

IT'S A WONDERFUL ILLUSION

A Play

By Tom Attea

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## CHARACTERS

Ian Evans, a screenwriter

Madelyn Adorno, his admin and an aspiring actress

Max Palmeri, his agent

Gloria, the self-proclaimed spirit of life

Happyola, the Great, her father

Time: The present

Setting: Ian's home in Malibu

AT RISE:

Desk with a laptop, paper shredder to one side. A bar. Madelyn Walters, a secretary and a would-be actress with no training, is sipping a beverage. Ian, a 30-something bachelor who has already lost a lot of his hair, dashes in.

IAN

I've got it!

What?

IAN

The weapon to blow up the bullet-proof Mercedes.

MADELYN

Oh, what is it?

IAN

A pistol that fires nuclear bullets.

MADELYN

That's different, Ian. But how can you fit a nuclear weapon into a pistol?

IAN

That's the innovation. Come on, Madelyn. Type it into the script.

MADELYN

(gets up and heads  
for the computer)

If you insist but --

IAN

-- make a note that the pistol is slightly larger than usual.

MADELYN

OK. But the villain is supposed to be a vengeful weakling.

IAN

Make another note. He always wears baggy clothes. Maybe I should change the title from Ten Killers to Duke Nuke.

MADELYN

Duke Nuke?

IAN

Yeh. Admit it. He makes a typical James Bond villain as sinister as Kermit, the Frog.

MADELYN

Whatever you say. But what about my role? I told my whole family about it.

IAN

Relax, Madelyn. I'm not changing it.

MADELYN

Great. But what will Max say about the changes? He likes the treatment.

IAN

Pumping the danger will help him make a deal.

MADELYN

You know best, sweetheart.

(gets up, heads for  
computer)

Who do you see as Duke Nuke?

IAN

Let's leave that to the casting director.

PHONE RINGS. SHE picks up.

MADELYN

(on PHONE)

Ian Evans.

(to IAN)

It's Max.

(hands him the  
PHONE)

IAN

(on PHONE)

Max, how goes it?... Really?... Hey, that's fantastic! Congrats!

(to MADELYN)

He just sold Ten Killers for a million dollars!

MADELYN

A million smackers?

IAN

The studio loves the treatment. Looks as if I created my first blockbuster!

MADELYN

And you're changing it?

IAN

Not anymore.

(on PHONE)

You made my day, Max!... I'm putting the finishing touches on the script right now. Be done by tomorrow .... Sure, stop by if you get a chance, and we'll celebrate!

(hangs up; excited)

Fantastic! My years of struggle have finally paid off big time! Scratch the title change!

MADELYN

If anybody payed a million for something I wrote, I wouldn't change the title, either. What about the new kind of pistol?

IAN

Let's save it for a new script titled Duke Nuke. Why give away the innovation now?

MADELYN

Do you think Max could get a million for Duke Nuke, too?

IAN

Given my new track record and the concept, he should ask for two million.

MADELYN

Wow, maybe I should have studied screenwriting.

IAN

It's a talent, Madelyn. Not a decision. Think about it! Nuclear weapons have been around since the 1940s, and I'm the first one to think of putting one in a pistol. It's huge!

MADELYN

I didn't think of it that way. Can I be in Duke Nuke, too?

IAN

I'll do what I can to make sure.

MADELYN

Wow. Two films. Wait till I tell my family. My mother always wanted to be an actress.

IAN

May I make a suggestion, Madelyn. Since your career is starting to look promising, maybe you should take an acting course.

MADELYN

I've thought about it. But why? I have natural ability. Besides, you know as well as I do that everything in Hollywood is who you know.

IAN

Whatever you say, gorgeous! Now, let's get back to the script. Where was I before Max called?

MADELYN

(reads)

"Cut to: vacant lot - day. Deadheart's BMW skids to a stop and he leaps out, pistol drawn. The bullet-proof Mercedes limo plunges into the lot right behind him with ten killers inside. Ming Borat --

IAN

-- The Chinese-Chek immigrant with the machine gun?

MADELYN

Yes, dear. He leans out the window and, laughing hysterically, shrieks, "So Detective Deadheart, how would you like a dozen bullets in your face?"

IAN

Well, that's an interesting question. It requires a clever answer.

MADELYN

What if he just says, "No thanks"?

IAN

Good, but not great. An occasion like this is an opportunity to write a line everybody will walk out of the theater talking about. It's like when Alexander the Great approached the Greek Cynic philosopher Diogenes.

MADELYN

Diogenes? I grew up with Disney.

IAN

Sweetheart, I'm not talking motion pictures. This is ancient history.

MADELYN

Oh. Well, I was never good at history. But I got a B in my high-school typing class.

IAN

You wanna hear the story or don't you?

MADELYN

I can't wait.

IAN

As I said, Diogenes was a Greek philosopher. He was known as a Cynic.

MADELYN

I don't like cynical people. But go ahead.

IAN

Thanks. Anyway, Alexander the Great had just conquered Athens. He saw Diogenes lying on a rock in the sun. He goes up to him and says, "Oh, great Diogenes, name anything in the world, and I, Alexander, will grant it." Know what Diogenes said?

MADELYN

Got any suntan lotion?

IAN

No, dear. In those days, they didn't have suntan lotion. He said, "Move a little to one side. You're blocking the sun."

MADELYN

Wow, that is clever.

IAN

Yes, it is. So I need a little time to think.

(looks at watch)

Almost noon. Let's knock off a few minutes early -- and finish the script tomorrow.

(heads for liquor cabinet)

Meanwhile, I'll work on a wisecrack for Deadbeat.

MADELYN

You mean, Deadheart?

IAN

Right. I'm a little too excited to think straight.

(opens bottle)

MADELYN

You said you never have a drink before noon.

IAN

What's fifteen minutes?

(pours drink)

Come on, Madelyn, I'm a man of modest vices. Who else would make a million-dollar killing and only celebrate by having scotch on the rocks?

MADELYN

But you promised you wouldn't drink all afternoon and evening. I worry about you.

IAN

Relax. What can I tell you? I'm a slow drinker. Want some?

MADELYN

No, thanks. Too many calories. Please, don't drink the whole bottle.

IAN

Why not? It's my prerogative as a successful man. And wait till you have a few more years on you. Once you're beyond the smooth water of youth, you hit more and more white water. When you float through, you have to keep a lot of alcohol between you and the rocks.

MADELYN

I would rather use a lot of water.

IAN

(raises glass)

Time and the river, my dear. Besides, haven't you heard? Alcohol helps you live longer. Reams out your blood vessels. Otherwise, they can get clogged up and you get pale and stupid. Then one day, you get a heart attack!

MADELYN

Ian, everybody knows doctors say to limit yourself to one or two glasses a day, not one or two bottles.

IAN

Whatever. Did I ever tell you tell you my list of the four greatest discoveries of modern medicine. One: Booze is good for you. Two, three, and four: So are coffee, chocolate, and sex.

MADELYN

I like the last three.

IAN

Excellent, Ms. Walters.  
(raises glass to her)

MADELYN

(raises bottle of water)

And here's to your liver! You should call the locksmith and have him put the lock back on your liquor cabinet.

IAN

He won't do it. I woke him up in the middle of the night too many times, begging him to bring me the key. At any rate, Madelyn, you're my hero.

MADELYN

Why me?

IAN

Here's to anyone who can stay sober all day.  
(takes drink)

MADELYN

Why don't you try to be that kind of hero, too?

IAN

Sorry, sweetheart. I only write about heroes. Heroes and villains, but killers one and all.

MADELYN

Maybe you'd be happier writing other kinds of movies.

IAN

Why? I know what the public likes and how to deliver it. The higher the body count, the bigger the box office.

MADELYN

I prefer romantic movies, especially ones about innocence lost.

IAN

Never had a talent for them.

MADELYN

(stands)

Since we're done working, I'm going to go for a mani-pedi.  
(holds out hands)  
Typing kills my nails.

IAN

I don't even know how you type with those things. They're long enough to pass for murder weapons.

MADELYN

Well, they do need trimmed. See you later, darling. And try not to drink too much. Tonight, I want you to experience my loving caresses.

(gives him a kiss)

IAN

I'll look forward to them. But with a light touch. Remember, I'm an artist, not a man of steel.

SHE EXITS; HE goes to the bar and pours himself more scotch, as the LIGHTS fade down. Beat. Lights come back up.

IAN is lying on the couch. He takes the bottle of scotch off the coffee table and pours the last few drops into his glass.

IAN

(to himself)

Here's to Max! May he sell all my scripts for a million -- or even more!

HE gets up and staggers toward the bar. HE begins to open another bottle, as we hear a loud KNOCK at the door. HE turns and faces it. The KNOCK repeats.

IAN

All right, coming.

HE makes his way to the door and opens it. We see a beautiful woman in her late twenties, in a flowing white gown with a band of flowers in her long hair. She may or may not be a figment of his drunken imagination.

IAN (CONT'D)

Whoa! And who are you, beautiful?

GLORIA

Gloria.

IAN

Got a last name?

GLORIA

No.

IAN

Oh, you mean, like Madonna or Sting?

GLORIA

Not quite.

IAN

Then mind telling me who you are?

GLORIA

Someone who is hurt by your behavior.

IAN

May I ask how that's possible, since we never had the good fortune to meet?

GLORIA

It's all very understandable. You write screenplays that depend for excitement on the threat of death. And I'm the spirit of life.

IAN

Sorry. The only spirit I believe in comes in a bottle. Excuse me.

(closes door; to  
self)

Maybe I've had one too many.

KNOCK again; HE stops.

IAN (CONT'D)

(calls)

Go away!

KNOCKING repeats.

IAN (CONT'D)

OK, OK.

(opens door)

What do you want?

GLORIA

I'm here to talk with you.

IAN

I don't have time for kooks.

GLORIA

I'm not a kook.

IAN

Of course, not. You tell me you're the, what the hell did you say?

GLORIA

The spirit of life.

IAN

Right. And you're not a nut case?

GLORIA

No, I'm perfectly sane.

IAN

Well, that makes us even. I'm perfectly drunk. Now, please, go haunt someone else.

GLORIA

But I have to talk with you about your destiny.

IAN

Sure, you do. What are you -- an aspiring starlet? I've already got one too many on my hands.

(as he slams door)

Now, please, go away! Get lost!

KNOCK once again.

IAN (CONT'D)

In Hollywood a man can't even get wasted in peace!

(opens door again)

You're starting to upset me, and that's not good. Because when I get upset, I start to think clearly.

GLORIA

Then let me in.

IAN

Are you armed and dangerous?

GLORIA

Never.

IAN

All right. As Ernest Hemingway said, the hardest thing for a man is to learn how to say no to a woman. *Entrer, jeune femme.*

GLORIA

(enters)

*Merci, jeune homme.*

IAN

I see we both picked up a smattering of French along life's uncertain way. You've got five minutes.

GLORIA

I was hoping for more.

IAN

Don't press your luck, even if you are beautiful. Want a drink?

GLORIA

Maybe next time.

IAN

What next time?

GLORIA

I only drink wine. But I never touch it on my first visit.

IAN

And you say you're not a kook? All right, what do you want?

GLORIA

Actually, quite a lot.

IAN

Really? You mean, like my house or my Tesla? Well, you can't have either. I worked too hard for them.

GLORIA

No, not either.

IAN

Then what? My life? You want my life?

GLORIA

In a manner of speaking.

IAN

Out, out! I don't like that kind of talk, except in the pictures I write!

GLORIA

I assure you, I only want to talk about you and your career.

IAN

No, thanks. Self-reflection is not my favorite indulgence.

GLORIA

No wonder.

IAN

Let's not get personal. Especially when you won't even tell me your last name.

GLORIA

I don't need one, because there's only one of me.

IAN

I see. Very sane. Come on, you're an actress and want a role? Sorry. I've given all my female leads away into the distant future.

GLORIA

I told you before, I don't want a role. I want you.

IAN

Really? What for -- sex?

GLORIA

Not now.

IAN

Oh, I thought this might be my lucky day. Then what, love? Forget it. Been there, done that. I'm only into recreational relationships.

GLORIA

Why?

IAN

What can I say? Sincerity didn't work out for me.

GLORIA

Are you sure you weren't demanding too much?

IAN

Does preferring to be with someone who doesn't scream all day or write checks to herself out of your account sound like expecting too much? Especially when it's in my unfortunate nature to hope for a woman with beauty, brains, and heart.

GLORIA

Tell me more about your unfortunate nature.

IAN

I'm not in the habit of baring my soul to strangers or to anyone else. What's to know, anyway? I'm your usual well-rounded guy. I write in the morning, drink in the afternoon, and, when I get lucky, make love at night. Now, please, get to the point. You're almost out of time.

GLORIA

I've been watching you for many years.

IAN

Ah, ha! A stalker! Out, out, brief candle!

GLORIA

Only as an observer. I have big plans for you.

IAN

Really? Hold it. Are you for real? Or the product of my booze-soaked imagination?

GLORIA

I'm real. But most of the time people can't see me.

IAN  
Ah, ha! Another piece of winning logic.

GLORIA  
Spirits are like that.

IAN  
And you're telling me you're not a nut-case?  
(holds up glass;  
looks at her through  
it)  
Why can I see you?

GLORIA  
I want you to.

IAN  
What is this -- my personal version of *It's a Wonderful Life*?

GLORIA  
Is yours wonderful?

IAN  
I was referring to the Capra film. Now, since you're a spirit, just let yourself out through one of the walls.

GLORIA  
I can't leave until we have our talk.

IAN  
Says who?

GLORIA  
Everyone I represent.

IAN  
Oh, so you're an agent! I already have one.

GLORIA  
You might say I am. I represent all living things.

IAN  
You call that statement normal?

GLORIA  
Talk to me about happiness.

IAN  
Sorry, it's beyond my expectations. But today I sold a screenplay for a million dollars.

GLORIA

Ten Killers?

IAN

How do you know the title? You work for Paramount?

GLORIA

No.

IAN

But that title is supposed to be confidential! Come on, how do you know it?

GLORIA

As I said, I've been watching you. The sale really upset me. I want you to cancel the deal.

IAN

Cancel it? Now, I know I'm drunk. Out, out! You've overstayed your welcome!

GLORIA

But --

IAN

-- Depart, immediately.

(opens door)

Or vanish -- like the illusion you undoubtedly are.

(Eases her out the door and closes it)

Loud KNOCK at door.

IAN (CONT'D)

Go away!

(to self)

I've got to sober up.

(calls through door)

Cancel the deal? My first million-dollar deal, when I'm up to my ass in bills.

Repeated KNOCKING.

(opens door)

Come on, Gloria. Give me a break. This is my first really big picture deal. And, let me tell you, I've earned it.

GLORIA

(enters)

So you're pleased with yourself?

IAN

Being pleased has nothing to do with it. First, I can pay off my credit cards. Second, I can pay the lawn-care

(MORE)

IAN (cont'd)

service. Third, I can continue to support the life to which I have not yet grown accustomed.

GLORIA

I was asking about your inner happiness.

IAN

Nosy for a hallucination, aren't you? Look, I came to Hollywood with nothing and was driving a cab to support the creative habit. But now, thanks to a few relatively minor successes, I take cabs, I live in Malibu, and on occasion I rent a limo.

GLORIA

I think you can be truly happy.

IAN

I can't wait. A stranger unlocks the secret of my life. Keep it up, and you'll be out of here forever!

GLORIA

But why do you only write violent movies?

IAN

What can I tell you? It's what the public wants, all over the world. The vicarious excitement the present culture prefers. Also, known as the democracy of the box office.

GLORIA

Is it all they want?

IAN

It's what they want most. Every repressed kid or working slob lets his frustrations out by seeing someone beat the hell out of and kill other people, preferably criminals. As a result, there's a fortune to be made in writing about violence and death.

GLORIA

But how can you beat up and kill people just to make money?

IAN

Hey, it's only a film. I merely reflect the violent, death-obsessed world in which we live.

GLORIA

You mean, you exaggerate and glamorize it.

IAN

You mean I commercialize it.

GLORIA

I didn't see anybody who was beaten up or with a machine gun in your neighborhood. It's nice and sunny outside. Some people are even smiling and being courteous.

IAN

The way I choose to write is my privilege as a condemned man.

GLORIA

Condemned?

IAN

We're all gonna die, aren't we? "The paths of glory lead but to the grave."

GLORIA

I think you're forgetting something.

IAN

What?

GLORIA

The journey. It lasts much longer than the moment your lifespan ends.

IAN

Some journey? When you're born, you're already old enough to die. You slip out of the warm water of Lake Erie, float along the river, experiencing some of the sites, and then you start to hear a roaring of Niagara Falls. Then, quite unexpectedly, you go over them. And the only question is, is that the end? Or do you float on to Lake Ontario, which is even bigger and lovelier. At any rate, let's not confuse media life with real life.

GLORIA

Don't many people?

IAN

Not my problem. I live in a zoo, and I'm a zookeeper. I feed the lions meat and the rabbits lettuce. If I walk into the lion's cage with lettuce, I get eaten. It's a hard lesson.

(looks at her through  
glass)

To paraphrase Shakespeare, "Who is Gloria, what is she?"

Loud KNOCK at the door.

IAN  
 Ah, maybe that's Max. I could use a timely rescue.  
 (as he crosses to  
 door; opens it)  
 Max, help!

HAPPYOLA, a handsome adult male who  
 appears to be in his forties, is  
 standing there. He's wearing a blue  
 toga with an olive-branch wreath  
 around his head.

IAN (CONT'D)  
 Ah, ha! A second drunken delusion!  
 (looks at him through  
 the glass of scotch)  
 And who are you?

HAPPYOLA  
 Thank you. I'm her father.

IAN  
 Come right in. Now, we can have a party!

HAPPYOLA  
 (steps in)  
 Hello, Gloria.

GLORIA  
 Hi, Dad. I'm so glad you're here.  
 I feel like giving up.

HAPPYOLA  
 Mustn't do that, Gloria.

GLORIA  
 But I'm afraid you just didn't give him enough character for  
 his role.

IAN  
 My role?  
 (looks at bottle of  
 scotch)  
 This stuff is fantastic. They must've changed the way they  
 make it. Got a name?

HAPPYOLA  
 Of course, I'm Happyola.

IAN  
 Happyola? Woo-hoo!

HAPPYOLA

Yes, also known as Happyola, the Great.

IAN

I see. And how did you acquire that particular name?

HAPPYOLA

Primarily, because I was given the assignment to create this particular universe and I succeeded splendidly.

IAN

You don't say?

HAPPYOLA

Yes, When it comes to everything that exists, as well as everything that doesn't, I'm now a member of senior management. I was also born with an irrepressible smile on my face, which is how I acquired my name.

IAN

And you're never sad or perhaps angry?

HAPPYOLA

Only when I behold the behavior of many members of the human race, especially on this planet.

IAN

Hey, that's different. Where are you two from, anyway?

HAPPYOLA

The other side of matter.

GLORIA

But it really doesn't matter.

IAN

This is too much.

(points to bottle)

I'm changing brands.

GLORIA

We made a mistake with him, Hap.

IAN

Hap? She calls you Hap?

HAPPYOLA

Yes. It's her version of "Pap."

IAN

And you can make mistakes?

HAPPYOLA

I'm afraid so. My only excuse is how many details I have to deal with. But I do my best. For example, I decided that in my universe freedom was a good choice for all the creatures with the intelligence to utilize it. So I gave, or thought I gave, all of them enough brain cells to conduct their lives intelligently. Apparently, I succeeded with every creature but the vast majority of human beings. Deer and elephants do fine. So do frogs and flies. Even trees. Actually, every creature and plant but human beings function as I expected.

IAN

Maybe we're too intelligent to be happy?

HAPPYOLA

Haven't you noticed? Many people, even those considered bright, are miserable, but brilliant people often seem quite content.

GLORIA

Not him. He's so negative.

HAPPYOLA

Don't fret, my dear. Tell him what you want, while I go get something.

Exits in a flash.

IAN

Where'd he go?

GLORIA

Where all spirits go for supplies.

IAN

Of course. Now, listen to your father and tell me what you want.

GLORIA

I want you to think so highly of life that you couldn't possibly write another screenplay where even one person gets injured or killed.

IAN

Sorry, kid. I can't be that irrelevant. Besides, life owes me.

I put up with it, and it puts up with me.

GLORIA

Well, then, just count your blessings. For example, look how symmetrical you are. Two eyes, two ears, a nice nose and mouth in the middle. A brain with two lobes.

IAN

And a heart that's not worth a damn. I have a murmur.

GLORIA

I know.

IAN

Really?

GLORIA

It's in your file.

IAN

What? You have a big book in the sky? I don't go for it. I believe in a world that functions in a perfectly natural way. And I prefer it. At least, I can make my little, earthbound plans without the sky cracking open with an unexpected announcement -- that is, at least, until today.

GLORIA

My father planned it that way.

IAN

Sure, he did, Gloria.

MADELYN Enters.

IAN (CONT'D)

Come off it, you gorgeous excuse for Silly Putty.

MADELYN

Ian, who are you calling Silly Putty? Me?

IAN

No, Madelyn. I'm working on a new script.

MADELYN

Oh. Want me to turn on the digital recorder?

IAN

Not yet. I want to continue to ad lib it for a while.

(to GLORIA)

OK. You're right about my ticker. I've spent my life walking around a casket that keeps snapping its lid at me. Probably should have grabbed me by the ass a long time ago.

MADELYN

Ian, are you sure you're all right?

IAN

Sweetheart, please, don't interrupt. Go for a swim.

MADELYN

All right. But look at my nails. Isn't the color beautiful? It's called Purple Death.

IAN

Wonderful.

MADELYN

Don't get too excited. It's still too early. I'll be outside if you need me.

GLORIA

Your girlfriend?

IAN

She's an office temp.

GLORIA

She looks full-time to me.

IAN

Look, stick to what's on your mind or shove off, OK?

GLORIA

All right. I'm not sure about your murmur.

IAN

Well, I am. I was diagnosed -- once as a child and once in my twenties. My dad had the same thing. He died of a heart attack when he was thirty-one.

GLORIA

That doesn't mean you will.

IAN

Forget it. I've already overstayed my guest shot. Maybe you have, too? What do you mean, coming in here and upsetting a harmless drunk? Especially this drunk. I could have a heart attack.

GLORIA

You look healthy to me.

IAN

Sure, I do. Believe me, I'm just passing through.

GLORIA

But isn't even a moment of life better than no life at all?

IAN

I'll think about it.

GLORIA

What if you knew you were going to live for a long time?

IAN

As long as George Burns?

GLORIA

How about until the age of eighty-six?

IAN

Show me the piece of paper. I'll sign up now.

GLORIA

I wish I could. But there isn't one. Life is merciful that way.

IAN

That's merciful?

GLORIA

You never know when your life will end. So you can be free to live.

IAN

What is going? Now, I'm learning about life from my own hallucinations?

GLORIA

I'm not a hallucination.

IAN

Sure, you're not. That's why Madelyn wondered who I'm talking to. But I know exactly what's going on. My booze-soaked mind has demented to the point of being delusional. But back to your idiotic comment. That's not the way uncertainty works. When you don't know when you're going to die, you think it could happen at any second. I'd rather know.

PHONE rings. HE picks up.

IAN (CONT'D)

(on PHONE)

Hello, Max!... Great! See you soon!

(hangs up)

Time to move along, my delightful delusion. My agent is coming over.

GLORIA

The wonderful Max Palmeri?

IAN

How do you know his name?

GLORIA

As I said, I know a lot about you. Would the thought of living a long time change the way you feel?

IAN

I never considered the possibility.

GLORIA

Would you still think so little of life?

IAN

Why not? "It is a tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing."

GLORIA

But, Ian, if even intelligent people agree life is meaningless, what hope is there for the human race?

IAN

Hope? Find me one intelligent person who doesn't feel surrounded by barbarism, who isn't concerned about the threat of cultural or environmental collapse, and who isn't haunted by explosions and murders. In fact, if every person with a barbarian's brain had to wear a steel helmet with horns, most intelligent people would be afraid to go outside.

GLORIA

Then how can you contribute to --

IAN

-- Hey, come off it. I'm just a harmless grub worm trying to navigate life without getting stepped on.

GLORIA

But, Ian --

IAN

-- Please, it's been hard enough for me just to find a place for myself. But I finally have, and I'm OK about it.

GLORIA

Lucky you.

IAN

I'm never lucky. I've achieved what little success I have despite having the world's worst luck! And do you know why? Because I'm too dumb to quit!

GLORIA

I meant, lucky to have a great talent.

IAN

Maybe a little talent. But don't talk to me about luck. Not even when it comes to women.

GLORIA

What do you mean?

MADELYN enters; overhears.

IAN

I mean, look at you -- a beautiful, intelligent, kind woman -- the kind of woman I've always dreamed about meeting. Only when she shows up in my life, she's an illusion.

MADELYN

Hey, Ian, who's an illusion? Every inch of me is real.

IAN

I told you, I'm working on a script.

MADELYN

But I never saw you get this carried away. Are you sure you haven't had too much to drink?

IAN

I'm never sure of that. But I was in the middle of a very high-energy scene. Can I get back to it?

MADELYN

Sure. But, I don't mind telling you, I'm concerned.

IAN

Return to the pool, please.

MADELYN

OK, OK.

(goes toward door to pool)

GLORIA

I'm not an illusion, Ian.

IAN

Sure, you're not. Except I'm the only one who can see you. How do I take you to a restaurant and have a normal conversation?

MADELYN

(stops and returns)

Ian, are you sure you're OK? I mean, we go to restaurants all the time.

IAN  
(to MADELYN)  
Skip it. Swim, swim!

MADELYN  
Are you sure you don't want me to call for help -- Max or maybe an ambulance?

IAN  
I said I'm fine. Now, please, be a good duck and go for a swim.

(to GLORIA)  
Come on, how do I do it, Gloria?

MADELYN  
Gloria? Is that a new character? Can I play the role?

IAN  
Madelyn, please, let me work.

MADELYN  
Sure, sure.

SHE exits.

GLORIA  
Can we continue?

IAN  
Why not? This is the most interesting conversation I've ever had with myself.

GLORIA  
Good. I have a question. Do you think the universe evolved and supports life for nothing?

IAN  
I haven't got a clue.

GLORIA  
For the time between the start of each life and the end of it.

IAN  
Come on, will ya? It's too brief to give a damn about. We each rise up out of a genetic hole that goes clear back to the first higher molecule, run across a crowded and confused field in the darkness with lightning and thunder all around us, and then, quite unexpectedly, step right off a cliff into a second oblivion -- and all too soon, much, much too soon.

GLORIA

Well, I hope we planned better than that.

IAN

We planned? Come on, Gloria, get real. Excuse me, I forgot. You can't do that.

GLORIA

I can if I want to.

IAN

Really?

GLORIA

Of course. But not now. I want to know, when you think of the universe and the earth circling the sun, don't you think every moment of life is a miracle?

IAN

That's what Einstein said. Exact quote: "Every moment is a miracle." To me it's a nightmare. Who even knows what to do with it? In fact, many a wise man has said you're only truly happy after you're dead.

GLORIA

Really? Have you noticed much laughter coming from the cemetery? Now, think of it, Ian -- eighty-six years! And certain insects only live a day.

IAN

Excuse me. I may be many things, but I'm not an insect. Even if I do expect to have the lifespan of a firefly.

GLORIA

All the more reason to value every moment.

IAN

I might drink a little less.

GLORIA

Good. But I expect much more.

IAN

What the hell gives you the right to expect anything?

GLORIA

Because I have a special calling for you.

IAN

I can't wait to hear this. What is my inebriated brain imaging now?

GLORIA

I want you to become my poet.

IAN

Your what?

GLORIA

The poet of life.

IAN

Is that all? I haven't written a poem in over ten years.

GLORIA

Why did you stop?

IAN

The fact is, once I built my whole life around it -- the music of words. I was wild about it. Totally entranced.

GLORIA

And?

IAN

What can I tell you? I became Golden Boy, so I could make a living. I put away my quill and put on boxing gloves. Besides, I discovered that my mind wasn't aflame with something to say.

GLORIA

That's because you didn't give yourself enough time to find your voice.

IAN

What voice?

GLORIA

The voice of the talent we gave you. The world is full of death and destruction. I desperately need a voice.

IAN

And you're talking about me?

GLORIA

Yes. I want you to do something no other poet in history has done. Devote yourself to writing poetry about the care and intelligent fulfillment of this life.

IAN

You want me to do that? First of all, I'm not sure life is worth saving. I have an excellent case of Kierkegaard's "sickness unto death." Second, there are too many people out there who are absolutely convinced that death is the big picture, not life, including the editors of every literary

(MORE)

IAN (cont'd)

magazine I occasionally still peek into. As a result, the world would either ignore me or crush me.

GLORIA

If it does, all is lost on this planet.

IAN

I'm just not up for the challenge. Heroes often come to a bad end. They try to push back the tide of evil, which finally shapes itself into a force that pushes back at them. And evil kills. Fortunately, for villainous souls, good people don't usually return the favor. I was only made to observe such things and write movies about them.

GLORIA

And just stand by while --

IAN

-- Make me a list of happy people who tried to change the world. How about this one: They made Socrates drink hemlock, crucified Christ, and shot Lincoln. And that's just for starters.

GLORIA

I don't think you really understand, Ian. You can recapture the dream of your youth and celebrate life in poetry.

IAN

What? Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you may die? It's an old story.

GLORIA

No, your poems will be new. You will be the first to appreciate the wonder of life as the highest achievement of the universe, cry out against its abuse and express your hopes for it to flourish.

IAN

Sorry. I can't identify with the role. I just want to get through life with a little, yes, I'll say it, a little relatively undisturbed happiness.

GLORIA

A few people also aim at greatness.

IAN

Please, stick somebody else with the assignment.

GLORIA

We only gave the talent to you.

IAN

Well, give it to somebody else.

GLORIA

We can't. So far in this century we gave a special talent to four people to help humans on this planet appreciate the wonder of life, and three of them did their job.

IAN

Really? Who?

GLORIA

Albert Einstein. Talent: to help humans understand the greatness of the universe. Albert Schweitzer. Talent: to give humans a helpful ethical principle: Reverence for Life.

IAN

Wait a minute. This whole tale leaves me out.

GLORIA

Why?

IAN

Everybody you picked is named Albert.

GLORIA

Not true. The third person was Bertrand Russell. Talent: to explain in modern terms that faith in reason, along with the appreciation of life's natural pleasures, can make happiness possible.

IAN

Don't tell me I'm the fourth person?

(big realization)

I can't possibly fit in with distinguished people like that. I'm just a somewhat gifted screenwriter, who also happens to be a drunk.

GLORIA

Why?

IAN

Why what?

GLORIA

You've only become who you are because you mistrusted and repressed your real talent. You're supposed to be the one who turns thoughts like theirs into beautiful poetry. But I guess we made one of our rare mistakes. Apparently, we didn't give you enough character.

IAN

Tough luck for all of us.

GLORIA

As my father says, it doesn't matter how great a ship is. Without a good captain, it can hit the rocks. In your case, scotch on the rocks. I can't believe we're stuck with you.

Loud KNOCK. HAPPYOLA, THE GREAT,  
enters with a large black book  
under his arm.

IAN

Why not let yourself in?

HAPPYOLA

Sorry, I took so long. I wanted to fill my wife in.

IAN

You have a wife?

HAPPYOLA

You want to think of me as all alone? And I do have a daughter to account for.

(holds up book)

Here it is.

IAN

What?

HAPPYOLA

My big book copycat crimes. To be exact, a complete record of crimes committed within one week of seeing an excessively violent film.

(opens book)

For example, here is the entry for the film Dynamite City. As you may know, it features a maniac who walks around a city randomly throwing lit sticks of dynamite. Now look here. See the two followup instances of exactly the same behavior, resulting in five real-life fatalities and eleven injuries.

IAN

Any of my films in there?

HAPPYOLA

Two are on the waiting list.

GLORIA

So far, you're in luck.

IAN

Don't rub it in. My new film is sure to make the list.

HAPPYOLA

What a sad prospect.

GLORIA

I told you, Hap. He's a lost cause.

HAPPYOLA

Why is that, Ian? I'm certain I gave you a brain ideally suited for the role. But perhaps my daughter is right. I was insufficiently attentive to the character I gave you.

IAN

So don't blame me, OK?

HAPPYOLA

I'm happy to share the blame. But that doesn't solve our problem. We need you to create the poetry on this planet that will inspire the human race to take good care of life and not inflict a very degraded condition on itself or a vastly premature extinction.

IAN

What for? The whole thing's eventually dust to dust. Look at the moon.

HAPPYOLA

Ah, my poor, misunderstood moon. And to think. I only put it there to help you appreciate the environment on the earth. My complete and really quite wonderful idea is atoms, to life, to atoms.

IAN

Everything still ends in dust.

HAPPYOLA

Well, I certainly wouldn't consider my resourceful little atoms dust,

IAN

I couldn't live with myself -- I mean, to b.s. people when we all know we're going to be worm-meat. I've torn away the veil of Maya, as Schopenhauer says, and seen how pathetic the will-to-live really is.

GLORIA

Only one kind of person could have such an attitude. A very early human being.

HAPPYOLA

Yes, such attitudes can develop on the planets where animate life can evolve.

IAN

How could you allow that?

HAPPYOLA

I always give intelligent life the ability to improve its condition.

MADELYN ENTERS.

IAN

Well, Happyola that --

MADELYN

-- Ian, I know you said it's a new script. But what kind of character is called Happyola?

IAN

That's just a working name for a really happy-go-lucky hero.

MADELYN

Oh, but still a bit strange.

IAN

I'll explain everything if you just give me a little space to work out the plot.

HAPPYOLA

Who, may I ask, is she?

GLORIA

His secretary and girlfriend.

MADELYN

Ian, I'm tired of swimming.

IAN

Then work on your tan.

MADELYN

What if I work on you a little, and you work on me? You know, a little afternoon delight -- with my newly manicured nails running up and down your spine.

IAN

I'm too drunk.

HAPPYOLA waves his hand at her; SHE seems affected and changes her tone abruptly.

MADELYN

Oh, excuse me. I have a sudden desire to swim fifty laps.

SHE exits.

IAN

Did you do something to her?

HAPPYOLA

Of course. Now, where were we?

IAN

I still want to know how you could decide it's OK to let people suffer.

HAPPYOLA

It was a tough decision, but every well-made universe is like a well-made car. It has the capacity to function on its own.

IAN

At least, a car comes with an owner's manual.

HAPPYOLA

According to my original specifications, all life forms evolve with enough intelligence to achieve their potential.

IAN

But why do I have to die?

HAPPYOLA

You owe your life to death.

IAN

How's that, Happyola?

HAPPYOLA

If nothing ever died, the earth would have been filled up a long time ago. So there would very likely have been no room left for you.

IAN

Excuse me. I only have conversations like this when I'm sitting around getting smashed with my friends. Why couldn't you time things so we could go to other planets before we got to be too numerous for the earth?

HAPPYOLA

What can I say? It's part of the wonderful variety of my universe. Close planets and distant planets, dinosaurs and space ships -- all at the same time. And at some future date the human race will be able to settle on other planets.

IAN

I'll be dead by then.

HAPPYOLA

If you appreciated life, you might adjust positively to its limits.

IAN

I'm not really in the mood.

HAPPYOLA

Natural variety includes individual life forms with short lives and long ones.

IAN

And mine just happens to be short?

HAPPYOLA

Well, I certainly hope not. We have big plans for you. At any rate, when you're born, a unique candle is lit. When the wax is gone, it goes out. While it burns, you're supposed to send your light out as brightly as you can.

IAN

You sure are a cheerful soul. But there are a ton of reasons not to call life a fun fest.

HAPPYOLA

And a lot of reasons to consider it quite a lot of fun. For example, permit me to demonstrate how generous I've actually been. Please, take your right hand.

IAN

What for?

HAPPYOLA

Rub the back of your left hand lightly, like this.  
(demonstrates)

How does it feel?

IAN

Well, it tickles.

HAPPYOLA

Do you suppose it would feel that way if I intended life to nothing but a vale of tears? And just think how you feel when a lovely woman like my daughter touches you?

IAN

How do your daughter feel about that?

GLORIA

I'm perfectly well adjusted to life.

HAPPYOLA

Yes, she is. Lovemaking is the basic rite of life. And just think. I might have made sex painful.

IAN

It does costs some creatures their lives.

HAPPYOLA

Yes, I delight in the possibilities of matter and energy. Look at a reef and all the colorful fish! Or at a rain forest, with all its bright birds and insects. And consider this: Food didn't have to taste good. The sky didn't have to be blue, the sun gold, and the trees green.

IAN

OK, then, prove how powerful you are. Make a miracle.

HAPPYOLA

Haven't I already made enough of them?

IAN

If you do, I might even start to take you seriously.

HAPPYOLA

Well, perhaps one tiny demonstration. Your hair appears to be receding a bit. Would you like me to make it grow back?

IAN

You can do that?

HAPPYOLA

Mere child's play.

(waves his hand)

IAN's hair fills out. He feels his head.

IAN

My hair is back!

(runs to the mirror)

Wow! Look at that! But everyone knows me without it. They'll think I'm wearing a toupee. Quick, change it back!

HAPPYOLA

See one of the problems with miracles? You must be careful what you wish for. Is it any wonder I decided the universe should function in a perfectly natural way.

(waves his hand  
again)

Same business. IAN looks as he did before.

IAN

(checks mirror)

That was scary, but impressive, even to a drunk.

HAPPYOLA

Thank you. I don't need praise but accept it when offered.

IAN

Even from a booze-soaked, insignificant twerp whose biggest dream is to get though one day at a time?

HAPPYOLA

Wouldn't you be happier as the poet of life?

IAN

I can't identify with the role. Don't you see? I'm too far gone.

GLORIA

That's not true.

HAPPYOLA

You don't care to help save the human race from itself?

IAN

What for? So one day I can be a statue in a park with a pigeon on my head?

HAPPYOLA

But --

IAN

-- That's the way it is, Happyola. I'm no self-sacrificing saint. I'm a semi-content sinner. But wait. What if I just try to write screenplays where nobody gets killed?

HAPPYOLA

Do you know how?

IAN

Never considered the option. You've got a gun to someone's head, you've got an emergency. It's easy. But nobody's interested in happiness. There's no tension.

HAPPYOLA

Excuse me. When I give such a talent to someone, the recipient knows the difference between a negative crisis and a positive crisis. By the latter, I mean when the excitement comes from characters struggling to achieve life-enhancing goals, such as struggles against climate change, disease, and poverty, or to grow personally against their self-imposed inner limits.

IAN

At best, you're talking small-budget material.

GLORIA

Ian, your talent is to do what we're asking. All you have to do is decide to dedicate your life to it.

IAN

And you'll do the rest?

HAPPYOLA

No, you will. There's only one condition.

IAN

What?

HAPPYOLA

You can never write another thing that has unnecessary violence in it.

IAN

But you're OK with the screenplay I just sold?

HAPPYOLA

You have to cancel the deal.

GLORIA

Once you're known for such a violent work, you'll never be taken seriously in your new role.

IAN

But how can I be the poet of life if I'm starving to death?

GLORIA

We'll do what we can to make sure you can make ends meet.

IAN

Great. So what am I supposed to do, live in a farmhouse like Robert Frost?

HAPPYOLA

If you were an accomplished poet, with a new message, wouldn't you be happy in a farmhouse?

IAN

Where's the guarantee?

GLORIA

You have been given the talent.

IAN

I'm telling you, this is wacko, totally wacko.

DOORBELL RINGS.

IAN (CONT'D)

Please, let that be Max.  
 (as he crosses to  
 the door)

He's my agent.

GLORIA

We know that, Ian.

HAPPYOLA

Tell him the deal is off.

IAN

Make yourselves visible and tell him yourselves.

HAPPYOLA

We only appear to selected humans. But we will stay and give you strength.

IAN

(as he crosses to  
 the door)

Thanks a lot.

(opens door)

Max! You have no idea how good it is to see you. Come in.

MAX enters.

MAX

Thanks, Ian. I just wanted to stop by and say congratulations.

(hugs him)

Think of it! A million smackers! You're almost rich!

MADLYN enters.

IAN

I thought you were going to swim fifty laps?

MADLYN

I don't know where I ever got that idea. I was exhausted after five. Max, am I happy you're here or what? Ian is behaving a little --

IAN

-- I confess, crazy.

MAX

You mean, you drank a few too many? And on the day when you should be the happiest guy in Hollywood! What is it with you? Your career is made.

IAN  
What if I can't deliver the script?

MAX  
Why? You never had any trouble delivering the ones I almost had to give away. I thought you're almost done with it.

IAN  
I am.  
(indicates HAPPYOLA  
and GLORIA)  
Notice anything usual?

MAX  
Only if you were sober.

MAX goes to take a seat where HAPPYOLA is sitting. HAPPYOLA slips out of the way deftly, and MAX sits where he was.

HAPPYOLA takes another seat.

IAN  
(to HAPPYOLA)  
Come on, make yourself visible and tell him.

MAX  
Visible? Who? I'm right here.

IAN  
Right.  
(to GLORIA)  
Come on, say something.

MAX  
What?

MADELYN  
See what I mean. He's been acting a little strange.

IAN  
Forget what I said.

MAX  
Gladly. I told you I'd come through for you, kid.

IAN  
Yeh.  
(takes another swig  
of scotch)  
Thanks a million.

MAX

Take it from me, Ian. Lay off the booze. You already drink more than a forgotten star. And imagine how many scripts you could write if you stayed sober in the afternoon, too.

IAN

Maybe you're right, Max. I'm having the craziest thoughts.

GLORIA

You are not.

IAN

The hell I'm not.

MAX

Ian, I'm not disagreeing. It's a wonder you can still have any thoughts. Just wrap up the screenplay, and we're in the money.

IAN

Right. But let me ask you something. What if I try to write another kind of screenplay?

MAX

Worth a million bucks? You have my blessing.

IAN

I was thinking maybe a screenplay where nobody gets killed.

MAX

Sure. Nobody but the author and the agent.

IAN

I thought I might give it a try.

MAX

You put any kind of script on my desk that I can sell for a million bucks or more, and I'll be happy to sell it.

IAN

Really?

MAX

Anything that helps you get off the sauce, even if it damages your reputation as a fearless writer. But don't get carried away. I needed Ten Killers yesterday. Paramount is waiting.

GLORIA

Tell him no, Ian.

HAPPYOLA

Show that I gave you the strength of character.

IAN  
I tried. Which is more than you two did.

MAX  
More than who, Ian?

IAN  
(points)  
Them.

MADELYN  
I'm getting the creeps just listening to him.

MAX  
Oh, he's just seeing a few things.

GLORIA  
But --

IAN  
-- Forget it. Max, I need help. I don't want to give up my first million-dollar deal!

MAX  
Don't even mention such a thing. Just finish the script. I could use the commission, too. The new ten-thousand square foot house my wife and I are building in Brentwood is costing more than I projected.

(looks at watch)  
I have to be on my way.  
(stands)  
"I have miles to go before I sleep."

GLORIA  
Tell him now, Ian.

HAPPYOLA  
You can do it.

IAN  
You tell him. Come on, appear and tell him!

MAX  
Ian, baby, I'm right here. Tell who what?

MADELYN  
Ian, you keep up this crazy behavior, and I'm gonna be afraid to stay here, even if it costs me my career.

PHONE RINGS; MAX takes a smartphone out of his pocket.

MAX  
Excuse me.

(MORE)

MAX (cont'd)

(on PHONE)

Max here.... Oh, hi, Al.

(to IAN)

It's Paramount.

(back on PHONE)

I'm with Ian right now. Should have it for you tomorrow.... Guaranteed, baby.... I'll let you know as soon as he delivers it.

(ends call)

Hear that, kid? I gave my word. Tomorrow, no ifs, ands, or buts.

IAN

Count on it.

GLORIA

Ian, how can you say that?

HAPPYOLA

Where is the character I gave you?

IAN

If it's that important to you, you break the news to him!

MAX

What news? Look, Ian, you want me to stay till you finish the script. I can cancel my other appointments.

IAN

I'm OK.

(to HAPPYOLA and  
GLORIA)

The least you could do is prove you're real.

MAX

What do you mean, Ian? I'm for real. The deal is for real. What else do you need to know?

IAN

Nothing, Max.

MAX

But, Ian, I'm concerned. Why not take a nap to sober up and enjoy a relaxing evening with your girlfriend. Then tomorrow first thing, put the finishing touches on the script and shoot it over to me.

IAN

I'm telling you, I'm OK. I'm actually just starting to work out a new idea for a script and getting a little carried away with the characters.

MAX  
Oh, why didn't you just say so?

GLORIA  
I am so disappointed in you, Ian.

HAPPYOLA  
Extremely disappointed.

IAN  
Well, I'm not.

MAX  
Not what?

IAN  
Nothing.

MAX  
Not nothing? A double negative. Take it from me, Ian, lay off the booze and think of your future. It's big, in fact, it could be huge. Even bigger than Tom Clancy.

IAN  
You really think so?

MAX  
But only if you stay sober. Then, trust me, nobody's better at killer stories than you are.

IAN  
Thanks, Max. You'll have the script tomorrow.

MAX  
To play it safe, how about by noon?

HAPPYOLA  
Tell him you changed your mind

IAN  
Not a chance, Happyola!

MAX  
Happyola? Who the hell is Happyola? It's me, Max.  
(puts his arm around  
him)

Put a cork in it, will ya, kid?  
(to MADELYN)

Make sure he finishes the script before he hits the sauce tomorrow, OK?

MADELYN  
If I'm still here.

MAX

Just remember -- you have a role set aside for you in this film.

MADELYN

I'm so excited about it.

MAX

Then stay on his case.

MADELYN

I'll do my best.

MAX

Good. It's the most and the least you can do.

(heads for door; to

IAN)

Tomorrow. Ya hear that? I'll leave you a note.

(takes out notebook

and scribbles;

tears it out and

hands it to him)

Here. Read it first thing in the morning.

MAX exits.

IAN

(to GLORIA and

HAPPYOLA)

Stop haunting me! Got it?

MADELYN

Me? How am I haunting you?

IAN

I wasn't talking to you.

(to HAPPYOLA and

GLORIA)

Why didn't you make yourselves visible?

MADELYN

Here we go again. Ian, concentrate on me. I'm right here.

HAPPYOLA

That's not the way things work in my universe. You must be the one who gets all the credit -- or all the blame -- for what you do.

IAN

I'll share it. Go on. Go after Max and tell him I'm supposed to give up screenwriting and become the poet of life!

MADELYN  
A poet? What poet?

IAN  
Go on, Gloria.

MADELYN  
Who's Gloria? I'm Madelyn, remember?

IAN  
(to MADELYN)  
I'm working on the new screenplay again.  
(to GLORIA)  
Who are you and your dad anyway but figments of my alcoholic  
imagination?

(to MADELYN)  
The new story is somewhat autobiographical.

MADELYN  
Whatever you say, Ian, But I gotta say -- you gotta detox.

IAN  
(to MADELYN)  
Sure, sure.  
(to GLORIA and  
HAPPYOLA)  
Give me a break, will ya?  
(goes to door and  
opens it)  
Please, go haunt someone else.

MADELYN  
Me? Ian? Who would I haunt?

IAN  
Skip it. I'm getting rid of the characters in the new  
screenplay so I can concentrate on you.

MADELYN  
Oh, great.

HAPPYOLA  
Gloria, my dear, perhaps we should leave. At least, for now.

GLORIA  
I guess Hap.  
(to IAN)  
You could have been the poet of life. Now all you can be is  
a rich drunk. And in the arms of the lovely Madelyn.

IAN  
I'll settle for that.

MADELYN

What do you mean, you'll settle? To concentrate on me?

IAN

I told you, I'm just wrapping up work on the new script.

HAPPYOLA

We'll be back.

IAN

No, you won't. I'm cutting back on the sauce. I've had my last drunken delusion.

MADELYN

Well, it's about time.

IAN

Good-bye!

MADELYN

To me again?

IAN

To the booze. Goodbye forever!

HAPPYOLA and GLORIA exit.

IAN (CONT'D)

(closes door)

Never let a stranger in your house.

MADELYN

A stranger? Is that all I am to you?

IAN

I wasn't referring to you.

MADELYN

But, if it was just a screenplay, why did you have to open the door? You had to act that out, too?

IAN

What else?

MADELYN

Wow, I never saw you get that realistic. Can I play Gloria, too?

IAN

Why not?

(goes to bar)

I think I'll have one more sip before I give it up.

HE picks up a bottle of scotch and sees it's empty; then HE notices a white flower lying on the bar. HE picks it up and looks at it. Then HE drops it in neck of the empty bottle, so that it sticks out of it.

LIGHTS fade down. Beat. Come back up.

MADELYN is at the word processor.  
IAN is staring out the window.

MADELYN

Ian, if this new kind of screenplay helps you drink less, I'm all for it. What are you gonna call it?

IAN

I don't have a title yet. I just know it has to be totally nonviolent.

MADELYN

I have a suggestion. Instead of Ten Killers, how about Ten Chickens?

IAN

Thanks for the encouragement.

MADELYN

I'm sorry, Ian, but so far the story doesn't excite me.

IAN

You think it excites me? Now, let's see. I've got a likable hero. He's got a girl friend, who's also really likable. And they've got a big problem. They're fighting to save the forest on government land, because it's home to the great-horned owl. But the timber company has a lot of influence. What time is it?

MADELYN

Almost eleven.

IAN

Did you say almost noon?

MADELYN

You don't need to write this kind of sappy screenplay, Ian. Especially when it gets in the way of finishing Ten Killers. Remember, Max is waiting.

PHONE rings.

MADELYN

Apparently impatiently.  
(answers phone)

Ian Evans.  
(hands over  
receiver)

Yep. The one and only.

IAN

Tell him I flew to Fiji.  
(takes PHONE)

I know, Max. I'm working on it, but I may need an extra  
day.... All right, I'll messenger it over later.  
(hangs up)

That's it!

MADELYN

For what?

IAN

Ten Chickens! I tried and now I know. I have no talent for  
the struggles of idealistic characters. Let's get back to  
Ten Killers.

MADELYN

It's about time.

IAN

I need a drink.

MADELYN

Please, Ian. Think of your career -- and mine. Or I'm going  
to the beach. There's only a little left to do.

IAN

You're right. What was I thinking?      Where were we?

MADELYN

I'm still waiting for the clever answer to the question,  
"How would you like a dozen bullets in your face at once."

IAN

Right. Here it is. "Actually, I'd prefer one naked woman."

HE picks up the empty bottle of  
scotch and notices that the flower  
is gone.

LIGHTS fade down. Beat. Come up  
again.

IAN is drunk again. KNOCK at the door. HE makes his way over, drink in hand, and looks out the peephole. Relieved,

HE picks up the manuscript envelope on the table near the door, opens the door, and hands the manuscript to a messenger.

IAN

Remember, it's a rush.

(closes door;  
relieved, HE goes to  
the PHONE and picks  
it up; dials; on  
PHONE)

It's Ian. Tell Max the script is on the way.

HE takes another sip of scotch. Then HE heads to the armoire. HE opens the glass door and takes out a photograph of his mother.

IAN

Come on, Mom, tell me, it was you, wasn't it, wanting me to be a good son and make use of all the books you gave me to read? But then who was Happyola -- dad? This is all too crazy!

HE puts her picture back, as we hear a loud KNOCK at the door.

IAN

Again?

(takes another sip  
and heads for  
the door. Opens it  
and sees GLORIA)

Ah, ha! And I'm not even that drunk today!

GLORIA

May I come in?

IAN

Can I stop you? You walk through walls, don't you?

GLORIA

Only when I have to.

(enters)

I can't believe you sent the screenplay to Max.

IAN

I tried to write a commendable and heartwarming screenplay, but I couldn't make it work.

GLORIA

We appreciated the effort. But did we ask you to give up your million-dollar deal for that? Talk to me. What did we want you to do?

IAN

I can't even say it. The whole idea embarrasses me. It makes me self-conscious. But now I know.

(goes to armoire and  
takes out  
photograph)

You remind me of my mother.

GLORIA

Your mother?

IAN

That's it, isn't it? I've internalized my mother the way Freud says the primal sons internalize the father they kill, who haunts them even more, because now he's inside their minds, watching their every thought. My mother tried to take over my conscience. Why didn't I see it before? You're my mother!

GLORIA

(goes up to him and  
kisses him on the  
lips)

Did your mother ever kiss you like that?

IAN

I didn't know you kiss, Gloria.

GLORIA

Kissing is part of life, isn't it?

IAN

Excuse me, but I have to ask. Do you make love, too?

GLORIA

Naturally.

IAN

What a wonderful illusion! I love this booze! But just to have children, right? You're too good for anything else?

GLORIA

Why do you think you can make love often? You wouldn't want that many children, would you?

IAN

I'd be the father of nations. You do it just for pleasure, too?

GLORIA

My father evolved all his creatures so making love would also help bring physical joy to life and bring people closer together.

An INTRUDER wearing a trench coat, hat, and mask slips in from the pool entrance and observes the conversation. HE has a pistol.

GLORIA

The realization should make it easier for you to write poetry that celebrates life.

IAN

I'm no good at positive stuff.

GLORIA

The kind of poetry I had in mind for you is far different from the screenplay you were working on. Among other things, you would discover how to use your talent for violence, death and destruction in a positive way.

IAN

How would I do that?

GLORIA

You were given a complete talent.

IAN

I don't want to talk about it anymore.

GLORIA

Why? Don't you see that life is crying out for help, like a neglected orphan on a doorstep? Its plight can inspire you to cry out against the harm being inflicted on it.

IAN

Well, Gloria, I have to admit it. For an illusion, you've got some pretty interesting answers.

GLORIA

I'm telling you, Ian, there is greatness in you, but you've become lost. Now is the moment to reclaim the talent you were born with. Now, before it's too late.

IAN

The messenger already left with the script.

GLORIA

I know. Call the messenger service and stop the delivery. Just think. You can be in love with the music of words again. You can take up the books you once loved and make them a real part of your everyday life. And you can live the life of a great poet. All you have to do is accept the talent we gave you.

IAN

Maybe I need a psychiatrist.

GLORIA

Why? I'm real, Ian. Real as the kiss I gave you. Besides, you read the most important books of psychiatry and psychology years ago, didn't you? And why? To prepare yourself to be the great modern poet we need.

IAN

Sorry, Gloria. I can't sabotage my career as a screenwriter, especially now, when it's just taking off.

The INTRUDER comes forward with the gun pointed at IAN.

INTRUDER

Up with your hands!

GLORIA

Don't shoot him. I need him.

INTRUDER

Shut up, beautiful.

(to IAN)

Your wallet. Hand it over or die.

IAN

Sure, sure.

(takes it out of his pocket)

Here.

INTRUDER

(looks inside it)

Not much cash. Where do you keep it?

IAN

That's all I have around here.

INTRUDER

Then prepare to meet your maker.

GLORIA

Please, don't.

IAN

(indicates wallet)

Take my ATM card. I'll tell you my pin number. You can clean out my checking account.

INTRUDER

How much is in there?

IAN

A few hundred dollars.

INTRUDER

And you live in this house? Where's the card for your savings account?

IAN

I don't have one.

INTRUDER

Where's the rest of your money?

IAN

That's all I have right now. I'm waiting for a check.

INTRUDER

And you live in a house like this? Get real. Where's the safe?

IAN

I wish I had one.

INTRUDER

A likely story. Take me to it or die.

GLORIA

Oh, please, don't shoot him.

INTRUDER

Shut up and get your purse.

GLORIA

I don't have a purse. I'm only visiting.

INTRUDER

Then butt out.

(points gun at IAN's  
face)

Goodbye, pal.

IAN

Go ahead and shoot. I don't give a damn about life anyway. The sooner I'm dead, the sooner all my useless questing will be over.

INTRUDER

You sure about that, buddy?  
(points gun at him)

IAN

OK, I admit it. Life isn't so bad after all.

INTRUDER

Then, my dear Mr. Evans, how would you like a dozen bullets in your face at once?

IAN

I don't want to insult you or anything, but that's my line. Who are you anyway?

INTRUDER

As far as you're concerned, the messenger of death.

GLORIA

Oh, please, he's an important person.

INTRUDER

How important? I made a study. He's just another merchant of death.

GLORIA

But --

INTRUDER

-- How do you like it when a gun is staring you in the face, pretty boy?

IAN

To tell you the truth, I'd rather be on the beach.

INTRUDER

Take the experience as a lesson -- appreciate your life and live in a way that's worthy of it!

IAN

Wait a minute. Who the hell are you?

INTRUDER tears off hat, mask, and coat, revealing that he is HAPPYOLA, the Great.

GLORIA

Dad, how could you scare us like that?

HAPPYOLA

To bring my big book of copycat crimes to life for him.

IAN

I thought you said you were never vengeful.

HAPPYOLA

That doesn't mean I can't give you a little reality therapy, does it?

IAN

You think you can change my mind with a threat? Forget it! I'm like Camus's rebel. I will decide to live and love, despite death and every other liability life entails! That is, if I so choose! The trouble is, you look at life like Voltaire's Dr. Pangloss.

GLORIA

Please, Ian, calm down.

HAPPYOLA

He was not as foolish as the author presents him. All actually is "for the best in this best of all possible worlds."

IAN

Then let me ask you the classic question. If you're such a good guy, why is there evil?

HAPPYOLA

If I made evil impossible, what could possibly be the merit of being good?

IAN

Why did we have to wait so long to discover things like antibiotics? Sounds sadistic to me.

HAPPYOLA

If I made all things perfect to begin with, what on earth would you humans do with your minds? Sit around century after century without a thing to achieve.

IAN

I suppose you've got an excuse for all the wars, too?

HAPPYOLA

Hey, don't blame me. I gave you freedom, and some people abuse it. Humans who love life intelligently would never fight a war, except for defense -- that is, to save lives.

IAN

But now you're dealing with a species with a bloody past. One civilization after another is conquered, and when the Roman Empire goes down, Western Civilization is numbed out. Flash forward to the 20th Century and T. S. Eliot writes, "April is the cruelest month..."

GLORIA

What a horrible thought, that the spring rebirth of life life could be cruel.

IAN

I agree. I'm not that far gone.

HAPPYOLA

Faint hope! We really do have a problem, Gloria. And, as you know, a great deal of it is due to another person who didn't have faith in the talent we gave him.

(turns to Ian)

His name was Veracles.

IAN

Never heard of him.

GLORIA

That should tell you something.

HAPPYOLA

Haven't you noticed the gap in he left? Your philosophers have talked about reason and happiness, justice and the good, pleasure and perception, truth and language. But not one of them is known for the idea that none of these things would exist as a human value without life itself.

IAN

And all because --

GLORIA

-- of another human like you.

HAPPYOLA

And what harm his lack of faith in his talent has caused! Until you humans value life as it should be, you can't even have a clear definition of good and evil.

IAN

(takes a sip of  
whiskey)

Oh, come on, Happyola. I didn't tell Gloria when she mentioned Albert Schweitzer. But the poet Wordsworth mentions "reverence for life" in one of his poems.

HAPPYOLA

Good, Ian, good! Waking up your memory, I see.

IAN

I don't have to wake it up to remember that. Heck, the legal principle of the "sanctity of life" is a cliché'. And you want me to dedicate my life to --

HAPPYOLA

-- present in beautiful language an appreciation of life based on logic and human knowledge to date. I myself will indulge in the currently questionable act of syllogizing. We should appreciate what human values depend on. They depend on life. Therefore, we should appreciate life.

GLORIA

Then you can get specific. Love depends on life. Love is a good value. Therefore, we should value life.

IAN

How romantic, Gloria. But face it. A lot of rotten things depend on life, too. For instance, murder.

HAPPYOLA

Then let me say, Good things and bad things depend on life. Good things still depend on life. So humans should value life.

GLORIA

I'd go even further, Daddy. How about this? We should value what good things depend on. At least, one good thing depends on life. Therefore, we should value life.

HAPPYOLA

Excellent, Gloria. And, Mr. Evans, if you take a survey of your beliefs, I think you'll find at least one good thing depends on life, for example, scotch.

IAN

But on balance --

HAPPYOLA

-- Appreciating life is for people who see some good in it and, ideally, more good than bad.

GLORIA

And you could help make sure there are more such people.

IAN

Sure, sure, But let me ask you. How do you excuse such things as hurricanes and earthquakes?

HAPPYOLA

May we take them one at a time?

IAN

Why not?

PHONE rings.

IAN (CONT'D)

Excuse me.

(answers phone)

Hi, Max.... The script is on the way.... Call me when you get it .... Thanks.

(hangs up)

GLORIA

I feel like giving up.

HAPPYOLA

(to GLORIA)

Patience, my dear.

(to IAN)

Let's begin with hurricanes. As you know, the global weather system is quite large and, I admit, it can develop conditions that affect you as extremes. But overall it has been gentle enough to have evolved life and to continue to support it. Additionally, you're learning to make your buildings wind-resistant. And one day you may discover how to steer a hurricane away from land.

IAN

Really?

HAPPYOLA

Yes. One day you may even discover how to unspin a tornado. I've certainly given humans the brains to do it.

IAN

So you say. Now, explain away earthquakes?

HAPPYOLA

By now, you've learned how fast the earth travels through space and time, along with how it renews its surface over what you consider long periods. Yet just hitting a pothole can jolt you more than an earthquake along your local San Andreas Fault.

GLORIA

And by now you've learned how to make buildings that can withstand them.

HAPPYOLA

Anyway, it's the smoothest ride through space and time I could arrange. Do you think you might have done better?

IAN

Hey, it's beyond me.

HAPPYOLA

Thank you. For once, you're right.

IAN

Well, I hate to press the matter. But what about mud slides? My house could be pushed right off its perch in Malibu.

HAPPYOLA

Why haven't you planned better?

IAN

Come on, I --

HAPPYOLA

-- ask you to consider the environment on the earth, compared to the environment on the moon. Or, for that matter, on any other planet in your star system.

IAN

Oh, come on, the whole life thing's based on a really horrible idea.

HAPPYOLA

What, may I ask, is that?

IAN

Did you ever watch the Discovery Channel?

HAPPYOLA

Excuse me, I don't have a great deal to discover.

IAN

I mean, the entire eat or be eaten setup. How can you excuse that?

HAPPYOLA

You can always go vegan.

IAN

Tell that to a lion or a crocodile.

HAPPYOLA

Everything in the universe needs energy, and it has to get it somewhere. So I decided that all creatures have two functions -- to enjoy their lives and to help support other life.

IAN

People included?

HAPPYOLA

Personally, I think your primary secondary function is to be good stewards of the earth and to help other forms of life flourish. But you also need the common sense to avoid close encounters with great white sharks and other such creatures.

IAN

I still don't see the setup as ideal.

HAPPYOLA

What would you prefer -- a universe where your daily sustenance arrives in mysterious containers from what you call outer space?

GLORIA

My father had to make a lot of hard decisions and he had the courage to, which is more than we can say for you.

HAPPYOLA

Thank you, Gloria.

(to IAN)

What we need you to do is appreciate my handiwork.

GLORIA

And value it so much you'll be my poet.

MADELYN ENTERS in beach clothes.

IAN

No chance. How can I even be sure you exist?

MADELYN

I'll tell you how. I got too much sun. Look at me. Red as a lobster.

IAN

Take a cold shower.

MADELYN

Maybe you should take one, too?

IAN

I'm working on the new script again.

MADELYN

So I noticed. Did the messenger pick up Ten Killers?

IAN

A while ago.

MADELYN

Call if you need me. I have to shower and put on some body lotion.

EXITS.

IAN

Can we get back to my question?

HAPPYOLA

Excellent. I've been described in countless ways. But there's one I particularly like.

IAN

What's that?

HAPPYOLA

One that refers to my proudest achievement. Just say I'm the ultimate source of life.

IAN

Just?

HAPPYOLA

Well, the universe, too. But I'd be content to be known for my favorite accomplishment.

IAN

You mean, as the ultimate source of life?

HAPPYOLA

What else? And, since you know that life exists, you know that I do, too.

IAN

I'm not convinced.

GLORIA

Why not? Just because he doesn't keep poking into every human's life?

HAPPYOLA

Let me ask you a question. Do you really need a personal connection with the infinite to be happy?

IAN

I'm just like most people. I can't help it. I have these infinite longings. Why did you give them to us if they can't connect with you?

HAPPYOLA

I decided to give you minds that could think of the possibilities -- and leave it up to you to decide what to believe.

IAN

But what if I feel as if I'm in a big black bag and want to break out and participate in infinite vistas?

GLORIA

Daddy, why don't you tell him about your puzzle without an answer?

IAN

What? Are we back to Heidegger's famous question. Why is there something instead of nothing?

HAPPYOLA

Oh, that one's easy. It's because I decided that something is better than nothing. So much better that you say in human science, without the graceful language we wish you to contribute, that nature abhors a vacuum.

IAN

OK, let's hear the answer to a hard one.

HAPPYOLA

How about this? Was life initiated by something outside the universe or by the universe itself?

IAN

That's hardly a new question, Happyola.

HAPPYOLA

No, but the answer is readily apparent.

IAN

OK, let's hear it.

HAPPYOLA

There's no need for you to know the answer. You only have to know how to live -- specifically, to accept life as a great gift, despite what you may perceive of its shortcomings, and to fulfill your finest possibilities with thoughtfulness for others, help, or at least allow, others to fulfill theirs, and then when your life to nears its natural completion, to be satisfied that you were privileged to experience existence and have your eternal place in the great unfolding of the universe. You'd certainly know I would find such a life highly commendable. And now I've certainly told you enough.

IAN

Then why do I still want to know more?

HAPPYOLA

My, you are a persistent fellow. All right, I'll tell you one more thing. Why would we want to be completely apart from our creations?

IAN

How do I know?

HAPPYOLA

We like to be part of them. That's why we all exist in the same universe. I only wish human beings were as happy as we are.

IAN

Trust me. You've got a long wait.

HAPPYOLA

Not a possibility. You see, the change from death orientation to life orientation has to happen at about the same time people on a planet develop enough to destroy most of its life -- with weapons, overpopulation, and pollution. The change is, in fact, the usual pivot of history -- and it's often a close call. But I'm pleased to say that the humans on most planets make it.

IAN

Maybe too close a call for this planet.

HAPPYOLA

Ah-ha! Now you know why we need your help.

IAN

What you want from me doesn't play to my strength.

GLORIA

You are so wrong, Ian.

HAPPYOLA

Let me give you a little help. Do you know how hard it is to get into life?

IAN

How about I get into Alcoholics Anonymous?

HAPPYOLA

How about a swimming lesson instead?

IAN

A swimming lesson? Now I know I need to get into AA.

HAPPYOLA

No need for that if you hearken to our plea. Now, let's say there were swimming races three or four times a week for many years. In every race, there were a million or two entrants. And during all those races, over all those years, there were only two races when there was a prize waiting for the winner. You do have a brother, don't you?

IAN

How do you know?

HAPPYOLA

Why wouldn't we? Now, to go on. What if the millions of swimmers were your father's sperm, and the two prizes were your mother's eggs? See what the odds were against getting into life? And you were one of the winners!

IAN

Woo-hoo!

GLORIA

Just think, Ian! Since every sperm and egg are genetically different, only one sperm and egg could turn out to be you. So you not only got into the right race; you won it!

HAPPYOLA

Yes, isn't the truth of life a natural miracle? No wonder when the humans on most planets begin to understand the processes of life, reverence for life becomes the usual foundation of their religion.

IAN

I gotta tell you both, this is one choice hallucination. Am I supposed to write poetry about that kind of stuff, too?

HAPPYOLA

One day you may actually find a way.

GLORIA

I promise you can make it all sound as miraculous as it is.

IAN

Uh-oh. You two may be having an effect on me.

HAPPYOLA

Well, it's about time.

GLORIA

How can you tell?

IAN

I just remembered something that makes more sense to me now.

HAPPYOLA

What is it?

IAN

In one of his letters, Chekhov, whose writing I admire, said "My holy of holies is the human body."

HAPPYOLA

Yes, I commended him for that.

IAN

You knew Chekhov?

HAPPYOLA

I just patted him on the back once, but when he turned to look, I remained invisible.

GLORIA

But don't you see? You'll be joining a proud tradition.

HAPPYOLA

Yes, you will. And there are a multitude of topics you'll be able to express in poetry. For instance, do you realize how wonderful it is that you can see a woman like my lovely daughter and, without even touching her, feel desire?

IAN

You're right there. You don't mind?

HAPPYOLA

Why would I mind? I designed the setup.

IAN

That kind of poetry I might be able to write.

HAPPYOLA

Let me give you added inspiration. If you do as we need you to, I'll do a really wonderful thing for you.

IAN

What?

HAPPYOLA

I will, with her consent, make my entirely lovely daughter human.

IAN

What for?

HAPPYOLA

I think you might want to be with someone who's more likely to stay with you after you become a poet. A woman who can give you inspiration and joy all your life.

IAN

Wow, that's hot! What do you say about that, Gloria?

GLORIA

I like the idea.

IAN

Really? Will you even be with me when I'm sober?

GLORIA  
Yes, and visible, too.

IAN  
To everyone?

GLORIA  
Uh-huh.

HAPPYOLA  
Consider yourself lucky. She is life itself, and once you are together, she will always be with you.

IAN  
Hey, I'm starting to like this plot. Will you ever kiss me again?

GLORIA  
Every day and every night.  
(she kisses him)

IAN  
Then let's get to it. Will you ever make love with me?

GLORIA  
That's part of my father's design, isn't it? Yet in a way, I already have.

IAN  
Funny, I didn't notice.

GLORIA  
Life is always at one with you, every moment you're alive.

IAN  
Come on, Gloria, I mean, will I ever be able to take you in my arms and really make love with you?

HAPPYOLA  
One one condition. Will you do as we ask and consecrate yourself to life?

IAN  
And if I do?

HAPPYOLA  
She will become your wife in every sense of the word.

IAN  
My wife?

HAPPYOLA  
Yes.

IAN  
And you agree?

GLORIA  
What else?

HAPPYOLA  
And I will perform the ceremony myself.

IAN  
You will?

HAPPYOLA  
As soon as you consent to our one condition.

IAN  
OK, OK. But do I want a wife?

GLORIA  
Well, that's up to you, Ian.

HAPPYOLA  
Let me tell you, a wife like her doesn't come along every day.

GLORIA  
How about once in a lifetime?

IAN  
I'll tell ya, this is quite an illusion.

GLORIA  
I can be as real as you are, Ian. Just tell me you will always be my poet, no matter how challenging the role becomes -- my beloved poet through any number of rejections and years of poverty, my treasured poet even if you achieve nothing while you are alive.

IAN  
Achieve nothing? I thought you gave me the talent to succeed.

HAPPYOLA  
We did. But, as you know, many great people have lived without recognition during their lifetimes. I myself spend quite a lot of time without recognition for creating the universe and its abundant life.

IAN  
At least, you don't have to deal with poverty and hunger. I'm supposed to give up a million-dollar screenplay deal for that kind of uncertainty?

HAPPYOLA

You must decide now. Do you want wealth and security or a satisfying and quite possibly great life?

IAN

How about all of those things?

HAPPYOLA

Perhaps, one day. But now you must decide.

GLORIA

Tell me you will dedicate your life to being my poet, and I will always be yours.

IAN

Tell me more.

GLORIA

Yours, once I am human, with love and all its natural expressions.

HAPPYOLA

Choose, Ian, before we vanish, and you find yourself with no more than wealth, self-hate, and booze.

IAN

But I don't want to be a Pollyanna. Suffering is real. Death is real.

HAPPYOLA

I gave humans the ability to reduce suffering, and the experience of what you call death is only for the living.

IAN

You mean, as Epicurus said, "Death is nothing to us, because it is the loss of consciousness."

HAPPYOLA

The day he said that I put a gold star next to his name. I can only tell you so much, but I'm very generous and encourage you to live thinking how wonderful the idea is of life as a free gift -- simply yours to enjoy and do your best with for as long as you're alive and then to live on in the memory of those who love you -- and perhaps those who will forever admire your life-devoted poetry.

IAN

I get what you're saying. But is everyone's epitaph "He died without knowing it"?

HAPPYOLA

Let me simply say that you may have as many worries after you're dead as you had before you were born.

IAN

But what about eternal justice? Who will finally right every wrong?

HAPPYOLA

I can't get into the eternal aspect. But haven't you noticed? I built perfectly natural justice into human life -- in the sense that people become what they do.

IAN

That has a familiar ring to it, Happyola. I remember now. The idea is in Plato.

HAPPYOLA

Yes, we're very proud of him.

GLORIA

He accepted his gift for philosophy from us, and the rest is history.

HAPPYOLA

Exactly. To elaborate, if you pollute the environment, you become a person who polluted the environment. If you kill someone for any reason other than to save other life, you become a killer. And look at who you've become because you have not listened to the voice of your talent.

IAN

But what about scotch? No way I can give that up.

HAPPYOLA

No need to. I'm the one who put the potential to distill scotch from barley, as well as ferment grape juice into wine. But, when you are at peace with yourself, you may want to moderate your intake. Remember: I made alcohol in moderation good for your heart.

IAN

I could sing your praises for that alone.

HAPPYOLA

I don't need praise. Just appreciation of my achievements. Ian, I promise that you have the sensitivity and inspiration to be who we're asking you to be. Gloria will be by your side to help you find happiness while you describe life in such a way that people all over the earth will begin to realize how fortunate they are to have a share of it. Your words will become among their most treasured works. With your help, the earth will become a planet where life is considered sacred and never unnecessarily hurt. It will become the paradise of life I created it with the potential to be. And you will forever be the poet who brought about the transformation.

IAN

Wow! That's big.

GLORIA goes up to him and takes him in her arms.

GLORIA

Call the messenger service and tell them to return your screenplay.

IAN

If I only knew all this is real!

GLORIA

(kisses him  
passionately)

Is that real enough?

IAN

Tell me, is this fair? OK, I'd do it if I could!

HAPPYOLA

Then, my friend -- or, should I say, my son-in-law? -- no problem at all.

IAN

What do you mean? It's probably been delivered already.

HAPPYOLA

I decided to perform another small miracle.

(holds up envelope  
with script)

Behold! Your screenplay.

GLORIA

Good work, Dad.

IAN

You lifted it from the messenger service?

HAPPYOLA

Just now. There are certain times when I have a remarkably good idea of what the right thing to do is.

IAN

But to give up a million dollars when I'm already a month behind on my mortgage? I don't know how wise that is, even when I'm drunk.

GLORIA

I will live with you and love you, wherever we live.

IAN

I'll tell you, Happyola, even if this is, if you'll excuse the expression, one helluva an illusion...

(kisses GLORIA  
passionately)

... I'll take it.

HAPPYOLA

Congratulations! Her life with you is now her most important calling.

IAN

Hold it. Before we finalize the deal, what if I sober up? I need a reality check.

HAPPYOLA

Even after I offered you the hand of my beautiful daughter?

IAN

(touches Gloria's  
face)

Can you really become real?

GLORIA

As real as you are.

IAN

But if I cancel the film deal, Max will murder me.

GLORIA

Simply explain what your new calling is.

IAN

Trust me. He won't get it. But guess what? I don't think I care anymore. Hey, it's true -- I don't.

HAPPYOLA

Ah, you have finally gotten in touch with the character I gave.

(crosses to him with  
GLORIA and takes his  
hand)

IAN

OK, OK. I'm sold!

HAPPYOLA

Wonderful. From this moment on, you are her poet of life. She will be your wife and give you faith in life. She will help inspire you to write the first great poems based on a true appreciation of life's greatness. You will know that what your physicists call the big bang was the birth of the universe, that what they call energy is the basic life of

(MORE)

HAPPYOLA (cont'd)

it, what they call matter is the substance that is the home of its life, and what they call gravity is a form of love that binds the whole universe together. And you, with her loving assistance, will turn the eyes of the world away from obsession with death toward devotion to life. You and you alone have been called to do it and must do it -- for what is the end of death-orientation but universal death?

(takes drink away  
from IAN and motions  
for him and GLORIA  
to kiss each other)

GLORIA

With this kiss, I, the spirit of life, make you my voice on earth!

IAN

I can only say I'll try my best to be your poet and...  
(pauses, swallows)  
... and to be a good husband.

HAPPYOLA

That's all we can ask!  
(holds out two  
rings)

GLORIA

How beautiful! Thank you, Dad.

IAN

Yeh, thanks.

HAPPYOLA

I picked them up at Tiffany.

THEY put the rings on their fingers.

HAPPYOLA

Then, Ian and Gloria, by the power vested in me by myself, I pronounce you man and wife.

HE motions, and THEY kiss again.

HAPPYOLA

Now, I must leave you to your callings. The universe is quite large, and I've got a multitude of things to do  
(kisses GLORIA)  
Good-bye, my brilliant, kind, and beautiful daughter. Enjoy being human. It's a great privilege.

GLORIA

What about Mother?

HAPPYOLA

I've already brought her up to date. She said she's proud of you and sends her love.

IAN

You're married, too?

HAPPYOLA

Of course. What's one half without the other -- a sun without a planet, land without an ocean, a male without a female? And you don't want to think of me as all alone, do you? As you've noticed, I also have a lovely daughter to account for.

GLORIA

I'll miss you, Dad. Tell Mom I'll miss her, too.  
(kisses him)

HAPPYOLA

We'll miss you, too. But you have your calling, and we have ours. Now, good-bye -- and think well of me. Doubtful as it may seem at times, I always do my best.

HE vanishes.

IAN

I hope you don't vanish when I'm sober.

GLORIA

I wasn't aware that you're still all that drunk.

IAN

Hey, you're right. I didn't even notice.  
(takes manuscript)  
Gloria, dear. Can I really call you that?

GLORIA

Yes, darling.

IAN

What should I do with this now? I mean, the whole idea of burning any kind of writing strikes me as endorsing ignorance. Besides, I don't have a fireplace, But this part of my life is over.

GLORIA

And a far better part is just beginning.

IAN

You're right. I think it's time.

GLORIA

For what?

IAN

The paper shredder.

HE goes to it and feeds the screenplay into it.

KNOCK at the door while he's doing it. Another KNOCK and then MAX enters.

MAX

Where's the script, Ian?  
 (sees shredding in progress)  
 Don't tell me that's Ten Killers?

IAN

I'm sorry, Max. But --

MAX

No, no! Stop!  
 (to GLORIA)  
 Tell him to stop!

MADELYN enters, dressed after taking her shower.

MADELYN

Oh, I feel so much better now.  
 (sees GLORIA)  
 Ian, who's she?

IAN

You mean, you two can see her?

MADELYN

What do you think I am, blind?

MAX

Of course, we can, you idiot!

IAN

(to GLORIA)  
 They can see you!

MAX

(to MADELYN)  
 You've got a copy in the computer, right?

MADELYN

That was my thankless task.

IAN

Don't either of you take this too hard. But I decided I'm going to write poetry instead.

MAX

Poetry? Sorry, I don't handle it.

MADELYN

What kind of role can I have if you write that kind of stuff?

IAN

I'm sorry, Madelyn. It's something I have to do.

MAX

Yeh, and lucky me. I have to tell Paramount.

MADELYN

How come you're wearing a ring?

IAN

We just got married.

MADELYN

While I was taking a shower? And I didn't suspect a thing. Well, here's to the newlyweds...

(referring to GLORIA)

... whoever you are. I'm out of here. Max, can I call you about my acting career?

MAX

Sure. Just don't leave till you go to the computer and --

MADELYN

-- take it up with Ian.

(to IAN)

I'll send for my things.

(as SHE heads for door)

And tell your lovely new wife to get a decent dress.

MADELYN exits.

MAX

(to GLORIA)

Look, you love him. He's your husband. When I don't know, but congratulations. Now, please, talk some sense into his head.

GLORIA

I already have.

MAX

Ha, I should have know. When a man suddenly acts crazy, you bet the cause is a beautiful women. But that script is worth a million dollars. You'll both be rich. Think of the life of luxury you can have together!

GLORIA

I like what he did to the script.

MAX

Great, just great! Ian, keep this up, and I'll sue you for breach of contract!

IAN

If you have to, Max. I'm sorry, but my decision is final.

MAX

Sure, sure. And what will you do without the money? You need it even more than I do. And what the hell do you plan to live on as a poet -- complimentary copies and rejection slips? Come on, Ian, start to make sense again. You write fantastic action-adventure pictures. Write the damn poetry on the side.

IAN

Max, you're not getting it. I'm into an entirely different mindset now.  
How can I even say it? I want to try to be the poet of life.

MAX

The what? Look, kid, be the screenwriter of death! There's a lot more money in it. And I'm tellin' you right now. If I don't have that script on my desk before five today, you're gonna hear from my lawyer. Got it?

(goes to door; turns  
back)

Not after five, not even at five. Before five!

MAX exits, slamming the door.

GLORIA

Poor Max. Maybe he'll understand as you succeed.

IAN

Let's hope he has the capacity. The amazing thing is, they could see you. You're real!

GLORIA

Didn't I tell you?

IAN

But think what that means! My calling isn't a wonderful illusion. With you by my side, death will be dead for me.

(MORE)

IAN (cont'd)

Say half of my brain is gone. Say I'm insensitive to suffering and death. But suddenly all I can think about is life. And with your help, I shall free it from the rusty chains of death and give the human race beautiful, life-enhancing poetic legacy, even if no one knows what I did while I was alive. Life, Gloria, I'm in love with you, now and forever!

(embraces her)

I will be your voice, from now until I take my last breath.

(catches his breath;

holds his chest)

GLORIA

Ian, what's wrong?

IAN

My heart. I knew it. Call an ambulance. 911.

(hands her his

cellphone)

GLORIA

Yes, dear. Right away.

(dials)

Hello. This is the residence of Ian Evans. We need an ambulance. 1800 Cliffside Drive. Please, hurry!

(hangs up)

Oh, my dear, Ian, my beloved.

IAN

I thought you told me I could live to be eighty-six? Don't tell me you lied?

GLORIA

No, I merely gave you the gift of uncertainty.

IAN

The what?

GLORIA

I freed you from the constant fear of death so that you might live -- and glorify life.

IAN

But part of the deal was living at least longer than this. Contact your dad. Tell him I need another miracle.

GLORIA

I would, but I know what he'd say.

IAN

What?

GLORIA

That doing something special wouldn't be fair to everyone else.

IAN

But, if you two only gave the talent to me, why did you give me a heart murmur?

GLORIA

I'm upset, too. But probability is built into the gene pool. My dad can't keep showing up like a mechanic to repair the universe he created.

IAN

But, Gloria, I'm still only thirty-four -- just three years older than my father when he died.

GLORIA

Who said you're going to die?

IAN

I'm having a heart attack, aren't I? You mean, I might not die?

GLORIA

You know how much I want you to live and how much my father does. We need you to.

IAN

But I still have to live with uncertainty?

GLORIA

Everyone does. Ian, my darling, the most important thing is not that each life will end, but that each life will be born and live. The whole universe is devoted to that one idea. When you are born, yes, you are old enough to die. But you are also old enough to live, and even a moment of life is better than dead stillness everywhere. Even a life with an ailment or handicap is better than no life at all, better, at least, until the pain becomes so intense that it begins to diminish life. Ian, you will express such thoughts in your poetry.

IAN

If I live long enough.

GLORIA

We can only hope.

SIREN in the distance.

IAN

But I am in the arms of life, aren't I?

GLORIA

Yes, my darling. Always in my arms, as long as you live. I love you.

IAN

I love you, too. You're the first woman I ever met who brought out the best in me.

GLORIA

Thank you, my dear sweet Ian.  
(kisses him)

IAN

Life kissed me. No matter what happens, I will always remember that. You are mine, aren't you, Gloria?

GLORIA

Yes.

IAN

And I may not die now?

GLORIA

I hope not with all my heart. You are my voice, Ian! My only voice on earth! And my dear, dear husband!

IAN

Oh, the uncertainty of it all! But the glory, too -- the irreplaceable glory of life! Take me in your arms, Gloria. I could use at least one more kiss.

(as the SIREN grows louder)

GLORIA

Oh, Ian! My love! My voice!

SHE kisses him as LIGHTS fade to black.

THE END