

# Travels with a Masked Man

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*This is a two-character play for one actor. Time: the present.*

*An old wooden chair, on a medium oriental rug, sits in the middle of a small space. An old tweed jacket is draped on the back of the chair. A 6' by 8' picture frame is suspended slightly above the ground, upstage of the chair. The chair will be lit with a relatively harsh light; when the action shifts downstage, the light will be softer. Lights up as:*

## PROLOGUE

*Tom, down right.*

TOM

Hey, hello!

*He looks for Joe, sees the room and the jacket, turns out, heaves a sigh.*

OK.

*He breaks character, walks into the chair area, becoming JOE, puts on the jacket.*

JOE

OK... OK. Goddamn Bastards... The phone's ringing! Goddammit... Never Trust Anybody. Life's Like That. Bongo, bongo, bongo... OK. OK.

## SCENE 1

*He sits and speaks straight out, as though to Tom.*

JOE

Now you want me to do this? You want me just to sit here and...

TOM

*Tom also speaks straight out, as though to Joe.*

Yeah, that's fine, that's fine. This is the microphone here, ok?

JOE

Like this. It's not *going*, is it?

TOM

Yeah, it is.

JOE

Oh, it is. Well, shouldn't we turn it off till you...?

TOM

No, that's OK. I'll just get rid of this part.

JOE

Oh, OK.

TOM

I wonder what you think about this whole thing, these interviews...

JOE

Oh, my mind is a total blank. You're writing with chalk on a totally blank blackboard. I haven't had any thoughts, no.

TOM

You said something at lunch about how I should dip from the puddle?

JOE

Yes! Yes, that's what I am; I'm a mud puddle.

TOM

I see. What kind of mud puddle comes to mind?

JOE

Do you remember that wonderful Escher drawing of a mud puddle? And the leaves are reflected in, and it comes in and out of the mud puddle...

TOM

Those are tire ruts, aren't they?

JOE

Yes! A car had made the mud puddle. Yeah. Well, anyway, I'm just a puddle reflecting whatever it is *you're* saying.

TOM

What do you make of that picture?

JOE

Well, of course he's a great artist. And I suppose a wonderful architect, because his things were mostly structural (*laughs*) – you know, steps going both ways up and down, in the same plane, yeah.

TOM

But back to the puddle...

JOE

Oh dear...

TOM

You've chosen this Escher puddle to compare yourself to...

JOE

Yeah, you're supposed to dip into the puddle and whatever you want... you can splash it around...

TOM

I know, I'm dipping now: I'm saying you've got this picture of yourself as this Escher puddle...

JOE

Well, the dip has to be a question.

TOM

OK: why does the Escher puddle in particular come to mind?

JOE

You asked me what I... before, before. You asked me what I was thinking of and I said I don't have any thoughts about this thing at all. It's all yours. And that I'm just a puddle for you to splash...

TOM

Exactly. And here I am. We're pursuing this.

JOE

... and I guess that's the end of the line.

TOM

Well, see, to me the Escher puddle is much more particular than...

JOE

Oh Jesus...(*sighs*)

TOM

For one thing, the fact that the ruts are made by a tire...

JOE

But I hadn't...

TOM

It's a mechanical violation of the landscape that...

JOE

But I hadn't remembered how the puddle was made. So that's *your* input.

TOM

OK, I concede. Your mind is a blank.

JOE

Yeah, there you go. *Now* we're talking...

TOM

I don't believe you.

JOE

*(long beat)*

TOM

Are there things you won't say?

JOE

Oh, Of course. *DHWRRUP!*

TOM

So... the cold war was a high-stakes game you played, in which it was reasonable to risk your life. And to ask other people to risk theirs. For a game.

JOE

Yes, that's right.

*He drops character(s), looks out and moves down right. Light shifts.*

**TAPE 1** *(these recorded sounds are in his head): For a game?... You know, people die. For a game. People die... Life's like that. Bongo, bongo, bongo.*

## SCENE 2

TOM

There was this thing he always said about the death certificate: If the Soviets moved in (as they did just after I was born, and they outnumbered us in troops, a thousand to one), the evacuation would never work for him, so he had a *secret* plan that involved a doctor who was going to stamp a death certificate on the lid of the pine box where he was hiding, to be shipped out with all the other corpses,

TOM (*cont'd*)

back to the West. And I always thought that was fantastic! But until recently, I never really got what my mother and I were supposed to do.

(*to Joe in the chair*)

Something about waiting in a farmer's hayloft, some farmer that you knew, that you *trusted?*—bombs falling—and you would come pick us up sometime... later...

JOE (*back in the chair*)

(*laughs*) Never Trust *Anybody*... Those were good years, in Berlin, there was the Airlift—of course that was before you were born. You remember that Hungarian student who asked me, why didn't we just drop the bomb when we had the chance? Different perspectives, huh?

TOM

Just before lunch— you were saying that espionage was a puerile occupation —

JOE

A game.

TOM

... a juvenile game — and you were saying why you couldn't possibly do it anymore, now that you have more perspective.

JOE

Well, there was the Soviet Union with its half million KGB people — and they were far better at it than we were—but look what happened. They lost in a walk—they just collapsed.

TOM

So it's a game that doesn't do any good.

JOE

For the most part, no. The Israelis, of course, are a special case, because they're so small —and they're at war all the time — they can go out and murder people and do all kinds of things that we can't do. They get a lot done. Of course, Israeli intelligence is our main source of intelligence. Unexamined, and that's another problem...

TOM

*(making a note)* What do you mean, we don't murder people?

TOM *(back to Joe)*

So being an intelligence officer—it's a capacity for ruthlessness...?

JOE

It requires a certain Byzantine mentality to live in a world of secrets and Americans aren't suited to it. They talk too much... Bongo, bongo, bongo...

TOM

So I read all of the stuff you sent me...

JOE

Uh-huh, uh-huh...

TOM

...and listening to the tapes – there's a thing that keeps coming up about how bare facts are no good without knowing where they come from or who is speaking them...

JOE

Yeah. A fact is no more useful in itself than a piece of wood.

TOM

*Yeah, Yeah. Well, that's what I'm asking you about, not just the facts, but what it means. I'm looking for...*

JOE

*(shouting off right)* The gate's open! Goddammit.

TOM

...what it means to you—and me...

JOE

Shall we turn this off?

TOM

No, you know what I'd like is...

JOE

Oh. *(laughs)* I think we ought to turn this off...

TOM

No because I'm right in the middle of a thought...

JOE

*(shouting off right)* There! That's better! Bob's your Uncle! *(to Tom)* Yeah, OK.

TOM

I want you to come with me a little bit on this.

JOE

You realize that I can't come up with anything without being provoked by a question – or reminded of something because these are all buried logs and they're down in...

*Tom launches himself down left, stares back at the chair.*

**TAPE 2:**

*It requires a certain Byzantine... No! ... No. I want you to come with me... They talk too much!... but I'm right in the middle of ... buried logs, buried logs...*

*Back to the chair.*

TOM

So let's just forget it! You have no interest in any of this on your own anyway, do you?

JOE

Not in that sense, no. But I think I'm remembering more things as you remind me; it's kind of a chain reaction. You start with a few neutrons, and you... *(mimes nuclear explosion, with a grin)*

TOM

So you'll keep doing this?

JOE

Whatever you want. I told you about the event in Hamburg, when the Germans came to me and...?

TOM *(getting up)*

Can you wait a second? I have to pee.

JOE

Well this is the story of what happened in Hamburg. But I went through that, didn't I?

TOM (*half up*)

Yeah, but we haven't put it on tape. And I don't mind if we repeat things.

JOE

Oh, OK. I'm likely to do that, so cut me off, cause I can't remember what I've said and what I haven't. Your mother complains bitterly about this. She's just like

JOE (*cont'd*)

my mother talking to my father, you know, my dear, you never get it *right*. That's not at all the way it happened.

TOM (*back in the chair*)

She ought to be interested in the latest version of it.

JOE

Yeah, well, no. It has to be the *right* version. Did I tell you about Mishu?

TOM

Yes, but tell me again.

JOE

It's a kind of snapshot in my mind: going downtown to watch the riots, with Mishu, my grandmother's chauffeur. He drove this great big shiny car, you know, the kind where the chauffeur sat in front—in the open air, rain or snow. The rest of the vehicle was covered over, where my grandmother would sit with her rug, in the back. Let's see, it was the Depression, so I was at least nine years old. I remember this very distinctly, when no one was paying attention, we'd go out—I'd sit in the front with him, 'cause that was a lot more fun—and he would drive me down to Union Square, where the riots took place. The unions against the scabs, you see—and there they were... Christ, throwing things and beating each other up, with brickbats and anything that came to hand, really having at it. It was fantastic. And here I was, standing outside this huge limousine, a Pierce Arrow, with this Russian chauffeur in uniform, cap and black boots. The two of us standing there... watching the riots. It was (*laughing*) just like going to a Broadway show. These people... (*shaking his head*) Well. Shall I turn this off?

TOM

Sure.

JOE

I don't know how to do it.

*TOM gets up, moves down right.*



**TAPE 3:**

*These people... these people... tell me again... Christ, there they were beating each other up... that's not what happened...fantastic!... these people...*

**SCENE 3**

TOM (*back to the chair: Round Three*)

What did you do in Austria?

JOE

Austria was a “stay-behind” operation. The idea was to hide stashes of gold and weapons, explosives and stuff, and recruit people to be insurgents, underground armies in all NATO countries and beyond, to literally stay behind when the Soviets rolled over Europe . . . and it was all supposed to work. And no one was supposed to know about it. They picked me because I'd gone to West Point. *Dhwrrp!*

TOM

You expected the Russians to attack?

JOE

We all did. We all expected a third world war with the Soviet Union. I certainly did. The Soviets had set up Salzburg as a major base. They had eighteen KGB officers . . .

TOM

In Salzburg?

JOE

Yeah, rezidents, as they called themselves, making their moves all over Europe, from Salzburg...

TOM

And you were the only one?

JOE

I was the only American, yeah, so it was tricky to be constantly tracking them all over the place, figuring out what they were up to... (*chuckles*)

TOM

You enjoyed Salzburg.

JOE

It was a lotta fun; but of course if you're talking about a career it was a dead end. A total zero. But Salzburg was a wonderful place.

TOM

Yeah, that's why I live in Vermont, probably, looking for Salzburg... I loved that old house on the side of the mountain overlooking the castle... Playing on the

TOM (*cont'd*)

balcony, on the little wooden bench, my pirate ship. I still have that little wooden bench. And that incredible flag you made me, a skull and crossbones.

JOE

The skiing was pretty unbeatable. Not much going on otherwise, just watching. You know, Spy Vs Spy.

*He moves down right again, back in touch with the audience.*

**TAPE 4:**

***It was a dead end, a total zero... That incredible flag you made me... I was the only American... that old house... not much going on otherwise... that little wooden bench ... a third world war! not much going on otherwise...***

TOM (*miming incoming jets*)

fzhew, Boom!... boom... I was sitting with my mother in church and she leaned over and whispered to me, like an intimate secret, that we were moving to Israel. I liked it. I liked the dry heat, the dunes, playing ping pong...

(*sits; to Joe*) the Mirage jets every day, skimming in over the water, breaking the sound barrier...

JOE

Israel was all about conversations. I talked to as many people as I could. Most of them had nothing to do with what I was there for, but this is how I forced the guys who were watching me to waste their time keeping tabs on a bunch of tennis players and opera singers. Some of my favorite people in the world. You remember Yossi?

TOM

Sure, sort of a beatnik. And Greta, right? I liked them a lot. But were they part of it?

JOE

Hard to say.

TOM

So what did you talk about?

JOE

Everything. I let things happen. You start looking for something, you won't find it. It's like Brecht, you know, if you go running after it, it's probably right behind you. That's espionage. Be careful, cause it's *right there*.

TOM

What would you do with things you found out?

JOE

I would report back to Washington. Course, they never paid any attention. So you want to go to Chapter Two of disobeying orders? One day, it was during the Six-Day War, I was at the office, I got a hot cable from Washington telling me to go to... my friend in the Mossad... and tell him we think it's OK to... XYZ... a catastrophe of destruction. Bomb Cairo! I took one look at the thing and just dropped it in the shredder. It was on a weekend—some deputy's watch, some gung-ho idiot. It was the days of the procunsuls—and when Helms came in on Monday he said, Christ, someone get hold of him and tell him to ignore... XYZ! I was lucky... I could say I'd never seen the damn thing...

TOM

Wow.

JOE

Goddamn Bastards. Never Trust Anybody... and it gets worse... A man who's hungry: Christ, look at the things he'll do that he would never do otherwise. He'll steal; he'll murder; he'll kill. Make him hungry enough...

TOM

He'll kill even if he's not hungry, if he's paid to do it and told to do it.

JOE

Well, of course. There. Things are rather bad but the point is...

TOM

Did you ever kill anybody?

JOE

No... *(slowly)*

TOM

...yourself?

JOE

...no, no, no, I never did.

TOM

Did you ever recommend a killing?

JOE

No, no. I was never put into that kind of a box.

TOM

How did you avoid it?

JOE

The nature of my jobs. It never came up. It was never a question, no.

TOM

So what was it? You always said that working for the CIA was not for anybody with a weak stomach—because you had to do things that were against all moral precepts and against the law...

JOE

Well, that's it—you... you persuade a guy to go out and do something and then he gets killed. Then, you know, it's hard.

TOM

So that happened.

JOE (*getting up, turning upstage, leaning on the chair*)

Yes, very unpleasant...

TOM

More than once?

JOE

Oh, I don't know, but it happened.

TOM

Shit, come on, how could you not know?

JOE (*explodes, slams chair*)

I can't count them up! Give me a few weeks and I'll try... Jesus Christ!

(*Pause*)

TOM

Sorry.

JOE (*sits*)

Never mind!... Next question.

TOM

Were you ever afraid?

JOE

I was afraid of Dr. X.

TOM

Who was Dr X?

JOE

Dr. X was a mad scientist in this Gothic castle, where the scientists lived, and he had one hand missing. And one after another in this Gothic castle people were being murdered—strangled, you see. And you saw this figure in a cloak and a mask. But it wasn't a mask. What it really was, coming out of a panel in the back—Kkkkkwwhhh—was this mad scientist who didn't have a hand. He had invented a thing called synthetic flesh. And so he had this hand, in a... oh my God, I'll never forget this, in this thing that looked like a fishbowl, and it was alive. The hand by itself was alive, and he would reach in and put it on like a glove. And when the moon was full, (*burst of laughter*) he would go from room to room and just go—Kkkkkwwhhh! And he would put synthetic flesh on his face, to turn him so that nobody would know who he was. And then he'd come out and start murdering people. Except Fay Wray. Fay Wray always got away...

*Tom stares at him; stays in the chair.*

***TAPE 5: Never trust anybody... Did you ever kill anybody?... he'll steal, he'll murder, he'll kill, ... Did you ever kill anybody? Did you ever kill anybody? Jesus Christ!***

TOM

Were you angry as a kid?

JOE

I remember picking up a lead pipe and chasing this guy and I was going to kill him. And you know, if three or four others hadn't jumped me, and... and held me back... I would have killed him. They left me alone after that. Goddamn bastards.

TOM

Why, though? Why did you...?

JOE

They stole my sneaker. That was enough, and I just... I was absolutely out of my mind. *(He breathes hard, then laughs.)* I was. I was going to kill him.

TOM

Yeah.

JOE

So. I was lucky. *(laughs)*

TOM

So this kid stole your sneaker...

JOE

...and I lost my temper.

TOM

...and you chased him with a lead pipe. And you wanted to kill him.

JOE

I would have killed him. Yeah. I didn't *want* to kill him, I just would have.

TOM

Did you ever run into that kind of reaction in yourself again?

JOE

Again? No... no. I have a bad temper, that's true, but nothing like that, no.

TOM

When we were little, after you'd lost your temper at dinner because someone was talking or giggling and you were trying to read—*(shouts)* RUHE! Gott in Himmel! ... how would you process that?

JOE

It doesn't... help much to think about it at all. Just forget it, move on, do better next time. I try to do that with every mistake. *(deep breath)* What can you do? I mean, was it something I ate? Was it something somebody said? Am I tired?

TOM

Were you tired?

JOE

Well, I was always tired, but you can never know what moves the human being. Ever. Ever.

TOM

And what about the people?

JOE

Which people?

TOM

The people you work with.

JOE

It's very close, it's a very close...

TOM

Because they're taking huge risks with their lives, and with the lives of their families...

JOE

All on your behalf.

TOM

On your behalf.

JOE

Of course you pay them and whatnot but it's like a platoon leader in combat: follow me!

TOM

So you become a father figure in a sense...

JOE

I never thought in those terms, you just...do the best you can. When they kill one of your agents you have to be able to take it, you know. For example, you were asking me about killing people yesterday. And I thought about... You know I ran into your old Buddhist friend, you know, we used to coach football together, or some damn thing, Christ, imagine that ... and I was moaning about this and that, and he said, but you had fun, didn't you? And I said, oh yeah, I had a lot of fun. And he said, and you learned a lot, didn't you? And I said, oh, yeah, and he said what else is there?

*Pause*

TOM

What were you going to say about killing people?

JOE

... I had an agent in Berlin, and the East Germans caught him and put him on a railroad... uh track, and they found his head, you know...

TOM

And you had developed him?

JOE

I hadn't developed him, but I was running him, yeah. So you always wonder, was... was that my fault? What happened? And you never know. It gets to be quite a problem. The old hands, the Czecks, the old Poles, the Soviets we worked

JOE (*cont'd*)

with are much more attuned to this kind of life—you know, people die... but Americans get bothered, they get neurotic about it. They get off the track.

TOM

How many others were there?

JOE

I don't know. It's hard to say. You're asking things that are covered in time and I don't...

*Joe collapses a bit. Tom recovers, gets up but stays in the frame.*

**TAPE 6:**

*was that my fault? You're my father. What happened? And you never know. It gets to be quite a problem. You're my father. Americans... you're here to judge me. You're my father. They get off the track... I don't... I don't (weakening) ... you always wonder, was...*

**SCENE 5**

TOM

"You are old," said the youth, "one would hardly suppose That your eye was as steady as ever; Yet you balanced an eel on the end of your nose What made you so awfully clever?"

JOE

"I have answered three questions, and that is enough," Said his father. "Don't give yourself airs! Do you think I can listen all day to such stuff? Be off, or I'll kick you down stairs.

*They laugh.*

TOM

So I'll just keep going till you kick me downstairs.

JOE

Have at it.

TOM

Remember the time you accused *me* of working for the KGB?