

War Rabbit

a play in two acts

by

Larry Maness

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Contact: LJM@larrymaness.com

Characters

Harry Gates: A college professor in his 50s

Jack Ruland: A college dean in his 50s

Cubby, Bobby and Annette: College-aged Mousketeers

Voice/Police Officer

War Rabbit

A play in two acts

The Setting: A rehearsal space on the campus of an American university.

The Time: Evening of the present.

At Rise: Three graduate students converge. Bobby, moody and distracted, strolls in listening to his iPod. Following him is Annette talking to someone on her cell phone. The curtain covering one wing flutters. A flustered and nervous Cubby paws his way out from behind and drags a heavy duffle bag center stage. He lets it go.

CUBBY

This thing weighs a ton.

ANNETTE

Hey.

CUBBY

Hey.

She closes her phone and puts it away. Bobby unplugs from his iPod.

BOBBY

Somebody begging for a hot date?

ANNETTE

Always.

BOBBY

You're the one to call.

ANNETTE

Bitterness? I thought we were past that.

CUBBY

Come on you guys, who was on the phone?

ANNETTE

Somebody making sure we we're all here.

CUBBY

You got that, too?

BOBBY

I got a terse reminder to be on time.

ANNETTE

From who?

BOBBY

He wouldn't say and I couldn't place the voice but it sounded familiar. Not that it matters, I mean what's to rehearse. There's no script.

ANNETTE

I thought I was the only one who got left out.

CUBBY

All I got was an e-mail telling me to pick up this bag.

BOBBY

Who sent it?

CUBBY

Professor Gates.

BOBBY

You're kidding.

CUBBY

Not kidding. He left detailed instructions and I followed them.

BOBBY

Damn.

ANNETTE

What's the matter?

BOBBY

The voice on my phone. I knew I'd heard it. It was Gates. If I'd have made the connection then, I'd have hung up on him.

ANNETTE

Why?

BOBBY

We have an unpleasant history.

CUBBY

You must've heard the stories about Gates. Brilliant mind, Rhodes Scholar, MacArthur Fellowship, New York Times bestsellers every other year...and screwy.

ANNETTE

Every genius is a little off.

BOBBY

Gates is more than a little off. I was in his military history seminar a few years ago and ended up listening to some teaching assistant drone on about the brilliance of Napoleon's Italian campaign. None of us in that class liked being lied to.

ANNETTE

Who lied?

BOBBY

Gates. He was supposed to lecture and didn't.

ANNETTE

Maybe there was good reason.

CUBBY

This was before your time, Patsy. It was the campus buzz for weeks.

ANNETTE

That a professor hands over his class to a TA? What's earth shattering about that?

BOBBY

Nothing. The earth shattered when Gates defended himself after I complained to the department chair.

A figure of a man enters and slides mysteriously along the side curtain.

BOBBY (cont)

Gates swore he never missed a class.

CUBBY

He said he was there, just invisible.

ANNETTE

Invisible?

BOBBY

Said with a straight face.

ANNETTE

That's crazy.

BOBBY

That's Gates.

The man, Gates, steps forward. There is a menacing air about him.

GATES

That's not Gates. I'm Gates...in the flesh. I want to thank you for accepting my invitation to participate in my first literary foray into... I'm not certain yet what to call it.

BOBBY

If there's a script, it's probably a play.

GATES

Yes, yes, Bobby, leave it to you to offer your opinion even when not called for.

BOBBY

What's that supposed to mean?

GATES

It means I haven't forgotten that gang of wolves you organized to tear my reputation to shreds.

BOBBY

I didn't organize anything. I went to one meeting with the chairman of your department.

GATES

You called for the meeting.

BOBBY

How do you know that?

GATES

I know everything.

Bobby scoffs.

BOBBY

Except my name. It's not Bob or Bobby, it's
Thomas Sutherland.

GATES

You're playing Bobby. You're Cubby and you are
Annette. Three of the original Mouseketeers made
immortal by the never ending drivel put out in Disneyland.
The other member of our group plays himself as only he can.
Jack? Jack? I'm sure you've stopped bleeding by now. Come
out and join us.

When nothing happens, Gates charges to the curtain, sweeps it back and yanks Jack
Ruland into the room. Jack stumbles and holds his forehead. Bobby and Cubby weigh
their options as Annette rushes to Jack's aid. It's clear there is something between them.

ANNETTE

Jack. Professor Ruland. Are you all right?

JACK

Fine, fine. Harry got a little overheated, that's all.

ANNETTE

What's this all about? What's going on?

Jack puts an arm around her.

GATES

Didn't take long to corroborate my suspicion, did it?

JACK

About?

GATES

That you two know each other rather well.

Jack removes his arm.

JACK

Patricia was a student of mine, Harry.

GATES

Learning what?

(Beat.)

Not that it really matters. What matters is that we're
all here...and that our pasts are all connected, we've got history.

CUBBY

Not me.

GATES

No, not you, Cubby. But every stage requires a traffic warden to offer directions. I'll put people in their places, if you get my meaning. You keep things moving. Besides, I want someone onboard whose passions are for men. Not everyone can be panting after Annette. That's why I choose you as my director.

CUBBY

I don't deserve the honor, professor.

GATES

Perhaps not but I saw the student production you directed last semester. Fine pacing even if you did rush through the subtleties. You're perfect for the task at hand: no subtleties at all.

CUBBY

And no script to direct.

GATES

In the bag.

JACK

Don't open it.

BOBBY

Yeah, don't open it.

Cubby doesn't move.

GATES

Playing the hero?

BOBBY

No. Just making the observation that it's three against one. If none of us wants to go along with this...

Gates pulls a handgun from his coat and waves it. The gun never leaves his hand.

GATES

How do you think I convinced Jack Ruland to

GATES (cont)

come along?

JACK

You promised if I came there'd be no guns.

GATES

The road to good intentions is littered with broken promises.

Gates aims the gun at Jack. Annette rushes to Cubby.

ANNETTE

Don't just stand there, do something.

GATES

Not 'something'. Do what I ask. Inside the duffle you will find everything you need.

Cubby sees there's no choice and opens the bag. He takes out four bound scripts and hands them to everyone but Gates.

GATES (cont)

Excellent. What you have in your hands are codes of conduct, rules of the road, what to do at the green light and all that. What I have in my hand is the arbiter. This gun makes all decisions final. Is that quite understood? I won't hesitate to shoot. Clear?

(Beat.)

Very good. Now, I suggest that you take a look at what's inside. Go on.

Cubby, Bobby, Annette and Jack take their scripts and move toward each other.

GATES (cont)

You can slack off a bit, Jack. You're playing yourself and don't need to study the pages. Just be your old natural duplicitous self with a little back-stabbing edge mixed in.

JACK

You're not being fair, Harry.

GATES

No, I'm not. Being fair didn't get me very far. In fact it got me divorced and fired and pitied.

GATES (cont)

(Beat.)

I think I hated the pity more than anything else.
The pity and those looks. “There goes madman
Gates, poor bastard. However did he fall so far?”

(Beat.)

You have the answer to that, don’t you, Jack?
Remember the good old days when all we had
to worry about was the end of the world?

Hesitantly, Cubby steps from the group.

CUBBY

I’m not sure about any of this.

GATES

Of course you are. It’s written on the page. All
you have to do is read the words and follow the instructions.

The Mouseketeers refer to scripts as needed throughout the play.

CUBBY

But there are large gaps.

GATES

I’ll fill them in.

(Beat.)

Let’s see you do some work, Cubby. Show your stuff.

CUBBY

All right.

(Beat.)

Conference room. Department of History. Dr. Jack
Ruland, chair.

BOBBY

Thank you for taking the time, Professor Ruland.
It’s not easy for any of us to...

GATES

A little more bravado, Bobby. You’re an eyewitness
to the crime of the century. My God, man, one of your
professors didn’t spoon feed you.

Bobby bristles, then plows vigorously ahead.

BOBBY

This isn't an easy thing to do, Professor Ruland. None of us wanted this to go so far, but the course was advertised as a seminar with Professor Gates and as I pointed out earlier, he hasn't shown his face.

GATES

Much better. Not there yet, but improving.
(Beat.)
Jack?

Jack glances at his script.

JACK

What have you got to say for yourself?

GATES

A pack of lies, of course.

JACK

I have a signed complaint from eight students out of twelve. Each one swears that you presented one lecture, then were replaced for the rest of the semester by a teaching assistant. You disappeared.

GATES

I've said that all along.

JACK

You weren't invisible, Harry.

GATES

Who said?

JACK

Even you can't do the impossible.

(Beat.)

The department needs to respond decisively to this behavior, Harry. We can't have our faculty making up their own rules as they go along. We need a consistent and united front, especially when some of our finest students complain.

GATES

Finest? A Mousketeer is the best we have to offer?

JACK

I'm afraid I have no choice but to forward this matter to the dean. If she decides further action is necessary, you may present your case before the grievance committee.

Cubby and Annette step forward.

CUBBY

Good to see you, professor. I understand we have a bit of a problem that needs resolving.

GATES

This hearing is an assault on my integrity.

ANNETTE

Then you deny the charge?

GATES

Absolutely.

CUBBY

You attended each class for the full two hours?

GATES

I did. If the students did the reading, I stayed longer. It didn't happen often.

ANNETTE

This isn't the first time, Professor Gates. We've heard complaints in the past. Six months ago, you were once again before this committee.

GATES

I was under a tremendous strain. A book I was working on wasn't going well. In addition, there were troubles at home.

(Beat.)

I went to my old friend, my best friend, really, Jack Ruland. I told him I'd come home from my office and found a U-Haul out front. My wife was moving out.

ANNETTE

You were asked to get help. The committee wanted you to see someone professionally.

GATES

It didn't help.

CUBBY

Why?

GATES

Because—like the sniveling students who are after me now—my analyst wouldn't believe me.

(Beat.)

I have the gift. Incredible as it seems, I can will myself into a vapor like some invisible faint mist. I can see everything, but those around me can't see me. The proof is my innocence of these charges. I was in my classroom. I should not be blamed that my students did not have the ability to recognize me. Even Jack was unaware that one evening while he read in his study, I was behind him, my gun aimed at the back of his head.

JACK

I don't believe that.

GATES

It's true.

JACK

Why didn't you pull the trigger?

A burst of sound from a snare drum.

JACK (cont)

Why didn't you?

GATES

(Beat.)

Cubby has the answer.

A drum roll. Cubby strides forward and address the audience.

CUBBY

Ladies and gentlemen, it is with high honor that I participate in this explanation of what appears to be a minor crinkle in the social fabric. If you would just answer the simple questions on this small test, you will have your explanation regarding

CUBBY (cont)

whether or not Professor Harry Gates can will himself into the world unseen. Ready?

(Beat.)

Question one: Classes unattended? True or false?

Question two: An armed man in another man's study?

A) Likely. B) Unlikely. C) We will never know.

Lastly, fill in the blank: "Harry Gates can make himself _____."

(Beat.)

Bobby?

BOBBY

True. C. Disappear.

ANNETTE

False. A. I'd say be invisible?

CUBBY

One word, Annette. "Be invisible" is two.

ANNETTE

Vanish.

CUBBY

Very good. And in this unseen state, Professor Gates put his years of teaching military theory into practice and stepped foot onto the battlefield in the greatest scuffle to cross the Idaho plains in years.

GATES

I was the obvious choice. I could have killed my old friend, or I could have saved the rabbits. I decided to put my gift to good use and shoot Jack later.

The drumming crescendos, then abruptly stops.

ANNETTE

Gentlemen and ladies, The Living History of War Rabbit One.

BOBBY

Idaho. Eighty-two thousand square miles, criss-crossed by fur traders, Lewis and Clark, prospectors for gold and silver, Indians and Indian killers, and farmers who found fame with the Idaho po-ta-to.

ANNETTE

She was the forty-third state. She has Rocky Mountains, the Snake River, Sun Valley, the Salmon River, and towns with names like Moscow, Boise, Twin Falls, Burley, Idaho Falls, Soda Springs, and Mud Lake.

CUBBY

Little more than half a million people live in Idaho. That comes to about seven people for every square mile. Not what you'd consider a population problem.

ANNETTE

Unless you're a hare.

BOBBY

A rabbit. It's December 1, 20__ and the North American mammal of the genus *Lepus*, the hare, sometimes referred to as the jackrabbit is about to become embroiled in an altercation with the fine citizens of Mud Lake, Idaho. Farmers and ranchers... clean air and blue skies...breast feeding...strong backs...up with the chickens...hot sun...leathery skin...sex in the meadow...sex in the row boat bobbing along the curvy shores of Mud Lake...no anchor, just drifting along like all the other ma's and pa's of the world. Ma's and pa's with babies and bibles and barbed wire fences put up trying to keep genus *Lepus* on the other side of the drawn line. And when he crossed that line, BAM!

GATES

Mass murder. Five thousand dead rabbits in two days. I couldn't imagine not trying to help, not trying to stop all the nonsense. I knew the tactics that would work. I'd studied the cunning military maneuvers of Hannibal and Napoleon and MacArthur and Eisenhower. I knew the theories of attacking one flank before sending the main force to the enemy's weakened side. Plus I was living in a dump brought on by divorce and suspension from the university.

(Beat.)

I had no reason not to go to Idaho.

ANNETTE

Did he really?

JACK

No. He never left this state.

ANNETTE

I mean try to kill you?

GATES

I snuck aboard a chartered plane full of big game hunters heading for the killing fields. Not an empty seat around so I stood in the aisle all the way.

JACK

When was this, Harry?

GATES

Christmas Day. Coldest one on record.

JACK

You had drinks at my house Christmas Day.

GATES

I don't think so.

JACK

I drove you home. You were in no shape to be out on the roads.

GATES

I was at thirty-seven thousand feet, bucking a hundred mile an hour head wind.

JACK

You were drunk enough to believe that. All this is in your mind, Harry. None of this is real.

GATES

Even your affair with my wife? What's the name of your favorite spot? Carmine's, wasn't it? Booth in the back. Candles on the white tablecloth. I saw you there.

Gates puts a menacing arm around Annette.

GATES (cont)

One of the reasons I wanted you here, my dear. I wanted to warn you about him if I'm not already

GATES (cont)

too late, as I fear I am. Jack here is a notorious bed-hopper. He hops about like a rabbit. He's already hopped in your little bed, hasn't he?

ANNETTE

Keep your hands off me.

Gates doesn't budge.

JACK

Get your hands off, Harry.

GATES

Seems I've heard that before or at least a variation. "Keep your damn hands off my wife, Jack!"

He removes his arm.

GATES (cont)

A cry in the darkness from what I recall

(Beat.)

Do you know what I did when Helen told me she wanted a divorce? I went out and bought a set of weights. I did push-ups, pull-ups, sit-ups, curl-ups before I'd hit the weights, doing a hundred reps at a time—all a plea against being unwanted. How could a man so fit, so handsome, so bright get kicked out of his own house? I don't have an answer. All I know is that I'd go to bed so tired, I couldn't lift my arms to wipe away the tears.

(Beat.)

You see why we have to go through this, don't you, Jack? You owe me part of my life and I intend to collect it.

Gates points the gun at Jack's head.

GATES (cont)

I'll take what's left of yours as down payment.

ANNETTE

Don't!

A terrifying silence is broken by Cubby rummaging through the duffle. He pulls out an air horn and blows it toward the audience. Bobby stands beside him.

CUBBY

Ladies and gentlemen, ladies and gentlemen of Mud Lake, if I might have order. Please. Quiet out there.

BOBBY

Quiet!

Gates lowers the gun.

CUBBY

Thank you.

BOBBY

This is important stuff, so keep it down.

CUBBY

It's a matter of life and death. We need to use our heads. We need to come up with a plan.

BOBBY

We're under siege. A few hundred rabbits showed up at my place this past spring. A few hundred more hopped in a week or two later. Before you knew it, my potato fields were laid bare and a hundred thousand rabbits ran wild.

ANNETTE

Fish and Game estimates between eight and ten million across the state. The simple fact is that you cannot walk across the street to your mailbox without standing in a sea of bunny ears.

CUBBY

And they're right on time. Every ten years a proverbial explosion of jackrabbits hops across the fields of Idaho.

BOBBY

What are we going to do about it?

CUBBY

That's what we're here to decide.

Another blast from the air horn.

CUBBY (cont)

I hereby call to order the first meeting of the
Mud Lake Rabbit Committee.

BOBBY

We don't need any meeting to kill a bunch of
damn rabbits.

Cubby digs in the duffle and pulls out a pair of rabbit ears. He tosses them to Annette who, reluctantly, puts them on. Bobby doesn't like the looks of things.

BOBBY (cont)

You don't need to wear those.

GATES

Read the script, Bob. She needs to wear the ears.

BOBBY

So we can club her to death?

GATES

I see you've read ahead. Excellent. I take it you've seen a thread running through: Fear. Everyone's a bit on edge, a bit unsure of the future. The folks in Mud Lake don't know if life will ever return to normal, and Jack here, doesn't know if he'll live another hour. But, Annette, dear, you have no reason to fear. Not yet. Remember, I boarded a plane and I'm on my way to help.

JACK

Don't hold your breath.

GATES

That's right. I'm not on the plane because the truth is I don't have the gift of invisibility. But, I do and can prove it.

(Beat.)

The day Helen moved out, I ordered the man carting off the television to put it down and leave. At first, I thought he hadn't heard since he kept on his merry way. When I told him not to touch the sideboard, I thought he was ignoring me. But when I jumped on the sofa

GATES (cont)

and threw a tantrum as he and his helper lifted it into the back of the truck, I knew they couldn't see me. Helen either. I begged her to stay, but she didn't hear a word I said. It was like I wasn't even there.

JACK

She needed a change, Harry. She wanted a change.

GATES

And what about what I wanted? Who puts a mark down the center of my house and dares the other to step over it? I'm talking about my heart exploding like some gigantic bomb when she stands there with my boys and starts off with a line that I know from the first utterance is going to drag me through the depths of hell. "I don't want to hurt you, Harry, but..." How can anyone say that to another person? What she really meant was, "I don't want to hurt you but I'm going to tear your heart out."

JACK

It wasn't easy for Helen either.

GATES

Then why did it happen?

JACK

You're asking the wrong man, Harry. I've been divorced four times. Every time the lawyers divided up the pie, I felt like I'd swallowed a stun gun. Who knows why anything happens? They just do.

GATES

Maybe. But sometimes there is calculation. A plan. A purpose.

(Beat.)

On the airplane to Mud Lake, I considered opening the bomb bay doors and dropping the big one.

Annette—in rabbit ears—address the audience.

ANNETTE

On August 6, 1945 at 8:16 A.M., a fission bomb with a yield of twelve and one half kilotons was detonated about nineteen hundred feet above the central section of Hiroshima. Present day standards would classify the bomb as a small one. A mere tactical weapon that flattened a city of three hundred and forty thousand people.

Ground Zero became a word with meaning as one hundred and thirty thousand people were killed. Nearly seventy percent of the buildings in Hiroshima were destroyed or damaged beyond repair. Since we now possess over one million times the destructive power of the August 6th bomb, there is great concern for the future of the earth. As Professor Gates wrote in his bestseller “The Survival of Species in the Event of Nuclear War” cows, rabbits, plants will all die out. Water protects against radiation so fish will last a week or two longer. Insects will flourish then die out selectively since some tolerate poisons better than others. Humans—the most frail of all—will be the first to go.

JACK

Why didn't you?

GATES

Why didn't I...?

JACK

Drop the bomb on Mud Lake?

GATES

Because I didn't want to add to the horror. Not yet. I wanted to see if there was another way to stop the insanity.

(Beat.)

You're falling asleep on the job, Cubby my boy. Hand Jack the New York Times.

Cubby pulls the paper from the duffle and hands it to Jack who finds the article and reads.

JACK

“December 25. Dateline: Mud Lake. Hundreds of farmers clubbed jackrabbits to death today

JACK (cont)

in a roundup that had been called to save crops from the proliferating animals. The hares were rounded up in a three-mile-square area by 400 farmers on horseback, motorcycles and on foot, armed with pool cues, baseball bats and homemade spears and golf clubs.

“The hares were herded into a fenced enclosure where they were clubbed, had their throats slit and were skinned.”

ANNETTE

That’s disgusting.

GATES

My thoughts exactly.

ANNETTE

How many were killed?

JACK

Over fifteen thousand.

Cubby slides a golf club from the duffle and tosses it to Bobby who swings wildly then watches the trajectory of his hit.

BOBBY

Did you see that?

CUBBY

Must have gone a mile.

BOBBY

Whap. Right between the ears.

CUBBY

Fore!

BOBBY

Pure excitement. Not recommended for little children, of course. But it’s either them or us, right? I mean, I’m not working dawn to dusk to feed a bunch of damn rabbits. I was forced into the frenzy.

Bobby swings again and again, growing accustomed to the killing.

CUBBY

What about the bloody part?

Bobby swings away.

CUBBY (cont)

Fifteen thousand rabbits. There must have been rivers of blood. You had to be wading in it.

BOBBY

We all drank a cup.

ANNETTE

You all did what?

BOBBY

Drank a cup of blood. We were comrades. We were in the fight together.

GATES

“When, O Sorrow, has war been more dangerous, the enemy more powerful, the armies more cruel? Do you see the slaughter? Do you see the destruction, and the battlefield buried under plies of slain? Do you see that in this year the earth has drunk more blood than rain?” The voice of Egidio of Viterbo, the General of the Austustinians in 1512.

His voice came to me a few days after Helen left. I was alone in that big house of ours, drinking a whiskey and building a fire in the fireplace so as to burn everything she hadn't taken. One of the papers was the Times with that article about the rabbit massacre. I had another whiskey and thought about burning down the house when I wondered if Helen would come back if she saw me differently. Not at my desk typing away, or in front of a classroom lulling my charges asleep. What if she saw a man of action? A man of action she could look up to and respect?

(Beat.)

I had another whiskey and went to the airport.

Annette removes her bunny ears.

ANNETTE

May I help you, sir?

GATES

I certainly hope so. I want to by a ticket.

ANNETTE

To?

GATES

Mud Lake, Idaho.

ANNETTE

Mud where?

GATES

Lake. Mud Lake. Madam, this is an emergency. Lives are at stake.

ANNETTE

I'm checking the computer, sir.

GATES

Check for Helen Gates last seen in a U-Haul going west. Tell her to be on the lookout for a changed man.

ANNETTE

Sorry?

GATES

That makes two of us. Tell her that I am more capable now than ever of making those changes she wanted years ago. I'll pick up after myself. I'll go to counseling. I'll spend more time with the children and enjoy it.

ANNETTE

Are you sure you want to buy an airplane ticket?

GATES

Never more sure of anything in my life. Although I could sneak on the plane if you'd prefer.

ANNETTE

Not past our security. They'd stop you in a second.

GATES

You can't stop what you can't see.

ANNETTE

I see you.

GATES

That's because I'm trying to do the right thing. I'm trying to buy a ticket. I'm not trying to get a free seat.

ANNETTE

To Mud Lake.

GATES

That's right.

ANNETTE

I'm afraid you won't be going, sir.

GATES

Why's that?

ANNETTE

The shuttle's booked. Sold out.

GATES

A dinky town like Mud Lake has a shuttle?

ANNETTE

Not until a few days ago. Supply and demand. We've had lines all the way out the door. Reporters and big game hunters are headed for the action. Must be some party.

GATES

Where's the gate?

ANNETTE

I said the plane's full, sir.

GATES

I'll stand.

ANNETTE

You can't do that.

GATES

You can't imagine what I can do when I put my mind to it.

Gates presses his hands together and stands rigid as if in a trance. Nothing happens.

JACK

Helen took the kids to Idaho, Harry.

GATES

I didn't know that.

JACK

I told you. In the office after our talk about you missing all those classes. I told you where Helen went.

GATES

How did you know?

JACK

She called to see how you were. There was caring about you, Harry. There still is.

GATES

Why didn't she prove it and call me?

JACK

Because she didn't want another argument. She didn't want to talk about coming back. She wanted to know if you were all right.

GATES

What did you tell her?

JACK

(Pause.)

I told her you ought to be committed.

GATES

Committed?

(Beat.)

GATES (cont)

What did she say?

JACK

She didn't say anything.

GATES

For the longest time, you mean? She hunted for the right words then said...?

JACK

She said she'd sign the consent papers.

GATES

Now we're getting somewhere. See?

He motions to the Mouseketeers.

GATES (cont)

See? The two people I was closest to plotted against me. My Idaho wife and my once best friend.

(Beat.)

What's the plan, Jack? Are you spending all your vacations from here on out in Idaho? Or is Helen flying in to meet you somewhere else? She always loved Paris. Was it Paris last month?

ANNETTE

You were in Paris three weeks ago.

JACK

A conference. I presented a paper. I told you that.

GATES

You can do better than that, Jack. All your little love interest has to do is go online and check the presenter's schedule. She won't find you listed, will she?

ANNETTE

Will I?

(Beat.)

Jack?

BOBBY

He's the guy you dumped me for? You're having an affair with a prof old enough to be your father?

JACK

Shut up.

BOBBY

Make me. Patty and I had something going until somebody came along and she threw me out. I had no idea it was you.

JACK

We didn't want it known.

ANNETTE

I didn't mind.

JACK

Some things are best kept quiet.

GATES

Sordid little details, you mean.

ANNETTE

There's nothing sordid about us.

GATES

How do you know?

ANNETTE

My heart told me.

GATES

Flutter did it? Quick beats on butterfly wings? That's youth for you, right, Jack? And did your heart do the talking or was there something else beating away down there behind your zipper?

JACK

I'd like to beat you, Harry. If the opportunity presented itself, I like to beat you damn bloody.

GATES

Knight in shining armor defending the damsel?

JACK

No, Harry, just sick of the games. How much embarrassment do you want me to suffer in front of my students?

GATES

A small audience, don't you think, Jack? Three students versus the whole town ridiculing me when word got out I was going to an institution. I was a laughing stock. Shunned by my own neighbors.

JACK

It was the best thing for you, Harry.

GATES

Was it? Or was it the best thing for you? You'd have Helen all to yourself, wouldn't you? I'd be no trouble locked away in a nut house.

JACK

How did you get out, Harry?

GATES

I'd had enough. I walked out the front door.

JACK

How did you get past the gate?

GATES

How do you know so much? Guards and front gates. You were never there.

JACK

Helen signed the papers and I drove you to Pinehurst. We walked in the front gate together, Harry. It was one of the hardest things I've ever done in my life. The look on your face when I turned to leave. Such a fallen man.

GATES

Well, I've risen, Professor Ruland. I'm back. Not one more word of locking me up. Not that I didn't appreciate the ride in the country.

GATES (cont)

Isn't that what you said we were doing?
Going for a ride to get some air. Then you
betrayed me. You left me there.

(Beat.)

What kind of man are you, Jack? First you
steal your oldest friend's wife, then you make
up lies about his state of mind.

(Beat.)

Do you see the man you lie in bed with? For
the first time, do you really see him?

ANNETTE

Is that true about his wife?

JACK

What do we say about an interpretation of history?
It may not be true, but there is truth in it.

ANNETTE

I want to know about Mrs. Gates, not some
trivial moment in history.

JACK

(Beat.)

She was a very lonely woman. We were
friends, that's all. There was never any
romantic intent.

ANNETTE

You say that like circumstances changed.

JACK

(Beat.)

I don't want to hurt Harry any more than
I already have.

ANNETTE

What about me? Have I somehow ceased to
matter?

JACK

Of course not.

ANNETTE

Then tell me what happened.

JACK

What often happens when unhappy people
get together for a drink.

(Beat.)

Maybe I wasn't exactly honest when I said there
was no romantic intent. Helen had a certain way
about her, a certain elegance and grace. She made
it easy to forget that I was a married man. I wasn't
married for long once my wife found out
I was having an affair.

GATES

"Another" would be more accurate. Hunters
put notches on their guns, Jack here puts
notches on bedposts as his four wives can
attest. I'm afraid that's what you've been
reduced to, my dear, a bedpost notch. But
you're an intelligent college lass, you must
have read the graffiti on the bathroom walls
about ol' Jack's sexual appetites.

ANNETTE

I heard the rumors.

GATES

And didn't run?

(Beat.)

Well, now. That puts a different spin on it,
doesn't it? I mean, the way Bobby explains it
you two were living together hence his complaint
that you threw him out only to replace him
with the professor who never met a co-ed he
didn't like.

(Beat.)

I suppose that gives some romantic hope for
me and Cubby, doesn't it?

ANNETTE

None.

GATES

Regarding Cubby, I would agree. But, I flew
west two-thousand miles to save your beautiful
bunny ass. That ought to generate some warm
feeling, some attempt at kindness, some
passionate moments in a cheap roadside motel.

ANNETTE

You're disgusting.

GATES

Women usually reserve that pronouncement until I've taken off my clothes.

BOBBY

Your wife included?

GATES

Ah, a low blow. But, yes. My wife included. She became tasteless in her middle age as the choice of her lover proves.

BOBBY

I don't think it proves anything except that you're mad as hell at Professor Ruland. You and he need to sort all this out between the two of you somewhere else. I'm taking Patsy out of here.

GATES

Heroic, but very doubtful.

Bobby takes Annette by the hand. Cubby stands beside her.

BOBBY

You coming, professor?

GATES

None of you is going anywhere.

BOBBY

Professor?

Jack moves to join them. Gates raises his gun and fires. Jack grabs his arm and falls in pain to his knees. Annette rushes to him. When she does, Bobby and Cubby advance on Gates who turns his gun on them. Bobby and Cubby stop.

GATES

Perhaps you should reconsider. Once you were inside, I locked all the exits with chain and padlocks. The keys are in my pocket. No one gets inside or goes out unless I permit it. We are all in this for the duration.

ANNETTE

Jack needs a doctor.

GATES

You two do something. Or, do you want to join the wounded?

Cubby rips away part of his shirt and ties a tunicate above Jack's wound. Bobby impassively watches as Jack winces in pain. Suddenly, bright lights flash through the windows as someone tries to break into the room.

VOICE

Open up in there. Open up. We heard a shot.

ANNETTE

Help us!

The shaken door rattles.

VOICE

Who's in there?

BOBBY

The lunatic Gates.

VOICE

So that's where he is. We've been looking all over for the past two days. Who's with you, Gates?

GATES

Friends.

VOICE

Let your friends out, Gates. Then you come out yourself.

GATES

I don't want out. I want in.

VOICE

You wanted out of Pinehurst. The doctor you shot, didn't make it. He died just over an hour ago.

GATES

He should have done what I asked and let me go. All I wanted was to find my wife and talk to my boys.

VOICE

Where is she?

GATES

Idaho last I heard. A little town near Mud Lake. Tell her Jack Ruland's been injured and that he'd like to speak to her before he dies.

VOICE

We'll send in a doctor.

GATES

No doctors. I'll give you one hour to get her on the phone. After that, I'll not be responsible for what happens. Do you hear me? I will not be responsible.

End Act One

Act II

Time: Later the same day.

At Rise: Gates, weapon in hand, marches across the stage like a military general in full command. Jack, his arm in a sling, concentrates on a glorified boom box. Strings from a Strauss waltz fill the air.

GATES

Not that one.

Jack stops the music.

GATES (cont)

We're on the battlefield here. I've just gotten off the plane in Mud Lake. Cold as hell in the middle of a blizzard. A cab was waiting so I hopped in and shared a ride with a reporter from the Times. We rode straight up to the front lines. What a horrible, bloody mess.

(Beat.)

How's the arm?

JACK

I'm alive. That's more than I can say for the doctor. Is that really how you got out of Pinehurst? You shot your way out?

GATES

I did. Two days ago. It seems like forever.

JACK

Why? What was so important that you had to kill a man?

GATES

I had my orders, Jack. As a military prisoner, my orders were to escape at all cost.

JACK

Pinehurst isn't a military prison.

GATES

Believe what you want. Granted it looks like a mental hospital, but on the inside its true

GATES (cont)

purpose becomes apparent. I saw right through the charade.

JACK

Say that you did.

GATES

I did. I broke out, I traveled, I came back here.

JACK

Why today? Of all days, why this one?

Gates takes a folded paper from his shirt pocket and hands it to Jack who opens and reads it.

GATES

That's from Helen's attorney. My divorce becomes final tomorrow. I have one last chance to get Helen to see that she's making a terrible mistake.

JACK

She's gone, Harry. She's not coming back.

Gates stomps the floor in a rage.

GATES

That's what Doctor Raj said. Every time the conversation would turn to my trouble with women—his phrase, not mine—he would remind me that the only woman I ever really loved, the only woman who ever took the time to understand me left. Walked out when she knew I needed her more than ever. That's a dagger, Jack. A pain you'll likely never know. But a pain you were a part of.

JACK

Helen had made up her mind to leave you before I ever came on the scene.

GATES

You were always on the scene. You and Helen were the scene.

JACK

I'm talking about after you two got married.
Once that happened, I backed off.

GATES

I don't believe you.

JACK

I know you don't, but I've told you the truth
a thousand times. I'm a cad. A womanizer.
A cheater on my many wives.

(Beat)

There was a time, Harry, when I could
walk into a graduate seminar, look out at
all those bright and freshly scrubbed faces
and make a bet with myself that I'd sleep
with all the women by mid-semester. I
never lost that bet, Harry. I admit all that despicable
behavior. But I wouldn't stoop so low, didn't stoop so
low as to put a move on my best friend's
wife.

GATES

You're not a convincing liar, Jack.

JACK

After she'd made up her mind that she
wanted nothing more to do with you, we
got together. I admit that.

GATES

Did it ever dawn on you to come to my
defense? You knew my marriage was
in trouble. Did it ever dawn on you to
make my case as opposed to making my
damned wife?

JACK

I tried to help you, Harry. I went to bat for
you, I certainly did.

GATES

You're not convincing, Jack. I told you that.
I can see you're lying. I can smell it.

JACK

No, no. I went to bat for you. I did. We talked about you so often I was convinced she would go back to you. I was your advocate, Harry. I was.

GATES

What did Helen say about me?

JACK

She said she didn't want to hurt you.

GATES

What else?

JACK

That you were a hard man to live with.

GATES

Not true.

(Beat.)

What else?

JACK

She said that after all the years with you she finally realized she'd made a mistake and that it was time to face up to it.

GATES

Time to leave me.

JACK

Yes.

GATES

Time to duck tail and run like any other coward.

JACK

You're not talking about a war, Harry.

GATES

Oh? Not at the beginning, maybe. As time went along, she turned on me. A fight here, a fight there. No peace with honor in my household.

JACK

She tried to be a major part of your life.
You wouldn't let her. You were occupied, Harry.
How could you not be with your publishing
schedule, your research, your classes?

GATES

Is that what you told her? I was too busy
to notice if you two had an affair? Well, you
were wrong. It took a while, but I did notice.

JACK

I told her not to do anything drastic. I
told her to be patient.

GATES

She'd run out of patience years ago.

(Beat.)

I never told you this, but right after Steven
was born, Helen took the boys and went back
to her family in Idaho. She said she needed
time to think.

JACK

I believe I heard about that.

GATES

I'm sure you did. She was gone four months.
I wanted to visit but she asked me not to. I
didn't pay attention, of course, and got on
the next plane.

JACK

I'm surprised she didn't divorce you right then.

GATES

I'm sure she would have had I announced
my arrival. I stayed in a motel in the next
town and drove around in a rental car...

JACK

Spying on your own wife.

GATES

Precisely.

JACK

What did you think she was doing?

GATES

That's what I wanted to find out.

JACK

That's low, Harry. Not trusting your own wife is down near the bottom.

GATES

True, but not as low as Helen. Seems she was involved with a man out there. I don't know much about him. In the four days I was spying, she spent every night at his ranch.

JACK

You didn't get a good look at him?

GATES

No. I never did. Before I left town, I looked into who owned the ranch. Seems the family who did was in Mexico on vacation.

JACK

Too bad.

GATES

Mexico's a fine spot for a week or so.

JACK

That you never found out who he was. Of course, you could have it all wrong about what Helen was doing. My guess is, you had your own doubts or you would have done something.

GATES

What was I to do? Knock down the man's door and let Helen know I'd come out to spy on her? That was a lose lose situation. I decided to wait and let things play out.

JACK

Let her bring him up, you mean.

GATES

Exactly.

JACK

Let her confess her guilt. That ploy gives you the upper hand.

GATES

In theory. She never mentioned him.

JACK

Never?

GATES

Never.

JACK

She had to have said something.

GATES

She said she appreciated the time to herself and that she didn't want to talk about those four months. It was her time with her emotions and she wanted them kept private.

(Beat.)

I take it she never told you about him either.

JACK

Not a word. I'm surprised. I thought we'd been quite honest with each other.

(Beat.)

Why didn't you let on you knew she had a lover?

GATES

The right time never presented itself. You don't just blurt out something like that. You want maximum impact, maximum destruction. It could be your only shot.

JACK

You must have done something.

GATES

Oh, well, I followed her around a bit, keeping my distance, you understand. I became quite skilled at it. You never noticed me, did you?

JACK

Never.

GATES

Carmine's on Fridays, symphony Saturdays, a weekend at the Stoddard Inn with Do Not Disturb hanging on the doorknob, and that trip to...

JACK

That's enough.

GATES

...Paris.

JACK

You weren't there.

GATES

Do you remember the trouble with your bed board pounding on the wall and someone in the next room pounding right back to keep your sexual frenzy to a low moan? Hotel Malar, 7th arrondissement, rooms eight and nine. I was in nine.

(Beat.)

Hit the music, Jack. You act like you're in shock.

(Beat.)

Jack? The music, I don't want the Mouseketeers to think they've been forgotten.

Jack turns on the sound, which isn't music at all, but instead a roar of machine gun fire and fighter planes scorching the sky. Annette, wearing her rabbit ears, runs toward Gates in a panic.

ANNETTE

Help. Somebody help. They're going to kill me.

Gates stands between Annette and the stalking Bobby and Cubby. Bobby and Cubby search, but they can't seem to find either Gates or Annette. Jack turns the music off.

CUBBY

I could have sworn those rabbits came this way.

BOBBY

They did. There was a man up there, too. Damn rabbit jumped right in his arms and vanished.

Cubby looks around, bewildered.

CUBBY

I must be imagining things. They say men in battle sometimes start to see things that aren't there.

BOBBY

Oh, he was there all right. I saw him and that New York Times reporter get out of that cab together just as we were closing in.

Jack opens a newspaper.

JACK

December 25, Mud Lake. "As the circle of people grew smaller and the hares attempted to escape the group, the activity became frenzied with motorcycles buzzing back and forth, people shouting, and hares dying under the clubs. Thousands of jackrabbits, jammed atop one another as high as three feet in their panic, kicked and screamed as they were clubbed."

In the background, Gates begins a sexual advance toward a resisting Annette.

BOBBY

Rabbits don't scream.

CUBBY

You think a reporter for the New York Times would lie about something like that?

BOBBY

Did you hear the screams?

CUBBY

All I heard was motorcycle engines.

(Beat.)

We're made out to be the enemy. We're out here protecting our own, saving our crops from a horde of starving rabbits and we end up

CUBBY (cont)

looking like a pack of murderers. Even if we do win this damn war, we'll have lost.

BOBBY

How do you get that?

CUBBY

Perception. In the eyes of the world, we're criminals. The reputation of Mud Lake is just that: mud.

BOBBY

What do you propose?

CUBBY

A PR reclamation effort.

He addresses the audience as Annette shoves Gates away.

CUBBY (cont)

Members of the press, television, radio, web bloggers, war correspondents all, let me begin by saying that the ladies auxiliary of the Mud Lake Rabbit Committee will, after this briefing, be serving buffet style lunches on a daily basis. Beer, wine, and hard liquor will be available twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week—free of charge—until this war is over.

(Beat.)

Now, as to the Military Intelligence offered at this briefing. Those of you who have been covering this war from its inception know that the MLRC is not the enemy. Genus Lepus swarmed down on us, not the other way around. To halt their advance, we sent out long-range recon patrollers on night search and destroy details. It did not dawn on me as chairman of the MLRC that in fatigues with our faces painted that these long-range recon patrol missions might take on the atmosphere of Halloween. That was unfortunate. There should have been no fun and games out there. I apologize for that.

CUBBY (cont)

I also apologize for some of our men playing what has been called “air sports”. Dropping milk cans from crop dusters onto the rabbits has been stopped. Will and Barney Ottermeyer have both been grounded. We are now completely hand to hand with the enemy.

Annette shoves Gates harder.

ANNETTE

Stay away from me.

She rips off her rabbit ears, throws them at Gates who seems to enjoy the contest.

GATES

Did you ever wonder why so many rapes occur during battle? All the killing raises testosterone. The men can't control themselves.

BOBBY

What are you talking about?

GATES

I told you: rape. You were chasing the young lady. You know.

BOBBY

I was following the script. Besides, it was a damned rabbit.

GATES

But had you caught her. Had I not be in your way, then what? You'd have had your way. The spoils of war, so to speak.

ANNETTE

I'm not the prize in any war.

GATES

Oh, but you are, my dear. Bobby fell in love with you, then along came Professor Ruland who swept you away. You don't think for a moment that Bobby has given up hope of getting you back. It's a lover's clash, pure and simple.

ANNETTE

That's preposterous.

GATES

You're suggesting I didn't do my homework
before I selected you three to join me today?

(Beat.)

Cubby told me all I needed to know.

Bobby flashes anger.

BOBBY

Why don't you keep your mouth shut?

Cubby flinches.

CUBBY

I answered a few questions. I didn't know
I was talking to a lunatic.

GATES

Careful.

CUBBY

I got a phone call, all right? The man on
the other end said there was going to be
a surprise for you. He said he wanted to invite
the women in your life. I said there was
only one woman that I knew of, the one
you always talk about.

BOBBY

I've had a change of heart, all right? Annette,
Patsy, whatever the hell her name is means
nothing to me.

CUBBY

I'm sorry.

GATES

Isn't that always the way? Someone's sorrow
is another's joy. The young man who mounted
a posse and rode triumphantly into Jack Ruland's
office to complain about my military seminar
is the same young man whose love was stolen
away by the rat, Jack Ruland.

GATES (cont)

(Beat.)

Seems we have more in common than you want to admit, Bobby. We both are associated with the same university and we both lost women we loved to the same professor at that very same university. What are the odds?

BOBBY

Astronomical.

GATES

In most cases, yes. In Jack's case, no. Seduction is something of a game with him. It never crosses his mind that others might get hurt. Do get hurt. It's a selfish oversight that you and I also have in common, Bobby. We've both suffered enormous pain because of this man. Annette, too.

ANNETTE

Don't include me.

GATES

You're right. You have been excluded. Out of the loop, out in the cold with a savaged heart.

ANNETTE

What are you talking about?

GATES

Jack. His love is gone, my dear. Disappeared.

(Beat.)

You asked him a question. He never really answered you, did he?

ANNETTE

I don't remember.

GATES

"What about me? Have I somehow ceased to matter?" Your words to your lover. Or, should I say, ex-lover?

ANNETTE

Which is it, Jack? Ever since you went to Paris, you have been different.

JACK

I've wanted to talk to you about that.

ANNETTE

A 'let me down gently' conversation?

JACK

No.

(Beat.)

An explanation.

ANNETTE

I'm listening.

JACK

With all these people around, it's not that easy.

GATES

Pretend we're not here.

BOBBY

Yeah, pretend. I want to hear what you have to say.

JACK

What I have to say is that we're all adults in these matters. We knew there were no commitments. We knew we were sharing an adventure. We knew it might end and that if it did, when it did, we'd part as good friends with wonderful memories.

ANNETTE

We knew all that did we? Parting as good friends?

JACK

I know it's hard.

ANNETTE

Do you?

(Beat.)

Who replaced me, Jack?

JACK

No one.

GATES

Don't let him lie.

ANNETTE

Who?

JACK

Does it matter?

ANNETTE

Don't worry, I won't tell her your little secrets, your sickening bedroom fantasies. I want to avoid her, especially if she's in one of my classes. I couldn't stand that humiliation.

JACK

You don't have to worry, she's not a student.

ANNETTE

Then who?

JACK

Her name's of no consequence, really.

ANNETTE

Why are you hedging?

Annette is struck with a realization.

ANNETTE (cont)

Helen Gates? Has he been telling the truth all along?

JACK

Don't be ridiculous. Helen and I...

GATES

I want to hear this.

JACK

Helen and I have been friends for years.

GATES

You can do better than that. Tell the little girl the truth, Jack.

JACK

So you can what, justify all this madness? I won't give you the satisfaction.

Annette moves to Bobby.

BOBBY

You're a bastard, you know that?

JACK

Children should be seen, not heard.

BOBBY

All the while I'm in your office complaining about Harry Gates not showing up for classes, you're sleeping with my girlfriend. You are a real bastard.

Gates holds out his gun.

GATES

Here. Shoot him.

Bobby takes a step toward the gun.

CUBBY

You'll go to prison for the rest of your life.

GATES

We'll be cellmates. One shot and it will all be over.

Bobby reaches for the gun.

JACK

Don't let Harry trap you into doing his dirty work. You're smarter than that, Bobby. You're...

Bobby charges Jack and hits him. Jack stumbles back.

BOBBY

My name is not Bobby and I'm sick of all this. I want...

GATES

No one cares what you want, Bobby,
Bobby, Bobby. No one gives damn just
like no one gave a damn what I wanted.
A wife, kids, a job. All ripped away from
me by you and Jack.

BOBBY

I'm sorry, all right?

GATES

No, it isn't all right. I'm a walking ruin.
I have nothing. Nothing! That's your
future, Bobby: A big zero. You and Jack
have that to look forward to: One big,
fucking zero.

Gates circles Annette and Cubby.

GATES (cont)

You two might face the same. I might
just make clean sweep of it and kill you all.

CUBBY

Look, professor, I did nothing.

GATES

Who said life is fair? You want an example?
Way back, it seems a hundred years ago, we
were all graduate students; Jack, Helen, and me.
Jack and Helen had been lovers long before I came
on the scene. They even shared a tiny apartment
behind the library. Helen wasn't much of a
student to hear Jack tell it. What she wanted
was breakfast in bed followed by sex in the
meadow, sex in the row boat bobbing along
the curvy shores of...

JACK

That's bullshit and you know it.

GATES

My story, Jack. My view of my personal
history. Anyway, time sped along. Jack and
I earned our degrees and went our separate
ways to teaching trenches on campuses who

GATES (cont)

would have us. I went to say goodbye to Helen and learned she'd run off with a house painter.

JACK

More lies.

GATES

A year or so later, buried behind a mound of student papers that needed my attention, a ringing doorbell created a welcomed diversion. It was Helen. She'd left the house painter, she'd forgotten that Jack ever existed, and she wanted to tell me how adorable and stable and irresistible I was. I invited her in and we began what was to become one of the world's most passionate romances. I blush at the thought of our escapades. Even the cold, hard kitchen floor didn't stop us. I'd never been in love before, but I reasoned I was in love then. I proposed marriage. Within one year, we had had our first son. Within three years, our second. If life could be better, I could not imagine how.

I was working on a new book about the American west, focusing on William Cody and his slaughter of the buffalo. One day alone, he shot and killed over four hundred. I was doing field research and retracing his trail. When I got back to my rooming house for the night, the letter I expected was waiting for me. Helen wrote every day. Her joyous words reminded me of the passionate letters Josephine wrote to Napoleon when he was away at war. But there was something different about this letter: It wasn't for me, it was for Jack and sent to me by mistake. The longing was present, so was the pain suffered by absence, the ache of being alone. You can envision my shock, then, when I got to the end of the letter and read that Helen wanted to move her next rendezvous with Jack up a few days. I was away, you understand. The lovers could have the entire house to themselves once Helen placed the children with the sitter.

I felt like I'd been shot with a buffalo gun. My insides were gone. I got on the next plane and headed home

GATES (cont)

to confront them.

(Beat.)

But when the cab pulled up out front, I was frozen.
I couldn't get out.

ANNETTE

Why not?

GATES

Who wants to see the one they love with
someone else? Who seeks out that agony?

ANNETTE

You can't just close your eyes to it.

GATES

You can. I'm living proof. I closed my
eyes to every conniving move Jack and
Helen made for years. I told myself as
long as no one else knows, I can live with
it. Everything went fine until Helen broke
one of the ground rules of our deceit and
moved out. As soon as she did, the ghastly
rumors began and I heard snippets of conversation
about Helen sleeping with the soccer team and
swimming naked in the campus pool with the
cleaning staff. That I'd born children with
a slut brought mounds of sympathy.

JACK

For God's sake, Harry, what are you saying?

GATES

That my wife for many, many years was a rotten slut.
The university's private whore.

Jack stirs agitatedly.

JACK

I don't care if you do have a gun, Harry,
watch your mouth.

GATES

A little testy, are we? Protecting the lady's
honor?

JACK

Someone has to.

GATES

Well, it certainly won't be me. I gave up on that idea the night she slept with the football team.

Jack's intensity escalates.

JACK

One more lie and...

GATES

And what?

(Beat.)

I'll tell you. You'll die making a fool of yourself.

Jack relaxes momentarily as Gates confronts Bobby.

GATES (cont)

What do you think about that?

BOBBY

Me?

GATES

You. You're a college boy, you've certainly heard about an age-old strategy for knocking the enemy down to size by demeaning them, mocking them, loading them up with lies.

(Beat.)

It works for spouses as well, don't you think? Helen loves another man, a fact that I don't handle well, so to manage my disappointment, to get on with my life such as it is, I turn Helen into something I wouldn't want anyway.

BOBBY

You mean she's not really a whore?

GATES

You're a bright boy. I always knew you could grasp the principles if they were laid out slowly for you.

GATES (cont)

(Beat.)

Dr. Raj at Pinehurst said that my major problem with Helen was that I no longer recognized what was true about her and what I'd made up. She'd become a clone of the real and the unreal and if I ever wanted to see my children again, I'd have to learn the difference. He always knew that bringing my children into the conversation gave him the upper hand.

ANNETTE

If she wasn't having other affairs,
how do you explain the man in Idaho?

GATES

It's obvious, isn't it? But like me, you don't have the stomach to admit you're being two-timed and cheated on by someone in our presence.

ANNETTE

Jack?

GATES

Very good. And on the first guess.

ANNETTE

Is that true? You followed her to Idaho?

GATES

He followed her everywhere. Meet Jack the lap dog, the love puppy tagging along licking at her heels from time immemorial.

JACK

I was more discreet than that.

ANNETTE

Do you still see her? Do you?

JACK

Whenever I can, but not as much as I'd like.

ANNETTE

Why didn't you marry her?

JACK

I'm a four-time loser. Helen wasn't a marriage poster child with Harry either. We decided to stay with what worked in the past. You might say we never really split up. We fell in love with others, but we always knew where the safety net was.

ANNETTE

What about your best friend?

JACK

One thing you learn about military history, my dear, is that all is fair in love and war.

Annette pulls in a deep breath and sighs.

ANNETTE

You're lucky, Jack.

JACK

Why is that?

ANNETTE

Because if I had been in your study, holding a gun at your head, I'd have shot you.

(Beat.)

Why didn't you?

GATES

My boys. The thought of never seeing them again stopped me cold. I had memories of a few fine moments of toss and catch in the front yard. A football, I believe. Perfect arcs into their little hands.

(Beat.)

Do you have children that you know of?

BOBBY

No children.

GATES

It's a wonder when they arrive. You stand there looking through the glass into a room where a dozen other sons and daughters lie in their medical bassinets and when you see

GATES (cont)

yours you know that of all the people in the world, only you are his father. Only you and he will share that special bond. Only you and he will toss that imperfect spiral on the front lawn. Only you and he will listen to the bedtime stories you tell of Buffalo Bill Cody and Napoleon and General Robert E. Lee. Boys look up to brave men.

(Beat.)

You look up to me, don't you, Bobby?

BOBBY

If I have to.

GATES

Of course you do. Bill Cody, Bob Lee, me; all men of strength. I knew when I arrived in Mud Lake and killed every man, woman and child in Idaho that my boys would look up to me. Generals demand that respect.

JACK

You didn't do that, Harry. The folks in Idaho are doing just fine.

GATES

I believe I did. Mowed them down like any great General would do. Most men of military greatness were disasters on the home front. Wives drank all the cooking sherry before lunch and the kids grew up looking for grenades so they could blow daddy over the hood of the Jeep. But the thing is, if you go to war with rabbits or Chinese or women in bathing suits, and if you win, a thousand admiring eyes will be on you. And in that brief moment, in that headiness of victory, you can pretend that the home front is fine, too. The wife is chaste and sober, the kids look up to you and see beyond their shotguns at the fine dad you are. That's why I had to go to Mud Lake. I did it for my boys.

JACK

And what do they think of you now, Harry? You've killed one man, shot me, and kidnapped three college kids. Is that something to look up to?

GATES

You're twisting what happened. Cubby? Set the man straight, will you?

Cubby snaps to attention and salutes Gates.

CUBBY

I will, sir.

Gates attends Cubby's stance.

GATES

Shoulders back, chest out, chin like so. Much better, soldier. Continue.

CUBBY

As you wish, sir. General Gates arrived at Mud Lake at zero eight-hundred hours. He forged ahead to the front lines where he assessed the danger.

GATES

I was fearless. Surrounding me were the weak and trembly. I looked straight into the face of...

Gates confronts Bobby.

GATES (cont)

...the enemy. Over confident, if I ever saw overconfidence. The entire Mud Lake Rabbit Committee had the bold look of invincibility. I knew I could take them at will.

(Beat.)

At midnight, I gathered my troops. One hundred crack snipers took the left flank, a single battalion took a position on the right. The middle was mine and I led the charge. Let me tell you, it was hell. Cannon to the right and left, bullets flying high and low, crop dusters dropping poison gas. We took everything the enemy threw at us and threw it right back until off in the distance I saw the flag of capitulation.

CUBBY

White and fluttering on the back of a motorcycle.

GATES

Indeed. The MLRC had had enough. They put down their golf clubs, wiped the blood from the baseball bats and tried to apologize for hammering the hell out of a hundred thousand dead rabbits.

(Beat.)

You can't apologize for something like that.

BOBBY

It was the only thing I could think of to say.

GATES

It trivializes the pain. You can't trivialize pain by being sorry. It's right up there with, "I don't mean to hurt you, but..."

BOBBY

What I was sorry for was that some of our members, me included, played a bit of bunny baseball. It was the games I was sorry for.

GATES

They're not games. They're war crimes. Jack here, acclaimed military historian that he is, knows what happens to most war criminals who beg for forgiveness. What happens, Jack?

JACK

They are listened to and then turned down.

GATES

Followed by a military court martial and an execution at dawn.

JACK

That is often the case.

GATES

Sergeant Cubby.

CUBBY

Yes, sir?

GATES

You may defend the indefensible or carry

GATES (cont)
out the execution.

CUBBY
Defend who against what?

GATES
Bobby the Mousketeer-murderer against
unspeakable crimes of bunny ball.

CUBBY
How do you plead?

BOBBY
Not guilty.

GATES
I'll be the judge of that.

JACK
Judge and jury? Stacking the deck against
the young man, aren't you, Harry?

GATES
What have you got in mind?

JACK
Impartiality. Let me be the judge, and if I
make my case, you let us all go.

GATES
What tricks have you got in mind, Jack?

JACK
No tricks. A fair hearing, that's all.

GATES
(Beat.)
All right. Let's see you be fair.

JACK
Call your first witness.

CUBBY
Annette, please step forward.

She does.

CUBBY (cont)

Raise your right hand and swear the truth.

She raises her hand.

ANNETTE

Like always, I swear.

CUBBY

You are the former Mousketeer?

ANNETTE

I am. Recently, however, I've been living in Idaho as a rabbit.

CUBBY

Near Mud Lake?

ANNETTE

That's right. Very near the war zone.

CUBBY

Describe the nature of that war.

ANNETTE

We were being clubbed to death.

CUBBY

By?

Annette points to Bobby.

ANNETTE

By folks like him. He and others devised various means to rid us from the face of the earth.

GATES

She means genocide.

JACK

Don't put words in her mouth.

GATES

Stating the obvious.

JACK

Cubby, I don't want to tell you how to present your defense, but you should object.

GATES

No, no, no. I object. Look, Jack, I was there. I saw this poor creature huddled up all frightened and confused. Your little heart was about to explode, wasn't it?

ANNETTE

It was, yes.

GATES

What happened next?

ANNETTE

You came along.

GATES

And?

ANNETTE

Bobby and other members of the Mud Lake Rabbit Committee couldn't hold their own against you.

GATES

You needed someone strong.

ANNETTE

I did.

GATES

And virtuous. And willing to jump into the fray.

ANNETTE

That's right.

Gates faces Bobby.

GATES

Standing up to MLRC and the likes of

GATES (cont)

this boy who, in his icy-hearted way, was stalking my client with the intent of seducing her or killing her—it doesn't matter which.

JACK

Of course it matters.

GATES

They're crimes of passion. Opposite extremes, perhaps, but crimes of passion all the same.

JACK

That's preposterous.

GATES

Have you ever killed a man?

JACK

Don't be absurd.

GATES

Then you can't judge, can you? You have no idea what it's like to pull the trigger. You may have read about it in cheap crime novels or seen the flash of gunfire in the movies, but that's not what it's all about. What you read and see has nothing to do with it at all. It's not about any out of control violence. It's a calculated series of maneuvers taken to destroy your enemy. Me and you, Jack. That's what love of one woman has made of us. We're enemies in a fight to the death.

Someone pounds on an outside door.

VOICE

Gates? Gates, you still in there?

GATES

Where would I go?

VOICE

We've had contact with Idaho.

GATES

I knew we'd finally hear. What's the total body count of the rabbits? It must be in the thousands.

VOICE

We're not talking rabbits, Gates, and you know it.

GATES

Oh? What are we talking about?

VOICE

We're talking about your giving up. We know you were out there, we've impounded your car from the Boise airport.

GATES

How very thorough of you.

VOICE

It will take a few days for forensics to identify whose blood is on the back seat. No one's staying with you in there for that long.

GATES

Why not? We're all quite content.

VOICE

Mind telling us where your wife is?

GATES

I haven't seen her. Perhaps my old friend, Jack can answer that.

JACK

I'm professor Jack Ruland. Who am I talking to?

VOICE

Head of Security. City police have surrounded the building.

JACK

Good, good, but don't do anything rash. I'm trapped in here with three students.

JACK (cont)

I think we're all going to be fine. I think we'll get out of this okay.

(Beat.)

Why can't you locate Helen...Mrs. Gates? She's got a little house...

VOICE

State Police have been to the house, Professor. They said it looks like a war took place inside.

JACK

A war?

VOICE

That's what they said. Place is torn to bits.

JACK

What about the boys? She had two young boys.

GATES

You don't need to worry about the boys, Jack.

JACK

How would you know?

GATES

I made sure they were away when I drove by.

JACK

Is that all, Harry? You just drove by?

GATES

No. Not all.

(Beat.)

Officer?

VOICE

What is it Gates?

GATES

We need a little time to ourselves. Jack was right. Everything is going to work out fine. Just give us a few, all right?

VOICE

I can't do that.

GATES

Of course you can. If you don't, I'll start shooting. Do you hear? Three dead students or a few minutes with my friends.

VOICE

You'll get your time, Gates.

GATES

Wonderful.

(Beat.)

Where were we? Oh, yes. Now I remember. You in your icy-hearted way were about to rape and torture...

JACK

Is that how it happened, Harry?

GATES

...the woman of your dreams.

He turns to Jack.

GATES (cont)

She was the woman of your dreams, wasn't she?

JACK

I think you know the answer to that.

GATES

I think I do. The problem was, Jack, she was the woman of my dreams as well. The mother of my children. The love of my life. I couldn't let you take her away without a fight.

JACK

Explain the blood in the car, Harry.

GATES

Messy business.

JACK

You killed her, didn't you? You went out there and killed the only woman I ever loved.

GATES

(Beat.)

I had to.

He spins toward Bobby.

GATES (cont)

I'll show you exactly how I did it on this boy who I pronounce guilty as charged.

(Beat.)

Come here, Bobby boy, my little Helen of Troy.

Bobby is terrified.

BOBBY

No. Somebody help me.

GATES

There is no help. It's you and me for one last time. Take off your clothes, my dear.

BOBBY

No. Listen, I didn't mean anything. When I went to Professor Ruland...

GATES

Don't mention his name. Never mention his name. Do you think I don't know what's been going on all these years?

BOBBY

Please.

GATES

Begging? It's a little late for that, isn't it, Helen? That's what you said to me when I got

GATES (cont)

down on my knees and pleaded for you not to sign those divorce papers.

He goes to his knees. When he does, Cubby and Annette circle behind.

GATES (cont)

What can I do, Helen? Tell me. Tell me and I'll do it. A smaller house? A bigger house? A move farther west? East? Canada? Cuba? One less bottle of gin before dinner? Name it. It's done. Put some air behind it, Helen. Let me hear some sound because if you don't, I swear... I swear I'LL KILL YOU WHERE YOU STAND!

Gates gets ready to fire at Bobby when Jack, Cubby and Annette rush him. Bobby joins the brief, but furious fight. Jack comes up holding the gun on Gates who doesn't seem aware he's lost his weapon. Gates moves threateningly toward Jack.

JACK

Not another step.

BOBBY

Shoot! Shoot him!

GATES

He's not man enough. That's what I said to my whore of a wife. Jack Ruland, that behind the back lying fuck, is not half the man General Harry Gates is.

Jack backs up. Harry pursues.

GATES (cont)

I proved to her the man I was, Jack. I ripped her clothes off.

ANNETTE

I don't want to hear this.

JACK

Shut your mouth, Harry.

GATES

I forced her to the hard, cold floor.

JACK

Not another word.

GATES

It was like old times. And when I came,
I shot her and shot her and shot her and...

Jack fires. Annette covers her eyes. Gates stumbles back clutching his side.

GATES (cont)

You missed.

Jack fires again. Gates drops to his knees. The sound of a door being broken down fills the space. The Voice, Officer Miller, rushes in, gun drawn.

GATES (cont)

See you in hell, Jack.

Gates falls face down. Miller grabs Jack's gun.

MILLER

Which one of you is Gates?

JACK

He is.

MILLER

We just got a message from his wife.

JACK

Helen's alive?

MILLER

Seems some prankster killed a bunch of
jackrabbits and spread the bodies all around
her house.

ANNETTE

The blood in the back of his car.

BOBBY

Rabbits? Rabbit blood?

ANNETTE

What else.

(Beat.)

ANNETTE (cont)
I think I'm going to be sick.

Miller checks Gates's pulse.

MILLER
The man's dead.

Miller points his service revolver at Jack.

MILLER (cont)
Did you do this?

JACK
No.

ANNETTE
He wanted you to kill him.

JACK
Shut up. Nobody killed anybody. Let me think.

ANNETTE
Locking you in a cell was the only way
Gates could think of to keep you away from
his wife.

MILLER
I'm afraid you'll have to come with me.

JACK
Why? It was self-defense. I have witnesses.
They'll tell you. Annette? Patsy? Tell the
officer what went on here.

ANNETTE
It was horrible. Cruel.

JACK
You're not helping. Tell the officer about...

ANNETTE
What happens when you break somebody's heart.

Jack sees Annette is a dead end. He turns desperately to Bobby.

JACK

Thomas?

(Beat.)

Oh, come on. We can work all of this out. I'll be ruined. That's what Harry wanted.

BOBBY

What about what I wanted?

He moves toward Annette who takes a step back. Bobby glares at Jack.

BOBBY (cont)

You killed more than Harry Gates.

JACK

Cubby? Say something.

CUBBY

(Beat.)

Looks like General Gates won his war.

The end.