

# TELL-ALL

Chuck Palahniuk



Doubleday

*Fight Club*

*Survivor*

*Invisible Monsters*

*Choke*

*Lullaby*

*Fugitives and Refugees*

*Diary*

*Stranger Than Fiction*

*Haunted*

*Rant*

*Snuff*

*Pygmy*

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# Tell- All

CHUCK PALAHNIUK

Doubleday  
*New York London Toronto*  
*Sydney Auckland*



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Boy meets girl.

Boy gets girl.

Boy *kills* girl?

## ACT I, SCENE ONE

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Act one, scene one opens with **Lillian Hellman** clawing her way, stumbling and scrambling through the thorny nighttime underbrush of some German *schwarzwald*, a Jewish babe clamped to each of her tits, another brood of infants clinging to her back. Lilly clammers her way, struggling against the brambles that snag the gold embroidery of her **Balenciaga** lounging pajamas, the black velvet clutched by hordes of doomed cherubs she's racing to deliver from the ovens of some Nazi death camp. More innocent toddlers, lashed to each of Lillian's muscular thighs. Helpless Jewish, Gypsy and homosexual babies. Nazi gestapo bullets spit past her in the darkness, shredding the forest foliage, the smell of gunpowder and pin needles. The heady aroma of her **Chanel No. 5**. Bullets and hand grenades just whiz past Miss Hellman's perfectly coiffed **Hattie Carnegie** chignon, so close the ammunition shatters her **Cartier** chandelier earrings into rainbow explosions of priceless diamonds. Ruby and emerald shrapnel blasts into the flawless skin of her perfect, pale cheeks.... From this action sequence, we dissolve to:

Reveal: the interior of a stately **Sutton Place** mansion. It's some **Billie Burke** place decorated by **Billy Haines**, where formally dressed guests line a long table within a candlelit wood-paneled dining room. Liveried footmen stand along the walls. Miss Hellman is seated near the head of this very large dinner party, actually describing the frantic escape scene we've just witnessed. In a slow panning shot, the engraved place cards denoting each guest read like a veritable **Who's Who**. Easily half of twentieth-century history sits at this table: **Prince Nicholas of Romania, Pablo Picasso, Cordell Hull** and **Josef von Sternberg**. The attendant celebrities seem to stretch from **Samuel Beckett** to **Gene Autry** to **Marjorie Main** to the faraway horizon.

Lillian stops speaking long enough to draw one long drag on her cigarette. Then to blow the smoke over **Pola Negri** and **Adolph Zukor** before she says, "It's at that heart-stopping moment I wished I'd just told **Franklin Delano Roosevelt**, 'No, thank you.'" Lilly taps cigarette ash onto her bread plate, shaking her head, saying, "No secret missions for this girl."

While the footmen pour wine and clear the sorbet dishes, Lillian's hands swim through the air, her cigarette trailing smoke, her fingernails clawing at invisible forest vines, climbing sheer rock cliff faces, her high heels blazing a muddy trail toward freedom, her strength never yielding under the burden of those tiny Jewish and homosexual urchins.

Every eye, fixed, from the head of the table to the foot, stares at Lilly. Every hand crosses two fingers beneath the damask napkin laid in every lap, while every guest mouths a silent prayer that Miss Hellman will swallow her **Chicken Prince Anatole Demidoff** without chewing, then suffocate, writhing and choking on the dining room carpet.

Almost every eye. The exceptions being one pair of violet eyes ... one pair of brown eyes ... and of course my own weary eyes.

The possibility of dying before **Lillian Hellman** has become the tangible fear of this entire generation. Dying and becoming merely fodder for Lilly's mouth. A person's entire life and reputation reduced to some **golem**, a **Frankenstein's** monster Miss Hellman can reanimate.

and manipulate to do her bidding.

Beyond her first few words, Lillian's talk becomes one of those jungle sound tracks one hears looping in the background of every **Tarzan** film, just tropical birds and **John Weissmuller** and howler monkeys repeating. *Bark, bark, screech ... Emerald Cunard. Bark, growl, screech ... Cecil Beaton.*

Lilly's drivel possibly constitutes some bizarre form of name-dropping **Tourette syndrome**. Or perhaps the outcome of an orphaned press agent raised by wolves and taught to read aloud from **Walter Winchell's** column.

Her compulsive prattle, a true pathology.

*Cluck, oink, bark ... Jean Negulesco.*

Thus, Lilly spins the twenty-four-carat gold of people's actual lives into her own brass straw.

Please promise you did *NOT* hear this from me.

Seated within range of those flying heroic elbows, my Miss Kathie stares out from the bars of cigarette smoke. An actress of **Katherine Kenton's** stature. Her violet eyes, trained throughout her adult life to never make contact with anything except the lens of a motion picture camera. To never meet the eyes of a stranger, instead to always focus on someone's earlobe or lips. Despite such training, my Miss Kathie peers down the length of the table, her lashes fluttering. The slender fingers of one famous white hand toy with the auburn tresses of her wig. The jeweled fingers of Miss Kathie's opposite hand touch the six strands of pearls which contain the loose folds of her sagging neck skin.

In the next instant, while the footmen pass the finger bowls, Lillian twists in her chair shouldering an invisible sniper's rifle and squeezing off rounds until the clip is empty. Still just dripping with Hebrew and Communist babies. Lugging her cargo of Semitic orphan. When the rifle is too searing hot to hold, Miss Hellman howls a wild war whoop and hurtles the steaming weapon at the pursuing storm troopers.

*Snarl, bark, screech ... Peter Lorre. Oink, bark, squeal ... Averill Harriman.*

It's a fate worse than death to spend eternity in harness, serving as Lilly Hellman's zombie brought back to life at dinner parties. On radio talk programs. At this point, Miss Hellman is heaving yet another batch of invisible babies, rescued Gypsy babes, high, toward the chandelier, as if catapulting them over the snowcapped peak of the **Matterhorn** to the safety of **Switzerland**.

*Grunt, howl, squeal ... Sarah Bernhardt.*

By now, **Lillian Hellman** wraps two fists around the invisible throat of **Adolf Hitler**, reenacting how she sneaked into his subterranean **Berlin** bunker, dressed as **Leni Riefenstahl**, her arms laden with black-market cartons of **Lucky Strike** and **Parliament** cigarettes, and then throttled the sleeping dictator in his bed.

*Bray, bark, whinny ... Basil Rathbone.*

Lilly throws the terrified, make-believe Hitler into the center of tonight's dinner table, her teeth biting, her manicured fingernails scratching at his Nazi eyes. Lillian's fists clamped around the invisible windpipe, she begins pounding the invisible Führer's skull against the

tablecloth, making the silverware and wineglasses jump and rattle.

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*Screech, meow, tweet ...* **Wallis Simpson.**

*Howl, bray, squeak ...* **Diana Vreeland.**

A moment before Hitler's assassination, **George Cukor** looks up, his fingertips still dripping chilled water into his finger bowl, that smell of fresh-sliced lemons, and George says, "Please, Lillian." Poor George says, "Would you please *stuff* it."

Seated well below the salt, below the various professional hangers-on, the walking men, the drug dealers, the mesmerists, the exiled White Russians and poor **Lorenz Hart**, really on the very horizon of tonight's dinner table, a young man looks back. Seated on the farthest frontier of placement. His eyes the bright brown of July Fourth sunlight through a tall mug of root beer. Quite the American specimen. A classic face of such symmetrical proportions, the exactly balanced type of face one dreams of looking down to find smiling and eager between one's inner thighs.

Still, that's the trouble with only a single glance at any star on the horizon. As **Elmer Maxwell** would say, "One can never tell for certain if that dazzling, shiny object is rising or setting."

Lillian inhales the silence through her burning cigarette. Taps the gray ash onto her bread plate. In a blast of smoke, she says, "Did you hear?" She says, "It's a fact, but **Eleanor Roosevelt** chewed every hair off my bush..."

Through all of this—the cigarette smoke and lies and the **Second World War**—the specimen's bright brown eyes, they're looking straight down the table, up the social ladder, gazing back, deep, into the famous, fluttering violet eyes of my employer.



## ACT I, SCENE TWO

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If you'll permit me to break the fourth wall, my name is **Hazie Coogan**.

My vocation is not that of a paid companion, nor am I a professional housekeeper. It is my role as an old woman to scrub the same pots and pans I scrubbed as a young one—I've made my peace with that fact—and while she has never once touched them, those pots and pans have always belonged to the majestic, the glorious film actress Miss **Katherine Kenton**.

It is my task to soft-boil her daily egg. I wax her linoleum kitchen floor. The endless job of dusting and polishing the not insignificant number of bibelots and gold-plated gimcracks awarded to Miss Katie, that job is mine as well. But am I Miss **Katherine Kenton's** maid? No more so than the butcher plays handmaiden to the tender lamb.

My purpose is to impose order on Miss Kathie's chaos ... to instill discipline in her legendary artistic caprice. I am the person **Lolly Parsons** once referred to as a "surrogate spine."

While I may vacuum the carpets of Miss Kathie's household and place the orders with the grocer, my true job title is not majordomo so much as mastermind. It might appear that Miss Kathie is my employer in the sense that she seems to provide me funds in exchange for my time and labor, and that she relaxes and blooms while I toil; but using that same logic, it could be argued that the farmer is employed by the pullet hen and the rutabaga.

The elegant **Katherine Kenton** is no more my master than the piano is master to **Ignace Jan Paderewski** ... to paraphrase **Joseph L. Mankiewicz**, who paraphrased me, who first said and did most of the dazzling, clever things which, later, helped make others famous. In that sense you already know me. If you've seen **Linda Darnell** as a truck-stop waitress sticking a pencil behind one ear in *Fallen Angel*, you've seen me. Darnell stole that bit from me. As does **Barbara Lawrence** when she brays her donkey laugh in *Oklahoma*. So many great actresses have filched my most effective mannerisms, and my spot-on delivery, that you've seen bits of me in performances by **Alice Faye** and **Margaret Dumont** and **Ris Stevens**. You'd recognize fragments of me—a raised eyebrow, a nervous hand twirling the cord of a telephone receiver—from countless old pictures.

The irony does not escape me that while **Eleanor Powell** lays claim to my fashion signature of wearing numerous small bows, I now boast the red knees of a charwoman and the swollen hands of a scullery maid. No less of an illustrious wag than **Darryl Zanuck** once dismissed me as looking like **Clifton Webb** in a glen plaid skirt. **Mervyn LeRoy** spread the rumor that I am the secret love child of **Wally Beery** and his frequent costar **Marie Dressler**.

Currently, the regular duties of my position include defrosting Miss Kathie's electric icebox and ironing her bed linens, yet my position is not that of a laundress. My career is not as a cook. Nor is domestic servant my vocation. My life is far less steered by **Katherine Kenton** than her life is by me. Miss Kathie's daily demands and needs may determine my actions but only so much as the limits of a racing automobile will dictate those of the driver.

I am not merely a woman who works in a factory producing the ever-ravishing **Katherin**

**Kenton.** I am the factory itself. With the words I write here I am not simply a camera operator or cinematographer; I am the lens itself—flattering, accentuating, distorting—recording how the world will recall my coquettish Miss Kathie.

Yet I am not just a sorceress. I am the source.

Miss Kathie exerts only a very small effort to be herself. The bulk of that manual labor supplied by me in tandem with a phalanx of wig makers, plastic surgeons and dietitians. Since her earliest days under a studio contract it has been my livelihood to comb and dress her hair, often blond, sometimes brunette, occasionally red hair. I coach the dulcet tones of her voice so as to make every utterance suggest a line of dialogue scripted for her by **Thornton Wilder**. Nothing of Miss Kathie is innate except for the almost supernatural violet coloring of her eyes. Hers is the throne, seated in the same icy pantheon as **Greta Garbo** and **Grace Kelly** and **Lana Turner**, but mine is the heavy lifting which keeps her on high.

And while the goal of every well-trained household servant is to seem invisible, that is also the goal of any accomplished puppeteer. Under my control, Miss Kathie's household seems to smoothly run itself, and she appears to run her own life.

My position is not that of a nurse, or a maid, or a secretary. Nor do I serve as a professional therapist or a chauffeur or bodyguard. While my job title is none of the preceding, I do perform all of those functions. Every evening, I pull the drapes. Walk the dog. Lock the doors. I disconnect the telephone, to keep the outside world in its correct place. However, more and more my job is to protect Miss Kathie from herself.

Cut direct to an interior, nighttime. We see the lavish boudoir belonging to **Katherine Kenton**, immediately following tonight's dinner party, with my Miss Kathie locked behind her en suite bathroom door. From offscreen, we hear the hiss and splash of a shower bath at full blast.

Despite popular speculation, Miss **Katherine Kenton** and I do not enjoy what **Walter Winchell** would call a "fingers-deep friendship." Nor do we indulge in behavior *Confidential* would cite to brand us as "baritone babes," or **Hedda Hopper** describes as "pink pucker sucking." The duties of my position include placing one **Nembutal** and one **Luminal** in the cloisonné saucer atop Miss Kathie's bedside table. In addition, filling an old-fashioned glass overflowing with ice cubes and drop-by-drop pouring one shot of whiskey over the ice. Repeat with a second shot. Then fill the remainder of the glass with soda water.

The bedside table consists of nothing more than a stack of screenplays. A teetering pile sent by **Ruth Gordon** and **Garson Kanin**, asking my Miss Kathie to make a comeback. Begging in fact. Here were speculative Broadway musicals based on actors dressed as dinosaurs or **Emma Goldman**. Feature-length animated versions of *Macbeth* by **William Shakespeare** depicted with baby animals. Voice-over work. The pitch: **Bertolt Brecht** meets **Lerner and Loewe** crossed with **Eugene O'Neill**. The pages turn yellow and curl, stained with Scotch whiskey and cigarette smoke. The paper branded with the brown rings left by every cup of Miss Kathie's black coffee.

We repeat this ritual every evening, following whatever dinner party or opening my Miss Kathie has attended. On returning to her town house, I unfasten the eye hook at the top of her gown and release the zipper. Turn on the television. Change the channel. Change the

television channel once more. Dump the contents of her evening bag onto the satin coverlet of her bed, Miss Kathie's **Helena Rubinstein** lipstick, keys, charge cards, replacing each item into her daytime bag. I place the shoe trees within her shoes. Pin her auburn wig to its **Styrofoam** head. Next, I light the vanilla-scented candles lined up along the mantel of her bedroom fireplace.

As my Miss Kathie conducts herself behind the en suite bathroom door, amid the rush and steam of her shower bath, her voice through the door drones: *bark, moo, meow ... William Randolph Hearst. Snarl, squeal, tweet ... Anita Loos.*

In the center of the satin bed sprawls her Pekingese, **Loverboy**, amid a field of wrinkled paper wrappers, the two cardboard halves of a heart-shaped candy box, the pleated pink brocade-and-silk roses stapled to the box cover, the ruched folds of lace frilling the box edge. The bed's billowing red satin coverlet, spread with this mess, the cupped candy papers, the sprawling Pekingese dog.

From out of Miss Kathie's evening bag spills her cigarette lighter, a pack of **Pall Mall** cigarettes, her tiny pill box paved with rubies and tourmalines and rattling with **Tuinal** and **Dexamyl**. *Bark, cluck, squeak ... Nembutal.*

*Roar, whinny, oink ... Seconal.*

*Meow, tweet, moo ... Demerol.*

Then, fluttering down, falls a white card. Settling on the bed, an engraved place card from this evening's dinner. Against the white card stock, in bold, black letters, the name **Webster Carlton Westward III**.

What **Hedda Hopper** would call this moment—a "Hollywood lifetime"—expires.

A freeze-frame. An insert-shot of the small, white card lying on the satin bed beside the inert dog.

On television, my Miss Kathie acts the part of Spain's **Queen Isabella I**, escaped from her royal duties in **the Alhambra** for a quickie vacation in **Miami Beach**, pretending to be a simple circus dancer in order to win the heart of **Christopher Columbus**, played by **Ramon Novarro**. The picture cuts to a cameo by **Lucille Ball**, on loan out from **Warner Bros.** and cast as Miss Kathie's rival, **Queen Elizabeth I**.

Here is all of Western history, rendered the bitch of **William Wyler**.

Behind the bathroom door, in the gush of hot water, my Miss Kathie says: *bark, bray, oink ... J. Edgar Hoover*. My ears straining to hear her prattle.

Fringe dangles off the edge of the red satin coverlet, the bed canopy, the window valance. Everything upholstered in red velvet, cut velvet. Flocked wallpaper. The scarlet walls padded and button tufted, crowded with **Louis XIV** mirrors. The lamps, dripping with faceted crystals, busy with sparkling thingamabobs. The fireplace, carved from pink onyx and rose quartz. The entire effect, insular and silent as sleeping tucked deep inside **Mae West's** vagina.

The four-poster bed, its trim and moldings lacquered red, polished until the wood looks wet. Lying there, the candy wrappers, the dog, the place card.

**Webster Carlton Westward III**, the American specimen with bright brown eyes. Rooster beer eyes. The young man seated so far down the table at tonight's dinner. A telephonic

number, handwritten, a prefix in **Murray Hill**.

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On the television, **Joan Crawford** enters the gates of **Madrid**, wearing some gauzy harems getup, both her hands carrying a wicker basket in front of her, the basket spilling over with potatoes and Cuban cigars, her bare limbs and face painted black to suggest she's a captured Mayan slave. The subtext being either Crawford's carrying syphilis or she's supposed to be a secret cannibal. Tainted spoils of the New World. A concubine. Perhaps she's an Aztec.

That slight lift of one naked shoulder, Crawford's shrug of disdain, here is another signature gesture stolen from me.

Above the mantel hangs a portrait of Miss Katherine painted by **Salvador Dalí**; it rises from a thicket of engraved invitations and the silver-framed photographs of men who **Walter Winchell** would call "was-bands." Former husbands. The painting of my Miss Kathie has her eyebrows arch in surprise, but her heavy eyelashes droop, the eyelids almost closed with boredom. Her hands spread on either side of her face, her fingers fanning from her famous cheekbones to disappear into her movie star updo of auburn hair. Her mouth something between a laugh and a yawn. **Valium** and **Dexedrine**. Between **Lillian Gish** and **Tallulah Bankhead**. The portrait rises from the invitations and photographs, future parties and past marriages, the flickering candles and half-dead cigarettes stubbed out in crystal ashtrays, threading white smoke upward in looping incense trails. This altar to my **Katherine Kenton**.

Me, forever guarding this shrine. Not so much a servant as a high priestess.

In what Winchell would call a "New York minute" I carry the place card to the fireplace. Dangle it within a candle flame until it catches fire. With one hand, I reach into the fireplace deep into the open cavity of carved pink onyx and rose quartz, grasping in the dark until my fingers find the damper and wrench it open. Holding the white card, **Webster Carlton Westward III**, twisting him in the chimney draft, I watch a flame eat the name and telephone number. The scent of vanilla. The ash falls to the cold hearth.

On the television, **Preston Sturges** and **Harpo Marx** enter as **Tycho Brahe** and **Copernicus**. The first arguing that the earth goes around the sun, the latter insisting the world actually orbits **Rita Hayworth**. The picture is called *Armada of Love*, and **David O. Selznick** shot it on the **Universal** back lot the year when every other song on the radio was **Helen O'Connell** singing "**Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered**," backed by the **Jimmy Dorsey** band.

The bathroom door swings open, Miss Kathie's voice saying: *bark, yip, cluck-cluck*. **Maxwell Anderson**. Her **Katherine Kenton** hair turbaned in a white bath towel. Her face layered with a mask of pulped avocado and royal jelly. Pulling the belt of her robe tight around her waist, my Miss Kathie looks at the lipstick dumped on her bed. The scattered cigarette lighter and keys and charge cards. The empty evening bag. Her gaze wafts to me standing before the fireplace, the tongues of candle flame licking below her portrait, her lineup of "was-bands," the invitations, all those future obligations to enjoy herself, and—of course—the flowers.

Perched on the mantel, that altar, always enough flowers for a honeymoon suite or a funeral. Tonight features a tall arrangement of white spider chrysanthemums, white lilies and sprays of yellow orchids, bright and frilly as a cloud of butterflies.

With one hand, Miss Kathie sweeps aside the lipstick and keys, the cigarette pack, and she settles herself on the satin bed, amid the candy wrappers, saying, “Did you burn something just now?”

**Katherine Kenton** remains among the generation of women who feel that the most sincere form of flattery is the male erection. Nowadays, I tell her that erections are less like a compliment than they are the result of some medical breakthrough. Transplanted monkey glands, or one of those new miracle pills.

As if human beings—men in particular—need yet another way to lie.

I ask, Did she misplace something?

Her violet eyes waft to my hands. Petting her Pekingese, **Loverboy**, dragging one hand through the dog’s long fur, Miss Kathie says, “I do get so tired of buying my own flowers...”

My hands, smeared black and filthy from the handle of the fireplace damper. Smudged with soot from the burned place card. I wipe them in the folds of my tweed skirt. I tell her I was merely disposing of some trash. Only incinerating a random piece of worthless trash.

On television, **Leo G. Carroll** kneels while **Betty Grable** crowns him **Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte**. **Pope Paul IV** is **Robert Young**. **Barbara Stanwyck** plays a gum-chewing **Joan of Arc**.

My Miss Kathie watches herself, seven divorces ago—what Winchell would call “Renovations”—and three face-lifts ago, as she grinds her lips against Novarro’s lips. A specimen Winchell would call a “Wildeman.” Like **Dorothy Parker’s** husband, **Alan Campbell**, a man **Lillian Hellman** would call a “fairy shit.” Petting her Pekingese with long licks of her hand, Miss Kathie says, “His saliva tasted like the wet dicks of ten thousand lonely truck drivers.”

Next to her bed, the night table built from a thousand hopeful dreams, those balance-screenplays, it supports two barbiturates and a double whiskey. Miss Kathie’s hand stops petting and scratching the dog’s muzzle; there the fur looks dark and matted. She pulls back her arm, and the towel slips from her head, her hair tumbling out, limp and gray, pink scalp showing between the roots. The green mask of her avocado face cracking with her surprise.

Miss Kathie looks at her hand, and the fingers and palm are smeared and dripping with dark red.

## ACT I, SCENE THREE

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**Katherine Kenton** lived as a **Houdini**. An escape artist. It didn't matter ... marriages, fun farms, airtight **Pandro Berman** studio contracts ... My Miss Kathie trapped herself because she felt such a triumph to slip the noose at the eleventh hour. To foil the legal boilerplate binding her to bad touring projects with **Red Skelton**. The approach of **Hurricane Hazel**. Or the third trimester of a pregnancy by **Huey Long**. Always one clock tick before it was too late for my Miss Kathie would take flight.

Here, let's make a slow dissolve to flashback. To the year when every other song on the radio was **Patti Page** singing "**(How Much Is) That Doggy in the Window?**" The mise-en-scène shows the daytime interior of a basement kitchen in the elegant town house of **Katherine Kenton**; arranged along the upstage wall: an electric stove, an icebox, a door to the alleyway, a dusty window in said door.

In the foreground, I sit on a white-painted kitchen chair with my feet propped on a similar table, my legs crossed at the ankle, my hands holding a ream of paper. A note flutters, held by paper clip to the title page. In slanted handwriting the note reads: *I demand you savor this while it still reeks of my sweat and loins.* Signed, **Lillian Hellman**.

Nothing is ever so much signed by Lilly as it is autographed.

On page one of the screenplay, **Robert Oppenheimer** puzzles over the best method for accelerating particle diffusion until Lillian stubs out a **Lucky Strike** cigarette, tosses back a shot of **Dewar's whiskey**, and elbows Oppenheimer away from the rambling equation he's chalked the length of a vast blackboard. Using spit and her **Max Factor** eyebrow pencil, Lilly alters the speed of enriched uranium fission while **Albert Einstein** looks on. Slapping himself on the forehead with the palm of one hand, Einstein says, "*Lilly, meine liebchen, du bist ein genius!*"

At the window of the kitchen door, something outside taps. A bird in the alley, pecking. The sharp point of something tap, tap, taps at the glass. In the dawn sunlight, the shadow of something hovers just outside the dusty window, the shining point pecking, knocking tiny divots in the exterior surface of the glass. Some lost bird, starving in the cold. Digging, chipping tiny pits.

On the page, Lillian twists a copy of the **New Masses**, rolling it to fashion a tight baton which she swats across the face of **Christian Dior**. **Harry Truman** has herded together the world's top fashion mavens to brand the signature look of his ultimate weapon. **Coco Chanel** demands sequins. **Sister Parish** sketches the bomb screaming down from the Japanese sky trailing long bugle beads. **Elsa Schiaparelli** holds out for a quilted sateen slipcover. **Cristobal Balenciaga**, shoulder pads. **Mainbocher**, tweed. **Dior** scatters the conference room with swatches of plaid.

Brandishing her rolled billy club, Lilly says, "What happens if the zipper gets stuck?"

"Lilly, darling," says **Dior**, "it's a fucking atom bomb!"

At the kitchen window, the sharp beak drags itself against the outside of the glass, tracing

long curve, scratching the glass with an impossible, high-pitched shriek. An instant migrain headache, the point traces a second curve. The two curves combine to form a heart, etched into the window, and the dragging point plows an arrow through the heart.

On paper, **Adrian** sees the entirety of the atom bomb encrusted with a thick layer of rhinestones, flashing a dazzling Allied victory. **Edith Head** pounds her small fist on the conference table at the **Waldorf=Astoria** and proclaims that something hand-crocheted must rain fiery death on **Hirohito**, or she'll pull out of the **Manhattan Project**. **Hubert de Givenchy** pounds on **Pierre Balmain**.

I stand and cross to the alley door. There we discover my Miss Kathie standing in the alley bundled in a fur coat, both arms folded across her chest, hugging herself in the cold dawn.

I ask, Isn't she home a few months early?

And Miss Kathie says, "I found something so much better than sobriety...." She waves the back of her left hand, the ring finger flashing with a **Harry Winston** diamond solitaire, and she says, "I found **Paco Esposito!**"

The diamond, the tool she used to cut her heart so deep into the glass. The heart and **Cupid's** arrow etched in the alley window. Yet another engagement ring she's bought herself.

Behind her stands a young man hung like a Christmas tree with various pieces of luggage, purses, garment bags, suitcases and satchels. All of it **Louis Vuitton**. He wears blue denim trousers, the knees stained black with motor oil. The sleeves of his blue chambray shirt rolled high to reveal tattooed arms. His name, Paco, embroidered on one side of his chest. His cologne, the stench of high-test gasoline.

Miss Kathie's violet eyes twitch side to side across my face, up and down, the way they vacuum up last-minute rewrites in dialogue.

The sole reason for **Katherine Kenton's** admitting herself to any hospital was because she so enjoyed the escape. Between making pictures, she craved the drama of overcoming locked doors, barred windows, sedatives and straitjackets. Stepping indoors from the cold alley, her breath steaming, my Miss Kathie wears cardboard slippers. Not **Madeleine Vionnet**. She wears a tissue-paper gown under her silver fox coat. Not **Vera Maxwell**. Miss Kathie's cheeks scrubbed pink from the sun. The wind has tossed her auburn hair into heavy waves. Her blue fingers grip the handles of a shopping bag she lifts to set atop the kitchen table.

In the screenplay's third act, Hellman pilots the controls of the **Enola Gay** as it skims the tops of Japanese pine trees and giant pandas and **Mount Fuji**, en route to **Hiroshima**. In a fantasy sequence, we cut to Hellman wielding a machete to castrate a screaming **Jacques Warner**. She skins alive a bellowing, bleeding **Louis B. Mayer**. Her grip tightens around the lever which opens the bomb bay doors. Her deadly cargo shimmers pristine as a bride covered with seed pearls and fluttering white lace.

In her own kitchen, my Miss Kathie sinks both hands into the shopping bag and lifts out a hairy chunk of her fur coat. The ragged pile of hair seems to tremble as she places it atop the Hellman screenplay. Two black button eyes blink open. On the table, the damp, hairy wafer shrinks, then explodes in a *hah-choo* sneeze. Between the two button eyes, the fur parts to reveal a double row of needle teeth. A panting sliver of pink tongue. A puppy.

Around the new diamond ring, her movie star hands appear nicked and scabbed with dried

red, smudged with old blood. Spreading her fingers to show me the backs of both hands, Miss Kathie says, "This hospital had barbed wire."

Her barbed wire scars as gruesome as any wounds Lillian shows off from the **Abraham Lincoln** brigade. Not as bad as **Ava Gardner's** scars from bullfighting with **Ernest Hemingway**. Or **Gore Vidal's** scars from **Truman Capote**.

"I picked up a stray," says Miss Kathie.

I ask, Which one? The dog or the man?

"It's a Pekingese," says Miss Kathie. "I've christened him **Loverboy**."

The most recent of the "was-bands," Paco arrives after the senator who arrived after the faggot chorus boy who arrived after the steel-smelting tycoon who arrived after the failed actor who arrived after the sleazy freelance photographer who arrived after the high school sweetheart. These, all of the stray dogs whose photographs line the mantel in her lavish upstairs boudoir.

A rogues' gallery of what **Walter Winchell** would call "happily-never-afters."

Each romance, the type of self-destructive gesture **Hedda Hopper** would call "marry-kiri." Instead of plunging a sword into one's stomach, you repeatedly throw yourself on the most inappropriate erect penis.

The men Miss Katherine marries, they're less husbands than they are costars. Souvenir. Each one merely a witness to attest to her latest daring adventure, so much like **Raymond Massey** or **Fredric March**, any leading man she might fight beside in the **Hundred Year War**. Playing **Amelia Earhart** stowed away with champagne and **beluga caviar** in the romantic cockpit of **Charles Lindbergh** during his long flight over the Atlantic. **Cleopatra** kidnapped during the Crusades and wed to **King Henry VIII**.

Each wedding picture was less of a memento than a scar. Proof of some horror movie scenario **Katherine Kenton** has survived.

Miss Kathie places the puppy on the Hellman screenplay, smack-dab on the scene where **Lilly Hellman** and **John Wayne** raise the American flag over **Iwo Jima**. Dipping one scabbed hand into the pocket of her silver fox coat, Miss Kathie extracts a tablet of bound paper, each page printed with the letterhead **White Mountain Hospital and Residential Treatment Facility**.

A purloined pad of prescription blanks.

Miss Kathie wets the point of an **Estée Lauder** eyebrow pencil, touching it against the pink tip of her tongue. Writing a few words under the letterhead, she stops, looks up and says "How many Ss in **Darvocet**?"

The young man holding her baggage says, "How soon do we get to **Hollywood**?"

**Los Angeles**, the city **Louella Parsons** would call the approximately three hundred square miles and twelve million people centered around **Irene Mayer Selznick**.

In that same beat, we cut to a close-up of **Loverboy**, as the tiny Pekingese drops its own hot, stinking A-bomb all over **General Douglas MacArthur**.



## ACT I, SCENE FOUR

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The career of a movie star consists of helping everyone else forget their troubles. Using charm and beauty and good cheer to make life look easy. “The problem is,” **Gloria Swanson** once said, “if you never weep in public ... well, the public assumes you never weep.”

Act one, scene four opens with **Katherine Kenton** cradling an urn in her arms. The setting is the dimly lit interior of the Kenton crypt, deep underground, below the stony pile of **St. Patrick’s Cathedral**, dressed with cobwebs. We see the ornate bronze door unlocked and swung open to welcome mourners. A stone shelf at the rear of the crypt, in deep shadow, holds various urns crafted from a variety of polished metals, bronze, copper, nickel, or engraved, *Casanova*, another engraved, *Darling*, another, *Romeo*.

My Miss Kathie hugs the urn she’s holding, lifting it to meet her lips. She plants a puckered lipstick kiss on the engraved name *Loverboy*, then places this new urn on the dusty shelf among the others.

**Kay Francis** hasn’t arrived. **Humphrey Bogart** didn’t send his regards. Neither do **Deanna Durbin** or **Mildred Coles**. Also missing are **George Bancroft** and **Bonita Granville** and **Frank Morgan**. None of them sent flowers.

The engraved names *Sweetie Pie* and *Honey Bun* and *Oliver “Red” Drake, Esq.*, which **Hedda Hopper** would call “dust buddies.” Her beagle, her Chihuahua, her fourth husband—the majority stockholder and chairman of the board for **International Steel Manufacturing**. Scattered amongst the other urns, engraved: *Pookie*, and *Fantasy Man*, and *Lothario*, the ashen remains of her toy poodle and miniature pinscher, there also sits an orange plastic prescription bottle of **Valium**, tethered to the stone shelf by a net of spiderwebs. Mold and dust mottle the label on a bottle of **Napoleon brandy**. A pharmacy prescription bottle of **Luminal**.

What **Louella Parsons** would call “moping mechanisms.”

My Miss Kathie leans forward to blow the dust from a pill bottle. She lifts the bottle and wrestles the tricky child-guard cap, soiling her black gloves, pressing the cap as she twists the pills inside rattling. Echoing loud as machine-gun fire in the cold stone room. My Miss Kathie shakes a few pills into one gloved palm. With the opposite hand, she lifts her black veil. She tosses the pills into her mouth and reaches for the crusted bottle of brandy.

Among the urns, a silver picture frame lies facedown on the shelf. Next to it, a tarnished tube of **Helena Rubinstein** lipstick. A slow panning shot reveals an atomizer of **Mitsouko**, the crystal bottle clouded and smudged with fingerprints. A dusty box spouts yellowed **Kleenex** tissues.

In the dim light, we see a bottle of vintage 1851 **Château Lafite**. A magnum of **Huichalvados**, circa 1865, and **Croizet cognac** bottled in 1906. **Campbell Bowden & Taylor** port, vintage 1825.

Stacked against the stone walls are cases of **Dom Pérignon** and **Moët & Chandon** and **Bollinger** champagne in bottles of every size ... **Jeroboam** bottles, named for the biblical

king, son of **Nebat** and **Zeruah**, which hold as much as four typical wine bottles. Here are **Nebuchadnezzar** bottles, twenty times the size of a typical bottle, named for a king of **Babylon**. Among those tower **Melchior** bottles, which hold the equivalent of twenty-four bottles of champagne, named for one of the **Three Wise Men** who greeted the birth of **Jesus Christ**. As many bottles stand empty as still corked. Empty wineglasses litter the corners, shadows, long ago abandoned, smudged by the lips of **Conrad Nagel**, **Alan Hale**, **Chester the chimp** and **Bill Demarest**.

Miss Kathie's mourning veil falls back, covering her face, and she drinks through the black netting, holding each bottle to her lips and swigging, leaving a new layer of lipstick cake around each new bottle's glistening neck. Each bottle's mouth as red as her own.

**Sydney Greenstreet**, another no-show at today's funeral. **Greta Garbo** did not send her sympathies.

What **Walter Winchell** calls "stiff standing up."

Here we are, just Miss Katherine and myself, yet again.

Brushing aside the black rice of mouse feces—in this strange negative image of a wedding—my Miss Kathie lifts the silver picture frame and props it to stand on the shelf, leaning the frame against the tomb's wall. Instead of a picture, the frame surrounds a mirror. Within the mirror, within the reflection of the stone walls, the cobwebs, poses Miss Kathie wearing her black hat and veil. She pinches the fingertips of one glove, pulling the glove free of her left hand. Twisting the diamond solitaire off her ring finger, she hands the six-carat, marquise-cut **Harry Winston** to me. Miss Kathie says, "I guess we ought to record the moment."

The mirror, old scratches scar and etch its surface. The glass marred by a wide array of old scores.

I tell her, Hit your mark, please.

"Are you absolutely certain you phoned **Cary Grant**?" says Miss Kathie as she steps backward and stands on a faded X, long ago marked in lipstick on the stone floor. At the precise point her movie-star face aligns perfectly with the scratches on the mirror. At the perfect angle and distance, those old scores become the wrinkles she had three, four, five dogs ago, the bags and sumps her face fell into before each was repaired with a new face-lift or an injection of sheep embryo serum. Some radical procedure administered in a secret Swiss clinic. The expensive creams and salves, the operations to pull and tighten. On the mirror linger the pits and liver spots she has erased every few months, etched there—the record of how she ought to look. Again, she lifts her veil, and her reflected cheeks and chin align with the ancient record of sags and moles and stray hairs my Miss Kathie has rightfully earned.

The war wounds left by **Paco Esposito** and **Romeo**, every stray dog and "was-band."

Miss Kathie makes the face she makes when she's not making a face, her features, her famous mouth and eyes becoming a **Theda Bara** negligee draped over a padded hanger in the back of the **Monogram Pictures** wardrobe department, wrapped in plastic in the dark. Her muscles slack and relaxed. The audience forgotten.

And wielding the diamond, I get to work, drawing. I trace any new wrinkles, adding any new liver spots to this long-term record. Creating something more cumulative than any photograph, I document Miss Kathie's misery before the plastic surgeons can once more wipe

the slate clean. Dragging the diamond, digging into the glass, I etch her gray hairs. Updating the topography of this, her secret face. Cutting the latest worry lines across her forehead. gouge the new crow's-feet around her eyes, eclipsing the false smile of her public image, the diamond defacing Miss Kathie. Me mutilating her.

After a lifetime of such abuse the mirror bows, curved, so sectioned, so cut and etched so deep, that any new pressure could collapse the glass into a shattered, jagged pile of fragments. Another duty of my job is to never press too hard. My position included mopping up Paco's piss from around the commode, then taking the dog to a veterinarian for gelding. Every day, I was compelled to tear a page from some history book—the saga of **Hiawath** written by **Arthur Miller** as a screenplay for **Deborah Kerr**, or the **Robert Fulton** story, or a vehicle for **Danny Kaye**—to pick up yet another steaming handful of feces.

I drag the diamond in straight lines to mimic the tears running down Miss Kathie's face.

The diamond shrieks against the glass. The sound of an instant migraine headache.

The mirror of **Dorian Gray**.

Then footsteps echo from offscreen. The heartbeat of a man's leather shoes approach from down the corridor, each step louder against the stone. **Van Heflin** or perhaps **Laurence Olivier**. **Randolph Scott** or maybe **Sid Luft**.

In the silence between one footfall and the next, between heartbeats, I place the mirror facedown on the shelf. I return the diamond ring to my Miss Kathie.

A man's silhouette fills the doorway to the crypt, tall and slender, his shoulders straight, outlined against the light of the corridor.

Miss Kathie turns, one hand already reaching for the tarnished tube of lipstick. She peers at the man, saying, "Could that be you, **Groucho**?"

A bouquet of flowers emerges out of the gloom, the man's hands offering them. Pink **Nancy Reagan** roses and yellow lilies, a smell bright as sunlight. The man's voice says, "I'm so sorry about your loss...." The smooth knuckles and clear skin of a young man's hands, the fingernails shining and polished.

What **Hedda Hopper** calls a "funeral flirtation." **Louella Parsons** a "graveside groomer." **Walter Winchell** a "casket crusher."

**Webster Carlton Westward III** steps forward. The young man from the dinner party. The name and phone number on the burned place card.

Those eyes bright brown as summer root beer.

I shake my head, Don't. Don't repeat this torture. Don't trust another one.

But already my Miss Kathie wipes a fresh coat of red around her mouth. Then tosses the old lipstick to rattle among the tarnished urns. Among the empty wine bottles that people call "dead soldiers." My Miss Kathie lowers the black mesh of her veil and reaches one gloved hand toward something coated with dust, something abandoned and long forgotten among her dead loves. She lifts this ancient item, her red lips whispering, "*Guten essen.*" Adding, "That's French for 'never say never.'" Her violet eyes milky and vague with the drugs and brandy, Miss Kathie turns to accept the flowers, in the same gesture slipping the dusty item—her diaphragm—deep into the sagging slit of her old mink coat pocket.

## ACT I, SCENE FIVE

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**Clare Boothe Luce** once said the following about **Katherine Kenton**—“When she’s in love nothing can make her sad; however when she’s not in love, nothing can make her happy.”

We’re playing this next scene in the bathroom adjacent to Miss Kathie’s boudoir. As the scene opens, we discover my Miss Kathie seated at her dressing table, facing three mirrors angled to show her right profile, her left profile, and her full face. The bouquet of pink **Nancy Reagan** roses and yellow lilies delivered by **Webster Carlton Westward III** occupy a vase. Those few flowers reflected and reflected until they could be a florist shop. An entire garden in a vase. This single bouquet, multiplied. Made infinite. Not left at the crypt to rot.

Dangling from the bouquet, a parchment card reads: *Our love is only wasted when we fail to share it with another. Please allow the world to share its limitless love with you.* Some gibberish plagiarized from **John Milton** or **Mohandas Gandhi**.

Reflected in the mirrors, my Miss Kathie pinches the slack skin that hangs below her chin. Pinching and pulling the skin, she says, “No more whiskey. And no more of those damned chocolates.”

Chocolate poisoning, it fits all the earmarks. Shame on Miss Kathie for neglecting an entire box on her bed, where **Loverboy** would be bound to sniff them out. The caffeine contained in even a single bonbon more than sufficient to bring about a heart attack in a dog of that size.

The parchment card, signed, *Webb*. The Westward boy, what **Cholly Knickerbocker** would term an “opportunistic affection.” Next to the roses on the polished top of her dressing table rests the rubber bump of Miss Kathie’s diaphragm, pink rubber flocked with dust.

Peeling off her false eyelashes, Miss Kathie looks at me standing behind her, both of us reflected in the mirror, multiplied into a mob, the whole world peopled by just us two, and she says, “Are you certain that no one else sent their condolences?”

I shake my head, No. No one.

Miss Kathie peels off her auburn wig, handing it to me. She says, “Not even the senator?”

The “was-band” before Paco. **Senator Phelps Russell Warner**. Again, I shake my head. No. Not **Terrence Terry**, the faggot dancer. Not **Paco Esposito**, who currently plays a hotheaded, flamenco-dancing Latin brain surgeon on some new radio program called *Guiding Light*. None of the was-bands have sent a word of condolence.

Pawing the makeup from her face with cotton balls and cold cream, Miss Kathie snaps the elastic wig cap off the crown of her head. Her movie-star hands claw the long strands of gray hair loose. She twists her head side to side, fast, so the hair fans out, hanging to the padded shoulders of her satin dressing gown. Fingering a few wispy gray strands, Miss Kathie says, “Do you think my hair will hold dye again?”

The first symptom of what Walter Winchell calls “infant-uation” is when Miss Kathie colors her hair the bright orange of a tabby cat.

“Optimism,” says H. L. Mencken, “is the first symptom that any disease is fatal.”

Miss Kathie cups a hand beneath each of her breasts, lifting them until the cleavage swells at her throat. Watching herself in the angled mirrors, she says, "Why can't that brilliant Dr. Josef Mengele in Munich do something about my old-lady *hands*?"

At best, this young Westward specimen is what Lolly Parsons calls a "boy-ographer." One of those smiling, dancing young gadabouts who insinuate themselves in the private lives of lonely, fading motion-picture stars. Professional listeners, these meticulously well-groomed walking men, they listen to confidences, indulge strong egos and weakening minds, forever cherry-picking the best anecdotes and quotes, with a manuscript always ready for publication upon the instant of the movie star's demise. So many cozy evenings beside the fire, sipping brandy, those nights will pay off with scandalous confessions and declarations. Mr. Bright Brown Eyes, without a doubt, he's one of those seducers ready to betray every secret, every wart and flatulence of Miss Kathie's private life.

This Webster specimen is obviously a would-be author, looking to write the type of intimate tell-all that Winchell calls an unauthorized "biography." The literary equivalent of a magpie, stealing the brightest and darkest moments from every celebrity he'll meet.

My Miss Kathie scoops a finger through a jar of **Vaseline**, then rubs a fat lump of the slime, smearing it across her top and bottom teeth, pushing her finger deep to coat her molars. She smiles her greasy smile and says, "Do you have a spoon?"

In the kitchen, I tell her. We haven't kept a spoon in her bathroom since the year when every other song on the radio was **Christine, Dorothy and Phyllis McGuire** singing "**Don't Take Your Love from Me.**"

Miss Kathie's goal: to reduce until she becomes what **Lolly Parsons** calls nothing but "tendrils and bones." What **Hedda Hopper** calls a "lipstick skeleton." A "beautifully coiffed skull" as **Elsa Maxwell** calls **Katharine Hepburn**.

The moment of Miss Kathie's exit in search of said spoon, my fingers pry open a box of bath salts and pinch up the coarse grains. These I sprinkle between the roses, swirling the vase to dissolve the salts into the water. My fingers pluck the card from the bouquet of roses and lilies. Folding the parchment, I tear it once, twice. Folding and tearing until the sentences become only words. The words become only letters of the alphabet, which I sprinkle into the toilet bowl. As I flush the lever, the water rises in the bowl, the torn parchment spinning as the water deepens. From deep within itself, the commode regurgitates a hidden mess of paper trapped down within the toilet's throat. Bobbing to the surface, bits of waterlogged paper, greeting cards, the tissue paper of telegrams. It all backs up within the clogged bowl.

Within the rim of the toilet swirls a tide of affection and concern, signed by **Edna Ferber**, **Artie Shaw**, **Bess Truman**. The handwritten notes and cards, the telegrams reading, *If there's anything I can do ...* and, *Please don't hesitate to call.* The torn scraps of these sentiments spin higher and higher toward the brim of disaster, preparing to overflow, to run over the lip of the white bowl and flood the pink marble floor. These affectionate words ... I've torn them into bits, and then torn those into smaller bits, scraps. All of my covert work is about to be exposed. These, all of the condolences I've destroyed during the past few days.

From the downstairs powder room, echoing up through the silence of the town house, the sounds of Miss Kathie's gorge rises with beef **Stroganoff** and **Queen Charlotte** pears and

veal **Prince Orloff**, heaving up from the depths of Miss Kathie, triggered by the tip of a silver spoon touching the back of her tongue, her gag reflex rejecting it all.

“Fuck ’em,” Miss Kathie says between splashes, her movie-star voice hoarse with bile and stomach acid. “They don’t care,” she says, purging herself in great thunderous blasts.

The infamous advice **Busby Berkeley** gave to **Judy Garland**, “If you’re still having bowel movements, you’re eating too much.”

Upstairs, the shredded affections rise, about to spill out onto the bathroom floor. Spiraling upward toward disaster. At the last possible moment I drop to my knees on the pink marble tile. I plunge my hand into the churning mess, the cold water lapping around my elbow, the swirling about my shoulder as I burrow my hand deep into the toilet’s throat, clearing aside wet paper. Clawing, scratching a tunnel through the sodden, matted layer of endearment. The soft mass of sentiments I can’t see.

Downstairs, Miss Kathie heaves out great mouthfuls of gâteau **Pierre Rothschild**. Bombes de **Louise Grimaldi**. Aunt **Jemima** syrup. **Lady Baltimore** cake. The wet, bubbling shroud of undigested **Jimmy Dean** sausage.

The plumbing of this old town house shudders, the pipes banging and thudding to contain and channel this new burden of macerated secrets and gourmet vomit.

A “Hollywood lifetime” later, the water in the toilet bowl begins to recede.

The shredded scraps of love and caring, the kind regards sink from sight. Freshwater chases the final words of comfort into the sewers. Those lacy, embossed, engraved and perfumed fragments, the toilet gulps them down. The water swallows every last word of sympathy from **Jeanne Crain**, the florid handwriting of **Her Royal Highness Princess Margaret** from **John Gilbert**, **Linus Pauling** and **Christiaan Barnard**. In her bathroom, the purge of names and devotion signed, **Brooks Atkinson**, **George Arliss** and **Jill Esmond**, the spinning flood disappearing, disappearing, the water level drops until all the names and notes are sucked down. Drowned.

Echoing from the downstairs powder room comes the hawk and spit sound of my Miss Kathie clearing the bile taste from her mouth. Her cough and belch. A final flush of the downstairs commode, followed by the rushing spray noise of aerosol room deodorant.

A “New York second” goes by, and I stand. One step to the sink, and I calmly begin to scrub my dripping hands, careful to pick and scrape the words *sorrow* and *tragedy* from where they’re lodged beneath each fingernail. Already, the lovely bouquet of pink roses and yellow lilies poisoned with salt water, the petals begin to wither and brown.

## ACT I, SCENE SIX

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The next sequence depicts a montage of flowers arriving at the town house. Deliverymen wearing jaunty, brimmed caps and polished shoes arrive to ring the front doorbell. Each man carries a long box of roses tied with a floppy velvet ribbon, tucked under one arm. Or a cellophane spill brimming full of roses cradled the way one would carry an infant. Each deliveryman's opposite hand extends, ready to offer a clipboard and a pen, a receipt needing a signature. Billowing masses of white lilac. Delivery after delivery arrives. The doorbell ringing to announce yellow gladiolas and scarlet birds-of-paradise. Trembling pink branches of dogwood in full bloom. The chilled flesh of hothouse orchids. Camellias. Each new florist always stretches his neck to see past me, craning his head to see into the foyer for a glimpse of the famous **Katherine Kenton**.

One frame too late, Miss Kathie's voice calls from offscreen, "Who is it?" The moment after the deliveryman is gone.

Me, always shouting in response, It's the Fuller Brush man. A Jehovah's Witness. A Girl Scout, selling cookies. The same *ding-dong* of the doorbell cueing the cut to another bouquet of honeysuckle or towering pink spears of flowering ginger.

Me, shouting up the stairs to Miss Kathie, asking if she expects a gentleman caller.

In response, Miss Kathie shouting, "No." Shouting, less loudly, "No one in particular."

In the foyer and dining room and kitchen, the air swims with the scent of phantom flowers shimmering with sweet, heavy mock orange. An invisible garden. The creamy perfume of absent gardenias. Hanging in the air is the tang of eucalyptus I carry directly to the back door. The trash cans in the alley overflow with crimson bougainvillea and sprays of sweet smelling daphne.

Every card signed, **Webster Carlton Westward III**.

From an insert shot of one gift card, we cut to a close-up of another card, and another. A series of card after gift card. Then a close-up of yet another paper envelope with *To Miss Katherine* handwritten on one side. The shot pulls back to reveal me holding this last sealed envelope in the steam jetting from a kettle boiling atop the stove. The kitchen setting appears much the same as it did a dog's lifetime ago, when my Miss Kathie scratched her heart in the window. One new detail, a portable television, sits atop the icebox, flashing the room with scenes from a hospital, the operating room in a surgical suite where an actor's rubber-gloved hand grasps a surgical mask and pulls it from his own face, revealing the previous "was-band," **Paco Esposito**. The seventh and most recent Mr. **Katherine Kenton**. His hair now grows gray at his temples. His upper lip fringed with a pepper-and-salt mustache.

The teakettle hisses on the stove, centered above the blue spider of a gas flame. Steam rises from the spout, curling the corners of the white envelope I hold. The paper darkens with damp until the glued flap peels along one edge. Picking with a thumbnail, I lift the flap. Pinching with two fingers, I slide out the letter.

On television, Paco leans over the operating table, dragging a scalpel through the ine

body of a patient played by **Stephen Boyd**. **Hope Lange** plays the assisting physician. **Suzanne Parker** the anesthesiologist. Fixing his gaze on the attending nurse, **Natalie Wood**, **Parker** says, "I've never seen anything this bad. This brain has got to come out!"

The next channel over, a battalion of dancers dash around a soundstage, fighting the **Battle of Antietam** in some **Frank Powell** production directed by **D. W. Griffith** of a musical version of the **Civil War**. The lead for the **Confederate Army**, leaping and pirouetting, featured dancer **Terrence Terry**. A heartbreakingly young **Joan Leslie** plays **Tallulah Bankhead**. **H. B. Warner** plays **Jefferson Davis**. Music scored by **Max Steiner**.

From the alley outside the kitchen door, a man's voice says, "Knock, knock." The window is fogged with the steam. The kitchen air feels humid and warm as the sauna of the **Garden of Allah** apartments. My hair hangs lank and plastered to my wet forehead, flat as a **Louis Brooks** spit curl.

The shadow of a head falls against the outside of the window, the pane where my **Miriam** **Kathie** cut the shape of her heart. From behind the fogged glass, the voice says, "Katherine!" His knuckles knocking the glass, a man says, "This is an emergency."

Unfolded, the letter reads: *My Most Dear Katherine, True love is NOT out of your reach.* I flatten the letter to the damp window glass, where it sticks, held secure as wallpaper, pasted there by the condensed steam. The sunlight streaming in from the alleyway, the light leaves the paper translucent, glowing white with the handwritten words hung framed by the heat etched in the glass. The letter still pasted to the window, I flip the dead bolt, slip the chain, turn the knob and open the door.

In the alleyway, a man stands holding a paper tablet fluttering with pages. Each page scribbled with names and arrows, what looks like the diagram for plays in a football game. Among the names one can read **Eve Arden ... Marlene Dietrich ... Sidney Blackmer ...** On his opposite hand, the man holds a white paper sack. Next to him, the trash cans spill the roses and gardenias onto the paving stones. The gladiolas and orchids tumble out to lie in the fetid puddles of mud and rainwater which run down the center of the alley. The reek of honeysuckle and spoiled meat. Pale mock orange mingles with pink camellias and bloodred peonies.

"Hurry, quick, where's Lady Katherine?" the man says, holding the tablet, shaking it so the pages flap. On some, the names radiate in every direction from a large rectangle which fills the center of the page. The names alternating gender: **Lena Horne** then **William Wellman** then **Esther Williams**. The man says, "I'm expecting twenty-four guests for dinner, and we have a placement emergency...."

The diagrams are seating charts. The rectangles are the dinner table. The names the guest list. "As added incentive," the man says, "tell Her Majesty that I've brought her favorite candy ... **Jordan almonds**."

Her Majesty won't eat a bite, I tell him.

This man, this same face smiles out from the frontline skirmishes on television, amid the **Battle of Gettysburg**—this is **Terrence Terry**, formerly Mr. Katherine Kenton, former dancer under contract at **Lasky Studios**, former paramour to **Montgomery Clift**, former catamite to **James Whale** and **Don Ameche**, former cosodomite to **William Haines**, former



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