

EXCERPT:

Lights up on Eliot and Groucho.

GROUCHO: Most of you have heard this story before, I'm sure. It is about a man who tells a doctor he has lost the will to live. The doctor advises this melancholic patient to go to the circus, and spend the evening laughing at Grock. Grock: the World's Funniest Clown! 'After you have seen Grock,' says the doctor, 'You are sure to be much happier.' The despondent figure rises to his feet and starts to leave. 'By the way, what is your name?' the doctor asks. The man turns, regards the doctor with sorrowful eyes and says: 'I am Grock.'

Beat.

I am Grock...

ELIOT: *Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable
What might have been is an abstraction
Remaining a perpetual possibility
Only in a world of speculation.
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present...*

GROUCHO/ELIOT:

*(Singing) Did you ever sit and ponder as you walk along the strand
That life's a bitter battle at the best
And if you only knew it and would lend a helping hand
Then every man can meet the final test
The world is but a stage, my friend, and life is but a game;
How you play is all that matters in the end...*

Music: a rousing rendition of 'Behold the Lord High Executioner' from The Mikado.

GROUCHO: Gentlemen, I'm much touched by this reception. If I should ever be called upon to act professionally, I am happy to think that there will be no difficulty in finding plenty of people whose loss will be a distinct gain to society at large.

Music: 'As Some Day it May Happen' (The Mikado).

GROUCHO: *(Singing) As some day it may happen that a victim must be found,
I've got a little list. I've got a little list.
Of society offenders who might well be underground,*

*And who never would be missed. Who never would be missed!
There's the pestilential nuisances who write for autographs
All people who have flabby hands and irritating laughs
Skinny jerks that exercise and tell you that you're fat
And all persons who when shaking hands shake hands with you like that...
And lawyers, lawyers everywhere, I really must insist
They'd none of 'em be missed. They'd none of 'em be missed.*

ELIOT: *(Singing) He's got 'em on the list. He's got 'em on the list;
And they'll none of 'em be missed. They'll none of 'em be missed.*

GROUCHO: *There's the columnists and critics with their poison pens pre-licked
Who fill their mill up with your grist – I've got them on the list,
The toadies and the sycophants who praise you till you're sick
They never would be missed. They never will be missed...*

ELIOT: *There's the self-obsessive actors going on about intent
Directors who manipulate, the tortured scribe's lament
The comic men and clowns who pour their pain out on the stage
And all those pompous poets spilling mist upon the page*

GROUCHO: *Power-tripping boards whose every ass must now be kissed
I don't think they'd be missed. I'm sure he'd not be missed!*

ELIOT: *He's got him on the list.*

GROUCHO: *I've got me on the list!*

ELIOT: *And he don't think he'll be missed.*

GROUCHO: *No I'm sure I won't be missed.*

Lights out on Eliot.

GROUCHO: I played...will play...am playing the Lord High Executioner for the Bell Telephone Hour production of Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado* in 1959. Incidentally, the same year I receive a startling and peculiar little letter.

*The Duck from "You Bet Your Life" drops down with a letter clutched in its beak.
Groucho takes the letter and opens it. The duck is pulled back up. Lights up on Eliot.*

ELIOT: Dear Mr. Groucho Marx,
I am writing to you as a great admirer of your work, and in the vain hope that you might honour this humble author with an autographed portrait. Should you be so obliging, I can assure you that it will be

prominently displayed amongst distinguished company. I do believe you would look most debonair next to W. B. Yeats. Yours sincerely, T.S. Eliot.

GROUCHO: T.S. Eliot?!

ELIOT: Yes?

GROUCHO: *The* T.S. Eliot? The greatest poet of the twentieth century?

ELIOT: The century is hardly over, now is it?

GROUCHO: To the Esteemed Professor T.S. Eliot Esquire, Etcetera,
I was most thrilled to receive your note, and you are most welcome to an autographed picture. I would say that this particular photograph highlights my best features, but being a portrait, it required the inclusion of my face. As I am unaccustomed to correspondence with men of letters, I will keep this missive brief, but should you be so inclined, you might return the favour with a signed picture of your own. I promise to tack it to the wall next to my own framed portrait of Yeats, which I clipped out of an encyclopedia earlier this afternoon. Cordially, Groucho Marx.

ELIOT: Dear Groucho Marx,
This is to let you know that your portrait has arrived and has given me great joy and will soon appear in its frame on my wall. Whether you really want a photograph of me or whether you merely asked for it out of politeness, you are going to get one anyway. Incidentally, if and when you and Mrs. Marx are ever in London, my wife and I hope that you will dine with us. Yours sincerely, T.S. Eliot. P.S. I like cigars too but there isn't any cigar in my portrait either.

GROUCHO: Dear T.S.,
Your photograph arrived in good shape and I hope this note of thanks finds you in the same condition. I had no idea you were so handsome. Why you haven't been offered the lead in some sexy movies I can only attribute to the stupidity of the casting directors. I read in the current issue of *Time* magazine that you are ill. I just want you to know that I am rooting for your quick recovery. First because of your contributions to literature, and then that under the most trying conditions you never stopped smoking cigars. Should I come to London I will certainly take advantage of your kind invitation, and if you come to California I hope you will allow me to do the same. Cordially, Groucho Marx.

ELIOT: I've heard Los Angeles is a wonderful city.

GROUCHO: If they'd lower the taxes, get rid of the smog and clean up the traffic mess, I really believe I'd settle there until the next earthquake.

ELIOT: Dear Groucho Marx,
This is to thank you for your letter and to say that I am convalescing as fast as the awful London winter permits. My wife and I hope to greet you in the spring. So come, let us say, about the beginning of May?
Yours very sincerely, T.S. Eliot. P.S. Your portrait is framed on my office mantelpiece, but I have to point you out to my visitors as nobody recognizes you without the moustache and cigar. If you are so inclined, might you indulge this humble fan with a second photograph of Groucho in *full regalia*?

GROUCHO: My first child has just been born, and I am hanging about the maternity ward cracking jokes with the nurses. One night I completely lose track of the time, and run back to the theatre to find an empty dressing room and the final notes of the overture drifting down the corridor. The glue for my stick-on moustache takes too long to dry, so I grab a nearby stick of greasepaint, spread it across my upper lip, and make my entrance the moment the curtain rises. After the show, I find the theatre manager waiting in my dressing room.

To Eliot:
Would you play the manager?

ELIOT: Certainly.

GROUCHO: Thick *New Yawk* accent, fuming like a smokestack.

MANAGER: That greasepaint will have to go! Those patrons have paid for hair!

GROUCHO: Tearing that sticky moustache off the same patch of skin every night left my lip raw as an oyster, so I told Mr. Manager where he could stuff his hairpiece.

ELIOT: Dear Groucho, I ought to have written at once to thank you for the second beautiful photograph, but I was in hospital for five weeks, and then at home for as many under my wife's care. I do hope to be about when you and Mrs. Groucho turn up in the summer. Is there any date known? Meanwhile, your splendid new portrait is at the framers. I like them both very much and I cannot make up my mind which one to take home and which one to put on my office wall. The only solution may be to carry them both with me every day. Gratefully, Your Admirer, T.S.

GROUCHO: Dear Mr. Eliot, I am a pretty shabby correspondent. The fact is that soon after your letter arrived, I was struck down by a mild infection. All intentions of getting away this summer have gone by the board. The best

laid plans of mice and men, etcetera. My plan now is to visit Israel the first part of October when all the tourists are back from their various journeys. Then, on my way back from Israel, I will stop off in London to see you, and you and I will get drunk together.

ELIOT: Dear Groucho—

GROUCHO: Cordially, Groucho—

ELIOT: This is not altogether bad news because I shall be in better condition for drinking in October than I am now. I envy you going to Israel and I wish I could go there too if—

GROUCHO: Wait right there.

ELIOT: Yes?

GROUCHO: You say you *want* to go to Israel?

ELIOT: Most certainly.

GROUCHO: But aren't you a notorious anti-Semite?

ELIOT: I am not an anti-Semite and never have been!

GROUCHO: Being half-Jewish, I'm a simple semi-Semite.

ELIOT: It is a terrible slander on a man.

GROUCHO: My father was Alsatian, you see. He led a dog's life, by which I mean he liked to have his belly rubbed.

ELIOT: I envy you going to Israel and I wish I could go there too as I have a keen admiration for that country. I hope to hear about your visit when I see you and that, meanwhile, we shall both be in the best of health.

GROUCHO: Dear Tom—

ELIOT: Dear Groucho—

GROUCHO: My illness which, three months ago, my doctors described as trivial is having quite a run in my system —

ELIOT: I am sorry that you are not coming over here this year and still sorrier the reason for it—

GROUCHO: The three medics, I regret to say, are living on the fat of the land—

ELIOT: I hope, however, that you turn up in the spring—

GROUCHO: So far they've hooked me for eight thousand bucks—

ELIOT: If your doctors leave you a few nickels to pay your way—

GROUCHO: I only mention this to explain why I can't get over there in October—

ELIOT: There will still be a meal and drinks for you in London by next May—

GROUCHO: However, by next May or thereabouts—

ELIOT: Whether I can produce as good a cigar as you are accustomed to—

GROUCHO: I hope to be well enough to eat that meal you've been promising me—

ELIOT: I do not know, but I will do my best—

GROUCHO: My best to you and Mrs. Tom—

ELIOT: Ever yours—

GROUCHO: Yours—

ELIOT: Tom.

GROUCHO: Groucho.

ELIOT: Dear Groucho, we have arranged for a taxi to collect you and Mrs. Groucho from the Savoy. You are, of course, our guests entirely. The newspapers are saying that, amongst other reasons, you have come to London to see me. This has greatly enhanced my credit in the neighbourhood, and particularly with the grocer across the street. Obviously I am now someone of importance.

GROUCHO: *(Singing) You must do your best tonight, be on your toes men
There's another guest tonight, he's one of those men
Who are being feted by the smart set*

ELIOT: *We'll see that he gets what he deserves*

GROUCHO: *Treat him as they do a king, in manor royal
Like a subject to a king, you must be loyal
On this object you must have your heart set*

ELIOT: *We'll do nothing to get on his nerves*

GROUCHO: *Again I mention, be on your toes men
He craves attention, he's one of those men*

ELIOT: *Yes, sir, we will give him just what he deserves...*

GROUCHO: Tom, by the way, is tall...

Eliot straightens up.

GROUCHO: ...lean...

Eliot sucks in his stomach.

GROUCHO: ...and rather stooped over.

Eliot stoops.

GROUCHO: But whether this is from illness, age, or both, I don't know.

Beat.

But he is clearly ill, and old.

Beat.

Very, old.

Beat.

Very, *very* old.

Beat.

Two years older than me, in fact.

ELIOT: I shall die seven months after this evening.

GROUCHO: What do you plan on dying of?

ELIOT: Too many birthdays.

GROUCHO: Hey – that's not a bad bit.

ELIOT: It ought not to be: it's yours.

GROUCHO: Mine? In that case it's a great bit. In my case, I plan on dying the same week as somebody famous. That way no one will feel obliged to make a fuss.

ELIOT: I daresay you'll be hard-pressed to find someone whose fame exceeds your own.

GROUCHO: I'll find someone or die trying! In the week leading up to our dinner, I read *Murder in the Cathedral* twice, *The Waste Land* three times, and just in case of a conversational bottleneck, I brush up on *King Lear*.

ELIOT: Why *Lear*?

GROUCHO: Why – haven't you heard I'm known for my *leer*...?