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The Absent One

Adam Blackwell

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THE ABSENT ONE
ADAM BLACKWELL

ACT ONE

Lights on Bryan. He addresses the audience directly.

BRYAN: I got this letter, this very strange, *personal* letter a few days ago. And I decided to do some detective work. I phoned the post office Public Relations Department and talked to a woman named Tracy who told me that people post about 10,000,000 letters a day in Britain. Or about one letter for every five people. Of those letters, according to Tracy, over 99 percent will reach their destinations more or less on time. But, most days, apparently, there are a few that get lost. Dropped on the rounds or lost in some appalling crevice in the post office, I'm not sure. All fine and good, but what Tracy failed to mention—and shame on her because this is really the most interesting little postal fact of all—was that, occasionally, many years later, they find these lost letters and—just as a joke, really—send them on to the same address. My friend Tom Conway, who works at the big post office in Camden, told me that.

Light on Bryan dims as main lights come up. Paula on couch. Bryan picks up two cokes, hands one to Paula and sits down on a chair. We are joining their conversation in progress.

BRYAN: But I don't see why—
PAULA: I've told you. And I realize now you've got me here under very false pretenses.
BRYAN: Not really.
PAULA: Yes you have. You promised you wouldn't ask me to dwell
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on why I dumped you. I’m sorry, why we broke up.
Because I’ve already told you.

BRYAN: No you haven’t.
BRYAN: WHAT?
PAULA: This isn't fair, it's really not. (resigned, giving in) We're just different.
BRYAN: How? In what way?
PAULA: It doesn’t matter.
BRYAN: It does Paula, it does to me. I want to know . . . how?
PAULA: Lots of things—
BRYAN: Name one.
PAULA: I’m female.
BRYAN: Very funny. (beat, hurt) Just don’t even talk to me—
PAULA: It was a joke. I thought you could take a joke.
BRYAN: No, no that's not fair. You’re not getting away with that. I can—you know I can. Just because I’m trying to get an answer from you doesn’t mean I can’t take a joke. I mean I got it. It wasn’t funny. (pause) There’s a time and a place you know—
PAULA: See, you were offended.
BRYAN: No I wasn’t!
PAULA: I never get offended like that. Americans don’t take offense so easily.
BRYAN: (doubtfully) Oh really?
PAULA: Just, just lighten up—
BRYAN: Oh me lighten up? That's new. I mean you’re the one who’s always getting on at me . . .
PAULA: Then you’re better off without me. Like I’ve said already.
BRYAN: Don’t be like that!
PAULA: Like what?
BRYAN: (getting upset) I’m just saying that it’s usually you who’s getting upset.
PAULA: When? What do I get upset at?
BRYAN: A lot of things. Me, Tom Conway, anyone who doesn’t agree with you.
PAULA: That's not true. Just because I stick up for myself—
BRYAN: Not just yourself.
PAULA: So? Is that bad?
BRYAN: J. Danforth Quayle recently celebrated his 45th. I can't remember if it was his birthday or IQ.
PAULA: (a little dumbfounded) What?
BRYAN: Maybe it was his 35th.
PAULA: What, you want me to defend Quayle?
BRYAN: If anything should happen to Bush, the security guards have immediate orders to go Quayle-hunting.
PAULA: What the hell—like I'm really going to defend Quayle—
BRYAN: How d'you spell "potato"? How d'you spell "moron"?
PAULA: What is your point?
BRYAN: You're mad, right?
PAULA: No! I don't care. But what's the point? He's an easy target.
BRYAN: Well, he's not the only easy target.
PAULA: Oh come on. No martyrs please.
BRYAN: Why not?
PAULA: Because I don't like you when you're a martyr.
BRYAN: (smiling to himself) Yea, I don't know why I said that. For effect, I suppose.
PAULA: (laughing) Effect? You? No!
BRYAN: (in clumsy American dialect) Well, yep, yep. That'd be me. Mr. Effect. Mr. Head Cheerleader. Mr. Captain-of-the-Football-Team.
PAULA: Your accent—it's terrible.
BRYAN: (in mock posh English accent) Accent, which accent? If you, my dear lady, are insinuating that I have an accent, then you're quite mistaken. I speak RP and—
PAULA: What?
BRYAN: (same accent) RP, received pronunciation. What the Queen speaks, what you hear on telly—the noncommercial channels that is. And it's not an accent at all. (reverting to normal accent—philosophically) In fact, it's not even a dialect. Dialect always seems to imply vulgarity, you
know the kind of thing they speak in Scotland. Or in McDonald's. That's one thing I really hate. I mean I really hate it, that accent the English McDonald's cashiers put on. "Would you like anything to drink with your meal, sir?" I mean it's somehow humiliating to buy a Big Mac without at least a medium Coke—

PAULA: Oh that reminds me—something very funny!

BRYAN: About medium Cokes?

PAULA: No—well, yes, in a way. I had this philosophy professor at Cambridge who lectured on Pascal. You know him? Pascal I mean?

BRYAN: French by the sound of it.

PAULA: Yes he is. And he's the one who said you might as well believe in God. You know Pascal's bet. It's 50–50 there's a God so you might as well believe because, if there is, you'll get to Heaven and, even if there isn't, it'll be better for you in this life.

BRYAN: He sounds sophisticated.

PAULA: No, he is. That's just vulgar Pascality. But anyway, there was this minister who was attacking Pascal at some lecture in London, and so a bunch of us went up there including MacFarlane, the professor. And after it was over, we stopped at McDonald's. And you know he seemed lost. True, there's no McDonald's in Cambridge, but even so you'd think the guy would have made an effort. But, anyway, we all order and go and sit down. MacFarlane ordered a cheeseburger and a cup of tea. Strange combination but, you know, fair enough. So he drank his tea and unwrapped his cheeseburger—really carefully, a bit suspiciously almost. He looked pretty funny so I was kind of watching him out of the corner of my eye. And he took a bite and, I'm not kidding, he looked like he'd just eaten excrement. Anyway, we were all watching at this point. And he put his cheeseburger down and thought for a second. Then he said—I'll never forget this—he pointed to his cheeseburger and said: "This has meat in it."
BRYAN: Were you sympathetic?
PAULA: Some of the guys were saying “Ah that’s awful—go and take it back,” but I told him it was really pretty normal.

BRYAN: Now why do I believe that?
PAULA: ’cause I’m such a brown-noser.
BRYAN: Yes, you are, aren’t you?
PAULA: Well, I’m not too bad. You know I was the only woman in that whole damn class. I had to do something.

Beat.

BRYAN: It’s odd—
PAULA: I remember the first day I went to class and saw I was the only woman.

BRYAN: That must’ve been strange.

PAULA: Well, yes and no.

BRYAN: Hmm. Funny thing happened this Thursday—

PAULA: You too?
BRYAN: I got this old letter—
PAULA: This idiot came up to me—and you say Americans are pushy—

BRYAN: This letter, though, it’s weird. It’s like it was written—

PAULA: Of course I was polite—
BRYAN: Paula!
PAULA: What? I’m sorry—it’s just that letter stuff makes me go a little jumpy. When you told me about it—on the phone I mean—you made it sound like—

BRYAN: Like what?
PAULA: I don’t know—but you sounded weird, Bryan. Like—

BRYAN: Like what? Tell me.
PAULA: Just weird—like that time you were telling me about the dreams you were having about those hands and that head—

BRYAN: Thanks for the memory.
PAULA: It’s that Peter guy again, isn’t it?
BRYAN: (agitated)No!
PAULA: Really?

Longish beat.
BRYAN: Really.
PAULA: (magnanimously) Well what? Go ahead, talk to me. Tell me anything.
BRYAN: It’s nothing. (pause) Well—I mean—you know I’m not pressuring you, don’t you?
PAULA: Oh come on, play fair. That’s the one thing which is off limits. I thought you meant that letter.
BRYAN: I did. (pause) I’m sorry, but it’s important for me to understand—
PAULA: I explained it all two weeks ago. And several times after that.
BRYAN: Yea, and I think . . . I mean I think you think . . .
PAULA: What? What do I think?
BRYAN: Well I don’t know what you think. But you’re wrong. Because I’m not. I don’t want anything too, I don’t. I mean . . . marriage—
PAULA: Marriage—
PAULA: No I don’t.
BRYAN: Well not marriage, of course. But pressure, yes. You think I’m pressuring, and I’m not. I want to take things slowly—very slowly. But—
PAULA: Bryan, I had fun. I’m still having fun. (beat, gently) Not now obviously, not right now.
BRYAN: Then why change that? I mean there’s—there’s—there’s no problem. Fun’s not a problem. Is it?
PAULA: No. It’s good, it’s fun—it’s very good. And we can still have fun. I mean—really . . .
BRYAN: Then why change? I told you I’m not pressuring you. I don’t want to. Not me either, I don’t want to pressure me—myself.
PAULA: I know. But there is pressure. There’s some . . . if we’re still . . . If we’re still going out then we can’t relax, we have to worry about each other.
BRYAN: Who's worrying?
PAULA: (somewhat assertively) Well, I am frankly. Me. There are things about you that bother me.
PAULA: No! They're not bad things. It's me—just as much as you.
BRYAN: OK, then tell me. Maybe I annoy myself as well.
PAULA: No, Bryan, no—I'm trying to tell you that they're only a problem for us—
BRYAN: What are?
PAULA: Your problems—no, no! You made me say that. They're not problems, they're just or us problems.
BRYAN: Paula, we're not that different. I mean you think we are, like you think I'm pressuring you. But we're not, and I'm not.
PAULA: OK, maybe.
BRYAN: So you agree?
PAULA: No Bryan, I don't. Just, enough. (pause) I want to go. You're majorly violating our agreement.
BRYAN: Just tell me first.
PAULA: Tell you what?
BRYAN: (pause) Differences.
PAULA: No, not again.
BRYAN: What d'you mean again?
PAULA: I mean—(then, giving in, with resignation and irritation) I'm American. I don't want to live here. I happen to think President Bush is usually right—see, you're groaning!
BRYAN: Yes, but—
PAULA: (with increasing energy) I like McDonald's. I hate steak and kidney pie—pudding, whatever. I believe in things: country, God even. I'm a student still. I'm a woman . . . I guess I've made that point. (pause) Hey?
BRYAN: What! I'm not offended!
PAULA: Good. See, I'm not offensive, I'm not an offensive person.
BRYAN: I know!
PAULA: OK, I'm sorry.
BRYAN: Don't be. (pause) But it was you. At first, I mean. You, you wanted us to be . . .

PAULA: I know, I know . . . I know. (beat) And I still do want us to be—

BRYAN: Friends! (pause) Right, friends? I'm right, yes?

PAULA: What are you making it sound like that for?

BRYAN: Like what?

PAULA: Like—I dunno—like it's nothing.

BRYAN: I didn't say—

PAULA: Didn't say, but that's what I'm hearing. What's wrong with that? You don't have anything against friends do you?

BRYAN: Not against friends, no.

PAULA: What's that supposed to mean? Look, I'm trying to be friendly here. I'm telling you—for the fifteenth time—why it would never work between us, and I'm trying not to be a jerk about it. But you, you're not helping. Tell me what I'm doing wrong. Am I being a jerk? Am I—am I a—

BRYAN: No, you're not a jerk. (slight pause) You're just a patronizing jerk.

PAULA: See, you're just rude. I mean I wouldn't say stuff like that.

BRYAN: I know you wouldn't.

PAULA: And you say we're not different!

BRYAN: We're not!

PAULA: Yea, right!

BRYAN: You're not a jerk.

PAULA: Oh you charmer—

BRYAN: I mean I'm sorry I called you . . . I didn't mean . . . But you are patronizing, aren't you?

PAULA: (patronizingly) No Bryan, I'm not.

BRYAN: There—that's what I mean!

PAULA: It was a joke.

BRYAN: Oh. Yes. OK.

PAULA: Geez, you can call me a jerk, and I can't even joke . . . Bryan steps forward as main lights dim. Light only on Bryan.

BRYAN: I didn't call her a jerk, and she knew it. It was just her way
of distancing herself from me. But I’ve done the same thing so I suppose I can’t complain. I was very brave in that conversation, very open—at least for me. But I could have been braver. I could have read her that letter. I wanted to. I wanted to get it out and—kind of mocking myself to make it seem in character—read it to her and ask her there and then whether it was a message from God. I wanted to, but I didn’t. (beat) I thought she might see that I was in earnest. (beat) She’s pretty damned perceptive—I mean she was right about Peter. The letter is about him. At least that’s the way I’ve been reading it. It’s about all of them: Peter, Kathy, Alain—the whole boat really.

Spot off Bryan as lights come up on Kathy and Peter. Music plays in the background.

KATHY: Come and help Peter, Bryan.
PETER: It’s all right, I’ve got it.

KATHY: He can’t move it alone.

Bryan and Peter bring on a standup coffin to use in an act. We are on a French cruise ship, and this is a rehearsal for the cabaret.

PETER: It’s all right, Bryan. I’ve got it.
BRYAN: Forget it. It’s not a problem. This OK, Kathy?
KATHY: (vaguely) Yes I suppose so.
BRYAN: Well say if it’s not, we can move it. I said we can move it.
KATHY: Look, it doesn’t matter, does it? (pause) Now Bryan scram, there’s a dear, Peter and I have to continue our rehearsal.

BRYAN: Continue—I have to start mine.
KATHY: Of course you don’t, now just leave us alone. Peter, come on. (Bryan still hasn’t left.) Bryan, you’re tiresome, you really are. (to Peter) Now get in the coffin.

PETER: But I thought you said—
KATHY: No individual tricks.
PETER: Why not?
KATHY: Have you been drinking?
PETER: A little. I’m fine though—
KATHY: You’ll go in the coffin. There’s nothing to worry about. I’m fairly sure I remember which holes to put the swords in.

Bryan laughs.

KATHY: But I’m sure you’ll scream if I get it wrong.

BRYAN: (imitating BBC newscaster) And tonight’s main news again. The French company Chez la Mer has decided to refund its passengers’ money after a bloody corpse shocked spectators by falling out of a coffin onto the dance floor.

KATHY: Don’t listen to him my baby, he’s very sick.

BRYAN: Police have refused to comment on one of the most bizarre murders in cruise ship history. Kathy Frayn, 45, reportedly stabbed her son eight times for failure to brush his teeth with a fluoride paste. Peter, 22, budding magician, died of several swords to the heart and left all his money to his good friend and your charming MC, Bryan Potter.

KATHY: Droll, Bryan, very droll. But enough, because we have to rehearse.

BRYAN: He was always making my fivers disappear, said the grieving mother—

KATHY: Shut up Bryan. Now introduce our act since you refuse to leave.

BRYAN: With pleasure. Ladies and gentlemen, mesdames et messieurs, please put your hands together, applaudissez s’il vous plaît, for the fair and lovely Peter Frayn and his mum, pour le beau Pierre Frayn, Queen of Hearts, Dame des Coeurs—

KATHY: Do it properly.

BRYAN: What do you mean, do it properly?

KATHY: I mean do it right. We agreed to use only the English name.

BRYAN: We did? The Frenchies aren’t going to like that.

KATHY: Yes they are; I’ve cleared it with LeCacheur. Dame des Coeurs sounds ridiculous.

BRYAN: Not as ridiculous as (heavy French accent) Queen of ’earts. What do you think, Peter?

PETER: I don’t care.
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BRYAN: Oh more decision man, please. I mean if we're translating everything else, how can you justify omitting the name of your act, the title of the glitziest, *prestigious* mother-son act on cruise ships throughout the Mediterranean?

KATHY: Leave Peter out of this, and say what I told you, or I'll have you replaced.

BRYAN: Oh Kathy, come off it. You don't have that power over me. Or LeCacheur.

KATHY: We'll see about that.

BRYAN: Kathy!

KATHY: You're dispensable. Acts don't need to be introduced.

BRYAN: Yes they do, and I'm the only one on this God-forsaken boat who can speak two languages.

PETER: No, that's not true! Alain can as well.

BRYAN: Oh Alain, I'm sure he's got a great accent. (*with a crass American accent*) *Mesdames et Messieurs* . . . I don't think so. Besides, he doesn't have the Hitlerian charisma you need to charm a bunch of drunken French nationalists whose only holiday this year is being wasted on this pathetic and inane boat ride.

KATHY: And you do?

BRYAN: I think so. I mean Alain seems to be a very warm person when you're talking to him, but he's not exactly a rally leader. And, yes, I am. I mean, seriously Peter, can you imagine him whipping those Nürnberg crowds into hysterics?

KATHY: Peter's not interested. One more chance, you either announce us only in English, or you leave. *Dame des Coeurs* is pretentious.

BRYAN: You're no fun any more.

KATHY: I don't think I ever was, Bryan.

BRYAN: All right—*mesdames et messieurs, veuillez accueillir*, please welcome, Queen of Hearts. (*pause*) That's that, what's that you're grumbling about? You can't understand—*can't understand* the name of the act? Well, I'm sorry, that's what you
get when you buy a ticket on a French boat with a group of English entertainers. But don’t worry, you’ll love the finale. A real live death, on stage, Actors’ Studio style, Jocasta’s Revenge.

KATHY: (to Peter) Ignore him, ignore him, we’ve got to practice. All right, now get off stage. Good. And when you hear us being announced, come on in and take a modest bow. Try it. Just like we practiced. And please welcome Queen of Hearts . . .

Peter comes on stage and bows almost imperceptibly.

KATHY: Bow I said.

PETER: I did.

KATHY: That’s not a bow, that’s barely a nod. Now come on, try it again. Not the entrance, just the bow. Queen of Hearts . . .

Peter bows, this time too extravagantly.

KATHY: No, that’s too much. You haven’t done anything yet, what are you bowing to your toes for?

PETER: But I thought . . .

BRYAN: He thought that was the end of the act, didn’t you Peter? He thought it was a minimalist kind of thing. I hear LeCacheur’s a fan of the genre. (reverting to MC voice) And that was Queen of Hearts doing Richard Foreman’s entrance without purpose . . . Now please give a warm welcome to Mr. Francophobe himself, yes, Mr. Totally Culturally Intransigent, Jonathan Cody . . .

KATHY: (to Peter) All right darling, that’s good. Now walk around the stage—remember there’ll be music—so just acknowledge everyone. Give them a slight nod—

BRYAN: Like that first bow you did—

KATHY: No attention to Bryan—yes, yes, that’s nice. And smile a little, good, good. Just let them know you exist, and then come to me, and we’ll get started.

BRYAN: (obligingly) Queen of Hearts, Queen of—

KATHY: Just leave us. I’ve got two hours to get this act up and running, and I can’t deal with your stupidity—
BRYAN: But I just said Queen of Hearts, I didn’t translate it or anything. I made no cultural concession whatsoever, and you blow up on me.

KATHY: I didn’t blow up on you.

BRYAN: I thought you’d be proud.

KATHY: No, no. You’re just delaying us.

BRYAN: The hell I am, I was just announcing you like you wanted—

KATHY: Your presence here is not at all constructive, you’re simply distracting Peter for your own amusement.

BRYAN: And tremendously amusing it is too! Wow I’m having fun! Thank you so much for letting me introduce you, I feel so privileged.

KATHY: You’re superfluous, Bryan, I’m ignoring you. (to Peter) Come on darling.

Kathy and Bryan speak their next lines together. We hear Bryan’s most loudly, with Kathy’s in the background.

BRYAN: (to himself) Superfluous, huh? (beat) Suppose I am, really. I’m on a cruise ship, and I’m a university graduate. I’m spending my whole damn summer introducing seaside magic acts. This is slippage, it must be. This must be what they meant. It must be slippage. I finally understand you, Derrida, you old dog.

KATHY: (softly, overlapping, to Peter) Don’t listen to him darling. Now that entrance was fine, and the circle—that was good too. Just walk on and smile. Remember, they just want to know you’re there and that you’re going to entertain them. You’ll like this new act, I promise you.

PETER: Oh I know. I think I’ve got it down.

KATHY: But my darling we haven’t even started.

BRYAN: Sure you have, you’re finished. It’s Johnny Cody’s turn. Mesdames et messieurs, Jonathan Cody. (imitating Cody) Well, it’s nice to see so many of you here, but I’m afraid the bar’s on the upper deck.

While Bryan imitates Cody, Kathy and Peter try rehearsing and then reluctantly watch Bryan perform.
INSCAPE

BRYAN: Oh you brought your booze with you, did you? A mate of mine once told me that the more you drink, the funnier I become. The same mate also told me that the more I drink, the funnier you become. And I’m telling you, I’ve had a few pints, and you’re hilarious. Makes 200 of us. Are there any children out there and, by children, I mean anyone who can’t get drinks at the bar? So we’re talking about the under fives. No, but seriously, I love children. I do. I went to school with chem. I know it says I’m a saxophone player and you’re probably expecting me to play the Marselleis-y, but I’m afraid that’s a mistake. I actually play the whistle. And I’m going to play Rule Britannia. Bryan pretends to take out a whistle and does his best to make out a few bars of Rule Britannia. Kathy orders Peter into the coffin. A man walks in and observes. Kathy starts sticking in swords.

KATHY: I’m not going to cut you, you needn’t worry. Just keep calm. All right, my darling, very nice, very nice . . .

The man (Alain) reacts to Bryan.


BRYAN: Father Alain! How could you tell?

ALAIN: It’s a fine impersonation.

BRYAN: Thanks. He’s pretty easy to do.

ALAIN: John’s an interesting character. Especially sober.

BRYAN: I wouldn’t know Father.

ALAIN: Sure. He’s lonely, and he drinks to—well, he’s recently divorced.

BRYAN: Yes I know. Strange that, Father, he seems the selfish bachelor type.

ALAIN: Maybe. He says it would start World War III if his wife came on board. In fact he said it in a show a few weeks ago.

BRYAN: Did he really? I bet that went down well.

ALAIN: Well it didn’t cause any offense.

BRYAN: Not a very English-speaking audience, I take it.

ALAIN: Exactly.
BRYAN: Do you think John will be saved, Father?
ALAIN: You’re an idiot, Bryan. But I like you. (beat) Poor John! Peter! Peter, what are you doing?

*Peter has stepped nervously out of the coffin.*
PETER: Hi Alain. It’s the new act.
PETER: I’d love to watch.
KATHY: Actually, Alain, I need you to go and get that Polaroid you were using. I mean if you could.
ALAIN: Sure thing, the bar doesn’t reopen until six.
KATHY: Good, it’s just I want pictures of this stage for LeCacheur. It’s not safe.

*Alain disappears, and Peter, disappointed, starts to follow him.*
KATHY: Where are you going darling?
PETER: I’m just going with Alain.
KATHY: What about our rehearsal? You know we’re performing tonight, don’t you? Do you think we’re ready?
PETER: Well, yes, I—I—I thought we were done.
KATHY: (with mock incredulity) Thought we were done?
PETER: Yes. I remember everything.
KATHY: What do you think Bryan? Are we ready for tonight?
BRYAN: (oddly sincere) You’re as ready as anyone else. Ten minutes’ practice may not seem like a lot, but that’s more than most. You don’t want to peak too early.
KATHY: (to Bryan) Well, it’s been more than ten minutes. (to Peter) We’ll go through it one more time. Now get off stage, and I’ll have Bryan announce us.
BRYAN: Oh forget it, I’m bored! *Alain returns unexpectedly with camera.*
ALAIN: I forgot, I just left it at the reception.
KATHY: All right. Peter, you can go now, we’re through. No, that’s fine, please go.

*Peter hesitates, then leaves. Alain, under Kathy’s direction, starts taking pictures of the stage. Bryan imitates him vaguely in the background. Lights fade on scene as Bryan walks downstage into spot.*
INSCAPE

BRYAN: I always thought he was a Moonie—Alain, that is. To me, all those weird American religions beginning in “M” were the same. Moonie, Methodist, Mormon, take your pick. I wonder if it matters.

Lights up revealing two female Mormon missionaries, sitting in Bryan's living room.

BRYAN: Are you sure I can’t get you something to drink?
SISTER MOON: Yes, honest, I’m fine.
BRYAN: And your friend?
SISTER JOHNSON: I’m fine too.
BRYAN: Well, you’ll have to excuse me because I’m rather thirsty. Bryan drinks.

JOHNSON: So how much do you know about our Church?
BRYAN: You don’t drink . . . (realizing) Would you like a Coke or squash or something?
MOON: Really, we’re not thirsty.
BRYAN: And you don’t swear much or eat rice.
MOON & JOHNSON: What?
BRYAN: You don’t eat rice, do you? Or swear—
MOON: Well I do!
JOHNSON: Swear?
MOON: No, eat rice. I often eat rice, and so do you.
JOHNSON: Of course.
BRYAN: I thought—well, (beat) Alain didn’t. They’d always have to make him pasta. He was one of yours . . . I think. I knew him on a cruise.
JOHNSON: A cruise?
BRYAN: Yes, yes. Two summers ago. It was run by these crazy French mafiosi.
MOON: Who didn’t eat rice.
BRYAN: No they did. It was Alain who didn’t—on religious grounds.
MOON: Are you sure? That sounds very strange.
BRYAN: Yes I’m sure, I remember because, as I say, he’d always get pasta . . . or bread sometimes.
MOON: Was it soaked in whisky or something?
BRYAN: The bread?
MOON: No, the rice. Did they soak it in alcohol?
BRYAN: Why would they do that?
MOON: They wouldn't, but I'm just saying, did they?
BRYAN: Of course they didn't. Not even the French go that far.
MOON: Alain was French?
BRYAN: No, he was Mormon! (pause) American!
MOON: And he didn't eat rice.
BRYAN: (devoutly) He wouldn't touch it.
MOON: Bizarre, where was he from?
BRYAN: America.
MOON: Yea, where exactly? Idaho?
BRYAN: No, I don't think so. That's not in Boston, is it?—no, of course it's not, Boston's not a state. He was from Boston.
JOHNSON: Did he know the Richards?
BRYAN: I don't know.
MOON: It's a big city, Sister Johnson.
BRYAN: (surprised) You're sisters?
MOON: No! Not for your purposes.
BRYAN: (recapitulatingly) Well it is a big city, Boston.
JOHNSON: You've been?
BRYAN: No, but I've seen maps.
MOON: (diverted) That's strange. A city like Boston—you wouldn't think they'd have such folksy beliefs. (to Bryan) He didn't ever quote you any scriptures explaining why he didn't eat rice, did he? I mean, it wasn't part of any strange new order?
BRYAN: No, I don't think so. He just didn't eat it.
MOON: On religious grounds . . .
BRYAN: Well I assume!
MOON: (realizing) You mean he never actually said.
BRYAN: Not in so many words, no. But he didn't drink beer or wine or eat rice, I remember that much.
MOON: Well, I can believe that. The beer and wine he wouldn't drink, but the rice . . . That—that must have been a personal choice.
JOHNSON: We’re warned against a lot of things—
MOON: Yep, but not rice.
BRYAN: Well I suppose he could have just not liked it. But it seems to me he said it was religion once. Maybe not, I dunno.
JOHNSON: So really you don’t know too much about our Church?
BRYAN: It’s a fair cop. (pause) No I don’t.
JOHNSON: But you’d like to know more? Right?
BRYAN: Well actually . . . I mean yes, yes—yes I would. Tell me.
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JOHNSON: Have you heard of a man called Joseph Smith?
BRYAN: No.
JOHNSON: So really you don’t know too much about our Church?
JOHNSON: The Restoration was over 150 years—
MOON: He's not talking about the Restoration, he's talking about the Hoffman thing.
BRYAN: I am?
JOHNSON: Hoffman?

Moon tries to impersonate a salamander.

MOON: (hissing) Salamander!
BRYAN: What?
MOON: Nothing, nothing relevant. A man forged some documents stating that Joseph Smith had seen a heavenly salamander. And some people got killed.
BRYAN: That's not nothing.
MOON: True, but it doesn't have anything to do with the beginning of the Church.

JOHNSON: (trying to restore some order) We believe that Joseph Smith received a vision—
BRYAN: (interested) From God?
JOHNSON: Yes, and his son.
BRYAN: What kind of vision? Like in the sky? Or—or a dream or something?
JOHNSON: Well, we know he saw God the Father and his son, Jesus Christ.
BRYAN: I mean, visually—or physically rather—he saw them.
JOHNSON: Yes.
MOON: Why d'you ask? Are heavenly messages difficult for you to come to terms with?
BRYAN: Oh no—well, of course—but I mean that's not what I . . . I mean that's not why I asked . . .

JOHNSON: We believe that Joseph—
MOON: Sorry, Sister Johnson, let Bryan finish.
BRYAN: That's it, I've finished.

JOHNSON: We call that the First Vision. And it's the basis—
MOON: Sister Johnson, just give him a minute.
MOON: Look, you didn't drag us all the way from town just to offer us Cokes all the time—

BRYAN: No, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to offend—

MOON: No one's offended. I just want to know why you brought us here. You can't date us, you know.

BRYAN: *As if...* I have a girlfriend. *(beat)* Well, I did anyway—'til last week.

JOHNSON: I'm sorry.

BRYAN: No, it's fine. *(smiling to himself)* I mean I had to end it, she wanted too much. She wanted to get married.

*Johnson and Moon exchange a glance.*

BRYAN: What did I say? Did I say something funny? What are you—

MOON: No, it's nothing. We—well, we know a few people like that.

BRYAN: She was—*is*—American. But not Mormon, I'm pretty sure. She believes in God though.

MOON: Do you?

BRYAN: Me? I?

MOON: Yes. Do you think that there's a God out there who orders our universe?

BRYAN: And sends people messages and stuff? Well, no...no... I don't think...no. I mean—what do you mean? Like a person, a real person in the sky? I mean—you know—that's kind of hard to swallow. *(pause)*

MOON: But do you think about it ever? I mean do you ever wonder?

BRYAN: Sure I wonder. Especially... 

MOON: Especially what?

BRYAN: Especially... *(beat)* Forget it, there's no order in this world. I mean, *come on!* *(beat)* If he is meant to be benevolent, then... Well, I mean, there's no way.

MOON: You're saying that there can't be a God if there's suffering.

BRYAN: It's a *cliché*, I know.

MOON: It's a valid concern.

BRYAN: Well, not—not just suffering. I mean, fine, that's OK,
I suppose. If everybody suffered, then no one would be left out. But we don't, not the same amount. I know I'm not saying anything original, but—

MOON: That doesn't matter.

BRYAN: I mean—well—the other night—Saturday—I was on the train, coming back from Leicester Square. It was late, and there was just me and this other bloke in our compartment. I was feeling kind of friendly—perhaps a little drunk—and so I struck up a conversation. And he slurred, he slurred all his words, making it really difficult to understand. (beat) He—he was handicapped, I realized. And you know you hate to make people—people like that—repeat themselves, but you don't want to pretend like you understand them when you don't. So we just stopped talking. But a few minutes later—he had crutches, by the way—he started saying something else. I realized he wanted something, but I couldn't think what. I think I said yes a few times and just kind of smiled inanely. But I knew I wasn't helping. Then he let out this awful noise—this cry of pain—agonyalongot up. And I figured out—too late of course—that he'd wanted me to give him a hand. That's what he'd been asking me. I wanted to do something for him, I wanted to carry him up the escalators and put him in a taxi—my treat! But I didn't. And, with great difficulty—and pain, he got off the train. And that was it. He left, and I just sat there wondering—wondering what kind of God would do something like that to a man. I mean, why can't God step in? I mean, if he's so great and powerful—why doesn't he help people like that man? And why does he let me just sit there—sit there—like an idiot and not do anything? Why?

JOHNSON: I don't know. But Bryan, he does care.

MOON: So you do wonder? About God, I mean. That's something you think about.

BRYAN: No, not really. It's just that I had a few things on my mind. Paula had broken up with me the day before and . . .
MOON: And what Bryan? What else?
BRYAN: (very defensively) Stop playing the knowing psychiatrist! I told you... it's not important.
MOON: (taken back) I'm sorry.

Beat.

JOHNSON: Bryan, God is there. He'll listen. He hates our suffering, I know he does. That man on the tube, God knows about him. And you too, he knows what you need. Just give him a chance.
BRYAN: (too resolved) Yes. Yes I will. Thanks for coming, listening to me spout nonsense.
MOON: It wasn't nonsense.
JOHNSON: Of course it wasn't. They're all things we have to deal with. Can we stop by again? We'll probably have to bring someone with us.
BRYAN: Well, I don't know. I don't want to waste your time. I mean if there're people out there more likely to listen...
JOHNSON: We don't just want to convert you.
MOON: We want to help.
BRYAN: You do?
MOON: Of course.
BRYAN: (struggling) Then—I mean—OK—don't go. Not yet. Just a second.
JOHNSON: Well actually, we kind of—sort of—have to.
BRYAN: Eight seconds.
JOHNSON: We've got an appointment at 3:30.
BRYAN: It's just that... a couple of weeks ago, I got this letter. (makes sure they are staying and sprints out of the room) Hang on!

Bryan returns and coughs, startling the missionaries a little. He is carrying the letter.
BRYAN: This letter, right, it wasn't addressed to me. I mean it was addressed to this flat, this street number. But it was to an older occupant, Lionel Morgan. It was originally posted in 1971!
MOON: How strange.

BRYAN: *Postal humor, I think. I’ve got a friend who works at a sorting station who tells me that they do that occasionally. You know, send one on that’s been lost for ages. Funny thing is, and I think I believe him, he swears it wasn’t him.

JOHNSON: Sister Moon, it will take us half an hour to—

MOON: Just a minute.

BRYAN: It’s odd—really odd—and I don’t know how to say this without sounding odd myself—it’s like it was written to me, at least written for me. I mean the references, the situations, a name, it’s like it’s me. It seems like—well—it seems almost supernatural—no, uncanny. That’s the word. Uncanny. Especially, as I say, the name. Peter. Peter Frayn. I knew a—

JOHNSON: It’s five of three.

MOON: *(resigned)* OK. Bryan, we’re sorry, but it’s true, we have an appointment which we really can’t be late for. The woman works. Another time though. We’d love to come back and—

BRYAN: It’s all right. Forget it. It’s probably just a joke.

JOHNSON: We’ll be back. Have you got a phone number?

BRYAN: Sure. 071 744 5351.

JOHNSON: We’ll be in touch.

Lights fade. *Then they come up again. It is night, and Bryan (a little drunk) is in his room with a Chinese woman, Tessa. Bryan goes to a drawer and takes out an envelope. From inside, he pulls out a letter, the letter. He approaches Tessa.*

BRYAN: Listen: that’s all you need to do. Listen, and then give me your opinion at the end. It’s a letter, right? I got it about two weeks ago, but it was written twenty years ago. Got it? Bizarre, I know. Dear Lionel. *(to Tessa)* This bit’s in French so I’ll translate. *(reverts to letter)* If you don’t like the sea, if you don’t like the mountains and if you don’t like the city, then forget it. *(to Tessa)* OK, now it’s English.

*Tessa stands up.*

TESSA: I go, I’m going.
BRYAN: (very angrily) You'll listen to this, damn it, now sit down!
(completely calm again) I'm sorry, but I need your opinion, no one else will listen. Now, please, sit. Come on, sit down. Thank-you so much. This next bit's difficult because the handwriting's bad, and it looks like something's spilled on it. (reads somewhat tentatively) Put away the bottles and forget your sorrows. Nobody—nobody likes an alcoholic, and neither do I. (to Tessa) Can't be Tom because he does like alcoholics, he is one. (as if to read, then looks up) Oh this next bit's really kind of fascinating. Don't know what it means though. (reads) Treat it—treat it like a tragic play. You've been doing a Chekhov for the last few weeks, and tonight it ends. You've had to internalize all the heartache and sorrow, but no longer, for tonight the curtain came down for the last time. (to Tessa) Isn't that an interesting way of looking at things? I really like this fellow.

TESSA: Can I have a drink?

BRYAN: No you can't, you've got to listen to the end of this letter. (beat) Yes, you can have a drink, help yourself.

Tessa pours herself a drink.

BRYAN: It's such an odd letter, this. And the way it's written: all that movie stuff—that opening monologue is from Breathless, I've checked—and—and the play bits . . . It's most intriguing. What's the fellow called—Raymond. An unlikely name, he sounds like a Tyrone or something. And Lionel Morgan—the bloke it's written to—well I finally heard back from my landlord, and there's been no one of that name living here for as long as he can remember. OK, you've got your drink, sit down again.

TESSA: Is it much longer?

BRYAN: Don't offend me, Tessa. No, no it's not much longer. Now sit, please. Thank—you. (as if to read, then looks up) This bit, this is what really chills me. (reads) Don't worry about old Pete Frayn. (looks up) Frayn. Pete Frayn. F–R–A–Y–N. Same spelling, same everything. (reads) He's in a better
place. Now don't tune out, Lionel, I know you're not a "believer." But you'll be all right if you just trust in the good Lord above, as the Americans say. He'll lead you out of these dark scenes, and the lights will come up on some glorious comedy. Your true friend, Raymond Dunbar. (to Tessa, who is actually asleep) That's it, that's the whole letter. You don't know how odd . . . That theatre stuff, and that name, Pete Frayn! (beat) All right Tessa, darling, let's have it. Who's it from? God or Tom Conway? Come on love, wake up, I need some answers.

He goes over to Tessa and shakes her gently. She won't wake.

BRYAN: (gently) All right, All right. Sleep there. Let me know in the morning.

Blackout.

End of Act One.

This is the first act of a two act play