

A Terminal Case

By

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Cast of Characters

<u>Glen Malloy:</u>	A morning radio joke writer; late thirties.
<u>Doctor:</u>	No specific age or gender.
<u>Elise:</u>	A first-generation German-American; late seventies.
<u>Anna O'Brien-Malloy:</u>	Glen's estranged wife; late thirties.
<u>Dean:</u>	Anna's boyfriend; mid forties.

Scene

A large American city.

Time

The present.

ACT I

Scene 1

A doctor's office. MALLOY sits on the exam table, reading a celebrity magazine. DOCTOR enters carrying a folder.

DOCTOR

Mr. Malloy?

MALLOY

(Waving magazine)

Britney Spears is on another diet. She's only eating her own hair.

DOCTOR

Sorry?

MALLOY

A joke.

DOCTOR

Oh. Very good.

MALLOY

Not my best, granted. Just riffing. I have to stay up on this celebrity stuff. I'm in the joke business. Radio. Do you listen to "Wild Eddie and the Beast" in the morning?

DOCTOR

I've seen the billboards.

MALLOY

Eddie and the Beast, they're just voice talent. Most of what comes out of their mouths, that's my stuff. "Ask the Angry Black Man." "Mongoloid Jeopardy." "Prank Call a Foreigner." All mine. And I'm the "Top Ten" champion. I can write a Top Ten list about anything in fifteen minutes.

DOCTOR

Very impressive.

MALLOY

Ah, you're an NPR fan, I bet.

DOCTOR

I have a very short commute.

MALLOY

I knew it, professional class. Well I'm educated, too, you know. I have an MFA. The entertainment business is full of MFAs.

DOCTOR

I read that somewhere.

MALLOY

Anyway, what have we got? If it's a good news/bad news thing, hit me with the bad stuff first.

DOCTOR

Well--.

MALLOY

Wait--that reminds me of an old joke. You've probably heard it. Guy goes to the doctor. Doctor says, Which do you want first, the good news or the bad news? And the guy says--

DOCTOR

"Does my insurance cover both?"

MALLOY

You've heard it. Probably a million times.

DOCTOR

I'm afraid none of it's good, Mr. Malloy. It's exactly what we feared.

MALLOY

None of it? Well, can you make up something good? I don't mind being lied to.

DOCTOR

In my experience, it's best to be direct when confronting this kind of diagnosis.

MALLOY

Sure. Okay. This kind of diagnosis. Meaning what, terminal?

DOCTOR

I'm sorry, Mr. Malloy.

MALLOY

Now wait a second. How are you so sure? It's only one test, right?

DOCTOR

The test is foolproof.

MALLOY

How about treatment? Drugs? Even experimental stuff, I don't care. Chinese herbs or something. What about acupuncture? My cousin uses that for asthma.

DOCTOR

The condition is irreversible. And there's no maintenance protocol. It simply runs its course.

MALLOY

I assume it's pretty rare, then.

DOCTOR

No, not so rare. Which is one bright spot. There are support groups.

MALLOY

Christ. I'm a young man, Doctor. Is it painful? Will I suffer?

DOCTOR

In most cases I've seen, only minor discomfort. Until the final stages...

MALLOY

Great. So what's the "course"? Weeks? Months?

DOCTOR

In your case, my best estimate is...thirty-seven years.

MALLOY

Christ. This is too much. Thirty-seven years. Why me, Doc? New town, new job. Bought a condo. Forty-year mortgage--typical. Things were finally looking up. I even started a 401(k). Early withdrawal penalty, of course. God, Doc, why me!?

DOCTOR

Please, Mr. Malloy. Don't despair.

MALLOY

Don't despair? I'm dying!

DOCTOR

As I said, there are support groups.

MALLOY

Oh, that'll be a lot of laughs. Sitting in some church basement with a bunch of terminal cases stroking their cats.

DOCTOR

Perhaps you can find meaning in your work.

MALLOY

Doc, I write fart trivia for a living.

DOCTOR

Are you a man of faith?

MALLOY

Nah, I grew up Catholic but it didn't take.

DOCTOR

What about family?

MALLOY

Oh, don't get me started on them.

DOCTOR

It says in your chart that you're married.

MALLOY

Anna? I wish. She left me three months ago and wants a divorce. She won't even speak to me.

DOCTOR

I see. It's not my place to offer advice, Mr. Malloy, but I will say this. People react to this kind of news in two ways. I won't lie to you, most simply give up. They wither into self-pity and hopelessness. Those cases rarely last half the time they have left. But the exceptional few rally to the cause. They grab circumstance by the neck and bend it to their will, not the other way around. Life becomes profound in ways they never imagined.

MALLOY

Every day is a miracle! Flowers smell sweeter, the sky is bluer, all the world learns to sing. I get it, Doc. And I appreciate it. But I'm not wired that way. Never have been. Another old joke, you've probably heard it: A man gets home from work. His wife's at the door. We won the lottery, she says, twenty million bucks! Twenty million!? the guys says.

DOCTOR

"Do you have any idea of the taxes?"

MALLOY

Exactly. That's my view of the world, Doc: I can't help but think of the taxes.

DOCTOR

Please consider those groups, Mr. Malloy.

MALLOY

Maybe after I get my head around all this. In the mean time I think my support group will be a bottle of Jameson.

DOCTOR

That reminds me. It says in your chart that you're a heavy drinker.

MALLOY

Who wrote that?

DOCTOR

Your primary care doctor, I assume.

MALLOY

He exaggerates. Besides, I'm very careful these days. I only drink organic.

DOCTOR

In any case, you should stop drinking. It will only aggravate the condition. And don't, under any circumstances, take aspirin. No salicylates of any kind.

MALLOY

Aspirin? Why not?

DOCTOR

It's bad for the blood. If you need something, a headache or what have you, use Tylenol. You might want to get one of those medical bracelets.

MALLOY

They make bracelets with Tylenol in them?

DOCTOR

No, Mr. Malloy. A bracelet warning that you aren't to have aspirin. In case you're in an accident.

MALLOY

Oh, right. Slow on the booze, Tylenol, bracelet. Got it.

DOCTOR

Again, I'm sorry, Mr. Malloy. I wish you the best.

They shake hands. DOCTOR begins to leave.

MALLOY

Thanks.

(Pause)

Hey, Doc--one more joke.

DOCTOR

I'm sorry, Mr. Malloy. I have other patients.

MALLOY

C'mon. Humor a dying man.

DOCTOR

All right.

MALLOY

A famous psychiatrist says to his wife, I'm so depressed. I'm going to see my shrink. The wife says, But you're the world's greatest psychiatrist! I know, he says--

DOCTOR

"But my fees are outrageous."

MALLOY

You're sharp, Doc. Very sharp.

DOCTOR

Good luck, Mr. Malloy.

[Blackout]

Scene 2

*A subway platform. ELISE waiting for the train.
MALLOY sulks in.*

MALLOY

What a day.

(He paces, takes out his mobile phone,
punches buttons)

Thirty-seven...times... Shit, where's the times? How the fuck do you multiply?

ELISE

Asterisk. And watch your mouth, please.

MALLOY

What?

ELISE

Asterisk. Popularly known as "star." And please watch your mouth in the presence of a lady.

MALLOY

Oh. Thanks.

(Muttering)

Thirty-seven...star...three six five. How do you equals?

ELISE

OK.

MALLOY

OK what?

ELISE

Press "OK."

MALLOY

Oh, right.

ELISE

Thirteen thousand four hundred five.

MALLOY

Thirteen thousand five hundred five.

ELISE

Your phone is broken.

MALLOY

Not likely.

ELISE

Show me.

MALLOY crosses to her.

MALLOY

See. Three seven...star...three six five, OK. Thirteen five o-five.

ELISE

So it is.

MALLOY

You were close. Closer than I would've been.

ELISE

I edited a piece back in the Seventies. For a computer magazine. It was about a Russian math professor with an abacus who raced a supercomputer.

MALLOY

The guy beat a computer?

ELISE

No. He hung himself in disgrace.

MALLOY

Jesus.

ELISE

Luckily I don't take math that seriously.

MALLOY

Yeah, luckily. Well, thirteen five o-five. Five o-four, really, if you subtract today.

ELISE

What's so special about this number?

MALLOY

That's the number of days I have to live.

ELISE

Oy, another nut.

MALLOY

Not a nut. Not a nut, thank you. Would you call a specialist at University Hospital a nut?

ELISE

Most of them, yes.

MALLOY

They ran a very expensive test. Injected some dye in me, hooked me up to this machine.

ELISE

What bunk.

MALLOY

This is modern medical science, lady.

ELISE

I know all about modern science. You can't predict a thing like thirty-seven years to live. It's silly.

MALLOY

How do you know?

ELISE

I'm the most widely read person you'll ever meet, that's how.

MALLOY

You're a professor or something?

ELISE

I'm an editor. Freelance, for sixty-one years. I read a hundred thousand words a week. A slow week. I edited the first article on DNA. Mr. Crick asked for me personally.

MALLOY

Editor. So what? When you get an M.D. from a world-renowned medical school, then we'll talk. I'm no dumb ass. I have an MFA.

ELISE

So you're no doctor, either, then.

MALLOY

No, I'm not. Do you ever listen to "Wild Eddie and the Beast" in the morning? On the radio?

ELISE

I don't listen to anything.

MALLOY

That's my show. I write all the jokes. Well, me and another guy, but he sucks. Do you like jokes? Here's an old one, you've probably heard it--.

ELISE

I don't like jokes. So, what if you get hit by a train? There goes your University doctor.

MALLOY

Oh, yeah, that's logical. Like you'd tell a guy with lymphoma, okay, the doctor says you got two months; but don't lose any sleep over it, you could get hit by a train.

ELISE

Does this mysterious malady have a name?

MALLOY

I can't pronounce it.

ELISE

Write it down, I'll pronounce it.

MALLOY

I can't spell it. It's like fifty letters long.

ELISE

What does it start with?

MALLOY

"M," I think.

ELISE

You think.

MALLOY

Why am I having this conversation? Look, just mind your own business, okay? I have a lot on my mind.

Long pause.

ELISE

I'm sorry. I shouldn't have made light. You should listen to your doctor.

MALLOY

Exactly.

ELISE

So what are you going to do?

MALLOY

I don't know. Maybe I'll take a trip.

ELISE

Thirty-seven years, that's a long trip.

MALLOY

For someone who doesn't like jokes you sure crack a lot of them.

ELISE

I can't help it. I'm a bitter old woman.

MALLOY

I'll say.

ELISE

I know about death.

MALLOY

Well, there's a lot more to death than reading about it.

ELISE

Not just reading. Most of my family was killed in Dresden.

MALLOY

New Jersey?

ELISE

No, the fire bombing in Germany. World War Two. The Allies dropped four thousand tons of bombs in three days. They incinerated the most beautiful city in Europe for nothing. A hundred thousand people died. Civilians.

MALLOY

Get out of here.

ELISE

Heh. You get out of here. A grown man and he never heard of Dresden. Millions of Europeans died in that war, you know. Twenty million in Russia alone. But living in this country you think America just waltzed right in tackled Hitler all by yourselves.

MALLOY

Holy shit. How did you escape?

ELISE

Nobody "escaped." I simply wasn't there. A very perverse kind of luck. We'd been deported to Hellerberg, years before. Mother, father, brother and I. 1942. But you've never heard of Hellerberg, either.

MALLOY

No.

ELISE

It was a labor camp. You've heard of Auschwitz, of course. And maybe Buchenwald, Treblinka.

MALLOY

I've heard of Auschwitz. I saw "Schindler's List."

ELISE

"Schindler's List" wasn't Auschwitz. It was Płaszów.

MALLOY

Oh.

ELISE

Well, Hellerberg was like Płaszów. They simply worked people to death and threw them in a ditch. Or shot them. Or sent them on to Auschwitz anyway.

MALLOY

Wow.

ELISE

My mother and father died in Hellerberg. Brother and I lived. We were two of ten left at the end of the war.

(MORE)

ELISE (cont'd)

Cousins were sent straight to Auschwitz. The rest--aunts, uncles, grandparents--all incinerated in Dresden. I've also buried my husband and my only child. So I know about death.

MALLOY

Look, your story is really terrible. My heart goes out to you. What kind of person would I be if it didn't? But you'll understand if you're not exactly making me feel any better.

ELISE

I've never been good at making people feel better. Never really tried, I suppose.

MALLOY

How about yourself? You're still here. You kept going all these years. How'd you do it?

ELISE

No, thank you. There's an old saying: Share your grief, double your sorrow. I didn't do anything special; every day simply followed another. And here I am, old.

Sound of a train approaching.

MALLOY

The express. Is this yours?

ELISE

No, mine is the local.

MALLOY

(Stepping toward the platform)

Well, I'm sorry again about your tragic life and everything. What I mean is. Well, I hope things get, you know, better.

ELISE

They won't, but we get through. Do we have a choice?

MALLOY

No, I guess we don't.

[Blackout]

Scene 3

Anna's apartment. ANNA is on the sofa reading a book. The doorbell rings.

ANNA

I got it!

She crosses, opens the door, revealing MALLOY.

MALLOY

Hello, Anna.

ANNA

What do you want?

MALLOY

Can I come in?

ANNA

Why?

MALLOY

Because I'm standing in the hall.

ANNA

Very funny. I told you not to bother me. Talk to my lawyer.

MALLOY

I've come to make my peace with you.

ANNA

"Make your peace." Why don't I smell alcohol?

MALLOY

I haven't been drinking. Can I please just come in?

ANNA

(Considers)

Five minutes.

(MALLOY enters, ANNA closes the door)

It had better be important.

MALLOY

Oh, it is.

ANNA

Okay, speak.

MALLOY

Arf arf.

ANNA

Stop goofing off for once in your life.

MALLOY

Have you heard the one about the dog and the bishop?

ANNA

Yes.

MALLOY

May I sit?

ANNA

If it will get you out of here sooner.

MALLOY sits on the sofa. ANNA remains standing.

MALLOY

Like I said, I came to make my peace with you, Anna.
I'm serious. Certain events have occurred. Things have
transpired.

ANNA

Is that so.

MALLOY

It is. Now, I want you to brace yourself.

ANNA

I'm braced.

MALLOY

Anna, please.

ANNA

Your clock is ticking.

MALLOY

Okay, but I warned you.
(Clears his throat)
Anna, I saw a doctor today.

*DEAN enters. MALLOY stands. They regard each other
for a long moment.*

DEAN

(In unison with MALLOY)
This is him?

ANNA

Oh, great.

MALLOY

You can do better, honey. I'm no prize, sure, but come on.

DEAN

From what I've heard she's made a vast improvement.

MALLOY

Oh, "a vast improvement." Oh, indeeeeee! So erudite! I have a Masters, too, pal.

DEAN

A lot of good you're putting it to. And I have a Ph.D., in addition to a Master's. And a J.D.

MALLOY

(To ANNA)

Seriously?

(ANNA nods)

Well, big deal. All lawyers are creeps.

DEAN

I'm not a lawyer. I'm a Professor of Law.

MALLOY

Oh, excuse me. You train the creeps.

DEAN

At least I don't write obscene prattle for cretins.

MALLOY

Have you ever read about Hellerberg? I doubt it.

DEAN

The prison camp? What does that have to do with--

ANNA

Guys, please. Dean, may I have a moment with you?

She pulls DEAN aside.

MALLOY

A moment? You see him every day. And night, I imagine. You haven't taken so much as a phone call from me in months!

(To DEAN)

And comedy is a noble art. Just ask the Greeks.

DEAN

That's not the same kind of comedy, you imbecile.

MALLOY

Imbecile? Hey, what's the difference between a monkey and a lawyer?

DEAN

"The lawyer only talks shit, he doesn't throw it."

MALLOY starts toward DEAN. ANNA blocks him.

ANNA

Cool it, both of you!

MALLOY

I'll cool him. I'll stuff him in a meat locker with the other stiffs.

DEAN

(Striking an old-fashioned boxing stance)

Try it!

ANNA

(To DEAN)

You: shut up.

(To MALLOY)

And you: you want to leave? Huh?

MALLOY

Sure, can we go downstairs and get some coffee or something?

ANNA

Leave by yourself.

(To DEAN)

You: sit.

MALLOY

Arf! Arf! Arf arf arf!

DEAN crosses his arms.

ANNA

(To DEAN)

Put your ass on that couch!

DEAN sits on the sofa.

MALLOY

Good boy.

ANNA

(To MALLOY)

Now, please excuse me a moment.

She crosses to DEAN. While they speak Malloy browses some magazines on the table near the door.

DEAN

What does he want?

ANNA

He said he's come to "make his peace" with me.

DEAN

I'm not leaving you alone with him.

ANNA

Oh, relax. He's harmless. Probably just lovesick. I told him five minutes, then he's leaving. Don't make this into a big thing. Your moving in won't help my case, you know.

MALLOY

Oooh, The Economist! Yeah, I'm impressed.

DEAN

He's a clown. Any judge will have sympathy, trust me.

ANNA

Nevertheless. Five minutes. Where's that civility you're always preaching about?

DEAN

Okay. Five minutes.

DEAN stands, tries to kiss her, she evades him.

ANNA

Dean has agreed to give us five minutes.

MALLOY

Gee, thanks. It's still my apartment, too, you know.

DEAN

It was a pleasure finally meeting you.

MALLOY

Creep.

DEAN shakes his head, exits.

MALLOY (cont'd)

What do you see in that guy?

ANNA

Maturity. Respect. Influence. Dean gets paid by some very powerful people to travel the country and speak on their behalf.

MALLOY

Yeah, well, so does Chuck Norris. And he throws in free karate lessons.

ANNA

Still have that defensive wit, I see.

MALLOY

You can't tell me that guy makes you laugh.

ANNA

No, I can't. Now make your "peace."

MALLOY

Okay, but you'd better sit down for this.

ANNA sighs, crosses to the sofa and sits.

MALLOY (cont'd)

Anna, I come here with a heavy heart.

ANNA

Please don't get dramatic.

MALLOY

Excuse me, I have the floor.

ANNA rolls her eyes.

MALLOY (cont'd)

A very heavy heart. I know I just barged in on you, and it's late, but I had to see you. I've been riding the train all night. One end of the city to the other, just thinking. Thinking and thinking and thinking. Eventually I started thinking about you. I couldn't get you out of my head. Anyway, things ended bad with us, which was my fault, but we've been through a lot together. I didn't know who else I could talk to. I'm not here to try and fix anything or whatever. I just wanted to see you.

ANNA

I understand. And I shouldn't have been so rough on you just now, but I still have a lot of anger.

MALLOY

You have a right to be angry. Anyway, I've been seeing some doctors lately. I saw another one today. A specialist at University Hospital. He ran a test. It's very accurate. And I have this, condition. It's not good. Anna, I'm dying.

ANNA

(Pause)
Glen. My god.

MALLOY

I know. I warned you.

ANNA

Oh, Glen.
(She stands and they hug)
Glen, I'm so sorry.

MALLOY

Thanks, honey.

ANNA

(Stepping back)
Shouldn't you get a second opinion?

MALLOY

It won't matter. This guy I saw, he's the best.

ANNA

There's nothing he can do? No treatment? Surgery? What is it called? I'll do some research.

MALLOY

I can't pronounce it. Or spell it. It just runs its course. The doctor told me to stay away from aspirin. And liquor.

ANNA

I'm so sorry, Glen. It sounds so, empty, to keep repeating that, but I don't know what else to say.

MALLOY

I know you mean it. Just telling you has lifted a huge weight off me. Well, I should get going.

ANNA

No, no. Forget the five minutes. Here, sit.

They sit on the sofa.

ANNA (cont'd)

Can I get you anything? Something to drink?

MALLOY

Maybe some water?

ANNA

Dean!

DEAN runs in.

DEAN

What did he do?

ANNA

Bring Glen a glass of water please. Plenty of ice, right, Glen?

MALLOY nods.

DEAN

Water? I thought he was leaving?

ANNA

Dean, please, some water.

DEAN storms off.

MALLOY

Dean. I bet he's not such a bad guy. You deserve better than a loser like me.

ANNA

Glen, stop.

MALLOY

It's true. I was thinking on the train, Christ--what have I done with my life? Nothing. Your boyfriend's right. I'm just a hack.

ANNA

That's not true. Forget Dean. You're a great comic, you just never, or haven't, found your audience yet. But I want to know more about how you're feeling. Are you in pain?

MALLOY

Oh, no. Not at all. Physically I feel great.

ANNA

That's good. Can I ask how...?

DEAN enters with the water, hands it to MALLOY.

DEAN

Water. Plenty of ice.

MALLOY

Thanks, Dean.

DEAN

Things have certainly taken on a somber tone in here.

ANNA

Dean, later. I want to speak with Glen. Alone. And for as long as he wants to stay.

DEAN

Oh, I see! And shall I make up a bed? Lay out some fresh towels?

ANNA

Dean, get out of here.

DEAN throws up his hands, exits.

ANNA (cont'd)

What I was saying is, and please forgive me, did the doctor give you any...estimate? As to how long?

MALLOY

He did.

(Sighs)

He figures it at about thirty-seven years.

A long pause

ANNA

Thirty seven...years?

MALLOY

If I take care of myself. Otherwise I could be looking at thirty-four, thirty-five...

ANNA

A doctor told you you have thirty-seven years to live.

MALLOY

Trust me, I'll never touch booze or aspirin again.

ANNA

Aspirin?

MALLOY

Doctor's orders. Bad for the blood. You'd probably be safe to stay away from it, too.

ANNA

(Stands)

Thirty seven years? Aspirin? What kind of quack doctor is this?

MALLOY

Anna, he's at University Hospital.

ANNA

Glen, I could tell you you have thirty-seven years to live! Anybody on the street could!

MALLOY

This man is a specialist. He ran a test. Anna, I'm dying!

ANNA

Sure, when you look at it in terms of decades, we're all dying!

MALLOY

You don't understand. My life is half over!

ANNA

So is mine! So is Dean's!

MALLOY

You don't know that. You could live to a hundred. I won't be that lucky.

ANNA

I take it all back. I'm such an idiot. I knew something was screwy when you show up here in the dead of night to make your "peace."

DEAN enters.

DEAN

I heard my name.

ANNA

It's time for Glen to leave.

DEAN

And on such short notice...

MALLOY

But Anna.

ANNA

Out!

MALLOY

Fine!

DEAN

So we're back to screaming and yelling.

(To MALLOY)

(MORE)

DEAN (cont'd)
I take it you'll be canceling your breakfast order?

ANNA
(Together with MALLOY)
Shut up, Dean!

MALLOY
Serves me right for thinking you'd care that I'm dying.

DEAN
He's dying?

ANNA
Yeah, forty years from now.

MALLOY
Thirty seven!

DEAN
I don't understand.

MALLOY
I've been diagnosed with a terminal disease.

DEAN
Good heavens.

MALLOY
But it's no big deal, because Anna says we're all dying.

DEAN
(Aghast)
Anna!

ANNA
Some quack doctor ran one test, told him he has thirty-seven years to live and ordered him not to take aspirin.

DEAN
Aspirin?

MALLOY
Yeah, but Dean--wouldn't you agree that the number of months or years doesn't really matter? It's the knowing that counts. The certainty.

DEAN
Sure, I could see that side of it.

ANNA

Dean!

DEAN

What? It's a rational argument.

MALLOY

You're all right, Dean. I knew you were an educated man.

DEAN

Well, as Schopenhauer said, "I've never know any trouble that an hour's reading didn't assuage."

ANNA

(To MALLOY)

He's an idiot, like you. Now get out.

MALLOY

Schopenhauer. I've heard of him.

DEAN

He wrote a great deal about death. You should look him up. He had a very unique perspective.

MALLOY

Thanks, I will.

ANNA

Goodbye, Glen! I'm counting to five. One. Two. Three...

MALLOY

(Pointing to his face)

Get a good look, baby, because this is forever.

ANNA

You'll be a jackass forever!

MALLOY exits, slams the door.

DEAN

Well that was certainly a dramatic close to the evening.

ANNA

(Glaring at DEAN)

"A rational argument"?

DEAN

What? It was! And remember--"compassion is the basis of morality."

ANNA

Ugh. I'm going to bed.

She storms off, turning out the light on her way, leaving DEAN alone in the near darkness.

DEAN

And a man can be himself only when he is alone...

[Blackout]

Scene 4

Another subway platform. ELISE is there. MALLOY enters.

MALLOY

What, you just ride the subway day and night?

ELISE

The dying joke man. I could ask the same of you. There's no law against it.

MALLOY

No, there isn't. You aren't scared to be alone down here this late?

ELISE

What's to be afraid of?

MALLOY

You're tough, I give you that.

ELISE

How are you feeling?

MALLOY

Like a bucket of shit with piss poured on top.

ELISE

Tsk. What a mouth on you.

MALLOY

I just had a big blow-out with my ex. She's dating a lawyer. I think they're shacking up.

ELISE

People have no morals today.

MALLOY

You're Jewish, right? How come you want all your kids to be lawyers, anyway?

ELISE

What a disgusting thing to say!

MALLOY

It's true.

ELISE

It's a stereotype, and a very ugly one. And it's not true. I wanted my son to be a painter.

MALLOY

Let me guess--he became a lawyer.

ELISE

He died when he was twenty-two.

MALLOY

Oh, right. Sorry. Yeah, well, I'm Irish Catholic and trust me--we are all drunks. Cheapskates, too.

ELISE

You're upset, so I'm assuming you don't mean all the vile things you say.

MALLOY

Vile: that's just the word for my mood today. I feel vile inside and out.

ELISE

You need rest.

MALLOY

I need a drink.

(Pause)

Hey, have you read any Schopenhauer?

ELISE

I've read all of Schopenhauer.

MALLOY

What did he say about death?

ELISE

About death? Too much, in my opinion.

MALLOY

C'mon, what did he say?

ELISE

He believed that it was necessary.

MALLOY

What the hell does that mean?

ELISE

Without death, life would have no meaning. We wouldn't be capable of taking anything seriously. He called death "the kernel of reality itself."

MALLOY

What crap.

ELISE

He also said, "After your death, you will be what you were before your birth."

MALLOY

Jeez. He should've written fortune cookies. Do you agree with all that junk?

ELISE

There is some wisdom in it, yes.

MALLOY

He could have used a good joke.

ELISE

German philosophers aren't exactly famous for their sense of humor.

Pause.

MALLOY

So, how did your son die?

ELISE

None of your business.

A long pause.

MALLOY

Hey, you want to hear a joke?

ELISE

The kind of jokes you write, no thank you.

MALLOY

You said you don't listen to my show.

ELISE

I don't, but I can imagine. I've seen those ridiculous billboards. What passes for humor today is nauseating.

MALLOY

Hey, don't blame me. Jokes are a product of the culture that creates them.

ELISE

A sick culture.

MALLOY

That isn't for me to say. That's why it bugs me when people say that comedy isn't art. It is art, because what makes people laugh, even one joke, that tells you more about their culture than all the sociology books ever written.

ELISE

That's a bold statement.

MALLOY

Oh, but it's true.

ELISE

I didn't say it wasn't true, I said it was bold. When I was a young girl, all the papers and magazines printed these cartoons. Jews with enormous hooked noses and pointed ears. Wads of money bulging from their pockets. Der Stürmer was one. There was also one called Brennessel--a Nazi humor magazine, if you can imagine such a preposterous thing. Most Germans found those cartoons very funny. They cut them out and saved them, probably mailed them to relatives, tacked them to the walls in barber shops. And we know where that led.

MALLOY

My point exactly.

ELISE

It doesn't bother you that you're the one writing the cartoons now?

MALLOY

Whoa--wait a minute. There's a big difference between what I do and, you know, propaganda.

ELISE

If that's what you believe.

MALLOY

Absolutely. What I write are just goofs. We're not saying, you know, round up all the Jews or whatever. That's nuts.

ELISE

(Shrugs)

If you can sleep at night.

MALLOY

Don't pull that passive-aggressive stuff. That was a dig at me.

ELISE

I didn't say otherwise.

MALLOY

Well, you insinuated it. What I do is important. I give people a laugh every morning. I help them bear the shit jobs that they're driving to every day.

ELISE

It's important to be proud of one's work. Gives you something to live for.

MALLOY

Oh, I get it. Nice trick. You, Mrs. Dark Cloud, who think life's such a piece of shit, giving me reasons to live. Trying to make me look like a fucking hypocrite.

ELISE

Tsk. What language.

MALLOY

Okay, allow me to illustrate then. I'll tell you a joke. A great joke.

ELISE

No thank you.

MALLOY

You don't like to laugh?

ELISE

All Jews are funny, is that it?

MALLOY

No. It just seems you could use a laugh. I think under all the hard-boiled stuff you probably have a sense of humor.

ELISE

I have a sense of humor. Having a sense of humor doesn't mean you go around giggling all the time.

MALLOY

I can make you laugh. Five bucks says so.

ELISE

I didn't ask you to. And I don't gamble.

MALLOY

This is a really good one. One from my "golden vault."
if you will. Totally clean. Ready?

ELISE

I don't want to hear it.

MALLOY

A guy and his wife are on their honeymoon. Niagara Falls. The wife says, Let's go on a picnic. Okay, says the guy. So off they go. They get to the, picnic place. The wife opens the basket, spreads everything out on the blanket. They start eating. The wife asks, How are the sandwiches? The guy kisses her, says, Delicious, Love, but you forgot the meat. Well, how are the cupcakes? she asks. Again he kisses her. Wonderful, my pet, but you forgot the sugar. But how's the coffee? A kiss, and then, Superb, Angel, but you forgot the water. And the wife says...

ELISE

Yes?

MALLOY

You never heard it?

ELISE

You're going to tell this much and not the punchline?
Some comedian.

MALLOY

(Brightens)
And the wife says...
(In falsetto)
Our second day of marriage and all you can do is
criticize!

ELISE chuckles, faintly at first, then moderately.

MALLOY (cont'd)

Eh? Told you so. Pay up.

ELISE

Pay nothing. I only laughed to be polite.

MALLOY

You lie. It's funny.

ELISE

All right, I confess. I'm sentimental. It reminds me of the old Catskill jokes.

MALLOY

Really? You like those old guys?

ELISE

Like them? I knew them. Henny Youngman was my favorite. I helped him with his autobiography.

MALLOY

No way.

ELISE

The man was funny every second of his life.

MALLOY

I love Henny Youngman. Buddy Hackett, Don Rickles, all those guys. That's the comedy I really want to do--classic style.

ELISE

I knew every one of them. My husband was Henny's attorney.

MALLOY

Oh really...?

ELISE

Shut up. So some Jews are lawyers.

MALLOY

I'm not saying anything...

ELISE

We should be ashamed to be educated? To earn a decent living?

MALLOY

Of course not. I take it back.

ELISE

Anti-Semite.

MALLOY

I said I take it back!

ELISE

I'm kidding. You're not an Anti-Semite, just a bit of a schlemiel.

MALLOY

And you're a bit of a noodge.

ELISE

(Gasps)

I am not!

MALLOY

How about that? The dumb Mick knows some Yiddish.

She slaps his arm playfully.

ELISE

You got me. I laughed. The joke was good, and you were good telling it. Your timing is excellent.

MALLOY

Hey, I'm a professional.

(Pause)

Look, I want to thank you for, you know, listening. And for telling me your story. You have a good heart.

ELISE

Thank you. I don't tell those things to everyone.

MALLOY

Well, I'm honored. So, what's your name?

ELISE

None of your business.

MALLOY

Oh, c'mon, we're friends, right?

(Extends his hand)

My name's Glen Malloy. Put 'er there, soldier.

ELISE

Chatting up old ladies in the subway. You're probably some pervert.

MALLOY

Relax.

Pause.

ELISE

First name only.

MALLOY

Fair enough.

ELISE

Elise.

They shake hands.

MALLOY

(Bowing)

Pleasure to meet you, Elise.

ELISE

Look at you, bowing. Such a charmer. You are some pervert.

MALLOY

I'm offended, Elise. I figured you for a lady of good manners.

ELISE

I am!

(She curtsies slightly)

The pleasure is mine, Mr. Malloy.

MALLOY

Elise. What a pretty name.

ELISE

My father adored Beethoven. He wanted me to be a musician. Not a lawyer.

MALLOY

Elise. That's a weird name for a guy. I thought his name was Ludwig.

ELISE

It was Ludwig!

MALLOY

So where did your father get Elise?

ELISE

Oy, vey... Beethoven wrote a piece for somebody named Elise. He called it "Für Elise." It means "For Elise"?

MALLOY

Elise was his girlfriend or something?

ELISE

Nobody knows who Elise was!

MALLOY

Okay, okay! Jesus, calm down.

ELISE

You've never heard "Für Elise"?

MALLOY

No.

ELISE

Oh, I'm sure you have. In some elevator, a waiting room. It's one of the most famous pieces of music ever written.

(To the melody of "Für Elise")

La da da da da da da dum... (etc)

(MALLOY shakes his head)

You have to be kidding me.

MALLOY

Don't blame me! The only music I heard growing up was "The Chieftains." And Ray Stevens. My old man knew every word to "The Streak."

ELISE

Ugh. My sympathies.

MALLOY

Teach me. About music.

ELISE

Now?

MALLOY

Sure.

ELISE

I'll make you a list of records to buy.

MALLOY

C'mon, now. How about coffee? Elise, would you do me the honor of joining me for a cup of coffee to discuss serious music?

ELISE

(Gasps)

I won't!

MALLOY

In public, of course.

ELISE

I have work to do.

MALLOY

Work!? It's one o'clock in the morning.

ELISE

I'm old. I need to go to bed.

MALLOY

Coffee keeps you awake. That's kinda the point. C'mon, let's talk all night. Teach me stuff. You're the most well-read person I've ever met, after all.

ELISE

(Considers)

One cup. In a booth, opposite sides of the table. Near a window. On my street.

MALLOY

Whatever you want. And I'm buying.

ELISE

I should hope so.

MALLOY

Excellent!

ELISE

Don't get so excited. It's not a date.

MALLOY

You know something? Thirty-seven years, is a long time. That's half a life.

ELISE

You're only now realizing this?

MALLOY

I can make a lot of people laugh in thirty-seven years.

ELISE

Don't get carried away. You're no Henny Youngman.

MALLOY

Sure, rub it in.

ELISE

I'm kidding.

MALLOY

(Peering down the tracks)

So where's this goddamn train? I need some caffeine!

ELISE

He fell off a scaffolding.

MALLOY

Who did?

ELISE

My son. He was working construction for the summer.
Home from college. He tripped and fell.

MALLOY

Jesus.

ELISE

I think about him so often. I hear his voice. I talk to
him. When I hear him, I have to answer. I'm his mother.
People in my building whisper that I'm crazy.
(She chokes up)
Does that make me crazy?

MALLOY

Fuck no. That makes you normal. Screw those people.

ELISE embraces him.

ELISE

Thank you.

MALLOY

(Hugging her awkwardly)
Um. Your welcome.

Sound of a train approaching.

ELISE

(Abruptly)
The local. That's us.

They separate.

MALLOY

You want to see crazy? Look at me. I'm crazy.

ELISE

Not at all. Your doctor, however--absolutely.

MALLOY

(Chuckles)
Good one.
(Pause)
So you really liked that joke, eh?

ELISE

I haven't laughed that hard in a long time.

MALLOY

Shit, honey, you gotta get out more.

ELISE

Tsk. What a mouth on you.

[Curtain]