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SF PERUSALS

The City of Conversation

Anthony Giardina

A Samuel French Acting Edition

SAMUEL FRENCH
FOUNDED 1830

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THE CITY OF CONVERSATION was first produced by the Lincoln Center Theater (Andre Bishop, Producing Artistic Director; Adam Siegel, Managing Director) at the Mitzi E. Newhouse Theater in New York City on April 10, 2014. The performance was directed by Doug Hughes, with sets by John Lee Beatty, costumes by Catherine Zuber, lighting by Tyler Micoleau, and original music and sound by Mark Bennett. The Production Stage Manager was James FitzSimmons. The cast was as follows:

JEAN SWIFT. . . . . Beth Dixon
COLIN FERRIS/ETHAN FERRIS (AGE 27) . . . . . Michael Simpson
ANNA FITZGERALD . . . . . Kristen Bush
HESTER FERRIS . . . . . .Jan Maxwell
GEORGE MALLONEE . . . . . .John Aylward
CHANDLER HARRIS . . . . . Kevin O'Rourke
CAROLYN MALLONEE. . . . . Barbara Garrick
ETHAN FERRIS (AGE 6). . . . . Luke Niehaus
DONALD LOGAN . . . . . .Phillip James Brannon

CHARACTERS

JEAN SWIFT

COLIN FERRIS

ANNA FITZGERALD

HESTER FERRIS

GEORGE MALLONEE

CHANDLER HARRIS

CAROLYN MALLONEE

ETHAN FERRIS, at age 6

ETHAN FERRIS, at age 27

DONALD LOGAN

ETHAN and **COLIN** can be, and are intended to be, played by the same actor.

SETTING

The living room of a townhouse in Georgetown, in Washington, D.C.

TIME

Fall 1979 to January 2009

AUTHOR'S NOTES

A note on the use of parentheses in dialogue: when a line begins or ends with certain words enclosed in parentheses, it means that the words are meant to overlap with the words in the following or preceding parentheses. In other words, those are places where people are meant to deliberately step on each other's lines.

ACT ONE

Scene One

(October, 1979.)

(In the dark, we hear excerpts from Jimmy Carter's 1979 "Malaise" speech – "The erosion of our confidence in the future is threatening to destroy the social and political fabric of America… The symptoms of this crisis of the American spirit are all around us… Washington D.C. has become an island. The gap between our our citizens and government has never been so wide.")

(Lights come up on a living room in Georgetown. The room is well appointed, not extravagant. There should be very small signs of eccentric taste. On a credenza, an array of small framed photographs. Large windows open onto the top of a garden. Doors stage right open onto a kitchen (unseen); there is an entrance to the dining room at lower stage right. Stairs lead to a bedroom upstairs.)

*(***JEAN SWIFT** *is seated at a small table, eating from a plate of toast. It is mid-morning. She has a list in front of her, and is checking things off, making notes. She has reading glasses on, and is dressed neatly. She is in her mid-fifties.)*

HESTER. *(calls from upstairs)* Cream of tartar? Jean? Do we have some? The caterer (asked especially) –

JEAN. (In the lazy Susan.) There should be plenty.

HESTER. Would you look? Would you make sure?

JEAN. *(wanting to finish her toast)* Hester, tell her you'll call her back.

HESTER. She says she'll hold.

JEAN. *(affected pique, as she rises, wipes her mouth with a napkin, goes into the kitchen)* I'll go.

(As soon as **JEAN** *exits,* **COLIN** *and* **ANNA** *enter from downstage. They are in their late twenties, wearing backpacks, and carrying one shared suitcase. They look exhausted, not particularly clean.* **COLIN***'s hair is longish; he may have a bit of a beard. They wear the clothes of ex-hippies of the period – jeans, perhaps corduroy jackets (much worn).* **ANNA***'s hair is long and blonde; she wears very high, attention-getting boots.)*

COLIN. The remains of a Spartan breakfast. Welcome to Washington, D.C.

(He eats the rest of **JEAN***'s toast.)*

ANNA. *(at the window)* I like the view.

COLIN. You'll like it even more. Joseph Alsop's house is over there. My mother will tell you all about it. The famous dinner she attended there with Jack Kennedy. Aren't you hungry?

ANNA. Starved.

COLIN. Here.

(They share the last piece of toast. A sexy little moment between them as **COLIN** *feeds her.)*

My mother lives to tell this story. The night in 1962 when Kennedy showed up for dinner looking all troubled until he saw, across the room, Isaiah Berlin.

(A beat.)

There won't be more of this, you know.

(to **ANNA***'s silent question:)*

My mother doesn't believe in keeping food in the house.

ANNA. I'll be fine. Just need a nap, that's all. And a shower.

*(***JEAN** *enters from the kitchen, holding a cup of coffee, calling up to* **HESTER**.*)*

JEAN. Hester, I took it down –

(Shocked at the sight of **COLIN** *and* **ANNA**, *she nearly drops her coffee.)*

COLIN. Hold on.

JEAN. Colin, we didn't expect you until *(*tomorrow*).*

COLIN. (Hold on.) Let me take your coffee. Give you a hug.

JEAN. *(as he hugs her, hard, lifting her off her feet)* Big boy. Oh my Lord.

COLIN. You didn't expect me until tomorrow because my mother got it wrong. Didn't she?

JEAN. Yes. No. She said – your letter said –

COLIN. Today. My letter said today. No matter. This is – (I'd like you to meet)

JEAN. (But she's having a) dinner tonight. Oh, you look wonderful. Scruffy, but healthy.

COLIN. My aunt Jean, I'd like you to meet Anna Fitzgerald.

JEAN. I'm sorry. Of course.

(She regards **ANNA***'s boots.)*

Welcome. I'm the aunt.

ANNA. Yes. (Nice to –)

COLIN. (A dinner) for who?

JEAN. Senator Mallonee from Kentucky. I'll call her. She'll be furious with herself.

(out of the side of her mouth, as if being mock-private)

In curlers.

(calling, as she goes upstairs:)

Hester! Colin's home a day early!

COLIN. *(calling after her)* I'm not – home – a day –

(Giving up, he turns, and he and **ANNA** *smile at one another.)*

She loved your boots.

ANNA. I noticed.

COLIN. Washington is not about boots like that.

ANNA. Not yet, anyway.

COLIN. *(made slightly nervous by what* **ANNA***'s just said, he calls off:)* Jean, is there more toast?

JEAN. *(re-enters)* She's coming, she's coming. Of course she doesn't want you to see her in curlers. But she's so excited.

(As **COLIN** *holds up the plate expectantly:)*

No, I'm afraid not. You know how she is. I brought my own from home. I'll see if there's something in the cupboards. They didn't feed you on the plane?

(heading back into the kitchen)

Hester, never mind the curlers! Colin is dying to see you!

(As **JEAN** *heads into the kitchen,* **HESTER** *enters. She is in a silk robe, hurriedly taking curlers out of her hair, holding a hairbrush. In spite of the fact that we are not seeing her at her best, it is evident that she is a glamorous woman with a vivid sensuality. Like her sister, she is in her early fifties, and very excited to see her son.)*

HESTER. Darling. You were supposed to arrive tomorrow.

COLIN. Today, actually.

HESTER. No, I was sure. You're positively hirsute. Cave man. Oh God, you're gorgeous, though.

(The following line should be said as they engage in a huge hug.)

How dare you come and see me when I'm like this? Curlers in my hair.

(Within the hug, she regards **ANNA***.)*

Who's this?

COLIN. I wrote you. Do you read my letters? Anna Fitzgerald, my mother. Hester Ferris.

(As **JEAN** *did,* **HESTER** *regards* **ANNA***'s boots with a barely disguised critical regard.)*

HESTER. My son is a terrible correspondent.

ANNA. I know.

HESTER. Forgive me.

ANNA. His scrawl is unreadable. Don't blame yourself.

HESTER. I don't. It's very nice to meet you, though. Unprepared as I am.

ANNA. *(slightly intimidated, in spite of her attempt not to be)* I've seen pictures of you looking extraordinarily glamorous. So there's no need to apologize for the curlers.

HESTER. Thank you. That's kind. Where did you find her, Colin? Did you attend the London School of Economics as well?

ANNA. I did.

COLIN. Winner of the Ormsby Prize.

HESTER. My.

ANNA. *(deflecting attention from herself)* With Henry Kissinger.

(In response to **HESTER***'s slight confusion:)*

The picture I'm talking about. You at Nixon's Second Inaugural. The dress you wore.

HESTER. That was ages ago. Seven years, I think. But thank you.

*(***JEAN** *enters, holding a box of Pop Tarts.)*

JEAN. Here. Will this do? I think you toast them.

COLIN. Aunt Jean, check the expiration date.

*(***JEAN** *puts on her glasses, does.)*

JEAN. Oh dear.

(She exits.)

COLIN. *(He puts his hands around his mother's face, squeezing maybe a little too roughly.)* Do you throw nothing out? Do you buy nothing new?

HESTER. Don't. Dear.

COLIN. Why not? Mess with you?

(touching her face more affectionately, almost sexually, now)

Can't mess with you?

HESTER. Of course you can. But my face has become so vulnerable. And tonight, Senator Mallonee is coming.

*(***HESTER** *has by now begun removing her curlers, and will, throughout the remainder of the scene, begin brushing her hair, to bring herself to her customary level of presentableness.)*

COLIN. To dinner. I know.

HESTER. With his wife. From Kentucky.

COLIN. Well, what are you worried about? Not enough chairs? Last time I was in the dining room I counted six. And we can bring an extra one in for Jean.

HESTER. Oh, Jean doesn't come to these dinners. You know that. Now stop joking with me. This is important. You have to promise to behave.

COLIN. Of course I will.

HESTER. Promise. Don't sass him. This is hugely important.

COLIN. You can give us some money and send us out for something to eat and have us arrive just in time to say goodbye.

HESTER. I want you here.

COLIN. *(to* **ANNA***)* What she used to do.

HESTER. But I want you to look nice. Will you do me the biggest favor and get a haircut?

COLIN. Why?

HESTER. Because these are conservative people, Colin, and you've been away. Sideburns are fine. Sideburns are in fact disgustingly fashionable in this town right now. But long hair is not –

COLIN. Not what?

HESTER. It brings back memories. Raw – things. Vietnam. We're barely over Vietnam here. I'm sure in London it's all ancient history. I can have Chandler make you an appointment in the Congressional barber shop.

COLIN. What's this dinner about? Excuse me –

(turning to **ANNA***)*

Dinner, you have to understand, is always about something.

HESTER. It's really all settled. It's a little Judiciary Committee thing.

JEAN. *(enters, holding a plate)* I found an egg. And scrambled it.

COLIN. God bless you, Aunt Jean.

(Ravenous, he eats.)

JEAN. One lone egg in the back of the refrigerator.

COLIN. *(remembering to offer some of the egg to* **ANNA***, who refuses it)* So. Judiciary Committee thing.

HESTER. Chandler and Teddy Kennedy. And you won't believe it – even Strom Thurmond has signed on. It all started when Jimmy Carter –

COLIN. *(to* **ANNA***, explaining, and hugely amused by his mother's opinions)* The unforgivable one.

HESTER. President Seatwarmer. The Emperor of Malaise. Appointed a federal judge by all accounts decent except that he refuses to resign from his all-white country club.

COLIN. Aunt Jean, this is the Willie Mays of eggs.

JEAN. *(flattered)* There was only one.

COLIN. Yes. Go on.

HESTER. It's something Chandler and Teddy are trying to do. Force resignations.

COLIN. From all-white country clubs.

HESTER. As a kind of benchmark for nomination to the Federal judiciary. Which of course should have happened years ago. Should have happened. But well, now, Teddy, Chandler, Strom Thurmond –

COLIN. And hopefully Senator Mallonee from Kentucky.

HESTER. Which is an awful state. You know that.

COLIN. *(starting off)* I'm going to wash this plate, Aunt Jean. So you don't have to. And then stow some of this stuff.

JEAN. Oh no, you shouldn't have to (wash it) –

COLIN. Why is Kentucky an awful state?

HESTER. Think about it. Who ever has come from Kentucky?

COLIN. The Great Compromiser, Henry Clay. Zachary Taylor. Lincoln was raised there.

HESTER. You're so good.

COLIN. Do you think I've forgotten all those dinnertime tutorials? Other kids got "Pat the Bunny". I got selections from de Tocqueville.

(He exits, with his and **ANNA***'s bags. Both* **HESTER** *and* **JEAN** *smile after him, appreciating him.)*

JEAN. He shouldn't have to wash it.

(She exits after **COLIN**. **HESTER** *and* **ANNA** *are alone.* **HESTER** *has by now removed all her rollers and is brushing her hair.)*

HESTER. Anna Fitzgerald.

ANNA. Yes. From Minneapolis. Obsequious Minneapolis.

HESTER. I'll bet you're an ambitious girl.

ANNA. I'll bet you're right.

HESTER. Come to look around Washington?

ANNA. Yes. To see if it's the place. To see if it's the right fit.

HESTER. Colin should know that. He grew up here.

ANNA. But I didn't...

HESTER. And you're that kind of couple. It has to work for both of you.

ANNA. Yes.

HESTER. Dual careers. Parallel tracks.

ANNA. Yes. I wonder if I could ask you something.

(A beat. **HESTER** *nods permission.)*

Something arising out of my naivete. My Minneapolisness.

HESTER. Of course.

ANNA. Can I watch you get ready?

*(***HESTER** *tilts her head. It's an odd request.)*

Watch how you do it. How you choose what to wear. How you – stage yourself. I'd like to learn.

HESTER. I think I saw this movie.

(Now it's **ANNA***'s turn to tilt her head, not sure where this is leading.)*

The young faux-naif making up to the aging star.

*(***ANNA** *still doesn't seem to get it.)*

It's called *All About Eve*.

ANNA. Forgive me. I didn't want to make that kind of impression.

HESTER. But you have. All right. First lesson. Washington is about boldness, but it has to be couched in layers. People smell ambition. They do, and they defend themselves. The turf is not so large, you know.

COLIN. *(enters, angry)* Jesus, he's got his stuff all over my room. Where exactly are we supposed to sleep?

HESTER. Who? Who's got his stuff?

COLIN. Chandler. You've allowed him to take over.

HESTER. Well, I let him use your room, of course, but I didn't know he had "taken over".

COLIN. Don't you two sleep together?

HESTER. What a question.

COLIN. Well, why does he need two rooms?

HESTER. Jean will clean it up. Jean!

COLIN. She's your sister. She's not the maid.

(The next four lines should overlap one another:)

HESTER. *(calling offstage)* Jean! will you take Chandler's things out of Colin's room?

JEAN. *(offstage)* And put them where?

HESTER. In mine.

COLIN. Jean. No. I will do it.

(turning to his mother:)

Why in God's name don't you two just get married?

HESTER. Because we can't. You know that. He's married. You know that.

COLIN. I'm surprised you're not afraid of being found out. You and the senior Senator from Virginia.

HESTER. Darling, it's still a small town in one sense. When you find yourself seated next to Don Graham at dinner every two weeks or so, you don't have to worry about your affairs turning up in the Washington Post.

COLIN. *(to* **ANNA**, *another demonstration of what he's wanted to show her)* You see? Everything covered.

(It's only now that he picks up on the tension between these two women.)

What – happened?

ANNA. Nothing.

HESTER. Nothing at all. One little mistake.

(She's now almost over-friendly to **ANNA**, *perhaps even taking her hand.)*

You get more than one mistake, Anna. Listen. I have a dress for tonight I think you'd look splendid in.

ANNA. I have a dress.

HESTER. No, no, let me do this, to make up for being a little too harsh with you before. Please. That dress you spoke about before, from Nixon's Inaugural – I still have it. I've saved it, of course I've saved it.

(calling off)

Jean, the black Geoffrey Beene in the back of my closet! I'm sure you'll be able to get into it. Please. Let me.

(She exits.)

ANNA. She's very good.

COLIN. Oh, she's the best but you're her match. Trust me.

*(***COLIN** *approaches her from behind, lifts up her hair, tickles the back of her neck.)*

Listen, don't lose your nerve tonight.

ANNA. In her dress.

COLIN. Wear the dress. You don't have a dress as good as hers. Dazzle them tonight. Wear the dress.

*(***JEAN** *enters, carrying the dress, followed by* **HESTER**.*)*

JEAN. I think this should fit you nicely.

HESTER. Try it on.

*(***ANNA** *takes the dress and starts to move off.)*

Where are you going?

ANNA. To try it on.

HESTER. Dear, you don't need privacy. We're all women. Except for Colin.

JEAN. And he's seen you, no doubt.

ANNA. Yes. He has.

HESTER. Try it on.

ANNA. I'd prefer privacy.

COLIN. There's a bathroom right off the hallway.

HESTER. *(as* **ANNA** *is exiting)* Just – leave the boots here, dear.

*(***ANNA** *is half shocked, half amused by this. She takes the boots off, then exits. As soon as she's gone,* **HESTER** *picks up the boots as though she's handling something rancid, and places them beside what we presume to be a door downstage.)*

COLIN. What exactly are you doing?

HESTER. You can't be serious about that girl.

COLIN. I am entirely serious about that girl.

HESTER. She'll eat you alive. I have an instinct about these things.

JEAN. Hester.

COLIN. Then I'll be eaten alive. I'm going to marry her.

(This affects **HESTER** *more than she'd like to show.)*

JEAN. That's wonderful.

HESTER. Colin, I am sure you're utterly enchanted, as who wouldn't be? That hair and those legs. But you don't marry a girl like that.

COLIN. No? I thought you did. I thought you fall in love with a girl like that and the next most natural thing in the world was to want to spend your life with her.

HESTER. You want to have a career here, don't you?

COLIN. Here. Or somewhere.

HESTER. Don't be silly. Who do you think you're talking to? She's come here so that she can take over this town. You'll be her little adjunct.

COLIN. We both did well. Stars, you might say. At the London School of Economics.

HESTER. Well, let me call up Cy Vance right now and tell him that. Because of course that doesn't make you a dime a dozen in this town.

COLIN. All right. Enough.

HESTER. I had looked forward to having you here.

*(***JEAN** *looks at the floor, embarrassed.* **COLIN** *notices this.)*

COLIN. To groom me. To make sure I don't put a foot wrong.

HESTER. Say it that way if you must.

*(***ANNA** *enters, looking spectacular in the dress.)*

I knew it!

JEAN. Stunning.

HESTER. You're transformed.

ANNA. Am I?

HESTER. Senator Mallonee will have eyes for no one else.

ANNA. Well.

HESTER. Though there are always rumors about him playing for the other team.

*(***COLIN** *and* **ANNA** *look at her, questioning.)*

Well, he is a conservative Republican, after all.

JEAN. Paging Noël Coward.

(They all look at **JEAN**. *She smiles to herself.)*

HESTER. But tonight, seeing you in this dress, he will be entirely and forcefully heterosexual. And now let me tell you why it's so important that you both of you – please just be decorative and gentle at dinner.

The stakes are huge for us tonight. Teddy needs us to secure this vote so he can start off his Presidential campaign with a bang. And if Chandler can do this for Teddy, there's a very good chance he'll have a shot at the Cabinet, or even the Vice Presidency. I'm being quite naked about this in order to ask you this hugely important favor.

COLIN. We're going to be half asleep at the dinner table. I don't think you have to worry about us being anything but –

ANNA. Decorative and gentle.

HESTER. And a haircut, please?

*(***COLIN** *shakes his head.)*

This is important, Colin. It's important to Chandler.

COLIN. *(starting off)* I'm going to clear out Chandler's stuff so that I can take a nap. In my disgustingly long hair.

*(***JEAN** *starts off after him, but they're both stopped by* **ANNA**, *though her comment is made directly to* **HESTER**.*)*

ANNA. I wonder how you can lift the soup spoon to your mouth. With so much at stake. At these dinners, I mean.

*(***COLIN** *hesitates – wants to be present now for any conversation between his mother and* **ANNA**.*)*

HESTER. You get used to it. We're an arm of the government, you might say. Georgetown. Dinners in Georgetown. Or we were. And will be again.

COLIN. The once and future king. Teddy will bring it all back. Challenge Carter, win the nomination. *Resurgit.* And Chandler with him. And you with Chandler.

HESTER. He's never taken this as seriously as he should have, I'll tell you, because he's incapable of anything like proper awe. Which I have tried to invest in him since he was a child.

COLIN. Awe.

HESTER. *(as she takes* **ANNA***'s hand, leading her to the window:)* Over there. Joseph Alsop's house. You know Alsop?

ANNA. He was a great columnist.

HESTER. One night Jack Kennedy came to his house for dinner looking (all –)

COLIN. (Here's the story.)

HESTER. (– troubled.) He told you? We all knew something was up. The guests were Kay and Philip Graham, myself and Colin's father, and Isaiah Berlin. "Isaiah," Kennedy asked at dinner –

COLIN. "What have the Russians historically done when another country pushed their backs against the wall?"

HESTER. The next day we heard about the Cuban missile crisis. You see, he was secretly looking for advice, and he took it. That's the way it used to be. A president was able to get out of the White House, come to Georgetown, and learn something just because someone brilliant happened to be at dinner. Nixon did away with all that.

COLIN. Vietnam did away with all that.

HESTER. Fair enough. But Nixon killed it by deciding to be afraid of us, and now this band of mugwumps in the White House, this southern cabal –

COLIN. Spoken like a true Southerner.

HESTER. But it can all come back. Say what you will about the Kennedys. They know how to use us to move a social agenda forward. And that is what we are about. So if dinner is sometimes tense with purpose, you do get used to it.

ANNA. I very much hope to.

(Something in this stops **HESTER***, if very briefly.)*

HESTER. Come, Colin, promise to be my good son tonight, and I'll help you clear out Chandler's things.

COLIN. *(as she's leading him off)* Just don't try and get anywhere near me with a pair of scissors.

*(***HESTER** *and* **COLIN** *exit.)*

(Left alone onstage, **ANNA** *and* **JEAN** *smile tightly at one another.)*

ANNA. I'm very sorry about your husband. Colin has told me about it. You lost him in the Second World War?

JEAN. Oh, all that was so long ago. Forgotten, really.

ANNA. Not by everyone.

*(***ANNA** *exits.)*

*(***JEAN** *watches her go, then approaches the table, where her plate of toast has been left. She's hoping to find some toast remaining, but all that's left is crumbs. Still watching the place where* **ANNA** *has exited, she begins to gather the crumbs onto her thumb and then lifts her thumb to her mouth to lick them off, all that's left of her breakfast.)*

(Lights down.)

Scene Two

(That evening.)

(Blackout music: Frank Sinatra's "It's Nice to Go Travelling")

(Lights up to reveal the living room in the aftermath of that evening's dinner. Candlelight, with some candles snuffed. Seated around a small table, **ANNA***, looking gorgeous in* **HESTER***'s dress, and now wearing earrings. Also seated are* **CHANDLER HARRIS***, a patrician liberal senator from Virginia, in his 50's, and* **GEORGE MALLONEE***, the Senator from Kentucky, roughly* **CHANDLER***'s age. They are all three smoking cigars, and holding snifters of brandy. Of the three, only* **CHANDLER** *looks like he's not having a very good time.)*

MALLONEE. I must say, Chandler, I'm admiring this young lady's balls.

*(***ANNA** *laughs, coughs.)*

But you seem nervous.

CHANDLER. The last time a woman did this, refused to leave the gentlemen to their post-prandial drinks – I think it was Sally Quinn, before she got it, before she learned Washington.

*(***MALLONEE** *refills* **ANNA***'s brandy snifter.)*

MALLONEE. Young lady.

ANNA. Only if you do, Senator.

MALLONEE. I don't mind.

(He refills his own.)

Go on, Chandler.

CHANDLER. I'm just remembering how curtailed the conversation became. I believe we spent a long time pondering Adlai Stevenson's last recorded words.

ANNA. What were they?

CHANDLER. "I would like to sit in the shade with a glass of wine and watch the young people dance".

MALLONEE. That's the last thing he said? Good God, I hope it's not the last thing I say. I want to drop dead dancing. The young people can go to hell. Forgive me, young lady.

ANNA. I'll forgive you if you tell me what you usually do. The men alone. While the women go off. In this charmingly quaint fourteenth century ritual.

MALLONEE. We get naked and wrestle in the mud.

ANNA. Well, don't let me stop you.

MALLONEE. Chandler?

CHANDLER. Where do we find the mud, I wonder.

ANNA. Seriously. What do you do?

CHANDLER. We could tell you. But then we'd have to kill you.

*(***MALLONEE** *laughs.)*

MALLONEE. Tell her, for God's sake, Chandler.

CHANDLER. It's very dull. We use the bathroom. We tell an off-color story or two. We enjoy the privilege, in the understanding that it is soon to be taken away.

ANNA. Tell an off-color story. Please. I would love to hear one.

MALLONEE. Oh, you spoil all the pleasure. It's never –

CHANDLER. *(Seamlessly picking up the cue, as the two of them will continue to do with one another throughout this part of the scene.)* Deliberate. It's never a planned thing. It's something that happens.

MALLONEE. Exactly.

CHANDLER. Or funny, either. It's never really all that funny. Wouldn't you say?

MALLONEE. No. It's all about one guy leaning over another guy's shoulder, his hand on your shoulder, breathing close to you. Maybe you've been fighting all day about some pissant provision in some damn bill that can't move out of committee –

CHANDLER. Exactly.

MALLONEE. And suddenly he's a man. He's just a man with slightly foul breath. And the mere fact that he's using certain words –

CHANDLER. The great words. The great language.

MALLONEE. Dick. Tit. Ass.

CHANDLER. Shakespearean language.

MALLONEE. Suddenly he's familiar. He's not the asshole across the table holding up a bill because he won't agree to a little kickback to the bloc of farmers you've got to answer to.

CHANDLER. Screw the farmers, you almost say.

MALLONEE. I'll deal with farmers, you say. The bill moves a little closer to an agreed-upon state because the man you've spent the whole day –

CHANDLER. Fulminating against.

MALLONEE. He's just, goddammit, he's just a guy. You almost love him.

(A beat.)

ANNA. I could never penetrate that. Which is what makes me sad.

CHANDLER. Don't be sad. It's going. We might as well invite the others in. If I know Hester, she'll have had her ear to the door this whole time anyway.

(He exits.)

MALLONEE. Where'd your good looking boyfriend go?

ANNA. He seems to have picked up something weird on the plane.

MALLONEE. That's right. You're just back from England.

ANNA. Yes.

MALLONEE. Hate the place.

ANNA. Do you?

MALLONEE. Yes. Hate it. Don't tell anyone?

ANNA. Why?

MALLONEE. They don't like us. Don't like me, anyway. They pretend they do. But have you ever been with anybody

who's smiling at you, but you can tell they can't wait for you to leave so they can make fun of you?

ANNA. Yes, I have.

MALLONEE. Then there's the goddamn history. So much of it. Westminster. Whitehall. Like a weight on your back. Great thing about this country is we don't have to have a history if we don't want one. We can be as selective as we like. Go on citing George Washington and the Constitution, those'll cover a man for just about anything.

(to **ANNA***'s unspoken question)*

I'm serious.

ANNA. I don't doubt your seriousness.

MALLONEE. Or my intelligence. Secret of politics. Keep things simple. Hark back all you can. People feel like the government is out to take away their freedoms, and goddammit, they don't like that. You've always got to make it look like you're on the side of giving something back. Ever been to Kentucky?

ANNA. Not yet.

(He looks at her with new interest. **CHANDLER** *leads the women on, from where they have been waiting in an adjacent room –* **HESTER***, now looking fully "staged", and* **CAROLYN MALLONEE**. **MRS**. **MALLONEE** *looks very much the Kentucky doyenne – at least the 70's version of it – but with a Lauren Bacall sangfroid. They are all in the midst of a conversation.)*

HESTER. We've been discussing *Apocalypse Now.* And you –

CHANDLER. Don't be coy. You know exactly what we've been discussing.

MALLONEE. We saw that movie.

HESTER. Yes, and your wife was appalled by it.

CAROLYN. That's right. I was. Appalled.

MALLONEE. Oh, we both were. What was that?

CAROLYN. The whole movie, I was thinking, will someone please shave?

MALLONEE. Exactly. Like it was a goddamn rock and roll war.

HESTER. You're aware it's based on Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness.*

(A beat.)

CAROLYN. You know, Mrs. Ferris, I almost resent that.

(As it slowly dawns on **HESTER** *that she's committed a faux pas:)*

My Congressional Ladies' Book Club is reading that novel right now. As we speak. "Mistah Kurtz, he dead."

(She lights a cigarette.)

HESTER. I stand corrected.

MALLONEE. Tell them what else you read.

CAROLYN. George.

MALLONEE. Tell them.

CAROLYN. *(She won't.)* I don't like showing off.

MALLONEE. Henry James.

HESTER. I stand so corrected.

MALLONEE. Called this town. Tell them. "The city of conversation". Got that one right.

HESTER. Why is it I haven't been invited into this book club?

CAROLYN. *(a velvet fist)* We started it, Congressional ladies from places like Kentucky and Iowa and Nebraska, to defend ourselves from people like you, Mrs. Ferris, who might think that because we come from backwater places, that we are backwater people.

HESTER. Do you know where I come from?

MALLONEE. It so happens I do. My staff does good work. Forrest City, Arkansas. Though you'd never know it.

CAROLYN. She's worked hard to lose her accent.

MALLONEE. Why would you want to do that?

HESTER. Have you ever been to Forrest City, Arkansas? Kentucky, on the other hand. A wonderful state.

We're such creatures of assumption. To think I would think that. A backwater person like myself. I've driven through Kentucky only twice, I'm sorry to say, and what I felt was how lush and beautiful it was.

CAROLYN. Flatterer.

MALLONEE. No. Let her. Go on.

HESTER. That – grass. And those wonderful white fences. Horses. I've felt this other places. Texas. Places no one up here thinks much about. But you drive through and you get a feeling, it comes over you, what it must be like to be from there, the pride you must feel. Which is not possible everywhere. Not, anyway, in Forrest City, Arkansas.

MALLONEE. *(having enjoyed* **HESTER***'s little aria)* You've hit it. No one wants to leave.

HESTER. Which is why it seems silly to me that we should come to this city and feel we have to be able to quote Henry James, as if we all have to be all one thing. Something boiled down to an essence. When we're really so many things. We come from places we are so proud of, and want to protect, while at the same time understanding we are this odd and unwieldy but necessary union.

MALLONEE. Carolyn, She's absolutely right. I want you to quit that book club in the morning.

(He laughs loudly.)

*(***COLIN** *enters, having come from a long sojourn in the bathroom.)*

HESTER. Are you all right?

COLIN. *(holding his stomach gently)* Any – guess – as to how long that egg was in the refrigerator?

HESTER. The egg was fine. You drank too much, I think, at dinner.

COLIN. When you're tired, you do that.

MALLONEE. He's all right. Have some of this.

(He pours **COLIN** *brandy.)*

HESTER. I don't think so.

MALLONEE. Medicinal. Soothes the belly. An old Kentucky remedy.

(He winks at **HESTER**.*)*

*(***COLIN** *takes the brandy, under his mother's disapproving stare.)*

And speaking of this odd and – what?

ANNA. "Unwieldy but necessary" –

MALLONEE. Union. You mind if we talk a smattering of business? I mean, I'd much rather talk about Henry James.

CAROLYN. George can't get enough of Henry James.

MALLONEE. Well, that's what these damn dinners are supposed to be about, aren't they? Chatter and culture and nuance, and we don't talk about the real thing.

CHANDLER. What's the real thing?

MALLONEE. Fact is, I'm having doubts about this bill.

(to the others:)

Excuse us, this is what we were supposed to be talking about when this charming young lady joined us for drinks after dinner.

CHANDLER. Doubts?

MALLONEE. A lesson in Washington. These young people might enjoy this. Teddy Kennedy is running for President.

HESTER. He hasn't quite announced yet.

MALLONEE. Teddy Kennedy is running for President. And though Senator Kennedy seems to expect to be anointed, there will be primaries. Hard fought. You don't unseat a sitting President without hard fought. Some of these primaries will be in the South. He can't just win in the North. He's got to beat Carter somewhere in the South. So the question becomes –

ANNA. Carter's a Southerner.

MALLONEE. So the black vote becomes crucial. Who wins the black vote. Teddy gets an idea. From his august position as chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee, make a dramatic statement. Remind people of what the Kennedys stand for. Federal judges can no longer belong to all-white country clubs.

CHANDLER. Sounds entirely reasonable to me.

MALLONEE. Of course it does. If reason was the whole ball of wax.

HESTER. Strom Thurmond has signed on.

MALLONEE. Strom Thurmond, having spent his entire working life putting down the Negro race in this country, can afford a valedictory gesture of munificence.

HESTER. Senator Mallonee, your backwoods manner masks a certain eloquence.

MALLONEE. Thank you.

CAROLYN. Watch her, George.

HESTER. You have nothing at all to fear.

MALLONEE. But a man like me. Not valedictory but still in the arena. In Kentucky. There are judges who might well look askance.

HESTER. Rise above them.

MALLONEE. No, that's exactly where you're wrong. Nice men. Good men. Reasonable and enlightened men who enjoy a mint julep on the veranda. And when the veranda happens to be at the Royal Oaks Country Club, closed since time immemorial to our black brethren, well, there are friends there on the veranda with them.

(pause)

Tell them to resign? To lose forever the sight of that magenta-colored Kentucky sun falling behind the oak trees?

HESTER. You can't be serious.

MALLONEE. I am.

HESTER. Well, then, open it up.

(to his silent, skeptical question:)

The club.

MALLONEE. Oh yes, and watch our black friends stream in. They can't wait to get into the Royal Oaks. This is all a farce, Mrs. Ferris. Those places are about tradition, that's all they are. What's a black man going to find to enjoy on that veranda? The food is terrible, the drinks are weak. But the people who want to be there have to feel they can still do things even if they know those things aren't perfect.

CHANDLER. Teddy will make a speech, just prior to the vote, calling you the last holdout and the biggest obstacle to racial progress since Bull Connor. You will then be free to stage a dramatic turnabout and vote yes, earning yourself a place in the revised, updated version of *Profiles in Courage*.

MALLONEE. It so happens I don't want him to make that speech. I do not want to endear myself to my constituents by being called a racist. It so happens I'm not, and they do not want to see me that way. Trust me on this. But I do not believe in denying a man his beloved – ingrained – unbad – freedoms just because an entitled candidate is looking for a straw issue with which to beat a sitting President.

(A beat. **COLIN** *pours himself more brandy, suddenly nervous.)*

HESTER. Colin.

ANNA. In Minneapolis, where I come from, Senator.

MALLONEE. Lovely place, Minneapolis. The falls. Majestic.

ANNA. Or not the city of Minneapolis, exactly, but a small town north of there, there's a feeling – you can sense it when you talk to anyone – that we've gone about as far as we need to. That – I think what people would most like from Washington is a bill declaring the 60's officially over.

HESTER. Is that how they think in Minneapolis? I've often wondered.

COLIN. Let her talk.

ANNA. And by "the 60's", what they mean is the stranglehold of the Northeast – of a worldview that insists we all need to be legislatively coerced into good behavior. That seven or eight highly educated people in New York and Washington know what's best for the rest of us.

HESTER. God save us from the wisdom of the small town.

MALLONEE. Go on.

ANNA. The Kennedys, for instance. The long, ambiguously positive rule of a very rich, highly suspect American family with a set of ideals forged in the crucible of the trust fund.

HESTER. Perhaps you don't read the polls, young lady.

ANNA. My name is Anna.

HESTER. Forgive me. Anna. If the election were being held today –

ANNA. It so happens it isn't. Being held today.

HESTER. Senator Mallonee reads polls. And understands, I'm sure, what life might be like under a new Democratic President who will not appreciate a signature bill being held back by a single vote.

MALLONEE. Oh, I can appreciate that very well.

ANNA. But who is to say that is going to happen, Senator. Another whole – possibility exists.

MALLONEE. (*an understanding growing between them*) So they tell me.

ANNA. There is a feeling – not yet reflected in the polls – that a suppressed energy is waiting to be released. People like my father might begin to have a voice.

MALLONEE. And your father is –

ANNA. A small city cop, who feels, quite rightly as it happens, that something in this country has been lost.

MALLONEE. It has. Indeed it has. Governor Reagan speaks to that, doesn't he? Quite well.

HESTER. God help us.

ANNA. Governor Reagan, or someone much like him – but let's say, for the purpose of argument, *him*, might restore people's simple belief that the old agreements, the ones that made this a great country – personal responsibility, neighborhood, family, a reassertion of people's basic freedoms – have to come back. Or we're quite possibly lost.

MALLONEE. I like what I'm hearing.

HESTER. Oh, don't we all. The old Jeffersonian vision. A country of yeomen farmers. Or cops, with all due respect. who conveniently forget that liberalism came along to take care not only of the poor and the disenfranchised blacks, but of the unions that gave your father what I expect has been a (comfortable life).

ANNA. (The Democrats took) us a certain distance. but now they've walked off the cliff and don't yet realize there's nothing under them.

HESTER. Be specific, please. I feel like I'm being taken back in a time capsule to Barry Goldwater's '64 campaign.

ANNA. All right then. Look where the winner of that election took us. Deeper into a war he refused to win. Into an enormous defeat that left us devastated as a country in terms of purpose. No one respects us in the world anymore.

HESTER. Does it interest you that your boyfriend – excuse me, fiancée – protested that war? Dragged his college buddies – a very messy, smelly crew, as I recall – into this house so that they had comfortable beds to sleep in after their protests –

ANNA. Exactly. The beds were always comfortable for the elite that protested that distasteful war. But an enormous – majority – those that slept in less comfortable beds – lost something in those protests.

MALLONEE. I always felt that.

ANNA. A belief in their ability to have a voice. A belief that their country still had the potential to be a force for good in the world. They were drowned out.

MALLONEE. Yes.

HESTER. Speaking of voices – Colin, do you have one?

COLIN. I do, as it happens.

CHANDLER. George, I think you and I might want to continue this in private – shall we take a little walk around the block?

MALLONEE. I'm enjoying this.

CHANDLER. I fear it's going to descend into a family washing its dirty laundry.

MALLONEE. The best kind of descent after a pleasant dinner party. Carolyn, do you have any objection to our staying?

CAROLYN. *(smiling pointedly at* **HESTER***)* None at all.

(A beat.)

HESTER. Colin.

COLIN. I always felt – something phony about it – me and my friends. Our dirty, expensive clothes. The celebrity studded marches. Robert Lowell and Norman Mailer at the barricades. Why did people hate us? Why did the construction workers want to beat us up? It was about being young and excited, but you never felt you were –

(difficult for him)

– an American.

HESTER. So at the London School of Economics, you met an example of that corn-fed breed.

(The next two lines should be spoken simultaneously, with **HESTER** *riding right over them.)*

CHANDLER. Hester.

ANNA. The contempt you feel.

HESTER. The sparkling star of the London School of Economics production of *State Fair*. I bet you looked wonderful in gingham and tight jeans. Did you appear with a hayseed between your teeth?

ANNA. The contempt for the vast majority in this country. Legislate anti-racism, so that people will actually hate the strait-jacket you've put them in, rather than allow the inevitable progress of decent people changing their attitudes over time –

HESTER. How much time do you think we have? You're asking black people, just wait. They've waited.

ANNA. It does them no real good when people are forced to think differently.

HESTER. No. I think it does. Senator Mallonee?

MALLONEE. Wonderful. She's right, of course. Let some new energy out. Forcing people –

HESTER. What is this "new energy"? Is it that washed up movie star governor? Is it him you're talking about?

ANNA. You can't see what he represents –

CHANDLER. Calm down, Hester.

ANNA. Because you're locked in the past.

HESTER. Am I, really? Tell me what's the difference between being locked in the past and insisting people remember it.

ANNA. Mrs. Ferris, I say this with respect. I know you see me – us – Governor Reagan – as barbarians at the gates. But you have lost touch. Do you have any idea how deep it is right now, people's desire to love their country again?

HESTER. Oh please.

ANNA. It's very hard to perceive that desire when you're locked inside this –

MALLONEE. City of conversation.

HESTER. So this is what I sent you to London for.

COLIN. You didn't send me.

CHANDLER. George, I hate to take us away from this cheerful scene, but we do need a little time together before tomorrow's meeting.

MALLONEE. *(He's been fascinated by the exchanges.)* Oh, yes. And it's getting late. Fascinating, though. Carolyn?

CAROLYN. George, I think you might ask this young woman to come and see you.

MALLONEE. *(picking up a little slowly on her hint)* What? Yes. Of course. Would you come see me? Call my office and come – I don't suppose I could entice you to come work for me?

ANNA. *(handling this masterfully)* I would very much like to come and see you.

MALLONEE. Call my office. Be sure you do. I'll alert my assistant. A stimulating evening, Mrs. Ferris. Do we have to go?

HESTER. Aren't you – wouldn't you be nervous, Mrs. Mallonee, having such an attractive young woman working with your husband?

CAROLYN. *(She smiles.)* Thank you for an illuminating evening. If you're really interested in our Ladies' Book Club, I'd be happy to put your name forward.

HESTER. Thank you. I'll consider it.

CHANDLER. I'll see you both out.

*(***CHANDLER***,* **MALLONEE** *and* **CAROLYN** *exit.)*

(tense silence)

ANNA. I'm going to – take off the dress. Leave it hanging somewhere. So you can take it to the cleaners.

(A beat.)

ANNA. I meant it. I have nothing but the highest respect for what your generation achieved. Standing up to the Russians. That was huge, and brave. Not to mention your sister's sacrifice.

(She exits, leaving **HESTER** *and* **COLIN** *alone.)*

HESTER. I didn't read the date on your letter wrong, did I?

COLIN. We found out about this dinner. Jean let it slip in her last letter. Anna thought it might be an opportunity. He was the right sort of Senator. It actually cost quite a bit to get the tickets changed.

(He tries to pour himself another drink.)

HESTER. Stop.

(A beat.)

Who are you now?

COLIN. I was contemplating my future in London. Like everyone else. From my gorgeous privileged position. I would come back with my advanced degree, and you would no doubt find me a job on someone's staff – Senator Church's. Senator Bayh's from Indiana. Senator Moynihan's. The right Senator. I would go to lunches in Washington. I would have dinners here. Date a tight blonde from the Wharton School of Business by way of Stanford. Liberal pedigree. You would groom me.

HESTER. Wretched. Yes. Terrible. Your mother's stranglehold.

COLIN. And it occurred to me. I would never know what it was to be –

HESTER. Oh please. If you say you want to be an "American" one more time I'll scream. We are all Americans.

COLIN. What it was to feel something for this country. I would only know what it was to be educated at Sidwell Friends and Harvard.

HESTER. So you met, in the form of a long-legged, untight blonde, the country itself.

COLIN. Dismiss it that way. I started to listen, that's all. To other voices.

HESTER. And what did they tell you, Colin? I listened to your girlfriend and I know what she wants. Is that what you believe now, Colin? Coming from this house, is that what you believe?

COLIN. I don't want to offer it up to you.

HESTER. You have fallen for something, Colin. You were always a boy who got good grades but did not think in complex ways. That's my assessment. It's always been my assessment.

COLIN. Do you have any idea what a squeeze that is. What a tight, deballing squeeze.

HESTER. Well, there it is. You go off to London, all the bright new ideas are about the decline of liberalism. Let's forget everything we learned in Vietnam. Let's just love our country again. Let's go out and be a force for good in the world. Let me get on that bus, my son says. All the cute girls are on that bus. The wind is blowing in that direction.

COLIN. Stop.

HESTER. And it allows me to be free of my mother, doesn't it?

COLIN. It would never occur to you that I could have a thought – a set of thoughts – outside of the bounds of Georgetown.

HESTER. Why should that occur to me?

(At the foot of the stairs, **ANNA** *appears. A very different* **ANNA***, her makeup gone, in pajamas. Her hair pulled up. Scrubbed. Almost innocent and virginal looking.)*

ANNA. Colin. I just came to see if you were coming to bed.

COLIN. Yes. I'm coming. In a minute.

(He reaches for her hand.)

ANNA. We won't be staying here, Mrs. Ferris. We've made other arrangements. Just tonight, if that's all right. You won't have to put up with me after tonight.

COLIN. Just for the rest of my life.

ANNA. (A *beat.*) Yes. Just that.

(She goes.)

*(***HESTER** *stands. She and* **COLIN** *look at each other.)*

(Lights down. End of Act One.)

ACT TWO

Scene One

(Mid-September, 1987.)

(In the dark: Teddy Kennedy's "Robert Bork's America" speech, denouncing the Supreme Court nominee. ["Robert Bork's America is a land in which women would be forced into back alley abortions, blacks would sit at segregated lunch counters, rogue police could break down citizens' doors in midnight raids, schoolchildren could not be taught about evolution, writers and artists would be censored at the whim of the government."])

(Lights come up to reveal the living room only superficially changed, the same furniture with some new slipcovers, perhaps more memorabilia on the credenza. The only really new thing is a TV with a VCR attached [the screen turned away from us], and a stack of children's videos on top of it. A child's toys mildly clutter the space.)

(A ball comes bouncing on from the kitchen area, followed by **ETHAN**, *the six year old son of* **COLIN** *and* **ANNA**. **ETHAN** *chases the ball onstage while* **HESTER**, *behind him, talks into a cordless phone while holding a piece of paper in her hands. The eight years that have passed since the time of Act One should not have caused huge physical changes in her, though she's in her late fifties now. She wears glasses.)*

HESTER. Ethan, be careful. The ball is not to be thrown inside.

(into the phone:)

HESTER. *(cont.)* Ralph, I'm sorry. It's my grandson trying to destroy some perfectly good if faded old furniture.

(She puts the piece of paper down, holds out her hand to **ETHAN** *for the ball, trying to do two things at once.)*

Okay. The wording should be this.

(to **ETHAN***'s refusal to hand over the ball:)*

Ethan. Give it to me.

(back into the phone, picking up the piece of paper:)

No. No, Ralph. It should read "The Reagan administration has fired a parting shot of contempt for the rights of minorities and women in the nomination to the Supreme Court of Robert Bork".

(Toward the end of this statement, **JEAN** *enters.)*

Too many words?

JEAN. Ethan, come.

ETHAN. Don't want to.

JEAN. Young man, I don't believe I'm giving you a choice.

(As **HESTER** *continues her phone conversation, there should be another conversation, in dumbshow, in which* **HESTER** *tells* **JEAN** *it's okay to leave the boy alone, while she wrestles the ball away from him. Their relationship is playful;* **ETHAN** *does not make her work physically hard to wrest the ball away.)*

HESTER. *(into the phone)* All right. Yes. We'll simplify the beginning.

(reading:)

"Robert Bork thought it was just fine that an American company give women the choice of being sterilized or losing their jobs. He could find no constitutional basis for desegregating schools in Washington, D.C." This is all about pointing out how narrow his vision of the Law is. And then urge people to call Senator Heflin. Heflin is huge, Ralph. He's the vote we need on Judiciary.

(It's at this point that she should have wrested the ball away.)

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