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STOP! ...The Play

by David Spicer
from an original idea by John Schwab

|| SAMUEL FRENCH ||

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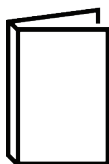
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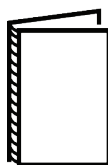


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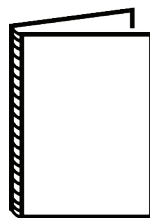
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Spicer's stage plays include *Superheroes* (The King's Head, London and Edinburgh Festival), *Long Live the Mad Parade* (Ashcroft Theatre, Croydon) and *Raising Martha* (Park Theatre, London).

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The following script is the play as it was presented in London in 2015. The original idea that John Schwab and I worked on was to have as much fun as we possibly could with the nightmare rehearsals of an increasingly terrible play. And then, having made the characters suffer as much as we could, we decided to push the evening right over the edge and show the world's worst play in all its mad glory.

So what we ended up with was a full-length, two-hour play comprising two, very distinct acts, labelled here as REHEARSAL and PERFORMANCE. And whilst I definitely wouldn't recommend presenting the PERFORMANCE of our invented fellow playwright Hildred McCann's work to an audience without their first having seen how it came about, the REHEARSAL could well be presented to them as a one-act play in its own right.

At one point in REHEARSAL, Linda says she has an actor friend who does the voice of the Meerkat and could possibly get Gemma a "baby Oleg". This refers to a very popular advertising campaign that was running in Britain during the run of the play and always got a good response from the audience. However, as it is a topical reference, it can be changed with my permission and blessing to suit any time and place the play is staged.

However, whilst the references in PERFORMANCE to the rituals surrounding Saturday afternoon wrestling on the telly (which was an early and bizarre British precursor to WWE) may be equally obscure and baffling, I feel that they are just what Hildred would have wanted them to be.

David Spicer

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Raising Martha

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Stop! ...The Play was first produced by Tim Beckmann for Hatch It Productions in June 2015 at Trafalgar Studios in London with the following cast:

HUGH	Adam Riches
GEMMA	Hatty Preston
LINDA	Hannah Stokely
WALTER	James Woolley
KRISTON	Tosin Cole
CHRISSIE	Charlie Cameron
EVELYN	Ben Starr

The play was directed by John Schwab
Production Design by Mike Lees
Lighting Design by Catherine Webb
Wardrobe Design by Jo Lewis
Sound Design by Jonathan Cook
Stage Management by Brian Perkins

To All Actors Everywhere

CHARACTERS

In order of speaking:

- CHRISSIE** THE STAGE MANAGER. 20–25. She is hard working, loyal and willing to do anything to help the show go on.
- HUGH** LEAD ACTOR 40–45. He has never found the fame, fortune and acclaim which he believes he has deserved and is now painfully vain, insecure and very needy.
- GEMMA** LEAD ACTRESS 25–30. She is a dedicated and accomplished actress who masks her lack of confidence by pretending to be younger and more foolish than she really is.
- EVELYN** DIRECTOR 25–55. The spoiled son of accomplished parents whom he has always tried and failed to live up to. He signally lacks any of the artistic or personal qualities required to direct a play.
- LINDA** ACTRESS 50–55. A competent and clever performer. She is independently wealthy and so doesn't need to work. Acting is, therefore, something of a hobby for her.
- WALTER** ACTOR – 65+. A jobbing character actor, nearing the end of a long, varied but not terribly illustrious career. But whilst he struggles with remembering his lines, he does have an inexhaustible fund of anecdotes and an inexcusable desire to tell them.
- KRISTON** STAR ACTOR 20–25. A young, hip, Afro-American who is brought in at great expense to save the day. He is open and willing to please but smart enough not to allow himself to be exploited.

The action takes place in a rehearsal room and then on the stage.

TIME: The present

ACT I

Rehearsal

HUGH and **GEMMA** are lounging in the stalls, reading their scripts. **CHRISSIE** is taping up the floor.

Apart from four chairs which have been pushed together to make a sofa, the stage is bare.

Slowly GEMMA, HUGH and CHRISSIE get themselves ready to start.

HUGH waits quietly at the back of the stage for his cue.

GEMMA stands passively at the front of the stage, looking blankly out at the audience, ready to start.

CHRISSIE, reads from a copy of the script...

CHRISSIE The Dark Heart of Art by Hildred McCann. Scene one. We are in the plush opulence of Linda and Michael's sumptuous loft apartment. It drips with wealth and taste. Original works of stunning art adorn the antiseptic white of the walls, garishly tattooing them with vivid splashes of daring colour and form. There is a marble indoor fountain bubbling in one corner and the couple's pet monkey scampers around the room with innocent chattering abandon. Linda, a woman, is standing in front of a full-length shabby chic mirror, reminiscent of the Egyptian glass in which Darley first catches sight of Justine in volume one of Laurence Durrell's Alexandria Quartet. As the lights come up, she is applying her makeup.

On cue, GEMMA starts miming making up her face in a mirror.

Her strong, confident hands move with precision and grace across the flawless features of her chiselled beauty and, beneath their practised and expert menstruation... *ministration*, the face of a proud but strangely vulnerable woman emerges.

GEMMA does her best to look proud but strangely vulnerable.

From upstairs we hear the front door shut and then Michael descends the ornate spiral staircase like a confident swan landing on his favourite millpond.

HUGH has stood up and walked onto the stage and started miming walking down a spiral staircase. They both read from their scripts.

HUGH "Linda."

GEMMA "Michael!"

She turns and rushes over to him, almost colliding with the four chairs. There is then a slightly over-long pause whilst he stops spiralling. She then embraces him, rather more tightly than necessary.

"You're home."

HUGH "Yes. Home. Back where I started out this morning."

He goes and sits on the chairs but she remains standing.

GEMMA "How was your day?"

Because she is still standing, he stands up again.

HUGH "My day?"

She sits on the chairs and so he follows suit and sits.

GEMMA “Yes. How was your day, teaching at that school you teach at?”

HUGH “My day was a day, a day like any other day. A day like *every* other day. It broke like an egg and smeared itself across the plate of the morning. The clock ticks on and the world races by, past me, busy and occupied – preoccupied and self-obsessed. Passing me by day by day by bye-bye day. And today? Today was just another day. Gone. Past. Another day older but none the wiser.”

He pauses. Has he finished the speech? Finally GEMMA comes in with her line.

GEMMA “Keep strong my...”

No, he hadn’t finished.

HUGH “Just another day closer to the end.”

GEMMA Sorry. “Keep strong, my darling.”

HUGH “Strong? For what? For who?”

He frowns as he notices there is an “m” missing. He adds it in with a pencil. This confuses GEMMA.

...m.”

LINDA “For us. For me...m. You know I think you’re a genius.”

HUGH “Do you?”

GEMMA “Yes. Isn’t that enough?”

CHRISSIE He goes to speak but there are no words and he turns away from her.

HUGH turns away. They both have to wait, consciously, until the end of the next, interminable stage direction.

All of the emotion and wellspring of desire flap frantically in his breast like a seagull trapped in a picnic basket. How can a man so full and vibrant feel so crushed and empty?

He can't go on and yet he will. He sighs the soft sigh of a man riding a carousel of disappointment...

HUGH *sighs.*

HUGH No, wait.

He sighs again.

Yes, that's the one.

CHRISSIE ...and wheels back to face the woman who has so faithfully and lovingly remained on his team at his side in his corner.

HUGH *turns back to GEMMA but she stands up and starts aimlessly (and directionless-ly) wandering the stage.*

HUGH "But do you really, Linda? I know you say you do but do you *really* know what it's like?"

Because she is not with him on the sofa he has to get up and start following her around the stage.

"Having to teach other people's art when all you want to do is create your own. Do you know what that does to your heart? To your soul?"

CHRISSIE He crumples to the sofa like a spent tissue as his wife gently cradles him to her like a distressed orphan. Or a puppy.

During this HUGH and GEMMA have had to rush to the four chairs and act out the stage direction.

GEMMA "There, there, darling boy. I know it's hard for you at the moment but you have to work to support us, just until the world recognises you and your work."

HUGH "I know that. But when, Linda? When?"

EVELYN *calls out from the auditorium.*

EVELYN And... Stop!

HUGH and GEMMA *immediately break character and look out front as their director makes his way up to the stage.*

I think that's a good place to take a break. Well done. First time through on its feet. Talking of which, Gemma, just be a bit careful where you wander...

GEMMA You didn't like the movement? I thought it was a bit static without moving.

EVELYN No, no, I liked it. It was good. It was...kinetic and gave an energy to the scene but a couple of times you walked through the ornamental fountain. So...

HUGH Is there going to be an actual, real, practical fountain?

EVELYN It's in the script. Also, guys, remember, don't tread on the monkey.

CHRISSIE About that, Evelyn...

EVELYN Hmm?

CHRISSIE I don't know that we'll be able to have a real...live monkey.

EVELYN It's in the script.

CHRISSIE I know but...

HUGH Why do they have a monkey?

GEMMA It's a pet.

EVELYN It's in the script.

HUGH Why can't they have a cat?

GEMMA Because they have a monkey. Because he's an artist. Because it's...you know...

HUGH No. I don't know.

GEMMA It's dramatic. It's unexpected.

EVELYN And in the script.

CHRISSIE But I think there's regulations and stuff. We'll need a...monkey licence.

EVELYN So?

CHRISSIE And we'll need to find a monkey.

HUGH I think we could lose the monkey.

GEMMA I like the monkey.

EVELYN We can't lose the monkey. The monkey is in the script.

HUGH Only at the beginning.

EVELYN We are *not* losing the monkey. Chrissie...

CHRISSIE Yes, Evelyn?

EVELYN Get a monkey licence and get a monkey?

CHRISSIE *nods and pulls out her phone.*

CHRISSIE Right.

EVELYN Also, remember, I want you to really play those moments.

CHRISSIE What kind of monkey? Big monkey? Small monkey?

GEMMA Pet monkey.

EVELYN Get me a few monkeys. I'll audition them.

CHRISSIE Right.

EVELYN Choices.

CHRISSIE Choices. Right.

She gets out her phone and starts Googling.

Okay Google.

EVELYN Good. Now...

HUGH Evelyn...

EVELYN Hugh...

HUGH While we're stopped...

CHRISSIE *talks to her phone.*

CHRISSIE "Give me monkey choices".

EVELYN Yes...

HUGH I was just wondering...

EVELYN Wondering?

HUGH Yes. About the set. The apartment. With the fountain,
and the artwork and stairs...

GEMMA And the monkey.

HUGH And the monkey, yes...

GEMMA I love it. It's so...bold and striking and...you know.

HUGH Yes, I know...

EVELYN It's *so* Hildred-esque.

HUGH Yes, but...

GEMMA It's going to make such an impression on the audience.

HUGH Stop.

EVELYN Problem, Hugh?

HUGH Yes. Is it in character?

EVELYN Character? Is the set in character?

HUGH Yes. He's a teacher, right.

GEMMA Only until he's discovered as an artist. He's only working
as a teacher because he has to.

EVELYN Like it says in the script.

HUGH Yes, I know that. But...

EVELYN But?

HUGH Well, how much do teachers earn?

EVELYN I really have no idea. Chrissie?

CHRISSIE I'm not sure. But I don't think it's very much. I think they're a bit like nurses.

HUGH Yes. That's what I thought.

GEMMA But he's not a nurse, is he? He's an artist.

HUGH Who has to work as a teacher. So he's not going to be rich, is he. I mean, rich enough to have a real fountain and a pet monkey.

EVELYN For the last time, people, we're not losing the monkey.

GEMMA Well, maybe she works. Does something in a bank. They earn buckets of money.

HUGH But it doesn't say in the script.

EVELYN Not at the moment. In this draft. But it's a good draft and it's a good point, Hugh.

GEMMA A good point for a good draft.

EVELYN Thank you, Gemma. Hugh. This is what this process is all about. It's a new play. It's a brand new Hildred. An exciting journey. We are giving birth in an almost literal sense to the writer's words and these are all the things that you'll be able to discuss when Hildred comes in.

GEMMA When is Hildred coming in?

EVELYN Chrissie?

CHRISSIE I haven't heard yet from him.

EVELYN I've asked for a little time to ourselves, to bond together as a company, to get the play on its feet – stop splashing through the fountain...

GEMMA Squashing the monkey.

EVELYN Exactly. And Hildred's been very understanding and supportive of that.

HUGH Yes. But he will be coming to rehearsals.

EVELYN Of course. And you will have the chance to discuss all these little points then. And, do you know something, Hugh, I know the play, *our* play will grow and evolve as we all go along our path together.

GEMMA Well said, Evelyn.

EVELYN Thank you, Gemma.

GEMMA That was beautifully put.

EVELYN I meant it all.

GEMMA No, it was really heartfelt and wise and...you know. Really.

CHRISSIE There's a petting zoo near Rotherham that hires out monkeys.

EVELYN Brilliant. There you see. Well done, Chrissie.

CHRISSIE I'll call them.

Dialling, she rushes out.

EVELYN And we will carry on with the scene.

HUGH Yes. But...

EVELYN But?

HUGH About my entrance down the spiral staircase.

EVELYN Like a swan landing on a favourite millpond.

GEMMA Wonderful imagery.

HUGH Yes, I'm working on the swan.

He makes a ludicrous swan gesture.

I think I'm almost there on that. It's just...

EVELYN Just?

HUGH This is a loft apartment, right?

EVELYN Right.

HUGH And I'm coming home from work.

GEMMA As a teacher and an artist.

EVELYN Yes.

HUGH Down the stairs...

EVELYN So?

HUGH So have I been on the roof?

EVELYN Stop!

He takes a deep breath and then walks out shouting as he goes.

Chrissie! We're going to take a little break now.

GEMMA Shall we go through the script?

There is a scene change.

It is the next day and all the company has been called.

LINDA (the actress who will be playing Samantha) and WALTER (the actor who will be playing Joe) enter and join GEMMA and HUGH. They are carrying chairs, which they plonk themselves down on. As she comes on, LINDA brandishes her script.

LINDA It's changed.

HUGH Changed?

LINDA The script.

HUGH What?

LINDA Didn't you get the rewrite?

HUGH When?

LINDA Last night. Don't you check your emails, Hugh.

GEMMA Exciting. I love getting rewrites. Don't you, Linda?

WALTER I never "check my emails".

GEMMA Don't you, Walter?

WALTER I'm afraid I'm all rather stupid with technology.

HUGH So what's changed?

WALTER I like it when things come in the post.

HUGH Am I still a teacher?

LINDA Yes. But you're not really an artist any more.

HUGH What?

WALTER But they never do.

GEMMA I find it exhilarating. And this is apparently what
Hildred does. The piece changes and grows every day.

HUGH But the entire play is about me being discovered as an
artist.

LINDA It was.

HUGH What?

LINDA It's changed.

GEMMA So exciting.

HUGH Has my speech gone?

HUGH *grabs LINDA's script and starts scanning through it.*

LINDA 'Fraid so.

GEMMA It's stimulating.

HUGH Bollocks. I'd just learnt it.

WALTER I never learn anything too quickly.

GEMMA *is now a bit concerned.*

GEMMA Ooh, has my part changed?

WALTER Mind you, I also have trouble learning things slowly too.

HUGH There's whole scenes of mine gone!

LINDA It seems to be more about Linda now.

GEMMA Really? How exciting for you.

LINDA No, Gemma luv, it's not more about me, Linda. It's more about you, Linda.

GEMMA Really? Oh, that's nice.

HUGH *is still scanning the script.*

HUGH There's lots of stage directions.

LINDA Yes. Hildred likes directions, doesn't he.

HUGH I have to pick up my coat "in my tortured hands like I'm strangling a childhood kitten".

GEMMA Gosh. That's...powerful.

HUGH But I don't get to say much.

WALTER I've not been cut down, have I?

LINDA No.

WALTER Pity.

LINDA But you're not Michael's dad anymore.

WALTER Then who am I?

LINDA Linda's dad.

GEMMA Me, Linda?

WALTER I'm not too sure about that.

HUGH Quite right, Walter. It's a whole different character you've been given.

WALTER No, I'll do the same performance I always do, I just hope the words aren't too different.

LINDA But I didn't think you'd learnt it, yet.

WALTER No, I haven't. But some bits were starting to feel sort of...familiar.

HUGH Well, I'm not happy with this.

WALTER Like an old coat.

HUGH I was contracted to play a role, a character, and I've already started the process of creation.

GEMMA But this is what happens with new writing, Hughie. It's alive and growing and...

HUGH And it's Hugh. I have been inhabiting Michael, my Michael and I can't just cast him off like an old coat.

GEMMA But he's not *your* Michael, is he?

HUGH Well, he's not any more.

GEMMA He's the writer's Michael. He's Hildred's Michael.

HUGH Well, frankly, I think Hildred's taking the Michael.

LINDA Oh, that's very good. Was that meant to be a joke?

HUGH No, Linda, it wasn't. I don't think the writer has the right to change the play once rehearsals have started.

LINDA "The writer has the write"?

HUGH You know what I mean. I'm not happy and I'm going to talk to Evelyn about it.

He throws his script in the air and EVELYN enters through the shower of pages.

EVELYN Good morning troops!

HUGH Hello.

EVELYN Hughie. Ready for another bright new day on our continuing voyage of exploration and discovery.

GEMMA Rather.

LINDA Hughie's not happy.

EVELYN Really? Morning Walter. You're looking well.

WALTER Am I?

HUGH Actually, I'm not happy.

EVELYN I know that, Hugh. And it's wonderfully in character of you. And how's my Linda this morning?

GEMMA Me, Linda?

EVELYN No, you Gemma, she Linda.

LINDA I'm fine thanks, Evelyn.

GEMMA And so am I.

EVELYN And are you happy?

GEMMA I'm happy, excited and...

EVELYN There, you see, Hugh, Gemma's happy.

GEMMA And so's Linda.

LINDA Am I?

HUGH Well, she would be, wouldn't she. It's not her part that's getting cut to ribbons.

EVELYN Hugh. No one's part is getting cut to ribbons.

LINDA (*to HUGH*) Except yours.

HUGH Thank you, Linda.

WALTER If you want to cut my bits down, I don't mind.

EVELYN Thank you Walter but it's not a question...

HUGH There. Why don't you cut Walter's part? He doesn't mind.

EVELYN It's not a question of cutting anyone's part.

HUGH He hasn't even learnt it yet.

WALTER It's becoming familiar.

EVELYN The play is changing.

WALTER But slowly.

GEMMA It's *evolving*.

EVELYN Exactly, Gemma. Well said.

WALTER Like an old coat.

GEMMA Your words, Evelyn.

EVELYN Then it was even better said.

HUGH I learnt my scene one speech.

WALTER That was a bit quick off the mark, Hugh old lad.

LINDA Think you're going to have unlearn it, aren't you.

WALTER I find I can do that bit okay these days.

HUGH Yes, *Thank You* Linda!

GEMMA Me Linda?

LINDA I'm just saying.

WALTER Mind you, it wasn't always the way. I've still got bits of Mercutio stuck in there from 1986.

EVELYN Stop!!!

Pause – they all stop.

Can we just start?

HUGH I know what you were just saying and it's not very helpful.

LINDA But it's true.

EVELYN Where's Chrissie?

WALTER "Oh, then I see Queen Mab hath been with you. She is the fairies's midwife and she comes in shape no bigger than an agate stone on the forefingers of an alderman."

LINDA Rotherham.

EVELYN What the hell is she doing in Rotherham?

LINDA Search me.

WALTER "Drawn with a team of little atomies over men's noses as they lie asleep.."

EVELYN Did she leave the new scripts?

HUGH Why don't we just stick to the old ones?

GEMMA This is SO exciting.

WALTER "Her chariot is an empty hazelnut, made by the joiner squirrel or old grub, time out o'mind the fairies' coach maker."

HUGH What are you rattling on about, Walter?

EVELYN Can we *please* start?

WALTER It's still in there, see. Word perfect after all these years.

LINDA I think she wanted us to print out our own copies.

WALTER Mind you, I cocked up on opening night.

EVELYN Oh, Christ!

HUGH Walter...?

WALTER Romeo and Juliet in Guildford.

LINDA It's what she said in the email.

HUGH I thought it was in Verona.

GEMMA Fresh, new and...words, waiting for us every day.

LINDA Didn't you get it?

WALTER Smashing production.

EVELYN So we don't have the new script?

LINDA I've got mine.

GEMMA We won't know what we're doing from day to day.

WALTER I wish we were doing that play.

EVELYN Right, well, we're just going to have to start.

HUGH I wish we were still doing the play we were doing yesterday.

LINDA I'm ready when you are, Evelyn.

GEMMA It's a real adventure.

HUGH I'm not happy.

WALTER So what are we doing?

EVELYN Can we please *start*?

LINDA Where are we going from?

HUGH When's the writer going to come in?

GEMMA Oh! I haven't got a script?

WALTER It's just I'm no good with emails and whatnot.

GEMMA Has anyone got a script for me?

HUGH I think we should have a meeting with him.

LINDA Are we going to start?

EVELYN STOP!!!

Everyone stops.

Let's just get this over with, shall we? Scene four. Hugh, you're there, Gemma over there and Linda on the other side. I need to feel the distance...the spaces between you all. Let's go.

They get into position and start the scene – but GEMMA and LINDA have to keep crossing over to pass the script.

LINDA “When did you first realise that your husband was a genius?”

LINDA crosses and passes the script to GEMMA and crosses back.

GEMMA “You think he's a genius?”

GEMMA crosses and passes the script to LINDA and crosses back.

LINDA “You mean you don't?”

LINDA crosses and passes the script to GEMMA and crosses back.

EVELYN Stop!!! What are you doing?

LINDA Only one script.

EVELYN Chrissie!

LINDA Rotherham.

EVELYN Shit.

GEMMA Evelyn. How about we move closer?

EVELYN I want distance.

LINDA How about we move distantly closer.

EVELYN Try it.

GEMMA and LINDA shuffle a bit closer and the scene continues.

GEMMA "I know he's the man I married. My life partner. My significant other."

LINDA "And this precludes him from genius?"

EVELYN Uh huh. That works.

GEMMA "It's certainly not a prerequisite. Although genius is an admirable quality."

LINDA "In a husband or an artist?"

GEMMA "Both. Although there are many who get by as either with none."

LINDA "And therein lies the tragedy."

GEMMA "For art or marriage?"

LINDA "Both."

EVELYN They laugh like cut glass Christmas baubles tinkling down a mountain stream.

GEMMA and LINDA try out various tinkling laughs.

LINDA "But..."

GEMMA "Yes?"

LINDA "There is something."

GEMMA "There's always something."

LINDA "Something I wanted to ask."

GEMMA "Me?"

LINDA "Of course you. Who else?"

GEMMA "Ask away."

LINDA "Where does it all come from?"

HUGH Can we stop, please?

EVELYN Problem, Hugh?

HUGH Question, Evelyn. Why is she asking Linda?

GEMMA Me Linda?

HUGH I mean, how the hell is *she* going to know where the inspiration and genius comes from? I mean, I am standing here actually *being* the genius, you know, like, painting a masterpiece and everything, so why is she asking her and not me?

EVELYN Yes. You know, that is a good question.

HUGH So what's the answer?

EVELYN It's in the script. Now, can we get on with the scene?

GEMMA "The inspiration. The art. The genius?"

LINDA Yes. "The inspiration. The art. The genius?"

There is a pause.

GEMMA "The inspiration. The art. The genius?"

LINDA Yes... *Linda...* "The inspiration. The art. The genius."
Can *you* tell *me* where does it all come from?

GEMMA "The inspiration..."

LINDA "...the art and the genius." Yes. That's my line.

GEMMA Is it? Sorry. It's just it's highlighted and...

LINDA That's because it's my script. Look...

She shows her the front page.

... "Linda".

GEMMA I thought I was Linda.

LINDA No, you're Gemma.

EVELYN Oh, for Christ's sake!

GEMMA Oh yes. Sorry. Sorry, Evelyn, my mistake everybody.
Me Gemma, you Linda.

LINDA No, Gemma, you Linda, me Samantha, he Michael but
this, my script.

EVELYN Can we *please* get on?

GEMMA Go back?

HUGH To my line?

LINDA God! Not that far. Here...

She points to a place in the script for GEMMA.

"Where does it all come from?"

GEMMA "What?"

LINDA "The inspiration. The art. The genius?"

GEMMA "When I was a child, seven years old, I yearned for a pot. To have something beautiful, of my own, to love and care for, to nurture and watch grow..." Oh, it was *pet*! "I told my parents and they, lovingly misguided, offered me a kitten. Then a puppy, then a rabbit, a goldfish, even some bizarre creature they called a German...*gerbil*, all of which I swiftly and shudderingly rejected. How could I explain? I lacked the language...the *art* to tell them what it was I wanted. Until, one sunlit, magical afternoon when from

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