

FOURTH OF NEVER JULY

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**Once every few years, even now ... I find it impossible to bear.
– Barbara Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible***

FOURTH OF NEVER JULY

TIME AND PLACE

Scene 1: Late 1990's. Before Y2K and 9-11. Summertime.
Midwest USA.

At center stage between two houses is a tree that can easily be climbed and sat in.
Nighttime. (Say, 10:15).

CHARACTERS

ANNE, female, 11 in Scene 1.

JULIAN, male (Anne's next-door neighbor), 11 in Scene 1.

... in the dialogue indicates a thoughtful break.

SCENE 1

JULIAN creeps out of his house and climbs the tree, stage center, putting an envelope in a safe spot higher up.

Shortly thereafter ANNE creeps out of her house and climbs the tree, sitting on a parallel branch.

JULIAN

[*pause*] Dr. Livingstone, I presume.

ANNE

[*laughs*] Nope.
The one and only Anne Brown.

JULIAN

Julian Henman's my name. At your service.

ANNE

My pleasure, Master Julian, to be sure.

JULIAN

Are you in these parts often?

ANNE

When I'm exploring.

JULIAN

And what are you exploring tonight?

ANNE

Maybe just waiting.

JULIAN

For what?... For some news I have to tell you?

ANNE

For the fireworks. What else?
What news?

JULIAN

Ah, the terrible fireworks of July.

ANNE

Independence Day, tomorrow....
So ... what is it you have to tell me?

JULIAN

[*beat*] Independence ... that's what.
But independence from what? would you think?

ANNE

From the British, I suppose. Is that what you mean?

JULIAN

Sometimes I'd just as soon trade our history of independence from England for another history.

ANNE

That's weird.

JULIAN

Look at it. Look at the world.

ANNE

What world? Down there? Or up here?

JULIAN

I mean, how different things might be if there could still be a United Kingdom.

ANNE

Are you starting on again about King Arthur?

JULIAN

And Camelot.

ANNE

Camelot's a musical.... Do you really want to know how different?

JULIAN

I guess so.

ANNE

First of all, no fireworks tomorrow night. Bonfires, maybe, on Guy Fawkes.

JULIAN

Big whoopie. I could deal without all the fireworks, and all the fire hazards.

ANNE

What fire hazards are you talking about?

JULIAN

You don't remember Linda's roof?

ANNE

I remember one of the rockets went on it, by mistake. But nothing happened.

JULIAN

She and her sister were crying their eyes out, afraid their house would burn down. *Remember that?*

They never should have been allowed to shoot rockets off in the neighborhood.

ANNE

Why are you thinking about that?

That was five years ago.

And they're not.

JULIAN

Not what?

ANNE

They're not allowed to shoot rockets off in our neighborhood.

JULIAN

Well, they will anyway. Roman candles, at least.

Go figure. Where's the justice?

I make a mistake, and it's punishment for the rest of my life.

ANNE

Stop that. You're being such a grouch.

JULIAN

Groucho Marx.

ANNE

Rosa Parks.

JULIAN

Patriarchs.

ANNE

Question marks.

Lost Arks. **JULIAN**

Meadowlarks. **ANNE**

Clark bars. **JULIAN**

Matriarchs. **ANNE**

Hark a herald angels harks. **JULIAN**

Puppies bark. **ANNE**

Tiger sharks. **JULIAN**

Hazard sparks. **ANNE**

Lizard parks. **JULIAN**

Smashing Pumpkins. **ANNE**

Whatever. Just keep rockets off *our* roof please. **JULIAN**

Pause.

Jules?... **ANNE**

Yes? **JULIAN**

If it was like you said ... still a United Kingdom **ANNE**

JULIAN

[beat] Yes....

ANNE

There wouldn't be as many countries in the world.

JULIAN

Duh!

ANNE

And fewer stamps to collect.

JULIAN

Oops! I hadn't thought about that.

ANNE

Think of your Presidents collection. Where would they be?

JULIAN

I have *all* of them, you know.

Every one.

Mint.

ANNE

I know.

I know.

You've shown me.

They must have cost a fortune.

JULIAN

Have I shown you my Legends of the West?

ANNE

Yes.

When you got them.

JULIAN

And the Bill Pickett misprint stamp I got later?

ANNE

No. You never showed me that one.

JULIAN

I won it in the lottery they had.

ANNE

Is that your favorite one?

JULIAN

Until they release the Legends of Baseball series next year.
Then Barry Bonds will be.

ANNE

Stamps. Stamps. Stamps.... And baseball players.

JULIAN

Which reminds me ... there's a letter here for you.

ANNE

There is? Where is it?

JULIAN

Reaches up to a higher branch, and touches something.

Up here somewhere.

Can't find it now.

I'll find it later.

ANNE

No big deal. I'd rather talk to you than read some old letter.

So, as I was saying ... What was I saying?

Oh. That, where would all those Presidents of yours be if we hadn't gotten our independence? Or the Legends of the West, for that matter?

Not on U.S. postage stamps. That's for sure.

JULIAN

I could have lived without them.

ANNE

And could you have lived without baseball?

And your precious baseball cards?

JULIAN

Why would I have to live without baseball?

ANNE

Because all the baseball players would be playing cricket instead.

Or nothing at all, Stupid!

Even Barry Bonds.

JULIAN

Bor-ing! And anyway, you're crazy.

ANNE

You're the one who said it. Not me.

JULIAN

Well, it's not funny, like you seem to think.
I love this country for its stamps and baseball cards.
But not for its Fourth of July.

ANNE

Just saying. Not to mention the elephant.

JULIAN

The elephant? What elephant?

ANNE

The one in the living room.

JULIAN

What on earth are you saying?

ANNE

I'm just saying: If we hadn't gotten our independence, where would democracy be?

JULIAN

Details. Details.
That's what democracy is: In the details.
They'd work it out.

ANNE

Where?

JULIAN

On top of the world, if they had to.
On Mt. Everest.
Or the moon.

ANNE

An elephant. Like I said.
An elephant on the dark side of the moon.

JULIAN

I'll tell you what's an elephant.

ANNE

[*beat*] Well, go ahead.

JULIAN

You being Catholic and all, answer me something....

ANNE

What?... Are you trying to start an argument, Jay?

JULIAN

What do you think God is?

ANNE

Like *you* know.

JULIAN

I asked you first.

ANNE

Well ... God's no elephant. That's for sure.

God's a Trinity.

The Holy Trinity of man, spirit,

and the super power that created the universe and everything in it.

And controls it all.

JULIAN

God is a man in body, with a superpower brain.

ANNE

That's hardly what I said.

Who believes anything like that?

JULIAN

Oh, there must be someone somewhere. But anyway, how can God control everything and let children die and Presidents be shot?

ANNE

I don't know. And I don't pretend to know things like that.

JULIAN

Do you think God has eyes in the trees and is watching us right now?

ANNE

I told you: *I don't know.*

JULIAN

Like a miracle, maybe?

ANNE

He's *more* than a miracle. I *do* know that.

JULIAN

And does he let children go to heaven?

ANNE

If they've been baptized.

JULIAN

Baptized Catholic, you mean.

ANNE

That's what the nuns tell us.

JULIAN

And if they're not baptized? What then?
If they're pure of sin but die unbaptized?

ANNE

There's a place for them.
Just ... it's not in heaven.

JULIAN

Where is it then?

ANNE

It's Limbo,
where they stay as children, without any of the tortures of Hell.

JULIAN

Then when I die, I want to go to Limbo.

ANNE

I'll miss you.

JULIAN

It makes me mad.

ANNE

That I'll miss you?

JULIAN

No.

Not that.

That innocent children have to die.

ANNE

[*beat*] Can I tell you about a dream I had last night?

JULIAN

You're *always* having dreams, aren't you Anne?

ANNE

Sometimes they're about you.

But not this one.

I don't think so, anyway.

But now that you're acting all strange all of a sudden, maybe it *was* about you.

JULIAN

Then tell me.

ANNE

Do you remember the movie called "The Day the Earth Stood Still"?

JULIAN

Like I don't love sci-fi?

Of course I remember it.

It was one of the best, back in the day, and rerun on TV just a few weeks ago.

ANNE

And when the robot ... Gork I think they called him.

JULIAN

Gort.

ANNE

Gort. Yes, Gort.

JULIAN

What about him?

He was played by an actor who was seven-and-a-half feet tall, did you know?

ANNE

Well, when Patricia Neal goes to see him, and he starts to come after her, and she backs away, and falls down, and screams

JULIAN

And his death-ray visor goes up, and she has to tell him the three secret words, or he'll vaporize her.

ANNE

And most of the rest of the Earth with her.

JULIAN

And what?
You dreamed about *that*?

ANNE

Do you remember what those three words were, by any chance?

JULIAN

Like I just don't happen to.

ANNE

Tell me.

JULIAN

Slight pause, with a pretend apprehensive look.

Klaatu.
Barada.
Nikto.

ANNE

What a memory!

JULIAN

It never helped me any.

ANNE

Well, in my dream I was outside somewhere, someplace like where Patricia Neal went to see Gort. And he was there.

JULIAN

Who was there?
Gort?

ANNE

A robot like him, named Julian.
And the robot spoke first.

JULIAN

And what did he have to say to you?
Klaatu barada nikto, neighbor Anne?

ANNE

Not exactly.

JULIAN

Then what?

ANNE

Princess Anne

JULIAN

He called you “Princess”?

ANNE

As a matter of fact, he did.

JULIAN

Weird.

ANNE

Why is that weird?

JULIAN

For a rookie robot to call some girl “Princess” seems weird to me.

ANNE

Well it was *my* dream.

JULIAN

Sorry. No offence intended.

ANNE

No problem....

JULIAN

[*beat*] And that’s it?
He just called you “Princess” and walked away?

ANNE

He said: "I will always believe in you Princess Anne, even when you make me mad. Or make me sad. Or be confused. Or make me feel used."

JULIAN

That makes no sense:
What's a robot supposed to say?
That he doesn't feel used?
Because, what's the point?
That's a robot's job, isn't it?
To be used.

ANNE

I think the dream was a little more personal than that.

JULIAN

What? A personal robot like Data? On Star Trek?

ANNE

Yes. More like Data.
More like you, to be exact.

JULIAN

Like me?!

ANNE

It was just a dream, Jay.
And usually, in one of my dreams, when I don't recognize a character,
it turns out in the end to be me talking.

JULIAN

But you're already in the dream.

ANNE

That makes no difference.
One time I was in the same dream as four different people.
All me. Talking to myself.

JULIAN

You *do* talk to yourself. That's for sure.

ANNE

[*beat*] Do you think it's true?

JULIAN

Do I think what's true?

ANNE

That he'll always believe in me, even if I screw up?

JULIAN

Depends.

ANNE

On what?

JULIAN

How bad you screw up.

ANNE

Catholics don't believe that.

Catholics know we can always be forgiven, no matter what we do.

JULIAN

Forgiven? By what? A priest?

ANNE

Yes. A priest.

JULIAN

The real question is: Can you forgive yourself?

ANNE

I don't know about that.

JULIAN

That's where Hell is: In the hands of people who cannot forgive themselves.

ANNE

God forgives you.

JULIAN

And that makes everything all right, does it?

ANNE

When you go to Heaven you see things differently.

That God is all there is that matters.

Everything else was just part of the road you had to take. Bumps and rocks.

JULIAN

But everything's not all right. Not when there are snake pits in the road.
How obvious does it have to be?

ANNE

What's the matter, Jules? What's troubling you?

JULIAN

[*beat*] What about that bump in your road you told *me* about?
Has God made that all right?

ANNE

What bump?

JULIAN

On your chest.

ANNE

Oh, my chest....
Oh, that. It's nothing.

JULIAN

Nothing?

ANNE

Just nature.... What happens to girls my age. You know.

JULIAN

At eleven?

ANNE

Yes.

JULIAN

Oh.

ANNE

[*beat*] I wish I could make you feel better.

JULIAN

I have a lot on my mind.

ANNE

Maybe the fireworks will make you feel better.

JULIAN

I hate July fourth. Every July fourth.

ANNE

Why?

JULIAN

I just do, that's why.

ANNE

[*beat*] Oh my God! I forgot!
It happened on the fourth of July, didn't it?
I'm sorry. I forgot.
Oh! I'm so very sorry.

JULIAN

Forget it.

ANNE

With all the voices then, I never heard yours.

JULIAN

That was the worst thing I remember:
I couldn't shut up all the noise.
That, and that I had to tell my mother.

ANNE

My mother told me never to talk about it.

JULIAN

Mine told me the same thing.
But she needn't have.

ANNE

But if words were a way I could have told you how I've felt these two years

JULIAN

If words were an island I should have drowned by now.

ANNE

What happened, when you told your mother?

JULIAN

[*beat*] She screamed at me like a Banshee, and never forgave me.

ANNE

Dear Lord!

JULIAN

And she told me today we're moving away.

ANNE

Oh no!!

Moving away?

What will I do without you next door?

JULIAN

She said she can't go on living here anymore.

They can't. My father, either.

Like she's in a tunnel that's caving in and swallowing her.

She has to get away to forget.

ANNE

Is that what you had to tell me?

JULIAN

Reaches and retrieves the envelope.

Here's the envelope. What I've told you. And I'm going now.

ANNE

Don't go yet. *Please*.

I need to talk to you.

JULIAN

What about?

ANNE

I'm going to miss you so much.

What are we going to do?

JULIAN

There's nothing to do.

What's done is done.

ANNE

I care so much for you I can't understand it.

JULIAN

Anne, you've been the only thing good that's ever been in my life.

ANNE

And now what?...
I know what!
We can talk.
Call me; and we can talk.
Every time you can.
Until we can see each other again.

JULIAN

I can call you.

ANNE

Until we can see each other again. Promise.
Every chance you get.
And write.
Please write.

JULIAN

Okay.
I can write.
But I've got to go now.

ANNE

I love you.

JULIAN climbs down from the tree.

JULIAN

Looking up at her.
Goodbye, Friend.

JULIAN exits.

SCENE 2

Eleven years later. ANNE and JULIAN are both 22 and recently graduated from college. Anne's parents still live in the same house as before; and she is home for a few weeks in the summer staying with them. JULIAN has returned to visit.

The tree between the two houses is eleven years older, as well as larger.

ANNE is stepping out of the front door as JULIAN walks down the street. They meet at the tree.

It's daytime.

JULIAN

Anne Number One? I presume.

ANNE

The one and only.

JULIAN

Julian Henman, at your service.

ANNE

Welcome back, Mister College Graduate.
It's been a long time.

JULIAN

Thank God for the iPhone.
I've watched you grow up on it.

ANNE

God?

JULIAN

Well, thank Steve Jobs then.

ANNE

Are you in these parts often?

JULIAN

This is the first time, Anne, that I've been back since my parents moved away.
What? Ten, no eleven years ago.
Everything seem so strange.
I don't know what to say....
Any news?

ANNE

What kind of news?

JULIAN

Are you engaged yet?

ANNE

Oh Jules, you would just love him.

JULIAN

Is he bonny?

ANNE

Bonny??
Aren't you the quaint one now?
How can you say "bonny," Jay?

JULIAN

All right, dammit.
Is he hot then?

ANNE

You better believe it, he is!

JULIAN

Why do girls always get the hot ones?

ANNE

Happy Birthday to me!

JULIAN

You've never looked better, Anne, or happier. I can say that.

ANNE

I've never felt happier.
It was just out there, waiting for me I guess.

JULIAN

[*pause, looking at her*] Do you remember when we used to sneak out of the house at night, and climb that tree together?

ANNE

Want to try it again?

JULIAN

I'm game if you are.

ANNE

Take off your shoes.

**They take off their shoes, climb the tree,
and sit on the branches they sat on in
Scene 1.**

ANNE

I always loved climbing trees.

JULIAN

So did Jesus.

ANNE

How could you know that?
You're an atheist.

JULIAN

That's how I know it. It made him feel closer to his father.

ANNE

Sort of ironic, don't you think?

JULIAN

That's why I think it.

ANNE

[*beat*] How's *your* love life?

JULIAN

Slow, and even slower.

ANNE

Sorry to hear it.

JULIAN

But, what's the rush?
I'll find him eventually, the right one. The very right one.
Won't I?

ANNE

I suppose so.
Why not?

JULIAN

I'm only twenty-two....
But of course, so are you.
And look at you!
You're beautiful.
You're bursting with vitality.
And you've already found your love life.

ANNE

I couldn't be luckier, could I?

JULIAN

What about the future?
Any plans?
Grad school, or something?

ANNE

Plastics.

JULIAN

Did you say "plastics"?

ANNE

Just kidding.

JULIAN

Oh! "*Plastics.*"

ANNE

Our wedding will be quite different from that one, I'm sure.
But in the meantime, Mark is determined to try the law.
He's been accepted at Harvard and Yale, and he wants to wait till he gets his
degree before we formally tie the knot.

JULIAN

And you're okay with that?

ANNE

What do you mean?

JULIAN

What do you mean, what do I mean?

ANNE

You don't have to be married nowadays....
Do you?

JULIAN

Are you still Catholic?

ANNE

Yes.
Why?
I think so.

JULIAN

Because that sounds very *un*-Catholic to me.

ANNE

He's not, you see.

JULIAN

Maybe some of me has rubbed off on you.

ANNE

Some of your what?

JULIAN

My agnosticism.

ANNE

You're an atheist, I thought.

JULIAN

Ahhh, maybe only part way.

ANNE

Well, you were always challenging my faith, weren't you?

JULIAN

Not your faith so much. Just the porridge you were being fed.
It's how true faith grows.

ANNE

We did have our arguments, didn't we?

JULIAN

Discussions, I'd call them.
Up here, on top of the world.

ANNE

I've missed that.

JULIAN

Me, too.

ANNE

How can two such opposite views be so much fun to argue about?

JULIAN

Simple.

ANNE

There you go again.
Why is it "simple"?

JULIAN

Because we don't threaten each other.
We complement each other, as only such a joyful girl and a gay guy can do.

ANNE

Mark doesn't threaten me.
But we still can't talk like you and I can.

JULIAN

There's more than one explanation for that.

ANNE

Oh?

JULIAN

Does he speak English?

ANNE

You idiot! Of course he does.

JULIAN

Well I didn't know.

Maybe all he says is *res judicata*, and *quid pro quo*, and *ipso facto*, for all I know.

ANNE

You're just being silly.

JULIAN

I had a law-school friend at college who told his girlfriend about a case they were studying involving a German citizen whose name was Zoffer Rocker.

ANNE

So?

JULIAN

He talked a lot about Zoffer Rocker. For a couple of months.

ANNE

Mark and I *do* talk.

And I expect we'll talk about a lot more things than what he studies in law school.

JULIAN

In Cambridge or New Haven.

ANNE

Yes. In Cambridge or New Haven, whichever he chooses.

JULIAN

Do you like New England?

ANNE

Yes. I suppose so.

JULIAN

And what will you be doing while he's chasing papers and precedents?

ANNE

I don't know. Get a job, I suppose.

JULIAN

At the Law School?

ANNE

Maybe. Why not?
Why are you asking me these things?

JULIAN

Because I think that brain of yours deserves a lot more than shelving books in a law school library.

ANNE

You're just peeing on my parade, aren't you?
Just jealous of me.

JULIAN

Zoffer Rocker.

ANNE

Why are you being so mean?

JULIAN

Why aren't you going to Med School, like you always planned?
And let Mark get a job in the hospital?

ANNE

Not enough money.
And that would mean we'd be separated, for the most part, for years.

JULIAN

Come on! Don't tell me you've been four years an undergraduate and never heard of student loans, for Christ's sake.

ANNE

What is a wife sposed to do, when her husband has a career?...
When he has a calling, to be a corporate lawyer?

JULIAN

Zoffer Rocker.

ANNE

Will you stop with that "Zoffer Rocker" bit.

JULIAN

Zoffer Rocker. Zoffer Rocker. Zoffer Rocker.
What's a wife supposed to do? Why, follow his parade, of course.
Support her husband at all costs, of course. From the back.

ANNE

Why are you being so mean?

JULIAN

Because what a wife is supposed to do is what any human being is supposed to do: Follow their own dreams.

ANNE

Like you?

JULIAN

My dreams went to shit thirteen years ago.

ANNE

And that's no excuse.

JULIAN

[*pause*] Have you ever seen pictures of places in World War One where people were killed and blinded by mustard gas?

ANNE

No.

JULIAN

Well thank God. Your God....
What stands out is the darkness and filth on the glass.
Room after room with so much death ... and not a broken window.
Blackened, but not broken.

ANNE

Why are you telling me this?

JULIAN

Because this is who I am. Inside.

ANNE

How?

JULIAN

Anne, I killed my little brother.
My six-year-old brother, who would be nineteen now.
And you are the only person in the world I can breathe these words to.
But it doesn't make it go away.
The guilt has grown legs and arms, and won't let go of me.

ANNE

But, Jay, you never killed him.
A driver did.
Driving an ambulance.
We all know that.

JULIAN

Not how I see it.
And I'm no more a man now than I was back then.

ANNE

Jay, you are a wonderful man.
And I'd give most anything to make the hurting in you stop.

**JULIAN half falls, half jumps down from
the tree.**

ANNE climbs down after him.

ANNE

Are you okay?

JULIAN

If there was that God of yours, he wouldn't have let Cody die.

ANNE

I know how you are struggling with this.
And all I can tell you is that our God, someday, will give me the power to
straighten this out in you.
I believe that.
And I always will.

JULIAN

Oh, I'm a hopeless case.
Let's, please, talk about something else. Please?

ANNE

[*beat*] Zoffer Rocker.

JULIAN

And a Zoffer Rocker to you, too.

ANNE

But you're right. Mark and I don't talk about our plans like this.

JULIAN

You're in a Goldilocks zone.
It'll come around.
You hide and watch.

ANNE

You're making me wonder about getting married at all.
I was so happy to see you again, and you're making wonder about ever getting married.

JULIAN

Anne....
I know I'd feel a lot different if I knew Mark.
It's just

ANNE

Just what?

JULIAN

Just that life turns on such precious, small moments.
Such inconsequential decisions.

ANNE

Getting married is hardly an inconsequential decision!
Not to me it isn't.

JULIAN

No, of course not.
But deciding to shelve becoming a doctor for Mark to go to his big time Harvard,
or Yale

ANNE

It's seems like you're asking me to make a choice.

JULIAN

If looking out for yourself is a choice.

ANNE

I mean a choice whether I'd be a better doctor than Mark will be a good lawyer.

JULIAN

Oh, the world needs both, God knows.
More doctors *and* more lawyers.

ANNE

You're just being snarky. I know you.

JULIAN

Me?! Of a gaggle of everyday snarks?

ANNE

You, being Groucho Himself Mister Marx.

JULIAN

Me, a tricky fox with Kryptonian birthmarks?

ANNE

You, in a clan of Arthur C. Clarke's.

JULIAN

Me, at World's End with only Deutschmarks?

ANNE

You, at the walls of Chicago ballparks.

JULIAN

Me, on a team of South African aardvarks?

ANNE

You, in the fields of moths and Monarchs.

JULIAN

Me, at the gate where Prince Charles embarks?

ANNE

You, with all the other skylarks.

JULIAN

Me, shaking hands with Zoffer Rucker himself?

ANNE

All right. All right. Who was Zoffer Rucker anyway?... Go ahead and tell me.

JULIAN

It's not so much *who* Zoffer Rucker was, as *what* Zoffer Rucker was.

ANNE

Okay. *What* was Zoffer Rucker?

JULIAN

One day my law-school friend, and his girlfriend, and I were riding in his car,
and the radio was on, and someone said something about Betty Crocker.
Like, her cake mix was in the Poisonwood Bible, or something.
And my friend made a rhyme:
“Betty Crocker, Zoffer Rocker.”

ANNE

And?...

JULIAN

And his girlfriend got all excited. She almost wet her pants.
“Betty Crocker Zoffer Rocker” she said.
“Betty Crocker Zoffer Rocker.
Get it? Get it? Betty Crocker’s. Off her rocker.”

ANNE

So?

JULIAN

Well, my friend just looked at her and winked at me, and she got it.

ANNE

Got what?

JULIAN

That the bastard had set her up.
Months’ worth of the set-up, just for that moment.
You see, there never was a Zoffer Rocker.
He made it up to play a joke on her.

ANNE

What a bastard!

JULIAN

Like I said.

ANNE

So, what’s the point?...
Something about Mark and me?

JULIAN

It’s language.

ANNE

Language?

JULIAN

Doctors and lawyers both speak a language.
Doctors heal, and save lives with their language.
Lawyers win court battles and help rich men rule from the grave with trusts and wills.

ANNE

You don't care much for lawyers, do you?

JULIAN

I don't care much for anybody who takes you away ... doctor or lawyer.

ANNE

I'm trying to follow this. Are you suggesting Mark and I are talking a different language about getting married?

JULIAN

I'm suggesting you're not talking about *parts of it* at all.

ANNE

What parts?
What are we not talking about?

JULIAN

Dreams.

ANNE

Dreams? We're getting married, and you want us to discuss our dreams.

JULIAN

Let your dreams be known.

ANNE

My dreams??

JULIAN

Of becoming a doctor. And saving pieces of the world.

ANNE

Or saving a piece of you....
[beat] How does it feel? Being back, next to your old house after all this time?

JULIAN

They never come back, so far as I know.

ANNE

I thought I might never see you here again.

JULIAN

And here I am.

ANNE

Time flies like an arrow, you used to say.

JULIAN

From a bow of rusty feathers.

ANNE

How was college?

JULIAN

I chased it four years ... looking.

ANNE

Okay, I'll bite: Looking for what?

All the king's horses and all the king's men?

JULIAN

Something like that.

ANNE

More specificity, please.

JULIAN

I had an idea that I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life.

No idea what I was even looking for.

ANNE

Nothing?

JULIAN

Then one day god happened to me, in reverse.

ANNE

You found God?

Or God found you?

JULIAN

I found a dog.

ANNE

You're an idiot, Jules.

JULIAN

A dyslexic idiot. Something like that.

ANNE

Shut up!

JULIAN

But not completely an idiot....

I never thought I could ever talk to Cody again.

Tell him how I couldn't imagine ... or stand myself for how stupid I was.

Because I don't believe in spirits and things.

You know that.

And I certainly would never have thought it would be a dog.

A lost puppy.

Thrown away, to be exact.

Because, he didn't just jump into the lake at State by himself.

He was in a bag....

Anyway, I wasn't thinking, which was easy for me at the time.

And I jumped into the lake, off the bench I was sitting on, after I heard the splash.

When I got out all I had were wet clothes, wet shoes,

and a wet bag with a wet Dalmatian puppy in it.

ANNE

O my God!! Really?!

JULIAN

I had no idea of becoming a dog owner.

But I did. For a year.

ANNE

You don't still have him?

JULIAN

Not anymore.

I finally found a family with a young boy who could be better dog owners than I alone can be.

With a couple of acres for Cody to run on.

ANNE

You named him “Cody”?

JULIAN

Not really.

He told me “Cody” was his name....

It was the first time, and the only time, I felt sunshine like that in my life again.

He was so happy to be with me.

Always.

Just to see me.

Wiggling and jumping.

I had to get on my knees and give him my face to lick to calm him down.

I’d sit on the ground, and when he quieted down he’d put his head in my lap,
and look into my eyes.

Then we’d talk.

ANNE

What about?

JULIAN

My stamps. And my baseball cards.

And that made him happy, the way it used to do....

And about the mystery of life.

Why some children have to die.

[*beat*] But then he grew out of his puppy stage, and Cody left Cody....

[*pause*] Anne, if there’s one thing I’ve learned in this life

ANNE

[*beat*] What? What is it?

JULIAN

It’s how animals can heal a person.

Help heal, for a time.

And I thought, after that, I might become a veterinarian.

But becoming a vet is harder than finding golden hen’s teeth under your pillow.

ANNE

I’ve heard.

JULIAN

So, I’m thinking of finding a way to bring dogs that care to people who need
emotional help from them.

ANNE

Wow!!

What a marvelous idea....

In hospitals, too, like when someone, a child maybe, has to go into surgery.

JULIAN

In hospitals ... yes.

And in courtrooms, too, while a witness testifies.

Or in church, when a child's being baptized.

ANNE

You just can't leave well enough alone, can you?

JULIAN

Sorry.

It's the nature of the beast in me.

ANNE

You *are* a beast.

JULIAN

[*thoughtful pause*] So, what are we doing today?

What's new around this town?

ANNE

What are you in to?

JULIAN

I don't know.

You're the expert.

ANNE

Well. There's a chess tournament at the Biltmore.

JULIAN

Will Bobby Fischer be there?

ANNE

I doubt it.

I think he died last year.

JULIAN

He did??

Where have I been?

ANNE

In Iceland, I think. Reykjavik. The place where he won the world championship.

JULIAN

Sorry. Never been there....
Anything else?

ANNE

Want to go swimming at the Y?
We still have a family membership.

JULIAN

No thanks. Not today.

ANNE

How 'bout the Casino?
Now that we're old enough.

JULIAN

What else?

ANNE

Well, out at Sicilian Lake I read they are having an auto race.

JULIAN

An auto race?
What?
They've built a racetrack round the lake?

ANNE

No. They're racing *in* it.

JULIAN

You're joking.

ANNE

It's a bunch of VW Beetles, airtight, equipped to motor in the water.

JULIAN

Now *there's* an event you don't expect to see every day.... But I think I'll pass.

ANNE

What about the county arboretum?
I hear they have an amazing exhibition of butterflies this summer.

JULIAN

Sorry. Anything else?

ANNE

Want to rent a bike?

JULIAN

Where would we ride?

ANNE

There are some nice trails in Oakwood Park.

JULIAN

That's a possibility.

Anything else?

ANNE

How about just hanging out along the river?
You and I, walking with our thoughts together.
Like we used to on Sunday afternoons.
How does that sound?

JULIAN

That sounds perfect.
Let's go.

As they are exiting:

ANNE

Why is it, when we talk, I feel holes inside me filling up?

JULIAN

I don't know....

They exit.

SCENE 3

Eleven years later. ANNE and JULIAN are both 33.

Stage right ANNE is at a desk, on a laptop.

Stage left JULIAN is at a desk, on a laptop.

It's daytime.

ANNE

Julian, is this you? I can barely see your face.

JULIAN

Makes an adjustment.

Is that any better?

ANNE

Yes. Much.

JULIAN

How are you, Princess?

ANNE

My upper half's together, I hope. Forgive the hair, and forget the rest.

JULIAN

COVID?

ANNE

No COVID, thank God. But no relief, either, from the quarantine. Mark is working three days a week from the apartment. The other three he goes in, with a mask on, of course. How about you?

JULIAN

About the same. Crazy like all the rest of the people trying to get on top of this. Except in our office most everyone has opted for working remote. So, it's damned quiet on work days. And likely to stay that way until we get the vaccines up and running. What about med school?

ANNE

Education interrupted. I'm getting antsy.
We have Zoom lectures every day. But not any hands on stuff.

JULIAN

Ahh, you've got plenty of time.
You're only thirty-three....
What's the school's take on what's happening?

ANNE

People would be healthier without politics.

JULIAN

Aside from that truism.

ANNE

We need an effective vaccine.
Period.
Without it, we'll fall back on what they're calling "herd immunity."
Which will be an unmitigated disaster, they're telling us.
Three million lives in the U.S. alone. At best. Probably more.

JULIAN

I can't disagree.
And on the other side, if we get to it soon enough,
the economy will survive the day.
No Doomsday.
Give it a couple of years, with Government help of course.

ANNE

Mark figures the same thing....
By the way, he's on track for a partnership vote in December,
unless, heaven forbid, COVID sticks its ugly head in the way.

JULIAN

[*unenthusiastically*] Wonderful.
Any other news?

ANNE

Oh, we got a dog.

JULIAN

Yeah. A golden doodle puppy. Saw it on Facebook.

ANNE

She's adorable!
We named her Dodo, because Doodles aren't the smartest bark on the block.

JULIAN

What prompted that?

ANNE

Home alone.

JULIAN

I thought you said Mark was staying at home.

ANNE

Only half the time.
The other half he's full time gone at the office.

JULIAN

Yep.
That's dog country.

ANNE

How's everything with you?

JULIAN

Okay.

ANNE

And your folks?

JULIAN

We don't talk. We seldom talk.
Too bad COVID doesn't have a side effect of loss of sense of loss.
Like loss of sense of smell or something.
And we could all catch it.

ANNE

You don't really mean that, Jay!

JULIAN

No. Not really.
Half really.
Parents can be sharper than a serpent's tooth.

ANNE

A grieving problem, I imagine.
Maybe they haven't found closure.

JULIAN

Closure?!

I hate that damn word.
It's a total myth.

ANNE

All right. All right.
You're right.
I never liked the word much myself.
I should never have said it.
Sorry.

JULIAN

No. *I'm sorry*, Anne.
It just touches a nerve in me.
Like some form of brain washing,
that supposedly will produce eternal sunshine of the spotless mind.

ANNE

You once read me a poem about a spotless mind.
I remember.
But I can't remember it.
Was it from the Psalms?
Or Shakespeare?

JULIAN

A poem by the Pope. Alexander Pope.

ANNE

Oh.

JULIAN

Something like:
"How happy is the vestal virgin's lot.
The world forgetting, by the world forgot.
Eternal sunshine of the spotless mind...."
Not me!
I ceased being spotless on a day in July, when I was nine years old.

ANNE

Didn't they make a movie of a spotless mind?

JULIAN

A science fiction movie.

ANNE

Oh, yes. Science fiction. The Day the Earth Stood Still.

JULIAN

Not that one. Another one....

By the way, have you seen any good movies lately? On Netflix, or HBO?

ANNE

Just the normal stuff:

Stranger Things.

Westworld.

The Crown.

Game of Thrones reruns.

But I'm really looking forward to The Queen's Gambit next month.

I was always fascinated by the chess mind, back in the day.

JULIAN

You played chess, didn't you?

Weren't you on the high school chess team?

ANNE

I've lost interest in playing it.

I used to study chess, what? maybe ten hours a week.

More than homework.

It was a world in itself to me. A beautiful world of its own logic.

One that a girl can control just as well as any boy.

But that seems a lifetime ago.

Now I have other things on my mind.

JULIAN

Is that why you gave the game up?

ANNE

The problem I had was artificial intelligence.

JULIAN

AI? How was that a problem?

ANNE

A thousand different ways.
But don't you remember?
How the IBM computer beat world champion Garry Kasparov in 1997?

JULIAN

I'm afraid I wasn't much interested in following chess matches back then.

ANNE

The computer was named Deep Blue, and Garry Kasparov was my hero.
World champion at age twenty-two. The youngest ever. The greatest ever.
I followed all of his games.
He was a monster.
Almost *never* lost a game.
Head and shoulders above everybody else.
Plus, darkly handsome with piercing eyes.

JULIAN

That I might like.

ANNE

It came down to a single move,
with the future of artificial intelligence on the line.

JULIAN

O! Come on! Now I *know* you're exaggerating.

ANNE

I remember it still.
For me, like the world changed.
Move 37 in game 2.
Kasparov had just laid a trap that any normal computer would have fallen for.
The machine thought an unusual 15 minutes,
and then did something no computer had ever done before.
It declined a two-pawn sacrifice,
blocked Kasparov's crucial King pawn,
and nine moves later Kasparov resigned.
He was furious.
He was convinced that someone behind the computer had tipped it off.

JULIAN

Was there someone behind it?
Did the computer cheat?

ANNE

Not at all.

It took time, but in the end the computer out thought one of the greatest minds in the chess world.

JULIAN

That's what I don't get.

How can a computer, programmed by lesser chess players, or maybe even programmers who don't know crap about playing chess, how can it out think the world's greatest master?

ANNE

By being able to study millions of variations, and selecting the end position that looks the best, and usually is. It's because computers today can see moons farther into the future. Now all the best chess players in the world are computers. Garry Kasparov's rating was around 2900. Computers come in at 3400 or better today.

JULIAN

So, what's the problem?

ANNE

It's me. It's inhuman.

I wanted the best minds in the world to be human minds.

JULIAN

Why, exactly? And I'm not saying I disagree with you.

ANNE

Because human brains incorporate emotion. And humanity. And computer brains are cold and mechanical.

JULIAN

If it takes a cold, mechanical brain to feed all the people of the world, wouldn't that make a difference to you?

ANNE

Of course it would.

JULIAN

Or cure cancer, say, or diabetes, or Alzheimer's?

ANNE

Needless to say.

JULIAN

Or stop war?

ANNE

Gort!

JULIAN

What?

ANNE

Do you want a mechanical robot ruling your life?
What if something goes haywire inside it,
and the world forgets to say, “klaatú barada níkto”?

JULIAN

You have a point there.

ANNE

Artificial intelligence works when it works with people.
When it’s on its own, it can go rogue. Like Hal, in 2001.

JULIAN

Because artificial intelligence lacks empathy. Is that it?

ANNE

History has had monstrous problems with people who lack empathy.
But so far we’ve been able to deal with them.

JULIAN

Thirty million lives lost to Hitler and Stalin is hardly dealing with them.

ANNE

And artificial intelligence could?

JULIAN

Hey, I’m no AI fan, particularly. But a supercomputer might be able to give
credible warning of the rise of a new Hitler, or the fall of the Earth’s environment.

ANNE

I just don’t want AI to take the life out of life.
The way Deep Blue did to me when I was in high school.

JULIAN

Or to replace lawyers with processors that can write wills and contracts, and litigate court cases.

ANNE

No. Not that either.

JULIAN

John Henry was a steel drivin' man.

ANNE

I mean ... and try to take this seriously, Jay:
Kasparov suspected there was a human brain behind Deep Blue that helped it cheat.

Ridiculous, we now know.

But in the future, how ridiculous will it be when some player suspects that his opponent is cheating *using a computer* during a chess match?

JULIAN

If it weren't for technology, we wouldn't be talking now.

But, you win.

Let's talk about something else....

Anything else new?

ANNE

Well ... I did hear a remarkable interview on the radio the other day.

It was Connie Francis. She's 82 now, and what a life she's had!

JULIAN

I remember the name, but

ANNE

She was probably the biggest female recording star of the late 50's and early 60's.
More than 100 million records sold worldwide.

And in 1960 she co-starred in the movie, "Where the Boys Are."

JULIAN

Oh, I remember that.

Fort Lauderdale, right? Spring break? Fifty's female coming of age?

ANNE

Correct. Very good.

JULIAN

I have a picture in my mind of a sweet teenage blond,
walking dazed, down the middle of a street, traffic around her, being hit by a car.
Maybe one of the most beautiful faces and smiles that didn't make it around long
enough.

ANNE

Yvette Mimieux.
Same movie. One of the four co-stars.

JULIAN

What ever happened to her?

ANNE

Yvette Mimieux?
I think she gave up acting.
But I was talking about Connie Francis.

JULIAN

It was hard for a woman back then.

ANNE

Damn hard. Even for a Marilyn Monroe.

JULIAN

I suppose your Connie Francis sang the title song to the movie.

ANNE

She did. It changed the life of Fort Lauderdale forever.

JULIAN

I remember that song very well.... Where the boys are.

ANNE

Do you remember "Who's Sorry Now"?

JULIAN

She sang that, too? What an angelic voice she had, in my memory.

ANNE

It almost didn't get recorded.

JULIAN

How so?

ANNE

MGM Records had signed Francis to a contract when she was seventeen, but after ten or so mostly flops, they were ready to give up. And she was getting ready to pursue a career in medicine at, go figure, NYU.

JULIAN

NYU?

ANNE

The same.
She'd graduated salutatorian of her high school class.
I mean: She had brains as well as talent.

JULIAN

Salutatorian, like you.
But brains and talent don't always win the battle over luck.

ANNE

They told her it was her last recording session with them.
Actually, "Who's Sorry Now" was the last song to be recorded that day with the orchestra, and she wasn't at all fond of it.
She delayed and delayed, until there was barely enough time left. When the recording was completed there were only a few seconds left on the tape.

JULIAN

I'll never get it: Why life is so full of twists of fate like that.

ANNE

Within six months "Who's Sorry Now" had sold more than a million copies. And for the next four years Francis was voted the Best Female Vocalist on American Bandstand.

JULIAN

Where's this going?

ANNE

She fell in love with Bobby Darin.
But her father scared the bejesus out of him. At gunpoint.
Told him to get out of his daughter's life, or he'd kill him.

JULIAN

And, did he?

ANNE

Darin ditched her and married Sandra Dee.
And even at age 82 Francis says that not marrying Bobby Darin was the biggest mistake of her life.

JULIAN

We're not all the same, that's for sure; but it does ring a bell.
How many people, even after years have gone by, find it nearly impossible to bear, when they start thinking about the one lost moment in their lives?

ANNE

You just never know, do you?
We think from the outside that other people's lives go so swimmingly, when, in fact, they may be close to drowning.

JULIAN

People too much don't want what they get.
Connie Francis might actually have been happier going to NYU with you, and becoming a doctor.

ANNE

And meeting a man like my Mark....
Or meeting a man like you, for that matter.

JULIAN

Well ... any other news before we log off?

ANNE

Not much.... Oh, I'm pregnant.

JULIAN

You're pregnant?! God dawg, Anne! That's huge news!

ANNE

I think so.

JULIAN

How does Mark feel about it? Over the moon?

ANNE

Not quite that high.
Maybe just a tad worried. Like I am.
These aren't the most certain of times.

JULIAN

Most babies *aren't born* in the most certain of times, Princess.

ANNE

We're asking around for a nanny.
Do you know of any?

JULIAN

In Atlanta?
To move to New York in this season?
Not very likely, my dear.
Sorry.
But I'll check with some of my gay friends.

ANNE

Just thought I'd try.

JULIAN

Any names picked out?

ANNE

We're holding off.
We don't even want a gender reveal yet.

JULIAN

Like Kirk?

ANNE

Kirk?

JULIAN

Or Dirk?

ANNE

What are you doing?

JULIAN

Maybe Burke?

ANNE

Are you being a jerk?

JULIAN

With a smirk.

ANNE

A jerk with a smirk that's becoming a dull irk.

JULIAN

A Mechanical Turk.

ANNE

No. That won't work.

And seriously, I'd prefer it to be a girl, God willing.

JULIAN

Sperm willing.

ANNE

Cute.

JULIAN

Girl or boy, just so that it's

ANNE

Healthy.

JULIAN

Right. Healthy.

That's what *I* was going to say.

ANNE

[*pause*] Jay ...?

JULIAN

Yes?

ANNE

I'm worried about something.

Can we talk about it?

JULIAN

Of course.

ANNE

That I'm not good enough to be a mother. Not kind enough.

JULIAN

That's ridiculous.

Of course you're good enough, Anne.

ANNE

I worry into the night, when Mark is asleep. Snoring.

JULIAN

He snores?

ANNE

Maybe it'll be a girl.

I feel better when I think maybe it'll be a girl.

If it's a boy, I think I might be all at sea.

JULIAN

You'll be a great mother. Think of *your mother*.

ANNE

I do.

And I do love her. But that's part of what I worry about:

I don't know how to ask her.

I have no idea how to be kind, other than to be just me. That's all I know.

I've not been around babies much; and that's all I know about it.

I don't even know whether I *am* kind, or not.

Not enough to be a mother.

JULIAN

Of course you are.

Of course you will be.

Don't be silly.

ANNE

I don't know.

JULIAN

It's human nature.

It's an instinct.

ANNE

[*silence*]

JULIAN

Needless to say, it would scare the poo out of me.

ANNE

What if I screw up?

JULIAN

I'm sorry.
I know you won't.
But I don't know what to say.
Except, you're right.
No one teaches a person how to raise a child.
I wouldn't have a clue what to do.
Except pray for the right instinct.

ANNE

What if it gets sick?
Or has a fall?
Or can't sleep at night?
Or doesn't love me?
What do I do?

JULIAN

You'll know.
Just like other people have done from the beginning of time.
It'll just come naturally to you, what to do.
Like being a good wife.

ANNE

Am I?
Am I a good wife? I don't know that.

JULIAN

Aren't you?

ANNE

I'm not sure anymore.
Something's missing.
Something's missing in my life, Jay.
In me.
Something's missing in me.

JULIAN

Do you know what it is?

ANNE

No....
But if it weren't I wouldn't want to be something else.

JULIAN

Something else??

ANNE

I want to be a doctor.

JULIAN

You're going to be a doctor.

ANNE

Maybe not now.

JULIAN

Why not? People can do both these days all the time.

ANNE

It oughtn't feel like this, I know,
like it does at nights while I'm lying there,
but it feels like something has died inside me. *Died.*
Like I felt when my love of chess died in me.
Like, actually, I've been in the process of dying all along.

JULIAN

Life's not easy, is it? through the struggle of the miles.

ANNE

Just random and fugitive bits of it.

JULIAN

But it'll be fine.
I promise you.

ANNE

What is it about you why it's only you I can always talk to?

JULIAN

Tomorrow and tomorrow.
It's what's gotten me by all these years.

ANNE

Maybe that's it. Maybe I'm afraid of some tomorrow.

JULIAN

Which tomorrow?

ANNE

That that'll be the day I miscarry, maybe.
That's she's going to die....
My God! The things we dream up.
It could make saints tremble.

JULIAN

You're making *me* tremble.

ANNE

Thanks for being there when I need you, Jay.
It means the world to me, talking to you.

JULIAN

What have I said?

ANNE

You've listened.
That's what matters.
I'm fine now.
And when the time comes, I'll be fine then.

JULIAN

When is that?
When is the due date?

ANNE

In early March. The third, they think.

JULIAN

That gives us plenty of time.

ANNE

For what?

JULIAN

To pick a name for the little squirt.

ANNE

Mark and I will take care of that, thank you.

JULIAN

Just let yourself do it, Anne, and quit thinking so much.
It'll just happen. Like ibuprofen.

ANNE

Pregnancy can drive a woman crazy.
Sorry for being such a burden.

JULIAN

What burden?

ANNE

[*beat*] So? Time to go?

JULIAN

Yep, guess so.
But we'll be back in touch a dozen times before the little squirt squirts out.

ANNE

If you say so.

JULIAN

Take good care of yourself, Princess. You're my only princess.

ANNE

I will.
You, too.

JULIAN

Bye.

ANNE

Bye bye.

Darkness.

SCENE 4

Eleven years later. ANNE and JULIAN are both 44.

JULIAN is standing in front of the tree (twenty-two years older than it was in Scene 2). Using a handheld, he is attempting to reach ANNE.

ANNE (offstage) is in Zomba, Malawi (Africa).

It's daytime.

JULIAN

Anne Brown.

No.

Shit!

Anne Whitman.

Hell, I don't know.

One of the two:

Anne Brown Whitman....

A doctor.

She's a doctor.

In the clinic there.

In the health facility at the University.

[*pause*] Yes.

Anne Whitman.

An American.

[*pause*] Yes. Yes.

I'm Julian. Julian Henman.

Calling from the United States.

She emailed me that I could reach her at this number today at six.

[*beat*] It's six there isn't it?

It's Noon here.

[*pause*] Yes. I can wait.

Pause.

ANNE

Hello?

JULIAN

Anne?

ANNE

Julian?

Is that you?

JULIAN

The one and only.

Who did you think it would be at this time of day, Princess?

ANNE

I thought you were going to call tomorrow.

JULIAN

Tomorrow? Did I screw up?...

What day is it there?

ANNE

June 25th.

What day is it there?

JULIAN

The same: June 25th.

Is it Wednesday in Malawi?

ANNE

It is Wednesday in Malawi, and most of the rest of the world I suspect.

I must have gotten mixed up.

I wrote it down on my calendar for Thursday.

Sorry.

JULIAN

No problem.

Should I call back tomorrow? At six?

ANNE

No. We're on the line now. Let's talk.

No telling what tomorrow may bring.

It gets crazy here.

JULIAN

Sorry about the mistake.

ANNE

It's probably mine.
Getting more like Mom every day.

JULIAN

Like your Mom? did you say?

ANNE

A little forgetful. Lots on her mind.
Sometimes she doesn't quite remember why I came to Africa in the first place.
Mothers can be like that, if they don't understand why their daughters do things.
Unlike me, she wants so much to hold tight to all the memories. You know.

JULIAN

It's a problem, isn't it?
What memories to lose, and not want back the very next day.

ANNE

Once the mind is spotted it's never spotless again.

JULIAN

Oh, the proverbial sunshine of the spotless mind!

ANNE

You still remember?

JULIAN

How could I forget?

ANNE

How are you?

JULIAN

About the same as always, just a little older.
Forty-four and still in the fight.

ANNE

Me, too, I guess.

JULIAN

It's been how long now you've been in Africa? Three months?

ANNE

Four, going on five.

JULIAN

Horse flies!
And how are you and Malawi getting along?

ANNE

The country seems to like me okay, despite my occasional moods.
People here are incredibly friendly.
They don't have all that much,
but they'd share anything they have off their backs in a heartbeat.
Especially advice.
Which turns out to be a life-saver.

JULIAN

Where are you living?

ANNE

Outside of town.
Zomba it's called.
The town, I mean, where I work.
At the University.
Not the village where I live.
It's a mud hut with a brown thatched roof.
And it's lovely

JULIAN

Indoor plumbing?

ANNE

You're kidding, of course.

JULIAN

Just hoping, I guess....
How far outside Zomba is it?

ANNE

About fifteen kilometers.

JULIAN

Any goats?

ANNE

As a matter of fact, yes.
I'm sharing a pair with neighbors of mine right now.
They seem to have a particular fondness for my digs.

JULIAN

And a car?

ANNE

What??
People here ride bikes.

JULIAN

Do they speak English?
In your village?

ANNE

Enough for me to get by.
With some sign language thrown in.
Until I learn more of their words.

JULIAN

Wow! English? Really?
In the African bush?

ANNE

English is Malawi's official language in the cities.
By ten children in school are taught almost exclusively in English I'm told.
They're proud of it.

JULIAN

Great Britain's greatest gift to the world ... their tongue.
Do many kids in Malawi actually go to school?

ANNE

In Zomba most all of them do.

JULIAN

One surprise after another, for this provincial American.

ANNE

You're hardly provincial, my friend. Maybe a little more Googling might help.
But for me at least, this is certainly a place for constant surprises.

JULIAN

[*pause*] I'm sorry about what happened, Anne.
I just never seem to know how to say it right.
It devastated me, finding out.

ANNE

I know, Jay. And I love you for it.
But I'm not ready to talk about it yet.

JULIAN

Of course.

ANNE

You can find sorrow wherever you go.
I'm hardly unique.
I tried God, for a while.
But it's not religion that's brought me some peace. It's Africa.
I balance the darkness of the nights here with the days, and that gets me through.
The days are nonstop.
And that's a blessing.
But why am I telling you all this, like you don't already know?

JULIAN

It's work that finds you escape.
In Africa or in America.
I totally understand.

ANNE

With one difference:
If you see someone on an American street you probably have no idea what they're
walking from.
In Malawi you have every idea.
Food.
Shelter.
Babies.
Toil and troubles.
And some simple happiness.

JULIAN

I get that.

ANNE

So how are *you* doing? How's your love life?

JULIAN

Haven't you heard?
I'm dating Harry Styles.

ANNE

You are??
Really?

JULIAN

Nah! Just kidding!
There's nothing new under the sun over here.
And you might as well stop asking.

ANNE

Miracles can happen.

JULIAN

For Catholics maybe.

ANNE

If I've learned one thing, Jules, it's not to talk Catholicism with you.
Look what you've done to my faith over the years:
Making me question things like the virgin conception and immaculate perfection.

JULIAN

Jesus was a man.
And no man is a perfect island, no matter who his father is.

ANNE

So *you* say.

JULIAN

Everything good they say Jesus was, is in you.
Including his imperfections.

ANNE

That's the thing, isn't it? Perfection.
That's the wall.

JULIAN

The wall?...
Oh yes, *it is* the wall.
The wall that was built around Jesus when he died, to keep him hidden.

ANNE

So you've told me.

JULIAN

Look at Albert Schweitzer.
He knew Jesus wasn't perfect.
But he still gave his life to him.
In Africa....
That's what *I* can't do.
I understand the mystery of it.
But I've never found the quiet.
I've never found the peace.

ANNE

Not having to believe in God's perfection at least should unlock some of the guilt,
doesn't it?

JULIAN

I don't have God to blame.

ANNE

In Africa it's so very, very easy to release the divine illusion of perfection.

JULIAN

So ... how *is* the medical business on top of the world?

ANNE

Malawi is hardly on top of the world.
Certainly not on top of the Earth's wealth.
Or health.
It's one of the least developed countries there is.

JULIAN

Oh?

ANNE

It has a horrible infant mortality rate.
I had no clue before I came.
It tears my soul apart to see how these young mothers lose their babies,
and open their mouths in grief, like holes in their mosquito netting.
I do what I can, but there's nothing you can do about it.
There's simply not enough medicine. Not enough pre-natal care.
Not enough corn and fish. And far too much cholera and malaria.

JULIAN

It sounds awful.

ANNE

It is.

And people So many people in the world have no idea.

They live in comfort and just don't know.

They have no idea how lucky they are.

The mothers in America who don't lose a baby.

They should spend time in Africa.

And yet, somehow, the people here are happy.

It makes as much sense to me as poetry I don't understand.

JULIAN

Life, and happiness, they seldom make much sense.

ANNE

You know, Jules, it's the most baffling mystery of nature:

How people in some places can find a way to die from too much food,

while others die from too little.

It's cruel.

So many people in Malawi are going hungry every day,

while other places people's bodies keep getting stronger and taller.

World records fall every year in sports.

But not in Malawi.

JULIAN

And that's why you're there.

ANNE

Yes.

Malawi is damaged goods, like me.

JULIAN

You are not!

ANNE

You should see me.

JULIAN

Yes, indeed. I should.

I should.

ANNE

You wouldn't like it.
What you'd see.
I'm not that young girl anymore who used to climb trees with you....
By the way, how is our tree doing?
Have you seen it lately?

JULIAN

I'm standing in front of it as we speak.
It's taller than ever.
And if you believe it, it was talking to me just before I called.

ANNE

What did it say?

JULIAN

It asked me where in the world you are.

ANNE

Tell it I don't ever want to lose it.

JULIAN

[*to the tree*] She's in Malawi, Africa, and she never wants to lose you.

ANNE

You and our tree are the two most lasting pieces of goodness in my life.

JULIAN

You *do* sound down.

ANNE

I am sad, Jay.
I won't lie to you.
But if it were a choice, I'd choose sadness over ever losing a child.
And now I'm both.
But I'm doing something.
And that makes all the difference.
Serving the less fortunate and letting time take the sting out.

JULIAN

You're an amazing person, Anne.
I can't tell you that enough.

ANNE

Malawi is the amazing.

JULIAN

O Poverty, be thou an amazing bride.

ANNE

I can imagine more disappointing marriages.

JULIAN

What ground is there in which some kind of disappointment doesn't lurk.

ANNE

Like clockwork.

JULIAN

Tripping young turks.

ANNE

Or desk clerks.

JULIAN

Or Captain Kirk.

ANNE

Or a soda jerk.

JULIAN

Or the Shadow lurks.

ANNE

And knees jerk.

JULIAN

And flies berserk.

ANNE

And time's patchwork.

JULIAN

Are you coming back soon? I miss you.

ANNE

Not for a while, Jay. This is where I belong now.

JULIAN

How long?

ANNE

Maybe ten years.

JULIAN

Oh!

ANNE

Would you like to come visit me?
There's plenty of space on the ground of my one-room hut.
And I keep the dirt floor well swept.

JULIAN

In the universe there are things that are known, and things that are unknown,
and in between there are doors.

ANNE

Who said that?

JULIAN

William Blake, I believe.
Something like that.

ANNE

Meaning what, exactly?

JULIAN

There's always a chance I'll come.

ANNE

Fat chance, eh?

JULIAN

Like straws on a camel's back.

ANNE

Sometimes when ice cracks, it pops.
But there's not any surplus of ice in this place, I tell you. No. Sir.

JULIAN

It seems so utterly strange that I am here, with our tree,
and your nearly a third of the world away in Africa.

ANNE

[*aside*] What?
Okay, I'm coming.

[*to JULIAN*] Sorry. Something's come up.
Got to go.
Talk soon. And email.
Love you.

JULIAN

Love you, too.

The call disconnects.

JULIAN walks offstage.

SCENE 5

Eleven years later. ANNE and JULIAN are both 55.

The tree between the two houses has been cut down. All that remains of it is a high stump – high enough to sit on comfortably. Next to it is a large stone with a flat surface – large enough to sit on comfortably.

ANNE and JULIAN enter from opposite sides of the stage; and upon seeing each other they run into each other's arms.

It is a LONG and tearful embrace.

Daytime.

JULIAN

What a sight you are for sore and longing arms.
And you don't look a day older, Princess.

ANNE

My hair does.

JULIAN

Where has time gone?

ANNE

Into books.

JULIAN

Into the libraries of our minds.

ANNE

Time flies like an arrow, you always used to say.

JULIAN

Like fruit flies like a banana.

ANNE swallows a laugh.

JULIAN

You're the only medicine that's ever worked for me.

ANNE

Me?

JULIAN

Yes, you.

ANNE

Same here.

JULIAN

I occasionally wonder what it all would have been like,
if we had just run away together, and I had never played tennis.

ANNE

[*beat*] Are you ready to talk about it now?

JULIAN

To talk about it? Oh. That morning.

ANNE

Yes.

JULIAN

Forty-six years, and it still puts pain into my throat,
and into my stomach.

Pause.

JULIAN

I can't believe how many children Nature produces to reproduce itself,
so that so many people have to bear such heartache.

ANNE

You can't care for life in this life without loss.
Or live long without feeling the pain of it. It's the blight of human being.

**They sit – ANNE on the stone, JULIAN
on the tree stump.**

ANNE

Tell me what happened.

JULIAN

Why did they have to cut our tree down?

ANNE

Lightning hit it.

JULIAN

Jupiter sparks.

ANNE

Maple tree barks.

JULIAN

Sparrow larks.

ANNE

Groucho Marx.

JULIAN

Lightning never strikes twice, they say....
And it always does, doesn't it?
In our lives.

ANNE

Tell me what happened....
It's been forty-six years.

JULIAN

How could a brother live so long in such self-blame?
I'm an idiot.

ANNE

Given that you're an idiot, talk to me.

JULIAN

I *am* an idiot....

Pause.

JULIAN

It was July Fourth.
July Fourth, 1996.
I was nine, and already people were telling me I'd be a champion....

ANNE

A tennis champion.
Yes, I remember.

JULIAN

Yes.

ANNE

You were really good.

JULIAN

I've never picked up a racket since....
Cody was only six that morning.

ANNE

He idolized you.

JULIAN

His loss.

ANNE

I did, too.

JULIAN

An idiot, but not a demon. I didn't do it on purpose.

ANNE

You were only nine. Nobody thought you did it on purpose.

JULIAN

But I should have known better.

ANNE

A nine-year-old is not an Atlas.

JULIAN

[*beat*] It was a beautiful morning.
Like 9-11 was in New York.
And I was babysitting him while Mom and Dad were getting ready for the
cookout that evening....
Before the fireworks.
We always had a cookout at the house on the Fourth.
And then went to watch the fireworks at the park on the hill across from the
country club.

ANNE

I remember. I went with you and your family a few times.
It was a beautiful place.

JULIAN

Yes, it was.

ANNE

Some of my happiest memories growing up.

JULIAN

Memories. Where do they all come and go?

ANNE

Memories, in the moonlight, as the saying goes.

JULIAN

As the song goes.

ANNE

O my God, it was so long ago.

JULIAN

Without memory we'd be even more alone. But not know it.
With it, endless lyrics of "I should have known better."

ANNE

A gift of the gods.

JULIAN

Being with you *was* a gift of the gods.

ANNE

We never needed anything special, did we?
To be just ourselves together.

JULIAN

Like what?

ANNE

Like the same church.
Or poetry.
Or sex.
Or God.

JULIAN

Why is that, do you think?

ANNE

I don't know.
I really don't know.
Maybe we learned it young, and never forgot.

JULIAN

Nothing to hide.

ANNE

Nothing to hide behind.

JULIAN

From a tennis phenom one day, to a has-been the next, all at age nine.

ANNE

You didn't have to quit.
No one wanted you to quit.

JULIAN

Oh how wrong you are.
So very, very wrong.
It's a modern-day miracle I've lasted this long.
Our tree didn't.
And tennis would have driven me absolutely insane....

ANNE

[*beat*] What happened?
Tell me what happened that day

JULIAN

July Fourth.
Ross and I went up to the courts.
Like we always did.
And Cody tagged along.
Because I was "babysitting" him.
And we just started hitting balls.
Back and forth.
Just hitting them.
Without a care or purpose in the world.
I should have known better.

ANNE

[*beat*] And ...?

JULIAN

We weren't playing an actual game.
Just taking turns slamming the ball.
As hard as we could.
And sometimes the balls would bounce over the fence.
And Cody would chase them down....

[*beat*] O shit!!

Pause.

JULIAN

He'd chase them down, and come back laughing all the way....
There never was a hint.
Never the slightest hint....
Are there hints?

ANNE

Who knows?

JULIAN

I should have known better.
And then Cody was gone.
Gone forever.
A shot I could never take back.
Never....
[*beat*] I ask myself, from time to time, how old would he be today?

ANNE

Maybe there are signs. And maybe your parents

JULIAN

Maybe you're thinking what's been on my mind, too.

ANNE

Maybe I am.

JULIAN

Grief, and the glassy stare of death, are shot from the same needle.
Vying for the same space.

ANNE

They say a man dies but one death only if he has no family or friends.

JULIAN

Why did I have to hit it that hard?
Is that what I was doomed to do?
To homerun a ball out of the ballpark?
Over the fence and out of the park at the wrong time?
Into fucking traffic....
But I did.

ANNE

And he chased it.

JULIAN

Cody chased it, into the street.

ANNE

Enough blame to feed a herd of elephants.
With cars there always are.

JULIAN

So much confusion.
We didn't even know what happened at first.
Or what words to say to change things.

ANNE

Klaatu barada nikto.

JULIAN

Grief becomes its own addiction.

ANNE

There's a hole in my heart for Cody.
And for Anna.
And for you.

JULIAN

You hope the memories go away.
And then you don't want them to. What's left of them.

ANNE

So much time ... wasted.

JULIAN

I see him sometimes. In a park, somewhere.
Or in a dream, still six, and running, and cheerful,
and looking at me the way he used to.
But when I wake up, there it is: The lack of Cody all over again.

ANNE

I see Anna the same way.
We're all so much different, you and I.
And all so much the same.

JULIAN

When childhood is crushed that way,
is there any chance of going back?

ANNE

Some say life is all a story, and we live it the way we wear it.

JULIAN

A story, told by an idiot

ANNE

With only actors brave enough to go on every day, saying,
"Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow."

JULIAN

We all have our own story, don't we?

ANNE

I'm afraid so.

JULIAN

I feel so old.

ANNE

Fifty-five. Too young to be old.

JULIAN

When do we start to forget?

ANNE

I don't think we ever get rid of the old thoughts.
We simply place new books closer to the front of our library.

JULIAN

[*pause*] What about you?

ANNE

About Anna?... I don't know what you know.

JULIAN

I know only the end.

ANNE

Mark graduated Harvard law in 2012, and we got married.
He got a good job in New York City, with a top-flight law firm.

JULIAN

And worked his ass off.
Sixty hours a week, I bet.

ANNE

Plus transportation.
Actually, it's a strange existence, being married like that in New York.
So much wealth hanging down from trees you can smell. You just never know.
So many people climbing to get on top of everybody else's world.

JULIAN

Until either you make it, or you don't.
I've heard.

ANNE

Maybe not *that* bad. But worse than law school, that's for sure.
By the time he was getting himself established on partnership track I'd decided I
had to get a life of my own.
Not just a dust cover for someone else's achievements.
So I applied to Med School, and got in. NYU Grossman. Midtown. Manhattan.
And then Anna came.
I got pregnant in my second year.
"Great timing," Mark said.
"Ditto."
He made partner the end of the year, and Anna was born the next March.
March 3, 2021. Right on schedule.
We got a nanny. Maybe an illegal one.
But it worked out okay at first.
I spoke enough Spanish; and she spoke enough English.
But it couldn't last.

JULIAN

No. Right.
Not for a partner in a big name New York law firm.

ANNE

So we let her go, and I took time off from my residency.
Which worked out horribly.
Not Anna's fault. She was an angel.
I never loved anyone like I loved her.
Or ever imagined I could.
She was my life.
If people think of me at all, they must think of me first as a mother.
That's what I am. A mother.
And now the mother of my daughter's memory.
She was the most beautiful creature in Creation. Mine and Perfect.
But *I* wasn't. I needed more than that.

JULIAN

There must be some hidden purpose in wanting.
People do it all the time.
More than eating.
More than praying.
More than taking someone to bed with them.
They want more room.
More money.
More people to chase.
But how can we be that irrational when we have the world in our hearts.

ANNE

At that time I had a new religion.
Woman's rights.
And a woman's duty to claim those rights against the Caesars of the male world.
I had the Earth in my arms and a craving for something more, like you said.

JULIAN

At least it was a longing to do for other people.

ANNE

I needed to get back into the hospital.
Back to the medicine I knew.
To prove a woman can be just as powerful and healing as a man.
And I let myself be tricked by those feelings.

JULIAN

Because you are a woman.

ANNE

Whatever...

We got another nanny, at five times the price.

And I went back.

And to drinking, a little.

We both did.

The stress.

And, let's face it, the damned disappointment of marriage.

Why is it so glorified, when it makes a wife feel like her husband's instrument?

His animal?

JULIAN

I think I get the picture.

ANNE

And I met a different Mark when he had too much to drink.

Life started falling apart.

Booze. Arguments. And an affair I found out about.

JULIAN

I think that's enough.

ANNE

And then that evening.

That God-awful evening.

When he yelled at me he was getting out.

I don't even remember what started the argument.

But Anna ran to *him*.

And hugged *him*.

And told him he couldn't go without her.

I screamed "NO!!"

And he hit me, and left.

With her ... and with our dog, Dodo.

JULIAN

Dammit!... God dammit!!

ANNE

I cried myself to sleep like an idiot.

And never

JULIAN

[*beat*] You never ...?

ANNE

I never called 9-1-1, or anything.
That's what I did.
I didn't do a thing.
Until they came to tell me....

JULIAN

They just came?

ANNE

I wouldn't answer the phone, would I?
And when they came, I knew right away.
Not about the truck they thought caused the accident. But the rest.

JULIAN

There's a darkness in a knock at the door like that.

ANNE

My little baby.
My precious angel was gone when I loved her so.
The last of the world I loved like that. My own. At seven....
She'd be twenty-one now. And would be what I so longed for:
To see a part of myself live on beyond me.

JULIAN

I know, Anne. I know.

ANNE

I know you know. The judgments of heaven for the mistakes we make.
Hounding people with all deliberate speed on those small feet that follow us for
our lives.

JULIAN

When a child dies, we die too.

ANNE

[*beat*] I had a dream, Jay. I saw it in my dream.

JULIAN

You saw it?

ANNE

In my dreams.
In the one dream I had so many times....
I've never told anyone.

JULIAN

A dream about Anna?

ANNE

I knew we had to get out, but I had no idea where to go.
It never would have happened but for that place we got ourselves into.
That's what you can't forget. Can't squeeze out of your thoughts. The *place*.
Was it my destiny? Or just my Original Sin?

JULIAN

How can you know?

ANNE

Oh we can know, we can know if we're wise enough.
I believe that.
We can know even when we're paralyzed with the knowledge.

JULIAN

What *was* the dream?

ANNE

I was in a large hotel.
Walking down the hallway on some upper floor.
The rooms had numbers on them, and pads by the handles to open with a card.
Until I'd come to a plain, wooden door at the end.
Not like any of the modern doors.
A plain wooden door with no number on it.
I'd open it; and there was a long flight of stairs going down and down.
Almost forever.
At the bottom I could hear Anna, calling to me.
So terribly afraid.
I'd start running down the stairs.
But I could never get to the bottom. Never get to her.
The stairs went on and on.
Endlessly.
With her calling to me in fear.
And me asking, why does God make these stairs last for so long?

JULIAN

Why does God ...?

ANNE

I really didn't care to go on any farther.
But my friends ganged up on me.
They forced me to care by caring so hard themselves for me.
There's no justice in this world, I told them.
You plant a seed, and it grows to smother your heart in grief.
But they pulled me back, into medicine.
And then I found the chance to move to Malawi through the Peace Corps.
And Africa ...
Africa brought peace to my mind.
Not forgetfulness.
You never forget.
But peace.
I had never really felt sorry for myself before Anna died.
And the life I saw in Malawi cured me of that.
For better or worse, it saved my life.

JULIAN

But you moved back.

ANNE

Schweitzer didn't, I know.
He stayed in his part of Africa until the end.
But I had my parents to consider.
They're growing older.
And I'm the only one to look after them.

JULIAN

How are they?

ANNE

They're doing pretty well.
We just moved them into a retirement home last week. And they seem to like it.

JULIAN

How do you feel about it?

ANNE

It'll take a bit of getting used to.
I'm staying in the old house. By myself. Probably till they're gone.

JULIAN

I'm at a crossroads, too.
Thinking of taking early retirement from my company this year.

ANNE

And then what?

JULIAN

Buying some land.
I've lived in apartments long enough.
Planting a garden.
I've always wanted to do that.
And letting flowers, tomatoes, and vegetables judge me as they will.

ANNE

Maybe it's time to retire from the other thing in your life, too.

JULIAN

What?

ANNE

Jay ... I'm not getting religious here.
All I'm saying is:
Maybe now is the time to forgive yourself.
For not being perfect.
It's time.

JULIAN

My grief is all I have left of him, and my childhood.

ANNE

Find a place where you can be with him in your memories.

JULIAN

Your God gives people a place like that.
I don't have a God like yours.

ANNE

My God's not done with you yet.

JULIAN

And you?
Are you going back to Africa eventually?

ANNE

The thought's a lonely one, isn't it?

JULIAN

It's not just the grief and loneliness. It's the fear, too.

ANNE

Fear?

JULIAN

That I'll find my heart coming up empty.

ANNE

There's not anyone else you've found?

JULIAN

Never. And why?

Because sex doesn't sow love in this barren ground.

ANNE

Amen to sex.

JULIAN

How did I let it happen?

Was I that inferior to caution?

ANNE

At age nine?

What caution does an active nine-year-old have?

JULIAN

I should have known better.

ANNE

And your parents?

JULIAN

They're both still alive.

I think.

We don't talk much.

ANNE

That is sad.

JULIAN

What about yours?
Did *they* ever forgive me?

ANNE

I've told you: They never blamed you.
You were a part of the tragedy. Not the cause.

JULIAN

They never blamed me?

ANNE

They loved you.

JULIAN

I thought *you* were the only one who never blamed me.

ANNE

Well, I wasn't the only one.

JULIAN

But I thought you were.
Not your Bible, though.
It faulted me up one side and down the other.

ANNE

You're wrong there, too.
But it's not so much my Bible anymore.
Not when it told me that women, for all eternity, must inherit sorrow from Eve's
mistake in the Garden.

JULIAN

Genesis is a trap for the unwary.

ANNE

What's happened to the good people God created in Chapter One of Genesis ...
before Adam and Eve?

JULIAN

That's my kind of question.

ANNE

They died, and we were saved.

JULIAN

They died, and we were saved.
You and I, not Cody and Anna, saved.
For this day.
For this moment.

ANNE

So, *are we saved?*

JULIAN

Are we worth saving?

ANNE

In the end, every good need is worth saving.

JULIAN

Do you think we are?

ANNE

As much as everyone else I do.

JULIAN

And I'll have help?

ANNE

Grief is not a war you can win on your own.

JULIAN

[*beat*] Anne.

ANNE

Yes?

JULIAN

What a beautiful name.
All these years a name that anchored me to a life I wasn't so sure I wanted to keep.

ANNE

Strange. How one doesn't think about how others are thinking about them.

JULIAN

Or how long one thinks about a normal nine-year-old boy on a Fourth of July whose world changed in an instant, never to be normal again.

ANNE

We can change that. I can finally see that now.

JULIAN

How?

ANNE

By sharing the sorrows and remembering the laughter.

JULIAN

Can that work for you?

ANNE

If I find the right person.

JULIAN

You're talking about the rest of our lives, aren't you?

ANNE

Because that's exactly what we have left.

JULIAN

Just talk?

ANNE

No. Not just talk. There has to be motion.

JULIAN

Motion?

ANNE

Growing things.
Fostering the less fortunate.

JULIAN

A new life you mean?

ANNE

To live outdoors as much each day as possible. Under the sun.
Breathing in as much of the sun-drenched air as can be....
My little beast. My little eyes.
My eyes in the trees.
My stolen moments of joy.
It's time I opened the wounds and shared you with another.

JULIAN

What will happen to us?

ANNE

What happens to anyone who leaves home for a long time, when they come back.

JULIAN

Forgetting Cody is something I'm not capable of doing.

ANNE

That's not what I'm saying.

I'm saying to find him again in your heart, alive.

Like finding something like Jesus born anew inside you.

Long pause.

JULIAN

Anew?... Anne?

ANNE

Yes?

JULIAN

Will you marry me?

ANNE

What?! You're saying what?

That I should marry the very best friend I ever knew?

Whose companionship I'd rather have than the love of any lover in the world?

JULIAN

But only if that's what you want to do.

ANNE

And hope that our souls' goodness can get us through?

JULIAN

Hope that the sky turns a brand new blue.

ANNE

And makes old things, a brand new new.

JULIAN

And feelings become passion's greatest glue.

ANNE

And all of this you wish to be true?

JULIAN

With all my heart I do.

ANNE

Then yes, my Dear, I shall marry you.

They stand and embrace.

**THEN, AS SOLEMN AS A PRAYER,
THEY EACH PRODUCE, EXCHANGE,
AND EXAMINE WELL-WORN PHOTO
WALLETS, WITH THE SOFT DELICACY
AND LOVE OF ANGELS.**

END