

Nonsense and Beauty

By

Scott C. Sickles

NONSENSE AND BEAUTY

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NONSENSE AND BEAUTY

*for Christian Borle, Alison Luce, Michael McEachran,
Gregory Sims, and Don Wadsworth*

dedicated to the memory of Patricia O'Connell

*and most of all, to Michael Montel for his years of devotion
to this piece and decades of friendship*

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS: Michael Montel; Seth Gordon and the Repertory Theatre of St. Louis; Kristen Coury and the Gulfshore Playhouse New Works Festival in Naples, Florida; Michael Beh, Paul Zablocki and Carnegie Mellon Drama; Dayton Playhouse; HB Studios and Urban Stages in New York City; Robbie Simpson; William C. Kovacsik; legions of actors in reading after reading; and last but far from least Corey McDaniel, Jennifer Ewing, and Theatre22 in Seattle.

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Cast of Characters

- E. M. FORSTER: 51 to 91. The writer. Acerbic, witty, generous, either a cynical romantic or a romantic cynic.
- BOB Buckingham: 28 to 68. Roguish young policeman with aspirations of being more. Forster's friend and lover. Darkly handsome, masculine, athletic, and temperamental. Bob is very physically affectionate.
- MAY Buckingham: 23 to 62. Formerly May Hockey. Bob's fiancée and later his wife. A nurse. Strong willed, direct, and patient. Never wears makeup.
- J. R. ACKERLEY: Historically mid-30s, but for our purposes can be closer in age to Forster. Friend of Forster and the Buckinghams. Strikingly handsome and distinguished radio producer and writer. Flamboyant homosexual.
- LILY Forster: E. M. Forster's mother. A very strong, often overbearing woman in her early eighties.

Note on Casting: People aged more quickly in the 1930s than they do now, so when casting feel free to err on the side of older.

Scene: England: Various locations in and around London.

Time: April 12, 1930 to June 1970.

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Playwright's Notes

Nonsense and Beauty is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

The play is meant to be performed on a unit or abstract set. The action is meant to move fluidly from scene to scene without stopping to move furniture in the dark. That will not always be possible.

Whether or not a scene takes place indoors or outdoors is very important in the Forster universe. People lie indoors but outside, the truth is admitted, exposed, and faced.

Costume changes should be simple.

Dialogue in parentheses is only to provide context and is not to be spoken. Air quotes must ever be used.

On sound/music: should you choose to use music for transitions, etc., I suggest using Beethoven as his music played a significant role in Forster's novels.

Chapter titles are in bold. They are an homage to the titled chapters in *A Room with a View*.

NONSENSE AND BEAUTY

NONSENSE AND BEAUTY was originally produced by the Repertory Theatre of St. Louis (Steven Woolf, artistic director; Mark Bernstein, managing director) in New York City in March 2019. The scenic and lighting design was by Brian Sydney Bembridge; the costumes by Felia K. Davenport; sound by Rusty Wandall. The stage manager was Shannon B. Sturgis. The production was directed by Seth Gordon with the following cast:

E. M. Forster	Jeffrey Hayenga
Bob Buckingham	Robbie Simpson
May Buckingham	Lori Vega
J. R. Ackerley	John Feltch
Lily Forster	Donna Weinsting

NONSENSE AND BEAUTY was subsequently produced by Theatre22 (Corey McDaniel, producing artistic director; Alber Sucupira, general manager) at the Seattle Public Theatre in Seattle, Washington, in September 2022. The scenic design was by Parmida Ziaei; costume design by Jocelyne Fowler; lighting design by Ahren Buhmann; the sound design by Kyle Thompson. The stage manager was Megan Kay Wright. The production was directed by Corey McDaniel with the following cast:

E. M. Forster	Eric Mulholland
Bob Buckingham	Russell Matthews
May Buckingham	Jennifer Ewing
J. R. Ackerley	Hisam Goueli
Lily Forster	Marty Mukhalian

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ACT 1

England: Various locations in and around London. The play is performed on a unit set. It is important to note whether a scene takes place in an interior or exterior setting (see Playwright's Note).

IN DARKNESS, a medley of popular instrumentals from early 1930 England plays, evoking the period and a romantic, adventurous mood. As it peaks, the first four notes of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony trumpet and SPOTLIGHT COMES UP ON J. R. ACKERLEY – a strikingly handsome, well-dressed man with a grandiose, flamboyant manner.

ACKERLEY. (*Aside:*) **At Mr. J. R. Ackerley's party celebrating the 1930 Oxford versus Cambridge Annual Regatta.**

(CROSS FADE FROM SPOTLIGHT TO: a bright afternoon by the river. The popular tunes from 1930 resume faintly in the background. E. M.

FORSTER – a well-dressed Englishman of 51 – watches boat races on the offstage river as Ackerley joins him, conversing seamlessly, in medias res.)

ACKERLEY. I tell you, Morgan, it was ridiculous. He accused me of loving my precious dog Queenie more than I love him. Is that not absurd?

FORSTER. You do.

ACKERLEY. Which is why it's so absurd! I do enjoy it when your attempt to argue with me proves my point.

FORSTER. Is Oxford or Cambridge winning?

ACKERLEY. I haven't the slightest.

FORSTER. If you don't care, Joe, then why hold a party?

ACKERLEY. I do care. The boat race will happen regardless of the party's existence, but the party cannot happen without the race. If it did, it would be celebrating something else. Why do you care so much who wins?

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FORSTER. I was just testing to see if you were paying any attention whatsoever.

ACKERLEY. That's silly when it's obvious I'm not.

FORSTER. Well, shocking though it may be to you, I am watching them. I enjoy watching them. I can only watch the races while they are happening. I can listen to you prattle any time.

ACKERLEY. Tell me, Morgan: which do you enjoy watching more? The boats or the strapping lads rowing them?

FORSTER. Have you no other guests?

ACKERLEY. I do apologize. I had no idea the suggestion would bring such longings to the fore. The subject of your sexual frustration shall never again pass my lips.

FORSTER. You want me to make an innuendo, don't you?

ACKERLEY. Are you suppressing one to hide your frustration?

FORSTER. My frustration is hardly sexual.

ACKERLEY. Oh, no. Is it artistic? Spiritual? (*Watches Forster looking at the racing boaters.*) Athletic?

FORSTER. (*Pause.*) Even when I was young, I could never row like that.

ACKERLEY. If you had, where would you have been seated? On the end so you could watch the others strain against the river? Or in the middle, so whichever way you'd thrust or pull, you'd lean into the heat of a crewmate's body without actually touching him? I'm flustering myself! Stop me now or I shall be forced to fling myself in the river to cool down!

FORSTER. Fling yourself in, then. It'll save me the trouble.

ACKERLEY. Please, Morgan, tell me what it is. It's bad enough you're preoccupied with other matters when I'm talking to you. Keeping those thoughts private is simply unacceptable.

FORSTER. If you must know...

ACKERLEY. I must. Is it love?

FORSTER. If you tell me all I need is a loyal, canine companion—

ACKERLEY. Who, Morgan? With whom are you in love?

FORSTER. No one.

ACKERLEY. That is worse, isn't it? Than being in love with someone you can't have.

FORSTER. Should we really be discussing this here?

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ACKERLEY. It's fine. The ruffians are busy being rough. The aristocrats fancy themselves far above such coarse conversation. And besides, everyone's eyes are on the coxswains (*pronounced "cox-enz"*) and their crews. You may speak freely. If you could have your pick... (*As Forster opens his mouth to answer, SFX: A gunshot and an announcement.*)

ANNOUNCEMENT. The winner of the 1930 Oxford versus Cambridge Annual Regatta is... Cambridge! (*BOB BUCKINGHAM – 28, dark, handsome, and masculine – enters and approaches them.*)

BOB. Mr. Ackerley! Mr. Ackerley. Smashing party. Thanks for inviting me.

ACKERLEY. My pleasure. Bob, have you met my friend?

BOB. I'm afraid not. Hello, sir. Bob Buckingham. (*Bob extends his hand to Forster. They shake.*)

FORSTER. Pleasure to meet you.

ACKERLEY. Bob is a policeman. A colleague of our dear Harry Daley.

FORSTER. Is that so?

BOB. That's how I met Mr. Ackerley. I'm sorry, Sir, but I didn't catch your name.

ACKERLEY. My dear Bob. Do you not recognize him?

FORSTER. Joe...

ACKERLEY. The hand you just shook belongs to Edward Morgan Forster.

BOB. Now, why is that familiar? (*Figures it out. Blushes.*) Oh, God. I feel like an idiot.

FORSTER. Blame Joe.

BOB. It's just I never hear your... (*full name.*) Well, you know what I mean. I don't meet very many famous novelists.

ACKERLEY. Writer! World traveler! Legend.

FORSTER. So, Mr. Buckingham. Do you row, yourself?

BOB. Whenever I get the chance. Do you?

ACKERLEY. How uncanny. We were just talking about that.

FORSTER. No. Although I enjoy being on boats.

ACKERLEY. The lulling back and forth, up and down, to and fro!

BOB. It's a great feeling. When you're out there on the water, something happens. Struggling against the river in the hot sun... Your body gets

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flushed with this – I don't know how to describe it – this amazing pain. Only it doesn't hurt as much as it... what's the word I'm looking for...

ACKERLEY. Exhilarates.

BOB. That's it. Exhilarates.

FORSTER. Yes, well. That sounds...

ACKERLEY. Harry says you're quite the sportsman.

BOB. I enjoy games.

ACKERLEY. Don't we all? (*Inelegant pause.*) I've occupied enough of Mr. Forster's time this afternoon. I shall mingle with the others and leave you gentlemen to become acquainted.

FORSTER. Yes, Joe. Do.

BOB. Thanks again for inviting me, Mr. Ackerley.

ACKERLEY. Call me Joe. All of Mr. Forster's friends do. (*Exits.*)

BOB. Quite a character, he is.

FORSTER. You have no idea. So, do you enjoy police work?

BOB. It's all right. Not nearly so exciting as what you do. I try to read books so they can take me places. But you... You've been to those places.

FORSTER. Have you read my work?

BOB. Uh... Not yet. But I've been meaning to. I've only recently taken up reading in my leisure time. I used to be too busy, but now that I'm unattached...

FORSTER. Were you married?

BOB. Almost. Didn't quite work out.

FORSTER. How tragic.

BOB. Yeah, well... How about you? Are you attached?

FORSTER. Romantically? No. So, Mr. Buckingham—

BOB. Oh, please. A man of your stature can call me Bob.

FORSTER. Very well. A man of your stature may call me Morgan.

BOB. Are you sure?

FORSTER. Absolutely. What I wanted to ask you was, if you haven't been reading me, who have you been reading?

BOB. Mostly Dostoyevsky. *Poor Folk. Notes from Underground.* Right now, I'm in the middle of *Crime and Punishment.*

FORSTER. I see you're avoiding titles that begin with “A,” “An,” and “The.”

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BOB. I hadn't realized. Do you think it means something?

FORSTER. No. Although you might want to read some things that were originally written in English. Translations can be deceptive.

BOB. I hadn't thought of that either. You must think me terribly—

FORSTER. Not at all. Why don't you stop by my flat at 26 Brunswick Square. I'll lend you some books. If that's not too presumptuous of me.

BOB. No, Sir. I'd be honored.

FORSTER. Well... that's nice. I shall see you soon then, Bob.

BOB. Yes, Mister... Yes, Morgan. Soon. *(Bob exits. Ackerley returns.)*

FORSTER. What is today?

ACKERLEY. Check your invitation.

FORSTER. Just tell me.

ACKERLEY. The twelfth of April, in the Year of Our Lord Nineteen Hundred Thirty. Do you wish to write it down?

FORSTER. I'll remember it. *(CROSS FADE TO: Lily Forster's garden. Late August 1930. Forster helps his mother, LILY – a cantankerous woman in her early 80s – sit in a chair.)*

LILY. Must I sit out here in the hot sun?

FORSTER. We can go back in if you like, Mother.

LILY. Into the cave you call a house? I am not a mushroom. Could you hand me my parasol?

FORSTER. It's right next to you.

LILY. I know where it is, Edward. I'm asking you to hand it to me. *(Ackerley enters, calling out.)*

ACKERLEY. Hello the house!

LILY. Good Lord! I hear the ghost of Mr. Ackerley.

FORSTER. Mr. Ackerley is not a ghost, Mother. He is here in the flesh.

LILY. I am old. I can dream.

ACKERLEY. Hello, Mother Forster.

LILY. Did I hatch you? Edward, I've been meaning to tell you. You received a letter from that lovely Polish woman. Evidently, she thought you still lived here. At West Hackhurst. In your home.

ACKERLEY. Polish woman? You don't mean that Miss What-was-her-name...

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FORSTER. (*Pronounced: Miss-lah-COW-skuh:*) Miss Myslakowska. What does she want?

LILY. A wonderful woman. She wishes to translate your work into Polish. Has anyone ever asked to transform you into their native tongue?

ACKERLEY. I do recall this one individual—

FORSTER. So, what are you doing here, Joe?

ACKERLEY. Is there any place we can talk?

LILY. Does sound not travel here? Speak your mind.

FORSTER. Mother. Joe wishes to speak to me about private matters.

LILY. Then he can do it in his own home. Anything spoken in my home is not private to me.

ACKERLEY. Oh, Mother Forster. I know you mean to make sense, but—

FORSTER. You may as well just tell me, Joe. If she doesn't like what you say, she'll pretend she didn't hear it.

ACKERLEY. Very well. I was having a conversation with Harry Daley, who informs me—

LILY. Edward. I was recently thinking how much happier your life would be if you had accepted that nice Polish woman's marriage proposal.

FORSTER. 'Tis a pity we shall never know. If you like, Joe and I can talk elsewhere.

LILY. Am I interrupting? I forgot I am not to speak in my own home. Go on. You may leave me to bake beneath the sun. If I am not here when you return, do not think I have wandered off. I will most likely have burned to ashes. But you two have your chat.

ACKERLEY. As you wish! Morgan, this way. (*Takes Forster aside.*) I have it on good authority... What is it? You look tired.

FORSTER. Nothing to worry about. Mother's in her usual summer state. Oh, and I received word from Goldie.

LILY. Are you discussing Mr. Ackerley's dogs?

FORSTER. No, mother. Mr. Ackerley's dog —

ACKERLEY. — One dog!—

FORSTER. — is Queenie. I'm telling him about the letter from Mr. Lowes Dickinson.

LILY. Oh, Goldie! Yes, I like him. Go on with your conversation. I am not listening.

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ACKERLEY. How is the old sod? Doing well, I hope.

FORSTER. Actually, he's taken ill. Prostate trouble. I'll be tending to him. His family is in a state of complete chaos. Do you want to visit him with me?

ACKERLEY. Soon. Not today. I hope tending to the ills of your mother, your friends, and civilization won't completely consume your time. Do you recall Bob Buckingham? The policeman you met this past spring.

FORSTER. How could I forget?

ACKERLEY. You offered to lend him some books.

FORSTER. He never called to borrow them. I should say my pomposity rightfully kept him away.

ACKERLEY. As it turns out, Mr. Buckingham became very busy with work—

FORSTER. Did he now?

ACKERLEY. That's what he said... But now he has some free time. He wants to call on you, but frets that the invitation is no longer open. What word should I pass on to Harry?

LILY. It is a very lucky thing that the human body can survive several days without water. I am not parched just yet. I shall simply linger.

FORSTER. My mother needs—

ACKERLEY. Your mother is a prickly cactus and the Gobi Desert couldn't kill her if it tried. What shall I tell Harry?

FORSTER. Tell him... yes.

ACKERLEY. Yes? That's it.

FORSTER. I don't want to appear too eager.

ACKERLEY. As you wish.

LILY. Edward!

FORSTER. Yes, Mother, I'll get your water.

LILY. I am no longer thirsty. Are you going to reply to that woman's letter?

ACKERLEY. You're quite popular today. I shall speak to you soon. Love to Goldie. *(Kisses Lily's hand. She flinches.)* I too wish your dear son to find a suitable mate. Be well, Mother Forster. *(Exits.)*

FORSTER. I'll fetch your drink now, Mother.

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(Forster exits with a skip in his step. CROSS FADE TO SPOTLIGHT on Bob.)

BOB. *(Aside:)* **Lending.** *(CROSS FADE FROM SPOTLIGHT TO: an afternoon in front of Forster's flat at 26 Brunswick Square. Bob stands nervously. Forster greets him. It is a sunny day in early September 1930.)*

FORSTER. Oh, good, you're here. Just hang on a moment. *(Goes to get the books.)*

BOB. I did mean to drop by sooner—

FORSTER. Think nothing of it. A policeman's work is never truly done.

BOB. Actually, I... It wasn't...

FORSTER. No matter. You're here now. *(Hands him the books.)* You're sure this isn't too presumptuous?

BOB. Yes. I'm sure. I appreciate your help.

FORSTER. Think nothing of it. Here, I'm giving you—

BOB. Giving?

FORSTER. *(Beat.)* Lending. I'm lending you Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and, in a hopefully not-too-conceited gesture, my own *A Passage to India*.

BOB. Thank you! I'll read yours first.

FORSTER. The order is unimportant. But I appreciate the priority.

BOB. I see you've given me titles that begin with "A."

FORSTER. Hm?

BOB. I suppose that means "An" and "The" are next.

FORSTER. Oh! Right! I'd forgotten about that remark.

BOB. *(Pause.)* Have you really been to all these places in this book?

FORSTER. Geographically and emotionally.

BOB. We could never afford to travel. Me and my family, that is.

FORSTER. I was lucky. Travel was my occupation. So... You row.

BOB. Yes. I'll take you out on the river sometime.

FORSTER. That's very kind of you to offer, but—

BOB. Come on. We'll relax, take in the sun, and discuss these books. I've never had the opportunity to talk about a novel with its author before.

FORSTER. That's because you've only been reading one dead Russian.

BOB. Next Saturday?

FORSTER. What?

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BOB. I'll take you out. On the river.

FORSTER. Ah.

BOB. Don't you want to?

FORSTER. No. I mean, I do want to. Yes.

BOB. Great. It's a date. (*BLACKOUT. SFX: A heavy thunderstorm.*

CROSS FADE TO SPOTLIGHT on Ackerley.)

ACKERLEY. (*Aside:*) **Mister Robert Buckingham stays the night at Mister Edward Morgan Forster's flat at 26 Brunswick Square.** (*Beat. SFX: A low clap of distant thunder.*) **They share a bed.** (*CROSS FADE FROM SPOTLIGHT TO the front of the flat. Bob and Forster are soaking wet. Forster fumbles for the keys. (This can all be pantomime. You don't need a door.) Bob struts around enjoying the rain. LIGHTNING FLASHES.*)

BOB. Are you sure you don't want to stay out a little longer? This rain is wonderful.

FORSTER. I love the rain. It's unfortunately unrequited. Rheumatism and all that. (*Gestures for Bob to enter.*) Here we are. Come on in. (*CROSS FADE TO: Interior. Forster and Bob "enter the house." SFX: Storm sounds subside. A set piece represents Forster's bed.*)

BOB. Sorry we weren't able to get on the water.

FORSTER. That's all right. The boats aren't going anywhere. Next time. (*Pause. Bob smiles.*)

BOB. All right, then. Next time. (*Re: his wet clothes:*) You don't mind if I take these off do you?

FORSTER. Uh. Of course not.

BOB. Thanks. Could I trouble you for a robe or nightshirt...

FORSTER. Certainly. (*Forster retrieves a nightshirt from a wardrobe. His back is to Bob, who is taking off his shirt and pants.*)

FORSTER. I think this might fit you. It may be a little... (*Turns and sees Bob in his underwear.*) ...snug.

BOB. Snug is fine. (*Takes the nightshirt.*) How about you?

FORSTER. What?

BOB. You're soaked.

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FORSTER. Yes. Well. Hm. *(Bob begins to put on his nightshirt.)* Wait. Before you do that. *(Forster exits. Pause. Bob stands there in his underwear holding the nightshirt. Forster returns with two towels.)*

BOB. Good idea.

FORSTER. Well. We are wet.

BOB. Not for long. *(Tosses the nightshirt on the bed and dries himself off with the towel. Forster watches Bob put on the nightshirt, which is too small.)*

FORSTER. You might want to spread your clothes out on the floor. They'll dry faster.

BOB. *(Reaching under his nightshirt and removing his underwear.)* Right. *(Bob spreads his clothes out.)*

FORSTER. Those probably won't dry until morning.

BOB. It won't matter if this storm keeps up. I'll be drenched again anyway.

FORSTER. You'll catch your death. Why don't you... *(Massaging his own hands and fingers.)* Why don't you spend the night?

BOB. I couldn't impose.

FORSTER. Nonsense. If you die of pneumonia, the police will be out another man and the streets will be at the mercy of cutthroats. It's morally imperative you stay.

BOB. Is that your way of insisting? *(Pause.)* Thank you. Is your rheumatism bothering you?

FORSTER. A twinge. It's nothing.

BOB. Here. Let me. *(Bob sits on the bed next to Forster; takes Forster's hands and begins gently massaging them.)* My mother was arthritic. It always helped her when I did this. Is it the light or is your face flushed completely red? That's why there's no blood in your hands. It's all migrated north. *(Rubs Forster's hands vigorously; then massages them gently again.)* This reminds me of the end of your book. When Mr. Fielding reaches out for Doctor Aziz to seal their friendship. How did you put it? "But the horses didn't want it. They bolted apart." Is that it?

FORSTER. Something like that. It's been a while since I read it myself.

BOB. That's funny. Most people assume writers have all their work memorized. But you're just like us, aren't you? You still have to read what you write. Anyhow, I really... When you described how the animals, the

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Earth and the heavens were conspiring to keep them apart... When the mountains looked at them and said, “Not now” and the sky looked down upon them and said, “Not here.” That... moved me. I sat there, alone in my room, staring at it. I could barely breathe. I actually had to will myself to close the book. *(Beat.)* But I'm boring you.

FORSTER. Not at all.

BOB. You must think me a horrible... sycophant. That is the word, isn't it?

FORSTER. No. I mean, yes, it is the word you're looking for, but no, it's not you. You're... very sincere.

BOB. I do my best. How do you feel?

FORSTER. Much better. *(Taking his hands back from Bob.)* Thank you.

BOB. My pleasure. I'm nodding off. Do you mind if I have a nap?

FORSTER. Not at all. *(Bob climbs onto the floor.)* What are you doing?

BOB. I thought...

FORSTER. Don't be ridiculous. That floor is cold and uncomfortable.

BOB. *(Getting into bed.)* You don't object to my being in the bed?

FORSTER. I trust you'll keep your hands to yourself. *(Bob smiles at this and lies down to sleep. Forster watches him. CROSS FADE TO: Ackerley writing a letter— this can be mimed or simply spoken. He holds another letter to which he refers.)*

ACKERLEY. 28 September 1930. Dearest Morgan, Rumor has it, you've passed along a concubine of yours to Harry Daley: a ship's steward. Why didn't you pass him on to me? Do you presume I've nothing better to do than stay at home with Queenie and read your gushing letters about the young policeman? Sickening. And confusing. Week after week. Letter after letter. How can your... *(Looks up from paper.)* Dare I call it a relationship? *(Resumes writing.)* ... liaison with Mr. Buckingham be serious enough for you to forsake shipboard playthings? Am I correct in assuming that not only have the two of you not yet consummated, but he has never even kissed you?! *(Looks over the other letter.)* You write, “Oh, Joe, if you could only have seen him sleeping...” Forgive my candor, but if I had, I'd have collapsed into a coma myself. I know you want to spend the rest of your days in his arms. Do me this favor: spend one night! Then, talk to me about eternity. *(Pause.)* Morgan, what if this man is not what you need him to be? He could send you to prison. I hope you find what

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you're looking for. More than that, I hope you discover whether or not you're looking in the right place. *(Holds up letter and reviews it.)* Thank you for writing that I'm 'as good a friend as Queenie.' Though I strive to be more like her, I've decided to take a less taxing route. I shall urinate on a fire hydrant. Then if I'm lucky, I will be taken into custody by a policeman who will break the law with me. *(Poises pen to sign the letter.)* Love... *(Reconsiders. Then signs.)* Yours always, Joe. *(CROSS FADE TO SPOTLIGHT on Bob.)*

BOB. *(Aside:)* **The nature and purpose of rowing. A cloudy day on an insignificant river.** *(CROSS FADE TO: An overcast day in October 1930. There is a representation of a rowboat, perhaps benches. Bob gets in the boat as Forster edges closer.)*

BOB. Shall I give you a hand?

FORSTER. That would help, yes. *(Bob helps Forster in the boat. When they're settled, Bob begins rowing. The sun begins to come out a bit.)*

BOB. Comfortable?

FORSTER. Yes. You?

BOB. Yes. Lovely day, isn't it?

FORSTER. Lovely.

BOB. There's a cove I'd like to show you.

FORSTER. I look forward to seeing it. *(CROSS FADE TO: LATER. Bob and Forster in the boat. It's sunny and bright on the river. Bob continues to row.)*

FORSTER. *(In medias res:)* Why do you ask?

BOB. You write about these passionate women; sometimes too passionate. And the men are often so lost. I guess what I'm asking is... Which of those people are you, and which do you aspire to be?

FORSTER. Which do you see me as?

BOB. I see you... somewhere in between. *(Bob stops rowing.)* You've got a great heart. I see you talking to people who have no passions of their own – artistic passions and the like – and you get this look. It's as if you wonder why they bother to get out of bed.

FORSTER. Are you saying I'm judgmental?

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BOB. So what if you are? I love seeing that look on your face. It reveals you. It shows that you know exactly where you are and exactly what you want.

FORSTER. I think you're reading a little too deeply into a facial expression.

BOB. I think you like to fancy yourself more lost than you actually are. *(Takes Forster's hands in his own.)* And I think you're afraid to become as passionate as you could.

FORSTER. That's easy enough to say. But if we don't have someone to take us, then the journey is pointless. *(Bob releases Forster's hands and takes up the oars. He rows faster. CROSS FADE TO: LATER. Sunlight shines down on them through branches that become increasingly thick. As they drift into shadows...)*

FORSTER. Is this the cove?

BOB. Yes.

FORSTER. It's very secluded.

BOB. Very.

FORSTER. And lush.

BOB. *(Stops rowing.)* Come here. *(Bob takes Forster in his arms and kisses him passionately. LIGHTS FADE ON Bob and Forster. Bob exits as SPOTLIGHT UP on Ackerley reading a letter.)*

ACKERLEY. "His carrying on was perfectly extraordinary. It seemed a new sort of intercourse – more like those sea lions we saw diving around their tanks than anything / describable in human terms." *(Ackerley sniggers and turns the letter over. SECOND SPOTLIGHT UP on Forster.)*

FORSTER. *(Overlapping on "describable:")* "– describable in human terms I must emphasize the need for silence about Bob. The results of his kindness rather disconcerted him, I think. And I am most anxious that nothing should get about to vex him." *(CROSS FADE TO SPOTLIGHT on May – 23, plainly dressed.)*

MAY. *(Aside:)* "Only connect! *(CROSS FADE FROM SPOTLIGHT TO Forster's back garden at Brunswick Square. Mid-February 1931. The day is alternately overcast and sunny, as if clouds were drifting in front of the sun and away. Forster listens to Bob reading from a copy of Howards End, which is in the public domain.)*

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BOB. “That was the whole of her sermon. Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer. Only connect and the beast and the monk, robbed of the isolation that is life to either, will die.” *(Pause.)*

FORSTER. What part of it are you having a problem with?

BOB. Hold on... So, what Margaret wants Henry to do is... not be such a... monk?

FORSTER. Go on. I'm not sure what you mean by monk. You might be onto it.

BOB. Well, he's certainly no beast. She wants him to stop thinking. Not stop entirely, but... to allow himself...

FORSTER. Yes. You're almost there.

BOB. To feel. It's not quite that simple, is it?

FORSTER. Well, actually, on a very basic level—

BOB. No, no. She wants him to feel... very largely. She wants him to feel passionately, not just about her – although that would help things – but...

FORSTER. ...also about the things he—

BOB. – the things he cares about himself –

FORSTER. –Yes. The things that mean something—

BOB. – that mean something to him. But nothing means anything to him. I mean, things are important but only in a... mental sense. He doesn't have a heart. At least not one that works.

FORSTER. So, the point is...

BOB. The point is you've got to think about what you're passionate about and feel passionately about what you think about. Otherwise it's all mental or all overheated emotions and there's nothing that... nothing that truly matters. *(Pause. Sees Forster smiling at him.)* Is that not it?

FORSTER. That is it.

BOB. Good. There was this dead silence. I thought I bungled. This whole thing is much easier the second time.

FORSTER. Have you read this before?

BOB. Well, I started. I never got this far, though. It's actually quite good.

FORSTER. *(Beat.)* Thank you.

BOB. I hope it's not a stupid question, but... Is it a real place? Howards End?

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FORSTER. Yes! The house is called Rooks Nest. Most of my boyhood was... *(Pause.)* My first memories are there.

BOB. No wonder Margaret and Mrs. Wilcox love it so much. *(Pause. If possible, Bob leans against Forster.)*

FORSTER. I could show it to you sometime. The house.

BOB. I would like that. Very much. *(Pause.)* Speaking of houses... Never mind.

FORSTER. What? No, what were you going to say.

BOB. It was silly.

FORSTER. Why do people, when they've taken a serious pause and suppressed what is obviously a serious comment, claim they were about to be silly? *(Bob pauses, building up to what he wants to say. He turns to Forster. Beat.)*

BOB. Wait here. *(Bob bolts into the house.)*

FORSTER. All right. *(Leans to see what Bob is doing.)* Do you need any help?

BOB. *(Offstage:)* No, no. I just wanted... *(Enters holding a bouquet of roses – a half dozen or so.)* I've been wanting to give you these.

FORSTER. *(Takes the roses.)* Oh. Bob. I'm...

BOB. They're not too... ordinary?

FORSTER. What do you mean?

BOB. I know how you hate clichés. *(Forster laughs.)* I tried to come up with something more original. I even badgered the florist for ideas. Five more minutes, I think she would have stabbed me with her shears. Finally, she said, "Sir, look around you. Take it all in. Now, close your eyes, think of your sweetheart and tell me what you see." So I did.

FORSTER. They're lovely.

BOB. Good. I'm glad you like them. *(Pause.)* Morgan...

FORSTER. Yes?

BOB. Does it bother you, living alone?

FORSTER. After living with my mother so long, I rather enjoy it.

BOB. So, you wouldn't entertain the possibility of a flat mate.

FORSTER. To what? Share expenses? Oh. You mean... you and...

BOB. I thought it might be a way for us to... you know... connect. As your Margaret might say. I told you it was silly.

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FORSTER. No, no. On the contrary.

BOB. You'll consider it then?

FORSTER. Yes. Of course. Consider it, that is. (*Smells the flowers.*) Thank you for the roses. (*Bob puts his arms around Forster and holds him.*) (*CROSS FADE TO SPOTLIGHT on Ackerley.*)

ACKERLEY. (*Aside:*) **Mr. Buckingham meets Mrs. FORSTER.** (*CROSS FADE FROM SPOTLIGHT TO: Lily's garden. Bob and Forster approach Lily.*)

LILY. Edward. Have you seen what's become of the garden? It's awful. I can't tend to it myself.

FORSTER. I'll send up a gardener.

LILY. Gardeners? What do they know? All they'll do is ruin my garden and then wonder why I'm chasing at them. I abhor gardeners.

FORSTER. Mother. Mother, I'd like you to meet my friend, Mr. Buckingham.

LILY. Who?

BOB. Bob Buckingham, Ma'am. Good to meet you.

LILY. Are you a gardener?

BOB. No, Ma'am.

LILY. Pity. We could use one. How do you know my son?

BOB. We, uh... met through Mr. Ackerley.

LILY. Ah. So, you're a deviant. Is that what you're telling me?

BOB. Ma'am?

LILY. Mr. Ackerley sports a sordid affection for dogs. Did you not know this? Ask Mr. Ackerley. He'll tell you himself. And he won't stop telling you. That man is the reason apothecaries invented aspirin.

BOB. Actually, I think he only has affection for one dog.

LILY. Oh! Well, that makes it all right!

FORSTER. Mother. Mr. Buckingham is not a deviant. He's a policeman.

LILY. Since when have deviant and policeman been mutually exclusive? Are you going to arrest my son?

BOB. No, Ma'am. I have no intention of doing so.

LILY. Then either he's behaving for your sake or you're misbehaving for his. (*Pause.*) Well! Which is it? (*Bob stammers.*) I don't want to know! I don't have the energy to know! Not since he moved back to London.

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London! Why not move to America? No matter how far you go, Edward, I'm still your mother.

FORSTER. I know...

LILY. The mother you left behind with outdoor plumbing and no electricity.

BOB. Is that true?

FORSTER. I'll call the plumbers and the electrician. They can install—

LILY. You want strange men hovering over me, destroying my home? I love my house the way it is. I even love that draft that comes in the kitchen window. It keeps the apples on the windowsill nice and crisp.

BOB. Would you like me to repair that for you? I'm very handy.

LILY. Then keep away from my son. The toolbox is in the foyer closet. Rusting. Edward is not particularly effective when it comes to repairs. Are you sure it's no trouble?

BOB. It would be my pleasure.

LILY. You just want to get away from me, don't you? You're all alike.

BOB. Aren't you funny, Ma'am. I'll let you know when I'm done.

LILY. Don't eat my fruit.

FORSTER. Say nothing. Go. *(Bob exits.)* What do you think of him?

LILY. Of whom? *(LIGHTS CROSS FADE TO: A taxi. Bob and Forster sit. SFX: Car motor. Note: The driver wouldn't be able to hear them but they'd still be discreet.)*

BOB. She knows, doesn't she?

FORSTER. She suspects.

BOB. Will she report me?

FORSTER. For what? Bugging her son? Don't be ridiculous.

BOB. I don't want... I don't want anything spoiling anything.

FORSTER. Neither do I. Bob, please. She does this with everyone.

BOB. Oh. So, you bring lots of friends to visit her?

FORSTER. Of course. Is something wrong?

BOB. I thought this was a special occasion.

FORSTER. Bob, you might recall, I lived with my mother until recently. When people wanted to see me, they often had to come to West Hackhurst. As they knew my mother was the price of that visit, they began writing letters. I rarely bring anyone to meet her, especially someone as...

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BOB. Common?

FORSTER. Important. As you.

BOB. Oh. Well, that's all right, then. (*Holds Forster's hand.*) You're sure she won't say anything? (*Forster just looks at Bob. Exeunt. CROSS FADE TO SPOTLIGHT on Lily.*)

LILY. (*Aside:*) **The testimony of experts.** (*CROSS FADE TO SPOTLIGHT on Bob standing at attention in uniform, holding his hat under his arm.*)

BOB. Constable Robert J. Buckingham reporting as ordered. I understand this is a formal internal investigation. (*ANOTHER SPOTLIGHT COMES UP elsewhere on Forster and Ackerley.*)

FORSTER. You despise me, don't you?

ACKERLEY. No. Why would I?

FORSTER. I do go on and on about him.

ACKERLEY. That's all right. If you become tiresome, I shall simply pretend to listen. You'll never know the difference. Go on.

BOB. Certainly. Constable Renfield's report reads as follows: "I, Constable Clarence T. Renfield, came upon two men touching one another inappropriately in an alleyway. I called out to them and they began to run. One perpetrator's trousers fell around his ankles. He tripped and fell. I apprehended him. The other suspect continued to run. Constable Robert J. Buckingham happened upon the scene. He gave chase to the second man but was unsuccessful in apprehending him. I recognized the second man as... Constable Harry Daley."

FORSTER. Well, this spring, there has been a... plighting of troths.

ACKERLEY. Are you seriously considering...

FORSTER. What? How? It's not possible. At least not in England.

ACKERLEY. You could emigrate to the Netherlands and live blissfully in a windmill.

FORSTER. I've got to face facts. As much as I would like to, Bob and I can't live together. It would be disastrous.

BOB. No. For the record, I do not concur. The man I chased into that alleyway was not Constable Daley. I have served with Constable Daley for several years. I certainly would have recognized him. Clearly, Constable Renfield is mistaken.

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ACKERLEY. What's wrong? Are you disillusioned with him?

FORSTER. Hardly. Bob is affectionate, hefty, intelligent, enlightened and says he is fond of me, which I like people to do and he does often.

ACKERLEY. Hefty? Don't explain. I'd rather figure it out myself. So, if it's not disillusionment...

FORSTER. I'm concerned it might be... indiscreet.

BOB. Ah. I see. No. My familiarity with Constable Daley would not have influenced me into permitting his escape. If the man in question had been Constable Daley or any other colleague, I would have been bound by law to take him into custody. Failing that, I would still be obliged to report him.

ACKERLEY. Morgan, please. You and Bob are perfectly discreet. You know that's not what's bothering you. If you ask me, I think you're afraid.

FORSTER. Afraid of what?

ACKERLEY. Domesticity, reciprocity, happiness. You know: the unknown.

FORSTER. Don't be ridiculous.

ACKERLEY. Quite right. I forgot to whom I was speaking. A practical man such as yourself would be more concerned with societal risks than with the emotions that plague mere mortals. You are, after all, a bastion of romantic strength, the avatar of stability, a spiritual fortress holding all doubt at bay!

FORSTER. If I admit you are right, will you stop talking?

ACKERLEY. Think about this: someone you love, loves you too. Why hesitate? Say yes!

FORSTER. I will. When the time is right. (*LIGHTS OUT ON Forster and Ackerley leaving Bob alone in his spot.*)

BOB. I have filed no report to this effect because none is warranted.

If I may be so frank, Constable Daley is a bit of a rake when it comes to the ladies. (*Pause.*) No. I do not recall their names. (*Pause.*) No. I am not married. (*CROSS FADE TO SPOTLIGHT on May in her nurse's uniform.*)

MAY. (*Aside:*) **A maelstrom of invitations.** (*CROSS FADE FROM SPOTLIGHT TO: Hospital Casualty Department [Emergency Room]. March 1931. May crosses to Bob, bedraggled and holding a book.*)

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BOB. There I was: in the pub minding my own business. I'd just gotten off duty: I'm a policeman, you know.

MAY. Compelling. Hold still. (*May examines Bob's scalp.*)

BOB. I look up from my book when all of a sudden this bloke—

MAY. I'm applying antiseptic. This will hurt.

BOB. This bloke starts calling the barkeep an — Ow!

MAY. You were warned.

BOB. Indeed, I was. At any rate, the whole pub broke out into a fight.

That's when I got knocked on the head with the bottle.

MAY. You don't have any glass lodged in your scalp. You don't have a concussion.

BOB. Are you sure?

MAY. Yes, but if you want one, I can find a spare bottle.

BOB. No. But thank you for asking. You've been very kind.

MAY. I'm a nurse; kindness is my life. All done. You can go.

BOB. Would you like to join me for dinner?

MAY. Why?

BOB. Well... Eating is a reason.

MAY. If this is to thank me for tending your wounds, it really isn't—

BOB. I have had many wounds “tended” by many medical professionals. You are the first I've invited to dinner.

MAY. Perhaps you do have a concussion.

BOB. I promise I won't take you to the same pub where the fight was.

MAY. Look. Most policemen I have encountered — in my job and on infrequent yet unfortunate occasions in my life — have been unpleasant.

BOB. In what way?

MAY. Common, arrogant, and vulgar. You seem to have some idea of what manners are and could possibly evolve from a bobby into an actual person.

BOB. That wasn't a very nice thing to say. Though I liked the remark. May I use it?

MAY. You should get your quotations from your books.

BOB. You don't think I actually read, do you?

MAY. I have to be on my way.

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BOB. I'll have you know I'm quite the reader. I have read many books and several of them contained no pictures.

MAY. I didn't mean to imply—

BOB. I will confess, however, to having read this volume before.

MAY. Look, Constable... I'm sorry I didn't catch your—

BOB. Bob. The name's Bob.

MAY. You're joking. A policeman named Bob. That's dreadfully redundant.

BOB. I'm a civilian right now, so it's all right. What's your name?

MAY. May.

BOB. May what?

MAY. Please, Constable Bob. You're my last patient this evening and I would like to start home.

BOB. I shall escort you. And if we happen to pass a restaurant you fancy en route...*(May gathers her coat and leads Bob "out of the hospital." They are outside.)* Force me not to beg.

MAY. Force you not? Have you forgotten which century this is?

BOB. I promise, even though I'm a common, vulgar bobby, I won't belch, fart, or otherwise embarrass you.

MAY. Must you be so... indelicate.

BOB. Ah! "But things that are indelicate can often be beautiful." Told you I read it.

MAY. May I see that? *(Inspects book.) A Room with a View? (Not buying it.)* And you say you've read this before?

BOB. Is that so difficult to believe?

MAY. Yes. All right. If you've actually read it, who says that?

BOB. One of the Misses Alan. Catherine. I think.

MAY. And what was the other Miss Alan's name?

BOB. Teresa. I must say, I'm surprised by your fascination with the gentlewomen.

MAY. They're very interesting.

BOB. Yes, but so's the rest of it. For instance, that kiss... when George takes Lucy into his arms and—

MAY. I know which kiss you're referring to.

BOB. It changes her life.

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MAY. It's so typical of a man to assume one kiss—

BOB. I'm not talking about any kiss. I'm talking about this kiss. The kiss that makes you look out windows to see your beloved coming home in a storm. A kiss that inspires you to make foolish decisions – decisions so outrageous it takes another stolen kiss to bring you back to your senses. Have you... Have you ever been kissed like that? Oops. I'm being indelicate again, aren't I?

MAY. That's all right. I didn't mind it this time.

BOB. Wait here. *(Bob runs offstage. SFX: Cars honking.)*

MAY. Please be careful! You could hurt yourself.

BOB. Then you'd have to take care of me.

MAY. I'm off the clock. Isn't it illegal to pick those flowers?

BOB. Corruption comes in many forms. Some take bribes, others blackmail. *(Bob returns to May with a makeshift bouquet and hands it to her. She accepts.)* I pick wildflowers.

MAY. I'll consider them contraband; that's even more exciting.

BOB. So. Dinner?

MAY. Look, Bob... You're obviously aware of the stereotype that nurses are easy to talk into bed. I am not of that breed.

BOB. I don't want to go to bed with you.

MAY. You don't?

BOB. Well, eventually perhaps, but not right this instant. Really, May. Which of us seems to be dwelling on stereotypes? I must say, I feel rather hurt by your generalization. *(“Hurt,” Bob steps away from her.)*

MAY. I do apologize. *(As he keeps walking:)* You're not really upset, are you? *(Bob stops, but coyly does not face her.)*

BOB. You could make it up to me.

MAY. You win. I accept your invitation. If it will mend your feelings.

BOB. I don't want your sympathy. *(Turns to her.)* But I'll accept it. Where would you like to go? *(SFX: Thunderclaps and rain.)*

MAY. Anywhere dry. Quickly. *(Bob and May exit. CROSS FADE TO Ackerley reciting from an invitation as Bob and Forster converse elsewhere.)*

ACKERLEY. Dear Morgan,

FORSTER. Bob.

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ACKERLEY. It's that time again.

FORSTER. Do you know what today is?

ACKERLEY. I am writing to cordially invite you...

BOB. Yes, it's... April 12.

ACKERLEY. ... to my annual party...

FORSTER. Yes... Do you know what that means?

ACKERLEY. ...celebrating...

BOB. Yes.

Bob and ACKERLEY. The Oxford versus Cambridge Annual Regatta.

FORSTER. It's truly amazing how close to the mark you are.

ACKERLEY. Queenie and I shall be thrilled to have you as our distinguished guests.

BOB. Am I forgetting something?

ACKERLEY. This invitation is for two.

BOB. *(Hands Forster a small single rose...)* Such as the anniversary of our meeting? *(...and puts it in his lapel. Smooch!)*

ACKERLEY. Spouses welcome. *(CROSS FADE TO: The Oxford vs. Cambridge Annual Regatta. Bob and Ackerley converge. Forster is away from them.)*

ACKERLEY. I see you've fallen quite violently in liking with our dear Morgan.

BOB. We're becoming quite close.

ACKERLEY. It's me you're talking to, Bob, not internal investigations. It's obvious the influence he's had on you. Harry Daley has been complaining how you've taken on the air of the literati.

BOB. *(Amused.)* Has he?

ACKERLEY. At a certain point in a man's life – i.e., now – he must ask himself, should I continue leading a life of leisurely romance or should I settle down into a quieter yet uniquely blissful domesticity? And you must choose, for if you don't, you'll end up exactly like me.

BOB. Actually, I have considered sharing a flat with him. *(Forster joins in, but it must be clear the two conversations with Ackerley are separate.)*

FORSTER. It would be nice if it were possible.

BOB. Of course, there is his mother.

FORSTER. It would look odd, what with Bob being a policeman and all.

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BOB. You know how he hates making himself noticeable.

FORSTER. And I see him... leering at women.

ACKERLEY. Why?

FORSTER. You're asking me?

BOB. I'm not put off by the fairer sex as much as he is.

ACKERLEY. Why not?

BOB. I'm just not.

FORSTER. I think there may be someone.

ACKERLEY. *(Guiding Bob away from Forster:)* Have you met someone? Someone besides Morgan?

BOB. Do you mean another man?

ACKERLEY. Man, woman, amphibian; anyone?

BOB. *(Pause. Fuck. He's caught.)* It's not serious. Not yet.

FORSTER. Damn. *(Ackerley exits and Bob remains during the CROSS FADE TO: Sunset outside the Brunswick Square flat. Forster, preparing to unlock an offstage door, fumbles and drops his keys.)* Damn.

BOB. What is it?

FORSTER. These hands. I don't know what's wrong with them today.

BOB. It's the humidity. *(Bob picks up the keys and hands them back to Forster.)* There you go.

FORSTER. Thanks. Coming in?

BOB. I'm going to sit out here for a while.

FORSTER. We've been outside all day.

BOB. I won't be long.

FORSTER. Shall I join you or would you rather be by yourself?

BOB. Whichever.

FORSTER. All right. I'll put on some tea then.

BOB. No. Come here. *(Forster sits with Bob. Bob takes Forster's hands and massages them.)* Can't allow you to suffer unnecessarily.

FORSTER. Suffer only when necessary. There's a motto.

BOB. It's been a wonderful summer.

FORSTER. It has.

BOB. Morgan. There's something...

FORSTER. Is he anyone I know?

BOB. It's not...

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FORSTER. Good. That's at least a relief.

BOB. I don't think I'm making myself clear.

FORSTER. The point is: I understand you. Is she anyone I know?

BOB. You really are something, aren't you? You don't know her. But she's a great admirer of yours.

FORSTER. Well, obviously she and I have... similar appreciations. How old is she?

BOB. Twenty-three.

FORSTER. Ah, yes. I remember when I was twenty-three. The Spanish Armada was quickly approaching our hallowed shores...

BOB. Stop it. You're not that old.

FORSTER. And what does this charming turtledove of yours do? She does do something, doesn't she?

BOB. Yes. She's very respectable. She's a nurse.

FORSTER. *(Pause.)* And the respectable part would be...?

BOB. Now you're just being difficult.

FORSTER. You're right. I must confess a prejudice about... *(Hisses the word with contempt:)* nurses! Mother had a... nurse once who was simply... indescribable. She was less a... nurse and more a... glorified chambermaid qua tart who spent half her time steeping in diseases and the other half spreading them. I'm sure your girl is nothing like that.

BOB. She isn't.

FORSTER. Then I'm happy for you.

BOB. Don't do this.

FORSTER. Do you doubt my sincerity? Look at it from my perspective. If it were a younger man, I wouldn't be able to compete. But since it's a woman, I'm not even in the same race. *(Takes hands back; goes to door.)* Thank you for doing my hands for me. You can't know how much I appreciate your concern over my comfort. I'm going to bed now. *(Pause, as Forster waits for Bob to come in and Bob waits for Forster to invite him. As neither event happens, Forster exits into the house. Bob exits elsewhere. CROSS FADE TO SPOTLIGHT on Bob.)*

BOB. *(Aside:)* **Facing the enemy.** *(CROSS FADE FROM SPOTLIGHT TO a classy restaurant represented by a table [optional] surrounded by*

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four chairs [required]. Music can play softly for ambiance. Ackerley and Forster take their seats.)

ACKERLEY. If you didn't want to meet her, why did you ask them to dinner?

FORSTER. I didn't think he'd accept! Then he was so happy about it...

ACKERLEY. I think you're very brave.

FORSTER. Piss off.

ACKERLEY. Right. Get all your hostility out now. Before you prove to the world that you deserve to lose the man you love to "a... nurse." I love the way you hissss the word... "nurse." Does she know about you and Bob...

FORSTER. Not yet.

ACKERLEY. You're not going to...

FORSTER. Don't ask me those questions! I don't know! Oh, I wish there weren't this horrid... nurse. Stop chortling! Anyway, I assume she's horrid. I'm certain her head is buried under an inch of cosmetics alternating between pallid and pastel. Her hair is probably done up to look like a cancan dancer at the Moulin Rouge; but if you'd ask her if she liked Toulouse-Lautrec, she'd slap you for being fresh. *(Bob enters with May, dressed in a pretty but not lavish frock; she wears a locket and a small cameo that is obviously old and sentimental; she does not wear cosmetics.)*

ACKERLEY. Remember, she's younger than you. Go for her eyes. *(Bob and May join Forster and Ackerley. Forster and Ackerley stand.)*

MAY. Oh, no, gentlemen. Please don't get up.

BOB. You must let them, May. Otherwise they wouldn't be gentlemen. May, I'd like to introduce you to my friends, Joe Ackerley and Morgan Forster. Gentlemen, this is my May.

ACKERLEY. Enchanted! My dear, you are a vision of loveliness.

MAY. That's very kind of you, Mr. Ackerley.

FORSTER. It's a pleasure to meet you, Miss...

MAY. Hockey. Like the sport. Inelegant, but what can I do?

ACKERLEY. Change it to Buckingham, like the palace!

FORSTER. Joe.

MAY. Let's not jump ahead of ourselves, Mr. Ackerley. Mr. Forster, I can't tell you what a thrill it is to meet you.

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FORSTER. Likewise. I'm certain. (*All sit. Pause. They look at menus.*)

MAY. I was quite surprised when Bob said he knew you, Mr. Forster. Even on the way here I secretly had my doubts.

FORSTER. One thing I have learned, Miss Hockey: one can always trust Bob.

BOB. In fact, I insisted she bring along her favorite of your novels to sign.

MAY. Which, finally convinced he did know you, I refused to do.

ACKERLEY. Which novel? Tell me. I must know.

MAY. *The Longest Journey.*

FORSTER. (*Pleasantly surprised.*) Is that so?

ACKERLEY. But that's nobody's favorite!

FORSTER. I wouldn't say "nobody's."

ACKERLEY. Name one other person.

FORSTER. Lionel Trilling.

ACKERLEY. Well... (*Rolls his eyes a bit.*) Lionel...

BOB. She even has a favorite passage.

ACKERLEY. Which is it?

MAY. It's when Stephen recalls escaping from his nurse when he was a child and surprising the butler.

ACKERLEY. Stark naked if memory serves! Oh, do recite it.

MAY. (*A moment of "huh", then...*) Very well... The passage reads, "He felt that nonsense and beauty have close connections – closer connections than Art will allow – and that both would remain when his own heaviness and his own ugliness had perished." (*Pause.*) That just breaks my heart.

FORSTER. Yes. (*Pause.*) Mine too.

ACKERLEY. See! There's nothing an author loves more than being quoted. If Shakespeare were alive to today, he'd die of joy!

MAY. Bob says he wasn't much of a reader until he met the two of you. Clearly, you've been a marvelous influence.

FORSTER. Influencing Bob has been one of the great joys of my life.

MAY. His police friends say you've turned him into quite the snob.

FORSTER. Oh. So, you've already met Bob's friends—

ACKERLEY. (*To May:*) Your face is completely unpowdered, isn't it? Simply marvelous. Don't you agree, Morgan?

FORSTER. Ideal.

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MAY. I see no real purpose in cosmetics.

BOB. Nor any necessity. Have you ordered yet?

FORSTER. No. Not yet.

MAY. There are so many wonderful dishes to choose from, aren't there?

BOB. Indeed. I must say, I've never been presented with so many appealing options.

FORSTER. Really?

ACKERLEY. Enough! Roast beef for everyone! Are we in agreement?

FORSTER. Yes! The bloodier the better! (*CROSS FADE TO: LATER. Just after the entrees, Ackerley addresses May as Bob and Forster eat quietly but not unpleasantly.*)

ACKERLEY. Miss Hockey, I've been meaning to compliment you on your jewelry.

MAY. It's not very flashy, I know.

ACKERLEY. That's the beauty of it. Your beauty is your simplicity. I mean in your manner and appearance, of course. It's already quite obvious simplicity is inadequate to describe your character.

MAY. Bob, tell your friend to stop. If he continues, he might steal me away.

FORSTER. What are the odds?

BOB. The locket belonged to May's great aunt who passed away during the influenza epidemic.

ACKERLEY. I'm sorry!

MAY. It was before my time, I'm afraid.

FORSTER. Why regret missing an era of death and disease?

MAY. From what I'm told, my great aunt was a remarkable person. I would like to have known her.

FORSTER. I must say, that is a divine little cameo.

MAY. Thank you. Bob gave it to me. It was his grandmother's.

FORSTER. Was it? May I see? (*May takes off the cameo and hands it to Forster, who examines it.*)

MAY. Lovely, isn't it?

FORSTER. Yes. Lovely. (*Forster hands it back to May. Bob takes it from her and reattaches it to her dress. CROSS FADE TO: LATER. The end of*

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the meal. May and Ackerley are getting along swimmingly. Bob and Forster are barely speaking.)

MAY. I had no idea those radio programs were yours!

ACKERLEY. Mine, they are. I must do something to pay the rent. Which is your favorite?

MAY. *Conversations on a Train.* I love hearing those people argue over their professions. I find it utterly amusing.

ACKERLEY. In that case, I must do a show in your honor. Bob, Morgan, what do you say?

FORSTER. Regarding?

ACKERLEY. The two of you being on *Conversations on a Train.* Discussing the difficulties of police work and the true value of art and literature in a declining society.

BOB. I don't know, Joe. I doubt I'd have much to say on the subject.

ACKERLEY. That's all right. If you get stuck, Morgan can lead you.

MAY. Go on, Bob. It'll be fun.

ACKERLEY. It settled then!

FORSTER. It is?

ACKERLEY. Do it for May, Bob. And Morgan...

FORSTER. What?

ACKERLEY. Do it for me. (*Turns to Bob:*) How about it, Bob? It'll be fun.

MAY. Do, Bob. Please.

BOB. I always enjoy conversations with Morgan. Why not on the radio?

FORSTER. God only knows what we might think of to say to the world. Yes, Joe, if Bob is amenable to it, I'd love to also.

ACKERLEY. Bravo! I'll schedule it tomorrow. Although, I must say, Miss Hockey—

MAY. Mr. Ackerley, please, do call me May.

FORSTER. My, how time pushes on. Joe, we really must go.

MAY. Must you? Mr. Ackerley has so delightfully occupied me this evening, that I haven't had a chance to talk to you, Mr. Forster.

FORSTER. I'm certain there will be other opportunities.

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ACKERLEY. May, I look forward to a long acquaintance with you, regardless of Mr. Buckingham's presence. Bob, she's marvelous, but don't tell her I said so.

BOB. Thank you, Joe. Thank you, Morgan.

FORSTER. Mr. Buckingham. (*Forster and Ackerley exit. Bob and May remain.*)

MAY. That was fun.

BOB. Mm-hm. (*CROSS FADE TO: Forster and Ackerley outside the Brunswick Square flat.*)

ACKERLEY. I couldn't help being effusive. She was marvelous. You were afraid she'd be some graffitied hussy.

FORSTER. I wanted her to be a graffitied hussy! Then I could have felt superior and insulted her with witticisms she didn't understand. No, this woman understands everything! (*Pause.*) What if he marries her?

ACKERLEY. You've carried on with married men before. Hell, you've supported their families.

FORSTER. I didn't wait over half a century to find I wanted to live the rest of my days with any of them! (*Pause.*) Oh, to hell with it. Would you like to come in or... (*Forster and Ackerley see Bob enter from the edge of the walkway.*)

BOB. Good evening, gentlemen.

ACKERLEY. Bob. You're here. My, it's late. I must be going.

FORSTER. Must you? Surely, you can stay for a spot of tea or... gin or...

ACKERLEY. I'll call you both about the show. And Bob. I can't tell you how charming I find your May.

FORSTER. Perhaps you should go.

ACKERLEY. She's more than a lady; she's an honest-to-God woman. A rarity, I must say.

FORSTER. I think I hear Queenie pining for you.

ACKERLEY. In fact, she may be the only one.

BOB. That's very kind of you, Joe.

FORSTER. Too kind. Good night.

ACKERLEY. Good night, gentlemen. "Parting is such sweet" et cetera, et cetera. (*Ackerley exits, leaving Bob and Forster to stand in silence for a moment.*)

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FORSTER. Yes?

BOB. I... I wanted to...

FORSTER. Be careful how you finish that sentence, Mr. Buckingham.

BOB. What am I supposed to do, Morgan? I am an officer of the law. You of all people know how it would look if you and I had—

FORSTER. So you're saying this woman is a mask? She exists to make you appear acceptable to the world and you have no feelings for her. Is that it?

BOB. I don't know what I feel for her.

FORSTER. Yes, you do. You just can't say it to my face. You're charmed by her. She gives you respectability you don't think you have otherwise. But don't try to spare my feelings by saying she's only here for appearances. I watched you tonight. You were not being merely charming with her. You were affectionate, tender, even loving. You were able to treat her publicly the exact same way you treat me privately. You must have felt quite relieved.

BOB. All right, yes I admire her. I am... developing feelings for her. I may even someday love her. I thought love was a good thing. Everyone's always complaining there isn't enough of it in the world. For God's sake, Morgan, when did caring about people and wanting to make them happy become a sin? Look, I don't know how to explain it to you. I should go.

FORSTER. Give the lady my regards. That's is where you're off to, isn't it?

BOB. I'm going home.

FORSTER. It's a pity that's not here.

BOB. Morgan. Are you all right?

FORSTER. I am tired and I am old. If I appeared tense or anxious this evening, that is why. I am pleased you found someone so... like she is. In fact, why aren't you going to her?

BOB. It's late.

FORSTER. I see. She's not that kind of girl then who would...

BOB. She most certainly is not!

FORSTER. But I am? *(Pause.)* Go home, Bob. *(Forster exits. Bob stands there as the LIGHTS CROSS FADE TO SPOTLIGHT on Lily.)*

LILY. *(Aside:)* ***Conversations on a Train – a radio broadcast.***

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(CROSS FADE FROM SPOTLIGHT TO the radio studio. A microphone or two is set up. Ackerley, Bob, May, and Forster enter. Forster and Bob gather round the mic. Ackerley gives them scripts.)

ACKERLEY. Its quite simple, really. The two of you will read this little scripted contretemps where you, Morgan, find Bob's suitcase and, thinking it belongs to someone who's left the train, will try to throw it out the window.

FORSTER. I would never do such a thing.

BOB. Why would I talk to someone who tried to throw my bags off the train?

ACKERLEY. Just read the script. You'll be fine. Come with me, May. We shall watch them from the booth.

MAY. Thank you, Joe. This certainly is exciting. *(Ackerley and May cross to an area LIT to represent the booth.)*

BOB. How have you been?

FORSTER. *(Into microphone:)* Joe, can you hear us in there?

ACKERLEY. Yes. Very clearly.

FORSTER. Good. Finish reading your script, Bob. *(OPTIONAL SFX: "Conversations on a Train" intro music plays low under Ackerley's intro.)*

ACKERLEY. *(Into microphone:)* You are listening to BBC Radio's *Conversations on a Train...* *(OPTIONAL SFX: the "toot-toot" of an old train over the music.)* where a chance encounter between two strangers can lead to penetrating discourse. Today, on a train from London to Manchester, a policeman encounters a writer. *(THE OPTIONAL MUSIC FADES as Ackerley signals Bob to begin.)*

BOB. *(Obviously reading:)* "Wait. Stop! That's my suitcase!"

FORSTER. *(Irritated by the bad dialogue:)* "My apologies. I thought it might belong to the previous occupant." *(Glares at Ackerley, then departs from the script, ad-libbing:)* I thought of opening it and rummaging through it. However, rummaging lacked dignity, so I decided to hurl it onto the platform. That way it might burst open and send its cargo flying into the arms of the truly needy. Lucky you found me when you did.

BOB. *(Still reading:)* "There's a good chap." *(As Forster grabs Bob's script and throws both scripts away...)*

FORSTER. What is it you do, Sir?

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BOB. I... uh... I'm a policeman.

FORSTER. Then, I'm lucky you found me when you did. Otherwise, I'd have been in quite a tight spot, wouldn't I? Odd that a policeman would leave his luggage unguarded on a train, wouldn't you say? *(Forster waits for a reply from Bob who looks eagerly to Ackerley who flails for Bob to say something. Bob turns back to Forster and comes up with...)*

BOB. And what is your occupation, sir?

FORSTER. I'm a writer. *(Ackerley is stressed. May is amused.)*

MAY. This may be the best one yet. You seem suddenly dyspeptic, Joe. Does Mr. Forster's improvisation bother you? *(Ackerley smiles, swallowing great anxiety as Forster and Bob resume. The dialogue moves at a strong clip.)*

FORSTER. Tell me. Are you married?

BOB. Not yet.

FORSTER. But many policemen are married, aren't they? I imagine that's quite difficult.

BOB. *(Looks at May, who waves back.)* It takes a very special woman to be the wife of a law enforcement officer.

FORSTER. *(As though it were one sentence:)* I'm sure it does. Tell me about corruption.

BOB. I beg your pardon.

FORSTER. It's always in the news. The police are supposed to protect us, but inside your hallowed walls aren't there numerous infractions? Thieves, extortionists, even... and I should whisper this... DEVIANTS?

BOB. I suppose if there weren't we'd have no need for internal investigations. There is a good and bad side to police work.

FORSTER. I'm dying to hear.

BOB. The bad side is that corruption does happen.

FORSTER. And the good?

BOB. We believe that no one is beyond rehabilitation.

FORSTER. Even the deviants?

BOB. I wouldn't know. I haven't had much experience with deviants. Aren't many writers and artists... how might one such as yourself put it?... morally eccentric. Aren't many celebrated writers convicts? Oscar Wilde for instance?

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FORSTER. *(Next two sentences as one:)* Frequently, incarceration enhances an artist's credibility. Back to the wives. How do they react when their spouses, whom they trust—

BOB. It is devastating. But you must realize, the frequency of deviance from the law, and from what society accepts as normal, is very small. If it were common, it would hardly be newsworthy. Would it?

FORSTER. Tell me. Does the reputation of the police as ignorant flatfoots bother you, or do you find it to be true? I'm sorry, was that indelicate?

BOB. As a writer, could you tell me: when there's more than one flatfoot, doesn't one refer to them as flatfeet?

ACKERLEY. *(From booth:)* Ha! *(Forster glares back at Ackerley and May who both wave back.)*

FORSTER. What a charming question. *(“BOOTH” LIGHT OUT. Ackerley and May join Bob and Forster at the mic.)*

MAY. I had no idea the two of you could be so colorful.

ACKERLEY. They do bring out the best in one another.

MAY. At times Joe and I were afraid it might come to blows. Mister Forster, I'm glad to finally see your sense of humor isn't confined to the page.

ACKERLEY. Yes, our Morgan is one funny chap.

MAY. Oh, look Bob. We're late. *(To Forster and Ackerley:)* Friends of ours invited us to dine with them after the broadcast.

ACKERLEY. Pity. I thought we'd all have dinner together.

MAY. I apologize. It was most inconsiderate of me to make plans without consulting you. Actually, we'd be honored if you would join us.

FORSTER. We wouldn't think of inconveniencing your hosts.

MAY. Don't be silly. Join us. Bob, convince them.

FORSTER. We all know that extra people mean smaller portions. No one wants that.

ACKERLEY. We shall fend for ourselves. But you enjoy.

MAY. We must all do something together soon. Bob, you've been awfully quiet. Aren't you going to say anything?

BOB. Thank you for the opportunity, Joe.

ACKERLEY. Thank you for doing it. May, if I ever need a nurse, you shall be the first I call. *(Bob and May exit.)*

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FORSTER. Us. She called them... Us. (*CROSS FADE TO SPOTLIGHT on May.*)

MAY. (*Aside:*) **Following the funeral service for author, educator, and philosopher Goldsworthy Lowes-Dickinson. August 1932.**

(*CROSS FADE FROM SPOTLIGHT TO: a sunny day outside. Forster and Ackerley are at a funeral reception. Ackerley has been crying.*)

FORSTER. It's a lovely day. Goldie would like this. He hated rainy funerals; found them too cliché. You don't realize how much you put into caring for a person until you don't have to anymore. It brings out the generosity in both of you. And now...

ACKERLEY. Never too busy to bring people closer to perfection. That's what separated the two of us: he pursued perfection while I shunned it. The thing I remember most is how soft he was. Soft hands. Soft lips. We would complain we were tired of men who'd make love to us and end up married with scads of brats running around. Then we'd walk on the beach. We would hold hands. And kiss. I always closed my eyes, because when I looked into his I could see he loved me more than I could ever love him.

FORSTER. That was a long time ago.

ACKERLEY. But if I'd had an open heart...

FORSTER. Goldie was loved. You didn't deprive him of that.

ACKERLEY. I want to say I didn't call on him while he was ill because I didn't think he'd really die. But that's a lie. I knew it was going to happen and I couldn't face it. When did I become so selfish?

FORSTER. You've always been selfish, Joe. It's one of your most radiant qualities.

ACKERLEY. I'm afraid he might not have known how important he was.

FORSTER. Before he died, Goldie gave me some letters to deliver in case the inevitable did occur. Since it has... (*Hands Ackerley a letter.*) I think he knew. (*Bob enters.*)

ACKERLEY. Look who it is.

BOB. Hello, Joe. Hello, Morgan.

FORSTER. Bob.

BOB. I'm sorry about Mr. Lowes Dickinson. I wish I had known him.

ACKERLEY. There are so few truly great people in the world, Bob.

When you get an opportunity to be close to them, don't let it pass. Morgan,

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I'm going to leave. I want to read Goldie's letter. (*With heavy regret:*) I must find a beach. (*Ackerley embraces Forster and exits.*)

BOB. So, how have you been?

FORSTER. Busy. I've been tending to Goldie's affairs. He's appointed me his literary executor, which means I get to read all his letters.

BOB. That's quite an honor. Morgan, I've been meaning to— (*Forster throws his arms around Bob and holds on tightly. Bob responds kindly.*)

FORSTER. I am so relieved you're here. I have had to be the pillar of strength for Goldie's entire family, not to mention Joe. They've asked me to write his biography, which I of course will do. I've not had a moment to myself.

BOB. There's something I must tell you.

FORSTER. Yes, I'm sorry too. I promise such an inane rift shall never happen again.

BOB. It's not that. It's... May and I... have become engaged. (*Silence.*) I didn't want you finding out from anyone else.

FORSTER. Quite right. (*Bob goes to Forster and places a reassuring hand on his shoulder.*)

BOB. This won't change anything between us.

FORSTER. But you do love her. Don't you?

BOB. I love you.

FORSTER. (*Forces a smile, knowing Bob did not answer the question.*) Good. Then you have my blessing.

BOB. Thank you.

FORSTER. Of course. (*Beat.*) Well then. Thank you for coming and... paying your respects. Now, I really must—

BOB. Morgan? There is... one other thing... (*Works up the nerve...*) You know how important you are to me and... I know it's... What I'm trying to say is... Would it be too much to ask you to be my best man? (*No response.*) I'm sorry.

FORSTER. No, no. I did not mean to hesitate. So many responses exploded into my brain at once. Instead of choosing between them, I shall simply say... yes.

BOB. Thank you. (*Embraces Forster.*) I'm honored.

FORSTER. (*Beat; lets go of Bob.*) Well, I must attend to the bereaved...

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BOB. Do you want me to stay?

FORSTER. No need. My friends are here. They will take care of me. Give my congratulations to the bride-to-be. *(Bob gives Forster a gentle, reassuring kiss on the cheek and exits. Forster stands perfectly still. Ackerley enters and approaches him.)*

ACKERLEY. It occurred to me on the way out I can't bear to read this letter alone. If I do, I might end up drowning myself. *(Pause. Forster is crying.)* Morgan? What is it? *(Forster turns to Ackerley and reaches out for him. Ackerley takes Forster in his arms and holds him. Slow fade to black.)*

END OF ACT 1

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