THE SOUND OF FEAR
CLAPPING
Acknowledgments:

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"Watch Out for Obscure Publications"
THE SOUND OF FEAR
CLAPPING

by Charles Borkhuis

Obscure Publications
2003
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LIST OF CHARACTERS (Speaking parts only) In order of appearance:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>character</th>
<th>actor</th>
<th>sex</th>
<th>relationship</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. MR. X</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>amnesiac</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. LIMA</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>mistress/neighbor of Howl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. SMILEY</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>gangster</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. ICE PICK</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>gangster, driver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. JIMMY THE WEASEL</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>assassin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. BILL REGAN</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>private investigator</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. WOMAN</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>shopper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. FATMAN</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>head gangster</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. JOHN HOWL</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>mystery writer</td>
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5 actors could do the 7 speaking parts by doubling as indicated above. Each letter under "Actor" indicates a specific actor who may play several roles.
SCENE ONE

MUSIC SUSPENSE THEME, LEAD IN, THEN UNDER

X (Int.) (GROANS) When I came to my... head was still buzzin' around my body like a big, green fly... A room slowly... started fillin' in the dots... somebody's swank digs -- thick burgundy drapes, walls of books, a glowin' fireplace -- the whole bit. I was lyin' on a plush white rug decorated with modernist red drippings. I looked a little closer and discovered the little red dots were only on my side of the rug. About then, the walls started squeezin' my temples together like the sides of an accordion. (GROANS)

SFX RUNNING WATER, UNDER

X (Int.) Felt this lump over my eye, surfacin' like a golf ball I thought I'd lost last summer in Echo Lake. I pressed a cold cloth over the knot on my head and noticed... a figure behind me in the mirror. He was lying face-down on the rug near a white baby grand. A small pool of blood was collectin' under his head.

MUSIC SUSPENSE CHORDS

X (Int.) I turned the body over and an old guy looked up at me. Dead pupils rolled back like lemons in a slot machine. His mouth was wide open but he was through talkin'.

MUSIC LIGHT FRENCH ACCORDION, UNDER

X (Int.) The room started playin' it's favorite little tune again. (GRUNT) The front door lock was busted. (GRUNTING IN EFFORT) I made it to the elevator and pushed "Down."

MUSIC FADE OUT
SCENE TWO

ELEVATOR BELL

DOORS OPENING

(1nt.) I found myself starin' at the double-image of a woman in a black dress. Then the two squeezed back into one.

ACCORDION CHORD

She was a tall blond, thin with troubled eyes and classy cheekbones.

Hey . . . you OK?

Yeah.

ELEVATOR DOORS CLOSING

What happened?

I took a fall. I'm a . . . stuntman.

Really? You in the movies, or do you do this just for fun?

One of the two. I can't remember.

Amnesia, huh?

Somethin' like that.

Have I seen you in this building before?

No . . . I'm a new face.
LIMA   Really? I'm Lima. You look like you could use an ambulance.
SFX    THE WORD "AMBULANCE" ECHOES IN A TUNNEL, UNDER
X      (int.) I heard her words fallin' through a tunnel as I started slidin' down the elevator wall.
LIMA   Hey! Don't black out. Wake up!
SFX    ELEVATOR BELL
SFX    ELEVATOR DOORS OPEN
LIMA   I can't send you down like this. You better get off on my floor. (x GROANS)
MUSIC  SUSPENSE, BUILDING, UNDER
SFX    FOOTSTEPS IN HALL
SFX    KEY IN LOCK
SFX    DOOR OPENING, MUSIC OUT
LIMA   Don't mind the mess. I wasn't expecting guests.
X      (Int.) The place was . . . immaculate. Art Deco. Lots of cool, elegant lines and creamy curves. It fit her like a glove. She helped me into a leather couch.
LIMA   Water?
X      I thought you'd never ask.
SFX    DRINKING, UNDER
LIMA   Christ -- I'm a fool to let you in here.
SFX    DRINKING, OUT
I've been set up. You're her idea of a spy. How could I have been so stupid...

What are you talkin' about?

Don't play dumb with me. You're in on this. You were sent here by her to...

Now wait a minute...

This is how she gets her information. Guys like you! Devious little moles, sneaking around, spying behind...

Look, I haven't been sent by anybody. O.k.? (GRUNTS) Maybe I'd just better go before...

Sit down! I'm not through with you yet... She wants me dead. Only she likes to draw it out slowly...

Say ah, how about a little ice... for my eye.

My god! That is real, isn't it? You mean they actually beat you up before they sent you over here?

No one sent me. I just ended up here.

In my living room.

That's about it.

(PAUSE) You mean you're not one of hers?

One of whose?

I thought I made it perfectly clear. There's a woman who's tryin' to have me killed. I've got a feelin' you know who I'm talkin' about...

Not a clue.
LIMA Two days ago I was in the garden when someone fired a shot... it broke the planter over my head. Here's the slug.

SFX A BULLET DROPPED IN AN ASHTRAY

X (Int.) She went into the kitchen and started poundin' somethin' on a board.

SFX POUNDING MEAT ON BOARD, UNDER

LIMA (FROM KITCHEN) Last week a car tried running me down at an intersection. The week before that, the butcher almost...

MUSIC LIGHT CHORDS

X (Int.) She was a piece of work all right. A real mystery you could peel away for the rest of your life and never get past the peelings. I picked up a book lying on the TV. The photo on the back cover looked vaguely familiar. Then it hit me.

SFX FINAL CHOP ON BOARD

It was the dead guy on the twelfth floor!

MUSIC SUSPENSE CHORD

X (Int.) Lima came out of the kitchen with a slab of steak and tried puttin' it over my eye. I told her to save it for supper.

X Who's the stiff in the photo?

LIMA Don't you recognize him?

X Should I?

LIMA Of course. Unless you've been livin' in a cave. He's one of the most famous mystery writers in the world -- John Howl.

(READING TITLE) The Sound of Fear Clapping. It's been on the best seller list for 12 weeks.
That right?

(*hf.*) Howl's beady eyes burned a hole straight through me. He had a small, twisted smile that wrapped around the stem of his pipe like a snake. It was the face of authority, all right -- a stern task master who made his characters jump through hoops. Needless to say, his back was propped up by a wall of books.

**SCENE THREE**

SFX PAGES TURNING, FADE INTO

SFX A MAN'S FOOTSTEPS, RUNNING, UNDER

(*Int.)(READING) Jimmy "The Weasel" takes off down a back alley, followed by two large shadows.

SFX RUNNING FOOTSTEPS YIELDING TO HEAVY BREATHING, UNDER

He ducks into an old theater and hides in the balcony.

SFX GENERAL: MOVIE SOUNDS (W.W. II, FRENCH AND GERMAN), UNDER

There's a movie going on. It's a World War II film about an American pilot who's shot down over Roussillon, a small village in Provence. A French girl, Desiré Daumal, finds him in a field after he parachutes from a burning plane. She takes him home and cares for him. He's suffering from amnesia, but that doesn't keep them from falling hopelessly in love. She calls him "Jack". They both join the Maquis, the local Resistance. American planes make drops on the countryside at night and the Maquis make the pick ups. One night the pilot gets separated from the others and is picked up by the Gestapo. They torture him with lit
cigarettes until he tells who's been harboring him. They leave him in the woods with a bullet in his head.

In the balcony of the theatre, two large men sit behind Jimmy "The Weasel."

SFX W.W. II SOUND EFFECTS. GERMAN SOLDIERS ARGUING IN THE DISTANCE, FOOTSTEPS GETTING LOUDER, UNDER

SMILEY Hello, Jimmy . . . Hope you're enjoyin' the picture. Sorry it has to be like this.

ICE PICK Nothing personal, Jim. Just business. You're the fall guy on this one.

SFX W.W. II SOUND EFFECTS: GERMAN VOICES, SOLDIERS KICKING THROUGH THE DOOR, GERMAN VOICES LOUDER, UNDER

JIMMY (Desperate) Look, fellas . . . This was a set up. I didn't mean to kill anybody. I can't remember how the rifle got in my -- Here, I 'got some money. Take it all. It's yours.

SMILEY Too late, Jimbo.

ICE PICK You're the man of the hour.

SMILEY Goodbye Jim. It's been real.

SFX GERMAN MACHINE GUNS OPEN FIRE, THEN GERMAN VOICES UNDER

X (Int.) Jimmy "The Weasel" slumps over his seat. On screen, a German turns over the dead body of Desiré. We see her clutching a book. He pries it from her fingers and we read the title: Le Paradis Perdu. The book falls open, revealing a Derringer in its hollowed-out heart.

SFX SHUTTING THE COVERS OF A BOOK

LIMA Well, what do you think?
SFX THREE SLOW HAND CLAPS
X He's a master.
LIMA You think so?
X Absolutely.
LIMA Perhaps I shouldn't tell you but... He's planning to leave his wife for me.
X Is that right?
LIMA That's why she wants me dead.
MUSIC LIGHT SUSPENSE CHORD
X (Int.) Her story had enough holes to sink the Titanic. But something told me I was going down with the ship.
LIMA I'm not really in love with him.
X You're not?
LIMA No. I'm just in love with his books. That's not the same thing, is it?
X I guess not.
LIMA It's not the same thing at all.
SFX KISS
X Watch it, that lump's still new.
LIMA Sorry. After a few minutes, you won't even remember you have a lump.
X Don't bet on it.
LIMA So what do I call you?
X Just make somethin' up.
LIMA You're that new, huh?
X Feels like I was born an hour ago.
LIMA Yeah?
X Right out of the blue.
LIMA Really? You just parachuted in.
SFX KISS
X That's right.
LIMA Listen . . . I'm in a little trouble, see? I was thinking maybe you could help . . .
X (Int.) This girl could be the death of me, but somehow I was drawn to her . . . like a horse runnin' back inside a burnin' barn.
MUSIC LIGHT SUSPENSE CHORDS, THEN UNDER
LIMA I need you to find Mrs. Howl and tell her . . . I'm through with him. I'm throwin' him back. Now that I've got you.
SFX KISS
MUSIC ROMANTIC THEME, UNDER
Tell her . . . if anything happens to me, you'll get her.
SFX KISS
X I will?
LIMA Of course you will, darling. You'll do anything for me, won't you?
A SERIES OF COOS AND KISSES, UNDER

(Int.) She ran a line of kisses down my throat that felt like a cool drink to a dyin' man in the desert.

SWIRLING WINDS

(Int.) Not only didn't I know who she was, I didn't know who I was. But none of that seemed to matter. My head was swimmin' in a cloud of perfume and French kisses. Whoever I was -- I seemed to be enjoying myself.

ZIPERS UNZIPPED, UNDER

(Int.) I was in over my head.

DREAMY VIOLIN TRANSITION

SCENE FOUR

(Int.) When I woke up, she was gone. No note, no sign of her. The apartment felt like a mausoleum. Only somebody forgot to tell me I was the deceased. I walked through her rooms like a ghost. In the pristine kitchen I saw a groggy roach crawling across the spotless white wall. He must be the lone survivor from a recent holocaust. I looked up and saw a calendar with two rows of black X's scrawled across it. They stopped on the twelfth. Maybe nothin' mattered before yesterday. Maybe I was someone else now, and everything before was just a fiction, a daydream leading up to this point.

FOOTSTEPS

She'd taped somethin' to the front door.

OPENING FOLDED SHEET OF PAPER
LIMA  (FROM A DISTANCE) Darling, if I stay any longer I'll be a sitting duck. Remember your promise. I'll be in touch. I miss you already. All my love, Lima.

SFX  OPENING DOOR

H  (Int.) What promise? What'd I . . . ?

SFX  DREAMY TRANSITION CHORDS, UNDER

X  I'll tell her to call off the dogs. You're cuttin' Howl free. If she still comes after you, I'll get her. I promise . . .

SFX  ECHO IN A TUNNEL: ". . . promise . . ."

SFX  CLOSING DOOR

SFX  FOOTSTEPS

SFX  ELEVATOR BELL

SFX  DOORS OPENING

Mercifully, the elevator was empty. I had to get out of the building! I could feel my head swellin' and my eye startin' to close.

SFX  DOORS CLOSING

X  (Int.) I pushed "L", but the elevator wasn't havin' it. I shot up to the twelfth floor.

SFX  ELEVATOR BELL

SFX  DOORS OPEN, SILENCE.

The whole corridor was empty.

SFX  FOOTSTEPS
Where's the cops? Where's Lima? She must be in on this. Who wants me on the twelfth with Howl?

FOOTSTEPS/HEAVY BREATHING
SUSPENSE BUILDING
FOOTSTEPS STOP
FINAL SUSPENSE CHORDS, OUT
DOORKNOB TURNING

(Int.) It was the same room -- exactly. Untouched... except that Howl's body was gone. There was no sign of Lima. I looked up at my reflection in the mirror. There was someone standing behind me -- a tall, thin man in a baggy suit and gray fedora stepped out from behind the burgundy drapes. He squeezed off a slow, wise guy grin and leaned against the window pane. He was either packin' a .38 or an extra rib.

Well, well -- What have we here? A little breakin' and enterin'?

The lock was busted.

Yeah? You try every door on the floor, or did you come straight to this one?

I had an appointment with Mr. Howl. What about you?

Me? Ha, ha, ha... That's pretty good. Now get your head out of that Spillane spittoon. I'm callin' the shots around here.

I got another one for you... What happened to the body?

What body?

The one that was lyin' next to the baby grand.

What'd you say your name was?
(PAUSE) O.K. friend... Maybe we can make a little deal. I'm gonna give you a break. The name's Bill Regan... I'm a private dick.

X Yeah? You workin' for Howl?

REGAN Don't you think you're a little out of your league here?

X Not from where I look at it.

REGAN Yeah, where's that?

X I'm a private dick, too.

MUSIC LIGHT SUSPENSE CHORD

REGAN Yeah, who hired you?

X (PAUSE) Afraid that's confidential, Regan.

REGAN Sorry, pal. You're all wrong for the job.

X Somebody must have thought I was right for it.

REGAN Gettin' hit over the head with a tennis racket doesn't make you a private eye. It's a whole other world you know nothin' about. You see this envelope? Hours of detailed investigative reportage. Dates, times, places, tapes, photos -- all the major players, the whole nine yards. Only, I got the negatives. Anything happens to me, the original file goes to a few friends of mine in the papers. All this is understood up front. I don't take chances. That's how you stay alive.

X What kind of photos?

REGAN What are you, kiddin' me? This stuff 'll make the hairs on your butt stand up and salute. He's gettin' it on with some classy dame in the building. I had to crawl out on a ledge to get these shots. His wife's got him over a barrel.
And where've you got her?

You mean where've I had her? Now, it wouldn't be professional of me to go into the gory details, but we have put a coat of steam on her limo windows. Sometimes that kinna thing just goes with the territory. Still, you can't let it get out of hand. You gotta keep a professional distance on things at all times.

Rifle shot

Body hitting the floor

(\textit{Int.}) Regan kept a professional distance all right. But he didn't count on being magnified through the scope on a sniper's rifle ... I looked through the window and saw a guy on the opposite building starin' at me in a trance. Then he snapped out of it, dropped the rifle and ran over the rooftop. I turned Regan over and his eyes came up double zeros.

A thin stream of blood ran out of his mouth. He was still wearin' a little smirk, just to let me know he'd done it his way. I took the envelope with the photos and grabbed Regan's wallet. I figured he wouldn't be needin' it anymore and my pockets were empty. He was carryin' over three hundred bucks. That ought' a get me around the block a few times.

\textbf{SCENE FIVE}

\textit{(Int.)} I ran down the hall, took one look at the demon elevator and decided on the stairs.

Footsteps down stairs, then under
The twelve flights didn't do much to clear my head.

SFX FOOTSTEPS OUT

On the eighth floor, I took a breather and opened the envelope. There were pictures of Lima doin' things with the old man that made my skin crawl. In the photos, they were already ghosts, frozen in the act. I looked closer at the back of her arm stretched over his spindly thigh. The soft light on her flesh... Something turned in my stomach.

SFX FOOTSTEPS DOWN STAIRS, UNDER

I wondered whether I was just another insect in her web. Or was it different with us? That's what she wanted me to think. That it was still possible for somebody to do or say somethin' that didn't come out of a movie or book... I had my doubts.

SFX STREET SOUNDS, HORNS, TRAFFIC, THEN UNDER

The street hit me with a rush. I remembered the feel of it. But that was another life.

SFX SOUND OF WAVES, UNDER LIMA ON ECHO LOOP "You're that new, huh?"

X (Int.) I'd drawn a blank on who I was since I woke up in Howl's place. But that didn't seem to matter much. I was somebody else now... Bill Regan, Private Eye. And I had the papers to prove it. Maybe that's all there was to havin' an identity. You choose a part and play it out to the end. Play it out for all you're worth.

SFX CROWD NOISES, UNDER

X (Int.) I stepped into the flow of humanity that was twistin' through the streets like a Chinese dragon. I gave in to a wave of energy that moved through the crowd and let it take me where it wanted. I passed in and out of perfumed interiors, lingerie departments and smoke shops. I stared at the mannequins in windows, and they stared back, confident and indifferent. Theirs
was the perfect world, and they were the perfect specimens; they had long since lost any desire to act.

MUSIC STREET SOUNDS YIELD TO ICE SKATING MUSIC

X (Int.) I watched a skater turning lazy eights into infinity... His face had a serious, far away concentration, as if he were staring at something beyond the loop.

SFX SKATES CUTTING A SHARP TURN, UNDER

X (Int.) But when he turned, there was no place left to go, except back the other way. He seemed strangely resigned to this pattern. I had to turn my face away.

SFX STREET SOUNDS, UNDER

X (Int.) I let myself just... drift... for hours. Ended up shadowing this guy or that woman for a while for no real reason. As if... there were something between us -- a secret -- that we couldn't tell anybody else. That we didn't know ourselves.

SFX DOORBELL, STORE

SFX DOOR OPENING, BELLS

SFX DOOR CLOSING, BELLS UNDER

X (Int.) I followed a redhead in matching emerald hat and shoes into a bookstore. She was pourin' herself into a book as I slowly came up behind her...

WOMAN (LOW, SEXY) Do you make a habit of reading over strange women's shoulders?

X Are you a strange woman?

WOMAN That all depends... What took you so long to find me?

X You mean I know you?
WOMAN: You certainly act like you do.

X: Sorry, I . . .

WOMAN: Don't remember.

X: What?

WOMAN: Do you like books? . . . Or is it just the one I'm reading?

X: (Int.) The Sound of Fear Clapping.

MUSIC: SUSPENSE CHORDS, UNDER.

X: Hold it, sister. Am I followin' you, or are you followin' me?

WOMAN: Don't you know?

X: Don't I know what?

WOMAN: (BEAT) We're all in it.

SFX: FOOTSTEPS WALKING AWAY.

X: (TO HIMSELF) We're all in what?

SFX: DOOR OPENING, BELLS.

SFX: DOOR CLOSING, BELLS.

MUSIC: EERIE.

X: (Int.) I went into a small coffee shop on the corner. It was late afternoon. The only customer in the place was a short guy in a pork pie hat and rumpled suit. He looked like he'd been sittin' in the same spot for so long he'd put a permanent shadow on the wall. I took a booth in the back, ordered a coffee and opened Howl's novel to a page at random.

MUSIC: SUSPENSE, UNDER.
(READING) Jimmy "The Weasel" wakes up with a rifle in his hands.

SFX SHOUTS AND SCREAMS AT A DISTANCE (APPROPRIATE SFX PRECEDE ACTION THROUGHOUT PASSAGE.)

(READING) He looks down and sees a small crowd around someone lyin' facedown in the gutter. He drops the rifle and runs down the rear staircase. The Weasel takes off down a back alley, followed by two large shadows. He ducks into an old theater and hides in the balcony. There's a movie going on. It's a World War II film about an American pilot who's shot down over Roussillon, a small village in Provence.

(Int.) I looked up and saw two thugs in overcoats staring at me from either side of the booth. They both had little heads and big bodies. One smiled, the other sucked on a toothpick. Smiley pulled a .38 out of his coat while his friend showed me his ice pick.

SMILEY Maybe it's time you close the book, stand up and walk quietly out the door. Oh, ah ... just leave the book here; there's no readin' where you're goin'.

MUSIC SUSPENSE CHORDS

SCENE SIX

SFX CAR DOOR CLOSING. CAR STARTING OFF. CRUSING, UNDER

(Int.) They stuffed me into a limo. "Smiley" blindfolded me in the backseat while "Ice Pick" drove. I was hopin' we were goin' to some rich kid's party to play Pin the Tail on the Donkey, but I didn't hold my breath. Smiley droned on for over an hour about his wife who'd left him for a biker.
SMILEY I told her I'd kill her if she left. So what does she do? She leaves! Now I'll have to kill her. Damn, I loved that bitch! You know what it's like to be driven crazy by a dame?

X Yeah.

SMILEY What do you know? You're just some clown we picked up off the street. Let me give you a tip -- love is poison. Take enough of it and it'll kill ya. You're a wise guy, ain't you? What do you know about love?

ICE PICK Ha, ha, ha -- What's he know about love?

SMILEY I know about love, pal. I got a layer of emotional scar tissue coverin' every inch of my body. I still take pills to get to sleep every night . . . Otherwise I keep seein' 'em together -- doin' things. Doin' all kinds of things to each other's bodies. You know what that's like, don't you?

ICE PICK He don't know nothin'.

SMILEY That's when I want to put my hands around somebody's neck and start squeezin' . . . Know the feelin', pal?

X Yeah.

SMILEY She's the reason I took this job. I needed the dough to keep her happy. Now she's gone and I'm in over my head. What, you think I like doin' what I'm gonna have to do to you? Hah? What do you think I am, an animal? You think I have no feelings? She's the animal! You hear me?

X Yeah.

SMILEY She's the animal, not me -- no! She's not an animal, she's worse than an animal. She's an insect.

ICE PICK An insect is an animal.

SMILEY Shut up and drive.
MUSIC  SUSPENSE, UNDER
SFX  CAR CRUISING, TURNING CORNERS, SHIFTING GEARS
SFX  CAR COMING TO A STOP ON LOOSE GRAVEL
MUSIC  OUT
SFX  CAR DOOR OPENING
SFX  WAVES IN THE DISTANCE
SFX  CAR DOOR CLOSING
SFX  FOOTSTEPS IN SAND, UNDER
SMILEY  Get 'im inside and hurry up.
SFX  FOOTSTEPS ON WOODEN BOARDS
SFX  SCREEN DOOR OPENING, FOLLOWED BY FRONT DOOR
SFX  X STUMBLING IN, FALLING TO FLOOR
SMILEY  All right, tie 'im to the chair.
SFX  TYING X UP, SCUFFLING
SFX  RIPPING OFF BLINDFOLD.
X  (Int.) They ripped off the blindfold. It wasn't exactly the birthday party, I was hopin' for. I was in a cabin with a lit fireplace and two men standing around grinnin' like hungry dogs eyin' a piece of meat.
SMILEY  You're a lucky man. Most don't make it this far.
ICE PICK  Now we get to see what you're made of.
SMILEY  You see, pal... we gotta make sure you know this is for real. So we'll start with lit cigarettes and move up from there.
SFX MATCHES LIGHTING CIGARETTES

ICE PICK Ahh, the classical approach.

X (Int.) They puffed hard and started circlin' me like a couple of Kamikazes ready to dive.

X Can't we talk about this, boys?

SMILEY Don't worry . . .

ICE PICK we'll talk plenty . . .

SMILEY later.

SFX DOOR OPENING

FAT MAN (ENGLISH ACCENT) Put those fags out, gentlemen. When I want to leave marks, I'll let you know.

X (Int.) The thugs parted as the Fat Man waddled across the room like an old walrus, slappin' the young bulks out of the sun. He spoke in a wheezy rasp like the air squeezin' out of a tired beach ball.

FAT MAN So good to see you, Mr. . . .

SMILEY Regan.

FAT MAN Mr. Regan. Yes . . . Your papers say you're a private investigator. Is that correct?

X What of it?

FAT MAN Please, if you don't mind, I'm in charge of the questions at this little soiree. Now . . . for whom are you working?

X Let's say I'm between engagements.
FAT MAN Let's say you're a liar, Mr. Regan. You're workin' for Mrs. Howl, actress-wife of the novelist John Howl, are you not?

X Never heard of her.

FAT MAN Ha, ha, ha . . . Mr. Regan, you disappoint me. We didn't bring you all the way out here to play Pin the Tail on the Donkey.

FAT MAN Give Mr. Regan a quick peek at the big picture.

ICE PICK The pleasure's all mine.

SFX THREE PUNCHES TO THE STOMACH, EACH FOLLOWED BY A GRUNT FROM X.

FAT MAN All right, sit him back up.

X (GASPING FOR AIR)

FAT MAN Now, you see where negative thoughts can lead? Only to more needless pain and violence. You must think positively, Mr. Regan. Consider the possibility that you may still use some of your favorite body parts if you cooperate with us. Remember: The truth shall set you free, my boy. Now, what can you tell us about Mrs. Howl?

X (CATCHING HIS BREATH)

I never . . . met the woman.

FAT MAN But you're working for her, aren't you?

X (BEAT) Yeah.

FAT MAN Yet you've never met her? . . . Somehow, I find that rather difficult to believe. Unless, of course . . . you're not Bill Regan.

MUSIC SUSPENSE CHORD

SFX LIMA IN ECHO LOOP: "You're that new, huh?"
FAT MAN All these papers, the wallet, the money -- none of it's yours. The truth of the matter is . . . Regan's dead, and you don't know who you are, do you?

SMILEY You were lucky. If you were Regan, we'd have to kill you all over again.

FAT MAN Yes, well as fate would have it, we happen to be looking for a nobody just like you. We've always got our eye out for certain drifters and malcontents. People who have erased their identities and backgrounds somewhere along the line. People who are on the way to becoming . . . blank slates. So you see, you're perfect for the part.

X What part?

FAT MAN All in good time, my friend . . . The organization of which we are a part is extremely discrete in these matters. We provide our clients with assassins programmed to complete their assignments to the letter and then . . . forget the program.

We've got some new identity papers for you, my friend. Here we are . . . Mr. James T. Murphy, alias Jimmy “The Weasel.”

SMILEY That's right, Jim, this is the big time.

FAT MAN From here on, we'll be providing for all your needs. Congratulations, Jimmy, you've finally become somebody.

X (Int.) Smiley stuffed “The Weasel's” wallet in my pants pocket. That was the third life I'd picked up today. I looked up and saw the Fat Man shootin' some clear liquid out of a long needle.

X Eh! What are you doin' with that . . .

X (Int.) He smiled and jammed the spike into my arm. (GROAN)

FAT MAN Hope you like the theater, Jim.

MUSIC SUSPENSE CHORDS
SCENE SEVEN

SFX SOUNDS OF THE PLAY (WHERE APPROPRIATE) UNDER MONOLOGUE

X (Int.) The usher ripped my ticket, and I entered a small, dark, box-shaped room. About twenty-five people sat on four sets of hard wooden benches. There were thick logs hanging over the audience's heads on ropes. The program read, LOGS: A Deconstruction of Abe Lincoln in Illinois.

The lights went up on eight actors wearin' Abe Lincoln masks. Then there was a lot of shouting and gunfire and Mary Todd Lincoln rushed out and cried and started goin' on about how she'd lost her three sons in childhood, and how when nothin' else helps, sometimes she sticks her head in the knothole of a tree and screams.

Then a bearded woman on stilts wearin' a stovepipe hat came out and said she was Lincoln. She started readin' from the phone book while pacin' back and forth. Somebody rolled a bowlin' ball across the stage between Lincoln's stilts; cannons went off and the stage was filled with smoke. Lincoln shouted above the rant,

SFX PLAY PANDEMONIUM, LINCOLN SHOUTS "Four score and seven years ago . . ." 

X (Int.) Something went off in my head. I drew a pistol out of my boot . . .

SFX CROWD SCREAMS/MONTAGE, UNDER

stood up and fired a shot at the bearded woman playin' Lincoln. She crumbled like she'd been hit by a wreckin' ball. I jumped off
the bench, shouted "Sic, semper tyrannis!" and ran out of the theater. As I rushed past the exit sign, I heard the sound of one remaining person in the audience.

SFX THREE SLOW CLAPS

SCENE EIGHT

HOWL (GRUNTS AND SIGHS, BENDING)

SFX CLICK OF TAPE RECORDER, ON


Mr. X runs down the street with a limp after ah . . . injuring his foot, jumping off the bench in the theater. He ducks down a side street and ah . . . finds himself facing a stone wall. A cop turns the corner, kneels and puts X in his sights.

Cut to the police station where Lt. Hobbs of Homicide is grilling Mr. X. Hobbs tells X that the actress he shot in the play croaked on the way to the hospital. Her name was Jane Howl, wife of the famous mystery writer, John Howl. (SMALL LAUGH)

X says he was a patsy; he was set up. He says he can't remember the events leading up to the shooting. Hobbs smiles at him as if he were examining an exotic insect with pins through its wings.

"Eh buddy, by the time you get out of the slammer, you'll be ready for the rocker. If they don't fry you first."
SCENE NINE

SFX  DOOR OPENING IN ANOTHER ROOM
SFX  DOOR CLOSING IN ANOTHER ROOM

HOWL  (UNDER HIS BREATH) What's . . . ? Is someone . . . ?
       (UNCERTAIN) Who is it?

MUSIC  SUSPENSE, FADE IN, UNDER

X  (Int.) My clothes were ripped and muddy from the escape. I
    limped into the light and gave Howl a big dirty grin. I was
    drippin' blood on his carpet from a gash over my eye.

X  (BREATHY) You know me, Howl. We're not really that
    different. Take a closer look . . . They say I murdered your wife,
    but you're the one who wanted her dead, not me. I finally
    figured it all out. I'm just a character. It's your script, so you're
    takin' the fall.

X  (Int.) Howl's chin dropped like a drawbridge on chains. He
    gabbled his chest and staggered back like he'd just seen a
    mummy starting to unravel.

MUSIC  OUT

HOWL  (GASPS) p . . . p . . . pills . . .

X  (Int.) Howl's knees buckled and he fell backwards. It looked like
    the big one.

SFX  SOUR PIANO CHORD
SFX  THUD OF HEAD HITTING CARPET
(Int.) Howl's head bounced off the baby grand and onto the carpet like a golf ball landin' on the 18th green. Drops of blood were splattered across the white rug. I turned him over and a couple of dead pupils rolled back like lemons in a slot machine. His mouth was wide open, but he was through talkin'.

MUSIC SUSPENSE CHORDS, THEN OUT

SFX FRONT DOOR OPENING

(X) (Int.) Lima appeared in the doorway. She saw Howl's body on the rug but walked right over it. She knew the score by now. She was a character herself.

LIMA Is he dead?

(X) Yeah, but only in this draft. He's been workin' on a bunch of different endings.

LIMA What about this ending?

(X) You got me, kid.

LIMA Have I? . . . I told you I'd be back. I wasn't about to lose you. You've begun to create ripples inside other ripples inside me.

(X) That goes ditto for me.

SFX KISS

MUSIC ROMANTIC THEME

LIMA Ummm . . . You know something?

SFX KISS

LIMA He really looks dead.

(X) He was dead before. Then he woke up and wrote another ending.
LIMA But what about this ending?

X I don't know what happens next. Maybe nothin' happens. Maybe this is the ending.

LIMA (PAUSE) How can this be the ending?

X Suppose he didn't finish the ending and we're left hangin'.

LIMA Suppose we're free but we don't know it. (BEAT) Come on, let's go before someone finds us here.

MUSIC SUSPENSE THEME, UNDER

SFX FOOTSTEPS AND PANTING

SFX ELEVATOR BELL

SCENE TEN

MUSIC SUSPENSE THEME, UNDER

X (Int.) There was no way of knowin' whose ending we were actin' out -- Howl's or our own. Maybe in the end, it didn't matter. We'd stolen our lives back from under the noses of the Gods, and we'd found a roomy apartment for a song in another city.

SFX APPROPRIATE EFFECTS, UNDER

Pretty soon we started pickin' up the routines of those around us -- stayin' home more and watchin' TV shoppin' channels. But we soon grew bored. Truth is, we weren't like the others. All our memories, our whole history was between the covers of Howl's book. We were misplaced persons in this world. Some nights we found ourselves longin' to be back-in the mystery in some way, even if only as minor characters. The chapter on Desiré and the American pilot, Jack, came back to haunt us.
(Int.) We flew to Paris and took a train to Provence. When we got to the village of Roussillon, it all felt strangely familiar. It was as if... we might have been Desiré and Jack in former lives... Now they seemed to be livin' through us in this one. Sometimes we felt their ghosts makin' love through our bodies... They were our histories, our connection to the mystery. We chose to let them live inside us, and they chose to stay.

(Off.) We rented a little place on a narrow, curvin' street in Roussillon. Life was simple and happy. Lima started a vegetable garden out back and took long walks through the nearby forest...

(Off.) I began writin' a novel set in a southern village... It was about the French resistance and a young couple who survived the war. The novel seemed to be writin' itself. I figured this was as good a place as any... to start over.

-MUSIC-

FINAL SUSPENSE CHORDS

-END-
Charles Borkhuis is a poet, playwright, and essayist living in NYC. His books of poems are: “Savoir-Fear,” [Spuyten Duyvil], “Alpha Ruins” [Bucknell University], “Dinner with Franz,” [Poetry New York], “Proximity (Stolen Arrows)” [Sink Press], and “Hypnogogic Sonnets” [Red Dust.] “Alpha Ruins” was chosen by Fanny Howe as runner-up in the W.C. Williams Award for 2001. His plays have been produced in New York, Paris, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Hartford. A collection of his full-length plays “Mouth of Shadows” was recently published by Spuyten Duyvil. “Black Light,” a CD of two of his radio plays produced for NPR was released in 2002. He has recently completed a feature-length film script “Undercurrent,” and has written two new two-act plays “The Man in The Bowler Hat,” and “Dusk.”
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