

Cast of Characters

- Roget: A conflicted well-read man.
- Otto: A gangly high-strung man - the youngest of the four.
- Harrison: An angry black man of considerable physical presence - probably oldest of the four.
- Ponzi: A thin knife-like ethnic man.

Time

After 1975.

Setting

A white room. Four white chairs. A white table. A white television set bracketed to the wall. Three white coat racks. One each for Otto, Roget, and Harrison. On the racks - various props and clothing. A green trench coat for Roget is among them. A deck of cards on the table. Possible music: My Daddy's a Hocus Pocus Man.

ACT I

SCENE 1

SETTING: The white room.

AT RISE: The white room unoccupied and unlit.

OTTO

(Offstage. Agitated.)

So who's gonna turn on the TV?!

(Lights up.)

(ROGET enters wearing denim pants, sandals with socks, obvious false facial hair and glasses. He crosses to his coat rack and slips into a long-sleeved blue working man's shirt and his corduroy jacket with patches on the elbows during the following-.)

OTTO

(Offstage.)

Can you tell me that? It's a simple dang question! We don't turn on the TV, all heck will break lose, I promise you! Can't anybody hear me?!!

ROGET

(Addresses the camera - the red light above the audiences' heads.)

Yes, I can see by the red light you're watching us. Listening in. Hoping to get at our secrets. Well, here are the facts: My mother remained conscious during the entire - incident. When the paramedics arrived, they took her to the trauma center at Parkview Hospital where the attending physician counted 30 puncture wounds. Not twenty-seven or 3.14 or the square root of the hypotenuse of some obtuse triangle. Thirty. Of course, this - accounting weighed heavily at the trial.

(Pulls a pre-knotted tie from a pocket and puts the tie on during -.)

OTTO

(From offstage.)

It has to be on when I get in there!

ROGET

The headlines in the morning edition of the local newspaper proclaimed: Woman Found Perforated. I thought that - distasteful.

(MORE)

ROGET (CONT'D)

(Pulls tie up, but not snug.)
But what isn't nowadays?

(OTTO bursts in wearing a bold primary color t-shirt, garish boxers, knee-high socks and red high-top sneakers. Except for his mouth, he's in clown makeup.)

OTTO

Look!

(Referring to the TV.)
Just like I thought. Dumb as a stone.
(Speaks to the red light -.)
I'm telling you, I won't be responsible. It doesn't come on, don't blame me for what happens next!
(Turns and sees ROGET.)

Hey, you.

ROGET

She survived, by the way. The question is - why did I do it?

OTTO

Hello, there's someone else in the room.

ROGET

The therapist already?

OTTO

Yeah, drop your drawers and I'll check for brain damage.
(Crosses to his coat rack.)

ROGET

So you know Freud's work?

OTTO

(Dons his oversized clown pants with suspenders on-.)
Is that funny?

ROGET

Funny ha-ha or funny -.

OTTO

Nobody likes a clown, Mister.

ROGET

Roget.

OTTO

Whatever.

I thought everybody -. ROGET

You thought wrong. We've got to turn on the TV! OTTO

How hard can it be? ROGET

Again with the smart mouth. We need a Monday! OTTO

Who? ROGET

Yeah. Who? That's what I want to know.
(Calls offstage.) OTTO
Harrison! Ponzi!

Forget your meds? ROGET

Great. Where is everybody!?! OTTO

How many does it take for god's sake? ROGET

You're sick; you know that? OTTO

Obviously. ROGET

Look at it. Dead to us. What are we going to do? OTTO
(Glances at the TV.)

Why don't you turn it on yourself? ROGET

I'm Tuesday you half-wit. OTTO

Is that your name? ROGET

Otto's my name. Tuesday's my day to turn on the TV. And today is -. OTTO
(Waits for ROGET to finish.)

Monday? ROGET

OTTO
Which you may or may not be.

ROGET
Who decides?

OTTO
Can you be bonkers and stupid?

ROGET
I'd like to think that impossible.

OTTO
Thinking is what got us in here, Mister. And slapstick.

ROGET
You - are a lunatic.

OTTO
No kidding! Oh boy. This is not gonna to be pretty, Roger.

ROGET
Roget.

OTTO
(To the red light.)
It's gonna get nasty in here! Prepare the body bags. Call the
cops or switch that -.
(Referring to the TV.)
There. See how it mocks us. Stop it, teaser!
(Turns on ROGET.)
Do something, Roger!

ROGET
(More pointedly.)
Roget.

OTTO
I'm telling you, Roger, the sky will fall.

ROGET
(On top of OTTO'S line.)
It's Roget, not Roger!

OTTO
(Reined in.)
Roget? Sounds like a salad dressing.

ROGET
It's French.

OTTO
What a surprise. Are you queer?

Just enough. ROGET

Who isn't? I wore leotards once. A big mistake. OTTO

Too tight? ROGET

NONE OF YOUR MONKEY BUSINESS! OTTO

You mentioned it. ROGET

Nice try, *doctor*, but we're closed for business. OTTO
(Plays the following as a mime.)
(Closes a door.)
Hey, wait just a minute.
(Defines a wall.)
Hold on.
(Peaks around the wall.)
Who are you, really?

Roget -. ROGET

Not your name. That doesn't tell me spit. OTTO

It's all I have. Anymore. ROGET

What? No identifying marks? OTTO
(As a tough interrogator with fake cigar.)

A childhood scar. ROGET

Dental work? OTTO

Here. ROGET

A hitch in your walk? OTTO

Does it show? ROGET

OTTO
A filthy habit?

ROGET
Nothing I would share with you.

OTTO
Secret lives?

ROGET
Several.

OTTO
A grim childhood?

ROGET
It goes without saying.

OTTO
(As himself.)
There! One in a million. A billion!

ROGET
A billion what for god's sake?

OTTO
Suspects.

ROGET
This is ludicrous. Absolutely ludicrous.

OTTO
Yes. All of it. But the questions remains - how will I know you
if we meet tomorrow?

ROGET
I'll look the same!

OTTO
Too bad for you.

ROGET
For both of us, I'd say.

OTTO
Beauty is skin deep, Roget.

ROGET
But ugly is a profound neurosis, Otto.

OTTO
That explains everything!

(MORE)

OTTO (CONT'D)

(Retreats. Mimes getting
into a box.)

The beginning and the end. The fire and the ice. The hurt and
the hurting.

ROGET

Yes, you're really quite ill, aren't you?

OTTO

I had the measles - age six. Is that what you mean? Then mumps.
And after that whooping cough, diphtheria, pinkeye and a bad case
of nocturnal emissions. All before I left the farm. Now here I
am - a survivor. Lucky me.

(Hands over his ears and
hollering to the red light.)

It's too quiet in here!

ROGET

You're making enough noise to wake the dead.

OTTO

Somebody has to. You're practically a mute.

ROGET

And you are a -.

OTTO

Freak.

(Pops up as a Jack-in-a-
Box.)

Is that what you were going to say? Well, guess what? You don't
know anything about me. We haven't even met.

ROGET

So this is this where we shake hands?

OTTO

I don't touch strangers. Especially jossers.

ROGET

Josser?

OTTO

It's circus for newbie. Fresh meat for the lions.

ROGET

And this is your - circus?

OTTO

Not mine, no.

(Shifts. Lyrical. Enacting
the memory.)

Mine existed a hundred years ago.

(MORE)

OTTO (CONT'D)

Back then calliopes pulled by dappled horses were all the magic people required. And fireflies. In those days, when the circus came to town, schools let out early and businesses closed. Not anymore. Now they keep the kids at arm's length.

ROGET

Clowns can be - scary.

OTTO

You know what's scary?! Jossers like you who don't know the ropes. You could end up killing somebody!

ROGET

Have you always been so - irrational?

OTTO

Of course! Anybody in their right mind would be.

ROGET

But you're not in your right mind.

OTTO

(On top of ROGET'S line.)

Don't confuse me with the facts! I don't do well with those.

(To the red light.)

Isn't that right?! I don't face the facts. I don't - accommodate the truth. Yeah? Well try this: Life goes on with us or without us! How's that for starters?!

(Spent now, he takes a long moment to calm himself.

Massages his head, adjusts his suspenders and so forth.)

Wow.

(Finally he rediscovers ROGET.)

Hey?

ROGET

What?

OTTO

Do you come here often?

ROGET

No, but I'm staying for a while.

OTTO

Why? This is madness.

(Disengages. Carries his chair to the TV, stands on it and stares at the blank screen.)

ROGET

(Addresses the red light.)

You're interested in my dreams. How about this one? I'm riding in a Cadillac with God. The top is down. He's a lousy driver. Like a kid on a joyride. He's roaring down the road, squealing around corners, knocking folks over like bowling pins. 'Where are we going?' I shout at him. And, 'Where'd you get your license - out of a CrackerJack box?' But he remains dumb just like he has for more than two thousand years. So I grab his arm. 'Let me out! I plead. 'You're driving me crazy!' He takes his eyes off the road then and grins right into my mind, his face a blank page, his skin like parchment. And I scream, silently, of course, because there are no words to describe what I'm feeling; just the obsession to describe it.

OTTO

What channel is that?

(ROGET checks OTTO with a look. HARRISON enters to a dramatic effect. He's in black face and wearing a white dress shirt with cuff links, the pants to his tuxedo and white gloves.)

ROGET

Damn.

OTTO

Holy smokes!

ROGET

What -?

HARRISON

Ah, Friday.

OTTO

Not Monday?

HARRISON

(Crosses to his coat rack.)

Precisely.

ROGET

I am?

(HARRISON dons his tuxedo coat with tails during the following.)

OTTO

That's Harrison.

Who?

ROGET

HARRISON
Yesterday evening John-Paul willed himself into a catatonic state.
Not hours later our friend arrived. He takes John-Paul's spot.

OTTO
Friday -.

HARRISON
Again, precisely.

OTTO
And today?

HARRISON
When Albert convinced himself he didn't exist and disappeared -
for all intents and purposes -.

OTTO
You didn't - poof?

HARRISON
No. And stop interrupting. He left Monday to itself and no one's
here to replace him, Otto.

OTTO
Geez, this is worse than elephant duty.

(PONZI enters wearing his
plaid 'huckster' suit.
He's carrying a newspaper.)

PONZI
Hey, pigeons, what's the poop?

OTTO
I hate that word.

HARRISON
John-Paul's gone, Ponzi.

OTTO
G - o - n - e.

PONZI
I can spell, Otto.

OTTO
Cretan, yeah.

PONZI
I'm not from Crete, okay!?

HARRISON
I wouldn't give that any - credence.

ROGET
Who's John-Paul? And so what?

PONZI
Who's John-Paul? That's like asking who's buried in Grant's tomb.

OTTO
Who is buried -?

HARRISON
John-Paul lit up our consciousness, rookie. A brilliant philosopher who tore down the curtain and revealed a most wonderful and terrifying secret.

OTTO
He did?

PONZI
Sure, but the tube was on and you missed the - bad news.

ROGET
And he said -?

PONZI
(Quoting.)
Your guess is as good as mine.

OTTO
Guess?

HARRISON
Ta-da.

ROGET
That's it?

PONZI
What else, man?

OTTO
It's a dud.

HARRISON
Exactly.

ROGET
A joke -.

HARRISON
And we're the punch line, ah -.

Think lettuce. OTTO

Iceberg? PONZI

Does he look Jewish? OTTO

Roget. ROGET

Roget, the man is gone and -. HARRISON

All right! I'll turn it on. ROGET

Not today, Roget. Listen up - you're Friday. I'm Wednesday. PONZI
(Intercepts ROGET.)

Thursday. HARRISON

Tuesday -. OTTO

And Albert was Monday. Get it? PONZI

Don't touch that dial. HARRISON

But I'm missing the -. OTTO

Noise!?! PONZI

(A sustained silence during
which the MEN listen
intently. Finally -.)

Did you hear it? OTTO

It sounded like death. HARRISON

Like being - god forsaken. ROGET

Go ask Big Moe! OTTO

PONZI
Leave Big Moe outta this. He's already got Saturday and Sunday.
The rest of the week we're on our own.

ROGET
Who the hell cares who turns it on!

HARRISON/PONZI/OTTO
We do!

PONZI
Everything in its time.

HARRISON
Proper sequence.

OTTO
Place.

PONZI
Otherwise you got -.

HARRISON/OTTO
Chaos!

ROGET
And now you have what?

HARRISON
(In ROGET'S face.)
An officious newcomer who hasn't earned the right to challenge
the social order. So shut your yap before I turn you into a victim
of your own arrogance. Shazzam.

(ROGET backs away toward
the door. Shaken and
stirred.)

OTTO
The TV, Harrison.

HARRISON
Let me think about it!

(HARRISON takes on a thinking
posture. OTTO watches him
think.)

(ROGET nears the door.
PONZI intercepts him.)

PONZI
Where you going?

ROGET
That man needs restraints.

PONZI
(Guides ROGET to a chair.)
Don't mind him. It's part of his act.

ROGET
The angry - black - magician?

PONZI
He has his reasons.

ROGET
Then he doesn't have much.

PONZI
Lots to think about.

ROGET
No wonder he's in residence.

PONZI
He's got the room with mirrors.
(Swings a chair over and
sits on -.)
Smoking allowed.

ROGET
Excuse me if I don't laugh.

PONZI
Bad for you; better for me.
(Slides in closer.)
So, what'd you do - to get inside?

ROGET
I bounced a check.

PONZI
Is that the same as climbing a Pole?
(Bursts out laughing.)

ROGET
A clown, a magician and a comedian. This *is* hell.

PONZI
And outside was what? A walk in the park? Which I don't recommend
by the way.
(Slides in closer.)
Hey, you got change for a thirty?
(Flashes a bogus bill.)

ROGET
A what?

PONZI

No? That's all right. Give me a twenty and we'll call it square.

ROGET

Twenty?

PONZI

Bingo. Wait. I'll tell you what -
(Stuffs the bogus bill into
ROGET'S pocket,)
Keep it and when I need some cash, I'll come to you.

ROGET

What's to buy for god's sake?

PONZI

Everything's for sale, Roget. By the way, I need five dollars.

(PONZI holds out his hand.
ROGET fishes a five from
inside his coat pocket and
gives it to PONZI.)

PONZI

In this color, even Lincoln looks good. Name's Ponzi. I'm in -
marketing. You?

ROGET

We really should turn on the television.

PONZI

Not gonna happen.

ROGET

It's too -
(Referencing his brain.)
Loud when it's off.

PONZI

Talk to me.

ROGET

Talk?

PONZI

Yeah, you know. Make conversation. I'll say something. You say
something back. Then me. Until we're pals.

ROGET

Pals?

PONZI

Friends, buddies, chums - confederates.

ROGET
You want something.

PONZI
Ten dollars.

(PONZI extends a hand.
ROGET puts a ten on it.)

PONZI
You still owe me fifteen. Hold it for safe keeping. So what are you?

ROGET
A bank?

PONZI
No. What sort of person?

ROGET
A writer sort of person.

PONZI
Harrison, you hear that? We lost a philosopher and gained us a scribe.

HARRISON
Terrific. How will we ever tell the difference?

OTTO
Does he smoke a pipe?

PONZI
What?

OTTO
All writers smoke a pipe.

HARRISON
And philosophers?

OTTO
Dope.

ROGET
I don't smoke, period!

PONZI
Well, that clears the air.

OTTO
Now we're supposed to laugh.

HARRISON
Given our circumstances that seems to be the general idea.

ROGET

(Moves to stand.)

There's has to be someone who can sort this out.

HARRISON

If we believed that, we wouldn't be in here!

PONZI

(Sitting ROGET back down.)

I write.

OTTO

What, on bathroom walls?

HARRISON

You are the reason clowns don't speak anymore.

ROGET

There's a difference between typing and writing.

PONZI

If it sells, who cares?

ROGET

I do and you should!

HARRISON

Oh my. Now you've done it, Ponzi. You have to be more sensitive. Treat him gently. Writers are extremely - fragile. Isn't that right, Roget.

ROGET

I'm done talking.

PONZI

How about writing?

OTTO

Yeah, maybe he rather *write* what he has to say.

ROGET

What about the television, Otto? Hey? It really does need to be switched on. Agreed?

PONZI

You're much more interesting. Fresh blood and all that.

OTTO

Especially if someone else is the bleeder.

HARRISON

Besides, a man should play to his strengths. You're a writer - so write.

OTTO
With what, Harrison?

HARRISON
(Produces a pencil from
OTTO'S ear.)
With this, prince of pratfalls.
(Sets the pencil on the
table.)

PONZI
Now - ask him a question.

OTTO
What's your name?

PONZI
We know his name.

OTTO
Last name.

HARRISON
Immaterial.

OTTO
But at least he'd get it right!

PONZI
How about a poem? You know - something short. A sample.

HARRISON
Perfect. Evidence he is who he says he is.

OTTO
Give us a poem, Roget.

(OTTO, HARRISON and PONZI
perform a routine while
watching for ROGET to write.
ROGET sits.)

OTTO
There once was a lady from Limerick -.

PONZI
Clam-up!

OTTO
Somebody needs to rescue us.

HARRISON
You might as well throw water on a drowning man.

You've seen my act -. OTTO

Leave him to it! PONZI

(OTTO, HARRISON and PONZI
resume watching.)

Nothing. OTTO

Maybe he needs something - up front. PONZI

Earnest money. HARRISON

Sure. Show our good faith. PONZI

Good luck. OTTO

You couldn't pay me enough. ROGET

What then? OTTO

Prime him. HARRISON

Like a pump? OTTO

Yes. HARRISON

With? PONZI

A suggestion. HARRISON

A topic. OTTO

Inspiration. PONZI

A scenario. HARRISON

OTTO
The circus.

HARRISON
You're so - one dimensional.

OTTO
A three ring circus?

(PONZI and HARRISON and
ROGET do a take on OTTO.)

OTTO
What?

ROGET
It's all a circus! Look at us.

HARRISON
Ah, a voice crying out in our wilderness. But a false prophet in
sheep's clothing or one who sees through the glass clearly?

OTTO
Really?

PONZI
Your choice, then, Roget. What'll it be? Obituaries? Greeting
cards?

HARRISON
Parking tickets? Dialogue for mimes?

OTTO
Write about clowns.

HARRISON
He could accomplish that with a single word: Stooges. End of
story.

PONZI
Look beneath the grease paint, Harrison. That's what - writers
do.

OTTO
And see what?

PONZI
Themselves. And you know what can happen then, Otto-.

OTTO
Bugger off!

HARRISON
Eureka. Ponzi, you've solved the riddle. What's a writer's
favorite subject?

OTTO

Himself?

HARRISON

Always. Roget, proceed. Write something about you. Give us a taste of your memoirs. Write us your sad little story.

ROGET

You are not my fault!

PONZI

No one's pointin' fingers.

HARRISON

No, but a man ought to be who he says he is!

(ROGET picks up the pencil,
snaps it in two and throws
the pieces on -.)

ROGET

Go to hell!

HARRISON

(Physically confronts ROGET.)

We already are in hell, Mr. Roget. As you pointed out. Only in this hell we're put on ice. And it's awfully cold, if you take my meaning. Too cold to try and survive on your own. Too cold to leave the rest of us without your - company. So you best check your lonely writer routine at the door or -

PONZI

Watch out for Big Moe!

HARRISON

I'll have to teach you some manners.

(The MEN regroup.)

ROGET

Is this necessary?

PONZI

Oh, yeah.

OTTO

It's almost as good as a talk show.

PONZI

Better. And better for you.

HARRISON

No commercials.

OTTO

Fine. Then play on already.

ROGET

You mean prey on! Stalk the lame and bring them down. Isn't that how the world works - even in here. Especially when -.

HARRISON

When you make yourself a target, Roget, expect to get hit.
(Shift.)

When you're made a target - expect to be persecuted.

OTTO

Amen.

PONZI

So, Roget. I get it. You're not in the mood for scribblin'. It's understandable given your - dilemma. How about telling us a title of something you've wrote. Maybe I read it.

ROGET

You won't find any titles.

HARRISON

They're out of print? Must be rare books.

ROGET

Never in print.

PONZI

Now you're selling us something -.

ROGET

There's nothing to sell! That's the point. But god help us if you're able to understand that.

HARRISON

Sweet Jesus! I hope you write better than you make conversation.

ROGET

I have no words on paper! It's all up here.

HARRISON/PONZI/OTTO

What?

ROGET

Where it's safe.

PONZI

You call yourself a writer without having written?

ROGET

Putting words on paper doesn't make anyone a writer.

Really? What does?
Deprivation.
Ooh.
Yeah. Sure.
Damn, Roget. I could say I'm an astronaut, but that doesn't mean I know how to fly. It would mean, however, I'm an impostor.
But I'm writing all the time, Harrison. Even in my sleep. Words and more words. Images and scenes. Passages and paragraphs. Entire stories spiraling out into this - enigma.
Yeah, so where's the proof?
I can't stop! They come from in here - from some - raw wound that won't heal, from beyond this flesh and this bone. From heaven-
Get out of here -.
And from hell.
They come even when I pray for escape. They're a voice so compelling, so great a tidal wave it compresses my chest and overwhelms my senses.
So release it. Write it -.
Speak, it implores me.
But with what? Mere words? Paper and pencil?

OTTO
ROGET
OTTO
(Sarcasm.)
(Disengages.)
PONZI
(Disengages.)
HARRISON
(Disengages.)
ROGET
(Pleading his case from one player to the other.)
PONZI
ROGET
OTTO
ROGET
(To PONZI.)
OTTO
ROGET
(To OTTO.)
HARRISON
ROGET
(To HARRISON.)
(MORE)

ROGET (CONT'D)

The tick of key boarding? They're clumsy artifices. Tools of the - masses. The ordinary. The scavengers. I refuse to - debase my stories that way!

(A moment.)

HARRISON

You pretentious prick. You're hiding something.

PONZI

Is he ever.

HARRISON

Oh yes. You have something up your corduroy sleeve, Roget. And your lame protestations are a fast shuffle. But I know about shufflin'. Yeah, I know how to make something appear from nothing.

(Does a trick.)

While you are spinning naught from nada. It won't play.

ROGET

Please. Really. The television -.

PONZI

To hell with that!

HARRISON

Bring me the pencil, Otto. The pointy end. Roget's about to come clean. Our author is about to - show his hand, earn the right to his self-proclaimed *title*. Now take the pencil and write something.

(Slams pencil down.)

OTTO

Expose yourself.

PONZI

Here, on this wall.

OTTO

Yeah, put it out there where everyone can see it.

HARRISON

Be who you say you are or shut - the - fuck - up.

(ROGET hesitates before taking the pencil.)

PONZI

Go ahead, Roget. It's your only way out.

(ROGET steadies himself and writes - on the wall - one awkward and painful letter at a time.)

(OTTO and HARRISON call out
the letters as he shapes
them.)

H - . OTTO
E - . HARRISON
L - . OTTO
P - . HARRISON
M - . OTTO
E - . HARRISON
Help me. OTTO
You are a fraud. HARRISON
Welcome. PONZI

(HARRISON, PONZI and OTTO
abandon ROGET.)

ROGET
No, that's not true. I wrote a poem once. On paper. Yes. About
a crushed milkweed caterpillar. I recited it to my mother. 'But
it doesn't rhyme,' she said. 'Rhyme? How could it,' I answered?
'And this word,' she said, 'is misspelled.' And, 'What does it
mean: It never had a chance to be a king? You must be clear.'
And, 'It's too long. And, 'Where's the punctuation -.' And,
and, and, and - I snatched that paper away, ran from the room,
burned the poem and kept them all to myself after that. All those
voices clamoring to be heard caged inside my mind. I didn't know
it then, but ten is too damn young to think there is no rhyme or
reason.

(Exits.)

Well played. PONZI
Heartfelt. HARRISON

It hurt him. OTTO

It has to. Par for the course. PONZI

We're next. OTTO

In time. PONZI

Not if we figured out the TV! OTTO

Good luck with that! PONZI

He'll be back. HARRISON

Sure. We've got zilch in our rooms. PONZI

Just ourselves. HARRISON

And that's too much - and too little. PONZI

Yes. HARRISON/OTTO

So, here we are - face-to-face -. PONZI

We need another madman! OTTO

That shouldn't be hard. Ask them. HARRISON

Somebody? OTTO
(To the red light.)

Anybody. HARRISON

Everybody? PONZI

Someone from the streets. OTTO

PONZI

Who's to judge, Otto?

HARRISON

They're alive, huckster. Judgment has been passed.

PONZI

On you two.

OTTO

Us three all together, Ponzi.

PONZI

You're the guys with scar tissue no doctor can take credit for.

HARRISON

Everybody's scarred. To paraphrase yourself.

PONZI

Forget it, already! You gotta jump through hoops before getting in here and by the time they do that it'll be Tuesday.

OTTO

So think of something else!

HARRISON

Think for yourself, Otto.

OTTO

I did. That's why I'm a clown.

PONZI

Yeah, being is burlesque.

OTTO

(Crosses to TV.)

But when this is on, it easier. It brings us together - like a glowing kitchen stove.

HARRISON

And keeps us apart - like a wall.

OTTO

Keeps us from knowing, Harrison.

HARRISON

'Cause you don't want to *know* me.

PONZI

Heck, he doesn't even want to know himself. Right, Otto?

OTTO

No questions! I'm telling you right now. They want answers and they're a dime-a-dozen.

PONZI
You get what you pay for.

OTTO
Somebody do something before the - slaughter continues!

PONZI
Maybe Harrison can perform a bit from his act.

HARRISON
A bit? What sort of *bit*?

PONZI
Something entertaining. Like a - I don't know - like a - minstrel show.

HARRISON
Entertaining?

OTTO
A what?

PONZI
Or a - flogging?

HARRISON
Be wary, Ponzi.

OTTO
What's a minstrel show?

HARRISON
Caucasians mocking negritude. Should be right up your - alley.

OTTO
I don't talk like that in or out of the alley.

PONZI
People talk like that all the time. Right, Harrison? Especially folks like Otto.

OTTO
Who says?

PONZI
Ask him, Mr. Magic. Now's your opportunity.

HARRISON
You're goading me.

OTTO
Yeah, poking a stick at a -
(Covers mouth and crosses away.)

At a what, Otto?
HARRISON

Nevermind.
OTTO

Yes, Mr. Ponzi wants a little show with his tell and you may have provided the impetus.
HARRISON

I swear I won't speak that way.
OTTO

It's worst than swearing.
PONZI

Speak - what way, Otto?
HARRISON

Crudely.
OTTO

Of course. I understand. Some words you - never say.
HARRISON

There's lots of words I never say.
OTTO

Especially the - N word.
HARRISON

Nonsense.
OTTO

At least not when one of them is in the room -. Correct?
HARRISON

One's in the room now, Otto.
PONZI

One what?
OTTO

Ah. We're to believe you've been so engrossed watching that damned television you haven't noticed who I am. Well, here's an opportunity to take a good look!
(In Otto's face.)
HARRISON

Keep it civil, Harrison.
PONZI

Stay the whip-cracking, carney!
HARRISON

OTTO
Back up.

HARRISON
Frightened you might *black* out?

OTTO
(To PONZI.)
See what small-talk does.

HARRISON
Yes, despite yourself, I saw the aversion in your eyes when we first met. So get it off your sunken chest. Hell, I bet you've been wanting to since my appearance.

OTTO
I've been wanting to what?

HARRISON
Call a spade a spade.

OTTO
I don't even play cards.

HARRISON
Not even the race card? Then you'd be in very rare company.

OTTO
(To Ponzi.)
What's he on about?

PONZI
He's not playing with a full deck.

HARRISON
Negrophobia, Otto! Fear of -.

OTTO
I don't know any!

HARRISON
No, you don't. Not in your monochromatic neighborhoods. Not in the circus. 'Cause everything is painted white. Your picket fences and your faces!

OTTO
What's wrong with white?

HARRISON
Hell, it's not even a color.

OTTO
We're supposed to be funny.

HARRISON

Funny? Oh, you pale folks are plenty funny. And we black folk have been - *laughing* for over two hundred years!

PONZI

Who's laughing now?

HARRISON

After the - anguish I've had to bear, a grin is impossible. Even a cosmetic one, harlequin.

OTTO

Where is all this coming from?

PONZI

A skewered heart.

HARRISON

A mortal blow from goons with badges, Otto.

OTTO

LEAVE ME ALONE!

HARRISON

(In OTTO'S face.)

That's what she said, but the child was *colored* and that's still a crime in America! Right, chalky?!

PONZI

Step away, Harrison! Harrison!

HARRISON

(Backs away. And now from a profound angst and to the red light.)

Still. Still - a crime.

(A moment before he exits.)

OTTO

(A moment and then to the red light.)

I warned you. Didn't I? Instead of a game show this is what we get.

PONZI

What, Otto?

OTTO

Trouble.

PONZI

Truth?

OTTO

What is true, Ponzi?

Whatever hurts the most. PONZI
 I'm not who he thinks I am. OTTO
 What else could you be? PONZI
 A stranger! Always a stranger. OTTO
 Sure. It's safer that way. PONZI
 It's safe nowhere. OTTO
 Hey, here you got a cot and three hots. PONZI
 But I'm cold, Ponzi. Deep inside. OTTO
 What do you know from cold, Otto? PONZI
 I lived in North Dakota. That's what I know. Winter came early OTTO
 one year and never left.
 (Crosses to his coat rack.)
 That's why I ran away.
 Who doesn't? PONZI
 (Takes jar of face paint in OTTO
 hand.)
 And joined the circus.
 What else? PONZI
 In Florida. OTTO
 Where it's warmer. PONZI
 (Begins to paint a garish OTTO
 red grin on his face.)
 And slathered on the grease paint.

Gave yourself a name. PONZI

Hightops. OTTO
(Shows his shoes.)

Came up with a character. PONZI

Because I had none. OTTO

But who? PONZI

I didn't know. OTTO

A smile or a frown? PONZI

Do I have a choice? OTTO

Which comes easiest: laughing or weeping? PONZI

OTTO
(Finishes his grin.)
What's the difference, I told the ring master.
(Faces audience.)
Either way your heart breaks.
(A pose.)

OTTO. Otto, it's no good hiding behind a mask. PONZI

What do you know? I could see out, but they couldn't see in. OTTO

You can't get out either. It's a trap. PONZI

It set me free. OTTO

It - becomes you. PONZI

At least I'm somebody then. OTTO

And yet still nobody when you wiped it off. PONZI

OTTO
 (On top of PONZI'S line.)
 Let it go!

PONZI
 Like you -?

OTTO
 It's no good remembering!

PONZI
 That's all you do.

OTTO
 BECAUSE SHE LOVED ME!
 (Pulls out an outlandish
 handkerchief and dabs at
 his eyes.)
 Loved me. Loved - me. Loved - - me.

PONZI
 Okay. Okay, Otto. Easy does it. We'll take it step at a time.
 No hurry. But you've got to relax.

OTTO
 Relax? How, Ponzi?

PONZI
 With this.
 (Pulls a bottle from a deep
 pocket.)
 An elixir to ease your nerves.

OTTO
 Another elixir?

PONZI
 Sure.

OTTO
 To calm my nerves?

PONZI
 It's recommended.

OTTO
 By who?

PONZI
 Lots of people.

OTTO
 What sort of people?

PONZI
Nervous ones. You're all the rage.

OTTO
It's not our fault!

PONZI
Okay. Who can blame you? Too many answers for too many questions.

OTTO
Yes. Too much time in-between shows.

PONZI
Sure. Too much of being alone.

OTTO
On the farm. In the circus. Surrounded by people, but - apart.
Touching - but not feeling.

PONZI
Feeling and being - touched.
(Referencing brain.)

OTTO
Can it help with forgetting?

PONZI
This elixir can help with forgetting and remembering.

OTTO
How much?

PONZI
Five dollars.

OTTO
It cost three dollars last time.

PONZI
Your need is greater. Ya got no TV.

OTTO
That's taking advantage.

PONZI
That's business.

OTTO
Forget it.

PONZI
Okay.
(PONZI returns the bottle
to a pocket.)

I don't want any. OTTO

So you say. PONZI

I can live without it. OTTO

Convince yourself. PONZI

I'm convinced. OTTO

Good, 'cause I'm running low. PONZI

What? OTTO

Sure. There's only so many miracles. PONZI

Really? How many? OTTO

One. PONZI

You've only got one left? OTTO

With your name on it. PONZI

Then I'm on my own? OTTO

What can I tell ya? PONZI

You wouldn't do that to me. OTTO Ponzi?

You're doing it to yourself, Otto. PONZI

She took me up there. OTTO

And where is *she* now -? PONZI

OTTO
All right! I'll take it!

PONZI
Twenty dollars.

OTTO
Twenty -?

PONZI
Supply and demand, my friend.

OTTO
Who's demanding?

PONZI
Pay attention. You are.

OTTO
Just me!

PONZI
When demand goes up, so do prices.

OTTO
And if I didn't want it?

PONZI
Ten dollars.

OTTO
It was five -.

PONZI
Inflation.

OTTO
Inflation?

PONZI
Sure. The price of pussyfooting. He who hesitates, Otto -.

OTTO
You've got to be kidding!

PONZI
I don't kid about free enterprise.

OTTO
Free?

PONZI
To those who can pay for it.

OTTO
Those would be somebody else.

PONZI
Hey, who's thirsty?

OTTO
Thirsty? I'm not thirsty! I'm haunted, Ponzi. Spooked.

PONZI
Whatever. They're your demons.

OTTO
All right. Quick. I don't want it. Here's ten dollars.

(THEY exchange money for a
bottle of elixir. OTTO
removes the cap and chugs
half the bottle.)

OTTO
It tastes just like the other stuff you sold me for my hemorrhoids.

PONZI
You want it to work?

OTTO
Absolutely.

PONZI
Then it will.

OTTO
Just like that?

PONZI
Better already, aren't ya?

OTTO
Maybe.

PONZI
There.

OTTO
What's in it?

PONZI
Does it matter, Otto?

OTTO
Might be poison.

PONZI
Then your troubles are over.

OTTO

Or - sugar water.

PONZI

Then living is sweeter. Enjoy.

OTTO

(Drinks.)

I could get used to this.

PONZI

Life is better taken with a tonic.

(Disengages. Reads his paper.)

OTTO

(Triggers a memory.)

Tonic?

(To the red light -.)

My father used to say that. Time for my tonic he'd announce. And fill a glass and hoist it aloft saying - Bottoms up. Or - Here's looking at you. And - Cheers. Cheers. Funny, I don't remember being happy - not after the second funeral. Just a crushing isolation where I lived on that faraway farm. The third and last of my parents' three children. We lost one to the hay mow. I thought that's what the preacher meant by the grim reaper.

PONZI

You weren't funny even then.

OTTO

We lost another to an automobile accident. My sister. Miss Burke County. She made all the local and statewide publications and became famous for being pretty. After her funeral, my daddy fell thoroughly in love with the bottle and out of love with me. The runt. The one who shouldn't have lived. The one whose face wasn't fit for the cover of anything but - darkness. It took years before I was beautiful.

(Drinks from his bottle.)

(HARRISON enters.)

PONZI

Enough elixir, you'll feel differently.

OTTO

That's the trouble. I feel too much!

(Exits.)

HARRISON

Dropping like flies.

PONZI

You're back. Already.

HARRISON
You knew I would be.

PONZI
'Cause we all feel too much.

HARRISON
Ponzi included.

PONZI
I know what it means to be cut. Sure.

HARRISON
Because you're the knife?

PONZI
Even a knife can save someone, Harrison.

HARRISON
Like your - tonic.

PONZI
Hey, it is what it is.

HARRISON
You make selling snake oil an art.

PONZI
I could sell a blind man pornography.

HARRISON
And birds their cages.

PONZI
Sure. It's almost too easy. Everybody's mad about something.
Take yourself for example -.

HARRISON
We're in the same fix, Ponzi!

PONZI
I didn't get dragged in here kicking and screaming.

HARRISON
Which says more about you than me.

PONZI
What does it say, Harrison? Hey? Go ahead - tell me what it says.

(No response.)
Sure. Okay. Wizards never - show their hands. Especially where the nails went through.

HARRISON
(On top of PONZI'S line.)
You don't speak of that!

PONZI
Because it didn't happen?

HARRISON
Because it happened according to me.

PONZI
Yeah, forget the facts.

HARRISON
Don't believe everything you - don't see.

PONZI
'Cause the hand is quicker than the eye. Right?

HARRISON
The eye sees upside down and not very well. Ergo - magic.

PONZI
Tricks.

HARRISON
The art of possibilities, Ponzi. The substance of hope.
(Does a trick.)
That's why people pay me to produce wonders. Why they praise my
name, shout hosanna and throw palm fronds at my feet when I beguile
them with a - conundrum.

PONZI
The magician as savior.

HARRISON
Precisely! The world has always been hungry for wizards,
sorcerers, conjurers, shamans, con men -.

PONZI
(On top of HARRISON'S line.)
Artists.

HARRISON
(The scarf disappears.)
The very thing.

PONZI
Is that why, Harrison? You thought yourself the savior?

HARRISON
It's time I bought one of your - remedies.

PONZI
Yeah. Sure. One - diversion for another.

Diversions keep us sane!	HARRISON
But what drove you mad?!	PONZI
Sell me a bottle!	HARRISON
Why, Harrison?!	PONZI
For becoming white!	HARRISON
(Shift.)	PONZI
Say what?	
Pasty, Ponzi.	HARRISON
	PONZI
Come on. It's not even a color - your words.	
	HARRISON
But it is trump - your world.	
	PONZI
You're -.	
	HARRISON
Distraught?	
	PONZI
Sure. Angry.	
	HARRISON
Angry? What a pathetic little adjective.	
	PONZI
It's <i>killing</i> you.	
	HARRISON
Oh no. No, no, no. I'm very much alive.	
	PONZI
But your daughter -.	
	HARRISON
EMANCIPATE ME, damn you!	
	PONZI
(Shift.)	
It'll cost extra.	

HARRISON
Yes! The perfect response. Never deny. Disabuse doubt by raising the price.

PONZI
It's all about -.

HARRISON
Economics.

PONZI
Them.

HARRISON
And one gets what one pays for. Right, alchemist?

PONZI
We all pay for whatever we do get.

HARRISON
Even the miraculous?

PONZI
If that's what a person's buying.

HARRISON
If?

PONZI
I market the - remedy, you've got to make it work.

HARRISON
Ta-da. Put responsibility for failure of the product on the consumer. You could be in a pulpit.

PONZI
Whatever. You want it - I do happen to have one bottle left.

HARRISON
Sold.

PONZI
Fifty dollars.

HARRISON
(Produces a fifty dollar bill from 'thin air'.)

Pass the plate.

(PONZI holds out a hand.
HARRISON sets the bill on it. PONZI palms it, hands a bottle to HARRISON.)

PONZI

Set yourself free.

(HARRISON savors a swallow
of elixir. ROGET enters.)

HARRISON

White or drunk. Either way it's an escape.

PONZI

Yeah, one way or another. I'd better check on Otto.
(Exits.)

HARRISON

Welcome back.

ROGET

It's this or - nothing.

HARRISON

Who can tolerate their own company?

ROGET

Madmen.

HARRISON

Therefore we are sane and will soon be released to re-engage the
mindless masses.
(Drinks.)

ROGET

What's that?

HARRISON

An elixir to turn me white.
(Drinks.)

ROGET

Christ, you're an intelligent man.

HARRISON

See, it's working already.

ROGET

Yeah, now you're a smart ass.

HARRISON

Another step up, correct, literary lion?
(Notes ROGET'S pencil.)
Speaking of -. Draw any blood yet? Or just pictures?

ROGET

I don't draw pictures.

HARRISON
Word pictures?

ROGET
(Sets pencil down.)
Drop it, already.

HARRISON
What are you hiding from, man?!

ROGET
What are you so damned inflamed about, man?
(Sits.)

HARRISON
So you're - color-blind.
(Swings his chair over.)
Is that it?
(Sits adjacent to ROGET.)
Good for you.

ROGET
I know what - color you are.

HARRISON
Hell, I didn't until four years of age.

ROGET
I'm not interested.

HARRISON
You're a writer, Roget. Of course you're interested.

ROGET
I have my own stories.

HARRISON
What? How your lily-white self grew up emotionally deprived?
Heartbreaking.

ROGET
And yours? It's been told and retold ever since the 60's and
frankly I'm tired of it.

HARRISON
Have you heard this? I was reared white as the driven snow.
(ROGET responds.)
There. Now you want more. All right. White parents adopted and
raised me in a white neighborhood. Life seemed grand. But when I
grew beyond my ego-centered self and realized I stood out as a -
smudge on the landscape, a Neeegro at the dinner table, I felt -
how should I say it? Discombobulated? Still, in that small
universe, this *colored* boy became everyone's friend - but my own.
(MORE)

HARRISON (CONT'D)

Classmates included me in all their activities - in and out of school. They even elected their - token African - student body president. Imagine.

ROGET

Imagine.

HARRISON

They tried so hard to love me because I am black *not* because I am imminently loveable. And so they hid the truth. Later, their - betrayal devastated me more than the beating I earned from *honest* men with more callused hands.

(Takes a drink.)

ROGET

So every - Caucasian is the devil.

HARRISON

Oh, the devil is in all of us, Mr. Roget. And our better angels have taken flight long, long ago.

ROGET

What are we going to do about the television?

HARRISON

Drink enough of this, it won't matter.

ROGET

Colored water.

HARRISON

The stuff of dreams, charlatan.

ROGET

Dreams are nightmares, Harrison. Nightmares.

HARRISON

So the - words are - synonyms?

ROGET

How could they be anything else?

HARRISON

And you being a writer would know.

ROGET

Writers suffer. *This* I know.

HARRISON

Only those who put pen to paper, or geniuses like yourself who hide their light and call it brilliant?

ROGET
I won't play games with you!
(Sits to play a game of
solitaire.)

HARRISON
Why? Because you're a dissembler? A mountebank? You don't want
to be - denuded?

ROGET
You're over-compensating.

HARRISON
Now we're talking.

ROGET
Jousting with syllables - that's all.

HARRISON
Words are powerful magic, Roget. They can open doors or turn
hearts to stone.

ROGET
Then be careful what you say, Harrison.

HARRISON
Good advice from a man named after a thesaurus.

ROGET
Is this going anywhere?
(Quits the game.)

HARRISON
You tell me. You're the author.

ROGET
Not of your life.

HARRISON
Beg to differ.

ROGET
It's time for Truth or Consequences. Anything.
(Crosses to the television.)

HARRISON
The truth is we've been given just enough rope to hang ourselves
and not enough to escape our well plotted consequences. So some
of us look for scapegoats - *black* sheep and use the rope on them.

ROGET
My god, man, you're talking gibberish. Mumbo jumbo.

HARRISON
Sorry, Master. You knows I ain't much for learnin'.

ROGET

I didn't - invent you.

HARRISON

Didn't have to. I read nothing can exist without its opposite. Night or day. Dog or cat. Us. Comforting, no?

ROGET

If a thing doesn't exist in our minds, Harrison, then it doesn't exist anywhere.

HARRISON

Oh. So - you think, therefore - I am.

ROGET

Yes!

(Solitaire again.)

HARRISON

Typical pseudo writer.

ROGET

Typical? How?

HARRISON

You have a god complex.

ROGET

The doctors differ.

HARRISON

All right. An *inferiority* god complex.

ROGET

I know what I'm capable of, Harrison.

HARRISON

Scary, huh?

ROGET

What in heaven's name do you want?

HARRISON

How about throwing me a line not a noose.

ROGET

Clearly you mistake me for someone else.

HARRISON

A white man in America. Plain as day. What else do I need to know, Roget?

ROGET

Despite the - little you've shared, I don't know your particular tribulations.

HARRISON

But you can be damn certain you've contributed to them.

ROGET

Everyone lives with prejudice.

HARRISON

What no valentine cards in grade school? Picked last for baseball games?

ROGET

To hell with you!

(Scatters the cards.)

HARRISON

Right. But you'll need a *black* oak tree to send me there. They can take a lot of weight.

ROGET

Oh! That way madness lies; let me shun it.

HARRISON

Please. Shakespeare is a crutch.

ROGET

Who then?

HARRISON

Say what's on *your* mind, Roget.

ROGET

Nothing black or white.

HARRISON

Fine. Okay. Something grey then. Something - noncommittal. In your own words. Mommy's not here to - squash you.

ROGET

You're less than amusing.

HARRISON

Childhood angst drives all of us. But it's time to make your own noise. Isn't that what authors are for?

ROGET

That's inane.

HARRISON

Are you kidding? Howler monkeys are the Mayan gods for writers. Appropriate, right? Come on, man, give us something of yours.

ROGET

I'm not some demented primate -.

HARRISON

Need inspiration? Haven't mustered up the courage yet? How about this for a writer with cajones? Spray painted on a wall in Toledo: Me cago en todos Los dioses. Comprende? I shit on all the gods. What do you think the author meant by that, Roget? Defiance? Despair? Just plain ole' devilment? Share some of your profundity, professor.

ROGET

D, all of the above.

HARRISON

That won't do for a short essay question.

ROGET

Then you fill in the blanks.

HARRISON

We can't, Roget. That is the author's subtext. The underlying theme. Knowing is impossible which makes wretched bigotry both more understandable and less acceptable. Your own fear of facing failure fatuous. Makes you a sad little man.

ROGET

All right! What will *make* you happy? Hey? A *written* confession - 'Yes, I am a racist' so *your* - mania can be justified?!

HARRISON

(Accosts ROGET.)

Justified?! Oh, could you ask my splendid child about justification, Roget. An ebony black girl whose luminescent skin shimmered - had an entire continent smoldering in it; the glow of kings and queens; the story of Man resonating in her prodigal pigmentation. For that they let her die! For the sin of her appearance!

(PONZI and OTTO enter.)

PONZI

Harrison, Big Moe is watching -.

HARRISON

They need us to believe that!

OTTO

What happened -?

PONZI

Yeah, what's the story?

HARRISON

(Turns on PONZI.)

DON'T PRESS ME! By Jesus, don't press me.
(Disengages.)

(A moment.)

OTTO
It doesn't hurt when it's on TV.

ROGET
I told you he's dangerous.

PONZI
Who isn't?

OTTO
Clowns.

ROGET
You're - a cliché.

PONZI
What isn't?

OTTO
Love.

PONZI
That's all it is, Otto. And look what it did to you.

HARRISON
How did it -?

OTTO
I hate Mondays! I hate the way it's spelled. I hate that it comes after Sunday. I hate there's no show to - to -.
(Takes a drink. Regroups.)

Where are we?

PONZI
Where do you think?

OTTO
Lost?

HARRISON
Ostracized.

PONZI
On a rock going nowhere.

ROGET
Spinning through the darkness like a top.

OTTO
Yes. Like a toy.

HARRISON
Hurtling through a black abyss.

OTTO
 (To HARRISON.)
 How will we see?

ROGET
 The moon's at our shoulders.

OTTO
 (To ROGET.)
 But it's a false light.

PONZI
 Everything is lunacy.

OTTO
 (To PONZI.)
 Man especially.

HARRISON
 Especially man.

ROGET
 We can't make a worm, but create gods by the handfuls. And toss
 them out like ballast till we come to -.

PONZI
 This.

OTTO
 But on what side of the lights?

HARRISON
 It doesn't matter. Either way it's another bloody Shakespearean
 tragedy.

PONZI
 Yeah. Bodies scattered across the stage. Right, Roget?

ROGET
 So they rise at the curtain for their applause.

HARRISON
 Not all of them.

OTTO
 None of them.

ROGET
 Yes, at least one!

PONZI
 Which one, Roget?

OTTO
 He must have been a ghost.

She. ROGET

A Christ. HARRISON

Fish, visitors and the savior. Three days and -. PONZI

She lived, damn you! ROGET

Terrific. Another happy ending. HARRISON

Are there any happy endings? ROGET

No. OTTO

Blasphemer. Read the New Testament. HARRISON

Ask Anne not his mother. PONZI

Is this why I came back into the room? ROGET

Sure. This is why you have to be in the room. PONZI

To face our demons. Wrestle with our torment. HARRISON

Escape nowhere. OTTO

Your Anne found an escape. PONZI

I bet Anne sang while that car engine hummed. ROGET

Your mother sang -. PONZI

Off-key and half-baked rhymes, Ponzi! ROGET

Reason enough to stab her. PONZI

ROGET
(On top of ROGET'S line.)
I thought God mocked me!
(Shift.)
I - thought - God - mocked me. Damn.

HARRISON
Open sesame.

PONZI
And you're - believing that? About God?

ROGET
If I did, I'd be crazy.

OTTO
Am I missing something?

HARRISON
Yes.

PONZI
Your mother testified against you, Roget.

ROGET
What does a hustler know about her?

PONZI
(Flourishes his newspaper.)
It made the front pages four weeks in a row.

OTTO
I read the comics.

ROGET
This is my story.

HARRISON
So tell it, Roget. Write it out, man. We'll believe anything.

ROGET
No. I won't have you picking at it.

PONZI
Sooner or later -.

ROGET
The television.

OTTO
While we can.

HARRISON
Becoming to literal for you, author? Is that it?
(MORE)

HARRISON (CONT'D)

Safer with the metaphorical? Denial with the rhetorical?
Obfuscate with the allegorical?

ROGET

(On top of Harrison's line.)
Playing with words.

HARRISON

Jealous?

ROGET

I've told you what I have to say isn't for sale.

PONZI

If it isn't for sale, it isn't for shit.

ROGET

The dirge of a salesman.

OTTO

I'd watch that.

HARRISON

We all turn our tricks. Provide a service. A port for our
wayfaring minds. You ought to do your part!

ROGET

I WANT TO, BUT CAN'T STAND THE CONDEMNATION!

(A moment.)

OTTO

Is it still Monday?

HARRISON/PONZI

Yes.

OTTO

They don't want us happy.
(Plays his noise maker.)

PONZI

How about sane?

HARRISON

I'd settle for - content.

(The MEN disengage.)

ROGET

(To the red light.)
Was I ever - content? Perhaps.

(MORE)

ROGET (CONT'D)

But all I remember are endless empty afternoons - following days upon harrowing days at school chock full of verbal assaults. So I'd turn on the television - tune into those invented worlds. They - functioned as *my* narcotic. My own - elixir. If I concentrated fiercely enough, the flickering images and blather blotted out the cruelty of my peers and mother downstairs banging on her piano working out one banal jingle after another while I ached to speak, but distrusted the sound of my own voice.

OTTO

Jingle?

ROGET

Ditty. Four lines of rhyming doggerel Mother submitted to contests for advertising products. 'Wake up bright and refreshed; ready to do your best; when you sleep on a pillow; made by RaptureRest.' She'd win, cash the check and we'd eat steak for dinner. I hated that it tasted so good.

HARRISON

Here, Roget, any - noise will do.

OTTO

Has to do.

(HARRISON offers ROGET the pencil. ROGET accepts it. PONZI arranges ROGET'S chair. ROGET sits at the table.)

HARRISON

And a notebook?

PONZI

Check his trench coat.

(OTTO crosses to ROGET'S coat rack and pulls a notebook from the trench coat there. He hands it to PONZI. PONZI sets it on the table.)

PONZI

And the pipe?

(OTTO reaches inside ROGET'S jacket and removes a pipe 'hidden' there. OTTO gestures 'I told you so'. HARRISON sticks it between ROGET'S teeth.)

HARRISON

Courage, man. (To ROGET.)

(While HARRISON, PONZI and OTTO watch, ROGET struggles to write Christopher. And so he begins.)

PONZI

Good.

OTTO

He's still there - watching.

PONZI

How can you tell?

OTTO

The red light is on.

HARRISON

The mad scientists -.

OTTO

We're in a glass bowl.

HARRISON

A terrarium.

OTTO

Like lab rats.

HARRISON

Poked and prodded to see how we respond.

OTTO

We're going down in here!
(Shift.)

He has nothing to say. He never has anything to say anymore.

HARRISON

It's all been said.

PONZI

You do the talking.

OTTO

I'm a mime, remember?

HARRISON

If only that were true.

PONZI

Take another drink.

OTTO
The TV works better. I swear to heaven.

PONZI
It's not coming on by itself, Otto.

HARRISON
Not even remotely.

OTTO
It should never be off.

PONZI
Why?

OTTO
Things are going on in there.

PONZI
Things? What things?

OTTO
Entertainment, Ponzi.

HARRISON
Not even remotely.

PONZI
A bill of goods, Otto. Commercials baited with eye-candy.

OTTO
Magicians, Harrison.

HARRISON
You can't perform magic on television. The technical possibilities negate the suspension of disbelief.

PONZI
Does it mean nothin' if no one can understand you?

HARRISON
The television is a trick already, peddler. Making an elephant disappear for people watching thousands of miles away is - redundant. It sure as hell isn't magic.

PONZI
Either way it's a snore.

HARRISON
I'm telling you, Ponzi, magic is the way we understand the universe.

PONZI
And I'm telling you levitating women doesn't explain a single damn thing.

HARRISON

That's just a showman's manifestation of the idea.

OTTO

But what's the point, Harrison?

PONZI

That he's an angry black man who 'magicked' himself right through that door. Didn't you, Harrison? You played at being god -.

HARRISON

Somebody has to.

PONZI

Look how it turned out.

HARRISON

If they had left me to it.

PONZI

You would'a died on your cross!

OTTO

Really?

ROGET

Cross -?

HARRISON

And been resurrected, Ponzi. Blond and blue-eyed. Abracadabra.

OTTO

I'm not believing this.

HARRISON

(Removes his gloves.)

Want a show of hands? Hey? All right, Thomases! Have a look. Take a touch.

OTTO

Oh, my gosh.

ROGET

Fascinating.

PONZI

Proof of your madness.

HARRISON

Proof of my despair!

PONZI

It's part of the deal, Harrison.

HARRISON
Then deal me out, Ponzi.

PONZI
'Cause you can't take the heat.

HARRISON
Look at me. I'm rooted in Africa and lived in these United States.
I know about heat!

OTTO
Stop it! Stop it right there. Please. Please. You're going
too dark. Way, way too dark.

PONZI
(Shift.)
He's right. Too - black.

HARRISON
Yeah, too - spooky.

OTTO
I don't like it dark.

PONZI
You're afraid of it.

ROGET
Deathly.

OTTO
Any kind of light will do.

HARRISON
There are all kinds of darkness, Otto.

OTTO
The glow from a TV screen.

PONZI
So much frightens you.

ROGET
Everything -.

OTTO
Frightens me.

HARRISON
Silence.

OTTO
Yes.

Solitude.	ROGET
Yes.	OTTO
Two-o'clock a.m.	PONZI
Yes!	OTTO
Ennui.	HARRISON
What?	OTTO
Boredom.	ROGET
Yes.	OTTO
Memories.	PONZI
Yes. Yes! Yes.	OTTO
What sort of memories?	HARRISON
Personal -.	OTTO
Amuse us.	PONZI
Why me, Ponzi?	OTTO
You opened the show, Otto.	HARRISON
But I'm not the main act.	OTTO
No, but you'll do.	PONZI
What sort of memories, Otto?	ROGET

OTTO
The sound of my sister's voice.

ROGET
Calling from the garden?

OTTO
Yes.

PONZI
Describe it.

OTTO
Roget. Can you?

ROGET
Come see, Otto, she calls her voice bright and full of discovery.

HARRISON
Like music.

OTTO
Yes.

PONZI
Lost music.

ROGET
Look. Green cocoons with crowns of gold.

HARRISON
They're splitting open.

OTTO
A miracle.

ROGET
And your brother out in the field - sunburned and strong as a well-made rope.

PONZI
Can you see him, Otto?

OTTO
Yes!

ROGET
Otto, look what I've caught. Butterflies. See. Orange and black wings.

OTTO
Monarchs. Monarch butterflies.

HARRISON
Bring a jar.

OTTO
Bryan!

PONZI
But then your brother and sister buried.

OTTO
No.

ROGET
And silence like a shroud dropping over the house.

OTTO
Please.

ROGET
The loss of shared companionship driving you inward.

HARRISON
Driving you mad.

PONZI
So you escaped.

OTTO
Turn the blessed thing on!

HARRISON
And painted your unsightly face.

PONZI
A freaky mask.

OTTO
It stayed on 24 hours in the circus. Twenty-four hours.

ROGET
Because it's better to be laughed at than ignored.

OTTO
Not loud. Just there. Just in case.

PONZI
Then your own fairy tale princess showed right on cue.

OTTO
Channel Five -.

PONZI
One kiss and you were Prince Charming.

OTTO
I'm a clown, Ponzi.

That's right. A Joey. PONZI

A foil. HARRISON

A reason to chuckle. OTTO

A joke. PONZI

A master of mayhem. ROGET

A court jester. HARRISON

But no one's laughing anymore. PONZI

She used to! She laughed *with* not at me. OTTO

Who, Otto?! PONZI

CRYSTAL! OTTO

Crystal? No wonder she broke -. PONZI

NOOOOO! OTTO

(Collapses. Reaches out for
Crystal's hand.)

(A moment.)

Roget, are you getting all this down? HARRISON

ACT II

SCENE 1

SETTING: The same white room.

AT RISE: HARRISON, ROGET and PONZI consider OTTO curled up in a fetal position on the floor.

ROGET

What does it mean?

PONZI

Wait for the ending.

HARRISON

The deities make sport of our madness.

ROGET

It's so easy.

PONZI

Somebody always gets hurt.

HARRISON

Clowns.

PONZI

Yeah. Let them take the falls. They go to school for it.

ROGET

Learn how to be mocked.

HARRISON

Play the greater fool so we don't come off so - foolish.

ROGET

Keep our minds off the press of despair.

HARRISON

The rank odor of fear.

ROGET

Loneliness.

PONZI

The truth.

ROGET

You drown the truth with your elixir!

PONZI

It's right at our feet!

(They consider OTTO a long moment.)

Is he alive? HARRISON

Wake him and find out. PONZI

Wake up, Otto. It's time for your walk around. Time to fill in the dead space. HARRISON

Time for the burning building bit. PONZI

Otto? Otto, the gag's over. ROGET

(Nothing from OTTO.)

(ROGET kneels next to OTTO and searches for a pulse during -.)

Has he killed himself? PONZI

We should call Big Moe. HARRISON

He's not dead, you idiots. ROGET

He wants to be. HARRISON

He's deranged. ROGET

It's the same thing. PONZI

Whom the gods would destroy, they first make mad. Euripides by Longfellow. HARRISON

You make me crazy with that sort of talk. PONZI

Otto? ROGET

Stay clear. The man's gonna be angry he's still living. PONZI

ROGET
Otto. You're all right. It's simply a memory.

HARRISON
Simple memory is an oxymoron.

ROGET
Sit up. That's it.

OTTO
Is it show time?

ROGET
For those keeping watch.

HARRISON
Yeah, we're the caged menagerie.

OTTO
(Stands.)
And the clowns.

PONZI
Thank god for them.

OTTO
Kiss a clown, you kiss an angel.

HARRISON
The gospel according to Barnum and Bailey.

OTTO
She taught me that.
(Crosses to his coat rack.)

ROGET
Crystal.

PONZI
Before she died.

OTTO
(On top of PONZI'S 'died'.)
All the rest I learned at the clown academy. Graduated first in
my class.

(Slips into his oversized
jacket.)

HARRISON
First among the least. Christ would be proud.

OTTO
And joined the touring company straightaway.
(MORE)

OTTO (CONT'D)

(Dons his red wig on -.)

Later, I created my own routine. A bit with the spotlight.

(MUSIC rises.)

Maybe you saw it. My signature piece.

ROGET

Show us.

PONZI

How? We don't even got a flashlight -.

HARRISON

(Snaps his fingers. A spot
light appears.)

You're on.

OTTO

Okay.

(Crosses to the spot on -.)

It's warm in one of those.

(The spot 'darts away'.
OTTO sneaks up on it.)

Bright.

(Slides a foot toward the
spot. It shrinks in
diameter.)

You step into that, you're the center of the universe.

(Leaps into where the spot
is, but it flashes away.)

People pay attention.

HARRISON

I hope that's all they paid.

OTTO

Crowds would wait for my autograph after the show.

(Blows up a balloon. The
spot 'inflates' as well.)

On glossy photographs of me as Hightops. I'd pass out balloons.

(Offers the balloon to the
spot. It 'shakes' itself
no.)

The babies cry.

ROGET

For them nothing is an illusion.

OTTO

This happened twice a day on weekends.

(The spot crosses toward
OTTO.)

OTTO
 It's never enough.
 (Let's the balloon go.)
 (The spot 'embraces' OTTO.)

OTTO
 Hello. My name is -.

PONZI
 Mud.

HARRISON
 Incidental.

ROGET
 Accidental.

PONZI
 Asinine.

HARRISON
 Philistine.

ROGET
 Inconsequential.

OTTO
 (In tears.)
 Otto Diffenderfer.
 (Spotlight goes black.)
 And I do matter.
 (Exits.)
 (Lights up.)

ROGET
 See what revelations do.

HARRISON
 They scare the hell out of us Christians.

ROGET
 You've reopened his wound.

PONZI
 Sure. To clean it out.

ROGET
 With your elixir?

PONZI
 Perfect. I have one bottle left.
 (Reaches into his coat.)

ROGET
 No, I've got something better now.
 (Takes up his notebook and pencil.)

HARRISON
 Something for all of us?

ROGET
 I'd like to think so. Yes. I'd truly like to think so.
 (Exits.)

HARRISON
 Otto - will he be all right?

PONZI
 He'll be in the kitchen.

HARRISON
 Yeah. The man's starved.

PONZI
 Famished.

HARRISON
 Still, he survived.

PONZI
 You've all survived one way or another.

HARRISON
 Lucky or unlucky?
 (Does a card trick.)

PONZI
 Asks the man with the stacked deck.

HARRISON
 Got to give yourself a chance to win. Especially if you're saddled with a handicap.

PONZI
 Throw away your crutches, man, and walk.

HARRISON
 Magician heal thyself.

PONZI
 Exactly. But get out of your own way first.

HARRISON
 Some trick, Ponzi.

PONZI
 Tricks. I'm not buying them. Period.

HARRISON
Because it's - *black* magic.

PONZI
Whichever.

HARRISON
Because you can't appreciate something called the *black* arts?

PONZI
I never said it like that.

HARRISON
You don't have to say it. The unspoken speaks volumes. Cuts to the core.

PONZI
Translation: you hear what you wanna hear.

HARRISON
Innuendo, alchemist.

PONZI
The more the syllables, the bigger the scam, Harrison.

HARRISON
The breadth of your denial reflects the depth of your - insincerity.

PONZI
You're gonna falsify what I didn't say just to square your -.

HARRISON
Delusions?

PONZI
Them.

HARRISON
This I don't need to *square*. I just need to speak English. Something you might consider doing.

PONZI
Words are a smoke screen.

HARRISON
Smoke signals, Ponzi. One simply has to know how to read them.

PONZI
Smoke? You gonna read smoke? There's too much wind.

HARRISON
Language defines us.

PONZI
You got overeducated in those universities.

HARRISON
I was *blackballed* from them.

PONZI
Get outta here.

HARRISON
Blacklisted when I forced the issue.

PONZI
Terrific.

HARRISON
And *blackmailed* if I tried attending classes.

PONZI
Enough already -.

HARRISON
Because I looked black-hearted and black marked so I soiled myself working for the black market.

PONZI
All right. They're just words.

HARRISON
I suffered a black eye, had blackheads, spurned because I was born on Black Friday and sacrificed at a black mass. Amen. Are you reading between the lines, Ponzi, or should I draw you a not-so-pretty picture?

PONZI
They're sounds, Harrison -.

HARRISON
Signifying a well articulated fury!

PONZI
Blacksmith.

HARRISON
Black Maria.

PONZI
Say what?

HARRISON
A paddy wagon, you blackleg.

PONZI
You're a crackpot.

HARRISON

And you're a blackguard, Ponzi, which is not a compliment.

PONZI

I didn't make the language.

HARRISON

But you're happy to use it.

PONZI

It doesn't mean nothing.

HARRISON

It doesn't mean nothing. Well, maybe you're right. Maybe words are simply noise, so much - gas, flatulence from a black hole -.

PONZI

(On top of HARRISON'S line.)

All right! What are we supposed to do?

HARRISON

Forgive us!

PONZI

But *your* daughter was killed.

HARRISON

WE DIDN'T ASK TO BE NIGGERS!

PONZI

(Hold. Stunned.)

No. No, you did not.

HARRISON

Years ago, when I was - assaulted, they caved in my ribs and my head and left me there for the city to sweep up with all the other - refuse. Did you read that in your newspapers?

PONZI

Who?

HARRISON

Five Caucasian males.

PONZI

Where -?

HARRISON

It doesn't matter where! Fear drove their madness and that sort of insanity is universal. I spent two weeks in the hospital - juvenile ward.

PONZI

And never recovered.

HARRISON

No! But what a piece of luck *that* near-death experience turned out to be. A magician came to entertain us. He put a black rabbit into a top hat, waved his elegant fingers over the opening and pulled out a white one. There I had the answer. This is how I would surmount my - obstacle: Live and work in a world where appearances are deceiving. Where it's understood what you see is not what you get. So I spent the next several months of my recovery and then years afterward studying those - *sooty arts*.

(Referencing himself.)

Perfect, don't you think?

PONZI

Yeah, it's a match made on Madison Avenue.

HARRISON

I practiced diligently until I appeared - undetectable. Until perception had little to do with truth.

(Puts on his top hat.)

And made my debut at birthday parties. But that proved a mistake. Children are inexperienced with the world. They have too few assumptions to exploit. So a pencil from your noise is perfectly reasonable.

(Does the following trick.)

Scarves turning color before their eyes no surprise whatsoever. But adults. They can't help themselves. The more educated they are, the easier they are to engage. The stronger their beliefs, the riper they are for the masterful deception. Indeed: *the* Masterful Deception.

PONZI

Speaking of yourself.

HARRISON

Speaking *for* myself.

PONZI

(Shift.)

Harrison, you're playing one note. You're bigger than that. You're about more than that.

HARRISON

(Heartfelt.)

How I've tried to believe it, Ponzi. But my own experiences and your newspapers tell me otherwise. A black man dragged to his death. Another arrested for breaking into his own house. A third pummeled on a public street by those sworn to protect him. The incessant malevolent hum of bigotry - until. Until -.

(Shift.)

Funny thing, Ponzi. I've never liked television.

OTTO

(Enters with ROGET in tow.)

Hallelujah!

But I could learn to. HARRISON

Take a look at our author! OTTO

Put him in a dress and I'll think about it. PONZI

He's gone and done it. OTTO

It is a bit of relief -. ROGET
(Gestures with notebook.)

Make sure he washes his hands. HARRISON

He's written a whole lot of something, Harrison. OTTO

Already? HARRISON

It - spills out. A work in progress. ROGET

Doodling most likely. PONZI

No. Here - OTTO
(Snatches notebook away.)
It has words on the page.

Give it back. ROGET

And sentences. OTTO

No kidding? PONZI

It's private. ROGET

Paragraphs even. OTTO

Let's have a look. PONZI

ROGET

I wrote it for me!

HARRISON

You wrote it for the adulation!

ROGET

(Caught in a silly position.)

That's ridiculous.

HARRISON

Precisely.

PONZI

Now leave us to it.

(ROGET regains his normal upright position. PONZI and OTTO read. ROGET waits expectantly - despite himself. As PONZI and OTTO read their 'enthusiasm' increases. HARRISON sits up - alert to possibilities. Done - all freeze.)

OTTO

Geez. Is this the best you can do?

(ALL deflate.)

ROGET

PERFECT! Absolutely perfect!

OTTO

What?

ROGET

This is why! This is the very reason why. A man - clears his throat for god's sake and the world is only too quick to criticize.

OTTO

But your mother got it right -.

ROGET

Too vulgar, they say. Too self-serving. Too loud. Too - too - *phlegmatic*. WELL, TO HELL WITH YOU!

PONZI

Relax. He's only a clown.

OTTO

What's that supposed to mean?

HARRISON
You don't have any taste.

ROGET
If I have to write it, you don't have to read it.

OTTO
Then what's it for?

HARRISON
He's purging.

OTTO
What?

PONZI
Spewing up his guts.

OTTO
Eeuu. Disgusting. Take it.

(ROGET picks up the notebook
and retreats.)

OTTO
Anyway, I don't like to read. Especially books. Too many pages.

HARRISON
Yes, but being read to, Otto. The distraction we've been looking
for.

PONZI
Sure, put us to sleep with a fairy tale.

HARRISON
It's what we're all after. An escape from - consciousness.

OTTO
A good night story.

PONZI
Bad or worse, There's comfort there. Remember, Otto?

OTTO
I do. Read it to us, Roget. Then I won't have to think.

HARRISON
A remark every author cherishes.

ROGET
It's unfinished, Otto.

OTTO
When are you going to be done?

How should I know? ROGET

Write a short story. OTTO

It's an art, not an assembly line. ROGET

Leave out the big words. HARRISON

Leave me alone. ROGET

No one *wants* to be alone. PONZI

It's not a choice, Ponzi. OTTO

No, but it is our fate! HARRISON

(The MEN disengage in the
face of this truth.)

ROGET
(To the red light.)
He's right. That's why the English language has over thirty
synonyms for the word solitary. I lived them all. Even in
college.

HARRISON
Where you *did not* write copious amounts of poetry, praise Jesus.

ROGET
But did discover hers.

OTTO
Who?

PONZI
Back to your mother -.

ROGET
Not my mother! Anne Sexton, Ponzi. Anne Sexton. A Pulitzer
Prize winner. She came to the college I attended for a reading,
and I sat front row center listening transfixed while she read
one poem after another illuminating me - touching on the chaos I
knew so well. And the exaltation I ached to realize. I - felt -
enthralled.

OTTO
Pretty talk -.

ROGET

Poetry, Otto. I found myself afterward asking for an autograph on the title page of her most recent volume. 'Write well,' Anne penned. 'It may rescue someone.' Already *she's* forgotten, but my mother's jingles - oh, my mother's jingles - people know them like their first names.

(Exits.)

PONZI

Well, we're getting at the heart.

OTTO

We've already said too much.

PONZI

Have another drink. It makes it easier.

HARRISON

Loosens the tongue.

OTTO

It's gone.

PONZI

Time for the payoff?

OTTO

How can we be five?

HARRISON

How about we give our author a pen name?

OTTO

Like Bic?

HARRISON

No, like fountain, Otto.

OTTO

And then what?

HARRISON

One of them can be Friday, the other Monday.

OTTO

Yes! Good. I knew you'd think of something!

PONZI

He's clowning around, Hightops.

OTTO

Nobody's laughing are they?

HARRISON

Understandable.

I understand the TV. OTTO

Understand it remains off! PONZI

What day is it? OTTO

It's still Monday. HARRISON

A dark day in the circus. OTTO

The day Crystal died? PONZI

I know what you're trying to do, Ponzi.
(Exits on -.) OTTO

Roget, hurry!

I don't remember Monday's being this long. HARRISON

All the days have the same number of hours, Harrison. PONZI

You're a practical man. HARRISON

I try to keep it simple, sure. PONZI

Play by the numbers. HARRISON

Better than nailing myself to a board. PONZI

People always mock what they don't understand, Ponzi. HARRISON

People who say they understand deserve to be mocked. PONZI

Why are you here? HARRISON

I'm passing time - like everyone else. PONZI

That's it? HARRISON

PONZI

What do you think?

HARRISON

I think otherwise. Either that or you have a poverty of purpose.

PONZI

Yeah, you've got a - thing for words.

HARRISON

Remarkable, isn't it?

PONZI

Come on. Not even yourself has a - monopoly on suffering.

HARRISON

But some of us have cornered more than our share of the market.

PONZI

Time to unload them. Time to throw off your chains.

HARRISON

They're in *your* mind.

PONZI

Have another drink.

HARRISON

Perfect.

(Does so.)

PONZI

And one for Adia.

HARRISON

My daughter is off-limits.

PONZI

Should have told that to the authorities.

HARRISON

Forget it, Ponzi.

PONZI

What? How they - abused her?

HARRISON

I will shut you up.

PONZI

In ways no father would wanna know.

HARRISON

It's none of your damn business!

PONZI

I'm making it my business.

HARRISON

Yes, you trade on other peoples' horror.

PONZI

And you fester in yours.

HARRISON

Hell, I'm consumed by it!

PONZI

Why? Because your magic couldn't save her? Heck, it couldn't even save you -.

HARRISON

(Throws bottle and moves to attack PONZI.)

That's enough, you bastard!

(PONZI quickly maneuvers HARRISON into painful and potentially harmful position.)

PONZI

Is this what you want, Mr. Houdini? Is it! Is this what you keep asking for? Your final escape?! A twitch of muscle and it's over! Is it?

HARRISON

All right. Fine. I'm done.

(PONZI releases him.)

Damn. You *have* been schooled.

PONZI

Yeah, the academy of hard knocks.

HARRISON

Yes. I bet you had quite an education. Phd? University of?

PONZI

The streets, Harrison.

HARRISON

Ah, that's where you learned how to create a market by pushing people over the edge then selling a potion that numbs the pain of their fall.

PONZI

Like you said - numbing the pain - it's all anybody wants. I can do that for you, one way - or another.

Ninety proof will do it. HARRISON

My - con is for real, Harrison. It does the trick. Your - black magic is show and no business. The - customers pay for illusions. I - sell - solutions. PONZI

Can it raise the dead? HARRISON

No. (Sharply.) PONZI

No. (Hold.)

No.

(OTTO rushes in with cart or tray full of cream pies.)

Roget writes on! OTTO

You're interrupting. PONZI

Thank me later. OTTO

That's the matter with clowns: they're cue-less. HARRISON

This is a common room. OTTO

It must be if you're allowed in it. HARRISON

Do you hear that, Ponzi? OTTO

Spurtiz him with seltzer water. Cool him off. PONZI

How about a pie in the face?! OTTO
(To HARRISON.)

(OTTO cocks his arm to throw a pie.)

Voila! It's nearly done. ROGET
(Enters.)

Time to celebrate? OTTO

Apparently. PONZI

How? HARRISON

Otto, what do ya think? PONZI

Yeaaaaaaah! OTTO
 (Considers the pie in his hand. Gives the Red Light a look then throws his pie which HARRISON dodges.)

(And now this slow-motion mimed pie-fight between ROGET, OTTO and HARRISON. A ballet of sorts wherein the physical exertion releases their emotional angst. We see this increasingly raw emotional release in their actions and their faces. Finally, the three MEN end up with an actual pie in hand, their features wracked with pain.)

Enough already. PONZI

Enough. OTTO
 (The pie in his face.)

Enough. ROGET
 (The pie in his face.)

More than enough. HARRISON
 (The pie in his face.)
 (The MEN disengage.)

Big Moe must be sleeping. PONZI

HARRISON

Or waiting to count the bodies.

OTTO

It seemed like a good idea at the time.

PONZI

You have scars where other people have veins. Bungled it three times. Was any of them a good idea?

ROGET

Life is stubborn. It won't let go without a struggle.
(Sits to finish his story.)

HARRISON

Oh, my girl struggled.

OTTO

You didn't have to say that, Ponzi.

PONZI

Reporting the facts.

HARRISON

Adia. I named her. It's Swahili for gift.

OTTO

It's personal.

PONZI

You make a mess like that, it's for everybody to see.

HARRISON

She embodied - divinity.

OTTO

It wasn't part of my act.

PONZI

It's all show business.

OTTO

Then why does it hurt so much!

HARRISON

Like Jesus who was black.

PONZI

Because you're alive.

HARRISON

They nailed that shaman to a tree. Then brought him back on stage white as snow. The real miracle.

ROGET
 Yes, we are alive. And when the appalling absurdities drives us
 to despair, what else can we do?
 (Writes 'the end' and puts
 the pencil down.)

HARRISON
 What - else?

OTTO
 So who can blame me?

ROGET
 Who can blame me?

HARRISON
 Who can blame me?

HARRISON/ROGET/OTTO
 For what happened next.

PONZI
 It's Monday.

HARRISON/ROGET/OTTO
 Yes.

PONZI
 There'll be no TV.

HARRISON/ROGET/OTTO
 No.

PONZI
 No magic, no routines -.

HARRISON/ROGET/OTTO
 NO!

PONZI
 So - is it time? Finally.

OTTO
 But the story -?

PONZI
 You have to earn it!

HARRISON/ROGET/OTTO
 Okay.

PONZI
 Right. Good. Let's get ready.

(PONZI, HARRISON, ROGET and OTTO cross to their coat racks. PONZI grabs his cane. During the following, HARRISON removes his black face, OTTO his clown face and so forth, ROGET his false beard and glasses -.)

PONZI

(A barker in the grand style to the red light.)

And now ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls of all ages, the only show this side of the galaxy - that we know of - presents its grand finale, a rousing finish, a little something against the night.

OTTO

Stop with the ballyhoo.

PONZI

That's right, folks. This is a ballyhoo. A pitch. A way to sell the dark side of the moon. So go deep into your pockets 'cause we have the usual -

HARRISON

Aberrations.

PONZI

The run-of-the-mill -

ROGET

Anomalies.

PONZI

For you to gawk at. We've got them tall, short, bearded, tattooed, multicolored and mad. Step right up! Don't be shy. We're all family here. But not to worry. We'll keep the lights low so you won't recognize one another. And please don't taunt or throw things or otherwise try to interact with these -

HARRISON/ROGET/OTTO

Unfortunates.

PONZI

Look but don't touch. See but don't feel. Be - but - be wary.

OTTO

Introduce us!

PONZI

They already know who they are - the twelve tribes, the lost boys, civilizations wandering in the wilderness led by one remarkable magician or another, refugees from the fabled garden left to work

(MORE)

PONZI (CONT'D)

out their own why's and wherefore's - stumbling around in the dark searching for the light switch.

(Pulls another bottle from his pockets.)

Well, here's your illumination: the elixir of life, pain-killer, love potion and laxative all in one bottle. I'll be selling them after the show -.

OTTO

All right! I'll buy it. Now bring out the acts.

PONZI

Sure. Give them what they've paid for. Now, without further ado, how about an inclusive welcome for Harrison Turner in ring center.

HARRISON

I made a name for myself levitating women, sawing them in half and causing them to vanish while appearing in venues all over America. A novelty act. But no matter the artfulness of my - tricks, I remained a black man - that African. Suspect. Dangerous. On the outside even of myself. So I went to Europe where rumor had it being was all about culture not color. In a medieval monastery, I happened upon a Mass. Monks straight out of the 15th century entered the sanctuary followed by the celebrant who addressed the altar with a large billowing incense burner. Then the stations of the cross. Now the church was awash in sweet smoke and secrets. And the golden crucifix suspended over the altar seemed something of the illusionist's trick - hanging without discernable support. Magic hovered literally in the air. And when the haunting, harmonious intonations of the monks' voices spiraled up with the incense - rose beyond the here to the hereafter, I was exhilarated and the tears streaming down my face wouldn't be stopped. But it wasn't the smoke. You understand it wasn't the smoke. It was Christ ascending. Christ resurrected. Christ reincarnated. The greatest conjurer of all time performing his finest illusion. Oh, I wept for joy.

PONZI

And now a rousing welcome for the irrepressible Hightops.

OTTO

I left my home at sixteen and hitchhiked across America. Along the way strangers robbed, raped and arrested me. In the circus, it got worse.

PONZI

And finally a man of many words, Roget Roget.

ROGET

Anne was tall, striking and sensual. Regal. Her appearance had an immediate effect on me.

(MORE)

ROGET (CONT'D)

Charmed by her outward exuberance; seduced by the inner turmoil, she allowed me refuge in the landscape of her long lanky body. Afterward, I lay there like an emperor while she medicated herself and called it sleep.

HARRISON

I returned from Europe to the news that two Caucasian males tossed a fire bomb into a church and burned three children to death. They were black before the fire ate them alive.

OTTO

I had been in the circus three months when she arrived and lit up the big top. Found me in the sawdust, grease paint and dung. 'I'm Crystal,' she said. 'I know,' I told her. 'I've seen your light.'

ROGET

The next morning, Anne forgot my name and wept over coffee and cigarettes. She wore those tears like pearls.

HARRISON

It was one more act of terrorism among so many. Still it staggered me. Later, the pestilence found my own unmarked door. Again. And then again.

OTTO

Crystal said, 'Look at me. I'll be your mirror.' And wiped off the paint. And the past. And in her eyes I was - beautiful.

ROGET

I knew she was wounded, but I wouldn't imagine mortally.

HARRISON

So when that reporter provided me all the grisly details of how my daughter, Adia, an asthmatic was toyed with, assaulted, restrained and suffocated in the back of a police car, I struck him.

OTTO

And liberated I dropped my baggy pants, left clown alley and stepped out into the world as myself.

ROGET

Anne inspired me to write - yes. Yet, I felt anything put on paper would be a mockery of what we shared.

HARRISON

'Adia! My blessed child!' I cried out and shattered plummeted into hell.

OTTO

I trusted her.

ROGET

But she believed in me.

HARRISON

Oh, I needed magic to save me then. So I took up my cross.

OTTO

So she took me up on the high wire.

ROGET

So with her encouragement, I took up a pencil.

HARRISON

(Plays out the following.)

And with hammer and spike in hand, I secured my feet to the rough wood. My left hand to the perpendicular.

OTTO

(Plays out the following.)

I had no fear.

ROGET

I sifted through my cache of words for some that might do her justice.

HARRISON

And dropping the hammer, flung my right hand across my chest against the spike already driven through the beam opposite and hung there.

OTTO

But I mis-stepped and the high wire trembled throwing Crystal off balance. I grabbed her - one hand on the wire, one hand crushing hers, but - she - slipped - away, tumbled to the ground, arms and legs flailing, face ashen with surprise. My god! CRYSTAL! Crystal. Why? Why did I hang on?

ROGET

(Plays out the following.)

And I began to write, but was interrupted by a newscast: A dry, matter-of-fact voice announcing the successful suicide of Anne Sexton as if reading copy from a weather report.

HARRISON

And I called out, 'Now take this burden from me!'

OTTO

No one could answer, so I let go as well - opening up my veins like rivers to carry me away.

ROGET

Stunned I ran from my room, stumbling down the stairs and into my mother as she confronted me at the door.

(MORE)

ROGET (CONT'D)

'Look,' she said in her bright and cheery voice waving one more \$25 dollar check she had earned writing a jingle selling soap; the letter opener flashing in her hand. 'Listen to this.' 'No,' I shouted. 'No!' Thirty times no! Till she was quiet and still as my Anne. My Anne. Anne. And somehow - that's who I saw there at my feet. Anne Sexton. Her brave heart giving way. Her lungs thick with carbon monoxide from the car's exhaust. I cradled her head and recited poem after poem hoping such - incantations would breathe life back into her. But not even the power of words could rescue so mortal an immortal. And now - and now - this awful rowing toward God.

PONZI

Okay. Good. You've done it.
(OTTO, ROGET and HARRISON
relax.)

Better?

OTTO

Lighter.

ROGET

Emptier.

HARRISON

Clarified.

PONZI

This is where we begin.

OTTO

Our story -.

PONZI

Sure. You've paid your dues.

(ROGET takes his notebook
and offers it to PONZI.
PONZI accepts, settles
himself and 'reads'.)

PONZI

Listen. Christopher had the misfortune of being born ugly.

(HARRISON, ROGET and OTTO,
as mimes, play out the
following story. OTTO as
Christopher. HARRISON as
the teacher and parent.
ROGET the other children
and parent.)

PONZI

The startled looks and pained expressions of visiting relatives taught him this early. As he grew older, the rejection by neighborhood playmates affirmed it. And even though his mother and father tried to reassure Christopher, a parent's love cannot replace the joy of companionship and discovery shared by children. A great emptiness opened in him. Christopher invented other fantasies to fill it.

PONZI

On his first day of public school, some students taunted him. An especially brutal boy called out, 'Hey, kid, what's with the mask?' Other children followed his example. Most whispered and pointed and kept their distance. Christopher burrowed further into himself, put off the outside world and sang a lark song from the magic kingdoms he inhabited, but the knife-edged words pierced the shield of his retreat and inflicted new and telling wounds.

PONZI

Christopher's first grade teacher stood tall and willowy. She flowed through the room like a river. Shimmered like a crystal. When she knelt next to Christopher's desk, looked him full in the face and took his small cold hands in her long fingers, he knew she understood and fell in love. He drew her a picture that day and every day thereafter. And each time she'd say, 'Only a beautiful person can make such a beautiful picture.' And a small part of Christopher strove to believe her. But the world can be a bitter place. On the playground or the bus or in the cafeteria there remained many who would not let Christopher forget the sin of his appearance. It was a cross he bore in silence, and his silence caused further abuse.

PONZI

On the day his teacher brought in orange, white and black striped caterpillars, Christopher's life changed. The larvae looked strange and unfamiliar. 'Ugly,' one little girl pointed out. 'Oh, no,' the teacher responded. 'Look more closely and be patient.' What will happen the children clamored to know. 'Wait and watch for a miracle,' she told them. They watched and waited as the caterpillars attached themselves to milkweed stems and spun emerald green cocoons with crowns of gold - and disappeared. Days passed. A week. The children lost interest. But Christopher remained fascinated. Whenever he had a free moment, he sat by the terrarium and studied the cocoons.

PONZI

Because he remained vigilant, Christopher was the first to see the miracle emerge. The luminescent shell of a milkweed caterpillar shimmered - vibrated rapidly. It split apart. Something was breaking free. Christopher stood and ran to the class library. He pulled a book about butterflies from the shelf and thumbed quickly through it. When he came to the right page, he stopped, held out the book and called triumphantly, 'It's a monarch butterfly!'

(MORE)

PONZI (CONT'D)

Everyone stopped what they were doing and stared at him. Their teacher hurried to Christopher's side and put an arm about his thin shoulders. 'In the terrarium,' she asked. Christopher nodded yes but dared not speak again standing so exposed in the glare of his classmates' attention. 'Let's go see,' the teacher said.

PONZI

She guided Christopher back to the glass enclosure. The class followed. Inside a magnificent monarch butterfly slowly fanned its glistening orange and black wings. 'Beautiful,' whispered the teacher. Everyone murmured in agreement. Following dismissal, Christopher, thinking of monarch butterflies, bumped into a small group of sixth graders. 'Hey, watch where you're going, freak,' one of them said. 'Go join the circus,' another chimed in. They laughed and hurled stones after him as he ran away all the while concentrating on the blazing orange and black of butterfly wings. 'Beautiful,' Christopher repeated like a mantra trying to beat back their assault. But the weight of a brutal world was a burden difficult to bear.

PONZI

Hours later his mother and father walked the neighborhood looking for their only child. Some neighbors joined in the search. Their flashlight beams danced like fireflies throughout the immediate streets and alleys, but revealed nothing. Father called the police. As night thickened, a bitter cold settled on the town and Christopher's parents wept. Their boy could not be found.

PONZI

At dawn Christopher's mother drifted into tranquilized sleep. His father wandered outside. In the rose light of morning, he looked up and cursed God, his fist clenched so tightly the nails on his fingers made his hands bleed; and there he saw through the tree limbs of a black oak something wrapped in his green trench coat. He knew instantly what it was. 'Christopher,' he said and ran to the ancient tree and bulled his way up through the tangle of branches all the while calling his son's name. When he had climbed to where Christopher lay, he flung off the rope wrapped loosely about the boy's legs and pulled Christopher to him. His body was curiously light. It felt hollow and brittle as parchment. A small smile soften his damming features, but there was no life left in him. His father cried out and the anguish in his voice filled the universe end to end. Later, he gave the trench coat away. A man who slept in doorways bought the coat for two dollars at a thrift store. Hidden inside the breast pocket, he discovered a picture of a monarch butterfly carefully cut from a book. He held it out in the palm of a grimy hand and was not surprised when it lifted up and away on feathery wings. Free at last.

(The jangling sound of ice
cream vendor MUSIC.)

OTTO

Wow.

Magical. HARRISON

Metaphorical. ROGET

He's us. OTTO

That's absurd. HARRISON

Exactly. PONZI

Still - it hurts. ROGET

On occasion. PONZI

But what does it mean? OTTO

Hell, you want meaning? Do the Hokey Pokey. PONZI

Because that's what it's all about? HARRISON

Maybe. And then what, and so what? Gentlemen. PONZI
(Tip of his hat and begins
an exit.)

Ponzi, advice like that could put you out of business. ROGET

Yeah. Wouldn't that be something? PONZI
(Carries on with his exit.
Stops.)

Roget.

What? ROGET

You still owe me fifteen dollars. PONZI

(The lights go black. That's
all.)

(The End.)