

ACT 1.

PRE-SHOW.

Evening. A sonata plays. CLARA and WALLACE work in their respective studies. WALLACE writes on a computer, CLARA in long hand. As the audience settles, WALLACE and CLARA finish. THEY meet somewhere--the hallway, threshold--and lightly kiss.

WALLACE

Lucky?

CLARA

Lucky.

Lights come down. Music stops.
End pre-show.

EXPOSITION.

Act 1, Scene 1. Afternoon. CLARA and WALLACE sit at the kitchen table with tea. On the table is a winter arrangement of dried flowers, twigs.

WALLACE

(About tea) What is this?

CLARA

Green tea.

WALLACE

No one serves health food to a condemned man, Clara.

CLARA

Exactly my point, Wally.

WALLACE

Ah.

CLARA

I know some things.

WALLACE

Yes.

CLARA

And others I don't. The Psychologist of Psychological Services called me today. She was looking for clues about my student Miriam. The Psychologist says Miriam went over the edge. The Psychologist says Miriam speaks my name. The Psychologist says she can't break patient confidentiality and then the Psychologist, as they always do, does. It seems Miriam woke up with death on her chest. She could feel his weight bearing down. In the shower slipping soap on the floor. A blouse button into her throat. The air so odd and thick--Miriam is dying, she's convinced. (Beat) Well, I say. That's simple, Doctor. A mystery solved. Miriam wrote quite a good poem for class. There was a charge in the air when it was read aloud. Poetry, Doctor, can be dangerous.

WALLACE

The Psychologist doesn't understand?

CLARA

The Psychologist does not understand. Tell me, she says, what was in this...*poem*?

WALLACE

Ah. What was this *poem* about?

CLARA

And I say, you'll have to ask Miriam, Doctor. I don't violate student confidentiality.

WALLACE

That's good.

CLARA

The Psychologist says, I detect resentment in your voice.

WALLACE

You refrain from saying what you detect in her voice.

CLARA

I refrain. In fact, to ease the Psychologist's mind--a difficult mind to ease--I tell her that in Miriam's *poem* there is no father cock slipping, no uncle too familiar in the past.

WALLACE

The Psychologist doesn't quite believe you.

CLARA

Though she refrains from saying so.

WALLACE

The content of the poem is irrelevant. Your student Miriam has created something from nothing. Something from within is now without. Miriam suffers loss, dies a small death. She'll learn how to mitigate this. Learn to let the next thing to be written, and the next, and the next, distance her from this awareness of death. How could she die with so much work to do.

CLARA

How could any of us?

WALLACE

I have so much work to do.

CLARA

Exactly my point.

WALLACE

Ah.

CLARA

I know some things, Wally.

WALLACE

Yes.

CLARA

And others I don't. Will I see Miriam, the Psychologist asks. Miriam wants to see me. I said no.

WALLACE

I would have done the same.

CLARA

No one would ask a male professor to be so involved with his student.

WALLACE

Probably not.

CLARA

Whereas the Psychologist assumes I harbor a maternal impulse, a Florence Nightingale fantasy. Must I, I ask? I thought it my job as adjunct lecturer to introduce them to iambic pentameter and Elizabeth Bishop.

WALLACE

And Wallace Stevens.

CLARA

And Elizabeth Bishop. Besides, I say. Didn't anyone tell you that I'm crazy? She refrains from saying so, yet.... My reputation has been braided into a small-town noose.

WALLACE

What a day for you.

CLARA

What kind of day for Miriam?

WALLACE

She's all right.

CLARA

I hope she's all right. I would want my favorite food and white cotton socks.

WALLACE

The psychologist will figure it out.

CLARA

Don't overestimate her.

WALLACE

Don't underestimate her.

CLARA

(Onset of accelerating doubt) What would it take for me to visit?

WALLACE

It's not your job.

CLARA

Why am I so stingy with myself. Am I stingy with myself?

WALLACE

No.

CLARA

Should I call Miriam?

WALLACE

No.

CLARA

Am I unfeeling?

WALLACE

No.

CLARA

I am unfeeling. I'm a monster.

WALLACE

Are you harboring a maternal impulse, Clara?

Short silence.

CLARA

Probably. Men are better suited to teaching. No urge to mother; only to lead, instruct and on occasion fuck.

WALLACE

You were a graduate student. A poet futzing around with fiction. It was different.

CLARA

We were different.

WALLACE

I wasn't one of those arrogant professorial bastards.

CLARA

You were God.

WALLACE

You mean to say I was one of those arrogant professorial bastards.

CLARA

You weren't that kind of God, Wally. The kind we yearn for. Someone who knows how to run the show.

WALLACE

Thanks.

CLARA

You were more the God we deserve. Spent, weary. Fragments of creation at your feet. I think half the class pined for you. Your self-loathing was majestic.

WALLACE

I was a mess.

CLARA

Magnificently so.

WALLACE

From that formless *shit*, the class constructs a narrative. My life story.

CLARA

A tragic figure. A man who lost his only child. A broken god story.

WALLACE

A fabrication.

CLARA

Don't pout. (Kisses WALLACE) Lucky?

WALLACE

Lucky.

CLARA

(About unopened letter on table) Your mother?

WALLACE

Mother's convinced my death is imminent.

CLARA

She's wrong.

WALLACE

A person in their seventies can't be wrong. Just ask one. Some pool side idiot described the trajectory of my illness to Mother. More precisely, the trajectory of his cousin's sister-in-law's son's illness. Clara.

CLARA

Your tone, Wally. Your tone is foreboding.

WALLACE

Mother is coming to visit.

CLARA

No!

WALLACE

Yes.

CLARA

Why?

WALLACE

To take care of me.

CLARA

You tell her you're fine.

WALLACE

I did. She says she can always tell when I'm lying. Of course every time I told the truth as a kid, I was branded a fibber.

CLARA

Little wonder you're a novelist.

WALLACE

(About letter) Flight arrangements contained within.

CLARA

This is not the greatest news I've ever heard.

WALLACE

I know.

CLARA

In fifteen years I've met the woman twice and she wasn't nice, Wally.

WALLACE

I know.

CLARA

Either time. (Beat) The only subject she discusses with me is Saint June Your Ex Wife. They're inseparable.

WALLACE

At one time, Mother and I were inseparable. (Beat) She's my mother.

CLARA

But why now?

WALLACE

Because things are different now.

CLARA

I dislike that word. Now. (Beat) I need a walk. Some air.

WALLACE

I'll go with you.

CLARA

Your mother's not going to clean my house, Wally.

WALLACE

She's 77 years old, Clara.

CLARA

Then who's going to clean the house? We live in a pig sty. She'll think me unfit.

WALLACE

We'll hire a cleaner.

CLARA

I don't want anyone in my room.

WALLACE

We'll put up signs. Keep out. Private.

CLARA

Did you put up those signs when you were little?

WALLACE

Sure.

CLARA

Did your mother obey those signs when you were little?

WALLACE

Absolutely not. She'd barge right in.

CLARA

I'm going for a walk. Move some leaves aside. See if anything's awake pushing through the earth.

WALLACE

May I come with you?

CLARA

Why?