

DEAD MAN'S BLUFF

A Thriller by Mario Fratti
Copyright © 1978/1981

Copyright © 1978 by Mario Fratti, all rights reserved. Caution, professionals and amateurs are hereby warned that Fratti's plays are subject to a royalty. They are fully protected under the copyright laws of the United States of America, and all other countries of the Copyright Union. All rights, including professional, amateur, motion pictures, recitation, lecturing, public reading, radio broadcasting, television and the rights of translation into foreign languages are strictly reserved. Royalty for amateur, stock, repertory, off-Broadway, touring companies, first-class legitimate theatre, radio, television and motion picture production will be quoted on application to Mario Fratti, 145 West 55th Street, New York, New York 10019. Copying from the books in whole or in part is strictly forbidden by law and the right of performance is not transferable. Due authorship credit must be given on all programs, printing and advertising for the play.

Cast of Characters

STEFAN: a writer in his early forties he has a beard
KERMIT: his friend, a journalist
ZENA: Stefan's wife, in her early thirties.
PAULA: a neighbor; Zena's friend; in her early twenties
AGENT
INSPECTOR
THE PLACE: New York City. 1970s.

Scene I

The living room of an attractive and tastefully furnished apartment. Stage left, window and two doors. Two windows upstage. In the right corner upstage, a desk, bookcases, a door.
Downstage, a table, telephone, sofa and armchair.
The Agent is already on stage at curtain. He wears a trench coat and hat. He pours a powder into a bottle of cognac and mixes it with the contents. Then he goes upstage right and searches in one of the drawers of the desk. He scrutinizes papers and documents. Sound of a key in the lock. He goes quickly and silently to window left, and goes out of it into the apartment next door. Zena enters followed by Paula and Kermit.
Zena wears a simple black dress, Paula and Kermit solicitously help Zena into a chair.
Silence.

KERMIT: How about a brandy? *(Zena shakes her head.)*
PAULA *(picking up the bottle before Kermit can touch it.):* No, not this one. It was Stefan's special bottle ... *(Kermit pours himself a short drink from another bottle.)* He was the only one who drank from this bottle. *(Paula strokes the bottle gently and replaces it carefully. She then walks towards window stage left.)*
ZENA *(raising her voice, compelling):* Stay away from that window! Stay away! *(Paula turns to her frightened. She moves away from the window)* Away from ghosts and memories! *(She takes off her gloves and puts them aside with her bag. She gets up and begins to pace nervously.)*
PAULA *(timidly):* Would you like to stay with me, downstairs?
KERMIT: Or at my place? I could stay here for a few days, until you decide... *(Zena is absorbed in her own thoughts, and doesn't react. Kermit goes to the window, stage left.)*
ZENA *(seeing this):* Please don't! I can't bear to see anyone at that window!
KERMIT: *(ignoring Zena)* It's been left open. *(To Zena)* Do

you want me to close it?
ZENA: Do whatever you want!
(Showing great tension, she pours herself some sherry and drinks.)
KERMIT *(inspecting the window carefully); looking up):* No prints, no trace...
ZENA: Close it! Oh please close it!
(They all sit in silence. No one can think of anything to say.)
PAULA: Can I get you something?
ZENA: No.
PAULA: A cup of tea?
ZENA: No, thank you.
KERMIT: No, thanks.
(Silence. Paula and Kermit are uncomfortable, wanting to console Zena, yet not knowing what to say or do.)
ZENA: I shouldn't have left him here, alone.
KERMIT: It wasn't the first time.
ZENA: He seemed strange when he said goodbye at the airport. Remote, as if he wasn't there.
PAULA: Did he kiss you?
ZENA: Just the corner of my mouth, absent-minded, casual...
PAULA *(timidly):* Platonic...almost?
ZENA: The kind of kiss you give your wife after six years ...
KERMIT: You two were always together: theater, concerts, traveling. Why didn't he go to California with you?
ZENA: He had to work on his book, he told me. His manuscript is on his desk—up to page 97. His last page, his final curtain.
KERMIT: He was writing, then. Working, dedicated. It doesn't sound like a man ready to commit suicide.
ZENA: He was so young and full of life.
KERMIT *(to Paula):* When the inspector mentioned suicide, you seemed surprised. Why?
PAULA: Because I feel the way Zena does. He was not a man who would take his own life.
KERMIT: When did you find out?
PAULA: Late afternoon. I sent Zena a fax immediately. *(She looks to Zena for confirmation.)*
ZENA: I wasn't at my sister's. I heard it on the radio...
(Silence. They look at each other.)
KERMIT *(to Zena):* A man has to die to have such a funeral. *(Zena and Paula stare at him in surprise.)*
PAULA: Obviously!
KERMIT *(embarrassed):* I mean... to find out how many friends he has and how much they care. *(Zena looks at him again, puzzled. Kermit is more embarrassed)* I

mean—we all saw it today, how much love and respect there was for him ...
(The sound of a key in the lock interrupts him. There is surprise and tension. Kermit starts for the door. Enter Stefan, the “deceased”, with two suitcases. Zena screams, terrified and hysterical. She backs into a corner. Paula, very, frightened, remains where she is, frozen. Kermit, not believing his eyes, approaches Stefan and touches his arm.)
KERMIT: Stefan ...
STEFAN: Hi! How come you're all here? What's wrong?
KERMIT *(continues to hold on to Stefan, as if to make sure)*: Can it be? Is it really you?
STEFAN: Who else? Why? *(He starts to go to the two women, but Zena screams again. Kermit holds him back.)*
KERMIT: Wait a moment. Let's calm down!
STEFAN *(to Zena)*: Why are you dressed like that, in mourning? Did your sister...?
ZENA: No! No! It's not possible!
STEFAN: What's happened? What's this all about? *(a silence.)*
KERMIT *(slowly, hesitatingly)*: We've just come back from... your funeral. *(Stefan gives a startled laugh. He puts down the suitcase while the others continue to stare at him in disbelief.)* Sit down. *(Stefan hesitates and looks at them questioningly to see if they are joking or perhaps have gone mad.)* Come on. Sit down here and we'll try to figure this out.
(Stefan finally decides to sit down next to Kermit.) Where have you been?
STEFAN: You first. What is this story about a funeral? *(Kermit gives him a newspaper pointing out a column. Stefan reads with amazement.)* Good Lord! And you, all three of you! You identified the body? You recognized me? *(The others laugh nervously and Kermit nods. The two women continue to stare at Stefan as if he were a ghost.)* I would have thought you'd know me better than that! *(To his wife)* At least you, Zena! *(Kermit motions Zena to come closer. She is still frightened. She is hesitant and uncertain.)*
KERMIT *(to Zena)*: It's Stefan ... Your husband.
STEFAN: Give her a chance to accept this, and to calm down. You, Paula, take my hand, here... and tell her it's really me—alive. *(Paula approaches him timidly and touches his hand.)* Well? Of course it's me! *(Paula looks at Zena and nods. Zena goes to him cautiously; then finally, embraces him.)*
STEFAN: Tell me about the funeral, then I'll tell my story. This has been the strangest week in my life!
KERMIT *(to Paula)*: Go ahead, Paula.
PAULA: I was home. Tuesday. At about three, I heard all this noise and commotion from the street. I looked out the window. Down there, in the courtyard. there was a crowd surrounding a body. I went downstairs to see and...
STEFAN: What did you see?
PAULA: You!
KERMIT: Someone in your clothes... *(Looks inside Stefan's jacket)* Someone who uses your tailor....And your papers!
(Stefan takes out his wallet and shows his papers.)
PAULA: The wallet was just like yours, same papers. I recognized them, your picture...
STEFAN *(amazed)*: How about his face? His hands?

PAULA: Identical!
KERMIT: The same beard, the same head. A little blood on the right temple where your head struck the—*(Stefan puts his hand to his temple; Kermit smiles)* where that guy hit his head when he fell.
STEFAN: From that window?
KERMIT: Exactly.
STEFAN: Me?
KERMIT: You. *(Stefan touches himself jokingly, to make sure he is still there.)*
ZENA: I heard it over the radio and left immediately.
STEFAN: And you identified me?
ZENA: Yes—it was you—exactly like you. *(a sudden idea)* Oh my God, your brother?
STEFAN: Impossible.
ZENA: Why? It must be. Only a twin could have fooled me. It's the only explanation.
STEFAN: Impossible.
KERMIT: How can you be so sure?
STEFAN: When did he die, this double of mine?
KERMIT: Tuesday afternoon.
PAULA: At two forty-five.
STEFAN: Tuesday evening I had dinner with my brother.
ZENA: Where?
STEFAN: In Budapest.
(They are all silent. Paula, Zena and Kermit are amazed. Things are becoming more complicated.)
ZENA: When did you leave? Why didn't you let me know?
STEFAN: I faxed to you in California. At your sister's.
ZENA *(guilty, unsure)*: I didn't receive it... I wasn't told...
STEFAN: I sent it from here, as soon as I got the call.
ZENA: What call?
STEFAN: On Monday, I was at my desk, writing *(points to desk)*, when the phone rang. It was a call from Budapest. My mother's personal physician, telling me she was dying, I had to leave immediately.
ZENA: How is she?
STEFAN: In the best of health. I faxed the details to you. I took the first plane to Budapest. I knocked at their door in the greatest anxiety. For my mother and brother it was like a bolt out of the blue. They had no idea what it was all about. They were delighted to see me, of course. And they are both quite well. *(Goes to the bar)*
KERMIT: What about the doctor?
STEFAN: He swore he hadn't called me! *(To Zena)* I stayed three days. And now ... here I am back at home!
KERMIT: In the meantime...
STEFAN: My alleged “double” goes out the window!
KERMIT *(suspiciously)*: Are you sure the call was from Budapest?
STEFAN: So I was told.
KERMIT: You recognized the doctor's voice?
STEFAN: He spoke very quickly... and not very long. It seemed to be his voice. It never occurred to me that maybe...
KERMIT: A few fast words, then he hung up to prevent you from realizing that it was fake!
STEFAN: I hadn't thought about it in that way, but I suppose anything is possible. *(He pours himself a brandy from his special bottle.)* Want a drink?
KERMIT: No, thanks.

[The play continues]