

The Wisdom to Know the Difference

A Play By

Michael Parra

(415) 730-2385

maestromiparra@yahoo.com

25-B Noe Street

San Francisco, CA 94114

God grant me the Serenity
to accept the things I cannot change,

The Courage
to change the things I can

And the Wisdom
to know the Difference

CAST OF CHARACTERS

JOSEPH ALVAREZ.....A ballet teacher (50)
SEAN BLACKWELL.....A boot camp fitness trainer (23)
BONNIE BLACKWELL.....Sean’s mother, a ballet dilettante (55)
ANNE DAVENPORT.....A ballet student (35)
TENACITY.....An angel
ACCEPTANCE.....An angel

TIME:

June – the present

PLACE:

San Francisco, California

SETTINGS:

Scene 1 – Joseph’s apartment

Scene 2 – A city park

Scene 3 – A dance studio

Scene 4 – The Men’s restroom in a restaurant

Scene 5 – Joseph’s apartment/ The sidewalk in front of Joseph’s apartment building

Scene 6 – Joseph’s apartment

The Wisdom to Know the Difference

(SCENE 1: Alone in his bedroom, JOSEPH reads by the light of a floor lamp. The bulb flickers out, leaving the stage in complete darkness)

JOSEPH

Merde.

(Across the room, lying on his desk, JOSEPH'S cell phone rings.)

JOSEPH (*Cont'd*)

Merde! (*As he crosses to his desk his shin loudly bumps into furniture*) Shit! (*Beat*)

(*Still in complete darkness*) Hello, this is Joseph.

Oh, hello Doctor Martinez. No, it's good of you to call. I was just reading.

Very well thank you. I'm still wearing a protective pad, but for the most part I feel continent...strong enough to return to teaching.

No, I won't actually dance the steps. That's the beauty of ballet. All the movement is codified. I can pretty much talk the combinations without needing to demonstrate the movement, at least not full out.

Oh?

I'm sorry Doctor, what does that mean, "invaded"?

But I thought –

I see.

How soon?

And will that be with you or another oncologist?

Yes, yes, I'll do that. Thank you Doctor. Good night.

(JOSEPH turns on his desk lamp, illuminating TENACITY and ACCEPTANCE, two angels that remain invisible to him)

JOSEPH (*cont'd*)

Oh God...why?

ACCEPTANCE

So what do you think? I'd say he's not taking it very well.

JOSEPH

I can't bear any more.

TENACITY

No. He's definitely had better days.

(The cell phone rings again.)

JOSEPH

Hello. Bonnie? No, it's not too late. I was just --

What? The Board fundraiser...yes, I remember --

Sushi? I think that would be fine along with other finger foods for those who don't care for fish.

Uh, Brie I suppose, though I prefer Gouda my—Yes, an assortment of wines would --

Listen Bonnie; I just got some bad news, terrible news...devastating really.

TENACITY

Oh, come on Joe. It's cancer, not an I.R.S. audit.

JOSEPH

My doctor called with the results of the pathology report. They didn't get it all.

I don't know for sure: radiation in a couple of months, maybe hormone therapy. They want to wait until I've completely healed from the surgery.

ACCEPTANCE

Joseph, maybe this is a good time for that big vacation you've been putting off for years.

JOSEPH

No, nothing for now, thank God. No treatment until after the New Year...when I'll have a new out-of-pocket deductible.

ACCEPTANCE

Ah yes, well there's that. So much for the vacation idea.

JOSEPH

No, I'm feeling okay, physically at least. In fact I plan on teaching Tuesday. Will you be coming to class?

TENACITY

Atta boy! Fight back. Show 'em what you're made of Joe!

ACCEPTANCE

He'll be fifty-five next month. There are some things one cannot refute. Change is inevitable.

TENACITY

So is the grave, but like I said, it ain't as bad as an audit. Death and taxes...get it? He-he.

JOSEPH

Don't worry. I'll talk and sit through most of the class. How is that injured ankle of yours? Foot, yes, I meant your foot.

What? Choreograph a little number? You mean a short ballet? Bonnie, the fundraiser is next week! I suppose I could polish the pas de trois from the Mozart—

Cute? What exactly do mean by "something cute"?

Uh-huh...to a live band? Ah-hah...playing cover tunes.

Aerosmith? "Walk This Way", yes, I see.

You know my Dear, I don't believe I'm quite up to it.

No, I really don't—

Listen Bonnie; I have to go now. I'll look forward to seeing you in class Tuesday. Yes, thank you. I will. Thank you. Good night.

(JOSEPH paces the room, becoming increasingly agitated)

ACCEPTANCE

Sushi sounds nice, but I hope they don't go with the Brie cheese. It always gives me gas.

TENACITY

As long as there's a full bar...

ACCEPTANCE

He really should have agreed to choreograph the entertainment. It wouldn't have required much of him, and a creative project would be a welcome distraction at this time.

TENACITY

It wasn't welcome though was it? "Cute" isn't Joe's thing. It's not who he is. Right now he needs to marshal his resources and limit his activities to only those most important. It's time for Joe to refine his priorities.

ACCEPTANCE

Right now Joseph needs to prudently consider every opportunity that comes his way, especially those endeavors that bring him in collaboration with other people. It's time to use the vulnerability inherent in his circumstances to become receptive to new ways of thinking.

TENACITY

He's better off alone.

ACCEPTANCE

Exactly the wrong approach! To my thinking Joseph needs more community, more social participation, not fewer friends. He needs to release this burdensome perspective that—

TENACITY

You mean Joe should lighten up?

ACCEPTANCE

...As though he had wings.

TENACITY

Well, a new attitude would do him some good...might at least get him laid more often.

ACCEPTANCE

Not that he's thinking about that sort of thing right now.

(JOSEPH stops his pacing long enough to dial his phone.)

JOSEPH

Hello Gwen. It's Joe. I'm sorry about the late hour. Is Mom up? Gwen would you wake her please. I need to talk with her...Mom? Hi Mom, it's Joe. I'm hope I'm not calling too late.

(END OF SCENE)

(SCENE 2: The lawn area of a City park on a sunny day. An assortment of body types in athletic wear, some fit, some less so, dutifully run laps, following the barked commands of their fitness trainer SEAN. The participants' grunts, groans, complaints, panting and spontaneous laughter fill the air.)

SEAN

(Clapping to get trainees' attention) Okay People, pick up the pace. Let's go, let's go!

Push ups! Everybody! Give me one-handed if you have it in you. Start full length. Drop to your knees and keep going once you exhaust in the plank position.

(Enter TENACITY and ACCEPTANCE, dressed in entirely white athletic wear. They begin their own limbering, warmup exercises.)

ACCEPTANCE

Ah, the vigor, the enthusiasm, the fresh air!

TENACITY

Yeah, it's a beautiful thing...a little too early in the morning for my taste. I'd kill for a cup of coffee and a cigarette.

ACCEPTANCE

Does this outfit make my butt look big?

TENACITY

Well, uh, angelic robes are much more...forgiving.

ACCEPTANCE

Don't I know it; and you wouldn't believe what I went through to find matching shoes.

SEAN

Break! All right, everybody up. Jumping Jacks. If you're not injured I want to see your feet leave the ground!

(TENACITY and ACCEPTANCE join in the jumping jack rhythm.)

TENACITY

Ugh! Reminds me of angel flight training.

ACCEPTANCE

Yes, isn't it wonderful? Hey! No fair using wings now; that's cheating.

TENACITY

The teacher is a stud.

ACCEPTANCE

Oh please...backwards baseball cap, sunglasses, clipboard...he's a cliché'. All he's missing is a—

(From beneath his shirt, SEAN pulls out and blows a whistle on a neck chain)

SEAN

On your back! Crunches! That's right People, it's called sweat. It's a clue that you might actually be doing something. (*Blows whistle again*) Okay, lunge and forward fold over your front leg, alternating stretches.

(Enter JOSEPH performing walking lunges, twisting side to side with a medicine ball in his hands)

TENACITY

Ah, there's our boy.

SEAN

(No longer shouting, speaking for only JOSEPH'S ears) How you doing Big Guy? I haven't seen you around for a while. I heard that you've had some health challenges; but I gotta say, you sure look good.

JOSEPH

Thank you Sean. You heard correctly. I'm doing very well; though I don't think I'm quite ready to rejoin your class. Next week perhaps.

SEAN

Take your time Joe. We're here when you're ready.

Back to work People! On your butts! Crunches again, this time slow and controlled.

(JOSEPH sits and attempts abdominal exercise but fatigues early, which prompts SEAN to return to his side.)

SEAN

Easy does it My Friend. No injuries or relapses on my shift please.

JOSEPH

Sir, while it's true that I no longer perform on stage, I am a classically trained dancer. This boot camp of yours, in comparison with my discipline, is child's play. You wouldn't last a half-hour in a professional ballet class.

SEAN

So that's the way it's going to be, eh Buddy?

JOSEPH

That's the way it is.

SEAN

(Removing his shirt to reveal a ribbed, white, tank top beneath) Okay Hot Stuff, show me what you got. *(He stands straddle over JOSEPH'S supine form and holds out his hands, palms facing JOSEPH.)* Sit ups, pushing against my hands to control the extra force on the way down. Let's go!

(The exercise is executed in profile to the audience so that each time JOSEPH sits up his head disappears between SEAN'S thighs, giving the appearance of clothed oral sex.)

SEAN *(cont'd)*

Five more, four, three...Okay, you're good. I'm impressed.

JOSEPH

(Panting) You're pretty impressive yourself. That shirt fits you very well.

SEAN

(Nervous laugh) Uh, yeah? Thanks. *(Hurriedly putting on his over shirt)* Hey, I wonder if it's still called a Wife Beater when a fag wears it? Ha-ha.

TENACITY

(Pulling SEAN'S cap off and tossing it on to the ground) Eh! Watch your mouth. That's our boy you're insulting!

SEAN

Whoa, that wind came out of nowhere. *(Blows whistle again)* Okay Folks, off your butts. Let's run! Three laps...come on, come on, pick up the pace!

(Indicating that he'll forego the run, JOSEPH waves to SEAN and shakes his head "no". The other boot camp participants, running in single file, exit the stage.)

SEAN

Joe, if you're not doing anything this weekend...I mean, uh...maybe you'd like to hang. I mean, I'd really like to hear what's going on with you. We could go for a few beers, or maybe catch a movie.

JOSEPH

Well I, um....I don't have my planner with me at the moment. I, uh—

SEAN

That's cool. I'll check back with you later. (*Exits running after his class participants. O.S.*) All right People, time is moving and you're not!

(JOSEPH is left alone on stage with his guardian angels, talking to himself)

JOSEPH

What am I doing? He's half my age and almost certainly straight. I'm behaving like a dirty old man.

ACCEPTANCE

Well, if the shoe fits...

TENACITY

The coach could just be a concerned, compassionate leader.

ACCEPTANCE

Right.

TENACITY

Maybe he thinks Joe's health problem is orthopedic and he just wants to score a new private training client.

ACCEPTANCE

Right.

JOSEPH

I should simply get out of here before any of this silliness gets any further out of hand.

TENACITY & ACCEPTANCE

(In unison) Right!

(Enter the boot camp participants, staggering with fatigue as they run. They cross the stage and exit in single file, still running laps. SEAN brings up the rear and lingers as the rest exit.)

SEAN

Lift those feet People, keep going, stay strong! *(Intimately to JOSEPH)* Hey, you got a card? Something with a phone number?

JOSEPH

Oh, yes. Here. That's my mobile. If I don't answer just leave--

SEAN

You got it Big Guy. See you this weekend. (*Exits*)

JOSEPH

(*To himself*) Why bother?

TENACITY

Because you can beat this thing. Stay strong. You can be an example, an inspiration to—

ACCEPTANCE

Because life is shorter than you think. Squeeze the juice, every drop of joy, from every moment that you can.

JOSEPH

Sean is far too young for me; and we have nothing, absolutely nothing in common.

ACCEPTANCE

Well (*beat*) I can think of at least one thing you two have in common.

TENACITY

Joe, you ain't dead yet.

(END OF SCENE)

(SCENE 3: A dance studio. The audience/fourth wall is the mirror. JOSEPH leads a diverse collection of adult amateur ballet students. As the lights go up, he is demonstrating the final barre combination, after which the students will move to center floor. TENACITY and ACCEPTANCE attend the class very ineptly.)

JOSEPH

Tendu and demi plie' fifth, passé, plie' fifth, battement closing straight legged and stay...same thing a la seconde' and derrière, pas de cheval tendu seconde', sousou and hold. Repeat. Music!

(JOSEPH coughs several times while the class executes the combination.)

JOSEPH (*cont'd.*)

Overall that was very well done. I'd like to see greater awareness of head placement and your use of facial expression. What are you doing with your eyes? Bonnie, don't close your fifth so tightly. It will hurt that knee of yours. Foot, I meant your foot. Anne, keep that hip down in grande' battement a la seconde'. Other side, please.

(As the class repeats the exercise on the new side, JOSEPH'S cough escalates until he must sit down.)

JOSEPH (*cont'd.*)

Merde! (*Words spoken between coughs*) Excellent...class. Dancers please...stretch yourselves and then...we shall come to Center.

BONNIE

(*Quietly to JOSEPH in private conversation*) Are you all right? Maybe it's too soon for you to resume teaching.

JOSEPH

Nonsense. Thank you for your concern, but this is only a cold or allergies...the dust in here. We really must clean more thoroughly. Perhaps one of our work-study students—

BONNIE

Joseph, no one will fault you for taking a bit more time off.

JOSEPH

Really Bonnie, I don't need it. I feel wonderful, elated even. I recently met someone, someone very promising, and it makes me feel like, like dancing.

BONNIE

Marvelous, I can't wait to meet this lucky person. Is she a dancer?

JOSEPH

He doesn't dance, at least not as far as I know, though he is most definitely fit enough. I don't know much about him yet actually. I don't even know with any degree of certainty that we play on the same team.

BONNIE

Joseph, I was hoping that you would let that...that life style go. Look around you. Beautiful women surround you, the envy of any other man. Think of how your daily existence would be so much easier, so much more...normal, if you settled down with a young lady, (*primping and admiring herself in the studio mirror, making it obvious that she is recommending herself*) well not too young, someone age appropriate, cultured, someone who shares your interests and appreciates your artistry.

JOSEPH

Bonnie my dear, there is nothing that would please me more, and nothing more implausible. Believe me; I've tried and...it's not so easy...rather like a zebra changing its stripes, or like a person with the soul of a dancer trudging through their days making do as...an insurance underwriter, or a grocery clerk.

BONNIE

Joseph, it's not just convenience. It's a matter of morality and reputation—I mean socially, the opportunities you could--

JOSEPH

Bonnie, if life is short, and whatever its duration it is certainly less than ideal, then to a degree we're talking about a matter of satisfaction; and beyond that it's an issue of respect.

BONNIE

That's what I'm talking about, respect for what's natural and...decent, and behavior that assures public respect, acceptance by your peers.

JOSEPH

(Pause) I was speaking of self-respect. Excuse me while I open a window. It's suddenly become unbearably stuffy in here, don't you think?

(JOSEPH crosses to one side of the stage while ANNE joins BONNIE downstage. The two women stretch.)

ANNE

What's going on with Joseph? Is he okay? He's acting rather queer.

BONNIE

Yes, that's the problem.

ANNE

Pardon? I don't follow you.

BONNIE

Oh, he has a few...health concerns. I'm sure it's nothing to worry about. Apparently there's romance in the air.

ANNE

Well, good for him! How about you? Are you seeing anyone?

BONNIE

Me? Anne please, it's been...oh, I don't know, a long, long time. Not that I'm complaining. I have many solitary pursuits, and of course there's my book club; and we're blessed with an abundance of theater here. (*beat*) I think I probably could have found somebody after the divorce. I was young enough, but when Frank left I was devastated; and then there was my son to—Anne, are you involved with anyone right now?

ANNE

Don't I wish! All the guys my age are too busy with their careers. They're available for a good time, but nothing serious; or maybe it's me, always working or working out. And that's another thing. I don't mean to sound superficial, but I like 'em buffed. I'm not asking for an Adonis, but these weekend warriors that used to be in good shape don't do it for me. I don't care how much money they make if—

BONNIE

Ah youth. At my age men think golf is a wilderness experience; and just try to get one out on a dance floor.

ANNE

Yeah, that's true for men of any age. It's a cultural aversion. Well, we're not going to meet any eligible guys in here. Maybe at the gym, or a boot camp class, or—

BONNIE

Anne! Have you met my son Sean?

ANNE

I don't--has he come to ballet class?

BONNIE

Sean? In tights? Heavens no; but I think you two might be a good match. He's very athletic; and I can't remember the last time he spoke of a girlfriend. There was one flirtation he mentioned last spring, what was her name? Lindsey I think, some large breasted bimbo he met in a dive bar. Can you imagine? She sounded like a tragic figure, the big-hearted cocktail waitress who falls in with a bad crowd. I believe she hit bottom following a hospitalization for methamphetamine use. Thank God Sean recognized the absurdity of their association. He's really too mature for his own peer group.

ANNE

Oh Bonnie, he must still be in his twenties, too young for me, not that I haven't gone there on occasion.

BONNIE

Hmm, you need a man with a youthful attitude and Sean could use a serious—a gal with a good head on her shoulders.

ANNE

I don't know Bonnie; most guys want to date younger than themselves. In fact my last two—

BONNIE

Sean isn't like that. Growing up, all his pals were older than he. Granted, we don't often attend social functions together, but when we do, he usually gravitates to my friends or people your age rather than his own. He used to go to book signings when he hadn't even read anything by the author, just to meet the older women attending the lecture.

ANNE

Well, I guess it wouldn't hurt to meet him for coffee.

BONNIE

Excellent! I have a very good feeling about this.

JOSEPH

(Demonstrating as he speaks) Dancers, please take your places for Center work. Let's begin with an adagio. We'll keep it simple, feet on the floor initially. Fifth position en face', four tendus a la seconde' closing back; then croise' tendu and as you ronde jambe en de hors, and pivot to the new croise' and tend l'e derrière. Repeat on the other side. Yes? Let's try it once altogether with the music.

(JOSEPH leads the dance sequence through the first side, but as the class begins the combination on the second side he begins to grimace and presses his hands against his abdomen as though nauseous. He waves BONNIE to front-center, indicating that she should lead the class in his place. JOSEPH exits, running and covering his mouth.)

(END OF SCENE)

(SCENE 4: The Men's restroom in a restaurant. JOSEPH stands upstage flanked by TENACITY and ACCPETANCE, each at a urinal in wide straddle stance facing upstage.)

TENACITY

The evening's going well don't you think? I mean, so far so good.

ACCEPTANCE

Hmm, they seem to be enjoying each other, but Joseph hardly touched his food; and Sean is drinking whiskey as though it were water.

TENACITY

Ah, they're both just nervous, first date jitters, that sort of thing. Joe is self-conscious; worried that he'll look bad, talking with food in his mouth, and Sean is—

ACCEPTANCE

Straight? Juvenile? A jerk?

TENACITY

Young...maybe too young for our boy Joe, but fun. You gotta admit, he's pretty entertaining.

ACCEPTANCE

He's pretty. Period. I think Sean is toying with Joseph. It gratifies his ego to get attention from an older man. At best, he's conflicted about his orientation. In either case Joseph would be better off ending the evening sooner rather than later.

TENACITY

And then what? An hour of bad cable T.V. reruns? Falling asleep with a copy of The New Yorker on his lap?

(Enter SEAN, intoxicated, staggering to a urinal alongside the others.)

SEAN

(Bracing himself against the back wall) Whoa! Damn, I shoulda stuck to beer.

JOSEPH

Yes, it looks as though you're having some trouble balancing.

SEAN

Right huh? Maybe I should take some dance classes.

JOSEPH

Hmm, I believe I could teach you a few things.

TENACITY

(Looking over SEAN'S shoulder) Mister! This guy's packing one heck of a bat...impressive.

JOSEPH

I'm a very careful and encouraging teacher.

ACCEPTANCE

Frankly I find it rather intimidating.

SEAN

Yeah? Well, as you know from boot camp, I'm a demanding coach. You gotta set the bar higher than they can jump, or higher than they think they can jump. You gotta push.

JOSEPH

It's not the jumping that hurts. It's the landing. If you're going to push for anything push for the experience of success for your students.

SEAN

My students experience success. They experience success because I insist on it. They're not children. If you coddle them they won't respect you.

TENACITY

He makes a good point.

JOSEPH

Sean, underneath it all we are all children. I concur that there's great value in establishing high standards. By all means, shoot for the stars; but be satisfied with the moon.

ACCEPTANCE

Bravo!

SEAN

My people follow me because I'm tough. They're up for the challenge. They crave it. Besides...it's part of my appeal. Manly. (*beat*) You like it. Right?

JOSEPH

Doesn't it get old, always playing the tough guy?

SEAN

Doesn't it get tough, always playing the old guy?

JOSEPH

Excuse me. I'll see you back at the table.

SEAN

Joe wait. (*SEAN drunkenly stumbles and is restored by JOESPH'S embrace.*) Look Joe, I'm sorry about that last remark. That was a cheap shot and....and...I was trying to be witty, trying to keep up with you. I guess I'm a little self-conscious.

JOSEPH

Merde. With your looks I'm surprised to hear that you are ever anything but confident.

(Pause while JOSEPH and SEAN draw slightly nearer to one another)

TENACITY

Ooooooooookay, I'm outta here.

ACCEPTANCE

Right behind you partner. This sort of thing is well beyond my comfort zone. I don't know and I don't want to know...you know?

TENACITY

(*Exiting*) What, you've never watched dirty movies?

ACCEPTANCE

(*Exiting*) Pornography? You're kidding me right?

(END OF SCENE)

(SCENE 5: All of the stage is dark, save for just enough illumination to show JOSEPH asleep in his bed. The sound of shuffling feet and the bang of a shin striking unseen furniture awakens him.)

SEAN

(In darkness) Damn it Joe! You've got to fix that lamp.

JOSEPH

Uh, I'm sorry. Hold on a minute. *(Turning on his desk lamp)* Are you all right? Let me have a look.

SEAN

Don't worry so much. I'll be okay...once the room stops spinning. I really tied one on last night.

JOSEPH

I had a wonderful time with you, all of it. You're a Wild Man.

SEAN

Uh, yeah, you know...when I drink I sometimes act kind of crazy. Dude, do you have any coffee? My head is screaming.

JOSEPH

Certainly, I...um, recently had to give it up, but I think there's still some French Roast in the refrigerator. How do you take it?

SEAN

I like my coffee like I like my women, blonde and bitter.

JOSEPH

(Beat) That surprises me.

SEAN

That I like to be with women?

JOSEPH

No, I suspected that men weren't your, uh, usual cup of tea; but why "bitter"?

SEAN

Girls my age sometimes play stupid, and that annoys me, that pretense of innocence. I don't buy it. Maybe that's because I was raised by a smart woman. My mom's a college professor.

JOSEPH

Is she bitter too, your mother?

SEAN

Ha-ha, yeah, I guess she is. My father left us early on. Mom is a survivor...and a realist. How about you?

JOSEPH

I'm not big on reality. Fantasy is more my strong suit. The arts have been my escape, my salvation as much as they've been my career; but my mother was a realist. She had to be, what with six children, no money and an abusive husband. However, she wasn't much of a survivor. I did her fighting for her.

SEAN

I'm sorry. I didn't mean—

JOSEPH

No, please, think nothing of it. That was a very long time ago. Is she blonde also?

SEAN

My mother? Ha-a, like...you think I may be looking for a girl just like dear old Mom?

JOSEPH

She's probably about my age.

SEAN

Well, you're just her type, smart, sophisticated, sensible....handsome.

JOSEPH

Am I your type?

SEAN

(Beat) How about that coffee?

JOSEPH

One cup 0' Joe, blonde and bitter, coming right up.

(JOSEPH exits. SEAN examines the knickknacks, the personal items on Joseph's desk and about the room. SEAN studies a photograph in a silver frame.)

SEAN

Joe, who are the four guys in this picture?

JOPSEPH (O.S.)

Which one? Are two of the men dressed in overalls?

SEAN

Yeah, and one of them has a broken arm or something like that. He's in a cast.

JOSEPH (O.S.)

Those are my brothers. I'm the one in the hat, second from the left.

SEAN

(Quietly to himself) No shit Dude. You were a hottie. *(Louder to JOSEPH)* How did your brother get the broken arm? Was it a boxing injury?

JOSEPH

(Entering with a cup of coffee) As a matter of fact it was broken in a quarrel, though I wouldn't call it boxing. His name was William. What made you think he hurt himself fighting?

1 SEAN

Well, all four of you look kinda rough; and you in the photo, you look like you have a black eye. Did you get into it with your brothers a lot?

JOSEPH

Let me see that. *(beat)* Merde! We were always battling over some small offense, territory, stupid squabbles.

SEAN

Did Will give you the shiner?

JOSEPH

And did I break his arm in return? No, our father gave us those wounds. Dad was a poor provider, but very generous with his fists.

SEAN

What was this fight about?

JOSEPH

(Pause) My brothers and I were defending our sister...Gwen. She was not yet fourteen. I don't know how long Dad had been...molesting her, or how he managed to keep it from the rest of us. When she got pregnant he...Will and I heard him in the barn, swearing and kicking her...she was unconscious by the time...

SEAN

My God Joe. Was she okay?

JOSEPH

She lived, lost the baby of course; and perhaps that was a blessing.

SEAN

What happened to your Dad?

JOSEPH

The sheriff came and carried him off to jail; and I mean carried. Will and I made sure he would never walk again. I left a week later and never went back while he lived. That photograph was taken at my goodbye party. Mom is still there, cared for by Gwen.

SEAN

Merde.

JOESPH

Hey, I've got a couple of steaks in the refrigerator. If you're not busy tonight we could—

SEAN

Um, (*handing JOSEPH his coffee mug*) how about a refill?

JOSEPH

Certainly. I'll be right back.

(Once JOSEPH exits, SEAN hurriedly gathers his discarded clothes from the floor. Unnoticed by SEAN, JOSEPH returns to the bedroom with the coffee and silently observes SEAN dressing.)

JOSEPH (*cont'd.*)

I take it breakfast is not in the offing?

SEAN

Uh, no. I mean, no thank you. I mean, there's things I need to do today.

JOSEPH

I thought you were home on summer break.

SEAN

Well, yeah Joe; but you know...I have a life.

JOSEPH

What about dinner? It's supposed to be another warm night tonight. We could grill—

SEAN

Right. Um, let me get back to you about that.

JOSEPH

Sean, don't string me along. If you don't want, or can't feel something for me, then...I need to know if I'm wasting my time. I...I may not have a lot of time to waste.

SEAN

Whoa, slow down. Last night was fun, but we hardly know each other. I thought you guys messed around with each other all the time and it didn't have to lead to anything heavy.

JOSEPH

"You guys"? You mean, you queers? Men different from you? I suppose last night was just the alcohol talking, kissing, licking and—

SEAN

Okay, okay, I get it Joe. You don't have to—

JOSEPH

So what am I to you? An hour well spent?

SEAN

Look Joe, I think you're a great guy, and last night was hot. I'd be up for a repeat, but let's not get ahead of ourselves here or make more out of it than it was.

JOSEPH

I'm too old for you. Is that it?

SEAN

Hell no! Why are you trippin' on this? You know I'm only in town for the summer. Besides, I wouldn't have ended up here...

JOSEPH

You only put out because you were drunk?

SEAN

Maybe, maybe not. I sometimes enjoy a...uh, varied sexual palette; but I don't date dudes. You can't seriously expect a guy like me, young, educated, from a good family, a man with tremendous social upward potential, to limit his options, or ruin his reputation. I mean, it wouldn't be manly—

JOSEPH

So, dating me is limiting or ruinous. Listen you Little Shit, you may be built like Samson and hung like a prized stallion, but you'd be lucky to win the affection of a real man...after being abandoned by your father at an age too young to know what—

SEAN

Leave my father out of this! You don't know anything about that.

JOSEPH

Oh. So I don't know anything about it? About making my way in the world without a man to stand by me? A father to protect, advise, hold me? You think manhood, that sense of independence, a sense of...integrity, just happens? It takes more than muscles and a tough guy attitude. You don't just master a few difficulties and skip over others. Some challenges you have to own. Not all obstacles disappear just because you do. What the hell do you know about being a man?

SEAN

Maybe you're right (*quickly gathering his clothes strewn about the bed and getting dressed*) and I don't know a real man when I see him; but I'll tell you what I do know. First, one should feel strengthened by one's challenges, not trapped by them...and second...that as a man I don't need to stick around here and listen to your shit!

(SEAN exits as BONNIE and ANNE enter downstage. The ladies are outside Joseph's apartment, taking a sidewalk stroll in the morning sunshine.)

ANNE

Ah, what a great day. Don't you love this neighborhood, all the potted flowers? The gays really know how to dress up a place.

BONNIE

Yes, "dress" is the operative word...those men who masquerade as women, nuns even! It's dreadful. Such artifice, it's all so...superficial.

ANNE

Bonnie, I'm surprised at you. The boys are just celebrating beauty.

BONNIE

They're talented. I'll give you that; but they're silly, and very easily distracted by lust--

ANNE

Well what man isn't?

BONNIE

...and generally debauched. I mean, here it is, what? Nearly eleven on a Sunday morning, and you can see by their attire that many of them are still carousing from the night before.

(Enter SEAN in his very rumpled evening attire gathered from the bedroom floor)

SEAN

Mom!

BONNIE

Good morning, Sean. What a happy coincidence to run into you today. This is my friend Anne, the fashion designer. I think I may have mentioned her last week. Anne, my son Sean.

ANNE

Hi. She's very proud of you.

SEAN

Yeah, she's my biggest fan. Nice to meet you.

BONNIE

What are you doing in this part of town?

SEAN

Oh, I, uh...um, clothes shopping. There's some good men's wear stores in this neighborhood.

ANNE

True. Your current outfit fits you very well. It's—

BONNIE

Wrinkled.

SEAN

*(Responding to his cell phone vibrating.)*Merde!

(BONNIE reacts to the word with a sideways glance)

SEAN *(cont'd.)*

Excuse me. I ought to take this call. I'll be just a minute.

(Into phone) Hello?

ANNE

Bonnie, you certainly raised a healthy boy. Sean is a hunk. I bet he's very popular.

BONNIE

I imagine that's so. I try to remind him that it's always bet to keep all your options open. In any case, he doesn't disclose his dating details to me. In fact, I can't remember the last time he talked about a girl.

SEAN

(Into phone) Yeah, I'm sorry about that; but I needed to get some air, literally and figuratively.

ANNE

Maybe he's a player.

BONNIE

A "player"?

ANNE

Someone who enjoys the game of recreational sex with multiple partners.

SEAN

No, I'm not brushing you off, just taking a break.

Uh...because I like to keep my options open.

BONNIE

I did not raise a slut! I don't know how your mother raised you...but she obviously—

ANNE

That's right Bonnie, you don't know. How could you? I don't often speak about my childhood, and I rarely if ever mention my mother. Let's just say I have my own good reasons and leave it at that.

BONNIE

Well, if I were your—

ANNE

Please don't go there.

BONNIE

Well, I must confess that I'm surprised to hear such a degree of defensiveness in your tone. You clearly have a hidden side to you, Anne. There's a lot more to you than you let on.

SEAN

No, I told you. I had a terrific time with you last night.

ANNE

Certainly, but isn't that true of everyone

SEAN

Look, I'll...uh, I'll call you. Saturday? Sure, this Saturday is good for me too. (*Returning to CONNIE and ANNE*) Sorry about that, I, uh, had some business I needed to manage.

ANNE

Business? I thought you were on summer vacation.

SEAN

Well, business of sorts, a friend needed to talk and I—how did you know I was here on break? Mom, have you been talking about me?

BONNIE

Perhaps a little, but only the good things.

ANNE

It's true. She may be loose lipped, but your mother is very proud of you.

BONNIE

"Loose lipped"? - Grammar my dear. A better adjective would be "indiscreet". I understand that you people in the fashion industry love to gossip. That's understandable in such a superficial and vain field. I, however, happen to be the model of tact, the perfect confidant.

ANNE

Oh really Bonnie? Tell me Sean, did you visit that crack head Lindsey in the hospital?

SEAN

Mom! I can't believe you told Anne about Lindsey. What other details of my private life have you been blabbing all over town?

BONNIE

Sean, Anne is a very close friend of mine. I may have mentioned a few things about you by way of introduction, but that's hardly "blabbing". You're over reacting.

SEAN

(To Anne flirtatiously) Did she tell you about my taste for older women?

ANNE

Oh, you mean your strategy of cruising book signing tours?

BONNIE

Anne! You're behaving contemptuously.

ANNE

Yes, I'd say that right this minute; contempt probably has something to do with it.

SEAN

Mom, You're the one who lets fly the snide comment. When are you going to stop playing the critic? When are you going to stop casting blame at everyone but yourself?

BONNIE

I am not critical of others. How dare you! And as for taking responsibility for one's own decision and actions, well my son, let me tell you—

SEAN

Tell me what? How Dad left us to our own resources? And you claim not to be critical? Come on Mom. Dad didn't leave us for another woman. He left to escape your sharp tongue. You dogged him—

BONNIE

Poor word choice...

SEAN

...Ridiculed him until his pride forced him into a terrible choice.

BONNIE

This conversation is absurd and unwarranted. I'm not having it, any of it. The two of you are a better match than I dreamed. You're both rude and cruel. When you come to your senses I expect a full apology from each of you. Until then don't bother speaking to me!

(BONNIE exits)

ANNE

Ug. I've known Bonnie for years and I've never seen her this upset. I should probably go after her and apologize, but I'm still mad.

SEAN

Don't sweat it. She had it coming. Sometimes my mom gets a little full of herself. She'll come back around in a couple of days.

ANNE

But aren't you staying with her for the summer? Things could be very uncomfortable at home for those couple of days.

SEAN

Yeah, I may need to find other accommodations for a few days. (*Moving in close to ANNE*) So, are you free this evening?

ANNE

Whoa Mister, slow down. I've got plans tonight, but...this weekend...Saturday? If you're not already seeing somebody I mean.

SEAN

Seeing somebody? No, I'm completely unattached. This Saturday is good for me too. (*pulls out cell phone*) What's your number?

(END OF SCENE)

(SCENE 6: With only moonlight from a window illuminating Joseph's bedroom, TENACITY, ACCPETANCE and JOSEPH, all three dressed in angelic robes, observe the entrance of SEAN and BONNIE. Mother and son are dressed in formal black. SEAN carries a small paper bag and BONNIE holds a ceramic urn.)

BONNIE

Let's see, I'm not sure which key unlocks which bolt. I never dreamed that I'd be doing this, packing up his belongings...funeral arrangements. I appreciate your help with all this Sean. I don't know to whom else I could have turned, certainly not the members of the dance company board. God knows what we'll find in here. Joe had, uh...unusual tastes. There may be rather sordid material that we'd better dispose of—

SEAN

Clandestinely?

BONNIE

--quietly, in order to lend the deceased a certain dignity that he may not have been able to sustain through his—

SEAN

Debauchery?

BONNIE

--protracted illness.

JOSEPH

Good Lord, I had now idea they were related! Wait until they find my video library. Years of collecting, I must have spent a small fortune.

ACCEPTANCE

Ballet performance recordings?

JOSEPH and TENACITY

(In unison) Are you kidding?

(When the light switch inside the entry door fails to turn on lights, BONNIE crosses to the floor lamp and tries again without success.)

BONNIE

Oh Dear, I'm afraid we may have to come back tomorrow. We can't do this in the dark.

SEAN

No, we're good. I brought a replacement bulb.

(SEAN retrieves a light bulb from his paper bag, swaps it with the spent bulb and switches on the floor lamp.)

SEAN *(cont'd.)*

That's better. Mom, what do say we start with three piles: one trash, one of valuables that we definitely want to keep or sell, and a third for—

BONNIE

Sean?

SEAN

What?

BONNIE

How did you know that we'd need a light bulb?

ACCEPTANCE

Oh, this is good! I can't wait to hear him squirm out of this one.

SEAN

I, uh...

BONNIE

You've obviously been here before, in Joseph's apartment.

SEAN

Yeah, well, uh, Joe and I hug out for a bit. You know—

BONNIE

No, "hung out"? I had no idea. Just how close were you?

SEAN

Oh, we were friends, drinking buddies. You know...that sort of thing.

BONNIE

No, I don't know about "that sort of thing". Joseph never mentioned anything about meeting you; and you've been oddly secretive about your acquaintance.

SEAN

Well it's no secret. You and I just haven't talked much since that disagreement we had on the sidewalk, and—

BONNIE

“Disagreement”? You and Anne hurling insults at me hardly constitutes a—

SEAN

--and I saw Joe mostly when he attended my boot camp class. I’m not surprised that he never said anything about it to you. We didn’t know each other all that well.

JOSEPH

Right! We only knew every inch of one another’s bodies. I can tell you the location of each mole and freckle on that boy’s—

TENACITY

Relax Joe. She isn’t going to let him off the hook that easy. Look at her. She’s like a dog excavating a buried bone, dig , dig, dig.

BONNIE

Sean (*beat*), were you and Joseph...intimate?

(SEAN begins to stack Joseph’s possession into piles on the floor, one item at a time.)

BONNIE (*cont’d.*)

Son?

SEAN

I can’t believe you’re asking me that question. It’s disgusting.

(Jeers from TENACITY, ACCEPTANCE and JOSEPH)

BONNIE

I agree. The behavior...two men...it is disgusting—

SEAN

No, I'm not putting down the sexual act; I mean the intrusion to my privacy.

BONNIE

Sean, I'm about to strip the sheets from my dead friend's bed. Is it so appalling that I'd like to know if my own son has lain within them?

SEAN

You know Mom, if it were just a matter of laundry, devoid of judgment, or...condemnation...if I knew that your interest was a matter of concern rather than an accusation—

BONNIE

Well, I'm worried that you've become a (*pause*)

TENACITY and JOSEPH and ACCEPTANCE

(*In unison*) A fag!

SEAN

Mom, I've done a lot of things...been around the block, seen an elephant.

BONNIE

(*Shaking as she begins to stockpile Joseph's possessions*) What about Anne?

SEAN

I like Anne. She has a lot of things going for her.

JOSEPH

Yes, she's alive. That definitely works in her favor.

SEAN

We've had a good time getting to know one another; but I'll be leaving soon to return to school. I don't think either of us expected the romance to last beyond the summer. We'll probably maintain a friendship for a while, long distance though—

BONNE

That's ridiculous. How can you so glib, so blind, so mean?

SEAN

"Mean"?

BONNIE

(Throwing the framed photograph of Joseph with his brothers at SEAN) Yes, mean! The girl adores you!

JOSEPH

Hey, that's a Tiffany frame!

SEAN

(Throwing another one of Joseph's belongings at BONNIE) You don't know anything about it. How can you say that? After all these years, you hardly know me!

BONNIE

(Kicking and flinging stockpiled items in all directions - a tantrum) Of course I know something about it! And how well I know you! Anne is my friend. I see her coming to morning ballet class still...disheveled from a night with you. You're all she talks about! She has no idea that you've shared your affections with other people, other...men. You can't imagine what's she' in for, the heartache, the dishonor, the...fifth!

SEAN

"Filth"? You think I'm filth?

BONNIE

Yes, you're disgusssssssting! Oh, the horror of it, the humiliation, just like your father.

SEAN

What? Dad messed around with other dudes?

BONNIE

(Slamming the urn onto the floor. Ashes fly) Yes! The bastard!

JOSEPH

Oh no! I wanted to be scattered in the Bay.

ACCEPTANCE

Best to let it go Dear.

JOSEPH

I guess it's true, "You can't take it with you."

TEANCITY

Actually that's not entirely true. We can make arrangements so that you can take it with you; but the shipping charges are hell. Heh-heh.

SEAN

(Holding up a piece of the urn, stunned and staring into space) Dad.

BONNIE

Your father ruined our life. Ruined us! I was a good wife, the perfect spouse, a great mother.

SEAN

(To himself) Dad?

BONNIE

I tried my best. I gave him— I can't let you go down the same path Son. I won't have it.

SEAN

(To BONNIE) Dad?

BONNIE

Look, we'll talk about this some other time; sort out the fact from the fiction; and *(gesturing to the piles of Joseph's possessions)* this mess. Right now I need some air.

(BONNIE hugs SEAN who hardly acknowledges her embrace, BONNIE exits.)

SEAN

Dad. (*He begins cleaning up Joseph's ashes.*)

JOSEPH

I wonder if I should stick around to make sure he—

TENACITY

Probably not a good idea Joe. You could end up in a trash bag.

ACCEPTANCE

Or down the toilet.

(JOSEPH and TENACITY turn and glare at ACCEPTANCE, who shrugs in response)

ACCEPTANCE (cont'd.)

I'm just saying...it happens sometimes. At least you'd still end up in the Bay.

JOSEPH

(*Embracing SEAN*) Goodbye beautiful man.

(SEAN reacts to the unseen embrace with increasing tears until his sobs bring him to his knees.)

JOSEPH (cont'd.)

What about you two? Are you ready to leave?

TENACITY

No, you go on Joe. We have another assignment.

(TENACITY gestures towards SEAN. TENACITY and ACCPETANCE sit on the floor, shoulder to shoulder on either side of SEAN. JOSEPH exits.)

ACCEPTANCE

It looks like we've really got our work cut out for us this time.

SEAN

What am I going to do? I've been awful, just awful.

TENACITY

Let go of the self-pit for starters. Look at him will you? He's acting like a spoiled child, like most young men, hard and horny. Sean ought to just move back to campus, focus on his studies and forget all this foolishness.

ACCEPTANCE

Foolishness is right. He's been a real turd; but he needs to make apologies to a lot of people.

(The lights slowly fade as the eternal argument of the angels continues)

TENACITY

What he needs is to choose guys or girls and stick to dating one gender or the other.

ACCEPTANCE

Nonsense. It's not a matter of who he's with, but an issue of integrity. Sex has its place, and it isn't first.

TENACITY

Spoken like someone who didn't get enough.

ACCEPTANCE

Look who's talking. Enough? Do you even know the meaning of the word? There are other joys in life besides the carnal pleasures.

TENACITY

Amen to that.

(THE END)