

WHITEHEAD MONOLOGUE, ACT 1

From *An Increasingly Uncordial Invitation*

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WHITEHEAD

Just a moment everyone...and...okay. I didn't know Mr. Houdini. Ummm... I did kill Mr. Houdini, if that means anything. Which, yes, of course it means something. I, um... yes. So, he was a hero of mine, of most people maybe. Which I guess means I did know him--in that sense. He didn't know me. I just read about him, saw him on the reels. Hanging by straight jackets and the like. Which I thought, you know, that's pretty fantastic. The magic part, that was fine and good. Impressive. I don't know if you knew, which of course you did, he could hold his breath for four minutes. I'm an athletic sort so, you don't have to be to know, that's amazing. I hoped I'd meet him, when I heard he was coming in. I hoped, but; the odds, you know? And then, poof, there he was. And I really think he said "punch me." I'm really pretty sure about that. Honestly, he asked me to punch him. I'm not accusing or...what's the--shirking. Just saying he did, I think, tell me to punch him. Maybe it was the when. Like he was going to say "Punch me on 3: 1, 2, 3!" But I was excited and he only got through "punch me ah!" Do you think that was it? Was the "ah" him trying to say "on three?" I think it maybe was. I guess it's my fault. No, no. See it was no matter what. I haven't even gotten to that part yet. See, I was distraught. When I heard he was in the hospital. Because, you know, like I said, kind of a hero. And the punch. Punch your hero into the hospital, *that's* distressing. So I went swimming. That's not... that sounds wrong. What it was was that I didn't know what to do. All nerves. So I went to the gym, the pool at the gym, to work it off. Work off the anxiety. To distract. I felt like I should dwell, sorta mea culpa, but I'd been doing that, dwelling, and it wasn't really taking off for me, you know? Like, "geez, this isn't going anywhere." So, yeah, so, I went to do some laps. Trying to calm down, to forget. Not totally, just for a while, take it out of the foreground. And I thought that'd work out. But no. Freestyle: still

Houdini. Backstroke: still Houdini. Sidestroke, butterfly, doggie-paddle: Houdini, Houdini, Houdini. Then I started swimming submerged, thinking about him holding his breath. I couldn't match his record standing, let alone swimming; all that oxygen the muscles take. And the heart and the, well obviously, the lungs. I wondered, could I do a whole lap underwater? Never thought to try before. I wasn't sure, like, was this a *hard* thing to do? So I gave it a shot and about halfway across I said, "say, this is kind of difficult. Difficult, but manageable." A difficulty I could manage. So I said, er, prayed. Communed. I communed with God and said "hey, how about you and I make a deal: I make it to the side without surfacing, Houdini lives." Seemed reasonable. Obviously God didn't say anything back, but it seemed reasonable so I took it as tacit. And so I kept swimming, like a frog--I don't think it's called a frog stroke, it's not called anything maybe--but that's pretty much what it is. And as I got close, could see the wall, I realized "oh, this is easy. This is too easy. This wasn't reasonable at all." So I touched the edge, came up, caught my breath, and said "okay God, sorry. I misjudged that one. This time, two laps. Two laps without a breath, Houdini lives." And so I did it. It was harder--don't get me wrong. Harder than one lap. Twice as hard. Two laps is twice as hard as one. But when I came up I took a moment to wipe the water from my mouth and then inhaled. Which indicated, to me, that it wasn't enough. Figuring God can probably hold his breath... I don't know, forever, I guess. If he wanted to. So if I'm going to stand a chance at impressing him, I'm going to have to really push myself. So I took off underwater again. Two and a half laps this time, Lord. Double or nothing. Which I'm not sure what that meant, because I couldn't kill him twice, right? And I couldn't save him twice either. But when I got there it just felt like I could go farther, and if I could go farther, I'd better. So I kept swimming, hitting mark after mark, and each time telling God the next one would be the deciding race. Hit the wall, third lap complete. Started on the forth, and now my lungs are burning, like they're in a vice made out of the sun. But it's still just not enough. Another half-way across, I'm

wondering, is this enough? This is really getting hard. But how hard can it get? How much suffering does it take to impress God? So I kept going. Three quarters, still going. I can see the wall, just out of the very center of my vision, the rims of my eyes like an eclipse, a corona. Splotches everywhere. And then I gave in. Next thing I know I'm being pulled from the pool, exhaling water. I killed him. Whether the punch did or not, I killed him. And if he could die again, that'd be me, too. With the lifeguard pressing against my chest like a bilge-pump, my head to the side, looking at the water, all I could think was "wouldn't you know, four laps would have done it."