

# PHOBIA FACTORY

## By Patrick Rainville Dorn

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## CHARACTERS

(5 M, 13 F, plus 20 minor characters, doubling recommended)  
(In order of appearance)

### PHOBIA FACTORY STAFF

AL ARMER (M)	Computer whiz
NURSE TARTLE (F)	Psychiatric nurse and assistant
DOCTOR KILDARE (F)	Runs the Phobia Factory

### CUSTOMERS/PATIENTS

BAILEY (F)	Timid individual
VAL (M)	Thinks he's brave
CARLOTTA (F)	Fashion conscious mall crawler
BARB (F)	Rebel, mentally unbalanced

### VIRTUAL CHARACTERS

VIRTUAL NURSE TARTLE (F)	Cortex counterpart
VIRTUAL VAL (M)	Cortex counterpart
VIRTUAL CARLOTTA (F)	Cortex counterpart
VIRTUAL BAILEY (F)	Cortex counterpart
VIRTUAL DR. KILDARE (F)	Cortex counterpart

### CORTEX CREATURES

WORM PERSON ONE (F or M)	Slimy
WORM PERSON TWO (F or M)	Slippery
WORM PERSON THREE (F or M)	Icky
BIRD ONE (F or M)	Hungry for worms
BIRD TWO (F or M)	Hungry for worms

BIRD THREE (F or M)	Hungry for worms
BABY BIRD (F or M)	Hungry for worms
SALES ASSOCIATE (F or M)	Hosts a fashion show
FASHION POLICE ONE (F or M)	Gaudily garbed guard
FASHION POLICE TWO (F or M)	Gaudily garbed guard
FASHION GEEK ONE (F or M)	Outlandish dresser
FASHION GEEK TWO (F or M)	So outlandish she's inlandish
MOTHER (F)	High society
ESSAY PART ONE (F or M)	Introduction
ESSAY PART TWO (F or M)	Body of essay
ESSAY PART THREE (F or M)	Body of essay
ESSAY PART FOUR (F or M)	Body of essay
ESSAY PART FIVE (F or M)	Conclusion
CLOWN ONE (F or M)	A scary clown
CLOWN TWO (F or M)	Another, even scarier
CLOWN THREE (F or M)	Yet another, also scary
CLOWN FOUR (F or M)	How many are there?
CLOWN FIVE (F or M)	Oh, just five, and this one is really scary
XENOPHOBIA (F)	Warrior princess, afraid of strangers
ARACHNIA (F)	Not so super hero, afraid of spiders
CORTEX QUEEN (F)	Wicked, evil, cruel, etc.

LONE STRANGER (M)

Gunfighter, touchy about being touched

SANTA CLAUSTROPHOBIA (M)

Knows if you've been naughty or nice

## SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

The action of the play is continuous, taking place in the *Phobia Factory*, and in the mind of the patients. There is one intermission.

*Dedication: To my son Jacob and Ms. Amberg's drama class at Green Mountain High School, who helped bring my funniest nightmares to life.*

## PRODUCTION NOTES

### PROPERTIES

ONSTAGE: Desk with computer on top and screwdriver in drawer, three chairs with headphones attached. Cortex panel of blinking lights.

BROUGHT ON: Clipboard, watch (NURSE); handkerchief, gummy worm (DR. KILDARE); rolling chair, bird whistle, giant pencil; clown mask, rat-faced doll baby in blanket (VIRTUAL NURSE); strips of colorful cloth, rolling clothes rack filled with outrageous costumes (FASHION POLICE); handkerchief (AL); Frisbee (XENOPHOBIA) balloon animal or balloon sword, bucket of confetti (CLOWN); cap gun or water pistol (LONE STRANGER); chair (FASHION POLICE); candy canes (SANTA CLAUSTROPHOBIA); magic wand, screwdriver (CORTEX QUEEN).

RAT-FACED BABY: Any kind of scary head will do. Take a basic doll baby, and a stuffed animal of a predator or rodent, or even a shark. Carefully remove the stuffed head, take out most of the stuffing, and fit over doll baby's head.

## COSTUMES

AL ARMER could wear dress shirt and tie. NURSE TARTLE could wear a nurse's uniform. DR. KILDARE wears a white lab coat. CARLOTTA should be very fashionably dress. BARB wears all black, preferable with metal accessories. BAILEY and VAL are dressed in "normal" high school attire. VIRTUAL characters should have clothing identical to their real-world counterparts. WORM PEOPLE can be dressed in gray sweats, preferably with gray gloves and socks. BIRDS can have basic wings and a beaked headdress. Or, if resources allow , have marionette/stick puppet birds, operated by actors dressed totally in black. SALES ASSOCIATE wears retail uniform. FASHION POLICE are outrageously dressed, possibly with hints of uniform underneath. FASHION GEEKS have very specific costumes. See playbook for descriptions. MOTHER is upper class and high society. She may have a broad hat, lots of feathers, perhaps some furs. She must be able to perform martial arts moves, however, even if it means kicking off her high heels. ESSAY PARTS wear foam board "sandwich boards," painted to look like notebook paper, front and back. CLOWNS can wear any type of clown attire, but their faces should look very scary, menacing and mean. XENOPHOBIA can be dressed in something out of a Wagnerian Opera or Roman Coliseum, so long as it is exotic and Amazon-like, and allows her to move freely. ARACHNIA is dressed like a black widow spider, with black leotard and tights, four extra arms which may be strung together on each side and linked to the real arms so they move as one. Black hood, glove and slippers. CORTEX QUEEN wears a large, floor-length robe, the scarier the better, and a half-mask, covering her upper face and hair. The mask should have an evil expression. LONE STRANGER is dressed like a comic book gunfighter. SANTA CLAUSTROPHOBIA wears a baggy Santa suit and hat, no beard, possibly a cigar stub in his mouth.

## ACITON, FIGHT and CHASE SCENES

Please make every effort to stage action scenes carefully, to eliminate all possibility of injury to the actors. Plan each move, rehearse in slow motion. Add padding or protective clothing as needed. Though injury is unlikely in the "chomping machine" scene with the ESSAY PARTS, timing will be very important.

## SOUND EFFECTS

Sound of Cortex malfunctioning should include electrical short circuit, sparks and conclude with a loud bang.

## LIGHTING and THE CORTEX

Additional EXTRAS may be added to the Cortex scenes, including more Worm People, Birds, and Fashion Police. Doubling is also recommended, as extra Worm People, Birds and Fashion Police could also play other Cortex Creatures, including Lone Stranger, Santa Claustrophobia, Clowns, Essay Parts, etc.

## CORTEX QUEEN UNMASKED

There are a couple of ways to achieve the surprise ending. The first way would be to have separate actresses play BARB and CORTEX QUEEN. After BARB is carried OFFSTAGE at the end of ACT TWO, she could quickly change into CORTEX QUEEN's robe and mask and return for the final moment. Another way to achieve the effect would be to have a double or a dummy take over the unconscious BARB at intermission so BARB can play CORTEX QUEEN throughout.

## THE PHOBIAS

Ablutophobia (uh-blue-toe-foe-bee-uh) fear of water or bathing  
Acousticophobia (uh-koo-stick-oh-foe-bee-uh) fear of loud noises  
Acrophobia (ack-row-foe-bee-uh) fear of heights  
Agoraphobia (uh-gore-uh-foe-bee-uh) fear of open spaces  
Aichmophobia (ache-mow-foe-bee-uh) fear of sharp or pointed objects  
Arachibutyrophobia (uh-rack-ee-beauty-row-foe-bee-uh) fear of having peanut butter stuck to the roof of your mouth  
Arachnophobia (uh-rack-no-foe-bee-uh) fear of spiders  
Cacophobia (kackoh-foe-bee-uh) fear of ugliness  
Claustrophobia (claws-troe-foe-bee-uh) fear of enclosed spaces  
Chiraptophobia (cheer-ap-toe-foe-bee-uh) fear of being touched  
Glossophobia (gloss-oh-foe-bee-uh) fear of speaking in public  
Phobophobia (foe-bow-foe-bee-uh) fear of phobias  
Xenophobia (zee-no-foe-bee-us) fear of strangers

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**ACT I**

**SETTING:** EXTREME DOWN RIGHT is the Phobia Factory, containing a desk, an office chair, and three matching high-backed arm chairs. There's a laptop computer on the desk. Stereo headphones rest on the chairs, and appear to be "plugged" into the backs of the chairs. Against the back wall is the cortex, an imposing-looking bank of dials, buttons and blinking lights. The STAGE AREA is completely empty. If possible, the STAGE should be lit separately from the Phobia Factory.

**AT RISE:** AL ARMER sits at the desk EXTREME DOWN RIGHT, typing furiously on the computer. NURSE TARTLE enters right. SHE carries a clipboard. SHE watches AL for a moment, then decides to interrupt.

NURSE TARTLE: Mr. Armer. . .

*(AL continues to type, doesn't look up.)*

Mr. Armer

AL: Not now.

NURSE TARTLE: Mr. Armer. . . Doctor Kildare wants to know -

AL: *(Holds up one finger but keeps his eyes on the computer screen.)* Wait.

NURSE TARTLE: The doctor needs to see you right now -

AL: *(stands, shouts)* No! It's not ready yet! All right? *(regains composure)* I'm sorry, Nurse Tartle. You didn't deserve that. Please forgive my rudeness.

NURSE TARTLE: I understand. We're all under a lot of pressure to be ready for today's opening of the Phobia Factory.

AL: It's just that this final programming phase of the Cortex interface is particularly delicate. I wish we could have had a few more weeks of beta testing.

NURSE TARTLE: We've all been working around the clock for days.

AL: Tell me about it. Last night I plugged into the Cortex to run a diagnostic on the environmental controls sub-routines and almost dozed off!

NURSE TARTLE: No!

AL: Scared me half to death, I can tell you. *(shivers, then smiles)* Are you sure you don't want to take a test run in the Cortex?

NURSE TARTLE: No way. *(gestures to Cortex panel)* You'll never catch me plugging into that thing. Reality is scary enough for me, thank you very much.

AL: Once inside, it's hard to tell the difference between the real world and the virtual reality of the Cortex. *(shudders)* I can't imagine what might have happened if I'd actually fallen asleep.

NURSE TARTLE: Promise me that you won't plug into the Cortex again unless there is someone with you. It could be dangerous. *(looks at watch)* So how

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much more time do you need? Dr. Kildare is becoming impatient. There's a line of curious shoppers outside waiting for us to open the doors.

AL: (*sits at the desk, types on the keyboard*) I was just running a systems check on the safety protocols. I should have the Cortex up and running in another minute or two.

NURSE TARTLE: (*relieved*) Oh, thank goodness. Dr. Kildare is pacing back and forth in the front lobby, muttering to herself and breaking all the points off my pencils. I don't know why she does that. And she won't let me keep scissors in my desk, either.

AL: For a psychiatrist, she's pretty unstable.

NURSE TARTLE: Psychiatrist? She's more of a business person, really. All Dr. Kildare can talk about is how much money shopping mall ophthalmologists are making doing laser surgery on people's eyes. She's convinced psychiatrists can make a bundle treating neuroses the same way, using the latest computer technology.

AL: She's got a point. If the Phobia Factory idea catches on, Dr. Kildare could franchise the Cortex virtual reality system out to every mall in the country. There will be Phobia Factories in every city. She'll make a fortune.

NURSE TARTLE: If it works, that is.

AL: Oh, the Cortex works, all right. It's just that a person's mind is very complex. There are an awful lot of variables when it comes to treating fears and phobias.

(*DR. KILDARE enters right. SHE is very nervous. SHE paces, twitches, wipes her face with a handkerchief and laughs at inappropriate times.*)

DR. KILDARE: All right, people! Time is money. Let's get this show on the road.

NURSE TARTLE: It'll just be another minute or two, Doctor.

DR. KILDARE: What's the hold up?

AL: Just a few last minute adjustments. I'll reboot the system and we'll be ready to roll.

DR. KILDARE: Very good. There are customers outside and I don't want to keep them waiting. Nurse Tartle, you may admit the first four patients and begin working up their psychological profiles.

NURSE TARTLE: Very good, Doctor. (*exits right*)

AL: Doctor Kildare, may I have a word with you?

DR. KILDARE: (*annoyed*) All right, but make it quick.

AL: It's just that I'm nervous about the Cortex being so exposed, that's all.

DR. KILDARE: Not that ridiculous idea you have about putting the computer in a back room!

AL: I'd feel better if it was protected. Not so out in the open.

DR. KILDARE: I've already told you. Customers want to see the technology working. What's the point of creating a virtual reality system as advanced as the Cortex and then locking it up?

AL: But once they're plugged in . . .

DR. KILDARE: No! Patients need to be able to see the computer. It serves as an anchor to waking reality. No matter how deeply they go into the virtual

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reality of the Cortex, part of their consciousness will be aware that everything they see and hear is being created by a machine.

AL: I suppose you're right about that. What if we put up a Plexiglas screen so people see the Cortex but can't touch it?

DR. KILDARE: A good suggestion. I'll take it under advisement.

AL: That's all I ask.

DR. KILDARE: And all I ask is that you get this machine running, so I can start making money.

AL: No problem. *(opens drawer, pulls out a small screwdriver and moves to behind armchairs.)* I'll just tighten the port connectors . . .

DR. KILDARE: *(terrified, backs up)* What are you doing? Put that back!

AL: Put what back?

DR. KILDARE: That. . . that. . . thing. That pointy. . . thing!

AL: *(holds up screwdriver)* What, this?

*(KILDARE gasps)*

It's just a screwdriver. I need to tighten the screws.

DR. KILDARE: *(tries to control herself, fails)* Of course . . .but . . .it's so sharp! I've got to run. I'll. . . I'll go and see how Nurse Turtle is doing with the first batch of customers . . .I mean patients. *(looks at screwdriver, whimpers, exits right)*

AL: *(shrugs)* Whatever, *(tightens "screws" behind chairs)* That should do it. *(crosses to desk, sets screwdriver on top of desk, sits.)* Now all I've got to do is reboot. *(types on keyboard)* Control . . .Alt. Delete.

*(Stage lights go out, flicker back on)*

NURSE TARTLE: *(enters right, followed by VAL, BAILEY, CARLOTTA and BARB)* Right this way, please.

BAILEY: *(relieved)* This doesn't look so scary after all.

VAL: I told you, Bailey. There's nothing to worry about.

CARLOTTA: *(looks around, disappointed)* Not much to it, is there?

NURSE TARTLE: We deliberately keep the surroundings neutral and unobtrusive. That way there are fewer distractions. When you see something unusual at the Phobia Factory, it's all in your mind.

BARB: Yeah, unless it's a mall rat like Carlotta, here.

CARLOTTA: Hey! Malls are the cultural center of our society. And I'm a social person. Unlike you, Barb.

VAL: *(throws himself into a chair)* So when do we get started?

NURSE TARTLE: Well, you've completed the questionnaires and signed all the disclaimers waiving your rights to sue us if something goes wrong. . .

BAILEY: Val, I didn't feel too good about doing that.

VAL: Relax, Bailey. These days if you want to have fun, you have to sign these kinds of forms first. It's just a formality.

BARB: Right. No one wants to accept responsibility when things go wrong.

BAILEY: You mean IF things go wrong, don't you?

BARB: *(stares at BAILEY)* Do I?

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CAROTTA: (*picks up a set of headphones*) These won't mess up my hair, will they? Because I don't want to spend the rest of the day at the mall with headphone hair.

AL: They are very lightweight. Once you interface with the Cortex, you'll forget you even have them on.

BARB: Who are you?

NURSE TARTLE: This is our computer technician, and one of the chief designers of the Cortex, Al Armer.

BAILEY: Pleased to meet you. And you're sure this is safe?

AL: I think so . . .

(*DR. KILDARE enters right, interrupts*)

DR. KILDARE: Of course it's safe. I'm Dr. Kildare. I invented the Phobia Factory.

VAL: My friend Bailey here isn't used to trying new things. But I'm up for anything. Nothing scares me.

DR. KILDARE: That remains to be seen.

CARLOTTA: How does the Phobia Factory work, Doctor?

BARB: If it works at all.

DR. KILDARE: Oh, it works all right. The Cortex, which is the brain of the Phobia Factory, picks up on your subconscious fear-inducers, and creates an imaginary, virtual reality setting where you can face your fears and overcome them. But like most forms of therapy, you only get out of it what you put in.

AL: Garbage in, garbage out.

NURSE TARTLE: (*to AL*) Hush, Al.

VAL: So if I want to show how brave I am and stuff, you can make it look like I'm eating worms or something?

DR. KILDARE: (*refers to main stage area*) Anything you imagine will be projected on this giant screen here. We'll be able to see what's happening in your mind.

VAL: Cool.

DR. KILDARE: Who would like to go first? Just to show the others there's nothing to it.

BAILEY: Not me (*to CARLOTTA*) Carlotta?

CARLOTTA: I'll pass.

BARB: (*refers to VAL*) Why don't we let Mr. Guts and Glory here try it out? (*stares VAL in the eyes*) If you're not too chicken, that is.

VAL: Who, me? Chicken? No way. Bring it on.

DR. KILDARE: You're already sitting in the chair. That's the first step.

VAL: What's next?

NURSE TARTLE: You put these headphones on.

CARLOTTA: What are the headphones for?

AL: The headphones play a continuous tone at the cycle rate of seven Hertz. The subject's brain synchronizes with the tone, and the person goes into what we call a theta state.

BAILEY: Theta?

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DR. KILDARE: Brainwaves fall into four categories: alpha represents heightened awareness; beta is associated with relaxation and creativity; theta is the range for visions and waking dreams, and delta is deep sleep.

CARLOTTA: If you say so.

NURSE TARTLE: If you were a plug into the Cortex while in the alpha or beta states, the experience would simply be like watching a play or movie. But when your brain is in the theta, everything you experience seems real, as if it is actually happening to you.

BARB: What happens if you go into delta while you're jacked in?

AL: You don't want to go there.

DR. KILDARE: *(fast)* We have safeguards to make sure that no one drifts into a delta state while they are in the Cortex.

VAL: You mean if I fall asleep I could die? Cool!

NURSE TARTLE: I'll be watching you the whole time.

VAL: *(to NURSE)* Will you hold my hand, too?

NURSE TARTLE: That won't be necessary.

AL: I'll be monitoring your brain waves from here.

NURSE TARTLE: At the first sign of trouble, I'll bring you out.

AL: And I'll abort the program.

DR. KILDARE: So there's really nothing to worry about.

VAL: Right. Nothing to fear, but fear itself.

DR. KILDARE: Exactly. *(looks at clipboard)* I see by this questionnaire that you have an aversion to worms. Is that so?

VAL: Right. They freak me out. Nothing gets to me faster than slimy, squiggly night crawlers. *(shudders)* Oooh!

DR. KILDARE: Excellent. First we'll synchronize your brain with the Cortex. Then we'll introduce a program in which you will be given the opportunity to face your fear.

NURSE TARTLE: Once you've faced your fear in the safety of the Cortex, you'll be cured.

AL: The new attitude will be programmed into your brain at a subconscious level.

CARLOTTA: Sounds easy enough.

BARB: Yeah, as easy as re-wiring someone's brain. 'Course you have to have a brain to rewire.

CARLOTTA: Hey!

VAL: I don't see you climbing into the chair, Barb. So back off.

BAILEY: Let's take it easy, okay? We're all just a little nervous, that's all.

DR. KILDARE: Then maybe we should get started. *(to VAL)* Are you ready?

VAL: Sure.

*(NURSE TARTLE helps fit headphones over VAL's ears)*

NURSE TARTLE: Can you hear the tone?

VAL: Yes. I think it's working. *(VAL's eyes roll upward and HE suddenly slumps, as if rendered unconscious.)*

NURSE TARTLE: AI? Is it supposed to happen this way?

AL: I don't think so. It shouldn't be so quick. Maybe there's something wrong with the audio feed.

BAILEY: Val, are you all right?

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*(OTHERS lean forward)*

BARB: Maybe he went into the delta state right away. He falls asleep in class all the time.

CARLOTTA: Val? Can you hear me? Speak to me.

VAL: *(startles OTHERS by jerking suddenly upright)* Boo!

OTHERS: Ahhh! Don't do that! You creep! Etc.

VAL: *(laughs)* Ha, ha, got you all. Now look who's scared.

DR. KILDARE: Very funny. Are you quite finished with your joking around? May we proceed?

VAL: Sure. *(relaxes back into the chair, takes a deep breath and sighs.)*

DR. KILDARE: Now just listen to the tone, and let your mind go blank.

BARB: That shouldn't be too hard.

BAILEY: Shhh!

AL: He's going into theta.

*(Lights flicker, flash, and slowly fade up on main stage area.)*

DR. KILDARE: *(to OTHERS)* You can see what he's thinking about by watching this screen.

*(VIRTUAL NURSE pushes VIRTUAL VAL, who is seated in an identical chair but equipped with wheels, from right to center stage.)*

**NOTE: Actors playing virtual characters should be dressed identically to their "real" counterparts. Match the actors as close to body type as possible, but they don't need to be a perfect match.**

VIRTUAL VAL: *(enjoys the ride on the rolling chair)* Wheee!

CARLOTTA: That doesn't look like Val.

DR. KILDARE: Naturally, we don't have an exact replica of Val in the database. The Cortex creates a rough approximate of the original.

AL: This Phobia Factory is the prototype. In phase two we'll include a full body scan of the subject.

NURSE TARTLE: But since a subject rarely looks at himself or herself while in the Cortex, perfect appearance isn't a priority.

CARLOTTA: For you, maybe. *(primps)* Some of us have reputations to maintain.

VIRTUAL VAL: *(to VIRTUAL NURSE)* Hey, you didn't say you were coming in with me.

VIRTUAL NURSE: Nurse Tartle is not in the Cortex with you. I am Virtual Nurse Tartle. I'm like a panic button built into the program. If it gets to be too much for you, call for me and I'll take you back, just as my counterpart brings you back to normal waking consciousness.

VIRTUAL VAL: Sort of like a babysitter, huh?

VIRTUAL NURSE: If you like.

VIRTUAL VAL: Yeah, stick around. I might need you to hold my hand when the worms start arriving.

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VIRTUAL NURSE: I'll be close by if you need me. *(exits left)*

DR. KILDARE: Mr. Armer, are you ready with the worm aversion program?

AL: Uploading it right now, Dr. Kildare.

*(Stage lights flicker.)*

VIRTUAL VAL: *(stands, looks at floor)* Ewww. An earthworm. Yuck. *(moves left)* Ewww, another. *(moves right, sees another)* They're all over the place. Gross. Cold, slimy, slippery, disgusting worms. *(looks closer, shivers)* At least they're dead. Probably came up after the last rain. *(tries to tiptoe around them)*

*(WORM PERSON ONE, looking and moving as much like a worm as possible enters right. VIRTUAL VAL sees WORM PERSON ONE.)*

Wow, that's a honking big one!

*(WORM PERSON TWO enters left)*

Man, they really grow them big around here!

*(WORM PERSON THREE enters upstage. THEY begin to circle VIRTUAL VAL, arms and legs extended like additional worms as THEY stand.)*

Okay, let's not get carried away here.

WORM PEOPLE Hiss.

DR. KILDARE: *(to AL)* Hiss?

AL: Sorry. I just don't know what kind of sound worms make.

DR. KILDARE: Well, try something else. *(AL types on his keyboard)*

WORM PEOPLE: Glub, glub. Gurgle, gurgle. Slurp.

DR. KILDARE: That's better.

VIRTUAL VAL: *(tries to back away)* Okay, that's close enough. I'm not kidding.

*(WORM PEOPLE reach to the floor, pick up fists full of imaginary worms, fingers wriggling.)*

No way! What are you going to do with all those worms?

WORM PEOPLE: Glub, glub. Gurgle, gurgle. Slurp.

*(WORM PEOPLE start flicking imaginary worms on VIRTUAL VAL, one at a time. VAL tries to brush them off.)*

VIRTUAL VAL: Hey, keep away from me with those things. I'm serious. *(to self)*

Okay, I've got to face my fear. This is all just in my mind. *(recites)* I am not afraid of worms. I am not afraid of worms.

*(WORM People advance on VAL, thrusting imaginary worms into VAL's face and clothing.)*

WORM PEOPLE: Glub, glub. Gurgle, gurgle. Slurp, slurp. Group hug!

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*(WORM PEOPLE squeeze VIRTUAL VAL in a tight huddle.)*

VIRTUAL VAL: *(panics)* Ahhh! That's so gross! I can feel the worms crawling all over me! I can't stand it! Get me out of here! *(breaks free, tries to run, slips on "worms," falls)*

*(WORM PEOPLE surround VAL, dripping imaginary worms all over his thrashing body.)*

No! No! This is sick! *(covers face with hands)* Help! Help!

VAL: *(also covers face with hands.)* Help! Help!

BAILEY: Are you just going to leave Val like that?

BARB: Why not? Looks better that way, don't you think?

DR. KILDARE: As you can see, Val has reached what I refer to as the crisis point. Now, we will help initiate a psychological breakthrough. Al?

AL: I'm on it. *(types on computer.)*

*(VIRTUAL NURSE enters left with a bird whistle.)*

VIRTUAL NURSE: Hang on, Val. Help is on the way. *(SHE blows on the whistle.)*

*(Three BIRDS "fly" on, flapping their wings.)*

BIRDS: Caw! Caw! Caw!

*(WORM PEOPLE pull back from VAL.)*

WORM PEOPLE: Gurgle? Slurp! Birdies! Incoming! *(THEY try to wriggle away, but the BIRDS peck at them.)*

VIRTUAL VAL: Birds? Birds! Birds eat worms! I'm saved! *(to BIRDS)* Get 'em! Eat 'em up. *(bends over, scoops up imaginary worms, tosses them to BIRDS.)* Here, have some more. *(to WORM PEOPLE.)* Welcome to the bottom of the food chain, slime balls!

*(WORM PEOPLE escape, exiting in all directions. VAL continues feeding BIRDS with imaginary worms from his clothing, hair, and from the floor.)*

Here you go.

BIRD ONE: Caw!

BIRD TWO: Tweet!

BIRD THREE: Awoooga! *(BIRDS begin to back away.)*

VIRTUAL VAL: Getting a little full? Well, you helped me. Now I'll help you. *(picks up long, dangling imaginary worm, lifts it over his face)* You're not so scary now, are you, squirmy wormy? *(opens mouth and "slurps" the imaginary worm like spaghetti.)* Hmm. Not bad. A little like cold spaghetti. *(BIRDS exit in all directions. VAL picks up another "worm," examines it, eats it, chews.)* The big, fat juicy ones are a little on the sour side. Wish I had some Parmesan cheese.

## PHOBIA FACTORY – Page 15

*(BABY BIRD enters, sits at VAL's feet.)*

BABY BIRD: Chirp! Chirp! *(opens its mouth, begging)*

VIRTUAL VAL: Hey there, little guy. Hungry, are you? Well there are still a few worms left. *(tries to feed BABY BIRD a worm, BABY BIRD shakes its head.)*

BABY BIRD: Chirp!

VIRTUAL VAL: What's the problem, little guy?

BABY BIRD: Chirp! Chirp! *(BABY BIRD gestures to VAL, then to worms.)*

VIRTUAL VAL: What's that? You want me to chew it up first and regurgitate it into your mouth?

BABY BIRD: *(hops up and down)* Chirp! Chirp!

VIRTUAL VAL: Hey, for you, anything. *(scoops up handful of imaginary worms, stuffs them into his mouth, chews, speaks with mouth full.)* Open wide! *(leans over BABY BIRD)*

DR. KILDARE: Freeze program!

*(AL hits a key on the keyboard. VIRTUAL VAL and BABY BIRD freeze.)*

I think that's probably enough reinforcement, don't you?

NURSE TARTLE: More than enough.

CARLOTTA: Okay, that's just way too gross.

BARB: I think I'm gonna lose my lunch.

BAILEY: Good thing Val's not afraid of birds, too.

*(NURSE removes headphones from VAL's head. Stage lights flash, fade out. VIRTUAL VAL and BABY BIRD exit left, taking chair with them. VAL's eyes flicker open.)*

VAL: Whoa. That was intense. I never would have thought of imaginary birds helping me out. I thought all I had to do was use will power.

DR. KILDARE: Our conscious mind is generally too weak to fight off subconscious fears. To effect a lasting change, the Cortex draws from your own subconscious to fight your fears at the source.

BARB: Lasting change? How do you know this wasn't just all in his head? Like hallucination or something.

DR. KILDARE: Easy enough to test. *(pulls gummi worm from pocket, offers it to VAL)* How about a snack?

VAL: Huh? Oh, okay. Why not? *(jumps up, takes and eats gummi worm as OTHERS watch, swallows)* Chirp! *(claps hand over mouth)*

CARLOTTA: What was that?

NURSE TARTLE: Just a small side effect from the reprogramming. Nothing to worry about. It will fade with time.

DR. KILDARE: If you ever need a refresher treatment, the Phobia Factory offers discounts to return customers.

BAILEY: What was it like inside the Cortex, Val?

VAL: Strange. Hard to describe. Everything looked and felt so real, but I knew it really wasn't. I never would have eaten worms in real life.

BARB: Seemingly real, but fake at the same time. Sort of like Carlotta, here.

## PHOBIA FACTORY – Page 16

CARLOTTA: Hey! That was entirely uncalled for.

VAL: Yeah, Barb. What's your problem?

BARB: You're all deluding yourselves. Isn't that what all this mall crawl scene is about? Putting on airs, acting like you're better than everyone else. Escaping reality by pretending you have it all together?

BAILEY: Take it easy, Barb.

BARB: So tell us, Carlotta. What kinds of fears does a diva wannabe like you have? What makes your heart skip a beat?

CARLOTTA: Why should I tell you?

DR. KILDARE: Actually, talking about our fears is one of the ways that we learn to face and overcome them. Laughing at them is another.

CARLOTTA: I don't want anyone laughing at me.

VAL: I won't laugh, Carlotta. I've been through the Cortex. I know what it's like. *(to OTHERS)* And the rest of you are going to do it too, right?

BAILEY: I . . . I guess so.

BARB: Yeah, I'm going to give it a shot.

VAL: So we're all in this together. Carlotta, why don't you go next? Show Barb here that deep inside, you're no different from her.

BARB: I'll have to see it to believe it.

CARLOTTA: Doesn't anyone else want to go ahead of me?

BAILEY: I don't think I'm ready yet.

BARB: And I want to save the best for last.

VAL: Carlotta?

CARLOTTA: All right. I'll do it. If for no other reason than to show you all that I'm not some shallow, materialistic mall crawler. Besides I already put this on my credit card.

DR. KILDARE: That's the spirit.

NURSE TARTLE: *(leads CARLOTTA to chair)* Sit here, please.

*(CARLOTTA sits. NURSE places headphones on her head.)*

VAL: *(to AL)* Why the extra chairs?

AL: Group therapy.

VAL: More than one person can go into the Cortex at a time?

AL: Theoretically. We haven't fully worked out the bugs yet, so the other chairs are off line.

NURSE TARTLE: *(to CARLOTTA)* How does that feel?

CARLOTTA: Not bad at all. It's like the headphones are hardly even there.

NURSE TARTLE: Good. Now just sit back and relax. Let us do all the work. And remember, my virtual counterpart will meet you inside the Cortex.

CARLOTTA: Okay. Fire away.

DR. KILDARE: AI?

AL: Uploading program . . .now. *(punches a button on the keyboard)*

CARLOTTA: Is that it? I don't feel anything.

DR. KILDARE: It takes a few seconds for your brain to synchronize with the tone. Close your eyes and forget about all of us here. Look inside yourself.

CARLOTTA: *(closes eyes)* Look inside? How am I supposed to . . . *(smiles)* Oooh, pretty colors.

AL: She's moving through beta and approaching the theta state.

## PHOBIA FACTORY – Page 17

CARLOTTA: I like colors, they're so . . .so . . .colorful.

*(Stage lights flicker, flash and fade up as VIRTUAL NURSE wheels VIRTUAL CARLOTTA on, from right to center stage.)*

VIRTUAL CARLOTTA: *(reaches hand up)* Pretty, pretty colors. Hello, pretty colors.

VIRTUAL NURSE: You can open your eyes, now.

VIRTUAL CARLOTTA: What? Oh. Okay. *(opens eyes)* Oooh. *(stands, walks around)* This looks just like the real mall.

VIRTUAL NURSE: Remember, call me if you need me.

VIRTUAL CARLOTTA: Will do.

*(VIRTUAL NURSE exits left)*

This is the perfect place to face my fears. I feel safe at the mall. *(hugs herself)*

*(“Real” CARLOTTA hugs herself at the same time.)*

I'm in my happy place.

BARB: She's in a virtual mall?

DR. KILDARE: The Cortex can be programmed to represent any location you've ever seen. Apparently her subconscious recreated the mall to offer her a place of comfort and safety in which to face her fear.

BAILEY: That's no surprise. She spends all her free time here.

*(VIRTUAL SALES ASSOCIATE enters left.)*

ASSOCIATE: Hello there. Are you here for the fashion show?

VIRTUAL CARLOTTA: Fashion show?

ASSOCIATE: All of next year's school fashions are available today. Instead of being behind the times, you can become a trend setter.

VIRTUAL CARLOTTA: Sounds good to me.

ASSOCIATE: Very well. Have a seat here, please. *(gestures to rolling chair)*

VIRTUAL CARLOTTA: Don't mind if I do. *(sits)*

ASSOCIATE: Before we begin with the newest styles, I'd like to show you some color combinations we'll all be looking at next year. *(claps hands)*

*(Outrageously attired FASHION POLICE ONE enters right with a long strip of colorful cloth. SHE waves it like a streamer, circling the chair.)*

VIRTUAL CARLOTTA: Oooh. I like that. That would go well with my skin tone.

FASHION POLICE ONE: *(extends the end of the fabric to VIRTUAL CARLOTTA.)* And just feel the texture.

*(VIRTUAL CARLOTTA takes it.)*

VIRTUAL CARLOTTA: It feels a little bit sticky.

## PHOBIA FACTORY – Page 18

FASHION POLICE ONE: Once you've worn this fabric, you won't wear anything else! *(FASHION POLICE ONE dances around the chair, wrapping the fabric around it, partially securing VIRTUAL CARLOTTA to the chair.)*

VIRTUAL CARLOTTA: I guess I could get used to this. It certainly feels snug.

FASHION POLICE TWO: *(enters left with another long strip of colorful cloth which clashes horribly with the first and stretches)* In addition to sticky fabrics, we have stretchy fabrics. Feel free to give and take in this.

VIRTUAL CARLOTTA: *(grasps fabric with free hand)* It's got a lot of bounce. Does it come in any different colors? These two kind of clash.

*(FASHION POLICE TWO dances around the chair, further securing VIRTUAL CARLOTTA.)*

FASHION POLICE TWO: This fabric will grow on you. And grow, and grow, and grow! *(Laughs)* Ha, ha, ha!

VIRTUAL CARLOTTA: *(realizes SHE is now tied to the chair)* Hey! I can't get up.

ASSOCIATE: Why would you want to get up? The fashion show is about to begin.

VIRTUAL CARLOTTA: But I can't move.

ASSOCIATE: You will be deeply moved when you see what we have in store for you

VIRTUAL CARLOTTA: Then you'll let me out?

FASHION POLICE ONE: Out? Who would ever want to be out?

FASHION POLICE TWO: It's all about being in. In fashion, in view, in the "in crowd."

ASSOCIATE: *(claps hands)* Let the fashion show begin!

*(FASHION POLICE take their places up right and up left.)*

VIRTUAL CARLOTTA: I don't know about this.

ASSOCIATE: Knowledge can be a good thing. And knowing how to pull the wool over your teachers' eyes is even better. In fact, next year's designs include the perfect wardrobe for the seemingly dedicated student. Whether you're loitering in the magazine section of the library, passing notes in study hall, or just want to make your teachers think you're smarter than you really are, this ensemble is for you. . .

*(FASHION GEEK ONE enters left. Her costume is decorated like a "one man band" of school supplies: books strapped to her feet like platform shoes, protractors dangling from ears, pencils protruding in all directions from her hair, notebooks, pads of paper, calculator, maybe even staplers on her shoulders. FASHION GEEK ONE parades around the stage.)*

VIRTUAL CARLOTTA: You've got to be kidding.

FASHION GEEK ONE: *(sneers)* One so erudite as myself does not kid. Knowledge is power. If you don't have knowledge, you are powerless.

VIRTUAL CARLOTTA: Let me out of this chair, nerd.

## PHOBIA FACTORY – Page 19

FASHION GEEK ONE: I think not. (*snarls*) You think you're so smart, making fun of us nerds at school. Well now we're going to have our revenge. We'll hit you where you are most vulnerable . . . in your fashion sense. Take a good look at me. This is what you'll wear if you know what's good for you.

VIRTUAL CARLOTTA: No way. You look so gaggy. If I looked like you, I'd lose my lunch.

(*FASHION GEEK ONE flounces right.*)

ASSOCIATE: (*steps forward*) Lunch? Did you say lunch? Then let's move on to the latest fashions for dining in. As you know, lunchtime in the cafeteria is not exactly an elegant culinary experience, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't look your best. Though the food may not be appetizing, your wardrobe can be a banquet for the eyes. Feast your eyes on the latest in cafeteria couture.

(*FASHION GEEK TWO enters left. Her clothing and accessories consist of Styrofoam boxes, plastic cutlery, cafeteria trays, straws, cups, bowls, etc. FASHION GEEK TWO parades about the stage, gesturing and simulating using the items.*)

FASHION GEEK TWO: This outfit is practical, functional and dish-washer safe.

VIRTUAL CARLOTTA: Oh, no way! Sorry, loser. I'm just not in to wearing utensils.

FASHION GEEK TWO: You think you're superior to everyone because you can afford to eat out all the time. Well some of us have to eat at the cafeteria because we don't have any other choice. We've had a stomach full of you making fun of us. We're sick of it, do you hear? Someday you're going to get a belly full of humble pie.

VIRTUAL CARLOTTA: Hey, geek, why don't you just go stand over there next to your nerdy friend?

(*Offended, FASHION GEEK TWO moves right, pouts and poses.*)

BARB: Is there a point to all this?

BAILEY: I don't see what Carlotta has to be afraid of.

VAL: She seems to be taking all this in stride. Though she is being a little harsh.

DR. KILDARE: Watch and learn. Anger and disdain are actually coping mechanisms to cover deep-seated fears. We'll get to the heart of her phobia any second now.

ASSOCIATE: Obviously, you are not capable of making important fashion decisions yourself.

FASHION GEEK ONE: You don't know anything about looking good.

FASHION GEEK TWO: You have no taste in clothing.

FASHION POLICE ONE: Ugly!

FASHION POLICE TWO: Double ugly!

VIRTUAL CARLOTTA: (*struggles with bonds.*) I'm getting out of here. Let me go!

**PHOBIA FACTORY – Page 20**

ASSOCIATE: I'm afraid we are going to have to take drastic action. (*claps hands*)

(*FASHION POLICE ONE and TWO exit left.*)

VIRTUAL CARLOTTA: What do you mean?

ASSOCIATE: (*moves VIRTUAL CARLOTTA's chair so that it is facing downstage*) We have to save you from yourself.

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