

Tantalus Descending

A one-act play for two actors

by
Edward Morris

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CHARACTER NAME

Dennis Compton

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

75; recent widower, retired editor of Clayton University Press

Lacy Silver

50; divorced, Clayton University's public relations director and freelance writer

SCENE ONE

DENNIS' library/office, with bulging bookcase, easy chairs, a coffee table and side tables. Door to guest bedroom is stage right.

The time is tonight.

DENNIS is walking around the room, a bottle of wine in one hand and talking on the phone to his daughter.

DENNIS

Listen, honey, I'm feeling tip-top. Couldn't be better. Seriously, I'm absolutely buoyant. If you were here, you could actually see me floating around the room. . . . Is Rachel back from Paris yet? Tell her I'll expect a full report. . . . Guess who's just stopped by for a visit. Lacy Silver. . . You remember . . . Lacy, my writer friend from the college? Yeah, that one. And she's brought pizza. Am I not living the lush life? Yeah, sure, I'll give her your best. You too. Talk to you tomorrow.

DENNIS puts down the phone as LACY enters from stage left, holding aloft two wine glasses.

LACY

Found them.

DENNIS

That was my Ginny checking in to see if her old man has shattered into atoms yet. She says, 'Hi.' And I'm sure she meant every word of it.

DENNIS sets the bottle on the table, takes the glasses from LACY and pours the wine, while she puts the pizza box on the coffee table, opens the box and sits down to serve the slices. DENNIS hands LACY a glass of wine and sits beside her at the opposite end of the sofa. The mood is more collegial than cozy.

LACY

Well, you can count yourself lucky. My daughter only calls me to whine about how her husband can't get his act together. Which, believe me, is a case of the eel calling the snake "creepy." She wants a baby. He's bucking for full professorship and has no detectable zeal for fatherhood. You know how that game goes. Oh, well. Who can quarrel with such modest ambitions? But on to important matters. How goes it? Are you doing OK? You look good.

DENNIS

It's kind of up and down—with the ups slowly gaining ground. Mary's dying didn't exactly immobilize me. But, damn, I miss her. After I retired, she and I used to stroll around campus like a young couple. We'd pretend we were inspecting the family estate—our own Downton Abbey. She'd talk about improvements we needed to make to the servants' quarters or the appalling conditions of the stables. Just silly stuff like that. She'd fantasize, and I'd be the straight man who fed her lines. Then she got really sick really fast, after which we rarely left home. With her gone these last five months, I've been pretty much at loose ends. I guess I should have spent more time re-connecting with friends. Like you.

LACY

And I should have initiated some re-connecting myself.

LACY reaches over to place a comforting hand on his shoulder.

It's that old case of not knowing what to say in the face of someone else's loss—and ending up not saying anything. Anyway, here I am. Eager to catch up and glad you're staying afloat. I wish I'd known Mary better. She must have been a delight to be around.

(A BEAT)

DENNIS

She sparkled. She really did.

DENNIS changes the subject

So what's been going on with you these past centuries? Bring me up to date.

LACY

That should take all of 30 seconds. Obviously, I'm still beating the drums for Clayton U. Still trying to convince parents that a degree from the old school is worth mortgaging their homes for. Not all that much has changed there since you and I were spooning out our lives in committee meetings and staff retreats. You'll be pleased to know the press is still running on your momentum. You turned out some best sellers.

DENNIS

Bestsellers by university standards, maybe, but only a couple actually crawled onto the Times' list.

LACY

Even so, you're something of a legend down there at the adjective factory. And I'm prepared to milk it for all it's worth. Also, I want to pitch the idea of doing a cover story on you for the alumni magazine.

DENNIS feigns distress, with the back of his hand against his forehead

DENNIS

Must I be hounded by fame the rest of my days?

LACY

You'll love being spotlighted by my radiant prose. I promise. The story might even help us with faculty recruiting.

DENNIS

One can always hope. Being useful is not something I'm doing a lot of these days.

LACY

Then I've arrived just in time to give meaning to your diminished existence.

DENNIS

The pizza's a good start. I'm not a cook. If I can't microwave it into submission, I order out—or experiment with various tomato and vodka-based soups.

LACY closes the pizza box and pushes it aside as the both continue to sip their wine.

LACY

You should have called me. At least for lunch.

DENNIS

Oh, well, it's not that awful. I'm down to about one day of self-pity a week. The other six days I sleep a lot and read funeral home brochures.

LACY

Don't tell me you're worrying about your age at your age.

LACY gives him a visual "once-over"

You may have weeks left.

DENNIS

I know. I know. When I breezed into my seventies, I thought, "This ain't so bad. Maybe I'll escape being an old man." I felt sure I'd cash out before Mary did, anyway. She seemed ageless. I didn't realize until she died how much my own high spirits depended on hers—even when she was sick.

LACY

That's a sweet tribute. . . .

DENNIS

. . . and an aching truth.

LACY

You probably heard that Joe and I split up—nearly two years ago. Somewhere along the way I got the courage to send him packing. He wasn't such a bad guy on a spectrum of dreadfulness, but he wasn't much to rush home to, either. We were just acting the happy couple.

DENNIS

Ah, the pitfalls of a flagging marriage—always betting you can win bigger pots with fewer chips to play. I've seen that happen a lot.

LACY

I did send Joe packing, but it wasn't until I found out he'd been staring dreamily into younger and more adoring eyes.

DENNIS returns the gesture LACY gave him earlier: a companionable hand on the shoulder

DENNIS

It's hell to have to compete with adoration. Hardly fair, really. But adoration tends of have a short shelf life

LACY

Well—in addition to her soulful gaze—friends told me Joe boasted that the second Mrs. Silver was sexually addictive—the very opioid of pussy.

DENNIS

So he actually married her?

LACY

That he did. And with no long engagement, either. Joe's too fussy to have an untethered mistress lying around.

DENNIS

Did you ever meet her?

LACY

Once. We collided in a grocery story. Joe was pushing their cart and pontificating like a museum docent about the canned goods. He introduced us, and then scurried off like the sneak he is to get a doughnut. She was quite courteous and restrained—no fake chumminess, very careful not to say the wrong thing or smile too broadly. I expected her to be condescending. But she wasn't at all. Her eyes actually seemed kind. Under other circumstances, I'd probably have liked her.

DENNIS turns his whole body to face her

DENNIS

So do you feel antelope free now? Or just cut adrift?

LACY

Basically the latter. I had a few dinner dates and a couple of sleepovers after the divorce, mostly, I guess, to convince myself I still had some opioid left. These days, I don't think that much about sex anymore. But when I do, I try not to be driving.

DENNIS

Both hands on the wheel, right? . . . Another slice? More wine?

LACY shakes her head 'no'

LACY

I feel like I'm starting over with nowhere in particular I want to go.

DENNIS

Ain't that the truth! Our kids have long gone. No partner left to re-live the old days with. No bosses to impress and suck up to. Maybe you and I should join forces and do something outrageous, one last gasp for immortality—like building our own pyramid.

LACY

Have you checked the price of limestone and marble lately? And the labor costs alone would kill us.

DENNIS

OK, you've convinced me. We'll have to think of something else equally grandiose and doomed to failure. Maybe smuggling dictionaries into Mississippi.

LACY

Or open an Air Guitar Museum. Did you and Mary have big plans for your “golden years” before she got sick?

DENNIS

No. Our enthusiasms never quite matched—a fact we adjusted to early on. She loved to travel, and being a photographer took her all over the world, shooting everything from factory openings to celebrity weddings. I preferred sitting on my ass, nurse-maiding authors and firing off angry letters to the op ed pages. She enjoyed the beach, while I melt in direct sunlight. Once Ginny left for college, Mary and I tended to run on parallel tracks.

LACY

With all those differences, what did you two have to hang onto?

DENNIS

Plenty. She was one of the smartest people I ever met, and I think I did a fairly good job of keeping up with her. So we certainly relished each other's company—always that. We generally liked the same kinds of books and movies, and our politics meshed. Come to think of it, I guess we were already living our golden years right here. But we were never a clinging couple.

LACY

Well, no wonder. You sound unbearably stuffy.

DENNIS

You don't know the half of it. I also loath sports, dancing and pets. But in my defense: I donate lavishly to Planned Parenthood, I have a lifetime subscription to The New York Review of Books, and I'm totally free of tattoos. Not to mention a shelf loaded with NPR coffee mugs.

LACY

Oh well, that certainly evens things out.

DENNIS

How about you? Did Joe's wandering willie muck up any of your cherished dreams?

LACY

We never really got that far. We met in journalism school. Remember the days when newspapers still mattered? When real news still mattered?

(MORE)

LACY (cont'd)

Back then, Joe and I talked about retiring early to some small town in West Virginia, buying the local weekly and showing them how the pros did it. Then the internet came along and blew newspapers out of the water. So we just plugged ahead being working stiffs for other people.

DENNIS

Some more wine?

LACY

Absolutely. This is really good.

DENNIS

No wine connoisseur I. It's a leftover from Queen Mary's reign—always the right wine even for the most humble pizza. She was elegant in all things small and large—and uncompromisingly civilized.

LACY

Do I detect a teeny note of discontent in all that praise?

DENNIS

Oh, no. . . . Well, some wistful regrets. There were times I could have made do with less elegance and more trailer park aerobics. But I gather that's the common male complaint.

LACY

So I've heard. More than once. So how did you handle your two roads diverging? You clearly did a better job at keeping your marriage alive than Joe and I did. How did Mary hold her scholar/satyr inside the fence?

DENNIS

She didn't.

LACY

You strayed on her?

DENNIS

Never that, but I wasn't sexually exclusive either.

LACY

What does that mean?

DENNIS

Ten years or so into our marriage, I fell madly in love with another woman. I never looked at it as a rejection of Mary. I still loved her, too, but we had basically satisfied all the curiosity we had about each other. There seemed to be nothing new inside for either of us to discover. Even worse, our sex life had pretty much been sidelined by the demands of our jobs and keeping up with Ginny. She was always a handful. I respected Mary too much to start an affair behind her back. That's a betrayal she would have never forgiven. But I felt like I just had to be with this new woman. I had to. When would I ever have another chance to feel like a first romance? Before I went to bed with her, though, I confessed to Mary that I had this obsession and was determined to let it play itself out. Oddly enough, she agreed to go along with it instead of kicking me out of the house. She as much as admitted she was relieved that someone else would be sharing the moan and groan duties with her. Can't say that did much for my libido, but it made me feel less a cad. Mary even got to the point that she'd sometimes take Ginny to visit her grandparents so my new love and I could have some privacy.

LACY

You've got to be kidding. Nobody's that magnanimous.

DENNIS

Mary was. I'll swear it. And get this. She and that other woman ultimately became best friends and remained so up until the time Mary died. Mary even dedicated one of her books to her. And why not—they were both lovable people? I'm sure part of Mary's generosity came from knowing that there was never a time I didn't want to make love to her. She was all too aware of that. Our sex life never got old to me—just rare. But there was a sticky side to her open-mindedness. It had to work both ways. I knew that if she ever found another lover, I'd have to be just as accommodating. And she did. She was on a wedding shoot on Nantucket when she encountered this rugged—dare I say “burly”—construction worker. Yeah, it was a real *Lady Chatterley* thing, all sweat and monosyllables—or so I chose to imagine. She told me about him, even gushed a bit about what a sensitive chap he was. I gritted my teeth and made a few elitist remarks that were utterly beneath me. In the end, though, I gave her my blessing, albeit grudgingly. Their sexual relationship gradually cooled, but they remained close. I never got to know him or particularly wanted to. The only time we crossed paths was when Mary was in the hospital and he came to see her. We shook hands, I bought him a drink, and we talked about everything except Mary.

(MORE)

DENNIS (cont'd)

He was a solid, old-fashioned sort who, as Mary once let slip, considered me a wuss for not being more possessive about my wife. How's that for irony?

(A BEAT)

Let me show you something.

DENNIS gets up, goes to the bookcase and brings back a coffee-table size book.

This is Mary's last published collection of photos.

DENNIS resumes his seat—but this time closer to LACY—and begins showing her pictures.

This was my first love after Mary.

DENNIS points to a picture. LACY hesitates for a moment before leaning in for a closer look.

LACY

She is beautiful.

DENNIS

In so many ways. She was divorced when we met. After we separated—amicably I must emphasize—she remarried and quite happily.

DENNIS turns to another page.

And here's Mary's muscular indiscretion. She chose to photograph him in black and white, standing in this working man's bar, throwing darts. Note the bulging triceps. Even now, I imagine them holding Mary and me wincing in envy.

DENNIS closes the book and pushes it aside but remains seated closer to LACY

LACY

But your marriage was never in danger?

DENNIS

Nope. We never once discussed separating. In spite of our differences, our trust in each other's love was rock solid. Too solid to be shaken by what—for all we knew—might turn out to be nothing more than midlife flings. What if Mary or I had let jealousy—and there was some on both sides--destroy our marriage? Would she have had someone as devoted as I was to take care of her when she was helpless and dying? Maybe. But probably not.

LACY

Did you have just that one visit to the nookie jar?

DENNIS

There were a couple of brief relationships after that. Mary knew about those, too, but she never met the other women. Generally she was on assignment somewhere else when I was indulging myself. She could have been too, I guess. But unless she was a master of disguise, she had only that one long affair. My other romances were less profound and withered pretty quickly once the women realized I wasn't looking to replace Mary. Of course, it could be that they also withered because the women found me too boring and set in my ways. I'm pretty sure no one—Mary included—ever referred to me a “fun date.” My idea of a great time—after enjoying the main attraction, of course--was just sitting around and listening to the women talk about themselves—what they'd done, what they wanted to do, what they were afraid of. That was a huge part of the attraction for me—their back stories. I never let myself be pulled into their orbits of family and friends. Nor did I spend much time with them on the town. She—whoever she was at the moment—was enough for me in herself. I can honestly say that no woman ever walked away from me because I wasn't paying her enough attention. I found them all fascinating.

LACY

You're a strange case. With Mary gone this long, are you on the prowl again?

DENNIS

Christ no! My zeal for having sex is still there. But I'm far too timid for a frontal assault—so to speak. I've always just showed a lot of honest interest in the women I was attracted to and waited for them to make the first move. No risk, no rejections. I'm seventy-fucking-five years old. What am I gonna do—cruise nursing homes? A stalker in a walker? What's my come-on going to be—backyard sunsets and a discount on heart medicine?

LACY

Don't you think you might be a little too hard on yourself? Perhaps this is where I should come in and tell you what a catch you still are.

DENNIS

Why don't you do that? I've just depressed the hell out of myself.

LACY

OK. Let's take a reading: You're still a reasonably presentable chap—given the right lighting—and you're certainly a man of means. If you're aching for some action, consider the possibilities. Hit the coffee shops for breakfast after the moms have dropped their kids off. Cruise the college bars and zone in on embittered faculty wives. That's a deep talent pool. Hang out at the library and look wistful? You've got a great far away look that some morbidly lonely types might find appealing. I'm sure there are hordes of ladies in transit who'd have some free afternoons.

DENNIS

The last thing I need is to hook up with some head case who's more emotionally fucked up than I am. I'm certainly not angling for a pal for my old age. My aim is narrow. Basically I want some nice conversations and a great piece of ass. Period. I think I've got just about enough stamina left for that.

LACY

So how do you feel about relating to a whole woman? We're out there, you know, and just as cautious about emotional land mines as you are. But if you're just in the market for choice body parts, I believe there are certain artisans for hire who can make you feel like a pole vaulter. Two tits and a slit, as my vulgar friend labels them.

DENNIS

Hell, I'd like a little more than that. Maybe someone with a coherent world view and at least a Google awareness of Frank Sinatra and typewriters.

LACY

Boy, are you shooting for the moon! Not too hot, not too cold, eh Goldilocks?

DENNIS

Listen, I don't claim to have granite principles, but I tell you this: I've never paid for sex and I never will. Not that I'm too good or too proud to do it—it just wouldn't work for me. I don't expect the woman I'm with to break into applause when I'm performing—or trying to—but I've got to believe she's at least open to enjoying the tumble. I wouldn't get that feeling with credit card dates.

LACY

And that's your big objection?

DENNIS

That's one of them. But another one looms even larger. If I were paying for it, I'd be scared to engage in my favorite part of the recreation. I refer, of course, to the oral component of the carnal arts—you know—noshing in the nether regions. That's been both my joy and my specialty as the years ticked on. When my magic wand was in the shop, when John Thomas was on sabbatical—which was all too often—I could still please both my partner and myself with a sturdier appendage.

LACY

Well that's more information than I expected to get without a subpoena.

DENNIS

Does it repel you?

LACY takes a beat before she responds

LACY

No. I appreciate your bluntness if not your finesse. You stir some ancient memories. Pleasant ones. And it's the most impassioned pitch for going down on a woman I've heard in . . .like. . . ever.

DENNIS

Lacy, I apologize. I'm truly embarrassed. Don't know how I got so carried away. Here you are, kind enough to spend an evening with an old friend—even bringing your own supper—and suddenly I'm giving you the Viagra Monologues. You're way too easy to talk to.

LACY

Don't slash your wrists on my account. I'm more puzzled than offended. Am I to sit here and act oblivious to the fact that I have what you want?

DENNIS

So did Mary, but that didn't complete the equation.

LACY

Are you hustling me or just tone deaf? What am I? Your therapist? Just a sounding board for your codger fantasies? Why is it that you men can drone on endlessly to your women friends about your wet dreams and just assume we don't have the same urges? Are we less needy? Maybe it's not just sex for us. Maybe it's something really stupid—like warmth, too. I think I'd rather fuck you than listen to your eye-of-the-needle excuses for why you won't get laid.

DENNIS

It just never occurred to me that you'd be interested.

LACY

So what if you and I did end up sleeping together? Just this once. Would that kill either of us?

(A BEAT)

DENNIS

Is that an offer?

LACY

It's a topic. God knows it's gotta be more fun to do it than to talk it to death. I mean all I'd be doing is generously putting out for a friend. It's not like I'm donating a kidney.

DENNIS

It would have the same life-saving effect. Who knew this could be the day I finally believed in a merciful god?

LACY

You're cute—in a Senior Olympics sort of way.

DENNIS

I'll take “cute” or “desperate” or “marginally useful.” You name it, and I'll be exactly that thing. When impending bliss is in the wind, I'm a goddamn shape-shifter.

LACY

I'm just thinking out loud. As simple and inviting as it sounds, the whole idea of us thrashing around like arthritic porn stars is kind of ridiculous, don't you think? This doesn't happen to credentialed folks like us. . . . except at out of town conferences.

DENNIS

Well, if the topic becomes an offer, I'll start the bidding with my right arm.

DENNIS very gingerly moving in on her

You know it could work. There's just a short step between a lukewarm inclination and deciding “Why the hell not?” We're in a world of flux.

(A BEAT)

LACY shifts from 'flirtatious' to 'serious'

LACY

How would we relate to each other afterward if we went through with this. Would it be the first thing—maybe the only thing—we'll think of every time we see each other? Would I still see you as the wise academic I've always admired or as the pathetic groveling charity case you've become?

DENNIS

I certainly wouldn't want sex to spoil our friendship. On the other hand, I can always make new friends. I say let's give it a shot and if it doesn't work out, we can both claim we were really drunk and have no memory of what went on here.

(Eagerly and urgently)
(MORE)

DENNIS (cont'd)

Come on. I may surprise you.

(A BEAT)

LACY

OK. But I reserve the right at any time to stop, have one last slice of pizza, and go home.

BOTH get up and look straight at each other for a moment. DENNIS puts his hand on LACY'S shoulder. Then, almost pushing her, but not, they walk to the bedroom door

DENNIS

Right this way, your ladyship. Welcome to the Ecstasy Hilton. Do you have any luggage?

LACY

No. Just baggage.

LIGHTS FADE

SCENE TWO

Only voices are heard. DENNIS and LACY are in the guest bedroom. The audience can see perhaps silhouettes, shadows or shifts in lighting,

DENNIS

Your comfort is our only goal. Would you prefer to start the evening with champagne or perhaps a local anesthetic?

LACY

Careful Dennis. Your nerves are showing. Imagine what that does to me.

DENNIS

Well, I do feel somewhat awkward.

LACY

So, you wanna have a few more drinks in the living room and a heartfelt discussion about near misses?

DENNIS

Never! I say we push on. I mean proceed, of course. We mustn't look at this as just another tawdry coupling on Faculty Row. Better we cloak it with an air of intrigue. Strangers on a train, an ocean-going romance, last call at Rick's Place before the fall of Casablanca, our last night together before they ship you off to war while I flee to Canada.

LACY

Tawdry Coupling. I like that. It sounds like an English village. "Breaking into a brisk trot, Reginald and I managed to catch the 2:17 to Tawdry Coupling."

DENNIS

Mary would have loved that one.

LACY

Please tell me this isn't your and Mary's bedroom.

DENNIS

No way! I'm eager, but I'm not sacrilegious. This is, of course, our Visiting Goddess Suite. Notice the monogrammed towels and complimentary chocolates.

(A BEAT)

Bathroom's that way.

LACY

Why don't you get reacquainted with yourself while I freshen up and give myself a good talking-to?

Sound of bathroom door opening and closing and then water running. DENNIS hums something sprightly.

DENNIS

Take your time. Please. I'm trying to do something with all these damn pillows. I've been led to believe there's a bed underneath here somewhere.

DENNIS begins lighting candles, moving them around from place to place as he tries to get just the right mood.

LACY

Is the bed ready? More to the point—are you bed-ready? 'Cause here I come.

Sound of LACY, flinging the bathroom door open

DENNIS

My god! You're incandescent! Quick, sign this model release so I can post your pictures online.

LACY

Easy cowboy. Let's not overdo it. And definitely no jokes about pictures, either.

DENNIS

Me overdo it? No chance there. Do you have any idea how many years it's been since I've seen a naked woman in three dimensions. My superlatives are straining at the leash. By the way, did I mention I plan to endow a chair in women studies in your name?

LACY

That's nice.

(A BEAT)

Don't keep looking at me like I'm a salad bar...

DENNIS

Why not? The resemblance is inescapable. I assume I can go back for seconds.

LACY

Where have I heard that one before? Oh, yes. From every desperado I've ever been with. Just before he kisses my forehead and nods off to sleep. While you admire my underused body, I'm going to lie down proudly uncovered, stare at the ceiling fan and have second thoughts.

DENNIS

Oh, no! Not that. And not now. You wouldn't want history to remember you as a tease, would you?

LACY

Then please shut the hell up and come over here and let's see if we can recall how it's done. You guys think you're the only ones with bedroom jitters—that all we women have to do is lie back, open wide and let you hotshots work your magic.

DENNIS

Are we wrong in that?

LACY

You're a real bastard, you know?

DENNIS

Real in all things, my plum. Not a phony bone in my body—nor in yours.

The sounds of kissing can be heard, and skin being playfully smacked

LACY

You do know your quips have to stop at some point so your lips can become otherwise engaged

DENNIS

I've never heard it so well put. If I weren't pawing you like a crazed terrier, I'd take notes.

LACY

Let me know when your soliloquy is over. My mind's starting to wander.

LACY's phone rings in the living room

Can you get that for me? Phone's on the coffee table.

DENNIS

You're going to answer your phone at a moment like this?

LACY

I'm a mom and a worrier. I always answer calls. Especially at night.

DENNIS emerges from the bedroom at top speed, wrapped in a blanket. He picks up the first phone he sees. It is his. Frantically, he moves the books, wine glasses and pizza box around until he locates LACY's phone. He then hurls himself back into the bedroom and hands it to her.

DENNIS

Here it is, and, please God, make this a robo call.

LACY takes the phone, and we see the blue light of the phone become less visible as she puts the phone to her ear.

LACY

Hi, sweetie. Is everything OK? . . . Well, maybe it'll happen next month. Don't stop trying. . . I sound stressed? Not a bit of it. Everything's serene on my end. . .No, I haven't forgotten. I've already picked his birthday present: the new biography of George Orwell . . . You know. He wrote "Animal House"- I mean "Animal Farm."... Yes, I'm sure he'll love it. Look, sweetie, I'm in the checkout line at the drug store, and I'm wondering . . . No, just some bathroom items- I'm just wondering if we can continue this conversation in the morning? Late morning.... All right. I'll do that. Love you too. Bye.

LACY hangs up and puts down the phone.

So sorry. Ellen has never made a brief call in her life. I'd hate for her to have to report a house fire. Now where were we?

DENNIS

And where am I. It was here just a minute ago. That shy devil. Oh, here it is again.

LACY

Welcome back to both of you.

We hear some rutting sounds alternating between LACY and DENNIS

My, you were famished, weren't you?

DENNIS gasps as if clawing for air

You can just nod your head.

DENNIS comes up for air

DENNIS

“O my America! My new found-land.”

LACY

You're spouting John Donne at a time like this?! What am I? An undergraduate from Iowa? Get back to work.

DENNIS

Mock me if you will. But, as you've discovered by now, I'm severely limited in ways to show off.

Silence for a moment, then sounds of humming and thrashing about

LACY

Ooh, I do remember that. Yesss. . . There . . . Right there! . . . Jesus!

A silence

Je—ee—zus!

DENNIS

(singing)

“Jesus loves you, this I know.”

LACY

Maybe you could just let me enjoy the afterglow without being a smart ass!

Silence

Dennis? Dennis! My god! Are you having a heart attack? Dennis! Holy shit! He's dead.

DENNIS

(Coughing and clearing his throat)

La petite mort, my dove. Your loveliness has left me mute and bereft of oxygen, Call Medevac and demand that they ‘copter in flowers.

(A BEAT)

Hold on. I've lost a contact somewhere.

LACY

Stay right where you are. I'll look for it.

DENNIS

Spoil sport!

LIGHTS FADE OUT

SCENE THREE

DENNIS and LACY return to the living room, holding hands. They are wearing identical, calf length terrycloth bathrobes, with hotel logos on them.

LACY

Well that was fun.

DENNIS

I was thinking more along the lines of “rapturous” or “transcendent.” Were we watching the same movie?

LACY

Do you always talk like that after you've just knocked off a piece?

DENNIS

I'm always properly grateful. Always with the impulse to reflect and genuflect. Know what I mean?

A PAUSE

Want some coffee?

LACY

That'd be nice.

DENNIS departs to the kitchen, while LACY wanders over to his bookcase, read the titles on the spines. LACY pulls out a book and starts paging through it.

DENNIS

It'll just be a minute.

LACY

No hurry, unless you plan to toss me out after you've had your oafish way with me.

DENNIS

(Still in the kitchen)

Actually, what I had in mind was falling to my knees—which is no small gesture these days—and begging you to stay for breakfast, after which we could run out for something to eat.

LACY

(to herself)

I've unloosed a plague.

LACY continues paging through the book until DENNIS emerges from the kitchen with two cups. He hands her one and they sit shoulder-to-shoulder on the sofa, their feet side by side on the coffee table.

LACY (cont'd)

You're still beaming like you've had a religious experience.

DENNIS crosses himself and lifts his cup in a toast.

Now you're closed-mouth. Are you thinking about the enormity of your offense?

DENNIS

So who's nervous now? I'm simply pulsating with joy. You are a peach, you know. It probably escaped your notice, but I've been casting lecherous eyes on you since first we met.

LACY

You've hankered for me all these years and never even hinted at it? Why you sly old fox!

DENNIS

My hankering tended to be widespread back then. But I remember you well. I was late for the meeting, and when I walked behind your chair to get to mine, I gazed down on that Alpine cleavage, and it was like the farmer's wife had just rung the dinner bell. Of course I quickly shook off my impure thoughts and asked myself instead, "I wonder what her views are on Thomas Hardy."

LACY

Yeah, right. Sometimes I feel like my boobs are majorettes up front leading the parade while my brain is in the back row playing the tuba. You men are so easy.

DENNIS

Frankly, my dear, we don't give a damn—as long as your undulating contours keep recharging our batteries.

A moment where DENNIS and LACY sip their coffee.

LACY

So, Dennis, who are we now that we weren't an hour ago?

DENNIS

Seriously?

LACY

I don't know if I've just started to relieve two years of tension or rediscovered how sweet it feels to be this close again to someone I'm fond of—even though it was a wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am ride. Maybe it's both. We know there's more to us than this.

DENNIS

I'm on a whole other plane. To me, it was almost like encountering sex for the first time.

The last time was so long ago—if you ignore my frequent voyages of self-discovery, The older I've gotten, the more resigned I became to giving up on sex. Just letting it go. Whether women my age feel the same urges and despair I don't know. But I never imagine having sex with women my age. What older man does? Maybe I underestimate their allure. Maybe their dreams and loins are as steamy as mine. But as callous as it sounds, I want to sink into breasts that point outward and into a warm, wet, grasping port of entry. I want to embrace hips that flex and shudder from ecstasy, not ones that droop from fatigue and world weariness.

LACY

While you men are holding out for stiff nipples and sex-toy vaginas, does it ever occur to you that the women you're fumbling over probably want more than pot bellies, bad breath and thumb-size pricks?

DENNIS

Ouch! But you're talking fairness and I'm talking desire. The bedroom's not a courtroom where the goal is to dispense justice. It's a take-what-you-can world. No matter how pathetic I may be, I nonetheless lust for the ideal lay. I'm not saying I deserve it or have the presence to attract it. But it's the one thing I've yearned for before I take my last bow. And you really came through tonight. You were monumental.

LACY

Damn! I feel like I just led my people out of Egypt.

DENNIS

Hold that thought. We may have to go back and rescue a few stragglers before the night's over.

LACY

You realize you've projected a pretty bleak future for yours truly. In this me-first age, does anyone give a damn about an old woman who's outlived all her lovers? OK, maybe her kids and grandkids do—that is until she's just an obligatory Sunday visit in the nursing home. Don't feel too sorry for yourself.

DENNIS

Well, that's one way of looking at it, but as I see it here in the real world, while I'm teetering on the lip of eternity you've still got 10 or 15 years of slap-and-tickle sex left in you. All in all, I'd rather have your future than mine. And who knows? Maybe old women are hotter items than they get credit for. There's a whole branch of erotica called “granny porn.”

LACY gives him a look that ranges between contempt and disgust

Not that I'm into pornography myself! I just study its effects on the elderly.

LACY

I wonder why people like us who can talk glibly about sex always feel the need to talk about it. It's probably just an urban myth, but I've heard there are couples who simply jump into the sack, thrust and snort a few times and immediately drop off to sleep and never mention it again. That's not for our kind, is it?

DENNIS

Well, I certainly wouldn't want to know any people like that. It would be like going out to dinner and not feeling the urge to mention that new restaurant you've just discovered. . . . I believe we talk so much about sex because it diverts us from seeing ourselves as the ravenous beasts we really are. We didn't get all these degrees and credits just to think less of ourselves. Like we're part of the herd. Face it—there's nothing majestic in the act of making love. No matter how beautiful our bodies may be, when we're really getting it on it looks either like a traffic pileup or dogs in heat. And nothing noble or uplifting happens during this ungainly clashing of flesh—unless, in the process, we accidentally spawn a future genius. Our brittle conversations about sex lets us put a gilded frame around a child's impulsive scrawl.

LACY

You've given this a lot of thought, haven't you?

DENNIS

It came to me during my monastic spell. Again I'll defer to you when it comes to what women feel, but it's obvious that men don't actually need the luscious services of women. When the urge hits us—and it never really goes away—we can get ourselves off easily enough solo and then go on about our business. But having sex the way Playboy intended us to is so goddamn much more fun than masturbation that we'll risk life, liberty and the contempt of crowds for a quick blow job. I imagine a Greek chorus made up of Bill Clinton, Bill Cosby, Governor Cuomo, Matt Lauer, Charlie Rose and Garrison Keillor singing,

(he breaks into a spirited tune)

“We did it before and we would do it again...”

LACY

It is strange, though, that you and I—sophisticates that we are—can't get off the topic. I mean you no disrespect when I say our leapfrogging wasn't that big a deal in the grand scheme of things. Why do we keep chewing it over? It's not like we've hurt or betrayed anyone.

DENNIS

Or used each other. . . in a destructive way, I mean.

LACY

Or did anything kinky or degrading.

DENNIS

Well, I can grow.

LACY

Metaphorically I assume.

DENNIS

Madam, you wound me. Just look at the size of these thumbs.

LACY starts giggling at the thumb image, undercutting the seriousness of the moment.

LACY picks up the book she had taken from the shelf

LACY

Isn't this the last book you published for the university?

DENNIS

It was—and one of my favorites, too. But it didn't exactly launch me into retirement with a blare of trumpets. It turns out that not many people wanted to read about Chaucer's Use of Food Imagery.

LACY

Do you miss publishing?

DENNIS

I do. Every day. . . . Is this for the article you're wanting to do about me?

LACY

No. I was just wondering what it's like psychologically when the two main pillars of your life—Mary and your job—collapse.

DENNIS

It's less shattering when you know it's coming—as I did in both cases. But it's still left me feeling unmoored and empty. I get up in the morning and my big choices are whether to have a bagel or just go back to bed and get another surplus hour of sleep. I believe it's called “low grade depression.” Fortunately, the new editor at the press occasionally sends me book proposals to screen and comment on. But that's like an hour out of my day.

(A BEAT)

Say! You're a damn good writer. You got any book ideas you'd like me to look at?

LACY

I'm not sure I'd trust the editorial judgment of a guy who's just grazed over me like a pasture.

DENNIS

Wisely said. Right now I'd give you the green light if you suggested a book on the history of butter.

LACY

However . . . since you brought the subject up, I have been researching a student rebellion at a small Ohio college in the early Sixties—a full year before all hell broke loose in Berkeley. I think I could work that into something.

DENNIS

Sounds intriguing. Shall we discuss it tomorrow night over brandy?

LACY

No surprises from you.

DENNIS

Some women find predictability arousing.

LACY

Maybe you should hustle them.

DENNIS

Well, it's been a lovely evening you've given me. To show my appreciation, may I lay my hand on your delicious thigh with an option to inch it forward? "License my roving hands," as John Donne put it to his mistress.

LACY gives him a "Oh please, not again." look.

LACY

I can always use a friendly hand.

Both LACY and DENNIS are silent for a moment.

LACY (cont'd)

Dennis, you know this thing we had tonight can't go anywhere, don't you? You're too old, too grief stricken and too good a guy to open yourself to more hurt. And I'm too unsettled myself to be the steady relief you want. We both have other fish to fry or hills to climb or miles to go or whatever the hell the applicable cliché is.. What we have here is a sweet but momentary lapse in judgment.

DENNIS

Far be it from me to be the grammarian, but I notice your tenses fluttering back and forth between "had" and "have." Sounds to me like you're wavering.

(with a wink)

Or maybe you're just tense.

LACY

The curse of literacy is that you can never escape from it. Enchanting as it's been for the moment, we should end this frolic before it gets messy. It would really stir up a hornets' nest if word got out that we were wrinkling the sheets on a regular basis. Ginny might think I'm trapping you and dishonoring her mother. And my daughter would die of embarrassment knowing her mom was screwing a guy old enough to be her father. Besides all that, you just know our friends would be merciless in their teasing. I see nothing but clouds obscuring your twilight temptations.

DENNIS

But hasn't it been the best evening in a long time for both of us? It would be cruel of you to rein in my heavy-breathing too quickly. I need all the steamy dreams I can store away.

DENNIS stands up, stretches and yawns. LACY stands beside him. DENNIS places his arm familiarly around her shoulder.

DENNIS (cont'd)

So, Ms. Silver, can I talk you into staying the night?

LACY

Well, I do have this urge to tell you more about myself—my joys, my worries, my Amazon password.

DENNIS

I'm all ears. And I promise—no kisses on the forehead tonight.

BLACKOUT.

END OF PLAY