

# **The Straits**

- or -

**“I Thought I Was Depressed  
But Then I Realized I Was  
Only Broke”**

---

A Play

by

**Alan David Perkins**

Copyright © 1993,  
By Alan D. Perkins  
Revised 5/23/94

## CHARACTERS

ARTIE - Our Hero. Male, mid-20's to late 30's.

MALE: HOMELESS MAN  
MEPHISTOPHELES  
BOSS  
HOST  
POLICEMAN

FEMALE: MARGARET  
WIFE  
TIME  
BANK WOMAN

The set for ***The Straits*** should be small and simple with most everything implied. A small table should be visible and movable. Upstage should sit a free-standing chalkboard. Possibly an easel should be to one side with placards to show the titles of each scene.

ACT 1, SCENE 1

"THIS IS WHERE I ..."

(The stage is barren save for a small table, center, and a standing chalkboard, upstage. ARTIE sits at the table addressing a large envelope. He licks a stamp and presses it on the envelope, then rises and proceeds to walk offstage. Before he does, he gestures slightly to the audience as to clue them in on what he is doing.)

ARTIE  
Mail.

(ARTIE exits, not only the stage but the theater as well. We can either see or hear the stage door open and close. Long pause. Finally the door opens and closes again. ARTIE returns to the stage.)

ARTIE (cont'd)

There. It's gone. Once again my future lies in the hands of the US Postal Service. That's a frightening thought, isn't it? But what the hell - life's a gamble. Think about it - all of my hopes, dreams and ambitions are now in the hands of total strangers who could accidentally destroy, lose, bend, spindle or mutilate them.

So, "What," you're probably thinking, "could possibly be in that envelope that is making me so nervous?" I'll tell you - pen and inks, some pencil sketches, a few line drawings - basically comic book art. You see, I'm an artist. My name is Artie. Artie the Artist. A little obvious? Maybe - but the playwright got a kick out of the allusion.

Whenever I can scrape up return postage I send my best work out to be seen and, more often than not, I get it back six months later with a form letter. Occasionally I get the "your works shows promise" letter, but nothing's been accepted yet. But I keep trying. I would go so far as to say that every newspaper, magazine, comic book company, coloring book company and animation studio in the country has had something of mine skid across SOMEBODY'S desk one time or another. My old mentor used to say that if someone rejects something, send it RIGHT back - sooner or later they'll get the hint and actually look at it.

So, why do I do it? Why have I chosen the road of the starving artist instead of the well-fed capitalist? The world needs dreamers, too. Think about it.

(Motions to the stage)

This is where I draw.

(Motions to the same space)

This is where I live.

(Motions to the same space)

This is where I work.

(Motions to the same space)

This is the bus stop.

(Motions to the same space)

This is where I bring my victims before I kill them, skin them and eat them. Are you paying attention? You have to use your imagination. Why? Because sets cost

...

(draws a dollar sign on the chalkboard)

... money. Everything costs money, and money is one thing I ain't got.

Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to The Straits. (bows)

(Blackout.)

SCENE 2

"THE HOMELESS MAN, PART 1"

(ARTIE appears to be waiting for a bus. He carries a sketch pad under his arm. A HOMELESS MAN lies under the table. ARTIE takes his pad and starts to sketch. The HOMELESS MAN notices.)

HOMELESS MAN

Hey, pal - please support the Kentucky Fried Chicken fund.

ARTIE

That's not original. There's a guy who uses the same line in front of Carnegie Hall.

HOMELESS MAN

Spare change?

ARTIE

Sorry, I'm penniless.

HOMELESS MAN

Yeah, yeah. I know what "broke" means. A quarter, a dime, whatever you can spare ...

ARTIE

I said I was penniless. There's a big difference between "broke" and "penniless" ...

HOMELESS MAN

Are you gonna lecture me?

ARTIE

Yes, I am.

HOMELESS MAN

Have a nice day.

ARTIE

This isn't finished!

HOMELESS MAN

Yes it is. Leave me alone.

ARTIE

I'll bet you have more money in your pocket than I do.

HOMELESS MAN

You're probably right. Leave me alone.

ARTIE

Let's see. Show me how much you've got.

HOMELESS MAN

No. Besides ...

ARTIE

Besides what?

HOMELESS MAN

Besides, you can get more.

ARTIE

Oh? From where?

HOMELESS MAN

The Bank! Where else?

ARTIE

Not unless I steal it. Come on, pull out your spare change.

(The HOMELESS MAN empties his pocket, as does ARTIE. All they have are coins.)

HOMELESS MAN

Three dollars and sixty-four cents.

ARTIE

Two dollars, eleven cents.

HOMELESS MAN

Here. Take the sixty-four cents.

ARTIE

No, that's okay.

HOMELESS MAN

No, I mean it. Take it and go.

ARTIE

No, you've proven my point.

HOMELESS MAN

Another lecture.

ARTIE

Okay, so I have a job. It doesn't necessarily mean I have money. It's like this ...

(goes to the chalkboard and writes)

"X" is my monthly budget.

(draws an "X")

"X" minus "Y" equals my monthly income.

(draws "X - Y")

HOMELESS MAN

You should reduce your spending.

ARTIE

Oh? Like how?

HOMELESS MAN

Fewer luxuries?

ARTIE

What constitutes a luxury? After rent, power, phone and a few outstanding credit card bills I usually wind up with (checks his pocket again) two dollars and eleven cents.

HOMELESS MAN

Yeah, but at least you have a roof over your head.

ARTIE

Overhead.

HOMELESS MAN

You have friends ... and family.

ARTIE

Says who?

HOMELESS MAN

Take a buck. Please.

ARTIE

I appreciate it. No.

HOMELESS MAN

How about a token? I have a bunch.

ARTIE

No thanks. I'm walkin'.

HOMELESS MAN

Then why are you standing around at a bus stop?

ARTIE

I'm not waiting for the bus.

HOMELESS MAN

Oh, let me guess. You're looking for some homeless to harass.

ARTIE

It's nothing like that at all.

HOMELESS MAN

Okay, Mister Pauper, enlighten me.

ARTIE

I'm waiting for Godot.

HOMELESS MAN

You're not very funny.

ARTIE

I spend so much of my life waiting - waiting for payday, waiting for the weekend, waiting for the mail - I thought I might as well be where people are SUPPOSED to wait. It's not so bad, really.

HOMELESS MAN

You're sick.

ARTIE

No, just in the straits.

(Lights go down on the HOMELESS MAN while ARTIE steps forward.)

ARTIE (cont'd)

The American Heritage Dictionary defines "strait" as "a difficult or perplexing position. Strict, rigid or righteous." A common usage of the word is "Dire Straits" or, basically, in a real bad position. But in common colloquialism, "The Straits" basically means you're broke. Don't confused it with the geographical straights, like "Straights of Gibraltar."

Lots of things can go wrong in your life and lots of things can go right, but when you're broke it seems to magnify even the slightest setback into a crisis. It's the basic domino effect. Once you're in the straits, you're trapped.

(Blackout.)



SCENE 3

"MARGARET'S TALE, PART 1"

(ARTIE sits at the table, stapling and sorting a large stack of papers. MARGARET, carrying a stack of papers and dressed in a corporate manner, strides up to him.)

MARGARET

Oh, no. Not again.

ARTIE

I think they enjoy humiliating me with these trivial tasks.

MARGARET

Well, someone's got to do them.

ARTIE

You're starting to sound like "them."

MARGARET

Take me to the ballet tonight, Artie.

ARTIE

Oh, Margaret, I wish I could.

MARGARET

Someday you'll make it as an artist and I'll make it as a dancer ...

ARTIE

I'll settle for "makin' it" in the broom closet.

MARGARET

(Giggles) Arthur, that's rude.

ARTIE

Speaking of which ... (hands MARGARET a piece of paper)

MARGARET

(Looks at the paper) Another broom ...

ARTIE

Yeah.

MARGARET

Why do you do these things?

ARTIE

I'm an artist. It's how I express myself.

MARGARET

(Laughs a little) It's so cute. I want to kiss you so bad.

ARTIE

Are either of our bosses watching?

(Both look back and forth  
and kiss each other  
quickly.)

MARGARET

Was it bad for you?

ARTIE

One of us needs to get an office.

MARGARET

Not while we're just secretaries.

ARTIE

I wish I could do something about that.

MARGARET

Why not climb the ladder? You've had plenty of opportunities.

ARTIE

Are you kidding?! If I'm gonna give my all to something full-time I'd rather it be something I actually believe in.

MARGARET

Advertising is a lucrative industry.

ARTIE

It's skeevy! It's full of slimeballs! It's the most unethical, underhanded, phony industries I've ever had the MISFORTUNE of slaving for.

MARGARET

Then why do you do it?

ARTIE

The benefits. It's all part of the divorce settlement. I'm stuck.

MARGARET

My boss wants me to go out for an Account Coordinator position.

ARTIE

Don't.

MARGARET

If that works out, soon I'll be an Assistant A.E. - and then a FULL FLEDGED A.E.!

ARTIE

Don't do it. They'll take your soul.

MARGARET

I'm being practical, Artie. You can't live in the clouds forever.

ARTIE

What about your dancing?

MARGARET

Dancing is my life, but it'll always be there. Besides, I can't dance forever. This could free me up financially. You know - do what you HAVE to do so you can do what you WANT to do ...

ARTIE

Show me one Account Exec who has time to do what they WANT to do.

MARGARET

I'll be different.

ARTIE

Let me guess, after you sell your soul you'll still get to borrow it on weekends?

MARGARET

I'll have an office and make enough to pay rent AND eat.

ARTIE

How do you know?

MARGARET

It's in the contract.

(MEPHISTOPHELES appears holding a contract, looking like a cross between a demon and a yuppie.)

MEPHISTOPHELES

That's right, Margaret. If you sign this contract you'll be receiving a big window office, an apartment in Greenwich, Connecticut, unlimited credit at Saks Fifth Avenue, a beamer, cellular phone, personal secretary, nose-job, weekly manicures, one week a year at Club Med, one week a year in either rehab or detox and more money than you'll have time to spend!

ARTIE

And you are ...

MEPHISTOPHELES

Mephistopheles. Hope you'd guess my name.

ARTIE

Then what about her soul?

MEPHISTOPHELES

Face it, pal. If she signs she won't miss it.

MARGARET

(To ARTIE) See? How could I pass that up?

ARTIE

Easy. What about dancing?

MARGARET

Dancing? What's that?

ARTIE

Up until a few minutes ago it was your entire life.

MARGARET

Oh, Artie. Will you ever grow up?

MEPHISTOPHELES

Shall we discuss major medical and pension benefits?

MARGARET

What about profit sharing and stock options?

(MARGARET and  
MEPHISTOPHELES exit,  
bantering over the  
contract.)

ARTIE

(To the audience) Another casualty of the economy. Soon the world will be full of suits and "60 Minutes" will be the number one rated show in America. Wait a minute, "60 Minutes" IS the number one rated show in America.

(draws "#1" on the chalkboard)  
God help us all. Then again, it could be "Baywatch"  
... which is kind of popular in Europe ...

I refuse to let her go that easily. It's not like we  
have a long history or anything, but we get along, and  
that's nothing to sneeze at. I'll figure out  
something. After all, life is a gamble ... with shitty  
odds.

(Blackout.)

SCENE 4

"THE PART-TIME JOB"

ARTIE

(To the audience) Eventually the need to eat regularly wins out and a part-time job becomes a harsh reality. Temp work would be preferable, and Lord knows you may be able, but nobody will give you a chance without paying your dues, and you can't pay your dues temping if you have a day job because they want you when THEY want you. Freelancing would be nice, but after a while you start thinking that you DESERVE to work retail.

The way I look at it, it's economical to start at the bottom. You usually wind up there anyway, so why waste the time and effort?

Let's look at the advantages of retail. The pay sucks, you get abused by every walk of life, if you've at LEAST finished High School you'll be grossly over-qualified, you get a name-tag, and you're immediately considered a prospective thief. And now the disadvantages; it takes up time and effort. Time I can spare, but effort is another story. Let me tell you, being broke is exhausting.

(The BOSS enters and sits behind the table. ARTIE pulls up a chair for his interview.)

ARTIE (cont'd)

The story remains the same. The names change to protect the innocent.

BOSS  
Education?

ARTIE  
I have a BA in Art from Michigan State.

BOSS  
Last year of High School finished?

ARTIE  
Twelfth. I've finished the twelfth grade.

BOSS  
Ever do this kind of work before?

ARTIE

I worked at a Burger King through High School, and was a bus boy for at least three different restaurants through college. It's all there in the application. Can't you see?

(The BOSS slowly tears up the application.)

BOSS

We all know that these things don't mean much.

ARTIE

(Getting a little nervous) We do?

BOSS

Why you want this job?

ARTIE

I need the money.

BOSS

Do you think it's worth it? Hell, you'll be scrubbing floors! You'll be handling food! You'll be dealing with the general public!

ARTIE

I think I'm getting nauseous.

BOSS

Is sticking your arms into sinks full of greasy dishwater worth minimum wage?

ARTIE

Not even on a dare.

BOSS

Been nice meeting you, Arthur ...

ARTIE

Wait a minute, what about the job?

BOSS

You don't want it.

ARTIE

Yes, I do.

BOSS

C'mere a second.

(BOSS puts his arm around  
ARTIE's neck as they look  
at different points  
together.)

BOSS (cont'd)

See that guy? Professional trombone player. Gets  
about one gig a month. See her? Used to be a  
copyrighter until the ax fell. And that guy? He gets  
an article printed every now and then. What's your  
medium?

ARTIE  
Medium?

BOSS  
Artistic medium of choice. What do you do that's so  
important that you're willing to do this shit?

ARTIE  
Graphic arts.

BOSS  
I used to do R&D for IBM.

ARTIE  
I'm sorry.

BOSS  
Me too.

ARTIE  
So, do I get the job?

BOSS  
You'll hate it.

ARTIE  
Then why do YOU do it?

BOSS  
Same as you. (hands him a name-tag) Here's your name-  
tag.

ARTIE  
(Looks at the tag) My name's not "Biff."

BOSS  
Keep a shred of dignity.

(BOSS exits. Lights  
down, spot on ARTIE.)



ARTIE

There's an old expression: If you aren't making money...

(circles the dollar sign on the blackboard)  
chances are you're spending money.

(pause as he looks at the board)

I suddenly feel very worthless.

(draws a slash through the circle around the dollar sign).

(Blackout.)

SCENE 5

"IT DOESN'T ADD UP"

(ARTIE sits at his drawing table. He is very frustrated. He looks at the pad for a good, long time.)

ARTIE

Nothing. Damn it!

(draws a few lines and looks at it)

No.

(tears up the page)

I can't do it. There's nothing left. I can't ...

(stares at the page longer - sighs)

I have to figure this out.

(Goes to the chalkboard.)

There's rent ...

(writes in "Rent" with a scribble for a figure next to it)

then there's my student loan ...

(writes "Loan" and a scribble)

then there's electricity ...

(writes "power" and a scribble)

thank God I got cable and phone disconnected ... then there's old debts ...

(writes "Plastic" and a scribble)

child support ...

("Support" and a scribble)

Christ, I'm already into negatives and I haven't even added food or art supplies.

(finishes the equation with a big negative sign)

(Sits on the floor in front of the chalkboard.)

It doesn't add up. When did it happen? At what point in my life did everything get so fucked up? Damn. I can't draw, I can't even think anymore.

What happened?

(Fadeout.)

SCENE 6

"THE DIVORCE GAME"

(Game show-type music plays. The slick HOST comes into a spotlight. He holds a microphone and wears a sequined jacket.)

HOST

Yes, yes, good evening ladies and gentlemen and welcome to America's most popular game, The Divorce Game.

(Sound of applause as lights come up. ARTIE is writing the word DIVORCE on the chalkboard.)

HOST (cont'd)

You all remember Artie, our latest contestant, who is being sued for divorce by his wife.

ARTIE

It was a mutual decision.

HOST

It doesn't really matter here on the Divorce Game, because here EVERYBODY's a loser! Now let's bring out the challenger - your wife!

(Sound of applause. WIFE comes out. She looks very stern.)

HOST

Hello. Welcome to the Divorce Game.

WIFE

I want everything.

HOST

Who's everything?

WIFE

(Points to ARTIE) His.

HOST

Judges?

ARTIE

What? Wait a minute ...

(Sound of applause.)

HOST  
It's a done deal! The Judges have awarded her with everything Artie and his wife owns!

WIFE  
It's about time.

ARTIE  
What just happened? I want to see my lawyer.

HOST  
(To ARTIE) I AM your lawyer. (To everyone) Since they've waived the alimony part of the game we'll move right along to our favorite part of The Divorce Game - the Child Support Barter.

ARTIE  
Why can't I get alimony? I can barely support myself.

HOST  
Frankly, we don't care.

WIFE  
I want more than he can afford for child support so he'll never be able to live a comfortable day for the rest of his life.

ARTIE  
Hey, I object!

HOST  
Judges?

ARTIE  
Judges? Already?!

HOST  
When money is at stake we work fast.

(HOST calmly waits for the judges' decision.)

ARTIE  
(To WIFE) I thought we had an agreement.

WIFE  
Sorry, I have to look out for number one.

ARTIE  
But what about our son?

WIFE

You should have thought of that before I started cheating on you.

ARTIE

You WHAT?

(HOST steps off stage and returns with a small slip of paper containing the verdict, which he examines carefully.)

WIFE

It's too late to do anything about it now.

HOST

Okay, we have a verdict. Artie, aside for losing all of your personal possessions and capital, you get a permanent lien on all of your wages for the next sixteen years, you get forced to keep a lousy-paying corporate job just so you can keep the insurance on your son, you get to live without your son and you get the burden of the situation unforgivingly hounding you and relentlessly dragging you down for the rest of your life. On the other hand, your wife gets everything you once had, total control over your son and the right to demand more and more out of you for the rest of your life.

ARTIE

But my son ... I love my son ... I can't live without my son! When can I see my son?!

WIFE

When I say so.

ARTIE

But what will I do? Where will I go? Where will I stay?

WIFE

Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn.

ARTIE

Why are you doing this to me?!

HOST

Well, as you know, divorce can always be so hard on the wife, especially when children are involved. Besides, the court always goes with the mother. You saw "Kramer Vs. Kramer."

(WIFE pulls out a fur and  
puts it on.)

ARTIE

Where did you get the money for that?

WIFE

Why, from YOU of course.

HOST

Tune in tomorrow, ladies and gentlemen, when we fleece  
some other poor schmuck on The Divorce Game!

ARTIE

I want a rematch.

HOST

Too late. All decisions are final. Have a nice life -  
- NOT!

(Blackout)

SCENE 7

"THE HOMELESS MAN, PART 2"

(THE HOMELESS MAN is  
under the table again.  
ARTIE comes up to the  
table and waits again.)

HOMELESS MAN

Back again, Vladimir?

ARTIE

Who's Vladimir?

HOMELESS MAN

You know ... "Waiting for Godot"?

ARTIE

Oh, I see. Yes, I'm waiting for Godot again.

(HOMELESS MAN takes out a  
dollar and tries to hand  
it to ARTIE.)

HOMELESS MAN

Here. Take it.

ARTIE

Why?

HOMELESS MAN

Because you depress me. Take it and go.

ARTIE

What happened to you?

HOMELESS MAN

Nothin'.

ARTIE

Seriously, what did you do before you became homeless?

HOMELESS MAN

Why should I tell YOU?

ARTIE

Why not?

HOMELESS MAN

I wasn't much different than you.

ARTIE  
Frightening.

HOMELESS MAN  
Damn straight.

ARTIE  
You know, I envy you.

HOMELESS MAN  
Izzat so.

ARTIE  
No responsibilities, no commitments, no debts, no  
baggage.

HOMELESS MAN  
Yeah, I sure do live the good life.

ARTIE  
It's better than you think.

HOMELESS MAN  
Living in the street ...

ARTIE  
... no rent, no overhead ...

HOMELESS MAN  
... no roof overhead, beggin' for food ...

ARTIE  
... no taxes ...

HOMELESS MAN  
... no friends ...

ARTIE  
... no disappointments ...

HOMELESS MAN  
... no job ...

ARTIE  
... no compromises ...

HOMELESS MAN  
... no rights ...

ARTIE  
... same here ...



HOMELESS MAN

... no way out ...

ARTIE

... no way out ...

HOMELESS MAN

... no fun ...

ARTIE

... no shit.

HOMELESS MAN

So, I guess that makes us the same.

ARTIE

I guess it does.

HOMELESS MAN

'Cept one thing - you got a roof and I don't.

ARTIE

You can sleep on my couch if you want.

HOMELESS MAN

You got a couch?

ARTIE

Actually it's a day bed. Actually it's a majority of my apartment. Actually there's barely enough room for me. Having an apartment guest could get a little tight.

HOMELESS MAN

Then why'd you offer? You little shit! What right do you have doin' that to a guy?

ARTIE

You mean you'd take it?

HOMELESS MAN

Face it, when you've got nothing, pride ain't a thing to hold on to.

(ARTIE takes out a dollar.)

ARTIE

Here.

HOMELESS MAN

No, you take mine.

ARTIE

No. Here.

(HOMELESS MAN takes the  
dollar.)

HOMELESS MAN

Hey man, thanks.

ARTIE

Maybe someday you can do ME a favor.

HOMELESS MAN

Maybe. Thanks.

(ARTIE pulls a piece of  
paper out of his pocket  
and hands it to the  
HOMELESS MAN.)

ARTIE

Here.

HOMELESS MAN

What is it?

ARTIE

Look at it.

(The HOMELESS MAN unfolds  
the paper and looks at  
it.)

HOMELESS MAN

Hey! This is me!

ARTIE

You like it?

HOMELESS MAN

You did this?

ARTIE

Yeah. You like it?

HOMELESS MAN

Not bad. Not bad at all.

ARTIE

Look, I gotta go ...

HOMELESS MAN

This is what you do?

ARTIE

Yeah.

HOMELESS MAN

Yeah. I understand. Good luck.

ARTIE

Understand what?

HOMELESS MAN

Why you do what you do. You got talent. You see everything as a picture of beauty 'stead of the ugly reality. Look ... keep waiting for Godot. Don't compromise. It's better to lose your house than to lose your soul.

ARTIE

Thanks.

(ARTIE exits, whistling.  
Fadeout.)

SCENE 8

"TIME, PART 1"

(ARTIE runs on stage as though he's just ran a marathon race. He wears sweats and is drenched. He pants furiously as he collapses on the table.)

ARTIE

(Panting) I did it. I won! Do you hear me, I BEAT YOU! (pants for a beat) I beat you.

(TIME enters from the same direction ARTIE entered. She also wears sweats but is dry, comfortable and alluring. She walks very slowly, fixing her face in a compact. She nonchalantly approaches ARTIE and casually touches the table with her finger.)

TIME

I win.

ARTIE

No you didn't! I got here first!

TIME

Yes, but you waited for me. I'm in control. I win.

ARTIE

You cheated!

TIME

You can't beat me. I wish you'd stop trying.

ARTIE

I'll beat you yet. Just you wait.

TIME

It's not my nature. "Keep moving forward," that's MY motto.

ARTIE

It'll happen. I know it. All I need is time.

TIME

You've got me! I'm ALL you've got - in abundance.

ARTIE

And I'll beat you.

TIME

Oh, please.

ARTIE

All I need is an opportunity ...

TIME

(Interrupting) See? I've done it again. "All I need ... all I need ..." I control you. I have you wrapped around my little finger. You're helpless.

ARTIE

But I can always stay one step ahead of you.

TIME

Say, I'm thirsty. How about some Gatorade?

ARTIE

Can't.

TIME

Let me guess ... waiting for payday? And what else are you waiting for? How about that big break? How about when some poor sap will look at one of your sketches and give you a chance?

ARTIE

What have I done to you? Why do you do this to me?

TIME

It's love, sweetheart. What we have is a true love-hate relationship. I'm not only your worst enemy but your best friend - and at times your ONLY friend.

ARTIE

I can't keep waiting for my life to begin. I have to beat you.

TIME

Artie, sweetheart, you've got it all wrong. Don't work against me here. Work with me.

ARTIE

No! You're in the way.

TIME

You're making a mistake.

ARTIE

Come on. We have a race to run.

TIME

A race against time? Not really. Hey, look at this!

(TIME takes ARTIE'S hands  
and puts them around her  
with his hands on her  
behind.)

TIME (cont'd)

You've got too much time on your hands! Get it?!

ARTIE

(Pulling away) You're not very funny.

TIME

I'm a laugh riot, sweetheart. You need to learn to  
lighten up. Slow down a little.

ARTIE

You think I can?

TIME

You can do anything you want to, honey.

ARTIE

All I can do is keep going and wait for YOU to catch  
up.

TIME

You'll be waiting a long time.

ARTIE

Why do you do this to me?

TIME

Oh, we're back to THAT again.

ARTIE

Okay, look - you win. I surrender. I surrender to  
Time. My life is in your hands.

TIME

It's always been in my hands. How about putting it in  
your OWN hands?

ARTIE

What can I do? Everything is waiting with you. I wait  
for the weekend ... I wait for Monday ... I wait or pay  
day ... I wait for lunch ... I wait for five o'clock  
...

TIME

Why don't you live in the moment? You won't need me if you do.

ARTIE

I can't afford it! I don't know where my next meal comes from, dearie. Time is the friend of the affluent, but here in the Straits you're the sworn enemy.

TIME

I AM on your side, you know.

ARTIE

Then don't work against me.

TIME

Use me. Use me for your own benefit.

ARTIE

Work with me.

TIME

Make me.

(ARTIE gets up, ready to run again.)

ARTIE

I've got my second wind. I'm ready to continue the race.

TIME

The dreaded "race against time?"

ARTIE

Make fun of me all you want.

TIME

Thanks. I will.

ARTIE

Come on. Let's see time fly.

(ARTIE darts off stage.  
TIME pulls out her compact again and primps her hair.)

ARTIE (cont'd)

(Off-stage) Come on! Aren't you coming?

(Sighs - to the audience) TIME I guess this is his idea of  
a "good time." (laughs - jogs off stage)

(Blackout.)



SCENE 9

"MARGARET'S TALE, PART 2"

(ARTIE is at the table, working. MEPHISTOPHELES saunters up and peers over his shoulder. ARTIE gets annoyed.)

ARTIE

Can I help you with something?

MEPHISTOPHELES

Oh, no. Don't let me bother you.

(ARTIE tries to work. MEPHISTOPHELES starts looking through papers on his desk and finds a sketch pad. He starts flipping through the pad.)

ARTIE

Do you mind?!

MEPHISTOPHELES

You're not bad.

ARTIE

(Sarcastically) Thanks. Do you plan on making a deal with me, too?

MEPHISTOPHELES

You? No.

ARTIE

(A beat) Why not?

MEPHISTOPHELES

Do you want me to?

ARTIE

No.

MEPHISTOPHELES

That's why not.

ARTIE

But I thought you were big on the temptation thing.

MEPHISTOPHELES

You have to be open for it. You're a dreamer - too idealistic, too many principals. You'd never go for it.

ARTIE

(Sarcastically) Gee. I'm flattered.

MEPHISTOPHELES

It's a shame, you know? You're really a good artist. I could make you an Art Director here at the agency. Your foot's already in the door.

ARTIE

I'd rather not. I could never sell out and do commercials.

MEPHISTOPHELES

No kidding. Your work's very original.

ARTIE

What are you doing here?

MEPHISTOPHELES

Appointments. I'm a busy guy around here.

ARTIE

Leave Margaret alone.

MEPHISTOPHELES

Can't. It's my job. I'm sure you understand.

ARTIE

You've come to take her away, haven't you?

MEPHISTOPHELES

Sadly, no. She's having her attorney look over the contract.

ARTIE

She can do that?

MEPHISTOPHELES

Why not?

ARTIE

What about ethics? Lord, what am I saying?!

MEPHISTOPHELES

Precisely.

ARTIE

You know I'm gonna fight you over Margaret.

MEPHISTOPHELES

I know. Good luck, I'm a tough opponent.

(MARGARET enters with a stack of papers. She looks a little more proper than before.)

ARTIE

Margaret! I got tickets to the ballet!

MARGARET

That's nice, but I can't make it. Sorry.

ARTIE

You don't even know when they're for.

MARGARET

That's right. I still can't make it. I'm booked solid from here till Doomsday.

ARTIE

Margaret, you love the ballet. You once said that going to the ballet was your all-time favorite thing in the world and NOTHING would stop you.

MARGARET

Well, something has. Maybe you can find someone else to go with, or maybe even get a refund on the tickets.

MEPHISTOPHELES

Where are the seats?

ARTIE

What? I was only kidding - there are no tickets. (Stands, pulls MARGARET aside) Margaret, what's happening to you?

MARGARET

What's happening to YOU? All of a sudden you're Mister Self-Righteous. Why can't you put things into perspective?

ARTIE

My perspective is just fine.

MARGARET

Oh? When was the last time you ate? When you bought your last shirt was the President a Democrat or a Republican?

ARTIE

Is that all that matters to you now?

MARGARET

How long will your stomach grumble before you do something about it?

ARTIE

Margaret, your soul is in jeopardy.

MARGARET

It's my soul. Leave it alone.

MEPHISTOPHELES

Uh, Margaret darling, I think we still have a few details to discuss.

MARGARET

(To ARTIE) Now, if you'll excuse me ...

ARTIE

But ... (hands her a piece of paper)

MARGARET

(Looks at the paper - annoyed) Another broom? Come on, Artie. It was cute for a while.

(MARGARET and  
MEPHISTOPHELES leave arm-  
in-arm.)

ARTIE

(To the audience) I know what you're thinking. You're thinking - "Can the playwright possibly be any more obvious?" The answer - sure, but when dealing with a delicate subject, sometimes it's best to bludgeon you over the head with it.

(goes to chalkboard)

After all, when you go out of your way to make a point,

(draws a big dot on the chalkboard)

usually the point isn't made.

(erases the dot)

(Blackout)

SCENE 10

"YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT"

(Lights up on ARTIE. He dons a white apron, picks up a bus pan and begins to pantomime cleaning the table like a table in a restaurant.)

ARTIE

(To the audience) I went to college.

(The BOSS enters. He carries a broom and starts sweeping.)

BOSS

Was I right?

ARTIE

Yep. This really bites.

BOSS

Y'know, I've run this place for almost a year now and I STILL can't afford to eat here.

ARTIE

Judging by the clientele, I wouldn't WANT to eat here.

BOSS

(Laughs) Me neither. But still it would be nice to make that much money to eat this fancy once in a while - if you wanted to.

ARTIE

To me eating fancy means paying for the meal AFTER you eat it.

BOSS

Either that, or in a place where you don't have to bus your own table.

ARTIE

Or carry a tray.

BOSS

(Laughs) You're a pip, Artie. You're a pip.

ARTIE

(Indicating something he'd picked up) Look at this. Barely touched it. (starts eating it)

BOSS  
Hey! You don't know where that's been!

ARTIE  
I don't care. I'm hungry.

BOSS  
Hey, give me a piece of that.

(ARTIE breaks off a piece  
and hands it to the  
BOSS.)

ARTIE  
You know, it's not bad.

BOSS  
It sure ain't worth what they pay for it.

ARTIE  
That's the truth.

BOSS  
But it sure beats Mac n' Cheese.

ARTIE  
The Poor Man's Caviar.

BOSS  
What about Ramen Noodles?

ARTIE  
You know, I have an idea.

(ARTIE moves the table  
out of the way, erases  
the chalkboard and starts  
to lecture the audience.)

ARTIE (cont'd)  
"You Are What You Eat" or how to eat on no budget at  
all. We've already brought up Mac and Cheese.  
(writes "Mac & Cheese" on the board)

BOSS  
Don't go for Kraft if you can help it. House brands  
always cost less.

ARTIE  
And don't bother following the directions either. It  
says to use butter and milk, but you can get by without  
it. True, it'll be a little sticky, but who cares.  
It's filling and won't make you too sick.

BOSS

Another think you can do is cut it with more noodles. Always keep a jar of pasta noodles handy. Just toss in a handful with the average box of mac n' cheese. It not only increases the volume but makes it a little more palatable.

ARTIE

As a matter of fact,  
(writes "PASTA PASTA PASTA" on the board)  
Pasta should be your number one staple.

BOSS

It's tasty, easy to cook and cheap.

ARTIE

A can of sauce can cost you less than a buck ...

BOSS

. . and if you're particularly daring, a little cottage cheese mixed with noodles - salted to taste - is not only healthy but quick. On the down side, cottage cheese tends to be pricey.

ARTIE

Only if you're fussy about expiration dates. Now ...  
(writes "Ramen Noodles" on the board)  
Ramen Noodles are probably the least expensive food around.

BOSS

Usually you can pick some up for about a quarter.

ARTIE

A little cooking tip - let them soak up the soup as long as possible. That way it's got a little more bulk.

BOSS

And bulk is something you want.

ARTIE

(Writes "Spuds" on the board)  
Potatoes can REALLY be your friend.

BOSS

As well as good food value for your dollar.

ARTIE

Or two dollars, depending on how upscale your grocery store is.

BOSS

Basically you can get a bag of taters for under two bucks. On the down side, you can't serve spuds plain.

ARTIE

I don't endorse the use of butter or margarine, but sometimes it's unavoidable - and this is one of those times. But it couldn't hurt to invest in a jar of garlic powder or onion powder to pep things up a little.

BOSS

And never peel 'em. Most of the nutritional value is in the skin - and you need all the nutrition you can get.

ARTIE

(Writes "RICE" on the board)

Rice is very versatile. Instant rice is on the pricey side, but normal rice is easy enough to fix without getting fancy. Always keep it around.

BOSS

A can of rice mixed in with a can of soup is a meal in itself.

ARTIE

Or you can fry it up with some left over veggies for something á la orientáalle.

BOSS

And, like the potatoes, there's that nutritional value thing.

ARTIE

Now, just because you're broke it doesn't mean that you have to eat tasteless food. And if you do, there's nothing that says you can't season.

BOSS

Seasonings don't cost much and will make all the difference between an enjoyable meal and wanting to slit your wrists.

ARTIE

Ketchup, mustard, oregano, garlic powder ...

BOSS

Salt is pretty cheap, but pepper can cost you. You can usually pocket some from your local restaurant.

ARTIE

On the upscale side there's soy sauce ...



BOSS

... again, a little Chinese take-out can keep you in soy sauce for a while, but who can afford take-out ...

ARTIE

... margarine, and don't forget Velveeta - or as we like to call it ...

ARTIE & BOSS

(Unison) Vegetarian Spam.

BOSS

Truly an all-purpose food.

ARTIE

But what about breakfast? Good question. I usually try to do without.

BOSS

But if you gotta eat something, go for plain toast.

ARTIE

Actually, eggs aren't that expensive.

BOSS

And never underestimate the power of leftovers.

ARTIE

(Writes "Peanut Butter" on the board)

Right now let me give you a major warning about the evils of Peanut Butter. Peanut Butter can be your best friend for a long time, making every meal special and cozy. But after about five or six months you'll never be able to look at a jar of peanut butter again for the rest of your life.

BOSS

Just THINKING of Peanut Butter makes me want to hurl.

ARTIE

Me, too. Now, before we close out the cooking portion of the show, let's touch on desert. Just because you don't have a penny to your name and have been stripped daily of any and all dignity, it doesn't mean you have to go without desert. Friends, I'm talking ...

(writes "P.C." on the board)

popcorn.

BOSS

Orville Reddenbacher, we love you.

ARTIE

But only in concept. Go for the house brands. And invest in an air popper. The kernels are real cheap and they cure those munchies at odd hours.

BOSS

And there you have it. How to Eat on a Non-Existent Budget.

ARTIE

Tune in next time when we'll go over one-hundred and one ways to stall your landlord and not get kicked out on the street.

BOSS

Good night.

ARTIE

Good night.

(Blackout)

SCENE 11

"DEGREES OF LOSERS"

(ARTIE sits at the table,  
drawing. His ex-WIFE  
watches him, studying  
everything he does.)

WIFE  
Are you finished?

ARTIE  
Soon.

WIFE  
(A beat) We don't have all day.

ARTIE  
Some things can't be rushed.

WIFE  
That's YOUR problem.

ARTIE  
Isn't there something else you can take?

WIFE  
I don't see anything else.

ARTIE  
Just hang on.

(ARTIE draws more  
furiously.)

ARTIE (cont'd)  
I thought you just wanted money.

WIFE  
In a realistic situation, sure. But this isn't  
realistic, is it.

ARTIE  
(Looks around) I guess not.

WIFE  
I hope you think this is easy for me.

ARTIE  
Isn't it?

WIFE

Do you think it's easy raising YOUR son alone?

ARTIE

What about your fiancé?

WIFE

He isn't as good with him as you were.

ARTIE

Then let me have him.

WIFE

(Laughs hysterically) Are you kidding?!

ARTIE

Why not?

WIFE

Because it has to be this way. (a little tender)  
Look, Artie, sometimes you can be so idealistic.  
Sometimes in life there are no winners, only degrees of  
losers.

ARTIE

I lost a whole lot more than you did.

WIFE

It had to be that way.

ARTIE

I'm almost finished.

WIFE

(After a long pause) Why don't you call him?

ARTIE

Who?

WIFE

Your son.

ARTIE

Could we not talk about it, please?

WIFE

Okay, okay.

ARTIE

(After another long pause) Is he okay?

WIFE

He asks about you.

ARTIE

What do you tell him?

WIFE

I tell him that sometimes mommies and daddies sometimes have to be away from each other. I tell him that you love him very much. (a beat) You DO, don't you?

ARTIE

What kind of a question is THAT?!

WIFE

I mean, you don't call ... you're MONTHS behind on your child support ...

ARTIE

Look, what do you want?

WIFE

More! More than you've got ... more than you're doing ... more than you can give!

(WIFE goes to the chalk board and starts writing "MORE" over and over again all over the stuff from the previous scene.)

ARTIE

I'm giving you all I can!

WIFE

It's not enough!

ARTIE

I can't do any more!

WIFE

(Stops writing) That's not my problem!

(ARTIE throws the drawing to the ground.)

ARTIE

(Practically in tears from anger and frustration) WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS TO ME?!

WIFE

THIS IS THE PRICE OF FREEDOM! (a beat - calms down)  
You're on your own now. You're where you want to be doing what you want to do. You're responsible only for yourself now. I have a life I'm responsible for. It's not easy, Artie.

ARTIE

It's not easy for me. At least you'll be there when he scrapes his knee, and learns to read, and starts school, and everything. Every night he'll put his arms around you and say "I love you, Mommy" and give you a big kiss. I don't have that anymore.

WIFE

Like I said, there's only degrees of losers. I didn't want it this way.

ARTIE

Then you shouldn't have cheated on me.

WIFE

Not now. You promised.

ARTIE

That's right. I'm sorry.

WIFE

(A beat) How's that girl you're seeing?

ARTIE

Margaret? Not too good. She's selling her soul.

WIFE

I always suspected. (A beat) You WILL find someone else, you know.

ARTIE

On my income? What little I make YOU get.

WIFE

Hmmm. You're right. That doesn't paint a real attractive picture. Have you ever considered a second job?

ARTIE

I've GOT a second job.

WIFE

Oh. (awkwardly indicates the drawing he threw down)  
Uh, you know you really need to ...

ARTIE

I know, I know.

(ARTIE picks up the drawing and continues.)

WIFE

It doesn't have to be this difficult, you know.

ARTIE  
I know. It's hard compromising everything.

WIFE  
It's just your drawing.

ARTIE  
It's my life.

WIFE  
I know.

(ARTIE draws, WIFE  
watches. Fadeout.)

SCENE 12

"THE BANK"

(A bank TELLER stands behind the table. ARTIE approaches and hands him a piece of paper.)

TELLER

(Looks at the paper) What's this?

ARTIE

An ice-breaker. (indicates) See? It's a boat - an "Ice Breaker!" I thought it could break the ice ... so to speak.

TELLER

I see. Can I help you with something?

ARTIE

I'm having trouble getting money with my ATM card. (hands TELLER the card)

TELLER

I see. (pantomimes running it through a scanner) Enter your PIN number, please.

ARTIE

(Entering the number) I hate it when this happens.

TELLER

I'm sure it's a simple problem.  
(looks at an imaginary computer terminal)  
It says here you're thirty dollars overdrawn. What's your problem exactly?

ARTIE

It won't let me withdraw any money.

TELLER

Of course not - you're overdrawn. What did the ATM say when you attempted your withdrawal?

ARTIE

(Hedging, embarrassed) That ... I ... was thirty dollars overdrawn.

TELLER

I'm sorry sir, but there's nothing I can do.

ARTIE

Come on. You've got to.



TELLER

I'm sorry, I can't. Until you make a deposit you can't make a withdrawal. That's usually the way it works.

ARTIE

You don't understand. I don't get paid for another week and I'm out of food.

TELLER

I'm very sorry. Maybe there's a shelter you can go to.

ARTIE

Look, the money will be there in six days. Can't I get out a little? Maybe a twenty?

TELLER

No. Now if you'll move along ...

ARTIE

(Becomes more agitated and frantic) You don't understand, pal. I'm broke ... busted ... rock bottom ... in the dire straits ... the well is dry ... I'm scrapin' the barrel ... a charity case ... there's nary a penny to my name.

TELLER

(Embarrassed, trying to appease him so he'll go away) Look sir, I'm very sorry, but what would you like me to do?

ARTIE

(Exasperated) I don't know ... I don't know. Just give me the answer to all this.

TELLER

An answer ... ?

ARTIE

What can I do?

TELLER

I don't know ... a part-time job maybe?

ARTIE

I've got one. All proceeds go directly to my ex-wife and son.

TELLER

I'm sorry ... you really have to move along, sir. There are other people in line ...

ARTIE

I understand. (holds his stomach and winces as it  
"growls") Damn. I'm going, I'm going. (starts to go)

TELLER

Sir?

(ARTIE stops and turns.  
He has a very angry and  
hurt expression. The  
TELLER hands his card  
back.)

TELLER (cont'd)

Your card?

(ARTIE snatches the card  
and exits. The TELLER  
watches, sadly.)

TELLER (cont'd)

I really like the boat.

(TELLER looks at the  
drawing. Fadeout.)

SCENE 13

"TIME, PART 2"

(ARTIE sits on the table, looking off stage for a painfully long time. TIME enters seductively, wearing the same sweat suit as earlier. She has a water bottle, which she drinks from leisurely.)

TIME  
Waiting for me?

ARTIE  
Aren't I always?

TIME  
Oh, what is it this time? Still waiting from that response from Marvel Comics?

ARTIE  
It's been a long time.

TIME  
You're exhausting, you know that?

ARTIE  
Plan on caving in?

TIME  
Nope.

ARTIE  
I'll beat you. You wait and see.

TIME  
You want to beat time? Cute.  
(snaps her fingers in time)  
One ... two ... three ... four ...

ARTIE  
Cut it out!

TIME  
Oooh, testy. I like that. (starts seductively touching ARTIE)

ARTIE  
(Shaking her off) What do you want from me?!

TIME

To give in. To stop pushing me. A lady can only take so much pressure.

ARTIE

When will you start working WITH me instead of AGAINST me?!

TIME

Honey, some things just can't happen.

ARTIE

Why?

TIME

(Royally pissed-off) Because, okay?! Everybody has their lot in life and yours is to be at my mercy. I don't make the rules and I'd appreciate it if you'd just do your time and leave me alone! (thinks) That sounds pretty kinky, doesn't it?

(Long pause. ARITE sits, coldly. TIME bows her head with a bit of shame.)

ARTIE

How long am I going to wait for this one?

TIME

A long time.

ARTIE

Days?

TIME

Months.

(They freeze for a few seconds. Fadeout.)

SCENE 14

"THE HOMELESS MAN, PART 3"

(ARTIE enters the stage wearing a coat. He looks very angry and holds his arm. He has just given blood. He waits around for a few moments. The HOMELESS MAN follows, looking not so unhappy.)

ARTIE

Why did I let you talk me into this?

HOMELESS MAN

You asked.

ARTIE

(A beat) I hate this.

HOMELESS MAN

Yeah, but it's money.

ARTIE

I know, I know. It doesn't make it any easier.

HOMELESS MAN

It doesn't hurt, does it?

ARTIE

More my pride than my arm.

HOMELESS MAN

You can't afford pride.

ARTIE

You're right. Well, at least I eat for another week. What are you gonna do with your money?

HOMELESS MAN

I don't know ... I was thinking of putting a down payment on a co-op.

ARTIE

Seriously.

HOMELESS MAN

No plans, really. It'll stay in my pocket for the most part. Maybe a some fruit.

ARTIE

It seems so anti-climactic. We give blood for what? A few bucks? It hardly makes a difference.

HOMELESS MAN

After a while the bucket becomes so deep and so empty that a drop here and there really doesn't make a big difference in the long run. It just keeps the bottom a little damp for a while.

ARTIE

You're not gonna use it for ... you know ...

HOMELESS MAN

You think I'm a drunk?

ARTIE

Well ... not exactly ...

HOMELESS MAN

It's okay. Never touch the stuff. Lots of them do. It's how they cope. You?

ARTIE

Nah. Can't afford it.

HOMELESS MAN

It's all a matter of priorities.

ARTIE

I can't even budget. After the essentials - rent, insurance, electric, child support, legal fees - there's hardly enough to even eat off of.

HOMELESS MAN

What about art stuff?

ARTIE

I need art supplies.

HOMELESS MAN

You still haven't reached the bottom yet - unless you can eat them supplies.

ARTIE

I have to draw. If I don't then I'm doing this for nothing.

HOMELESS MAN

I can't say I agree with your priorities.

ARTIE

But they're MY priorities. I have to go to an art museum at least once a month. Does that make me terrible? I NEED to go. It inspires me - it feeds me.

It's what I'm doing all this for. I mean, what's the point of banging your head against the wall all the time working two jobs and eating dust when you can't enjoy some of the fruits of your labor?

HOMELESS MAN

You mean with today's economy?

ARTIE

ESPECIALLY in today's economy. I may not be able to buy The Laundry Lady on the corner flowers, but I can draw flowers and she still smiles.

HOMELESS MAN

Stay away from The Laundry Lady. She's crazy.

ARTIE

She still deserves to smile once in a while. It may be the end of me, but if I can't make my fortune drawing at least I can make people smile. It's not the tastiest fruit of my labor, but it's fruit. (beat)  
How long before we can give blood again?

HOMELESS MAN

I like to give it about two months. You don't do anybody any good if you pass out.

ARTIE

You'll let me know?

HOMELESS MAN

What about your pride?

ARTIE

I think I'll go draw The Laundry Lady some pansies. Maybe some mums.

HOMELESS MAN

Sounds like some tasty fruit to me.

(They shake hands, but wince since they use the arms they gave blood from. Fadeout.)

SCENE 15

"DADDY"

(ARTIE is alone. He  
pantomimes dialing the  
phone.)

ARTIE

Hello? It's Artie. (beat) Yes, I know ... I know. (beat)  
I KNOW. Look, I called. Alright? (beat) Yes. It's in  
the mail. (beat) Can I ... can I ... (beat) Thank you.  
(pause)

(With gentle excitement) Hi! Do you know who this is?  
(beat) It's daddy! (beat) Yes, it's daddy. (beat)  
Hello, son. (a beat) Yes, I know. (beat) Is mommy being  
good to you? (beat) She did? (beat) She did? (beat)  
Wow, that's great.

Did you get the pictures I sent you? (beat) I did those!  
(beat) Maybe mommy will help you put them up in your  
room. (beat) Uh-huh ... uh-huh ... that's terrific.  
(beat) I'll send you more real soon.

Look ... look ... I have to go now. (beat) I don't know.  
(beat) Soon. Very soon. (beat) I'll be home very soon.  
(beat) No ... no, don't ask mommy. I promise I'll be  
home very soon. (beat) I love you.

(ARTIE hangs up the phone.)

ARTIE (cont'd)

(To audience, a little embarrassed) I'll be alright.  
Really. But if you would be so kind as to excuse me I feel  
the need to regain my composure. See you in about fifteen  
minutes.

(ARTIE walks off stage.  
Blackout.)

\* END OF ACT 1 \*