

## Penelope & The Sterile Field

James Magruder

—For all my Penelopes, especially Catherine Weidner

### CHARACTERS

Penelope

Clement

The Suite of Swains

(2M, 1W)

(Author's Note: Style isn't everything, but it counts for something with this piece. Better to be brisk. Simple is very good. Scene titles should be incorporated into the performance: voice-overs, title cards that Penelope manipulates, or Penelope can announce them. Penelope's tasks are up to the actress and director, but it would be nice if one of them involved weaving, sewing, crochet, knitting, etc.)

### SCENE ONE

Groundhog Day, 1988

PENELOPE. (As a nurse.) Mr. Bendix?

CLEMENT. Clement Bendix.

PENELOPE. Your test came back positive. I'm sorry.

CLEMENT. Um... yes. Yeah. I thought it would. Yeah. That's me.

PENELOPE. Is there any—

CLEMENT. Yeah, that's me.

PENELOPE. Thing you need to know?

CLEMENT. No, not really. I've heard.

PENELOPE. Is there any—

CLEMENT. No.

PENELOPE. Is there anyone you need to tell? (No answer.) Is there anyone you would like us to tell? Anonymously. Any sexual contacts?



CLEMENT. No. I'll tell. I'll tell them all. I promise. I'm sorry.

(He starts to go. She stops him.)

PENELOPE. Here.

(She places a standard-sized medical sticker labeled "Biohazard" on his breast. She is gone.)

CLEMENT. They weren't contacts.

SCENE TWO.

Later That Same Day, 1988

CLEMENT. I told Warsaw-man. A classmate into Polish drama, which is what we'd talk about instead of having sex. Well, I didn't know anything about Polish drama and I was such a flaming know-it-all, it turned my head. His milky white skin against my red flannel sheets—and Witkiewicz on top of such beauty and intellect. (Beat.) He never kissed me once.

PENELOPE. It was 1988. No one knew much of anything.

CLEMENT. That's Penelope. She does things, and then she undoes them. He never kissed me once, he was so scared. But he *wanted* to, he said. That was enough. But after four entire months of rubbing around and no loss of fluids, if you know what I'm saying, I started to get tired of Slawomir Mrozek bull sessions as a sex substitute and started to whine, only a little—finally not too proud to beg—there are things we can do, Warsaw-man. I took the AIDS test to alter the power dynamic of the most humiliating relationship in my life. (Beat.) Warsaw-man only really fell hard for me after I got the news. Flowers. Cards. Rilke poems. Wallace Stevens poems. Original poems. I finally figured out he wouldn't have kissed me even if I turned out negative.

PENELOPE. "Finally" took you three years.

CLEMENT. During which I didn't have sex rather than have to tell. But eventually I had to start dating.

SWAIN. Spoon. Croon.

CLEMENT. And telling. (Beat.) I really hated the Biohazard sticker on my medical file at school.

(He puts on a jacket in preparation for his date, covering the sticker.

Penelope calmly undoes her task.)



SCENE THREE.            Swain #1, Summer 1991

PENELOPE. Clement has packed a piece of his antique luggage and flown to Santa Cruz to be with an opera singer he has admired from afar. A hotel balcony overlooking the Pacific. June. Moon.

CLEMENT. Wow. Palm trees *and* pine trees in the same town. California.

SWAIN/EMIL. Yes. Are you comfortable?

CLEMENT. Yes. Out of practice. You?

EMIL. Yes. Comfortable. I like being with you.

CLEMENT. Hear the ocean.

EMIL. Yes.

CLEMENT. Never been much of a nature boy, but o that ocean. I almost drowned as a kid.

EMIL. Tell me.

CLEMENT. Diving lessons at a community pool. I swallowed some water.

EMIL. I'm a Druid.

CLEMENT. A what?

EMIL. A Druid.

CLEMENT. Um. That's trees? Trees, right?

EMIL. I have many gods, but yes, I have chosen the cypress god Cyrwydyn as my totem.

CLEMENT. Cyrwydyn, huh? A real nature boy then. Cyrwydyn. Is that Welsh?

EMIL. I feel very close to you.

CLEMENT. You are very close to me.

EMIL. I would like to hold you.

(He pulls Clement in.)

PENELOPE. Clement wasn't a Druid. He was raised Catholic, so, face down, his hot cheek nestled on Emil's ample, operatic trunk, he made his first confession.

CLEMENT. Emil. Emil. Emil. I tested positive for HIV. Emil. Did you hear me?

EMIL. I'd love to see India. With you. Druids don't recognize corporeal illness.

CLEMENT. (To us.) I thought I was in denial. (To Emil.) India, huh? I'll wait in the car.

(Penelope undoes her task.)

SCENE FOUR

Swain #2, Summer 1992

PENELOPE. Max the civil rights activist he met at a conference at Smith College. They discussed essentialist theory and played tonsil hockey right away. Pragmatic Max didn't understand why Clement wouldn't just take his clothes off and set down on it.

CLEMENT. I liked Max. He made me feel stupid, which was a turn-on. I don't just sleep with people. I needed extra time to entrap him with my personality, before he could reject me for being a biohazard. (To Penelope.) You know I don't just sleep with people. She thinks I'm a slut, but on very little evidence.

PENELOPE. After a week of itchy late-night phone calls, Clement took the train up to New York from Baltimore and met Max in Washington Square Park.

CLEMENT. I have something to tell you.

SWAIN/MAX. Clement, having HIV isn't the worst thing anymore—I have friends who are doing very well—

CLEMENT. You know? How did you find out? I never tell anybody! This is insane! Who told you?

MAX. It's OK, Clement. (He takes his hand.)

CLEMENT. This isn't happening! They had no right! Who told you?

MAX. You were seeing Emil Russo.

CLEMENT. The famous Druid opera star. It's over. You don't know him.

MAX. Not directly. Emil Russo told his friend Gerda Valner who was in Copenhagen last week visiting her friend Jane Severson who plays in the Danish National Symphony. My brother plays in the Danish National Symphony and I had called him this week to say that I'd met a wonderful man and I told him your name. He was so happy for me, he mentioned it to Jane who told Gerda who told Jane who told my brother who called two nights ago to tell me about your health.

CLEMENT. I knew this would happen, not quite in this insane way, but I knew word would get out. (Head in hands.) This is a nightmare. This is why I don't tell anybody.

MAX. What is? Clement, I was so happy I called Denmark to kvell about you. We'd be having safe sex either way. It's a piece of information. What's the problem?

(Penelope looks up from her task.)

CLEMENT. It's my information.



PENELOPE. (To audience.) It's his information.

CLEMENT. (To Penelope.) It is.

PENELOPE. (To Clement.) It is. I know.

MAX. (Pause.) Are you seeing a doctor?

CLEMENT. No.

MAX. And you've known for how long?

CLEMENT. Four years. Infected for seven, I'm pretty sure.

MAX. And you're not seeing a doctor. That's insane. They've got drugs now.

CLEMENT. I'm not sick. I never have been.

MAX. Look, I'm not going to date someone who isn't making an effort to take care of himself. That's really crazy. I'm healthy enough to insist on that.

(Penelope undoes her task.)

SCENE FIVE. November 1992, For Max

PENELOPE. (As doctor.) Mr. Bendix, I recommend you begin a course of medication immediately. I also want you to make an appointment with the Wilmer Eye Clinic at Hopkins to check you for CMV. Cyto-megalo virus. It can cause rapid blindness in patients with low CD4 counts.

CLEMENT. CD4?

PENELOPE. T-cells.

CLEMENT. Right. Blindness. Oh right, doctor, how many do I have?

PENELOPE. 34.

CLEMENT. That many.

PENELOPE. I have patients dying with three hundred and patients hanging in nicely on seven. (She hands him the prescription slips.)

SCENE SIX. Swain #3

PENELOPE. Randy picked Clement up at the Allegro and then got him drunk at the Rendezvous Lounge. Randy was twenty-two years of age, with a twenty-two-year-old's vitality.

CLEMENT. Nearly took my face off with his mouth on my front stoop and then slipped into my apartment like a black cat. A lot of wrestling.





Partial nudity. (Calls out to Randy, who is in the bathroom.) My legs are whipped.

(He settles back to wait. Randy finally returns with something in his hand. He throws it on the bed.)

SWAIN/RANDY. What the fuck is this? Huh? What the motherfuck is this?

CLEMENT. My AZT.

RANDY. I know what it is, it's lying out on your goddam sink, you fucking sick piece of shit. I ought to have you arrested, you fucking asshole! I can read, you stupid fuck. Fuck!

(He starts getting dressed.)

CLEMENT. But we didn't—I didn't—it's not—that's why I wouldn't—Don't tell—

RANDY. Like I'm gonna tell people—are you fucking nuts? That I got roped into some sick bastard's apartment? Someone too mental to hide his fucking drugs! Where's my goddam windbreaker? Am I that stupid? Am I that young? I don't think so, asshole!

CLEMENT. Don't—Randy—

RANDY. Where's my fucking windbreaker? Did you hide it for some faggot memento of our rotten time together?

CLEMENT. We didn't do any—it was all safe, I promise—

RANDY. Fuh-uck you, you sick bastard. (Door slams.) Fuck!

(Penelope undoes her task.)

PENELOPE. Leaving your drugs out on the sink?

CLEMENT. What?

PENELOPE. That's one way to tell people.

SCENE SEVEN. Swain #4, Johns Hopkins Hospital, Baltimore

CLEMENT. (To doctor.) Never been sick. Nothing. No side effects.

Nothing. I take my pills. Never miss a dose.

PENELOPE. Clement wakes up carpeted with bumps, spots, hundreds of them all over his body, red, livid, hello.

CLEMENT. Everywhere but my face, doctor.

PENELOPE. Say what you will, it's a smart virus. It knows in this particular instance that the host organism is so vain, it would kill itself if it lost its looks.



SWAIN/DOCTOR. No itching.

CLEMENT. No.

DOCTOR. No pain.

CLEMENT. No.

DOCTOR. No fever.

CLEMENT. No.

DOCTOR. (To nurse.) Pustular in appearance, papular in substance.

CLEMENT. What does that mean?

DOCTOR. Looks wet, is dry. (Back to nurse.) Silver dollar-sized thrush patch left cheek. Several smaller patches on the soft palate. Pectoral folliculitis.

CLEMENT. Doctor...

PENELOPE. Clement has noticed something. Beneath the surgical mask, the rubber gloves, the scrubs, the infectious disease man is attractive.

CLEMENT. What is this? Is it bacterial? Is it viral?

DOCTOR. (Beat.) We don't know. We've never seen it before.

Dermatology has never seen it either.

CLEMENT. This is Johns Hopkins Hospital and you don't know?

DOCTOR. Do you ride horses?

CLEMENT. No.

DOCTOR. Raise horses?

CLEMENT. No.

DOCTOR. Bet on the ponies?

CLEMENT. Never.

DOCTOR. Eat any horsemeat recently?

CLEMENT. I did *Equus* in college. That's it.

DOCTOR. It's a long shot, but what you have could be related to hoof-and-mouth disease.

CLEMENT. You have nice eyes.

DOCTOR. Thank you.

PENELOPE. Using a device that looked like a potato corer, the doctor with the nice eyes punched a hole one inch deep into Clement's right arm.

CLEMENT. Will you call me?

DOCTOR. The results of the biopsy will take about ten days.

CLEMENT. No. Will you call me?

(Penelope looks at him. Undoes her task.)

CLEMENT. I didn't have to tell him. He could tell by looking.



SCENE SEVEN.            Swain #5, September 1993

PENELOPE. First meeting. A country and western bar on North Charles Street. A psychiatrist.

(Clement and the Swain execute a portion of a line dance in unison as they move toward a couch)

PENELOPE. First date two nights later. Bombay Grill, a walk to the Inner Harbor, then back to Clement's apartment. He is even cuter than Clement remembered.

SWAIN/HUSBAND. (Very comfortable, on couch.) You don't have a personality disorder.

CLEMENT. I don't? You mean it?

PENELOPE. This is wonderful news. Clement longs to hear things about himself that he doesn't know.

HUSBAND. I mean it.

CLEMENT. How can you tell?

HUSBAND. It takes thirty minutes of conversation. Forty tops.

PENELOPE. A psychiatrist.

CLEMENT. I don't know why that makes me happy, but it does. I mean I never thought I had a personality disorder, but to hear for sure, from a professional, that I don't, it's—

(Swain moves in for the kiss.)

CLEMENT. Here's the potential dealbreaker. I have HIV.

HUSBAND. How long have you known?

CLEMENT. (Quick.) Had it for eight, known for five. I'm on five drugs. T-cells up to seventy from thirty-five, never been sick, if you don't count the hoof-and-mouth, a lot to live for, still think I deserve it, over the denial but still shame there, not a lot of people know, my boss at work, it's a piece of information, not my identity, I'm not a professional person with HIV, I decided early on not to become a scholar of the disease, I'm afraid of the blindness most of all, and the dementia, oh god, to lose that kind of control, I don't want to die without a long-term companion to list in the obituary. I don't have any friends who've died, and I don't volunteer. I like you very very much.

PENELOPE. Clement walked him to his car.

CLEMENT. I think *you* should call *me* if you want to get together again.







PENELOPE. He called him the instant he got back from a weekend trip to New Hope. Second date. Clement cooked. (Penelope laughs.) Then back to the couch.

(Beat. They look at each other.)

CLEMENT. Why did you come back?

HUSBAND. I figured the choice was between loving you and losing you and never having had the chance to love you.

CLEMENT. Seven months later, when he asked me to marry him, I said yes. (Beat.) He made me feel safe. He made me feel— (Husband removes the biohazard sticker.) He made me feel safe, not like a biohazard at all. We got married because we loved each other.

HUSBAND. We got married because we could.

PENELOPE. It was a beautiful wedding.

CLEMENT. These were the things I had worried about. The wrong fluids in the wrong places. Hangnails. Razor cuts. Acne. Over-zealous flossing. Cat scratches. Crying into his cuts.

PENELOPE. (Interrupting.) A very long shot.

CLEMENT. I know. (Continuing.) Biting. Telling people. Fever blisters. Canker sores. Chapped lips. The wrong toothbrush. Dying alone. But he was a doctor and knew how to preserve the sterile field. It's a term from surgery. You open somebody up, you keep the area sterile, you don't let anyone or anything contaminate it, not the other surgeons, the nurses, the interns, the anesthesiologist. No matter what happened in bed, he made sure the sterile field would not be contaminated. I stopped worrying about these things. He had disarmed me, you see. I began to tell people. Because the story had a happy ending. Job, money, friends, art, a house, pets, someone to put lipstick on for every day of the year. That's all I ever wanted. The clock was ticking mind you, eleven years, never higher than seventy-five T-cells, we figured we had a couple of years left, a lovely, dignified fade-out in our Charles Village home on a bed we bought together.

SCENE EIGHT.                      July 1996. Combination Therapy.  
   The first results.

PENELOPE. (As doctor.) Clement, you have a viral load of one hundred.

CLEMENT. Is that good?

PENELOPE. Very good.





CLEMENT. How very good?

PENELOPE. Let's contextualize. I have patients who won't medicate for religious reasons with a viral load of one million. One hundred and twenty to one hundred and forty thousand means you're not responding well. Ten to thirty thousand is pretty good. Your one hundred is the lowest I have seen so far. That's very good news.

CLEMENT. I thought of three things in the car on the way home. I have to learn how to invest money. I have to work on my marriage. I have to fulfill my early promise.

PENELOPE. It wasn't exactly happy what Clement was.

HUSBAND. So are you going to start telling people?

CLEMENT. What? What do you mean? I do tell people.

HUSBAND. Tell them about your health. Why you don't look well.

CLEMENT. What? I don't look well?

HUSBAND. You're doing well. You're not looking well. People must already be asking.

PENELOPE. The one side effect to Crixivan, the miracle protease inhibitor, for Clement, was a loss of muscle mass in his cheeks.

CLEMENT. He said I didn't look well. He was right. I looked like Vanessa Redgrave in that Holocaust movie. And people did notice. But because I was with him, I didn't care. He opened me up. I looked upon my withered cheeks as a marker that I was one of the ones who was going to make it through the plague. I would stand in for the others. Sometime in October of '96, I sero-converted back again. There was now no trace of the virus in my blood. There's some hanging out in my lymph nodes and gonads, but I now tested HIV negative. I didn't know this was a possible outcome until my doctor told me. I should be happy right? I am stunned.

PENELOPE. Two weeks later.

HUSBAND. I'm feeling hopeless about the marriage. I want it to be over. I was never happy with you. I can't breathe. You take up all the air. I have to work too fucking hard to get so little room from you. You don't recognize me as a separate and equal person. You are completely invalidating. The person I'm becoming can't be with the person you are. I deserve better than this.

CLEMENT. (Very quiet.) What would have happened if I had gotten sick?

HUSBAND. I would have stayed with you.

CLEMENT. (Even quieter.) Lucky for you, I got better, huh?

HUSBAND. How soon can you be out of here?





(Clement bows his head. Is lifeless. The Swain moves away. Penelope undoes her task. There is an uncomfortably long pause. Clement cannot continue, so Penelope improvises, hoping to lure him to speech.)

PENELOPE. I am Penelope, the watchful queen. The gods forever took my sheen away when my lord Ulysses sailed for Troy in the deckèd ships. I do not lack for suitors. I wait. I watch. I keep them at bay.

My deal is I've been waiting for Ulysses to return for twenty years. Return? How about turn up? How about was he ever here? Circumstance has made me an expert at the needle arts, but I have branched out. Laying sheetrock. Pacific Rim cookery. Step classes. Mutual funds.

Trouble is a man, Clement.

He could marry a dying man, but couldn't stay with one who was getting better.

It's better to know, I think.

Circumstance has made me an expert at the needle arts.

Ann Marie must slipcover six Dutch Regency dining-room chairs, the seats of which measure eighteen by nine inches by two and one-quarter inches. Given her upholstery budget of 128 dollars, and allowing for extra material, calculate the number of chairs she can cover in crushed maroon velvet at \$6.39 a yard, gold brocade at \$71.50 a yard, and natural crocodile at \$639 a yard. How much would two crocodile, two brocade, and two velvet chairs cost? (Beat.) Defend Ann Marie's purchase.

Are you dead, Clement? Have I had to put you on the quilt? Are you blind? Are you demented? Do you walk with a cane? Are you on a respirator? Are you homeless? Are you without health benefits? Are you *even* sick?

You've been opened up, you're grieving, you're vain, tell me something I *don't* know, your cheekbones are higher than they ever used to be and yes you've looked better, so if it's a huge problem, then for God's sake, make sure no one photographs you from below. You've got three hundred T-cells. You've come through. You are not as you were. Who is? Deal with it.





Clement, don't contaminate the field.

CLEMENT. Penelope, he was the great work. Penelope, he was... why did I live this long?

PENELOPE. To fulfill your early promise.

CLEMENT. Yeah, and Ulysses is right around the corner.

PENELOPE. He is. (Relieved that Clement is speaking.) He most certainly is.

#### SCENE NINE.

PENELOPE. First you drink, then you go to the gym. Then you date.

CLEMENT. I'm positive and I'm negative.

SWAIN. Great! Fuck my ass baby, ooh that's right, fuck my ass. Here's some poppers. Yeah, stick it in, yeah, you're fucking my ass, oh yeah oh yeah, oh yeah baby, that feels so great.

PENELOPE. We called him the selfish bottom.

CLEMENT. I'm positive and I'm negative.

SWAIN. That is really cool. That is really... kind of glamorous, you know. It makes me hot. You wanna watch me jerk off?

PENELOPE. Generation X.

CLEMENT. I'm positive and I'm negative.

SWAIN. So like you're my gym teacher, and it's after swim practice, here's a clipboard, a whistle, put this cap on backwards—I enter like this—

PENELOPE. Actors.

CLEMENT. I'm positive and I'm negative.

SWAIN. Praise God. Let us just praise His holy name. Jesus is Lord and I think it's no accident there are three drugs in this combination. Crixivan, Zerit, and Epivir. It's like the holy trinity. (Beat.) Are you going to hurt me daddy?

(Clement and Penelope look at each other, make a sign of the cross.)

#### SCENE TEN. Groundhog Day, 1998.

PENELOPE. The Viceroy, a bar in Boys Town, New York. The second date.

CLEMENT. I'm positive and I'm negative. I found out in 1988, in fact, it was ten years ago this month, but I'm one of those combination therapy miracles—



SWAIN/FRANK. Wait. Run this by me again.  
CLEMENT. Never mind.  
SWAIN/FRANK. I heard. I think your cheeks are beautiful. I think you are very brave. (He touches them, freezes. Clement turns out to talk to Penelope.)  
CLEMENT. I had my ten-year anniversary yesterday.  
PENELOPE. I know. Happy anniversary.  
CLEMENT. Incredible.  
PENELOPE. I know. Happy anniversary.  
CLEMENT. He's nice.  
PENELOPE. (Agreeing.) I think so.  
CLEMENT. It's not the same.  
PENELOPE. It never can be.  
CLEMENT. (Anxious.) Where's Ulysses?  
PENELOPE. He's coming. (Beat.) Clement, don't worry. (She acknowledges the audience.) Everybody knows now.  
(Penelope hands Clement a lipstick. He takes it, removes the top, twists the bottom to reveal the lipstick, looks at the Swain. The lights fade.)

THE END