

Act 39

A Play in Two Acts

Based on True Events

by

Rob Mermin

The World Premiere of **Act 39** was at The Haybarn Theater, Goddard College, Plainfield, VT, spring of 2023

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Setting

Act 1: Living rooms of two adjacent apartments, doctor's office.

Act 2: Same apartments, pharmacy, car, doctor's office.

Time: 2015

Stage set:

Stage left: Bill's apartment, living room. A couch, floor lamp, rug, and shelf with dishes and a few books and DVDs. Spartan, very tidy. Large film poster above couch?

Stage Right: Rob's very untidy apartment: shelves crammed with toys, games, books, magic tricks. Large circus poster above the kitchen table...

Center Stage: Action takes place in four areas: the two apartments; the upstage center platform for flashback scenes; and center downstage along front of stage for Bill and Rob's ball playing, representing 'outside.' When they leave their apartments, they mime the doors.

Cast:

Rob: In his mid-sixties, apartment neighbor and best friend of Bill. Smooth movements from training in mime and career in circus. Playful, does magic tricks. He has a philosophical bent with nonconventional ideas. Occasional shaking of the left hand (not overdone, almost unnoticeable) from recently diagnosed Parkinson's. A good storyteller, he is expressive with gestures, acting out what he says. The play can be interpreted as taking place in his mind or told from his perspective. He greatly appreciates Bill's intellect and aptitude for hearty laughter.

Bill: 70-yrs old. He is a film critic. He gestures with hands elegantly; animated, his eyes sparkle when he speaks. A progressive radical, an erudite skeptic with a ready smile, prone to outbursts of genuine delight with Rob's tricks, often laughing wholeheartedly, throwing his head back. He is a courteous gentleman with traditional good manners. Highly intelligent, professorial, unabashed joy in intellectual conversation. Appreciates Rob's aptitude for play, which had been lacking in his life.

The two characters engage in playful banter without any rancor or competition: it is with mutual respect and good humor. Casting: not essential, but the two characters could be almost opposites; not quite Laurel & Hardy, but Rob slender, Bill more rotund and balding, perhaps with a white beard. They wear casual clothes, jeans, sneakers, adding different shirts over their t-shirts in scenes with passage of time. Baseball caps when playing catch.

Actors 1 & 2: Two unnamed actors, one male, one female playing multiple roles:

1. Bill's doctor
2. Carol, hospice nurse
3. Sunday Morning Film Society
4. Hercules
5. Samuel Morse
6. Mistress Death
7. Sigmund Freud
8. Pharmacist

(The play is based on true events and real conversations. Four actors, two acts, one intermission. Scenes change with music and dimmed lights, enough to see the actors transition to new places. The two main characters, Bill and Rob, are named. When the two unnamed actors appear, on the platform, the lighting shifts to represent flashbacks or memories. Lighting may also shift on the main characters and return to normal when the Actors disappear. Rob's tricks: in an addendum, there will be descriptions of how to do the tricks plus alternates, based on simplicity to perform, easy visuals, actor's skill, director's discretion.)

ACT 1

(Music overture. Lights up: Rob in his apartment stage right, sitting at his small kitchen table, practicing blowing some soap bubble tricks. Bill is stretched out on the couch in his apartment stage left, reading. Lights up on the scene before music ends.

Rob puts out his left hand, fingers straight: there is a tremor in the hand which he tries to control, flexing his fingers a couple of times. He shakes his hand to loosen it. He blows one bubble, size of a baseball, swings the baseball bat to 'hit' the bubble. Then, with the bat, he bangs on the floor 10 times fast, pauses briefly, then slowly three more times (a traditional Commedia dell'Arte beginning to a play). Bill sits up, grins, listens for the 3 bangs, and answers with three bangs on his floor with his own bat. He gets his baseball glove and shows up at Rob's place, 'knocks' on the door and enters.)

Scene 1. Hercules, Morse, Parkinson's

Bill: Hey, neighbor!

Rob: *(smiling)* Neighbor. Hey, check this out. *(He blows a large single bubble and bounces it on his cotton shirtsleeve several times.)*

Bill: *(laughs with delight)* Who knew soap bubbles could do that!?

Rob: As the poet says: "There is nothing quite so ineffably sad and lovely, as a single bubble in its brief and fragile existence, floating through this sad and lovely world."

Bill: Who said that?

Rob: Me! Hey, you wanna play catch?

Bill: Okay! I'll just go get my glove. Meet you outside.

Rob: Okay. *(Puts away bubble jar, picks up his glove and meets Bill downstage center.)*

Bill: I remember the first time you banged on the floor—I had just moved in to the apartment next door. I didn't know what the heck you were doing in here. Who was this nut?

Rob: *(Some improv dialogue, depending on how well they play: "Oh, nice catch! Stee-rike!" etc.)*
I just wanted someone to come out and play. I remember you banged right back in some kind of frenetic Morse code. I reckoned either you were mad as hell, or even better, you were as eccentric as me.

Bill: Ha! Not even close. Actually, the Morse Code was invented because Samuel Morse was a portrait painter.

Rob: Really? *(grinning)* OK, let's hear it....

Bill: *(pontificating)* Morse was working on a commissioned portrait in Washington D.C. *(Lights change for appearance of the two Actors on upstage platform. Actor 1 mimes painting as Morse; he mimes receiving a letter, riding horseback.)* He received a letter that his wife back home in New England was seriously ill. He immediately set off, probably by horseback—early 1800's, no trains yet—but by the time he finally arrived, his wife had already died and been buried. *(Morse on his knees grieving, head in hands. Lights out on him. The mime acting can be stylized poses, with melodramatic gestures.)*

Rob: That's terrible.

Bill: Morse was devastated that he had been totally unaware of his wife's failing health—so he dedicated his life to finding some means of rapid long-distance communication. Et voila! Morse Code!

Rob: Was he a good painter?

Bill: He studied at the Royal Academy in London. That's where he painted his masterpiece, "Dying Hercules."

Rob: "Dying Hercules?" Bill, how the hell do you know these arcane things?!

Bill: Can't help it: I retain information.

Rob: It can be damn *annoying*, you know—if it wasn't always so damn *interesting*. *(Pause.)* Wait a minute. I thought Hercules was half mortal, half god—so how could he die?

Bill: Aha! the story has all the ingredients for a bestseller: betrayal, passion, jealousy, friendship, war, sex-crazed gods.... *(He tosses a fast one to Rob.)*

Rob: Sounds like one of those classic movies you'd screen for your film club.

Bill: In fact, there have been over a dozen Hollywood movies about our hero: *Hercules Unchained*, with Steve Reeves; *Hercules in New York*, with Arnold Schwarzenegger...

Rob: You gotta be kidding.

Bill: Classic! Arnold hangs out on Mt. Olympus, and is sent by Zeus back to modern day Earth, where he finds true love and starts a promising career as a professional wrestler...

Rob: Oh, God....

Bill: (*counting on his fingers*) *Hercules and the Argonauts, Hercules Meets the Three Stooges...*

Rob: That's probably one of the better ones.

Bill: Heracles, as the Greeks called him, was the illegitimate son of Zeus and his human lover Alcmene. Zeus tricked his wife Hera into nursing the infant. But when she discovered who he was—the product of Zeus' illicit affair—she pulled him from her breast and a spurt of her milk formed the smear across the sky that we mortals know as...The Milky Way!

Rob: Great image! What would Freud say about *that*?

Bill: (*Hercules appears.*) Hercules was going away on some adventure and his wife, Daenira (Day-ah-NEER-ah) gave him the gift of a nice robe, hoping to ensure his fidelity. (*She appears and mimes giving Hercules a large robe, which he mimes putting on. She feels his muscles, flirts, blows a kiss, and exits.*) She was tricked into believing the robe had been dipped in a powerful love potion—but it turned out to be poison! Classic marriage misunderstanding. When he put on the robe, the poison burned his skin to the bones.

Rob: That's how he died?

Bill: Not exactly. (*Hercules acts out the agony, in poses.*). Being half-god, it didn't kill him. But his skin was being ripped from his body, his blood boiled, the torment was ceaseless. Blinded by pain, he managed to build his own funeral pyre. Despite his pleas for assistance, none of his frightened companions would light the damn fire. Finally, his loyal friend Philoctetes (Phil-OCK-teeteeze) agreed to help. As the fire consumed Hercules' body, his soul arose with the smoke to join the immortal gods on Mt. Olympus. (*Hercules, in silent agonized slow motion, writhes down to the ground—and sets off a puff of stage smoke around him—as his spotlight goes out.*)

Rob: That was a good friend, Philoctetes.

Bill: Yeah. Maybe the earliest example of assisted death between friends. Hey, if I was dying, would you light a fire for me?

Rob: Not a chance! I was taught not to play with matches. Besides, you're no Hercules!

Bill: Maybe you could just paint my picture, like Sam Morse and his “Dying Hercules” which depicts our hero wrapped in a robe, in the throes of merciless agony. (*Projection of the painting?*)

Rob: You’d be wrapped in that funky bathrobe of yours. Title of painting: “Bill, Film Scholar at Work.” (*They laugh.*)

Bill: (*He pitches a fast one. Rob plays catcher.*) Hey—your reflexes are pretty damn good today.

Rob: (*Puts out left hand*) Slight tremor. It shakes more when I get agitated. But you know, somehow it goes away when we play catch. I think my reflexes take over, when we’re just playing, having fun.

Bill: If I didn't know, I couldn't tell you have Parkinson's.

Rob: The doctor thinks my training in mime probably helps. Every checkup I have with the neurologist, she tests me with simple hand movements. (*He demonstrates the palms up/down; index fingers touch then one touches nose, switch.*) Finally, I said to her, “How about this?” (*He demonstrates the ‘finger pistols’ game: left hand makes a fist with the thumb pointing up; the right hand makes fist with the index finger pointing to the left hand. Then switch several times: left index points as right thumb goes up, then back again, etc.*) She couldn’t do it, so I said: Sorry, doc—you may have Parkinson’s. (*They both laugh.*)

Bill: (*he tries to do the finger pistols, laughing.*) Damn...I can’t do it either.

Rob: For me, having Parkinson's is like doing mime all day. Every gesture is intentional; what used to be automatic just isn’t anymore.

Bill: So, when you throw this ball....

Rob: Yeah, I analyze how I throw the ball a split second before doing the movement. Six movements. (*He mimes pitching the ball in slow motion, counting out loud the six positions*) One. (*leans forward*) Two. (*straightens, glove to chest*) Three. (*half step back, arms overhead*) Four. (*knee up*) Five. (*lunge forward*) Six! (*throw.*)

Bill: Gotta appreciate the irony of a mime having a movement disorder.

Rob: Yeah, some irony. I have to think about every movement as I’m making it. It’s exhausting. But when I play games that require reflex action, the movements somehow become easier. Like I was a kid again, just playing *without* thinking about it.

Bill: When did the symptoms start?

Rob: About a year after...the car crash.

Bill: Jeez, Rob. (*They stop playing.*) You’ve told me about the car accident—but not the details. It happened during your circus tour, right? You want to talk about it...?

Rob: I don't know; maybe one of these days.

Bill: Maybe today is one of these days...

Rob: *(sigh)* Okay. But If I'm gonna tell this story, I'll need a beer. *(Bill looks surprised.)* Root beer!

Bill: Okay. I'll have a *real* beer. Meet you back here. *(short music interlude)*

SCENE 2. ROB'S STORY

(Rob gets the beers. Bill sets up two lawn chairs out front. Rob takes a photo from his pocket to show Bill. They both sit 'outside.')

Bill: *(Bill looks at the photo.)* God, she was beautiful.

Rob: Yes, she was. Marian was a Dutch circus performer. Long, auburn hair, green eyes, starbright smile. She had that European charisma—you know, feminine beauty plus strength of character. The instant our eyes met...it was...well, it was instant. That magnetic energy: romance at first sight.

Bill: What happened?

Rob: It was a rare day off in the middle of the circus tour. We'd gone skinny dipping alone at a deserted lake in the woods. Back on shore, we talked about our future together. After a while she said, "That's strange. I always have a vision of the future, or at least a plan, but right now it's just...blank. I see nothing, beyond this moment with you." We got in her old stick shift car, no airbags. Around a downhill curve the old dirt road had washed out. She must have lost control of the wheel, we slid off the road, BAM—into a tree. She was killed instantly. *(Emotional silence.)*

Bill: And you...?

Rob: I have no recall of the crash, none whatsoever. *(Pause.)* I tried to crawl out of the car for help, but...I just fell onto the dirt road. I couldn't move. In and out of consciousness. I must have been lying there for, I don't know, maybe 20 minutes. Then the first vision came. *(He looks over to Bill for a reaction.)*

Bill: *(Quietly.)* Go on.

Rob: *(gesturing as he speaks, looking out front as he relives the memory. Lights change. Marian appears on the platform, with some fog. Soft music.)* I'm lying on my side above the earth on an ocean of thick white clouds. I look up and see Marian standing on the clouds, beautiful in a simple white dress, looking down at me. I struggle to get up but can't. Then she says—her lips don't move, I hear her words mentally: "You can't come. You have to stay." *(Marian slowly gestures and shakes her head at the words. Rob looks over to Bill, who is just listening intently; Marian fades away.)*

OK, second vision. I'm still lying on the road, broken, my eyes closed, I don't see anything, but I hear these disembodied voices. They're discussing my body, casually, as if they were perusing a menu. *(Actors embody the voices, voice-over recording of the lines)* "How about his leg, what do you think?"... "Some bruising, maybe?"... "OK, but what about his neck?" ... Ah, yes, his neck! Let's be very careful..." "Anyone for ribs?") I desperately try to say, 'I can hear you!' but it's just in my head, and I lose consciousness again....

There I am, in shock, lying on the dirt road. The rescue squad finally arrives. They take me to a small rural hospital. I remember two coaches from the circus being there, Donny and Stewart, both looking scared. I'm on my back on a stretcher in a small room, barely conscious, I can't move my neck, I can only move my eyes. *(The actors, a doctor and nurse, appear on platform, the nurse behind the doctor. He is brandishing a real knife.)*

Doctor: Good. You're awake. I need your permission....

Rob: For...what?

Doctor: You may be bleeding internally. We need to open your chest to find out. If you *are* hemorrhaging, we'll need to operate...now.

Rob: *(weakly)* Options?

Doctor: Operate immediately. Or...or we put you back in the ambulance to the hospital in Burlington. They have more equipment. But it's a 45-minute drive; I can not guarantee you'll survive it. *(Pause.)* You need to make a decision. *(The nurse is slowly, firmly, shaking her head. Lights change back, music out as Actors leave. Bill and Rob again sit in the lawn chairs and continue conversation.)*

Rob: I saw the nurse in the shadows standing just behind the doctor. She was slowly, but firmly, shaking her head, indicating NO! Get the hell out of here! Go...!

Bill: And...?

Rob: I go! In the second hospital—doctors hovering over me—I say, *Go ahead, I'm ready, cut me open.* The doctor in charge looks puzzled. He says: *Why would we do that?!*

Bill: You are one lucky bastard.

(faster pace dialogue)

Rob: I'm in that hospital for ten days...

Bill: Jesus...I don't think I could stand it for ten minutes, never mind ten *days*.

Rob: *(Wryly)* I ate a lot of jello. Anyway, it's a teaching hospital, the doctor makes his rounds at 6:00 in the morning, followed by a gaggle of interns. By the third morning I'm fed up with all the interrupted sleep. So I put on a red clown nose *(Rob mimes the clown nose)* and I feign sleep.

Bill: Of course, you *would* have a clown nose with you in the hospital....

Rob: (*smiling*) They arrive on schedule. I still can't move my neck. The doctor goes right to my chart at the foot of the bed and starts reading it out loud: *'five broken ribs, lacerations on the knee...'*

Bill: Like those voices in your vision!

Rob: Right! And he hasn't once looked at *me*, the patient. The interns are trying their best to stifle giggles. The doctor finally glances up at me. Without missing a beat, poker faced, he continues reading from the chart: *'...and there is pronounced swelling along the nasal passages, resulting in severe discoloring of the proboscis.'*

Bill: (*laughing*) I'll bet the interns still tell that story —the Day the Doctor Diag-Nosed the Circus Clown.

Rob: The next day, the coaches visit and I say to them, 'Guys—find out the name of that nurse at that other hospital, I want to send her some flowers. And chocolates. She saved my life!' Donny says, *What* nurse? I say: the one standing behind the doctor. (*Pause*) They look at each other, puzzled. Donny stares at me frowning. "Rob, it was just us and the doctor. There *was* no nurse in that room..." (*Rob pauses, letting it sink in. slower pace dialogue starts...*)

I spent those days in the hospital meditating, trying to get back to those visions, trying to see Marian in the clouds, trying to see that nurse. But every day the clarity of those visions was fading, slipping away. It was breaking my heart.

Bill: Your anguish was very real, Rob. But you were in shock. Your brain was addled...more than usual, even for you.

Rob: The nurse was *real*, Bill. I *saw* her clearly, not some phantom image.

Bill: Hearing doctors' voices in your head, conjuring Marian as an angel nurse—it *was* her, right? (*Rob, who had his head down, looks up, wondering.*) That's the mind's way of organizing events to deal with intense trauma. The visions were creative, even beautiful—but still a coping mechanism.

Rob: (*Not convinced.*) That's a very...rational way to look at it. (*pause.*) I was ten days in that hospital, rigid, hardly moving...so they send me in a wheelchair down to physical therapy, where they tried to loosen up my stiff neck with massage. A month later I drive back to the hospital to take stitches out of my arm. The doctor sees me sitting there, stiff like a board, (*he demonstrates*), head and trunk still moving in a block like a robot. "Why still stiff?" he says, "Let's take more x-rays." When we're done, he comes sliding into the room, waving his arms, white-faced like a ghost, shouting "Don't move! Don't move! **You broke your neck!**"

Bill: What?! How could they not know your neck was....

Rob: They told me loose bone fragments can sometimes cover a fracture from showing up on the first x-ray...

Bill: (*Shaking his head*) But still...

Rob: (*lighter pace again*) Turns out it was a fracture of C-2—the Hangman's Bone—the one that breaks when...(he mimes hanging and rope.) Can you imagine—they had been sending me to *physical therapy*!

Bill: Unbelievable. You know, Buster Keaton broke his neck while filming *The General* in 1926. He didn't know it either and went right on filming.

Rob: Then they literally screwed a heavy metal scaffolding into my skull to hold my head still. I'm awake watching the doctor pick up a screwdriver! Four huge screws into my skull.

Bill: *Young Frankenstein*—Mel Brooks, 1974.

Rob: And add insult to agony: they call that torture device a 'halo.'

Bill: (*shaking his head*) No damn sense of irony.

Rob: When they finally took it off, three months later, I asked the doctor how close I had been to being paralyzed for life. (*Rob unconsciously touches his neck.*) He hesitated, then said, 'Not close: you shouldn't even be here.'

Bill: (*He looks again at the photo of Marian and hands it back to Rob, shaking his head slowly.*) It's a good thing we've got our Morse Code. Honestly, if I don't hear a banging on the floor for a few days, I'll be banging on *your* door. You worry me...

Rob: Yeah. I worry me too. (*He rubs his neck involuntarily.*)

Bill: You've had Close Encounters of the Fatal Kind—flirting with Mistress Death.

Rob: No, the other way 'round: she's been courting me!

Bill: It's always been hard for you to avoid the charms of la femme fatale! (*They clink beers in acknowledgement, cross one leg, and drink, as music comes in, lights fade. End of scene. They leave lawn chairs out front, as each goes to his apartment.*)

Scene 3. Romance, Circus

(*Rob bangs on the floor with the bat. Bill answers with three bangs and goes over.*)

Bill: Hey, neighbor.

Rob: Neighbor.

Bill: OK, whatcha got here?

Rob: (*Grinning. Rob is setting up a trick, the Blow Cups: two empty teacups next to each other; an empty soda can sits in one.*) OK. Here's the challenge: to get the can into the other cup. BUT: without touching the cups or the can. And not using any other object to help.

Bill: (*He waves his hands, gives up, shakes his head*) Beats me. (*Rob blows between the can and the cup; the can jumps into the second cup. Bill belly laughs, delighted. He tries it, successfully—or not, laughing.*) I love that! Where do you learn these things?

Rob: In the circus, of course! When we're not in the ring, we hang out in our caravans and share tricks and tell outrageous stories of the road. (*They laugh and, still conversing, go to the lawn chairs 'outside' with their beers.*)

Bill: Who'd have figured I'd end up living next door to a retired clown who actually ran away to the circus? C'mon...who *does* that?

Rob: Who'd have figured I'd live next door to a curmudgeonly old film critic who ran away from a career in corporate law to start his own independent movie house? On an island! Who does *that*?

Bill: I love learning about circus traditions from you. At the end of a long season together there are no drawn-out sentimental goodbyes.

Rob: Right. We know we'll meet up again someday, in some show, in some country, somewhere. So, it's just a nod of the head, a wave of the hand, and "*See you down the road.*"

Bill: (nodding) I like that: "*See you down the road.*" (*Pause*) Maybe I'll screen some old circus films for the film club. *Chad Hanna*—a young Henry Fonda runs off to join the circus. (*gestures out front*) *The Wagons Roll at Night*, 1940: Humphrey Bogart as a circus owner!

Rob: How about Burt Lancaster and Tony Curtis in *Trapeze*?

Bill: ...and Gina Lollobrigida!

Rob: (*He acknowledges that with a Mmmm, mmm!*) One of the best circus films. Lancaster actually *was* a circus acrobat before he went to Hollywood.

Bill: Do you miss going out on the road?

Rob: Sometimes. Caravan life really simplifies things. You, Bill, fit that lifestyle: you've already simplified your life: no car, no cell phone, no TV. No woman.

Bill: Who needs *that* complication when you're seventy years old?

Rob: Circus folks live a vagabond lifestyle, on the fringe of society...and yet, there is a real sense of community and tradition.

Bill: Something wonderfully contradictory in that.

Rob: Talk about contradictions! You're a film scholar; you know everything about cinematography and filmmaking technique—but you never even *touched* a movie camera.

Bill: Look who's talking: you're a mime—who gives lectures on a speaker's circuit!
(*Good-natured banter picks up pace. They mime fencing with swords with each repartee.*)

Rob: You dislike anything New Age-y, yet you have a vast collection of synthetic New Age music...

Bill: (*shrugs*) Helps me sleep. (*lively*) You dislike crowds; but you joined the circus which does everything it can to *attract* crowds.

Rob: You're the guy who didn't want children—but you and Becky had a dozen foster kids run through your house...

Bill: Until she left me.

Rob: Ah...Right. (pause) You know, sometimes I forget what a strange pair we are.

Bill: I won't argue that. Come to think of it, we never *do* argue...that's strange right there.

Rob: Maybe that's why we like playing catch. No rules, no score...no competition. Just fun.

Bill: Playing catch is more like a conversation than a debate—it's a fair exchange. (*The pace slows down again. More contemplative silences, each in their own thoughts, as they drink a beer.*) When Becky and I moved to Martha's Vineyard I felt at home for the first time in my life. I really thought I had finally found the perfect life. (*Long pause.*)

Rob: Why do guys like us get so blindsided by romance?

Bill: I was *totally* unaware she had been so unhappy. (*Silence*) When she left, I felt my heart actually sink. Something in me died.

Rob: Scientists say nothing in nature, on the quantum level, really dies. There's just change of form.

Bill: My marriage certainly changed form.

Rob: Maybe death is just a change of form. Like when Hercules' friend helped him die, he transformed from human to immortal. *(pause)* It's like a metaphor for a transformation of consciousness into another dimension of reality after death.

Bill: You lost me there.

Rob: What do you think happens at the moment of death?

Bill: We cease to exist.

Rob: But if nothing in nature is ever destroyed, as the scientists say....

Bill: Death is the *absence* of something: life.

Rob: So, Death is a noun...a thing?

Bill: What are you talking about...?

Rob: Does a shadow have substance, is it a 'thing'?

Bill: A shadow is the absence of light...

Rob: But we *see* it, right? We feel it too, it's cool...it even moves...

Bill: *(waving his hands in dismissal)* OK, Peter Pan—what are you getting at?

Rob: If a shadow—like a thought—has no substance, but it exists.... Does the soul also exist as a 'thing?' Maybe extrasensory activity like telepathy and clairvoyance and remote viewing and dowsing...are also 'things' that exist...

Bill: Don't get me started with *that* psychic crap.

Rob: *(dialogue picks up pace)* C'mon, Bill. The paranormal is just another angle on what scientists won't accept because they can't easily measure it or explain it— even if they've experienced it.

Bill: Well, one thing I can't explain—and definitely have *not* experienced—is death.

Rob: I wonder if the actual moment of death is...hard?

Bill: You know the famous line of the dying actor when asked that question: "Dying is easy..." *(They intone together)* "Comedy is hard." *(They raise their beers in acknowledgement.)* You'll appreciate the film I'm screening this week for the film club. A Japanese film called *AfterLife*, by director Hirokazu Koree-Ada.

Rob: What's the premise?

Bill: It takes place in a run-down building, a kind of way station, where the recent dead—slightly confused folks in ordinary clothes—wander in and are received by caseworkers with clipboards. They are told they have three days in which to review their lives and select only one favorite memory, one scene...to take into eternity.

Rob: So, it's about what happens after death....

Bill: It's not about death really; it's more an exploration into what we honestly value in *life*.

Rob: You believe in an afterlife?

Bill: C'mon, Rob. You know me better than that. Catholic school knocked religion the hell out of me.

Rob: Religion aside: what do you really think happens after death?

Bill: George Bernard Shaw, when asked if he believed in an afterlife said, "No. But I like surprises." Anyway, come to the film I'm screening; I think you'll like it.

Rob: I'll be there. *(Simultaneously, they both cross one leg over a knee, and stare off into space, and drink, as lights fade, with music interlude.)*

SCENE 4. Film Club: AFTERLIFE

(Rob joins the two Actors in the film club, sitting semi-circle in chairs on both sides of the platform. Bill stands in the middle, facing the group, leading the discussion of the film they had just watched. The scene perhaps begins with the sound of a projector, Bill shutting off an old reel-to-reel projector's light; actors briefly applaud. Actors 1 & 2 may flirt: one stands up to get popcorn from a bowl and switches chairs to sit near her. Bill & Rob banter.)

Bill: "AfterLife"—by director Koree-ada, 1998. It's fascinating that the film uses non-actors who narrate their actual memories, along with the professional actors. *(Actors are quietly reflecting. Bill looks around at them.)* Anyone?

Actor #1 (*woman*): I liked the leisurely pace, the understated environment. The newly-deceased shuffle along, in ordinary street clothes, and just enter a rundown place, like an old school building..

Rob: If Hollywood re-made this film, it would have technicolor clouds, a sentimental soundtrack, and movie star angels with wings.

Actor #2 (*man*): I found myself drifting off into my own thoughts about what scene from my life I would choose....

Bill: That's the beauty of this film. Watching it, we can't help contemplating what memory in our *own* lives we'd select to experience for eternity.

Actor #2: How would a psychiatrist interpret this premise? I imagine Freud questioning his patient: "So, my good man, what would you say, if you must choose only *von* of your dreams to take into eternity...hmmm?"

Bill: Actually, Freud did choose the moment of his own death. He suffered a brutal cancer of the mouth—addicted to cigars. He finally asked his doctor—who was also his close friend—to relieve his anguish and help him end his life. *(pause)* What if we all could choose not only one cherished scene from our life, but also the actual timing of our death? *(general moment of silence.)*

Actor #1: What's your review of the film, Bill?

Bill: *(slowly)* I found the film very moving. The leisurely pace of the film allowed us time to ruminate on the idea of 'timeless' eternity as an enigmatic concept. I think of the chosen memory not as an endless looped reel that gets replayed forever. Rather the chosen Moment is stretched into a realm of 'consciousness' where you are not even aware that Time passes. *(pause.)* Because it doesn't: time itself is the illusion. Past & Future no longer exist—there is only the Present.

Rob: So: the Past, Present, and Future walk into a bar. *(pause.)* It was...tense! *(the others groan.)*

Bill: *(thoughtfully, out front.)* I loved how the departed were engulfed in that deep ocean of emotions—and then just fully disappear into that memory. *(He looks around as thoughts sink in.)* Maybe that's what death is like—a vague memory of this life as a movie set.

Rob: Maybe when the physical body dies, consciousness—memories, thoughts, emotions—simply separates and floats off and... *(mimics Rod Serling's voice and suave manner)* "travels through another dimension, a dimension not only of Sight and Sound but of Mind...."

Bill: *(picks up the reference)* "A journey into a wondrous land whose boundaries are that of Imagination. Our next stop...."

Everyone: The Twilight Zone! *(they mimic the theme song opening bars: Doo-doo-do-do, Doo-doo-do-do...)*

Bill: Rod Serling was brilliant. I remember an episode called "Nothing in the Dark." Death is played by a very young Robert Redford. An old woman is afraid of Death showing up, but she doesn't recognize it in the form of Redford. In the end, he gently takes her hand and says: "It's alright...don't you see? No shock. No tearing asunder. It's just like...a whisper.' As they go off together, she looks back...and sees her body lying on the bed! *(cast: Doo-doo, doo-doo/doo-doo, doo-doo...)*

Actor #1: What if there was a film sequel to AfterLife, called AfterDeath—written by the ghost of Rod Serling....

Actor #2: And in the moment of death, 100 earth years have passed— instantaneously, so to speak.

Actor #1: Yes! Death as a time travel device. And the newly dead are allowed three questions to ask their case workers.

Bill: OK, first question: has the human species finally grown up and relegated all religious dogma to the category of fiction?

Rob: Do universities—if there still are such institutions—have major departments of *metaphysics* instead of old-fashioned physics?

Actor #1: Is time travel a matter of consciousness travel?

Bill: Ok, that's three questions....

Actor #2: Do we live multiple lives, and can you describe, please, the nature of how that works?

Bill: That's enough, I think....

Actor #1: Has contact with extraterrestrial life forms, or for that matter communication between the dead and the alive, become commonplace?

Bill: Hold on—let's get back to the premise of *this* film... Rob, any thoughts?

Rob: Okay. I drifted off in a daydream kind of scene. (*Gesturing and dreamily looking out in space*) I imagined a cozy personal library: the Library of Souls. The Oversoul is sitting by a fireplace....

Bill: Emerson's Oversoul....?

Rob: What...?

Bill: In his Essay on the Oversoul, Emerson wrote about the nature and existence of the soul, and its relationship to human ego. Published in 1841. (*He looks around at everyone. They look at him, then back at Rob*) What?

Rob: Alright, why not. *Emerson's* ancient Oversoul sits in a big easy chair, dog at his feet, cozy fire, floor-to-ceiling shelves overflowing with leather-bound books. (*He leans forward, intently, and mimes taking a book off a shelf, opening it.*) Each book is the story of one of the Oversoul's *own* multiple—or probable—lives. He—or she—picks a book and, while reading, is totally immersed living the reality of *that* life, while all the other lifetimes exist too, on the shelves. Not past lives, but *simultaneous* lives. (*He gestures around.*) We are characters interacting in one of the books...right now! (*Actors look at Rob, and each other. Silence. Raised eyebrows.*)

Bill: On *that* note...if we're still here in *this* improbable life, next time we'll watch a comedy! See you all next week! (*Actors get up, moving chairs, shaking Bill's hand, improvised chatter: 'Thanks, Bill.' 'I'll never look at my bookshelves the same again.' 'I'm feeling kind of improbable myself...' 'Are you a hardcover, or softbound?' etc. Bill is left with Rob, who smiles and shrugs, shake hands. They go to their apartments during a music interlude.*)

Scene 5. Dowsing, Metaphysics

Bill: (*He stands outside Rob's door. Comes in and sees Rob laying out five sheets of paper in a row on the floor*) Neighbor!

Rob: (*Looks up, invites Bill in.*) Neighbor!

Bill: (*He sees the props.*) Got a trick?

Rob: I can show you something that looks like a trick—but isn't... Have you got a five-dollar bill? (*Bill hands him one. Rob studies the fiver, folds it twice carefully then pockets it.*) And a one-dollar? (*Bill hands him one.*) I'll turn around. You place the dollar under one of those papers. (*Rob turns around and picks up two dowsing L-rods.*)

Bill: OK. (*He hides the dollar, then steps back.*) Done.

(*Rob turns back holding the L-rods (see end notes). He walks by each paper, until the rods move. He bends down and finds the bill under that paper. He does not act smug; for him it is simply fact.*)

Bill: This is a trick...!

Rob: Dowsing is not a trick.

Bill: You made the rods move.

Rob: Not consciously. (*Bill looks skeptical.*)

Bill: Let's do it again. (*Rob turns around. Bill shuffles the papers, making 'noise' then puts the dollar not under a paper, but inside a book on the table.*) OK....

Rob: (*He turns back, walks over the papers twice, no reaction.*) Huh. (*He turns around, holds the rods over the table. They move over the book. He hands the book to Bill, who looks surprised.*) Wait a minute. (*He holds the rods in position.*) Between pages 1 and 100? (*Rods don't move.*) Between 100 and 150? 150 to 175? (*Rods swing.*) OK. 160..170 (*rods move*)...171, 72, 73 (*rods swing*). Page 173.

Bill: (*He turns to page 173...and takes out the dollar, surprised. Studies the bill, still skeptical.*) How the hell...? Damn good magic trick!

Rob: It's no magic trick. Dowsing is just an information search-and-retrieval system. It deals with facts. If something is there—water, lost car keys, the dollar in a book—it is a fact and you tune into it. I don't know how it works. But it does.

Bill: How do you know that?

Rob: From results.

Bill: You're talking paranormal stuff again...

Rob: Nothing paranormal about it. I don't know how a cell phone works, but I still use it. Dowsing is kindergarten stuff compared to that kind of magic. Really, Bill—talking face-to-face with a person on the other side of the world, in a normal voice, in real time? *That's* paranormal. *(He hands Bill the rods. Shows him how to hold them.)* Here—try it. Turn around. *(Bill turns around and Rob places the bill under a sheet of paper.)* OK, done. Visualize your target—the dollar bill. *(Bill walks slowly by the papers, and the rods move. He stops, nonplussed, looks at the rods. Bill lifts the paper and picks up the dollar.)* Well done! *(smiling broadly)*

Bill: I didn't do that.

Rob: *(smiling, having fun at Bill's confusion.)* Sure you did. The rods moved.

Bill: A lucky guess. *(He hands rods back to Rob)*

Rob: *(laughing)* Oh, really? What is a guess, if not a conscious response to intuition?

Bill: Intuition is a feeling, a hunch—not some trick with a prop.

Rob: *(still smiling)* Isn't an insight or sudden awareness a response to received information?

Bill: You're saying the dowsing rods move because they are aware?

Rob: The rods don't matter. Your mind was aware of the target you were seeking. And that target radiates information. You simply resonated with that information.

Bill: You're saying the thought alone—the intention—

Rob: ...is enough to make the physical connection! *(He picks up papers.)*

Bill: I still don't believe the rods moved by themselves.

Rob: As a magician once explained: if an event is incompatible with one's beliefs, the first reaction is to deny that it happened; then you construct some rational explanation.

Bill: I'd say it's a pragmatist's need to understand reality.

Rob: I'd say it depends on your worldview. Like you, even Einstein was skeptical about quantum entanglement, which he acknowledged but—as you well know, my friend—he famously called ...

Bill and Rob: *(together)* "Spooky action at a distance."

Rob: Yup. Remote interaction between two entangled particles. A dowser and his target?

Bill: Or a magician trying to fool a skeptic?

Rob: *(raises a finger to quote)* "Magic is not a puzzle to solve, but a mystery to experience—like Death itself."

Bill: Who said that—Einstein?

Rob: *(smiling, points to himself.)* Me!

Bill: *(raises his finger)* "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic." Arthur C. Clarke.

Rob: Then there's Holmes' Law....

Bill: Sherlock?

Rob: Right. "When you have eliminated all which is impossible, then whatever remains—*however improbable*—must be the truth."

Bill: More like Murphy's Law: "Whatever can go wrong, will go wrong."

Rob: Or Cole's Law.

Bill: Cole's Law? What's that?

Rob: *(pause, straight-faced.)* Carrots, shredded cabbage, mayonnaise mixed together...

Bill: *(laughing)* I should have seen that coming.

Rob: Anyway, Niels Bohr said...

Bill: *(interrupting)* The Great Dane? He won the Nobel Prize in 1922 for his work on quantum theory.

Rob: Okay. He said...

Bill: The chemical element Bohrium is named for him. No. 107 on the periodic table of elements.

Rob: *(With a smile and a sigh, gestures at Bill to see if he has more)* Niels Bohr said, “Everything we call real is made of things that cannot be regarded as real.”

Bill: *(pondering)* Okay. I don’t understand it, but I like it. You know, Niels Bohr loved Hollywood westerns.

Rob: Ah...of course: a film connection.

Bill: Playful scientist that he was, he wondered why, in a cowboy showdown, the bad guy always drew first, but the good guy always won. The Gunslinger Effect: Hollywood fabrication...or was there a truth behind it? He put the question to his university students. They got a bunch of toy cap pistols and one at a time, out in the hallway, Sheriff Bohr shot them all! It became known as The Great Copenhagen Showdown!

Rob: Which proves what?

Bill: That the act of thinking slows you down!

Rob: *(smiling)* So, a thought is a ‘thing’ that has a physical effect. And the sheriff never draws first, because, well, that would be a dastardly and dishonorable act.

Bill: Right! The bad guy, nervously staring at the steely-eyed sheriff, has to *decide* when to draw, and the act of thinking slows him down just enough to get himself shot. The sheriff has to erase all thoughts, and just react!

Rob: *(Showdown. Speaks in a John Wayne voice.)* OK. I’m Niels Bohr, uh huh. You’re the bad guy....

Bill: Naturally. *(Back to back, ten paces, but Rob has tip-toed right behind. Bill turns, they laugh. They again stand apart for showdown, hands by sides, finger and thumb as pistols.)* Now, don’t think.

Rob: That’s easy for me. *(Bill makes the first move to draw, but Rob reacts and says ‘Bang’ first, Bill says BANG on top of it.)*

Bill: Wait a minute! You said BANG! before you finished the draw!

Rob: *(laughing.)* Hold on...(he brings out two small water pistols, already with water.)

Bill: *(Laughs heartily)* Of course you’ve got these! Okay, partner... *(They take positions, draw simultaneously and both get wet, laughing. Rob takes the pistols and turns to put them away, doesn’t see Bill cringe in sharp pain for a few seconds, out of breath. He appears to have a cramp; takes a deep breath, shrugs it off.)*

Rob: Wait—if *both* cowboys refuse to think...then it’s a draw.

Bill: Or they're both dead.

Rob: *(Freud, German accent.)* So, vhat do vee conclude from zis?

Bill: Bohr suggested that the logical conclusion is a negotiated settlement. Since neither protagonist would want to draw first, there is nothing to do but go to the saloon for a drink.

Rob: *(Grinning)* OK, you're buying. *(Bill gets up to leave, but stops, leans over, hands on knees. Sudden pain in chest. Doubles over with cramps.)*

Rob: *(concerned)* Hey, you alright?

Bill: *(straightening up slowly, letting out a slow deep breath, but still holding his side.)* Maybe you're a better shot than we thought. *(He goes to leave and stops at the door.)* Hey, where's my five bucks?

Rob: *(Pats his pocket.)* That's the fee for a dowsing lesson! *(They laugh.)*

Bill: OK. I'll just get my jacket. *(Rob goes to put away water pistols. Bill goes home to his apartment. He stops in front of his door, in pain, breathing hard, before going in. The following action happens almost in slow motion, taking time to just watch the drama unfold. Lights slightly dimmed. Bill in pain goes to sit on his couch. Music theme kicks in. Bill, breathing heavily, cramped up, slowly collapses to the floor. He manages to grab the bat; he starts banging on the floor. Lights out on Bill. Rob re-enters his room, hears the banging. He looks up, frowning and listening, freezes. Lights very slowly fade as Ambulance sirens get louder and music continues for scene change.)*

Scene 6. Diagnosis

(Lights up on Bill in a hospital room. He wears a medical gown, or bathrobe, very worried. Music theme fades out. Nurse enters with clipboard.)

Nurse: Hello, Bill. The doctor will be in shortly. *(She is sympathetic, exits.)*

Rob: *(Enters with a coffee for Bill. Deadpan.)* Neighbor.

Bill: Neighbor. Ah, coffee. Thanks. *(Sips the coffee and spits it back)* Yuck...tastes like dirt.

Rob: *(pause.)* What do you expect...it was *ground* just 20 minutes ago.

Bill: *(Pause.)* What? *(They stare out front, sitting next to each other.)*

Rob: Sorry...old joke. *(He doesn't smile.)*

BILL: *(After another deadpan pause.)* That's actually funny.

Rob: Yes, it is. *(They both sit, unexpressive. Long pause.)*

Bill: I just don't have laughter inside me at the moment.

Rob: Well...why did the chicken cross the River Styx? *(Bill shakes head)* To get to the Other World!

Bill: No, no...the River Styx leads to the Underworld—not the “other” world. He'd be a fried chicken.

Rob: OK, so the chicken crosses the River Jordan to get to the Other Side....

Bill: No...you cross the River Jordan to get to the *Promised Land*.

Rob: Okay...maybe the chicken crossed the Rubicon?

Bill: No, that's Julius Caesar crossing over the Point of No Return. He was no chicken!

Rob: Let's just cross over to the diner and get a chicken salad. *(They laugh.)*

Bill: *(He gets a sharp pain in his side; briefly doubles over.)* Oww! Hurts me when I laugh.

Rob: *(touches his shoulder)* Hurts me when you *don't* laugh.

(Doctor—male Actor—enters stage right, with clipboard, white coat. He is nervous, not smiling. A professional attitude.)

Doctor: Good morning, Bill.

Bill: *(nodding)* Doctor....

Doctor: How are you feeling?

Bill: *(shallow breathing)* Well, for my first night ever in a hospital, I actually slept.

Doctor: *(Glances briefly over at Rob, hesitates, frowning.)* We have your test results.

Bill: *(after glancing at Rob and the doctor)* You can say anything in front of him.

Doctor: *(Straightforward, all business.)* The shortness of breath is from a pulmonary embolism-- we can treat that with anticoagulants. *(He pauses...but never looks away from Bill, speaking directly.)* But the x-rays show a large black mass in the pancreas. And it has spread. I've consulted with two other doctors, who corroborate the diagnosis. *(Awkward pause.)* It's pancreatic cancer. *(Pause.)* *(Silence in the room. Bill turns white, Rob freezes, stiffly.)*

Bill: *(After a strained moment.)* I know what that means.

Rob: (*shaken*) How far?

Doctor: Stage four.

Bill: That's a death sentence. (*More silence.*)

Doctor: I'm sorry, Bill.

Rob: But how...only yesterday we were playing....(*he falls silent, in shock.*)

Doctor: Often there are no obvious symptoms for a long while, and then it suddenly—well, it can hit hard. (*Pause.*) We can do aggressive chemotherapy, but...the cancer has metastasized—it's widespread.

Bill: (*after a deep breath*) Prognosis?

Doctor: (*speaking frankly*) Six months. (*Long silence.*)

Bill: (*Visibly shaken.*) What...what are my options?

Doctor: We have an excellent palliative care team to guide you through this.

Bill: I do not want to die in a hospital. (*Long pause.*)

Doctor: (*He hesitates, looks down at the clipboard. He looks up at Bill and speaks candidly, with compassion.*) This is a lot for you to absorb right now. The nurse will be here shortly with more information. Any immediate questions?

Bill: What do I need to do right now?

Doctor: Just be kind to yourself, Bill. Gather a support team. Make sure to have an Advance Directive in place. And name someone to be your proxy, authorized to act on your behalf. (*Pause*) Is there someone close to help you through this process?

(*Bill looks over at Rob. Doctor looks over at Rob. Rob is stunned, implications dawning. He nods in agreement.*)

Doctor: I'm...I'm truly very sorry, Bill. (*He goes to shake Bill's hand, looks over at Rob, nods, and exits. Bill stares into space; Rob is very still. Long pause.*)

Rob: (*softly, putting a hand instinctively on the back of his neck*) I should be the one on that table.

(*Nurse enters, goes right to Bill and takes his hand in both of hers.*)

Nurse: I'm so sorry, Bill. What questions do you have?

BILL: When can I go home?

Nurse: *(She sits on a stool next to him.)* In a couple of days; we want to monitor some more tests to better prescribe medications. When you get home, we can help arrange a meeting with hospice. *(Hesitation.)* Bill, there is another option the doctor hasn't mentioned. *(Long pause.)* The state legislature here in Vermont recently passed a bill—Act 39—legalizing medical aid in dying.

Bill: Act 39?

Nurse: It allows a doctor to prescribe medication that hastens the end of life for terminal patients with less than 6 months. It can be an adjunct to hospice care at home. It's still new here; many doctors disagree or lack knowledge about it. I'll bring you more information on both hospice and Act 39, if you'd like. *(Bill nods in agreement. Nurse nods back, touches his shoulder and exits.)*

Bill: *(Long silence. He is in shock. Doesn't look at Rob, also in shock.)* I see everything, now, from behind a glass wall. *(Bill stares out. Rob stares at him, and goes to sit next to him. He puts his arm around Bill's shoulder, they both look forward. Rob has one word....)*

Rob: Fuck. *(Blackout)*

INTERMISSION

Act II

Scene 7. Hospice

(Lights up on Bill's apartment, Rob & Bill sitting on the couch. Bill feels pretty weak.)

Bill: I could really use a trick today....

Rob: Okay *(He does 'Torn & Restored Napkin' trick. He tears a napkin in pieces, rolls it into a ball, opens it—fully restored.)* That's called Torn & Restored Napkin.

Bill: Can you do a Torn and Restored Body? *(they laugh. Bill grimaces...)*

Rob: Carol from hospice will be stopping by soon with more pain meds.

Bill: *(sigh)* Life is one long hospice. As soon as we're born, we're terminal. *(Carol knocks and enters. Rob helps her off with her winter coat. She stares at them, bemused.)*

Carol: *(slightly scolding, but with a big smile)* Bill, what are you doing up? *(She takes out meds and tools from a doctor's bag, and gets busy taking Bill's vitals.)* How's the pain level today?

Bill: The pain is constant, worse every morning. It's only been a month....

Carol: We'll increase the morphine dosage. Here are enough fentanyl patches for the next few days. Now, really—how are you feeling?

Bill: Carol, you and Rob are the only ones who ask me that—and really get it. What am I supposed to say to people—"Thanks for asking, I'm dying—how are *you*?" *(long silence)* Sorry. You know I never could tolerate small talk. *(He sighs deeply, clearly in pain. Bill used to gesture a lot, but now hardly moves.)* The meds help—but the pain, everywhere really, doesn't stop.

Carol: How's your breathing?

Rob: Ah-ha! We've got a new test for lung capacity. *(Rob holds the small plastic jar of soap bubble liquid for Bill. Bill tries but the bubble only comes halfway off the wand. He is too weak to blow a bubble. Finally, he successfully blows a single few bubble, then sits back exhausted. As the bubble floats, Rob reaches for it and magically produces a clear glass bubble—which he had hidden in his hand—to give Carol, who accepts it delighted.)* For you!

Carol: *(She holds it, amazed, then knocks it a few times on the table.)* Brilliant! Bill's Bubble Breathalyzer! I'll have to show this to the other hospice nurses. *(They flirt with her, and she gives it right back at them.)* I start smiling as soon as I get in the car, knowing I'm coming over here.

Bill: And that smile is the highlight of my day.

Carol: You're such a gentleman. Look at you: always dressed and sitting up when I come.

Bill: It takes me a half hour to get dressed; but what else am I going to do?

Carol: Most patients I see are in bed all day. You are always on the couch. I've never yet been with you in the bedroom. *(Bill raises his eyebrows and exchanges looks with Rob—but both decline the chance to crack a comment. Carol blushes, then quickly gets down to business.)* You know what I mean. You're just a couple of 12-year old boys! Have you talked with the doctor recently?

Bill: I'll see him tomorrow to discuss the Death with Dignity law, Act 39. He wants to confirm that I'm in my right mind to make a such a decision—as the law says, without coercion or confusion.

Carol: Yes. Medical aid in dying could be a legitimate option for you.

Rob: Does hospice endorse it?

Carol: Not officially. But our local organization will support *you*—whatever you decide. Act 39 is still pretty new here in Vermont. You would be my first, Bill.

Bill: *(Courteously)* Why, Carol...I'm flattered.

Carol: *(smiling, packing up her things.)* I'd say you're still in your right mind. I've got to run, Bill—to a patient who *really* needs me. Here's my personal number—you know you can call me anytime.

Bill: *(He looks at her card, reads aloud the number)* 802-One-Eight-Seven-Six. Huh—1876 was the year Alexander Graham Bell filed a patent for the telephone. *(Carol and Rob glance at each other, smiling.)* Rutherford B. Hayes installed the first telephone in the White House. Guess what the phone number was? *(They wait, expectantly)* One!

Carol: *(laughing, as Rob just shakes his head.)* I always learn something when I come here. You know, in my twenty years with hospice, I've seen it all—the family squabbles, the breakdowns, the long painful decline—but you guys *(she pauses)*—are you guys related, or what?

Rob: Rumor had it we're a couple! People would see us coming out of the same apartment house, playing catch, sitting on the porch deep in conversation.

Bill: There's no word in this culture for two straight older men, best buddies, who just pal around together.

Rob: That's it right there: pals...best buddies.

Carol: *(smiling)* You still sound like a couple of 12-yr olds! OK, boys. Gotta run. *(She hugs Bill.)* Good luck with the doctor tomorrow. *(Rob 'opens' the mime door and holds her coat for her. Rob goes to sit on the couch next to Bill, each in his corner. With one arm on the couch arms, they simultaneously cross one leg over his knee, looking outward. Bill hands Rob a folded piece of paper.)*

Rob: What's this?

Bill: Let's continue the film club. I want to float away in glorious Technicolor....

Rob: *(opens the paper, smiles broadly and reads the list)* The King & I...West Side Story...The Music Man...The Pajama Game...South Pacific. Musicals! How grand!

(Rob reaches over and shakes his hand. They both sit back, daydreaming of songs. They sing together, "Some Enchanted Evening" as lights slowly fade, with that music....)

Scene 8. Bill's Story

(Lights fade up slowly on the platform—the doctor's office. Three chairs set up in a triangle. Rob sits slightly upstage, in the middle of the triangle of chairs. Bill sits stage left facing the doctor's chair. Rob is jittery—desperately trying to be supportive, but barely holding it together. He glances

furtively over to Bill, who is clearly weak, his breathing labored. But he sits stoically, resolute, looking straight ahead. Tense, palpable silence. Not able to stand it, finally, Rob speaks.)

Rob: Do you want me to do the talking...? *(Bill gives Rob a look; Rob shuts up)*

Doctor: *(The Doctor enters and mimes washing hands, pumping soap, drying hands as he speaks. He is still curt, professional—but after hearing Bill's speech, he becomes more compassionate.)*

Hello, Bill. Thanks for coming in. I know it's not easy for you. *(He looks at his clipboard.)* I'm sure you have many questions...

Bill: I have questions about Act 39.

Doctor: *(brief hesitation)* Vermont is only the third state to legalize medical aid in dying. I'll do whatever I can to help. But...of course, Act 39 is not the best option for everyone....

Bill: *(interrupts the doc)* Doctor, it's the only option...for me. *(As weak as he is, he leans forward, eye to eye with the doctor. During the speech, Rob just stares, in awe of Bill who takes full control. It is as if Rob is invisible. Bill talks articulately, labored but firm—not once glancing over to Rob.)*

I've always had intellectual curiosity—until now. For years, I read two books a week; I can't focus on a book anymore. I watched a film to review every day; that's over. The most important thing in my life has been the deep conversations I have with friends—on art, life, politics, culture, science— everything! *(Pause.)* I've lost all interest. It's just...gone.

I took no drugs this morning because I wanted my head to be clear. I *hate* being in a constant fog of drugs. I want to face death intentionally—not in a morphine stupor.

I'm fading, faster than we expected. *(pause.)* I don't want to die. If you can honestly tell me, today, there is hope for some miracle drug in trials right now—I would sign up. But my standard of living now involves my quality of dying. I just want to go the way I lived—on my own terms. I do not want to have a diminished, dependent, uncommunicative, pathetic end. There is no purpose in that. My body has become a prison, and I want out. *(Long silence.)*

Doctor: *(Nodding)* I appreciate your candor, Bill. *(sighs)* How can I help?

Bill: How exactly does it work?

Doctor: *(formal, up pace statement of facts)* If you choose to proceed with this, a second doctor will interview you after a two-week period, to reassess your capability to follow the protocols. Then I will write the prescription. *(A long silence here.)* The prescription is for Seconal, a barbiturate—essentially a sleeping medication. You first take an anti-anxiety pill, then anti-nausea pill, to keep the Seconal down. You open each capsule—90 capsules—and empty the powder into a glass with some water. You must drink it all down, it acts fast. *(Rob looks at Bill, who absorbs this info intently, leaning forward.)*

Bill: How fast?

Doctor: You'll fall asleep quickly. Then you enter a coma, and finally your breathing stops. It can take effect in a matter of minutes. *(Silence. It sinks in...)*

Bill: Can we pick up the prescription in advance—even if I don't intend to use it right away...or at all?

Doctor: Yes. It can provide some peace of mind just knowing it's there. *(Seriously)* Of course, you can change your mind at any time. You are completely in charge.

Bill: Do I need to go to the pharmacy myself?

Doctor: A person you designate can pick up the prescription. *(Bill nods over at Rob, who nods in acknowledgement; he's by now emotionally distraught, numb with inner turmoil. Bill remains resolute; the conversation saps all his strength, but he remains calm. Doctor hesitates, glances at Rob, then Bill, and changes his manner from professional to personal. He slowly puts down his clipboard, stands.)* When I was young, I watched my father suffer horribly from inoperable cancer. Treatment was ineffective—and tortuous. He was mortified by loss of bodily control, his pride, his growing incoherency. Like you, Bill—he assured us he was not depressed, just desirous of departing with the satisfaction of a life well lived and a death well remembered. *(Long pause, and a sigh.)*

Bill: What happened?

Doctor: *(Stands up, speaking outward.)* The doctors refused to hasten his death with medication. It was illegal. *(Pause.)* In the end, he shot himself in the head. *(They just look at each other in silence for a moment.)* Please know that you can call me anytime if you have questions—or just to talk. *(He stands, as does Rob and Bill; solemnly shakes Bill's hand, nods at Rob and exits.)*

Rob: Bill...maybe Act 39 is not really the way to go.

Bill: Rob, if I gotta go, I want to go on my terms.

Rob: But...Bill...what if it turns out you have a lot more time....

Bill: Stop. *(Pause.)* Look at me. The game is over, Rob. *(They stare at each other, Rob upset, almost angry; Bill stoic, finally just shaking his head.)* Anyways, what have I got to lose?

Rob: Your life, dammit! *A rare moment of tension between them, unresolved. Music begins under their silence. They don't look at each other, but stare in opposite directions.)*

Scene 9. The Pharmacy

(Lights up on Rob standing center in spotlight, different jacket. He stares out front. Rob looks around, sees pharmacy—on the platform-- looks away shaking head...agitated...pacing...takes a step toward the pharmacy, hesitates, can't go in. Starts to leave, stops. Finally goes up, opens mime

door—little bell jingles—and store ‘elevator music’ in soft background. Pharmacist—male Actor—in bow tie, sports jacket behind a small counter, mimes putting pills in bottles, looks up...)

Pharmacist: *(Much too cheerily helpful)* Hi there! What can I do for you?

Rob: *(soft voice, looking around, hesitant, hands trembling slightly)* Uh, yes...I need to pick up a prescription... *(hesitates)*.

Pharmacist: Okay. And...your name?

Rob: *(agitated, taking papers from his pocket)* It's not...not for me...I'm here for a friend. The doctor called ahead...

Pharmacist: *(looking at the papers)* Oh, yes. No problem! We've been expecting you. I just need your ID please.

Rob: *(searching his pockets nervously, he gives him, or mimes, an ID card)* I've got a written authorization for the prescription...and....uh...

Pharmacist: Yes, that's fine. The paperwork has all been completed. *(He looks for the small white bag and plastic med containers of capsules)* Ah, here it is. *(Cheerily taking out two small plastic med containers of capsules, as if they were just for a headache.)* Let me go over the protocols....

Rob: *(interrupting, distraught, wanting to grab the little paper bag and run out the door.)* I know the protocols. Thank you. *(He signs the receipt, reaches for the bag, but the guy holds it back.)* The doctors went over the instructions. I...I really need to go...*(left hand is trembling more noticeably now.)*

Pharmacist: *(insufferably cheerful, pleased with being helpful)* I'm required to go over this with you. *(Rob is dismayed, not sure again, hand tremors visibly.)* Are you alright?

Rob: *(trying to control his hand, puts it in his pocket.)* Yes...no...Parkinson's. It's just—he's my best friend....and I...I mean, I just don't know... I'm bringing my friend a little white paper bag of...Death.

Pharmacist: *(now sympathetic, a change in demeanor)* I understand your conflict.

Rob: *(nervous)* He's depressed. Maybe he says he wants my support, but he *really* wants me to talk him out of it. *(pause, conflicted)* No, no—he's too damn stubborn to talk out of anything. *(frowning)* Maybe I'm the one who's depressed.

Pharmacist: You're there for support, especially if he changes his mind.

Rob: He's frightened that he might be too debilitated to follow the protocols—or so weak that he loses courage at the last moment. I'm frightened that I can't do this...or *should* do this.

Pharmacist: (*concerned and compassionate*) You friend is showing moral courage—by his decision, his determination, and his appreciation of the depth of your friendship. I’m sure he feels fortunate to have a friend who is kind enough to help him through this difficult process.

Rob: Is it really a kindness...?

Pharmacist: By asking you to be his witness, yes, he honors you. By accepting his request, you honor him. (*He quietly puts his hand on Rob’s shoulder.*) Please, let’s take time to go over the instructions. It will help. (*He takes the meds and—silently, gesturing—explains their use, putting them in the bag. Rob listens, resigned, as lights change. Actor (female) places two chairs downstage—the car—and sits in the passenger seat. Jazzy film noir music begins for scene change. Rob leaves the pharmacy holding the little white bag and goes down to the driver’s seat. Lights out on the pharmacy.*)

Scene 10. Mistress Death

(*Mistress Death—in a black pants suit, sun glasses—mime opens passenger door, sits patiently in the car, mimes lowering mirror flap to adjust hair. Rob, unnerved, sits in the driver’s seat and puts the little white pharmacy bag on the lap of Mistress Death—not ‘seeing’ her at first. He mimes putting on seat belt; she watches, starts to put on hers, smiles, lets it go. She is courtly, courteous, sympathetic. She speaks in conversational American English with Rob but slips into mild biblical parlance when righteously angry with Hercules; New England accent with Morse; German with Freud. The male Actor plays Hercules, Morse, Freud with quick changes. Hercules is angry with Death for not appearing quicker when he needed her; Morse is upset that Death came too quickly, taking his wife; Freud is more understanding, he “prepared” for Death.*)

The tempo of this scene is faster, the acting more passionate and dramatic. The fantasy characters can be melodramatic with voice and gestures, heroic caricatures, but not cartoons. Rob speaks only with Death. It’s all in his mind. Overwrought, he starts driving.)

Death: (*She stares at Rob, who just drives*) You seem...unsettled.

Rob: (*Glances at the bag, picks it up, sees her, puts it back on her lap.*) Unsettled!? I know who you are: Death Be Not Proud, Death in Venice, Death of a Salesmen... (*He still mimes driving, hands on the wheel.*)

Death: (*modestly, playing with her hair, flirtatious.*) I suppose I am something of a celebrity.

Rob: (*annoyed*) Where's your black hood?

Death: (*With old world courtesy and a friendly chuckle*) Too cliché. After Bergman, I tossed that costume out. When Ingmar asked me to be in his film I said yes—in return for one of the actors after the final shoot. Your friend Bill recently screened that film—Seventh Seal—didn’t he?

Rob (*muttering to himself, stops the car.*) I can't do this.

Death: I agree.

Rob: What?!

Death: I agree—you shouldn't do this.

Rob: (*Warily*) What do you mean?

Death: It's *my* job. There is nothing to fear.

Rob: I don't fear you.

Death: (*gently*) No, of course not. We are well acquainted, after all. (*She looks at Rob.*) How's your neck? (*Rob unconsciously rubs his neck.*) I will help your friend. It is just a Momentary Pause of Transition. And really, that moment is only like...a Whisper. (*Rob is startled by reference to the Twilight Zone episode.*)

Hercules: (*With a BOOM and flashing lightning/thunder/smoke effects: Hercules appears heroically upstage on the platform in spotlight, thundering, gesticulating, theatrically histrionic*) **HA!** "only a whisper"—like **Hades** it is! **Rage**, the poet sayeth, **rage** against the dying of the light!

Mistress Death: Heracles—calm thyself! Or dost thou prefer **Hercules**? (*Ignoring the car door, she goes to platform and stands stage right, facing forward as she speaks. Hercules is sputtering, taking poses on the platform. Rob stays in the car, bag of pills on the passenger chair.*)

Hercules: **Calm** myself?! By Zeus, you let me suffer! (*raising his arms to the sky, then pointing at Death*) YOU—Thanatos—who torments mortals with immortal indifference—you witnessed my anguish with devilish amusement, like any other minor god!

Death: (*with calm power, still facing front, not looking at Hercules.*) Minor god?! So speaketh a half-breed mortal! (*to Hercules*) Pay heed now: be done with your wailing, thou who hast already attained immortality.

Hercules: (*with brief compassion*) Immortality, yes.... But only with the help of Philoctetes, my one true friend. Like him (*gestures to Rob, as they both look at Rob*)—my friend assisted me, whilst you stood idly aside. (*Angry again*) Thou hast no power over my fate!

Death: (*Righteously.*) Do not prattle about power thou canst not comprehend.

Hercules: (*Scornfully*) You are no god, merely an escort whose single task is to ferry souls from this world to the next.

Death: My task, Heracles, is gentle closure from earthly woe. Sully not my honor with the stain of thy paltry accusations! ENOUGH! *(She raises her arms and with a flick of her wrist with sounds of thunder, she goes back to sit in the car.)*

Hercules: *(Lights flicker more as he looks frantically around, sputtering)* **WHAT?!** *(more thunder)* **I'm not finished!** He roars **"Aaaarhhh!"** as spotlight on him flashes...then goes out in a puff of smoke. The actor quickly changes costume in the dark.)

Death: *(She chuckles, happy with herself. Speaking to Rob in the car, again in modern voice.)* He speaks of fate. Sir, you betray your friend in denying *his* fate. There is a natural end to life. Not by his own hand.

Rob: *(holding up the little white paper bag)* What if *this* is his natural fate? How could I deny his request? Where is the compassion in *that*?

Death: Faith, sir, is trusting that all that happens is essential, even though it involves suffering. Your compassionate spirit must respect what is unknowable and unchangeable.

(Samuel Morse appears in spotlight on the platform furiously banging on the floor with a baseball bat. He speaks to Death, indignant and melodramatic, perhaps with a New England/Boston accent.)

Morse: **YOU**, Mistress Death! How dare *you* speak of compassion and faith—you who stole from me the last dying moments of my beloved wife.

Death: *(She sighs, not without some fondness for these mortals. Still in the car, looking forward.)* Samuel Morse. I honor your grief, sir. I do. You understand my kindness was to release her soul from prolonged suffering, by the grace of mercy.

Morse: *(He pounds his heart)* "Death, be not proud, though some have called thee Mighty and Dreadful, for thou art not so...."

Death: *(Speaking aside to Rob)* A nice enough sonnet, I admit...though rather judgmental.

Morse: *(who continues to quote the sonnet, melodramatically)* "One short sleep past, we wake eternally/And death shall be no more. Death, *(he pauses to point at her)* thou shalt die."

Death: If the sentiment gives the souls of mankind serenity, so be it.

Morse: *(angry, as Death gets up out of the car with each Bang, facing forward. History is strewn with your base methods: (He **bangs** the baseball bat on the floor.) War (**BANG!**), Torture (**BANG!**), Murder, Lynching, Crucifixion (**BANG...BANG...BANG!**)*

Death: *(she gets up, holding the bag, speaks with quiet, unassailable power)* You expose, sir, the vile cruelty of your wretched species. I do not punish, nor do I cause pain. I choose neither the manner of dying nor the suffering endured before death. I *amend* the misery of the human race.

Morse: *(kneeling)* Oh, heavenly Lord! I turn to Thee. I take refuge in Thy compassion and mercy; my prayers...

Bill: *(slams the book, stands, shouts)* **ENOUGH!** *(Spotlight up on Bill—angry and no longer ill—who has jumped up from the couch where he was reading a book. They all look at Bill: Morse says “Huh!?” Bill strides—ignoring the invisible door—with full life force to confront Morse.)* **Do NOT bring goddam religion into this!** *(Bill grabs the bat.)* **Dammit, this is not some hypothetical debate! I’m dying!** *(He bangs ten times and hands it back to Morse. The light flickers on Morse—getting up from his knees and sputtering incoherently, “What??” and is suddenly gone in blackout. Bill and Death stand now on both far sides of the stage, facing out to audience, conversing, but not talking directly to each other.)*

Death: *(Quietly)* Your anger, sir, is with God, not with me.

Bill: *(He sighs, unfolding his arms and gestures to Rob, who sits with head in hands)* I was expecting to help *him* in his frailty—and now you do this to *me*?!

Death: My role in human affairs is to unfetter the temporary embodiment of earthly life. Nothing more.

Bill: *(more calmly, engaged by this conversation)* It’s not you, Mistress, that alarms me—it’s not the moment of death I fear, but the *process* of dying. In the face of inevitable suffering, do I not have autonomy in averting the indignities of a diminished life?

Death: How does one measure the standards of a ‘diminished life’? Are you suffering moral or physical indignities now, dear sir?

Bill: No, not yet...but...

Death: *(gesturing to Rob)* Does he not struggle with the fearsome burden you have placed upon his conscience? Are you so sure the course you are taking is the ethical choice—for him? *(Mistress and Bill stay in their spots, but now turn and address each other directly.)*

Bill: Now, that’s not fair...

Death: Is not palliative care offered by your Hospice the compassionate standard for easing physical and spiritual pain, when approaching the end of life?

Bill: Act 39 doesn’t replace this standard; it’s a *last resort* if palliative care becomes ineffective. To ensure a more dignified...

Death: *(with a brief flash of anger, picks up the bag of pills, tossing them to Bill.)* This is not Death with Dignity; it is Death on Demand. *(Gently again)* To you, sir, I say: **Amor Fati**.

(Freud suddenly appears—with a clash of thunder—from the wings, stage left near Bill, stroking his beard thoughtfully, wearing glasses, top hat, frock coat. He speaks with a German accent. He has an austere bearing and authority, with a sly twinkle of the eye, loving a good debate.)

Freud: *(boisterously)* “**Amor fati!**” And from the immortal lips of Mistress Death, herself!

Death: Ah, Sigmund—my good doctor—how nice to see you again.

Freud: *(addressing Bill)* Amor fati. Latin, my friend. Love of one’s own fate; acceptance of the inevitable, even suffering *(gestures to Bill)* and loss *(gesturing to Rob.)*

Bill: *(defiant)* Acceptance of suffering?! You really suggest I throw away these pills?

Freud: Ach, acceptance does not mean acquiescence. *(Rob still sits, holding head in hands. Freud speaks outward facing.)* “Si vis vitam, para mortem. If you wish Life, prepare for Death.” *(Death nods, in acknowledgement.)*

Bill: *(Holding up the bag)* I am preparing, dammit...! *(Bill gets painful cramp.)*

Freud: Yes, yes, of course. *(Arm around Bill, he takes the bag, leading him back to his couch. With a big sigh, Bill transforms back to his former weakness, once again exhausted and frail.)* You must be tired, my friend...go home, get some rest. *(Freud starts to go, but stops, says...)* And do rest in peace...

(Freud opens car door for Rob, holds the bag out for him and bows. Then Death and Freud converse lightly, as Freud removes car chairs. Soft Viennese waltz music. He goes over to Mistress who gives her hand for him to kiss.)

Death: Your own transition, dear doctor, was not the smoothest, as I recall.

Freud: Cancer of the mouth—was that indignity really necessary? Only through the aid of my personal physician did the agony end. With *his* aid, dear Mistress—the kindness of a dear friend. *(Freud takes out a real cigar, smells it admiringly. She regards it...and him, with raised eyebrows.)*

Death: Really, now, Sigmund.....

Freud: *(He puts the cigar in his mouth and offers her his arm.)* Sometimes, my dear, a cigar is just...a cigar. *(She grabs cigar, takes a puff, smiles, “Ahhh!” They exit—waltzing to the music—leaving Rob alone in a spotlight, ‘holding the bag’, stunned, trembling, and highly conflicted. Scene change: lights down. Rob slowly goes to Bill’s door and enters.)*

Scene 11. Near Life

(Bill's apartment. He sits on the couch, very weak. Slow movements, no more gestures. Rob enters Bill's place with the bag of pills—he is agitated, distressed, gesturing and moving around a lot.)

Bill: Neighbor.

Rob: Neighbor. *(He avoids eye contact with Bill. He rambles on, shaking, pacing, goes to a shelf, picks up things, puts them down, straightening things.)* Eve will come over later with some soup. Susie said she'll come by to tidy up the place. Rick will take back your library books.... *(Bill just watches him pace.)*

Bill: *(Concerned)* Look at you. You're shaking, Rob.

Rob: *(stops pacing, waves it off)* Parkinson's.

Bill: No, you seem...unsettled.

Rob: Unsettled?! *(He holds up the bag.)* Jeez, Bill, this is not about me! You're the one who's...*(he stops short, and shifts awareness of his own situation.)*

Bill: *(gently)*...and you're the one left holding the bag.

Rob: *(hesitantly, he holds up the bag, hand shaking. Softly says...)* Dammit. For a long time I just couldn't go in that damn pharmacy. It felt like standing outside the gates of Hades. It took three damn hours coming back: I kept stopping by the side of the road. Just sat there staring at this bag of death on the passenger seat.

Bill: Death Rides Shotgun! Good title for a Yul Brynner movie. *(Rob sits by him on the couch; they look at the bag and each other a moment. Rob has calmed down, he sighs.)*

Rob: I kept hallucinating. There was some fantastical debate in my head. Samuel Morse was there...

Bill: Ah, yes: his famous painting "Dying Hercules."

Rob: Hercules showed up too! And Freud—he was waltzing with Mistress Death. *(Rob holds up the bag of pills.)*

Bill: *(shakes his head.)* I don't know Rob...I'm just weary of it all. I'm really losing it.... *(He lets down his guard. Sees Rob's hand shake, holding the bag.)* Just put that away.

Rob: *(quietly)* Have you changed your mind?

Bill: No. I was depressed after the diagnosis. Now I'm just...scared. And numb.

Rob: *(Pause.)* Me too.

Bill: (*breaking the silence.*) I was thinking about your car accident last night. I've never known anyone before who's had a near-death experience.

Rob: It was more like a near-life experience.

Bill: What do you mean?

Rob: It wasn't *near*-death. It *was* a death experience.

Bill: (*He stares.*) Do you recall the moment of the accident?

Rob: Totally blank. Lying broken on that road there was extreme...quietude. No birds, nothing, like all sound had left the world. And no pain: why doesn't the body feel pain when you're in shock?

Bill: Maybe there *is* a quality of mercy, as Shakespeare put it, when approaching Death. Your two visions of Marian: in the clouds, then as a nurse in that hospital. How does the mind do that beautiful trick?

Rob: It's no trick, Bill. I believe that nurse shaking her head was an echo from a different layer of reality.

Bill: Are you suggesting she was some kind of angel of God?

Rob: I'm not talking about god, Bill. What if consciousness does survive our physical bodies at death, at some...different frequency of existence? When my mind revisits that accident, I get an uneasy sense that I *did* die, and this life I'm living now...is a version of me that took an alternate path. (*He looks at Bill, who doesn't react*) Sometimes late at night in bed, I get a sensation that Marian *didn't* die. The car never crashed. *That* lifetime also feels real. It exists.

Bill: As a book in your Library of Souls? Maybe it exists in dreams you had after the accident.

Rob: In dreams, we *do* experience other realities.

Bill: (*With some old energy.*) Freud says in trauma the ego's defenses are down, so material from the subconscious mind is interpreted through believable imagery. Like your hospital nurse.... (*Bill is again out of breath.*)

Rob: What if in our dream states we *really experience* these things, not symbolically, but *actually*?

Bill: Sounds like wish-fulfillment to me.

Rob: Like in lucid dreaming. You know how great you feel when you wake up from a flying dream...

Bill: You believe it was real?

Rob: *(slower pace)* It's not a...belief. It's an experience. *(They pause, both looking outward.)* Anyway, it's more plausible than saying *this* reality *(gesturing the surroundings)* is all there is.

Bill: I have no trouble saying that. *(Bill crosses one leg over his knee. So does Rob.)* Amor fati....

Rob *(startled)* What?

Bill: *(waves it away)* Never mind.

Rob: *(pause.)* Okay.

Bill: *(pause.)* Okay. Now I'm exhausted.

Rob: Okay. Me too. *(They both look forward into space, expressionless, as lights fade....)*

Donny: Okay.

Scene 12. Bill's story

(Both in Bill's apartment, sitting on the couch playing Bouncing Paper Rolls on the coffee table. They each hold an empty cardboard toilet paper roll, horizontally, six inches above the coffee table, and drop it. They play until someone gets it to bounce and stand up on its end. They continue playing, without great energy or fun, mildly despondent, just marking the number of 'wins')

Bill: *(or Rob, if he wins one)* That's six for me...four for you....

Rob: How long have we been doing this?

Bill: I dunno. It's better than just sitting here waiting for Godot. *(Rob gets rid of toilet rolls, and starts setting up the camera on tripod. Bill holds up a letter, faster pace)* Friends send me letters with poems about death. This is supposed to cheer me up? "Do not go gentle into that good night/Rage, rage against the dying of the light!/Old age should burn and rave at close of day." Bullshit. What did Dylan Thomas know of old age? He died at thirty-nine. Rage is for the living...not the dying. *(He picks up another letter)* Here's one: "A well-spent day brings a happy sleep; a well-employed life earns a satisfied death."

Rob: Hallmark?

Bill: Leonardo da Vinci. *(Rob guffaws.)* This one really is a good one: John Donne: "Death, be not proud....One short sleep past, we wake eternally/And death shall be no more; Death, **thou** shalt die."

Rob: Right, the poet has a conversation with Mistress Death. *(He rubs his neck...)*

Bill: I never really understood how many people sincerely cared for me. I've never been so vulnerable, or honest...or alone. (*Bill changes tone, sits up erect, says, softly...*) I'm ready.

Rob: (*He nods slowly, a bit nervous.*) Thanks for doing this, Bill, really. Your friends will appreciate it. (*Bill just nods.*) OK—recording.

Bill: (*sitting up as straight as he can on the couch, takes deep breath, rallies to the occasion.*) When I lived on Martha's Vineyard with Becky, she had a day job across the bay. Instead of driving the long way around, she rowed across in our old rowboat. At the end of every day, I would go down to the shore, gather fresh clams and oysters, make a little fire on the beach and wait. With my binoculars, I watched as she got in the rowboat and slowly made her way back to the beach. I'd help land her boat, and we'd eat fresh seafood over the open fire, listen to the waves, and watch the sunset. I loved that!

AFTERLIFE is the title of a Japanese film. When people died, they could choose a single memory from their lives to take with them into eternity. (*Swallows hard, emotional.*) I would choose the scene with the binoculars, on the beach, watching the woman I shared a life with slowly rowing towards me. It was a sublime moment. Romantic, not in the sense of loving another person, but...a romance with life. Serene anticipation: it's a state of being that engulfs me now. (*Pause. He breathes deeply, looks steady at the camera as if done, but then speaks more didactically.*)

I've always had a sense of life as an adventure. There's an old tale about the first elephant brought to the circus in America. People were struck with astonishment. To say 'I've been to see the elephant' became a catchphrase for the strange and wonderful things one sees when you go out into the wide world. Well, I've...(long pause, getting choked up) I've been to see that old elephant. (*Pause, emotional.*) I've lived a good life. It's been a blessing. (*Pause.*) And it's enough...for a lifetime. (*Bill looks down a while, then looks directly at the camera—he's finished speaking. He nods. Rob puts camera away. Bill watches quietly, drained of energy.*)

Rob: You still surprise me, old pal. (*He puts away the camera and sits next to Bill.*) When my mother died, the rabbi said that for a period of time of my own choosing, I was: 'A person with no obligation to the world.'

Bill: (*He is quiet, drained*) I'm a person with no obligation to life. (*Miming the action.*) I've been taking off layer after layer to reveal: nothing. Like the man in that film—that old black and white film...uh....what was....?

Rob: (*gently*) The Invisible Man?

Bill: Right. (*Confused.*) Who was that? Ray Milland?

Rob (*distressed that Bill can't remember*) Claude Rains.

Bill: (*shakes head*) I'm really losing it, Rob. I'm ready to check out of this old hotel. (*Pause.*)

Rob: (*Worried*) It's only been three months...

Bill: I've chosen the day, my friend. (*Rob freezes.*) Monday.

Rob: (*Dismayed, stands up.*) That's only 3 days away....

Bill: It's the end of December. You can start a New Year without all this hanging over you.

Rob: But...why Monday?

Bill: I checked the weather report.

Rob: What? The *weather* report!?

Bill: Weather will be OK through Monday but turns to snow and ice Tuesday. (*Rob looks confused.*) I don't want to inconvenience people. (*He hands Rob an envelope, who is extremely nonplussed.*)

Rob: What's this?

Bill: Next month's check for the landlord.

Rob: (*shaking his head, confounded, hand trembling.*) Wha...?

Bill: So you and the Team won't be rushed dealing with all my stuff. (*Lots of pauses in this scene. Time has slowed.*) And don't tell them until after.

Rob: But...would you want them here...maybe....

Bill (*interrupts*) Rob...I've said my goodbyes...and it was emotionally exhausting. For them...and me. I don't want those emotions now. Just you, Rob. (*pause*) And remember: no memorial gathering until later in spring. Keep it simple. The Whispering of the Stars.

Rob: The what...?

Bill: The winters in northern Siberia get so cold they have an expression for the sound that exhaled breath makes when they talk. The words freeze in the air and turn into crystals and gently fall to the snow. In the spring, if you walk over the same ground, you can hear the whispering of those words as they thaw and evaporate into the night sky. It's like a prayer.

Rob: You certainly seem to be clear-headed.

Bill: (*slowly*) Not really. (*He gestures around the room.*) Everything is alive...except me. The couch is alive: I don't do anything, just sit on it while it does all the work supporting me. The floor *pushes* me up when I try to stand. I wash my face: it's like washing my soul. Every movement is...intentional. It's how you always spoke about mime. (*He sits back, exhausted by talking.*) I finally get it....

Rob: *(tenderly)* Maybe you're having a near-life experience. *(Bill reaches out his hand. Rob takes it. Lights dim.)*

Scene 13. The Drink

The morning of The Day. Rob is in his room, dressing...brooding, anxious. Bill is in another spotlight by his couch. Slowly, somberly, he arranges the bottle of pills and a bowl and glass on the coffee table in front of the couch. Rob makes his way to Bill, who waits for him sitting on the couch, as usual. They nod silently. Everything moves slowly. The mood of the scene: Rob is a mess, stricken with foreboding; a dark cloud of impending dread hovers over the room. Time has stopped; the world outside is gone. The air in the room is tense. Palpable. Lights slightly dimmed. The following banter is done gently.)

Rob: *(holding up the bottle of Seconal capsules.)* You'd think they could just make one pill, instead of 90 damn capsules. *(Seeing the bowl and glass.)* What are these for?

Bill: I thought we could empty the powder into the bowl, then....*(he stops, mildly confused.)*

Rob: Wait a minute. *(He goes to the shelf, takes a plate and another bowl, sits on the couch.)* Here: we put the capsules in *this* bowl. The glass goes on the plate—to catch any spilled powder when we empty the capsules in the glass.

Bill: *(Still confused.)* And the second bowl?

Rob: That's for tossing in the emptied capsules. *(They both nod, satisfied with the plan. They pour the capsules—real, but empty props—into a bowl and start the process of opening them one by one, twisting the tops off and mime 'pouring' the powder into the glass. Awkward process, starting with some silence. Bill is resolute, avoiding deep conversation—everything has been said; he doesn't want to "lose it" at the end. They converse as they empty the capsules.)*

Bill: When are you going to tell the Team?

Rob: Bill... *(slowly shakes his head.)* They knew three days ago. I asked them to be at my place tonight: I'll really need them to be around. *(Bill nods, accepts that.)* Did you...sleep?

Bill: *(shakes his head slowly)* I can't tell. Night, day—no difference. *(Pause.)* I do remember having a vague image of Closing Night after a long running show.

Rob: I had a dream we were playing FenceBall again.

Bill: *(he smiles, chuckling weakly.)* FenceBall. Now, that was fun.

Rob: *(faster pace dialogue, energy again, briefly)* Very early spring, wasn't it? The snow was gone...the tennis nets were not up yet.

Bill: Just that 30-foot high chain-link fence separating the four courts.

Rob: That didn't stop us! You took the far court and WHACKED that ol' Spaldeen over that fence and I WHACKED it back! Man, it took all our "whackability" to hit that ball the length of four courts over that fence.

Bill: In ten minutes we were exhausted from the "whacking" *and* the laughing.

Rob: And then that group of pre-schoolers walked by in single file, holding a rope led by their teacher...

Bill: ... in their yellow boots...like ducklings.

Rob: I'll never forget that tiny little girl who left the line and came up to the fence, wide-eyed, watching two old geezers belly laughing, and she said in that tiny little voice, so earnestly: "When I grow up, I wanna play THAT game!! *(They both laugh, almost teary, then quiet again.)* We've played a good game, old friend....

Bill: And won every inning. *(Silent, long pauses slower pace now.)*

Rob: *(Nervously trying to be more in control.)* The anti-nausea pill?

Bill: Took that already.

Rob: And the anti-anxiety pill...?

Bill: *(shaking his head)* Don't need that. *(Rob hesitates)* Maybe you should take it. *(They smile soberly. Music theme begins softly.)*

Bill: If you had to choose, for eternity, one scene from your life, Rob— what would you pick?

Rob: *(smiling.)* Ah...well. *(For a full minute, with soft music, the lights dim a bit: they 'converse' silently, with gestures, as Rob reveals his chosen scene, but we never know what it is. Then the moment is done, and all the capsules are empty. The lights change back again. They are both tense; Rob edgy and focused on Bill, who is resolute, but emotional. Music fades out...)*

Rob: *(Tenderly)* Do you want to lie down on the bed? *(Bill shakes his head. They hug for a long moment. Bill sits at the left end, with his left arm draped over the arm of the couch and one leg crossed over the other knee, his typical pose.)*

Well, I won't let you drink alone. *(Bill is momentarily startled, as if Rob would take some of The Drink too.)* Where's your whiskey? *(Rob gets a shot glass, pours himself one. Then pours water into Bill's glass. Every movement now feels like slow motion. Rob is numb as he gives Bill the glass to*

hold in his left hand. Bill reaches out with right hand to take Rob's left hand and they don't let go. They look at each other for a long time, then...)

Bill: See you Down the Road, my friend. (Rob is startled and moved by the circus phrase. They clink glasses and drink in one gulp. Bill leans back; Rob puts a pillow under his head, still holding his hand. Lights dim slightly. Thirty seconds pass...Bill stays in same cross-legged position. He gives one small snore—or sigh. Breathing stops. Rob stares hard at him another minute. Bill's head leans just slightly to one side on pillow, otherwise his position—in death—remains the same, like he's just taking a nap: arm draped over the couch arm, one leg crossed over knee. Finally, Rob slowly releases his hand, gets up, paces, in shock. More pacing...glancing at Bill.

Rob: (Softly) Neighbor. (Finally, as light fully fades out on Bill—who exits in the dark—spotlight follows Rob going across to his own apartment, ignoring all doors and stage conventions. Light does not go out on him as scene changes. We see him change his shirt to what he wore opening the play. It is all in his mind now. He takes the bat, blows a single bubble, 'hits' it. Then bangs three times on the floor, waits a moment, shakes his head...takes his baseball glove and sits center stage, on edge of platform. Lighting, if possible, on backdrop is now a night sky with a million stars.)

Scene 14. Epilogue

(We hear three bangs offstage, from Bill. Rob looks up, startled.)

Bill: (Healthy, full of life, cheerfully enters wearing a new shirt and baseball cap.) Hey, neighbor!

Rob: (Nodding, smiling) Neighbor!

Bill: (He takes a seat next to Rob.) Got any new tricks?

Rob: Got any new answers?

Bill: All in good time, my friend.

Rob: Really, Bill...what happened after you took The Drink? I'm dying to know.

Bill: You were in a state of euphoric shock.

Rob: Yes, I was. Euphoric that it went so smoothly...and shock at what we had just done.

Bill: Emptying all those capsules actually gave us a ritual; a rite of passage.

Rob: (Nods in agreement.) Passage to...? C'mon, a hint?

Bill: (looks around, making sure no one else is around) Can you keep a secret? (Rob nods, expectantly) Good! So can I.

Rob: (*shaking his head, smiling*) Maybe death is merely one of God's magic tricks. (*Gestures*) Poof! Gone. Some kind of metaphysical misdirection....

Bill: (*Grins, gestures a lot, raises a finger.*) Someone I know once said: "Magic is not a puzzle to be solved; it's a mystery to be experienced. Like Death itself."

Rob: That's not an explanation; it's another misdirection. Hey, can you finally do this? (*He does the 'finger pistols' game.*)

Bill: (*He just smiles, does it easily, then looks at the ball Rob holds.*) You still play much?

Rob: I play catch with our friends, sometimes. It's just that...no one laughs like we did. (*Pause as he looks down, then at Bill.*) Thanks, by the way....

Bill: For what?

Rob: The last laugh. That last image of you...just sitting there, legs crossed. Like you were taking a nap. (*Rob demonstrates.*)

Bill: (*Smiles, and nods.*) Thought you'd appreciate that.

Rob: When the coroners came to the door, they asked, 'Where is he, the bedroom?' I said, 'No, he's...sitting right over there.' They scowled, thinking I was joking, but when they saw you, their jaws dropped! They couldn't believe it. In thirty-five years of business, they said, they never saw anything like it.

Bill: (*smiling*) Really, though, Rob—thank *you*. It was a beautiful thing you did for me. (*He pauses, and studies Rob.*) You seem melancholy.

Rob: (*He nods and sighs*) Grief passes; Sorrow just...lingers. It was that way after Marian. There's always a bit of melancholy in beauty.

Bill: It's been six months. How're plans for the gathering?

Rob: We'll tell risqué stories about you and laugh a lot...and show that video we made and get weepy a lot. Then I thought we'd all go up to our field and play some baseball...

Bill: (*laughing*) Excellent! I love that!

Rob: (*smiling*) Hey, you're welcome to make an appearance!

Bill: (*gently, after more silence, speaking out front*) Make the stars whisper, old friend.

Rob: (*softly*) It really was just like a whisper, wasn't it?

(Long pause, both staring out front as if looking at the stars, taking their time, in silence for a while. Bill starts to leave... Rob holds up the ball.)

Rob: Wanna play catch?

Bill: Okay. *(They look at each other meaningfully, then out front again.)*

Rob: *(still just sits there.)* OK.

Bill: *(stands up, nods slowly.)* I'll just...go get my glove.

Rob: *(He nods, knowingly, sadly.)* OK. *(He stares out front, not looking at Bill.)*

Bill: *(softly)* OK. *(One spotlight on Rob, one upstage: Bill slowly walks to that spot, stopping to look back at Rob, long pause. Bill turns and quietly exits, as the light on him slowly fades out to black.)*

Rob: Okay. *(He looks up with a small smile on his face, blackout. Music cuts in: Dr. John singing Take Me Out to the Ballgame, loud and upbeat. Bill re-enters for curtain call, helps Rob to his feet. They bow as all lights up and Actors join them for bows. Music continues to end of song.)*

FINIS.

NOTES

Rob's games & tricks: (descriptions and instructions to be added)

Music interludes: Original musical score & soundscape for the 2023 production by composer Johnnie Day Durand. Based on phrases from Mozart piano sonatas, specifically Piano Sonata No. 16 in C ("Sonata Facile"), Piano Sonata No. 5, G major, (Andante), Piano Concerto No. 27, B-flat major, Larghetto (all played by Mitsuko Uchida)...and Prelude in C minor, J.S Bach, BWV 999 played by Jacob Lindberg on lute.

Talk Back: After performances, when appropriate, a talkback discussion with the audience will be offered, with literature on medical aid in dying available.

Vermont's Patient Choice at End of Life Law (Act 39) was enacted in May 2013. Bill died in 2015. Vermont became the third state to legalize a Death with Dignity law and the first state to pass the act through the legislative process. *Patient Choices Vermont* is a nonprofit organization that educates Vermonters and doctors on Medical Aid in Dying (MAID). As of this writing (2023) ten states have passed similar laws. In 2023, Vermont passed legislation overturning the requirement for only VT residents to use Act 39. Also, there is a compound med available—no longer 90 capsules!

Rob & Bill (2012)

