

IMAGINARY FRIENDS
Conjuring 1959's most famous lunch

A Play in One Act

By

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CHARACTERS**

CARSON McCULLERS (42): The stroke-stooped, alcoholic, erstwhile-wunderkind Southern writer is thrilled to host a luncheon at her home in honor of the author Isak Dinesen. Her other guests are Marilyn Monroe and Arthur Miller.

ISAK "TANIA" DINESEN (74): The imperious and legendary, turban-clad baroness and Danish author of *Out of Africa* is enjoying her first trip to the United States and being lionized – as she expects to be – everywhere she goes.

MARILYN MONROE (32): Bombshell icon married to Arthur Miller, although the marriage is failing. Her alcohol and drug addiction – and fragile emotional state – will contribute to her death just three years later, a month before Dinesen's.

ARTHUR MILLER (44): In addition to his marriage to Monroe, his writing is in a slump, and he recently, barely survived the ringer that is the House Un-American Activities Committee. Although a renowned playwright, he is still tinkering with his screenplay, *The Misfits*, which will be Monroe's last film. On this day, however, he is the man who chauffeurs Marilyn and the baroness to Nyack.

IDA "SISTER" REEDER (55): McCullers's Black, Southern maid, cook, attendant and friend. She worked at a psychiatric hospital before moving in to nurse the ailing author a few years earlier. Since McCullers's mother's death in 1955, Sister has been the frail writer's primary caretaker and companion. She calls Carson her "foster child."

SETTING

February 5, 1959, a cold Thursday in Nyack, a Hudson River town not far from New York City. Carson McCullers's two front rooms in her stately, white Victorian house are set for luncheon, where she will host Dinesen, Monroe and Miller in an historic gathering.

***Although these people are well-known, they should be fresh characters and not mimicked or impersonated.*



"So, I had the great honor of inviting my imaginary friend, Isak Dinesen, to meet Marilyn Monroe, with Arthur Miller, for luncheon in my home." – *Carson McCullers*

"They are the we of me." – *Carson McCullers, The Member of the Wedding*

ACT ONE
Scene One

(It's late morning on this cold February day.)

(CARSON, 42, but seemingly older due to her alcoholism, general poor health and most recent stroke, is dressed in black – from her crewneck sweater down to her trousers and KEDS sneakers. She stands at the bar cart in her dining room, stage right, smoking a cigarette that juts from a sleek cigarette holder – as one will for much of the play – and, with trembling hands, struggles to pour herself a drink.)

(Nearby, the table is set for four, lain with CARSON's finest silverware, a waxed-fruit centerpiece, and tall candles standing in elegant holders – currently unlit.)

(Like CARSON, so back to the bar and that drink... but between her stooped posture; cigarette holder; cane hooked over her right forearm; left hand gnarled and virtually unusable because of the stroke; and strong likelihood that this is *not* her first drink of the day, CARSON has difficulty holding the bottle and pouring its contents into the recently emptied sherry glass she is trying to refill.)

(Adjacent to the dining room and separated by opened pocket doors is the living room, stage left, with a fireplace, four chairs, a whole lot of books on all manner of shelf – same as in the dining room – and a victrola stashed in a corner, currently playing Bach. A door, far stage left at the rear, leads to the offstage kitchen.)

(Windows enable views and reflections of the icy Hudson River that flows in CARSON's backyard.)

(Meanwhile, back at the bar cart, CARSON finally manages to pour that drink. She takes a sip, an act that fills both a need and an itch, then relishes the alcohol as it enters her bloodstream.)

(Soon, she will speak to the audience. This is a memory play, after all, and her voice is often delighted-sounding, as though she were perpetually discovering something new and smiling about it. Her accent, meanwhile, betrays her hometown of Columbus, Georgia, and formative years in the South.)

(The fact that this is a memory play should be augmented somehow – perhaps by the lighting and the sound; a record skipping and buzzing – as the moments in this scene flit between past and present, whenever that is, as they do in Scene Four, too. When CARSON addresses the audience, we're in a different plane of reality versus when she interacts with SISTER.)

CARSON

(mostly to herself, as though
rehearsing the lines)

Sunday afternoons are the loneliest ones of all...

(now reciting to the audience)

*That's why nothing is so musical as the sound of pouring
bourbon for the first drink on a Sunday morning. Not Bach
or Schubert or any of those masters...*

(The record skips and CARSON giggles.)

CARSON – CON'T.

(to the victrola)

Oh, hush. I'm not talking to you. And, besides, this is sherry, not bourbon. And today is Thursday, not Sunday!

(The record plays again and CARSON shrugs.)

CARSON – CON'T.

(rehearsing, again)

*Sunday afternoons are the loneliest ones of all... don't you believe that's true? I sure do. Those sentences are from my last, well, my would-be last novel, which, at the time... at this time... I was struggling to write. Its working title was *The Pestle*... why was it called *The Pestle*, you ask? Well, you'll just have to read it to find out if you haven't already had the pleasure, or *pain*, as the case may be, and according to some *literary critics* not worth noting much...*

But my last... my *final* novel was, I am delighted to tell you, after years of stultifying labor, published in 1961 as

CARSON – CON'T.

A Clock Without Hands, a title I like very much. It captures the essence of what we call time, the sheer nothingness of *now*, whatever that means.

You see, things move forward and they move back, don't they? What with memory and *déjà vu* and recollections of that nature... there is what we remember, what we forget... and, something most of us don't like to cop to, what we imagine or *misremember*...

(thinking, then quoting)

But meanwhile time flies; it flies never to be regained...

(confiding in the audience, and maybe even showing off a little)

My dear, antiquated friend Virgil said that. That venerable Roman poet who has, like so few of us ever have or ever will, withstood the test of time.

But back to my novel, which would be, in its conclusion, final proof that I existed and had something I tried to say in the world – even if that Alabaman Nelle Harper Lee would get far more credit for saying what I'd been saying all along, and before anyone *ever even heard* of her – but, once I finally finished my hard-as-hell-to-write novel on the races... the ghosts of the South... that would be what was left of me in this life.

(CARSON waits a beat before continuing.)

CARSON – CON'T.

But on this, *that* Thursday – not Sunday, mind you – back in 1959, which was one of the coldest readings of the weather that winter, I could not do a single thing to break through my most recent, resolute spell of what is conventionally referred to as an age-old affliction: *writer's block*. None of my old tricks would do; I wonder what Virgil might have done? I'll have to listen through the ages to see if I can glean something about that.

Anyhow, on this... *that* particular day, I was especially grateful for the wonderful diversion that was heading my way, via automobile direct from New York City, and driving toward me at that very moment.

(The PHONE rings.)

CARSON – CON'T.

Or so I thought...

(CARSON moves to answer the phone; it's a hard undertaking considering she has to balance her cane, cigarette, cocktail and self. Finally, she arrives at the phone, puts down her drink, clenches the cigarette holder between her teeth and answers the call.)

CARSON – CON'T.

(speaking into the phone)

Hello? Aren't you on the road yet? Why, yes! That would be lovely. You know you look positively lovely in everything you put on that beautiful body of yours, or don't put on as the case may be. You don't have to keep calling me. Just hurry yourself and get here already, alright? Alright. Yes, yes, see you soon, Dearheart.

(CARSON hangs up and returns her attention to the audience.)

CARSON – CON'T.

(teasing)

That was Marilyn. Marilyn *Monroe* – perhaps you've heard of her? You know, a lot of people don't have knowledge of this particular situation, but Marilyn and I once lived together in the Gladstone Hotel in New York City, just a stone's throw from the Museum of Modern Art. Well, no, we didn't actually *live together*, fortunately or unfortunately... we just occupied it at the very same time. Isn't that a wonderful tidbit of arcana I just shared with you?

(She chuckles, retrieves her drink and takes another sip.)

CARSON – CON'T.

You see, a few years back, Marilyn was studying with none other than Mr. Lee Strasberg and his *methodists* to become a great actress herself, which we both knew she could and would be, and I was there, at the Gladstone Hotel, because my friend *Tenn*...

(off the audience)

Oh, you know Tennessee? You all really get around, don't you? Well, *Tenn*, as I like to call him and have since the day we met – I can do things like that because I'm Southern – well, *Tenn* suggested I live at the Gladstone for a spell because I couldn't write and they had domestic help and I could use a place to be alone for a while...

CARSON – CON'T.

(confidentially)

You see, my mother, or *Bebe* as we called her, was still alive at the time and, well, she lived here with Sister and me and I guess if you've ever been a full-grown adult person living with your mother, then I needn't tell you any more about that.

Anyhow, at the Gladstone Hotel is where I met Marilyn, and we shared many a Sonny Boy cocktail in that very nice lobby by the fire.

(CARSON drains her sherry and shuffles back to the bar to pour herself another.)

CARSON – CON'T.

I haven't seen her since... when was that? 1955 I think it was? I wonder what I was writing at the time...

(she can't remember)

Anyway, she's coming here today, along with her husband, the esteemed playwright Mr. Arthur Miller, and that divine, ancient spirit Isak Dinesen, the author of one of my most favorite stories, *Out of Africa*... Have you read it? Isn't it something? I, myself, have been reading that particular masterpiece each and every year since it was first brought to my attention... must be nearly 20 years now.

(once more quoting Virgil)

But meanwhile time flies...

Isak, or *Tania*, as she likes to be called by dear friends – I know this because we've been in correspondence for some time – but, frankly, she I hesitated to meet because she had been so fixed in my heart, I was afraid the actual might disturb this image. When I met her last month at the Academy dinner, she was very, very frail and old, but as she talked her face was lit like a candle in an old church. My heart trembled when I saw her fragility.

Meanwhile, it took every ounce of strength I had to attend, being so not myself, as you can see, but Tania was being honored so I just had to, and I asked to sit beside her and was delighted to learn she had asked the same – to sit beside me! Well, that very evening she told me she wanted to meet none other than Miss Marilyn Monroe.

(CARSON takes turns trying to pour another drink and focusing on her conversation with the audience.)

CARSON – CON'T.

She said..

(imitating the venerable Dane)

When I knew I would be traveling to the United States, I said I wanted to meet four Americans: Mr. Ernest Hemingway..

(back to her own voice and so on)

...who is unfortunately out of the country and who declared, in 1954, that she, not he, should have won the Nobel Prize; *Mr. e.e. cummings*, he of the lower-case letters and with whom she has since had the pleasure of making an acquaintance; yours truly, Miss Lula Carson Smith McCullers, dispatched in a beeline from Columbus, Georgia, straight to Manhattan Island; and, of course, our dearest friend, the most remarkable *Marilyn Monroe*.

(CARSON takes a moment at the mention, once more, of MARILYN'S name.)

CARSON – CON'T.

An interesting, if not odd, assortment, but there we are. Or were, as the case may be. And I only had to look over to the table next to ours at the Academy dinner to see Mr. Arthur Miller seated right there beside us. Can you imagine all the luck?

Then, as these things go when one has been fortified with a good square meal and his fair share of cigarettes to smoke and bourbon to drink, one thing leads to another and, so, I had the great honor of inviting my imaginary friend, Isak Dinesen, to meet Marilyn Monroe, with Arthur Miller, for luncheon in my home. There were some others present, of course, but they weren't quite as *luminous* as the rest of 'em, so never mind all that. As Bebe always said, No time like the present to perfect the past!

Anyhow, that's where we are today, or were, on Thursday – not Sunday – February the 5th, 1959, on a very cold winter's day.

(CARSON finally succeeds in pouring that new drink and takes a sip.)

CARSON – CON'T.

I cannot even begin to tell you the joy this undertaking brought me during that writers-blocked winter. My afflictions made everything even bleaker than they could ever possibly be, and I couldn't get out from under any of

CARSON – CON'T.

it. So, I trust you can see why it did my lonely heart such a world of good to have these divine spirits here with me, at least for a moment, under my very own roof.

(CARSON's reverie is disturbed when the front door – at the far end of the dining room at stage right – opens and CARSON's housekeeper, SISTER, enters, carrying the last-minute groceries she had raced out to get, and the lighting changes to denote we are in that different plane of reality and/or time. SISTER heads through the dining room then passes through the living room and offstage left into the kitchen, chatting with her charge as she goes. CARSON, meanwhile, tries and fails to hide the fact that she's just poured herself a drink.)

SISTER

I wish you would take it easy on the sherry, today of all days, Foster Child. You need to keep your wits about you.

CARSON

Now why would I go and do a useless thing like that?
(noticing the bundles)
Looks like you went and found some?

SISTER

I sure did!

CARSON

How many, Sister?

SISTER

Three-dozen.

CARSON

Ooh-wee! Well, how about that? We are indeed lucky 'tis the season for Tania's oysters! But I'm afraid that will be too much.

SISTER

Don't worry. I'll save some for us.

(re: the bar)

It'll be a long afternoon; take it slow, ya hear?

CARSON

Sister! You know I always do.

(CARSON waits for SISTER to make it offstage.)

CARSON — CON'T.

(to the audience)

Call me a fabulist, but sometimes it just pays to not tell a *true* truth! Don't you think?

(When SISTER is gone, CARSON rights her glass and keeps on sipping it.)

CARSON — CON'T.

(calling out and lying through her teeth)

And besides, it's my first drink of the day!

(raising her good right hand in the air)

Hand to the Muses.

(back to the audience; rolling her eyes)

Sister, who is a teetotaler of all the things I have to contend with, has been telling me for years: 'Take it *easy* on the sherry; *easy* on the cigarettes.' Before her and until she died, that was Bebe's line of condemnation even though she loved her libations, too, and, well... my late husband Reeves never told me to take it easy. No, he was right there with me and, let me tell you, Reeves never took anything easy. That's why he took his own life, after the war. Everything was just too much for poor Reeves. What a lost and desolate man he was. Never comfortable in his own skin. Not even once.

(She stares into the middle distance for a moment, then raises her glass in a silent toast and sips her drink.)

CARSON — CON'T.

Today, however, is a special day. I mean, they all are, and worthy of a celebratory drink or two for just making it through if you ask me. So what is wrong with enjoying a nerve-settling cocktail to commemorate another day of living? Every one of my doctors since the beginning of time has pointed out to me that a good drink calms the nerves, steers the ships and soothes even the most troubled soul...

Although I admit, lately I've been doing a lot of thinking on *the soul*... that singular, individual place where the self

CARSON – CON'T.

comes into the light. *Shining*. I want mine to shine ever so brightly this afternoon. Yes, today is... was one of those days one never forgets and hopes to always remember... *correctly*, if at all possible... there really are so few, aren't there?

I have not had many special days lately. You see, I'm having a hard time doing what I do, and that is write. Oh, I told you already. Apologies. Sometimes I repeat myself. I don't know if it's because I'm sickly or because I'm Southern. But, as I mentioned, I've been working on a new novel, the first in a long time and the one that will be my last. It's inspired by my days as a girl in Georgia, when the races were still so much more separated than they are even today, which sure is saying something, isn't it?

But I mean it to be a tale of response and responsibility – of man toward his own livingness, yet I'm having a hard-as-hell time and I don't know that I'll make it through. This miserable winter has me positively starved for artistic companionship... *creative camaraderie*... but now? Being in the presence of these divine spirits, and my imaginary friend? I just can't believe my good luck. And I know that these forces of nature will do my soul – and work – a world of good.

As the poet Mr. William Stanley Merwin, or W.S. as you'll know him, will write in his poem, "Soon I Will Be Gone," in just five years' time, *What you remember saves you*. Well, I stand before you, here and now, positively desperate to be saved...

(directly to the audience)

So, will you help me to remember?

(CARSON calls out toward the kitchen.)

CARSON – CON'T.

Sister? Where are you? Your dear and desperate foster child needs you – are you through shucking those oysters yet? Hurry up now. They're going to be here momentarily if they were ever here at all.

(BLACKOUT.)

End scene.

Scene Two

(SISTER puts the finishing touches on the dining room table while CARSON, standing behind the curtains at stage right near the front door, sneaks anxious peeks out the window.)

(CARSON's – and later the others' – italicized dialogue, highlighted in yellow, denotes her speaking in asides, sometimes to herself and sometimes to the audience, but not to the other characters.)

SISTER

Get away from there! You're Carson McCullers, not Emily Dickinson.

CARSON

Oh, you hush. I'm excited, that's all. Can't I be excited for a change?

SISTER

Not if you're gonna be all creepy, staring out the window like you're the Belle of Nyack.

CARSON

Don't poke fun, Sister. I'm raw enough as it is.

SISTER

Oh, I'm just teasing... but not about this menu. Whoever heard of an entire meal of nothing but oysters and Champagne?

CARSON

And white grapes and soufflé. We do have white grapes and soufflé, don't we?

SISTER

Yes, but it's still a horrible meal if you ask me. Is it a Danish thing?

CARSON

It's a *Tania* thing. But we mustn't judge. She is a delightfully strange spirit who must not be judged.

SISTER

I'm not judging. Just sayin'...

CARSON

She is to be revered and respected. As my brother-in-arms and most favorite artistic ancestor Mr. Walter Whitman has intoned through the ages: *Be curious, not judgmental.*

SISTER

(cracking up)

That's a hoot. You judge *everybody!* Why, just the other day you were calling your former *best friend* from Louisiana a little Champagne bunny.

CARSON

You hush now and, please... show the baroness respect.

SISTER

You know that's what I always mean to do. However, right now, I am merely commenting on the fact that this is an odd diet, and an unhealthy one, too. You say she eats like this all the time?

CARSON

Every meal.

SISTER

Downright unhealthy.

CARSON

We have some odd delicacies ourselves, don't we, Sister?

SISTER

What are you sayin'?

CARSON

What do you think the baroness would think of our...

(sing-songs)

Southern love of butter beans and collared greens...

SISTER

(laughing)

You're so silly...

CARSON

...and black-eyed peas and pimento cheese...

SISTER

OK, OK. At least we have ourselves some variety and nutrition. This is not a nutritious way to eat.

CARSON

Then I'll go on to remind you...
 (singing again)
 ...of our barbecue and buttermilk, too...

SISTER

Alright, alright...

CARSON

...and chicken *friiiiied* steak and *friiiiied* green tomatoes
 and...

SISTER

(interrupting, still laughing)
 Alright! You won't hear another word about it from me.

CARSON

Well, alright then...

(CARSON mumbles unintelligibly to the audience.)

SISTER

You saying something, Carson?

CARSON

Nothing much...

SISTER

Truth be told? I'm just happy you'll get to see your old
 friend. And to be honest? I can't wait to see what she
 looks like up close and personal.

CARSON

(teasing)

Which one?

SISTER

Which one do you think?

CARSON

Uh, Marilyn?

SISTER

(imitating her)

Uh, yeah, Marilyn! I can already tell you what the baroness
 looks like. Downright unhealthy! And starved near to death.

CARSON

Oh, you hush now. Look at you teasing me today of all days.

SISTER

Oh, I tease you every day coz I love you. You know that. And I'll hush now. But only if you tell me a bit about what she's like?

CARSON

Well, she's a real beauty, as you already know. But not in a classical sense; rather in a *today* sense. She *is* today, and beautiful inside as well as on the out... you know, something that gets lost is that, down deep, past all that movie star glamour and excitement, she really is just a positively lovely person.

SISTER

I'm sure, but can you imagine going through life looking like that? Mmm mmm mm!

CARSON

Can you imagine the burden of having the world's adoration? I do believe it's wonderful and miserable at the same time. Oh, Sister, I am beyond happy to be seeing her again. I always did enjoy her company so.

SISTER

(insinuating)

I bet you did...

CARSON

You stop now. Please don't tease me... today of all days.

SISTER

I just want you to be your own fine self, not pretend anything and have a wonderful time. Is that too much to ask... just for today?

(A car horn HONKS. CARSON's excitement gets the better of her and she almost loses her balance as she makes a move toward the door.)

(SISTER rushes to her, takes CARSON's arm and walks her gently toward the entrance. SISTER opens the door and MARILYN, looking stunning in a black sheath, mink stole and pumps, shimmies and enters the house as though someone just called "action.")

MARILYN

Where is my sweetest friend, the sensational author Miss Carson McCullers?

CARSON

Marilyn? My dearest Marilyn. Why I'm right here!

(MARILYN MONROE, 32, hugs CARSON like an adorable hurricane and almost knocks her down with her velocity and affection. SISTER manages to hold CARSON upright.)

MARILYN

I can't even begin to tell you how excited I was when Arthur said you wanted to see me and, well, Tania, too. Isn't she something? We just met in the car.

(confidentially re: her clothing)

Do I look alright? I hope this is alright. It's appropriate for luncheon, isn't it?

CARSON

You look wonderful! Just as you always do and just as I remembered. Dearest Marilyn, let me look at you. Just as beautiful as the day we met at the Gladstone Hotel.

MARILYN

Oh, the good, old Gladstone Hotel! We were so happy there. Remember all those double whiskeys we drank by the fire?

CARSON

Sure do. And I still have my special cocktail thermos to prove it!

(re: SISTER, who smiles and stares at the beauty standing before her)

Marilyn, this here's Sister. She takes right good care of me and is not ashamed to say she has been looking *ever so forward* to laying eyes on you today.

(SISTER takes a playful swipe at CARSON.)

MARILYN

Well, isn't that just the sweetest thing I ever heard? Thank you, Sister. It's a wonder to lay eyes on you, too. Let me look at you!

(MARILYN looks SISTER in the eyes, then flings her arms around her and gives her a great big hug)

and kiss, too, just like she did with CARSON. SISTER isn't sure what to do but revels in the attention and affection. CARSON beams at them.)

SISTER

Thank you, Miss Monroe. It's an honest-to-goodness pleasure to make your acquaintance.

MARILYN

Same here, but please call me Marilyn. And I'll call you Sister, OK? I always wanted a sister. Would you be mine? Even if it's just for today?

SISTER

(beaming)

That would be fine!

(CARSON looks past MARILYN to see her other guests. MARILYN walks deeper inside the house, looking at the accouterments in CARSON's rooms. SISTER can't take her eyes off the movie star in her midst.)

(ARTHUR MILLER, 44, tall and elegant in a gray Brooks Brothers suit, long black tie and tortoise-shell glasses appears in the doorway with the emaciated ISAK "TANIA" DINESEN on his arm. Though elderly and fragile, TANIA is a fabulously imperious-looking woman dressed in a gray top and matching skirt with a scarf wrapped around her head like a turban. CARSON can't stop grinning when she sees her. She's besotted with all of them.)

CARSON

My dearest Tania! Welcome!

(SISTER now turns to the other guests and practically gasps at the sight of the gaunt TANIA.)

CARSON — CON'T.

What an undeniable pleasure it is to see you here. This isn't the South as I've mostly written to you about, but it is my most beloved home.

(TANIA extends her hand and CARSON kisses it.)

TANIA

It is truly marvelous to see you again, *Mpendwa*.

CARSON

And an honor to have you here.

(to ARTHUR)

To have all of you here. Thank you so much for delivering them to me.

ARTHUR

My pleasure.

(CARSON extends her hand to ARTHUR and he shakes it, gently, although CARSON does her best to make hers firm, then SISTER takes his overcoat and TANIA's fur. But before she can take them away, TANIA clutches SISTER's hand and speaks to her.)

TANIA

My good woman, I am Baroness Karen Christenze von Blixen-Finecke, but you may refer to me in the way of my dearest friends. And that is as *Tania*.

(SISTER, not knowing what to do and startled by TANIA's appearance, kind of curtsies.)

SISTER

Thank you, ma'am..

(off CARSON)

Tania.

TANIA

We will have much to talk about.

SISTER

Yes, ma'am.

CARSON

Tania will be insulted if you keep referring to her that way, won't you Tania?

TANIA

I will indeed.

(again, to SISTER)

Later, we will have much to discuss.

SISTER

I look forward to it but, for now, I'll go put these coats away so we can all get started.

(SISTER motions to ARTHUR to take CARSON's arm, and now he escorts both CARSON and TANIA slowly through the dining room and toward the chairs in the living room before the fireplace. SISTER heads for the kitchen at stage left.)

CARSON

(to the audience)

I hope she hurries back. I want everyone to know she was so much more to me than just a housekeeper. I want them to see she was my dear friend... and I was hers.

(SISTER disappears offstage left into the kitchen. Eventually, CARSON and TANIA take their seats.)

MARILYN

What a beautiful table, Carson! You have such a lovely home. But I'm not at all surprised.

CARSON

Why thank you, Dearheart.

MARILYN

Dearheart. Oh, how I miss hearing you call me that!

CARSON

Well, that's what you are. Dearest to my heart.

(MARILYN practically wraps herself in the warmth of CARSON's words.)

CARSON – CON'T.

We'll be dining in a little while, but first I thought we'd have a celebratory drink. How does that sound?

(to TANIA)

Champagne, of course.

(TANIA nods, pleased with this information.)

CARSON – CON'T.

We have lots and lots of Champagne.

TANIA

That is very good.

(ARTHUR leans against a wall and keeps an eye on MARILYN, who looks around at the books and photographs on the bookcases. She lets her fingers glide along the edges of the hardbacks as she reads their spines.)

MARILYN

Oh, Carson, I have missed you so! Why is it we haven't seen each other in so long?

CARSON

Well, I suppose it's because you went and got yourself married to Mr. Miller, and I finally left the good old Gladstone Hotel.

(an aside to TANIA and ARTHUR)

I came here, back to Mother, having always functioned under the assumption that I must go home periodically to renew my sense of horror.

MARILYN

You're so naughty.

CARSON

What? It's true! Isn't that what we all do?

(She looks to TANIA, who nods, although TANIA mostly avoids direct eye contact.)

MARILYN

I should have stayed in New York. I was so happy back then. Brooklyn, really. I *much more prefer* it to Connecticut and, well, Hollywood, of course.

CARSON

I thought you were enjoying life as a couple of Connecticut country squires?

MARILYN

That's Arthur. Turns out, I'm not the homemaker... or country girl I dreamed I'd be.

ARTHUR

Marilyn...

(ARTHUR looks at his wife but she doesn't know what he wants. She waits for him to clarify.)

ARTHUR — CON'T.

(correcting her)

You mean your preference is New York. You don't *much more prefer* anything.

MARILYN

Well, it's the truth, isn't it? And shouldn't that be what matters most of all?

ARTHUR

Why, yes, but you want to be correct, don't you?

MARILYN

My *preference* is to be in New York. How's that? All you writers, especially you women... I just have so much admiration for you.

(SISTER returns from the kitchen with a tray of Champagne flutes and passes the drinks around to the guests.)

MARILYN — CON'T.

How I wish I had your way with words.

CARSON

(to SISTER)

Thank you, Sister. I'm glad you're back. This is just lovely. Isn't everything so lovely?

(Her guests nod and murmur appreciatively. CARSON smiles and nods at the audience. See? Everyone's having a good time.)

TANIA

I might like someday to visit Hollywood.

MARILYN

Oh no you wouldn't, Tania.

TANIA

Why not?

MARILYN

It's a place where they'll pay you a thousand dollars for a kiss and fifty cents for your soul.

TANIA

Isn't that everywhere?

MARILYN

No, and I know because I've turned down the first offer enough and held out for the fifty cents.

(When everyone has their drink, SISTER puts down the tray and takes the remaining glass for herself. Then she takes a seat.)

CARSON

Yes, Sister. You have yourself a drink. Will do you a world of good.

(to her guests)

Now, if you'll indulge me, I'd like to make a toast...

(TANIA, not waiting, sips her Champagne.)

CARSON - CON'T.

No need to wait, Tania. You go right on ahead.

(TANIA nods. Of course she'll go right on ahead. CARSON raises her glass as high as she can and her guests follow suit.)

CARSON - CON'T.

I would like to take a moment to welcome you here to our home. Sister and I have been in a near tizzy of excitement awaiting your arrival, haven't we, Sister?

(off SISTER's nod)

And we are honored to be in the divine presence of each and every one of you. Especially you, dear Tania. How lovely it is to have you with us... and all the way from Denmark! To Tania!

(TANIA nods appreciatively but remains stoic. She seldom reacts; she just sips.)

MARILYN/SISTER/ARTHUR

To Tania! Hear, hear!

(After everyone sips their drinks, MARILYN returns to the books in the dining room and ARTHUR pulls up the fourth chair to sit with CARSON, TANIA and SISTER by the fireplace. But he

still looks at his wife rather frequently to see what she's up to and whether she needs him.)

TANIA

I abhor living in Denmark.

(to no one in particular)

Kenya will always be my home. Has anyone ever been to the Dark Continent?

(The non-response makes it clear no one has.)

TANIA - CON'T.

(to SISTER)

Nowhere on this earth is there a nobler people than the Somali. You, Madame, look as though you are a descendent of that great African tribe.

(SISTER raises an eyebrow - come again?)

TANIA - CON'T.

(to the group but also to no one in particular)

My beloved Farah was Somali; he was one of the most dignified mortals who ever lived. He and I were a true unity, even though we were of separate races...

(back to SISTER)

...which was very rare at the time and I imagine still is today.

(SISTER puts her glass down and prepares to head into the kitchen.)

SISTER

(to CARSON)

I forgot to wash the grapes.

CARSON

You can do that later...

SISTER

I'll do it now. You all go on ahead. I'll be right back.

(SISTER, clearly uncomfortable with the conversation, heads toward the kitchen and disappears offstage. CARSON watches after her.)

TANIA

The Somalis are the aristocrats of Africa. They go after lions, which recognize them and are afraid of them.

(confidentially)

The Kikuyu, on the other hand, are a stupid people.

(MARILYN SQUEALS at the discovery of a book on the shelf. ARTHUR rises, then, realizing it's an outburst about nothing, sits back down. TANIA is annoyed that her storytelling has been interrupted.)

CARSON

(delighted)

What is it?

MARILYN

My absolute favorite!

CARSON

Which one?

MARILYN

(caressing the book)

The Brothers Karamazov.

TANIA

(surprised)

You like Dostoyevsky, *Mpendwa*?

MARILYN

I don't just like him. I love him. My dream is to play Grushenka.

CARSON

Still?

MARILYN

You remember?

CARSON

Of course. I've always thought you would play a wonderful Grushenka.

MARILYN

You really think so?

CARSON

I do indeed!

(to ARTHUR)

Don't you?

ARTHUR

Well, Grushenka is *the queen of all infernal women the world can imagine*, after all. And Marilyn is nothing if not *infernal*.

MARILYN

I take that as a compliment.

CARSON

As well you should!

ARTHUR

I meant it as one.

MARILYN

Oh, I don't believe you. Every time I bring it up, Arthur teases me. He doesn't think I can do it.

ARTHUR

That's not true.

MARILYN

That *is* true. He doesn't think I can play such a complicated and *literary* figure.

ARTHUR

(to CARSON and TANIA)

He doesn't think that at all. It's just...

MARILYN

Just what?

ARTHUR

(to CARSON and TANIA)

I wrote a screenplay... for Marilyn.

CARSON

How wonderful!

ARTHUR

I don't want her to get sidetracked...

CARSON
(to the audience)

She's very easily sidetracked...

MARILYN
(to ARTHUR)

I won't get sidetracked, Silly.

CARSON
(to the audience)

She most definitely will get sidetracked.

TANIA
(to ARTHUR)

You wrote a movie?

ARTHUR
(a bit defensively)

Why, yes... it's not my first. I wrote a novel once, too...
about antisemitism..

CARSON
A very important topic. Aren't you a Jew now, too, Marilyn?

MARILYN
Yes, I converted..

CARSON
How wonderful!

MARILYN
I can identify with the Jews. Everybody's always out to get
them, no matter what they do. Like me.

CARSON
Like I said, it's a very important topic.

ARTHUR
Yes... thank you. I know you've been a great champion of
Jewish characters in your work.

CARSON
I'm so glad you noticed. I am very mindful of being an
underdog in this world. But I do like the sound of a movie!
What's it called?

ARTHUR

The Misfits. It's based on a short story I wrote for *Esquire*...

CARSON

Ooohh! What a wonderful title! All of my characters are misfits, you know? Practically every last one of them. Same with their author.

(MARILYN giggles at this.)

CARSON – CON'T.

I think it's because I thought I was born a boy and it took me a very long time to figure out I was a girl. Although, sometimes, I'm still not so sure. That's why I call myself Carson.

(to MARILYN)

Did I ever tell you that by the fire at the Gladstone Hotel? Lula is my real name; Carson's the middle.

MARILYN

I barely even remember where *Marilyn* came from..

CARSON

But I like the *ambiguity* of Carson... no one knows if I'm a man or a woman, even though so many not worth mentioning say my deceased ex-husband, who I divorced not once but twice, wrote my books. Did you ever? Why is it still so hard for men to believe that women can write good books? Look at Tania, for the love of Pete.

TANIA

(sober as a judge)

The name *Isak* means *the one who laughs*. I chose it as my *nom de plume* because I always wanted to be a man. The men in this world have most of the fun and all the freedom.

(CARSON reaches out to give TANIA's hand a squeeze. They have so much in common.)

CARSON

You're positively right about that. We're lucky, though, that in our professions we have quite a bit more freedom than so many of our sisters..

(CARSON looks toward the kitchen in search of SISTER. She wants her to come back.)

TANIA

(to ARTHUR)

What is it about? Your *misfits*?

ARTHUR

Well, Marilyn has been sort of... my collaborator. And sounding board. She's doing a great job. Aren't you, Marilyn?

MARILYN

You really think so?

ARTHUR

Of course. We've drawn a lot of ourselves into the story, which is important... for *authenticity*... it's our attempt to find a home in the world.

(to MARILYN)

Isn't it, Darling?

MARILYN

(still sulking)

I only said it's a *lifelong dream* to play Grushenka. That doesn't mean it's going to happen tomorrow. Although I sure would like it to. Someday.

ARTHUR

I would like that, too.

MARILYN

You would?

ARTHUR

Of course. Whatever makes you happy.

(CARSON smiles at them, sanguine, as if wishing them well with this and hoping it could be so, although she knows it won't.)

(Meanwhile, ARTHUR and MARILYN share a "romantic" moment of eye contact. Then, as though overcome by this brief encounter, MARILYN downs her Champagne and heads over to the bottle to pour herself another glass.)

CARSON

What is it about her that you love so much?

(ARTHUR thinks CARSON is asking him this question about MARILYN. He is relieved to realize she's not, or just that MARILYN is focused on the Champagne and assumes the question is meant for her and answers before he can.)

MARILYN

Grushenka?

CARSON

Yes, or...

(mimicking a Russian royal)

Agrafena Alexandrovna Svetlova.

MARILYN

I love how you know her true name. But of course you do. You've read just about everything, haven't you?

(TANIA's glass is empty. She holds it out for MARILYN who, after filling her own glass, fills TANIA's. ARTHUR lights a cigarette.)

CARSON

Well, I don't know about *everything*..

TANIA

I have read everything.

CARSON

I bet you have, Tania.

TANIA

There is so very much to discuss.

CARSON

Why of course there is.

TANIA

In this life. How can we remember it all?

CARSON

(practically winking at the audience)

Why, I was just asking that very same question!

(back to MARILYN)

But back to Grushenka for a moment. What is it about her?

MARILYN

I know her pain... her *heartbreak*..

TANIA

That is the story of us all. We hunger for what we cannot have. And what we've lost. It is the same in all of our lives – from Rungstedlund to Ngong all the way to... where is this place we are now?

CARSON

Why, all the way to Nyack in the Hudson River Valley of the United States!

TANIA

Everywhere, around the world, it is the human condition – the wish to love and be loved.

(to CARSON)

Like your *Ballad of the Sad Café, Mpendwa*.

MARILYN

The lover and the beloved.

(CARSON is thrilled they know her work.)

CARSON

You all know about that?

MARILYN

Of course! Problem is, I'm usually the beloved.

ARTHUR

Yes, you inspire...

(quoting)

...a love which is wild, extravagant and beautiful as the poison lilies of the swamp.

MARILYN

That's me! Just a bunch of poison lilies.

ARTHUR

(teasing)

From the swamp!

CARSON

I'm just so flattered you all know about that!

TANIA

But, of course, it can never truly be so. It is impossible to love and be loved, always together and always at the same time.

CARSON

That is true. That's why I wrote it. After all, I am the queen of unrequited love, don't you know?

MARILYN

Isn't that something? Tania just took one little thing I said and turned it into something beautiful then it came back as something Carson already wrote down.

CARSON

Universal truths. That's what artists suss out and share. We say what everyone thinks but may not have the capacity or comprehension to note.

TANIA

(to MARILYN)

You already are a wonderful Grushenka, *Mpendwa*.

(MARILYN looks as though she might float away from all the praise.)

ARTHUR

However, lest we forget, her *heartbreak* was a ruse to disguise her manipulation... *of men*.

(to MARILYN)

That is the primary trait of your great character *Grushenka*.

MARILYN

Oh, you be quiet.

(ARTHUR looks to CARSON and TANIA to agree with him. But they don't.)

MARILYN — CON'T.

Why do you have to ruin it?

CARSON

I would say there was much more to Grushenka than that.

ARTHUR

And I would say that's her main feature. Her primary trait and prevailing characteristic.

TANIA

Perhaps these are things only a woman can understand.

CARSON

Yes, I think you're right.

MARILYN

Tell him, Ladies!

ARTHUR

Yet she was written by a man. How do you explain that?

CARSON

(to the audience)

How can a man be so smart and yet so stupid? To persist like that... doesn't he know anything about women? About his own wife?

TANIA

Arthur?

ARTHUR

Yes?

TANIA

Do you know that we can transform ourselves from great suffering if we tell a story about it?

ARTHUR

Why, yes I do, Tania.

TANIA

Good. Then we will have much to talk about.

ARTHUR

I look forward to it.

TANIA

I am part of an ancient tribe, you know: The storyteller.

CARSON

That you are, Tania. You are indeed that!

TANIA

It is said I am a modern-day Scheherazade.

ARTHUR

I am aware that people call you that...

TANIA

I am 3,000 years old.

(CARSON claps her hands with glee. She loves the weirdness and playfulness of this conversation.)

TANIA – CON'T.

Soon, we will talk.

ARTHUR

Can't wait.

(draining his glass)

Whenever you're ready.

(to CARSON re: the Champagne)

Is there more?

CARSON

Yes, of course! There's enough for a small army. Or hopefully the four of us.

(calling out)

Sister! Will you bring out the Champagne, please? We'd like another bottle! And we'd like you to grace us with your warm and wonderful presence.

(to TANIA)

Would you like some more?

(TANIA holds out her not-yet-empty glass as though she were a pauper. ARTHUR drains what's left of the bottle into her glass.)

MARILYN

In the end, all that matters is love. Even though she schemes for much of the story, in the end, she gives up everything for Dmitri, her one true love.

ARTHUR

Alright, enough about *Grushenka*. Although she's not yet 3,000 years old – like Tania – let's give her a much-deserved rest, shall we, *Darling*?

(MARILYN is hurt and ARTHUR, feeling sorry, goes over to her to kiss her cheek. She reluctantly lets him, but it's awkward and clear she's annoyed – and that he is, too. It's a scene they play, over and over...)

MARILYN

Carson, did I ever tell you I was crying when Arthur met me?

ARTHUR

Not this again, please...

MARILYN

Seems I haven't stopped in all this time.

CARSON

(to the audience)

She was crying well before then. Never could get enough proof of love. The same was true for me, I suppose. It's one of the so many things we had in common. And our love of cocktails, of course.

(MARILYN moves away from ARTHUR and takes his seat. He remains standing where she was.)

(SISTER rejoins them with Champagne in the living room – arriving to CHEERS all around – and pours some more, including a glass for herself. Then she puts the bottle down and retakes her chair to join in the conversation. There isn't a chair for ARTHUR, so he remains standing.)

CARSON

(to SISTER)

Yes, you sit right there. Please... join us.

SISTER

Did I hear talk of a movie?

CARSON

Yes! Arthur wrote one for Marilyn to star in.

SISTER

Isn't that exciting?

MARILYN

It's such a sad story...

(off ARTHUR, for his benefit)

...but fascinating, too.

CARSON

(to MARILYN)

Sounds like you, Dearheart.

ARTHUR

It's about the American West. Today. Not what it's been in the past... An aging cowboy... he needs to find a new way to exist. So, he starts a business wrangling wild horses. Mustangs. It's about survival... change... people trying to connect but are unable to connect... with an unrequited longing for something they can't name...

CARSON

What part do you play, Marilyn?

MARILYN

Roslyn...

(not happy)

A former stripper... a thinly disguised *Marilyn*, wouldn't you say?

ARTHUR

Not at all...

MARILYN

You know, when I was a pin-up girl, they gave me so many different names. I can't say *Roslyn* wasn't one of them.

ARTHUR

The *character* of *Roslyn* is recently divorced...

MARILYN

Like me...

ARTHUR

No, my dear, you are recently married.

MARILYN

Not that recently.

CARSON

(to MARILYN, trying to tamp things down and lighten them up)

What is it about this compelling story that intrigues you? There must be so much.

(But ARTHUR's been on a roll talking about it, so he thinks this question is meant for him when it's really for MARILYN.)

ARTHUR

It's the trifecta: man against man, man against nature and man against himself.

CARSON

(to ARTHUR)

But isn't the story meant to be about Marilyn? I mean, *Roslyn*?

(MARILYN rises and wanders off, back into the books in the dining room. ARTHUR paces as he speaks.)

ARTHUR

Yes, of course. It's a celebration of her warmth, her spirit and beauty... her humanity...

CARSON

(calling out to MARILYN in the other room)

What's wrong with all that?

(MARILYN doesn't answer.)

ARTHUR

It's her story, too. But there are others. Naturally, the cowboys... and other characters... they fall in love with her and vie for her affection. Like every man who meets her is wont to do.

CARSON

(to ARTHUR)

Naturally!

(to the audience)

And spend most of their lovesick time fending each other off. Like poor Arthur's been doing since the moment he fell in love.

ARTHUR

But it's poetic. Not ugly.

CARSON

Of course not!

ARTHUR

(to MARILYN)

It's a terrific role for you, Darling. Isn't it?

MARILYN

Sure. After all, I've been playing her my whole life, haven't I?

CARSON

It's going to be your last film, Dearheart. Oh, how I wish I could warn you it's going to be your last film and urge you to relish it.

(instead, to MARILYN)

Aren't you the least bit excited about it?

MARILYN

(not sounding so sure)

Sure.

TANIA

It does not sound like that is the case.

MARILYN

It's just... Arthur could have come up with anything for me and he comes up with cowboys and horses?

ARTHUR

It's from my short story.

(to CARSON)

But I'm still tinkering...

CARSON

Oh, I hope you're not blocked, Arthur.

ARTHUR

(uncomfortably)

No, it's just... I've had a lot on my mind.

(toward MARILYN)

But it will be good for us.

(MARILYN looks at him with a small smile.)

ARTHUR – CON'T.

We have to try?

(back to CARSON)

It's been a rough time... with all that *business*... McCarthy.

CARSON

I thought that was over?

ARTHUR

It reverberates... resounds...

CARSON

So ugly and unfortunate.

ARTHUR

A sordid business.

TANIA

What *business*?

CARSON

It's just been a horrible business with a horrible senator who thought everyone with an artistic bone in his body is a Communist. Which is positively not true!

TANIA

Well...

CARSON

Well, what?

TANIA

Maybe it is just a little bit true, *Mpendwa*?

ARTHUR

Well, yes, of course... *idealistically... in theory*, sure, but not in practice.

CARSON

Not since the '30s anyway.

TANIA

I have heard of this. It is rather awful. I will say what I want about Denmark, and I will not spare its feelings, but I cannot understand why Americans – who settled an entirely new continent...

CARSON

Or *conquered*, as the case may be...

TANIA

...can be so, so...

CARSON

So what, Tania?

TANIA

Afraid.

CARSON

We are *afraid*... what in the world are we so afraid of?

TANIA

It is almost the same as anywhere. There are those who hunger to learn and to see more, to know something about the world beyond themselves. They are the storytellers. The artists. And then there are those who are afraid of all of those things... of what is *other*... and because of that fear they make life hard for everyone else. That senator, where is he from?

ARTHUR

Wisconsin.

TANIA

That is right.

(wistfully)

I know that place. The man from Wisconsin is afraid.

CARSON

That's all over now. Thank heavens.

SISTER

I don't know about that...

CARSON

What are you saying?

ARTHUR

Well, whether it is or it isn't, he sure hurt a lot of people.

CARSON

He ruined careers.

ARTHUR

He ruined lives.

TANIA

Why did he go after you? Are you a Communist?

ARTHUR

He came after me because... look, if Marilyn and I hadn't married, I think he would have left me out of it and all of it would have gone away sooner. We gave him a hail Mary...

MARILYN

He means a *hail Marilyn!*

(to ARTHUR)

I hate when you say it's all my fault.

ARTHUR

I never say it's your fault. I say it was a publicity stunt, that's all. You're the biggest name in Hollywood. He tried to make hay with you. With *us*.

MARILYN

It was a horrible time.

ARTHUR

Yes, it was.

CARSON

But it's all done now.

(SISTER shakes her head no.)

CARSON — CON'T.

What are you saying, Sister? What do you know?

SISTER

Men like that never go away. He'll haunt this country for a very long time.

CARSON

Well, you may be right about that, but I think it's a badge of honor, Arthur. Standing up like that? And Marilyn? So many didn't...

(ARTHUR walks over to MARILYN and puts his arm around his wife.)

ARTHUR

Marilyn was brave to stand with me.

MARILYN

Arthur was the brave one. He didn't name names. And of course, I stood with you. You're my husband. We take care of each other, don't we? Till death do us part?

(MARILYN looks like she might cry. ARTHUR tries to hold her close, but she wriggles away and retakes the empty seat in the living room.)

CARSON
(to the audience)

Did she really believe that was gonna happen? Poor, poor Marilyn.

(to MARILYN)
I sure hope you're right about that, you lovebirds. That wasn't the case for me... or Tania for that matter...

(TANIA nods and sips...)

SISTER
(a quiet warning)
Foster Child...

CARSON
(to SISTER)
It's alright. I'm alright. It's helpful to remember... even the hard times.

(to the group)
I divorced Reeves for the second time before he killed himself. This November 19th will be six years.
(directly to MARILYN)
An overdose of alcohol and barbiturates.

(There is a moment of silence. MARILYN goes over and kneels beside CARSON for comfort. CARSON speaks directly to MARILYN)

CARSON – CON'T.
People need to be careful with those things.

(MARILYN stands back up and moves away; she knows CARSON meant that *she* should be careful with those things. After all, that's what's going to kill her in a few years.)

TANIA
It will be 28 years this May – the fourteenth – since Denys died ever so tragically... I still imagine he's with me every day, especially in the morning when the sun is rising.

(TANIA drains her glass and then holds it out again for a refill. SISTER fills it.)

TANIA – CON'T.
(faraway)
Thank you, Farah.

(SISTER looks to CARSON but CARSON motions to her to ignore this and just smiles.)

MARILYN

What I wouldn't give for less sadness in the world... I hope you don't mind me asking, Tania, but has there been anyone else? Since Denys?

TANIA

I learned long ago that if I'm going to be alone, I want to be by myself.

(TANIA takes another sip, still lost in thought about Denys, while ARTHUR takes a notepad and pen out of his coat pocket and jots down what TANIA just said. It will make an appearance in *The Misfits* script a short time later.)

CARSON

(to the audience)

You see that? That line's gonna wind up in his movie script, just you watch... it's a good line. Wish I'd grabbed it.

MARILYN

What about you, Carson? Has there been anyone since Reeves?

CARSON

Ooh, I fall in love every day, Marilyn, you know that.

(coyly)

But no one I should tell you about. By name, anyway.

MARILYN

As long as you have opportunities for love, I'm happy. All of us. I don't want to imagine a time when that goes away, or when we're not in love with somebody or something.

CARSON

If it's any consolation, I don't believe that's possible.

MARILYN

I hope you're right. I just wish...

(MARILYN, on the verge of tears without quite crying them, returns to the bookshelves.)

CARSON

Are you alright?

MARILYN

I'm fine.

(She's not fine.)

CARSON

If I could get out of this chair I'd come over there and comfort you.

(ARTHUR takes MARILYN's vacated seat near CARSON, TANIA and SISTER and changes the subject. MARILYN realizes he's ignoring her and doesn't like it.)

ARTHUR

(saying to them both)

So, are you working on something now? Anything in particular?

TANIA

That is mostly behind me. But not entirely. Does it ever go away?

(ARTHUR looks to CARSON.)

CARSON

Trying to. But, once again, I'm blocked.

ARTHUR

I'm sorry to hear that.

CARSON

Yes, but I'll get there. I just have to. That Champagne bunny from Louisiana told me that a friend of his, Miss Nelle Harper Lee from Alabama, is covering a similar subject matter and it pains me deeply that, in addition to being in a desperate state with my health, I have to endure a run of the block on top of all that. It's the night glare to my illumination.

MARILYN

(intrigued; she starts paying attention to the people again over the books)

What's that, Carson?

CARSON

It's the way I see things. There are illuminations... inspirations that drive or compel you to write. And then there's night glare... the shadows. The obstacles that

CARSON – CON'T.

prevent you from working. In my case, it's my poor health and some of the more *silent sufferings* I've had to endure.

SISTER

And the *drinking*..

CARSON

(annoyed)

And the *ancillary factors* that can find their way into a person's life at one point or another.

(back to ARTHUR)

Anyway, these *ancillaries* help us manage. And cope. To have something to look forward to when everything seems so black and bleak.

ARTHUR

You'll get through it. We always do, don't we?

CARSON

Well thank the Muses for that.

TANIA

Unless we don't...

CARSON

Oh, Tania... please don't put that on me now. I don't think I can handle it.

ARTHUR

All I want to do is write. If I can't write, then I don't know who I am or what I'm meant to do in this life.

(MARILYN looks pained by his comment but he doesn't notice. The trio of writers is far too engaged in itself.)

TANIA

Even though I came late to writing, in a serious sense, it is the lifeblood that runs through me.

CARSON

I just don't know what else there is in the world if you can't tell stories. Write it all down, pass it along and live forever. Hopefully..

(to TANIA)

Why, you know that better than anyone. You're the greatest living writer in this room, that's for sure.

CARSON – CON'T.

I hope you're not offended, Arthur.

ARTHUR

Not at all. I happen to agree.

(TANIA nods approvingly.)

CARSON

I just mean to say that our dear Tania has been writing for nearly longer than any of us has been alive, and what she has accomplished is just so much to be desired for a person who chooses the literary arts as not merely a profession, but a way of life.

(to TANIA)

Tell us a story. Tell us one of your glorious Gothic tales.

MARILYN

Tell us about Africa!

CARSON

And sumptuous French feasts! Tell us about Babette and those stodgy old Protestants from Denmark.

TANIA

I would be honored, however, it is best to tell stories around a table... with a meal, our friends – past, present and future – and copious amounts of Champagne.

CARSON

Why, of course! You are positively right! Is everyone ready for luncheon? Sister, help me out of this chair and, Arthur, would you be a dear and escort our dear Tania?

(ARTHUR and SISTER rise to CARSON's request. Everyone inches their way toward the dining room and the dining room table.)

CARSON – CON'T.

As one of my least-admired writers, and an incomprehensible one to boot, but still a dear friend and imaginary family member, Miss Virginia Woolf, once implored us: *To the lighthouse!* Or at least to the next best and more accessible place available to us: the table. *To the table!*

(BLACKOUT.)

End scene.

SCENE THREE

(TANIA sits at the head of the dining room table and holds court. She mostly looks into the middle distance and rarely makes eye contact as she speaks.)

(ARTHUR is to TANIA's left with an empty chair for SISTER to his left, but she's not there and there's no place-setting.)

(CARSON is at TANIA's right with MARILYN beside her at her right.)

(The quartet slurps oysters, eats grapes and sips Champagne. CARSON has a lit cigarette smoking much of the time, as do the others. There is some light classical music playing on the victrola in the background.)

TANIA

(in the midst of telling a story and trying to remember something)

...it was an odd, childish-sounding place... *Mish Mosh*... or *Poppycock*...

ARTHUR

Oshkosh?

TANIA

Yes, I believe that's it. *Oshkosh*. Is that in Wisconsin?

ARTHUR

Yes.

TANIA

That's it! That is where he saw not a single white man for the three years he was there, *in Oshkosh*, choosing instead to live among the Chippewa, who, of course, did not see him as *mzungu*...

MARILYN

(enraptured)

What's that, Tania?

TANIA

Mzungu is Swahili for 'white man who wanders aimlessly,' which is what white people tended to do in Africa. And, I imagine, still do.

(Her audience chuckles at this.)

TANIA – CON'T.

They saw him as a man. A man as they were. He lived in a cabin he called *Frydenlund*, which means happy grove. *Frydenlund* was high on a bluff where the Wolf River met Swamp Creek, near the Chippewa encampment. There, he fished and hunted and even baked his own bread.

MARILYN

Sounds like a real Davy Crockett to me!

(ARTHUR puts his finger to his lips: don't interrupt the storyteller. But TANIA doesn't notice, she's practically in a trance telling her story.)

TANIA

He was at one with the land... at one with the animals. A self-reliant king among men and the most adventurous, *creative* spirit you could ever hope to meet. *My father...*
(the words hit her hard and she pauses before continuing)

The Chippewa called him *Boganis*, and he published under that name. *Letters from the Hunt* is one of his books...

CARSON

Wilhelm in Wisconsin sounds a lot like you in Kenya, Tania.

TANIA

I went to Africa a Dane and came back a Masai. My father went to Wisconsin a Dane and returned a Chippewa.
(dreaming)

He was the love of my life, and when he died – a suicide – he hanged himself from the rafters of our family home in Copenhagen...

CARSON

Oh, Tania...

(to the audience)

My father killed himself in his jewelry store, but we all lied about it. I myself wrote that he died of a problem with his heart. Bebe wanted it that way...

TANIA

I hungered for my father for the rest of my life... I wasn't yet 10 years old... Afterward, I was a misfit in my own family. My love for him was too great; there was no room for anything else and no one wanted to be reminded of what they had lost. I spent more time with our servants than with my own mother and siblings. It was as though a part of myself had died along with him... although I didn't try suicide myself at the time. That came later.

(Everyone is quiet a moment, waiting while TANIA sips her Champagne before continuing.)

TANIA – CON'T.

It is believed my father never recovered from his cousin Agnes's death. Agnes, the poor girl with whom everyone believed he was in love, died of typhus in Italy when she was not yet 20. He mourned her his whole life. He also suffered from syphilis, as do I. My father's destiny has, curiously enough to a great extent, been repeated in my own... although he went mad, and I haven't. Yet...

CARSON

(to the audience)

I am of the firm belief that life is a race against time to stay sane.

(smiling at MARILYN then TANIA)

You can rest assured they thought the same.

TANIA

He was 27 when he went to Oshkosh to be a pioneer in the North American woods and, after he returned, he became my father. My Chippewa father. I would like to go there, to see my father's *Frydenlund*, but I would not like to meet that senator there.

ARTHUR

I don't think you have to worry about that, Tania...

TANIA

Why not?

ARTHUR

Because he's dead.

TANIA

Oh, I am very glad to hear that.

MARILYN

(softly)

I never knew my father.

TANIA

I am unsure of which is worse, *Mpendwa*. To suffer the pain of losing one's father or never having had one in the first place.

MARILYN

I grew up mostly in foster homes...

ARTHUR

Yes, Marilyn can spot an orphan from a mile away. It's uncanny. She taught me how... to see the bottomless loneliness that no parented person can really know.

(tenderly)

Marilyn is the quintessential orphan... the saddest girl in the world.

MARILYN

You used to love that about me. It made you feel strong.

(MARILYN turns away; she knows that's no longer the case.)

ARTHUR

(to TANIA)

My father was illiterate... I'm still ashamed of how ashamed I was of that when I was a younger man.

CARSON

Is he still living? Your father?

ARTHUR

Yes. He and Marilyn are madly in love. Sometimes I think she's going to run off with him.

MARILYN

He lets me call him Dad, which I appreciate.

(giving it right back to ARTHUR)

I just hope I don't lose him in the divorce!

ARTHUR

Marilyn...

MARILYN

Oh, I'm just teasing... you know that.

(MARILYN sips her drink and looks away.)

CARSON

(to the audience)

No, she's not. Marilyn does 'win' Mr. Isidore Miller in the divorce. And he, not Arthur, will go to her funeral. When asked why he won't attend, Arthur will say, Because she won't be there.

(TANIA clears her throat, commanding their attention, then continues where she left off.)

TANIA

Losing my father and Denys... then leaving Farah and Ngong... these are among my most painfully insurmountable memories... Along with the child Denys and I... the one he didn't want us to have and so I didn't have it. Still, I called him *Daniel*... I knew then that wherever I may be in the future, I will be wondering whether there is rain at Ngong.

(finally making eye contact with CARSON and MARILYN)

We are all childless women here?

MARILYN

(softly)

Not for lack of trying.

CARSON

(to the audience)

I was pregnant once... Bebe, well... she thought it best I didn't have it...

(sanguine)

Can you imagine me with a sweet little child?

(convinced)

Me neither!

(SISTER returns from the kitchen, carrying her own plate and utensils. CARSON waves her over to join them... SISTER excitedly takes the empty seat next to ARTHUR, unaware of the solemnity of the moment, and sets her place.)

SISTER

What'd I miss?

MARILYN

Tania's telling the most remarkable stories.

SISTER

Please, don't let me interrupt.

(SISTER pours herself some Champagne then settles into her chair to listen to TANIA.)

TANIA

(without skipping a beat)

When Denys crashed his plane, he burned to death.

(SISTER's expectant smile turns into a frown.)

TANIA – CON'T.

There were neither flesh nor bones, so we took the ashes from the seat where he had been sitting and placed them in a casket. A short time later, I tried to kill myself. *Naturally*. No one should experience such loss... such tragedy.

CARSON

(to the audience)

Tenn once said I had known so much tragedy, it scared people... Sister tells me I should be careful how much I tell others, but I don't have to worry about that with this crowd. They are the we of me.

TANIA

And so, Farah took me to Mombasa, where I set sail for my return to Denmark.

SISTER

How long were you there, Tania?

CARSON

Oh, Sister! Haven't you read *Out of Africa* yet? We have it right over there on the shelf. It's a positively beautiful book. I read it every year. And you should, too.

(TANIA nods appreciatively.)

SISTER

I didn't know it was a story for me.

TANIA

My stories are for everyone, *Mpendwa*. Even though it tells of a white woman on a black continent, it is for anyone who has ever left home.

SISTER

Well, that's me then. I came north to work in the Rockland Psychiatric Hospital before coming to live here.

(to CARSON)

With my foster child.

CARSON

(squeezing MARILYN's hand)

See? I'm an orphan, too.

(joking, and trying for levity)

So, in addition to cooking, cleaning and keeping me in the highest spirits *and fostering me*, Sister is here, as well, when I have my on-the-regular nervous breakdowns.

MARILYN

Ooh, maybe I can borrow her sometime?

(to SISTER)

Would that be alright?

SISTER

The more the merrier!

(ARTHUR looks at MARILYN, unamused, and she hides behind her drink.)

(SISTER lights a cigarette.)

(TANIA clears her throat, eager to go on with her story, then speaks to everyone and no one in particular.)

TANIA

When I arrived in 1914, Farah was there to greet me. And when I left Ngong 17 years later, Farah accompanied me. I never had a more faithful and supportive friend in my life. Before I left Africa for the last time, I looked into Farah's eyes and said, *I see you in a thousand different ways*.

MARILYN

What does that mean, Tania?

TANIA

Precisely what it says.

(MARILYN looks to CARSON for explanation but CARSON just shrugs, smiles and luxuriates in TANIA's words.)

MARILYN

I can't imagine going so far away. To a strange land filled with so many strange and unfamiliar things.

SISTER

Try moving from the South to New York City!

CARSON

But what a wonder all those strange and unfamiliar things are while the South is full of ghosts... all the same antique and stereotypical notions that prevent people from being who and what they are.

MARILYN

(to TANIA)

Why did you go in the first place?

TANIA

I went there to marry. And I did love my husband, Bror, at least for a little while, but then you can only see so many Masai babies with your husband's blue eyes before you do not love your husband anymore...

(Each person responds physically with their own ouch.)

TANIA – CON'T.

After I returned to Denmark and started writing *Seven Gothic Tales*, Bror said, *Couldn't you have done with four?*

(ARTHUR chuckles at this, angering MARILYN, who gives him a stern look.)

MARILYN

It sounds like Bror was a mean old boor!

TANIA

Yes, but, even when I no longer loved him, I found so much more to love in Africa... I have always loved animals. But now, to meet them on their own ground, and not enforced into human existence... that was an entirely different

TANIA — CON'T.

experience than I had in *Rungstedland*, my family home in Denmark and where I was born. There is something about safari life that makes you forget all your sorrows and feel as if you had drunk half a bottle of Champagne, bubbling over with heartfelt gratitude for being alive.

CARSON

(raising her glass to toast)

I like the sound of that.

(MARILYN clinks her glass with CARSON's.)

TANIA

And, of course, *hunting*.. all hunting is a kind of love affair.

MARILYN

And I like the sound of that!

TANIA

Do you know what I did after I shot my first lion? I sent the skin to the king of Denmark.

MARILYN

You didn't!

TANIA

It is said he hung it in one of his castles for many years to come.

CARSON

What a gift!

ARTHUR

Yes, it all sounds very romantic, but I'm not ashamed to say I'd be frightened to death to go on safari.

MARILYN

No, you wouldn't. You're a brave sort, Arthur.

ARTHUR

I'm glad you think so.

MARILYN

Oh, I'd take care of you! I wouldn't let any lions or elephants or zebras or... what other animals are there, Tania?

TANIA

Too many to count.

MARILYN

I wouldn't let any of them *maul* you. No, I'd tame them then I'd take all those formerly wild animals home and live with them happily ever after as one great big warm and cozy family.

CARSON

In Connecticut?

MARILYN

No... in Brooklyn! I'd get us a big, beautiful brownstone where we all could live. Always together.

ARTHUR

I'm afraid you'll have to go in search of your menagerie with your friends, Marilyn. Without me.

(MARILYN pretends to pout.)

ARTHUR — CON'T.

I'll stay home and console myself with that fact that I'll finally be able to get some work done in your absence.

MARILYN

(ignoring him)

Wouldn't that be wonderful?

(to CARSON, SISTER and TANIA)

When can we go? I mean it!

CARSON

What a motley crew we would be!

MARILYN

The motliest for sure!

(to ARTHUR)

Is that a word?

(He shrugs, but CARSON answers for him.)

CARSON

It is now!

(mostly to herself)

Just wonderful...

(The reverie and good humor die down as everyone accepts that it will never happen. ARTHUR helps himself to a handful of grapes while CARSON lights another cigarette.)

ARTHUR

Tania, I hope you don't mind... but I have to ask.

TANIA

I don't mind any question.

ARTHUR

What in the world kind of doctor put you on a diet of oysters and Champagne?

TANIA

My doctor is horrified by my diet, naturally, but I love Champagne and I love oysters and they agree with me.

SISTER

What do you do when oysters are out of season?

TANIA

I turn to asparagus in those dreary months...

(They all chuckle at this.)

CARSON

(to the audience)

In just a few days' time Tania's going to wind up in the hospital, diagnosed with acute malnutrition described as that of a concentration camp survivor...

TANIA

...but I will tell you, when my doctor told me not to travel – to not come to America because of my poor health – I told him that going to America will be like going to Africa all over again, and there was nothing he could say to that.

MARILYN

I should try that with the studio heads...

(pretending)

I don't want to play another showgirl who all the men ogle and paw and all she wants to do is find a rich husband. No, no, no! I won't do it and you can't make me!

(CARSON and SISTER crack up at this.)

SISTER

You tell 'em, Miss Monroe. You tell 'em good!

(ARTHUR, unamused by his wife's aside, goes back to questioning TANIA.)

ARTHUR

So, what have you been doing? Since you arrived in New York?

TANIA

I have been feted everywhere I go...

CARSON

As well you should...

TANIA

I was taken to lunch at the St. Regis...

CARSON

By whom, Tania?

TANIA

I'm not one to name names...

CARSON

Of course not...

TANIA

(not skipping a beat)

...but since you asked, Babe Paley, Cecil Beaton, Truman Capote...

(CARSON is visibly uncomfortable by the mention of Capote's name. A fact not lost on TANIA.)

TANIA — CON'T.

What a strange and oddly talented little man...

CARSON

A Champagne bunny if ever there was one.

MARILYN

What's that? Champagne bunny.

CARSON

Why you're one, too, aren't you? You know what it means.

(MARILYN laughs at the thought and CARSON does, too. Then MARILYN shimmies toward her husband.)

MARILYN

I'm a Champagne bunny. Isn't that cute?

ARTHUR

(unamused)

Adorable...

SISTER

Who else, Tania? What other famous people have you met? Miles Davis?

CARSON

Greta Garbo?

TANIA

Again, I don't like to disclose private social engagements...

CARSON

Of course not!

TANIA

But there were cocktails with John Steinbeck, dinner with Gloria Vanderbilt and, when I spoke at the Young Men's Hebrew Association Poetry Center, I was told it was considered the *place to be*.

CARSON

Why of course it was!

MARILYN

I'm sorry we missed it. How did we miss it, Arthur?

ARTHUR

You weren't feeling well last month. Remember?

(She doesn't. ARTHUR shrugs and there's a moment of silence, which makes CARSON uncomfortable, so she injects a new topic into the discussion.)

CARSON

Tania, tell Sister and Marilyn about your talk. At the Academy dinner.

TANIA

It was titled *On Mottoes of My Life*, in which I explained the five primary phases of my existence: First, *Like the Eagle I Shall Grow Up* tells of my girlhood, trying to determine what my life should be. Then there was *It is Necessary to Set Sail, It is Not Necessary to Survive*, which describes my desire for a creative life, not the bourgeois existence that was expected of me in Copenhagen. Next came *I Respond*, in which I become a multifaceted being in Africa. After that, *Why Not?*, during which I return to Denmark. I thought I was broken until I began to write. And, lastly, *Be Bold*, which is where I am now; an aging storyteller without much time left to tell her tales.

CARSON

Please don't say that.

TANIA

But it's true, *Mpendwa*. I am old and sick. What can I do but hope I'll live on through my work and my friends?

CARSON

But we've only just met and become a family! We need more time.

SISTER

It's alright, Carson...

MARILYN

Should we name the chapters of our lives like you, Tania?

TANIA

Yes, and your clothing.

SISTER

Beg your pardon?

TANIA

Clothing is the extension of your inner being. It should be named.

(re: her outfit)

Meet *Sober Truth with Tristan and Isolde*.

(Everyone cracks up at this and, for the first time all day, even TANIA giggles.)

TANIA — CON'T.

Due to its medieval and romantic flair.

CARSON

There she is! The one who laughs!

(This gets another round of giggles. Then, CARSON looks down at what she's wearing and comes up with a name.)

CARSON – CON'T.

Look at me, I'm wearing *A Misfit for All Seasons*... but I should tell you, I have a Chinese robe that is more than 2,000 years old, which I wear on all *state occasions*.

(to SISTER)

Now, why didn't I wear that today?

SISTER

That robe most certainly is not 2,000 years old.

CARSON

That robe most certainly is!

SISTER

Maybe one-hundred and fifty. Tops. You fabulist, you.

CARSON

Oh, hush yourself, Sister. It was indeed a missed opportunity not wearing that on such a special occasion. You should have reminded me of that particular form of sartorial splendor... Now, you, Marilyn.

MARILYN

(thinking)

Um... OK, I'm a... I'm wearing..

(shimmying)

It's All Really Make Believe, Isn't It?

CARSON

Oooh, I like that one!

TANIA

Everything is a story we tell others as well as ourselves...

CARSON

(to the audience)

That is precisely what I've been trying to say this whole time!

MARILYN

Arthur, who are you wearing?

ARTHUR

(looking at himself)

Why, I'm sporting Brooks Brothers. Isn't that obvious?

MARILYN

Oh, you're no fun.

ARTHUR

(taking off his coat)

What? That's its name. It's on the label and everything.

MARILYN

So sullen and serious. All the time. Never good for a single laugh.

SISTER

(rising from her chair)

If you'll excuse me, I am not going to name my dress, but I am going to call the travel agency and book our safari...

(off their laughter)

Or, better yet, put the soufflés in the oven. Now, please don't get eaten by any lions while I'm gone!

(SISTER scurries off to the kitchen.)

SISTER – CON'T.

(to herself)

We wouldn't want them to die of alcohol poisoning.

(SISTER exits offstage into the kitchen.)

CARSON

(to TANIA)

I know what you mean about your Farah. I don't know where I'd be without the love and support and, damn it, just wonderful friendship of my dear Sister. It's another reason I need to get past this hard-as-hell block.

MARILYN

Your book?

CARSON

That's right. I want it to be my final statement. About the South... it is a wish of mine to depict Negroes – as I

CARSON — CON'T.

believe I do Jews and queers and all the other misfits in the world... now how was that remarked upon?

(CARSON recites from memory.)

CARSON — CON'T.

...to me the most impressive aspect of The Heart is a Lonely Hunter is the astonishing humanity that enables a white writer, for the first time in Southern fiction, to handle Negro characters with as much ease and justice as those of her own race.

TANIA

Who said that, *Mpendwa*?

CARSON

Mr. Richard Wright, who became my dear friend, in a review about my first novel. I would like for everyone to know it to be true.

MARILYN

Everyone knows that, Carson.

CARSON

Thank you for saying that, Dearheart. But I don't know. My book, the new one, is your *Grushenka*. I won't feel complete without it.

(to ARTHUR)

Don't you feel that way?

ARTHUR

I'm not sure I follow.

CARSON

Is *Salesman* your great statement?

ARTHUR

Well, I hope it's one of many...

CARSON

Or is it the *body* of work that matters? People seldom remember the body. It's usually one or the other or none at all. What do you think, Arthur? You've written so many wonderful plays.

ARTHUR

Why, thank you. That's a hell of a hard question to answer. But isn't that what being a writer is all about? You always think you have something more to say, but then it feels impossible to find the time or space... or the right words with which to say it.

MARILYN

That's Arthur's way of saying I get in the way.

ARTHUR

That's not at all what *Arthur* is saying.

MARILYN

That I take up too much time and energy. That I'm a drain...

ARTHUR

Marilyn, please...

CARSON

Dearheart, you know that's not true...

MARILYN

And that before he married me, he had time to read and write and think and be... and spend all day in his study if we wanted to.

CARSON

(to the audience)

When she's dead, he'll write a play about her. He'll call it After the Fall and he'll be eviscerated for it. But it will do him a world of good to exorcise Marilyn from his soul, at least for a little while.

MARILYN

...I get it. I understand. I *require* a lot. I'm a handful. Isn't that what you always say?

(to the group)

It's what everyone always says and has said about me since the beginning of time!

CARSON

(again trying to appease)

If it's any consolation, I have been considered *difficult* by every person who's ever made my acquaintance. Every single one. And I have more than just a feeling it's true. So what? We don't care what others think, do we?

(Of course they care, especially CARSON cares.)

(MARILYN lifts the Champagne bottle and frowns to see that it's empty. Then she sulks. CARSON puts her right hand over MARILYN's.)

CARSON – CON'T,
It's alright. Sister will be back with more soon. Why don't you have a cigarette to tide you over?

(MARILYN rises abruptly from the table.)

MARILYN
I need to powder my nose. Where is it, Carson?

(CARSON points to the bathroom, near the front door at stage right and out of sight.)

ARTHUR
Marilyn?

(She turns but doesn't say anything.)

ARTHUR – CON'T.
Please don't take anything.

(MARILYN's purse lies on the table, and she takes it, pointedly, then heads toward the bathroom offstage. Everyone is quiet a moment after she's gone.)

TANIA
(to no one in particular)
No one can be a savior of someone else.
(to the audience)

This soiree was meant to be for me, not a pity party for a doomed marriage...

(a beat, to the audience)
After this... that day, someone asked me what I thought of Miss Monroe, and I said, It is not that she is pretty, although she is incredibly pretty – but that she radiates at the same time unbounded vitality and a kind of unbelievable innocence. I have met the same in a lion cub that my native servants in Africa brought me... I would not keep her.

ARTHUR

(anguished, he takes a moment then
changes the subject)

In answer to your question, Carson, while I do think
Salesman is the play I'll be remembered for, if I am to be
remembered as a playwright and not as Mr. Marilyn Monroe,
that doesn't mean I don't want to *outdo* it. I always want
to write a masterpiece.

CARSON

But *would Salesman* be enough?

(to TANIA)

Is *Out of Africa* enough?

(TANIA doesn't respond.)

ARTHUR

(to CARSON)

Is *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* enough? *Member of the
Wedding?* *Ballad of the Sad Café?*

CARSON

It never seems so when you're working on a new one. But I
have to say I sure am happy to know you're familiar with my
work.

ARTHUR

I admire it greatly, but does it matter? You write
something, some people read it, or see it. Most people
don't. And maybe they're moved, stirred for a moment, or
maybe they even think about a line here or a character
there from time to time and, maybe... *just maybe*, if you're
lucky, it actually matters to them, even if it is only on
some nebulous, ephemeral level. But then what? They move on
to something else, another moment, a separate thought.
While still others get paid to criticize or tear you down.
So, where does that leave us after all the doubt and
rejection and goddamned insecurity? Never mind the writer's
block and failure and isolation and broken marriages.

CARSON

Well, you might have *moved* somebody...

ARTHUR

So what?

CARSON

The world needs artists...

ARTHUR

Does it?

CARSON

Of course, it does. Why, you yourself once said the job of the artist is to remind people of what they have chosen to forget.

ARTHUR

When did I say that?

CARSON

If you haven't yet you will eventually..

ARTHUR

Wait, what? Why?

CARSON

What do you mean why?

ARTHUR

Devil's advocate.

TANIA

I do not like devil's advocate. It is an annoying game and intellectually lazy.

ARTHUR

Then I'll ask in earnest.

CARSON

Where would we be without art and the artists who make it? Where would the world be?

ARTHUR

The world would be just fine. And busy with a million far more important things.

CARSON

No, no it wouldn't. Tania, tell him!

ARTHUR

What does it get you being a poor, miserable, suffering *artist* in this world?

TANIA

An artist is never poor. We have a richness others couldn't possibly understand.

ARTHUR

No one cares. And it's a terrible way to make a life.

CARSON

Arthur? Where would the world be without Willy Loman? Would it be better off never having known him?

(This quiets ARTHUR and gives him pause.)

CARSON – CON'T.

Think of all those people watching and reflecting, grown adult people, bursting into tears when poor Willy kills himself. Remember them and then tell me art doesn't matter. That is doesn't make a difference in people's lives.

ARTHUR

But is it enough?

TANIA

I do not think anything is enough for people like us. It is our fate. We were born hungry for knowledge and understanding; raised to be insatiable and now, as we age, we are starving... for recognition, approval, everlasting love... that is the plight and fate of the artist.

(MARILYN returns to the table and speaks, before retaking her seat.)

MARILYN

I'm trying to become an artist, and to be true, and sometimes I feel I'm on the verge of craziness. I'm just trying to get to the truest part of myself, and it's very hard. Do you think I'm an artist, Tania?

TANIA

Most certainly, *Mpendwa*.

MARILYN

How do you know?

TANIA

Art is the truth above facts... artists are thought to be wild people, but it is disciplined fantasy, and no one is as disciplined as the storyteller.

TANIA — CON'T.
(to MARILYN)

And that includes you.

(MARILYN smiles at this, happy again.)

TANIA — CON'T.
Writing is a place to *live*...

CARSON
I know of no other place.

TANIA
Arthur?

ARTHUR
Yes, Tania.

(TANIA makes sure everyone is focused on her before speaking these words as though they were a prayer.)

TANIA
Ars longa, vita brevis.

MARILYN
What's that?

ARTHUR
(resigning himself to this notion)
Art is long, life is short... It seems we are all alive in Pirandello's play.

CARSON
Which one, Arthur?

ARTHUR
Six Characters in Search of an Author. Do you know it?

MARILYN
Of course she does. Carson knows everything about books and plays and stuff.

CARSON
Well, I don't know about *that*...

CARSON – CON'T.

(to ARTHUR)

...but what are you saying? Are you disproving your own point? Pirandello's been dead 20 years; how could his old words possibly matter?

(MARILYN lights up when SISTER returns with more Champagne and pours glasses all around, starting with MARILYN.)

MARILYN

There she is! My sweet Sister, coming to save the day.

ARTHUR

(re: his dining companions)

In our case today, we have *five* characters... five characters in search of an author. Each of us wearing a mask.

SISTER

Oh no no, please leave me out of it. I don't want to be in any play. Not even one of yours, Mr. Miller. It's bad enough my foster child has me drinking all this Champagne and smoking these cigarettes!

ARTHUR

There's no escape. Every one of us lives behind a mask, every moment. Separating reality from fantasy... what we'd like others to believe about our lives.

CARSON

(to the audience)

What we'd like you to believe about our lives.

ARTHUR

What mask are you wearing today, Carson? With us?

CARSON

I don't know that I'm wearing any *mask*... I couldn't even if I tried!

ARTHUR

Come on, we're all friends here.

MARILYN

(to ARTHUR)

Then you should go first. This was your idea.

ARTHUR

This is Carson's house. She's the host. She should go first.

MARILYN

Leave Carson alone!

ARTHUR

OK, then you go first.

(But they all look to CARSON, who pauses while they wait to see if she's actually going to answer... SISTER pours CARSON's glass then stands behind her.)

CARSON

Thank you, Sister... I have to say this reminds me... this feeling I have right now... whenever I went to Yaddo...

(to MARILYN)

The writers' colony... I always found myself at the *Table of the Sensitives*...

ARTHUR

That was the queer table.

(SISTER puts a hand on CARSON's shoulder while MARILYN gives ARTHUR an angry-as-hell look.)

CARSON

...or maybe I made my way there. *Wanted* to be there.

(realizing what ARTHUR said)

It was for *sensitive* people...

ARTHUR

You're right. I'm sorry. You were saying?

CARSON

Right now I'm feeling deeply, deeply sensitive. So I guess I'm at the right table.

MARILYN

You don't have to play his game, Carson.

ARTHUR

It's not a game!

CARSON
(bucking up for the sake of the party)

It's alright.

ARTHUR
It's merely an exercise. Perfectly harmless...

CARSON

I'm not afraid.

(shyly)
And, if I had to say, I guess it's that I want you all to like me, and hope you have a wonderful time today. One that you'll always remember.

MARILYN
We are having a wonderful time...
(angrily to ARTHUR)
Aren't we, Arthur?

ARTHUR
Of course, we are.

CARSON
I'm glad. Because, if I'm being *positively* honest, I don't just want you to like me. I want you to love me, and remember this day as something special. I want everyone to love me, even though I know they won't.

MARILYN
I love you, Carson.

CARSON
Thank you, Dearheart. That's sweet. And I love you, too.

MARILYN
We all love you, don't we?

(ARTHUR and TANIA nod politely. SISTER kisses CARSON on the top of her head and moves on to pour Champagne for TANIA.)

MARILYN — CON'T.
No need to wear that mask anymore.

CARSON
I want us to remember each other as family.

MARILYN

We will, Carson. Promise!

(TANIA puts her hand atop CARSON's gnarled left hand.)

TANIA

You may refer to me the same as my dearest family, and that is as *Tanne*.

(CARSON beams at this and immediately feels better. She leans over and kisses TANIA's hand, then holds the hand to her cheek.)

CARSON

My darling *Tanne*...

TANIA

(to the audience before returning to her Champagne)

The poor dear.

ARTHUR

Tania? Your turn.

MARILYN

Arthur!

(But TANIA's happy to play and doesn't skip a beat.)

TANIA

My mask is no mask at all. It is the one I wear every day in every situation. I say you should revere me, of course. I wish to be lionized, as well I should be.

ARTHUR

I think that goes without saying. Marilyn?

MARILYN

See, it was just to get to me, wasn't it? You don't even care what Carson and Tania said.

ARTHUR

That's not true.

MARILYN

I don't like this game.

ARTHUR

I told you it's not a game.

MARILYN

I don't understand why we're playing.

ARTHUR

It's merely a question.

MARILYN

Then you go first. Before me.

ARTHUR

Don't be so...

MARILYN

So what? *Difficult?*

CARSON

(to the audience)

He was going to say difficult.

ARTHUR

I didn't say that. You did.

TANIA

(to the audience)

He was definitely going to say difficult.

(SISTER stops pouring Champagne and they all stare, agog, at this argument taking root. Are they really going to go there?)

MARILYN

There you go, turning everything around on me all the time. Like in that movie with Ingrid Bergman, that's what Arthur does. *Gaslight*. He turns things around and manipulates them then says *I'm difficult*. Well, you know what? *You're difficult!* How's that? Making up this silly, pseudo-intellectual game just to start with me. To try to make me say things you'll use against me. Well, I don't want to play that with you, Arthur. I've had enough of that game and I don't want to play anymore!

(rising, she says to the audience)

You wanna know something? The Arthur Miller I married wouldn't have married me if I had been nothing but a dumb

MARILYN — CON'T.

blonde. But that's all you ever wanted me to be, and you know what? I've had it with all of you! Every last one. Judging me all the time, even after I'm dead! I wish you would just leave me the hell alone and let me rest in peace, once and for all! Just leave me alone!

(MARILYN sits back down and sulks.)

ARTHUR

Fine. I'll go. I am wearing a mask of compassion — for each of you as well as for myself. But especially you, Marilyn, because you've been angry with me since the day we met for not filling the infinite void that is your loneliness and despair. And you still don't understand that it is impossible for anyone — man, woman, child or even Carson, your dearheart friend — to fill that infinite void that is your loneliness and despair. After all this time, after all this time as your husband, all I want, what I really so desperately want, is peace. Just like you. I want my own peace... to write, which is why I am in this world in the first place. I came here to write. But that is not something that is possible to do with you needing constant caretaking and assurances and everything else I can barely stand to do all the time. There's no room for anything or anyone else, and I am as exhausted as a person can be.

(rising, he faces the audience)

She's a super-sensitive instrument, and that's exciting to be around... until it starts to self-destruct. Everyone always said, How lucky! He married Marilyn Monroe! Every man's dream, to sleep with Marilyn Monroe! Well, you want to know something? I would give it all back if I could. The years... sapped, impotent, blocked. I would give all of it back if only I could.

(He sits back down and they're all quiet for a moment.)

MARILYN

(softly, mostly to herself)

I am tired of your pity. I just want respect. And I know I will never, ever get it. From anyone. Least of all my own husband.

(CARSON waits a beat then tries for some levity...)

CARSON

Arthur, why are you trying to invade our souls' particular territories this afternoon? And have us wrestle like this with our hidden selves?

(SISTER pours the last glass of Champagne for ARTHUR, then she removes the empty bottle and places what's left of the new bottle in the ice bucket. Then, she starts clearing their plates.)

CARSON – CON'T.

Not now, Sister. Please. Let's sit and rest a moment, peacefully, before we dive into those sumptuous soufflés.

(No one moves, so CARSON lights a cigarette, and everyone is quiet for a while as things simmer down.)

CARSON – CON'T.

Would somebody please say something? It doesn't even have to be something wonderful.

TANIA

Marilyn, if I may ask, how does a person become... *you*?

MARILYN

I don't think I know what you mean, Tania.

CARSON

I think that Tania would like to know how you became such a wonderful actress. Isn't that right, Tania? The beauty is the easy part to figure out.

MARILYN

Speak for yourself!

ARTHUR

And she's a terrific comedienne.

(MARILYN looks at him, stunned. How can he just go back to bullshitting like that?)

MARILYN

(to herself)

Gaslight...

(to ARTHUR)

I'll never be brilliant like you.

ARTHUR

(to MARILYN)

And I'll never be beautiful.

(to the group)

Soon you'll see her new picture, *Some Like it Hot*.

CARSON

What a fitting title!

ARTHUR

She steals the show. It's very good, and Marilyn's very good in it.

MARILYN

I'm not so sure... I play someone called *Sugar*, of all things... another showgirl.

(to no one in particular, although her heart isn't in it)

But Arthur is a tough nut to crack, so when he compliments me... the work I do? I have to swoon.

CARSON

Well, he is the premier dramatist of our time.

ARTHUR

Why, thank you. That's very kind. But your friend *Tennessee* isn't exactly a slouch.

CARSON

That is true.

ARTHUR

And neither are you!

CARSON

Thank you. I think I'm OK in that playwrighting respect.

MARILYN

Tennessee is my 8th cousin. Did you know that, Carson?

CARSON

I did indeed. I believe you told me that once before. Isn't that wonderful? I wonder if any of us at this table are related?

MARILYN

I bet we are!

CARSON

I'd sure like to think so. But whether we are or not, I will heretofore think of each of you as my family. My family of storytellers.

MARILYN

I always wanted a family of my own... like yours, Carson, I remember you telling me at the Gladstone Hotel, when we were drinking bourbon from your flask by the fire, how supportive your parents were about your, your...

CARSON

Music?

MARILYN

That's right. Your piano playing... I don't know anything about what that's like. To have parents, or people, who support you like that.

(at ARTHUR)

Through thick and thin.

CARSON

(to TANIA)

They thought I might have a career as a classical pianist had I been able to keep playing... I had rheumatic fever as a child. I had meant to attend Juilliard, but then I just didn't have the strength to become a concert pianist. Fortunately, Daddy bought me a yellow Corona typewriter to make me feel better and, well, I turned to writing.

MARILYN

I'm sure happy about that. The world is a better place thanks to your stories.

CARSON

That's a lovely thing to say. Thank you, Dearheart. And now, with Sister here these last few years, taking good care of me... if I can just finish my novel on the races, that Alabaman Miss Nelle Harper Lee will be given a good run for her money. That I can tell you.

SISTER

Don't you worry yourself about that, Carson. You'll get it done. I'll see to it that you get it done.

CARSON

Speaking of music... Sister? Why don't you put on the victrola and let's add some music to our party? What do you

CARSON – CON'T.

say? I think we have a good recording over there if you can just go and put it on.

MARILYN

That would be wonderful!

CARSON

Tania is a music lover, too. Aren't you, Tania?

(TANIA nods and sips her Champagne.)

(SISTER rises and heads over to the victrola to play a record: "Prove It on Me Blues" by Ma Rainey. The record is scratchy but wonderful. CARSON claps when it starts to play.)

SISTER

This one?

CARSON

Yes. Thank you, Sister. I love it so.

(to TANIA)

This here's Ma Rainey. From my hometown of Columbus, Georgia. A wonderful blues singer... Sadly, she's deceased now – she died ever so young – but boy could she sing.

TANIA

Many nights Denys and I would listen to the gramophone and dance by candlelight or under the stars... we would take it with us on safari.

(dreaming)

I can imagine it now...

MARILYN

How wonderful! Arthur, why don't we do that? We should listen to music, light candles and dance and dance...

ARTHUR

I would love nothing more than to dance with you...

(MARILYN rises and starts to dance. She beckons ARTHUR to join her but he lights a cigarette instead.)

ARTHUR – CON'T.

...in the privacy of our own home.

MARILYN

Oh you. Such a fuddy duddy. Carson, will you dance with me?

(She turns to CARSON, who objects, but then MARILYN helps her out of her chair and CARSON tries to "dance" as best she can. After a moment, her maladies seem to disappear and she's dancing like she'd never been disabled.)

(Next up: TANIA. MARILYN moves to help her up, too, and SISTER joins the women, all moving to the music, including TANIA and CARSON, invalids no more, as they "dance.")

SISTER

(to MARILYN)

Miss Monroe? Is it true about you and Ella Fitzgerald?

MARILYN

That we're friends? Of course, it's true.

SISTER

And how you helped her? At that nightclub out in Hollywood.

MARILYN

The Mocambo? Sure did. What a rotten little man.

CARSON

What's that, Marilyn?

(TANIA, reverting to her invalid self, re-takes her seat and lights a cigarette and CARSON, also having overextended herself, sits down, too. Each woman lights a cigarette and sips her drink.)

(MARILYN, meanwhile, dances with SISTER and gives her a twirl. SISTER lets her.)

MARILYN

Oh, the manager didn't want Negroes playing there, so I called him and said that if he let Ella play, I'd sit front-row center every night. So he did. And I did, too.

(MARILYN dips SISTER, who appears to be in heaven.)

CARSON

That's a marvelous story, Marilyn. Is it true?

MARILYN

Of course it's true. But *Ella's* the one who's marvelous. She sold out every night.

CARSON

Sounds like that's in part because of you.

MARILYN

No, it's because of her and her enormous talent. People couldn't wait to hear her sing. They stood in line clear around the block.

ARTHUR

Have I told you lately that you're a wonderful person?

MARILYN

Sometimes I am, right? Or are you gaslighting me again?

ARTHUR

No, I don't do that... you know I don't do that. And I truly believe you're wonderful.

MARILYN

Sometimes...

CARSON

Always!

MARILYN

Ella helped me, too, ya know. She's a good friend.

SISTER

How'd she help you?

MARILYN

I studied her music for years. She helped me turn into a pretty decent singer. Don't you think so, Arthur?

ARTHUR

(tired of complimenting her)

Yes, Marilyn. You have a lovely voice.

(The song winds down.)

MARILYN

Sister, can we hear it again?

ARTHUR

That's enough for now. You've exhausted everyone.

MARILYN

No, I haven't. We were just having fun, something you know next to nothing about.

(MARILYN takes her seat, lights a cigarette and sips her Champagne.)

MARILYN — CON'T.

Have to practically beg you to do anything just for the sheer pleasure of it...

(SISTER, meanwhile, catches her breath and stares at MARILYN. What in the world just happened?)

CARSON

Sister, why don't you go check on those soufflés? It should be about that time, don't you think?

SISTER

I'll go have a look.

(SISTER takes another look at MARILYN, smooths down her dress then heeds CARSON's direction. She heads toward the kitchen but, before exiting, turns to MARILYN.)

SISTER — CON'T.

Thank you for the dance, *Marilyn*.

MARILYN

Oh, won't you call me Sister, too? Even if it's just for today?

SISTER

Yes, *Sister*. I most certainly will. Thank you. It's all just... joy. Pure joy!

(SISTER disappears offstage and into the kitchen. MARILYN takes her cigarette and rises once again, dancing around the room and the dining room table, humming and singing the tune they just listened to.)

MARILYN

I guess that, if I want to have fun sometime in the future, I'll just have to imagine I'm back here, dancing with my dear friends... Carson. Tania. And Sister..

(ARTHUR and CARSON watch MARILYN dance. TANIA looks straight ahead, although she may tap along on the table, and they all kick back, smoke and sip and enjoy a quiet moment together.)

(Soon, SISTER rejoins them in the dining room, carrying a tray of soufflés. She places it in the center of the table.)

CARSON

Oh, that looks wonderful. Let it sit a minute, would you please?

(to ARTHUR)

And would you be a dear and pour everyone some more Champagne? Our family needs to celebrate!

(MARILYN returns to her seat next to CARSON. SISTER takes her seat, too, then ARTHUR does as he's told and tops off everyone's glass.)

CARSON — CON'T.

(to MARILYN)

Are you having fun?

MARILYN

I can't remember the last time I had so much fun. Let alone danced in the middle of the afternoon!

CARSON

Don't tease me.

MARILYN

I'm not teasing, Carson. I'm no gaslighter.

(glaring at ARTHUR)

I mean everything I say.

(CARSON, overcome with love and happiness, leans over and plants a kiss on MARILYN's left cheek, an act that MARILYN welcomes with delight.)

(When ARTHUR gets to SISTER to pour her a glass, she holds up a hand.)

SISTER

No more for me, please. I'm feeling a bit tipsy as it is.

CARSON

That's just happiness you're feeling. Sheer happiness.

SISTER

That may be, but if I feel any happier, I'll be laughing my way straight back to the Rockland Psychiatric Hospital where I came from!

(CARSON once again raises her glass to make a toast. Her friends do the same.)

CARSON

To my dear friends... we the descendants of the ancient tribe known as storytellers... we who are more than 3,000 years old and who the world needs, whether we realize it or they even deign to recognize us... yes, we will live on...

(to TANIA and ARTHUR)

...in our words...

(to MARILYN)

...and pictures...

(to SISTER)

...and friendships... real, imagined and everlasting...

(to ALL)

...please know that I am grateful for the opportunity to share this afternoon with you today. It is a joy... and a love... that I will never forget. One thing that I have come to rely on in this world is the fact that we are shards of others, and, creatively speaking, one thing suggests another and one doesn't know why. And that's alright by me.

(They clink their glasses and cheer and wonder about each other. The stage goes dark except for one spotlight that shines on CARSON.)

CARSON

(to the audience)

Please, will you remember us this way? I'd be forever grateful if you'd remember us just like this.

(BLACKOUT.)

End scene.

Scene Four

(CARSON and SISTER stand in the doorway, waving goodbye to their guests. CARSON breaks a little, but SISTER holds her up and consoles her.)

SISTER

It's OK, Foster Child. I've got you.

(We hear a horn HONK and the car drive away and, after a moment, SISTER gives CARSON a peck on the cheek and leaves her in the open doorway.)

SISTER – CON'T.

Come on, now. Time to move on with our lives...

(The lighting and sound in this scene revert to as it was in Scene One when, like now, we flit between this being the past and CARSON'S reflections on the day that just was.)

(SISTER heads to the dining room table, where she removes some plates and silverware to take with her into the kitchen.)

CARSON

I'm never gonna see them again, am I?

SISTER

Don't go dark on me now, Carson. You had a lovely afternoon. Just enjoy it for what it was.

CARSON

It was lovely, wasn't it?

SISTER

Yes, so don't go getting dark.

CARSON

Wasn't everybody just wonderful?

SISTER

Yes, everybody was positively wonderful...

CARSON

Why are you saying it like that? Are you making fun?

SISTER

No, I am not making any fun...

CARSON

Then what are you doing?

SISTER

I'm just trying to understand why Tania kept talking to me about East Africa when I told her several times I'm from South Carolina.

CARSON

(chuckling)

Well, she is an otherworldly, radiant spirit. Nothing can be done about that.

SISTER

As are you, my dear.

CARSON

Foster child?

SISTER

That's right. My dear foster child... Miss Lula Carson Smith McCullers, a most wonderful author, friend and, most important, human being...

CARSON

But...

SISTER

But nothing.

CARSON

You're not altogether convincing, you know.

SISTER

I'm just happy to let you remember *everything* as *everyone* always being *ever* so happy and wonderful. I know that's what you mean to do.

CARSON

So? What's wrong with that?

SISTER

I'm not saying there is.

CARSON

Then what are you saying?

SISTER

You just go on and conjure the story about what you want us to believe happened today. I know that's what you're fixin to do. So do it.

CARSON

(giving up the interrogation for now)

I want to revel in it first. For a little while. But you know what I realized, Sister?

SISTER

What's that?

CARSON

Artists are orphans. We are singular and strange, which is why it's positively vital that we create families amongst ourselves.

(SISTER smiles at her charge then heads toward the kitchen. When she's gone offstage, CARSON limps over to the window and takes one last glance after her friends.)

(Then, she ambles back over to the bar cart, chatting with the audience as she goes.)

CARSON – CON'T.

I never did see any one of them again. Marilyn died three years later, poor dear, and Tania just a month after that. Arthur, well, he and Marilyn divorced after they did, in fact, make *The Misfits*, which I never could bring myself to see. I just couldn't bear to watch her heartbreak up there on a big screen like that and, well, I was in no condition to go much of anywhere for the remaining years of my own life, which ended, right here in Nyack, in 1967. I'm buried up there in Oak Hill cemetery along with Bebe and luminaries such as the great painter of American loneliness, Mr. Edward Hopper, and the grande dame of our stage, none other than Miss Helen Hayes. Yes, I imagine it doesn't surprise you when I tell you I am beyond thrilled to be remembered in such exquisite company.

(Just as CARSON begins to pour herself a drink, SISTER returns to clear off more dishes from the dining room table.)

SISTER

Oh, Carson. Please tell me you're not having another drink?

CARSON

Just a little nightcap.

SISTER

It's still afternoon!

CARSON

Oh, you hush. Always trying to spoil my fun.

SISTER

Come on now, no more drinking today. I need you to take care of yourself! How am I gonna help you finish your *great novel on the races* if you're gonna go and pickle yourself all the time?

(SISTER removes the drink from CARSON's hand, then heads over to the victrola to put Ma Rainey's "Prove It on Me Blues" back on for CARSON's pleasure and, hopefully, distraction.)

SISTER — CON'T.

Listen here and reminisce a spell..

CARSON

(covering her ears)

Ohh, it's going to be so hard to listen to Ma Rainey ever again.

SISTER

Do you want me to turn it off?

CARSON

No, no, keep it. Even if it's just for a little while.

SISTER

I promise you everyone had a wonderful time.

CARSON

Even you?

SISTER

Even me.

CARSON

Honestly?

SISTER

What do you want me to say?

CARSON

The truth would be alright.

SISTER

(reluctantly)

Well...

CARSON

Well what?

SISTER

Give me a moment, would you? I want to put this right.

CARSON

I can't take anything harsh right now, so please don't put anything harsh on me.

SISTER

Not gonna be harsh, just to say that, if this were *my* recollection, I might have changed some things.

CARSON

Oh yeah? Like what?

SISTER

Well, for one, I personally could have done without all that smoking and drinking. You are well aware of the fact that I neither smoke nor drink!

CARSON

I am sorry about that.

SISTER

Why'd you have me puffing and chugging like that? I feel horrible right about now! How in the world do you people do that all day long?

CARSON

Oh, Sister, I just wanted you to join in the fun. Feel like one of the bunch. The *motlies*...

(nervously)

What's the other thing?

SISTER

Well, I should say thank you for putting me at the table. I would have liked that in the actual.

CARSON

Me too, Sister. You know that's true. I did the best I could. I hope you know that.

(SISTER nods.)

CARSON – CON'T.

Now come on. What's the other thing?

SISTER

(reluctantly)

Well... all those stories...

CARSON

Tania?

SISTER

Don't you mean *Tania and the Magic Somali Negro*?

(They look at each other – neither knowing what to say and worried about where to go from here – then, eventually, they start cracking up in laughter.)

CARSON

Oh, I'm sorry about that, too, Sister. She really did go on and on...

SISTER

I know, but she is, after all...

(imitating TANIA)

3,000 years old!

(They really crack up now.)

SISTER – CON'T.

A real dinosaur.

CARSON

Oh, you're terrible.

SISTER

I'm sorry. I mean, she *is* a very good storyteller...

CARSON

And a Champagne bunny to boot!

(SISTER playfully slaps CARSON, she's laughing so hard. They both are. In a moment, their laughter dies down.)

CARSON – CON'T.

Oh, Sister. A whole lot needs to change.

SISTER

You're telling me?

CARSON

I'm sorry about all that. Just so tired of it and sorry as I personally can be...

SISTER

I know you are, Carson... I am, too.

(back to clear off the table some more)

So, what about today will you *choose* to remember?

(CARSON listens to the music for a moment then starts to move, like she was dancing once more with her friends, and she even manages to smile, too. Just a little bit.)

CARSON

(dreaming)

Just a wonderful afternoon... an afternoon for the ages...

(remembering and giggling)

With the motliest crew...

(CARSON addresses the audience once again, even though SISTER is still in the room. Or maybe she's confusing SISTER with the audience and talking to one or the other.)

CARSON – CON'T.

I just love when we danced... did we dance?

(unsure)

We did, didn't we?

(to the audience)

Well, you all saw that we did. Maybe that's enough.

(SISTER is now in on the conversation with the audience as she clears the table.)

SISTER

You still talking to them?

CARSON

Yes, and you hush. Don't go spoiling any of my fun.

SISTER

I'm not gonna do that. But what do you want from them? I don't know that there's much they can give you now.

CARSON

I said hush.

SISTER

You want so much.

CARSON

We all did! And why wouldn't we? Look, you're wonderful company, Sister, but I'm afraid just one person... one person can't be enough for anyone. You know that, don't you?

SISTER

Go right ahead. I'm not stopping you.

(The lights start to dim.)

CARSON

(to the audience)

This was the best and most frivolous party I had ever given, and I took great pleasure and wonderment at the love that my guests seemed to express for each other, or at least according to myself and our author, who imagined this here version of that particular event.

(SISTER backs away as though to leave – even opens the kitchen door to give the impression that she's gone – but, unbeknownst to CARSON, she's still in the room.)

CARSON – CON'T.

(to the audience)

You know what I've been pondering lately? My good friend and constant companion Miss Maya Angelou, whom I never had the pleasure to meet, mind you, but she said something that I always take with me, everywhere I go: *There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.*

(CARSON considers this a moment.)

CARSON – CON'T.

There is so much to know. To understand, about others and ourselves, and to make sense of and leave behind. That's why I conjure stories. I must... I *need* to imagine all the lives that each of us live: public, private... and *secret*.

SISTER

What's the secret of your life, Carson?

CARSON

(startled – and busted)

Why, that's just for me to know, Sister. That's why it's a secret.

SISTER

Mmm-hmm...

CARSON

You don't hear me asking about your secret life, do you? It's enough for me just to envision it.

SISTER

You stay out of my secret life and I'll stay out of yours, OK?

CARSON

It's a deal. Now go on.

SISTER

God only knows what we'll find in there.

CARSON

Oh, everyone will know everything at some point. I guess that's what it really means to be remembered. These days anyway. Whenever these days are...

(SISTER laughs, shakes her head and goes with a stack of dishes back toward the kitchen.)

(The lights dim some more.)

SISTER

No more drinking, ya hear?

CARSON

(raising her hand to the heavens)

Hand to the Muses.

SISTER

That would be fine, if I trusted you or any of your *Muses*.

CARSON

Love ya, Sister.

SISTER

Love ya, Foster Child.

CARSON

I want you to know, for the record... for *this record*... that I really did want you at that table.

(SISTER gives her a look, then blows a kiss and disappears offstage into the kitchen.)

CARSON – CON'T.

(back to the audience)

Now, where was I?

(loudly to the nether-regions of the house)

Before I was so rudely interrupted?

(CARSON goes back to making that drink while the lights dim even more.)

CARSON – CON'T.

Oh, yes, it's the memory of it all, isn't it? You may have missed it when Tania said... *These sources of creation are very mysterious. I don't think one can find them by looking for them. I think they have to come from within you.*

And then Arthur said... *I have no idea where my ideas come from. If I knew, I'd go back there again and again and again...*

To me, and to people like us, we just can't imagine any other way of life. Even that Alabaman Miss Nelle Harper Lee... you may think more highly of her work than you do of mine, which is alright, I guess, but, when you think of it, if I'm only 3,000 years old, which I am, mind you, just like Tania and Arthur and Marilyn and all the others, then I – and my work, too – have thousands more years to live on, haven't we?

(CARSON finishes pouring and sips her drink.)

CARSON – CON'T.

Oh, Marilyn... We all miss her so. And wish she could have lived a longer and much happier life than she did. And that she could have, at last, played her beloved Grushenka. I know she would have been just wonderful... and felt fulfilled like never before... had she only had the chance.

Still, today, *that day*, was a day that, despite all of our difficulties and tragedies and sadness, we loved what we had done in our lives that brought us to this place, where we could revel in one another's company for a moment in time, on a cold February afternoon – a Thursday, not a Sunday – in 1959.

(CARSON smiles at the audience then ambles with her drink back into the living room, where it takes her a moment to sit back down in a chair before the fireplace, which she does slowly and carefully.)

CARSON – CON'T.

It's like my dear friend, the high priestess of all and everything, that ageless alchemist Miss Emily Dickinson, once said to me through space and time: *The soul should always stand ajar, ready to welcome the ecstatic experience.* Well, you want to know something? If you listen close, I'll tell you a secret. You ready? That's how I lived my entire life, with my one true soul ajar, shining, and it was all so *positively ecstatic.*

(CARSON puts her drink in her lap and raises her hand to the sky as best she can. The victrola makes a scratching noise as if it's gearing up to play something...)

CARSON – CON'T.

At least that's how I like to remember it. Hand to the Muses...

(We hear the opening strains of "Prove It on Me Blues" start to play as the lights dim near to black...)

(BLACKOUT.)

END OF PLAY