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Pairing Energy

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Artificial
by Sean Kenealy

2 Males

Synopsis: When Dan enters an empty cafe just after midnight on New Years, wielding a guitar case and razor sharp tongue, he sparks the ire of cafe manager Charles, who wants nothing more than to close up, albeit a bit early. What transpires between the two are conversations and stories ranging from the trivial to the tragic, almost bringing the men to blows, and definitely blurring the lines between the truth and the artificial.

Touchstone, U.S.A.
or How Terrorism Brought an
American Family Back Together

by Paul North

3 Males, 3 Females

some play multiple roles

Synopsis: Billy converted to Islam causing his parents to think he's a terrorist; now the only solution is for the ghost of Billy's older sister, Liberty, to come back and set things right again. A look at the American family and all its dysfunction.

"PAIRING ENERGY"
A Love Story in One Act

by

Roy C. Booth and Mitch Berntson

CHARACTERS

PAUL: A gifted, yet disturbed scientist who has just turned 30.

CONSTANCE: PAUL's former fiancé, an "interactive hallucination," 26.

NATE: PAUL's cousin, a successful screenwriter, 29.

STEPH: PAUL's lab assistant, also in her late twenties.

TIME: *The early 1990's.*

SETTING: *An observation deck adjoining a beach house somewhere along the mid-southern Californian coast.*

PAIRING ENERGY

AT RISE: *A wedge-shaped, railed deck spans the stage, recessing to the middle of the set. It is sometime past 10 PM on a somewhat cooler night in the early summer. The deck is lit by a few Chinese style lanterns, with hints of others off stage. The intermittent sounds of a party are heard in the background along with waves breaking against the shore. Standing on the down stage thrust part of the deck, leaning against the railing is the conservatively, yet comfortably dressed, PAUL. He appears deep in thought. In his hand is a concoction of his own consisting of tequila and cranberry juice. Leaning against PAUL is CONSTANCE, a very attractive woman in her mid to late twenties dressed in a very expensive and equally provocative evening dress.*

(NOTE: Whenever CONSTANCE is on stage, an eerie, almost ethereal, dream-like light bathes the set. Only PAUL can "see" or "hear" her – she is an interactive hallucination.)

(NATE slowly shuffles onto the deck. NATE is almost 30, looking like a surfer bum judging from his loud Hawaiian shirt, shorts, and untied tennis shoes sans socks. Despite his somewhat slovenly appearance, NATE is a respectable person and is the owner of the deck and adjoining beach house. He stops, assesses the situation, and then shakes his head.)

(PAUL notices NATE without looking, sighs.)

(CONSTANCE exits, the lights return to normal.)

(PAUL stares off into the water.)

(NATE crosses to PAUL, assuming a similar position next to him.)

(PAUL briefly glances a NATE, grumbles, then stares back off into the water.)

NATE: Excuse me, but is this Lovers' Leap?

(PAUL grumbles.)

NATE: Hate to toss a wet blanket on your latest doom and gloom session here, fair cousin...

PAUL: Ha, too late.

NATE: But, uh, some of the guests are beginning to wonder if you were indeed a figment of my own overwrought imagination and...

PAUL: *(flatly.)* Tell 'em all to go to hell.

NATE: And have them riot and trash my heavily insured, yet oh so ever humble abode? Heh, *nooo* thank you.

PAUL: Darn.

NATE: Besides, I think that'd be considered occupational suicide. And redundant.

PAUL: Euh...

NATE: Aw, c'mon, lighten up, Paul... you can't fool me; we've known each all our lives for cryin' out loud...!

PAUL: Hurm. I should have let you drown that one time when you were six...

NATE: You were... um... thinking about what's-her-name again, weren't you?

PAUL: Ahm...

NATE: C'mon, spill...

PAUL: It's nothing Nate... nothing...

(PAUL stares off back to the water.)

NATE: Oookay. *(Pauses, takes in a deep breath, releases it.)*
Ahhh! *(Stretches.)* Beautiful night, huh?

PAUL: *(fingering his glass.)* Hurm.

(Pause.)

NATE: *(determinedly trying to restart the conversation.)*
Y'know Paul, this is supposed to be your birthday party, not your funeral...

PAUL: *(sighing.)* Yeah, and you're not a recovering head case and *you're* not the one who's just turned thirty...

NATE: *(to the Heavens, arms outstretched.)* Thank God and all the Apostles!!!

PAUL: Leave... me... alone.

(PAUL stares off back into the distance.)

NATE: Oh, so this *is* about the marauding she-devil from hell again, isn't it? Huh? It is, isn't it?

PAUL: Hey, are you deaf? I said, "Leave me alone."

NATE: News flash! She's not coming back to you, Paul. Ever.

PAUL: *(turning.)* Don't you think I know that!?! *(Turns away.)* And I said, "Leave me alone."

(PAUL returns to his staring.)

(Pause.)

(NATE mouths counting to three, then points to PAUL without looking at him. NATE has played this little game with PAUL before, and he knows that by the time he's finished counting and points, PAUL will have broken the silence. PAUL does so with predictable results and NATE sighs.)

PAUL: I've just turned thirty and where am I? *(Drinks.)*

NATE: No comment.

PAUL: I mean, take a look at you: you're making it big as a screenwriter; you have a big beautiful house by the ocean; you have that new Mercedes in the garage; and...and you're not even thirty!

NATE: Yeah, but unlike you, being thirty's almost like a death-knell in my profession!

PAUL: What do you mean?

NATE: What did I do when first came out here?

PAUL: Nearly starve to death?

NATE: After that...

PAUL: You did all of that TV sitcom work.

NATE: Exactly, 60 to 80 hours a week.

PAUL: Yeah, you were practically swimming in it...

NATE: It was because I was fresh, talented, and easy to milk! It was grind, grind, grind! Churn, churn, churn! Spew, spew, spew! Unreal demands, even unrealer deadlines!

PAUL: Yeah, you were pretty frazzled for a bit.

NATE: Exactly! I only started on features because I was too burned out to do anything more with the TV crowd. And even then... okay, how many scripts have I had optioned? Hmm?

PAUL: You mean have sold?

NATE: Whatever. How many?

PAUL: Six, seven?

NATE: Eleven. Now, how many of those scripts have made it to film?

PAUL: Three.

NATE: And were actually released.

PAUL: Two.

NATE: That's right. Only two. One moderate box office success and one straight to video el-cheapo groaner. I invest my script and TV residual money wisely, buy this place cheap off of a foreclosure, and wham! Everybody thinks I'm rolling in it! That's why I find every and any excuse to throw parties out here: to make it look like I'm still in circulation and keep my network going. It also makes for one helluva tax write off...

PAUL: Hmph.

NATE: Oh, yeah... the Mercedes is kinda new.

PAUL: Aha!

NATE: Bought it cheap from a producer friend of mine so he wouldn't lose it to his wife during the upcoming divorce...

PAUL: Figures...

NATE: I'm also, according to the locals, woefully politically incorrect, pay ungodly taxes up the wazoo, and... (*Tugs at his scalp.*) And I just became a proud, upstanding member of the "Hair for Men Club." Or hadn't you noticed?

PAUL: Oh, I noticed all right. I just thought something had crawled up there and died, that's all...

NATE: Ha, ha. Very funny.

PAUL: Brought a wry smile to my inner mind...

NATE: Besides, in two months *I'll* be thirty and even *that* is going to become a moot point. So you haven't reaped the rewards and ulcers that I have... so what? Paul, you're just...

PAUL: Save it. (*Sighs.*) I look around me... all my friends, my colleagues... my own family... and what have I done?

NATE: Except bitch and moan like some big bawling baby, not much...

PAUL: What!?!

NATE: Well, what the hell did you expect me to say? Jackass.

PAUL: Creep. (*Mumbles.*) Thanks fer nothin'.

NATE: Aw, quit yer bellyaching. You're just a late bloomer, that's all.

PAUL: Nate, when you're in science, you have to make some kind of significant contribution before you're thirty. It's expected of you. After that, you spend the rest of your life defending your work while trying to secure the funding to move onto other more important projects.

NATE: You're kidding, right?

PAUL: I wish I was.

NATE: You're not?

PAUL: Look, Einstein figured out his theory on relativity in 1905 when he was only twenty-six! His doctoral thesis was only six frigging pages long!

NATE: Only six?

PAUL: Six!

NATE: Wow.

PAUL: Stephen Hawking was making headlines in the scientific community by the time he was twenty-four! Twenty-four! Cripes, even Newton had the good fortune to get hit on the head by that... that blasted apple before he turned thirty! Me? I've been slaving away building my career over picolinic acid and nickel trace compounds. (*PAUL straightens up.*) I have nothing to defend. (*Somberly.*) Constance and I were going to be married before I turned thirty...

NATE: (*striking the rail.*) Dammit, Paul!!! You're acting like some... some... self-pitying butthead! She left you over a year ago! A year ago, for God's sake!

PAUL: I know, but...

NATE: And she's not coming back! Ever! Now get that concept tightly secured and tucked away into that dented, thick skull of yours and keep it in there, all right?!

PAUL: Nate...

NATE: I don't know why you're still so hung up over...

PAUL: She...

NATE: I don't want to hear it...

PAUL: Constance...

NATE: Curve ball! What about Stephanie?

PAUL: St-steph?

NATE: Up the middle! Caught him looking! *Stee-rike!*
Yeah, Steph.

PAUL: (*chuckles.*) And what about the ever intelligent, yet oh so vivacious Miss Gardner?

NATE: Oh, ho! He cracks, he finally cracks! C'mon pal, you have to admit there is some... spontaneous, dare I say it, *chemistry* between the two of you...

PAUL: Is it that obvious, Herr Freud?

NATE: Ja, ja it ist, Herr Einstein. (*Pause.*) The bottom line, Paul: you're not only family, you're my best friend and I care a lot about you...

PAUL: Oh, joy. Rapture. I'm all tingly even.

NATE: I want to see you get better and start using that gifted mind of yours again --- so knock it off already, will ya? (*Changing tone.*) Besides, if you and Steph ever did get together, imagine how the children would turn out. Let's just hope they have *her* looks and *your* liver...

PAUL: But what if...?

NATE: Miss High-Falootin' Society comes back? *Pfaugh...* forget it! And if so, who cares? I sure as hell don't, and you shouldn't either. She doesn't deserve a fun, spontaneous, outgoing, chemically knowledgeable guy like you anyway...

PAUL: But...

NATE: Save it. All I want is for you and Steph to get together. Why?

PAUL: Why?

NATE: Because I'm tired of you moping around here like somebody took away your favorite chemistry set. Good God, you make "*The Sorrows of Young Werther*" seem like a cheerful romp through the countryside by comparison!

PAUL: Sorry, never read it.

NATE: Maybe that's a good thing, then. Anyway, spending time with Steph is, in my humblest of humble opinions...

PAUL: Ha!

NATE: The best thing to do... especially now that you've... y'know... gotten better.

(PAUL becomes noticeably uneasy, and then drinks.)

NATE: Sorry, I know you don't like to talk about your "enforced vacation" ...

PAUL: Too late...

NATE: But you've got to return to the world of the living someday. *(Elbows PAUL playfully.)* Aw, c'mon, it's just like those seizures you used to have when you were a kid... remember, sputtering and flopping around like a fish in public... *(Imitates.)*

PAUL: *(smirking.)* Oh God, don't remind me... Huh. Too bad I outgrew all of that just before break dancing became really popular...

NATE: See, see, you can joke about it now.

PAUL: Ooo. Whoopee. Gollygeewillikers.

NATE: Then it seemed like the end of the world. Now it's just... past history.

PAUL: Lord, I sure hope so...

NATE: Well, it's just like it was then. *(Pause.)* I know the stigma of being a mental out patient still gets to you...

PAUL: *(in mock disbelief.)* Nooo...

NATE: But you'll get over it eventually. Just like the seizures.

PAUL: *(still unconvinced.)* Hmp.

NATE: You took one helluva mental beating before you went into the hospital... others would have cracked completely from the strain in your situation... but *you* didn't.

PAUL: Hooray.

NATE: Besides, the doctors wouldn't have released you from the hospital so soon if they didn't think you had all of your marbles back, ah, proverbially speaking, that is...

PAUL: Hmpf.

NATE: Look, if you don't seize...

PAUL: Watch it, wordsmith...

NATE: Ooh... ouch... sorry... if you don't *grab* this opportunity with Steph now... better?

PAUL: Passable...

NATE: And let your... "delusions" of Constance get in the way; you're going to miss out on her forever. Think about it. Not only that, Steph's seen you at your absolute worst and she's *still* around! Now that's what I call a bonus!

PAUL: (*sarcastically.*) Ha. Ha.

NATE: Do you know what you really need?

PAUL: What?

NATE: A change in perspective.

PAUL: That's it?

NATE: That's it. You've got to start rejoining the human race some day pal, so why not rejoin it with Steph? Huh? Just think about it, okay. (*Shaking.*) Brrr... it suddenly got chilly out here.

PAUL: Euh.

NATE: I'm going back in. (*Starts to exit.*) You tagging along?

PAUL: No... no, you've given me something to think about. I'll... I'll be in in a while.

NATE: Good. Fine. Peachy. (*Continues to exit.*)

PAUL: Nate?

NATE: (*stopping.*) What?

PAUL: You're right.

NATE: About what?

PAUL: I am a self pitying butthead.

NATE: And?

PAUL: And a jackass.

NATE: You sure are.

PAUL: Sorry. *(Pause.)* Thanks.

NATE: *(smiling.)* Anytime, pal, anytime...

(PAUL leans back against the railing.)

(As NATE is leaving, STEPH enters.)

(STEPH is a fit young woman in her late twenties wearing glasses, running shoes, shorts, and a white T-shirt -- very laid back Californian. STEPH is the science geek's version of Betty Cooper.)

NATE: *(kissing STEPH on the cheek.)* Hey, Steph. Glad you could make it.

STEPH: Sorry I'm so late. Had to finish up some preliminary work in the lab. So, how is our birthday boy?

NATE: *(looks back, drops his voice.)* Uh... not too well, I'm afraid. He's really down in quite the funk right now... er, you wouldn't mind staying with him for a while, would you?

STEPH: I believe that your honed observational skills as a writer may have already deduced the answer to that one, o Mr. Nosy Matchmaker...

NATE: *(throwing his arms up.)* Hey, guilty as charged! I admit it! What can I say? I've got a good eye for the human condition. And *his* condition is lousy...

STEPH: No problem. I need to talk to Paul about work anyway.

NATE: Good.

STEPH: You go back in and take care of your guests. I'll let you know if... you know...

NATE: *(relieved.)* Thanks, I really appreciate it. *(Seeing some guests.)* Yo, Sam... Jess... wait up!!!

(NATE exits. STEPH joins PAUL.)

STEPH: Happy birthday... again, Paul.

PAUL: Hmmm? Oh... hi, Steph. You two finished conspiring against me yet?

STEPH: No, not yet. We're still arguing over on where and how to dispose the body properly. I opt for the hydrochloric acid and the bath tub; Nate's still holding out for a larger industrial-sized woodchipper.

PAUL: Ha, ha. Cute.

STEPH: *(settling in next to PAUL.)* Looks like Nate's put on quite the party this time. There are some *very* interesting people in there...

PAUL: A few...

STEPH: Paul...!

PAUL: Okay, yeah, but does anyone in there know what the Boltzmann Constant is used for... besides you and me that is?

(STEPH leans on the railing.)

STEPH: Oh, I don't know. Some of those TV science fiction writers really know their stuff.

PAUL: As far as the “space/time continuum” is concerned, I guess... Oooo-eeee-ooo!

(Pause.)

STEPH: Okay, Rocket Man, time to talk shop.

PAUL: Hit me, Madame Curie.

STEPH: I've come up with some new ideas for the project.

PAUL: Hmm...

STEPH: I thought I'd run some of the preliminaries by you now, then show you some of the applications in the lab tomorrow.

PAUL: Uh... I might not *be* in the lab tomorrow...

STEPH: Excuse me?

PAUL: I... ah...

STEPH: Paul, this could be the big break we've been looking for for the past year... if you're not going to be around...

PAUL: You guys really don't need me and...

STEPH: Like hell we don't! This was your baby from the start! We...

PAUL: Look, I really don't think...

STEPH: You haven't even heard me out yet.

(STEPH grabs PAUL by the shoulders, forcing him to face her.)

PAUL: *(indicating his drink.)* Hey, careful! This stuff's highly volatile!

STEPH: What's with you?

PAUL: *(breaking free.)* Oh, for crying out loud, Steph -- we're pissing around with transition metal complexes. It's not like we're... we're pioneers in cold fusion or anything!

STEPH: Paul...

(PAUL walks away, talking louder, more to himself.)

PAUL: Hell, we might just as well try to link picolinic acid with... with trivalent chromium!

STEPH: Been done. That scientist in Minnesota. Bemidji State.

PAUL: Aaagh! See!?! See!?!

STEPH: What we do isn't glamorous Paul, but it *is* important.

PAUL: Yeah, right.

STEPH: Look, you wouldn't have received such early recognition for your theories if that weren't true, you know that...

(PAUL sighs, looks down.)

STEPH: You've got to let go of your past mistakes, Paul. You've got to let go of the *past*... you've...

(PAUL twirls around with a raised hand.)

PAUL: Ut! I know what you're leading up to, so don't say it. Don't say it.

STEPH: Paul...

PAUL: No, you don't understand...

STEPH: I understand Constance left you for another man with a lot more money and influence...

PAUL: B-but...

STEPH: I also understand that she was a vain, self-centered, egotistical bitch who repeatedly walked all over you...

PAUL: *(raising his voice.)* Steph...

STEPH: *(soft, yet assertive.)* Paul.

(PAUL turns away and rests against the railing, scowling.)

STEPH: So who cares if you've just turned thirty? Big deal! You're a damn fine chemist with people around you who care a lot about you. Nate cares, Sid and the other guys at the lab care... I care.

PAUL: Hmph. You came in late and Sid and the guys didn't even bother to show up.

STEPH: Sid's daughter had a piano recital; you know how much she means to him...

PAUL: Yeah, I know... great kid.

STEPH: *And* tonight's dart league night for the others. Need I say more?

PAUL: Nope. Hmpf.

STEPH: And I had to stay late. I was having problems adding the bidentate ligand to the silicon radical.

PAUL: That shouldn't have been a problem.

STEPH: Well, the bipyridine...

PAUL: (*straightening up.*) Bipyridine? I told you to use ethylenediamine.

STEPH: Adding the ethyl-d changed the coordination number of the silicon.

PAUL: Damn!

STEPH: The bipyridine didn't.

PAUL: It didn't?

STEPH: It didn't.

PAUL: Really? Hm. (*Pause.*) How did you come by to using the bipyridine?

STEPH: I was really getting frustrated with all of the negative results we've been getting lately, so I went back to your original grant proposal notes and there it was, scribbled in the margin, your formula to use bipyridine.

PAUL: Huh. That was something I was screwing around with before I met... ah... I'd completely forgotten all about that. (*Pause.*) What time will you be in tomorrow?

STEPH: (*smiling.*) Eight.

PAUL: You better be, it looks like we've got a lot of work to do.

STEPH: Great!

PAUL: Great.

STEPH: Now that that is settled, I'm going back in to see... um... to see how Nate is doing...

PAUL: A bit star struck?

STEPH: Just a touch, oh, yeah. There are guys in there I used to have major crushes on when I was a teenager and they still look great.

PAUL: Even now when they're grey and balding?

STEPH: *Especially* now that they're grey and balding. Rrrr.

PAUL: Heh.

STEPH: I know you're kinda used to it and all, but me...? Do you know how many people in there have been on the cover of *People* magazine in that past year alone?

PAUL: I dunno. Two? Three?

STEPH: Try six. And none of them on the "10 Worst Dressed List," either, I might add. (*Motioning to his glass.*) Care for another?

(The CONSTANCE light comes back on.)

(PAUL notices the light, stares at it.)

STEPH: (*trying to see what PAUL is staring at.*) Paul? What's wrong? Is something out there?

PAUL: (*turning back.*) No. Nothing at all... it's, it's nothing. Really.

STEPH: Okay.

(PAUL looks warily at his glass, and then finishes his drink.)

PAUL: (*Handing STEPH the glass.*) Thanks.

(STEPH exits with a smile. PAUL looks back at the light confused. Through the "mists" emerges CONSTANCE "walking" across the water. CONSTANCE climbs onto the deck.)

PAUL: Omigod... Constance?

CONSTANCE: I've come back, Paul.

PAUL: *(drawing back.)* What the hell is this? You can't be here!

(PAUL turns away from CONSTANCE.)

CONSTANCE: I am.

PAUL: Now I know I've had too much to drink.

(PAUL turns to see if CONSTANCE is still there, and upon finding out she is, turns back wincing as if in pain.)

PAUL: *(appealing to Mr. Quervo, wherever he may be:)* Jose, you've never done this to me before!

CONSTANCE: Tequila with cranberry juice again?

PAUL: My favorite, yet most mind numbing undergrad concoction, what else?

CONSTANCE: Yech. So, what have you been up to this past year?

PAUL: Hmph!

CONSTANCE: How is your research going along? Did you ever synthesize... or whatever... that silly notion of yours of turning... what was it... sand... into plastic?

PAUL: Gee, thank you so much very for asking. No, I never did. I wasted all of my valuable research time traipsing all over the world wining and dining you. And where did that get me? A stiff shrift at the altar, that's what!

CONSTANCE: (*taking a step forward.*) Paul... please, don't be bitter.

PAUL: *ME!?! Bitter!?! Naw, I'm not bitter. How could I be bitter? Nope, sorry, you must have me confused with some other poor delusional schmuck whose heart you've ripped out and trampled upon within the past year or so...*

CONSTANCE: Paul...

PAUL: For your information the research is going great! Steph has been a great asset to the team and...

CONSTANCE: But she doesn't always do what she's told, does she?

PAUL: (*turning.*) Excuse me?

CONSTANCE: That incident with the ethyl-dia-whatever.

PAUL: *Ethylenediamine.* She did try that at first, and upon finding it didn't work...

CONSTANCE: She lifted the solution from your notes!

PAUL: That's why I leave them there! She's my lab assistant, for crying out loud! What she did shows initiative... ingenuity...

CONSTANCE: I think she's trying to undermine your authority. I really do. I think she's trying to take over your project!

PAUL: Oh, please...

CONSTANCE: And take all of the credit for herself!

PAUL: That's... that's crazy!

CONSTANCE: I'm just concerned about your future, that's all.

PAUL: *(snorts.) Rrrrrright.*

CONSTANCE: I've changed Paul, really, I have.

PAUL: Really?

CONSTANCE: Really.

PAUL: Hmph! I remember the time you told me that I had changed, that you couldn't bear to be seen in public with me anymore. That we were no longer "compatible." It was conveniently the same time my career started floundering and you left me for that... that other bozo!

CONSTANCE: Skip was a very sensitive man.

PAUL: "Skip?" "*SKIP!?!*" What the hell kind of name is "*Skip!?*"

CONSTANCE: Now Paul...

PAUL: You left me for a guy named "*Skip?*" Oh, great, and to think I spent all that time in therapy as a guest of the State thinking you had left me for a guy named... Antoine... or Fernando... or... or... Trump!

CONSTANCE: At least Skip was there when I needed him.

(Pause.)

PAUL: *(sighing.)* I'm sorry. My work was... *IS...* very important to me. *(Turning away.)* What the hell am I doing!?

(CONSTANCE starts crying softly. PAUL hesitates, and then puts his hands on her shoulder and holds her for a moment as she cries. Approaching footsteps are heard offstage. PAUL draws back, still "holding" onto CONSTANCE.)

(STEPH enters carrying two drinks. PAUL holds still as CONSTANCE slips out of his grip and exits the stage.)

(Lighting returns to normal.)

STEPH: *(concerned.)* Paul?

(PAUL, still "holding" CONSTANCE, turns to STEPH. Realizing what he must look like, PAUL tries to cover for himself by brushing himself off.)

PAUL: Heh... heh. Damn bugs. Heh.

STEPH: Nate said to give this to you... I think its cranberry juice. Straight up. I hope...

PAUL: *(taking the glass.)* Great, thanks! *(Pause.)* Uh... how's Nate doing?

(PAUL quickly downs a swallow. STEPH stands next to PAUL by the railing.)

STEPH: Oh, Nate's doing fine. He's cornered some other poor guy in the kitchen and the two of them are talking about some dysfunctional family, shucking corn, and burying dead babies out in the back forty. And I thought Nate's idea with the wood-chipper was scary. Brrr. Really weird off-the-wall stuff.

PAUL: That's Nate and American pop culture for ya...

STEPH: Anyway, here's a thought: now that we have the configuration we want in the silicon radical, we could go ahead and add our substituting group.

PAUL: What's going to ensure complete mono-substitution?

STEPH: We'll add a different metal complex that will immediately bond with the ligand coming off the silicon.

PAUL: No fear of substituting onto the metal ion?

STEPH: There may be some, but the silicon substitution should be favored.

(PAUL shrugs and nods in a well-it-might-work fashion.)

PAUL: What else you got?

STEPH: By adding your catalyst...

PAUL: Ah, the other lifetime achievement in futility...

STEPH: We should be able to follow the guidelines outlined in your grant proposal.

PAUL: Hmm. *(Pause.)* If I remember my original notes right, we shouldn't have to worry much about inversion of configuration with that bipyridine there.

STEPH: No.

PAUL: *(thinks for a bit, then...)* Huh, it seems do-able. It really does...

STEPH: It's not Nobel Prize material...

PAUL: *(building.)* No, but if it can help isolate that silicon radical, we might be able to get that original research grant renewed. Heck, I know we could...

STEPH: *(stepping in closer.)* And then what?

PAUL: Then we can break this whole thing wide open and... and... yes, I think it can be done!

STEPH: A few minutes ago you didn't seem to care about any of this.

PAUL: That's because for the past two years I didn't think any of my original research could be completed... but now... Huh.

STEPH: What?

PAUL: "A change in perspective," indeed.

STEPH: What?

PAUL: Never mind. *(PAUL faces STEPH.)* I guess... I guess I owe it all to you.

STEPH: Yes, yes you do. We make a good team.

PAUL: Yeah, I guess we do.

(Pause.)

(The ethereal light returns with CONSTANCE.)

PAUL: Uh... there's a little Italian restaurant downtown, uh, that is if you'd care to join me for dinner tomorrow night. That is, of course, if you're not...

STEPH & CONSTANCE: *(together.)* I'd love to.

(PAUL notices the light, and turns to see CONSTANCE approaching.)

PAUL: Constance?

STEPH: What about her?

(PAUL turns back to STEPH.)

PAUL: What?

STEPH: You just looked that way... *(STEPH points.)* And muttered, "Constance."

PAUL: I did? Ah...

CONSTANCE: *(sounding hurt.)* Our restaurant?

(PAUL turns to CONSTANCE.)

STEPH: What's wrong?

PAUL: Nothing. It's... nothing.

CONSTANCE: That's where you proposed to *me*.

PAUL: Yes, it is.

STEPH: What is? Are you feeling all right, Paul? You're shaking. You look ill.

(CONSTANCE comes up from behind PAUL and caresses PAUL's shoulders, back, and sides.)

PAUL: Uh... it's... it's the cranberry juice... and tequila. Empty stomach. I'll be fine, really.

(PAUL stomps away, placing STEPH between CONSTANCE and himself. STEPH turns to face PAUL.)

(CONSTANCE drifts offstage the way she came.)

(Lights return to normal.)

PAUL: The metal complex.

STEPH: What?

PAUL: The metal complex. What do you have in mind?

STEPH: Oh... um... I thought perhaps tetraaquovanadium III...

PAUL: All right, but why not a six coordinate ion?

STEPH: Because I've worked with TAV III before... it's like an old friend.

(PAUL laughs.)

STEPH: What's so funny? What?

PAUL: *(grinning.)* I used to have a professor in my undergrad days who always talked like that.

STEPH: *(smiling.)* Me too. Mine would compare people's love lives to electro negativities.

PAUL: *(taking a step towards STEPH.)* Mine would compare a ligand field splitting with getting married. If the pairing energy was less than the activation energy, one electron would pair up, marry another.

STEPH: *(As she moves in closer to PAUL.)* And if the pairing energy was too great, the electron would go into a different orbital and stay single.

PAUL: Exactly. That's what helped get me through the final.

(STEPH smiles. Another Moment passes.)

STEPH: *(folding her arms in front of herself, shaking slightly.)* There's a bit of a chill out here tonight...

PAUL: There is.

STEPH: I'm going to my car for my jacket. Would you like yours from the house?

PAUL: Yes, please.

(STEPH smiles, then leaves.)

(PAUL watches STEPH leave, then turns back smiling.)

PAUL: Oboy.

(CONSTANCE drifts back on stage across the waters with the usual light accompaniment.)

CONSTANCE: A bit plain isn't she? She could stand to lose some weight.

PAUL: What?!

CONSTANCE: Yes, she definitely needs to lose some weight. See those legs? Tsk.

(PAUL turns away.)

CONSTANCE: She's not quite the demure woman your mother always hoped you'd eventually find.

(PAUL stops, and lowers his head.)

CONSTANCE: I heard Ann passed away while you were... in the hospital. Pity. I always did like your mother. She was so level-headed. So full of life.

PAUL: The circumstances, of my losing everything, and your... walking out on me before the wedding... and my being... committed... were too much for Mom. She always thought I should have married you. *(Pause.)* And you're right, Mom never would have approved of Steph; she is a bit... rough around the edges.

CONSTANCE: She's a sleaze! A tramp!

PAUL: Excuse me?

CONSTANCE: Is that what you want, Paul?

PAUL: Ye... I don't know. I don't know what I want anymore...

CONSTANCE: You really do like her, don't you?

PAUL: Yes. Yes I do. A lot.

CONSTANCE: But can she make you happy, Paul? Truly, truly happy?

PAUL: It seems so right, but...

CONSTANCE: (*moving closer to PAUL.*) Do you remember the parties we went to? How well we danced in the moonlight? Does Steph dance?

PAUL: Down at the bar sometimes on Saturday nights.

CONSTANCE: Hmpf. Really? The same one your lab buddies play darts at, right?

PAUL: Right.

CONSTANCE: The same guys who can't bear to miss a night of tossing pointed projectiles at a plastic target even to see you on your birthday?

PAUL: Yeah.

CONSTANCE: Well, she definitely wouldn't travel well in our circles, that's for sure. Remember the yachts, Paul? The fine cuisine? The famous and powerful people? Our trip to Europe? That first night we spent in Venice? The hotel? What we did? Remember, Paul? What we did?

PAUL: I... I... *(PAUL noticeably starts to shake.)*

(STEPH enters. CONSTANCE sees STEPH and disappears again along with the ethereal light. PAUL does not notice STEPH as she watches him.)

PAUL: *(pacing.)* This is crazy! I've been out of the hospital for over two months now and... But God, she seems so real!

(STEPH reaches out and hands PAUL his jacket. PAUL looks up, takes it, and puts it on.)

PAUL: Steph, I...

(STEPH reaches out and puts a finger against PAUL's lips.)

STEPH: Shhh... I think I know what's happening... don't say anything...

(They become very close. They look into each other's eyes, and look as if they may kiss.)

(The ethereal light returns.)

CONSTANCE: *(as she enters on stage.)* Paul! *(Pause.)*
Come back to ME, Paul!

(PAUL stops and looks up.)

(STEPH looks at PAUL.)

STEPH: What?

PAUL: Sorry... I...

(PAUL looks around nervously. They try to kiss again.)

CONSTANCE: PAUL!!!

(PAUL stops and turns to CONSTANCE.)

STEPH: Paul, what's wrong? Paul?

(PAUL looks at CONSTANCE, then STEPH, then back at CONSTANCE. PAUL starts to move towards CONSTANCE. STEPH grabs PAUL's hand.)

STEPH: Paul, what is it?

(PAUL looks at STEPH.)

PAUL: Constance...

CONSTANCE: Come back to *me*, Paul! To me! *Our* love is real!

(PAUL breaks free of STEPH and goes to CONSTANCE's open arms. STEPH lunges after PAUL.)

STEPH: PAUL!!!

(STEPH grabs PAUL by the shoulders, turning him to face her. PAUL pushes STEPH away and embraces CONSTANCE.)

STEPH: Paul, what's wrong!? Paul? Omigod. Nate! Nate!

(STEPH starts to run off the deck off stage.)

CONSTANCE: That's it, my love... kiss me... kiss me now... we'll go out into the water... I'll be yours... forever...

(STEPH stops and looks back.)

PAUL: *(in a daze)*. Yes, forever...

(They kiss and CONSTANCE starts to lead PAUL off the end of the deck into the water.)

STEPH: Paul... wait! Wait! Pairing energy!

(PAUL stops confused. CONSTANCE still tries to lead him into the water.)

STEPH: Pairing energy, Paul!

PAUL: Whuh...?

STEPH: Remember what you said earlier, about pairing energy?

PAUL: Yes, but I...

STEPH: Do you think a social climbing airhead like Constance could truly understand what we were talking about earlier?

PAUL: N-no, but...

STEPH: Exactly! Because she is not part of your world, Paul! *Our* world! Never has been, never will be! She's a fraud, Paul! A fake!

PAUL: W-what?

CONSTANCE: *(sounding more and more like her "true" self.)* It's a trick, Paul. Quickly, join me in the water... come on, let's go...

PAUL: I...

STEPH: Your relationship with Constance was like the splitting ligand field -- you weren't compatible, so when you got too close to her she split on you! Think about it! Use that gifted intellect of yours and reason this through!

CONSTANCE: *(shrilly.)* Come on, Paul... or we'll be late!
There is so much to do and so little time to do it...

PAUL: C-constance?

STEPH: *(turning PAUL to face her, leading him away from the edge.)* No, not Constance... she's gone, remember? She's off in her own orbital... remember?

PAUL: Yes... orbital... single... alone...

STEPH: That's it! And what are we? Come on, Paul, what are we?

CONSTANCE: No, Paul! Don't listen to her... don't...

PAUL: We're... comparable... compatible... we're... we're... less activated... we're... we're...

STEPH: Together, Paul... *we're* together. Right here, right now. *We're* together. She's nowhere near us.

PAUL: Yes... yes, we are...

CONSTANCE: *(as she starts drifting away.)* No... don't let it end like this, Paul! Please, don't! I love you! I love you!!
Nooo!!! (A flash of light - CONSTANCE exits as if she had been violently and utterly dispelled.)

PAUL: No. No. You... she... Constance... never did... love me. I see that now... I... Oh, God, Steph... I'm so sorry. I've been so blind. So... thank y...

(PAUL starts shaking violently, collapsing into a seizure.)

STEPH: Omigod! Paul! *(Shouting.)* Nate!

PAUL: Gnnh! Gnnh! Gnhh!

STEPH: *(cradling him.)* Shh, shh, everything's going to be all right. Shh, I'm here Paul, I'm here...

(PAUL tries to nod and rides the seizure out as STEPH continues to comfort him. Finally...)

PAUL: *(clearly embarrassed, yet still very weak.)* S-steph...? I'm sorry, I...

STEPH: Oh, just shut up and kiss me, Paul.

(PAUL smiles weakly and they kiss.)

(NATE rushes on-stage.)

NATE: Steph, someone said they'd heard... *(He sees the two kissing, stops.)* Oh. *(STEPH, without looking, waves him away.)* Heh. Um... never mind. *(He smiles, then heads back the way he came as...)*

(The lights slowly fade to...)

(Blackout.)

END OF PLAY

