I SETTE DORMIENTI

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CHARACTERS

GIUDITTA TAGLIONI: Possesses alarming physical frailty, though she is quick and discerning. Her voice has a steel core that makes every statement a declaration. In youth, she was work-oriented and tenacious to the point of obsession. *Avoid* playing her as an aged, infallible dispenser of wisdom.
REAPER: Ethereal, childish, clingy; becomes cold, weary, dispassionate. In appearance, distinct to the rest of the cast. Wears all white, with tens of watches clasped up their arms, and several round their ankles.
JOURNALIST: Young, independent journalist. She is alert, work-oriented, presumptuous, and has little patience.
OLD MAN: Knew the Reaper in his youth.

PROPS:

- 2 Chairs
- 2000s Microcassette recorder
- Folder, with paper clippings
- Veil
- Metal petrol lighter
- Matchbox with matches
- 2 Cigarettes

RUN TIME: 30 mins

SCENE. 2000s, A simple room in Italian villa style. Two chairs are set up mid-stage for an interview, with a small side table beside the left chair. There is one door towards the left of the back wall, and one door on the right of the stage. JOURNALIST occupies the left chair; GIUDITTA occupies the right. A high-angle beam isolates the two players. JOURNALIST is dressed boldly but professionally, and fiddles with a microcassette recorder set up on the table. A folder with clippings and files lies closed on her lap. She sits comfortably, self-assuredly. GIUDITTA is bent over in her seat, unlit cigarette in one hand, shawl pulled over her hair. She suffers from slight tremors, but her physical weakness is not reflective of her mental acuity. The JOURNALIST, however, does not take her seriously.

JOURNALIST
(brightly, professionally, but without genuine passion—as if reading off a script)
It's *date of production*, 2000, and I'm here with Giuditta Taglioni in her childhood home in Siena. A giant in the ballet world, you'd be hard-pressed to find an aspiring ballerina unfamiliar with her remarkable achievements. Not only did she serve as principal ballerina of the New York Ballet Theatre for over twenty years, she has an extensive history of humanitarian efforts, going back to her participation in anti-fascist student groups during World War II.
(turning to GIUDITTA)
But I'm not here today to discuss your career. Though notorious for keeping out of the spotlight, Guiditta—I may call you that—was the one who reached out for this interview, one of her rare appearances since returning to Siena for retirement. We at the American Public News are thrilled to gain a fresh perspective on your *personal* life after so many years of secrecy and speculation.

GIUDITTA
(nearly cutting her off, voice clear and measured to prevent trembling; pointing off-stage)
Look-through that window. Do you see the lion's paw fountain in the garden?

JOURNALIST

(surprised, after a brief hesitation)
I see it.

GIUDITTA
Leave a copy of the tape by the water when you're done. There is someone I wish it to be heard by.

JOURNALIST
(recovering professionalism)
Absolutely.

GIUDITTA
(with some sardonicism)
So, they sent you all the way from America…
(tapping her cigarette on a surface in recognition)
I have heard of you—I read your article, your Bly award winner on New York prostitution. What are you interviewing a tottering old ballerina for?

JOURNALIST
(with pride)
My topics have changed since I joined a national newsroom. It's a different world from independent work.

GIUDITTA
Certainly more international. How are you enjoying this part of Tuscany?

JOURNALIST
(facetiously)
Oh, the village is beautiful, just beautiful—and with so much *history*! I feel like I'm walking through a postcard. Honestly, I don't know why you insisted on going without cameras, we could have got some great footage.
(holds up her microcassette, chuckles politely)

GIUDITTA
(with almost imperceptible sarcasm)
Call it vanity.
(when JOURNALIST appears confused)

I’m old; I’m not used to such an exposed medium. If you think about it, your generation is the first with the ability to see and hear people from last century.

(Towards the end of GIUDITTA’s sentence, JOURNALIST flips open her folder and leaves through her pages.)

JOURNALIST

That’s very interesting… Giuditta, I completely understand the struggles of pursuing a career as a woman in the post-war period. Your life is defined by economic turbulence, and the struggles of authentic expression and self-determinism in a foreign country. What gave you the *bravery* to remain true to your artistic vision, in spite of cultural and institutional—

GIUDITTA

(cutting her off)

You seem to be interested in injustice. If you wish to conduct a sociological analysis of *cultural* and *institutional* barriers a female artist must face, I recommend speaking to a scholar.

(JOURNALIST is left speechless.)

As for the exigence to my art, I trust you’ve listened to my early interviews where I discuss the topic.

JOURNALIST

(glancing at her notes)

The… the incident in the Riviera. Your ‘near death experience’, when you were thirteen.

GIUDITTA

When I died.

JOURNALIST

You nearly drowned.

GIUDITTA

I died. You can say the current was too strong; I was a poor swimmer. But that was not how it happened.

(readjusts her legs, lifts the cigarette to her lips)

My family was well-off. While the rest of the country picked up the pieces spared from the Great War, we packed up for a Portofino holiday.

The water in that part of Italy is clearer than air. I swam out; far out. Blinded by sun, I dove under to cool my eyes, and there, I saw about a dozen long, pale shapes, slipping through the waves. I knew I had to follow them. I knew with the illogical certainty of a dream. I needed to follow them. No matter how hard I swam, they drifted ahead; bright as sparks, then indiscernible from dark water. Just as I thought I'd better turn back, I found myself in the center of a white vortex. I'd caught them! But those were not the white bodies of fish surrounding me—they were white bubbles, streaming from my mouth. I woke up on the shore. I knew I had died.

JOURNALIST
(jumping in, rapidly and evidently rehearsed)
Your brush with death must have caused you to reevaluate your priorities—I mean, this was the moment, wasn't it—the moment you decided your art must serve a greater good—

GIUDITTA
(forcefully)
It didn't matter that I died. What mattered were the fish. What I had seen in them.

JOURNALIST
The fish!—what about the fish—

GIUDITTA
Amid clear and terrible darkness, they shone, brighter than coins, than swinging bells, than wedding bands. Where had I seen such brightness before? In the eyes and open arms of my tutors and peers at the local dance academy. Even then, I had some understanding of my talent that proved more than childish fantasy. In front of tall mirrors, I did fouettes until my reaching arms became fins, my white skirts and tights tangled into rippling, aquatic forms. I would have brightness, or I would die. By seventeen, I knew I would be great.

JOURNALIST
(hurrying GIUDITTA to the next point)

But by then, the war was coming.

GIUDITTA

The war…

(sighs; for the first time she looks tired)

Yes, the war. And other things too.

JOURNALIST

You were, and are, vehemently anti-fascist. While studying at La Scala during the 40s, you aided the *Gruppi di Difesa della Donna,* distributing leaflets and shuttling messages between major cities you toured. You've accepted enormous personal risk for your principles—have you always had such a strong sense of moral responsibility?

GIUDITTA

(laughs bitterly)

Moral responsibility…

(with malicious, self-depracating satisfaction)

On the eve of the war, I was a toothless dissenter. Oh, I'd moan about tasteless fascist aesthetics to avoid addressing cruelty being carried out in broad daylight. My parents were a couple of *Bolscevicos, Antinazionales… Sovversivos…*

(the preceding said with irony, the insults drawn out as if she is recalling and mocking them)

They'd rant about the expulsion of Jewish professors, and I'd roll my eyes. Selfish bastards, running their mouths when they knew it could ruin my career…

JOURNALIST

But of course, your perspective changed after your acceptance to La Scala—

GIUDITTA

(as if JOURNALIST had not spoken)

The truth is, we rather brutal violence is committed to others that suffer personal inconvenience. *Principles…* I've never had such things. I was just a dancer. What did it matter to me, those old men playing at power.

JOURNALIST

(a little desperately)

Now Giuditta, at the height of your fame in Milan, you defied Mussolini's personal request that you dance the lead in *Vecchia Milano*, and fled to America because of it. This was an act of civic courage and… artistic integrity… What exactly happened at La Scala to change your attitude?

GIUDITTA
(echoes)
La Scala.
(she stills)
I still have dreams about that place, or what I believed that place to be—a bastion of art, the beginning of my legacy…
(with introspection)
La Scala was my fish… for a while.

JOURNALIST
(jumping in)
The arts were heavily monitored by the regime, and used as a tool to justify and propagate fascist narratives—

GIUDITTA
La Scala is, as you know, the greatest ballet establishment in the country. The fascists were very proud of it—after all,
(with sardonicism)
ballet is classical, it's *purely European*, not like the degenerate expressionists, or American swing and jazz—
(she taps her cigarette against her mouth)
My childhood instructor was an active and respected Party member, and only through her *moral* recommendation was I permitted an audition. I was to travel to Milan—but the train broke down in Po Valley. A shuttle was called, but it would arrive at night and that was far too late. Funny to think that would no longer be a concern today.

JOURNALIST
(impatiently)
How did you get there?

GIUDITTA
I decided to walk. Perhaps I could find a cart willing to take me to Milan. I walked for hours, and when I found no-one—no cars, no people, not so much as a dog on the side of the road—I ran.
(gathering herself up)

That is when she appeared.

(REAPER slowly emerges from the back door, in the unlit part of the stage. As GIUDITTA speaks, a circular beam light slowly brightens, illuminating REAPER. They remain still, looking out at the audience passively. JOURNALIST does not look at REAPER yet.)

Her arms were covered with silver watches. Against the natural, blooming colors of the Po Valley, she appeared as monochrome as a ghost from this digital century. She blinked against the heat, and her babyish uncertainty was at odds with her stiff movements and white hair.

(GIUDITTA rises with immense difficulty. JOURNALIST starts forwards to help her but is waved away. As she speaks, she approaches REAPER and circles them very slowly, as if she is thinking about touching them but daren't. REAPER does not move yet.)

She kept checking her clocks. Each displayed a different time, and each seemed a product of a different era: from onion-shaped Renaissance contraptions, to Victorian pocket watches, to World War One army issues, though of course I didn't think to call it that then.

(slowly unties the veil covering her head)

I asked her if she was lost.

REAPER

(speaks as if she just woke from a dream)

What year is it?

(Lights change from isolate to full, yellow wash. GIUDITTA transforms from her old to her young self. She lets the veil fall to the floor. From here, JOURNALIST can observe the REAPER.)

GIUDITTA

(panting from exertion, hands on her knees)

1938. Don't you know?

REAPER
I need to go to the city. I need to find him… before I fall asleep again. The city…

GIUDITTA
Milan?

REAPER
Milan… Yes, Milan!

GIUDITTA
I'm going to Milan too. But I haven't seen a car for miles.
(her panic finally catching up with her)
If I'm not there by noon…

(GIUDITTA covers her face in distress and sinks to the ground, exhausted)

REAPER
(peering at their watches)
Noon has passed.

(Lights return from full wash to isolate)

Q323

JOURNALIST
(interrupting, REAPER freezes once more)
You missed the exam? There's no official record of this…

(As JOURNALIST speaks, GIUDITTA picks up her scarf from the ground and covers her head once more, signifying her present self. She rises to her feet.)

Q324

GIUDITTA
So I had missed the exam. I would go to Milan and beg them to give me another chance. If that didn't work… I was crazy and conceited enough I might have held the Director at gunpoint for my chance. Not really. But I never had to make that choice, because a car pulled up. The driver was on his way to Milan, and agreed to take us.
(with irony)
Divine intervention. Even amidst panic, I wondered: What had the strange woman meant by 'before she fell asleep again'? Why

would she not know the year? Why her strange clothes, her hundreds of watches?

Q325 We arrived at night. I was ready to march to La Scala, knock the door down,

(GIUDITTA pulls down the veil once again, but does not remove it.)

but she begged me:

(Lights switch to full yellow wash)

REAPER
Please, I need your help. There is a man in the city. He is about to die. He does not have long.

GIUDITTA
(to JOURNALIST)
His fate meant nothing to me. It wasn't my business, and I told her as much.

(REAPER snatches GIUDITTA's veil from her shoulders, drawing GIUDITTA's gaze back to them.)

REAPER
(with desperation)
I'm afraid. I need you with me. Please.

GIUDITTA
(to JOURNALIST)
I wouldn't have said yes, but I saw, approaching, a group of *Camicie Nere*—Blackshirts. Fascists. I had enough sense not to put myself at the mercy of puffed-up young men, hungry to exercise fantasies of power. I went with her.

(GIUDITTA and REAPER walk together to the side door. They knock three times. Silence, then footsteps. OLD MAN stumbles out. GIUDITTA takes several steps back.)

OLD MAN
(crying out, reaching for REAPER)

Thanatos!

REAPER
(steps back at the sight of him, covering her mouth)
Oh, what's happened to you?

OLD MAN
You're finally here. I've waited, how I've waited—

REAPER
(desperately)
I've come back! I've come back.

OLD MAN
(stumbling towards REAPER)
Morte, morte—

(OLD MAN falls into REAPER's arms and dies. REAPER collapses under his weight and they sag to the floor. There is silence. GIUDITTA is utterly shocked.)

GIUDITTA
(finally)
He's dead.

REAPER
(numbly, wearily, without inflection)
It was bound to happen.

GIUDITTA
A doctor… Call for the police!

REAPER
And have those brutes in black shirts come?
(suddenly, furiously)
No! You have no idea… I haven't seen him in… years—decades.
(toneless once more)
Help me carry him inside.

(REAPER and GIUDITTA drag his body across the stage and to the background, symbolically taking him indoors. REAPER covers his face with

GIUDITTA's veil. REAPER drifts to the front of the stage, and GIUDITTA follows them.)

(again, stroking the watches on their arms)
It was bound to happen.

(REAPER takes out a cigarette and matchbox from their pocket. They withdraw a matchstick and try unsuccessfully to strike it. After several failed attempts, GIUDITTA takes out a petrol lighter and lights REAPER's cigarette.)

GIUDITTA
Who was he?

REAPER
Someone I hoped would be an exception.

GIUDITTA
Your father? Your grandfather?

REAPER
(eyes closed; their tone darkens)
War is coming. I can feel it. Then, it does not matter who he is. There will be no fathers, no grandfathers. Only soldiers, and bodies.

(REAPER and GIUDITTA turn their attention to the corpse.)

GIUDITTA
(uneasily)
Not after the Great War.

REAPER
War is coming. War greater than the last.

GIUDITTA
(somewhat spitefully)
Don't you have any faith? Nobody wants any more senseless—

REAPER
(blankly)

Death?

GIUDITTA
(after a silence)
If you're so sure, aren't you worried?

REAPER
It doesn't matter.

GIUDITTA
(growing angry)
It matters to me. I don't know who *you* are, I don't know where you're from—likely not around here. Then, you can't know how much I've sacrificed, how hard I've trained. I've danced a hundred vapid numbers to Great Rome and our *glorious* heritage, turned like a trick pony, carved an audience from these—philistines! If there's a war—I'll lose everything. You have the gall to tell me it doesn't matter?

(GIUDITTA snatches the cigarette from REAPER's hands, but REAPER intercepts GIUDITTA and grabs GIUDITTA's hands, cruelly. GIUDITTA jerks back, but cannot free herself.)

REAPER
(with flat bitterness)
Yes, turn a trick. Then you will be famous! And when they walk through the graveyard, they will leave extra flowers at your stone.

GIUDITTA
Can you name one of the Russian millions who died in the Great War—no really! It's a tragedy, no doubt, but can you? Yet everyone remembers Anna Pavlova. You see!

REAPER
(releasing GIUDITTA's hands, with some disgust)
Vain child. You don't know *war*.

GIUDITTA
As if you do. You look younger than me.

REAPER

(gesturing behind)
Do you know that man on the floor?

(When GIUDITTA refuses to look at him, the REAPER grabs her face and forces her to see.)

GIUDITTA

No.

REAPER

Do you recognize him?

GIUDITTA

I've never seen him before.

REAPER

When he was young, he promised he would become the greatest actor the world had ever seen. He said there would not be a single person in Italy who did not recognize his face.

GIUDITTA

How could you have known him when he was young? He looked eighty—no, ninety—

(she falls silent, gaze returning to the corpse)

REAPER

I knew him when he was twenty years old.

GIUDITTA

Impossible.

REAPER

I have been alive since the 3rd century.

JOURNALIST

(butting in)
That can't be true. That's—

(REAPER freezes. In the following exchange, they do not move, but they do observe the scene, following the conflict with their eyes. OLD MAN quietly rises and exits the stage, leaving the veil on the floor.)

GIUDITTA
(still as her young self, turning on JOURNALIST)
It *was* true. If you had been there, you would know. If you had seen her face.
(touches the REAPER's frozen cheek briefly)

JOURNALIST
Giuditta, Giuditta. You're telling me you met a woman who, in no metaphorical or allegorical sense, was a *vampire*? Or she claimed she was a vampire, and you claim to believe her?

GIUDITTA
(grave)
She held the flood in her eyes. The flood of fire born at the universe's conception, the flood that will destroy not only the library of Alexandria, but every stone and soul that bears the memory of written word. What terror. I could barely look.

JOURNALIST
And that changed your life? You met an immortal woman who upturned your philosophy?

(GIUDITTA does not respond, and there follows a silence. JOURNALIST snaps her folder shut, exasperated.)

I'm sorry the media has posed such a headache that you feel the need to spin a narrative to shake us off.

GIUDITTA
The one in the business of narratives is you.

JOURNALIST
(caught completely off guard)
Excuse me?

GIUDITTA
(in a way that makes it evident she is not giving a compliment)
I read your Bly award winning article. I, like many others, found it astonishingly detailed, astonishingly real—an

important work that *spoke* for the underrepresented and exploited.

JOURNALIST
I don’t see how that’s relevant.

GIUDITTA
I understand you promised your sources, Christina Russo, Amber Price, and five other working women, anonymity.

(JOURNALIST rises, and reaches for the microcassette.)

Don’t turn that off.

(JOURNALIST turns it off.)

JOURNALIST
What is this? Come on, Giuditta, are you the ethics board? Is this an interrogation?

(JOURNALIST laughs, partially from the ridiculousness of the situation, partially to alleviate the tension. GIUDITTA is silent. After a pause, JOURNALIST drops her confused, professional act.)

I know you don’t respect me. You don’t respect what I do. You and your whole generation think you have the right to judge things you know nothing about—why?—because you’ve got one foot in your grave? Let me tell you, I’m not some blind idiot who considers themself harbinger of justice. Yes, I spin narratives. My narratives are what got me signed by American Public News. My narratives pay my rent. I doubt you’ve ever had to worry about rent. Would you like me to shout my truth from the gutter, like those tweakers in the streets?

GIUDITTA
You discredit the journalists who do.

JOURNALIST
Those women knew the risks of testimony. You want real immorality? Turn your anger to the celebrities and billionaires

running the show—those fossils judging good and bad news—what voices are worth illuminating, what stories worth telling—

GIUDITTA
I fault hypocrisy, not immorality.

JOURNALIST
(sarcastically)
And it is wrong of me to compromise—

GIUDITTA
(in the following passage, the word 'tell' mocks the JOURNALIST's repeated use of the term)
What do you hope to achieve, *tell* me? A position high enough in the company that you can broadcast unfettered truth? The day that your words will bring justice? *I* tell you, that day will never come!

JOURNALIST
And what about your selfish profession?
(briefly shocked she spoke aloud)
I do have the capacity to make a real impact. People will always need information, and someone they can trust to give it to them.

GIUDITTA
So said the scribes and the bookbinders.

(JOURNALIST flinches. At this, GIUDITTA puts her face in her hands as if she has just remembered something.

No, I'm sorry. My anger isn't meant for you.

(A silence. JOURNALIST breathes hard, but she's mollified. Giuditta eventually looks up, and spreads her hands.)

Forgive me. I'm tired and old, and I've been in the building so long I've forgotten it's burning. I'm no wiser or happier for it.

(JOURNALIST falls back into her seat, puts her head in her hands.)

Will you allow me to finish?

JOURNALIST
(bitterly)
That's what I'm here for.

(From this point, GIUDITTA acts like the hybrid between her young and old selves. During the following exchange unfolds, JOURNALIST slowly sits up as her attention resumes. At some point, she restarts the microcassette.)

GIUDITTA
(walking back to REAPER, slowly)
I asked her: you've been alive for 1500 years?

REAPER
(reanimates smoothly)
No. Since I died, I've been alive for 50 days. All the rest was sleep.

GIUDITTA
(doubting)
Sleep?

REAPER
When I fall asleep, a lifetime passes before I rise again. I wake up, and all the clothes are different, the landscapes, the language. And in recent centuries: machines! Machines like I've never dreamt of.

Somehow, I know everything. I know the cruel, wicked things that have happened despite progress, and I know I am one of them—I am a curse, a blight, that marks the end of some random life—and all I want to do is bludgeon them over the head and tell them, don't hope! Don't hope. It won't make anything better.

GIUDITTA
The old man—

REAPER

I met him one summer, seventy years ago. His lifetime passed, so I am awake again.

GIUDITTA

If you sleep now…

REAPER

I will not wake until you are very old. Until you are about to die.

GIUDITTA

How much longer?

REAPER

For me? A few hours. Till morning, if I am lucky.

GIUDITTA

(grabbing REAPER's hands and shaking them)

Then you must do something, now. While you still have time.

(REAPER starts in surprise, and turns sharply to look at GIUDITTA. JOURNALIST also reacts, though more subtly. GIUDITTA picks up the veil from the floor. She holds it tightly in her hands.)

(to JOURNALIST)

You asked me what changed in my philosophy. I won't pretend I was struck by any noble sentiment. Despair was the flood in her eyes. Oh my god, I was terrified. Religion, beauty, ambition—the twigs we prop our lives upon—snapped under the weight of that flood. I'd sustained myself on brightness, the promise of achievement, and now I knew the chaos I was destined for… Once again, upended in unending bubbles, grasping nothing, for I was nothing—

The next moment, I became very aware of my cursed, lonely, companion, resolved to do nothing in the meagre time she had before morning. Was it spite or pity that came over me? I thought: I have looked into the face of death. So what? I'd killed death once and I could do it again.

Not to say this was easy. The despair was still there, it would always be there. But if my art changed nothing, why should I

put it above or below a warm cup of tea? This is what passed through my mind when I refused to dance for the fascists.

(with significance, towards the tape)

Perhaps I surprised her.

JOURNALIST

(subdued)

What did you do?

GIUDITTA

There's an awful freedom in living your last day. I could take her to the capital to shoot Mussolini. We could go to a museum. We could save a life. Instead, we talked.

(GIUDITTA puts the veil around her head again. While she speaks, REAPER backs into the dark part of the stage, slowly, finally exiting just as GIUDITTA says 'asleep'. Lighting slowly returns from full wash to isolation, completing the transition at the word 'asleep'.)

We talked about many things. She told me about the old man, and the ones that came before him. She was struggling to keep her eyes open, so I danced with her. Around midnight, she cried, because she knew it would be over soon. As the first orange rays emerged behind the blinds, she leaned forwards, kissed me, then slumped to her side—asleep.

(pause)

I went into the street and told someone to remove the old man's body. When we returned, she was gone.

JOURNALIST

Did you ever see her again?

GIUDITTA

(pensively)

No. But she's coming.

(JOURNALIST turns off the microcassette, but holds it for the remainder of the show. The two sit in silence for a while.)

JOURNALIST

(*not* obsequious)

I want to apologize for interrupting your story.

GIUDITTA
(slightly facetious)
I don't blame you. It doesn't make for respectable published material.

JOURNALIST
Your result betrays your argument. You've made your mark on the world.

GIUDITTA
Hardly.

JOURNALIST
(appears torn whether she should speak, and ultimately decides to)
There was a little girl I met in the field—not for my Bly article—some other, low-profile, leg work, I don't even remember the story… Anyways, she was just a baby, eleven or twelve, working the streets with her mother. She owned the clothes on her back, and a tape. A tape of your performance of Appalachian Spring, 1950-something. She'd sneak into the public library—she didn't own a VCR—and played the tape over and over. She knew the dance by heart, though without training, she couldn't imitate it. Well, I had to work with that family for a while, and at some point, I realised the girl had stolen bills from my wallet. When I confronted her, she said she needed to buy a new tape. She was sick of Appalachian Spring, she said!
(as if confused by the fact)
I'd forgotten that story until something you said earlier.

GIUDITTA
(inclining her head in acknowledgement)
I'm glad they sent you.

(JOURNALIST stands, then walks slowly to the side door. Halfway across the stage, she pauses, peering at the unlit door, as if she has caught sight of someone. There is brief beam light, and we see the REAPER standing there for an instant before the light cuts; REAPER exits immediately after. JOURNALIST, stunned, opens her mouth to say something, but

(changes her mind. Just before JOURNALIST reaches the door, GIUDITTA calls out, without turning in her chair.)

GIUDITTA

I never did catch the fish. I can see them, just ahead of me. Aren’t they beautiful?

(JOURNALIST looks back one more time, then exits. GIUDITTA closes her eyes. After a silence, three knocks are heard.)

(CURTAIN)