

Roman Times

a play in one act

by Geoffrey Owens

Roman Times

a play in one act by Geoffrey Owens

Cast

Paul (fifties-sixties; a writer)
Ben (fifties-sixties; a producer)
Waiter (thirties-forties)

The action takes place at a table at a deli-restaurant (a la Canter's) in Los Angeles.

Paul sits alone at the table, checking his cellphone, glancing at the menu, looking at his watch, etc. After about 15 seconds, the Waiter approaches.

Paul You know what? I'm just gonna wait for my friend to show up. Thanks.

The Waiter leaves. Paul resumes his activities. After about 10 seconds, his cellphone rings; he answers.

Paul Yeah. Hey, hon. ... I'm here. ... I'm at Jolson's. ... Not yet.. ... No. ... You know what, don't wait for me. I'll probably just eat something here. ... Yeah. ... Okay. ... Yeah. ... I don't know, hon. ... I don't know. ... Yeah. ... Good. ... Call you when I'm on my way. ... Love you, too.

Paul hangs up and puts the phone away. He looks around the restaurant a bit, then back at the menu. After 20 seconds or so, he takes out his cellphone again and starts to dial. As he's dialing, Ben enters and stands next to the table.

Paul I'm just calling you.

Ben You're calling me?

Paul Just now.

Ben Why're you calling me? Am I late?

Paul No.

Ben Then why're you calling me? I hate that. (*Ben sits across from Paul.*) You order yet?

Paul What do you hate?

Ben When I'm not even late and you're already calling like I'm late. You order yet?

Paul No, I was waiting for you.

Ben Because I'm late.

Paul No. Because I got here before you.

Ben I can live with that.

Paul Good. How are you?

Ben I'm late. Other than that, I'm fine. Where's the waiter?

Paul He's ... He was here, but ... He's here... He's over there ...

Ben Not like it's busy...

Paul Relax.

Ben Don't!. (I hate that.)

Paul More hating?

Ben "Relax."

Paul What did I do now?

Ben I hate when people say "relax."

The Waiter approaches. He stands at the table looking above and beyond Paul and Ben. He says nothing.

How are ya?

The Waiter shrugs slightly and looks around the restaurant, as if checking something.

Paul (to Ben) You know what you want already?

Ben Yeah, I'll have a cup of the matzo ball and an iced tea with lemon.

The waiter looks vaguely towards Paul.

Paul You know what? I'll have a cup of the soup, the matzo ball ... and a sesame bagel, toasted, with butter.

The Waiter takes the menus off the table and starts to leave.

Ben And a couple of glasses of water, please.

The Waiter continues walking off as if Ben hadn't made the last request.

Rude.

Paul They're all like that. He's the worst.

Ben Do something else if you don't like waiting tables.

Paul They're all like that. But you're right. ... I mean, don't ... don't do it.

Ben How's Pamela?

Paul Great.

Ben The kid?

Paul Great. Joshua got to pitch this morning.

Ben No kidding.

Paul Yeah! Two whole innings. He did great.

Ben Does he want to play baseball?

Paul Oh, yeah! That's *all* he wants to do. Especially pitching. Oh, yeah. ...

Ben That's great. ... Little League?

Paul Uh ... not really. Just the local... Van Nuys ... parks league, I guess.

There is silence for about 5 seconds.

Paul How's Gillian?

Ben Fine. Well ... No, she's fine now ...

Paul What?

Ben No, she had that back and shoulder thing going on for a while ...

Paul Oh! Right ... How's ...

Ben No, she's fine. Doing much better now.

Paul Good. Great.

Ben Yeah ...

There is silence for about 5 seconds. Then the Waiter approaches with two glasses of water. He puts them down and leaves.

Ben Employee of the month.

Paul He's the worst. But they're all like that.

Ben It's like that place on forty-third. (What was the name of that ...?)

Paul In New York?

Ben Yeah, yeah. (What was the ...?) Carly's? Something like that.

Paul On forty-third?

Ben Yeah. Carly's or something. All the guys there were rude.

Paul Garland's.

Ben Garland's! That's it! Garland's!

Paul Forty-third and ninth.

Ben Right! Garland's! World's rudest waiters!

Paul I remember.

Ben The ruder they were, the bigger tip they expected. This place is a close second.

Paul They're just trying to make you feel at home.

Ben Is that what it is?

Paul Sure.

Ben Then I can't complain. *(He drinks some water.)* Fucking town.

Paul Yeah?

Ben Yeah. I hate this fucking town.

Paul Really. I thought ...

Ben You know that story about the Hollywood agent ...

Paul Which one?

Ben This one. The agent whose client books a role in a production of *The Three Sisters* ? ...

Paul *(I can't believe I don't know this one...)*

Ben ... and the agent wants to talk to the writer about changes to the script?

Paul *(Pause.)* Well ... It's not ... you know ... It's not New York ...

Ben No, it's not.

Paul It is what it is. I mean, you've done so well here ...

Ben Have I?

Paul Aww ... C'mon Ben. You know you have.

Ben I guess so.

Paul You guess so? C'mon Ben. Give credit where credit's due. All the films, the t.v. stuff ...

Ben *You've* done well...

Paul Yeah, but not ... not like ... not like I'd like to. You know.

Ben What d'ya mean? You've done great!

Paul Well ...

Ben What, you're not happy?

Paul Well, I don't ...

Ben What? You've got a beautiful wife, a terrific boy ...

Paul Thanks. I know ...

Ben You live in a nice place...

Paul Yeah.

Ben You like L.A., don't you?

Paul Sure.

Ben You like it more than I do.

Paul Really? (Maybe...)

Ben Which is funny, 'cause you're the most New York guy I know.

Paul Really.

Ben Absolutely.

Paul How's that?

Ben C'mon! English major, Columbia, Shakespeare expert, theater lover...

Paul True.

Ben ...playwright, Mets fan ...

Paul Don't remind me.

The Waiter approaches with the two soups, places them on the table and leaves.

Ben *(loudly and overly politely)* Thank you. (Bitter actor.)

Paul Probably.

Ben *(looking at soup)* I forgot.

Paul What, you want the bowl instead?

Ben No, I forgot they don't make it so good here.

Paul No?

Ben No.

Paul You haven't even tasted it yet.

Ben No, I mean no carrots, no onions, no chicken...

Paul Like they make it at ... at that ... on Pico...

Ben Exactly.

The two men eat and sip the soup for a few moments.

Best matzo ball soup I ever had was at your aunt Ethel's.

Paul I won't argue with that. (She wouldn't either.)

Ben (I was just gonna say that.)

They eat and sip in silence for a few moments.

Paul You know the Marilyn Monroe story of course.

Ben I do. (I was just thinking of that.)

Paul You think that's true? Because she wasn't a stupid woman at all.

Ben I don't care if it's true, it's a great story. ... "Excuse me, Mrs. Miller, but is there any *other* part of the matzo you can eat?" ... Great stuff.

Paul I don't think she ever said that. She was too smart.

Ben You brought it up!

Paul My dad knew her.

Ben I remember. Worked with her, right?

Paul Yeah, a couple of films.

Silence

Ben What they *do* have here is those great black and white cookies.

Paul Oh yeah!

Ben The best! Greg Taylor used to ... Greg used to ... to get ... *(Pause.)* You heard about Greg, right?

Paul Yeah. ... Yeah, I did.

Ben Terrible shame. ... Great guy. *(Pause.)* Anyway, he used to get the black and whites ... (this is when we were all in New York) ... he used to get the black and whites ... And you remember Greg's mixed, his mom's white, his dad's black ...

Paul Sure.

Ben He'd get them and before he took a bite ... every time he had one, before he took a bite ... he'd look over at me, real quick, and say ... "Story of my life."

Ben motions for the Waiter, who's crossing near them.

Uh, excuse me. We need an iced tea for me, and I believe this gentleman ordered a bagel. Thank you.

The Waiter checks his notepad for a few moments and then leaves.

What's he checking his book for? He never wrote it down.

Paul You're right.

Ben Watch. It'll come, it'll be a sesame, *not* toasted, with cream cheese.

Paul If I'm *that* lucky.

The two men sit in silence, Ben scooping up the last of his soup with his spoon, Paul taking a sip of water and then looking around the restaurant for a moment.

So I didn't get it, did I?

Ben stops scooping and carefully puts the spoon down. He takes his napkin off of his lap and wipes his mouth, then takes a big gulp of water.

Ben No. You didn't get it. *(Pause.)* How'd you know? Am I that obvious?

Paul I figure if it was a "yes," you'd have said it by now.

Ben *(finishing another gulp of water)* Yeah. No, they passed on it.

Silence.

Paul Okay ... Well ...

Ben No, it's *not* okay. It sucks. ... It sucks is what it does. *(I hate this fucking town.)*

Paul Well ...

Ben Well nothing. It sucks. They're idiots. It's a great script. They're fucking idiots.

Paul *It is* a good script. ... I ... I guess something else was better.

Ben Bullshit.

Paul Or at least they liked something else better. *(Pause.)* Right?

Ben I guess. *(Where's my goddamn iced tea?)*

Paul Well, you would know. They must've liked something better.

Ben Paul! ... C'mon, Paul! You know how it works. Yeah, they liked something better. Does that mean that it *was* actually better? C'mon!

The Waiter approaches with a glass of iced tea and a plate with a bagel.

Some lemon, please. *(The Waiter coughs slightly and leaves.)*

(I'll be damned. He got your bagel right.)

Paul *(I'm blessed.)*

Ben *(Mazel tov.)*

Paul *(Silence.)* So what'd they go with?

Ben Oh, god! ...

Paul What?

Ben Oh, my god! You don't wanna know.

Paul What?

Ben Really, Paul. Just ... Really. ... You don't wanna know.

Paul I actually do.

Ben No you don't.

Paul Actually, I do. I *do* want to know, Ben.

Ben Why? So you can make fun of me?

Paul *(Silence.)* What does that mean?

Ben *(Pause.)* Never mind.

Paul What does making fun of you have to do with anything?

Ben You know the story about the Hollywood casting director?

Paul Which one?

Ben This one. The casting director who was looking for a "Phil Silvers type"?

Paul I think I ...

Ben Yeah. So Phil Silvers calls up and says, "Hey, I'll do it." And the casting guy says, "No." And Phil says, "But you're looking for a Phil Silvers type! I'm Phil Silvers! I'll do it!" And they say, "I'm sorry, Mr. Silvers. We'll keep you in mind for other projects."

Paul I've heard that one.

Ben That's this town. I hate this fucking town.

Paul So what did you mean by making fun of you?

Ben Look, Paul. I'll tell you if you really need to know, but I know how you're gonna feel about it and it just makes me feel stupid.

Paul *You* feel stupid?

Ben Uncomfortable.

Paul *(Pause.)* I promise I won't make you feel uncomfortable, Ben. Tell me what you guys went with.

Ben Hey! *I* didn't go with it. I fought it every ... every ... inch of the ...

Paul You went with Hoffman's thing?

Ben (Don't say "You"!...) Nah ...

Paul Mendoza's?

Ben Nah ... Wish we had. (I mean ...)

Paul I got a look at that. I thought it was pretty solid.

Ben It was. It is. Like yours! (Yours was even *more* solid.)

Paul Pete's project! The psyche ward thing.

Ben Nope. ... (Nope.)

There is silence for about 10 seconds.

Paul (Wow.) ... What else ...?

Ben (Nope.)

Paul What else was there? ... Just that dating thing ... the reality thing.

Ben Eat your bagel, it's getting warm.

Paul Help me out here. Was there something else other than that awful reality dating thing?

Ben Nope.

Paul (*Pause.*) So what did you go with?

Ben I *didn't* go with it. I fought it. I fought it. I fought for *your* show.

Paul Oh, no.

Ben See?

Paul Oh, no.

Ben See? That's why I didn't want to tell you.

Paul The dating thing?

Ben Now you're gonna make fun of me.

Paul Ben. The reality thing?

Ben They shoved it down our throats.

Paul Ben. (*Pause.*) No. (*Pause.*) Ben.

Ben I knew this ... Don't ... (I hate this fucking town. This is why I hate this fucking town.)

The Waiter appears. He stands over the two men, looking at them but not looking at them.

(To the Waiter) We're good. ... We're ... We'll let you know ... Thanks.

The Waiter leaves.

So. *(Pause.)* There you have it. ... Now you know.

Paul Wow.

Ben Is Pamela gonna be very upset?

Paul Uh ... I ... Yeah, probably. ... I mean, she's not going to be euphoric ...

Ben What, she was thinking you'd get it?

Paul No. ... No, she never thinks that. She knows better.

Ben She's a good woman.

Paul Thanks.

Ben A great lady.

Paul Okay, let's not get carried away.

Ben You know she is. You're very lucky.

Paul Thanks, but don't ...

Ben When something doesn't happen for me, Gillian gives me such shit...

Paul Don't change the subject.

Ben I'm not. I'm just saying you're a very lucky man.

Paul Thank you. Now shut up about it.

Ben Who's talking? *(I need some more iced tea.)*

Silence. Ben looks for the waiter; Paul looks at Ben.

Paul It's like Roman times.

Ben What?

Paul It's like we're living in Roman times again.

Ben What do you ... ?

Paul's cellphone rings. He reaches inside pocket for it, retrieves it and answers. (At some point during Paul's conversation, Ben gets the Waiter's attention and, via sign language, orders a refill of iced tea.)

Paul Hey, hon. ... Yeah, what? ... I'll tell you later. What's up? ... Oh, yeah ... Yeah, I forgot about it. ... How much is it? ... Jeez! ... I guess we could, his birthday's coming up. ... He really wants it, right? ... Okay. ... Okay, but that ... But that means that's it nothing else, no other gifts. ... Well, that's... Okay. ... It's a one-of-kind thing, I guess. ... Okay. ... I'm still talking to Ben, I'll call you in a bit. ... Bye. *(Paul hangs up and puts the phone away.)*

Ben Everything okay?

Paul Yeah. She just ... Joshua wants this autographed baseball, and we ... we weren't sure whether or not to get it for him.

Ben Mets, of course. (You and your Mets.)

Paul Seaver and Ryan.

Ben Seaver *and* Ryan?

Paul Yeah. So ...

Ben So of course! My god! Seaver *and* Ryan? *I* want it! If you don't get it, *I'll* take it ... (and I *hate* the fuckin' Mets!)

Paul Well, we're gonna get it for him.

Ben Lucky kid. Hey, that's terrific. (*Pause.*) Is it a lot?

Paul Almost four.

Ben Four hundred bucks?

Paul Yeah.

Ben That's a nice birthday present.

Paul Yeah. It's a lot, but you know, it's the real thing.

Ben I was gonna say, are you sure it's for real?

Paul No, it is. We're getting it from a good friend of ours (Pam and I know him from Brooklyn) ... he's selling a bunch of his stuff. He actually got it signed by Ryan and Seaver at Shea some time in the early seventies.

Ben Oh, well, that's great. That's the real deal.

Paul Yeah.

Ben And you trust this guy?

Paul I do. (*Pause.*) I trust him even more than I trust you. So ... that's saying something.

Ben I should say so. (*Pause*) Thank you.

Paul Mention it.

Ben "Mention it." I love that. "Mention it." I've heard you say that before. Brilliant. (*Ben gulps down some iced tea.*) Hey!

Paul What?

Ben Let me get the ball for Josh.

Paul Huh? Wh...?

Ben I don't think I've got him a present since ... I don't know when. Let me get it for him.

Paul That's really very nice of you, Ben, but that's not necessary.

Ben I know that, but I'd like to.

Paul *(Pause.)* Well, thank you, Ben, but ... no ... You don't need to do that for us.

Ben I know I don't need to. "Need." (What's that line? ... "Reason not the need"? Something like that? ... What's that from? I know you know.)

Paul *Lear.*

Ben Of course. (Your favorite, right?)

Paul (Yes.)

Ben (Right.) So. Reason not the need, and let me do a nice thing for you guys. For Josh, I mean.

Paul Thank you, Ben, but ...

Ben Do you still carry a little copy of *King Lear* around with you like you used to?

Paul Yeah.

Ben You are something else. What is it, like a good luck charm or something?

Paul I guess so. In a way. More like a reminder.

Ben Of what? Of what counts, right?

Paul Yeah.

Ben I know. I know. I know what you mean. You gotta hold on to what counts when you're dealing with this town. Right?

Paul Yeah.

Ben A Hollywood writer with a little copy of *King Lear* in his pocket. You are something else, my friend.

Paul That I am.

Ben So, is it a deal?

Paul What?

Ben You'll let me get the Seaver ball for the kid. Tell Pam to call me with the guy's info.

Paul No.

Ben Awwww! Why not?

Paul No thanks.

Ben Why not? Let me do something nice for you guys. For Josh. Why not?

Paul I just don't ... feel comfortable ... with it.

Ben Okay. *(Pause.)* Can I get him something else? Is there something else he really wants?

Paul I'm sure there is, Ben, but no. No thanks.

Ben Okay. *(Pause.)* Sorry if I made you ... "uncomfortable." *(Pause.)* Just thought it would be a nice thing to do. *(Pause.)* No big deal.

Paul Good. *(Pause.)* You need to go?

Ben Uhh ... *(he looks at his watch)* not yet. In a few, maybe. Why?

Paul No, just ... I just thought you might tell me some ... something more about what happened today.

Ben At the meeting?

Paul Yeah.

Ben Paul. What can I tell you? They went with the stupid reality thing instead of your beautiful ... sensitive ... well written drama. What can I tell you? That's what they want these days!

Paul Roman times.

Ben Yes! (And what does that mean, "Roman times"? You said that before...)

Paul It's like we're living in Roman times. The stuff people want to see these days.

Ben What, you mean like ... the Coliseum?

Paul Yes.

Ben This is a bit of an overstatement, don't you think?

Paul No, I don't. Think about it, Ben. Think about what they used to watch in the Coliseum.

Ben They used to kill people in the Coliseum.

Paul It wasn't just about killing people. It was about entertainment. *(Pause.)* It had to be the most *entertaining* killing. *(Pause)* You see what I'm saying?

Ben Yeah. *(Pause.)* Okay.

Paul The most gruesome, the most exotic, the most disgusting. The most entertaining, Ben. That's what this stuff today is. *(Pause.)* Roman times.

Ben Okay. I see your point. (Jeez, I feel like I'm in school here.)

Paul And it's all about money, Ben. Money is the thing that ...
The Waiter appears. He stands next to the table, and says nothing. Paul and Ben look at him. Then Ben looks around the restaurant. After five seconds or so, the Waiter leaves.

Ben You think he needs the table?

Paul All right, so he's an underachiever.

Ben This guy couldn't wait for a bus.

Paul Leave him a big tip. Shock him.

Ben Nothing could shock this guy.

Silence.

Paul Roman times, Ben.

Ben Yeah. (I gotta go.) But it was always about the money, Paulie. Television's always been about the money.

Paul It was always about money, but it was about other things, too. It was about money when they did Playhouse 90, but ... good lord, look at the kind of stuff they were doing. It was about money when Serling did his thing, but look at the ... Do you remember the ... what kind of stuff, what kinds of issues that show dealt with? I look at it now, and I'm amazed. Even Norman's stuff in the seventies! Amazing. All about the money, sure ... but ... *(Pause.)* I don't know, Ben.

Ben Money is money.

Paul Oh, come on, Ben! Money is money. What does that mean, "Money is money"? There's nothing wrong with making money. Hell, Van Gogh wanted to make money. Cervantes wrote *Don Quixote* for money. You can make money selling something worthwhile, or you can make money ... by selling any old shit.

Ben Well, this is where we *are* in the business right now, Paulie. This is the trend we're in. If you don't want to be a part of it, ... I guess you don't have to be a part of it.

Paul I think I'll opt not to be a part of it, thank you very much.

Ben Well, then you can't blame anyone else for ... for not ... for not having certain opportunities.

Silence. The men look at each other.

Paul Who ... am I blaming, Ben?

Ben I'm not really saying you're blaming anyone. I'm just saying that if you're so ... above it all ... you gotta be willing to take the consequences.

Paul The consequences.

Ben Yeah. The consequences.

Paul You mean like not getting hired.

Ben Yeah. *(Pause.)* Among other things ... yeah.

Silence.

Paul So, Ben ... I guess it's almost like I'm being punished.

Ben I don't know about *that* ... ("Punished.")

Paul Punished for being a good writer who wants to do something worthwhile with his work.

Ben Jeez, Paulie! No! Punished for being ... so ... above it all.

Paul For being a snob.

Ben Whatever. I like the way *I* put it. For being above it all. You think you're too good for all this.

Paul What, you mean for the reality television thing?

Ben Yes.

Paul Dammit, Ben, I *am* too good for it! *You're* too good for it! We're *all* too good for it, goddammit!

Ben Yeah, yeah, yeah! I hate it, too! But that's what people want right now, so that's what they're doing right now. ... So ... either *we* do it, or someone *else* does it!

Paul Someone puts a gun in your hand and says "Shoot that guy, if you don't do it, someone else will" and so you shoot him?

Ben Paulie! ... Please!

Paul Well?!

Ben I'm talking about getting your head out of the clouds and joining us here on the planet earth. I'm talking about keeping up with your own industry. Compromise. Playing the game a little.

Paul Playing the game.

Ben Yes, Paulie, playing the game! Something you're obviously not very good at.

Paul No?

Ben No. And you know it. You gotta bend a little, but you're never willing to. It's a big reason why you don't ... do more than you do. I've told you a hundred times about dyeing your hair.

Paul *(pause)* What?

Ben Dyeing your hair! I've told you a thousand times about dyeing your hair when you go in for pitches. And you never listen to me.

Paul Dyeing my hair.

Ben Yes!

Paul That's why my pitches aren't hitting? Because I don't dye my hair? Because my hair's too gray?

Ben Hey! I don't know! Could be!

Paul So ... all the shows I wrote and co-wrote the past thirty-plus years ... all that doesn't matter ... because my hair is too gray?

Ben Look, Paulie, I'm not saying it makes sense. I'm just saying that's the way it is right now. They want young. Everything is young now.

Paul Same script ... but it needs to be by a guy with darker hair.

Ben Young, Paulie. Young. "Hot." That's what they want now. They want "hot."

Silence.

Paul Blessed are the sleek.

Ben Huh? *(Pause.)* Blessed what? ... Blessed are the sleek? Is that what you said?

Paul Yeah.

Ben "Blessed are the sleek." *(Pause.)* That's pretty brilliant. *(Pause.)* I love that. *(Pause.)* I gotta go. *(Ben looks around for the Waiter.)* Where's Prince Charming?

Silence.

You going to Greg's ... uh ... you know ... Greg's ... that thing for Greg?

Paul I might. I was thinking of it. When is it, day after tomorrow?

Ben Not sure. I think so. *(Pause.)* Gil and I wanted to go, but then she got the back thing, and on and on ...

Paul Yeah. *(Pause.)* Yeah, we'll probably go. I should probably book a flight when I get home tonight.

Ben You should. ... Definitely should. *(Pause.)* You'll give Darlene and the family our love, won't you?

Paul Oh, sure.

Ben I mean, I'll send something, of course. But it would be nice if you could ... ya know ...

Paul Sure, Ben. No problem.

Silence.

You know that story about Marty Balsam?

Ben Which one?

Paul At some point, Marty goes to see a producer about a part in some film, ...and the woman says, "So, Mr. Balsam. What have you done?"

Ben *(Pause.)* You're kidding me. *(Jesus.)*

Paul I kid you not.

Ben What did Marty say?

Paul He got up and walked out of the office.

Ben Good for him. Good for him. (Can you imagine?)

Paul Good for him, but not good for me for not dyeing my hair.

Ben Aaahhh! ... It's different. Different ... thing.

Paul How is it different? How is it different, Ben? Why did Marty walk out? ... Because he'd done hundreds of film and television gigs over the course of forty-plus years ... And to have to some young ... idiot ... ask him "What have you done?" was just too much. It was too much. He had to draw the line.

Ben Right.

Paul Well, for *me*, dyeing my hair ... crap like that ... is just too much. That's where I draw *my* line.

Ben Yeah, but Paulie, that's not the only place you draw the line. There's also the matter of what you will or will not work on. What you will or will not write.

Paul Given. Goes without saying.

Ben So? ... You got a lot of lines you're drawing. You're drawing yourself right out of the business.

Paul Maybe. Maybe, Ben, but ... I just can't work on that stuff ... on anything, really, that doesn't matter to me.

Ben Well, good for you, Mr. Bigshot.

Paul Well ...

Ben Mr. Above-it-all.

Paul I'm not trying to ... (Never mind.)

Ben Listen. (I gotta go in a second. Gillian needs me to ... do something.) Listen. I know you're Mr. Bigshot and Mr. Above-it-all ...

Paul Awww, come on, Ben ...

Ben Hey! Hey. Hear me out. (*Pause.*) I know you're Mr. Above-it-all and all that, but what would you say to making an easy 10,000 dollars or so a week?

Silence.

Paul Doing what?

Ben Writing.

Paul (*Pause.*) Writing what?

Ben Working on the show.

Paul What show?

Ben 10,000 dollars a week (maybe more – I might be able to get you more) working on the show we're doing.

Paul You mean the show that got picked up?

Ben Yeah. 10,000 dollars a week. At least.

Paul The reality show that beat out my show.

Ben The reality show that beat out your show. Grow up. 10,000 a week. Yes.

Silence.

You can take a day or two to think it over, of course. Talk to Pamela about it. I bet she'd be thrilled. *(Pause.)* Especially in lieu of the ... you know ... the bad news about ... your project.

Paul Yeah, that was bad news.

Ben Yeah, but this is good news. You can give her some good news along with the bad news ... or *instead* of the bad news. (That's even better.) *(Pause.)* That would be nice for her ... for both of you. *(Pause.)* For Josh.

Paul Yeah. Josh.

Silence.

Ben Paul. Don't be stubborn. Take the job. It's a good gig. You can do it in your sleep. I know you don't appreciate this thought, but someone else is going to do it if you don't. *(Pause.)* Come on, Paulie. Time to grow up.

Paul Yeah. Grow up. *(Pause.)* Do I have to dye my hair?

Ben You do not have to dye your hair. In fact, you can make it grayer! (Or "more gray.") *(Pause.)* So ... yes?

Paul You're being very generous today.

Ben What? What d'you mean?

Paul You offered to pay for the baseball, you're offering me 10,000 dollars a week ...

Ben You know what? The 10,000 was the low end. Sam said if you had any problem with that, I should go to 15. *(Pause.)* So ... We're at 15 now.

Paul That's all right, Ben.

Ben What's all right? *(Pause.)* The 15,000 is all right? That's good for you?

Paul No, I mean ... I mean, that's all right, Ben. We don't have to talk about it any more.

Ben Okay. *(Pause.)* What does that *mean*?

Paul It means no thanks, Ben. ... But thanks.

Ben Shit!! *(Pause.)* Shit, Paul!! *(Pause.)* Why don't you think it over a bit? Talk to Pamela about it.

Paul I don't need to. The answer's "No."

Silence.

Ben Don't you think you oughtta let Pamela ... have a say in this?

Paul No.

Ben Why not?

Paul Because we've already had that discussion. A hundred times.

Ben Really.

Paul Oh, yes. We talk about it all the time. She knows what's out there. And she knows what I want to do. And what I don't want to do.

Pause.

Ben You think you're better than me.

Pause.

Paul I don't think I'm better. *(Pause.)* I think ... maybe ... I value better things.

Ben Fuck you, you snob.

Paul Okay.

Silence.

Ben You don't think much of me, do you?

Paul I like you. *(Pause.)* You're okay.

Ben *(I can't believe you.)* You fucking snob.

Paul Come on, Ben.

Ben Fuck you, "come on"! *(Pause.)* *(I gotta go. This was a big waste of time.)* Here's for my stuff, I don't wanna wait for that asshole. *(Ben puts dollars on the table.)*

Paul Sorry I couldn't help you, Ben.

Ben That's fine. I did what I had to do. I'm not feeling guilty about it any more. I gave you a chance. A great opportunity. I'm not feeling bad about this any more.

Paul Why should you feel guilty? What did *you* do?

Ben I didn't say "guilty," I said "bad." *(Ben is now standing.)*

Paul Okay. But why should you feel bad? You didn't do anything wrong.

Ben Bad! Bad! I felt bad because we didn't pick your show up. Bad! Okay? Does that make sense, you ... literary ... bigshot!?

Paul Okay! Okay. I'm sorry. *(Pause.)* It just kind of sounded like you felt bad about something ... personally. *(Pause.)* Like ... as if ... *you* were the one who made the decision. *(Pause.)* Or something.

Ben What decision?

Paul Not to do my show. ... To do the reality project instead of my show.

Silence. Ben stares at Paul. The Waiter approaches.

Ben Fuck off, my friend.

The Waiter leaves. Ben sits down. Silence.

My father worked in a pants factory on the lower east side for thirty five years. *(Pause.)* I think maybe he had two vacations all those years. His boss was a prick. Some rich prick. *(Pause.)* Do you understand what I'm telling you? *(Pause.)* "Poor" doesn't cut it. We were beyond "poor." *(Pause.)* I grew up in the Bronx. *(You know that.)* And I don't mean fucking Riverdale. I'm talking about that awful fucking area where our pal Pacino comes from.

Paul Ben ...

Ben Yeah.

Paul Why are you telling me this?

Silence.

Ben What did you mean "as if I were the one who ... who made the decision"?

Paul I just meant you were acting like you were guilty. Like maybe you were the one.

Ben Who knocked down your show.

Paul Yeah.

Ben Is that what you think?

Paul Is *what* what I think?

Ben Don't play games with me, Shakespeare. *(Pause.)* Is that what you think?

Paul Do I think you shot down my show?

Ben Yes, you self-righteous prick.

Paul I *know* you did.

A long silence.

Ben You know, Paul... *(Pause.)* You know ... *(Pause.)* You know that Gillian hasn't been feeling very well. *(Pause.)* Her back and her shoulder have been really ... *(Pause.)* I told her I'd be home by nine, so... *(Pause.)* So to be sitting here with you... *(Pause.)* when I didn't even have to come... *(Pause.)*... didn't even have to be here... *(Pause.)* ... is ... *(Long pause.)* I think you ought to consider that this meeting was ... is a courtesy meeting. *(Pause.)* Because we're friends. *(Pause.)* And because of what happened to our friend, Greg...

Silence.

Now I have to go. But before I do, I just want to be really clear about something. *(Pause.)* Because you just said something that really ... really bothers me. *(Pause.)* Upsets me. *(Pause.)* You said "I know you did, Ben" as if you actually know that I was the one who nixed your show.

Silence.

Paul Right.

Ben So, you're actually saying that.

Paul Right.

Silence.

Ben Wow.

Paul (That "Wow" sounded like Brando ... in *Waterfront?*. ... You remember when he says "Wow" when Steiger pulls the gun on him?)

Ben (Great moment. Your favorite film, right?)

Paul (My dad's. Anyway, you just reminded me of it when you said "Wow" like that.)

Ben I said "Wow" like that because I'm really surprised, and upset, by what you said.

Paul Why should you be surprised?

Ben Why *shouldn't* I be surprised?

Paul Well, I guess you're surprised that I know. *(Pause.)* I guess.

Ben I'm surprised that you would even think such a thing.

Paul I would never have thought such a thing, until someone told me.

Silence.

Ben (Oh, boy...) *(pause)* Someone told you.

Paul Right.

Ben Someone at the meeting?

Paul Right. You know what? I'm sitting here and I'm feeling sorry for you. I don't know what's wrong with me, but I'm actually sitting here feeling sorry for you. You cheated me, you fucked me out of a great job, and I'm sitting here feeling sorry for you. Can you tell me what in heaven is wrong with me? *(Pause.)* I'm sitting here watching you be uncomfortable in front of me because I caught you in this horrible thing, I caught you red-handed at this ... this really horrible ... thing ... and I'm feeling sorry for you. *(Pause.)* I felt sorry for the men who blacklisted my dad. *(Pause.)* Can you imagine that? I felt sorry for those fucking sons of bitches. I felt bad for my dad of course. I knew he was innocent ... My dad's career was ruined, and I felt sorry for the HUAC guys. *(Pause.)* So here I am now sitting across from you and instead of thinking "That son of a bitch Ben, I'm going to stick it to him, I'm going to fuck him over for this, I'm going to sit and watch him squirm as he tries to act innocent" ... I'm sitting here thinking "Oh my god! Poor Ben! Look at him! He's completely guilty and I know it, but he doesn't *know* I know it so he's sitting there trying to act innocent, oh my god, look at him, I'm being so mean to him!" *(Pause.)* I guess what I'm saying is ... I'm sitting here trying to be nice, trying to be nice to you, Ben. And I want you to know that. I want you to know that I don't want to watch you squirm even though you thoroughly deserve to squirm because you're a scumbag and did a really scumbag thing to me, your friend. ... who hooked you up with that ... Ramona chick ... that time. ... who took you to that Mets game in sixty-nine when they were chasing the pennant and people couldn't find tickets if their life depended on it. *(Pause.)* So I'm trying to be nice to you and not do this cat and mouse thing anymore because I wouldn't want someone doing it to me ... I don't want to ... "rejoice at the destruction of my enemy." (Not too much at least.) So I'm not going to do that to you. *(Pause.)* But don't pretend you're innocent, Ben. Don't fucking pretend you're innocent, because not one but two people, two people AT THAT MEETING told me what you did and what you said, (and one of them even sent me some of the "dialogue") ... So don't, please don't, act like you're innocent or I'll stop feeling sorry for you and just want to fucking hate you for the rest of my life.

Silence.

Ben You hate me already.

Paul You know what? If I don't hear you apologize, I don't want to hear anything at all.

Ben Apologize for what? For doing my job?

Paul What's your job, fucking your friends?

Ben Making money, Paul. Making money.

Paul That's a job?

Ben Sure.

Paul But, Ben ... *(Pause.)* How much money do you need? *(Pause.)* How much money do you need, Ben? *(Pause.)* How many houses? ... How many cars? *(Pause.)* How much money do you need to make ... to *have* ... before you can stop working at it?

Ben Will you ever stop writing?

Paul I hope not.

Ben Well ...

Paul You're comparing me writing to you making money?

Ben Sure. *(Pause.)* That's what I do. *(Pause.)* That's what I do best.

Paul But you're fucking people, Ben. *(Pause.)* You fucked me. *(Pause.)* You've fucked others. ... So many others. *(Pause.)* Your houses and your boats and your cars, Ben ... They're the fruit of fucking people. *(Pause.)* Grinding the faces of the poor, Benjamin Yakelstov.

Ben Jackstone.

Paul Yakelstov! Benjamin Yakelstov! You are grinding the faces of the poor!

Silence.

How much money do you need? *(Pause.)* I'm sorry, but aren't you ashamed of that shit you're producing? *(Pause.)* That's right, Ben. Shit. *(Pause.)* "Reality t.v." ... It's nothing but shit. *(Pause.)* How vile can we get people to be to one another? *(Pause.)* What more and more disgusting things can we get people to eat? *(Pause.)* What horrible, harmful, shameful secrets can we get people to reveal in front of the cameras .. in front of the whole world? *(Pause.)* And why? Because you need more money. Ben "Jackstone" needs more money. *(Pause.)* And yeah, I know, the poor fuckers on your shows get paid. I'm sure they think they get paid real well. *(Pause.)* Because, after all, you can get anyone to do anything if you give them enough money. I mean, we know they're not up there just degrading themselves for free. We know it's for money. Yeah. Not only do we get to sit at home and say, "Wow! Look at that sexy girl eat those dead bugs!" or "Wow! Look at that guy fuck that girl behind his wife's back!" but we also have the satisfaction ... the superior satisfaction ... of being able to say, "Wow! What people will do for money!" *(Pause.)* And we get to say, "At least *I'd* never do *that!* *I'm* better than *that!*"

Silence.

Ben Yeah. "Roman times." *(Pause.)* You finished?

Paul *(Pause.)* Is that all you can say? *(Pause.)* After all that, is that all you can say?

Ben What do you want me to say?

Paul I don't know. ... Say you're sorry?...

Ben For what?

Paul Oh, that's right. You're just doing you're job. I mean, someone has to do it, right? *(Pause.)* Okay, don't say you're sorry. Say you'll pay some actors and some writers one of these days. How about that? *(Pause.)* Say you'll spend a few million dollars on some actors and writers ... Huh?! ... To write and act in shows that mean something. *(Pause.)* Say you'll throw a little work to some of us artists so we don't have to hang ourselves in our bathrooms.

Ben Don't you dare! Don't you ...!

Paul Yeah, did you hear the story about Gregory Taylor?!

Ben Don't you dare, you son of a bitch! *(Ben stands up.)* I'll ...

Silence. The two men look at each other, Ben standing and glaring down at Paul. After some moments, Ben slowly sits.

Paulie ... don't you dare say that to me. *(Pause.)* I loved Greg Taylor. *(Pause.)* He was a great man. A great actor, but an even greater man. *(Pause.)* He and I were like brothers ... years ago. *(Pause.)* I was absolutely sick ... sick, I tell you, when I heard what happened.

Paul *(Silence.)* Why don't you come with me ... to Connecticut?

Ben Nahhhh ... I'd like to, Paul ... I just ...

Paul Why not?

Ben I ... I don't know. ... Gillian's not well. ... And I've got a lot of things ... you know ... to ...

Paul Sure, Ben. I know. ... A lot of work, right? *(Pause.)* A lot of money to make.

Silence.

Ben When I first got here from New York, I tried to produce a film. An indie ... little, funny film about ... Anyway ... *(You would've liked it.)* Anyway, I met with this guy at one of the big studios ... *(I had a friend who knew him, got me in the door)...*and he said to me...*(well, first of all, he turned me down) ...but he said to me, "They give me a million a year just to make sure your film doesn't get made."* *(Pause.)* I'll never forget that. *(Long pause.)* Your father was blacklisted, but he wasn't poor. *(Pause.)* We were poor, Paulie. You never knew what that was like. Yeah, we both went to Stuyvesant, but you could've gone to Horace Mann. ... *(if your father wasn't such a ... such a goddam socialist).* For me, it was either one of those few good public schools or it was something in my neighborhood *(god forbid).* *(Silence.)* Yeah, your dad took us to that Mets game. *(Pause.)* My father could never take us to Yankee Stadium. Never. *(Pause.)* Never, never, never, never, never. *(Pause.)* And he loved the Yankees.

Silence.

Does Pamela know?

Paul Know what? ... What you did?

Ben Yeah.

Paul No. Does that matter?

Ben Yes.

Paul Why does that matter?

Ben I like her. *(Pause.)* I respect her.

Silence.

I'm gonna go.

Paul Yeah. ... Okay.

Ben stands, straightens his jacket and pants, and looks around the restaurant.

Ben Where's ...? ... Where's the ... ? ...

Paul You told him to fuck off.

Ben So?

Paul So? ... So, he's fucking off somewhere.

Ben Everyone's so sensitive.

Ben looks around the restaurant. Paul watches him.

I'll see ya.

Paul See you, Ben.

Ben Yeah. *(Pause.)* I don't suppose you could tell me who told you?

Paul My love to Gillian. I hope she feels better.

Ben Thanks. Love to Pamela. ... And Josh.

Paul Will do. Thanks.

Ben starts to leave. A little past Paul, he stops and turns back towards the writer.

Ben You gonna forgive me? *(Pause.)* I mean, at some point?

Paul Yeah. *(Pause.)* Probably. *(Pause.)* It's *you* you have to worry about.

Ben What do you mean?

Paul I mean ... *you* might not be able to forgive you.

Ben I probably won't.

Paul I hope not.

Silence.

Ben I gotta go.

Paul So go. What is this, a scene from a Beckett play?

Ben *(Pause.)* See? I don't even get that.

Paul Don't worry about it.

Silence.

Ben I remember. *(Pause.)* The Mets beat the Pirates one-to-nothing on a home run by Don Clendenon. ... Good game. *(Pause.)* I don't know ... I think that might've been the best day of my life.

After a few seconds, Ben leaves. Paul sits for a moment before picking up the money that Ben left on the table. He checks it, puts it back down, then pulls out his cellphone and dials.

Paul Hey, hon. Coming home. ... Aahhh ... I'll tell you when I see you... ... He's Ben. ... Yeah. ... Who? ... Oh, Darlene? What did she ...? ... Yeah, I'd like to go. ... Well, let's both go, I'm sure it would mean a lot ... Yeah. ... Yeah, I'll book the flight when I get home. ... Yeah. ... Bye. ... Love you, too. ... On my way.

Paul hangs up, puts his phone back in his jacket pocket and stands. He stretches for a moment before taking another look at the money on the table. He takes out his wallet, gets two singles from it and throws them down. As he's doing this, the Waiter arrives and begins clearing the table. Paul watches him for a few moments.

Paul Sorry about my friend.

Wait Whatever.

Paul *(Pause.)* You ever hear of Greg Taylor?

Wait Sure.

Paul The actor.

Wait Sure. Great actor. Did lots of film and t.v.. He used to live near me in Silverlake.

Paul Did you hear he died? Committed suicide.

Wait No. That's terrible. You know why?

Paul Work. I mean, not enough work. ... I don't think any at all the last many years.

Wait That's a shame. Probably all the reality t.v.. You know?

Paul Yeah.

The Waiter finishes. With his arms and hands full of dishes, etc., he starts to leave.

Paul You an actor?

Wait I'm a waiter.

The Waiter leaves. Paul stands for a moment and then leaves the restaurant.

The End

September 8th, 2009
Studio City, California
Revised 10/16/09, 9/2/18