

GUIDED TOUR

A play

by

Peter Snoad

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GUIDED TOUR

CHARACTERS

JOE BELL, a tour guide, African American, 33 to 64 (depending on the scene)
SUSANNA HATCH, a student, white, 23
LINDSAY PETTIGREW, an heiress, white, 40's
MARTHA MCNAB, a psychiatrist, 40's

TIME

The action of the play shifts in time within the period 1958 to 1986.

SETTINGS

A prison psychiatric unit and a Rhode Island mansion. Staging is minimalist – a bare stage, a table, chairs, the creative use of lighting and sound to shape scenes.

Act One

Scene One: Vestibule of Elmwood Hall
Scene Two: Visiting room of a prison psychiatric unit
Scene Three: The library at Elmwood Hall
Scene Four: Visiting room of the prison psychiatric unit

Act Two

Scene One: Dr. McNab's office
Scene Two: Bare stage – a scene in Joe's imagination
Scene Three: Visiting room of the prison psychiatric unit

ACT ONESCENE ONE

A bare stage. Dark. A soft light comes up on the figure of a white woman, LINDSAY PETTIGREW. She is elegantly dressed in a pale gown and she wears an African mask. After a moment, she slowly removes the mask, wraps it in her arms, and draws it close to her chest with great tenderness and affection. We hear music—the spare and haunting rhythm of an *mbira* (a Shona thumb piano). Slowly, languidly, and with a contemplative passion, LINDSAY dances around the stage. The music and the lights fade. Immediately, the lights come up on JOE BELL.

JOE is a well-groomed African American man of 46, sharply dressed—colorful cravat, blue blazer, well-polished loafers. He radiates charm and a folksy good humor. We are in the vestibule of Elmwood Hall, a mansion in Newport, Rhode Island where JOE is a guide. It is 1970. His tour party is the audience. In this and other subsequent scenes at the mansion, the stage is bare. The interiors of the rooms—the décor, fixtures, furniture—are imagined by the audience, aided by the dialogue, lighting and sound effects.

JOE

Mornin’! How we all doing?

(He elicits some audience response)

Good, that’s good. My name is Joe Bell and I’m your tour guide today. Welcome to Elmwood Hall, one of the most famous, most historically significant mansions in these United States. Who’s been here before? Anyone? Ok-ay. But I bet you seen it in the movies. We’ve had a bunch of movies made here. Know what they were?

(Beat.)

Oh come on now, we ain’t got no movie buffs here today? What you folks do on a Saturday night? Or shouldn’t I ask.

WOMAN’S VOICE

(From the auditorium)

The Great Gatsby.

JOE

Thank you, ma'am, you go to the head of the class. And High Society—Grace Kelly, Bing Crosby and all the rest, 'course that was set right here in Newport. Just last month they were here shooting *The Golden Bowl*, based on the Henry James novel, it'll be in your local theatres next year. But, hey, who needs celluloid, right? Today, you get to see Elmwood Hall in the flesh, up close and personal. Which is a whole different experience, let me tell you. A feast for the senses. An artistic cornucopia.

(Catching the eye of a child and explaining)

Like the biggest hot fudge sundae you ever seen. How about you go get one later, huh? Julia's Homemade on Ferry Road—that's the place to go. You gonna take her? Yeah, see, your Mom's going to take you. They got the best chocolate chip, the *best*. And say Joe sent you—they'll give you free fudge.

(To the whole group)

Now, first thing you all should know about Elmwood Hall: it's not a mansion, it's a cottage. I'm serious. Okay, so it is seven thousand square feet, and it's got thirteen bedrooms, and ten bathrooms, and a dining room that seats forty-six, and a ballroom you could play football in, and three acres of formal gardens all the way down to the beach. But this is a *cottage*, a summer cottage. Well, it was back then at the turn of the century. In So-ci-ety. A cottage was where you came for five weeks in the summer, for the social season. And the place to come was Newport, Rhode Island, *the* favorite summer playground of the rich and famous. Now you and I, we'd get by, right, a lil' ole cottage like this, we'd just grin and bear it. But maybe you would feel a teeny bit cramped if your regular old home was three times the size and covered two entire blocks of Fifth Avenue in New York City. Which happened to be the case with Althea Monroe Chase. That's her right there.

(He points at an imaginary photograph)

The creator of Elmwood Hall. Althea was the daughter of a wealthy attorney and United States Senator from Long Island, New York. And she married Cornelius Chase—

(Pointing at another photograph)

—with the mutton chop whiskers and the Irish wolfhound—kinda look alike, don't they? His daddy made a fortune in railroads and coal, and Cornelius inherited the best part of two hundred million dollars in 1893, that's about a billion and a half today, give or take, and you didn't pay no income tax back then. So Althea was what you might call well-placed. And she was a builder. Loved to build things—houses, mausoleums, pleasure boats, you name it, but mostly

houses, including this one. Elmwood Hall. Her dream cottage by the sea.

Blackout.

ACT ONESCENE TWO

The echoing sounds of a prison: shouts, buzzers, automatic doors opening and clanging shut. Lights up on the visiting room of a prison psychiatric unit. It is 1986. The room is institutional—plain and bare. A table and two facing chairs occupy center stage. Seated on one of the chairs is SUSANNA HATCH. She's dressed up, as if for an interview. JOE sits opposite her. He is now in his mid-sixties, but still with an edgy vitality. He is dressed in a prison-issue jumpsuit.

JOE

I gotta hand it to you. You are persistent.

SUSANNA

Yes, I'm sorry if I—

JOE

No, no, man my age, in this place, I get three letters from a pretty young lady in Boston, I ain't complaining.

SUSANNA

I did get a little...worried.

JOE

Worried?

SUSANNA

When you didn't respond.

JOE

And have you stop writing?

SUSANNA

I did. For a while.

JOE

You are exactly like I imagined.

SUSANNA

Really?

JOE

(Looking at her intently)
Exactly.

SUSANNA

Well, that's surprising.

JOE

Not at all.
(Beat. He realizes his gaze is making her uncomfortable)
Where's your tea?

SUSANNA

Tea?

JOE

(To a prison guard offstage who is monitoring their meeting)
Hey, Alonso, where's her tea?

SUSANNA

Actually, I—

JOE

(To the guard)
What is with you, man? We talked about this. Didn't we talk about this? You have a guest, you give 'em refreshment. This young lady here come all the way from Boston to see me, and you was going to fix her peppermint tea. Right? With honey. Right?

(To SUSANNA)

Peppermint is a carminative. Know what that is?

SUSANNA

It helps with digestion.

JOE

Keeps you clean. And not just the body, the mind, too. And you need that. They have toxins in here like you wouldn't believe.

(To the unseen guard)

What you waiting for? Go get the goddam tea! And honey. HONEY.

(No reaction from the guard)

Alonso, man, you disappoint me, man. How many times I gotta tell you? You gotta do it right. Consideration, kindness, respect. They got them words in every other language, Kiswahili, French, Farsi, Spanish. Bostonian. It ain't too late,

JOE (CONT.)

brother, ain't never too late to revitalize the language. You know what I'm talking about.

(To SUSANNA)

He knows what I'm talking about.

(To the guard)

Whaddya say, Alonso, you wanna get serious? You wanna revitalize?

(Beat. No response from the guard)

Fine. I'll go get it myself.

He rises from his seat. A warning buzzer sounds.
JOE stops.

(To the guard)

The lady needs her tea.

SUSANNA

You know, I'm fine, I—

JOE

You gotta protect yourself.

SUSANNA

I don't drink tea.

JOE

You don't drink tea?

SUSANNA

No. I don't actually like it.

JOE

You don't like tea?

SUSANNA

No.

JOE

Any kind of tea?

SUSANNA

No.

JOE

Well, how about that.

(To the guard)

You hear that, Alonso? Susanna don't drink no tea. You are a lucky man, Alonso, you are one lucky sonofabitch. You are off the hook this time. This one time. What do you drink?

SUSANNA

Juice. Water.

JOE

Good, good. You need them fluids, keep you lubricated.

SUSANNA

I try to stay healthy.

JOE

What do you do for fun?

SUSANNA

This is fun.

JOE

This is fun? Meeting with a crazy old goat like me in a shithole like this? Oh girl, you are in trouble.

SUSANNA

I meant the project.

JOE

Yeah, the project. I'd about given up you. Three letters and then nothing.

SUSANNA

I got sidetracked.

JOE

For seven months?

SUSANNA

Yes, well—

JOE

I hope he was worth it.

(Beat. Susanna's face betrays her.)

Was he?

SUSANNA

Like I said in my letters, I've always been fascinated by your case, everything, I mean, the whole controversy—

JOE
Controversy? There weren't no controversy.

SUSANNA
It was on TV, in the papers.

JOE
Yeah, but everybody knew I done it.

SUSANNA
Did you?

JOE
(Laughing heartily)
You come all the way from Boston to ask me that? Oh man.

SUSANNA
It is why I'm here.

JOE
Cut right to the chase, huh? What if I tell you? I could tell you yes, I could tell you no, then what? Whatcha gonna learn? Ain't that why you come here? To learn?

SUSANNA
Yes, but—

JOE
A thesis ain't a one word answer.

SUSANNA
No.

JOE
This is your thesis, right? For college?

SUSANNA
Yes.

JOE
So you gotta do it right. Get yourself a methodology, a structure. Chapters.

SUSANNA
Yes, and I will.

JOE

And plenty of them long words that don't appear in the biggest baddest dictionary. What else?

SUSANNA

Content.

JOE

A fancy binder. They don't give out no Master's degree without a fancy binder.

SUSANNA

Or good primary source material.

JOE

And that's me.

SUSANNA

Which is why—

JOE

How about that? I ain't never been a primary source before. Sounds kind of powerful, don't it? Deep.

(He deepens his voice.)

Primary source.

(He laughs.)

Like I'm way down there in some deep dark well.

SUSANNA

Mister Bell—

JOE

The well of wisdom. The oracle of Delphi.

SUSANNA

Excuse me?

JOE

Thesis. It's Greek, a Greek word. How do I know that? Huh? How come crazy old Joe knows something like that?

SUSANNA

I don't know—

JOE

I'm a student, too. Doing my Master's in Philosophy. University of Baton Rouge.

(Quoting)

“Love does not begin and end the way we seem to think it does. Love is a battle, love is a war. Love is a growing up.” Who was that?

SUSANNA

I don't know...Socrates?

JOE

Socrates! James Baldwin.

SUSANNA

Oh right.

JOE

My favorite philosopher.

SUSANNA

I thought he was a novelist.

JOE

Mister James Baldwin was a genius and a truth-teller. Every word from here.
(He slaps his heart.)

SUSANNA

That's what I'm looking for, too. The truth.

JOE

I got myself three B.A.s—Black Studies, History of Architecture, and French. Figured I do something different for my Master's, and I always been a philosophical kind of guy, thinking, thinking, thinking all the time. Wish I could shut it down once in a while, stop asking myself so many goddam questions.

SUSANNA

I do have a lot of questions for you.

JOE

You know what the odds are?

SUSANNA

The odds?

JOE

Of being here on Planet Earth, you and me, right now, in human form, four billion years after the Big Bang? We won the lottery, girl.

SUSANNA

Mister Bell, we don't have a lot of time.

JOE

Damn right! That's the cosmic joke. We got so little TIME.

SUSANNA

To accomplish things.

JOE

To connect.

(Beat)

SUSANNA

I don't think I've heard of the University of Baton Rouge.

JOE

Correspondence course.

SUSANNA

Oh right.

JOE

I study every day. Unless, you know, they got something going on.

SUSANNA

Like what?

JOE

They got some crazy people in here. Disruptive.

SUSANNA

Well, I certainly don't want to—

JOE

But I keep busy. Got my studies, my music, my books, my masks. I make these African masks. And my lecture series.

SUSANNA

You...lecture?

JOE

Every other Thursday. "How Things Are Made". The old way, the traditional way— techniques of the master craftsmen. I done a presentation on furniture, glassware. Shoes, I done shoes. And wine. Wine was popular, oh yeah, I had six guys for that one, no, no, seven.

SUSANNA

Sounds great. Could we—?

JOE

What about your family? They in Boston?

SUSANNA

No, they're mostly here, in Rhode Island.

JOE

I bet your Mom and Dad are proud of you, huh? Studying criminal justice. You got brothers and sisters?

SUSANNA

Mister Bell—

JOE

Joe.

SUSANNA

We should get started.

JOE

I thought you'd never ask.

(She doesn't get the joke)

I'm kiddin', I'm kiddin'! I'm all ears. I'm all yours.

SUSANNA

Great.

JOE

But you gotta promise me one thing.

SUSANNA

What's that?

JOE

Keep an open mind.

SUSANNA

Well, sure, I—

JOE

People is always jumping to conclusions. You gotta stay open.

SUSANNA

I'll try.

You promise?

JOE

I promise.

SUSANNA

Good. That's good.

JOE

SUSANNA takes a portable tape recorder from her bag and places it on the table.

SUSANNA

Okay if I tape this? I wanna make sure that—

JOE

Go right ahead, I'm used to it. All them reporters.

SUSANNA

Oh, right. When was the last time that...?

JOE

It's been years. Ain't got no interest in me now. Back then, well, they were climbing all over each other.

SUSANNA

Yeah, I can imagine.

JOE

Offered me all kinds of money for my "story".

SUSANNA

But you didn't take it.

JOE

And have them lie and distort everything? Anyways, they'd never have believed the truth.

SUSANNA

Will I?

JOE

That depends.

SUSANNA

On what?

(Slight pause.)

JOE

I'm glad you came.

SUSANNA

Maybe we could start with your personal history.

JOE

You got all that.

SUSANNA

Not all of it.

JOE

Focus on the trial, the facts, the evidence.

SUSANNA

Of course, but—

JOE

Don't they teach you that at Suffolk in your criminal justice program?

(Beat.)

SUSANNA

Mister Bell.

JOE

Joe.

SUSANNA

Joe. This is my thesis.

JOE

And I'm your primary source.

(Beat.)

Look, I know, I know...

(Beat.)

There are some things I don't like to talk about.

SUSANNA

I understand, and I want to respect that. I mean, I don't mean to pry.

JOE

'Course you do, that's why you're here.

(Beat. He is in emotional pain.)

And you should. You should ask me about everything.

SUSANNA

Are you sure?

JOE

No.

(Beat)

Go ahead. Shoot.

SUSANNA

Okay. I've done a ton of research. The transcript of the trial, newspaper reports, basically anything I could get my hands on, and I think I've got a pretty full picture. But there are some things that just don't make sense.

JOE

Like what?

SUSANNA

Your motivation. For one. I mean, why would you do this? No one really got into that. It was like, well, he was crazy, right? As if that was all there was to it. I mean, you worked at Elmwood Hall for twelve years, you were real good at your job, you knew all this incredible stuff about the house and the antiques, and you were entertaining, and you loved what you did. Right?

JOE

Right.

SUSANNA

And people loved you. They would call ahead to make sure you were going to be there. They wanted you, they wanted the best. It was like, why visit Elmwood Hall unless you have Joe Bell as your tour guide? It'd be like going to a Broadway show and seeing the understudy instead of the star. And then one day you turn around and burn the place down?

The lights fade and come up on JOE downstage. We are back in Elmwood Hall, in the ballroom. It is 15 years earlier.

JOE is the tour guide.

JOE

Now you know why they called it the Gilded Age. See these chandeliers? Seven thousand glass beads. Seven thousand! Every one handmade at the Cristalleries

JOE (CONT.)

Baccarat, the most famous glassmakers in France, founded in 1765. See how the light bounces back and forth between the mirrors and the gilt surfaces? It's designed like that.

Wherever you look, you're gonna see glitter and sparkle, sparkle and glitter. Like a jewel box. And this, folks, this is where it all happened. The Grand Ballroom. Party Central. I mean, they had some pretty wild times here, let me tell you, right here, right where we're standing. Listen. Shhh.....Listen. You hear that?

Distant sounds of a high-spirited party: dance
music, laughter, animated conversation.

You hear the orchestra? The tinkle of the champagne glasses? How about the orchids—can you smell the orchids? Oh man, that sweet perfume. Hundreds of orchids, hundreds, in big crystal vases all over the room. And the women in their gowns, dripping diamonds. And the men in tuxedos and tails puffing their big cigars.

The sounds fade.

It always starts out formal—an elegant ten-course dinner in the dining room, servants in royal livery, the whole nine yards. But then comes the entertainment. And Althea is famous for her entertainment. She has opera singers perform here, vaudeville actors, all kinds of celebrities. One time she tells her friends she's got someone real special coming to her next party: an Italian prince. Well, everyone is just so excited—I mean, we're talking European royalty, the *crème de la crème*. Guess what? The prince turns out to be a pet monkey, all dressed up in formal evening wear. The other guests think it's a hoot. Althea, my dear, you did it again! Until the little critter gets drunk on champagne, climbs up onto this chandelier, and starts throwing light bulbs at 'em!

A soft light downstage illuminates the almost ghost-like figure of LINDSAY PETTIGREW. She stands alone, dressed in a fine evening gown of the period, and holding a champagne glass. She looks directly at JOE as he continues.

But, you know, fun can be hard work. You shake your booty into the early hours, you stay for breakfast—you are starving after all that dancing—and finally, *finally*, you take your leave. It's six in the morning, and you are *dead*, you could sleep 'til noon, easy. But there ain't no rest for the wealthy and the wicked. You got midmorning cocktails and croquet at The Breakers, an art show in the afternoon, and then a special performance of "The Wild Rose" at Beaulieu. It's the best musical on Broadway right now, and the Vanderbilts have brought the

JOE (CONT.)

whole cast and crew from New York to entertain their friends. It's one heck of a schedule, and you better keep up.

JOE turns towards LINDSAY. Their eyes meet.

After all, what choice do you have?

The lights fade to black. JOE returns to his chair and sits down. The lights come up again. We are back in the prison visiting room. SUSANNA is seated at the table.

Why?
SUSANNA

I had a psychotic break.
JOE

That's what they told you.
SUSANNA

That's what they told me.
JOE

They say you're schizophrenic.
SUSANNA

They say a lot of things.
JOE

But you had no history, right? I mean, before the fire?
SUSANNA

History?
JOE

Of mental illness.
SUSANNA

I been called a whole lot worse than crazy.
JOE

But you weren't diagnosed?
SUSANNA

I never went to no doctors.
JOE

So what happened? Did you have some kind of personal crisis? Like in a relationship or...?
SUSANNA

JOE

Why you wanna know?

SUSANNA

Well, sometimes a psychotic break is just that—it's a break, a break from reality, and then you recover. It's like a one-time thing.

JOE

So?

SUSANNA

So did something happen?

JOE

A lot of things happened.

SUSANNA

But was there a trigger?

JOE

Man, you sound like Mad Martha.

SUSANNA

Who?

JOE

Doctor McNab. My therapist.

SUSANNA

Was there something? Like, the last straw?

JOE

You said you wanted to talk to me about my case.

SUSANNA

I do, and this is related.

JOE

The hell it is!

SUSANNA

The thing is, Joe—

JOE

No, no, no. You don't need to know nothing about my diagnosis or my treatment, none of that stuff, okay? Trust me. It's irrelevant.

SUSANNA

(Decisively)
I don't think you're crazy.
(Beat. JOE starts to laugh.)
I think you were misdiagnosed.

JOE

(Laughing almost uncontrollably)
Hey, Alonso, you hear that? I'm not crazy. Joe Bell is not crazy! Man oh man, praise the Lord and pass the bourbon!

SUSANNA

Joe, I'm serious.

Joe starts to sing and do a little jig.

JOE

Oh Lord, I ain't crazy, I ain't crazy, I ain't crazy...

SUSANNA

(Overlapping)
They do it all the time.

JOE

(Overlapping)
Oh Lord, I ain't crazy—

SUSANNA

(Overlapping)
They label you schizophrenic to keep you locked up—

JOE

(Overlapping)
Let my people go!

SUSANNA

(Topping)
And give you drugs that make you crazy!

Joe stops dancing abruptly.

JOE

How you know all this?

SUSANNA
Research.

JOE
Research?

SUSANNA
And this friend. She went through a lot of shit. She's okay now, she's fine.

JOE
Yeah?

SUSANNA
Yeah.

JOE
What was her problem?

SUSANNA
Her parents. They didn't like her boyfriend. Starving artist, druggie, no money, no prospects. And Puerto Rican.

JOE
What did her parents do?

SUSANNA
They sent her to a nuthouse. Pumped her full of zombie juice.

JOE
Neuroleptics.

SUSANNA
Yes. Of course it was a clinically appropriate intervention. She had screws loose, wasting her life with that spic loser. What I'm saying is, you probably had some kind of breakdown but you could have gotten past it and gone on with your life but no, they kept you whacked out and locked up.

JOE
(Almost to himself, quietly, distantly)
What choice do we have?

SUSANNA
Joe?

JOE
You're forgetting something.

What? SUSANNA

I said I was nuts. JOE

When? SUSANNA

At the trial. JOE

You did not. SUSANNA

My attorney— JOE

Your attorney— SUSANNA

He had those shrinks testify. JOE

In mitigation. After he lost the case. SUSANNA

Danforth did what he could. JOE

Danforth screwed up. Okay, I don't pretend to know a lot about the law but if you go with an insanity defense— SUSANNA

They had the evidence. JOE

Like what? SUSANNA

The kerosene on my jacket. JOE

And you believe them? SUSANNA

JOE
They had eyewitnesses.

SUSANNA
Who?

JOE
That couple, you know, with the dog, the Schnauzer.

SUSANNA
They were half a mile from the house when they saw you.

JOE
I was acting weird.

SUSANNA
So?

JOE
There was Janet Templeton.

SUSANNA
Oh please.

JOE
She saw me coming out the main gate, right around that time.

SUSANNA
So she said.

JOE
She picked me out of the line-up.

SUSANNA
Without any prompting, of course. A white woman who had a hard time telling black men apart, even with her glasses on.
(Imitating her)
“Except for that guy on my block. He’s from the islands. I know him, I always know him, he wears those tropical shirts with the big flowers.”
(Back to normal voice)

SUSANNA (CONT.)
She wasn’t even sure she was wearing her glasses at the time. And it was dark.
(Beat.)

JOE

You have done your homework.

SUSANNA

They had nothing, Joe. It was a house of cards.

JOE

And Baldacci? He lied too?

SUSANNA

Probably. I mean, even if he did stop you in the street that night and you were drunk and distraught and whatever, “I did it, I made that baby burn, I’m the one you want”? Give me a break! No one says stuff like that. And anyway why would you confess to a cop who wasn’t even in uniform?

JOE

He flashed his badge.

SUSANNA

You didn’t remember that.

JOE

I was upset, I didn’t remember a lot of things.

SUSANNA

That’s right. You didn’t remember hacking the antique furniture into a million pieces. Or taking a carving knife from the kitchen and slashing the Flemish tapestries. Or climbing up a stepladder and pulling down the chandeliers. Of course you didn’t, why would you? Why would you do any of that stuff—I mean, you of all people, who loved the house and everything in it? It’s absurd, it’s crazy.

JOE

It’s crazy all right.

SUSANNA

I mean, am I missing something here?

JOE

Maybe.

SUSANNA

What? What?

JOE

It’s your thesis.

SUSANNA

You didn't do it, Joe, you couldn't have.

JOE

Then who did?

SUSANNA

I don't know.

JOE

Well that's good.

SUSANNA

The cops wanted you. They didn't even look for anyone else.

JOE

You got proof?

SUSANNA

Not yet.

JOE

It's just a theory.

SUSANNA

At this point—

JOE

A theory ain't a thesis.

SUSANNA

Oh come on, Joe, they were going to get you no matter what—

JOE

Oh man—

SUSANNA

Given what was happening at the time.

JOE

Don't go there—

SUSANNA

King is dead, Black Power is booming—

JOE

Yeah, yeah, yeah—

SUSANNA

And a famous historic mansion burns down and the tour guide is black, I mean—

JOE

(Insistently)

They had the evidence.

SUSANNA

How do you know?

JOE

How do you know they didn't?

SUSANNA

Your Defense Committee found—

JOE

MY Defense Committee? It weren't nothing to do with me. I didn't set it up, I didn't authorize it, it wasn't about me, it was about them—their agenda. You think it helped me to have my face on a poster like Che Guevara? And T-shirts? And that song they put out, "Burn, baby, burn"?

SUSANNA

All I'm saying is—

JOE

I was framed. Of course, no question, join the club.

(Beat.)

SUSANNA

And what about you?

JOE

What about me?

SUSANNA

What do you think?

JOE

It don't matter what I think. Or you, or anyone. What matters is whether you can prove it. The rest is just talk.

SUSANNA

Maybe we can prove it.

JOE

We? What you got? You got any *evidence*? Some incriminating document, some retired FBI guy who wants to clear his conscience? You got anything like that?

SUSANNA

Yes.

JOE

Like what?

SUSANNA

David Coniston.

JOE

Oh man. Who you been talking to?

SUSANNA

Muhammad.

JOE

Shit.

SUSANNA

And two other members of the Committee.

JOE

Who?

SUSANNA

Charlie Hines and Denise Simon.

JOE

They still together?

SUSANNA

I don't know, I didn't—

JOE

Susanna, let me tell you something. They're a bunch of assholes. Okay? Assholes and dreamers. You believe them, you may as well believe in the tooth fairy.

SUSANNA

They say Coniston may be willing to talk. He's retired now, lives in Florida. Fort Lauderdale.

JOE

You've been to see him?

SUSANNA

No, but I'm going to.

JOE

Don't waste your time.

SUSANNA

He could get you a new trial.

JOE

Oh man, they saw you coming.

SUSANNA

Joe, their whole case was built on the forensic evidence—the kerosene stain, your prints on the axe handle, as if you wouldn't have worn gloves. They had nothing else, no eyewitnesses, nothing. If Coniston lied, I mean, if that forensic report is basically fiction—

JOE

If, if, if. It happens in the movies, Susanna, it don't happen in real life. Retired FBI forensic experts do not come out of the woodwork years later and confess their sins. They don't do that.

SUSANNA

Well, this guy did—

JOE

And that's assuming he lied in the first place, and we don't know that. Just because Muhammad knew some guy who had a cousin who went to school with Coniston and they got drunk and had some tell-all conversation in a bar in Virginia don't make it true.

SUSANNA

But it could be.

JOE

My "Committee" was clutching at straws then, and they're still doing it now. It's pathetic. And they go and drag you into it. Shit.

SUSANNA

I'm going to check it out.

Don't do that. JOE

It's worth a shot. SUSANNA

It ain't worth beans. JOE

It could be worth your life!
(A pause)
I don't understand, I— SUSANNA

Look, I appreciate what you're trying to do. JOE

Do you? SUSANNA

Sure. You believe I'm innocent. JOE

And you keep trying to convince me you're guilty.
(Slight pause) SUSANNA

I been in this place a long time. Had a lot of time to think. I'll tell you this. There was one thing that could have kept me out of jail. JOE

What's that? SUSANNA

Testimony. JOE

What testimony? SUSANNA

Testimony that was never given. JOE

Who? SUSANNA

Oh, it don't matter now.	JOE
No, who? Tell me.	SUSANNA
You know who.	JOE
I do?	SUSANNA
Sure you do.	JOE
I don't think I...	SUSANNA
Lindsay Pettigrew.	JOE
	The lights fade.

ACT ONE

SCENE THREE

The library at Elmwood Hall. It is 1958. JOE, aged 33, is being interviewed by LINDSAY PETTIGREW for the position of tour guide. LINDSAY is attractive, in her early 40's, casually but elegantly dressed.

LINDSAY

(Glancing at his letter of application)
So you were in the Navy.

JOE

Yes.

LINDSAY

An Able Seaman.

JOE

I stoked the boilers.
(Beat. She looks uncertain.)
With coal.

LINDSAY

Yes.

JOE

Destroyers gotta have fuel. People, too.

She smiles at him, then goes back to the letter. A slight pause.

I was in France at the end of the war. Paris.

LINDSAY

So I see.

JOE

Went to Versailles, The Louvre. Notre Dame. Now that is an amazin' place, Notre Dame. Well, it's all amazin'.

LINDSAY

It certainly is.

JOE

One time, I'll never forget it, I walk into this square, near the Place De La Concorde. It's a mess, you know, all that damage to the old buildings. But there's this one church, fifteenth century. Beautiful. Majestic. Not a scratch on it. No holes in the stained glass, no bullet marks, no tiles off the roof, nothing, totally intact. And it's glowing. Like the moon on a summer night.

LINDSAY

And why do you think—?

JOE

Love. Centuries of love and certainty.

LINDSAY

It obviously made a deep impression.

JOE

I'm a Renaissance man, Mrs. Pettigrew. Kinda unusual for a man like me, I know, but that's who I am. Ever since I was a boy, growing up in Virginia, I had this hunger. I wanted to know about things, about their *history*. Like the Corinthian columns on them big old plantation houses? How come they're like that? Someone told me they got it from the Greeks. *The Greeks*? I had to know all about the Greeks.

LINDSAY

And no doubt you did—

JOE

I lived at the public library, read anything I could lay my hands on. Novels, yes, but books about doing, about making things, knowing how to...Architecture, cabinet making, stonecutting, navigation by the stars—

LINDSAY

I see—

JOE

I barely had hair on my lip and I knew more than some college professors. It's true, no boast. 'Course I did have myself one big advantage.

LINDSAY

And what was that?

JOE

What they call a photographic memory.

LINDSAY

Well, that certainly is—

JOE

Some piano players have an ear so fine, all they gotta do is hear a tune one time and they can play it right off, note perfect. Same with me and words on a page. You know, the first time I took the tour here, I come up them steps and I am trembling like a butterfly. Same thing today. Look at that.

(He holds out a trembling hand)

LINDSAY

Mister Bell—

JOE

It ain't nerves, ma'am, it's pride. I'm proud to be in this house. What you got here is a celebration of the American spirit. I mean, it's a heck of a thing your grandmother did. Taking all the beauty of French art and architecture and re-creating it right here in America. It takes guts. Vision.

LINDSAY

No question—

JOE

You know what it says to folks like me?

LINDSAY

Mister Bell. May I speak?

JOE

I'm sorry, I'm running my mouth here.

LINDSAY

Please, no need to apologize, but I think we should move to the business at hand.

JOE

Of course, I didn't mean to—

LINDSAY

Mister Bell. I need to make something clear to you. This position requires experience.

JOE

I got a lifetime of experience.

LINDSAY

Relevant experience.

JOE

Mrs. Pettigrew, I—

LINDSAY

You stoked boilers on a ship and since then you've....

(She glances at the letter)

Fished for scallops.

JOE

It's what I could get.

(Indicating the letter)

Theater, I done a lot of theater.

LINDSAY

(Glancing at the letter)

The Portside Players.

JOE

Official theater troupe of the U.S.S. Endicott. We entertained the troops. You should have seen me in "As Thousands Cheer." I stole the show.

LINDSAY

Mr. Bell, being a guide at Elmwood Hall is not musical comedy.

JOE

It's performance, Mrs. Pettigrew. Now, of course, it depends what you want.

LINDSAY

Yes, it does.

JOE

I mean, you can have some *expert* take people round this house and tell 'em the history of the place and what's here and what's there and how it all came to be, and that's fine. But if he don't how to *present*, folks are going to fall asleep on the walnut parquet, and they ain't never coming back, and they're going to tell their friends: you want to be bored to death, go take the musty old dusty old tour of Elmwood Hall. With all due respect, ma'am, what you need is someone like me who can feed 'em all the facts in a way that *entertains*.

LINDSAY

I am not looking for an entertainer.

JOE

Make 'em laugh while you make 'em think. They want to learn, sure, but they want to have a good time doing it. You gotta bring it alive, make it real, like they're not outside the dream, they're in the dream, living it, right now. Let me show you—

He gets up from his chair.

LINDSAY

Mister Bell, I don't think—

JOE

(Addressing her as one of a group of imaginary visitors)

Step right this way, folks, that's it, and stay close so you can hear me. I'm loud and proud but I'm no Caruso. So this is it, this is the library—

LINDSAY

Mister Bell—

JOE

Mrs. Pettigrew—

LINDSAY

Sit down. Please.

JOE

If I ain't got relevant experience, you gotta see I can do it.

He goes back to his performance.

This, folks, this was Althea's refuge. This is where she could relax, curl up by the fire with a good book and a glass of wine. Just like all those dukes and duchesses and princes and bishops. They all warmed their toes in front of this fireplace. Probably scorched their stockings, too. That's because it's all original—the carvings, the wrought-iron grate, the mantel, everything. Custom-made three hundred years ago for the Chateau d'Arnay-le-Duc near Paris. Which, by the way, still produces some of the finest wines in France. Now suppose you're a guest here, want to do a little reading. You got yourself quite a choice. There's close to five hundred books on these shelves—burl-walnut and English cherry, pretty, huh, and solid as a rock. What's your pleasure? How about a little Balzac? First edition, of course. Or the Bible in Gaelic—if you happen to read sixteenth century Gaelic. Or something a little lighter...let's see now, what we got here...The Thoroughbred Horse: An Illustrated History. 'Course, maybe you're

JOE (CONT.)

just worn out with all that socializing. All you really want to do is kick off your shoes, sit back, stare at the fire, and listen to the ocean. Solitude. A chance to think about nothing at all. Or something, something in particular. Like the inscription on this lovely fleur-de-peche marble mantelpiece. "De gran bien me rie, et point ne default; il n'est qu'adresse, quant tout prevault." "I laugh at great wealth, and never miss it; in the end, all that matters is wisdom."

(She is silent. A slight pause.)

What do you think?

LINDSAY

Mister Bell, let me explain something to you. We are looking for a new guide for Elmwood Hall because the gentleman who previously held the position, Mister Charles Vaillancourt, developed a heart condition.

JOE

That is too bad, I'm sorry to hear that.

LINDSAY

Yes, it is very sad—we shall miss him. He was a charming man, a retired architect, and quite knowledgeable—

JOE

'Specially about eighteenth century French furniture.

LINDSAY

You met him?

JOE

He was surprised I knew what I was talking about.

LINDSAY

Yes, well, someone like Charles is hard to replace. I'm sure you can appreciate that.

JOE

Absolutely.

LINDSAY

And, in terms of qualifications and experience, we do have, we must have, certain.....standards.

JOE

I'm not exactly what you had in mind.

LINDSAY

Mister Bell, you are simply not qualified.

JOE

So why am I here?

LINDSAY

Excuse me?

JOE

Why are you interviewing me?

I was curious. LINDSAY

About what? JOE

Mister Bell, are you married? LINDSAY

I was. JOE

Do you have a family to support? LINDSAY

Why do you want to know? JOE

Well, these are difficult times and— LINDSAY

You think I just need a job? JOE

You wrote a very good letter. LINDSAY

What are you curious about? JOE

I wanted to know why you applied, why you consider yourself suited for this position. LINDSAY

Well, now you know. JOE

Yes. LINDSAY
(Beat.)

I will do one heck of a job for you. JOE

You are very personable, Mister Bell, and clearly quite talented— LINDSAY

JOE

A breath of fresh air, Mrs. Pettigrew.

LINDSAY

I'm afraid it's simply out of the question.

JOE

Why?

LINDSAY

We both know it wouldn't work.

JOE

A six-month trial.

LINDSAY

I'm sorry.

JOE

How many people come through that door in a week? A hundred? Two hundred?

LINDSAY

The numbers are not our highest priority.

JOE

Give me six months and I'll double it.

LINDSAY

Mister Bell—

JOE

Money-back guarantee. I double your visitors in six months or I'm gone *and* I give you back every red cent you pay me.

LINDSAY

It's not a question of—

JOE

You can't lose, Mrs. Pettigrew.

LINDSAY

Oh, but I can, Mister Bell. We both can.

(Beat.)

JOE

You got cold feet.

LINDSAY

Mister Bell, it has been a pleasure meeting you.

JOE

Nice idea, but on second thoughts, nah, too risky.

LINDSAY

I want to thank you for your time.

JOE

Your granddaddy would have done it. He'd have rolled the dice. Did it all his life, did the unconventional thing, and it made him a fortune. Starting with that first loan from his Mom at sixteen. A hundred bucks so he could buy a boat and run hay and fish from Staten Island to Manhattan. Used the profits to start a ferry service, then steamboats up the Hudson River, then railroads, and on and on—you know the story. But did he ever take the easy road? Never, not once. Where's the fun in that? Where's the challenge in that? It's a family tradition, Mrs. Pettigrew. Taking chances built this place. Taking chances is going to preserve it.

LINDSAY

You're right, Mr. Bell. My grandfather took chances. He also took liberties—and I mean that quite literally. He destroyed anybody and anything that got in his way. He lied, he cheated, he bullied, he schemed, he was the medieval rack in human form—he stretched people until they broke. He made more money and caused more misery than any man of his time. And women? They didn't exist except as slaves in the kitchen, bearers of progeny, and pretty appendages when it suited his fancy. My grandmother was the exception—she stood up to him. But most of the women he had power over never had a day's rest or a day's joy in their entire abbreviated lives. So, please, don't lecture me about the entrepreneurial virtues of my grandfather, I know too much about him.

JOE

I apologize, ma'am. I—

LINDSAY

It is unwise to make assumptions about people.

JOE

I couldn't agree more.

LINDSAY

What do you like about this place?

JOE

Like?

LINDSAY

And don't tell me what you think I want to hear. I want your honest opinion.

(Beat.)

JOE

I hate that Louis Quinze chair in the conservatory.

LINDSAY

Oh that thing.

JOE

Ugliest damn chair I ever saw.

LINDSAY

Hideous, absolutely hideous!

JOE

And uncomfortable, imagine sitting in that.

LINDSAY

In corsets!

They laugh. They connect. A beat.

JOE

When I was a boy, I spent a lot of time with *my* grandfather. Poppy I called him. Quiet man, never said much. Made these masks, African masks. Animals and birds—you know, with the big features and the fierce eyes? Man, those eyes! You'd try to ignore them, but you couldn't, you'd look away but you'd feel 'em in your back, looking inside you to see what you had—if you had pride, if you had foolishness going on, where your spirit was at. And they never quit. Just like

Poppy. He had a moldy old chair out back, under this big old shade tree. He'd sit there all day whittling away with his knife. He weren't in no hurry. One of them masks might take him two weeks or two months or two years. Didn't matter. He

JOE (CONT.)

had to get it right. Not perfect—nothing's perfect. But he had to be free of doubt. That's when he was finished. When he knew he could look at that mask until the day he died and have no doubt about it. Not a whisker.

LINDSAY

And you don't see doubt here?

Do you?

JOE

I don't know. I've never thought of it quite like that.

LINDSAY

Well, there's a first time for everything.
(A pause.)

JOE

I'll need references.

LINDSAY

No problem.

JOE

There is the question of language.

LINDSAY

My French accent ain't what it should be, but I'll study, I'll improve.

JOE

I mean your English.

LINDSAY

My English?

JOE

When you're conducting a tour here, your language will have to be...well...

LINDSAY

Appropriate. No cuss words, no jive talk.

JOE

Indeed.

LINDSAY

Don't you worry, Mrs. Pettigrew, I'll be so squeaky clean you could...I'll be appropriate.

JOE

We'll need clothes for you.

LINDSAY

JOE

Whatever you want, I dress up good.

LINDSAY

I'll arrange to—

JOE

No, no, I'll take care of it. I know all about costume.

LINDSAY

(With a smile)

That makes two of us.

The lights fade.

ACT ONE

SCENE FOUR

The visiting room at the prison psychiatric unit.
JOE is seated at the table. SUSANNA is standing,
facing front.

JOE

That's all she had to do. Testify to my good character.

SUSANNA

And you really think that—?

JOE

It would have made all the difference in the world. She was a Pettigrew, one of the oldest families in Rhode Island, all the way back to the Mayflower.

SUSANNA

But by itself—

JOE

They were her people. Senators, bank presidents, big business guys. That judge, too, for Chrissakes, he'd been trying to get in her pants for years.

SUSANNA

Joe, this was a criminal case in a court of law.

JOE

She had the power to shut it down.

SUSANNA

You can't just do that.

JOE

This is Rhode Island, girl. The plantation. All she had to do was to get on that stand and say, I've known Joe Bell for twelve years, he's a good man, an honest man, there's no way in hell he could have done this thing.

SUSANNA

She did say that to the newspapers.

JOE

In a statement.

SUSANNA

Right. It was—

JOE

“Inconceivable. The Joe Bell I know could never have committed this unspeakable act.”

SUSANNA

She believed in you.

JOE

Yeah? Then why didn't she get up there on the stand and swear it?

SUSANNA

Because—

JOE

You ever trusted someone with your life?

SUSANNA

Joe—

JOE

It's like believing in God. There's no fear. You know that whatever happens, whatever shit comes down, they'll be there, they'll hold you up. But that's it, see, it's all or nothing. When that person don't show, you can't believe it. It is inconceivable.

SUSANNA

But in this case—

JOE

Danforth wouldn't listen to me. I told him, put Linny on the stand. He looked at me like I was crazy. Why the hell would she testify for me if I'd burned her house down? Trust me, I said, she'll do it, call her. He told me he did. Every day I'd ask him: you talk to Mrs. Pettigrew yet? She's out of town, he'd say, I left a message. Every goddam day, out of town. Then he said she was sick, she was “indisposed.” Like I was some kind of fool. I wrote to her. I couldn't call, but I could write. I wrote three letters. Nothing. For a while, you know, I kept telling myself: Danforth never called, that lying sonofabitch never even tried calling her, they tossed my letters in the trash, what the fuck do they care. But I couldn't keep that up. I couldn't.

SUSANNA

They never told you.

JOE

What?

My God. SUSANNA

What? JOE

She was ill. SUSANNA

Well, yeah— JOE

No, I mean before the trial. She had a stroke. SUSANNA

A stroke? JOE

Her whole right side. She couldn't speak. She couldn't testify.
(JOE is in shock. Beat.) SUSANNA

But there was nothing in the paper. JOE

The family kept it quiet, the details. It was, I don't know, a private thing. SUSANNA

No. JOE

Joe— SUSANNA

What happened? I mean, what...? JOE

She never spoke again. SUSANNA

In two years? JOE

And mentally, well, she, er... SUSANNA

What? JOE

She kinda lost it. SUSANNA

But it was heart failure. That's what the papers said, she died of heart failure. JOE

That was the immediate cause of death. I'm so sorry, I had no idea— SUSANNA

(Anguished)
Why? JOE

Joe, I— SUSANNA

Why did nobody tell me? Why? JOE

Lights fade.