

OPENING CREDITS over the rhythmic sounds of plaintive Klezmer music mixed w/gospel and the blues with a rim shot or two thrown in for good luck:

1 EXT. NORTH MAIN STREET / SUNSET 1

Early evening in 'The Pinch,' the immigrant section of Memphis, Tennessee.

A balmy autumn night; the crunch of fallen leaves underfoot.

A soft seven o'clock light embraces the residents as they wend their way to the Idle Hour Cinema, accompanied by the contagious sweet and sour klezmer/gospel/blues.

There is a joyfulness and a feeling of serenity that comes from belonging to a small community where everyone knows everyone. Neighbors greet each other warmly as they walk on the sidewalks and spill over onto the street.

Sprinkled throughout, well-dressed African-American men, women, couples, and several children with their parents.

In this casual parade, we meet everyone we are going to come to know and love. (See Opening Richard Altman's "THE PLAYER")

END OPENING CREDITS:

2 EXT. NORTH MAIN STREET / SAME 2

Mature AUNT FRIEDA and UNCLE SHARKEY walk arm-in-arm.

UNCLE SHARKEY  
...He said it would be here by  
Tuesday...

AUNT FRIEDA  
A day more, a day less.  
If he said he sent it, he sent it.  
What's the point in worrying?  
It will get here...

Camera lingers on the always elegant MR. and MRS. ROSEN, their raven-haired daughter MIRIAM--the village beauty (16-18), and their painfully shy, appealing son STUART (13-14).

Walking close-by is Miriam's good friend RACHEL, and Rachel's younger sister, CLARA.

Three teen-agers: BERNIE SAPERSTEIN (good-looking, with slicked-down hair), MICKEY GRABER (the poet), and the somewhat consumptive HERMAN BLEN, jostle each other good-naturedly.

Rachel observes Bernie with interest.

Clara sneaks a peek at Stuart.

Bernie shoves Mickey for Miriam's benefit.

Miriam is unimpressed.

Bernie, failing to get Miriam's attention, calls out to her brother, Stuart.

BERNIE  
Hiya, Stuie!

Stuart turns away as though he hears someone calling him from the opposite direction.

Rachel looks at Bernie again, appraisingly.

Passing the Rosen family, walking more briskly than the occasion calls for, is the charismatically handsome, HYMAN WEISS (Think: Timothee Chalamet), who takes a sideways glance at Miriam, then looks away quickly.

Miriam's eyes linger on Hyman's back; a look not lost on Miriam's disapproving mother.

DR. DREYFUS and his wife walk and talk with IKE TAUTENBLATT.

DR. DREYFUS  
...I was thinking of telling maybe  
a few jokes...

IKE  
Do you know any new ones?!

Mrs. Dreyfus smiles knowingly.

IKE (CONT'D)  
I am going to do my soliloquy from  
'King Lear'.

Ike breaks into oratory, barely containing his enthusiasm.

IKE (CONT'D)  
'Blow winds, and crack your  
cheeks!...'

MR. BLOCKMAN, ancient patriarch with deep soulful eyes, strolls with his two assistants: CORDELLE, a good-looking YOUNG man from many gene pools, and RUFUS, an African Albino who is taking in the sights with infectious delight.

MRS. ALTFELDER holds the arm of her friend, MRS. PINSKY, who is very much out of breath. On the other side of MRS. PINSKY, is the accordionist, MRS. ELSTER (her gleaming accordion strapped to her chest.)

MRS. PINSKY turns to Mrs. Altfelder, ignoring her own labored breathing.

MRS. PINSKY  
What if I sing, "St. Louis Blues,"  
you know--that new Bessie Smith ...

MRS. ALTFELDER  
That's a good one! A Yiddisha  
Bessie Smith...

In spite of her shortness of breath, Mrs. Pinsky begins to belt.

MRS. PINSKY  
"I hate to see, that evenin' sun go  
down, I hate to see that evenin'  
sun go down, 'Cause my man done  
left this town..."

Mrs. Elster, accompanies her on the accordion.

Camera continues to pan the procession with Mrs. Pinsky's singing and Mrs. Elster's accompaniment fading into the background.

MRS. PINSKY (CONT'D)  
"St. Louis woman, with her diamond  
rings, She drags that man of mine  
around by her apron strings, and if  
it weren't for her diamonds and her  
store-bought hair, that man of mine  
would not have gone nowhere....  
...nowhere..."

MR. KLOTWOG walks along amiably with his unstable wife PEARL.

The rambunctious BIRNBAUM kid sprints along gleefully, as his mother tries to contain him.

THE pan ends on a large colorful homemade sign announcing: "AMATEUR SHOW - 7:00 PM - THURSDAY NIGHT" propped up on an easel in front of the Idle Hour Cinema.

3 EXT. IDLE HOUR CINEMA - NIGHT

3

Camera pulls back from the "AMATEUR SHOW" poster for a full view of the Idle Hour Cinema, a utilitarian structure devoid of frills, built for the sole purpose of showing "motion pictures." The building nonetheless has a warm and welcoming glow.

The marquee announces, "Coming Soon: John Barrymore's "THE BELOVED ROGUE."

4 EXT. IDLE HOU CINEMA - SAME

4

MR. FORBITZ, tall, craggy lean engaging impresario, owner of the Idle Hour Cinema, stands in front of THE IDLE HOUR greeting patrons by name as they arrive.

MR. FORBITZ  
Frieda...Sharkey Nussbaum...  
Good to see you Dr. and Mrs.  
Dreyfus...  
Hello, Ike!  
Good evening, the lovely Rosen  
family!

Mr. Forbitz looks primarily at Miriam, who has something else on her mind. Stuart turns away trying to pretend he is somewhere else.

The Rosen family, along with Rachel and Clara, disappear into the Idle Hour Cinema.

MR. FORBITZ (CONT'D)  
(To Bernie, Herman, and  
Mickey)  
Hello, fellas! Now, you boys  
behave yourselves!

Hyman strides up to the theatre.

MR. FORBITZ (CONT'D)  
Ah, Hymie! My best customer!

Hyman responds to Mr. Forbitz with considerable flourish.

HYMAN  
And I always will continue to be  
your best customer as long as you  
keep showing Houdini pictures!

Mr. Forbitz gives Hyman a collegial pat on the shoulder.

Hyman walks into the theatre alone.

5 INT. IDLE HOUR CINEMA LOBBY - SAME

5

CAMERA pans past a set of stairs with a sign that says  
COLORED to a large attractive display of **CRACKER JACKS** boxes  
placed prominently on the counter of the Refreshment area.

6 INT. IDLE HOUR CINEMA THEATRE INTERIOR - SAME

6

Hyman glances around as though looking for someone.

People who haven't seen each other in less than a day are  
catching up on the latest.

After routine commotion, the assembled finally select seats.

Mr. Forbitz walks to the center of the stage, waits an  
instant for the audience to settle down.

MR. FORBITZ

Welcome! Welcome!  
My friends, I'm so glad you're all  
here tonight!  
This is the kind of evening that  
makes me proud to live in 'The  
Pinch'!

Hecklers in the audience take this opportunity to begin their  
good-natured banter.

AUDIENCE

Where else would you be?

MR. FORBITZ

It's not too soon to start  
preparing your acts for the Amateur  
Show next Thursday!  
Don't forget to sign up!

Audience members respond with more hoots and cat-calls,  
YELLING OVER EACH OTHER.

IKE

I'm going to do my King Lear  
soliloquy!

AUDIENCE MEMBER #1

I'll be there to see everyone make  
a fool of themselves.

AUDIENCE MEMBER #2

You won't catch me up there.

Hyman, in thought, wonders if he will participate in the Amateur Hour. He is not one to join in the catcalls, never one to follow the crowd.

Stuart hunches down in his seat even further than usual. If he could be, Stuart would be invisible.

MR. FORBITZ  
Here's your chance to be  
discovered!  
Fame and fortune await you!  
One and all!  
And I will be able to say you got  
your start at the Idle Hour Amateur  
Show!

MORE CAT CALLS.

AUDIENCE #1  
Yeah! That's a good one!

AUDIENCE #2  
Sure! Sure!

AUDIENCE #3  
Fat chance!

MR. FORBITZ  
(to the projectionist)  
Let the newsreel begin!

The theatre goes black.

**Footage of Houdini** lights up the screen to the rollicking klezmer-like accordion music of Mrs. Elster.

AUDIENCE #1 (ALL AT ONCE)  
He's the greatest!

AUDIENCE #2  
Look at him!

AUDIENCE #3  
How about that!

AUDIENCE #4  
He is one in a million!

AUDIENCE #5  
Our hero!

REPORTER'S VOICE is heard over the Houdini footage, the cat calls, and Mrs. Elster's klezmer accordion.

REPORTER (V.O.)  
 It has been reported that the great  
 Harry Houdini died suddenly on  
 Halloween Eve of a ruptured  
 appendix at the age of 52...

The Reporter continues over the AUDIENCE calling out: "Why  
 him?" "He was our hero." etc.

REPORTER (V.O.)  
 ...when a Canadian fan took up the  
 challenge of the world-famous  
 magician and punched him in the  
 stomach before the great Houdini  
 had a chance to brace himself.  
 (beat) Harry Houdini was killed by  
 a Canadian?

The reporter continues, barely audible over the din, as a  
 photo of Houdini and his wife Bess appears on the screen.

REPORTER (V.O.)  
 Many are expecting a message from  
 Houdini... for his wife, Bess...  
 from the beyond...

Hyman holds his face in his hands, barely concealing his  
 features, which are clearly shrouded in grief.

7 EXT. ROSEN'S DELI - DAY 7

Rosen's Deli is a one-story building in a row of small shops.  
 The front plate glass window beckons enticingly.

8 INT. ROSEN'S DELI - DAY 8

The ceiling, of embossed tin; the chairs and tables, worn and  
 welcoming. Behind the counter in the front of the store,  
 the always elegantly dressed Mr. Rosen sits by the cash  
 register, and as always is engrossed in a book.

On the counter next to Mr. Rosen sits a large round glass  
 fish bowl filled with **penny-size TOOTSIE ROLLS** and a  
 cylindrical glass jar with a glass top containing **shiny**  
**HERSHEY KISSES.**

9 INT. ROSEN'S DELI - DAY - SAME 9

Bernie, Marty, and Herman sit at one table.

Stuart sits at the far end of the counter, which is presided over by his mother, Mrs. Rosen. He half-hides behind a raised pedestal-footed platter covered with a glass dome, containing an elaborately frosted coconut cake. Stuart waits to be told what to do next; nonetheless, he is sharp-eyed and vigilantly alert.

Miriam is waiting tables.

Miriam's friend Rachel sits at a table with her younger sister, Clara.

THE CAMERA ROAMS THE DELI, SETTLING ON MIRIAM'S VARIOUS SUITORS AS STUART MENTIONS THEM, OR THEY SPEAK.

STUART (V.O.)

Most of the guys in our neighborhood, which was called 'the Pinch,' were starry-eyed over my sister Miriam. They lined up at my parents' deli where she waited tables. I think they came just to watch her serve kreplach...

Miriam, lifting her eyes to dart a look from under drowsy lids, throws her brother Stuart a sisterly smile (almost as though she can hear his voice-over).

STUART (V.O.)

(continuing)

The guys in 'The Pinch' outdid their efforts to try and get her attention..... like the dapper Bernie Saperstein...

Bernie Saperstein wears a tailored shirt and silk tie under his butcher's apron.

STUART (V.O.)

And the town poet, Mickey Graber...

Mickey leafs through a small volume of SHAKESPEARE SONNETS.

HERMAN BLEN

(to Miriam)

If you don't go with me to the Institute dance, I'll kill myself.

Miriam ignores him.

Rachel glances at Bernie. Bernie notices Rachel looking at him. He looks away, toward Miriam.



Clara peeks at Stuart who is totally oblivious.

10 EXT. MIRIAM'S BEDROOM WINDOW - NIGHT

10

Mickey stands under Miriam's bedroom window. He recites Shakespeare's sonnet #18.

MICKEY GRABER

"Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? Thou art more lovely and more temperate... Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May, And summer's lease hath all too short a date. Sometimes too hot the eye of heaven shines, And often is his gold complexion dimmed; And every fair from fair sometime declines, By chance, or nature's changing course, untrimmed;"

Miriam parts her pink and white floral chintz curtains, taking care not to let Mickey know that she sees him.

MICKEY

"But thy eternal summer shall not fade, Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st, Nor shall Death brag thou wand'rest in his shade. When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st. So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, So long lives this, and this gives life to thee."

11 INT. ROSEN'S DELI - DAY

11

Herman Blen enters Rosen's Deli with a giant snake draped around his shoulders, and calls out.

HERMAN

Hey, Miriam, look what I got!

Miriam rolls her eyes and feigns indifference, but she is clearly amused.

MRS. ROSEN

Get that thing out of here!  
What are you, some kind of a nut?

CAMERA pans the counter with the glass fish bowl filled with **TOOTSIE ROLLS**, and the glass cannister containing **HERSHEY KISSES**, next to Mr. Rosen, wearing a brown Harris tweed three-piece suit with a flower in his lapel, sitting at the cash register reading.

We see Hebrew letters from Exodus 7: 8-12.

The English translation appears at the bottom of the screen.

We hear Mr. Rosen read the English translation in voice-over.

MR. ROSEN (VO)  
 "Aaron threw his staff down and it  
 became a serpent..."

12 INT. ROSEN'S DELI - DAY

12

Hyman enters the deli. Bernie, Marty, and Herman look up, note Hyman's arrival but continue eating without acknowledging him.

All ignore Hyman, except for Stuart who responds when Hyman greets him warmly.

HYMAN  
 Hiya, Stuart!

As Hyman makes his way to the back of the Deli, with Stuart following closely behind him, Hyman exchanges the briefest of glances with Miriam. Sometimes a fraction of a second is all it takes to establish interest and attraction.

Stuart notices the meaningful exchange between his sister and Hyman. Stuart looks away, embarrassed.

Rachel and Clara watch everything from a table near Bernie and his friends.

13 INT. ROSEN'S DELI: TABLE IN BACK - DAY- SAME

13

Hyman sits down at a table in the back of the restaurant and Stuart joins him.

Hyman takes newspaper articles with photographs from his memorabilia box and arranges them on the table.

[As Hyman mentions each person, the article with their photograph appears on the screen.]

## HYMAN

Stuart, Americans of Hebrew  
extraction can do anything they put  
their minds to:  
look at AL JOLSON, the singer,  
or BENNY LEONARD, the fighter...  
Here, FLO ZEIGFELD, the world's  
greatest impresario,  
ARNOLD ROTHSTEIN, the famous  
gangster...  
BERNARD BARUCH is an advisor to  
Presidents.  
And composers: JEROME KERN, IRVING  
BERLIN, GEORGE GERSHWIN...  
But Stuart, Houdini, Harry Houdini  
was the greatest of them all.

Hyman gathers the clippings and puts them back in the box.

As Stuart speaks in Voice over, Hyman spreads his Houdini  
clippings on the table, ending with the most recent  
announcement of Houdini's death.

We see Hyman gesticulating wildly as he points out Houdini's  
incredible exploits and remarkable deeds, while we hear:

## STUART (V.O.)

Hyman Weiss was an orphan, raised  
by his Aunt Frieda and Uncle  
Sharkey above their dry goods  
store, NUSSBAUM'S EMPORIUM, on  
North Main...  
Nobody regarded Hymie as a serious  
rival for my sister's affections,  
but that didn't stop them from  
disliking him anyway.  
Naturally, all the guys in 'The  
Pinch' were nice to me, but that  
was only to score points with my  
sister.

Hyman gathers up his Houdini clippings and returns them to  
his memorabilia box.

Reaching into the box, Hyman takes out a sepia-tinted  
photograph of a bearded man in a dented bowler, holding a  
book. Beside the man is a woman wearing a kerchief with  
fearful eyes, and cheeks that look stung by bees.

Miriam makes her way to the back table to look at the  
photograph Hyman is showing to Stuart.

HYMAN

(to STUART)

Aunt Frieda says that they were good *haimesheh* people, but I ask you, Stuart, do these people look like the parents of a hero?

STUART (V.O.)

That's the way Hyman talked, which never sounded boastful or immodest, so sure was Hymie that he was marked for greatness.

Hyman registers Miriam's interest but does not directly acknowledge her.

Annoyed that Hyman is ignoring her, Miriam walks away to attend to her customers.

14 EXT. NUSSBAUM'S EMPORIUM - DAY

14

Establishing shot: A simple two-story brick building with a large sign along the side announcing NUSSBAUMS' EMPORIUM. The two front windows of the story are decorated with a wide assortment of artfully arranged products popular in 1926.

15 INT. NUSSBAUM'S EMPORIUM- DAY

15

CLOSE-UP: THE CONJUROR'S MONTHLY MAGAZINE (with Houdini's picture on the cover).

Camera pulls back to reveal Hyman engrossed in his magazine, THE CONJUROR'S MONTHLY.

Miriam and Stuart approach the fabrics counter.

Hyman, behind the counter, gives Miriam and Stuart a perfunctory glance, nods to Stuart, and goes back to his Houdini magazine.

From the other side of the store, Aunt Frieda and Uncle Sharkey observe Hyman's shortcomings as a clerk.

UNCLE SHARKEY

For this we went to Ellis Island to get my poor dead sister's baby...?

AUNT FRIEDA

You'll see: he'll be someday a credit to the Jewish race.

UNCLE SHARKEY

Credit? Credit we don't take on  
North Main Street.  
Cash'n carry's the name of the  
game.

AUNT FRIEDA

But, Sharkey, let's not praise him  
too much....

UNCLE SHARKEY

We wouldn't want he should get a  
swelled head... He should be  
already married!

AUNT FRIEDA

It will happen. You'll see... All  
in good time...

Miriam, so used to men fawning over her, is challenged by Hyman's seeming indifference. She tries to catch his attention by twirling prettily, but is unsuccessful. Although Hyman has taken a quick peek as she turns, he is careful not to let Miriam notice.

Annoyed with her lack of success at catching Hyman's attention, Miriam starts to search through the bolts of fabric.

As Miriam examines the fabrics, the camera scans the myriad objects in the emporium: fish scalers, bath yokes, hammers, rakes, women's hats, velvet flowers, long johns, porcelain plates...

The inside of Nussbaum's Emporium is a glorious mess of every tool and trinket imaginable stacked ceiling-high with little to no organization whatsoever, except for the sewing section with its bolts of fabrics, threads, cards of buttons, and various notions related to the making of clothing.

STUART (V.O.)

All Hyman knew about his real  
parents was that his father was a  
tinker who died in a cholera  
epidemic in the Old Country.  
His mother died giving birth to the  
infant Hymie in steerage on a  
steamship going to the Golden Land.

Miriam selects a bolt of deep blue chiffon, and a bolt of emerald green and removes them from the rack.

She holds them against her face.

MIRIAM  
Stuart, which do you think?

Stuart shrugs his shoulders noncommittally.

Miriam turns to Hyman.

MIRIAM (CONT'D)  
Which one do you think looks  
better?

Hyman looks at her thoughtfully for the briefest moment.

HYMAN  
I think I wasn't put on this earth  
to be your fashion consultant...

Stuart smirks slightly. Hyman, who misses nothing, ignores Stuart's reaction.

HYMAN (CONT'D)  
... I have a greater destiny ...

Miriam is more than a little intrigued by this young man who can so easily resist her charms.

MIRIAM  
Well! I think I'll take the green.  
It matches my eyes.

Hyman gives Miriam an exaggerated bow.

HYMAN  
Your wish is my command.

MIRIAM  
I'll take two yards and don't skimp  
on the fabric!

As Hyman cuts, he takes a veiled sideways glance at Miriam.

STUART (V.O.)  
Whatever Hyman's greater destiny,  
it changed daily.

16 EXT. MR. KLOTWOG'S FRONT DOOR

16

HYMAN, holding a copy of the World Book Encyclopedia, speaks to MR. KLOTWOG.

HYMAN  
If you buy this, you'll never  
regret it.

(MORE)

HYMAN (CONT'D)  
It's the best encyclopedia on the  
market. And every month you will  
receive the next letter!

MR. KLOTWOG  
Hymie, I'd be glad to, but this is  
just not what my wife and I need at  
this time...

HYMAN  
Are you sure you won't reconsider?

17 INT. NUSSBAUM'S EMPORIUM -- DAY

17

CLOSE-UP of the cover of Jerome Kern's Sheet Music:  
"THEY DIDN'T BELIEVE ME."

CAMERA PULLS BACK TO REVEAL Hyman balancing bolts of fabric  
while trying to hold the sheet music and sing the tortured  
melody of "They Didn't Believe Me," giving it his all.

HYMAN  
"And when I told them how beautiful  
you are, they didn't believe me,  
they didn't believe me..."

From afar Aunt Frieda hears Hyman wildly inadequate attempt  
to approximate the melody and walks over to the fabric  
counter.

AUNT FRIEDA  
Such a beautiful song...

Uncle Sharkey is not far behind.

UNCLE SHARKEY  
But I'm not sure you're the right  
man for the job...

HYMAN  
(Half to himself in response to his  
aunt and uncle)  
May I should try it in another  
key...

18 EXTERIOR: NUSSBAUMS' EMPORIUM: DAY

18

CAMERA zooms into Hyman's bedroom above the store.

19 INT. HYMAN'S ROOM ABOVE NUSSBAUM'S EMPORIUM 19

Hyman has rigged up a boxing bag in his small room. As he spars with the bag, he gets more and more into it.

HYMAN  
I could be bigger than Benny  
Leonard...

The boxing bag bops him in the head and he falls back on his bed, which is covered with Houdini magazines and magician's paraphernalia.

20 INT. IDLE HOUR CINEMA - DAY 20

Houdini footage is being shown on the big screen at the Idle Hour Cinema.

Hyman and Stuart are entranced by what they are watching.

Mrs. Elster's Klezmer-inspired accordion accompanies the movie.

Stuart's voice is heard over the Houdini footage.

STUART (V.O.)  
Every Saturday morning for fifteen consecutive weeks, Hyman took off from work to see the serial installments of Houdini's cliff-hanger, "The Master Mystery." Hyman saw all the features too, including his favorite, "The Man from Beyond," in which Harry Houdini, as Howard Hillary, is chopped from the ice -- still alive after having been frozen for a hundred years.

EXT. IDLE HOUR CINEMA - DAY

Hyman and Stuart emerge from the Idle Hour Cinema, and walk along North Main.

Behind them can be seen the large home-made sign announcing:  
"IDLE HOUR CINEMA AMATEUR SHOW - Thursday night - 7PM."



HYMAN

Stuart, for centuries Jews did nothing but read books and get clobbered by Cossacks, but this one -- he was more than just a showman, this Houdini, he was a millionaire and a movie star, a friend of presidents and a pilot of flying machines. He threaded needles in his mouth, produced lit candles and miles of silk from his pockets, walked through walls, made elephants disappear with a clap of his hands.

STUART (V.O.)

I listened, but I had my doubts.

21 INT. ROSEN'S DELI - DAY

21

Hyman is sitting at the counter. Miriam is standing on one side of the counter; Stuart is standing on the other side of the counter.

HYMAN

Do you realize that Houdini's real last name was: Weiss!  
The same as mine! Ehrich Weiss!  
And that the name of his first partner was Jack Hyman!  
If Houdini had a son, he might have named him Hyman Weiss!  
(beat)

Then Hyman lapses into an uncharacteristic low.

HYMAN (CONT'D)

I think Houdini's finally in a place where he can't come back.  
(beat)  
Ever since he died, it's like I lost a piece of myself.

MIRIAM

You do seem to be missing a piece or two.

Stuart reacts to his sister's quip with a slight smile which Hyman notices but ignores. Throughout their conversation, Stuart, sitting between them, glances back and forth between Hyman and Miriam like he is watching a ping pong match, his face a range of animated expressions.

Rachel and Clara sitting at a table on the side of the Deli are taking in the scene.

HYMAN

(returning to his characteristic ebullience)  
Someone has to take up the fallen magician's torch and carry on his legacy... Why not me?  
Don't you get it?  
By dying, Houdini has called my bluff. You can run from a thing like his, like Jonah, you can hide in the belly of a whale, or be buried alive behind a dry goods counter.  
But in the end, you will be forced to break out of your situation, if only to prove it is possible.  
And emerging, what choice do I have but to take up the master's mantle and step on to the stage of the world and accept the challenge!

MIRIAM

Challenge? What challenge? Who challenged you?

HYMAN

I challenge me!

MIRIAM

Hymie, don't you think this is a little far-fetched, even for you.

HYMAN

You know, I think you're right. Houdini himself was afraid of going mad. He wondered how, when he lost his mind, they would ever find a cell that could hold him.

MIRIAM

You're impossible!

HYMAN

You're impossible!  
Sometimes I think you don't take me seriously!

MIRIAM

Take you seriously? I don't even take seriously that you should ask why I don't take you seriously!

(MORE)

MIRIAM (CONT'D)

Whoever takes Hymie Weiss seriously, that person is as *meshuggah* as Hyman Weiss!

HYMAN

Not everything that goes on around here is for the amusement of Miriam Rosen, *shaina maidel* of North Main Street!  
Some of us have ambitions of our own.

Miriam tries to stay angry, but it isn't lost on her that for once Hyman has noticed.

HYMAN (CONT'D)

Miriam, I mean it. This is for real.  
Next Thursday night at the Idle Amateur Show, North Main Street will witness the debut of the new Harry Houdini, reborn in the person of Hyman the Magnificent.  
I thought of calling myself 'The Hebrew Mahatma,' but decided that 'HYMAN THE MAGNIFICENT' says it all. Kind of no-nonsense, don't you think?

MIRIAM

Hymie, you want to do amazing feats?  
Try growing up, why don't you.  
Find a girl, get married--it's about time, have little Hymies, raise them to be magicians, for all I care...

Hyman looks at Miriam appraisingly.

HYMAN

Miriam, I'll need an assistant.

MIRIAM

Oh, no!  
You want to make a horse's caboose of yourself in front of the whole neighborhood, that's your business, just leave me out of it.  
(beat)  
Ask your shadow.

Hyman and Miriam have an opportunity to exchange significant glances while Stuart reacts to Miriam's suggestion.

STUART (V.O.)

For a second I panicked and thought he would actually take her advice, but he continued as though he was doing Miriam a favor.

HYMAN

You still don't understand, do you Miriam?

MIRIAM

You're cracked is what you are!  
Hymie Upside-Down!  
You don't need an assistant, you need a keeper.

HYMAN

(to STUART)

I tried.  
Nobody can say I didn't try, even though I knew she'd only be in the way.

MIRIAM

Hymie!

HYMAN

(continued to STUART)

Even though she'd just hog the spotlight, being such a notorious glamour puss and all...

MIRIAM

Hymie!

Miriam locks eyes with Hyman's, forcing him to look her full in the face.

MIRIAM (CONT'D)

Just what is it you want me to do?

Next to the bowl of **TOOTSIE ROLLS** and the cannister of **HERSHEY KISSES**, Mr. Rosen, registers his daughter's voice, looks up from his book, pages covered in Hebrew letters of Genesis 28:15.

The English translation appears at the bottom of the screen.

MR. ROSEN (V0)

I do not promise that your heart will never be broken. My promise is simply that I will always be with you..."

22 EXT. MR. KLOTWOG'S HOUSE - NIGHT

22

Hyman is outside Mr. Klotwog's modest front door.

MR. KLOTWOG

If my Pearl is feeling okay on  
Thursday, I can lend you my wife's  
straight-jacket, just before the  
show okay...

HYMAN

That doesn't give me any time to  
rehearse, but I know the ins and  
outs of the Punishment Suit  
Release...no pun intended...  
Please, give my regards to Pearl,  
and tell her to stay calm. She'll  
be fine!

23 INT. STAGE: IDLE HOUR CINEMA - NIGHT

23

THE HOUSE is packed. People, holding **boxes of CRACKER JACKS**,  
are enjoying eating their **CRACKER JACKS**.

Mr. Forbitz walks to center stage, pleased with the turnout  
and pleased with himself. He enjoys introducing each act.

MR. FORBITZ

You all know Max Dreyfus, our  
favorite Dentist and Master  
Comedian!! Why just the other day  
he filled a cavity of mine, almost  
no pain at all, but you don't want  
to hear about my fillings!

The audience laughs at Mr. Forbitz' attempt at levity and  
gives Max Dreyfus a warm welcome.

Accompanying each introduction, Mrs. Elster plays Klezmer-  
like riffs on her accordion.

DR. DREYFUS

What hangs on a wall, is green, and  
whistles?

The audience having heard all of his jokes before, responds  
IN UNISON so loudly that plaster falls from the ceiling.

AUDIENCE

(in unison)  
A herring!

DR. DREYFUS  
 Since when does a herring hang on  
 the wall?

AUDIENCE  
 Who stops you from hanging it!

DR. DREYFUS  
 Is a herring green?

AUDIENCE  
 You could paint it!

DR. DREYFUS  
 But who ever heard a herring  
 whistle?

AUDIENCE  
 Nu, so it doesn't whistle!

Dr. Dreyfus, pleased with the raucous laughter and applause,  
 bows deeply and exits.

MR. FORBITZ  
 Thank you! Thank you!  
 Now, let's have a round of applause  
 for our favorite Shakespearean  
 thespian, Ike Tautenblatt, who will  
 recite from "King Lear."

Audience responds warmly.

Ike strides onto the stage and begins his oratory.

IKE  
 Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks!  
 Rage! Blow! You cataracts and  
 hurricanes, spout till you have  
 drenched our steeples, drowned the  
 cocks!

Over Ike's impassioned King Lear monologue, HYMAN THE  
 MAGNIFICENT puts on a top hat, the final piece of his  
 traditional magician's costume, which consists of black silk  
 cape and bright red cravat. He peeks out at the audience and  
 then looks around for Miriam.

IKE (V.O.)  
 You sulphurous and thought-  
 executing fires, vaunt-couriers to  
 oak-cleaving thunderbolts, singe my  
 white head! And thou, all-shaking  
 thunder, strike flat the thick  
 rotundity o' the world!

Miriam has finished dressing and looks around for Hyman.  
 They almost collide back stage.

HYMAN  
 Oh, great! You're here!

MIRIAM  
 Where else would I be?

IKE (V.O.)  
 Crack nature's molds, all germens  
 spill at once that make ingrateful  
 man!

Ike finishes his monologue and the audience applauds  
 enthusiastically.

25

INT. IDLE HOUR CINEMA STAGE - NIGHT - SAME

25

MR. FORBITZ  
 And now, for the *piece de*  
*resistance*: Hyman the Magnificent!

Hyman emerges from the wings to swelling accordion chords.

Hyman doffs his top hat, and removes his cape, revealing a  
 sleeveless undershirt that shows off his stringy physique.

The audience goes wild with calls and jeers.

AUDIENCE  
 Look at that body!  
 There goes a real man!  
 Now, that's the real thing!

When Miriam emerges from the wings, the audience gets even  
 louder, despite Miriam's obvious self-consciousness and  
 discomfort.

Hyman hands his hat and cloak to Miriam.

AUDIENCE (CONT'D)  
 (shouting out)  
 She can help me anytime!  
 I need an assistant, too!

Miriam places Hyman's hat and cloak on a chair, and picks up a stiff sailcloth strait-jacket trimmed with leather.

AUDIENCE (CONT'D)  
 I know someone who could use one of  
 those!! Help! Help!  
 I think I'm going crazy!

Hyman stares at the audience intently.

The audience responds to his authority and simmers down.

When quiet descends, Hyman projects theatrically.

HYMAN  
 Ladies and gentlemen, for your  
 express delectation, I will perform  
 Houdini's famous "Punishment Suit  
 Release".

Miriam holds the strait-jacket in front of Hyman.

Hyman thrusts his hands into the sleeves, which overlap the ends of his outstretched arms.

Hyman gives Miriam a nod.

She turns to the now tittering crowd.

MIRIAM  
 (mumbling to her sandal-  
 shod toes)  
 Hymagnimummmm...

The audience heckles her to speak up.

AUDIENCE  
 I think I'm going deaf.  
 Can't hear you!  
 Speak up!

MIRIAM  
 (defiantly)  
 Hyman the Magnificent requests  
 volunteers from the audience.

Bernie, Mickey, and Herman, eager to be near Hyman's assistant, stampede the stage.

Miriam glances sheepishly at Hyman, who maintains his rigid pose but rolls his eyes, as the small stage is overrun by the sons of North Main Street.



Most conspicuous among them is Bernie Saperstein, the most aggressive of Miriam's suitors, looking spruce in his canary yellow blazer.

Shouldering his way to the forefront of the would-be volunteers, Bernie leaves Miriam no recourse but to choose him to help fasten Hyman's restraints.

She also chooses Herman, to compensate for Bernie's vigor.

Exercising somewhat more zeal than is called for, Bernie goes to work on the buckles and straps.

Bernie slaps Herman's hands whenever he tries to help.

Hyman's torso is so constricted that he can barely speak, his voice trapped somewhere in his diaphragm.

HYMAN

The committee will confirm that the  
Punishment Suit is secured.

Bernie tugs at the jacket.

BERNIE

No way you're getting out of this!

HYMAN

(barely croaking)  
And now, as I say the magic word:  
"Anthropropolygos"! Miss Rosen, if  
you please--

Miriam rolls out a gauze hospital Modesty Curtain from stage left. She folds its panels around Hyman.

MIRIAM

*Je tire le rideau comme ca.*

26

INT. AUDIENCE: IDLE HOUR CINEMA - SAME

26

Stuart, sitting next to his mother, explains.

STUART

It means, 'I draw the curtain  
thus!'

MRS. ROSEN

Don't be such a wisenheimer.

STUART

I just thought you'd like to know  
what...

MRS. ROSEN  
 (interrupting him)  
 I'm just glad it's not you up there  
 making a complete fool of yourself.

STUART  
 As though I could ever... I only  
 wish I could...

MRS. ROSEN  
 (interrupting him, again)  
 I don't know what your sister sees  
 in that...

Mrs. Rosen doesn't finish her sentence, as she focuses on the stage.

Rachel and her sister Clara are sitting next to Stuart and his mother.

27

INT. AUDIENCE: IDLE HOUR CINEMA: STAGE - SAME

27

Miriam steps to one side, attempts to make an artistic gesture with her arm, and smiles unconvincingly.

Mrs. Elster plays appropriately suspenseful accordion chords.

The ordinarily boisterous Amateur Hour audience is subdued as they listen to the sounds of the struggle behind the Modesty Curtain.

Rachel and Clara watch anxiously from the audience.

Camera pans audience members in rapt anxious attention.

STUART (V.O.)  
 Under my breath I remembered the  
 passage from "*Magical Rose Ties and  
 Escapes*": "*The first step  
 necessary in freeing oneself from  
 the jacket is to place an elbow on  
 some solid foundation and by sheer  
 strength...*"

The audience remains reverent, even as the Modesty Curtain topples over on its clattering frame, revealing Hyman wrestling furiously with himself.

Hyman thrashes around like a cat in a bag, flinging his body around, assuming contortions certain to cause him harm.

Miriam is chewing on her nails in alarm.

Bernie is standing to one side of the stage.

BERNIE

Quick, somebody, get the Rabbi!  
There's a *Dybuk* inside of Hymie  
Weiss!

The whole theatre erupts in laughter..

Mrs. Elster strikes up a rollicking tune.

The general hilarity seems only to encourage Hyman's violent behavior.

Mr. Forbitz marches out of the wings, shooining Bernie and Herman from the stage.

MR. FORBITZ

All right, Weiss, that's enough  
already. *Shoyn genug!*

MIRIAM

Stop it, Hymie!

If anything, Miriam's agitation only fuels Hyman's efforts.

Mr. Forbitz returns to the wings and lowers the movie screen with a dust-raising thud, separating the spectators from Hyman's ordeal.

Mr. Forbitz steps back out onto the stage again and signals the projectionist to begin.

The lights go out. The stage goes black.

A bright beam shoots over everyone's head.

John Barrymore's "*The Beloved Rogue*" starts with text:

"Even torture could not quell the spirit of the vagabond poet."

The rooftops of medieval Paris, over-shadowed by Notre Dame, appear to be caught in a blizzard of blackbirds, so poor is the quality of the film.

As the dauntless vagabond swaggers into the frame, the screen, patched and fragile, begins to flutter from the goings-on behind it. The crooked streets ripple as if in an earthquake and the audience howls over the distortions.

Then, from the side of a house ON THE SCREEN from whose window a bosomy lady is waving, a fissure opens and Hyman hurtles through.

Still in the throes of his desperate struggle to free himself, Hyman lurches noisily into the orchestra pit.

The Audience reacts loudly with a jumble of catcalls, questions, and concerns as the movie continues over the torn screen.

AUDIENCE

What happened to Hyman?  
More important, what's happening  
to the Vagabond Poet!  
Where's the 'Beloved Rogue'?  
Be quiet, we're try to watch a  
movie here.  
Who's going to fix the screen?  
Is Hymie okay?

The Ghost of HARRY HOUDINI appears--with a special light shining on him.

Harry Houdini's ghost leans over the injured Hyman.

HOUDINI

Hymie, luckily it's only a broken  
bone.... You have to rehearse! You  
can't do any tricks that you  
haven't thoroughly first rehearsed!

28

INT. NUSSBAUM'S EMPORIUM - DAY

28

Behind the fabric counter, Hyman, his arm in a cast, in a sling, has a plaster over his swollen eye. A pair of shears piratically held in his teeth, as he waits on Mrs. Altfelder. Hyman unrolls a bolt of cloth with his good hand, stabilizing it with the elbow of his right arm in its sling.

Miriam and Stuart approach.

Mrs. Altfelder, seeing Miriam and Stuart, greets them warmly, while she taps her foot impatiently as she waits for her yards of chenille.

MRS. ALTFELDER

Hello, Miriam. Stuart.

Miriam smiles and returns the greeting.

MIRIAM

Hello, Mrs. Altfelder...

Stuart looks at his shoes and does not respond.

Taking the shears from his mouth, Hyman cuts Mrs. Altfelder's fabric in a reckless zigzag with his left hand.

Hyman reads disapproval in MIRIAM'S face.

HYMAN

Don't say it. I heard it already  
from my aunt and uncle.

(imitating his Aunt  
Frieda)

"It doesn't look good for the  
Jews." So I tell them it looked  
good enough when Houdini did it!  
And my uncle says,

(imitating his Uncle  
Sharkey)

"Houdini didn't fall off the stage  
and break his arm, which makes the  
whole theayter pish in their  
pants..."

HYMAN (CONT'D)

(to Miriam)

Next time I'll be better prepared.  
If I can wow them so much by  
bungling, just think how they'll  
react when I succeed.

Hyman hands the ragged-edged fabric to Mrs. Altfelder, who huffs and turns back to Miriam and Stuart.

MRS. ALTFELDER

Give my regards to your mother.

MIRIAM

Of course.

Stuart seems to be hiding behind Miriam until Mrs. Altfelder leaves.

MIRIAM (CONT'D)

(To Hyman)

Did I hear you correctly? What next  
time? Am I wrong or wasn't it that  
they had to scrape you out of the  
orchestra pit and carry the pieces  
to Doctor Seligman?

HYMAN

I may have some kinks to work out  
but by the time the doc takes my  
cast off, I'll be ready. I got a  
brand-new act in mind, what I call  
the "Procrustean Bed Mystery"!

MIRIAM

Come again?

HYMAN

It's my version of Houdini's  
"Spanish Maiden Escape", only I  
plan to use a Murphy bed. There'll  
be these iron spikes in the  
mattress, see, and I'm standing  
inside the closet...

MIRIAM

Hymie, this is too much!

HYMAN

...then the committee folds up the  
bed...

MIRIAM

(Loudly and with exasperation)  
Hymie!

Mrs. Altfelder, who hasn't gone far, turns to look at Miriam.

There are no other sounds in the store but the CREAKING  
CEILING FANS.

Miriam steps closer to Hyman and lowers her voice.

MIRIAM (CONT'D)

What happened to my friend who  
knows the difference between real  
and make-believe?

HYMAN

This act is so *not* dangerous, I'm  
almost embarrassed to do it!

MIRIAM

It's not the act that scares me so  
much as you... All of a sudden I  
don't know you anymore.

HYMAN

That's because Hymie Weiss fell off  
the stage, but it's Hyman the  
Magnificent that gets back on!

Hyman takes his arm from the sling to reveal his stage name.  
CLOSE-UP on: HYMAN THE MAGNIFICENT painted in scarlet across  
his cast.

Miriam stares hard at Hyman as if she is making an effort to  
believe her eyes.

MIRIAM

You should just hear yourself!

Her pleated skirt whirls, as she turns on her heels and leaves.

HYMAN

Women, who can figure 'em, eh  
Stuart?

29 EXT. ALLEY BEHIND NUSSBAUM'S EMPORIUM - DAY 29

30 IN THE ALLEY BEHIND NUSSBAUM'S, HYMAN IS WORKING ON THE 30  
"PROCRUSTEAN BED."

Stuart watches.

Hyman is creating a sliding panel in the back of a wardrobe.

HYMAN

These screws - don't they look to  
be so securely fastened that the  
mechanism can stand the closest  
examination without being detected?

(beat)

Stuart, here, would you take this  
chalk and just draw an outline of  
my body on the mattress...

Hyman lies down on the mattress.

Stuart takes the chalk from Hyman and awkwardly draws a line  
around Hyman's prone body.

Then Hyman gets up and meticulously perforates the down  
stuffing with railroad spikes sharpened to glistening points.

Hyman lays down again in a flurry of feathers.

STUART

When did you get to be so handy?

HYMAN

My hands are being guided by my  
spiritual father - Houdini himself.  
And you see this, these spikes will  
never so much as touch me! Why  
don't you help me with a run  
through...

With Hyman in place, Stuart is unable to lift the iron bed  
frame with its railroad-spike embedded mattress.

HYMAN (CONT'D)  
 Not a problem, Stuart. I know how  
 this works.

INT. IDLE HOUR CINEMA - HYMAN'S IMAGINATION

As Hyman explains to Stuart how the trick works, we see Hyman  
 imagining his triumph which takes place on the screen.

HYMAN (V.O.)  
 I just stand inside the dummy  
 wardrobe, like this, right?  
 Then the committee raises the bed.  
 They draw the cabinet doors and  
 Miriam locks them with padlocks,  
 then Miriam draws a screen around  
 the whole contraption.  
 This is when I escape through the  
 false back.  
 Then, Miriam says, "Behold, a  
 miracle!"  
 At that, she removes the screen and  
 unlocks the doors to reveal an  
 empty space where the magician had  
 been.  
 The audience will gasp.

Hyman makes the inhaling whooshing sound of universal  
 astonishment.

HYMAN (V.O.)  
 I will have slipped into the wings  
 and run around to back of the  
 theatre where I shout, "Here am I!"

31 EXT. BOX OFFICE OF THE IDLE HOUR CINEMA - DAY

31

The Murphy bed is unfolded from its upright mahogany cabinet,  
 in front of the Idle Hour Cinema, its mattress bristling with  
 shining spikes.

An ornate sign in eye-catching colors announces:

Tonight:  
 HYMAN THE MAGNIFICENT  
 ESCAPES  
 The TORTURES of the PROCRUSTEAN BED



32

INT. LOBBY OF THE IDLE HOUR CINEMA - SAME

32

Hyman and Mr. Forbitz stand in the Refreshment area, the large array of **CRACKER JACKS boxes** is prominently displayed behind them.

HYMAN

...and Mr. Forbitz, considering my enormous following... and what I have already laid out: the bed from Shafetz's Discount cost me the better part of three weeks' wages... Then I had to pay Leiberman to haul the bed over from the Emporium, the railroad spikes that I bought from Blockman's Salvage... the bolts, brackets, and screws from Heckie's Hardware.

(continuing weakly)

I think maybe I should get a percentage of the gate?

MR. FORBITZ

Where you been boychick? You don't know the meaning of the word 'amateur'?

Hyman is beaten, but not defeated.

HYMAN

Who knows, some scout from the Pantage's Circuit might be in the audience. He could offer me top billing to take my act on the road... Then it'll be good-bye Main Street, and hello Atlantic City, Rio-by-the-Sea-o, Zanzibar....

33

INT. IDLE HOUR THEATRE - NIGHT

33

THE IDLE HOUR THEATRE is filled to capacity.

STUART (V.O.)

As Hymie predicted, the Idle Hour was packed.

34

INT. IDLE HOUR CINEMA AMATEUR HOUR - SAME

34

Stuart is sitting next to his mother.

MRS. ROSEN

Your friend Weiss is a scandal! I don't want you spending any more time with him...

STUART

But Ma, he's my friend...

MRS. ROSEN

Friend! *Shmendrick!*  
As for your sister... I don't know what she sees in that ...

STUART

You try telling Miriam anything...

Not able to control her daughter's life, Mrs. Rosen turns to her son.

MRS. ROSEN

And as for you, young man, it's time you started studying for your Bar Mitzvah... You've been putting it off for far too long...

STUART

But, Ma... there's no way I can stand up there... in front of all those people...

MRS. ROSEN

(interrupting him)

It won't kill you. It's about time! It's long overdue! You will start studying with Rabbi Fein as soon as it can be arranged...

STUART

(to the camera/audience/almost to himself)  
Standing up and speaking in public was more terrifying to me than being eaten alive by sharks...

35

INT. IDLE HOUR CINEMA - SAME

35

The IDLE HOUR CINEMA AMATEUR HOUR audience is stomping and clapping.

AUDIENCE

We want Hymie! We want Hymie!

36

INT. THE WINGS OF THE IDLE HOUR CINEMA - NIGHT

36

Mr. Forbitz is trying to mollify Dr. Dreyfus, Ike Tautenblatt, and Mrs. Pinsky, who all speak at once.

MR. FORBITZ

So, you'll go on *after* Hymie...

DR. DREYFUS

I was planning on telling a new joke tonight!

IKE TAUTENBLATT

I can't go on after Hyman, it'll be an anticlimax!

MRS. PINSKY

I was going to sing "St. Louis Woman...."

MR. FORBITZ

I gotta give the people what they want! So you'll *follow* him. It's no big deal....

Dr. Dreyfus, Ike and Mrs. Pinsky grumble and mill about disconsolately.

STUART (V.O.)

Although Hyman was backstage, I bet I knew what he was thinking: when Houdini was at the London Palladium, the other performers were also bumped.....

37

INT. IDLE HOUR CINEMA AMATEUR HOUR - NIGHT

37

Miriam emerges from the wings in a dress of airy chiffon sashes that float around her like smoke. Her hair is loose and luxuriant.

The young men in the audience whistle and stomp.

Hyman enters wearing an orange terry cloth bathrobe, which he removes, revealing a red, white, and blue one-piece bathing suit that highlights his bony ribs and knobby knees.

AUDIENCE

Look at those muscles!  
You'll be as big as Houdini  
some day!

Hyman strikes several poses before the nightmare piece of furniture with its jagged mattress lowered like a cruel jaw.

Then Hyman struts around the Murphy bed with a studied swagger.

The audience is a riot of cat-calls.

AUDIENCE (CONT'D)  
Let's see you get out of this one!  
There is no way you can do it!

Hyman is impervious and undeterred; if anything, even more determined in his theatricality--a study in admirably cool self-assurance.

Hyman stares at the audience until they simmer down and then he begins to speak.

HYMAN  
I spit in the face of danger.  
I invite one and all to examine  
this bed which could become my  
coffin.

Hyman takes his place in the hollow wardrobe of the Murphy Bed, while Miriam tries to deliver her introduction.

Mrs. Elster's ominous accordion chords almost drown out Miriam's spiel, forcing her to shout.

MIRIAM  
At this time, I give you Hyman the  
Magnificent performing the...Pro...

Miriam becomes tongue-tied.

As Miriam stumbles over the word "Procrustean," Bernie, Mickey and Herman, storm the stage.

Many of the adults in the audience shake their heads in disapproval.

The young men lift the bed frame up from its foot, slamming it shut with such zest that the whole wardrobe falls over backwards.

It hits the stage with such a loud bang that the entire house is hushed.

The cabinet begins to rattle.

Muffled sounds of distress start emanating from within the cabinet.

Rachel and Clara look at each other with alarm.

As energetically as they knocked it over, Bernie, Herman and Mickey right the bed.

They open the wardrobe doors and pull down the mattress, revealing Hyman squirming in pain from the spike that has entered his thigh.

Bernie, Mickey and Herman lift Hyman from the cabinet.

Hyman's leg wound is bleeding profusely.

Aunt Frieda looks at Uncle Sharkey with dismay.

Mrs. Rosen shakes her head at Stuart as if to say, "I told you so."

Some of the audience lets loose a thunder of cheers and raucous applause. There is a smattering of "Boo's."

As Hyman is being carried from the stage by Bernie and his pals, despite the pain, Hyman waves to the audience like a conquering hero.

Mr. Forbitz shouts after the bleeding Hyman Weiss.

MR. FORBITZ

This is the last time you will ever  
perform in my theayter.

HARRY HOUDINI'S GHOST

(appearing in a special light and  
comforting the wounded Hyman as he  
is being carried off stage)  
Hymie, you can't succeed in this  
business, or any business for that  
matter, without practice--careful  
preparation is the name of the  
game...

38

INT. HYMAN'S ROOM ABOVE NUSSBAUM'S EMPORIUM - DAY

38

Miriam and Stuart have come to visit.

Miriam is not prepared for what she sees:

Hyman is skin and bones, his color yellow as his withered arm, his pajamas cut off at the thigh to accommodate the swollen leg propped up on cushions in his sagging bed, littered with books and pamphlets, their covers bearing various images of Houdini in *extremis*.

Handcuffs and padlocks similarly strewn across his bed.

HYMAN

So, I flinched, so sue me!

MIRIAM

You really are cracked, aren't you,  
kiddo?

For a moment, the way he stares at Miriam, Hyman seems to have lost his focus.

When the moment passes--God forbid she should catch him openly admiring her--Hyman hauls himself, wincing, to a seated position and starts to talk.

HYMAN

(imitating DR. SELIGMAN)

'Weiss,' says Dr. Seligman, 'just make sure that foot you favor, it isn't already in the grave.'

(continuing in his own voice)

'Better one foot in the grave,' I tell him, 'than two feet behind the fabric counter at Nussbaum's Emporium.'

Then my Aunt Frieda says,

(Hyman does an imitation of his Aunt Frieda.)

"Hymie, the Jews don't have already enough *tsores*? You have to suffer on purpose?"

Then my Uncle Sharkey chimes in:

(Hyman breaks into an imitation of his Uncle Sharkey.)

It's a *chillul Hashem*. You know what is it a *chillul Hashem*, nephew? That's a suicide.

(continuing in his own voice)

When I get back on my feet, I might try a few tricks Houdini never got around to, such as escaping from a casket plummeting over Niagara Falls.

Miriam rolls her eyes.

HYMAN (CONT'D)

...or a straitjacket release while dropping from the top of the Woolworth Building by parachute.

(MORE)

HYMAN (CONT'D)  
 I could do that from the roof of  
 the local Cotton Exchange... but  
 that would take a lot of  
 planning...

Miriam tries to get a word in edge-wise.

HYMAN (CONT'D)  
 (to Miriam continuing,  
 unstoppable)  
 When I take my act on the road,  
 maybe you'd like to come, too...

MIRIAM  
 Hymie...

HYMAN  
 We could do the 'Metamorphosis' to  
 spice up the act... You know, the  
 one where the magician and his  
 assistant trade places.

MIRIAM  
 (with a firmness that will  
 tolerate no interruption)  
 Hymie, I may not always be content  
 with my life, but I'm not so screwy  
 that I would want to trade places  
 with you.  
 This is it, Hymie, no more  
 assistant.  
 I'm handing in my resignation  
 I can't watch you hurt yourself  
 anymore.

When Miriam leaves, Hyman slumps back in his bed, looking  
 like a corpse at his own wake, as if her departure has pulled  
 a plug.

HYMAN  
 Easy come, easy go, eh, Stuart!

Stuart sighs.

HYMAN (CONT'D)  
 You know, Stuart, sometimes I think  
 every guy on North Main is under  
 your sister's spell.  
 If it weren't for their fascination  
 with Miriam, maybe this whole  
 generation would get the hell out  
 of the Pinch.

(MORE)

HYMAN (CONT'D)

They would leave the miserable  
grind of shop hours, let the shops  
crumble to dust, and go off chasing  
wild destinies.

(beat)

But for that, you need the spirit  
of Hyman the Magnificent!

STUART (V.O.)

I sat with him a little while  
longer while he enumerated the  
stunts that would make him the  
toast of the waiting world.

HYMAN

What I want is an outdoor event,  
something to capture the  
imagination of a clamoring crowd;  
not to mention the agents  
outbidding one another to book me  
at the Roxy in Peoria, the Circus  
Busch in Dusseldorf...

STUART (V.O.)

I could only listen... Somebody has  
to listen...

HYMAN

I have just the thing.  
(slowly as a revelation)  
Miriam calls me Hymie Upside-Down.  
Hymie rhymes with tie-me.  
I shall do Hymie: Tie-Me Upside-  
Down!

39 INT. RABBI FEIN'S STUDY - DAY

39

Rabbi Fein and Stuart sit at a desk.  
Stuart is miserably uncomfortable in the enthusiastic young  
Rabbi's cozy book-lined study, crammed with evocative  
mementoes and artifacts: menorahs, shofars, photographs of  
ancestors, etc..

STUART (V.O.)

Against my better judgment, I had  
begun studying for my long delayed  
Bar Mitzvah with Rabbi Fein.

RABBI FEIN

(to STUART)

There is no shame in being afraid.  
I will help you through this...



STUART  
What if I faint...

RABBI FEIN  
You won't faint.  
When we conquer our fears, we  
become stronger. At every stage in  
life, we are all battling one fear  
or another...

STUART  
What if I wet my pants...

RABBI FEIN  
You won't... wet your pants...  
And if you did? What would be so  
terrible? You wouldn't be the  
first person to do so!

RABBI FEIN (CONT'D)  
Stuart, when your fears no longer  
control you, you will know a great  
happiness.  
(having his own epiphany)  
Maybe that is what it means to be a  
man...

40 INT. ROSEN'S DELICATESSEN - DAY

40

Stuart clears tables.

VARIOUS CUSTOMERS  
Hi, Stuuie.

Stuart looks away. His shyness prevents him from responding  
appropriately.

STUART (V.O.)  
I had my own problems, but I'd come  
to share my sister's frustration  
with Hymie. Before he'd been a  
likeable eccentric, good for a  
laugh, now that he appeared  
seriously *famisht*; he made everyone  
uncomfortable.

41 EXT. NORTH MAIN STREET - DAY

41

Hyman limps along North Main Street.

STUART (V.O.)

When he limped along North Main Street, the shopkeepers pretended he was invisible, as if he had vanished from his dummy wardrobe and had stayed disappeared. And without Hymie around, Miriam was fair game...

42 EXT. MIRIAM'S BEDROOM WINDOW - NIGHT

42

Mickey Graber, on stilts, recites Shakespeare's sonnet #2 outside of Miriam's bedroom window.

MICKEY GRABER

"When forty winters shall besiege thy brow, and dig deep trenches in thy beauty's field, Thy youth's proud livery, so gazed on now, Will be a tottered weed of small worth held: Then being asked where all thy beauty lies, Where all the treasures of thy lusty days,"

MIRIAM PEEKS THROUGH HER PINK AND WHITE FLORAL CHINTZ CURTAINS, TAKING CARE NOT TO LET MICKEY KNOW THAT SHE SEES HIM.

MICKEY GRABER (CONT'D)

"To say within thine own deep-sunken eyes, Were an all-eating shame and thriftless praise. How much more praise deserved thy beauty's use, If thou couldst answer, "This fair child of mine Shall sum my count, and make my old excuse," Proving his beauty by succession thine. This were to be new made when thou are old, And see thy blood warm when thou feel'st it cold."

43 EXT. SAPERSTEIN'S MARKET - DAY

43

Bernie Saperstein, looking dapper, sporting a China silk tie under his apron bib, crosses the street from his father's store and enters Rosen's deli.

44 INT. ROSEN'S DELI - DAY

44

Bernie pursues Miriam relentlessly.

BERNIE

Why don't you come and sit down  
with your best customer!

Miriam deigns to sit at Bernie's table, and is trying to look interested, while Bernie basks in the admiration of his jealous peers.

BERNIE (CONT'D)

You know, Miriam, I'm a born family man... I have great plans for Saperstein's! Maybe expand... you know, open another store... There's no telling where this could go!

MIRIAM

I have to get back to work...

Miriam's mother observes their interaction.

Rachel and Clara watch from a table on the side.

45

INT. ROSEN'S DELICATESSEN: STORAGE ROOM - DAY

45

Miriam's mother corners her daughter in a supply closet.

Miriam is clearly reluctant to listen to her mother's words of wisdom.

While Mrs. Rosen tries to impart wisdom to her daughter the CAMERA pans supplies in the Storage Room: neatly stacked boxes of **STEIT'S** and **MANISCHEWITZ** products, amid paper goods, and manufacturer's bulk packaging for **HERSHEY KISSES** and **TOOTSIE ROLLS**.

MRS. ROSEN

You know, Miriam, you're not getting any younger...  
The longer you wait around,  
there'll be fewer good men to choose from...  
You remember what happened to your Great Auntie Annie...  
(beat)  
Well, she was the bell of the ball!  
Everyone wanted to marry her...

Shot of Miriam's impatience; she has heard this all before.

MRS. ROSEN (CONT'D)

But, no one was good enough for Annie! She rejected every suitor.

(MORE)

MRS. ROSEN (CONT'D)  
 Finally, after everyone was taken,  
 she married your Uncle Joe.

Mrs. Rosen shakes her head sadly.

MRS. ROSEN (CONT'D)  
 What you want is a good provider...  
 Not to be chasing after some good-  
 for-nothing *schmugegee*..

MIRIAM  
 Ma, don't tell me what to do...

MRS. ROSEN  
 (undeterred--almost  
 musing)  
 What do you think of the new  
 Rabbi... Rabbi Fein...? He seems  
 like a very nice young man. I  
 could see you as a *Rebbetsin*...

In total exasperation, Miriam walks away from her mother.

46 EXT. MARKET SQUARE - DAY

46

Hyman tacks up a sign on the OAK TREE in MARKET SQUARE:

HYMAN the MAGNIFICENT

MARKET SQUARE - SATURDAY at 3PM  
The UNIVERSAL SYMBOL OF LIBERATION

Hyman nails a block and tackle to the tree trunk attached to  
 a heavy rope.

STUART (V.O.)  
 And while Hyman was out of sight,  
 this didn't mean he was out of our  
 thoughts. Mutterings had reached  
 Rosen's Deli, a regular clearing  
 house for gossip...

47 EXT. NORTH MAIN STREET - DAY

47

STUART (V.O.)  
 In the end, my curiosity got the  
 better of me. I waited round the  
 corner from Nussbaum's on the  
 Saturday afternoon of the event,  
 intending to just watch Hyman from  
 afar.

Stuart skulks in doorways, watching Hyman hobbling along in his bathrobe, a coil of rope over his shoulder.

Hyman catches sight of Stuart and greets him warmly.

HYMAN

Good to see you. Stuart! Anyone else here, that I should know about? Like your sister, maybe?

STUART (V.O.)

I was caught off guard, and didn't know what to say. To cover my embarrassment, Hymie went straight into impressions of his aunt and uncle.

HYMAN

(imitating his Aunt Frieda)

Shame on you that you ain't got sense to be ashamed for yourself.

Then Hyman switches right into his Uncle Sharkey.

HYMAN (CONT'D)

(imitating his Uncle Sharkey)

If you see Hymie Weiss, tell him our door is always open. As for Shnooko the Magnificent, tell him we are changing the locks every day - which is too good for him, eh Frieda? -- fresh lox every day!

STUART (V.O.)

Hymie talked all the way to Market Square.

48 EXT. MARKET SQUARE - DAY

48

MARKET SQUARE, a dirt patch behind the shops on MAIN STREET, is packed with tons of curiosity-seekers.

STUART (V.O.)

There were far more people at the Market Square than the Idle Hour could ever hold.

49 EXT. MARKET SQUARE - SAME

49

Clerks from Main Street on their lunch hour.

Irish toughs from Goat Hill.

African-Americans of all ages are standing randomly in the crowd.

HYMAN

You know, Stuart, Market Square was once the site of slave auctions. These people have all come to watch a man break free in a place where people have been so unmercifully bound.

(beat)

That's why I'm the universal symbol of liberation.

Hyman looks over the crowd, as though searching for someone.

50

EXT. MARKET SQUARE - DAY

50

Hyman takes off his robe and hands it to Stuart, who is clearly embarrassed by this unrehearsed bit of business, and lets the robe fall.

Hyman is now stripped to his bathing outfit, a stained tourniquet around his thigh.

A SHARPIE is, working the audience, placing bets on Hyman's chances of success.

SHARPIE

Five'll get you ten Hyman falls flat on his face again.

WOULD-BE BETTOR

What'll you give me if Hymie succeeds?

SHARPIE

And what's that?

BETTOR

I'll give you two to one!

SHARPIE

You're on!

At the FOOT OF THE OAK TREE: Bernie, Herman and Mickey are eager to get in on the act.

The heavy rope of Hyman's block and tackle, nailed to the tree trunk, is now looped through a pulley which hangs from a high branch.

Hyman looks over the crowd, and in a loud authoritarian voice begins:

HYMAN

I use only the finest-quality  
braided lariat, certified by the  
honorable Heckie Schatz of Heckie's  
Hardware on Commerce Street...

Before Hyman can finish his introduction, Bernie rushes forward.

BERNIE

I'm clearly the man for the job.  
Ain't I wrapped enough fish in my  
Papa's store?

Bernie is rudely shoved aside by EUGENE and CLARENCE, two local YOKELS in bib overalls.

EUGENE

I'm the champeen hog-tier of She'by  
County.

CLARENCE

You oughtn't to talk like that,  
Eugene.

Eugene pushes Hyman into the dirt and proceeds to wind the rope several swift revolutions around Hyman's ankles, and then, uncoiling the same rope, binds Hyman's legs, arms, torso and shoulders.

CLARENCE (CONT'D)

Take it easy there, Eugene.  
This here's kosher meat.

Laughter and catcalls from the assembled as the two men hook Hyman's feet to the block and tackle, then tug at the thick hawser cable and haul him, up-side-down, aloft.

AUDIENCE

"This is his best trick ever."  
"He'll never get out of this one!"  
"This time, he's a goner!"

STUART (V.O.)

I hoped Hymie had the presence of  
mind to recall Houdini's advice, to  
swell his muscles during the  
binding, then contract them to gain  
the necessary slack.

Whatever strength Hymie had had been squeezed out of him by the snugness of his restraints.

Several stories above the earth, Hyman begins his struggle.

Bucking valiantly against the ropes and, with a mighty effort, Hyman manages to get one shoulder free, but in doing so he lets loose a cry of excruciating pain.

At the sound of Hyman's piercing scream, the SPECTATORS freeze and quiet down.

STUART (V.O.)

I was getting pretty anxious but I told myself not to worry. Houdini often dislocated his own limbs at will.

Camera angle on the branch beginning to bend.

After a few seconds, seeing that Hyman is well enough to continue with his contortions, the spectators are rambunctious again.

Bernie starts up a mock cradle song: "Rock-a-bye Hymie in the treetop..." and is joined by others in an off-key choir.

The branch Hyman is tied to begins to bend lower and lower.

"Rock-a-bye Hymie in the treetop..."

We see the possibility of the branch breaking, but hoping against hope that it won't.

Then, with an unforgettable sound, crisp and clear, the swaying bough splinters and breaks.

Angle on AUDIENCE watching Hyman fall.

Hyman bounces from branch to branch in slow motion.

51 EXT. MARKET SQUARE - SAME

51

Eugene and Clarence run over to Hyman. They carefully carry him off in a makeshift litter made from an old horse blanket.

REACTION SHOTS OF AUDIENCE.

AUDIENCE

Is he alive? Is he dead?  
Where are they taking him?  
What happened?

(MORE)



AUDIENCE (CONT'D)  
 It all happened so fast...  
 I missed it...

The SHARPIE IS WALKING AROUND SETTling HIS BETS.

GHOST OF HARRY HOUDINI  
 (With a special light shining on  
 him as he walks alongside Hyman  
 being carried away from Market  
 Square)  
 Hymie, you're not listening to my  
 advice! A wise man listens to good  
 advice!

52 EXT. HOSPITAL - DAY

52

Hyman leaves the hospital. He starts walking down Main  
 Street in a fog of confusion.

STUART (V.O.)  
 Although I didn't see him again  
 until some time after he was out of  
 the hospital, I kept track of him  
 through the grapevine. I knew he  
 hadn't broken his neck. Bouncing  
 from branch to branch had slowed  
 his descent, diminishing the impact  
 of his collision with the ground.  
 (beat)  
 Beyond his separated shoulder, and  
 contusions from head to toe,  
 leaving him with the tendency of  
 pausing at street corners in  
 bewilderment; aside from the  
 original handicaps of his crippled  
 arm and wounded leg, Hymie was  
 reasonably intact.

Hyman is ambulatory, and although he is uncertain, he manages  
 to continue to awkwardly propel himself forward.

53 INT. NUSSBAUM'S DRY GOOD STORE - DAY

53

UNCLE SHARKEY  
 (to his wife Frieda)  
 Around here, he is no longer  
 welcome.

AUNT FRIEDA  
 Just one more chance, Sharkey.  
 He is a good boy. You'll see: some  
 day, he will do us proud.

UNCLE SHARKEY

Not around here he won't.  
He's out and that's final, and  
don't try and make me change my  
mind.

AUNT FRIEDA

I am hoping that you will change  
your mind of your own free will.  
This is when he needs us..

UNCLE SHARKEY

My answer is no and that's final.

AUNT FRIEDA

Then you tell him.

UNCLE SHARKEY

That's not my job!

AUNT FRIEDA

But where will he go?

UNCLE SHARKEY

Somewhere where I hope he grows a  
brain.

54 EXT. BLOCKMAN'S SALVAGE - DAY

54

BLOCKMAN'S SALVAGE CART is piled high with assorted rags,  
mattresses, cast-iron stove plates, mangled trombones, and  
busted sewing machines, etc. the horse, QUEEN ESTHER,  
tethered to the cart, waits patiently.

INT. BLOCKMAN'S SALVAGE - DAY

"Junk" is arranged in distinct piles: glass, porcelain,  
metal, electric wire, paper, rope, etc.

Hyman stands in front of old MR. BLOCKMAN's ancient desk.

HYMAN

Mr. Blockman, do you think you  
could use, maybe, another  
assistant?

MR. BLOCKMAN

Well, you could help Cordelle and  
Rufus collect and sort... I could  
give you maybe somewhere to  
sleep... and maybe... ..if  
business is good... maybe... I can  
pay you a dollar or two a week...

(MORE)

MR. BLOCKMAN (CONT'D)  
 Who knows? You might be Elijah...  
 How could I turn you away, Hymie?

55 INT. BLOCKMAN'S SALVAGE - DAY

55

Hyman helps Cordelle and Rufus sort the junk from the cart into different piles: paper, metal, glass, rope, porcelain, etc..

Ever the optimist, even these circumstances do not squelch Hyman's natural buoyancy.

STUART (V.O.)  
 What Hymie didn't know was that  
 without him around to cramp  
 everyone's style, Miriam's  
 resistance was beginning to weaken.

EXT. DREAMLAND GARDENS - NIGHT

The local "dance palace" is mock-pretentious with faux rococo decorations, as well as a large neon sign proclaiming "DREAMLAND GARDENS."

INT. DREAMLAND GARDENS - NIGHT

A large, utilitarian dance hall without many frills.

Mickey and Herman are sitting at a table on the side of the dance floor, observing Bernie resentfully.

Bernie is awkwardly dancing Miriam around the floor.

56 EXT. ESTABLISHING SHOT OF THE *ENCHANTED ISLE* - NIGHT

56

The Enchanted Isle, a Mississippi steamship, is operated for the pleasure of tourists.

Miriam stands, somewhat forlorn, on the deck of the *Enchanted Isle* with Bernie, who couldn't be happier.

57 INT. ROSEN'S DELI - DAY

57

Miriam catches Stuart stealing a nibble of brisket.

MIRIAM

*Chazzer!*

When was the last time you spoke to  
Hymie? Don't you think it's time  
you paid your friend a visit...

58 EXT. AUCTION STREET - DAY

58

Stuart walks down Main Street.

BLOCKMAN SALVAGE CART is being pulled over cobblestone streets by Queen Esther. Cordelle and Rufus sit on the box on top.

The bed of the wagon is piled high with an assortment of miscellaneous junk.

Walking along side the wagon is a character at least as bedraggled as the others. As the wagon turns into BLOCKMAN'S SALVAGE, Stuart realizes that the third junkman is Hyman and he starts running after the wagon shouting.

STUART

Hymie, it's me, Stuie!

59 INT. BLOCKMAN'S SALVAGE - DAY

59

Hyman sits on some baled magazines.

Stuart sits on a prickly nest of copper tubing.

HYMAN

(doing a half-hearted  
imitation of Dr.  
Seligman)

Keep up this *shtuts*, Mr.  
Magnificent, and you can find  
yourself another sawbones. A  
specialist in whatchamacallit:  
escapology. Somebody who, when you  
put on a strait-jacket, doesn't  
help you take it off. You're a  
menace to yourself when you're  
free.

STUART

Hymie, why are you doing this?

HYMAN

In my memoirs, this is the chapter called, "It's Always Darkest Before the Dawn." Let me tell you the chapter's opening sentence: "Shloss the tailor had his cot, and Ridblatt the baker his hide-a-bed, but Hyman Weiss, the orphan of the world, had no place to lay his head...almost."

STUART

You know, Hymie, enough time has passed. I'm sure your aunt and uncle would take you back...

HYMAN

Stuart, would you do me a tremendous favor?  
Could you go round to the Emporium and get me a few things?  
You know, I can pick any lock, but breaking and entering--that's against my ethics.

STUART (V.O.)

I figured that he would want some clothes, since grubby *schmattes* were what he was wearing... But all he wanted was his "Houdini stuff..."

HYMAN

Here, Stueie, take this. You can use it to bring back my stuff.

Hyman hands Stuart a bushel basket.

60

INT. NUSSBAUM'S EMPORIUM - DAY

60

Stuart has both arms wrapped around the bushel basket, which is piled high with books, Houdini magazines, and Hyman's memorabilia box. He is about to make his escape through the door to the back alley when Aunt Frieda approaches him.

AUNT FRIEDA

Don't tell Sharkey...  
Please, give this to Hymie.  
He's okay?

Aunt Frieda pushes clothes and perishables into Stuart's already over-filled basket.

Aunt Frieda scurries away, and once again Stuart attempts to make his get-away. This time Uncle Sharkey corrals him.

UNCLE SHARKEY

Stuart, here, give this to Hymie.  
Don't tell Frieda.

Uncle Sharkey stuffs a wad of cash into Stuart's front shirt pocket.

UNCLE SHARKEY (CONT'D)

Tell Hymie he can come back  
whenever he wants.

61 INT. BLOCKMAN'S SALVAGE WAREHOUSE LOFT - NIGHT

61

Stuart hands Hyman the over-flowing bushel basket, and Uncle Sharkey's cash.

Hyman receives the cash with gratitude, but he is most excited about his Houdini material.

HYMAN

You know, even the maestro took  
some knocks early in his career.  
He traveled with medicine shows and  
two-bit circuses ... surviving all  
kinds of situations, including a  
bullet wound...

62 INT. ROSEN'S DELI - DAY

62

It's slow at the Deli. Miriam and Stuart are sitting at the counter with Rachel and Clara.

MIRIAM

To think that I was ever mixed up  
with such a nut case.  
Does he ever ask about me?

STUART

Only to ask if you ever ask about  
him...

MIRIAM

Does he talk about doing more  
"performances"?

STUART

Not really...

MIRIAM

Well, that's good. At least,  
that's something...

Camera pans the fishbowl of **TOOTSIE ROLLS** and the glass cannister of **HERSHEY KISSES** as Mr. Rosen sits behind the cash register, reading his book. The Hebrew letters from Song of Songs 2:11-13 are translated into English along the bottom of the screen, while Mr. Rosen reads in voice-over.

MR. ROSEN (VO)

"Look! Winter is past. The rain  
is over and gone. Blossoms have  
appeared in the land. The season  
of songbirds has arrived, and  
cooing of turtledoves is heard in  
our land..."

63 INT. BLOCKMAN'S SALVAGE - NIGHT

63

Stuart is visiting his friend.

HYMAN

Look, Stuart, look what I found in  
one of the bins in the junk yard.  
It's fate!

Hyman drags a large object from a remote corner of the warehouse, covered with a dirty canvas tarpaulin.

Hyman dramatically pulls off the tarp revealing a galvanized iron milk can, slightly the worse for wear.

Stuart watches while Hyman, surrounded by crowbars, hacksaws, and cutting pliers, begins to meticulously transform the milk carton into a theatrical prop.

STUART

Why are you doing this, Hymie?  
What drives you? If you say,  
"destiny", I'll scream!

Hyman, about to answer, closes his mouth.

STUART (CONT'D)

Is it the crowds? After all, you  
have become somewhat of a local  
celebrity...

Hyman shrugs.

HYMAN

I like the crowds...

Something else dawns on him.

HYMAN (CONT'D)

I was born to escape! With the Milk Can Test, I will strike a new balance: the perfect marriage of showmanship and chutzpah. This new stunt will require unflinching nerve. After all, you can say that my escapes were less than complete successes, but nobody can say that my nerve ever failed.

Hyman caresses the milk can.

HYMAN (CONT'D)

Besides, I love it!

STUART (V.O.)

I could see that Hymie had dizzy spells as he worked with such precision, and that he ached all over, especially his shoulder, where he had taken his arm from the sling too soon. But he kept working, overcoming all obstacles.

HYMAN

Let me tell you how this trick works:  
First, I enlarged the neck of the can. Then I put on these staples and hasps. During the performance these hasps will be padlocked, making the water-filled container look escape-proof.

Hyman looks to see if Stuart is getting it.

Stuart is clearly mystified.

HYMAN (CONT'D)

Here's the ingenious part: the neck of the can is attached to a collar which is adapted to the tapering portion of the cylinder. The collar is studded with false rivets that fit too tightly to be detected, but can be easily punched out from the inside. Then I will lift the collar, neck and all, and I will release myself from the flooded compartment!

(MORE)



HYMAN (CONT'D)  
 Once out, I will replace  
 everything, including the sham  
 rivets, so that no one will be the  
 wiser when the curtain opens!

Hyman waits for Stuart's reaction, but Stuart remains stupefied.

HYMAN (CONT'D)  
 But this trick, I'm going to have  
 to practice!  
 Houdini could hold his breath for  
 four, maybe five minutes. I can  
 already do thirty seconds...  
 I'm going to do the performance  
 right here on Saturday.  
 Mr. Blockman will be in shul all  
 day. What he doesn't know won't  
 hurt him...  
 (beat)  
 I'll need an assistant...

STUART  
 Not on your life!

Stuart tears out of the junk yard without looking back.

64 INT. BLOCKMAN'S SALVAGE - DAY

64

In his make-shift office, MR. BLOCKMAN sits at his battered wooden desk.

Tucked inside his account book (as though hiding it from "the boss"--although he is "the boss") is a copy of "The Forward."

CAMERA SCANS the HEBREW LETTERS.

Translation on screen: "Neither exploiter nor exploited be."

MR. BLOCKMAN (VO)  
 "Neither exploiter nor exploited  
 be."

In the background, Hyman is holding the milk can and demonstrating to Cordelle and Rufus with screws and bolts what they will be required to do.

65 EXT. NORTH MAIN STREET - DAY

65

Being pulled by QUEEN ESTHER, hand-painted banners are draped on both sides of the BLOCKMAN'S SALVAGE CART that reads:

SEE HYMAN THE MAGNIFICENT  
 ESCAPE FROM THE INUNDATED CHAMBER  
 OF THE MILK CAN!!!!  
Just One Thin Dime!

On the back of the wagon a sign reads:

THIS SATURDAY - 3 o'clock  
 BLOCKMAN'S SALVAGE!!!!  
Just One Thin Dime!

66 INT. BLOCKMAN'S SALVAGE - DAY - SATURDAY

66

Hyman gives Cordelle and Rufus each a cotton sack.

HYMAN  
 Each of you will stand on either  
 side of the front gate and collect  
 one thin dime from each person that  
 walks through. Get it?

Their enthusiasm is palpable.

CORDELLE AND RUFUS  
 We get it! We get it! Just one  
 thin dime!

67 INT. ROSEN'S DELICATESSEN - DAY

67

Bernie chortles into his cuff-linked sleeves.

BERNIE  
 He's doing the "Escape from the  
 Milk Can Trick" this Saturday, at  
 Blockman's Salvage.

Hearing this, Miriam claps her hands over her ears and flees  
 from the room.

BERNIE (CONT'D)  
 (to Stuart)  
 I heard it from Patsy Quinn, the  
 Iceman, who said that they were  
 coming from all over...

Next to the bowl of **TOOTSIE ROLLS** and cannister of **HERSHEY KISSES**, Mr. Rosen reads behind the cash register. The page of Hebrew letters from Deuteronomy 4:31 are translated across the bottom of the screen, while Mr. Rosen recites in voice-over.

MR. ROSEN (VO)  
 ...For the lord thy God is a  
 merciful God: he will not forsake  
 thee, neither destroy thee, do not  
 forget the covenant of thy  
 fathers...

68 EXT. BLOCKMAN'S SALVAGE - DAY

68

The crowd is filled with Goat Hill roughnecks and Mud Island fishermen; African-Americans are among the assembled.

Union Street swells in white linen suits pass hip flasks to the girls on their arms.

Everyone is pitching dimes, without protest, into the sacks that Cordelle and Rufus are holding on either side of the gate.

69 EXT. BLOCKMAN'S SALVAGE: LOADING DOCK - DAY

69

Looking around, Hyman is satisfied that his audience is fully assembled.

HYMAN  
 And now, for your momentous  
 pleasure...

Before Hyman can introduce his act, the two local yokels from his earlier HYMIE TIE ME UPSIDE-DOWN trick at Market Square, storm the yard.

Eugene and Clarence lift Hyman by his armpits with his legs cycling in the air and stuff him into the milk can.

Then they form a bucket brigade with Cordelle and Rufus and the four of them repeatedly douse Hyman with water.

EUGENE  
 So, Hyman the Magnificent, you're  
 finally getting baptized!

When the milk can is filled, the yokels turn to Cordelle and Rufus.

CLARENCE  
 What happens next?

Cordelle and Rufus screw on the lid and snap on the padlocks.

The crowd is alive with opinions about this latest trick.

## AUDIENCE

The guy is gonna drown.  
 How can he get out of there?  
 This is one for the books!  
 I don't even believe my eyes!

Then Cordelle and Rufus drag out a circular shower stall,  
 and draw a curtain around the container.

The RAMBUNCTIOUS CROWD simmers down.

After a few short moments, Cordelle and Rufus move the shower  
 curtain.

They remove the neck and collar of the milk can and tip the  
 can over.

Water flows onto the ground.

Hyman is no longer in the milk can.

The crowd goes wild.

Hyman has not gone far. He has barely managed to crawl to  
 the side of the yard.

When Clarence and Eugene spy him, they lift up the water-  
 logged escape artist to more cheers and applause.

Hyman, more dead than alive, tries to wave to the crowd with  
 bravado, but he is clearly impaired.

It seems as though Hyman's first professional engagement,  
 from a distance, is a ringing success.

Sensing Hyman's distress, Eugene lowers Hyman gently on to  
 the ground.

## GHOST OF HARRY HOUDINI

(with a special light shining on  
 him as he observes Hyman's  
 distress)  
 Hymie, I don't know how much more  
 of this you can take--and for sure,  
 I know I've had enough..."

Bernie is convulsed with laughter as he tries to report  
 to Miriam and the assembled customers, including Rachel and  
 Clara.

BERNIE

Some wise guy sat on his chest and  
started working his arms like oars.  
They started singing "Paddlin'  
Madeline Home!"  
Hymie's lips were blue, and then  
all kinds of water came flowing out  
of him...

MIRIAM

(turns to Stuart)  
Go, see how he is...

71 INT. BLOCKMAN'S SALVAGE WAREHOUSE LOFT - DAY

71

Hyman is lying on a mattress, drifting in and out of  
a fugue state.

STUART (V.O.)

Hymie had developed an infection  
from water retained in his inner  
ear. Dr. Seligman prescribed  
antiseptics but he refused to pay a  
second house call.

Rufus silently spoon-feeds Hyman some broth.

HYMAN

(shouting out deliriously)  
I will escape the clutches of a  
mermaid with tentacles of midnight  
hair...

STUART (V.O.)

When Hymie came to his senses, he  
gave what for him was a plausible  
excuse.

HYMAN

They should have filled the can  
before they put me in it...

Rufus continues to feed Hyman like a caring grandfather.

STUART (V.O.)

Now he seemed to have permanent  
hardness of hearing in his left ear  
which upset his sense of balance  
which was frankly not so good in  
the first place, especially since  
he had begun to drag his right leg.

(MORE)

STUART (V.O.) (CONT'D)  
 He consoled himself that his  
 injuries were evenly distributed--  
 on the other hand:

HYMAN  
 I'm rich! I have enough of a nest  
 egg to launch myself - to kick the  
 dust of the Pinch, for good. But  
 why should I spend my own savings  
 to mount a traveling show, when the  
 shows ought to be paying hard cash  
 to hire me? I'll just sit tight and  
 wait for the booking agents to come  
 around. But let's face it,  
 vaudeville is dying. Maybe I should  
 just wait for movie offers.

EXT. THE HOTEL PEABODY - DAY

An imposing edifice, the elegant Peabody Hotel in downtown  
 Memphis.

72 INT. HOTEL PEABODY LOBBY - DAY

72

Hyman and Stuart look around the fancy LOBBY of the  
 Peabody Hotel.

1

HYMAN  
 I need a more dignified door than  
 Blockman's Salvage for the world to  
 beat a path to. But the lobby of  
 the Peabody will be crawling with  
 autograph hounds and manufacturers  
 pestering me to escape from this  
 sealed envelope or that glass box  
 for the greater glory of their  
 products. Better I should stay at  
 the Cochran Hotel on North Main  
 Street, where no one will recognize  
 me. This is because Hymie Weiss is  
 banged-up beyond recognition.  
 Don't you see, Stuart, Hymie Weiss  
 is the perfect disguise for HYMAN  
 THE MAGNIFICENT!

73 EXT. THE COCHRAN HOTEL - DAY

73

A more modest establishment, the Cochran Hotel is serviceable  
 and starkly unglamorous.

74 INT. HYMAN'S ROOM AT THE COCHRAN HOTEL - DAY

74

Hyman, in his plain hotel room, looks around at his surroundings and is exceedingly pleased with himself.

Stuart is at the door, about to leave.

HYMAN

I sure have come a long way from the days when I worked behind the counter at Nussbaums's and worshipped at the feet of one small-time femme fatale.

Stuart leaves, closing the door softly behind him.

75 INT. ROSEN'S DELI - DAY

75

Stuart and Miriam stand by the counter.

STUART

(to Miriam)

He looks really awful. His skin is stretched taut over his cheeks like old rubber. He has circles around his eyes like a purple mask.

MIRIAM

So what am I supposed to do about it! Miriam Rosen, who is incidentally thinking over Bernie Saperstein's proposal - she should run to this broken-down over-aged shmo and sooth what hurts? She should say to him, 'Hymeleh, be a person already, join the rest of us and live a little longer?"

76 EXT. NORTH MAIN STREET - DAY

76

From the inside of Rosen's Deli, Miriam observes Hyman clunking down the street in his new clothes, flapping on his wizened frame.

77 INT. ROSEN'S DELI - DAY

77

STUART

(to Miriam)

Hymie has this theory that your looks have certain healing properties.

MIRIAM  
I could care less.

Next to the **TOOTSIE ROLLS** and **HERSHEY KISSES**, Mr. Rosen is sitting behind the cash register reading his book. The Hebrew letters from Leviticus 19:1 are translated into English along the bottom of the screen, while Mr. Rosen recites in voice-over.:

MR. ROSEN (VO)  
Speak to all the people and say to  
them, you shall be holy for I am  
holy..."

78 INT. HYMAN'S ROOM AT THE COCHRAN HOTEL - DAY

78

Stuart unloads a bag of groceries for Hyman.

HYMAN  
(twitching from various  
irritations)  
Stuart, my bucko, pain is the spur.

STUART  
Your Aunt Frieda tells me not to  
tell your Uncle Sharkey... and your  
Uncle Sharkey gives me this, and  
tells me not to tell your Aunt  
Frieda.

Stuart hands Hyman a fistful of cash.

HYMAN  
Oh, they are good people. I'm  
almost down to my last peanut.

STUART  
How could you be broke? You had a  
fortune. What do you spend your  
money on besides your hotel room?

HYMAN  
Stuart, you have been such a good  
friend to me, you are going to be  
the first to know.

Hyman reaches into a cardboard carton and takes out some printed handbills with a lithographed illustration of a wooden crate in flames. The crate is cut away to reveal a crude portrait of a shackled Hyman the Magnificent, beneath which is the caption:



SEE  
The daredevil and impetuous  
!!!PACKING CASE PLUNGE!!!

Hyman hands several handbills to Stuart.

On inspecting the handbills STUART starts to sob, which Hyman mistakes for tears of joy.

HYMAN (CONT'D)  
I knew you'd get a kick out of them. Now someone accustomed to playing it safe would return to the salvage yard where his fortune was assured. But I prefer to up the ante.

Stuart holds his head in his hands in anguish.

Hyman is oblivious to Stuart's despair.

HYMAN (CONT'D)  
Rather than invite the audience back to The Pinch, where a prophet is without honor in his own home, I have decided to take this show to the audience! I shall offer an escape so spectacular, that ever after I will be able to ask my own price from the crowned heads of who knows where!!!!

STUART  
(shouting through his  
sniffling)  
Shmuck! Where are your marbles?

HYMAN  
Stuart, my good man, not to worry! The danger is minimal! A skeleton key tucked in a seam of my bathing suit will unlock the chains, and the packing case will be fitted with a special gag panel, undetectable, of course, that will slide aside for a hasty exit. The flames are a purely theatrical touch and will be extinguished once the box begins to sink. As for working underwater, the Milk Can Test will stand me in good stead.

STUART (V.O.)

For his most ambitious event ever,  
Hymie was taking his most elaborate  
precautions, doing everything short  
of actually rehearsing the stunt.

STUART

Hymie, it'll never work.

Hyman gave Stuart a look of wounded indignation, like  
contusions and broken bones might not hurt him, but words  
cut deep.

HYMAN

I thought you understood, Stuart,  
I'm an escape artist - it's what I  
do.

Stuart shouts as he runs out of the room.

STUART

You don't have to do it! No way  
you can convince me you have to do  
it.

79

EXT. NORTH MAIN STREET - NIGHT

79

Hyman is standing shakily in the wagon bed, supporting  
himself against a large wooden packing case, as Queen Esther  
pulls the cart down the street.

STUART (V.O.)

Hymie determined on an evening  
performance, since darkness would  
heighten the dramatic effect. It  
was only September but there was a  
slight autumn nip in the air, and  
leaves fell as Queen Esther pulled  
the wagon along North Main at dusk.

Cordelle and Rufus sit in the front box on the top of the  
wagon.

CLOSE-UP on the monogram "**H the M**" ruggedly hand-stitched in  
gold lame across the back of a silk dressing gown flapping in  
the breeze, dramatically draped over Hyman's shoulders.

At Hyman's feet: an assortment of handcuffs, padlocks, leg  
irons, and chains; there is also a jug of kerosene and a sack  
brimming over with bottle rockets and Roman candles.

The turnout on the street is inconsiderable at first.

A few kids try to follow but are quickly recalled by their parents.

A few old men leave their liars' bench in front of the barbershop and stumble funereally behind the wagon for a block or two.

OLD WORSHIPPER  
(to ANOTHER)  
It's almost time for services.

The old men turn off toward the Synagogue.

80 INT. ROSEN'S DELI - NIGHT 80

Stuart watches the junk yard wagon from across the street.

Rufus is tossing handbills, which scatter among the dead leaves.

81 EXT. HARAHAN BRIDGE - NIGHT 81

Traffic has been stopped at the bridge, due to the crowds which have gathered.

Hyman poses dramatically from the bed of the wagon while photographers take his picture.

Clarence and Eugene, who participated in Hyman's earlier performances, push their way to the front of the crowd.

Seeing them, Hyman begins to look worried.

To quell his anxiety, Hyman sets off a series of fireworks.

Scarlet pompoms shoot off in all directions.

Roman candles spray the evening sky with peacocks' tails.

Clarence and Eugene jump on to the wagon.

Hyman flinches. He looks toward Rufus and Cordelle for support but they are enraptured by the fireworks and don't notice Hyman's silent plea for help.

Never one to give in to fear, Hyman pleads with Clarence and Eugene.

HYMAN  
Go easy on me, fellas.

Eugene winks at Hyman as they dump Hyman, who is now looking very worried, into the crate.

They man-handle the crate onto the railing, douse the crate with kerosene and set it aflame.

Then they push the crate off the railing into the water.

For a moment, Hyman's packing case looks like a meteor.

However, upon hitting the water, the packing case shatters to pieces with fire crackers going off in all directions, leaving Hyman bobbling in the water.

The crowd roars.

The water is inky black beneath the fireworks.

Hyman waves his arms wildly.

HYMAN (CONT'D)  
(Barely audible under the roar of  
the crowd...)  
I'm okay... I'm okay... but I  
can't swim....

82

INT. ROSEN'S DELI - MORNING

82

Stuart is holding the Memphis-Scimitar:

On the front page is a shot of Hyman posing on the wagon.

The headline reads: "PINCH MAN TAKES DIVE."

A cartoon next to the article shows a character wrapped in bandages like a mummy, his head crowned with stars and bedsprings. The caption reads, "And for my next trick..."

STUART  
(reading from the  
newspaper)  
"He escaped with broken ribs and  
superficial burns thanks to the  
quick thinking of the crew of the  
Enchanted Isle.."

Miriam, who has been peering over Stuart's shoulder, snatches the paper from his hands and sets off for the door.

Stuart chases after her.

Rachel and Clara watch from another table.

83

INT. CHARITY WARD - DAY

83

Miriam and Stuart stand at the foot of Hyman's bed looking down at the sleeping figure.

Wearing a thin print sundress covered with tiny flowers and cinched at the waist with a primrose ribbon, Miriam is a sharp contrast to the wire mesh windows and the stack of cracked enamel bedpans.

Hyman's chest is girded with adhesive tape, his exposed flesh is oysterish with blisters. The combination of singed eyelashes and hair like molting feathers gives him an almost extraterrestrial aspect.

When Hyman startles awake and realizes that Miriam is at the foot of his bed, he smiles goofily.

HYMAN

Miriam, you're a sight for sore eyes.

MIRIAM

What have you got that isn't sore?

HYMAN

Beg pardon?

MIRIAM

I said you're a mess.

Hyman tries to sit up but the effort is beyond him.

Miriam sits on the edge of his bed.

Stuart remains standing at the foot of the bed.

Miriam leans over Hyman and plumps his pillows.

Hyman breathes in her aroma and closes his eyes.

Then Hyman opens one eye, then the other, as if to accommodate the full reality of Miriam's presence. Maybe he is dreaming.

MIRIAM (CONT'D)

Hymie, they're all laughing at you, y'know. Look at this.

Miriam shows Hyman the newspaper she is holding and sticks it into Hyman's gauze-mittened hands for him to read.

As Hyman reads the article about himself, he looks pleased and his chest starts to swell visibly, stretching his fractured ribs until he winces.

Seeing that Hyman is still unremorseful, Miriam seizes back the newspaper.

MIRIAM (CONT'D)

What's the matter with you?  
Don't you know the truth anymore?

HYMAN

When Houdini escaped, the men and women hugged each other and wept!

MIRIAM

Escape! Who escapes!  
You never noticed that every stunt you pull ends in disaster?  
You think you're a cat, you got nine lives?  
Well, I'll tell you something, you got only one, and you mostly used that one up. You're pushing your luck, Hymie. For God's sake, take a look at yourself.

HYMAN

I tried that already...

Miriam, having worked herself up to a high pitch, lets go with a sign.

MIRIAM

(her tone is a mixture of sorrow and resignation)  
Hymie, I have something to tell you. Me and Bernie, we decided to tie the knot.  
(then realizing that the expression might have other connections for Hyman, she adds)  
We're getting married. Rabbi Fein is going to do the honors right after Sukkos.

Hyman shrugs to show that it is all the same to him. He turns his head away to conceal the pain that he is feeling.

STUART (VO)

Hyman looked the way I imagined  
Houdini must have looked on that  
fateful night backstage, when the  
magician was poked in the gut  
before he could brace himself  
against the punch that would burst  
his appendix and set loose the  
poison in his bloodstream that  
killed him.

Eventually Hyman reluctantly mutters.

HYMIE

*Mazel tov.*

Miriam bites her lip in contemplation, looks this way and that, taking in the length, and breadth of the white-washed ward.

All up and down the row of beds, patients in traction, some looking already dead, have raised themselves to get a better look at Miriam.

Then Miriam stands up, apparently having come to a decision.

She steps over to where a gauze Modesty Curtain is folded against the wall, and places it around Hyman's bed.

The two of them are now hidden from view.

Stuart speaks softly to himself.

STUART

*Je tire le rideau comme ca.*

The other patients, some perhaps with a final effort, are straining toward the curtain, which Stuart parts from its frame to peek inside.

The camera peers over Stuart's shoulder as Miriam bends over Hyman. Both of their faces are concealed by the further curtain of her midnight hair, but still she can be heard whispering.

MIRIAM

Escape this.

The sound of a stopper being pried from a bottle, as Miriam kisses Hyman on the lips.

Miriam slips out from behind the Modesty Curtain and disappears.

For a moment, Hyman's limbs are slightly elevated from the bed as if in an authentic struggle, then he relaxes.

STUART (V.O.)

If Hymie was able to think at all,  
he was probably remembering how  
Houdini's wife, Bess, used to pass  
Harry a skeleton key in a kiss.

84

INT. CHARITY WARD - DAY/SAME

84

Aunt Frieda and Uncle Sharkey approach Hyman's bed. They move the Modesty Curtain aside.

When Aunt Frieda sees Hyman's condition, she lets out a shriek and almost faints. Uncle Sharkey catches her before she falls and props her up so she can speak.

AUNT FRIEDA

Mine *tatelah*, are you okay?

UNCLE SHARKEY

Don't treat him like a baby!

AUNT FRIEDA

He'll always be my baby! When he's  
forty-five and has six children,  
he'll still be my baby...!

HYMAN

Six! I'm going to have six  
children!

AUNT FRIEDA

At least!

UNCLE SHARKEY

Let him alone, for God's sake! He  
can't even sit up by himself...  
and you're having him making  
babies...

AUNT FRIEDA

We want you should come home,  
Hymie!

Hyman looked as though he might have considered Aunt Frieda's offer, until his Uncle Sharkey speaks.

UNCLE SHARKEY

We forgive you everything, Hymie.  
Just come back and everything will  
be just the way it was before.



85 EXT. BLOCKMAN'S SALVAGE - DAY

85

Hyman is walking with a cane.

He works alongside Cordelle and Rufus sorting materials.

HYMAN

(as much to himself as to  
Cordelle and Rufus)

Faint heart never won the fair  
lady.

Only the brave deserve the fair.

86 INT. BLOCKMAN'S SALVAGE: LOFT - NIGHT

86

Stuart has come to visit.

HYMAN

I think the failure of my escapes  
is all Miriam's fault.

It puts me in mind of Houdini's  
obsession with flying. It kept him  
awake for the couple of hours that  
he slept each night.

It left him muddled and spoiled his  
timing. So what, you might ask,  
was the maestro's solution?

STUART (V.O.)

I had no intention of asking...

HYMAN

He took apart the plane, which by  
the way he was the first aviator to  
fly over Australia. He packed it  
up and never flew again. Then he  
devoted himself with a vengeance to  
greater and more dangerous stunts.

STUART

Hymie, I don't know how I am going  
to go through with it. I can't even  
say the word!

HYMAN

Oh, your Bar Mitzvah... You'll be  
fine!

STUART

No, Hymie, you don't understand. I  
will completely panic if I have to  
speak in front of a room full of  
people.

(MORE)

STUART (CONT'D)

I can barely speak to anyone one-on-one. Except you, who are the only exception... which I don't even understand except...

HYMAN

Pretend no one is there, like you're looking in the mirror.

STUART

Won't work...

HYMAN

You have no choice, buddy, so just make up your mind that you're going to do the best you can. I'll be sitting in the front row to cheer you on! But why worry about something that is still far away? At some point your Bar Mitzvah will be over and your life will go on...

STUART

Is that how you do it?

HYMAN

Me, no. I love what I do or I wouldn't do it! (beat) You'll be fine...

STUART

I wish I could be more like you.

HYMAN

What you need is to be more like you! Like the person you want to be!

87 INT. ROSEN'S DELI - DAY

87

Mrs. Rosen is a whirlwind of activity.

MRS. ROSEN

(to Miriam)

Invitations have to be sent out.

(to Mr. Rosen)

You have to secure the hall at The Workman's Circle for the Reception.

Mr. Rosen nods.

MRS. ROSEN (CONT'D)  
 (to Miriam)  
 We have to go for a fitting for  
 your bridal gown...

Miriam is noncommittal.

MRS. ROSEN (CONT'D)  
 What is the matter with you?  
 You don't even look excited...

Not waiting for an answer, Mrs. Rosen turns back to her husband.

MRS. ROSEN (CONT'D)  
 Do you have any idea what this  
 wedding is costing us?  
 Why the food alone is....

Next to the containers of **TOOTSIE ROLLS** and **HERSHEY KISSES** Mr. Rosen is sitting behind the cash register reading from Isaiah 62:4-5 while the Hebrew letters are translated into English across the bottom of the screen:

MR. ROSEN (VO)  
 "...you will be called the One the  
 Lord delights in.. That's because  
 the Lord will take delight in you,  
 as a groom is happy with his  
 bride..."

88 INT. ROSEN'S DELI - SAME

88

Bernie is strutting around like a pouter pigeon.

He rubs Stuart's head.

BERNIE  
 Brother-in-law...

Miriam is absent-minded and inefficient.

CUSTOMER  
 I didn't order *kneydlach*!

SECOND CUSTOMER  
 Where are my *lattkes*?

Miriam keeps gazing out of the front window as if looking for someone to appear.

Rachel and Clara, sitting at a table, observe.

89 INT. ROSEN'S DELI - NIGHT

89

Mr. Rosen is locking up the Deli.

Bernie is waiting for Miriam at the front door.

BERNIE

Why don't we go for a walk...

MIRIAM

I'm really too tired, Bernie...

I'll see you tomorrow...

90 EXT. ROOF - NIGHT

90

Miriam is sitting with Stuart on the roof of her house.

MIRIAM

He used to be my lost cause.

Now he's everybody else's...

How could I, such a legendary  
beauty, with such a head of hair,  
have fallen for such a *zhlub* as  
Hyman Weiss.

And now he's such a mutilated  
fragment... Oy, such a fragment...  
Besides, it's too late...

STUART (V.O.)

I wished there was something I  
could do for my sister... but once  
the machinery for a Jewish wedding  
is set in motion, no power on earth  
could turn it around.

91 INT. BLOCKMAN'S SALVAGE - DAY

91

STUART (V.O.)

The one thing that scared me more  
than watching Hymie, was letting  
him out of my sight. I figured he  
was too crippled to try any more  
funny business; however, I found  
out how wrong I could be.

HYMAN

(to Stuart)

I think I have decided on my next  
escape.

(MORE)

HYMAN (CONT'D)

Not just any escape, but the one that was almost Houdini's undoing-- the trick of being buried alive resulted in Houdini almost suffocating makes it a kind of ultimate stunt! I am determined to pull it off without a hitch! It will be my crowning achievement!

(beat)

But this one I am going to rehearse!

92

INT. RABBI FEIN'S STUDY - DAY

92

Miriam and Bernie are meeting with Rabbi Fein.

RABBI FEIN

It is customary before a marriage for the bride and groom to meet with the Rabbi... so we can talk... There is a common misconception about relationships.

Bernie is uncomfortable.

Miriam is distracted.

The Rabbi is passionate about his job.

RABBI FEIN (CONT'D)

Why, at a Jewish wedding, do the men and women face each other in two straight lines?

Bernie looks as if he is thinking of an answer for the Rabbi, but it is a rhetorical question.

RABBI FEIN (CONT'D)

They run towards each other and meet in the middle, and then run backwards to their original places, only to do it over again. But they always face each other!

Miriam begins to drift off into thoughts of her various encounters with Hyman. Her recollections vary from the events we have seen earlier.

93

INT. NUSSBAUM'S EMPORIUM - DAY

93

Miriam's recollection of Hyman at the fabric counter at Nussbaum's Emporium:

Miriam holds two bolts of fabric up to her face while she talks to Hyman.

MIRIAM

Which do you think looks better?

HYMAN

The green one--it goes with your eyes!

94 INT. RABBI FEIN'S STUDY - DAY

94

RABBI FEIN

Many people think that if they meet the right person, things will go smoothly from then on. If a relationship is bumpy, and if we need to put effort into it to make it work, it must be the wrong relationship.

95 INT. ROSEN'S DELICATESSEN - DAY

95

Miriam's recollection is of Hyman acknowledging her, as he shows her a photograph of his parents: a man in a dented bowler hat holding a book and a woman in a babushka, with frightened eyes and cheeks that look stung by bees.

HYMAN

I ask you, Miriam, do these people look like the parents of a hero?

96 INT. RABBI FEIN'S STUDY - DAY

96

RABBI FEIN

The wedding dance, with its forward and backward motions, tells us that in any loving relationship, a couple experiences moments of closeness and love, as well as moments of distance and tension.

97 INT. ROSEN'S DELI - DAY

97

Miriam's recollection of Hyman confiding his passionate feelings about Houdini's death.

HYMAN

I challenge me! I shall take up the mantle of Houdini!

(MORE)

HYMAN (CONT'D)

After all, Houdini just might be my  
long lost father!  
Miriam, you'd be the perfect  
assistant...

98

INT. RABBI FEIN'S STUDY - DAY

98

RABBI FEIN

It is not possible for two human  
beings to share an intimate space  
and not go through some rough  
patches. (beat)  
The only reason you retreat from  
each other is in order to become  
close again. Closer and stronger  
than ever. The secret: even in  
those rough times: never turn your  
back. In the dance of love, the  
good times bring you close, but the  
tough times bring you even closer.

Bernie has almost fallen asleep, as much from embarrassment,  
as from inactivity.

Miriam looks sadder than ever.

RABBI FEIN (CONT'D)

In the words of the prophet Hosea:  
*"Va ar resh tech lee La Olam..."*

On the screen, the English translation appears:  
"I marry you forever."

RABBI FEIN (CONT'D)

In English that means: "I marry you  
forever." Do either of you have  
any questions?

Bernie puts his arm around Miriam's unwelcoming shoulder.

BERNIE

No, I think we're just fine!  
Aren't we, Miriam...

Miriam looks down.

MIRIAM

Just fine...

99

INT. BLOCKMAN'S SALVAGE - DAY

99

Stuart and Hyman are talking among various stacks of salvaged materials: piles of magazines, broken appliances and bicycles, odd-sized pieces of wood, etc..

STUART

In less than a week, Miriam will become Mrs. Bernie Saperstein... I don't think really she's happy about it...

HYMAN

Her choice. No one's making her do it. I have more important things on my mind.

STUART

You're in no condition to perform anything more strenuous than tying your shoe laces!

HYMAN

(ignoring Stuart)

This stunt will be perfected first in solitude!

STUART

Hymie, you yourself said that you can't call a stunt accomplished without an audience on hand to applaud--to say nothing of saving you from your own botched devises.

HYMAN contemplates STUART's remark before responding.

HYMAN

Agreed. Stuart, you are right. You will be my audience! We will do a dry run tomorrow night, which coincidentally is Halloween Eve: the one-year anniversary of Houdini's death.

100

EXT. STUART'S HOUSE - NIGHT

100

Stuart, wearing a skeleton costume that is too tight, carries a lantern as he tries to leave his house unnoticed.

Mrs. Rosen calls out from inside the house.

MRS. ROSEN

And where are you going, young man?



STUART  
Treat or treat!

MRS. ROSEN  
Wait a minute. Let me look at you.

Mrs. Rosen comes to the door and scrutinizes Stuart.

MRS. ROSEN (CONT'D)  
Who ever heard of a zaftig  
skeleton? I'll have to make you a  
new costume next year...  
Now, don't get into any trouble...  
and stay away from that Hyman  
Weiss.

101 EXT. NORTH MAIN STREET - NIGHT 101

As Stuart walks to meet Hyman, the streets are crawling with  
pint-sized ghosts and witches.

102 EXT. NORTH MAIN - NIGHT - SAME 102

Walking closely behind Stuart, but making sure that he does  
not see them: RACHEL and her younger sister CLARA, wearing  
Halloween costumes of their own, but their faces can be  
discerned behind their "finery."

103 EXT. NORTH MAIN - NIGHT - SAME 103

Approaching Stuart, carrying clanking shovel, coal chute,  
and toolbox is a buoyant Hyman Weiss.

STUART (V.O.)  
For the site of Hymie's rehearsal,  
he chose Catfish Bayou, an area  
just north of the Pinch, its banks  
bordered by ramshackle shanties and  
an old slave burial ground.

The only light is from jack-o'-lanterns in some windows.

But, the moon is bright enough to upstage Stuart's oil lamp.

The moon shines on the mud of the bayou, rippling sluggishly  
with the spines of snakes, and on the tin roofs and smooth  
headstones where Hyman and Stuart have stopped.

104 EXT. CATFISH BAYOU - NIGHT 104

Rachel and Clara remain hidden from Hyman and Stuart. They observe all from a safe distance.

105 EXT. CATFISH BAYOU - NIGHT 105

Hyman, impervious to fear, has set to work.

He bangs together some slats from his toolbox, making an upright trestle against which he props the coal chute.

At the mouth of the chute he places a tumbled wooden grave marker and tamps it into the ground.

STUART (V.O.)

Seeing him so industrious, who  
would have believed that he didn't  
necessarily know what he was doing?

Hyman completes his incline, and begins to dig, heaving damp clumps of earth onto the coal chute, between rambling grunts about Houdini.

HYMAN

One time he h does one of his  
bridge leaps... Unh... and there's  
a corpse stuck in the weeds which  
had settled... unh... at the bottom  
of the river... unh... so before  
the maestro can get free of his  
chains, the corpse floats to the  
surface... unh... and that's what  
the crowd sees first, this  
decomposed dead man... unh... then  
Houdini pops up right after...

STUART

You're looking a little worse for  
wear... Why don't you let me dig  
for a while...

106 EXT. CATFISH BAYOU - SAME 106

Hyman leans against a mossy headstone and laughs at Stuart's efforts to help him.

STUART (V.O.)

My offer surprised us both! Here  
I was, a kid in a skeleton suit,  
helping his only friend dig a  
grave.

Stuart climbs out of the hole and hands Hyman the shovel.

STUART

Hymie, please reconsider this  
insanity.

Hyman's answer is to climb back into the hole and continue digging.

HYMAN

Stuart, there is really nothing to  
it. I lie in the hole with my  
knees to my forehead, which makes a  
nice pocket of air. You can live  
like this ten, maybe fifteen  
minutes, long enough so the  
audience goes crazy with suspense.  
Then it's a simple matter to  
scramble up through the loose  
earth.

By the time Hyman has finished explaining, the dirt is piled  
high in the coal chute, the excavation is chest-deep, and  
Hyman is ready to demonstrate.

Hyman takes wads of cotton from the pockets of his ragged  
cardigan and stuffs some in his nostrils, mouth and ears.

Throwing off the sweater, Hyman unwinds a long linen sack,  
from his waist, the kind used for picking cotton.

He pulls the sack over his head, poking his arms through  
slits in the sides.

Rachel and Clara exchange glances.

107 EXT. CATFISH BAYOU - SAME

107

Then Hyman curls up in the hole and mumbles something  
that the cotton in his mouth makes unintelligible.

STUART

What?

HYMAN

I said, 'Open the chute'.

STUART

Guess again!

HYMAN

Stuart, just this one favor!

STUART  
I will not do it!  
Miriam would kill me!

108 EXT. CATFISH BAYOU - NIGHT - SAME

108

At the mention of Miriam's name, Rachel and Clara look at each other and silently start back the same way they have come.

100AA EXT. CATFISH BAYOU - SAME

100AA

Undeterred, Hyman gets to his feet and begins to grope around in his toolbox at the side of the hole.

From among the collars and shackles, he eventually dredges a large three-pronged fishhook with line attached.

After a couple of clumsy efforts he manages to snag onto the soggy marker at the lip of the coal chute.

Then Hyman lays back down in the giant hole with the line in his hand.

HYMAN  
Anthropropolygos!

Hyman pulls on the cord. The marker topples but the huge mound of earth stays put.

HYMAN (CONT'D)  
(pleading like his heart  
would break)  
Oh, for God's sake, Stuart! Give  
it a shove!

STUART  
No way!

HYMAN  
This is what I was born for! This  
is my destiny!

STUART (V.O.)  
So I did it. If only to shut him  
up, to stop his accusing me of  
coming between him and his destiny.

In exasperation, Stuart places his hands against the wall of cold earth, which is taller than he is.

STUART

All right: Hymie meet Destiny.  
Destiny meet Hymie.

Stuart pushes but the earth refuses to budge.

Then he pushes again, and it begins glacially, inch by inch, to slide down the chute.

Spilling over the edge, it dumps its full weight like a dull avalanche on top of Hyman.

Within seconds, Stuart falls on his knees and begins madly clawing his way from above, the way Hyman was supposed to be tunneling from below.

STUART (V.O.)

In the moment before I panicked, I was angrier than I'd ever been in my entire life--angry at myself for having let Hymie sucker me into this, angrier at him for not being what he claimed.

Stuart digs, certain that he isn't going to be meeting Hyman halfway, and is nearly out of strength when he remembers the shovel.

STUART (V.O.)

Never anybody magnificent, he was only the screwball Hyman Weiss, whom I could wait for till kingdom come without his ever crawling out of that grave.

Stuart grabs the shovel and manages to finally scoop out the hole to the depth where Hyman lays inert.

Stuart tosses the shovel and lowers himself into the hole.

Stuart continues clearing away the dirt by hand, finally unearthing Hyman enough to lift his head by the filthy linen shroud.

Stuart pulls the sack off Hyman's head and unplugs the cotton, which the weight of the earth had yet to expel from his nose.

But, all along, Stuart knows that it is too late.

Hyman is stone cold, with no hint of a pulse in his neck.

Stuart, beating Hyman on the chest, is unable to elicit even the faintest sign of life.

He lifts one of Hyman's arms, which falls back limply, like a marionette's.

Stuart starts to cry and calls for help through his tears.

A few kids from the shanties come and peer over the rim of the hole.

When they see a stiff, pearl gray corpse in the arms of a skeleton, they turn and flee.

Hyman suddenly opens one eye, and then the other.

As Hyman's eyes adjust, he sees Stuart and begins to scream.

Hyman leaps to his feet, and screams some more.

Stuart, sitting splay-legged in the hole starts screaming, too.

Stuart is pointing at Hyman, screaming, and holding his heart with his other hand.

Suddenly Stuart realizes that he still has on his rubber skull mask and pulls it off.

STUART (CONT'D)  
Hymie, it's me, Stueie!

Hyman, his hysterics ebbing, he catches his breath and distantly says, "Stuart," like he might have made his acquaintance in another world.

Hyman hunkers down in the hole beside Stuart and touches Stuart's features, the way a blind man might touch someone he was hoping to recognize.

HYMAN  
Stuart, I was dead.

Hyman confides in a voice thick with awe. He repeats with growing urgency.

HYMAN (CONT'D)  
I was dead, Stuart.  
I was crushed under the weight of  
the clay. I wasn't alone, but I was  
lonely and I wanted to come back.  
So I escaped.

STUART (V.O.)  
At first Hymie said he couldn't  
explain it, then he began...

HYMAN

Stuart, death is like being in an audience, looking towards a milk can, or a packing case that contains your life.

(beat)

It is your life though you aren't in it anymore, and you can only see it taking place vaguely, like on the screen at the Idle Hour before the curtain is raised.

109 INT. STAGE: IDLE HOUR CINEMA

109

STUART (V.O.)

Hymie told me that everybody who had recently died was there: the Birnbaum kid, who was knocked over by a meat wagon...

The Birnbaum kid, still lively and full of energy, emerges from the behind the curtain and takes his place on the stage.

Softly in the background is heard the Mourner's Kaddish:  
*"Yit'gadal v'yit'kadas sh'mei raba..."*

STUART (V.O.)

(continuing)

Mr. Klotwog, who died of that thing that nobody will mention...

Mr. Klotwog emerges from behind the curtain.

End Mourner's Kaddish.

STUART (V.O.)

(continuing)

And Mrs. Pinsky, who passed away in shul... she was there...

110 EXT. SYNAGOGUE -- DAY A SURPRISINGLY "MODERN" BUILDING 110  
 FOR ITS TIME: ARCHITECTURALLY DARING, BUILT OF BRICK WITH  
 LOFTY WINDOWS.

111 INT. SYNAGOGUE - DAY

111

Mrs. Pinsky is sitting with the women.

She seems to have fainted. People gather around to revive her with smelling salts.

They realize that she is dead.

FEMALE CONGREGANT  
I didn't think anybody could die in  
shul...

112 INT. STAGE: IDLE HOUR CINEMA - DAY 112

Mrs. Pinsky takes her place on stage.

113 EXT. CATFISH BAYOU GRAVE - NIGHT 113

HYMIE  
(to Stuart)  
So I thought, maybe Houdini is here  
and we could put our heads  
together, and figure a way to get  
out of there. But when I asked,  
nobody knew who I was talking  
about.

114 INT. IDLE HOUR CINEMA: STAGE - NIGHT 114

HYMIE  
(turning to the people on  
the stage)  
Has anyone seen Houdini?  
Maybe he can get us out of here!

Their faces are blank.

115 EXT. CATFISH BAYOU GRAVE - NIGHT 115

HYMIE  
Stuart, they didn't know who I was  
talking about.

116 INT. IDLE HOUR CINEMA: STAGE - NIGHT 116

The gaunt, bearded man (from the photograph Hyman showed  
Stuart earlier) wearing the dented bowler holding a book  
comes over to Hyman.

GAUNT MAN  
(to Hyman)  
Pardon me, but I was your Papa, Berl  
Weiss, that didn't live to meet  
you.



Then BERL WEISS waves toward the woman in the babushka (seen in the same photograph).

BERL WEISS

(continuing)

And this is your mama, Chanah Sarah, rest her soul. We've been watching your monkeyshines, which makes us wonder: is this really our own sonny, eh Mama?

LADY IN BABUSHKA

*Gevalt!*

117 EXT. CATFISH BAYOU GRAVE - NIGHT

117

STUART

(to Hyman)

Have a heart!

HYMIE

There's more.

118 INT. IDLE HOUR CINEMA: STAGE - NIGHT

118

Hyman speaks directly to his parents.

HYMIE

I'm sorry if I've been a disappointment to you, but I'm a little disappointed, too, because I was sort of hoping that I was Houdini's son...

(beat)

Say, do you guys know of a way out of here?

BERL WEISS

Give a listen, Mama! He wants out, this little *pisher*, that's been trying so hard to get in. Well, it ain't to my knowledge in the Five Books of the Torah, the secret how to get out of here...

MAMA WEISS

(to Hyman)

Was you afraid? We was all the time afraid.

Papa Weiss nods.

MAMA WEISS (CONT'D)  
 That's right. We were afraid of  
 the pogroms, and the diseases and  
 the whole *gantseh megillah*. Good  
 riddance, says I. We was glad to  
 leave the world.

119 EXT. CATFISH BAYOU GRAVE - NIGHT

119

HYMAN  
 (to Stuart)  
 Then I started to think, was there  
 anything I was afraid of?  
 Certainly not danger, or pain, or  
 even death - which is no big  
 deal...  
 (beat)  
 But it occurred to me, when I  
 looked back on my life from the  
 other side, everything was faded  
 already to shadows - everything,  
 that is except for Miriam - lit up  
 as bright as my own dead family.

120 INT. IDLE HOUR CINEMA: STAGE - NIGHT

120

Hyman sees Miriam standing next to his parents lit up  
 on the stage.

121 EXT. CATFISH BAYOU GRAVE - NIGHT

121

HYMAN  
 (continuing to Stuart)  
 All right, I'll admit it. I was  
 frankly afraid of her. But now I  
 was even more scared that, if I  
 didn't act fast, Miriam would turn  
 to shadows along with the rest.  
 And that's when it came to me,  
 Stuart, how to jimmy the lock so to  
 speak - which you'll understand is  
 a professional secret that I must  
 take to my grave.

Hyman scrambles out of the hole and quickly gathers up his  
 gear, with a definite spring in his limp leg.

112 EXT. CATFISH BAYOU - NIGHT - Same

112

Rachel, Clara and Miriam have returned.

MIRIAM  
Hyman, you're okay!

HYMAN  
Miriam!  
(When he recovers from his surprise  
and delight!)  
Couldn't be better!

They exchange a smile that holds the promise of future, and begin to walk off together toward North Main Street.

Rachel and Clara walk behind them with Stuart.

STUART (V.O.)  
I wonder if there's any place I  
wouldn't follow him...

122 EXT. SYNAGOGUE -- (THE SAME SYNAGOGUE IN WHICH MRS. 122  
PINSKY DIED)

123 INT. SYNAGOGUE - DAY 123

The entire neighborhood has gathered at the Synagogue for the wedding of Miriam Rosen and Bernie Saperstein.

Women in the gallery upstairs are weeping openly or talking in whispers.

Downstairs, young men and old are grumbling into their prayer books.

Miriam, a vision in organdy and lace, begins circling the groom seven times.

Even Bernie, despite the finery of his leather spats and silk lapels, looks humble as Miriam marches around him.

Veiled and resolute, she is such a spectacle, you could go snow-blind from looking at her too long.

Bernie, in fact, looks downright apprehensive, like a captive tied to a stake surrounded by crocodiles.

Then Miriam comes to a full stop and stands next to the groom, under the bridal canopy.

Directly in front of them, wearing his homburg, Rabbi Fein, is reciting a psalm.

## RABBI FEIN

The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul. He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

Members of the congregation recite the well-known psalm along with the Rabbi.

Rabbi Fein begins to say the blessing over the wine.

## RABBI FEIN (CONT'D)

*Borei pri ha Gafen...*

Stuart, sitting in the front row next to his father, clearly girds himself for what is to follow.

He rises from his seat, and passes in front of his father.

## STUART

Excuse me.

## MR. ROSEN

What's the matter, mister? You got ants in your pants?

Stuart walks to the altar.

He turns toward the audience and sniffs the flower in his buttonhole as though this will give him the courage to go on.

Stuart looks around at his family, the Nussbaums (Uncle Sharkey wheezing, and Aunt Frieda shushing him from the gallery), Mr. Forbitz, Ike Tautenblatt, Dr. and Mrs. Dreyfus, Mrs. Elsner and assorted guests, all of them muttering in a commotion that swells like a stirred hive of bees.

Stuart hesitantly pronounces the French phrase used in all of Hyman's escapes.

STUART  
*Je tire le rideau comme ca.*

The congregation freezes in anticipation.

Rachel looks at Clara, knowingly.

Stuart pulls on a cord.

Instantly, muslin draperies fall about the bridal canopy concealing the wedding couple.

The congregation holds its breath.

Stuart starts to count down from ten, barking out the numbers as loudly as he can to drown out his own fears, and the noise of scuffling, and chains.

Then, standing up very tall and proud, Stuart pulls on the cord again, and the curtain goes up.

STUART (CONT'D)  
 Behold, a miracle!

Restored with the top hat and cloak of his original performance, Hyman the Magnificent is standing astonishingly straight in the place of the groom.

Miriam is smiling mischievously. She winks at Rachel.

HYMAN  
 You want kiddies?  
 I'll give you kiddies.  
 I'll give you six kiddies.  
 We can use them in the act.

MIRIAM  
 You're impossible!

Somewhere in the distance, the sound of thumping and clanking.

STUART (VO)  
 Struggling in his chains, Bernie was in a safe place, known only to me and Hymie, Miriam, and Rachel and Clara...

CLARA  
 (turning to Rachel)  
 That was a great idea of Miriam's.

RACHEL

Miriam made sure that Bernie  
wouldn't get hurt!

CLARA

They couldn't have done it without  
us! It wasn't easy!

RACHEL

Well, nothing difficult ever is!

Hyman gently extends his hand to Miriam. She looks at Hyman fondly then reaches out her hand to accept his.

Mr. Rosen looks confused.

Mrs. Rosen turns to her husband and pats the back of his hand comfortingly. Mrs. Rosen knows that her daughter is marrying the man she loves and she beams at the happy couple.

Rabbi Fein has gone into shock, his mouth is hanging open.

The ceremonial goblet has fallen from his hands. It is waiting on the floor to be smashed.

Hyman slips a ring on Miriam's finger.

They turn toward the Rabbi, who begins to deliver the benediction.

RABBI FEIN

Blessed art thou, O Lord, our God,  
King of the Universe, who, in his  
infinite wisdom, plucked this bride  
and this groom out of a hat....

CLOSING CREDITS over the entire town doing a joyous wedding hora to the klezmer music heard throughout (with a special light shining on those from the other side, because they, too, are always with us: Hyman's parents, smiling at their son and new daughter-in-law, Mrs. Pinsky, Mr. Klotwog, and the ever joyful Birnbaum kid.)

THE GHOST OF HARRY HOUDINI

(with a special light shining on  
him)  
Hymie, I'm so glad you finally  
figured out what really matters...

Rachel is happily dancing next to Bernie (who has been released), and Clara sneaks a peek at Stuart, standing next to her in the circle dance--(this could be the start of some beautiful friendships).

**THE END, or MAYBE JUST THE BEGINNING**

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SilverFox Cinema / 914-751-3027 / 917-921-7791  
**silverfoxcinema100@gmail.com**