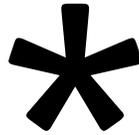


# The Harp Star

A play in one act

by Dennis Fisher



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## CHARACTERS

Michael - SCENE 1-10	several ages throughout play
Woman - SCENE 1	20 something female
John - SCENE 2	Middle aged male traveling salesman
Esther - SCENE 3	50 year old female
Conductor - SCENE 3	40 year old man
Mother - SCENE 3	35 year old female
Deirdre - SCENE 3	7 year old girl
Stephen - SCENE 3	30 year old man
Driver - SCENE 4	19 year old male
Helen - SCENE 5	15 year old girl, Robert's daughter
Allen - SCENE 6	36 year old male Air Force member
Jenny - SCENE 7	55 year old female
Damon - SCENE 8	30 year old male prison inmate
Athena - SCENE 9	40 year old female
Intercom & radio	several speakers from England and U.S.

Six actors can play all of the roles of this loose take on Homer's Odyssey.

The play is a journey that takes place in various modes of transportation, including walking, cars, a train, a boat, a plane, and an elevator. The seats of the mode of transportation are simply chairs arranged as they would be in each setting.

Each scene will begin with a projection above the stage that tells the scene number, title of scene, a brief quotation, the year, and the type of transportation.

"MEN ARE SO QUICK TO BLAME THE GODS: THEY SAY THE GODS DEVISE THEIR MISERY. BUT THEY THEMSELVES, IN THEIR DEPRAVITY, DESIGN GRIEF GREATER THAN THE GRIEFS THAT FATE ASSIGNS." HOMER

"HERE BE DRAGONS" THE LENOX GLOBE

SCENE #1. A SINGLE STEP

“THE MIND IS ITS OWN PLACE, AND IN ITSELF CAN MAKE A HEAVEN OF HELL, A HELL OF HEAVEN.” JOHN MILTON

1983. ON FOOT

MICHAEL, 30, is walking along a narrow path. He has a small bag over his shoulder. We hear the sound of birds chirping. He smiles at the sound of the birds, looks around, obviously in bliss. He looks down, as if surveying a deep chasm. He is giddily singing Bang a Gong by T-Rex.

MICHAEL

Well you're built like a car  
You've got a hub cap diamond star halo  
You dance when you walk oh yeh.  
Get it on, bang a gong, get it on

Walking from the other direction we see WOMAN, in her 20's. She has a large backpack. There is barely room to pass on the trail. MICHAEL stops. WOMAN stops but seems nervous and is palming something in her right hand.

MICHAEL

(Speaks with urgency) Isn't it a beautiful day for a hike? I can't believe how beautiful it is. Garden of the Gods. A hike before I head north Isn't the view down the gorge amazing? (He points below)

WOMAN

If you say so.

MICHAEL

Where are you heading?

WOMAN

That's none of your business.

MICHAEL

Oh. . . OK. Just trying to be friendly.

WOMAN

(Agitated) My dad told me not to give out information. He said people could use it to stalk me. And he said to watch out for bears, and snakes, and wolves, and bobcats, and rabid squirrels and bats and rusty nails. And don't eat berries or mushrooms - they're usually poison. And there's all kinds of herbs and plants like nightshade that can cause hallucinations and amnesia and make you crazy. People can slip them into your food. And trees are really dangerous. Dad told me never to travel by myself. Uh. Not that I am. My friend is just behind me. He's big. He'll be here any minute.

MICHAEL

(Calmly) Listen. No need to be fearful. The world is a pretty benign place if you have an open heart.

WOMAN

My dad got killed by a meteor.

MICHAEL

(Disbelief) Oh. I'm so very sorry. (Pause) You mean meteorite.

WOMAN

Meteor.

MICHAEL

You sure the correct term isn't meteorite?

WOMAN

(Pissed) Meteor.

MICHAEL

No, I think once they hit the ground it's called a meteorite.

WOMAN

(Pissed) It was a meteor dammit! A falling star! Dad taught me everything I know. I'm walking the trail in his memory. A thousand miles. I started 15 minutes ago. I'm kind of tired.

MICHAEL

You'll do fine. . . You know. I don't think there is any recorded incident of a person being killed by a meteorite, ah, meteor. If one came out of the starry heavens and hit him, it's awful, but it could be one of the most unique things in history. Your dad should be famous.

WOMAN

He was watching a meteor go across the sky and drove his car into a tree.

MICHAEL

Ah ... I see. Wow. Anyway. No need to, ah, be afraid.

WOMAN

He was in the hospital for weeks. He had a slow, lingering death. He whispered that God will protect me after he's gone. . . I better keep moving. I have a ways to go.

MICHAEL

You sure do. Lots of luck to you. OK. Well. I don't care to slide down the mountain so I'm going to squeeze by you.

He starts to move past WOMAN. As he brushes against her she screams, raises her arm and sprays MICHAEL in the face with pepper spray. MICHAEL shouts in pain, falls to the ground writhing in agony, rubbing his eyes. Groans

MICHAEL

Why did you do that!

WOMAN

You tried to touch me!

MICHAEL

I just tried to get past you!

He grasps for his water bottle, pulls it out blindly, pours water in his eyes, and can now look at WOMAN out of one squinted eye)

MICHAEL

Jesus. I could have fallen off the cliff! You could have blinded me!

He sits up on trail.

WOMAN

That's the point pervert! Dad told me about men like you.

MICHAEL

(Groans) I thought God was gonna protect you!

WOMAN

God made pepper spray!

She hurriedly walks past him along the trail and goes out of sight. Squinting, MICHAEL watches her walk away.

MICHAEL

(To himself) I can't believe this. (He struggles to his feet. Tries to look out of one eye to survey his surroundings). Fifteen minutes on the trail and she attacks someone. (Sighs) Her goddamn dad inoculated her with the fear virus. (Shakes fist at the sky) You aren't infecting me you asshole!

MICHAEL starts to walk uneasily down the trail. After two steps we hear a loud buzzing. MICHAEL stops. He bobs his head, squints.

MICHAEL

Hornet?

He tries to duck under the hornet to continue on trail. He falls backward as hornet adjusts. He tries again to get past hornet. His body language suggests that the hornet has adjusted and is always at eye level.

He turns around, heading the other direction. Buzzing continues. His body language lets us know that another hornet is on the other side of him. He tries to go under it. Again he is blocked as the hornet stays at eye level.

He looks up as if surveying a steep cliff. He looks down, as if surveying a deep chasm. He moves back and forth, trying to get past one of the hornets, turning, trying the other direction, blocked each time.

He turns toward the audience. He sits on the trail as buzzing continues, rubs his eyes, takes a long drink from his water bottle, then puts both his hands on his knees, looks back and forth each direction, squinting at hornets as the buzzing continues, world weary look on his face.

(Deep sigh) Bang. A. Gong.

LIGHTS DIM, THEN BUZZING FADES.

END OF SCENE

SCENE #2. THE THESIS

"A WISE MAN SHOULD HAVE MONEY IN HIS HEAD, BUT NOT IN HIS HEART" -  
JONATHAN SWIFT

1973. Automobile.

Roadside in Illinois. MICHAEL stands next to a sign that says Interstate 57, representing an entrance ramp to the interstate. He is looking at a map. There is the sound of a car approaching, he sticks out his right hand and extends his thumb.

MICHAEL

Thumb akimbo.

Sound of car receding into the distance- he puts map in backpack.

MICHAEL

Only a lunatic would pick a up hitchhiker here today. I'm an idiot.

We hear the sound of birds chirping.

MICHAEL

At least the birds are happy. That's a good omen.

Sound of car approaching, MICHAEL sticks out thumb, sound of car going by.

MICHAEL

Damn!

He paces. Sound of car approaching, MICHAEL sticks out thumb, sound of car stopping.

MICHAEL

Oh boy. Looks like I'm going for a ride in a Vega.

We hear sound of door opening and closing. MICHAEL is in passenger seat of car driven by JOHN, a middle aged man, dressed in a cheap suit. He has an eye patch on. Song "Everybody Is A Star" by Sly and the Family Stone playing loudly on the radio. MICHAEL starts to speak as he gets in car but John shushes him with finger to lips. As song ends John turns radio down

JOHN

Sorry. Love that song. I like to think I'm a star. Just waitin' for my big break. (Chuckles). Where you headed?

MICHAEL

(cheerfully) I'm heading north to Blue Island. You going anywhere near there?

JOHN

I'm only going to Champaign. I'm John. (holds out his hand. They shake) Like the Baptist - only with one eye (points to eye patch) - don't ever play darts when you're shit faced. (Laughs)

MICHAEL

I'm Michael. I really appreciate the ride. It's very kind of you to pick me up.

JOHN

What the hell are you going to Blue Island for? All the white people are moving out of the south side. (JOHN reaches into paper bag on seat, take out a peeled hard boiled egg and eats it in one bite)

MICHAEL

Uh, I'm going to visit a friend back home. My girlfriend. She's back from Cornell. She's expecting me. Big Party. And it's a pretty diverse place.

JOHN

I bet it is. Wait. Listen.

John turns radio back up.

VOICE FROM RADIO

... few leads and no motive for the apparent random murders along I-57. Police would not respond to a reporter's request for confirmation of rumors that the victims bodies were defiled by the I-57 murderers.

John clicks off radio.

JOHN

(Laughs) So, you're hitchhiking on I-57 at the exact moment in time that a lunatic murderer they've named the I-57 murderer is on the loose? Great timing kid. You're either a dumb ass or you have some serious brass balls.

MICHAEL

I guess I'm a serious dumb ass.

JOHN

(Laughs) Well, you're an honest dumb ass Michael. Just the kind of person I like to find on the other side of a desk when I'm making a sale.

(Laughs again) Did I mention I'm in sales? What's up with the hair?

MICHAEL

I just like it long.

JOHN

I bet the college girls like it.

MICHAEL

I'm not sure. I haven't thought about it.

JOHN

Oh, come on. That's what college is all about isn't it? I mean it's all about pussy isn't it?

MICHAEL

(Shocked) What?

JOHN

It's about pussy. College is about getting laid. If I had gone to college that's what I would have majored in. What are you majoring in my friend?

MICHAEL

Uh, Psychology.

JOHN

(Laughs) Exactly. Studying how the mind works ... to get pussy.

MICHAEL

We haven't hit that chapter in the textbooks yet. What do you sell? As a salesman.

JOHN

I just sell. That's what I do to pay the bills. But you don't really give a shit Michael, you're just changing the subject. Maybe you *are* the I-57 killer. But then again, maybe *I* am. (Laughs)

JOHN takes an apple out of the bag and takes a huge bite.

JOHN

I picked you up to serve as a sounding board. To give feedback. I'm kind of proud of my thought process. Are you willing to give feedback?

MICHAEL

(Wary) I guess so.

JOHN

I've hammered my world view into shape over many years behind the wheel with time to think. My thesis is simple but powerful: If an activity is not making you money or getting you laid you should not engage in that activity. This thesis gives you a blueprint for your life. What do you think?

MICHAEL

I, well. It seems like there might be a little more to life than that.

JOHN

Nope. Money and pussy.

MICHAEL

John, Just so you know, I consider myself a feminist.

JOHN

Only reason a guy would say he's a feminist is to get pussy.

MICHAEL

Good god that's offensive.

JOHN

Cool down junior. This is my area of expertise. Let me expound. Let me make a case. Commerce has changed in my lifetime. It's evolved, it isn't about personal relationships as it once was, as it has been since men first gathered around a campfire to barter and exchange. Now it's about guys with MBAs using technology to manipulate and deceive. It's dishonesty and lack of humanity makes me sick.

MICHAEL

It's good that you have a problem with the lying.

JOHN

Fuck no. Lying isn't the problem. I lie my ass off to make a sale. But I look 'em in the eye when I lie. It's personal. I give them the personal touch. I'm in the room with them. I nurture them, I make them feel good about the process before I fuck 'em.

MICHAEL

Jeez.... I don't know. That's pretty harsh.

JOHN

(JOHN becomes increasingly shrill) You bet it's harsh. Try sitting in an office in an industrial park talking to some bitter bastard whose wife hasn't screwed him for six months and listen to him, really listen. It doesn't matter that you don't give a shit what he's saying. You listen. Then you get him to laugh, get him to think positively for the first time in God knows how long, look into his dead eyes and make him think your product is the product that will keep his business from completing it's death spiral - you say his first name fifty fucking times, you get close enough to him that you can see the pores in his nose, you can smell the vodka on his breath at nine in the fucking morning, and convince him that he should spend his last dime on something you're selling that almost certainly will just speed up his financial doom - and do it with a spring in your step and a smile on your face - that's goddamned sales! I like to think of myself as a healer. Their lives and their business are teetering on a precipice and I give them a little hope about their prospects, I give them a little hope of salvation before their business goes on to the next life. I take them to the river to clean them of their sins before the trip to the other shore. (Chuckles)

MICHAEL

Wow.

JOHN

Mike Viola. He goes to my church. I'm obsessed with Mike fucking Viola. He went to high school with a guy that's a congressman now and he's crawled so far up his ass that he's part of his digestive system. Got a contract with Martin Marietta to sell missiles to the Air Force. Do you know how much of that shit they burn through on a daily basis in Vietnam? A license to print money. Selling stuff to blow people up during wars that never end. The lucky bastard. His house has a four car garage. Connections! ... More important than skill. . . (a reflective pause)

You ever date a red head?

JOHN takes big bite out of apple.

MICHAEL

(Disoriented by the sudden shift) I guess I have. Although, now that I think about it, I can't remember one, I mean specifically.

JOHN

Oh, you would remember if you had. You'd remember if you had Michael.

MICHAEL

I guess.

JOHN

(Getting more and more agitated) When you are on the road as much as me you replay every single sexual encounter you have ever had over and over in your mind. Every triumph, every rejection, every interlude of the flesh you ever experienced. Getting shot down when you thought you were going to get laid is a painful thing to remember, but remember you do, trying to figure out how you fucked it up, how you might have handled it differently, how you might have added another notch to whatever the fuck it is you notch. There were successes, but it is the missed opportunities that sting. I have replayed a handful of lost opportunities so often in my mind I don't know if I am remembering the incident or the replay.

MICHAEL

Are we talking about sex or sales?

JOHN

What I remember most is the smell. The taste. What would we be without memories? (Pause) Would you rather get a blowjob or eat pussy? Be honest now.

MICHAEL

(MICHAEL's eyes open wide ) I ... whoa. John... this is way too personal. I've got a sister.

JOHN

Are you paying for gas?

MICHAEL

What?

JOHN

Are you paying me for gas?

MICHAEL

No.

JOHN

Then shut the fuck up and listen to my thesis... If you are like most men you'd rather receive pleasure rather than give pleasure. That's the natural order of things. But if you are a student of human nature as I am, you come to the conclusion that giving pleasure first is more successful in the long run, more honorable if you will, because giving pleasure first will ultimately lead to you getting more pleasure than you would get by being your normal selfish self. If that is too abstract, let me spell it out for you. If you eat pussy first, you will be blown with more enthusiasm after the fact.

MICHAEL

John.... I'm not sure this is appropriate.

JOHN

It is a truth. An honorable man takes care of his partner first. It is the truth behind honor. It is the truth that is the secret of sales. If you eat the customer's pussy first, they will fall all over themselves to blow you and consummate the sale. I sell with honor. But honoring the customer is not viewed with reverence anymore. That goddamn war shit sells itself. I have to ponder the stars in heaven to sell the shit I sell. But it's why I have had some success in both business and pleasure. Pondering the cosmos. Delayed gratification.

Eat the pussy first. The personal touch. Viola's got a four car garage but he sure as hell ain't eatin' any pussy.

MICHAEL

(MICHAEL looks uneasy ) I'm speechless.

JOHN

As you should be. Your job is to listen. But a red head. That is something special. Did you ever eat any red headed pussy?

MICHAEL

Good God John. I told you, I have a sister.

JOHN

Is she a redhead?

MICHAEL

No.

JOHN

Then what are you worried about?

JOHN takes another big bite of apple leaving nothing but the core, talks with mouth full.

JOHN

Red heads have a beautiful musty smell unlike any other women. Tastes like butterscotch.

MICHAEL

(MICHAEL almost levitates with discomfort) John, John, John. Enough.

JOHN

I shit you not. I have replayed that taste in my head a thousand times.

MICHAEL

John, this is making me uncomfortable. Really uncomfortable.

JOHN

Oh for fuck's sake. It is painfully evident I've picked up a prude. Hey. Reach under the seat.

MICHAEL does not move. His uneasiness has increased, afraid of what he might find under the seat.

MICHAEL

What? Why? Why?

JOHN

Reach under the fuckin' seat.

MICHAEL

Come on. Please. I've got some vertigo issues. I get anxious. I don't want to lean over. (He is reaching for door handle)

JOHN

For fucks sake Michael. You are up fucking tight!

JOHN eats entire core and seeds of apple in two quick bites - MICHAEL can't believe it - JOHN wipes his mouth with back of sleeve.

JOHN

I figured a long haired college kid would be a little looser. Let me tell you what's under there. Hold on to your crank. A machete.

MICHAEL sinks into seat - JOHN chuckles)

JOHN

You don't look well Michael. You might wonder why I would be comfortable with suggesting a total stranger, right next to me, grab a machete. Here's why.

JOHN reaches under his seat and pulls out a handgun. Michael sits upright and gasps. John laughs.

JOHN

Don't worry. I'm not the I-57 murderer. Or am I? (giggles) I drive in a lot of dicey places. This is for the (he spells) n-i-g-g-e-r-s. (Laughs) Their eyes get about as big as yours when I pull this little beauty out.

By the way, I spelled the word because I could see your delicate sensibilities would have been offended had I said it as I usually do. I'm thoughtful that way.

MICHAEL

John, you're freaking me out. (looks around car as if searching for a way to jump out)

JOHN

Relax, I just wanted to get a rise out of you Michael. You're such a prude, it's entertaining. You might want to reconsider hitchhiking. But then we're all just hitchin' a ride somewhere, aren't we?

MICHAEL

Uhh.

Suddenly JOHN swerves steering wheel wildly, tossing JOHN and MICHAEL in their seats. Tires screech. MICHAEL gasps.

JOHN

Shit! Don't ever poke an eye out kid. It was just a bird crappin' on the windshield. Goddamn bird. My depth perception is so screwed up that I think stuff is jumping out at me all the time. If you were the I-57 killer your job would be easy. Just poke out my good eye and have your way with me... You know, you are not an unattractive young man Michael.

MICHAEL stares straight ahead. His voice becomes squeaky.

MICHAEL

How long until the Champaign exit?

JOHN

Not far. Why are you askin'?

MICHAEL

I, ah, I'm ready to get out.

JOHN

(Sounds genuinely hurt) No. Aw. I feel like we're kind of making a connection.

MICHAEL

What?

JOHN

(Whines) Didn't you like my thesis? I put a lot of thought into it.

MICHAEL

It was fine. But it's time for me to go.

JOHN

(Pause. He is downcast) You probably won't believe this Michael, but I don't have a lot of friends. I have trouble making connections. It's like it isn't in the stars.

MICHAEL

It's hard for us all. It's hard. John, I hope to have kids some day. Please put your gun away. Do you mind? And could you stop the car right now?

JOHN

But the exit is a couple of miles away.

MICHAEL

I feel like going for a walk and looking at the stars.

JOHN

But it's daylight. You can't see the stars.

MICHAEL

They're still there.

JOHN

That's weird.

MICHAEL

There's a whole lot of weird going on here. Stop the car. Please. Please. Please.

JOHN pulls the car over to side of road, pauses before speaking.

JOHN

Michael, can I ask you something?

MICHAEL

What?

JOHN

I'm a little short. Can you loan me five bucks for gas?

BLACKOUT - SOUND OF CAR DOOR OPENING AND CLOSING

END OF SCENE

SCENE #3. YOU SHOULD YOU KNOW

“WE ARE OUR OWN DEVILS; WE DRIVE OURSELVES OUT OF OUR EDENS.”  
JOHANN WOLFGANG GOETHE

1986. Train.

Rhythmic sound of train wheels clacking in background before the lights come up. As lights rise we see chairs on stage representing seats in train car. MICHAEL sits by himself , only passenger in car. He is reading a book, occasionally gazing out the window, looking out at the English countryside and smiling. ESTHER enters from rear of train car, bags over each shoulder, passes all of the empty seats, stands next to MICHAEL.

ESTHER

Is this seat taken?

MICHAEL

Er ... no. No.

Woman immediately sits down, crowding the sitting man - he is not pleased to have his solitude intruded upon.

ESTHER

If I am not mistaken, your accent is American?

MICHAEL

(wary) Yes.

ESTHER

I am from Ohio myself. I have been traveling around England by train for some time, taking in the sights. I have found the English to be lacking in profound ways. The trains are filthy, the food abhorrent, the weather appalling, the people indifferent.

MICHAEL

(Surprised) Yet you've traveled here for some time? What's the attraction?

ESTHER

Years ago I received a modest inheritance. Father invested well, mainly with defense contractors, Northrup Grumman and the like, and, although I am certainly not wealthy, I don't need to work anymore, so I decided to see the world. England has a rich history so here I am. It is the present England that I don't care much for. I am Esther. Tell me about yourself . . .

MICHAEL

Michael. What do you mean, tell me about yourself?

ESTHER

Where are you from, what do you do, why are you here?

MICHAEL

(he just wants to get back to book) I'm from Illinois, I am an educator, and I'm here for a conference.

ESTHER

A real wordsmith aren't you? Are you traveling alone? Are you married?

MICHAEL

That's sort of personal, don't you think?

ESTHER

Are you sure you aren't English? Come on Mike, I'm sick to death of English reserve. Fill in the gaps for me.

MICHAEL

I really prefer Michael.

ESTHER

Michael. Michael. Michael. Do you have a world view you live by?

MICHAEL

(reluctantly) A world view. Sure. I believe people are good and I try my best to live by the golden rule. It's passed the test of time.

ESTHER

(seems unsatisfied with Michael) Oh. Those old canards. Inconsequential. Listen. Are you right with God? Do you have Faith?

MICHAEL

Faith?

ESTHER

What are you, a parrot? A few years ago, *Michael*, I became born again. I accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. I used to be a miserable human being. I was alone. I was unhappy with a capital U-H. That is no longer the case. I am as happy and content as a person can be. I am not alone anymore. Salvation. Eternal life. I know what the future holds and it is glorious. I know the meaning to life.

(She rummages through her purse) Here take this. It's a gift. (She hands Michael a penny. He seems puzzled)

Go ahead read it.

MICHAEL

Read what?

ESTHER

The penny.

MICHAEL

This penny?

ESTHER

Yes.

MICHAEL

(He is genuinely confused) Read the penny?

ESTHER

Yes, read it. Right there. It says In God We Trust . . . . You *should* you know.

MICHAEL

Uhh.

ESTHER

My life has been nothing but joy since I accepted Jesus into my life. It can be that way for you too, Michael.

MICHAEL

(Tired of playing game) Esther. I'm reading an unbelievably good book so I'm really sorry, but I don't feel like talking. It's nothing personal, I just want to get back to my book. It helps keep me from getting motion sickness.

ESTHER

I see. I see. You know *Mike*, I came to England to get away from people like you in America. That provincial, head up the rear bull *crap* that Americans are renowned for. I needed to come to the continent for some culture and to get away . . . (her voice rises and she begins to shout)

from a-holes like you! It's people like you that are screwing up America, people like you that are destroying the world with your passive aggressive bull *crap*! You have an intelligent, fascinating, worldly person sitting right next to you and you have an opportunity for growth and communion but you'd rather crawl up your own narcissistic rear end than interact with someone you can learn from. *You don't listen!* You and people like you and your bull *shit* are the reason the world is such a *goddamned* mess! (She waves her hands theatrically) You - are - a - pig!

She gets up and moves to a seat at the back of the car. MICHAEL is stunned. He sits in silence with a stricken look on his face as he wonders what just happened. He looks around to see if anyone else witnessed the episode but sees the car is still empty. He starts to get up, sits back down, looks back at ESTHER, pondering his next move. He seems to think he can talk to her and fix things. He gets up, walks to the back and stands by ESTHER

MICHAEL

Esther, I . . . .

ESTHER begins to scream. Loudly.

ESTHER

Heeelp! Heeeeelp! This man is harassing me! Get away from me! Help!

MICHAEL had only wanted to make peace. He didn't see this coming. He becomes unglued.

He twists, turns his head wildly, semi squats, stands back upright, has wild look in his eyes, starts to run back to his seat, stumbles on first step, stops - at that moment the conductor enters the car as ESTHER continues to scream.

ESTHER

Conductor, this man is harassing me. He won't leave me alone! He - is - a -pig!

CONDUCTOR

Sir, what is this about?

CONDUCTOR puts hand on MICHAELS shoulder.

MICHAEL

I was just, well I wanted to .... we were talking and she was upset, and she got up and moved to the back, and I wondered ... I wondered why.

CONDUCTOR

She is screaming at you because you wondered why she moved to another seat? Madam, is that true?

ESTHER

I was speaking to this man, he was rude, I asked him to leave me alone, he persisted in harassing me with callous remarks, I asked him to stop, and when he continued, I called for your help.

CONDUCTOR

Sir, sit down and leave this lady alone or I will remove you from the train. Do you understand?

MICHAEL

(Seriously rattled)

Yes sir. I do. I will. I am. Sorry. I'm sorry.

As they conclude a woman and her small daughter enter train car and find seats. Mother sits next to window, daughter on the aisle. MICHAEL returns unsteadily to his seat and sits down, shaken and slump shouldered. The conductor approaches the woman and her child

CONDUCTOR

Your tickets please.

Conductor takes tickets and punches them. He leaves the car. MICHAEL cautiously turns around and looks back at ESTHER. She smirks at him. Woman and girl settle in. ESTHER stands up, walks next to them and sits in the seat across aisle, next to the little girl

ESTHER

Is this seat taken?

MOTHER

MOTHER looks around car at empty seats. MOTHER and daughter have crisp, upper class English accents

I guess not.

ESTHER

Oh good. I am traveling around England by myself and I am starved for conversation. Judging by your accent, you are English, correct?

MOTHER

Yes, of course.

ESTHER

(To little girl) I am Esther. What's your name darling?

Little girl is quite shy and hesitant to answer.

MOTHER

It's alright honey.

GIRL

Deidre.

ESTHER

What a beautiful name!

Little girl snuggles closer to her mother.

ESTHER

Well. I am seeing England by train. I received a modest inheritance some years ago that allows me to travel. I am enjoying England, but, if you will allow me a moment of candor, the trains are filthy, the food is horrid, the weather awful, and, I hope you don't take this personally, but I find the English people to be a bit, shall we say, withdrawn, not emotionally present. What part of England are you from?

Mother is shocked and tries to hide her horror at the impudence of Esther.

MOTHER

We are, well, we are from Cambridge. We are returning from a visit to London, but we just stopped at Letchworth to have lunch with friends.

ESTHER

Oh, London. I couldn't believe how dirty and down at the heels so much of it was. Do they ever clean the streets? And the people of color! I thought London was a Caucasian city. The smell of curry everywhere. Goodness. What do you do in Cambridge?

MOTHER

MOTHER is slack jawed with amazement at the conversation.

MOTHER

I, I am a barrister. A lawyer.

ESTHER

Oh, don't get me started on lawyers. I ...

MOTHER

So what was it that you do again, er, Esther?

ESTHER

As I said, I have a modest inheritance, so I travel around the world, enjoying culture, getting to know people, trying to live my Faith.

MICHAEL, who can overhear, begins to subtly react to each familiar utterance.

MOTHER

Live your Faith?

ESTHER

Yes, some years ago I accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior.

ESTHER digs through her purse.

ESTHER

Here. Take this penny. It's a gift.

ESTHER hands penny to little girl, who takes it as if she has been handed a bug.

ESTHER

Read it.

GIRL

Read what?

ESTHER

The penny.

GIRL

How can I read a penny Mummy?

ESTHER

Look right there.

She points to penny.

ESTHER

In God We Trust .... You *should* you know.

GIRL

Mummy. Mummy. I want another.

ESTHER

Oh how cute! She wants another penny!

GIRL

No. I want another seat.

ESTHER, who was smiling broadly, goes blank faced. There is an uncomfortable silence. MICHAEL has a broad smile on his face. Train brakes hiss.

INTERCOM

Cambridge. This stop is Cambridge.

MOTHER

Oh goodness. This is our exit. It was lovely chatting with you Esther.

The mother and daughter, with a palpable sense of relief, get up and walk quickly to back of car to the exit. Mother looks back at ESTHER as they leave the car. ESTHER doesn't respond, and has a deflated look on her face. A man enters car and sits near ESTHER. SHE face perks up. CONDUCTOR appears.

CONDUCTOR

Your ticket please.

CONDUCTOR takes ticket from man and punches it. He looks at MICHAEL intensely, MICHAEL is uncomfortable. CONDUCTOR leaves the car.

ESTHER moves to seat across from man.

ESTHER

How do you do? My name is Esther ... I'm an American. I'm simply starved for conversation. Do you mind if I sit here?

STEPHEN

Not at all. Hello. My name is Stephen.

ESTHER

It is so lovely to meet you Stephen. Where are you traveling to?

STEPHEN

I am traveling to Peterborough to see my fiance. And may I say how nice it is to meet an American. Americans are so open, so friendly.

It is such a contrast to we English, who, you may have noticed, are reserved, protective of our privacy. Frankly it can be oppressive. I wish I would have been born with that American spirit. It seems so invigorating, so, so ... intoxicating.

MICHAEL raises an eyebrow. ESTHER seems quite taken with STEPHEN

ESTHER

Stephen, I find it refreshing to hear you say that. I came into a modest inheritance and left Ohio behind. Americans lacks sophistication but I can see how their openness can be refreshing to the English. I have been quite amazed by the dreariness of England, the dirty trains, the horrid food, the dreadful weather, the gimlet eyed people. And oh, London. Foreigners and that awful curry smell everywhere!

MICHAEL, is cringing, waiting for another listener to realize he is being insulted by ESTHER. To his surprise, STEPHEN is quite taken by ESTHER's candor.

STEPHEN

How interesting. Your observations mirror my own. England *is* a dreary place. I watch American television shows and the excitement is almost overwhelming. Such openness, such innocence, and oh, the sun, the weather. It seems like Shangri La.

ESTHER

Well Stephen, American has it's own set of problems. Those terrible Democrats, and all of the people on welfare. It's just too much. No one works anymore. They just wait for Uncle Sam to put the feast on the table.

STEPHEN

It's no different here Esther. Half the country is on the dole, and the other half works to support them. I am a supporter. It's dreadful.

ESTHER

And what do you do to support the slothful masses, Stephen? (chuckles)

STEPHEN

I'm in sales. I work for a financial services firm. Thesis Limited. We sell financial instruments. Not on the level of some of the bigger firms, but we do well. I hope to work my way up to management once Amanda and I get married.

ESTHER

Tell me about Amanda. She must be wonderful for such a lovely man as you to be attracted to her.

STEPHEN

Oh, she is truly a remarkable woman. I am a lucky, lucky man.

ESTHER

What does Amanda do?

STEPHEN

She's a teacher. She teaches pre-school students. And she's involved in a non-profit that does environmental work.

ESTHER

Oh. Oh.

STEPHEN

There was something in your tone. Is something wrong?

ESTHER

Well, I pictured you with someone in a profession with more, oh, of an upside. What is the upside of environmental charity? Really.

STEPHEN

I don't understand. (MICHAEL sits up as if to listen more closely)

ESTHER

Well, you obviously are going to go places. You are a man with promise written all over you. You have a very bright future, Stephen. Is Amanda an attractive woman?

STEPHEN

She is the most beautiful woman in the world to me.

ESTHER

What are her goals?

STEPHEN

Well, she plans to teach her whole life, I guess.

ESTHER

You guess. You haven't spoken to her about what her goals are? What your goals are as a couple?

STEPHEN

I don't know. I just want her to be happy, for us to be happy.

ESTHER

Oh Stephen, my naive friend. A man with your promise must be very proactive in how you choose a mate. The difference between upper management, say the CEO or CFO, and someone who remains in sales their entire career is often as simple as who is on their arm at corporate functions. Is Amanda ambitious?

STEPHEN

(Seeming to ponder Amanda in a way he never has before) No. No. Amanda is utterly content to be in the classroom. She has no interest in my business. She seems to think that the banking industry is up to no good. She is suspicious that something untoward is going on with my superiors.

ESTHER

First off Stephen, no one is your superior. That is apparent. You are a man who is going places. I know we just met, and it really is none of my business, but I just have a feeling. I shouldn't say it. Oh, what the heck. I really wonder if Amanda is the woman to nurture your career into the stratospheric level that's within your reach. I fear that she may hinder your career more than help it. (MICHAEL sits upright, shocked)

STEPHEN

Oh dear. I've never thought of it this way before. (He rubs his forehead)  
... You may be right. (MICHAEL squirms in seat)

ESTHER

I know this must be a terrible thing to consider, Stephen, but you may want to think about, well, breaking off the engagement before it's too late. You must think of yourself. Of your career. Of your future.

MICHAEL seems to be expecting STEPHEN to tell her to go to hell. STEPHEN is lost in thought.

STEPHEN

I don't know. This is all a bit much to consider. I. I. ... Yes. Yes I must.

(MICHAEL looks on incredulously)

Oh goodness. I can't believe how close I am to making a terrible mistake. I see it now. With Amanda I will always be a part of the status quo. She is perfectly content with what she has. I want more.

ESTHER

Of course you want more. You are one of the people in this world who make things happen, who build tomorrows. Amanda I fear, is one of those people who criticize and close doors rather than open them .... Stephen, some years ago, I accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. My journey is complete. I see the world with crystalline clarity now. (MICHAEL shakes his head in disbelief)

I can see that it is the same for you.

(She rummages through her handbag)

Take this. It's a gift.

She hands him a penny, which he accepts.

ESTHER

Read it.

STEPHEN

Read it?

ESTHER

Yes, read it. It says In God We Trust. You *should* you know.

STEPHEN

Yes. We should. *I should*.

ESTHER beams. MICHAEL cringes. Sound of airbrakes. Train stops.

INTERCOM

Peterborough. This stop is Peterborough.

STEPHEN grabs his bag.

STEPHEN

Esther, this has been the most remarkable conversation. (MICHAEL nods)  
I am off to see Amanda. This will be difficult, but I see what I must do. I am  
ending the engagement this very day. Thank you, thank you. You have  
changed the course of my life. For the better.

ESTHER glows with contentment.

ESTHER

Stephen, the pleasure has been all mine.

STEPHEN leans over, they kiss on the cheeks.

STEPHEN

God willing, we will meet again someday.

STEPHEN leaves through the rear of the car.  
ESTHER looks towards MICHAEL, they get eye  
contact and ESTHER gives him a wide smile. Train  
begins to move. ESTHER and MICHAEL sit in  
silence, ESTHER beaming, MICHAEL looking  
overwhelmed. Soon the sound of air brakes fills  
the car. Sounds of train stopping. After a few  
moment of silence a voice comes over intercom

INTERCOM

Ladies and gentlemen. I regretfully must inform you that we have struck  
something on the tracks. If past experience is any measure, it may take an  
extended period of time for authorities to complete all of the necessary details  
of investigation and cleanup. Passengers must remain on the train until the  
process is complete. We ask you not to look out the windows as the scene  
might be unsettling and indelicate. British Rail apologizes for the  
inconvenience.

ESTHER walks to MICHAEL and sits down, smiling.  
We hear sirens in the background.

ESTHER

(Calmly) Goodness. Goodness. Mike, it appears that we *will* have a chance to  
continue our conversation.

MICHAEL

(We hear anxiety in his voice) I. Oh. I heard you talking to those other people.

ESTHER

I do hope I don't have to call for the conductor.

MICHAEL

(Gulps) Please.

ESTHER

Mike, let's think of this as an opportunity. An opportunity for you to become a better listener. So few people know how to listen. Listen.

MICHAEL stares straight ahead with a look of quiet horror on his face. Lights begin to dim and sound of sirens fade with the light.

FADE TO BLACK

END OF SCENE

SCENE #4. PHARMAKIA

“THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS PARANOIA. YOUR WORST FEARS CAN COME TRUE AT ANY MOMENT.” HUNTER S. THOMPSON

1973. Automobile.

In darkness we hear the start of song “Riders On the Storm” by the Doors. Lights come up and we see a sign that says Interstate-57. MICHAEL, who is hitchhiking, has just got into a car driven by a 19 year old with a buzz haircut, wearing t-shirt and jeans. Blood has dripped from nose to his shirt. He turns off radio.

MICHAEL

Thanks for the ride. Nice Vega. (He sees blood and cringes) I’m going to visit my girlfriend. In Blue Island. A couple of hours north.

DRIVER

(Intensely) You got any dope?

MICHAEL

(Sighs) No. No, I do not have any dope.

DRIVER

(He rushes his words) Shit! Fuck! That’s the only reason I picked you up. You looked like you’d have dope.

MICHAEL

(Realizing he is in trouble) I’m really sorry man. I just don’t have any pot.

DRIVER

You holdin’ anything? Anything at all?

MICHAEL

No. It’s not a good idea to hitchhike with dope. Not that I would have any anyway.

DRIVER

Fuck! Goddamnit! I need some dope.

MICHAEL

(Eyes wide) Sorry.

DRIVER

Huh? Me and my buddies are on a week pass after boot camp and we did a shit load of angel dust and I'm so fuckin' high I can't sit still, so I'm drivin'. Damn. (Drifts off in thought) Where'd I leave them? Ithaca? Man I can't remember the last time I slept. I can't think. *Shit!* We drank like twenty beers a piece and it didn't take the edge off at all. I just need some smoke to mellow out. Shit man. Where'd I leave 'em?

MICHAEL

(Under his breath) In the gutter?

DRIVER

Huh?

MICHAEL

Ithaca is in New York.

DRIVER

Yeh.

MICHAEL

We are in Illinois.

DRIVER puts head on steering wheel and closes eyes.

Hey. Hey. Hey!

DRIVER Jerks head up and turns wheel violently.

Jesus! You almost drove off the road!

DRIVER

Sorry man. I just need some pot to clear my head.

MICHAEL

(Whispers to himself) Oh God.

DRIVER

You got any pot?

MICHAEL

No. I do not have any pot. Are you ok? Your nose.

DRIVER

(looks in mirror) Shit. Just a nose bleed. Pot helps me mellow out. You wanna snort some dust with me?

MICHAEL

(Eyes open wide) Uh. No thanks. Certain about that. I got some anxiety problems. Claustrophobia. Dentophobia. Pharmacophobia. Phobophobia. I'm phobia rich and marijuana poor.

DRIVER

Come on. Do a snort with me. Man I just got out of boot camp. I'm goin' to Vietnam in a couple of weeks. I wanna party man. I need to party man! (Looks directly into MICHAEL's eyes - he is desperate) I'm gonna die in Vietnam. Do a snort man. I'm gonna die soon. For real. For real.

MICHAEL

(Scared to death) Just keep your eye on the road. We almost went into the median there. I hope to get home alive. (whimpers) Home ... So no thanks. No PCP for me. But thanks anyway.

DRIVER

Just a little toot?

MICHAEL

I appreciate it but no.

DRIVER

A little toot.

DRIVER pulls vial out, drives with knee, pours powder between thumb and forefinger, loudly snorts drug. MICHAEL slides to car floor, in terror.

Fuckin' A!

DRIVER slumps forward and moves steering wheel to the left. MICHAEL grabs wheel and pulls it back - DRIVER lurches to attention - He now has blood over lips and chin.

Oh, thanks man. I kinda went blank for a second. I think I saw God.

MICHAEL

What!?

DRIVER

He had a crazy smile. His eyes were like stars man. Stars! You wanna toot some dust? Do some dust man, you'll see God.

MICHAEL

Nothing personal but I'm not sure if that's God you're seeing. Could be the angel dust.

DRIVER

His eyes man. Look at the stars.

MICHAEL

(Voice vibrates with anxiety) It's daylight. There are no stars.

DRIVER

Stars man.

MICHAEL

(Frantic) Want to listen to some music? (Reaches, turns on radio)

RADIO

State Police say that they have no leads in yesterdays I-57 murders. Anyone with ... (MICHAEL quickly turns radio off. He gasps)

DRIVER

Stars.

MICHAEL

(Looks around frantically, trying to think of something to do - we sense he is considering jumping out of the car) Oh. Hey. This is my exit. This is Chicago.

DRIVER

Wow. Already?

MICHAEL

Sure. Yeh. That did seem quick. Time flies.

DRIVER

(Driver pulls over and stops)

Yeh, OK man, this is your exit. (looks around) Woulda thought there were buildings instead of cornfields in Chicago.

MICHAEL

You'd think.

DRIVER

(Driver's eyes are unfocused. Looks around dreamily) Stars.

MICHAEL

(Shocked his subterfuge has worked) OK. Wow. Wow. Thanks for the ride. Good luck finding some dope.

DRIVER

Thanks man. And good luck on the next ride. You know where Ithaca is?

MICHAEL

(Looks at heavens as if to say thank you. DRIVER reaches out hand for soul shake) Uh. That way? (points over corn field)

DRIVER

(DRIVER seems to be looking through MICHAEL) Cool.

MICHAEL

Drive carefully.

DRIVER

Always man. Always.

Blackout - sound of car door opening and closing.  
We see two stars twinkling above stage - We hear  
"Riders on the Storm" and it fades to silence.

END OF SCENE

## SCENE #5. THE OGRE

“NATURE IS AN EQUATION WITH AN UNKNOWN, A HEBREW WORD WHICH IS WRITTEN ONLY WITH CONSONANTS, TO WHICH REASON HAS TO ADD THE DOTS.” JOHAN GEORG HAMANN

2003. Boat.

On river taxi on the Chicago River. Before lights come up we hear the sound of a boat motor. As lights rise we see two pairs of chairs, in rows, represents the interior of the water taxi. HELEN, age 15, is sitting in one chair, looking out the window at Chicago skyscrapers. MICHAEL is in a seat next to her, reading the paper. HELEN occasionally leans toward MICHAEL to get better view.

HELEN

Nobody talks on this boat. Everybody's in their own world. So I look at strangers and play a game with myself. I imagine that guy over there is a spy. He observes others and plans terrible things for them. I make reality what I want it to be.

MICHAEL

That's nice.

HELEN

Dad! (MICHAEL is startled from his newspaper) You made me come to the city and you aren't even paying attention to me.

MICHAEL

I'm sorry honey. I was looking at the sea gulls and I got a little motion sickness from the movement of the boat. (Sheepishly) And I'm kind of claustrophobic here in the cabin. Reading the paper helps.

HELEN

I can't believe it. A psychologist with *psycho* problems. You worry more about all of your phobias and hang ups than you do me. Even when I was sick you were only thinking about you!

MICHAEL

That's not fair and you know it.

HELEN

I didn't want to come to the museum. You made me come and now you ignore me because you're fucked up.

MICHAEL

Don't use that kind of language in front of me. Or behind me. Don't use it period. We're going to the museum to share some quality time.

HELEN

Quality time. A bullshit rationalization for divorced parents to look in the mirror and like the asshole staring back at them.

MICHAEL

I had to raise the most crudely literate teenager in the world.

HELEN

(Raising her voice) You and mom only think about yourselves! I could've spent the day with my friends talking about what ogres our parents are instead of being ignored by the man who ruined my life.

MICHAEL

(Sighs) Listen. We are here. We are going to the museum. Lets make the best of it. We have established that your mom and I are responsible for making your life a bottomless well of horror . . . Let's move on. I was looking up at the skyscrapers when we got on the boat and had a little epiphany. You remember the mountains outside of Grindlewald when we visited Switzerland?

HELEN

(Rolls her eyes) I'm not an idiot dad. The Moench, the Jungfrau, and the Eiger.

MICHAEL

(Sighs) The skyscrapers here are so tall they block the sky like the mountains. I think the Hancock building is the peak called the Monk, the Trump building is the Jungfrau, the Sears Tower is the Eiger. The ... Ogre. (he smiles) The Eiger is the biggest and darkest and most foreboding. The wind roars through the streets around the skyscrapers here like it does in the valleys around the peaks. In a way, Chicago reminds me of a man made Grindlewald.

HELEN

That's total BS. The skyscrapers aren't anything like mountains.

MICHAEL

I'm trying to pay attention to you with scintillating small talk (smiles) . Hey. See the people riding their bikes along the river? Remember when we rode the bikes down the mountain to the bottom of the Grindlewald valley then took the train back? That was one of the most fun things we've ever done.

HELEN

All I remember about that was mom insulting the girl who rented us the bikes.

MICHAEL

What are you talking about?

HELEN

Mom didn't like the bikes and threw a fit.

MICHAEL

(Forlornly) I remember.

HELEN

Then she leaned over and whispered in the girls ear that her mom did a terrible job of raising her.

MICHAEL

You heard that?

HELEN

Of course. I thought mom was the biggest asshole in the world. That girl was really cool. Mom made her cry.

MICHAEL

I heard your mom whisper to her. I was mortified. I was sure you didn't hear it. (He looks stricken - stares into middle distance) We can imagine that strangers are something they aren't. We can imagine that loved ones *aren't* something that they *are*. (beat) We can connect the dots wrong. We make reality what we want it to be ... It was on that trip, when she threw that silly fit, that I realized something wasn't right ... I began to connect the dots correctly.

HELEN

(Sarcastically) Good for you Dr. Metaphor. I was so angry.

MICHAEL

I'm sorry honey.

HELEN

I blamed both of you when she said that. I didn't want to be seen with you. I went for a walk in the dark later to get away from you.

MICHAEL

(Big sigh) I sat alone on the balcony that night and looked at the stars. They're so bright there. How could she have treated a young girl like that? A girl the same age as you. I remember looking at the stars and suddenly realizing there was a blank spot in the sky, a place where there were no stars. I felt a panic rising in me and then, suddenly, I realized that it was the Eiger. The North Face was so massive that it blocked the stars for part of the sky. Once I realized what was happening I could see the outline of the peak and I felt silly - I had forgotten in the dark about a giant mountain in front of me. But for a minute I thought that some of the stars had gone missing. I somehow managed to make a mountain and a chunk of the Milky Way vanish - but only in my head. It seemed like a ... (sheepishly) metaphor. Part of us was missing. In my mind the void in the sky represented our marriage.

HELEN

(Sarcastically) Sure dad. You can make stars disappear. You're a God.

MICHAEL

Then, incredibly, there was an intense meteor shower. Only the second one I'd ever seen.

HELEN sits abruptly upright.

HELEN

You saw them?

MICHAEL

I don't really believe in God, but in my state of mind it had to be a sign from on high, and, as I looked at the stars I imagined them as being neurons and dendrites, a map of the brain, the nerve cells of the cosmos, firing and glittering with the energy of thought.

It was like it was a reflection of my own brain. Maybe it was the wine, I don't know. The stars were like a brain and my brain tricked me into thinking part of it was missing.

HELEN

I got chills .... I saw it too. I was outside of the hotel looking at the sky, wondering how mom could be so cruel. I was so angry at her and at you for not standing up for the girl. I saw the meteor shower . . . I made a wish to God.

MICHAEL

You made a wish?

HELEN

Yes.

MICHAEL

What did you wish for?

HELEN

(Begins to cry) I wished for you and mom to get divorced! You got divorced! I wanted you out of my life. It's all my fault! I made a stupid wish and for the first time in my life God listened to me! (she sobs)

MICHAEL

(Shocked) It's not your fault honey. It was going to happen. The stars don't make things happen. They just reflect back what we project on them. It has nothing to do with a God.

HELEN

You didn't cause me to suffer. I caused us to suffer! I'm sorry dad. I did it.

MICHAEL

(Shaken. He hugs her) There's no need to be sorry. You didn't cause the divorce. (He looks up at the skyscrapers) Half of our life it's daylight and there is no chance of seeing the stars. Cities block them out at night. Such a loss to not see the stars. We need to see the stars. We look at the sky and what will we see? Dot's to connect or no dot's at all?

HELEN

Dad, there's no map to the brain! Stop with the metaphor crap. Stop with the stars! You're never here with me when I need you.

You're just as much a stranger as everybody else on this boat. You're always someplace else in your head! Be - with - me!

MICHAEL looks as though he is about to cry. He hugs his daughter as she sobs.

MICHAEL

Wishes. Prayers. (Looks up at sky). Dot's to connect or no dot's at all.

INTERCOM

(Sound of boat engine softens) This is the Michigan Avenue stop. The Michigan Avenue stop. Please be careful as you exit to the dock. Connections can be made on shore.

FADE TO BLACK. As stage goes dark, flickering stars emerge on two thirds of the ceiling and rear of the stage, then gradually appear on the entire ceiling and rear of stage. Sound of boat motor fades along with stars.

END OF SCENE

SCENE #6- THIS FOR THAT

“ PEOPLE ARBITRARILY SEIZE ON A FEW MOMENTS AND ESTABLISH THEM AS LAW.” KARL MARX

1973. Automobile.

On Interstate 57 in Illinois. Lights come up. MICHAEL has another ride, in another Vega. ALLEN, dressed in a military uniform is in driver’s seat. He has an ace bandage on his left hand. “Closer to Home” by Grand Funk Railroad is playing on radio. Allen turns radio off as MICHAEL slides into seat.

MICHAEL

Thanks so much. I really appreciate the lift.

ALLEN

Where you headed?

MICHAEL

I’m going near Chicago. To Blue Island. Home. I’m Michael.

ALLEN

( Chuckles again ) I’m headed to Flossmor. I can get you a good chunk of the way to where you’re going. I’m Allen .... you don’t mind if I smoke a joint do you?

MICHAEL

Uh. No. But none for me, thanks.

ALLEN

Too bad. (He fires up a joint) What do you do with yourself when your not risking your life hitchhiking?

MICHAEL

I’m a college student.

ALLEN

Studying?

MICHAEL

Psychology.

ALLEN

Well now, that's a fascinating subject. Analyzing behavior. What do you make of a guy who would pick up a hitchhiker on a day that the news media is hyperventilating about murders on the very road we're driving on?

MICHAEL

(Pause) Well, I would hope that he is an altruistic, loving pacifist.

ALLEN

(Laughs) Well Michael, not a lot of pacifists in the military. But as long as we're sizing people up, I don't really see a long haired kid with a big vocabulary carrying a backpack as a potential serial killer. A better question might be why would you get into a car with a stranger when someone just raped and butchered some people on this very road.

MICHAEL

(Shocked) Raped? How do you know that? I didn't hear that.

ALLEN

They used the word "defiled" on the radio to describe the victims. It struck me a perfect code word for rape that the media can use to not upset people with delicate spirits.

MICHAEL

Oh boy. It's worse than I thought.

ALLEN

Yes, it is bad. Very bad. So how did you happen to hitchhike on I-57 on the single worst day to hitchhike on it in it's history of existence? I've got to hear this. (Puffs on joint)

MICHAEL

Well, my girlfriend back home is having a party and I couldn't find a ride from college and I've hitchhiked a little so it seemed to make sense.

ALLEN

It doesn't make sense to me.

MICHAEL

I really want to see Penny. I miss her.

ALLEN

Love is a remarkable motivator. It makes men do curious things. Men have been known to kill for love.

MICHAEL

(Suddenly wary) Sure. I guess so. Do you like your Vega?

ALLEN

(Cynical laugh) Michael, that is like asking if you like hitting your dick with a hammer. (MICHAEL cringes) The answer should be evident. It burns oil like a grease fire, the workmanship is shoddy, the design awful, parts falls off of it with startling regularity, and the aluminum engine block is the stuff of nightmares. I still have two years of payments to make and I'm confident it will be crushed into a metal cube long before that last payment is made. Two days ago I was told that I need to rebuild the cylinder heads, which will cost me two weeks pay. I punched a wall and now have a cracked bone in my hand. I'm wound tight about a lot of things and I just exploded. So, to answer your question Michael, no, I do not like my Vega.

MICHAEL

I'm really sorry. I was just trying to make conversation.

ALLEN

That's all right Michael. I picked you up because I could use someone to listen. I read in Reader's Digest that the single leading cause of relationships falling apart is that one partner doesn't think the other is listening. Since you are getting a free ride here, the quid pro quo for this ride is that you listen. It's important for the survival of our relationship. (He has grim look on face) I need a listener Michael. Are you ready to listen?

MICHAEL

(Gulps) Yes. Yes I am.

ALLEN

I've been in Rantoul for a year living with my wife of 13 years. The light of my life, supportive and wonderful and beautiful. We planned to raise a family but it wasn't meant to be. I hope I'm not sharing too much, but we discovered after much effort that I cannot have children.

I struggled with this when we first found out, I've got a big ego after all, I'm a military guy, I've been in battle for God's sake. I've *killed* people Michael. (Michael's eyes get big) Fired missiles at people. In a weird way it builds the ego to kill people. Odd isn't it? (MICHAEL is squirming) But it's tough on the ego to not be able to *create* life. My wife, Jill, seemed to accept my inadequacy. We thought about adopting, but with the constant moves we just never were able to gain traction on adoption.

MICHAEL

She sounds wonderful. Uh, have you told this story before?

ALLEN

I have had other listeners - Being in the military is tough on spouses. *Most* marriages don't survive. It is so hard on the women at home. They have to essentially run a household and raise a family on their own. But Jill is the best. One in a million.

MICHAEL

You're a lucky guy.

ALLEN

Lucky. (wistful chuckle) Yeh. She never even bitched about being seen in a Chevy Vega. (Laughs)

MICHAEL

It's not that bad.

ALLEN

Yes it is. About four months ago I was sent to an training course in southern California. I was not looking forward to eight weeks training away from Jill. You know what I mean?

MICHAEL

Sure. Yeh. I guess I know what you mean.

ALLEN

My best buddy Steve, he promised me he'd keep an eye on Jill for me. I used to look after his family when he was in the field or doing training. Since Steve got divorced though, he hasn't needed my help that way. Jill gets along with Steve real well so it was comforting to know if she needed anything he'd be there to do stuff I couldn't help her with.

(Pauses)

Well that sounded weird. Don't get me wrong Michael. Nothing was going on between them, it hasn't been that kind of arrangement. Just friends helping friends. That gives a fellow piece of mind. We do some crazy, dangerous shit, forgive me, in the military, in the Air Force. You're more likely to get killed in the training exercises than in battle. Way more likely. Understand?

MICHAEL

Uh, yeh, sure.

ALLEN

I was getting training for some new protocols on air-to-air refueling with KC one thirty fives - the big air to air refueling jet. Dangerous machines. One little glitch and you're a fireball crashing to into a field. It can be something as simple as running into a flock of birds. Birds are more dangerous than missiles. Birds are a bad omen in my world. Here's something I dwell on to the point of obsession - that you have some time your about to enter the void. One minute you're a thinking, breathing, feeling human being, then, after a few moments of ball tingling, terrified thought and biblical pain, you are a wisp of carbon, floating down on somebody's picnic and streaking clothes a hundred miles away. Are you religious Michael?

MICHAEL

(Uncomfortable) Not really. I mean I don't know.

ALLEN

Seems like a thoughtful guy like you would have considered that. You should you know.

(MICHAEL looks queasy. ALLEN pauses)

There's rarely a body for viewing or burying when a plane goes down. A box of ashes at best. Steve would have been there to deliver that box. (takes puff from joint)

MICHAEL

Do you guys smoke pot when you're flying?

ALLEN

That's a passive aggressive question. It's impolite. While I was gone Steve would check in on Jill, helping with chores and making sure she was ok. A helluva pal. Steve got a big, noisy old Harley when he got divorced.

He said it let him live in the moment, get over the divorce, forget his troubles.

(Pauses)

I was gone a week. Jill asked Steve if he'd take her for a ride to kill the boredom. They headed for a state park outside of town. I want to be clear here. There was *nothing* going on between them, Steve just wanted to cheer her up and get her out of the house. Nothing going on *at all*.

MICHAEL looks really uncomfortable, eyes darting, gears obviously turning in his head. ALLEN pauses.

A few miles out of town there's an intersection and a teenage kid blew through a stop sign. Steve went over the handlebars into a corn field, but other than a few scrapes and bruises he was ok.

(Pause) Jill though. Jill . . .

MICHAEL

(Grimaces) Oh no.

ALLEN

(Pauses and fights a sob ) Jill broke both ankles, some ribs, punctured a lung, she had a terrible concussion. She couldn't breath. To the teenage kid's credit, he stopped, picked them up and took them to the hospital. If the kid hadn't stopped, she'd be dead.

MICHAEL

Aw, I'm sorry. I'm really sorry.

ALLEN

(Looks at MICHAEL funny) She had a half a dozen surgeries. Steve was beside himself. He was supposed to look after her and she almost died on his watch. They decided not to worry me. They knew I had enough on my mind. Thoughtful people.

Steve visited her every day at the hospital and looked after her and made sure she got the best doctors and specialists. Once she got home he moved in to handle her care, took her to doctor's appointments, therapy, just making sure she had the best chance to recuperate. He's a hell of a friend. He was there for her. For me.

Sounds of the car engine and wind flowing past car. MICHAEL squirms in seat. ALLEN seems lost in thought. MICHAEL squirms some more.

ALLEN

(Pause. Long Pause) Goddamned if they didn't fall in love.

MICHAEL slumps in seat. Leans against car door. Checks door lock. Looks like he wants to jump out of car. He thinks ALLEN is I-57 murderer.

ALLEN

(Another uncomfortable pause) They were just friends, but something about nursing her back to health, keeping it secret ... well, it just happened. (Big sigh) Our divorce was final last week. Don't ever get divorced Michael. (MICHAEL shakes his head) It's a horror story. We were so connected. We aren't connected anymore. My best friend became my monster. (beat) I've been driving back and forth from my mom's in Flossmor to Rantoul everyday on I-57. I just can't stay in Rantoul. I have enough rage and anger without hanging around there. They're getting married next month. Steve asked me to be the best man. (Laughs sarcastically) Silly bastard thinks we can still be friends.

Pause. ALLEN looks at MICHAEL longer than he should given that he is driving.

ALLEN

Michael, I've thought about killing them both. Isn't that awful?

He looks back at the road. MICHAEL looks like he is about to soil himself.

ALLEN

I'm alone. I don't trust myself.

ALLEN pauses. MICHAEL looks like he's about to cry. Both are lost in their thoughts. Suddenly, without warning, there is a loud explosion. Both men leap in their seats. MICHAEL hits his head on roof of the car, let's out a short, feral scream, grabs his head with his hands. ALLEN gasps in response.

MICHAEL frantically looks all over his body, searching his arms and legs as if expecting a bloody wound to reveal itself. ALLEN looks at him with fear and confusion. MICHAEL realizes he is not shot, looks at ALLEN with wild eyes and shouts, in a screeching voice.

MICHAEL

What was that!

ALLEN

ALLEN, obviously charged with adrenaline, speaks about an octave higher than his earlier voice.

ALLEN

It was a backfire!

MICHAEL

A what!

ALLEN

A backfire!

MICHAEL

A backfire?!

ALLEN

Yes!

MICHAEL

What kind of car backfires going full speed?!

ALLEN

ALLEN'S shoulders slump.

ALLEN

It's a Vega.

They both are breathing heavily.

MICHAEL

Goddamnit Allen, that scared the shit out of me! (fighting for breath) I'm about to have an anxiety attack here.

ALLEN

When you screamed it scared the shit out of me. It was just a backfire.

MICHAEL

I was sure you were the I-57 murderer and just shot me, for God's sake!

ALLEN

Ahhh.

They sit in silence for a moment.

MICHAEL

Allen, I'm sorry about your troubles. But listen to this - I'm out of the listening business for the rest of this ride.

ALLEN

I understand. I understand. No . . . I don't understand anything.

They sit in silence again, lost in their own thoughts. MICHAEL takes his map from his backpack and looks at it. FADE TO BLACK. We hear car door open and close.

END OF SCENE

SCENE #7. THE LOTUS EATER

"FOREVER IS COMPOSED OF NOW". EMILY DICKINSON

1992. Elevator.

Chicago. MICHAEL and JENNY are standing in front of an elevator.

Are you going up?

JENNY

I hope so.

MICHAEL

Pardon?

JENNY

Yes.

MICHAEL

JENNY hits the UP button. They wait, not talking. Sound of elevator doors opening. They enter. Sound of doors closing and elevator rising. Digital readout on wall shows them moving up floors. They stand, silent. After a few moments we hear unsettling mechanical sounds. Lights flicker and go out. Elevator stops. Emergency lights go on. MICHAEL and JENNY look at each other.

Oh no.

MICHAEL

Have we stopped?

JENNY

Oh.

MICHAEL

I hope you're not in a hurry to get anywhere.

JENNY

MICHAEL

This is not good.

JENNY

I agree.

MICHAEL

I have a bit of claustrophobia. I have a lot of claustrophobia.

JENNY

I'm sure the elevator will move soon.

MICHAEL

*Please* make it move. (pause)

I've got to sit. I feel queasy.

MICHAEL sits on floor of the elevator. JENNY sighs, sits beside him, and stares at him.

JENNY

Your lips are moving. (He just looks at her) You seem to be doing OK. I'm Jennifer. You can call me Jenny.

MICHAEL

(Speaks quickly) I'm Michael. Nice to meet you Jenny. Well actually this isn't nice. But ..... Thanks for sitting down with me. I think the claustrophobia might not be so bad if I'm sitting down.

JENNY

I hope so. Tell me about yourself. It looks like we might have some time on our hands. What do you do?

MICHAEL

Promise you won't laugh?

JENNY

Why would I laugh?

MICHAEL

I'm a psychology professor.

JENNY

(laughs) I'm sorry. A psychology professor with a phobia. (Chuckles again)

MICHAEL

I know, I know.

JENNY

How do you account for this .... problem?

MICHAEL

Well, my *problem* has more to do with an inability to get out of some place than it does with a confined space. If I am in the middle of a row on a plane or at a ball game it makes me really uncomfortable. Kind of like right now.

JENNY

Well, here we are. Not much you can do about it.

MICHAEL

(*Nervous, speaking quickly*) That's the problem. Other mammals get a shot of adrenaline and they react spontaneously - they don't think. They burn the adrenaline off quickly. We don't burn it off. Our brains race. We see patterns and we build scenarios. We see our fears in the stars. We connect the dots. That's what human brains do.

JENNY

Spoken like a psychology professor who needs to lay off the caffeine.

MICHAEL

My brain is in the scenario building business right now. I've constructed a dozen or so scenarios that all end with us crushed by this elevator.

JENNY

Why don't you keep that stuff to yourself?

MICHAEL

It helps to talk about it.

JENNY

It isn't helping me to listen to that shit.

MICHAEL

Most animals live in the moment. Humans usually don't. Our brains skip around time and we project into the future. A future with crushed elevators and broken bodies. That's why we're so neurotic.

JENNY

Speak for yourself.

MICHAEL

This doesn't make you anxious?

JENNY

Of course. But dwelling on it isn't going to help.

MICHAEL

Instead of living in the moment phobias cause us to leave the moment.

Elevator makes creaking noise. MICHAEL flinches and JENNY looks up. MICHAEL'S voice sounds more panicked - he speaks rapidly.

MICHAEL

The holy grail of almost all religions is living in the moment. Meditation is about living in the moment. Prayer is about living in the moment. Dogs are man's best friend because they always live in the moment.

Another creak. They both look up.

MICHAEL

We embrace things that force our brain to shut off the white noise of neurosis and live in the moment.

JENNY

You don't seem to be living in the moment at this moment Michael.

Sudden screeching sound. Elevator drops several feet. Digital readout flickers and goes down one number. MICHAEL and JENNY both gasp.

MICHAEL

(Fear in Voice) Oh God. This is going to end badly. That's the scenario my brain is building.

JENNY

(Exasperated) Here's a scenario for you. In a minute someone on the building staff is going to figure out the elevator is stuck and get us out of here. You're really smart Michael, but where's the wisdom? If it's all about scenario building, how about using your big brain to build positive scenarios Mr. Psychologist?

MICHAEL

(Panic) If we'd just move. Movement equals life. Lack of movement equals stasis. Stasis equals death. I could get back in the moment if I was moving. It's all about being in the moment.

JENNY

I'm a widow.

MICHAEL

What?

JENNY

Speaking of death, I'm a widow. My husband died 5 years ago.

MICHAEL

I'm so sorry.

JENNY

He was a lovely man. A lovely *person*. We were together for 30 years. He had a brain hemorrhage.

MICHAEL

How terrible.

JENNY

It was terrible. He had a brain hemorrhage. He lived two more years. His brain was damaged. He was the same beautiful man, but different. His life became tragic.

MICHAEL

Why are you telling me this?

JENNY

First, to get your mind off of our situation before I have to club you like a baby seal. (MICHAEL jerks his head and looks at her, startled) Also to let you know about living in the moment. You make it sound so wonderful.

MICHAEL

Living in the moment *is* wonderful. It's why meditation is so therapeutic. Why prayer is so essential to believers. It's why anything that makes you live in the moment is so helpful. The research *proves* this.

Elevator shakes and an screeches as it drops a foot.

JENNY

(Voice filled with melancholy) Michael. The damage to my husband's brain made his long term memory disappear. He was left with only short term memory. It was good for about ten seconds or so. His brain was forced to live in the moment. He perpetually lived in the moment.

MICHAEL

Oh.

JENNY

(Stares intensely into MICHAEL'S eyes) He knew that he had lived a life. He knew we had a connection. But he couldn't remember anything beyond what just happened. He knew that other people could revel in past memory. He knew that other people could plan and get excited for the future. He somehow knew these things. But he couldn't participate. He was trapped in the moment. He wanted more than anything to remember, to come back, to go home. Imagine losing the ability to connect the moments of your life.

MICHAEL

(Somberly) No dots to connect.

Elevator engine noise.

JENNY

He was heartbroken for losing his story, *our* story. His life's journey simply disappeared. I lost my story too. Nothing is more heartbreaking than losing your common history. *Nothing*. It's a kind of death, a terrible waking death. Forgive me Michael if I don't get misty eyed about embracing the moment. We are the story telling animal. Without that we lose what makes us us. The story of our journey is all we really have. It is our life. It. Is. Us.

Elevator makes mechanical noises. We hear noise of elevator beginning to work and digital readout shows them rising to higher floors. MICHAEL and JENNY look up.

Twinkling stars begin to appear behind the elevator as stage darkens. We can faintly see MICHAEL and JENNY. They continue to look up as if they can see the Stars, which become brighter and continue to flicker. Interior of elevator fades to black. Stars twinkle brightly then one third of stars disappear. FADE TO BLACK.

END OF SCENE

SCENE #8. THE QUARRY

“THINK LEFT AND THINK RIGHT AND THINK LOW AND THINK HIGH. OH, THE THINKS YOU CAN THINK UP IF ONLY YOU TRY.” DR. SEUSS

1973. Automobile.

Before lights come up we hear “Bang a Gong” by T-Rex. On Interstate 57 in Illinois. Sound of car door opening and closing in darkness. When lights rise again MICHAEL has hitched a ride in another car. He is holding his map. DAMON, the driver, is in his 30’s. He has a large bandage that covers much of his neck. He turns off radio.

MICHAEL

Thanks so much for picking me up. I was getting worried that I was gonna be stuck on the highway for a long time.

DAMON

(DAMON notices MICHAEL looking at bandage covering neck. He points at the bandage) Cut myself shavin’. (laughs) No problem on the ride man. Hey. I’m Damon. When I hear that song I want to do wild things. Bang a gong get it on.

MICHAEL

Yeh, uh, great song. Good to meet you Damon. I’m Michael. This is weird but this is the fourth time today I’ve been picked up by a Vega. I’ve had some of the scariest rides ever.

DAMON

No kiddin’. What happened?

MICHAEL

Well, a guy high on PCP picked me up.

DAMON

PCP?

MICHAEL

It's a drug the Manson family rejected as too dangerous. (DAMON chuckles). Just kidding. Kinda. But people get violent on it. It seems to alter perception of time and place. I thought I was in deep trouble. I have some anxiety issues anyway.

DAMON

Well, it looks like it turned out OK. Where ya headed?

MICHAEL

I'm going to visit a friend in Blue Island, where I grew up. She's having a party I don't want to miss. Hitchhiking might have been a bad decision though.

DAMON

When I was younger I would have done the same thing. I used to play harp in a blues band. I hitched to gigs. Still like to play. (He digs between seats and holds up harmonica) Worked around Blue Island a lot. Met my wife there. We used to do some crazy shit. Thought we were gonna be stars. But I ended up workin' at the quarry on the des Plaines with my buddies. Carrying rocks up a hill. Hey. I'm babblin'. (Laughs) It's gettin' kind of rough around Blue Island these days.

MICHAEL

I'm aware of that.

DAMON

Blue Island's got the blues (laughs). What do ya study at college?

MICHAEL

Psychology.

DAMON

No shit? You analyzin' the people that pick you up?

MICHAEL

On this trip I sure have. What with the murders on the Interstate. I convince myself that everybody who picks me up is the I-57 murderer.

DAMON

(chuckles) That's funny. Do I look like a killer?

MICHAEL

(Looks at bandage) Uh, no.

DAMON

Don't be so sure. The world's a dangerous place. I might be the guy. (Laughs)  
What other kind of rides have you got?

MICHAEL

. . . Everybody that picked me up had a screw loose. A guy in an Air Force uniform told me a story so weird I was sure he was the killer. Drove a Vega, like I said. My first ride showed me his handgun. I about wet myself. He drove a Vega too. Then there was the guy on PCP. I thought each of them was the killer. What are the odds of getting picked up by four Chevy Vegas in one day?

DAMON

Four Vega's that still run? Around zero.

MICHAEL

I kept checking my map to find a way home without using this road. The map says there's really only one road to get home. I may need a new map. Oh well.

DAMON

Maps only take you where other people have gone. Don't interest me.

MICHAEL

(laughs) You're kind of a philosopher aren't you? What do you do when your not sharing wisdom with strangers?

DAMON

I'm at the prison.

MICHAEL

Really? That sounds interesting. Are you a guard or an administrator (laughs) Or the warden?

DAMON

I don't think the warden drives a Vega.

MICHAEL

So what is it you do at the prison?

DAMON

I'm *in* prison.

MICHAEL

(Perplexed)

Huh?

DAMON

I'm in prison. In Joliet. A prisoner. A jail bird. (Laughs). But we're all in a prison in a way, don't you think?

MICHAEL

I ... how... why are you out?

DAMON

Work release program. I have a real smart lawyer. I got to be back on time or I'll have a problem. But I'm used to problems. I'm a problem solver. I didn't go to work today anyway. I just been drivin' around thinkin' about my next move. Ran some errands. (He winks at MICHAEL) I may just take you all the way to Blue Island. My ex wife still lives there. She'd be surprised to see me. Real surprised. I think the restraining order expired. As soon as you said you were goin' to Blue Island the gears started turnin'.

MICHAEL

(Shocked by the offer) But if you don't go back to the prison won't you get in trouble?

DAMON

Sure, but I'll worry about that later. The prison psychologist says to live in the moment. The warden might want to talk to her about that. (laughs loudly) Anyway, my star seems to be guiding me to Blue Island. And I could use the conversation. You seem like a good listener.

MICHAEL

Pause, he is taken aback and lost in thought.

MICHAEL

I've got to ask . . . why are you in prison?

DAMON

Oh, I hurt some people. Smashed 'em with a big rock at the quarry. But they kinda deserved to be hurt. They didn't listen.

MICHAEL

(Michael does not look well) Ohhh.

DAMON

Kept me out of Vietnam, so there's that.

They drive on to the sound of the engine and the road. DAMON turns the radio on. Music is on for a moment and radio is interrupted. DAMON pulls out harmonica and play the blues with one hand and drives with the other as news report plays in background.

VOICE FROM RADIO

Police continue to warn motorists to be cautious on Illinois highways in the wake of this weeks brutal murders on I-57 in Cook County. Do not stop to assist cars along the side of the road or pick up hitchhikers .....

MICHAEL stares straight ahead, Damon has satisfied look on his face as he plays. MICHAEL looks ill. LIGHTS go black as sound of harmonica continues, then fades to silence.

END OF SCENE

SCENE #9. THE ARMS DEALER

“ YOU CAN HOLD YOURSELF BACK FROM THE SUFFERINGS OF THE WORLD, THAT IS SOMETHING YOU ARE FREE TO DO AND IT ACCORDS WITH YOUR NATURE, BUT PERHAPS THIS VERY HOLDING BACK IS THE ONE SUFFERING YOU COULD AVOID.” FRANZ KAFKA

2015. Airliner.

MICHAEL is sitting in an airline window seat, looking out the window, ATHENA has the aisle seat and is reading a magazine. Sound of jet plane engines in background.

PILOT OVER INTERCOM

Ladies and gentleman, my name is Captain Paulson and I will be piloting you on our flight from Chicago to Los Angeles today. We hope you enjoy the flight and somehow get to where you are meant to be. Thanks for flying United.

ATHENA

(Speaking to MICHAEL) Hi, I'm Athena.

MICHAEL

I'm Michael. Nice to meet you Athena. You won the name lottery. Where are you from?

ATHENA

Upstate New York.

MICHAEL

I spent some time in Ithaca years ago. That part of the world is beautiful.

ATHENA

It is. Would you like to chat or would you prefer your solitude?

MICHAEL

Oh. I kind of enjoy looking out the window and getting lost in thought.

ATHENA

A penny for those thoughts.

MICHAEL

Seriously? . . . well, I was just looking at the sky and thinking that stars are out there, but it's day time and we can't see them, but they're still out there. So much of the universe is invisible to us. It's, oh, food for thought I guess.

ATHENA

You have an interesting way of looking at things.

Suddenly there is a sound of turbulence and the plane lurches. MICHAEL and ATHENA to jump.

PILOT OVER INTERCOM

Ladies and gentlemen, it appears we are going through some turbulence that might cause a bit of a tingle in the nether regions. Please stay in your seats and buckle up for the time being. Time and being. There's an interesting topic for a reverie on a bucking airplane. (Chuckles) Thanks again for flying United.

MICHAEL

(Breathing heavily) You know, rather than staring out the window, a chat might be nice.

ATHENA

That sounds lovely, tell me about yourself Michael. Why are you flying to LA?

MICHAEL

I'm delivering a paper at a conference. And I'll visit my daughter.

ATHENA

How exciting. And what do you do?

MICHAEL

I'm a professor. I teach psychology. What takes you to LA?

ATHENA

Business.

MICHAEL

And how do you earn your daily bread?

ATHENA

I like that you put it that way. I'm an arms dealer.

MICHAEL

(Surprised) You're an arms dealer?

ATHENA

Yes I am. National and international arms deals are what I do. You have to make a living you know.

MICHAEL

An arms dealer. I would never have guessed. You don't remotely seem the type. This is ... It's just ... shocking.

ATHENA

I am also a legs dealer.

MICHAEL

(confused) I'm lost here.

ATHENA

(Laughs) I'm sorry Michael, I can't help myself. I know I have an odd sense of humor. I *am* an arms and legs dealer. I work for a company that makes prosthetic arms and legs. Please forgive me. The look on your face was priceless but it was kind of cruel of me to do that to you.

MICHAEL

(Look of relief) No, no, no. That was funny. You had me going there. Now how did you get into *that* business?

ATHENA

I wanted to work in the health care field, and I wanted to earn my living in a way that brought good into the world. So I am an arms and legs dealer. I try to make people whole again.

MICHAEL

Given the state of the world I fear that yours is a growth industry. Bush ...

ATHENA

It has happened, I have decided to help in the best way I can.... Are you a spiritual person?

MICHAEL

Isn't there an old adage about avoiding politics and religion when you meet someone?

ATHENA

I think it is reckless to not discuss matters of the spirit. (smiles) Do you have Faith?

MICHAEL

Faith means a lot of different things to a lot of different people.

ATHENA

Do you believe in a compassionate God who listens to our petitions?

MICHAEL

Do you?

ATHENA

I asked first.

MICHAEL

(Smiles) It seems, as I observe flocks of birds or schools of fish, or people at a football match for that matter, that group consciousness is a very real thing. It occurs to me that as all things are interrelated, that the universe as a whole could have a consciousness. Pantheism. But a monotheistic, Abrahamic God who listens to us and intervenes, no. It is irrational, outside of the boundaries of reason. Now, how about you?

ATHENA

Michael that was a beautiful explanation. But I do have Faith. I do believe in a compassionate God who listens to us. If we pray for strength to get through life's inevitable challenges, if we pray for wisdom, I feel like He listens and somehow responds within us.

MICHAEL

You made an important distinction. You said you feel like God listens. I need evidence, proof. I am as certain as can be that Faith in an anthropomorphic God who listens to our petitions is misguided. It is contrary to the known laws of matter in the universe.

ATHENA

The journey of the spirit takes unexpected turns. Who knows where the journey will lead?

MICHAEL

Hopefully to Los Angeles.

ATHENA

(Laughs) You said you are delivering a paper. What's it about?

MICHAEL

Are you really interested or just being polite?

Sounds of plane slightly changes. There is a small bump that jostles ATHENA and MICHAEL.

ATHENA

I'm really interested.

MICHAEL

(A little shaken by the last bump) OK. You know, I have a bit of claustrophobia. This turbulence isn't helping.

ATHENA

A psychologist with a phobia. That's somehow endearing.

MICHAEL

I know. Physician heal thyself. Here, try something for me.

Takes a pencil and piece of paper out of his briefcase and draws an X and a dot about 3 inches apart on the paper

MICHAEL

Do like this.

He covers his left eye, focuses on the X with his right eye, and slowly moves the paper towards his face.

MICHAEL

You try it.

ATHENA repeats this.

ATHENA

Oh my. That's amazing.

MICHAEL

What happened?

ATHENA

The dot obviously disappears, then returns depending on the distance.

MICHAEL

The dot disappears. Dot. No dot. Where the optic nerve enters the back of your eye there are no light receptors so you have a blind spot. A lot of the world disappears. Your brain fills in the blanks. Your brain actively creates reality.

ATHENA

I didn't know about the blind spot.

MICHAEL

The human brain is the most remarkable computer in the world. But I'm fascinated by its deficiencies.

ATHENA

A flawed computer?

MICHAEL

Theorists are starting to view consciousness as something like a computer's user interface. It winnows down the countless bits of information we are bombarded with and shapes a reality from them. The brain connects the dots, even though some dots are illusions.

ATHENA

Some dots are illusions.

MICHAEL

Sometimes the user interface of consciousness comes unglued. Schizophrenia is one example. People on psychedelic drugs can have consciousness come apart.

ATHENA

I've never tried drugs. Or schizophrenia for that matter (a smile).

MICHAEL

There are people on earth afflicted with a disorder called synesthesia that can smell sounds, hear images, taste numbers. Reality is what their brain makes it.

ATHENA

Heavens.

MICHAEL

Our perceptual apparatus is so limited that 80% of earth's biomass is invisible to the human eye. We are utterly oblivious to most of life.

ATHENA

Amazing.

PILOT OVER INTERCOM

Excuse me, this is Captain Paulson. We seem to be out of the area of turbulence. If you look out the windows you will see the irrigation circles so prominent in parts of Kansas. The arc of a circle, I am reminded, has no beginning and no end. Again, thank you for flying United.

MICHAEL

(Seems puzzled by Captain) Another curiosity about the brain involves the corpus callosum, the tissue between brain hemispheres. A woman's corpus callosum is significantly thicker than a man's. This is perhaps why women, in general, are better at multitasking than men.

ATHENA

The corpus callosum plays favorites.

MICHAEL

Interestingly, it appears that gay men often have thicker corpus callosums than even women. The historical record shows that gay men have been inordinately represented in the arts, perhaps because of the heightened ability of the two hemispheres to communicate. Connections.

ATHENA

My best friend is gay. He and I can talk about our emotional lives for hours on end. My straight male friends, not so much.

MICHAEL

I apologize for straight men everywhere. (a smile) As I said, the brain actively creates reality. In other words, the mind has a mind of it's own. The brain hates unfinished business.

The rain in Spain falls mainly on the .....

ATHENA

Plain.

MICHAEL

You had to complete the lyric. Your brain insisted upon it. You would have been uncomfortable had you not. Our brains insist on unified wholes.

ATHENA

I got tense the other day when I couldn't remember the name of a meaningless song I heard on the radio.

MICHAEL

Exactly. Recent research examines the age old question of whether mankind is inherently good, inherently bad, or a blank slate. No less that the Christian bible places it's bet on mankind being inherently bad.

ATHENA

Now I'm not so sure that is fair Michael. There are other ways to interpret that.

MICHAEL

I hope you're right. The science says that natural selection long ago favored mammals with a sense of empathy, because empathy has such important qualities for survival.

ATHENA

That's a hopeful thought.

MICHAEL

It is. We know now that 99% of the different kinds of genes in our body aren't ours, but rather come from microbes. It's humbling to think that most of what we consider us, isn't really us.... So.

MICHAEL leans back in his seat, obviously pleased with himself.

ATHENA

Goodness gracious. Most of us isn't us.

MICHAEL

You are one heck of a listener Athena. I've been thinking about listening lately. I need to be better at it. Thanks for listening.

ATHENA

No. Thank you for the preview of your presentation. That was a lot to process. I will be thinking about this for a while.

MICHAEL

Unfortunately our cognitive apparatus is so imprecise as to be fundamentally untrustworthy. I was thinking ...

Plane hits massive turbulence, passengers tossed around in seats, sounds increase, huge pop sound, oxygen masks drop, sudden roar, lights flicker.

PILOT OVER INTERCOM

Ladies and gentlemen we've hit severe turbulence and have lost cabin pressure. Please put on your oxygen masks. We are going to a lower altitude. Please remain calm. Our journey is only beginning.

Lights flash off and on, MICHAEL has look of terror on his face, ATHENA is calm. A few moments pass.

PILOT OVER INTERCOM (cont'd)

Ladies and gentlemen we lost cabin pressure momentarily, but all is well now. My hunch is that a few of you might need to use the rest room so feel free to unbuckle. The sphincter, it is worth noting, is a muscle without beginning or end. Thanks again for your patience and understanding and for flying United.

ATHENA

(ATHENA and MICHAEL seem puzzled  
by the pilot's comment)

Heavens. That was exciting.

MICHAEL

(agitated) I thought we were going to crash. I thought the last thing I would hear was those screams.

ATHENA

It occurred to me that your lovely discourse would be the last thing I ever heard. That wasn't so bad.

MICHAEL

(still agitated) You were so calm.

ATHENA

When it's your time, it's your time. We don't get to choose. You have to be ready.

MICHAEL

I thought about my daughter, then I looked at your face. You seemed at peace.

ATHENA

Everything is fine now. I'd like to talk about your lecture now that the excitement is out of the way.

MICHAEL

(Takes a deep breath) Are you sure?

ATHENA

Absolutely. Let me make sure I understand your premise. We should be wary of the contents of our consciousness because the construction and operation of our nervous system and our sense organs can, and will, create illusions.

MICHAEL

(Still shaken) That's a fair assessment. Very perceptive.

ATHENA

(Speaking deliberately) You made a decisive argument that the nature of the human nervous system is that it is oblivious to much of the universe ... that it often misinterprets much of the information that it *can* perceive ... it understands reality only metaphorically ... and *then* in ways that are distorted by experience, chemical imbalances, genetic issues and any number of other ways ...

MICHAEL

(Michael nods his head) Very good. Very good.

ATHENA

You seem to suggest that what we embrace as reason and logic are anything *but* reasoned and logical, and that we see the universe through a filter of consciousness that dramatically lacks precision. We create a reality that fits our biases and preconceptions.

MICHAEL

Athena, you're a quick learner. My students surely don't pick it up that quickly.

ATHENA

Yet earlier you told me that you reject the concept of Faith because it couldn't stand up to the standards of reason - the reason that you just quite effectively proved *can't* be trusted.

MICHAEL

Furrows his brow. lost in thought for a moment.

MICHAEL

Well . . . I don't know about .... I'm not sure if you ....

ATHENA

I'm hope you don't take offense, it just seems a bit inconsistent to me.

MICHAEL

No. I ... ahh, give me a moment.

ATHENA

Oh that's ok Michael. It will be a lovely presentation.

MICHAEL rubs his forehead. Begins to sit up, sits back down.

ATHENA

Are you all right?

MICHAEL

How could I have missed that?

ATHENA

Missed what?

MICHAEL

I've built my life around reason. Around rational thought. . . . I missed it. You didn't. It's so obvious suddenly. The thing that I use to reject the mystical, my refuge of reason, is no more verifiable than a reliance on the mystical. I think I may be having a road to Damascus moment.

ATHENA

Forgive me Michael, but when we lost altitude.... you seemed to be .... praying. It isn't the contradiction you think it is. I have a hunch that, in spite of your beliefs, if your daughter were terribly ill, you would find yourself praying.

MICHAEL

(Softly) She was once. I did.

ATHENA

Again, forgive me ... You mentioned adaptability. You need to adapt. You need to use all of your brain. You need to have a little Faith.

MICHAEL

Maybe. Maybe. What are you? A neuroscientist Zen Christian?

ATHENA

I remember as a child looking at the stars and feeling something powerful, something beyond words, a connection. At some point I read that we are made of stars, the leftover matter from the Big Bang. We are made of stars. Then I visited the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago and saw the exhibit on hieroglyphics.

MICHAEL

(Distracted. Still lost in thought) I think I've been there.

ATHENA

I was shocked, in a pleasant way, to see that the original symbol for God was what we would call an asterisk. They chose a picture of a star to communicate the concept of God. I immediately made the connection to the feeling I had as a child, looking at the stars. When I look at the night sky now, I see two stars together and I see eyes, I connect the stars to see a face, a face I interpret as the face of God. Isn't that wonderful?

MICHAEL

(He rubs his temples) Oh my . . . Oh my. Goodness.

ATHENA

What is it Michael?

MICHAEL

I have a Vonnegut print,, a signed print, on the wall in my study. It's an image from his book Breakfast of Champions. This will sound crude, but it's his depiction of an asshole.

ATHENA

(Laughs) It's an asterisk, isn't it?

MICHAEL

How could you know that? You're starting to scare me.

ATHENA

It was a best seller. I've seen his doodles in the book. Maybe you've had a picture of God on your wall this whole time.

MICHAEL

(Staring at ceiling) Adaptation. Quid quo pro. This for that...

ATHENA

Michael, trying to break things down into science or spirit might not serve us well. They intersect. They connect. You know they have sensors that listen to the stars. They are learning what is important to listen to.

MICHAEL

(In daze) They listen to stars.

ATHENA

We are passengers. We're given the miracle of life and for reasons we can't comprehend it is taken away. It breaks our hearts. We want the eternity of the stars but instead we get only the moment. We connect with people and then they're gone.

MICHAEL

I've lost so much. I thought I'd made a connection. I don't want to be alone. I'm alone again.

ATHENA

(firmly) No. You are not alone. When we admit we are just passengers we are not alone. We get the eternity of the stars. This may seem silly Michael, (She rummages through her purse) but please take this as a gift to remember this wonderful conversation. On it's surface it's says "In God We Trust". You should you know. (MICHAEL looks stunned as she hands him a penny)

PILOT OVER INTERCOM

This is Captain Paulson. We have passed through the area of turbulence. I'm sharing the yoke. We are United. (Michael stares at the penny)

ATHENA

Michael, Michael, Michael. You haven't told me where your home is. Where do you live?

MICHAEL

(Pause. Melancholy tone) I . . . . In my head. I live in my head.

MICHAEL begins to softly cry. ATHENA smiles, puts her arm around him and comforts him.

FADE TO BLACK

END OF SCENE

SCENE #10. HUB CAP DIAMOND  
STAR HALO

GETTING RID OF A DELUSION MAKES US WISER THAN GETTING HOLD OF A  
TRUTH - LUDWIG BORNE

1973. On foot.

MICHAEL is walking towards a house. It is dark out.  
He is singing "Bang a Gong" by T-Rex to himself.

MICHAEL

You've got a hubcap diamond star halo  
Bang a gong, get it on, get it on.

He approaches porch of the house. There is a trash  
can by the sidewalk. We hear sounds from inside  
the house, as if a party is taking place. MICHAEL  
turns around and looks at the sky.

MICHAEL

Home.

MICHAEL smiles as he looks upward. We see a  
meteor shower behind him.

MICHAEL

Wow. A good omen. A great omen. (in theatrical voice) The God's have  
spoken!

MICHAEL closes his eyes, seems to make a wish,  
smiles and turns to knock on door. Door opens.  
We don't see anyone, but MICHAEL speaks.

MICHAEL

Penny! ..... Huh? What? She's not here? She's back in Ithaca? Oh. (Perplexed)  
No. No I don't have any dope .... Sorry. Gotta go. (door closes)

MICHAEL starts to walk down sidewalk hanging his head. We hear a bird chirping. He reacts. He squints. He shakes his head and smiles.

Hummingbird.

He stares at the hummingbird which appears to be hovering in front of him. He tries to duck under the hummingbird. The hummingbird adjusts and stays at eye level.

He tries again to get past hummingbird. It remains at eye level. He turns around, heading back to the house. He stops. His body language lets us know that another hummingbird is on the other side of him. He tries to go under it. Again he is blocked as the hummingbird stays at eye level.

He goes the other way. We continue to hear chirping. He confronts the other hummingbird. He smiles and gently moves around it.

He shakes his head and takes the road map from his backpack along with a flashlight. He puts flashlight in his mouth and directs light at map which he looks at intently. He stops, put flashlight away, takes map, stares at it, moves to trash can and throws map away.

MICHAEL

(tilts head) Listen. (Looks at the night sky. Tilts head other way) I hear the siren call of Ithaca.

He begins to whistle "Everybody is a Star" by Sly and the Family Stone, and walks down the sidewalk, away from house, smile on face.

Lights slowly fade as darkness envelopes stage - - twinkling stars fill the ceiling and rear of the stage as a meteor streaks across the sky -

FADE TO BLACK

END OF PLAY