THE TELEPHONE

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On the stage, in a triangle, as if it could rotate, sits the telephone booth. The "booth" is actually three confessionals so that the actors can use phones in opposing places. While the audience seats itself, water rises from the center of a construction like a fountain, flowers grow from it. It is covered in different colored posters, which have words or don't; in either case, there is only a suggestion of realism. A dog crosses the stage and sniffs at its base.

A line of people stand downstage. They will do nothing during the play but stand and wait; they can be cardboard people or real actors. If they are real actors, they fidget. At different times during the play they spin as if waiting for a bus or for the light to change or for the phone (again).

The telephone is the world of anything, of chance interruptions, of opportunity. The opening moments transform the telephone into anything—into a piece of art, a piece of bread. The lights cast colored shadows on it and it rains. There are many silences before the play begins.

A woman comes and dances round the construction mistaking herself for someone in "Singing in the Rain."

A man pisses on it.

Another passes and checks herself in its reflection.

Suddenly the stage is alive with the People moving somewhere. The People pick up the receivers, look for change, wait, bang the receivers down. They move as if other telephone booths were growing from the stage floor, but still they hurry and wait, there are never enough.

A man walks by carrying a portable phone. He offers to share. A line forms around him.

A hostess walks through offering two old telephones on a silver platter, but

no one responds. She is just seen, not real.

The telephone of this play will transform the characters and not and back again.

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Characters:

The Whore

The People

Dan

His Brother

His Mother

His Father

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The following lines are spoken by the crowd as it disperses:

Art converts each man into a philosopher…

A character represents one of the human conditions through absence. Loss of smell, touch, gesture, eyes…

What? A voice-machine? A word-maker?

What do I hate about voice? Lies. What do I hate about words? Lies.

Weaknesses.

The incapacity to maintain a consistent thought.

There is no going backwards.

Exchange signifies energy.

A sense of home and a sense of distance.

They exchange goods through tariffs.

Two competing societies. Man and phone. It's beautiful. Really. It's got synergy.

Maintaining sustenance through cooperation. Remarkable.

* * *

A full moon appears behind the telephone. Somewhere in the downstage distance, a flamenco guitarist sings. Japanese tourists stroll by.

The telephone rings, the telephone rings. The Whore enters.

WHORE: Amazing humanity doesn't get confused, with all the signals it has to understand. And yet, red light, pink light, it makes no difference. With that one little voice, that inside voice, they can hear the one thing they really want.

There is a pink light around the telephone.

WHORE: Woman, woman. Woman is everything, you don't need a matriarchy to tell you that. Oppression tells it better than anything because it's what a man tries so hard to shut out. Or shut in. In the house, in the bedroom,look at that. Whore is dangerously close to whole.

She giggles.

Oh wouldn't it be simpler just to be the saucy coquette, that bitch who comes and paints her lips in the reflection of this surface. You wouldn't need so much confidence. A whore has to take in. Here's one, he'll do. She takes him in, converts his member into a tongue, he speaks inside her mouth, and he doesn't even know what he's telling her. What would he say if he did? She has no need to tell him about shoes or bills or kids. They're not making a home or small talk or love or kids. They are making absolutely nothing, the universal nil. A silence full of groans and hate and sucking. Remarkable.

See, mister, this world is called nothing and that's what it's good for. The whore is like a trash can. All of man's needs, after they've been half used up, go down her. Where else are they supposed to go to rot?

The whore turns the red light off.

Hello?

Hello?

Hello?

Suddenly the stage is alive with people picking up telephones. They say hello compulsively in all the languages they know:

¿Sí, diga?

Allo?

Etc.

This is the last dance before the man arrives with change in his pockets. As he

counts it out the people disappear, except for the whore, his mother, the alcoholic father who beat him and his brother shooting up junk, all of whom stand in line behind him as he phones. His fingers shake as he dials.

DAN: It's just that…

He adds more coins.

DAN: It's just that…

He dials.

DAN: Profundity. What is its relationship to contempt?

He throws the phone down and turns to acknowledge his family, Mother, Father, his brother shooting up junk, giving a nod to the whore.

She strolls to the phone, picks it up without putting in any coins and mimics him.

WHORE: Profundity. What is its relationship to contempt?

MOTHER: Leonard, your son wants to know profundity's relationship to contempt.

FATHER: Has he cleaned his room yet?

They exit.

DAN: (into the phone) Everything is a yellow dream this time of day.

He adds some coins.

DAN: I love to watch a beautiful woman walk. The way her hips (more coins) sway like church bells (coins) like in the movies. Smooth like chocolate.

He tries another phone.

DAN: I love to watch the way a beautiful woman walks. The kind of woman who says, want to?, but of course you never…

The beautiful woman walks by. They sit on a street bench. He gives her a cigarette.

SHE: Elize.

HE: Beautiful name. Beautiful day.

SHE: You know, Dan, violence is a form of romanticism.

HE: Sure, that's right. Hey, that's why they call it shooting up, honey.

He hands her some telephone coins.

SHE: Wait.

She runs off stage to get some large foil-wrapped chocolate coins, which she lets drop into his hands.

HE: What's this?

SHE: Chocolate, stupid.

HE: No.

SHE: Go on, eat it.

He bites the coin.

SHE: You have to unwrap it first, silly.

HE: Ah, I love it. It's like chocolate.

SHE: It is chocolate, silly.

HE: No. The way a beautiful woman walks.

SHE: Oh, beauty, *beauty*. You're on a fine quest for beauty, you are.

HE: What? Life takes its toll.

SHE: Pay the toll, pay the toll.

She kisses him. She dances around the phone singing, "It's busy, it's busy, my mamma's in a tizzy."

HE: (Jumps up.) Hey, do you know this one? (Sings.) "Hey ho, nobody home. Everybody's at the baseball game."

SHE: That's a stupid one.

She kisses him and lights another cigarette. Then one for him too.

HE: I made it up.

SHE: Tell me what else you've made up.

HE: I made up a poem. I'll recite it.

He recites it. [See Plath.]

SHE: Hey, that's pretty good. Where did you learn that?

HE: I saw this guy do it on tv. I thought, hey, I can do that. (Thinks.) So what's in this cigarette anyway?

SHE: Nothing. Why?

HE: Tastes like butterscotch.

SHE: Oh.

HE: So tell me something you've made up.

SHE: Oh, I don't make things up. (Giggles.) Why bother? You know.

HE: Sure, sure. Make nothing up. You're not just being shy, are you?

SHE: Oh no, really. I knit, but I don't make things up.

HE: Oh. So hey, why don't you knit something for me now?

SHE: Now? Knit? You are stupid. You can't just knit something out of thin air. You need needles, stupid! You need yarn! Marls, magazines and directions! I never knit just out in the street like this.

HE: Oh. (Disappointed.) You can't show me how?

SHE: No.

HE: Not even a little?

SHE: Not at all. I don't have my things with me. I need my things. I can't do a thing without my things.

HE: (Flapping his hands in front of him in a gross imitation of knitting. They look like birds. Sings.) I can't do a thing without my things. (Dances.)

SHE: Shut up now. People are staring.

HE: I can't do a thing without my things, but tonight I'll kill my father. I can't do a thing without my things, but tonight I'll kill my father.

Sirens.

Darkness.

He picks up the phone, enters his card number, but does not dial.

DAN: Father, I think tonight I will try to kill you. Perhaps. I might.

His mother walks on stage, picks up the phone, then turns with a disgusted look to call off-stage:

MOTHER: Leonard, your son says he's going to kill you.

She hands him the phone as he enters.

FATHER: Hello?

The son is absent-mindedly looking for change in the other booths.

FATHER: Maybe it was Twain or perhaps Roosevelt who said it's perfectly

normal for a man to be a liberal when he's young and a conservative when he's my age.

MOTHER: Give me that. (Takes the phone.) Your father says that fish and visitors stink in three days. Thomas Jefferson.

By this time Dan is rolling another cigarette with the whore on the bench.

FATHER: Marie, tell him that when you're young you hate your parents for everything you're not, but that at my age you wish life could be as easy for you as it was for them. Tell him.

MOTHER: Listen, Dan. Your father says children should be seen and not heard.

Dan and the whore kiss.

FATHER: Tell him that when I was young we used to play games with the packets of margarine during the war, throwing them to one another until the yellow color capsules in them burst. Tell him I had a Little Orphan Annie Decoder Pin.

MOTHER: Your father says, tomorrow is another day. But listen, Dan, when your grandfather was young he had a Charlie Chaplin walk that entertained all the kids in the neighborhood. He used to give your grandmother rides on his bicycle handlebars. That was before they got married.

DAN: When did they decide to get married, Mom?

MOTHER: Your father says they always knew. It's not his fault. Believe me, son, he's changed a lot. He's doing his best. He used to refuse to go to church.

FATHER: Tell him I bought him a leather briefcase.

The whore, pissed that Dan is no longer kissing her, walks over to the free phone and dials.

WHORE: Dan wants to know if you want to try some junk with him tonight.

MOTHER: Hello? Hello, Mr. Cosmo? Mr. Bobo and Mr. Gogo would like to schedule a meeting with you this afternoon at three. Would that be all right?

FATHER: What's that, dear?

MOTHER: Yes? Good then.

FATHER: What *is* that?

MOTHER: That's all, then. That's all right.

DAN: Good.

WHORE: Your parents are interesting people.

DAN: Oh, I don't mind them much. They made me what I am. One can't mind that too much. (Taking out syringe, et al.)

WHORE: A liar?

DAN: One can't mind being a liar too much. One has to endure one's fate. I saw that on tv too.

WHORE: Are you going to start knitting now?

DAN: Ah ha! With these things I am nothing!

WHORE: Tell me why you lie.

DAN: Tell me why *you* lie.

WHORE: Oh, it's not the same!

DAN: Truth from the mouth of babes and flowers. (Sings). Roses and poses.

WHORE: Reposes.

DAN: I suppose your nose knows but…

WHORE: Whose nose?

DAN: The whore's nose!

WHORE: Liar!

DAN: That's all right.

WHORE: Tell me when you started lying.

DAN: Before you started fucking.

WHORE: You fucking pig.

DAN: Open your mouth.

WHORE: Shut your eyes.

DAN: Open your legs.

WHORE: You fucking pig.

DAN: I'll tell you why I lie. It's easy. It's obvious. What isn't a lie? What about a hello doesn't include a lie? Or a goodbye?

MOTHER: I don't see how you can say that.

WHORE: It's easy. It's obvious.

DAN: It's like...

WHORE: ...taking candy to a woman.

DAN: When I'm with my things, inside my things, I don't hate myself. If I'm doing something, then what do I care about myself?

WHORE: Like counting numbers.

DAN: Like counting numbers.

The whore goes to the phone and begins saying numbers aloud in different languages, pressing the buttons. She calls out various telephone combinations and occasionally calls out "Bingo!"

DAN: At work I counted numbers. Numbers in, numbers out. Numbers are like needles.

His brother walks in, pushes the whore from the phone, dials.

BROTHER: I want to know what it takes to redeem a man from contempt.

WHORE: (On the other line) You fucking pig.

BROTHER: Why did you do it, Dan?

DAN: In, out, in, out.

BROTHER: When I came in and found you on the beam...

WHORE: You fucking pig.

BROTHER: The neighbor didn't even believe me.

WHORE: The important thing is to express yourself.

BROTHER: Communication, you bitch.

DAN: I said that.

WHORE: I lie because I can't tell the difference.

BROTHER: What do I care?

WHORE: Exactly. What do I care? Honey, it's the same as the needle slipping in. It's no exaggeration. It's not contact...

BROTHER: Communication, you bitch.

WHORE: It's not contact. It's not contact. It's inevitable. That's what it is. Contact with the inevitable.

BROTHER: Hey, that's pretty good. Contact with the inevitable. What I want

to know is…

WHORE: Dan, pull yourself together. Kill yourself before you kill your father. It's better that way.

DAN: (Slowly, high now) I learned on tv, "God may say to me I am judging you out of your own mouth."

BROTHER: (To phone) "Your own actions have made you shudder with disgust…"

WHORE: I know! "…when you have seen other people do them." I'm not capable of disgust. Disgust is a kind of prude. Morality is a whore.

DAN: Liar!

BROTHER: It's best to make a mistake twice.

WHORE: Morality is a liar. Tell me how you did it, Dan. Was it fun?

DAN: I had the sensation of it being fun. I had dreamt about the inside of her legs. I'd never dreamt about a woman like that before.

WHORE: What's that, Dan?

DAN: I said I'd never dreamt like that. With touch and smell and almost taste. I dreamt I was arriving soon. What does it mean?

WHORE: Tell me how you did it.

DAN: Schubert was playing. I was riding, no, my brother was riding a tricycle and I was racing him to the house. Dad had the money in a satchel. The first one to the door would lock it. Then there was nothing else you could do!

WHORE: I dreamt everyone was wearing the same shoes.

BROTHER: You took your pocketknife and you ran it along his neck, that's what you did.

DAN: Buddy, listen to me, I've got a job interview. Could you spare me some change?

To the phones.

WHORE: Society Is A Menace, good morning.

DAN: Yes, I'd like to speak to Mr. Cosmo, please.

WHORE: I'm sorry, only Mr. Bobo and Mr. Gogo are in. Would you like to leave a message?

DAN: I have an interview with him. Tell him I'm your man!

WHORE: I'm sorry we don't hire men.

DAN: What?

WHORE: Would you like to speak to the operator?

DAN: You mean the company shrink?

WHORE: Most of us, it's true, dabble in psychology these days. That or law or medicine. I understand you have an interest in syringes. Now tell me why you killed your father.

BROTHER: Elize, hello? I'm on the Avenue. I just got into town. I'll meet you at...I'll meet you at...The Pink Light. Sound good?

DAN: That's someone else's story. It's all Japanese to me. I'm a very nervous person. I can forgive my parents anything. I was drunk, that's all.

BROTHER: The Pink Light is at the end of the world. On a little cove on an island in the Mediterranean. The sun sets. You drink Irish coffees. Julio Iglesias is playing. Why does it all have to change?

WHORE: Romanticism is a kind of violence.

DAN: Why do I want so much, Buddy?

BROTHER: Because you haven't got a job. If you had a job, life would go on.

WHORE: The blood's not on my hands, Dan.

BROTHER: Your job gives you a place, Dan. Stop putting yourself in a bad situation. Most people are bored with their jobs.

WHORE: With some exceptions.

BROTHER: Most people, Dan, end up as something. Just ask Pop.

DAN: Pop, is it ok if I kill you?

WHORE: Oh talk talk talk. Cheap talk cheap booze easy women. Cheap fun. Peep peep. Cheap cheap. That's what makes the world go round.

BROTHER: She reminds me of Mom.

DAN: Shut up already.

BROTHER: Listen, Dan, the oyster's at your feet. There's no reason for you to go cutting Dad's throat.

WHORE: Dan, listen. The world is...full of contradictions.

BROTHER: Hang up now, Dan.

DAN: When people go to the telephone, what are they thinking? Are they even thinking? I saw on tv…

WHORE: We know, Dan.

DAN: I saw on tv that the telephone was invented by a man who wanted to let deaf people speak. Deaf people speak!

BROTHER: Speak up.

WHORE: Sit up.

BROTHER: Listen up.

WHORE: Stand up! Dan, you fucking liar, you disgust me but I love you. The world is never over, silly. What does it matter? A mouth here, a mouth there. What does it amount to? When I go to the telephone all I can think is how stupid it would look if I dialed with my tongue.

BROTHER: She's right, Dan. Go to Australia.

DAN: It's just that it always interrupts.

WHORE: Facilitates distance, Dan.

BROTHER: The pink light.

DAN: I remember.

WHORE: Of course.

BROTHER: We are what we want to know.

WHORE: But I know more than you.

DAN: Of course.

BROTHER: The mind is a body.

WHORE: Uh huh.

DAN: The other way around.

WHORE: Unhuh. Uhuh. Uhhuh. Unhh.

DAN: That means one in Portuguese.

BROTHER: Just shut up for a second, Dan. Listen, listen up.

DAN: My father's ringing.

WHORE: Your head, Dan.

DAN: It's between your legs.

BROTHER: The light from the window.

WHORE: The sound of foreign traffic.

DAN: The woman who liked angels. I didn't trust her.

WHORE: You can't trust someone who wants, Dan.

DAN: I didn't want her.

WHORE: She was never home.

DAN: Your telephone rings so loud.

BROTHER: It's an old phone.

DAN: I can tell by your voice it's her.

WHORE: Don't think I'm not jealous. Of course I'm capable of being jealous. I have feelings. Feelings your stupid fucking ass cheap talk couldn't even begin to comprehend.

DAN: So tell us the scoop.

BROTHER: It's the latest distraction, Dan. The Pink Light.

DAN: I can't Buddy.

They exit. The pink light and the fountain return to the phone. So does the dog. Dan sits on the bench, not pretending to do anything. The people return to the telephones. One picks up one and cheap disco music comes out. He slams it down. From the next one he hears Chet Baker. In the third, a dog barks.

MAN: Does nothing work!

He exits. Two women enter.

1: Nothing works.

2: Yes, I know. Nothing works.

They have no trouble with the phones and smile and babble into the mouthpieces.

1: Have you replaced your receiver yet?

2: Yes, I've replaced mine. And you?

1: Yes, and I've collected my change from the cup at the bottom of the phone.

2: Shall we?

1: Do you believe in science fiction?

From the bench. Elize returns.

DAN: What matters doesn't matter.

WHORE: Matter matters. Matter matters. The stuff of faith!

DAN: When I was a child—I remember the first time my mother let me make a call. I dialed the numbers very carefully—we had to do everything very carefully in our house. I dialed the first three, 3, 5, 4, and then I didn't know what to do because I couldn't find the dash on any of the buttons of the phone.

WHORE: The source of your inevitable longing is impotence.

DAN: I know, but I'll never say anything smart.

WHORE: That's ok. Your mother will make you chicken soup. I just don't think like everyone else. I never had time to think as a kid. I raised my mother's kids. We're not a great family, you know. Wanting is just another form of thinking.

DAN: How can that be?

WHORE: Your mind is your body.

DAN: You disgust me. You're so simplistic.

WHORE: You think my life is so simple? You think it's simple to know how they work, how I work? You think they know? They're just following some instructions passed down to them by their idiot friends! They just assume it's all right. Their secrets are so secret they assume the word fuck says it all. They poison me.

DAN: They're the ones who are poisoned, Elize.

WHORE: Oh sure, their pockets are full.

DAN: It's the anger that scares me. You don't know a thing about that in yourself.

WHORE: Everything I know I made up! Passion over here, passion over there. Want, want, want. Think, think, think. Believe, Dan, you need to believe, not kill.

DAN: Don't tell me what I think. I never let anyone tell me what I think. That's one thing I've learned in life.

The telephone rings.

I'll marry the woman who doesn't tell me what to think.

WHORE: Making love is like sunshine, Dan.

DAN: Oh, your mind really goes round in circles, doesn't it.

WHORE: Don't abandon me.

DAN: Could I borrow a dime?

WHORE: Are you sure that's enough?

To the phones.

DAN: Dad, it's me. I'll hate you forever. I'm just repeating myself. I have no imagination.

WHORE: Like this.

She dances.

Com-mu-ni-ca-tion.

DAN: Like this.

He pulls the phone off and ties the cord around his neck.

WHORE: Like this? (Taking the cord and steadying it.) It's not too late?

DAN: Faster. Elize.

WHORE: You'll be a good secretary.

DAN: You have a voice like a fairy.

WHORE: Don't think I'm not jealous.

DAN: Do you want my needles?

WHORE: Are you knitting?

DAN: You were so funny, Elize.

WHORE: Isn't romanticism always?

She drops the cord. Dan falls. She begins kissing the other telephones. The flamenco guitarist comes back. Sings:

Yo tuve una vez
un teléfono que sonaba que soñaba
que sonaba que soñaba
cuánto te querría
las vocicitas las vocicitas
los numeritos

* * *

Reprieve:

DAN: It's not a woman I dream about but a city. I'm entering its bowels, where the outside world doesn't exist. I begin to disappear. There's a soft center of being here, silence, the stares. It's not a woman I dream of approaching, but an interior place that takes me in, rendering me…anonymous.

Sometimes I hate what I can't explain. I can't get my words to make my thoughts. It's like I've been adrift backwards for as long as I can remember.

Maybe I could make a machine and try and change that. I think I could do that. I could do something useful with my life.

Sits on bench. Lights a cigarette.

END