

nebu[lab] 2/2011

Dana Lang

Death Caps and the Jersey Devil

“It is a haunted place where the blood red waters of the Mullica River rise in the bog of a New Jersey town. The cedars that line the river banks stain the waters their deep color. Stunted pitch pines stand motionless, their shallow roots anchored precariously in gleaming white stands. Silence reigns.”

—Helena Mann-Malnitchenko in “A Haunted Place,”
her memoir of the New Jersey Pine Barrens.

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CHARACTERS: (Roles can be multiple as indicated, if necessary.)

TREEHOPPER / Professor Bralhopf

WALKINGSTICK / LUCY LEEDS / Mrs. Lowden / Pinafore Girl 1

ADRIENNE / Midwife / Mae Rawhle / Pinafore Girl 2

GENE / Mr. Lowden

CHAZ / John Margovitch

THE GROUNDSKEEPER / REVEREND DOCKERD / Lou

J.D. / THE TRAINEE / Joe Springer

MARCIANNA / BLUEBOTTLE / Veruka / Mrs. Sorbinski / Pinafore Girl 3

SETTING:

The action of the play takes place in a secluded area of the New Jersey Pine Barrens, between the Atlantic County graveyard and the Mullica River, where the flats meet the treeline; in the backseat of a Lincoln Towncar; and on the streets of New York City.

Note: Words appearing in [brackets] are to be read as asides.

Prologue. A stand of trees at night. Gene crawls on the forest floor. He hears voices from the darkness.

TREEHOPPER:

Hey, Gene! Did you hear about the fungus and the algae? They took a lichen to each other.

The laughter of insects.

WALKINGSTICK:

What do you call a mushroom that buys all your drinks? A fungi to be with. Get it, Gene? A fun guy!

Gene writhes.

TREEHOPPER:

Say, Gene. Why did the fungus refrain from sex? Because sex is a pain in the ascus.

Much insect laughter.

WALKINGSTICK:

Did you hear that the French love the fungus so much that they eat button mushrooms with milk in the morning like we eat cereal? Yeah, they call it “the breakfast of champignons.”

Gene crawls offstage shaking his head as lights fade out.

Scene 1. Street noise. A car door slams. Lights up on Adrienne, a 30ish Manhattanite (a dyed redhead who can't quite pull it off, always dressed in shades of gray, brown and beige) settling into the back of a Towncar.

ADRIENNE:

Here we go. (*To driver.*) Yes, I'm buckled!

She snaps her seat belt strap forward to demonstrate.

ADRIENNE:

God, he's such a drip. So this is it. The Lincoln Towncar. Just for the week, don't get all excited. Couple readings, the big release party. Company car. They're paying the guy anyway. My agent Donny pushed for the ride. “Look, she's got no income, the advance is gone, and she needs to get around.” Whoever heard of that? Donny. Real toughguy. Maybe my material scares them. Or he sucks dicks over in Acquisitions, I dunno. In the meantime, I'm takin' care of some major errands. What? No, I said 86th! 86th! Jerk. Or maybe they're just trying to torture me. I mean you take your chances with cab drivers, but this guy's like a tree stump. Nah, he can't hear me.

She knocks on the divider.

ADRIENNE:

Plexiglass. Gotta love Plexiglass. Take me to Bumfuck, Brooklyn you sorry sack of shit!

She chuckles, nods and waves at the rear-view mirror.

ADRIENNE:

Alright. Let me calm down. I've been a little... anxious lately. That's the weird thing. You spend two years of your life holed up in some room, then you're supposed to open your wings like a friggin' social butterfly and meet... people. Stressful? Shit. Shit! Not the FDR! (*She bangs on the divider.*) Street, street! What is this guy, a masochist? Jesus, I can't even deal with one loser, how the hell am I gonna deal with a whole roomful of 'em?

She takes a deep "cleansing" breath.

ADRIENNE:

OK, A. Get a hold of yourself. They're not losers. They're readers. People. Just like you and me. He is kind of cute. Imagine going through life like that. Little happy man, no troubles, just drive here, drive there. A job with a beginning and an end. A task and a completion. Like you know when you're done. Wouldn't that be something? Probably pretty repetitive, though. Not like my work at *all*. Fresh as a fucking daisy! I wonder where he's from. Sad story. Was a doctor in his country, here, he's a driver. Here! This is it! Here!

Adrienne gets out of the car and speaks to the driver's side window.

ADRIENNE:

I'll be done in an hour. One hour.

She points to her watch.

ADRIENNE:

No, no, it's just the dentist. Dentist. Teeth, you know?

She bares her teeth and taps on them. Some are missing.

ADRIENNE:

[Gotta see what he can do to stop them from falling out.] Yeah...I see. No, I don't think I'm doing the gold thing, but they look very nice. [God.] OK, see you in an hour. Bye.

The car is gone. She's not in Kansas anymore. She sees a stand of trees and two men on all fours doing something on the ground. She crouches down and hides.

ADRIENNE:

What the fuck?

Blackout. **Scene 2.** Lights up on the front porch of a fieldstone house in the Pine Barrens, circa 1735. Lucy Leeds enters from the woods carrying a bucket of water. She is humming to herself. Children are playing offstage. The Reverend spies on her from behind the trees, then enters. She stops humming.

REVEREND DOCKERD:

Good morrow to you, Mother Leeds. Isn't the weather fine.

LUCY:

Yes, hello Reverend. I was just starting the day's washing. What brings you this way again? So soon.

REVEREND DOCKERD:

Is Mr. Leeds at home?

LUCY:

Why no, of course not. He's down at the mill. Sunrise is still his customary session.

REVEREND DOCKERD:

Ah. You're looking well.

LUCY:

Thank you. I must say, you've certainly been keeping up on your rounds. Third time this week.

REVEREND DOCKERD:

Yes. I feel it's much nicer to bring the Lord around to the flock especially in such nice weather. Tell me, have you and the children been well?

LUCY:

Certainly. Now that Suzy's gotten over that terrible rash, things have been almost tranquil around here...

Blood-curdling screams interrupt her, followed by maniacal laughter of children.

REVEREND DOCKERD:

Mother Leeds, is there a quiet spot where we might commune together in our heavenly discourse? I have traveled quite a brambly distance in order to minister to you.

He brushes off leaves and twigs from his black suit.

LUCY:

You know there's not much quiet around here with this brood.

REVEREND DOCKERD:

Well, might we abscond to the barn then? Like last time?

LUCY:

Fond of the hay, Reverend Dockerd?

REVEREND DOCKERD:

That's not all.

LUCY:

Alright. But quickly!

REVEREND DOCKERD:

Yes, I can deliver your salvation very quickly.

LUCY:

As I recall.

They exit. **Scene 3.** Lights up on a chirpy morning in the Pine Barrens, present day. Gene and Lou are on all fours, wearing baskets of mushroom hunting equipment (scissors dangling from the handles; long pointed sticks wrapped with florescent tape on the ends; hooked knives with brushes on the handles; and boxes of giant Ziploc bags, etc.) Lou drags a heavy chain with an empty dog collar at the end of it from his belt. Gene is singing.

GENE:

Amanita, Amanita / The breezes blow your name
Amanita, Amanita / I'll never be the same
Amanita, Amanita / My arms they long to hold you
Amanita, Amanita / Our own little pot-au-feu

GENE (con't.):

Ugh, flowers! Why must they obliterate my dried and shriveled fungi? Summer is the pits. What to do when you yearn for gloomy skies and a good soaking?

Lou shrugs. He is a mute. Treehopper, a brown and green triangular insect, and the pregnant but willowy insect Walkingstick pop out of the trees above.

TREEHOPPER:

There he goes again. Always when I'm trying to enjoy my sap.

WALKINGSTICK:

Why don't you move to a more inclement climate? I have eggs to drop and this weather is just perfect for it.

Gene scuttles out of egg-dropping range.

GENE:

I've every right to complain. Bugs! I have been sorting out my clothes closet which has revealed the ugliest of spectacles—horrid moths flapping around in there dining free as larvae, getting fat on my dried stashes. I hate those little insects but they love me for my mushrooms. Not a relationship destined to end happily, I assure you.

TREEHOPPER:

You don't have a clothes closet. You live in the woods. We see you.

GENE:

Ah, *Galerina venenata*! (*He picks a mushroom.*) Unlikely to be considered as potential food, but it does pose a "grazing" danger to small children and dogs.

He puts the mushroom into his pocket.

WALKINGSTICK:

Gangway!

Walkingstick drops an egg.

TREEHOPPER:

What's that one make?

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WALKINGSTICK:

Seventy-six. Twenty-four more to go. Fucking bastards.

TREEHOPPER:

Congratulations.

WALKINGSTICK:

Yeah, save it for next spring when they hatch.

Chaz sticks his head out of another tree.

CHAZ:

What the—! Who's there?

A shower of coins falls from Chaz's tree. Lou jumps, Gene is disinterested.

CHAZ:

Shit! Not again.

GENE:

The day was off to such a promising start.

Chaz climbs down, holding a large canvas bag full of what sounds like coins.

CHAZ:

Who the hell are you?

Gene ignores Chaz.

CHAZ:

Uh, hello? (*No response.*) Fuckin' forest freaks.

Gene notices Chaz. Gets ideas.

GENE:

Ah, yes. The name's Gene. Freelance mycologist. General piney.

CHAZ:

Jesus, Gene. I thought I heard voices.

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GENE:

It happens.

CHAZ:

A real piney, huh? I'm Chaz. What are you doing down there?

GENE:

Working, thank you very much.

CHAZ:

Sorry, didn't mean to uh, disturb you.

Chaz gets down on all fours and picks up his coins. Lou stares at him.

CHAZ:

Got a problem, bub?

GENE:

Don't bother about Lou, he communicates with his eyes.

Lou communicates with his eyes at Chaz.

CHAZ:

Listen, do you guys know how to get to the old Leeds Road from here?

GENE:

You're not gonna find it up there.

CHAZ:

I was just taking a rest. These woods are massive. I got all turned around last night.

GENE:

What do you have in there? Sounds jingly.

CHAZ:

What do you have in *there*? Looks slimy. Smells awful.

Gene opens a bag full of mushrooms and selects one. Chaz recoils from the smell. Lou is happily cutting and bagging mushrooms.

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GENE:

The *Marasmius oreades* isn't really viscid. The taste is nothing like the smell, believe you me. Fortunately that pungent, unappealing odor dissipates by the time those babies are sizzling in a sauté pan. These scotch bonnets invoke a rich, creamy taste, which to my palate, suggests overtones of butterscotch without all the cloying sweetness.

CHAZ:

You got a sauté pan out here?

GENE:

Nope.

CHAZ:

Well fuck me.

Lou is momentarily offended.

GENE:

It's not to everyone's taste.

CHAZ:

I'll take a swig of that scotch, though.

GENE:

Alcohol only deadens the palate for 'shrooms.

CHAZ:

So that's what you two are into out here? (*He looks at Lou's chain and dog collar.*) Mushrooms?

Lou shakes his mushroom stick at Chaz.

CHAZ:

(*He stands up.*) Hey, whatever. So listen, couldja help me out? I know there's supposed to be this dirt road, but I couldn't find shit in the dark. Damn, it gets dark out here. I musta circled that old bone yard three times.

GENE:

Ahh, that place. Cemeteries can be fungally fabulous.

CHAZ:

(*With distaste.*) Yeah, I noticed. Plus that ornery groundskeeper has no sense of humor what-so-ever. No, I can't go back through that away.

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GENE:

There's nothing like a grassy plain ringed with stately pines, cedars, and oaks. Being so close to the coast, it gets a yummy drizzle of fog condensation too. If there are no mushrooms around, you've always got some reading material handy on the tombstones.

CHAZ:

You're a pretty deep guy, huh Gene?

GENE:

In a shaggy lawn like that, you have to plunge deep into the grass where big clusters like to hide. Where you find one, you usually find more. They're gregarious that way. Some are in slug-eaten tatters past their prime, some just starting life as tiny caramel dots, others are jusst riight.

CHAZ:

That's great. Some lifestyle you got going there.

GENE:

I make sacrifices for my career. You, on the other hand, sleep in a tree.

CHAZ:

I was supposed to meet up with my partn— my pal. I'm just, hangin' out a while.

GENE:

Till the heat's off?

CHAZ:

Ha ha! Get a load of him. Jimmy Cagney over there.

GENE:

I'm a professional.

CHAZ:

You don't even get any light down there.

GENE:

Beautiful things grow in the darkness.

CHAZ:

(A beat.) Look, are you gonna help me out or what?

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GENE:

You must be sure of your identification when picking Marasmius. You have to examine their gills and spore color very closely, especially if they are growing in ring formation. You'll want to avoid unpleasant surprises and liver transplants.

CHAZ:

Uh-huh, right. Ok then, see ya later. Take care now. Buh bye, Lou.

Lou waves a Ziploc bag at him like a hanky.

GENE:

And you must maintain a serious demeanor on your face so as not to disturb whatever kith and kin still show up to visit their dead.

CHAZ:

Gene...

GENE:

Many folks actually bring gardening tools to spruce up their relatives' graves, so I didn't stand out there as much as you might think. I did, however, get the odd stare.

CHAZ:

Gene?

GENE:

It always helps to read the headstones while crouching down there scissoring Marasmius heads—the arc of a lifetime condensed to a few paltry words: “Beloved Husband,” “Daughter and Wife,” or the ever-popular, “Gone Fishin’.” If I should ever need a tombstone [highly unlikely] it would read: “Pushing up Mushrooms, Please Help Yourself!”

CHAZ:

Gene! If you love that old graveyard so much, why don't you go over there instead of talking about it ad nauseous?

GENE:

I can't. I'm banned. For life.

CHAZ:

Well, does it really surprise you? Shit. You make it sound like more fun than a titty bar.

GENE:

You could help me. If you wanted to.

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CHAZ:

Why would I want to? Besides, that place gives me the creeps.

GENE:

You would be helping a great cause. Plus, I do know the way to the Old Leeds Road.

CHAZ:

Oh, I see. A little case of tit for tat. Let me rot out here while you're getting off on slimy mushroom heads.

GENE:

Good luck finding your friend. Don't worry, the Pine Barrens isn't as big as it seems.

Gene laughs. Lou laughs with him, silently.

CHAZ:

I'll get there, with or without your help. Still got the whole day.

GENE:

When my work is completed, it will be a different world. Your troubles with the law would be a distant memory.

CHAZ:

What do you mean, troubles with the law?

GENE:

I'm close, Chaz. I'm getting very close.

CHAZ:

Fuck. I gotta get out of here. What do I have to do?

GENE:

Come on down. I'll tell you.

Chaz hunkers down as Gene greedily crawls over to him.

WALKINGSTICK:

Gangway!

TREEHOPPER:

There he goes, lucky number seventy-seven!

WALKINGSTICK:

Ugh. (*Groans.*)

Blackout. **Scene 4.** Lights up on the porch of the fieldstone house, later that afternoon in 1735. Lucy is hanging out her washing. There is a pie cooling on the ledge. Veruka, a gypsy woman with a husky European accent, approaches.

VERUKA:

A crust of bread for the famished, good lady?

LUCY:

Veruka, you startled me. Are you here again?

VERUKA:

Times are difficult.

LUCY:

I'm sorry. I have so many mouths to feed as it is...

VERUKA:

Yes, I know. More than one mouth is many.

A strange pause.

LUCY:

Why don't you go to see Reverend Dockerd? I'm sure he has some kind of provisions at the church for such a case...

VERUKA:

Devil! We do not ascribe to his ways. Besides he's never there. Maybe you have seen him? Around here mayhaps...?

She moves closer to the pie, sniffing.

LUCY:

Me? No, I haven't seen him. Not since last Sunday anyway.

VERUKA:

Hay.

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Lucy brushes strands of hay from her dress. Then she covers the pie with a handkerchief.

LUCY:

Please understand, it's for the children.

VERUKA:

Of course, I understand. Good day to you. [For now.]

LUCY:

What was that?

VERUKA:

Good day, good lady!

LUCY:

Goodbye.

Lucy goes back to her washing. Veruka moves into the trees and takes a satchel from under her skirts. She mutters and sprinkles what looks like clumps of hair, fish bones and peach pits on the ground. She does a little dance, laughing. Then she gets her foot caught in something and struggles angrily to get it out. She moves off. Lucy thinks she hears something.

LUCY:

These Pines are becoming a mite too reachable I daresay.

Lights out. **Scene 5.** Lights up on Adrienne entering the Towncar.

ADRIENNE:

Well, that went surprisingly well! Hey, Charlie. Take me down to Nobu. Nobu, Hudson and Franklin? Yeah. Fuck it, I'm takin' myself out to lunch. Chase Manhattan doesn't own my ass yet. Well not ENTIRELY. Who knew the women's bookstore crowd would be so receptive? I mean this isn't exactly warm and fuzzy stuff here. Barnes & Noble's gonna be a fuckin' breeze after this. Hmm, I wonder if they have some kind of guidelines. Could be kids around. Hey. Do you think a woman fucking severed body parts would be too over-the-top for Barnes & Noble? Huh? Oh, nevermind. Yeah, next left.

The car stops and Adrienne exits in a rush. It is the woods at dusk. She panics and hides. Treehopper and Walkingstick are in the trees enjoying a rain shower.

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TREEHOPPER:

Ahh, it feels good to de-sapify. I needed this.

WALKINGSTICK:

You and me both. I can't wait till the rest of those things are out of me.

TREEHOPPER:

You're doin' great, kid. Say, it's quiet today. Where did those freaks get to?

WALKINGSTICK:

Off to the cemetery. I overheard Mushroom Man telling the Fugitive of Justice all about how to get around the groundskeeper.

TREEHOPPER:

Good luck.

WALKINGSTICK:

Yeah, he'll never learn.

Bluebottle, the tourist housefly, buzzes into a tree.

BLUEBOTTLE:

Hey, bugs.

WALKINGSTICK:

Bluebottle! What are you doing in this neck of the woods?

BLUEBOTTLE:

Got me a time-share down in the holler. I love the city, but all the festering even gets to me after a while. I needed a rest. Hitched a ride with some demented city chick. Sushi, bleh.

TREEHOPPER:

Say, if you need some company...I'd love to help you, uh, relax.

WALKINGSTICK:

Give it up, Hopper.

BLUEBOTTLE:

Hey, is it like this here all the time? I hope I didn't get screwed on this deal.

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WALKINGSTICK:

Don't worry, just a brief shower. You should stick around for the entertainment though. First a concerto, later some dramatics.

TREEHOPPER:

Now you're talkin'.

The insects hum and buzz an overture as the lights fade out.

Scene 6. Lights up on Marcianna walking through the woods.

MARCIANNA:

Chaz? Mike? (*A beat.*) Chaazz? Miikke?

She exits. Gene and Lou crawl in from another direction. Gene stops at the base of the tree where Chaz is hiding.

GENE:

Give it here.

HAZ:

Forget it. I knew I shouldn't of listened to you.

GENE:

You're fine. What are you worried about? Give 'em over.

HAZ:

What am I worried about! In case you don't recall, I have a warrant out on my ass! Last thing I need is that old fart makin' trouble.

GENE:

I knew you could outrun him, even up on two legs. Now throw them down. They're no good to you.

HAZ:

I think you and your project are full of shit.

GENE:

Even so. GIVE ME THE SPECIMENS!

HAZ:

(*A beat.*) OK, here.

He throws down a few baggies stuffed with gray fungal matter.

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CHAZ:

But I'm keepin' the pretty ones.

GENE:

They're ALL pretty!

Gene peruses the contents of the bags, sucking his teeth.

CHAZ:

Oh, is there a problem?

GENE:

Mushroom hunting is not a hobby for the careless or the uninformed. Look at these. Puffballs. Amateur! Chanterelles, how gourmet of you. One Bearded Tooth. A Hen of the Woods. And all the rest false Morels.

CHAZ:

I have some more up here. They're real pretty.

GENE:

One, two, thicken my stew. Three, four, down to the floor.

CHAZ:

I'm not fallin' for your trickery. Are you gonna tell me the way or not? It's almost night time again!

GENE:

You don't get it, Chaz. We're talking global environmental degradation here! The chytrid fungus is solely responsible for the decline of boreal toads. Almost 85 percent of the entire world's boreal toad population has been decimated, leaving biologists completely mystified.

A large mushroom in the background begins to move across the stage, very slowly, for the rest of the scene. It is sporting a jaunty flowered scarf.

CHAZ:

So what? I hate frogs. Nasty things.

GENE:

TOADS! Last year I discovered a chytrid growing right over there (*Chaz looks, then scoots away from the spot*) and I biochemically linked it to those toads. Normally these fungi are bottom-feeders, living off of dead plant material, but now they have evolved into an entirely new species. A sentient fungus that attacks living amphibian flesh!

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CHAZ:

I don't care about your stupid toads!

GENE:

Those toads are your oldest living relatives. There's only one way to save the human race. My project.

CHAZ:

That whole "Fungus People" thing you were telling me about? I don't think it's gonna go over too well, Genie-boy. For one thing, it's icky.

GENE:

This is a case of fungal lust in the extreme. Since time began, fungus has lived among us, putrescent and yearning to break free, mutating for control over its own existence. It's only a matter of time. We humans all share an innate sense of awe for what grows under the earth. So why not join them?

CHAZ:

Because it's crazy? You need a good woman to take your mind off the fungi.

GENE:

Yeah? Come down here and say that.

CHAZ:

God, I miss Marcianna.

GENE:

What do you know about love?

An inhuman screeching erupts from a distance. Lou begins to pull in his chain, twisting it around his arm. It gets darker.

CHAZ:

What was that?

GENE:

Just the wind.

The screeching gets louder. Lou slinks into a hollow behind a tree.

CHAZ:

Gene? What the fuck is that?

Chaz's tree trembles as he climbs higher. Gene packs away his tools. It is now dark, except for the moonlight shining on the moving mushroom.

GENE:

Don't worry, Chazzie ole boy. Just some of our local fauna...or flora. Or whatever. Better stay up there for the night, now. I'll draw you a map first thing in the a.m. Nightie night.

Gene rolls onto his back.

GENE:

(A passionate whisper in the darkness.) Oh, Amanita. My destroying angel. My love for you grows like a wet, dark thing under the earth. I feel your long skinny limbs reaching for me, always so hungry. But are you still faithful? I feel you growing, but are you moving out of reach? I'll never forget the first night we spent together in your delicious fairy ring. I'm doing this for us, Amanita. I dedicate my life's work to you. We will be together again, soon my darling, soon.

Scene 7. Lights up on a workshed at the old Atlantic County Cemetery. The Groundskeeper's Trainee runs into the workshed, as if for his life. The Groundskeeper follows, breathlessly.

THE GROUNDSKEEPER:

Just what do you think you're doing, boy?

TRAINEE:

I, I-I-I saw something.

THE GROUNDSKEEPER:

Holy Christ, don't tell me I got another garter snake shrinking violet on my hands. What kinda pansy ass school they runnin' over there?

TRAINEE:

It wasn't a snake, ok?

THE GROUNDSKEEPER:

You kids think you see something in the corner of your eye and get all spooky on me. I'd like to have seen you back in '64 when James "Jacky" Johnson sat right up in his coffin just as pretty as you please one night I was here alone. Ha ha ha. You would have stained your shorts that time, son. Now let's get back to work, we still gotta hit the northern mound!

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TRAINEE:

Mr. Bips, please. I can't go back out there.

THE GROUNDSKEEPER:

Oh yes you will. That's what they got the minimum wage for.

TRAINEE:

Look, do you have a gun or anything?

THE GROUNDSKEEPER:

A gun! What are ya gonna do, shoot me? 'Cause if you don't get your ass back to work, you better plan on it.

TRAINEE:

I saw something, some kind of... monster out there. It was big.

THE GROUNDSKEEPER:

Monster, huh? (*A patronizing pause.*) Well, kid. I'll tell ya what. Why don't we set a spell here, out of the sun. The heat might be gettin' to ya.

TRAINEE:

OK.

The Groundskeeper reaches into a cooler for two cans of Coke, pops one open and passes it to the Trainee.

THE GROUNDSKEEPER:

So what did this "monster" look like?

TRAINEE:

I'm not seeing things in the corner of my eye. And it's not the heat!

THE GROUNDSKEEPER:

OK, OK. Was it tall? Kinda long-legged, but lizardy lookin'?

TRAINEE:

I-I think so. Yes. It had a tail. I saw its huge wings flapping. And red eyes. It had glowing red eyes!

THE GROUNDSKEEPER:

Uh-huh. Yessir. Sounds like you had yourself a run-in with the Jersey Devil.

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TRAINEE:

The Jersey Devil.

THE GROUNDSKEEPER:

Didn't your mama ever tell you about that one?

The trainee shakes his head slowly.

THE GROUNDSKEEPER:

That's right, your people aren't of the Pines, are they? Well, we got us a real homegrown freak living out here. They call him a "Devil" for lack of a proper name. No one's ever seen such a creature, living or dead.

TRAINEE:

They should tell us that when they're giving out the summer jobs.

THE GROUNDSKEEPER:

It's a funny thing. All these years and they never caught 'im yet. Never even got him up real close. 'Less the poor sap didn't live to tell the tale. No polaroids, no video recorder, no camera crews. That's one smart Devil. He could have a whole gallery full of himself in action.

TRAINEE:

Maybe it was only my imagination.

THE GROUNDSKEEPER:

Are you kidding! We might have to call Bob over at the journal. Haven't had a real good sighting around here since God wore short pants.

TRAINEE:

I feel better now. I can work. Let's go.

The Groundskeeper takes a long swig of his Coke.

THE GROUNDSKEEPER:

Son. Let me tell you something. I want you to be informed, so if this thing happens again, you'll be ready. Now, sit down here.

He pulls down a shade covered with yellowed newspaper clippings.

THE GROUNDSKEEPER:

This here has been the unofficial headquarters of the Jersey Devil Eradication Office for many years. It's best that you're told the whole story.

He takes down a clipping, and puts on a pair of reading glasses and a green eyeshade.

TRAINEE:

It's ok, really... I want to work!

THE GROUNDSKEEPER:

This is the earliest surviving written report, from the *Atlantic Monthly*, 1859. "There lived, in the year 1735, in the Township of Burlington, a woman. Her name was Leeds, and she was shrewdly suspected of a little amateur witchcraft. Be that as it may, it is well established that one stormy gusty night, when the wind was howling in turret and tree..."

Lights fade out. **Scene 8.** A stormy night circa 1735 at the Leeds' fieldstone house. Amber light. Lucy is on her bed in a fitful labor. A Midwife and other women are attending her.

LUCY:

O, it is unholy. No, you must stop it.

MIDWIFE:

Come, Lucy. Try to lie still. Get her some cool water. You have birthed twelve healthy children. You will be fine, fine as frog's hair, you'll see.

LUCY:

You don't know! I have been haunted by dreams of this, this beast. Hear me! It is evil. Send for Reverend Dockerd.

MIDWIFE:

Alright now. The Reverend is on his way. You must lie still. Here.

She puts a damp cloth on Lucy's head.

MIDWIFE:

There. Be still, Lucy dear. You are almost through it.

Lucy goes limp. After a beat, she lurches up.

LUCY:

It is here! No, you must run away. Oh, let me die before this evil thing comes into being.

MIDWIFE:

Here. Bear down, Lucy. That's it. Almost. Push. Good! It's here! You've done it, Lucy. You have a healthy baby... boy!

The Midwife takes the infant and swaddles it. The women gather around. One brings over a wash basin. The Reverend enters.

REVEREND:

Blessed be the House of Leeds. Another son to carry his father's name.

LUCY:

Oh, Father. Please, anoint this child quickly. I fear, I fear it is a beast.

MIDWIFE:

Your son is perfectly whole and healthy. Why, he's just as pink as a little rosebud...

Her face turns from bliss to shock, then to abject horror.

MIDWIFE:

He's... it's, something's happening. Reverend!

As the Midwife hands the newborn to the Reverend, it leaps onto his face, emitting horrible piercing shrieks.

LUCY:

It is evil! I knew it! I have spawned evil.

Lucy flails out of bed and lands in a heap, clawing at the floor. The women free the Reverend, whose face is dripping with blood, while the infant sprouts bat's wings and flutters up to the ceiling, hissing.

REVEREND:

It hath taken flight! The Devil's child. O, cursèd thing.

He cowers. Lucy is clawing, the Midwife grabs a broom. The baby screeches around the room, then up the chimney, shrieking into the night. All freeze into a terrible sepià tableau, while the

“Beautiful” theme, which sounds like contemporary Parisian lounge music, plays.

VERUKA (V.O.):

And every day it revisited her doorstep screeching, until she shooed it away...
Mother Leeds practiced witchery, that’s why the beast was born unto her...
It was her wanton ways...Ask the Reverend, he knows the true cause...
13th son of a 13th son / Gypsy’s curse, gypsy’s curse
(*Evil laughter.*)

Blackout. **Scene 9.** Spotlight up on the Groundskeeper as he reads from old news clippings. Several characters are spotlighted as they step out of the news accounts.

THE GROUNDSKEEPER:

And so Mother Leeds gave birth to a son, whose father could have been no other than the Prince of Darkness. No sooner did he see the light than he assumed the form of a fiend, with horse’s head, wings of a bat, and a serpent’s tail. The first thought of the newborn Caliban was to fall foul of his mother, whom he scratched and bepommelled soundly, and then flew through the window out into the village, where he played the mischief generally. Little children he devoured, maidens he abused, young men he mauled and battered; and it was many a year before anyone succeeded in repeating the enchantment of Prospero. Finally a brave holy man with bell, book and candle exorcised the Devil for one hundred years...

VERUKA (V.O.):

13th son of a 13th son / Gypsy’s curse, gypsy’s curse

MR. LOWDEN:

The Lowdens, Burlington. I watched the Jersey Devil cavort on the roof of our woodshed for approximately ten minutes. The creature had a head like a horse and phosphorescent eye holes. Stunk to high heaven.

MRS. LOWDEN:

We found hoof prints around our trash, which of course was half-eaten. Almost every yard in town had these strange hoof prints in them. The tracks went up trees, from roof to roof, disappeared in the middle of roads and open fields. And my darling Lady Di roses started withering away, remember that dear?

MR. LOWDEN:

I believe they had been evacuated upon. The same tracks were found in Collingswood, Hedding, Kinahora and Maple Shade. A hunt was organized to follow the tracks but not one of the dogs would follow the trail...

PROFESSOR BRALHOPF:

Professor Bralhopf, N.J.U. The tracks were made by a prehistoric animal originating from the Jurassic period. I believe the ancient creatures, possibly descended from Pterodactyls, slipped through the proverbial cracks and made their way any way they knew how, scratching and surviving, perhaps breeding deep underground in a cavern of some kind. The Academy of Natural Sciences, however, does not support my theory as they can find nothing in the fossil record, living or extinct, that resembles the descriptions of the Jersey Devil. Hacks.

MRS. SORBINSKI (and her white poodle):

Mrs. Sorbinski, Camden. I heard quite a commotion out in the yard. I opened the door to see the Jersey Devil standing there with my poor Lulu in its vicious grip. I hit the Devil with a broom until it begrudgingly let her go and flapped away. Later, the whole neighborhood heard a terrible screech coming from Kaigan Hill. A mob ran towards the hideous creature, the police fired shots, and the Devil flew off into the night. People stayed inside of doors for a month.

THE GROUNDSKEEPER:

In 1909, a lineman on the electric railroad watched the Devil fly into the wires above the tracks. There was a violent explosion which melted the track 20 feet in both directions. No body was ever found but the Devil was seen later, the picture of health. Years later the Parks Department found a strange corpse in a burned out area of the pines. It was a partial skeleton, feathers, and hind legs of an unidentifiable creature. But each time the people of New Jersey believe these exaggerated reports of the Devil's demise, it returns.

VERUKA (V.O.):

13th son of a 13th son / Gypsy's curse, gypsy's curse

MAE RAWHLE:

Mrs. Mae Rawle. I survived the Invasion of Gibbsboro, May 9th, 1951. He went off on a real bender that time. Two days of bloody hell. Old Man Johnson's farm was raided and a total of 31 ducks, 18 chickens, nine geese, six cats, three dogs, two small children and one goat were mutilated and killed. You have to give the Devil his due. It was a real mess.

JOHN MARGOVITCH:

John Margovich, Philadelphia. My grandmother knew the Jersey Devil personally. Nah, not the "creature." She knew this guy George Bishop, from Bensalem? In the fifties, well, he went a little crazy and moved out to the Pine Barrens to be alone with himself. You know, one of those Walden-type things. He was all scraggly and dirty from living in the woods. I mean, really scruffy, with a long smelly beard

JOHN MARGOVITCH:

and such. George used to love scaring people and hearing that they claimed to see the Jersey Devil. He got kind of a bad rap when they found that bear claw on a stick, but I know he couldn't have made all them tracks. He was a writer.

JOE SPRINGER:

Joe Springer, Pine-American, born and raised. People still talk about it, though mostly in private. I met this ambulance driver over at Tooley's Bar? He said he was riding around one night when he heard all these screams coming from the woods. This was back in '74. He threw on his sirens and tore outta there like a maniac. He still swears it was the Jersey Devil to this day.

VERUKA (V.O.):

13th son of a 13th son / Gypsy's curse, gypsy's curse. (*Evil laughter.*)

Scene 10. Dusk lights up on the workshed. The Trainee is on the floor with his arms wrapped around his knees.

THE GROUNDSKEEPER:

So there you have it. Now you know the whole story right and proper.

TRAINEE:

Cuh-can I go now?

THE GROUNDSKEEPER:

Sure, sure. (*Trainee gets up to leave.*) Just one little thing...

TRAINEE:

Uh, what's that?

THE GROUNDSKEEPER:

Girls? Are you with us...?

Three ashen-faced girls dressed in white pinafores slowly enter from separate sides. They begin to do a hand-clapping routine—two together and one alone facing the audience.

PINAFORE GIRL CHORUS:

Jer-sey Dev-il, born of fire
Jer-sey Dev-il, made his momma cry
You can't run 'cause he can fly
Jersey Devil pluck out your eye

Jer-sey Dev-il, lives on blood
See his hoofprints in the mud
Sing your baby this lullaby
Jersey Devil will suck you dry

PINAFORE GIRL CHORUS: (con't.)

Jer-sey Dev-il in the trees
Turn your skin right into grease
If you die before you wake
Jersey Devil your soul will make
Jersey Devil your soul will make
(*Screaming.*) Jersey Devil your soul will make!

They scare themselves and run off. As soon as he can unfreeze himself, the Trainee runs out as well.

THE GROUNDSKEEPER:

What's the matter? I just thought you should know the theme song! (*Laughs.*) Pansy.

Scene 11. City night lights up on Adrienne and a bunch of unseen people piling into the Towncar.

ADRIENNE:

No problem, no problem. Room for all! D'ya believe they sprung for the car? And my very own driver! Say hi, Charlie. Nah, I don't know his actual name. We communicate mainly in intersections, if ya wanna know the truth. Where? Oh, sure. Just give 'em the directions, Joe. Yeah? Well, thanks for coming to the party. I'm glad you liked the book. (*All laugh.*) Research. That's a good one. No, you'll be happy to know it all came from my own mind. (*A pause.*) Jesus, it's not that scary, I'm sorry, what did you say your name was? Skylar. No, I mean it's more, you know, symbolic or something. (*Trying to be heard over the din.*) I said, symbolic? [Christ. I bet Bret Ellis doesn't get this shit.] Huh? Oh, well now I'm working on this evil kid genius thing... what? We can stop there on the way, sure. Maybe you can fit one more up front there... oh, two more, whatever.

The lights flicker out and then back up. She is standing on a curb later that night with a small ice chest talking to an unseen companion. Her left hand is bandaged.

ADRIENNE:

That's alright. No, I had a great time at the last three places, really. Besides they're on the list. I just don't feel like dealing with that mob. Feels so... desperate. (*Nervous laugh.*) No, of course I didn't mean you! I'm gonna head home. I should probably do something about the pinky. (*Indicates cooler.*) No, I have no fucking clue! First I felt a little tingle and next thing it was in my lap. Sure, got my ride right cheer. (*Pats car.*) Ok, well, keep in touch. You have my number? Yeah, no, when you get back from Paris, sure. Ok, bye bye.

She collapses drunkenly into the car.

ADRIENNE:

Hi, there. Yeah, home finally. [Well, maybe just a quick stop at the ER.] Sorry for the long night. You must be bored out of your tiny mind. Bored? Like the opposite of excited? What do you do out here to pass the time? (*A confused pause.*) What the hell is mod lips? (*She looks.*) Oh, Mad Libs! I remember them, fill in the blanks. We used to make them gross-out filthy. God, I loved the fifth grade. Do they help? English must be a crazy language to learn. Nope, no need for a nightcap tonight...

She digs underneath the seat for a bottle of champagne.

ADRIENNE:

I took me a little souvenir. "It's my party I can die if I want to, die if I want to..."

She struggles with the bottle and pops the cork.

ADRIENNE:

Heads up! Yep, this is the glamorous part of the job alright. Hey, how 'bout some tunage?

She swigs from the bottle as tribal music begins to play.

ADRIENNE:

Ya want a pop? Pink champagne, can't beat it.

She passes the bottle up front.

ADRIENNE:

At'a boy! You know, on second thought, why don't ya swing it around the park a while, Charlie. I'm sorry, this is really rude, but I don't know your name. I mean we've been riding around like this all week. Andrei. Where do you hail from? No, I mean like what country... are you from? Quiz time, huh? Let's see. The fifth romance language. (*She guzzles.*) OK, French, Spanish, Italian... Portuguese? What's the fifth? Celtic? I have no idea. Gimme a hint. Count Dracula?! You're from Transylvania? Spooky. Oh, duh. Romania. I see. What kind of work did you do over there? Oh, a driver. Med school, really. No, I can't stand it either. It's funny though, I don't seem to mind it at all on the page. "Droplets of blood permeate Ms. Burden's writing like portentous punctuation." That was from the *Times*. So spit it out, is it literature or polka-dots? Yes, it is a beautiful night. (*She rolls down the window and the breeze blows her hair.*) I like it at this hour. Quiet. (*A scream.*) Except for the occasional emotional disturbance. I feel so at home in it. You know, you really are kind of cute.

Blackout. **Scene 12.** Lights up on a ruin of an old fieldstone house. There is a log set up as a makeshift table and also a giant cooler that says: "Mike's Suds—Do not touch under penalty of death" scrawled on the side. Marcianna enters gingerly.

MARCIANNA:

Chaz? Mike? You guys here or what?

She goes to the cooler and looks inside. She takes out a box of Apple Jacks, a bottle of red Juicy Juice, a loaf of Wonder Bread, and a jar of grape jelly. She sighs and puts them back in.

MARCIANNA:

That's Mike for ya. Never send the sugar freak out for supplies.

She whips out a bedazzled cell phone and dials.

MARCIANNA:

Hey, Stace. I'm leavin' you this message so you can call me out if I don't make it back in time for my shift. Tell 'im I sprained my ankle or somethin'. I finally found the place, I had to walk for miles. Talk about the frickin' boondocks. But I don't see 'em anywhere. Mike's at least been here. I'm gonna wait around a while and try to talk 'em into comin' back. Stupid mother-fucks. Anyhoo, I'll catch ya later. Oh, you can get me on my cell. Byeee.

She puts the phone away. She paces. It is quiet except for some rustlings in the woods outside. She goes to the glassless window and leans out.

MARCIANNA:

Chaz? (*A beat.*) Mike?

She takes off her denim jacket and lays it over the log. She lies back and closes her eyes. As the lights fade, a pair of glowing red eyes appears outside the window. They stare, then lights out. Reprise of the "Beautiful" theme music.

Scene 13. The trio of insects is in the trees. They have a bunch of assorted props: a military jacket and hat, a phony cannon, nautical spyglass and an antique bell.

WALKINGSTICK:

And now for a dramatic interlude!

BLUEBOTTLE:

Oh, yes. I love entertainment. I come from a theater town, you know.

TREEHOPPER:

Now, Bluebottle. You will supply the sound effects for our scene from the Hanover Iron Works, circa 1850. Don't worry, we will prompt you. This dramatization is based on true local legend. I will reprise my role as Commodore Stephen Decatur, in full naval uniform (*he puts on costume*) whilst my colleague, the ever-gestational Walkingstick, shall embody several Iron Workers of the period. Ahem.

The insects prepare themselves.

WALKINGSTICK (as Man 1):

These are our finest artillery, Commodore Decatur. We are honored to have you here at the Hanover Iron Works for inspection.

TREEHOPPER:

Yes. I am pleased with your labors here in New Jersey. I am highly impressed with your entire forge. [Now, an inhuman bone-chilling screaming is heard from offstage while all stop dead.]

BLUEBOTTLE:

(Makes inhuman screeching sounds.)

TREEHOPPER:

[Excellent.] What in God's name...!

WALKINGSTICK (as Man 1):

It can't be...

She changes her position and voice.

WALKINGSTICK (as Man 2):

The Devil! The Devil has returned!

She changes again.

WALKINGSTICK (as Man 3):

I see it. It's there, on the munitions shed.

TREEHOPPER:

Sir, is this cannon fitted to be fired?

WALKINGSTICK (as Man 1):

Yes... yes, light the fuse! Damned cursèd Devil is running amok again.

TREEHOPPER:

Now, Decatur lights the cannon, points it toward the screeching, and fires. There is a huge explosion and the men shield their faces. The dust clears.

Bluebottle makes fuse-lighting and explosion sounds.

WALKINGSTICK (as Man 2):

But it's still there. It hasn't ruffled fur nor feather! The cannonball passed right through the vile thing, untouched.

BLUEBOTTLE:

(Makes an angry hissing noise.)

TREEHOPPER:

[Good improv!]

WALKINGSTICK (as Man 3):

It's still there!

TREEHOPPER:

What is that horrible beast? Do my eyes deceive me? Molten lead and still it rests?

WALKINGSTICK (as Man 1):

Oh, Commodore. This land is cursed...

WALKINGSTICK (as Man 2):

It's going! Off toward the mill.

WALKINGSTICK (as Man 3):

Saddle the horses, sound the bells.

Bluebottle rings the bell.

TREEHOPPER:

Cursed?

WALKINGSTICK (as Man 1):

It's the Leeds Devil, sir. It has tormented our people since the day it was born, over a century ago.

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TREEHOPPER:

But how is that poss... we must capture it!

WALKINGSTICK (as Man 1):

No, sir. This Devil cannot be caught.

TREEHOPPER:

Surely, we must try.

WALKINGSTICK (as Man 1):

Many men have tried, sir. I can squire you to the Atlantic County graveyard directly if you would like to meet them.

Bluebottle begins to toll the bell.

WALKINGSTICK (as Man 2):

Hurry, maybe we can head it off before it reaches the schoolhouse. (*Sadly.*) Again.

TREEHOPPER:

Decatur and the remaining men rush off. And, scene! That was fabulous. I felt like I was really there.

WALKINGSTICK:

I always get stuck with the multiple roles. Hey, you did a really nice job on the sound.

BLUEBOTTLE:

Thank you, it was quite exhilarating.

TREEHOPPER:

Remember, tomorrow night is badminton. See you then!

Scene 14. Dim lights up in the fieldstone house. Marcianna is still on the log. It is hazy. There is a figure moving oddly about the room. She becomes fitful, talking in her sleep.

MARCIANNA:

Stop it. Don't. It's evil. No, I won't. No. No! Motherfucker!

A match is struck and she bolts upright. J.D., a 25-ish guy wearing jeans and a Jersey Devils team jersey, is lighting red candles all around the room. It becomes a bit brighter, despite the falling light outside.

MARCIANNA:

Jesus, Mike. You scared the shit outta me! Where have you been? I been looking for you guys all day. Where the fuck is Chaz? They found his car, you know. You guys gotta go back. Turn yourselves in. I'm sure if you just return the money, say temporary insanity or something, which you have to admit is pretty close to the truth, 'less you guys are gonna plead Plain Ole Stupid...

J.D. finishes with the candles and stands up, coming toward Marcianna.

MARCIANNA:

You're not Mike.

J.D.:

No.

MARCIANNA:

What are you doing here?

She stands up and puts on her jacket, crosses her arms.

J.D.:

Guess this is a pretty popular hideout. *(He holds out his hand.)* Hi, I'm J.D.

MARCIANNA:

Hi. *(A beat.)* Marcianna.

She puts out her hand to shake and he kisses it.

J.D.:

Very pleased to meet you.

MARCIANNA:

OK, pal. What's your story? Like how long you been in here?

J.D.:

Don't worry. I only came in when I heard you shouting. I figured maybe you got creeped out or something. I always carry extra candles.

MARCIANNA:

I was having a bad dream... Look, have you seen two other guys around here? One of them's my boyfriend?

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J.D.:

I haven't seen anyone in a dog's age. What did they do? Something illegal?

MARCIANNA:

Something stupid, that's for sure. (*A beat.*) I could ask the same of you.

J.D.:

I like it out here. Quiet.

MARCIANNA:

You one of those nature types?

J.D.:

You might say.

MARCIANNA:

Yeah, I could see that. Meanwhile, I'll take the mall.

She looks around the flickering room.

MARCIANNA:

I have to say, the candle bit is pretty romantic, though. Shit, I'm starving!

She opens the cooler and rustles around in it.

MARCIANNA:

Sorry to say, J.D., but looks as if Sugar Mike did the shopping. Let's see, can I get you something?

J.D.:

Nah, you go ahead. I had a pretty sweet breakfast myself.

MARCIANNA:

Well, it's almost dinner time!

She checks her cell phone.

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MARCIANNA:

Nine-thirty! Where the fuck are those two jag-offs? I have to get home. I hope Stace-Face got my message and called me out. (*She tries unsuccessfully to dial the phone.*) Welp, my battery's dead. So much for that.

She pockets the phone and opens the Apple Jacks. She eats the dry cereal by the handful, then gets a brainstorm. She takes out two slices of bread, spreads jelly with a plastic knife, and shakes cereal onto them, making a sandwich. She opens the red juice and offers it to J.D., who declines, then she gulps from the bottle.

MARCIANNA:

Don't think I eat like this at home.

J.D.:

When in Rome...

She studies him.

MARCIANNA:

What are you, a Devils fan?

J.D.:

Gotta root for the home team.

MARCIANNA:

You live around here?

J.D.:

I grew up right near here, actually.

MARCIANNA:

Guess that's why you turned out to be such a "people person."

J.D.:

Aww now, that's not fair. I like people just fine. They just never seemed to have much use for me.

MARCIANNA:

You seem like a nice-enough guy.

J.D.:

I try.

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MARCIANNA:

Well, that's alls ya can do.

She eats her cereal sandwich and goes to the window.

MARCIANNA:

Damn, I can't see nothin' out there. I can't believe Mike would take off without his precious cooler. I hope Chaz is all right.

J.D.:

It's a big woods out there. Goes on for miles. Maybe he got lost. What are you going to do?

MARCIANNA:

I dunno. I was thinking they'd be here any minute. Maybe they got a change of heart and already went back. You know your way around pretty good out there?

J.D.:

I can walk you, want me to?

MARCIANNA:

Those pines are mad creepy. It's the dwarf ones, all short and squat and clumped together like they're huddled up around something, ugh. Who knows what's going on in there. Are you sure? My car's parked about a mile down from the dirt road.

J.D.:

C'mon, let's go.

MARCIANNA:

Hey, should I bring the Apple Jacks? We can leave a trail, like on *The Brady Bunch*?

J.D. laughs. He has a nice laugh.

J.D.:

You won't need a trail with me, Marcianna. Don't worry.

MARCIANNA:

'Kay.

They blow out the candles and exit. **Scene 15.** Lights up on the stand of trees. Adrienne is sprawled out over a shrub, half-dressed in the same clothes from the night before. She has difficulty extricating her legs from a black web-like substance.

Gene's equipment is lying on the ground with a huge mushroom sticking out from it. She panics, hides. Chaz enters with a large plastic bag.

CHAZ:

Gene? He never leaves his equipment. Oh, no...

He sees the huge mushroom and approaches carefully, believing it is Gene.

CHAZ:

Oh man. Why'ja do it? *How'ja do it?*

Chaz leans closer.

CHAZ:

Are you okay? Do you feel alright?

He pokes the mushroom with a stick.

GENE (O.S.):

I'M FINE!

Chaz jumps a mile. His mushroom bag goes flying.

CHAZ:

Holy shit, he can still talk! (*A beat.*) Figures.

Gene pokes his head out of a tree. He is wearing a large mushroom cap on his head.

GENE:

Of course I can talk. I'm right here.

CHAZ:

You scared the Bejesus out of me! I thought you went and did it that time. Hey... I thought you never leave the forest floor.

GENE:

I was running out of storage space.

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CHAZ:

Storage? You don't even have a tent to sleep in.

GENE:

I like to sleep embraced by my chosen work environment. Like an artist who lives in his studio.

CHAZ:

You're an artist alright. Bullshit artist.

GENE:

Ha-ha! Let's meet back here at 1600 hours. I will debrief you.

CHAZ:

When is that?

GENE:

Four o'clock p.m., civilian time.

CHAZ:

Four o'clock! Listen, Gene. I do not have the time to waste around here for another whole day! I need to hook up with Mik—my friend, figure out Plan B, and get the fuck outta here.

GENE:

I'm working on a very simple map for you even as we speak. But before you take leave of our unit, you need to be debriefed. It's for your own protection.

Lou crawls in, his baskets full.

GENE:

Ah, Lou. Good work, my friend. Lou will keep you company until the debriefing. T.T.F.N.—Ta ta for now!

Gene pokes his head back into the trees and disappears.

GENE (O.S.):

Oh, by the way. I packed you a sack lunch for the meantime. See you!

A brown paper bag flies out of the tree and hits Chaz on the head.

CHAZ:

You can shove your stupid lunch! (*No response.*) I've had it. I'd of done better on my own. See ya Lou, I'm heading out. Tell the mushroom man I said "later."

Lou unpacks his mushrooms, beginning to sort them. He freezes at a screeching sound in the distance. He starts to pull in his chain, winding it around his arm.

CHAZ:

There's that noise again. What is it, Lou? A bobcat or something?

Lou is terrified. When he gets to the dog collar, he hugs it in tightly and seems grief-stricken. They wait and listen, and the noise stops.

CHAZ:

It can't be a dog making sounds like that... Did you have some kind of pet that like went rabid?

Lou responds in the negative.

CHAZ:

No, you loved your dog. It, it got hurt?

Lou digs in his pocket and takes out a tattered photograph. He shows it to Chaz.

CHAZ:

Well, he looks like a fine specimen. Shepherd. Guess you guys were tight, huh? What happened to him?

Lou mimes a vicious attack, then takes the pose of a beaten four-legged victim. He acts out himself crawling in and discovering the body of his beloved companion. He removes a dog's collar and winds a chain around his arm. He drapes a body, digs a hole, places the body inside, and covers it over.

CHAZ:

I'm sorry, man. Big dog like that. Must have put up a hell of a fight. What kinds of animals live around here that could do something like that to him?

Lou responds in the negative.

CHAZ:

Not an animal? Don't tell me a person did that!

Lou responds in the negative.

CHAZ:

I don't get it. Animal, vegetable, mineral? Aah, don't let me start in on you like that. You must fuckin' hate charades anyway. Wait a minute, vegetable... No way, are there Fungus People walking around in here, Lou? Is this shit for real?

Lou responds in the "no way" mode. He silently laughs and adds the finger-round-the-temple "crazy" motion.

CHAZ:

Then why do you stay out here with him? You know he's crazy!

Lou takes a deep breath and opens his arms at the surrounding nature and then adds the thumb-and-forefinger "money" gesture.

CHAZ:

Well, at least you're getting something out of it. (*Pause.*) I guess I'll go make one last cemetery run for Gene. Maybe he'll feel generous towards me, too. This Coin Star booty ain't gonna hold out forever. I have to admit, the way it went down was kind of fucked up. I wonder if Mike's given up on me. And Marcianna. Feels like I haven't seen her in a year.

Lou understands. He fingers his chain.

CHAZ:

She would know what to do. Well, I guess when I get back I'll get my map and finally be on my way. (*He picks up the lunch bag.*) See ya later, Lou. Keep on baggin'.

Lou salutes him and Chaz walks toward offstage. He passes Adrienne.

CHAZ:

Hi there.

She gapes at him, unable to form words. Blackout.

Scene 16. The woods at night, almost pitch. J.D. uses a flashlight sparingly. When the light is off a set of red eyes occasionally glows in the darkness.

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J.D.:

It's right this way, just a little further.

MARCIANNA:

Dude, can I say again how glad I am you're here? I never should have come out here alone. Wait a minute, how are you going to get back? D'ya want me to give you a ride home after we get to the car?

J.D.:

Yeah, that would be great. I'm just down the road apiece. Hmm. I thought the cutoff was right around here...

MARCIANNA:

So... you're pretty cool for a piney.

J.D.:

That's me, the O.P. Original Piney. Think we don't throw it down out here? You wrong.

MARCIANNA:

Country boy.

J.D.:

You're holding onto me kind of tight.

MARCIANNA:

Do you mind?

J.D.:

No ma'am.

MARCIANNA:

Ya know, it's pretty ironical that we would meet this way. Don't get me wrong, I love Chaz, but he's not so good for me. Obviously. Girl tryin' to help her man winds up in some godforsaken hicksville... Oh, sorry babe. But it's like, he makes all these crazy choices and I'm always there for him and all, but it's starting to like wear me out. I mean, your boyfriend and his buddy try to knock over a Coin Star machine and botch it? His fly getaway car—a bright orange Duster—breaks down, they lose each other in the scuffle, they're caught on video surveillance from like nine different angles, and they wind up clearing about 500 bucks? In change?

J.D.:

You deserve so much better.

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MARCIANNA:

Do I?

J.D.:

Uh-huh.

MARCIANNA:

So what could you do to help me get on the right track?

J.D.:

Oh, I don't know, how about this...

MARCIANNA:

Ohh, J.D.

Various make-out noises, then Marcianna squeals loudly.

J.D.:

I'm sorry, I thought girls liked that move.

MARCIANNA:

Not that. My foot is caught in something!

J.D.:

Let me see.

He shines the light.

J.D.:

Ugh. That horrible fungus.

MARCIANNA:

Fungus? Eeuw, get it offa me! J.D.!

J.D.:

Calm down. It's only a small patch. I've seen much worse than this, believe me.

He frees her foot.

MARCIANNA:

It grabbed my foot!

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J.D.:

Don't take it personally, baby. It's mostly blind. You probably just hit a sensitive spot.

MARCIANNA:

What the hell is it? Let's get outta here.

He crouches down and shines the light.

J.D.:

No, see this black vein running through the dirt here? They say it spreads about 100,000 acres under the ground. Covers almost all of this area. Turns out it's all one huge organism, some scientists even came out to study it.

MARCIANNA:

I don't care who discovered it, let's go.

J.D.:

Actually their results were never published.

MARCIANNA:

Why not?

J.D.:

Oh, something happened. They never finished their project.

MARCIANNA:

Huhn. Hey, it's getting a little chilly.

He holds her.

J.D.:

Here. Better?

MARCIANNA:

Yeah.

They resume kissing.

J.D.:

You know, it's been a while since I felt this way about anyone. It's kind of hard for me. Will I see you again, Marcianna?

MARCIANNA:

Maybe. I really have to find Chaz and see what's going on. (*A beat.*) He needs me, you know?

They walk. Marcianna squeals again.

J.D.:

What is it?

MARCIANNA:

Euuw. Now I stepped in something gushy!

J.D.:

Probably just mud. We should get back to finding the path anyway.

MARCIANNA:

If it's mud, then why is it so stringy? Here, lemme see the light.

J.D.:

Marcianna...

They struggle for the flashlight. Marcianna wins.

MARCIANNA:

Oh my god! What the fuck is that? It's all bloody...and pulpy!

J.D.:

Probably just an animal...

Marcianna screams and the flashlight goes skittering.

MARCIANNA:

Mike's cap! I saw Mike's cap! Oh my god, it's Mike. It's Mike. It's Mike!

Marcianna continues screaming, vicious animal noises and devouring sounds ensue, then blackout. **Scene 17.** Lights up on the Towncar moving at breakneck speed. Adrienne's red suitcase is next to her.

ADRIENNE:

Um, Gate 3A—American. Pretty short notice. Donny's meeting me out there. It's really cool they're thinking about doing a movie. They're talking like five figures. My kind of language. I guess I just have a few uh, reservations. Yes, I have *plane* reservations. I meant the other...oh, nevermind. (*Looks at her face in mirror.*) God, my skin is so slimy! I ran out of the Shiseido last week, but this is ridiculous. Christ, I look like a friggin' toad! Huh? No, just a meeting really, but Donny thinks I should spend the weekend. You know, chillax, take a break. Like you'll be able to after MY ass is on the plane. Well, thank you. Likewise I'm sure. Listen, about the other night. I don't do things like that all the time. It was nice. Just so you know. What the hell, it's a free trip, right? Movie stars, right. I'm sure I'll be tripping all over them. Movie stars! That's what I'm talking about. What the hell are they thinking? Jennifer Aniston? Did they *read* the book? Jennifer fucking Aniston? I don't know about these Hollywood types. But five figures. That'll carry me for like, almost a year. There it is. I will. Thanks for the week, Andrei. Thanks for everything. Ciao.

Blackout. **Scene 18.** Lights up on Adrienne with her suitcase in the woods. She greets Chaz, but he doesn't see her. Gene climbs down from a tree wearing the mushroom cap headpiece and holding a second one. She hides.

GENE:

I want you to put this on.

CHAZ:

Oh no, you're not gonna make a mushroom outta me. No shitake.

Chaz climbs up a tree.

CHAZ:

Look, I did what you wanted. There's the stuff. The groundskeeper made me outside the northern mound. I'm done. I retire.

GENE:

It's useless to resist. It's for your own good.

Gene calmly tends his mushrooms.

CHAZ:

Day in and day out with the cuttings and the baggings. I'm tired, I'm filthy and I'm starting to smell like fungus!

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GENE:

Relax, you're ripening. You're almost ready. Soon you will bear dark and lovely fruit. Now put this cap on!

CHAZ:

Look, bub. I don't think you get it. I'm shoving off. Got me some friends I can lay low with for a while. I'm just going to gather my things and I'll be on my way.

GENE:

Oh, you'll leave the Pines alright. But you'll return. They always do.

CHAZ:

What's that supposed to mean?

GENE:

Project F.P. It's in Phase Two. (*He indicates Adrienne's hiding place.*) I don't think those friends of yours will recognize the new, improved, You.

CHAZ:

You're insane.

GENE:

But it's your lucky day, Chaz. I made this cap especially for you. A mycelium is a web of microscopically fine tendrils that weave themselves through a hospitable substrate: horse manure, wood pulp, a man on the run... whatever satisfies its hunger for dead or decomposable organic material. Its life, just like that of many humans, centers around the essentials: absorbing nutrients, soaking up fluids, and seeking sex.

CHAZ:

Sex! I knew you were some kind of a freak.

GENE:

Someone like you might find it hard to hold fungus and sex together in the same thought. But then you never met Amanita. It's a fact that mycelia come in two sexes: A and B, for lack of better terms. For all their high-tech equipment, "professional" mycologists have no clue how to tell sex A from sex B. But when a mycelium of sex A encounters a mycelium of sex B, they know exactly what to do—intertwine and gestate through the lucky host.

CHAZ:

Come near me with that thing and I'll beat the pulp out of you.

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GENE:

(With an evil laugh.) Come now, that would only hasten the release of my spores. Any cultivator can tell you that growing mated mycelia is relatively easy. The only tricky part is convincing it that it's time to fruit.

Chaz moans with intense stomach cramps.

CHAZ:

Ugh, what's happening to me?

GENE:

Did you enjoy the lunch I packed for you?

CHAZ:

You said there was no fungus in there!

GENE:

Gyromitra cookies. Makes a hell of an oatmeal-raisin substitute, huh?

Chaz slips out of his tree, writhing on the ground.

GENE:

If I hadn't ground them up, you surely would have recognized their rusty brown heads, a color not usually found in the panoply of Morel colors. Their heads are lobed like a brain, and they slump over the tip of the stalk instead of merging smoothly into it...

CHAZ:

Stop it! Enough. I'm dying.

Gene crawls over with the mushroom cap.

GENE:

You're not going to die. You will live eternal, our seed will birth millions. Now, here.

He puts the cap on Chaz's head with a loud squish.

CHAZ:

It's a death cap, I tell ya!

GENE:

Yes, she is. *Amanita phalloides*. No mushroom is more worthy of fear and respect than my beloved destroying angel, the Death Cap.

CHAZ:

Ughh.

Blackout. **Scene 19**. Somewhere in the woods. J.D. is sitting alone under a tree crying. He cries and cries. J.D.'s "Beautiful" theme music fades in. Lights fade out. **Scene 20**. Lights up on Adrienne's red suitcase next to two giant mushrooms sitting underneath the trees. It is very quiet. The three bugs appear.

TREEHOPPER:

Sure been quiet around here lately.

WALKINGSTICK:

True that. How was your week? Restful out here, idn't it?

BLUEBOTTLE:

Pretty good. Quiet. Good eats. You people have more decomposing delicacies out here than I thought.

WALKINGSTICK:

Oh yeah. People come from miles around.

The Groundskeeper enters and heads for the giant mushrooms.

THE GROUNDSKEEPER:

Well, if that don't beat all. Get over here, kid, you should see this. Hey, kid! Where did that pansy ass get to now?

A screeching ruckus and the Trainee's shouting is heard in the distance. No one reacts.

THE GROUNDSKEEPER:

So this is why my bone yard was all dug up to shreds. This musta been what they was after all the time. Crazy 'shroomers. Look at those disgusting things.

He kicks over one of the mushrooms. Pink spores are released.

WALKINGSTICK:

Great for laying eggs, though.

THE GROUNDSKEEPER:

Layin' eggs. The next time I see one of those jokers on my watch, I'll lay him an egg he'll never forget. Diggin' like I don't know what, I tell you... Hey, kid! Kid?

He shuffles his way offstage. Lights fade out on all but a pink haze around the two mushrooms. “The Look of Love” by Dusty Springfield begins to play. Lights up on a mushroom-covered horizon. Blackout. End of play.

The Pinelands occupies about 1.1 million acres in southern New Jersey and was the US’s first national reserve. It covers 22% of the state’s total land area and includes portions of seven counties.

The Pinelands contains over 12,000 acres of “pygmy forest,” where dwarfed but mature pine and oak trees stand less than 11 feet tall. Organic material leaching out of the soil stains the area’s streams a dark tea color. Dozens of species of northern and southern plants reach their respective geographic limits in this unique territory.

Originally inhabited by the Leni Lenape Indians, the Pinelands were not inhabited by white settlers, who refused to set foot there until Henry Hudson first explored the region in 1609. Europeans eventually settled there in numbers, particularly after the English seized New Jersey from the Dutch in 1664. Years before the Industrial Revolution, a thriving iron industry arose in its remote sections when bog iron was discovered.

Over 2,000 witnesses have reported seeing the Jersey Devil, a mythical creature that has haunted the Pine Barrens for the past 260 years. It has terrorized towns and closed factories and schools, though many believe it is a legend originating from Eastern European folklore.



Rumored to feed on small children and livestock, it is reported that the Jersey Devil still inhabits the eerie and misty wetlands today, venturing into the woods under cover of darkness, seeking humans to torment with its piercing screams and grotesque appearance.