

SHOWS FOR DAYS

ACT ONE

An empty rehearsal room. During the pre-show, the crew spikes the stage with tape.

When the taping is complete, Car, a man in his forties—who looks young enough to play a lot younger—walks through the door into the empty space. He flicks on the overhead lighting. It isn't fluorescent because too many directors complain it gives them headaches. He has a folder of papers, photographs. Research. He looks around at the room, then to the audience.

START CAR. Hey. The first place is 711 Penn Street, Reading, Pennsylvania. That's the blue tape. Okay. It's a hat store. An abandoned hat store. Storefront. Thirty feet wide. Seventy feet long. This is the side view. On either side are abandoned buildings. A men's clothing store upstage. A hobby store where you're sitting. Built in the teens of the last century. 1911, says a cornerstone. And there was a new storefront put on in the fifties. Empty now, just a big shoebox. *(Beat.)* I once wrote a show, really turned out great. The show moved to Broadway and then it closed after three weeks. So I sent off a text to everyone who was contacting me so upset—"What can I tell you? Showbiz." But it spell-corrected, "What can I tell you? Shoebox." What was interesting is how many of my arty friends texted back to me, "Yeah right." *(Goes back to the prop storage and returns wheeling on a desk and chairs as necessary.)* Curtained off by the entrance is the tiniest of offices. Desk. A chair. All found in the street. With a telephone—that somehow still works. *(He stops for a moment.)* I've been thinking about theater a lot lately. I don't usually think about theater, I just do it. But I have been thinking about it and inevitably

where I first learned what it was. With an amateur troupe in Pennsylvania. Stick with me, I think there's stuff here. Like—oh my God—the performance space! Rows of chairs from a church basement set up over there. A slightly raised platform over here. The platform is eight feet by twelve feet. Above it, hanging from the ceiling, are coffee cans painted black with light bulbs in them. And colored cellophane. Held on with rubber bands. It is May of 1973. And a loaf of bread cost—Oh who the fuck cares, I hate when people do that. I am fourteen. I've convinced my parents to let me go to Reading for the day. Officially to go shopping at Pomeroy's. Unofficially...well. I am fourteen. Oh and when I walk in the phone is ringing. No wait, not at first. **Stop** (Looks around the room.) Hello? Hello? (Car is fourteen. He walks into the front door as if he's walking into a cave. He walks in and walks over to the desk. He sees a knife. He picks it up. Pretty threatening. He touches the tip. It collapses into the handle—it is a prop knife. He does it again. The phone rings. Startled, he quickly puts the knife down. Sid, a woman in coveralls, enters.)

SID. You hear a phone ring, you answer it, you little fucker. And don't touch the props. (Answering phone.) Theater. Prometheus theater. First show's tonight. Sure how many? (Car clears his throat. Sid glares at him.) Great. Yeah, opening tonight. Thanks. Curtain's at 8:30. (As Sid hangs up she writes something on a tablet. Car is about to clear his throat. Sid cuts him off.) And you, Camille, what? You coughing up a lung?

CAR. I was just in town doing some work. Killing time before my bus. Thought I could help out. It said in the paper—

SID. Christ we're desperate. Well, that set don't paint itself. (She walks back to the stage, he follows.) What's your name?

CAR. Car.

SID. Ho ho. You must be a Wyomissing boy or are your parents just climbers?

CAR. Wyomissing.

SID. Just paint the side there. (Watches him paint.) Well, that sucks.

MARIA. (Enters with a largish box.) Howdy doody.

SID. Maria, you better have programs!

MARIA. I have programs. That is such a not-nice greeting. Wouldn't you know, I park all the way up by the freakin' pagoda almost, I swear to you, and what's sitting here, in front of the theater? Bright as a button? Parking spaces. Spaces for days. Sid, we have to run the Bala Cynwyd scene, I am not getting the lines there.

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SID. *(As she exits.)* Let's go take an ad out in the *Eagle*.

IRENE. Let me pull the quotes. I have my station wagon. *(The cast members ad-lib as they leave. Car puts down new tape.)*

START

CAR. But then school was out and I had a birthday and turned fifteen, thanks for the card, too late. And thus began the best summer of my life. Prometheus was the center, I'd rehearse from seven to eleven every night, but after that I would work at the theater, paint, sew, stretch muslin, Dutchman the flats—Google it later, you'll be surprised—and make midnight runs and all the time getting to know these fascinating creatures that were the exact opposite of anything suburban I had seen. I'd be home at two in the morning. I'd wake up at eleven. And then, as if God himself had created the syllabus, every day at noon Channel 48 showed another midday musical. The entire MGM and Warner Brothers catalogue of movie musicals. For me. Then a trip to the Wyomissing library. I took out all the plays I could: Williams, Noël Coward, Oscar Wilde, the collected plays of Kaufman and Hart. George Kaufman was my gateway drug to the harder stuff—the Algonquin wits! I think it's safe to say my life would have turned out differently if I had played sports as a child. Let me show you one of the midnight runs! Yellow tape. *(Looks down at the small box with yellow tape, puts five chairs in the box.)* This is a small one. A 1969 Dodge Coronet station wagon. The back is filled with costumes, playbills, scripts *(return to Tams-Witmark three months ago or be fined)*. Tuxedos picked up from Joe's Tuxedo, pick up after nine. Irene. Is in the front seat with Damien. The waiter. Who is now playing the pornographic postman. We are on to the next show. Getting props for a production of an O'Neill play. I am asleep in the back seat—well pretending to be asleep. *(Damien and Irene sit in two chairs side by side. Car sleeps on the back two.)*

IRENE. Here we be.

DAMIEN. Cold. Late. Should we wake up the kid and make a run, it's only a block?

IRENE. Cold on a June night, go figure. He asleep?

DAMIEN. Yeah. *(A mischievous smile from Irene. He warns her.)*

Reenie. Nothing too much, we'll wake the closet case. *(She kisses him.)*

You're crazy. Like everyone says you're crazy, and you are. I hear—Mayor Lackey's popped his lid he's so ticked off at you.

IRENE. Why?

DAMIEN. 'Cause you got Jo Jo to give you the building.

IRENE. Then he should be mad at Jo Jo, not me.

STOP

CAR. Weren't you going to—

IRENE. Because I'm not quite good enough, Car. Not quite as strong as I should be. Because I am afraid of everything too much. Because the only thing I know anything about is theater, and the older I get, the more I realize how little I know about that even. *(Car pushes Irene off. Then returns.)*

CAR. Sometimes shows are really good and critics hate them. I'm glad you were all seated when I told you that. The O'Neill play was probably the best thing we ever did. But the critics haaaaaaated it. *(From a folder he pulls out two reviews. Reads.)* The headline in the *Reading Eagle*: "Great God Brown question mark. Good god no exclamation point." That was our friend Kurt, the local theatre critic who was coincidentally the artistic director of the always well-reviewed Civic Players. He wrote: "The Reading Redevelopment Authority need not worry about tearing down the 700 block of Penn Street. Not with the bomb that Prometheus just put there." So the show closed early. And we weren't broke, we were in debt. And from desperation come interesting choices. Irene decides to create a whole season for next year so we can get subscribers who will pay in advance. But first she decides to choose a show with recognizable-name value but that we can really mine for the psycho-sexual undercurrents. We're going to go back to the theater now. The shoebox. That's the blue tape. It's opening night of Irene's new show that I won't say what it is because you would think it's in the public domain, but it's not—you'll figure it out soon. Let's start this scene with a scream.

IRENE. *(Off.)* AAAAAAAAAHHHH!

CAR. It's a month later.

IRENE. NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! *(Enters in a gold lamé gown with an empire waistline. I'm serious. Clutching a copy of the Reading Eagle, she is distraught.)*

CLIVE. Sit and unleash all your angst but quickly, I have to get into my Long John Silver drag.

MARIA. What's up? *(Walks in, in her Japanese robe but full Indian warpaint makeup.)*

IRENE. THIS!!!

CLIVE. Anguish my dear, for days and days and days.

IRENE. Read this— *(Hands Maria the Reading Eagle. Maria reads it.)*

MARIA. "Three held in public lewdness sting"?

IRENE. Beneath that.

STOP

SID. You destroyed that poor boy's life—Don't look away from me!

IRENE. Was I—there's so—Brenda always had nice hair, she should wear it up—

SID. Can it, Desdemona, no more death scenes. And maybe I should actually ban myself for a while from all this—

IRENE. The rocks are in the hands.

SID. No death scene, now. Now— *(She notices Irene has an odd look as she gazes off.)* Reenie? Hon? *(A pause, then Irene falls back into her chair and shakes mildly, but her face has the oddest expression. A mixture of a daze and a fear of the daze. Sid runs over, holds her, and comforts her. The others all run to her side.)* Just relax, lady. Just relax. *(In a moment, Irene is calm, then looks at Sid and the others as if waking from a nap.)*

IRENE. Well now, that is something, isn't it?

START CAR. *(Walks back on as his adult self. Unseen and unheard by the others onstage.)* Look, I'm going to level with you, this story isn't the truth. It's the only way I know how to tell the truth which is through fiction. Which is facts rearranged in a way that makes sense to me. Some of these people were real. Some are composites. *(He walks over and looks at the others onstage.)* Thanks for the life you gave me. *(He walks over and kisses Clive. Clive does not feel the kiss.)* Thank you, Brian. *(Walks over and kisses Maria, she doesn't notice.)* Thank you Jeannie and Linda. *(Hugs Sid, she doesn't notice.)* Thank you, Ric. You died just this last August. Alone in your apartment with twelve cats. And fourteen more in the lot across the street. Thank you and I loved you. *(Walks over to Damien.)* Thank you, David. And Michael. And Bill. And Ben, and the violinist whose name I can't remember. And all the rest. But mostly David. *(He kisses Damien, who doesn't notice.)* **STOP**

SID. How bad is this, really?

IRENE. Oh these doctors are such amateurs. One says I've got five years. One says two years. Another says six months. One even says fourteen weeks. *(She looks as if she has just remembered this last prognosis, and she is immediately in the profundity of it. Car walks over to her.)*

CAR. You'll be gone in a year's time. And I'll still be banned, but Sid will call to invite me to your funeral. And then I'll be in the next show and every show after for the next two years, until I graduate high school. So I never get to say. Thank you, Jane. *(He leans in and kisses her. Irene places her hand on her cheek. She is the only one who feels Car's kiss. A smile and a gasp.)* And for you, a moment of *Carousel*. Thank you and I love you and I forgive you. *(Car looks around.)* Goodbye, Genesis Theatre. Sorry I called you "Prometheus" in this.