

IN THE MATTER OF ARTHUR IMMORTAL

By Jerold London

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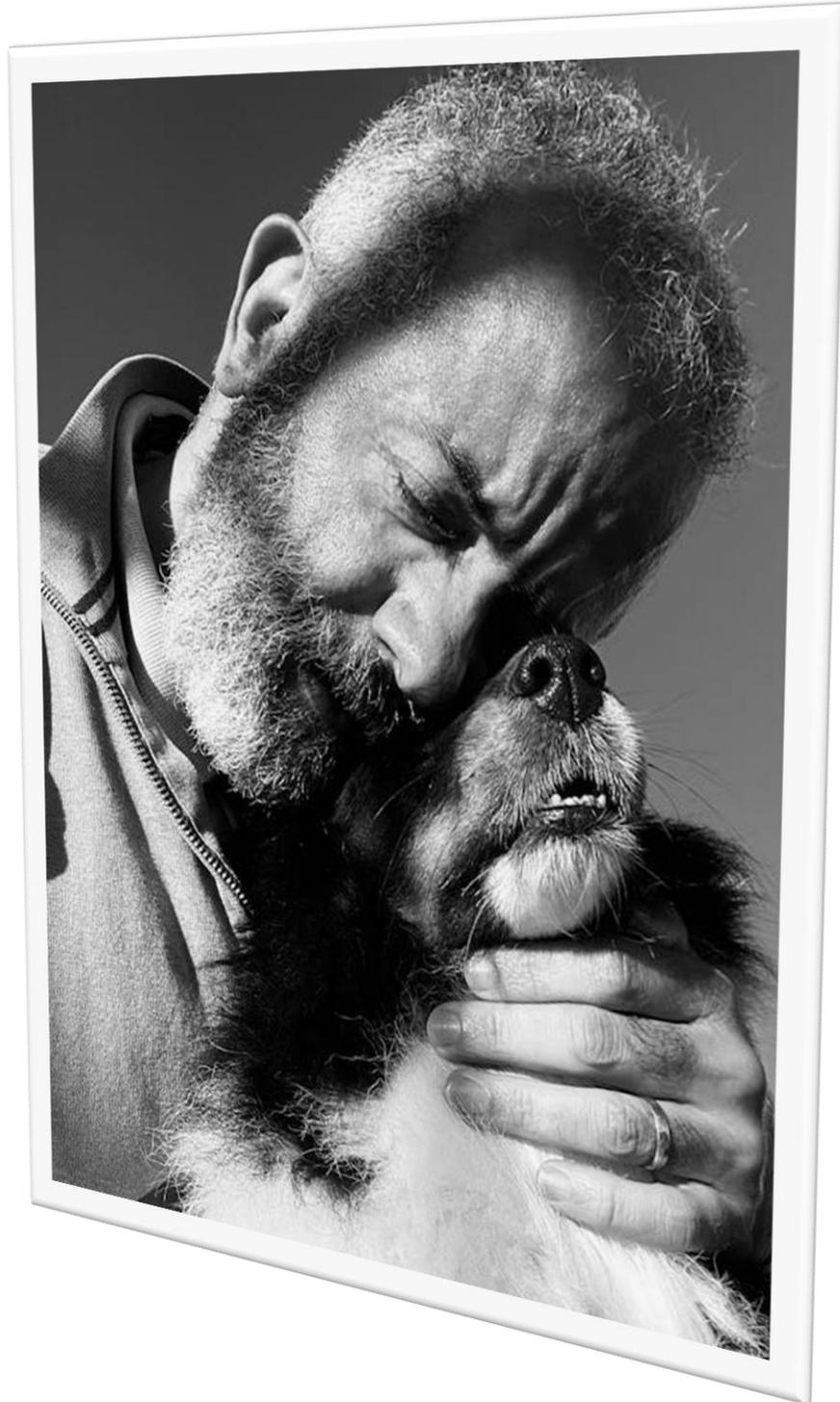


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Once every few years, even now ... I find it impossible to bear.

– Barbara Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible*

IN THE MATTER OF ARTHUR IMMORTAL

TIME AND PLACE

Present time.
In a courtroom.

CHARACTERS

ARTHUR, male, 62, wearing a blue quilted jacket with zipper pockets.

EMILY, female, 18, dressed in jeans, a white shirt, and boots a bit too large.

PROBATE JUDGE, female.

FINCH, male attorney for the Petitioner.

... in the dialogue indicates a thoughtful break.

SCENE

ARTHUR, sitting in the witness chair.

PROBATE JUDGE seated.

FINCH standing, facing the JUDGE.

JUDGE

You may proceed, Mr. Finch.
The witness has been sworn.

FINCH

Regarding our evidence, your Honor, as to the need to appoint a guardian for Mr. Immortal, he has voluntarily agreed to testify today himself. He is our only witness, and we do not consider him to be an adverse witness. His testimony should not exceed ten minutes; and we ask the court to allow him to tell his story as he tells it, without interruption.

JUDGE

Proceed.

FINCH

Mr. Immortal, please tell us your name and age.

ARTHUR

I am Arthur Immortal, age 62.

FINCH

And you have been a resident of this county your whole life?

ARTHUR

Not yet. But for 62 years I've been.

FINCH

Now, Mr. Immortal, tell us in your own way about Emily.

ARTHUR

I would have been a sinner had I ever had the chance.

Always wanting freedom to think my own thoughts my own way, and be my own person.

Always wondering whether wanting that wasn't a sin.

In some churches it is, you know.

Or not caring that much about people, one way or the other, or myself, for that matter. Is that a sin?

I was in church once. Not just once.

At one time in my life, with Emily, for eighteen years, I knew the inside of a church.

Something in its certainty about the unknown appealed to me.

The readiness to overlook the idiosyncrasies of the Redeemer's non-conforming life. His sorrow which passed all understanding. His freedom.

Like the water that flows under the McClugage Bridge in Peoria that I go watch three, maybe four times a week.

Staring down, thinking how much the world, East and West, listed to starboard in the grotesque seasons of the Holocaust, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Viet Nam, 9/11, Gaza and Ukraine.

Where are they now? The victims of those atrocities? Or does no one care?

And how far does the water down there go under that bridge?

It was in church I learned the certainty of Matthew 25.

Either you feed and clothe the poor and take in strangers, and go to heaven; or you don't, and go to Hell.

That simple. And I do it. And could care less if one of them steals from me.

Except, I've learned something's missing in Matthew: You don't have to care.

All Matthew says is that you love your neighbor as yourself.

And I've never really loved all that much about myself. Only Emily.

ARTHUR

My house is empty now. My dog Argos died a year after Emily left.

I walk alone.

I once was loved. I lived with love in the kitchen. And by the fireplace in the den.

When Emily would visit, and we'd make breakfast, or lunch, or dinner together.

My home was her home, always. And she loved Argos, too.

And we'd sit by the fire and talk.

Talk about things that made life matter to us. And laugh about it.

O! The stupid things that matter to twelve-year-old girls!

And O! The bitter silence that remains after laughter is gone!

There is no home when laughter leaves.

I took in Emily's mother off the streets, homeless, hungry, pregnant, and an orphan.

When Emily was born, her mother died in childbirth.

No father ever showed up, or anybody else; and I brought Emily to my place.

My part-time housekeeper moved in for a while, to help.

Then we found a couple in the neighborhood to become Emily's foster parents.

They were "Aunt" and "Uncle" to her. I was always only Arthur.

And she was as much my daughter as a homeless stranger's daughter ever was.

When she'd clasp my finger in her little hand, days old, in her cradle, I fell in love with her at first touch, and have never stopped. She's really the only person in my life. I love her even now, and miss her horribly. Otherwise

How strange! That life can exist in love and distaste simultaneously.

In equal degree.

How light can be in two places at the same time.

How joy mixes with sadness.

I never cared all that much for myself, or others, but when Emily came along, she was different.

My love for her is what John calls agapē love.

Unmixed love. What church people mean when they say "God is Love."

Which doesn't explain it. Just tells it as it is.

Or where it comes from. Like a comet, out of nowhere.

Love is gone. Emily. A child. And for eighteen years that was enough.

How strange to want a fireplace brimming with heat to sit next.

Flames dancing. Licking the air. Wood crackling.

A comfortable armchair with a bottle of Glenlivet in easy reach, and Emily near.

How strange now to walk instead in the chilled air.

Sensing my loneliness in the cold water below the McClugage Bridge.

My hair going grey. My hair young and dark.

My hair on a baby's head too thin to make anything of it with comb or brush.

ARTHUR

All things in me occurring in one moment.
Every version of me occurring simultaneously.
Do this in remembrance of me, he asked.
I remember my father. He saved my life, and died young, leaving the house to
Mother and me, and a comfortable trust fund for the rest of our lives.
She got Pick's Disease – God only knows how long she'd had it – and died ten
years later when I was twenty-eight.
Twenty-eight, and leaving me the house, in it, alone.
I've written it all down (as though it would matter).
At arthur immortal dot com.
It's a disease that degenerates the frontal and temporal lobes.
The place in the brain where people feel for other people ... empathy and
sympathy, you know. And behavior control.
My mother used to scream at me, for nothing.
And didn't care. She stopped caring.
And would steal food from me at the table.
Before she lost it completely, and couldn't speak, or eat, and died.

Look at me! Poor Arthur Immortal they will say. What a difficult patient!
For every unholdable pain he has held since that girl left him, he allows his
stomach to burn. Fire! Fire! It's a wonder he's still alive.

Time is too immense. Mere moments are all we have.
A string of pearls that bursts onto the floor, scattering into the orbits of the Earth,
moon, and Mars.
For all of us, all we have at the end is a string of scattered pearls.
Years we were witness to. Moral violations of leaders and nations.
The Earth forever rotating on its axis and revolving around the sun.
Or is it the opposite? God!? Is it the opposite?
Let lightning strike me if it is!
Let me be struck by the obliterating knowledge of my smallness on this planet!
Let horses in the fields.
Let deer on the slopes.
Let the rain proclaim the trees.
Let the trees tell of the sun.
Let the birds.
Let birds.
Let Linda Gregg live again.
For God's sake, let Linda Gregg speak to me again.
If I can't have Emily's laughter let me at least have the comfort of Linda Gregg.

ARTHUR

“Rather pleased,” Linda told me once when I called her, that I cared about her poetry. And Brussels.

And the photo of her and Jack Gilbert taken in Firá on the island of Santorini.

The dress she wore, made of a white Greek sheet.

My God! Those were the days: Emily, Argos, and Linda Gregg’s poetry.

Emily was the most alive person I ever met.

As a baby.

As a girl growing up.

As a teenager.

At eighteen.

Now a bustling twenty-eight-year-old, I should imagine.

Given to tempers, as always.

I’m ten years older, why wouldn’t she be? Wherever she is.

What happened?

How did I lose it?

Like a steak left a moment too long, out to grill, and the dog got it.

Do this in remembrance of me, when I don’t want to remember you.

I want to remember Emily.

Where *are you*? My wretched child?

The courtroom door opens, and EMILY enters.

EMILY

Hey there, Man.

ARTHUR

Emily! How are you here? And how are you still eighteen?

EMILY

Hermione and Dumbledore, at the Infirmary door.

ARTHUR

With a time-turner?

EMILY

Nothing less; and we’re in this together.

ARTHUR

We had happy days with Harry Potter, didn’t we?

Where did they go?

EMILY

Into the spaces between the moon and the stars, when you sent my Dylan away.

ARTHUR

Bring those times back!

EMILY

Bring Dylan back.

ARTHUR

I can't

EMILY

You're not what you seem to be, you know.
And that's a lie!
People should be what they seem to be.
If not, they're liars.
Like you are, Arthur.

ARTHUR

I gave to you everything I had in me to give, you wretched child.
More than I have ever given anybody else. Likely more than your aunt and uncle.
And you left me.

EMILY

You took the only boy I'll ever love, you wretched man. And I'll never forgive you.

ARTHUR

Dylan was no good for you, and I could see it.
He just wanted you for the surface things a boy wants a girl for.

EMILY

You don't know shit. It was no surface desire.
I'm peculiar. Everybody knows that. Mainly because of you.
And he loved the strangeness in me.
Besides, it wasn't for you to decide.

ARTHUR

That was ten years ago. You were eighteen.
And has he ever sought you out?

EMILY

No.

ARTHUR

There! There! That's proof enough!
If he were the one, a few words from an older man would not have kept him away.

EMILY

You had no right, and I'll hate you for it the rest of my life.

ARTHUR

I learned life through you, Emily. Through your eyes. And I understood it better.
Simply by living with joy and excitement and love you explained life to me.

EMILY

And you taught me everything I believed in, about good and bad.
About reason and nature. About saints and devils.
Extraordinary things. Everything. And I loved you for it. But so what?
You turned, and betrayed me, and did the worst thing imaginable, ever.

ARTHUR

I'm sorry it hurt you. I did it because I knew Dylan was the kind of boy who would
take the spirit out of you, and ruin you.

EMILY

So, instead, you did it for me yourself....
I love you, Arthur. And I hate you.
But still, you're the only person in the world I can tell the hidden places in my
heart to. So I love you. And I'll never forgive you.

ARTHUR

Is there any hope?

EMILY

Have you found your faith?

ARTHUR

No. I've forgotten what cupboard I put it in.

EMILY

It's a dreadful thing.

ARTHUR

What is?

EMILY

To take love away from a young person, and to confine faith within a cupboard.

ARTHUR

Maybe I was wrong. Maybe I was being selfish.
Maybe I am responsible for your leaving me. And I was wrong.

EMILY

At last you've said it.

ARTHUR

Well, I've said it.... Fuck me!!
But it isn't fair, that beauty secures love so easily.

EMILY

And what isn't fair owes a debt to truth.

ARTHUR

The truth is, it isn't fair, and therefore it's truth that owes a debt to truth.

EMILY

There's more than one truth?

ARTHUR

Is there more than one star?

EMILY

Stars fall.

ARTHUR

Only when the moon is blue.

EMILY

Only when all the suffering and sorrow on Earth are sucked back into Eden, you mean.

ARTHUR

When the tree of life yields her fruit, and her leaves heal the nations.

EMILY

And I shall see his face again. The boy I've loved all these years.

ARTHUR

And this shall be a sign to me.

EMILY

Amen.

ARTHUR unzips a pocket in his jacket, takes out a pen and a green notebook, writes in it, puts the pen and notebook back in his pocket, and zips it up.

EMILY

Your shoe's untied, Mister.

As ARTHUR bends over to tie his shoe, EMILY exits.

ARTHUR

Looking up.

She's gone.

Tonight let the moon turn blue. Its own blue.

The blue of itself that it's been hiding.

Like a comet that seizes the eye.

And Emily will return.

And with my help and my apologies, Dylan will return.

And time will do its age-old job of healing all wounds. Provided we give it a hand.

There are damages to the brain that can do this to a person which are incurable.

Damages to the frontal lobe that create a loss of empathy for others.

From blows to the head I never received. Drugs I never took.

[*beat*] Pick's Disease.

I need a new brain. A new frontal lobe before I go crazy.

I need a new life.

Matthew 25, bringing in all the homeless of McLean County.

And actually caring about them.

Actually caring about all of them. Even if I don't care much about myself.

FINCH

[*pause*] Petitioner rests its case.

JUDGE

Pause, then striking her gavel.

Case dismissed.

You are free to go, Mr. Immortal.

END