

OVERSEAS CALLS

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Scene I

The Professor is in his office, not his teaching office but the office of the head of Dept., where he's talking to a Mrs. Watson, a middle aged lady who has come to see him to complain that she came across her daughter's creative writing folder and was shocked at the language her daughter had used in some of the poems . . . and even more shocked to hear from her daughter that the professor not only approved and considered the poems in question to be good, but that his (the professor's) own poetry is full of such language.

P.: You see, Mrs. Watson, there are those who believe that language in itself is never really good or bad . . . it depends on how and where it is used. . . .

Mrs. W.: Oh but Professor, you know the words, I mean, I won't – can't – bring my self to repeat them again. . . . Surely there can be no 'right' way of using –

At this point the departmental secretary interrupts, opening the door and poking her head in the office.

Sec.: Excuse me Professor, but you have an overseas call, I believe it is your Grandson in Toronto.

P.: Todd? What on earth can he want at this time of day? And why isn't he in school? Tell him I'm busy now . . . perhaps -

Sec.: *(lowering her voice)* I think . . . maybe you should talk to him yourself, Professor. . . . I suspect that there's some kind of problem. . . . I can hear tears in his voice. . . .

P.: What? Oh, Ok, I'll have a quick word with him then. *(Sec. withdraws.)* Mrs. Watson, would you excuse me for a few minutes- no you needn't leave, this won't take long- it seems I must talk to my grandson in Toronto... *(Mrs. W. nods and leans back in her chair, P picks up phone).*

Hello, Todd? What's the matter, son, and why aren't you in school?

What? Oh yes, one of your silly Canadian holidays, but see, son, grandad is busy right now, and – Todd? Son? Are you crying, boy? What is the matter?

You're in pain? Oh Todd, dear, what's wrong? You hurt yourself? And where is your mother?

Your what is burning? Speak up Toddie dear. . . . nd your mother went out and you don't know where *(looks apologetically at Mrs. W. who waves her hand to signal she will wait)* - why don't you call her cell phone?

Oh, you tried but you heard it ringing on the bathroom counter . . . typical, your mother will forget her head one of these days (but don't you dare tell her that I said so, understand?).

Now, love, tell me where it's burning.

Your what is burning? Your bum? Why should your bum be burning? What have you been eating?

What do you mean you think it's the onion? What onion?

I still can't follow you, love, what has an onion –

What!? I don't believe you! (*Turns away from Mrs. W. and lowers voice.*) You shoved an onion up your bum? Oh Todd, why on earth would you do such a silly thing?

I don't care if the skin is peeled off! What has that got to do with anything? So you peeled an onion and shoved it up your bum (*looks helplessly at Mrs. W. whose eyebrows are at their highest elevation*), Toddster, love, that's the dumbest thing I ever heard. . . .

Of course that's what's burning you son! You ever bit into a raw onion? Some onions are very strong. . . . You still have not told me why you did this foolish thing. . . .

Who?

Who is this Tommy? And do you do everything he tells you? Really, Toddster, you should know better – you're ten years old, for Christ's sake!

Tommy Tarkington. . . . Why does that sound familiar? Wait, isn't Tommy Tarkington the neighbour boy. . . . Oh Todd, you're still hanging out with that fat loser? Isn't he the one who made you shave off all the hair on your head last spring when I was there, so that it would grow instead as pubic hair in your groin? (*Mrs. W. puts her hand on her mouth and turns away.*)

And didn't I explain to you at the time that Tommy Tarkington was an absolute idiot, and you were not to hang with him?

What do you mean 'he did it too'?

Oh-ho! He shoved an onion up his bum as well, did he? Good. I hope it's burning his fat ass. (*P. puts hand over mouthpiece and says*) Mrs. Watson, I think you'll have to excuse me for a while . . . this is taking longer than expected . . . would you mind waiting in the outer office for ten minutes or so? (*Mrs. W. looks very disappointed, but gets up with a flourish and lets herself out of the office.*) Now Todd, did that fool Tommy Tarkington say *why* you two were shoving onions up your butt?

I see, it was supposed to make you feel 'nice'! Well, you see for yourself how nice it feels. . . . Wait till your mother finds out what you two have been doing with her onions. . . . Anyway, take it from your grandad, son: shoving an onion up your butt is not the way to make a 10-year-old boy feel 'nice' – today's a holiday, and it's not cold yet . . . you should be playing outside . . . a good vigorous boyhood game outdoors is what you need to make you feel 'nice.' . . . You never play police an' teef? When your grandad was a boy in Guyana we

used to have lots of fun playing police and teef . . . you suggest that to Mr. Tommy Tarkington . . . and make sure you're the police, cause then you can take off your belt and chase him all over the place – and when you catch him, drive some good lashes in his fat tail. . . . Those are good childhood games, not shoving onions up your butts . . . see, now both of you are in tears.

What? His isn't burning? I suppose that figures! Hard-ass idiot that he is, the poor onion is probably lost in unfeeling layers of fat. . . .

He says it's maybe because yours is what? (*shouts*) WHAT? . . . *Pickled!* Let me get this straight, Todd, you shoved a *pickled* onion up your butt?

Alright, don't cry, son. . . . I'm not mad at you, honest. . . . But if I could get my hands on that Tommy Tarkington, I'd pickle his onions, for sure. . . .

OK, I see, . . . there was only one onion in the basket – in your mother's kitchen you're lucky you found any at all: grocery shopping is not one of her strong points, I'm afraid– anyway, so you gave the good onion to Tommy Tarkington and then took a pickled onion for yourself – My God, I hope it's not one of your grandmother Lawrence's pickled onions: those things are full of pepper! Nice, mind you, but kind of hot in the mouth– I can only imagine what it's like in the butt!!

What's that? You washed it?

Oh, you poor thing. . . . You can't wash off pepper that has been soaking into it since last Christmas! No wonder it's burning you. Have you tried to take it out?

I know. . . . It's gone in real far. . . . Maybe you should try straining . . . you know, as though you're trying to pass a big hard –

You tried that? And it only burned hotter? I see. Well, I don't see what your grandad can do from here, love. . . . I hope your mother is responsible enough to come home soon. . . . All I can say is wait a while for her. . . . If the burning becomes unbearable . . . you remember the emergency number?

Right. . . . You dial that and tell them that you need an ambulance. . . . I'm afraid you'll have to explain what you did on the phone. . . . At the hospital they will know what to do. . . .

OK love, I'm real sorry you're in pain. . . . Oh and Todd . . . before you hang up the phone: try and take Grandad's advice and have nothing more to do with that Tommy Tarkington: the boy is a menace. Always beware of fat people. . . .

What's that? . . . Yes, fat people. You can tell anybody that your Grandad says that all the trouble in the world is caused by fat people. . . . It's true. . . . They can't help it, you see, but it's best to keep far from them.

Understand?

OK, son, love you (*hangs up phone and buzzes for his secretary*).

Sec.: (*over the intercom*) Professor?

P.: Yes, please send Mrs. Watson back in.

Sec.: (*pops head in office door*) Oh Professor, Mrs. Watson left, I'm afraid. I tried to get her to wait, but she said she had to go – and also muttered something about now knowing that it was a waste of time complaining to you about bad language. . . .

P.: Ah, never mind. What a morning! I think I'm going to head off for an early Lunch. I should be back by 1:30.

Scene II

Early afternoon, Toronto. Maggie is leaning against the kitchen counter in her suburban home, talking into the receiver of the phone on the wall.

M.: Dad? Is that you – at last? Did Audrey have to drag you out of class? Because I told her to do that if it was necessary. . . .

Oh, it was only a meeting. . . . Never mind, this is more important. What? Yes, I know you spoke to Todd before lunch . . . that's what I'm calling about. Dad, I wish you would think for a minute before you say all kind of foolish things to Todd – he's only 10 years old . . . he can't judge when you are being funny or sarcastic – or just plain ridiculous. . . . You should know better. . . .

Of course I'm quarreling with you, you are responsible for this whole fiasco. . . . No. What are you talking about Dad? Yes, yes, of course I know about the onions-up-the-bum business. . . . I came home to a full-blown crisis . . . turned into my driveway just behind an ambulance with sirens wailing and some self-important young paramedic jumping out and shoo-ing me back out onto the street so that the ambulance could be able to make a fast getaway. Not to mention the Tarkingtons from next door and six other neighbour children huddled excitedly on my front lawn. I've never been so embarrassed!!

No! I was not in dereliction of my maternal duties – I did NOT abandon my son to the sinister influence of an evil, fat – DAD! Will you LISTEN to me? I went to the grocery store for an hour to buy some stuff for the house –

What? As a matter of fact I DID buy some onions, but that is neither here nor there –

Look, we can't both speak at the same time, Dad. . . . Yes, I did forget it on the bathroom counter. . . . Is that a crime? When you and Mum left Paul and I at home when I was Todd's age you couldn't be reached by cell phone either, because there were none in those days – Oh yes! It is EXACTLY the same, now HUSH and let me blow off my steam or I swear I'll smash every breakable thing in this kitchen!

No, we are not back from the hospital already. . . . We never went to the stupid hospital: I sent the ambulance packing and dealt with the situation myself – if you had not whipped up all that hysteria from 2000 miles away, none of this would have happened. Yes, of course it's out. . . . It's right here, soon to be thrown into the garbage (*she fingers something wrapped in a paper towel and pushes it further up the counter*). What do you mean 'how'? – I took it out. . . . No, I did not spear it with one of my lethal fingernails. Dad, can you try to be serious? I'm really upset at you over this thing. . . . Mrs. Tarkington is upset. . . . The whole thing has been blown out of proportion. . . .

I know it was burning him, Dad, but –

No, I don't blame Tommy Tarkington, I blame YOU. . . .

Yes, I hold you responsible. . . . No, I know that you did not tell him to shove an onion up his bum. . . . I know he SAYS that it was Tommy's idea, but – Dad . . . DAD –

(*Re-dialling with vehemence*) Oh no, Mister, you don't get rid of me that easily. . . . Come on, pick up the phone you old reprobate. . . .

Dad, don't you dare hang up the phone on me again. . . . Listen to what I have to say. . . . I will TELL you why I'm blaming you if you would only have the decency to listen . . . OK? . . . Now all of this stuff started when you were here in the spring – How do you mean 'What stuff'? . . . Todd would have grown serenely into his late teenage years blissfully ignorant about things being pushed into a bum, he would have known that that orifice was for the purpose of relieving his bowels and that's it. Period. . . . But no, you had to tell him in graphic detail. . . .

Yes, Dad, I AM bringing all that up again – because it's very germane to what happened today. . . .

I'm perfectly aware that he asked you what it means for a guy to be gay and what do gay guys do, but you did not have to give him all the lurid details – the poor boy has been obsessed with all that awful stuff since then – both him and Poor Tommy. . . .

Yes, I did say 'poor Tommy.' . . . Both of those children are seriously confused with all that stuff you told them – not to mention your advice for them to read more about it on the net. . . . When we asked those kind of questions as children, you always fobbed us off with some quick and plausible response – which is the right thing to do, and you know it. . . . It's only since your famous mid-life crisis that you've begun to think about of all this sexual nonsense . . . including the obsession with all this gay stuff . . . and Todd and his friends are the ones suffering from it, always measuring and looking for pubic hair and now shoving things up their bums. . . .

I don't agree that that's normal at all, I'm convinced it would not have happened if you had not had that talk with Todd.

And another thing, Dad, how could you tell Todd to tell Mrs. Tarkington that all fat people are evil and will rot in hell? She is very upset –

Well, you must have told him *something*, because he was most definite when I asked him: “My Grandad said. . . .”

What? – Of course she’s fat, Daddy, don’t you remember Mrs. Tarkington? . . . You may not have given him a message for her, but you know what kids are like . . . and I’ve heard you on the subject of fat people before . . . you should have known that he would go and tell her. . . .

Dad . . . Dad! What are you laughing at? Please control yourself. . . . This is *not* funny. . . .
. Dad!

You are impossible . . . irresponsible . . . a disgrace of a grandfather, you hear. . . . Stop laughing and listen to me! . . . You make my son insult the neighbours . . . you may have made him gay with all your unnecessary information. . . . You should have seen him prostrate on the lawn with tears rolling down his cheeks, like a real little drama queen, surrounded by the ambulance men and the neighbours. . . . Really, I swear, Daddy, I’m never having you stay in my house again . . . I hate you! (*Slams down phone.*)

Scene III

The Professor is in his office, it is late and he's about to leave, turning off his computer and tidying up. The phone rings . . . 3 . . . then 4 times.

P.: Oh, I’ve forgotten how late it is. . . . Audrey must have left. (*Picks up phone*) Hello . . . Who is it? Ah Woodie. . . . Well, it’s been an extraordinary day for overseas calls from the Lawrence family: your son in the morning, your wife in the afternoon and now you at night. . . . I take it that things have calmed down somewhat over there by now?

What do you mean you don’t know what’s going on? Your wife is in bed with a headache and your son is sulking in his room? Oh, I see, and she tells you to call her disgrace of a father and let him tell you what he’s been up to. . . . Well . . . Well . . . First of all, Woodie, let me point out that I am 2000 miles away in Barbados, that I was not the one who picked up the phone and called on any of these three occasions. . . . Your wife goes wandering off and leaves two little boys in the. . . .

To the grocery, she says, buying onions and stuff. . . .

No, that’s not really what the whole thing is about . . . but I don’t see why I should be the one to tell you. . . . What? . . . Of course you’ve seen her like this before. . . . She always milks every situation for the maximum dramatic effect . . . takes after her mother –

Oh, she told you that much, did she? But you know by now that my little talk with Toddster last spring was a real godsend for her . . . she has been able to blame that for everything that

he's done wrong in the past 5 months! What? You agree with her? Well, I don't think you have much choice really, do you?

Look, I said at the time that I was perhaps a bit hasty in getting into so much detail about gay love-making, but I still think Toddie is better off for knowing. . . .

You! You're kidding yourself. . . . You're probably the one who told him – in an embarrassed fluster – that you knew nothing about that stuff and he must go and ask his grandfather –

OK, OK, so you never told him that . . . but can you imagine yourself giving him 'the' talk . . . I mean, about the Birds and the Bees? . . . Oh yeah, when?

Eighteen!! Really Woodie, by then he'll be able to tell you things that would shock your prim and prudish self to the core! I rest my case. . . . Really, for a research biologist you are hopelessly ignorant about the development of modern children. . . .

I know that's not your area of specialization, but you're at least alive . . . and male . . . and sexually active!! Aren't you? Well then . . . for someone with a pre-teen boy and someone whose name is a synonym for an erection, you're hopelessly out-of-touch with the sexual needs of –

I'm not obsessed – now you're sounding just like your wife – it's a matter of common sense. . . .

What? What other business? Upsetting who? Oh, the neighbour. . . . You mean fat Mrs. Tarkington. . . . God, why doesn't she tell you all this yourself?

Yes, I made the mistake (and I admit it's a mistake) of telling Toddster that all the trouble in the world is caused by fat people – and I happen to believe that that is not much of an exaggeration – but I never intended for him to go and tell Mrs. Tarkington anything (I didn't even know she was fat, though it figures . . . her little lard-ball of a son must have got it from somewhere!).

No – and . . . (What's that noise?) No. . . . No – Listen, nuh. . . . And I certainly did NOT say that all fat people were evil and would rot in hell. . . . Yes, that apparently is what he told her – a little bit of poetic license on his part, perhaps. . . . The boy has potential. . . .

Woodie ,what IS that noise? . . . What are you doing?

Eating? . . . Eating what?

Don't tell me you have picked up your wife's bad habit of eating ice when trying to talk on the phone – it's rude and your teeth –

It's not ice? What then? An onion!! What's it with you people and onions? Your son shoves –

Wait, Woodie. . . . Oh God! Are you eating a *pickled* onion? . . . HA! Where did you get it? Tell me was it out of the bottle in the fridge!? . . . No? . . . it was in a paper towel on the counter by the phone. . . . That's what I was afraid of. . . . Ha ha ha ha. . . . O my God, Woodie, does it taste . . . you know . . . kinda funny? . . . Ha ha ha. . . . I'm going to die laughing. . . . Ha ha ha –

What? Ha ha ha. . . . No, no, I can't: you go and ask your wife just WHERE that onion came from. . . . Ha ha ha. . . . 'Bye for now. . . . What a scream! Ha ha ha ha ha. . . .

END