

LOCKE, LOST:

THE LESSON OF THE ITALIANS

An Homage to Ruth Draper and Her Darlings

by Robert Locke

© May 20, 2010 rev. 3/13/13 ☺

Bob is alone on stage, no set of any kind except for a comfortable chair. Bob is wearing a jacket, stripes of many colors, mostly primary colors. All props are pantomimed except for one: a coffee-stained notebook, much used and abused, dog-eared, underlined, with various colors of ink, Bob's "talking points" to which he refers at times.

All characters brought onstage by Bob are in the audience's imagination.

Bob puts an imaginary telephone receiver to his ear and punches in a phone number on the desk-set.

BOB

Hey, Ray, it's Bob, got an hour or so to talk? Why, what are you doing? Oh, that's not important, it can wait. Listen, I've got—now, Ray, do not roll your eyes at me; do you think I can't hear that?—listen, I've got Diana on the line and—

(presses button on desk set to go onto three-way speakerphone and hangs up the receiver)

Can you hear us, Diana? Good, ...and we're all going to talk on speakerphone. Say hello sweetly to each other and—now you two behave! None of that! And you've got your recorder working, Diana? Good, and—no, Ray, the recorder is for me, I can't imagine what you might say that would be worth recording ... and, uh, I don't mean that in any kind of ... negative way. And here in my hand I've got my, um, whadyacall'em, my um, talking points, and it says in big print, red ink, "Talking Points", so this time I can't go off-course and, um, don't worry about the coffee stains, I

can read right through them, and besides Diana is on hand to help, right Diana? You'll be alert and bring me back if I start to go off on one of my tangents? Good, I'm counting on you now, so just jump in at the first sign.

And listen, Ray, I want you to just consider this a regular producer's audition for my new play, and forget about all the favors I've done for you through the years, all of my plays that I allowed you to put on, waiving my royalties, not even one thin dime, forget about that, don't let all of those old debts—and all the times I've come down to work on your sets, and pulling splinters from my fingers, don't even begin to think—Oh, right, Diana, right, tangent.

(under his breath)

Haven't even started and she says I'm off on a tangent. Where are my talking points?—yes, here we go, so, listen, Ray, about this new play, first of all, I want you to know that everything is working perfectly, just as though there really *WERE* a god. But at first, well when I got that email, I can't tell you how sick it made me, I mean physically sick, I went straight into the bathroom and vomited my guts out but then—

What do you mean, what email? I told you about the email, Ray. Of course I told you about the email, you are the **FIRST** person I would have told about the email.

Diana, I told **YOU** about the email, right? Maybe I didn't tell **ANYONE** about the email!

Now wait, wait, let me think. I remember I went straight into the bathroom, I vomited my guts out, oh, yes, I remember now, I was holding onto that toilet bowl like it was my closest friend, and I had my cheek pressed against the rim, that lip, so gross—no, Diana, this isn't a tangent; it's leading somewhere—and the porcelain so cool and soothing against my cheek. I stayed like that for I don't know how long, and then finally I stood up, I flushed, and the swirl, that swirl! Suddenly it all started making sense, that swirl! As the world turns, clockwise in the northern hemisphere, counter-clockwise in the southern hemisphere, "there are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy..."

...I rushed to the wash basin, splashed water over my face, cool clear water over my face and into my mouth, saw my face in the mirror, horrible, and I came right in to the computer and started typing, typing, napping, typing, and that's what I've been doing ever since and so no, Ray, you're right, I did **NOT** tell you about that email.

Ray, I got an email!

It was from that man at the Draper Company, oh he was so nice, but he said no, they wouldn't give me permission to perform *The Italian Lesson*, All that work, LOST. My homage to Ruth Draper, LOST! And I was so ... elated! ... from having just finished performing it for your little writers group in your little Threepenny Theater, and you were there, Ray, you heard. Those writers were so enthusiastic, Diana, they gave me a standing ovulation! And I was—

What, huh? Standing ovation, what did I say? (*laughs*) I didn't. Oh, but that's pretty good, "standing ovulation" I can just see it, ooooh!

(*applauding, holding legs together tightly*)

— "...that was so good, so riveting that I just had to stand up and ovulate!"

Diana, make a big note up top about that, I know exactly where I can use it. What do you mean, it's not original to me? I just said it. Well, but is it copyrighted? No, of course not because you can't copyright a phrase, and you can't copyright a title, and so I can use it, right? And I know exactly where I'll use it.

Oh, Ray, never mind about that silly email, because I have devised a plan to rectify the situation: I'm not going to DO *The Italian Lesson*. No, I'm not going to do Ruth Draper's *Italian Lesson*, and I'm not going to do Bob Locke's *Italian Lesson* either. Well, Ray, you know they're not the same! I gave you that cassette, and—and no, Ray, I did not GIVE that cassette to you, I LOANED it to you, and I want it back, but you said you listened to it, and if you really did, then you heard that Ruth Draper's version on that tape is less than half an hour, but the piece I performed for your writers group ran over an hour. And all of that extra stuff is mine, mine, and how can the Draper Company tell me that I can't perform my own stuff, and so no, I'm not doing *The Italian Lesson* any more, Ray.

What I'm doing, listen now, Ray, what I'm doing is *The Lesson of the Italians*.

No, Ray, indeed that is NOT a mere semantical change of title, that is a change of everything. *The Italian Lesson* is a little tiny swirl of a play: a woman wants to undertake an Italian lesson and she gets so distracted by everything in her life that she never gets beyond the first line of *The Divine Comedy*. *The Lesson of the Italians* is a HUGE swirl, the sweep of history!

And I can do this, Ray, anywhere. I can do it in your big theater, or in your middle sized theater, even though I hate that space, or in your little Threepenny Theater again, I can do it for an audience of one, in fact I would LOVE to do it for an audience of one because it's all just an audience of one anyway, each individual in the audience with me, our private little journey together: *(sings)* 'Vissi d'arte, vissi d'amore,' Giacomo Puccini, Ray, an Italian; 'I lived for art, I lived for love,' and this single person shared it with me. And that other Italian guy, with the funny name, uh uh Leoncavallo, Ruggero Leoncavallo, the lion roaring out from his cave and over the valley, *(sings)* 'Riti Pagliaccio!' Laugh, Clown, laugh, the lesson of the Italians, *(sings)* 'What's it all about, Alfie?' Where did THAT come from, no, Diana, no, not a tangent, I am ... connecting ...

(arm operatically straight up, making a swirl in the air, back to audience)
...the swirl... 'only connect' ... 'only connect': Forster ... *A Passage to India* ... *A Room with a View* ... 'only connect'—*A View from the Bridge* ... 'only connect'—Statue of Liberty, 'give me your poor, your muddled asses ...

(manic. moving quickly, covering the stage in an arc from SR and returning to DSL where, with his arms outstretched, he establishes the entrance for the signorina)

... the Italians on their boats ... the signorina ... oh, Signorina, I'm so glad you've arrived ...

(ushering in the imaginary signorina as she enters from DL)

...“Oh, Signorina, I'm so glad you've arrived! I can't tell you how much I've looked forward to our Italian lesson. Thank you, Nellie, that'll be all. I don't wish to be disturbed.

(leading the signorina to her imaginary seat just R of the armchair in which Bob takes his seat, describing for her the waters beyond the audience)

“Come in, Signorina. Please have a seat right beside me here, Signorina. But before we start on our Italian lesson, do please look out over the water. I've been mesmerized this morning, absolutely mesmerized, watching the early morning sunlight playing in and around the islands with the swirl of the waves, just so lovely, as though the sun is playing hide and seek with the planet. And seven hundred years ago Dante Alighieri sat beside the shore of the

Mediterranean, writing that first line to *The Divine Comedy* about his circles of Hell—‘Nel mezzo del cammin—’ and Signorina, I hope you will be diligent in helping me with my Italian accent, the cadence and lilt of the Italian, because sometimes I fear that I sound too much like Count Drackoola. ‘Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita mi ritrovai per una selva oscura que la diritta via era—’ What? That’s not the Mediterranean? Yes, of course, all around Italy, the Mediterranean Sea?

“Oh, I see, that’s one of the northern seas with its own name, well but all of those little seas connect to the Mediterranean don’t they, and so I’m just going to call it the Mediterranean, you don’t mind, do you. ‘Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita mi ritrovai per una selva oscura que la diritta—’

“Well, yes, of course I KNOW Dante was from Firenze, and Firenze IS inland, of course I do know that, but mightn’t he have come to the beach on vacation? Signorina, you are Italian, where is your romance?”

And that’s all my stuff, Ray. Well, sure Ruth Draper invented the signorina but the signorina is imaginary, elle n’existe pas except in the minds of the audience, she comes in and she sits down and the audience never hears a word she says. Yes, I do still call her the signorina, but so what? I could just as easily call her ... Sister ... Mary ... Elephant.

(rising, ushering in the signorina anew)

“Oh, Sister Mary Elephant, I’m so glad you’ve arrived! I can’t tell you how I’ve looked forward to our Italian lesson. Thank you, Nellie,”—uh let’s say Agnes— “Thank you, Agnes, that’ll be all. I don’t wish to be disturbed. Come in, Sister Mary Elephant. Please have a seat right beside me here, Sister Mary Elephant...” (ka-boom!)

My signorina is what the audience makes of her, Ray, vis a vis my character. And that’s the same with all the char— well, yes, I do use some of Ruth Draper’s names but I also make up many of my own, and in fact they are my own characters: Tonie and François and Wittsie and Mr. Wong—and I just love that sweet Mr. Wong! But, speaking of characters, Diana, two things...

(consults talking points)

... we need to come up with a name for Ruth Draper's main character, no, she never gives her a name, something regal, I think, because that woman has such a sense-of-place, To-The-Manor-Born; and the other thing is—what was the other thing again? Where are my talking points?

(consults talking points)

... oh, yes, make a note about this now, so that I don't forget, for me to discuss with myself why it is that I am calling all of my main characters "Bob" these days. Well, it was one thing for *Murder and Edna Redrum* which is palindromic, *Murder and Edna Redrum* spelled backwards is *murdeR and Edna redruM* and the whole play works palindromically and so I needed a character whose name was the same spelled backwards as forwards, b-o-b spelled backwards is b-o-b, and so that makes all the sense in the world. And with *Love, Bob* that play is autobiographical and so Bob makes sense there, too. But why have I named THIS character Bob? Is this something that happens to writers when they reach ... uh, uh ... a certain age? I think that psychologically this might be very interesting, or more likely very dull, but it seems like maybe there's a play in it?

Well, yes, tangent, tangent, Diana, just make a note, and did you come up with a name for Ruth Draper's character? Carlotta? Oh, yes, Diana! I like Carlotta. Queen Carlotta, and yes! yes! that Alfred Hitchcock movie, *Vertigo*, with the blond with the big breasts, Kim Novak, fascinated on that portrait, and the name of the woman in the portrait is Carlotta!

Oh, and how I love the swirl of the arts as the ideas flow together, 'only connect', because I'm already using that other Hitchcock movie, *Rebecca*, as my subtext for Bob and the way he relates to the servants in this house, especially Jane-the-Cook—I mean Jane-the-Cook is a mere servant! And yet she is so haughty around Bob, always putting on airs, like in *Rebecca* where, uh, uh, Dame Judith Anderson, yes, Dame Judith Anderson plays the part, and Dame Judith is so, you know, Dame Judith, and she's all, "I am the Houskeeper! I am Mrs. Danvers! And I am devoted to the memory of Rebecca, rowl,"

And Joan Fontaine is all, "Oh, oh, uh ha ha tee hee," but with Olivier, *Sir* Laurence Olivier—and what on earth could Sir Laurence Olivier possibly see in Joan

Fontaine anyway?!? but never mind that, I wasn't in on the casting, nobody asked me, oh Academy Award, my foot!. But Olivier, well Sir Larry to Dame Judith, floating above the effluvium that is Mrs. Danver's existence is Carlotta floating above the effluvium that is Jane-the-Cook, you see, Ray, it's all subtext:

(adopting an imperious tone as Carlotta)

"Jane, we shall be eight for dinner tonight, and I want a very simple little dinner."

But compare that to Bob, who has MARRIED into this wealth and INHERITED these servants, Bob is all Joan Fontaine in the presence of her servants:

(sitting, very timid)

"Uh, Jane, we shall be eight for dinner tonight, and I ... I ... I want a very simple little dinner."

Jane's going to have BOB for dinner! It's two different lines, Ray! So no, I don't got to get no stinking permision from the Draper Company to say those stinking words. And then when Bob orders the salad course—and this got a little laugh, Ray, among the writers and I heard your laugh, too, and I wasn't expecting a laugh here, so maybe you can tell me what's funny about it because I always think it's a good idea to know what's funny about what I write—

"And for the salad course, Jane, I was thinking that delicious tomato aspic that you make, and you put it in a ring on the plate? And for this crowd, Jane, I was thinking all primary colors! With blue corn tortilla chips around the outside of the red ring of tomato aspic, and in the center of the red ring, yellow, yellow crook-necked squash, yellow corn perhaps, yellow onions, and— Bananas and blueberries, Jane? Ah ha ha ha, you're pulling my leg, aren't you, Jane?"

And that nice little laugh from the audience, Ray, why do you think? Oh, because of Bob's costume?

(sees what he's wearing)

Oh, for criminy's sake, I'm still wearing Bob's costume! I wanted to save these clothes for Bob! If I wear these socks out where am I ever going to find this color yellow again?

(stops dead)

What day is it today, Diana? And what day did I perform in the Threepenny, Ray? And I haven't been home since then? Oh, I must stink!

(starts to sniff under his armpit)

No, I daren't. No, Ray, no, I'm working ... here ... I'm writing! Writers write, they come to their office and they write, when inspiration descends in a downpour like this, they write, and they take a short nap on the couch and they continue to write. They don't just stop writing and go home for the niceties of a shower, good heavens. But maybe I'd just better ... just turn my cell phone back on.

(pantomimes taking his cell phone from his pocket)

No, I turned off all the phones so that I could work undisturbed, these phones are always ringing, and what is the good of a telephone if it just keeps ringing! Oh, twenty-seven voice mails! Well, I'll just delete them and say I never got them ... which... would then be true, of course—

Ray, why are you still going on about that? Do you think I don't know what you are insinuating? And no! If I were indeed going senile, don't you think I would be the first to know it? Besides, I've decided that as long as I can still SAY Alzheimer's I can't possibly have it. But that's not the point, Ray, that's not even the point!

Diana, what is the point? Where are my talking points? No, yes, primary colors, but *The Divine Comedy*, Ray, Dante by the water, Ray, the swirl, 'Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita—' The Draper Company can't claim rights to that, I guess! Dante belongs to all of us, I guess! 'Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita mi ritrovai per una selva oscura che la diritta via era smarrita.'

'La diritta via era smarrita!' Ray. 'The direct way was LOST!' 'In the middle... of the road ... of our life ... I found myself in a dark forest because the direct way was LOST.' I couldn't find the doggone shortcut. Oh, and I just love what Ruth has Carlotta do with that first bit!

"Now let's see, Signorina: 'Nel mezzo del cammin...' that just means 'in the middle of the road', doesn't it? That's not very poetical in English, is it? But we can take certain liberties, I mean, don't translators always, take certain liberties? So that for example instead of saying 'In the middle' we could say 'Midway' and instead of saying 'of the road' we could say, 'along the

pahhhthway'? 'Midway along the pahhhthway of our life...' don't you think that sounds better, Signorina?"

Oh, and I wish I could do it as Ruth Draper does it! She's brilliant! Well, that's exactly the word Katherine Hepburn uses for her!

(using Hepburn voice)

"My God she was brilliant. What fascinated me was to see this enormously distinguished creature transform herself into a peasant... instantly."

And incidentally, Ray, I throw in that little Katherine Hepburn impersonation not just because it's so much fun to do Katherine Hepburn—although, really, it is—but to prove further that by being able to commit to memory a new quote like that...

(Hepburn voice again, bobbling head)

...senility is not encroaching, uh, uh, Ray.

But here's the thing: all of the great actors, of course, revered Ruth Draper—Sarah Bernhardt, Eleanora Duse, Ellen Terry, uh, that Englishman with the marbles in his mouth, uh, John Gielgud, Helen Hayes, the First Lady of American Theatre, indeed! And they wrote the forewords to these books—but what THEY went on and on about was what a brilliant actress Ruth Draper was, but what I admire so much is what a brilliant WRITER Ruth Draper was! She was a genius! Like right there, in the very beginning of *The Italian Lesson*, Ruth has Carlotta messing around rewriting Dante—Dante, for crimony sake, I mean it's divine!

And isn't that FAIR USE, Ray? One genius doing a variation on the work of another genius, composers do it all the time. Ruth Draper, one genius, playing off an earlier genius, Dante, and isn't that all I'm asking from the Draper Company, FAIR USE? Ruth Draper was a genius, working off Dante's genius and ... I ... I ... well, some might call me a genius, I suppose; I don't, of course, that would be immodest and, yes, yes, Diana, it would be a tangent. But Shakespeare, for example, and the way he was always borrowing—or let's just say stealing, let's just say that, because that's exactly what it was—one genius taking from another, like with this first line of Dante, "In the middle of the road of our life," you can hear how Shakespeare uses that—uh, Shakespeare did come after Dante, didn't he, Diana? yes, of course, I knew I was right about that, Shakespeare did come after Dante, and centuries later, am I right?

(sings)

'It is the echo of centuries before us, "Remember, Remember, you're not here alone..." —who wrote that?

(smites forehead)

Oh, I did! Well, it's a tune by Stephen Foster, but I wrote the lyrics, after all, so I did write it, and ... gee, maybe I really am a genius, because that's good, "the echo of centuries," and you can hear that echo of Dante's first line 'In the middle of the road of our life' resonating in that famous line from Macbeth, or was it Hamlet? I always get those two so confused:

'Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow creeps in this ... whatever, whatever ... to the last ... whatever ... of recorded time. And all our yesterdays ... uh ... etc.' Oh, who could ever forget it!

And that reminds me of something my father used to say to my mother, oh if I've heard him say it once I've heard him say it a hundred times, 'We're all just going to live and die, just like everybody else.'

(stunned)

My father was a genius.

(lost)

What am I doing here? No, Ray! No, I am not lost, I am not lost!

(brandishes his talking points)

I have my talking points, I have my roadmap, I am in Hell with Dante! Lost in those seven circles of Hell, the monsters and the dead all around us—seven circles, Diana? or eleven, was it? Nine? Only nine? What did he do, run out of ideas? And he's got Virgil with him, right? The two of them stumbling around among the monsters and the dead and—

And why Virgil? That's what we have to ask ourselves, Ray, why Virgil? Diana, make a note of that, for me to explore that question with myself, because that, Ray, is what this play is all about, that IS the lesson of the Italians! Or the beginning of it anyway, Italo-Istoria 1A!

Why Virgil? Because Virgil was centuries before Dante, wasn't he, Diana? Yet Dante has chosen Virgil to wander around Hell with because Virgil was another Italian

guy, Ancient Rome, right? Roman guy, wrote *The Aeneid*, didn't he? *The Aeneid*, Diana, I'm right, Virgil's *Aeneid*, all about ... Aeneas and wasn't Aeneas Italian, too, Diana, centuries before Virgil, wasn't he?

Oh, Aeneas was NOT Italian? Diana, is that right, what Ray says, Aeneas was NOT Italian, but Greek? Ray, ts ts ts, let Diana talk, she knows all this stuff.

Aha! So no! Aeneas was Trojan! He was NOT Greek, Ray, he was fighting AGAINST the Greeks on the side of Troy. And poor Troy, well, we all know where that went. And then Aeneas, what happened to him, Diana? ...was sold as a slave, of course, I'm sure I knew that, and put on a ship, yes, and then? The ship got swept off-course in a storm, of course, that was always happening to those old guys—and so Aeneas was LOST, yes, of course, and he ended up where... ? Italy, yes, yes! And then he founded the city that became Rome, well then Aeneas was the FIRST Italian, Ray! Honestly!

And centuries later there was Virgil stumbling around with Aeneas giving him a tour of Hades, and then centuries after that there was Dante stumbling around with Virgil in Hell, the Christian Hell, as opposed to the pagan Hades, but ALL Italians, all the way up the line to Mussolini, for criminy's sake, stumbling along after Hitler into World War II, into the very maw of Hell.

And Lauro de Bosis, has anyone even heard of Lauro de Bosis? No, but Lauro de Bosis was a genuine Italian hero before World War II, in 1931, and he was Ruth Draper's much younger Italian lover, oh I swoon, I swoon, Ruth's young Italian stud! And get this, Ruth met Lauro de Bosis on the very day that she did a command performance for Mussolini in 1927, on the day that Ruth Draper shook Mussolini's hand—imagine shaking that monster's hand! Oh, no, of course, Ray, Mussolini wasn't always a monster. When he first came into power, oh, the Italians all loved him, but by 1927 when Ruth Draper gave her command performance for him—and he roared with laughter, and she shook his hand—and that afternoon she and Lauro met, and it was love at first sight, it was spring, in Rome, and oh the romance! They saw each other every day for two weeks and became lovers. She went upcountry with him to his villa to meet his mother. He came to the theater every night to watch her perform. "Miracola!" he called her. Miracle.

But then in four short years, Mussolini clamped his vice on Italy and the whole country was in a media blackout, and Lauro even right there in the middle of it could SEE—"in the middle of the road of our life"—with his mother imprisoned for speaking out against fascism, and his best friends in prison for distributing Lauro's antifascist writings, and Lauro, fearing for his life and not daring to cross the frontier and come to the aid of his own mother, Lauro could SEE what was happening. He was in Paris with Ruth, and he bought this little airplane with money that Ruth supplied him, and he outfitted that little airplane to drop his antifascist leaflets over Rome to wake up his fellow Italians to where Mussolini was leading them, and Lauro, flying in from Marseilles but running low on gasoline, flew that little airplane so low over Rome, scattering those antifascist leaflets right into the face of Mussolini, so many that witnesses said the ground was as white as with snow, flying so low to keep under the Italian air force radar that witnesses said it looked like the little plane was climbing right up the Spanish Steps—

—and Lauro, Lauro, what happened to him after that flight? Lost. Did he make it across the sea to Corsica, his planned escape? Or, running low on gasoline, did he change his plan and head northward over the Alps to Switzerland? And meanwhile, there was Ruth in Paris, waiting waiting waiting for word. "Does my Lauro yet live?"

I've got to eat something or I'm going to faint. No, I've already checked, there's nothing here but empty cartons of Chinese take-out, look at this place, good heavens, and I keep thinking of that entire dinner menu with Jane:

"And then, Jane, for the main course, I was thinking a leg of lamb, wouldn't that just taste scrumptious. An entire leg of lamb, I could— Children! If you're going to play in here—"

And the difference, Ray! The difference between the way Carlotta treats her children and the way Bob treats them! The children are merely more of the effluvium of Carlotta's existence, which is why she says to them, "Children, I'm in the middle of an Italian lesson, go away and play, shut the door and don't come back," but Bob cherishes each of them because Bob married INTO this family:

"Children, if you're going to play in here then you must play quietly because Daddy's in the middle of an Italian lesson, say good morning nicely to

the signorina, Signorina this is Nancy, now don't pull on me like that, babe, you're going to break my back again, isn't she a precious little imp? And this is Barbara, isn't she lovely, and this is Billy, he's the skipper of the ship here, and this is the baby (*kiss, kiss, kiss, kiss*) oh, I love you all so much. Mademoiselle, could you please take the children over to that carpeted area that I've laid out on the other side of the desk—I just wish I could find a way to soundproof it—and there are all those toys over there, children, and coloring books, and Barbara, you can read from the picture books to Nancy, and Nancy, very soon you'll be able to read to the baby, and Billy, I've put some new toys over there for you, too, since you didn't like any of the other ones that I put there for you, and—no, no guns, no guns in this house, Billy, but if you must play with guns you can use your finger like this and go 'Q, Q'. That's what we boys used to do when we were kids, I was never any good at it, but you practice it, and you'll get just as good as the other boys. But don't point your finger at the baby, I don't want her frightened. And then, Jane, with the lamb I think perhaps—

Oh, I'm just famished!

“—a breast of turkey with a whole loaf of french bread and mayonnaise, and a salami, why not?, and a nice prime rib, oh, thick and juicy, and mashed potatoes and gravy, and...

(looking about through the old cartons of take-out)

Egg foo yong! I wonder if this could still be—oh, no, not even I—

(remembering where he is)

Uh... Ray? Diana? Ah, ha ha ha, caught you napping, didn't I?

And then, the children come in! No, the children are already in. And then Nellie comes in. No, Jane's in the doorway over there. And then the telephone rings! And no, Diana, this is the core, the core, the eye of the tornado, and I do not wish to be disturbed, oh, where are my talking points? And the telephone rings!

“Oh, this telephone!”

Only connect!

“This telephone! This telephone! It's always ringing! It drives me mad.

Please excuse me, Signorina, uh, Jane...

(holds up a finger to the signorina, then to Jane in the doorway)

“... I’m going to have it pulled out by the roots, hello? Oh, hi, babe, how’s your day going, I was just thinking of calling you but I’m in the middle of an Italian lesson and— Billy! Billy, get down from there! Mademoiselle, hurry! Could you hold that bookcase steady, it’s so...! It’s so ... it’s so ... unsteady, oh my God! Oh, thank you, Mademoiselle, just in time. No, don’t cry, Billy, no, I can’t come help you down, babe, you’ll break my back again, Barbara, help your little brother down, no, Billy, I don’t want you to try to get down yourself, let your big sister help you down, that’s right, just come back down the same way you went up... Nancy! Get the baby out of the waste basket, I saw some papers with staples and paperclips in there! And, Billy, good job, now don’t get up there again, and Barbara, very very good girl. Thank you, Mademoiselle, and would you put that waste basket up on the desk and put a yellow sticky note on it for Tonie saying NOT to put anything with staples or paperclips in there because that’s the first place the baby always heads whenever—

(into phone)

“Bruce, Bruce, calm down, you’re hysterical, calmate, tranquilo, babe, tranquilo, no, he didn’t fall but Bruce you promised me that you would fix that bookcase, ever since I moved it in here, you promised, no I’m not nagging, but isn’t that something that I could do? Couldn’t I just take that driver thing of yours, that electric driver thing, and those screwy things, yes, screws, of course, screws, and couldn’t I just screw through the wood of the bookcase into the wall and—

“You need to find a stud? Oh, Bruce! Oh, a different kind of stud. Oh, for a second I thought you meant... Oh, no, no it sounds too complicated for me, but— why did you call?

“No, no problema, I’ll have Morris take it down to you. No, Morris, can use the Ferrari, and yes, Mademoiselle, you’re taking the children to the zoo this afternoon, and all those errands this morning that I wrote down for you, yes? and you can use the Mercades, and after the funeral this morning, Bruce, I have a dental appointment for Nancy, but I’ll take the Volkswagen. No, Bruce, I prefer

my Volkswagen, I know the way it handles, and it's good on gasoline. Well, I know that conservation of our natural resources is nothing YOU care about, but I care about it, well, then, good heavens, let's just give the Volkswagen a paint job, and meanwhile I'll have Nancy duck her head and I'll wear a mask. Okay, I'll take care of it all for you, never fear, and have a jolly day, *(sotto voce)* I love you. I said have a good day. Bye."

"And then, Jane, for dessert, oh, those shortbread cookies you make that are so delicious, with the zested lemon—I'm so famished—and chocolate chip cookies, and toll house squares, and vanilla ice cream and, oh, chocolate cake, you can't have vanilla ice cream without chocolate cake, German chocolate cake, with lots and lots of coconut. And Jane, here is where you could bring in those bananas and blueberries you mentioned earlier, quite inappropriately I might add. Thank you, Jane, that will be all.

(calls down the stairs after her)

"Jane? I said thank you.

(listens for a response, doesn't like it)

"Now, Signorina, shall we just go through that first line again? It's so profound and so modern, really, what with the Hell we see all around us, 'Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita...' "Yes, Nellie, come in, what is it? Oh, this telephone, really, I may hemorrhage! And what a terrific sense of *deja vu!*

"No, I'm sorry, Signorina, but on this telephone it's always important, I don't give out this phone number to anyone who is not important. Who is this, please?!? Oh, Miss Pounder, please excuse me for being so ferocious, Miss Pounder, but I'm in the middle of an Italian lesson and I did so hope that this telephone would not ring, and why are you calling me today anyway, aren't you on holiday? *(panic)* We're on holiday here today, aren't we, children? Mademoiselle?. Oh, yes of course, Miss Pounder, how right you are, an elementary school principal's work IS never done. Miss Pounder, could you hold the line for just a second, please?

(whispers into phone)

"I want to get the children out of the r-o-o-m.

(signals one more moment to the signorina and to Nellie)

“Children, why don’t you go downstairs now for your breakfast and tell Jane— ‘Oooh, pancakes, pancakes!’ Take care, Nellie, stampede! Aren’t they delightful, Signorina? Don’t run down the stairs! Mademoiselle, could you just make sure they don’t come back, and Nellie, could you please close the door, thank you. Who? Mr. Wong! Oh, I entirely forgot! Yes, Nellie, please bring him right up. Oh, Signorina, you don’t mind, do you, if—

(into phone)

“Who is this again? Oh, Miss Pounder, could you hold just a moment longer, please? I won’t be a moment.

“Signorina, you don’t mind, do you, if Mr. Wong my acupuncturist comes up and works on me for a bit. Well, yes, he usually WOULD have me spread eagle naked on his table—um, please pursue that image no further—but for today so that we can continue our Italian lesson, he can just work on my left arm here which has a truly wonderful sympathetic relationship to the right side of my neck which is where I carry all of my tension, Mr. Wong tells me, and he’s very quiet, well, he’s Chinese.

“Oh, good morning, Mr. Wong, come in, please, and thank you so much, Nellie, and would you tell François to listen for the cuckoo, and you yourself, listen for the cuckoo, because I must leave this house directly afterwards within the half hour. And, yes, please, Mr. Wong—

(into phone)

“Yes, who is this again please? Oh, yes, Miss Pounder, please hold the line one moment longer, it is tremendously important, but my acupuncturist is just about to save my life or my sanity, and I will be right with you.

“Mr. Wong, for today could we just work on this left arm, you know the way you sometimes do when I’m in a hurry. I’m in the middle of an Italian lesson, you see, and that will leave my right hand free to turn the pages—which I shall do, Signorina, I promise you, like mad. Mr. Wong, this is the Signorina, Signorina, this is Mr. Wong. You can just pull up that chair there, good, and Signorina, don’t look at the needles, I never look at the needles. Now, ‘Nel mezzo

del cammin di nostra vita—’ Can you manage, Mr. Wong? Do you know, Signorina, I think I’ve got this first line almost memorized, you’ll find me a very quick study, ‘Nel mezzo del cammin—’ What? Oh, thanks so much, Signorina, I forgot completely!

(takes up the phone from his lap, hesitates, covers the mouthpiece and whispers to the signorina)

“Do you know who it is? Oh! Miss Pounder. Thank you so much for holding, Miss Pounder. The reason I called is about my boy Billy.

“Miss Pounder, please tell me we’re NOT going to have THIS conversation again? I remind you that in your outer office there, you will find a number of filing cabinets, and in one of them is a filing drawer that used to be labeled J through L—though it is now probably only J as the Jeffries file continues to grow ever thicker—and in that file you will find all of the documentation you have requested, including a copy of the marriage certificate, yes, indeed in this state two men can indeed get married, yes, Miss Pounder, to each other, it is the LAW, Miss Pounder. And you also have all the documentation regarding my adoption of all four of the Jeffries children, proving that I am indeed a legal guardian alongside Mr. Jeffries, shoulder-to-shoulder as it were. And Mr. Jeffries has asserted to you more than once, and has written it formally in a letter which you will indeed find within the ever burgeoning Jeffries file, that Mr. Jeffries and I do confer together at great length about the children’s welfare.

“No, Mrs. Jeffries—the former Mrs. Jeffries—and we should be very careful now, shouldn’t we, to always say, the ‘former Mrs. Jeffries’—is no longer in the picture as regards formal decisions about the welfare of the children, wiser heads than yours and mine, Miss Pounder, both male and female, having made decisions and court orders declaring that until some time in the future when circumstances MIGHT be reviewed and altered—and wouldn’t we all love for that to happen, wouldn’t it make the children’s lives so much richer if their mother were to find some way through her personal circles of Hell?— but until then, Miss Pounder, the former Mrs. Jeffries is really none of our business, is she?

“And so when I say ‘my boy Billy’ we both now know exactly who I am talking about? Without any argument of any kind? Good, we understand each other—again.

“Well then, the reason I called was that Mr. Jeffries and I were very disturbed when Billy brought home his report card and we saw that dreadful grade in arithmetic, and we were completely perplexed because you know how Billy excels in everything academic, and we questioned Billy about this grade, and at first he could come up with no answers, so we took him to our doctor—yes, our therapist, Miss Pounder—and it turns out to be first of all very simple: a kind of temporary dyslexia not too uncommon in children of Billy’s age, where he simply gets his numbers confused, something he will no doubt soon grow out of: but also something far more complex, and truly egregious.

“Well, Miss Pounder, I am referring to your arithmetic teacher there at your school, your Mr. Boyle who goes from class to class to teach arithmetic—which I must say I find to be an extraordinary decision on the part of your school since mathematics at that level should be something really that any teacher should be able to undertake, but ah ha ha ha that is YOUR decision, isn’t it, and Mr. Jeffries and I are perfectly ready to go along with it, whatever your own personal relationship to Mr. Boyle.

“But your Mr. Boyle, as you no doubt are aware, is ex-military, and he brags in our P.T.A. meetings about how he likes to run his classroom like a ship, and evidently Mr. Boyle has made certain sarcastic remarks not only about Billy’s problem with his numbers but also about his family life, it seems, asking Billy—in front of the other students! ‘Where are your fatherS?, Can’t your two fatherS teach you your numbers better!’

“And Miss Pounder Billy isn’t old enough to even begin to understand that kind of sarcasm, and he has no idea what he is doing wrong and meanwhile some of the other boys in Billy’s class—no doubt PRE-military wise-cracking little bullies who probably themselves don’t even understand yet what they are talking about—are repeating Mr. Boyle’s remarks on the playground, and—well it is affecting Billy’s health, Miss Pounder! And that’s what concerns Mr. Jeffries

and myself. He wakes up screaming practically every night, screaming, Miss Pounder! A little boy, screaming in the night!

“In his dreams he gets lost and falls into a deep well, and the waves ripple out in circles, and come back at him from the walls of the well, and the ripples all have numbers, hundreds and hundreds of numbers on the hundreds and hundreds of ripples! And he can’t breathe, and he wakes up screaming. Well, the doctor says this is a very dangerous symptom, and we must remove the cause of his anxiety which is undoubtedly his arithmetic lessons with Mr. Boyle, and so Mr. Jeffries and I have decided to simply withdraw Billy from arithmetic at your school.

“Miss Pounder?

“Well, of course not, Miss Pounder, we have engaged a very talented young woman from the junior college, and she speaks Billy’s language and it is a joy to watch the two of them working out the problems together. No, no, no, no, we do not wish to take Billy or any of our children out of public school, Miss Pounder, as we believe public education is at the heart of our Democracy and absolutely vital for the socialization of all the children. But we are, after all, the boy’s fathers, and we think we know what is best for our son at this time of his life.

“Well, Miss Pounder, that would be entirely up to you, but it seems to me a study hall would be very easy to arrange while the other children are taking their math with Mr. Boyle, and you know how well behaved and cooperative Billy is, or if I were you I would put him into a second physical education class and let him run off some of that extra energy, and you know how Billy excels in athletics and—

“Ah, ha ha ha, why, yes, and how aptly you put it, Miss Pounder: “No mama’s boy he.”

“Oh, do you know, Miss Pounder, the Superintendent of Schools is coming to our house this evening for bridge, and I think I shall share with him your little rejoinder there. “No mama’s boy he.” Ha ha ha. I can’t think of anyone who will be more amused at that remark of yours than OUR Superintendent, can you?

“Well, good then, Miss Pounder, once again we have reached an amicable agreement. And no, I do not think that I will, quite yet, bring up with the Superintendent Mr. Boyle’s teaching style, but do you suppose that you might like to have a little discussion with your Mr. Boyle, in your office, after school, I should think? And should you choose to invite Mr. Jeffries and myself to attend, I can assure you that we would both roll up our sleeves at the opportunity.

“Good, then, I’ll look forward to that. Thanks so much for calling, we always have such fruitful conversations, and it is so good, isn’t it, to reach agreement on such difficult matters as these. Goodbye, Miss Pounder. Mr. Wong, would you please hang this up for me?

(hands Mr. Wong the phone then turns to the signorina)

“That woman, Signorina, and her Mr. Boyle are no doubt directly descended from one of those monsters that Signor Dante met in the innermost circle of Hell. Well, come Monday morning, she’ll be getting HER report card from the Superintendent. Nel mezzo del camin di nostra vita...!!!

“Is that the cuckoo?!?”

“Needles out, needles out, Mr. Wong! I can’t give you a second longer. Signorina, don’t look at the needles. Oh, Signorina, where did the time go! I have looked forward to this lesson all week long but, oh, I’m so terribly sorry. When can you come again? No, not Monday or Tuesday or ... Wednesday, but Thursday morning, no, afternoon, yes, come again on Thursday afternoon at two, Tonie, could you make a note in... Tonie, how did you get over there? How could I be so inattentive?!? Could you please make a note in my daybook, no, the other one, the red one, 2:00 Thursday, the signorina.

“And Mr. Wong, you got all your needles, none on the floor? Because the baby will find every one of them that you don’t and— Mr. Wong! Signorina! You both ... look ... so ... lovely standing there together.

“Oh, good, Nellie, you heard the cuckoo? Could you show Mr. Wong and the signorina to the door, and ask François, oh, François, good, you heard the cuckoo? Goodbye, goodbye. François, down on my bed you’ll find all the clothes laid out, but I’ve got them all wrong. Well, this is Leslie’s funeral! Leslie

would NOT want me in black, for goodness sake, so could you find some color, the black pants, the black shoes, the black socks, all right, but, *NO!* I'll just wear these socks, and a blue jacket, and a blue vest or a red vest, look in Mr. Jeffries closet, he's got a panoply, and I think I can just fit one or two if I haven't gained too much around the—uh, but a ... a a red or blue cravat, whatever color best for the vest, the opposite for the cravat. I leave it all to you, François, you know what I want, and I trust you implicitly!

(calling after him)

“But François, nothing clownish! And Tonie... what are you doing there? Oh, the checks for the donations, of course, well they can wait, but what I need you to do right now is to write two checks, one for the signorina and one for Mr. Wong, and double their usual fee. Well, no, they didn't accomplish much, but when they do so little then you must pay them extra because of their frustration. But, in fact, oh, Mr. Wong has done wonders for my neck, treble his fee, quadruple it, and the same for the signorina because they are going to see each other's checks, because I have devised a plan—well, did you SEE the two of them standing in the doorway there! Mr. Wong looked so fragile, and the signorina looked so pale! I'm sure they're not eating correctly, but I have devised a plan to rectify the situation.

“Listen carefully, in my desk down in the drawing room, in the lower right drawer, you'll find boxes of greeting cards, many of which have a geographical theme. What I'd like is for you to find a Chinese card and an Italian card, and send the Italian card to Mr. Wong, and the Chinese card to the signorina, and write something in my handwriting—you do it so well—something very clever about Marco Polo, something about the East-West connection that will cause them both to smile—“only connect”, oh, those clever Italians and Chinese!—but not exactly the same words to both, mind you, and please make copies of both notes for me in case I need to quote myself. And say something like, ‘I want to verify your telephone number,’ and print each phone number very neatly inside the card.

“Now, here’s the good part of the plan, use two envelopes for each card. Oh, you catch my drift, yes, an inner envelope with the addresses printed clearly on them, and then an outer envelope with only the name, and SWITCH the two envelopes so that the signorina gets Mr. Wong’s card and Mr. Wong gets the signorina’s card. I’ll have François deliver—

“Oh, François, you heard? The colors work, do they? Oh, good, wouldn’t Leslie die laughing! If ... not ... already dead, poor thing.

“Now, for the signorina and Mr. Wong, François, I want you to ask Morris to stop on the way taking you and Billy to the gymnasium this afternoon for Billy’s lesson—and François, oh, how can I put this to you? Could you ... butch it up in front of Morris? Well, there have been remarks—and I don’t know that the remarks have been made by Morris directly—but these remarks have gotten back to Mr. Jeffries, and François, you do understand, Morris has been with Mr. Jeffries’ family for decades, generations, I think, I sometimes think CENTURIES, and if it comes to a choice between you and Morris? —you understand? ?

“Well, I don’t know, François, invite him to call you Frank. I mean, do you HAVE to be called François? Frankie, perhaps? No, that’s too invitational, Frank. And start him talking about football—no, football, that’s the one that’s pointy at both ends? And it flies in such a lovely arc when it’s thrown, and there’s a hunky man down at the end of a field who leaps to catch it, and for that one moment, when the ball and the man are coming into the same arc together in the air, it is like a beautiful ballet, but then when he comes down it’s all smash and bang up all over again. Just get Morris talking about football and you won’t have to say another word for hours; you can do the crossword. And perhaps tighten up your wrists a little?

“Oh, François, what am I, of all people, saying? Just be yourself, for goodness sake. And on the way to the gym—but there in the Ferrari, you might just make sure that Billy sits between the two of you?—on the way to the gym ask Morris, TELL Morris that I want you to stop at the health food store, you know the one? halfway between where Mr. Wong and the signorina live? and purchase two gift certificates for fifty dollars each, or what do you think, Tonie?

Fifty? No, of course you're right, a hundred each, don't you? Take two hundred dollars from the petty cash there in the desk, you have the key? And François, put each gift certificate into each envelope, deliver the envelopes to the wrong house, and then off to the gym with Billy, and oh, this is just the best intervention I have ever concocted!

"Oh, this telephone, no let it ring, let it ring, I have something that is urgently important for the two of you, and you must do it right this instant because tempus increasingly fugit. And you might find it a little delicate, but François, would you take Tonie down to the kitchen and introduce Tonie to Jane.

"Yes, Tonie, I know, Jane has met you dozens of times but she will pretend not to recognize you, and standing shoulder to shoulder, please ask Jane, please TELL Jane—but with as much servility as you can muster—please tell her that I want her to make up a basket of very nutritious food to be sent to the Children's Ward at Boston General Hospital, Miss Lizzie Pike, and Tonie, please make sure you write 'Miss' on the card, I think it will make her feel more grown up.

"Oh you hadn't heard, François? The night watchman's little girl was hit by a car and very severely injured, well, she was on her bicycle and it was a long, hard fall onto concrete, but I've been in touch with the surgeons every day, and they say that she is improving quickly and is now even eating solid food, so ask Jane—and make sure that you tell her that it is for the night watchman's little girl because you know how Jane adores the night watchman—to make up this basket of food to be sent at noon every day, and that's why there is the hurry-up, at noon today and every day for at least a week. Oh, Jane will know, some roasted chicken and noodle soup, perhaps, my favorite when I'm sick, and ripe fruit, something very nourishing.

"And François, will you please decorate each basket yourself, with ribbons, the way you do, and please make sure that there is a little toy put into the top of the basket, wrapped individually because I think it will amuse the child to unpack the basket herself. And no, not just dollies but, oh, a red fire truck, who could resist it! And ... an ambulance? Well...? maybe it's not too soon? Oh yes! And you could sew up little nurse and doctor outfits for Barbie and Ken,

and make Barbie the doctor and Ken the nurse, oh, I like that so much, François, thank you for that idea! And perhaps a dinosaur for science, I always liked the dinosaurs, but is that too...?

“Oh, Tonie, that is perfect, a unicorn! Tonie, down in the drawing room in that glass case in the corner, on the second shelf down you will find the most exquisite glass unicorn, well, I broke off the horn when I was a child...

(close to tears)

“...but my mother helped me to glue it back on, and I think Lizzie won’t even be able to see the join. So, François, let that be the first toy, yes, today, today! Oh, I can just—

(presses his heart with his left hand, full of pain)

“...I can just see her little eyes light up. Thank you. That’s all. Until later.

(calling after them as they leave)

“Thank you both so much. For all you do.”

Diana, are you still recording? Oh, I liked all that, didn’t you? That dear man giving his precious unicorn to that little girl. We’ll keep that in. Oh, that makes me almost weep.

(brings cell phone from his pocket again)

Oh, criminy, it’s my cell phone and it’s going to be Sammy and he’s going to be so vexed with me. Oh, good, it’s Wittsie. Oh, no, Wittsie! Diana, what day is it? No, the date? Oh no, oh no!

(answers phone)

Oh, Wittsie, I’m so sorry—? Goat! Now, don’t yell at me, Goat, what’s happening there, are you at the hospital? Has Wittsie gone in yet? When? Well, have they shot him up with anything yet? So he’s still awake? Just say yes or no, Goat, is he right there, is he listening? Now, Goat, don’t yell at me, sweetheart, that’s not going to do Wittsie any good right now. Just say yes or no, Goat, is it what we thought? Quadruple! Oh, my God, no wonder he’s been so weak, he’s barely been able to move any blood at all!

Goat, don’t yell, please, think about Wittsie, he needs to go into the surgery calm. Please, please, Goat, let me speak to him. Please, Goat, that’s why he gave you his cell phone, to call call me. Please, calm down.

Wittsie, can you ever forgive me? I don't know how this—I haven't looked at my calendar for days, I've been— I'm not making excuses, there can be no excuse, but I just think that I must be going crazy, and now this, to completely miss your surgery, how are you, are you strong? No, I will not allow you to say that. This is not your last day on the planet, and I could kick you in the butt for saying that, I could twist your—! *(laughs)* Oh, that's even worse than what I was going to say!

Wittsie, you should tell Goat to quiet down, he's going to bring the nurses in there, and nurses can ... be ... brutal, believe me, I know! Talk to him right now, and then come back, I've got two other people on the line, I'll be right back.

(covers the mouthpiece of the cell phone)

Diana, will you get on your other line and call Goat's cell phone, you've got the number? He's making such a scene there in the hospital room that they're going to throw him out. Just calm him down, you know how, tell him to go take a walk while I'm talking to Wittsie, you know how jealous he can get, yes, right now, thank you, and then come back, Diana, to this line.

And Ray, would you please call my house and ask Sammy to pack up a bag for me for a week, and to get the gas tank filled, and go by the ATM and get some cash, and I'll be there in a half hour at the latest. And tell him, tell him, ask him to find my glass unicorn, he'll know where it is--he should know where it is anyway, but if he doesn't, remind him that it's in the glass case in our bedroom, second shelf down--and ask him to wrap up it up in a gift box with a get-well-soon card for Wittsie. I bought the card weeks ago; it's got a really hunky guy on it, and I'm sure that Sammy knows exactly where that card is because he's probably been salivating over it. And tell him please that if he would like to come with me, he certainly may, but that Goat's going to be there, and if he doesn't want to come, that's his choice. Sammy will understand. And Ray, come back to this line, too.

Hi, Witts, back again, listen I know just the thing to cheer you up, yes you do, you need to go into surgery laughing.

(sings from The Mikado)

“Laughing ha ha, chaffing ha ha, nectar quaffing, ha ha ha.” When are they going to start shooting you up? Okay, that gives me time. Listen now, I have written you

into my new play! No, you never actually come onto the stage, but your character does, I bring you on in a telephone call. Here's the set-up, I play this guy named Bob—yeah, aren't they all these days?—and Bob has recently married a very wealthy man in Massachusetts with four adorable children—and, yes, of course, Wittsie, he IS younger, well, he's got four children beneath the age of ten, so of course he's younger—well, Wittsie, some younger men do go for older men, you know, and you know, I'm still, you know, uh, there are some people who do consider me a ... a ... catch, and ... and ... virile, and yes, he's extremely goodlooking, and yes, since it's all just imagination anyway, built, Wittsie, built! You should see him in his bathing suit! Eat your heart out, and he's all mine!

And I tell my secretary who is one of my friends that I've hired and, oh, this is the perfect secretary and guess what name I use for the secretary? (*laughs*) Yes, Tonie! Isn't that perfect. And I've got a dresser, too, who's always dressing me in primary colors and guess—(*laughs*) Yeah, François, oh I'm so transparent. Anyway at the point where you come in, I've got Tonie trying to round up three men for my opera box on Monday night. I've got a box, and I've got three ladies, but I've got no men. I say...

“Just go right through that blue address book, Tonie, no, straight or gay, for these ladies it doesn't matter, so long as they are in trousers with their hair combed and they have a vocabulary of over 500, no, for these ladies, even less. And François, you HAVE culled all of the opera screamers out of that blue book? For Lucia di Lammermoor last month, Tonie, we had Wittsie in the box with us and his entire Shriek of Queens! And they screamed so loud that I thought the conductor was going to come up into our box and throttle them, he was looking up at us in the box and making stabbing motions with his baton.”

And then the phone rings, the phone is always ringing, and I say:

“This had better be important, or... no it's Wittsie! We were just talking about you! (*laughs*) No, nothing good! François and I were telling Tonie about your coloratura debut at Lucia last month. No, you gave a brand new dimension to Lucia's mad scene. Well, the pandemonium alone was worth the price of admission. But I must warn you that until further notice you HAVE been culled from my opera bluebook. Oh, no, I'd love to play with you this morning, Witts,

but ... something about a child and a Volkswagen, oh, I'm taking Nancy to the dentist... and before that I'm rushing off to a funeral if I can ever get out of this house. Poor old Leslie, heart attack.

(realizes his faux pas, deep chagrin, but he goes on)

"...Yes, that... as you say... is finally ... that. Oh, and it was so funny, but really so dreadful (oh!) last night I was at the visitation with Leslie's son and daughter-in-law and we were going through all the beautiful flowers, and the cards, but the florist made a terrible mistake, there was one card that said, 'Surprise!'

(laughs)

Oh, Witts, that's priceless! I'm going to use that in the play, if you'll let me: "At least they didn't send balloons!" That's so perfect!

Oh, Witts, I'm so sorry right before your surgery to bring up ... heart attack! for criminy's sake! but there I was lost in the middle of it, and I couldn't find my way out. Oh, you're such a jewel! Oh, well, Witts, what can we do, we're all just going to ... live and die, just like everybody else.

Oh, are they there already? Don't look at the needles, Witts. And now listen, Witts, I'm going to be there when you wake up, the first thing you're going to see is the whites of my eyes, right there beside Goat, so you just better wake up, do you hear me? I'm counting on it, and you have never let me down yet. Okay, I love you so much. Okay, hasta la vista ... mi querido.

(hangs up, presses his hand against his heart)

Diana, you're back? Thanks so much, yes, Goat had quieted down and it was all better, I knew I could count on you. And Ray, Ray? Diana, before Ray gets back, I've been meaning to tell you, well I've been meaning to tell someone—but not Ray, certainly not Ray—about this twitching thing that I've been doing, oh, you've noticed? Well, it used to be only in the mornings, I think, when I'm lying in bed just kind of concentrating on all I'm going to do—but it's been worse, here in the office on the couch—and I'm concentrating so hard that I forget to breathe, and I don't even know how long. No, it's not sleep apnea because I'm not asleep, I'm fully awake, sometimes sitting straight up! And I don't know—I mean how long CAN you not breathe before you ...

just forget altogether to take the next breath, you know? And so, I just wanted to warn you, just in case... you know... some morning... I'm found—

Yes, Ray, found! Discovered! Can you believe that after all these years of obscurity I'm still hoping to be discovered? What are the chances do you think? *(laughs)* So, Diana, you understand all of that, right? And, Diana, thank you so much for all your help, not only are you a superb amanuensis but you are a regular Google, too. And listen I'll be gone for at least a week, but no messages, okay? Okay, Ray? Not of any kind, because I'm going to devote myself to getting Wittsie back on his feet. Okay, darling, thanks, darling, thanks. Bye bye.

But Ray, one last thing, when I bought those cassettes of Ruth Draper that I loaned you? Well, with the cassettes in the mail I got this very nice personal letter from this man from a company called Spoken Arts, a man named Arthur Luce Klein, Luce, isn't that a family name of people in the arts back east? Clare Boothe Luce, you know? If Diana were on the line, she'd know. Anyway, this was back in the 80s. I don't know why this man would have taken the trouble to write me such a long and intimate letter; I suppose I must have written him first, when I made the order, about how deeply I feel toward Ruth Draper. In any case, he wrote me that he had met Ruth Draper in London in the early 1950s, not too long before she died, and they were doing voice-over work together and she said to him, "What, oh what, is going to happen to my little darlings when I'm gone?" Ruth Draper had no children; she was talking about her monologues. She had never written the monologues down and had never recorded them but had created them through a kind of improvisation, I think, and they must have grown through the years, and now here she was approaching death, and her monologues were just in her head, she didn't have them in a form that she could ... pass on.

This man said to her, "Come back to New York with me and I'll record you." And that is how we have those recordings today. Aren't we all indebted to him? To think of those performances being lost forever! And she died only a few years later.

And when she died, among all of her letters they found a green leather case, locked, with all of Lauro's letters to her, some seventy letters and a telegram, and all of them signed, "Lauro de Ruth," isn't that just as sweet as anything you've ever heard?

And his last letter to her, postmarked just fifteen minutes before he took off in his airplane from Marseilles to Rome on that last flight, was also in that green leather case. She left instructions that those letters not be published until ten years after her death.

I've memorized some of the sentences of that last letter, I want to find some way to put them into *The Lesson of the Italians* because they are so heartwrenchingly revealing—I think—that he knew even then, before taking off in that little airplane, that he would never make it back. I don't know if I can get his Italian accent, but I'm going to try because I can hear it in his words and cadences:

"If I had lived—"

You see? He knew, he knew.

"If I had lived you—"

Um, how did he say it? Oh, I know, I wrote it in my talking points.

(gets his talking points, finds the place, purple ink, reads aloud)

"If I had lived you would have done thousands of things for me. Won't you do only one more? My last and deepest desire? Be happy and continue your glorious life not as if something had been taken away from it but as if something had been added.

"Be happy, 'sta allegra', and work. You will have given me then your crowning boon. If you do that I will feel that my love continued after my death to protect you, otherwise my soul will never have peace. Never until you are again happy. And please love somebody else. I will consider it indirectly love for me. I embrace you with all my adoration.

"Lauro de Ruth."

But, Ray, in all of the letters in that green leather case, kept so immaculately, not a single letter that Ruth wrote to Lauro. He would have saved them all for her, you know he would have, but not one letter from Ruth to Lauro has survived. I picture her sitting by a fireside, toward the end of her life, knowing her death was near, reading each letter and putting it into the fire.

I want to do *The Lesson of the Italians* for your audiences, Ray, for Ruth and for Lauro, her little darling, so that the two of them—Ruth and Lauro— should not be ... lost.

I don't have to convince YOU? Ha! Ah, Ray, you're a champ! No, I did not say chump; I said champ! Thanks, Ray, thanks so much. I'll be back in a week or so. I'll call. I'll give you the script then, what I've got of it so far. Bye. Take care. You're a champ.

(feels his pockets, collects some things)

Wallet, keys, glasses ... and ...

(thinks hard, looks around, nearly lost)

Oh ...

(exits)

The End