

Murder in the Knife Room

a play by Jonathan Rand

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*Dedicated to TFL –
Pulling the lever since 2006.*

Cast of Characters

MYSTERIOUS HOST
WEALTHY DOWAGER
RESPECTED GENERAL
SOUTHERN BELLE
DECREPIT INVALID
SKETCHY FOREIGNER
BRAINLESS MODEL
BEARDED SCHOLAR
SEDUCTRESS
POMPOUS MILLIONNAIRE
RECKLESS COWBOY
BOY BAND REJECT
PROBABLY-FAKING-IT DEAF-MUTE / INSPECTOR
PLASTIC POLITICIAN
WASHED-UP ACTRESS
SANTA CLAUS
SERIAL KILLER
SPOOKY PIRATE
DIRTY HIPPIE
DIEHARD DOLPHINS FAN
STRUGGLING STAND-UP COMIC
INTIMIDATING MOBSTER

REENACTED MYSTERIOUS HOST
IDEA PITCHER #1
IDEA PITCHER #2
IDEA PITCHER #3
POOLSIDE WIDOWS LEADER
POOLSIDE WIDOW #1
POOLSIDE WIDOW #2
POOLSIDE WIDOW #3
POOLSIDE WIDOW #4
CAPTAIN EO
LIEUTENANT SMASH
MAJOR LEAGUEBASEBALL
BRIGADIER GENERAL FRANCIS X HUMMEL

BRIAN
KEVIN
A.J.
HOWIE

NICK
LAUGH HOLE HOST
PARAMEDIC #1
PARAMEDIC #2
ELF
MALL CHILD #1
MALL CHILD #2
MALL CHILD #3
MALL DAD
HOT NEW MOM
THE REAL SANTA CLAUS
PAW
FOOLISH
IRRESPONSIBLE
NEGLIGENT
MATEY #1
MATEY #2
MATEY #3
MATEY #4

Author's Notes

While the genders of most characters have been established in the script, those genders are by no means fixed. This entire play could be performed by all females or all males. The gender of the *character* sometimes matters, but never does the gender of the *actor*. In some cases, it might be best to retain the original character gender, but if you're limited by your casting options, you could have the opposite gender perform that part. For example: I imagined that Decrepit Invalid would have an absurdly long beard. A female can play that role as if she were male. Also, Santa Claus is traditionally a male icon, but I see no reason why a female couldn't play the role as a male. I encourage you to cast genders in the way that works comedically best for your group. I approve of the swapping of pronouns and words like "son" or "daughter" in the dialogue to fit any character gender discrepancies that occur as a result of casting limitations.

I encourage production groups to use spooky, gripping, murder-mystery-type music for pre-show and intermission.

Acknowledgements

Murder in the Knife Room (originally entitled *I Suppose You're All Wondering Why I Gathered You Here Tonight In The Knife Room*) was commissioned by and first produced at McDonough High School of Charles County, Maryland on February 24, 2007. The World Premiere production was directed by Jana Whitlock Heyl and included the following cast and crew:

MYSTERIOUS HOST.....	Will Thiedeman
PROBABLY-FAKING-IT DEAF-MUTE / INSPECTOR.....	Kelly Colburn
POMPOUS MILLIONAIRE.....	Angel Gooch
WEALTHY DOWAGER.....	Lucy Ragland
RESPECTED GENERAL.....	Joey Garvey
BOY BAND REJECT	Joey Frenette
STRUGGLING STAND-UP COMIC.....	Katie Morris
DECREPIT INVALID	Kiefer Zickafoose
SANTA CLAUS.....	David Lockett
RECKLESS COWBOY	Marc Kenney
SPOOKY PIRATE.....	Skip Chavez
REENACTMENT PLAYERS	Janay Anderson Christian Childress Kenyetta Evans Sarah Hamilton Ashley Ippolito Victoria Scalfari
MYSTERIOUS HOST PLAYER.....	Camila Figueroa
PRETENTIOUS SCHOLAR.....	Gayle Morris
DIEHARD REDSKINS FAN.....	Erica Winter
INTIMIDATING MOBSTER	Kyle McNiece
OBVIOUS STONER.....	Josh Rizzo
PLASTIC POLITICIAN.....	Catie Taylor
SERIAL KILLER	Christine Bakir
SKETCHY FOREIGNER	Patrick Pruitt
SEDUCTRESS.....	Beth Hines
BRAINLESS MODEL.....	Tory Davis
WASHED-UP ACTRESS.....	Keisha Linder
WIDE-EYED INGENUE.....	Amanda Wegand
THE REAL SANTA CLAUS.....	Dennis Suggs

Acknowledgements *(continued)*

Assistant Director.....	Emily Davis
Tech Director	Patrick Sandy
Stage Managers	Sam Bowie Katrina Royce
Costume Designer	Joey Frenette
Costumes	Alex Heilmeier
House Manager	Nancy Belle
Lights	Danny Williams Steve Leydon Patrick Sandy
Publicity	Nancy Belle
Props	Amy Heidemann Nikki Horstkamp Angelina O'Leary April Leydon Gabby Perry
Set	Steve Leydon Patrick Sandy Danny Williams John Pruitt Michael Figueroa Matt Donahue The Play Productions Class
Sound	Patrick Sandy Sammie Doubleday

Lake Braddock Theatre of Burke, Virginia (R.L. Mirabal, director) presented a staged reading of the play in June 2006 at the International Thespian Festival in Lincoln, Nebraska.

A very special thanks to Jana Heyl, R.L. Mirabal, and their passionate and talented students for their invaluable help in developing this play.

MURDER IN THE KNIFE ROOM

by Jonathan Rand

(The Knife Room of a mansion. There are different kinds of knives mounted all over the walls. There can be knives of all sorts: machetes, katana blades, Swiss-Army knives, butter knives, paring knives, regular dining knives, plastic knives, but mostly the scary, murderous kind of knives. Or it could exclusively be scary, murderous knives.)

(Lights up on this Knife Room, crowded with people. All are focused on MYSTERIOUS HOST. His manner of speaking is sinister and, well, mysterious.)

MYSTERIOUS HOST. I suppose you're all wondering why I gathered you here tonight in the Knife Room.

ALL. *(Murmurs of agreement:)* Yes. / Quite. / I am curious of that, as well.

MYSTERIOUS HOST. Patience! Patience! In due course all will be revealed. Rest assured, however, that the reason involves...a mystery!

(Thunder.)

Intrigue!

(Thunder.)

And apparently thunder.

(Thunder.)

But before I explain to you why exactly I've gathered you here tonight in the Knife Room, I would like everyone to introduce themselves. Tell us your name, a little background about yourself, annd, your favorite movie. I'll start. My name is Mysterious Host. I have led an intricate life involving dozens of careers and relationships, all of which may or may not be relevant later on. I wear an eye patch and my favorite movie is *Twilight: New Moon*.

Okay! Let's go around the room, and please be brief because as you may have noticed, this is a comically large group of people.

(He gestures to SOUTHERN BELLE.)

Please go ahead.

SOUTHERN BELLE. Hello everyone! My name is Southern Belle. I'm young and innocent, filled with hope and love, and have no apparent problems at all. (*Beat.*) Or so it seems... (*Thunder.*) My favorite movie is *Star Wars: Episode 1 - The Phantom Menace*.

DECREPIT INVALID. My name is Decrepit Invalid. I am the 109-year-old bastard¹ grandson of Rutherford B. Hayes. My bones are brittle and I have a lengthy and storied past. My two most cherished moving pictures are the 1916 classic *The Mystery of the Leaping Fish*, and also *High School Musical*.

SKETCHY FOREIGNER. Hello... I am Sketchy Foreigner. It is unclear where I am from because my accent is one of those ones that just sounds "foreign." My favorite film is *Y tu mamá también*, which I have never seen, but I think it sounds sexy when I say it.

RESPECTED GENERAL. Good evening. My name is Respected General. I am a military veteran who served this great nation for over thirty years. This means that I have a distinguished demeanor, as well as a dark history of killing people all over the world.

(*Thunder.*)

MYSTERIOUS HOST. And your favorite movie.

RESPECTED GENERAL. Oh. Well, I don't see many films these days.

MYSTERIOUS HOST. Something comparable then: A novel, a short story...

RESPECTED GENERAL. Well, I have recently taken quite a liking to the television program *Sex and the City*...

ALL. (*Murmurs of agreement:*) I agree. / Oh sure. / That's a good show.

RESPECTED GENERAL. But only Season One. I stopped Tivoing it after Carrie and Mr. Big went splitsville.

ALL. [*More murmurs of agreement.*]

BRAINLESS MODEL. I'm Brainless Model... My favorite movie is the Hawaiian chicken salad with the dressing on the side. Oh, and we're in a rush so if you could speed things up for us, that would be amazing.

SOUTHERN BELLE. I'm sorry – Ms. Model – the last thing I want to be is rude, but I believe you just tried to order lunch.

BRAINLESS MODEL. (*Unfazed:*) My bad. My favorite movie is definitely –

¹ If "bastard" would be inappropriate in your community, replace with "illegitimate."

(She freezes mid-thought. Silence. Her mind has wandered off.)

DECREPIT INVALID. I think we lost her.

MYSTERIOUS HOST. Okay, next.

BEARDED SCHOLAR. Good evening. My name is Bearded Scholar. I have a pretentious British accent that is completely uncalled for given that I am from Passaic.² My hobbies include existentialist art, modern poetry, and stroking my beard with a studious look on my face. My favorite film is the modern classic of our time, *Paul Blart: Mall Cop*.

SEDUCTRESS. I'm Seductress. I only go by one name, like Bono and Jesus.³ I'm a recent graduate of Shameless Flirt Junior College where I double-majored in Promiscuity and Tight Pants. I don't have a favorite movie because I never pay attention when I go to one, either because I'm getting frisky with my date, or when I go alone because I'm practicing my make-out skills with a box of JujuFruits.

POMPOUS MILLIONNAIRE. My name is Pompous Millionaire. I accrued my unbelievable wealth from conducting illegal business with crooked oil executives. Money is priority one for me. Priority two is Monopoly money because it reminds me of real money. My favorite movie is *Titanic* because of that touching moment at the end when they put the rich people in the lifeboats instead of the poor people.

WEALTHY DOWAGER. Hello. My name is Wealthy Dowager. I too have a great deal of money—money that was bequeathed to me after my bemonocled husband mysteriously died. (*Thunder.*) My favorite film is *Big Mama's House 2*.

RECKLESS COWBOY. I'm Reckless Cowboy! Whoooooaaaaa! Yeaahhhh! I'm loud, I'm wild, and no one can tell me what to do! No one! (*Thunder.*) No one! (*Thunder.*) No one! (*Thunder.*) I like that special version of *Brokeback Mountain* with all the gay parts cut out.⁴

BOY BAND REJECT. Hi. The name's Boy Band Reject. I was the sixth Backstreet Boy. For reasons I hope I won't have to reveal later, they kicked me out of the group. I wrote the song "I Want It That Way." (*Beat.*) You're welcome. (*Beat.*) My favorite movies are every video Justin Timberlake has ever made.

² Use a local town that would be amusing in your area—whatever city would be the last place where you'd expect someone to have a British accent.

³ If the "Jesus" line wouldn't fly in your community, please cut "and Jesus."

⁴ If you feel like your audience would mistake this line as homophobia instead of satire against homophobia, then please replace the line with: "I like *Bambi*..."

PROBABLY-FAKING-IT DEAF-MUTE. [*Using sign language, he gives his name, introduction, and movie.*⁵]

SKETCHY FOREIGNER. That wasn't really a movie as much as it was a mini-series.

ALL. True. / Yeah. / He's right.

PLASTIC POLITICIAN. My fellow party guests. My name is Plastic Politician. I always have an obviously fake positive expression on my face, and think of nothing else but how my constituents will vote. Whenever I want to emphasize a point, I make this special gesture with my thumb. See? (*She points to her thumb.*⁶) My favorite movie is *American Psycho* because it has the word America in it.

WASHED-UP ACTRESS. Hello, I'm Washed-Up Actress. I had my shot at Hollywood stardom when I was nineteen, but my chance slipped away for...unspoken reasons. (*Thunder.*) My most notable role was in a commercial for diarrhea medicine.⁷ I don't watch movies 'cause I'm bitter at the success of any actor who isn't me.

SANTA CLAUS. Ho ho ho!! My name is Santa Claus. I spend every hour of every day spreading Christmas cheer to the people of the world. I also determine who's naughty – (*Thunder.*) – and who's nice. (*Thunder.*) My favorite movie is *Miracle on 34th Street*, because it enlivens the Christmas spirit, and I get residuals every time it airs.

DIRTY HIPPIE. My name is Dirty Hippie. I'm a vegan, I like laser light shows, and I live in my parents' basement. And yeah, I know what you're thinking... you're thinking my favorite movie is some low-quality bootleg video I made at a Grateful Dead concert. Well, you'd be making what I call a "flash judgment"; you'd be stereotyping me, which is exactly what's wrong with this country right now.

SOUTHERN BELLE. Is that your favorite movie?

DIRTY HIPPIE. (*Downtrodden:*) Yes.

SERIAL KILLER. Hi, my name is Serial Killer. My name pretty much sums it all up. *Ace Ventura* makes me laugh. I do a great Jim Carrey. (*Clears his throat.*) All righty then. (*His voice did not change one bit from his regular measured voice. Just a terrible impression.*)

SPOOKY PIRATE. Ahoy. My name be Spooky Pirate. Years ago I lost me left arm in a mysterious accident. (*Thunder.*) There be no film finer than *Hannah Montana: The Movie*.

⁵ The actor need not learn sign language for this role. He should feel free to fake it as expertly as possible.

⁶ See the Appendix for illustrations of the Politician Thumb of Emphasis.

⁷ Optional moment: Washed-Up Actress looks at the group, and they all react in excited recognition. They now know where they've seen her before. "Oh yeahhhhh!" / "I've seen you!" / etc. Then they do a full-cast rendition of the song and dance from the Pepto Bismol commercials: "Nausea, Heartburn, Indigestion; Upset Stomach, Diarrhea."

DIEHARD DOLPHINS FAN. I'm Diehard Dolphins Fan. I wear this giant We're Number One foam hand wherever I go, which makes it hard to use a cell phone. Let's do the Wave everybody! Yeah!! (*Nobody budges.*) If you say anything bad about the Miami Dolphins, I will beat you on the head with this foam hand until you get a reasonably bad headache. (*Thunder.*) Favorite movie? Our 17-point mauling of Minnesota in Super Bowl Eight. I burned it on a DVD, so it counts as a movie. Unh!

STRUGGLING STAND-UP COMIC. Hi there! I'm Struggling Stand-Up Comic. My only goal in life is to make people laugh. All right, ready? I got one for ya. Here we go: What would happen if Dan Rather and Jay-Z were stranded together on a desert island?

SANTA CLAUS. (*Cheerily curious:*) What would happen?

STRUGGLING STAND-UP COMIC. (*Delivered as a long punch line:*) I don't know, but it would sure be awkward, given they're so different, because one of them is a retired Caucasian newscaster and the other is a young hip-hop artist of African descent. (*No response.*) Yeah? Yeah? Ya like? Uhhh, what else—oh—my favorite movie is *Are You Ready to Laugh Your Gas Off?* which is a YouTube video I made about Fart Jokes.

INTIMIDATING MOBSTER. My name is Intimidating Mobster. I got power beyond anyone's wildest dreams. Ya look at me the wrong way, you just might find yourself the victim of an unfortunate accident. Like receiving magazine subscriptions you did not sign up for. As for movies: If anyone's got a problem with *The Little Mermaid*, they got a problem with me.

MYSTERIOUS HOST. That's everybody, right? Well, that took forever.

BOY BAND REJECT. I was gonna say: This is kind of a lot of people for one room.

MYSTERIOUS HOST. Yeah. You know when you throw a party and you invite like twenty people but assume that maybe five are gonna show? That's what I was shooting for. Then everybody RSVPed yes.

SPOOKY PIRATE. Curses! Y' must've been displeased.

MYSTERIOUS HOST. Now... you may be wondering —

BRAINLESS MODEL. *Muppet Movie!*

(Pause. Everyone takes a moment.)

MYSTERIOUS HOST. Now...you may be wondering: Why did a complete stranger invite me to this mysterious party?

(DIRTY HIPPIE raises his hand.)

Yes.

DIRTY HIPPIE. I was wondering: Why did you, a complete stranger, invite me to this mysterious party?

MYSTERIOUS HOST. Did you not hear what – I just said that exact same thing.

DIRTY HIPPIE. I'm pretty sure you didn't.

MYSTERIOUS HOST. Never mind. My point is: Have any of you ever considered the possibility that perhaps I am not a stranger after all...

INTIMIDATING MOBSTER. What're you talkin' about. I ain't never seen you before in my life.

SERIAL KILLER. Yeah, me neither.

STRUGGLING STAND-UP COMIC. (*Proud of herself:*) Me, four!

MYSTERIOUS HOST. Are you certain you've never seen me before...? What about...now?

(*MYSTERIOUS HOST switches his eye patch from one eye to the other.*)

(*Everyone gasps.*)

RECKLESS COWBOY. It's you!

PLASTIC POLITICIAN. But it can't be!

SEDUCTRESS. Let's take off our shirts!⁸

MYSTERIOUS HOST. Now you know the truth. Now you know that Mysterious Host was merely a disguise and that I am actually... Host Whose Identity You Are Already Familiar With.

(*Thunder.*)

(*Aside:*) But you can keep calling me Mysterious Host to keep it simple...

Now that you know who I really am, we have reached the moment you've all been waiting for – the moment that I reveal to all of you why I have gathered you here tonight in the Knife Room. Why? The answer...is in this box.

(*He reveals a box which sits on a surface.*)

PROBABLY-FAKING-IT DEAF-MUTE. [*Signs: What's in the box?*]

⁸ Alternate line: "Who wants to make out!?"

MYSTERIOUS HOST. That's a good question, Probably-Faking-It Deaf-Mute. And while I don't appreciate your profanity, I can fully understand why you might be curious to know what is inside. You see, there is someone in this room with a secret—a secret they have been keeping from the public for too long. The contents of this box will reveal that secret. And now is the moment of truth. I will now...open...this box.

(MYSTERIOUS HOST starts to work on the lock's combination.)

(The lights shift as we suddenly see every character looking out to the audience with looks of terror and concern on their faces. All the while, music plays. It is intense throughout with sharp chords of...intensity.)

(The intense music and looks of terror continue. If possible, lighting focus should move from person to person, or group to group, as we see the abject terror on each of their faces. This goes on for longer than you'd expect for someone opening a Master Lock.)

(The music stops momentarily.)

MYSTERIOUS HOST. Sorry you guys. It's like a ten-number combination.

(Beat.)

All right, I'm almost therrrrre. Almost to the last number of the combination that will reveal the incriminating evidennnnnnce...

(The lights suddenly go out.)

(Everyone screams.)

(The lights come back up.)

BRAINLESS MODEL. *(Her hands covering her eyes:)* My eyes are blind!

(MYSTERIOUS HOST is dead, with a knife obviously sticking out of his chest. Throughout the following dialogue, nobody notices/acknowledges this fact.)

(RECKLESS COWBOY is standing by a wall.)

RECKLESS COWBOY. Sorry about the lights. I thought this switch on the wall here worked the fan but I guess it was the lights. Anybody else warm? I was gettin' a little warm.

WEALTHY DOWAGER. I was rather warm, actually.

SPOOKY PIRATE. Yarr, me too.

POMPOUS MILLIONNAIRE. I was warm, but I'm usually warm because I always wear the new line of Louis Vuitton wool socks.

SOUTHERN BELLE. Ooooh, I heard about those. Are they expensive?

POMPOUS MILLIONNAIRE. I don't really know, 'cause I'm a pompous millionaire, so I pay someone to buy my clothes for me, and I wouldn't care how much they cost, because I have millions of dollars.

(Pause.)

(Everyone's just hanging around, not acknowledging anything odd in the room. Maybe someone whistles a tune, looking around innocently.)

RESPECTED GENERAL. Did anyone see last night's episode of *Desperate Housewives*?

ALL. Yeah. / No. / Yes. / Narr, narr.

WASHED-UP ACTRESS. I was an extra in a scene that was cut.

ALL. Oh. / Huh. / That's a shame.

(Pause.)

DIEHARD DOLPHINS FAN. Oh my gosh! I'm just noticing now! Look!

(He points his foam finger to the dead body. They all "suddenly" see the knife in MYSTERIOUS HOST's chest.)

(Everyone gasps.)

SOUTHERN BELLE. Is he...*dead*?

SKETCHY FOREIGNER. Someone has to check the body.

WEALTHY DOWAGER. Well I say, that someone will certainly not be me!

(She puts her finger on her nose.)

(Gradually around the room, people pick up on the "Not it" finger-on-nose game. The last one with their finger on their nose is the one who has to do it. SANTA CLAUS is left as the only one with his finger not on his nose. He doesn't notice what's going on; he's just looking jolly.)

BOY BAND REJECT. It's all you, Claus.

(SANTA CLAUS realizes he has missed the boat.)

SANTA CLAUS. Oh, fiddlesticks!

(He approaches the body of MYSTERIOUS HOST and checks his pulse.)

SANTA CLAUS. Ho ho ho!! He has no pulse!!

SOUTHERN BELLE. Oh my goodness. How truly awful.

PLASTIC POLITICIAN. Tragedy has befallen this great nation.

SEDUCTRESS. If anyone needs anything: a shoulder to cry on, a shoulder to nibble on...

WASHED-UP ACTRESS. What happened?

DIRTY HIPPIE. Wait a minute... I read in a magazine about this exact phenomenon! Sometimes these supernatural events occur where random knives appear out of these time wormholes? and they stab whatever object is closest. It can be anything that happens to be nearby—a coffee table, a volleyball, a fajita quesadilla? But most often...it's a *human chest*.

BOY BAND REJECT. So you're saying that it's scientifically possible for a knife to spontaneously appear and stab someone?

DIRTY HIPPIE. That is what I am saying.

BEARDED SCHOLAR. Ahhhh yes, I have read about this! I believe the scientific term for the phenomenon is: Spontaneous Manifestation and Thrust of Knife.

WASHED-UP ACTRESS. Ohhhhh, S.M.A.T.O.K...

(Everyone vocally approves of that observation as the obvious conclusion.)

PLASTIC POLITICIAN. Given that we all appear to agree that this tragedy was clearly a naturally occurring accident, I propose that we all go home and never speak of this naturally occurring accident again. All in favor?

(Everyone's hand shoots up in complete agreement, except for PROBABLY-FAKING-IT DEAF-MUTE.)

ALL. Aye.

PLASTIC POLITICIAN. All opposed?

(PROBABLY-FAKING-IT DEAF-MUTE raises his hand.)

PROBABLY-FAKING-IT DEAF-MUTE. Nay.

(Everyone gasps.)

BRAINLESS MODEL. OMG, he's cured!!

BEARDED SCHOLAR. Actually, Brainless Model, neither deafness nor muteness are curable conditions. I believe that the Probably-Faking-It Deaf-Mute was—

POMPOUS MILLIONNAIRE. Probably faking it.

BEARDED SCHOLAR. —probably f— Yes...

PROBABLY-FAKING-IT DEAF-MUTE. Bearded Scholar is right. I am not actually deaf and mute. On the contrary. I can speak and I can hear.

DIEHARD DOLPHINS FAN. (*A random sound, loudly:*) Mrahhhh.

PROBABLY-FAKING-IT DEAF-MUTE. What?

DIEHARD DOLPHINS FAN. (*Timidly:*) Just checking...

PROBABLY-FAKING-IT DEAF-MUTE. Now you're all probably wondering who I am. The answer is quite simple. My name is not Probably-Faking-It Deaf-Mute, but in fact—

(He produces Sherlock Holmes–reminiscent paraphernalia: an inspector hat, pipe, and large magnifying glass.)

Inexplicably Omniscient Inspector.

(Everyone gasps.)

That's right. Earlier tonight I received an anonymous tip that there may be something amiss at Mysterious Host's infamous Knife Room. I came here undercover and see now that something is undeniably amiss.

PLASTIC POLITICIAN. I assure you, good inspector, that nothing is amiss. We have already established that Mysterious Host was very clearly another sad victim of Spontaneous Manifestation and Thrust of Knife.

INSPECTOR. I beg to differ, sir. It is my suspicion that what has actually occurred here tonight...was *murder!*

(Thunder.)

WEALTHY DOWAGER. That's preposterous!

SOUTHERN BELLE. That's absurd!

SANTA CLAUS. Merrrrrry Christmas!

DECREPIT INVALID. Inspector, what gives you the impression this was murder and not Spontaneous Manifestation and Thrust of Knife? Why, during the Depression,

knives were so hard to come by, and Spontaneous Manifestation and Thrust of Knife was so common, that if you wanted a slice of bread, your only option was to hold up a loaf and wait.

INSPECTOR. Thank you for that analysis, Decrepit Invalid. Nevertheless, I suspect murder. And I do for two reasons.

Reason Number One! Mysterious Host was stabbed mere seconds before opening this box of incriminating evidence. It seems only reasonable to assume that in order to prevent the truth from coming out, someone in this Knife Room committed murder.

Reason Number Two! There is obviously no such thing as Spontaneous Manifestation and Thrust of Knife. In all my years of Inspecting, it may be the dumbest excuse I've ever heard.

STRUGGLING STAND-UP COMIC. Oh *really*. And if the knife didn't spontaneously manifest itself, then where do you suppose the knife came from?

(*Beat.*)

INSPECTOR. You're joking...

STRUGGLING STAND-UP COMIC. I never joke.

(*Beat.*)

INSPECTOR. The walls are covered in knives.

STRUGGLING STAND-UP COMIC. Touché.

BRAINLESS MODEL. Ohhhhh, *Knife...Room...*

INSPECTOR. This was murder, ladies and gentleman. Murder in the first degree. Or maybe second; I forget the difference. But nobody leaves this Knife Room until I crack the case – even if it takes all night.

(*Hubbub.*)

RECKLESS COWBOY. What?! We can't stay here all night!

DIRTY HIPPIE. Yeah. What if some of us have a hot date later on?

POMPOUS MILLIONNAIRE. Do you have a hot date?

DIRTY HIPPIE. Hypothetically speaking, any number of us could have a hot date tonight. Me? You? Anybody.

SERIAL KILLER. Do you have a hot date?

DIRTY HIPPIE. Hypothetically, yes, I could have a hot date.

INTIMIDATING MOBSTER. Do you have a hot date?

DIRTY HIPPIE. (*Frustrated:*) I OBVIOUSLY DON'T HAVE A HOT DATE.

(*Pause.*)

(*DECREPIT INVALID raises his hand.*)

DECREPIT INVALID. I have a hot date.

INSPECTOR. Ladies and gentlemen, we are wasting precious moments. The sooner I solve this mystery, the sooner we can all be on our way. Now... I have dedicated my entire career to the life of Mysterious Host. I know everything about him. More importantly, I know a great deal about the *people* he has interacted with over the years. Which means I know who among you might wish him dead. For example: Pompous Millionaire.

(*Thunder.*)

POMPOUS MILLIONNAIRE. Me? Inspector, you're barking up the wrong tree.

INSPECTOR. Am I... Well then do you mind describing to me how you became so wealthy?

POMPOUS MILLIONNAIRE. As I said earlier, I accrued my unbelievable wealth from conducting illegal business with crooked oil executives. Is that a crime?!

INSPECTOR. Yes.

POMPOUS MILLIONNAIRE. Oh.

INSPECTOR. But let's ignore that for the time being. Right now I ask you this: How did you make your very first million?

POMPOUS MILLIONNAIRE. My first— Wait, are you saying you know about—?

INSPECTOR. Yes.

POMPOUS MILLIONNAIRE. But—?? How did you—??

INSPECTOR. I know a lot more than you think, Pompous Millionaire. But in order to crack this case I'll need to know much, much more. I will need you to describe to me exactly what happened...and describe what happened...in reenactment form.

POMPOUS MILLIONNAIRE. But how does a reenactment work?

INSPECTOR. Just dig deep into your memories and communicate them in narrative form. To give us a visual aid, I've hired some professional actors who specialize in murder motive reenactments.

(The REENACTMENT PLAYERS quickly enter – perhaps from dozens of different places on the stage – give a big thumbs-up, and quickly exit. Perhaps they have theme music that plays for a two seconds, or a triumphant chord.)

POMPOUS MILLIONNAIRE. All right. I'll try.

INSPECTOR. You'll know you're starting to reenact with when the lighting changes.

POMPOUS MILLIONNAIRE. Okay.

(He closes his eyes.)

It was twenty years ago. We were just a bunch of kids. Kids with dreams. Dreams to come up with the next million-dollar idea.

(The reenactment begins.)

(In each reenactment, members of the Reenactment Players play the roles of everyone in each reenactment, with the exception of the person telling the story. The actors can wear outfits that indicate they're in an acting troupe – e.g. baseball shirts with the words "Reenactment Players" on the front. Whenever an actor is portraying the part of Mysterious Host, they should always wear an eye patch.⁹)

(POMPOUS MILLIONNAIRE, MYSTERIOUS HOST, and three IDEA PITCHERS are frantically throwing out ideas and drawing on a dry-erase board or easel pad. They're moving around, getting into it. These ideas could make them rich one day, so they're in a frenzy of excitement.)

IDEA PITCHER #1. How about this, fellas: Take an ordinary coat hanger, and paint it green. We'd call it "Green Coat Hanger."

IDEA PITCHERS. Ohhhhh! / Yeahhhh! / Nice! / etc.

IDEA PITCHER #2. Wait, wait: A commercial airline where you take out the seats and replace them with trampolines.

⁹ If you want to produce this play with a smaller cast, one option would be to scratch the Reenactment Players and instead have the party guests take on the reenacted roles. Whenever one of the party guests plays the role of Mysterious Host, they simply wear an eye patch. Regardless, the reenacted role of Mysterious Host should not be played by the corpse. The corpse should stay unmoving throughout the play, unless specified. If you decide on this option, cut the entrance of the Reenactment Players, as well as the line: "To give us a visual aid, I've hired some professional actors who specialize in murder motive reenactments," as well as the following line on p. 41: "I hired these reenactment actors for the whole night."

IDEA PITCHERS. Ohhhhh! / Yeahhhh! / Nice! / etc.

IDEA PITCHER #3. Orrr? Orrr? A handgun, that you sell to criminals, and when they shoot bullets, instead of the bullets *killing*, the bullets cure *cancer*.

IDEA PITCHERS. Ohhhhh! / Yeahhhh! / Nice! / etc.

POMPOUS MILLIONNAIRE. I don't know guys. These are all solid ideas, but I just don't know if any of them are The Big Idea.

(They are dejected, but realize that he's probably right.)

IDEA PITCHER #1. Yeah...

IDEA PITCHER #2. Yeah...

IDEA PITCHER #3. Yeah...

MYSTERIOUS HOST. Hold on, fellas. I think I might be onto something. Now I've been toying with this idea for months now; I think it might be big. Here it is.

(MYSTERIOUS HOST reveals a folder that contains his idea. He either shows them concepts from the folder itself, or he lays it out on the dry-erase board or easel pad.)

Okay, work with me on this... We're all familiar with the concept of "computers," right?

IDEA PITCHER #1. Right.

IDEA PITCHER #2. Sure.

IDEA PITCHER #3. Computers.

MYSTERIOUS HOST. So the idea is to create a global system of interconnected computer networks where all information would be shared instantly, whether it be a piece of electronically delivered mail, or a news article, or a video of a puppy being adorable. Now I haven't come up with a *name* for this *interconnected network*, but I'm thinking either WebNet, or CompuConnector, or InterCompNet.

(They ponder.)

IDEA PITCHER #1. Hmm...

IDEA PITCHER #2. HMMMMM...

IDEA PITCHER #3. HMMMMMM...

(POMPOUS MILLIONNAIRE *can clearly see the promise in this idea, but decides to lie.*)

POMPOUS MILLIONNAIRE. I don't know, Mysterious Host. The idea sounds okay in theory, but don't we already have the post office and newspapers and fax machines and VHS tapes and typewriters? And wouldn't a resource of unlimited scope just end up distracting people from their family and jobs? It sounds like it could even be *addictive*. *Nobody* would want that.

MYSTERIOUS HOST. (*After a moment of reflection:*) Yeah. You're probably right—it's a lousy idea. Oh well. Hey listen, we gotta run. We're late for the Barbershop Quartet National Championship.

(*IDEA PITCHER #3 blows a note on a pitch pipe. They quickly assemble and build the chord one person at a time, each producing a styrofoam barbershop quartet hat out of nowhere. Strangely, though, each person ends up singing the exact same note.*)

IDEA PITCHERS and MYSTERIOUS HOST. Ahhhh.

(*IDEA PITCHER #3 ends the chord with a close of his fist.*)

IDEA PITCHER #2. (*To IDEA PITCHER #1:*) Was that your note?

IDEA PITCHER #1. Yeah. I'm on Ahhhhh.

IDEA PITCHER #2. Oh. I thought you were on Ahhhhhh.

IDEA PITCHER #1. No.

IDEA PITCHER #2. Oh okay.

MYSTERIOUS HOST. We'll see you later, man. Hey, would you mind throwing this idea in the trash for me? Thanks!

(*They leave.*)

(*POMPOUS MILLIONNAIRE stands there with the idea folder in hand.*)

(*Lights to normal.*)

SEDUCTRESS. So you lied to him that it was a bad idea and then stole the idea?

POMPOUS MILLIONNAIRE. (*Ashamed:*) I did.

INSPECTOR. The idea made millions, did it not?

POMPOUS MILLIONNAIRE. Squillions.

INSPECTOR. And the proof was no doubt inside this box – the proof that you achieved your wealth and success not from your own moxie, but by stealing the idea of The Internet from your best friend.

POMPOUS MILLIONNAIRE. Yes! Yes! I'm a phony, okay! And Mysterious Host would've ruined me! (*Whispered intensely:*) Ruined me...

INSPECTOR. So you murdered him!

POMPOUS MILLIONNAIRE. No! I may have committed many crimes, but never murder.

INSPECTOR. Maybe yes, maybe no. You may have been the killer, Pompous Millionaire. It's certainly possible. You had the motive, and definitely the means, given the walls are covered in knives. But the murderer could also have been... Wealthy Dowager!!

WEALTHY DOWAGER. Me? You're barking up the wrong tree, Inspector.

INSPECTOR. Am I... Well then would you mind telling me about your special society?

(*WEALTHY DOWAGER is suddenly taken aback.*)

WEALTHY DOWAGER. Have you no decency...

INSPECTOR. I do not.

WEALTHY DOWAGER. You truly are inexplicably omniscient.

INSPECTOR. I'm waiting, Ms. Dowager...

WEALTHY DOWAGER. I suppose there is no avoiding it... I belong to a very special society of ladies who are known for wearing certain articles of clothing.

BEARDED SCHOLAR. Ah! The Red Hat Society!

WEALTHY DOWAGER. No, the Poolside Widows. We're a select group of wealthy dowagers who meet every Monday to drink tea, sew mittens, and make emphatic statements.

(*Reenactment. A meeting of the POOLSIDE WIDOWS. They are all dressed like stereotypical old wealthy dowagers, the difference being that each wears a different garish pool accessory: goggles, a swim-cap, a snorkel and mask, flippers, bright-orange waterwings, etc. Teacups and mittens are on the table. Half are drinking tea and half are sewing mittens.*)

POOLSIDE WIDOW #1. And *that* is why toilet paper has no place in public schools!

(POOLSIDE WIDOWS *murmur in approval.*)

POOLSIDE WIDOW #2. Very emphatically put, Margaret!

POOLSIDE WIDOW #1. (*With a nod:*) Why thank you.

POOLSIDE WIDOW #3. And I don't know about you, but I think Puerto Rico is far too small to be considered a continent!

(POOLSIDE WIDOWS *murmur in approval.*)

(POOLSIDE WIDOWS LEADER *taps a spoon against her teacup.*)

POOLSIDE WIDOWS LEADER. Attention ladies! I'd like to take this moment to set aside our mittens and emphatically-delivered yet unsubstantiated opinions and raise a toast to Wealthy Dowager, who has graciously allowed us into her home for this week's meeting.

POOLSIDE WIDOWS. Speech! Speech!

WEALTHY DOWAGER. I'm just honored to be here. As a young girl I never dreamed I'd some day be a member of an exclusive society of wealthy dowagers who wear pool equipment.

POOLSIDE WIDOW #3. Dreams do come true!

POOLSIDE WIDOWS LEADER. As is our tradition, we will now take the time to pay respects to our late husbands.

(*They all reach into their purses. Each produces an urn and places it on the table.*)

POOLSIDE WIDOWS LEADER. Phyllis, if you would do the honors...

(*They hold hands and bow their heads.*)

POOLSIDE WIDOW #4. Dear Late Husbands. We want to thank you for leaving us all that money. Amen.

POOLSIDE WIDOWS. Amen.

(*They take their urns and place them back in their purses. Before WEALTHY DOWAGER can put her urn away, MYSTERIOUS HOST has entered and notices it.*)

MYSTERIOUS HOST. Mom...? What is that?

(*She is caught red-handed, not able to put the urn away in time.*)

WEALTHY DOWAGER. Son! Why are you home so early?

MYSTERIOUS HOST. Scattergories practice was canceled. What's that urn for?

WEALTHY DOWAGER. It's— Well— How do I put this...

POOLSIDE WIDOWS LEADER. I'll handle this, dear. *(To MYSTERIOUS HOST:)* There's no easy way to say this, little one, but this is your father.

MYSTERIOUS HOST. *My father?* What are you talking about? He's upstairs.

POOLSIDE WIDOWS LEADER. Yes, my dear. We all make our way to heaven at some point.

MYSTERIOUS HOST. No, I mean, he's in his bedroom.

POOLSIDE WIDOWS LEADER. I know, I know. All of God's children must eventually reach eternal rest.

MYSTERIOUS HOST. He's watching *CSI: New York*.

(Beat.)

POOLSIDE WIDOWS LEADER. *(To WEALTHY DOWAGER:)* You're on your own with that one.

WEALTHY DOWAGER. Mysty honey, can I talk to you for a second?

(They head into another room.)

POOLSIDE WIDOW #2. So, so sad...

POOLSIDE WIDOW #1. That poor young man. In such denial.

(Beat.)

POOLSIDE WIDOW #2. By the way, fabulous floaties! Who are you wearing?

POOLSIDE WIDOW #1. Vera Wang.

(They all murmur with admiration.)

(Focus shifts to WEALTHY DOWAGER and MYSTERIOUS HOST.)

MYSTERIOUS HOST. I don't understand...

WEALTHY DOWAGER. Son, I'm not sure how to sugar-coat this, so I'll cut right to the chase: I'm pretending your father is dead in order to take part in an exclusive club of widows who wear pool equipment.

MYSTERIOUS HOST. Oh.

WEALTHY DOWAGER. I know that must sound crazy.

MYSTERIOUS HOST. Actually, the same thing happened to Frank last week.

WEALTHY DOWAGER. Odd...

(**MYSTERIOUS HOST** *shakes his head.*)

What is it, son? Tell me what you're thinking.

MYSTERIOUS HOST. I just can't believe I didn't see the signs: Dad never meeting your friends... You locking him upstairs every time we have guests over... His funeral...

WEALTHY DOWAGER. I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner.

MYSTERIOUS HOST. Then what's in the urn?

(*Beat.*)

WEALTHY DOWAGER. (*Slightly embarrassed.*) Garlic powder.

(*Beat.*)

MYSTERIOUS HOST. I've gotta tell Dad.

(*He takes the urn and starts to exit.*)

WEALTHY DOWAGER. Mysterious Benjamin Host, you stop right there!

(*He stops.*)

The Poolside Widows mean everything to me. Your father wouldn't understand. Don't do this to me, son. Don't do this to me...

(*They share a moment of silent intensity.*)

(*Back to present day.*)

INSPECTOR. So what happened next?

WEALTHY DOWAGER. I begged him to keep my secret, and he did. But it appears tonight he changed his mind.

INSPECTOR. And the garlic-powder-filled urn was in this box.

WEALTHY DOWAGER. Most likely. If the Poolside Widows ever found out the truth, they'd throw me out of the group faster than you can say Lifeguard Whistle.

DECREPIT INVALID. *(Slowly:)* Life. Guaard. Whistle... That is fast...

INSPECTOR. So to save face, you killed your own son?

WEALTHY DOWAGER. Heavens no! He's my own flesh and blood! And while I am guilty of wearing sunscreen indoors, I am not guilty of murder!

SKETCHY FOREIGNER. You do not seem very broken up about your son being dead.

STRUGGLING STAND-UP COMIC. Well y'know what they say!—ya never want your child to outlive you!

WEALTHY DOWAGER. Actually, there is a good reason why I do not appear distraught. I was born with a rare condition that prevents me from showing emotion when something bad happens.

WASHED-UP ACTRESS. Really?

WEALTHY DOWAGER. Yes.

SANTA CLAUS. That's odd.

WEALTHY DOWAGER. Somebody tell me something bad that happened.

(Everyone looks around for someone.)

SANTA CLAUS. The Dow dropped 200 points today!

WEALTHY DOWAGER. *(Pointing to her face:)* See?

ALL. Would you look at that... / Wow. / That's amazing.

INSPECTOR. You may still have been the killer, Wealthy Dowager, despite your probably-fake rare condition. You had the motive, and definitely the means, given the walls are covered in knives. But the murderer could also have been —

DIEHARD DOLPHINS FAN. Hold on a second. Are you really going to interrogate all of us? 'Cause at this rate, it'd take a really long time.

INSPECTOR. No, that's a fair question. I will be interrogating all of you, but some of them will be extremely short. Like, uh, you — *(He points to SERIAL KILLER.)* What's your motive?

SERIAL KILLER. *(Simply:)* I'm a serial killer.

INSPECTOR. See? *(To DIEHARD DOLPHINS FAN:)* Good question, though. All right, where'd I leave off... Ah! *(Continuing:)* The murderer could also have been... Respected General!!

(Thunder.)

RESPECTED GENERAL. Me? You're barking up the wrong tree, Inspector.

INSPECTOR. Am I... Well then do you mind describing to me why you were discharged from military service?

RESPECTED GENERAL. Correction: I *retired*.

INSPECTOR. Is that so? Keep in mind, Respected General, you are under oath.

DECREPIT INVALID. No he's not.

INSPECTOR. Oh...right...well, can you pretend you're under oath?

(Beat.)

RESPECTED GENERAL. Very well... But only because I like make-believe.

(Beat.)

It was 1992: the sixth and final year of the American-Canadian War...

BEARDED SCHOLAR. America never went to war with Canada.

RESPECTED GENERAL. Your mother never went to war with Canada.

We were in the war room putting together the finishing touches on our strategy for the Battle of Winnipeg. I remember it so clearly...

(Reenactment. Members of the military top brass are seriously focused on a map on a table, or a map that hangs down from the flies, or a map projected on a scrim. It might be funny to use an old-school overhead projector – those mirrored projectors where you put a transparent sheet on a glass surface and use a dry-erase pen to write on it. It's up to the production group – whatever's available and would be most amusing to the audience.)

(As they strategize, they use whatever tools are appropriate to make their points, depending on which of the above options you choose – whether it be figurines on table map, a metal pointers on a map from the flies, or dry-erase pens on an overhead projector.)

CAPTAIN EO. ...which means that prior to our initial assault on Lake Manitoba, I strongly believe that our most viable option will be to assemble our infantry for a northerly medium-scale flying wedge.

LIEUTENANT SMASH. Interesting idea, Captain, but would you be open to the suggestion that we thrust forward past Riding Mountain before attempting a 500-man pincer movement –

MAJOR LEAGUEBASEBALL. (*Overlapping with knowing excitement:*) – pincer movement to achieve full tactical envelopment!

LIEUTENANT SMASH. Exactly.

MAJOR LEAGUEBASEBALL. Yes! It's perfect!

RESPECTED GENERAL. Well done, gentlemen. I do believe our plan is finally in place. We'll finally crush those Canadian dogs.

ALL. Huzzah!

BRIGADIER GENERAL FRANCIS X. HUMMEL. There is just one open question remaining, General. We haven't yet decided whether or not we should begin by flanking the Chesterfield forces from the south.

LIEUTENANT SMASH. I think we should. It seems our best option.

MAJOR LEAGUEBASEBALL. I disagree, Lieutenant. It's too risky if the Canucks assemble a Finnish Motti defense.

BRIGADIER GENERAL FRANCIS X. HUMMEL. What do you think, General? Should we flank from the south?

(Pause.)

RESPECTED GENERAL. I'm sorry, gentleman. Will you excuse me for just a moment? I have to use the men's room.

(He exits.)

CAPTAIN EO. That's so odd.

MAJOR LEAGUEBASEBALL. What?

CAPTAIN EO. Haven't you noticed? The General leaves for the restroom right before he makes every major decision.

LIEUTENANT SMASH. He's right, you know. That's his 28th trip this morning.

BRIGADIER GENERAL FRANCIS X. HUMMEL. Gentlemen! I ask you to please cut the General some slack, given that he polishes off like ten Snapples a day.

ALL. True. / Yeah. / Good point.

(Pause.)

BRIGADIER GENERAL FRANCIS X. HUMMEL. But while we're waiting, you guys wanna pillow fight?

ALL. *(Like little girls:)* Yayyyyyy!

(Focus shifts to RESPECTED GENERAL in the bathroom, staring at the mirror.)

(RESPECTED GENERAL ruminates to himself.)

RESPECTED GENERAL. Should we flank from the south...? Think, Respected, think! I just don't know. This decision may easily be the turning point for the entire war. *(He thinks for a moment.)* Well, I'd better consult my inside source.

(He produces a Magic 8-Ball and addresses it.)

Should we flank from the south?

(He shakes it, turns it over, reads the answer.)

"All signs point to yes." It's settled then!

(Suddenly, a toilet flushes.)

(SERGEANT HOST appears from elsewhere in the bathroom – he's wearing military apparel, but also his usual eye patch. He sees the Magic 8-Ball.)

RESPECTED GENERAL. Sergeant Host! I—

(A tense moment of silence between mentor and disciple. SERGEANT HOST shows a look of complete bewilderment and betrayal, as if his young, militaristic heart might break in two. Then suddenly:)

SERGEANT HOST. You're a phony! *(Weeping:)* A phony!

(SERGEANT HOST grabs the 8-Ball and flees the bathroom, bawling.)

RESPECTED GENERAL. What have I done? What...have I done...

(Back to present day.)

POMPOUS MILLIONNAIRE. You used a Magic 8-Ball to make a military decision...

RESPECTED GENERAL. I needed a second opinion! Such tactics weren't so uncommon in military history. Every good war scholar knows that General Grant would have surrendered at Gettysburg were it not for his Ouija board. But these are modern times, and I am far from a modern man. Nowadays military leaders turn to technological devices I simply don't understand, like the "World Wide Interweb."

DECREPIT INVALID. And “mouse pads.”

SERIAL KILLER. So what happened?

RESPECTED GENERAL. Well, Sergeant Host was chagrined, but he chose to sweep my secret under the rug for the good of the country. In return his demands were that I (A) retire immediately, (B) forfeit the 8-Ball, and (C) give him one of my legendary back rubs.

INSPECTOR. So you were concerned that your Magic 8-Ball is inside this box, and your good name would be tarnished in the history books for all time.

RESPECTED GENERAL. Yes. But I am no murderer. Anyone could tell you that. Even a small black sphere with an eight on it could tell you that.

DIRTY HIPPIE. Not a murderer?! What about all those innocent Canadians?!

RESPECTED GENERAL. The term “Innocent Canadian” is an oxymoron.

DIRTY HIPPIE. *You’re an oxymoron!! (Quietly:)* If you take away the oxy part, which is my way of saying you’re a moron...

(He trails off on this, realizing it’s a pretty weak comeback.)

INSPECTOR. Regardless of moronic Canadians, I still put forth that you, Respected General, may have been the killer. It’s certainly possible. You had the motive, and definitely the means, given the walls are covered in knives. But –

(Referring to DIEHARD DOLPHINS FAN:) Y’know, you were right. This is taking a while. Um, let’s just have a few of you throw in some quickies in here, okay, just to keep things moving? How abouuuut: Washed-Up Actress, Southern Belle, annnnd, Plastic Politician.

THOSE THREE. Sure. / Yeah. / No problem.

INSPECTOR. Great. Go ahead.

WASHED-UP ACTRESS. Mysterious Host was cast as the lead role in a play. I’m his understudy.

INSPECTOR. Solid motive. Okay, Southern Belle.

SOUTHERN BELLE. I lost all my money when I invested my life savings in a company that specialized in microwavable popsicles. Given my desperation, and given that Mysterious Host is my brother – when he wasn’t looking, I stole his will and crossed out everyone’s name but mine.

INSPECTOR. Okay –

WEALTHY DOWAGER. You're grounded.

INSPECTOR. – and Plastic Politician.

PLASTIC POLITICIAN. Mysterious Host is running against me for the State Senate, and he somehow uncovered a video of me throwing a litter of golden retriever puppies off a bridge. God Bless America!

INSPECTOR. Wow... That was really efficient. But we have to get back to the flashbacks—I hired these reenactment actors for the whole night. Okay! You may have been the killer, Washed-Up Actress, Intimidating Mobster, or Plastic Politician. Each of you had the motive, and definitely the means, given the walls are covered in knives. But the murderer could also have been...Boy Band Reject!!

(Thunder.)

BOY BAND REJECT. Me? You're barking up the wrong tree, Inspector.

INSPECTOR. Am I... Well then do you mind explaining to me why you were kicked out of the Backstreet Boys?

BOY BAND REJECT. It's really not something I like to talk about. It was a rough time, the mid-to-late-'90s.

INSPECTOR. Tell us about the rehearsal session that changed everything.

BOY BAND REJECT. If you insist, Inspector. If you insist. It was 1995. The Boys and I were just wrapping up rehearsal for our first single, "Lovin' You."

(BOY BAND REJECT joins the other Backstreet Boys: NICK, A.J., HOWIE, BRIAN, and KEVIN. We see them in the studio, at the end of their song. It's a really sappy, classically Boy-Bandish ballad. Dance moves and synthesized music would be ideal, but the most important element is the level of intensity and passion with which they sing the song.)

LUHHVIN' YOOOOU
IS SO EASY 'CAUSE YOUR HEARRRT IS TRUUUE. (SO TRUE.)
WHETHER CHRISTIAN, MUSLIM, OR A JEW
I'M LOVIN' YOU
AS LONG...AS YOU LOVE...MEEEEEE...

(Preferably, the song ends in a pose and maybe that synthesized rushing wave sound effect. Now that the song is over, they break away from their frozen poses and get real excited, slapping each other five, hugging each other, jumping up and down, cheering,

clapping, screaming, pumping fists. They're going to be big pop stars – they just know it.)

(MYSTERIOUS HOST *walks in.*)

MYSTERIOUS HOST. Gentlemen, I'm gonna be honest with you: I got a hunch and that hunch is telling me this single is gonna shoot straight to number one!

(They cheer.)

BRIAN. Thanks, Mysterious Host. With you as our Boy Band manager, we can't lose.

KEVIN. This is gonna be gigantic, y'all.¹⁰ This song's gonna take us over the TOP!

A.J. Word up to that!

BRIAN. Way to go with your sweet lyrics, man.

BOY BAND REJECT. Thanks, Brian!

HOWIE. My favorite is when we get real topical during the part about world religions.

BRIAN. Me, too!!

NICK. Yeah, man. And the harmonies sound tight. TIGHT!

BOY BAND REJECT. I know! Our voices are really in sync.

(Suddenly, total silence from everyone.)

(BOY BAND REJECT realizes his mistake.)

BOY BAND REJECT. I mean, they're not in sync. Our voices... they're aligned. They're— They're on the same page... uhh... They're...

(Total silence.)

(Then...)

NICK. *(With loud-whispered-almost-crying intensity:)* What did you say...?

BOY BAND REJECT. You guys, I'm really sorry. It just came out. It's a homonym.

MYSTERIOUS HOST. I hate to do this to you, my friend, but you're done. You violated The Code. I'm sorry, son, but you'll never work in the Boy Band industry again.

¹⁰ A Backstreet Boy would probably pronounce that "gigannic."

BOY BAND REJECT. No... Please, no... *(He looks to his fellow Boy Band members, who are exiting.)* Guys, please say something. Howie... Brian, please... Kevin? Kevin! Nick, come on... A.J... Of all people, A.J. *(He drops to his knees, screaming:)* A.Jaaaaaaay!

(If possible, add an echo effect here.)

(BOY BAND REJECT speaks in present day.)

BOY BAND REJECT. I had committed the ultimate sin; spoken the unspeakable. It was the Boy Band equivalent of telling an actor "Good luck," or asking a woman "When's the baby due?" and the finding out she's not pregnant, just large. *(Pause.)* I had sealed my Boy Band fate.

RECKLESS COWBOY. Wait, so they kicked you out just for sayin' the name of that other sangin' group? What's it called ag'in?

BOY BAND REJECT. I'd rather not say it out loud.

INTIMIDATING MOBSTER. *NSYNC.

(BOY BAND REJECT shrieks in pain at the sound of that word.)

INSPECTOR. So you can never be in a Boy Band again.

BOY BAND REJECT. *(Calming down:)* Not exactly. I eventually took control of my life, put my past behind me, and started a new Boy Band. We're called Ready Set Flow.

And if the Ready Set Flow guys find out what I said that day, my boybandhood days are gone for good.

INSPECTOR. And you figured the tape of the rehearsal session was in this box.

BOY BAND REJECT. Yeah...

SPOOKY PIRATE. So ya hurled Mysterious Host straight off the plank and into Davy Jones' locker!!

BOY BAND REJECT. What...?

SPOOKY PIRATE. *(Much quieter; less over-the-top:)* So you killed him.

BOY BAND REJECT. No! I may be a Grammy-nominated lyricist, but I'm no murderer!

INSPECTOR. Maybe yes, maybe no. You may have been the killer, Boy Band Reject. It's certainly possible. You had the motive, and definitely the means, given the walls are covered in knives. But the murderer could also have been —

(Beat.)

Actually, um, before we move on to the next interrogation... This is sort of embarrassing, but... Uh... I've been out of the office since noon. Do you guys mind waiting here while I use the men's room?

ALL. All right. / Sure. / That seems fair.

INSPECTOR. Awesome. I'll be right back. Gimme, I dunno, fifteen minutes.

SOUTHERN BELLE. But whatever shall we do while you're gone?

INSPECTOR. Uhhhm.

SEDUCTRESS. *(A genuine suggestion:)* We could play Spin the Corpse. I'll go first.

INSPECTOR. Actually, I'll need you to leave the body alone. But you could play another game, I guess... Uhhh, how about... —okay, I got it—a 20-person game of Rock Paper Scissors! And the winner gets a special prize.

ALL. All right. / Sure. / That seems fair.

INSPECTOR. Okay! Fifteen minutes!

(INSPECTOR darts out.)

(Pause.)

(Everyone brings one fist to rest on top of the open palm of their other hand as they face each other.)

(They simultaneously hit their fists into their palms twice and then settle on a Rock, Paper, or Scissors. All characters but BRAINLESS MODEL land on Scissors, while she lands on Rock.)

BRAINLESS MODEL. Yayyy!

(As the lights fade, they continue with the same process again, each time with the same victor. All but BRAINLESS MODEL choose paper, and she chooses Scissors. "Yayyyy.")

(Blackout.)

End of Act I¹¹

¹¹ The act break is optional. In order to produce the play in a single act, cut everything between Inspector's line "Actually, um... (p. 44) through her line "So as I was saying... The murderer could also have been—" (p. 46).

ACT II

(Lights fade up with the same game of Rock Paper Scissors, with the same results. Everyone is quite jaded by now — except BRAINLESS MODEL, of course.)

(INSPECTOR enters.)

(They stop playing the game.)

INSPECTOR. All right! Thanks everyone. I really needed that. Who won?

(Everyone gestures to BRAINLESS MODEL. She points to her scissor fingers.)

BRAINLESS MODEL. These are sharp!

(INSPECTOR tries to feign excitement to fake out BRAINLESS MODEL.)

INSPECTOR. Well congratulations, Brainless Model. Here is...the...exciting...Grand Prize!

(INSPECTOR produces a bottle of air freshener, clearly taken from the bathroom.)

You just press this button here to make any room instantly smell better than it previously did.

BRAINLESS MODEL. *(Taking the air freshener:)* Yayyyy!

INSPECTOR. Okay, now, where were we... Ah yes. Murder.

(Thunder.)

SERIAL KILLER. Looks like that storm's back...

INSPECTOR. So as I was saying... The murderer could also have been—Struggling Stand-Up Comic!!

(Thunder.)

STRUGGLING STAND-UP COMIC. Me? You're barking up the wrong tree, Inspector. And speaking of trees, why don't you make like a tree and photosynthesize the oxygen that humans require to breathe. Ohhhh, snap!

INSPECTOR. I don't understand what you just said, but regardless, I'll need you to explain to me what happened during your performance at the Laugh Hole.

STRUGGLING STAND-UP COMIC. *(Suddenly very solemn:)* Inspector, please, no. I can't. It's— it's too much.

INSPECTOR. You have no choice in the matter. Proceed.

STRUGGLING STAND-UP COMIC. Well, all right... It was early in my career, and I was headlining at the Laugh Hole, which as you all know is the premier comedy club in West Peoria.

ALL. Sure. / Oh yeah. / Great place.

STRUGGLING STAND-UP COMIC. I was really feeling it that night. It was one of those gigs where every joke just rolls off your tongue like a rotisserie chicken playing blackjack.

(Everyone looks at each other with confusion.)

I still remember it like it was yesterday.

(Reenactment.)

LAUGH HOLE HOST. And now, fresh from his critically-reviewed one-man Off-Off-Broadway musical, *White House Chief of LAUGH*, ladies and gentlemen, put your hands together, for Struggling – Standup – Comiiiiiii!

(Hip-hop intro music plays as STRUGGLING STAND-UP COMIC runs onstage and takes the microphone.)

STRUGGLING STAND-UP COMIC. Hello West Peoria!! How's everyone feelin' tonight?

(Actual crickets.)

I can't hear you, how's everyone feelin' tonight?

(Actual crickets.)

That was pretty good, but I think you can do better. HOW'S EVERYONE FEELIN' TONIGHT?!?

(Actual crickets.)

That's more like it!! Well it's great to be here.

(He delivers three jokes as a stand-up comic would normally deliver a joke.)

So get this, people. I'm on the airplane on the way over here, and I had me some of them roasted peanuts they give you? And you'll never believe it? One of the peanuts still had a piece of shell on it and it scratched my throat pretty badly so I'm in a terrible amount of pain. Heyyohhhhhh!

(Actual crickets.)

Great to be here, great to be here. So what about this weather we're having? Yesterday it rained, and today it didn't. I'm like hey, *weather*: Make up your mind already!

(Actual crickets.)

So who here like politics? Me neither. Ha HA! I've got a political joke for all you political junkies out there. What's the difference between Barack Obama, Orrin Hatch, and Antonin Scalia? *(Waits a moment.)* They each work in a distinct branch of the U.S. government!

(Actual crickets.)

And what's the deal lately with incurable fatal diseases!? I'm like, what—?

(Suddenly, a siren blares and three paramedics—PARAMEDIC #1, PARAMEDIC #2, and MYSTERIOUS HOST—burst onto the scene.)

PARAMEDIC #1. Excuse me, ma'am. I'm sorry to intrude, but someone across the street just reported a putrid smell coming from this building.

PARAMEDIC #2. *(Noticing the comedy club audience:)* Johnson, look.

PARAMEDIC #1. *(Looking:)* Oh no...

PARAMEDIC #2. Dear God...

PARAMEDIC #1. All right, all right...let's be professionals about this. You two get started. I'll need a head count ASAP.

STRUGGLING STAND-UP COMIC. What happened?

PARAMEDIC #1. Well sir, there's no easy way to say this. As a result of your comedy stylings, you literally bored this entire audience to death.

(STRUGGLING STAND-UP COMIC is speechless.)

In all my years as a paramedic, I've only seen this once before, and that was really early Robin Williams.

STRUGGLING STAND-UP COMIC. Oh my gosh...

PARAMEDIC #1. Listen kid, if I were you, I would keep this whole fiasco to yourself. Me and Jimbo here signed a patient confidentiality agreement back when we got hired, so your secret's safe with us. *(He then refers to MYSTERIOUS HOST.)* Now, that guy with the eye patch is just a temp, so I don't think he signed it. Hey Host, d'you ever sign that?

MYSTERIOUS HOST. Nope.

PARAMEDIC #1. Oh, oh well. Let's get this audience to the morgue, stat!

(Back to present day.)

STRUGGLING STAND-UP COMIC. That night I almost gave up on stand-up comedy...

(She starts to cry.)

SPOOKY PIRATE. 'Twould be a cryin' shame, it would.

STRUGGLING STAND-UP COMIC. Really?

SPOOKY PIRATE. No, not at all.

(He notices people glaring at him.)

Oh come off it, she's terrible.

INSPECTOR. So one of the paramedics was Mysterious Host?

STRUGGLING STAND-UP COMIC. Yes. He didn't notify the police, but he kept all of the death reports just in case.

INSPECTOR. And because you thought the death reports were in this box, you killed him!

STRUGGLING STAND-UP COMIC. No! I didn't kill anybody. *(Beat.)* I mean...except for an audience full of people.

INSPECTOR. You may have been the killer, Struggling Stand-Up Comic. It's certainly possible. You had the motive, and definitely the means, given the walls are covered in knives. But the murderer could also have been... Decrepit Invalid!!

(Thunder.)

DECREPIT INVALID. Inspector, I dare say the brain in yer noggin's been replaced with a copper thimble.

INSPECTOR. Okay... Well then do you mind answering a few questions for me about the early 1900s?

DECREPIT INVALID. More than happy to oblige. Ask away, young ragamuffin.

INSPECTOR. What groundbreaking invention was first introduced in 1908?

DECREPIT INVALID. Ah, 1908. A fine year, a fine year indeed. I believe you are referring to the microwave oven.

INSPECTOR. That's...not what I'm referring to. The microwave was released in 1947.

DECREPIT INVALID. I think you may be mistaken. I still remember quite fondly the days when the Invalid family purchased their first microwave oven. It was spring of 1908, and I'd spend hours upon hours in th'kitchen, puttin' DVDs in the microwave oven, watchin' 'em burn...

BEARDED SCHOLAR. Pardon me, but DVDs were invented in the mid-90s.

DECREPIT INVALID. Ohhhhh, wait just a Cincinnati minute. Now I remember... It was Christmas of aught-eight that I was given my very first hoverboard. What a glorious day that was...

(Beat.)

INSPECTOR. Hoverboards haven't been invented yet. That's from a movie.

SANTA CLAUS. And I delivered no such gift.

(DECREPIT INVALID suddenly breaks, his voice and physicality changing completely.)

DECREPIT INVALID. Okay, stop! I'm sick of this! I'm not really 109 years old! Okay?! I'm really... I'm really a fifteen-year-old high school student...

(All simultaneously gasp.)

BRAINLESS MODEL. OMG, he's cured!!

PLASTIC POLITICIAN. I don't understand, Youth of America. Why have you been pretending to be old?

(DECREPIT INVALID lets out a big sigh.)

DECREPIT INVALID. *(Reluctantly:)* All right... I'm a drama student...right? And last year I played King Lear. And I was a really good. *(Seriously. Ask Miss Heyl.¹²)* Then after closing night my buddy Troy dared me to keep my makeup on and try getting into a rated-R movie. I was like, Troy there's no way this'll work. But I tried anyway? *(Pause of reverence. Intensely:)* The cashier didn't even flinch!!

I know, right?! So I just kept doin' it! And man, it's been amazing. *(Counting off on his fingers:)* I got my driver's license, I voted in the last election, I go to Club Paris¹³ all the time, I even buy cigarettes for Miss Heyl, which let's just say doesn't hurt my GPA.

¹² Replace with your drama teacher's name; if you're not a school group, any name will do.

¹³ Replace "Club Paris" with a local nightclub or bar in your community.

I was hooked. And I gotta tell you people...I know my mom says life starts at forty, but I'm fifteen and I say: life starts at a hundred and *nine!!*

INSPECTOR. Interesting story. But how is Mysterious Host involved?

DECREPIT INVALID. Oh. Well, one time I tried to get a tattoo on my chest, and Mysterious Host was running the tattoo place. He found me out and threatened to blackmail me.

INSPECTOR. How did he discover your real age?

DECREPIT INVALID. Um, have you ever *seen* a bare fifteen-year-old male chest? It's pretty much a given I'm fifteen. (*Beat.*) Anyway, Mr. Host here told me that one day he was going to show those documents to everyone—the principal, the police...my MOM...

(He shakes his head and whistles at how angry his mom would be.)

INSPECTOR. And in order to avoid trouble, you murdered him.

DECREPIT INVALID. No! I didn't kill anyone!

INSPECTOR. Maybe yes, maybe no. You may have been the killer—

DECREPIT INVALID. Hey listen, sorry to interrupt, but would you guys mind if I go back to pretending I'm a 109? It just feels natural.

ALL. All right. / Sure. / That seems fair.

DECREPIT INVALID. (*Back to his elderly state, he tips his cap, or just gestures in that old-timey way:*) Much obliged.

INSPECTOR. As I was saying, you may have been the killer, Decrepit Invalid Who's Actually Fifteen. It's certainly possible. You had the motive, and definitely the means, given the walls are covered in knives. But the murderer could also have been... Diehard Dolphins Fan!!

(Thunder.)

DIEHARD DOLPHINS FAN. Listen, I'll save you some time, 'cause these interrogations are taking a while, and my man over here's got some "business"¹⁴ to attend to with a female later on this evening, if you catch my drift.

(He reaches his free fist to DECREPIT INVALID and they press fists.)

¹⁴ He makes air quotes with both real hand and foam hand.

DECREPIT INVALID. Yes indeedy pumpkin seedy.

DIEHARD DOLPHINS FAN. So I'll get right to it with my motive. (*He points to MYSTERIOUS HOST and says straightforwardly:*) Mysterious Host here used to play middle linebacker for the Jaguars in 2000; Jags beat the Fins 62 to 7 (yes, seven) in Dan Marino's last game before retirement. I can't even *look* at this guy without vomiting in my mouth I hate him that much.

INSPECTOR. Enough to kill him?

DIEHARD DOLPHINS FAN. Oh sure. Totally. I'd stab him right now if it'd make a difference.

(Beat. His eyes widen with youthful enthusiasm.)

Wait, would it...?

INSPECTOR. So you admit to the murder of Mysterious Host!

DIEHARD DOLPHINS FAN. No no no. I *want* to kill him—I would LOVE to kill him—but I didn't kill him. I couldn't've. See I'm left-handed, and there's no way I can hold a knife with this thing on. (*He refers to his giant foam hand.*)

INSPECTOR. You could have temporarily taken it off.

DIEHARD DOLPHINS FAN. (*Half-laughing, conveying "Yeah, like that's gonna happen":*) Right...

INSPECTOR. Well, I still argue that you may have been the killer, Diehard Dolphins Fan. You had the motive, and definitely the means, given the walls are covered in knives. But the murderer could also have been... Santa Claus!!

(Thunder.)

SANTA CLAUS. Ho ho—ho?

INSPECTOR. That's right, Mr. Claus. Even though you're a beloved icon, you had every reason to murder Mysterious Host.

SANTA CLAUS. But I can't be a murderer. I'm Santa Claus! Ho ho ho!!

WASHED-UP ACTRESS. Will you please stop saying ho ho ho. Everyone's sick of it.

SANTA CLAUS. But—the Christmas spirit!

WASHED-UP ACTRESS. It's March.

INSPECTOR. Mr. Claus, I'm going to need you to tell me what happened many years ago at Regency Mall.¹⁵

SANTA CLAUS. Oh no. How did you know... I— I can't...

INSPECTOR. You must.

SANTA CLAUS. Very well. But only because you've been a good boy this year.

INSPECTOR. (*A little embarrassed:*) Oh. Thank you.

SANTA CLAUS. It was two weeks before Christmas. Everything was going along just as it always did...

(The reenactment begins.)

(SANTA CLAUS sits on a chair. There is a line of children with their parents. A nearby ELF [or elves] is taking care of business. MALL CHILD #1 sits on SANTA CLAUS's lap.)

SANTA CLAUS. Ho ho ho! Hello, little one! What would *you* like for Christmas?

MALL CHILD #1. I really, really, really want a fire truck.

(SANTA CLAUS presents MALL CHILD #1 with toy fire truck.)

MALL CHILD #1. Yayyyyy!

(MALL CHILD #1 exits with the toy fire truck.)

SANTA CLAUS. Ho ho ho! Hello, little one! What would *you* like for Christmas?

MALL CHILD #2. I got a dollhouse last Christmas, and now I want a new dolly.

SANTA CLAUS. A dolly? I believe we may have a dolly for you...

(SANTA CLAUS presents MALL CHILD #2 with a dolly – the metal device used for carting heavy packages. MALL CHILD #2 exits with the dolly, confused and disappointed. SANTA CLAUS is oblivious.)

SANTA CLAUS. Ho ho ho! Hello, little one! What would *you* like for Christmas?

MALL CHILD #3. Hi Santy Claus. My mommy went away a long time ago. Daddy says it's 'cause she's a filthy whore.¹⁶

¹⁵ Or your local mall.

¹⁶ If it would be inappropriate in your community to say "whore," Mall Child #3 can whisper that word in Santa's ear.

SANTA CLAUS. Oh my.

MALL CHILD #3. For Christmas?, I want a new mommy.

SANTA CLAUS. Well, little one. I'm afraid Santa doesn't make new mommies at his workshop at the North Pole.

MALL CHILD #3. Pleeeeease?

SANTA CLAUS. Maybe you'd like an iPod?

MALL CHILD #3. I really, really want a new mommy!

(Beat.)

SANTA CLAUS. Well...okay.

(An ELF brings out a HOT NEW MOM. Like, really hot.)

MALL CHILD #3. Thanks, Santa! You're the best!

(MALL CHILD #3 takes HOT NEW MOM over to her DAD. He looks up from his newspaper; sees the HOT NEW MOM; gives a SANTA CLAUS a subtle thumbs up.)¹⁷

(SANTA CLAUS calls out to the ELF.)

SANTA CLAUS. Helen, I'm taking my lunch break.

ELF. All right. Be back in an hour, Claus.

SANTA CLAUS. *(As he is heading elsewhere in the mall:)* You know, Helen... I love Christmas so much. On a day like today, it feels like absolutely nothing could go wrong...

(SANTA CLAUS turns around and crosses paths with REAL SANTA CLAUS. There is a moment where they are frozen, startled by their identicalness. They share a moment of confusion and fascination.)

(Then REAL SANTA CLAUS launches into the usual. REAL SANTA CLAUS is totally innocent and well-meaning throughout. SANTA CLAUS is still jovial, but it's clear he's a little flustered – he's met his match.)

¹⁷ Three options for Hot New Mom: (a) She is played by one of the Reenactment Players. (b) Use an public icon that everyone in the audience would know (the mayor, the local news anchor, the school principal, etc.); they make their cameo and they're done. (c) The Elf ventures into the audience and picks out a new mother for Mall Child #3, and brings her on stage. This audience "volunteer" and her new family exit together.

REAL SANTA CLAUS. *(Jovially:)* Merrrrrrry Christmas!!

(Beat.)

SANTA CLAUS. Um – pardon me, Misterrrrrr...? *(Trying to get him to reveal his name.)*

REAL SANTA CLAUS. Saint Nicholas.

SANTA CLAUS. Pardon me, Mister Saint Nicholas, but “Merrrrry Christmas!!” is my line.

(Pause. REAL SANTA CLAUS tries a new tactic.)

REAL SANTA CLAUS. Ho ho ho!!

(Beat.)

SANTA CLAUS. *(Wowed:)* Man you’re good... *(Beat.)* Listen, I think you and I should go our separate ways before someone sees two Santa Clauses in the same –

(MYSTERIOUS HOST suddenly appears with a huge lollypop. All three freeze in terror. MYSTERIOUS HOST screams as a little kid would if he saw two Santas and runs away screaming.)

(Back to real life.)

SANTA CLAUS. It was my worst nightmare come to life at the Chick-fil-A. That Saint Whatshisname was just like me! He had the exact same outfit, the same portly physique, the same jolly demeanor –

INSPECTOR. But the one major difference?

(A moment, as SANTA CLAUS sighs in resignation. Then, a huge revelation.)

SANTA CLAUS. He was the *real* Santa Claus!!

(He looks around at the group, who aren’t surprised. He is confused.)

Why didn’t anybody gasp in disbelief?

SERIAL KILLER. Sorry, but it’s pretty obvious you’re not the real Santa Claus.

SANTA CLAUS. Really?

INTIMIDATING MOBSTER. Santa Claus rides a sleigh. You drove here in a Ford Focus.

SANTA CLAUS. Oh.

INSPECTOR. Regardless, you were afraid that this box contained proof of your real identity, so you killed him!

SANTA CLAUS. No no no! I'm not a murderer! I'm Santa Claus!

BOY BAND REJECT. (*Simply:*) No you're not...

SANTA CLAUS. True.

INSPECTOR. You may have been the killer, Fake Santa Claus. It's certainly possible. You had the motive, and definitely the means, given the walls are covered in knives. But the murderer could also have been... Reckless Cowboy!!

(*Thunder.*)

RECKLESS COWBOY. Me? Inspector, you're brandin' the wrong USDA-approved cattle.

INSPECTOR. Am I...? Then would you mind telling us about your family life, specifically your father?

RECKLESS COWBOY. My what?

INSPECTOR. Your father. Your dad? Paternal guardian?

RECKLESS COWBOY. Oh, my *Paw!*

Yeah, I'll tell you what happened. Back in the day, growin' up in the Cowboy family it was just Paw and the young'uns. Maw done run off with the Maytag man. But we made do just fine.

(*Reenactment. PAW COWBOY saunters into the Cowboy living room.*)

PAW. Git in here young'uns! I got someone fer you to meet.

(*The four COWBOY CHILDREN run in. They're all young – preteen and younger.*)

Now come on in here, E.S.

(*MYSTERIOUS HOST enters. He's dressed like a cowboy, and wears the usual eye patch.*)

Kids, this here's my ol' roommate from M.I.T.

MYSTERIOUS HOST. Howdy. Name's Host. Eugene Sarsaparilla Host. But everybody calls me E. S.

RECKLESS COWBOY. Please t'meet you, Mister E. S. Host!

PAW. These are m'young'uns. You've already met Reckless. That's my oldest. Next in line is Foolish.

FOOLISH. Howdy.

PAW. Irresponsible.

IRRESPONSIBLE. Evenin'.

PAW. And m'youngest, Negligent.

NEGLIGENT. (*Tips hat.*) Mister.

PAW. Now boys, as you know, our family name is known across this great land for its blatant disregard for rules and common sense. Keeping in that tradition, my old buddy and me are gonna go play a little game called Russian Roulette.

IRRESPONSIBLE. What's Russian Roulette, Paw?

FOOLISH. Is that what the Reds do in Reno?

PAW. Good guess, Foolish, but not quite. Russian Roulette is a game where the loser very well may git shot dead. (*He gathers his sons around him.*) But I'll tell you this, Reckless, Foolish, Negligent, Irresponsible— (*Quietly intense:*) your Paw don't plan on losin'. (*He breaks away and runs out with MYSTERIOUS HOST trailing him.*) Woooooouoooooooooooo!

(*Pause.*)

NEGLIGENT. If Paw dies, I'm changin' my name to Steve.

RECKLESS COWBOY. (*As an adult:*) We were too young to understand it then, but Paw was starin' fate dead in the eye an' spittin' a juicy gloppa dip at it. See, Paw and Mister Host couldn't find a workin' six-shooter, so they wrestled up the next best option.

(*MYSTERIOUS HOST wheels out a cannon.*)

PAW. Woooooouoooooooooooo!

RECKLESS COWBOY. That was the last day we saw Paw...

POMPOUS MILLIONNAIRE. A cannon? That's probably the dumbest thing I've ever heard.

RECKLESS COWBOY. Oh yeah?! You wanna take this outside and settle this man to man to cannon?

(They start to approach each other menacingly. Eventually others hold them back and they give up.)

PLASTIC POLITICIAN. This fighting on our native soil must cease!

DIRTY HIPPIE. She's right, man. War solves nothing.

SEDUCTRESS. Yeah, you guys should kiss (me) and make up.

(She says "me" under her breath, or mid-fake-cough.)

DECREPIT INVALID. I feel your pain, young cowpoke. Back in the day before the advent of cannons we had to play Russian Roulette with catapults filled with tar. It was very messy.

SPOOKY PIRATE. Tarrrrr.

BOY BAND REJECT. Why'd you just repeat that?

SPOOKY PIRATE. Whenever I hear a word at ends in "ar," I find I can't help myself. Sorry. *(Beat. Recognition.)* Sarrrrrrrrr-y.

RESPECTED GENERAL. I don't like you.

INSPECTOR. Okay, let's focus, everyone. What you're saying, Reckless Cowboy, is that Mysterious Host played a role in your father's death.

RECKLESS COWBOY. *(Sobbing:)* M'Paw!!

INSPECTOR. What did you think was in the box?

RECKLESS COWBOY. *(Recovered:)* Ahdunno. Sump'n incriminatin'? Orrrr... a cannonball?

INSPECTOR. So you killed him.

RECKLESS COWBOY. Not a chance! If I was gonna get my revenge, I'd never use a knife. Ever hear of a feller named Hammurabi? He had this sayin' that went sumpin' like, "An eye for an eye, a cannonball-in-the-head for a cannonball-in-the-head."

WEALTHY DOWAGER. I don't believe that's accurate.

BEARDED SCHOLAR. Actually, he is correct. There was an early draft of the Hammurabi Code that Hammurabi discarded after concluding the word "tooth" was snappier than "cannonball-in-the-head."

ALL. Huh... / That's odd. / I didn't know that.

INSPECTOR. Nevertheless, Reckless Cowboy may very well have been the killer. He had the motive, and definitely had the means, given the walls are covered in knives. But the murderer could also have been... Brainless Model!!

(Thunder.)

(No reaction from BRAINLESS MODEL. Her mind is elsewhere.)

INSPECTOR. Would somebody poke her...

DIEHARD DOLPHINS FAN. I'll do it! I've got a giant foam hand.

(DIEHARD DOLPHINS FAN pokes BRAINLESS MODEL.)

BRAINLESS MODEL. *Muppet Movie!*

(INSPECTOR takes a moment, then continues her interrogation.)

INSPECTOR. But the murderer could also have been... Brainless Model!!

(Thunder.)

(BRAINLESS MODEL reacts with terrified words but not with a terrified expression.)

BRAINLESS MODEL. Ahhh thunderrr.

INSPECTOR. To be honest, I'm a little concerned with your ability to form a rational thought. So, I don't know... just... tell me the first thing that pops into your head when I ask you this question: What is your motive?

BRAINLESS MODEL. Hula hoop!!

INSPECTOR. Okay. Let's try again. What is your motive?

BRAINLESS MODEL. Yogurt?

INSPECTOR. What is your motive?

BRAINLESS MODEL. *(Extremely deep, menacing voice:)* Brainwashed assassin.

(Pause.)

INSPECTOR. Wow. Really? I can't believe that worked.

BRAINLESS MODEL. Yayyyyy.

INSPECTOR. So you may have been the killer, Brainless Model. You had the motive, and you definitely had the means, given the walls are covered in knives. But the murderer could also have been...Spooky Pirate!!

(Thunder.)

SPOOKY PIRATE. *(Dismissive:)* Narr, narr.

INSPECTOR. Is that so? Why don't you tell us about your voyage to Crossbones Cove...

SPOOKY PIRATE. Ah, Crossbones Cove. I knew that day would return t'haunt me. Ya be a schemin' rogue, Inspector. You'd make a fine Buccaneer.

INSPECTOR. Please proceed.

SPOOKY PIRATE. Aye... Aye... It all started on the high seas. Me first mate had heard tales of Crossbones Cove bein' a surefire source of endless booty. And when I say "booty" I'm referrin' to gold coins or other items of monetary worth—as opposed to the modern definition that relates to making out, or the female rear end. Of course, given we were an exclusively male crew and were at sea for eighty fortnights, we certainly would have welcomed booty of either variety.

(Reenactment begins. SPOOKY PIRATE is aboard his ship with his crew members.)

MATEY #1. Land, ho!!

MATEY #2. There she be... Crossbones Cove.

MATEY #3. We made excellent time, Spooky Pirate.

MATEY #2. And you wanted to stop at Bennigan's...

MATEY #3. *(Begrudgingly conceding the point:)* Aye... Aye...

MATEY #4. Lead on, Spooky Pirate. What be our plan for acquirin' the booty?

MATEY #2. Which kind?

MATEY #4. I'm flexible.

SPOOKY PIRATE. Well, me blaggards... As is the custom, I will first go ashore and survey the pillage opportunities. You wait here and I'll call forth no sooner than a stout sutler could bellow "Splice the mainbrace." Fair winds, me hearties!

ALL. Fair winds, Spooky Pirate!

(SPOOKY PIRATE leaves.)

MATEY #1. You have any idea what he's saying?

MATEY #4. No.

(Focus shifts to SPOOKY PIRATE who is surveying the area, which is deserted, as expected.)

SPOOKY PIRATE. Now where be the endless booty...

(Out of nowhere, in pops MYSTERIOUS HOST, dressed for a tropical vacation: Hawaiian shirt, sunscreen on the nose, camera around neck, patch on eye... He approaches SPOOKY PIRATE.)

MYSTERIOUS HOST. Carl? Carl Benson? Is that you? Heyyy! It's me, Mysterious Host! From Teaneck? How y'doin', man! Good to see you!

SPOOKY PIRATE. Arr, ya must be confusin' me fer someone else...

MYSTERIOUS HOST. Nawww, I could never forget you! You were the *man* back in Teaneck. Awh! Always threw the sweetest barbeques! How you been?! Y'look great! I mean except for the missing arm—that looks like it probably hurt—but ignoring that, y'look fantastic! Y'lost weight, right? I can usually tell.

(SPOOKY PIRATE takes a moment, then suddenly breaks character and grabs MYSTERIOUS HOST by the collar. Now he speaks in a totally normal, non-pirate accent.)

SPOOKY PIRATE. Listen buddy, forget about Teaneck. I've got a different life now, and I need you to keep your mouth shut about my past. Especially around my crew. Got it?

MYSTERIOUS HOST. Okay...

(Pause.)

(SPOOKY PIRATE weakens his grip on MYSTERIOUS HOST's collar and is about to break away, but then feels compelled, and slightly embarrassed, to add one more thing.)

SPOOKY PIRATE. And yes, I've lost weight...

(He lets go of MYSTERIOUS HOST, who exits.)

(SPOOKY PIRATE calls to the ship, back in his pirate voice.)

SPOOKY PIRATE. Step ashore, me scalawags! There be plenty of booty for all!

MATEYS. Arrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!

(Back to present day.)

SPOOKY PIRATE. *(In his Carl Benson voice:)* So the honest truth is: I didn't take on the field of piracy right away. My first few years out of Ohio State I sold pre-owned

minivans. Once I began my pirate ways, though, (*Back to pirate voice:*) I became a pirate for life! But then that rogue Mysterious Host boiled up a scurvy scheme to show me mateys photographs of one of me famous New Jersey parties.

INSPECTOR. So you figured that the negatives were in this box.

SPOOKY PIRATE. Narr. They were digital, so I'd wager they're on a flash drive or maybe a CD-R.

INSPECTOR. Regardless, you feared for your reputation among your crew, so you killed Mysterious Host!

SPOOKY PIRATE. Bilgewater! I did no such thing. I be not a murderous pirate the likes of Long John Silver. I be more of a friendly pirate, like Captain Crunch.

RESPECTED GENERAL. I must protest. While his public persona may be one of happiness and of sweetened corn and oat – on the high seas, Captain James T. Crunch is nothing short of a cold-blooded killing machine.

SPOOKY PIRATE. (*Caught in a lie:*) Aye, 'tis true...

INSPECTOR. So you may have been the killer, Spooky Pirate. It's certainly possible. You had the motive, and definitely the means, given the walls are covered in knives. But the murderer could also have been...

All right, honestly?, this is taking forever and if we wrap this up soon I might get home in time to catch the season finale of *Scrubs*. So raise your hand if you haven't confessed a shocking secret from your past.

(DIRTY HIPPIE, SKETCHY FOREIGNER, INTIMIDATING MOBSTER, BEARDED SCHOLAR, and SEDUCTRESS raise their hands.)

Great. Do you guys mind just quickly giving me your motives in a short answer...fifty words or less?

LAST FIVE. Sure. / Yeah. / No problem.

INSPECTOR. Terrific. All right, let's start with Sketchy Foreigner.

SKETCHY FOREIGNER. There was a brief, ten-year period of time when I was mailing cologne-drenched love poems to Mysterious Host's girlfriend. She did not return my affections. If her boyfriend was no longer in the picture, it would be my hope that she would come running to my arms, and also nullify her, how you say, "restraining order"?

RECKLESS COWBOY. Restraining order.

SKETCHY FOREIGNER. (*Genuinely appreciative:*) Ah. Thank you.

INSPECTOR. Intimidating Mobster.

INTIMIDATING MOBSTER. One: Mysterious Host is the sole eyewitness of last week's unfortunate *accidental* drowning of Skinnylegs Malloy. Two: I am the prime suspect in aforementioned accidental drowning. Three: The trial is tomorrow. Do the math.

BRAINLESS MODEL. Yay math!!

WASHED-UP ACTRESS. *Here we go...*

BRAINLESS MODEL. One plus two plus three equals Elephant Rodeo!!

INSPECTOR. And you're an idiot. Bearded Scholar!

BEARDED SCHOLAR. Years ago Mysterious Host broke my world record for the longest period of time pretentiously stroking a beard. With him out of the way, I could finally join the pretentious-beard-stroking Olympic Team.

INSPECTOR. Dirty Hippie.

DIRTY HIPPIE. So Mysterious Host custom-made this really funny hoodie that I wanted more than anything in the world, but he refused to give it to me. It says "Flower Power" on it, but instead of a flower like you'd expect, like a plant?, it's got — it's got a bag of *flour!* Like for *baking.*

INSPECTOR. That's really dumb, annnnd Seductress.

SEDUCTRESS. (*Simply:*) I need his kidneys.

ALL. Makes sense to me. / Sure. / Can't blame her for that.

BOY BAND REJECT. Wait. But none of those last five motives had anything to do with incriminating evidence in the box.

INSPECTOR. That's a great point. (*To the FIVE:*) Explain yourselves.

DIRTY HIPPIE. (*Adamantly:*) Okay, have you ever considered the possibility that any of us could've killed Mysterious Host just because it was a smart idea to do it when the lights were off? Huh? I mean — why's it always gotta be about the box, man? Did you ever consider that it might not be about the box?! *Man?!*

(SKETCHY FOREIGNER, INTIMIDATING MOBSTER, BEARDED SCHOLAR, and SEDUCTRESS gather around DIRTY HIPPIE *aside* and consult with him. Then he emerges.)

DIRTY HIPPIE. If it pleases the court, I would like to withdraw my last statement, as I've decided on my own that it conflicts with my own best interests.

SERIAL KILLER. I'll allow it.

INSPECTOR. This isn't a courtroom, and you're definitely not a judge.

SERIAL KILLER. I'm in law school.

INSPECTOR. The important thing is, I think we've covered everybody. I'm done with the interrogations!

ALL. Yayyyyy!

INSPECTOR. Which means that now is the moment of truth.

ALL. Boooooooooo.

INSPECTOR. Now is the time I will determine which of you twenty suspects committed the unconscionable act of murder.

As I consider all of the facts presented to me, I must admit that throughout my entire career in criminal investigation, this has to be the most puzzling, the most mind-boggling case I have ever –

(INSPECTOR happens to have walked behind the corpse of MYSTERIOUS HOST and something catches his eye.)

Ahh, come on...

STRUGGLING STAND-UP COMIC. What? What is it?

INSPECTOR. I can't believe I never looked at his back...

(INSPECTOR rotates MYSTERIOUS HOST's body. There are nineteen knives in MYSTERIOUS HOST's back.)

INSPECTOR. *(Without emotion:)* Nineteen knives. Okay, so this actually isn't the most puzzling case I've ever encountered. Nineteen knives in his back, plus the one knife in his chest, and there are twenty of you. Each of you stabbed him once.¹⁸

(INSPECTOR looks to the group.)

Right?

¹⁸ If it isn't feasible for your production group to have nineteen obvious knives protruding from Mysterious Host's back, then in this paragraph change "knives" to "knife wounds."

ALL. Noooo. / That's absurd. / Impossible.

INSPECTOR. Really?

(Beat.)

ALL. Okay... / Sure... / All right...

(DIEHARD DOLPHINS FAN raises his hand, and says proudly:)

DIEHARD DOLPHINS FAN. I did the front.

INSPECTOR. Well if all twenty of you killed Mysterious Host, then all twenty of you are under arrest!

ALL. No! / Please! / Show some mercy!

(INSPECTOR holds up his hands to silence the group.)

INSPECTOR. That is to say, I *would* place all twenty of you under arrest if you had in fact murdered Mysterious Host.

SANTA CLAUS. What ever do you mean?

SEDUCTRESS. I don't understand...

INSPECTOR. Mysterious Host isn't dead. Mysterious Host is actually... *(He takes out an eye patch and puts it on.)* ...alive and well...

ALL. Whuuuuuuuh?

INSPECTOR (REAL MYSTERIOUS HOST). That's right! *I...am* Mysterious Host. I put together this elaborate ruse in order to see what would happen to me if I revealed your secrets.

RECKLESS COWBOY. *You're* Mysterious Host?

SOUTHERN BELLE. Wait a minute... If *you're* Mysterious Host, then who did all of us kill?

REAL MYSTERIOUS HOST. A fine question, Southern Belle. I knew I couldn't carry out this brilliant ruse alone, so I've spent the last few days building a robot to match my exact likeness.

(REAL MYSTERIOUS HOST takes out a remote control and presses some buttons. MYSTERIOUS HOST ROBOT's eyes suddenly open, and it speaks just like a stereotypical robot.)

MYSTERIOUS HOST ROBOT. Good evening, Mysterious Host. How may I be of service?

RESPECTED GENERAL. Unbelievable!

BEARDED SCHOLAR. It's uncanny...

WASHED-UP ACTRESS. Wait, but how do we know it's a robot?

(REAL MYSTERIOUS HOST presses some more buttons. MYSTERIOUS HOST ROBOT stands up and does a brief rendition of "The Robot" – everyone's favorite dance move.)

ALL. Oh. / Yep. / Definitely a robot.

SEDUCTRESS. *(To REAL MYSTERIOUS HOST:)* That was hot. Can I have his number?

(Without hesitation, REAL MYSTERIOUS HOST presses a button. MYSTERIOUS HOST ROBOT robotically hands SEDUCTRESS a piece of paper or cocktail napkin with his number already on it.)

POMPOUS MILLIONNAIRE. But wait one minute. If you're the real Mysterious Host and you're still alive aren't we sort of back where we started where we had every reason to kill you?

(Pause.)

(They all ponder.)

(Then they all look to REAL MYSTERIOUS HOST.)

REAL MYSTERIOUS HOST. Okay, that point may be valid, but one sec.

(Then they each simultaneously reveal a knife. If possible, there should be an unsheathing sound.¹⁹)

(They start to edge toward REAL MYSTERIOUS HOST.)

Okay okay okay okay! Just hear me out. I realize that you're mere moments away from stabbing me twenty times, but before you do that, I have one final question: Aren't you curious to know what's inside the box? You already know each others' secrets now anyway. And if you kill me, you'll *always wonder...*

(They ponder.)

(They look to each other for confirmation.)

¹⁹ If it would be too daunting to have 20 knives, this stage direction can be cut.

INTIMIDATING MOBSTER. All right, open it.

REAL MYSTERIOUS HOST. A wise choice.

(REAL MYSTERIOUS HOST moves to the box, turns to the final number on the combination, opens the lock, then opens the lid of the box.)

REAL MYSTERIOUS HOST. Have a look.

PLASTIC POLITICIAN. There's no incriminating evidence in here at all! It's just filled with Reduced Fat Twinkies!

(She pulls out a Twinkie.)

(They all look to REAL MYSTERIOUS HOST.)

ALL. ("Why you little so-and-so":) Mysterious Hohhhhhhhst!

REAL MYSTERIOUS HOST. *(Fake innocently:)* Whaaaaaat?

(They all let out corny laughter.)

(REAL MYSTERIOUS HOST pulls out a two handfuls of Twinkies.)

REAL MYSTERIOUS HOST. Twinkies for everyone!!

ALL. Yayyyyyyyyy!

(They all react with great joy and then freeze in that pose. Corny music plays – perhaps from the opening credits of an early-90s sitcom. Blackout, as the music plays through the darkness.)

(Optional: During curtain call, cast members throw free Twinkies into the audience.)

Mystery Solved

~ Fin ~

Appendix

Below are examples of the Politician Thumb of Emphasis from page 10:

