

**DEATH**

***-BY-***

**POWER**

**POINT**

***Experts Take Your Cherished  
Beliefs & Destroy Them***

# DEATH BY POWERPOINT

by  
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Set at the fictional National Global Influencer's Finals, where the country's top speakers compete to destroy the audience's "Cherished Beliefs" in their quest to be crowned National Global Influencers champion, using their sharpest PowerPoint skills.

## **CHARACTERS**

LUCY DURAS	Not the kind of woman you would turn your back on. Here to prove everyone wrong.
MARK HUGO	A legend in the "expert" biz it seems. This should be his year, finally.
JOAN RENARD	The new one, young and believes she can do anything.
MATTHEW STENDHAL	Champion kicker of asses. On a hot streak. MUST win.
VOICE	The person running it all
STAGE MANAGER	Does stuff

<b>SETTING</b>	A meeting room in an expensive hotel, in front of an audience.
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<b>TIME</b>	Present day, or close to it, with flashbacks.
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<b>SYNOPSIS</b>	Four "expert" motivational speakers compete by making life-changing presentations in a contest that becomes life-or-death.
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NOTE: This is the "Reading Version" of the play. The "Production Version" has much more technical cues, as there are many more screen projections than are noted here. These make for cumbersome reading and are omitted in this version.

# **DEATH BY POWERPOINT**

## SCENE 1

**(PRE-SHOW - SLIDE “DEATH BY POWERPOINT”)**

### **LIGHTS - LOW**

THE STAGE IS BARE except for a large  
ILLUMINATED VIDEO WALL far upstage filling most  
of the stage.

There are four generic FOLDING CHAIRS leaning  
against the wall.

A STAGE MANAGER comes out and sets up the chairs in  
a single row. He brings out a PROP BOX and puts it on a  
CUBE, STAGE LEFT, and EXITS. The actors will  
retrieve props from this box as needed. The STAGE  
MANAGER gives the PRE-SHOW SPEECH (if required).

**(SCREEN: It reads, “WELCOME, 23RD ANNUAL  
GLOBAL INFLUENCERS FINALS”)**

FOUR “EXPERT SPEAKERS” ENTER & take their  
places in the chairs (L to R) is LUCY (wearing a tight-  
fitting professional ensemble, in ORANGE), MARK  
(business casual in BLUE), & JOAN (a youthfully tight  
skirt, in PINK), MATTHEW (tailored suit in BLACK).  
Ages are not so important, but Mark should be the oldest  
and Joan, by far the youngest.

A VOICE is heard:

VOICE

Good evening. Welcome to the 23rd Annual National Global Influencers Finals.  
Presenter Number One, Ms. Lucy Duras, please begin.

LIGHTS UP.

LUCY stands. She has the confidence of a TED TALKS diva, even if this confidence seems over-rehearsed. She directly addresses and interacts with the AUDIENCE, as do all the characters.

LUCY

(Addressing the audience)

Hi, I'm Lucy. I have competed in this event on the regional level for a few years now, but THIS is my first time in the finals. I finally made it! (APPLAUSE) Thanks. Now as the first speaker. I'm obligated to inform you how this competition works. You will hear FOUR EXPERT SPEAKERS tonight -- they are each challenged with a TASK. And YOU, my friends... ARE the task. Our job is to take something you have... and ALTER it. That "something" is a "Cherished Belief" you hold dear, and our task is to CRUSH that Cherished Belief. To crush it beyond recognition. Fun!

**(SCREEN: It reads "SHINE BABY, SHINE!")**

LUCY

My presentation tonight is called, "Shine Baby, Shine!" So what is the "Cherished Belief" I have chosen to crush? Well, it's something that we ALL believe, something we learn when we are very young. This Cherished Belief is a dark, dark secret that we almost NEVER talk about. We BELIEVE it... and yet we COVER IT UP... we try to bury it and pretend it isn't there.

**(SCREEN: It reads "YOU ARE NOT GOOD ENOUGH")**

LUCY

(at a oddly cheerful, upbeat pace)

It is the belief that "YOU ARE NOT GOOD ENOUGH." It's EVIL, but an evil we cling to. That's true in my case. It sings softly to me in my most intimate moments... "LUCY - YOU ARE NOT GOOD ENOUGH!" I believed it, I believed it for years. I believed it like I believed in gravity. My mother told me I wasn't good enough. My father never had much time for me -- most likely it seemed, because I wasn't good enough to be paid attention to. My teacher in 3rd grade told me I wasn't good enough. The looks I got from other kids in school told me it was true. I wasn't good enough to make the cheerleading squad, or the choir, or the Honor Society. I never got a speaking part in a school play, although I tried out for every show.

(MORE)

LUCY (cont'd)

The best part I got was a gambler in “Guys and Dolls”, and they dressed me up as a man because there were not enough boys who tried out. I had to strap my boobs down and sing in a low voice to hide my emerging 10th grade womanish-ness.

**(SCREEN: “BOUND”)**

LUCY

So basically, I wasn’t good enough to be my own sex.

**(SCREEN: “TEEN BOYFRIEND”)**

LUCY

My first boyfriend, once I got one, told me I wasn’t good enough. My second boyfriend in college dumped me for my roommate. This happened with man after man... not that I was with THAT many but, you know. I was told I was not SMART enough, not DUMB enough, not SUBMISSIVE enough, not ASSERTIVE enough, not HOT enough... I was just not GOOD enough.

(she’s ANGRY, but suppressing it)

Not being GOOD ENOUGH became a belief I cherished. And you know what? It made me feel SAFE. It was that gruesomely low self-image that attracted the man that would become my future husband.

**(SCREEN: “BRIDE”)**

LUCY

When I got married - too young ladies, don’t do it -- I hit the low-water mark of my self-esteem.

**(SCREEN: “CRUSH”)**

LUCY

(She pauses, something pivots in her head)

Tonight, I will CRUSH that belief forever. If YOU are burdened with that belief ... as I was. ...as I suspect you MAY BE, we will crush it TOGETHER.

**(SCREEN: It reads “WHY”)**

LUCY

But first --”WHY?” How did we get here? Right? WHY do we BELIEVE we are not good enough? How did this notion take root in the human mind? A lot of it is simple metrics. Statistics. Let me explain...

**(SCREEN: Image - GLOBE)**

LUCY

Here is a photo of our Home Sweet Home -- Planet Earth. Did you know that while the children of earth were Trick-or-Treating on Halloween in the year 2011... The SEVENTH billion living human entered the world? That October night we passed the 7 billion population mark. "So what," you might think. Right? To give perspective, the book "Frankenstein" was written two hundred years ago. The funny thing is that two hundred years ago there were only ONE billion people in the world. It took tens... or hundreds of THOUSANDS of years to make enough people to get to the one billion mark... But it only took 200 years to multiply that number by seven hundred percent.

**(SCREEN: IT SHOWS VARIOUS STATISTICS)**

LUCY

Those seven billion people significantly changed one thing: COMPETITION. I actually did my Master's Thesis on this... What I found was that your chances of being really great -- what scientists call, "HISTORICALLY EXCEPTIONAL", is smaller than you would think. According to a study at Stanford University's Rothberg School of Advanced Statistics, we are LESS likely to be "historically exceptional" than being killed from space debris, the odds of which are about 1 in 3 billion. Let me say that another way, you are more likely to be hit by a chunk of an old Russian Sputnik than meeting your parent's expectations of being, well, REALLY amazing. Like they always told you would be. They lied.

**(SCREEN: "HAPPY PEOPLE" )**

But forget "amazing" and "historically exceptional." Are you "good enough" just to be HAPPY? You might have doubts about even that. How do we define "Happy" anyway?

**(SCREEN: It reads "LIFE-LONG HAPPINESS" )**

LUCY

(faster paced, and building speed)

Well, Oxford University published a study that defined a person having something they called "Sustained, Life-Long Happiness" as an individual with a high score in six crucial areas: Respect, Confidence, Relationship/Family Satisfaction, Sense of Well-Being, Lack of Anxiety/Depression, and Fulfilment of Goals. That's what they measured those six things. But very few modern people got high marks in ANY of these things. Humans are good at lots of stuff, but HAPPINESS isn't one of them.

(MORE)

LUCY (cont'd)

It's funny, when eleven hundred Americans were polled about their GREATEST GOAL IN LIFE, only three people mentioned, "happiness." Isn't that odd? That's about ONE QUARTER of ONE PERCENT that had a "GOAL" to be happy. Oh, they had plenty of other goals, "getting skinny" -- "being rich" -- "their team win the championship" -- "a hot sexual partner" -- but not many people cared about being HAPPY. (BEAT) Modern people, on the whole, think they are not "good enough" to be happy. Just like you.

**(SCREEN: Various images of "RICH & POOR")**

LUCY

(steadily and coldly building tempo)

A UN study showed that the happiest country in the world is Paraguay, where there is TONS of poverty, and the least happy place on earth was Singapore, where there is ZERO poverty.

**(SCREEN: It reads "1 in 23,000")**

LUCY

The University of Heidelberg took the UN study and did more research. They published a paper that stated that the average person's chances of actually sustaining what they called "Real Happiness" in life is 1 IN 23 THOUSAND. And if you have a college education, those chances drop to 1 IN 86 THOUSAND. I guess the more you know... the more you know you are NOT good enough?

**(SCREEN: It reads "1 in 127,000")**

LUCY

If you are a married man AND you went to college, those two things lower the chance of being "really happy" to 1 in 127 thousand. According to the study, educated, married men may be the most miserable people on earth. Of course, they didn't do the research on divorced, college-educated women... I mean, wheeeew... My god - I wouldn't even WANT to see those numbers. Am I right ladies? That would be horrifying. But let's move on. Let me show you images from the Spleenfield/Morris test battery, a test used to evaluate self-esteem. We ALL hoard and stock-pile a vast arsenal of negative opinions about ourselves. Assess these images in regard to YOUR self image...

**(SCREEN: Einstein. It reads "YOU ARE NOT VERY SMART")**



LUCY

(lighter, almost cheery)

In comparison -- you might say you are not very smart.

**(SCREEN: A pinup girl. It reads “YOU ARE NOT VERY BEAUTIFUL”)**

LUCY

You undoubtedly think you are not very beautiful. Are you kidding? I'll never compete with this.

**(SCREEN: A bodybuilder. It reads “YOU ARE NOT VERY STRONG”)**

LUCY

Or guys - you're probably not exactly playing in this league.

**(SCREEN: A combat soldier. It reads “YOU INTIMIDATE NO ONE”)**

LUCY

And you're not REALLY that intimidating. Look at this kid. A nineteen year old High-School dropout with a M4A1, Colt Advanced Piston Carbine. He can kill twenty people faster than you can say, “Let's play Team Fortress II.” It takes 4.5 grams of pressure on that trigger to spew out almost a thousand rounds a minute. So in comparison, when you feel like a bad-ass as you flip-off someone in traffic, you are not THAT high on the intimidation scale.

**(SCREEN: Homeless guy sleeping on sidewalk. It reads “YOU THINK YOU ARE A PATHETIC LOSER”)**

LUCY

(slowing down)

Well. Okay. It's easy for people to believe that they are not “good enough.”

**(SCREEN: Image, “MAN ASLEEP ON SIDEWALK”)**

LUCY

That might be the problem for this particular individual, subject number SV334-T -- a 39 year old white male.

(MORE)

LUCY (cont'd)

He was a subject in a University of Chicago study, and he actually earned a MBA from Northwestern. But, as this photo shows, that MBA didn't count for much in terms of "quality of life". The subject has, or "had" -- an IQ of 136, which is classified as "very superior intelligence." He ended up living on the streets after his third layoff. The study lost track of him after that.

**(SCREEN: Image, "EINSTEIN")**

LUCY

Which reminds me, we grew up thinking SMART PEOPLE are HAPPY PEOPLE. Our parents wanted us to be SMART. They loved us and wanted what was best. They worried when we displayed copious acts of stupidity. They thought being SMART would make us SUCCESSFUL and HAPPY.

**(SCREEN: Image, "A NOT SO SMART FACE")**

But that model is flawed. New research tells us there is a DOWNSIDE to intelligence. A Cornell study found that people with high IQs were 2.43 times LESS LIKELY to classify their life on this Earth as "Happy" or "Not Unhappy." In other words, almost two and a half times more likely to be UNHAPPY. This is radical new data that may change the way humans approach their child-rearing. There is speculation that future parents may REFRAIN from pushing their children to achieve scholastic excellence. "Forget the Algebra -- more Mario Kart!"

(she slows, making sure they understand)

Listen - Why be smart? -- If it just means you are going to be unhappy? In fact, scientists have suggested that future generations of parents will actively MANIPULATE their children's development to assure that they will NOT be intelligent. If they love their children, if they really want them to be happy, they will ENCOURAGE their stupidity. For the first time in Human history, we will actually engineer the Human Race to be dumber than the generation before it. At least on purpose this time. Yaay TV!

**(SCREEN: "BLACK")**

LUCY

Is any of this helping? Well, of course not. It's not supposed to. How many people here actually hate themselves MORE than they did when they walked in? Okay, good.

**LIGHT CHANGE - "FLASHBACK POOL" STAGE  
RIGHT**

LUCY FREEZES as MATTHEW rises. He takes his chair with him and sits down in front of Lucy, facing her. He has his PHONE in his hand and glances at it. We have flashed back to an earlier time. Lucy has none of the polish we have seen in her presentation so far.

LUCY

(nervous & quieter -- repeating for Matthew only)

...Is any of this helping? Well, of course not. It's not supposed to. How many people here actually hate themselves MORE than they did when they walked in? Okay, good.

MATTHEW

(quickly, impatient)

STOP. I don't get it. The "Cherished Belief" is supposed to be what, now?

LUCY

"You are Not Good Enough."

MATTHEW

So maybe YOU don't get it. You are supposed to CRUSH the belief, not reinforce it.

LUCY

Can I finish? It's all setup so far. The big pivot is coming...

MATTHEW

(looking at his phone)

So far, seven and a half minutes of set-up... You know, you don't have FOREVER.

LUCY

My idea is that at this point, the audience is REALLY listening to me, and BELIEVING what I'm saying. They are not feeling very good about themselves, the NEXT STEP is to pick them up, give them a REALLY empowering pep talk and lead them all into a land of sunshine, and joy. They will be so relieved, and I'll get a massive score.

MATTHEW

You think people are that stupid? The judges will see right through it.

LUCY

Maybe. Look, I know I won't win, I'm hoping for 2nd. You have this locked up.

MATTHEW

Well, so far your presentation is confusing and a little hard to follow. Way too many statistics, and your slides are all over the place. You are in danger of putting them to sleep with the University of this and that and all the stuff about "...studies show." And you had them raise their hands? That is so cliché. No one does that anymore.

LUCY

(crushed)

Gotcha.

MATTHEW

You have to understand that the LAST thing an audience wants to do, is THINK. They want simple good guy vs. bad guy story lines. And I have one Cardinal Rule in public speaking -- "Make It Personal." Always tell a PERSONAL story. Something about overcoming adversity. Something with a little self-mockery. Make them feel sorry for you a little bit. Then, share your triumphant rise from despair. Have them rise with you.

(Lucy is listening intently)

But you uh, well... have to HAVE a story WORTH telling. I mean, it can't be a story about how you hate your sister or the time you went without a manicure for 3 weeks.

LUCY

I've NEVER gone three weeks without a manicure... But I do understand you were trying to be clever. Anything else?

MATTHEW

Since you ask, "Shine, Baby Shine?" -- Really? That's your title?

LUCY

It's easy to remember.

MATTHEW

Well, if that is your only criteria, why not name it "BIG BOOBIES ARE AWESOME?" That's memorable to me.

Lucy JUST STARES at him, whatever respect she had for him is evaporated.

**(LIGHTS - MAIN WASH - BACK TO PRESENT)**

Matthew takes his chair and resumes his place with the others. We are back in the PRESENT. Lucy discreetly adjusts her bra and picks up where she left off.

**(SCREEN: It reads “ETERNAL TRUTH”)**

LUCY

People have told us we are “not good enough.” If you are like me, it is something you have heard your whole life. Everywhere we look, we see evidence that backs that up. Not good enough to be “exceptional.” Not good enough to succeed... not good enough to even be HAPPY. But there is one ETERNAL TRUTH that can fix it all. Something that can make anyone “good enough.” THE LIE. Or to use its more common name... “Bullshit”.

**(SCREEN: “BLACK”)**

LUCY

Let me share with you a very personal story. I told you at the beginning that I was well trained in my youth to believe that I wasn’t good enough. I TRULY believed that, I believed it deep in my DNA. My body vibrated in the key of low self esteem. My marriage was one giant celebration of my worthlessness. My husband at the time was successful, dominant and made his living by telling people he was “EXCELLENT.” But he never did ANYTHING, really, except rip-off other people’s ideas and talk like he invented fire and water. But the WAY he did it was thrilling. People believed it. He seduced me in that thrilling way. It was a three-hour weather delay at O’Hare, and we started talking at the bar and he was wearing really good shoes. Before I knew it, he had me in the “family” toilet in Terminal Three. You know -- the ones where you can lock the doors? He impressed me with several new ways to use that fold-down baby diaper-changing shelf. (REMEMBERING) But it wasn’t just a LUST thing -- I was smitten. We kept meeting in cities here and there, (I paying my own way, of course) but it didn’t matter because I felt so alive when I was with him. I ABSORBED his success just by being next to it. Four months after his divorce was final, we were married. I moved to Atlanta. Everything was great for oh... three months.

**(SCREEN: Images of FINANCIAL COLLAPSE)**

LUCY

Then the financial meltdown came and some genius at his company decided my new husband’s bullshit and nice shoes didn’t contribute to the corporate bottom line. So he became a “consultant” -- which means he spent a lot of time feeling sorry for himself while making a lot less money.

(MORE)

LUCY (cont'd)

I remember one day, after I came home from work, I was changing clothes, which used to be the cue for Mr. Dreamboat to initiate the pre-dinner mating ritual -- but that activity had come pretty much to an end after his layoff. I stopped wearing the good underwear even. Ladies -- It was SAD. So on that day, as I went to hang up my dress, I could see him in his boxers in the bathroom -- the boxers he had been wearing all day, the boxers he SLEPT IN the night before - and he's leaning into the mirror, plucking his eyebrows... verrrry slowly and verrrry carefully. His belly was pressed against the sink. It was fleshy and flaccid. It was over.

**(SCREEN: "OVER")**

LUCY

I never had sex with him again. And to torture him, I made up these vast lies, that I was interviewing for this or that management position at a huge salary, that the CFO had cornered me in the hallway after-hours, and had been VERY inappropriate... and asked me out for drinks. All Bullshit. But in an ABSTRACT way it was all true, I got a better job and a better lover that I controlled. And I dumped my husband hard. I WAS GOOD ENOUGH. Hell yes I was. And I'm here today to crush forever the concept that I was NEVER good enough.

**(SCREEN: It reads "Secret Eternal Truth")**

LUCY

(building something monumental)

The Secret Eternal Truth: BULLSHIT IS THE LUBRICANT THAT GREASES THE WHEELS OF HUMAN PROGRESS. I assume we all know what kind of bullshit I am talking about. It is something self-serving that is baldly untrue, that we APPEAR to believe with every particle of our soul. Bullshit is essential to the progress of humanity. Columbus sailed the ocean blue based on it. Politicians are elected riding a wave made of it. Women sleep with the wrong men because of it. Men make innumerable bad choices based on it. There would be no sports cars, high heels or stock markets without copious amounts of bullshit. This is all true, and every person in this room knows it.

**(SCREEN: It reads "SECRET ETERNAL TRUTH")**

LUCY

But what is the "Secret" part of this Eternal Truth? Here it is: Bullshit is MOST POTENT when you swallow it yourself. The Bullshit really isn't for others, it's for YOU. To truly succeed, you must LIE TO YOURSELF. DRINK your own Kool-Aid.

(MORE)

LUCY (cont'd)

Lie back and think of England.

(Evangelically)

We can bullshit others, but it is much, MUCH more important that we bullshit OURSELVES. It's true. If we stare at the Truth in the harsh light of day, NOTHING IS POSSIBLE. But if we close our eyes -- and swallow the lie whole -- and never, EVER look back -- Those seven-plus billion people don't exist. You discover one day - you have NO competition!

**(SCREEN: "HUGE CROWD")**

LUCY

I mean, the seven billion DO EXIST -- but only to consume your GREATNESS, to worship your UNIQUENESS, to validate your SUPERIORITY. But they cannot hold a candle to YOU. YOU. And among the entire seven-plus billion, there is only one YOU. And YOU are freaking AMAZING. Why? Because you say you are.

**(SCREEN: It reads "WHY I AM AMAZING?")**

LUCY

(proudly reciting)

Why Am I Amazing? Well, I could quote Milton in pre-school. I've had 12 patents awarded to me for things I doodled on napkins at lunch. Men usually weep after sex with me, it's that profound and deeply moving. (BEAT) And that's only THREE things I feel like sharing today. (BEAT) Did you believe me? Did you believe ANY of what I said? It doesn't matter.

**(SCREEN: It reads "I DID")**

LUCY

I did.

**(SCREEN: It reads "GO FORTH")**

LUCY

Now go forth, and "SHINE -- BABY -- SHINE."

The others on stage APPLAUD. LUCY takes her seat.

**(SCREEN: "Lucy's Credit.")**

**(SCREEN: It reads "Presenter #1: 97 points")**

VOICE

Thank you, Presenter Number One, Lucy Duras. Judges are scoring. Score for Presenter Number One, 97 points.

LUCY seems hugely pleased - it is obviously a great score.

VOICE

Notation... Ms. Duras' score of 97 points is the third highest score in finals history.

LUCY does a fist-pump and WHOOPS.

The other CONTESTANTS fidget.

Matthew is especially annoyed. LUCY settles, glowing.

FADE TO BLACK.

**(SCREEN: "NGI logo")**



SCENE 2

VOICE

Presenter Number Two, Mr. Mark Hugo, please begin.

MARK

Hi everyone. My name is Mark and let me say, it is such a pleasure to be able to compete in this year's final competition. I have been making inspirational expert presentations for many years now, and I think what you are going to experience in the next several minutes will actually make sense to you. It may do more than that. It may help initiate a PROFOUND CHANGE in your life. What you are about to realize will take an immense BURDEN off your shoulders.

**(SCREEN: It reads "YOU BELIEVE LIFE IS HARD")**

MARK

Your Cherished belief? "LIFE IS HARD." Who has never thought to themselves: "Life is hard?" We all believe that in one way or another. But I am here today to tell you, it doesn't have to be that way. Here is my evidence to the contrary.

**(SCREEN: Image of a cute PUG FACE )**

MARK

*"Look at that smushed-in face!"* How can life be hard when there is a face like that to look at? Does looking at it make you feel better? It makes ME feel better. Com'on. Relax everyone. Just relax... I mean it! Let's ride the cosmic face of pug into the inevitability of bliss! Let's surf the frothy current of least resistance...

**(SCREEN: It reads: "YOU Believe Life is Hard")**

MARK

*"YOU Believe Life is Hard."* No...

**(SCREEN: It reads "YOU SHOULD BELIEVE LIFE IS EASY")**

MARK

*“You SHOULD believe life is EASY.”* I mean come on. Life COULD be easy... “Easy” is well, EASY. “Hard” is hard. It’s not that complicated really, when you think about it. But here is your problem...

**(SCREEN: Image of a MOUNTAIN TOP )**

MARK

...You were always told you were going to do great things and you had a DESTINY... YOU had a SPECIAL GIFT and would leave your mark on the world, write your own stanza to the great poem of Human History... and if you just believed, my god, BELIEVED IN YOURSELF, all your dreams would come true.

**(SCREEN: Image of a BOY & GLOBE)**

You’ve heard it on all of those talk shows. It is a theme of countless self-help books... “Don’t give up your dreams! Don’t give up your dreams, Tommy. BELIEVE, always believe!”

**(SCREEN: Image of a DESERT)**

MARK

And all little Tommy got was more and more and MORE... of NOTHING. And yet, we are told we still must DREAM. Who could imagine that dreaming of your glorious destiny would be such a burden? My god, it’s stressful carrying around that bullshit idea. That “Dream” is a freaking BITCH. And what is the DREAM we are all supposed to be endowed with? This thing, glowing red-hot in our chest like ET... What is that thing we are to believe is our destiny?

**(SCREEN: Image of a PERSON IN A SPOTLIGHT)**

MARK

Okay. Let’s be honest. We all have huge expectations of ourselves. If we are honest, we expect nothing less than becoming a LEGEND. But you know, dealing with this “I have a dream” business can produce a lot of stress. A WHOLE lot of stress.

**(SCREEN: Image of a STRESSED FACE)**

MARK

Oh, dear -- The PUNISHMENT you put yourself through! It’s inhuman. Look. We aren’t going to be exceptional. We are just PEOPLE.

(MORE)

MARK (cont'd)

People who have to work and pay bills and go grocery shopping and wash our clothes and pay taxes and get rejected for sex. People like our father and grandfather and his father and his father and on and on. People.

**(SCREEN: Image of a HORSE & WAGON)**

MARK

Do you think your Great, Great Grandfather put himself through all of this? Do you think he had some dream of wild success and international acclaim working that farm in Indiana? His dreams were limited to having a roof that didn't leak and bringing in a decent harvest -- or maybe his dream was his children graduating from Primary School back in the year 18-whatever. Maybe his dream was to have a healthy MULE. And HIS great-grandfather's special dream was not freezing to death in the winter in Lithuania and not having ALL his children die before they were six.

**(SCREEN: "LITHUANIAN MAN")**

MARK

(loosening a bit)

But things are easier now. The poor used to starve to death with regularity, now the poor die from Diabetes and Heart Disease. It's sad -- but if you think about it, it's comforting. It doesn't take a whole lot of work just to EXIST. I mean, look around. You are sitting in a city with a public sewer system and electric lighting and a 99 cent hamburger on every corner. Guess what, you are probably going to live until next week. That's not something you could have confidence in if you were living in a third-world slum swimming in garbage. Like this guy....

**(SCREEN: Image of a MAN SWIMMING IN GARBAGE)**

Mark freezes as a DOWNSTAGE SPOTLIGHT FADES UP - Stagehands move a SMALL TABLE into the light on the table are NAME-TAGS attached to LANYARDS. JOAN steps up to it, MARK moves to stand behind her.

**(SCREEN: Background is now a HOTEL LOBBY)**

JOAN

(to the invisible person working the table)

Joan Renard. I'm an "expert speaker." I'm in the FINALS - Ha! Yeah, I know, right?

(MORE)

MARK (cont'd)

(She looks over the lanyards)

Oh, I see me! How about that! MY NAME!

JOAN proudly puts on the lanyard. MARK sees his and reaches to get it. She sees his name.

JOAN

Mark Hugo. THE Mark Hugo?

MARK

Yeah.

JOAN

The Mark Hugo who has been in the National Global Influencers Finals a RECORD 6 CONSECUTIVE TIMES? I remember watching you, that first time you were in the finals, because that was the very day I got my braces off.

MARK

Yes, this is my 7th time...

JOAN

God, I was streaming the finals last year... your presentation was, oh my god... that slide with the starving African kid, that morphed into a butterfly... Holy shit -- I was crying my frigg'n EYES OUT.

MARK

Someone noticed...

JOAN

How did you NOT WIN?

MARK

Uh...

JOAN

You SHOULD HAVE WON. I mean seriously, COME ON!

MARK

You know, it's an honor just to participate in the finals...

JOAN

Mark, COME ON! That's horse-shit. You must just hate Matthew Stendhal. Oh my god, he beat you by one point last year. ONE POINT! You hate him, right? I would. I SO would! And you were better, I swear to god. Did that just eat you alive inside?

MARK

No, not really.

She PAUSES -- remembering.

JOAN

Shit dude... Didn't he beat you the year before too?

MARK

Uh, huh.

JOAN

Yeah, but that time by a lot, I remember, he killed everyone. That was the year with all the puppies, the puppies dressed up like the founding fathers... With those little white wigs.

MARK

...Look, Matthew is a friend of mine, a tough competitor...

JOAN

...But gimmicky, right? I mean that limp he used last year, did anyone buy that?

MARK

I'm guessing the judges did, at least one point's worth. Ha-ha!

JOAN

Jeeze -- it would totally eat my insides out to lose like that. To a frigg'n fake LIMP? Come on! Talent should beat gimmicks, it should! Talent is always over gimmicks!

MARK

(diverting)

So, it's your first finals? Gee - I remember mine...

JOAN

You were better Mark! That butterfly-starving-kid shit was awesome! I was CRYING, Mark, you made me cry. I didn't cry when my dog died while I was away at college. But YOU did it. With Stendhal, I was like, is anyone buying this fake-limp bullshit? COME ON!

MARK

I appreciate your support.

JOAN

I bet this is your year to win it all. Didn't you win once?

MARK

Actually I... Well... 4 second places... a third and one forth.

JOAN

I thought you won one?

MARK

Uh. No.

JOAN

(A LONG BEAT - softly)

Oh. God, that HAS TO eat you up inside... EAT. YOU. UP.

MARK

(upbeat)

Not really. But I'm going in a completely different direction this year, I feel really good about it. It's going to freak everyone out. Pure, unvarnished TRUTH. I'm going after the most cherished belief of all. Taking NO prisoners. So, it's your first finals?

JOAN

Oh my god -- it's my first year competing! And I entered on a dare! I mean, I started at the Kiwanis event in Lucas County and was HORRIBLE, but this old guy who was against me kept trying to look down my shirt and was rolling his eyes at the judges and got kicked out by the lady who ran everything, and that was good... but I was SO bad. But the only other competitor was this even OLDER dude who said "in conclusion" about five times. So I won Lucas County. I thought I would get annihilated at State but I won somehow and from then on I didn't care.

(MORE)

JOAN (cont'd)

But I won Ohio, breezed through the Tri-State in Lansing, the Upper Midwest Sectionals in Bloomington and killed it at the Quarterfinals in Rochester. Whew.. And here I am. Dumb luck probably. Ha!

But she doesn't believe it was luck. Mark can only nod, absently, the wheels of self-loathing spinning madly in his head. LIGHTING CUE takes us back to the competition.

**(SCREEN: MAN SWIMMING IN GARBAGE  
FADES BACK UP)**

Mark addresses the audience:

MARK

(deep breath)

So -- Sometimes you feel like you are in a hole -- a deep, dark hole. You were SUPPOSED to be GREAT, but how can you be GREAT at the bottom of a PIT? So just STOP IT.

**(SLIDE: THE CUTE PUG FACE SLOWLY  
DISSOLVES IN)**

MARK stands bathed in light as the image FADES UP.

MARK

Stop torturing yourself. See? Everything is going to be FINE. Embrace the face. THE FACE TELLS ALL. And here's another face...

**(SCREEN: THE LAMB FACE SLOWLY  
DISSOLVES IN)**

MARK

(melodious - mystical)

CUUUUTE. That's a HAPPY, PEACEFUL face. It's OUR face.

A long BEAT - a chill sets in. Mark stands in front of the screen, he is surrounded by the IMAGE OF THE LAMB.

MARK

It's us. The SHEEP. (He stands there, palms out, saint-like) Life is easy when you are a sheep.

**(SCREEN: It reads “LIFE IS EASY” )**

MARK

“EASY.” It should be your favorite four-letter word. A sheep gets up in the morning, every day, with an “easy” day ahead of her. That COULD be you. Stress is a foreign concept in the tiny sheep-brain. And what is wrong with that? Really, what is wrong with never having stress? Do we get a special award in the afterlife for being stressed-out our ENTIRE adult life? A GOLD MEDAL? If not, why are we so disturbingly PROUD of it somehow? Because we are so important or so vital that stress is a badge of honor?

**(SCREEN: Background is a DMV OFFICE)**

MARK

I remember, just a few weeks ago, I was sitting in the DMV, waiting for my turn. The time had come to finally pay the piper. I had my licence suspended for not paying my parking tickets, and my license plates were expired too, and I had these all massive fees to pay. So I had been there for an hour already, and I had 120 or so numbers ahead of me, and I was just sitting there. My phone was dead and I remember just SITTING there, just staring blankly -- vaguely contemplating the neck tatoo on this man sitting in front of me, and slowly realizing this massive BALL OF STRESS back here. (touching the back of his neck) Just where the shoulders and neck meet. It had been there so long I had forgotten it was there. It throbbed. I closed my eyes. And in my DMV-demented brain, I had a vision -- maybe you would call it just a daydream.

**(SCREEN: Image of the HAND OF GOD)**

MARK

I imagined, in this daydream, that some supernatural hand, some benevolent, loving, paternal paw reached down from Eternity, and right back here... (TOUCHING HIS NECK AGAIN) ...reached right back HERE where all the stress and worry and failure lives, where it is all knotted up like a malignant monkey, chattering in my ears, celebrating my failings, whispering to me in the middle of the night in that evil, liquid monkey-voice... After all those years perched there, its malicious monkey tail had grown down into my spine, branching off into thousands of feathery, tiny roots -- growing down, down and worming its way into the tiny cavities of my spine, like a toxic weed, grasping and binding me... And then, there in the DMV, I had a vision of this BENEVOLENT HAND, reaching down from heaven, grasping that fucking little chattering monkey by the skull, and slowly pulling, slowly pulling as if to pull it out as ONE SINGLE PIECE, pulling the monkey and it's tail and all the little feathery roots up and away. I could feel it releasing... uncoupling,,, one by one, root by root.

(MORE)



MARK (cont'd)

I could feel the grasping tendrils of all that toxic, filthy guilt and shame and inadequacy loosening and dislodging from my body and sliding upwards, up and finally out and away and gone forever. And it was gone. That voice was gone.

(LONG BEAT)

MARK

And ANOTHER voice said, (in DMV voice) "NUMBER J467, at window 23." And in case I didn't hear, "NUMBER J467, at window 23." And I was still at the DMV, and still had to wait 45 more minutes to give them my two thousand and forty nine dollars to get my license renewed and my car registered and all my fees paid. And it turns out the monkey never left. He was still there, buried in my spinal column. Daydreams aren't real.

**(SCREEN: Images of DOMESTIC ANIMALS)**

MARK

We all might be better off as sheep. Here are some great things to know about sheep. First, they enjoy the LONGEST life of any domestic animal. No kidding. That chicken you ate for lunch? Six weeks old, its entire life spent crammed in a cage with its beak cut off so it couldn't murder any of its cousins. That hamburger you had yesterday? The steer's life consisted of seventeen months standing in a feed lot in an eternal goo of its own feces with flies crawling over his eyelids all day. Then he gets a bolt slammed into his castrated brain and you eat him.

**(SCREEN: Image of SHEEP ON A HILL)**

MARK

Now the SHEEP -- Well... the sheep has it MADE. Hardly anyone wants to eat him, assuming he makes it out of the lamb-chop phase. Of course, assuming HE is a SHE. Being a girl sheep is GOOD. Being a boy is BAD. In the sheep's case, boy lambs become the lamb-chops -- but the girl-lambs? They are the Kardashians of the animal world. The sheep rancher takes care of his girls and makes sure they are healthy and happy and safe. He just wants to fleece her a couple times a year. That's it! It's a haircut for crying out loud! And of course she gets to have lots of kids. You see, the farmer wants to keep his sheep happy and healthy for as long as possible. Years and years and years... Peaceful and happy and relaxed and growing wool.

**(SCREEN: Image of SHEEP SHEARING")**

MARK

By the way -- you know the old saying? “The Sheep Silent Before the Shearers?” It’s TRUE, oddly, when sheep get sheared they just shut up... and take it. They know it’s useless to resist... and it doesn’t really hurt anyway. Come on folks, we are getting sheared no matter what. We could fight it and lose, and give that monkey more to chatter about, or we could shut up and take it. Your choice. The sheep’s only job is to BE. No ambitions. She doesn’t want to “make” something of herself. Perfect. So you could do a LOT worse than be a sheep. So you get fleeced occasionally, so what? It probably feels good to get rid of that stuff. Sheep have an awesome life -- they don’t have to VOTE or PARTICIPATE in anything or know what’s happening outside of their comfy, familiar pen, they can just think about food and the seasonal fornication rituals. In fact, seasonal fornication is built right INTO their schedule by their benevolent masters! A sheep never worries about attracting a mate. She doesn’t worry about fat thighs or zits or bad hair days or not sounding cool. There is little uncertainty in the sheep life.

**(SCREEN: Image of a PEACEFUL SHEEP FACE)**

MARK

“Sheepful Bliss” It’s WONDERFUL. Stress-FREE. And unlike The Hindu’s Nirvana, or Jannah, the Islamic Paradise -- Sheepful Bliss is not that hard to achieve. Simply do nothing. My, you are probably 95% sheep already!

**(SCREEN: Icons of WORLD RELIGIONS)**

MARK

Okay, let me just say that what I am proposing is not some kooky, oddball philosophy. It’s been around for millennia. The idea of surrendering into some sort of blissful and divine sheep-dom is a major part of most popular religions. In fact, it is the only thing they agree on. Look in any religious text you want and find me a passage that tells us we are supposed to scheme and claw and back-stab our way onto the board of Goldman Sachs. I’d LOVE to see that. It’s not there. What IS kooky, is the idea that you can avoid being fleeced. Eventually, it comes to us all.

**(SCREEN: Images of INSPIRATIONAL POSTERS)**

MARK

Okay -- some of you are wondering, what kind of 180 degree turn-around, stunt-reversal I’m going to do, maybe at this EXACT point in my presentation, to take care of that uncomfortable, anxious, nagging... FEELING you are having right now.

(MORE)

MARK (cont'd)

What is bothering you is that feeling that I might NOT be kidding. That I really, REALLY BELIEVE this shit. And you may say, "Well maybe he DOES believe that, but that's okay", you are thinking, because "He's just a guy talking, and he's trying to win a contest," and that's what it is... "It's just a guy talking, trying not to lose, like he has over, and over and OVER AGAIN." But YOU -- you think to yourself -- you will NEVER give up on... your... Ahhhh! Your "DREAMS." Because YOU are not a quitter, because YOU - as Churchill said - "never, never, never, never surrender" and you believe that "a winner is someone who gets up ONE MORE TIME than he is knocked down." Yeah. I read those posters too. I just don't believe them anymore.

**(SCREEN: It reads "THE QUESTION")**

MARK

But saying all of that to yourself doesn't ease that uncomfortable feeling you have. That feeling that is way back in the last distant chamber of your head, just past where logic lives... That part of your brain that tells you not to go to the railing and look down, down, down because you just might want to... JUMP. That part of your brain is, right now maybe, asking a tiny, itty-bitty question -- a question that is the opposite of everything you have ever been told in your entire life: "Could GIVING UP be the best option?" You are saying to yourself, "Isn't this some kind of blasphemy?" Un-American? Anti-Human? Giving up? Stop swimming up-stream?

**(SCREEN: a MOUNTAIN STREAM)**

MARK

A question. What the hell is wrong with swimming DOWN-STREAM? Does that make you a coward? A loser? Sure, those struggling upstream will curse you as you glide past. You -- relaxed, chilled and blissful -- riding the current provided for your ease and convenience. Say? You know who swims upstream?

**(SCREEN: Image of a SWIMMING SALMON)**

MARK

Salmon. Some people find salmon "inspiring." There comes a time in the life of every Pacific Salmon that he or she MUST swim upstream. It is the defining moment of their life. It's considered fucking HEROIC by those that think on a third-grade level. And for the few that make it, those who don't die on the rocks or on the hooks or nets or in the jaws of a hungry bear, those that push themselves until they get to the place where they were born, those fish are truly the super-heros of the fish world.

(MORE)

MARK (cont'd)

But they arrive completely and utterly exhausted, having used up every bit of energy they stored up in the five or so years of their life in the ocean -- so when they get to that place of their birth, and blow their wad -- blissfully -- I must assume -- when they spew their spunk into the clear waters of their natal stream, they -- they then roll over and DIE. Almost immediately. And the stream clogs up with the rotting bodies of these overachievers... these “Winners.” Their bodies can’t adapt to the return to fresh water you see, and they actually stop eating as they make their suicidal journey, so once they “mate” -- if you can call spewing semen into the water above a clutch of eggs, “mating”... Well, once they do this, they literally start falling apart. It’s as if the day after you achieve your life-long goal, say, paying off your mortgage or getting that novel published, your nose falls off in the shower, and your arm rips off when you try to open a car door. (SLOWER) That’s what these super-fish get for their heroics. “Congratulations! Oh! Is this your eye-ball?” They simply self-destruct. (BEAT) Sound familiar?

Emotionally exhausted, Mark gathers himself.

**(SCREEN: Image of a SHEEP WITH HALO)**

MARK

So. I must postulate here, dear audience, I must, in my quest to destroy what might be your MOST Cherished Belief, make a suggestion. Though you may no doubt resist, I ask you to put your Achieve-ist Dogma on pause for a moment and just CONSIDER “Sheephood” as an easy, painless option. As I said, you are likely 90 percent sheep as it is. Only the last 10 percent is left -- the step of Total Acceptance is all that remains.

**(SCREEN: It reads “TOP FIVE REASONS TO BE A SHEEP”)**

MARK

Here, in conclusion, are my TOP FIVE REASONS why you should love being a sheep. And by sheep, I mean adopting the way-of-the-sheep, an ambition-less, lamb-like bliss as a Human Being. Number One: The feeling of FAILURE is more painful than the slight tinge of REGRET for not trying. It’s the opposite of what you were taught. It hurts like hell to fail, and the scar tissue lingers to screw with our heads forever. The monkey never shuts up about it. Sheep never fail at being sheep. Ever hear someone criticize a sheep? Number Two: Sheepdom means lower expectations for your life but MUCH lower stress and ZERO fear of failure. As long as you have the Internet, it should be fine. Number Three: Your only real job is to BE. Easy! You can do that WELL, right? The bar is quite low.

(MORE)

MARK (cont'd)

Number Four: Without the self-loathing that always accompanies failed ambition, you can finally LIKE yourself. Imagine that? Liking yourself? Number Five: If you have any regrets at the end of your life, let's be realistic, they will be numbed by the morphine anyway. It's hard to be regretful when you are floating in an ecstatic, narcotic haze.

**(SCREEN: "MARK'S CREDIT SLIDE")**

MARK

Thank you... I have spoken the truth... and await your verdict.

MARK rather dramatically takes his seat. The others on stage APPLAUD slightly.

**(SCREEN: "PRESENTER #2: 92 POINTS")**

VOICE

Thank you, Presenter Number Two, Mark Hugo. Judges are scoring. Score for Presenter Number Two, 92 points.

**(SCREEN SLIDE: "PRESENTER #1: 97 POINTS, PRESENTER #2: 92 POINTS")**

MARK reacts BADLY. He sits, steaming. Then gets up and THROWS the chair ACROSS THE STAGE, CURSING. He stands there. A BEAT. Then, meekly, he RETRIEVES the chair. Humiliated, puts it back with the others and SITS. LUCY sits stoically, her eyes glowing. Then, not able to accept the injustice, MARK RISES and storms OFF STAGE. The others are uncomfortable, then we hear HORRIBLE SOUNDS from backstage, furniture being thrown and something LOUDLY BREAKING. Then MORE. The destruction CONTINUES. Then silence. A LONG SILENCE. Then, MARK REAPPEARS... slowly walks over to his seat and sits. He is neither apologetic or embarrassed.

FADE TO BLACK.

**(SCREEN: Image "NGI logo")**

INTERMISSION IF DESIRED.

SCENE 3**(SCREEN: “NGI logo”)**

VOICE

Presenter Number Three, Ms. Joan Renard, please begin.

JOAN

(flow of consciousness, breakneck pace.)

Hi everybody, I’m Joan. I just have to say I thought the last two presentations were, like, SUPER impressive. I mean, WOW! I was feeling so insignificant after Lucy explained how I was really a nobody and then I felt so empowered by my ability to use the ol’ “bull poop” to make myself feel like a million bucks. Then, my goodness, Mark, who as you probably know, is one of the LEGENDS of this industry, he was VERY vivid and VERY persuasive that we should all just, you know, “go with the flow.” And I certainly don’t want to be a cow standing in my own poop. I mean, Ewwwwh. I just mean to say there was a lot of poop in those last two presentations. I’m not as experienced as Lucy or Mark or Matthew here to come... But my presentation is pretty much poop-free. I hope that’s not a mistake.

**(SCREEN: It reads “YOU BELIEVE YOU HAVE FREE WILL”)**

JOAN

My presentation is called, “You believe you have Free Will.” I’m supposed to pick something that pretty much everyone believes in. I’d say that’s a pretty big, “Cherished Belief.” So here goes. Does everyone here believe in Free Will? Hands? Oh I see some of... most of you do. Well you don’t. You don’t have Free Will I mean. Sorry. So all of you that think you have Free Will, what I am going to reveal to you is going to pretty much be a big shock. Let me tell you a story that happened to me yesterday.

**(SCREEN: Image of a GAS STATION)**

JOAN

I was getting gas at the gas station and I went into the store they have there and I was only going to get a Coke Zero. There was no way I was going to buy candy. For sure, absolutely, no way was I going to buy any type of candy for me to eat.

**(MORE)**

JOAN (cont'd)

My Free Will said, "No Candy." I walked into the store, and on accident went down the candy aisle and there was a Reese's Peanut Butter Cup - it was looking at me, and it spoke to me and it made me buy it and it made me take it to my car and it made me eat it. I ate it before I even STARTED the car. I put on my seatbelt and then I ripped it open and I ate it, both pieces in about 4 seconds. I looked at the package and it was 210 calories and TWENTY THREE percent of my recommended intake of saturated fat. And I said to my Free Will, "What happened?" I mean really, what the heck happened? I cannot eat another Reese's Peanut Butter Cup, I said to myself, I am not going to eat another Reese's Peanut Butter Cup EVER. I knew I had eaten my last Reese's Peanut Butter Cup and I was fine with that. I knew my future husband and our future kids and my bright, bright future would all be just FINE with me never eating one of those things ever again. I had turned a corner. So, feeling better, I pulled away from the gas pump, but, before I could get out of the station, as if pulled by a tractor beam -- (faster and faster) I pulled into another parking space and got out of my car and went back into the shop of the gas station and I bought another Reese's Peanut Butter Cup and I took it my car and I ate it.

She takes a breath.

JOAN

Something very evil and very horrible and nasty and hateful beat the shit out of my Free Will and now I had consumed 420 calories and 46% of my recommended daily intake of saturated fat. 46 PERCENT! Has something like this ever happened to anyone here? Really? I mean when you eat a Reese's Peanut Butter Cup, first of all it's wrapped in like surgical-grade plastic -- it's like specially sealed in this plastic to last as long as -- as long as maybe a Pharaoh would be buried under the sands of Egypt and then they would discover the tomb and then there would be the Reese's Peanut Butter Cup still fresh after all of these thousands of years. But probably melted. Because it is hot in Egypt.

**(SCREEN: Image of a REECES PACKAGE)**

JOAN

So you are tearing open this special industrial grade plastic wrapping and you are thinking, "who would eat anything that is wrapped like this? That is surgically wrapped like this?" And you have to use your teeth to open it. Is that appealing? It's like I'm an animal desperate to add another inch of fat on my thighs to get through the winter, so desperate that I rip apart space-age plastic with my teeth. I want to remind you that those little peanut butter cups with chocolate - there's only three bites there -- even if you take small bites - that's IT. I tried to eat one in four bites and it is pretty much impossible.

JOAN

And it goes in your mouth, and it tastes good, but then you're thinking, "it's not that good -- it's not THAT good!" But then you eat the other two bites and then the other cup like, right away - like you are being watched by a rival that is going to snatch the Reese's away from you before you can eat it. I mean, EVERYONE eats them that way I think. For example, have you ever seen someone with a book and coffee slowly nibbling on a Reese's? Never. In fact, you really never see anyone actually eating a Reese's Peanut Butter Cup in public, even though they sell a gazillion of them. I think people are eating them hunched over the steering wheels of their cars, shoving them into their mouths as rapidly as possible.

**(SCREEN: "BLACK")**

JOAN

Now, how could my Free Will have let that happen? Oh, I know what you're saying. I know what you're thinking. You're saying, "Joan you chose to eat that Reese's Peanut Butter Cup - THAT was your Free Will. You CHOSE to park and buy a second one and gobble it down like a starving dog." If you say that, first of all I HATE YOU, and second of all it is NOT TRUE -- my Free Will was roofied and raped by a Reese's.

**(SCREEN: Images of HANDSOME MEN)**

JOAN

It's like Men. My Free Will is often doomed in that department. What I want to happen rarely happens and what I DON'T want to happen usually does.

**(SCREEN: Images of BEAUTIFUL WOMEN)**

JOAN

It seems I don't have enough confidence in my feminine, uh, things, to attract guys. I look in the mirror and, well, it's not so bad. It's good! I mean, all the essentials are there. I am not hideous. I'm kinda hot in a accessible kind-of-way. Not "kinda" -- Very! I've got plenty of stuff that most men would want to do stuff with... And don't laugh, I mean my brain and personality and general fun-ness as well. Men like that too.

She takes a breath, switches gears.

JOAN

It didn't help that my mom was the way she was. It sucks to have a sexy mom. I remember as a little girl I used to watch with amazement while my mother got any man to do anything she wanted. My mother was, I'm not sure how to say it, she was... "confident". She had what women used to call a great, "figure".



**(SCREEN: Image of HOT MOM)**

JOAN

My mother's confidence drew a lot of attention from people, especially and obviously, men. This made a big impression on me as a little girl. It was kind of amazing to watch. I remember once when I was in first or second grade -- I was shopping with my mother and I remember my mother deciding to rest on a bench at the mall. I was just sitting there, obediently parked in neutral, and slowly I became aware that my mother was CRYING. But I didn't find it scary or upsetting, just, well, mildly confusing. It was a kind of crying that I was not used to. It sounded different in her throat. It had this kind of weird, artificial sound. Usually, if you have to cry in public, you stifle it. You don't want people to see. But the way she was crying, she sort of pretended to be covering it up, but made sure it was big enough so that other people would be sure to notice it. It wasn't long until someone DID notice it. I saw this man watching her, he was smoking a cigarette and then he turned to walk away. I looked at my mom. I didn't say anything because my Mom had always taught me that her life and its details were none of my concern. So I watched her like I might watch a grown-up TV show I didn't completely understand. Then out of the corner of my eye was this shape, kinda hovering. It was that man who was watching and then walked away -- he had come back. My Mom saw him too, but acted like she didn't. Then -- this is the part I remember most -- SLOWLY, she turned her face towards him, turned it perfectly so the light was just on her smooth cheek so it shined on the wetness of her tears and she held it there, in the light, until the man had no choice but to say, "Are you okay?"

**(SCREEN: Images of MAN FACE)**

JOAN

I remember he looked older up close. Then she started talking to him and soon I stopped paying attention, because the theatrical presentation of the moistened cheek to the man was what had fascinated me, and I guess I was busy filing that away in the deep recesses of my little girl brain. Saving it for a day when it would become useful. My memories pick up again when we all went shopping, which all seemed very natural to me, and I remember my mom, she got new shoes and some other nice things and I got a pretty new dress that was pink with yellow flowers. It seems that the man paid for everything, but I wonder if I only think that looking back. I mean why would he be there if he was not paying, right? I guess that is sexist or anti-feminist or something, but let's get real. I remember years later my mom telling me, "It makes men happy when they pay. And why shouldn't we let them be happy, Joan? It's nice to make people happy." Wise words, I guess.

**(SCREEN: Image of "DARK GIRL")**

JOAN

But what I remember most was that dress I got. Little tiny yellow flowers, like silk flowers attached to the top part of the dress, here. (She touches herself lightly around her collarbone) I loved that dress. I remember how proud I was of that dress and how much I wanted for there to be a party so I could wear that dress to the party and how I wore it around the house for days and days and my mother laughed so because I never wanted to take it off. Then on the day my daddy was coming home from his business trip my mom told me to take off the dress because it had to be cleaned, she said it had to be cleaned to surprise daddy and because of the wonderful yellow flowers, it had to be specially cleaned at the dry cleaners. Daddy came home and everything was normal and later when I asked my Mom about the dress with the yellow flowers she said she would check on it, and then she bought me another dress that was baby blue with lots of stitching but it wasn't as wonderful as the pink dress with the yellow flowers, and when I asked about the dress again my mother said... the dry cleaners LOST IT.

She catches herself, realizing. She takes a breath.

JOAN

Gosh, I went on a tangent there. The point I was making, the PROOF I was talking about was about the MAN. That man I never saw before, the one that stopped because my mom was crying. Like I said, he was smoking a cigarette and I remember now he had to put it out when he was talking to my mom, or felt obligated to put it out and for some reason he really didn't WANT to put it out... but he DID. Like he HAD to. Most of all -- I remember the LOOK he had when he talked to my mom at first, when she was crying in that funny way, like he wanted to help or somehow was obligated to help but part of him wanted to go and do what he was supposed to do and the other part of him was excited somehow... excited like a hunter that found an animal caught in a trap. And I remember him looking around the mall when we were walking from shop to shop, with his "man" face like he was worried to see if he was being watched. But then when he was talking to my Mom, she would seem to magically make his "boy" face appear. And he kept making these two faces at the same time, the "man" and "boy" face, the "man" and "boy" face... and eventually, the more things he bought for us, the more the "boy" face was there. Finally, like the Cheshire Cat, the "man" face disappeared altogether and all was left was the boy. A little, happy boy. The boy my Mom made happy, by letting him spend his money. That man thought he had Free Will but he didn't. It turned out HE was the animal in the trap. My mom took his free will away just like she took my pink dress with the yellow flowers away. The one that never came back.

**(SCREEN: Background, "BEDROOM WALL")**

The LIGHT changes and LUCY rises and walks downstage, looks towards the audience and starts primping, as if in a mirror. A STAGEHAND brings a stand with several articles of CLOTHING on hangars and puts them near her. LUCY tries on these during the scene.

LUCY

(to Joan, as her mother)

Joan... JOAN. Come here please!

JOAN

(she is still in place, but her voice has become 12 years old)

I'm busy!

LUCY

JOAN! Come here!

JOAN

...Buuuusy!

LUCY

Joan... RIGHT NOW.

JOAN

(sighs, walks towards her)

...What mother?

LUCY

(still looking in the mirror)

I saw you talking to that boy.

JOAN

Who?

LUCY

That big boy, with the long hair. Yesterday. With the bad posture.

JOAN

His name is Derek.

LUCY

Is he older than you? He looks a lot older.

JOAN

He is one grade older. I can talk to who I want.

LUCY

Look, you are going to be thirteen, that's a teenager, you have to KNOW things.

JOAN

Mom, I KNOW.

LUCY

How you handle boys... and later men. Is the most important thing there is for a young lady. Because it can determine your future happiness or misery.

JOAN

Oh, mother.

LUCY

You want future happiness don't you Joan? Or would you PREFER future misery?

JOAN

Oh, jeeze.

LUCY

Misery?

JOAN

NO....

LUCY

Some girls walk down the street and puberty just hits them like a brick and all of a sudden men can't stop bothering them. Do you know what I am talking about Joan?

JOAN

Oh, jeeeeez mom...

LUCY

They walk down the street and puberty hits them and all kinds of "things" happen, they just erupt -- like a volcano. A hot, hot volcano Joan, do you understand?

JOAN

Oh, well...

LUCY

I'm not trying to scare you Joan, I am just giving you very, very important information. I know all about this stuff.

JOAN

Oh, mother...

LUCY

You KNOW I know all of this stuff Joan, don't you? You KNOW I know.

JOAN

Yes, mother.

LUCY

Now here's the thing. You are not one of those girls. You are just NOT. I'm not telling you anything you don't know. But no use waiting for the volcano to erupt. There is not going to be any ERUPTING. There is nothing shameful about it. But you are never going to be a volcano, and that's alright. It is fine. Sometimes it is much better not to be one.

JOAN

Oh my god...

LUCY

You are not going to be a volcano that just starts flinging hot stuff out of the ground and people gather just to watch. You are going to be more like a, uh, like a campfire. Still pretty hot, and worthwhile and comfortable and somewhat attractive -- but a campfire has to be carefully constructed to burn properly, or no man wants to sit by it.

JOAN

(searching for a comeback)

Volcanos kill people.

LUCY

(proudly, speaking as a volcano herself)

Yes they do Joan, that's why people stand and watch. Volcanos are never boring.

JOAN

(giving up)

Are you finished please?

LUCY

No, and that brings me to Darren with the long hair...

JOAN

DEREK.

LUCY

Just tell me, what do you want from him?

JOAN

I don't know...

LUCY

Come on, think.

JOAN

(sighs)

Maybe --- well -- to sit with me at lunch?

LUCY

Hmmm. And how likely do you think that is at this point?

JOAN

Not?

LUCY

And why is that?

JOAN

(thinking...)

Because... I am not a volcano?

LUCY

No. Derek doesn't need a volcano. He wouldn't know what to do with a volcano if she jumped in his lap and stuck a tongue in his ear.

JOAN

Ewww...

LUCY

So, you want Derek to sit with you at lunch. How do you see that going?

JOAN

I don't know.

LUCY

I mean will he talk to you? Will he sit there like a lump? What will you discuss?

Joan starts to say something, then reconsiders her options -  
- obviously every option is ridiculous.

LUCY

That's what I thought.

JOAN

Just sitting with me is enough.

LUCY

Just sitting with you. You, him and the corn dogs. When do you see Derek?

JOAN

(wistfully)

Mainly from a distance.

LUCY

Maybe you are not ready. Maybe you will never be ready.

JOAN

He has lunch at the same time as me, but he is usually with other people.

Lucy finally, for the first time in the conversation, turns to face her daughter. She is considering her. Joan stands there, feeling very small. Finally Lucy turns back and looks again in the mirror.

LUCY

Okay... That's all.

LIGHTS CHANGE back to the Presentation. LUCY  
EXITS behind the screen.

JOAN

But that wasn't all... The next week, something happened so amazing, that even today, it is spoken about in whispers in the hallways of Ronald Reagan Middle School.

**(SCREEN: Background, SCHOOL LUNCHROOM)**

LIGHTS CHANGE - FLASHBACK TO SCHOOL

JOAN

I had my tray -- and no Mom, it was NOT a corn dog -- it was pizza, tater-tots, a cookie, 2 apple juices - counts as fruit - and a milk, NON FAT by-the-way. And as I emerged from the line, I saw Derek over there, against the wall, which was odd as I remember, because he was holding his own tray of food and just standing there. Standing and looking around. Usually he would be with friends and eating his food like he was in a rush. But today he was all alone and, kinda looking for something. And then he looked at ME, in a way that I didn't know, and something clicked inside me, and I did something remarkable. I didn't smile or giggle or blush or fall over, I turned my head away, slowly and elegantly like some kind of princess. Like this...

She turns her head elegantly, and with great import.

JOAN

And I turned and walked to my usual table, and as I went, I sensed something, something awesome behind me, a presence...

MARK (as DEREK in a wig) pantomimes walking behind her, carrying a tray.

JOAN

There was some kind of sexy dude radar locked on me, following me like a puppy. I could see it all playing out on the girl's faces in front of me as I walked, a mixture of awe and disbelief. I was just praying the dude was not that snotty Brendan Hoffsbarger, the 6th grader who SOMEHOW thought he was in my league, but I was pretty sure by the wide-eyed look of Alicia Poperelli, that this was not a Brendan "Snott-Burger" episode. Oh no, this was something, much, much more significant. I got to my seat, put down my tray, and dramatically turned around and faced the music. (SHE TURNS) "Hey Derek," I said, VERY nonchalantly, and SO confident, "Want to sit with me?"

MARK EXITS, almost FADES AWAY.

**(SCREEN: Background, MIDDLE SCHOOL)**



JOAN

Now, you are no doubt wondering, “What happened?” Well, Derek, the widely-admired and hottest guy in the eighth grade at Ronald Reagan Middle School, did, possibly against his own better instincts, sit and have lunch with a seventh-grade girl who he previously may have barely known even existed, even though she had tried to talk to him every day since the school year started. Now maybe they didn’t say much to each other, maybe they didn’t say ANYTHING to each other, except when he asked if , “Was I going to eat that?” And then took her cookie before she could even say, “Sure.” But that’s not the point. The point is, he sat with her. And she MADE him do it.

**(SCREEN: Background, RED CURTAIN)**

JOAN

How did she do it? How did she take his “Free Will” away and replace it with her own overwhelming desire to have the whole school see her having lunch with him? Despite her Mom thinking it would NEVER happen. I’ll tell you, it was the turn, the HEAD TURN, self assured, confident... And it was that TURN -- almost in slow-motion - - that made him intrigued, and made him follow me over to the where the 7th graders sat, following me like a little puppy, because I had taken his free will away. It wasn’t only my mom that could do that, I obviously could do it too. In fact I am pretty sure I could do it better than she ever could.

**(SCREEN: Background, HIGH SCHOOL)**

JOAN

A few years later in high school, a friend of Derek’s was my lab partner in Biology and he told me that Derek told him that one day in middle school, after class, my mom showed up and found Derek and made him talk to her outside the cafeteria and Derek said it got really “weird” and my mom was super-mean or “something” and the NEXT day that was when Derek sat with me at lunch. She said MY MOM made Derek sit with me. I know for a fact, that was NOT true, because that fake story came from Clarissa Hatchenberg who was my arch-enemy and tried to ruin every part of my life at Reagan Middle... That story is a LIE. (BEAT) It was MY head turn that did it.

**(SCREEN: reads “FREE WILL”)**

LIGHTS CHANGE TO DESIGNATE WE ARE BACK  
AT THE COMPETITION.

JOAN

And it proves my point. Are we really in charge of our Free Will? Obviously, “NO.” But why? Why do lovely and ultimately not-that-interesting boys like Derek let women like me reach right in and snatch their Free Will away from them? Why do WE allow someone, or something -- like a luscious chocolate-peanut butter cup -- take our Free Will away from us? How can a mom pretending to cry on a bench in a mall ring up an impressive stash of stuff from a total stranger and make him grin like a little boy? Well... folks.... I have no idea. I just DON’T know. I just know it happens. All I promised to do is crush your cherished belief, not explain how it happens. (SHE CURTSIES) Thank you.

**(SCREEN SLIDE: “JOAN’S CREDIT” )**

Joan sits. The others APPLAUD. MARK gestures, like “That’s it?”

**(SCREEN SLIDE: “PRESENTER #3: 93 POINTS”)**

VOICE

Thank you, Presenter Number Three. Joan Renard. Judges are scoring. (LONG BEAT - faint MUSIC) Score for Presenter Number Three, 93 points.

LUCY is thrilled, she still has the lead. JOAN is joyous. MARK is visibly agitated again, he’s lost to Joan by 1 point. LIGHTS CHANGE - Spotlight on LUCY. She RISES.

**(SCREEN SLIDE: “PRESENTER #1: 97 POINTS, PRESENTER #2: 92 POINTS, PRESENTER #3: 93 POINTS”)**

FADE TO BLACK.

**(SCREEN: “NGI logo”)**

SCENE 4

VOICE

Presenter Number Four, Mr. Matthew Stendhal, please begin.

MATTHEW rises.

**(SCREEN: It reads “THE SHORTEST DISTANCE BETWEEN TWO POINTS IS SIDEWAYS.”)**

MATTHEW

(forcefully and rapidly)

Hello. The “Cherished Belief” I will destroy today is: “The Shortest Distance Between A and B is a Straight Line.” Yeah. I see you -- you’re sitting there thinking: “That’s a let-down. What is this, geometry?” I mean, Joan told you not to have those mean old thoughts, and you really ARE good enough. “Rah-Rah Team!” Mark countered that by telling you, you are NOT that special, and you should just submit to the “Zen of Loserhood.” And perky Miss Joan here says you don’t really have Free Will because chocolate is awesome and her mother was a bitch. Ok. Fine. But my cherished belief is a cornerstone of society. And by the way, my presentation doesn’t have anything to do with how you FEEL about yourself, because... well, I don’t give a shit how you feel. If you don’t feel so great about yourself right now, or hate your relationship, or you gained a few pounds, I am not that interested. God bless you in your journey. What I’m talking about is TRUTH, and how something you ALL believe, is wrong.

**(SCREEN: It reads “FROM A TO B”)**

MATTHEW

Humans believe things go in a certain direction. Usually we think things “move ahead” -- “Go from A to B.” In fact, we ALL live our lives trying to go from “A” to “B.” From starting college to finishing college. From no job to a job. From Virgin to Stud. From Iowa to LA. We want to move FORWARD in the straightest line possible. In reality, that hardly ever happens. NOTHING in the history of Mankind has evolved in a linear and straightforward fashion. I’ll say it again, because most of you were not listening. Nothing in the history of Mankind has EVER evolved in a LINEAR and STRAIGHTFORWARD fashion. They don’t go straight at all, they go “sideways.” “Sideways” is the essential cosmic flow of the universe. NOTHING goes straight ahead for very long. We actually live in a SWIRLING FRACTAL MAZE of unintended consequences.

**(SCREEN: It reads “A Swirling Fractal Maze of Unintended Consequences”)**

MATTHEW

Okay, it's a mouthful... You say, Matthew, “What do you mean by a swirling fractal maze of unintended consequences?”

(as if talking to a child)

I mean that CHAOS and RANDOMNESS is all you can reliably expect where Human Behavior is concerned. That's all. I'll give you an example.

**(SCREEN: Images of HITLER & STALIN)**

MATTHEW

These two assholes, for example, came out of nowhere. You would think that somehow future leaders of mid-20th century Germany and Russia would be groomed for the job, raised out of the aristocratic class, well educated... No chance. Neither of these gentlemen had any formal education at all. One was denied entrance to an art school, the other was kicked out of seminary. Oh, they were plenty smart, don't get me wrong. Both are excellent examples of my thesis. But Hitler, my god - we've all heard enough about him. So let's take this sociopath Stalin as our example. You probably have a vague idea who he was. But he is a great example for my theory. Let me tell you, Stalin had an amazing “Sideways” instinct.

**(SCREEN: Portrait, “STALIN”)**

MATTHEW

The best figures available indicate that Stalin killed around 43 million people in his long and productive life. That number is impossible to even comprehend. I looked it up -- it's equal to the ENTIRE populations of LA, NY, AND Chicago... all dead. PLUS everyone who lives in Paris, and Berlin, AND Hong Kong... AND Mexico City... AND London. Every single person dead. One man did it. So he was a bad guy. Did he get some kind of “Karmic Payback” in the end? Not really, he died a rich old man surrounded by people who were scared shitless of him in his luxury dacha outside Moscow. Despite his kicking the shit out of Russians for 30 years, the Average Ivan still loved him. Which is exactly the way he always wanted to go.

**(SCREEN: Image: “STALIN'S BODY ON DISPLAY”)**

MATTHEW

When his formaldehyde-drenched carcass went on display in Red Square, the crowds were so packed trying to see him that people were trampled underfoot, others were crushed to death against walls and even traffic lights, and some, according to reports, were choked to death by other Necro-Tourists. The Soviets estimated that 500 people lost their lives while trying to get a glimpse of Stalin's corpse, which somehow, was a source of pride.

**(SCREEN: Image: "STALIN MURAL")**

MATTHEW

(with a bit of superior glee)

The usual number floating around, the one you heard in school, says Stalin killed 20 million people. It's a nice, round number. But it is a lie. That number doesn't tell the whole story. It omits a significant number of concentration camp deaths of those Stalin sent to Siberia, who expired by freezing or starving to death; and that 20 million does not include all the executions of Russians from '39 to '52. For some reason, Stalin never got tired of killing Russians. Most historians also neglect to count the deaths of non-Russians. There were millions and millions. Also, we shouldn't forget, although most of the world has... that Stalin engineered a deadly Ukrainian famine from 1932 to 1933 -- another 6 million or so dead. We overlook it because it was over a relatively short time, 2 years. Now... I thought about that. The number seems unlikely. I mean, it took Hitler well over a DECADE to kill 6 million Jews. But Stalin starved and shot 6 million Ukrainians in 2 years? That took some work. Some say the number was as high as 12 million Ukrainians dead. So Stalin out-Nazi'd the Nazis, the year BEFORE Hitler gained power in Germany. But you probably never heard of it. The idea was to put down the ideas circulating about Ukrainian Independence. Stalin basically tried to starve to death an entire country. First he took all the food and limited what they could grow. Ukrainians were shot if they hid food to feed their families. They were shot if they tried to leave their village and go somewhere else. You see, it was against the law not to starve to death.

**(SCREEN: Image "NEWSPAPER - FAMINE")**

MATTHEW

At the height of the famine, people in Ukraine are dying at the rate of about thirty thousand a day. I'll say it again... THIRTY THOUSAND A DAY. Nearly a third of them were children under 10. Now, think back... The U.S. lost 58 THOUSAND American soldiers in Vietnam over TWENTY years. Remember what a BAD war people thought that was? Stalin topped that number in TWO DAYS in 1933 in the Ukraine. 60 thousand people... starving to death... over two days.

**(SCREEN: Image “UKRAINE”)**

MATTHEW

So... Why did Stalin do this? Now, this massacre was not the result of a war. Stalin simply decided to kill millions of citizens of the country he was the absolute dictator of. He wanted to make sure everyone knew that HE was the boss. And he figured it was worth six to twelve million lives to teach that lesson. Did it make sense to kill off millions of productive Soviet citizens farming the breadbasket of Eastern Europe? Not really... In fact it was illogical and devastatingly destructive thing to do in the middle of a global economic depression. It was just a “swirling fractal maze of unintended consequences.”

**(SCREEN: Image “42 MILLION”)**

MATTHEW

So, add in 6 million or so Ukrainians, and we get to 42 million men, women AND children killed by Stalin.

**(SCREEN: Image, “STALIN WITH PIPE”)**

MATTHEW

What does it take to get ENOUGH POWER that you can murder 42 million human beings without anyone, well, objecting? (BEAT) “Sideways.” He got there sideways.

**(SCREEN: Image, “BOY STALIN”)**

MATTHEW

The son of a shoe-maker and a devout housekeeper, Stalin’s alcoholic dad beat the ever-loving shit out of him and his mother throughout his childhood. His mother sent him to a Seminary, to keep his father from beating him to death. I’m guessing Stalin would have been just another Orthodox priest with issues. His grades were good enough in school, but history hinged on one day -- when young Stalin blew-off a final exam and got thrown out of priest-school. Stalin wasn’t his name by the way, it was *Ioseb Besarionis dze Jughashvili*. But “Stalin” is Russian for “STEEL” and sounded much better. “Yes Sir, Comrade Steel!” A nice touch of Bolshevik Branding. Stalin wasn’t even Russian, he was Georgian, just like Hitler wasn’t German, he was Austrian. Weird coincidence. Anyway, he got in deep with the Bolsheviks and started robbing banks, extorting money and organizing strikes for the cause.

**(SCREEN: Image “STALIN POLICE PHOTO”)**

MATTHEW

He got arrested many times, and was sent to a Siberian prison on several occasions. Maybe that was where he got the idea that Siberia was a good place to send folks he didn't like so much. It's funny that the authorities didn't just hang the hairy bastard. They did try to shove him in the army and send him to fight the Germans in World War I, but because he had an accident as a boy his left arm was shorter than his right. That freaky short arm changed history. So they didn't send him to the Great War to get his head blown off or his lungs turned to mush with poison gas, because he was "deformed." (BEAT) "Sideways." It took a lot of "sideways" to get young Stalin to the top.

**(SCREEN: Image "STALIN & YEZHIV")**

MATTHEW

And the help of people like this guy, the little shit on the right side of the picture next to Stalin. That is Nikolai Yezhiv, otherwise known as the Bloody Dwarf. He was 5 feet tall and carried out Stalin's purge of millions of Russians with, I don't know, let's say an extreme "gusto." A real sick little pervert that loved his job. Until Stalin got tired of him, and had him stripped naked and beaten and left wheezing and crying as he was dragged into a cell to have the back of his head blown off. It was an execution cell that Yezhiv designed himself, with a sloping cement floor. It was easier that way you see, to hose down the blood. And brains.

**(SCREEN: Image "STALIN W/O YEZHIV")**

MATTHEW

Later this was his place in history -- ERASED.

**(The PHOTO DISSOLVES to reveal a blank space where Yezhiv was)**

MATTHEW

Okay. Well, that might be a little more information than you wanted to know, but it happened, and not knowing about it doesn't erase that fact.

Matthew seems uncertain, distracted.

MATTHEW

Like I said, nothing progresses in a straight and orderly fashion. Stalin and Hitler are only 2 examples in a long line of... (regards the audience, unhappy) OKAY... Well... I see in your eyes that I am losing this battle. I see your glazed inattention. You...

(MORE)

MATTHEW (cont'd)

and you... just looked at your phone. A lady in the back just sent her ninth text message. Just curious... when did you “check out?” Somewhere around “thousands of kids starving to death in the Ukraine?” Okay -- I get it. It’s not YOUR problem. It’s not INTERESTING. Okay.

**(SCREEN SLIDE: “LAID”)**

MATTHEW

So... Maybe a personal story is in order. Let’s get back to a topic of broader and more attractive general interest: GETTING LAID. There you go! Heads up, eyes forward. Interesting, right? Desire, shame, bodily fluids... That’s what good theater is about after all. OKAY. So, things happen. Usually “Sideways.”

**(SCREEN: It reads “SIDEWAYS”)**

MATTHEW

I first learned the truth of “Sideways” when I was fifteen years old and had my first carnal experience. There was a woman. Her name was Mrs. Reginald Dewberry. Of course that was not REALLY her name, I have more class than to reveal her identity. But, let’s call her Mrs. Dewberry. It has a round, succulent sound to it. I lived across the street from her, she was married at the time, and I walked her dog. I had been walking her dog since I was twelve or so, a little wiener dog named Alfred. She had three kids, one in college and the other two grown up. So she was of, well, “a certain age.” She had an insurance salesman husband that everyone liked, and who liked everyone back, and he especially liked a girl ...who worked at Walgreens. This was known by almost everyone in town, except Mrs. Dewberry.

**(SCREEN: Image of a HOT BLONDE)**

MATTHEW

Ah, “The Blonde at Walgreens”. Let’s just have a moment of silence for The Blonde at Walgreens. I could describe here, but you know what I mean. The problem with The Blonde at Walgreens, no matter how mythical she was for the boys of my type in the town, she was always unattainable. And we knew this because we were invisible to her. Every male under the age of 25 was invisible. It’s as if we were made of a pigment that the retinas in her eyes could not detect. When she happened, by accident maybe, to look in the direction where you stood, her gaze went right through you.

**(SCREEN: Image of numerous “MEN”)**



MATTHEW

Now, I believe there are two types of men in the world, those that long for the unattainable, who spend their whole lives wanting that which they will never have, and those that consider the unattainable, well, unattainable. I am in the latter group. I prefer the high percentage shot. I prefer achievement to frustration. And that brings me to Mrs. Reginald Dewberry.

**(SCREEN: Image of a “WOMAN’S GLOVED HAND”)**

MATTHEW

I had always gotten a funny tingle in my tangle around Mrs. Reginald Dewberry since puberty. I didn’t understand much, but I DID understand what was pleasurable, and when she thanked me for walking Alfred and tousled my hair and smiled at me - that was pleasure. So I set it upon myself to slip sideways into Mrs. Reginald Dewberry’s embrace. And somehow I knew that Mr. Dewberry and his Walgreens-blondie was my ticket to paradise. It was in this pursuit that I found myself one sunny Saturday afternoon at the lunch counter at Walgreens. Would it be believable if I told you I was having a root beer float? Well, I was, and all the time watching Mr. Dewberry, and the Walgreens Blondie chit-chat at the cosmetic counter. He kept touching her forearm as he talked and she kept brushing her hair back. I was looking sideways but I wasn’t aware of what I was doing, exactly. I just knew I WANTED TO WIN, and knew somehow that sideways was the fastest path to that goal. It wasn’t long until Mr. Dewberry decided to give Miss Walgreens Blondie a quickie quote on a term life insurance policy in his office up the stairs. Since it was Saturday, there was no one in the office to distract him. I figured it was a good time to see if Mrs. Reginald Dewberry needed her wiener dog walked.

**(SCREEN: “BLACK”)**

**LIGHTS - BLUE LOWER POOL, STAGE RIGHT**

MATTHEW

As I clasped the leash on Alfred’s collar, I casually said to her...

LUCY becomes Mrs. Reginald Dewberry donning a purse and white gloves crosses STAGE RIGHT.

MATTHEW

(at the imaginary dog)

Boy, he sure is ready to go, isn’t he Mrs. Dewberry? Yes, ol’ Alfred loves his exercise...

(MORE)

MATTHEW (cont'd)

Even on Saturday. Do dogs know it is a weekend Mrs. Dewberry? Like people do, not working on weekends and all?

LUCY/MRS. DEWBERRY

(digging through the purse)

Oh, I don't know Matthew, what does it matter?

MATTHEW

I know that people don't like working on weekends, my Dad sure doesn't. He'd never be caught at the office on a Saturday, EVER.

LUCY/MRS. DEWBERRY

(finding lipstick and putting in on)

I don't know Matthew, I don't worry much what the dog thinks. Are you going to walk Alfred or not? I am supposed to go to a bridge Party. I don't know what to tell you about men and their weekends.

MATTHEW

I don't mean to bother you Mrs. Dewberry, I just noticed poor Mr. Dewberry helping someone get some insurance, up at his office, seemed to be pretty happy about helping someone be fully... and completely... uh, insured.

LUCY/MRS. DEWBERRY

Mr. Dewberry, you saw him at work?

MATTHEW

Yes, Ma'am.

LUCY/MRS. DEWBERRY

Who was he with?

MATTHEW

Oh, I couldn't tell... not really. She seemed pretty anxious to be well insured, they were practically taking the stairs two at a time.

LUCY/MRS. DEWBERRY freezes, wheels turning.

MATTHEW

Come on Alfred, let's get to that walk.

LUCY/MRS. DEWBERRY EXITS

**(SCREEN SLIDE: “BLUE HOUSE PORCH”)**

LIGHTS - SLOW FADE TO LOW/BLUE

MATTHEW

I think I waited on her porch, Alfred and I, maybe three hours or more, after a quick walk around the block, that is. I guess I could have tied up Alfred to the front porch or taken him home with me and left a note, but that wasn't going to happen. I knew I had started a chain reaction of some magnitude, and I was going to be damned before I missed the heat of the blast and the lingering glow of my mushroom cloud floating over the neighborhood. So I waited until the sun went down and I waited some more, and decided to lay down on the porch. I remember being cold and it being dark, and...

As he is talking, MATTHEW goes to the box and pulls out several VOTIVE CANDLES and lights them with a LIGHTER. He places several around the stage at strategic intervals as he talks, and EVENTUALLY RECLINES ON THE STAGE, LIT IN CANDLELIGHT.

LUCY/MRS. DEWBERRY is revealed (wrapped in a FLORAL PRINT), in the dark, she is SMOKING as in the story, the red tip of her cigarette GLOWING.

MATTHEW

...I remember just kind of opening an eye, and seeing this red glowing thing in the distance, this RED GLOWING LIGHT that became brighter and then would fade out and then brighten again, like a living thing. It wasn't until my eyes got focused that I could see that it was Mrs. Reginald Dewberry, sitting there, perfectly STILL -- scary still -- still except for her cigarette glowing in the night, and the red knob at the end of it glowing like a furnace with each long, exquisite draw.

She takes another draw, turns to watch Matthew.

MATTHEW

She was dressed up, a floral print dress, white gloves and a stupid little hat, that somehow she made look glamorous. She sat there for long time, watching me, smoking. I was too terrified to move.

(MORE)

MATTHEW (cont'd)

I didn't know if she was going to hack me into bits with a garden hoe, or do something much, much worse. I had violated the grown-up world of grown-up things, I've messed with their mojo, and I was filled with nothing but fear and regret and shame. ....Finally she said,

LUCY/MRS. DEWBERRY

(in a sustained, low, terrifying manner)

Matthew, are you going to sleep on my porch all night?

MATTHEW

"No, Mrs. Dewberry," I said.

LUCY/MRS. DEWBERRY

Well, it looks like you are Matthew, it looks like you are going to stay there all night. Do you think that is the right thing to do?

MATTHEW

Oh, well... No, I'll go home now.

LUCY EXITS (UPSTAGE AND RETURNS TO STAGE  
VIA THE FRONT ONCE LIGHTS RETURN).

MATTHEW is now finishing the story alone.

**(SCREEN: Background "GARDEN SHED")**

MATTHEW

What happened between that moment and the instant I thrust myself inside Mrs. Dewberry in the darkness of the garden shed has been somehow erased from my memory. But that moment was the greatest 6 seconds of my young life. I remember the smell of the gasoline from the lawn mower. Her hat askew and those gloves, how she took them off and just TOSSED them aside. Wow. And that slight, but sincere GASP -- oh my GOD I made her GASP -- I replayed that file in my head over and over -- I'm replaying it NOW.

LIGHTS UP - FAST

MATTHEW

So, that's my losing-my-virginity sideways story. My point is -- "SIDEWAYS". Had I had made a direct assault on Mrs. Reginald Dewberry's honor, using all my pimply-faced, 15 year old charm, I would have undoubtedly been rebuffed, and shame and dishonor piled upon me. Not to mention I would never had heard that GASP.

**(SCREEN: It reads "SIDEWAYS")**

MATTHEW

That would have been a great way to end this presentation, underage sex, adultery and revenge, but of course, the story is all a LIE. Did anyone buy it? Really? You guys did? A root beer float at the lunch counter at Walgreens? Do I LOOK like I was born in 1935? The small-town Insurance Agent with an upstairs shop? Mrs. Reginald Dewberry as the wronged woman, jealous and sexually frustrated? Her in a floral print dress, with a hat, white gloves and teary mascara? Vengefully BANGING a pimply-faced dog-walker in a shed with the garden tools? Oh dear. If you must know - I lost my virginity in a quite ordinary way, with a girlfriend in her room when her parents were at a dinner party. There was no vengeance or betrayal, just hormones and awkwardness and 6 seconds of complete joy. THAT part of the story was true. Com'on folks! The Mrs. Reginald Dewberry story is obviously cobbled together from a half dozen movies and TV shows, with me playing the Tatum O'Neil character from PAPER MOON, when I wasn't playing the young Dustin Hoffman from THE GRADUATE. And why was it set in the Fifties? No reason, but you bought it anyway. And all of you were ACTUALLY PAYING ATTENTION to this rehashed bag of crap, hoping for details maybe of Mrs. Reginald Dewberry's plump bosom being ejected from the top of her floral print dress. Hmmm. Well, all of that was vastly more fascinating to you than the FACTUAL mass murder of tens of millions of innocent people I guess. WASN'T IT? Come on, be honest - More interesting I mean - to hear a story you have heard before, told in almost the same way, just with a different voice. (BEAT) That, my loving audience, is the power of "Sideways". The big events of the world just DON'T hold our attention, the base fantasies and fictions do. And they slip in... "sideways" when we are not looking.

MATTHEW goes to the BOX to retrieve something.

**(SCREEN: "PRESENTER #4")**

MUSIC UP

MATTHEW

(a wild look grows in his eyes)

Wait... I'm not finished. I have more to say. (TO THE BOOTH - YELLING) STOP!  
HEY! I SAID I AM NOT FINISHED! Not yet anyway...

The MUSIC keeps playing, LOUDER. The STAGE  
MANAGER COMES OUT, signals to MATTHEW to  
shut up. He gives a "neck-slash" sign.

MATTHEW

(apoplectic)

STOP! I AM NOT FINISHED!

VOICE

Thank you, Presenter Number Four...

MATTHEW

STOP!!!

The MUSIC and VOICE stop. The Stage Manager stands  
there, arms crossed.

**(SCREEN: "BLACK")**

MATTHEW

(catches his breath, then softly)

For my final trick of the evening, I will MAKE SURE I win this competition. If there is  
one thing I know judges respect - it is TOTAL COMMITMENT to the cause. My fellow  
competitors on the stage, despite their charms, have not really RISKED anything tonight.  
I will. And you can tell your grandchildren you were here to see it.

LIGHT CUE - RED LIGHT EFFECT - PULSING

He takes out a pair of GOGGLES from the box and puts  
them on. He PULLS A GUN OUT OF the box - makes  
sure everyone sees it -- and puts it in his pocket

MATTHEW

Now, even though I will be cutting my oxygen flow in a moment, it does not mean I will  
not be aware enough to SHOOT SOMEONE IN THE FACE if they try to stop me before  
I fully depart.

He takes PLASTIC WRAP on a spool, the kind movers use to wrap objects in packing for shipping. HE STARTS WRAPPING THE TOP OF HIS HEAD IN IT.

MATTHEW

The goggles will assure that I can see what is going on, and hopefully, my final triumphant score. It will undoubtedly be the highest in competition history. How could another be higher? Who will have given more for the Art of Persuasion? Who?

With this, he WRAPS HIS NOSE AND MOUTH TIGHTLY IN PLASTIC. The lines that follow are almost intelligible...

MATTHEW

Are you paying attention now? Are you paying attention now? (TO THE OTHER CONTESTANTS) Who's kicking your ass now? Total commitment, my friends, TOTAL COMMITMENT. That's how it is done.

Matthew stands there, now dazed, his face contorted under the plastic - staring at the audience. For what seems like a long moment. His eyes are piercing.

**(SCREEN SLIDE: "WINNING 1")**

MATTHEW

(hands raised, his voice trembling)

I'M WINNING!

**(SCREEN: reads "WINNING 2")**

-THEN FEAR GRIPS HIM - HE REACHES FOR HIS THROAT.

-THEN HE SINKS TO HIS KNEES.

**(SCREEN: reads "WINNING 3")**

MATTHEW

I'M WINNING!

-HE LAYS DOWN ON THE STAGE - THEN STILL.

Everything is SILENT. Is he DEAD? A LONG BEAT.

The other presenters look at the audience. Joan SHAKES HER HEAD.

JOAN

(dismissive)

REALLY? Come-on...

Then... MUSIC!

LIGHT - MAIN WASH

**(SCREEN: “PRESENTER #4: 96 POINTS”)**

MATTHEW - not dead after all - lifts his head, waiting for his score.

VOICE

Thank you, Presenter Number Four, Matthew Stendhall. Judges are scoring. (MUSIC)  
Score for Presenter Number Four, 96 points.

LUCY jumps up, SQUEALS with delight - SHE HAS WON. MATTHEW realizes his stunt has failed. He sits up, UNWRAPS the plastic, which was never covering his nostrils anyway. Lucy hugs Mark, hugs Joan. They all ignore Matthew.

CONFETTI FALLS.

STAGE MANAGER brings a TROPHY to LUCY

**(SCREEN: “PRESENTER #1: 97 POINTS,  
PRESENTER #2: 92 POINTS, PRESENTER #3: 93  
POINTS, PRESENTER #4: 96 POINTS”)**

VOICE

Congratulations to a NEW NATIONAL GLOBAL INFLUENCERS CHAMPION! -  
Presenter Number One, Lucy Duras! Thank you, Ladies and Gentlemen, for attending the  
23rd Annual National Global Influencers Finals. Join us for next year’s 24th Annual  
National Global Influencers Finals in lovely Akron, Ohio! See you there!



CAST BOWS as the STAGE MANAGER helps MATTHEW up.

MATTHEW joins CAST, they HOLD HANDS & BOW.

CAST EXITS.

END