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Artist Descending a Staircase

A play

Tom Stoppard

Samuel French – London
New York – Sydney – Toronto – Hollywood



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CHARACTERS

Martello, older

Beauchamp, older

Donner, older

Sophie

Martello, younger

Beauchamp, younger

Donner, younger

ARTIST DESCENDING A STAIRCASE

The play was originally commissioned by the BBC and transmitted on Radio 3 on 14th November, 1972.

This stage version was presented at the King's Head Theatre, London, on 2nd August, 1988, with the following cast of characters:

Beauchamp , older	Peter Copley
Beauchamp , younger	Gareth Tudor Price
Martello , older	William Lucas
Martello , younger	Karl James
Donner , older	Frank Middlemass
Donner , younger	John Warnaby
Sophie	Sarah Woodward

Directed by Tim Luscombe

Décor by Martin Chitty

It was subsequently presented by Bill Kenwright and Dan Crawford at the Duke of York's Theatre, London, on 2nd December, 1988, with the following cast of characters:

Beauchamp , older	Peter Copley
Beauchamp , younger	Gareth Tudor Price
Martello , older	William Lucas
Martello , younger	Karl James
Donner , older	Alan MacNaughton
Donner , younger	John Warnaby
Sophie	Sarah Woodward

Directed by Tim Luscombe

Set design by Carl Toms

NOTE

There are eleven scenes. The play begins on a day in the early 1970s; the next five scenes are each a flashback from the previous scene; the seventh, eighth, ninth, tenth, and eleventh scenes are, respectively, continuations of the fifth, fourth, third, second, and first. So the play is set temporally in six parts, in the sequence ABCDEFEDCBA.

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

The scenes are symmetrically arranged around SCENE 6

- SCENE 1 An attic studio. A summer afternoon, 1972
- SCENE 2 The same. A few hours earlier
- SCENE 3 The same. A week earlier
- SCENE 4 A room in Lambeth. 1922
- SCENE 5 The same. 1920
- SCENE 6 In the open air. 1914
- SCENE 7 The room in Lambeth 1920. (Continues from the end of
 SCENE 5)
- SCENE 8 The same, 1922. (Continues from the end of SCENE 4)
- SCENE 9 The attic studio. 1972. (Continues from the end of SCENE 3)
- SCENE 10 The same. 1972. (Continues from the end of SCENE 2)
- SCENE 11 The same. 1972. (Continues from the end of SCENE 1)

Time—1972 and, in flashback, 1922, 1920 and 1914

Other plays by Tom Stoppard
published by Samuel French Ltd:

Albert's Bridge
Dirty Linen and New-Found-land
The Fifteen Minute Hamlet
If You're Glad I'll Be Frank
Night and Day
The Real Inspector Hound
The Real Thing
Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead
A Separate Peace

SCENE 1

An attic studio. A summer afternoon, 1972

The room is evidently a studio shared, as it turns out, by three artists. It is a large attic space, approached from below by a staircase which disappears out of view. The top of the staircase is protected by a wooden balustrade. The balustrade is now broken. The attic contains various tools of the trade, including a canvas on an easel and a lifesize female figure suggesting a piece of early surrealism whose details will emerge from the dialogue. In general, the room conforms to what the play tells us, that three artists have lived and worked here for many years and not always harmoniously

Two elderly artists, Martello and Beauchamp, are standing quietly listening to a tape-recorder. The machine is not up to date, even for the 1970s, being something of a museum piece. The machine is playing and re-playing a loop of tape. Evidently, Beauchamp has adapted his machine so that it records and re-records, without wiping, on the same loop. Such a machine would certainly not be capable of this trick without a good deal of ingenuity on Beauchamp's part so it would be as well if the apparatus indicated this. The sounds coming from the machine are to be interpreted by Martello and Beauchamp thus:

- (a) *Donner dozing: an irregular droning noise*
- (b) *Careful footsteps approach. The effect is stealthy. A board creaks*
- (c) *This wakes Donner, i.e. the droning stops in mid-beat*
- (d) *The footsteps freeze*
- (e) *Donner's voice, unalarmed: "Ah! There you are . . ."*
- (f) *Two more quick steps, and then: thump!*
- (g) *Donner cries out*
- (h) *Wood cracks as he falls through a balustrade*
- (i) *He falls heavily down the stairs, with a final sickening thump when he hits the bottom. Silence*

So, after a pause the entire sequence of sounds begins again . . . droning . . . footsteps . . . and so on

Martello I think this is where I came in.

Tape: "Ah! There you are . . ."

Beauchamp And this is where you hit him.

Tape: Thump!

Martello I mean, it's going round again. The tape is going round in a *loop*.

Beauchamp Well, of course. I record in loops, lassoing my material—no, like trawling—no, like—no matter.

Tape: Donner reaches the bottom of the stairs

Martello Poor Donner.

The tape starts off again as before

Beauchamp (over the tape) Round and round, recording layer upon layer of silence while Donner dozed after a heavy lunch, the spools quietly folding silence upon itself, yes like packing linen into trunks . . . Fold, fold until the footsteps broke it . . . and woke him——

Tape: "Ah! there you are . . ."

How peaceful it was, in the afternoon in the great houses before the Great War, to doze after luncheon with only a fly buzzing in the stuffy room and a sense of the maids somewhere quietly folding the linen into pine chests . . .

Tape: Donner reaches the bottom of the stairs

Donner knew the post-prandial nap. His people were excellently connected. With mine, in fact.

Tape: re-continues under

I suppose we should let someone know, though not necessarily the entire circumstances. I'm not one to tell tales if no good can come of it.

Martello I will stand by you, Beauchamp. We have been together a long time.

Beauchamp You may rely on me, Martello. I shall not cast the first stone.

Martello You *have* cast it, Beauchamp, but I do not prejudge you.

Beauchamp My feelings precisely, but there seems to be some confusion in your mind——

Martello My very thought. Turn off your machine, it seems to be disturbing your concentration——

Tape: "Ah!——" and is switched off

Beauchamp There you are.

Martello On the contrary, Beauchamp, there *you* are. Unless we can agree on *that*, I can't even begin to help you clear up this mess.

Beauchamp Don't touch him, Martello.

Martello I don't mean clear up *Donner*!—honestly, Beauchamp, you buffoon!

Beauchamp Cynic!

Martello Geriatric!

Beauchamp Murderer!

Pause

Martello As I was saying, I shall help you so far as I can through the difficult days ahead, whether in duplicity or in the police courts, depending on how you intend to face the situation; but I shall do so only on the condition that we drop this farce of accusation and counter-accusation.

You had only two friends in the world, and having killed one you can't afford to irritate the other.

Beauchamp Very well!—I gave you your chance, and now I'm going to get the police.

Martello A very sensible decision. You are too feeble to run, and too forgetful to tell lies consistent with each other. Furthermore, you are too old to make the gain worth the candle. Be absolutely frank with them, but do not plead insanity. That would reflect undeserved credit on three generations of art critics.

Beauchamp I must say, Martello, I have to admire your gall.

Martello Stress all mitigating factors, such as Donner's refusal to clean the bath after use, and his infuriating mannerisms any of which might have got him murdered years ago. Remember how John used to say, "If Donner whistles the opening of Beethoven's Fifth in six/eight time once more I'll *kill him!*"?

Beauchamp John who?

Martello Augustus John.

Beauchamp No, no, it was Edith Sitwell.

Martello Rubbish!—you're getting old, Beauchamp.

Beauchamp I am two years younger than you, Martello.

Martello Anybody who is two years younger than me is *senile*. It is only by a great effort of will that my body has not decomposed. Which reminds me, you can't leave Donner lying there at the bottom of the stairs for very long in this weather.

Beauchamp It is nothing to do with me.

Martello Beauchamp, I am shocked. You were at school together. You signed his first manifesto, as he signed yours. You have conjured with his name and travelled on his ticket; shared his roof, his prejudices, his occasional grant; eaten his bread and drunk his health (God forgive my *brain!*—it is so attuned to the ironic tone it has become ironical in repose; I have to whip sincerity out of it as one whips responses from a mule!)—to put it plain, you have been friends for over sixty years.

Beauchamp Well, the same goes for you.

Martello Yes, but you killed him.

Beauchamp I did no such thing! And you have good reason to know it! I am thoroughly disillusioned in you, Martello. I was willing to bend over backwards to see your side of it, but I can't stand a chap who won't come clean when he's found out.

Martello I, on the other hand, admire your hopeless persistence. But the tape-recorder speaks for itself. That is, of course, the point about tape-recorders. In this case it is eloquent, grandiloquent, not to say Grundigloquent—Oh God, if only I could turn it *off!*—no wonder I have achieved nothing with my life!—my brain is on a flying trapeze that outstrips all the possibilities of action. Mental acrobatics, Beauchamp—I have achieved nothing but mental acrobatics—*nothing!*—whereas you, however wrongly and for whatever reason, came to grips with life at least this once, and killed Donner.

Beauchamp It's not true, Martello!

Martello Yes, yes, I tell you, *nothing!*—*Niente! Nada! Nichts!*—Oh, a few pieces here and there, a few scandals—Zurich—Paris—Buenos Aires—but, all in all, nothing, not even among the nihilists! (*Pause*) I tell you, **Beauchamp**, it's no secret between us that I never saw much point in your tonal art. I remember saying to Sophie, in the early days when you were still using gramophone discs, **Beauchamp** is wasting his time, I said, there'll be no revelations coming out of *that*; no truth. And the critics won't listen either. And they didn't. But this time you've got them by the ears. It has the impact of newsreel. In my opinion it's a *tour de force*.

Beauchamp You are clearly deranged. It is probably the first time a murderer has tried to justify himself on artistic grounds. As it happens, you are also misguided. Far from creating a *tour de force*, you ruined what would have been a strand in my masterwork of accumulated silence, and left in its place a melodramatic fragment whose point will not be lost on a jury.

Beauchamp presses the tape switch:—"There you are . . ." etc.

There indeed he is, ladies and gentlemen, caught by the fortuitous presence of a recording machine that had been left running in the room where Mr Donner was quietly working on a portrait from memory, a portrait fated to be unfinished.

Martello Poor Donner, he never had much luck with Sophie.

Beauchamp For the existence of this recording we have to thank Mr **Beauchamp**, a fact which argues his innocence, were it ever in doubt. Mr **Beauchamp**, an artist who may be familiar to some of you—

Martello If you are extremely old and collect trivia—

Beauchamp—and his friends, Mr Donner and the man **Martello**, lived and worked together in a single large attic studio approached by a staircase, which led upwards from the landing, and was guarded at the top by an insubstantial rail, through which, as you will hear, Mr Donner fell.

Martello An accident, really.

Beauchamp If you say so.

Martello You didn't mean to *kill* him. It was manslaughter.

Beauchamp You will hear how Mr Donner, while working, dozed off in his chair . . .

Tape: Droning

Footsteps approach.

Tape: Footsteps

Someone has entered quietly. Who? No visitors came to this place. **Martello** and Mr **Beauchamp** met their acquaintances outside, formerly at the *Savage*, latterly in public houses. And Mr Donner, who was somewhat reclusive, not to say misanthropic, had no friends at all—except the other two, *a fact whose importance speaks for itself*—

Tape: "Ah! There you are . . ."—and is switched off

Not, "Who the devil are you?" or "Good Lord, what are you doing here,

I haven't seen you for donkey's years!"—no. "Ah. There you are." The footsteps can only have belonged to the man Martello.

Martello Or, of course, the man Beauchamp. It is absurd that you should prevaricate in this way when there is no third party to impress. I came home to find Donner dead, and you at the top of the stairs, fiddling with your tape-recorder. It is quite clear that I arrived just in time to stop you wiping out the evidence.

Beauchamp But it was I who came home and found Donner dead—with your footsteps on the machine. My first thought was to preserve any evidence it had picked up, so I very quietly ascended——

Martello Beauchamp, why are you bothering to lie to *me*? You are like a man on a desert island refusing to admit to his only companion that he ate the last coconut.

Beauchamp For the very good reason that while my back was turned you shinned up the tree and guzzled it. And *incidentally*—I see that you have discovered where I keep my special marmalade. That's *stealing*, Martello, common theft. That marmalade does *not* come out of the housekeeping——

Martello It must have been Donner.

Beauchamp It was not Donner. Donner never cleaned the tub and he always helped himself to cheese in such a way as to leave all the rind, but he never stole my marmalade because he didn't *like* marmalade. He did steal my *honey*, I know that for a fact. And he had the nerve to accuse me of taking the top off the milk.

Martello Well, you do.

Beauchamp (*furiously*) Because I have paid the milkman four weeks running! It's *my milk*!

Martello I suppose we should leave a note for him. Two pints a day will be enough now.

Beauchamp Since you will be in jail, one pint will be ample. Poor Donner. He was not so easy to get on with in recent years, but I shall always regret that my last conversation with him was not more friendly.

Martello Were you rowing about the housekeeping again?

Beauchamp No, no. He was rather unfeeling about my work in progress, as a matter of fact.

Martello He was rude about mine the other day. He attacked it.

Beauchamp He said mine was rubbish.

Martello Did he attack you? Was that it?

Beauchamp Why did he resent me? He seemed embittered, lately ...

Martello He'd been brooding about Sophie.

Beauchamp And that ridiculous painting. What was the matter with the man?

Martello I think I was rather at fault ...

Beauchamp I paid him the compliment of letting him hear how my master-tape was progressing ...

SCENE 2

The same. A few hours earlier

The balustrade is now unbroken

Donner is working at the easel. He is painting "a naked woman sitting about a garden with a unicorn eating the roses"

Beauchamp is busy with his own art form: listening appreciatively to his latest tape; which is a tonal collage of random noises, sighs, pops, squeaks, human and mechanical, randomly captured and layered over each other, interspersed by periods of relative quiet. Beauchamp allows the tape to play for a while and then turns it off

Beauchamp Well, what do you think of it, Donner? Take your time, choose your words carefully.

Donner I think it's rubbish.

Beauchamp Oh. You mean, a sort of tonal debris, as it were?

Donner No, rubbish, general rubbish. In the sense of being worthless, without value; rot, nonsense. Rubbish, in fact.

Beauchamp Ah. The detritus of audible existence, a sort of refuse heap of sound . . .

Donner I mean, *rubbish*. I'm sorry, Beauchamp, but you must come to terms with the fact that our paths have diverged. I very much enjoyed my years in that child's garden of easy victories known as the avant-garde, but I am now engaged in the infinitely more difficult task of painting what the eye sees.

Beauchamp Well, I've never seen a naked woman sitting about a garden with a unicorn eating the roses.

Donner Don't split hairs with *me*, Beauchamp. You don't know what art is. Those tape-recordings of yours are the mechanical expressions of a small intellectual idea, the kind of notion that might occur to a man in his bath and be forgotten in the business of drying between his toes. You can call it art if you like, but it is the commonplace of any ironic imagination, and there are thousands of clerks and shop assistants who would be astonished to be called artists on their bath-night.

Beauchamp Wait a minute, Donner—

Beauchamp's attention is caught by a fly, which we can hear buzzing around

Donner And they, incidentally, would call your tapes—

Beauchamp Quiet!

Donner —rubbish.

The fly has landed on the table. Beauchamp slams his hand on the table

Beauchamp Missed him!

Donner I see I'm wasting my breath.

Beauchamp I heard you. Clerks—bath-night—rubbish, and so on. But my tapes are not for clerks. They are for initiates, as is all art.

Donner My kind is for Everyman.

Beauchamp Only because every man is an initiate of that particular mystery. But your painting is not for dogs, parrots, bicycles . . . You select your public. It is the same with me, but my tapes have greater mystery—they elude dogs, parrots, clerks and the greater part of mankind. If you played my tape on the radio, it would seem a meaningless noise, because it fulfils no expectations: people have been taught to expect certain kinds of insight but not others. The first duty of the artist is to capture the radio station.

Donner It was Lewis who said that.

Beauchamp Lewis who?

Donner Wyndham Lewis.

Beauchamp It was Edith Sitwell, as a matter of fact.

Donner Rubbish.

Beauchamp She came out with it while we were dancing.

Donner You never danced with Edith Sitwell.

Beauchamp Oh yes I did.

Donner You're thinking of that American woman who sang negro spirituals at Nancy Cunard's coming-out ball.

Beauchamp It was Queen Mary's wedding, as a matter of fact.

Donner You're mad.

Beauchamp I don't mean wedding, I mean launching.

Donner It was Nancy Cunard's coming-out.

Beauchamp Down at the docks?

Donner I can understand your confusion but British boats are not launched to the sound of minstrel favourites.

Beauchamp I don't mean launching, I mean maiden voyage.

Donner I refuse to discuss it. Rubbish, anyway.

Beauchamp Only because people have not been taught what to listen for, or how to listen.

Donner What are you talking about?

Beauchamp Really, Donner, your mind keeps wandering about in a senile chaos! My *tape*. If I had one good man placed high up in the BBC my tape would become art for millions, in time.

Donner It would not become art. An artist is someone who is gifted in some way which enables him to do something more or less well which can only be done badly or not at all by someone who is not thus gifted. To speak of an art which requires no gift is a contradiction employed by people like yourself who have an artistic bent but no particular skill.

Beauchamp smacks the table again, in pursuit of the elusive fly

Beauchamp Missed!

Donner An artistic imagination coupled with skill is talent.

Beauchamp Where is he?—Ah——(*He smacks the table again*) Damn!

Donner Skill without imagination is craftsmanship and gives us many useful objects such as wickerwork picnic baskets. Imagination without skill gives us modern art.

Beauchamp A perfectly reasonable summary.

Donner (*smacking his fist on the table in frustration*) Beauchamp!

Beauchamp Did you get him?

Donner I am trying to open your eyes to the nakedness of your emperor.

Beauchamp But Donner, ever since I've known you you've been running around asking for the name of his tailor—Symbolism, Surrealism, Imagism, Vorticism, Fauvism, Cubism—Dada, Drip-Action, Hard-Edge, Pop, Found Objects and Post-Object—it's only a matter of days since you spent the entire housekeeping on sugar to make an edible Venus de Milo, and now you've discovered the fashions of your childhood. What *happened* to you?

Donner I have returned to traditional values, that is where the true history of art continues to lie, not in your small jokes. I make no apology for the past, but precocity at our age is faintly ludicrous, don't you think?

Beauchamp At our age, *anything* we do is faintly ludicrous. Our best hope as artists is to transcend our limitations and become *utterly* ludicrous. Which you are proceeding to do with your portrait of Sophie, for surely you can see that a post-Pop pre-Raphaelite is pure Dada brought up to date——

This time Donner smacks Beauchamp

Donner Shut up, damn you!—how dare you talk of her?!—how dare you -- (*and weeps*)—*and would you stop cleaning the bath with my face flannel!* (*Pause*) I'm sorry—please accept my apology . . .

Beauchamp I'm sorry, Donner . . . I had no idea you felt so strongly about it.

Donner (*with a sniffle*) Well, I have to wash my face with it.

Beauchamp No, no, I mean about your new . . . Donner, what *has* happened? What happened between you and Martello? You have not been yourself . . . since you smashed your Venus and began your portrait . . . You have . . . shunned me——

Donner I did not intend to.

Beauchamp Have I offended you? Is it about the milk?

Donner No. I have just been—sad.

Beauchamp Do you blame me for Sophie?

Donner I don't know. It was a long time ago now. It *is* becoming a good likeness, isn't it?

Beauchamp Oh yes. She would have liked it. I mean if she could have seen it. A real Academy picture . . . !

Donner Yes.

Beauchamp I don't know, Donner . . . before the war, in Soho, you were always making plans to smuggle a live ostrich into the Royal Academy; and now look at you. In Zurich in nineteen fifteen you told Tarzan he was too conservative.

Donner Tarzan?

Beauchamp I don't mean Tarzan. Who do I mean? Similar name, conservative, nineteen fifteen.

Donner Tsar Nicholas?

Beauchamp No, no, Zurich.

Donner I remember Zurich . . . after our walking tour. God, what a walk! You were crazy, Beauchamp, you and your horse.

Beauchamp I'll never forget it. That really was a walk. When we got to Zurich, my boots were worn to paper. Sat in the *Café Rousseau* and put my feet up, ordered a lemon squash.

Donner The *Café Rousseau* was Monte Carlo later.

Beauchamp Monte Carlo was the *Café Russe*.

Donner Was it?

Beauchamp Put my feet up and ordered a *citron pressé* in the *Café Rousseau*.

Donner Still doesn't sound right.

Beauchamp Couldn't have it—no lemons. The waiter was very apologetic. No lemons because of the war, he said. Good God, I said, is Switzerland at war?—things have come to a pretty pass, is it the St Bernard?—Not a smile. Man at the next table laughed out loud and offered me a glass of squash made from lemon powder, remarking, "If lemons don't exist, it is necessary to invent them." It seemed wittier at the time, I don't know why.

Donner Voltaire!—of course, the *Café Voltaire*!

Beauchamp That was a rum bird.

Donner Voltaire?

Beauchamp No, Lenin.

Donner Oh yes. Very rum.

Beauchamp Very liberal with his lemon powder but a rum bird nevertheless. Edith saw through him right away. She said to him, "I don't know what you're waiting for but it's not going to happen in Switzerland." Of course, she was absolutely right.

Donner Edith was never in Switzerland. Your memory is playing you up again.

Beauchamp Oh yes she was.

Donner Not that time. That time was Hugo Ball and Hans Arp, Max, Kurt, André . . . Picabia . . . Tristan Tzara——

Beauchamp That was him!

Donner What was?

Beauchamp Conservative. But he had audacity. Wrote his name in the snow, and said, "There! . . . I think I'll call it The Alps."

Donner That was Marcel. He used to beat Lenin at chess. I think he had talent under all those jokes. He said to me, "There are two ways of becoming an artist. The first way is to do the things by which is meant art. The second way is to make art mean the things you do." What a stroke of genius! It made anything possible and everything safe!—safe from criticism, since our art admitted no standards outside itself; safe from comparison, since it had no history; safe from evaluation, since it referred to no system of values beyond the currency it had invented. We were no longer accountable. We were artists by mutual agreement.

Beauchamp So was everyone from Praxiteles to Rodin. There's nothing divine about classical standards; it's just a bigger club.

Donner It seems there is something divine about modern art nonetheless, for it is only sustained by faith. That is why artists have become as

complacent as priests. They do not have to demonstrate their truths. Like priests they demand our faith that something is more than it appears to be—bread, wine, a tin of soup . . .

Beauchamp Donner . . . *what happened?* A week ago you were still ahead of your time, and now look at you!—what did Martello say to you?

Donner It really doesn't matter. And how do I know he wasn't lying, just getting his own back?—you see, I damaged his figure, slightly . . . He was working on it—I didn't know what it was—And I brought him a cup of tea . . .

SCENE 3

The same. A week earlier

Donner has brought Martello a cup of tea, and one for himself. Martello has paused in working on his surreal female figure. Donner has paused in working on his "edible art"—perhaps carving a block of salt. Martello has borrowed Donner's newest work, a sugar Venus de Milo, and is scraping her into his cup of tea

Donner That's it—help yourself to sugar.

Martello I'm not getting any. She's set too hard.

Donner Knock off her head.

Martello I'd need a chisel.

Donner Well, stick her head-first into the cup and stir her around a bit.

Martello does so

Martello What a ridiculous business. How am I going to sprinkle her on my cornflakes?

Donner Starving peasants don't have cornflakes. Good God, Martello, if they had any corn do you think they'd turn it into a sunshine breakfast for figure-conscious typists?

Martello What the hell are you talking about? What starving peasants? Honestly, Donner, you go from one extreme to the other. On the whole I preferred your ceramic sugar lumps.

Donner No, I got the whole thing back to front with my ceramic food. Of course, ceramic bread and steak and strawberries with plaster-of-paris cream defined the problem very neatly, but I was still avoiding the answer. The question remained: how can one justify a work of art to a man with an empty belly? The answer, like all great insights, was simple: make it edible.

Martello Brilliant.

Donner It came to me in my—incidentally, is it you who keeps using my face-cloth to clean the tub?

Martello No. It must be Beauchamp.

Donner That man has absolutely no respect for property.

Martello I know. And he's taken to hiding the marmalade. Do you happen to know where it is?

Donner In the pickle jar.

Martello Cunning devil! Thank you.

Donner The olive oil is really honey.

Martello Incredible. It probably came to him in his bath, while he was using your flannel.

Donner Where is he?

Martello He went out to get some more sugar, out of his own money. I wonder where he'll hide it.

Donner Let him. Sugar art is only the beginning.

Martello It will give Cubism a new lease of life.

Donner Think of *Le Penseur* sculpted in . . .

Martello Cold rice pudding.

Donner Salt. Think of poor villages getting a month's supply of salt in the form of classical sculpture!

Martello And not just classical!—your own pieces, reproduced indelibly yet edibly—

Donner Think of pizza pies raised to the level of Van Gogh sunflowers!—think of a whole new range of pigments, from salt to liquorice!

Martello Your signed loaves of bread reproduced in sculpted dough, *baked* . . . your ceramic steaks carved from meat! It will give opinion back to the intellectuals and put taste where it belongs. From now on the artist's palate—

Donner Are you laughing at me, Martello?

Martello Certainly not, Donner. Let them eat art.

Donner Imagine my next exhibition, thrown open to the hungry . . . You know, Martello, for the first time I feel free of that small sense of shame which every artist lives with. I think, in a way, edible art is what we've all been looking for.

Martello Who?

Donner All of us!—Breton!—Ernst!—Marcel—Max—you—me—Remember how Pablo used to shout that the war had made art irrelevant?—well—

Martello Which Pablo?

Donner What do you mean, which Pablo?—*Pablo*!

Martello What, that one-armed waiter at the *Café Suisse*?

Donner Yes—the *Café Russe*—the proprietor, lost a leg at Verdun—

Martello God, he was slow, that Pablo. But it's amazing how you remember all the people who gave you credit . . .

Donner He gave you credit because you had been at Verdun.

Martello That's true.

Donner It was a lie.

Martello Wasn't I? It must have been pretty close to Verdun, our route was right through that bit of country, remember it well.

Donner God yes, what a walk. You were crazy, Martello.

Martello I must have been, I suppose.

Donner Beauchamp was crazy too.

Martello Him and his horse.

Donner That was about the last really good time we had . . .

Martello You hated it.

Donner No.

Martello More than the war.

Donner That's what killed it for me. After that, being an artist made no sense. I should have stopped then. Art made no sense.

Martello Except for nonsense art. Pablo never understood the difference. He used to get so angry about his missing arm——

Donner Leg . . .

Martello I can see him now—a tray in each hand, swearing . . . wait a minute——

Donner Leg.

Martello A tray in each leg . . . Are you deliberately trying to confuse me?

Donner He was right. He understood exactly. There *wasn't* any difference. We tried to make a distinction between the art that celebrated reason and history and logic and all assumptions, and our own dislocated anti-art of lost faith—but it was all the same insult to a one-legged soldier and the one-legged, one-armed, one-eyed regiment of the maimed. And here we are still at it, looking for another twist. Finally, the only thing I can say in defence of my figure is that you can eat it.

Martello And of mine that you can smile at it. How do you like her?

Donner Is it symbolic?

Martello Metaphorical.

Donner Why has she got straw on her head?

Martello Not straw—ripe corn. It's her hair. It was either ripe corn or spun gold, and I wouldn't know how to do that, it was bad enough getting the pearls for her teeth.

Donner They look like false teeth.

Martello Well, of course, they're artificial pearls. So are the ruby lips, of course. I know you'll appreciate her breasts.

Donner Oh yes. Are they edible?

Martello Well, you're not supposed to eat them—I'm only using real fruit for the moment, and real feathers for her swan-like neck. I don't know how to do her eyes: stars seem somehow inappropriate . . . Would you have described them as dark pools, perhaps?

Donner Who?

Martello Well, Sophie of course.

Donner Are you telling me that that *thing* is supposed to be Sophie?

Martello Metaphorically.

Donner You cad, Martello!

Martello I beg your pardon?

Donner You unspeakable rotter! Is nothing sacred to you?

Martello Hold on, Donner, no offence intended.

Donner What right have you to sneer at her memory?—I won't allow it, damn you! My God, she had a sad enough life without having her beauty mocked in death by your contemptible artistic presumptions——

Donner smacks the figure and a pearl bounces from her mouth

Martello Now steady on, Donner, you've knocked out one of her teeth.

Donner (*by now nearly weeping*) Oh Sophie . . . I cannot think of beauty without remembering your innocent grace, your hair like . . .

Martello Ripe corn——

Donner Gold. Your tragic gaze—eyes like——

Martello Stars——

Donner Bottomless pools, and when you laughed——

Martello Teeth like pearls——

Donner It was like a silver bell whose sound parted your pale ruby lips——

Martello A *silver bell!*—yes!—behind her breasts——

Donner —were like——

Martello ripe pears——

Donner Firm young apples——

Martello Pears. For heaven's sake control yourself, Donner!

Donner, in grief, is assaulting the figure

Donner Oh Sophie . . . I try to shut out the memory but it needs only . . . a ribbon . . . a flower . . . a phrase of music . . . a river flowing beneath ancient bridges . . . the scent of summertime . . .

SCENE 4

A room in Lambeth. 1922

Now we are in a different room, introduced by music from an accordion, cliché Parisian music, but the room is in fact in Lambeth

Young Beauchamp, who is in his mid 20s, is shutting and strapping up a leather suitcase. Sophie, aged 22, stands facing a window which is high up in the building. They are dressed for the street

The accordion music becomes distant

Sophie I must say I won't be entirely sorry to leave Lambeth—the river smells like a dead cat, and the accordionist downstairs is driving me insane . . . If only someone would give him a job, elsewhere, even for a few minutes. Or perhaps we could employ him to take down our suitcases. He'd have to put his accordion down for that. But then he'd probably whistle through his teeth. I'm sorry to be so useless, darling . . . Are the others downstairs? . . . Yes . . . that's them: isn't it awful to know voices, instantly and certainly, by their shouts to the waggoner five floors down . . . I wish that yours was the only voice I knew that well. I like them well enough—they are both kind, and your oldest friends, which is enough to endear them . . . But I think now—forgive me—but I think now—before it is too late . . . I think we ought not to go with them, I think we ought to remain, just you and I . . . Darling—please—Please don't do up the strap—say what you think—it's not too late—Please say quickly, I heard Banjo's feet across the hall, he'll be up in a moment . . . *Please don't do it up!* . . . not even slowly . . . (*Wan, affectionate, ironic*) I can hear the clothes

you put on in the morning . . . Your serge today, hear it and smell it—with a cornflower out of the vase: I caught that the minute you put it in your buttonhole—do you sometimes wonder whether I'm a witch . . . ? I'm only your good fairy, if you let me, and I want to stay here with you. I'll be all right, after all this time, I'm confident now, I won't be frightened, ever, even when you leave me here—and of course you will be going out—often—to visit Mouse and Banjo in their new studio—Please *say*.

Beauchamp Sophie . . . How can I say . . . ?

Young Martello enters

Martello Hello . . . So—what news?

Beauchamp None. (*He violently pulls the case-strap tight*) I'll take this down. How's the waggon?

Martello All right, but I fear for the horse—bow-backed and spindle-shanked.

Beauchamp I'll . . . come back.

Beauchamp leaves, taking the suitcase

Sophie I'm sorry not to be helping. I have to sit by the window and be look-out.

Martello (*laughing openly*) Oh, that's frightfully good. Always making such good fun of yourself, Sophie . . .

Sophie Perhaps there will be another accordionist waiting for us across the river. And no doubt the smell will be much the same on the left bank. But I shall like the Chelsea side much better.

Martello It's a better class of people, of course. Even the artists are desperately middle-class.

Sophie I was thinking of the sunshine—we'll be facing south on that bank, and we'll get the sun through our front windows. I shall sit at my new post, with the sun on my face, and imagine the view as Turner painted it. It probably has not changed so very much, apart from the colours. Don't you wish you could paint like Turner?—no, I'm sorry, of course you don't, how stupid of me . . . Well, I don't suppose Turner would have wished to paint like you. He *could* have done, of course.

Martello Of course.

Sophie But he would not have wished to.

Martello It would not have occurred to him to do so; I think that's really the point.

Sophie Yes, I think it really is. What are you doing now?

Martello I'm not painting now. I'm making a figure.

Sophie I really meant *now*—at this moment—what are you doing here?

Martello Oh. Well, I'm not actually doing anything now, just talking to you.

Sophie Can you see a hamper anywhere?

Martello A hamper?—no.

Sophie There ought to be one; for my shoes and handbags.

Martello Well, wait till Biscuit comes up—I think I can hear him on the stairs.

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