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First Love

by CHARLES L. MEE

[We are indoors and out at the same time.

This is the world of Magritte.

There is a tree, perhaps with a bright yellow summer dress hanging from a branch.

A piano.

We hear birds singing.

Harold, in his seventies,
lies napping on a stone bench.

After a few moments, Edith, in her seventies, enters.]

EDITH
Shove up.

HAROLD [awakened from sleeping—still half-asleep, disoriented]
What?

EDITH
Shove up I said shove up.

HAROLD
What what?

EDITH

I want to sit down here.

HAROLD

Goddam it to hell, this is my God Damn bench.
Can't you see I am sleeping here?

EDITH

This is not your God Damn bench.
This is a common bench
and I said:
[shrieking]
shove up!!!

HAROLD [shouting]

Can't you see
I am trying to sleep in peace?

EDITH

You want peace?
You want peace?
Go someplace else.

HAROLD

I did go someplace else.
This is where I went.

EDITH

I am going to explain this to you:
I am not the sort of person who looks at a man and thinks
oh, I could take him on
make a project out of him
fix him up
he looks okay to me
not too disgusting
I am going to reason with the sonofabitch.
No.
This is not who I am.
I am the sort of person who says shove up

or

[she starts trying to kick him]

I will kick you black and blue,
because I am tired of walking around!

HAROLD

Okay, okay, sit.

[he makes room for her on the bench]

EDITH

Thank you.

HAROLD

Do we know each other?

EDITH

No. No, we do not.

[she rummages through her stuff,
brings out a bottle]

Sherry?

HAROLD

What?

EDITH

Would you like a little nip of sherry?

No hard feelings.

HAROLD

Well.

Yes.

Okay.

Thank you.

Very kind of you.

[he takes a drink;
then, talking too loud]

You can't get this any more on your medicaid card
the bastards.

EDITH
You never could.

HAROLD
Never could what?

EDITH
Get sherry on your medicaid card.

HAROLD
How the hell do you think I got it then?

EDITH
How the hell should I know?
Maybe you had a credit card.

HAROLD [shouting]
Credit card, that's what I said.
You can't get the stuff on a goddam credit card any more.

EDITH
Are you hard of hearing?

HAROLD
What?

EDITH
Can't you hear too well?

HAROLD [shouting]
What does that have to do with it?
I don't enjoy the opera any more, if that's what you mean.
Or the symphony.

I used to go to Ravinia.
Do you know Ravinia?

EDITH
Ravinia.

HAROLD
Outdoors, in the summertime
every Friday night.
Fritz Reiner conducting.
You remember Fritz Reiner?

EDITH
Of course I remember Fritz Reiner.

HAROLD
That was lovely.
You know, lying out on the lawn listening to the music.
Mozart, all those fellows.
Like the Grand Canyon, you know,
a marvel of nature, that's all,
a complete breakthrough of the divine
or whatever, you know,
if you believe in that sort of thing.

EDITH
I don't.

HAROLD
Well, then, a breakthrough of the human.
But that's all gone
now that I can't hear a thing
you know there's a lot you can't enjoy any more.
When you get down to it, at my age,
I don't see so well either.

EDITH
Well, it's the end of an era.

HAROLD

That's for sure.

The end of a way of life.

EDITH

An entire way of life.

HAROLD

The end of poetry.

EDITH

Of the book itself.

HAROLD

Yes, well....

EDITH

Don't go gentle into that good night!

HAROLD

No. No. Right you are.

EDITH

We lost a lot when we lost communism.

HAROLD

Isn't that the truth?

EDITH

Where's the opposition any more?

I never said I loved Stalin

but where is the inhibition any more

if the bastards know you have nowhere else to turn

HAROLD

Castro! Castro!

EDITH
Castro!
Che!

HAROLD
Che!

EDITH
Danny the Red!

HAROLD
Abby Hoffmann!
Jerry Rubin!

EDITH
Jerry Rubin:
There's a flash in the pan if ever there was one.

HAROLD
Allen Ginsberg.

EDITH
Gregory Corso!

HAROLD
Ferlinghetti!
These are the heroes!
All gone!

EDITH
Trotsky!

HAROLD
Trotsky!

EDITH
The Red Brigades!

HAROLD
The Catholic Workers!

EDITH
Gandhi!

HAROLD
Mao!

EDITH
Lenny Bruce!

HAROLD
Lenny Bruce goddammit. Goddammit it to hell.

Where is everyone when you need them?
Where is the threat if the bastards don't deliver?
Something to say:
the way things are
is not the way they have always been

EDITH
or the only way they can be.

HAROLD
These sons of bitches:
Just like they say themselves:
all they understand is force!

[they begin to cry and yell with frustration through the rest of this;
speaking on top of one another in a confused babble, a steady crescendo]

EDITH
You could die from neglect

HAROLD
die from it

EDITH

I mean it

HAROLD

I'm not kidding around

EDITH

people are dying from neglect

HAROLD

and indifference

EDITH

and indifference

HAROLD

sheer—indifferent indifference

EDITH [declaiming]

Ah, Carl Solomon!

I'm with you in Rockland

where you're madder than I am

Do you know this poem?

HAROLD

Do I know this poem?

I'm with you in Rockland

where you bang on the catatonic piano the soul

is innocent and immortal it should never die

ungodly in an armed madhouse

EDITH

I'm with you in Rockland

where you scream in a straightjacket that you're

losing the game of the actual pingpong of the

abyss

HAROLD & EDITH ALMOST TOGETHER

I'm with you in Rockland
where there are twenty-five-thousand mad comrades
all together singing the final stanzas of the
Internationale

[they are both spent from this, exhausted;
Edith fiddles with the knobs on the radio,
and we hear one of the Bach cello solos
or the Adagio from Alessandro Marcello's
Concerto for oboe, strings, and continuo in D minor,
while they sit and weep;
Harold reaches out and takes her hand;
they sit, holding hands;
and then, when they are composed again,
he speaks]

HAROLD

You know, you go through life.
There were certain things I wanted to do
certain ambitions
some things that had to do with politics and the world
things I thought when I was a boy
what I wanted to be when I grew up
and so I pursued it
worked at it
it preoccupied me
I did it with more or less success
and then it turns out really
all life comes to be about is
I miss my kids.
I think, well, I threw away a lot of time on my career
worked nights and weekends
neglected my family and friends
end up all these years later
and I just wonder where my kids are

EDITH

Well, we all have a history.

I knew Ginsberg as a matter of fact.

Patti Smith

and Kerouac

Kathy Acker.

I've been on the stage.

HAROLD

On the edge?

EDITH

On the stage!

HAROLD

Yes, I can believe it.

EDITH

It was a community then.

Everyone knew each other.

HAROLD

Like the Cedar Tavern.

EDITH

Exactly.

HAROLD

I met John Simon once.

Do you know John Simon?

EDITH

John Simon?

HAROLD

Yes.

EDITH

There's a jerk if ever there was one
a real jerk.

I was there when Joe Chaikin tried to throw an ice cream cone at him
in the Theatre de Lys
and missed him and hit some innocent bystander in the face
and then he had to apologize
and that shit Simon got off free.

What a prick.

Opinionated little prick.

Stupid, opinionated little shithook that fucking creep.

HAROLD

I knew David Rattray.

[silence]

EDITH

Who was that?

HAROLD

Poet.

EDITH

A poet.

HAROLD

Wonderful, wonderful poet.

Not well known, but a wonderful poet.

New York School.

EDITH

No.

HAROLD

Good friends with Herbert Huncke.

Huncke used to stay with him in New York.

Very

sort of
fucked up.
He's gone now.

Paris '68.

EDITH
What's that?

HAROLD
He was in Paris in '68.

EDITH
I was in Paris in '68.

HAROLD
That's where I wanted to be
but
I had a job.

EDITH
Well, I've had a life.
My friends and I
we went places, you know.
Nicaragua.
We were active.

HAROLD
Yes, I can see that in you.

EDITH
We were in bed
my husband and I one time
this was in Nicaragua
making love in the daylight
there were sounds of voices and movements around the house
but I was not so attentive to them
I heard him whisper in my ear
—teasing me—

to come again
but this time
be very quiet.

And then
it was as if
a box of matches
had been struck by a hammer.

I heard no sound
but the glass was shattered on the floor.

I took a deep breath and then
I noticed that
the side of my own body
was on fire.

HAROLD
My first wife was holding our son in her arms,
standing on the bus,
this was in Washington, D.C.
when we all rode the busses
when a young woman in front of her said, "Please
take this seat."
They were just changing places
when all of a sudden there was a strange sound.

All at once it was dark
and before she knew it,
it seemed she had just jumped outside.
She was outside the bus on the grass
and fragments of glass had lodged themselves in our son's head.
Of course, he didn't know what had happened.
And soon after that
he died.

EDITH

I'm sorry.

Imagine:

There was a time
when a person came indoors from the fields
they would expect to see
traces of human occupation everywhere;
fires still burning in the fireplaces
because someone meant to come right back;
a book lying face down on the window seat;
a paintbox
and beside it
a glass
full of cloudy water;
flowers in a cut glass vase;
an unfinished game of solitaire;
a piece of cross-stitching
with a needle and thread stuck in it;
building blocks
or lead soldiers
in the middle of the library floor;
lights left burning in empty rooms.
This was the inner life.

HAROLD

That was another time.

EDITH

We miss it.

[a waitress enters,
coming right through a wall by magic]

WAITRESS

Now then, who was having the raspberry tart?

HAROLD

I was having a lemon tart.

WAITRESS

The lemon tart is finish.

HAROLD

Oh.

WAITRESS

So you are having the raspberry tart.

HAROLD

No, thank you. Perhaps I will have the cookies.

WAITRESS

I have brought you the raspberry tart.

HAROLD

I think I'd rather have the cookies.

WAITRESS

You can have the cookies tomorrow.

HAROLD

No. I'd like the cookies today.

WAITRESS

You can't have cookies every day.

HAROLD

I'll have something else tomorrow.

WAITRESS

What will you have tomorrow?

HAROLD

Well, I don't know. Perhaps I'll have the chocolate cake tomorrow.

WAITRESS

We don't have the chocolate cake tomorrow.

HAROLD

Well, look, then today I'll have the— what?
What was I having?

WAITRESS

The raspberry tart.

HAROLD

I don't want the goddam raspberry tart.

WAITRESS

Look at yourself.
Sitting in a cafe, not a care in the world.
Other people are dying everywhere or starving, sick and starving
and you are in a snit over a raspberry tart.
Aren't you ashamed of yourself?

HAROLD

Yes. Yes, I am.
Give me the tart and I just won't eat it.

WAITRESS

You're going to let it go to waste?

HAROLD

Okay, I'll eat it. I'll eat it.

WAITRESS

Sometimes in life
you have to be happy with what you get.

[the waitress leaves through a wall]

EDITH

Perhaps you would think of coming home with me.

HAROLD [startled]
Come home with you.

Well, I think of myself as an outdoorsman really.

[A couch appears.]

HAROLD
This is a nice place.
I've always liked the coziness of a basement.
Close to the furnace.

EDITH
I was lucky to find it.

HAROLD
Very nice.

EDITH
I'll tell you what you do.
You throw these on the floor.

[she picks up some magazines from the couch]

We'll do a little rearranging.

[she hands him a stack of magazines from the couch]

HAROLD
Well, you don't want them on the floor.

EDITH
Put them on the floor.

HAROLD
You don't want people to trip on them.

[he takes the magazines, goes to the easy chair that has appeared, puts them there, and, as he returns to get another stack of magazines from the couch, she takes the magazines out of the chair and puts them on the floor]

EDITH

Who's going to trip on them?

HAROLD

Unsuspecting people!

EDITH

There's no one here but us!

[he returns, gets another stack, brings it to the chair, where she, meanwhile, has put the magazines on the floor; he puts more magazines in the chair, returns to the couch for another stack of magazines, takes them to chair; she has removed the magazines and put them on the floor; he puts stack of magazines on the chair, picks up a stack from floor and puts it on chair, and returns to the couch for another stack of magazines while she is putting the magazines from the chair on the floor; and so forth around and around while they say:]

HAROLD

Oh. Right.

You say come home

you invite me to set up housekeeping with you

make a home together

EDITH

What?

HAROLD

And the next thing you know

you don't think of it as our home.

All I am saying is:

You might have unexpected guests.
You never know.

EDITH

I know! I know!
I have no unsuspecting people in my life.

Put them on the floor.
Just put them on the floor.

HAROLD

Exactly.
The trouble is:
you wouldn't welcome my children into our lives.

EDITH

What lives?

HAROLD

That's how it is with a woman
you want to start with a tabula rasa
as though there were no history.
We are all the creatures of our histories!
We don't come naked into the world again every day
born anew.
I have a past.

[by this time, he has found an electrical appliance that he picks up]

EDITH

Of course you do. I know you do.

HAROLD

So,
are my children free to come and go or not?

[absently, he starts to fix the appliance]

EDITH

What children?

Of course they are.

They should phone ahead.

There are certain days I like to be alone.

HAROLD

There you are.

Just as I said:

but you see, if you need to phone ahead,

this isn't any longer home

home is where you don't need permission to come to

and I don't think any place that isn't home to my children

can be home to me.

EDITH

Why do you make a problem out of nowhere

when everything was going so well.

HAROLD

Yes.

[yelling]

Everything is going well if you never talk about anything

but the moment you want to deal with the real issues

of how real people are going to get along with each other

then things aren't going quite so well!

[the appliance blows up in his face,
exploding sparks and shooting flames;

silence;

he turns to her, amazed, speechless,

his hands out in a gesture of innocence]

EDITH

It doesn't matter.

I have another one somewhere.

HAROLD

I thought I could fix it.

EDITH

It was good of you to try.

[silence]

HAROLD

That's kind of you to say.

EDITH

It's nothing but the truth.

The fact is:

I've never been in love before

I thought I was

but I never felt like this

HAROLD

What?

EDITH

And I'm thinking: at my age

how can this be your first time

HAROLD

Right.

EDITH

The truth is

I'm not a baby.

HAROLD

No.

EDITH

I've had a whole life

I've had other relationships in my lifetime

and other things, not even relationships

and people I've cared about

HAROLD

Yes, indeed.

So you've said.

EDITH

cared about deeply
people, in fact, I thought I loved
but it wasn't as though I looked at them
and felt at once I had to cry
because I felt such closeness

HAROLD

Empathy.

EDITH

Empathy.

Exactly.

Immediate empathy.

I looked at you

I almost fell on the floor.

HAROLD

Things happen so suddenly sometimes.

EDITH

Do you believe in love at first sight?

HAROLD

No.

EDITH

Neither do I.

And yet there it is: I'd just like to kiss you.

HAROLD

Oh.

EDITH

I think for me it took so long to be able to love another person
such a long time to grow up
get rid of all my self-involvement
all my worrying whether or not I measured up

HAROLD

Yes.

EDITH

or on the other hand
the feeling that perhaps other people were just getting in my way
wondering if they were what I wanted
or what I deserved
didn't I deserve more than this
to be happier
is this all there is

HAROLD

Right.

EDITH

Or I thought
I need to postpone gratification
and so I did
and I got so good at it
I forgot how to seize the moment

HAROLD

breaking hearts along the way if someone else was capable of love
at that earlier age when you weren't

EDITH

exactly
and now I think: what's the point of living a long time
if not to become tolerant of other people's idiosyncracies

HAROLD

Or imperfections.

EDITH

you know damn well you're not going to find the perfect mate

HAROLD

someone you always agree with or even like

EDITH

and now you know that

you should be able to get along with someone who's in the same ball park

HAROLD

a human being

EDITH

another human being

HAROLD

because we are lonely people

EDITH

we like a little companionship

HAROLD

just a cup of tea with another person

what's the big deal

EDITH

you don't need a lot

HAROLD

you'd settle for very little

EDITH

very very little when it comes down to it

HAROLD

very little

and that would feel good

EDITH

a little hello, good morning, how are you today

HAROLD

I'm going to the park

OK, have a nice time

I'll see you there for lunch

EDITH

can I bring you anything

HAROLD

a sandwich in a bag?

EDITH

no problem

I'll have lunch with you in the park

HAROLD

we'll have a picnic

and afterwards

I tell you a few lines of poetry I remember from when I was a kid in school

what I had to memorize

EDITH

and after that a nap or godknows whatall

HAROLD

and to bed

EDITH

you don't even have to touch each other

sure, what

a little touch wouldn't be bad

HAROLD

you don't have to be Don Juan

have some perfect technique

EDITH

just a touch, simple as that

HAROLD

an intimate touch?

EDITH

fine. nice. so much the better.

HAROLD

that's all: just a touch
that feels good

EDITH

OK, goodnight, that's all

HAROLD

I'd go for that.

EDITH

I'd like that.

HAROLD

I'd like that just fine.

EDITH

I'd call that a happy life

HAROLD

as happy as it needs to get for me

EDITH

Sometimes in life
you just get one chance.
Romeo and Juliet
They meet, they fall in love, they die.
That's the truth of life
you have one great love
You're born, you die

in between, if you're lucky
you have one great love
not two, not three,
just one.
It can last for years or for a moment
and then
it can be years later or a moment later
you die
and that's how it is to be human
that's what the great poets and dramatists have known
you see Romeo and Juliet
you think: how young they were
they didn't know
there's more than one pebble on the beach
but no.
There's only one pebble on the beach.
Sometimes not even one.

[Harold sits down at the piano and plays a medley
of romantic songs, which he sings as well as plays—
or, if he can't play the piano, then the waitress returns as a pianist and plays
while he sings—
maybe Cole Porter, Gershwin,
maybe some of these songs:]

I love you
for sentimental reasons
I hope you do believe me
I'll give you my heart

I love you
and you alone were meant for me
please give your loving heart to me
and say we'll never part

I think of you every morning
dream of you every night
darling I'm never lonely
whenever you're in sight

I love you
for sentimental reasons
I hope you do believe me
I've given you my heart

Edith sits on the piano and sings:

I'm wild again
beguiled again
a simpering whimpering child again
Bewitched bothered and bewildered
am I

couldn't sleep
and wouldn't sleep
when love came and told me I shouldn't sleep
bewitched bothered and bewildered
am I

lost my heart
but what of it
he is calm
I agree
he can laugh
but I love it
although the laugh's on me
I'll sing to him
each spring to him
and long for the day when I'll cling to him
bewitched bothered and bewildered
am I

They sing a duet:

Oh it's a long long while
from May to December
but the days grow short

when you reach September
when the autumn weather
turn leaves to flame
one hasn't got time
for the waiting game
oh the days dwindle down
to a precious few
September
November
and these few precious days
I'll spend with you
these precious days
I'll spend with you

EDITH

I was thinking of changing into a little something else.
What do you think?

HAROLD

Yes. Good. Excellent.

EDITH

What should I wear?

HAROLD

I don't know. What are my options?

EDITH

I have a basic black.

[taking it from a rack of clothes that has appeared,
holding it up]

How do you like it?

HAROLD

Very nice.

EDITH

Nice? It's very nice?

HAROLD

I mean it's lovely. Very elegant.

EDITH

But it's not good on me?

You don't really like it?

HAROLD

I have to admit I had been thinking of something with a little color.

EDITH

Something like this?

HAROLD

That's beautiful.

EDITH

Or something in red?

HAROLD

Or something in red.

I always love red.

[as she looks through the rack of clothes,
he continues]

It's such a mysterious thing.

People try to make a connection

but why is it one person is attracted to another person in particular?

EDITH

I know what you mean.

HAROLD

You can say
well, it's where she comes from
or how she was brought up

EDITH

her relationship with her mother or her father

HAROLD

but, as it turns out, that explains nothing

EDITH

No.

HAROLD

that a person wears her hair in a certain way
or puts her hand to her cheek in a certain way
and you find it irresistible
otherwise in every other way she could be a numbskull
or you could be a numbskull
but you can't resist her
and she can't resist you
where does this come from?
These are mysteries buried so deep inside a person
you can never understand them.

EDITH

How is this?

HAROLD

Lovely.

EDITH

Should I have some jewelry?

HAROLD

A necklace.

And then,
you put two people together
each with these idiosyncracies
that are so particular

EDITH
so odd

HAROLD
so pointless

EDITH
and yet so crucial
because these are the connections people have
to one another's strangest aspects

HAROLD
what seems hot to them

EDITH
the reason they make a particular choice
and not just a general one

HAROLD
not any man or woman
but this unique person

EDITH
responding to something unfathomable

HAROLD
the particularity of it

EDITH
the mystery of two people finding their way to the same particularity

HAROLD
it seems hard enough all the neurons working in one brain

but then all the neurons in two brains together getting along
plus the hormones and whatnot.

EDITH

It is so fragile.

HAROLD

And so strong.

EDITH

And so fragile.

HAROLD

This is what it is to love another person.

EDITH

How is this?

HAROLD

Good. I like the necklace.

I don't think I'd wear the bracelet.

[as she looks again at the necklace]

There are people
who simply need to have ants crawling on their stomachs
or across their chests
before they can think of having some sort of relationship
or even friendship with another person
and I make no judgments

EDITH

No.

HAROLD

I make no judgments.

EDITH

Neither do I.

HAROLD

People are unique, each one of them.

I knew a fellow

who used to go to a bar in Oregon
where he knew a couple of women
who were willing
to go up to his hotel room with him
watch him strip naked,
get into a tub of bath water,
and walk back and forth.

His only request was that the women
would throw oranges at his buttocks
as he walked back and forth.

Then he would get out,
pick up the oranges,
put them in a paper bag,
get dressed,
and leave.

That's simply how it was for him
how he was able to connect to another human being
in an affectionate way.

This went on for some years
this relationship among the three of them.

In a sense, you might say,
this is the way in which they were able to constitute a human society
in which they felt comfortable.

Freud never explained that.

EDITH

People are like that.

HAROLD

Some people.

EDITH

Some people are.

[while Harold continues talking
he finds his way over to the barbecue
where he puts coals on the grill
and pours kerosene over the coals]

HAROLD

It's not my taste as it happens.
And yet it can't be wrong
if that is the only way they can reach out to another
and have a relationship that is rewarding for them both
because, as Aristotle said,
man is a social animal.

EDITH

And woman, too.

HAROLD

And woman, too.
We are ourselves only in our relationships.
We are human only in our societies.
And this is how it is to be human
whether your love is erotic love for another individual person
what the Greeks called erotike
or it takes the form of friendship
which the Greeks called senike
or was that heteraike

EDITH

What's that?

HAROLD

What the Greeks called friendship

EDITH

How would I know?

HAROLD

Is that how you pronounce it?

EDITH

I wouldn't know.

HAROLD

In any case
that's what the Greeks knew
that love is not just an agreeable option
love is the glue of human society
we can't live without it

EDITH

Peculiar as it may sometimes seem to us

HAROLD

the forms that it may take
that may seem objectionable or wrong to one person or another

EDITH

nonetheless without it the world just comes apart.

HAROLD

There was a woman in Milwaukee
who could only have sex in the back yard.
She needed to be in a public place.
She tried parks and other outdoor places
but none of them were any good,
only her own back yard,
and never in the house.

[silence]

And I myself, I have to say,
it may sound strange
but I just like to rub my buttocks on someone else's buttocks.
I like to kiss someone's buttocks, too,

or just,
fondle them,
but mostly I just love to rub buttocks.

[silence]

EDITH

There was a fellow
who was arrested in Syracuse
for sexual abuse
because he was going around and knocking down girls and young women
and taking off their shoes
and sucking on their toes.
And I have to say,
I can understand that
because
I like feet.

I myself I used to go into bars in Alberta
every Friday night during rodeo season
and challenge the cowboys to leg wrestle
clear the tables and chairs and lie down in the middle of the barroom
and bet these guys I could beat them, which I could
and you might say after that
that I should spend my Saturdays praying for forgiveness
but what else do you suppose there was to do
on a Friday night in Alberta?

[Harold turns around from the barbecue;
his hands are on fire;
he holds his arms bent at the elbows,
his hands up in front of his face,
looking at his burning hands]

EDITH

Your hands are on fire.

HAROLD

Yes.

Yes. They are.

[they both watch his hands burn;
he is wearing asbestos gloves]

I'm afraid I won't be able to cook dinner now.

EDITH

I think I have something in the refrigerator for dinner.

[she goes to the refrigerator
and gets out two tunafish sandwiches in their wrappers;
they go to sit by the edge of the plastic swimming pool,
their feet in the pool;
she unwraps the sandwiches;
he sits next to her;
they sit side by side,
their feet in the water, while his hands burn out
and then they eat their sandwiches;

she picks up a magazine]

EDITH

OK, let's see how you do on this quiz.

When I'm feeling stressed out or anxious, I usually prefer:

- a) closeness
- b) solitude
- c) doing something, like gardening, playing a sport, or getting on the computer for a few hours
- d) daydreaming, hiking, or just taking off on a long walk.

HAROLD

Mm-hmmm.

I would say c) gardening, or playing a sport.

EDITH

I think of myself as:

- a) sharing and emotionally available
- b) agreeable and cooperative
- c) fun-loving and creative
- d) rational and well-organized

HAROLD

Mmmmm.

That's a hard choice.

I'd like to, you know, choose them all.

EDITH

Right.

HAROLD

I guess I'd have to say sharing and emotionally available.

EDITH

When it comes to sex, I usually:

- a) initiate
- b) wait to be invited
- c) schedule sex
- d) am a spur-of-the-moment type

HAROLD

I'm an initiator, I'd say, definitely an initiator.

EDITH

When my romantic relationships end, I tend to be the one who:

- a) leaves
- b) is left
- c) has a plan worked out
- d) has another lover in the wings

[silence]

HAROLD

Leaves. I'd say: the one who leaves.

EDITH

Do you want me to tie you up and dominate you?

HAROLD

I don't know.

I don't know if I want to be dominated.

EDITH

I'd like to dominate someone sometime.

HAROLD

Well, sure, so would I, I suppose.

I'd never thought about it.

[Edith reaches over, turns on the radio,
then gets up and starts to do a seductive dance to the music—
not too graceful, a little unruly, raunchy, and fun.

He turns and just looks at her.
As she moves upstage, dancing as she goes,
she pulls her skirt half-way down her butt
and continues dancing.

He then joins in the dancing,
doing his solo at a distance from her.
After a few moments, he unbuttons his shirt,
then slowly strips it off,
twirls it above his head and throws it across the stage.

As she continues to dance, into her own world,
he does a complete striptease,
doing something wildly suggestive with each piece of clothing—
beyond sexy and on into Dionysian.

When he is naked,
she grabs him,
and throws him down on the couch
and jumps on top of him,

and has her way with him for 17 seconds,
and then kicks him onto the floor,
and the music stops.

They are both embarrassed.

Neither speaks.

She arranges her clothes.

He goes around picking up bits of clothing from the floor,
hiding his nakedness as he does so,
awkwardly trying to get back into his trousers,
putting on his shirt and leaving it unbuttoned.
Some minutes pass before they speak again.]

HAROLD

You kicked me out of bed?

Did you kick me out of bed?

EDITH

I might have.

HAROLD

What is that supposed to mean?

EDITH

I've had enough.

HAROLD

You've had enough?

What is that supposed to mean?

[no answer]

Well.

You never know where you stand with a woman, do you?

Whatever you do is wrong.

One day they call you a satyr,
the next day an impotent idiot.

And then women will complain about physical satisfaction!

A man would rather die before he complained.

Or gossip to his friends about her.
He would consider it a betrayal of her trust,
her privacy.
It never occurs to a woman to think a man
might have miscalculated about her!
Might have second thoughts about her—
in giving her what she needs to feel secure,
having given away himself
no longer *possesses* himself
so that he no longer knows who he is
or if he even exists any longer!

And then she turns right around and invites you to dinner.

EDITH

What are you saying:
You can't have dinner with me?

HAROLD

You know, this is too much. I can't....

EDITH

Dinner? You're saying you can't have dinner?
Just dinner. Nothing more.

HAROLD

You say so, and then you'll just want me to stay on after dinner.
In a word, a man is an object to be used, that's all.
One of a number of equally acceptable items
taken down from the shelf, used, put back,
never valued for himself, no,
but only for what can be gotten out of him.

EDITH

How can you talk like this?

HAROLD

I hope we're not going to argue
and then you're going to try to cajole me,

you don't let me leave, you don't leave,
I begin to feel cornered.

EDITH

This is crazy talk.

HAROLD

Next thing you know you think
there's no reason I shouldn't spend the night....

EDITH

Well, sure, just sleep together,
just sleep in the same bed, that's all, nothing more

HAROLD

And then [yelling] when you fall asleep
I'll look at you
and I'll see how ugly you are when you're relaxed.

EDITH

What?

HAROLD

Probably that's when you're at your ugliest,
when you're asleep so that I can't stand it.

EDITH

When I'm asleep I'm ugly, that's what you're saying?
How can you say such a thing?

HAROLD

Or really anytime after twelve o' clock: old and ugly

EDITH

Every night? Are you saying every night?

HAROLD

Almost every night probably.
Ugly and repulsive.

Like another person altogether.
So that I would hardly recognize you
except I would say to myself:
right, yes,
there you are again
the way you really are.
I would wake up with palpitations
and a pain in my head and I would think:
right, there you are again,
attacking me in the middle of the night
when I'm defenceless.

EDITH

Attacking you!

HAROLD

Trying to hypnotize me while I was asleep,
setting my nerves on edge
so I would have to hit you in the face
to get you to stop,
and then you would make some remark probably
like how you are being eaten alive by worms.

EDITH

Worms! Worms?

You crazy sonofabitch!

HAROLD

What are you saying?

What are you saying to me?

EDITH

What does it matter? You never hear a word I say.

HAROLD

I hang on every stupid word you ever say!

EDITH

Every stupid word I say!

You are stupid.
Stupider than ever.
And black and venomous.
Poisonous poisonous,
more poisonous now than ever.

HAROLD

Ever before when?
Before you gave me that filth at dinner
— on purpose, on purpose—
so that it made me shiver?
Before that?
Before you would seek some intimacy with me,
force yourself on me,
demanding I make love to you....

EDITH

Excuse me, would this be after you turned your back on me?

HAROLD

Excuse me, I think it was you who turned your back on me.

EDITH

No. No, I don't think so.
If I remember correctly
it is you you who turned your back on me,
as probably you always would,
always.
So that I am supposed to pursue you I suppose,
put my arms around you
so that I am always in the position of the suitor,
and you can be always cool,
no, cold,
and I would be the beggar the suppliant
and then, if I *had* to turn over
because my arm had gone to sleep
and my shoulder felt broken
and I had a pain in my head,
and I turned over because

I couldn't bear the pain of holding you in my arms,
then would you ever, ever, ever once,
would you ever a single fucking time
turn over and hold me the way I held you?

No.

Would you ever pursue me the way I pursued you?

No.

HAROLD

I have pursued you.

I have pursued you.

It's you who have never pursued me.

EDITH

When did you?

When did you ever?

[silence]

HAROLD

I don't remember.

But it seems to me I did.

EDITH

You just got finished saying

I made you come over to dinner and try to stay the night.

Is this not pursuing you?

HAROLD

Oh, sure! Now! Now! Now it's too late!

EDITH

Too late?

HAROLD

Because I woke up this afternoon

in the middle of the afternoon

with women's voices in the apartment below

and I thought I had come to live finally
in a home invaded by sluts!

EDITH
What!?

HAROLD
And I began to cry!
I'm a man, and I began to cry!

EDITH
What?

HAROLD
I can't take this bullshit forever!
What kind of person do you think I am?
Do you know why the earth has governments and dictators
and none of the other planets do?

EDITH
Where does this come from?

HAROLD
Because this is the only planet
where all the inhabitants do not say what they think,
where people lie all the time,
lie and lie and lie all the time,
and I am sick of it.
No, I will not stay for dinner.
No! Just fucking leave me alone!

EDITH
Right! Right! Leave you alone!
I am leaving you alone, you nutcake!
No wonder your family won't speak to you
and every woman you've ever been with has gone crazy
probably or killed herself.
Did you ever think about that?

It's not them, it's you!
You're like a baby with a switch blade.
So fucking needy
and when you get everything just the way you want it
you attack who ever gives in to you
for being weak and pathetic and worthless.

[she exits]

HAROLD

Who told you this?
You don't know this about me.

[she enters]

EDITH

Nobody needs to tell me.
It's written all over you, you crazy fucker!
You make me crazy.
You drive me down into the pit of my own craziness
till I'm begging for mercy
you hunt me down
you throw me down the stairs
you rip off all my hinges
till my ears are flying in every direction
I can't understand a thought I'm having
my mind is a million bits of shattered glass on the kitchen floor
and you stand there calmly yelling at me
go ahead and die, go ahead and die
you don't think I have inside me a capacity for misery?

[she exits;
she enters]

I'm off the edge of the world here!
I'm into the abyss
where is your helping hand?
are you a human being?
You are making me crazy!

I'm begging you!
Who could live with you?
Who needs you?
Now that a person sees how you are,
who would want you?

[she exits;

he half follows her to the edge of the stage,
yelling after her]

HAROLD

Who would want you?
You crazy needy person
grabbing grabbing whatever you see
a bottomless pit of wishes and longings
a man could work and work and give you all he has
and you would be asking what's next what's more
and all the while telling him he is clumsy and ignorant
withdrawn graceless brutal insensitive confused
This is why men drive naked women into a pit with bayonets

[she enters]

EDITH

And this is why women want to shoot men on sight
This is why they flush boy babies down the toilet at birth

[she exits for good;

he yells after her]

HAROLD

This is why
everywhere a man finds a house
he will leave rubble
smoldering woodpiles.

[she is not coming back]

This is why a man will smash his way into crowds
of women
raging and beating and hunting;
drive them across the fields
like frightened horses;
set fire to their houses;
hurl their corpses into wells.
This is why a man pulls the hair out of his head
and hopes to die of a heart attack

[he realizes she is never coming back]

weeping
always weeping
with his head in his hands
his knees around his shoulders.

[quietly now]

They say
there are places in the world today
where the houses are all collapsed as far as the eye can see
the father of one family standing outside his door
almost naked
his skin peeling off the upper half of his body
and hanging down from his finger tips
standing outside the door
looking for his family.

It can take generations to recover.
And sometimes you never recover.

You feel the chill in the countryside,
the low-lying white mist,
shards of farmhouses in the haze,
shattered stones,
empty streets,
and silence
no living thing

no bird, no animal breaks the silence
no dogs,
no children,
not one stone left standing on another,
rather a wilderness of stones.

[He goes to one side
where he begins to slam a door over and over and over.
And, after a while, he notices the hinge needs fixing,
and he sets to work on fixing it.

After a few moments,
Edith enters again, and,
in a fit of insane rage,
she throws 100 dishes against the walls and to the floor,
dish after dish after dish,
singly and in gobs,
and smashes them.

The two of them sit, exhausted, looking at the floor.]

HAROLD
I'm sorry.

EDITH
What?

HAROLD
I'm sorry.

[silence]

EDITH
How could a person be like this?

[A flower seller
with a bouquet of roses
appears at a window

EDITH

I think
what brings people together
is their common humanity
and what pulls them apart
is their separate histories.

HAROLD

Oh, yes.
I'd have to agree with that.

EDITH

Life is a strange thing.

Nowadays, everyone lives alone.
You get up in the morning
you have to know
when you got up
to know if you are right on schedule.
6 AM
And then recite
briefly
the main goal
getting fit
10 exercises
at one time it might have been
running
chinups, pushups
the indoor track
the weight machines
nowadays it would be
ten times swinging of the head
ten winks
ten nose-ups.
A good workout.

Then.
Washing.
Eau de Portugal

left temple, armpits,
face upwards. Nose.

Dressing toward the north.
Feng shui
dress in parallel, first right, then left,
doing it in order also
so that you don't forget to dress
one side or the other.

8 o'clock.
Hand practice—working out the kinks
42 glasses of water.

And then, with the other folks in the park, remember:
Be sociable!
Droll stories. Anecdotes.
Unforgettable characters.
And so forth. And so on.

Later. Back home. Supper alone.
Eat soup in silence.
Dear little right finger plays at tasting.
Sit towards the right.
(don't cross left foot)
remember the circulation.

In the evening hours:
sofa—prone exercises.
make a little poem.
enjoy colors.

And then,
to bed at 8 o'clock
bed in northerly direction, head better towards the east.
Feng shui.

[she stops, thinks]

Shui Feng.

Eye exercises: glossy spots, bright spots, distance.

Rest towards southeast.

Estimate star,

weather glimpse.

10 glimpses through the room (left, right, above).

Remember Beckett.

Ten o'clock.

Midnight.

One.

Day's end.

Fetal position.

Left hand sideways.

Rectum.

Left ass cheek.

Four o'clock. Night's end.

Another day.

[he reaches out and puts his hand on her;
they sit with his hand on her, in sympathy]

EDITH

There needs to be love in the world.

HAROLD

Oh, yes.

Yes.

There does.

And where does that start?

I don't know.

I've come to feel very close to you.

EDITH

I feel it, too.

I feel such warmth and
comfort.

HAROLD

I feel so at ease

we have become such good friends

EDITH

I feel it in my entire body.

I feel so at peace, and so light.

HAROLD

Such a sense of wellbeing.

EDITH

Such happiness.

HAROLD

I would call it

even

joy.

[silence]

EDITH

What makes us start singing, do you think
if it isn't making love?

HAROLD

Well, yes.

And why do we make wine?

Indeed, why do we set sail on the high seas?

These are the mysteries of life.

EDITH

Among the mysteries.

HAROLD

Among the mysteries.

To be sure.

EDITH

When you think

how we used to live in the ocean

in the salt water

you think:

we don't live there any more.

but really, in fact, we just took the ocean with us when we came on land.

The womb is an ocean really,

babies begin in an ocean,

and human blood has the same concentration of salt

as sea water.

And no matter where we are

on top of a mountain

or in the middle of a desert,

when we cry or sweat,

we cry or sweat sea water.

HAROLD

What you're saying is:

humanity, the earth

the great thing of life itself.

EDITH

Precisely.

HAROLD

I know what you mean.

I listen to your voice, I think

I could nestle right into it,

I could crawl right up inside it

you take me to a world that frankly

seems not altogether rational to me

more a world of tarot cards and chakras and the I Ching
mystical stories and folk tales
I guess I'm saying stories from the heart
I could get happily lost in your world
just letting go of my mind
and feeling your sweetness and your vulnerability
your tenderness and frankly your generosity
your lack of judgment of me
even though
or even at the same time really
that you were raking me over the coals
at the same time not holding it against me
as though it were some final judgment
sending me to hell
but just speaking the truth
that seems so generous to me and ultimately loving
in the deepest and truest sense
that I have to say
I've come to think of you almost as a mountain.

EDITH

A mountain.

HAROLD

Like a mountain rising up from a lake
smooth and soft
covered with fuzzy fir trees
but solid rock underneath
strong and everlasting
the valleys and crevices
the swelling softness
the little village on the shore
nestled into the mountainside
secure, protected
settled there for eternity
on the breast of the earth.
I look at you, I think
Mother Earth.

[silence as she considers whether or not to call him on the over-the-top stupidity of what he has just said, and then decides not to]

EDITH

No one's ever talked to me like this before.

HAROLD

I think there are qualities you have that are so sweet
they are beyond the beyond really
qualities to cherish really
I cherish them.
If you want to know the truth
I cherish you.
I cherish you.

[silence

church bells ring]

EDITH

Well, we've gone some places together.

HAROLD

Why do you say that?

EDITH

Because it's the truth.
We've been places, you and I,
that other people haven't gone to,
shared things.
In life, it's not just that you meet and fall in love
but the experiences you share
that either drive you apart
or bring you closer together.
Sometimes even difficult experiences,
bad things,
even tragedies that you share
deepen your love for one another.

HAROLD

That could be true.

EDITH

Of course it's true.

Why do you say could be.

HAROLD

Well, things are not always the same
under every circumstance.

Sometimes tragedies deepen your love
sometimes they don't

and sometimes you might not even feel as though you've shared them at all.

EDITH

I mean, if you are together.

HAROLD

If you are together, even so,
sometimes people live lives apart
even when they are together.

EDITH

Well, then they wouldn't be together.

I was talking about things that you share when you are together.

HAROLD

And what I am saying is that sometimes
you are apart when you are together.

EDITH

That's very sad.

HAROLD

Very sad.

You feel even lonelier

being together with someone and feeling apart

as though who you are, for example, is not being loved

or even acknowledged

your essential self is not appreciated
for instance, a person doesn't think your jokes are funny
or your advice is worth listening to
or a person doesn't feel excited or interested just to be in the room with you
then you feel every moment you are together
you are being injured
by disdain or scorn or indifference
you feel even more alone than ever
and so what you share together is a sense of being alone
and you could shoot yourself.

EDITH

Have you felt this way?

HAROLD

Yes, I have. In the past.
I've felt that way.

EDITH

I'm sorry.

HAROLD

Thank you.
You've never felt that way?

EDITH

Oh, yes. Very often.

HAROLD

Or a person might be subject to fits
or sudden rages
that have nothing to do with you necessarily
it's just the way they are made
suddenly they explode
a love is destroyed
and it can never be regained

EDITH

This is a sad thing.

HAROLD

Very sad.

[A beautiful young woman,
a high wire walker
(whom we recognize as having been the waitress and the flower seller),
walks through the air
from one side to another,
holding a crimson umbrella.

Or she walks down a board
(hidden by all the other set pieces so she seems to walk on air)
from high on one side
to the floor level on the other side
with her crimson umbrella.

In any case, as Edith speaks,
Harold is distracted by the wire walker.]

EDITH

And yet I think: what difference would it make whether I was a professor
or a shopkeeper
as long as somehow I had a time sitting by a lake
in the late afternoon
watching the light soften and change
the church bells ring
no matter whether they ring three times or four or five
so long as I can hear them ring
and the weather is not too cold
or not too cold all the time
I've had a time on earth
and if I can add some years of love to that
why, I'd rather have this than heaven
because I am having such joy
and I am still alive on top of it all
if I could be with you the rest of the years of my life
wake up in the morning
have a cup of coffee
do a little work in the garden

a light lunch, napping in the afternoon
music, reading in the evening
and holding you the whole night
what more would I wish for
I love you
I love you like life itself
I don't understand how I can be so happy.

I wonder if you've ever thought of marriage.

[silence]

HAROLD

Marriage.

Well, yes, I suppose I have.

You mean, marriage again.

EDITH

Marriage to me.

HAROLD

Now.

EDITH

Yes.

HAROLD

Well, no.

Well, yes.

I mean, of course I have.

One always thinks of these things.

But then I think: I've been married before.

I haven't perhaps been gifted at marriage.

EDITH

Or you haven't found the right person.

HAROLD

That, too.

That's a possibility.

EDITH

And now you have.

Some people say
there is something frightening
about the branches of the camphor tree,
about the way they are so tangled.
And yet,
it's because of that
that poets will sometimes use the image of the tree
to refer to people in love.

[silence]

HAROLD

I feel that.

EDITH

You feel that?

HAROLD

Yes, I feel that.

EDITH

You only feel it?

HAROLD

How do you mean?

EDITH

For example, I know it.

And you only feel it?

HAROLD

Oh, I see.

Yes. Yes, I know it, too.

EDITH

Because I wouldn't want to be making a mistake.

We're talking marriage here
for the rest of our lives.

And I don't think of marriage just because everyone does.

I mean, who cares?

At my age especially.

It's an old convention, stupid really. Pointless.

A way of doing things that we've discarded
gotten past to new ways of doing things.

But, it signifies a commitment.

And that feels good to me. And specific.

I think we ought to be specific.

HAROLD

I don't know if I'm quite ready to be exactly specific.

Things are moving very quickly it seems to me.

EDITH

I see.

Shall we see if we can't imagine how it might be
and see how we feel about it.

HAROLD

Yes. Yes. Good idea.

EDITH

Let's say,
we get married,
and let's say, how would you like to do it,
with a justice of the peace,
or in a church for example?

HAROLD
Right, okay.

EDITH
So, in a church.

HAROLD
A church?

EDITH
You don't like a church?

HAROLD
Well, okay, a church.
Yes, a church.

EDITH
A large wedding or small?

HAROLD
Well. Whatever you like.

EDITH
Say just the two of us?

HAROLD
Say just the two of us.

EDITH
And then where shall we live?

[silence]

HAROLD
I'm afraid I've fallen in love with someone else.

EDITH
What do you mean?

HAROLD

I don't know. Just
I've fallen in love.

EDITH

How is that possible?
Who else do you know?
Do I know this person?

HAROLD

No.
I hardly know her myself.

EDITH

Then how can you say you are in love?

HAROLD

Do you know the way you fell in love with me?

EDITH

So suddenly you mean?

HAROLD

Yes. Well. At first sight it seemed.

EDITH

Yes, I do.

HAROLD

That's how I've fallen in love,
except with someone else.

EDITH

Who is she?

HAROLD

The flower seller.

EDITH
The flower seller?

HAROLD
Yes.

EDITH
You don't even know her.

HAROLD
I've gotten to know her a little bit
in a way.

EDITH
What do you know about her
except maybe her measurements?

HAROLD
Her what?

EDITH
Her proportions of bust to waist to hip.
It turns out it's true what the scientists have been saying
a man is just a sucker for certain measurements
as though a man had no brains
only biological instincts.

HAROLD
That may be true.

EDITH
Of course it's true, you idiot.
How could you do this to me?

HAROLD
I don't think of it as doing it to you.

EDITH

What does it matter
who's done what
when you've lost someone
there's no bottom to it
your life is over
there's nothing to look forward to
but darkness till you die
your pleasures are all behind you
the afternoons lying in your arms
the glass of wine in the evening
the feeling of being known
and loved
of having a home
in your heart
for all that I feel
so that it matters
what I feel resides somewhere
it's not just a passing daydream
forgotten in a moment
it rests on the earth
in the heart of the one I love
I am not alone
and then, all at once, it seems
I am alone
my thoughts and feelings have no place
there is the present moment
and there is the end
and nothing in between that I can bear
and I wish the interval would pass
as quickly as it can
so I can find a place of rest again for my soul.

HAROLD

Do you think forgiveness is possible?
In general, I mean, in life.

EDITH

No.

HAROLD
Ever.

EDITH
No, never.

HAROLD
Sometimes people forgive the worst things
I know someone whose little boy rode his bicycle out into the street
and a car came along and killed him
and the mother forgave the driver of the car immediately
they fell into each others' arms and cried

EDITH
That's not how it is going to be for us.

HAROLD
Why not?

EDITH
Because you hurt me and I hate you.
I hate you.

HAROLD
How can you hate me?

EDITH
You've ruined my life.
I fell in love with you,
you were the only love of my life
you changed my life completely
completely
and now you're going to dump me
for what?
on a whim
to run off with someone
something that will last three months if you're lucky

HAROLD

Oh, I don't....

EDITH

Or a year, so what?

For a year's happiness you ruin my life
when I love you

I love you so much

I would care for you forever

you think love is so cheap

you think it comes and goes

but it doesn't

and you could have had love for the rest of your life

and now you will end up with a fling

and then nothing

you will be lonely

you will die alone and lonely

when you could have been with me

no one has ever loved you as I do

and you could be happy with me

you think you don't love me

the way you love this bimbo

because she is blond

and you think

you need some hot sex before you die

because you never had enough sex in your life

but you would end up loving me so much

because you would see

you couldn't resist me after a while

when a person loves you so much

finally you can't resist you end up loving them like crazy

[Harold is standing in the wading pool,

fixing the radio

which blows up in his face,

and he turns around,

his hands and face blackened,

looking hopeless]

HAROLD

I'm sorry.

Sometimes you can't help it
where your heart takes you.
You see what's happening
you think, oh, no,
I don't think this is good
this could be so wrong
I think this might be shortsighted thinking
or worse
some damage will be done
and that sense of emptiness in the pit of your stomach
when you realize you've made a mistake
in your life
when I think I've gone down a road
and there is no turning back
and this is the only life I have to live
and I don't have that much time left anyhow
but time enough to live some years regretting it
getting up each morning
and feeling first
before I feel anything else at all
that I would like to weep
nonetheless
I can't help myself from doing it
because my heart takes me there
and I can't live a life that isn't true to my heart
no matter how wrong my heart might be
and how devastating my life might become.

I'm sorry.

EDITH

We could try again.
We could start from the beginning.
I could say shove up.
You could say what what?
We could begin again.

Because I think what we felt
was precious
not something to throw away
something this good
you don't just walk away from it
without making another attempt.
I love you.
You are my first love ever
and my last.

[silence]

Go ahead.
Get out.
I have a life without you, you know.
Before you, I had a happy life.
I'm the kind of person who doesn't need another person.
I'm an autonomous person.
I don't need you.
I don't want you.
Get out.
Get out.

HAROLD
Right.

[He gathers up his clothes and leaves;

she curls up on the bench alone;

while we hear a soprano sing a piece from Alessandro Marcello's 17th century
opera *La Lontananza*, "Lontananza, crudel lontananza/ch'a me togli l'amato
tesoro...."

all the set pieces ascend to heaven,

leaving her alone on the bench on a bare stage

along with a refugee's suitcase tied with rope.

While we hear the soprano, the English translation is projected in supertitles:

"Separation, cruel separation
which robs me of my beloved treasure
tell me when my suffering will end.

"For if with sweet hope
you do not soon offer me balm
my heart will only find death.

"For one who is too long apart
from her beloved must end her love
or die."

As the music continues,

Harold returns,

lies down on the bench with Edith,

taking her in his arms,

her back against his stomach,

embracing her,

and, with one hand, she takes his hand,

and the lights fade slowly to darkness.]

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