

THE MISTAKE

A Play

In

Two Acts

By

PETER GARTNER

Copyright PETER GARTNER 2022

15, St. Margaret's Road,
Prestwich,
Manchester.
M25 2QB.

0161 773 0389

petergartner@tiscali.co.uk

ACT ONE

Room. Dark with minimal furniture. An unoccupied chaise longue beneath a window.

JOHN, mid-forties

JANE, late thirties.

Jane seated behind a desk. From time to time, Jane gets up from her chair and leans forwards on the desk, whilst talking to John. She also occasionally gets up and walks around John, whilst talking, before returning to her seat.

John seated a little distance from the front of the desk. John remains seated throughout.

JANE

If you remember, you made a mistake...

JOHN

Did I ?

JANE

Yes, you did. In that particular circumstance, the correct thing to do was to co-operate...

JOHN

I...I didn't understand that..properly...

JANE

You were very much mistaken; you were very much in the wrong.

JOHN

I guess I was – if you put it like that.

JANE

You had to do one thing, one simple thing, but you resisted. Why ?

JOHN

At the time, the natural thing to do...was to resist...

JANE

Was it ?

JOHN

It was for me...

JANE

Was it for anyone else - ? Would anyone else have done what you did ?

JOHN

I don't know – there's no way I can know that.

Pause.

JOHN

The natural thing for me to do..was to say, "No".

JANE

That led to a set of consequences you might have avoided, if you'd co-operated properly.

JOHN

I couldn't do that...

JANE

Why not ?

JOHN

I...I..don't know.

JANE

You needed to co-operate.

JOHN

I...I...

JANE

You resisted...

JOHN

Yes...

JANE

That was, a mistake. Why did you do that ?

JOHN

I thought I had to...to..resist.

JANE

That was obstinate, and stubborn, and..immature.

JOHN

I guess it was.

JANE

Why were you so stubborn, obstinate, and

immature ?

JOHN

I don't know...Maybe, I was...Maybe, I wasn't, maybe I wasn't stubborn, obstinate, and immature.

She looks at him with disdain, almost disgust.

JOHN

Maybe, it was the right decision. Maybe, it was a matter of my essential integrity -

JANE

“Integrity !” That was not a time or place for any integrity ! That was a time and circumstance for simple obedience, without question, without any thought of integrity.

JOHN

I gotta live with the consequences of my mistake, even if it wasn't a mistake; even if, I did the right thing for me...

JANE

- It was the wrong thing -

JOHN

The right thing for me -

JANE

The wrong thing, for everyone else, for anyone else ! You made that mistake because of the defects in your character.

JOHN

That is possible.

JANE

You are the author of your own misfortune. You made the mistake...

JOHN

Yes, I did – if it was a mistake...

JANE

You did the wrong thing...

JOHN

And I have suffered the consequences, the whole of the rest of my life.

JANE

You are to blame...

JOHN (mumbling)

Y-yes...

JANE

No-one else is to blame. You, you are to blame.

JOHN

Did I get what I deserved ?

JANE

You certainly did. You were too naive, to think you could get away with any type of disobedience. You broke the rules.

JOHN

I didn't know there were any rules.

JANE

There are always rules, in any institution.

JOHN

I thought the opposite.

JANE

What ?

JOHN

I thought the opposite was the case. I thought I had to say, "No"; I didn't think I could say, "Yes".

JANE

That was a mistake, a stupid mistake..you made.

JOHN

I thought I had to say, "No". I thought I could not co-operate.

JANE

Why ?

JOHN

I thought if I co-operated, I would end up in a load of trouble.

Jane sighs.

JANE

You ended up in a load of trouble because you did not co-operate.

JOHN

I...I couldn't do that.

JANE

Why not ?

JOHN

There were reasons...I must've forgotten, why...

JANE

What reasons ?

JOHN

I don't remember any more.

JANE

I bet you do...

JOHN

I don't...

JANE

You know you do. You know the reasons you did not co-operate.

JOHN

I don't, want to, remember.

JANE

But you do, you do remember - ?

JOHN

Yes...I remember. The reasons were..a mistake...
The reasons were in error...

Pause.

JOHN

There was so much disapproval of my..my behaviour...so much disapproval of me, my course of action, my decision...my decisions.

JANE

You were mistaken...

JOHN

I was then.

JANE

You made mistakes...

JOHN

Yes, I did...

JANE

You made a very bad mistake, a critical error...

JOHN

I guess I did.

JANE

Very, very bad...

JOHN

I don't wanna remember...but I do... remember

Pause.

JOHN

I want a fresh start.

JANE

You can't have one.

JOHN

I was too naive and innocent...I always acted from the best of intentions...

She looks at him with disdain.

JOHN

People should be allowed one mistake, one tiny little mistake. The only time I had some freedom of thought, I made that terrible mistake. People excuse the mistakes of others; they even excuse their own mistakes – not me...I am forever cursed to remember my mistake.

JANE

Maybe, they forget their mistakes, or pretend they never happened.

JOHN

That's possible. Maybe, I should try to forget my mistake...but I always remember it, constantly, but, at the time, it was the only course of action I could take. It seemed so right at the time, the natural thing to do in those circumstances; but, I did not understand at the time, what a horrendous mistake it was. Now, I get it. I understand how that endangered me...Should I have been given a chance, to escape from the consequences of my mistake at the time? I didn't get that chance, and I have suffered ever since, with a type of remorse for the damage done to me since then, as a result of the mistake I made. I was forced into that position. I had no choice. Of course, I was under the influence of other people, at the time. I had been on drugs, but...I must now confess, I not too sure about that, because, the truth is, I lied about that...I lied to myself...I tried to lie, but I just had to tell the truth, at least to myself... I gotta learn how to forgive myself...Forgive and forget...I gotta do that, somehow...

JANE

Are you ashamed - ?

JOHN

Yes, I am.

JANE

Of what ?

JOHN

Of my stupidity. I simply could not do what I had to do – maybe, I was..dumb...

JANE

What you did was dumb...

JOHN

So dumb, so stupid...

JANE

Indeed.

Pause.

JOHN

Maybe, it was inevitable...My frame of mind at the time, there was nothing else

I could've done.

JANE

You're too obsessed..with this mistake,
you made.

JOHN

I am admitting I did the wrong thing, for
the right reasons.

JANE

Who cares about your reasons, for doing
the wrong thing ?

JOHN

I care.

JANE

Your opinion, does not matter.

JOHN

It does to me...

JANE

No-one else !

JOHN

Somehow, I got the wrong idea. I made
mistakes...I wasn't thinking straight...
I messed up bad...I'm not sure, why, not
any more...maybe, I knew at the time, but
I don't remember, not no more, I just don't
remember clearly enough, why I did what
I did...

JANE

You remember, well enough.

JOHN

I wanna forget...

Slight pause.

JOHN

...The mistakes I made...How can I absolve
myself of blame ? How can I relieve myself
of this guilt ? Things went wrong...I despair
to find some way outta this maze...feeling so
bad...

JANE

I can't feel any sympathy for you.

JOHN

I know that, but, -

JANE

For peace of mind, you gotta forget the whole damn thing.

JOHN

Ain't that easy.

Pause.

JANE

Does anyone else know about this mistake.. you made ?

JOHN

No. I told no-one.

JANE

No-one else needs ta know...

JOHN

I guess not.

JANE

Then, it's just you and me and your conscience...?

JOHN

I guess so...

JANE

Then, let it go. Forget the whole damn thing.

JOHN

I can't do that.

JANE

Why not ?

JOHN

Because I'm too honest with myself. I am not able to lie..to myself.

JANE

Everyone's gotta be able to do that.

JOHN

Not if my life depended on it – I insist on telling the truth, especially to myself.

JANE

You're too honest...

JOHN

I can't help that.

JANE

Then, why not tell some other people ?

JOHN

What other people ?

JANE

People it concerns.

JOHN

It don't concern no-one no more.

JANE

Then, why remember it, at all ?

JOHN

It's my memory, my conscience, makes me, confess, I made a mistake...

JANE

A dreadful binding mistake...

JOHN

True; it was. I do not have, a convenient conscience. I cannot tell a lie, even to myself.

JANE

You can't do that, you're no good for nothing. You're certainly no use to us. There is no way, we can employ you. Your conscience discredits you.

JOHN

I guess it does.

JANE

What use is a man, if he can't tell himself the odd occasional lie ?

JOHN

I know; I know.

JANE

You gotta reconcile yourself to the truth,
and live what's left of your life. You can't
afford to be, so moral.

JOHN

Morality is essential. A man without morality
is, dishonest.

JANE

You don't hafta have, an absolute morality,
not in all things. You need-ta cut yourself
some slack, especially when you're dealing
with the past.

JOHN

The past sucks...

JANE

Then, don't remember it.

JOHN

I have to. I can't escape my past.

Pause.

JANE

So, you wanna be a virtuous hero in your
past ?

JOHN

I guess I do.

JANE

So, everyone else got it wrong ?

JOHN

I'm not saying that.

JANE

What are you saying ?

JOHN

I did the right thing for me, -

JANE

- Which was, the wrong thing for everyone else.

Pause.

JANE

You've not told anyone else about this,
have you ?

JOHN

No.

JANE

So, I'm the only one has to listen to your
bullshit !

JOHN

No-one else knows anything about this.

JANE

Good. Then, maybe, you can keep this
a secret.

JOHN

I have to tell the truth.

JANE

You don't hafta tell nobody nothing.

Pause.

JANE

You can't have this hanging over you like
a cloud all the time...

JOHN

It does..hang over me.

JANE

We have a little life, not much, but a little...
better than nothing.

JOHN

You are not me.

JANE

I know that.

JOHN

Do you...do you know that ?

JANE

Sure, I do.

Pause.

JANE

We just sit here, and lament our awful lives,
and do nothing, except remember ancient
sorrow, ancient loss and woe. Why don't
we ever do anything ?

JOHN

You mean, me ?

JANE

Yes, I do.

JOHN

Thanks a lot.

Pause.

JANE

You're nothing special...

JOHN

I never said I was...

JANE

You did...

JOHN

Huh ? What ?

JANE

You did say you were special.

JOHN

When ? I don't remember that. When was
that ?

JANE

I remember...I remember..you said you were.

JOHN

I think you're mistaken.

JANE

I don't think I am.

JOHN

What do you want me to say ?

JANE

Admit, you once said, you were special...

JOHN

Ha ! I don't think I did, and if I did, so what ?

JANE

If you think you're special, and you're not,
it's no good pretending you are...

JOHN

What ?

JANE

Special...

JOHN

I am not, special.

JANE

What makes you so special ?

JOHN

Nothing; absolutely nothing.

Pause.

JANE

You disrespected me...

JOHN

Did I ? I don't remember...

JANE

You know you did.

JOHN

I don't know nothing no more.

JANE

You did, disrespect me.

JOHN

When ? How ?

JANE

You were rude and disrespectful..toward me.

JOHN

Well, I don't remember.

JANE

I think you do...

JOHN

Well, you thought wrong.

JANE

Admit, you disrespected me.

JOHN

Do I have to ?

JANE

Yes, you do. Admit the truth.

Pause.

JOHN

Why was disrespecting you such a crime ?

JANE

No-one should be disrespected. No-one should be disrespectful.

JOHN

Not against the law.

JANE

Ain't nice..to be disrespected.

JOHN

I'm sorry...

JANE

I don't believe you are...

JOHN

Well, I am...

JANE

I don't think you are..sincere...

JOHN

You're disrespecting me now, saying I am insincere.

JANE

I am not disrespecting you !

Jane looks at John.

JOHN

Yes, you are !

Pause.

JANE

You're too obsessed with the notion of your own integrity.

JOHN

Ha ! The worst mistake I ever made was getting involved with you.

JANE

- Because I won't sympathise with you - ?

No reply.

JANE

Is that the reason ?

JOHN

I regret being involved with you.

She is upset and offended by this, but after an angry look, she regains her composure and speaks deliberately.

JANE

I regret being involved with you.

Pause.

JOHN

How did we meet ? How did we ever get together ?

JANE (ironically)

I don't remember...

Pause.

JOHN

I remember things I don't wanna remember.

JANE

Such as - ?

JOHN

I can see them now.

JANE

What things ? What can you see ?

JOHN

It's bad enough seeing these thing – I don't
wanna talk about them.

JANE

I can't help you if you don't tell me, what's
upsetting you.

JOHN

I can't change my past, not even in my own
mind.

JANE

Then, you're weak; you're hopeless.

JOHN

Maybe, I am.

JANE

You cannot have a normal life.

JOHN

I know that. I am an empty, desolate
person.

JANE

You're tiring my patience.

JOHN

Am I ? I can't help the way I am.

JANE

You don't want to get better. You wanna
stay the way you are.

JOHN

You're not helping me...

JANE

I don't think I can, unless you change...

JOHN

I can't change.

JANE

You don't want to change.

JOHN

You're too..judgemental.

JANE

Am I ?

JOHN

You like to be in the right.

JANE

I guess I do.

JOHN

You enjoy it...

JANE

I don't think I do. It's just that I happen to be right most of the time, and you, are often in the wrong.

JOHN

Not always...

JANE

Of course, not always; but, often..you usually are, in the wrong.

JOHN

I'm not so certain about that.

JANE

I am.

Pause.

JOHN

You like to put people in the wrong.

JANE

If people are in the wrong, which they often are, it is my moral duty to say so.

JOHN

You don't have to do that...you want to do that...you enjoy it.

She shakes her head.

JANE

No.

JOHN

You enjoy putting me in the wrong...

JANE

That's because you are in the wrong !...often.

Silence.

JOHN

I don't know what to do any more.

JANE

You're pathetic.

JOHN

I was..damaged. Maybe, my memory is a bit, mixed up. I hope so. I hope I got it wrong..what I did. But, it's all about, why...why I did the wrong thing ? It might ease my conscience, if I don't remember too much...maybe, if I'm lucky, maybe, my memory is, inaccurate...

JANE

If that's so, you'd be a lousy witness in your own trial.

JOHN

Is that what this is, a trial ?

JANE

In your mind, it is.

JOHN

How can you say that ?

JANE

You're trying to work it out, to defend yourself, because you made a dreadful life-changing mistake, and you have to live with the consequences of that mistake for the rest of your life, and you don't really want to be to blame, but you are. You want to, exonerate yourself of the burden of guilt you feel, because you know you screwed up, and that means, logically, you must blame yourself for the God-damn mess you made of your life. Ain't that so ? You are the defendant in the trial of your life, and you can't

pretend you're innocent.

JOHN

I wish I could, pretend I was innocent. Maybe, if I could claim my memory was defective, maybe that invalidates the evidence I give against myself.

JANE

Your testimony makes you guilty, even in the court of your own mind.

JOHN

Why can't I lie to myself, or at least claim I might be mistaken.

JANE

You're too honest, and that makes you guilty.

Pause.

JOHN

If only, I'd got it wrong...

JANE

You wanna plead, ignorance and error.

JOHN

Please...

JANE

You can't do that. How can you discover anything about yourself, if your memory is defective ? if your recollection of events is unreliable ?

JOHN

I wish it was. If I did wrong -

JANE

You did...

JOHN

It was because I had no choice, no choice whatsoever.

JANE

You were..immature...you still are. How can you live with yourself if you're so

guilty, and responsible for harming
yourself, so much ?

JOHN

Should I have been offered a chance ?
Should I have been given a chance ?

JANE

You had to make your own chance.

JOHN

I couldn't do that.

JANE

You're still to blame.

JOHN

That's too easy to say.

JANE

But it is, true.

JOHN

As far as it goes...

JANE

What to the contrary ? You're giving
evidence against yourself.

JOHN

I can't help that.

JANE

You have no discretion, no disguise,
nothing to offer in mitigation.

JOHN

I know.

Pause.

JOHN

I want a rest. I need a rest.

JANE

Can't help you.

Jane sighs.

John looks at her.

JANE

What am I gonna do with you ? Huh ?
You got any idea - ?

JOHN

You hafta tolerate me.

JANE

I guess I do. Tolerate ? You are intolerable.

JOHN

How can I improve myself ?

JANE

Look at yourself in the mirror, and conclude,
you are a boring self-centred obsessive...
tedious..person.

JOHN

Do you have contempt for me ?

JANE

A little.

Pause.

JOHN

What advice can you give me ?

JANE

Let your conscience..rest.

JOHN

I can't do that. I wish I could.

JANE

Life is too short -

JOHN

I know that ! It's just, I must have too
much damage to change my frame of
mind.

JANE

Then you're stuck, like a groove in
a record.

JOHN

It's the needle gets stuck.

JANE (deliberately)
Then you're stuck, like a needle, in
a groove, in a record.

JOHN
That's vinyl.

JANE
You get the point...

JOHN
I don't know that I do.

JANE
You do...you know that.

JOHN
I'm not sure I know anything any more...

JANE
- Except your guilt...

JOHN
Except my guilt...

Pause.

JANE
No-one else knows. No-one else accuses you.

JOHN
My conscience -

JANE
Why must you remember such an ancient
sorrow ?

JOHN
- Because I do, my conscience will not
let me forget it.

JANE
No-one else knows, except me, and I
say, let it go. I will not accuse you to
anyone.

JOHN
I can't -

Jane sighs.

JANE

We're going round and round in circles,
and getting nowhere...What's done is done;
it cannot be undone.

JOHN

It's still so prominent in my memory.

JANE

If you make the right decisions, you can
avoid the moral censure of Fate and Destiny.

JOHN

I have free will...

JANE

...To make mistakes.

JOHN

I made mistakes.

JANE

You sure did. You were young, and immature...

JOHN

I was young then, wasn't I ?

JANE

You were...

JOHN

Young and immature...Is that an excuse ?

JANE

It could be...Maybe, more of an explanation,
a plea in mitigation, to make yourself, a little
less guilty.

JOHN

I am guilty, but...I am damaged.

JANE

You're stuck..in the past.

JOHN

There's no way out.

JANE

You gotta find a way, somehow.

JOHN

How ?

JANE

You gotta find that out for yourself.

JOHN

You got any suggestions ?

JANE

Just..take yourself outta yourself.

JOHN

How do I do that ?

JANE

You...

She is lost in thought.

JANE

I don't have, all the answers.

JOHN

I need you to concentrate on me, my problems.

Pause.

JOHN

Am I the problem ?

Jane sighs, exasperated.

JANE

You certainly are.

JOHN

Can I find anything good, in the wreckage of my life ?

JANE

Can you ?

JOHN

I don't know. I done nothing since that time it all happened. My life has been...

He sighs.

Pause.

JOHN

If you're gonna make a life for yourself,
you gotta do it when you're still young.
I'm too old to do it now. All I can do now
is regret, regret my life. It's all too late now,
to do anything, except, regret. That's all
I got..nothing but regret. So, it didn't work
out for me back them...there's always
another chance, another opportunity,
that's what they say...but there ain't,
there ain't no other chance, to do something,
to do, anything. You get one chance in life
...you blow it, you're screwed. That's the
story of my life. I despair, my life has been
such shit...I hate my lousy miserable existence.

JANE

I'm sorry...

Jane gets up from her seat behind the desk and walks over to the chaise longue. She sits down and then reclines on the chaise longue.

John turns to look at her.

JANE

You tire me out.

JOHN

Do I ? I do nothing.

JANE

That tires me out.

Pause.

JANE

You are..boring.

JOHN

I can't help, being a failure.

JANE

Huh...

Pause.

JOHN

The world decides if you're a failure,
not you..not me...the world.

JANE
That's your excuse...?

JOHN
It's true. I had the potential to be a success.

Jane deliberately yawns and puts her hand over her mouth.

JANE
Sorry.

JOHN
Successful people are just as boring as..
failures...

Jane sits up straight on the chaise longue, her feet now on the floor. She shakes her head.

JANE
No, they're not.

JOHN
They are.

JANE
So says a failure.

JOHN
It's what I believe.

JANE
What you believe is, immaterial.

JOHN
I am a failure.

JANE
I know that.

JOHN
I failed because...things went wrong.

JANE
And whose fault is that ?

JOHN
Mine...

JANE
Yours...exactly.

JOHN

I made a mistake...and I have to live
with the consequences...

JANE

...And I have to live with you.

Silence.

Jane puts her feet up and reclines on the chaise longue.

JOHN

I wish..I could be better...

JANE

But you're not.

JOHN

When people talk about their successes,
it hurts...

JANE

Shame...

JOHN

That could've been me, boasting about
my achievements...

JANE

You ain't got none...

JOHN

I know. Maybe being alive is enough
of an achievement for me.

JANE

You hafta be happy with that.

JOHN

I'm not happy. I am upset.

JANE

You're too sensitive, too easily upset.

JOHN

It's..painful...

JANE

No-one cares; no-one's interested...

JOHN

- Because I'm a failure - ?

JANE (deliberately)

Because you're a failure.

Silence.

JANE

Don't dwell on the past.

JOHN

I have to.

JANE

No, you don't.

JOHN

Yes, I do.

Pause.

JANE

You should not live in the past; no-one should.

JOHN

I reckon my brain is not strong enough to live in the present. It's always easier to slip back into the past. - What about you ?

JANE

Women are more resilient. Men are weak, mentally.

JOHN

Don't get too smug.

This causes Jane to sit up straight, her legs going down to the floor.

JANE

I am not..smug.

JOHN

Yes, you are. You believe you're so superior, because I'm too easily upset.

JANE

Men think they're the only people got

feelings. You don't respect me.

JOHN

Well, you don't respect me; so it's mutual.
Since it all went wrong for me, I gotta identify
those moments in time when my fate could've
been avoided, and who to blame for everything
went wrong after.

JANE

Do you really need ta know ? You're obsessed !
It's no good...

JOHN

I know.

JANE

Then, why do you persist ? Why do you insist,
on knowing stuff you should've forgotten about,
years ago - ?

JOHN

It must be my mind – I'm stuck at the time the
mistake got made, by me...I made the mistake,
but -

JANE

You wanna blame someone else...Why can't
you be to blame ?

John sighs.

JANE

Why can't you accept that ?

JOHN

I can't be certain I was...

JANE

You made the mistake -

He looks straight at her.

JOHN

What made me make that mistake ?

JANE

Your incompetence.

John shakes his head.

JOHN

I was not incompetent.

JANE

You were not fully competent.

JOHN

I was competent enough.

Jane sighs in exasperation.

JANE

There goes, diminished responsibility.
You idiot.

JOHN

I want to discover the truth about the
mistake I made.

JANE

So many years ago, how is that even
possible ? What purpose would that
serve ? How could that help you ?

JOHN

It might make me feel better.

JANE

For how long ? A month, a year...

JOHN

A day would be long enough...just one
day free from all that doubt...

JANE

The doubt is in your mind – not reality,
not what happened...

JOHN

I did everything right until...I made that
mistake...Now show some kindness...

JANE

To you ? Why should I ?

JOHN

I would be grateful.

Jane looks angered and stands.

She walks away from the chaise lounge, to the desk, and sits down behind the desk.

John turns to look at her.

JOHN

Believe me, I would..be..grateful.

JANE

I don't care ! Let's face facts – you had a chance and you blew it.

JOHN

Did I ? Is that what happened ?

JANE

You screwed up – you made a mistake...

JOHN

One, one mistake...

JANE

It was a crucial mistake. The difference between a successful life, and misery.

JOHN

My fault...?

JANE

Of course, it was. You try to distance yourself from the mistake, you made. That is not honest. You can't lie your way outta things. You're a God-damn failure, and you only got yourself to blame.

JOHN

I don't think I was given a chance...

JANE

Huh ?

JOHN

It's my honest belief, I was not given a chance.

JANE

You hafta make your own chances in this world – you can't expect to be given a chance. You can't depend on other people to secure your future.

JOHN

I ain't got no future. All I got is a past,
and I hate it, I hate every minute of it !
I wish I had another life.

JANE

How can you ever move on, if you're
stuck in the past ?

No reply.

JANE

You're hopeless.

JOHN

D'you know how difficult it is to admit
blame ? No-one wants to do that.

JANE

It requires some honesty and truth...and,
some humility, which you ain't got.

JOHN

I am not proud.

JANE

You're not humble.

JOHN

I can't be what I'm not.

JANE

I don't expect that; but, what I do expect
is some honesty and truth...maybe, just
a smidgeon of humility.

JOHN

What d'you want me to do ?

JANE

Take responsibility for your mistakes.
Don't try to blame others...

JOHN

But they might be to blame...

Jane laughs, ironically.

JANE

Ha !

JOHN

Don't laugh at me...

JANE

Why not ?

JOHN

I don't like it.

JANE

I don't care...

JOHN

You're getting a bit aggressive; the tone of your voice.

JANE

You're making me angry. You're making me raise my voice.

JOHN

You shouldn't do that...

JANE

Why ? Because I'm a woman...?

JOHN

It's not nice when you're aggressive.

JANE

I am not aggressive...

JOHN

It's not at all ladylike.

JANE

I ain't no lady. I am a woman...

JOHN

- And a woman should not get, angry.

Pause.

JANE

You make me, despair.

John is puzzled by this.

JOHN

"Despair - ?"

JANE

Despair...

JOHN (puzzled)

Er, why ?

JANE

You're so self-centred...

JOHN

I'm damaged. Damaged people are self-centred. They don't have the same capacity for feeling normal people have.

JANE

You are so disappointing !

JOHN

Am I ? What did I do wrong ?

JANE

Everything...

He looks at her.

JANE

Everything.

Pause.

JOHN

When you look back and consider, how your life has been determined by forces beyond your control, you begin to wonder if the whole thing was rigged against you from the very start. When you recall certain events from your past, it's painful to see how little choice you had in anything. You begin to realise, you have no free will. You notice you got talked out of doing what you needed to do; how you got persuaded to do things against your better judgement, knowing in advance, things would go wrong. You know, I predicted, I predicted it would be a disaster. It could have been avoided – I needed to be given a chance, there and then; but, that did not happen – I was given no chance, no chance whatsoever, none. My whole life has been a waste, all down to that little mistake, I made. I could've been..anything. I had potential. I was smart..just

naive, immature, stupid, and too..too weak to get my own way, to get, what I needed. The idea, that you make your own destiny, is total crap.

Pause.

JANE

Is that it ? Your speech, your philosophy of life - ?

JOHN

It is, what I believe.

Jane suddenly claps, at normal speed at first, then slows down, then stops.

John looks at her.

JOHN

That's, sarcastic...

JANE

Was it ? I didn't notice.

JOHN

You don't feel, what I feel.

JANE

How can I ? You make no sense.

JOHN

You don't sympathise...

JANE

- With you ?! How could anyone sympathise with you ?

JOHN

I'll find someone, someday...

JANE

I doubt that.

JOHN

You never take my side...

JANE

So many years ago – how can you even remember, what happened ?

JOHN

I do remember – I wish I didn't.

JANE

It's tedious...

Pause.

JOHN

What do you want me to do ?

JANE

Keep it to yourself...

John sighs.

JOHN

I can't do that.

JANE

Why..not ?

JOHN

I gotta tell someone...

JANE

- And that someone has ta be me !

JOHN

Unfortunately...

JANE

Unfortunately, because...

JOHN

- You don't sympathise with me.

JANE

I can't sympathise with you – no-one can.

Pause.

JANE

Just keep it to yourself.

JOHN

Why should I ?!

JANE

You're hostile...

JOHN

You got no compassion, no empathy.

Jane is appalled by this, causing her to shake her head.

JANE

No...no...I got plenty compassion and empathy, but none for you...and that is because you deserve none.

JOHN

Who do you sympathise with - ?

JANE

Lots of people; not you.

JOHN

Why not ?

JANE

You missed your chance for sympathy. You missed your chance to make a success of your life. It's too late now. It would be inappropriate to give you any sympathy, now.

JOHN

Thanks a bunch.

JANE

What did you expect ?

JOHN

I expected something better from you.

JANE (ironically)

I'm sorry to have disappointed you.

JOHN

I shoulda known better.

JANE

Yes, you should. Idiot.

She stands and walks out from behind the desk, then pauses for a moment to look at John, who follows her with his eyes.

Jane then turns away from him and walks to the chaise longue, where she sits down, and then reclines.

JANE

You are..boring.

JOHN

You're not giving me the support I need.

JANE

I don't care.

JOHN

You should do.

JANE

I am so indifferent to your suffering.

JOHN

I suffered so much in the past, too much;
must I continue to suffer ?

JANE

You enjoy suffering...

JOHN

I don't enjoy it. I'm just so used ta suffering.

Pause.

JOHN

What should I do, now ?

JANE

You should..forget about the whole thing.

JOHN

I don't think I can. It was such a bad
experience...

JANE

I know...

JOHN

I wasn't thinking straight enough...

JANE

You missed out on your fair share of
sympathy and compassion at the time,
and now it's too late.

Pause.

JANE

If it's too late, it's too late. You can't expect to get it now. - You understand that - ?

JOHN

I guess so. Life is unfair.

JANE

It always was...it always will be, unfair. Learn to live with it.

JOHN

I gotta imagine, another past, another life...

JANE

Can you do that ? Do you have the imagination ?

JOHN

If I don't resolve this, there's no point to my life.

JANE

People can live a pointless life, as long as they accept their limitations. Can you do that ?

JOHN

I hope I can. I gotta try...

JANE

Okay.

Jane sits up straight.

JOHN

Maybe, tomorrow, I can do better.

JANE

Maybe...

Light down.

ACT TWO

Same scene.

Slightly more light.

Jane asleep on the chaise lounge.

John asleep in his chair.

John wakes, and becomes conscious. He looks around to see Jane asleep.

JOHN

You awake ?

This wakens Jane.

JANE

Wha-...what ?

JOHN

Morning...

Jane sits up straight.

JANE

Good morning.

Pause.

Jane looks around the room for a moment, then turns to speak to John.

JANE

D'you remember what we said yesterday ?

JOHN

Uh...I think so.

JANE

What did we talk about ?

JOHN

Starting a new life.

JANE

Is that what we said ?

JOHN

Starting a new life, for me.

JANE
For you...?

JOHN
Yes...

JANE
Not both of us - ?

JOHN
For me first; and then, both of us. I have
to change.

JANE
What about me - ?

JOHN
You're perfect as you are.

JANE
Thanks.

Pause.

JANE
I think, you were once complacent.

JOHN
That was years ago. I'm much better now,
much more, humble.

JANE
I don't think you have shown any real
humility.

JOHN
Believe me, I have.

JANE
I must've missed it, then.

JOHN
Maybe, you did.

JANE
Please, refresh my memory...

JOHN
Well, I admitted I had done wrong, I made
a mistake.

JANE

Uh-huh...

JOHN

Yes...I owned up...it was my mistake
screwed everything up...

JANE

I see. That was an admission -

JOHN

- Of guilt...my guilt. I was, securely in
the wrong.

JANE

Good. You admit that...

JOHN

I sure do...

JANE

That's a start.

Pause.

JANE

You gotta remember, life is short. Life is
a gift. You only got so much time on this
little planet of ours.

JOHN

There's still enough time...

JANE

To do what ?

JOHN

To..start to live a better life.

JANE

Can you do that ?

JOHN

I hope I can. I believe I can.

JANE

Good...That's progress.

Jane stands and walks over to the desk. She sits behind the desk.

JOHN

I want to do better.

JANE

I believe you do.

JOHN

You can't force it.

JANE

I know...

JOHN

It has ta be part of a natural process,
to realise...

(sighing)

...bad stuff happens...

JANE

Sure does.

JOHN

You gotta have, some sort-a morality...

JANE (nodding)

Good...

JOHN

You gotta find some way to...to...forgive
and forget...

JANE

Can you do that ?

JOHN

I've got to; for my own peace of mind.
Otherwise, I'd just go round and round
in circles, never getting anywhere...

JANE

You realise that...

JOHN

I definitely do.

JANE

There may be hope for you.

JOHN

I hope so.

JANE

You know what we do not allow, what we frown on, what we disapprove of strongly, is, externalising blame...that we do not allow...

JOHN

I don't do that. I am to blame; I said so.

JANE

Good. Externalising blame is very bad. It is what psychopaths do, and you do not want to be considered psychopathic, do you ?

JOHN

I most certainly do not.

JANE

Then, accept, you made a mistake.

JOHN

I admit, I made a mistake.

JANE

And you have to live with the consequences.

JOHN

I accept all that.

JANE

Good.

JOHN

When I reflect on the past, I just despair.

JANE

You must not feel sorry for yourself.

JOHN

But I do; I do.

JANE

That is not allowed...

JOHN

What can I do ?

JANE

Give evidence against yourself.

JOHN

But I plead, exceptional circumstances,
which made me make that mistake...

JANE

You're blaming the circumstances, now.

JOHN

What else can I do ?

JANE

Blame yourself...

JOHN

Do I have to ?

JANE

There is no alternative. You're nothing special. You're ordinary, and you have a certain propensity to misbehave, and make mistakes. It's due to your defective personality; not to the circumstances. You should not in any way consider yourself special.

JOHN

I don't...

JANE

That is, hard to believe...

JOHN

It's the truth...

JANE

As you see it...

JOHN

I gotta believe in my own integrity...

JANE

You ain't got none...

JOHN

I do believe, I have some integrity...

Jane sighs.

JANE

Not enough, to free you of the charge
of, ruining your own life,

JOHN

How did I do that ?

JANE

You made that life-changing dreadful
mistake...You admit that...?

JOHN

Yes, I do...

JANE

Then, take responsibility...you don't
like to do that, do you...?

A delay before John replies.

JOHN

I felt pressure to...to...sacrifice myself...

JANE

Explain that...

JOHN

I felt I could not advance my own interests
above those of, other people...

JANE

You put other people first...

JOHN

I had to. It was expected...

JANE

How was that, a sacrifice ?

JOHN

Because, my interests, my survival, meant,
I could not accommodate both...I could not
balance out the two...either me, or, other
people...I had-ta sacrifice myself.

Jane shakes her head.

JANE

No. You should've been able to compromise
between conflicting interests...

JOHN

I couldn't do that.

JANE

Other people can.

JOHN

I am not, "other people" !

JANE

That's because, you are, immature.

JOHN

I can't win...

JANE

Of course, you can't.

JOHN

See what I mean - ? I was put in an impossible position. The pressure was too much...other people forced me to.. sacrifice myself...

Jane looks at him with disapproval and shakes her head.

JANE

No...

JOHN

I felt, enormous pressure. I could not stand up for myself...I had-ta be sacrificed, for the greater good; much against my own interests.

JANE

All you had-ta do, was come to a reasonable compromise.

JOHN

I couldn't do that...

JANE

Ask yourself, why...

JOHN

Because I wasn't thinking straight. They cut my drugs down, just before it happened...

Jane sighs.

JANE

You made the mistake...

JOHN

I admit that.

JANE

Then, don't blame other people. Don't blame the circumstances. Blame your own defects of character.

JOHN

If I did that, I would hafta change...

JANE

You don't like change...?

JOHN

No-one likes change.

JANE

Change is necessary. Change moves Time on. Change restarts a stopped clock. Change overrides the groove in the record you're stuck in. Change is beautiful. Change is redemptive.

JOHN

Change cannot be my redemption.

JANE

It has to be. Nothing else will free you from the prison of past memories. Allow yourself to change.

John ponders this and contemplates this idea.

JOHN (reflectively)

Change...

JANE

Yes, change. No-one you sacrificed yourself for, remembers your sacrifice. No-one else cares; only you. So, forget the whole thing. Let it go...

JOHN

If only I could...

Jane stands and leans forwards on the desk, looking down at John.

JANE

Nobody lives in your past, except you.

JOHN

...Except me...?

JANE

That's right. Promise me, you're gonna change; promise me...

JOHN

I guess, I could try...

JANE

If you try hard enough, you might succeed.

Jane then stands back from the desk, and sits down.

JANE

You only haunt yourself; no-one else. You understand that, now ?

JOHN

I think I do.

JANE

Do not despair. There is a life after doubt.

Pause.

JANE

You just soak it all up, now.

JOHN

I will. I hafta learn to be stoical. I need ta learn how to suffer patiently.

JANE

That's it. You're learning to be mature.

JOHN

It's better than being, immature.

JANE

It sure is.

JOHN

If people harm you, you hafta learn forgiveness.

JANE

That's it. You're getting there.

JOHN

Don't harbour grudges. Learn to forgive and forget.

JANE

It's the best way, for your own peace of mind.

JOHN

It's not easy...

JANE

But it is, worthwhile.

Pause.

JOHN

You gotta blame yourself.

JANE

It's the best way.

JOHN

No-one else is to blame...ever...

JANE

That's what you gotta say, and believe.

JOHN

"Believe - ?"

JANE

Believe. You do believe that, don't you ?

JOHN

Sure, I do.

JANE

Good. You're making excellent progress. You will be reformed, and reclaimed. You will be a new man.

Pause.

JOHN

What if..I'm mistaken...?

JANE

You admit, you made a mistake; so, you must be, mistaken...

JOHN

I was...mistaken. I made a mistake, then. Have I made a mistake, now ?

JANE

You have a propensity, to make mistakes...

JOHN

Have I just made a mistake, now ?

Jane is puzzled by this.

JANE

Huh ?

JOHN

Have I just made a mistake ?

JANE

A mistake - ?

JOHN

Has my confession to you, been a mistake ?

JANE

I do not think so.

JOHN

Is admitting, to being mistaken, a mistake ?

JANE

This is getting a bit, confusing...

JOHN

You're confused - ? So am I...

JANE

That's two of us...

JOHN

Are you beginning to sympathise with me ?

JANE

Maybe, I'm beginning to understand you a little better.

JOHN
That's good. That's progress.

Jane smiles a little.

JANE
Are you copying me ?

JOHN
Maybe, I am, a little. I hope you don't
find that annoying...

JANE
No; as long as it's not too much. I am
indulging you.

JOHN
That's what I need, a little indulgence;
not too much, just a little.

JANE
A little is all you're gonna get...

JOHN
It's enough.

Jane smiles a little.

JOHN
It's better to be friendly.

JANE
Sure is...

JOHN
I need ta, move on.

JANE
Of course...

JOHN
I gotta learn, to forgive myself.

JANE
It's a start.

JOHN
Then, I can forgive other people.

Jane nods in agreement.

JOHN

I gotta improve my behaviour..which is what other people see, not how I see myself.

Pause.

JOHN

I complained too much...in the past. I need to take myself outside of myself. When I made that mistake, what was I thinking ? I must forget about that...try to forget...if I can... I am too self-obsessed...I can't be certain of the past...

JANE

The past is open to interpretation.

JOHN

When I made that mistake, I needed someone to get me out of it, but no-one came, no-one came to rescue me from the consequences of my actions...

JANE

You only have yourself to blame. That is, the mature attitude.

JOHN

What are you saying ?

JANE

Even if you're not to blame, or only partly to blame, it's impolite to blame other people.

JOHN

"Impolite - ?" This is about my life, not polite society.

JANE

You'll never make friends until you learn how to behave, in the company of others.

JOHN

What ? Like I'm nothing...like I don't matter...?

JANE

You're getting a little tedious, now. It's not about you; it's about your acceptance in the company of others. No-one likes or can accept, a self-obsessed person.

JOHN

I don't know what I can do, to gain acceptance...

JANE

Be yourself, but don't dwell on the past.

JOHN

I need a future...

JANE

It's still untrodden territory. The past is gone; the future, undefined.

JOHN

The present -

JANE

- Is what we make of it. The present is now.

JOHN

I wanna live a better life. I am so tired of my life, so weary.

Pause.

JOHN

I think I got cheated, out of a decent life.

Jane looks at John.

JOHN

I cheated myself. I allowed myself to be cheated...I enabled, other people to cheat me. I couldn't hold them to account. They denied any wrong-doing. They did me wrong. I got no redress. No-one admitted ever doing me harm. No-one was prepared to say, it was their fault.

JANE

In a situation like that, the polite thing to do, is to take the blame on yourself...

JOHN

Even if it's not true...?

JANE

Even if it's not true.

JOHN

Then, what chance have I got to free
my conscience of blame ?

JANE

You got no chance, unless you take the
blame on yourself.

John shakes his head.

JOHN

It's not true.

JANE

The truth don't matter no more, so many
years after the event.

JOHN

I was not capable of complaining at the time.

JANE

It's too late, now.

John shrugs.

JOHN

I guess it is.

JANE

You guess right.

Slight pause.

JOHN

What am I to do ?

JANE

You gotta rebuild your life, somehow.

JOHN

But how ?

JANE

I don't know...Somehow, you gotta find
a way, to come to terms with the mistake
you made...somehow...

JOHN

I gotta change...somehow...

JANE

You realise that...?

JOHN

I think I do.

JANE

That's better...Good...Progress. The worst thing is not to advance your understanding of your mental state...

JOHN

I gotta move on, somehow...It was a dreadful mistake...Sometimes, I try to imagine what might've happened, if I had not made that mistake; but, I can't do it, not properly... my guilty conscience stops me from lying to myself; and I have to face up to it again, the appalling consequences of that mistake, over and over again – which I why I'm in the state I'm in, and why I can't escape from the treadmill of my miserable existence, which is my life...

JANE

That's deep, but full of self-pity...

JOHN

What's wrong with that ?

JANE

It does not advance your prospects...

JOHN

I have no prospects.

JANE

Self-pity is derided.

JOHN

That's because people are insensitive inconsiderate shits, with no empathy.

JANE

That is unkind.

JOHN

But, true.

Jane sighs.

JANE

You cannot expect people to sympathise with you, if you exhibit self-pity. You need to, overcome your past, if you want to live in the future..and the present.

JOHN

I do not think, in the past, I was treated with kindness and compassion.

JANE

I can't help that now. I can't interfere with the past...

JOHN

I wish you could.

JANE

Was I even there, when it happened ?

JOHN

I believe you were.

JANE

That's not what I remember. You don't seem to realise, you'll never be as good as you once were, many years ago, before it happened. You gotta lead a lesser life, without imagining how you might've been. You can't discover what you lost, because you never had it.

JOHN

Other people done better than me; other people I was better than, done better than me.

JANE

I can't help that. It's gone; past. You can't live in the past, with all the disasters, all deriving from the mistake you made.

JOHN

I got no purpose in life, except regret.

JANE

You can't live like that.

JOHN

That's all I got.

JANE

I can't live with you if you can't forget your past.

JOHN

I can't. I wish I could, but I just can't. What was natural for me -

JANE

- Was not natural for anyone else.

JOHN

I see myself, as I was then, just before it happened, but I still can't do what I was told to...

JANE

You really needed to co-operate...

JOHN

I couldn't co-operate then, and I still can't...

Pause.

JOHN

I still can't co-operate now, despite all the consequences...I was never gonna do what I was supposed to...

JANE

Then, you gotta live with the consequences of the mistake you made...the life you chose...

JOHN

I never chose this life !

JANE

Yes, you did, by the decision you made, the mistake you made..the choice you made.

JOHN

A choice that was, imposed on me. I had no choice.

JANE

You should not resent your past.

JOHN

I regret my past; so, I should be able to

resent my past.

JANE
Appreciate, you have a life.

JOHN
Not much of a life; more of an existence.

JANE
You have an existence. Better than having none.

JOHN
“Having none - ?”

JANE
Being dead. You ain't dead.

JOHN
I guess so.

JANE
Your misery is so, self-indulgent.

JOHN
Is it ? Is it really ?

JANE
Yes; it is.

JOHN
I have to be grateful for my life ? I mustn't complain how bad it is ?

JANE
Can't you keep it to yourself ?

JOHN
Why should I ?

JANE
It would be more polite and considerate, to other people.

JOHN
They don't have no consideration for me ! They never did ! That's why I'm in such a state. If people cared for me, they would never let it happen in the first place.

JANE

You made it happen, to you ! No-one else is to blame...

JOHN

They were negligent...

JANE

To you - ?

JOHN

They were negligent, to me.

JANE

How is that possible ? Explain that.

JOHN

My concerns were always nullified.
I have no life, except to record the deliberate negligence and hostility I was subject to.

JANE

Don't be so bitter !

JOHN

I got every right to be bitter.

JANE

Other people have it worse than you.

JOHN

Ha !

John is exasperated.

JOHN

You have no right to tell me how I should feel.

JANE

I am giving you friendly advice, to make your life better.

JOHN

I don't need your advice; and it ain't friendly. It's hostile.

JANE

I have no intention to be hostile.

JOHN

But you are...to me.

JANE

I'm sorry you feel that way.

JOHN

I look back on things, and I despair.

Pause.

JANE

The future is not written yet...

JOHN

The past is...

JANE

Unfortunately...

JOHN

Unfortunately...

Pause.

JANE

Life goes on...

JOHN

For some people...

JANE

For most people...

JOHN

Not all...

JANE

Of course not. - Life is what you make of it.

JOHN

I can't make nothing outta my life.

JANE

You're not trying...

JOHN

I tried...

JANE
...And you failed, because...

JOHN
I made a mistake...

JANE
That's why you ain't never made nothing
out of your life.

Pause.

JOHN
What am I to do ?

JANE
Get over it – somehow...

JOHN (despairingly)
How ?

JANE
Maybe, you just need ta..change your
perspective on your past...Maybe, you
gotta tell yourself, you survived, despite
making that dreadful mistake...it was not
fatal.

JOHN
True, I survived; just about.

JANE
Then, the old saying goes, "Whatever
doesn't kill you, makes you stronger."

JOHN
That's a load o' crap ! It made me weaker,
much weaker...

JANE
But, it didn't kill you...

JOHN
It almost did -

JANE
- But it didn't...

JOHN
I guess not.

JANE

Then, you should be stronger...

JOHN

I'm weaker, much weaker. Damage makes people, weaker. Damage damages. It always does...

JANE

But you survived...

JOHN

Survival is not enough...

JANE

It should be...

JOHN

It ain't !

Pause.

JOHN

I gotta ask myself, was the damage avoidable ?...and I conclude, it was. I didn't hafta be like this. I could've had a better life; but, I'm stuck with this miserable existence, and I resent it...first of all, I regret it; then, I resent it...and don't tell me I gotta adjust somehow, adjust to this, situation I hate...

JANE

You're a boring self-centred person, suffered a considerable misfortune, due to a mistake you made, damaged yourself; no-one else was responsible !

JOHN (ironically)

You're so sympathetic !

JANE

Why should I sympathise with you ?

JOHN

Someone has to...

JANE

Why should anyone, sympathise with you ?
You don't deserve sympathy.

JOHN
Someone's gotta help me.

JANE
You can't even help yourself. You're pathetic !

JOHN
That is a major vote of confidence...

Slight pause.

JOHN
I was always gonna do what I did...
Maybe, it wasn't a mistake...

JANE
It sure was a mistake...

JOHN
Judged by other people...

JANE
...Who were, in the right...

JOHN
...Which means ?

JANE
You were in the wrong...

JOHN
...I was in the wrong...

Pause.

JANE
Why are you so obsessed with that one mistake you made, so many years ago ?

JOHN
It was the only major mistake I ever made,
and look at all the damaged it's done !

JANE
Okay. Let's try to change your perspective
on this one mistake caused so much damage.
Let's pretend, let's just pretend, as you said,
maybe it wasn't a mistake for you to make,
maybe it was the right thing for you to do;

maybe, it was the only thing you could do, in those circumstances – so, even if it was a mistake in the eyes of everyone else; for you, let's just pretend, it wasn't a mistake...

JOHN

I can't do that...

JANE

Why not ?

JOHN

It would be dishonest.

Jane sighs in exasperation.

JANE

For once in your life, allow yourself a little lie, a little delusion...pretend it wasn't a mistake...

JOHN

It was most definitely, a mistake.

JANE

Pretend it wasn't -

John shakes his head.

JOHN

I can't...

Jane suddenly rises from her chair and stands, leaning forwards with her palms on the desk, looking directly at John in a fast motion.

JANE

Pretend, God-dammit !

John shakes his head.

JANE

Do it !

JOHN

I can't.

Jane stands up straight, looks towards the chaise lounge, and walks out from behind the desk. She walks to midway between John and the chaise lounge. She looks at John for a moment, then goes over to the chaise lounge and sits down.

She picks up her feet and rests her head against the headrest of the chaise lounge.

She reclines on the chaise lounge, with her feet up.

She speaks, not looking at John.

JANE

Think yourself lucky – you survived.

JOHN

I am..an honest..man.

JANE

Too honest.

JOHN

Indeed, I am.

JANE

Other people can delude themselves...

JOHN

Not me...

JANE

You're stupid...

JOHN

Is honesty and integrity stupid ?

JANE

It is, if it makes your life a misery.

JOHN

You hafta have at least a little intelligence to be a person of integrity.

JANE

You ain't got none.

JOHN

I think I do possess, some intelligence.

JANE

Not enough. You were smart, you wouldn't allow yourself to be tortured by ancient memories.

JOHN

Ain't about smart; ain't about intelligence.

JANE

What is it about ?

JOHN

Having a conscience.

JANE

You made a mistake...

JOHN

I have said as much.

JANE

You admit, you made a mistake...

JOHN

I just did; I always said that.

JANE

Then you're stupid.

She sits up on the chaise lounge, putting her feet on the floor. She looks towards John.

JANE

Tell yourself a lie, for God's sake. It shouldn't be that difficult.

JOHN

It is...for me. I can't get my head round it, why I made that terrible mistake...I reckon I was confused, not thinking straight...I am puzzled...I'm trying to work it out...apply logic to my mistake...

JANE

Mistakes aren't always logical.

JOHN

What if I was right...?

JANE

What ?

JOHN

What if the mistake I made, wasn't really a mistake - ?

JANE

It was a mistake...you know that...

JOHN

At the time, it seemed to be a completely natural course of action...it only became a mistake, in hindsight.

JANE

It was a mistake at the time.

JOHN

- But I didn't know it was a mistake, at the time.

JANE

You should have known, at the time, it was a mistake.

JOHN

I didn't know, not then.

JANE

You survived -

JOHN

Somehow, I did.

JANE

The mistake you made, was not fatal.

JOHN

But it was serious...

JANE

Okay...

JOHN

I need to know, why things went wrong.

JANE

Who cares any more ?

JOHN

I care.

JANE

No-one else does. Learn to live with yourself...learn to live with your mistake, its consequences.

JOHN

I just feel so bad...

JANE

You need ta take your mind off things...

JOHN

The one time in my life, I took my own initiative, did what my mind told me to do, was forthright in my decision-making, I made that mistake...

JANE

You haven't had much of a life, since that time, have you - ?

JOHN

I am...damaged...

JANE

But not beyond hope...

JOHN

I hope not...

Pause.

JOHN

How can I justify what I did ?

Jane looks at him, a little puzzled.

JOHN

The harm I did to myself, through that decision, that mistake...but, I didn't just harm myself...I harmed other people... mainly myself. How can I justify even to myself, that mistake ? What excuses can I make ? What explanations, what reasons, can I give to cancel my guilt ? I have to ask, why, why did I do it ? What mitigating circumstances can I propose, to invent a plausible denial of my own guiltiness ? Just accept, you made a mistake – anyone, would have done the same, in those particular circumstances...anyone, might've done the same...not everyone...no...some would not...some, many would've made the right decision, the correct choice, avoiding that mistake. What percentage of the population, in those particular circumstances, would've done what I done ? Fifty, thirty, ten percent,

or less...Then, it was my mistake, and I should own it...I must own it...I must accept, I screwed up royally, and have only myself to blame. I am ashamed of my mistake; the harm it did to me, the damage it did to other people. I am just an ignorant, stupid person, to have made that mistake. I deserve no pity, no kindness or sympathy, for simply doing the wrong thing. My state of mind, at the time, told me, I must do this...I must own that poor decision until my last day on earth...

JANE

I bet on your death-bed, you'd still be mulling this over, as if anyone cared ! No-one's interested in your mistake; no-one is interested in your psychology at the time. No-one knows, except me. You torture yourself unreasonably. You should forget the whole damn thing.

JOHN

If only I could. I got reminders of that all the time.

JANE

Tedious...boring...You broke the rules and you must pay the price...

JOHN

For the whole of the rest of my life ?

JANE

Yes, for as long as you remember...so, the simple solution is, don't remember; don't remember the mistake you made. Forget the whole damn thing...

JOHN

I can't.

JANE

Why not ?

JOHN

The damage done to me, as a result of that mistake...

He looks at her face.

JANE

...Your mistake...

JOHN

...My mistake...The damage done to me,
by my mistake, forces me to remember.
I can't forget, because I got damage.

JANE

Okay...that makes it harder...

JOHN

That makes it impossible.

Pause.

JOHN

I gotta define for myself, the precise
reasons I made that mistake. I gotta
work it out, the factors determined
the decisions I made, established my
future, at that time...

JANE

You're not gonna have a future, if you're
so obsessed with your past...

JOHN

What were the essential factors made me
make that mistake ?

JANE

Get a grip...

JOHN

Was the mistake inevitable, in those
circumstances ? Was that mistake always
gonna happen, regardless of who made
that mistake ?

JANE

Who made that mistake - ? You did !

JOHN

I want ta, depersonalise that mistake.

JANE

You can't do that. You made the mistake.
No-one else. I like your protracted attempts
to dissociate yourself from blame.

JOHN

If I'm to blame...

JANE

You are...

JOHN

It happened to me. I damaged myself. If I had harmed someone else, I could've begged their forgiveness; I could've done penitence. They could forgive me. But I cannot forgive myself for the harm I did, to myself.

JANE

Why can't you forgive yourself ?

JOHN

Because I should've done better. I should not have made that mistake.

JANE

But you said, it was, inevitable...

JOHN

Maybe, it was...

JANE

Then, you shouldn't blame yourself...

JOHN

But I do, I do...

Pause.

JANE

Learn..to forgive yourself...

JOHN

It's too difficult...

JANE

I could forgive you, if you want...

JOHN

You would do that ? For me ?

JANE

Sure. I can make a ceremony out of me forgiving you.

JOHN

That would be, very kind of you.

JANE

I am a woman of considerable kindness.
You should appreciate that...

JOHN

I do...I do appreciate that...

JANE

Good. Maybe we can get somewhere.

JOHN

I hope we can.

Pause.

JOHN

I need your help.

JANE

You admit at last...

JOHN

Nothing wrong with that.

JANE

I will help you, if I can; if you allow
me, to help you.

JOHN

I need ta go blank – not remember
things I don't want ta remember. Life
ain't kind to me.

JANE

Life is what you make of it.

JOHN

How can I make something out of
my life, after so many years of this
self-torture.

JANE

I forgive you...Now, try to forgive
yourself.

JOHN

Forgiveness follows from forgetfulness.

JANE

Allow yourself, to forget.

John closes his eyes, leans backwards and take a deep breath; then, leans forwards to his previous position, and opens his eyes.

JANE

Can you do it ?

JOHN

The indelible truth is written in my brain.
I gotta find some way to, erase it, somehow.

JANE

Use your imagination.

JOHN

People can make mistakes; they can get things wrong. I knew at the time, it wasn't gonna end well. I needed someone to rescue me, but I made that mistake, no-one else, just me. Why didn't anyone, intervene ?

JANE

"Intervene...?" Maybe, they didn't want to, interfere.

JOHN

I was left alone, abandoned; forced to face the consequences of my actions, my choice, my decision, my mistake.

JANE

That's your conscience speaking; your guilt.

JOHN

I don't wanna be a footnote in my own history.

JANE

What ?

JOHN

Someone whose significance in their own story is incidental, not the main mover.

JANE

You did what you did...It was a mistake.

JOHN

I made a very poor decision, I admit that.

JANE

You cannot escape that conclusion.

JOHN

Would anyone else, in the circumstances, do the exact same thing ? Make the same mistake ?

JANE

That's a very difficult question to answer.

JOHN

I gotta believe the circumstances were against me, not my own defects.

JANE

That might not be strictly true, but believe it if it helps you, even if it's not the truth.

JOHN

I pride myself on my honesty.

JANE

For once in your life, allow yourself to be, dishonest.

JOHN

So many things were against me. I wasn't thinking straight at all. I need oblivion.

Pause.

JANE

Life is imperfect. You are imperfect. I am imperfect. You can't hold yourself to such a high standard.

JOHN

That's my conscience...

JANE

Let it go...

JOHN

If only I could...I am compelled to suffer so much internal censure for my mistake, my error, my choice. Why didn't I realise it was a mistake at the time, and do what I had to do ? What didn't I do what people told me to do ? That was not a situation to

be stubborn and uncooperative. Up until that point, I did everything I was told to. Why was I so obstinate ? So stupid ?... What I did was understandable, excusable, in the circumstances. What was I afraid of ? I honestly believed what I did was right; but now, I admit it was wrong. Why couldn't I see that at the time ?

JANE

Time often makes our past decisions look wrong in retrospect.

JOHN

At the time, I was so obstinate, so unshakeable, in the belief, I was doing the right thing; but now, I know, I was so, so wrong. Look at the damage that mistake caused. Look at all I lost through doing the wrong thing. It cost me so much.

JANE

Just, let it go.

Pause.

JANE

Maybe, you need some love.

He looks up at her.

JOHN

Maybe, I do...

JANE

Love and affection can soothe the sore heart...

JOHN

Can it soothe the mind ?

JANE

More heart, less brain. Allow yourself the luxury of denial.

JOHN

Deny the truth ?

JANE

The truth is open to question, especially after all this time since the mistake was

made. Denial can be an attractive alternative. Why do you see your guilt with such acute certainty ? Give yourself the benefit of some doubt.

JOHN
A reasonable doubt ?

JANE
Yes...

JOHN
Some doubts are more reasonable than others.

JANE
Make your doubt work for you.

JOHN
My conscience -

JANE
- Is a burden, a curse. You gotta learn the nimble art of denial.

JOHN
That comes so close to lying...too close.

JANE
It's reasonable to cut yourself some slack.

JOHN
Live a lie...?

JANE
It's better than suffering with the truth.

JOHN
Is it ?

JANE
Sure, it is. Learn to compromise.

JOHN
My conscience -

JANE
- Is a pain.

JOHN

My mind is damaged. I cannot lie...

JANE

Not even a teeny weeny little lie ?

JOHN

I can't do it.

Pause.

JANE

You know what ? You're your own worst enemy, and the best witness against yourself in the trial of your life...

JOHN

It's the truth...

JANE

The truth is always open to interpretation.

JOHN

It's a matter of integrity, my integrity.

JANE

Personal integrity is over-rated.

JOHN

Personal integrity is essential.

JANE

You're a fool...

JOHN

So what if I am ?

JANE

So, you're gonna be like this every day of your life, lamenting your mistake from so many years ago; preventing you from doing anything else, always obsessed with this theme, until you die. Your last words on your death-bed will be, "My mistake..."

JOHN

Maybe...

JANE

This obsession, is selfish.

JOHN

“Selfish !”

JANE

Selfish...This issue of yours will remain unresolved. Such unimpeachable integrity is why you got a tortured mind. Ain't healthy. You gotta allow yourself some leeway, some discretion.

JOHN

I can't. I don't.

Pause.

JANE

What am I to do with you, huh ? You stubborn self-centred boring man of integrity ?

JOHN

Acknowledge me for what I am, a man of considerable honour and truthfulness.

JANE

You know what ? I would like to wash my hands of you...

JOHN

Do it. See if I care. I never wanted your help. You couldn't help me, anyway.

JANE

Can anyone help you ?

JOHN

Probably not.

JANE

You're hopeless.

Jane reclines on the chaise lounge with her feet up.

John leans back in his chair, and closes his eyes.

Lights down.

THE END

