

The Third Story

Charles Busch

A SAMUEL FRENCH ACTING EDITION

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FOUNDED 1830

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THE THIRD STORY was originally commissioned and given its world premiere by the LaJolla Playhouse, La Jolla, California, September 2008 (Christopher Ashley, Artistic Director). The play was directed by Carl Andress. The cast and crew was as follows:

PEG/DR. RUTENSPITZ Mary Beth Peil
DREW/STEVE Jonathan Walker
QUEENIE BARTLETT/QUEENIE 2/BABA YAGA Charles Busch
DR. CONSTANCE HUDSON Jennifer Van Dyck
VERNA/VASALISA Rebecca Lawrence
ZYGOTE Scott Parkinson

Original music – Lewis Flynn
 Scenic design – David Gallo
 Costume design – Gregory Gale
 Lighting Design – Christopher Akerlind
 Sound Design – Walter Trabach
 Wig design – Tom Watson

The New York premiere of *THE THIRD STORY* was produced by MCC Theatre by special arrangement with The Lucille Lortel Theatre Foundation, January 2009 at the Lortel Theatre (Robert LuPone and Bernard Telsey, Artistic Directors, William Cantler, Associate Artistic Director, Blake West, Executive Director). The play was directed by Carl Andress. The cast and crew was as follows:

PEG/DR. RUTENSPITZ Kathleen Turner
DREW/STEVE Jonathan Walker
QUEENIE BARTLETT/QUEENIE 2/BABA YAGA Charles Busch
DR. CONSTANCE HUDSON Jennifer Van Dyke
VERNA/VASALISA Sarah Rafferty
ZYGOTE Scott Parkinson

Original music – Lewis Flynn
 Scenic design – David Gallo
 Costume design – Gregory Gale
 Lighting design – David Weiner
 Sound design – Chris Luessmann
 Wig design – Tom Watson

CAST OF CHARACTERS
(and suggested doubling of actors)

Actor 1 – **VASALISA/VERNA**

Actor 2 – **BABA YAGA/QUEENIE BARTLETT/QUEENIE 2**

Actor 3 – **PEG/DR. RUTENSPITZ**

Actor 4 – **DREW/STEVE**

Actor 5 – **DR. CONSTANCE HUDSON**

Actor 6 – **ZYGOTE/BABA YAGA DOUBLE**

ACT ONE

Scene One

(Omaha, Nebraska, 1949. Mid-afternoon. A furnished boarding house room, with a worn sofa, an easy chair, a liquor cabinet, a desk with a typewriter and a chair, is currently home to DREW, a young screenwriter and refugee from Hollywood. His mother, PEG, a veteran screenwriter, is visiting. This room stays throughout the play. All the stories that stem from the minds of Peg and Drew are enacted in this room and among this furniture. Changes of location should be made clear through lighting and sound.)

(DREW enters from the kitchen. From offstage, we hear PEG boisterously talking to him. DREW lies down on the worn sofa and picks up the book he had been reading.)

PEG. *(offstage)* I was throwing a million ideas at him. Every kind of story. Comedy, drama, romance.

(PEG enters from the kitchen. She's a tough, energetic woman in her sixties. She's always been catnip to men, but due to her salty intelligence rather than her beauty.)

PEG. I'm telling you, this young producer at Republic, his name is M.J. Furman, is a huge fan of mine. The man is on tenterhooks, desperate to read a script, even an outline from the two of us. I promised we'd have something to show him by next week.

DREW. Sorry to disappoint both of you, Mother, but you're looking at a devoted full-time employee of the Post Office. See how great it is? It's Sunday and I have the day off to do nothing but read. Over the next year, I'm thinking of plowing through all of Tolstoy.

PEG. Oh, why couldn't you have been born a fabulous Aries like me? Instead, you're a goddam Pisces. Imaginative and creative but sensitive and easily led astray. We Aries can be exhausting but oh, how brightly we shine. In the game of life, we play to win.

DREW. Well, get used to losing because the answer is still no.

PEG. If you're no longer a writer, why the hell do you have this Smith Corona so prominently displayed? You might as well have a pin spot on it.

DREW. I write letters.

PEG. You don't write me any letters.

DREW. I write to Vera.

PEG. I thought you two broke up.

DREW. She broke up with me. I haven't accepted it yet.

PEG. I never liked that dame. Never trusted her. *(She pours herself a drink.)*

DREW. She hates you too. Vera says you'll never release me from your grasping tentacles.

PEG. Oh really? What other lovely things has she to say about me?

DREW. She says if you expect to find work as a writer again, you're deluding yourself.

PEG. Well, you can tell Vera that if she expects to find work as an actress, she'd better do something about those teeth.

DREW. What's wrong with her teeth?

PEG. Has love blinded you to that overbite? I see no work in her future unless they're casting a hillbilly comedy. Her jealousy knows no bounds.

DREW. Jealous of what? Your dental alignment?

PEG. Jealous of what we share. We have a magic and a chemistry that goes beyond mother and son. She couldn't keep up. She felt excluded. Now I blame her for this whole thing.

DREW. What whole thing?

PEG. Breaking your heart and forcing you into this Midwestern exile in Omaha and a dead-end job as a mailman.

DREW. Mother, you have to accept that I love my job. I love this place. I love my life.

PEG. Forgive me if I remain a skeptic. If nothing else, this postal charade is hard on your feet. You always had rotten feet.

DREW. You're the one with the bad feet. Your aristocratic Russian feet that no shoes ever fit. I've got my father's big, wide Midwestern feet.

PEG. Your father has the feet of a murderer.

DREW. I'm impressed. You haven't seen his feet in over thirty years. Perhaps you're confusing my father's feet with those of one of your other five husbands?

PEG. Three husbands, my boy. You keep forgetting I married Miles twice. I was never legally wed to Irwin and my marriage to Jorge was annulled.

DREW. Forgive me. I forgot to bring along my abacus.

PEG. Oh boy, nobody kicks me in the ass like you do. I love it. The banter. The back and forth. Bam, bam, bam. I miss it. I haven't had one good solid laugh since you left.

DREW. Sorry but I'm staying put. I want to get to know my father. And I want to spend time with him before he's too old.

PEG. Well, that's very dear of you. Of course, you know, kid, I'm not enjoying the best of health.

DREW. What's wrong with your health?

PEG. What's wrong with my health? My darling, I was in a major car accident less than three years ago. One never fully recovers from that sort of trauma.

DREW. I don't see any residual effects.

PEG. You refuse to. You like to think of your mother as immortal. Well, she's not. I have many physical problems. I suffer from arthritis. My bones have never fully knit.

DREW. Have you been to a doctor?

PEG. I've had my fill of the medical profession. I've happily returned to my roots as a devout Christian Scientist.

DREW. You're not a devout Christian Scientist.

PEG. Kid, don't tell me what I believe in. Madeleine Andrews and I go once a month to the Christian Science Reading Room.

DREW. I've just never understood how you can be lifelong friends with a pickled-in-vodka ham actress like Madeleine Andrews.

PEG. I'd love to write something for her. The poor thing is starving for a meaty role.

DREW. But she's a terrible actress.

PEG. Explain that to her legion of fans. I can see Madeleine as a very stylish Queen of the mob. The ruthless head of a crime syndicate gowned by Dior. Hey, I bet a raw Freudian-tinged gangster picture would cinch us a deal.

DREW. I don't write as butch as you.

PEG. We make it a woman's picture but with violence instead of violins. We'll give her a troubled son. She adores him and worries how he'll get along after she's gone.

DREW. Digging deep, huh Ma?

PEG. It'll be a picture that speaks to every mother with a difficult child.

Scene Two

(An elegant high rise apartment. QUEENIE BARTLETT, the undisputed first lady of crime, enters. She exists in another world from Peg and Drew; that of a moody film noir crime drama. Onyx hard, she wears only the most elegant and understated of Paris fashions. DREW puts on a suit jacket and a fedora and plays Queenie's handsome and volatile gangster son, STEVE. His beautiful, blonde and lethal bride, VERNA, joins them.)

QUEENIE. The poor old Ma is always the last to know.

VERNA. I tell you, Mrs. B, there should have been violins playing. Steve says to me, "You think I'm a fibber, huh? You think I'm selling you a bill of goods on this marriage proposal business?"

QUEENIE. Who could resist such a romantic swain?

STEVE. Ma, I tell her to take a gander in the parlor and she sashays in there with a smirk on that beautiful puss of hers and what does she see but a Justice of the Peace.

VERNA. Five minutes later, I emerge Mrs. Steve Bartlett.

QUEENIE. Can't say I'm pleased you denied me the joy of planning your wedding.

STEVE. And what a flash that would have been.

QUEENIE. It would have been the height of elegance. I would have had my couturier Monsieur Andre design Verna's trousseau. The talented frog owes me plenty.

(With lightening dexterity, STEVE jokingly whips a gun out of his pocket.)

STEVE. Oh yeah? Should we take the boat to France and shake the pansy until his petals fall?

QUEENIE. Darling, please. This penthouse is no place for firearms.

STEVE. Whatever you say, Ma. Whatever you say. *(STEVE puts the gun back in his jacket pocket.)* Ma's pistol packing days are over. She's got others to do the dirty work but once upon a time, my mother handled a machine gun better than Dillinger.

QUEENIE. Well, the invention of the tommy gun was a real blessing. Finally – a machine gun you could carry. Before that, I was one big bruise. When Steve was a kid, he was convinced that the tommy gun was named after some other little boy named Tommy. Oh, he'd pitch a fit. Finally, just to quiet the kid down, I had the fellas call their guns their "Stevie." It got around and soon all the other mobsters thought we'd invented a new weapon. That's what it was like back then. We had fun. Today it's all dollars and cents.

VERNA. Sweet story.

QUEENIE. Verna, it's still not too late for me to take you shopping.

VERNA. It's very kind of you to offer, Mrs. B, and while I certainly admire your legendary chic, I tend to feature a younger look.

QUEENIE. Is that what you call it? Lord, I've never seen so many diamonds worn before noon. And Verna, in this town, summer furs are placed in storage no later than Labor Day.

VERNA. I'll remember that.

STEVE. Doll, maybe you should hold off buying too many clothes, I'll be wanting a son pretty soon. Ma, doesn't Verna look like she could give you plenty of healthy grandkids?

QUEENIE. Son, let's not place the ox before the tart. I'm sorry, a slip of the tongue. I meant the cart. Darling, there's so much I want for you.

STEVE. But I've got so much. I have Verna. Isn't she a beauty?

QUEENIE. Yes, she's quite a hooker. I'm sorry, looker.

STEVE. Another slip of the tongue, Ma?

VERNA. Stevie, we should be going. The train leaves Union Station in less than an hour.

STEVE. Our Palm Springs honeymoon awaits.

VERNA. A train ride into the desert. How can a tough guy like you be afraid to fly?

QUEENIE. He's not afraid of anything.

STEVE. I just don't like being penned in.

QUEENIE. It's a common medical condition called claustrophobia.

STEVE. Aw, Ma. Not now.

QUEENIE. She better know what she's getting into.

VERNA. I like being wise to the score. How long have you had this claustrophobia?

STEVE. All my life. I don't even ride in a car unless the top's down. Get me in a stalled elevator and I'm ready for the bughouse. That's why this great lady here took the rap for me last year. I couldn't face six months in the slammer. How can I ever repay her?

QUEENIE. Son, I needed the rest and was out in time for the fall fashion collections.

VERNA. Guess I'll just have to accept that my tough guy is a Mama's boy. But there's one place where he'll always be mine, unless you've got other ideas, Mrs. Bartlett.

(QUEENIE "accidentally" spills her drink on VERNA's dress. VERNA shrieks.)

QUEENIE. Oh, Verna. I'm terribly sorry.

VERNA. My dress! She did that on purpose! How am I supposed to get on a train like this?

STEVE. It was an accident, honey. Wasn't it, Ma?

QUEENIE. Of course, it was. Besides, Verna, you ought to know from experience that blood is the only stain that's hard to remove.

VERNA. Steve, are you coming with me, or am I flying to the desert solo?

STEVE. I'm coming with you. I'll phone you, Ma, from the Springs.

(He kisses her and he and VERNA exit. QUEENIE remains very perturbed. STEVE removes his jacket and hat and returns to being DREW.)

Scene Three

(Omaha. The living room. We continue where we left off.)

PEG. Now watch it, honey. Let's not make the mob queen a horrible bitch. We're writing this for Madeleine. She's not some sweaty, legs over her head B-movie actress.

DREW. Mother, I'm not working on this movie with you. And hey, I write great roles for women.

PEG. I beg to differ. Lately, you're always making your lead female character a selfish, unsympathetic harridan.

DREW. Not true. How can you say that?

PEG. You did it with the magazine editor in your last picture. You even did it with the manicurist in that dreadful comedy you worked on at Fox.

DREW. Dreadful? You told me you screamed with laughter.

PEG. I was being a devoted mother and downed a fifth of scotch.

DREW. Well, you don't need me. You've never written with a partner.

PEG. I need you now. I've hesitated bringing this up, darling, but perhaps I should prepare you. I could be under investigation from the House Un-American Activities Committee.

DREW. Have you received a summons to appear in Washington?

PEG. Not yet, but I have enemies who would gladly finger me.

DREW. Do you have anything in your past, besides slugging Ginger Rogers, which could get you in trouble?

PEG. When I was married to Miles, he made me sign all sorts of petitions to defeat Franco in Spain. I may have joined the goddam Communist Party and not even known it. I tell you, any moment someone out there is gonna finger me.

DREW. Mother, would you please stop using that phrase?

PEG. I could very well be blacklisted. If we collaborate, I may need you to take a solo credit. I can't imagine life without work. I've been making up stories my entire life.

DREW. You certainly have.

PEG. I recall you being quite enraptured with my narrative abilities when you were a child.

DREW. I loved your stories. You had an endless collection of Russian fairy tales.

PEG. The stories my Grandmother Olga told me.

DREW. I liked the one about the firebird and the woebe-gone Princess.

(The beautiful but painfully shy PRINCESS VASALISA runs on in her Russian fairy tale.)

PEG. What was her name? Vasalisa?

DREW. Yeah. Vasalisa.

Scene Three B

(The fairy tale past. Nightfall. A small hut deep within a Russian forest. VASALISA searches for an inhabitant of the hut.)

VASALISA. Baba Yaga? Baba Yaga?

(The BABA YAGA emerges. She is an old witch, swathed in rags and shadows.)

BABA YAGA. Princess Vasalisa, you are here at long last.

VASALISA. You- you know my – my name?

BABA YAGA. I was expecting you. The lair of the Baba Yaga is everyone's greatest fear and last hope. There are many questions you long to ask. Is it true I feed off the blood of stray cats? Am I guilty of strangling my daughter with her own braid? Did I indeed poison my late husband's kugel?

VASALISA. Well, di - did you?

BABA YAGA. I ANSWER NOTHING! Now tell me, child, what brings you to the forest.

VASALISA. I – I – it is so diffi –impossi – if you only –

(The BABA YAGA hands her a bladder full of wine that was hanging from her shoulder.)

BABA YAGA. Child, take a sip of this fine kvass. It will loosen your tongue. It was given to me by Smigel the wine merchant, for turning his straying son-in-law into a woodpecker.

(VASALISA drinks from the bladder.)

VASALISA. I'm afraid, I am not ac-accu-accust – *(The wine takes effect and suddenly she's remarkably articulate.)* Oh my. I feel a hitherto unknown ease of verbal acuity. Baba Yaga, I am so utterly and miserably in love with Prince Mishka. He is everything one could wish for in a husband. But why would he want me? I should only prove an embarrassment and burden to any man. Please, Baba Yaga, please make him love me. There must be something I can give you. Gold? I have gold.

(She rummages through her small change purse. She takes out a golden feather.)

BABA YAGA. What have you there?

VASALISA. Oh this? A feather that dropped from the sky.

(VASALISA hands it to her.)

BABA YAGA. A feather bright as flame. It fell from the breast of the enchanted firebird. It sheds its feathers on a blessed few.

VASALISA. Then you shall make it possible for the Prince to fall in love with me?

BABA YAGA. We shall make of you a twin; someone who is everything you are but more. She shall captivate the Prince in your stead. After he proposes marriage to this double, all you need do is wish it and she will quickly and painlessly die.

VASALISA. How, may I ask, do we create this twin?

BABA YAGA. Shortly, I shall take a hatchet and cleave you in two. You will of course, feel nothing. One hopes. The rest of the spell I shall explain to you later. Now come, child, we have much to do. Come!

(The BABA YAGA pulls VASALISA off into the hut.)

Scene Three C

(Omaha. The scene continues.)

DREW. At the end, Princess Vasalisa climbs on the back of an enchanted firebird and flies off gloriously alone and independent into the sunset.

PEG. Your favorite story, huh? Dr. Freud would say you wanted to escape from me. I always thought it was the two of us against the world. All the men in my life, all my husbands, were mere side shows and they damn well knew it. That knowledge at times earned me a bloodied lip, a blackened eye and a punch in the stomach.

DREW. I seem to recall you giving as good as you got.

PEG. My pet, a woman of achievement; be it in business, the arts, politics or science, is truly the most vulnerable of God's creatures. Science. Hey, how about a science fiction yarn? Since Uncle Sam put Nagasaki in the pressure cooker, they're all the rage.

DREW. I don't know anything about science.

PEG. What's to know? Toss in some fifty-cent words like homo sapien and protozoa. Make it about a glamorous lady scientist who's on the cusp of a breakthrough that could benefit or destroy mankind. A perfect role for Linda Belmont. She's under contract to Republic. Linda looks like she could possibly spell "molecule."

Scene Four

(A scientific laboratory. DREW remains lying on the sofa. DR. CONSTANCE HUDSON enters, carrying a clipboard. She exists in a different story from Peg and Drew; a B-movie science fiction picture. A beautiful woman, she masks her vulnerability with a severe upswept hairdo and an intimidating air of efficiency.)

CONSTANCE. Dr. Rutenspitz!

(PEG dons a pair of glasses and a German accent and becomes DR. RUTENSPITZ.)

DR. RUTENSPITZ. Yes, dear Constance. What is it you could not discuss on the telephone?

CONSTANCE. The Rappaport Foundation has decided not to renew my research grant.

DR. RUTENSPITZ. Oh, no, my dear.

CONSTANCE. In their infinite wisdom, they have chosen to lend their financial support to Dr. Meinhardt Biederman. I have nothing but contempt for these petty administrators with their paltry little dreams.

DR. RUTENSPITZ. Your field of study frightens them. Creating a duplicate human being questions the very essence of mankind.

CONSTANCE. I cannot concern myself with trifles. I offer up this question. Is mankind worthy of our intelligence? You possess the most fertile mind since Galileo and yet you've been metaphorically castrated by the scientific community.

DR. RUTENSPITZ. How ironic since for years I've been accused of having penis envy. My dear Constance, I have at times lamented never marrying, never having a child. Will you one day regret your personal sacrifice to science?

CONSTANCE. I've had my share of romantic folderol. Leaves one physically exhausted, mentally befogged and unprepared to conduct accurate diagnostic research.

DR. RUTENSPITZ. My child, have you never been in love?

CONSTANCE. Dr. R, are you hoping to uncover the secret wound responsible for my frosty exterior?

DR. RUTENSPITZ. Was there someone in the past that hurt you?

CONSTANCE. Let me ponder that. Have I ever felt abandoned? Was there an episode in my life where I fell head over heels in love, desperately and completely, so much so that I would have gladly given my life for his happiness? And then been tossed aside, left disconsolate and stripped of all hope? No. Can't say I have. Dr. Rutenspitz, I have no fear of ending up a spinster academic with a test tube full of sperm. In fact, I welcome it.

DR. RUTENSPITZ. If you will excuse me, dear Constance, I am on tenterhooks to complete my liver enzyme protocol.

CONSTANCE. The good work must continue.

(DR. R. exits. Unbeknownst to CONSTANCE, ZYGOTE, an ageless male being, eerily beautiful yet grotesque, has snuck into the lab and is standing behind her.)

ZYGOTE. Dr. Hudson.

CONSTANCE. Zygote!

ZYGOTE. Did I frighten you? I hope so.

CONSTANCE. No. Merely startled.

ZYGOTE. Nothing can keep me away from you.

CONSTANCE. I like to think that you can always regard this laboratory as home.

ZYGOTE. I should. It's the place of my birth. But then we can't really call it a birth, can we?

CONSTANCE. For me, it was a most profound moment.

ZYGOTE. Really? I'd consider myself one of your most egregious failures.

CONSTANCE. Not at all. I'm very proud of you, Zygote. You were an invaluable stepping-stone to my ultimate clinical conclusions. For that I shall always be grateful.

ZYGOTE. That's a good one. Grateful to a botched experiment.

CONSTANCE. Botched? Why you're a great success. You live, you breathe, you walk, you talk. If you feel unattractive, reserve your anger for your tailor. I can't say I'm mad for that jacket.

ZYGOTE. I'm a tough fit. Perhaps it's that pesky seventh nipple. In the past two years since you granted me my independence, I've had forty-three wisdom teeth extracted and six appendectomies. And then of course, there's my very original intestinal tract.

CONSTANCE. Well, I for one thought we were awfully clever in creating an alternate opening for waste elimination.

ZYGOTE. Yes, *very* clever. Because of that ingenious new opening, I now have to wear a **TOUPEE! YOU MAD-WOMAN! WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO ME?**

CONSTANCE. I will not take such abuse from a –

ZYGOTE. From a what? From a lab experiment? The brilliant Dr. Hudson did her brilliant best creating life in a test tube and then tried out her new method to mature the Zygote to full adulthood in a matter of hours. Gosh darn, it's working. No, wait a minute. There's something wrong. Something hideously wrong. Destroy it. Put it out of its misery.

CONSTANCE. That's not how it was.

ZYGOTE. My earliest memory is hearing frightened voices shouting, "Kill it, kill it!"

CONSTANCE. Yes, "kill it," they said. "Kill it." That much is true. I refused to let you die.

ZYGOTE. Why? What did I mean to you?

CONSTANCE. You meant – my life's work. Hours of intense study and labor. So much had built to that moment.

ZYGOTE. It only meant something to you professionally? I grew up virtually alone with you in this lab. Don't you recognize yourself? The way I talk? The words I choose? You know, I perform a very cruel and accurate impersonation of you. It's quite a hit in scientific circles. Does that make you angry?

CONSTANCE. I have more important things with which to concern myself.

ZYGOTE. You know, it's possible that you're more of a zombie than I am.

CONSTANCE. You've succeeded in insulting me. Have you come for more than merely settling old scores?

ZYGOTE. You know what I came for. Give it to me!

CONSTANCE. I will not encourage you in your addictions.

ZYGOTE. My addictions? My one addiction is to your patented chemical SP 596.

CONSTANCE. Abuse of this compound could lead to serious destruction of the nervous system.

ZYGOTE. Give it to me. It's the same chemical that made me age thirty years in three hours. Now, I need it to live.

CONSTANCE. You do not need it to live. That is a falsehood.

ZYGOTE. I do need it. Every atom in my body craves it.

CONSTANCE. Zygote, you place me in a dreadful quandary.

ZYGOTE. I'm begging you, Dr. Hudson. You owe me this much.

CONSTANCE. Oh, all right. Just this once. (*She prepares the injection.*)

ZYGOTE. Thank you. May I inquire; are you any closer to creating your perfect human double?

CONSTANCE. Quite close.

ZYGOTE. You must be working around the clock. No time for friends?

CONSTANCE. I'm afraid not. I had hoped that *you* would make friends.

ZYGOTE. I find the general population as repulsive as they find me.

CONSTANCE. I too prefer my own company.

ZYGOTE. We're cut from the same cloth, eh?

CONSTANCE. You look thin. Have you been eating?

ZYGOTE. I take my meals at the boarding house. I don't seem to be gaining any weight. I suspect the fat German cook sucks all the nutrients out of the meat before she serves it.

CONSTANCE. You really do an impersonation of me?

ZYGOTE. Oscar worthy.

CONSTANCE. Hold still. *(She gives him the injection.)*

ZYGOTE. Ahhhh. The chemical. It's instant. I keep forgetting that. Ahhhh. You're the crazy genius of all time. You gotta market this thing. It's a killer.

CONSTANCE. I have no intention of being in the business of trafficking illegal substances. And neither should you.

ZYGOTE. What's that supposed to mean?

CONSTANCE. It's no secret that selling morphine is your stock in trade.

ZYGOTE. So what if it is? We all have to earn a living. And we all need our crutch.

CONSTANCE. What am I to do with you?

ZYGOTE. You'd like to see me destroyed. Wouldn't you? Thrown in the garbage with the rest of the medical refuse. Well, I'm not going anywhere, Dr. Hudson. You and I are linked together forever or until I decide to bring you down. And I will bring you down. I'll bring down this entire building.

(He runs out of the lab and crosses into Queenie's Penthouse.)

Scene Five

(Queenie's Penthouse. QUEENIE enters. ZYGOTE is waiting for her. She takes a wad of money out of her purse.)

QUEENIE. Same price?

ZYGOTE. For you, Mrs. Bartlett, the price never changes.

QUEENIE. You should be doing pretty good in this racket. Maybe it's time you spent some money on your appearance.

ZYGOTE. There's not enough money in the world that can help me.

QUEENIE. Kid, pardon me for asking but what in heaven's name happened to you?

ZYGOTE. A simple explanation. I'm a medical experiment gone wrong. But I've been told that I should derive satisfaction from the fact that my handicap will ultimately serve mankind.

QUEENIE. I'm not following you.

ZYGOTE. I was created in a lab. A bold step into the future. My creator, the estimable Dr. Constance Hudson, is on the threshold of conceiving a perfect double for any living creature.

QUEENIE. A double?

ZYGOTE. A complete duplication molecule by molecule of one organism for another.

QUEENIE. She knows how to make a twin?

ZYGOTE. She's working on it. But like everyone else, she needs cash.

QUEENIE. I got cash.

ZYGOTE. As well as a cancer in your body that's killing you.

QUEENIE. How do you figure that?

ZYGOTE. I was created with keen powers of deduction. The morphine helps the pain.

QUEENIE. I need to stick around a while longer. I have a kid who needs me.

ZYGOTE. Steve Bartlett seems like a pretty tough customer.
I hear he makes grown men cry.

QUEENIE. We've got an angry Senator on our backs. Crenshaw's committed to wiping scum like us off the face of the earth. I'm not worth much but my boy is. This Crenshaw business requires a finesse that doesn't come easy to Steve. It's about negotiation and giving them a piece of the action. That's why I've lasted so long in this line of work. So this doctor can really make you a twin?

ZYGOTE. If anybody could.

(QUEENIE smiles to herself.)

ZYGOTE. Penny for your thoughts, Mrs. Bartlett.

QUEENIE. Oh, I was remembering a fairy tale I heard as a girl. I grew up in an orphan asylum that made San Quentin seem like the Ritz. But there was one matron who had a soft spot for me. Awfully quaint I should think of that now.

ZYGOTE. Tell me more. I grew up in a laboratory. No one ever told me such a story.

(PRINCESS VASALISA runs through the forest.)

QUEENIE. Believe it or not, I was a painfully meek young thing. This matron told me a story about a very shy Princess who was madly in love with a handsome Prince. There was no way this fella would ever wink at her, let alone slip a ring on her finger. So she visits a kindly old woman in the forest, who makes her an identical twin with a gift for gab, and gives the Princess the future she'd considered hopeless. I need some strong magic now, kid. Can you arrange for me to meet this Dr. Hudson?

ZYGOTE. I believe that's within my powers.

QUEENIE. You'd have my eternal appreciation.

(She goes to shake his hand and instead surprisingly hugs him. He's taken aback.)

QUEENIE. What's wrong? Did I hurt you? You don't have fins back there, do you?

ZYGOTE. I wouldn't touch me if I didn't have to.

QUEENIE. Everyone deserves to be touched. You and I are in the same boat, aren't we? Time is running out for you too.

ZYGOTE. Excellent deduction, Mrs. B. I was designed only to last a decade. I've never expected more.

QUEENIE. Oh honey, I expected so much more.

Scene Six

(The Laboratory. QUEENIE, picking up a fur stole, is looking over the place.)

CONSTANCE. Your offer is extraordinary. But you understand, there can be no strings attached.

QUEENIE. Dr. Hudson, my only goal is for you to succeed. Losing your funding was a rotten break.

CONSTANCE. The scientific bureaucracy has effectively neutralized my attempts to create life from life.

QUEENIE. Well, your dark days are over. Whatever you need, I'll foot the bill. The double, the identical twin. It shows up full size? The same age as the original?

CONSTANCE. That is what I am attempting to do. Yes.

QUEENIE. But can you stuff the brain with all the memories of the original person?

CONSTANCE. I am of the belief that memory is connected to cellular structure.

QUEENIE. What about the sense of humor? Would the double have to be a grim-faced Gussie?

CONSTANCE. Wit can be viewed as a by-product of cerebral configuration.

QUEENIE. What about love? Can you transfer feelings from one person to another?

CONSTANCE. Mrs. Bartlett, are you by chance hoping I would make a double of you?

QUEENIE. That's the ticket.

CONSTANCE. You are intrigued by the fantasy of being in two places at once?

QUEENIE. Yes. Because one of us will be lying in a grave. I'm dying, Dr. Hudson. I need this double to carry on my work and to protect my son.

CONSTANCE. Your work is not unfamiliar to me. I've read about "the Bartlett Syndicate" in connection with Senator Crenshaw's investigation of organized crime.

QUEENIE. Don't believe everything you read in the papers. Sure, I walk on the shady side of the street from time to time, but no more than any of the folks you vote for on Election Day. One more question. If this double is exactly like me, wouldn't it also have the same tumor?

CONSTANCE. I shouldn't think so. But there would be that risk. However, you seem like a woman who thrives on risk.

QUEENIE. When do we get started?

CONSTANCE. My work has never ended. Despite my financial woes, I've maintained a skeleton staff.

QUEENIE. I meant, when do you make my twin?

CONSTANCE. I'm still doing clinical trials on rodents. I will not be rushed. My credo has always been "Collect, collate, evaluate."

QUEENIE. Evaluate this, Dr. Hudson. I'm a dame on borrowed time.

CONSTANCE. Well, Mrs. Bartlett, I'll certainly pursue this avenue of thinking and get back to you.

QUEENIE. Lady, you beat the band.

CONSTANCE. I beg your pardon.

QUEENIE. You're in no position to turn up your fine schnozzola at my offer. I've done my research as well. You owe months of back rent on this shabby piece of real estate. In fact, at the end of this month, you're going to be tossed out on your biological keister. I'll have my lawyers draw up the papers and you'll find me at Bullocks shopping for a fashionable new wardrobe for my twin. Good day, Dr. Hudson.

(QUEENIE exits, followed by CONSTANCE.)

Scene Seven

(Omaha. PEG and DREW enter from the kitchen.)

PEG. So the lady scientist and the mob queen make some kind of pact. What's next?

DREW. I haaaate this story. First it was a gangster film. Then it was a science fiction picture. Now, we're scrambling the two together?

PEG. As I get older, I find I have two false starts for every script. It's that third story that finally takes off.

DREW. If I was going to write a movie, it would be a love story. A tragic love story to suit my current romantic situation.

PEG. If you're referring to Vera, that buck toothed broad was no Juliet.

DREW. She was a great girl. You did everything short of murder to break us up. I know about the letter you wrote her. I know about your "just us girls" lunch at the Formosa.

PEG. It was agonizing watching her dominate you.

DREW. You see no irony in that statement? None of my girlfriends have passed the test. None of my friends were good enough. Every kid I brought around was either a nitwit or "Hollywood peasantry."

PEG. Why should my opinion mean so much? You could have rebelled. I have great respect for rebels.

DREW. Living in Omaha is my act of rebellion.

PEG. Drew, perhaps I was wrong keeping us so isolated. I did have the girls around to liven things up.

DREW. Your pals from the silent days. Not much fun for a ten year-old.

PEG. You wanna write a love story? Fine. Let's write a love story. I'm great with love scenes.

DREW. You write great prison riots. You write great elephant stampedes. Love scenes? No. And it makes sense. Despite the multitude of men in your life, you've never loved any of them. You love your work.

PEG. I love you.

DREW. I want to write something where the lovers never speak of love. I want to explore hidden desires which the characters are afraid to reveal. .

PEG. Well, let's not make their desires too hidden. At some point the leading man better metaphorically haul out his pecker.

(PEG remains seated on the sofa. DREW once more puts on his jacket and hat and becomes STEVE.)