



THE SUBSCRIPTION

a play by
Josh Worth

The Subscription

by Josh Worth

A play in 2 acts

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THE CHARACTERS:

LOIS

A typical subscriber

LEWIS

Lois' husband.

MR. BURKE

A representative of the Dotzweiller Corporation

MRS. SHARP

A department head at the Dotzweiller Corporation

MR. SHINEBECKER

An employee of the Dotzweiller Corporation

ACT I: SCENE I

A satellite office of the Dotzweiller Corporation. Typewriters. Adding machines. Telephones. Various pieces of scientific equipment. MR. SHINEBECKER and MR. BURKE sit at their desks, typing. On another part of the stage, MRS. SHARP sits behind a larger desk, also typing.

MR. SHINEBECKER

Whattaya say, Burke? Time for egg-salad?

MR. BURKE

Not today, Shinebecker. Got a lunch meeting with Mrs. Sharp.

MR. SHINEBECKER

Lunch meeting, eh? Where's she taking you?

MR. BURKE

Her office.

MR. SHINEBECKER

Doesn't sound like much of a lunch meeting.

MR. BURKE

Probably right.

MR. SHINEBECKER

Sounds like more meeting than lunch.

MR. BURKE

Probably right.

MR. SHINEBECKER

Big meeting with Sharp...

MR. BURKE

I hope not.

MR. SHINEBECKER

You hope not? Something worrying you?

MR. BURKE

The numbers.

MR. SHINEBECKER

We're all worried about the numbers. We're all worried about the numbers but we're not all having meetings about it, are we, Burke? Eh? What's this meeting about? She read your addenda?

MR. BURKE

Don't know.

MR. SHINEBECKER

You after those coupons or something? How 'bout that watch? You after the watch?

MR. BURKE

That'd be nice, wouldn't it?

MR. SHINEBECKER

Better believe it...I'll bet, and this is just between you and me, that whoever gets the watch and the coupons gets a transfer to editorial.

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MR. BURKE

Editorial, eh?

MR. SHINEBECKER

You ever been over to editorial?

MR. BURKE

Nope.

MR. SHINEBECKER

Me neither. But I hear it's the place. Booze and stuff. You ever hear that?

MR. BURKE

I hear it's like paradise... Lotta work though. Long hours.

MR. SHINEBECKER

Sure but that's where it all goes down. The big ideas. The decisions. The stuff that gets into one hundred seventeen point five million homes.

MR. BURKE

One hundred seventeen point four seven you mean.

MR. SHINEBECKER

Goddamn numbers... You think you might take a transfer?

MR. BURKE

Haven't thought about it.

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MR. SHINEBECKER

Haven't thought about it... Get a loada you. We've all thought about it. Even Sharp's thought about it. I can guarantee you.

MR. BURKE

It'd be nice, I guess.

MR. SHINEBECKER

Damn right it'd be nice. Working on the real stuff. Pay hike. Booze. Women. You name it.

MRS. SHARP

Mr. Burke.

MR. BURKE

That's me.

MR. SHINEBECKER

That's you, all right. Want me to bring you back something? Egg salad?

MR. BURKE

Nah.

MR. SHINEBECKER

Suit yourself.

Shinebecker exits. Burke crosses to Mrs. Sharp's desk.

MRS. SHARP

Have a seat Mr. Burke.

MR. BURKE

Thank you.

MRS. SHARP

How are you?

MR. BURKE

Fine.

MRS. SHARP

You look good. Healthy.

MR. BURKE

Thank you.

She puts a memo on her desk.

MRS. SHARP

Just received a memo. A memo from Fred at the Cola Vista office. There's a new initiative that just came down from exec.

MR. BURKE

Sounds interesting. I'd like to hear more.

MRS. SHARP

There is more. But before I go on I just need put something out there... on the table.

MR. BURKE

By all means.

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MRS. SHARP

I don't want you sharing the details of this initiative with Mr. Shiny-face.

MR. BURKE

Shinebecker.

MRS. SHARP

Yes. If he hears that I've chosen you to head up this initiative instead of him, he'll be in here whining again.

MR. BURKE

Of course.

MRS. SHARP

I can't stand his whining.

MR. BURKE

No?

MRS. SHARP

No. Now - what was I saying?

MR. BURKE

The new initiative...

MRS. SHARP

Yes... You won't tell Shinebecker.

MR. BURKE

Definitely not.

MRS. SHARP

Thank you. Now...

(flipping through papers)

Numbers are down. You know that... There's a new study from marketing. We're getting negative feedback...

MR. BURKE

Um... I'm sorry. I have a question.

MR. BURKE

Go ahead, Burke.

MR. BURKE

Will you be eating?

MRS. SHARP

Yes. This evening.

MR. BURKE

Oh. No lunch?

MRS. SHARP

I don't eat lunch.

MR. BURKE

Oh. I just thought it was a lunch meeting.

MRS SHARP

It's a meeting which takes place during the luncheon hour... As I was saying...

MR. BURKE

A study from Marketing.

MR. BURKE

Right. It shows we're getting negative feedback due to something they're calling "the blank face effect."

MR. BURKE

Um, do you mind if I eat my pretzels?

MRS. SHARP

Are they Conquistador pretzels?

MR. BURKE

Of course.

MRS. SHARP

They've done some good things over at Conquistador. I worked on the aquisition, you know.

MR. BURKE

Really?

MRS. SHARP

Good people over there. A great addition to our network. So, this study from Marketing. It's quite fascinating - this "blank face effect." It seems that our subscribers are unable to put a face to us. It's sad, really. We conducted a survey of 2000 people.

MR. BURKE

Pretzel?

MRS SHARP

No. In the survey, the participants were instructed to imagine the Dotzweiller corporation coming to their

house, and relaxing at their kitchen table. They were then given a set of watercolors and asked to paint a portrait of the Dotzweiller Corporation. And do you know what the participants painted?

MR. BURKE

I have no idea.

MRS. SHARP

Nothing. Dribbles. Abstractions. Non-representational splotches. No eyes, no mouth. No hairstyle. Nothing. It was shocking. I'd like a pretzel.

He offers her the pretzels. She takes one but doesn't eat it.

MRS. SHARP

Of course upper management threw a fit.

BURKE

Naturally.

MRS. SHARP

Because, 'What have we been doing all this time?' they wanted to know. If our subscribers can't even put a face to us, how can they feel comfortable letting us into their homes?

MR. BURKE

And yet they do.

MRS. SHARP

But the numbers.

MR. BURKE

The numbers are down.

MRS SHARP

Tell me, Burke, what is it we offer our customers?

MR. BURKE

We provide them with valuable services, with life-sustaining products, and essential information for living.

MRS SHARP

That's right. And they know that. But what do our subscribers give us?

BURKE

Their money. Loyalty to our brand network...

MRS SHARP

They offer us everything, Mr. Burke. Everything. Without them, we would be unemployed, penniless ghosts, wandering through the world with no purpose to guide us. But do they know that?

MR. BURKE

I suppose not.

MRS SHARP

They need to know it, Mr. Burke. They need to know that every time they shop, or read, or think, outside our brand network, someone suffers. Someone like you or me. It hurts us. Not just financially, but personally, and emotionally.

MR. BURKE

It does hurt.

MRS SHARP

You know, of course, that our department is up for review next month. The backers want to see numbers. If they don't see the numbers, they don't renew our budget. They don't renew our budget, that means cuts.

MR. BURKE

What kind of cuts?

MRS SHARP

Please don't panic.

MR. BURKE

There's no reason to panic.

MRS SHARP

I didn't say that. I say "don't panic" because panic creates chaos. And right now, we need order, not chaos. We need a plan. Do you need a drink?

She finds a bottle of juice in a drawer.

MR. BURKE

I am a bit thirsty.

MRS. SHARP

Barnaby Juice? It's good for eyelids, you know.

MR. BURKE

That would be nice, thank you...

She pours him some juice.

MRS. SHARP

Worked with Barnaby also...

MR. BURKE

So, is there a plan?

MR SHARP

I'm on the planning committee, am I not? If there was no plan, why would I be talking to you?

MR. BURKE

So there is a plan.

MRS SHARP

There's always a plan. As long as I am employed here, there will be a plan. I'm a planner. The plan involves you. We need you to put a face to the Dotzweiller corporation... Your face.

MR. BURKE

My face?

MRS. SHARP

You have a good face, Mr. Burke. A nice face. A face that makes people comfortable. People trust your face. I trust your face. I like your face. Sometimes I want to kiss it... But I don't. That's not part of the plan.

MR. BURKE

I see.

MRS. SHARP

(She hands him a huge document)

This is a plan to combat “the blank face effect.” You are the first field worker we’ve assigned to this initiative. You will need to prove the effectiveness of the plan so we can begin instituting these policies across all of our markets.

MR. BURKE

I feel very... warm inside.

MRS SHARP

You should. By the way, this assignment qualifies you for our company-wide incentive program. If you’re successful, you’ll get a new watch and a book of coupons.

MR. BURKE

That’s nice.

MRS. SHARP

We take care of our people... Next, let me show you who we’ve matched you up with. Mr. and Mrs. Lewis Keever. A typical couple from our subscriber base.

Mrs. Sharp activates a television. She flips through several channels. Each channel shows a different couple interacting. She finally stops on LOIS and LEWIS, a young couple cleaning their kitchen.

A light goes up on another part of the stage. It’s the same kitchen as the one on TV. The following scene takes place on stage and on the TV screen.

LEWIS

I don't feel like placing another order.

LOIS

But I need to get rid of this mung.

LEWIS

What does it matter?

LOIS

It's a breeding ground for microbes.

LEWIS

Not all microbes are bad.

LOIS

You're an expert on microbes now?

LEWIS

I didn't say that. It's just a feeling I have.

LOIS

You shouldn't have feelings about things you don't know.

LEWIS

I don't know you anymore.

LOIS

But you have feelings for me.

LEWIS

But I shouldn't.

LOIS

Probably not... The improved formula is supposed to eliminate 74 classes of microbes. They can cause disease and madness.

LEWIS

How do you know?

LOIS

It says so on the label.

LEWIS

You don't know who wrote that.

LOIS

Experts in the industry.

LEWIS

Have you ever seen these experts? If I gave you a set of watercolors, could you paint a picture of them?

LOIS

Stop talking like that.

LEWIS

Why?

LOIS

It makes me uncomfortable.

LEWIS

Fine... I'll order a fresh bottle.

LOIS

Thank you.

Mrs. Sharp turns off the television. Lights down on the kitchen.

MRS. SHARP

They'll get their new issue tomorrow morning. I want you to be there. There's a script for you to follow. Some questions to ask. Some behavioral guidelines. You'll need to memorize them.

MR. BURKE

By tomorrow?

MRS. SHARP

Is that a problem?

MR. BURKE

A problem? Not at all. I have been an employee of the Dotzweiller corporation since before the takeover. I have conducted 714 surveys, 347 case studies, and 227 focus groups. You should have the utmost confidence in me.

MRS. SHARP

My God, you really do have a magnificent face... More juice?

MR. BURKE

Thank you.

She pours him some juice. Lights down.

ACT I: SCENE 2

The next morning. It's breakfast time in Lois and Lewis' kitchen. It's the perfect kitchen in an imperfect world. Music. Lights. A table, four chairs. A refrigerator covered with magnets, coupons and photographs. In the corner, is a workbench covered by the parts of a disassembled adding machine. Lois is polishing a set of glasses. Lewis sets a box of cereal on the table. He opens it, dumps some into a bowl, and pours some milk over it. He then reaches into the cereal box and digs around until he pulls out a pamphlet. He settles himself in the chair, puts on a pair of glasses, and begins reading the pamphlet as he eats his cereal. Lois glances jealously at him as he does this. The sound of Lewis eating is quite loud.

LOIS

Such a crunching noise you're making.

LEWIS

It's a crunchy cereal this week.

LOIS

I don't understand how you can make such a crunch when you have only twenty teeth.

LEWIS

How many teeth do I have?

LOIS

Twenty.

LEWIS

I have twenty two.

LOIS

The two on the bottom don't count.

LEWIS

Why not?

LOIS

You can't chew with them.

LEWIS

I can too. Watch.

He crunches some cereal with his back teeth.

LOIS

Stupid.

LEWIS

Why?

LOIS

You shouldn't do that.

LEWIS

Why not? They're perfectly good.

LOIS

They'll rot out like your other ones and you'll only have eighteen.

LEWIS

Are you not counting the ones made of glass?

LOIS

Of course not.

LEWIS

Why not?

LOIS

Do you count diamonds when they're made of glass?

LEWIS

I know nothing about diamonds.

LOIS

You should learn.

LEWIS

What's there to know? Either something's a diamond or it's not.

LOIS

There's much to know. A whole world of diamonds. The four Cs for instance.

LEWIS

The what?

LOIS

The four Cs. Carat, Cut, Clarity and... and... What's the other one?

LEWIS

I told you. I know nothing about diamonds.

LOIS

Well are my eyes diamonds?

LEWIS

No.

LOIS

Why are you like that?

LEWIS

Like what?

LOIS

You're supposed to say yes. You're supposed to tell me I have diamonds in my eyes.

LEWIS

I said: I know nothing about diamonds.

LOIS

Do you know about my eyes?

LEWIS

I suppose I should, but no. I don't.

LOIS

You never look into my eyes.

LEWIS

I do all the time.

LOIS

When?

LEWIS

When you're asleep.

LOIS

But my eyes are closed when I'm sleeping.

LEWIS

Only half way.

LOIS

Oh no. Still?

LEWIS

I can see the lower part of the - of the colored part.

LOIS

I was working so hard to fix that.

LEWIS

It's nothing to be ashamed of.

LOIS

I'm drinking that juice that's supposed to fix it.

LEWIS

How much have you been drinking?

LOIS

Half a glass.

LEWIS

That would explain it.

LOIS

There's not very much in the bottle. We should order more.

LEWIS

Why do you need it if it doesn't work?

LOIS

Is there a coupon for it?

LEWIS

I'm not sure.

LOIS

Well check.

He flips through the pamphlet.

LEWIS

I can't find a coupon for the juice. But there are several other offers.

LOIS

Is there a quiz?

LEWIS

Yes.

LOIS

What's it about?

LEWIS

It's about the topic of last week's pamphlet. Disguises.

LOIS

Read me part.

LEWIS

Why do you like the quizzes so much?

LOIS

Why do we read the pamphlets?

LEWIS

They're informative, I guess.

LOIS

Well how can you be sure they're informative if there's no quiz. You need the quiz to test you on what you've learned. When you pass the quiz, it means you've been informed.

LEWIS

I never thought of it that way.

LOIS

Read me the first question.

LEWIS

(adjusting his glasses)

Okay. 'Number one. When donning a mask, what is the best way to ensure that excess moisture does not collect on the interior surface?' I know.

LOIS

You haven't read the choices.

LEWIS

I don't need the choices.

LOIS

But it's a multiple choice quiz.

LEWIS

I don't understand why there are multiple choices when we all know there's only one answer.

LOIS

Some of the answers are wrong.

LEWIS

That's deceptive.

LOIS

It's what they call a "process of elimination." It's a very important process.

LEWIS

I'll read the other choices, then, if they're so goddamn important.

LOIS

Thank you.

LEWIS

'A) Only breath through the nose. B) Make a whistling noise when you exhale. C) Chew a stick of "clever

tongue” brand chewing gum - available this week at a 10% discount when you include this coupon.

LOIS

It's C. I know it's C.

LEWIS

I thought it was A.

LOIS

No. It's C. I read it in last week's pamphlet.

LEWIS

I don't remember that.

LOIS

I'm beginning to think you're not reading as closely as you should be.

LEWIS

There's something wrong with my glasses.

LOIS

You're blaming the glasses for a lot, these days. First it was your fatigue, last night it was your mumbling, and today they're responsible for your inability to retain important information.

LEWIS

I have a hard time reading. Perhaps it's the size of the type on the page. It seems to have grown smaller.

LOIS

I haven't noticed.

LEWIS

Look. Look here how small it is.

He shows her the pamphlet.

LOIS

Oh - it's about microbes this week.

LEWIS

But look at the size of the words.

LOIS

The words are too long for you? We're supposed to be able to read words that are three hundred and seventy letters by now. Next week it will be three hundred and eighty. Don't tell me you're falling behind.

LEWIS

No - I mean the size of the letters themselves. They're so very tiny.

LOIS

How else would they be able to fit such long words?

LEWIS

If it gets any smaller, I may well cancel the subscription.

Lois falls deathly silent.

LOIS

Don't say such things.

LEWIS

I mean it.

LOIS

Imagine you. Canceling the subscription.

LEWIS

And why not?

LOIS

It's the only thing you know how to read. What would you do? Go back to solving the children's pictograms at the bottom of the box? You'd have to wait until the cereal was gone before you had anything to look at during breakfast.

LEWIS

I can read other things.

LOIS

Other things? Don't you remember three Aprils ago when we learned about "spring cleaning your literacy"

LEWIS

Of course I do.

LOIS

About how you have to go in there and sweep away all those old, outdated symbols and words.

LEWIS

Yes. And I did that.

LOIS

Well now... why would you want to go and muck it up again by reading something that wasn't written in the approved "clever tongue" style.

LEWIS

It's just these damn glasses.

LOIS

Canceling the subscription... Without the subscription, we'd be uninformed, brain-dead ghosts, wandering around this kitchen without a spark of intellect to speak of.

LEWIS

I don't want to be a ghost.

LOIS

No. No you don't. Now, read to me about these microbes.

LEWIS

(reading)

"There are seventy-nine classes of microbes which we share our lives with. The microbes can be classified by their appearance, their behavior, their preferred environment, and their effect on humanity. A Class 12 microbe, for instance, is a transparent, single-celled organism four micrometers in diameter which moves in a slow circular pattern. We needn't fear the Class 12 microbe as it is quite harmless and longs only for the company of other microbes." I told you some are harmless.

LOIS

Keep reading.

LEWIS

“The Class 12 is especially fond of the Class 24. The Class 24 is an attractive, albeit overweight microbe with a pink hue and a manipulative personality. The Class 24 is attracted to the smell of dead swine and has been known to cause madness in the minds of drunks, slobs, and non-subscribers.”

LOIS

This is a particularly fascinating issue.

LEWIS

I don't find it that fascinating.

LOIS

Perhaps you're not reading closely enough.

LEWIS

It's these damn glasses.

LOIS

Take them off then.

The doorbell rings.

LOIS

My god!

LEWIS

Who could that be?

LOIS

Well answer it.

Lewis opens the door. Burke is standing there with a briefcase and a tape recorder.

BURKE

Hello. May I ask you a few questions?

LEWIS

What sort of questions?

BURKE

It's really none of your business. It's for a study.

LEWIS

A study? What sort of study?

LOIS

He said it's none of our business.

BURKE

May I begin by asking your name?

LOIS

Lois Kever.

LEWIS

I'm not telling you my name.

BURKE

In that case, I'll just be on my way.

LOIS

His name's Lewis.

BURKE

Excellent. And you weigh, how much?

LEWIS

Now... now wait just a moment. If you want us to answer your questions, you'll need to explain your intentions.

BURKE

Who told you that?

LEWIS

I don't know. My ancestors, I suppose.

LOIS

Don't be rude, Lewis.

BURKE

What I'm going to do now, is I'm going to repeat what I think I hear you saying and I want you to tell me if I'm right or wrong in my assessment. You have heard, from your ancestors, that if you are going to provide information to a complete stranger, then you require that the stranger provide you with some information in exchange.

LEWIS

That's correct.

BURKE

What if I told you that by cooperating with my study, you'll be entered in a sweepstakes?

LEWIS

Then that's a different story.

LOIS

I should say so!

BURKE

Your weight?

LEWIS

145 pounds.

LOIS

I'm 120.

BURKE

And Lewis? Where do you work?

LEWIS

(pointing to the workbench)

Right over there.

LOIS

He fixes things.

MR. BURKE

Are you subscribers to the Clever Tongue periodical club?

LEWIS

Yes. Although we've been thinking of canceling.

Burke becomes solemn and dejected.

LOIS

Lewis!

LEWIS

There's been talk of it around the house.

LOIS

Not from me.

BURKE

That distresses me.

LOIS

Me too.

BURKE

Because if that's the kind of people you are, I'm afraid I would be unable to enter your name in the sweepstakes.

LOIS

But that's not the kind of people we are. You'll have to excuse my husband... His glasses have been giving him trouble.

BURKE

Fine.

LOIS

Would you like to sit down?

BURKE

Thank you.

He sits at the kitchen table. Lois joins him.

BURKE

I see you received your new issue.

LOIS

Yes. It's very informative. Are you from the Clever Tongue group?

BURKE

My name is Cedric Burke. I'm a representative of the Dotzweiller Corporation. We publish and distribute the Clever Tongue family of products as well as those of 379 other brands.

LOIS

Your wife must be very proud of you.

BURKE

I'm not married. My work is my first love.

LOIS

You seem very dedicated.

BURKE

All employees of the Dotzweiller corporation are very dedicated...

LOIS

I've always felt that.

BURKE

You have? That's very intereting.

LEWIS

It is?

BURKE

What gives you the impression that our employees are dedicated?

LOIS

Well... the number of words that are put into each issue. The tireless research. And of course the superior quality of the products.

BURKE

I hope you won't be offended, but as I was looking around, I noticed a sort of "mung" accumulating in the corners of your kitchen.

LEWIS

Hey now.

LOIS

Oh god.

BURKE

Not to worry. It just so happens, Lois - do you mind if I call you Lois?

LOIS

Not at all.

BURKE

It just so happens, Lois, that I have brought with me, a sample bottle of Barmino Deluxo 720.

LOIS

720?

BURKE

It eliminates 79 classes of microbes. I offer it to you, free of charge, as a thank you from the dedicated employees of the Dotzweiller Corporation.

LEWIS

Oh, that's okay. We can buy our own.

LOIS

Lewis! Didn't you hear what he said? It's a token of appreciation.

LEWIS

He insulted our kitchen.

LOIS

How could he help but notice the mung?

BURKE

I was only pointing out the obvious.

LOIS

You see? The least we can do is accept this sample bottle of Barmino Deluxo 720...I mean really. You're so fuddy this morning.

LEWIS

I'm not fuddy.

LOIS

You are. You're a fuddy duddy.

LEWIS

Don't even start with me.

BURKE

I'm sorry, Lewis. It seems we started on the wrong note. I'm going to make a few observation, and I want you to tell me if I'm correct. You feel threatened by my token of appreciation. You feel as though I've usurped your role as provider.

LEWIS

You don't threaten me.

LOIS

You're not threatening at all.

BURKE

Let me phrase it differently then. You were planning on buying this product on your own. You had already accounted for the cost of it in your mind and you were looking forward to receiving your wife's gratitude when the product arrived.

LEWIS

But instead you-

BURKE

Instead, I gave her the product and was the recipient of her gratitude.

LEWIS

And you had no-

BURKE

I had no right. But let's explore that idea for a moment. As a representative of the Dotzweiller corporation, parent company of Barmino Household Cleansers Incorporated, I am, in fact the real provider of this product. I eliminate dirt and odors. I protect your home from disease and madness. I assassinate 79 classes of microbes.

LOIS

He's right.

BURKE

(He picks up the pamphlet)

I also provide you with essential information for living.

(He picks up the cereal box)

I provide your body with the vitamins and minerals it needs to start the day off right.

(He stands and picks up some paper towel)

I clean your spills.

(He smells Lois' clothes)

I bequeath a floral scent upon your garments.

(He touches her hair)

I make the strands of your hair shine like rays from the sun.

(He caresses her face)

I put the depth in your eyes and rub rose petals on your lips... And you ask me, what right do I have - to offer you a simple bottle of kitchen cleanser? I should say, with all due respect sir, what right do I need, other than the many I have already been given?

LEWIS

I didn't mean - I was saying...

BURKE

There's no need to explain, Lewis. I understand completely.

LEWIS

I'm not so -

BURKE

At the Dotzweiller Corporation, we make a point of understanding all the concerns of our subscribers.

LOIS

I've always felt that.

BURKE

You have? What gives you that impression?

LOIS

Oh - I don't know. I've just always felt it. The issues always, they always address a topic that's um...

BURKE

Relevant?

LOIS

Yes. Relevant.

BURKE

That's good to know. Lois. Now, let me ask you this question. Do you ever find yourself looking for the right word, or the right phrase?

LOIS

Yes!

BURKE

Do you wish you could come up with a sentence which could strike deep to the heart of the matter with a militaristic efficiency of words?

LOIS

Yes!

BURKE

Well, the Clever Tongue publishing company in partnership with Edgewater Produce may have just the answer.

(He removes a bunch of grapes from his suitcase.)

They call them "Grape Quotations." Each of these tasty grapes has been imbued with an ingredient to help you recall a quotation which has appeared, at one time or another, in the pages of a Clever Tongue periodical... Go ahead. Try one.

Lois picks off a grape and eats it.

LOIS

"Eloquence is evidence of true inspiration." Oh my! Did I just say that?

BURKE

Wonderful, aren't they? I'd like to offer you this first bunch free of charge. You'll receive a new bunch every week and the cost will be added to your bill. If, at any time, you're not completely satisfied, you can cancel your order for a full refund.

LOIS

Wonderful. I don't know what to say.

BURKE

Try another one!

Lois eats another grape.

LOIS

“Generosity is a gift in itself..” I love these grapes!

BURKE

“We put the right words right in your mouth.”

LOIS

Try one Lewis!

LEWIS

No thank you.

LOIS

Oh, Lewis...

(She eats another grape).

“Those who fear new things are condemned to live in the past.” See there?

LEWIS

Who can keep up with all of it? That’s what I’d like to know.

LOIS

Lewis, honey? Can you get rid of the mung while I speak with Mr...

BURKE

Mr. Burke.

She passes him the bottle of cleanser.

LEWIS

Stuff's not poisonous is it, Burke? Any fumes?

BURKE

It's perfectly safe. As long as you don't drink it!

*Burke and Lois laugh. Lewis pretends to laugh.
Lewis eyes his wife then begins to clean.*

LOIS

So, how can we help you with your study?

BURKE

Well, in the study, you'll be providing valuable data to the Dotzweiller Corporation to help us better serve our customers.

LOIS

And we'll qualify for the sweepstakes.

BURKE

Of course... in order to gather the proper data, I'll need to remain with you and your husband for several days.

LOIS

Really?

BURKE

Is that a problem?

LOIS

No. Not at all.

LEWIS

It might be a problem.

LOIS

Why? Why would it be a problem?

LEWIS

I don't know. We might have things to do.

LOIS

Like what? What do we have to do that's more important than helping Mr. Burke with his study. This could help the lives of hundreds of people.

BURKE

Millions, actually.

LOIS

Millions! Don't you want to do something important for a change?

LEWIS

I don't really think-

LOIS

Lewis! We haven't had a house guest in ages. We have no friends. We have no company.

LEWIS

We have each other.

LOIS

I'll change the sheets in the guest bedroom. That will be fine, won't it, Lewis? It was originally supposed to be a child's bedroom, you know. But we're still waiting. Aren't we honey?

LEWIS

Waiting for what?

LOIS

For the right time.

BURKE

That sounds fine.

LOIS

(quietly)

It's right next to the master bedroom. Barely two steps away. That won't be a problem will it?

BURKE

No. I don't think so.

LEWIS

(Interrupting)

Okay. I'm done with this.

Lois eats a grape.

LOIS

"A mediocre accomplishment is the triumph of a fool."

She laughs. Grape juice runs down her face.

Lights down.

ACT I: SCENE 3

Several days later. Back at the offices of the Dotzweiller Corporation. Mr. Shinebecker and Mrs. Sharp. are sitting at their respective desks.

Mr. Shinebecker checks to see whether Mrs. Sharp is looking, then stands up and walks casually to Mr. Burke's desk. He sneaks a peak at some of Burke's papers. He can't find anything. He goes back to his desk and begins typing angrily.

He stops typing, stands up and digs around through Burke's trash can. Still nothing. He begins typing angrily again.

He stands once more and slowly approaches Mrs. Sharp.

MR. SHINEBECKER

Mrs. Sharp?

(She doesn't respond.)

Mrs. Sharp?... May I have a word with you.

MRS. SHARP

Do you have an appointment?

MR. SHINEBECKER

No.

MRS. SHARP

I'm quite busy.

MR. SHINEBECKER

I'm finding it difficult to work in this environment.

MRS. SHARP

You're having problems working?

MR. SHINEBECKER

Not problems. I'm the same effective worker I've always been.

MRS. SHARP

That's nice.

MR. SHINEBECKER

It's just that I was wondering-

MRS. SHARP

You were wondering.

MR. SHINEBECKER

I haven't seen Mr. Burke in a over a week.

MRS. SHARP

That's because he hasn't been here.

MR. SHINEBECKER

Mrs. Sharp, if you'll just listen for a moment. I think I have a recommendation that would benefit the department as a whole.

MRS. SHARP

Is that so?

MR. SHINEBECKER

I would just recommend that we keep our interdepartmental communication channels flowing in an open and multidirectional fashion.

MRS. SHARP

Is that so?

MR. SHINEBECKER

So that if, for instance, one of our project managers is out of the office for a number of days, a memorandum of sorts could be circulated throughout the department stating his whereabouts.

MRS. SHARP

That sounds like a fine idea. Why don't you head that up?

MR. SHINEBECKER

Me?

MRS. SHARP

It's your idea. Take some initiative.

MR. SHINEBECKER

It's just that, I don't know where-

MRS. SHARP

The dispensation of high-level information is an executive prerogative.

MR. SHINEBECKER

I'm aware of that, of course. Sure. It's... There are projects we've been collaborating on - Burke and I. What if I need to get in touch with him?

MRS. SHARP

He's been taken off any other projects for the time being. You'll have to handle it yourself.

MR. SHINEBECKER

Why? That's so...

MRS. SHARP

Are you saying you have a problem with my delegation skills? If so -

MR. SHINEBECKER

No. That's not what I'm saying.

MRS. SHARP

Then what are you saying?

MR. SHINEBECKER

It's just...

(whining)

Why is it such a secret? What's the harm in telling me where Burke went?

MRS. SHARP

He's out sick.

MR. SHINEBECKER

He is? No. He's not out sick!

MRS. SHARP

You asked where he is, Mr. Shinebecker. I'm telling you, he's out sick.

MR. SHINEBECKER.

I don't believe this. This is the second time I've been passed over for a high-level field assignment. I've conducted over 250 focus groups and now-

MRS. SHARP

Is there anything else, Mr. Shinebecker?

MR. SHINEBECKER

No. No that's it. I'm sorry. I'm sorry to have disturbed you.

ACT I: SCENE 4

That evening. It's after dinner. Mr. Burke is seated across from Lois at the kitchen table. They're playing a game which involves moving pieces around a board and drawing cards. Lewis is seated at a small workbench taking apart an adding machine while drinking something alcoholic.

LOIS

How many teeth do you have, Mr. Burke?

MR. BURKE

I have twenty two. Plus two made of glass.

LOIS

Lewis only has twenty.

BURKE

Oh. That's too bad.

LEWIS

I had the glass replacement also. Waste of money if you ask me.

LOIS

Nobody asked you.

LEWIS

That's right. Nobody asked me. Nobody's asked me anything for over a week. And why not?

LOIS

Haven't you had enough to drink this evening, Lewis?

LEWIS

Maybe I'm not... um... so impressed by the Dotzweiller Corporation.

BURKE

I'll be quite honest with you, Lewis. As in many domestic relationships, your wife here makes the buying decisions. She controls the purse strings. You merely provide the capital.

LEWIS

(mumbling)

I fix these things all day...

BURKE

For that reason, the primary focus of my study has been on her.

LEWIS

Sure... sure... And what if I just you know -

He quietly smashes the adding machine.

LOIS

Oh. Wonderful. You're what? You're just going to quit working?

LEWIS

I'm tired.

LOIS

(To Burke)

Just ignore him. He'll be back to normal in the morning.

(She draws a card)

Blank Nightingale. What do I do?

Lewis wanders the stage while Lois and Burke continue their game.

BURKE

Take a coin and draw again.

Meanwhile - at the Dotzweiller offices, it's after-hours. Mr. Shinebecker enters. He sneaks around with a flashlight and sorts through some papers on Mrs. Sharp's desk.

LOIS

Orange seven.

MR. BURKE

White twelve.

LOIS

So I cancel you out?

MR. BURKE

No. My space is blank. It means I get five coins.

LOIS

It's confusing with all these symbols.

MR. BURKE

What would make it clearer to you?

LOIS

If the pictures were clearer.

BURKE

(making a note)

Okay. That's good to know. Draw again.

LOIS

Green berry.

MR. BURKE

See there? You take my coins.

In the office, Mr. Shinebecker finds a document that peaks his interest.

He turns on the television. A live image of the Keever's kitchen appears on the screen.

MR. SHINEBECKER

There you are, Mr. Burke.

Lewis continues to wander around the stage, getting drunk. Shinebecker watches the rest of the scene.

LOIS

You've been loafing around this house for weeks now, Lewis. Is that really what you want Mr. Burke to think you do?

LEWIS

Yessir.

LOIS

Go to bed, Lewis...

LEWIS

(mocking)

'Go to bed, Lewis.'

LOIS

That's right. Leave us in peace.

LEWIS

Why do you get peace? I have no peace... Come on, Lois. Let's go back to how things were.

He stands and tries to rub her shoulders. She pushes him away.

LOIS

You smell like a dead pig.

LEWIS

You remember how things were. When it was just us?

LOIS

(To Burke)

You'll have to excuse him.

LEWIS

Before all this? Before the coupons and the products and the quizzes and the articles? You know?

LOIS

When was that?

LEWIS

I don't know. But I know-

LOIS

Your problem is you're always going backwards when you should be going forwards. You want to go back to when our minds were cluttered? When we were like ghosts wandering around this kitchen-

LEWIS

Yes! Like ghosts. Floating around like spirits. None of this - you know?

LOIS

No. I don't know. Now go to bed.

LEWIS

I'm having... um... you know?

BURKE

You seem to be having a hard time expressing yourself, Lewis. Perhaps you'd like a grape.

Burke offers Lewis a grape. He takes one and chews it sloppily.

LEWIS

"Pointless thoughts are not worthy of expression."

He spits out the grape.

LOIS

You disgust me.

*Mr. Shinebecker laughs. He turns off the TV.
Lights go down on the kitchen scene.*

MR. SHINEBECKER

What are you up to, Burke?

(reading)

“Assignment 427. Strategic initiative to offset the blank face effect.” Maybe you could use a little help there Burke?

He switches off the flashlight.

ACT I: SCENE 5

Later that same night. The kitchen is dark. Lewis enters wearing pajamas. He turns on a dim light. He pours himself a drink and sits down at the kitchen table.

LEWIS

'Haven't you had enough to drink tonight?' Lois...
Goddammit, Lois... God damn it... This kitchen. This
goddamn kitchen...

*He sits down at his workbench and begins to
tinker then suddenly pushes the parts onto the
ground.*

I'll be damned if I fix one more thing.

He polishes his glasses.

Goddamn glasses. Everything's a blur. Everything from
the day I was born to this wretched moment.

*He smashes his glasses and takes another drink.
Two large MICROBES appear on stage. (Puppets
or projections)*

What's this? I know this from somewhere.

CLASS 24

We've been watching you.

LEWIS

I cleaned you. I used the cleanser.

CLASS 12

You missed a spot.

CLASS 24

You haven't been yourself.

LEWIS

I like it that way.

CLASS 24

But you know what it means, don't you? When you're not yourself?

LEWIS

I'm drunk.

CLASS 24

You're mad.

LEWIS

I'm not mad.

CLASS 24

That's what happens when you talk to things you can't see.

LEWIS

But I see you.

CLASS 12

But we're so tiny.

LEWIS

You're harmless.

CLASS 12

I'm not! Tell him we're not harmless.

LEWIS

And you're manipulative.

CLASS 24

We can help you escape. We can guide you into new worlds of understanding. We can illuminate the unmarked roads down which millions have walked before you.

LEWIS

I won't follow.

CLASS 24

You will. You have no choice.

CLASS 12

You're lonely. We can keep you company.

LEWIS

I don't need company.

CLASS 24

You don't really want to live in this world anymore, do you? It's a world that belongs to others. A world that's been packaged and sold back to you.

LEWIS

That's why I'm canceling the subscription.

CLASS 12

It's a lifetime subscription.

LEWIS

No! I'm canceling it!

CLASS 12

You can't. They've thought of everything.

CLASS 24

Give up your mind. It was never yours to begin with

LEWIS

I won't. I won't be a madman who talks to things he can't see. I would be hopeless. Lois would abandon me.

CLASS 24

She abandoned you long ago.

CLASS 12

We won't abandon you.

LEWIS

I don't need you.

CLASS 24

Then you'll have nothing.

LEWIS

That's what I want.

CLASS 12

Why won't he go with us?

CLASS 24

Submit or go mad. Those are your choices.

LEWIS

No! I know how to eliminate you.

He picks up the bottle of cleanser

CLASS 12

That's funny.

CLASS 24

You wouldn't do that.

LEWIS

And why not? I'm tired of all this. I'd rather be a ghost.

He unscrews the cap and smells the contents.

LEWIS

Cancel anytime if not fully satisfied.

He tilts the bottle back above his mouth. He's about to drink it.

Lights out.

ACT II: SCENE I

The same night in the kitchen. Just as Lewis is about to drink the cleanser, a small pool of light moves around the room.

LEWIS

A light! A beacon to guide me on...

The light crosses Lewis' face. We hear a shriek. Mr. Shinebecker enters carrying a flashlight and a briefcase.

LEWIS

Are you here to guide me on?

MR. SHINEBECKER

Didn't think there'd be anyone up at this hour.

(noticing the bottle of cleanser)

You doing some cleaning?

LEWIS

I guess.

MR. SHINEBECKER

You don't look so good.

LEWIS

I'm canceling my lifetime subscription.

MR. SHINEBECKER

Canceling?

THE SUBSCRIPTION

LEWIS

I'm ready to move on. I don't want to be a madman.
Show me the way out.

MR. SHINEBECKER

You must be Lewis. I'm Mr. Shinebecker from the
Dotzweiller Corporation.

LEWIS

You're everywhere! Leave me alone!

MR. SHINEBECKER

Hey. Easy there. I think I can help you out...

LEWIS

I want to find peace on my own.

MR. SHINEBECKER

Sure you do.

Lewis is about to drink the cleanser.

MR. SHINEBECKER

Hey. You can't drink that. You got any booze?

(Noticing a bottle of liquor)

How bout it?

Lewis nods. Shinebecker pours two glasses.

MR. SHINEBECKER

Burke giving you problems?

LEWIS

Who?

THE SUBSCRIPTION

MR. SHINEBECKER

My associate. Guy who's been staying here?

LEWIS

He's made some things very clear to me.

MR. SHINEBECKER

I'll bet... Sit down.

They sit at the kitchen table with their drinks.

MR. SHINEBECKER

Here's what I've gathered. You've got some troubles. Burke's here trying to put a face to the Dotzweiler Corporation - giving you a hard time. That right?

LEWIS

I don't know.

MR. SHINEBECKER

You don't have a lot to offer the world, except maybe your two hands and an ability to understand the workings of a few outdated mechanisms. You're not all that smart and you're easily confused.

LEWIS

I am confused

MR. SHINEBECKER

Yes. And your wife Lois, she thinks you're worthless...

LEWIS

I am worthless.

MR. SHINEBECKER

Not to me, mister. What if I told you, you could put a stop to all of it?

LEWIS

I wouldn't believe you.

MR. SHINEBECKER

You need a little help, is all... Now, I'm going to explain some things to you and I hope that you'll understand.

LEWIS

I'll try.

MR. SHINEBECKER

You see, Lewis, the Dotzweiller Corporation made a mistake. They sent the wrong man for the job.

LEWIS

Oh no.

MR. SHINEBECKER

But your wife likes him. She cooperates with him and she likes to look at his face. And as long as she likes to look at his face, you will have no peace.

LEWIS

I don't understand.

MR. SHINEBECKER

No. I do wish you were a little smarter... But nonetheless, I have a plan for you. And if you think you can follow it, then you should do just fine.

*He opens his briefcase and takes out a flat mask.
It's a photographic representation of Mr. Burke.*

LEWIS

It's Mr. Burke!

MR. SHINEBECKER

No. It's a mask of Mr. Burke.

LEWIS

A mask?

MR. SHINEBECKER

Do you remember, a few weeks back, the issue about disguises?

LEWIS

Yes. Of course.

MR. SHINEBECKER

Tomorrow, when Mr. Burke isn't around, I want you to wear the mask and pretend like your him. Talk to your wife. Try to make her mad at you.

LEWIS

She's always mad at me.

MR. SHINEBECKER

That's perfect. You think you can do that?

LEWIS

Why?

THE SUBSCRIPTION

MR. SHINEBECKER

(Selling. Unconvincing)

You want your life back, don't you Lewis? You want to go back to how things were before the coupons and the products and all that, right?

LEWIS

Yes. But I can't remember how things were.

MR. SHINEBECKER

Just trust me on this. I'll meet you here at the same time tomorrow night.

LEWIS

Okay... Thanks, Mister.

MR. SHINEBECKER

And Lewis?

LEWIS

Yes?

MR. SHINEBECKER

Don't tell anyone you spoke to me.

LEWIS

I don't even know who you are.

MR. SHINEBECKER

That's fine... And also, Lewis?

LEWIS

Yes?

THE SUBSCRIPTION

Shinebecker hands Lewis a piece of gum.

MR. SHINEBECKER

Chew this before you put on the mask. Keeps it from getting sweaty inside.

LEWIS

Thanks.

ACT II SCENE 2

Late the next morning. Lois and Burke are in the kitchen. Lois is holding a Clever Tongue pamphlet.

In the Dotzweiller office, Shinebecker is working. Mrs. Sharp is watching the scene on the TV.

LOIS

Do you know anything about diamonds, Mr. Burke?

MR. BURKE

I know there's a new procedure which can replace your eyes with diamonds.

LOIS

Yes. I've been reading about it. My normal eyes give me such trouble.

MR. BURKE

I can give you some information about it if you like. I think you qualify.

LOIS

I have the information. Do you know the four C's?

MR. BURKE

Cut, clarity, carat, and cost.

LOIS

Cost... that's right.

MR. BURKE

Let's continue, shall we.

Lois reads the pamphlet. Burke is taking notes.

LOIS

Oh this is very interesting. It says here that candy can be good for you.

MR. BURKE

Yes. That's true. Certain candy.

LOIS

I like candy.

MR. BURKE

Many people do. How often would you say you buy candy? Once a week. Once a month. Twice a year, or almost never?

LOIS

Twice a year.

MRS. SHARP

That's it?

MR. BURKE

Thank you. You can keep reading.

LOIS

There's a coupon for a new candy called Red Rubies.

MR. BURKE

Yes there is. What drew your eye to that coupon?

MRS. SHARP

Good.

LOIS

I think it was the color. Or maybe the funny bird character.

MRS. SHARP

Is it male or female?

MR. BURKE

Would you say you're interested in sending away for Red Rubies?

LOIS

I'm not sure yet.

MRS. SHARP

Why not?

MR. BURKE

What if I told you that I personally have tried the candy and found it to be quite tasty?

LOIS

Well then, I'd probably give it a try.

MR. BURKE

So, you trust my opinion?

LOIS

Yes. I guess I do.

MR. BURKE

What makes you trust my opinion?

LOIS

I'm not sure. There's just something about you. Something about your face.

MRS. SHARP

Good.

Lewis enters and watches without making his presence known. He doesn't appear on the TV.

MR. BURKE

I have to say, Lois. I've met with thousands of customers and subscribers, but you are, by far, the most cooperative, the most insightful subject I have ever encountered.

LOIS

Really? That makes me feel nice.

MRS. SHARP

I've seen better.

MR. BURKE

What is it about my face that you like?

MRS. SHARP

It's everything.

LOIS

I don't know. It's how all the features work so well together. Sometimes I just want to reach out and touch it. Sometimes I want to kiss it.

MR. BURKE

Why don't you?

LOIS

Am I allowed to?

MR. BURKE

Of course.

MRS. SHARP

No you're not.

Lois reaches out and touches Burke's face. She leans closer and kisses him on the cheek.

MRS. SHARP

What is this? This is very disappointing, Mr. Burke. Very disappointing.

Mrs. Sharp switches off the TV.

MR. BURKE

Well then, Lois. I think that's all I need for the moment. I'll be in my quarters writing up my report if you need anything.

LOIS

I might.

MR. BURKE

Your husband will be awake soon.

LOIS

I'm afraid you're right.

Lois clips the candy coupon. Lewis unwraps a stick of gum and puts it in his mouth. He puts on the mask and enters.

LOIS

Oh, Mr. Burke. Did you forget something?

LEWIS (AS BURKE)

No.

He comes closer.

LOIS

But my husband...

LEWIS (AS BURKE)

Your husband is a good person.

LOIS

I feel nothing for him.

LEWIS (AS BURKE)

You're not a good person.

LOIS

What do you mean? You were just saying...

LEWIS (AS BURKE)

I was wrong. You're disgusting.

LOIS

But Mr. Burke...

LEWIS (AS BURKE)

I can't stand you.

LOIS

I guess I shouldn't have-

LEWIS (AS BURKE)

How could you be so-

LOIS

But you said it was allowed!

Lewis slaps her across the face. Lois stares at him.

LEWIS (AS BURKE)

I'm going back to my quarters now.

LOIS

I think you should.

Lewis exits. Lois, recovering from the slap, wads up the coupon and sets it on the table.

Lewis re-enters without the mask.

LEWIS

Good morning.

LOIS

What are you doing up?

LEWIS

I woke up.

LOIS

Lewis?

LEWIS

Yes?

LOIS

Am I a bad person?

LEWIS

I don't really have any feelings about that.

LOIS

No. No you don't, do you?

She rubs her face.

LEWIS

What's wrong with your face?

LOIS

Nothing.

LEWIS

Does it hurt?

LOIS

No.

LEWIS

It should.

LOIS

Why? Why should my face hurt?

LEWIS

You deserve it.

LOIS

You can fix your own breakfast.

Lewis sits down at the kitchen table and pours himself some cereal. Lois looks at some photographs on the fridge.

LOIS

Why doesn't the world sparkle like it's supposed to? Like in the pictures.

Burke enters with his tape recorder.

BURKE

Excuse me. Lois? There's something I forgot to ask you. The funny bird character on the coupon. Did you think it was male or female?

LOIS

What?

LEWIS

Good morning, Mr. Burke.

BURKE

Oh. Good morning, Lewis. On the coupon for Red Rubies, Lois. The funny bird?

LOIS

What is it about this bird that's so important, Mr. Burke?

BURKE

Do you still have it?

Lois points to the wadded up coupon on the table. Looking worried, Burke flattens out the coupon and shows it to Lois.

BURKE

At first glance, would you say that it's a male or female bird?

LOIS

It's a female bird. A lonely female bird who's eggs have been stolen from her nest and turned into candy.

BURKE

Why do you say that, Lois? It's a funny bird.

LOIS

It not funny anymore.

BURKE

Why do you think that is?

LOIS

Because I don't know what to think, Mr. Burke... I'm leaving for a little while.

MR. BURKE

Where are you going?

Lois exits. Lewis begins to chuckle to himself.

BURKE

What's so funny?

LEWIS

Nothing.

BURKE

Well what about you? Would you say this bird is male or female?

Burke shows him the coupon.

LEWIS

I would say it's a male bird. A male bird who's just done something very clever.

BURKE

Is that so? What did he do?

LEWIS

He- No. I can't tell you... My head hurts an awful lot, Mr. Burke. I need to go lie down.

Lewis exits. Mr. Burke wads up the coupon again.

BURKE

(speaking into the tape recorder)

Subjects were divided on the matter of the bird's gender... Recommendation: Kill the bird. It's confusing. You don't know what to make of it. You don't know whether it's going this way or that... Female subject seemed angry and distressed. It was an unusual reaction considering

the subject's previous history of cooperation... Considering that she is normally so charming and delightful to behold. What do you think was bothering her?... I don't know. Something in my face, perhaps... What is it about your face that she might have seen?... She seemed to look beyond my face into... something else. I'm going to point out a few things and I want you to tell me if I'm correct... Previously, you felt as though you were connecting with her, in a manner beyond that of the typical interviewer-subject relationship. That connection excited you and made you want to spend time alone with her, in an intimate setting. Perhaps by the sea. Is that correct?... Yes. That's correct... You feel as though your role as an interviewer may be interfering with your ability to deepen this connection... Yes. That's correct... But you're a professional. You have a job to do. You want the watch and the book of coupons... I'm not sure... Yes you are... You are sure.

ACT II SCENE 3

That night. Lewis enters the kitchen. The microbes appear.

CLASS 12

He's back. He wants our company.

LEWIS

Leave me alone.

CLASS 24

Sanity is a small and cramped little box, isn't it?

LEWIS

There's room to move.

CLASS 12

But you have to be tiny and sneaky like us.

CLASS 24

Your wife is gone, now.

CLASS 12

She won't be coming back.

LEWIS

She will.

CLASS 24

You drove her away.

CLASS 12

We'll keep you company.

LEWIS

No. I know what I'm doing.

CLASS 12

He knows what he's doing!

The microbes laugh. Mr. Shinebecker enters with his flashlight. The microbes disappear.

MR. SHINEBECKER

Lewis?

LEWIS

Oh. Hello.

MR. SHINEBECKER

Tell me, Lewis. How did it go?

LEWIS

I'm not sure. I think it went well.

MR. SHINEBECKER

On a scale of one to ten, one being 'not distressed at all' and ten being 'very distressed,' how did your wife react to your negative portrayal of Mr. Burke?

LEWIS

I don't know really. I'm afraid I may have hurt her. She left the house and hasn't come back.

MR. SHINEBECKER

Where did she go?

LEWIS

I have no idea. She rarely leaves the house.

MR. SHINEBECKER

And what about Mr. Burke? How was he when you last saw him?

LEWIS

He was wandering around muttering into his tape recorder.

MR. SHINEBECKER

It seems you were quite successful, Lewis.

LEWIS

I'm not-

MR. SHINEBECKER

How did you feel, having deceived your wife?

LEWIS

I didn't- I don't know... No. I felt like a clever bird.

MR. SHINEBECKER

You are a clever bird, Lewis. A clever bird indeed. Now, when your wife returns, I want you to impersonate Mr. Burke once again. Be offensive. Be ruthless.

LEWIS

And after that, things will go back to how they're supposed to be?

THE SUBSCRIPTION

MR. SHINEBECKER

Of course. I will see to it myself.

Lights down.

ACT II SCENE 4

The next day. Lights up on the Dotzweiller office. Mr. Shinebecker is working. Mrs. Sharp is on the phone.

MRS. SHARP

Have you read his reports?... Yes. I know they're good but-... you have to read between-... I know it's important, Fred. But it's like launching someone into the stratosphere. There's no oxygen. It causes delirium... Yes. He's straying from the behavioral guidelines, but... The subjects? Lewis and Lois Keever... Number 0517 81 25 595. Why? What do you have in mind?... Well I think I should know... It's my initiative, isn't it? What do you mean?... Well I should at least know what- no... No, I didn't mean-... Okay... I understand. Yes. No. That's fine. You know what's best.

She hangs up the phone angrily.

MRS. SHARP

(mocking herself)

'You know what's best.' How would you know? You've never met Mr. Burke.

(she eats a pretzel)

You've never had him offer you a pretzel. You've never gazed at his face... been so close you could reach out and

touch it... or kiss it... the way she did... Oh, to be her. To bathe in the light of his scrutiny even for a moment...

(she thinks to herself)

Yes. It's my initiative. I know what's best.

(she stands)

Mr. Shinebecker!

MR. SHINEBECKER

Yes?

MRS. SHARP

I'll be out of the office for a little while. I'm expecting a call from Fred at the Cola Vista office. He says it's very important, so be sure you take a message.

MR. SHINEBECKER

Okay.

MRS. SHARP

Also, there's a bit of mung collecting on my desk. Do you mind cleaning it for me?

She hands him a bottle of cleanser.

MR. SHINEBECKER

No. Not at all.

ACT II SCENE 5

An hour later. Lights up on the Dotzweiler office. Mr. Shinebecker is still cleaning Mrs. Sharp's desk. The TV is on showing the empty kitchen scene.

MR. SHINEBECKER

I'm a servant. An underling... I am, aren't I? A victim of my own obedience. Loyalty, which I thought was a means towards authority, has rendered me inconsequential...

Mr. Burke enters the kitchen. He is listening to his own voice on the tape recorder.

MR. BURKE (ON TAPE)

Am I condemned to spend my days in this state of imbalance?

MR. SHINEBECKER

Hello, Burke, old friend. Strange that your undoing may be my last avenue for advancement.

MR. BURKE (ON TAPE)

My heart is locked away - confined to a prison buried deep below the collected sediment of my professional duties.

Mrs. Sharp sneaks on stage. She's holding a mask which bears a photographic representation of Lois' face.

MR. SHINEBECKER

Mrs. Sharp? Since when are you doing field work?

MR. BURKE (ON TAPE)

It beats against the walls, struggling to break free, but to no avail. It has been abandoned by its only agent of salvation.

*Mrs. Sharp, puts a stick of gum in her mouth.
She dons the mask of Lois and makes her presence
known. Burke shuts off the tape recorder.*

MR. BURKE

Lois! At last!

MRS. SHARP (AS LOIS)

Yes. I've come back.

MR. BURKE

My work has suffered greatly since you left.

MRS. SHARP (AS LOIS)

Is that so?

MR. BURKE

I've been doing a lot of thinking. I understand now... and I have to know-

MRS. SHARP (AS LOIS)

You're acting quite strange, Mr. Burke.

MR. BURKE

I'm sorry. You're right. Let me rephrase that...

MRS. SHARP (AS LOIS)

Go ahead.

MR. BURKE

You said, Lois, the other day, that there was something about my face that makes you trust my opinion. Is that correct?

MRS. SHARP (AS LOIS)

Yes. I trust your face.

MR. BURKE

Good. That's very important to me... But would you say that... that it's *my* face you trust? Or is it more... is it the face of the Dotzweiller Corporation?

MRS. SHARP (AS LOIS)

I thought they were one in the same.

Lewis enters. He remains hidden.

MR. SHINEBECKER

What? No, Lewis. Goddammit.

MR. BURKE

No. See... I thought so at first, that was the idea, but, in fact-

MRS. SHARP (AS LOIS)

In fact, your assignment is no longer clear to you. In fact, you're failing at your job.

MR. BURKE

No! That's not it at all. I'm a dedicated employee of the Dotzweiller Corporation. I am.

THE SUBSCRIPTION

MRS. SHARP (AS LOIS)

Let me touch your face, Mr. Burke.

MR. BURKE

No! It's not allowed!

MRS. SHARP (AS LOIS)

You said it was.

MR. SHINEBECKER

Oh that's rich. That's really something.

MR. BURKE

I don't know anymore.

MRS. SHARP (AS LOIS)

Please. Let me kiss your face. Just once.

MR. BURKE

I need to think. I'm sorry.

He exits.

MRS. SHARP

Mr. Burke! Come back... He's trying so hard, but he's failing... and we need our funding. We'll never boost the numbers this way. I'll most certainly have to fire Shinebecker.

MR. SHINEBECKER

Me? I'm not the one who's failing.

Lewis puts on the mask of Mr. Burke, and approaches Mrs. Sharp who is still disguised as Lois.

MR. SHINEBECKER

No Lewis. That's not her!

MRS. SHARP (AS LOIS)

Mr. Burke. I'm sorry.

LEWIS (AS BURKE)

You should be sorry.

MRS. SHARP (AS LOIS)

I can help you. You just need guidance.

LEWIS (AS BURKE)

I don't need anything from you. They've corrupted your mind, Lois. All these coupons and products. The small writing. It's turned you into a person I hate.

MRS. SHARP (AS LOIS)

You can't hate me. I'm your subject. You're supposed to be objective.

LEWIS (AS BURKE)

I don't know what you're talking about. You used to be a kind woman who... who cared about your husband. You wanted to... to surround yourself with beautiful things. But now... You're a bad person now. Do you even think about your husband? He works himself to the verge of madness. He exposes himself to dangerous microbes. And what? What does he get in return?

THE SUBSCRIPTION

MRS. SHARP (AS LOIS)

What have I done? I only wanted to kiss your face.

LEWIS (AS BURKE)

Is that all? Fine. Then do it. I'm letting you.

MRS. SHARP (AS LOIS)

Really?

LEWIS (AS BURKE)

If that's what you want.

MRS. SHARP (AS LOIS)

It is. It's what I want more than anything.

MR. SHINEBECKER

No. This isn't right.

Mrs. Sharp moves closer to Lewis. Their masks are face-to-face. She kisses him.

Lewis slaps her face and pushes her away. Her mask flies off. She looks up at Lewis.

MRS. SHARP

Mr. Burke, I'm-

LEWIS (AS BURKE)

Who are you?

MRS. SHARP

It's me. Mrs. Sharp.

LEWIS (AS BURKE)

You're not my wife.

MRS. SHARP

Your wife? You don't have a wife.

LEWIS (AS BURKE)

I do. Lois is my wife. Where's Lois?

MRS. SHARP

Lois is your wife? That's impossible. It's a conflict of interest.

LEWIS (AS BURKE)

What are you talking about?

MRS. SHARP

What are *you* talking about, Mr. Burke?

LEWIS (AS BURKE)

Mr. Burke? Oh...

He removes his mask.

MRS. SHARP

Oh dear God. You're not Mr. Burke at all.

LEWIS

What have you done with Lois?

MRS. SHARP

What is the meaning of this? Why are you disguised as Mr. Burke?

LEWIS

I only wanted my life back.

MRS. SHARP

How long has this been going on?

LEWIS

Only recently.

MRS. SHARP

Of course... It was you she was kissing... Mr. Burke would never allow anything so unprofessional... We should have never run the disguise issue. Where did you get that mask?

LEWIS

I don't know. From a man in my kitchen late at night. He may have been a microbe.

MRS. SHARP

Shinebecker?

MR. SHINEBECKER

No!

LEWIS

Something like that.

MR. SHINEBECKER

I told you not to say.

LEWIS

I'm not really supposed to tell anyone.

MRS. SHARP

He's been sabotaging this initiative all along.

MR. SHINEBECKER

No! I cleaned your desk. You never even noticed me.

MRS. SHARP

That meddlesome stooge will never work again.

MR. SHINEBECKER

What? You can't do that. My work is all I have. I was supposed to get the watch. You stick me in here to clean your office...

He looks at the bottle of cleanser in his hand.

Mr. Burke enters the kitchen.

MR. BURKE

Mrs. Sharp? What are you doing here?

MRS. SHARP

I... I came to clear something up. This man has been impersonating you. Shinebecker was trying to ruin everything. I'm going to fire him.

MR. SHINEBECKER

My only chance is lost. I'll never work again and if I do... If I do I'll remain an underling forever...

LEWIS

But this woman- She's done something with Lois.

He points out the mask of Lois to Burke.

MR. BURKE

What have you done with her?

Mr. Shinebecker drinks the bottle of cleanser.

MRS. SHARP

I haven't done anything-

LEWIS

She came in here to see you and to-

MRS. SHARP

I had to expose this charade. Shinebecker will never work again.

Shinebecker laughs and falls over dead.

MR. BURKE

What were you thinking, Lewis?

MRS. SHARP

He wanted to restore order to his household. And that's what we're all about at the Dotzweiller Corporation. Bringing order to the chaos of modern life.

Lewis hears the microbes. He stares off into space.

CLASS 24

If only you could read words that were 380 characters long, maybe then you could bring your wife back.

CLASS 12

But he's not very bright.

LEWIS

She's coming back. Things will be back to normal. We'll cancel the subscription. We'll read other things. We'll grow our own flowers.

CLASS 24

Nobody likes people like that. People like that don't qualify for the sweepstakes.

MR. BURKE

You can't cancel now, Lewis. We've made so much progress.

Lois enters. Her eyes have been replaced with diamonds.

MR. BURKE

Lois!

LEWIS

Your eyes!

LOIS

Do you like them? I've had them replaced with diamonds.

LEWIS

No! I've fixed everything. Everything will be back to the way it's supposed to be.

LOIS

This is how it's supposed to be. Sparkling and shining!
Stars pouring from every reflection. Every blank wall
containing a thousand rainbows!

LEWIS

But your eyes, Lois. I liked to look into them when you
were asleep and your eyelids were half open.

LOIS

But now you can look at diamonds.

LEWIS

I don't want diamonds. I want the real thing.

LOIS

The real thing is so drab and lifeless.

(noticing Mrs. Sharp)

And who is this shimmering goddess?

MR. BURKE

This is-

MRS. SHARP

I'm his lover.

MR. BURKE

You are?

LOIS

What are you doing here?

MRS. SHARP

You were being deceived. Your husband was disguising himself as Mr. Burke.

LEWIS

I had to. I was losing my mind to-

MR. BURKE

But it was me. I was the one who's face you wanted to kiss.

LOIS

Yes. It was your face.

MRS. SHARP

It was his face, but it was your husband who was wearing it.

MR. BURKE

That's not true...

MRS. SHARP

It is true, Mr. Burke. You need to accept that. You failed in your assignment. You will never make the connection.

MR. BURKE

No. It's-

MRS. SHARP

Yes, Mr. Burke. Yes. But it doesn't matter. You'll still receive the watch and the book of coupons and we will both be working very closely together on our next initiative.

MR. BURKE

But I need to complete the assignment. I have to run the final test.

He takes a set of watercolors and an easel out of his briefcase. He places them on the kitchen table.

MRS. SHARP

I'm afraid you won't prove anything.

LEWIS

She's not herself.

MR. BURKE

Lois.

LOIS

Yes?

MR. BURKE

I want you to imagine that the Dotzweiller Corporation has come into your home. Picture it relaxing at your kitchen table. I want you to paint a picture of what it looks like.

LOIS

That sounds fun.

She sits down to paint. The others stand behind her to watch.

MR. BURKE

I want you to picture the qualities you described to me in the past. Dedication. Trust.

LOIS

All the colors!

As she paints, a phone rings in the Dotzweiller office.

MR. BURKE

Close your eyes, Lois. Paint what you see.

LOIS

I see so much.

She continues painting. She's truly inspired.

MR. BURKE

(to Mrs. Sharp)

I see eyes. A mouth.

MRS. SHARP

The hair. What about the hair?

LOIS

It's becoming clear to me...

She's almost done.

MR. BURKE

No. It can't be. Lois - the Dotzweiller Corporation. Think about everything it does for you! All the things I've given you!

LEWIS

No, Lois. Don't paint that. Things are supposed to go back to normal.

LOIS

It's a face isn't it? I think it's a face I remember loving once.

Mrs. Sharp picks up the paper. It's a portrait of Lewis. At this point, Lois speaks to the portrait of Lewis instead of Lewis.

LOIS

(speaking to the portrait)

I remember loving you.

LEWIS

No. That's not who I am!

The doorbell rings.

LOIS

Oh my! Who could that be?

LEWIS

I'll get it.

LOIS

No. I'll get it. I love visitors.

Lois goes to the door.

MRS. SHARP

We have our face, Mr. Burke.

MR. BURKE

But it was supposed to be me.

MRS. SHARP

It's not. Mr. Burke. You'll never be anything more than someone who does his job well. Instead, it's him. He is the face. He is dedication and trust. He is the provider.

MR. BURKE

But he's not!

LEWIS

I'm not.

Lois comes back with an envelope. She opens it and reads.

LOIS

Oh my!

Lois screams.

LEWIS

What is it?

MRS. SHARP

What is it?

LOIS

We've won!

MRS. SHARP

You've won?

LOIS

We've won the sweepstakes!

Lois kisses the portrait of Lewis. Lights flash. Streamers fall from the sky. Celebratory music plays loudly.

Lewis stands dumbfounded. He looks up, seeing the microbes.

LOIS

We're set for life!

LEWIS

(quietly)

No. I don't want this.

MRS. SHARP

Very clever, Fred. Very clever... Our work here is done, Mr. Burke.

MR. BURKE

Lois. Lois, what about me?

Mrs. Sharp leads Mr. Burke off-stage.

LOIS

We'll never need anything again.

CLASS 24 (VOICE ONLY)

You'll never need anything again.

LEWIS

No. No we won't.

THE SUBSCRIPTION

LOIS

And the world will sparkle forever.

The streamers continue to fall. Lewis puts his head in his hands as the music plays.

The lights go down.

A projection appears on the wall. It's a logo for The Dotzweiller Corporation. Lewis' face has been incorporated into it.

THE END