

Setup and Payoff Readings

“Wallet” by Allen Woodman

Tired of losing his wallet to pickpockets, my father, at seventy, makes a phony one. He stuffs the phony wallet with expired food coupons and losing Florida Lottery tickets and a fortune cookie fortune that reads, “Life is the same old story told over and over.” In a full-length mirror, he tries the wallet in the back pocket of his pants. It hangs out fat with desire. “All oyster,” he says to me, “no pearl.” We drive to the mall where he says he lost the last one. I am the wheelman, left behind in the car, while my father cases a department store. He is an old man trying to act feeble and childlike, and he overdoes it like stage makeup on a community-theater actor. He has even brought a walking stick for special effect. Packages of stretch socks clumsily slip from his fingers. He bends over farther than he has bent in years to retrieve them, allowing the false billfold to rise like a dark wish and he’s grappled by the passing shadow of a hand. Then the unexpected happens. The thief is chased by an attentive salesclerk. Others join in. The thief subdued, the clerk holds up the reclaimed item. “Your wallet, sir... Your wallet.” As she begins opening it, searching for identification, my father runs toward an exit. The worthless articles float to the floor. Now my father is in the car, shouting for me to drive away. There will be time enough for silence and rest. We are both stupid with smiles and he is shouting, “Drive fast, drive fast.”

Hunger Games Excerpts

The Payoff Scene

There’s a small burst of static and then nothing more. I stare at Peeta in disbelief as the truth sinks in. They never intended to let us both live. This has all been devised by the Gamemakers to guarantee the most dramatic showdown in history. And like a fool, I bought into it.

“If you think about it, it’s not that surprising,” he says softly. I watch as he painfully makes it to his feet. Then he’s moving toward me, as if in slow motion, his hand is pulling the knife from his belt—

Before I am even aware of my actions, my bow is loaded with the arrow pointed straight at his heart. Peeta raises his eyebrows and I see the knife has already left his hand on its way to the lake where it splashes in the water. I drop my weapons and take a step back, my face burning in what can only be shame.

“No,” he says. “Do it.” Peeta limps toward me and thrusts the weapons back in my hands.

“I can’t,” I say. “I won’t.”

“Do it. Before they send those mutts back or something. I don’t want to die like Cato,” he says.

“Then you shoot me,” I say furiously, shoving the weapons back at him. “You shoot me and go home and live with it!” And as I say it, I know death right here, right now would be the easier of the two.



“You know I can’t,” Peeta says, discarding the weapons. “Fine, I’ll go first anyway.” He leans down and rips the bandage off his leg, eliminating the final barrier between his blood and the earth.

“No, you can’t kill yourself,” I say. I’m on my knees, desperately plastering the bandage back onto his wound.

“Katniss,” he says. “It’s what I want.”

“You’re not leaving me here alone,” I say. Because if he dies, I’ll never go home, not really. I’ll spend the rest of my life in this arena trying to think my way out.

“Listen,” he says, pulling me to my feet. “We both know they have to have a victor. It can only be one of us. Please, take it. For me.” And he goes on about how he loves me, what life would be without me but I’ve stopped listening because his previous words are trapped in my head, thrashing desperately around.

We both know they have to have a victor.

Yes, they have to have a victor. Without a victor, the whole thing would blow up in the Gamemakers’ faces. They’d have failed the Capitol. Might possibly even be executed, slowly and painfully while the cameras broadcast it to every screen in the country.

If Peeta and I were both to die, or they thought we were...

My fingers fumble with the pouch on my belt, freeing it. Peeta sees it and his hand clamps on my wrist. “No, I won’t let you.”

“Trust me,” I whisper. He holds my gaze for a long moment then lets me go. I loosen the top of the pouch and pour a few spoonfuls of berries into his palm. Then I fill my own. “On the count of three?”

Peeta leans down and kisses me once, very gently. “The count of three,” he says.

We stand, our backs pressed together, our empty hands locked tight.

“Hold them out. I want everyone to see,” he says. I spread out my fingers, and the dark berries glisten in the sun. I give Peeta’s hand one last squeeze as a signal, as a good-bye, and we begin counting. “One.” Maybe I’m wrong. “Two.” Maybe they don’t care if we both die. “Three!” It’s too late to change my mind. I lift my hand to my mouth, taking one last look at the world. The berries have just passed my lips when the trumpets begin to blare.

The frantic voice of Claudius Templesmith shouts above them. “Stop! Stop! Ladies and gentlemen, I am pleased to present the victors of the Seventy-fourth Hunger Games, Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark! I give you—the tributes of District Twelve!”

The Precursor Scenes

(The word “berries” appears 45 times in the book.)

1.

As the day wears on, I know I’m headed for trouble. What little urine I’ve been able to pass is a dark brown, my head is aching, and there’s a dry patch on my tongue that refuses to moisten. The sun hurts my eyes so I dig out my sunglasses, but when I put them on they do something funny to my vision, so I just stuff them back in my pack.

It’s late afternoon when I think I’ve found help. I spot a cluster of berry bushes and hurry to strip the fruit, to suck the sweet juices from the skins. But just as I’m holding them to my lips, I get a hard look at them. What I thought were blueberries have a slightly different shape, and when I break one open the insides are bloodred. I don’t recognize these berries, perhaps they are



edible, but I'm guessing this is some evil trick on the part of the Gamemakers. Even the plant instructor in the Training Center made a point of telling us to avoid berries unless you were 100 percent sure they weren't toxic. Something I already knew, but I'm so thirsty it takes her reminder to give me the strength to fling them away.

2.

At Rue's suggestion, we lay out all our food to plan ahead. She's seen most of mine, but I add the last couple of crackers and beef strips to the pile. She's gathered quite a collection of roots, nuts, greens, and even some berries.

I roll an unfamiliar berry in my fingers. "You sure this is safe?"

"Oh, yes, we have them back home. I've been eating them for days," she says, popping a handful in her mouth. I tentatively bite into one, and it's as good as our blackberries. Taking Rue on as an ally seems a better choice all the time.

3.

"I don't know what ate the cheese," Peeta says slowly and distinctly, as if trying not to lose his temper, "but it wasn't me. I've been down by the stream collecting berries. Would you care for some?"

I would actually, but I don't want to relent too soon. I do walk over and look at them. I've never seen this type before. No, I have. But not in the arena. These aren't Rue's berries, although they resemble them. Nor do they match any I learned about in training. I lean down and scoop up a few, rolling them between my fingers.

My father's voice comes back to me. "Not these, Katniss. Never these. They're nightlock. You'll be dead before they reach your stomach."

Just then, the cannon fires. I whip around, expecting Peeta to collapse to the ground, but he only raises his eyebrows. The hovercraft appears a hundred yards or so away. What's left of Foxface's emaciated body is lifted into the air. I can see the red glint of her hair in the sunlight.

I should have known the moment I saw the missing cheese....

Peeta has me by the arm, pushing me toward a tree. "Climb. He'll be here in a second. We'll stand a better chance fighting him from above."

I stop him, suddenly calm. "No, Peeta, she's your kill, not Cato's."

"What? I haven't even seen her since the first day," he says. "How could I have killed her?"

In answer, I hold out the berries.

