THE MORPHOLOGY OF THE HUMAN FOOT

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 A play in several scenes

 by

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 Cast of Characters

Voices: We hear three voices; all can be recorded: The Voice at rise sounds like a voice one might hear in a medical lecture: dispassionate. The second voice is Esther’s (dead) heart surgeon father. We hear him in Esther’s nightmare at rise. The last Voice (p 58 in this text) sounds like the first.

Esther: She’s a podiatrist, who worries about her credentials and about the credentials of podiatrists in general. Also, she is not at all confident in her skill level and -- if the truth were known -- would be much happier teaching middle school. She’s attractive, but she’s a wreck. She loves Fred (who’s a rat). She’s in her early 30’s.

Horace: He’s a vending machine operator, who frets about the value of his job. He’s decent fellow, sensitive, and very much aware that he’s invisible to the medical professionals around him. He’s married to Allie. He’s in his 20’s or 30’s.

Fred: He’s a male nurse and a cynic who drinks on the job. He seduces Esther and ultimately betrays her. He’s anywhere from 25 to 35.

Allie: She is Horace’s wife as well as the one bright spot in his mundane existence. She is pregnant. She’s 28.

Felson: He’s a scoundrel and an opportunist, but he’s not the sharpest knife in the drawer. Speaking of knives, Esther is responsible for the loss of two of Felson’s toes. He’s 20’s-30’s.

Sylvia: Sylvia is pretty, she’s hip, and she’s tough. She’s in her middle 20’s to early 30’s.

Scene: A single metal frame bed is up right. A vending machine – or the suggestion of one -- is down left.

 At rise: A tight special reveals a woman sleeping fitfully on the bed. Bed curtain is gathered at the head of the bed. The vending machine set is not lit. A medical illustration depicting the human foot appears on the upstage wall. The foot rotates 360 degrees during the voiceover, which describes in semi-technical detail – maybe over schmaltzy music -- the intricacies of the human foot.

 VOICE

The human foot is a strong and complex mechanical structure containing 26 bones, 33 joints, and more than a hundred muscles, tendons, and ligaments. The joints of the foot are the ankle and subtaler joint and the interphalangeal articulation of the foot.

An anthropometric study of 1197 North American adult Caucasian males found that a man's foot length was 26.3 cm with a standard deviation of 1.2 cm. The foot can be subdivided into the hindfoot, the midfoot, and the --

(At FATHER’S VOICE, graphic instantly disappears, music

 and VOICE immediately cease.)

 FATHER’S VOICE

It’s a foot, Esther! A goddamned foot! After four years of college, four more of medical school, an internship, two residencies, and a shit pot full of money, you end up a foot doctor?! Let me tell you something –

 (ESTHER wakes as from a nightmare with a gasp, jerks up

in bed. Crossfade: Lights down on bed, up on vending

machine alcove. HORACE, wearing a khaki uniform with a Mrs.

Freshley logo over one shirt pocket and his name over the other,

 is discovered stocking the vending machine, while dealing

with an irate male nurse, named FRED. When lights come up on vending machine, ESTHER – unseen --rises, dons a white medical smock, drapes a stethoscope around her neck.)

(ESTHER pulls a curtain around stage right side of bed.

Also unseen, FELSON slips into bed, hangs one of those

hospital charts at foot of bed.)

 (We hear a typical hospital announcement – which

 can be recorded -- in background just before

HORACE speaks.)

 HORACE

These are all one dollar bills. See? Look. One, one, one, one --

 (HE tries to get the FRED to look at the ones.)

 FRED

I’m not interested in your sleight of hand.

 HORACE

 (HE moves the money close to HIS face,

continues counting.)

One, one, one –

 FRED

Get that filthy money out of my face! I’m sterile!

 HORACE

So sorry to hear that. One, one, one –

 FRED

I said get that money out of my face!

 (FRED slaps money out of HORACE’S hand.

 HORACE scrambles after money.)

 HORACE

Hey!!

 FRED

Ok, now I didn’t mean to do that. Here. I’ll help –

 HORACE

 (HE goes into an awkward karate crouch.)

Don’t you touch that money!

 FRED

Calm down, buddy-boy. Just calm down.

 HORACE

 (As HE picks up scattered money.)

I’m not your buddy-boy!

 FRED

It’s a figure of speech … buddy-boy.

 HORACE

Don’t push it, mac.

 FRED

My name’s not Mac.

 HORACE

It’s a figure of speech … mac.

 FRED

You owe me three dollars.

 HORACE

I want you to leave.

 FRED

You want *me* to leave?

 HORACE

That’s what I said!

 FRED

I work here! I’m a professional!

 HORACE

So do I! So am I!

 FRED

Not for long, buddy-boy.

 HORACE

Oh. You’re going to fire me?

 FRED

I won’t have to –

 HORACE

Because you can’t –

 FRED

Because heads will roll very soon around here.

 HORACE

In that case, I’d worry about my own head if I were you.

 FRED

 (Suddenly worried.)

You’ve heard something?

 HORACE

No. … Have you?

 FRED

No, but I know how these things work. They don’t give a damn who they crush. But it’s not going to be one of the big boys –

 HORACE

Or girls.

 FRED

Or girls.

 (Beat.)

There’s no real way to know who they’ll keep and who they’ll toss.

 HORACE

I’m very good at my job …

 FRED

Maybe so. But you local guys are too expensive. They’ll find some huge national conglomerate that buys product for a fraction of what you pay and … It doesn’t matter. It’s all about money. Speaking of which you owe me. I put a five-dollar bill in your machine –

 HORACE

It’s not *my* machine –

 FRED

In your company’s machine then – Look I don’t give a damn whose machine it is! I put a five dollar bill in, got a two dollar Mrs. Freshley out. That leaves me three

dollars short. Either you owe me three dollars or the machine owes me three dollars! One of you is going to pay.

 HORACE

Do you see any fives here? Huh? Do you?! Look! One, one –

 FRED

Will you please stop that!

 (Beat as THEY stare at each other.)

 FRED (continued)

And a word to the wise: two bucks is a bit much for a Mrs. Freshly honey bun!

 HORACE

Don’t you lecture me about how much stuff costs! One eight-minute visit –I timed it -- with the obstetrician cost my wife –

 FRED

Be thankful you don’t live in … I don’t know … Russia!

 HORACE

Oh, you mean a country where the health care’s free?

 FRED

You can always move, pal!

 HORACE

I don’t want to live in Russia. I’m just saying health care costs less in some places --

 FRED

You have a bad attitude. You’re lucky to have any customers at all.

 HORACE

So are you!

 FRED

We deal with patients, not customers --!

 HORACE

Oh, is that right?! Well, I’m running out of my patience! I … I … Look, this is pointless! There were no five dollar bills in the machine. Check your billfold. You must have made a mistake –

 FRED

I didn’t make a mistake.

 HORACE

So you’re accusing me of lying … of pocketing your five dollar bill –

 FRED

So there was a five dollar bill --!

 HORACE

There was not a five dollar bill in the ... I am not a thief! I wouldn’t … I didn’t …

 (Beat.)

What can I do to make you happy?

 FRED

You can give me my three dollars. And by the way, this Mrs. Freshly isn’t.

 HORACE

Isn’t --?

 FRED

Fresh.

 HORACE

That Mrs. Freshly is not stale. I stocked it yesterday afternoon. I oughta --

 FRED

Be very careful of what you say next.

 HORACE

Here. Three dollars and one Mrs. Freshly honey bun. Have a nice day.

 (HE hands him the money and Mrs. Freshley.)

 FRED

 (As HE crosses to exit.)

Yeah. Whatever.

 HORACE

Jerk.

 (FRED stops, turns.)

 FRED

A word from me to the concessions administrator of this hospital, and you’ll be on the street. Consolidation or no consolidation. My advice? Watch your mouth … buddy-boy. And remember this: We deal with life and death. You deal with honey buns.

 (HORACE waits until FRED exits.)

 HORACE

Yeah? Well, you’re eating that honey bun like your life depends upon it. … mac.

 (HORACE kicks at something in HIS anger

as FRED crosses up right to bed. Crossfade: Lights down on vending machine, up on bed. FRED and ESTHER stand SL of bed. Curtain is extended along stage right side of the bed.)

 FRED

 (HE reads from the bed chart.)

Orbital rim fracture, left side; clavicle fracture, left side; contusions; hematomas –

 ESTHER

Yes, ok. I want to know how his –

 FELSON

 (HE stirs.)

Doc? You talkin’ about me? Orbital … what?

 ESTHER

Oh. Yes, we’re discussing your … injuries, Mister –

 (SHE looks at chart.)

Felson?

 FELSON

Yeah. Felson. Give it to me straight, doc. Am I gonna make it?

 ESTHER

Yes, let me assure you. You’re going to be fine.

 FELSON

You saved my life. Doc, you saved my life.

 ESTHER

No, I didn’t –

 FELSON

You did. You really did. I saw that light tunnel they’re always talking about. All my family was there – the dead ones, that is. My mother said “Jimmy, come on home, darlin’. Come on home.” There was music and everything. Beautiful music. I was so happy … and peaceful, you know? I was really glad I was goin’ home. Suddenly, I saw that my ex was there, too, so I said, “What the hell’s she doin’ here, Ma?” My mother says, “Shut up, Jimmy.” Then I felt this ripping pain in my great toe. “Jesus!” I said. Bam. Light went out. Music turned into a scream.

 ESTHER

Actually, the scream came from you. Through the anesthesia. I don’t know how –

 FELSON

Then there was a second shot of pain in my other great toe. Like someone was ripping my toenails out. “Jesus, God!” I thought I was dyin’. Again.

 FRED

She didn’t *rip* them out –

 FELSON

You ripped out my toenails?

 ESTHER

Of course not. They were, however, ingrown, and I had to --

 FELSON

Did they slam into the dash or something?

 ESTHER

What?

 FELSON

What?

 FRED

Your feet were not hurt in the wreck.

 FELSON

They weren’t? They hurt like hell right now. Don’t get me wrong. I mean you did a great job, doc. My head doesn’t hurt. My –

 ESTHER

Oh. I’m not your surgeon. I’m a podiatrist.

 FELSON

What?

 ESTHER

I specialize in … feet.

 FELSON

You didn’t do the other stuff?

 ESTHER

No.

 FELSON

You did something to my feet … which were not hurt in the wreck?

 ESTHER

Yes.

 FELSON

Nothin’ personal, Doc … you are a real doctor, right?

 FRED

She’s a podiat --

 ESTHER

Yes, I am a real doctor.

 FELSON

My head doesn’t hurt. My collarbone feels ok. And my eye is throbbing some, but there’s no pain. Now, my toes? They’re killing me! Killing me! What did you do to me!?

 ESTHER

I took out your ingrown --

 FELSON

Wait. You did rip off my toenails?

 ESTHER

No. No, of course not.

 FELSON

Oh.

 ESTHER

I performed a lateral matricectomy.

 FELSON

What the hell is that?

 FRED

She split your toenail down the middle, drained the pus, and removed –

 FELSON

Holy shit!

 ESTHER

I had to destroy the nail matrix, Mr. Felson. Your infection –

 FELSON

Holy shit!

 FRED

Calm down, Mr. Felson. Just calm down.

 FELSON

 (To FRED.)

You a doctor?

 FRED

I’m a nurse.

 FELSON

I need to see a real doctor!!

 ESTHER

 (Just as the lights go into crossfade.)

I am a real doctor!

(Crossfade: It’s a few days later. HORACE and his wife, ALLIE, sit on drink crates, eating lunch. ALLIE is very pregnant.)

 HORACE

Just so you know: not everyone can get these seats, but I happen to know the

maître d.

 ALLIE

I am very impressed, sir.

 HORACE

 (HE indicates HIS half-eaten sandwich.)

This is good.

 ALLIE

Does it look familiar?

 HORACE

What do you mean?

 ALLIE

Oh Horace. It’s last night’s meatloaf.

 HORACE

Well, it’s delicious, baby. Again.

 (THEY eat in silence for a beat or two.)

How about William Horace?

 ALLIE

Hmmm.

 HORACE

After your dad and me.

 ALLIE

I know who it’s after, Horace. But you said you didn’t want to carry your father’s name forward –

 HORACE

I’ve been thinking about that. He’s dead, so Horace is my name now, not his. And I like the sound of it: William Horace.

 ALLIE

I like the sound of it, too … until you add the last name. Then it just gets hard to say: William Horace Harris.

 (BOTH ad lib saying the name, laughing.)

 HORACE

Ok, how about Horace William Harris?

 ALLIE

Ugh.

 HORACE

Horace Henry Harris, the second?

 ALLIE

What about my father?

 HORACE

I don’t really care what we name him, Allie. I just want to work Horace in there somewhere.

 ALLIE

What if he’s a she?

 HORACE

Allie Horace Harris, of course.

 (BOTH laugh.)

 ALLIE

Stop it …

 (BOTH still laughing.)

 HORACE

Allie Horace Harris.

 ALLIE

 (Laughing, SHE slaps at HIM.)

Horace quit. I’m serious. … Wait. We could call her Harry, for short .

 (THEY continue laughing until HORACE’s next line.)

 HORACE

We can find out any time you want –

 ALLIE

No. I want to be surprised.

 HORACE

Doc says everything’s ok?

 ALLIE

Everything’s fine. He wants me on bed rest.

 HORACE

That’s where I want you, too.

 ALLIE

You want me on bed rest?

 HORACE

No, no. Just on bed.

 (SHE laughs, slaps at HIM again.)

 ALLIE

No you don’t. I’m a walrus.

 HORACE

But you’re *my* walrus.

 ALLIE

 (Slaps at him again.)

That was not the right answer!

 HORACE

I’m sorry, baby. Umm. Hippopotamus? Is that good? Hippopot –

 ALLIE

 (SHE laughs.)

Shut up, and give me a Mrs. Freshley honey bun.

 (Beat.)

I’m not a hippopotamus … am I? … Horace? … Am I, Horace?

 HORACE

You know I’m teasing you, baby. You’re a –

 ALLIE

Watch out, mister. If you want dinner tonight.

 HORACE

 (As HE hands HER a honey bun, kisses HER mouth.)

You’re a … gazelle, a mink, an ermine. The very best that ever happened to me. And I love you.

 (HE kisses HER.)

Now, give me a bite of that Mrs. Freshley.

 (He grabs at the honey bun, hugs HER, tickles HER.

 THEY fall off the crate she’s been sitting on.)

 ALLIE

Owww.

 HORACE

 (As HE rises, helps HER to HER feet.)

Baby! I hurt you! Did I hurt you? Are you ok?

 ALLIE

No, I’m ok. Whoo. Just a bit dizzy.

 HORACE

I’m so sorry. I got carried away … are you sure you’re ok?

 ALLIE

I’m fine. Whoo-ooo. Here eat this thing. I don’t need it.

 HORACE

No, no. It’s for you … and for whoever’s riding with you.

 (HE pats HER stomach.)

You sure you’re ok?

 ALLIE

I’m ok.

 HORACE

I don’t want you coming down here any more, Allie. I want you on bed rest like the doc said.

 (SHE struggles to HER feet, cleans up lunch

 detritus.)

 ALLIE

Sure, and we’ll get some live-in help to cook, clean, paint the baby’s room –

 HORACE

I’m serious. You need to slow down. That’s what happened last time. You

wouldn’t --

 ALLIE

That was then. This is now. When will you be home?

 HORACE

Just gotta finish here and check the machines upstairs. Then swing by Southern and over to the Welcome Center … Then I gotta restock the truck, do the paperwork … So around eight.

 ALLIE

I’ll be waiting.

 (THEY kiss. Just before SHE exits we hear a voice off,

 and HORACE looks to the sound of the voice,

 so HE doesn’t see HER falter a bit as SHE exits.)

 VOICE

Hey you! Are you the vending machine guy?

(Crossfade. A few days later. Lights up on bed, which is empty. Curtain is drawn around entire bed with an opening on the stage left side. FRED is doing

 some Nurse stuff.)

 FRED

 (HE sings as HE works.)

Hang down your head, Tom Dooley,

Hang down your head and cry …

 (HE stops work, uses IV bottle – still

 attached to the IV cart– as a microphone

 and performs.)

Hang down your head, Tom Dooley,

Poor boy, you’re bound to –

 (HE instantly stops, replaces IV as ESTHER enters.)

 ESTHER

What happened to … ? What are you doing?

 FRED

I’m … removing the IV cart. What are you doing?

 ESTHER

I’m checking on Mr. Felson.

 FRED

He’s not here.

 ESTHER

I can see that. Where is he?

 FRED

Surgery.

 ESTHER

What happened?

 FRED

He developed an infection, and they had to –.

 ESTHER

I’m not surprised. That orbital rim was a mess.

 FRED

It’s not his eye.

 ESTHER

No? … Then it’s gotta be his –

 FRED

It’s in his feet.

 ESTHER

It’s in his feet?

 FRED

Yeah. His feet.

 ESTHER

Are you sure?

 FRED

What kind of question is that? Of course I’m sure. Look.

 (Holds up the chart.)

His feet.

 ESTHER

What kind of infection?

 FRED

Osteomyelitis –

 ESTHER

Osteomyelitis?

 FRED

It’s a bone infection.

 ESTHER

 (SHE snatches chart, looks at it.)

I know what osteomyelitis is!

 FRED

Hey. Take it easy. I’m just saying –

 ESTHER

 It’s an infection in a bone. That is to say a bone infection! See? I know that!! Amazing, huh? Why would you think I wouldn’t know that? Why would you … dare explain it to me?!

 FRED

I was just pointing out what was on the chart.

 ESTHER

Oh? Does it say explain osteomyelitis to the doctor on there?

 (SHE pretends to read chart.)

Nope. Nope, not here.

 (SHE hands chart back.)

 FRED

Take it easy, doc.

 ESTHER

You take it easy! He has an infection, osteomyelitis … which must have slithered through his bloodstream or hopped from the surrounding tissue like a microscopic fucking frog!! See?! I know all of these things! More than you’ll ever know, nurse-boy!! More than you’ll ever know, you … you … Oh my God. I am so sorry.

 FRED

Nurse-boy?

 ESTHER

I am so sorry. You’re not a nurse-boy. You’re a nurse … man. Nurse. Period. Nurse. Why was I not informed?

 FRED

There was no time.

 ESTHER

Let me see. Which foot?

 (SHE looks at chart as FRED speaks.)

 FRED

It was … both of them. That’s why he was complaining so much.

 ESTHER

Both of them. It was both of them. Two fucking feet. Two fucking infections.

 (SHE throws the chart.)

 FRED

Doc. Doc, infections happen all the time –

 ESTHER

Thank God I’m not a pulmonologist. Whoops. Sorry, sir, you have an infection in both your lungs, thanks to my misdiagnosis, so it looks like you’ll be gasping for air until you die.

 FRED

Stop –

 ESTHER

Or an ophthalmologist. Sorry about you being blind and all, young lady, but –

 FRED

Stop. I’ve been here a lot longer than you. I’ve seen things happen that make this look like a minor misstep --

 ESTHER

They’re going to say this is iatrogenic.

 FRED

What?

 ESTHER

They’re going to blame me.

 FRED

Who is?

 ESTHER

Them.

 FRED

That’ll be a first. Nobody’s going to blame a doctor –

 ESTHER

Oh, they’ll blame me all right. They did last time.

 FRED

There was a last time?

 ESTHER

The patient was not diagnosed as diabetic, ok? And I missed a few signs that *in retrospect* seem obvious. Hindsight – as they say – is 20-20. But … but I guess I’ve cost the hospital a few bucks here and there.

 FRED

How much did they --?

 ESTHER

Six figures.

 FRED

That’s a lot of figures. Maybe you should talk to Felson.

 ESTHER

Maybe he won’t sue.

 FRED

Maybe you’ll win the lottery.

 ESTHER

Maybe I should talk to Felson.

 FRED

Maybe you should. Be careful. Feel him out. Most of all, don’t put any ideas in his head.

 ESTHER

Right. I should get this done because they’re going to cut staff when we get sucked up by Southern and I‘m already on the edge --

 FRED

Have you heard something?

 ESTHER

Nothing specific, but think about it. Two administrations, two staffs. And one entity. Heads will roll. And I could get sued. Oh my God, you’re right. I’m going to get sued. There’s no doubt about it.

 FRED

The hospital will get sued, and they will take care of that. They won’t want bad press --

 ESTHER

And they won’t want *me* either …

 FRED

Trust me -- they’re going to protect you. It’s just good business. I mean, would you want to be cared for in a hospital where someone is rushed to the OR because of an ingrown toenail? They’re not going to let that leak … Wait. That’s not what I meant exactly.

 ESTHER

I never even wanted to be a doctor. I wanted to teach elementary school. But my father … he pushed. And then he ridiculed me when I … see, I know my limits. That’s why I chose the foot. I mean who dies from sore feet. You know?

 FRED

That’s a nasty cough you have there.

 ESTHER

What? I don’t have a cough.

 FRED

And I think you need some cough medicine.

 (FRED produces a big cough medicine bottle from

someplace, takes a drink, offers it to ESTHER.)

 ESTHER

Oh. You mean my cough. Yes, it is a nasty cough.

 (SHE coughs once or twice. BOTH laugh, then

THEY pass the bottle back and forth throughout

the following.)

 ESTHER (Continued)

I like helping healthy people.

 FRED

I suppose that would keep you out of trouble, all right.

 ESTHER

What I mean is I enjoy advising people how to stay healthy. How to avoid diabetes and ingrown toenails, both of which, I might as well say, pretty much disgust me.

 FRED

You might be in the wrong profession –

 ESTHER

I especially like people who *try* to stay healthy … like the folks in the running club downtown.

 (SHE drinks, hands it back.)

You’re a member, aren’t you?

 FRED

No.

 ESTHER

You ought to think about joining. You can do it online at feetal position.com

Feetal position– get it?

 FRED

Yeah, I get it, and I think it’s pretty damned juvenile.

 ESTHER

Really? I think it’s clever.

 FRED

It’s one reason I never joined.

 ESTHER

I’m the one who came up with it.

 FRED

I’m sorry, but the name is awful. So’s the logo. I mean, how do you even get two feet in the fetal position if you put one behind the other?

 (HE illustrates HIS point.)

 ESTHER

They’re two different people. You need to do it with another person. The foot in front is a woman’s. The one behind, a man’s. I think it’s comforting.

 FRED

Ok, I suddenly like the logo. In fact, I think I love it. But I gotta tell you, “comforting” never entered my mind.

 ESTHER

 (SHE laughs.)

Mmm-hmmm. No surprise there. I’m the official club physician, by the way.

 FRED

Oh. Didn’t know that.

 ESTHER

Mostly advisory, actually. The most common ailments are shin splints, achilles tendonitis, plantar fasciitis, things like that. All of which I’m quite comfortable dealing with. Runners love me. They trust me.

 (Beat.)

Oh my god. Felson isn’t a runner, is he?

 FRED

He’s no runner. Did you not look at his chart? His vitals are screwy.

 ESTHER

How could I have missed … how could I have not considered osteomyelitis? I mean I *did* consider it. I know I did! but I somehow… Give me another drink.

 FRED

 (As HE hands over the flask.)

So you’re a runner …

 ESTHER

Yes. And so are you.

 FRED

Every chance I get. I haven’t seen you at any races.

 ESTHER

I’ve seen you.

 FRED

Are you any good?

 ESTHER

No.

 (BOTH laugh.)

 FRED

Then that’s why I haven’t seen you. I’m pretty damn good.

 ESTHER

Yes, you are. You were second in your age group, tenth over all at the Heart Run last week.

 FRED

You were there.

 ESTHER

I was.

 FRED

Actually, I’m not pretty damn good. I’m … sort of good. If the real racers show up –

the really fast people – I wind up third, fourth, fifth in age group. But that’s ok. I run because I like it, because it makes me feel good. That’s enough. That and the adulation.

 (BOTH laugh.)

 ESTHER

I like the solitude of running. Never have liked being on a team. Or doing anything that involved hitting a ball -- or throwing one or catching one.

 FRED

I like the sweat, the heat, the exertion. Did I mention the adulation?

 ESTHER

At least once.

 FRED

You know, I wanted to teach also. Summers off. June, July, August off with pay… for the rest of my life. Not a lot of pay, true. But enough for me to try it. For a while anyway. So I tried it. Hated it.

 ESTHER

What level?

 FRED

Middle school.

 ESTHER

What’s wrong with --?

 FRED

Kids that age are horrible. Their voices changing, bumps popping out on the girls’ chests, hormones raging. Pimples. Plus they never shut up. And to them everything – I mean everything – is a major crisis. God, I hated it. Forget June. I couldn’t make to October.

 ESTHER

October? You didn’t give it much of a chance.

 FRED

I gave it enough. By the end of the second week, I was bringing scotch to school in a cough medicine bottle.

 ESTHER

 (SHE holds bottle up.)

Not much has changed.

 FRED

I just keep it for emergencies now. Like this.

 ESTHER

So you quit teaching and … ?

 FRED

I broad jumped into the Army … I wanted to be a photographer, and they promised to send me to photography school, but somehow they ended up training me as a medic. Don’t know how that happened. I was going to complain, but I liked what I was learning, so I when I got out, I went to nursing school. And here I am. A nurse-boy.

 ESTHER

I’m so sorry I said that.

 FRED

I like being a nurse-boy.

 (THEY laugh.)

 ESTHER

Did you consider medical school?

 FRED

For about 15 minutes, but I’m basically pretty lazy, and you all never get off. I just need to know that when I’m off, I’m off. What are you? A DPM?

 ESTHER

Something wrong with that?

 FRED

Not at all. Just asking. It’s very much like an MD, isn’t it?

 ESTHER

Yes, it’s very much like an MD!

 FRED

 Why are you so defensive?

 ESTHER

I’m sick of answering that question. Sick to death.

 FRED

I didn’t mean anything by it. Just curious. Did you go to medical school?

 ESTHER

Yes, I went to medical school! Did you think I went to foot school or something?!

 FRED

Easy. Take it easy, doc.

 ESTHER

My father is – was – a heart surgeon.

 FRED

Ah. And I guess he thinks the foot’s a pretty long drive from the heart, right?

 ESTHER.

Yes. All downhill.

 FRED

Is your father …?

 ESTHER

He died.

(Suddenly, SHE bursts out laughing, says much of

the following through HER laughter.)

Of a heart attack. A heart -- Oh my god. That’s not funny. Famous heart surgeon …

 (SHE can barely get the words out.)

Heart attack …. I’m so sorry. Heart …. Lord, lord. Not funny. Whoo. Not funny at all.

Father. Daddy … Hooo.

 FRED

Hard to know what to say here.

 ESTHER

No, no. I loved him.

 FRED

You must miss him.

 ESTHER

Not a bit, actually.

 (SHE starts giggling again.)

 ESTHER (Continued.)

Oufff. Sorry. I am so sorry. Whoo. It’s just such a relief not having him peering over my shoulder.

 (SHE imitates his voice.)

Esther, had you specialized in something other than the foot – the goddamned foot – had you become a real doctor, in short – if I heard him say “in short” once, I heard him say it ten thousand times. And some disparaging remark inevitably followed –

 FRED

Here, have a sip.

 (Offers bottle.)

 ESTHER

… you’d be dealing with something more important than ingrown toenails… blah, blah, blah.

 (Takes a drink.)

 FRED

Right. Right. Um … you could become a teacher now if you wanted.

 ESTHER

I’ve thought about that, but I don’t think so. I’ve come too far on this journey.

 FRED

Some journey. Here we are in the middle of a work day. Drinking scotch out of a cough medicine bottle.

 ESTHER

I hope Mr. Felson will be ok.

 FRED

May I call you Esther?

 ESTHER

You want to call me Esther?

 FRED

Yes, I do.

 ESTHER

Yes. Of course. Call me Esther. May I call you Frank?

 FRED

You already do, but I’d prefer Fred, which is my name.

 ESTHER

Oh. I don’t know why I …

 FRED

You’ve been calling me Frank for about six months now.

 ESTHER

Why didn’t you say something?

 FRED

I don’t know why. I know I liked listening to your voice and watching your mouth when you talked.

 ESTHER

You watched my mouth when I talked?

 FRED

I still do.

 ESTHER

Now it’s hard for *me* to know what to say.

 FRED

May I kiss you on the mouth? Esther.

 ESTHER

 (SHE stands.)

What … Frank?

 FRED

You heard.

 (Beat.)

It’s Fred.

 ESTHER

Fred. … On my mouth?

 FRED

 (HE stands.)

Your lips.

 ESTHER

Oh. My lips.

 FRED

May I?

 ESTHER

You mean right now?

 FRED

Yeah. Right now.

 ESTHER

Yes, you may. … Fred.

 (HE crosses to HER, kisses HER on the mouth.

 BOTH fall through the stage right opening on curtained bed as we crossfade. Lights up on vending machine. HORACE is stocking the machine. Crossfade to bed. ESTHER enters, paces. FRED enters.)

 ESTHER

This has got to stop because I – oh my god.

 (ESTHER rushes to FRED. THEY fall into an embrace, fall back onto curtained bed. Crossfade to vending machine. HORACE is stocking the machine. Crossfade to bed. ESTHER adjusts HER clothes as SHE exits the curtained bed. )

 ESTHER

Now this is really the last time. It has to be because I --

 (We see FRED’s arms as HE pulls HER back to bed.)

Oh my god.

 (Crossfade to vending machine. HORACE is stocking the machine. Crossfade to bed. FRED adjusts HIS clothes as HE exits the curtained bed.)

 FRED

Goodbye, Esther. I’m going to miss you, baby --

 (We see ESTHER’s arms as SHE pulls HIM back.)

 ESTHER

Come here, you.

 FRED

Oh my god.

 (Crossfade. FELSON is in a hospital gown, pushing HIS portable IV. HIS feet are heavily bandaged, and HE wears those hospital shoes that immobilize feet. HE’s talking to HORACE, who is checking expiration dates and restocking.)

 FELSON

Yep. Two toes on my left foot, the great toe – doc calls it a hallux – as well as the one next to it. I forgot what he calls that one. And my great -- my hallux on the right foot. Plus the tip of the one next to it.

 HORACE

Yeah, that’s tough. How did you …?

 FELSON

Car wreck. Totaled my Chevy, killed my bird-dog. Drinkin’ and drivin’. My own damned fault. Broke this socket around my eye, broke my collarbone – got a pin in it – and fractured my skull. But I’m healed up pretty good.

 HORACE

Except your feet. Did they hit the dash or something?

 FELSON

Same question I asked. Turns out my feet weren’t even hurt in the wreck. Give me one of those Mrs. Freshly honey buns while you’ve got your machine open.

 HORACE

I’m not supposed to sell them from … Sure. Sure, why not?

 (HE gives FELSON a Mrs. Freshley. FELSON pays.)

 HORACE(Continued.)

So what happened to your feet?

 FELSON

Ingrown toenails.

 HORACE

They cut your toes off because you had ingrown toenails!?

 FELSON

I got this infection …

 HORACE

In the hospital?

 FELSON

I’m not sure …

 HORACE

I’d be thinking lawsuit.

 FELSON

Oh, there’s going to be a lawsuit. Without therapy, I’ll be walking funny for the rest of my life. Somebody’s got to pay for that.

 (Indicating the Mrs. Freshley.)

These are good.

 HORACE

Yeah, they’re fresh. Is there such a thing as an artificial toe?

 FELSON

Doc didn’t say so. But he did say I’ll be fine. My gait might be slower and a little bumpier, but I’ll be fine.

 (Conspiratorially.)

 To tell you the truth I’ve been walking funny for years anyway just to keep the weight off my ingrowns. They hurt like hell with the slightest bump … but I’m not telling anyone about that. I gotta get paid for my emotional damage, if you know what I mean. I’m not even sure the lady who yanked off my toenails is a real doctor.

 HORACE

 She yanked off your toenails?

 FELSON

Absolutely. She’s gonna pay.

 HORACE

How much will you ask for?

 FELSON

Haven’t talked to my lawyer yet, but I’m gonna get as much as I can. Need the cash. I totaled my car, I’m facing a DUI, my auto insurance is gonna skyrocket, I gotta pay to repair the fire hydrant, my health insurance probably won’t pay off because of the

DUI. Plus, I think the lady I hit is gonna sue me. Hell, I know she is. Scattered her groceries, broke both her legs, killed her dog.

 HORACE

You hit a fire hydrant and a lady and a dog.

 FELSON

Well not in that order. As near as I can remember. I hit the dog first, then I hit the lady. Then I hit the fire hydrant. Happened so fast.

 HORACE

Wait. I thought you said you killed *your* dog.

 FELSON

Did. Killed hers too.

 (Beat.)

 HORACE

Whew. That’s almost funny …

 FELSON

Funny?

 HORACE

No. No, not funny.

 FELSON

I’m sure as hell not laughing.

 (HE watches HORACE replace stale Mrs. Freshley’s

 for a beat.)

What do you do with the stale ones? Throw ‘em out?

 HORACE

I’m supposed to, but I usually take ‘em to the homeless shelter. They love them.

 FELSON

This your full time job?

 HORACE

Yes, it is. Something wrong with that?

 FELSON

What? No. Just … you know, honey buns.

 HORACE

It’s not just honey buns. There are other products. Plus I have the coffee franchise here. I’m my own boss.

 FELSON

So what do you think about all day? Honey buns? … and coffee?

 HORACE

What the hell’s that supposed to mean?

 FELSON

Nothing. It means nothing. I was just wondering.

 HORACE

Why in hell would you ask a thing like that? Would you ask a psychiatrist if she thinks about people’s brains all day?

 FELSON

I might ask her that. Because her answer would be interesting. Exciting. Mrs. Freshley honey buns not so much, so I was just wondering.

 HORACE

I don’t ever bring Mrs. Freshley home. Not the bun, not the idea of the bun.

 FELSON

 (Beat.)

I think about water meters all day. Just about drives me crazy some days.

 HORACE

The trick is to think about something else.

 FELSON

Like what?

 HORACE

I don’t know. Whatever works for you. Some people have jobs – professions, I

 HORACE (Cont.)

guess – that keep their brains engaged. Like psychiatrists. Or teachers.

 FELSON

Yeah, now, teaching, that’d be the life. Summers off …

 HORACE

You and me have to shoot our brains full of Novocain just to get through the day.

 FELSON

What?

 HORACE

I mean we have to distract ourselves because our jobs are … well … there’s no meat to them, you know? But … we got to keep food on the table. So every day, we …

Achh, hell with it. So you work for the city?

 FELSON

Yeah.

 HORACE

So you have to walk every day …

 FELSON

Yeah, that’s why I’m gonna –

 HORACE

That’s why you’re gonna sue the hell out of that doctor.

 FELSON

That’s right. I never really measured it, but I think I walk seven to ten miles a day. Five days a week. Rain, snow, heat, freezing cold. People don’t realize what we go through. It looks easy, but it isn’t.

 HORACE

Yeah, I guess you need healthy feet for that. How many meters do you read in a day? Do you have a quota or …? … if you don’t mind me asking.

 FELSON

No, I don’t mind you asking. Nobody ever has before. I have a route. I read around 300 a day. I’m usually invisible, you know? I walk through these fancy neighborhoods … nobody says anything to me. It’s like I’m not really there.

 HORACE

I know what you mean. Doctors around here … pfff.

 FELSON

Dogs speak to me, though. Jesus. Look at this …

 (HE turns up HIS gown, shows a scar.)

 HORACE

You should have sued.

 FELSON

I was going to. Dog’s owner says, “I’m a lawyer, pal. You haven’t got a case.”

 HORACE

There’s a leash law –

 FELSON

Guy says I was standing on his property.

 HORACE

Were you?

 FELSON

Yeah, I guess. I don’t know.

 HORACE

I think about poetry sometimes.

 FELSON

What?

 HORACE

You asked what I think about.

 FELSON

You think about poetry?

 HORACE

It … gets me to a different place. I’ve been memorizing some. There’s truth and beauty there. Like uh… like this one poet said.

 (awkward silence.)

 FELSON

Yeah. … Well, I better get back before they miss me.

 HORACE

I’m married, you know. Got a baby on the way, so don’t think that I’m … you know.

 FELSON

No, no. Nothin’ like that. I just gotta … I’m not supposed to be out on my own.

 (FELSON starts to exit. HE stops as HORACE speaks.)

 HORACE

Hey. I’m not crazy about poetry or anything. I mean, I don’t write any of it … or anything. I just … like it. You know, it takes my mind off stuff, off of Mrs. Freshley honey buns and … Snickers. And coffee.

 FELSON

 (HE turns to HORACE.)

Yeah. Yeah, I hear ya. Hang in there.

 (HE turns away, then back to HORACE.)

I’m gonna ask the doc about those artificial toes.

 (HORACE just nods. Beat.)

 FELSON (Continued.)

I think about fishing a lot. There’s beauty there, too. And truth, I think.

 HORACE

Yeah.

 FELSON

Yeah. … Well.

 (HE exits as HORACE’s cell rings.)

 HORACE

Hello .. . Oh, hi. Everything ok? … What?! Right now? ... Ok, stay with her. I’m coming home. … You are? What…? … Yeah, ok. Who -- who … yeah. Is she ok? … Is

she ok? … Oh, God. I’m on the way. Wait! What room is she in? … Oh, God. Ok, I’m on the way.

(HE hurriedly gathers HIS gear. Crossfade. It’s about a week later. ALLIE is in the bed. Curtain is stretched along stage right side of bed. We hear the quiet beep-beep of the monitors attached to HER. FRED is making entries on a chart. HORACE enters.)

 HORACE

Can we have a few minutes, please? Alone.

 FRED

Of course. Oh. You’re the vending machine guy. I didn’t know. Sorry.

 HORACE

I have a name. It’s Horace. Probably you should call me Mr. Harris.

 FRED

Yes, I recognize the attitude. You’re the vending machine guy.

 HORACE

I just need to talk to my wife alone for a few minutes.

 FRED

Yeah, sure. Take your time.

 (Just before HE exits.)

She can’t hear you, you know.

 HORACE

Get out.

 FRED

Just so you know.

 HORACE

Out.

 (HE leans over bed, kisses ALLIE. Then HE sits,

 holds HER hand.)

Hi Sweetie. I went ahead and named her. Allie H. Harris. The H is for Horace. Allie Horace Harris.

 (Sad little laugh.)

Just like we said.

 (Beat.)

But nobody needs to know that. It’s Allie H to everybody else. They’re all trying to get me to say what the H is for. And I tell them, you fill in the blanks. Whatever you want. … So somebody guessed “Heavenly,” and I … I thought that was as good a guess as any. … You ought to see the house. Flowers everywhere … beautiful flowers…

 HORACE (Continued.)

 (HE breaks down, then regains HIS composure.)

Everybody’s in town already. Your folks, my sister Eileen. Even your Uncle Floyd showed up. And he’s sober, too. At least he was when I left.

 (Another laugh.)

I love you, Allie. I love you with all my heart. Nothing will ever change that. Not this. Not anything. Don’t worry, Baby.

 (FRED enters.)

 FRED

Do you want to stay?

 HORACE

No. No, I don’t .

 (HE turns to ALLIE.)

Goodbye, Allison.

(HE leans over, kisses ALLIE, hugs HER, hovers, finally exits. Beat. ESTHER enters. FRED crosses to monitors. ESTHER checks HER watch, makes some notations on HER clipboard, nods. FRED turns monitors off. Beeping slows, stops. HE covers ALLIE’S face as we crossfade. One week later. FELSON is at vending machine talking on HIS cell.)

 FELSON

I know that. … Listen, I can’t … I can’t just walk outta here. I’ll get there as soon as I can. … Well, what *can* you do over the phone … Look, do you want to represent me or not? … I told you. I blew a .14! … I’m sorry.

 (HE gathers HIMSELF.)

 … I know it’s legally drunk, but what’s that got to do with me losing my toes? The two things aren’t even related. … OK, I mean directly related … OK. All right. They’ll be letting me out of here soon. … Monday, I think. … Yeah, you too.

 (HE ends call, looks at vending machine, hits it.)

 Shit. Out again.

 (FRED enters.)

 FRED

Mr. Felson, what must we do to make it clear to you that you’re not free to leave your room without an escort?

 FELSON

Is this a hospital or a prison?

 FRED

For you, it’s a little of both. The police are interested in your whereabouts. Did you know that?

 FELSON

Yeah, I know. It’s like DUI is a crime.

 FRED

It’s not *like* it’s a crime. It *is* a crime.

 (As HE pulls out HIS billfold, steps to the machine.)

 FESLON

Hey. I didn’t kill anyone.

 FRED

You broke both of Miss Johnson’s legs –

 FELSON

How do you know that?

 FRED

She’s up on Seven in a full body cast.

 FELSON

Oh, Jeez. Maybe I should go see her.

 FRED

I wouldn’t.

 FELSON

Why not? I want to tell her I’m sorry, that it was just an accident. Maybe she won’t sue –

 FRED

Do you intend to sue?

 FELSON

That foot doctor? You bet. I got expenses –

 FRED

You do see the irony here, right?

 FELSON

I’m not sure what that even means, but I’ll tell you what I do see. I see a very remorseful man with seven and a half toes – me -- limping painfully into that old lady’s room with flowers and apologizing and asking for her forgiveness.

 FRED

I wouldn’t count on it. Miss Johnson loved that dog. She called him Sweetie Boy, and he was all she had. You took him from her. We sedate her most nights because she

has dreams that wake her up screaming “Sweetie-Boy!” Worse, you robbed her of her mobility.

 FELSON

She can always get a new dog, right? And in a few weeks she’ll be back on her feet. Me? I’m gonna be gimpy my whole life.

 FRED

She’s 86. She’s not going to be back on her feet any time soon. If ever.

 (Beat.)

 FELSON

It was a bad day. Dog bit me the day before, so I was limping and real bummed out. Plus it was pouring rain, my ingrowns were screaming, and I was sick to death of reading water meters.

 FRED

Is that what you do for a living?

 FELSON

Oh, no, that’s just a hobby! … Of course, it’s what I do. Think I’d be out there sticking my nose down holes in the ground for the hell of it?

 FRED

Take it easy. You’re not the victim here.

 FELSON

Oh, I’m a victim all right. A victim of … something.

 (Beat.)

I was at the bottom of this long hill on Oakland -- 35 houses, which means 35 meters, each one a climb higher than the one before it. And I had to read every damn one of them. Cold as hell --

 FRED

Listen –

 FELSON

Some of those meter boxes are elbow deep in muck – a real mess in the rain – and most are filthy with spiders and cockroaches. Jesus, I hate cockroaches. The way they skitter around –

 FRED

You got change for a five?

 FELSON

What?

 FRED

You got change for a – ?

 (HE holds the bill up.)

 FELSON

Oh. You can put a five in there –

 (HE gestures at the machine.)

 FRED

Yeah, as long as you want to get stiffed.

 FELSON

 (He makes change.)

Here. … Anyway, I looked up that hill and thought I can’t do this. I need a drink –

 FRED

 (As HE looks over vending machine selections.)

Damn! No Mrs. Freshley’s! Again.

 FELSON

Even though I knew in my heart that if I took one drink –

 FRED

Man. I had my mind set on a Mrs. Freshley.

 FELSON

But my knee was bleeding, my ankle hurt, my ingrowns were killin’ me –

 FRED

Man, this is no time for incompetence. They’ll yank that dude’s contract so fast …

 FELSON

What? Oh. Yeah. He’s been pretty slack lately.

 (Beat.)

Anyway, I thought what the hell. Hopped in my Chevy –

 FRED

You know what happened to him, right?

 FELSON

Who?

 FRED

The vending machine guy.

 FELSON

He quit, I guess?

 FRED

His wife died last week.

 FELSON

No shit.

 FRED

He’s pretty broken up.

 FELSON

Yeah, I guess he would be. … He said something about her being pregnant.

 FRED

Baby survived. She didn’t.

 FELSON

What … what happened?

 FRED

Amniotic fluid embolism. Bam. Gone.

 FELSON

Amniotic --?

 FRED

Baby killed her.

 FELSON

What the hell does *that* mean?

 FRED

Fetal skin cells got into her blood stream. She was allergic –

 FELSON

Allergic? To her own --?

 FRED

I found her in distress. Did all I could until the docs got there …

(Beat.)

Her heart. I got it beating. But she … she … her brain died.

 FELSON

Her brain died, but she didn’t?

 FRED

Something like that.

 (Beat.)

Damn company needs to get somebody over here to fill in for him. Hell of a way to run a railroad, you know what I mean?

 FELSON

Not exactly. I -- Hey. Here he comes.

 (HORACE enters with HIS supplies.)

 HORACE

I’ve got fresh product here. Let me change all that out.

 FELSON

There’s nothing to change out … Understandable, of course. I’m really sorry for your loss.

 HORACE

Thank you. I got fresh product here.

 (HE begins stocking the machine.)

How are you doing? Your feet.

 FELSON

Me? I’m fine. Turns out there is such a thing as artificial toes, by the way. Expensive as hell. But … but what isn’t? I’m sorry for your loss.

 HORACE

Yes, you said.

 FRED

I’m sorry for your loss, too. This …

 (HE gestures at the machine.)

isn’t your fault. You had … other things on your mind. But your company should have sent your back-up to … you know … to stock your machines. This one’s about out, so’s the one upstairs.

 (HORACE says nothing. Beat.)

 FRED (Continued.)

I guess I could go up to the fourth floor.

 (He moves to exit.)

 HORACE

No. Here take this one.

 (HE pulls a Mrs. Freshley from his crate.)

 FRED

Oh. Good. … Thanks. How much do I …

 HORACE

No. Nothing. I know what you did for my wife.

 FRED

I did what I could. We all did.

 HORACE

Yes, I know. I … appreciate it.

 FRED

 I’m really sorry. How’s your baby?

 HORACE

I don’t know. She’s with Allie’s mother.

 (Beat.)

 FELSON

She’s not hurt. Right?

 HORACE

No, I hear she’s healthy.

 FRED

You *hear* she’s healthy. You don’t know?

 HORACE

 (HE stops stocking, looks at FRED for a beat.)

That’s right. I don’t know! I don’t want to be in the same room with her right now.

 (HE goes back to stocking the machine.)

 FELSON

You don’t want to be in the same room with your own daughter?

 HORACE

How is this your business, Felson?

 (Beat.)

How?

 FELSON

Sorry. It’s not my business.

 HORACE

She caused a hell of a lot of damage and a hell of a lot of misery!

 FELSON

But your own daughter …

 HORACE

Would you want to spend time with someone who murdered your wife?

 FRED

I think I’m gonna … get back to work.

 (HE crosses up a few steps, stops, turns.)

You might want to talk to somebody about these feelings you’re having. I could recommend –

 HORACE

No.

 FRED

Call me at this number. Later.

 (HE proffers HIS card.)

 HORACE

No –

 FRED

Just take the card.

 (Beat. HORACE takes it. FRED exits.)

 FELSON

None of my business, of course –

 HORACE

That’s right. It’s not.

 FELSON

But nobody murdered your wife. That little baby didn’t even know what was going on –

 HORACE

I accept death. I mean, I have no choice. None of us do.

 FELSON

I know. My mother –

 HORACE

This isn’t about your mother.

 FELSON

I’m just sayin’ –

 HORACE

How old was she?

 FELSON

My mother?

 HORACE

Yes. How old was she?

 FELSON

When she died?

 HORACE

Of course, when she died.

 FELSON

Eighty-seven.

 HORACE

That kind of death I understand. Eighty-seven. She lived a very long time. I’m sure she didn’t want to go, but that’s the deal: you gotta die. Allie was twenty-eight. Twenty-eight years old! We were just getting started.

 FELSON

Not everyone can make it to 87. Soldiers die real young. So do –

 HORACE

Please!! Don’t tell me about soldiers. You know what gets me? She was dying. Dying. Right down that hall! While I was standing here. Oblivious. Stocking this shit into a machine! Talking about honey buns and water meters!

 (HE slams a Mrs. Freshley to the floor.)

Now what the hell can that mean?!

 FELSON

It doesn’t mean anything. It’s like … it just happened. You couldn’t know.

 HORACE

And here I am … still stocking Mrs. Freshley … and she … she disappeared. Pffft. Just like that. Out of my life. Out of the world. How can that happen? So fast, so … I think I killed her.

 FELSON

What!?

 HORACE

I think –

 FELSON

I heard you. You just said you were stocking this machine when she …

 HORACE

Earlier. I was tickling her. She fell.

 FELSON

An accident. Little thing like that couldn’t --

 HORACE

Yeah. An accident.

 FELSON

You don’t know that had anything to do with it.

 HORACE

She was rushed here the next day.

 FELSON

People die. You have to get over it, or …

 (Beat.)

 HORACE

Yeah? Or what?

 FELSON

Or … I don’t know what. You just gotta get over it. When my mother --

 HORACE

Was your family there?

 FELSON

When my mother … ?

 HORACE

Yes.

 FELSON

Yes. We were all there. My old man sang to her.

 HORACE

That nurse …

 (HE gestures off.)

 HORACE (Continued.)

He was the only one with Allie. He was beating on her chest, trying to keep her heart going. I wonder if she knew … I wonder if she was still … in there … You know? Who was she at that moment?

 (Beat.)

 FELSON

Who was she? What? What does that …?

 HORACE

Did her personality stay? Or did she turn into something … transitional? Like some kind of spirit? Was she on a journey … or not on one … I don’t know. But I do know I was standing right here babbling about honey buns while she was dying right down the hall.

 FELSON

When I was dying, I saw this light tunnel that they always talk about. And I just felt like my regular self, only happier.

 HORACE

She disappeared. I hope she went somewhere good, but I’m afraid she just went away. Pfft.

 FELSON

I’m sorry for your loss.

 HORACE

Don’t say that any more.

 FELSON

I don’t know what to say …

 HORACE

There’s nothing to say. There’s just … nothing.

 FELSON

Yeah. … Yeah. Well. Could I ….

 (HE gestures at the machine.)

 HORACE

Life goes on, huh? What do you want? A bun?

 FELSON

What?

 HORACE

A Mrs. Freshley. Is that what you want?

 FELSON

Yeah, that’s what I –

 (HORACE shoves a Mrs. Freshley at FELSON.)

 HORACE

Here. On the house. Now, leave me alone. I got to get caught up.

 FELSON

Sure. Sure. Thanks for the –

 HORACE

You’re welcome.

 (Beat. FELSON begins cross up, off.)

 FELSON

Mrs. Freshley.

(HE exits. HORACE slams a few more Mrs. Freshley’s

into the machine. Suddenly, HE collapses in tears.

Crossfade to bed. Curtain is gathered at the head of the bed. We see ESTHER pacing. She holds a bouquet. FELSON enters to HER. He’s eating a Mrs. Freshley.)

 FELSON

You! What are you doing here? Wait! Don’t even think about it, lady! You’re never touching my feet again!

 ESTHER

 (SHE proffers flowers.)

No, no. I simply want to apologize –

 FELSON

I don’t want your flowers!

 (HE knocks them from HER hand. SHE scrambles to

 pick them up.)

 ESTHER

And ask your forgiveness –

 FELSON

You trying to bribe me?

 ESTHER

Of course not.

 (Beat.)

You had an infection, Mr. Felson, one that I missed –

 FELSON

You’re telling me you made a mistake?

 ESTHER

I’m telling you that accidents happen. You of all people should know that –

 FELSON

What’s that supposed to mean?

 ESTHER

Your accident --

 FELSON

My lawyer says I shouldn’t talk to you at all.

 ESTHER

Oh. You have a lawyer.

 FELSON

Damn right, I have a lawyer. I got seven-and-a-half toes left, lady! Seven-and-a-half! Do you know what I do for a living?

 (Beat.)

Do you?

 ESTHER

No I don’t –

 FELSON

 (Mockingly.)

“No I don’t.”

 FELSON (Continued.)

I’m a meter reader –

 (Involuntary chuckle from ESTHER.)

 FELSON (Continued.)

You think that’s funny?

 ESTHER

No, no. It … it ‘s just that it rhymes. Meter reader.

 FELSON

It’s not funny.

 ESTHER

No.

 (SHE fights a giggle gathering in HER breast.)

No, It’s not funny. At all.

 FELSON

 It kept me on my feet all day! I walked … 15 miles every day. How am I supposed to do that now?

 ESTHER

I suppose –

 FELSON

Don’t bother. I’ll tell you the answer: I *won’t* be able to do it any more! Thanks to you.

 ESTHER

It was an accident, a terrible accident. I want to help with your expenses. I … I’ll …

 (SHE blurts the rest of the sentence.)

I’ll cover whatever your insurance doesn’t pay for. All of it. It won’t cost you anything. Not a cent.

 FELSON

Geez, thanks, lady. You going to do my job for me, too?

 (Beat.)

Because I sure as hell can’t!

 ESTHER

I can help you find another one. One that doesn’t require you to be on your feet all day. I have connections … friends who can help.

 FELSON

How kind. You’re going to do all this for me. And all I have to do in return is … what?

 ESTHER

Not sue me.

 FELSON

My lawyer tells me I can get a lot of money –

 ESTHER

That will take years. And you could wind up with nothing.

 FELSON

I don’t think so. I got a real good lawyer, that TV lawyer – you know the one -- who says “We don’t get paid until you get paid.”

 ESTHER

What they say on TV is quite different from what happens in reality, Mr. Felson.

 FELSON

They’re not asking for any money up front which makes me think they gotta win – or they don’t get paid at all. They’re not gonna let that happen. How’s that for reality?

 ESTHER

I could lose my job, my livelihood.

 (SHE bows HER head, HER voice breaks.)

My life would be over.

 (Beat.)

Don’t do this to me. Please?

 FELSON

You willing to put all those promises in writing?

 ESTHER

 (SHE looks up.)

What? Yes, of course. Certainly.

 FELSON

Well, I guess I could think about it …

 ESTHER

Oh, thank you, Mr. Felson –

 (SHE crosses to HIM, takes both HIS hands,

 kisses one of them.)

 FELSON

Wait just a minute. I said I’d think about it.

 ESTHER

Yes, of course. Whatever I can do to convince you …

 FELSON

There is one thing –

 ESTHER

Anything. Name it.

 FELSON

I want to see your boobs.

 (SHE recoils.)

 ESTHER

What?

 FELSON

You heard me. Let me see ‘em. Or no deal.

 ESTHER

Have you lost your mind? You … you creep –

 FELSON

Creep? You were just kissing my hands.

 ESTHER

I came in here hoping we could discuss this like two reasonable adults --

 FELSON

Get out of my room.

 ESTHER

Mr. Felson –

 FELSON

Or open your blouse.

 (Neither moves nor speaks for several beats.

 Finally, ESTHER – who can be facing upstage

 if director chooses – slowly unbuttons HER blouse,

 opens it.)

 FELSON (Cont.)

Take off the bra.

 (Beat. SHE just as slowly takes off her bra.)

 FELSON (Cont.)

Yeah, those are very lovely.

 (SHE starts to cover up.)

 FELSON (Cont.)

No! Not just yet.

(HE crosses to HER, suddenly puts both HIS hands

on HER breasts.)

 ESTHER

 (SHE slaps HIM. Hard.)

Don’t you touch me!

 (FELSON recoils, gathers himself, crosses to the exit.)

 FELSON

Fine. I’ll see you in court. Doctor.

 (FELSON exits. Then HE looks back in.)

I do admire your tits.

(FELSON exits. ESTHER doesn’t move. Then SHE clutches HER blouse to her bosom, sits on the bed, looks out. Crossfade to vending alcove. It’s a few days later. HORACE is working. Enter to him SYLVIA.)

 SYLVIA

(SHE’s carrying roses.)

Hi. Can you tell me where 256A is in this labyrinth?

 HORACE

Is it a patient’s room?

 SYLVIA

Yes. Oh. Are those Mrs. Freshley honey buns?

 HORACE

They are.

 SYLVIA

I haven’t had one of those since my mother was a patient here. She hated the food, so every time I visited, I bought her a Mrs. Freshley. She loved them. I did too. Can I get one from you since you’re right here?

 HORACE

I’m not supposed to – but sure, of course. Two dollars.

 SYLVIA

Whew. Inflation.

 HORACE

I think 256A is down that hall, though I’m not positive.

 (FRED enters, crosses left to right.)

 SYLVIA

Excuse me.

 (FRED stops. HORACE stocks machine.)

 FRED

 (As HE turns to SYLVIA.)

Yes?

 (HE likes the way SYLVIA looks, becomes

 instantly friendly. HE crosses to HER.)

How can I help you?

 (HE touches HER arm.)

 SYLVIA

I’m looking for a patient’s room. 256A.

 FRED

 (As HE points.)

Just past the nurse’s station on the right. Mmmm, I like roses.

 SYLVIA

So does my husband. Want one?

 (SYLVIA offers a rose.)

 FRED

 (HE takes the rose.)

Darn. You’re married.

 SYLVIA

I should have said ex-husband.

 FRED

Oh good.

 SYLVIA

My, my. A flirtatious doctor.

 FRED

Actually, I’m a flirtatious nurse. You smell good. Like the roses.

 SYLVIA

Thank you, sir.

 FRED

256A is right down this hall, but straight lines can be tricky.

 SYLVIA

Oh my. A straight line. That *is* tricky, but I think I’ll be able to manage it.

 FRED

I really think you need an escort.

 (HE offers his arm. SHE takes it.)

 SYLVIA

My hero.

 (THEY exit as HORACE’s phone rings.)

 HORACE

Hello … no, at least four hours … Thanks, thanks. But I have plans. … Can you mail them to me? … Yes, I’ll sign them and return them immediately. …. Is that her? … Why is she crying? … No, I don’t want to see her. …. I know she’s my daughter, dammit! … Sorry. I’m sorry. … No, no. I can’t hold on. I’ve got customers waiting …. Listen to me, please! Just send the papers. I’ll sign them and … No! No pictures. Just -- … Hello? Hello?

 (Crossfade to bed. A medical illustration depicting a woman’s breasts appears on the upstage wall. The illustration rotates as did the foot at top of Act I. ESTHER is in bed with FRED, though audience doesn’t know FRED is there until HE reaches out to hug HER. Curtain is gathered at the head of the bed.)

 VOICE

Although the primary biologic function of the breast is to make milk, the breast has for many centuries been a symbol of femininity and beauty --

 (ESTHER jerks awake with a gasp as at the top

 of the play. Illustration disappears. Beat. FRED

 sits up, hugs HER.)

 FRED

Easy. Easy. Same old dream?

 ESTHER

Close enough.

 FRED

You’ve got to let it go. He’s dead.

 ESTHER

I’m not worried about him. I’m worried about me.

 FRED

What does that mean?

 ESTHER

All those years of training. For what? I didn’t have any great passion, any great

 ESTHER (Continued.)

vision pulling me through to … to what? I don’t even know. To make my father

happy? What did I …? I mean what in God’s name was I thinking? I have no idea.

Now, I could lose it all. And you know what? Suddenly, it matters.

 FRED

You’re not going to lose it, Esther.

 ESTHER

I don’t know what’s real any more.

 FRED

Us. We’re real.

 ESTHER

Are we?

 FRED

What does *that* mean?

 ESTHER

I don’t know what it means … Felson has filed suit –

 FRED

I know. I tried to stop him. I forced him to see the irony of his actions – you know --

agonizing over Miss Johnson’s suit while he was almost deliriously happy about

suing you. He said he didn’t give a damn, so I jacked him up against the vending

machine –

 ESTHER

You did that for me…?

 FRED

Of course, I did. I told him he should apologize to Miss Johnson and beg her

forgiveness. Then, in the same spirit, he should forgive you.

 ESTHER

 (SHE hugs FRED.)

Thank you for caring. ... But it didn’t work.

 FRED

I know. I did my best.

 ESTHER

So did I.

 FRED

The insurance will –

 ESTHER

I know. I know. It’s just … I’m in the wrong life. I’m in the wrong life.

 FRED

Then find the right one, Esther. Life’s too short to waste time on something

you’re not interested in. Something that causes nightmares.

 ESTHER

You wouldn’t mind?

 FRED

Why would I mind?

 ESTHER

I don’t want t lose you.

 FRED

You’re not going to lose me. I’m your nurse-boy.

 (THEY have a quiet laugh.)

 ESTHER

Maybe I *will* teach.

 FRED

You do know what teachers earn, right?

 ESTHER

I mean at Southern. I’ve certainly got the credentials.

 FRED

I wouldn’t count on any new positions opening up. Once the university and the

 medical center combine, positions will be cut, not added.

 ESTHER

My father’s name carries a lot of weight. I’m pretty confident I could get on faculty.

Plus I think my days here are numbered.

 FRED

Here and there will be the same after consolidation.

 ESTHER

They can’t fire me, and I think they’ll be happy to get me out of the OR.

 FRED

Then do it. I’ve never slept with a teacher.

 ESTHER

I just need to get through this Felson mess.

 FRED

Leave that to the lawyers and your insurance. Meantime, can you give me a little

anatomy lesson? Hmmm? Teacher?

 (HE tries to pull HER into an embrace.

 SHE resists.)

 FRED (Continued.)

What?

 ESTHER

What about us?

 FRED

What *about* us?

 ESTHER

What if I wanted something … more permanent?

 FRED

I’m not going anywhere.

 (Again HE tries to pull HER into an embrace.

 Again, SHE resists.)

 ESTHER

You know what I mean.

 FRED

You want me to move in?

 ESTHER

Not exactly.

 FRED

My place is tiny, Babe. No place to hide.

 ESTHER

You want to hide from me?

 FRED

No. But we all need private time, right?

 ESTHER

I don’t. Not from you.

 FRED

Esther, where is all this coming from?

 ESTHER

I want to be married –

 FRED

Married?!

 (HE rises quickly from the bed.)

 ESTHER

… have a family.

 FRED

Whoa! Slow down!

 ESTHER

Do you love me?

 FRED

Do I …? Do I … love you? Yes, of course I love you.

 (Beat.)

In my own way. You know.

 ESTHER

In your own way? What does that mean?

 FRED

It means all this is too sudden. It means you need to be sure you want this for the

right reasons.

 ESTHER

The right reasons --?

 FRED

Wait. I don’t want to be an escape from a lawsuit. Or …. or an oasis from your

nightmares. I mean it’s good I can help you with those, but that’s not a reason to get

married. … Married? You want to get married? Aren’t you happy like this? We

make each other laugh. We have great sex.

 (ESTHER begins crying.)

 FRED (Continued.)

Wait. Wait. Wait. I might not have said that right. It’s just that we’ve never talked

 about marriage, and you’re already talking about having children.

 (Suddenly HE turns to HER.)

You’re not pregnant?

 (Beat.)

Esther, are you pregnant?

 ESTHER

What if I were?

 FRED

 (Beat. HE crosses to the bed.)

There are several answers to that. We could terminate –

 ESTHER

No! I could never do that.

 FRED

We could give the baby up for adoption –

 ESTHER

I don’t think I could do that either.

 (SHE cries again.)

 FRED

 (HE takes HER in HIS arms.)

Then I’d marry you. I guess I’d have to.

 FRED (Continued.)

 (Beat.)

Are you? Pregnant?

 ESTHER

Don’t worry. I’m not pregnant.

 FRED

 (Clearly relieved.)

I’m not worried. It’s just not the best reason to get married. Listen. This is a lot to

think about. So let me mull it over for a day or two, ok?

 ESTHER

I certainly don’t want to force you into anything.

 FRED

You couldn’t force me. But this is an important step. That’s why I want a few days

to think it over. OK?

 ESTHER

 (SHE smiles.)

Ok.

 FRED

Now about that anatomy lesson ...

 (THEY fall into an embrace as we crossfade to

vending machine. Five weeks later. HORACE is sitting on an upturned crate eating. FELSON, who is now well-dressed in street clothes, stands right. HE has a black eye and a bandaged nose. HE has a walking cane.)

 FELSON

And I got the artificial toes to boot.

 HORACE

Is that a pun?

 FELSON

What?

 HORACE

Toes. Boot. You know.

 FELSON

What?

 HORACE

Never mind. Sure was a fast decision. What’s it been? A month?

 FELSON

Five weeks. They settled outta court. My lawyer wanted to push it further, but I said no. I got what I needed: got a new truck, got my toes, paid for the fire hydrant, got Miz Johnson off my conscience –

 HORACE

Miss Johnson?

 FELSON

The old lady whose legs I broke.

 HORACE

How much did she get you for?

 FELSON

She never sued me, so I bought her a new dog.

 HORACE

Oh. Good.

 FELSON

I thought so. She didn’t.

 HORACE

No?

 FELSON

She told me to get the hell off her property. And to take the dog with me. So I did.

What can I tell you? I tried.

 (Beat.)

You wouldn’t want to buy a pit bull would you? Two years old. Has all his shots, nearly housebroken. Cheap.

 HORACE

You bought that old lady a two-year-old pit bull?

 FELSON

He woulda calmed down. Woman’s touch is all he needs.

 HORACE

Why don’t you keep him?

 FELSON

Can’t leave him in the same room with Jasper.

 HORACE

Your son?

 FELSON

 (HE laughs.)

I don’t have any kids. Don’t even have a wife. First one up and died … after putting me through four-and-a-half years of pure hell. Second one left me seven months ago – though she sure has been trying to get back with me. All of a sudden, she shows up with a bunch of roses, says she …

 (Air quotes.)

“loves me,” says she can’t live without me. She heard about my settlement. That’s what she can’t live without.

 HORACE

So Jasper is your second wife’s son?

 FELSON

 (HE laughs.)

No, Sylvia’s barren. Jasper’s my new Beagle. That damned pit bull tries to kill him every time he sees him. Oh, I almost forgot. I quit my job.

 HORACE

I was wondering what you were doing here in the middle of the day. So. Lucky you. No more water meters. Mrs. Johnson decides not to sue --

 FELSON

She didn’t decide not to sue. I paid her a visit, gave her the flowers Sylvia gave me,

 (HE assumes the phony voice HE used

 with Miss Johnson.)

and begged her to have mercy on a poor Christian soul whose wife died. She went for it.

 HORACE

That’s pretty cold.

 FELSON

I did what I had to do.

 (Beat.)

I wouldn’t have sued that foot doctor either, but I got expenses.

 HORACE

You mean you *had* expenses.

 FELSON

Yeah. Had expenses. No more water meters for me. Got enough money now to cruise for seven or eight years. Maybe I’ll invest in this bar I used to drink at. I don’t know. Plenty of time. Things look good. Well … guess I’ll shove off. Glad I caught you. Just wanted to see how you’re getting on.

 (Beat.)

How’s your … family?

 HORACE

 (Shortly.)

Fine.

 FELSON

Your daughter?

 HORACE

Her grandmother keeps her while I’m working.

 FELSON

But you see her now?

 HORACE

Her grandmother wants to adopt her.

 FELSON

You’re not going to let her, are you?

 HORACE

It was my idea. I … signed the papers two days back.

 FELSON

But you’ll visit her, spend time –

 HORACE

I don’t want to talk about this right now!

 (Beat.)

 FELSON

Maybe some of that poetry you’re memorizing will help you out. You know, if there really is truth and beauty there like you said, maybe –

 HORACE

No.

 (Beat.)

I don’t read poetry any more. I sell Mrs. Freshley honey buns. And coffee. And candy.

 FELSON

Well …

 HORACE

Well …

 FELSON

 (As he crosses off left.)

You take care.

 HORACE

Yeah.

 (HE calls FELSON back.)

 HORACE (Continued.)

Felson.

 FELSON

Yeah?

 HORACE

What happened to your nose?

 FELSON

Got in a fight.

 HORACE

Who with?

 FELSON

 (Beat.)

You don’t know her.

 (HE exits.)

 HORACE

Maybe not, but I think I’d like her.

(HORACE gathers HIS materials, begins his cross

off right as ESTHER approaches the vending

machine. She carries an envelope. THEY nod

at each other as they pass without speaking.

ESTHER buys a Mrs. Freshley as HER phone

rings. SHE answers.)

 ESTHER

Hello?

 (SHE looks around to be sure she’s alone.)

… Hi. … You upstairs? … Ummm. I’d Love to, but I can’t today. … I’m sure. … How about my place tonight? I’ll cook. … Oh. OK. Tomorrow then. … Yes, I’m positive. I’ve been called to a meeting -- … Why yes. I’m on my way there now. How did you know? … Oh. Yes, I guess I did get one.

 (SHE looks at envelope in HER hand.)

Do you still have a job? … I don’t know. I haven’t opened mine yet. What did they --? … Wow. That’s impressive. Of the whole department? … How about you? That’s wonderful, Fred. Just wonderful. Congratulations. … I’m going to. I just need to be alone when I open it -- … because it could be bad news. The Felson suit cost the

hospital a good bit of -- … No, it’s my fault, all right. Well, let me … Yes. I’ll see you tomorrow night.

 (SHE hangs up, stares for a beat at the envelope

in HER hand, opens it, reads. Finally, SHE looks

up, betraying no emotion. Then SHE continues

HER cross off left. SHE stops, turns abruptly,

Quickly crosses back the way SHE came.

 Crossfade to bed where FRED is pouring drinks

from the cough medicine bottle into two paper

cups. Curtain is drawn around bed except for an opening on stage left side)

 ESTHER

(SHE knocks. From the dark.)

Fred?

 FRED

 (HE jumps, spills Scotch.)

Oh my god. OK, I need quiet. Absolute quiet.

 (HE takes a step or two left with two cups

 in his hands.)

Esther, is that you?

 ESTHER

Yes. Let me in.

 (FRED crosses to the edge of the light as if at the

 door. ESTHER enters.)

 ESTHER (Continued.)

Thank God you’re still here.

 FRED

You said you couldn’t come –

 ESTHER

 (SHE throws herself into HIS arms.)

I opened my letter.

 FRED

And …?

 ESTHER

I won’t be teaching at Southern. They don’t want me. I’ve been reassigned to patient relations. Oh Fred.

 (SHE cries.)

 FRED

Wait now. Patient relations. That could be –

 ESTHER

Horrible! I can’t see patients as a medical doctor. I’m to be an assistant administrator – ***assistant*** administrator …

 (SHE opens the letter, reads.)

 ESTHER (Continued.)

 with administrative responsibility for housekeeping and security.

 (SHE looks up.)

Housekeeping?

 (SHE reads.)

blah, blah … serves as a liaison between patients and/or their families, hospital staff, administration, and practitioners as needed.

 FRED

Well … that sounds –

 ESTHER

Horrible! They know they can’t fire me, so they’re simply going to wait until I resign. Or lose my mind. What am I going to do, Fred? Help me. Please.

 (SHE looks at cup in FRED’s hand.)

What’s that?

 FRED

Uhh … it’s Scotch.

 (HE suddenly offers it.)

For you. Here.

 ESTHER

Thanks.

 (SHE takes it, knocks it back.)

 FRED

 (Offers the other.)

Here.

 ESTHER

Thanks.

(ESTHER slams this drink back also. SHE now

 holds a paper cup in each hand, though SHE is

hardly aware of holding them.)

 FRED

I’ve got one or two things I’ve just got to accomplish, so why don’t you go home,

 (HE begins easing HER toward the door.)

take a nice hot bath, and I’ll join you tonight after all. We can … talk.

 ESTHER

Are you trying to get rid of me?

 FRED

No. No, of course not. I just have some things to do, and you’re upset. And –

 ESTHER

Upset!? I’m devastated! My life is falling apart! And your advice is that I should take a hot fucking bath!?

 FRED

As a first step. Baby steps first. You know. Baby steps, then bigger steps –

 ESTHER

What the hell are you talking about?

 (Beat.)

Do you intend to marry me, Fred? Ever?

 FRED

Well… I … I --

 SYLVIA

 (From behind the bed curtain.)

I’d like to know also, Fred. Do you intend to marry her?

 (Beat as everything stops.)

 ESTHER

Who is that?

 (SHE crosses to bed, throws back curtain.)

 FRED

Wait. Wait a minute!

 ESTHER

 (To SYLVIA.)

Who the hell are you?

 SYLVIA

Who the hell are you?

 FRED

I can explain this –

 ESTHER

 (To SYLVIA.)

Are you naked under that sheet?

 SYLVIA

 (As SHE gathers the sheet more tightly about her.)

Why? Are you interested?

 ESTHER

 (SHE looks down at the cups SHE has been holding

throughout. Then SHE looks at SYLVIA, then up at FRED.)

You son-of-a-bitch!

 (SHE throws both cups at HIM. They fall

 harmlessly to the ground because they’re

 empty.)

 FRED

She …. she … she … she’s … part of a patient’s family …. She was worried. I was helping her. Right, Sylvia?

 SYLVIA

What the hell are you talking about?

 FRED

 (Sick little laugh.)

She’s quite a kidder. She’s --

 ESTHER

Shut up! Just shut up! I’m such a fool …

 (SHE starts to cross off, stops, turns.)

What did you say her name is?

 FRED

Not important. Doesn’t matter.

 ESTHER

Sylvia was it?

 SYLVIA

What’s the difference?

 ESTHER

Where have I heard that name?

 FRED

Common name. Common name.

 ESTHER

You look so familiar. Where did you – ? You’re the one who popped Felson in the nose up in 256A … Are you Felson’s wife?

 SYLVIA

Ex-wife. How do you know that cheap son-of-a-bitch?

 ESTHER

It’s a very long story.

 FRED

Everybody calm down. We can work right through this misunderstanding --

 ESTHER

Let me shake your hand.

 FRED

If we just discuss this like -- You want to shake her hand?

 (ESTHER and SYLVIA shake hands.)

 FRED (Continued.)

Jesus. I’m in the twilight zone.

 ESTHER

That was a heck of a shot.

 SYLVIA

Thanks. Broke his nose. By the way, This jerk …

 (SHE gestures at FRED.)

told me he was coming off a bad divorce. Plus he got me at a time when I needed someone to … well, doesn’t matter. Hand me my clothes, Fred.

 FRED

Sure. See? We can all get along if we just talk –

 (HE gathers HER clothes, hands them to HER.)

 ESTHER

 (To FRED.)

I start my new appointment tomorrow …

 FRED

That’s the spirit.

 ESTHER

 (SHE takes the reassignment letter from

 somewhere and reads.)

Let’s see … “serves as a liaison between patients and/or their families, hospital staff, administration, and practitioners as needed.”

 (SHE looks at FRED.)

Serves as liaison between family and staff. You would be staff, right, Fred?

 FRED

Now, Esther, there’s no need to meddle.

 ESTHER

Shut up. I’m sure there’s a clause in my charge somewhere that deals with staff seducing patients.  I’ll ask about it tomorrow at the staff meeting, just to be sure.

 FRED

Esther –

 ESTHER

 (SHE crosses to HIM, feints throwing a punch.

 FRED flinches. SHE looks HIM in the eye.)

Goodbye … Frank.

 (SHE exits.)

 FRED

Just a minute! Wait! Wait!

 (FRED turns to SYLVIA.)

I need a drink. How about you?

 SYLVIA

Hold my clothes for a second, will you, Frank?

 FRED

Yes, I will.

 (HE takes HER clothes. SHE grasps HER sheet

 with one hand.)

 FRED (Continued.)

It’s Fred.

 SYLVIA

Whatever.

 (SHE hits FRED in the nose with a solid

 right cross, which sends HIM sprawling.)

 FRED

My nose! My God! I think you broke my nose!

(Crossfade to vending machine. Two weeks later. ESTHER enters in a business suit. SHE holds a cup of steaming coffee in one of those 7-11 logo cups. SHE crosses to the machine, studies the selections. Enter to HER, HORACE. HE carries a tray of supplies.)

 ESTHER

(SHE looks over HER shoulder, sees HORACE.)

You here to restock the snacks?

 HORACE

Where’d you get the coffee?

 ESTHER

Pardon?

HORACE

The coffee. Where’d you get it?

 ESTHER

(SHE glances at coffee vending machine.)

I brought it with. Why?

 HORACE

You brought it with?

 ESTHER

Me.

 HORACE

Then why didn’t you say “I brought it with me”?

 ESTHER

It’s just an expression… Are you going to restock this machine?

 HORACE

You people kill me. With your cute little expressions –

 ESTHER

I don’t intend to defend my syntax to someone like you. I asked you a simple --

 HORACE

You don’t mean me, then. You mean someone *like* me.

 ESTHER

What the hell is this? You going to restock this machine or not?

 HORACE

Well, that’s why I brought all this stuff with.

ESTHER

Look, buddy, I’m a very busy --

HORACE

My name’s not Buddy.

(ESTHER leans into HORACE, looks at the name tag on HIS shirt.)

ESTHER

Look, Horace, I’m a very busy woman.

HORACE

We’re not on a first name basis, lady.

ESTHER

Doctor.

HORACE

Oh. I call you doctor; you call me Horace. Is that how it goes?

ESTHER

Who’s your supervisor?

 HORACE

Who’s yours?

ESTHER

I *am* the supervisor.

 HORACE

So am I.

(Beat. As the two study each other.)

ESTHER

Look. Let’s start over. Shall we?

 HORACE

Sure. Fine.

ESTHER

I bought my coffee at the 7-11. I’m sorry if that offends --

HORACE

No. It’s OK.

ESTHER

Are you going to restock this machine?

HORACE

People at the 7-11 don’t brew coffee. They throw grounds into a pot.

 ESTHER

Look, I live alone, so I don’t take the time --

 HORACE

I live alone, too. But I make my coffee at night, set the timer for early morning and –

ESTHER

How clever. Gosh, I never would have thought of that.

 (Beat.)

Are you going to restock the machine?

HORACE

Sorry. Didn’t mean to get personal.

ESTHER

Are you going to --?

HORACE

Do you live close to the hospital?

ESTHER

I don’t intend to discuss my personal life with someone like … with you. Are you going to restock the snack machine? All I want from you is a simple yes or no.

HORACE

That would be a simple yes.

ESTHER

I don’t mean to be rude. I’m in a kind of hurry....

HORACE

A *kind* of hurry? What’s a *kind* of hurry?

 ESTHER

Just quit with the semantic cuteness, ok?

(Beat.)

Just quit! And give me a goddamn Mrs. Freshley!

HORACE

Yeah. One goddamn Mrs. Freshley coming up.

ESTHER

Listen, I’m sorry. I’ve had a bad … I...May I call you “Horace”?

HORACE

Go right ahead. May I call you “Doc”?

ESTHER

Doc is fine.

(As SHE points at the tray on the floor.)

Horace, do you mind selling me one of those Mrs. Freshley honey buns?

HORACE

That’s why I’m here, Doc.

ESTHER

Good. Thanks.

(ESTHER bends to fetch a Mrs. Freshley from the tray. HORACE moves the tray back with HIS foot.)

HORACE

Whoa. Just a minute, Doc. There’s a Mrs. Freshley in the machine.

ESTHER

But I just thought...

HORACE

You just thought you’d get the fresh one from me and --

ESTHER

So you’re implying the ones in the machine are stale...

HORACE

There is nothing wrong with the Mrs. Freshleys in the machine.

ESTHER

Then why are you replacing them?

HORACE

I’m not replacing them. These Mrs. Freshleys...

(HE gestures at the ones in the tray.)

 go *behind* those Mrs. Freshleys.

(HORACE gestures at the one in the machine.)

ESTHER

So by the time these Mrs. Freshleys get to the front they’ll be stale also.

HORACE

The expiration date on these babies is March.

 (OR WHATEVER MONTH DIRECTOR CHOOSES.)

ESTHER

This is April.

HORACE

*Next* March.

ESTHER

Look since you’re here and I’m here –

HORACE

What kinda doctor are you?

ESTHER

(Beat.)

I’m a podiatrist.

HORACE

You work on people’s feet?

ESTHER

Yes. Anything wrong with that?

HORACE

No. It’s like being a real doctor, isn’t it?

ESTHER

A real –? What’s that supposed to mean?

HORACE

Well...nothing. Podiatrist. Doctor. Whatever.

ESTHER

There are MDs, DMDs, DPMs, Ph.Ds, Ed.Ds, and we’re all doctors, OK?! And podiatrists are --

(ESTHER smacks HER forehead.)

Why am I explaining this?

HORACE

Wouldn’t know. Doc.

ESTHER

...because you obviously know nothing about the morphology of the human foot.

(Beat. As THEY look at each other.)

HORACE

You mind taking a look at my swollen bursa sometime, Doc?

ESTHER

I assume you think you’re making a point here...

HORACE

You buy your coffee at the 7-11! You call me Buddy, you want to eat outta my tray --

ESTHER

Why the Hell do we keep discussing the 7-11?

HORACE

I sell coffee!

ESTHER

Your coffee comes out of a damned machine!

HORACE

All coffee comes out of a damned machine! And so do the Mrs. Freshleys you want so badly!

ESTHER

Who’s been looking at your bursa?

HORACE

Huh?

ESTHER

Somebody at the 7-11? A clinic somewhere?

HORACE

What are you talking about?

ESTHER

You got bunions right?

HORACE

Damn right, I got bunions. You would, too, if you had to –

ESTHER

Well, somebody’s been looking at ‘em!

HORACE

How the hell do you know?!

ESTHER

Because you would have said bunions! Not swollen bursa!

HORACE

It’s a free country! I can go to whatever foot fixer I want!

ESTHER

Foot *doctor*!

HORACE

Whatever!

ESTHER

You go to whatever foot fixer you want, buddy-boy, and I will buy my coffee wherever I choose!

(SHE takes a long drink.)

Ahhhhh. Delicious.

(In HORACE’s face.)

 Fresh!

HORACE

(HORACE reaches into tray, rips paper off a honey bun, bites into it.)

Ahhhh. Delicious.

(In ESTHER’s face.)

 Fresh!

ESTHER

I demand one of those Mrs. Freshleys!

HORACE

Demand?

(HE stands in front of HIS tray.)

Get one outta the machine!

ESTHER

I’m through playing with you, fellah. Hand one over. Or else!

HORACE

Are you threatening me, foot girl?

ESTHER

Or else, bun-boy. OR ELSE!

(THEY jostle one another, ESTHER trying to get to the tray, HORACE refusing access.)

ESTHER (Continued.)

Give me one of those...!

HORACE

Not a chance!

(HORACE goes into a karate crouch. ESTHER takes a step back.)

HORACE

You better back off, foot girl! I got a green belt in karate!

ESTHER

A *green* belt?

HORACE

Well...I just started. But don’t kid yourself. I’m dangerous.

(HORACE does some kind of awkward karate move involving a spin. ESTHER quickly backs up further, drops HER coffee.)

ESTHER

Look what you’ve done! I could call Security and have you fired, Bun-boy. I could sue you...

HORACE

For what? Bein’ present when you spilled coffee all over yourself?

ESTHER

For threatening a medical professional! A doctor!

HORACE

You want a Mrs. Freshley, Miss Medical Professional –

 ESTHER

DOCTOR medical professional!!

 HORACE

Whatever! You get one outta the machine! Just like everybody else!

(Beat as THEY stare at each other.)

ESTHER

All right. All right, I will.

(SHE steps aside, sweeps HER arm in a grand gesture.)

 ESTHER (Continued.)

Go ahead. Restock. I can wait.

HORACE

(As HE takes out a chain filled with keys.)

Thought you were...

(HE mocks ESTHER.)

...a very busy woman.

ESTHER

I’m not so busy that I can’t wait ‘til you leave -- bun-boy -- and get a fresh Mrs. Freshley out of your fucking machine!

HORACE

Like I said -- foot girl -- these Mrs. Freshleys...

(HE points to the tray.)

 go behind those Mrs. Freshleys. In my fucking machine!!

(HE points to the machine.)

ESTHER

Then I will buy as many fucking Mrs. Freshleys as necessary until I get a fresh fucking Mrs. Freshley!

HORACE

Then allow me to thank you in advance for your kind patronage!

 (Suddenly ESTHER lunges for a Mrs. Freshley. HORACE moves it out of reach, but dangles it tantalizingly close. Each time ESTHER lunges after it, HORACE moves it.)

 ESTHER

Bully! Show-off bastard!

 HORACE

What?

 ESTHER

Never mind! You give me that Mrs. Freshley!

(SHE reaches for the Mrs. Freshley. He pushes HER away. SHE slaps HIM in the face. Hard.)

Give it to me!!

 HORACE

 (HE grabs HER arms, snarls HIS line in HER face.)

Not a chance!!

 (Suddenly, SHE screams and slaps at HIM again. The fight intensifies with slapping and kicking. HORACE simply tries to protect himself, restrain her. Adlibs. This should continue for a minute (or two). Just as suddenly SHE stops fighting. Sobbing, SHE buries HER face in HIS chest.)

 ESTHER

I don’t know what I’m doing. I … What am I …? Are you …?

(Beat. SHE looks up, touches HIS face. HORACE looks into HER eyes; SHE into HIS. SHE puts HER arms around HIS shoulders. Beat. HE puts HIS arms around HER waist. Neither one moves for a beat. Then HORACE turns HER face up to HIS, leans in to kiss HER. Just as HIS mouth touches hers, SHE knees HIM in the groin. HE collapses in agony and drops the Mrs. Freshley. SHE bends, retrieves it. HORACE reaches out, tackles HER. SHE falls to the floor. THEY wrestle desperately. Finally, we hear a loud thud. As HORACE rises, HE releases ESTHER, who rolls into the fetal position facing downstage. SHE lies motionless, eyes closed.)

HORACE

You gotta understand...I don't mean to be... Look. You can't waltz in here with 7-11 coffee and call me Buddy like you’re some kind of queen, and I’m your obedient servant! Like your life is better -- !

 (HE turns away, then turns back.)

And you can’t dunk *my* Mrs. Freshley into your coffee like it's OK, like it doesn't mean anything. This is ... this is all I got left. You understand me?! This is it!! Mrs. Freshley... Mrs. Fuckin’ Freshley!!

 (In a sudden fury, HE hurls the Mrs. Freshleys at upstage

 wall, kicks them, stomps them. Spent, HE stands there. Beat.)

Doc?

(Long silence.)

Doc?

ESTHER

 (Finally.)

What?

HORACE

You OK?

ESTHER

No.

HORACE

Is there anything -- ?

 ESTHER

No.

 HORACE

I just thought …

 ESTHER

Leave me alone.

 HORACE

Right … right. I don’t usually …

 (Beat.)

I’m sorry if I … maybe if we start over –

 ESTHER

Please.

 HORACE

Right … right.

 (HE looks around helplessly. Then HE picks up

 HIS tray and begins gathering the scattered Mrs.

 Freshleys.)

 HORACE

I … I'm not gonna be stocking any Mrs. Freshleys today.

 (Beat.)

 HORACE (Continued.)

Maybe tomorrow. … I don’t know. Maybe tomorrow.

(HORACE, crosses left as if to exit. HE looks back, returns, pauses, then lies down right behind ESTHER in exactly the same posture. HE holds a Mrs. Freshley. ESTHER lies motionless. Then HER hand moves to HIS arm, pulls it over HER breast as one might a comforter. The Mrs. Freshly drops from HIS grasp. ESTHER continues to hold HIS hand. BOTH lie motionless as lights fade to black. A very tight special remains on their feet just before blackout.)

 END OF PLAY