

ACT ONE

Scene 1

*(The office of the American News Service, Berlin, the American Sector, September, 1948)*

*(The office is brightly lit and sparsely furnished. Two desks are set at left center, facing away from each other, each set with a 40's era typewriter, at least one of which should be practical. The door to the street is at up left. At right, three steps lead to the bureau chief's office. At down center, unseen, is a large picture window looking out on the city)*

*(At rise, PAUL SCANLON is alone on stage at a reporter's desk on the telephone. He is in his early sixties, with the weary look of a man who has been at his work too long. He is of medium height, thin and nearly bald. He wears glasses he doesn't think he needs and invariably loses)*

PAUL

*(angry)*

What do you mean...is the phone tapped? I don't give a good lusty crap if it *is* tapped! This isn't any fucking state secret, you know!

*(He is momentarily drowned out by the roar of airplane engines...this will continue at intervals throughout the play)*

The Airlift! The fucking Airlift! I can't fucking hear you!

*(Another airplane roars overhead, making him angrier)*

I don't know where the son of a bitch is! All I know is he's in Berlin! Somewhere! For all I know the fucking Russians have him and they're shoving red hot pokers up his ass!

*(Pause)*

You're fucking right! This is a goddamned good bureau and George Russell is a goddamned good reporter and the fucking Airlift is his goddamned story. But all I get from you fucking people is ANS by-lines dropping out of the fucking sky on every fucking transport that lands! I didn't need Val-fucking-Thomas and I sure as shit don't need Kevin-fucking-Riley! What's *he* doing here?

*(Pause)*

What the hell do you mean you don't know?! Jesus Christ!

*(Pause)*

All right! I'll have the son of bitch get in touch...I said I'd fucking have him get in touch!

PAUL (cont'd)

*(He slams the phone into its cradle)*

Jesus-fucking-Christ!

*(He rises slowly on shaking legs. He rummages in the bottom drawer of the desk, brings out a whiskey bottle and a glass, pours two fingers and throws it back with practiced ease. Then, carefully, he puts the bottle back, closes the drawer and retreats toward the steps to his office)*

*(Exit PAUL)*

*(Enter VAL THOMAS and GREGORY STRATTON)*

*(VAL is in her early forties, handsome rather than petty, with long brown hair she wears perpetually tied behind her head. Though she's attractive, there's also something hard and tough about her. Her stride is easy and loose, rather like an infantryman's)*

*(STRATTON is in his mid-thirties, an Army Colonel. He is not tall but has an erect carriage and bearing that make him seem larger than he is. He is a combat soldier, caught by a wound and the untimely outbreak of peace in a press liaison job he hates)*

VAL

I swear to God she had her hand down the guy's pants in broad daylight in front of the Adlon Hotel. I thought they were going to start humping right there on the sidewalk!

STRATTON

I hope he at least bought her a room.

VAL

I doubt it. He didn't seem like the type. And she couldn't have been more than fourteen.

STRATTON

That's old for a prostitute in Berlin.

VAL

So I hear.

STRATTON

Well, here you are. As promised.

VAL

Good old ANS. Fucking anus of the universe.

STRATTON

I've heard it called a few other things. Particularly after one of your pieces bashing Occupation Command hits *Stars and Stripes*.

VAL

I do have a certain obligation to the truth. There are those of us who think you guys are a little paranoid. Yourself excepted, of course.

STRATTON

Of course. On the other hand, there are those of *us* who think *you guys* kind of stretch the truth from time to time. There are also those of *us* who think *you guys* could pay a little more attention to what's actually happening here. Yourself excepted, of course.

VAL

Yeah, well, there are those of *us* who think *you guys* could be a little freer with what actually is happening here as opposed to what you want us to think is happening here. Yourself excepted, of course..

*(A plane passes overhead, lower and louder than before)*

VAL (cont'd)

Right on fucking cue! You planned that!

STRATTON

I don't have that kind of influence with the Airlift. And say what you will, Miss Thomas...

VAL

Call me Val, please. Things got a little intimate in that jeep for "Miss Thomas".

STRATTON

All right then...Val. You want to know what's really happening here? Okay, I'll tell you and then you tell me who's paranoid. Berlin is cut off, blockaded. There are enough Russian troops right outside the city to take the Western sectors any time they feel like trying it. And the only thing...*the only thing*...between Berlin and starvation is an incredibly thin line of American and British flyers. It may not look much like a war...yet. But guys have died flying those planes. And more guys are going to die. That's not paranoia. That's just plain damned fact.

VAL

The Russians surely don't love us anymore.

STRATTON

No, ma'am, they do not. There's a place you should see...this little cemetery on the final approach to Tempelhof. Every day a couple hundred people are there to watch us land. This was the enemy, the same enemy that was trying to shoot us out of the sky three years ago. Now they cheer when the planes come in. They know what keeps Berlin alive. And who.

VAL

You're a credit to your profession, Colonel. The Berlin garrison couldn't have a better press liaison officer.

STRATTON

My *profession* is combat engineer. Or it was until I caught a bullet coming across the Rhine in '45.

VAL

*(Looking toward the office)*

There really should be someone here...PAUL!!!

*(She waits but there's no answer)*

He's probably up there laughing at me...you fucking gnome!!

STRATTON

I don't mind waiting.

VAL

You must have better things to do than baby-sit a reporter who's supposed to be in Cologne right now, anyway. Which is probably why *I'M BEING IGNORED!!!*

STRATTON

Can't think of a thing I'd rather be doing. Or anyone I'd rather be with.

VAL

Why, Colonel, was that a pass? You should be careful. I might take you up on it. Then you'd be stuck with this nasty bitch.

STRATTON

It wasn't really a pass. And I don't think you're quite as tough as you think you are.

VAL

Oh, don't kid yourself, sonny. I'm plenty tough. I've been hanging around newsrooms since I was nineteen. I was in Berlin when Hitler and all that gang were pups. I was in London at the height of the Blitz and I was tickling Mark Clark's ass when Rome fell. The day you were shot crossing the Rhine, I was two jeeps behind.

STRATTON

You were in Berlin...when?

VAL

1934...and you don't have to bother adding that up. For awhile again in '39. I used to like Berlin. Now...I'm not sure I understand Berlin.

STRATTON

It's not so hard. They had to survive. That girl in front of your hotel? She was probably raped by the Russians when the city fell. She would have been about eleven. So since she was ruined anyway...that's the way they think around here...her father probably decided she might as well get paid for it.

VAL

You don't like the Germans much, do you?

STRATTON

I've got a couple ounces of German lead in my chest...and I had a brother killed at Anzio. So, no, I don't have much love for them. But I don't hate them, either. Hell, they're just trying to get by in a world that doesn't look much like it used to. Like we'd be doing if we were them. Funny thing about these people. Bombed to dust, conquered, raped...and still they wanted to survive. So they did.

VAL

I had a friend once who told me Europe is nothing but a charnel house...always has been, always will be. I didn't believe him then. But that was long ago and I was very young. I'm not young, anymore.

*(Another plane passes low overhead)*

VAL (cont'd)

Shit, you could go deaf around here.

*(Enter PAUL)*

PAUL

You've got a foul mouth, Val. You always had a foul mouth.

VAL

Oh, go fuck yourself, Paul.

PAUL

Charming as ever, I see.

VAL

Same bitch I always was, if that's what you mean.

*(They embrace like old friends long separated and glad to see each other)*

PAUL

Ah, Colonel Stratton! Did you drop by to tell me why you kicked George Russell out of the Air Safety Center yesterday?

STRATTON

It was nothing personal, Paul. We kicked all the reporters out of the Air Safety Center yesterday.

VAL

You two know each other, I take it?

PAUL

Know each other? A reporter can't take a shit in Berlin without clearing it with Stratton first. It's a funny thing about that Air Safety Center. It's under Four Power control...which means the Russians can sit there all day and watch the Airlift. Which they do, believe me. But my guy sneezes wrong and he gets kicked out on his butt. What's the matter, Colonel? Afraid we're going to find out you're not going to make it?

STRATTON

We'll make it. You don't have to worry about that.

PAUL

I don't worry about it. The Russians like us. I'm not so sure about the Americans.

*(To VAL)*

So, Val, what is it? New York decide the poor Berlin bureau is such a shithole we can't handle this story on our own...so they had to send you?

VAL

It was my idea. New York just said yes.

PAUL

Really? I thought it might have been Kevin's idea.

VAL

Kevin...Riley? He was in China last I heard.

PAUL

He's not in China anymore. He's here. In Berlin.

VAL

*(stunned)*

He's...what?

PAUL

Got in this morning. Right about the time you did...which I find fucking coincidental. I suppose you don't know anything about him either, Colonel Stratton?

STRATTON

He flew in on one of my airplanes. Yes, I know about him.

PAUL

When the bloody fucking hell was somebody going to tell me?!

STRATTON

He works for you, Paul. We just assumed...

PAUL

Never assume anything where ANS is concerned. You just end up looking stupid.

*(SILENCE)*

VAL

I don't care who the fuck Kevin Riley thinks he is. This is my story. If he thinks he's going to poach it off me, he's...

PAUL

Are you kidding me, Val? This is the great god Riley. When it comes to stories, well, there's the great god Riley's story and there's the trash. I hope you weren't counting on that Pulitzer too much.

*(He starts for the door)*

VAL

Where the hell are you going?

PAUL

New York seems to have misplaced the great god Riley and I have to go find him. Fetch, Spot! Good dog!

*(Exit PAUL)*

STRATTON

He doesn't seem happy.

VAL

Paul? Oh, he's never happy unless he's chewing on somebody.

*(Pause)*

He's a really great bureau chief, you know. He's had this bureau over twenty years. He was the last American out of Berlin when the war started and the first one back when it was over. Berlin's probably the best bureau ANS has and that's because of Paul. But does he get any credit for it? He does not. A big story breaks here and ANS sends someone like me.

STRATTON

Did they send Kevin, too?

VAL

I doubt it. Why underpay two of us when you only have to underpay one? Paul's right about one thing, though. Kevin has this way of sucking all the air out of a story. If he's here to write about the Airlift...

STRATTON

...he'll write one hell of a story.

VAL

*(surprised)*

Oh...*this* reporter you're a fan of?

STRATTON

Oh, yeah. A big one. I know Kevin a little. In Hawaii, right after Pearl Harbor. That's when I started to read his stuff. After I got transferred to Europe...well, what I knew about the war in the Pacific, I learned from him.

VAL

Yeah. So did I. So did most of the country.

STRATTON

There was something different about him, though...about the way he saw things. Once I ran into a GI who'd been with him in the Pacific. A good old boy from south Georgia. He says to me, "Kevin didn't write about no generals nor no politicians. He wrote about *us*, the way we was. He was one of us, right there on the line next to us, every single day. Time was I was with him in a foxhole...on Kwajalein it was...and them Japs, they're shooting at us. I says to him, 'Kevin, you ought to get down. You could get shot as easy as me, but at least I got this here rifle. I can shoot back. You ain't got nothing but that notebook.' And he says to me, 'Ah but, Mack, it's a magic notebook.' Guess it was at that."

VAL

The great...god...Riley.

STRATTON

I don't know about that. But I'm a soldier. I know war. And he took me there. He made me see what those men were seeing, feel what they were feeling. He told about war the way it was, the way the men saw it, not the way people wish it was.

VAL

Irritating as shit, isn't it? You want to find a flaw in him somewhere. Just one, just to prove he's human. But he isn't.

*(SILENCE)*

STRATTON

You don't know where Kevin is, do you, Val?

VAL

Me? Don't you know where he is?

STRATTON

He...uh...sort of slipped away from the man I had with him. Lost him in an S-Bahn station.

VAL

*(laughing)*

Oh...no...!!!

STRATTON

There's nothing funny about this.

VAL

*(still laughing)*

No...of course...there isn't...!!

STRATTON

We hope he doesn't get into any trouble...on his own.

VAL

*(calming down)*

Kevin's been covering wars since 1935. I imagine he can take care of a couple of surly Russians.

*(She regards him closely)*

Why would you think I'd know where he is?

STRATTON

Oh, no reason, really. Just you've known him so long and...

VAL

Cut the shit, Colonel. You had a reason.

STRATTON

All right. When we were in Hawaii, we talked. A lot. A couple of times...well, a couple of times he talked about you. Nothing really specific. But I got the feeling that maybe once there was something between you. So when I found out he was coming to Berlin on the same day you were...well, I suppose I made a connection.

VAL

*(quietly)*

The son of a bitch.

*(Pause)*

Once upon a time, maybe. But *once upon a time*. Our paths haven't crossed in years.

*(Enter REBECCA FARRELL)*

*(She's in her late twenties, tall, with pale skin and dark hair worn short.)*

*While she appears thin and frail, she carries a great number of heavy bags without apparent effort, as if from long practice)*

REBECCA

Hello?

*(VAL turns, startled)*

VAL

Can I help you?

REBECCA

Is this ANS? Please, God, let this be ANS!

VAL

This is ANS. Who the hell are you?

REBECCA

I'm Rebecca Farrell. I'm looking for Paul Scanlon.

VAL

Does he know you?

REBECCA

He knows my boss.

VAL

And your boss would be...who?

REBECCA

Kevin Riley.

*(SILENCE)*

VAL

So he does exist.

REBECCA

He exists. I have almost everything he owns here. Not to mention everything I own.

*(She struggles with the bags)*

Could somebody...?

STRATTON

Oh, Jesus, I'm sorry.

*(STRATTON helps her put down her load)*

VAL

So where might...Kevin...be now?

REBECCA

I don't know. We had to come on separate flights. It isn't easy getting into Berlin right now.

VAL

Really? I hadn't heard.

REBECCA

I expected him to be here, actually.

VAL

Well...*actually*...he probably would be. Except our Colonel Stratton here seems to have lost him.

REBECCA

Oh, I doubt that. Kevin might have lost Colonel Stratton, but I doubt it was the other way around.

VAL

We haven't been properly introduced. I'm Val Thomas.

*(The two shake hands; the tension is palpable)*

REBECCA

I've heard of you.

VAL

I *haven't* heard of you. When did Kevin acquire a secretary?

REBECCA

Let's see...the start of the war. So...six years?...seven?

VAL

My, aren't you the well-kept secret?

REBECCA

I don't think I'm any secret at all. Look, this is a charming conversation and I'd love to go on with it, but I have to find Kevin. Colonel, the officer in Dusseldorf said arrangements had been made...

STRATTON

There's a suite at the Adlon Hotel.

VAL

How like Kevin to travel first class.

REBECCA

Really? Could have fooled me. I haven't seen an actual bed in about eight months.

STRATTON

I can drive you if you like. Just give me a second to get your bags in the jeep.

*(STRATTON loads himself up with her bags and starts for the door)*

VAL

Now don't lose this one, too, Colonel. They'll have you chipping ice off penguins somewhere.

*(Exit STRATTON)*

VAL (cont'd)

So...you're Kevin's...secretary.

REBECCA

Secretary. Travel agent. Pack mule.

VAL

I always knew Kevin to travel light.

REBECCA

Kevin does travel light. I don't.

VAL

That isn't what I mean...exactly.

REBECCA

I know what you mean...exactly.

VAL

Listen, honey, if there's one thing I know about, it's Kevin Riley, and...

REBECCA

Oh? You were his secretary, too?

VAL

Honey...I was never *anybody's* secretary.

REBECCA

No...I suppose you never were. And I'd better be going.

VAL

I guess you'd better, honey. Don't want to keep the great god Riley waiting. Wherever he might be.

REBECCA

You could stop calling me "honey". I wouldn't mind.

VAL

Honey...I call everybody "honey".

REBECCA

I'll bet you don't call Kevin "honey".

*(VAL looks at her, startled; REBECCA smiles)*

*(Exit REBECCA)*

*(VAL gathers her things, takes a place at one of the desks winds a sheet of paper into the typewriter and begins to work)*

*(Enter KEVIN RILEY)*

*(He's in his mid-forties, not a particularly big man nor a particularly striking one. In short, he is not the popular image of a war correspondent. He wears a battered Army field jacket and fatigue pants and carries a duffel bag and a portable typewriter. He walks with a slight limp)*

VAL

*(not looking up)*

Just what we fucking need. Grand Central Station in the middle of fucking Berlin.

KEVIN

Hello, Val.

VAL

Why, Kevin Riley! Imagine finding you in this part of the world! If you're looking for your...cheerleader...she's gone to the hotel.

KEVIN

I know.

VAL

Paul isn't here, either.

KEVIN

I know that, too.

VAL

Then you know a hell of a lot more than anyone else around here. Such as where the great god Riley's been...

KEVIN

I've been around.

VAL

...and what the fuck he's doing in Berlin!

(SILENCE)

KEVIN

It's been a long time, Val.

VAL

A writer of your caliber should be able to come up with a better line than that.

(KEVIN laughs)

VAL (cont'd)

Well, this is an occasion, isn't it? Where do you suppose Paul keeps his bottle?

KEVIN

(pointing to the upstage desk)

That desk...bottom left drawer under a file marked "Petunia Queen 1923".

(She goes to the desk, opens the lower left drawer, rummages around a bit before finding the bottle and glasses. She lifts them out, together with a ratty file folder)

VAL

"Petunia Queen 1923". How could you possibly know that?

KEVIN

I've known Paul thirty years. You think I wouldn't know where he keeps his liquor? I really don't want a drink, Val.

VAL

Well, I do.

(She opens the bottle and pours drinks. She hands one to him but he doesn't take it)

Take the damned thing, will you? I don't want to drink alone.

(He takes the glass)

VAL (cont'd)

What shall we drink to? I know...

(She lifts her glass)

To the great god Riley's return to Berlin!

KEVIN

(putting down his glass)

Oh, shit.

VAL

But it's true, isn't it? You know they call you the "Ernie Pyle of the Pacific"? Of course, Ernie had the good sense to die and leave the legend alone. But not you.

VAL (cont'd)

You go to China and start a whole new legend. Now you're here. What's the matter? The last war wasn't enough for you?

KEVIN

There's always a war. Some place.

VAL

I haven't missed you, you know.

KEVIN

I haven't missed you, either.

*(Pause)*

You got married?

VAL

Once. For about a day.

KEVIN

When the by-line changed.

VAL

When the by-line changed. You?

KEVIN

No. Not even once. Not even for a day.

VAL

Well, why should you? There are always plenty of cheerleaders, aren't there?

KEVIN

She's not a cheerleader.

VAL

*(as if she hadn't heard)*

Paul's having a cow with you back in Berlin. He thinks New York sent you to take the Airlift story right out from under the Berlin bureau.

KEVIN

New York didn't send me.

VAL

I knew that...since they did send me.

*(Pause)*

You're not getting this story, Kevin. It's mine.

KEVIN

There are other stories in Berlin.

VAL

Such as...?

*(He takes a battered envelope from his coat pocket and hands it to her. She opens it and starts to read. As she does, her eyes widen in horrified fascination)*

VAL (cont'd)

Jesus Christ.

KEVIN

That's pretty much what I said.

VAL

I knew. I...I guess I knew. I followed the trial but, God, after awhile those things all blur into each other.

KEVIN

Not this one. This one's different. This one was always different.

VAL

When's the...hanging?

KEVIN

Day after tomorrow. Midnight. Fourteen years too late.

*(SILENCE)*

VAL

Do you ever see them?

KEVIN

Jacob died two years ago.

VAL

And Eric?

KEVIN

He's alive. Well...you could call it alive, I guess. He has a room in New York. He sits and stares at the wall. Someone brings him his food. Someone cleans up after him. I see him once or twice a year, whenever I'm in town. He doesn't know me, of course. He hasn't known anyone since 1934.

*(She crosses away from him and, when she thinks he can't see, brushes away a tear)*

KEVIN (cont'd)

I should go. I kind of embarrassed one of Greg Stratton's boys earlier. I shouldn't disappear again.

VAL

No. That would be poor form.

*(Pause)*

Do you love her? The cheerleader?

KEVIN

She's not a cheerleader, Val. Stop calling her that.

VAL

I guess that answers the question.

KEVIN

No, it doesn't. You just think it does.

*(He starts for the door)*

VAL

Are you going to see Ernst...before they hang him?

KEVIN

He asked me to.

VAL

I know he asked you to. Are you going to do it?

*(He thinks for a long moment)*

KEVIN

He says he has something to tell me. Something I need to know. I suppose I ought to find out what it is, don't you?

*(Pause)*

And then I'm going to watch the son of a bitch hang.

*(Exit KEVIN)*

*(FADE TO BLACK)*