

LEVITATION

by Timothy Mason

Performing Script for Chat's Palace
1994

Cast

Joe Dahl	29
Arthur Dahl, His Father	70
Ada Dahl, His Mother	70
Michael Lundgren, his nephew,	16
Ira Sherman, his lover	24
Jean Lundgren, his sister, a mother earth	40
Inga, Arthur's teacher, elderly	
Wright, A portly old man	
Tom Lundgren, his nephew, [a walk-on]	14-15

SET

The front porch and garden of a residential house somewhere in the mid-West of America. The 1980s.

The action is continuous

[The early morning of an August night. A Yellow Porch lamp, a porch swing and chairs. Empty clay pots stacked inside each other. Crickets.

Headlights swing across the face of the house, and come to rest. A car door slams.

JOE enters, climbs the steps to the porch, searching his pockets for the house keys. He opens the screen door protecting the front door, and drops his keys. He picks up the keys. He looks at the locked door. He looks at the darkened windows. Suddenly his entire body sags with a weary reluctance to enter the house. He gives up for the moment, slowly takes off his t-shirt and collapses on the porch swing.]

ARTHUR: *[From the darkness of the lawn]* That brings me back.

[JOE leaps up, startled by the voice]

ARTHUR: [Approaching] Reminds me of your school play.

[ARTHUR is about 70 and dressed in pyjamas.]

Did I frighten you?

JOE: Good God! Dad! You nearly killed me, that's all. What..... ? [Catching his breath] What on earth are you *doing* out here? Now. In your pyjamas

ARTHUR: It reminded me of that play you were in. At school. That scene where you came home drunk and couldn't get the keys in the door. Is that the story now? You drunk?

JOE: For goodness sake, Dad. What are you doing out here at..... at two fifteen in the morning? On the *lawn*.

ARTHUR: Nothing. Sitting.

JOE: What do you mean, nothing?

ARTHUR: Are you all right?

JOE: No. Yes. I mean, you nearly scared me to death, Dad.

ARTHUR: I am sorry.

JOE: Killer Dad Causes Kid's Cardiac.

ARTHUR: Shh!

JOE: More on Page Three.

ARTHUR: We don't want to wake Mother.

JOE: *[Forced undertone]* I mean, you were waiting up for me? On the lawn? In your pyjamas?

ARTHUR: For you? Oh no. For the stars, the shooting stars. Meteor showers predicted for tonight. It's that time of year. No, I wouldn't be waiting up for you. When you come to visit, we want you to know, you're free to come and go whenever you wish. No, I set up a deckchair earlier, just over there. A couple of them. And a little folding chair, and a jug of orange juice. You want some?

[Looking up at the sky] Nothing so far, though. You were awfully good in that play.

JOE: Preacher Praises Prize Performance.

ARTHUR: Who writes the headlines when you're not in New York?

JOE: Gnomes. And fairies. Maybe I am a little drunk.

ARTHUR: Then you shouldn't drive. And you shouldn't be drunk in the first place.

JOE: Wow. You. Here. Middle of the night. Dressed in

pyjamas and waiting for the stars to fall. I mean it. This is exactly how I want to remember you.

ARTHUR: Well. That's what I'm here for, isn't it?

[Small pause. ARTHUR looking into the sky.]

JOE: I suppose so.

[Small pause.]

JOE: Do you do this often?

ARTHUR: Well, in August I do. When I can.

JOE: How long are you going to wait?

ARTHUR: Until we hit some. It's not as though they hit us, you see. We run into them. There are swarms of meteors that cross the path of the earth's orbit, and every year, on the same day every year, we run smack into them.

JOE: And today's the day?

ARTHUR: Well, different swarms, different days.

JOE: I see.
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ARTHUR: What we'll be seeing tonight are known as "The Tears of St. Lawrence".

JOE: Sit down, Dad. Tell me about it.

ARTHUR: 65,000 miles per hour when they enter the atmosphere, some of them. They're fragments from a comet. The Perseid Shower, it's called. Where were you?

JOE: Out.

Oh, I wasn't trying to pry. Your mother and I want you to know that when you come home we're not going to pry, for goodness' sake.

JOE: I appreciate that.

ARTHUR: *[After a small pause]* It's just that you're so sweaty. I was wondering where you were. *[Small pause]* Not that it matters. *[Small pause]* Warm August night, it's natural you should sweat.

JOE: I was out dancing, Dad. *[Pause]*

ARTHUR: Good exercise.

JOE: Sure.

ARTHUR: You're in pretty good shape.

JOE: Pretty good.

ARTHUR: Made you sweat something awful.

JOE: Uh-huh.

ARTHUR: You see Paul?

JOE: Yes, as a matter of fact.

ARTHUR: "Yes, as a matter of fact"! How was he?

JOE: Ambulatory. I don't know, Dad. I saw him. I didn't speak to him.

ARTHUR: Mother and I had him out here to dinner not long ago. He was fine then.

JOE: Good.

ARTHUR: After dinner he washed the dishes.

JOE: That's nice.

ARTHUR: Does this bother you?

JOE: No.

ARTHUR: Good. *[Small pause]* Before dinner he mowed the lawn.

ARTHUR: You two don't talk any more?

JOE: Sometimes. Not much.

ARTHUR: You know, I've got a theory that the speed of light is not the speed limit of the universe.Æ

JOE: No kidding.

ARTHUR: No, sir, I am not kidding. No, this is a theory that will take Einstein one step further. I've been working on it for the past couple of months, and now I am convinced: there is definitely something in the universe which travels faster than light.

JOE: What?

ARTHUR: I'm... not... sure. *[JOE laughs.]* I mean, I'm not sure I want to say just yet. Not until I've had a chance to develop my theory a little more.

JOE: *[Pulling a can of beer from his six-pack]* You want a beer, Reverend?

ARTHUR: The thing to remember is that things here are not what they seem.

JOE: Tonight especially.

ARTHUR: Especially tonight.

JOE: A beer? *[Pause]* Go ahead, Mum's asleep.

ARTHUR: Are you sure you should have another?

JOE: Positive.

ARTHUR: Well, in that case I'll join you.

[JOE opens a can and gives it to ARTHUR.]

Just one, now.

JOE: That's all you're getting.

[JOE opens a beer for himself. The two of them sit back on the swing and watch the night sky.]

Parson Poses Speedy Theory. *[Small pause]* Fire from Heaven: Miracle or Menace? *[Longer pause]* Pop to Einstein: Drop Dead.

ARTHUR: That could get a little tiring.

JOE: Gosh, Dad, don't I know it.

ARTHUR: But you're pretty good at it, aren't you?

JOE: When it comes to alliteration, nobody can touch me.

ARTHUR: Then you should be proud of what you do.

JOE: Ruined Writer Holds Head High. Finds Meaning in Macramé.

ARTHUR: I'm serious.

JOE: So'm I.

ARTHUR: Maybe if you didn't always write plays about death....

JOE: What?!

ARTHUR: People might warm to your work a little more.

JOE: I do not always write about death.

ARTHUR: Or, you know, crippling diseases.... patricide.... fratricide...

JOE: Dad....

ARTHUR:ulcers. What was the title of that last play?

JOE: *[Sullenly, after a pause]* Her Final Summer.

ARTHUR: There, you see? I don't mean to criticise, but something's always dying.

JOE: Dammit, Dad, something always is. And I do mean to criticise.

ARTHUR: For that matter, of course, I'm dying.

JOE: Don't say that.

ARTHUR: So's your mother. So're you. You intend to attack the entire system?

JOE: Maybe. Come on, Dad, it's too late to talk about this.

ARTHUR: I'll say. It's been going on for quite some time.

JOE: As far as I'm concerned, it's been going on for exactly twenty-nine years, and I will not be reconciled to it, and

I'm too tired to talk about it tonight. Besides, it doesn't matter anyway. I'm through with all that.

ARTHUR: All what?

JOE: The writing, the rejection, New York, all of it. I'm not going back.

ARTHUR: You're not going back.

JOE: Nope.

ARTHUR: Fine. Where are you going?

JOE: Nowhere.

ARTHUR: There. You see?

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JOE: Dad! I'm staying here, that's all! And I don't want to talk about it tonight, OK?

ARTHUR: All right, all right. Case closed.

JOE: Good.

ARTHUR: Subject dropped.

JOE: Finis.

ARTHUR: Finis. *[A beat.]* Of course, all of us are hit by several meteorites a week, but they're the kind that weigh a billionth of a gram and fall at the speed of two feet per minute. Now, that's slow. Can you picture it? Tiny fragments of the cosmos, utterly ancient, descending on our bodies with.... such deliberation.

JOE: Carry Moonbeams Home In A Jar? It's No Joke, Says Potty Padre.

ARTHUR: But the odds are that a more sizeable meteorite will strike one human being once every 9,300 years.

JOE: So stick around....

[JOE leans back and lights a cigarette.]

ARTHUR: All I'm saying is, people are in need. They need miracles. They're tired of cynicism, they're looking for salvation, and you offer them death. Although I hope you don't think I'm criticising.

JOE: Never.

ARTHUR: You have real gifts.

JOE: Thank you.

ARTHUR: And a real kindness.

ARTHUR: And we were thrilled when you called from the airport this afternoon.

JOE: I'm glad.

ARTHUR: Thrilled.

JOE: Good.

ARTHUR: Say, you do know where all the papers are, don't you? The deed to the house, the will....

JOE: You gave me a complete run-down.

ARTHUR: The key to the safe deposit box? Not that you're going to find much in there, of course. A copy of that thing I've been writing about time and travel.... Jean's engagement

announcement from the papers, that sort of thing....

JOE: *[Not wanting to hear this]* Please, Dad.....

ARTHUR: *[With a laugh]* An autograph I got when I was ten years old!

[Pause. Then JOE leaps to his feet and points.]

JOE: There!

ARTHUR: *[Standing]* Where?

JOE: Gosh. That was lovely....

ARTHUR: What?

JOE: You didn't see it?

ARTHUR: I must have missed it.

JOE: How could you miss it? It went clean across the sky.

ARTHUR: *[Disappointed and puzzled]* I'm very observant.

JOE: It was beautiful.

ARTHUR: Well, I'm glad you spotted it anyway.

[ADA DAHL, JOE's mother, enters in a nightgown.]

JOE: There'll be others.

ARTHUR: Oh, I know.

JOE: One meteor does not a shower make.

ARTHUR: No indeed. *[Pause]* I had a wonderful teacher when I

was a boy. Oh, maybe seven years old. An old maid, they called her, but she was anything but that. Of course, she was old. Retirement age when she taught me, I suppose. And I have no doubt she was a maiden. But she was completely alive. Miss Thorvaldson.

JOE: Miss....?

ARTHUR: Thorvaldson. And I remember one afternoon in late winter, she asked if there was anyone in class who knew when the buds appear in Spring. It was a trick question, of course, so I raised my hand, and said, "They don't. The buds appear in the fall, as soon as the old leaves drop." And Miss Thorvaldson said, "Now here is an observing boy." *[Small pause]* Now here is an observing boy.

ADA: Put your shirt on, Joe. You're all sweaty.

[The two men turn.]

ARTHUR: Ada! Did we wake you?

ADA: *[Resigned tone]* You might have. I don't know. I couldn't sleep. Put your shirt on, Joe.

JOE: Hi, Mum.

ADA: Well, what is all this?

JOE: Shooting stars.

ADA: Put your shirt on, don't be stubborn.

JOE: My shirt's as sweaty as me.

ADA: As sweaty as I.

JOE: As sweaty as I.

ADA: You always were stubborn.

ARTHUR: We were watching for meteors.

ADA: *[To JOE]* Your favourite word was "no", always. You were sixteen months old when you learned it, and it was the happiest day of your life. Have you seen Paul?

JOE: *[Suddenly irritated]* No!

ADA: *[Pleased]* There! You see? All the time, "no".

ARTHUR: But you did see him. You told me.

JOE: Will you leave me alone about Paul? What is this fascination with him?

ADA: We love him.

JOE: Right, right. *[Small pause]* I'm sorry.

ARTHUR: No....

[ADA goes behind the swing, putting her hands on JOE's shoulders]

JOE: *I'm sorry.*

[After a moment, ADA takes her hands off his shoulders and wiping them on her robe:]

ADA: I'll go and get you a dry shirt.

JOE: No, no - I've got one, Mum. Don't bother.

ARTHUR: *[To ADA:]* He was out dancing.

ADA: How'd you pry that out of him?

ARTHUR: It wasn't easy.

ADA: *[to JOE:]* Do you do much dancing in New York?

JOE: Not really. I was never a big dancer.

ADA: No, neither was I. But that's how you met your friend, isn't it?

JOE: What friend?

ARTHUR: *[Warning]* Ada....

ADA: *[Covering]* I mean, if you wanted to meet nice people your own age, you'd go out dancing or some such thing, isn't that it?

ARTHUR: *[Scolding]* For goodness' sake, Ada....

ADA: *[To ARTHUR, embarrassed]* I know, I know....

JOE: What are you two up to here?

ARTHUR: Oh, you know your mother....

ADA: *[Overlapping]* Nothing, absolutely nothing....

ARTHUR: *[Overlapping]* She gets going and she doesn't know when to stop.

ADA: *[Overlapping]* Try to make a little conversation, and people jump all over you. *[Pause]*

JOE: What?

ADA: *[Startled, looking up]* Oh - my!

JOE: *[The same]* Geez.

ARTHUR: What?

ADA: Beautiful.

JOE: Wasn't it?

ARTHUR: Shoot.

ADA: Didn't you see it, Arthur?

JOE: Not again, Dad....

ARTHUR: Well, maybe.... just out of the corner of my eye.

ADA: *[Pointing]* Oh! Another....

JOE: What a night!

[ADA and JOE look at ARTHUR expectantly]

ARTHUR: I'll go and get you a shirt.

ADA: It's so late - why don't we all go in?

JOE: Come on, Mum. Dad's been waiting here for hours and he hasn't seen one yet.

ARTHUR: I don't understand it. I am a very observing... person.

[He exits into the house]

ADA: He doesn't need to see any shooting stars for goodness' sake. At something o'clock in the morning.

JOE: Can't you just let things happen for once? It's important to him.

ADA: *[Irritated]* Just let things happen? For once?

JOE: Just.... let it happen.

ADA: What is that, some phrase? I don't know why you're picking on me.

JOE: I'm not.. I mean, it's not going to kill any of us to sit on the porch at.... *[Checks watch]* ... two thirty and look at the sky, is it?

ADA: Just let it happen, man.

JOE: All right, all right, I'm sorry, I give up....

ADA: No, no, I'm going to sit here and be spontaneous.

[ADA sits on the swing. Long pause.]

ADA: Well. Do you notice anything different?

JOE: Uh..... Your hair?

ADA: Oh no, it just gets more and more and grey in it, no surprises there. Something here is different, though.

JOE: I give up.

ADA: Go on - guess.

JOE: No....

ADA: Do you want me to tell you if you're getting warmer?

JOE: No!

ADA: Do you mean you give up?

JOE: Yes, yes!

ADA: Dad lowered the porch swing.

JOE: Wow!

[He looks at her blankly]

ADA: My feet can finally touch the floor.

[JOE laughs and puts his arm around ADA's shoulder.]

ADA: For years I have hated this swing. My entire life I've been sitting in chairs that made me feel.... insignificant. Go on, you're all sweaty.

JOE: Keep Feet on Floor, says Midwestern Matron.

[JOE withdraws his arm and kisses ADA's cheek; she is delighted]

ADA: Ooh! You smell like potatoes.

JOE: Thanks. My aftershave. You feel more significant now?

ADA: Not really. When I was a child my teachers would say, "We'll let the littlest girl in the class answer that one." Can you imagine how that made me feel? No, your father is really thoughtful, even when he has to be reminded to be. After twenty-six years living in this house; my feet dangling in the air every summer, one day he just ups and lowers the swing. A remarkably kind man. You're thin. Do you know how thin you are?Æ

JOE: Dad says I look good.

ADA: He would, he's not an observant person.

JOE: I'm not thin.

ADA: You're terribly thin.

JOE: Mum, I'm a balloon.

ADA: You're gaunt. You can see the bones in your face. You look like your Great Uncle Bredahl looked, just before he started eating wood.

JOE: Well, maybe it runs in the family: a long line of unrequited hunger.

ADA: You look like a skeleton. Is that a beer? Is that a can of beer?

JOE: No, it's a medieval wind instrument.

ADA: No it's not, it's a can of beer you're drinking!

JOE: I thought it would fatten me up.

ADA: A steady diet of cigarettes and beer, oh yes! Did he have one too? Boy, oh, boy!

JOE: Would you like one?

ADA: No, I would not like one. *[Small pause.]* Out here, where everyone can see me.

JOE: Everyone! Mum, it's two-thirty, there's nobody going to see you.

ADA: *[Significantly]* They're out there. *[They both look out into the night]* Perhaps just a little of yours, I'm so dry.

[JOE hands her his beer. ADA demurely takes a sip and grimaces.]

ADA: Augh! Awful. Tastes like potatoes. What on earth is keeping Dad?

JOE: How is he? I mean, how's his health?

ADA: Oh, he's fine.

JOE: No, I mean it: how are you?

ADA: Old.

JOE: Oh, Mum. Don't say that.

ADA: Why not?

JOE: I don't know. I just can't stand to hear you say it, that's all.

ADA: All right, I'll say something else. *[Pause]* Except I don't quite know how else to put it. Oh, I don't mean that I feel different than I ever did, except for in my body, of course. It's funny. The voice in my head is the same as when I was 18, or 12, or 60. I'm the same person. I keep waiting for that to change, but it doesn't. I keep waiting for some of that wisdom that's supposed to come with age, but I have a feeling it's just not coming.

When I was a young woman, when I was having the first of the children, I remember pitying people who were forty. Poor things, I thought, forty years old. Well, that's forty years ago now. Where did you eat supper?

JOE: That new French restaurant that opened up in St. Paul.

ADA: With whom?

JOE: A couple of friends from the Dispatch. I miss you, Mum. I miss Dad.

ADA: Well, we miss you, too. What did you have? You smell like garlic.

JOE: *[Opening another beer]* I woke up in New York this morning and realised how much I miss you.

ADA: Don't have another....

JOE: I.... worry about you. *[Small pause.]*

ADA: What have you heard about me? Is Dad keeping something from me?

JOE: No! No, no, no.... Dad's not keeping anything from you, you're fine.

ADA: Of course I'm not fine. My arthritis is a constant torment...

JOE: Oh, Geez. *[Snaps his fingers]* Like that it's out of control.

ADA: *[Quietly]* It's... out of control?

JOE: Oh, my God.

ADA: Don't take the name of the Lord in vain. Did Dad call secretly and tell you to come?

JOE: No! I'm as fearful for him as I am for you.

ADA: You mean.... he has it too?

JOE: Mum! Nobody has anything! I'm sorry I brought it up! Whatever it was! *[Pause]*

ADA: I wish you wouldn't frighten me like that.

JOE: I suppose I'm just.... missing the two of you, that's all.

ADA: Well, if you miss us so much, don't you think you could have eaten with us on your first night home?

JOE: Oh, maybe we should turn in.

ADA: I'll never get to sleep now. *[Pause]* Last night Dad and I were sitting here and a family of ducks waddled out from that clump of pines, crossed the road and disappeared down over the river banks. She reminded me of me.

JOE: Who?

ADA: The mother duck, she looked so ragged.

JOE: You're too much, Mum.

ADA: She looked completely exhausted.

JOE: Domestic Abuse Among the Ducks! It Could Happen In Your Own Backyard.

ADA: Dad said he'd invited them.

JOE: The ducks?

ADA: He's forever inviting. I don't know, Joe. He's fine, but....

JOE: But what?

ADA: Just promise me one thing.

JOE: Sure.

ADA: Whatever you do, don't get your father going on

levitation.

[MICHAEL LUNDGREN, 16, enters from the house, wearing pyjama bottoms, slamming the screen door behind him.]

MICHAEL: Hi, Uncle Joe! Where are you going to sleep?

ADA: What are you doing up?

JOE: Mike!

MICHAEL: Wow!

JOE: Wow! Good to see you!

MICHAEL: Yeah!

JOE: Great! *[To ADA:]* What's he doing here?

ADA: *[To MICHAEL]* What are you doing up at this hour?

[ARTHUR enters from the house, carrying a sweatshirt.]

JOE: *[To ARTHUR, indicating MICHAEL]* What's he doing here?

[To MICHAEL:] Mike! Great! You're looking terrific. I'm just.... trying to figure out why it's you that I'm seeing here.

MICHAEL: *[Pointing]* Wow! Was that a shooting star?

ARTHUR: *[Wheeling and looking up at the sky]* It's just not fair.

JOE: *[To ADA]* I guess I didn't quite realise we had other guests.

ADA: You don't know the half of it, believe me. *[To MICHAEL:]* Now, why are you out of bed?

MICHAEL: Grandpa came in Uncle Joe's old room and woke me up.

ARTHUR: I didn't want to go through Joe's bags. I want Joe to know that whenever he visits I'm not going to go through his bags.

MICHAEL: He woke me up to ask if he could borrow one of my shirts,

ADA: *[Scolding]* Arthur!

MICHAEL: It's okay, I don't think he woke Tom. So, what's everybody doing?

JOE: At the risk of being indelicate, who's Tom?

MICHAEL: An old friend of mine.

JOE: Oh. Well. In that case.

MICHAEL: We're on our way to oboe camp.

JOE: You've got to be kidding.

MICHAEL: This year I'm going to make first chair, and my lifesaving certificate.

JOE: Oboe camp?

ADA: *[To MICHAEL]* Your mother won't be happy if she finds you up.

JOE: His mother? Is Jean here too? What's she doing in town? *[Immediately, to MICHAEL:]* Bringing you to oboe camp. *[To his parents:]* Well, why don't you tell me these things?

ARTHUR: Actually, Joe, you're the surprise guest here. All the others were expected, more or less.

JOE: I see.

ADA: Not that we're not thrilled to see you - we are, very. We were just wondering what prompted.... If there was anything...

ARTHUR: He told me he's not going back.

ADA: Well, where's he going?

ARTHUR: Nowhere.

ADA: He told me he's afraid of death.

JOE: I did not!

ADA: Well, not in so many words, perhaps....

ARTHUR: Whose death?

ADA: Ours

JOE: Jeez!

ARTHUR: What do you mean? Did he come out here to prevent it, or to witness it?

ADA: Don't ask me.

ARTHUR: *[To JOE]* Well. Here's that shirt for you.

JOE: *[Taking the sweatshirt]* Dad, this is a sweatshirt. It's over eighty *degrees*, Dad.

MICHAEL: *[Taking the sweatshirt from JOE]* Did you come all

the way from New York to see Paul?

JOE: No!

MICHAEL: Have you met the guy he's living with now? I have.

ARTHUR: Michael....

MICHAEL: Do you miss him?

JOE: Not any more.

MICHAEL: *[During this speech he ties the sweatshirt round his head like a turban]*

I do. I mean, I was eight when he moved in with you, and fifteen when he moved out, so that makes him, like a part of my life too, and even though we didn't get here to the cities all that often, I had a really good time with you guys when we did, and so I miss him, don't you? *[Pause]* I mean, I know we're not supposed to talk about *it*. *[Pause]* So? I'm the Sheik of Araby. *[Pause]* What are you, thirty?

JOE: Twenty-nine.

MICHAEL: Same difference. What's New York like?

JOE: An incubator.

THUR: I think I'm safe in saying that neither of us wants to die just yet. There's so much more that we want to do and see and know.

JOE: I know...

ARTHUR: But have you ever considered the alternative? Just being here, eternally? No, I don't suppose you have, you're too young.

MICHAEL: Young? He's nearly thirty.

ADA: Be careful, Michael.

ARTHUR: You remember that camping trip we took up north, Joe, to Itasca State Park?

JOE: I was seven.

ARTHUR: And we saw that little rivulet come bubbling up out of the rock? Just a tiny little stream that you stepped over.

JOE: I remember.

ARTHUR: Well, that's the same Mississippi River that's across the road. Picture it if it didn't go on out to the Gulf eventually. If it just.... accumulated. In some unspeakably massive lake. Like the Dead Sea.

JOE: Dad, it's awfully late....

ARTHUR: How stagnant. How repellent.

JOE: *[With an edge]* I don't buy it, Dad.

ARTHUR: *[The same]* You don't have to. By no means.

JOE: I mean, you don't tell somebody who's about to die about the Mississippi River, for God's sake. Or some man whose wife and son or father has just kicked the bucket from emphysema or a mugging in the park: you don't tell him about streams or the natural order of things.

ADA: Michael, you go on back to bed, now.

ARTHUR: What do you tell them about?

JOE: I don't know.

ARTHUR: Futility?

JOE: I don't know.

ARTHUR: *[Turning and looking up at the sky]* Futility?

ADA: *[To MICHAEL:]* We're all going to bed, there's nothing happening out here.

ARTHUR: *[Looking at the sky]* You can say that again.

MICHAEL: So what are you doing out here, Grandpa?

ARTHUR: *[With a sigh]* Looking for meteors.

MICHAEL: You mean there's going to be more?

ARTHUR: *[As sardonic as he gets]* More? More of what?

MICHAEL: Wow! I'm going to wake up Tom.

[He turns and runs into the house, slumming the screen door behind him.]

ADA: *[Calling after him]* Don't you dare!

JOE: I'm beginning to get a distinct sense of unreality here.

[ADA and ARTHUR exchange glances.]

ADA: I wonder why, father.

ARTHUR: So do I.

ADA: *[Looking at the sky again]* It's about time.

ARTHUR: Many very early men ate juicy steaks, using no plates.

[JOE does an astonished take, first to ARTHUR, then to ADA.]

JOE: What?

ADA: It's a mnemonic device for remembering the order of the planets out from the sun. Many very early men - Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars - ate - that stands for the asteroid belt - juicy steaks - Jupiter and Saturn - using no plates. Uranus, Neptune....

JOE: *[Overlapping]* Uranus, Neptune, Pluto. *[Small pause]*

ARTHUR: Comes in handy.

JOE: I'm sure. Might make a page three headline for the Post. "No Plates for Early Steaks!"

[The screen door opens and IRA SHERWIN, 24, enters, tying his dressing gown around him. JOE looks at him in utter disbelief.]

IRA: So this is what people do in the Midwest? Pretend to go to bed at 10.30 so they can sneak back out at three?

ADA: Ira...

IRA: It's fun. I like it. Good morning, Mrs. Dahl. Reverend Dahl. Top of the morning to you, Joe.

[JOE slowly rises from the swing, as though looking at a ghost.]

ADA: Oh, Ira, I can't tell you how sorry I am we woke you up....

ARTHUR: *[Overlapping]* Waiting up for meteor showers, you see...

ADA: *[Overlapping]* Normally we don't....Æ

ARTHUR: *[Overlapping]* I'm afraid my grandson has been slamming doors and....

ADA: *[Overlapping]* I'm so embarrassed...

ARTHUR: *[Overlapping]* It all got a little out of hand...

IRA: Listen: I'm very flexible.

JOE: *[To IRA]* What on earth are you... *[To his parents]* You know him?

IRA: Do they know? Please. We have had supper together. And very delicious it was, Mrs. Dahl. *[To JOE]* Swedish meatballs.

ADA: Do call me Ada. Or Mrs. Dahl if you prefer. Or anything.

IRA: Phoebe? Dolores?

ADA: Would you like some hot milk?

IRA: *[After a pause]* I think you'll have to give me a little time to get used to your traditions. But thanks, Ada, believe me.

JOE: Ira... how...

ADA: *[Pointing to IRA's dressing gown]* Is that what you're wearing?

IRA: *[He looks down at his gown for a moment]* I think so.

ADA: You'll catch your death of cold in that.

IRA: Well, given the temperature, I doubt it. But if I do, I

hope I leave you with fond memories.

ADA: *[Laughs coquettishly]* Does your friend always talk like this, Joe?

JOE: Ceaselessly.

ADA: He kept me laughing all evening.

IRA: Well, lady, you got off some pretty decent one-liners yourself. *[To JOE]* Right in the middle of supper, your mother suggested we all take naps. Between the meatballs and the mince pie.

JOE: I don't believe this, Ira. Why are you here?

ADA: *[Admonishing]* Joe...

ARTHUR: *[To JOE]* Ira arrived late this afternoon, soon after you went out.

IRA: Surprise!

ADA: We put you both in the basement bedroom, I'm afraid. I hope it's not too damp...

IRA: Fine with me.

[JOE propels IRA by the arm down the porch steps.]

JOE: Ira...

IRA: *[Undertone, briefly parting his robe]* Quick, Joe. Tell me if I'm sprouting mushrooms.

JOE: *[Undertone]* Shut up, Ira.

ADA: I think I *will* take some hot milk.

IRA: Hot milk!
ARTHUR: I'll take a cup, Ada.

ADA: I hear one cup. Do I hear two?

IRA: I pass...

JOE: *[Strained]* No thanks, Mum.

ADA: Going, going, gone! *[She exits into the house]*

JOE: *[Undertone to IRA]* What the hell are you doing here? When did you leave New York? How did you find my parents?

IRA: I found them utterly unbelievable. And I begin to understand you. I mean, you come from completely queer stock.

ARTHUR: How long'd you say you two have known each other?

JOE: *[Primarily to himself]* A couple of *weeks* for goodness sake.

IRA: *[To ARTHUR]* It'll be three months tomorrow.

JOE: *[Undertone to IRA]* Well, I hope you didn't think that things were at a point where I wanted to take you home to meet the *folks*.

ARTHUR: Just think of it, Joe. Mr. Sherman has incorporated himself, and he's only... How old did you say, Ira?

IRA: Twenty-four.

ARTHUR: Twenty-four years old and already he's running his own private catering service!

JOE: *[To IRA, incredulous]* You told them about the Naked Cake?

IRA: And why not?

[IRA joins ARTHUR on the porch steps]

We do wedding parties, birthdays, shivas.

ARTHUR: Shivas?

IRA: think you people call them wakes. Sitting shiva: you cover up the mirrors, remember the dead, and eat.

JOE: What is going on here?

ARTHUR: Say, Joe. Why don't you write about your friend here? There must be interesting stories in private catering.

IRA: There are seven million stories in the Naked Cake.

ARTHUR: Come on, Joe. Sit down. Join us.

IRA: Your father was telling us all about the universe at supper, you should have been there. What was that passage you quoted, Mr. Dahl?

ARTHUR: *[After a brief silence, he raises his "preacher's voice" and recites in Hebrew:]*

KE A-LIF SHA-NEM
BE-A-NE-KU
KE-YUM ET-MOL
KE YA-VOR,
VE-ASH-MO-RA
VA-LI-LE

[Brief pause]

IRA: For four years I went to Hebrew school, and did I get anywhere? Don't ask.

ARTHUR: Psalm 90. "For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night."

[After a moment, IRA suddenly stands and points to the sky.]

IRA: There's one! Can you see it?

ARTHUR: Yes, I see it.

JOE: *[After a pause]* It's an aeroplane, Ira.

IRA: [Deflated] Oh. Yeah....

MICHAEL: [From within the house] But Mum, please.... Tom'll *kill* me if I don't get him up for this...

[MICHAEL and his mother, JEAN LUNDGREN, enter from the house]

JEAN: That's nothing to what I'll do to you if you do. Hi, Joe.

JOE: Jean.

JEAN: How are you?

JOE: [Embracing her somewhat awkwardly] It's good to see you. A real surprise.

MICHAEL: Mum...

JEAN : You look good. Where's your shirt?

JOE: Mum says I look like a skeleton.

JEAN: Of course. At death's door, no doubt.

JOE: Exactly.

MICHAEL: *[A whine]* Ma...

JEAN: Forget it, Mike.

IRA: *[Musical]* Hello again!

JEAN: *[Lukewarm]* Hello. *[Turning to ARTHUR, admonishing]* Dad...

ARTHUR: I know. I'm afraid I woke him.

MICHAEL: *[Sitting and sulking]* Yeah, but why did she have to get up.

IRA: Come on, kid. Don't be a pain in the ass.

JEAN: Please don't.... use that language with my son.

IRA: *[Innocently]* Language? You mean English? All right, I'll put it another way. Mike, you're a nice kid, you play a dynamite oboe after supper, but please just try not to make everybody's seat hurt, will you? *[To JEAN]* Is besser?

JEAN: You go on to bed now, Michael.

ARTHUR: We were just speaking of aeroplanes. You know, I can remember the first aeroplane I ever saw? Quite an event. And to think what has transpired in the heavens just in my lifetime. A miracle. Levitation. It just dropped out of the sky. I don't suppose you know what short pants are, do you, Mike?

MICHAEL: What?

ARTHUR: Short pants. Oh well, it doesn't matter. But all of us

boys were wearing them, which means I that I must have been less than.... ten years old at the time, and that it was a day in summer when the first aeroplane dropped out of the sky. Michael: never forget the advantages you and I have over these city boys here, having known the unutterable pleasures of growing up in a small town.

MICHAEL: I don't think it's so great.

[ADA enters from the house, carrying a tray with four cups of hot milk]

ARTHUR: You will. Anyway. I don't know what we were all doing that we all happened to be in that field south of town... or perhaps we all just came running when we saw that creature in the sky, dipping its wings and descending. It bounced twice - very high – then rolled to a stop in the long grass. And a god stepped out. He was tall and laughing and buttoned up in a stiff white collar and a dark suit, although it was a summer's day, and he was.... undeniably..... from another world. *[Small pause.]* By that time, of course, some of the grown-ups had run out to the field, and to our profound dismay they took the fellow off, to feed him and fawn over him. We stood guard over his chariot, half protective, half-fearful of it.... I know now that he was making a coast-to-coast flight, some record or other, but to us.... he was spreading the gospel of levitation.

ADA: All right, who got him started? *[To JOE]* Did you get him started?

JOE: *[A finger to his lips]* Shh, Mum, please!

ARTHUR: When it came time for him to fly away.... my goodness, what a thought that was then.... still laugh-ing, all teeth and mustache and bright eyes... he threw out long ropes from the cockpit and the strongest of the men held

them until the tiny engine had worked up enough power. And then he was gone from us, trailing little ribbons of rope, and dipping his wings, and disappearing.

[Small pause]

ADA: I knew I was right to make more than two cups. You'll have some hot milk, won't you, Jean?

JEAN: *[Taking a cup]* Thanks, Mum.

ADA: And there's more coming, so don't be shy. Michael?

MICHAEL: No thanks, Grandma.

JEAN: Michael...

MICHAEL: I don't care for any, all right?

ADA: *[Offering tray to IRA]* I think you'll be pleasantly surprised, Mr. Sherman.

IRA: *[Taking a cup]* Are you sure you have enough?

ADA: Oh, there are so many comings and goings in this house, especially as we get older, it seems... I never know who Dad is going to invite, or when, or how many.... So I always make plenty of everything.

[INGA, an elderly woman in a nightgown and robe, enters with another tray of cups.]

ADA: Oh, there you are. Thank you so much.

INGA: *[Offering her tray to ARTHUR]* Arthur?

ARTHUR: *[Offering her tray to JOE]* Please, Joe. It will let you sleep. So much better for that than all those cigarettes

and beers.

[JOE takes a cup, staring without recognition at INGA.]

ARTHUR: *[To INGA, taking a cup]* Not much sleep tonight, I'm afraid.

INGA: Sleeping or waking, it's all pretty much the same to me.

JOE: *[Undertone to ADA]* Mum. Who is that?

ADA: *[Relishing her opportunity]* Oh, for goodness' sake, Joe. Can't you just let things happen for once?

JEAN: Mike, take some hot milk.

MICHAEL: In case you didn't happen to know, too much milk causes Excess mucus.

JEAN: If you're angling for one of Joe's beers, you're going to have to do a lot better than excess mucus.

ADA: Dad? Do you know what I would like?

ARTHUR: *[Looking up at the sky]* I'm afraid I do. You want me to make popcorn.

ADA: Well, we do seem to be up...

INGA: Now that would be a treat.

JEAN: Popcorn!

ARTHUR: All right, all right. I submit to the will of majority.

INGA: So. What is it, exactly, that we're doing?

IRA: I'm not sure you could pin it down, exactly.

INGA: *[Suddenly pointing at the sky]* Oh! What was that?

ARTHUR: *[Wheeling round]* Where?

MICHAEL: *[Looking up]* Wow!

ARTHUR: Where? Where?

JEAN: *[To INGA]* Dad's waiting for a meteorite shower.

INGA: Oh, star-gazing, are we?

ARTHUR: Hardly.

INGA: *[Noticing JOE]* Here's a newcomer, Jean - could this be your brother? *[To JOE]* How do you do?

JOE: *[Stupefied]* How do you do?

INGA: Well, there's not a deal of family resemblance, is there? I don't know that I would have taken you for brother and sister.

JEAN: Maybe not, but we both have identical birthmarks in exactly the same place, so there must be some connection.

IRA: *[to JOE]* You mean that thing that looks like a map of Italy on the inside of your left thigh? *[Silence. Then to JEAN]* You have it too? *[Silence]*

INGA: I myself have never travelled in Europe.

ADA: What about that popcorn, Papa?

ARTHUR: *[Looking at the sky]* As soon as I turn my back it'll all start, I just know it.

INGE: What a vast expanse of lawn you have here, Ada. You could hold a cotillion on the green.

ADA: Joe used to hang lights from the trees and stage Hollywood spectacles out there.

JEAN: He recruited me to lead a chorus line of neighbourhood girls one summer, all of us in swimsuits and capes.

ADA: Which he recruited me to make.

IRA: If only you knew then where it was all going to lead, huh?

ADA: Why don't you write plays like that any more, Joe? With dancing and singing?

JOE: I'll get right on to it, Mum.

INGA: I don't know why I should be so hungry, but I feel like something more substantial than popcorn...

ADA: It's no wonder. The meatballs were so dry, people hardly touched them.

INGA: Not at all, Ada.

ARTHUR: Mike, you want to get that popcorn started?

MICHAEL: *[Looking at his mother]* If I can wake Tom up....

JEAN: Not a chance.

MICHAEL: OK, but Tom's going to be pretty mad about this, that's all I have to say.

[MICHAEL exits into the house.]

INGA: *[To ADA]* What about muffins? I don't suppose they really go with popcorn, but I have such a craving...

ADA: *[Doubtfully]* Well...

INGA: I won't make much more than a couple dozen.... cracked wheat?

JOE: *[Beyond comprehending anything]* Cracked wheat? Why not? Why not muffins? And then we can all dance around on the lawn.

INGA: *[To JOE]* Now you've gone and done it.

[Wistfully, as she exits into the house.]

I was raised in a strict Lutheran parsonage, Joe. As were you. I don't even know how to waltz.

ADA: *[Over her shoulder, going into the house]* Arthur...

ARTHUR: *[Still looking at the sky]* Coming, Ada. Coming.

[ARTHUR exits into the house. The remaining three sit and stand in silence for a few moments. Then a moustached older man dressed in a bathrobe comes walking from the darkness of the lawn into view.]

WRIGHT: Afraid I dozed off in that deckchair over there. Did Arthur call it a night? Oh, you must be Arthur's son, Joseph.

[He distractedly shakes JOE's hand and passes on to the door of the house. Then he turns back.]

WRIGHT: You know, your father is a remarkable man. Now Einstein, whom I met once, by the way, at some sort of awards banquet in New Jersey, Einstein said that as an object approaches the speed of light, time slows down.

At least, for that object it does. And that if anything were capable of travelling faster than light, time itself would be reversed; it would go backwards. Well, says Arthur, with not a shred of scientific jargon but with total assurance nonetheless, well, he says, what do we know that travels backwards in time? What, indeed, he says, but memory? Well, I didn't think I could let him get away with that sort of mystical double-talk, but he goes on to insist that we make our mistake when we think of memory as an abstract concept. He maintains that it's quantifiable, the old coot. And that we've lost sight of that, but that vestiges of an ancient understanding of memory can still be found in language. Do we not, he asks, do we not say, "I have so many memories, or that so-and-so has lost his memory? Quantifiable. Imagine that. *[Pause]* Anyway, I seem to have polished off Arthur's orange juice, and I was wondering if there was any more. *[Gesturing towards the sky]* Just yell if anything starts happening.

[He exits into the house. JOE stands perfectly still for a moment, then throws back his head and yells inarticulately.]

JOE: Ahhhhhhhh! *[Immediately afterwards, very fast]* I'm terribly sorry, everything's all right, I'm fine, I'm sorry, just a whim, nice night.

[JOE opens the screen door and shouts into the house.]

Sorry! False alarm! Nothing doing! Thought we spotted The Hindenburg! Never mind!

[He shuts the door, empties his cup of hot milk over the porch rail, pops open a can of beer, and flings himself down on the swing.]

JOE: So...

[Small pause. JOE jerks a thumb towards the house.]

JOE: Was he at dinner too?

IRA: Of course.

JEAN: So. Joe. What's all this about death?

JEAN: Out in the kitchen; Mike announced that Uncle Joe was freaking out about Grandma and Grandpa dying.

JOE: He said that? I'll kill him.

JEAN: It's not true?

JOE: *[Uncomfortable]* Well... Freaking out? No. You let him use cheap phrases like that?

JEAN: Actually, that was my phrase. What Mike said was that you were having problems coming to grips.

IRA: That kid's got a future. In California.

JEAN: What about it, Joe? Mum and Dad's death.

JOE: Well.... I mean, doesn't the thought nearly kill you? Am I alone in this? Completely odd, or clinging, or dependent or something?

IRA: What do you mean?

JOE: What I mean is that I live twelve hundred miles away from them, and I have a life of my own, such as it is, and yet whenever I feel time slipping away from me, and it does, oh God, it does, it is their time I'm feeling, it's those two slipping away from me and I nearly die of it. *[Beat]* And what I want to know is, am I alone in this?

JEAN: No.

IRA: Uh-huh.

[Small pause]

JOE: Oh. *[Pause]* Well, that settles that. *[Pause]* I picture coming back to this house and not finding them in it, and I can't.... picture that. *[Pause]* That's what death is for me; looking for someone, and you can't find them. Throughout the empty house, from one room to another, no matter how many times you search and search again, you can't find them. You won't ever find them. *[Beat]* Who was that man?

JEAN: I guess all that started for me when the kids came along.... Each one of them gave a new meaning to the phrase, "hanging on for dear life", because that's what I did to them, at least to begin with. I suppose that's what I did to you too, Joe, when I was a kid.

JOE: *[With a little edge]* "Tie your shoes, wipe your nose, cut your hair, chew your food and don't slurp the soup." And that's the sort of advice she was giving me while I was in college.

JEAN: Eventually, of course, you learn to let go. You learn you don't have any choice. Maybe you were the hardest to let go of, because you were the one who taught me how to cling.

IRA: My mother died two years ago. Of cancer.

JEAN: I'm sorry.

IRA: She was an accountant for the Mafia.

JEAN: Oh, for Pete's sake.

- IRA: No - she was. If you ever need something to fall back on, Ira, she'd say, become a bookkeeper for the Mafia, they hire them by the gross.
- JEAN: I thought you were being serious, for once.
- IRA: I am serious. So was Irene. I mean, she kept the books for some piss-elegant hotel in midtown. Very olde English, with olde oak panelling and the sort of doorman who wouldn't look at you if you weren't a WASP, much less hail you a cab, and in the role of president, proprietor, whatever, was this cultivated white-haired ex-headmaster, but you know that the power behind the throne was some guy named Nuncio or Bugsy or something, and that he was only running the place for his Great Uncle Scarface. Anyway, Irene got cancer, only nobody in the family, including her, was allowed to use that word. My aunts would gather together when Irene wasn't around and say that she had "the real one". The real one. It sounds like an ad for a cola.
- JEAN: Can't you ever be anything but flippant?
- IRA: Sure. But I try to live up to people's expectations of me. *[Moving into being camp]* Like this whole astronomy thing? You want flippant, you got it. *[Very camp]* Like I was telling your father earlier, last summer there was this total eclipse of the sun? And all day long on the radio they kept saying, "Don't look at it! It'll ruin your eyes!" So I said to my friend, Gay Morris, "Gay Morris," I said, "If these eclipses are so bad for you, why do they have them?" *[Back to his "straight" voice]* There, you see? It's simple.
- JEAN: That's amazing. I mean, how do you do that?
- IRA: Amazing? It isn't even interesting. It's what you're taught to do. So anyway, Irene died, and my father,

Eugene, who sold belts wholesale before he retired and who was always pretty much all right with me, as was Irene, by the way, suddenly turned into this sad old guy. There's only my sister, Ruth, and me left, and Ruth is married and lives in Bayshore, so Daddy and I go for little bachelor dinners together in the city, once a week, and in one way he's cool, because Ruth can and is handling the whole grandchildren thing, I mean, providing them for him, but in another sense it's a little depressing every Wednesday night, because sometimes Eugene forgets to shave. *[Small pause]* Which in him is a thing almost impossible to conceive.

JEAN: *[Sincerely]* I'm sorry about your mother, Ira.

IRA: *[Same]* Yeah. Thanks.

JOE: *[To IRA]* Hear that? Patronising. Condescending.

JEAN/IRA: *[Overlapping]* What?

JOE: It's what she does. When Paul split; she sat me down to talk about historical inevitability.

JEAN: *[To IRA]* It wasn't that way.

JOE: Patronising? Wow. I'm bleeding, for God's sake, and she's telling me it's for my own good. Politically. Can you believe it? That it's time for me to move on... to get outside of myself...

JEAN: *[To IRA]* All right, all right. My timing was...

JOE: She's a militant, my sister. Oh, yeah. Marx and Jesus.

JEAN: I see. We're going to start with the Christian Marxists again.

- JOE: You've got to watch your step around her, believe me. Watch your politics, watch your language, your thoughts...
- JEAN: *[To IRA]* He attacks the things he doesn't understand. It's what he does. And that's what I'm here for, I guess.
- IRA: The Christian Marxists?
- JEAN: *[To IRA]* You see, we're a couple of do-gooders, my husband and I. And me, I'm an aging earth mother.
- JOE: *[To IRA]* Earnest. God, is she earnest.
- JEAN: And that's a big mistake, I know. Futile, right? Try to feed hungry people? Pointless. Take home-less people into your home? Forget it.
- JOE: You see, Marx and Jesus have a lot in common, Ira. For one thing, neither of them has much time for queers.
- JEAN: Neither one of them says a damned thing about any of that, but both of them have a hell of a lot to say about cynics!
- JOE: *[To IRA]* Oh, yeah, she's the champion of all the right causes, but when it comes to perverts, well, let's just say she wouldn't want her son to marry one.
- IRA: I see.
- JEAN: *[To IRA]* And that is precisely what he wants to believe.
- IRA: I see.
- JEAN: *[To IRA]* I have a houseful of children who idolise their

Uncle Joe, and my husband and I love him more than he'll ever admit, and can you blame us if we didn't want to see him bogged down in a basically dead-end lifestyle?

IRA: Not me.

JOE: *[To IRA]* That "lifestyle" was Paul, and he wasn't a lifestyle, he was my life, and her kids loved him, and so did Mum and Dad and they're not even liberals, and where does she get off with this "basically dead-end" bullshit? She and Jerry showed Paul the last word in courteous contempt and he felt it.

JEAN: *[To IRA]* We did not!

JOE: *[To IRA]* For seven years they did!

JEAN: *[To IRA]* Did not!

JOE: *[To IRA]* Did! Did!

JEAN: *[To JOE]* He left you!

JOE: *[To JEAN]* I know!

[ADA enters, unnoticed by the others, and stands with a bowl of popcorn at the door.]

JEAN: *[To IRA]* He left him.

JOE: *[To JEAN]* He knows.

IRA: *[To JEAN]* I know. It's all he ever talks about.

JEAN: *[To JOE]* So you've decided that Jerry and I are the villains and you ridicule our work... *[To IRA]* ...which is not with the "right causes" in the least, and he knows it,

and he never answers our letters... *[To JOE]* ...and you never answer our letters and besides, what have you ever done for anybody... *[To IRA]* ...what stand has he ever taken.... *[To JOE]* and how can you possibly be so smug and self-righteous when you've spent the past year shying away from any sort of commitment and trying your damndest to pose as some sort of cold fish, for God's sake!

IRA: Touché.

JOE: Shut up, Ira!

JEAN: Don't talk to him like that!

JOE: Why not?

JEAN: I don't know!

ADA: Oh, my....

JEAN: *[To JOE]* Maybe I don't understand completely yet, but I'm trying, I've been trying, and you make it impossible for me to open my mouth without first examining my entire structure of belief, and how can you dare do that when you don't demand the same of yourself?

JOE: I loved him. I miss him.

JEAN: I know that. *[To ADA]* He acts like I don't know that. *[To JOE]* I know that. And now because maybe I made some mistakes at one point, am I dead to you? Will you let me be dead to you?

JOE: Every Christmas it was Paul who picked out the presents for the kids. Every year, Sherlock Holmes and sheet music for Mike. Necklaces and pins for Tra, picture-books about horses for Vin. An erector set once, for

George, that he got second-hand from the Salvation Army.

IRA: *[Quietly]* Jesus.

JOE: For Pilar, drawing paper and those pens with four different colours of ink in them....

JEAN: There was a dictionary for Kwami one year, and a doll-house for Rebecca...

IRA: *[Quietly]* My God.

JOE: And always puppets for... what's her name?

JEAN: I forget. *[Starting to giggle.]* I can't remember! *[To ADA]* Which one always got the puppets?

ADA: The what?

JOE: *[Also starting to laugh]* Hand puppets! Marionettes! Dummies!

ADA: *[Also starting to laugh]* I don't know. Wasn't it the one with all those wires on her teeth?

IRA: How many of them are there?

ADA: *[To IRA]* Oh, you don't know the half of it, believe me.

JEAN: *[Giggling, embarrassed]* Mother, please. Don't make me sound like a factory!

JOE: *[To IRA]* Some of them Ã adopted. From all over.

IRA: Which?

JEAN: It's so hard to remember. Well, Michael, for one.

JOE: Judith! Hand puppets! Marionettes! Dummies!

[JOE, JEAN, ADA all burst into renewed laughter.]

JEAN: *[To IRA]* We got Mike in Chicago.

IRA: Wow. Does this have anything to do with Christian Marxism?

JEAN: It's a long story.

JOE: *[Subsiding]* I was crazy about them all, but... I don't know what to get a kid for Chrstmas. So it was Paul.... who took.... such.... care.

[ADA gives the bowl of popcorn to IRA, and puts her arm around JOE.]

ADA: It's like he's dead, isn't it?

JOE: Uh-huh.

ADA: But he's not.

JOE: I know.

ADA: He mows our lawn.

JOE: I know.

ADA: Neither is your sister. Dead.

JOE: I know.

ADA: When you were born, I... was having a hard time. And you were so very sick. We both were. But we nearly lost you. One night we realised you could be gone before morning, and so we baptised you right there in

the parsonage... and your sister was your godmother, and because I was so very sick it was Jean who stayed up with you all through the night, night after night, and she... insisted... that you live.

JOE: I know.

ADA: You still haven't got a shirt on.

JOE: I know. I'm cold.

ADA: I know.

JEAN: I'll go get you one.

JOE: No...

JEAN: Sure I will.

JOE: Wait.... wait.... Listen.

[They all listen. INGA enters from the house.]

ADA: *[Finger to lips, to INGA]* Shh. We're listening.

INGA: *[Whispering]* What for?

ADA: *[Whispering]* We don't know.

[A single bird is heard, chirping.]

JOE: Hear that? It's the first bird. There's always one. The birds don't all just wake up together and burst into song, there's always one who takes the lead. Way before dawn. Sings alone for about half an hour. Before the other birds join in. All alone. I've been listening to him for years. When I'm writing all night.... When I used to write all night.... The moment he began, I felt I could

finish. It's the same bird, always. Everywhere.

[They all listen in silence to the solo birdsong.]

JOE: Many's the time I've wanted to kill that bird.

INGA: Know what you mean.

IRA: *[Overlapping]* Uh-huh.

JEAN: *[Overlapping]* Yup.

ADA: *[Overlapping]* Me, too.

JEAN: *[To JOE]* I'll go get you that shirt.

JOE: That's what they all say.

[MICHAEL enters, bearing a bowl of popcorn.]

MICHAEL: *[To JEAN]* I mean it, Mum, there's four more bowls of this stuff in the kitchen, and if I don't wake Tom...

IRA: *[Cutting him off]* Michael, just... go and help your grandfather.

MICHAEL: *[Appealing to the higher authority]* Mum...

JEAN: *[Surprising herself]* You heard.... what Ira said.

MICHAEL: So who's Ira all of a sudden?

JEAN: Ira is.... Ira.

MICHAEL: No kidding.

IRA: *[Primarily to himself]* Sometimes. Not often. Almost never. *[To MICHAEL]* Hey, Mike. You want a hand in

the kitchen?

MICHAEL: Aw, that's OK. See, I mainly just wanted Tommy to meet Uncle Joe because Tommy's gay too.

[A moment of profound silence]

JEAN: *[Quietly]* Tommy is what?

MICHAEL: Well, he's not sure, but he thinks he might be, so he's decided just to give it some time, to find out.

[JEAN, JOE, INGA and ADA all do a slow, unselfconscious unison take to the upstairs window where, presumably, TOM is sleeping]

IRA: *[After a small pause]* You're expecting maybe he glows in the dark?

MICHAEL: Didn't you know about Tommy, Mum? Didn't you guess?

JEAN: We'll talk about it later.

MICHAEL: I thought after that course you took, you'd be sussed.

JOE: What course?

JEAN: Mike, that's enough.

MICHAEL: *[To JOE]* After all that stuff went down between you and her, she enrolled in a class on human sexuality. *[He sniggers a little.]* To understand you better. It must have been a good one, she wouldn't let me see the textbooks.

JEAN: *[To JOE]* I'll go get you that shirt.

[JEAN exits into the house.]

MICHAEL: *[To INGA]* You want some popcorn?

INGA: Thank you, Michael.

MICHAEL: Mr. Wright says your muffins are almost done.

INGA: Would you mind checking on them for me, Ada? I think I need to sit for a while.

ADA: Not at all.

JOE: *[To himself]* Mr. Right?

ADA: *[To INGA]* You might try to talk him out of staying here while you're at it.

INGA: Who? Joe?

IRA: Staying here?

ADA: He says he's not going back.

INGA: I don't talk anyone in or out of anything any more, Ada. I am no longer a schoolteacher.

ADA: Well, whatever. Come on, Mike.

[MICHAEL gives the bowl of popcorn to INGA, and rises to go into the house.]

ADA: I mean, he's perfectly welcome to stay if he wants, but I just think there comes a time, don't you?

MICHAEL: I'll say.

[MIKE and ADA exit into the house.]

INGA: *[Offering the bowl of popcorn]* Want some, Joe? Ira?

IRA: Huh? Uh, not right now, thanks.

[He joins JOE, who stands at the porch rail]

INGA: Well, it's here if you want it.

IRA: *[To JOE]* You're, uh, not coming back?

JOE: I would have written to you.

IRA: Terrific.

JOE: I had dinner with some friends from the local paper.
I can get my old job back.

IRA: And what was that? Paperboy? *[Pause]* What about the plays?

JOE: Finished.

IRA: What about Paul?

JOE: Dead issue. That's not why I'm staying.

IRA: What about me?

JOE: What do you mean?

IRA: What about me? I'm not dead.

JOE: Who said you were?

IRA: Oh, I don't know. Every now and then I seem to get a little news bulletin, a little flash announcement, "Ira Sherman, only son of Eugene and Irene nee Baumgartner Sherman, passed away on his knees today, begging for attention."

JOE: I don't know what you're talking about.

IRA: You know, somehow that doesn't surprise me? Somehow that doesn't come as the shock of a lifetime, You know? What happens is, first your eyes glaze over, like when I'm laying bare the secrets of my soul or some such thing, and then you heave a little sigh or two, for God's sake, and then.... I cease.... to be. What's happened is you've climbed into your little time machine and gunned the engines back to the era of Paul the Great.

JOE: Ira, please, I don't need a scene right now.

IRA: *[Very angry]* From me you don't get scenes! For three months I've been waiting just to make an entrance!

INGA: *[Cheerfully]* Are you boys talking about relationships?

JOE: *[To IRA, intensely]* You have no way of understanding me.

IRA: Oh, dear God, the presumption of the man.

JOE: You haven't been through the wringer, that's all I mean!

IRA: Sweetheart, you don't have to go through the wringer if you were born on the rack. The wringer! You with your mince pie Midwestern upbringing, with parents you could eat for dessert, who say to you, "Oh, you're gay? Well, that's okay, and Oh, this is the boy you love? Well, we'll love him too, and Now you're blue? Well, we feel it with you," - and you're talking about going through some wringer? You're a sissy, that's what you are! You're a fucking coward!

JOE: Yes! Yes! I am! I'm afraid!

IRA: *[Wheeling, to INGA]* Translation: he's afraid I'll do to him what the legendary Paul did to him, although just what that might be is a little hard to pin down. I mean, what was this poor guy guilty of?

INGA: I'm sure I don't know.

IRA: Well, lady, neither do I. Are you going to let me have some of that popcorn or not?

INGA: Why, certainly.

[IRA sits beside INGA on the swing, eating a mouthful of popcorn furiously]

IRA: He didn't live happily ever after with him, that's what he did. First love, and it was supposed to last forever. Christ!

JOE: I just... didn't want to die alone.

IRA: God. Always thinking ahead.

INGA: Well, one of you would have had to. Don't you think?

IRA: At last! Some logic! Tell me, do you Midwesterners have a thing about first love?

INGA: I know I did.

IRA: Well, then, you're both so naive I could choke. *[To JOE:]* All this pain, and you never once call on me. Even when we're together, you have never once called on me.

JOE: *[To IRA]* It's not as if I didn't want to. Ira?

IRA: *[Weary, his anger spent]* Oh, shut up, Joe. Look, why

don't you just sit down and have some popcorn?

INGA: *[Suddenly pointing]* Oh!

[JOE and IRA look up into the night sky.]

INGA: And your father said there weren't any shooting stars tonight!

[After a pause]

JOE: Midnight Madness in Mystery Lodge.

IRA: Joe, do not start.

JOE: *[To IRA]* I did hear you ringing, you know. The phone and the buzzer.

IRA: I figured you just unplugged it. The phone.

JOE: Well, eventually.

IRA: Why did you do it, Joe?

INGA: What's he done now?

IRA: He locked me out! All this past week. He locked everybody out, no-one could get through.

JOE: It was.... very hot.

IRA: Hot! *[To INGA]* We were watching TV in his apartment. I was watching TV, he was sitting in a chair watching the wall, as far as I could tell.

JOE: A fun couple.

IRA: I said I'd go out for a chinese take-away, and when I got

back he wouldn't buzz me in.

JOE: What did you do that night?

IRA: Do? I'm sitting on the stoop, it's 97 degrees, and I'm thinking chow mein was a pretty stupid choice.

INGA: *[To IRA]* You mean, no-one's seen him for a week?

JOE: *[To IRA]* I wasn't watching the wall, I was watching your face and all I could see there was a death's head

IRA: Thanks.

JOE: No, no. It's... a very nice face, really. I just mean that suddenly everyone I saw was so unmistakably doomed and everything I had I was going to lose, one way or the other, and the city was an incubator for the still-born, for God's sake, and after a week of that it was either get myself into a plane and fly out here or... I don't know.... never buzz any-one in again.

[Pause]

INGA: You write headlines for a newspaper in New York City?

JOE: Until recently.

INGA: Just the headlines?

JOE: Just.... some of them.

INGA: Do you play sports?

[JOE double takes]

INGA: Well, you should. You should play golf. Writers like golf. Myself, I never married, so I wouldn't know.

What to advise you. And I don't pretend to

understand a thing about you young men who seemingly marry each other, I come from a different generation, a different world it was, so you could hardly expect me to understand, although I've always had a hearty interest in anthropology.

IRA: What's to understand? Think of us as hunters and gatherers. He hunts, I gather, it's crazy but it works.

INGA: Oh, no, no, no - I've got a hold on all that. What I don't understand is this: Now here is this perfectly nice young man...*[Indicating IRA]* intelligent, very good-looking, I know he's Jewish but anyway. *[To IRA]* You won't believe this, Mr. Sherman, but you're the first Jewish person I've ever met to talk to.

IRA: I believe.

INGA: I'm afraid that out here, and during my years, we were very limited in our experience although I do have one East Coast friend from way back, an inventor, he... well, he just dropped out of the sky one summer afternoon and into my life, but anyway - We struck up acquaintance, and then many years of correspondence and occasional visits, and he's the son of a Methodist bishop and not Jewish at all and I suppose really not East Coast but Midwestern although once he became famous, which was a few years before I met him, he spent much of his time in the East, which is why I think of him like that. As East. *[After a pause, to JOE]* Anyway. Here's this intelligent young man, and it's obvious he cares about you very much, he sang your praises all through supper and says he thinks you're a very good writer, although he does allow that you are perhaps a bit morbid and anyway he loves you so what's the problem? That's what I don't understand.

[Pause. IRA waits intently for an answer, but when none comes he gets up abruptly, descends the steps of the porch and stands looking at the sky.]

INGA: What is it, that Paul thing? But that's history, isn't it? When I say I'm from another generation, Joe, I don't mean I stayed there, that would be such a waste. I live now, in people's memories, and so do you, isn't that a thought? It's what your father was talking about at dinner, that every moment you live, you're planting seeds in people's minds, seeds of yourself, and they keep you alive, not in some fixed form but always changing, because of course there's nothing so unreliable as the human mind, but in a sense nothing so predictable at the same time, so that while you are there, always, you may end up becoming many different people, as many different people as the seeds you've planted.
[Immediately, to IRA] What do you mean, he hunts, you gather? He's unfaithful?

IRA: Only to himself, Miss Thorvaldson, only to himself.

INGA: Obviously. In that respect he's utterly fickle. *[To JOE]* Well, I am disappointed, I must say.

JOE: Thorvaldson. My father had a primary school teacher named.... Miss Thorvaldson.

INGA: Well, of course.

IRA: I'm going for a walk.

JOE: *[To IRA]* Don't leave me. I mean, what's going on here?

IRA: *[Suddenly angry]* I am going.... around the block. It's not often I get to be a tourist. *[Intensely]* You disappoint me too. *[Walking out into the darkness]* Ladies.

JOE : Ira... *[Pause]*

INGE: So I wasn't *allowed* to dance, or even to learn how, but I'll tell you what I once did. Twice a year some of the wealthier farm families would get together and give a ball in one of the large barns. None of this square-dancing, country stuff - a genuine ball with white tie and tails and gowns and an orchestra and waltzing.

JOE: Wait a minute. Excuse me. Please. Who are you?

INGA: Inga Thorvaldson.

JOE: My father's primary school teacher.

INGA: Well - not any more, of course.

JOE: Of course. And my father is seventy. And you were of retirement age when you taught him: So that makes you.... about.... one hundred and thirty years old.

INGA: Oh, for goodness' sake, who's counting? And more to the point, I suppose, how are you counting? Anyway, when I was thirteen I escaped my parents somehow one night and trekked across the fields to the old Benson place and climbed up in to the rafters of the barn and watched.

JOE: I don't like this. I don't like miracles.

INGA: And nothing I've seen since has moved me as the sight of those waltzing couples that night.

JOE: My father.... invited you?

INGA: Spinning, spinning. A blur in my eyes.

JOE: Faster than the speed of light.

INGA: Oh, at least. And the music! Can you imagine how it struck my ears? Thirteen years old and nothing in them until that night but hymn tunes on an old pump organ.

JOE: Are any of the others here? Is Ira really here? My sister? Anyone?

INGA: I had to pay for my night of sin, of course. Old Benson's nephew, Willie, found me crouching up there, spellbound. Oh, what a beautiful young man! Raven hair and dressed in black, and darkn eyes and pink, pink skin. Of course, he may just have had too much cider to drink, but anyway. He lifted me up and led me down and asked me for the honour of a dance.

[She breaks off, lost in memory, and also pained by it.]

JOE: *[Anguished]* Is this house empty?

INGA: I couldn't speak. Not a word. And then to my horror, I began to cry, all of them standing about me in a circle and Willie Benson at my arm and while a moment earlier they had all been laughing, now they began to clear their throats and cough quietly and all I wanted to tell them was how beautiful I thought they had been, spinning, and how I didn't want them to stop, ever. But I couldn't utter a word. Do you know the sensation?

[He nods. WRIGHT enters with a platter of muffins.]

Willie was very kind. He bundled me up in a blanket and perched me up beside him on his carriage and flicked his whip over the horses' heads and drove me home, telling me jokes and stories all the way, although I answered him not one word. *[Small pause]* I had fallen in love. *[Looking up]* Did I ever tell you that story, Mr. Wright?

WRIGHT: Yes, Inga.

INGA: I thought so. *[Pause]* Two years later he took his own life. There was no connection, of course. He hadn't fallen in love with a child, or anything like that. I never knew what it was. *[Pause]* He hanged himself from the rafters in his father's barn.

[ARTHUR enters, eating a muffin]

INGA: Do I smell muffins?

WRIGHT: I should say you do.

ARTHUR: Drowning in butter.

JOE: *[Sincerely]* Miss Thorvaldson...

INGA: Do call me Inga.

JOE: Your story? Where's the lesson?

INGA: *[Sternly]* There are no lessons. Only stories. I am no longer a schoolteacher.

[ADA enters]

JOE: *[Gentle, almost pleading]* Miss Thorvaldson. Do you know what I really write for that paper in New York?

INGA: Not the headlines?

JOE: Oh, yes, but the ones I really have to write, for my living, every day, they're like.... Father Slays Son and Self.... Calcutta Kids Trampled, 24 Dead.... Hurricane Havoc in Retirement Haven.... Second Infant Found in Incinerator...

INGA: Please...

JOE: It just goes on and on..... Pension Couple Starve in Westside Rooming House... Third Incinerator Baby Found..... Terminal! It's all terminal!

INGA: I'm sorry, Joe. I just... have no more lessons in me.

ARTHUR: Father slays son, dear God have mercy on us.

JOE: Son and self.

ARTHUR: Son and self. Son and self. Son and self. As if all the Natural loss with which we are encumbered weren't enough. *[To ADA]* Remember that situation in Montana? *[To WRIGHT]* We had a parish out there in the early years.

ADA: *[To ARTHUR]* But that was the other way around.

ARTHUR: Son slays father and self. *[To JOE]* Of course, you weren't born yet.

ADA: *[To ARTHUR]* But you told him about it. I remember.

ARTHUR: An unbending man he was, towards his son. A stiff-necked man.

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ADA: The poor boy's name was Roger.

ARTHUR: Son and self. Father and self. *[With a steadily rising anger]* I left the seminary, you know.

WRIGHT: I didn't know.

INGA: Oh, yes indeed, for nearly two years.

- JOE: After your training. You had doubts?
- ARTHUR: Doubts? I had no doubts. For two years I did my work, I studied and read and wrote and thought, for two years, so conscientiously, because I was preparing myself to serve. And then, with a face like milk, I marched forth into the field.
- INGA: *[Singing]* Rise up, oh men of God!
Have done with lesser things....
- ARTHUR: *[To INGA, annoyed at the interruption]* Yes. Thank you. *[Resuming his story]* The field being a tiny parish outside Fargo, North Dakota, two hundred and forty-one in the congregation. And by the end of six months, I knew more about those two hundred and forty-one men, women and children, body and soul, than I ever wanted to know about anyone! I couldn't go on. Serve them! I couldn't even face them! They were so full of want. And what had I to give them?
- JOE: Everything for me, you had everything to give, always.
- ARTHUR: So I quit! Couldn't face my family, couldn't face myself.... I was actually going to form a one-man Protestant monastery, emphasis on protest. Like Jacob I was going to spend my entire life alone, wrestling with the angel. Wrestling!
- JOE: But you didn't.
- ARTHUR: *[A little embarrassed]* No. I.... I met your mother.
- ADA: *[Also a little embarrassed]* Oh, go on, Arthur...
- ARTHUR: And coming to love her, and being loved by her, somehow I came to realise that anyone who is awake ... must look at the universe in all its...

[A gesture fails to encompass the pain]

...and must say either yes.... or no. And to say no would be to take death into one's arms. And by that time I was... already... married.

[Pause]

ADA: Our first child died in Montana. She was four days old.

[Pause]

INGA: Rise up, oh men of God!
Have done with lesser things
Give heart and soul and mind and strength
To serve the King of Kings!

[Pause]

Phew!

WRIGHT: *[Offering a platter of muffins to INGA]* Inga?

INGA: No more for me, thanks. Have you met my young friend Joe?

WRIGHT: Only in an off-hand sort of way, I'm afraid.

INGA: Joseph, meet Mr. Orville Wright.

JOE: *[Spent]* Oh, hello, Orville. How are you?

WRIGHT: A little tired, but who's complaining. Want a muffin?

JOE: Sure. *[Taking a muffin]* I'm a little tired too.

WRIGHT: Of course you are.

JOE: Well. *[Pause]* Congratulations...

WRIGHT: Why, thank you. Of course, equal credit goes to my big brother.

JOE: Of course...

INGA: *[Offering WRIGHT's platter of muffins to ADA]* Ada? Cracked wheat. *[ADA takes one]* Here it was, my silly idea in the first place, and then you end up doing all the work.

ADA: Oh, listen to that...

[The song of a single bird. WRIGHT turns to ARTHUR]

WRIGHT: You don't have whip-poor-wills out this far west, do you, Arthur?

ARTHUR: Only by invitation, Orville.

WRIGHT: Their cousin, the nighthawk, yes, but... *[They all listen]* Both of them we found extremely difficult to study. being birds of the night. And their flight, so rapid and erratic, this way and that. But you can be sure that many a moth is tumbling dim-witted into its beak at this very moment. *[They listen]* There was a whip-poor-will that kept us company on Kill Devil Hill, all during the trials. For four years, Wilbur used to say the creature was mocking our clumsy efforts to fly, and he may have been correct. Even after we... succeeded. I mean, there is flight and there is flight, don't you agree? Joe?

JOE: Uh-huh. Dad?

ARTHUR: *[Putting his arm around JOE's shoulder]* I'm here, Joe.

WRIGHT: No, for study, we had much better luck with the vultures, actually.

[They listen]

ADA: *[To WRIGHT]* You say you boys picked up your mechanical flair from your mother?

WRIGHT: *[With feeling]* Oh, Mother could fix anything. And she was a kindred spirit, for a time. Almost a conspirator with us boys. Once, when Father was away, out on the evangelical circuit, I took a machine can and filled it with water and put it on the stove. I was about nine. After a little while, of course, the boiling water came squirting out of the top, about a foot or two. It also went all over the kitchen floor, naturally, but Mother, when she came running into the room, had no word of remonstrance for me, none. And when I clapped with joy, she applauded that machine can too. I remember, it was in that same week our old cat died. *[Small pause]* Wilbur was the one who took care of Mother while she was trying to die, some years later.... I was 17 and my brother 21, and in poor health himself, after a rather bad accident. Ice skating. *[Small pause]* And then we lost Mother, and then we learnt how to fly, and then.... in just a matter of years, the typhoid took Wilbur off, loss after loss. But he went away much too soon. *[Small pause]* He used to say the whip-poor-will was mocking our desire to fly, and the vultures were mocking our desire for fame. *[They listen]* The whip-poor-will is a voice in the dark.

ARTHUR: *[Suddenly pointing]* Look... *[Turning to the others, excitedly]* Did you see it?

INGA: I always said you were an observant boy.

ARTHUR: Look! Another!

JOE: There you go, Dad.

ARTHUR: *[Pointing]* See, Joe? I think it's starting. Oh! Two at a time! Ada, I knew it; it was just the calm before the storm. It was worth it, wasn't it? The waiting.

INGA: Isn't it exciting, Mr. Wright?

WRIGHT: Miraculous.

JOE: Jean! Get out here! Jean! Mike!

ARTHUR: *[To ADA]* I've never seen such a storm!

JOE: Where's Ira?

[He walks down the first of the porch steps and hollers]

JOE: Ira! I-ra!

ADA: Joe! Hush! You'll wake the dead!

[MICHAEL enters carrying a pitcher of orange juice.]

JOE: *[Shouting]* I-ra!

MICHAEL: Who wanted the orange juice?

ARTHUR: See, Ada? There's no stopping it now.

MICHAEL: *[Looking at the sky]* Wow! *[Turning to shout at an upstairs window.]* Tom! Tommy! Wake up!
[Turning back down and pointing to the sky] Will you look at that, Uncle Joe? Tom!

[JEAN enters]

JEAN: What's going on?

ARTHUR: Jean, you're just in time!

JOE: *[Pointing up]* Look.

JEAN: Amazing!

JOE: Isn't it?

JEAN: Uh-huh! Oh! For Pete's sake! I forgot your shirt!

[She turns to head back into the house]

JOE: No! Wait! Here. My t-shirt's dried out anyway.

JEAN: Yeah?

JOE: Well, sort of.

ARTHUR: There!

JEAN: OK. Come on. Hands up!

[She puts the t-shirt over JOE's head.]

JEAN: First one arm.... you're shivering.

JOE: I've missed you.

JEAN: I've missed you, too.

JOE: And Jerry and the kids.... I've missed.... every-body.

[IRA enters from the lawn, carrying a large plastic flamingo]

IRA: Hi, Joe. I heard you calling for me.

JOE: I was calling for you.

IRA: I know. I heard.

ARTHUR: Ira.

ADA: Mr. Sherman! You got that from the neighbours!

IRA: Isn't it wonderful? Wouldn't you love to give this as a wedding gift to someone you really disliked?

ADA: That's Mr. Albright's flamingo!

IRA: *[Setting the figurine down]* You must tell me about this Mr. Albright some time.

JOE: Ira. Look.

IRA: *[Looking up]* Oh, my God.

WRIGHT: My father, the bishop, used to quote a line from the New Testament about a God who calls into existence things that are not.

JOE: *[Putting his arm round IRA]* I'm glad you're here.

IRA: You called for me.

JOE: I know.

IRA: It's a first, I think...

JOE: Maybe.... I don't know.... Maybe with practice...

IRA: Maybe.

MICHAEL: I bet you could see it better from over there on the river bank.

JOE: Don't.... you.... dare! Nobody moves! Everyone, everyone, just hold it right where you are! No more muffins! No more coming and going! No orange juice, no river bank! Just stop! Stay! Please!

[Pause]

I am grateful, I want you to know that, I'm grateful, but would you please just stay here and let me enjoy it, for God's sake! *[Accelerating]* Hold onto it, together, the night, that damned bird out there, the waltzing in the barn, Orville... Orville: Dad, why didn't you ever tell me it was him who landed in that plane. Or did you? You must have. You must have told me about the baby in Montana that died, Mum.... But I just forgot, how could I do that? Ira, your face in the light of a tele.... And the Christian Marxists of Minnesota, Jean, all those letters I tried to ignore, all that stuff I just threw away, all that ignoring! All that throwing away!

ARTHUR: Joey!

JOE: Dad?

[Long pause, with some slightly embarrassed shifting of feet among the others; some smiles]

ARTHUR: You don't have to throw away a thing. *[Pause]* But you're going to have to let go. *[Pause]*

ADA: I haven't seen him so excited since one day when he was sixteen months' old.

MICHAEL: It's a regular shower, isn't it, Grandpa.

ARTHUR: It's a downpour.

MICHAEL: Isn't it terrific, Mum?

[MICHAEL, his eyes fixed on the sky, walks down the steps and disappears into the darkness of the lawn, carrying the pitcher of orange juice.]

JEAN: Sure is.

IRA: *[Offering his arm to JEAN, who takes it]* Jean?

JOE: I'll call you.

IRA: Long distance?

JOE: No. I'll see you. Soon.

IRA: OK.

[JEAN and IRA start down the steps, with IRA carrying the flamingo under his other arm, and JEAN carrying a platter of muffins.]

IRA: How do you like it?

JEAN: What do you call it?

IRA: Albright.

JEAN: Of course.

[IRA and JEAN walk away across the lawn, out of sight]

INGA: I feel as though I were thirteen years old again.

WRIGHT: Miss Thorvaldson. Let's just waltz on out to the lawn, shall we?

INGA: Orville, you know I don't...

WRIGHT: It's simple. One, two, three, and all of that. Come on... *[He takes her in his arms]* Just a matter of

mathematics, believe me. One, two, three, one, two, three, one, two, three...

[They waltz haltingly across the lawn and into the darkness. Pause.]

JOE: *[To his parents]* There's no.... getting over it, I suppose, is there? Your death. In a sense.

ADA: I don't suppose.

ARTHUR: In a sense, that will keep us with you, if you're careful.

JOE: I suppose. *[Small pause]* The house feels as empty as me.

ADA: As empty as I.

JOE: As empty as I.

ADA: Paul. Drop him a note from time to time, he'd appreciate it, I know he would.

JOE: All right, Mum.

ADA: And don't forget Jean's birthday any more. It falls so close to Christmas, she's always being neglected.

JOE: I promise.

ARTHUR: Michael looks up to you, Joe, he admires you. That's a responsibility.

JOE: Maybe I'll invite him out to New York before school term starts. Ira could take him to Coney Island.

ADA: That sounds fine.

JOE: Thank you, Mum. Dad. For all of it.

ARTHUR: It was nothing.

[They each look up into the night sky.]

JOE: *[After a pause]* They won't be coming back, will they?

ARTHUR: Oh, I don't know. Sooner or later, they all come back.

[Pause]

ADA: Arthur? I'm here.

[ARTHUR offers her his arm, and ADA takes it. The two of them walk slowly across the porch steps and across the lawn into the darkness, looking up at the sky. Pause. JOE slowly turns and approaches the house. He opens the screen door and TOM, a sleep-tousled fifteen-year-old boy, walks out of it and exits onto the lawn. JOE looks after him. Pause.]

JOE: Good luck at oboe camp.

[JOE turns and opens the screen door. He finds the inner door locked. He takes keys from his pocket, opens the door, and goes into the empty house.]

Slow Fade

BLACKOUT