

Thank You, Don Ameche

A comedy in two acts

by

Lawrence A. Herman

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*Thank You, Don Ameche* was first produced by Ben Batchelder for the Brooklyn Alternative Theater Collective in July 2025 for a preview engagement at the Sargent Theater, American Theater of Actors, 314 W. 54th St. New York City, NY 10019 with the following cast:

Phil Horowitz: Joe Castinado

Arlen Carter: Emma Taylor Miller

Artie Benkman: Ryan Scott Thomas

Sammy Arnold: Mark Simonoff

Howard Edison: Dylan Smith

*Understudies*

Phil: Uri Zerbib

Arlene: Annelise Lipowitz

Artie, Sammy, Howard: Christopher Davis

Directed by Lawrence A. Herman

Costumes: Olly Huey

Props: Mary-Ellen Ransom

Public Relations: Lauren Dietzel

CHARACTERS (in order of appearance)

**Howard Edison**, male, mid-to-late 20s. Younger and greener than the others, less comfortable in the spotlight. He is more of a pen-and-paper writer than the others, and deferential as this is a new situation for him.

**Phil Horowitz**, male, early 40s, restless, small but energetic, always moving. Phil is a performer at heart, always in need of an audience. He can be self-centered and even obnoxious but has charm and a magnetic personality.

**Artie Benkman**, male, 37, calm and quiet; he might seem listless at times if his jokes didn’t show how sharp his mind is. He has a deep-seated negativity that comes out almost all the time, but is never angry. Rather he is resigned to living in a world he doesn’t like and even grateful to have found his place in it regardless.

**Arlene Carter**, female, 30s, describes herself as “dumpy” but is attractive; she is a little less forward than the men in the room, but manages to project herself, her wit, and her feelings.

**Sammy Arnold**, male, a few years older than the others, a leader comfortable with authority and not needing to be forceful to be influential. He is about as effective a moderator of everyone in the room as is possible with this group, and that includes using humor to keep everyone focused, although he does get exasperated at times.

*All of the characters are comedy writers and thus have good command of language and verbal facility. They are all likable, although in different ways. It is appropriate for any of the characters to laugh at other characters’ punch lines, even if not specified in the script. They insult each other continuously, but none of them take it as anything except joke writing. It should be clear that Phil, Artie, Arlene, and Sammy care deeply for each other, and that Howard quickly comes under the spell of the room.*

SETTING: The writers’ room of a network radio show in mid-town Manhattan, near Broadway.

TIME: 1938

Act I: 10 o’clock Monday morning.

Act II: Immediately thereafter.

**ACT I**

*(The writer’s room of a national radio show in 1938. It’s a bare-bones setting. There is a table and chairs with a typewriter and typing paper on the table. Pads of paper and mechanical pencils are laying wherever they happen to have been thrown the last time they were used. A counter against the back wall has a percolator on a hot plate and some coffee mugs, also in disorder. There is a coat rack in another corner. A door stage left leads to the hall.*

*The door opens and HOWARD EDISON walks in. He’s in his 20s and obviously green. He closes the door behind him and looks around, puzzled that no one else is here. He swivels his head to make sure he’s not missing anyone. He opens the door, looks at the nameplate to make sure he’s in the right place, then closes the door again. He sits down at the table and waits, looking at the pads to see if there’s anything interesting on them.*

*The door opens again and PHIL HOROWITZ comes in. PHIL is a ball of energy. He goes over to the coat rack, takes off his coat, and hangs it up.)*

PHIL

Who’s the guest star this week?

HOWARD

Sorry, I don’t know.

PHIL

Who are you? You from the network? They keep sending know-it-all kids over here. What do network schmucks know about writing a radio show? *(Building up steam)* Do you know how hard we work to get this program on with these idiots you have hosting it?

HOWARD

I’m not…

PHIL

Sure you’re not! Nobody is!

*(ARTIE has come in. He carries a newspaper, which he throws on the table.)*

ARTIE

Hello, beautiful people.

PHIL

No! No! It’s beautiful *person*! I’m beautiful, he’s a network schmuck. And network schmucks are not beautiful. They’re ugly. You can see it in their eyes, they’re like windows into their twisted, heartless souls.

ARTIE

*(To HOWARD)* Good morning, Heartless.

HOWARD

I’m not heartless! I’m not *network.* I…

PHIL

You phony philistine! You craven catastrophe! You insolent isolationist!

HOWARD

Isolationist??

PHIL

You pontificating proctologist!

*(ARLENE enters and hangs her jacket on the coat stand.)*

HOWARD

What?? That doesn’t even make any sense.

ARLENE

I remember the days it took Phil until noon to work up to incomprehensible alliteration.

*(SAMMY enters.)*

PHIL

I’m just getting started! I’ve had enough of these penny-pincher, pencil-pusher, floor-fisher…

SAMMY

That’s ‘four flusher’.

PHIL

Not him! He’s a five-flusher. An eight-flusher. He probably goes higher than that.

HOWARD

I’m not from the network! I’m a writer.

PHIL

*(Complete change of attitude; extending his hand)* Hi. Nice to meet you.

HOWARD

*(Shaking hands)* Likewise, I hope.

SAMMY

You must be Howard Edison.

HOWARD

That’s right.

SAMMY

They told me you’d be coming.

HOWARD

I’m glad they told someone. He thought I was from the network, looking to destroy the show.

ARLENE

He knows who you are. He’s trying to be funny.

PHIL

I don’t try. I *am* funny.

ARLENE

Howard, this is Phil. He’s funny.

PHIL

This is a comedy program. *Someone* has to be funny.

ARTIE

Variety.

PHIL

It’s comedy. Nobody listens to the variety part. We do opening banter, sketches, guest banter, closing banter, and commercials in case anyone is listening to them. Then a few times a show some singer or piano player comes out so everyone can take a leak for 2 minutes. That’s the variety.

HOWARD

So you’re funny *and* bitter.

PHIL

Ooh, I like this guy.

ARTIE

No, you don’t. He left out ‘brilliant.’

PHIL

*(Turning on HOWARD)* You bastard!

SAMMY

*(Coming to HOWARD and extending his hand)* I’m Sammy Arnold. It’s nice to meet you.

*(HOWARD shakes SAMMY’s hand.)*

PHIL

He’s *the* Sammy Arnold. The *award-winning* Sammy Arnold. He’s the boss.

SAMMY

But I try to downplay it. Authority makes Phil go crazy.

PHIL

That’s it, we’re on strike! Down with head writers!

SAMMY

Officially I’m the head writer. In here it’s more like ‘The Lone Babysitter.’

PHIL

Hi-ho Sammy, away!

*(PHIL starts vocalizing the Lone Ranger theme (William Tell Overture) conducting an imaginary orchestra.)*

HOWARD

I love your work. *Our Day* was a great program.

SAMMY

Thank you. I really liked the sketches you’ve done. Very clever stuff.

PHIL

Sammy loves clever. Funny he don’t know from.

HOWARD

*(To SAMMY)* Thank you. I appreciate that.

SAMMY

This is Phil Horowitz.

PHIL

I used to be Phil Horowitz. I changed it to Sir Deadbody of Glockenspiel to help my career.

*(HOWARD extends his hand to PHIL)*

ARLENE

He was going to change it to Cary Grant, but it was already taken.

PHIL

He was two people ahead of me in line!

(*PHIL takes HOWARD’s hand, turns it over, inspects it, then shakes it.)*

SAMMY

And this is Arlene Carter.

ARLENE

I used to be Arlene Carter. I changed it to Phil Horowitz to help my career.

ARTIE

She was at the *end* of the line.

HOWARD

*(Flustered at meeting a woman in what is usually a men’s-only space.)* How do you do?

ARLENE

*(Extended her hand)* You can shake a woman’s hand, Howard. *(HOWARD shakes ARLENE’s hand.)*

HOWARD

I didn’t mean…

ARLENE

I know. I get that often. Women aren’t a common sight in writers rooms.

SAMMY

Arlene’s a singer. Or she started out that way.

ARLENE

But I was too dumpy to be a chorus girl on Broadway. Radio is perfect for me.

PHIL

I think she’s gorgeous. We eloped. This is our honeymoon.

SAMMY

She was in the chorus on a bunch of shows, but she’s so witty I invited her into this room. She’s still on the network payroll as a singer.

ARLENE

I’ve called in sick 8 months in a row.

SAMMY

Howard, don’t let these guys corrupt you. We have enough one-line writers. We need you as a sketch constructionist.

PHIL

Sketch, schmetch. Funny is funny. When I played the Palace...

SAMMY

You never played the Palace, Phil.

PHIL

When I was in vaudeville I played *better* than the Palace.

ARTIE

When Phil was in vaudeville, Marconi saw his act. That’s when he decided we needed radio.

HOWARD

Better than the Palace? The Palace was the top of the heap.

SAMMY

Phil is a funny guy, but his hold on reality is a little tenuous.

PHIL

If reality is so great, why do people listen to the radio? You think that’s reality?

ARTIE

*(Opening his newspaper)* He’s right. Reality ain’t so great. Look at these headlines. There’s going to be another war.

SAMMY

There’s not gonna be any war. Nobody wants a war.

ARTIE

Nobody wanted the last war.

SAMMY

And this is Artie Benkman.

HOWARD

Don’t tell me you use your actual name.

ARTIE

No, I changed it from Julius Caesar. I didn’t want to ride on my family’s coattails.

PHIL

War, yeah. Let’s do a war sketch. I got it! A colonel who thinks his family is better fighters than his troops so he drafts them all.

ARTIE

Or we could get an idea.

PHIL

*(Peeved)* Thank you, Don Ameche.

HOWARD

Don Ameche? Is he a guest on the show?

ARLENE

No, that’s what Phil says whenever he’s ticked off.

ARTIE

Just a little sarcasm to lighten the mood.

HOWARD

What have you got against Don Ameche?

ARLENE

Phil’s got something against everybody.

ARTIE

But it balances out, because everybody has something against Phil.

PHIL

Thank *you*, Don Ameche.

SAMMY

Don Ameche had very little to do with it.

PHIL

No, it was that schmuck from the network.

ARTIE

You’re already familiar with Phil’s attitude toward the network.

PHIL

What was his name? Faberman? O’Shaughnessy? Pagliacci?

ARLENE

Yeah, one of those.

PHIL

It doesn’t matter. They’re all schmucks.

ARTIE

Phil was trying to break into radio as a writer. This was a couple years ago.

PHIL

Lemme tell it. It was the Scrub-True Soap Hour. They were a lousy show.

ARTIE

They were actually doing pretty well in the ratings, so they got the OK to increase the guest star budget. And they got Don Ameche.

PHIL

I was doing spec scripts, looking to break in. I’d gotten some work freelance, so they tapped me to write a sketch for Ameche.

ARTIE

Phil and 20 other guys. That’s what they do. They get 20 scripts and pay one guy. Then they use the other scripts later without paying anybody.

HOWARD

Is that what you guys did to me?

SAMMY

Yeah, but in your case the other 19 scripts were rotten.

PHIL

So I figure, Don Ameche… a leading man, a romance guy, started on the radio working on afternoon serials, now he’s breaking into pictures. How do I stand out? I need something new. I think, I think...

ARLENE

Something new already.

PHIL

...and I get it. Everybody, everybody is going to be writing parodies of daytime serials. Romance stories winking at the audience, ha ha, silly romance, that kind of stuff. So I figure I’ll go against type. Ameche will play *(PHIL pauses a moment to create dramatic tension)...* the devil!

HOWARD

A devil sketch? I’ve seen them on stage, but they don’t touch that on radio.

PHIL

Exactly! So I need an idea for a devil sketch that they *can* do on the radio. And I come up with one. It’s beautiful. See, the devil doesn’t like being the devil. He’s thinks people are really good deep down, so he’s looking for a way out. And he finds this sucker and he tries to sell the whole place to him. See? I really walked the line. It was brilliant.

HOWARD

Right. I heard you were brilliant.

PHIL

So I get word that they want me up in this network guy’s office. I’m nervous but I’m all set. I got the whole script memorized, I got my arguments, I got a bunch of substitute lines if they don’t like anything, right?

And I go up to this guy’s office. You have to picture this. It’s not some writer’s room. It’s a big-cheese network room with a big-cheese network guy sitting behind a big-cheese network desk. A big, mahogany desk with a hundred pictures of famous celebrities on it and no work. Three-piece suit, the whole bit.

I walk in and I figure I gotta take the lead right from the start. So I say, “Let me tell you why this works.” And he says right out, “I’m afraid we can’t use it. You’re not a radio writer.”

I’m stunned. I’m all ready to argue that the public will appreciate the daring. I’m all ready to argue that Don Ameche playing against type will draw the audience in. I’m all ready to argue that it’s not sneering at people, it’s encouraging people to be good. But “You’re not a radio writer”? How the hell do I argue that?”

So I say, “I don’t understand. Could you be more specific?”

So he says, “Well, this line here.” I say, “Which line? Where the devil says, ‘I haven’t had as much fun down here as I thought’? I got another line.”

“No, not that,” he says.

I say, “You mean the one where the other guy says, ‘I know a few women who should be here.’? It’s not dirty. I can fix it.”

He says, “No, no. This one here, after the sketch.”

I say, “*After* the sketch?”

He says, “Yeah. After the sketch, Dottie comes out and she says, ‘Thank you, Don.’”

I say, “’Thank you, Don’? That’s no good?”

He says, “This is radio. People turn it on and they turn it off. They don’t always listen all the way through. They don’t always know what’s going on. But what they have to know is that *we got a star on the show*. She has to say, ‘Thank you, Don Ameche.’”

*(PHIL lets that hang in the air a second.)*

I didn’t even try to argue. I didn’t bother to tell them that if they used my sketch Dottie could say ‘Thank you, General Sherman’ for all I cared. I just folded up my script, put it in my pocket and walked out.

Except when I got to the door, I turned around and said to the guy, “Thank you, Don Ameche.” And I’ve been saying it ever since.

HOWARD

That’s a great story.

ARTIE

Probably better than the sketch.

HOWARD

What happened to the sketch? Did it ever get on the air?

ARLENE

It’s still in his pocket. It’ll burn in hell when Phil gets there.

ARTIE

Maybe the devil will use it. I’ve heard he uses Phil’s sketches to torture people.

SAMMY

He keeps it in his pocket to remind him that the guy was right.

HOWARD

He was right??

SAMMY

He was a schmuck and he didn’t know good writing from a shopping list. He never should have been in the position of judging material. But he got to be a big deal at the network by making sure that the show did what the show needed to do. Sometimes you have to play that game. You have to satisfy the network guys and the audience. Being funny, that’s the hard part, and the most important thing. But don’t forget the rest.

PHIL

Not forgetting the rest is Sammy’s job.

ARLENE

Which lets the rest of us concentrate on being brilliant.

SAMMY

So, while we have all been hilarious this morning, we haven’t got a word down on paper. Let’s get to work.

ARTIE

Hey, I got a brilliant idea!

SAMMY

Let’s have it.

ARTIE

We do a war sketch. There’s this colonel who thinks his family is better fighters than his soldiers so he drafts them all.

PHIL

*(To ARTIE)* Thank you, Don Ameche.

HOWARD

You guys do 2 or 3 sketches a week, right?

SAMMY

Hour show, we have to fill 26 minutes with sketches. Plus the opening, the banter with the guest star, the rest of it. 12 minutes for commercials. The long sketches are tougher. They like it when we do one long and two short. But sometimes we do three medium, sometimes two long.

ARTIE

It depends on how brilliant Phil is.

ARLENE

If it was up to Phil, we’d do an hour of Ed Wynn’s material.

SAMMY

You’ve heard the repeating sketches we do. Those are easier.

PHIL

Judge Kelly. That was mine, always kills.

ARLENE

How long’s it been since we did Kelly’s Court? Can we do another one?

HOWARD

Wait a second. Have you ever done two sketches with the same characters in one show?

SAMMY

Repeating a sketch on the same show? No.

HOWARD

Well, not two different stories, but two scenes of the same story.

PHIL

*(Scornfully)* This isn’t a sitcom.

HOWARD

I was just thinking, Phil’s idea.

PHIL

My idea! I knew it was great. What idea?

HOWARD

The colonel in the army, who drafts his family.

ARTIE

It seemed kind of goofy.

PHIL

You ever listen to the radio? It’s goofy all day, except for 10 minutes every night on the news when they tell you who died.

SAMMY

*(To HOWARD)* How do you see it?

HOWARD

One sketch with the colonel at home. Domestic disputes, etc. Then a second sketch where they’re drafted.

ARTIE

You could just do the drafted.

SAMMY

No, he’s right. One sketch, it would seem goofy. Family in the army. But two sketches, it’s grounded. And the second sketch would come as a surprise.

ARLENE

So the audience thinks it’s a separate army sketch. But they suddenly realize it’s the same colonel.

SAMMY

I don’t think the network would have a problem with it in theory.

PHIL

My theory is, nobody cares about theory.

ARLENE

Certainly nobody cares about Phil’s theories.

SAMMY

But if the network turns the sketch down, we have to write two new sketches.

PHIL

We’re writers, aren’t we?

ARTIE

You can’t call yourself a writer until you learn the alphabet.

ARLENE

*(To PHIL)* The fourth letter is ‘D’.

HOWARD

We need to think of some kind of argument they could have at home that would mirror an argument for soldiers.

PHIL

Jealousy. It’s my favorite.

ARTIE

Hey, before we get into this, can we get some coffee going?

PHIL

It’s Arlene’s turn to make the coffee.

ARLENE

*(Walking over to the counter to make coffee)* I made the coffee yesterday.

PHIL

Who made the coffee the day before?

ARLENE

Arlene made the coffee the day before.

PHIL

Who made the coffee the day before that?

ARLENE

Arlene made the coffee the day before that.

PHIL

So who’s turn is it?

ARLENE

Must be Arlene’s turn.

ARTIE

Be patient, Phil. You’ll get your turn soon.

*(PHIL follows ARLENE over to the kitchen corner.)*

HOWARD

I could use a cup of coffee.

*(HOWARD goes over to the coffee and takes a mug from the counter.)*

SAMMY

That’s my mug.

ARTIE

This again?

SAMMY

It’s my personal mug.

ARTIE

It means a lot to Sammy. It took him three hours before he finally knocked down all the milk bottles.

SAMMY

They gave it to me when the show hit the top 10. It has my name on it.

PHIL

He keeps it here as a reminder of how far we can go in this business.

HOWARD

I didn’t know. Are there extras?

PHIL

If you admit I’m brilliant, you can use my mug.

ARLENE

Make sure he means a coffee cup and not his face. That’s a handicap you’d never get over.

HOWARD

So a colonel and his wife.

ARTIE

Who’s the guest star?

SAMMY

Don’t know yet.

ARLENE

Don’t know yet? We go on the air Friday.

ARTIE

Male or female? Who gets the star part?

SAMMY

They thought they were going to get Myrna Loy, but she backed out.

PHIL

Good. I prefer Claudette Colbert.

ARTIE

If I ever need someone for a double date with the both of them, you’re out. Claudette is mine.

SAMMY

We’ll just have to write them equal. We’ll make it flexible in case we have to shift some lines over one way or the other. If the guest is a woman, Jimmy can play the colonel. If it’s a guy, DeeDee can play the wife.

PHIL

*(To HOWARD)* You listen to him. He knows the difference between a man and a woman. That’s how he got his mug.

SAMMY

We’ve done all sorts of domestic argument sketches but not a military one. How would a colonel argue with his wife? What kind of argument?

PHIL

Maybe the wife wants Claudette.

HOWARD

*(Shaking his head at PHIL’s inability to focus)* Wereany of you in the service?

SAMMY

Artie was. He was in the war.

*(ARTIE continues reading the paper and doesn’t respond.)*

HOWARD

Did you know any colonels we could use for models?

ARTIE

Colonels didn’t come down into the trenches.

*(HOWARD gets that ARTIE doesn’t want to talk about it.)*

HOWARD

Oh…well the audience won’t know about colonels either. We don’t want to be realistic, we want to be funny. Or we could just make him a captain or something.

PHIL

Nah, colonel is funny. Captain sounds like a snooty waiter. I hate snooty waiters.

ARLENE

You know what might be funny? If the positions at home were reversed. You know, the wife was military-ish, everything done by the book, and the colonel was kind of, what’s the opposite of that?

ARTIE

Peaceful.

ARLENE

Just kind of loose, sloppy, lazy.

SAMMY

What happens is, the colonel gets into a fight with his wife. And she argues much more forcefully than him, even though he’s the soldier.

ARTIE

Where do you start? “I’m home from the army, dear?”

ARLENE

She’s trying to get him to the breakfast table to start his day.

PHIL

He comes in all sleepy and she yells “Ten-hut” and he snaps to.

*(SAMMY sits at the table, takes a pencil and paper, and starts to scribble. He will scribble down notes whenever the group is working on a sketch.)*

SAMMY

How do you snap to on radio?

PHIL

*(Taking center stage)* “Ten-hut!” “Yes, Sir!...Stop that, Phyllis!”

*(HOWARD laughs. SAMMY scribbles.)*

SAMMY

Before that.

HOWARD

She’s calling him. But funny. You need one of those names that you can stretch out.

ARLENE

Billy. No, that’s a kid. Wiiiilliam.

ARTIE

Ehhhhhhhhhhhhhd-*(voice rising)-muuuuuuund! (Everyone laughs)* She calls him, ‘Colonel! Colonel!’ but no answer. Then she Edmunds him and he shows up.

ARLENE

*(Acting the part of the wife)* Billy: *(Snaps her fingers)* plates! Maureen: *(Snaps her fingers)* silverware! Harold: *(Snaps her fingers)* salt and pepper!

ARTIE

‘Janey, you don’t set out the glasses anymore! Read the duty roster!’

HOWARD

‘Maureen, when was the last time you shined your boots?’

ARLENE

‘Colonel! Colonel!… Where is your father? It’s late. *(Hog calling)* Ehhhhhd-muuuuund!’

SAMMY

Reaction.

PHIL

*(Taking the colonel part; sleepily)* ‘Aw, jeez, Phyllis. I get enough of this at the barracks.’

SAMMY

Can’t say ‘jeez’.

PHIL

Oh, Christ!

ARTIE

You’d be the last person he helps, Phil.

PHIL

I used to use ‘odds bodkins’ in my act. They loved it.

HOWARD

I once tried to use ‘suffering succotash’ but they wouldn’t even let me say that.

SAMMY

Those are religious. Any non-religious ones?

ARLENE

They don’t shorten non-religious ones. That’s the point.

HOWARD

For Pete’s sake.

SAMMY

Still religious! We’ll just go with ‘Aw’.

ARLENE

A little too milquetoast. ‘Great guns’? He’s a colonel. Gotta be some military there.

PHIL

Great googly moogly!

ARTIE

For Pershing’s sake.

SAMMY

That’s it.

PHIL

‘For Pershing’s sake, Phyllis, I get enough of that at the barracks.’

ARLENE

‘You’re out of uniform!’

PHIL

‘I’m still in my pajamas, Phyllis.’

ARLENE

‘When I married a colonel in the US army, I expected a little more discipline.’

SAMMY

On the right track, but can we get a joke in there?

HOWARD

No husband of mine…

ARTIE

Get the time in. Too early for him.

PHIL

‘I’m still in my pajamas, Phyllis. What time is it?’

ARLENE

‘It’s already past 4 am.’

ARTIE

Oh four hundred.

ARLENE

*(Some genuine anger, not in the sketch, coming to the surface.)* ‘It’s already past oh four hundred. Get that sand out of your eyes!’

PHIL

‘Phyllis, I’m a colonel at the base. But when I’m home I don’t want…’

ARTIE

‘When I’ve got a 3-day pass.’

PHIL

‘...when I’ve got a 3-day pass, I like to get away from it all.’

HOWARD

Gimme a hug.

PHIL

‘I like to get away from it all. Come on, now, give me a hug. Be my sweet little girl.’

SAMMY

Army that up.

PHIL

‘Be my sweet little…’

ARTIE

They did have a few women in the navy.

HOWARD

Nurse?

ARTIE

Auxiliary.

SAMMY

That’s it. *(SAMMY pushes a pad over to HOWARD, who picks up a pencil to help SAMMY capture the dialogue.)*

PHIL

‘Be my sweet little auxiliary.’

ARLENE

‘Your sweet little auxiliary?!’

SAMMY

Not angry. Military.

ARLENE

‘Thursday at twenty-one hundred hours. Read your duty roster!’

*(SAMMY, ARTIE, and HOWARD laugh. PHIL and ARLENE stay in character.)*

SAMMY

We used duty roster. Is there something else we can call it?

HOWARD

Just hit the joke off the word. ‘I don’t know why I bother writing out a duty roster!”

ARLENE

‘I don’t know why I bother writing out a duty roster at all!”

PHIL

‘I have to do that all day, Phyllis. When I come home, I want to feel different.’

SAMMY

Examples.

PHIL

‘I march the guys up and down all day, Phyllis.’

ARLENE

‘I don’t know how with the kind of discipline you have. They’re probably running all over the battlefield.’

SAMMY

Wait…

PHIL

‘I have more discipline than you know. You don’t understand.’

ARLENE

‘I’ll believe that when I see it.’

SAMMY

Army, people.

PHIL

‘I have to be ready to fight all day long, Phyllis. I don’t need everything at home to be a fight.’

ARLENE

‘And polish your gun! The damn thing is practically useless.’

*(HOWARD and SAMMY start to laugh, but quickly stop. PHIL doesn’t respond, and the line hangs in the air a second. HOWARD is clearly surprised. ARTIE purposefully ignores the remark and looks at his newspaper.)*

SAMMY

*(Diplomatically)* Hold it, guys, we’re off track . . . I think I have a headache coming on. Arlene, can you run out to the drugstore to get me some aspirin?

ARLENE

*(Sorry for making things uncomfortable)* Yeah, sure. We’ll be on track soon as I get back.

ARTIE

Could you bring me a doughnut?

*(ARTIE reaches into his pocket, takes out a nickel, and gives it to ARLENE.)*

SAMMY

Why don’t you bring some back for all of us? The show will pay for it.

*(SAMMY takes a dollar out of his pocket and gives it to ARLENE, who takes it and gives the nickel back to ARTIE.)*

ARTIE

Wow, that’s generous. They paid for doughnuts less than a year ago.

PHIL

I’ll go with you. *(Turning on the jokes again; suggestively)* I’ll make sure they don’t cheat you out of your dough.

*(ARLENE responds to PHIL’s humor, which she genuinely loves.)*

ARLENE

*(An apology of sorts)* OK, but no crumb cake. Things have been crummy enough.

*(ARLENE and PHIL take their jackets off the coatrack and leave stage left.)*

HOWARD

They do this all the time? Do they really dislike each other?

SAMMY

They love each other. They’re a couple.

HOWARD

A couple? Married?

SAMMY

No, Phil couldn’t get a divorce. They live together.

ARTIE

If they were stars they probably couldn’t do it, at least not openly. But writers? Nobody cares. Dime-a-dozen, if you can find anyone willing to spend the dime.

HOWARD

Pretty funny couple. She needles him constantly.

ARTIE

She seems pretty tense. I wonder if anything’s up.

HOWARD

Maybe we shouldn’t write a couple’s argument sketch.

SAMMY

No. They can live with an orangutangif they want, but they stay pros in the office or they go back to their monkey house.

ARTIE

Phil or an orangutan. Tough choice.

HOWARD

Are we taking a break, or still writing?

SAMMY

Any ideas?

HOWARD

Too bad we can’t use Arlene’s line. It was hilarious. I’m surprised Phil didn’t come back with something.

SAMMY

Phil will attack almost anything, but not Arlene. He’s only here because of her.

HOWARD

Arlene talked someone into hiring Phil?

SAMMY

No. Arlene doesn’t have sway like that.

ARTIE

You mean she doesn’t have *legs* like that.

SAMMY

He contributes a lot to this show. I don’t think it would have been such a hit if they hadn’t found Phil. But that network schmuck was right. Phil isn’t a writer. At heart, he’s a performer.

ARTIE

He loves being on stage.

HOWARD

That’s obvious. He started in before I had a chance to say a word.

ARTIE

I saw his act, years ago.

HOWARD

Was it good?

ARTIE

He was using an act he’d bought, hadn’t found his own voice yet. The act itself stunk so bad you can still smell it when the wind’s from the west. If anyone else had done it, it would have killed vaudeville 10 years before it actually died. But I couldn’t take my eyes off Phil. He was just so compelling, so much energy.

SAMMY

And he had an attitude you never saw on stage. Everyone makes fun of things, but Phil has this attitude that cuts deeper. Sometimes he even seems hurt by his own jokes. He’s untethered, he can go off in a million different ways, but still have this puppy-dog edge. Not just the way people tell jokes. *(Unenthusiastically zipping through the joke)* ‘Waiter, bring me raw eggs on burnt toast.’ ‘We can’t do that, Sir.’ ‘Why not? You did yesterday.’ With Phil the anger is real, but somehow it’s aimed inward. And it’s all in the language of pure comedy, all mixed up with old jokes and bizarre fantasies. No, Phil is an original.

ARTIE

An original what, we still don’t know.

SAMMY

And then Phil found Arlene.

HOWARD

They seem like natural enemies. I wonder what their home life is like.

ARTIE

I once wrote a sitcom pitch about a millionaire who decided to become a coal miner. I wrote a sketch about an aerial ace who flew to the moon to battle flying space monsters. I wrote one about a mad scientist who invented a magic blueberry that could make everyone in the world call their mother. But I don’t have the imagination to picture Phil and Arlene being intimate.

*(HOWARD laughs)*

HOWARD

So how did Arlene get Phil on the show?

ARTIE

Phil has energy but not a lot of focus. When vaudeville died he took shots at everything. Broadway, movies, radio. But as a performer, he couldn’t fit his talent into what they needed. Give him 20 minutes alone on stage and he’s something special. Give him a role in someone else’s story and he lays an egg.

HOWARD

He’s not exactly Clark Gable.

ARTIE

He might have made it eventually. He has a lot of Marx Brothers energy and some of W.C. Fields’ attitude. He didn’t fit in, but maybe he could have found the character that worked. There have been a lot worse on screen.

SAMMY

And he learns. He absorbs everything. You make some offhand remark and forget it, and two days later it’s part of Phil’s shtick.

HOWARD

So what happened?

ARTIE

Arlene happened.

SAMMY

With vaudeville dying and him still supporting his wife, he didn’t have a lot of cash. Arlene needed something stable. So Phil gave up performing and started writing radio. It works great. We skim off the best parts of Phil and work them into the show.

ARTIE

But we have to listen to the rest of it here.

SAMMY

Phil gets a good, stable salary. And Arlene.

HOWARD

An amazing love story.

ARTIE

You know what’s amazing? That Phil can dominate the conversation even when he isn’t here.

SAMMY

Let’s get back to the sketch.

HOWARD

Where were we?

ARTIE

Phil’s penis.

SAMMY

The colonel’s gun. But we can’t use it.

HOWARD

We have to be able to fix it.

SAMMY

How can you fix it? If it means something dirty we can’t use it. If it doesn’t, it isn’t funny.

HOWARD

It’s just too close to the lines about getting a hug. That makes it only sex. We fix that, we can get away with it.

ARTIE

What was the line before that?

*(SAMMY picks up his notes and looks for it.)*

SAMMY

‘Everything at home is a fight.’ We have to fix that anyway. Arlene got carried away.

HOWARD

What was the last usable line?

SAMMY

‘Discipline. They’re probably running all over the battlefield.’ We have to get away from just the two of them, make it a whole sketch. Get the kids in there.

HOWARD

‘Out of the way, Dad, you’re...uh…’

ARTIE

‘If the table isn’t set by oh four thirty I’ll get 15 demerits!’

*(SAMMY starts scribbling again.)*

HOWARD

‘Phyllis, that’s crazy! Silverware isn’t worth more than 5!...Now you’ve got me doing it!’

SAMMY

We need to get Phyllis and Edmund alone together to have the real argument.

HOWARD

That’ll be at the end. We do the kids, breakfast gags, have the whole breakfast scene, the kids leave for school, then the final argument. And it ends with the colonel losing the argument. He gets the idea to draft the family.

ARTIE

No, that comes in the second sketch. We’ll find a punch line for him losing.

SAMMY

OK, that works. How about this? The colonel has maneuvers coming up, war games. He’s supposed to lead a mock battle against another platoon. It doesn’t mean much to him, but Phyllis thinks it’s very important for him to win.

ARTIE

A colonel wouldn’t lead a platoon. It’d be a brigade.

SAMMY

OK, brigade.

HOWARD

Are you guys married?

ARTIE

Sammy is.

HOWARD

*(To SAMMY)* Does your wife worry about how you do your job?

ARTIE

*(To HOWARD)* How young are you? Have you ever even talked to a girl?

HOWARD

Once, but I couldn’t understand a word she said.

SAMMY

Where are Phil and Arlene? We got the sketch laid out, we need them.

HOWARD

Let’s get that line in.

SAMMY

Can’t do it.

HOWARD

I like a challenge. *(Pacing and thinking out loud)* He’s still complaining...She asks him for a list of things...no, she gives him a list. Stuff to do. He still wants affection...hug…

ARTIE

I get it. They alternate. She lists something to do, he indicates he wants intimacy. Then when she says ‘Polish your gun’ it could just be a part of the list.

HOWARD

Sammy?

SAMMY

Let’s hear it.

HOWARD

‘I’ve got a list…’

ARTIE

Your schedule.

HOWARD

‘I’ve got your schedule written out for you.’ What are the times? Six hundred? Seven hundred? ‘At oh seven hundred, you review the troops.’

SAMMY

Treating the house like the army.

HOWARD

‘At oh seven hundred it’s physical fitness with the children.’

ARTIE

‘Aw, Phyllis, why don’t we spend a little time together today?’

HOWARD

‘At oh eight hundred, review of homework.’

ARTIE

‘Maybe we could go on a picnic.’

HOWARD

‘At oh nine hundred, inspect the grounds.

ARTIE

‘Or maybe we could take a drive. Park out by the lake.’

SAMMY

Doesn’t work. Get the maneuvers in. She has to be telling him what to do when he’s army, not at the house. The colonel’s lines are good.

HOWARD

‘You have to be ready if you want to win the war games, Edmund.’

ARTIE

‘It’s not that important, Phyllis.’

HOWARD

‘Of course it is. At oh seven hundred, you review your battle plans.’

ARTIE

‘Can’t we spend some time together today, Phyllis?”

HOWARD

‘At oh eight hundred, you give a pep talk to the troops.’

ARTIE

‘I know! Let’s go on a picnic.’

HOWARD

‘At oh nine hundred...’

ARTIE

Get class A uniform in there.

HOWARD

‘At oh seven hundred, you review your battle plans.’

ARTIE

‘Can’t we spend some time together, Phyllis?’

HOWARD

‘At oh eight hundred, you review your pep talk to the troops.’

ARTIE

‘I know! Let’s go on a picnic.’

HOWARD

‘At oh nine hundred, you put on your class A uniform.’

ARTIE

‘Can’t we move Thursday’s sweet little auxiliary time to now?’ *(ARTIE makes a kiss sound)*

HOWARD

‘And clean your gun! It’s practically useless!’

*(HOWARD and ARTIE both laugh and look at SAMMY.)*

SAMMY

It’s funny. Oh, well. We can let the network take it out. Maybe we’ll be lucky and they won’t get the joke.

HOWARD

Really? Are they that dumb?

SAMMY

Sometimes in the middle of everything you can miss a penis pretty easily.

*(PHIL and ARLENE enter, PHIL carrying a paper bag with doughnuts.)*

PHIL

We’re back!

ARTIE

*(Indicating PHIL)* This one’s obvious, though.

PHIL

I don’t know what you’re talking about, but if that was an insult I owe you one.

ARTIE

You’re running up a hell of a bill.

PHIL

I always pay my debts. Here’s the first installment: Artie, you’re a putz.

ARTIE

Very clever, Phil. How much did you pay a writer to write that joke?

PHIL

It was cheap. There were 50 guys writing insults about you. They had a price war.

ARLENE

It’s good information to have, Artie. You never know when we might need another putz around here.

*(SAMMY, HOWARD, and ARTIE all think of responses at the same time, and the next three lines are almost overlapping.)*

SAMMY

All the positions have been filled for years.

HOWARD

Could we get a putz past the network?

ARTIE

The story of your life, Arlene: looking for the perfect putz.

PHIL

Three on a match! The perfect straight man.

ARLENE

Ahem.

PHIL

Straight woman.

HOWARD

Really? I hadn’t noticed you were a woman.

SAMMY

Don’t listen to him, Arlene. Keep punching.

ARTIE

Not me. You can punch Phil.

PHIL

Be nice to me, Artie. I got your doughnut. *(PHIL waves the bag in front of ARTIE.)*

ARTIE

Yeah, let’s have it. *(PHIL tosses the bag on the table in front of ARTIE, who takes a doughnut, then pushes the bag across the table to the others. HOWARD and SAMMY take doughnuts.)*

PHIL

What is it with you and doughnuts? Since they put that guy with the automatic doughnut machine on Broadway, a day hasn’t gone by without you eating at least three.

ARTIE

I’ve been eating them for years.

SAMMY

Maybe we can use that in the sketch.

ARLENE

Did you guys get anywhere with it?

SAMMY

*(To ARLENE)* Yeah. I think we got the conversation started. Here are the notes. We can type them up into something usable after we get it down.

ARLENE

We, huh? You mean all of us that can type?

SAMMY

Sorry, Arlene. Please?

ARLENE

Hey, if I’m going to be a singer-typist, can I be on the payroll twice?

PHIL

You don’t want to get *type*cast.

ARTIE

That’s a terrible joke, Phil.

PHIL

Takes one to know one.

ARLENE

*(Picking up the notes)* Maybe I should just be a typist. It pays more.

SAMMY

We tried having a typist.

HOWARD

It didn’t help?

PHIL

I couldn’t think. It was too noisy.

ARTIE

You?? You love chaos.

PHIL

I couldn’t think. It wasn’t noisy enough.

SAMMY

OK, is everyone finished with the random jokes so we can get back to the sketch jokes?

PHIL

Sammy, when you get a chance I need to talk to you.

ARTIE

Forget it, Phil. You’re not gonna get your own secretary.

ARLENE

*(A little tense)* Where are we in the sketch?

SAMMY

Next break, Phil. *(To Arlene)* Breakfast on the table, the argument is about war games at the base. Phyllis wants to win, Colonel Edmund doesn’t care. Where do we go from there? Howard?

HOWARD

I think we need to get the kids in there so that in the second sketch, they can join the war games.

ARTIE

What’s the argument?

HOWARD

Something that contrasts war and family…

PHIL

My old man.

HOWARD

Was he in the army?

PHIL

No, he was a drunk. When he was loaded, he could pick a fight like Napoleon.

SAMMY

Can’t have a drunk in a family. Network would kill that in two seconds.

PHIL

They should have had that rule for my family. Would have made things a lot easier when I was a kid.

ARTIE

Times were tough when Phil was a kid. Lincoln was asking for volunteers in case the South seceded.

PHIL

Before the *great* war. Times were great. My father wasn’t. There was money everywhere, except in my father’s pocket. *(PHIL takes a ring of keys and a bunch of coins out of his pockets. He turns them inside out, showing they’re empty, and becomes his father. He’s drunk and staggers back and forth.)*

Phillip...Phillip! Where’d your mother *(Having difficulty talking)* ...your mother...put my beer?… Your mother’s a terrible housekeeper. Find anything in this place is like lookin’ for a needle in a *flapjack*. Phillip!... Don’t tell me that! I’d remember if I finished it. I remember everything...except for all those little things that aren’t beer…

Phillip...where are you? Run down to the tavern and get me a bucket of beer...When you get back, I’ll play catch with you…

*(PHIL’S FATHER stumbles, drunk, and falls backward onto a chair.)*...Throw the ball...throw the ball….

*(PHIL’S FATHER throws an imaginary ball, but the but motion makes him slide out of his chair onto the floor.)*

Now, where’s that beer? *(PHIL’S FATHER, now on the floor, crawls around looking for his beer.)* Beer, beer, where’dya go?  *(PHIL’s FATHER crawls back over to the chair. He puts his hands up on the seat of the chair and lifts his knees off the ground. He winds up with his hands on the chair, his legs straight out. He tries to stand up but his shoes slide on the floor, so he winds up walking in place in that position.)*

Philsy! Gimme a hand. *(With the help of an invisible Philsy, PHIL’S FATHER finally pushes himself up, but he’s unsteady. He’s sways back and forth and falls back into the chair.)* Boy, that was hard work. You gotta work or you get nowhere. Listen, Philsy...lemme gi’ ya some ik..ikvice… Work hard and don’t put all your eggs in one chicken… I’m tellin’ ya, you can lead a horse to water, but he better not drink my beer!

Phillip, run down and get me a bucket of beer….O’ course they’ll give it to you. Why wouldn’t they? I don’t owe them money. It’s only a nickel. All the nickels I’ve given him. He’s got more money than he needs. He’ll be sorry. You tell him a fool and his money have no customers! He thinks he’s gonna cheat me out of my beer he’s barking up the wrong dog…

Philsy, I know you got a penny...you got pennies...Go down and get me my beer…

What?? Oh, be quiet, Edna. I’m not doing nothing. It’s cause o’ you I got no money. You think you can throw money at trees...Everything costs a arm and a arm...and a arm...and a arm...How many arms ya think I got?!?…

*(PHIL’S FATHER, sobering, stands up unsteadily, the anger coming to the surface.)* How many arms, Edna?…

*(PHIL’S FATHER advances threateningly. PHIL turns around, facing the opposite direction, and becomes PHILSY.)* I heard a joke at school, Sir. Do you want to hear it?… Do you want to hear a joke? See, there was this schoolboy and he got a answer wrong and the teacher flogged him with a big stick ‘cause he got it wrong, see? And they said, ‘Why did you do that?’ And the teacher said it was the only way to make him smart. Get it? Get it?

*(PHILSY waits for a reaction but gets none. He tries again.)* And I heard another one. There was this banker, see, and he had this money and he was folding it so he could put it away, and so they said, this bank must be a good bank, because see how easy he doubles his money… (*PHILSY laughs uncomfortably, trying to get his father to laugh.)*

No, Sir, I know jokes aren’t important… Yes, Sir, I’m growing up as fast as I can... Yes, Sir, I’ll be serious...*(PHIL’s voice becomes less and less child-like as he repeats the word).* I will, Sir. Serious… yes, Sir…yes, Sir…

*(PHIL is suddenly PHIL again.)* They should be arguing about the kid, whether he’s old enough to be a soldier.

*(HOWARD is amazed at the performance, but SAMMY and ARTIE take it in stride.)*

HOWARD

Amazing, Phil. That’s perfect.

SAMMY

How does it start?

ARTIE

She’s got to want him to do something military.

HOWARD

The kid or the colonel?

PHIL

The kid. She wants to buy him a uniform.

ARLENE

Yeah. She could be worried about the medals he could wear, and he could be worried about the color.

ARTIE

You don’t get much choice of color in the army.

ARLENE

‘Argyle! Or maybe a nice plaid.’

PHIL

A gun. She wants to buy the son a gun and he thinks he’s too young.

SAMMY

That’s a whole different thing.

PHIL

So I changed my mind. Clothes aren’t everything, you hackneyed haberdasher.

ARTIE

Phil, it would help if you understood the words you use.

PHIL

Words, schmerds.

ARTIE

Funny, schmunny!

PHIL

*(Mock anger; boxing stance)* How dare you! Put ‘em up!

ARLENE

*(With a touch of bitterness)* Schmunny is Phil’s whole life.

SAMMY

*(Frustrated at the lack of focus)* Forget the schmunny! I mean, don’t forget the schmunny. I mean, don’t forget the *funny*. Wait...forget the gun? Uniform or gun?

ARTIE

Network problem with the gun?

SAMMY

In the military? Nah.

ARTIE

It’s a political question. There are a lot of isolationists.

SAMMY

We’ll stay away from the politics.

ARTIE

You hear that, Phil? None of your communist-fascist-isolationist-interventionist ranting.

PHIL

Very weak joke, Artie. They don’t even start with the same letter.

ARTIE

Then none of your alliterationist acrimony.

PHIL

Better. You’re learning.

SAMMY

All right, people. Colonel, Phyllis.

ARTIE

Gun. ‘Edmund, it’s Johnny’s birthday next week.’

SAMMY

*(Looking at his notes)* It was Billy. And Harold.

ARTIE

‘Billy’s birthday’s coming up.’

SAMMY

Which one said that?

ARLENE

Phyllis said that. She’s the one who keeps track of things.

PHIL

How did this guy get to be a colonel?

ARTIE

Could have been a political appointment.

HOWARD

Maybe we can use that.

SAMMY

Would explain things.

HOWARD

‘Phyllis, you know I’m an honorary colonel. I haven’t even been to military school.’

ARTIE

No, that doesn’t make sense.

ARLENE

*(Forcefully, intimating that she’s the only one who knows how to get this right; she turns to PHIL to say the line.)* ‘Edmund! You know what strings my father had to pull to get you your appointment to West Point! The least you could do is put in some effort!’

SAMMY

Yes! That fills in the background, some power struggle between them. But does it go before or after the gun?

HOWARD

Gotta be before.

PHIL

*(Marshaling his efforts in response to ARLENE’s anger)* ‘I did pretty good at West Point. My barracks had the best flower gardens on campus!’

ARLENE

‘Oh, that’s terrific! If we ever get invaded by an army with allergies, they’ll sneeze to death.’

*(General laughter, except from PHIL, who doesn’t like being topped)*

SAMMY

OK, now segue to the gun…

HOWARD

OK. ‘Phyllis, nobody’s going to invade. I’m home. Can’t we be a family?’

PHIL

We can do funnier.

SAMMY

Have at it.

HOWARD

Sure. Hit it.

ARTIE

Yeah, we heard you were funny.

PHIL

*(Suddenly on the spot, and still stinging that ARLENE’s line topped his)*… Hit me again.

ARLENE

‘If an army with allergies invades, they’ll sneeze to death.’

PHIL

‘Hey, my flowers are nothing to sneeze at!’

HOWARD

Not bad.

SAMMY

Get to the…

ARLENE

*(Cutting SAMMY off)* ‘Why not? Sneeze hard enough and maybe you’ll get a purple heart!’

*(HOWARD and ARTIE laugh. SAMMY knows he has to forestall problems.)*

SAMMY

Get to the birthday, the gun.

HOWARD

*(Jumping into the breech)* ‘Phyllis, next week is Billy’s birthday.’

ARLENE

‘I’ve been meaning to talk to you about that.’

HOWARD

‘I thought we could do something fun for the whole family. He’d love the circus. We all would.’

PHIL

Character...‘Ooh, let’s go to the circus! He’ll love it!’

ARLENE

‘The circus?! Can’t you ever be serious?’

SAMMY

You’re getting off the joke. Military.

ARLENE

Yeah...Yeah… ‘I’ve got the whole birthday celebration planned. You’ll make a speech, right between the cake parade and the review of presents.’

PHIL

‘A speech? What am I supposed to say? Boys, it is your duty to attack this birthday cake with every fork in your arsenal!’

ARLENE

‘Don’t worry, I’ll write a speech for you. Now, about his present.’

PHIL

‘Yes, I was thinking…’

ARLENE

*(Ignoring PHIL)* ‘It’s about time that Billy…’

PHIL

‘...thinking that...’

ARLENE

‘...started taking on the...’

PHIL

‘I mean, just thinking…’

ARLENE

‘...responsibilities of a young man.’

PHIL

*(Outraged)* ‘Responsibilities? He’s just a boy.’

ARLENE

‘He’s practically a man! It’s time he learned how to use a gun!’

PHIL

‘A gun?! What are you trying to do to him?’

ARLENE

‘Teach him his responsibilities!’

PHIL

‘You can’t just make him be what you want him to be!’

SAMMY

Hold it! Hold it! Hold it! *(PHIL and ARLENE retreat to opposite corners angrily. HOWARD stands still, dumbfounded. ARTIE picks up his newspaper and buries himself in it. SAMMY thinks better of addressing the problem directly, but aims his words at PHIL and ARLENE, speaking slowly and deliberately.)* We’re veering off target. It shouldn’t be that angry. Don’t lose the joke. The battle between the two of them is specific to running of the household… *(Back to quick speech)* Artie, we need a couple of toppers.

PHIL

*(Embarrassed and sorry)* We’ll get ‘em… *(To ARLENE)* Let’s try it again.

ARLENE

I need to go to the ladies room. I’ll be right back.

*(ARLENE exits stage left.)*

SAMMY

*(There’s nothing else to do)* Artie, why don’t you make sure Howard knows where the men’s room is?

ARTIE

Sure, Sammy. Come on, Howard. You’ll love the men’s room. Lots of history. George Washington peed there.

*(HOWARD follows ARTIE out the door stage left.)*

PHIL

Sammy…

SAMMY

*(Cutting him off)* I’m not going to ask you what’s going on because it makes no difference. You wanted to talk to me, you got the floor. Just make sure at the end of whatever you say, you let me know that you won’t bring anything into this room that gets in the way of the show.

PHIL

Sammy, you know what I owe you.

SAMMY

*(Starting to smile)* Don’t start, Phil. I’m trying to be serious.

PHIL

*(Recovering his footing and smiling)* You were the only one who knew I could do this.

SAMMY

You don’t owe me anything. I owe you. I wouldn’t have gotten my mug without you because the show wouldn’t have been a big hit.

PHIL

You deserved that mug! You saved me from the network schmucks!

SAMMY

Phil, what is it with you? I can’t tell you to get serious because, believe me, no one wants a serious Phil Horowitz.

PHIL

I love you, Sammy. *(Crooning Bing Crosby style)*

I’ve got to tell you I love you or I’ll bust.

There’ll be guts all over the floor...

SAMMY

Whether you love me or not, I got a show to get written. We can’t have you and Arlene going at each other like that.

PHIL

I know.

SAMMY

If you—and Arlene—need my help with anything, I’m there for you.

PHIL

I know.

SAMMY

I’ve always said you’d be the guy I’d want in a foxhole with me.

PHIL

Sammy…

SAMMY

We’d both get killed, but we’d die laughing.

PHIL

*(Blurting it out)* Sammy, I’m quitting the show.

SAMMY

*(Pause) …* No joke?

PHIL

No joke.

SAMMY

Did something happen? Something I can fix?

PHIL

No. I got an offer.

SAMMY

Another show?

PHIL

Nah, I wouldn’t do that to you. No matter what any other radio show offered me, I’d stay with you cheap bastards.

SAMMY

Very magnanimous of you, Phil.

PHIL

A small, independent movie studio. Glory Films.

SAMMY

Glory Films? Don’t they make those instructional shorts? How to hang a picture, how to make a sandwich...

PHIL

They did. They got sold, and now they want to break into comedy.

SAMMY

I haven’t heard even a whiff of rumor on this. What kind of backing do they have?

PHIL

Not much. They want me to make two-reel shorts to start them off. Then build.

SAMMY

Are they giving you a guarantee?

PHIL

Two pictures, low budget. A pittance for onscreen. Deferred percentage for everything else.

SAMMY

Everything else? You’re writing, producing, too, I take it?

PHIL

They’re also cheap bastards. Yeah. I’m the writing staff.

SAMMY

That’s a gamble, Phil. You don’t hit, they go under, you’re back out on the street.

PHIL

I know.

SAMMY

And I know nothing I say is going to stop you.

PHIL

That’s right… Nothing anybody says.

SAMMY

When are you going?

PHIL

I can run out the season. I told them I couldn’t start production until July.

SAMMY

Which means you’ll be writing now.

PHIL

Off hours. I can still make it here.

SAMMY

You’ll be busy. And Arlene will be helping you. Will I have to replace her, too?

PHIL

I don’t know...No, I don’t think so.

SAMMY

*(SAMMY is puzzled a bit, but doesn’t ask. Taking a coin out of his pocket and flipping it to Phil.)* I want a ticket to your first premiere.

PHIL

Great! I’ll give you 10% off your first bag of popcorn.

*(The door opens and ARLENE enters. She looks around.)*

ARLENE

Where’s Artie and Howard?

SAMMY

Men’s room. You OK?

ARLENE

Yeah, I’m fine. I’m sorry that happened. It won’t happen again.

SAMMY

Believe it or not, I’ll miss even that. I’ll miss everything.

ARLENE

*(To PHIL, not believing it would actually happen)* You did it.

PHIL

Arlene…

ARLENE

You left the show.

SAMMY

He’ll be here for the rest of the season.

PHIL

Everything will work out.

ARLENE

I don’t want to hear it. We’re writing a sketch. That’s *all* we’re doing. Sammy, where are we? Notes?

SAMMY

*(Pointing to the notes on the table.)* We haven’t gotten any farther than when you left. We need to get to the gun argument.

ARLENE

OK. Hit me with the last usable line.

*(The door opens and ARTIE and HOWARD enter.)*

SAMMY

‘I’ll write a speech for you. Now, about his present.’

ARTIE

‘When I was his age I got a slap in the mouth. But Billy already has one.’

HOWARD

‘When I was his age, I got my brother’s hand-me-down socks.’

PHIL

‘And we lived in Florida. I had the sweatiest feet in the baseball team locker room.’

ARTIE

The junior ROTC locker room.

SAMMY

Artie, take a shot at the colonel.

*(ARTIE snaps to and salutes SAMMY.)*

ARTIE

Yes, Sir.

*(ARTIE sits back down in front of his newspaper.)*

ARLENE

Hey, that’s good. The colonel can say ‘Yes, Sir’ to Phyllis.

HOWARD

The joke is that *she’s* the military one.

ARTIE

It’s his ‘Thank you, Don Ameche.’ Give me an order.

ARLENE

‘Let’s get going.’

ARTIE

*(Sarcastically)* ‘Yes, Sir.’

PHIL

‘Let’s get going.’ *(Meekly resigned)* ‘Yes, Sir.’

*(Everyone laughs.)*

SAMMY

Phil’s. That’s our button. We’ll use that as the last line. Now let’s get to the gun.

HOWARD

The whole thing is the setup for bringing the family into the army. At the end the colonel will think that if he’s going to get a rifle, it should be in an organized surrounding, in the army.

ARTIE

That’s second sketch.

SAMMY

It has to be intimated…

PHIL

‘His present should be memorable. Something with real significance.’

ARLENE

‘I agree. We’re giving him a rifle.’

PHIL

‘A rifle? That’s not special. I see a thousand rifles every day.’

ARTIE

‘I trip over a thousand rifles every day.’

ARLENE

‘And you never bring me any!’

PHIL

‘I bring you flowers.’

ARLENE

*(Being generous)* ‘They’re lovely, Edmund, but not fit for a young man. He needs a rifle, to take after his courageous father.’

PHIL

‘What does he need it for? Terrorizing the neighborhood squirrels?’

ARLENE

‘You’re a colonel in the army. You can teach him to shoot, instill discipline in him. *(Dreamily)* You’ll look wonderful drilling him up and down in the driveway.’

HOWARD

Let’s bring the kids back. We get the family in there, make them gang up on the colonel. Like a fight, give the colonel the draft idea.

ARLENE

Yes, and she can general the troops, organize the argument.

ARTIE

And throw in the reserves.

SAMMY

OK, kids in.

ARLENE

‘Besides you can’t back out now.’

PHIL

My line. Hit me again.

SAMMY

*(Looking at notes)* Uh...Marching up and down the driveway.

ARLENE

‘You’ll look wonderful marching up and down the driveway.’

PHIL

‘We’d trample the garden!’

ARLENE

‘Edmund, you can’t back out now. He’s excited about it.’

PHIL

‘You told him? Birthday presents are supposed to be a surprise.’

ARLENE

‘Surprises are for boys. He’s a man now.’

SAMMY

We’re repeating. And it’s off the joke.

ARLENE

What’s the kid’s name?

SAMMY

Billy...Maureen, Harold, and Janey.

ARLENE

‘Billy, come in here.’ Billy comes in. ‘Don’t you want a rifle for your birthday?’

PHIL

*(Becoming Billy)* ‘Gosh, yes, mom...I mean, Ma’am.’

ARTIE

*(Jumping in)* ‘He’s too young. You’re too young, Billy. It isn’t time.’ How old is Billy?

SAMMY

Has to be old enough to make some sense. Too young, the network will kill it.

ARTIE

The network isn’t against killing. It’s just against talking about it.

PHIL

‘I’m 14, Sir. I’m plenty old enough.’

SAMMY

Make it 15. Network.

PHIL

Thank you, Don Ameche. ‘I’m 15, Sir. I’m old enough.’

ARTIE

‘Don’t call me Sir.’

PHIL

‘Yes, Colonel.’

ARTIE

‘That’s even worse! Phyllis, why do you make them do that?’

HOWARD

Whip it up. Build to chaos.

ARLENE

Organized chaos. Kids one at a time, piling on.

ARTIE

‘Rifles are dangerous, Billy.’

ARLENE

‘Billy, tell the colonel why you should have a rifle.’

PHIL

‘Sir, I’m very careful with weapons. I’m the best dart player in school. I take safety seriously.’

ARTIE

‘There’s a big difference between darts and rifles.’

ARLENE

‘Maureen, second wave!’

PHIL

*(Tween girl voice)* ‘Besides, Sir, when we go camping a gun will be useful, for protection, in the event of bears.’

ARTIE

‘We haven’t ever seen any bears camping.’ *(To ARLENE)* Cut off his right flank.

ARLENE

‘Harold, get in there and cut off his right flank!’

PHIL

*(Young boy voice)* ‘Sir, Billy won a safety award at school!’

ARLENE

‘Send in the reserves! Janey!’

PHIL

*(Little girl’s voice)* ‘Billy wan’ wifle! Billy wan’ wifle! Billy wan’ wifle! Billy wan’ wifle!’

SAMMY

And chaos. Just punch the button. The colonel says, ‘Yes, Sir’ to the wife.

ARLENE

‘So we are going to get Billy a rifle!’

PHIL

*(Beaten)* ‘Yes, Sir.’

ARTIE

And while the little girl keeps saying that over and over, the wife starts chanting marching rhythm, ‘One, two, three, four’ over and over.

SAMMY

And applause. The notes are a mess, but I think we’ve got enough down that it can make a pretty good sketch. Arlene, maybe you can type these up in a skeleton when you get a chance, and we can polish it.

HOWARD

I can take a shot at it getting it into shape. I’ll take the notes home and bring it back in sketch shape in the morning.

SAMMY

That’d be great. Concentrate on the jokes. The transitions usually get worked out in rehearsal.

HOWARD

*(Collecting notes)* It’s mostly there. Can’t promise my typing will be up to Arlene’s standards.

ARLENE

If someone else does it, it’s perfect.

SAMMY

All right, people. The second sketch, in the army.

ARTIE

How about a break? Almost lunch time anyway.

SAMMY

It isn’t yet, but, yeah, it’s already been a long morning. I’ve got to go see Belson for a minute anyway. Might as well get that over with.

HOWARD

Who’s Belson?

PHIL

A network schmuck.

HOWARD

Is that his official title?

PHIL

It’s everyone’s official title. You can read it on all the doors as you walk down the hall. First Assistant Schmuck, Second Assistant Schmuck, Head Schmuck, Executive Jackass.

ARTIE

The jackass is the guy who isn’t Jewish.

SAMMY

I’ll be back in a few minutes. Try not to disappear.

*(SAMMY exits)*

ARTIE

I think I’ll run down and get another doughnut.

HOWARD

Might as well stretch my legs.

*(ARTIE and HOWARD take their coats and leave. PHIL and ARLENE are alone.)*

PHIL

Arlene…

ARLENE

Don’t, Phil. There’s nothing left to say. We’ve talked it through a hundred times. We both know what’s going to happen.

PHIL

We don’t have to talk. We can dance! *(PHIL waltzes with an imaginary partner, singing nonsense syllables in waltz time. PHIL waltzes toward ARLENE and absorbs her into the dance. She waltzes, torn between loving the moment and fearing the worst. After a few moments ARLENE breaks away)* Arlene! You know I’m crazy. I can’t help myself. You know I’ve always been like that. When I was a baby, *I* made funny faces at my parents to get *them* to laugh. *(ARLENE laughs)* When I was 6 I entered a Ulysses S. Grant lookalike contest. I went as Robert E. Lee. I thought it was funny.

*(Imitating Al Jolson, singing)*

Arlene, you know I’m crazy.

Arlene, you know I can’t help myself.

*(PHIL gets down on one knee)*

Arlene, you know I’m proud.

Arlene, you must know by now that I’m loud.

*(PHIL jumps up; as if in front of a microphone)* Do you know the one about the rabbi, three priests, a mad scientist, a piano player who’s only a foot tall, and an orange turtle that walk into a bar? Of course you don’t. Why would you? It’s a terrible joke. Even General Grant wouldn’t laugh at it.

*(ARLENE laughs)*

ARLENE

Do you know the one about the comedian and the singer who walked into a writer’s room?

PHIL

Comedian, singer; comedian, singer. I’ll come up with a punchline. Comedian, singer...I got it! They lived happily ever after, trading notes…love notes. *(PHIL bows as if to an applauding audience, then straightens up. Suddenly serious)* Arlene...you wouldn’t really leave me, would you?

ARLENE

*(Gathering her thoughts)* I don’t honestly know.

I know I love you. I know you make me laugh. I think you need me. I know you make me feel needed.

I think getting some of the chaos out of your life has been good for you. I know it’s been wonderful for me. I think this room itself has been great for you. I know this room has been great for us.

I know that something drives you to perform. I think there’s a reason you’ve never been a popular success as a performer. I think that reason is part of what I love about you.

I know what it feels like to have an audience applaud you. I know what it feels like to have an audience reject you. I know I’ve been the best audience you’ve ever had. I know how much I want you to be the best audience I’ve ever had.

I think I’d be happy for you if the performer in you found the audience you want. I know I’m unhappy because the man in you is looking for one.

I think I need to think.

*(Shaking off the serious mood, and going back to the comfort of the banter)* That network schmuck was dead wrong. You *are* a radio writer. And a comic. And a goofball and a sweetheart. *(ARLENE kisses PHIL on the cheek gently.)* And this room is where you’re everything.

*(ARLENE opens the door, walks out, and closes the door behind her.)*

PHIL

Thank you, Don Ameche.

*(Lights fade. End of Act I.)*

**ACT II**

*(The same. No time has passed. PHIL stands where ARLENE left him, staring at the door. PHIL does not like being alone. After a moment, he stops looking at the door, paces back and forth a couple of times, then sits down and drums his fingers on the table. This turns into rhythmic drumming with both hands.)*

*(After a moment, the door opens and HOWARD enters.)*

HOWARD

Hey, Phil. *(Looking around)* Guess the others aren’t back yet. That gives me an opportunity to tell you how thrilled I am to be working with you. Even just this morning…

PHIL

Give me a straight line.

HOWARD

*(Startled, but recovering quickly)* ...You got a setup?

PHIL

*(Desperately)* Give me a straight line!

HOWARD

I saw your brother yesterday. He wanted me to invest in his new business.

PHIL

Don’t do it! My brother is the worst businessman in the world. He opened a used car lot. Didn’t know what he was doing. He bought a new car, drove it around for an hour, and sold it used.

*(ARTIE enters.)*

HOWARD

*(Laughing)* Are you always on?

PHIL

On the ball? On time? On the fence? On top of Old Smokey?

ARTIE

On the rocks! What are we talking about? *(ARTIE sits down at the table in front of his newspaper.)*

HOWARD

On the rocks? Either scotch or relationships.

*(SAMMY enters)*

PHIL

Scotch! Let me get my kilt on!

SAMMY

Phil in a kilt. Lemme guess: you’re not working on the army sketch.

HOWARD

Yeah, we are. The colonel makes a mistake in his battle plan and accidentally invades Scotland.

SAMMY

It didn’t even take a half a day and Phil has you out in slap-happy land. At least it’s a segue. Colonel, army…. *(SAMMY takes a quick look around. To PHIL)* Is Arlene coming back?

ARTIE

She OK? Is she sick?

PHIL

She’ll be back.

SAMMY

She’s a pro. OK, back to the sketch.

PHIL

After the colonel invades Scotland, they retaliate by cutting off our supply of haggis. The haggis importers band together to kidnap congress and the US surrenders. Scotland takes over and all radio stations are forced to play bagpipe music all day.

ARTIE

I’ve had to listen to *you* all day, Phil. Bagpipes is no threat.

PHIL

Now I owe you two.

HOWARD

No, only one. He’s a putz, remember?

PHIL

How could I forget? I get reminders all the time.

ARTIE

I wouldn’t ever want you to forget me, Phil. That’s the only reason I’m a putz. It’s all for you.

SAMMY

Sketch. *(ARLENE enters)*

PHIL

That and a nickel won’t get me 6 cents.

SAMMY

*(Relieved)* Arlene. Good. We need you.

ARLENE

Where are we?

ARTIE

Same place we always are. Talking about Phil.

SAMMY

Sketch.

PHIL

Of course we talk about me. I’m the genius around here.

ARTIE

*(To HOWARD)* Yeah, but Phil isn’t a plain, old regular genius. He’s a tortured genius. And for the good of the show, it’s our responsibility to keep him tortured.

PHIL

You do a great job.

ARTIE

I’m the Spanish Inquisition of the airwaves.

SAMMY

Sketch.

PHIL

No, not the Spanish Inquisition, the Danish Inquisition.

ARTIE

*(Jumping up)* Nobody say it! That’s it, I got you now! You’re not getting your straight line!

SAMMY

Sketch!

ARTIE

You should have done it as a one-liner, Phil. But you used a setup. Fatal mistake.

PHIL

I don’t need your straight lines!

SAMMY

*Sketch!*

ARTIE

It‘s getting to you. Danish Inquisition! Danish Inquisition!

PHIL

Bah! Cheap tactic!

ARTIE

It’s in you! You have to let it out.

SAMMY

SKETCH!

PHIL

*(Bouncing around the room)* I’m a pro! I’ve dealt with straight men forgetting their lines.

ARTIE

I can see the punchline crawling around inside your skin, looking for a way to get out. It’s a lousy joke, but you can’t keep it to yourself.

*(SAMMY climbs on top of the table trying to command attention)*

PHIL

*(Blurting it out)* Somebody give me the straight line!

SAMMY

*SKEHHHHHHHHHTCH!*

PHIL

*(Desperately)* Sammy! You can‘t let them do this to me! Make them give me the straight line!

SAMMY

Phil, do you understand the concept of human social interaction?

*(PHIL runs over to the counter and takes SAMMY’s mug.)*

PHIL

Give me the straight line or I’ll drink from your mug!

SAMMY

Give me that back!

PHIL

Give me the straight line!

SAMMY

Phil!

*(SAMMY walks on top of the table toward where PHIL is, but PHIL rushes around to the other side. SAMMY tries to run back toward PHIL, but PHIL runs back the other way.)*

ARLENE

I think you need to send in the reserves.

SAMMY

Attack!

*(Feigning reluctance, ARTIE gets up and heads toward PHIL, slowly and deliberately. PHIL backs up against a wall, but just as ARTIE gets there PHIL jumps under the table. ARTIE sighs loudly, then gets on his hands and knees and crawls under the table after PHIL.)*

HOWARD

I’ll play.

*(HOWARD gets down on his hands and knees and crawls under the table. PHIL, ARTIE, and HOWARD chase each other around on hands and knees.)*

SAMMY

Arlene, for the good of the show, give Phil the straight line!

ARLENE

*(Long, deep sigh)* Why the Danish Inquisition?

PHIL

*(Popping up and casually tossing the line off deadpan, as if none of this has happened)* I have to find out where to get a good cheese danish.

SAMMY

Now can we get down to work?

ARTIE

*(Emerging from under the table)* Sure, if you’re through wasting time dancing on tables.

*(SAMMY climbs down. HOWARD comes out and stands up.)*

ARLENE

How far did you guys get on the army part?

SAMMY

All the way to the cheese danish. Can we get going? Howard, set us up. What do we need for this half?

HOWARD

More characters. At least one, someone to be the army. We set up the army, then it’s the same colonel. Then the family is in the war games. Two surprises in a row.

ARLENE

So we do the army, then the colonel. At that point the audience thinks the joke will be that the colonel is the same wishy-washy guy from the first sketch, trying to win the war games.

ARTIE

Couple of privates talking about the war games coming up, then a sergeant says ten hut and they snap to. Sergeant tells them an officer is coming for the inspection.

PHIL

And it’s the colonel. ‘You look wonderful, men. Lovely flowers in the barracks, too.’

ARLENE

And then the wife. ‘One, two, three four, one, two, three four. Company, halt!’

PHIL

‘Moo-ooom! Helen keeps bumping into me!’

ARLENE

Maureen.

SAMMY

That works, but let’s start at the beginning.

HOWARD

Couple of army guys complaining.

SAMMY

Should be easy for you, Artie. Would the guys take the war games seriously?

ARTIE

Mostly, yeah. A few complainers who hate everything.

PHIL

Perfect for you, Artie.

ARTIE

We’re a team. I complain, and you give me something to complain about.

SAMMY

Two privates. Phil, start us off.

PHIL

‘Come on, Jerry. You look like a mess. Inspection today.’

HOWARD

Gives away too much too early. Just need the army, not the inspection.

ARTIE

‘Why do they have to have reveille so damn early in the morning? I didn’t get any sleep last night.’

SAMMY

Good, we can have reveille blow to start the sketch. *(To ARTIE)* Kill the off-color language.

ARTIE

If they’d had that rule, we’d have lost the war. Nobody could have said two words in a row.

PHIL

‘I haven’t gotten any sleep since boot camp.’

ARTIE

‘At least it’s not another hike today. Out of bed for three minutes and my feet are already killing me.’

PHIL

‘Whoever said an army travels on its stomach was nuts. My *stomach* doesn’t have blisters.’

ARTIE

‘Mine does. The food in this place’ll kill me long before they need me to fight.’

SAMMY

Do we need these guys later? Or just a couple lines, and out?

HOWARD

Depends on how long you want it.

SAMMY

Or what we can make of it.

ARLENE

Build the joke? A can-you-top-this of complaints?

SAMMY

Anyone?

PHIL

‘The food isn’t the half of it. My back is breaking.’

ARTIE

Sounds too old. These are kids. *(Distracted)* Kids in the army...

ARLENE

What do kids have on their minds?

SAMMY

Keep it clean, Phil!

PHIL

I didn’t even say it yet!

SAMMY

You’re the kid around here, Howard. What do you have on your mind?

PHIL

Sex and booze.

HOWARD

*(Mock agreement)* That’s all *I* ever think about.

ARTIE

And revenge. The guys I was with, everyone had petty grievances that they couldn’t let go of. They should have been in school, ogling cheerleaders and thinking up mean practical jokes to play on each other. Instead they were in the army, learning to kill.

SAMMY

Focus, Artie.

HOWARD

We can use the ogling. ‘The lieutenant made me take down my picture of Mardee Hoff in her shorts!’

SAMMY

Touch and go.

HOWARD

They won’t let us mention Mardee Hoff?

SAMMY

That’s probably OK. But we shouldn’t emphasize the sex by saying ‘shorts.’

PHIL

Shorts is too sexy??

ARLENE

And all I’ve been wearing is dresses. No wonder I wound up with Phil.

ARTIE

What a world. We can talk about sexy girls, we just can’t talk about sex.

SAMMY

Thin line. All right, let’s get off the sex.

ARTIE

And get back to the killers.

HOWARD

No, let’s stay on the sex a minute. Suppose the reason the kid had to take the picture down was because a special guest was coming—and then it turned out the guest was the colonel’s wife.

SAMMY

Good. How many complaints have they said so far?

HOWARD

You got the notes.

SAMMY

*(Looking through notes)* Uh...sleep, feet, food. Couple more.

ARTIE

‘The sergeant’s a goon.’

PHIL

‘A complete animal. I don’t even know how he got into the army. He’s too dumb to sign the recruitment papers.’

ARTIE

‘I don’t know how he got in the army. He’s too dumb to sign with an X.’

PHIL

‘I don’t know how he got in the army. He had to stay in school an extra year to learn to draw an X.’

SAMMY

Phil’s.

ARTIE

Hold it… Hit me again.

SAMMY

‘He’s too dumb to sign the papers.’

ARTIE

‘They let him sign with an X, but he had to stay in school an extra year to learn to draw it.’

SAMMY

That’s it.

ARTIE

And the kids’d be laughing at their own jokes.

SAMMY

Now the picture.

PHIL

‘And the worst thing is they made me take my picture of Mardee Hoff off the wall!’

HOWARD

‘That’s cruel! It’s bad enough that there are no girls around here, but now we can’t even have anything to look at.’

SAMMY

Funnier.

ARLENE

‘It’s bad enough I had to leave my girl behind, but now I don’t even got nothin’ to dream about!’

PHIL

‘Why don’t ya dream about your girl?’ ‘You kiddin’? This place is scary enough!’

SAMMY

*(Laughing)* ‘How come you hadda take it down now? It’s been up for a month.’

ARTIE

‘Di’n’ ya hear? There’s a special guest comin’.’

ARLENE

‘They should leave it up. Maybe he got a ugly girl, too.’

ARTIE

*(Laughing)* Arlene, you’re beautiful.

PHIL

Take that, Mardee Hoff.

ARLENE

Take that, Phil Horowitz.

SAMMY

Take that somewhere else. Back to the sketch.

HOWARD

Ready for the ten-hut?

SAMMY

Could get the inspection in there. That leads to the colonel’s wife. ‘Hey, you got a spot on your shoes.’

PHIL

‘That’s a spot? I thought it was camouflage.’

ARTIE

‘You got no brains. What good is camouflage on your feet? They don’t need to see your feet runnin’ if your fat head is stickin’ out there.’

ARLENE

‘The army don’t use ketchup for camouflage.’

SAMMY

That’s it.

HOWARD

‘Maybe they won’t notice the spot. Who’s doin’ the inspection? The lieutenant or the captain?’

ARTIE

‘I heard this was an important inspection. Could be a real big-wig. Maybe even a major.’

PHIL

‘A major pain. Him and his ugly girlfriend.’

SAMMY

Oh, that’s good. Then they can see the colonel’s wife. Make a crack when they see her.

ARLENE

Or go the other way, think she’s beautiful.

HOWARD

We didn’t have anything about what she looked like in the home sketch. She ugly or beautiful?

PHIL

Ugly women are always funnier. *(To ARLENE)* Present company excepted.

ARLENE

*(Formally)* Thank you.

ARTIE

Wait a minute. You could interpret that different ways.

PHIL

No, you can’t. She’s funnier even if she’s beautiful.

ARTIE

You said that ugly women are funnier.

PHIL

But not Arlene.

ARTIE

But you didn’t specify which way.

SAMMY

Artie, don’t start.

PHIL

She’s beautiful and she’s funny! Whattsa matter with you?

ARTIE

What you said is that ugly women being funnier doesn’t apply to Arlene.

PHIL

It doesn’t.

ARTIE

But only one of those has to be false for the statement to be false.

PHIL

What are you talking about?

ARTIE

She could be not ugly but still funnier.

PHIL

Exactly. That’s what she is.

ARTIE

Or she could be ugly but *not* funnier.

PHIL

Who said that?? I didn’t say that!

ARTIE

You didn’t directly say it, you just left the possibility open.

PHIL

No, I didn’t!

SAMMY

Artie, what are you doing?

ARTIE

Giving Phil a lesson in grammar.

PHIL

Who needs grammar?

HOWARD

Or is it ‘Whom needs grammar?’ I never could get that straight.

PHIL

This is comedy, not grammar.

ARTIE

You may not resort to language very often, but it helps on radio. Breaks up the dead air.

PHIL

*(TO ARLENE)* He’s trying to get me in trouble. *(To ARTIE)* Artie, you’re trying to get me in trouble!

ARTIE

Yeah, I am. How am I doing?

ARLENE

Not too bad.

PHIL

Stop that! I got this one right!

ARTIE

Your sense of humor...it could have been a subtle rib.

SAMMY

*(Seriously)* Artie.

ARTIE

*(Picking up that the way SAMMY said his name has a message)* Then again, subtlety isn’t your strong point.

PHIL

Another shot. You’re still a putz, Artie.

ARTIE

But you know I love you, right?

PHIL

Believe me, when you’re loved by a putz it’s obvious.

ARTIE

Yeah, ask Arlene.

SAMMY

Hey, why don’t we all just forget the sketch and go to the movies? It’s not like we’re being paid to write, is it?

ARTIE

What’s playing?

SAMMY

A touching drama called “I Lost My Job and Now I’m Writing Advertising Copy for Cut-Rate Liver Pills.”

ARTIE

*(Mock sternly)* Hey, what are we wasting time for? Can we please get back to the sketch?

ARLENE

We’re writing a sketch? Could have fooled me.

HOWARD

Is that it with the regular soldiers? Let’s get the colonel back.

SAMMY

Artie, how would it go?

ARTIE

What are they doing? We got these two guys written for an inspection, but the first sketch is written for war games.

SAMMY

We have to have the war games for the colonel and the rest of the sketch.

ARTIE

We’d have to get them outside with the rest of the brigade for the war games. But an inspection would be in the barracks.

HOWARD

The colonel could do the inspection in the barracks so they’re good for the war games.

ARTIE

A colonel wouldn’t go to the barracks for an inspection.

PHIL

What a bastard. Let’s demote him to Vice Matador.

SAMMY

*(SAMMY walks up to PHIL and puts his face next to PHIL’s; calmly and slowly with emphasis)* No.

PHIL

*(Holding his ground; just as slowly with just as much emphasis)* Don’t you want to think about it?

SAMMY

I’ll put it on my list of things to think about, right after whether Claudette Colbert is going to pick you or Artie for the double date. *(SAMMY retreats from PHIL.)*

PHIL

He’s not getting Claudette!

HOWARD

Is it that important, Artie? The colonel not coming to the barracks?

ARTIE

Nah. The network doesn’t want a realistic army.

SAMMY

Inspection in the barracks, then. If we need them for the war games we can do a music up transition. Or we can follow them as they march over.

PHIL

I love a good march. *(Marching cadence)* One, two, three, four. Five, six, seven, eight. Nine, ten, eleven, twelve.

SAMMY

Phil, calm down.

ARLENE

He has to stop soon. He only knows a few more numbers.

SAMMY

OK, back to the two privates.

ARLENE

What if the colonel’s wife does the inspection? That could be funny.

SAMMY

That fits the wife’s attitude.

PHIL

All right, let’s do it.

ARTIE

A sergeant. ‘Ten-hut! Line-up!’

PHIL

‘Here we go. Try to hide your feet.’

ARLENE

‘I could put on extra socks.’

PHIL

‘If you were outside you could stand in a hole.’

HOWARD

The Sgt. ‘The colonel is coming down to do the inspection. I hope you slobs are gonna make a decent showing.’

ARTIE

He wouldn’t have said ‘slobs.’

SAMMY

Yeah, but what he would have said isn’t going out to Mr. and Mrs. America.

ARTIE

‘Henderson! Tuck your shirt in! Peterson! Tuck your stomach in! Davidson! Tuck...tuck...everything in somehow. Do the best you can.’

HOWARD

‘Colonel! Ready for inspection, Sir!’ And the colonel comes in.

PHIL

The colonel would be protective. ‘Thank you, uh, Sergeant. This certainly looks like a, uh, fine group of, uh, gentlemen.’

ARLENE

But it would be the wife seeing the problems. ‘Get out of the way!! Let me through!...Hold it right there! These guys are a mess!’

PHIL

‘Phyllis!...I mean, Captain Phyllis! I mean…’

ARLENE

‘Edmund, you’re letting your men get away with poor soldiering. They have no discipline!’

PHIL

*(Again it’s getting personal)* ‘They’re good young men. I’m proud of them. They’re very clever.’

ARLENE

‘You can’t win the war games with cleverness. They need to learn how to take care of themselves. Look at them! One of them even has a spot on his shoes!’

PHIL

‘They’re going to be marching through the mud, Phyllis. Their shoes will get filthy anyway.’

ARLENE

‘What’s the point of an inspection if you don’t inspect?’

SAMMY

*(Again trying to break up the argument)* Hold it. I’m not sure where we’re going with this. Maybe try some interaction with individual soldiers, get some jokes rolling. Artie, hit us.

*(ARLENE and PHIL retreat to opposite corners.)*

ARTIE

As the colonel, or the wife?

SAMMY

Whatever hits you in the moment.

ARTIE

*(Going up to SAMMY)* ‘Here, look at this, Phyllis. A perfect class A uniform. What’s your name?’

SAMMY

‘Hanson, Sir.’

ARTIE

‘Good job, Hanson. Just let me adjust your tie.’ But the wife says, ‘That’s 10 demerits, Hanson. Let me write that down: *(slowly, as if writing)* Hanson, sloppy tie, 10.’

HOWARD

I got the colonel. ‘Excuse me, soldier.’

ARTIE

‘Don’t say ‘excuse me,’ Edmund. You’re a colonel. He’s just a private.’

HOWARD

‘What’s your name, soldier?’

SAMMY

‘Williams, Sir.’

HOWARD

‘Very nice job, Williams.’

ARTIE

‘Don’t tell him it’s a nice job. Tell him to open his footlocker.’

HOWARD

‘I was getting to that! Please open your footlocker and let’s take a look there.’

SAMMY

Sound of footlocker opening.

ARTIE

‘Look at that! It’s a complete mess.’

PHIL

*(Jumping in as the colonel)* ‘She’s right! Your machine gun is crushing your coffee cake.’

SAMMY

Good. One more and we’ll get out to the war games.

PHIL

But the wife would be threatening. ‘I’ll handle this next one myself, Edmund. *(Loudly and threateningly, directly at HOWARD, who is playing the soldier being inspected)* What’s your name, you chicken-hearted, chuckle-headed chump?’

HOWARD

*(Scared)* ‘Uh...I forget!’

PHIL

‘20 demerits!’

ARTIE

‘At ease, soldier. There’s no reason to be nervous.’

ARLENE

*(Frightened, high-pitched voice.)* ‘I’m only 18, Sir. I’ve never been inspected by a woman.’

SAMMY

*(Laughs)* Funny, but no chance.

HOWARD

How about if we take out the 18? Just *(Squeaky voice)* ‘I’ve never been inspected by a woman.’

SAMMY

Maybe. If we don’t put the voice in the script. Worth a shot.

ARTIE

I’m surprised at you, Arlene.

PHIL

I’m surprised at the rest of us, letting Arlene beat us to a dirty joke.

SAMMY

Transition to war games. Artie?

ARTIE

War games. We’re not going to get into any actual battles, are we? Just the colonel’s speech. Or it becomes the wife’s speech?

HOWARD

Need the kids. They’ll be marching in the war games.

SAMMY

The games could be funnier. Let’s see what we can get out of that. We can use the speech if we need it.

*(ARTIE goes back to the table, sits down, and starts leafing through newspaper; he’s not into this part.)*

HOWARD

What kind of games do they play?

SAMMY

Artie?

ARTIE

*(ARTIE almost takes on a different personality for this speech. The humor is gone; he sounds like an army instructor, though in a casual moment)* It’s a giant game of Capture the Flag. It’s maneuvers with an emphasis at the platoon level. Send this platoon that way and that platoon this way, with referees at various points who decide which platoon adheres to the necessary values and performs the necessary jobs best. They use plenty of fake ammunition. Everyone fights hard, and almost all fighting techniques are used, except hand to hand. Explosives can be simulated and victims counted. There are no punishments for losing but a lot of rewards for winning, from favored assignments to citations and passes. The rewards are only to get everyone excited and performing at their best. The winning and losing doesn’t matter. What the army cares about is how well everyone does the jobs necessary on the battlefield.

HOWARD

Boy, you really absorbed the soldier stuff, didn’t you? How’d you ever wind up as a comedy writer?

ARTIE

*(Back to himself)* Pure irony. I was 16 when the country got into the war. I lied about my age to join up. Dumbest thing I ever did in my life. I wanted to change the world. I thought of being a scientist, a politician, something important. But I didn’t have the stamina to get much of anywhere, not to mention the brains. So when the whole world was at war, I thought, “OK, this will change the world. And I’ll be a part of it.” I got lucky. I got out in one piece. Didn’t have a limb blown off, didn’t fry my lungs in a gas attack. But I saw enough for a lifetime. I saw people get killed, and I saw people get torn up so bad they’d be better off dead. I saw people living in filth you wouldn’t believe, waiting to kill other people living in filth you wouldn’t believe. And I saw a bunch of 16-year-olds who wanted to change the world.

Well, the war sure did change the world. It changed me, too: I got bitter. I wanted to write a book telling everyone how horrible it was. Except 10,000 other people beat me to it, and they all wrote better books than I could. So I figured, to hell with everyone, the world doesn’t deserve my bitterness. But I couldn’t keep it inside. It leaked out in snide remarks and by twisting people’s words. And you know what? Nobody understood the anger. They just laughed. The more I did it, the more they laughed. And the better I got at it. So I thought, hell, making people laugh is a lot better than changing the world.

*(Indicates the newspaper)* There’s another war on the way. I hope not, but I wouldn’t bet against it. So if you see any 16-year-olds, tell them to write jokes, or build buildings, or study whatever they like that *isn’t* important. The world will change all by itself. There’s no need to rush things.

PHIL

Hey, great monologue. Let’s write that into the show.

ARTIE

Oh, yeah. The war was hilarious.

PHIL

That’ll be the variety this week. Beats the lousy singers they have.

ARLENE

Ahem.

PHIL

Present company excepted.

SAMMY

You need a break, Artie?

ARTIE

*(Shaking off his mood and coming back to him normal self)* Nah. This room is my asylum. It’s funny how that word has changed. An asylum is a safe place to get away. But then they started putting crazy people ‘away’ and an asylum became a place for the insane. But in here we’ve got the best of both worlds. In this room it’s crazy, but it’s Phil crazy, funny crazy. Not crazy like it is out there, full of hate and cycles of revenge. It’s where I get away from the real insanity.

SAMMY

And the audience gets away a little bit, too.

ARLENE

I have to agree.

HOWARD

So you drown your sorrows in doughnuts?

ARTIE

That’s the one good thing I got out of the war. The food was horrible, but every once in a while you could get out to a village and the French girls would fry dough with sugar and spices. I guess it was all they could afford. But I’ve never had anything taste so good. The Broadway doughnuts aren’t the same, but I picked up the taste for it and I never found a reason to stop.

SAMMY

Grab a doughnut and let’s get to it.

ARTIE

Yeah, a comedy war is a lot better than a real one. Let’s do it.

SAMMY

Go.

HOWARD

Get the kids in to surprise the audience.

ARLENE

And the soldiers.

ARTIE

Yeah. Get back into it. ‘Can you imagine bein’ inspected by a woman? What’s the army comin’ to?’

PHIL

‘Hey, do you hear that? There’s another high voice in back of us. Sounds younger than the one who did the inspection. Maybe it’s some real girls.’

SAMMY

Good, but split it up between the two soldiers.

HOWARD

‘Hey, there’s another high voice back there. But it doesn’t sound like the old one who inspected us.’

PHIL

‘Maybe there’s some real girls.’

ARLENE

‘Ah, you wouldn’t know what to do with a real girl.’

SAMMY

We can leave that, but don’t follow it up. Why is everyone making sex jokes today? STOP! I withdraw that straight line.

ARTIE

We’re trying to get to one more than yesterday.

HOWARD

Those who can, do. Those who can’t make jokes.

PHIL

What else do you expect from a roomful of schmucks?

SAMMY

Subtle, Phil. Thank you all, gentlemen. At least Arlene has the class to let it be.

ARLENE

With Phil, sex is always a joke.

PHIL

*(To ARLENE)* Thank you, Don Ameche.

SAMMY

I stand corrected.

PHIL

There’ll be more corrections coming. You might as well sit down.

SAMMY

Thank *you*, Don Ameche. Now we got the soldiers, and the kids are coming. How do we mix?

HOWARD

They heard the voice. Just have one of the kids doing it.

ARTIE

Let’s have the voice actually heard before the soldiers notice it. One of the kids says something.

ARLENE

Military, so we don’t give away the joke beforehand.

PHIL

‘One, two, three, four…’

ARTIE

Mostly the sergeant would call that out. We could use that. It would get a sound background for the dialogue.

PHIL

‘One, two, three, four; one, two, three, four.’

ARTIE

Some of the soldiers might chant along, especially green ones.

HOWARD

OK, so they’re chanting. And then the high voice chanting comes in. And the lines about real girls.

SAMMY

And then we need some line one of the family kids can say. Who?

ARTIE

How old is the oldest, the boy?

HOWARD

What’d we say, 15? Is that too old to sound like a girl?

SAMMY

I think so.

ARLENE

Is it as funny if it’s the young girl?

PHIL

The gag is that they think it’s a girl but it isn’t.

ARLENE

But it could be funny if they think it’s a girl their age and it’s a little kid.

PHIL

Trust me, it isn’t as funny.

ARLENE

*(A little too pointed to be funny)* Trust has to be earned.

SAMMY

*(Cutting the problem off at the pass)* So does a paycheck. Let’s worry about the soldier gags later and get to the family.

ARTIE

At the war games.

PHIL

Let me be the colonel. He was dumped on in the first sketch, but he needs to be sympathetic.

SAMMY

Build his character? Howard?

HOWARD

Maybe. He’s just a weakling for the jokes. But maybe it would be stronger if he had a sympathetic angle.

SAMMY

Like?

PHIL

He should be a good father.

SAMMY

That comes across in the first half, no?

HOWARD

Yeah. He doesn’t come across as a bad guy.

PHIL

He cares about his soldiers. He doesn’t want to hurt anyone.

ARTIE

Be careful. We don’t want to actually make a point.

PHIL

*(Mock offended)* I’ve never made a point in my whole life and I don’t intend to start now!

ARTIE

I know, Phil. You’re as pointless as anyone in show business.

SAMMY

Let’s get to the war games.

PHIL

Let’s do the speech. That could show he cares about his men, and then later show he cares about his family.

SAMMY

But what are the jokes?

ARLENE

Gotta be the wife, the contrast. She’s a strong character.

HOWARD

We should have parallels to the first part. They have the same arguments, but now in the army.

SAMMY

We did running the family as army in the first sketch. Let’s up the ante.

PHIL

Jokes or better to open.

ARTIE

I salute you, Phil. That was the worst joke of the year. And the year was 1847.

SAMMY

Somebody, anybody, have an idea for the sketch we are pretending to write?

HOWARD

This may be tougher than we thought. We’ve gotten away from the original idea, which was family in the army. The first sketch wound up focusing on the relationship between the colonel and his wife.

SAMMY

So where do we go?

PHIL

The speech. He’s not good at making speeches, so we get the jokes. But what he says makes sense. ‘Good morning, gentlemen, officers, and, uh, non-coms...Majors… captains, lieutenants, sergeants, and especially you privates… and cooks, janitors...oh, yes, secretaries, don’t want to forget the secretaries. And of course, the *(with finality)* honored civilians… *(But continuing)* And the distinguished guests among us…

ARLENE

‘And the rest of you. Thank you for coming. What I really want to say is…’

PHIL

*(Immediately picking up the gag that the colonel automatically repeats what his wife has whispered in his ear)* ‘And the rest of you. Thank you for coming. What I really want to say is...uh, that we are about to engage in our war games. And I want everyone to remember that these are games, not a real battle. The point of games…’

ARLENE

*(Crossing to PHIL and, picking up on PHIL’s take, stage whispering in PHIL’s ear)* ‘… is to win!…’

PHIL

*(The colonel without thinking repeats what he’s told, then tries to recover) ‘*...is to win!… But also to realize that this is a training exercise. War is a serious business, and no one wants to be in a war, but we all have jobs that we need to …’

ARLENE

‘… take seriously, because other people are counting on you.’

PHIL

‘...take seriously… but our real purpose is to…’

ARLENE

‘...win!’

PHIL

Winning isn’t everything!

ARLENE

No one likes losing.

SAMMY

OK, wait a minute. We’re confusing the characters. Artie, what is the colonel to you?’

ARTIE

Hold it, Sammy. I got a question.

SAMMY

Artie…

ARTIE

Short and sweet. Here it is: *(To PHIL and ARLENE) W*hat the bloody hell is wrong with you two today?

*(PHIL and ARLENE are both embarrassed and don’t say anything immediately.)*

SAMMY

Phil, they’re going to find out eventually. They’ll notice you’re not here.

ARTIE

What??

PHIL

Ah, it won’t make any difference.

SAMMY

It’ll be a lot quieter. Besides, do the math. I know, you know, Arlene knows. That’s 60 percent of your potential audience.

ARTIE

What’s going on? What do you know? Is somebody sick?

PHIL

Nobody’s sick… I’m leaving the show at the end of the season.

ARTIE

*(Chuckles, not believing PHIL)* What happened? Arlene finally got you to take that job as a garbageman?

ARLENE

He got an offer from a fly-by-night movie company. And he decided to get on the plane.

ARTIE

*(Completely thrown)* You’re really leaving? Who am I going to insult?

PHIL

Insult Sammy. He can take it. He’s got an award.

ARTIE

*(Upset)* He’s too dull. He doesn’t fight back.

HOWARD

You haven’t insulted me yet. Take a shot.

ARTIE

*(Frantic)* I can’t just start insulting you! I don’t even know your faults!

HOWARD

I’m sure I have some. You can look for them.

ARTIE

Forget it! I can’t insult someone who calls himself Howard.

HOWARD

What’s that got to do with it? Are Howards some sort of special people?

ARTIE

It’s too formal. When you get to be Howie I’ll insult you.

HOWARD

You mean if Phil used Phillip you couldn’t insult him?

ARTIE

*(Irrational)* If Phil had been called Phillip even once in his life he would have been a brain surgeon!

ARLENE

That could have helped because he needs a brain surgeon!

PHIL

I wouldn’t operate on myself. That would be showing off.

SAMMY

He’s done it. Phil has finally pushed us all over the edge.

ARLENE

Artie, maybe you can talk some sense into him.

ARTIE

Phil and sense are like the north poles of two magnets. They repel each other.

SAMMY

Howard, why don’t you hide under the table. Maybe you can avoid being infected by the Phil virus.

ARTIE

I get it, Arlene. You don’t want him to give up this job.

ARLENE

All right, I’m the bad guy. The terrible philistine destroying someone’s dreams.

ARTIE

Is it a bad deal?

SAMMY

My considered opinion, based on what Phil told me and my years in show business: it’s terrible. It’s not even Hollywood terrible, screwed out of the profits. It’s New York terrible, the phone’s disconnected.

ARLENE

All right, it’s selfish. I don’t want him to screw up everything we have. But I also don’t want him to do it for him. It’ll kill him, and I couldn’t stand to see that. I can’t help it, I love the son of a bitch.

PHIL

I’ll handle it. I’ll land on my feet. I always have.

ARLENE

You’ve moved on from that. You don’t have to land on your feet anymore. You’ve got a soft spot right here. I wish you’d want to stay.

HOWARD

I don’t know if anyone wants to hear my opinion.

SAMMY

When Phil leaves, we’d better hear more from you or there’s gonna be a lot of dead air coming out of the radio when the show’s supposed to be on.

HOWARD

I spent a few years trying to get here. Wrote all sorts of garbage and faced a thousand rejections. I started by writing parodies. I wrote a parody of *War and Peace* that wasn’t as funny as the original*.* I threw away enough bad jokes to close a dozen plays out of town. I worked at it and worked at it and worked at it. I got a little better but something was missing. And then one day last year I was twisting a radio dial and heard this show. And suddenly I was able to stop worrying about how to do it and start writing sketches, not just jokes. Sketches with people *under* the jokes, people with anger and fear and confusion. Within 6 months I was able to write sketches good enough to get this job. I’m not sure why or how. But I’m here and I don’t want to leave. Just being in this room for an hour has made all the rejections worthwhile. I know it can’t last forever. Radio shows get canceled, writers move around all the time. But I wouldn’t give this up for anything.

PHIL

You ever been a performer?

HOWARD

Hosted a comedy night once.

SAMMY

It’s like using narcotics. You can’t get away from it.

ARLENE

Well, there needs to be a Federal Narcotic Farm for it! Go ahead, Artie, let me have it. Tell me how horrible I am. Tell me I’m destroying an artist. Go ahead.

ARTIE

*(Walks up to ARLENE, putting his face inches from hers and speaking harshly directly to her)* Phil, you’re a schmuck. This is the perfect situation for you. You give it up, you’ll wind up in the gutter, begging strangers for straight lines. *(ARTIE retreats from ARLENE)*

ARLENE

That’s telling me!

PHIL

Why are you on Arlene’s side??

ARTIE

I’m not on Arlene’s side. I don’t divide the world into Phil vs Arlene. I divide it into laughs vs disaster, and I’m on the side of laughs. I told you this room is my asylum. I don’t want to lose it.

SAMMY

I don’t want it to change either, Artie, but that’s the way of the world, even on radio. We’ll have to find another Phil.

ARTIE

There can’t possibly be two of him.

SAMMY

There sure ain’t. And the show might not survive. In any case it’ll become something else. Who knows? Like you said, the world will change by itself.

HOWARD

Might not survive?

PHIL

The show has sponsors lining up.

SAMMY

We’ll finish the season—Phil isn’t leaving until summer hiatus—and we’ll be on next season. But if the quality suffers...the bell tolls.

ARTIE

So you’ll spend the summer looking for another Phil.

ARLENE

So will I. And neither of us will be successful.

ARTIE

You’re taking down everyone with you, you bastard.

SAMMY

The world doesn’t rest on Phil’s shoulders.

PHIL

I’ll miss this, too.

ARTIE

I know you will. In all seriousness…

PHIL

*(Cutting him off)* Stop! I can’t take any more seriousness from you.

ARTIE

You’re right. The world is too serious as it is.

SAMMY

Now that we’ve heard today’s episode of *The Perils of Phil and Arlene*, can we get back to the sketch?

PHIL

We can soldier on with the soldiers.

ARTIE

The statute of limitations ran out on that joke 50 years ago.

SAMMY

I know this is hanging over everybody, and you know that if you need me, I’m here. But we’ve got a show to write.

ARTIE

At least you two don’t have to disguise your insults. You can beat each other up openly.

SAMMY

Does anyone even remember where we were?

PHIL

The colonel’s speech.

HOWARD

Yeah but it wasn’t working.

SAMMY

I agree.

PHIL

But I was still brilliant.

ARTIE

That goes without saying. At least I hope it will from now on.

HOWARD

Let’s try the war games. The wife drives the kids and him to win. But what’s on the colonel’s mind? He can’t just be fighting his wife. He has to be doing something.

SAMMY

We’ve got two groups he can be focusing on, the kids and the soldiers.

ARTIE

He wants the kids to have a non-military childhood. He wants them to play. We could go there.

ARLENE

Making a game out of the war games, something like that?

PHIL

Let’s do hopscotch. *(PHIL starts jumping on an imaginary hopscotch board.)*

HOWARD

Artie, you said the war games are basically a game of capture the flag.

PHIL

*(Loudly)* Olly olly oxen free!

ARLENE

So the colonel says, “OK, kids, you can watch the games from here. Those soldiers there are on the front lines.’

ARTIE

‘What are they doing, Dad?’

ARLENE

‘They’re trying to find a way to get to the other team’s flag.’

ARTIE

‘Oh, like capture the flag. We played that at school.’

ARLENE

‘That’s right. It’s can be a lot of fun.’

PHIL

The wife. ‘Why aren’t they charging?’

HOWARD

OK, that could work. They argue over his orders to the soldiers, and then at the end she orders the kids to charge.

SAMMY

Yes! We have to work out the beginning, the reason the wife and kids are at the base, but we can do that after.

HOWARD

Who’s who?

ARLENE

I’ve been the colonel.

ARTIE

Phil’s been playing the wife. I’ve been playing the kid. Or kids.

SAMMY

Last line, ‘Why aren’t they charging?’

ARLENE

‘There’s a battle plan, Phyllis. It’s more complicated than just charging.’

PHIL

‘Let me see that battle plan. It was probably written by a pacifist.’

SAMMY

The network doesn’t like pacifism.

PHIL

‘Let me see the battle plan. It’s probably an old one of Gandhi’s.’

SAMMY

That works. The network hates Gandhi.

ARTIE

Take out ‘battle,’ it waters down the joke. ‘Let me see your plan. It’s probably an old one of Gandhi’s.’

SAMMY

*(Scribbling)* Good.

ARLENE

‘It’s got the latest strategies. It’s actually pretty ingenious.’

PHIL

‘You don’t need a genius to win a war. You need guts!’

ARLENE

‘I’ve got guts! Freddie, put down that pencil. It’s sharp! You could get hurt!’

ARTIE

Before that line: ‘Hey, Daddy, I’m a soldier. Bang bang!’ Then Phyllis says, ‘Don’t point that pencil at your father, Freddie.’

ARLENE

‘I’ve got guts. Put down that pencil. It’s sharp! You could get hurt!’

SAMMY

OK.

HOWARD

The name wasn’t Freddie.

SAMMY

We can get the names straight later.

HOWARD

It’s bogging down.

SAMMY

Artie, try the colonel.

ARLENE

I can do it.

PHIL

I’ll do it.

SAMMY

Let Artie. You two are not at your best. Take a minute to breathe.

PHIL

What? What are you saying?

SAMMY

Just take a minute. We need you at your best.

PHIL

That’s a direct challenge!

ARTIE

That’s not a direct challenge. Sammy doesn’t do direct challenges. He finesses.

PHIL

I know a challenge when I hear it!

ARTIE

It was a challenge but not direct.

PHIL

What are you talking about? He accused me of being not funny. That’s a direct challenge.

ARTIE

He didn’t accuse you of being not funny. *I’m* accusing you of being not funny! YOU’RE BEING NOT FUNNY!

PHIL

You wouldn’t know not funny if you saw its picture on a wanted poster.

HOWARD

We don’t need a wanted poster for not funny, you got that covered.

ARTIE

Ha! Howard got you. His first one. We gotta have that joke bronzed.

SAMMY

Is that what happened, Phil? You saw not funny on a poster and decided to quit the show and follow that muse?

PHIL

Sammy! Now everybody’s against me.

SAMMY

*(Goading PHIL)* I’m not against you, Phil, but I got a show to run. If you’re not up to being funny, you’re no good to us.

PHIL

*(Suddenly adopts a Warner Brothers gangster film/Jimmy Cagney accent and grabs SAMMY by the lapels.)*

Listen, buddy. There ain’t nothin’ that stops me from bein’ funny. Ya unnerstan’? I don’t care how tough you think you are. You think you and that gang of jerks-with-jokes behind you can out-funny me. Ha! Put together you couldn’t get a laugh with a joke book and a balloon full of laughing gas. Me and my gang, we rule this comedy territory!

*(PHIL pauses a second as if listening to someone. Then he drops SAMMY’s lapels and grabs ARTIE’s.)*

Oh, so you want a showdown, eh? A fight to the death! Only one of us survives!...And the other one dies laughing! This’ll be the easiest fight ever. I got the punch lines!

*(PHIL throws a wild punch at an imaginary opponent, then suddenly turns and looks at ARLENE.)*

This is my territory. The whole world is my territory! Oh, so you don’t think I can take over the whole world… *(PHIL walks slowly and meaningfully toward ARLENE.)* Well, you’re wrong, wise guy. … uh, wise girl...Wise potato chips!…

It’s time we had it out. This world ain’t big enough for the both of us…. Draw and fire on 3… One...two...three!

*(PHIL’s voice changes back to his own.)*

My brother loved radio. Listened to it all day long. Said it was better than the movies because you had the pictures in your head. One day he told us what the pictures in his head were. Had to put him away.

And speaking of asylums, did you know 9 out of 10 inmates prefer the radio to the movies? In fact, that’s how they know they belong there.

The movies are alright. My sister tried to get into the movies...without paying. She got arrested, but she saved the dime.

*(PHIL pauses and looks at ARLENE and goes back to the gangster voice.)*

Saved the dime, get it? You’re not laughing… You took my best shot and it did nothing!

ARLENE

I always thought the best way to break into the movies is with a crowbar.

PHIL

*(Still gangster)* That’s funny. *(As if being threatened)* No…. No! I won’t laugh! I won’t laugh, I tell ya! You can’t make me! *(PHIL let’s out a small chuckle but quickly stifles it. He tries to control it, but laughs keep coming out.)* I’m dyin’ laughin’!

(PHIL *grabs his chest. He goes into an elaborate death scene, staggering around with his hands on his chest, alternately laughing and dying. Finally, he sags to his knees, then falls down and lays on the ground quietly. Beat. Then he pops up.)*

Didja miss me?

*(HOWARD applauds. The others have seen PHIL like this before.)*

ARTIE

I got over it.

PHIL

I’m not funny?

ARTIE

I withdraw the remark temporarily, until there’s further evidence. Or you further aggravate me.

SAMMY

I don’t suppose you could redirect a little of that to the program?

PHIL

Alright, alright. I got the brilliant ready. Let’s write the sketch.

SAMMY

Where are we?

ARLENE

Bedlam, from the sound of it.

SAMMY

Why did I think it was going to be easy to get back to work?

HOWARD

We’re not lost yet. Colonel, Phyllis, war games.

SAMMY

Let’s plot it out first. It’ll make it easier to focus if we know where it’s going.

ARTIE

It should be straightforward. War games, she wants to win, he wants to….

ARLENE

I think that’s the whole problem. He gets annoyed by Phyllis, but he really isn’t trying to do anything.

HOWARD

If it was the other way around, if the colonel was the obnoxious blowhard, then we could have the wife swoop in and save everything.

ARLENE

But that isn’t how we set it up.

SAMMY

So the wife can be blowharding and the colonel can save the day.

PHIL

A colonel being a hero isn’t funny.

ARTIE

He wants to figure out a way to win the war games with the fewest casualties.

SAMMY

That’s touchy. The network could kill it outright.

PHIL

How about the colonel’s family invades the network and captures all the schmucks?

HOWARD

Basic structure, she’s driving the kids into the war games, we figure out something the colonel is doing, and then the kids win the war games.

PHIL

That’s not right.

HOWARD

Why not? It has to end with them winning the war games. We can’t have the main characters losing.

PHIL

But he would be losing. He’d be losing the argument with his wife.

ARLENE

She’d be showing him up. I don’t think that’s what she wants.

SAMMY

I don’t care what she wants. What do we want?

ARTIE

Do we have to have everything be a happy ending? Can we go with one of two? They settle their differences but they lose the war games.

SAMMY

We could do it that way.

ARLENE

Or the other way. They win the war games but are left arguing.

SAMMY

Why?

ARLENE

Because it just isn’t so easy to settle those kind of differences.

PHIL

Call me when you need jokes, not settling differences.

ARLENE

The story of my life.

SAMMY

All right, you two. Don’t go through this again.

HOWARD

It’d be easier to write an ending for you and Phil than the colonel and his wife.

SAMMY

Too bad Phil and Arlene aren’t a radio show. Then they’d get a happy ending. It’s mandatory.

ARLENE

I wish you *could* write an ending for us. It’d be better than the reality.

ARTIE

Let’s do it.

SAMMY

What?

ARTIE

Let’s write an ending for Arlene and Phil.

SAMMY

*(Dismissively)* Come on.

ARTIE

I mean it. Look, we can’t get anything done with these two like this. Let’s just write them a happy ending, settle their problem, and then we can get back to writing the show.

PHIL

You’re an idiot, Artie. Maybe that’s why I love you. Or maybe that’s why you irritate the hell out of me. One or the other.

ARLENE

I have to agree with Phil. You’re an idiot.

ARTIE

See? You’re already agreeing with each other.

ARLENE

Artie, there is no happy ending. It’s just a situation that has no solution. It’s life, not entertainment.

ARTIE

Well, it should be entertainment. Entertainment is better than life.

HOWARD

He’s right. If life was better than entertainment, people would sit around listening to life.

ARLENE

I’ve listened to life. It’s not believable. The characters are morons.

ARTIE

Let’s take a shot at it.

PHIL

*(Pleading)* We haven’t been able to figure it out by ourselves, Arlene. Maybe they can help.

ARLENE

Oh, Phil…

SAMMY

Can we do *something*? As long as we bothered to show up for work.

ARTIE

Howard, you be Arlene. I’ll be Phil.

PHIL

You’re no Phil!

ARTIE

One of the few breaks I got in life.

HOWARD

I’m not exactly Arlene, either. And I don’t know the backstory.

PHIL

*(To HOWARD)* You’re lovely, Arlene! May I have this dance? *(PHIL waltzes)*

HOWARD

I haven’t learned anything since the Charleston.

PHIL

*(Snob voice)* You dance divinely.

ARTIE

All right. Arlene, you be Arlene.

HOWARD

Typecasting.

PHIL

Arlene makes a great Arlene.

SAMMY

I’ve seen her in *The The Phil and Arlene Show.* It’s a lousy role. She has to play second banana to Phil Horowitz. She deserves better.

PHIL

*(Defensively)* There is nothing better!

ARTIE

Phil, *I’m* Phil. You’re, uh… Sammy.

PHIL

‘Then you better not be having any fun! Dig ditches while I go talk to the network schmucks.’

ARTIE

Let’s lay out the problem. We’ll start with Phil’s side. *(To ARLENE)* ‘Arlene, this could really be it. With everything I’ve learned doing the radio show, I think this has a real chance.’

ARLENE

‘It doesn’t matter, Phil. If you succeed it changes everything. If you fail, it changes nothing.’

ARTIE

‘Don’t be so negative. I’m still a good radio writer. If it doesn’t work out, I can come back to this show. If not this one, another one. They’ll want me. The movie credits will only help.’

ARLENE

‘Only until the next crazy offer comes along. And then we’ll be struggling for money again. And your wife is legally entitled to most of it anyway.’

PHIL

*(Just can’t resist making jokes)* ‘And your wife spends money like a drunken sailor. In fact, last week she got a recruitment letter from the navy.’

ARLENE

*(Laughing despite herself)* Phil, you’re insane.

ARTIE

This is easy. All we need is a little deus ex machina. I’ve written it a hundred times.

PHIL

What? These ex what?

ARTIE

It’s Greek.

HOWARD

It’s Latin, *from* the Greek. It means ‘God from the machine.’

PHIL

God comes out of a machine?

HOWARD

It’s when you have an unsolvable problem, but right at the end of the story something unexpected happens that changes everything. God, or whatever else you can think of, comes in and solves the problem, even though it makes no sense.

PHIL

We’ve been waiting for that for 2000 years.

ARLENE

Believe me, there are no gods in this story.

ARTIE

No, but we have Sammy and network schmucks… Wait a minute. I got it!

ARLENE

You got what? I’m lost.

ARTIE

Arlene, you be Arlene. I’ll be Sammy.

SAMMY

Another lousy role.

ARTIE

‘Arlene, I’ve just been to see the network schmucks. I’ve found a replacement for Phil.’ *(ARLENE doesn’t respond.)* Come on, Arlene. It’s your line.

ARLENE

*(Reluctantly)* ‘Who’s the replacement for Phil?’

ARTIE

‘You!’

ARLENE

What??

ARTIE

Stay in character.

ARLENE

OK. Arlene says, ‘What??’

ARTIE

‘I got the network to put you on staff. We’re giving you a real writer’s salary instead of an occasional singer’s. You won’t make as much as Phil, but it should be enough to carry you through financially until Phil bombs and comes back to radio.’

PHIL

Who says I’m going to bomb?

ARTIE

Shhh! The show’s on.

ARLENE

That doesn’t solve the problem.

SAMMY

I’ve been trying to get Arlene on staff for a year. *(To ARLENE)* You deserve it. *(To ARTIE)* The network probably *would* put Arlene on staff to replace Phil. But that *wouldn’t* replace Phil. We’d still be a writer short, and the network isn’t going to pay two new writer salaries.

ARTIE

Arlene does a full writer’s work.

ARLENE

Plus a typist.

HOWARD

And a coffee percolator-er.

ARTIE

It isn’t fair.

SAMMY

No, but that’s how it is.

ARLENE

I appreciate the thought, Artie. But it wouldn’t change Phil.

ARTIE

Three neurosurgeons and a rhinoceros couldn’t change Phil.

PHIL

Arlene, it will work out.

ARLENE

You’re chasing a dream. If you can’t let it go now, you never will.

SAMMY

If we were writing a soap opera, this would be helpful.

ARLENE

Soap operas never have happy endings. They go from one tragedy to another.

ARTIE

This isn’t going to be a tragedy. We got two problems, Phil’s dreams and money. We can figure it out.

ARLENE

We’ve tried.

SAMMY

*(Thinking)* Wait a minute.

PHIL

You got an ex mackerel?

HOWARD

Machina.

PHIL

Pardon my French.

ARTIE

Whattaya got, Sammy?

SAMMY

Just hold it a second. *(A very unusual silence descends on the group, as everyone looks at SAMMY, waiting for him to say something. Nobody moves. The tension builds. Finally)* My wife’s mother is sick.

PHIL

That’s good to know. If I’m gonna be miserable, everyone else should be, too. We can start with her.

SAMMY

It means, Phil, that we can’t take our family vacation this summer.

PHIL

I’m sorry. If I had known, I’d have brought the Eiffel tower over here for you to look at.

SAMMY

Which also means, Phil, that I’d have time to co-write and co-produce a couple of two-reel shorts.

PHIL

*(Completely confused)* You want in?

SAMMY

If you had some help writing, or at least editing your insanity, you could get the shorts written and shot while we’re on summer hiatus, and when you shoot I could, so help me, make you stay on schedule. If you could get two of them shot by the time we start writing the fall season, you’d have one to release and one in the can for a followup. You wouldn’t have to quit the show until you know if the shorts are a hit.

PHIL

You’d do that for me? I don’t have the budget to pay you.

SAMMY

It’s a better plan than counting on you to move the Eiffel tower… I’d work for a split of the net. Besides, I wouldn’t be doing it for you. I’d be doing it for the drunks who wouldn’t have a cheap place to pass out if there were no low-class movies.

ARLENE

You’ve got an exclusive contract with the network.

SAMMY

Only for radio. We can write for the movies.

ARTIE

Personally, Phil, I wouldn’t do that for you…. But I’d do it for Arlene. I don’t have any plans for the summer.

ARLENE

No!… I appreciate it and I love you guys. But it doesn’t solve the problem. It just pushes it down the road.

ARTIE

*(Picking up the newspaper and holding it out)* I’ve been following the news pretty closely. I figure if the entire world comes together in an unprecedented display of human decency, there might be a way to solve the fascist problem. But solving Phil? You haven’t got a prayer.

PHIL

*(Seriously)* Yes, she does.

ARTIE

I don’t see how.

PHIL

Here’s how.… Arlene, I’ve been listening to all this and Artie was right. What you do for me, and what these guys do for me, for us, I can’t live without it. I don’t need the movies.

ARLENE

Phil, that’s the most beautiful thing anyone has ever said to me. That’s the most beautiful thing anyone has ever said to anyone since Omar Khayyam walked into a grocery store to buy a jug of wine and a loaf of bread. But it won’t work. You’ll always wonder, and I’ll hate myself for stopping you.

ARTIE

That isn’t your line! Your line is, ‘I love you, Phil.’ And then you live happily ever after.

HOWARD

That’s a Hollywood ending.

ARLENE

This isn’t Hollywood.

SAMMY

When there’s something you don’t want to face, kicking things down the road makes things worse. But sometimes you need to wait and see what happens.

ARTIE

Phil could hate the movies. By which I mean the movies could hate Phil. Everyone else does.

SAMMY

Or maybe the network will give Phil his own radio show and he won’t need the movies.

ARTIE

I didn’t think of that.

PHIL

Is that possible?

SAMMY

We could do a pitch. You never know.

ARTIE

We’d all be writing for Phil every week?? War is one thing, but the world can’t be *that* cruel.

HOWARD

I’d listen to it. *Phil and Arlene: The Comic and the Crooner.*

SAMMY

Arlene’s more of a belter.

HOWARD

*The Belter and the …*

ARTIE

… *Bastard.*

PHIL

Thank you, Don Ameche.

ARLENE

As much as I appreciate you all, this is *my* decision. And I’m not going to commit to anything while I’m on the spot.

PHIL

So that’s a maybe? I can live with that.

ARLENE

*Maybe* it’s a maybe… OK, it’s a maybe. Maybe an extra summer together is better than a summer apart.

SAMMY

Music up, credits. Now can we get back to *our* show? The colonel.

HOWARD

Maybe it would help if we knew who the guest is going to be. Give us a personality to write for.

SAMMY

Did I tell you? Belson told me.

ARTIE

Male or female? Plays the colonel or the wife?

SAMMY

Male.

ARLENE

Actor? Comedian? Singer?

SAMMY

Actor.

HOWARD

Romantic or character?

PHIL

What is this, twenty questions? Right-handed or left-handed?

SAMMY

You ready for this? It’s Don Ameche.

ARLENE

You’re kidding.

SAMMY

Yeah, I’m kidding. But it would have been funny.

ARTIE

Don’t do that to us, Sammy.

SAMMY

And speaking of funny…

PHIL

Here I am!

SAMMY

Speaking of funny, can we get back to the sketch? Howard, where are we?

HOWARD

I don’t know. … To tell you the truth, I’m feeling left out.

SAMMY

You want to get involved in Phil’s movies?

HOWARD

I’d love to help out on the movies if I could, depending on what kind of work I can get from the network over the summer. But…

PHIL

What? WHAT??

HOWARD

You guys have never insulted me.

*(ARTIE gets up, goes to HOWARD, and puts his face next to his.)*

ARTIE

You still go by Howard?

HOWARD

*(Extending his hand)* Nice to meet you, pal. Call me Howie.

ARTIE

*(Shaking hands)* Well, Howie, if you want to spend who-knows-how-many extra hours practically living right here in this room, this asylum, listening to all of us insult each other for no pay, then you’re dumber than you are ugly.

HOWARD

*(Happily)* Thank you, Don Ameche.

PHIL

That’s my line!

HOWARD

Then *you’re* dumber than you are ugly.

ARLENE

Hey! That’s *my* dumb, ugly guy.

PHIL

*(To ARLENE, gently, with meaning)* Thank you, Don Ameche.

SAMMY

Well, let’s see. We took care of Arlene and Phil, at least for the summer, we got Howard—excuse me, Howie—settled, all we have to do is prevent war and we can get back to work.

ARTIE

I don’t want to think about war. Let’s write jokes.

PHIL

*(Taking center stage)* There I was, in the middle of the room, surrounded by desperate writers waiting for me to be brilliant. *(The lights begin to fade.)* Suddenly, a network schmuck came up to me and said, ‘Listen, pal, I’ve had enough of your cheap insults.’ Right away I snapped back, ‘Raise my salary, and you’ll get expensive insults.’ I grabbed some paper and dove behind a typewriter...

*(The lights are out. End of play.)*