

Asking Strangers About
The Meaning Of Life

(A Pandemic Comedy for Zoom or Stage)

By William Missouri Downs

Please Note

This play is designed to be staged in a theatre or over Zoom (with the actors and audience self-isolating), or as a closet drama (a play meant primarily for reading).

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CHARACTERS IN SEARCH OF THE MEANING OF LIFE

(4 with doubling - 10 without)

Franz Kafka
 Writer
 Dancer
 Genius
 Cardinal
 Student
 Bungee
 Therapist
 Counselor
 Professor

PLEASE NOTE: This play, like life, doesn't fit neatly into any one ism.

CASTING: The cast can be any race, ethnicity, physicality, and sexual orientation/identity. The only roles that are gender-specific are the Counselor (Female) and Therapist (Male).

HOW TO - ZOOM PLAY: There are only two characters in each scene, so it's easier to perform this play over Zoom with the audience and actors self-isolating. Locations are achieved by changing backgrounds. Several scenes can be staged as Zoom conferences.

HOW TO - STAGE PLAY: The simple stage is covered with a collage of bright autumn leaves. As with Shakespeare, the many locations are achieved through verbal scene painting, and not with a abundance of props, sets, or set pieces.

HOW TO - CLOSET DRAMA: Read page, turn page, repeat.

TIME/PLACE: Here & now, but normal time doesn't apply.

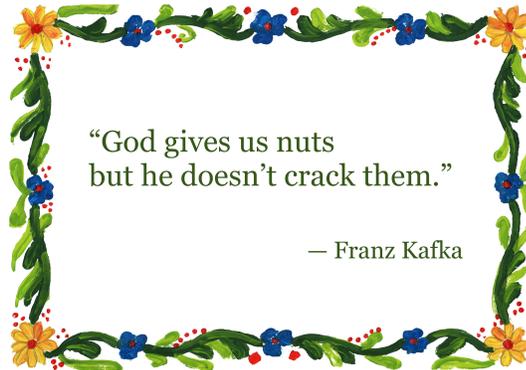
RUNNING TIME: 1:10 - No intermission.

Those Who Inspired This Play:

Émilie du Châtelet
Kierkegaard
Susan Stebbing
Joseph Frankel
Simone de Beauvoir
David Hume
Peggy Lee
Jean-Paul Sartre
Gilda Radner
John Steinbeck
Bangambiki Habyarimana
Martha Stewart
Voltaire
Rousseau
Will Durant
Ariel Durant
Michael Foley
Peter Thorpe
Alan Charles Kors
Seneca
Fran Lebowitz
Pascal
Brygmunt Bauman
Catharine Trotter Cockburn
Joseph Wood Krutch
Saint John Chrysostom
Nietzsche
Helen Mary Warnock
Michel-André Bossy
Buddha
Confucius
Sylvia Plath
James Joyce
Stefan Zweig
&
Franz Kafka

Asking Strangers About The Meaning Of Life

Each scene begins with a quote, which can be projected, included in the program, announced from the stage or inserted before each zoom scene begins.



(ZOOM: The actors talk directly into their cameras, the locations are achieved by changing backgrounds and verbal scene painting.)

(ZOOM & STAGE: Two high rise balconies only feet apart.)

(On one balcony enter FRANZ KAFKA, yes, the Franz Kafka, wearing the Kafkaesque medical mask. He takes in the view for a moment and then steps over the railing. He’s about to jump when...)

(From the other balcony enters a WRITER who starts sweeping. At first the WRITER doesn’t see FRANZ. Then...)

WRITER

Oh! Jeez! You okay?

FRANZ
(Austrian-Hungarian accent)

I’m fine.

WRITER

Ah... You do know that you are standing on the wrong side of the railing!

FRANZ
(*Intense*)

I do.

WRITER
And that our condos are three stories up!

FRANZ
Well aware.

WRITER
And that I can't possibly breach the gap between us!

FRANZ
I know.

WRITER
Okay, ah... May I ask why?

FRANZ
I've come to the conclusion that the earth, nature, and stars, all of it is absurd. But I won't jump.

WRITER
Glad to hear it

FRANZ
If.

WRITER
If what?

FRANZ
If you give me a convincing reason not to.

WRITER
(*Grasping at straws*)
Ah. Ahhhh. I was just sweeping my balcony.

FRANZ
If everything is absurd then sweeping is absurd. Ten seconds.

WRITER
Ah... Ah... Do you believe in God?

FRANZ
God gives us nuts but he doesn't crack them.

WRITER
Okay... Ah... Family?

FRANZ
Association with humans lures one into self-observation.

WRITER
(*Confused*)

That certainly happens with my family.

FRANZ
Just answer the question. Five seconds.

WRITER
I forgot the question.

FRANZ
What is the meaning of life?

WRITER
Ah... Before I answer, can I ask a question?

FRANZ
Sure.

WRITER
Why me?

FRANZ
Cause you came out to sweep.

WRITER
And if I hadn't?

FRANZ
I wouldn't be here right now. I'd be down there. But then I thought you might be an omen.

WRITER
Me? An omen.

FRANZ
Some higher power could be trying to have a Zoom conference with me through you.

WRITER
(*Nervous laugh*)
What about *me* made *you* think someone might be using me for... Zoom purposes.

FRANZ
I'm a good judge of people. Simply by looking I can tell you're a... (*Squinting*) A lawyer who defends the poor.

WRITER
No.

FRANZ
You manage a rigidly inflexible insurance company.

WRITER
No.

FRANZ

An airline co-pilot who doesn't play by the rules.

WRITER

I'm a writer.

FRANZ

I knew that.

WRITER

No you didn't.

FRANZ

What do you write? Horror books? Are you Stephen King?

WRITER

What? No, I'm not Stephen King.

FRANZ

Wouldn't that have been something - That would have been an omen.

WRITER

(Wishing this would end)

You a Stephen King fan?

FRANZ

No.

WRITER

Ever read one of his books?

FRANZ

No.

WRITER

Then why would meeting Stephen King be a...?

FRANZ

Think about it. Seconds before my demise, by chance, out of eight billion people on this earth, I run into the writer who single handedly revived the genre of horror fiction in the late 20th century.

WRITER

You're right that could be an omen.

FRANZ

But, unfortunately, you, like most, are too consumed by the stubborn facts of daily life. I will trouble you no further.

(FRANZ takes a hand off the railing.)

WRITER

Wait! I lied, I am Stephen King.

FRANZ

Really?

WRITER

I... ah...*(Stumbling)* single handedly revived the genre of horror fiction in the late 20th century.

FRANZ

May I have your autograph?

WRITER

Ah... Sure. But...

(WRITER feels pockets.)

WRITER

Ah... Don't have a pen.

FRANZ

I do.

(FRANZ pulls out a pen. For the first time we see that FRANZ is wearing rubber gloves.)

FRANZ

Could you sign one of your books?

WRITER

Generally, I... ah... don't have my books on me... when I'm sweeping.

FRANZ

You must have one in your condo.

WRITER

I don't.

FRANZ

Why not?

WRITER

(Making up bull)

You know, once I write'em I don't like to... keep them around. Cause, ah, I don't want my fame to go to my head.

FRANZ

Times up.

WRITER

Hold on! Ah... How about if I... ah... sign...*(Looking around for something)* This broom.

FRANZ

Would you?

(FRANZ holds out the pen. WRITER doesn't want to take it.)

WRITER

What do ya know, I just happen to have a pen on me.

(WRITER pulls out a pen.)

WRITER

Whom shall I...?

FRANZ

Franz.

WRITER

Franz? You mean as in Franz Kafka?

FRANZ

Yes.

WRITER

The guy who wrote Metamorphosis? That story about a guy who wakes up one morning to discover he's been transformed into a giant Cockroach?

FRANZ

Bad translation, should've read, "Monstrous vermin."

WRITER

Okay... Ah...

FRANZ

F.R.A.N.Z.K.//

WRITER

That's okay, know how to spell.

(With a nervous laugh, WRITER quickly signs the rake.)

WRITER

(Gently singing under his breath)

This is weird, really really weird.

(ZOOM: WRITER hands the broom off camera, it appears in FRANZ's camera.)

(STAGE: The WRITER does a long distance balcony to balcony handoff to FRANZ.)

WRITER

Here you go, Mr. Kafka.

FRANZ
(Reading the rake)

Thank you.

WRITER

You're welcome.

FRANZ

One more thing. Could I have taxi money?

WRITER

Ah... Sure.

(ZOOM & STAGE: The WRITER takes out a few bucks and does another long distance hand off.)

WRITER

What are you going to do? *(Hopeful)* Take a taxi to your therapist's office?

(FRANZ hops back over the railing.)

FRANZ

I'm going to the library and check out one of your books. Which do you recommend?

WRITER

Ah... Ah... 'Silence of the Lambs?' ...I think.

(FRANZ is about to leave but stops.)

FRANZ

Have you ever noticed that in almost every novel, biography, or autobiography the protagonist is searching?

WRITER

I guess.

FRANZ

They're trying to find that nebulous, transcendental... *it*.

WRITER

It?

FRANZ

The meaning of life. But in the end what does the protagonist find?

WRITER

Don't know.

FRANZ

Simple formulaic answers. No matter how good the writer, the most the protagonist achieves is a formulaic answer and resignation.

(ZOOM & STAGE: FRANZ exits with the broom. The Zoom camera goes off.)

(WRITER stands there, dumbfounded.)

WRITER

What the...

(Off a voice.)

DANCER

(O.S.)

Sweetheart!

(WRITER doesn't answer)

DANCER

(O.S.)

Where are you?

WRITER

(Snapping out of it)

Out here.

(ZOOM: In a new camera appear a DANCER.)

(STAGE: Enter the WRITER's partner a DANCER who loves to shop.)

DANCER

'Ballers' is on, want to binge?

WRITER

(Still dazed)

I just had a kafkaesque experience.

DANCER

(Not listening, looking out)

Oh, look at all the wonderful fall leaves.

WRITER

This well dressed stranger came out on the balcony of the unoccupied condo next door, and told me that everything was absurd.

DANCER

(Looking out)

Yellow, red. I think autumn is my favorite time of year.

WRITER

And then he talked about the nebulous, transcendental it.

(DANCER stops, looks at WRITER)

DANCER

Sweetheart, where's your broom?

WRITER

I gave it to Franz.

DANCER

Who?

WRITER

Franz, the person on the next balcony who said he was going to kill himself.

DANCER

...With the broom?

WRITER

But I talked him out of it.

DANCER

How?

WRITER

I autographed the broom.

DANCER

Was he suffering from mental illness?

WRITER

No, I told him I was Stephen King.

DANCER

Are you suffering from mental illness?

WRITER

I was sweeping when my mind began wandering and I thought... Why am I here? Am I just spending my time consumed by the 'stubborn facts of daily life' rather than asking the big questions. When, perfectly timed, I turned and there was this stranger standing on the next balcony.

DANCER

The condo next door is unoccupied.

WRITER

I know, but I swear Franz Kafka was there.

DANCER

Kafka? The writer?

WRITER

Yes.

DANCER

(Trying to place the name)

He wrote that absurd story about the guy who turns into a cockroach.

WRITER

Bad translation it should've read, "Monstrous vermin."

DANCER

Wait, didn't Kafka die like a hundred years ago?

WRITER

Yeah. But I swear Kafka was just standing right over there.

DANCER

And just before this happened you were thinking about the meaning of life.

WRITER

Yes.

DANCER

Like, what? Your purpose?

WRITER

I guess purpose can bring meaning.

DANCER

You mean like your purpose right now? Or overall?

WRITER

Well, both.

DANCER

That's easy, your purpose right now is to come inside and binge 'Ballers' - Overall your purpose is to go down to the hardware store and buy a new broom.

WRITER

Look at my life. It is in fact absurd. I spend every Sunday sitting here binge watching crap and staring down at a park.

DANCER

It's a wonderful park.

WRITER

Don't you see, all of this is trivial. In a hundred years this building probably won't even be here. And the park will most likely be replaced by some sort of synthetic waterless park. And no one will ever know or care that I existed.

DANCER

Look at the bright side, sweetheart, the park might be replaced with lifeless radiation-filled dirt.

WRITER

We don't have to go that far.

DANCER

Okay, synthetic, waterless - Your point?

WRITER

Why am I here? Why are any of us here? Why shouldn't we all jump.

DANCER

Everyone can't.

WRITER

Why not?

DANCER

Not everyone lives in a high rise condo.

WRITER

Or walk down to the bus stop and throw ourselves in front of the next cross town express?

DANCER

Everyone?

WRITER

Yes, everyone.

DANCER

Who would drive the bus?

WRITER

I'm serious.

DANCER

Are we having an existential crisis?

WRITER

...I guess I am.

DANCER

You know why I was attracted to you?

WRITER

Why?

DANCER

Cause you were voted by the graduating class the person least likely to read Franz Kafka.

WRITER
(*Frustrated*)

I've gotta go to the library.

DANCER

Why?

WRITER
To find Franz and ask him about the meaning of life.

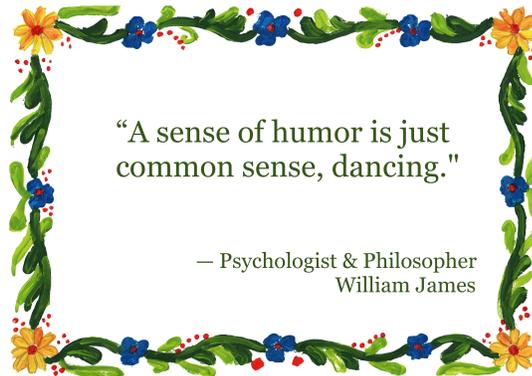
DANCER
But what about 'Ballers?'

WRITER
I don't know, I gotta think.

(*Far off the sound of a police
siren.*)

WRITER
Crap. It's Franz!

(*WRITER exits.*)



(*Apple Genius Bar.*)

(*A nerdy GENIUS enters to find the
DANCER in the middle of a personal
crisis.*)

DANCER
(*Troubled*)
And s/he left, and never came back.

WRITER
This yours?

GENIUS

(*He holds up a department store
shopping bag.*)

DANCER
(Self occupied)

Then this morning I thought to myself, it's going to be a good day.

GENIUS
 If not, gotta toss it in lost and found.

DANCER
 I'm going to shop in the mall, then I've got to pick up my Zoloft, and buy a broom.

GENIUS
 A what?

DANCER
 A broom. And then, suddenly, in the underwear aisle at Nordstroms it hit me, why is it a good day?

GENIUS
(Wishing this would end)
 Wouldn't know.

DANCER
 Is it good simply because I'm going to be busy? Is that all life's about? Buying stuff and binge watching 'Ballers' so we don't have to come face to face with our utter insignificance?

GENIUS
 As much as I'd like to continue, what's your Apple ID?

DANCER
 Why?

GENIUS
 You've walked into an Apple Genius Bar.

DANCER
 You asked if I needed help.

GENIUS
 I meant with an apple product, we're not here to address major existential questions.

DANCER
 Then why do you call yourselves 'geniuses?'

GENIUS
 Just a catchy name. And while I'm at it, this is not an actual bar, we don't serve rum and coke.

DANCER
 It's a simple question. Is life absurd? Does it have meaning? And if so, what is that meaning?

GENIUS

That's three questions.

DANCER

Is it to help others? Is it to sit in really uncomfortable positions under Zen trees?

GENIUS

What brings my life meaning is to have a purpose.

DANCER

And what's your purpose? *(Doubtful)* To sell overpriced I-Pads to millennials? *That* justifies your existence?

GENIUS

No, my purpose is to earn a living so I can pay my mortgage, so I can spend my weekends in my garage working on my exact replica of the bridge of the Starship Enterprise.

DANCER

You're not serious.

GENIUS

That *is* my purpose.

DANCER

But is that purpose or just something to keep you occupied so you don't have to face the absurdity of life?

GENIUS

You make it sound like it's some sort of plywood replica; mine is built with an aerospace-grade chromium alloy that's so real it's, like, real. I'm living the hero's journey.

DANCER

You can't be serious.

GENIUS

Every weekend I accept the call to duty, confront the unknown, and then warp-drive-it back to federation star space.

DANCER

But you're going to get old and die, and you'll never have been outside your garage.

GENIUS

I'm going to make sweet love to the shapeshifting (Prince) Princess Troyius this weekend in a mirror universe, and, I might add, live to tell about it. *(Doubtful)* What are you doing? Buying a broom.

(The DANCER starts to breathe heavily as panic sets in.)

DANCER
(*Desperate*)

My God...

GENIUS

You okay?

DANCER

You're right.

GENIUS

Didn't mean to upset you.

DANCER

Know what I need?

GENIUS

A Zoloft?

DANCER

I need to do what all Americans do when they realize they're living an anonymous, mundane, absurd life!

GENIUS

Buy an Apple watch?

DANCER

No. Go on a cruise.

GENIUS

They're petri dishes with propellers.

DANCER
(*Growing desperate*)

No they're pools, and gyms, and casinos, and spending your afternoons launching golf balls into the deep blue while bubbly waiters treat you special cause they're stuck in a service economy and the beautiful ocean which is filled with plastic golf balls (*Panicking, yelling*) and it's all there to make you forget how meaningless your life is! And and and!

GENIUS

People are looking.

DANCER

And people are looking! And out of the blue my partner tells me the world is absurd and goes off to find Franz Kafka and I'm asking a complete stranger about the meaning of life, and I just bought underwear. Do you know what I have plenty of?

GENIUS

Underwear?

DANCER

Drawers full! I have enough to last the rest of my life so why am I buying underwear at the shopping mall?! Do you know why shopping malls exist!

GENIUS

(Uncomfortable)

Why?

DANCER

The same reason cruise-lines exist! To keep us occupied so we don't hear the relentless ticking of all the clocks.

(Beat. The DANCER stands there, a lost soul.)

GENIUS

Ah... Look...I don't normally do this, but... Why don't you come over to my house this weekend.

DANCER

...What?

GENIUS

I'm looking for a navigation officer.

DANCER

...I'm sorry but I can't drive to some stranger's garage.

GENIUS

Don't have to, I can beam you up.

(Beat. GENIUS smiles. DANCER takes a deep breath and smiles. They share a soothing laugh at the absurdity of life.)

DANCER

(Calming)

So sorry, I guess I had a bit of a panic attack.

GENIUS

Don't worry, it happens all the time here when people see our prices. You okay?

DANCER

Yes. Thank you.

GENIUS

...Look, I don't know much, but I do know, you can't find the meaning of life if you are constantly distracted or in the middle of a panic attack.

DANCER

But that's modern life.

GENIUS

Only ask the question when you have a firm grasp on your sense of humor. And while you're at it, throw in a little common sense. Common sense and a sense of humor are the same thing, just moving at different speeds. A sense of humor is common sense, dancing. Only ask the meaning of life after you've danced a little.

(STAGE: The store's muzak fades in with Johann Strauss or Shostakovich or something wonderful.)

(ZOOM: the music is wild rock and roll, so they don't dance together.)

GENIUS

Will you join me in this existential dance?

DANCER

But people are looking.

GENIUS

No, they're distracting themselves by buying things they don't need so they don't have to come face to face with the utter insignificance of shopping malls.

(They dance their hearts out. It might be a few wonderful steps, or depending on the talent of your actors, much more. They end and bow.)

GENIUS

(out of breath)

Now you're ready to ask the meaning of life.

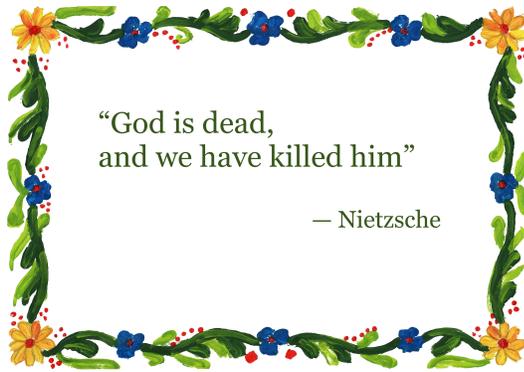
(GENIUS holds up the bag.)

GENIUS

I believe this is your underwear.

(ZOOM: A hand off.)

(DANCER smiles, takes the bag and exits.)



(Near a Church.)

(A CATHOLIC CARDINAL enters in full regalia carrying a crosier. Again we enter mid-conversation.)

GENIUS

And then s/he left.

CARDINAL

To return the underwear?

GENIUS

Don't know. Does it matter to the story? Then, before I knew it, it was the weekend and Princess (Prince) Troyius//

CARDINAL

Who?

GENIUS

The heir to the throne of the Pre-Crustacean Empire.

CARDINAL
(Confused)

Right.

GENIUS

Was obviously interested and using all her (his) shapeshifting powers to seduce me. But... I couldn't do it.

CARDINAL

Do what?

GENIUS

Exchange propasmic-mucus.

CARDINAL
(More confused)

...Good for you.

GENIUS

Then I saw the light.

CARDINAL

Ah, yes! The light!

GENIUS

This little ray of light. It was coming from behind the tractor beam control panel. So I got up, released the titanium latches and pulled back the panel. And behind, I saw... it!

CARDINAL

It?

GENIUS

...The garage door.

CARDINAL
(Confused)

And this was a revelation?

GENIUS

Yes. There on the door, in the dust, I saw//

CARDINAL
(Hopeful)

An image of Christ!

GENIUS

No.

CARDINAL

Mary?

GENIUS

A little window.

CARDINAL

With an image of Christ on it!

GENIUS

No. It was just a little window. I've lived there for years and I've never noticed that my garage door has a little star shaped window, a little peephole, right in the center. Isn't that amazing?

CARDINAL

Not as amazing as the miracle of Guadalajara in 1911 but okay.

GENIUS

And I looked out through this little peephole and I saw children playing, and birds flying.

CARDINAL

Ahh yes, God's wonderful embellishments.

GENIUS

And cars honking and dogs barking. And I just drank it in for a moment. And then//

CARDINAL
(*Hopeful*)

You faced reality?

GENIUS

Oh God no. I got some spray paint from the workbench and painted over the little window. And I put the cover back on the tractor beam and made sweet love to the Princess (Prince) like I was Captain Kirk and s/he was Lieutenant Uhura - I mean they were out in space for years, there must've been a lot of star-dates going on behind those automatic sliding doors.

CARDINAL

I'm more than confused; why did you want to meet with me?

GENIUS

Cause, as I was painting over the window, it occurred to me... we got a lot in common.

CARDINAL
(*Doubtful*)

Do we now.

GENIUS

We've both have found a pleasing unreal reality.

CARDINAL
(*Offended*)

I would hardly call what I do unreal.

GENIUS

What would you call it?

CARDINAL

...Real.

GENIUS

Really? You're wearing a red robe and silly hat in public. And what's the staff about?

CARDINAL

It's called a Crosier. It's the rod of God.

GENIUS

The rod of God?

CARDINAL
(*Flustered*)

Yes. You are the flock and I am the rod, I mean the metaphor, I mean the shepherd.

GENIUS

And I am Captain Reno, who replaced Captain Archer, who replaced Captain Janeway, who replaced Captain Sisko, who replaced Picard who replaced James T Kirk. (*Throwaway*) The captains on the animated version I don't count.

CARDINAL

I don't see how you could possibly compare what we do.

GENIUS

Transubstantiation - teleporting - We may vary the metaphor but we both find meaning. Think about it, we both have religious texts. You the bible, Me, the Federation Star-Space Standards and Practices Manual.

CARDINAL

Mine was written by God!

GENIUS

And mine by Gene Roddenberry - Peace be upon him.

CARDINAL

There is a difference!

GENIUS

It's like Nietzsche said, God is dead and we've replaced him with Star Trek.

CARDINAL

(Done with the conversation)

Do you hear those people cheering.

(The sound of cheering.)

GENIUS

So?

CARDINAL

They've come to see me.

GENIUS

Why? Pulling off a miracle or something?

CARDINAL

No, I'm participating in our first annual 'Leap of Faith.' In a moment I'm going to climb atop that spire.

(The CARDINAL points high up.)

GENIUS

(Looking up)

Jeez, way up there?

CARDINAL

I'm told, three hundred feet up, where I shall have bungee cables attached to my ankles.

(MORE)

CARDINAL (CONT'D)

And as I stand on the edge, lean into space and plummet, I shall know that I, unlike you, am living in reality.

GENIUS

Father, a bit of advice - I've traveled the universe from Delta Quadrant to the Mac Store on 59th, and the only thing I know for sure is... real life kinda sucks. That's why we need a bit of virtual reality to face the bleak matter-of-factness of life. Hey, let's face it the universe treats us pretty poorly.

CARDINAL

Does not.

GENIUS

Then why are there viruses?

CARDINAL

Well, I... Ah... Ah...

GENIUS

We all need to escape the endless bewildering complexity of raw phenomena. We need some semblance of order, some understandable patterns and something pleasing and predictable like... like ice cream.

CARDINAL

Ice cream?

GENIUS

Yeah. Banana peanut butter chocolate chip isn't a naturally occurring phenomena. So we add it to life. Ice cream is an ornament that makes life better. Like... like....

CARDINAL

(Starting to understand)

Art.

GENIUS

And philosophy.

CARDINAL

And religion.

GENIUS

And Star Trek. They all help us...

CARDINAL

Escape?

GENIUS

To an understandable world.

CARDINAL

And so the human mind needs these... metaphors and symbols that don't occur in nature.

GENIUS
Like... What did you say that thing is called?

CARDINAL
A Crosier.

GENIUS
For only when we create symbols can we move to significance.

CARDINAL
And from significance to the meaning of life.

(Beat, the CARDINAL smiles. The GENIUS smiles. A brief moment of understanding.)

GENIUS
Bless you father.

CARDINAL
(Vulcan salute)
Live long and prosper.

(GENIUS starts to exit. Stops.)

GENIUS
Oh, speaking of reality, did you know there was a recent recall on bungee cables.

(CARDINAL is stunned. GENIUS exits.)



(300 feet up, atop a church spire.)

(A BUNGEE person enters pulling a long rubbery cable. BUNGEE's torn jeans and Beavis and Butt-head T-shirt inspire little confidence.)

And s/he left.
CARDINAL

BUNGEE
And married the Princess (Prince) and lived happily ever
after?

CARDINAL
Don't know, is it important to the story?

BUNGEE
Guess not. Okay, if you're ready. You got two hundred members
of the Youth League waiting down there. You don't want to
disappoint.

CARDINAL
Question.

BUNGEE
Sure.

CARDINAL
(Trying not to be nervous)
I've heard there's a recall on Bungee cables?

BUNGEE
Not this year, that I know of.

CARDINAL
But there've been recalls in the past?

BUNGEE
Now and then. That's life. Your feet.

CARDINAL
Huh?

BUNGEE
(Holding up the bungee cable)
Gotta strap these to your ankles.

CARDINAL
Oh, right.

*(STAGE: BUNGEE starts binding one
of the Cardinal's ankles to the
Bungee cable.)*

*(ZOOM: BUNGEE drops out of the shot
to bind ankles.)*

BUNGEE
Red shoes, really cool.

CARDINAL
Do people ever have second thoughts?

BUNGEE

All the time. But once they find there's no refund they generally go through with it.

CARDINAL

And if, by chance, something should go wrong?

BUNGEE

Don't worry, that piece of paper you signed releases us from any liability.

(ZOOM: BUNGEE pops back up.)

BUNGEE

Other leg.

CARDINAL

Excuse me?

BUNGEE

I need to bind your other ankle.

CARDINAL

Oh.

(ZOOM: BUNGEE drops out of the shot.)

(STAGE: BUNGEE binds the CARDINAL's other ankle.)

BUNGEE

Of all the people I've done this with, I'd think you'd be the least nervous.

CARDINAL

How many people have you done?

BUNGEE

Gosh, what, don't know. Five, six.

CARDINAL

You've only done this with five or six people?

BUNGEE

Don't worry, I'm certified.

CARDINAL

By whom?

BUNGEE

Mama's Big Jump School of Baton Rouge.

CARDINAL

So you've taken lots of hands-on classes.

(ZOOM: BUNGEE pops back up.)

BUNGEE

Oh no. I was certified during the pandemic so my classes were all online. But don't worry. Online classes are just as good as the real thing. Takin' the cane with?

CARDINAL

What?

BUNGEE

(Pointing at the crosier)

The thingamabob.

CARDINAL

It's not a cane it's a crosier. And it's the rod of God.

BUNGEE

If I were you, I'd leave God's rod behind.

CARDINAL

Kinda attached to it. You know, security blanket.

BUNGEE

On the way down you get goin' about 50 miles per hour, so when you snap back up, you might drop it. Could become a projectile.

CARDINAL

Hadn't considered that.

BUNGEE

If a member of the Youth League was impaled by the rod of God dropped by a bungee jumping Cardinal that would definitely make some of them doubt.

CARDINAL

And it could make next Sunday's mass awkward.

(He puts the crosier down. They move toward the precipice. Below the crowd cheers.)

BUNGEE

Deep breaths. Relax. Here goes.

CARDINAL

Wait! Can I ask a question?

BUNGEE

Sure. But make it snappy. You don't want the Youth League to start thinking for themselves.

CARDINAL

(Nervous)

...What... What...

Yes? BUNGEE

What is faith? CARDINAL

...You? Are asking me? BUNGEE

Yes. CARDINAL

...Well, it seems to me that everything is a jump of faith. BUNGEE

Leap. CARDINAL

Leap. BUNGEE

Everything? CARDINAL

Let's say you're an atheist. BUNGEE

I'm not, if you haven't noticed. CARDINAL

But just say you were. BUNGEE

But I'm not. CARDINAL

Doesn't it take a leap of faith to be an atheist? BUNGEE

...I guess. CARDINAL

Let say you want to become a doctor? Doesn't that take a leap of faith? Or a mother. Or anything. I'm guessing. You're guessing. Do you know what the Pope's doing when he talks to thousands in St. Peter Square? BUNGEE

...Guessing? CARDINAL

That's life. You can't find your way unless you strap in, and jump. BUNGEE

CARDINAL

Leap.

BUNGEE

Leap.

CARDINAL

But... Wouldn't the world be far less absurd if we could find a rational way to God?

BUNGEE

No doubt. But in reality you can't add or subtract your way to God. Or no God. You just gotta...

CARDINAL

Leap.

BUNGEE

Or you'll spend your days in incurable uncertainty and perpetual hesitation. The meaning of life is to take action. Without risk... Say it. Without risk...

CARDINAL

...Life has no meaning.

(Far below a crowd cheers.)

BUNGEE

Going down!

(STAGE: CARDINAL shuffles off stage. The bungee cable trails behind him.)

(ZOOM: The CARDINAL shuffles to the edge.)

BUNGEE

Five, four, three, two, one, Jump!

CARDINAL

Leap!

BUNGEE

Whatever.

(STAGE: Off stage the CARDINAL leaps.)

(ZOOM: Arms out, CARDINAL falls out of shot.)

CARDINAL

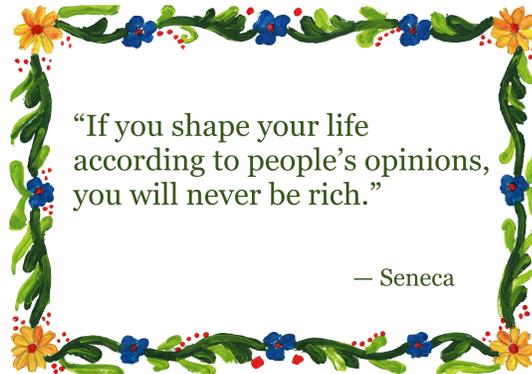
(O.S.)

Holy... Shiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiit!

(ZOOM: BUNGEE watches him fall, from his/her expression we see it didn't end well.)

(STAGE: Suddenly the other end of the bungee cable flies across the stage... unattached.)

(Note To Directors: if you want the Cardinal to live, that's okay with me.)



(An office.)

(A bespectacled THERAPIST enters. This role is played by a man, for reasons that will later become clear.)

THERAPIST

Did he make it?

BUNGEE
(Guilty, clearing throat)

Is it important to the story?

THERAPIST

I...suppose not.

BUNGEE
You know the first time I bungeed, it was amazing, the one hundredth, on the way down, I was actually thinking about my unpaid bills. And then one day I thought to myself, is that all there is to bungee jumping? So I upped the stakes.

THERAPIST

A higher platform?

BUNGEE

Cocaine.

THERAPIST

And how did that go?

BUNGEE

After a while I thought, is that all there is to cocaine?

THERAPIST

And so you moved on to?

BUNGEE

A BMW X3.

THERAPIST

Let me guess, pretty soon you were asking is that all there is to X3s.

BUNGEE

Wow, you're good at this.

THERAPIST

I'm a therapist, it's my job to be good at this.

BUNGEE

So I went for the ultimate high.

THERAPIST

God?

BUNGEE

No. A BMW X7 and fame. That longing gaze you get from people who drive Hondas. That feeling that we matter.

THERAPIST

But isn't fame fleeting?

BUNGEE

Is it?

THERAPIST

I had a couple who came to see me once who said their love life was boring, their jobs mind numbing and their weekends absurdly meaningless. I tried to help but after nearly a year of therapy I'd made little progress. Then one day they told me they'd discovered the meaning of life.

BUNGEE

Really?

THERAPIST

A follower.

BUNGEE

Don't understand.

THERAPIST

They hired someone to follow them.

BUNGEE

Like a stalker?

THERAPIST

No, a professional follower.

BUNGEE

Someone to just follow them around.

THERAPIST

And compliment them. After she dressed in the morning she'd step into the living room where the follower would be waiting to say something nice about her outfit. At breakfast the follower complimented him on his cereal selection. At work the follower constantly told them they were doing a great job.

BUNGEE

But they still had the same mind numbing employment?

THERAPIST

It worked so well they decided to hire ten followers.

BUNGEE

They had ten people following them, all day long?

THERAPIST

In order to bring meaning to their drive to work, they'd have their followers act like paparazzi and drive up beside them and take their pictures.

BUNGEE

That's weird.

THERAPIST

Then they hired fifty, then a hundred.

BUNGEE

But so what. If it brings meaning to their lives.

THERAPIST

Then one day I was at Yankee Stadium when the Jumbotron lit up - It was them.

BUNGEE

What were they doing?

THERAPIST

Having sex.

BUNGEE

You're kidding?

THERAPIST

They decided the only way they could bring meaning into their boring love life was to hack into the Jumbotron and *do it* live in front of 50,000 people.

BUNGEE

What happened?

THERAPIST

The Yankees won.

BUNGEE

Could you help them?

THERAPIST

I called them in for a session but my office was so jam packed with standing-room-only paparazzi I couldn't get anything done.

BUNGEE

But why'd they do it?

THERAPIST

I asked them. They said, no one exists unless they're observed.

BUNGEE

So they had to get someone else's permission to live a meaningful life.

THERAPIST

Hypothetical. Two people. One gives five dollars to a homeless person knowing that God is watching. The other gives five dollars not knowing, perhaps not caring, or not believing there's a God. Aren't both acts equally meaningful?

BUNGEE

Maybe the second one more so because there was no audience.

THERAPIST

As the Roman playwright Seneca said, shape your life according to people's opinions and you'll discover that Yankee fans can be highly judgmental.

BUNGEE

What happened to them?

THERAPIST

Who?

BUNGEE

The couple who thought the gaze of others meant something.

THERAPIST

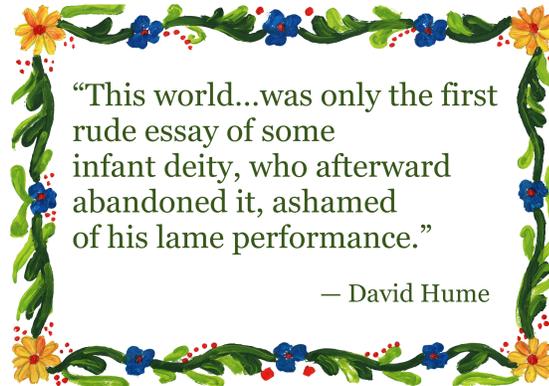
One day the paparazzis failed to social distance, they caught the virus, and a week later they were gone.

BUNGEE
 What were their names?

(Beat. THERAPIST considers.)

THERAPIST
 Huh... For the life of me, I can't remember.

(With a smile, BUNGEE exits.)



(A living room.)

(GUIDANCE COUNSELOR enters taking off an apron. This role is played by a woman for reasons that will become clear.)

COUNSELOR
 (Disappointed)
 You missed her!

THERAPIST
 Who?

COUNSELOR
 Martha Stewart!

THERAPIST
 The cooking show personality?

COUNSELOR
 I was making lunch and there was this knock at the door and I opened it and there stood, for real, Martha Stewart.

THERAPIST
 Why would Martha Stewart come to our house?

COUNSELOR
 She was passing by in her limousine and needed to use the bathroom.

THERAPIST
 The bathroom?

COUNSELOR
 You can understand, she's not the type to use a service station.

THERAPIST
 And so she just knocked on a random door?

COUNSELOR
 Apparently that's what she does. And then we got to talking and I made her lunch.

THERAPIST
 You're kidding.

COUNSELOR
 She even left us a gift. A signed copy of her latest book. Let me get it.

(COUNSELOR exits.)

THERAPIST
(Amazed)
 Wow. Martha Stewart.

COUNSELOR
(O.S.)
 Oh my God!

THERAPIST
 Everything okay?

COUNSELOR
(O.S.)
 Oh my God!

THERAPIST
 Honey, what?

(COUNSELOR enters shell shocked.)

COUNSELOR
 She... She...

THERAPIST
 Who?

COUNSELOR
 Martha Stewart. She left us a... gift.

THERAPIST
 So you said.

COUNSELOR

No. A different gift. It's in the guest bathroom. She... How do I say this, forgot to...

(She pantomimes flushing.)

THERAPIST

Flush?

COUNSELOR

(Grossed out)

I was walking down the hall, and the guest bathroom lights were on and I went in to turn them off and there beside my brand new Martha-Stewart-living-handy-space-saving-bathroom-organizer I saw it... Staring back at me.

THERAPIST

Oh for God's sake. Let a man take care of this.

COUNSELOR

Flush but don't look.

(THERAPIST exits.)

COUNSELOR

(Pulling herself together)

Oh my. Oh my.

THERAPIST

(O.S. Grossed out of his mind)

Oh! My! God!

COUNSELOR

I said, don't look!

(THERAPIST enters paralyzed with fear.)

THERAPIST

How? How? How could one person do all that?

COUNSELOR

She asked to use the little girls room - Little did I suspect.

THERAPIST

(Amazed)

The length.

COUNSELOR

I thought my cooking was rather light and healthy.

THERAPIST

(Amazed)

The breadth.

COUNSELOR

Oh God no, tell me it wasn't my miniature Chicken Mole Tacos.

THERAPIST

(Grossed out)

And she left the seat up. As if she were proud of her accomplishment.

COUNSELOR

(Weak kneed, light headed)

Oh God. Oh God.

THERAPIST

What's wrong?

COUNSELOR

(Breathing heavy)

I'm having a flashback. P.T.S.D.

THERAPIST

Oh come on you've seen it before, maybe not that much in one location, but you've seen it.

COUNSELOR

No, that's the first time I've looked in over a decade.

THERAPIST

You don't look before you flush?

COUNSELOR

Why would I?

THERAPIST

There's a lot of information there.

COUNSELOR

(Grossed out)

Oh my God, you look?

THERAPIST

It's not like I pull up a chair and study it.

COUNSELOR

(Grossed out)

Oh! Oh! Oh! Can't handle this - I married a man who looks.

THERAPIST

How do you do it?

COUNSELOR

Like a normal person, I flush while going. I don't think I can ever sleep with you again.

THERAPIST

What? Why not?

COUNSELOR

Because they're located right next to each other!

THERAPIST

So?

COUNSELOR

It's a design flaw. It's the one thing I've never been able to deal with. That's why I don't believe in God.

THERAPIST

What does God have to do with this?

COUNSELOR

If God were a perfect being - he, she, or they wouldn't have designed the reproductive and waste removal systems right next to each other. And they'd look different.

THERAPIST

How would they look?

COUNSELOR

Yours wouldn't be so ridiculous.

THERAPIST

What?

COUNSELOR

You gotta admit yours does look like a first draft. Like it was designed by infant deity who made it and got frustrated and gave up. An intelligent designer would make it look more... more...

THERAPIST

More?

COUNSELOR

...Art deco.

THERAPIST

Art deco?!

COUNSELOR

And some feathers would be a nice touch. You know, form over function?

THERAPIST

If you don't mind, I'd like to keep a little functionality.

COUNSELOR

What I mean is "art for arts' sake."

THERAPIST

How would yours look?

COUNSELOR

Mine would look exactly as it does - only it'd have a convenient zipper.

THERAPIST

I'm compelled to ask - Where would an intelligent designer put the waste removal system?

COUNSELOR

In some out of the way place, like in the armpit.

THERAPIST

We'd poop from our armpits?

COUNSELOR

And it would come out differently.

THERAPIST

How would it come out?

COUNSELOR

...Deer pellets.

THERAPIST

What?

COUNSELOR

A perfect God would make them look like cute little deer pellets. Simple, non-assuming.

THERAPIST

Let me get this straight, you'd believe in God if we crapped deer pellets from our armpits.

COUNSELOR

Look how perfect bathrooms would be. No need for toilets, no forgetting to flush.

THERAPIST

How would we do it, litter baskets?

COUNSELOR

No. There'd be a little tube and suction system. And it would be hidden behind a secret panel.

THERAPIST

Where would these secret panels be located?

COUNSELOR

All over. Like in your car or in... in voting booths.

THERAPIST

Voting booths?

COUNSELOR

In other words convenient, private locations.

THERAPIST

You've obviously given this a great deal of thought.

COUNSELOR

I was five, my mother took me to a petting zoo and this little fawn walked up and I thought how beautiful, how perfect and meaningful the creation is. And then it pooped. And I thought, why? Why would God make deer poop so pretty, so perfect so... so... edible.

THERAPIST

Oh, my God you didn't!

COUNSELOR

They taste better than Tide laundry pods.

THERAPIST

Please move forward in the story, please.

COUNSELOR

And then I thought, why did God make ours look so... so... nasty. And then I thought, is there an afterlife? Or is it just a dark endless void. Do we dump memory? Are we just flushed and forgotten?

THERAPIST

You thought this when you were five years old while eating deer pellets?

COUNSELOR

At that moment, I promised never to look at mine again.

THERAPIST

(Dawning on him)

Wait. Is this why you don't want a dog?

(COUNSELOR shakes head yes.)

THERAPIST

Or a cat?

(COUNSELOR shakes head yes.)

THERAPIST

Or children?

(COUNSELOR shakes head yes.)

COUNSELOR

At five years old it hit me... I could do better.

THERAPIST

Better than whom?

COUNSELOR

God. I could design a better creation.

THERAPIST
(*Doubtful*)

Could you now.

COUNSELOR
Yes. This creation is pretty awful.

THERAPIST
What would you change, people would poop pellets from their arm pits and...

COUNSELOR
Well, I'd leave out viruses.

THERAPIST
And?

COUNSELOR
Cancer.

THERAPIST
And?

COUNSELOR
Death. Come on admit it, you too could design a better creation.

THERAPIST
Could not. The creation is... is perfect. Wouldn't change a thing.

COUNSELOR
Really. You'd create parasitic bits of RNA or DNA, surrounded by a coat of protein that causes everything from cold sores to Ebola.

THERAPIST
Well...

COUNSELOR
And you'd allow Spina Bifida, and Hypoplastic Left Heart Syndrome. And of course you'd have no problem with asteroids, ice ages and random extinctions every few million years.

THERAPIST
They must have a purpose.

COUNSELOR
What? To make us miserable?

THERAPIST
Then why are they here?

COUNSELOR
Good question, why?

THERAPIST

Because... God couldn't make the best of all possible creations - that's heaven.

COUNSELOR

So what did God do? Give us the fifty-seventh best possible creation? Is this the one-hundred and eighth best possible creation? This world isn't even close to the best of all possible worlds or we wouldn't need science, or therapy, or ventilators.

THERAPIST

Is it God that causes these problems? Or us? We build large cities on fault lines. We stack people on top of each other so when a quake or a virus hits there's more damage, more deaths. If you built your home underwater would you blame God when you drowned?

COUNSELOR

No, I'd build a water-proof house.

THERAPIST

Then why isn't most of the world doing that?

COUNSELOR

Because too many of us are still living under the illusion that the creation was designed for us.

THERAPIST

I still say the creation is perfect.

COUNSELOR

Then why the hell are you wearing glasses?

(Beat.)

THERAPIST

Okay, perhaps I'd change a few things.

COUNSELOR

Like?

THERAPIST

Ah...

COUNSELOR

Give me one thing you'd change.

THERAPIST

...Banjos. I'd leave banjos out of the creation. No one likes banjos. You'll put up with a song or two but after that it gets old fast.

COUNSELOR

You're right, the creation would be better without banjos.

(A beat.)

THERAPIST

So what do we do?

COUNSELOR

Stop believing that we were born into a world that was made for us, and admit, at least from our point of view, it's a less than perfect design. And start creating a world that's right for us.

THERAPIST

That would bring meaning to life.

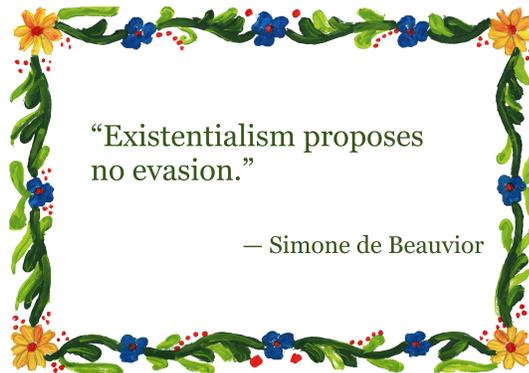
COUNSELOR

And to think, we owe this revelation to Martha Stewart.
(Beat) I'll go clean the kitchen.

THERAPIST

I'll clean the tube and suction system in the voting booth.

(THERAPIST exits.)



(A high school counselor's office.)

(A school bell rings. Enter a STUDENT with great potential but realizing none of it.)

STUDENT

Can't.

COUNSELOR

Why not?

STUDENT

I'm dyslexic. Code: 4-3-4. It's a learning disability.

COUNSELOR

I'm a high school counselor, I'm well aware of what dyslexia is.

STUDENT

And don't expect me to pay attention during this meeting.

COUNSELOR

Why not?

STUDENT

I'm ADHD. Code: 1414.

COUNSELOR

Concerning your math class//

STUDENT

Can't. I have Dyscalculia.

COUNSELOR

Which is?

STUDENT

A fear of math. Code: 3-point-1-4-1-5-9.

COUNSELOR

You're also flunking English.

STUDENT

Can't.

COUNSELOR

Why not?

STUDENT

I have E.L. James Disorder.

COUNSELOR

Which is?

STUDENT

The total inability to write. Code: Sixty-nine.

COUNSELOR

I don't want to be critical but//

STUDENT

Can't. I have Critaphobia. A deep fear of assessment. Code: 5-4-1-4.

COUNSELOR

Can we talk about what happened during gym class?

STUDENT

Can't. I have anti-social personality disorder. Code: 8-7-3-1. And anxiety attacks brought on by round objects like volleyballs. Code: zero, zero, zero.

COUNSELOR

What are these codes?

STUDENT

They're from the "Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders." My psychiatrist uses them for billing purposes.

COUNSELOR

Maybe I could speak with your parents.

STUDENT

Can't, mom's got Rumination Disorder.

COUNSELOR

Let me guess, the tendency to focus on one's own distress as opposed to solutions.

STUDENT

Code: 9-1-1.

COUNSELOR

Your father?

STUDENT

Stockholm syndrome, brought on by obsessive-compulsive disorder, brought on by premature ejaculation. Codes: 7-6-7, 7-9-8 and 5-4-3-2-1.

COUNSELOR

How can you find the meaning of life if you spend your days evading responsibility.

STUDENT

Can't take responsibility. Kardashian Disorder.

COUNSELOR

Let's try this a different way, ah, what do you want to be when you grow up?

STUDENT

Oh that's easy, I want to be an existentialist philosopher like Sartre or Simone de Beauvoir.

COUNSELOR

(Shocked)

...Excuse me?

STUDENT

I'm taking this philosophy class that I'm flunking because I suffer from depression brought on by Schopenhauer Syndrome, but when I'm not on my meds I think I'd like to be an existential philosopher.

COUNSELOR

How to you intend to get there?

STUDENT

Don't know, that's your responsibility.

COUNSELOR

...Do you even know what existentialism is?

STUDENT

(Rapid fire)

It's a philosophy that teaches that there are no alibis, or gods or devils to blame for our condition; there's no heredity, no race, no parents to blame, no gender, no wrong-headed education system, no childhood trauma and no learning disabilities to blame. We are fully responsible for our nature and our choices. We must take an active role in forging our own destiny because existence precedes essence. In other words, we come into being without purpose so we must create our purpose and thus the meaning of our unique life.

(COUNSELOR is at a loss for words.)

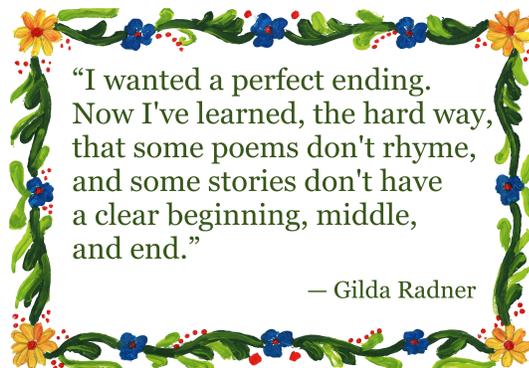
COUNSELOR

Ah... Have you ever thought about what you're saying?

STUDENT

Can't. I suffer from Trump Syndrome.

(Black out.)



(Writing professor's office.)

(The STUDENT is now a mature college writer. Enter an unkept vehement writing PROFESSOR.)

PROFESSOR

Congratulations! This is the best statement of purpose I've ever read.

STUDENT

Worked long and hard.

PROFESSOR

I think all of our students should read about how you finally realized that the world wasn't going to accommodate you, how you embraced existentialism, took responsibility and found meaning. Inspirational.

STUDENT

(Hopeful)

So... I'm accepted into the writing program?

PROFESSOR

The best creative writing MFA in the world.

STUDENT

Wow.

PROFESSOR

But...

STUDENT

But?

PROFESSOR

There *is* a problem.

STUDENT

Oh?

PROFESSOR

Your short story.

STUDENT

Didn't like it?

PROFESSOR

It's perfect.

STUDENT

Perfect?

PROFESSOR

Yes!

STUDENT

Wow.

PROFESSOR

Too perfect.

STUDENT

What?

PROFESSOR

It adheres to all the rules of storytelling. It's a flawlessly structured template which every short story, novel, movie, even sitcom should emulate.

STUDENT
(*Puzzled*)

So... I am accepted?

PROFESSOR

You are.

STUDENT

Oh good.

PROFESSOR

If.

STUDENT

If?

PROFESSOR

If you admit it's bullshit.

STUDENT

Excuse me?

PROFESSOR

What you've written is bullshit. All storytelling is bullshit.

STUDENT
(*Confused*)

Professor, this has been a dream of mine for years. I want to write great stories that right social wrongs and inspire people to be better people.

PROFESSOR

You do know novels, movies, poems are *just* words, right?

STUDENT

But those words add up to life.

PROFESSOR

No, they're just a bunch of crap writers make up.

STUDENT

What?

PROFESSOR

They're not real.

STUDENT

But//

PROFESSOR

Real life is merely a muddle of chaotic, irregular, fragmentary events. Real life has about as much plot as a robo call list.

STUDENT

But you wrote that story about that writer who walks out on his balcony to find Franz Kafka and sets out to find the meaning of life. And finds it!

PROFESSOR

You believe that crap?

STUDENT

Well, the autumn leaves in every scene was obviously symbolism, but the rest of it was based at least in part on reality.

PROFESSOR

You believe in Santa Claus?

STUDENT

No.

PROFESSOR

Then you shouldn't believe in stories. In real life there are no satisfying narratives, no neatly packed happy endings, no gift-wrapped love. Do you know the number one reason for mental illness?

STUDENT

Our screwed up society?

PROFESSOR

Writers. Screenwriters, novelists, song writers. They spend their lives confabulating beginnings, middles and ends.

STUDENT

But life *does* have a beginning middle and end.

PROFESSOR

But it doesn't add up to a plot. Life is ragged, complicated, sordid, inconsistent and piled with a shocking number of tangents. But above all, do you know what life is?

STUDENT

What?

PROFESSOR

Inconclusive.

STUDENT

You're kinda rocking my world here. I need stories.

PROFESSOR

And they make us paranoid.

STUDENT

That too?

PROFESSOR

What does every story have? A threat, a complication, or a conflict. Read enough and you begin to think that's also true in real life.

STUDENT

But that *is* true in real life.

PROFESSOR

No, real life doesn't have that much in the way of conflict. Most of our troubles are borrowed. And the troubles and conflicts that do exist, we can avoid if we give it a little thought. Unlike the characters in stories.

STUDENT

But we learn from great characters.

PROFESSOR

What great characters? Name one.

STUDENT

Ah. Ah. King Lear.

PROFESSOR

What can you learn from King Lear? He was a rotten father and a shitty administrator.

STUDENT

Hamlet.

PROFESSOR

Would you hire Hamlet as a crime scene investigator?

STUDENT

We're supposed to learn from their errors. Great writers can teach us.

PROFESSOR

Writers are horrible people. If they were good people they wouldn't be writers.

STUDENT

Some are good.

PROFESSOR

Name one.

STUDENT

I like Simone de Beauvoir.

PROFESSOR

She seduced innocent girls and passed them off to Sartre who broke their hearts and dumped them.

STUDENT

Sylvia Plath.

PROFESSOR

Mood swings, impulse control issues, couldn't operate ovens.

STUDENT

Franz Kafka.

PROFESSOR

A paranoid nut case with delusions of persecution.

STUDENT

Confucius.

PROFESSOR

Wasn't nice to his wife and children.

STUDENT

Buddha.

PROFESSOR

Abandoned his wife and children.

STUDENT

I still think writers and stories are important.

PROFESSOR

After going to the theatre, you go home and your wife disappoints because she's not as attractive as the actress up on stage. Read a novel and you realize that your husband isn't as exciting as the muscular hero dashing through the pages. Go to a movie, fade out, the end, walk out into the light of day and the reality that your life doesn't measure up to Tom Cruise's. Then we become depressed because we don't know that all stories are written for children.

STUDENT

All?

PROFESSOR

All.

STUDENT

'War and Peace.'

PROFESSOR

Children's story.

STUDENT

'Emma.'

PROFESSOR
Children's story.

STUDENT
'The Bible.'

PROFESSOR
Young adult fiction.

STUDENT
Obviously this MFA program is not for me.

(The STUDENT turns.)

PROFESSOR
You know I'm right.

STUDENT
Do not.

PROFESSOR
Do you know when I and you and everyone made this discovery?

STUDENT
Everyone?

PROFESSOR
When we were forced to shelter in place. From our solitary confinement, our time out, we saw that the distractions that make up our lives were just that, distractions. And the illusion of story: getting up, going to work, coming home, socializing, obligations, hierarchies, departmental feuds, bullshit-filled breakout sessions, were all taken away. What was left? Our 'self,' sitting in front of our computers not wearing pants. Suddenly we came face-to-face with the plotless reality that is life.

STUDENT
So, I should stop reading? Stop going to movies?

PROFESSOR
No, enjoy a good book. See movies, laugh, cry, but if you're looking for some overarching structure to untangle the ragged, complicated, paradoxical, joyful inconsistency that is life, you'll be disappointed. You can only find meaning when you admit that you will not defeat your enemies in this lifetime. Virtue will not always be rewarded. The shining prince seldom arrives in the nick of time. And that no curtain will ring down on a wonderful confession from your absent father who suddenly shows up and tells you he loves you.

(Beat.)

STUDENT
(*Overwhelmed*)

Writers must suffer a lot of things listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders?

PROFESSOR

Why do you think we drink so much. Cause we know that real life will never live up to the brilliant bullshit we peddle. And this counts for painters and poets and playwrights too. Do you know the only art that even comes close to reality?

STUDENT

Which?

PROFESSOR

Collage making.

STUDENT

What?

PROFESSOR

You know those artists who glue a bunch of crap together? That's reality. We are only bit players in a massive Darwinian amphitheater, which does not have heroic significance, nor a noble end.

STUDENT

So what do we do?

PROFESSOR

The most we can do is have a purpose everyday, if possible a purpose every hour. But no over all plan. For it you have no overall plan you'll never be disappointed. The meaning of life differs from human to human, from day to day and from hour to hour. But don't expect these purpose filled days and hours to add up to a chain of events. And above all, don't try to deconstruct life, just as with a play or novel 'unpacking' it, as English professors like to say, only kills it. No play, novel or life survives deconstruction. If you can do that, you will own the tragic optimism that allows you to find the perception of meaning, not an overall meaning, but a meaning just for this given moment.

(*Beat.*)

STUDENT

So I'm accepted into your MFA in brilliant bullshit.

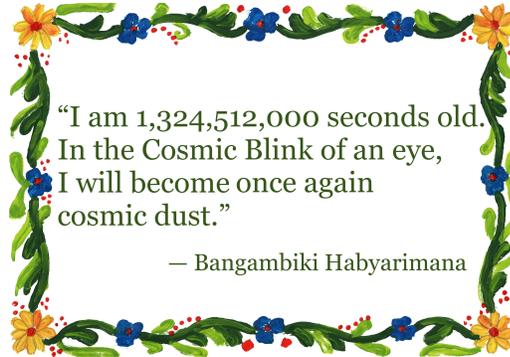
PROFESSOR

The best bullshit MFA in the world. Now, let's get drunk, break innocent hearts, ruin our marriages, abandon our partners and children and make up a bunch of beautiful inspiring well plotted bullshit that has nothing to do with real life.

(*Beat.*)

STUDENT

I'll go get us a six pack.

(The STUDENT exits.)*(Sidewalk café.)**(PROFESSOR is now with the DANCER.)*

PROFESSOR

That was a great meal.

DANCER

Perfect.

PROFESSOR

What shall we do now?

DANCER

How about if we pick up a New York Times and go to my place and binge watch 'Ballers?'

PROFESSOR

That's a wonderful idea// Wait. Do you realize what just happened?

DANCER

No.

PROFESSOR

Just now, right here at this little Italian sidewalk café... we became... a couple.

DANCER

(Dawning)

Oh my, you're right.

PROFESSOR

A minute ago we were just two strangers on their fourth date. But now we're...

DANCER
(Amazed)

Like, official.

PROFESSOR

I've always said that life was a muddle of chaotic, irregular, fragmentary events, but maybe I was wrong. I mean, for the first time in my life, I got it right. We followed a story. On our first Match-dot-com-meet-and-greet//

DANCER

We played it cool.

PROFESSOR

On our second date//

DANCER

We both swiped right.

PROFESSOR

And on our third date//

DANCER

We screwed like bunnies on crack.

PROFESSOR

Just like you're supposed to.

DANCER

And then...

PROFESSOR

When you said let's pick up a New York Times.

DANCER

And binge watch 'Ballers'?

PROFESSOR

It seemed so... so...

DANCER

Meant to be.

PROFESSOR

As if there was in fact an order and structure to the universe. And if it works out//

DANCER

Which I'm sure it will//

PROFESSOR

Tomorrow we'll announce on Facebook and Instagram//

DANCER

That we're a couple//

PROFESSOR
And move in together//

DANCER
And start eating off each other's plates//

PROFESSOR
And start//

DANCER
Finishing each other's sentences.

PROFESSOR
And have long conversations//

DANCER
About breaking up//

PROFESSOR
And... Wait, what?

DANCER
Huh?

PROFESSOR
What did you say?

DANCER
I was just following your train of thought.

PROFESSOR
No, you said something different.

DANCER
We'll announce that we're a couple.

PROFESSOR
And start eating off each other's plates - But you said something else.

DANCER
Oh, we'll break up.

PROFESSOR
What?

DANCER
Oh sweetheart, if we're going to be honest with each other, we have to admit that at some point 'we' will come to an end.

PROFESSOR
Yes, but...

DANCER
We'll break up or go through a messy divorce, if not, one of us will drop dead or shoot the other.

PROFESSOR
(*Confused*)

...This is kind of a romantic moment.

DANCER
(*Tender*)

It sure is.

PROFESSOR
And if it's all right I'd rather not talk about//

DANCER
Death?

PROFESSOR
Or divorce or//

DANCER
Dismemberment?

PROFESSOR
My god, why did you say that?

DANCER
You mentioned death and divorce - the next logical step would be dismemberment. They all start with Ds.

PROFESSOR
(*Getting frustrated*)
I'm trying to say that I love you.

DANCER
And I love you. So let's set a date.

PROFESSOR
(*Confused*)
...To get married?

DANCER
To end it.

PROFESSOR
Why?

DANCER
(*Optimistic*)
This is the most wonderful moment of my life. I finally found a great lover, who is also a Cowboys fan, but who unlike most Cowboy fans knows how to put the toilet seat down, so let's set an expiration date. How about one year from today?

PROFESSOR
You give 'us' only twelve months? Your expectations are that low?

DANCER

The key to happiness and the meaning of life is to set really low expectations. *(Kindly)* That's what I did when I met you.

PROFESSOR

Excuse me?

DANCER

I've had numerous relationships that I thought would last. I dated this crazy writer who ran off to find Franz Kafka. And then I dated an insane Trekkie who would only love me if I dressed up as Princess Troyius.

PROFESSOR

Who?

DANCER

The heir to the throne of the Pre-Crustacean Empire. Both ended in disappointment. But with you I set my expectations nice and low and was pleasantly surprised.

PROFESSOR

(Hurt)

How low did you set them?

DANCER

Did it ever occur to you how unnecessary we are in the grand scheme of things?

PROFESSOR

Don't change the subject, how low did you set them?

DANCER

We're thrown into existence without our permission. We live on an insignificant planet, full of earthquakes and viruses - obviously we're unwelcome. In such a situation high expectations only lead to depression and defeatism and//

PROFESSOR

Please don't say dismemberment.

DANCER

Don't you see, if we set low expectations and an endpoint everyday'll be special, every moment magnificent because we know it's not going to last.

PROFESSOR

I want to introduce you to my mother - How do I do that? "Hi Mom, here's the person I love, and oh, by the way, it's going to end badly."

DANCER

No, you say, this is the person I love and we're not going to pretend it's going to last forever, because mom, the person I love is terminally ill.

...What? Are you...? PROFESSOR

Yes. DANCER

Really? PROFESSOR

Yes. DANCER

I mean, really?! Oh my God. PROFESSOR

Yes. In the sense that *we're all* terminal. DANCER

I think I'm having chest pains. PROFESSOR

Sweetheart, are you ready for the best year you've ever had? I mean the very very very best? That's three verys. That's a lot of verys. DANCER

But... I... need more. PROFESSOR

Okay, we'll pretend we'll last forever. We'll go to my place, skim the New York Times and mindlessly binge watch a show that we'll forget two days later. (*Upbeat*)...Or we could go to my place and really read the New York Times, really enjoy *Ballers*, and make the evening a mind-blowing awesome experience that'll last! DANCER
(*Disappointed*)

Forever? PROFESSOR

Until we die and dump memory. DANCER

Stop! Just stop it! PROFESSOR

I have the Coronavirus. DANCER

What?? PROFESSOR

Yes, Corona. DANCER

PROFESSOR

That's, like, highly contagious?

DANCER

That's how we should live our lives! As if we have a deadly contagious disease and could drop at any moment.

PROFESSOR

Oh my God.

DANCER

Consider the lilies of the field.

PROFESSOR

Screw the lilies! I'm not in love with a lily, I'm in love with you and I want it to last.

DANCER

Say it, "I'm terminal." Say it.

PROFESSOR

(This isn't easy)

...I'm... I'm...

DANCER

You can do it.

PROFESSOR

I'm... Terminal.

DANCER

No, say it like you mean it.

PROFESSOR

I'm terminal.

DANCER

With conviction!

PROFESSOR

(Distraught)

I'm going to die! *(Pointing at air)* See that mosquito? It's going to die! Look! An ant! It's going to die!

(He stomps on the ant.)

PROFESSOR

What do you know, sooner than it thought!

DANCER

(Joyful)

And in 1.1 billion years the sun will consume all its hydrogen fuel and become so hot it'll boil the oceans and life will disappear!

PROFESSOR
(*Anxiety attack*)

Oh my God, you're right it all ends in death, divorce and dismemberment.

DANCER

Isn't it a wonderful life! Come on, let's have a great evening before we disappear into nothingness!

PROFESSOR
(*Distraught*)

But... but...

DANCER

Oh, almost forgot, I gotta stop at the drug store. I have to pick up my medication.

PROFESSOR

Medication?

DANCER

Techlaliezeen.

PROFESSOR

What's it for? And please don't say Coronavirus.

DANCER

Oh darling. Aaaaaaaachoo!

(*DANCER sneezes.*)

DANCER

Why else would someone be taking Techlaliezeen?

(*PROFESSOR puts on an mask.*)

DANCER

(*Looking up*)

Oh! The moon! Isn't it romantic and... (*Hinting*) And...?

PROFESSOR
(*Distraught*)

And... And...

DANCER

You can do it. (*Hinting*) And...

PROFESSOR

Temporary.

DANCER

But for the time being... It's *our* moon! Shall we dance?

PROFESSOR

What?

DANCER

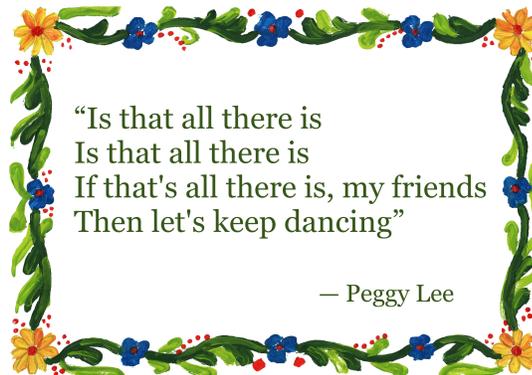
You can only find the meaning of life after you dance a little.

PROFESSOR

(Not so sure)

Okay.

(Music. The DANCER and the PROFESSOR try to be in the moment. They dance off. Seconds later, off stage, a horn, screeching brakes and a horrible crash as their bodies are dismembered.)



(As in the beginning, two condo balconies.)

(The WRITER is now dressed as a Cockroach. Why? Perhaps it's Halloween or maybe he just woke up that way.)

(The WRITER/COCKROACH and FRANZ look down on the park.)

WRITER/COCKROACH

Did you see that?!

FRANZ

What?

WRITER/COCKROACH

That poor couple. They were dancing in the street when they were hit by a speeding ice cream truck.

FRANZ

And dismembered. Gross.

WRITER/COCKROACH

I guess that proves it, life is absurd.

(The WRITER really sees FRANZ.)

WRITER/COCKROACH
(Shocked)

Wait. It's you!

FRANZ

Excuse me?

WRITER/COCKROACH
I've been searching every library in the city.

FRANZ

Do I know you?

WRITER/COCKROACH
It's me, ah... Stephen King.

FRANZ

Ohhhh. The broom.

WRITER/COCKROACH

Where've you been?

FRANZ

Here. There. Everywhere.

WRITER/COCKROACH
When I couldn't find you I traveled the world looking for the answer.

FRANZ

To?

WRITER/COCKROACH
The meaning of life. Went to India, climbed a mountain and met with a sadhu.

FRANZ

And did you find meaning?

WRITER/COCKROACH
No. What he said sounded like Bob Dylan lyrics so I knew that couldn't be right. So I flew to Tibet and sat under a tree with a Lama.

FRANZ

And did you find meaning?

WRITER/COCKROACH
No. Got struck by lightning. So I got a Shinto bell and rang it while spinning a prayer wheel, while taking communion, while fasting.

FRANZ

And did you//

WRITER/COCKROACH

No. Then I took an ocean cruise, bought an Apple watch, Bungee jumped, watched people have sex on the Jumbotron in Yankee Stadium, earned an MFA, and was impaled by the falling rod of God.

FRANZ

And did//

WRITER/COCKROACH

No. But then I went to the library and read all your books and short stories. And then I walked out into the night, looked up and asked the universe what does it all mean.

FRANZ

And...?

WRITER/COCKROACH

Nothing. But then it occurred to me, you're right, it's all absurd! (*Proud*) What do you think about that?

FRANZ

I think...

WRITER/COCKROACH
(*Hopeful*)

Yes?

FRANZ

You're full of it.

WRITER/COCKROACH

But you're Kafka. Right?

FRANZ

Yes.

WRITER/COCKROACH

You wrote that we're born covered with slime, spend our lives in futile and hopeless pursuit of unobtainable goals and die without knowing why we're here in the first place.

FRANZ

Some of my stories had happy endings.

WRITER/COCKROACH

Some?

FRANZ

Okay. One.

WRITER/COCKROACH

Why would you write that unless you knew existence was absurd?

FRANZ

Simple. Bad childhood.

WRITER/COCKROACH

What?

FRANZ

Had an awful childhood. And to top it off, I was sick most of the time. Suffered from migraines, depression, anxiety, insomnia and boils, which impacted my love life. Would you date someone with big chronic boils?

WRITER/COCKROACH

But that day you tried to jump.

FRANZ

Sorry. We all have bad days. You know in the end, on my death bed, I asked that all my writing be burned. Against my wishes it wasn't.

WRITER/COCKROACH

Thankfully.

FRANZ

No. I knew the trouble it'd cause. The universe is not absurd. The universe is simply... unintelligible.

WRITER/COCKROACH

The difference?

FRANZ

To say it's unintelligible is to admit we don't see existence as nature sees it.

WRITER/COCKROACH

But what about things like viruses? They're absurd.

FRANZ

Our bodies may follow nature, but our intellect, if we use it to capacity, is an unintended mutation that can create things the universe never intended.

WRITER/COCKROACH

Like?

FRANZ

Beauty. Nature creates flowers to attract bees, but nature doesn't know what beauty is. We are awed at its power, but the universe doesn't know what awe or power is. Nor does it understand other human creations like justice, kindness, or $E=MC^2$. Why? Cause nature doesn't understand its nature.

WRITER/COCKROACH

So how do we find meaning in an unintelligible universe?

FRANZ

Martha Stewart.

WRITER/COCKROACH

Excuse me?

FRANZ

What's Martha Stewart's most important ingredient?

WRITER/COCKROACH

Don't know. Profit?

FRANZ

No, her most important ingredient is 'meaning.' Leave that out and it's all just fast food. Add meaning and a meal becomes a seder, noodles become longevity, wine the blood of Christ, dumplings wealth, chocolate... love.

WRITER/COCKROACH

(Confused by life)

I'm talking with Franz Kafka about food preparation while wearing a cockroach outfit and the universe isn't absurd?

FRANZ

Don't get me wrong, we're still alone in a cold dark universe.

WRITER/COCKROACH

Ah, there's the Kafka I want to hear.

FRANZ

Yes, it's utterly dark, and we weren't designed to deal with the dark. We're also not designed to walk upright, but now that we've done it, there's no going back, so we have to invent spinal fusions and C-sections. And we weren't designed to stand outside of nature. As James Joyce said, nature is quite unromantic. It's we who put romance into her, which is an egotism. But again because there's no going back, we must invent other egotisms, like leaps of faith and philosophy, and purpose, as well as novels, poems and dumb TV shows like *Ballers*. But here is the key.

WRITER/COCKROACH

Oh jeez, here it comes.

FRANZ

What?

WRITER/COCKROACH

The formulaic answer. To quote you, "No matter how good the writer, the most the protagonist achieves is a formulaic answer and resignation." *(Sarcastically)* So what's your simple formulaic answer... what? Humans need to be part of something bigger than themselves.

FRANZ

No, you don't need to be a part of something bigger. Life is single-use, like Q-tips or straws and that stupid half spoon half fork thing you get at KFC.

WRITER/COCKROACH

Then the simple formulaic answer is what? Ah... Friendship.

FRANZ

A few friends are good, but too many people are just petty untalented narcissists - You don't want to get caught up in their tiny world.

WRITER/COCKROACH

I should've seen it coming, the simple answer is... Love.

FRANZ

Sure. Love's important. If I'd had a few more lovers to while away the hours, I never would've written half that crap I wrote. And that bullshit story about a man turning into a Cockroach//

WRITER/COCKROACH

"Monstrous vermin."

FRANZ

Whatever. Do you think that was written by a person with a healthy sex life?

WRITER/COCKROACH

I've got it. Standard formulaic answer... Art.

FRANZ

No, we have way too much art, we have enough paintings and plays and pottery to last a thousand years. We don't need any more. What we don't have enough of is... artists.

WRITER/COCKROACH

Wait, we have too much art but too few artists?

FRANZ

What do artists do? They take the raw flowing footage of nature and translate it into terms they can make sense of. Like a dancer's leap they momentarily transcend nature's grasp and create meaning and happiness and perhaps even hope. We need to teach people to be their own artists. And yet, look what we do with arts programs, rip them from our schools and universities like weeds from our gardens. Don't get me wrong, STEM classes are fine. But let's say one day all these STEM majors finally find an all-encompassing, grand unified theory that links all the aspects of the universe. Do you know what the universe will be on that day?

WRITER/COCKROACH

What?

FRANZ

Still unintelligible and indifferent to our antics. From the first morning of its creation to the moment it all supernovas, nature and the universe will always be a stranger. The massive trumpets of the universe are blasting the news, "none of it has meaning." So let's pretend not to hear it by creating our tiny speck of meaning each day, each hour. To ask the universe, the meaning of life is the only true absurdity, for you should never ask strangers the meaning of life. Instead, be an artist, for artists improve this small plot of earth you've been given by sprinkling it with meaning.

(Beat, the WRITER gets it.)

WRITER/COCKROACH

And death?

FRANZ

The dancer, no matter how talented, can only momentarily transcend gravity. In the end, nature will always defeat art.

(The WRITER takes a breath.)

WRITER/COCKROACH

Thank you, Franz Kafka.

FRANZ

No, thank Martha Stewart. Just don't let her use your toilet.

(Far off the roll of thunder. They look up at the darkening sky.)

WRITER/COCKROACH

Ah, the stranger approaches.

FRANZ

Let's protect ourselves by creating our own unique, positive, amusing, flexible, meaning so we can enjoy the art of living.

(ZOOM: The look out at the coming storm.)

(STAGE: A single autumn leaf floats to earth. A leaf that, according to humans, is... beautiful, but to the universe completely meaningless.)

FRANZ

Ah, there, the nebulous, transcendental... it.

(Fade out.)

The End