me, Augusta.

AUGUSTA
 Good-bye.
 (Walks out)

NYFFENSCHWANDER
 Augusta!
 (Drums furiously on the commode)
 Come back, Augusta! I forgive you.

(Pause)

NYFFENSWANDER (Continued)

(Screaming)

This is crazy, Augusta! You can't leave me! All because of a dead man!

(SCHWITTER sits up in bed with his chin tied up, a funeral wreath round his neck. Takes off the bandage)

SCHWITTER

This bed's in the wrong place.
(Looks round the studio)

NYFFENSWANDER

You -- you --
(Gapes at SCHWITTER)

SCHWITTER

The bed was where the table is now, and the table was where the bed is now.

(Sticks his legs out of bed)

I'll never die in this bloody disorder?

(Lifts wreath over his head)

More funeral wreaths. They keep following me.

(Gets out of bed)

Let's go. The bed over there.

(NYFFENSWANDER still sitting bewildered on the commode)

The table and chair to this side first.

NYFFENSWANDER

You slept with my wife.
(HE scrambles down from the commode)

SCHWITTER

The Belgian minister slept with my third wife.

NYFFENSWANDER

What the fuck has the Belgian minister got to do with me?

SCHWITTER

You look like him. Grab that end.

(Reluctantly, NYFFENSWANDER helps SCHWITTER with the table)

NYFFENSWANDER

It was a trick.

(SCHWITTER points to armchair)

NYFFENSCHWANDER (Continued)

A clever trick.
 (Carries armchair upstage)
 A mean trick.

SCHWITTER

Catch!
 (Throws chair to NYFFENSCHWANDER)
 Now the bed.

NYFFENSCHWANDER

You have destroyed my marriage!

(SCHWITTER grabs head of bed)

SCHWITTER

You pull there, I'll push from back here.

NYFFENSCHWANDER

She has left me!

SCHWITTER

It doesn't matter.

NYFFENSCHWANDER

It matters to me.

SCHWITTER

Nyffenschwander. I wish I had your worries. Here I am dying without a stop, waiting in this murderous heat for a decent take-off into the infinite, upset, because it doesn't seem to work, and you pester me with a triviality.

NYFFENSCHWANDER

(Furious)
 I'm not dying.
 (Throws wreath on the bed)

SCHWITTER

But I am.
 (Throws another wreath on the bed)

NYFFENSCHWANDER

Then don't fuck around on your death-bed. If you'd really mean it you'd pray for chrissakes!

SCHWITTER

Nyffenschwander. If anyone should pray, it is you. Pray to be forgiven for these paintings. Just look at your pictures. I've been looking at them all afternoon, and I tell you, Nyffenschwander, they are putting me off. You want to portray Life and you make such a mess of your wife on these canvasses that one can only blush with shame!

NYFFENSWANDER

I paint my wife as I see her!

SCHWITTER

Then your blindness must be phenomenal! Your wife, Nyffenschwander! She was naked here on this bed and that's how I met her the first time, the moment I entered the studio, and then again when she took her clothes off and laid with me in bed. Of her own free will. No question of seduction. She gave herself out of human kindness. Out of a magnificent caprice. She sensed what a dying man needs. Now, help me to get the bed over there.

(Shoves bed, NYFFENSWANDER pulls)

Your wife lay in my arms. She quivered and squirmed, clasping me with her arms and legs, she was screaming. That was Life; in your pictures there's nothing of that. Pull, Nyffenschwander, pull! There. That's where the bed belongs. Now the table over there.

(THEY carry table)

You've got to stop botching up your wife with dribbles of paint. It's a waste of time.

NYFFENSWANDER

My art is sacred to me.

SCHWITTER

Sacred my arse. Art is sacred only to bunglers and botchers. They get entrenched in a theory because they have no talent. Your wife didn't come to life in your arms, and she isn't alive in your pictures. Your wife was right to leave you. Now the easy chair.

(THEY move easy chair)

NYFFENSWANDER

I am going to break your neck, Schwitter.

SCHWITTER

In a moment, all right?

NYFFENSWANDER

Tear you apart.

SCHWITTER

Be my guest.

(Throws a chair to him)

Catch.

(Looks about him)

My studio. My old place, the way it used to be. I can die at last. In peace, with dignity, with spiritual concentration.

SCHWITTER (Continued)

(Goes to bed, lays himself down
on top of wreaths)

The furniture arrangement was getting in the way.
Tremendous, Nyffenschwander! Death roars down upon one
like an express train, eternity whistles round one's ears,
planets howl, crash together, the whole thing one gigantic
disaster --

NYFFENSCHWANDER

(Screaming)

You keep saying you want to die but you don't die!
(Beside himself, HE picks up a
poker)
Say your prayers.

SCHWITTER

Can't think of any.

NYFFENSCHWANDER

I'm going to get even with you.

SCHWITTER

Good.

NYFFENSCHWANDER

I'm going to kill you.

SCHWITTER

Go ahead.

NYFFENSCHWANDER

I'm going to strike.

SCHWITTER

Well, --

(Lying quite still)

What is delaying you?

(MUHEIM the Great enters)

MUHEIM

(Thunders)

Keep your hands off him -- he's a dying man!

NYFFENSCHWANDER

He slept with my wife while I was outside rattling at the
door!

MUHEIM

(Calmly)

Give me that.

(NYFFENSWANDER obediently gives him the poker)

MUHEIM (Continued)

(Calmly)

I alone have the right to kill Schwitter.

(Throws the poker away behind him)

I'm not going to kill him.

(Grabs NYFFENSWANDER by his shirt front and during the following forces him gradually towards the open door and out into the hall.

Restrained)

He took your wife while you rattled at the door. You don't have any illusions. But I had my illusions. Forty years I loved one woman, me, Muheim the Great, the building construction giant. When she died, I nearly perished.

NYFFENSWANDER

Mr. Muheim --

MUHEIM

I loved her, man. You don't know what that means, but I know what it means. I am eighty years, and I know it!

NYFFENSWANDER

Mr. Muheim --

MUHEIM

Life is power, conflict, conquest, humiliation and crime. I had to defile myself with all that. The competitive struggle knows no mercy. The meanest man wins, and I was always the meanest, and could be so mean because I loved this woman, loved her to distraction, to excess -- someone who seemed to make it worthwhile to wallow in the filth. And now, it all turns out to be a lie! D'you know what I am? A funny jerk!

NYFFENSWANDER

Oh, no, Mr. Muheim --

MUHEIM

(Screaming)

Why don't you laugh? Go on, have a good laugh! Laugh!

NYFFENSWANDER

I am laughing, Mr. Muheim! I am laughing!

MUHEIM

And here you come with pride of the artist and revenge.

NYFFENSCHWANDER

Mr. Muheim --

MUHEIM

Muheim the Great doesn't go for that sort of thing. You've made a big mistake there. Muheim the Great doesn't think that's funny at all. You feel hurt, your vanity has been injured. But I am finished, liquidated, spat upon, scoffed at, befouled --

NYFFENSCHWANDER

Mr. Muheim --

MUHEIM

Get out of my sight. You -- !

NYFFENSCHWANDER

Help! Mr. Muheim! Help!

MUHEIM

Out! Out! Down the stairs with you!

(Noise of a body falling down the staircase. A scream. Silence. MUHEIM returns slowly, breathing heavily, leaving door open)

I pushed the skunk down the stairs.
(Opens his collar)
Goddam heat.

(SCHWITTER crawls out of bed)

SCHWITTER

There's still something wrong.

(Takes a wreath)

Throw the wreaths out.

(Throws one wreath to Muheim)

From the P.E.N. Club.

(MUHEIM catches it)

MUHEIM

Go and join the skunk downstairs.

(Throws wreath out into hall)

SCHWITTER

From the Government. The Grateful Nation To Her Great Son.

(Throws more wreaths to MUHEIM, who catches them and throws them down the stairwell)

SCHWITTER (Continued)

From the Mayor, from the Nobel Prize Committee, from UNESCO, from the Authors' League, from the Lincoln Center, from the Publishers' Guild, from Actors' Equity, from the Film Producers, from the Book Clubs.

MUHEIM

Cleaned up!

(SCHWITTER looks around)

SCHWITTER

The bed -- a little more towards the wall.
(Shoves bed)

MUHEIM

And the pictures -- I'll just --
(Turns pictures with faces to the wall)

SCHWITTER

The table -- a bit more towards the centre. The two old chairs -- the easy chair --
(Moves furniture around)

MUHEIM

Schwitter. I raced round the city in my Cadillac. I passed every red light. The tickets will come snowing in. If I weren't Muheim the Great, the police would take my driver's license. But I am Muheim the Great. I came back here to take a long look at you. Hours I wanted to spend taking a good look at your dead body. To try and get the sense of a higher justice, that up there God still makes decisions.

SCHWITTER

Sorry; I'm alive.

MUHEIM

You're a tough chicken.

SCHWITTER

I don't understand it myself.

MUHEIM

The pictures are turned to the wall.
(Sinks exhausted into armchair)
The first time that I feel my eighty years.

SCHWITTER

(Satisfied)

But now there's nothing more to distract me. I'm going back into bed and try again.

MUHEIM

I do hope you make it.

(SCHWITTER gets back into bed
and pulls up bedclothes)

SCHWITTER

It's about time.

MUHEIM

It is.

(SCHWITTER lies down and suddenly
sits up again)

SCHWITTER

Still something wrong.

MUHEIM

Now what is it -- ?

SCHWITTER

I do need a touch of ceremony. If you wouldn't mind putting
the two candles beside my bed --

MUHEIM

Certainly.

(Puts the two candles on chairs
beside bed)

Light them?

SCHWITTER

Please. And close the curtains.

MUHEIM

Okay.

(Lights candles, closes curtains.
A festive atmosphere again
prevails in the studio as SCHWITTER
lies down again)

All right?

SCHWITTER

Fine.

(MUHEIM sits again in the armchair)

MUHEIM

All right, get going.

SCHWITTER

Patience.

(Pause)

Well? MUHEIM

Muheim? SCHWITTER

Come on, die! MUHEIM

I'm trying hard. SCHWITTER

I'm waiting. MUHEIM

Actually, I'm feeling quite well. SCHWITTER

(Taken aback)
Damn it, man -- MUHEIM

But my pulse --
(Feels it) SCHWITTER

Huh? MUHEIM

Slowing down. SCHWITTER

Thank God. MUHEIM

Just be patient.
(Very softly)
Be patient -- SCHWITTER

Any booze left? MUHEIM

(Shouts)
Augusta. SCHWITTER

(Silence)

Augusta! Hop!

(Silence)

SCHWITTER (Continued)

(Disappointed)

Nobody.

MUHEIM

The painter's wife's already left the skunk.
 (About to light a cigar, remembers)
 Excuse me. I beg your pardon.

SCHWITTER

Go on, smoke away.

MUHEIM

Not at a deathbed.

SCHWITTER

I wouldn't mind one myself.

MUHEIM

My pleasure.
 (Holds out cigar case to him)

SCHWITTER

Last puff -- so to speak.

MUHEIM

Understand. Havana.

SCHWITTER

Don't see these often anymore.

MUHEIM

Light.

SCHWITTER

Thanks.

MUHEIM

Another wreath.

(Goes to door, throws out wreath
 and shuts door, returns to arm-
 chair, sits, lights cigar)

Schwitter, I was happy with the wife. That you went to bed
 with her shouldn't really bother me anymore.

(Puffs away)

She's dead. And after all. Who and what doesn't copulate
 today? Everybody's doing it. Is there anybody who doesn't
 cheat, anybody who isn't cheated? It's like in a rabbit
 hutch. But still. It does matter. I was true to the
 wife and I believed she was true to me -- the one bit of
 decency in my life -- but Muheim the Great built on sand,
 the foundations are crumbling.

(Jumps up and hurls cigar against
 stove)

MUHEIM (Continued)

I don't know what's true anymore, Schwitter. It's driving me crazy. Who else did she sleep with? My lawyers? Members of the Urban Renewal Commission? Her doctor? Other tenants? Other artists? She knew many. And what were all the Italian workmen doing in the house? My God, who else did Irene sleep with?

SCHWITTER

Irene?

MUHEIM

Irene.

SCHWITTER

Wasn't your wife's name Mary?

MUHEIM

(Starts)

Huh?

SCHWITTER

You lived on Canal Street.

MUHEIM

Man, I lived for fifty years in my house on 54th Street and my wife's name was Irene.

SCHWITTER

Are you sure?

MUHEIM

Do you think I'm an idiot?

SCHWITTER

I'll be damned.

(Puffs)

Muheim, I never knew any Irene. I obviously got your wife mixed up with the wife of another landlord on Astor Place. I lived there later.

MUHEIM

Are you putting me on?

SCHWITTER

Your wife was faithful to you.

MUHEIM

Goddam bloody hell.

SCHWITTER

(Musingly)

Actually -- I am not even sure her name was Mary --

SCHWITTER (Continued)

(Sits up and puffs away)

In these final stages one does get everything muddled.

(Dangles legs over edge of bed)

Muheim, perhaps it was your wife Eileen --

MUHEIM

Irene.

WCHWITTER

Well, anyway I still remember the two stone lions in front of your house on Cherry Lane.

MUHEIM

No lions! I never had any lions!

SCHWITTER

No? That's funny.

(A sharp knock and INSPECTOR SCHAFFROTH and PROFESSOR SCHLATTER enter. PROFESSOR SCHLATTER wears spectacles and carries a sachel. TWO POLICEMEN and GLAUSER follow. The THREE are carrying the wreaths that MUHEIM threw out)

INSPECTOR

There's a man lying at the bottom of the staircase. Hugo Nyffenschwander. Artist. Married. Father of twins.

(Pause. MUHEIM slowly turns to face the INSPECTOR)

MUHEIM

Muheim. Muheim the Great.

INSPECTOR

Mr. Muheim?

MUHEIM

That skunk? I threw him down the stairs.

(Pause)

GLAUSER

Holy Jimminy!

INSPECTOR

Wreaths against the wall.

1ST POLICEMAN

Yes, sir.

GLAUSER

But Mr. Schwitter's come back to life -- Again!
 (Helps the POLICEMEN to line up
 wreaths against walls)

2ND POLICEMAN

Wreaths detail completed, sir.

INSPECTOR

Inspector Schafroth, Police Bureau of Criminal Investigation.
 I must ask you to come with me. It would be best if we
 went in your car, Mr. Muheim.

MUHEIM

Where to?

(Pause)

SCHLATTER

Professor Schlatter of the Municipal Clinic, Mr. Muheim.

MUHEIM

Yes, what?

(Pause)

SCHLATTER

The man is dead.

(Pause)

MUHEIM

(Upset)

From that little push -- ?

(Pause. Softly)

Dead.

GLAUSER

That's the second this afternoon, Mr. Muheim.

(MUHEIM turns slowly to SCHWITTER,
 who goes on smoking)

MUHEIM

Schwitter. I killed a man.

(The INSPECTOR gives a sign and
 the TWO POLICEMEN go and stand
 beside MUHEIM)

Schwitter. You are wrestling with death. Your mind is
 floating in higher regions. We don't mean anything to you.
 Still I've got to know. Did she -- did my wife -- and you
 -- did she -- ?

(SCHWITTER puffs calmly away)

SCHWITTER

I don't know.

MUHEIM

Schwitter. I can take quite a lot, that's true. But it isn't right that I should have killed in vain --

SCHWITTER

The truth --

MUHEIM

I've got to know.

SCHWITTER

Muheim.

(Beams)

I remember.

(Laughs)

I imagined it, Muheim.

MUHEIM

(At a loss)

You imagined?

SCHWITTER

Right. Struggling with death and in agony, I had that dream. Can you believe it? I thought one of my short stories was the real thing. I was imagining it, Muheim, it was a fantasy. I always paid the rent by mail; punctually. And I never got into bed with your wife.

MUHEIM

(Uncomprehending)

Never --

SCHWITTER

The only part that's true is the story about my wife and that man from the liquor store.

MUHEIM

You said it was a butcher.

SCHWITTER

Could be. Yes -- could be a butcher.

MUHEIM

You are a goddam lousy, stinking liar.

SCHWITTER

Funny, isn't it. Kills you.

(MUHEIM begins to rave)

MUHEIM
The poker! Give me the poker!

(The POLICE restrain him, and
now MUHEIM becomes calm and
dignified)
Forgive me. I lost my temper.

INSPECTOR
That's quite all right.

MUHEIM
Schwitter.

SCHWITTER
Great Muheim.

MUHEIM
Why did you do this to me?

SCHWITTER
I don't know. It so happened. I don't know why.

MUHEIM
(Helpless)
But -- but I didn't do anything to you.

SCHWITTER
You got dragged into my dying. An accident.

(Pause)

MUHEIM
Muheim the Great is an old man now. Ancient.

INSPECTOR
Shall we go, Mr. Muheim?

(THEY lead him away)

SCHLATTER
Light! Air! What a stink-hole!
(Flings curtains back, opens
window, extinguishes the candles)

SCHWITTER
(Groaning)
Still among the living, Professor.

SCHLATTER
As a physician, I am quite capable of appreciating that
fully without your help. I pronounced you dead on two
occasions and here you are smoking a cigar.

SCHWITTER

Not my fault if you make the wrong diagnosis.

SCHLATTER

Wrong diagnoses.

(Opens satchel)

My friend, I made no wrong diagnoses in this case.

SCHWITTER

You'll admit I'm not dead, Professor.

SCHLATTER

No longer dead.

SCHWITTER

Now don't you try to tell me it's a miracle.

SCHLATTER

No sir, you won't get any theological explanations from me.

SCHWITTER

Well, it's a scandal!

SCHLATTER

You can say that again!

(Takes a stethoscope out of his
satchel, sits at table)

Let's examine you again. Over here, my friend.

(SCHWITTER puts cigar on stove and
stands in front of SCHLATTER)

First the pulse.

SCHWITTER

It was slow a little while ago.

SCHLATTER

No talking, please. Close your mouth.

(Holds wrist)

Boy!

(Stares at him increculously)

Open up the top. Tongue, please.

(Examines him with stethoscope)

Breathe deeply. Again.

(SCHWITTER breathes deeply)

Cough.

(SCHWITTER coughs)

Man alive!

SCHLATTER (Continued)

(Again one of those incredulous looks)

Sit.

(SCHWITTER sits in armchair)

Curious about your blood-pressure.

(Straps the sphygmomanometer on him, measures systole)

Holy Aesculapius!

(Measures diastole)

SCHWITTER

You are sweating, Professor.

(PROFESSOR stares)

Examination concluded?

SCHLATTER

Examination concluded.

(Puts sphygmomanometer and stethoscope back into case.)

SCHLATTER stands up)

Hot.

(Cleaning glasses)

You'd think the sun was never going down.

SCHWITTER

The longest day.

SCHLATTER

Doomsday.

(Puts glasses on again)

At least, for us physicians. Let me tell you. My friend, I actually came here to put you on ice.

SCHWITTER

Fair enough.

SCHLATTER

But you aren't ready, my friend.

SCHWITTER

So you are finally getting impatient too.

SCHLATTER

My dear friend, the medical profession has suffered the most serious setback of the century. Your cardiac pulse and pulmonary murmur are in splendid shape.

(Pause)

I am feeling -- depressed.

(Pause)

SCHLATTER (Continued)

Frightening.

(Pause)

Even the blood-pressure is almost perfect.

SCHWITTER

Not true, not true! I am crumbling, decaying, wilting, rotting. I can hardly breathe.

SCHLATTER

Your constitution is something not to be believed.

SCHWITTER

You're lying.

SCHLATTER

Dear sir, if you don't trust me --

SCHWITTER

It's not the first time you've been lying to me.

SCHLATTER

I am a surgeon.

SCHWITTER

One more operation, my friend, and we'll be like new, just a little more surgery, dear sir, and the worst is behind us, one more treatment and we'll be on our feet again.

SCHLATTER

Given your catastrophic condition, a modest lie was a matter of human decency.

SCHWITTER

Then why should I believe you now?

SCHLATTER

Because morally speaking, there is no longer any reason to lie to you.

SCHWITTER

(Roars)

I'm dying!

SCHLATTER

The day will come, yes.

SCHWITTER

Right now!

(Pause)

I've been waiting for my death. For hours.

SCHLATTER

And I for months. Good God, even your peristalsis is on the move again.

(PUBLISHER KOPPE enters with wreath)

KOPPE

Hello there, Schwitter!

(Starts)

Schwitter!!

(Aghast)

Professor Schlatter! He's alive! Again.

SCHLATTER

And how.

KOPPE

Incredible! How do you explain --

SCHLATTER

There's nothing to explain.

KOPPE

But you pronounced him dead.

SCHLATTER

Yes, of course.

KOPPE

Twice. In my presence.

SCHLATTER

He died twice, in your presence.

KOPPE

Fantastic. Simply fantastic.

SCHWITTER

I don't find it simply fantastic at all, I find it outrageous and incompetent.

KOPPE

I'm in a great rush. Just popped in to drop this off. God knows I'm used to all kinds of crazy things from my authors, but what you're up to now, Walter has never happened to me before. How do you actually manage it?

SCHWITTER

Haven't the faintest.

KOPPE

May I sit down beside you. Thank you.
(Lays wreath against stove)

KOPPE (Continued)

From me. Personal.

(Sits down beside SCHWITTER on edge
of bed)Just for a moment, then I must run. I am late -- And
you're smoking, too!

SCHWITTER

Last cigar.

KOPPE

Beautiful, out of sight. To think that not long ago, in
this very studio, I closed your eyes!

SCHWITTER

Thank you.

KOPPE

I folded your hands.

SCHWITTER

How very nice of you.

KOPPE

Ordered flowers and wreaths.

SCHWITTER

I saw the arrangement when I came to.

KOPPE

I say, did you change the furniture around by yourself?

SCHWITTER

Myself.

KOPPE

Incredible. I ran into your son. He maintains you burnt
your last manuscripts.

SCHWITTER

They weren't any good.

KOPPE

And that one and a half million in cash had been reduced
to ashes too.

SCHWITTER

I was freezing. Three hundred thousand of it belonged to
you.

KOPPE

Five hundred thousand. Beautiful. My business went up in
smoke, so to speak.

SCHWITTER
Ruined?

KOPPE
Totally.

SCHWITTER
That's why you came? To tell me?

KOPPE
My dear fellow, how could I possibly have guessed I might be able to speak with you again in this life? I just wanted to spend a quiet moment with my dead friend. But now I must fly. Walter, shake hands for the last time. Are you really pegging out?

SCHWITTER
Really.

KOPPE
Are you sure?

SCHWITTER
Quite sure.

KOPPE
Because if not, you could be acclaimed as the Second Coming and my publishing business would be saved.

SCHWITTER
Nothing doing.

KOPPE
Let's wait and see.

(Rises)
If I were in your shoes, I'd be getting a little suspicious. Dying seems to have become just a state of mind with you. You go for death with such determination no one can keep up with it. Yet you're still alive. Doesn't it ever make you feel a bit uneasy? You should give life a try again, Walter, at least, while you're still alive. Really I must be off. I am terribly late. Professor, you give me the creeps. With all due respect to your profession, this time you seem to have made quite a monumental mistake.

(And HE's gone.)

SCHWITTER rises, throws the cigar
in the stove)

SCHWITTER
Let's get this over with, Professor. Give me an injection.
(Pause)
It's getting to be pretty pathetic.

(SCHLATTER rises)

SCHLATTER

Why didn't I? Why didn't I? My dear, out of sheer compassion I was countless times on the point of injecting you with a fatal shot. Nobody would have held it against me. You were the most beautiful hopeless case I ever had on my operating table.

(Closes his satchel)

But instead of just letting you die some demon possessed me to go on fighting for your life. For days on end I didn't change my clothes. I plugged you into an artificial kidney, I stitched plastic guts into your belly. I pumped poisonous gas into your lungs. I contaminated you with radioactive elements. It never crossed my mind that you might recover -- that's the tragedy! With blind rage I opposed your exit, but if any intern had given you the slightest chance of recovery I'd have personally thrown him out of the hospital.

SCHWITTER

Just give me a shot.

SCHLATTER

You've got to be crazy.

SCHWITTER

I implore you.

SCHLATTER

Out of the question.

SCHWITTER

I don't understand your scruples.

SCHLATTER

You don't? My dear man, there's got to be a limit to this irresponsibility. Try to put yourself in my position. If I had given you a shot in the hospital, you'd be pushing up daisies today. But if I give you one now, the public prosecutor will see to it that I push up daisies! That would be kind of embarrassing.

(Strides up and down with satchel
in hand)

It's horrible. The rationalists believe I'm an ass, and the faithful that you have arisen from the dead. Boy oh boy, what a disaster. Half the world thinks I'm a drivelling idiot, the other that God is taking the mickey out of me. Either way I look like a fucking idiot.

(Sits by the table)

Of course, it would be a Nobel Prizewinner putting this resurrection shit over on me. You should have heard the Secretary of Health yelling at me over the phone and whatsisname at the Department for Cultural Affairs is stuck

SCHLATTER (Continued)

with a state funeral on his hand and a graveside oration that's been released to the papers. You can imagine the language he used, Schwitter. It's a scandal of epic proportions, and now it's all my fault. To think that it was I who gave the world the Schlatter-forceps and the improved bone-saw. Get your coat.

SCHWITTER

What for?

SCHLATTER

You're going back to the hospital with me this instant.

SCHWITTER

To the hospital?

SCHLATTER

You heard me, old boy.

SCHWITTER

What's the point of my going there?

SCHLATTER

Clinically speaking, I'm going to give you such a going-over you won't know what hit you. I'm going to get to the bottom of this resurrection business. Actually, I'm willing to bet that the fact you're still alive is a purely neurotic phenomenon.

SCHWITTER

But why go through this all over again?

SCHLATTER

There's no other way to rehabilitate my reputation. They've all been praying for my downfall. If I do not prove, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that you died twice, I'll never have another patient, not even in any of the underdeveloped nations.

SCHWITTER

It's getting more and more obscene.

SCHLATTER

Let's step on it. No time to waste.

SCHWITTER

And go through all that torture again?

SCHLATTER

Now I have a good chance to cure you. Don't expect miracles. We can sing our praises of your general condition, but apart from that -- I've said it before, and I'll say it

SCHLATTER (Continued)

again -- your stomach must come right out. I'll connect your oesophagus directly onto your small intestine. It might give us not just a momentary but a lasting improvement. Anyway it's within the bounds of possibility. Courage, dear Schwitter, don't throw in the sponge now. Even I feel optimistic.

SCHWITTER

No.

SCHLATTER

Schwitter!

SCHWITTER

I don't want to hope again.

SCHLATTER

But now you've got every reason to hope.

SCHWITTER

I don't give a damn for hope. I've had it.

(Pause)

SCHLATTER

Does that mean --

(Rises)

Schwitter, I am amazed. Are you refusing to come with me?

SCHWITTER

Leave me alone.

(Covers himself)

SCHLATTER

You are letting me down, Schwitter. I am fighting for your life and you are letting me down.

SCHWITTER

You are letting me down.

SCHLATTER

Mr. Schwitter --

(Pause)

You can't send me away like this --

SCHWITTER

Just get out. Fast.

SCHLATTER

I'm a doctor. My patients have lost faith in me. You must give me one more chance.

SCHWITTER

Neither of us have another chance.

SCHLATTER
Do you know what you are doing to me?

SCHWITTER
I think I do.

SCHLATTER
I can't bear the humiliation.

SCHWITTER
Maybe you can't.

SCHLATTER
I'll kill myself.

SCHWITTER
Maybe you will.

SCHLATTER
I implore you, Schwitter.

SCHWITTER
Professor -- there isn't anything that you can do for me any more. Therefore kindly leave the premises. I'd like to rest now.

(Pause)

SCHLATTER
You are destroying a brilliant career, Schwitter --

(In the doorway appears MRS. NOMSEN, fat, hard, dark dress, dark hat. SHE carries a bunch of white carnations)

MRS. NOMSEN
Oh my God!

SCHWITTER
And what can I do for you, Madam.

MRS. NOMSEN
It's Mr. Schwitter! It's so unexpected! What a surprise! Excuse me, gentlemen, I have to sit down, I'm an old woman, getting up these stairs is a bit of a strain, see, and the shock --

(Waddling in)
I like to sit on something hard. At the Hotel Bellevue I always sit hard.

(Sits)
I am the ladies' room attendant, Mr. Schwitter, and that's how I know you. From where I sit I keep an eye on both departments, men's and women's. Gawd, my legs! So swollen.
(SHE starts massaging her legs)

SCHLATTER

This is the end!
(HE reels out)

MRS. NOMSEN

That's Professor Schlatter. I know him too.

SCHWITTER

Get out of here before I throw you out.

MRS. NOMSEN

I brought flowers.

SCHWITTER

Not today. Thank you.

MRS. NOMSEN

Here, you take them and don't you worry, they don't cost me a penny. I have a deal with a gravedigger, he picks them fresh from the graves. I wanted very much to put them on your death bed. Looking at a corpse is a spine-tingling thing to me, Mr. Schwitter. And now you didn't even die. Just the opposite. You look like you was new-born. Exuberant. I believe that's the proper word. Now last time I saw you down at the hotel, you looked pale and puffy to me, kind of bloated. Of course, the lighting down there is a bit dim. Here.

(A bit indignant, SHE holds out
the flowers to him)

SCHWITTER

(Irritably)

I don't suppose you came here as an admirer of my work.

MRS. NOMSEN

Yes, that too. Absolutely, Mr. Schwitter. I go to the theatre occasionally and I think your plays are very clever.

SCHWITTER

(Roughly)

Put it with the other garbage and leave, please.

(SHE calmly throws the floral
tribute over her shoulder toward
the back wall)

MRS. NOMSEN

My name's Nomsen. Mrs. Minnie Nomsen, Olga's mother. You are my son-in-law.

SCHWITTER

(Gasps)

You are -- She never told me about you.

MRS. NOMSEN

Should hope not. I strictly forbade her. A ladies' room attendant as mother-in-law would have stopped your career. Men are particular about such things, especially a Nobel Prizewinner -- no, Mr. Schwitter. I couldn't do that to you. I admired you from where I was -- anyway I'm glad to see how lovely you look. Positively flourishing. And there's my Olga telling me you kicked the bucket.

SCHWITTER

It's deceptive. But I am not flourishing. And if you want to grant a dying man's last requests, light the candles before you go, and draw the curtains.

MRS. NOMSEN

Gladly, Mr. Schwitter, gladly. But to get up, Mr. Schwitter, now that I'm sitting -- I just can't. I'm a sick, old woman. Just listen to me wheezing.

SCHWITTER

Certainly. I understand. Probably just as well that I perform the last service of love myself.

(Gets up, lights candles, draws curtains: the dark festive atmosphere is again restored)

MRS. NOMSEN

Mr. Schwitter. The reason why I came is, Olga's dead.

SCHWITTER

(Aghast)

Olga?

MRS. NOMSEN

(Matter-of-fact)

In my home, sir. The child took poison. She was friendly once with a pharmacist -- before she married you, of course.

(SCHWITTER sits down slowly on edge of bed)

SCHWITTER

That -- comes unexpected.

MRS. NOMSEN

She must have died instantly. I found this address on a slip in her handbag.

SCHWITTER

I'm terribly sorry, Mrs. --

MRS. NOMSEN

Nomsen. My father was a Frenchman, by the name of -- Bu -- Bi -- anyway it was a French name, and Olga's father was

MRS. NOMSEN (Continued)

also a Frenchman, only his name was I'm blessed if I can remember. Same with the fathers of Lucy and Frank. I have two more children, you know. A family should be born together, and logically, not like this here fancy mixture.

(Wheezes)

It's my heart. Oh yes, they do have air-conditioning in the hotel but the climate isn't exactly ideal.

(Opens her handbag)

I hate to bother you. But it's time for my pill.

SCHWITTER

Certainly.

(Goes to sink and returns with glass of water)

Here.

(MRS. NOMSEN takes pill and drinks water)

MRS. NOMSEN

My Lucy you know too.

SCHWITTER

No, I can't say I --

MRS. NOMSEN

She performs under the name of Lucy van Beethoven.

SCHWITTER

I remember the name dimly.

MRS. NOMSEN

It's not the name you remember dimly. It's her stupendous tits you remember. Lucy has become a striptease artist with an international reputation. Frankie turned out well too. He was darling when he was a little boy, quiet and dreamy, but then so was I when I was young, and I gave him a good education -- high school, trade school, then he goes and embezzles money the first job he gets. Mind you, I've nothing against criminals, my mother was a criminal and they say my father was too. But do you need an education for that? Plain common sense is all you need for that. Now you need education to handle big business with less risk. A criminal mind alone -- I mean without education -- can get you into trouble. Well, what's done is done. The four years will soon be up. In September. One good thing. He won't have to go into the army. They don't accept criminals.

SCHWITTER

My dear Mrs. Momsen --

MRS. NOMSEN

Nomsen, not Momsen. Funny. Lots of people call me Momsen. Even the hotel manager calls me Momsen all the time. He comes down to my station once in a while and -- visits even though he has his own very nice private facilities. Gawd, my back. The sitting all the time at work, the draught, the damp air -- naturally everything's sterilized, but in time, what with the constant flushing, all these hygienic fixtures get clammy you know. I think I'd better sit in the easy chair.

(Rises painfully)

SCHWITTER

Here, let me help you --

MRS. NOMSEN

Better not. We're poles apart. So we better stay in our proper station.

(Waddles to armchair, sits, folds hands and closes eyes)

SCHWITTER

Do the candles bother you?

MRS. NOMSEN

No, I like it. The lighting is like what we had down below before the renovation.

SCHWITTER

This heat --

MRS. NOMSEN

I'm cold.

(SCHWITTER covers her legs with his fur coat.

Leaning back)

Mr. Schwitter, I should like to make it quite clear again: it was only the erroneous report about your passing away that brought us together accidentally. But now that the damage has been done I have to pick a bone with you.

(SCHWITTER sits down again on bed.

Majestically)

I prepared Olga very conscientiously for her profession. She had it easier than I did. She was spared the customary inconvenience of walking the streets. I had to work my way up from the bottom, and if in my old age I'm still active as a lady lavatory attendant it's due to the changed character of my business which requires different tactics today. I make my living from addresses which the

MRS. NOMSEN (Continued)

gentlemen purchase when they come down to wash their hands. The porter gets twenty per cent, the girls thirty. Of course, I let Olga have eighty per cent, the porter got nothing. She had a nice little duplex and all. So what does the little broad do? She goes and gets herself married!

(SCHWITTER opens his mouth to say something but MRS. NOMSEN proceeds forcefully and relentlessly, giving him no chance to speak)

I know, you were happy with her. You had your fun with her and that's what she was there for. So what was the point of marrying her? I ask you, Mr. Schwitter, where do you think I would be today if I had married? I'll answer -- in the gutter, sir. And now? I own two brownstones, modern conveniences etcetera and an office building downtown. No, Mr. Schwitter, our kind grows old and wise, but marry -- never! One has to keep one's pride, or go under. We have proof of that right before us. Here we are, shaking our heads over my daughter. You know why? Because she thought she could afford to have feelings. I kept warning her but mother's words are like dry leaves blowing in the wind. Do you, as a writer, ever allow yourself to have feelings when you work? You see! One doesn't have feelings, one creates them. If the client so wishes. Good business has no place for feelings, not unless you can make a penny with it. My daughter made a damned bad deal.

SCHWITTER

Mrs. Nomsen --

MRS. NOMSEN

Mr. Schwitter, I had to get it off my chest.

SCHWITTER

My dear, good mother-in-law, --

MRS. NOMSEN

Mrs. Nomsen, if you please.

SCHWITTER

Mr dear, good Mrs. Nomsen --

MRS. NOMSEN

Mr. Schwitter. I don't have your radiant health. It's a miracle I live but I do it because of Frankie. Now that Lucy's engagements keep her travelling all the time. I must keep the apartment tidy so that it's spic and span when he gets out of the clink and comes home. I don't want

MRS. NOMSEN (Continued)

the boy to have any fancy illusions about himself anymore. He's got to learn to be a rich man, and nothing else. That's what I've got to hammer into his head. He'll have to live on dividends, and that's that. I know him. The moment he starts work, he'll be getting ideas and land in jail again. Our children have a right to be less capable than we were, Mr. Schwitter. Olga's death is a terrible lesson to me! I aimed too high for her, professionally. She had no talent for business life and fled into your arms. The arms of a Nobel Prizewinner!!

(A long pause)

SCHWITTER

I am grateful to you, Mrs. Nomsen, for coming up here to see me. Now at last I have someone I can talk to. I feel extraordinarily drawn towards you. You sold flesh for money, an honourable trade. I envy you. You dealt in whoring, I only in literature. To be sure I did try to keep my integrity. I wrote only to make money. I stayed clear of moral judgements or philosophical pronouncements. I invented stories. I stirred the imaginations of those who bought my stories; I therefore had a right to cash in and I did. Looking back, Mrs. Nomsen, I can even state, with certain pride, that I was not altogether inferior to you, both from a business and moral point of view.

(Silence)

But let me come to the point. The girl is dead. I shall neither defend nor condemn myself for that; you would not expect such a display of bad taste from me. Guilt, atonement, justice, freedom, mercy, love -- I reject these lofty expressions and explanations man uses to justify his law and order, his robberies and wars. Life is cruel, blind and brief. It's all a matter of chance. An indisposition at the right moment, and I should never have met Olga. We had bad luck with one another, that's all --

(Pause)

You don't say anything, Mrs. Nomsen. For you, life still has some meaning. I couldn't even come to terms with myself. During meals I'd be thinking of an opening line, and during orgasms of a curtain line. I locked myself inside an imaginary world of reason and logic. Away from the terrible disorder and confusion. I surrounded myself with imaginary creatures because I could not get along with real ones, for reality, Mrs. Nomsen, cannot be caught at the writer's desk; it manifests itself only in your white-tiled moist underworld. My life was not worth-while living.

(Pause)

SCHWITTER (Continued)

Then came the pains, Mrs. Nomsen, under the hypodermic needles, under the scalpel. Suddenly I was face to face with myself. There was no escape into fantasy anymore. Literature ditched me. There was only my old, bloated, putrid body. There was only horror.

(Pause)

And I let go. I kept falling, falling, falling. Nothing had any weight, nothing had any value, nothing had any meaning. Death is the only reality, Mrs. Nomsen, the one and only everlasting reality. I am not afraid of it any more.

(Puzzled)

Mrs. Nomsen!

(Pause)

Mrs. Nomsen!

(Worried)

Why don't you say something, Mrs. Nomsen?

(Goes to her and bends over her)

Mrs. Nomsen --

(HE is seized with horror and puts screen in front of her)

Augusta! No, she's run away! -- This heat. I'm suffocating.

(Tears back curtains, opens window, bright light floods studio)

That damned sun! He doesn't call it a day either.

(Runs to door and flings it open.)

JOCHEN stands in the doorway)

JOCHEN

There are no royalties either.

(Enters studio as SCHWITTER runs to crouch on bed)

Koppe just told me. You are through, daddy, old man. Your books collect dust; in a matter of days they'll be off the bookshelves. Your plays are already forgotten. The world wants hard facts, not invented stories. Documents, not funny fairy-tales. You've been eclipsed, old man.

SCHWITTER

Come here!

JOCHEN

Just dropped in to let go with a few choice curses I've been thinking up especially for you.

(Looks behind screen and jumps back)

Jeezes, who the hell --

SCHWITTER

Don't ask. Dead is dead. Here. Sit down. Put your arm around me. I'm glad you came.

JOCHEN (Continued)

pleasure with a few matches, just like that. Daddy, old man, whether you live or die or -- whether I live or die is not important anymore.

(In the doorway stands FRIEDLI,
a Salvation Army Major, with
Salvation Army MEN and WOMEN,
one with a trombone)

MAJOR FRIEDLI

I am Major Friedli of the Salvation Army.

ARMY

Hallelujah!

SCHWITTER

(Screaming)

Get out! This is a private house!

MAJOR FRIEDLI

(Unruffled)

Welcome, thou, whom Jesus Christ hath sanctified.

ARMY

Hallelujah!

SCHWITTER

You've got the wrong man. You are in the wrong place!

MAJOR FRIEDLI

(Imperturbably)

Blessed art thou, the Resurrected.

ARMY

Hallelujah!

SCHWITTER

You are trespassing! I'll call the police!

MAJOR FRIEDLI

Thou art summoned to Life Everlasting!

SCHWITTER

I'm still on the way out! To death everlasting.

(Hysterically, HE jumps up and
down on the bed)

Tear me asunder, you drumstick angels!

ARMY

Hallelujah!

SCHWITTER

Trample me to dust, you barrel-organ-saints.

ARMY

Hallelujah!

SCHWITTER

Fling me down the stairs, you psalm-yodellers! You
tambourine-twitchers!

(HE sits in bed)

ARMY

Hallelujah!

SCHWITTER

Be merciful unto me, you -- Christians.

MAJOR FRIEDLI

Hallelujah!

SCHWITTERS

Hit me with your guitars and with your trumpets blast me
to death!

(HE lies back and covers himself.)

ARMY accompanied by trumpet and
trombone sings and plays first
verse of appropriate hymn. At
the end, as trombone plays
introduction to next verse,
SCHWITTER raises his head.
Calmly, eyes upward)

When? When am I going to die, goddammit?

(As the SALVATION ARMY PEOPLE,
accompanied by trumpet, trombone
and guitar go full blast into
the second verse, the CURTAIN
falls slowly)

END