

10 Places at a Table

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We find that we live on an insignificant planet of a humdrum star lost in a galaxy tucked away in some forgotten corner of a universe in which there are far more galaxies than people.

– Carl Sagan

10 Places at a Table

TIME and PLACE

Now.

A large, sturdy table with room enough for 10 chairs.

CHARACTERS

JUSTIN, 40's. Scene 1.

MOLLY, 40's, Justin's wife. Scene 1.

MORGAN, late 60's, Justin's father. Scene 1.

PROFESSOR EISENHOWER, 50's, female, an expert on radiometric age-dating of rocks, moons, and planets. Scenes 1 and 10.

STANLEY, early 30's, muscular. Scene 2.

BRETT, early 30's, boyish face and smile. Scene 2.

BRICK, late 20's. Scenes 2 and 4.

CHARLES, 30's. Emma's husband. Scenes 3, 4, 6, 7 and 8.

EMMA, late 20's. Scenes 3, 4 and 6.

EDWARD, 50's, boyish face and smile. Scenes 3 and 6.

LIV, mid 30's, Edward's wife. Scene 3.

FRIEDA, 30's, an artist. Scenes 4 and 7.

HELEN, ageless and extremely beautiful. Scenes 4 and 5.

KING PRIAM, late 60's. Scenes 4 and 5.

PARIS, late 20's, Priam's son. Scenes 4 and 5 (played by BRICK).

AGAMEMNON, 50's. Scenes 4 and 5.

ULYSSES, 40's or 50's. Scenes 4 and 5.

RANDOLPH, late 20's. Scene 6.

ARTHUR, late teens. Scene 6.

FATHER BROWN, 40's or 50's. Scene 6.

PRESIDENT, late 60's. Scene 9.

SECRETARY OF STATE, 40's or 50's. Scene 9.

ASSISTANT to Professor Eisenhower, late teens. Scene 10.

A few non-speaking, incidental parts (such as the wall-builders in Scene 4).

SCENE 1
BLUE STONE

A blue stone, measuring approximately a foot and a half, by a foot, by nine inches is resting in the center of the table on a small cow hide.

JUSTIN, MOLLY, and MORGAN are seated at the table, eating and drinking.
(The actual food and drink are imaginary.)

MOLLY

When is she coming?

JUSTIN

When she gets here, Molly.
How many times do I have to say it?

MOLLY

But, Justin, what time did she tell you she'd be getting here?

JUSTIN

After her three o'clock lecture.

MOLLY

And you're sure she can find us?

JUSTIN

She said she could

MOLLY

We're not on GPS out here, you know.

JUSTIN

She's a University professor, for Saint Christopher's sake.

MOLLY

That doesn't make her a pathfinder.

MORGAN

For the love of God, will you two hang it up?
She'll get here when she gets here, or she won't.
And nothing you can do will change that.
Your talking about it isn't speeding the plow for her one minute.

MOLLY

Yes, Papa.

JUSTIN

[*beat*] What I'm going to tell her, Pa,
I've sort of been rehearsing,
is just the plain truth.
Because we don't know anything more than that, do we?
Just that it came down four weeks ago in a crash we heard.
Molly and me.
Plumb out of the sky, at night,
and knocked down two of our trees.
Buried itself a couple of meters or so in the ground without a flash.
Without a speck of light at all.
Right?

MORGAN

I wasn't here.
And why would you lie about a thing like that?
Except, you've lied about a barrel of things, haven't you, Son?
Now and then.

JUSTIN

No, Pa, I haven't.
Not when it gets me nothing I don't.
I sure don't.

MOLLY

[*to MORGAN*] Don't look at me, Papa. I don't lie.

MORGAN

And what's it matter anyway?
It's just a stone.
A blue stone.

JUSTIN

Have you ever seen a stone that blue, Pa?
In your life?
That blue and that smooth, out of the ground?
I sure haven't.

MOLLY

Or that heavy?

MORGAN

An unusually heavy stone. So what? There's nothing written on it, is there?

JUSTIN

No.
Why should there be?
But it's the heaviest damn thing I ever touched, for being that size.

MORGAN

So, what are you afraid of?

JUSTIN

Her attitude.

MORGAN

The Professor's attitude?
What's wrong with it?

JUSTIN

You know how people from the city get.
So high minded about what they think they know.
And their money, and all.
And how important they think big city life is.
And it's worse when you're an ivory tower kind of person.

MORGAN

How do you know that?
That's just what you suppose.
You're judging a horse by its bridle.
It's called prejudice.
You're the one with attitude, Justin, not her.

JUSTIN

You hide and watch.
She'll just come in here

MOLLY

If she ever gets here.

JUSTIN

She'll come in here and act just like we're some country bumpkin farmers,
who don't know hawks from hand saws,
since we live in a place that can't be reached by a railroad.
And that's no excuse for doubting a person's honesty and intelligence and all.
Don't you see?
It's curiosity, that's all with her. We're the curiosity. Not science. Not real science.

MORGAN

Then why did you write her in the first place?

JUSTIN

I didn't write *her*, exactly.
I wrote the University, and they're sending her.

MORGAN

Same difference.
Why did you write the University, if you don't want the attitude you imagine they have?

JUSTIN

Who else was I supposed to ask? About what this stone is?
People around here don't have a clue about shooting stars.
Especially one that didn't shoot at all when it came down.

MOLLY

He's right there, Papa, the thing didn't make a bit of light.
Only the huge crash when it hit the trees and the ground.

MORGAN

Like that means something?
You know, this is all a wild turkey shoot.

JUSTIN

It might mean something, Pa.
Who ever heard of a blind falling star?

MOLLY

Nobody round here.

JUSTIN

And nobody round here really cares, Molly.
They're too busy with their work to care about our blue stone.
Even though it could be the phenomenon of the century.

MOLLY

We may think so.
I do.
But not the neighbors. You're right about that.

JUSTIN

No.
Just cold shoulders for our amazing stone.

MORGAN

Can you blame them?
For all they know,
except what you've told them,
it might be the soil in our neighborhood that makes stones like this one.
This may be the first of dozens, baker's dozens, that get found.

JUSTIN

I didn't bake this up.

MOLLY

And it's not half-baked either, Papa.

JUSTIN

It's just a hope I have, that something in my life will leave a mark on history.

MORGAN

You want to change history, do you, Son?

MOLLY

We all want to feel our lives matter some.

MORGAN

Ja. Ja.
Just don't get your hopes up too high.
Okay? That's all I'm telling you.

JUSTIN

I'm not going to let anybody steal a march on me, Pa.
Not even you.

MORGAN

Wouldn't dream of it.
It's your stone.
It's your find.
Your trees that got knocked down.
The only thing in this that's mine is my oak table.
My two-ton table, and everything else it's been through.

JUSTIN

You mean that?

MORGAN

As God as my witness, if I don't may my name be blotted from this entire venture
forever, however it turns out.

JUSTIN

I only want it prized at its true value, and I'll gladly give you some of what we make from it. I'm hardly a heartless son.

MORGAN

Never said you were.
And I'm no traitor to my family.
I'll stand up for you, don't get me wrong, if I see the Professor disrespect you.
The best a father can do.
Besides the table I've loaned you.

JUSTIN

That's it, what you just put your finger on.
Professors at the University may be all too likely to disrespect something they didn't dream up, or write down.
That's my fear.

MORGAN

A universal evil, I might say.
But hold your horses. She may only want proof.

JUSTIN

But I've got proof.
No matter what others may say.
It's here. On your table. Your oak table. In *my* house. See?

MOLLY

Our house.

JUSTIN

Our house.

MORGAN

Maybe not just local people. Or university people.
The world, in the mess it's in, may be completely uninterested in your stone, no matter how blue and heavy it is.

JUSTIN

I'll take my chances.
When she gets here.

MOLLY

If she gets here.

A knock. JUSTIN stands and exits.

In a few moments JUSTIN returns with PROFESSOR EISENHOWER, who is pulling a large black box nearly the size of a steamer trunk on wheels.

JUSTIN

Professor, this is my father, Morgan Hoffman, and my wife, Molly...
Professor Eisenhower.

MORGAN and MOLLY stand and exchange greetings and handshakes.

MORGAN

My pleasure, Professor, meeting you.

MOLLY

Please, have a seat.
We've been expecting you.
Was the ride difficult?

PROFESSOR EISENHOWER takes a seat at the table, as the others retake their seats.

PROFESSOR

Not at all, really.
It gave me time to imagine what it is you've discovered here, Mr. and Mrs. Hoffman.
If what you wrote us is accurate, you may have found something quite interesting.

JUSTIN

[*pointing*] Well, here it is.

PROFESSOR

It is indeed most beautiful.
I can't remember seeing a color quite like that before.
And you say it fell onto your land?

MOLLY

Four weeks ago.

JUSTIN

Knocked down two trees with it, and went a couple of meters into the ground.
It took three men and me, with a team of four horses to pull it out.

PROFESSOR

My Goodness! How much do you believe it weighs?

JUSTIN

It's as heavy as a cow.

PROFESSOR

Which is about how much?

JUSTIN

Seven hundred twenty-five kilos, give or take.

PROFESSOR

Seven hundred twenty-five kilograms?! For that size?!

JUSTIN

I'm talking your ordinary, female cow now. Not a bull.

PROFESSOR

I mean, do you actually think that stone there weighs over seven hundred kilograms?

JUSTIN

About that.

PROFESSOR

I How did you get it in here, on the table?

JUSTIN

Oh, that took eight of us ... strong men all ... a skid, a sling, and a pulley. It weren't easy, I can tell you.

PROFESSOR

I imagine not. But

JUSTIN

But what?

PROFESSOR

That much weight should crack a table like this, shouldn't it? Being on it.

MORGAN

My table? My two-ton oak. Do you have any idea what it's been through?

PROFESSOR

No, I haven't.

MORGAN

I built it special for my wife, God rest her soul.
The kindest, most honest woman ever walked this earth.
It took me over two years, getting all the best wood and things.
And everything fitted right.
Built for a king, it was. And for a queen.

PROFESSOR

Oh.

MORGAN

When she died, I couldn't keep it. Because a light was in it. *Is* in it.
Invisible to most, I guess. Flashes of light. Memories of moments we shared.
Coming from inside. So I consigned it to a pub in the city, to sell for a price I set.

JUSTIN

A price you set too high, Pa. Ten times too high.

MORGAN

Willing buyer, willing seller. And I'm no willing seller for a cent less.
Anyway, the pub didn't find a buyer outright.
What it did find was a couple willing to buy it on time.
An installment sale, if you know what I mean.

PROFESSOR

I'm no lawyer, but I think I get the picture.

MORGAN

When they went bankrupt it was in an artist's studio for a while.
Then the U.S. government wanted it.

PROFESSOR

The U.S. government?! For what conceivable purpose did they want it?

MORGAN

For their Folsom prison. Some highfalutin prisoner they said they had,
who needed a table fit for a king. Mine, of course. On a limited-term lease.
After the term was up they brought it back here. To my son's house.

PROFESSOR

Nonetheless, I'm telling you, no stone that size can possibly weigh that much.
It's, what? Half a meter, by three tenths of a meter, by two tenths of a meter?
That's what your son wrote, and it looks about right.
Which makes it impossible to weight 725 kilograms.

JUSTIN

Why?

PROFESSOR

Because seven hundred twenty-five kilograms in three one-hundredths of a cubic meter is over twenty-four thousand kilos per cubic meter.

Nothing natural on the planet, *or* floating in outer space, is that dense.

Take my word for it.

That would be over three times the density of steel.

JUSTIN

You see, Pa? I told you it would be like this....

[*to the* PROFESSOR] What is it, anyway? My stone?

PROFESSOR

I'm not sure. For me to get a handle on that I'll need to estimate how old it is.

MORGAN

How do you do that? Ask it?

PROFESSOR

I brought a portable radiometer with me, in this trunk.

It'll give us an idea, within a couple of billion years, that is.

JUSTIN

Million, you mean. You said "billion."

PROFESSOR

Billion.

JUSTIN

What good is that?

PROFESSOR

We'll see.

PROFESSOR EISENHOWER opens the trunk, removes a laptop which she places on the table, and then two tubes with something like suction cups at the ends. She affixes the cups to the stone and turns on the radiometer. It hums.

JUSTIN

How long does it take?

PROFESSOR

Only a few minutes.

MOLLY

Can we serve you something to eat? Such a long trip you had. Or drink?

PROFESSOR

Yes, that would be nice. Thank you. A bock would be fine, if you have one.

MOLLY

Of course.

MOLLY exits, and shortly returns with a glass of beer and a plate of pretzels.

PROFESSOR

Very kind of you.

PROFESSOR EISENHOWER takes a bite of a pretzel and a drink of beer.

A bell rings.

She looks at her laptop.

PROFESSOR

O my God!!

PROFESSOR EISENHOWER stands. Then sits back down to study what the laptop is telling her.

PROFESSOR

It's never done this before.

MOLLY

What's wrong?

The PROFESSOR stands again, and then sits back down again.

PROFESSOR

This isn't true. It must be broken. I must have damaged it driving out here.

MOLLY

What does it say?

PROFESSOR

It says twenty-eight billion years, plus or minus twenty percent.

MOLLY

Is that old? For a stone, I mean.

PROFESSOR

That's older than the universe. At least eight billion years before the Big Bang.

JUSTIN

I'm sorry. Can you translate that into country jargon?

PROFESSOR

Its means my radiometer is like a calf, stuck halfway down the birth canal.

JUSTIN

Can we fix it?

PROFESSOR

Or it means this magnificent stone was in space eight billion years before time.

MOLLY

That is old!

PROFESSOR

Old enough to mean that the Big Bang was not the first.

JUSTIN

You're not saying, are you? that our stone was created before God created heaven and earth?

PROFESSOR

That's another way of putting it.

JUSTIN

Then who made it?

PROFESSOR

This is too much for me. I'll have to take it in to be studied at the University.

JUSTIN

You and what army?

PROFESSOR

What do you mean?

JUSTIN

This is my prehistoric blue stone, and you're not taking it anywhere.

MOLLY

Our blue stone.

PROFESSOR

You can't think of obstructing science, can you? Something this earth-shattering?

JUSTIN

We're not such ignorant country folk anymore? Is that what you're saying?

PROFESSOR

No....

JUSTIN

When we told you it took eight men with all their strength to get it on our table.

MORGAN

My table.

JUSTIN

And it's only believable when scientists at the University say it is?

PROFESSOR

We professors bear a great responsibility to science, *and to the public*. That's why we're so very careful in preparing our proofs. And this is *no proof*.

MORGAN

Let's just say that this stone here that hit the Earth here on my son's farm

PROFESSOR

Actually, it might be more accurate to say that his farm hit this stone.

MORGAN

Whatever. What I was asking is, let's assume it's as old as your portable thingamajig says it is. What's it worth?

PROFESSOR

What's it worth?

MORGAN

To the highest bidder? A million euros?

PROFESSOR

It can't be that old. But in a fantasy world, much more than you said. Much more.

MORGAN

A billion?

PROFESSOR

This conversation's a joke.

But in the Land of Make-Believe, something older than God, who could say?

Maybe a trillion, if the Chinese got into the action.

MORGAN

A trillion euros, and you want us to give the stone to you?

PROFESSOR

It's not worth a trillion euros. I can promise you that.

And I don't mean we'd keep it, of course. Just study it.

MORGAN

I don't think so.

PROFESSOR

What then?

MORGAN

We'll have to think about it. And talk about it.

And I expect you and your people will have to do the same.

PROFESSOR

And then what?

MORGAN

Make us an offer.

PROFESSOR

Like what?

MORGAN

Maybe agree to build a campus in the country.

Along with a science laboratory. Hoffman Campus.

The PROFESSOR begins to pack up her things.

PROFESSOR

Ridiculous!... Until we meet again, then.

She exits, pulling her black box behind her.

SCENE 2
SQUIRES OF THE NIGHT

STANLEY and BRETT, both tipsy, are standing at the table, drinking from pewter steins, throwing darts (imaginary) in the direction of the front rows of the audience. At the other end of the table rests a hand mirror. BRICK enters with a wooden moon. STANLEY twists his head around to look.

STANLEY

What's you got there, Brick, Baby? A beer mat for me or my BBDB?

BRICK

A wooden moon.... What's that you said, Stanley?

STANLEY

My BBDB ... Best Beer Drinking Buddy. As close as blood brothers, Brett and me.

BRETT

A wooden *what*?

BRICK

A wooden *moon*, Brett. It's for Frieda.

BRETT

A wooden balloon for Frieda who?

BRICK

Frieda the painter. The artist.

BRETT

Do I know her?

BRICK

She says she knows you.

BRETT

What's that supposed to mean?

BRICK

She's pretty well known around here, and at the theatre.
Mainly does work for people who want portraits: Faces. And dogs. And tables.

BRETT

You say *pretty* well known. But is she *pretty*? That's what counts. She could paint dog turds for all I care. I don't go in much for pictures, and plays, and all that artsy crap, unless they have pretty bodies. You know what I mean.

STANLEY

[to BRICK] What's she need a wooden moon for?

BRICK

It's an idea she has for a new painting that needs a certain kind of moon in the sky.

STANLEY

Why out of wood?

BRICK

Because, Stan, she's an artist; and artists want what they want.

BRETT

I have some news for you, Brick, Baby:

Women want what they want.

Doesn't mean they get it. The way they want it.

Not everything's under a Christmas tree.

BRETT pulls a coin out of his pocket.

BRETT

Here: Heads, she likes it. Tails, she'll think it's puke.

Ham-handedly BRETT drops the coin on the floor, underneath the table.

BRETT

Christ! I dropped the sucker. Under the table.

BRETT gets on the floor, scrabbling about for the coin under the table.

BRETT

[*from under the table*] There's a draft down here.

And ... there's a painting, or something.

STANLEY

A what??

BRETT

On the bottom of the table.

STANLEY

You're losing your marbles, Brett.

BRETT

Lying on his back under the table.

Looks like it could be a porno poster for the movie Helen of Troy I saw once.
You know: The face that lurched a thousand ships.
Lots of flames, and a broken wall.
Bare-assed boobs. Lots of them.
And a wooden horse.
Burning roofs, and burning towers, and more naked tits.
Now here's an artist.
Swords. And spears. And blood splattered everywhere.
And way back, all silver and white, the sails of the ships.

STANLEY

You're drunk. Too much beer for you tonight, Buddy.
You know how you get when you're drunk.

BRETT

Not too drunk to find a fallen coin.

**BRETT gets back up on his feet, then
wobbly holds on to the table for balance.**

STANLEY

But too drunk to flip it.

BRETT

Not to flip a wooden moon.

BRICK

You're not getting your hands on my moon. That's for sure.
Frieda's moon.

STANLEY

His arm around BRETT.

Steady, Boy, you can't hold your beer tonight.

BRETT

[to BRICK] For the love of God, it's only a wooden moon, sailing over a
cardboard sea.

BRICK

What's that supposed to mean?

BRETT

Only a song, Baby. Only a song.

BRICK

[*with a negative intonation*] Oh.

BRETT

You don't go in for songs?

BRICK

If they're understandable.

BRETT

Like what Frieda What's-Her-Name paints?
But it's not what she paints, it's Dame Frieda I don't go much in for.
Not when she calls me common.

BRICK

I thought you didn't know her.

STANLEY

[*to BRETT*] You talk too much, Brett.

BRETT

Common like she called you, too, Stan The Man.
Sitting on her paints and brushes in some little artists' café on the Left Bank.

BRICK

You've been to Paris?

BRETT

Maybe I haven't. But I can tell you anyhow, she's no French lily.
No sir. I've heard her mouth.

BRICK

She talks through her paintings.

BRETT

You think she's some kind of Rembrandt, or Norman Rockwell, or something?
Is that what you think?
Crap! She's not either.
Not half as good as the graffiti I see on the street every day.

BRICK

[*sarcastically*] And you would know.

BRETT

Called me indecent, too, the bitch. Imagine that! *The person who I am.*

STANLEY

Well, we all know that can't be.

BRETT

What do you mean by a crack like that, Mate?

STANLEY

Everyone knows you don't make a swan fly by pouring salt on its tail.

BRICK

In some places they say pigs can fly.

BRETT

And Leprechauns find gold-studded rhinestones just looking at themselves in a mirror.

STANLEY

Like some mirrors you've seen, huh? Brett?

BRETT

Mirrors talk too much.

BRICK

And pigs don't fly.

BRETT

Frieda's a pig, if you ask me.
Oink. Oink.

BRICK

Frieda's a great artist. But you wouldn't know one if you were on your back at the Sistine Chapel in van Gogh's bed.

BRETT

Bullshit!!

STANLEY

Brett, when are we going to stop with this?
You're talking too much. It's boring me. You hardly know Frieda at all.

BRETT

When I'm good and ready, that's when.
And, by the way, like *you do* know her?

STANLEY

[*beat, then cautiously*] I've seen her, some.

BRICK

You have?
When?

BRETT

We both have.

BRICK

When?

BRETT

When we've watched her. That's when.

BRICK

That's no answer.

STANLEY

She used to walk on the beach.
When the moon was full.

BRETT

What's a woman for, better than to watch on a beach?

BRICK

She's stopped walking on the beach at night.

BRETT

[*beat*] Well, don't look at a me.

STANLEY

Yeah. And don't look at *me*, neither.

BRICK

Was I?

BRETT

You're insinuating something.

BRICK

Just listening. Not inaugurating a thing.

BRETT

She's been feeding you a pack of lies about us, I bet.

STANLEY

The mendacity of women.

BRETT

Her hoity-toity self, claiming we're brutes.

BRICK

Maybe she had reason to.

STANLEY

I'm a brute, am I?
Brute force, I am!
Look at me.

Strikes a vogue of his masculine physique.

BRICK

With a tankard in your hand.

STANLEY

So I love to drink beer. What of it?

BRICK

What it does to you.

STANLEY

Oh. I forgot. You're a superior wine drinker.

BRETT

Sometimes the difference is that sometimes it's a beer-drinking Jesus,
and sometimes it's a wine drinking Jesus.
But no matter the name, we who love drinking beer stand more on our position in
the world, and less on our brand or our looks.
From lady artist down to something walking the street, so to speak.

BRICK

With perception like that you should have been a Doctor of Canon Law.

BRETT

And you should have been a prick.

BRICK

But I'm a Brick, aren't I?

BRETT

Let me take a look.

Reaching at BRICK.

BRICK avoids BRETT and picks up the hand mirror instead (from the end of the table) and hands it to BRETT.

BRICK

Here, Brett. Take a look.

BRETT throws the mirror offstage. There is a sound of glass breaking.

BRICK

That was a common move.

BRETT

Dirt common.
Ten years bad luck.

STANLEY

[*beat*] So, tell us Brick, what's Frieda's painting supposed to look like? This table? With your moon propped up on it?

BRICK

This table is a monument.
An Atlas of a table, built for a king.
You can just tell by looking at it; and you should appreciate it more.
And the priceless objects that undoubtedly have been set upon it.

BRETT and STANLEY simultaneously bring their steins down like gavels on the table, and point at them proudly.

BRICK

But Frieda's painting will be more sublime.
Black and red.
Mostly black and red.

BRETT

Black and red with lots of naked tits?
Or just black and red lines, and boxes, and swirls, and splattering?

STANLEY

That sounds like some of her shit.

BRICK

Black and red. Like blood at night.

STANLEY

Like what??

There wasn't any blood.

BRICK

On a beach.

She's sitting there, in the sand, her hands covering her head.

My moon up above.

Over the water a nuclear bomb is exploding.

And under the painting a title:

"Under a Naked Moon."

STANLEY

Well, that's something we can talk about in our later days.

Right, Brett?

Our own picture.

BRETT

Shakes Stanley's hand.

Makes me glad to be alive, Stan.

To have seen something like that with you.

It'll keep us young thinking about it.

Lights dim to a full moon.

They all exit.

SCENE 3
FROM SOUP TO ADULTERY

At the table CHARLES and EMMA are entertaining their “best friends,” EDWARD and LIV – CHARLES sitting at one end and EMMA at the other. On the side of the table facing the audience sit LIV (next to CHARLES) and EDWARD (next to EMMA).

The audience can infer from the intermittent touches secretly shared between EDWARD and EMMA that they are having an affair. CHARLES and LIV are oblivious to what’s going on at the moment. (But LIV knows of the affair.)

The food and drink they consume are imaginary. The background music (if any, in the Director’s discretion) can be in the mode of Mozart’s A Little Night Music.

CHARLES

[*pause, raising a wine glass*] To you, our best friends in the world.
And to friendship the world ‘round, as close and comfortable as good gloves on untroubled hands.

They drink to the toast.

EDWARD

[*raising his wine glass*] And to the good people who have served us this excellent dinner.

They drink again.

EDWARD

And to good times to come.

CHARLES, EDWARD and EMMA drink a third time.

CHARLES

[*to EDWARD*] Edward, I just saw the most extraordinary documentary on Troy. From the time of its sack and burning by the Greeks to modern-day excavations.

EDWARD

Really? I’m sorry to have missed that.

CHARLES

People ask why Homer was inspired to write his epic poem

LIV

To write *her* epic poem.

CHARLES

To write his *or her* epic poem

LIV

Thank you, Charles.

CHARLES

Thank *you*, Liv.

LIV

You are most welcome.

CHARLES

As I was saying:

People ask why Homer was inspired to write his, or her, epic poem.

And I can tell you:

The reasons were many, but at the heart of them was a burning need to remember and record the brutality and slaughter for generations to come, just to get the sight and sounds and horror of it all out of mind....

Some people feel guilt more deeply than others.

EMMA

One lives to live, and exists to exist, and to forget the guilt of it all.

CHARLES

Unthinkable, it was.

As unthinkable as the end of our little coterie would be.

We four, we happy few, we band of brothers and sisters all.

EDWARD

Charles, you're just too beautiful for words.

[*turning to EMMA*] You as well, Emma, of course.

LIV

[*with just the slightest hint of sarcasm*] Aren't we all? And the band plays on.

CHARLES

A foursome of harmony as unstoppable as dancing itself.

EDWARD

[*beat*] What is a dance like that called?

A square?

Square dancing?

No, that's eight.

LIV

A Morris dance, I believe.
I think that's done mostly with four ... or maybe six dancers.

CHARLES

Stands to do a dance step, waving his handkerchief.

Close the music books. Unwind the clocks.
Cut the telephones. Silence the dogs.
But stop Morris dancing? Never!!
It will last, like us, forever.

Sits.

EDWARD

[*raising his wine glass*] To the dances of love that last forever.

The three drink again.

LIV

Who knows?
Who knows the forever of fickle men's hearts?

CHARLES

Or of women's, for that matter.
Other than ours, of course.

LIV

Touché.

CHARLES

I wonder how anybody knows.
How *do* people who know intimacy come to know it how they do?
It's a mystery to me.

EDWARD

It's when women are men, and men are women, and the moon eclipses the sun.

CHARLES

Men *or* women, there's no difference: Some people just don't like to live alone.
So what does the moon, Earth's wheel in the sky, know about living alone?

LIV

The moon is a woman. Women know.

EMMA

Diana.

LIV

Goddess of the hunt. A virgin, not a cunn

EDWARD

[*interrupting her*] Not a *stunt*.... Not a nighttime *stunt* artist.

LIV

I was going to say cunning.

EDWARD

Oh.... By the way, did the moon inspire any of the dishes we had tonight?

CHARLES

Only dessert: The crème brûlée.

EDWARD

It was so delicious it makes me hungry again just thinking about it.

EMMA

Food always tastes better when you're not eating alone.
I wonder what the moon thinks of our food down here.

LIV

What cowbirds, cowards, and creeping lizards eat.

EMMA

Luna, lunar lunacy.

EDWARD

The eye of the moon rules the subconscious, they say.

CHARLES

Who said that?

EDWARD

Shakespeare, I would imagine.
He had a lot to say about the moon and lunacy. Didn't he, Charles?
Hamlet, and all.

CHARLES

Full moons.
New moons.
Gibbous moons.

EDWARD

The cycle of lunar love, menstruation, and men's patience.

LIV

The cycle of men's ignorance.

EDWARD

It is the very error of the moon.

She comes more near the earth than she was wont, and makes men mad.

EMMA

Which is what *I* want: To see men made mad.

LIV

Mad as werewolves without a leash.

EMMA

A strange look comes over Emma's face as she reaches to feel the necklace that's not around her neck, and her hand flies up.

Men made mad as werewolves. And their eyes. What their eyes do to me. And the fear of falling. The fear of failing. The fear of feeling poor and naked. I sometimes have the fleeting feeling that I'm falling into a sudden hole in the ground. Into a place that's dark, and dirt poor, and frightful.

CHARLES

That's folderol, Emma, unless you know something I don't know. It makes no more sense than people claiming to be moonstruck. I believe spells of the moon are as much a farce as spirits hovering in midair.

EDWARD

It's the *light* of the moon that does it. Because, in a weird way, life and death both get their meaning from connection to the moon's light. However, as farces go, do you think, Charles, that men on the moon were a farce?

CHARLES

Sending men to the moon was certainly a farce. It didn't do a thing. But sure as Hell they were there, and back.

EDWARD

Not fake news? A giant lie?

CHARLES

Liars are the liars who dream up conspiracy theories. They would have it that the Earth is a six-thousand-year-old flat iron, perched atop a cosmic tree.

EDWARD

Not some massive, governmental hoax?

EMMA

Relaxing again.

I hate hoaxes.

LIV

I hate liars.

CHARLES

I hate war and conflict.

It's my belief that war happens 95% of the time because 98% of our leaders lack wisdom. That's what I believe.

LIV

What's the alternative?

Wise men would be fools to go into politics.

CHARLES

There's always hope, if there's faith, and love, and honesty, and fidelity.

EMMA

You make fidelity sound like Gorilla Glue.

LIV

[to CHARLES] Don't you see, Charles? Can't you see what's going on?

CHARLES

What's going on, Liv?

LIV

I can't stand this.

Don't you see that that's the cause of the whole miserable affair?

Of all the sorrow in the world?

CHARLES

No, I don't.... Whatever is the matter?

LIV

Swindlers, and cheats, and infidelity.

CHARLES

Oh. Swindlers and cheats. Yes. Yes. You're right.

LIV

Oh where are the bright, happy, honest people?

One reads of them in books.

CHARLES

Why, Liv, we're here. Right here in front of you.

LIV

[*beat*] Yes. I suppose you're right. We can't all be blind.

CHARLES

You gave me a fright there, for a moment.

LIV

Just a brain fart.

LIV stands, gives CHARLES a hug, and sits back down.

LIV

You're such a nice chap, Charles. And I do like you.

Sorry. It's just the acting thing I find myself having to slip into, from time to time.

EMMA

Acting is the surprise we have planned for you in a couple of days.

EDWARD

Just lucky Liv only brain farted. She might have burst into tears and drowned us.

CHARLES

You must be joking.

Liv? Burst into tears?

Certainly not the Liv we've come to know and love.

EMMA

Liv has manners, having finally bitten her tongue.

CHARLES

[*to LIV*] You did? You bit your tongue?

LIV

In a manner of speaking.

The expression on Charles's face shows that he's not getting it.

CHARLES

[*to EDWARD*] You're just being a brute, my friend, about your wife.

But all in good spirit. Right? Am I right?

EDWARD

I'm as much a brute as American Pie....
When the king was looking down
And Blah Blah Blah
The jester stole his thorny crown.

CHARLES

I knew you were joking.
Bye-bye, Miss American Pie, and all that.
Right?

EDWARD

Right.

CHARLES

And who's the king, in your scenario?

EDWARD

You are, my Friend.
You are.

CHARLES

With a thorny crown?

EDWARD

It's just a song.
Just a flash I had.
A twelfth day moment.

CHARLES

I'm puzzled.
What's the flash?
To quote Don McLean?
Or to accuse your wife of having crying jags?

EMMA

Neither, I spose he meant.
Or both.

CHARLES

How can he have both?

EDWARD

I'm just saying: No one's perfect.
Not even my near perfect wife.

CHARLES

I'll accept that. Reluctantly.
Though no one can have both this and that.
And I hold Liv in the highest regard.

EDWARD

As do I.

LIV

Whose wives are you men talking about?

CHARLES

You and Emma, of course.

LIV

Figuratively, I presume.

EDWARD

Let me ask you something, my Friend. Literally:
On your travels, do you ever imagine you might die?

CHARLES

Possibly.
Sometimes.

EDWARD

How does that make you feel?

CHARLES

Irritated.

EDWARD

Irritated?

CHARLES

That I could have wasted my life on a wasted trip, when I should have been with
Em, safeguarding her.

EMMA

I don't need that kind of safeguarding. I'm a free spirit.

LIV

All husbands should spend more time safeguarding their wives.

CHARLES

And take fewer trips?

LIV

Keep their pants in their pockets.

CHARLES

I keep mine pressed. But I suppose you're right.
Although I rarely take trips away these days, leaving Em alone.

EDWARD

You were talking a bit earlier about Troy.

CHARLES

I've never been to Troy.

EDWARD

I mean, the documentary you've just seen, you were telling me about.

CHARLES

Oh. Oh yes. I'd quite forgotten.
It was mostly about the walls, and the blood on them.
You see, they estimated that it must have taken the Trojans twenty years or more
to build walls of that strength and height.
So how were they breached, in that day and age?
That's been a puzzle for centuries.

EDWARD

The Greeks built a huge wooden horse to trick the Trojans, that had men hidden
inside it.

CHARLES

Wait, my Friend!! Think of the reasons that can't be:
First, you would hear and smell them in there.
Second, so would the dogs.
Third, who wouldn't be suspicious of a gift like that? No free lunch, you know.
And fourth, the Greeks didn't bring artists and sculptors to fight Hector, Paris
and the crew.
They brought soldiers.
Only soldiers, and a few sailors.
None of whom could have fashioned a comb out of wood, much less a three-story
stallion of any esthetic appeal.
Not to mention Helen.
She was a Greek herself once.
She knew their tricks.
Before she cuckolded her husband.

LIV

It was Cassandra who did it.
She persuaded her fellow Trojans to hold their noses and cart the monster inside
the gates of their city.
Because she warned them up and down, in her nightgown, to burn the booger.
But since Cassandra was cursed never to be believed
like yours truly
the Trojans did the exact opposite thing, and died.
Go figure.

CHARLES

How can men be so gullible?

LIV

That's why I put my money on the horse.
Every man, from Helen's husband to jesters and kings, is guilty.

CHARLES

My guilt lies not in gullibility, but in my lack of discipline to schedule my hours
better.
They are as precious as the light on a cloudy day, and just as fleeting.

EDWARD

Whatever happened to Helen, anyway?

CHARLES

Who knows?

LIV

She was immortal.
The daughter of Zeus.

EMMA

Which means?...

LIV

She could mature, but never die.

CHARLES

Like whom? Who can be immortal and never die like that?

LIV

The Wandering Jew, for one.

CHARLES

The what? Who's that?

LIV

St. Lazarus, possibly.

“What Jesus raises up stays raised up.”

But more likely the Jew who taunted Jesus on the way to the Cross and was cursed to wander the Earth until the Second Coming.

EMMA

That *would be* a curse.

EDWARD

So what happened to Helen?

LIV

After the fall of Troy she returned to Sparta to live with Menelaus, her husband, until he lay on his deathbed.

There he gave her three ships and a crew, to sail west.

She made it to Carthage, and then later through the impassible Straits of Gibraltar, down the west coast of Africa, where she found a map, or a stone, or a brick, or something, that led her north, to the Elysian Fields, and back into the arms of Paris, whom she never stopped loving.

CHARLES

What are *they*? Elysian Fields, you said?

They weren't mentioned in the documentary I watched.

LIV

They were islands west of the Straits of Gibraltar, covered in clouds, that no Greek, or Roman, explorer ever found.

Where heroes and their lovers could live frugally, and make love forever.

EMMA

I couldn't stand to live poor with no end in sight.

Thank God I have my saccharin.

CHARLES

Saccharin?

EMMA

Laced with arsenic.

CHARLES

What??!

EMMA laughs.

CHARLES

Oh. You're just kidding, aren't you?

EMMA

Of course I am, Charles. Poverty isn't the worst curse on Earth.
There's always the Great Shunning Silence.

EDWARD

Anyway, it's not sweets you like, is it, Em? Not the artificial ones, I mean.

EMMA

You know it isn't.

CHARLES

It's your baths. Your two-hour baths.

EMMA

Hot and steamy, all the way....
I just love being naked.
With white linens. And plushy towels.
It tingles me.
I'd get naked now, if I could.

LIV

Spare us, please.

EMMA

Just joking.

CHARLES

Women are riddles to me.

EMMA

All women worth their salt are riddles to all men.

LIV

To foolish men.

EDWARD

You're just a sentimentalist, Liv.
That's what you are. A sentimentalist.

LIV

Like an elephant gun.

CHARLES

You're the sentimentalist, Teddy.

EDWARD

Not when men are around. It make me feel ... queer ... self-conscious, I guess.

LIV

It makes you look stupid, you mean.

CHARLES

And do you know why you are?

EDWARD

No. Why?

CHARLES

Because, like me, you are one hundred percent trustworthy.

A true gentleman, from the old school.

A man who would love his wife's child, even if he weren't the child's father.

And being that way it links you and me to a more genteel world.

A world within a world where time stops for courtesy.

Why, you can walk into a room, Teddy, with that boyish face and smile, and win the heart of every woman in it.

I've seen it. With my own eyes. But do you gather wild flowers? Not a whit.

It passes gently over you like a Brahms melody.

Because you don't care.

You don't care in the way that that rare breed of cultured men don't care about their own glory.

LIV

If I didn't know you as well as I do, Charles, I'd swear on a Bible you're shitting us.

CHARLES

You think my praise of your husband is too thick?

LIV

I'd say that's the pith of what I think.

CHARLES

But honest and heartfelt.

LIV

How many years have we been together like this as friends?

Long enough, I would think.

CHARLES

In an atmosphere, I might add, of one uninterrupted, common mind.
Like ... we all like our beef the same, undercooked, but not bloody.
And the same wines. The same restaurants. The same desserts.
And if we were shepherds abiding in the fields by night, and we saw the newborn
Christ child, we would all, all of us, see the light coming from inside the baby.
A holy and beautiful light ... in a dark barn ... like the light of our friendship.
Our friendship is one of those gifts you don't go out looking for, they just happen.

LIV

To both sentimentalists and sentimental asses.

CHARLES

You think I'm a sentimental ass??

LIV

Seriously, that's not what I'm saying at all.

CHARLES

What are you saying?

LIV

That we've been together long enough to have something to show for it.
More than fine meals and good wine.

CHARLES

Don't we? I have everything I ever wanted ... except a dog.

EMMA

I'll have one painted for you, Love.

LIV

Seriously, Charles, what *is* everything you've ever wanted?

CHARLES

Time.... Friendship.... Emma. With Emma no man could be happier....
Peace. And happiness. And fidelity. Isn't that true, Edward?
Nothing to prove. To be perfectly content being the good people we are.

EDWARD

All I know, Charles, is that there's a dark, unpleasant world out there.
A place I'd just as soon never wade into. And we've found a wall against it.

EMMA

For how long?

EDWARD

Until death, or divine love do us part.

EMMA

And what then, Edward?

EDWARD

A new place, with new rules to play by.

EMMA

And make love by?

EDWARD

Of course.

Anything that's the most important thing in life cannot die.

CHARLES

You can make love there?

EDWARD

New Testament, or Old Testament?

EMMA

When? When will there be a new place?

EDWARD

When Earth and sky stand presently, at God's great judgment seat.

EMMA

Oh. Old Testament.

LIV

Are you all so sure that there *is* a God?

EDWARD

The mere fact that there's a word for "God" in the English language, and poets and writers all over the place have used it, not just in the Bible, means to me that God is real.

People don't just live, and then die, and that's that, no more, no less.

That's not that. Life, at least love, making love, is more important than that.

CHARLES

I'm confused.

Isn't friendship one can trust the most important thing one finds in life?

Isn't that true, Edward?

EDWARD

What I mean, Old Chap, is:
Why can't people have what they want?
If they can pay for it, why not?
Certainly friendship is up there, near the top of the list.
But there's enough to go around, without one person hogging it all.

CHARLES

What I want is a flash of moments like these, remembered when we grow old.
Because a light is in them ... coming from within them, if not from above.

EDWARD

Too many people are married to the idea that if you choose one thing when you're young because of its passing magic, you're bound to it for life.
Why can't people have what they want when they want it, and be satisfied with all of the moments?

LIV

Because ... if there is a God, God's a hermit, not a Don Juan.

Pause.

CHARLES

On that note, let's repair for after-dinner drinks.

EMMA

And give them time to tidy this room up a bit.

They each rise and exit. As LIV exits:

LIV

O for God's sake!
Another pitiless night!

SCENE 4
HAMLET IS AN ABSURDIST PLAY.

EMMA, in a bathrobe, is sitting at one end of the table brushing her hair, occasionally looking at herself in a hand mirror.

In the middle of the table FRIEDA is standing, painting EMMA – the easel resting on the table, backside of the canvas toward the audience.

At the other end of the table are two men building a replica of the Trojan Wall out of wooden bricks and blocks.

EMMA

It's absurd, Frieda. How could anyone want the life I have?
Feeling empty all the time; addicted to cheating on my husband.
Can you paint that?
Is that making the world any prettier for my existence?

FRIEDA

Can I tell you, artist-to-artist, something that happened to me?

EMMA

Looks at her hands.

Of course you can. But I haven't held a brush for years.

FRIEDA

I used to walk at night on the beach.
In the dark. Under the moon. All alone.
To be inspired.
It's not like I can open my eyes each morning and right away see something to paint. I have to feel something first. From the moon and the stars.
Feel the beauty in life before getting in front of an easel.
Because a painting has a voice, and I want what I leave on the canvas to leave a question in people's minds like the night. There has to be a question in everything I paint that can be heard through the oils.

EMMA

What question? My question?

FRIEDA

Yes. Your question. Essentially.
Is this the world I want to look at?
Is this the life I picture for myself?
Is this the beauty I want to show and be remembered for?

EMMA

If that's what your paintings are asking, they certainly ask it in a peculiar way.

FRIEDA

Not really. Look at the great John Constable.
He's remembered for the beauty he saw in life.
English landscapes you could walk in.
So perfectly immortalized you can *feel* them touch your skin.
Feel the air on your face. Smell the animals. Sense the light in your soul.
As though you were there. I know you like him. You've told me.
And that's the feeling great art *should* possess. The essence of eyes that can see.
Yet people didn't understand what Constable was trying to do.
The special light he was trying to capture underneath the light he showed.
That's how I want my art to be, and appreciated before I die.
To connect people by removing them to another place.
To tell how life and death both get their meaning from connection to the light.
Your life, too.
But more than that, Constable was only satisfied when the scenery he painted
bore the scent of human life. Villages. Churches. Farmyards. Cottages.
He painted one portrait, of the woman he desperately wanted to marry.
But her family stood against it.
He wrote her: "Your picture hangs in my bedroom.
You are the last thing I see at night, and the first thing I see in the morning.
You are the very meaning of truth and beauty to me."

EMMA

My Lord! How I wish someone would say that about me.

FRIEDA

I would say that about you. It's the truth.
You're certainly the most beautiful woman I've seen.

EMMA

Is that a pass?... O, forget that.
And, anyway, one thing I've learned is that beauty's no guarantee.
In fact, in many places beauty beautifies the very opposite of truth.
[pause] Do you like any other artists? As much as John Constable.

FRIEDA

Of course.

EMMA

For example....

FRIEDA

Andrew Wyeth. For me he was the American Constable.
Except he spoke in contours of the human face and body.
No pictures mean more to me than “Christina’s World” and the Helga
paintings....
When they interviewed her, Helga said, about being a model for Wyeth:
“When it happens, and it’s the real thing,
And you have your work, and your passion, and your freedom,
It can be so beautiful to be yourself.
Somebody looking at you and really seeing you....”
That’s what I’m talking about. Do you understand?

EMMA

That’s why I like you with me. It gives me hope.

FRIEDA

And Dali, and Picasso, and Renoir, and Klimt, and on and on....
Van Gogh, of course, who was the greatest painter of life’s roller coaster,
and the angst of its imbalance moving by.
The same way Turner pictured the sun.
And Chagall pictured childhood imagination.
And Blake pictured God.

EMMA

God??
Blake made pictures of people. People in weird situations.

FRIEDA

Who do you think God is?

EMMA

God is the holy spirit that comes into us quietly.
When we’re baptized in holy water.

FRIEDA

You don’t need to be dipped in water to be baptized.
The spirit you were born with, God within you, that’s all you need to baptize you.
Like Blake said: “What immortal hand or eye dare frame *thy* fearful symmetry?”

EMMA

Long pause, studying her hands.

I have no idea what you’re talking about.
And my hands ache from trying to memorize them.

FRIEDA

I'm talking about the other person you have and are inside you.
The other person you get when you're born.
That's who baptizes you ... when you're ready.

EMMA

Baptizes you how?

FRIEDA

By telling you, or showing you:
That we're all connected, in one way or another, to the same common, universal
human understanding.
The living.
The dead.
And all the other people who haven't been born yet.
A single, great, artistic, connected creation.

EMMA

Including Adolph Hitler?

FRIEDA

And including Albert Schweitzer and Mother Teresa.
All the past is part of our future.
Eternity is not a one-way street.

EMMA

Are you saying I have the blood in my veins of all the female ancestors I've ever
had?

FRIEDA

And all the other women who've fought the fight before you.

EMMA

Do you see truth like that in me?

FRIEDA

I most certainly do.

EMMA

Then why do I do what I do?

FRIEDA

You don't. Not the way you mean.
You're fighting the fight your way.
There's nothing either good or bad in that, unless you think there is.

EMMA

Is that from Hamlet?

FRIEDA

Yes. When he tells his Wittenberg friends that to him life's nothing but a prison.

EMMA

That's probably true. But to me, Hamlet's nothing but an absurdist play.

FRIEDA

That's an exaggeration, don't you think?

EMMA

What about the Bible?

Do you believe the Bible's an exaggeration?

Or just a collection of fictional stories, like so many people say nowadays?

FRIEDA

You're putting me on the spot.

I don't judge the Bible, or the various men who wrote the stories in it.

All I believe is that it contains truth in the same way that art contains truth.

And books. And music. And poetry.

EMMA

And theatre?

FRIEDA

And theatre, of course. There's more truth about the human condition in Shakespeare's plays than there is in the entire Bible, I believe.

EMMA

Except for forgiveness.

FRIEDA

Oh? What about *The Tempest*, and *Winter's Tale*?

EMMA

What Shakespeare character am I, then? Desdemona?

FRIEDA

Desdemona. But not a guiltless one.

EMMA

Are *you* guiltless?

What about those nighttime walks on the beach you were telling me about?

FRIEDA

I walked at night on the beach to get inspiration.
Like I told you.
The sound of the waves.
The moon, reflecting on the water.
The stars. The quiet.
The distance away it brought my mind from a confusing world.
To a place in my childhood, riding a swing higher and higher in the air.
Like the moon running in and out of the clouds.
A beach not all that very far from here.
And sometimes I'd take my clothes off and run through the water like a little girl.
Naked all alone, and laughing, and picturing myself always happy.

EMMA

I've probably been on that beach, naked, too. But not alone.

FRIEDA

One night I thought I heard something.
The moon was full, and I didn't see anybody.
But I was sure I heard something.
So I ran to put my clothes back on, and they were gone.

EMMA

Where did they go?

FRIEDA

A couple of drunken pranksters in town had been following me.
I didn't know it at the time.
And they stole my clothes.
Hid them someplace, and left a note for me in the sand.

EMMA

What did it say?

FRIEDA

It said: "If you want your clothes back, you know what you can do."

EMMA

What did you do?

FRIEDA

I made it home the best I could, in the nude.
I don't think anybody else saw me.
And I never pulled a stunt like that again.

EMMA

How did you get your door unlocked? Without your key?

FRIEDA

I don't lock my doors. I have a dog.
And besides, paintings are my only treasure, not pearls.
And who'd steal them? What's the point?

EMMA

I had to hock my necklace, and what's the point in that?
Poverty? And if I don't get the money to get them back, I think I'll kill myself

FRIEDA

You don't seriously mean that.

EMMA

[*pause*] Did you ever get your clothes back? Clothes have cost me a fortune.

FRIEDA

The next day in the daylight I scouted them out.

EMMA

That was lucky.

FRIEDA

Lucky. Yes. It could have been a lot worse.

EMMA

I spose so.

FRIEDA

I could see myself standing there, in the sand, with nothing to protect me.
And imagine what some men could do.

EMMA

I do the same thing every day. Imagine what some men could do.

FRIEDA

Oh?

EMMA

I say to myself: Isn't there anything more to being than this?
Some different way men can make love to me?
To my body? To my mind? To my imagination?
Repetition stales so many of the intimacies of infidelity.

FRIEDA

For you, *and me*, and Constable, and Wyeth, and van Gogh, art is being.
You're just losing your real self with men.

EMMA

I've lost it too long ago, I'm afraid.

FRIEDA

[*beat*] But that wasn't the end of my story.

EMMA

Oh? What happened?

FRIEDA

I had a suspicion who they were. But no proof.
Until one day when I saw them staring at me outside the pub and laughing.
They made some lewd gestures, and called out to me.
Asking if I wanted to come to an all-night beer-drinking party they were going to.

EMMA

What did you do?

FRIEDA

I immediately saw a painting in my mind's eye.
Three lines, that crossed in the middle of the canvas.
Black and red. That's all.
The paint was thick, and two of the lines were dripping down into the third one.
It wasn't much of a painting, I thought. But then I thought, maybe it is.
And I called back at them: "You two are crass. Common."
"Oh yeah?" they called back.
"And indecent, too," I said.

EMMA

What did they do?

FRIEDA

That was it. I walked off; and I guess they went on, into the pub.

EMMA

That's all??

FRIEDA

I couldn't get it out of my mind, what they'd done.
Thinking how those two brutes had spied on me.
And seen me naked on the beach. And ruined the moonlight for me.

EMMA

But they didn't touch you, did they?
Or rape you?

FRIEDA

It felt as though I'd been violated.
My privacy.
My intimacy.
But not physically. No.

EMMA

Thank God times hadn't yet changed.

FRIEDA

But I feel they could have. And still can....
Do you understand what I mean?

EMMA

I've given up painting like I used to.
But I still understand the human body.
Even though I don't quite think about it the same way you do.
Because now my "art" is what I do *with* my body.
The special parts men like.

FRIEDA

That alone should make you want to get back to painting.

EMMA

You get used to it.
Something lets go inside, and it's not embarrassing.
It doesn't shock you anymore.
Being men's lover doesn't mean the same thing to me.

FRIEDA

It doesn't take your female intimacy away?

EMMA

What intimacy?
Haven't I already given that away?
Although maybe it's what I need.
To become intimate again. To become a virgin again.

FRIEDA

You need to fall in love again.

EMMA

I can fall in bed with a man, but not in love with one.
They tell you they love you. But what do they mean?
For a man, it's sex. It's being satisfied in the moment.
And what they say is just words they think women can understand.
I have a satchel here that says it better, "I love you."
A precious leather grip, filled with saccharin and arsenic.
So someday I can stuff my mouth with white powder until my cheeks bulge.
Then swallow. When I think to myself I really can't do this anymore.

FRIEDA

O my God, Emma!

EMMA

Have you heard the one about the introvert who loved his wife so much he almost told her?
I'm married to a man who could care less that I'm sleeping with other men.
If he even knows.
Sometimes I *wish* he'd hit me.
To know, at least, he cares that much.
A decent, dull man who told me once he had a dream.
About being followed by a little black bear who was eating all kinds of stuff along the way.
And the point, I asked him.
That if he could train the bear, maybe, someday, he'd have enough money to take me to Paris.

I had a dream once.
That I was destined to go to Paris.
I either wanted to live in Paris, or die.
But Charles is never going to take me there.
And neither is Edward.
What I need is a painting of Paris to take me there. All the streets and houses.
It's as close as I'll ever get.
And look at this!

Picks up a letter lying on the table.

It's from Randy, the young nitwit.
Heart-broken to say that he can't go on seeing me.
He says it's about honor, and my need for a temporary loan.
What rubbish! He's got plenty of connections at the bank where he works.
And I'm not living in any slums again.

FRIEDA

He has connections to do what?

EMMA

To get him money, one way or another. Steal it, if he has to.

Or he could borrow on a credit card for a few months.

What's the problem?

I just have to get some money. Soon.

Pay off some debts. Get to Paris.

Disappear from here for a while.

Away from this bullshit masquerade Charles, and Edward, and Liz, and I are playing at.

Adultery is draining me.

God didn't give men the sexual power they have without expecting them to take better care of the women they seduce.

It's not fair.

FRIEDA

Hold it there. Just a few moments. Don't move.

EMMA stops brushing her hair and sits still.

FRIEDA makes a few brush strokes, looking back and forth between the canvas and EMMA.

The two wall builders exit.

FRIEDA

All right. You can move again.

EMMA

What I think to myself,

when I get lost sometimes in my thoughts like now, is:

What would Kierkegaard do?

Because I believe he'd tell me what I already know:

That I'm my own truth.

Why?

Because I exist.

And because I care about myself.

That's how Kierkegaard thinks, I think.

How people find the truth and trash in life that's theirs.

EMMA

Flips her comb in the air and catches it.

Anyway, that's how *I* feel about how I feel.

And people who judge me for it are simply arrogant.

Where were they after Daddy died, and we were poor, and I was hungry, in bed at night alone? Praying to God not to make me be hungry my whole life.

Swearing if I ever got out, I'd never let myself be poor again.

And if it comes down to it, I can always swallow the white stuff I have.

That's why I'd do it: Incurable debt. Or a fire that ruins my looks.

And who will care?

She looks into the mirror a moment.

By the way, have you told anybody else the nude-on-the-beach story?

FRIEDA

Just my friend, Brick.

EMMA

Is he your lover?

FRIEDA

Brick?

Oh, no. Just a friend.

But a good one.

There are things you can tell a friend you can't tell a lover.

EMMA

I spose.

FRIEDA

And there's more than one way of making love.

EMMA

I'm an idiot! Look at me!

Here I am, with postpartum blues, and never been pregnant!

CHARLES enters at the side of the stage:

CHARLES

Are you okay, my Love? The actors are here.

EMMA

Send them in, Charles.

CHARLES exits, and five actors enter to the table, dressed as appropriate for a Greek/Trojan War scene:

**HELEN
AGAMEMNON
ULYSSES
KING PRIAM
and BRICK, playing the part of
PARIS.**

KING PRIAM inspects the wall.

KING PRIAM

The wall looks fine.
But have you thought:
Is this table sturdy enough to hold it through the performance?

EMMA

You better believe it is!

FRIEDA and BRICK see each other.

FRIEDA

Brick?!!

BRICK

Frieda? Is that you?
What are you
Of course.
What a stupid ... obvious question.
It's such a surprise seeing you here.

FRIEDA

What part are you playing?

BRICK

Paris.

FRIEDA

Oh!... Do you remember the role you played last year? An actor in Hamlet?
Your part, what I remember, started something like:
"The rugged Pyrrhus, he whose sable arms,
Black as his purpose, did the night resemble
When he lay couched in the ominous horse."

BRICK

The rugged Pyrrhus, he whose sable arms,
Black as his purpose, did the night resemble
When he lay couched in the ominous horse,
Hath now this dread and black complexion smeared
With heraldry more dismal. Head to foot
Now is he total gules, horridly tricked
With blood of fathers, mothers, daughters, sons,
Baked and impasted with the parching streets,
That lend a tyrannous and a damned light
To their vile murders. Roasted in wrath and fire,
And thus o'ersized with coagulate gore,
With eyes like carbuncles, the hellish Pyrrhus
Old grandsire Priam seeks.

FRIEDA

Clapping her hands.

Well done!

Well done!

EMMA

Enough of this rehearsing.
We can hear it all at the full performance this evening.
Let's clear the room.

All exit, EMMA last.

As she exits (turning to the audience):

EMMA

As I've said many a time:
To be or not to be, Hamlet's an absurdist play.
Who would kill himself over the law's delay or insolence of office, when there are
so many better reasons?
It's absurd.
Like this life of mine.

[*pause*] You know? I think this is the best scene I've written.

Exits.

SCENE 5
WAS HELEN OF TROY A SLUT?

A high, circular wall has been built at one end of the table.

HELEN enters to the other end of the table.

HELEN

I have a friend who tells me how lovely I am.
But that she's afraid I'll be dying soon.
Just a premonition she says she has.
I don't have the heart to tell her I'm immortal.

Which means living until everyone who matters to you is dead.
It's a synonym for a tale told by an idiot.

**AGAMEMNON and ULYSSES enter to
stand on one side of the table by the
wall; and KING PRIAM and PARIS enter
to stand across the table from them.**

KING PRIAM

We meet again, Cousin.

AGAMEMNON

You win some, and you lose some, Priam.
That's the nature of a true legend.

ULYSSES

I'd say ransacking Troy is a lose/lose proposition for us.

PARIS

So, what do you suggest, Ulysses?

ULYSSES

The best case scenario, absent a workable compromise, is a ten-year siege of
Troy, followed by twenty thousand lives lost in the slaughter at the end.

KING PRIAM

Who says we'll fall for the same flying pig ruse again?

ULYSSES

Who says you won't?
Or maybe it will be another trick up my sleeve.
It's a new production, you know.

PARIS

Beware of what Greeks have up their stinking sleeves.

ULYSSES gives PARIS the finger.

KING PRIAM

Now, now, Boys, let's stick to the terms of the parley.
No more name-calling.
We're here to work out a compromise.

ULYSSES

Paris started it. As he always does. *Pretty boy.*

KING PRIAM

[*with a tone of admonition*] Ulysses....

AGAMEMNON

There's only one compromise:

Pointing at HELEN.

Deliver Helen back to her husband, Menelaus.
Period.

KING PRIAM

There's only one compromise, Agamemnon

AGAMEMNON

What's that?

KING PRIAM

Let Helen choose. It's her life.
Long and cluttered as it will be.

AGAMEMNON

Limburger cheese!!
That's how your idea smells!
A woman doesn't make a choice like that.
Especially if she's only an economically engineered casus belli.

PARIS

What if she wants to stay with me?

ULYSSES

She, better than anybody, knows the consequences.
Your blood, Paris, like twenty thousand others, is on the line.

KING PRIAM

That's pretty harsh punishment for adultery, don't you think?

AGAMEMNON

Deliver Helen, and all damage else –
As honour, loss of time, travail, expense,
Wounds, friends, and what else dear that is consumed
In hot digestion of this fucking war –
Shall be struck off.

HELEN

What if I don't want to leave?

KING PRIAM

My son, Paris, is in love with her.

AGAMEMNON

This is absurd.
No boy's infatuation

PARIS

Infatuation?!
My love for Helen is the greatest love this world will ever know.
For a woman.

AGAMEMNON

No boy's ... *or man's* love for a woman is worth the price.

PARIS

Have you ever been in love, Agamemnon?

AGAMEMNON

As a point of fact, I'm married to Helen's sister.

PARIS

There never yet have been two sisters so different.

AGAMEMNON

Don't you dare disrespect my wife.
Anything she may have said after our daughter died can easily be explained by
her mental state at the time.

KING PRIAM

You sacrificed your daughter's life for fair winds to reach our shores.
Of course your wife is pissed.

AGAMEMNON

Whatever.

PARIS

Am I allowed to make my case here?

ULYSSES

Certainly.

Go ahead.

You have three minutes.

PARIS

Sticks his tongue out at ULYSSES.

I'm in your debt, Ulysses. Three minutes' worth.

Helen, as you know, was won by Menelaus, Agamemnon's fine brother, by a contest among a dozen or so titillated suitors.

At issue was her body.

Her heart was won by me, as my heart was won by her, by a conquest of true love.

On that basis alone my claim to her is superior.

What true love has joined together let no man put asunder.

AGAMEMNON

If arguments like that were accepted, then no marriage on the face of this planet is safe.

PARIS

It's Icarus, or his wings.

What's more important?

A man's right to the property of his wife's body?

Or a woman's right to the flight of her heart?

ULYSSES

The law's crystal clear on that point.

KING PRIAM

Except for kings and princes.

ULYSSES

Except for kings and princes.

PARIS

So our love trumps the law?

AGAMEMNON

But not the war.

PARIS

What?

You mean our love is but a pawn in the hands of generals and infantrymen?
Then strength is the lord of imbecility.

ULYSSES

Careful.

The flaw in your syllogism, Paris, is that it is based on the whim of a woman.

PARIS

But Helen is no ordinary woman.

ULYSSES

Which makes no difference.

She's nonetheless a woman, subject to a woman's inclination toward hysteria.

KING PRIAM

This talk is not leading us toward any remedy that I can see.

AGAMEMNON

The remedy is the will of the gods and the willpower of mankind.

PARIS

What is the remedy then, when Love and War stand face to face, though they
come from the ends of the earth?

AGAMEMNON

Give up your mistress.

PARIS

Give up your vow to ransack our city.

ULYSSES

An eye for an eye.

PARIS

A kiss for a sword.

ULYSSES

All Troy, and all Sparta, will be in your debt if you relinquish her.

HELEN

I won't.

PARIS

Helen won't.

AGAMEMNON

Peace is won by courage, not selfishness.

PARIS

If war were to win fair lady ...

AGAMEMNON

If Love were to quell the fires of conflict ...

PARIS

We'd have no freedom.

AGAMEMNON

And no law. Because, when all is said and done, war *is* law.
[*aside*] And beauty is truth. Keats said so.

KING PRIAM

What in the names of the gods should we do?

ULYSSES

What in the names of the gods should your son have done? Tell me.

KING PRIAM

There are times when truth needs to be read between the lies.

HELEN

You're forgetting something.

PARIS

We're forgetting something.

As though only he can hear HELEN.

ULYSSES

What?

PARIS

What?

HELEN

The message.

PARIS

The message.

ULYSSES

What message?

PARIS

What message?

HELEN

The oracle, sent to Troy from Delphi.

PARIS

The oracle, sent to Troy from Delphi.

ULYSSES

Where is it?

PARIS

Where is it?

HELEN

On a pure white stone.

PARIS

On a pure white stone.

HELEN

Buried in the Wall of Troy.

PARIS

Buried in the Wall of Troy.

ULYSSES

What does it say?

HELEN

It proclaims the path to peace and happiness on Earth.

PARIS

It proclaims the path to peace and happiness on Earth.

ULYSSES

Which is?

HELEN

On the stone.
But no one knows anymore.

PARIS

On the stone.
But no one knows anymore.

ULYSSES

Well, that's no help.

HELEN

If you destroy our wall, you will condemn mankind for eternity to the consequences.

PARIS

If you destroy our wall, you will condemn mankind for eternity to ignorance.

AGAMEMNON

We'll think about it.

KING PRIAM

Until the day.

ULYSSES

Until the day.

The four men exit, the Greeks in one direction, the Trojans in the other.

Smoke.

In the smoke AGAMEMNON and ULYSSES reenter, to knock down the wall built on the table, and then exit again.

HELEN walks to the remnants of the wall, puts her hand inside, and removes a white stone which she carries to the other end of the table. She places the stone under the table, and exits.

SCENE 6
THE EYES OF INFIDELITY

EMMA, sitting at the table unmoving, quietly dying from ingestion of arsenic. Her eyes are blackened like Day of the Dead eyes.

CHARLES enters to her, and sits.

CHARLES

[*pause, striving to make eye contact*] At last, the ocean.
Can you hear it, Emma? In your mind? The way it used to be?
The shifting presence of the water? The endless waves?
It's in *us*, you know, though it's too late for you to appreciate now.
Now that you've swallowed all that arsenic hours ago, and you must die.

Takes her hand in his.

I'm afraid I've just discovered how selfishly blind I've been.
Blind with endless love.
I've loved you so much I never saw the way *you* felt.
Never suspected it was tormenting you.
Never saw your need to get out of this place.
Please forgive me.
I'm truly sorry.
How you wanted to fly away to somewhere else.
And nothing I ever did stopped you wanting that.
I would have been a better friend to you than a husband. What a fool!
Oh! What is real is hidden! What is hidden is real! Oh, what is love?
A friend can stay a friend.
It's marriage that doesn't stay friends.

But you were foolish, too, my Love.
Those romantic dreams of yours.
To live in Romeo and Juliet's realm.
Blue-tinted lands where silken ladders sway from ladies' balconies.
Where kisses in the moonlight sweep a heart away.

**RANDOLPH enters, and sits on Emma's
other side.**

CHARLES

I can understand.
You're so beautiful, what young man could resist falling in love with you?
But not around here, of course. Right, Randolph?

RANDOLPH

[to EMMA] I've come two and a half hours to get here.
Traveled two and a half hours. At break-neck speed.
Took the day off from my job the moment you called me.
To see myself what you've done to yourself.
Did it ever occur to you that I really cared?
That our kind of love *can* coexist in this world?
I would have done most anything for you.
Except money. Except your asking me for money.
Asking for money is a cold wind.
It did something to me.
Can't you understand that, Emma?
How it could change the feelings between us?
From lady chic down to something walking the street, so to speak?

It's a matter of honor, you see.
Love is love, except when it's a matter of money.
How? How did it happen? Where did the money go?
You must have gotten desperate.

RANDOLPH takes Emma's other hand.

RANDOLPH

You told me you were filled with rage. Anger and hatred of people who were so vainly unaware of your suffering and your needs.
One feeling coming on after another.
Chasing each other round the inside of your mind.
Like van Gogh's ear.
Forever in search of new landscapes.

And then again, you told me that you either wanted to live in Paris, or die.
Be so swallowed up that your life would disappear into endless desire.
Because you were convinced that desire is the opposite of death.
And you would never die if you were desired. You told me that.
I desired you. And I would have taken you to Paris.
I would have worked everything out, someday.
When I got the money and the time, and you were free, and we could disappear together.

CHARLES

I'd like to make this whole day disappear.

ARTHUR enters, and sits at the table.

ARTHUR

[*pause*] You're dying, and I'll barely live a month without the sight of you.
And you could never barely see the sight of me.

I'm an extra.

A teenage Arthur Nobody without a line in your life.

Hidden like a weeping willow in the woods.

O God! How can someone who desires you so much go on living if you're gone?

ARTHUR lowers his head into his arms on the table, and sobs.

EDWARD enters, and CHARLES rises to shake his hand. They sit next to one another.

CHARLES

I'm so glad you've come, Edward.

EDWARD

I'm so sorry for you, Charles.

CHARLES

And for Emma, too.

EDWARD

For her, too, of course.

But, truth be told, more for you.

CHARLES

And why is that?

EDWARD

Because I grieve for them who are more like myself.

And she was not of my world. Everyone could see that.

Even Randolph here could see that.

And what she's done offends me.

RANDOLPH

We grieve in separate ways, Captain.

EDWARD

She's the most beautiful woman I ever saw.

Just to look at her and my heart beat like a wild lion.

But as close as we were, we were not of the same world.

CHARLES

You always did seem so close.

EDWARD

Then why were you not jealous as a lion?

CHARLES

I don't believe in jealousy.

EDWARD

It might have saved her life.

CHARLES

How?

**FATHER BROWN enters and stands,
listening.**

EDWARD

She told me she wanted to be in the arms of a lover so jealous he'd be willing to die with her, making love.

I wasn't.

CHARLES

To die together?

EDWARD

And live forever, in ecstasy, in another land.

CHARLES

On the Earth?

[to FATHER BROWN] Is it true, Father?

That some can die together and then live together in another land?

FATHER BROWN

In another land?

CHARLES

What Teddy just said.

FATHER BROWN

We all have eternal life.

But not in this world.

Not on this Earth.

CHARLES

Where then?
On Mars?
Or Venus?

FATHER BROWN

In heaven.

CHARLES

And make love there?

FATHER BROWN

In heaven there are no bodies to make love with.
Only spirits.
Heaven is a land of pure spirit.

CHARLES

Then what's the point?

FATHER BROWN

To avoid the torments of Hell.

CHARLES

I'm going to Hell.

FATHER BROWN

Not if I can do anything about it, you're not!

EDWARD

I just wanted to tell you, Charles, that I loved Emma, but she actually started it.

CHARLES

Started what?

EDWARD

You know.

CHARLES

No, I don't.

EDWARD

Our affair.

CHARLES

Your affair?!

EDWARD

Don't tell me you knew nothing about it.
The nights we spent together?
She told me she told you.
How could you not know?
Like what she and Randy must have done, on the side.

CHARLES

Emma told me it was music lessons, with her piano teacher.
And religious lessons with Father.

[to FATHER BROWN] You did teach her about Jesus, didn't you, Father?
At night?

FATHER BROWN

No.
All we spoke about, in church only, was that Jesus is here.
On Earth, dragging a dark ocean behind him.

CHARLES

Oh, my God! It can't be possible things like that can be possible.

EDWARD

I thought you knew.
I wouldn't have said anything if I knew you didn't.
I just wanted say I'm sorry. And that I didn't start it.

CHARLES

Who did, then?

EDWARD

She did. She had a passion for making love.
It helped her forget life.

CHARLES

I don't believe you.

EDWARD

And I couldn't resist her.... Who could?

CHARLES

You're lying!

RANDOLPH

He's probably not, despite his age.

CHARLES

[to EDWARD] But you're married to Liv.

**EDWARD makes a gesture to say: Yes.
But so what?**

CHARLES

Am I to spend the rest of my life picturing Emma in the arms of you men?
Naked??!

RANDOLPH

We could hardly have been the only ones.

CHARLES

Dear God, tell me this isn't true....
What would make a wife do such a thing to her husband?

FATHER BROWN

What would make a wife do such a thing to her husband?
Possibly only husbands know.
I don't.

People are born in sin and shit, and stumble even deeper into it in life.
But with the Church's help many find their way out.
Think of brief insanities that have been in your life, Charles. Even yours.

**CHARLES takes a glass, looks it over,
and then throws it offstage. There is the
sound of glass breaking. Despite the fact
it wasn't aimed at him, EDWARD ducks.**

CHARLES

My sins, great and small, have all been Emma, the slut.
I can't believe it!
A whole life associating with only the right people, to find not a single honest
man.
[*in Edward's face*] I *hate* you. I *hate* your face. I *hate* you, you fucker!

FATHER BROWN

Calm down, my son. You're getting hot.

CHARLES

Hot I am on the outside. Freezing cold inside.

FATHER BROWN

You sound like some screech owl, in an empty hole.

CHARLES

Pointing at the dying EMMA.

Her screech owls were all adulterers. *In her*. How can that ever be forgiven?

FATHER BROWN

The compulsion to possess beauty like Emma's is as close to Biblical male behavior as beauty is to truth.

Consider David and Bathsheba.

Samson and Delilah.

Ahab and Jezebel.

The seven hundred strange wives of King Solomon.

And yet, the sins of sinners must be forgiven in the end.

CHARLES

I can never forgive her.

EDWARD

Best we not think about those things now.

CHARLES

Our marriage is a portrait of madness in plein air.

EMMA lowers her head into her arms on the table (dying).

CHARLES

[to EDWARD] Did you two ever have sex on this table?

EDWARD

Once or twice.

CHARLES

O my God! I see it now.

This moment's never going away.

This precise moment

On this legendary table of ours

Has lodged itself in my memory for eternity.

CHARLES lowers his head into his arms on the table.

SCENE 7
ARTIST OF THE MOON

CHARLES is sitting at the end of the table, and FRIEDA is painting on an imaginary canvas resting on an imaginary easel on the table.

CHARLES

Paint her as you remember her, Frieda.
It's been three years, I know.
Or rather, paint her from my perspective, as *I* remember her.
That's all I ask.
For I need her.
God help me, I still need her.
She was an artist once like you.
And she struggled so hard not to lose the woman she wanted to be.

FRIEDA

I'm sorry.
I paint as I feel.
Thickly.
Leaving guilty hesitations on the canvas....

[*pause, while "painting"*] I've long since given up my search for the perfect painting.

When FRIEDA finishes, the two of them exit, and there follows momentary darkness.

When light returns a dog is sitting on the table.

SCENE 8
MAN'S BEST FRIEND

FRIEDA has exited – her painting becoming a dog on the table.

CHARLES enters to the dog, briefly pets her, hugs her, holds her head in his hands, and stares into her eyes.

CHARLES

Staring a bit longer into the dog's eyes.

Emma, *it's me*. Really, *it's me*!

Shocking, isn't it?

You're Emma and I'm Charles.

And I never thought I'd see you again.

Certainly not in a dog.

I know it's you. Don't try tricking me.

Your eyes show me it is.

I used to be too ignorant to believe in spirits.

Dear God! Have I learned!

And here you are. With me again. After all these years.

And now I believe we have a chance to live together differently.

Even though that's no man's gift to give.

You told me in that dream that you'd be back.

Not as you were before you died, but as you were when we first met.

Maybe I didn't believe it.

Maybe I was expecting something like a glittering young actress.

But I knew you the moment our eyes latched.

[*beat*] The night was so black when you left us. Just as black as your death.

I remember it bitterly.

Ten places at a table.

A table much like this grand one.

Maybe it *was* this one.

But how can *that* be? In Frieda's studio?

A table, and its debts unpaid.

And its secret knowledge of how many men you'd slept with.

O! If tables could talk!

Can tables talk?

Wounds can bleed, in the night, in their own light. I've learned that.

But that's life, isn't it? The risk of being beautiful and unfaithful.

CHARLES

A man can read, and read, and read about infidelity,
from Bibles, to Trojan Wars, to Anna Karenina,
and not learn a thing how it feels until it actually happens.
No. Not “happens.”

Not know a whit how it feels until it dawns on him:
He’s married to a slut of a wife.
Not until then.

When his eyes truly open for the first time. Like a baby’s.

It’s called adultery when water is furtively added to milk.
How it stabs the blood of the pronoun in the back.
How it poisons the embryo of it.
The way cheating kills the being when two become as one.
Diluting trust and faith.
Diluting them down to nothingness.
And for what?
Breathless mindless.
What?
Which in turn will inescapably strangle on its own, spoilt fidelity.
I hate it.

We were living in different bedrooms with different views in the same house.
But not anymore.
It’s not worth it.
It’s not worth wasting time over mending fences that can’t be meant.
What’s done is done.
The Tower of Babel is fallen.
All that can be now is to build anew.
For that’s what life’s about, isn’t it?
Destroying childhood illusions to create more adult masks.

You had your reasons. I’m sure of it.
Reasons that offered sense to your infidelity.
Reasons to end life for love of a fool’s-gold.
But it’s a lie. Love’s a lie.
Beauty is truth not love.
Somebody who knew said it much better than I:
Beauty is all we’re capable of understanding on this earth, the inconstant
creatures we are.
Love is a fuck! A fucking lie!

CHARLES

And poor, young, lovesick Arthur. Thinking *he* was in love.
Killing himself out of pathetic angst for not being able to have sex with you like everybody else.
Planning *his* suicide at the very table while you were enacting yours.
I call him Werther now.

How imperfect it all is: Love, sex, marriage, and men's stupidity.
But that's no reason to end it, no matter how irritating it all gets.
You wouldn't do that again, would you? I don't think so.
It's truly not poetic, no matter what poets may say.

Poets flat out lie about love.
Even when they know we know they're lying.
So what's fidelity worth to a poet or a slut? Or a bankrupt man like me?
You don't have to live in Paris to learn the answer to that one.

If you'd ask me how it feels to be a deceived husband,
Heavens, I have to admit I don't know.
Maybe it's a sort of Hell.
Or maybe it's like nothing at all.
All I can see are the four of us:
Two touching each other furtively under the table.
Two suspended in mid-air, floating with our arms over our eyes.

The question is not what infidelity does to rot a marriage.
Or what arsenic does to smooth the plow of dying.
The question is: Where do we go from here? Forget it all?
But something stands in the way of that, doesn't it?
It's not forgiveness, for I haven't that to give.
It's not acceptance, because I don't.
It's the idea of what beauty is. And I'll never find anything more beautiful than you. No great secret.

CHARLES hugs the dog close to him.

CHARLES

You are beautiful, my pet.
Beauty is what makes you, you. Not sadness.
I won't mistake sadness for beauty or companionship again.

CHARLES exits with the dog.

SCENE 9
FOLSOM PRISON UTOPIA

The PRESIDENT and SECRETARY OF STATE are sitting side-by-side at the table, facing the audience. Behind the President are the two flags of the Oval Office – the American flag and the President’s flag. The Secretary’s coat and hat lie at the end of the table; and on the table in front of the PRESIDENT is a large sheet of paper. The PRESIDENT begins drawing a crude map on it.

PRESIDENT

This does not pretend to be perfect. Heaven forbid! It’s a secret I want my Secretary of State to grasp with your wits’ ends, not their middles.

SECRETARY OF STATE

I understand, Mr. President.

PRESIDENT

Better than you did the last time, I hope.

SECRETARY OF STATE

I understood.

PRESIDENT

What?

SECRETARY OF STATE

That walls will fall.

PRESIDENT

Walls and rules may be made for breaking, but woe unto the man who does the deed.

It would be better for him not to have been born.

SECRETARY OF STATE

Not south of the border, at least.

PRESIDENT

But *I* am better than that.

Like this table. Take it anywhere and it will stand.

My walls should never fall. They ought to have been built as firm as this table, and held in even greater regard.

And beggar the fools who opposed them.

SECRETARY OF STATE

Walls imprison, as well as enshrine wealth and power.

PRESIDENT

What do you mean by that?

SECRETARY OF STATE

A prophet is not without honor except behind his own walls.

PRESIDENT

A prophet is not a moron, if that's what you're trying to say.

SECRETARY OF STATE

Something like that.

PRESIDENT

Good.

You could use a breath of fresh respect for your President.

Anyway, back to my map.

Do you know where it is, I'm drawing?

SECRETARY OF STATE

Not yet.

PRESIDENT

Look! This is where we are:

Folsom Prison.

And this is ... "Don't Cry for Me,"

Encouraging with his hands.

South of that. Do you get it?

SECRETARY OF STATE

Argentina? Antarctica?

PRESIDENT

Christ's sake, man! Don't say it out loud.

SECRETARY OF STATE

Why not?

PRESIDENT

They're listening.

SECRETARY OF STATE

Who's listening?

PRESIDENT

The guards out there. And the Secret Service.

SECRETARY OF STATE

All I see them doing is just sitting there, staring at us.
It makes me feel like a caged camel in here.

PRESIDENT

Sometimes I wonder how I ever picked you as my Secretary of State.

SECRETARY OF STATE

A witch clued you in.

PRESIDENT

A witch?

SECRETARY OF STATE

Three of them, in fact.

PRESIDENT

Three of what?

SECRETARY OF STATE

“Double, double, toil and trouble
Fire burn and caldron bubble....”
Do you get it?

PRESIDENT

Oh.
The Wizard of Oz.

SECRETARY OF STATE

Perzactly.

PRESIDENT

I don't get to Broadway much anymore.

SECRETARY OF STATE

I didn't think you did.

PRESIDENT

Enough of this chitter.
Do you see where I'm going?
[hurriedly] But don't say it out loud.
Just nod. This is for our eyes only.

SECRETARY OF STATE

I don't think I do.

PRESIDENT

We're going *there*.

Pointing at the map.

SECRETARY OF STATE

To do what?

PRESIDENT

To build a fortress.

Strongest in the world.

A half mile underground.

SECRETARY OF STATE

Under the ice?

PRESIDENT

And do you know why?

SECRETARY OF STATE

On some base compulsion?

PRESIDENT

Sometimes you astound me with your ignorance.

To get a leg up.

SECRETARY OF STATE

On what?

PRESIDENT

Claiming the entire continent as our own.

SECRETARY OF STATE

To do what?!

PRESIDENT

Like I said.

SECRETARY OF STATE

For what purpose?

PRESIDENT

That far underground it's not cold anymore.

Everybody knows that.

Did you ever see Matrix?

Or Journey to the Center of the Earth?

SECRETARY OF STATE

I don't believe this.

PRESIDENT

Believe it!

We're going to build an entire city, the size of L A, underground!
Where *I say* who can have a gun.

SECRETARY OF STATE

And then ...?

PRESIDENT

Give that Fascist party in Washington the middle finger.

SECRETARY OF STATE

Oh.

PRESIDENT

Not so stupid, right?

SECRETARY OF STATE

Is there a name for this Utopia?

PRESIDENT

There's a code name: The Great Again Underground Railroad.

SECRETARY OF STATE

I should have guessed.

PRESIDENT

Guessed what?

SECRETARY OF STATE

Not just fiscally irresponsible, but politically incorrect at the same time.

PRESIDENT

You're not going woke on me, are you?

SECRETARY OF STATE

Mr. President ...?

PRESIDENT

What?

SECRETARY OF STATE

What is it you're writing on?

PRESIDENT

My blueprint?
It's just an odd scrap.

SECRETARY OF STATE

What's on the other side?

PRESIDENT

I don't know. What?

The SECRETARY OF STATE turns the paper over, and reads:

SECRETARY OF STATE

"We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America."

[*beat*] It's an original of the U.S. Constitution!
Where did you get it?

PRESIDENT

I found it in some papers they left at my house. On the beach.
Like a beach I remember a friend of mine was once on, and happened to see a woman take her clothes off. And he didn't do a thing, except invite her to a beer-drinking party.

SECRETARY OF STATE

Well you better give it back.
Right away.

PRESIDENT

Why?
We're going to replace it anyway.

SECRETARY OF STATE

Standing. Putting on his coat and hat.

[*aside*] Follow down this road we're on,
a freakish way in your mind's eye:
the Constitution will be gone.
Then puff! A clear and present sky.

SCENE 10
ROCK OF AGES

The blue stone of Scene 1 rests in the center of the table on a small cow hide.

PROFESSOR EISENHOWER enters with an ASSISTANT, who is carrying a large copy of Exhibit A, the magic square shown in Wikipedia, Knight's tour.

They stomp the snow off their feet, remove their coats and hats (which they drop onto the chairs), and remain standing. The PROFESSOR places a briefcase on the table, opens it, and takes out notes which she occasionally refers to.

PROFESSOR EISENHOWER

Good afternoon.

A *great* afternoon, to be blunt, with what I've got to tell you.

Historians know that every journey ends at some point.

In Heathrow Airport, once you've collected your luggage.

On a mist-shrouded wharf where torches wait.

Disembarking a train from Manhattan to Chicago, asking for directions.

The Grand Canyon.

Docking at the International Space Station.

In front of the doors of Trump Tower, your taxi driving off.

At a Broadway theatre.

My great journey ends today. In this very room where it began.

At this same sturdy altar of a table that holds the most remarkable stone in the world.

When I met it, I began to think I was going crazy.

My portable radiometer, which had never given me a grain of trouble, registered its age at an unbelievable twenty-eight billion years!

That's older than the universe itself.

As we knew it then.

Older by fourteen billion years!!

Subsequently

[*beat*] Well, first there were some steps we had to dance to.

I had to convince fellow professors at the University to venture out here, and take a look for themselves. Face to face.

Which they did.

With more highly regarded, portable radiometers.

That showed the stone's actual age to be just shy of thirty billion years, give or take a mere nine hundred million.

PROFESSOR EISENHOWER

This fact has been discussed in more science journals than I ever knew existed. The long and short of the story, which you already know of course, has been a fundamental shift in the Big Bang Theory, together with our University's creating the Hoffman Campus, named for the father of the man who discovered the stone. I'm obliged to tell you that we, the University, participate in a lease of the stone's custody; and the Hoffman family has been more than generous with donations to our school out of fees that are paid for the stone's study and display.

That's history.

What I'm about to tell you is the next, even more astounding chapter in this stone's life.

I mean that.

It's a discovery that might shake, at its foundation, our understanding of knowledge, memory, and creation itself.

[*beat*] Computer engineers here at the Hoffman Campus, together with scientists at twenty of the leading institutions around the world, have discovered that from radiation emanating off the stone's surface they can hear and understand things the stone is saying!!

What's been known for a century on Earth, the stone has been saying for thirty billion years.

For example, Faulhaber's Formula for calculating the sum of an unlimited number of consecutive integers to given powers, Riemann's zeta function, the Bernoulli numbers, and Einstein's Theory of Relativity.

So far, all in the realm of mathematics.

But it's only a matter of time, our people believe, before the scope of communication will widen significantly.

Oh, and one more thing!

The stone has sent us a magic square.

To mathematicians, it's equivalent to what Beethoven's Ninth Symphony is to choral music.

For those in the dark about magic squares, look at the eight by eight chess board being held by my assistant.

The ASSISTANT holds Exhibit A up for the audience to see.

Add the top row of numbers.

The ASSISTANT runs his finger across the row.

PROFESSOR EISENHOWER

1, plus 48, plus 31, plus 50, plus 33, plus 16, plus 63, plus 18 equals 260.

When you add each row below it, the sum is identical: 260!

And when you add each column, the sum's also 260.

Each line and each column: 260 in every case!

It's a mathematical miracle.

I'm not a religious person; and I don't mean to step on any sacred toes here.

But to some people on this planet, me, for example, numbers and equations speak as eloquently *and as spiritually* as words in the Bible, or the Koran; or as masterpieces of art and music.

Roads to God are not all spelled out with nouns, pronouns, verbs, adverbs, adjectives, and prepositions.

But wait a minute.

I haven't shown you all of it.

Take a look at how the numbers progress across the board.

The ASSISTANT traces the pattern on Exhibit A.

From 1, to 2, to 3, and so on, all the way to 64, each step is a knight's jump.

Two down and one over, one down and two over, et cetera.

The "L" shaped move of a knight in chess.

And when the journey is complete, and the knight has touched each square on the board one time, and only one time, it's known as a Knight's Tour.

[*beat*] Could chess conceivably have been played 30 billion years ago in space? Or are certain chess moves in some way as much a mathematical truth as the Pythagorean Theorem?

We have chess computers running on Earth today, working to discover the perfect game. They are so far beyond the capabilities of the human brain that there cannot possibly be a competition between the two.

Rating-wise, it's something like 2900 for humans, 3700 for artificial intelligence. And the disparity only grows wider and wider every year.

That's the future, Folks.

Like it or not, artificial intelligence is destined to revolutionize the world.

From science, to health care, to research, to business and manufacturing, and beyond.

PROFESSOR EISENHOWER

As I said, I'm not a religious person; but I feel this blue stone is a Godsend to us today, the world going the way it is.

It gives me a strange sense of inner peace.

A sense that thinking, and the mind, and memory do not go dark after death.

The Hawkings, and Mozarts, and Shakespeares, and Emily Dickinsons of the world continue speak to us in what they've written and composed.

And the Newtons and the Einsteins.

And my profound belief and hope are that the level of intelligence buried inside this stone will help us find a better way to see inside and outside ourselves.

We are face-to-face with it.

All we need now is to find a more comprehensive way to communicate.

It's as though the land, the rocks, the sand, the earth, the water, and the space above can, at last, speak to us again.

ASSISTANT

Professor?

PROFESSOR EISENHOWER

[*somewhat surprised*] Yes?

ASSISTANT

There's something I've always wondered about...

"As I was going to St. Ives,

I met a man with seven wives.

Each wife had seven sacks.

Each sack had seven cats.

Each cat had seven kits:

Kits, cats, sacks, and wives,

How many were there going to St. Ives?"

PROFESSOR EISENHOWER

You're asking that now?!

ASSISTANT

I was just wondering.

PROFESSOR EISENHOWER

We don't have time for that foolishness.

ASSISTANT

All right, I'm sorry.

But

PROFESSOR EISENHOWER

What now?

ASSISTANT

This thing all things devours;
Birds, beasts, trees, flowers;
Gnaws iron, bites steel; grinds hard stones to meal;
Slays the king, ruins the town,
And beats the tall mountain down. What is it?

PROFESSOR EISENHOWER

Why are you asking riddles at a time like this?
And, besides, yours is a non-speaking part.

She kicks something that's under the table.

PROFESSOR EISENHOWER

What's this? There's something hidden underneath this table.

She reaches to pick up a white stone.

After examining it briefly:

PROFESSOR EISENHOWER

Something written on this white stone....
"Time creates itself. Then destroys itself.
And then begins anew. Like the great walls of Troy.
Each beginning begins with a bang.
Each end, ends with a whimper.
Then another beginning.
And in between each beginning and each new beginning, there is time."

ASSISTANT

That's it!! That's the answer to my riddle!...
Time.... See? Time.

PROFESSOR EISENHOWER

It goes on: "In time there is light.
And there is the absence of light.
In light there is life, and there is the absence of life.
In life there is memory, and there is the absence of memory.
In memory there is wisdom, and there is the absence of wisdom.
But without memory, neither time, nor wisdom, nor names exist."

PROFESSOR EISENHOWER

[beat] “Without memory, neither time, nor wisdom, nor names exist.”

This white stone says.

Well! There may be a lot of people in this world whose names don't matter to them, but my name matters to *me*.

Eisenhower.

That's what I say....

One final thing is here:

“What makes a cat happy?”

Is this meant to be some kind of poem? about cats? written in ancient Greek?... Happy's about the last thing *I'd* ever name a cat. *Or* a tiger.

“Tyger, tyger burning bright,
In the forests of the night:
What immortal hand or eye,
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?”

That's what William Blake says.

She puts the stone down on the table.

Pause, taking a deep breath.

PROFESSOR EISENHOWER

I will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written.

That's what the Bible says.

T. S. Eliot says:

The naming of cats is a difficult matter.

Tigers, too, I imagine.

There's a comfort in these stones ... blue *and* white (wherever they came from):
Knowing at the end of the day that memory,
a portion of it at least,
is eternal.

Like these stones.

They're *our* memory.

Like poetry.

Some of it.

Like this indestructible table.

Thank you.

PROFESSOR EISENHOWER and her ASSISTANT put on their coats and hats, and exit – PROFESSOR EISENHOWER with her briefcase, the ASSISTANT with the magic square.

The table remains in the light.

END

EXHIBIT A – KNIGHT’S TOUR
(found in Wikipedia, Knight’s tour)

