

PROFANITY
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It's about the mystery of how you hurt yourself. It's like the Talmud says: the evils others do to me are as nothing compared to the evils I do to myself... Dante was interested in what a soul could do to itself...To betray everything you're connected to is the bottom.

Robert Pinsky speaking about Dante's *Inferno* in an article on the occasion of Bernie Madoff's sentencing in *The New York Times*, 2009

But the true, creative overcoming of religious illumination... resides in a profane illumination...

Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism."

smack

"heroin," 1942, Amer.Eng. slang, probably an alteration of schmeck "a drug," especially heroin (1932), from Yiddish schmeck "a sniff."

Online Etymology Dictionary

Characters

LEO SCHNEIDER, late 20s/30s

GERSH SCHNEIDER, 40s

VIVIAN KAPLAN, early 30s

ESTHER KAPLAN, 12

WHITEY SCHNEIDER, late 30s

Time

Pretty much the 1950s.

Place

A small family real estate office on the first floor of a rowhouse on Broad Street in the Olney section of North Philadelphia.

Notes

It may be worth exploring a barely perceptible Philadelphia accent.

A slash [/] in the dialogue is a point of interruption.

Bracketed text at the end of a sentence indicates what might have been said had the speaker not been cut off.

A period at the end of a question indicates a lack of upward inflection or that the speaker isn't using the phrase as a question. For example:

GERSH

Why were you up so late. *[lack of upward inflection]*

OR...

VIVIAN

So they all knew. *[a challenge]*

Music

Latin jazz and showtunes popular during the period.

Playlist follows script.

1.

This is the beginning of the play.

*A real-estate office with a realism that fails to fill the space.
In the margins, there's room for revision, counter-argument.*

*A sweaty-uncle intimacy.
Like THESE GUYS are cornering you at a family dinner
to tell you the truth, the way things really are, the real deal.
Sure, you could learn something.
But they make you a little uncomfortable.
So you would really rather not hear.
Oh man, everyone else is in the other room.
There's no way out of this one.
You just have to listen.*

*Also. ESTHER is a beacon from the future.
THESE GUYS exist because she does and not the other way around.*

*LEO is isolated at first and then the lights broaden so we see that
he's talking to GERSH in the office. This sequence is a slow fade into
broad comedy.*

LEO

At 9am

I was finally fucking sleeping
when something woke me up.

ESTHER

Dog fight.

LEO

There was the warning shot:
a deep wet growl below my window.
I lay there and listened.
Like eavesdropping.

On what, though, it was dogs.
I don't know the story.
Between the dogs.
Like, what happened.

So I'm propped up
on my elbows peering down
into the airshaft
where these two fuckers
are circling each other.

The second one whimpers
shrinks back

baring its teeth
and kind of shitting itself.

The alpha dog snarls.
Y'ever hear that?
Sounds like starving.
Like guts roaring,
coming from deep inside.

ESTHER + LEO
Like the dog's inner dog.

LEO
And that one's a monster.

The beta snarls back
a little less robust.
Then I heard the gnash,
the teeth crashin' together
and the pained cry of the beta
as the alpha gave him his punishment.

I'm braced for fangs on flesh
hair mixed with blood
more growling
and desperate feeding
on the still-beating heart of the beta.

But instead
it was more crying by the lesser dog.
High pitched whimpers
sad tones resonating
through the snout.

ESTHER
It was submission.

ESTHER fades out.

GERSH
Why were you up so late.
Readin' your comic books?

LEO
No.

GERSH
Do you know what day it is?
Is it... a holiday?

LEO
It's—

GERSH
There's a calendar right there.
You could check.
But oh – it's missing the Jewish holidays
'cause it's from the Chinese restaurant.
Did you... do any business this morning?

LEO
I had insomnia. And then I had a meeting.

GERSH
With someone who sucked your dick?

LEO
It was with Whitey.

GERSH
Whitey's not a meeting he's a charity case.

LEO
Whaddya want?

GERSH
Wait, wait. You must be forgetting what day it is. You couldn't have been with
Whitey this morning.

LEO
I couldn't?

GERSH
Because you were at the Miller closing.

LEO
You were at the Miller closing.
[Uh-oh.] Fuck.

Beat.

GERSH
Let me describe something / to you.

LEO
That won't be nec/essary

GERSH
Let me describe to you this brilliant vision / I'm beginning to have

LEO

I know about your vision

GERSH

Of running my own bus/iness.

LEO

Gersh you don't have to do this.

GERSH

Of running my father's business *with* my brother. Keeping it: family.
And my brother and I will sweat our hearts out for this business
because we *own* it.

And our sweat will be fragrant and musky and male and women will *flock* to
our door because of the *eau de virile* domination wafting down the street
broadcasting our monopoly on the real estate trade of North Philadelphia.

LEO

Well – okay.

GERSH

As well as the massive scale of our manhood. And this isn't a particularly *big*
dream because I'm not trying to take over the *world* or anything. Just this
little corner.

LEO

Not the world?

GERSH

But what I must remember is that this kingdom of heaven is already here. We
do own this business and we *do* run this town and all those fuckers like Tiny
Rosenzweig who would like to see us crumble / will have to wait until [*God*
comes back to collect us]

LEO

Whitey's our brother.

GERSH

We're doing business / here, Leo.

LEO

He needs money.

GERSH

He preys on you because you're small and vulnerable.

LEO

I am not... small.

GERSH
What'd he want.

LEO
I took care of it.

GERSH
Okay so there's nothing to worry / about.

LEO
Right! Don't worry!

GERSH
Just that you're ruining yourself by not sleeping.

LEO
Esquire magazine says successful businessmen don't sleep more than 5 hours a night!

GERSH
While you can imagine my relief that you're all caught up on *Esquire*, I think that 5 hours is not enough.

LEO
Thank you, mother, for your concern!

Pause. Gersh rubs his eyes.

LEO
You look tired.

GERSH
Yeah.

LEO
Is it windy up there? On the moral high ground? You didn't sleep either, asshole.

GERSH
I had obligations.

LEO
You got rings under your eyes. And you're kinda flakey right / there

GERSH
I was working on my book.

LEO
Your book?

GERSH
About my life.

LEO
[*Hilarious*] What you played stickball in an alley and got beat up by some Italians and stuck your finger in someone's underwear?

GERSH
Watch it.

LEO
[*Repressing laughter.*] I'm sorry Gersh it's just – I don't know how the average reader is gonna care about your life story – it's just... not that...

GERSH
So now you know all about the book market?

LEO
No I—

GERSH
It's just a regular Monday morning in which you didn't get the money, Leo. And didn't do your job. In which you fucked up. For the last time.

LEO
What last time?

GERSH
THE last time. Yeah. The last time.

LEO
Whoa ho ho. You are not firing me...?...!

GERSH
Yyyyyp.

LEO
I'm sorry I laughed at your book. I'm sorry I missed the closing.

GERSH
I'm constantly picking up after you and I'm done with it.

LEO
No, no no! No!

GERSH
You were already on a warning / don't throw a tantrum.

LEO
You can't fire me!

GERSH
Why.

LEO
'Cause I have the goods on you.

GERSH
You don't have anything.

LEO
[Grumble.]

*GERSH, triumphant in his bluff.
LEO crumples a little bit. Exhausted and defeated.*

LEO
[small] You can't fire me. [Pause.] I need money.

GERSH
[Dramatic pause.] Hire a secretary.

LEO is relieved.

GERSH
Someone who can organize you.
I'm giving you a week.

LEO
Her pay comes out of the coffee can.

GERSH
Out of your salary.

LEO
No way! You know you're gonna use her, ask her to clean your coffee mug
and call it common decency.

GERSH
I won't.

LEO
You're gonna wanna get your hands on her.

GERSH
This is your last chance.

LEO
Well anyway, I might.

GERSH
Say Thank You.

LEO
[small] Thank you.

GERSH
Get someone ugly.