

**DAVID HENRY WILSON**

# **PROFESSOR IN PLAY**

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## **THE CHARACTERS:**

Professor Martin Windsor, mid fifties  
Dorothy, his wife, mid thirties  
Michael Palmer, a lecturer, late twenties  
A man and a woman on film

## **THE SETS:**

**Act One:** The Windsors' living-room. One door down right leads to the kitchen, and another left centre leads to hall and stairs. The furniture (including table and chairs, settee, armchairs, TV etc.) is modern but not obtrusively so. There are plenty of books. The window in the rear wall is curtained off, as the scene takes place at night. Overall effect: neat and prosperous.

**Act Two:** Michael Palmer's flat. This is a large bed-sit with a kitchen recess. The front door is up left, and another door, right centre, leads to the bathroom. The furniture (including double bed, desk, small table, chairs) is ultra modern. There are posters and abstract pictures on the walls - also a large nude. Again books are well in evidence, somewhat untidily. Overall effect: messy, and slightly pretentious.

## ACT ONE

*When the lights go up on the Windsors' living-room, MARTIN is sitting separately from DOROTHY and MICHAEL, who are together on the settee. All three are watching the TV. In the film, a man is pointing a gun at a woman.*

WOMAN: Please, John, don't!

MAN: You thought you could make a fool of me, didn't you? The two of you laughing behind my back...

WOMAN: It's not true!

MAN: That idiot John, who hasn't a clue what goes on, who lives in a happy little world all of his own...

WOMAN: No!

MAN: But my world is not a happy one. My world is shattered, just as I'm going to shatter yours.

WOMAN: John, please listen!

*He fires. The woman's face is contorted with horror and pain, and blood seeps through her fingers as she clutches her chest. She falls. .*

MARTIN: That's it.

*He stops the film, gets up, takes the disk out, and switches off the TV. While his back is turned, Michael gives Dorothy a quizzical look. Swiftly she touches his hand, shakes her head, and puts a finger to her lips.*

Film of the Year Award goes to the Ham and Corn Amateur Dramatic Society. I hope you weren't too shocked by the raw realism, Michael.

MICHAEL: Not at all, professor, it's very interesting...

MARTIN: Oh no, the interesting bit comes now. This is where we enter into the profundities, Michael, the convolutions. You'll enjoy this too, Dorothy, but let's give our rising star first sniff of the perfume, shall we? Now, Michael, we ask our students to give us all the information they can about that scene. Off you go.

MICHAEL: They're presumably husband and wife. She's betrayed him, he's found out, and he shoots her.

MARTIN: A commonplace story, and a commonplace interpretation. You agree with it, Dorothy?

DOROTHY: Yes.

MARTIN: Of course you do. But now we must analyse the facts. Dorothy, tell us what you actually saw.

DOROTHY: A man and a woman. He said she'd made a fool of him, and he shot her.

MARTIN: Excellent. We have no evidence that they're married, and we have no evidence that she has, in Michael's quaintly old-fashioned terminology, "betrayed" him. You made two assumptions by taking the given facts and linking them through your imagination. The way you linked them was conditioned by experiences familiar to you through literature, or perhaps even real life - who knows? And so you have, as it were, narrated a story that is not there.

MICHAEL: That's just elementary gestalt psychology.

MARTIN: Oh yes. I make no claim to any startlingly original discovery. I'm concerned with its application to the arts. And to life. I like to make sure my students know what they're doing when they read a book, or reflect on a lingering look.

DOROTHY: Go on, it's interesting.

MARTIN: Ah, good. If a wife encourages her husband, there must be something behind it, eh? Now, we've viewed the facts and formed - as Michael says - a gestalt. However, it appears that the man and woman were in fact brother and sister. You will immediately think back to what you saw, and...?

DOROTHY: Look for an explanation.

MARTIN: I.e. link up the facts in a different way. Right, we now have brother and sister: brother made a fool of, brother shoots sister.

MICHAEL: Incest.

MARTIN: Ah! He's in love with his sister, and otherwise the same pattern as before. Your mind runs along distinctly sexual lines, Michael. How our comprehension betrays our pre-occupations. Another step, then: he's a homosexual. Well?

DOROTHY: She's obviously gone off with the man he loves.

MARTIN: Sex again, but it's logical. What makes you so certain, though, that his homosexuality is relevant to the story? If in real life you saw a man commit a murder, and you happened to know he was Jewish, had brown eyes, sang bass baritone, and was a left-arm slow bowler, would you automatically link those facts to the crime?

MICHAEL: In art we assume a deliberate selection of facts to form a coherent whole.

MARTIN: The traditional concept of art, blown asunder by the modernists, of course. You see, my dear, what fun we have with our students. Where were we? Ah yes, he's a homosexual, but that's irrelevant. He collects butterflies. How about that?

DOROTHY: Irrelevant.

MARTIN: On the contrary, of vital importance.

MICHAEL: His sister's sold his collection.

MARTIN: Perhaps, but that leaves out an important fact.

DOROTHY: He mentioned somebody else.

MARTIN: The two of you laughing behind my back. You remember him saying that? The two of you...laughing behind my back.

*A moment of distinct tension.*

DOROTHY: Then she and somebody else destroyed his collection.

MARTIN: And we wonder who the third party might be, and so on. We needn't labour the point.

MICHAEL: What are you trying to prove?

MARTIN: Nothing. Oh dear, nothing at all. I'm illustrating, not proving. Surely when you lecture, Michael - and I hear he lectures very well - when you dissect a piece of literature, or describe its historical background...surely you don't always try to prove things, do you?

MICHAEL: No. I'm just not sure why...

MARTIN: I'm testing, that's all, Michael. Before I expound my theories to the waiting universe, I thought I'd test them on our brightest star.

MICHAEL: Your theories, presumably, on the phenomenology of reading.

MARTIN: Correct, and well pronounced. The more I go into it, the wider become its implications. We're grappling with enormous forces here, far beyond relationships between texts and readers. For instance, the film you saw. Even if we link all the facts in a logical pattern - let's say the man's sister and mother sold his butterflies, and he's a mental case and so on - we're still only talking on one level. Because we have assumed, have we not, that what we saw was fictional. You did assume that, Dorothy?

DOROTHY: Yes.

MARTIN: We are therefore not moved or horrified by what we've seen. But now I must shift you from your comfortable detachment, because it so happens that the film was real.

*A moment of uncertainty.*

DOROTHY: In what way real?

MARTIN: You remember the conference I went to last week in Edinburgh...(To Michael:) There was a conference last week, and I was away for a few days - perhaps you knew. ..We had a psychiatrist there - Philip Pyne, but you won't have heard of him - and he gave me this film. It actually happened. I don't mean the story, I mean the shooting. A bizarre case. They were amateurs making a film, but the man and woman were married in real life. She was having an affair, as you correctly surmised, so he put real bullets in the gun, and they acted a scene which turned out not to be acted at all.

DOROTHY: That's horrible.

MARTIN: It rather changes one's reaction, does it not? You remember the blood seeping through her fingers, and that look of sheer horror on her face. All absolutely real.

DOROTHY: Are you joking, Martin?

MARTIN: Such things are hardly material for jokes. Now you see how even the selfsame pictures can arouse totally different feelings in you, according to the information in which those pictures are embedded. One can apply the process to any situation. You, for example, listening to me.

*They wait for him to go on.*

MICHAEL: What do you mean?

*Martin shrugs his shoulders.*

I didn't quite follow the bit about the process applying to us.

MARTIN: When I told you the story behind the film, you couldn't be sure I was not lying. You reacted to the film, I told you something, and your reaction changed, and if you found out that I was lying, your reaction would change again. And yet what you saw remained precisely the same.

MICHAEL: That's the mechanics of perception and comprehension..

MARTIN: To give you another example. I see you, Michael, sitting close to my wife. This means nothing to me - I observe, but I do not react. Yet the same image - you sitting close to my wife - might drive me into a frenzy if, for instance, I believed that you and she were lovers. You take my point?

*Another tense moment.*

DOROTHY: Well it's all very clever and intellectual, but I don't see what it's got to do with teaching English Literature.

MARTIN: Ah, that you must leave to the professionals. The constitution of the aesthetic object. But let's give you a literary example. Take Othello. Now that poor man observed perfectly innocent behaviour, was fed with false information, and so formed a false gestalt - namely, that the wife he so loved and trusted was having it off with young Cassio.

DOROTHY (*standing up:*) Let's eat, shall we?

MARTIN (*abruptly:*) No. (*Softening:*) No, no, not yet. I'm anxious to pursue the line of thought. Sit down, Dorothy.

*She does.*

I have something to confess to you both. I am a very insecure man.

*An involuntary laugh from Dorothy.*

Why do you laugh?

DOROTHY: Because you're just about the most self-assured person I've ever known.

MARTIN: In certain respects I am indeed self-assured, but like many in my profession, I'm given to too much thinking. Caught in the pale cast. And the more one thinks, the less one knows. I observe, and I link my observations into patterns sometimes true and sometimes false, and I'm so conscious of these commonplace processes that I can no longer react to anything spontaneously. I am always aware of what is happening to me.

MICHAEL: I really don't think this is any of my concern...

MARTIN: Oh but it is, it is. You're a rising star...

MICHAEL: I wish you'd stop calling me that.

MARTIN: It's true. You've come to us armed with the latest theories, and full of the vigour of youth. You're sure to become a professor yourself one day, and eventually take my place - if you haven't indeed taken it already. I think this is very much your concern.

DOROTHY: What Michael was trying to say, very tactfully, was that he'd rather you didn't bare your soul to him. It's a little embarrassing, Martin.

MARTIN: Then bare your soul to me, Michael. Tell me what patterns you've been forming in the course of our conversation.

DOROTHY: Oh really! Michael, take no notice.

MICHAEL: No, I'll answer him. I haven't formed any patterns. You have me at a disadvantage, because you're head of the faculty and I'm just a lecturer whose future may depend on your goodwill. I'm interested in your theories, though I think perhaps they're already a little played out, but I'm keeping an open mind on what you're leading up to.

MARTIN: I don't think that's possible. Not for a thinking man. You're bound to form patterns. You may keep an open mind as to which pattern is correct, but you can't stop yourself from linking. And so you're lying, Michael, and yet you spoke so convincingly. I must therefore ask why. Are you acting a part, are you being diplomatic, are you perhaps frightened to tell the truth? You see how automatically I myself begin to form patterns? We do it all the time.

MICHAEL: Perhaps I don't analyse myself as consciously as you do.

MARTIN: You mean you have formed patterns, but you haven't lifted them out to look at them.

MICHAEL: Something like that.

DOROTHY (*standing again:*) I'll bring the food in.

MARTIN: You are determined, aren't you?

*She goes out to the kitchen.*

MICHAEL (*standing:*) Is there anything I can...

MARTIN: No, you stay, Michael. I'm interested in your patterns. Let's lift them out.

MICHAEL: As your wife said, this is embarrassing.

MARTIN: Dorothy - her name's Dorothy. I'll make a pact with you. You tell me what's in your mind, and I'll tell you what's in mine. Isn't that a fair offer?

MICHAEL: All right. I think you're trying to impress me, perhaps intimidate me, because you feel threatened in some way. As you said, I'm young, I'm coming up, whereas you... let's say, you've reached your peak.

*Pause.*

MARTIN: Is that it?

MICHAEL: Yes.

MARTIN: What are you keeping an open mind about, then? If there's only this one pattern, your mind must be closed.

MICHAEL: The pattern may be wrong.

MARTIN: Then you do have others?

MICHAEL: No.

MARTIN: That's impossible. If you have doubts, you'll try to form other patterns, and if you can't, you'll assume there is only the one. That's how the process works, Michael, even if it is a little played out.

MICHAEL: All right, then. That's what I think.

MARTIN: Then you have formed a definitive pattern.

MICHAEL: Yes.

MARTIN: And yet you said you hadn't. So you did lie.

MICHAEL: As you said, I was trying to be diplomatic.

MARTIN: But you lied so convincingly that if I hadn't had my theories to inspire me, if I'd had nothing but your voice, your direct gaze, your plausibility, I'd have believed you. And if you could lie so well then, how can I be sure you're not lying now?

MICHAEL: I wouldn't call it 'lying', and in any case why should I lie to you?

MARTIN: Precisely the point I'm trying to link to a pattern. I have two facts: one, you lied about your thoughts; two, you say you were trying to be diplomatic.

MICHAEL: I don't see any contradiction.

MARTIN: But supposing you are lying now? Then it could only be because there's some other pattern that you wish to hide from me.

MICHAEL: There's no other pattern.

MARTIN: You say it so directly, I'm almost convinced. But then I, too, have told lies in my time and been believed. I, too, can look someone straight in the eye and say: "The man really did shoot the woman." If I can lie so well, why shouldn't you?

MICHAEL: So that was a lie?

MARTIN: Of course.

*Short pause.*

MICHAEL: You said you'd tell me what's in your mind.

MARTIN: I am telling you. "There is no art to find the mind's construction in the face."

MICHAEL: Did I misinterpret your behaviour?

MARTIN: No, you merely bowdlerized it.

MICHAEL: What's missing?

*Dorothy comes in, carrying a tray.*

MARTIN: Ah, this is what's missing. Supper. Let me help you, my dear.

*He takes the tray from her and puts it on the table.*

DOROTHY: Thank you.

*She lays out the dishes etc.*

MARTIN: Michael and I were comparing patterns.

DOROTHY: How fascinating.

MARTIN: Come along, Michael, let us sweeten our discourse with a little nosh-up, shall we?

*He gestures to Michael to sit, and they take their places: Martin right, Dorothy centre, and Michael left.*

DOROTHY: Shall I be mother?

MARTIN: Oh yes, you're much better qualified than we are.

*She serves them.*

DOROTHY: If there's anything you don't like...

MARTIN: Yes indeed, no need to be diplomatic with us.

MICHAEL: No, that's lovely, thanks.

MARTIN: You cook for yourself in your flat? It is a flat you have?

MICHAEL: Yes. Well, I make do.

MARTIN: You don't get lonely there, of an evening?

MICHAEL: No, there's always plenty to do.

MARTIN: Of course. Especially when you're young and climbing. Our girl students are star-struck. Michael is the greatest thing to hit Eng. Lit. since Samuel Beckett. Thank you, my dear.

MICHAEL: How long have you been at the University?

MARTIN: A hundred years. Why do you ask?

MICHAEL: I just wondered.

MARTIN: It's a topic of conversation. I've been here for nineteen years. I am an institution of the institution. Only ten of my nineteen years have been spent in the blissful state of

matrimony. My wife - as you may have noticed - is a great deal younger than I am. This is delicious, Dorothy.

MICHAEL: Yes, it is.

DOROTHY: Thank you.

MARTIN: When you get married, Michael, marry a good cook. Ensure the satisfaction of your appetite - at least in the daytime. I've been very lucky to find such a beautiful and attentive wife so late in my career. Dorothy, you should know, studied under me. What an unfortunate choice of words. She was quite a good student, but she could never get the hang of the phenomenological approach, so we tried something different, didn't we, my dear?

DOROTHY: I don't think Michael really wants to know our history.

MARTIN: No, you must forgive me. I've been an intolerable bore all evening. You've been most patient with me. I scarcely deserve such forbearance.

*An awkward pause.*

DOROTHY (*To Michael:*) How do you find the students?

MARTIN: He opens the door, and there they are.

MICHAEL: Generally quite bright. Very conscious.

MARTIN: Conscious. Awareness - the Devil's gift to man. Would you excuse me for a moment?

*He stands up. They both look at him.*

Even professors have to pee.

*He goes out left, closing the door behind him.*

MICHAEL: My God!

DOROTHY: Sh!

*She goes to the door, listens, then returns to the table.*

It's all right.

*They talk in whispers.*

MICHAEL: He knows!

DOROTHY: He can't know. At the worst he's just guessing.

MICHAEL: Dammit! Has he ever been like this before?

DOROTHY: He's never invited you before, has he? We may be imagining things. He likes to show off. Just act naturally. Don't let him rattle you.

MICHAEL: How could he have found out?

DOROTHY: He couldn't.

MICHAEL: It's all too close to be coincidence.

DOROTHY: We're thinking too much. It's just as he said.

MICHAEL: I think I should go now.

DOROTHY: You can't. How would I explain it?

MICHAEL: So what am I supposed to do?

DOROTHY: Nothing. Just look like the innocent flower.

MICHAEL: Which of us is the serpent? I must say, you're remarkably calm.

DOROTHY: I'm not, but I'll put up with the occasional discomfort if it lets me be alive the rest of the time.

*He holds up his hand.*

What?



MICHAEL: I thought I heard something.

*They listen. She again gets up and goes to the door. Very gently she opens it and tip-toes out. There is a faint, indeterminate sound from upstairs. Dorothy returns, closes the door behind her, and goes to the table.*

Well?

DOROTHY: I'm not sure. I think he's crying.

MICHAEL: Christ! He knows all right. So why's he playing games with us?

DOROTHY: I don't know. But if he wants to have it out, that's up to him. I'm not making any first moves.

MICHAEL: Are we going to play-act the rest of the evening, then?

DOROTHY: Do you want to confront him?

*There is a long silence as they look at each other. Michael breaks the contact, and takes out a packet of cigarettes.*

MICHAEL: Do you mind? I've been dying...

DOROTHY: He can't stand cigarette smoke.

MICHAEL: I know. I'm sorry.

*He lights up. A long exhalation.*

DOROTHY: I'm only saying that if you want things to stay as they are, you'll have to play-act.

MICHAEL: I wish I'd never come to this bloody place.

DOROTHY: Thank you very much.

MICHAEL: That's not what I mean.

DOROTHY: What do you mean?

MICHAEL: Don't you start cross-examining me!

*His tone is vehement, which startles her.*

The whole thing's bloody stupid. Just what the hell am I doing here?

*He stands up.*

I'm leaving.

DOROTHY: Just like that.

*The door opens, and Martin enters. He gives no sign of having broken down.*

MARTIN: Sorry to have deserted you. "The broad-backed hippopotamus / Rests on his belly in the mud; / Although he seems so firm to us, / He is merely flesh and blood." Oh dear, I'm afraid I'm allergic to cigarette smoke. Would you mind?

MICHAEL: I was just about to leave.

MARTIN: No, no, you can't leave.

MICHAEL: I have some papers to mark.

MARTIN: Don't we all? Papers to mark, essays to yawn through, theses to plagiarize, committees, sub-committees, Walter Mittys...

*He has forced Michael back to the table.*

Sit down, Michael. You haven't even finished your meal.

MICHAEL: I'm not hungry.

MARTIN: Something curbed your appetite? Not Dorothy's cooking, I hope.

DOROTHY: Don't force him, Martin.

*Martin lets go of Michael with an exaggerated gesture.*

MARTIN: Nos cedamus amori. But at least have a cup of coffee, to round off the evening.  
Then we'll let you go.

DOROTHY: Why don't you sit over there, and I'll clear the table.

MARTIN: Agreed?

MICHAEL: All right, but I do have to go.

MARTIN: Of course. If you wouldn't mind putting out your cigarette.

MICHAEL: Sorry.

DOROTHY: What about your dinner, Martin?

*He shakes his head. She clears the table while the two men sit down in the living area.*

MARTIN: I was reading an essay the other day by Wolfgang Iser, on the subject of Beckett's fiction. It was called "When is the end not the end?" An apt title. It's amazing what a fertile subject the end can be. But life is full of endings, though they say every ending heralds a beginning. Perhaps even the last of them. And yet it's so difficult to reconcile oneself to endings - one so resents losing the illusion of permanence.

*Dorothy carries the dishes off right. Martin watches her go.*

I myself am suffering at present from the ending of a relationship. My wife is being unfaithful to me. Inevitable, I suppose, when an older man marries a young and attractive woman, but I can't accept it. It gnaws at me.

MICHAEL: Do you have any evidence?

MARTIN: Yes.

*Pause.*

MICHAEL: Would I be right in assuming that you suspect me?

MARTIN: And so we move from points to patterns.

MICHAEL: It's taken you a long time to accuse me.

MARTIN: I haven't. Should I?

MICHAEL: You can accuse anyone you like.

MARTIN: Or anyone I don't like.

MICHAEL: May I ask what sort of evidence you have?

MARTIN: Sordid, petty, and conclusive.

MICHAEL: Are you going to tell me what it is?

MARTIN: All in good time.

MICHAEL: Does Dorothy know?

MARTIN: That she's been unfaithful? She could have been sleepwalking.

MICHAEL: Does she know that you know?

MARTIN: Why don't you ask her? Dorothy!

DOROTHY (*off*): I'm coming.

MARTIN: She's coming.

MICHAEL: I'm beginning to find these games of yours rather tiresome.

MARTIN: You should read Caillois.

MICHAEL: What?

MARTIN: Game theory. There are four basic categories of game: agon, the contest; alea, the game of chance; mimicry, the illusory mirror image of the world; and ilinx, the anarchic game of rule-breaking. I think I'm playing agon, but which game are you playing, Michael?

*Dorothy re-enters, carrying a tray with coffee etc.*

Ah, Dorothy! I was just introducing our guest to game theory. Allow me.

*He gets up and takes the tray from her.*

DOROTHY: Thank you.

MARTIN: Always observe the little courtesies, Michael, if you want a happy marriage. My father told me that. He was washing his hands prior to strangling my mother. I'll pour the coffee, my dear. You sit down and prepare to answer a difficult question that Michael proposes to ask you.

*Dorothy looks at Michael, who avoids her gaze.*

With how many spoonfuls, Michael, should I measure out your life?

MICHAEL: Two, please.

MARTIN: And milk?

MICHAEL: Just a drop.

MARTIN: A drop. One drop would save my soul, half a drop, ah my Christ!

*He gives Michael his coffee.*

Black as usual, Dorothy?

DOROTHY: Please.

MARTIN: Black is the beauty of the brightest day. Come along, then, Michael, ask your question.

*He gives Dorothy her coffee, then pours out his own before joining them.*

MICHAEL: Your husband is under the impression that you've been unfaithful to him.

DOROTHY: Oh?

MARTIN: That wasn't a question.

MICHAEL: My question is supposed to be: did you know that he was under this impression?

MARTIN: Well done, Michael. In the true agonistic spirit. Your answer, Dorothy? (Pause.)

Poor Dorothy, she doesn't know which level to play on.

DOROTHY: I was not aware of your suspicions.

MARTIN: Ah! Now, Michael, is she telling the truth?

MICHAEL: It's no concern of mine.

MARTIN: There speaks a true academic. Dorothy, why don't you ask Michael a question, since he's caused you such acute embarrassment with his? Ask him whether he thinks I think he's the other man.

DOROTHY: I don't find this very amusing, Martin.

MARTIN: Don't come on your high horse to me! (*Softening:*) After all, Michael's willing to play.

MICHAEL: Why don't you say what you want to say?

MARTIN: Why don't you?

MICHAEL: All right, I will. You obviously think your wife...

MARTIN: Dorothy.

MICHAEL: ...and I are having an affair, but you won't accuse us outright because you have no evidence. You're afraid you'll make a fool of yourself.

MARTIN: He has given birth to a gestalt. Congratulations.

MICHAEL (*standing:*) That's enough for me. I'm leaving.

MARTIN: I don't think so.

MICHAEL (*to Dorothy:*) Thanks for what might have been a pleasant evening.

DOROTHY: I'll see you out.

MICHAEL: You needn't.

DOROTHY: Come on.

*They go out, closing the door behind them.*

MARTIN: Oh Christ!

*The mask has slipped, and all his pain shows through. He leans back in his chair, drained. Dorothy and Michael return. He resumes the mask.*

DOROTHY: Why have you locked the door?

MARTIN: Could it be to prevent him from leaving?

MICHAEL: I'll go out the back way.

MARTIN: Same story.

MICHAEL: Then I'll climb out through a bloody window!

MARTIN: I must confess that I'm appalled at the depths to which I have sunk. Even as I assembled the evidence, I could imagine the cameras on me, and the editor cutting out the inessentials so as to fit our story into fifty minutes. But setting up this charade, locking doors, producing guns...

*He takes a gun from his pocket and waves it at them.*

DOROTHY: For God's sake!

MARTIN: I find it quite unbelievable. Who is it that makes life imitate art?

DOROTHY: What are you doing with that gun, Martin?

MARTIN: Waving it in the air, like the mad professor so beloved of our thriller writers, not to mention our undergraduates.

MICHAEL: I shall leave, even if I have to smash a window.

MARTIN: You will not leave, even if I have to shoot you.

MICHAEL: We'll see.

*He makes to go out right. Martin shoots. Dorothy screams, and Michael claps his left hand to his right upper arm.*

Jesus Christ! He's mad!

DOROTHY: You could have killed him!

MARTIN: If I'd wanted to, yes.

DOROTHY: You're bleeding.

MICHAEL: It's all right. Just a graze.

MARTIN: Now sit down, both of you.

DOROTHY: He's bleeding!

MARTIN: So am I. Sit down!

*They sit down.*

DOROTHY: I don't understand you. I don't know you any more.

MARTIN: I scarcely know myself. New situations breed new characters. If anyone had told me that I should lie awake at night, pace the streets by day, disguise myself to make inquiries, follow a woman from fifty yards like some B-movie Humphrey Bogart, I'd have laughed like the jackass I am. I, a man like Othello, whom passion could not shake, an intellect that towered above the petty scabblings of human nature, I'm as amazed as you. I have not ceased to be amazed at myself since the day one week ago when I returned from a conference in Edinburgh and found a cigarette packet down the side of my mattress.

MICHAEL: My God!

MARTIN: It's been a remarkable experience, as if I'd been taken over by someone else. It raises fascinating questions about the nature of identity. We're so used to knowing characters through fiction that it's a shock to realize we can't even know ourselves. Still, that's one of the few advances our culture has made - recognition of our ignorance. Modern literature and art are infinitely less attractive than their predecessors, but far more accurate.

MICHAEL: I'd appreciate it if you'd do something to stop this bleeding.

MARTIN: One of the things I hate about my new self is that I feel no sympathy for you. I would like you to suffer. And yet I always saw myself as a kind and gentle man.

MICHAEL: The blood won't do your armchair any good. So maybe you can sympathize with your armchair.

MARTIN: A joke. Good, Michael. Humour in adversity - an admirable evasion of whoremaster man. Dorothy, get something to staunch the flow, will you?

DOROTHY: You'd better come to the bathroom.

MARTIN: No, he stays here.

*Dorothy goes out left.*

MICHAEL: It may not sound very convincing to you, but I'm sorry.

MARTIN: It does sound convincing. But you sounded convincing before, when you were lying.

MICHAEL: I didn't consider consequences.

MARTIN: Somehow the assassination never trammels them up. But anyway, what am I to you? It must be fun to outplay the played-out professor.

MICHAEL: I didn't think of you in those terms.

MARTIN: You probably didn't think of me at all. Who ever imagines the hippopotamus as flesh and blood? (*Pause.*) Our communication seems to have broken down.

MICHAEL: What more can I say except that I'm sorry?

MARTIN: Indeed. And what's the use of that?

*Dorothy returns with a bowl of water, cotton wool etc.*

Help cometh.

*Michael stands up, and Dorothy helps him off with his jacket, tie and shirt. His undervest is purple. They totally ignore Martin during the ensuing dialogue:*

You've rescued us, Dorothy, from the ignominy of silence. Michael was telling me how sorry he was, and I didn't believe him. It was an impasse. You should take my behaviour as a compliment to you. Your love is so important to me that...My God, a purple vest!

DOROTHY: It's nasty.

MARTIN: Indeed, what could be nastier than a purple vest?

DOROTHY: Sit down, Michael.

*He does so, and she attends to his injury.*

MARTIN: How very curious. I have a feeling that suddenly I don't exist. (*He shakes his head.*) Michael, let me ask you something personal. Michael!

*Now Michael looks at him.*

Ah! My question is, do you want to marry my wife?

DOROTHY (*to Michael:*) You don't have to answer.

MARTIN: Don't you want him to answer?

DOROTHY: I said he didn't have to, that's all.

MARTIN: And click went my hermeneutic wheels. Why must the receiver always transform the signals? Are you going to answer, Michael?

MICHAEL: No.

MARTIN: No you're not going to answer, or no you're not going to marry her? Or both, click click.

MICHAEL: No I'm not going to answer.

MARTIN: One wonders why. And you, Dorothy, wouldst thou have this man to be thy lawful wedded husband? (*No response.*) A question answered with the silence it deserves. But doesn't a woman's silence mean yes?

DOROTHY: I'll marry him if he wants to marry me.

MARTIN: Oh!

*He is thrown just for a moment, but quickly recovers.*

Of course you knew that, Michael. Or did you? Now I'm clicking like a Kaffir. Were you telling me, Dorothy, or were you telling him? Why did he refuse to answer? Do you know why he refused, and was your answer to my question in reality an answer to his refusal to answer? Oh

R.D.Laing, where art thou now? Was his refusal to answer meant to keep me in the dark, or you in the dark, or himself in the clear? If his refusal turns into a yes, shall I be asked to do the decent thing? And shall I do it? If he goes on refusing to answer, how long shall we chickens wait in the coop? And if his refusal turns into a no...then baby, you've been had for a sucker.

DOROTHY: There you are.

MICHAEL: Thanks.

MARTIN: I should be grateful, Michael, if you would elaborate upon the answer you refused to give.

MICHAEL: Is it possible to elaborate upon what Laing would call a nothing, Iser a structured blank, or Ingarden an "Unbestimmtheitsstelle"?

MARTIN: Are you crossing theoretical swords with me?

MICHAEL: Just letting you know I've read the same books.

MARTIN: And ploughed the same fields.

*Dorothy carries the bowl etc. off right.*

Am I right, Michael Palmer, in assuming that you are a bastard?

MICHAEL: You'll have to define your terms.

MARTIN: Very well. You have no intention of marrying my wife. Right or wrong?

MICHAEL: I'm not a bastard, and so I shan't answer your question.

MARTIN: Go back to Square One. But only a bastard would refuse to answer.

MICHAEL: I don't have to accept your definition of bastard.

MARTIN: Would you agree that a bastard takes another man's wife for a bit of fun?

MICHAEL: Would you agree that a bastard can drive his wife into the arms of another man?

MARTIN: Who's playing games here with whom? I'm not on trial!

MICHAEL: Nor am I.

MARTIN: But you will have to answer!

MICHAEL: Why?

MARTIN: Because that's the rule.

MICHAEL: Maybe we're playing different games.

*There is a moment of tension, as if Martin is about to explode, but he controls himself.*

MARTIN: Then let's find out.

*He goes to the door, right.*

Dorothy, you'd better come back in here.

DOROTHY (*off*): I'm just cleaning this...

MARTIN: Leave it.

*Dorothy comes in, drying her hands.*

Michael has just invented a new game. It's called "What Shall We Do With Dorothy?" And the first thing we have to do is guess the rules. Sit down.

DOROTHY: Martin, I'm tired of...

MARTIN: Sit down. The two of you together.

*They do. Martin sits separately.*

Now, what shall we do with Dorothy? A family game. Rule 1: No-one must know what the others are thinking. Rule 2: Everyone must speak, but no-one must say anything. Rule 3: No-one may show consideration for anyone else. Rule 4: Nothing is to be taken seriously. The object of the game: to ruin as many lives as possible.

MICHAEL: When does the game end?

MARTIN: When I say it ends.

DOROTHY: Martin, please put that gun away.

MARTIN: The gun is my trump. It's my only hope of getting fair play. So bags I first go.  
Michael, for the nth time: do you wish to marry my wife?  
DOROTHY: He doesn't know.  
MARTIN: Aha, amendment to the rules! You can only answer questions not addressed to you.  
Good! We must get this patented. Let's start again, shall we? A question to Dorothy, which of  
course Michael must answer. Dorothy, why are you so afraid to let Michael answer my  
question? (*Silence.*) Cuckoo!  
MICHAEL: It's not your turn.  
MARTIN; I shall never get the hang of this game! Whose turn is it, then?  
MICHAEL: Mine.  
MARTIN: Right. Ask away.  
MICHAEL: How long do you think you can keep me here, and what do you hope to gain by it?  
MARTIN: That's two questions.  
MICHAEL: Then I'll just ask the second.  
MARTIN: And Dorothy must answer.  
DOROTHY: He wants to force you into a decision about marrying me.  
MARTIN: Very good, Dorothy. And now it must be your turn.  
DOROTHY: All right. Do you want me to be happy?  
MARTIN: Michael? Do I want my wife to be happy?  
*Michael thinks about this.*  
MICHAEL: I imagine the thought never occurred to you.  
MARTIN (*visibly stung*): That's not true. Your happiness has always been paramount to me.  
DOROTHY: On your own terms.  
MARTIN: What terms?  
DOROTHY: That your meals were ready on time, your shirts were washed, the house was tidy,  
and no-one interrupted your reading, writing, thinking, and theorising.  
MARTIN: I've shared everything with you!  
DOROTHY: Shared what?  
MARTIN: My life! We go out, we entertain, I tell you everything...  
DOROTHY: Oh yes, you share yourself with me.  
MARTIN: Well then?  
DOROTHY: When did you ever ask me to share myself with you?  
*He stares at her.*  
MARTIN: I do love you, Dorothy.  
DOROTHY: Yes, I know you do.  
MARTIN: And he doesn't. Do you?  
MICHAEL: Is that your question?  
MARTIN: I'm not playing games! Now you answer! Do you love her?  
MICHAEL: Yes.  
*Pause. Now Martin stares at Michael. Dorothy puts her hand in Michael's.*  
MARTIN: You're a cold fish. The word doesn't mean anything, does it?  
MICHAEL: You used it. You should know.  
MARTIN: You never stop playing, do you?  
MICHAEL: You started the game, not me.  
MARTIN: Oh no, I joined this game long after you'd begun it. I'm only trying to find out the  
score. Dorothy, what do you want me to do?  
DOROTHY: Let him go home. Let things take their course.  
MARTIN: What course? (*Pause.*) What course?  
DOROTHY: I don't know.  
MARTIN: You want to live with him?

DOROTHY: Only if that's what Michael wants.  
MARTIN: But he doesn't. Do you?  
MICHAEL: What makes you say that?  
MARTIN: I asked my question first.  
MICHAEL: That doesn't give you priority.  
*Dorothy removes her hand from Michael's.*  
MARTIN: I love my wife! I don't want her to be hurt! I'm old and wise enough to know that hurting her will do me no good.  
DOROTHY: If you don't want me to live with you, I won't. It was his suggestion, not mine.  
MARTIN: Why will you never let him commit himself to an answer? Are you so terrified of losing him?  
*Dorothy turns away. She is on the verge of tears.*  
Yes, you are.  
*He stands up and goes to the drinks cabinet, where he pours out a whisky.*  
A drink, Dorothy?  
*She shakes her head.*  
You?  
MICHAEL: Please.  
*Martin pours out a second glass, which he gives to Michael. They drink in silence, Martin sitting again.*  
MARTIN: Will you give her up?  
MICHAEL: That depends on Dorothy.  
MARTIN: You damn coward! You know of course, Dorothy, that he has other women.  
MICHAEL: What other women?  
MARTIN: I told you, I made inquiries. I spoke to Mrs Finch, your tolerant and understanding landlady, who doesn't mind so long as you're quiet and pay your rent.  
MICHAEL: There have been no other women since I began seeing Dorothy.  
MARTIN: "Seeing"? Is that the word they use?  
DOROTHY: I know about the others.  
MARTIN: I find my wife's humiliation as painful as my own. Perhaps that's a sign of love.  
MICHAEL: She's not being humiliated. That's your imagination. You found out about us too soon, that's all.  
MARTIN: Oh, I'm so sorry. Perhaps we should ask for a slow motion replay, so you have time to make up your mind.  
MICHAEL: Marriage is not something you leap into.  
MARTIN: No, no, it's not like bed, is it? He's telling me about marriage! You can leap out of it, but you mustn't leap into it. I'm so glad you take the institution of marriage so seriously. If only we were all as high-minded. However, facts must be faced, and questions must be answered. May she come and live with you?  
MICHAEL: What about the scandal?  
MARTIN: Rule 97: answer a question with a question. And were you asking me, or asking Dorothy, or exclaiming in high dudgeon?  
MICHAEL: I was throwing it into the arena.  
MARTIN: Then let's maul it around, shall we? How will the scandal affect us? Dorothy?  
DOROTHY: I don't care! I'm sick of the talk and the games. If Michael wants me to live with him, I will. If he doesn't, I won't. And if he can't decide now, he can decide later. *(To Martin:)* I find your behaviour cruel and despicable. *(Pause.)* I'll have that drink.  
*In silence, Martin gets up and pours her a drink, which he takes to her.*  
I'm sorry. That was unfair.  
MARTIN: Yes, I thought it was unfair.



DOROTHY: Please let Michael go home.

MARTIN: But if he goes, nothing is solved. Even if you can live with this uncertainty, I can't.

DOROTHY: It's half past one. Can't we decide in the morning?

MARTIN: You think any of us would sleep? I haven't slept for a week. The decision is already made, Dorothy, only he's too mealy-mouthed to spit it out.

DOROTHY: Whatever the decision, Martin, I shan't stay here.

MARTIN: What do you mean?

DOROTHY: I can't stay here after all this!

MARTIN: Of course you'll stay here. This is your home. Or you think I'd turn you out?

DOROTHY: No.

MARTIN: Either you go with him, or you stay here.

*With a sudden violent movement, he crosses behind Michael, seizes him by the hair, and holds the gun against his throat. Dorothy screams.*

You bastard! Now answer! You want her or you don't want her? I'll give you five seconds. One, two, three, four...

MICHAEL: No!

MARTIN: No what?

MICHAEL: I don't want her to come with me.

*Extreme tension. It looks as if Martin is really going to shoot, but finally he pushes Michael away from him.*

MARTIN: Get out before I kill you.

*Michael stands up. Martin takes a key from his pocket.*

MICHAEL: I'm sorry, Dot.

MARTIN: Here, let yourself out.

MICHAEL: I'll look for another post.

MARTIN: Do what you like, but stay away from me.

*Michael goes out left. We hear the front door open and close. Dorothy has shrivelled. Martin puts the gun down, and very tenderly puts his hands on her shoulders.*

We should go to bed now. It's late.

*She reacts against his touch, and he takes his hands away.*

I'll sleep on the couch. We'll talk in the morning... about what you want. Dorothy?

*She remains transfixed, staring into space. Martin confronts her.*

He's no good, Dorothy. You couldn't have kept him.

*She looks up at him.*

If he'd said yes, I'd have let you go.

DOROTHY: You knew he'd say no.

MARTIN: I didn't

DOROTHY: You forced him.

*Martin walks away from her.*

MARTIN: I don't believe this. You expect me to feel guilty! You drop a brick on my head, and I'm to look up and say sorry! I don't want you to suffer, I don't want your life to be ruined, I want you to be happy, but I didn't start this affair! Am I expected not to react?

DOROTHY: I'm pregnant.

*It is now Martin who is transfixed. A long silence.*

MARTIN: By him?

DOROTHY: Of course it's by him.

*Martin sits down.*

MARTIN: Presumably he doesn't know.

DOROTHY: No.

MARTIN: You wanted him without that.

DOROTHY: I'm not going to blackmail him.

MARTIN: I should have shot him.

DOROTHY: It's not his fault. It's mine. I seduced him.

MARTIN: How long's it been going on?

DOROTHY: Since your Frankfurt conference. I met him in town, made him take me out to dinner, take me to his flat, and take me to his bed. Since then I've endeavoured to become as indispensable to him as Samuel Beckett is to you.

MARTIN: And now he's dispensed with the indispensable.

DOROTHY: Yes.

MARTIN: Perhaps you should have cooked his meals and washed his shirts.

DOROTHY: I did when you were away.

MARTIN: There are thought levels here that I find bewildering. You did know about the other women, didn't you?

DOROTHY: They were casual affairs.

MARTIN: Are.

DOROTHY: What?

MARTIN: Are, not were. Dorothy, you're thirty-five years old. How old is he?

DOROTHY: Twenty-seven.

MARTIN: Oedipus rides again.

DOROTHY: I'm still young!

MARTIN: You're not young. Compared with me you are - you'll always be young compared with me...

DOROTHY: I'm young enough to be in love and to start a family!

MARTIN: Oh yes, you've proved that.

DOROTHY: Anyway, it doesn't matter now. Everything's finished.

MARTIN: But the end is not the end. When's the baby due?

DOROTHY: You needn't concern yourself about it.

MARTIN: Are you going to have an abortion?

DOROTHY: I told you, it's not your concern! (*Change of tone:*) I'm sorry, you don't deserve this.

MARTIN: Why should I escape whipping? I must have failed you as much as you've failed me. Only in my case, it wasn't conscious.

*Dorothy breaks down.*

No, Dorothy!

DOROTHY: I've lost him! I've lost him!

MARTIN: Oh dear God!

*He hovers round her for a moment, then goes to the drinks cabinet, pours out two glasses, and returns to her.*

Here, drink this.

*She makes a gesture of refusal.*

Come on.

*He makes her take it. They both drink, and she gives him her empty glass.*

Another?

*She shakes her head. She is quieter now.*

You didn't seduce him, did you?

DOROTHY: I don't want to talk.

MARTIN: You don't need to. I can fill in the spaces. He's young, new, exciting. He beckons, and you go - out of curiosity, boredom, but just one step at a time, to see what'll happen.

Dinner, the flat. You walk into the parlour, and lo and behold it's a bedroom. A drop of Martini, a gallon of Mahler...

DOROTHY: It wasn't like that.

MARTIN: No? Port and poetry, perhaps. Or Mozart and Madeira.

DOROTHY: It was poetry.

MARTIN: Aha! His own, or the fruits of diligent research?

DOROTHY: His own, and others. Beautiful things that you wouldn't appreciate. Literature for you is a coat-hanger for theories, but Michael sees it as life. Not philosophy or aesthetics or anthropology, but life. Something you don't know about.

MARTIN: I'm learning. Thanks to you and Michael. Facts beyond my conception - though evidently not beyond yours.

DOROTHY: Your jokes are pathetic.

MARTIN: You never did understand my jokes. You never did understand why I made my jokes.

DOROTHY: To hurt.

MARTIN: I'm beginning to wonder if you've ever understood anything about me. I'm beginning to wonder, with a sinking feeling in my breast, why you married me.

DOROTHY: I thought I loved you.

*A short pause.*

MARTIN: I will extract what kindness I can from those words. At least our ten years were not all illusion. And you must have had your share of dreams. It does bring some small comfort to the deaf when the blind bump into lamp-posts. Would it seem incongruous to you if I were to quote a piece of poetry? My intentions are strictly honourable. It's by Rabindranath Tagore: "I long to speak the deepest words I have to say to you: but I dare not for fear you should laugh. That is why I laugh at myself and shatter my secret in jest. I make light of my pain, afraid you should do so."

*Pause.*

DOROTHY: I wish I could die.

*The curtain falls.*

## END OF ACT ONE

## ACT TWO

*Michael 's flat, the following morning. It is 11 am. Michael, in shirtsleeves, is sitting at the table over a cup of coffee, a cigarette, and a journal. There is a knock at the door.*

MICHAEL: Come in.

*Martin enters, wearing hat and overcoat. Michael stiffens and puts out his cigarette, then stands as Martin closes the door behind him and looks round the flat.*

MARTIN: It's not as grand as I'd imagined. Not really a flat at all. Just an overblown bed-sit. *He studies the nude.*

MICHAEL: Do you want to take your coat off?

*Martin removes his hat and coat, and hands them to Michael without looking at him.*

MARTIN: I take it she's here for aesthetic reasons.

*Michael hangs up the hat and coat, while Martin turns his attention to the bed.*

MICHAEL: I've just made some coffee if you'd like some.

MARTIN: No, thank you.

*He continues to gaze at the bed.*

MICHAEL: You've come to talk, I presume.

*Now Martin looks at him, then sits in one of the armchairs.*

MARTIN: I've actually come to kill you.

*Pause.*

MICHAEL: Do you mind if I finish my coffee first?

MARTIN: No, if you can swallow it.

*Michael returns to the table.*

MICHAEL: I've already said I'm sorry for what's happened.

MARTIN: I imagine you are.

MICHAEL: Only it's difficult to consider the feelings of people you don't know.

MARTIN: Hence the Holocaust.

MICHAEL: Dorothy came here of her own accord!

MARTIN: But she did not come uninvited.

MICHAEL: With the greatest respect in the world, it's not my fault that the marriage failed.

MARTIN: The greatest respect in the world. What a magnificent phrase! How tellingly you choose your words.

MICHAEL: Regardless of your sarcasm, the fact remains that your marriage had already failed, and I'm not responsible for that.

MARTIN: A remarkable argument. You dropped your wallet, so it's not my fault if I pinched the contents.

MICHAEL: Dorothy is not a piece of property, and she's old enough to take her own decisions.

MARTIN: Dorothy loved you.

MICHAEL: I made no promises. That was clear from the outset. We agreed there was no commitment for either of us.

MARTIN: Of course not. There's always agreement when one party's determined and the other hopeful. Half of English literature is based on such agreements. Though not perhaps the half that you and I would care to associate with.

MICHAEL: Dorothy came to me because she was sick of you, and if this brings out unpleasant facts you weren't aware of, it really isn't my concern.

MARTIN: You roll by on the other side of the bed.

MICHAEL: You don't expect me to bind your wounds, do you?

MARTIN: I think we have our lines crossed. I'm talking about Dorothy.

MICHAEL: So am I.

MARTIN: No, you're talking about our marriage.

MICHAEL: It's the same thing.

MARTIN: Oh no. Dorothy the wife is my concern, but Dorothy the woman in love is yours.

MICHAEL: Are you telling me now to marry her?

MARTIN: No, that's out of the question.

MICHAEL: Then why have you come?

MARTIN: I've told you.

*He takes his gun out and lays it on the arm of the chair.*

I should have killed you last night.

MICHAEL: I don't believe you, and I'm not playing your game.

MARTIN: Then why have I come?

MICHAEL: To indulge in some sadistic fantasy, I suppose. If you were mad enough to kill me, you wouldn't sit and talk about it.

MARTIN: Perhaps I want some information. Perhaps I want you to suffer. That's two reasons for you.

MICHAEL: What do you want to know?

MARTIN: But the sooner you tell me, the sooner you die. The Scheherezade syndrome.

MICHAEL: I still don't believe you.

MARTIN: It doesn't really matter what you believe. Que sera, sera.

MICHAEL: Games and more games. If your house caught fire, you'd be burnt to death explaining the glow.

MARTIN: I suppose deep down I believe that everything is a game. The only view of God I've ever been able to accept is that of the divine spectator –the supreme televiewer who switched on the set and now watches programme after programme. Do you never have a feeling of unreality?

MICHAEL: Rarely.

MARTIN: I have it nearly all the time. I suppose it's because I've lost my spontaneity. I feel as if I were acting the role of myself.

MICHAEL: May I ask what role of yourself you're acting now?

MARTIN: You're impertinent. And ignorant. What you haven't understood is that the game is the reality. The only difference between us is that I know it, and you don't.

MICHAEL: And that, no doubt, is why you're a professor and I'm only a lecturer.

MARTIN: You seem to be gaining unduly in assurance. I feel the temptation God must feel when an atheist says: "God, if you exist, strike me dead." You're too smug, Palmer. I think I disliked you for that even before I knew anything else about you. The confidence. The air of ownership.

MICHAEL: I'm not smug. But I'm not going to grovel just because you're acting God.

MARTIN: Do you believe in God?

MICHAEL: I don't disbelieve.

MARTIN: If you believed, you'd go down on your knees in terror.

MICHAEL: I should prefer to kneel for love.

MARTIN (*mildly surprised*): Perhaps we have something in common after all. I've always found it odd that God orders us to love him, and threatens to punish us if we don't. If I'd threatened Dorothy, she'd have despised me. Everyone knows love can't be born of fear. If there's no love, one's only hope is to be lovable, not terrible.

MICHAEL: Perhaps you'd better shoot me before we start liking each other.

MARTIN: Oh there's no danger of that. Too much kindling. Too smug, Palmer. Too proprietorial.

MICHAEL: You're entitled to your opinion.

MARTIN: How do you see yourself, then?

MICHAEL: Not as you see me.

MARTIN: That's how you don't see yourself. So put me right.

MICHAEL: I'm reasonably well balanced. I believe life exists outside books. I try not to hurt people.

MARTIN: Is that all? Most of us can talk for hours about ourselves, and all you can come up with is well-balanced, alive and non-toxic. You might as well be a bowl of yoghurt.

MICHAEL: Why don't you educate me, then? Show me how a self-portrait should be drawn.

MARTIN: There's a challenge. All right. I'm a doting husband in fairly advanced middle age. I'm insecure. I'm so bound up in my work that I sometimes confuse fact and fiction. I'm self-analytical to the point of absurdity. I'm deeply emotional, though I disguise it. I think well of people, and am hurt when they let me down. I have unknown depths of suspicion and spite, which I am only now discovering. You want me to go on?

MICHAEL: It depends what other ways you have of passing my time.

MARTIN: I have other topics of conversation, if that's what you want. Did you know, for instance, that Dorothy was pregnant?

*This shocks Michael.*

MICHAEL: Is it true?

MARTIN: I only have her word for it, but that's good enough for me.

MICHAEL: My God!

MARTIN: And your sperm.

MICHAEL: How the hell did that happen?

MARTIN: Ask your mother.

MICHAEL: We always took precautions.

MARTIN: Perhaps you're not so conversant with French Literature as you are with English.

MICHAEL: I find your jokes objectionable.

MARTIN: My wife finds them pathetic. I had noticed your inability to laugh. It's a flaw you forgot to mention in your self-portrait.

MICHAEL: This is another of your games, isn't it?

MARTIN: No. I swear to you on the grave of my marriage that this is not a game.

MICHAEL: Is she going to keep the baby?

*Pause, as Martin reflects.*

MARTIN: No. Does that relieve you?

MICHAEL: Maybe.

MARTIN: If so, your relief will be short-lived.

MICHAEL: What do you mean?

MARTIN: I haven't told you the reason for termination.

MICHAEL: Well?

MARTIN: All in good time. There are things I need to know first. Genesis Chapter One: did you pull, or did Dorothy push?

MICHAEL: You know yourself that relationships are two-way. Why don't you ask Dorothy?

MARTIN: I have. But you know yourself that relationships are two-way, and so I'm asking you. When did you first realize that the professor's wife was beddable?

MICHAEL: I don't see the point of this conversation.

MARTIN (*vehemently*): Must you always see the point? What's the point of teaching students literature, what's the point of sex without conception, what's the point of living? Did you ask Dorothy the point of starting an affair that would lead nowhere? Do you lie down and die because God hasn't told you what you're living for? I want to know what happened between you and my wife because I don't like unanswered questions. I like to fill in the blanks. This is my life, and I want to know how it's been ruined.

MICHAEL: All right. It never occurred to me that Dorothy was... available until I met her one day in town. You were away. She seemed eager to chat, and it was lunchtime, so I invited her to a restaurant.

MARTIN: And when did her... availability occur to you - in the street, in the restaurant?

MICHAEL: When she accepted my invitation.

MARTIN: Do you automatically categorize women into those you can and those you can't?

MICHAEL: There are also those I don't want to.

MARTIN: Of course. There must be limits. Otherwise you'd never have time for your reading. Was my little fish an easy catch?

MICHAEL: I don't think I have to answer that question.

MARTIN: Your discretion is touching. It would have been kinder if you'd said no.

MICHAEL: You want me to lie?

MARTIN: You had no difficulty last night. But then you were helping yourself. Why should you help me? So she accepted, and you wound her in reel by reel. A cup of coffee in "the flat"... a guided tour of the wallpaper... the conversation turns to...poetry, perhaps. A sheaf of papers from the drawer, a startling image, a tremor in the voice...and suddenly the vital spark that leaps

'twixt man and woman, setting fire to their bodies and welding their souls. I should like to hear some of your body-lighting, soul-melting poetry, Palmer - the word-music that drew Dorothy's heart from her breast and her knickers from her buttocks.

MICHAEL: Oh for Christ's sake!

MARTIN: This is keeping you alive, Palmer. And when I tell you what's happened to your embryonic son, you'll wish you could read me your poems till kingdom come. Besides, I'll be happy to give you an informed judgment of your work, and if it's any good - no promises, mind.. .but I do have some contacts. This could be the start of something big - as no doubt you informed Dorothy. Don't be shy, Michael dear. Imagine that I'm an available first-year undergraduette.

MICHAEL: My imagination can't stretch that far.

MARTIN: Then imagine that I'm an insanely jealous professor who will shoot you if you don't read out one of your poems.

*Michael goes to his desk and pulls out a stiff-covered exercise-book.*

Go and sit on the bed.

*Michael sits on the bed.*

Now read.

MICHAEL (*reading:*) "Firefly,  
Since you and I  
Both know not why  
We briefly glow and then forever die,  
I love your flight  
And know that you are right  
To give your light  
And ask no questions of surrounding night."

MARTIN: It rhymes!

MICHAEL: You're very perceptive.

MARTIN: Oh, don't misunderstand me. I was expecting something a little more esoteric, that's all. It's not even post-modern, is it? More like antediluvian. But very sweet - charmingly seductive. And so subtle. Most of us would have come out with the old clichés: Had we but world enough and time, gather ye rosebuds, make hay while the sun shines, Nelly, glow little glow-worm, glow, but Michael Palmer grasps language by the nipple and squeezes forth the milk of sheer poetry. One thing did disturb me slightly - "I know that you are right..." How did it go?

MICHAEL: "To give your light  
And ask no questions of surrounding night."

MARTIN: Although I have, to use your immortal phrase, the greatest respect in the world for your cognitive faculties, how the hell do you know?

MICHAEL: Know what?

MARTIN: That the firefly asks no questions. Have you ever seen fireflies? They dance in the night, quite frantically, as if desperately searching for something. How do you know that their dance isn't one long question of surrounding night, one long, panic-stricken quest for light in their impenetrable darkness. Like mine.

MICHAEL: Maybe.

MARTIN: Put your poetry book away, Michael, if you can scrape it off your hands.

*Michael goes to his desk and puts the book away. He remains there as Martin stands and slowly circles the room.*

I have one more question to ask you. Then I shall show your eyes, grieve your heart, shoot your shadow, so depart. My question, I must confess, is unbearably banal, but I have neither wit, nor

words, nor worth, action nor utterance, nor the power of speech, to stir men's blood. What did Dorothy say about me?

MICHAEL: You really are pathetic.

MARTIN: I agree. But I want to know.

MICHAEL: We didn't talk about you. We had other subjects of conversation.

MARTIN: If indeed conversation was necessary. No, I hadn't imagined you whipping off your trousers and then saying: "Wait a minute, let's talk about old Martin." But in the intervals - you know, where it says 'End of Part One' - surely there was an occasional reference.

MICHAEL: She found you boring, self-centred, and...old.

MARTIN: Oh! Once I was fascinating, self-assured, and...mature. Change and decay.

MICHAEL: You're also hopeless in bed. You do a lot of pawing, but when it comes to basics, you flake out.

MARTIN: I see. No redeeming qualities?

MICHAEL: Such as?

MARTIN: You didn't need prompting on the negatives. Surely you can remember the positives.

MICHAEL: You're not mean.

MARTIN: A positive negative. It's better than nothing. What else?

MICHAEL: It's all that's left in the barrel.

*Martin stands, gazing to the front. He shakes his head.*

MARTIN: After ten years.

MICHAEL: You did ask.

MARTIN: Yes.

*Pause.*

"Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean,  
Tears from the depths of some divine despair  
Rise in the heart, and gather to the eyes,  
In looking on the happy Autumn fields,  
And thinking of the days that are no more."

*Another pause.*

Sit down. Go on, sit down.

*Michael sits.*

You take too much pleasure in destruction. Or maybe I'm getting old. Young people always seem to be on the attack, pulling down what we've built up...

MICHAEL: I never attacked you.

MARTIN: Don't interrupt. Listen and learn. You see the faults in a structure, so you pull it down and build a new one to rectify the faults. But every structure has its faults, and yours will be no exception. If my house is square, it lacks roundness, and if you build a round house, it'll lack corners. Only God is faultless, until you try to define him. My marriage had its faults. So for boredom you substituted pleasure, poetry for self-centredness, youth for age, and no doubt Dorothy glowed in the night. But it was an illusion, as ephemeral as fashion. My boredom was bearable. Your desertion was not.

MICHAEL: You can't call it desertion.

MARTIN: Didn't you know she was in love with you? Didn't you know she wanted to live with you and have your child?

MICHAEL: I didn't know about the child.

MARTIN: Would it have made any difference? *(No response.)* Dorothy was a virgin when I married her. You were only the second man in her life.

MICHAEL: I've said I'm sorry.

MARTIN: Yes, but there's one thing more you must know. One level which the poet-architect couldn't have expected when he ripped down the old building. Dorothy died this morning.



*Pause.*

MICHAEL: Oh God! Is this true?

MARTIN: Yes.

MICHAEL: She can't...What happened?

MARTIN: What happened? She fell in love with a poet, that's what happened!

MICHAEL: I meant, how did...

MARTIN: I know what you meant. She took an overdose in the night. We slept in separate rooms, and when she didn't come down this morning, I looked in, and there was something strange about her breathing. Then I saw this empty medicine bottle beside the bed...

*He has difficulty in continuing.*

I carried her downstairs, and got her into the car, but by the time I reached the hospital, she was dead. There'll have to be a post-mortem, of course. They'll cut her open, take her to pieces...

MICHAEL: It was an affair!

MARTIN: For you!

MICHAEL: We agreed right from the start.

MARTIN: If you think love is controllable, you're as naive as your poetry. You might as well tell her to stop loving you as tell me to stop loving her.

MICHAEL: I understand why you want to kill me. I'd probably feel the same.

MARTIN: I doubt it. I doubt if you could love that much.

MICHAEL: I do have feelings.

MARTIN: Only for yourself.

MICHAEL: I did love Dorothy.

MARTIN: As you love Kate Marsden? Emma Brown?

MICHAEL: Christ!

MARTIN: Never mind, Michael, poets thrive on pain, don't they? You'll be able to distil this suffering into a drop of perfect imagery, and make it all worthwhile. Then future generations will pity you in the name of Dorothy.

MICHAEL: I don't believe this is happening.

MARTIN: No, one moves from one level to another, and it's hard to adjust. I myself cannot conceive that the end is the end. I know it, and yet I can't believe it.

MICHAEL: She never recovered consciousness?

MARTIN: No.

MICHAEL: Did she leave a note?

MARTIN: As in the best novels? No. When someone's world explodes, what should they write?

"Dear Martin, I'm about to kill myself. Please cancel the milk and give my love to Michael.

Yours sincerely..." Perhaps it would be different for a poet. Penning the final masterpiece - after three rough copies. But being a poet, you'd probably bungle it anyway. End up in hospital with an upset stomach.

MICHAEL: What happened when I left last night?

MARTIN: She disintegrated.

MICHAEL: In what way?

MARTIN: Collapsed, broke down, fell apart.

MICHAEL: Dorothy wasn't like that!

MARTIN: How do you know what she was like? Do you think she'd have shown you her real feelings, knowing about your "agreement", knowing you'd run like Samuel at the first sniff of meaning? In a thousand years she wouldn't have broken down in front of you. No, that was my privilege.

MICHAEL: When did she tell you she was pregnant?

MARTIN: It all came out in the flood.

MICHAEL: What did she say?

MARTIN: Her exact words? "I'm pregnant." Simple, straightforward prose.

MICHAEL: What else did she say?

MARTIN: Ah! I'm beginning to understand. There's something you want to know, isn't there?  
*Michael watches him, but says nothing.*

Why don't you come out with it? I'd like to hear how you formulate the question I had so much trouble with.

MICHAEL: All right. What did she say about me?

MARTIN: I won't call you pathetic, since you arouse neither pity nor sorrow.

MICHAEL: It's impossible to hold a normal conversation with you!

MARTIN: How do you hold a normal conversation in an abnormal situation? What should be the normal dialogue when a husband talks with his wife's lover about her suicide? Now you want to know what she said about you. And you're hoping to hear words that will relieve you of your guilt. Perhaps she said: "It's not Michael's fault." Or: "Don't blame Michael. I broke our agreement." Or: "Ask Michael to forgive me." Is that what you want?

*Again Michael watches without speaking.*

Of course it is. The Pontius Pilate Palmer complex. I'm sorry, Michael, I can't recall a single phrase that would lift the cross from your shoulders. All she could say was: "I've lost him! I've lost him!" over and over again.

*Pause.*

MICHAEL: Are you going to kill me?

MARTIN: I don't know. I came here with that intention, but now when I look at you, I wonder if you're worth it.

MICHAEL: Well make up your mind. Either do it or get out, because I can't stand your presence any more.

MARTIN: You can't dictate to me. Get me a drink, and then I'll decide.

MICHAEL: What do you want?

MARTIN: Whisky.

*Michael goes to his drinks cupboard and pours a whisky. He brings it across to Martin, who covers him with the gun.*

Power does indeed corrupt. This weapon gives me delusions of divinity. Your life is in my hands.

MICHAEL: What's the point of killing me?

MARTIN: Oh, we're scoring points again, are we?

MICHAEL: It wouldn't bring Dorothy back, and you'd spend the rest of your life in prison.

MARTIN: You don't think I'd survive you, do you?

*Michael stares at him.*

You've understood nothing. When I married Dorothy, I was already middle-aged. I'd spent my adult life between academic walls, immersed in books and theories. Suddenly into my world came this young and vibrant reality that was champagne supplanting my lemonade. Do you think I can go back to a lemonade life?

MICHAEL: You're serious, aren't you?

MARTIN: I take my wife's death seriously, and my own. But your death, Michael, is merely a game. Partly agonistic, partly aleatory, and wholly immaterial.

*There is a knock at the door.*

MICHAEL: There's someone at the door.

MARTIN: Tell them to go away.

*The door opens and Dorothy comes in. She is wearing a coat.*

DOROTHY (as she enters:) Michael?

*All three are stunned into momentary silence.*

MICHAEL: My God!

DOROTHY: I didn't know you'd be here, Martin.

MARTIN: No, of course not.

MICHAEL: You bastard! Christ, you damn bastard! *(To Dorothy:)* He said you were dead!

MARTIN: I am the Resurrection and the Life. .

MICHAEL: He said you'd taken an overdose.

DOROTHY: Well I'm not dead.

MARTIN: He's noticed.

DOROTHY *(seeing the gun:)* What are you doing with that?

MARTIN: Playing games with your lover.

MICHAEL: I ought to kill you!

MARTIN: Role reversal.

DOROTHY: I came to say goodbye. *(To Martin:)* I left a note for you.

MARTIN *(To Michael:)* There you are, she did leave a note. *(To Dorothy:)* I know. I found it when I got up this morning. I thought you'd be halfway to Manchester by now.

DOROTHY: There were things to do.

MARTIN: Things to do, people to see, And nothing left of you and me.

DOROTHY: I wouldn't have come if I'd known you were here.

MICHAEL: I want to know why the hell you came here and told me those bloody lies!

MARTIN: Forgive me, forgive me, both of you. I'd seen myself as a man more sinn'd against than sinning, but no, I was wrong. A man in my situation has no right to feel injured, to harbour thoughts of revenge, to hate the damned serpent in his Eden. No, I should merely have woken from my drugged stupor, read and digested my wife's farewell letter, and eaten my porridge.

*(Pause. Calmer:)* When I read your letter, I didn't know what to do. I thought of following you to Manchester, but you'd have found that despicable. So I came here to perform an act of despumation.

DOROTHY: I'm leaving.

MARTIN: No. You don't have to go to Manchester. I'll move out, and you stay in the house...

DOROTHY: I can't even stay in this town. You've read my letter, haven't you? I'll stay with Jackie until I've sorted out my life. *(To Michael:)* Jackie's my sister.

MICHAEL: Dot, there's something I've got to know. Is it true that you're pregnant?

DOROTHY: Oh! Why did you tell him that?

MARTIN: It seemed a pity that he should play the game and not know the result.

DOROTHY: You shouldn't have told him!

MICHAEL: I have a right to know.

DOROTHY: Why?

MICHAEL: If I'm the child's father...

DOROTHY: You are.

MICHAEL: Then I have certain responsibilities.

DOROTHY: I don't expect anything of you. I don't want anything of you.

MICHAEL: It'll be my child! Jesus!

DOROTHY: You would have forgotten me, so you can forget the child.

MICHAEL: How can I?

DOROTHY: I was ready to come with you last night, and you didn't want me. Are you telling me now that you want both me and a child you never dreamt of having?

*Pause, as Michael wrestles with new concepts.*

MICHAEL: There's maintenance...

DOROTHY: I don't want your money. Martin will give me money.

MARTIN: Will I? Yes, I suppose I will. After all, I'm not mean.

MICHAEL: Dot, you've got to give me time to think about all this. I can't make decisions on the spot...

DOROTHY: You decided last night.

MICHAEL: Last night there was a maniac pointing a gun at my head.

MARTIN: The maniac said take her or leave her, so you left her. You even said you'd look for another post. I distinctly recall wondering what sort of reference I would give you. At least I could recommend your fertility.

DOROTHY: Michael, I came to say goodbye. If you really want to help me, then forget you ever knew me.

MARTIN: And forget your child, too, Michael. Banish those niggling questions that will haunt you ten, twenty, thirty years from now.

MICHAEL: You've got nothing to gloat over! Your conscience won't sleep either!

MARTIN: Avenge, O Lord, thy slaughtered saints! Who's gloating, you smug, remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless, mindless villain? Does a drowning man gloat at a shipwreck?

DOROTHY: Martin, I'm sorry for what's happened..

MICHAEL: Don't waste your sympathy on him! He's still playing his games! He described your death down to the last detail! He was going to kill me in revenge for your suicide. He'll do anything for a winning hand!

MARTIN: Yes, I will. I'll clutch even at the short straw. But don't believe for one minute that my games are mimicry. My games are the thing itself. Life - yours and mine. And Dorothy's going to spin the wheel for us, to decide whether we live or die. (*To Dorothy:*) I won't let you go. You'll stay in the house, and I'll move out. You can impose any terms you like, but you'll stay. Otherwise, I shall kill him and myself.

*Pause, as she looks at him and tries to read him.*

DOROTHY: Don't do this to me, Martin.

MICHAEL: He's bluffing.

MARTIN: You want her to go?

MICHAEL: I don't want her to give in to your bluff!

MARTIN: Think, man. If she stays, we can help her. If she goes, it's the end of the game.

DOROTHY: Martin, I can't stay. I can't bear to stay!

MARTIN: Then go.

DOROTHY: You won't...do anything?

MARTIN: I didn't say that.

DOROTHY: But what's the point in killing Michael or yourself?

MARTIN: The point! We always fall on the painful point. Well, what is the point in him and me living on? Tell me! Convert me!

DOROTHY: I can't lecture you.

MARTIN: Why not? You're a human being, like me, fulfilling the human condition. Your philosophy is as valid as mine. I can see the point in your going on. Inside you is someone who may know all the answers and lead mankind to the promised land. But for me? And him? A flaked-out professor and a lecherous lecturer?

DOROTHY: Will you be any less flaked-out if I stay?

MARTIN: Yes!

DOROTHY: And what right do you have even to threaten Michael's life? Our marriage was over long before I met him. Martin, if you love me, you'll let me go.

MARTIN: I do love you, and I will let you go. But he and I are the price.

DOROTHY: Why?

MARTIN: Because the end has to be the end.

MICHAEL: Dot, he's playing! Can't you see? It's what he calls ilinx - he'll shatter every rule rather than let you beat him!

MARTIN: You decide, Dorothy.

DOROTHY: How can you be so cruel?

MICHAEL: Don't let him win!

MARTIN: I see it differently. If you stay, I have hope. If you go, I have nothing.

MICHAEL: He'll do anything to win! Lie, cheat, threaten...

DOROTHY: Then maybe he'll kill,

MARTIN: You're out of your depth, Palmer. Though otherwise, we're two of a kind, lying, cheating...

MICHAEL: I haven't lied!

MARTIN: Oh, forgive me. I thought you told Dorothy you loved her.

MICHAEL: I did love her! I do love her.

MARTIN: In one sense of the word or another. The difference between you and me is motive. You love for pleasure, and I love for survival. I think that puts me one link above you in the old lavatory chain of being. Dorothy, you have a decision to make. Will you end the game, or shall I?

MICHAEL: He won't do it.

DOROTHY: Please, Martin!

MICHAEL: Suppose I took the gun from him?

MARTIN: Ah! A new twist. The hero takes command. Will you do it with a sudden lunge, or with ice-cool deliberation?

*Michael confronts Martin.*

MICHAEL: I'm going to take it.

*Martin points the gun straight at him.*

MARTIN: Should he, Dorothy?

DOROTHY: Don't, Michael.

*Michael stands still. He is not yet within reach of the gun.*

MARTIN: Head or heart, Michael? I promise a clean kill with either.

DOROTHY: Michael, don't try it

MARTIN: To lunge or not to lunge, that is the question. Methinks your native hue of resolution is getting sicklied o'er. Let's switch the line of attack, shall we?

*He rises abruptly from the chair, startling the others.*

Liven the game up. Go and sit at the table, Michael. Go on.

*He takes a step forward, and Michael retreats.*

DOROTHY: Do as he says, Michael.

MARTIN: Possible bluff against possible bluff. Sit down.

*Michael sits at the table. Martin stands behind him.*

DOROTHY: Martin, what are you going to do?

*Martin holds the gun against the back of Michael's head.*

MARTIN: Now sit very still. I know it's against your hero's instincts to remain passive, but the better part of valour and so forth. I shall count to ten, and then I shall do something quite unexpected. But you must sit still - we don't want any accidents. Ready? One, two, three, four, five...

DOROTHY: Martin!

MARTIN: Sh! Six, seven, eight, nine...

*A sharp intake of breath from Dorothy.*

Ten. Bang! There.

*He puts the gun down on the table. The tension subsides.*

The gun is yours. You did well - scarcely flinched. Or were you paralysed?

MICHAEL: You bastard.

MARTIN: A bastard if I shoot, and a bastard if I don't shoot. How shall I ever legitimize myself?

MICHAEL: I presume it's not even loaded.

*He picks up the gun.*

Oh!

MARTIN: There should still be five bullets in there.

*Michael looks from the gun to Martin.*

Your face, my Thane, is as a book, where men may read strange matters. Why has the husband given the gun to the lover? Help him, Dorothy. My one weapon, the last remaining claim to respect, and I place it in his grasp. What does it mean?

DOROTHY: You'll let me go.

MARTIN: I could never stop you.

MICHAEL: He just wanted to make us squirm first. It's his idea of fun.

MARTIN: You seem to be regaining confidence. If only you could stop trembling, you might even take command now.

DOROTHY: Can I go?

MARTIN: If you don't mind us dying.

DOROTHY: But I thought...

MARTIN: Oh, I'm sorry, you thought you had the right answer! Forgive me, I should have made it clear. You did not solve the riddle in one.

*Silence. Martin looks from one to the other.*

I don't think this game will ever catch on.

MICHAEL: It doesn't matter anyway. I've got the gun. You can go, Dot.

MARTIN: And of course you want her to go.

MICHAEL: She wants to go.

MARTIN: And you won't stand in her way. Even if it means your death. Admirable. I wish you wouldn't call her Dot, though. She's not a blob.

MICHAEL (*to Dorothy*): Just go!

*Dorothy gazes at Martin.*

MARTIN: She can't go, Michael. She's far too intelligent to go without knowing the answer.

DOROTHY: What are you planning?

MICHAEL: It doesn't matter what he's planning!

MARTIN: Why did I give him the gun? Answer that, and I'll let him live. There's an offer.

DOROTHY: You want him to shoot you.

MARTIN: Oh Dorothy, you cut through me like a rapier. I thought of it, I must confess. But he could never do it. Even if I rubbed him raw. To kill a Brutus, you require...Now there's a tester for you, Palmer. Who killed Brutus?

MICHAEL: Lucius.

MARTIN; Wrong. Strato. And who killed Cassius? (*No response.*) Pindarus. No-one ever remembers the little people. So who will remember us? The light gleams an instant, then it's night once more. What a waste of bodies. Your reasoning, dear wife, is flawed. If he killed me, how could I kill him? (*To Michael*;) Why did I give you the gun?

MICHAEL: Maybe you've got another in your pocket.

MARTIN: A wild, melodramatic guess, and quite wrong.

*Michael suddenly stands and points the gun at Martin.*

MICHAEL: This is absurd. The game's over.

MARTIN: Catch.

MICHAEL: What?

MARTIN: The safety catch is still on.

*With a grimace, Michael releases it.*

He who bluffs should never show his hand.

MICHAEL: You've still lost this game.

MARTIN: Have I?

DOROTHY: He said he'd kill you.

MICHAEL: He can't! I've got the gun.

MARTIN: And there you have the solution. In the empty space, the no-thing, the structured blank between those points, lies the answer to my question. (Pause.) And still the penny hangs.

MICHAEL: Dot, go!

DOROTHY: I can't go.

MARTIN: So you've lost. Sit down, then, and I'll enlighten you.

DOROTHY: Sit down, Michael.

*He sits down.*

MARTIN: Your Royal Highnesses, ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, here again we have an example of man's inability to comprehend without forming patterns. But now we go one step further in the process. We have proved that when a pattern is formed, the mind unconsciously adapts new information to make it fit, even going so far as to reject information which it cannot adapt. Obvious instances of this process are racial and national prejudice. Religious faith follows the same schema, for whence cometh evil? You know the argument: if God created all things and is all powerful, then he can't be all good; and if he's all good, then he can't be all powerful. But the pattern is of omnipotent all-goodness, so let's talk about the weather. Thus prejudice and faith walk hand in hand through the night. Now then, to business. I threaten to kill Michael. I have a gun. I give the gun to Michael. Why?

DOROTHY: You'll kill him some other way.

MARTIN: Correct.

MICHAEL: I see.

MARTIN: It's simple once you remove the threads of your own sewing.

MICHAEL: It doesn't explain why you gave me the gun.

MARTIN: Ah, now there's nothing in the eye of the needle. You wanted the gun because you thought that would change the situation. The focal point of your thinking became the gun instead of the killing, and so you foregrounded what should have been background. I gave you the gun as a demonstration.

MICHAEL: Demonstrating, presumably, your cleverness and my stupidity.

MARTIN: Presumably.

DOROTHY: I don't know why I ever allowed my life to be soiled by people like you! You use us!

MARTIN: No!

DOROTHY: Yes you do. You've always used me for demonstration. Something small to show off your greatness. And attend to your domestic comforts. (*To Michael:*) And you used me for gratification.

MICHAEL: That's not true.

DOROTHY: Neither of you knows the meaning of love.

MARTIN: Dorothy, I do love you. I know my voice doesn't ring with passion, and I can't fling myself at your feet, but I love you and I beg you not to leave me.

DOROTHY: Perhaps you think you do, but your idea of love isn't mine.

MARTIN: Give me the words!

DOROTHY: There are no words. We don't speak the same language.

MARTIN (*gesturing helplessly:*) Michael, do you understand what's going on here?

MICHAEL: You're not asking me for help, are you?

MARTIN: Does nobody understand? Do I understand?

DOROTHY: I'd like to go now. (*To Martin:*) I'll write to you.

*She takes a small packet out of her handbag, and gives it to Michael.*

These are yours. And I'd like mine back, please.

*Michael goes to his desk, but has some trouble locating the letters, which are scattered. He gathers them.*

MICHAEL: I think that's all of them.

*He hands them over.*

MARTIN: Do you have money?

DOROTHY: Yes.

MARTIN: In any case, everything's in our joint names.

DOROTHY: And Michael?

MARTIN: No, he's not in our joint names. You have him all to yourself.

DOROTHY: You won't harm him?

MARTIN: Our fallen rising star? Is he still worth saving? Then I won't harm him. I'll leave him free not to enjoy the fruits of your labours. I'm sorry, that was tasteless and clumsy. Live, Michael Palmer, live and write poems to delight the hearts of lovers and the minds of professors.

DOROTHY: Goodbye, Michael.

MICHAEL: I'm sorry, Dot.

DOROTHY: Martin...

MARTIN: No, no, this you can't do. At least allow me to leave before you. Make me that one concession.

DOROTHY: All right.

MARTIN: My hat and coat, Michael, please.

*Michael fetches them.*

After all, you hadn't expected to find me here, had you? Let us pretend that you didn't. Let us pretend that you never found me anywhere.

*Michael helps him on with his coat.*

We shall make a gentleman of you yet, Michael - or at least a gentleman's gentleman.

*He stands before Dorothy.*

And there we are. I search for the bon mot.

DOROTHY: There's no need.

MARTIN: No, but I should like to leave you with some ringing phrase. Farewell! thou art too dear for my possessing, And like enough thou know'st thy estimate: The charter of thy worth gives thee releasing; My bonds in thee are all determinate. Whatever that means. And for you, Palmer, what parting shot can I fire? None. It's not worth the effort.

*He picks up the gun from the table.*

You won't be needing this. *(To Dorothy:)* I shan't kiss you. I don't want to flake out before I reach the door.

*He goes to the door, but stops and turns.*

I do hate losing. But I lose with panache.

*He puts the gun in his mouth. Dorothy screams as he fires. Blood spurts all over the door as he falls.*

*Curtain.*

**THE END**