

# **GOOD NIGHT, OSCAR**

**BY DOUG WRIGHT**

**TRW**

GOOD NIGHT, OSCAR  
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*Good Night, Oscar* received its World Premiere at The Goodman Theatre (Robert Falls, Artistic Director; Roche Schulfer, Executive Director) in Chicago, IL on March 21, 2022. The production was directed by Lisa Peterson. Scenic design by Rachel Hauck. Costume design by Emilio Sosa. Lighting design by Carolina Ortiz Herrera and Ben Stanton. Sound design by Andre Pluess. Wig, hair, & make-up design by J. Jared Janas. Music supervision by Chris Fenwick. The dramaturg was Jacqueline E. Lawton. The creative consultant was Tramell Tillman. The production stage manager was Kimberly Ann McCann. The stage manager was Mario (Mars) Wolfe.

The cast was as follows:

JUNE LEVANT.....Emily Bergl  
 BOB SARNOFF.....Peter Grosz  
 OSCAR LEVANT.....Sean Hayes  
 JACK PARR.....Ben Rappaport  
 MAX WEINBAUM.....Ethan Slater  
 ALVIN FINNEY.....Tramell Tillman  
 GEORGE GERSHWIN.....John Zdrojeski

*Good Night, Oscar* received its Broadway Premiere at The Belasco Theatre in New York, NY on April 24, 2023. The production was directed by Lisa Peterson. Scenic design by Rachel Hauck. Costume design by Emilio Sosa. Lighting design by Carolina Ortiz Herrera and Ben Stanton. Sound design by Andre Pluess. Wig, hair, & make-up design by J. Jared Janas. Music supervision by Chris Fenwick. The dramaturg was Jacqueline E. Lawton. The creative consultant was Tramell Tillman. The production stage manager was David Lurie-Perret.

The cast was as follows:

JUNE LEVANT.....Emily Bergl  
 BOB SARNOFF.....Peter Grosz  
 OSCAR LEVANT.....Sean Hayes  
 JACK PARR.....Ben Rappaport  
 MAX WEINBAUM.....Alex Wyse  
 ALVIN FINNEY.....Marchánt Davis  
 GEORGE GERSHWIN.....John Zdrojeski

**Cast of Characters**  
 (in order of appearance)  
 (1W, 6M)

**BOB SARNOFF**

Expensively dressed in a dark suit, 40s or 50s. The reigning president of NBC during television's Golden Age.

**JACK PAAR**

Bob Sarnoff's contemporary, and America's smoothest talker. 30s or 40s.

**JUNE LEVANT**

Attractive and gracious under pressure, mid-40s. Seemingly put-upon, she actually has a core of steel.

**ALVIN FINNEY**

A young medical orderly working in the mental ward at Mt. Sinai, with a droll sense of humor and serious ambition. 20s or 30s. African-American.

**MAX WEINBAUM**

Jack Paar's new production assistant. 20s. A young man whose ingratiating enthusiasm is matched only by his comic ineptitude.

**OSCAR LEVANT**

Just over 50, he's got the face of a movie gangster, the posture of a sad sack, and enough scabrous wit for the whole Algonquin Round Table.

**GEORGE GERSHWIN**

Charming and rakish. 30s. He's got the tapered physique of an athlete, a winning grin, and the most celebrated career in American popular music.

**The play is performed without an intermission.**

## Setting

1958.

The play takes place at NBC Television Studios in Burbank in Jack Paar's dressing room, Oscar Levant's dressing room, and on the set of *The Tonight Show with Jack Paar*.

The design needn't be scrupulously authentic; a few well-placed pieces of mid-century, modernist furniture can go a great distance in representing the various locales.

In her exquisite (and Tony nominated) design for the original production, Rachel Hauck set NBC and its attendant offices on a giant soundstage. Over the course of the play, walls, furniture and other scenic elements were stripped away until the play's final scene, which occurred in the vast studio, its walls covered in soundproof padding, resembling the padded room of a mid-century mental hospital. It was a haunting and profound effect.

Designers are encouraged to use their own imaginations to come up with visual elements that connote not only the backstage world of *The Tonight Show*, but of Oscar's reality as well, namely sanitariums of the era.

## Playwright's Note

*Good Night, Oscar* is not a strictly factual account. The narrative conflates several events, most notably Oscar's interment at Mount Sinai while filming the television program *Words About Music*, (when he took a limousine from the mental health facility to the studio to tape the show), and one of his many appearances on *The Tonight Show with Jack Paar*. Scene Five is not a faithful recreation of an actual *Tonight Show* episode; it is composed of many of Oscar's most famous remarks, drawn from a variety of sources: *Information Please*, *Words About Music*, his great MGM films, and his own writing, notably *A Smattering of Ignorance*, *Memoirs of an Amnesiac*, and *The Unimportance of Being Oscar*, as well as remarks I have crafted on his behalf.

## Note on Music

Royalty information and song credits for the music required for use in your production of *Good Night, Oscar*, along with recorded tracks (including the optional recording of Sean Hayes performing the piano solo in *Rhapsody in Blue*) will be provided with your license to perform the play.

## Special Thanks

The author would like to extend his heartfelt thanks to the following individuals not cited in the production credits who contributed invaluable to the play's evolution: Leigh Silverman, Jonathan Green, Arlene Hellerman, Michael Tisdale, Patrick Herold, Scott Icenogle, the entire Clement family especially David. And to the incomparable Sean Hayes, whose talent, passion and keen insight convinced me that Oscar Levant merited rescuing from the dustbin of popular culture and deserved to be center-stage in a play of his very own.

## PRE-SHOW

*In case it's required, the following pre-show announcement was used in the original production.*

*A burst of static, then old television theme show music from the 1950s floods the airwaves. We hear an ANNOUNCER trill:*

**ANNOUNCER**

And now — live from NBC Television Studios in Hollywood — please welcome the stars of *Father Knows Best*, Robert Young and Jane Wyatt!

**ROBERT**

Hello, Jane. We've got some announcements for the folks in the house tonight, don't we?

**JANE**

We sure do, Bob! All about their health and safety.

**ROBERT**

Don't forget to locate the nearest exit, in case of an emergency.

**JANE**

Photographs or recordings of any kind are strictly prohibited.

**ROBERT**

Here's a curious one, Jane. "Refrain from using your phones."

**JANE**

Why, that's absurd, Bob. Who'd bring their telephone to the theater?

**ROBERT**

Well, you can't. The extension cord's not long enough. But speaking of health and safety, Jane—

**JANE**

This announcement has been brought to you by CAMELS. More Doctors smoke CAMELS than any other cigarette!

**ROBERT**

Now sit back, relax and enjoy the show!

*Music out.*

## SCENE 1

1958. JACK PAAR's dressing room at The Tonight Show, broadcasting from NBC Studios in Burbank in lieu of its usual home at the Hudson Theater in New York City.

Swank, mid-century modern. A vanity. A closet full of pressed suits. A sitting area for guests. A few boxes, half unpacked, suggesting JACK has only recently taken up residence here.

Harvard-educated and bespectacled, BOB SARNOFF argues with TV host JACK PAAR. JACK has a dimpled chin and folksy demeanor that conceals his ambition.

**BOB**

His sound check was set for five o'clock. *(Checking his watch)* It's after six—

**JACK**

He's not punctual; everybody knows it.

**BOB**

Did you call him?

**JACK**

Helen's been ringing him for the last hour.

**BOB**

Last week, he stiffed *The Eddie Fisher Show*. The Lennon Sisters had to sing on the fly—

**JACK**

He wouldn't stand me up; he's my friend.

**BOB**

I want a back-up plan. Xavier Cugat's in town, playing at the Coconut Grove—

**JACK**

*Xavier Cugat?* My west coast debut? Are you kidding me?

**BOB**

—He's the King of the Rhumba—

**JACK**

—For heaven's sake! Bob—

**BOB**

—and if we call him, he can be here in ten—

**JACK**

—we've booked one of the reigning virtuosos in the music world, and you want to replace him with a guy who plays *Chica, Chica Boom Chic?*

**BOB**

I want to go live on schedule — that's two very short hours from now—

**JACK**

We had a deal. I bring *The Tonight Show* to California — I leave my core audience behind — all those late-night sophisticates back in New York—

**BOB**

—Oh, come off it, Jack—

**JACK**

—What?—

**BOB**

—Los Angeles audiences can be very discriminating—

**JACK**

Sure they discriminate. Against talent. Against intelligence—

**BOB**

—Now that's pretentious—

**JACK**

—The one city in the world where a good tan beats a college degree—

**BOB**

—*nobody* likes pretension—

**JACK**

—but what do I say? “Sure, I'll uproot my staff. My family—”

**BOB**

—For a week, Jack, one week—

**JACK**

“—all so you can conduct your — your — *ratings experiment*—”

**BOB**

—it's sweeps, for Christ's sake—

**JACK**

—In exchange for that, you promised I could have my pick, any guest I want—

**BOB**

You can have any star on the Walk of Fame. Why in God's name would you choose—

**JACK**

(*Emphatically*) Oscar. *Oscar Levant.*

**BOB**

—Yeah, him—

**JACK**

He's been on before, lots of times—

**BOB**

But tonight of all nights — when we can't afford to fail—

**JACK**

That's *precisely* why. The man's a musical genius.

**BOB**

He plays a nice piano; so does Liberace.

**JACK**

A “nice piano?” The man ranks with Horowitz, with Previn—

**BOB**

Half the time, he refuses to play! Milwaukee Symphony, he never made it to the stage! You know why? Some joker said something so upsetting—

**JACK**

I know, Bob—

**BOB**

—so perverse—

**JACK**

—I heard the story—

**BOB**

—*so unforgivable*—

**JACK**

—he's superstitious—

**BOB**

“Good luck.”

**JACK**

—Show people, Bob—

**BOB**

“Good luck, Mr. Levant—”

**JACK**

—It's “*break a leg*,” for Chrissakes—

**BOB**

—and he's on the next train out! Three thousand people in their Sunday best, waiting, and where's he? In the club car, knocking back Nembutal with a whisky chaser. All because some innocent schmo says “Good Luck.” (*Checking his watch again*) Look at the time.

**JACK**

(*Into his intercom*) Helen, ring Oscar again, would you?

**HELEN'S VOICE**

I've left word five times—

**JACK**

—Leave it again. And send Max in.

**HELEN'S VOICE**

Yes, Mr. Paar.

**BOB**

I'm gonna be frank. For some members of our audience, Oscar's little quips — his zingers — they're too *rarified*. Too *neurotic*.

**JACK**

Too Jewish?

**BOB**

I didn't say that.

**JACK**

Bob, you're Jewish.

**BOB**

Certain places, that kind of... ethnic humor doesn't fly—

**JACK**

Oh, really? Where?

**BOB**

—The Midwest, for example—

**JACK**

Look at me. Jackson, Michigan. I *am* the Midwest, and I think he's a riot—

**BOB**

Everyman, that's you—

**JACK**

That's why they love me—

**BOB**

—everyman with a mansion in Greenwich and two hours a day of national air-time.

*JACK laughs along jovially, feigning amusement, then:*

**JACK**

Fuck you, Bob.

**BOB**

How many pairs of Italian sunglasses you got, Jack? Twenty-seven?

**JACK**

*Fuck you!*

**BOB**

The truth is, people find him hard to watch. It's television, not a goddamn freak show.

*JACK harrumphs.*

**JACK**

Oh, please—

**BOB**

I don't trust you, either. You set him up. You want him to say outrageous things.

**JACK**

*(Losing his cool) What the hell do you want from me? I'm not primetime, Bob. I don't have dueling cowboys in the town square. I don't have detectives, or car chases, or fathers who know best. I'm late night. I'm on the cheap. I've got a goddamn stool. A couple chairs. Conversation, that's all I've got—*

**BOB**

You're a variety show — apples and oranges—

**JACK**

Ed Sullivan—?

**BOB**

Oh, Jesus, Jack — not *him* again—

**JACK**

Know how he scores the Paul Newmans? The Liz Taylors? He's *once* a week! At *eight o'clock!*

**BOB**

Is that what this is about?

**JACK**

Or Steve Allen? His budget is — what — three, four times mine?

**BOB**

You trying to bully your way into prime-time?

**JACK**

I'm trying to make the most of what you give me! If I'm gonna compete—

**BOB**

“Compete?” Who's your competition, for Chrissakes? *Test patterns?*

**JACK**

*I need true originals, Bob!* People who treat chit-chat with all the daring, all the danger of a high wire act—

**BOB**

But Jack—

**JACK**

Oscar does that. Folks are in bed, watching the TV screen *through their feet*, and Oscar jolts them awake. They know he's a goddamn lion, and all I've got is a whip and a cane-back chair. And for that, they're willing to pay five hundred bucks for a twenty-one inch Zenith, and go to work groggy every morning. All in the hope they'll catch him saying something on television they know damn well that *you can't say on television*. That's the moment *no one wants to miss*. *(Throwing up his hands)* Los Angeles for sweeps! You can air us from the moon, Bob, you can transmit our signal all the way from Jupiter and bounce it off the sun, but the one sure thing, the one guaranteed home run, is Oscar.

*MAX enters. He's a young Production Assistant, adorable and well-intentioned but with more enthusiasm than experience. He wears a headset and carries a clipboard.*

**MAX**

What can I do for you, Mr. Paar?

**JACK**

Any sign of Mr. Levant?

**MAX**

Not yet, sir. I'll let you know the moment he's here. *(A grin and a wave to BOB)* Hey, Uncle Bob.

**BOB**

Max.

**JACK**

You remember protocol with Oscar...?

**MAX**

*(Nodding)* Same as in New York. Windows in his dressing room, closed. *(His best Oscar)* “Nature? Who needs Nature? It's nothing but the space between buildings!” *(Then)* And lots of hot coffee. *(Again, Oscar)* “After all the benzedrine, it's the only thing that calms me down.”

*BOB beams, amused by his nephew's hijinks. JACK is not.*



**JACK**

Right. Now get out.

*MAX exits.*

**BOB**

*(Fondly)* Good kid, isn't he?

**JACK**

Who, Max? You really asking me, Bob?

**BOB**

He's crazy about the movies; he can name every contract player from Ava Gardner to Zasu Pitts.

**JACK**

Here's the thing about idiot savants, Bob: *both terms apply.*

**BOB**

Cut him some slack, would ya? I promised my brother I'd give the boy a break—

**JUNE**

Excuse me?

*BOTH MEN turn to see JUNE LEVANT, waiting in her hat and gloves. Her demure prettiness belies her formidable will.*

**JACK**

June! Thank God...

**JUNE**

Hello, Jack.

**JACK**

Bob, this is June Levant. Junie, Bob Sarnoff.

**JUNE**

The president of the network? Oh, my.

**BOB**

How do you do?

**JACK**

Helen's been ringing the house all afternoon—

**JUNE**

—I'm sorry, Jack, I've been in and out all day—

**JACK**

So where is that husband of yours?

**JUNE**

Oh, he'll be here. Trust me.

**JACK**

He's not with you?

**JUNE**

No. You see, I drove over from our place—

**JACK**

Yes?

**JUNE**

—and he'll be coming from... someplace else. I was hoping to speak to you before he gets here. Alone if you don't mind.

**BOB**

You're aware of the time, yes? We're somewhat concerned.

**JUNE**

*(To JACK, a bit more insistently)* Jack? Do you mind—?

*Both JUNE and JACK turn to look at BOB for a beat. Reluctantly, he takes the hint.*

**BOB**

Ten minutes, then I call Cugat.

*BOB SARNOFF exits.*

**JACK**

Junie, honey, your better half, he's got me in a bind. Sarnoff wasn't keen on having him; I had to fight.

**JUNE**

You do want him on the show, don't you?

**JACK**

Of course—

**JUNE**

Nothing would dissuade you?

**JACK**

He's got the top slot, before Jayne Mansfield and Señor Wences.

**JUNE**

Oh, Jack! At the time — when I made the decision — *when I finally found the courage* — I had no idea he'd booked the show.

**JACK**

What, June? Tell me.

**JUNE**

I had Oscar committed.

**JACK**

*(Taken aback)* “Committed?”

**JUNE**

I've tried to before, so many times. But he looks at me with those big wounded eyes of his, and I forget what's best. Somehow — this time — I found the nerve.

*JACK starts spiraling into a kind of panic.*

**JACK**

When did this happen?

**JUNE**

About a month ago. He's not supposed to leave. I signed papers.

**JACK**

You didn't think to tell me before now?

**JUNE**

—I know, I know—

**JACK**

When I talked to Lew, he didn't say a word about it—

**JUNE**

We couldn't tell his *agent*, Jack, you know that. If it gets out, it could ruin his reputation—

**JACK**

“Ruin his reputation?” It *is* his reputation. Everybody knows he's certifiable—

**JUNE**

—You're right, I should've told you—

**JACK**

You know the real casualty here? Me. My show.

**JUNE**

Now, Jack, honestly—

**JACK**

My relationship with Bob. And with the National Broadcasting Company, the folks who pay my salary—

**JUNE**

*Damn, you Jack! It's your show, but it's my life.*

*JUNE's outburst surprises JACK. He softens.*

**JACK**

Sorry, June. I'm a heel.

**JUNE**

It's me. My nerves.

**JACK**

Nah, I'm a jackass. A real putz.

**JUNE**

If you'll give me a chance, I can make this right.

**JACK**

How?

**JUNE**

Oscar wasn't about to lose this booking. He was furious; I'd show up for visiting hours, and he'd refuse to see me. I couldn't bear it. So this afternoon, I paid a visit to the hospital. To Dr. Greenleigh. He's the senior psychiatrist on staff..

**JACK**

Yes?

**JUNE**

I told him there were no two ways about it. “Oscar needs a pass,” I said. “I've seen you give them to other patients. They're good for four hours. Oh, I know; they're supposed to be *earned*. But damn it, he's just *got* to have one.”

**JACK**

A pass?

**JUNE**

For tonight.

**JACK**

To appear on national television?

**JUNE**

Not exactly. To attend his daughter's graduation.

**JACK**

Marcia's graduating? Already?

**JUNE**

Not till next year. Oh, I know, shame on me. Implicating her like that.

*JUNE rummages in her purse for a card.*

Trying to be a good wife makes me a terrible mother.

*She finds the card and passes it to JACK.*

Send a car, Jack; that's all you have to do. Mt. Sinai, the Klein Pavilion. He'll be waiting.

**JACK**

You sure?

**JUNE**

Oh, and tell the driver he won't be alone. He'll have Alvin with him.

**JACK**

Alvin? Who's Alvin?

**JUNE**

An orderly on the ward. Oscar grouses about him but I think they're quite fond of one another.

**JACK**

A four hour pass, minus travel time... all in all — we'd have him for roughly two hours and change?

**JUNE**

The moment he wraps, we're to send him right back; they have a very strict curfew.

*JACK thinks feverishly.*

**JACK**

Christ, Junie, I'm sorry. Bob won't go for it. He just won't.

**JUNE**

Does he have to know?

**JACK**

He could throw me out on my can—

**JUNE**

Really, Jack? As popular as you are? The Board of Directors would have *him* committed, right along with Oscar.

*A beat. JACK relents, pressing his intercom:*

**JACK**

Send Max in, would you? (*Back to JUNE*) I wouldn't do this for just anybody.

**JUNE**

Oh, Jack, you're a dear! You *truly* are...

*MAX enters.*

**MAX**

Yes, Mr. Paar?

**JACK**

Send a sedan for Mr. Levant, pronto.

**MAX**

Yes, sir. Right away.

*MAX turns to go then thinks of something.*

Where to? His home?

*JACK passes the card to MAX, who reads it.*

Holy smokes.

**JACK**

Who do you work for, Max? Me, or your Uncle Bob?

**MAX**

You, sir.

**JACK**

And don't forget it. Discretion, you understand. This is between us.

*MAX nods, wide-eyed.*

Now.

*MAX exits.*

Maybe I should have security meet him at the Gate—

**JUNE**

No. Treat it like any other night. He's an old dog; he likes a routine. After he's settled in his dressing room, stop by, say "hello," put him at ease.

**JACK**

I'd be remiss if I didn't ask—

**JUNE**

Why did I commit him in the first place?

**JACK**

Well?

**JUNE**

You know how his moods are! Oscar never gets depressed. He turns inconsolable. And when he's happy — if he's ever happy — he keeps it secret, like it's some kind of failing—

**JACK**

Something specific must have happened.

*JUNE steels herself to tell JACK the truth.*

**JUNE**

Dr. Greenleigh was giving him Demerol to wean him off paraldehyde. Dr. Kert had originally prescribed paraldehyde so he'd stop taking Demerol—

**JACK**

Christ.

**JUNE**

—so Oscar was taking them both, eight times a day. Well, one evening he had a concert engagement. I laid his clothes out on the bed, like I always do. His tuxedo jacket, his trousers, a clean, white shirt—

**JACK**

You're a gift, Junie, a goddamn gift—

**JUNE**

Oscar didn't see it that way. "You've murdered me, June," he shouted, "you've laid out my corpse for burial!" He started breaking things. A Murano swan he gave me one Christmas. A photograph of my mother. And then... he came at me.

**JACK**

Oh, no.

**JUNE**

The girls heard the noise, and came running. I grabbed all three of them and we locked ourselves in Marcia's room. I waited until he'd exhausted himself. Sure enough, I found him on the floor of our bedroom, rolled up in a ball. "I'm done," I told him. "If you don't commit yourself — if you don't put an end to the drugs and the rage then I'll pack up the children, and that's the last you'll see of us. You'll really, truly be as alone as you feel." The next thing I knew he was sobbing to the clinic on the telephone. The men in white coats came and shot him up with sodium pentathol, which he quite liked. They asked him to fill out paperwork; his fingers turned to rubber and he couldn't write his own name. *(A touch of wistfulness)* I couldn't help thinking, "These are the very same fingers that play Debussy and Ravel so beautifully." *(Regaining her composure)* At the intake, Dr. Greenleigh told me — this time — he wanted to try something new. "Something new?" I asked him. "Electroshock treatment," he answered. "I don't care if you cut off his head and stitch on a new one," I said, "as long as that head comes from a sober, well-balanced individual." Then I left.

**JACK**

Did they administer treatments?

**JUNE**

Two so far. At least he has a sense of humor about it. "Before they flip the switch," he tells me, "I put a slice of bread in each pocket. When they're done — *voila!* — toast for breakfast."

**JACK**

Have they helped?

**JUNE**

A little. Of course there can be side effects; headaches. Memory loss. Oscar's afraid it will impact his playing.

**JACK**

Junie, every time he's on my show, he ends up at the piano. It's in his contract. He can still play, can't he?

**JUNE**

Oh, it's like riding a bicycle, isn't it? You never forget.

*Then — somewhat evasively — JUNE starts scrounging in her purse for a handkerchief.*

*(Almost under her breath)* Not completely.

*She gently dabs her face.*

**JACK**

How's he look?

**JUNE**

The same way he always does: like Eeyore in a cheap suit.

*A beat, then:*

You're saving his life, Jack.

**JACK**

Who, me—?

**JUNE**

He needs an audience. He has me, of course, but I've heard all the jokes and besides, I'm his wife. My opinion hardly matters.

**JACK**

Nonsense; he reveres you.

**JUNE**

Most people need an encouraging smile or a kind word to keep going, but Oscar? He needs a thousand faces, staring up at him in the dark, while he plays music so beautiful it drowns out the thoughts — all the dreadful thoughts — in his brain. The promise of that applause... It's the only reason he hasn't—

*She stops herself abruptly. JACK weighs the options, then:*

**JACK**

You love him, don't you?

**JUNE**

I wouldn't go that far. But the house would sure seem empty if he weren't knocking around in it.

*A beat, then:*

Oh, Jack. You may be his last hope.

## SCENE 2

*About an hour later. A guest dressing room. Tonight it's been assigned to OSCAR LEVANT.*

*In addition to a make-up area, there is space for entertaining with chairs, a couch and a coffee table. On that table, an excessive floral arrangement — a veritable explosion of blooms — offers a very over-the-top welcome.*

*Near the crafts services spread, there's a modest dining table with chairs.*

*A cue light — which glows red when the show is live — extends from the wall.*

*From the hallway, a VOICE; it hovers between a Borscht Belt comedian and the bray of donkey:*

### OSCAR'S VOICE

NBC Studios are in Hollywood but my dressing room's in — where? — the fuckin' Mojave? They'll call 'places,' they'll have to send the rescue dogs out for me—

*OSCAR enters. He has a rubbery face with expressive eyes and a downcast mouth with a pronounced lower lip. He wears a wrinkled dress shirt, baggy pants, a patched cardigan, and floppy bedroom slippers. His posture is slumped and his shoulders are locked in a permanent shrug. He takes off his crumpled Homburg and tosses it onto a hook on the wall.*

*OSCAR notices the extravagant bouquet.*

### OSCAR

Gee. I wonder who died.

*ALVIN enters, hot on OSCAR's heels. He's African American, wearing a starched white jacket over his clothes. He carries a medical valise.*

### ALVIN

Now look here, Mr. Levant—

### OSCAR

Aw, relax—

### ALVIN

—you flat-out told the Doc you were going to your daughter's graduation—

### OSCAR

—it's four lousy hours. What can go wrong? By the time they call "lights out," I'll be strapped back in bed with a glass of warm milk and a fistful of librium.

### ALVIN

*(Brandishing a slip of paper)* I got your pass right here. In plain black-and-white, it says "The Westlake School for Girls."

### OSCAR

Yeah, well, lucky you. You're at *The Tonight Show* instead. This, and the psych ward... the only two places in the world I can still get repeat bookings.

### ALVIN

You want to get your day room privileges revoked?

### OSCAR

Aw, quit busting my chops, would you? We pin it on Junie. It was her idea, not mine.

### ALVIN

'Course it was. Nothing's ever *your* fault, is it?

*OSCAR sits and removes a pack of cigarettes from his breast pocket. He taps on the front of it three times, flips it over, and taps three times on the back; it's a ritual of his. Finally, he pulls out a cigarette to smoke.*

### OSCAR

She's a cunning woman, my wife. She drove me crazy, then had me committed. Talk about your perfect crimes...

### ALVIN

She knows better than to put you in stressful situations like this.

### OSCAR

What d'ya call life in the mental ward?

### ALVIN

Compared to being on television, you mean? That's why we're here, isn't it?

### OSCAR

Hey, if I got a choice between the Doc's couch and Jack's chair? Just like Al Capone at Sing-Sing, I say, "Gimme the chair."

### ALVIN

Doc's not gonna like this.

### OSCAR

Aw, he's happy to see me go for a few hours. I was starting to depress the other patients.

### ALVIN

Never mind about you. What about me? Hell, you want to get me fired—?

**OSCAR**

Quit worryin', for Chrissakes. This place here? It's just another madhouse. You know the difference between your top TV stars and the patients in the ward? We're all crazy. On the ward, you get electro-shock. On television, ya get paid for it.

*MAX bursts into the room. His whip-fast entrance startles OSCAR.*

**OSCAR**

*Jesus!*

**MAX**

You're here! Great.

*He cups his hand over his mouth and speaks into the mic on his headset:*

Can you let Mr. Paar know that "the cake is in the oven?" I repeat; "the cake is in the oven." *(Then to OSCAR)* Welcome, Mr. Levant. I'm Max, from production. We met in New York. I'm a *huge* fan.

**OSCAR**

Yeah, sure, I've seen ya before.

**MAX**

Mr. Paar sends his regards; he's in the make-up chair at the moment, but he'll be down to say 'hello' right before show-time.

*MAX notices OSCAR's attire.*

Should I maybe get the folks in wardrobe to stop by, too?

**OSCAR**

What for, nicer duds?

**MAX**

Well, sure, if—

**OSCAR**

Why bother? Lipstick on pigs, ya know?

**ALVIN**

*(To MAX)* You have a telephone I can use? *(Then pointedly to OSCAR)*

I need to place a call to my employer.

**OSCAR**

Kid, meet Alvin, my "guy Friday." Before that, he was social secretary for Attila the Hun.

**MAX**

*(Registering ALVIN)* Oh. Hey.

**OSCAR**

He's peeved, on accounta I'm not 'sposed to be here. Technically speaking, I'm in the booby hatch.

*Perpetually upbeat, MAX breaks into a big grin:*

**MAX**

It's always something with you, Mr. Levant. *(To ALVIN)* Payphone in the hallway.

**OSCAR**

You tell the Doc — if he wants to check up on me tonight — he can turn on his TV set, like the rest of America.

**ALVIN**

Who's to say he won't? That'd call your bluff in a hurry, wouldn't it? *(To MAX)* Hallway, you said?

**MAX**

On your left, past the dressing rooms.

*ALVIN exits for the telephone.*

**OSCAR**

*(Indicating the floral arrangement)* Hey, kid. Where are those from? *Forest Lawn?* Get 'em outta my sight, would ya?

**MAX**

Sure thing, Mr. Levant.

*MAX picks up the flowers and bolts out of the room. OSCAR slams the door after him. MAX whooshes back in.*

**OSCAR**

Jesus!

**MAX**

I almost forgot. Coffee! Would you like a nice hot cuppa joe?

**OSCAR**

Nah. I'd like eight Lithium, six Seconal and thirty milligrams of morphine. But in the absence of that, sure, what the hell, cream.

*MAX heads to the craft services table to prepare coffee for OSCAR.*

Did you know caffeine raises your heart rate three beats per minute? Doc says I should get more exercise. I told him my new fitness regimen's gonna be "Chock Full O'Nuts."

*OSCAR takes a seat at the dining table. With trembling fingers, he unfolds a napkin and places it on his lap.*

*MAX places a cup of coffee in front of OSCAR, along with cream and a sugar bowl. He stands back to watch as OSCAR undertakes a Byzantine ritual centered around his coffee.*

*OSCAR reverses the position of the cream and sugar bowl, and pulls the cup close. With his spoon, he gauges the distance between all three items to ensure they are equidistant from one another on the table.*

*Then he pings the spoon on the creamer, the sugar bowl and the cup in quick succession, three times. He puts the spoon down.*

*In one hand, he picks up two sugar cubes. In the other, the cream. He drops the first cube in the cup, then pours a dollop of cream. Then he drops the second cube in, and follows it with a quick splash of cream, too.*

*He picks up the spoon again and submerges it in the cup. He counts to himself, turning it clockwise four times, then removing it.*

(Mumbling) One... two... three... four...

*He submerges the spoon again, counting as he turns it counter clockwise four times.*

Four... three... two... one...

*MAX is transfixed.*

Hey, kid. What are you looking at?

**MAX**

(Abruptly turning away) Sorry.

**OSCAR**

You do the same goddamn thing!

**MAX**

(Flustered) Do I—?

**OSCAR**

Sure, everybody does!

**MAX**

I don't drink coffee.

**OSCAR**

Forget the coffee! Your shoes, then.

**MAX**

My shoes?

**OSCAR**

You put 'em on in the morning, left one first, always, without fail. You cross the right lace over the left one, then you *pull* and *tie*. Same way, morning after morning, so regular it's unconscious—

**MAX**

I'm sorry, but Mr. Levant—

**OSCAR**

(Really irritated now) What?

**MAX**

(Sticking out his foot) —loafers.

**OSCAR**

*Screw you!*

*A beat, then he tries again.*

Your front door. You're leaving your house, you lock up, you're set to go, and what do you do? You try the knob, just to make sure. You turn it one way, then the other. One way, then the other. One way, then the other. Three times, every morning, like clockwork. Am I right? Am I?

**MAX**

I think I'm supposed to say "yes...?"

**OSCAR**

I do it, goddamn it, and you know why? So I don't get hit by a bus! So my aging mother gets to live another day. So the asteroids don't penetrate the earth's atmosphere and knock us all into oblivion.

**MAX**

That's all because of the way you stir your coffee?

**OSCAR**

The real reason Rome fell? One morning, Caesar folded his toga left to right, instead of right to left! The Hindenburg? Some idiot stepped on a crack in the sidewalk! That earthquake, the one in San Francisco—?

**MAX**

(Helpfully) Mr. Levant, here in California I'm told there's something called a "fault line"—

**OSCAR**

Oh no, you don't! It's because some wise-ass like you tied his shoelaces backwards.

*OSCAR raises the cup to his lips, about to drink, then puts it down to address MAX:*

That's the trouble with you kids today. No respect for routine.

*He raises the cup again, has another thought and puts it back down.*

You gotta do everything willy-nilly, by the seat of your pants, everybody else be damned.

*He raises the cup a third time, finally takes a sip, then spits out the coffee.*

**MAX**

Something wrong with your coffee, sir?

**OSCAR**

All your jib-jabbing, *it's cold*. Get me another cup, would you?

MAX goes to get OSCAR a second cup. Meanwhile, ALVIN re-enters with a new, carefree lilt in his step.

**ALVIN**

Doc was tempted to send the police out after you. It would serve you right if he did.

**OSCAR**

So how come he didn't?

**ALVIN**

He's not legally responsible for you now. And guess what? *Neither am I.*

**OSCAR**

Who is?

**ALVIN**

Your wife. For the next four hours, anyway, on account of she's the one who signed you out.

**OSCAR**

So you're off the hook, are you? Tell ya what. Here's two bits. Count Basie's playing down at the Dunbar—

**ALVIN**

You can't get rid of me that easy.

*ALVIN plants himself in a chair, crossing his arms with finality.*

I'm not moving, not til your Missus gets here.

*MAX returns and sets another cup of coffee down for OSCAR.*

**MAX**

Here you go, sir.

*A gleeful MAX mimes a clapperboard:*

"Take two."

**OSCAR**

(*To ALVIN*) Watch out for this one. Sure, he's got that Kewpie doll face. But given the chance, he'll bust your chops.

**MAX**

Who, me?

**OSCAR**

He's dogging me on account'a the way I stir my coffee. Your pal — Greenleigh — he's got a word for it, hasn't he? "Obsessive-Compulsive," eh? That's the clinical term, yes? *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, page four-hundred-and-sixty-seven, *paragraph nine*. "A common, chronic disorder in which a person pays oppressive attention to detail, suffers uncontrollable, recurring

thoughts and repeats certain behaviors — usually pointless — over and over and over again?" That's it, isn't it? I'm right, aren't I? Am I right? Am I? Am I?

**ALVIN**

You want me to agree or surrender?

**OSCAR**

I'll have you know that Ludwig van Beethoven used exactly *sixty beans* in his morning coffee, no more, no less. And Howard Hughes, the richest man in the known world? He wraps the bathroom doorknob in six tissues before he turns. Not five, not seven: *six*.

*ALVIN reaches into his jacket pocket and pulls out a dog-eared copy of Freud.*

**ALVIN**

You want a proper diagnosis? I'll find it for you. Doc loaned me this book. *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Sigmund Freud.

**OSCAR**

Oh yeah? So what's it say I got, Big Shot?

**ALVIN**

I have to finish it first. But so far, I recognize a few of your symptoms.

**OSCAR**

You do?

**ALVIN**

Absolutely. In chapters two and three.

*Then:*

And seven, nine, thirteen, sixteen, twenty-four, and thirty-two—

*OSCAR frowns. ALVIN winks at MAX, then sits down to read, making occasional notes in the margins of his book.*

*OSCAR lights another cigarette. MAX raises the coffee cup for OSCAR, but OSCAR brushes it away. He's not interested in coffee anymore.*

*MAX begins cleaning up, putting away the creamer and the sugar, rinsing the cup, wiping down the table, etc.*

**MAX**

I gotta admit, Mr. Levant... I'm kind of a movie buff. And I've seen every one of yours.

**OSCAR**

Whaddaya want from me? Compensation for your time?

**MAX**

Heck, no. I love 'em all.



**OSCAR**

Kid, I used to play the upright at movie theaters. I wasn't supposed to wind up onscreen.

**MAX**

Then how'd you get there?

**OSCAR**

Through no fault of my own; that's for sure.

**MAX**

Nah, really. How?

**OSCAR**

Every so often, they need a piano man who can say a few lines. Real Shakespeare stuff like, "Welcome to the Mocambo, J.J." or "Sure thing, Detective; her dressing room's the third on the left."

**MAX**

You've got a face it's hard to forget.

**OSCAR**

That doesn't sound like a compliment—

**MAX**

(*Mortified*) No, I only meant—

**OSCAR**

It's not a pretty face, I grant you. But underneath this flabby exterior, there's an enormous lack of character.

**MAX**

I know the critics all say your greatest performance was in *An American in Paris*; Gene Kelly's wingman. That musical sequence — the *Concerto in F* — it's a showstopper. There you are, at the piano, pounding away, when all of sudden — *pow!* — lights up on the conductor... *and it's you!* You're the soloist, but you're also the maestro! And then — *pow! pow! pow!* Lights up on each section of the orchestra! First, the violins, and — holy cow — *all you!* Then the xylophone — *you!* The timpani — *you—!*

**OSCAR**

Yeah, kid, I know the picture.

**MAX**

But for me... your most striking turn? Sid Jeffers in *Humoresque*, with John Garfield and Joan Crawford. Behind every quip, there's a... a kind of... melancholy. (*Again, his Oscar*) "It's not what you are; it's what you don't become that hurts."

*OSCAR stares dumbly at MAX, then looks to ALVIN, who's equally perplexed.*

**OSCAR**

Who the hell was that?

**MAX**

(*Wounded*) You...?

**OSCAR**

Christ, I sound like Francis the Talking Mule.

*Then:*

The truth? My somewhat forgettable career in motion pictures... it ruined me.

**MAX**

"Ruined" you? For what?

**OSCAR**

Concerts! I was gonna be Shostakovich! What'd I wind up instead? A lousy plot device. Disappointed me, sure, but it almost killed my mother. She wanted me to be a real musician.

**MAX**

What did *you* want to be?

**OSCAR**

An orphan.

**MAX**

No, really.

**OSCAR**

(*He thrusts out his hands*) Look at 'em. When I was a kid, six years old, I'd practice four, five hours a day. Now I'm gettin' older, I got arthritis so bad, I can't even get through a set of scales. (*To ALVIN*) *Psst.* Hey. Inspector Javert. You wouldn't happen to have—

**ALVIN**

No.

**OSCAR**

—But my finger joints—

**ALVIN**

—You know I can't dispense medication; that's the nurse's job, not mine—

**OSCAR**

—But I saw the Doc — he gave you a whole pharmacopoeia—

**ALVIN**

—For emergencies only—

**OSCAR**

—So it's an emergency—!

**ALVIN**

—You think I like carrying your stash around? Suppose someone catches me with it. With no license and no certification—

**OSCAR**

—I got pain — terrible pain—

**ALVIN**

—it could end my career, even land me in jail—

**OSCAR**

—Then quick! Give it to me, for safe-keeping—

**ALVIN**

—*Are you out of your mind—?*

**OSCAR**

—That seems to be the consensus—

**ALVIN**

—Besides, you had your last Demerol at four o'clock—

**OSCAR**

—That was a lifetime ago—

**ALVIN**

—next one's not til bedtime... if God smiles on you and you live that long.

*MAX tries to bring the conversation back around to show business:*

**MAX**

A “real musician?”

**OSCAR**

What? Huh?

**MAX**

That's what your mother wanted you to be?

**OSCAR**

Aw, hush up already. What's a kid like you care about an *alte cocker* like me for—?

**MAX**

When Debbie Reynolds was here, I got to ask her about that famous couch flip in *Singin' In the Rain*. And Fred Astaire? Dancing on the ceiling in *Royal Wedding*—

**ALVIN**

(*To OSCAR*) Don't be shy. He's asking about your favorite subject: you.

**OSCAR**

What, ya got no sob stories of your own? You want another one a' mine?

*OSCAR shakes his head, emphatically, like he's not about to say a word. But he's only pretending to resist. In truth, he's found a new audience for an old story.*

So I'm seven years old. My mama ties me to the bench to make me practice. A few rope burns later, I'd perfected the Beethoven sonatas. So Ma decides it's time to pay for a teacher. “You're no Paderewski,” she tells me. “But if you can play a nice piano, you'll never be lonely.” Even then, she knew I was a *shlemiel*. A mug like a walrus, a physique like a loaf of challah, and a piggy bank full of plug nickels. “You gotta have something that compensates,” she says. “I'm no bathing beauty, but you know how I won over your father? *I had really soft knees.*”

*Shuddering all over.*

Trust me, kid: some things your mother tells you, you don't need to know.

**MAX**

So that's why you learned to play? To meet girls?

**OSCAR**

Just wait!

*Really digging into the story now:*

Pretty soon I'm a teenager. All my etudes, my nocturnes, my polonaises? They don't even get me to first base! Nah, in Pittsburgh — if you want a dame to fool around — it's gotta be *Whaa-Whaa* trumpets and snare drums.

**MAX**

So what'd you do?

**OSCAR**

Sixteen years old, I move to New York. Up around one-twenty-fifth street... at the Lido, at Small's, at the Cotton Club... I hear a whole new music. Stride piano. The blues; syncopated heart-break. Next thing you know, I land a gig at this posh hotel. I meet a couple of high-tone gals; shiksas, straight out of the Social Register. I decide to impress 'em with a couple of the tunes I heard up in Harlem. I'm playing the skin clean off my fingers, and for what? They couldn't care less! “Don't you know any Schubert?” one of 'em asks me. “Maybe a bit of Brahms?”

**MAX**

Can't win for losing sometimes.

**OSCAR**

So one night I find myself in a fleabag hotel with a hooker named Sadie. Nothing's happening below my equator. Sadie says to me, "What's the matter, engine trouble?" "Cut me a break," I say to her. "Sadie was my grandma's name. How'm I supposed to make love to you when all I can think about are potato kugel and rosewater?" "You're cute," she tells me, "in a sad kinda way." Next thing you know, I'm pouring out my heart. "I'm gonna die alone," I tell her. "How come?" she asks me. "Because no matter where I am, I got the wrong music. In Pittsburgh, they want jazz. In New York, it's the classics." And you know what Sadie says to me? Little Sadie, with the beeswax on her tits?

*MAX shakes his head "no." He has no earthly idea what Sadie might've said.*

**OSCAR**

*(Abruptly, to ALVIN)* How 'bout Seconal? You got any Seconal?

**ALVIN**

Your liver, remember?

**MAX**

*(Still curious)* So what'd she say?

**OSCAR**

She says, "Howza 'bout a concerto with a boogie beat?" A chippie in a bullet bra and nylons, and she's a musical genius. I pulled up my trousers and ran home to my piano. I started playing Shostakovich like it was Fats Waller, and Fats Waller like it was Shostakovich. I was hankering for something *new*; the sweet spot where Tchaikovsky and Jelly Roll Morton meet. Only someone else beats me to it.

**MAX**

Who?

**OSCAR**

You know, everybody knows...

*In the distance, the opening measures of George Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue. Only OSCAR hears it.*

**OSCAR**

There. You hear that?

**MAX**

Hear what?

*But OSCAR is in another reality for a moment, so much so that the room itself seems to turn an evocative shade of blue.*

**OSCAR**

Royal blue, baby blue, sky blue, sapphire, pigeon and powder blue, all rolling over each other in waves...

**MAX**

I don't hear anything. *(To ALVIN)* Do you?

**ALVIN**

*Shh.* Just play along. It's an auditory hallucination. He gets 'em sometimes.

**OSCAR**

First time I heard it? A fancy supper club. Paul Whiteman and his orchestra. Just a few bars... and I felt that emotion men like me experience when they're in the presence of true greatness.

**MAX**

Admiration?

**OSCAR**

Envy.

*The room restores, and OSCAR snaps back into story-telling mode.*

I learned it by heart. And I played it. Boy, did I play it. Every chance I got. At Ciro's, for the swell set. At the Roosevelt Hotel, for the *hoi polloi*. They'd stuff my fishbowl full of presidents and say, "Play *Rhapsody In Blue*, why don't you?" I may not have written it, but it fit my fingers like nothin' I ever played.

*Another short beat.*

Finally, one day, I got a chance to lay it down. Frankie Black was making a platter over at Brunswick, and he calls me. "Oscar! Piano man stiffed me. Help me out, would ya?" Ten minutes later, and I'm on the bench, still in my jammies, playin' my heart out. They press the record, and what do you know? It ain't bad. Sells some copies, too.

*Quoting a review:*

"Oscar Levant plays the *Rhapsody* with a panache all his own." It's in black-and-white, I got "panache." I get this half-cocked idea in my head that Gershwin himself should hear it. I'd met him once before; a swank little party down in the Village. I ask my society friends for his number. One night — after a few shots of Smirnoff — I dial it.

*And — from a flurry of blue smoke, the shadowy figure of GEORGE GERSHWIN appears, debonair with Brilliantined hair.*

Only OSCAR sees him. Once again, the room turns cerulean.

GEORGE picks up OSCAR's call. We hear the distant sounds of a party in progress; the clink of glasses, the chatter of conversation, and the tinkling of a piano.

**GEORGE**

Yes?

**OSCAR**

Mr. Gershwin—?

**GEORGE**

You'll have to speak up— (*Calling into the party*) Milt! Vern, get yourself a drink— (*Back into the phone*) Sorry; it's a zoo in here. Who's this—?

**OSCAR**

Oscar Levant here. We've met once before. You wouldn't remember me; I'd be embarrassed if you did.

**GEORGE**

Oh, I remember you.

**OSCAR**

You do?

**GEORGE**

We met at the Paley's, didn't we? You're kinda hard to forget.

**OSCAR**

Oh, geez—

**GEORGE**

It's fine; truly. I'm told Tiffany's replaced the vase, and Mrs. Paley assures me that the stains came out of the carpet.

**ALVIN**

(*A gentle nudge*) You still with us? Mr. Levant—

**MAX**

What is it? What's wrong?

**GEORGE**

(*Calling into the party*) Go ahead, Fritz! Open another bottle—

**ALVIN**

Every so often, he dissociates.

**GEORGE**

Sure, Kitty, I'll play it for you. Just give me a minute—?

**ALVIN**

Doc says it could be a reaction to the sedatives. Maybe a lesion on the frontal cortex.

GEORGE's demeanor changes; he finds a quiet place to talk, and the PARTY fades.

**GEORGE**

(*Back into the phone*) Now how can I help you?

**OSCAR**

I have a confession to make. See, I happen to be trapped in a — I don't know how else to describe it — a *deeply neurotic* love affair. Not with a person. With your music.

**GEORGE**

I'm not sure how to react. Should I be flattered or frightened?

**OSCAR**

I play it all the time. *The Rhapsody*, mostly. And now I'm the first piano man to immortalize it on a seventy-eight... besides you, of course.

**GEORGE**

Right, right. Frankie Black and his boys.

**OSCAR**

So you've heard it?

**GEORGE**

Yes.

**OSCAR**

Well, for Chrissakes... I mean... *what'd ya think?*

**GEORGE**

Heard *about* it, rather.

**OSCAR**

(*Momentarily deflated*) Oh. (*Rallying again*) How? You read the reviews?

**GEORGE**

Nah, can't say I did—

**OSCAR**

Very good, I'm told, the reviews—

**GEORGE**

—word gets around.

**OSCAR**

You think you'd ever give it a listen? Cause I'd love for you to. Really and truly. And when you do, you'll know... you'll know, deep down in your heart... you're not alone.

**GEORGE**

"Alone—?"

**OSCAR**

There's another human being on the planet who gets it... truly gets it... all the colors, all the hues.

*For a fleeting moment, this pierces GEORGE's brash demeanor and touches him.*

**GEORGE**

Is that so?

**OSCAR**

Any chance I could swing 'round with an LP?

**GEORGE**

Tonight? *Right now?* I've got a house full of people here—

**OSCAR**

All I gotta do is hop on the subway. Twenty minutes, tops. Whaddaya say?

*ALVIN touches OSCAR's shoulder and whispers:*

**ALVIN**

*Psst.* Mr. Levant. Come on back now. Join us, if you can.

**OSCAR**

Eh? Where was I?

**MAX**

The subway. Headed uptown.

**OSCAR**

Right, right. A hundred and third, off Riverside. Party's over. It's the middle of the night, dead of winter, and I'm sweatin' through my wool suit. He's in his dressing gown, all suave, smoking his pipe, looking like a cross between Cary Grant and a Weimaraner. He lifts the needle. The turntable stops. Silence. "So what do you think?" I choke out.

**MAX**

What did he say?

**GEORGE**

"I like mine better."

*GEORGE's verdict hangs in the air a beat.*

**OSCAR**

Oh, he was unstinting. Unstinting in his declaration of the superiority of his performance over mine. We bonded over our shared opinion that he was a genius and I wasn't. Pretty soon, I was sleeping on his sofa and hanging on his every word. And the gigs he didn't take? He passed 'em on to me.

**GEORGE**

Get Oscar Levant! The kid's not half bad.

**OSCAR**

His crumbs? To me, they were caviar. And then what does he do? He dies on me.

*GEORGE fades away and the room restores.*

A brain tumor. Thirty-eight years old. Now that he's gone, they want him more than ever. Only he's not available. My career sky-rockets. I play Lewisohn Stadium. The Kraft Music Hall. The Hollywood Bowl, for Chrissakes. But all this... it comes at a cost, see?

*Inside, OSCAR's really churning now, working himself into an anguished state.*

Playing his *Rhapsody* over and over again instead of writing my own. His *Concerto*, instead of finishing the one I'd started back in '52. Hell, even *Embraceable You*... *I'd written songs myself once, hadn't I?*

*OSCAR brays with genuine fury and regret:*

From the grave, George did me a horrible favor. He showed me the limits of my own talent. I stopped composing. Zip. *Nada*. I couldn't compete, not with that kinda brilliance. I gave up living my own life, so I could be a footnote in his.

*Then with resolve:*

*Well, I'm done playing him.* You hear me? No more.

*OSCAR's fingers involuntarily twitch.*

Now I tell jokes.

*From his breast pocket, he pulls out his cigarettes, repeating his ritual.*

I can't help myself; It's a disease. Beethoven was deaf. Mozart had rickets. Me, I make wisecracks.

*MAX is swept away by the story. He snaps back to life and checks his watch:*

**MAX**

Oh, geez. I almost forgot. We've got other guests! I promised Miss Mansfield a *Coca-Cola*.

**OSCAR**

Give her my warm regards.

**MAX**

You know Jayne Mansfield?

**OSCAR**

Nah, but we pretend to know each other. That's show business.

**MAX**

I'm a big fan of hers, too.

**OSCAR**

You and every horny teenager with a pulse.

**MAX**

Did you know before she became a big star, she was Miss Photo-flash, Miss Nylon Sweater, Miss Negligee, Miss Texas Tomato, *and* Miss One for the Road?

**OSCAR**

I apologize; you're a true connoisseur.

**MAX**

*Female Jungle?* I saw that movie seven times.

*And MAX exits.*

**ALVIN**

Your man Gershwin; was he really all that?

**OSCAR**

He thought so.

**ALVIN**

I'm not a jazz fan *per se*. But I know this much: he walked outta the Cotton Club with more than just his hat and coat. The bleat of Louie's horn; the Creole rhythms of the Duke. You hear the nights he spent uptown in everything he wrote.

**OSCAR**

You want me to argue the point? I won't.

**ALVIN**

He didn't do it alone. Three hundred years of suffering in those melodies; wasn't his, was it?

**OSCAR**

Not just a candy-striper, eh? You're a music critic too?

**ALVIN**

Who, me? I'll take Chuck Berry any day. "Johnny B. Goode." "Sweet Little Sixteen." That's more my style.

**OSCAR**

Oh, sure. What the youngsters call "Rock and Roll." I got a better name for it. "Loud and Annoying."

**ALVIN**

Went down to Wallich's Music City on Sunset and Vine; I put one of your songs on in the booth, gave it a listen.

**OSCAR**

*(Unexpectedly touched)* You did that?

**ALVIN**

Sure, why not?

**OSCAR**

Honest to God. To Wallich's? To listen to one of *my* tunes?

**ALVIN**

Nurse Brennan saw your picture in a magazine. She said you were somebody. I was curious.

**OSCAR**

Well—? The suspense, you're killing me.

*ALVIN sings the first verse of Oscar's hit love song, Blame It On My Youth; OSCAR joins in tentatively, humming softly along with ALVIN. It's sweetly affecting.*

**ALVIN**

That's a nice melody. Good as Gershwin, if you ask me.

*For a beat it's as if OSCAR is going to succumb to ALVIN's kindness. But he resists.*

**OSCAR**

You mashin' on me? Then gimme a Haldol.

**ALVIN**

No can do.

**OSCAR**

An emergency dose, just in case—

**ALVIN**

In case of what?

**OSCAR**

I become irascible—

**ALVIN**

You're always irascible—

**OSCAR**

You're right! And that can only mean one thing—

**ALVIN**

What's that?

**OSCAR**

*I'm under-medicated!*

**ALVIN**

This may not mean much to you—

**OSCAR**

—Where's your compassion—?

**ALVIN**

—but during my training—

**OSCAR**

—Your sense of mercy—?

**ALVIN**

—I took a pledge—

**OSCAR**

—A spare dexedrine, maybe—?

**ALVIN**

“—I promise to practice my profession faithfully—”

**OSCAR**

—How 'bout some Seconal? Ya got any Seconal—?

**ALVIN**

“—to abstain from any wrongdoing—”

**OSCAR**

—Or ritalin, just a few milligrams—

**ALVIN**

“—and to devote myself to the welfare of those in my care.”

**OSCAR**

—anything ya got, for Christ's sake!

**ALVIN**

(Sharply) NO. For the last time.

A tense beat, then:

Now stop asking me.

A stand off. JUNE appears in the doorway with a garment bag and a shoe box.

**JUNE**

Am I interrupting?

ALVIN sees JUNE first. OSCAR spins around to face her. JUNE tenses; how will he respond? This is the first time they've seen one another since that fateful night she described in Scene One.

**OSCAR**

Hello, June.

**JUNE**

Hello, Oscar.

**OSCAR**

(Gratefully) You spoke to the doc. You spoke to Paar, too, didn't you?

JUNE's shoulders relax; OSCAR doesn't seem to be mad. In fact, the contrary.

**JUNE**

Yes. Yes, I did.

OSCAR speaks in percussive bursts, less born of wit than anxiety:

**OSCAR**

Aw, Junie, it means the world. A few lousy hours, but still. I was in a bad way, kiddo. They shot me so full of electricity, every suburb from El Segundo to Oxnard went dark. The docs, they didn't wanna let me go on account of I'm the closest thing they have to an emergency generator. Doc says I really light up a room—

**JUNE**

(Sharply) Oscar. Please.

To silence himself, OSCAR plucks a half-sandwich from craft services and stuffs it in his mouth. JUNE begins emptying the garment bag and hanging up OSCAR's things:

**JUNE**

It's the grey flannel. I did my best to get the gravy out of your lapel. Oh, and your shoes. The oxfords.

**ALVIN**

Mrs. Levant—?

**JUNE**

Alvin, I'm so sorry. It's my fault entirely. I've put you in a terrible position, I realize—

**ALVIN**

If I might have a word, ma'am—

**JUNE**

Of course.

ALVIN gestures for her to come to him.

**ALVIN**

(Out of OSCAR's ear-shot) I'm gonna take the liberty of speaking to you with candor—

**JUNE**

Please.

**ALVIN**

My father's military. My mother, she's the chief night nurse over in Baldwin Hills. They have high expectations. I plan on going to medical school. Dr. Greenleigh says Loma Linda may have a place for me. He's promised to write a letter of introduction. But if I fall out of his good graces—

**JUNE**

*(Contrite)* Oh, Alvin—

**ALVIN**

All because of today—

**JUNE**

—I won't let that happen.

**ALVIN**

What about your husband? You think this is good for him? Don't forget; I was there when you brought him in; a wrinkled old coat with no man inside. You weren't faring much better; your every last nerve was frayed—

**JUNE**

What can I do to make it right?

**ALVIN**

The Doctor wants to speak with you. If you'll follow me, there's a payphone right outside.

*With that, JUNE and ALVIN slip out.*

*OSCAR's eyes land on ALVIN's medical valise. He stares at it like a laser. Just as he's about to get up and cross to it, ALVIN re-enters.*

*Their eyes lock. ALVIN strides over to his valise, picks it up and re-exits. OSCAR deflates.*

**MAX (O.S.)**

I mean it, Miss Mansfield. Truly I do.

*MAX enters, quietly dismayed.*

**OSCAR**

So how's your new girlfriend?

**MAX**

Not so good, Mr. Levant. *(Troubled)* I was telling her how great she was in *The Wayward Bus* when the traveling salesman says he'll marry her anyway, even if she was a stripper. Aw, Mr. Levant, it's a helluva scene. Her whole face melts with emotion... *(Visibly moved)* "Miss Mansfield," I tell her, "in that moment, you give a master class in the art of film acting." Only she cuts me off. She doesn't let me finish.

**OSCAR**

You don't say.

**MAX**

"You know," she says to me, "I'm not just a B-movie blonde. I happen to speak five languages, and I've got an IQ of a hundred and forty-nine—"

**OSCAR**

*(Dryly)* If I close my eyes, it's like she's in the room.

**MAX**

There she is, a bona fide movie star... and she's asking me — a nobody, a kid from Scarsdale — for some kinda respect. I wanted to say the right thing—

*A tiny shudder.*

—but I could hardly breathe.

**OSCAR**

Don't meet your heroes kid; it's a sucker punch every time.

**MAX**

*(Truly shattered)* It's like she needed more from me than I had to give. And if I wasn't careful, she'd swallow me whole.

*A beat, then:*

I got frightened. I had to leave.

**OSCAR**

Moment she gets a few easy laughs, she wants to be taken seriously. She got stuck playin' the dumb blonde, and me? I'm the perpetual sidekick.

**MAX**

Don't start selling yourself short, too—

**OSCAR**

Oh, there's an art to bein' a sidekick. First off, ya gotta be a schlump, so your leading man's handsome by comparison. Second, ya gotta care more about his love life than your own. He gets the dame, and you? You go to bed with a hot water bottle.

**MAX**

But Mr. Levant... you did it... you got the girl.

**OSCAR**

Eh?

**MAX**

Mrs. Levant.



**OSCAR**

Junie? Oh, I only married her to get even.

*JUNE re-appears in the doorway, but neither OSCAR nor MAX notice. She listens as the TWO MEN discuss her.*

**OSCAR**

We have a great deal in common, she and I. Neither of us can stand me.

**MAX**

Mr. Paar, he thinks the world of her. He says she's a saint.

**OSCAR**

I asked her once if she'd ever divorce me. "Nah," she told me. "I'm a good Catholic. I'd murder you instead."

**MAX**

Married to you, she's gotta have a sense of humor.

**OSCAR**

Nah, not Junie. She's dead serious. You know how marriage survives, kid? Same rule they got in retail: you break it, you own it.

*JUNE gathers her nerve, then steps boldly through the doorway and into the room.*

**JUNE**

Marriage is all about commitment, darling. It's just a question of who commits who first.

*She begins pulling off her gloves, amused by her own wry remark.*

That Alvin's a real taskmaster. He made me telephone Mt. Sinai and come clean; I felt like I was back in school, with the nuns.

*MAX senses he should make himself scarce.*

**MAX**

I'll... ah... I'll see what's keeping Mr. Paar.

*He exits.*

**OSCAR**

*(To JUNE)* Where is Alvin?

**JUNE**

I told him to get some supper. He wasn't sure he should leave you in my care. "I've been taking care of Oscar for twenty years," I told him. "I think I can handle it."

**OSCAR**

How 'bout Doc Greenleigh—?

**JUNE**

He's ticked off at both of us.

**OSCAR**

He tell ya to send me back, like an under-cooked steak?

**JUNE**

It appears you're my cross to bear, until your pass expires.

**OSCAR**

How're things on the home front?

**JUNE**

Quite peaceful, really. Quiet. *(A bit brittle)* Everything's... back in its place.

*As they speak, JUNE helps OSCAR into his talk-show duds, almost like she might dress a child.*

**OSCAR**

And the girls? They ask about their old man?

**JUNE**

Which would you like to know? How they are, or if they ask about you?

**OSCAR**

Don't bust my ass.

**JUNE**

Are we talking about them, or are they just a pretense to talk about you?

**OSCAR**

I married a tough cookie.

**JUNE**

You gave them quite a scare.

**OSCAR**

Aw, Junie—

**JUNE**

You *did*, Oscar. Marcia was beside herself.

**OSCAR**

How is she?

**JUNE**

How do you think? She's a teenager; she takes things very much to heart.

*OSCAR's resolved to prove to JUNE that he has the girls in mind, and not himself.*

**OSCAR**

She still going to the prom with that football player?

**JUNE**

You remembered.

**OSCAR**

Course I remembered.

**JUNE**

She bought a new dress, way too expensive, a coral taffeta. He's promised her a corsage of pink roses to match. I've told him she has to be home by midnight or I'll call out the National Guard.

**OSCAR**

And Lorna?

**JUNE**

All "A's" except for geometry, but Miss Belmont says she's improving.

**OSCAR**

And Amanda?

**JUNE**

She outgrew her Mary Janes. Just last week, I had to buy her pumps; her first pair. *(Relenting)* And yes. Yes, they ask about you.

**OSCAR**

What do you tell them?

**JUNE**

That you want very much to get well, and be the father you're meant to.

**OSCAR**

You going to bring 'em by to see me?

**JUNE**

Maybe. Lorna's written a poem; she wants to read it to you.

**OSCAR**

Aw, really? Don't let them leave the dinner table until they've finished their martinis, you hear?

*JUNE tries hard not to smile, but fails. Her demeanor softens.*

**JUNE**

Oh, you. Honestly.

*OSCAR's pleased he could make her grin; we get a fleeting glance at the shared humor that brought them together.*

**OSCAR**

So you're still sweet on me, eh?

**JUNE**

Who's to say?

**OSCAR**

Maybe just a little?

**JUNE**

*(Giving in)* Maybe.

*A moment. The old chemistry courses between them. OSCAR tentatively steps toward JUNE.*

**OSCAR**

It's silly, isn't it? You know that ratty bathrobe of mine?

**JUNE**

The one you put on Fridays around cocktail hour and don't take off again until noon on Monday?

**OSCAR**

Yeah, that's the one. What's it doin', hanging all by its lonesome on a hook in the bathroom?

*JUNE feels her spine stiffen.*

**JUNE**

Oscar, please.

**OSCAR**

I'd like to wear it again, that's all.

**JUNE**

Don't start.

*Fully dressed in his suit now — sans tie — OSCAR starts to pursue a reluctant JUNE, eager to seize the moment and make his case:*

**OSCAR**

The voices in my head? I don't hear 'em anymore. They're gone. It's quiet as the ocean floor!

**JUNE**

*(Hardening her resolve)* Four hours, that's all.

**OSCAR**

You wouldn't spring a guy from the snake-pit only to send him right back, would ya? That's what they'd call "cruel and unusual."

**JUNE**

We agreed.

**OSCAR**

But Junie—

**JUNE**

Those are the terms. Four hours, then Dr. Greenleigh expects you back before curfew.

**OSCAR**

What's one night, eh baby? One night in my own bed. I just want to come home.

**JUNE**

No. Absolutely not. You're not welcome until -

**OSCAR**

Until what?

**JUNE**

Until the girls and I... until we're more important than the way you stir your coffee. Than your *morbid obsession with death* and the way you love *little brown bottles* more than *the people who care for you most*—

**OSCAR**

Whoa, baby, now *whoa*—

**JUNE**

I can't take another night like the last one. I mean it, Oscar. *I'll break.*

**OSCAR**

How long's it been so far?

**JUNE**

About a month.

**OSCAR**

Twenty-eight days, ten hours, six minutes, and— (*checking his watch*)—thirty-two seconds.

*Then:*

And aw, Junie... Babe... I felt every damn one.

*JACK — fresh from the make-up chair — sticks his head in the door; tissues still stick out from his collar.*

**JACK**

Hello, June! Hello, Oscar! Mind if I—

*OSCAR waves JACK in—*

**OSCAR**

Nah, come on in.

*—then plops on an ottoman to put on his shoes.*

**JACK**

June tells me you've been... getting some rest.

**OSCAR**

Yeah, I'm at this swank country club. Interesting people. So far, we got two Napoleons, and six Jesus Christs.

*The room falls quiet while OSCAR goes about the painstaking ritual of putting on his shoes, just as he described it earlier.*

**JACK**

Half an hour till showtime, Oscar. You certain you're up for this?

**OSCAR**

Being on television? In truth, I prefer it to living.

**JACK**

You look good.

**OSCAR**

Brooks Brothers makes a swell straitjacket.

**JACK**

I've brought a friend along. You're getting the VIP treatment, Oscar; the president of the network doesn't make a personal visit for just anybody.

*JACK invites BOB SARNOFF to come in:*

Bob?

*BOB enters and extends his hand:*

**BOB**

A pleasure, Mr. Levant.

*Before shaking BOB's hand, OSCAR drapes a tissue or a handkerchief over his so their skin won't touch.*

*They shake, then BOB looks at JACK as if to say, "What the hell was that for?" By way of explanation, OSCAR offers:*

**OSCAR**

I'm afraid of germs. Goes way back; a burlesque house when I was nineteen. Front row seat, a stripper, a pelvic thrust, a loose rhinestone on her g-string that goes flying—

*OSCAR mimes something hitting him in the eye.*

*—bang — a nasty case of pink eye.*

**BOB**

Jack's delighted to have you on, and so am I. It's a "make or break" show for us tonight; our very first broadcast from the West Coast.

**JACK**

Bob thought it might be useful if we took a few moments, sketched out our interview.

**OSCAR**

In advance?

**BOB**

You know; set a few parameters, lay down some ground rules.

**OSCAR**

That's not *The Tonight Show*.

**JACK**

Sure it is, Oscar. I do it with all my guests—

**OSCAR**

You've never done it with me, Jack.

**JACK**

Yes, I have. Historically speaking, you tend to ignore me, that's all—

**OSCAR**

You're gonna kill the one thing you've got going for you? Spontaneity?

**JACK**

It's the *guise* of spontaneity, but — you know as well as I do — that's something we painstakingly rehearse—

**OSCAR**

I don't write jokes in advance. I'm extempore; everybody knows it—

**BOB**

The network feels that—

**OSCAR**

The network *feels*?

**BOB**

Yes, we feel—

**OSCAR**

Are you the whole network?

**BOB**

No, but—

**OSCAR**

You got people working for you, don't you? I've seen 'em. Whole floors. They're network, too, aren't they?

**BOB**

In a manner of speaking.

**OSCAR**

Then don't tell me how the network feels. Tell me how you feel.

**BOB**

Me and my associates feel—

**OSCAR**

Who's the poor jackass on the tightrope? You or me?

**BOB**

Look, we all want the same thing, Mr. Levant, and that's for you to look your absolute best. Let's not belabor this. It's simple, really. There are just a few topics we'd like you to avoid—

**OSCAR**

Such as—?

**BOB**

Oh, the same ones you'd avoid at, say, a dinner party.

**OSCAR**

I don't go to dinner parties.

**JACK**

Now, Oscar—

**OSCAR**

I don't! I don't like it when people watch me eat.

**BOB**

Dining aside, Mr. Levant, all we ask is that you use your common sense, and eschew subjects that might—

**OSCAR**

That might what?

**BOB**

—take our viewers by surprise.

**OSCAR**

Surprise? That's a bad thing?

**BOB**

*(Further clarifying)* Topics that might make them uncomfortable.

**OSCAR**

Uncomfortable? How?

**BOB**

By shocking them, for example.

**OSCAR**

You're bluffing. *(To JACK)* He's bluffing, right?

**JACK**

No, Oscar, I'm afraid he's not.

**OSCAR**

Well, it might *surprise* you to learn — hell, it might make you downright *uncomfortable* — *it might even shock you* — but you know what, Mr. Sarnoff?

**BOB**

What, Mr. Levant?

**OSCAR**

*You know what people do when they're surprised, uncomfortable and shocked—?*

**BOB**

I have a feeling you're going to tell me.

**OSCAR**

They *laugh*.

**BOB**

Some do. But others? Others change the channel—

**OSCAR**

You're a comedian, Jack. You ever hear of a *sincere* joke? You ever bring the house down with a *wholesome* gag? A — what? — a *well-behaved* one-liner? *Respectful* satire; what the hell is that, eh?

**JACK**

He has a point, Bob—

**OSCAR**

"Polite comedian?" It's an oxymoron. First time I've ever been on a talk show where they're paying me *not to talk*—

**BOB**

We'd like you to steer clear of certain subjects, that's all.

**OSCAR**

What kind a' subjects, precisely speaking?

**BOB**

Politics. Religion.

*BOB casts a furtive look at JUNE — the lone lady in the room — then lowers his voice to a whisper:*

Certainly anything having to do with sex—

*In rapid-fire sequence, OSCAR looks at BOB, dumbstruck, then turns to JACK, disbelieving, then back to BOB and bellows:*

**OSCAR**

*You just took the whole world off the table!*

**BOB**

That's absurd—

**OSCAR**

What else is there? Take away the big three, nothing's left. What're we gonna joke about? *The weather?*

**BOB**

A good comic can make anything funny—

**OSCAR**

The *best* jokes? The ones worth tellin'? They're dangerous on account'a they tell the *truth*—

**BOB**

Whose truth? *Yours?*

**OSCAR**

"Wit is *insolence*." That's Aristotle! "A *safety valve* for repressed hostility!" That's Sigmund Freud! "*Impropriety!*" Somerset *fuckin'* Maugham—

**BOB**

*(Losing it)* "Brevity!" "Brevity is the soul of wit!" Do you know that one? *I don't think you do!*

**JACK**

Bob, leave Oscar be. This is on me—

**OSCAR**

I'm controversial! People dislike me or they hate me—

*The room explodes in a barrage of chatter:*

**BOB**

I warned you, this was a big mistake—

**JUNE**

Try and calm down, darling—

**JACK**

—you get upset, you just signal to me from the booth—

**OSCAR**

—They wind me up, tight as a goddamn cuckoo clock—

**BOB**

—I can see letters now, pouring over my desk—

**JUNE**

—Jack's nervous; his Los Angeles debut—

**JACK**

—I'll re-route him, ever-so-gently—

**OSCAR**

Screw him; I'm nervous! *Me!*

**BOB**

He pulls anything, I'm holding you responsible. *(To OSCAR)* Mr. Levant.

**OSCAR**

Uh, *yes?*

**BOB**

There's one more thing you'd do well to avoid.

**OSCAR**

What, breathing? *(Shrugging, to JUNE)* I'm telling you, the man wants me dead.

**JUNE**

(Ignoring OSCAR) What would that be, Mr. Sarnoff?

**BOB**

(To JUNE) His... personal problems. *The Tonight Show* is meant to go down like warm milk. It's the last thing people see before they go to sleep. It's not in our interests to give them nightmares. (To OSCAR, sternly) They don't need tales of drug addiction. They don't need images of hapless patients in hospital gowns sleep-walking through day rooms—

**OSCAR**

I was at this nut-house out in Pasadena. New psychiatrist shows up on the ward. Had three sessions with him, crackerjack fella. Then I find out he's just another patient with delusions of grandeur. Truth is I got off easy. He told three gals in the women's ward he was a gynecologist.

*This infuriates BOB. He looks to JACK, incensed. But JACK can't help himself; he's heaving up and down with laughter, even slapping OSCAR on the back.*

*Mortified, BOB turns to JUNE, whom he was so gallantly trying to protect from OSCAR's blue humor. But even she's hiding her face in a fit of giggles.*

*This only spikes BOB's irritation:*

**BOB**

You see? Remarks like that... lurid sob stories, tabloid disclosures, segments designed to provoke, to titillate... *...that's not what television is for.*

**OSCAR**

Oh no?

**BOB**

And what's more, Mr. Levant certainly doesn't need to degrade himself by talking about these sad phenomena in a humorous fashion.

**OSCAR**

(A painful yowl) *How else am I supposed to talk about 'em?* I gotta tell every last person out there... the slob in Boise, sitting in his Barcalounger... the hooker in Vegas... the grandma in Oshkosh...

**BOB**

What? That you're a card carrying lunatic?

**OSCAR**

(Volcanic now) *I SAY IT ABOUT MYSELF BEFORE THEY CAN! I MAKE 'EM LAUGH, BUT I HAVE THE LAST ONE.*

*Everyone's momentarily stunned into silence by OSCAR's outbursts. A silent beat. The energy in the room shifts; it has a heightened gravity now.*

*JACK turns to JUNE for support.*

**JACK**

June, honey — if you can — make him understand—

**JUNE**

Really, Jack? *Really?*

**JACK**

(Defensive) *What—?*

*JUNE's losing patience with JACK but reluctant to call him out in front of BOB. So she lowers her voice, whispering with ferocious urgency:*

**JUNE**

*You don't book a zebra, then bitch about its stripes. (Then to BOB) My husband makes people laugh. But laughter's not innocent, Mr. Sarnoff; don't pretend it is, because that's a lie. It always comes at a cost. To someone.*

**BOB**

Middle ground, Mrs. Levant. That's all I'm asking for—

*JUNE turns to JACK.*

**JUNE**

For heaven's sake, Jack, tell the truth. It's why you book him.

**JACK**

(With a nervous glance to BOB) I don't know what you're talking about, June.

**JUNE**

Oscar's forever slipping on banana peels, so we don't have to. "There but for the grace of God go I." That's more than sacrifice, gentlemen. It's blood-letting.

*Nobody speaks. Finally BOB blurts to JACK:*

**BOB**

That's it. We've done all we can. I might as well tell you: Cugat's on his way here.

**OSCAR**

*Xavier Cugat?*

**JACK**

Is that what you want, Oscar?

**OSCAR**

The man is to music what Del Monte is to fresh pineapple!

**JACK**

Shall I get your chauffeur? Shall I put you in the car, send you straight back to— to— (*Notices BOB, changes course*) —where you came from?

*OSCAR looks imploringly at JACK, but JACK doesn't back down. He means it. He looks to JUNE, but she, too, seems to be saying, "Oscar, please, just behave." OSCAR explodes in defeat:*

**OSCAR**

*ALL RIGHT!* This is what you people want, this is what you'll get! The most lily-white interview since Pat Boone sat down with Dinah Shore. Only I got conditions of my own.

*Again, OSCAR engages in his cigarette ritual.*

**BOB**

Such as—?

**OSCAR**

No piano.

**JUNE**

You don't mean that.

**OSCAR**

I'm the world's oldest musical prodigy; it's degrading.

**JACK**

But you've got to, Oscar; your fans expect it—

**OSCAR**

I'll write 'em both and apologize.

**JUNE**

Darling, you have to play.

**OSCAR**

No, I don't.

**JUNE**

Sweetie, it's what you do best—

**OSCAR**

My playing? Forget my playing! Nobody gives a damn about my playing—

**JUNE**

—That's not true; *I do*—

**OSCAR**

No, it's *who* they want me to play—

**JUNE**

But the piano's a part of you. More than the jokes and the banter.

**OSCAR**

I ain't doin' it. Ya can't make me.

*In a surge of unexpected fury, JUNE grabs OSCAR by the lapels.*

**JUNE**

If you knew — if you only knew — the sacrifices the rest of us make!  
*She releases him, pushing him forcefully away.*

**OSCAR**

*(Stunned)* Christ, Junie.

**JUNE**

Walking on egg shells. Hiding in our own home. All so you can bluster through life with your *frailties* intact—

*JACK softly takes a trembling JUNE by the elbow.*

**JACK**

*Shh.* June.

**JUNE**

*(To BOB)* Can I share something with you, Mr. Sarnoff?

**BOB**

Please.

*JUNE addresses BOB, but looks straight at OSCAR:*

**JUNE**

I had a film career myself. Nothing major; show girls and secretaries mostly. But with each new picture, a few more lines... better billing. Some days I can't help but wonder...

**BOB**

You'd have gone very far; I have no doubt.

*JUNE gives a small nod of thanks to BOB, then she turns to JACK.*

**JUNE**

*(Emphatic, even angry)* He'll play the piano. It's the least he can do.

*She walks out, slamming the door behind her. A long pause, then:*

**OSCAR**

Sensitive, my wife.

**JACK**

Rough times, she tells me.

**OSCAR**

You ever survive a five-hundred foot fall off a mountain ledge onto a four-lane highway, only to get hit by a truck?

**JACK**

No.

**OSCAR**

Then you can't possibly know.

**JACK**

I'll tell production to throw some light on the piano—

*A howl of protest from OSCAR:*

**OSCAR**

—Who for? Not for me—

**JACK**

—just in case. See you in ten, with the rest of America.

**BOB**

Break a leg.

*BOB exits.*

*JACK can feel OSCAR bristle; he squeezes his shoulder and says with a twinkle:*

**JACK**

*Shh. Relax. It's me. Your boy Jack. Follow my lead, just like in New York.*

*And JACK's gone. Again in the distance the clarinet that opens Rhapsody in Blue. Smoke seems to curl up from the floor, and the room once again turns blue.*

**OSCAR**

*Shhhh! Not now. For Chrissakes.*

*Silence. With trembling fingers, OSCAR pulls out a cigarette. He puts it in his mouth.*

*He tries to light it, but his fingers are shaking too much. He puts down the match, then slaps his right hand with his left to calm it down.*

*Steadier now, he raises the match again. Just as he's about to successfully light his cigarette, the next few bars of Rhapsody in Blue crash over him, louder now. The cigarette flies out of his mouth, and he drops the match altogether.*

*He glances up, defiant. It's OSCAR versus the MUSIC now.*

**OSCAR**

*...Quiet! ...QUIET!*

*The MUSIC stops. OSCAR retrieves the cigarette, blows on both ends, and puts it back in his mouth. He takes out a fresh match. He's about to strike it when the MUSIC blasts again, catapulting him from the chair to the floor.*

*He rises, tugging on his coattails, looking anxiously about. Will the Rhapsody attack him again? It does, with gale-like force. He tries to quell it, gesticulating wildly, but it's as hopeless as trying to control the wind.*

*The door swings open. The MUSIC abruptly bumps out, and the lights restore. OSCAR is briefly unhinged.*

*But it's only MAX. Immediately, OSCAR pulls himself together so MAX won't see his despair.*

**MAX**

Five minutes til showtime, Mr. Levant. You want I should call make-up, a little powder on your face?

**OSCAR**

Nah, I'm allergic. You seen Alvin?

**MAX**

Not back yet. Can I help you with something?

*OSCAR holds out his limp tie.*

**OSCAR**

You know how to tie a hangman's noose?

*MAX begins to tie the tie on OSCAR.*

**MAX**

Sure thing; we'll spiffy ya right up.

**OSCAR**

He should be back by now. Time for my next dose of Demerol.

**MAX**

"Not til bedtime," he said.

**OSCAR**

Yeah, bedtime at the bughouse! *(Pounding the wall in rhythm) Eight o'clock, every night.*

**MAX**

Eight o'clock? Really?

**OSCAR**

I miss even one little pill... oh, Christ.

*MAX glances down the hallway to see if there's any sign of ALVIN. Not yet.*



**MAX**

What happens?

**OSCAR**

Eh?

**MAX**

If you miss a dose?

**OSCAR**

I turn into Emperor Nero, but without the charisma.

*MAX is flummoxed. OSCAR notices.*

**OSCAR**

What? What is it?

**MAX**

He... ah... he asked me to lock his bag up in the supply cabinet.

**OSCAR**

Aw, kid, you're a lifesaver — a real Samaritan—

**MAX**

Only I'm not sure I should be the one—

**OSCAR**

—to what? Watch me get the shakes something awful? My mouth turn so dry I can't even talk? That'd be a fine thing, me on Jack Paar, with no gift of gab?

**MAX**

Oh, God...

**OSCAR**

"Play the piano?" HOW?

**MAX**

Mr. Levant, I—

**OSCAR**

How, when I'm goin' crazier than Canter's Deli on a Friday afternoon—

**MAX**

I'm on a tight leash here — sort of a "family favor—"

**OSCAR**

—All the more reason, ya gotta help me out—

**MAX**

—I mess up at work, I kinda ruin the holidays at Uncle Bob's—

**OSCAR**

*Then hurry!* It's not like flipping a light switch; it takes a while to kick in—

*MAX has a torturous moment of indecision.*

**MAX**

But you're about to go on television—

**OSCAR**

The worst thing you could do, kid? Send me out there stone-cold sober. Go! Go!

*MAX exits. We hear a key turning in a lock. In a couple of beats, MAX returns, bearing ALVIN's medical valise.*

*MAX unlatches it, and it snaps open like the jaws of a predatory fish.*

**MAX**

Holy cow. It's a whole drugstore. Which one is the Demerol?

**OSCAR**

Little beauties right there.

*OSCAR extracts a small, amber bottle.*

Thanks, kid, and not just from me. On behalf of the whole network.

**MAX**

Mr. Levant?

**OSCAR**

What?

**MAX**

*(With great sincerity)* Good luck.

*The moment MAX says "good luck," OSCAR's face slackens with horror. MAX snaps the bag closed with finality and exits with it.*

*The cue light grows red. OSCAR stares at it like it's the red-hot mouth of a dragon.*

*He carefully extracts one pill from the bottle and regards it for a moment, poised between his thumb and forefinger.*

*With great care, OSCAR puts the pill aside. Then he opens his mouth, tips the bottle, and swallows all the others.*

**ANNOUNCER**

And now — broadcasting for the first time from the NBC Studios in Hollywood, California — it's *The Tonight Show* with Jack Paar! With Jose Melis and *The Tonight Show* band.

*The show's theme — "Everything's Coming Up Roses" — kicks in.*

Tonight's program is brought to you by the new *Polaroid Land Camera*, the remarkable new camera that develops its own prints! *Polaroid!* Just sixty seconds after you snap!

*A beat, then:*

Tonight's guests, Oscar Levant, movie siren Jayne Mansfield, and the magic of Señor Wences! And now, ladies and gentlemen, your host — *Jack Paar!*

## SCENE THREE

*The set of The Tonight Show. The studio lights click on, filling the space with hot, white light. JACK addresses the audience.*

**JACK**

Well, good evening! Good evening, and welcome! I'm always asking Miriam, why can't I get this reception at home?

*A beat, then:*

It's true; we're coming to you live from the West Coast. As one of my guests tonight famously said about Hollywood: "Strip away the phony tinsel, and you find the real tinsel underneath."

*Another beat.*

That's right. Oscar Levant. To wit, he's America's greatest wit. He's kept pace with the likes of Dorothy Parker and Oscar Wilde. It's true Oscar is unusual. Eccentric, even. A hypochondriac? Definitely; he's got more pills in his medicine chest than Rexall's does in its whole pharmacy. He's taken cures for which there are no known diseases. But I believe — and I think he'd agree — that it's good for Oscar to get out every once and a while and greet his public. His appearances on this show are therapy, really. I kid you not! So please welcome my favorite mental patient — one of America's true geniuses — Oscar Levant.

*The curtain rises, revealing OSCAR at his most louche, sitting in the guest's chair. The pills give him a looseness, a casual, "feel good" brio we haven't seen before. An omnipresent cigarette drips from his hand. Near his chair, a mic stand.*

*JACK joins OSCAR upstage. Above them, an ON AIR sign burns in bright red.*

**OSCAR**

I'm a genius, am I?

**JACK**

I'd say so, Oscar.

**OSCAR**

What the world needs are more geniuses with humility. There are so few of us left.

**JACK**

A mere mortal like me has to wonder; is it a burden, Oscar? An intellect like yours? Some people say there's a fine line between genius and insanity.

**OSCAR**

Oh, I erased that line a long time ago.

**JACK**

Aha! You see? You have a great wit. That's indicative of genius, isn't it?

**OSCAR**

Nah, wit's overrated. Wits say two or three good things in their lives. But humorists, they're the ones who are funny most of the time. You know what a humorist is, Jack?

**JACK**

What?

**OSCAR**

Someone like you. Someone with four writers who ad-libs a show.

**JACK**

That's a back-handed compliment, my friend, but from you I'll take it.

**OSCAR**

You're so full of charm; that's something I would never stoop to.

*Clearly, they adore playing off one another. JACK extracts a cigarette from his own gold case and smokes, too.*

**JACK**

So bring us up-to-date, Oscar. What've you been doing with yourself lately?

**OSCAR**

My behavior has been impeccable. I've been unconscious for the last six months.

**JACK**

Really? Flat-out, on your back?

**OSCAR**

I'm in the middle of a breakdown. It's my fifth in two years.

**JACK**

I'm sorry to hear it.

**OSCAR**

Don't be. That's the thing about schizophrenia—

**JACK**

—Yes?—

**OSCAR**

—it sure beats dining alone.

**JACK**

Maybe if you got out more. A bracing walk in the morning, or an evening jog. What do you do for exercise?

**OSCAR**

I stumble, then I fall into a coma.

*Ticked, JACK crumples up with laughter.*

**JACK**

You see? Right there? You're doing it again. You're spitting out one-liners faster than ticker tape.

**OSCAR**

It's the pills. Sober, I'm Dostoyevsky. A few Demerol, and I turn into Henny Youngman.

**JACK**

So tell me, Oscar. What makes a good joke?

**OSCAR**

Please. Analyzing a joke, it's like dissecting a frog. When you take it apart, you find out what it's made of, but you kill it in the process.

**JACK**

But you must know. You've built your reputation on your sense of humor.

**OSCAR**

It's a curse. I always say the wrong thing. I can't help myself. They're erecting a statue of me on Hollywood Boulevard. It's got a fig leaf over its mouth.

*JACK's having fun. He decides to push a button or two.*

**JACK**

You know, Oscar, there are certain folks out there... certain critics... who say some subjects just aren't suitable for comedy.

**OSCAR**

Yeah? Who?

**JACK**

Oh, those self-appointed guardians of our mores and manners.

**OSCAR**

Network executives?

**JACK**

You said it; I didn't! Take politics for example—

**OSCAR**

Only an idiot would come on a show like this and discuss politics. And guess what?

**JACK**

What?

**OSCAR**

*I'm an idiot!* You know what a politician is, don't you? A man who'll double-cross that bridge when he comes to it.

**JACK**

So are you a Democrat or a Republican?

**OSCAR**

Oh, a Democrat. The Republicans, they only look after the rich. But us Democrats? We're more broad-minded, see. We think the poor got a right to be corrupt, too.

**JACK**

There was some political news in the papers just today; J. Edgar Hoover just published a book about Communism—

**OSCAR**

Speaking of Hoover, you know why he told the FBI to chase after The Rosenbergs?

**JACK**

No, why?

**OSCAR**

He was gonna to do it himself, but he can't run in heels.

**JACK**

Now it's those kind of remarks, Oscar, that get you in trouble.

**OSCAR**

It could be worse.

**JACK**

Worse? How?

*OSCAR glances to and fro; he's about to do something naughty.*

**OSCAR**

I could be talking about *religion*.

**JACK**

You're right. Funny, isn't it? We're told it's so very important in our lives, and yet we're not supposed to talk about it, are we? Do you believe in God, Oscar?

*JACK reaches over and swivels the mic on the stand so it's poised squarely at OSCAR's chin.*

**OSCAR**

Believe in him? He was my roommate!

**JACK**

Excuse me?

**OSCAR**

Sure! This swank sanitarium over in Del Rey.

**JACK**

Is that so? The two of you? So how'd you get along?

**OSCAR**

To tell you the truth, lousy. Big mood swings, God.

**JACK**

Is that right?

**OSCAR**

Think about it. On the one hand, He gives us Mahatma Gandhi and the polio vaccine. On the other? Adolph Hitler and cartoon chipmunks that sing. Turns out He was manic depressive.

**JACK**

God? *Really?*

**OSCAR**

It only got worse. After the Holocaust, they had to put Him on thorazine.

**JACK**

There's that third subject, isn't there? That last taboo.

*This time, JACK picks up the mic stand entirely and moves it even closer to OSCAR. OSCAR seizes the bait and leans into the mic to say:*

**OSCAR**

*Sex?*

*The word booms throughout the studio.*

Oh, sex is a topic I can't resist. I've been married for nineteen years, so I'm very nostalgic about it.

**JACK**

There are those who suggest our culture is obsessed with sex, aren't there? What do you think of pornography?

**OSCAR**

*(A beat, then a shrug)* It helps.

**JACK**

The lovely Jayne Mansfield will be joining us shortly. You know what she said on the subject of sex and punch-lines?

**OSCAR**

No, what?

**JACK**

“Nothing risqué, nothing gained.”

*This tickles OSCAR, who laughs; score one for JAYNE.*

**OSCAR**

Clever woman, Jayne. She’s much smarter than her wardrobe implies.

**JACK**

Speaking of sex symbols, did you hear? Elizabeth Taylor’s on her third husband.

**OSCAR**

Poor Liz. Always a bride, never a bridesmaid.

**JACK**

She’s running neck-and-neck with Zsa-Zsa Gabor.

**OSCAR**

I’ll say this for Zsa-Zsa: she’s the only woman who ever left the Iron Curtain wearing it.

**JACK**

And speaking of celebrity marriages? How about Arthur Miller and Marilyn Monroe?

**OSCAR**

That’s a heartwarming story. You know what she did, just for him?

**JACK**

No; what?

**OSCAR**

She converted to Judaism.

**JACK**

She did?

**OSCAR**

Yeah. Now that she’s kosher, he can eat her.

*This stuns even JACK; he blurts out an awkward, incredulous laugh, popping up and down in his chair. He signals to BOB in the control booth, as promised.*

*OSCAR sits back, self-satisfied. The red studio lights blink frantically, as if they’re signaling a full-blown disaster.*

**JACK**

Maybe after our next commercial break, you’ll humor us—

**OSCAR**

What? *Humor you?* What have I been doing—?

**JACK**

You’ll humor us, and you’ll play something—

*OSCAR’s trying to be emphatic, but his words are starting to slur.*

**OSCAR**

Oh, no.

**JACK**

That’s right, ladies and gentlemen—

**OSCAR**

No, no, no... you’re trying to trap me... trap me, cuz we’re rolling...

*JACK turns to the camera and announces:*

**JACK**

Coming up next—

**OSCAR**

Are we? Are we rolling?

**JACK**

—Oscar Levant does what he does best—

**OSCAR**

—Yeah, he’ll commit suicide—

**JACK**

—tickling not just our funny bones—

**OSCAR**

—on live television—

**JACK**

—but the ivories as well—

**OSCAR**

...oh, the hell he will...

**JACK**

—when we come back!

*A loud brrrrrrnnnnng! as filming stops. The stage lights shut down. OSCAR bolts for the exit.*

**JACK**

Now Oscar—

**OSCAR**

You heard me.

*And he’s gone. JACK isn’t sure what to do; he half-rises from his chair, then sits again.*

*BOB SARNOFF steps onto the set. He walks briskly to JACK and leans over in his ear:*

**BOB**

What in the hell was that? *You wanna crucify me, Jack, just nail me to a goddamn cross—*

*BOB follows OSCAR off. JACK looks out to the audience where JUNE is presumably seated.*

**JACK**

June, can you meet us in the dressing room, please? June?

**SCENE FOUR**

*OSCAR's dressing room. OSCAR stumbles in, his legs turning to rubber. BOB charges in beside himself with fury.*

**BOB**

You want us off the air?

**OSCAR**

*(Mumbling to himself)* I told him... *one condition, I said... positively not, I said... you can't ask me...*

**BOB**

*Is that what you want? The FCC up my ass—? Our license revoked—?*

*JACK rushes in, hot on BOB's heels.*

**JACK**

Relax. One little remark. Off-color, sure, but it got some laughs—

**BOB**

*Gasps! They were gasping! One woman almost fainted!*

*ALVIN rushes into the room. He heads straight for OSCAR and starts checking his vitals.*

**BOB**

Who the hell is he?

**JACK**

He's with Oscar — here to help—

**BOB**

What is he, some kinda nurse—?

**ALVIN**

You took something, didn't you? What was it? Some kinda booze?  
You drinking your after-shave?

**BOB**

—Oh, big surprise! He's looped isn't he—?

**ALVIN**

I was a fool; a goddamn fool to let you out of my sight.

**BOB**

*—The man's flying—*

**ALVIN**

You know your trouble? Too many friends, all claiming they have your best interests at heart.

**JACK**

(To ALVIN) How is he? Will he be all right?

*MAX enters, frantic.*

**MAX**

Holy crap, Uncle Bob. The calls, they're coming already. The Legion of Decency. Cardinal Spellman. The national office of the Parent Teachers Association.

**BOB**

Shit, shit, shit.

**MAX**

Two minutes, then we're live again.

*He runs out.*

**BOB**

You're not going back out there—

**JACK**

Of course we are — *he's got to play—*

**ALVIN**

He *should* go straight back to treatment—

**BOB**

Excuse me—? Treatment? He's in treatment? Now?

**ALVIN**

Mt. Sinai. He's on a four hour pass.

**BOB**

(*Apoplectic now*) For *fuck's sake*, Jack. He's a *mental patient* on a fucking *furlough*? And he's a guest on *The frigging Tonight Show*?

*Once again, MAX enters with a prompt:*

**MAX**

*Ninety-seconds.*

**JACK**

Hear that, Oscar—? *Let's go—*

*OSCAR summons his strength to yowl, like a wounded dog:*

**OSCAR**

*No, no, no, no no!* Tell 'em I died.

**JACK**

(To MAX) Don't you dare.

**OSCAR**

You' wanna watch it happen? Cuz if I go out there *I'll have a heart attack—*

**BOB**

No, I'm the one who'll have a fucking heart attack—

**JACK**

It's my show. *If anyone's having a heart attack—*

*ALL THREE MEN stop arguing when they notice JUNE in the door way.*

*OSCAR hides his face in agony. JUNE appears in the doorway.*

**JUNE**

You can come home, Oscar.

*OSCAR looks up.*

**OSCAR**

Eh? What's that—? Junie—?

**JUNE**

Tonight. To Roxbury drive. To that ratty bathrobe you like so much.

You can give your daughter a proper kiss before the Prom.

**ALVIN**

Mrs. Levant, you know that's not wise—

**JUNE**

(*Sternly*) Alvin. *Please.*

**ALVIN**

—the Doctor's not gonna approve—

**JUNE**

I know you mean well, I do—

**ALVIN**

—his “good graces” — Loma Linda — *remember—?*

**JUNE**

*Enough.* This is a private matter between Oscar and me.

*ALVIN bristles but doesn't push further. JUNE turns her attention to OSCAR.*

I'll tell Doctor Greenleigh I want you home with me. If you'll be the man I know you can be. If you'll go back out on that soundstage and *play.*

**JACK**

June, if Oscar needs help — *serious help* — I would never—

**JUNE**

Never do what? Compromise his recovery? Of course you would. We all would. We do it every day. And no one does it more than Oscar himself. It's how he makes his living, isn't it?

In a soft voice, OSCAR sings the second verse of Blame It On My Youth. It grows louder.

**OSCAR**

(To ALVIN) “A real nice melody,” you said. “Good as his.”

**ALVIN**

(Heartened now) Yes. Yes, I did.

**OSCAR**

(Mumbling to himself) Yeah. Okay... okay...

*Then:*

Suppose I play one of my own pieces?

**JUNE**

Jack? You wouldn't mind, would you?

**JACK**

Play Chopsticks! Just get out there.

**OSCAR**

You mean it, Junie? No more restraints? No more shock treatments?

**JUNE**

I mean it. No more.

**BOB**

Mrs. Levant, I'm afraid—

**JUNE**

Mr. Sarnoff, the damage is done. It's just a few more minutes of your precious air time. If he's going to end his career— (She nods toward OSCAR)—let him do it with some dignity. Let him be the person he was meant to be: an artist, not a court jester.

*The red cue light starts to flash.*

**MAX**

Ten seconds, Mr. Paar—

**JACK**

No time left, people. What's it going to be?

## SCENE FIVE

Back on the set with JACK at his perch. The AUDIENCE is still in a state of overstimulation.

**JACK**

Welcome back, friends... I know, I know. Calm down, calm down now.

*He works to re-engage the audience, which by now is entirely overstimulated. He peers out across the rows:*

Ah, some empty seats! Water coolers will be buzzing tomorrow, won't they? Yes indeed...

*Someone calls to him from the balcony:*

You're with who? That busload of Methodists from Glendale?... Well, okay! Keep the faith, all right? ...*Shh. Shh...*

*The AUDIENCE finally settles.*

NBC would like me to remind you that the opinions expressed on this program are those of my guests, and not necessarily endorsed by the network.

*He smiles, a charmer, especially under pressure.*

One of the joys of live television is its unpredictability. Combine that with an unorthodox guest... well, the results can be... *unexpected*. But one thing we've all come to expect from Oscar Levant? He plays the piano with a grace and an ease that even Chopin might envy. Ladies and gentlemen... surprising us yet again tonight with a composition of his very own...

*JACK scrounges in his breast pocket for a slip of paper and reads from it:*

...his Piano Concerto, Number One...

*He puts the paper away.*

...Oscar Levant!

*OSCAR enters and stares at the grand piano. He approaches it as a animal trainer might broach a wild tiger.*

*He sits. He raises his fingers over the keyboard, ready to play. An excruciating pause. Will he be able to do it? Can he play?*

*Just as OSCAR starts to bring his hands crashing down, the ON AIR sign goes out. Something startling happens.*



*Another burst of blue smoke, and GERSHWIN appears from deep in the recesses of OSCAR's psyche. He's dressed in white tie and tails, almost as if he's about to play.*

**GEORGE**

Your *Concerto Number One*? Really?

**OSCAR**

Holy Christ. Not again—!

**GEORGE**

Big mistake, my friend—

**OSCAR**

—Not enough pills, not enough pills—

**GEORGE**

—playing your music when ya could play mine—

**OSCAR**

Screw you. I'm playing my own piece tonight... *my own piece, not yours...!*

**GEORGE**

For Christ's sake, Okkie, who wants to hear that?

**OSCAR**

Lotsa folks, that's who!

**GEORGE**

Who? Your wife? The kid in the lab coat?

**OSCAR**

I got talent too you know! I'm not nobody! I played it for Paderewski! For Heifitz! And they thought it was swell. SWELL! I got tunes in my head, all right, melodies you wouldn't believe—

**GEORGE**

*(Backing off, then)* Fine. Your *Concerto*. Go ahead.

**OSCAR**

*(Momentarily stunned)* You mean that?

**GEORGE**

Sure. I only hope...

**OSCAR**

Yeah, what?

**GEORGE**

...that you don't get nervous. That you don't forget.

**OSCAR**

I won't—

**GEORGE**

Suppose you skip the whole third movement, like you did that time in Cleveland. Or Boston remember? You got up mid-phrase, and walked off the stage.

**OSCAR**

I was young then. Insecure.

**GEORGE**

Who could blame you, after what they said in the papers—

**OSCAR**

Oh, now, don't go there, Georgie—

**GEORGE**

"Third-rate, imitation Schoenberg?"

**OSCAR**

—don't do this to me—

**GEORGE**

Or worse still—

**OSCAR**

—I'm begging ya, please—

**GEORGE**

—"a schoolboy's homage to George *Gershwin*?"

**OSCAR**

—*don't!*—

**GEORGE**

I can't. I can't stand by, and watch you humiliate yourself.

**OSCAR**

Fine. So get the hell out.

**GEORGE**

Not tonight.

**OSCAR**

GO, I SAID—!

*OSCAR starts slapping the sides of his forehead in a rhythmic, compulsive fashion, as if he's trying to drive GEORGE's voice from his brain.*

*Go, go, get outta my head, GET OUT....*

**GEORGE**

*(Quelling him)* OSCAR. *Shhh.* Now, now. *Shhhh....*

*GEORGE shifts strategy, playing on OSCAR's sentiment.*

Buddy. Pal. Have you forgotten our glory days?

*He climbs atop the piano, seducing OSCAR through memory.*

'Member how it was? You 'n me, sitting at those twin pianos on Riverside Drive. I'd scribble down a few notes, and pass 'em to you.

*From his breast pocket, GEORGE pulls out staff paper. He passes a page to OSCAR.*

"Play 'em," I'd say. "I wanna hear how they sound."

*We hear — but don't see — the OSCAR of long ago, plunking out the melody of I Got Rhythm on GEORGE's piano. GEORGE hums along.*

Next night — who knows? — Maybe a love song.

*He passes OSCAR another sheet of music, and we hear OSCAR play the opening bars to Embraceable You. As before, GEORGE hums.*

"Or this one. Give it a try, would ya?"

*GEORGE stretches out, supine now, and passes OSCAR another page of music.*

"I'm thinking — maybe, just maybe — it's the first thing ya hear when the curtain goes up."

*We hear the haunting first lines of Summertime. This time both men hum, enraptured by the tune. Together, they're swept up in the memory of the incredible, infectious bromance they shared two decades ago.*

You're the only one I trusted, and you know why? 'Cause of something you said. "You're not alone, Georgie. There's another human being on the planet who gets it... all the colors, all the hues."

*He lifts OSCAR's head to look him in the eyes.*

You were the first, Okkie... the first person in history to play my music... melodies that would one day be as famous as the Hallelujah Chorus. Made ya feel ten feet tall, didn't it?

**OSCAR**

*(A hoarse whisper) More like "second rate."*

**GEORGE**

No! Okkie, no—

**OSCAR**

Like I couldn't compete. *Like I was suffocating in your goddamn shadow—*

*GEORGE slides off the piano now, chasing OSCAR around it.*

**GEORGE**

You don't mean that—

**OSCAR**

*—but the only thing worse? The only thing more terrifying? Stepping out from under it.*

**GEORGE**

Say it ain't so...

**OSCAR**

I'm sick... *sick to death* of being your sidekick.

**GEORGE**

All Oscar and no Gershwin makes Jack a dull boy.

**OSCAR**

Leave the wisecracks to me. They're all I have left.

**GEORGE**

Hey, if I could give you my looks — my *confidence* — I would. But my music's the next best thing.

**OSCAR**

Oh, God... you're my fantasy... *I'm the one making up your lines...*

**GEORGE**

You're your own worst enemy, you know that?

**OSCAR**

Like I know my own name.

*GEORGE mimes firing a gun into his foot.*

**GEORGE**

Bang! Bang! Right in your own wing-tips!

**OSCAR**

Here's what I don't like — no, what I *hate* about you—

**GEORGE**

—Strong word, hate—

**OSCAR**

No gap! There's no gap — between the dream—

**GEORGE**

—I love you, Okkie—

**OSCAR**

—between the *dream* — and the *doing!*

**GEORGE**

—like a brother, kid—

**OSCAR**

That's what I hate. What I'll always hate.

**GEORGE**

You want in on a secret? I'm not the strong one. You are. You always have been. Me, I'm scared to death of failure. But you? You don't mind it. You're used to it, Okkie. Hell... *you eat it like dessert.*

*Then:*

So what'll it be? One of my *Preludes*?

**OSCAR**

No, no, I can't—

**GEORGE**

My concerto? The one in F—?

**OSCAR**

—I can't—!

*GEORGE lifts the lid of the piano, readying it for play, locking it into place.*

**GEORGE**

My *Cuban Overture*? My *Waltz in C*? *Blue Monday*?

**OSCAR**

Screw you—!

**GEORGE**

I know! The one you laid down yourself at Brunswick with Frankie Black and his boys—

**OSCAR**

Oh, hell no!

**GEORGE**

But it's your favorite!

**OSCAR**

*(Swallowing hard)* I've played it enough. I'm not playing it again.

**GEORGE**

Goddamnit, kid. You promised me.

**OSCAR**

Promised what?

**GEORGE**

That you'd play it forever.

**OSCAR**

When—?

**GEORGE**

*When—? When I was flat on my ass at the hospital. Everybody's fearing the worst. My brother's a goddamn mess! My mother, she's on her knees, sobbing her way through the *Mi Sheberach*. They're about to roll me into surgery, and you lean over and you say — right into my ear — you say— *(Whispering in OSCAR's ear)* "If the worst comes to pass, I'll make you a promise. I'll play *your* music... every chance I get..."*

**OSCAR**

*(Whispering back)* I said that?

**GEORGE**

*...every chance. I'll pledge my life to it."*

**OSCAR**

A weak moment. If you'd asked, I'd a cut out my heart and handed it to you.

**GEORGE**

Ah-one, and ah-two, and ah, three...!

**OSCAR**

*(Shaking his head woefully)* Don't count me in...

**GEORGE**

Show 'em what you got, Maestro!

**OSCAR**

*...don't...*

**GEORGE**

That beautiful wail—

**OSCAR**

*(An urgent plea)* ...I got my own music...

**GEORGE**

—My *Rhapsody's* tattooed on your soul, isn't it, every last note—

*All of a sudden, GEORGE straddles OSCAR on the piano bench. OSCAR stiffens.*

**GEORGE**

—almost like you wrote it yourself.

*He raises OSCAR's hands and places them over the keyboard.*

*Suddenly, the ON AIR sign re-ignites.*

*As if guided by GEORGE's hands, OSCAR plays the opening notes to Rhapsody in Blue. A pause.*

**OSCAR**

Aw, for fuck's sake...

*And as OSCAR continues, his playing gains momentum, full of the rage, envy and tortured love he feels for GEORGE.*

*GEORGE evinces a thin smile of satisfaction. He's won. Gratified, he rises from the piano bench. He steps back, fading away until he disappears completely.*

*Now it's just OSCAR and the PIANO in a life-or-death duel; a scene in which our hero finally confronts the demon that plagues him... which instead of a monster happens to be a piece of music.*

Each time OSCAR raises a hand off the keyboard, it hangs in the air, suspended, raising the terrifying possibility that he might go blank before the next phrase.

But each time, he triumphs, smashing the keys with a heart-stopping exuberance.

He makes for a sight that's odd and deeply poignant; his wrinkled suit, hang-dog face and frantic hands, moving across the instrument with passionate, pneumatic force.

Once or twice — during a rest — he glances furtively about to see if GEORGE is still actively haunting him.

Mid-way through the piece, he cues in orchestral accompaniment, and it fills the theater with a thunderous sound.

Lights hit him from a variety of sharp angles, casting multiple shadows — enormous ones — against the rear wall of the sound-stage, a reference to his classic sequence in *An American in Paris*.

The music reaches its shattering climax, and OSCAR brings it home with savage force.

When he finishes, he's bathed in sweat and his hands are shaking. He wrests them off the keyboard and plunges them into his lap.

He closes his eyes, tightly, as if he's a death row prisoner awaiting a jolt from the electric chair.

JACK's practically streaming tears, applauding with zeal.

## SCENE SIX

OSCAR's dressing room, but we can still hear thunderous applause from the Studio.

JUNE rushes to OSCAR, holding him up. His baggy suit is soaked-through and wisps of hair stick up in all directions.

ALVIN rushes in, taking command.

**ALVIN**

Quick! Over here.

ALVIN and JUNE lower OSCAR onto the couch. Once he's settled on the cushions:

**ALVIN**

No wonder he's unconscious. I found the empty bottle; he took it all.

**JUNE**

Oh, God. Not again.

**ALVIN**

We elevate his head; turn him gently to the side.

As they position OSCAR "just so," MAX rushes in with the medical valise.

**MAX**

Alvin! Thought you might need this—

**ALVIN**

There should be some charcoal tablets in the bag — quick — now! They'll absorb the extra Demerol, then flush it out of his system. (To JUNE) He'll need some water.

**JUNE**

Yes, yes of course.

JUNE dives into action, filling a glass from the cooler. She brings it to ALVIN.

**ALVIN**

(Mopping OSCAR's brow) Breathe, my friend. Just breathe.

MAX dutifully rummages for the tablets.

**MAX**

These?

**ALVIN**

The green tin. GREEN.

MAX tosses the tin to ALVIN, who hisses at him:

**ALVIN**

I told you to put that bag under *lock* and *key*.

**MAX**

It was time for his medicine; he said he couldn't miss a dose—

**ALVIN**

*And you believed him—?*

**MAX**

*(Cracking with emotion)* I'm sorry, so sorry—

**ALVIN**

You know this man can't help himself, you know he swallows pills like candy — *and still — STILL—*

**MAX**

*(The horrible truth dawning)* It's all my fault, isn't it?

JUNE heads back to ALVIN with the water.

**JUNE**

Don't take the blame for something Oscar's done. You'll spend your whole life apologizing.

**ALVIN**

*(Under his breath)* Shame on them, putting a man as sick as you on television.

**MAX**

He'll be okay, won't he? Please.

JUNE hands ALVIN the glass. He pries open OSCAR's mouth, feeds him a couple tablets, then follows them with water.

**ALVIN**

Thataway. Down the hatch. Easy, easy.

*Next, he rubs OSCAR's neck to make sure he swallows, like a vet does when giving pills to a dog or cat. OSCAR sputters, pushes the glass away and bellows:*

**OSCAR**

Water's for fish. Gimme some Wild Turkey.

**MAX**

*(With hope)* He's all right, isn't he?

MAX's headset buzzes. He speaks into his console to someone unseen:

**MAX**

He is; he's gonna be all right...

MAX bolts back to the set just as JACK rushes into the room with BOB right behind him. He's still on a high.

**JACK**

*Consummate.* There's no other word. Do you hear that? We cut to commercial; they're still going crazy. *(To BOB)* Music like that? You won't find it on Steve Allen. Ed Sullivan, either. I don't care *how late* we're on—

BOB turns to confront OSCAR directly. He sees him, sitting on the couch like a pile of dirty laundry.

**BOB**

Is he conscious? I'd like to speak to him.

**ALVIN**

Give or take.

**BOB**

Mr. Levant? *(Off no response)* Oscar.

**OSCAR**

*(Faintly)* Eh?

**BOB**

Look, I have plenty of admiration for you. I do. You play one helluva piano. *(His anger rising)* But this wit you're so famous for... you think it's an asset? Well, right now, *The Tonight Show* hangs in the balance, and all two-hundred and ninety-four people who work for it. Hell, the whole network may be in jeopardy. That's over three thousand nightly dinners on the table, three thousand car payments, three thousand mortgages, all so you could buoy your fragile ego with a few smart remarks—

**JACK**

Bob, for Chrissakes—

**BOB**

*(Sharply, to JACK)* I mean it. I listened to him; he can listen to me.

BOB turns back to OSCAR, who lies dumbly throughout BOB's tongue-lashing, absorbing every blow, too spent to defend himself.

**BOB**

This so-called "humor" of yours? It's not funny; it's cruel. Degrading women, insulting the Jews. The way you carve yourself up for public consumption... turning your psychoses into quips and your pain into punchlines. It's unseemly. And when we laugh at it, we debase ourselves. It makes us less decent. Less kind.

*A beat, then:*

If this augurs the future of television... well then, I rue the day.

*Everyone's hushed; nobody moves. A final, stinging instruction from BOB for JACK:*

And you? He may be the tinder, but you lit the match. Breakfast at my club tomorrow, nine a.m. sharp.

*And he's gone. A pall hangs over the room that JACK is determined to break:*

**JACK**

He's wrong, Oscar. It's a double-standard— *(Calling after BOB, so he hears)* —and he knows it.

*JACK crosses behind the sofa, standing over OSCAR, the two of them a united front.*

Sound off in the newspaper? Hell, you might win a Pulitzer Prize. Do it in a novel, and you're a regular Jonathan Swift.

*He claps his hands on OSCAR's shoulders; OSCAR winces. JACK speaks with Messianic fervor.*

But on television? If you have the gall — the gumption — to speak out on the idiot box, what are you? A clown, an uninformed stooge, who doesn't know his place. Well, I say bullshit. If television's ever gonna matter, we gotta use it to some real purpose to *slaughter a few sacred cows*. And sometimes, we're gonna ruffle feathers. Sometimes, we're gonna *offend*.

*A beat.*

But they gotta let us run loose. There's no other way.

*JACK leans down next to OSCAR:*

And Oscar?

*OSCAR mumbles an assent. JACK whispers in his ear.*

Be nicer to yourself, if you can.

*JACK kisses OSCAR on the top of his head. The red cue light starts to flash. MAX sticks his head in the door.*

**MAX**

Mr. Paar, you're on—!

**JACK**

*Oh, Christ—*

*And JACK runs back to the set. A pause.*

**OSCAR**

So, Junie... you said I could come home.

**JUNE**

Yes. Yes. I did. *(This is hard for JUNE:)* But Oscar I—

**OSCAR**

You said I could give Marcia a proper kiss, 'fore she goes to the prom.

**JUNE**

You're right, I did.

*She becomes her organizational self, the glue that holds OSCAR together:*

**JUNE**

Alvin, if you could just help me get him safely back to the house—

**ALVIN**

Back to “the house?”

**JUNE**

Roxbury Drive, yes.

**ALVIN**

*(To dissuade her)* Now, Mrs. Levant. You know what I'm going to say.

**JUNE**

Oh, Alvin, please. Forgive me. You've been... well... a godsend. I'll tell Dr. Greenleigh, I promise. And I'll tell him to write that letter on your behalf. You don't have to worry.

**ALVIN**

I'm not my first concern right now.

**JUNE**

I made a promise. It's one I may regret later, but I made it, and I'm going to keep it. *(To OSCAR)* Sweetheart, get your things. We're going home.

*But OSCAR has different intentions.*

**OSCAR**

*(Downplaying it)* I... ah... I'm gonna go with him.

**JUNE**

What?

**OSCAR**

*(A noncommittal shrug)* Nurse Nightingale.

**JUNE**

To Mt. Sinai?

**OSCAR**

I think so. Yes.

**JUNE**

But darling, I thought—

**OSCAR**

Don't get me wrong. I want that ratty bathrobe something awful. I want to crawl into bed next to you, thrash around, wake up screaming, and sleep-walk to the fridge... just like old times.

*JUNE laughs gently, and OSCAR joins in. His shoulders keep rising and falling ever-so-slightly. Soon it's hard to tell; is he laughing or crying?*

Only...

**JUNE**

*(Tenderly)* Only what, Oscar?

**OSCAR**

Tonight I... well, I...

*He can't contain his sorrow any longer; it wells up inside him with unstoppable force. He draws JUNE to him, pressing his forehead against hers. His voice cracks, and he vibrates with so much deep, internal emotion that it's almost unbearable.*

*It's hard to tell which is more heart-breaking; his tears, or his futile effort to stifle them.*

...I still got these voices in my head, see? And I want 'em to quiet down. And the music... the music that I play... that any man plays... ideally speaking... it should be his own. Nobody else's.

*JUNE's eyes fill with tears.*

**JUNE**

It should, yes.

**OSCAR**

Yeah, yeah. I know you're disappointed, but I'll make it up to you.

**JUNE**

I know you will.

**OSCAR**

*(To ALVIN)* All right, you. Take me back to the Looney Bin.

**ALVIN**

Yes, sir. Gladly.

*ALVIN hands OSCAR his homberg and his coat.*

**ALVIN**

*(Heartfelt)* Don't you worry, Mrs. Levant. I'll see to it we take real good care of him.

**JUNE**

Promise?

**ALVIN**

I started in the Maternity Ward. *(To OSCAR, fondly)* I'm used to big babies.

**OSCAR**

Quite a night, eh? In the words Miss Mansfield, "Nothing risqué, nothing gained."

*OSCAR starts to leave, but turns back to look at his wife:*

**OSCAR**

Keep the coffee on, would ya?

*JUNE nods, and mimes four stirs to the right:*

**JUNE**

One... two... three... four...

*OSCAR overturns his hat, like a big coffee cup, and mimes four stirs to the left:*

**OSCAR**

Four... three... two... one... You know what we did, you and me?

**JUNE**

No, darling. What?

**OSCAR**

Just saved six hundred coal miners from an avalanche in Mongolia.

*OSCAR feels more affection for JUNE than he could ever express. It makes his face twitch. He starts to say something, then stops. Finally he blurts out an awkward:*

See you in the funny papers, kid.

*And he's gone. ALVIN nods at JUNE; they share an understanding. Then ALVIN follows OSCAR out, closing the door behind them.*

*JUNE stands alone now, not moving. She appears stoic, but her eyes are glistening.*

*In the distance, we hear JACK's VOICE over a swell of theme music:*

**JACK'S VOICE**

...tomorrow night, our guests will be Joey Bishop, Gypsy Rose Lee, and Jonathan Winters. Join us, won't you? Good night, from the NBC Studios in Burbank!

*JUNE, meanwhile, gathers her things to exit and drive by herself to the house on Roxbury.*

*(A new — even tender — idea)* And good night, Oscar Levant... wherever you are.

*JUNE stops. She smiles, wistful, at the sound of OSCAR's name.*

*Slow fade.*

**END OF PLAY**

# GOOD NIGHT, OSCAR

## BY DOUG WRIGHT

### CAST

1W, 6M

### SYNOPSIS

It's 1958, and Jack Paar hosts the hottest late-night talk-show on television. His favorite guest? Character actor, pianist and wild card Oscar Levant. Famous for his witty one-liners, Oscar has a favorite: "There's a fine line between genius and insanity; I have erased this line." Tonight, Oscar will prove just that when he appears live on national TV in an episode that Paar's audience—and the rest of America—won't soon forget. *GOOD NIGHT, OSCAR* explores the nexus of humor and heartbreak, the ever-dwindling distinction between exploitation and entertainment, and the high cost of baring one's soul for public consumption.

*"A GOLD MINE! GOOD NIGHT, OSCAR is a play ostensibly about pianist, composer, and noted wit Oscar Levant—through whom the show offers commentaries on the nature and burden of genius, exploitation of mental illness, and the polarizing roles of comedy and the media in our society."*

—*Entertainment Weekly*

*"A tour de force! Searing and complex. It's not to be missed."*

—*The Chicago Tribune*

*"Incredible! GOOD NIGHT, OSCAR is a captivating work, as hysterically funny as it is heartbreaking."*

—*New York Stage Review*

*"Glorious! A show that truly, honestly, and unimpeachably deserves its tumultuous standing ovation. I have seen nothing on the New York stage to match it."*

—*The Observer*

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