

Takeoffs and Landings

A Play in Two Acts

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Characters

Jack Colton, 52, a disgraced talk show host on the run

Suzanne Light, 45, on-the-go businesswoman

Father Mark Dowd, 28, Roman Catholic priest

Brian Braga, 35, Catherine's husband

Catherine Carmen, 35, Brian's wife

Josh Daily, 23, a mysterious figure

Setting

All the action of the play takes place at Mercury Airlines Gate 13.

Act I

An airport boarding gate—Gate 13—in a small regional airport in an unnamed city in an unidentified mid-Atlantic state. At the back of the stage is a closed door that leads to the jetway and a window that overlooks the runway. In front of the door and to stage left is the check-in podium, which is unoccupied. There is a backdrop behind the podium bearing the logo of Mercury Airlines and “Flight 830 to Newark, 9:55 p.m., ON TIME.” Next to the podium are a couple rows of chairs. Stage left and stage right lead off to the rest of the airport. As Act I begins, there are only three people at the gate.

Suzanne Light sits closest to the podium, absorbed in tapping away on a BlackBerry. Father Mark Dowd sits a short distance away, reading a book (which, upon closer investigation, turns out to be *How to Practice*, by the Dalai Lama). Josh Daily sits farthest from the podium. He has a portable computer open on his lap and he stares raptly at the screen, sheathed beneath a large pair of headphones. Throughout this act, he is completely oblivious to everything around him.

It is implied that the airport is modestly crowded, but we only see this gate and its few denizens.

It is just past 9:00 p.m.

As Act I opens, the three characters are sitting quietly for a few beats. RUNNING FOOTSTEPS approach, and Jack Colton runs in from stage left. He is out of breath and carries a small black suitcase. He runs up to the podium and stops short. He is angry that he appears to have missed his plane.

JACK

Damn it!

(Suzanne and Father Mark look up at him.)

JACK

The 8:57 to Philadelphia—it’s gone already?

SUZANNE

Yes. It left right on time.

JACK

Goddamn it!

(He notices Father Mark.)

Sorry. Just my luck—the first time in my life a flight left on time and *I'm* the one who's late. Figures. It wasn't even my fault. I got hung up in security by some idiot with warped sense of humor.

(Neither Suzanne nor Father Mark is encouraging him to go on with the story, but he forges ahead anyway.)

JACK

This guy in front of me, he puts all his crap in the bins, but I guess he forgot the iPod in his pocket. He walks through the scanner and, surprise, it beeps. So what does he do? Just hand it over and continue like a normal person? No. He takes the iPod out of his pocket, holds it up to the security woman's head, and says, "Take this plane to Cuba." I mean, jeez, they don't like that crap. Didn't he read all those signs that say not to joke about security? So about half a dozen security people swarm the guy. They drag him off somewhere, which I thought was great. That'll teach him. Unfortunately, it pretty much held everyone else up for a while. So that's how I missed my flight.

SUZANNE

It may actually have been your lucky day. See him?

(She points to Father Mark.)

He was bumped. I'm not superstitious, but even I wouldn't be comfortable on a flight that a *priest* got bumped from. Says a lot about this airline, though.

JACK

That's an interesting thought. What's the next flight out of this gate?

SUZANNE

Newark at 9:55.

JACK

Damn. I really have to get to Philly tonight.

SUZANNE

This is probably the last flight out of this airport tonight. I've connected through here before; the whole place usually shuts down at 10. I was stranded here one winter. There isn't another flight until probably 6 in the morning.

JACK

Jesus Chr—

(glances contritely at Father Mark)

Sorry.

SUZANNE

If you go to Newark, you might be able to get a flight to Philly tonight. I know *that* airport stays open late; I'm catching a red-eye to L.A. Barring that, you can always take the train from Newark to 30th Street Station. I had to do that once when my flight was grounded due to weather.

JACK

That might work. Just as long as I get out of here.

(He looks at his watch, then looks around.)

Any chance there's someone from the airline around?

SUZANNE

There's a customer service desk by Gate 5.

(She points offstage.)

JACK

Thanks.

(He pauses.)

I'm Jack, by the way.

SUZANNE

Suzanne.

JACK

Wish me luck.

SUZANNE

Good luck.

(He smiles at her, then takes off in the direction she had pointed. She turns back to her BlackBerry. Father Mark puts down his book and stands up, stretching. He casually ambles over to where Suzanne is sitting.)

FATHER MARK

I actually didn't mind getting bumped.

SUZANNE

I'm sorry?

FATHER MARK

What you were telling that gentleman—Jack. About me being bumped. I actually didn't mind.

SUZANNE

You like hanging out in airports? Are you atoning for something?

FATHER MARK

(laughs)

No, no. I'm just not sure of...where I'm going right now. Physically...spiritually. It's...complicated. In some ways airports are rather like limbo or purgatory.

SUZANNE

Amen to that!

FATHER MARK

So I've been volunteering to give up my seat. About six flights since this morning. Everyone thinks it's some sort of charitable act, but I confess I have more practical reasons.

SUZANNE

Funny, I've never had a priest confess to *me* before.

FATHER MARK

We all need someone to confess to, don't we? Or at least just talk to. I was rather amused that Jack kept feeling the need to apologize for his language—like I've never heard people curse before! Still, I suppose it shows respect for the collar, so perhaps it's coming from a good place.

SUZANNE

People don't often know how to behave when they encounter priests out...

FATHER MARK

In the wild?

SUZANNE

(laughs)

Right! In the wild.

FATHER MARK

Sometimes it gets very strange. Once about a year ago I was on a flight to Atlanta, and I kept turning around and looking toward the back of the plane. For about, oh, 5, 10 minutes. There was this elderly women in my line of sight, and she got up and walked over to me, genuflected—right there in the aisle of the plane, missing the real point of the act—and said that she was very sorry that she hadn't been to Mass in years, that she had been a good Catholic most of her life but lapsed after her husband died, and she thought I somehow detected this and was judging her from across the plane. And I had to stop her and say that I wasn't looking at her; the rest room "occupied" lamp was on the bulkhead behind her and I really had to go and was waiting for it to be unoccupied.

SUZANNE

(laughs)

People always seem to feel guilty about something.

FATHER MARK

Sometimes it seems like they want to. It makes them feel like they're really living.

SUZANNE

If you don't mind my asking, why *are* you hanging out in airports all day? It seems like the opposite of "really living."

FATHER MARK

Well, I—

(Suzanne's mobile phone RINGS. She looks contrite as she looks at the display.)

SUZANNE

I'm sorry, Father, I really have to take this.

FATHER MARK

That's all right.

SUZANNE

(on phone)

Hi. Where are you...

(She ambles off and her conversation becomes inaudible. Father Mark takes out his own mobile phone, dials a number, and begins talking, also inaudibly.)

After a few beats, Jack returns, also talking on a mobile phone. He wanders into the gate and paces back and forth while talking—in audibly—in front of the podium, fairly oblivious to everything around him.

After a few beats, from stage right, Brian Braga and Catherine Cole enter.)

CATHERINE

Here it is, Gate 13.

BRIAN

Damn, it's on time. I was hoping it would be cancelled. Don't they cancel flights all the time?

CATHERINE

I was on a flight once that was actually cancelled in mid-air.

BRIAN

In mid-air? What, like the Bermuda Triangle?

CATHERINE

It was supposed to be non-stop from Boston to Seattle. Instead, we suddenly landed in St. Louis and the guy at the gate said that the flight had been abruptly cancelled and we were all on our own. Not surprisingly, that airline doesn't exist anymore.

BRIAN

Sounds like it barely existed then. Too bad *this* one exists.

CATHERINE

You've really been freaking out the last few days. How come you never told me how much you were afraid to fly?

BRIAN

I was trying to maintain my illusion of virile masculinity.

CATHERINE

Good luck with that. When was the last time you flew anyway?

BRIAN

Good question. When was Lindbergh's flight?

CATHERINE

Cute.

BRIAN

You know, everyone credits Lindbergh with being the first to fly across the Atlantic, but he was also the first to give out free peanuts.

CATHERINE

They don't give out free nuts anymore. Too many people with nut allergies.

BRIAN

I have pet allergies. They're not going to give out free cats or anything?

CATHERINE

On this airline we'd be lucky to get a gerbil.

BRIAN

That's a definition of "lucky" with which I'm unfamiliar.
(He cranes to look outside the window of the gate.)
If this plane says "Spirit of St. Louis" on the side I'm leaving.

CATHERINE

So am I. Seriously, when did this fear of flying start?

BRIAN

You know, Cat, I think the real question is, "why didn't it start sooner?"

CATHERINE

And is this fear the reason why, when we were planning our honeymoon, you had suggested the Marriott across the street from your office?

BRIAN

Well, I would have gotten Marriott points.

CATHERINE

Brian... After almost 8 years of marriage, I'm surprised to find something I didn't know about you.

BRIAN

Too bad it's nothing more sordid.

CATHERINE

Well, the stuff I know is sordid enough.

BRIAN

Hey!

CATHERINE

But this fear of flying is something new, and I'm curious.

BRIAN

Think about it. You're sealed into this silver gleaming death tube and shot into the upper reaches of the atmosphere and hurtle through space at improbable speeds. It defies the laws of physics.

CATHERINE

It really doesn't. The physics of aviation are quite sound.

BRIAN

A likely story. And on top of, you know, the basic terror of the process itself, you have every other aspect of flying being a complete and utter nightmare, from crowds, to surly airline personnel, to canceled flights—be they in mid-air or not—late flights, dashing from terminal to terminal to make connections, overpriced everything, fees for, I don't know, *oxygen*, and this is without even getting into the whole security business.

CATHERINE

And don't think we're not going to have a little talk about *that*.

BRIAN

I'll tell you...the last time I flew was 1999. March 1999, before we met. Los Angeles to here. We were delayed taking off for some reason—I don't know, maybe the pilot was still in the middle of a drinking contest or something. When we did finally take off, it was in Santa Ana winds. Do you

know what that's like? It's like some extreme theme park ride—it was basically a roller coaster in the air. I gripped the armrests so tightly I think my fingers became physically embedded in them. I was hoping I wasn't going to need surgery to have them removed. I think my stomach is *still* hovering somewhere over Burbank. Anyway, we had to transfer in Chicago, and flying into a place called "The Windy City" is not for the faint of heart.

CATHERINE

Or faint of stomach.

BRIAN

This is what I'm saying. And mine was still, you know, over Burbank. Everything was delayed getting into O'Hare, because planes are *always* delayed getting into O'Hare. They should rename it "No Hare." So we ended up circling over Lake Michigan for a small eternity. I think I memorized every feature of the shoreline. I could probably still draw a topographic map from memory.

CATHERINE

Rand McNally, eat your heart out.

BRIAN

Exactly. And once we landed, I discovered that my connection was still on time, which meant that after a three-terminal sprint I missed it by literally *two minutes*. So I had to go standby on the next flight, which was an hour late and of course oversold.

CATHERINE

That's always fun.

BRIAN

Yeah, so I was the last one to get to board and I was trying to find bin space to put my carry-on and I opened up the overhead compartment and someone had put this toothpick model of the Lincoln Memorial in it.

CATHERINE

What?!

BRIAN

I. Swear. To. God. It was a model of the Lincoln Memorial made out of toothpicks. About two feet by two feet or

something like that, about six inches high. It barely fit in the compartment. Anyway, I'm exhausted, frantic, and, well, a little drunk...

CATHERINE

I was wondering...

BRIAN

Well, you know, an hour to kill in an airport, a good airport bar near the gate, the need for a little liquid courage...Anyway, I'm about to shove my bag in the compartment and the Abe Lincoln fan spotted me and leaped up. He was this big, scary guy with some sort of thick Eastern European accent and he offered, well, *insisted*, that he carefully stow my bag without damaging his model.

CATHERINE

Did you tell him that you needed room for your own clay sculpture of the Jefferson Memorial?

BRIAN

I should have. Anyway, we take off and there's a *lot* of turbulence. It's like *The Great Waldo Pepper* up there. I half expected to fly upside-down the whole way. After about 12 hours—or what seemed like it—things finally calmed down and we're allowed to get up. So I needed to get something out of my bag, and I opened the overhead bin and all these toothpicks rained down on me. I gave Mr. Lincoln a sheepish look and sat back down and all through the flight I could literally feel his stare drilling into the back of my neck. Until I reached back and discovered it was just a toothpick wedged in my shirt collar. When we finally landed, I said "I am never flying again." And I didn't. Until now. And that's the story of my last flight.

CATHERINE

Aside from that, Mrs. Lincoln, how did you like the play?

BRIAN

Exactly. So after more than a decade of earthbound bliss, you drag my ass back on a plane...

CATHERINE

Well, Amtrak doesn't go to England.

BRIAN

Fortunately, I brought some of my own liquid courage. I'm glad you told me about that three-ounce liquid limit...

(Brian reaches into his jacket pocket and takes out a small 3 oz. plastic bottle filled with an amber liquid. He pops the cap and takes a sip.)

CATHERINE

You're the McGyver of drinking, you are. What is that, Scotch?

BRIAN

A McGyver 16-year-old, of course.

(He hands the bottle to her and she takes a swig. She hands it back to him. He takes another sip and then pockets the bottle. Jack gets off the phone and glances casually over at Brian and Catherine. He does a double-take and stares at Brian with recognition.)

JACK

I know you.

BRIAN

If it's about the Lincoln Memorial toothpick model, it wasn't my fault. Blame the Earth's atmosphere.

JACK

You're the douchebag from security. Thanks to you I missed my flight. You're a real moron, you know that?

(Suzanne is off the phone and is paying attention to this exchange. She wanders over to them.)

SUZANNE

You made a hijacking threat at airport security? How stupid are you? These guys are just doing their jobs and it's a serious job.

BRIAN

No, I think they're closet sadists who use authority as an excuse to humiliate and torture people. Maybe you missed this, *mon ami*, but as we were waiting there, in an adjacent line was this old woman in a wheelchair. She couldn't have been younger than 95, and obviously couldn't walk. Naturally, they made her take her shoes off, and then they had to run the wheelchair through separately, because it's a known fact that crippled 95-year-old women are terrorist

threats. Her son or grandson or whoever it was wasn't allowed to walk through the scanner with her, so they made her walk through unassisted. The security guy wasn't even remotely sympathetic and when, surprise, she fell down, he didn't even make a single goddamn move to help her, and just gave this look of annoyance. All this in front of a couple hundred people. So, sorry, maybe I'm not a veteran flyer or anything, but I'm not impressed with your "Angels of the Airport." Sure, I'm overgeneralizing, but I think they're bullies and misanthropes and use their authority as an excuse for abuse and vindictiveness.

SUZANNE

Maybe you should just not fly.

BRIAN

This is what I've been saying.

(Brian looks at Jack closely for a moment.)

Hey, I know you.

JACK

(nervously)

Uh...

BRIAN

Jack Colton.

CATHERINE

Oh, yeah. I think you're right.

BRIAN

From the *Jack Colton Show*.

(to Suzanne)

He's a local celebrity.

SUZANNE

I don't know. I'm not from around here.

BRIAN

When I was a kid, Jack Colton was the weatherman on Channel 5. Then about 10 years ago, you started hosting the *Jack Colton Show*, which was basically Jerry Springer without the class and quiet dignity.

JACK

Now, come on...

BRIAN

It was your usual trash TV fare, but with a local flavor. Or stench, if you prefer. You know, mother and daughter prostitute teams, cross-dressing albino midgets who drink human blood, women who married their daughters' rapists—and vice versa.

CATHERINE

Huh?

BRIAN

Really highbrow stuff. I mean, you could literally feel your IQ dropping while watching that show. If Marilyn vos Savant caught even five minutes of it, she'd be writing her *Parade* column in crayon and couldn't add 2 and 2.

JACK

(haughtily)

So that's why we topped the local ratings for 10 years straight.

BRIAN

Anyone will stop and watch a car accident. But it was your personal troubles that were the real story.

CATHERINE

Brian, I don't think this is the place...

BRIAN

No, if I'm going to be ripped a new one by all of you for not genuflecting at airport security, I want you all to know who it is that's claiming the moral high ground.

JACK

I don't have to listen to this.

BRIAN

Let's see, your first bit of trouble was after that probing look at kiddie porn you did—what was it, about six years ago? And then afterward you took your computer in for repair and they found all this—wait for it...kiddie porn on your hard drive. You claimed it was for "research."

JACK

It was, and I was never convicted of anything.

BRIAN

So then a few years later you were caught a few times in interstate rest stops in a variety of...compromising positions. More research?

JACK

Not that I owe you any kind of explanation, but we look at societal issues and sometimes the dark side of human behavior. As a result, you have to go where these things happen. That's why people rob banks—it's where the money is.

BRIAN

Speaking of which, my absolute favorite story was last year, after you had on a Bernie Madoff wannabe who had cleaned up on a Ponzi scheme, you were yourself nabbed for bilking investors in...yes, a Ponzi scheme. So I guess my question is, are you probing societal issues, or just trying to get ideas?

JACK

(gets in Brian's face; pokes him in the chest)
How dare you! You have no right to slander me in public like this. What gives you the right—

BRIAN

(takes a newspaper out of his bag)
And I suppose all the newspaper stories about you are libelous?

JACK

Yes, as a matter of fact, they are, and demonstrate the kind of shoddy, hearsay-based reporting I sought to avoid on my own show, which is why we conducted first-hand research.

BRIAN

How convenient that your "first-hand" reporting tended to avoid tax legislation or health care reform or a serious look at local politics—or any serious issue—and tended to focus more on getting "first-hand" jobs in restaurant rest rooms.

JACK

That does it!

(Jack charges at Brian. Father Mark leaps up and gets between them.)

FATHER MARK

Gentlemen, please.

CATHERINE

Brian, I think we should take a walk. Let's go see if that bar next to Gate 7 is still open.

(She pulls him away from Jack, and escorts him offstage. Josh is still glued to his computer screen and has remained oblivious to everything.)

BRIAN

(shouting, as Catherine drags him off)

Woodward and Bernstein, eat your hearts out!

(Father Mark sits back down and returns to his book. Suzanne stares at Jack. Jack had been staring after Brian and Catherine with a fiery look, but now starts to appear more guilty. He catches and tries to avoid Suzanne's gaze.)

JACK

(sheepishly)

Want an autograph?

(It doesn't entirely break the ice that has formed over whatever budding relationship they may have had.)

JACK

Okay, so I'm not Walter Cronkite. Hell, I'm not even sure I'm Ted Baxter at this point. We had tried, early on, to do a real, serious, issues-oriented show, but it was always the freak show stuff that got us ratings, and if we could get a good knock-down-drag-out on the air, hell, that was even better. After a while, you lose whatever ideals you may have had and just get cynical. And once you get cynical, forget it. You can justify anything.

SUZANNE

You don't need to apologize to me. I'm just a strange woman in an airport.

JACK

I know, but the person I really need to apologize to isn't here. And I'm not sure I could even speak if she were.

SUZANNE

Your wife?

JACK

Beth. My wife of 30 years, this June. Well, I doubt we'll make it that far. See, through all my...troubles of the past 10 years she always stood by me. Yeah, I knew that I was making a fool out of her, but as I said, once you become cynical, you can justify anything. When you're immersed in the basest forms of human behavior day in and day out, it all begins to seem kind of normal. You know, when you put a magnet next to a compass, it gets confused about where north is. Maybe when you stand too close to the dregs of humanity, your moral compass goes similarly kerflooy.

SUZANNE

I hadn't thought about it like that.

JACK

This evening—probably right about now...

(he looks at his watch)

...an enemy I had made is giving my wife undeniable evidence of my...indiscretions. And I can't bear to face her. Yes, believe it or not, me, Jack Colton, whom my local newspaper once called "The Trashman of Talk Television," actually has shame. Even someone like me can see that there's a news story in that.

SUZANNE

So you're running away from home?

JACK

It sounds foolish when you put it like that but, yes. There's some other crap that's going to come down, too, and right now all I want is to just disappear. To get on a plane and get out of here. Vanish into...the world someplace.

SUZANNE

Or Philadelphia. A girlfriend?

JACK

No. A friend. A very old friend. The kind of friend you can call and run to when you're in big trouble. Who doesn't judge, who is always there to help, no matter what. What surprises me is that I have any of them left. It helps that he's not in any way involved in television.

(He looks around.)

Anyway, I think I'm going to see if I can find a place to sneak a smoke.

(Jack slinks off, and Suzanne looks after him sadly, then takes out her BlackBerry. Father Mark puts down his book, stands, stretches again, and walks over to her.)

SUZANNE

I suppose you heard that.

FATHER MARK

This does lack the privacy of the confessional.

(He looks over at Josh.)

Perhaps he has the right idea. Shut out the world entirely.

SUZANNE

Should we at least poke him when we start boarding?

FATHER MARK

It would be the charitable thing to do.

SUZANNE

(looks at her BlackBerry)

It seems odd that we're getting so close to departure and no one from the airline is here, there are no announcements, nothing. The airport's Web site says the flight is still on time.

FATHER MARK

Well, they say the Lord moves in mysterious ways, but it's nothing compared to airlines.

SUZANNE

That's for sure.

FATHER MARK

I take it you fly a lot?

SUZANNE

Ever see the George Clooney movie *Up in the Air*?

FATHER MARK

(shakes his head)

I'm afraid not, no.

SUZANNE

Let's just say that I have enough frequent flyer miles on various airlines to make it to the moon and back at least twice. If you know the song "Fly Me to the Moon," I could fly to the moon and back for free and still get a free upgrade to first-class.

FATHER MARK

(laughs)

That's impressive. I take it this is all business travel?

SUZANNE

Mostly, yes.

FATHER MARK

What do you do?

SUZANNE

I'm a speaker and consultant for the information technologies industry. I help companies optimize their computer and networking systems, and give talks, conduct seminars, workshops, and so on, pretty much all around the world. I have a book coming out in a week which I'm hoping will lead to more speaking gigs.

FATHER MARK

I guess you must like to travel.

SUZANNE

(shrugs)

I'm not sure it's a question of like or dislike. It's just what I do. It's like commuting to work—people don't necessarily like it or dislike it, they just have little choice but to do it. But over the years I've come up with systems for minimizing the hassle of constant travel. People who don't travel often get frustrated because they approach everything from the perspective of what they expect or want traveling to be, instead of what it actually

is. Just think about the logistics involved in moving millions of people on thousands of flights each day, with all the variables that can involve—not the least of which is weather—and it's really quite remarkable that the whole system is as efficient as it is.

FATHER MARK

That's a very Zen way of looking at it.

SUZANNE

Could be.

FATHER MARK

It must be rough on your family, all this travel.

SUZANNE

How did you know...?

FATHER MARK

That you were married? Your wedding ring.

SUZANNE

Oh, right.

(She pauses, looks down somewhat sadly.)

You know, Jack was talking about running away from home and the argument could be made—and, in fact my husband often makes it—that I've been doing the same thing.

FATHER MARK

Is he right?

SUZANNE

I don't know. It's possible. I never really thought about it before. But, I have to confess that I never...aspired to be a wife and mother. I mean, it's not something I ever ruled out when I was in my 20s, but I was always committed to my work. And especially in my line of work, it's a lot of...well, *work*, to stay current. And if I don't stay current, I'm out of work.

FATHER MARK

That's understandable.

SUZANNE

And don't get me wrong, I love Jeff—my husband—and Justin—my son—but I always feel...I don't know...out of place whenever I'm at home. Like I don't belong there.

FATHER MARK

Out of place?

SUZANNE

It's frustrating in that...okay, this is going to sound really petty and egotistical, but...when I'm out at events and seminars or whatever I'm always being applauded and complimented because, not to blow my own horn or anything, but I'm very good at what I do. And after all that praise, I get home and there are dirty dishes, and diapers—not any more, thank Go—uh, thankfully—or Justin got in trouble at school or the washer needs repair, or whatever. There's always some minor tragedy or problem that needs to be taken care of. And I've been shielded from all that, usually on the pretense that "I'm the family breadwinner and this is how I win that bread." But I can't help but think it's also a matter of preference.

FATHER MARK

You must have problems that come up at work.

SUZANNE

Well, sure. But I can *control* them. At home, I try, but since I'm not there a lot of the time, whatever solutions I come up with are inevitably wrong. It's like coming in in the middle of a movie and then trying to explain what's going to happen next without even knowing what happened before. So I try to assert my authority, but it's obvious to everyone—especially me—that it's not a valid authority. And Jeff and I fight about it, and he usually wins because he's usually right.

FATHER MARK

Is there a way you could do what you do and travel less? Maybe do more things over the Internet? Believe it or not, we've actually been looking at the idea of conducting church services online.

SUZANNE

I've thought about that, but the thing is, I'm not sure I want to be home all that much. It's not that I don't want

to be a part of Justin's life, it's just that, I guess I want all the good and none off the bad. I know that's unrealistic, but there it is. And until I can resolve that, I guess I'm content to keep escaping.

(Pause.)

But then maybe it's even worse than that.

FATHER MARK

What do you mean?

SUZANNE

I mean, the trip I'm on now isn't *really* necessary. We could easily just Skype or video conference or something. I'm just going because I like going to L.A. But even worse, Justin is in a spelling bee this week. He won his school title or whatever it is and now he's competing at the state level. Shouldn't I be there for that? I mean, what's wrong with me? Have I become this self-absorbed?

FATHER MARK

If you have the presence of mind to even ask that question, I suspect you already know the answer. Besides, we're all trying to escape from something, aren't we?

SUZANNE

Could be. By the way, you never did tell me what you were doing hanging out in airports all day?

FATHER MARK

I just came from my sister's funeral.

SUZANNE

Oh, Father, I'm sorry.

FATHER MARK

Please just call me Mark.

SUZANNE

Mark. Okay. I'm sorry.

FATHER MARK

She had been fighting cancer for the better part—well, actually, the *worst* part—of the past 10 years. It started as breast cancer, and metastasized to her liver, and began to spread from there. She did chemo and radiation and

ultimately it did go into remission, but a year ago, it came back, this time in her bones.

SUZANNE

Wow. Sorry.

FATHER MARK

When cancer metastasizes into the bones, what it does is dissolve the bone, and as a result calcium levels in the blood become toxic. So every so often she would have to go to the hospital and have her blood cleaned. The last six months saw the cancer spread pretty much everywhere, and towards the end she was barely recognizable and in a tremendous amount of pain.

SUZANNE

It's awful, isn't it?

FATHER MARK

Yes. Watching someone you love die of cancer is probably the most awful thing you can imagine. Or dying of anything long and painful and debilitating. A year earlier we lost my aunt to ALS—Lou Gehrig's disease—which is also unspeakably awful but in a different way.

SUZANNE

I understand. I lost my grandmother to lung cancer because she smoked like a chimney for 40 years. You're absolutely right; it's completely terrible.

FATHER MARK

And as I was watching all of this, I couldn't help but think that...

(sighs sadly)

...God created it all. And not only cancer and ALS, but *all* the awful, painful, wasting diseases. I know I'm supposed to be the one who has all the answers, and be the one who's supposed to console the grieving that this is all part of God's plan and that His ways are inscrutable and that our loved ones are at peace in Heaven—but I'm just having a hard time getting God's back on this. Sometimes He just seems like a brutal, vicious thug. And if *I* have these questions, what kind of priest am I?

SUZANNE

A human one, I would think. You know, my father was a self-made man. A first-generation immigrant from Eastern Europe, and when I was 14 he finally, after years of putting himself through school doing a ton of crap jobs, and after working like crazy, he was finally a success. He had invented a type of hard disk controller for computers that—well, it's technical. Anyway, that Thanksgiving, we sat down to dinner, and my sister said Grace, and she said, "Thank you, God, for the food we are about to eat." And my father pounded his fist on the table and bellowed, in his thick accent, "I worked hard my whole life, I put myself through school and taught myself engineering and programming and after all that, God gets the credit? Bullshit!" And that was the end of my family's tenuous relationship with religion.

FATHER MARK

To be fair to God—although I don't know why I should be right now—I am compelled to point out that that the ability to learn and to persevere could very well have been given to your father by God.

SUZANNE

This is true. You tell him!
(They both laugh.)

FATHER MARK

So that's why I've been hanging out in airports all day. I don't know that I feel up to going back just yet. I feel like a fraud, and I'm seriously considering giving up the priesthood. But I don't know. What I do know is that if I go back, I'll have to make a decision one way or another. And I'm not ready for it yet. So I'm quite content to languish in the limbo of the airport.

(Catherine enters and looks over at the sign behind the podium.)

CATHERINE

We're not boarding yet?

SUZANNE

No, no word at all from anyone.

CATHERINE

I know this may be heresy—

(she smiles at Father Mark)
 —but a flight delay would be the best thing right now. Brian, that's my husband, has parked himself on a barstool and now insists there is no way on Earth he's getting on that plane.

FATHER MARK

A fearful flier?

CATHERINE

Well, yes and no. It goes deeper than that. We're actually in the process of relocating from the place he grew up in and has lived all his life.

SUZANNE

Where was that?

CATHERINE

Willowdale. A small town about 20 miles west of here. About 18 months ago, Brian was laid off from his job, then a year ago I was laid off, and it's been tough for both of us to find work. About six months ago, I got a lead on what looked like my dream job—the only hitch is that it's in England. I interviewed several times, racked up the frequent flyer miles, and finally got the job. Brian and I talked about it at great length before I even accepted, and Brian was very supportive, and actually kind of eager and excited about the whole thing. We got the necessary work visas and other reams of paperwork, sold off the house and other stuff, and were ready to go. Then about three weeks ago, Brian started having second thoughts.

FATHER MARK

Well, that's normal. When something like that is far in the future it seems like an abstract concept. Only once it looms nearer does it take on a certain concreteness.

CATHERINE

This is true. So I'm trying to be understanding and sympathetic, but at the same time I am wondering if anyone in the airport has some chloroform and a steamer trunk I can borrow.

(Brian enters.)

BRIAN

Well, closing time. They actually told me I don't have to go home, but I can't stay there. Trouble is, I can't even go home.

CATHERINE

Sure you can. You'll just have to ask the Devanes if you can stay in what is now their house.

BRIAN

Can I have my old room? With the airplane models and basketball posters?

CATHERINE

Brian, that was your mother's house. You were 31 when we bought that house.

BRIAN

Well, I *thought* about redecorating it with model airplanes and basketball posters.

CATHERINE

Hah! Like I'd let you.

BRIAN

(to Suzanne and Father Mark)

Do you know she wouldn't even let me get *Star Wars* bed sheets?

(to Catherine)

You're no fun.

CATHERINE

Yes, and over the age of 9.

(to Suzanne and Father Mark)

He's kidding by the way. To the best of knowledge, this has never come up before.

BRIAN

(to Catherine)

You're Darth Vader, you are.

(cups his hand over his mouth and makes the Darth Vader breathing noise; in a low, Vadery voice)

Brian, embrace the Dark Side. I want you to pick up milk on the way home.

CATHERINE

Brian...just how many drinks did you have?

BRIAN

(still doing the Vader voice)

Brian, I am your father...

CATHERINE

Now we're getting into a whole, weird area...

SUZANNE

I really wish we'd start boarding now.

BRIAN

(in his normal voice)

Did you know we're pretty much the only ones left in this airport?

(Jack enters.)

SUZANNE

We must be on the last flight out.

JACK

If we ever get out of here. We're not boarding yet? Jesus Christ!...Sorry, Father.

(Father Mark sighs heavily. Jack walks over to the window upstage and looks out on the runway. As the rest of the cast is milling around near the podium, Josh gets up and leaves unobtrusively. Ideally, no one [on stage or in the audience] would notice him leave.)

JACK

Is our plane even out there?

SUZANNE

Can you see anything?

JACK

It's kind of dark. I see a luggage wagon.

BRIAN

Maybe that's how we're-sorry...you're-getting to Newark.

CATHERINE

Brian...

BRIAN

Great. Say, maybe *this* would make for a better investigative piece than 900-pound lesbian sumo wrestlers who married their partners' housepets.

JACK

Oh, just bite me.

BRIAN

(in a high voice, imitating a Southern girl)
 "Oh, Jimmy Joe Bob, don't you know that Peaches the goat pledged her love to me?"

(in a deep voice, imitating a Southern guy)
 "Well, now, Cindy Lou Bob, don' you dun know that you could never please Peaches the way she dun like to be pleased?"

(imitating a goat)
 "Baaa!!"

JACK

(chooses to ignore Brian)
 This is damn peculiar. Was there even an announcement?

CATHERINE

(to Brian)
 "Peaches the goat"?

SUZANNE

No, there was no announcement or anything. I'm calling the airline.

(She punches a number into her BlackBerry and listens. Throughout the next sequence, she periodically takes the phone from her ear and punches a button or some sequence of buttons, as she navigates through a complex phone system. This should be exaggerated a little.)

SUZANNE

Phone system. This could take a while....You know, I was booked on a flight once and I was at the airport and there was an announcement that the flight was delayed because they forgot that it existed and they had to find a plane. You fly enough nothing and surprises you anymore.

JACK

(still staring out the window)
I don't even see anyone out on the runway. It's like we're really the only ones here.

BRIAN

(ominously)
Maybe we're all dead.

CATHERINE

Oh, brother. I can always count on you to be Little Merry Sunshine, can't I?

BRIAN

Just trying to cover all the options.
(Looks around at the seating area where Josh had been sitting.)
Hey, what happened to Headphone Boy?

JACK

He probably went to the can.

BRIAN

Maybe he's the Grim Reaper himself.

JACK

We're not dead, all right!

FATHER MARK

Besides, how could we all have died at the same time?

BRIAN

(imitating Death from *Monty Python's Meaning of Life*,
a deep, slow, sibilant rasp)
"The salmon mousse."

CATHERINE

Great, now he's doing Monty Python. Who, by the way, dear, are from England. If you come, I promise we'll tour all the locations where they filmed *The Holy Grail*.

BRIAN

If we get to England.
(starts singing)
"Swing low, sweet chariot..."

JACK

Would you cut that out, for Christ's sake!...Sorry, Father.

FATHER MARK

(snapping)

You know, you don't have to apologize every time you take the Lord's name in vain. I do live in 21st-century America. I'm used to foul language.

BRIAN

Ooh, the priest is getting hot under the collar.

CATHERINE

(groans)

You should be excommunicated for that.

BRIAN

And I'm not even Catholic. I just can't decide, is this Heaven, Hell, or...

FATHER MARK

I know I'm the once who brought this up, but I hereby declare a moratorium on the theological implications of being stuck in an airport. It's not Heaven, it's not Hell, it's not Purgatory. It's a damn *airport*!

(The lights suddenly go out and the airport is plunged into darkness.)

SUZANNE

Hey!

CATHERINE

What the—

JACK

Goddamn it!...Sorry, Father.

(Father Mark emits a low growl.)

SUZANNE

I guess they forgot that we were here. I'm still trying to get through the airline's labyrinth of a phone system.

BRIAN

Maybe we're being sealed in our own tombs.

CATHERINE

Would you cut that out!

JOSH

(over PA system)

Attention, passengers of Mercury Air Flight 830, the scheduled 9:55 departure to Newark Liberty Airport.

JACK

Finally!

JOSH

(over PA system)

Your flight has been delayed...indefinitely.

SUZANNE

Indefinitely?

JACK

What the hell does that mean?

BRIAN

Nothing definite, that's for sure.

(The lights come back on, and Josh is standing on top the podium, arms akimbo, staring down at the other characters.)

SUZANNE

(still on the phone, looking up)

What the hell?

JACK

Kid, come on, get down from there, before you kill yourself. Then we'll *really* be delayed.

FATHER MARK

Yes, please. This isn't funny.

JOSH

Silence!

BRIAN

"Silence"?

JOSH

Fate has brought you all to this place.

BRIAN

No, actually it was SuperShuttle.

(Josh glares at Brian, then points his finger at him. There is a sound like THUNDER or a ZAP, and Brian falls to the floor as though shot. Catherine runs over and kneels down to make sure he's okay. He's just stunned a little.)

CATHERINE

Brian!

BRIAN

What the hell was that?

JACK

That was cool. Do it again.

(Josh looks menacingly at Jack and holds up his finger. Jack holds up his hands in surrender.)

FATHER MARK

Who are you?

JOSH

My name is not important.

BRIAN

What, are we supposed to just say, "Hey, you"?

JOSH

My name is five thousand letters long and is unpronounceable in your language.

BRIAN

I'd like to see how they fit it on your driver's license.

JOSH

Silence!

BRIAN

Again with "silence."

JOSH

You can call me Josh, if you prefer.

JACK

Okay, *Josh*, is there a point to all this, or are we never going to actually leave this airport.

JOSH

You have been brought to—

SUZANNE

(finally gets someone on the phone)
Is this Customer Service? Listen, I'm at the...right...

JOSH

You have been brought—

SUZANNE

(on phone)
I'm waiting for Flight 830 to Newark....9:55, right...

JOSH

(getting frustrated)
All of you have been brought to this—

SUZANNE

(on phone, loudly)
No, *Newark*.

JOSH

(he's had it; he points his finger at Suzanne)
Your device will no longer function!!

SUZANNE

(on phone)
Hello? Hello?
(She looks at the phone's readout.)
I lost my connection.

CATHERINE

(to Josh)
I've always wanted to do that! I will bow down and worship you forever.

JOSH

For you all, time has now stopped. Fate has brought all of you to this airport at this time because your destinations are in question.

JACK

No, our *departure* is in question. I know exactly where my destination is. I'd like to be able to get there.

JOSH

Your intended physical destinations are at odds with your subconsciously desired destinations. It is important that the gap between the two be closed, because the destinations you choose tonight will profoundly affect the rest of your lives.

(There is a pause for a few beats while that sinks in.)

BRIAN

So are you a space alien, or an angel, or some kind of pan-dimensional being?

(Josh again points his finger and ZAPS Brian, who falls to the ground, slightly stunned. He gets to his feet during the next few lines of dialogue.)

BRIAN

(channeling *The Sunshine Boys*)

Again with the finger.

SUZANNE

It wasn't an unreasonable question, you know.

JOSH

What I am or am not is not important. This isn't about me, it's about you. You are being given an opportunity to stop time consider your options carefully.

JACK

We're going to make our flight, right?

JOSH

Oh, for crying out loud!

BRIAN

Well, you know, *Josh*, we don't encounter too many pan-dimensional zombie alien angels in our normal lives, so forgive us if we have some questions.

JOSH

(deciding to forge ahead regardless)
Jack Colton—you are fleeing your wife and career in the belief that you can avoid the shame of confrontation and atonement. Suzanne Light—you are trying to remain in a bubble of ego and self-importance and are losing sight of what is really important in your life.

SUZANNE

Hey!

JOSH

Mark Dowd—you are having a crisis of faith and wonder where your true calling lies. Brian Braga—you are fearful of the unknown realm of the future.

BRIAN

"The unknown realm of the future"? Will I finally get a hovercar?

JOSH

Catherine Cole—you too readily jumped on the uncertainty of that realm of the future.

CATHERINE

Say what?

BRIAN

(to Catherine)
Aha! *J'accuse!*
(to Josh)
Can *I* bow down and worship you?

JOSH

You will each in turn experience a vision that reflects the future in some fashion. They may not come true, they may come true. It will depend on what destination you ultimately choose.

BRIAN

(in a low, spectral, Jacob Marley-like voice)
Ebenezer Scrooge! You will be visited by three ghosts...
(Josh again ZAPS Brian, and Brian again falls to the floor.)

BRIAN

Ow! Is that going to leave a scar or a bruise or something?

JOSH

Since you all at this departure gate have formed a community, the characters from your present and future lives will be portrayed by the people in this community of Gate 13.

JACK

(derisively)
Great. Community theater.

JOSH

That was uncalled for! In each of your visions, you will see your community players as the people they represent and react accordingly. At the end, your visions will allow you to choose your final destinations, but you will have no direct recollection of the details of each vision.

(Josh looks around expectantly for a few beats to see if all this has sunk in. It hasn't really, but *c'est la vie.*)

BRIAN

All right, so, tell me this: do you work for the airline, or...?

(Josh forgoes the finger and grabs a stapler from the podium he's standing on and throws it at Brian, who manages to evade it.)

BRIAN

Hey! What happened to the magic finger?

JOSH

I felt more like pelting you with a blunt object.

CATHERINE

Welcome to my world.

JACK

So after we have these visions of yours—

JOSH

Not mine. *Yours.*

JACK

Yeah, fine, whatever. After we have these visions, *then* can we get out of here?

JOSH

(sighs)

Once you experience your visions, you are free to choose whatever destination you like, armed with the knowledge of what the consequences will be.

JACK

Thank God.

SUZANNE

So when are we having these so-called "visions"?

BRIAN

(again in a low, spectral Jacob Marley-like voice)
"Expect the first ghost when the last stroke of 12 has ceased to vibrate..."

(Josh looks around the podium for something throw at Brian, Brian ducks behind Jack, as Josh picks up a staple remover and prepares to throw it.)

JACK

Hey!

JOSH

Expect the first vision...now.

(BLACKOUT.)

End of Act I.

Act II

The boarding gate, as before. Although the rows of seats and the podium are dimly visible in the background, the light is concentrated on the front of the stage. Suzanne stands facing stage right, miming typing on a computer. She is oblivious to the entrance of Brian and Catherine from stage left behind her. Suzanne will see Brian and Catherine as if they were Justin and Jackie, respectively. Once Suzanne sees them, they will become Justin and Jackie.

BRIAN

So let me get this straight. We're not us. Is that the idea?

CATHERINE

As I understand it, yes.

BRIAN

You understand it?

CATHERINE

Not even slightly. I believe you're Justin, Suzanne's son. I'm Jackie, your fiancé.

BRIAN

Hmm...I bet that'll be a stretch.

CATHERINE

I'll have to summon all my acting powers.
(Suzanne turns around.)

SUZANNE

Justin! When did you get in?
(Brian and Catherine are now Justin and Jackie.)

BRIAN (as Justin)

Just now.

SUZANNE

How was your flight?

CATHERINE (as Jackie)

Not bad.

BRIAN (as Justin)

Sure, you were on the aisle. I was wedged in the middle seat. The guy next to me obviously came in first in a pie-eating contest. I was unable to exhale for two-and-a-half hours.

CATHERINE (as Jackie)

Breathing is highly overrated.

SUZANNE

(to Catherine/Jackie)

Hi, I don't believe we met. I'm Suzanne, Justin's mom, although you probably knew that already.

CATHERINE (as Jackie)

Justin does seem to lack something in the manners department. I'm Jacqueline Case. Jackie.

SUZANNE

Nice to meet you, Jackie.

BRIAN (as Justin)

Mom, this is Jackie. My...fiancée.

CATHERINE (as Jackie)

(to Suzanne)

Don't worry, he'll catch up.

SUZANNE

What do you do, Jackie?

CATHERINE (as Jackie)

I'm a support technician for a company that makes laboratory management software. Justin and I met when I had to install an upgrade to their system.

BRIAN (as Justin)

I hadn't even been aware that a romantic relationship was one of the features of the new version.

SUZANNE

Have you set a date for the wedding?

BRIAN (as Justin)

Why is that always the first question anyone asks? Is everyone a frustrated caterer?

CATHERINE (as Jackie)

(to Suzanne)

Not yet. That's one of the projects for this weekend. Jeff is checking the availability of some dates, so we're having a confab tomorrow.

SUZANNE

You've met Justin's father?

CATHERINE (as Jackie)

Oh, yes, many times.

BRIAN (as Justin)

What can I say? You're never here.

(Suzanne takes umbrage at this.)

SUZANNE

(snippily)

Someone has to earn a decent living around here.

BRIAN (as Justin)

(just as snippily)

Ah, so *that's* what it was. Dad, of course, being completely unemployable and devoid of any skills.

CATHERINE (as Jackie)

(knowing when to leave)

I'm going to go say hi to Jeff.

(She exits. Brian/Justin and Suzanne look at each other for a few beats.)

SUZANNE

Justin, I haven't seen you in six months. Could we get through this weekend without arguing, for once?

BRIAN (as Justin)

(shrugs)

That's a good question. We'll never know unless we try.

SUZANNE

Why are you always so hostile when you come visit? Damn it, Justin, you're over 30. You're getting a bit old for the petulant teenager routine.

BRIAN (as Justin)

Well, you weren't there for it the first time, so I'm just trying to get you caught up. I wouldn't want you to miss out on anything.

SUZANNE

Is *that* what this is about? Justin, we've been through this over and over...

BRIAN (as Justin)

(holds up his hands)

Look, mom, I'm not saying anything.

SUZANNE

No, but you're sure as hell thinking something.

BRIAN (as Justin)

I think lots of things.

SUZANNE

I'm sorry if I wasn't around a lot when you were a kid. But I had a job. And, hell, it paid for your college, and everything else you ever needed. You wanted for *nothing*.

BRIAN (as Justin)

A mother would have been nice.

SUZANNE

That was harsh.

BRIAN (as Justin)

(shrugs)

So it's harsh. I'm grateful to everything you did for dad and me financially. But I'd like to think that there's more to being a parent than just writing checks.

SUZANNE

Well, I'm sorry we weren't *Ozzie and Harriet*.

BRIAN (as Justin)

We weren't even Ozzy Osbourne.

SUZANNE

What?

BRIAN (as Justin)

That joke worked better in my head.... Look, it doesn't matter. Jackie and I are starting a new life and I'm happy to move on. You're welcome to be as much a part of that life as you want, but I really have no expectation of anything. Do what you want, just like you've always done.

(He turns to leave.)

I should point out, though, that Jackie and I are already married.

SUZANNE

What?!

BRIAN (as Justin)

We got married last weekend. A quickie civil thing. We're husband and wife already. We're not having a big wedding ceremony.

SUZANNE

Why?

BRIAN (as Justin)

It never occurred to me that you would come, and it would be embarrassing for me and for dad. Jackie's breaking the news to him now.

SUZANNE

What makes you think that I wouldn't attend my only son's wedding?

BRIAN (as Justin)

I have no doubt that the opportunity to fly off someplace far more exciting will come up. It always does. After all, you've managed to miss every single other major event in my life. It started with that spelling bee—even when I was in the national championship, I don't know where you were. Probably being honored by the geek squad.

SUZANNE

Justin...

BRIAN (as Justin)

Let's see...school plays? Nope. High school graduation? Uh-uh. College—

SUZANNE

I was at your college graduation!

BRIAN (as Justin)

And do you remember why? Because you were being given an honorary doctorate by the School of Computer Sciences at the same school! That entire Commencement weekend, I played second banana to you. The faculty took you out and wined and dined you, and dad and I had pizza in my apartment while we waited for you to call. And you didn't. Dad said you got back to the hotel at two in the morning and were boasting about how you had met some state senator or something at dinner.

SUZANNE

It was the governor actually...

BRIAN (as Justin)

Ah, of course. I should have known that mere state legislators would be beneath you.

SUZANNE

(a bit contritely)

I've been a terrible mother, haven't I?

BRIAN (as Justin)

No, a terrible mother would have been abusive. I never had that kind of attention.

SUZANNE

Justin...

BRIAN (as Justin)

You really weren't any mother at all. More of an egg donor, really. But, as I said, it's in the past. I'm moving on. Jackie tells me I should spend more time looking on the bright side. I apparently grew up all right; I've never been in prison or gone to law school so maybe it all worked

out for the best. I've decided to think that our relationship was based on a kind of benign neglect.

SUZANNE

Odd there's not a Hallmark card for that.

BRIAN (as Justin)

Maybe there should be. Greeting cards for people you're only sending a card to out of obligation. "We're not all that close and never will be, but here's a card anyway. Now leave me alone." When you don't care enough to send the very worst.

SUZANNE

You really have become a bitter young man, haven't you?

BRIAN (as Justin)

(shrugs)

Not really. They say absence makes the heart grow fonder—but only fonder toward those who are actually there. And if there's a positive side to all this, at least I know what not to do when Jackie and I have kids.

SUZANNE

What if I... I'll make it up to you. I promise.

BRIAN (as Justin)

"Promise." Interesting word. You said that to me many times before. You'd breeze in after some trip, I'd be upset that you missed something, and you would promise me that you'd make the next one, whatever that ended up being. And you never did. "Promise" is just a weasel word for you that signifies nothing. You missed your calling; you'd make a great politician.

(They look at each other for a few beats.)

BRIAN (as Justin)

Anyway, I should go check on dad and Jackie. We're going out to dinner at six, if you're free. Hey, maybe the mayor can join us.

(He exits. Suzanne looks after him sadly for a few beats. The lights come up full, illuminating the entire gate. Suzanne starts, as if coming out of a trance. She looks around at the empty gate, she takes out her BlackBerry, and starts tapping as she walks offstage and exits.)

(BLACKOUT)

The lights come up as at the beginning of the act, illuminating just the front of the stage. In front of the rows of seats, Jack is standing at an imaginary bar. Father Mark stands behind the "bar" pouring imaginary drinks. Jack occasionally grabs one and "drinks" it. Jack sees Mark as a bartender and not as a priest.

FATHER MARK (as bartender)

Another one, sir?

JACK

Keep 'em coming.

FATHER MARK (as bartender)

Rough day?

JACK

Rough year. Well, rough decade. Hell, my whole life has been pretty rough.

FATHER MARK (as bartender)

I haven't seen you here before. Just passing through? We don't get many non-regulars around here.

JACK

I'm only ever passing through anywhere these days. I've been on the run for about 8 months.

FATHER MARK (as bartender)

Say, you're not wanted by the cops or anything?

JACK

Not really, no. Or at least not anymore. I'm on the run from my own past.

FATHER MARK (as bartender)

That's a tough thing to run from. There's no statute of limitations either.

JACK

Tell me about it. You know, the speed at which things can go from really great to really crappy could stop a team of rampaging buffalo right in their tracks.

FATHER MARK (as bartender)

Oh, I know all about it. I've heard it all from all the folks that sit where you're sitting. Tending bar is a lot like confession. Only there's music and free munchies.

(He mimes putting out a bowl of nuts, proffering it to Jack.)

Nuts?

JACK

(chuckles slightly)

Yeah, I guess I must be.

(Suzanne enters from behind Jack. In Jack's vision, she is seen as Jack's wife Beth.)

SUZANNE (as Beth)

Jack?

(Jack freezes. He knows the voice and is terrified. He turns around slowly. He is a combination of happy and horror-stricken to see her.)

JACK

Beth? Beth, is that you?

SUZANNE (as Beth)

Yes, Jack. It's your wife. Remember me?

JACK

How on Earth did you find me in this godforsaken place?

(To Father Mark/bartender)

Sorry.

(Mark shrugs noncommittally.)

SUZANNE (as Beth)

I hired a private detective. You know, you've never been good at being stealthy and secretive, which is part of what got you in this situation in the first place. Anyway, you were pretty easy to track down. Inspector Clouseau could have followed your trail with no problem at all.

JACK

Okay, then, *why* did you find me? I didn't touch the savings accounts; you don't need me for money.

SUZANNE (as Beth)

Money, Jack? Do you think that's all I ever saw you as, a wallet with legs and a libido? Boy, you *have* been hanging around the dregs of humanity a long time, haven't you? It's a good thing you'll never get to do that horrible show ever again.

JACK

Then why—

SUZANNE (as Beth)

Did it ever occur to you that maybe I—oh, I don't know—loved you?

JACK

Even after you found out... When Donald...?

SUZANNE (as Beth)

What makes you think *Donald* opened my eyes to anything?

JACK

Then who—

SUZANNE (as Beth)

You labor under the assumption that I'm a complete moron or, worse, utterly naive.

JACK

I don't know what to say.

SUZANNE (as Beth)

Then shut up for once and listen. Do you honestly think I had no idea what was going on? If you did, then you lack the observational powers of even the worst reporter in the world.

JACK

Then why did you—

SUZANNE (as Beth)

Stay with you? What part of "I love you" don't you understand? But aside from that, I knew what you had gone through to get to where you are. Or were.

JACK

Uh huh. *Were.*

SUZANNE (as Beth)

Remember, Jack, we started dating in high school. We were married right after college. And, you know, I was the only woman you ever, you know...

(Father Mark casts Jack a curious glance.)

JACK

(to Mark; self-conscious and thus with a bit too much machismo)

Hey, she's great in bed.

SUZANNE (as Beth)

I'm *dynamite* in bed.

(Father Mark drops an imaginary glass.)

SUZANNE (as Beth)

Anyway, I knew what you went through at Channel 5. The abusive internship, and then when you ended up the weatherman, how that dipshit anchor Brock Charles used to harrass you constantly. It was a thankless job and you suffered. And I suffered with you. So when you got your own show, and it was a hit, I couldn't blame you for getting a bit too...big for your britches, with all the suggestive things that implies. And when you get a bit of fame, a little money, some power, it opens up the door to vast depths of sleaze.

JACK

You make it sound so romantic.

SUZANNE (as Beth)

So here you were, heading into middle age, a one-woman man, beaten down all his life...no wonder you went a little nuts and indulged yourself. And could I honestly say that I wouldn't do the same if I were in your shoes? Unfortunately, a career in financial planning rarely leads to that kind of...indulgence. Roth IRAs aren't exactly a potent aphrodisiac.

JACK

That's probably true.

SUZANNE (as Beth)

It was my assumption that once you were done playing around, you'd get it all out of your system and you'd come to your senses. I saw no harm in letting things take their course.

JACK

(pause)

I have to say, Beth, I'm pretty speechless.

SUZANNE (as Beth)

There's a first time for everything, I suppose.

JACK

So, you're not mad at me.

SUZANNE (as Beth)

Of course I'm *mad* at you. But what I'm more mad about is you running away instead of facing me like a man. Facing *everything* like a man. What, instead of trying to fix things, you just ran away? Who does that? Have been drinking yourself across the country?

JACK

Something like that.

SUZANNE (as Beth)

Yeah, that's proactive. Say what you want about the freaks you had on your show, at least they confronted their problems. Okay, the guy who attacked his wife with a snake was probably a bit over the top, but, hey, at least it beat running away.

JACK

Well, the snake wasn't poisonous.

SUZANNE (as Beth)

Yeah, but...*it's a snake!*

JACK

So I should threaten you with large reptiles, is that what you're telling me?

SUZANNE (as Beth)

It would be a start.

JACK

(to Father Mark/bartender)
That's the kind of thing they don't tell you in pre-Cana.
(Father Mark shrugs; To Suzanne/Beth)
You've never even been afraid of snakes, have you?

SUZANNE (as Beth)

Not really, no. It's hamsters that terrify me.

JACK

Hamsters?!

SUZANNE (as Beth)

They're rats, basically.

JACK

But they're harmless.

SUZANNE (as Beth)

Yeah, tell that to 14th-century Europe. Hello, Black Death! Look, Jack, we're drifting from the subject. Don't take the snake thing too seriously; it's just a metaphor. My point is, any kind of confrontation is better than just running away.

(Jack lets that sink in for a moment. Suzanne/Beth smacks him on the side of the head.)

SUZANNE (as Beth)

Ninny. Now come on. Let's go home.
(Jack looks at Father Mark.)

FATHER MARK (as bartender)

You're all set. Last round is on the house.

JACK

Thanks.

(to Suzanne/Beth)

I'll be right there, Beth. I just have to use the rest room.

SUZANNE (as Beth)

(concernedly; to Father Mark/bartender)
We're the only ones in this bar, right?

FATHER MARK (as bartender)

The only ones.

SUZANNE (as Beth)

(to Jack)

Three minutes. I'm looking at my watch.

(Suzanne/Beth exits stage right. Jack smiles and stares into space for a moment. Father Mark/Bartender exits stage left. The lights come up full, illuminating the entire gate. Jack starts, as if coming out of a trance. He looks around at the empty gate, then walks offstage and exits.)

(BLACKOUT)

The lights come up as at the beginning of the act, illuminating just the front of the stage. Brian and Catherine are sitting in two seats. Jack enters carrying a handheld microphone, as if he were still on a TV talk show.

JACK

(to audience)

Welcome to the *Jack Colton Show*. Today, we have a departure from our usual fare.

BRIAN

(to Catherine)

I never slept with your sister.

CATHERINE

(to Brian)

I never slept with *your* sister.

BRIAN

Well, neither did I.

CATHERINE

What about Peaches?

BRIAN

(imitating a goat)

Baaa!

JACK

Okay, settle down, you two. Today, we have Brian Braga and Catherine Cole. They were married for...nine years?

CATHERINE

Nine years.

JACK

And three years ago were divorced.

BRIAN

Three glorious years.

JACK

You both seem very happy.

CATHERINE

We're trying our best to make our divorce work. Our advice to other couples is to just give it time. Nothing ever comes easy, and divorce is no different.

JACK

Now, if I might ask, why was it, after, as you said, nine years of marriage, you suddenly got divorced?

CATHERINE

The problem was that after we had both lost our jobs four years ago, I had managed to land my dream job in England.

BRIAN

And since all I could find were an endless series of nightmare jobs, she held all the aces.

CATHERINE

And you held all the asses.

BRIAN

Well, meow.

JACK

Now, you two, focus. What happened in England?

BRIAN

Well, King Harold deployed his forces on Senlac Hill, some 6 miles northwest of Hastings. William the Conqueror's Norman army had its archers in the front rank, followed by infantry, and then the cavalry, whose charge would break through the—

CATHERINE

You can see what I've had to put up with.

JACK

I see what you mean. I'd marry him just so I could divorce him. Anyway, please continue with the story.

BRIAN

Well, the archers took out—

JACK

Your story!

CATHERINE

Six months after we moved to London—

BRIAN

After uprooting our entire lives, selling off all our lifelong possessions and abandoning all my family and friends—

CATHERINE

(casually)

Right, after all that, the company that had hired me went out of business and I was out of work again.

JACK

And that put undue strain on your marriage.

BRIAN

No, it put undue strain on our bank accounts. Our marriage was fine.

CATHERINE

For a while.

BRIAN

For a while.

JACK

And then...

CATHERINE

We were in a pub in Soho and, you know, *in vino veritas*.

BRIAN

Or in beero beritas.

CATHERINE

In Scotcho scurritas...

BRIAN

In gino geritas.

CATHERINE

I knew a Gino Geritas in college. Transfer student from Italy.

JACK

Guys! Focus!

(Brian and Catherine look at each other and giggle.)

BRIAN

(snaps to seriousness)

Anyway, it had just suddenly occurred to me, in a way that it never had before, that I wasn't really given any choice in the whole thing. That back in Willowdale, I had been asked to give up my entire life so Cat could pursue a dream—which didn't pan out.

CATHERINE

But we talked about it! We discussed it at great length before I made *any* decision.

BRIAN

Oh, come on. Look at the position I was in. I was out of work. The one company that had kept most of Willowdale employed moved out. I only had two options: leave or become an independent contractor. And I really didn't want to leave. My family was there. My whole past was there. It's not fair that I have to give up an entire community just to get a job. So reluctantly, and going against my personality, I did start to make a modest living as a freelancer. But you...you were always rootless. You never stayed in any one place very long, so what did you care?

CATHERINE

I cared! But I was an engineer—I don't have the option of freelancing, unless you want to put a research lab in the basement.

BRIAN

Well, we could have moved the boxes of Christmas stuff.

CATHERINE

So I was kind of stuck, wasn't I?

BRIAN

But England?

(to Jack)

Oh, is this the point where we strip to the waist and start slugging each other?

JACK

Please don't.

BRIAN

'Kay. Anyway, I know you like new adventures and were looking forward to the idea of living someplace exotic...

CATHERINE

London's East End isn't exactly exotic, except for maybe the swarthy guy in the off-license.

BRIAN

It is if you've never lived more than 20 miles from Willowdale.

CATHERINE

What is your unhealthy obsession with that town? Look, I understand that you don't want to be that far away from your family, but sometimes you have to change. Move out and move on.

BRIAN

But I don't want to! I liked my life in Willowdale. It was very comfortable and I was happy.

CATHERINE

But you weren't living, you were stagnating!

BRIAN

But I was happy. We were married, were probably going to have kids some day...

CATHERINE

I'm not in any great hurry for *that*.

BRIAN

We could have lived a fairly happy domestic life.

CATHERINE

But that's not *living*. It's existing.

BRIAN

But if you enjoy yourself, who cares? I don't get these people who think you have to leap out of planes or Bungee jump into yawning chasms to "live."

(He makes air quotes with his fingers.)

Why is so-called "living" always someone else's definition? I don't want to see the world or put my life at risk or wrestle crocodiles, or run down wildebeests on the plains of Africa or whatever. I just want a nice quiet life, a few friends, a family. Is that too much to ask?

CATHERINE

I think it's too *little* to ask.

BRIAN

What that's just hard cheese.

(to Jack)

So that's why we got divorced. So I could go back home and Magellan here could see the world.

(to Catherine)

And didn't Magellan's crew end up eating him or something?

CATHERINE

Yes, but they have restaurants now.

BRIAN

Don't order the Magellan Special.

CATHERINE

(laughs)

Donner, party of 6...

(Brian and Catherine are both amused by this.)

JACK

So what I'm sensing here is that you two have a rapport that most couples would kill for.

BRIAN

We have actually killed for it. We're relationship vampires.

CATHERINE

Yes, we suck other couple's joy and feed on their happiness.

JACK

It seems a shame that you would want to end that over something fairly trivial.

BRIAN

Well, first of all, I think our rapport makes for a better comedy team than married couple. And second, I'm not sure it *is* a trivial thing.

CATHERINE

But it really is. As long as we have each other, what difference does it make what else we have or where we have it?

BRIAN

But my life is more than you! Look, Cat, I love you with the white-hot intensity of a thousand suns, but does that mean that I have to give up everything else?

CATHERINE

My life is only you!

(They let that lie there for a moment.)

BRIAN

(speechless)

Ah.

JACK

You've rendered him speechless.

CATHERINE

That God for small favors.

BRIAN

I don't want to be divorced. The last the years have been hell on wheels.

CATHERINE

So, who's this Helen Wheels? Seeing someone else already, are you?

BRIAN

Rolling right along...

(gets emotional)

I never knew...I mean, I knew, but...I love you, too, Cat. You don't know what the last three years have been like.

CATHERINE

I don't?

BRIAN

Let's get undivorced.

CATHERINE

As soon as humanly possible.

(They embrace and kiss.)

JACK

(to audience)

Well, it looks like our time is up for today. Tune in tomorrow when my guests will be twin sisters who claim that their mother is a vampire and their father is a werewolf.

BRIAN

There's a marriage made in hell.

CATHERINE

I bet she yells at him all the time about hair in the shower drain.

BRIAN

On the plus side, they probably keep similar hours.

CATHERINE

That's true. "Honey, we'll always have Transylvania."

(Jack heads offstage.)

JACK

(muttering as he exits)

Tell me my show is worthless. Ha!

(Brian and Catherine sit back, Brian's arm around Catherine. The lights come up full, illuminating the

entire gate. Brian and Catherine start, as if coming out of a trance. They look around, then silently walk offstage and exit.)

(BLACKOUT)

The lights come up as at the beginning of the act, illuminating just the front of the stage. Father Mark mimes lighting candles. Catherine, as Mark's sister Julie, enters from behind him. He turns and sees her. He is taken aback.

FATHER MARK

Holy crap!

(he looks up)

Sorry.

(to Catherine/Julie)

Julie? Julie, is that you?

CATHERINE (as Julie)

Yes, Mark.

FATHER MARK

But you're...

CATHERINE (as Julie)

Dead, yes.

FATHER MARK

Ah.

(there is an awkward pause)

Um, so, how long has it been?

CATHERINE (as Julie)

I haven't the foggiest idea. Time is pretty meaningless in eternity. A couple years, a day, several hours?

FATHER MARK

Actually, it's been about six months. It was a rhetorical question.

CATHERINE (as Julie)

Oh, right. Duh.

FATHER MARK

(smiles)

You always were very literal.

CATHERINE (as Julie)

You seem very calm, almost like you see apparitions of the dead every day.

FATHER MARK

Well, you know, in my line of work...

CATHERINE (as Julie)

That's a fair point. Aren't you curious as to why I'm here?

FATHER MARK

Mildly. But I'm just happy that you are.

CATHERINE (as Julie)

I'm here to kick your ass. But I can't, at least not physically.

FATHER MARK

Why?

CATHERINE (as Julie)

I'm a ghost. My foot would pass right through you.

FATHER MARK

No, I mean, why do you want to kick my ass?

CATHERINE (as Julie)

Because I want you to stop using me as an excuse.

FATHER MARK

An excuse? Excuse for what?

CATHERINE (as Julie)

For losing your religion, if that's what you want to call it. It's BS and you know it. Let's face it, Mark, your faith has been shaky from the start.

FATHER MARK

Now, Julie...

CATHERINE (as Julie)

Look, baby brother, I remember our childhood. You were always an introvert, and as you got older you were always...searching for something. Even as a teenager you

were always on one spiritual quest or another. Your joining the priesthood took everyone by surprise, especially mom and dad.

FATHER MARK

I know.

CATHERINE (as Julie)

Especially as we weren't even Catholic. How many religions did you try? I remember your freshman dorm room when you dabbled with Hinduism. You had all this Indian decoration and that sitar music going all the time. Every time I visited you I had this intense craving for tandoori chicken.

FATHER MARK

I went down some blind alleys, I admit.

CATHERINE (as Julie)

It always seemed like you were using faith—in something—as a way to escape.

FATHER MARK

Escape from what?

CATHERINE (as Julie)

You tell me. But I do know that when you were 19, every time things got tense between you and Melissa you would insist that you were going to become a priest. I can't think of any worse reason to become one.

FATHER MARK

It wasn't that. But after a few years, it truly seemed like it was my calling.

CATHERINE (as Julie)

And now?

FATHER MARK

(thinks for a moment)

Not so much.

CATHERINE (as Julie)

You know, Mark, there's nothing wrong with searching, with looking for some sort of spiritual answer to everything.

And I say this even though I *am* a spirit right now. But you can't be surprised if the answers aren't easy to find. More brilliant people than you have been searching for thousands of years and those that have come up with anything could be counted on the fingers of one hand.

FATHER MARK

So what should I do?

CATHERINE (as Julie)

Well, first, don't mistake the journey for the destination. That is, enjoy the journey and don't worry that you may never arrive at where you want to go. Yeah, I know there's a joke about airlines to be made here, but I'm serious.

FATHER MARK

No, I hear what you're saying.

CATHERINE (as Julie)

Well, that would be a first. Anyway, I know—and you know—that faith can be a great comfort in a world that seems to get crazier by the minute, but when it becomes a way of trying to escape from that world, well, then there's trouble. Bad things happen, but a lot of good things happen, too. But more importantly, *things* happen. There's a reason that things happen, but things don't "happen for a reason." Trying to find some sort of cosmic rationale for it all is a fool's errand, and it just becomes a distraction from dealing with there here and now. You're here and it's now. So deal with it.

FATHER MARK

I'm not sure that I can, or at least not without help.

CATHERINE (as Julie)

Sure you can. It's like what that woman, Suzanne, said before: "People who don't travel often get frustrated because they approach everything from the perspective of what they *expect* or want it to be, instead of what it actually is." The same applies to life, to the world. Deal with it as it is, rather than what you want it to be, and you'll have fewer problems.

FATHER MARK

So should I quit the priesthood?

CATHERINE (as Julie)
 Mark, I can't tell you what to do.

FATHER MARK
 That's a first!

CATHERINE (as Julie)
 (laughs)
 Touché. Think about what you want. Remember Thomas Becket's line from *Murder in the Cathedral*: "The last temptation is the greatest treason: To do the right deed for the wrong reason."

FATHER MARK
 And look what happened to him.

CATHERINE (as Julie)
 Exactly. I'm a ghost, so it behooves me to say something spooky and sort of profound, so here goes: Choose your destination wisely, but enjoy the journey more.

FATHER MARK
 That doesn't sound very spooky.

CATHERINE (as Julie)
 To some people it does. Take care, baby brother.
 (She exits. Father Mark stares after her for a few beats. The lights come up full, illuminating the entire gate. Father Mark starts, as if coming out of a trance. He looks around, then silently walks offstage and exits.)

(BLACKOUT)
 After a few beats, the lights come back up on the entire gate area. However, this time, the sign behind the podium says "Gate 12." Josh is wearing an airline uniform and stands behind the podium typing on a computer. He is the only one there. He picks up an intercom.

JOSH
 (on intercom)
 Attention, passengers waiting for Mercury Airlines flight 830, the 9:55 departure to Newark. We will begin boarding at Gate 12 in a few moments.

(Suzanne, Jack, Brian, Catherine, and Mark file in. Suzanne has her mobile phone to her ear. Aside from

Brian and Catherine, the others don't seem to know each other. Suzanne walks up to the podium. She pockets her phone.)

SUZANNE

Hi, I'm ticketed for this flight, but I'd like to change my reservation. I think the next flight back to Orlando is tomorrow at 7 a.m.?

JOSH

(types a bit)
Yes, 7:05 a.m., Mercury flight 1131.

SUZANNE

Great.

JOSH

I'm afraid coach seats are sold out, but I can put you in first class at no extra charge.

SUZANNE

I think I can handle that.

JOSH

Outstanding. We can also put you up for the evening at the Hilton next door.

SUZANNE

That would be great, thanks.
(Josh hands her a new ticket from beneath the counter.)

JOSH

That'll be Gate 5. Boarding will start at 6:45 tomorrow morning.

SUZANNE

(takes out her mobile phone)
Thanks.

JOSH

Thank you for flying Mercury Airlines. Next!
(As Suzanne walks away from the podium, she punches a speed dial number.)

SUZANNE

(on phone, as she exits)
 Jeff? Listen, I've changed my plans. I'll be home first thing in the morning. What time is Justin's thing?...
 (Josh opens the jetway door, then returns to the podium and picks up the intercom.)

JOSH

(on intercom)
 Attention, passengers for Mercury Airlines flight 830 to Newark, we will now start boarding at Gate 12.
 (Mark takes his boarding pass out of his pocket and hands it to Josh, who tears it in half, and hands the stub back to him.)

JOSH

Thank you, Father.

MARK

It's just mister. Mister Dowd.
 (Josh nods, as Mark walks toward the jetway. Mark pauses, takes off his collar, gives it a reverent kiss, then puts it in his pocket. He exits through the jetway door.)
 (Jack walks up to podium.)

JACK

Listen, um, I'm supposed to be on this flight, but I've changed my mind. Can I just cancel the whole thing.

JOSH

Sure, that will be no problem.

JACK

I suppose you're going to gouge me with some sort of cancellation fee.

JOSH

We will waive the cancellation fee, sir.

JACK

(surprised)
 Oh...great. Thanks.

JOSH

Did you have any checked baggage?

JACK

Yes, one bag.

JOSH

If you give me the receipt, I'll have it removed from the plane and sent to baggage claim before the flight departs.

JACK

(takes baggage receipt from pocket and hands it to Josh)

Wow, thanks.

JOSH

It's no problem.

BRIAN

What an accomodating airline.

CATHERINE

We should fly them more often.

BRIAN

I wouldn't go that far.

(calls to Josh)

Can I get my checked baggage fee refunded?

JOSH

No.

(to Jack)

You're all set, sir.

JACK

Thanks.

(Jack starts to exit, then stops halfway. He takes a deep breath, steeling himself, and then strides offstage. Josh watches and smiles.)

(Brian and Catherine hang back from the podium.)

CATHERINE

This is your last chance to back out of this.

BRIAN

Cat, I thought about it and thought about it. I'm ready and willing to follow you to London or to the ends of the earth.

CATHERINE

There are no ends of the Earth. It's a sphere.

BRIAN

I was speaking metaphorically. And, hey, if this doesn't work out, we'll just do something else. As long as we're doing it together.

CATHERINE

All right, then. Here we go,

BRIAN

May fortune favor the foolish.

CATHERINE

That's the spirit!

(As they walk up to the podium, Brian looks down at the floor and picks up a stapler. He looks at it, confused.)

BRIAN

Wow.

CATHERINE

It's a device used to secure loose sheets of paper.

BRIAN

Yes, I know what it is. I'm just having this weird sense of *déjà vu*. Did someone try to bean me with a stapler?

CATHERINE

Not that I know of, but I applaud the sentiment.

BRIAN

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

(He looks at it curiously for a few moments, then hands it to Josh.)

BRIAN

I think you dropped this.

JOSH

Thanks. Boarding passes?

(Brian and Catherine hand Josh their boarding passes)
Thank you.

BRIAN

(reading Josh's name tag)
Josh...have we met before?

JOSH

Not that I know of, sir.

BRIAN

You're not some weird alien mutant zombie angel or something?

JOSH

No, but thanks for asking.

CATHERINE

(to Josh)
Don't mind him.
(Brian winches in pain and grabs his chest.)

CATHERINE

You okay?

BRIAN

Yeah, just heartburn or agita or something.

CATHERINE

"Agita"? What are you, my uncle Bernie?

BRIAN

It's gone now. Weird.
(He looks suspiciously at Josh, who shrugs.)

CATHERINE

You get stranger by the day.

BRIAN

But would you want me any other way?

CATHERINE

Not really, no.

(Bran and Catherine exit down the jetway arm in arm.
Josh picks up the intercom.)

JOSH

(on intercom)

This is the final boarding call for Mercury Airlines flight 830, the scheduled 9:55 departure to Newark Liberty Airport. If Liberty is your final destination, please make your way to Gate 13—I'm sorry, I mean Gate 12. On behalf of Mercury Airlines, thanks for traveling with us this evening, and I hope you enjoy Liberty...or wherever your final destination may be.

THE END.