

“The Walkover”

An epic in Thirteen Acts, as Dionysus bridges the river Styx.

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(abridged by editor James K Beach*)

PART I - DIGRESSION

Core Characters

- | | |
|-------------------|---|
| Gareth Rothschild | Dead from the start, then resurrected throughout. A young British man from Cambridge, dealing with posh problems of dysthymia in a blanket of stoicism: <i>how man would like to be man</i> . <u>Character note</u> : What’s in a name? Conjured. Nothing. In his case: it is in the name. Or else, nothing. |
| Leon Blackwell | The side kick-protagonist, the work’s narrative point-of-view, the bromance duo of the above. Emotionally charged, unsuspecting, loyally unfaithful, with the very best of intentions failing: flawed: <i>the modern man</i> . <u>Character note</u> : football, food: a fling; of fornication, fuddled - fouled. See? Typical. The f- vowel. The last laugh. |
| Fehmin Ashton | The protagonist-sidekick, the one for whom there is no absolute clarity to her point-of-view. Too quiet for the lead of a play, but too vocal a presence to be extruded from core. Mysterious, vivacious, perspicacious, and sangfroid: <i>how a woman wants to be perceived infinitum</i> . <u>Character note</u> : an academic conundrum; but everything and nothing is. |
| Karen Dashwood | Alive from the start, in the beginning, and then killed throughout. A young woman in Cambridge, dealing with posh problems of men around her dead or missing; puffed eyes and estranged unavailability, with tears held back over love that was never held back: <i>how a woman is usually perceived infinitum</i> . <u>Character note</u> : In the beginning there was the end, written. And at the end there is no beginning. |

ACT ONE - Dreams

(Motif: oracles at Delphi; reunion)

Disembodied oration:

“Dreams work the same way as ellipses in a prose, written.
They allow the bizarre to be comprehended without saying.
They let it remain vague, out there somewhere, within reach.
They deceive the reader into thinking he has understood
... And the writer into thinking he has conveyed.
They are a saving grace, saving... Words.
They even correct for Grammatik that since Shakespeare has prevailed.
They allow an escape route engineered for the reader, for the writer; or both.
As the dreamer longs to escape the agonies of the bizarre, all escape...
Within several breaths... That pass... That pause.
They are a forever punctuation of exeunt all and, continue.
And hence a terrible punctuation at the end of a final Act
... Confusing for the actor: to exit or to linger? Continue?
However, there are two types of continue: to continue, as in, linger?
Or, exit and... Continue? Which brings to mind the other extreme!
And amongst several suggestions to the conundrum; nothing starts, really”.

Curtains rise.

ACT ONE - Scene 1

Fog on stage: thick and billowing. Above, a giant cinema screen tilted toward the audience flickers to life... previously-recorded upcoming scenes from this play crash together, a poetic explosion on screen, a beacon in the darkness and fog. The dim lighting grows brighter. Various camera angles of the set eventually replace the pre-recorded montage in real-time on the cinema screen.

The set is a grey graveyard, with a rusty gate bent failingly on creaky hinges. A crippled Magda statue standing sentinel at one side of the gate, beaten down by centuries of rain, is looking skyward. The leaves of her little hollow bower beyond the listless gates move not. Her companion stone sentinel flagging the other side of the gate, whoever it was, is in flight. Only a pair of feet remain. It is silent and eerie, absorbed in the lilt of its own wordless requiem.

Slowly from amidst the thickly settling fog: a scene takes form, videoed onto the cinema screen from centre-stage:

LEON BLACKWELL stands at the edge of a freshly dug grave, the earth upturned, a spade in hand, in the act of burying. GARETH ROTHSCHILD lies inside the grave, his eyes closed, enshrouded, but perhaps not embalmed for Leon cringes, as if from the smell. He throws a few spade-full of earth into the grave.

Gareth:

“Don’t bury me”.

Leon falters but resumes the dictum of shovelling earth over the dead more marked now in haste though not progress.

Leon:

“It is the only way”.

The iron gate of the cemetery swings on its rusty hinges. An APOTHECARY enters and stands at the graveyard entrance, her back to the spying eyes of the audience behind, herself a spectator to the cinema screen above - she watches herself for a moment then ambles on. She is dressed in mourning black which is not quite like a funeral black, only just, her hair trussed into a haggard knot behind her head.

Leon looks up from his grave digging; he is far away in the fog.

Leon:

“Hello. Who is there”?

The Apothecary is silent and framed by the graveyard entrance, a companion now for the weeping Magda.

Leon:

“Anybody there”?

She moves into the graveyard and towards Leon; she comes to stand behind him. She has Fehmin Ashton’s face. She spares a moment to stare at the Iron Gate, which is shrouded in fog, where a SHADOW OF THE APOTHECARY enters, perhaps wearing white, and poses on the feet of the departed sentinel, as if pretending to be the companion of the Magda.

Apothecary:

“He has been dead in my shop for three days”.

Leon looks at her and then reflexively back at the Iron Gate.

In that moment when he is turned to look at the Apothecary behind, the Apothecary's Shadow exits the stage: Magda's companion once again in flight.

Apothecary:

"Nobody would move him. I'm afraid, once the flies settle the rot would set in".

Leon:

"What are - who are you"?

Apothecary:

"I am the Apothecary. My name is immaterial.
You must move him out of my shop".

Leon gapes at her. She closes her eyes and breaks into a sombre, insanely melodic chant, perhaps "Eowyn's Lament," by J.R.R. Tolkien. As she is chanting the eerie notes, two candles alight themselves by the grave. Leon's eyes alight on them in horror and wonder.

Leon:

"How? How did you do that"?

Apothecary:

"The dead should light their own candles, don't you think"?

Leon:

"But" -

Apothecary:

"My shop is easy to find. Ask anyone and they will tell you the way. In case they don't it is the seventh door to your right once the street is swept by night".

Leon:

"But" -

The Apothecary turns abruptly and walks upstage; the restless fog embraces her and within it she slowly disappears. Her chant lingers on and Leon watches in her wake, her flickering candles teased by some non-existent breeze - by the fog? And behind Leon the Shadow of the Apothecary reappears: an ephemeral sentinel once again.

The fog rolls on: the scene on the cinema screen metamorphoses: day to night?

And in a mad pirouette the Apothecary's Shadow exits the stage, just as the iron gate and its stony appendages forming the graveyard entrance dissolve... And in one defining snap, like the flick of a finger, the fog dissipates.

The set metamorphoses into: a small shabby room, a cross between a gipsy tent and a dingy pub, illuminated by a single guttering candle set on a high shelf of

rotting wood. Perhaps once sturdy wood now gone bad: rotten. Rows of shelves line one wall of the room almost completely: lined with dusty glass vials of the foreboding physik-gypsy. The rest of the room save the small area reserved as the threshold to the barred door is filled with small, round, rickety tables covered in grubby, tasselled cloth.

There is a knock at the door.

Another knock, harsher now, almost impatient which gives way to a tirade of continuous measured knocking before the door is pushed open with a creak.

A HOODED FIGURE steps over the threshold just as The Apothecary (with Fehmin's face) appears from behind the counter. She has heavily lidded eyes and rough, uncombed hair much tousled and piled on top of the head with almost zero aesthetic effort.

Apothecary:

"Shut the door. It is a rough night".

The Hooded Figure shuts the door.

Apothecary:

"There is no one here tonight, if you haven't come for me, that is".

The Hooded Figure turns and walks towards the tables and removes the hood. It is Leon's face that appears in the meagre glare of the candlelight.

The Apothecary relaxes after seeing it is Leon under the hood.

Apothecary:

"A traveller told me a strange tale today. He said he saw him die on a heath".

Leon:

"What are you talking about"?

Apothecary:

"That man you were burying. He was looking dreadful when he came to my shop".

She turns her gaze to the table in a far corner where a figure is seen hunched, decked in the faded regalia of the spidery light. Leon follows her gaze.

GARETH ROTHSCHILD is slumped on this rotting table, much rotted his own self, skin white and clammy, eyes closed in the stupor, a spider freely crawling over his hand curled around the handle of a brass pewter in rigor mortis.

Apothecary:

"How did he die"?

Leon:

"I - don't remember".

Leon takes a seat at one of the rickety tables, a frank distance from the dead Gareth, kissing the broken counter, almost. The Apothecary bends by his ear and whispers.

Apothecary:

“Hemlock, was it? Conium maculatum” ...

She takes a small bottle off a dust strewn shelf and puts it on Leon’s table, the liquid enshrouded in dirt, like a grave, to some irony.

“Two drops... Perhaps more” ...

Leon unable to bear anymore stands up with force, pushing the table ever slight, the bottles chink and tumble.

Leon:

“Why are you telling me this”?

Apothecary:

“To save you, Leon. To save you.

Leon” -

In a blinding flash, the spilled solutions on the table mix into an explosion, and the stage goes momentarily dark. The scene metamorphoses once more....

Vacillating between day and night, settling on twilight, much to the pleasure of the day, perhaps, not the night. It is the sea, crowned in the glory of its jagged cliffs.

The Apothecary hangs by the edge of a rocky cliff, buffeted by the strong winds like a ragdoll in weak wind, her hair streaming, black dress billowing.

Apothecary:

“Leon. Save me”!

Leon is bending over the fringing bushes at the cliff’s edge, his hands outstretched.

Leon:

“Give me your hand”.

Apothecary:

“The elixir, Leon. The elixir is in your pocket” -

He is confused, and hence he insists, stretching ever more precariously across the cliff edge:

Leon:

“Give me your hand, please” -

Apothecary:

“Leon - save me”.

The last words screech in the wind as she loses her grip on the rock and plunges beneath. A roaring silence permeates before the blackout. Though, just before everything snaps into darkness, the Shadow of the Apothecary is espied standing behind Leon... its robe billowing, betrayed by wind, mirroring Leon.

Curtains fall.

ACT ONE - Scene 2

Curtains rise. Real-time video on the cinema screen shows the action on stage from various angles, from a handful of live-feed cameras obvious to the set.

A wet grey morning: like a corpse that is old but with some effort kept fresh, thawing nonetheless now, with light drizzle and equally grey clouds obscuring the sun.

A courtroom entrance is in its routine bustle: a car stops outside the flight of bleached white steps and GARETH ROTHSCHILD steps out of the car, donned in a suit of formal black. A YOUNG MAN who looks out of place in the setting, clad in a rough medieval attire of a monk's brown truss, hurries down the steps to meet him.

As Gareth is climbing up and this man urgently rushing down, they meet: on the third step - third from the top and third from the bottom. They clasp hands but it is not quite a handshake - their hands make contact, out of necessity of relay runners and the urgency of departing lovers.

Young Man: *(rather morosely)*

"He is in courtroom number thirty-three".

A sad sigh hedges free.

"And nobody is on his side".

Gareth:

"Then why don't you go"?

Young Man:

"I am not a judge".

Gareth:

"And I am no jury".

They both look at one another with perfect understanding.

Young Man:

“Would no one help a widow’s son, Gareth? Even you”?

Gareth falters at being played a card he did not expect to trump - perhaps floored. He runs past the young man, quickly now, mimicking his earlier urgency. Then on an afterthought he pauses and then turns around to address him again, the young man.

Gareth:

“I think I know you. What is your” -

The Young Man is nowhere in sight. Gareth scrutinizes the courtyard and his parked car, perplexed.

The Young Man reappears behind him, paradoxically on the top of the stairs, his features subtly altered to render him horrific: there is a leer lingering on his thin red lip precipitating into maroon eyes. He is now carrying a crude staff fashioned in the shape of a cross, herding a small black goat.

He grins in amusement as Gareth keeps standing on his stoop, battling against the obvious to procure any other explanation that fits the little paradox. The Young Man vanishes.

Gareth climbs the remaining stairs and runs the length of a bleached white courtyard toward a second entrance at the other end which is narrow and grubby in contrast to the grandness of the entrance flanking the flight of stairs he has left behind as he covers the length of this grubby corridor.

At the threshold of this courtroom entrance Gareth suddenly loses his balance and trips - what he has tripped over is a crude staff fashioned in the shape of a cross, wedged cleanly at the foot of the door.

A security camera perched above this shabby door stirs to life at this and looks down to film Gareth’s fallen form, then clicks three times in succession to capture in broken sequence Gareth shuffling to resume his upright pose, as per footage on the cinema screen.

As the camera is clicking thrice, a horn blows three notes and Gareth spills out on stage through a door that reads “Courtroom 33”. The door disappears and the screen momentarily blacks out.

The set morphs again: a courtroom, with one high table for the judge, two witness boxes on either sides, with jury box in place and chairs and tables for the two parties to sit with their Lawyers, albeit facing the audience in this setup.

The AUDIENCE also forms the scripted audience for this courtroom. The actors playing the parts of the courtroom audience are seated amongst the actual audience of the play, in the first nine rungs or rows or lower box or pit.

The people are busy talking amongst themselves, some laughing a mutual horselaugh, some predictably pointing at the witness box and whispering in each other's ears.

The courtroom is a clash of the modern with the medieval, of past and present and not future things. Some of the Audience on the tiers are dressed in modern clothes, and are flashing modern gadgets and other merchandise of the year or of the future. Others are throwbacks to the times of armoured knights and damsels in hats.

Upstage, a group of DRUG SMOKERS swoon and share a pipe, shaped like a cornucopia, just like their real life counterparts in the audience.

In the dead space between the stage and the first row of the audience seat is a narrow bench where are seated a curious pair: a MAN IN BLACK and a WOMAN IN WHITE, her exaggerated garment tossed about everywhere around her, a careless white next to the man's prudent black. They have a backgammon board, and are in the middle of a game -

People from both the virtual audience of the screen and real-life audience are busy following this game as Gareth, who has just been spitted out on stage gets up, looking around and going largely unnoticed at this point.

The Woman in White tosses the dice, it rolls before it comes to settle with finality: she throws back her head and laughs: a ringing laugh. The Man in Black wipes sweat off his brow and plays his turn - the woman's laughter pierces the air once more.

Their game, amongst others, is being watched on by ELEVEN BLACK HOODED FIGURES seated at the topmost tier of the court; mirroring real life eleven hooded counterparts in the audience, in particular the FIGURE SEATED IN THE EXACT MIDDLE. It is an eerie sight. Each figure is identical and yet has a different identity.

Gareth's eyes travel to these singular eleven, coming to rest on the prominent figure in the middle, not distinguished in stature or built or the material of the cloth and yet too prominent to be missed: with five flanking it on either sides giving some berth between the centre figure and themselves. Gareth's eyes rest on the centre figure.

The Woman in White throws back her head to resound the echoing laughter. There is a very sinister feel in her winning the game or perhaps the innate distrust to the temerity of the victor at hand.

FOUR DRUNK BOYS enter the courtroom amidst the audience and also amongst the virtual audience; unsteady on their feet and decked in the regalia of football fans in a match: face paint, banners, scarves and stray funfetti-confetti-sweaty-apoplexy all lingering in their person. The virtual counterparts look to their real life counterparts for direction, pointing at their real-life counterparts and telling each other:

“Oh, that’s me, bruv”.
“Yeah, I can see thee, mate”.
“What the fuck are you doing in there”?
“What the fuck are you”?

And all four of them break in a guffaw slapping each other on the backs as if this has been the funniest joke ever.

The DRUNK DRESSED IN YELLOW AND BLACK STRIPES lets out a loud cheer.

Drunk in Yellow and Black Stripes:

“Yo, bruv. It’s on now, you geezers. The Champions”!
The last two words are said in the official FIFA Champions league song tune.

TWO GUARDS (BAILIFFS?) stand sentinel at each of the courtroom entrances on either side of the tier where the backgammon game between the man and the woman is played. One holds a flaming torch in hand, the other a flashlight.

THE BAILIFF WITH THE FLASHLIGHT decides to intervene.

Bailiff with a Flashlight:

“Excuse me there? Do you mind, mate? Can I see your ID”?

Two of the Drunk Boys break into a wave of laughter, slapping each other on the back. The fourth boy, dressed in blue, is visibly ill.

Blue-dressed Boy:

“Oh bruv, I think I am about to get sick”...

And he arches over and vomits copiously in front of the audience, most of which lands on the Man in Black.

The Woman in White who had thus far been eyeing this new entry to the proceedings with disdain breaks into the cruellest of laughs, slapping her thigh, gasping for breath. The Man in Black fishes a handkerchief from his pocket and attempts to wipe away the vomit.

Bailiff with Flashlight: (to Blue-dressed Boy)

“This isn’t match night, mate. This is” –

At this the centre black hooded figure of both real and virtual audience stands up, perhaps by accident, to arrange its cloak. The bailiffs look at this - perturbed and apprehensive.

Bailiff with Flaming Torch:

“Sit down, mate. Find somewhere and sit down”.

The Drunk Boys look around with bleary eyes before finally collapsing in chairs, snug in forbidden debauchery, decidedly drunk and periodically vociferous, like clockwork. They fondle themselves or each other in jest.

Below the drunks, A WIZENED LADY sits cradled in voluminous locks of iron grey hair in the likeness of coalesced tarantula webs, stitching rubies closely spaced on her hand to fashion it in the form of a jewelled glove. Her arthritic fingers gnarl around a ruby, holding it in place as she readies her needle to stitch it in skin; this is in close-up on the cinema screen.

The Bailiff nearly ignites her with his torch.

She picks another ruby from the supply cradled in her lap between her thighs in frayed tartan: her knotty fingers drop it to the floor: clattering for some time in octave, fulfilling a drum roll.

And at this point Gareth's attention is arrested by a bizarre sight: the bailiff holding the torch behind the judge's desk is replaced with a LIFE-SIZE GARGOYLE in a heartbeat of a moment, so sudden that the transformation is almost the trick of the eye. The burning torch is fixed in the hollow space of the clenched fist of the stone gargoyle: a gargoyle which on one close look is revealed to have the face of Karen Dashwood - a character to appear in the next scene.

Gareth, stunned, moves towards it: the bowed head and closed eyes, the hands knotted together with the head resting on them, one knee bent, the torch raising above form this poise: a trophy upheld?

The Woman in White stands up and overturns the board. Then she turns and looks ahead at the stage. Gareth follows her gaze and his eyes widen in horror. Seated at the jury table in the dead centre of the two witness boxes juxtaposed is the same Young Man in monk's attire that he met outside at the courtroom stair.

The Young Man looks at him; malignant amusement dances in his eye as he broadly smiles in a gesture of welcome.

Young Man:

"Welcome, Gareth. You are perhaps the only one on his side".

Gareth follows the jury's gaze to the witness box on the right. There, crumpled in chains lies a PRISONER who Gareth goes round and drags to the middle of the stage for the audience, and himself, to view. The spotlight shines on this chained figure and both Gareth and the audience realize together that it is an emaciated and wasted version of Gareth himself. The prisoner inadvertently lets slip a single whisper... "No"...

Gareth:

"What have you done to him? What have you done to me"?

As is apparent on the cinema screen, a single tear rolls down the gargoyle's closed eyes, falls missed and disappears, leaving a track on the stone cheek, a tell-tale.

Gareth stands up from where he was bent by the side of the prisoner and storms towards the gaming table. He puts the overturned table back in its place and pushes the Man in Black, who lost to the Woman in White, out of his chair, un-resisted.

Gareth:

“I will play for his life”.

Woman in White: *(a thunderous roar)*

“I have already played and I have won”.

Her eyes smoulder in rage. Gareth grabs her by her arm and brings her face close to his, both in different strengths quite matched.

Gareth:

“You will play again with me”.

He pushes the woman back on the narrow bench and she hisses curses in anger or fear.

A few Drug Smokers ceremoniously carry the cornucopia pipe into the action, offering their smoke to the scufflers. Gareth declines. Woman in White accepts a few tokes.

Then: some inexplicable commotion amongst the people sitting on the tiers, save the eleven hooded and robed, who merely observe the courtroom drug-smoking. The Centre Hooded Figure slides an iron pentagram out of its sleeve and clasps it firmly in the hand.

The Drug Smokers reconvene in a huddle before finding chairs in all areas of the courtroom.

Gareth:

“Play”.

Woman in White:

“Not this. No.

You really want to play? Then you will play this with me”.

She takes out a tablet from below the bench and pushes the button, switching it on to a screen showing a deck of overturned cards, reading “Tap to shuffle the deck”. This app appears also on the cinema screen.

Gareth looks at the cards in despair.

Suddenly the lights flicker threateningly and all of them go out in a flash, followed by a single flickering bulb on stage.

Woman in White:

“PLAY TAROT WITH ME, ROTHSCHILD”!

Gareth:

“I do not know how to play”.

The woman starts laughing at this, a sickeningly evil laugh and most of the audience taking up the cue laugh too, blowing raspberries at Gareth’s comment.

She taps on the tablet screen and the cards start to shuffle in manic frenzy.

Woman in White: *(in a sing-song voice)*

“I am picking my card, Gareth”.

Gareth:

“Don’t” -

Woman in White:

“Yes. This one” –

She taps on the screen to stop the shuffle.

Gareth:

“No” -

Woman in White:

“Oh. Would you look at that?

(A good hardy laugh that echoes.)

“IT’S THE HANGED MAN”!

She brandishes the tablet at Gareth. It shows a man hanging by the neck, lightning struck at the top of his head.

At this instant DOCTOR FANGORN appears from behind the witness box, as if just after examining an ill or dying, clad in the age-old symbol of white coat and a swinging stethoscope, he takes off his spectacles and predictably wipes them as he says...

Doctor Fangorn:

“I am so sorry, Gareth. He is already dead”.

At these words, the centre black hooded figure slips the iron pentagram back inside and the black hooded row stand up in muted silence and file out of the courtroom slowly: the ones seated in the audience. But the virtual ones seated in the projection behind the judge’s desk remain seated.

The Woman in White bows at the audience and exits.

Gareth is distracted, looks around, here there and everywhere.

Even though the Woman in White has exited, her laughter continues to echo from everywhere.

The debauched Drunk Boys in the virtual audience jump down from their tier and drop next to the Wizen Lady. After some initial misdirected attempts to finger her hand and her rubies, one of them throws an arm around her shoulder and smothers her in lewd kisses which make the other Drunk Boys hoot. She screeches and twisting away from him gets up abruptly, and a whole cascade of rubies, in an almighty din, slaver on the floor in red surf.

She disappears.

The drunken boys seated in the virtual audience break into a slurred chorus:

*“And in the darkness strike that chord
That all the booty laid to feast
That all the booty laid to feast
The booty of thy feast”.*

At this their real life counterparts seated amongst the audience also get up and join on cue, elbowing each other and sniggering at the real life counterpart of the hag seated below them:

*“And in her belly seed that pod
That duty all be crushed to least
That duty all be crushed to least
The duty of all thy least”!*

Behind Gareth, exactly where Doctor Fangorn stood, now stands the Young Man, holding aloft the tablet showing the Hanged Man. He is ever redundant in his amusement at Gareth’s confusion as Gareth tries to grope around for his bearings.

The one bulb illuminating this also goes out now as Gareth screams.

Curtains fall.

ACT ONE - Scene 3

Curtains rise on the courtroom steps, the cinema screen flickering. This is a rewind or a fast-forward, perhaps a skip of the scene before, on the screen?

A grey evening, riddled with pregnant clouds in the sky. GARETH ROTHSCHILD stands by his car, the door to the passenger seat expectantly opened for him. The CHAUFFEUR is sitting ready in the driver’s seat.

Three people occupy the backseat: LEON BLACKWELL, MARK DASHWOOD and KAREN DASHWOOD. Karen sits immediately behind the passenger seat, staring resolutely ahead refusing to make the invited eye contact with Gareth. Perhaps lost in thought... A gargoyle of stone, as her persona: A stone gargoyle in real. It is only righteous anger at him and a tantrum for all the rest. The overall mood is ambiguous: Leon and Mark are busy in a whispered, sniggering exchange, heads crammed together at something on Leon's phone which is only visible courtesy to the reflection in Mark's shiny black shades.

Leon addresses Gareth:

Leon:

"Well, you can get in, you know. So we can be off. I think we are past the fashionably late time" -

Mark:

"We're dreadfully late".

Leon:

"Exactly my point".

Gareth spares a glance at Karen, and then looks at Mark or rather at Mark's dark glasses for a long period of time.

Leon:

"Gareth, I don't understand. Why are you not getting in"?

On the courtroom steps behind Gareth THREE MUDDY CHILDREN trundle, chasing each other down the steps, barefooted, dressed in historical tunic rags, one holding a curious kite-like contraption: ox hide stretched across a cruciform lattice; perhaps heavier than all the three of them put together, thudding on the magnificent vestibule. They argue amongst one another.

Gareth ruefully scans the horizon, at the pregnant clouds, the mouldy grey of the damp of a fiscal air condoning already.

Gareth:

"There is thunder in the air. There is a storm coming. A storm that would destroy everything".

Karen:

"So you should get in".

Gareth:

"A storm that would destroy everything... even us".

Karen:

"We'll put on some music so we hear nothing of it".

Gareth:

“That will not stop anything”.

Karen:

“Yes. But we won’t get to know about it”.

Karen flips on loud techno music on the car stereo.

Thunder flashes on stage. Gareth sits in the passenger seat and is about to swing the car door shut behind him when Leon halts him -

Leon:

“Gareth, wait... What about the children flying a kite in the rain”?

Gareth, confused, looks between Leon and the Muddy Children.

Gareth:

“It’s the storm”.

Leon:

“The children, Gareth.”

Mark:

“One of them is the storm”.

Gareth swings the door shut. Rain infiltrates into the cinema screen as well and everything, virtual and real begins to get lost in the rain.

The Chauffeur drives off slowly, with Karen’s techno music blaring yet barely audible below claps of thunder.

The screen flickers once in malfunction, as it gets wet in the stage-rain. Or in its own virtual rain. From inside and outside. Thunder on stage crackles within the screen. The Muddy Children huddle beneath the courthouse roof as one of them flies a kite into the storm.

The car has sped off by now. And there is a crisp sound of electrical stuff sizzling before the screen blacks out.

Curtains fall.

ACT ONE - Scene 4

Curtains rise.

A courtyard of stone, bathed in yellow light, the edges fading into darkness. It is an unknown hour of the night, with too much lightening but no rain or thunder. On the cinema screen are real-time stills of the festivity unfolding, providing close-up details throughout the scene.

A narrow wooden table is in the dead centre of the stage, laden with ample wine and fruit and bread, a cornucopia as centrepiece. THIRTEEN GUESTS are seated, where only one side of the table is occupied, and all the diners face the audience: There is scarce talk between the guests and much eating: all thirteen guests, no hosts - that part is obvious... obvious to guess. There is a doleful and yet cheerful air that prevails, like the funeral of a person much hated or the relieved deathbed of someone in pain.

A man raises his glass in the air to toast, the wine catching the complimenting light: it is LEON BLACKWELL, in the centre of the row of guests, sporting a cruel goatee and three-piece suit with tails, like some fairy-tale Count. FEHMIN ASHTON sits to his right, crowned in a circle of roses as red as blood, twisted together with the green rose leaves and dotted with shimmering stones: diamonds? They glimmer like small droplets of dew; they trickle down strands of her ebony hair. Her dress is merely the coarse peasant tunic, secured at her waist by a thick lynching rope. MARK DASHWOOD sits to Leon Blackwell's left, dressed a fine shade of white-refined salt-like. His customary dark glasses are in place. He quaffs from an old ornate cup: the vestal virgins in a circle, holding hands, arms raised around the brim. Among the TEN OTHER MASKED GUESTS, who all wear grotesque headpieces, are: a woman with a necklace of jade, a man with a crown of pearls.

A band of people enter the courtyard, their portal of entry in an enclosed courtyard of stone unexplained and silent, completely unnoticed by the guests. The band is dressed in Goth black, their faces painted cult-like. GARETH ROTHSCHILD leads this curious band of six: himself, KAREN DASHWOOD and four others - JEHOVAH, MOODY, ROOKEWOOD, TITAN. All in sombre black, collars of their coats pulled up against identification.

Gareth scans the proceedings of the courtyard. Karen follows his gaze and as they alight on the feasting table (paradoxical for the feasting table being the only thing in the courtyard and hence the only object to behold), her eyes round in recognition and she utters a small "oh". She looks at Gareth whose face is all hardened lines, little amusement.

Gareth:

"Always the innocent for the game... This place reeks of death... Can you smell it at all? But then, I suppose one needs to know the scent of death in the first place".

Jehovah flexes his muscled arm uneasily, scanning the courtyard with tangible fear. Perhaps it mixes with his wine, in the air, and Gareth Rothschild turns, looking at Jehovah askance. Their eyes meet.

Jehovah:

“It is a necropolis, Gareth”.

Gareth:

“Would you believe me if I told you I would rather walk a necropolis”?

Jehovah looks at him in clear disbelief, blinking.

Karen:

“It is an altar... the ancient altar... These people do not know on what they are feasting”.

She turns to face Jehovah, tears in her gothic black eyes. In the background, at the feasting table, Mark Dashwood slumps in a drugged stupor... dead? - Possibly. The ornate goblet arcs out of his hand and landing at the edge of the table facing the audience, spills to their faces. The sheer white tablecloth pissed vermillion.

The goat from scene 2 races across stage, as if freed. A Masked Guest follows, with machete drawn.

Gareth:

“We need to get inside and reveal ourselves later. There is much to explain”...

Although his gaze is fixed at Leon, it is Fehmin who listens from her place at the table. She gets up and approaches Gareth - halfway there she becomes woozy, and unties her lynching-rope belt to catch her breath. She sighs, steadies herself, and staggers over to the rear wall of the courtyard. In her wake, Titan, Rookewood and Moody pick up the rope and encircle her, like fishermen with a net.

Ignoring the men with the rope, Fehmin glares at Gareth and says with forced whisper:

Fehmin:

“Gareth... I’ve got my eyes on you”.

Gareth turns away in shame or fear, then turns to face her a moment later. As if well again, Fehmin is standing upright - she places her hands over her eyes. She sneers at him, peeking through her fingers as blood spurts and dribbles down her hands, then sways yet again and falls, quite dead. Gareth shudders. Jehovah rounds on him, catching up, shivering with fright.

Jehovah:

“You will reveal yourself, won’t you? Won’t you? Gareth” -

He forcibly turns Gareth around.

“Answer me, man” -

Jehovah is wrenched away from Gareth by Moody and Rookewood who encircle him with the rope and shove him against the rear wall. Jehovah collides with the wall and gasps in pain.

Jehovah:

“What the” -

Rookewood:

“We are in on this together or you go sit at the table to feast the dead”.

Jehovah:

“We are walking into a trap. Gareth knows this. They will kill us. With sharpened knives on the altar.

Unless Gareth reveals himself” -

Karen:

“Gareth we are all afraid. But to let that fear drive us -

Please. Don't hide.

Speak to me... Gareth” -

There is a distant goat cry, before Gareth turns to her.

Gareth:

“Alright. Paint my eyes”.

He goes down to his knees, in front of her. She is taken aback, clearly.

“Before they know - paint my eyes” -

Karen and Moody exchange a look and then Karen obliges. Gareth's transformation is rapid but hardly visible as immediately after, in quick motion, he climbs the wall and jumps to the other side. The quickness is unexpected but even so, Jehovah has undone the rope binding him. The five of them exchange a glance before following Gareth over the wall but as they jump to the other side, the solid brick like a cardboard prop totters and falls.

The Masked Guest with the machete returns, holding aloft a plate carrying the sacrificed goat. He sets it reverently on the table, overturning the cornucopia. Most of the Guests eat pieces of the raw meat.

The cinema screen plays fractals, the sole source of light on the stage.

Gareth is nowhere in sight at the other side of the toppled wall. Karen calls his name as Moody and Jehovah wander offstage into the aisles of the audience while Rookewood attempts to comfort Karen but is rejected.

The stage lights black out -

Then, like a 1920s film, this pre-recorded scene plays in noir on the cinema screen:

A dark deserted corridor of a derelict mansion given up long in hopes to let. The only light source: a full moon. The corridor leads to locked doors on either side:

grim locks and bolts caked in cobwebs. The doors are cracked and loose. Beyond them, nothing much to hide. The corridor is riddled with an assortment of furniture pushed against the walls and in front of the doors, draped in sheets of white. Parchment yellow now, those sheets of white, and ridden in places with brown and grey cobwebs and clumped dust.

A footstep -

A gasp of breath: Gareth's.

Here the cinema screen merges with actual action on stage, as Gareth enters. On first impression it is a room no less in disarray as the corridor itself: a collection of tables burdened with an assortment of tools, files coming apart at the spine, and reams of faded, age old papers. Everything is scattered and in disarray. The tools on the tables are caked with dust and grime. The knives and shrapnel have their own patina of dark and dried crust. There are two large glass tanks filled with what might have once been water or some clear liquid, murky now with small grotesque eerily suspended flotsam. The reams and reams of bent and scribbled scraps of papers on the tables are feverishly whisked in odd directions, as if someone has gone through them in frenzy, looking for something. And as a result of this search pages stick out from piles at odd angles like dislocated bones. There is one computer set next to the murky water tank, gazing with glassy light on screen saver mode. The room bears an air of a laboratory abandoned in the middle of some experiment. Its first impression of a room no less in disarray than the corridor itself an illusion, for here; clearly, there is a method to all the disarray.

Gareth picks up a paper lying on the top of a twisted bunch and squints at the scrawny scribble in the meagre light. Unable to render it legible he brings it close to the illuminated computer screen for better view. And at once the gadget seems to come to life. A camera perched at the top scans the page with a red laser beam, before a mechanical voice issuing from the computer churns out the words: "Day 3480, forgotten age".

Below this heading is a grid of numbers till one hundred and one. Some of the numbers are circled and the author of this document has added notes on the side for his own advantage. Gareth scans it haphazardly. And the camera-eye at the top of the computer scans equally frantically with its red laser gaze, churning out broken bits of what it has managed to scan, trying to keep up with Gareth's pace: "Number 81: Dead... Number 57: Dead... Number 83: Dead"...

On the cinema screen, a lone scrawl in one of the bottom margins reads: "the void of this place has no life".

The eerie machine continues, "...Number 2: Dead... Number 8: Dead"...

Another note, boxed by the author to highlight its importance: "And yet today did not squander as its previous comrades, now long gone, for -" An arrow connects this box to a number on the grid.

"...Number 7: alive and ready to use" -

Gareth throws these papers away and brings himself at the level of the camera-eye and glares at it, getting closer and closer and trying to make sense. The camera scans his eye with the same indifferent red laser before it churns: "Subject unidentified... Please insert subject"...

There is a scuffle behind Gareth that makes him jump with the sense of not being alone. Another scuffle, a little louder now -

He turns as everything comes to light, a cheap parody of a theatrical epiphany; he wonders why he had not seen it immediately as he entered: a cage. It is life size, from the ceiling to the floor, covering one half of the room, or more. Rusted iron bars bent here and there in places in accordance to a dance move. In the light there is, they are almost dancing. Shapes. Dark shapes barely discernible beyond these dancing bars are very still: unmoving. Gareth moves towards them.

Inside the cage are TEN SHADOWY FIGURES, shackled from the ceiling, the walls, the bars of the cage - everywhere, out of someone's sadistic fear that they will escape. They are dead now, dead in their captivity, their dead forms hanging limply like broken puppets still clinging to their strings, chains.

In the middle of the cage, the real drama takes centre stage, slowly given the spotlight: a chair. Old but by no means relenting, designed for torture and entertainment alike. The chair bears the capsized form of a man shackled from the arms of the chair, his head bowed and only the top of his matted hair are visible. His figure is wasted and much skeletonised, the green veins on the hand and arm pulsating, snaking, entwining. Gareth presses his face to the bars to look at this slouching man, more drawn in kinship to him than the dead figures.

Gareth:

"No.

Leon...

Go feast at the table. Leon, you were feasting at the table, remember"?

The slouching figure does not respond. And Gareth looks beyond, breaking the fourth wall, at the audience, imploring assistance with his eyes. Getting none, he returns his gaze to Leon.

"Leon... Leon, please. Look at me, Leon. It's me. Gareth.

I agreed to reveal myself so you might not recognise me at first- but it's me, Gareth" -

The slouching figure starts to faintly whimper, in pain or remorse or grief: an unsettling emotion.

Then Leon begins to speak in a faraway voice, as if he is standing down below calling to Gareth who stands on top of a cliff. Quite faraway, an effort to speak:

Leon:

"Not one of them is living, Gareth".

Gareth's eyes are inadvertently drawn to the limp, incarcerated figures.

"And yet I can hear them, as plainly as I can hear you... Gareth"...

Gareth:

“This is not real. No. You are at the table and you are eating bread and drinking wine. And Fehmin is there with you. Leon, Fehmin is there” -

The slouching figure lets out a sob this time.

Leon:

“She died, Gareth. Didn’t you see? She died and I came here. I had no choice, you must understand this”...

Gareth:

“And now you can go back. Go back, Leon”.

Leon:

“I can’t... now, Gareth”.

The slouching figure raises his head and catches sudden light. Gareth backs away in horror - profane. Leon’s eyes are closed and stitched at the margins of the lids and two black irises are painted atop the closed eyelids.

Then, a red laser beam frantically going round the room lands on the painted irises of the stitched eyes, and the machine starts humming, almost in pleasure, before cooing: “Subject identified. Subject is ready for use”.

Gareth, momentarily distracted by the macabre machine, turns back to look at Leon in horror.

Leon:

“That’s right, Gareth.
And now, I have got my eyes on you”.

Curtains fall.

End of Act One.

PART I – DIGRESSION (Act Two)

Characters in Act Two

Fehmin Ashton

Leon Blackwell

Karen Dashwood

Mourners

Chapel Choir

A Bishop

Cambridge Coach Wollstonecraft

& the

Cambridge Football Team (“The Blues”):

Goalkeeper: Bloomsdale

Defenders: Blue, Carter, Handel, McPherson, Rookwood, Titus

Forwards: Jehovah (sub.), (Rothschild)

Midfielders: (Blackwell,) Brown, Donnoghue, Fowler, Moody, Titan, Warrington

Collective character note: bipolar swing of grandiose sense
of self and low self-esteem; gossip

ACT TWO – After the Funeral

(Motif: a thousand trees; all we are)

On the cinema screen are four mediums: snapshots and phone video, professional college sports footage, a social network album.

Karen Dashwood smiles in full bloom, her cheeks flushed. Leon has an arm around her shoulder and Gareth leans toward her so their heads touch—

Leon takes aim at the goal net, decked in Cambridge blue to an inexpertly held camera in the grainy crowd that cheers him.

Some photographs later he smiles: did he score? A photograph later he is jubilantly embraced by Gareth, wearing the captain’s armband.

Footage: The celebratory dance of an elated crowd – he must’ve scored.

Three images: Karen Dashwood smiling (again), with a girl of vivid golden-blonde bangs sitting beside her, with Leon standing behind them frozen in a laugh, his arms around them.

And then his arms are around Moody and Warrington in the changing rooms of the football team.

Finally his arm is around Fehmin as he points at something beyond the frame of the photograph while she, her attention caught, looks to the other side, out of the frame.

Karen and Mark Dashwood are smartly dressed at an elite gathering, both smiling, with sophisticated drinks. And Gareth and Karen beside them, at ease and totally unaware of the photograph being taken: Leon Blackwell's handiwork maybe. Add a few comments to testify the assumptions, a million likes to follow.

A club with two dozen or so rowdy men and women at the college bar. Leon is in the centre of the blur along with Titan and Brown, all singing a drunken chorus, and others are laughing. Someone speaks in the blur, "Pennying for the drink, please"? To which another replies, "Blackwell pennied"?

An offscreen Sports Commentator interjects with: "In the Cambridge tradition of pennying drink, you have to 'save the queen' (her face is on pennies). So if someone drops a penny in someone's drink they have to down it (drink it all very quickly) so that the Queen does not drown".

On the screen: Raucous laughter as Leon looks around groggily. In one fluid motion he drains his glass then says, "I can predict the year on the penny. But why bother?" Around him counting and chanting builds up to "predict" but Leon keeps drinking until the glass is finished and he catches the coin between his teeth. The crowd: "Predict! Predict!" Leon says: "The year is, 1973!" After a little holdup as it is checked, everyone cheers. Would the pennier stand up please? Brown raises a hand in the air, his cup emptied. Someone fills it. "Drink! Drink!" the chant resumes as Brown murmurs, "You bastard" to Leon and begins draining the cup, the countdown pursuing. Leon loudly declares, "That was the last of his penny. How very clever!" A few people boo and Brown finishes his glass and slams it on the table, richly burping. Brown, Titan and Leon loudly start banging the table.

Sports Commentator (offscreen): "In any dispute over drinking, whichever option involves collectively the most drinking is the option chosen".

On screen: An assortment of pictures, a montage of farewell parties: Leon waving at the crowd, dressed in the regalia of Cambridge blue, standing beside an equally jubilant Gareth with Moody, Warrington and Titan celebrating behind Leon.

Karen in the stands, waving back at him with the crowd around her in celebration.

Fehmin escorted from the stadium by Leon who has one arm around her waist and the other in mid-air as he enthusiastically explains something to her silent smile.

Leon, Gareth and Jehovah on the field in training suits, a football balanced on Jehovah's flexed knee as he and Leon listen to some match talk by Gareth.

Then: A posh dining club: Karen liveried in formality, and a pile of unwrapped presents on the dinner table. "Open it," Leon's voice. She opens a gift and gasps: on silken wrappings there sit, quite snugly, two pearl earrings directly from Vermeer's tell-tale painting—

And then: "Fehmin, wait!" Some pair of footsteps trundle down the flawless marble stairs as she races down, her rich hair deceptive in colour. Leon is quick, and catches up with her: "Please". She embraces him around his neck, her eyes misty.

A photo of the team singing: Gareth with Leon who casually has an arm around him; next to Leon are Brown and then Jehovah, Titan, Bloomsdale, Carter and Blue. In the background, banners proclaiming, "Cambridge versus Sheffield" flutter lazily in the stadium air above a thin knot of people.

The overture ending, everything upturned, as the funeral march has now begun.

ACT TWO - Scene 1

Curtains rise.

A funeral: a chapel, sombre in mourning. MANY MOURNERS sit in the pews, all in black, most of them young; or what is termed archaically as the bloom of youth. Whispers lace the air like a vapid chorale. BROWN sits in the first pew beside A CRYING GIRL and SEVERAL BOYS. Behind Brown, MOODY, ROOKEWOOD, TITAN, WARRINGTON and BLOOMSDALE sit in congregation. Behind them sit JEHOVAH, TITUS, BLUE, CARTER, FOWLER and DONNOHUGHE, and behind them sits the CAMBRIDGE COACH. All have their heads bowed but there are all too many familiar faces and shameless chatter ensues. Even the CHAPEL CHOIR gossips quietly yet animatedly. The modernist term of socializing is very apt; even here. Even now.

Crying Girl: *(a whisper, to Brown)*
"Where is the casket, Uncle Alastair"?

Brown keeps looking at the altar as he replies:

Brown:
"Gareth's loved ones will bring it very soon".

A Woman with a Bun at her nape leans forward in her pew to address the people sitting in front, who turn as she whispers:

Woman-with-bun:

“He seemed all right a few days ago when Cambridge played Sheffield, no? How did he die?”

Boy-with-mad-genius:

“A car crash. Died in the hospital a few days later... Had internal injuries”.

A Small Child sidles up behind the Woman with the bun, intrigued by her hair. He timidly reaches for a coin from the bun, plucks it out, and finds another coin, then another. The cinema screen shows this strange activity in detail.

Man-beside-woman-with-bun: *(amused, he pats the Small Child’s head)*

“Greatest captain to have ever led Cambridge”.

Noticing the child with fingers in her hair, the Woman whirls around. Her bun loosens and all remaining coins in the bun clatter to the floor. The Small Child drops his handful of coins and flees.

Woman-with-bun:

“My spells”...

Man-beside-woman-with-bun: *(ignoring the coins)*

“The most decent and sorted man I ever knew”.

Bespectacled Boy:

“True that”.

Boy-with-mad-genius:

“I don’t think he was drunk. Speeding, perhaps, but not drunk”.

They continue to speculate in hisses, crackling like wildfire consuming a forest.

Warrington looks up from his subdued reflections and asks Moody:

Warrington:

“Chief mourners”?

Moody:

“Blackwell is, of course, and Rothschild’s girlfriend. Both his parents are dead. No immediate family members, just distant ones from here and there. I think they are sitting over there”...

He points at a Group of Middle-aged People occupying three front rows in the opposite column of pews. Warrington stares at them for some time, perhaps trying to come up with some opinion about them.

Warrington:

“It is odd though. Wouldn’t – Shouldn’t he be buried beside his parents or family graveyard or some such”?

Moody:

“He will be eventually – I don’t know” –

Warrington:

“So Blackwell – Leon, and Gareth, they had been friends their whole lives”?

Moody:

“Most of their lives, I think it is appropriate to say. And yes, that is the talk” –

The BISHOP enters, dressed in formal black. Silence descends like an apostolic revelation over the crowd. A few moments later, an open casket is wheeled inside the chapel and all the guests stand up in reverence and respect. GARETH lies inside, his eyes closed. A gash on the forehead has been rendered presentable for viewing. As his coffin passes through the aisle, people now are truly sobered seeing his dead form. This gliding spectre is followed by LEON, KAREN, and behind these two, FEHMIN. The latter causes a fresh wave of whispered unrest in the hallowed silence of the coffin vicinity.

Titus: (to Moody)

“Blackwell’s girlfriend? But why”?

Titan looks aloft, the question balanced at the tip of his own tongue.

Moody:

“She was Rothschild’s cousin. Didn’t you know”?

Leon leads Karen after the gliding coffin, his head bowed. Karen is white-faced, her jaw set, her eyes fixed at the dead Gareth, so stoic save for the measured stride that she appears to be like the many stone effigies that deck the chapel walls. Fehmin is puffy-eyed. This singular procession reaches the altar where the coffin is set. The chief mourners take their reserved places in the front pew. Others shuffle back to their seats as the bishop takes over the proceedings.

Bishop:

“We are gathered here to observe the funeral rites of our friend, and colleague and blood kin, Gareth Morgan Rothschild, son of Ezra Crassus Rothschild, who departed this world on August the 26th of this year”.

The Bishop clears his throat.

“I will not go to the Bible, to the Book of Mormon, nor to the Book of Doctrine and Covenants for my text. On this occasion I will say, ‘Know ye not that there is a prince and a great man fallen this day in Israel?’ (2 Samuel 3:38). King David’s comment about Abner captured in a few words the feeling of the people whenever a beloved leader died. Robert B. Thompson quoted these words at the funeral of Joseph Smith Sr. on 15 September 1840 and here I quote them once more”.

A few mourners cough quietly.

“And from Job, chapter 19: 25-6, I quote, ‘For I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God’”...

The Chapel Choir begins to joyfully sing, perhaps “Hymn of the Church of Latter Day Saints” by Gordon Hinckley and G. Homer Durham.

Meanwhile the Bishop concludes with:

Bishop:

“MY REDEEMER LIVES”!

After the Chapel Choir concludes its hymn, the Bishop retakes to enlighten the gathering with the last well-chosen words on Atonement and Resurrection as Gareth sleeps on, the resurrection unheeded, the atonement woe bygone.

Bishop:

“Death is only the beginning of the greater Grace that we souls crave for in life. Death is be all, not the end all of all. Gareth Rothschild to die so young only conveys more fully the sense of the afterlife that awaits us all: The Greater path, the other being”.

The Bishop pauses in adoration of this notion.

“Mourning over death is paradoxical. We do not weep and mourn as those who have no hope. We give way to faith in God and in His eternal, merciful plan. I would conclude with Gareth Rothschild’s much cherished verse: ‘Follow in the footsteps of your husband and father, excepting wherein he may have manifested the weaknesses of the flesh’. Amen”.

The Mourners echo “Amen” as they get up from their chairs, crowding towards Leon and Karen or loudly inquiring about the burial and the graveside service. Some casually stroll in the garden where funeral refreshments are decked. The football team consoles Leon and Karen. A few people linger on out of sheer curiosity. But in the end, too soon the inevitable is achieved: the chapel is cleared.

ACT TWO - Scene 2

Grad Café on Mill Lane. PATRONS come and go. LEON and FEHMIN sit at a table in the corner, books interspersed by cups of steaming Italian coffee. Fehmin pores over a tablet, then studies a smart phone, sipping coffee. Leon, lost in thought, stares at the opposite wall; he clicks his pen every then and now. He is unkempt and

unshaven for days: an iconic impersonation of someone in grief. Both of them are dressed in black, still, their grief evident.

Suddenly speaking to no one in particular:

Leon:

“When you are friends with someone for as long as your whole life, perhaps, then your own life ALONE ceases to have a meaning.

“You see, if there is one thing Gareth Rothschild showed me, it is that I, Leon Blackwell, have no life that can exist without him. Everything we did had to be together. Why do people do that? We have been taught life is transient and so on so - why do people do that, still? Pathetic weaklings ” –

He takes his head in his hands.

“All things that I ever did were a ‘joint venture’ with him - *our* things, never *my* things. So, what I am saying is that I have no identity” ...

Fehmin:

“I am sure that’s not true, Leon”–

Leon: *(continuing, louder)*

...“Such that it is quite some time since he left and I still don’t have a damn idea about what to do”.

People in the vicinity go quiet: he might have spoken loud, arguably, but they were eavesdropping: the frailty of the mob.

Fehmin:

“Leon, please”–

He stares at her with a challenge in his eyes, daring her to say something else. She looks away.

Fehmin:

“It’s just – I am sure Gareth would have wanted you to move on. This – is not what Gareth would have wanted” –

He gives a sardonic laugh - not a laugh exactly.

Leon:

“Oh and you know what Gareth would have wanted” –

They stare at one another: another challenge proclaimed.

“I know, Fehmin that you have a knack of thinking that you are privy to secrets that you are not, but this is just stretching the truth beyond the breaking point”.

Fehmin thumbs through then closes a leatherbound book.

Fehmin:

“It didn’t work, Leon. It did not make me angry and it certainly is not going to keep me away from the case”.

Leon shrugs and pushes everything lying open in front of him away, moodily: the challenge is lost?

“Gareth is gone, Leon. The sooner you accept this” –

Leon:

“You know what I am thinking right now? You were his cousin, weren’t you? Gareth Rothschild’s cousin, so there can be no mistake. So why did he hate you so much”?

The last words said venomously, almost spat to her face. She clenches her fist to bite back a retort: an old reflex? Her face is white but whether in anger or fury or fear cannot be determined.

“He just put up with you because of me. You know that, right? Just because of me – proving once again, HOW HE WAS RIGHT AND I WAS NOT” –

The last words, indeed, in comparison, are roared. Leon stands up and so does Fehmin, once again suspended in a deadlock of defiance and challenge.

A group of people troop from the door toward their table, dressed from a football practice, very tentatively, which is tantamount: BROWN, MOODY, WARRINGTON.

In walks KAREN DASHWOOD. Modestly composed, she looks dazed, possibly on drugs, surely traumatized by the loss of Gareth. She is searching for something lost, or several lost items; life has handed her a macabre mystery.

Warrington breaks from his group with “Give me a minute, mates” and approaches her. He is somewhat drunk on alcohol or on power. The other football players await him from a distance as he approaches Karen.

Warrington:

“Karen Dashwood! I’d like to be first to introduce myself as the new team captain. My intentions are to honor Gareth’s playbook, yet I do have a few new ideas of my own to implement on the field. I hope you are copacetic with this”.

Karen attempts a smile, placing it over her revulsion for Warrington.

Karen:

“I do miss him terribly. Thank you. But this”...

She gestures limply at the collegiate café hoopla around her.

“This is all too much too soon”...

Warrington:

“Say, Karen, did I see your brother Mark at the funeral? No. I wonder why. At any rate I have something to discuss with him” –

A terrified look enters her glassy eyes.

Karen:

“Mark is... missing” ...

Warrington:

“Missing? Missing, how? Under what circumstances? Does this have something to do with that cult, that cult he allegedly joined” –

Karen: *(brightening)*

“My brother will turn up. He’s been known to take vacations from responsibility.”

Warrington:

“Yes. By the way, when I said I was the new captain, I did mean to convey that I can replace Gareth in any capacity.”

Karen: *(nearly a sob)*

“Oh!”

Karen runs toward the door, past where Fehmin is engaged in a stare-down with Leon. She pretends to not notice them, despite Fehmin’s perfunctory wave of hello, and exits the café.

Meanwhile, Warrington nods to himself and heads toward Leon, where Brown and Moody stand at the ready, following through on a plan of attack against Leon. Feeling Warrington’s elbow at his side, Brown springs into action.

Brown:

“Coach needs to see you, Leon”.

Moody:

“You should talk to him, Leon”.

Warrington:

“Why were you absent from the meeting he called up today”?

Leon:

“I don’t think I am answerable to you, Warrington, so you can clear off and tell the Coach from me that the tournament” –

Warrington:

“Oh and I don’t think I am your messenger boy either, not anymore” –

Moody:

“Careful, Blackwell. Warrington is your captain now”.

An uneasy silence diffuses.

Leon:

“So you think you can take Gareth’s place, do you”?

Warrington: *(getting angrier)*

“Yes. Yes, I think I can”.

Brown steps in between Warrington and Leon, facing Warrington, perhaps to balance out Moody who, arms crossed, stands glaring at Leon behind Warrington.

Brown:

“Hey – Warrington – hey – stop” –

He turns to Leon, a true mediator.

“Leon, the coach needs to see you, NOW”.

Leon:

“I have no desire to see him. Tell him that, if you please”.

He turns and begins to pack his books and things, taking a last unnecessary swig from his coffee: the gesture is cliché. Fehmin rises to stand at his side.

Moody:

“Or perhaps the tournament would be better off if you just hand in your resignation and save us the debacle Rothschild created in the last match against Sheffield” –

Brown:

“Moody” –

Leon:

“Oh really? A 5-0 victory suddenly appears to be a debacle to Cambridge” –

Moody:

“And thanks to Rothschild we did”?

Leon:

“You bastard” –

He moves toward Moody. Fehmin grabs his arm, yelling, “LEON, NO”. Brown stands in front of Moody while Warrington holds his arm in restraint.

Enter TITUS and ROOKEWOOD, who are flanking the CAMBRIDGE COACH (a.k.a. Wollstonecraft). The Coach appears fully aware of what he has interrupted, and yet looks as if he might have just wandered in by mistake.

Cambridge Coach:

“Leon, in my office, please” ...

A vacuum in the eye of the storm prevails. Leon wrenches his arm from Fehmin's grasp, where she has held on faithfully.

Leon: (to Fehmin)

"You stay out of this".

Leon storms out, the door swinging, followed by the Coach, then Titus and Rookewood. Moody frees himself from Warrington's grasp and follows, straightening his shirt almost emphatically: an old action, overdone.

An awkward silence prevails as Fehmin collects her books and things. Brown turns to her while Warrington shuffles uneasily in his wake.

Brown:

"I'll help you with this" –

Fehmin:

"It's all right. I can manage".

As she is moving on, Brown remembers himself once more.

Brown:

"I am sorry".

She turns.

"Gareth – I heard he was your cousin – His death – I am sorry" –

She dithers where she turned: about to cry? Only dips her head in acknowledgement.

Fehmin:

"That's very kind of you to say".

Brown:

"We should go out for a drink sometime, Fehmin. Someplace far from campus, where we can socialize discreetly."

Fehmin:

"I don't drink, Alastair."

Brown:

"Which are you: a recovering alcoholic, or a Muslim?"

Fehmin:

"Thank you and good night".

Fehmin fumbles with the books a moment and then heads toward the exit, the door swinging like a metronome behind.

Brown:

“I bet she drinks. The liar. Everybody drinks.”

The remaining patrons break off into bunches of conversation, their voices muted, trance-like, self-directed, each character detaching from the crowd.

ACT TWO - Scene 3

The office of Cambridge Coach Wollstonecraft: a table in the centre with several mismatched chairs, a sofa dumped in the corner, though quite well kept. Football posters line the well-lit walls and a tidy shelf in one corner is filled with football books. A few souvenir Cambridge kits line one part of the wall behind a glass case. Below this glassed display is a writing table covered with pamphlets, a few field drawings, drunk-from paper cups and such natural assortments.

JEHOVAH is seated on the sofa, absorbed in some sporting trivia off an influential magazine. LEON storms in, and goes off to stand in front of the Coach's shelf, fiddling with his book collection.

Jehovah:

“Gareth was an exceptional person, truly”.

Leon:

“I think no one knows it better than I do”.

Jehovah:

“Yeah.

I am not sure if anyone has told you – but Wollstonecraft signed me as the new – um, forward”.

Leon puts a random book back into the shelf.

Leon:

“You mean you have taken Gareth's vacant position now. Your moment of glory, I presume. Moving from the reserves to the starting XI right in the middle of the tournament– tell me how it feels. I would never know, since I have never been a reserve”.

Jehovah:

“You associate very poor morals with people, I think”.

The CAMBRIDGE COACH enters huffily, looking as usual. Whether he heard this exchange between the two is unclear.

Cambridge Coach:

“Ah, Leon– and Cabel, of course. Yes, Cabel, everything is settled and I will see you first thing in the morning. Off you go”.

Jehovah smiles at him and leaves, closing the door behind him. Leon stands narrow-eyed and fixating on the spot where Jehovah stood.

Cambridge Coach:

“Sit”!

Leon looks at him, sinks into a chair lying close to the writing desk. Wollstonecraft picks up a book from his table on pretext of looking for something: doesn't find it, but does realize what book he has in his hands.

Cambridge Coach:

“You know what book this is? It is the official football ‘Laws of the Game’. You or anyone else on my team has never read it, and yet you know everything it says. Cambridge was the first to form the official association football rules in 1848, and had we not digressed to rugby, Sheffield United would not have gone down in history as the first ever football club”.

Leon's brow furrows.

“I see I got your attention. You did not know this. And yet someone like your girlfriend” –

Leon:

“Fehmin” –

Cambridge Coach:

“Fehmin would know this piece of history. And yet you are the one who can play and not her, proving that one does not need to adhere to the past to live in the present”.

An easy silence stretches between them as Leon stares at a framed photograph on Wollstonecraft's desk: a woman, middle aged, smiling eyes. The Coach then following his gaze fixates on the photograph for some seconds – he picks it up.

Cambridge Coach:

“My wife, Julia – God rest her soul. She died of terminal cancer five years ago. That was when I thought everything I was would cease to exist. She was my childhood sweetheart to begin with and then later on, the love of my life. All my pupils called her ‘mother’ and she cooked for the entire team on some odd Sunday or the other. You didn't know her, of course”.

Leon:

“I am sorry”.

Cambridge Coach:

“That’s what everyone told me when she died. It hurt even more badly when they did that, even made me mad at times. How could they know? But eventually I learnt that everyone meant well”.

Leon:

“How did you then get out of it”?

Cambridge Coach:

“I didn’t. You can’t. Even to this day there are times when I want nothing but our morning walks together. But I learnt that there is no way you can stop until, of course, you stop”.

Leon lets the Coach’s words wash over him, like an embalming wave. Relativity is a trajectory sometimes a tangent.

Wollstonecraft puts her picture back on his desk.

“I would understand if you will not want to play the tournament out. But if you do, then make sure it is what you really want to do, not some misplaced aspirations or expectations”.

Leon nods and stands.

Leon:

“Can I leave now, Coach”?

Cambridge Coach:

“I think, yes”.

Leon:

“I will play the tournament out”.

Cambridge Coach:

“I insist you take more time than that”.

Leon nods once more, and makes to leave but turns on an afterthought.

Leon:

“I almost forgot. Is there a chance I might get the contents of Gareth’s locker once it is emptied”?

Wollstonecraft’s face falls morosely – abruptly.

Cambridge Coach:

“But Gareth emptied his locker the night we played Sheffield. Came down and handed me the keys. I am sorry but I thought you knew that already”.

Leon’s expression is unreadable as he walks out. The Coach thought he heard him say, “But I didn’t”.

Curtains fall.

End of Act Two.

PART I – DIGRESSION (Act Three)

Characters in Act Three

Nurses, Orderlies
Resident, Med Students
Fehmin Ashton
Leon Blackwell (various ages)
Gareth Rothschild (various ages)
Leon's Mother
Gareth's Father
Middle-school Coach
Brown (age 14)

ACT THREE – Hector, Odysseus, Achilles

(Motif: dark blue; the tenant)

Below the catwalk a second giant cinema screen has joined the first. Both screens zap on, ready to play two movies simultaneously, with each screen being slightly tilted toward the left or right.

On the first screen: After midnight, in a cemetery. Leon Blackwell weaves through the headstones until he opens a small chapel's doors. On the altar a cross is fixed – it's too dark, really, to see anything else.

On the second cinema screen: Leon and Gareth are dumped on a sidewalk, injured and bloodied. Leon looks the worse, with a rent cheek and dribbling temple. Gareth, on the other hand is much more decent, almost his usual self. Leon finds this funny and laughs while Gareth fishes in his pockets for a mobile phone and extricates out a pulped piece of gadget. This makes Leon laugh even harder – he also fishes in his pocket and once fished out, he starts punching a number on the phone. The screen blares, "Battery empty" and dies. Leon and Gareth both collapse into laughing heaps on the sidewalk, as Gareth tries getting up with the help of the nearest lamp post and Leon lies flat on the pavement, even more comfortably than in his bed, and mock sleeps. Gareth kicks him, not too hard, and he smiles, eyes closed. A streetcar zooms in quickening Leon to life as he jumps around and flays his arms for a hike. The car flurries by, almost as if it deliberately ignored and Leon looks at Gareth in mock disbelief as Gareth shrugs his shoulders and laughs. Leon who is equally amused goes and punches Gareth deeper into the lamp post as he wheezes out his redundant smirks rather more audibly–

On the first cinema screen: A measure for passing time these posters of athletes are, for their edges are eroded and flaked, wrinkled as if the skin has gotten old. Below them are two half-packed – or perhaps half unpacked? – trunks to Cambridge, a quantity of royal blue of Chelsea pouring out from one like a fountain, maybe a stream.

On the second cinema screen: An intense match, a derby almost: Cambridge blue and a rival team in complementary orange. It's a furiously contested match. After three successful tackles, and a few exchange of words, Leon rounds at the defender – who feigned a fall after Leon's tackling – to repeat a Zidane of the World Cup 2006. The crowd roars. Gareth rushes over to the commotion and so does the match referee to pull Leon away who is threatening his own time on the field. A free kick is awarded to the other side which further infuriates Leon but before he can say a thing Gareth pulls him off, quickly pointing to a few areas as the players take positions and the ball is once more in play. Seizing possession, Leon back-heels the ball to Gareth, who sends it into the goal.

ACT THREE - Scene 1

A hospital waiting lounge. LEON sits in a corner chair, haggard, red-eyed and dressed in black: he's evidently not eaten or slept for days. A pentagram pendent glimmers as it swings on the chain between his fingers.

Footsteps echo in the corridor.

Leon alerts; he's already looking at the door when the NURSE enters.

Nurse:

"Mr. Blackwell, he will see you now".

Leon is at the door by this time.

The nurse steps aside to let him pass.

Leon enters the spotless corridor of the most private of the hospital's wings; glass windows blaze the serene dark blue of the twilight outside. Slowly, already defeated, Leon selects a door to push open just as a MED STUDENT is leaving.

From the hospital bed, GARETH's eyes alight on Leon, framed there. Clustered near Gareth is a PHYSICIAN and a tiny GROUP OF MED STUDENTS looking tired and stifling yawns. ANOTHER NURSE fusses over the drip stands and IV lines. Flower

arrangements, from Karen Dashwood and others, and a football signed by the Cambridge team, overflow from the windowsill onto a nightstand. The shades are drawn but the utility fluorescents are bright.

The Med Students follow the Physician into the hall to discreetly inform Leon that the topic is sensitive: the end is near, death is inevitable.

The Med Students and the Physician disperse down various corridors.

Gareth manages a grin as Leon re-enters the room.

Gareth:

“Come. Sit with me for a while”.

Leon hastily wipes his eyes and takes the empty chair, dragging it to the bed while Gareth eyes the pentagram around Leon’s wrist – he closes his eyes in the manner of a silent prayer.

“I am dying. The doctors tell me that soon I’m to go into a state of cataclysmic respiratory collapse that will be the end of me. But I am not afraid”.

An adequate pause...

“I couldn’t play the tournament out, though. I wanted to see Cambridge win under my captaincy” –

Leon:

“Why are you saying this? Why would you care about it at this hour? Why would I care about it at this hour”?

Gareth:

“No, Leon, listen. We all care about it – you must listen – even though it is just a game, isn’t it? A game within a game and every player a different game”...

Leon puts a hand over Gareth’s folded ones, waiting patiently for Gareth to finish his thought. Above, each cinema screen shows one of Gareth’s closed eyes; two tears seep beneath his eyelids: one tear to each eye. A distant drum beat, before Gareth opens his eyes and smiles at a recollection; a shadow of a smile: a ghost. This seems to frighten Leon, who adeptly conceals his emotion.

Leon:

“Why are we discussing this, old friend”?

Gareth:

“Oh, so many reasons. In my last moments I deserve to dictate the course of the conversation, surely?”

The Nurse finishes giving Gareth his morphine and exits.

“I am leaving you words to remember me by”.

This breaks Leon, finally; fervent tears stream down before he chokes on a taste of eternity.

Leon:

"I don't need words to remember you by, Gareth".

Gareth answers vaguely, in a faraway voice, drugged into sleep – "Yes, I know, Leon... Don't I know"... Leon turns off the light to let Gareth sleep. A slowly beeping monitor lulls Leon into sleep as well.

Some time later, Gareth wakes Leon by gasping for breath, choking – the most ominous of beeping, ticking his seconds; the final countdown begins –

It is a pandemonium. The nurse – the orderlies – a resident. "Mr Rothschild"? An oxygen mask is clamped over him as he struggles to breathe – "Breathe, Mr. Rothschild, into the mask – Mr Blackwell, please leave"!

Gareth pushes away the mask; gasping, just one word – "Leon".

Leon rushes over and Gareth frantically clutches his shirt, hoisting himself up, it is a confusion – Leon supports him, an arm around him, an embrace of sorts. With his face by Leon's ear, he whispers:

Gareth:

"Will you forgive me?"

Leon holds him even tighter, the pressure is the answer but he insists.

"Will you forgive me?"

Leon:

"There is nothing to forgive, my friend".

Gareth:

"Everything I have said in all our years, you must remember me by the moments each".

He lets go and collapses against pillows. The mask is again clamped - the respiratory depression spirals down –

"Mr Blackwell" –

TWO ORDERLIES arrive with a stretcher: Gareth is shifted and whisked away with efficiency. A MED STUDENT enters the room, looking for something: his file. Leon and the student's eyes meet.

Leon:

"Will he live the night"?

Med Student:

"You can always pray. I hear it helps some people cope".

She dashes away, clutching the medical file. Leon watches her through a fresh blur of tears – he clutches the pentagram - “God in heaven above”...

ACT THREE - Scene 2

A group study room with one occupied lamp-lit carrel, where a laptop glows in front of LEON, aside a few books in a scatter. FEHMIN enters, her ambiguous hair the darkest brown in this indirect light: she takes her place beside him, dumping her own load of papers and books on top of his, before arranging all in a manageable order on the table: hers, his, the laptop, papers, writing things; and she always opens the talk while she is doing it.

Fehmin:

“Some lawyer named Amedus Rouald phoned. Your mobile phone was powered off, apparently – but that isn’t important. Amedus is the Rothschild family attorney. He needs us to be at the Rothschild mansion for the reading of Gare - HIS - will”.

Leon finally looks up from his reverie, attention caught.

Leon:

“Gareth left a will” –

Fehmin:

“Yes, apparently” –

Leon:

“He emptied his locker two days before his death and he left a will. He was the safest driver I ever knew and he dies in a freak car accident. What am I to make of this”?

She has been knotting her hands in her lap: unease or unwillingness to discuss the topic –

Fehmin:

“Leon... Leon, there is something I have to talk about” –

Leon:

“I know. Did he know that he was dying? That is your question. He can’t have. Nobody is that good at pretending ignorance. He was always terribly afraid of death”.

Fehmin:

“Yes. Are you”?

Leon:

“No, I don’t think so”.

Fehmin:

“Leon, there are things that”...

Leon:

“If he were here right now, he would want to go to La Galleria and he would personally take me aside and beg me not to bring you along before I would tell him you had already excused yourself and were busy. And then, at La Galleria, he would have ordered his boring age-old menu, commented at length at our practice session. Told me Moody is invaluable so I must keep it under control. After each practice, without fail, can you believe that? It’s just I miss him so much...”

He pauses; she puts an arm around him. She never uses words in vain, it is very apparent. So there can be no rash promises.

“There is no meaning with him gone. And when I think about it, it is not days or months. It is for life. A whole life without him. It is not possible. It is unreal”.

Fehmin:

“It is because of” –

Fehmin gasps as pain flits across her face. Leon alerts immediately, puts an arm around her shoulder.

Leon:

“Fem? Fem, what is the matter”?

She collects herself and takes a deep breath.

Fehmin:

“It was nothing. It is just some trivial pain that comes and goes. It will pass.

Yes – I think it did.

I am fine now”.

Leon:

“Are you sure”?

She smiles broadly – too broadly.

Fehmin:

“Very sure.

I am in a mood for some coffee. Are you?”

He places a hand around her waist out of habit as they stroll upstage and the study room lights dim into darkness.

The scene morphs into blinding whiteness. And then:

A sunlit cathedral, stained glass throwing discrete coloured rays. LEON'S MOTHER stands praying at the altar cross in her Sunday suit - as appropriate, as a Catholic would claim. Her eyes are closed, her hands clasped in prayer. Close to her is LEON AS A SMALL BOY of age six or so. With folds of her dress in his small hands, he looks up, transfixed for a moment on his mother, engrossed in her prayer. His short attention span gives way then to the cathedral itself, all the stained glass; next he stares at the altar itself. Then: a glimmer, under the altar, a pinprick sparkle. As soon as Leon's Mother finishes her prayer, her eyes opened, he lets go of the dress and dives for the glimmer –

Leon's Mother:

"Leon"!

Leon as a Small Boy hurls himself deeper beneath the altar to reach for the sparkling thing.

Leon's Mother:

"Leon, what are you doing"?

Leon extricates the silvery thing and in the process also mops out accumulated dust, which he wipes freely on a crisp white shirt. He holds the trophy to the light. It turns out to be a silver chain, very fine, and dangling off it, a queer pendent shaped in the form of a star enclosed inside a circle.

Leon-at-six:

"Got you"!

He turns to look at the Leon's Mother in jubilation and – as children do – the possibility of praise. She, however, is frowning at him.

Leon's Mother:

"Leon, put it back. Someone must have dropped it".

Leon, who had been staring transfixed at the pendant – possibly hypnotized – throughout the reprimand, pockets it.

Leon's Mother:

"Leon"!

Leon-at-six:

"I found it deep down under the table where it was thrown by someone who did not want it.

I'm not stealing it" –

There is a faint rustle in the nearby bushes (of rose?) causing both Leon and his Mother to stop arguing. There is a momentary glimpse of GARETH, also age six, amidst the leaves. Leon, for one moment, looks at the trembling bush and then takes the pendant out of his pocket, moving it from side to side as the sun plays on its edges, a tiny reflected circle dancing on his forehead before comprehension dawns on him.

Leon-at-six:

“HEY – WAIT” –

He trundles down the steps, his feet pattering. The small figure in the bush makes an escape, leaving the bush trembling in his wake. Leon’s Mother shouts in an attempt to stop her son. But Leon has already raced ahead and disappeared around the corner into the alleyway. She makes to follow him.

The young boy, Leon, is hot in pursuit of Gareth, who is running at break-neck speed himself. Running away – frightened? If yes, then: of what? Leon calls to him.

Leon-at-six:

“Hey, Rothschild – wait! I think you dropped something”.

The young boy keeps running and as the alleyway turns to a fork in the street, he turns right into a cobbled path and disappears around the bend. By the time Leon catches up and reaches the alleyway corner, there is no sign of Gareth. Leon frantically scans the narrowed, potholed street as his mother catches up with him, puffing and clutching a stitch in her chest.

Leon’s Mother:

“Leon – who were you running after”?

Leon-at-six:

“A boy from my class. He is weird. Does not talk to anyone in class. But he is damn rich! His name is Gareth. I think this is his” –

He, once more, and quickly becoming a habit with him, holds the pendant to light.

Leon’s mother turns to face the right of the street where an iron gate stands ajar on its rusty hinges: it is a cemetery, wild, overgrown. Just beyond the gate and a few opening graves Gareth has his back to the gate, standing sentinel at a tombstone and its grave. His mother’s eyes mist a little as she lightly taps Leon on the shoulder. Leon turns and spots Gareth; he leaves his mother’s side to chase him through the gate.

Leon-at-six:

“I called your name”.

Gareth-at-six:

“Go away”.

Leon-at-six:

“That is not very nice”.

He shifts to a lofty tone, detached to sound cool.

“I came to give you – this. I think this is yours”.

He straightens up, holding the pendant aloft only to notice an exact pendant hanging from Gareth’s neck, since the first two buttons are not in place.

Gareth-at-six:

“That is not mine”.

Leon-at-six:

“Yeah – okay. I thought it was yours”.

He carefully pockets it.

“What are you doing here anyway”?

Gareth-at-six:

“That is none of your business”.

Leon opens his mouth to shout an angry retort, but his mother has arrived to put a cautionary hand on his shoulder which is enough to silence him as he stamps his foot and drills the toe of one shoe in the mud and clayey sand of the cemetery.

Leon’s mother, meanwhile, tears in her eyes, bends down in front of Gareth, taking his small, serious face into her hands.

Some of his reflexes loosen.

Leon’s Mother:

“You miss her, don’t you”?

Leon cocks his head to one side to read the tombstone his mother is pointing to.

Etched cleanly and rather freshly in the marble of the tombstone are the words:

“Fallon Bayern Rothschild; nee Rothermere; d. 1995, August 24; b. 1967, September 18

Death is never eternal parting.

Before long Gareth joins Leon to cry in the Leon’s Mother’s arms: she ruffles his hair consolingly as she hugs him and whispers consolations in his ear.

Leon’s Mother:

“You can come to our place to play. I am sure Leon would love that more than anyone. He doesn’t have anyone to play with save Tess. Your mummy would be only happy if you are happy, my dear.

And I make excellent shepherd’s pies”.

She dries Gareth’s eyes and kisses him on the cheek.

“There. Now whenever you miss your own mother, come straight to our house.

Promise me”?

Gareth nods mutely as Leon’s Mother affectionately ruffles his hair and smiles at him: an encouraging, beaming smile. He holds on it tentatively, like a toddler grasping a mere finger, a meagre thread, and smiles.

She turns to Leon. Leon jerks to attention, caught slightly off guard.

Leon-at-six:

“Oh. We live in Camberwell. Have you seen it”?

Just as Gareth is about to reply with equal cordiality, there is a voice that rings out from behind the just-consoled boy: "Gareth"! All three jump at this, goose bumps raised. The man who called out and who is slowly but efficiently picking his way amongst the graves and potholes and weeds is GARETH'S FATHER, dressed in formal black. Gareth races to meet him.

Gareth-at-six:

"Father" –

His Father places a firm hand on his shoulder as he levels with him and then steers him towards the Blackwells.

Gareth's Father:

"Will you not introduce me to your charming friends, Gareth"?

Gareth-at-six

"That is Leon, from my class and Mrs. Blackwell, his mother".

Leon's Mother:

"I am sorry, Mr Rothschild – about your wife – Gareth's mother –

I – I have taken the liberty of inviting Gareth to our house every Sunday. I think that should cheer him up".

Gareth's Father:

"Cheer him up?"

Gareth recoils at his father's tone.

"Now I am sorry, because he cannot come visit you".

Leon's Mother:

"But surely, Mr Rothschild, the boy needs company" –

Gareth's Father:

"Are you, perhaps, endeavouring to tutor me on how to raise my own child, madam?

He does need company, I'll concede but not one of mangy and ordinary school boys.

I thank you for your concern, but it is not needed, I assure you".

He turns, the gesture quite clear, to leave.

"Come, Gareth. We are leaving".

Leon looks up into Mrs Blackwell's eyes and wants to say something, but he abruptly turns to follow his father, just one backward glance.

The Blackwells keep standing as the Rothschilds walk away, growing smaller and smaller before they exit through the rear gate. Leon again gathers the folds of his mother's dress. She looks down at him and smiles as she folds her arms across her chest.

Leon's Mother:

"What do you think of that"!

Leon-at-six:

“Nasty old man”.

Leon’s mother smiles rather approvingly.

Leon’s mother:

“So, what’s the plan”?

Leon-at-six:

“Rescue Gareth”.

She chuckles at this bravado even more approvingly as she leads him out of the gate from wherein they entered. Leon is sporting the silver pentagram that began all this: his trophy for the day

The scene morphs again, briefly into darkness, then:

Rothschild Manor: an imposing, cavernous room. On its walls is a gallery of family relics: important portraits in painting – heirlooms. There are precious tapestries and some contrived accolades of rare honour, some even rarer merit, artefacts – arcane – odd reliquary. Narrow windows in stone admit streaks of light, quite consciously chic and of such a repository of relics as thus, quite proper to seem. They carry name plaques, these heirlooms gilded and gold.

A studious old man, balding with wisps of white hair vaporising from the temples and rather intelligent eyes alongside a pencilled near-profile of a young man with straight nose and set jaw with a replica of the same intelligent eye – one – bears a mutual plaque: “Mayer Amschel Rothschild; 24 February 1774- 19 September 1812, The Founding father of international finance.

Below him is a neat little convoy of jitney frames and paintings: Amschel “Anselm” Rothschild (12 June 1773- 6 December 1855), Solomon Mayer von Rothschild (9 September 1774- 28 July 1885), Nathan Mayer Rothschild (16 September 1777- 18 July 1836), Calmann “Carl” Mayer von Rothschild (24 April 1788- 10 March 1885) and Jacob “James” Mayer de Rothschild (15 May 1792- 15 November 1868).

Twelve-year-olds Gareth and Leon stand in this mapped heritage. Leon’s tiny self, though much older in fact, craning around to see, well fixed before some kind of tapestry: clearly, a guest invited to partake of all this. Gareth, gazing around at all the well familiar things, can still keep him busy wondering.

Leon scrutinizes a detailed tapestry riddled with gold arrows and red, bloodied lettering, crisscrossing all over, names and arrows, joined to others, some in isolation, some, obscurity, a heading entitled: “The House of Rothschild” and a family crest borne aloft by a jeering lion and a unicorn, under a handful of half-eagle arrows in a subtle diagonal with the infallible motto etched: “Concordia-Integritas- Industria” and below it a melee of gold – a timeline; a family tree.

Leon-at-twelve:

“Impressive.

I don't think the Blackwells run that far. And even if we do, I am glad no one bothered to keep a record – for history is one overwhelming, overpriced thing and why anyone would bother remembering it is beyond human comprehension”.

Gareth chuckles.

Gareth-at-twelve:

“Their House, their rules. I believe they update with every birth etcetera”.

Leon rolls his eyes and mocks him in mime, all the while casually strolling past the portraits looking down at him with an expression of thorough disapproval. He stops by one. It is a photograph, scaled and magnified to the standard size of portrait paintings: a man and a woman standing side by side, the man in his formal best suit and the woman with a chic hat laden with sprig-bloom: some feather and heather, and stiff, expensive dress of soft crème: a hint of smile on both their faces, the woman and man. The plaque: “Wedding of Ezra Crassus with Fallon Bayern: December 24, 1984”.

Leon-at-twelve:

“Isn't that – your father? Blimey, there was a time when he used to be handsome”.

Gareth smiles

Gareth-at-twelve:

“What do you have against my father”?

Leon moves and one of the sun streaks catch the pentagram around his neck, the five points of the star touching the circle marked with a set diamond: this same pendant is around Fallon Bayern's wedding neck.

Leon-at-twelve:

“I never liked him from the first day – I am sorry if that hurts but truth has to be told”.

He gives Gareth a coquettish shrug.

He never used to let you come over at my place, still doesn't – or allow us to practice football late in the night”.

Garth-at-twelve:

“Such grievances” ...

He laughs a little at Leon's face.

“He doesn't have anything against football. Surprisingly is an avid fan, generally”.

Leon breezily scans the portraits and stops at them at random to freely comment. There is one of a peculiar young man sitting in a high backed chair and background curtain and laughs: “Don't you look a little bit like him, Gareth? Of course you do. Family resemblance”...

Gareth looks cautious.

Gareth-at-twelve:

“Let’s go up my study, I want to show you something”.

Leon-at-twelve:

“Boring books and some financial or economics research papers? I’m not interested. But that Nash’s equilibrium was interesting, I will have to admit. Though I only vaguely understood”...

Leon’s attention is arrested by a portrait of a woman, gilded in her majesty: white skin, like snow and pale gold dressing: wraps and shawls. The plaque: “Sybil Rachel Betty Cecile Sassoon, Marchioness of Cholmondeley, CBE (30 January 1894 – 26 December 1989)”.

Gareth follows his gaze, his eyes narrow.

There is a shuffle behind them and a dry cough: a man materializes. He has a limp and a slouch and a lean frame, lithe. His name is MR. POCKET, and he is Gareth’s butler.

Gareth-at-twelve:

“What is it, Mr. Pocket”?

Mr. Pocket:

“I was wondering if lunch is to be laid in your quarters or the dining hall”.

Gareth-at-twelve:

“My quarters, like we do always”.

Mr. Pocket:

“Of course. I think you should hasten there to prepare yourselves for I gather they would have laid the table already, Master Gareth. And, of course, you will take your charming friend”.

Gareth-at-twelve: *hesitates, a stammer, only slight*

“Y-Yes. We were just leaving. Leon, come”.

Leon inches towards the portrait, drawn quite disconcertingly: questionably.

Gareth-at-twelve:

“Leon – what” –

Leon-at-twelve:

“Very beautiful woman, that’s all. Very beautiful”...

He tears his gaze from the portrait and smiles perversely. At his smile Gareth’s face relaxes though his eyes still remain narrowed; perturbed.

“I think beauty was denied to everyone in your family save your mother and that woman. The price of money, if you ask me.

What was it that you were about to show me? I swear if it is some boring book by some dead, old idiot” –

Gareth-at-twelve:

“It isn’t. It is Beckham’s” –

Leon-at-twelve:

“WHA – BECKHAM – LET’S GO”!

The boys race each other down the corridor and out of sight, watched till the end by this strange man-servant – housekeeper? – Mr. Pocket. He turns and drags the heavy doors, to bolt them.

The scene morphs a third time, into:

An intense football match, typical of middle school tournament training: not a great many attempts on target but all of them cheered, all of them, in that age brilliant. The boys are aged eleven to fourteen, and their game plan is typical: one goal keeper, two strikers, and two defenders – even one – (or that is what seems) and all the rest is a variation of the midfield: every variation, everyone wants to score.

A trinity of familiar faces, only younger: Leon Blackwell, Gareth Rothschild, and Alastair Brown. The two main strikers: Blackwell and Rothschild, who can pass effectively, and have a few stunning techniques: push passing and neat chipping of the ball, some excellent display of wall passing; Leon’s magnificent side volley lands straight in the net and some moments later – perhaps in retaliation, perhaps in competition or perhaps awe – an incidental chipper, one of many others and Gareth’s bicycling it into an overhead kick –

THE MIDDLE-SCHOOL COACH whistles.

Polite clapping, some hooting from the sparse crowd of enthusiastic mothers, mostly.

Middle-school Coach:

“Excellent work, team, and if we can repeat this tomorrow we are flattening Westfield. But that is just a side-line treat: after this time tomorrow, we are preparing to lift the trophy”.

Everyone cheers. The Coach winks at Gareth as the ring breaks up, and puts one arm around his shoulder and the other around Leon’s and steers them toward the dressing room.

“That was magnificent. Can we repeat that tomorrow?”

Leon-at-thirteen:

“When have we failed to, Coach”?

The Coach is much humoured by the cheekiness. Gareth however adheres firmly to modesty and merely smiles.

Middle-school Coach:

“I will not be surprised if you are approached by some fine clubs very soon. Have you both given that a thought”?

Gareth-at-thirteen:

“Leon talks about it in his sleep too” –

Leon-at-thirteen:

“What” –

Gareth-at-thirteen:

“I don’t think a professional career in the game has ever attracted me” –

Leon laughs heartily at this.

Middle-school Coach:

“You two are a brilliant attacking duo, if you would care to develop. Which duo is your favourite of all time”?

Leon-at-thirteen:

“The Ro-Ro duo of Brazil: Ronaldo and Romario”.

Middle-school Coach:

“Excellent, excellent. Short lived, but excellent. The years after the world cup of 1994, and in that world cup how Romario partnered with Bebeto. That is another fierce duo; one of my favourites”.

He reminisces, as he steers them along.

“So which one of you is which”?

Gareth-at-thirteen:

“Leon likes to think he is Ronaldo, of course. But I think we work more like Kocsis and Puskas, or would like to in any case”.

Middle-school Coach:

“Ah. Them... Kocsis and Puskas and the Golden Team... So, I gather there must be a competition for Puskas”?

Leon-at-thirteen:

“Gareth sometimes very childishly never admits to the obvious”.

Gareth-at-thirteen:

“Most of Leon’s goals are headers, and it was Kocsis who was known for his aerial prowess and nicknamed “The Golden Head””.

Leon-at-thirteen:

“With Gareth around I think it is impossible – even criminal – for someone else to be crowned the ‘Golden Head’”.

The Coach laughs along with the duo, whichever they may be: Romario and Kocsis or the other. Some combination of the two or so –

The changing room door: the parting of ways, requires an excuse, nonetheless: as they reach for the door it is thrown open from the inside and a MIDDLE-SCHOOL BOY walks out, already showered and changed. The Coach calls him to stop, going

over to talk to him, with a slight pat; Leon and Gareth are dismissed. They enter the changing room.

Several cubicles are already busy, the generous rushing of shower water creating background music as they both extricate their changing things from their lockers; Gareth's deodorant can clatters to the floor.

Leon-at-thirteen:

"Puskas was the "Galloping Major", for God's sake. And we both know whose footwork resembles his when it comes to it".

Gareth-at-thirteen:

"Oh please, Leon. Like I said before: "The Golden Head" –

Leon-at-thirteen:

"I might have more headers, or whatever, but please don't try to cloud the fact that it is your favourite style of goal scoring. I just have 'accidental headers' more or less. I best enjoy a goal with footwork".

Gareth-at-thirteen:

"Puskas was the CAPTAIN of the Golden Team, for crying out loud, Leon. Captain, if you can hear well".

Leon-at-thirteen:

"You support Chelsea and I support United, sort of number two and number one, respectively" –

Gareth opens his mouth to retort but Leon forestalls him.

"No, wait, hear me out – And by the way what I said is true, just in case if you were defending it – When they left Hungary, Puskas joined Real Madrid" –

Gareth-at-thirteen:

"You are about to make a very silly point, really" –

Leon-at-thirteen: *even more loudly*

"– and Kocsis joined Barcelona, sort of number one and two, wouldn't you say"?

Gareth puts his deodorant can with some finality on the bench.

Gareth-at-thirteen:

"When they joined Real and Barcelona, Barcelona was number one and Real were number two, as far as La Liga titles go" –

Leon-at-thirteen: *somewhat outraged*

"You are just making that up".

Gareth-at-thirteen:

"Well, you have the right to go and check, of course. And I did warn you about the silly point in advance".

Leon struggles to come up with a counter argument to this.

Leon-at-thirteen:

“Fine, then. Whichever one of us dies first, okay”?

Gareth laughs briefly.

Gareth-at-thirteen:

“Be a good loser”.

Leon-at-thirteen:

“Oh I am. I am leaving it in God’s hands to choose: ‘divine oracles to proclaim’ or whatever the phrase is”.

Gareth laughs again, patting Leon mockingly on the back.

Gareth-at-thirteen:

“Yes. Seems fair to me, I would say. But please be a good loser on your death bed, because I don’t think it would be a pleasant sight to see your old, wrinkled self-coughing up his last breaths”.

Leon-at-thirteen:

“Blackwells generally live longer than Rothschilds, I have noticed. Another ‘price of money’ I would say. And thanks to your elaborate gallery, I can even imagine an exact white haired and toothless portrait of you in that hall. And since everyone in your family has an additional something to go with their faces, it would be my immense pleasure to get it personally carved in gold: ‘Sandor Kocsis’. I wouldn’t even mind dying the next second”.

Leon puts a hand on Gareth’s shoulder while he hasn’t retracted his, one hand on each shoulder, the mockery stays.

“So would you prefer a photograph or a painting in oil”?

Gareth-at-thirteen:

“Don’t” –

The warning is too late and they are both locked in a playful fist-fight and plummeting, on the ground, laughing as they carry on. Leon picks up Gareth’s deodorant can and drills it into his arm with as much force as when he would have been fighting for real. Gareth struggles towards the bench where their discarded things are, like a drowning man struggling for the shore– he grabs it: one of the metal-soled boots - his or Leon’s? it doesn’t matter – the fighting on a more equal plane continues.

After a few ticking seconds, Gareth extricates himself, red faced and laughing and now they face each other, the shoe lying at some distance to Gareth’s disadvantage. He makes a move to grab it – Leon hurls the all-purpose can at Gareth with full force which hits him squarely on the chest – Gareth catches it and hurls it back: it misses, sailing over Leon’s ducked head and hitting the lockers opposite – clang. Leon quickly dashes to retrieve it while Gareth strips and makes for an open shower cubicle. Leon turns and rages ahead, realizing – just as Gareth is forcing it shut – thud of body and wood – the sure-safe sound of a bolt sliding home. Leon kicks the door and it duly

shudders. To drive the victory nail even more surely home: the gurgle and merry splash of a shower turned on at full burst.

Leon-at-thirteen:

“Err... you left your clothes outside, though” –

The water-laughter stops immediately: a mute button pushed.

Gareth-at-thirteen:

“Leon, I am warning you – If you stoop to your usual bastardy and hide them” –

One of the shower doors opens and Leon turns, distracted by BROWN, age fourteen, just finished.

Brown-at-fourteen:

“Drop dead, Gareth, you poof.”

Leon-at-thirteen:

“Good luck in the game tomorrow, Brown”.

Brown-at-fourteen:

“See you around, Leon”.

Brown waves and exits through the entrance doors as Leon facetiously mouths “good luck” to the swinging door. A shower cubicle unlocks, stealthily: ‘the’ shower – and Gareth steps outside, hair dripping as he inches toward his pile of clothes: Leon is just too quick for him – in a flash he is waving them leeringly in the air above his head.

Gareth-at-thirteen:

“I could have taken them when you were busy talking to Brown, of course”.

Leon-at-thirteen:

“Not my fault, if you didn’t. So, some unfinished business from where we left off and as it is said, ‘if you want it, come, and get it”.

Gareth-at-thirteen:

“If we must” ...

He dives forward and catches a trailing sleeve from the heap. Leon clutches the bundle to his heart as the tug-of-war begins: the shirt comes lose as Gareth pulls and the force sends him reeling into the line of lockers, with Leon losing his footing on the wet surface and falling flat on the floor. The punch line of the most amusing joke as they both laugh –

The changing room door opens and the Coach steps inside, for several split seconds the scene frozen: both Leon and Gareth sober up and straighten.

Middle-school Coach:

“Not over with your shower yet”?

Leon-at-thirteen:

“Err... no” -

Middle-school Coach:

“Leon, your mother is waiting on the field. I told her I would go and check on what’s holding you”.

The Coach exits and Leon moves to follow him, still clutching Gareth’s clothes to his chest, and realizing this, he turns around and flashes Gareth an evil grin. Gareth flashes one back, for he is standing at the shower door, with Leon’s bundle of clothes held in an embrace. Leon winks at Gareth and throws the scrunched bundle of his clothes on the bench before dashing inside the shower cubicle. The song of the shower resumes. Alone now, Gareth folds Leon’s clothes and leaves them outside the shower cubicle. Eventually Leon shuts off the water and gets dressed.

By the time he reaches the field outside, it is nearly twilight. In the bleachers Leon finds his mother seated, with her warmest smile waiting. She stands and approaches her son.

Leon-at-thirteen:

“Did you see my last goal? And Gareth’s overhead kick, boy. That was something”.

Leon’s mother:

“Yes. You both were outstanding. Though I have noticed it works better when you create the room for Gareth and he almost always manages to convert your passes to goals. Possession isn’t Gareth’s strongest point and patience isn’t yours; a good portrayal of your personalities, I think”.

Leon laughs good-naturedly.

Leon-at-thirteen:

“That is very true, I think”.

Leon’s mother:

“What on earth have the two of you been doing all this time in the shower, I am wondering”.

Leon-at-thirteen:

“Oh. Arguing and killing”.

Leon’s mother gives a non-committal giggle as she heaves a bag from beneath her chair and puts it on her lap.

Leon’s mother:

“I brought you your things. How can you just show up for a stay over at someone’s house without a shred of preparation is beyond me”?

Leon smiles as he takes the bag and Mrs. Blackwell gets up and they both descend the stands into the parking lot. They hug for a long moment before she gets into her

vehicle. She turns on the engine and reverses the car out of the lot before driving off on the road, giving her son one final wave. Leon waves back, standing in the darkening parking lot as she drives away.

The moment: when it is subtly dark but the night-lights are not turned on, yet. The last rays of the sun catch the glimmering pentagram on his neck that snaked out during the wave back.

The scene morphs a fourth time:

Rothschild Manor: "Gareth's quarters" - in a room he calls his "study". Leon and Gareth, now age fourteen, lounge on high-backed tufted chairs. A great quantity of Chelsea F.C. posters, gathered over the years, every Chelsea hero on the field. The boys are in the middle of some serious conversation. Leon is sprawled beneath two photographs: Leon and Gareth, in the first photograph, sport aloft some trophy, the rest of their teammates surrounding them, yet only peripherally. The second photograph is newer: Gareth and Karen, his head resting against hers and more inclined than hers towards him so that his is almost a profile, a secretly or subtly blushing. Gareth sits on perhaps an heirloom, and inherited - the style or the furniture - both, it seems.

Gareth-at-fourteen:

"Father says I cannot continue Math for a professional degree once I start college, after high school".

Leon-at-fourteen:

"There must be an enlightening reason, I am sure".

Gareth-at-fourteen:

"Since I would have to take up the family business, it is prudent to pursue a more worthwhile combination: something that includes Accounts and Economics. So, pure Math is out of the question".

Leon-at-fourteen:

"So what is your family's business? Dishtowels, hotels or toilet seats"?

Gareth-at-fourteen: (chuckling)

"Our business is to make money".

Leon-at-fourteen:

"Err... that is the ultimate outcome, of course, but one needs to do something to make that outcome possible. Like my father is an assistant professor at King's and so on. So what does he do, your - I won't add a complimenting adjective - father?"

Gareth-at-fourteen:

"He makes money. That is his profession".

Leon-at-fourteen:

"Does he make money on fields or on trees? Oh, mines - probably"?

Gareth-at-fourteen:

“Take your pick.

The money is double than the last night in the morning and four times by the evening; that is how it grows.

We probably have more money than many small countries”.

Leon-at-fourteen:

“I get it now. So this is what you brag, in front of Karen.

I mean, she is such a brilliant girl, pretty and funny and well read – and I always think if any of my girlfriends were like that we would never split up” –

Gareth-at-fourteen:

“You humour me, Leon Blackwell. Tell me, truly, how many of that string of one-month- girlfriends did you actually know the favourite colour of? Or the birth dates of and countless such tiny details that responsible boyfriends are supposed to know”?

Leon-at-fourteen:

“Don’t divert the topic, Gareth Rothschild. I have just uncovered what makes a damn amazing girl so steadily cling to a guy as boring as you”.

Gareth-at-fourteen:

“Err... maybe because I am an ideal boyfriend, I think: rich, handsome, down to earth and sincere”?

He emphasizes the last word very emphatically for Leon’s understanding.

Leon-at-fourteen:

“You listen to opera, for heaven’s sake, and take her to dull, sordid and filthily rich restaurants and theatres for dates. It is the twenty-first century, for crying out loud. Dance clubs and cinemas have replaced the things our grandparents used to do... The only reason I can think as to why a damn beautiful girl like her would be wasting herself on you is because you probably bragged on the first date that you can buy Dubai if you wanted to”.

Gareth-at-fourteen:

“If just one of your one-month-girlfriends find you handsome, down-to-earth and sincere, then she has my sympathies”.

Leon mock-laughs and throws a cushion at Gareth, which he catches and flings back at Leon, like a redundant joke-line, repeated.

“Come. I want to show you something”.

Gareth gets up and switches on all the possible lights of the study: it is much larger than it appeared initially; every corner is now illuminated. Gareth particularly scans the corner recesses for Mr Pocket before bolting the doors of his study.

He then kneels to remove an expensive piece of carpet strategically placed. No markings to aid the memory - it is never advisable to mark these things.

He begins to count, something.

Finally he pushes on a plank of wood several floorboards wide, working somehow on the internal screws and wheels. It caves in to reveal a chamber below, dimly lit or so it appears from above –

Gareth-at-fourteen:

“As above, so below”!

Gareth jumps in, and a second later: the expectant thud on the floor below; body and stone. Leon keeps standing at the edge, looking down, a childish insecurity he would never admit to, creeping in.

Leon-at-fourteen:

“How do we get back up here”?

Gareth-at-fourteen:

“There is a way. Trust me. There is”.

Leon jumps in, and perhaps the pressure on the floorboard releases or some internal machinations controlled from down below, the floorboards swing back into place, sealing that connection with the world above quite definitely.

Down below: the slight echo of a room disused: and as Leon catches his bearings enough to register it; it is an exact replica of Gareth’s study save for a narrow bed with cushions and coverings where the lounging couch is located above – oh, the exactness of it. He goes around, now properly exploring with Gareth looking intently at him; waiting for his verdict.

Gareth-at-fourteen:

“It is a refuge. I can for hours ‘mysteriously disappear’ down here and no one knows. It is a place where I will find myself if I return to it with no sense of self at all”.

Leon’s attention is caught by a life-size poster of Ferenc Puskas and Sandor Kocsis together, pre-match and cropped off from the rest of the team. It bears Leon’s inscription: “To Gareth, From Leon”.

Leon-at-fourteen:

“I can’t believe you still have this”.

Gareth-at-fourteen:

“Well, I do”.

Leon’s attention once again engaged by something else: a photograph on Gareth’s study table: his father, with his arm around a woman, only slightly shorter than him and laughing enthusiastically. They both are frozen forever in the act of clinking together glasses of rare, exotic wine. The woman’s head is inclined, her face as exotic as the wine: bubbling, effervescent; her pendant is the letter ‘M’.

Leon-at-fourteen:

“Who is this”?

Gareth-at-fourteen:

“My father with his sister – my aunt – Emma Rothschild”.

Leon-at-fourteen:

“I see. I haven’t seen her around the estate. Is she dead”?

Gareth-at-fourteen:

“Yes. She was a beautiful person; a true friend – before all that blood traitor raucous”.

He sits down on a chair to compose himself all the while Leon peers closely at the photograph.

Leon-at-fourteen:

“How old is she in this photograph”?

Gareth-at-fourteen:

“Twenty-four, perhaps... twenty-five, I don’t know” –

Leon-at-fourteen:

“So you haven’t told me why you are showing me this secret space”.

Gareth-at-fourteen:

“It makes two places that only we know about. There should be seven in total”.

Leon-at-fourteen:

“And here come your superstitions and numerology and lucky numbers”.

Gareth laughs.

Gareth-at-fourteen:

“Hear hear”.

He crosses the study length to an apparently solid piece of wall, unadorned, and pushes it. It gives way, like a light door very craftily blended, that opens onto the grassy slopes of an extensive garden.

“You see? I can pretend I was in the garden all along. And I think it is an excellent day for practice, don’t you”?

A football sails past him into the garden, picked up and kicked by Leon Blackwell, displaying - wordlessly and elaborately - that he agrees.

The scene morphs a fifth time:

Rothschild Manor, Gareth’s study. Leon and Gareth are now on the edge of adulthood: age twenty. They stand opposite, a table between them: a proper argument is brewing. Gareth scowls. Leon paces tersely.

Leon-at-twenty:

“I don’t understand... how can I make her believe? ‘Believing’ has suddenly become so important... She just keeps refusing me”.

Gareth-at-twenty:

“And why has this become so important for you, I have some trouble coming to understand. She has been refusing you for half a year now – roughly more. Why don’t you try another girl?”

Leon-at-twenty:

“I can’t”.

Suddenly very vulnerable

“Because I love her”.

Gareth-at-twenty:

“Really? What do you know about her, let’s begin with that: her name is Fehmin Ashton and she is a double major, History of Politics and Contemporary Literature, whose hometown is York. She isn’t pretty enough, according to your usual standards. I can pick out for you ten other girls you can pursue”–

Leon-at-twenty:

“Ten other girls of that description? Political Thought and Intellectual History And English Literature double major. I would congratulate you if you even manage one”.

Another deep breath

“I am serious, Gareth”.

Gareth-at-twenty:

“So am I”.

They glare at one another.

Leon-at-twenty:

“There is something about her – Or perhaps there is everything about her. I will have her or none”.

He is visibly angry now: Gareth.

Gareth-at-twenty:

“Leon, this is very ridiculous. Some may-fair type of theatrical ridiculous. She does not want you, has in fact made this point quite clear but your obsession on trying to win her is” –

Leon-at-twenty:

“I might be wrong, Gareth Rothschild, but I think it was you who endlessly tutored me on fidelity. Or was it someone else? I forget”...

Gareth-at-twenty:

“I did, but” –

Leon-at-twenty:

“I see it now. You have something against her and against me pursuing her” –

Gareth takes his turn at feverishly pacing. Leon's turn to stop, a stability reached.

Gareth-at-twenty:

"No" –

Leon-at-twenty:

"I don't want to add the obvious Gareth but – you are lying. What is it about her?"

Gareth-at-twenty:

"It is nothing".

Leon-at-twenty:

"Look at me and say that and I will believe you".

Gareth looks up at him for a brief moment, it fails: the audacity – whose? – He bursts into a tirade well-kept in control for a good long time, it is very clear.

Gareth-at-twenty:

"Don't you see? Don't you understand? She is Emma Rothschild's daughter. She is a blood traitor. You can't be with her. You simply cannot. Leon? Are you listening to me"?

Leon-at-twenty:

"Yes".

Gareth-at-twenty:

"She is a blood traitor. She is – just forget her".

Leon-at-twenty:

"Gareth, your family judgements mean nothing to me, haven't I always been clear on that? I can't forget her. How can you even ask that of me"?

He draws in a deep breath – Gareth: the final card: would he play it? And if that fails too, what then?

Gareth-at-twenty:

"Leon" –

Leon-at-twenty:

"Why is it so difficult for you to understand, Gareth, that I lack imagination here too"?

Gareth's eyes widen – it is not that he did not expect this card to be played; it is only that he never expected this card to be played.

Leon strides from the room, significantly triumphant. Still in shock, Gareth appears frozen by Leon's words. All stage light then goes blue, before dimming into darkness.

On the first cinema screen: The hospital room is being cleared, every trace of Gareth removed to ready the room for a new patient.

On the second cinema screen: Leon kneels in prayer, the protégé cross dangling. On him, one floodlight is left lit. The stadium is deserted. Where the starting whistle is sounded – at centre point – is a football, next to Leon. His own mystic religion assumes a form in motion as he kicks the ball. The solitary match at midnight begins. All spectacular moves appear bizarre in isolation but not comical as he repeatedly scores on an undefended goal.

On both cinema screens: The dark blue of the hour before the dawn, when both Gareth and Leon, knocked silly on the sidewalk, hail a random streetcar to stop. The lamppost is out of order. Gareth's battery is untarnished, Leon's phone even more so. A quick exchange with the operator of the streetcar operator, who uses his phone to call for help. Rubbing of the wounds make them look presentable... A mutual story concocted to cover up most of the inquiries. But what follows is even more hilarious as an ambulance arrives, rounding them in. A matronly nurse and emergency staff, and a full week in the infirmary... The invented story takes only minutes to spread. Gareth in hospital bed says: "I hope one day we can appreciate this moment"...

Curtains fall.

End of Act Three.

PART I – DIGRESSION (Act Four)

Characters in Act Four

Fehmin Ashton
Leon Blackwell
Gareth Rothschild
Cambridge Football Team (“The Blues”)
A Doctor
Mr. Ashton
A Nurse
Mr. Blackwell
Mrs. Blackwell
Belmont
Hasselbach
Man
Woman
Voice(s)

ACT FOUR – The Other Players

(Motif: December; the two of cups, two of swords, two of pentacles)

On the two suspended cinema screens drifts this poem, like snow, over a wintry landscape:

“When Cold December” - by Dame Edith Louisa Sitwell

When cold December
 Froze to grisamber
 The jangling bells on the sweet rose-trees–
 Then fading slow
 And furred is the snow
 As the almond’s sweet husk–
 And smelling like musk...
 The snow amygdaline
 Under the eglantine
 Where the bristling stars shine
 Like a gilt porcupine–
 The snow confesses
 The little Princesses
 On their small chioppines

Dance under the orpines
 See the casuistries
 Of their slant fluttering eyes—
 Gilt as the zodiac
 (Dancing Herodiac)—
 Only the snow slides
 Like gilded myrrh—
 From the rose bushes— hides
 Rose roots that stir

“When Cold December” - by Dame Edith Louisa Sitwell

ACT FOUR - Scene 1

Curtains rise.

Grad café on Mill Lane. PATRONS come and go. FEHMIN sits with empty plates and unopened books while she plays on her tablet.

They troop inside, commanding attention: LEON, GARETH and the FOOTBALL BLUES.

Fehmin rises, and makes a hasty exit. Leon and Gareth occupy the table she has just vacated, joined by the others. In loud voices they order their lunch, almost everyone nearby looking up to see: they believe all publicity is good publicity. But then, one must make allowances for a gruelling practice before a match.

Leon sitting almost at the place she had occupied, though not quite, becomes aware of a fallen book— a book dropped in haste, now lying on the floor, facedown, and open to some page. He picks it up and a highlighted text catches his attention:

“The only design of the utopian in war is to obtain that by force, which if it had been granted them in time would have prevented the war”. The text plays across the cinema screens, followed by “Utopia, by Thomas More”.

Leon he turns to the first page inside the cover where it is scribbled: “F. Ashton- CL-008-00072”. (This also plays across the cinema screens.) He shrugs and pockets the book and joins in the conversation with the team.

The scene morphs to:

A hospital corridor, spotless and gleaming, a door to a private room has been thrown ajar for a patient about to be discharged: a DOCTOR troops out, in close conversation with Fehmin. Her father, MR. ASHTON, is wheeled out after them by a NURSE. Although the doctor and Fehmin have stopped to talk, the nurse wheels the man down the corridor.

Their conversation now finished, and so perhaps his evening round, the doctor pats Fehmin reassuringly on the shoulder and marches down the opposite end of the corridor. Fehmin follows her father's progress through the corridor until a frenzied door is thrown open right in front of her. She looks up just as he rushes out of the room and runs to the counter, harried and in dire urgency. She watches him, as he rushes past her; he disappears in the next blink.

She blinks now.

Fehmin pushes the door from where he emerged and enters. The room is dimly lit by a small bulb. She spots a patient's file and picks it up; turning to the first page where the identification essentials are filled: "Patient's Name: Adam Blackwell; age: sixty seven years; Family member in-charge: Leon Blackwell; Relationship to the patient: Son". These words drift across the cinema screens.

MR BLACKWELL, lying on the bed, is very much awake as Fehmin approaches. He calls: "Leon?"

Fehmin leans into Adam to whisper and pantomime; she holds the man's hand and closes her eyes. Since she closed her eyes she would never know that the moment she clasped her hands around his, he died.

The ring of the failing vitals on the monitor alerts her and in the next few seconds. And she is left still holding his hand, though his grip slackened. She slides her hand out of his grip and places his hands on his chest, in semblance of dead king effigies. Then she quietly exits.

The scene morphs again:

A private graveside ceremony: Leon with an arm around his weeping mother, MRS BLACKWELL, who stands irresolutely, holding a long stemmed white primrose. Gareth approaches and whispers something in Leon's ear: they make their way towards the cemetery gate.

Mrs Blackwell begins to shaking with grief– the primrose drops and so does her meagre confidence. Her resolve broken, she picks her way between the graves to exit.

Leon turns back, retraces his steps. He spies the primrose and picks it up with something of a reverence. He hesitates to put the flower on his father's grave.

Curtains fall.

ACT FOUR - Scene 2

Curtains open.

A private bed and breakfast accommodation at Cambridge; a private room: a man standing by and looking out of the window, dressed in a shirt that proclaims "University College London" on the front and "Belmont- 10" on the back.

A knock at his door forces him to tear his eyes off the view outside the window; dark and indecipherable in the early hours of the morning. He takes a swig from his coffee mug before striding to the door. A slight hardening of the jaw shows his feelings towards this guest.

It is another man of that same average age: young man; Apparently, the declaration of their academic affiliations is an unsaid rule that must be upheld.

HASSELBACH enters wearing a shirt that reads: "Oxford". His face is drawn, troubled, tired. But he does keep a margin for genuine humour.

Hasselbach:

"So they live up to their expectations by giving you better lodgings than us. I have heard talks that they keep Leeds like one would keep royalty".

Belmont clicks the lock in place. He has zero margins kept for genuine humour.

Belmont:

"Why are you here, Hasselbach"?

Hasselbach:

"We need to talk".

Belmont's eyes narrow.

Belmont:

"Okay. What about"?

Hasselbach looks at Belmont in disbelief.

Hasselbach:

"Gareth Rothschild is dead".

Belmont's turn now to mirror the incredulous, though kept in a more levelled balance than its predecessor.

Belmont:

"Since I am sitting in his University playing a tournament against his team and he was the captain of that team, I think I know that already, Hasselbach".

The pronunciation of his surname is deliberate and typical of his fashion.

Hasselbach takes it in his stride. Still a portrait of disbelief as Belmont pours water in an electric kettle to make him coffee.

“I must congratulate you, though. After Cambridge defeated Sheffield five goals to none I thought that couldn’t be bettered in this tournament, at least. But no– the quiet but steady Oxford took the field by storm: eight goals to one against Lancaster”.

He liberally laughs, measuring coffee and then sugar with the same spoon.

Hasselbach does not share his joke and only allows a very cautious smile to briefly spill through as Belmont raises the cup as if in a toast.

“To the winning captain”!

Hasselbach is unamused, and raises, of course, no cup.

Hasselbach:

“To you, Belmont. And best of luck for your match tomorrow against Bristol. I am surprised you are not practicing ‘into the late hours of the morning”.

Belmont fills and hands him a steaming cup.

Belmont:

“I am not worried about Bristol. They are not a very strong team”.

Hasselbach is stopped short of his first sip as he catches Belmont’s eye over the rim. He looks away.

Hasselbach:

“So– from Group A we have Cambridge and Sheffield qualifying for the quarter finals”–

Belmont:

–“No. Cambridge and Warwick. Warwick defeated Sheffield, remember”?

Hasselbach:

“Yes. That’s right. Manchester and Southampton from Group B. Us, Oxford and Imperial from Group C and Group D– tomorrow’s match will decide”.

Belmont:

“You think so? It would be us and King’s, of course. We are comfortably at the top of the group table. Bristol has already lost to King’s and King’s has lost to us. Well, I am in no way conceding that there is any reason why we should not win tomorrow”.

Hasselbach warms up to this over-confidence.

Hasselbach:

“I wonder what your pre-match talks are like, with this attitude”.

Belmont:

“Enemy captain this is information not to be divulged”.

He takes a sip.

“So why are you here”?

Hasselbach:

“I felt like talking to you. Enemy captains though we might be but friends also we certainly are”.

It is more than a statement; almost near a code word? Belmont studies Hasselbach over the rim of his cup. They both take it in turns to copy each other’s moves.

Belmont:

“And now you will get up to leave”.

Hasselbach looks up to Belmont’s scrutinizing stare.

Hasselbach:

“You know me too well, Isaac. I was thinking about leaving this very moment. I will probably be there to watch. I don’t know”.

Hasselbach makes a move to leave with Belmont still studying him.

Belmont:

“Geoff”?

Hasselbach turns.

“When was the last time you saw Gareth”?

Hasselbach:

“When Cambridge played Sheffield. We were both in the crowd, I think. He looked... Two days later he died”.

Belmont:

“Yes”.

Hasselbach, taking this to be a dismissal turns to leave and then stops on an afterthought.

Hasselbach:

“You did not go to his funeral, right”?

Belmont:

“No”.

Hasselbach:

“Oxford had a match against Lancaster that day. My excuse... But, why didn’t you go”?

There is a moment of pause.

“Now you will tell me that I have overstayed my welcome behind the enemy lines”.

Belmont:

“You know me too well, Hasselbach. I was thinking these words over at this very moment. Again, congratulations on that brilliant victory against Lancaster. They will be talking about that one for a long time”.

Hasselbach exits.

Curtains fall.

ACT FOUR – Scene 3

Curtains open.

Dark, dark; everything dark must be most literally: the dark. Only whispers and voices now; disembodied? A liturgy in hallows. One voice is a rasp, and harsh like the scrape of claws on granite with a pronounced scintilla of metal– a MAN’s? The other is the whooshing wind of the wilderness, hardly there: a WOMAN’s? Logic should so dictate. And all logic is order. And no order prevails when chaos reigns. There is no knowing and no confirming the fact. If it cannot be known and neither can be confirmed– the fact– then it is a dream, in fact. For fact is the mirrored truth of dream.

There might be more figures in this place, part of the dark, making up the dark: hallowed liturgy. There is no knowing and no confirming the fact– Someone speaks; the one with the rasp, and harsh like the scrape of claws on granite... very long talons of a witch– a man’s...

Man:

“Let the dealer be the best of them”.

The other voice follows: the hard whoosh of wind between the snow-capped peaks of the wilderness; hardly there, must be a woman’s...

Woman:

“Or the reaper, would you agree”?

The rasp-voice has an added glint of amusement at this, like the blade slightly unleashed.

Man:

“You forever remain faithful to your name. I should for the life of me dare refute a yonder notion”.

Woman:

“Perhaps that is why there is the ancient ritual of denoting names. For... without the ability to single out we are lost”.

A small pause, a transition; a transaction...

“Ah... the grim reaper”.

Man: *(a trace of a small laugh)*

“What is that rhyme, almost the adage: The queen of hearts made some tarts all on a fine summer’s day¹”...

Woman:

“And the knave of hearts stole those tarts and took them far away”...

Another pause by this voice, timed to the nearest second.

“Alas, why, thou saucy knave”?

Man: *(still amused)*

“Without the ability to single out we are lost, you said” –

There is silence now between the two: and there it is heard then as it prevails: a dull incessant whispering in the background. Some voices asking questions and some replying profound... it is so obscure and monotonous that it is the sound of silence itself in this place.

Woman:

“Gareth left some bequeath”.

Man:

“I have read it. The family assets are contained”.

Woman:

“A trivial rout when they were never his to give”.

Man:

“Were they not”?

Woman:

¹ “The Queen of Hearts” by anonymous author, popular English nursery rhyme based on characters of the playing cards. The full rendition is as follows: The Queen of Hearts

She made some tarts,

All on a summer's day;

The Knave of Hearts

He stole those tarts,

And took them clean away.

The King of Hearts

Called for the tarts,

And beat the knave full sore;

The Knave of Hearts

Brought back the tarts,

And vowed he'd steal no more.

“So... it cannot be prevented”?

Man:

“There is a niche in the law that sticks out on the parapet. He used it to haul himself over the battlements, as you can imagine”.

Woman:

“And now someone would throw the doors open to the wolves at night and the months of siege would be lost”.

Man:

“Even if the gates are thrown open at night, there are no hungry Greeks waiting outside to raze Troy to the ground, or Byzantines, if the tale were Antioch bound”.

Woman:

“I once heard a story...

There was once a tree outside the garden wall of a rich man’s house. It was fruitless and barren compared with the lush green ones that peeked from over the high walls. The man’s house had never been robbed, for all around; the walls were skewered in poison oak.

One day there was a terrible storm that uprooted the dried old tree. No one was sorry but the next day the man’s house was robbed”.

Although each syllable has been effectively pronounced and paused, this is the greatest pause of them all.

“You see... the tree stood on a passageway that led inside the house”.

The sound of silence itself now diffuses in the place.

Man:

“I doubt the man could have prevented the tree’s fall”.

Some lingering moments...

“Ah, I am finished”.

Woman:

“Why are we playing against one another”?

Another similar long stretch of silence: the sound of silence slightly frantic and harried. The man’s rasp fills the void, switching languages in a strange manner: switching tongues for pleasure, very much at home with it: a flowing accent. The whooshing wind of the woman has no ado following suite at all. The eerie atmosphere of the place is not the dark.

Man:

“Que dire de son kamerad, Léon Blackwell²”?

Woman:

² Compound French (Que dire de son) and German (kamerad). Loosely translates to, “What about his friend”?

“Léon Blackwell? Ó adta à son ami un enterrement chrétien... ennyi év után³”?

Man:

“Gareth kannte ihn jobban, mint bármelyik férfi ... és Gareth értékes neki túl minden más⁴”...

Woman:

“C'est vrai. Aber es ist seine Frau wäre ich mehr Sorgen um⁵“.

Man:

“Femme? Leon Blackwell”?

Woman:

“Blackwell femme.

Emma Rothschild réincarné de sévir dans la famille⁶”.

Man:

“Wenn sie wirklich ist Emma, wie du sagst ... dann wird sie nicht die Nacht dauern⁷”.

Woman:

“I understand”.

Man:

“It is a pity he had to fall. I saw resourcefulness and character in him the first time his father brought him to my house. And Ezra... said the birth was most favourable according to the stars”.

Woman:

“The stars never lie”.

Man:

“And neither would Ezra”.

Woman:

“Couldn't he”?

³ Compound Hungarian (Ó adta à son ami), French (adta à son ami un enterrement chrétien), and Hungarian (ennyi év után). Loose translations: Hungarian- Hungarian: He gave what... after so many years/ French: (He) admitted to his friend a Christian burial.

In composite form: “He gave his friend a Christian burial... after all these years?”

⁴ Compound German (Gareth kannte ihn) and Hungarian (jobban, mint bármelyik férfi ... és Gareth értékes neki túl minden más). Loose translation: Gareth knew him better than any other man... And Gareth (judgement) is worth(y) it all too

⁵ Compound French (C'est vrai.) and German (Aber es ist seine Frau wäre ich mehr Sorgen um). Loose translation: “That is true. But it is his woman that I am more worried about”. Although the German word ‘frau’ literally translates to ‘wife’, it is used to denote ‘woman’ or ‘female partner’.

⁶ French. Contextually translates to, “Blackwell’s woman. Emma Rothschild’s reincarnation to plague the family”

⁷ German. Contextually translates to, “If she really is Emma, as you say. Then she will not (like her) last the night”.

The dark churns, embodied, though must be disembodied. A VOICE calls out, disembodied, and though should be embodied.

Voice:

“Hark. Hasten. Hold your peace”.

Woman:

“Is it time”?

Voice:

“Aye. And harken”...

The voice speaks in strange tongues and the silence responds in even stranger replies: translations of the disembodied words; strange replies. Like the hissing of serpents and reptilian creatures, hisses the voice: the speech of silence. The other, the voice, is hardly there. It is a liturgy– the modern medley.

“Surveriet mas beruqah...

(On the cinema screens: They say the road was laid by one horse and one rider)

Mas beruqah bient cumpilir...

(On cinema screens: They say an army marched one after the other and never returned)

Des vierien bien deber...

(On cinema screens: They say something stirs along the road again, its scent caught on the wind)

Biner bivah aliacaha vierien...

(On cinema screens: They say the road prepares to welcome its new bearer...)”

The voice stops– the accompanying chant the incessant whispering does not: it prevails. The rasp resurrects; finds its own voice.

Man:

“It is time. Now we pray”.

Some shuffle as they stand up, surely. Some more shuffle of the dress: thick cassock: uniform for both the man and the woman of the original argument robes? Some more shuffle now: proper arrangement.

They begin, so many VOICES overlapping, so many crescendos-decrescendos. A liturgy; now most literally so. So many crescendos...

Chaíre Nýmfe, chaíre vákche⁸

⁸ Compound of the "Orphic Hymn to Dionysos" from 2 century C.E. drawn from ancient texts such as the Orphic and Homeric hymns, along with the poems of Sappho. This particular arrangement is taken from Daemonia Nympe's sung version: "The Orphic Hymn to Dionysos (Χαίρε Νύμφη)", with English translation merged from separate translations by Andonis Theodoros (credited in <https://anton-dion.blogspot.com/2014/06/the-orphic-hymn-to-dionysos-by-daemonia.html>) and Adam P. Forrest (credited <http://www.hermeticfellowship.org/Dionysion/InvocHymns.html>).

The Romanized text for Greek lyrics has been obtained using Google translated

few steps backward... the ball reels back to Leon and back further to Rookewood... The whole Cambridge team takes some steps backward, now in a file marching backwards, back into the tunnel as the crowd's banners wave.

Full furore in the crowd as the crowd's banners unfurl: amidst ecstatic cheering and hooting they flash like tiny squirts of blue, self-proclaiming, 'Cambridge Blues'; 'the other place in hospitality' and 'Not just defending champions this year the Cambridge blues'. The camera rolls in to round up the stadium stands in flashes as a running commentary fills the background in a supporting narrative:

"Good evening, all you ladies and gentlemen at Cambridge too lazy to hoist yourselves out of your couches for another match that promises to be a sensation delivered by the home team"...

A girl with red and pink striped hair cheers in her seat sporting a huge poster of Gareth in his Cambridge jersey with the caption: "the trophy is our homecoming queen".

"And my condolences for all those who (lazy but not too lazy) weren't able to grab the last of the tickets being sold in our very own black market"...

Several guys with glasses of beer boisterously sing the "three lions," repeating the refrain over and over again in festive celebration: "it's coming home, it's coming home; it's coming... home"...

The crowd around them slowly take it up: "it's coming home, it's coming home; it's coming – FOOTBALL'S COMING HOME" –

"Well, it most certainly is coming home at Cambridge or so the performance so far suggests. Which brings us to our very own invincible home team at last (a fact, which as per neutrality I had been advised to delay until absolutely necessary) – Oh, and here they arrive"...

The camera now taking the teams lined up inside the tunnel: the Cambridge in their very familiar Cambridge blue "home colours" talking and joking and subtly jogging for a warm-up on their standing spots, blowing into their fists and rubbing them together, slapping each other's backs and laughing at the newest of Leon Blackwell's creative imagination 'in-jokes'.

"I am sure no one needs the line up to be pronounced since we know them by heart – and here I am not even referring to just the Cambridge crowd, but I would be enumerating them anyway, George Bloomsdale; the goalkeeper. Harry Carter, Alistair Handel, William Blue and Neville Titan as our inebriated defence – for further reference attend one of the drinking club meetings. And now follows our libertine (and understandably aggressive) midfield – for further proof, again, the same place: Romerick Warrington, Alastair Brown, Leon Blackwell, Sean Moody, and Cato Rookewood. And to cap it all, our striker, our sober and most dignified and ever loved captain: GARETH ROTHSCHILD" –

The team files out as the tunnel gates open to spill them out like vomitus: the Roman vomitorium... A deafening din of the crowd welcomes them in as Leon, standing between Gareth and Brown abandons his childish mischievousness to wave at the crowd: they love him and they cheer back with even more unparalleled furore. Gareth who was staring at his feet throughout the march looks up at this fresh wave of cheering. Leon mutters something behind him, laughing. Gareth gives a distracted smile and looks around at the milling, pounding crowd, his seriousness back in place as the Sheffield team files in. He is as humble as he is serious and just as loved for they all cheer him the most: 'our captain one and only' –

"The atmosphere is breathtakingly infectious. This, of course is the last match of Group A which kicked off with a spectacular and unstoppable Cambridge victory over Warwick. Later Warwick went off to defeat Sheffield, so the only way Sheffield can hope to qualify is by beating Cambridge in this match by a three goal margin– It is a modest hope, really. And we are about to hear the whistle any second... Yep– it is time"!

From the second it kicks off, it is only about Cambridge: Leon to Brown to Moody to Warrington to Leon to Gareth and a sailing shot on the goal– saved –

'OOOOH,' the crowd goes.

Titan intercepts the ball from a Sheffield centre midfielder where it was thrown by their goalkeeper and feeds it back to his own: Leon to Brown to Rookewood who makes a spectacular run with it towards the penalty area: the Cambridge attack forms itself in hot pursuit: a kick as the ball lands at Gareth's feet: he turns brilliantly a full three sixty degree and fends it past two Sheffield defenders and kicks it into the goal keeper's outstretched embrace–

'OOOOH'...

"Some would say our captain has just missed a clear opportunity but"...

The attack builds up once more as the clock ticks into its fourth minute, the possession probably ninety percent to ten. Rookewood once again makes a run towards the penalty area, leaving two marking defenders behind. He gives a long and brilliantly abrupt long cross to Warrington who kicks it with equal agility at Gareth but Leon intercepts it in the middle and delivers a powerful volley home inside the net–

The deafening scream of the crowd blares –

"What a shot! This is brilliant stuff from Blackwell as he decides to take the game by the scruff of its neck. Stunning. Sheffield really has no answer to this midfield"...

As Leon surfaces from the embraces of his teammates he turns to the crowd and waves: the cameraman is very acute to pick out the exact person in the multitude: Fehmin Ashton waving merrily back at him with both her hands, a beautiful smile

and at her feet her dropped book: Charles Dickens; The Old Curiosity Shop. The camera swings back to him as he kisses the palm of his hand in her direction –

“And apart from his brilliant football he is known for his equally brilliant theatrics too”.

A soft click of the camera into the 26th minute of the match right at another goal attempt by Leon which hits the cross bar and is slapped out by the goal keeper –

‘OOHH’...

“Sheffield should thank goalkeeper Alexis Drachma who has saved their goal net from being breached six times already in the opening half hour of the game”.

Moody intercepts the ball from one of the Sheffield midfielders and charges towards the goal, dodging several Sheffield players in the mix; he passes the ball to Gareth who passes it back to him as he positions himself with a clear shot space. He juggles with the ball as he deceives another defender and shoots a sweet back-heel shot in the goal net–

The crowd goes wild and frantic with screaming.

Gareth takes the time to scan the crowd; distracted. The camera randomly takes in a sea of jubilant Cambridge supporters truly enjoying their time here and then stops at Hasselbach sitting in his Oxford hoodie. A row above him and several seats away is Isaac Belmont who wears an official UCL football jersey–

“If I were them I would definitely be worried with this performance by Cambridge. So the play resumes and we start off with Blue who passes it to Carter who sends a long cross to Warrington. Warrington pushes it back to Titan; the priceless Cambridge deep lying playmaker who” –

– pushes the ball even deeper to Handel. Handel sends it in a high kick back to him, as they toy with the Sheffield attack and Titan beautifully feeds the ball to Gareth in an extremely long cross traversing three quarters of the pitch roughly; Gareth connects with it a split second too late and a sure header turns into only another attempt on target.

‘BOOOOH’...

Gareth shakes his head regretfully and studies the crowd –

“Well if it isn’t someone’s day today, despite it being collectively Cambridge’s, it is the skipper, surely. Three clearly missed chances and some collection of loose passing here and there already in his keep”...

The camera takes in the Coach watching Gareth closely: shrewdly with Jehovah standing in his reserve trappings beside him.

“Would he make the needed substitution for Cambridge, we all are thinking as Cabel Jehovah has stood up from the benches. But with a lead of two goals to none, I wouldn’t be too worried about substituting before the first half. Perhaps that is what he is thinking too. And there we have it: the whistle for half time”.

The second half: a camera-click: a selective blur; the crowd regales in the cheering: a poster of the Cambridge team with the caption: “Most likely person to lift the trophy this tournament: Gareth Rothschild”... Gareth, surprisingly still not substituted continues in the same demeanour that has formed his style of the day. A flirting courtship between himself and the crowd now turning into a serious love affair; the game a distraction it seems, he scans it furtively. The camera now delves more curiously at his quarry. A zoom in at Hasselbach whose eyes are riveted at Gareth; the camera catches him just as he turns to look at Belmont seated a row above who unlike Hasselbach is far from sympathetic, wallowing, his eyes narrowed shrewdly at Gareth, calculating. A pass by Rookewood rolls past Gareth and the ball skids out of play.

Moody and Rookewood exchange a look before falling back into the rhythm of the play.

The camera forgets itself (and the match) and pursues the crowd now, chasing after the skipper, copying his move... A sea of jumping ecstatic faces in a horrible mute... Hurried scanning, harried scanning, a blur that blends several people into dark homogenous shapes, the whole crowd, jumping, ecstatic faces of the crowd cheering in mute... the camera is bent on fishing the quarry now... Blur and blur— The camera stops: a man sitting with his head bowed and a white jacket, hood drawn. He looks up, picking his moment: it’s him! It can’t be! The man who said he wasn’t the jury. He could be used to scare children in stage adaptations and shady places on Halloween. He excels his act: smiles—

The sound comes back in a rush of full volume screaming as Gareth, rooted to a spot a moment ago now falls flat on the field just as the ball sent sailing by Warrington lands home inside the goal. It is mayhem.

The crowd cheers, and the crowd intakes a mutual breath rather sharply—

Rothschild is still flat on the field.

The Cambridge players form a protective ring around him as the referee comes running in, followed by the paramedics. A minute of hubbub and then Gareth is borne away on a stretcher board, his eyes closed as everyone on the crowd tries to spot his breathing. He is breathing. And they watch until his stretcher board disappears through the vomitorium.

The resuming whistle blows. Several Cambridge players are too distracted to begin and Sheffield comes very near the goal several times as the defence struggles with its momentum. They gain it finally and soon prove it as the match waddles into the 71st minute, Titan with a well-executed interception of the ball beautifully dribbles it and an accurate shot from the edge of the penalty area neatly sees the ball home: a staggering score-line of four goals to none.

The midfield comes back into play now, alive with dangerous long crosses and effortless switch of wings as the ball passes between Warrington and Rookwood. A purely aggressive and innovative header by Jehovah sends the ball rocketing inside the goal post, leaving the net shuddering.

The crowd gives up then, even though there are still a good three to four minutes of play. A mixture of chants and victory songs with a fizz here and there of uncorked champagne bottles, the euphoria surpassing the maximum mark on some meters just as the referee blows the final whistle...

The footage freezes on the sparkling crowd and once again goes into rewind, the netted ball shooting out of the goal net five times and the numerous other goal attempts all retracing their progress and coming to a halt right at their perpetrator's feet. Gareth gets up from the ground where he had fallen flat and he goes around anti-clockwise now to his original position. The referee takes the whistle out of his mouth and the Cambridge team marches backwards inside the tunnel and the tunnel doors close in: back from where they came from.

A small click as the scene changes and also rewinds in a fast blur: Gareth and Leon disentangling themselves from an embrace on the field. A lot of players retrace their step; the ball is passed around in reverse, changing owners very rapidly before arcing from the goalkeeper's embracing arms and coming to rest at Gareth Rothschild's feet.

Pause; the scene freezes. Then this scrolls across the cinema screens:

August 11 @ 10:00am, Cambridge vs. Warwick, 1st match of "The trophy of the Golden Triangle"...

This footage:

The match is arrested as the commentator reels on...

"Frustration grows in the Cambridge camp as they advance with yet another attack, with twelve attempts on goal and nine on target, the score line still stands nil at both ends. Here comes Blackwell. Moody now who passes it back to Blackwell. Excellent tackle as he passes to Warrington. Warrington to Moody... Rookwood now. Rookwood is running now. Blackwell takes position further inside the penalty area. Blackwell now- Rothschild- he turns and- ROTHSCCHILD SCORES"!

The crowd erupts as the team dissolves their skipper into embraces...

"Cambridge's first goal of the tournament by none other than the man who would have won the poll for the audience choice for the first scorer of the tournament- and how they love it".

The game resumes and a few streaks of counterattacks by Warwick grow more accurate in their quality. The Cambridge defence, being up to the task, handle them

and keep feeding the ball back into their midfield. This tussle of ball-possession and attempts-at-goal carries on to the edge of the first half before Leon, as ever an embodiment of aggression, wrestles the ball past two defenders in the commotion of the penalty area. In this struggle a sweet flicker of ball by Leon swings it inside the net.

Leon turns and spots Gareth and by terms of celebration they embrace, jubilant on the field.

The footage freezes, rewinds. They disentangle from the embrace, and the ball juggles in reverse, zigzagging between booted feet before coming to lie once more at Gareth's feet.

Cinema screens go dark.

End of Act Four.

PART I – DIGRESSION (Act Five) **

Characters in Act Five
Disembodied Voices
Gareth Rothschild
Hooded Figure
Male Nurse
Karen Dashwood
Mr Pocket
Lawyer Amedus Rouald
Leon Blackwell
Fehmin Ashton
Noel
Nimhef
Nerak

ACT FIVE – The Bridge on the River Styx

(Motif: indestructible; cry! havoc!)

Disembodied voice:

“Gareth and Karen: Black Death, in the times of the Great Plague, all things good were rotten, all people cherished were burned to prevent the sickness from spreading. Black Death spread through all the months: the blistering June when the flies were worst; and the cold December when the moon never thrust— her pretty face into the ungodly. Averil... sweet April, when the blossoms bloomed... Eoforhild, saint Everild, there comes your doom”...

Three cinema screens light up above the stage, showing a mishmash of Greek war scenes, each screen different yet the effect is monochromatic.

The cinema screens go dark.

Voice:

“Amidst his fans from football field, a triumphant match succeeding.
 He has her fast by the arm, their car in the background awaiting.
 They both would wave like kings and queens, royalty descending.
 A kiss, a smile and much (warm) applause in their wake be echoing”.

Words scrawl across on the cinema screens, with photos and images: “Gareth and Karen, so young and happy/ At a teenage ball from school, perhaps/ Her cheek the plush of primrose; poppy/ They have dressed to match in schnapps”

Cinema screens read: “Eoforhild”.

Voice:

“Karen and Gareth forever wedded; if wed in ‘earts be true
Casually with Leon and Cambridge and all the Cambridge blues
A laugh instead of a former smile, such emotions accrue
The spark is naught? The spark is gone!—
That which glistens (on the petal) is not dew”...

Cinema screens read: “Saint Everild”.

Voice:

“In the crook of his arm: that is always her place
No woman has surpassed her yet, O the laughter dimmed?
The maturity, like autumn faze plashes upon their face
Wordless and wordlessness upon this silence has brimmed”.

Cinema screens play appropriate imagery of the following simultaneous dialog, perhaps staggered as in a ‘round’:

Nine Voices:

“The whole of Europe once burned in the fires of the plague: all was dead and rotten. The disease clung to the fruit, like a core that is black. Many lovers in love’s sweet throes had their lovers wrecked. Pathogens coursing in their blood, they all were petty pests. By the time it all were ending, the sickness had its nests. Their very bloods so accustomed to the disease had grown; that those that survived just survived ‘cause they were Beasts now cloned”.

“Such a melancholy time, this great Plague’s parading, so many died, so many lost; so many bereaving. Great love stories of this time we must have existing: of power and throne and godliness and sins some redemption receiving. Averil! Dear, Averil... the April bloom is blooming. Keep some; keep some, Averil inside your bodice threading. Sweet, sweet Averil, what scent is it exuding? Careful, dearest Averil, all pests and knights approaching! Captivate naught his heart, Eoforhild, he has a battle looming. O Averil, may Saint Everild protect your April blooming”...

“He is dead, Averil. Death is his way stealing. Stop it, dear Averil or for eternity you would be weeping”...

“Plague, it is O Averil! To the plague he is succumbing”.

“Boar-battle, O Eoforhild! This Beast to whom you are losing”...

“Kill it, O Saint Everild, pray, kill this transforming Beast—
For Averil whose heart must break on this blooming April feast”—

“In the Great Plague so many lives were lost, that it came to be known as a Black Death. Black was not for the numbers; equalling an abyss; it was for the manner in which those numbers had come to die”.

“O legions of the dead, ye all who succumbed
From the ashes of the plague, Burn, now burn

Sweeter incense has April bloom alighted
 Sweeter smells now that the disease is plighted
 Averil, weep not, not just thine lover has blighted
 So many hordes of able men at the Styx have alighted
 Sing a sad requiem, all ye who have lighted
 All the petty candles and rags, to those that have frightened
 This Great Plague, O Averil!
 Sweet April is in bloom.
 Forget the past, O Averil
 Is that so hard to brew?
 Ye have such reasons great to hate (that which is gone)
 Fear the past, O Averil, thine freedom is in Rue”.

“Averil, forever weeping, still calls to Eoferhild
 That day Saint Everild failed
 To wed her in April spring
 Averil, O Averil, the Black Death will have us all
 Pray, sweet Averil, to some pagan God of Pan
 He is not dead yet, O Averil, his ferryman told me so
 Go run with his two gold coins to Styx
 That he be ferried across”.

ACT FIVE - Scene 1

Curtains rise.

Gareth Rothschild’s study in the hermetic polarity: everything is dual; like and unlike are the same; opposites are identical in nature, but different in degrees; extremes meet... All truths are but half-truths; all paradoxes may be reconciled: as above, so below: Juxtaposed; a stone cavern – a seemingly affluent room stripped of furniture save for a table decked in curios; a throne like chair –

The curios: an ivory lion its body flexed to pounce; vials of tinkling glass sitting in ornate holders, wrapped in platinum serpents entwined, nay tightly knitted with writhing snakes of bronze, rubies in gouged eyes - they bear the vials aloft; papers: intricate drawings and maps of places unknown to the world or marked in code: IN-S-LE; two tall buildings sired in glory summits marked, hand drawn; overleaf: a rectangle, chequered; checkers; a deck of cards, a queen of hearts; a black bound book entitled “of lies”, bound.

Thus is the cornucopia laid?

GARETH ROTHSCHILD crosses downstage to face the audience and act as if looking into a mirror. On the three cinema screens can be seen: The assumed reflection of Gareth, a HOODED FIGURE, hidden even from itself. Black and black

robes. Biliou - which is green - billow in black of the morrow. The reflection stands in the reversed cavern of Gareth's study: a seemingly affluent room containing only a table decked in curios; a throne of a chair. The hooded figure takes off its hood, mirroring Gareth... The hood slips —

The balance of all things shudders; Gareth backs away and trips over jumbled boxes inside his study. He has been busy packing. This one... the one he has stumbled on topples and vomits out a rack of thick sinister books with black covers and too-faded titles...

His reflection jumps to an abyss of a hole created by the hidden trapdoor of his study, lying open at present — the communication between the As Above So would be Below... But it isn't. He does not resurface to the other side as the balance shudders again and the mirror is suddenly dark.

The stage goes dark, pitch black and even blacker... before a flashlight is clicked, and a small halo illuminates more sheaves of papers broken from their seals and bindings by a frantic Gareth who is ripping them apart in search of something... One winning page out of so many in this dark place... could be anywhere.

On the cinema screens: Shuffling and reshuffling a deck of cards, in haste and frantic panic - wanting to hit on the right card in that instant.

The hooded figure creeps onstage and circles Gareth in the shadows. A few of the lethal orange tresses spill out of the hood as the figure alights upon the object of quest. They both do. Gareth's eyes round in horror as the bundle slips from his hand and the flashlight does an unfocused arc of the tall chamber.

On the cinema screens: A knave of Hearts above a red-flamed candle. The flame licks the corners of the card and ashes powder down amongst the curios on the table. The screens go dark.

Onstage, the scene morphs to that of Act One, Scene 4: the walled-in courtyard of a dream. Gareth climbs over a crumbling wall and disappears over to the other side; the illusion of the dream... and then stands at the threshold of a bleached and aged door of a crumbling manor, riddle with ivy, poison.

He is dressed as a Black doctor from the ages of the Plague. The door is marked with a red cross (blood?) as warning. His eyes through the holes of his beak-shaped mask are hesitant to enter. He takes off the mask, despite the warning of the cross, and pushes open the door...

Stage goes dark.

Across the cinema screens, a panorama: Gareth is in his study, the Above. He rounds up all the boxes, sealing them with a fevered frenzy, throwing them pell-mell through the trapdoor into the Below. He has stripped the Above of almost everything curiously academic, as he goes over to his study table and punches in a combination to his safe. It has barely opened when Gareth grabs two revolvers, stuffing them in his pockets, swinging the safe door shut with a swing of the foot.

Almost the next second, in a lightening flash, he has dropped Below, the trapdoor resealing itself in his wake. Leaving not a trace of its existence... As the knave of Hearts is fully consumed, his ashes swept inside a mortar leaving not a trace of where they fell amongst the curios.

He comes out into his sloping garden, running...

It is some confusion...

Gareth running down an alleyway with two cars gunning after him. He zigzags into a narrower alley... somehow he is then checking in his rear-view mirror as he is driving: two cars behind him, first discreetly and then indiscreetly; he rams his foot on the accelerator and drives on. Both the cars stop and their drivers jump out, clear assassins as they load their guns and run after him in the zigzagging narrower alley... He pushes on faster as one of the cars has almost drawn level with him and swerves — one of the assassin poises his revolver, ready to shoot as the other tries to stop him: a heated argument and physical drama that ends with a shot. Gareth stumbles, the bullet lodged in his left thigh; he holds out his hands to break his fall... his foot now desperate on the brake pedal trying to control the damage of the swerve but it is too little and too late as the car rams into a tree and bursts into flames... But he recuperates, almost like a par excellence marksman and whips his own revolver in a flash, shooting the assassin who shot him, in the neck. Despite an injured thigh he ducks to avoid the partner's shot. And then, ready and skilled, he fires again.

He knows he has killed them both, as he is lying on that deserted alley, haunted by a ghost, maybe, while profusely losing blood.

The cinema screens shudder as he storms in, throwing some hidden door ajar, shouting in vehemence and fury as the hooded figure looks up.

Then:

The film morphs into live-action onstage:

Gareth grabs the figure by the hood and the orange hair, placing his revolver at the forehead. The figure is equally quick as it slides a dagger out of the sleeve and stabs it on his side, just below his rib.

Gareth breaths heavily, his revolver still poised: he perhaps held the gaze for a second too long, for he withdraws the revolver and tosses it against the opposite wall. Perhaps the pact was mutual, for after a painful twist of the knife, the robed figure withdraws it, glistening in fresh blood.

He turns to leave, but on an afterthought looks back, saying something accusatory or in warning, jabbing his finger: shouting - he does not overstay his welcome.

The robed figure readjusts its hood, the orange hair disappearing in the folds as it grabs the dripping knife and puts it inside a mortar, washing it clean with the

steady stream of a liquid poured off one of the ornate vials. As the blood and the liquid meet, a smoke as of hell arises.

The stage goes dark.

On cinema screens: Gareth clutches his chest with paroxysmal pain on his way down a flight of marble stairs pouring out of a colonnade of Doric columns. He drops to his knees, subjugated by the pain. The paralysis turns him almost to stone, for he cannot move... slowly passing away, he is aware of this little detail: he cannot move —

Next he is lying unconscious beside the charred remains of his burned car, a knot of people slowly gathering around him before the arrival of an ambulance, with paramedics rushing with stretchers and resuscitating essentials. As he is rushed to the hospital... a blur of blaring sirens...

He is lying unconscious in the zigzagging narrow alleyway: bleeding profusely so much that he has passed out, his breathing shallow, his revolver lying beside him. The alley is deserted and no charred remains of the car or marble colonnade are visible for miles at either end...

Cinema screens go dark.

Onstage: a hospital room, where Gareth lies in bed, suffering. After a long moment, a MALE NURSE enters.

Male Nurse:

“Mr. Rothschild, you have a visitor. A- Miss Karen Dashwood”...

His eyes fly open, his condition as near dying as is scientifically possible to discern.

KAREN DASHWOOD enters, her eyes caked thick with tears, already in black, perhaps only by coincidence. The nurse leaves, closing the door behind him.

Karen: *(words cannot describe the sounds she utters)*

“Argh Ohm”.

Gareth:

“I am dying, as you see”.

From then on, it is wordless. They look on, uninterrupted and unflinching gazes reproduced in real-time on the cinema screens speaking of many things: love and its parting sadness, and the ensuing accusation in the limbo of the parting: the betrayal.

Karen seats herself at the edge of his bed. Perhaps it is the usual way with them, sitting at either side of this wall of Silence, speaking all the unspoken things, without words, waiting for some hidden cue to speak—She puts her hand on his. He turns his face to the other side.

He never even betrayed a hint of the agony that seared through with that touch. Perhaps if he had, she would have wept less. Perhaps she would not have withdrawn her hand and clasped them in her lap, desperately looking for some other spectre.

She should not have withdrawn that hand, for it caused greater agony than clasping it; a choice of the lesser of the two pains. He clenches his fist, in his age-old manner of restraint and despair. A rare tear leaks down Gareth's eyes.

Curtains fall.

ACT FIVE - Scene 2

Curtains rise.

Rothschild manor: the disused sitting room with very few lights flicked on, only essential enough to light a small copse of sofa and table seating. The rest is the disused shadows of a room that has last held reception of its last surviving owner's death. The door near to the lighted copse creaks open as MR POCKET the housekeeper enters, leading KAREN. She is white-faced and subdued, dressed in black of the fashionable kind, not of disuse; she speaks, her what would perhaps have been matriarchal command returning with the environs of the room.

Karen:

"I know my way, Mr Pocket. Kindly do not trouble yourself on my account".

Mr Pocket: *(his voice in oily cogs, rusted recently out of disuse)*

"No trouble. It is my job".

Karen seats herself on a sofa, turning a woman's eye to inspect everything, including Mr Pocket.

Karen:

"Are you all up by yourself here... since"?

Mr Pocket:

"As you see".

The question was thrown to test grounds, and the reply has given her the full measure of the surroundings.

Karen:

"The lawyer would be here soon, I presume"?

Mr Pocket:

“He is never late”.

A doorbell chimes so far away, somewhere in the elephantine mansion. Pocket bows himself out; a phantom of the dark, gone!

Karen meanwhile runs a hand over the furniture, unwrapping its white sheet cover rather crudely. She goes over to a hanging by the wall and pulls off the white wrappings to inspect the painting below, perhaps her favourite in the house. It is there no more —

Two pair of footsteps and she turns sharply as Mr Pocket leads portly LAWYER AMEDUS ROUALD toward her.

Karen:

“Mr Amedus Rouald”.

Rouald:

“Ms Dashwood. It is a pleasure”.

Karen:

“You know my name”?

Rouald:

“Naturally. Gareth talked of you in all our business meetings together. I think I know you as well as he did”.

Karen:

“Not in as much detail as you are implying, I’m sure”.

Rouald:

“I think it is safe to say I understand you even more than Gareth did”.

Mr Pocket leads LEON and FEHMIN inside, quite abruptly, sans a warning doorbell. Fehmin’s hair is pinned back with a simple clip: deep black and ebony purple in this light. She acknowledges Karen with a nod as Rouald turns to her and Leon.

Rouald:

“Ah, Leon Blackwell”!

They clasp hands

“And” —

His eyes alight on Fehmin and he is arrested for a moment, perhaps calculating; his hand stays stretched and frozen midway, intended for a handshake.

Fehmin reaches out and clasps the lawyer’s hand.

Fehmin:

“Fehmin Ashton”.

Rouald:

“Like so. When he... told me you were his friend’s... *woman*... I must say, I did not understand. So naturally nothing made sense”.

She freezes in the handshake and withdraws her hand. He, unnaturally courteous points to an empty sofa.

“Please sit”.

He pauses before continuing.

“Family history of ancient age has gone rusty; but this is hardly ancient history”.

He turns to his folder and takes out three copies of the official document of the will, handing one to the each of them; while extracting a copy for himself. He clears his throat.

“The will, as you see, is very straight forward. It is one of the shortest of wills that I ever handled. He leaves”—

Fehmin:

“One of the shortest of wills that you ever handled”?

Rouald:

“Yes”.

Fehmin:

“Then you are not the family’s lawyer”?

A heartbeat of death silence

Rouald:

“And what gives you that impression”?

Fehmin:

“You would have otherwise remarked something like, ‘One of the only Rothschild to leave such a brief will’ and remarked upon the family history. And truly, if you were the Rothschild’s lawyer, you could possibly not have handled such a lot of wills in your career to recall them all and pick out one as the ‘shortest you ever handled’. Or upon my mentioning you would have been quicker with the affirmative rather than just asking me what gave me the impression. But by far what betrayed you the most was the infinitesimal silence”.

The lawyer stares at Fehmin until she breaks her gaze.

“I am sorry — but are you”?

Rouald:

“No, I am not”.

Fehmin:

“Shouldn’t the Rothschild lawyer be handling the will”?

Rouald:

“Yes. And he is... with the major part of the will that concerns the family”.

Fehmin:

“So well this could hardly be the shortest will you ever handled when this is just a minor portion of it”.

He stands before her, a lawyer stumped. He can only stare.

“Unless, Gareth made two separate wills and not one”.

Rouald:

“I cannot answer that”.

Fehmin:

“Meaning, yes”.

Rouald:

“I didn’t frame it that poorly this time, Miss Ashton. But if that is what you want to believe, then by all means do”.

Fehmin:

“By all means”—

Leon puts his hand over Fehmin’s clasped ones on her lap. Very politely. As politely as he must do it... to appease Karen —

Leon:

“Fem, stop. Please”—

There is a moment of restrained silence, as she withdraws her hands. She is very surprised to have been so mistaken in her assumption, but why yes. He couldn’t care less about the will... She sits back now as the lawyer clears his throat, brandishing paper-livery.

Fixing spectacles to his nose, he begins:

Rouald: *(reading the will)*

“I, Gareth Rothschild, son of Ezra Rothschild, hereby bequeath to my friend Leon Blackwell; son of Adam Blackwell; hereafter referred to as Leon in this document, and my cousin Fehmin Ashton; daughter of Emma Ashton nee Rothschild: the Rothschild manor and its heirlooms and estate walks that they should find me here always. Leon’s assets remain his to bequeath in the event that he might find it

necessary to do so or in the event of his dying, however, Fehmin Ashton may only transfer her assets in the name of another member of the family should she find it necessary to do so or in the event of her dying”.

He pauses, relishing the effect, as Leon is caught in disbelief, and Fehmin is staring into some dark space in some nether corner. Karen had taken her head in her hands as this all was being read out: disappointed? One would never know if she was, or if it truly were her place to be. Leon, on her behalf, perhaps, or thinking that he is doing this on her behalf, speaks up.

Leon:

“But there has been some mistake, surely. He couldn’t have left Fehmin everything...”

Rouald scrutinizes him over his spectacles.

Rouald:

“Hold your horses, Mr Blackwell. Hold them yet. Though, if you would allow me to say, he passed on what was his to the next in line by blood. Generous, yes, considering how she would not have gotten anything considering the circumstance of the Diaspora... But why impossible?”

Leon has no reply to this. Rouald carries on with the reading of the will.

“To Karen Dashwood, daughter of Godfrey Dashwood; hereafter referred to as Karen in the Document I wish to leave the stipend allocated to the matriarch femme de Rothschild”—

Karen gets up suddenly but the lawyer finishes the paragraph anyway.

“Karen, use it well for you and I both know what is well enough to be spent on. But use it, you must”.

Karen:

“He leaves me money”.

Rouald:

“Oh yes. And it is a lot of money, if I might add. For it has been adding up since Gareth’s father allocated his wife’s old stipend for you some time after you started... the relationship with his son. Gareth was merely passing it on”.

Karen:

“I don’t want it”.

Rouald:

“Yes. But take it, for you will need it. Even if you burn it away in charity without any return”.

Karen:

“I don’t— want it”...

Rouald:

“I have seen, rare as it may be, many clients throw away their legacies in a heat of emotion they almost always regret”—

She bursts without warning, abrupt, and with tears:

Karen:

“I AM NOT GARETH’S WIDOW. I am not your client either”.

Equally without warning she breaks into a crying spell, tears and sobs and for a split second all of them watch her cry, before Leon goes over and puts an arm around her, standing over her as she sobs into his shirt.

Leon:

“This sitting is finished, Mr Rouald”.

Rouald:

“Yes, it most certainly is. I would need your signatures when you have read the contents of the document for yourself and are ready to bind or retract yourself from it. Give me a call. Oh— I almost forgot, but since it loosely forms part of the will, I think sharing it right now would be most crucial. At least that is what Gareth thought”.

The lawyer takes a sealed envelope from his folder which is sealed in an old-fashioned nevertheless chic manner of wax seals bearing the House crest. He turns to Karen.

“He left this for you, Miss Dashwood”.

Karen, though not crying anymore, refuses to look at the attorney or take the envelope from him. Leon holds out his hand to take it, but Fehmin forestalls his hand, a move that earns her an impressed look from the lawyer as he puts the envelope on a table near Karen.

Rouald:

“If I may... why did that silence betray me”?

Fehmin:

“You had not decided a contingency plan with Gareth in the event that you were asked. It was clear that you decided to test grounds on your own instinct. That’s all”.

He cannot believe it, he cannot take his eyes off those light champagne-brown ones, gurgling a bit like a bottle disturbed, as they do, according to Leon, when she smiles.

“Though... if I may... when did Gareth draw this will”?

Rouald:

“I beg your pardon”.

Fehmin:

“I think you understood me the first time. It is not mentioned on the document, quite understandably. But among other reasons, I am curious because he uses my mother’s name when addressing my parentage and not my father’s, as he ought. By my calculation, it is a little impossible”.

He is stumped, but he is reassured that at least to this, he has an answer ready.

Rouald:

“I am afraid I have explicit instructions to not disclose that information. Though, it is not unheard of in these rich families for someone to be drawing a premature will that ends up taking effect because the perpetrator dies even prematurely”.

She bows in acknowledgement.

The lawyer prepares to leave, some parting words and ending lines forming.

“Miss Ashton, never play a Dionysian game with an Apollonian mind. Particularly when Dionysus is walking over the river Styx. It is disrespectful to both Apollo and Dionysus and you run into the danger of certain losing”.

He walks out, closing the door after him, and with a snap —

All the meagre lights in the room like a dream interrupted, go off with a pop.

Curtains fall.

ACT FIVE - Scene 3

Curtains rise.

Enormous upstage mirrors reflect most of the audience. From the wings: whispers: “which room?” and “none can say for sure”. House lights dim and three characters are reflected in separate mirrors. The dimly lit full-length reflections: NOEL, NIMHEF, NERAK. (These characters will need to be either prerecorded and projected into the mirrors, or played as actual reflections by body doubles of Leon, Fehmin, and Karen, with necessary voice overs and lipsynching by the actors.) These reflections change in size and proportion throughout this scene, enlarging or diminishing as the dialog guides these distortions.

Noel:

“Fehmin”...?

Nimhef:

“Here”.

Nerak:

“Leon? Are you there”?

Noel:

“Here. Are you okay”?

Nerak:

“Yes”.

LEON BLACKWELL and FEHMIN ASHTON enter from opposite wings of the stage and stand near their reflections, unaware at first that they are perhaps in two places simultaneously. A hot hassle breaks out between them and their reflections come together in one mirror to spar.

Leon:

“Nimhef, what the hell was all that about? Is it possible for you to not give a display of your superior intellect”?

Fehmin:

“What are you talking about, Noel? Why are you saying that? What have I done”?

Leon:

“Oh, you have done nothing, my Queen. Nothing at all, to incriminate you”—

Fehmin:

“Stop. I will not be spoken to in this manner. You have hurt me”.

Leon:

“Hurt you, because I love you, so yes, my Queen. Punish me for it, I command you. That attorney could have killed you. I saw murder in his eyes”—

Fehmin:

“—oh, that’s what you saw? Well, I saw lies”—

Leon:

“—what were you trying to prove with that Scotland Yard demeanour of yours? That you can spot”—

KAREN DASHWOOD enters, finding her place near the mirror with Nerak reflected. Nimhef and Leon hug and kiss then part and move into their respective mirrors.

Fehmin:

“—loopholes. I was trying to show you”—

Nerak:

“Leon”?

Noel:

“Yes, my sweet”?

They cordially interrupt their heated argument and then carry on as the whispering from the wings intensifies.

Leon:

“—loopholes? But surely your superior intellect failed, my Queen? Don’t you see? I care not for it all. I am not going to accept all this and it can burn and rot. All the money. Everything. Everything ingrate, Nimhef. He leaves you his entire possessions and you are sitting there pointing loopholes”—

Nimhef:

“I am afraid yes. And I will continue to be. After all, Gareth and I had bad blood between ourselves for a reason. I hope you appreciate now”—

Noel:

“I appreciate his hatred for you”—

Karen:

“Noel, I don’t like this place at all. May we leave, please”?

Leon:

“Soon we will”—

He is interrupted, as Nerak speaks. With her words, the squabble vanishes in the background. The entire squabble, the whispers and all layers of sound stripped.

Nerak:

“Gareth locked his study, did you know”?

Noel:

“He did what”?

Nerak:

“He locked his study. It was the only part of the house that defined him, really. There is a combination which asks for a password and there are only three chances to try. On the third wrong guess the study would detonate itself from the inside... and any attempts to force it through would also cause it to detonate...
And” ...

Noel:

“And”?

Nerak:

“On the door... in his writing... are the words... Veritos... Veritum... I forget”...

Nimhef:

“Veritas vos liberabit”.

Nerak:

“That’s right”.

Noel:

“What does it mean”?

Nimhef:

“The truth shall set you free”.

Silence is weighed in a balance and found wanting.

Nerak:

“Do you know any word, Leon? Anything Gareth would have kept as his password”?

Noel:

“I will have to think... Has anyone tried anything as yet”?

Nerak:

“I don’t know... But I’m... He never left anyone anything personal that means— I must be going”.

And the widow has started to weep. Bitterly and ceaselessly, in a flow. Weeping...

Nimhef:

“Karen? Any news of your brother Mark”?

Nerak:

“No. No news”.

The widow is as yet weeping and weeping away.

Noel:

“It is almost a month since he went missing. And the search Gareth ordered”?

Nerak:

“Will be aborted, now that he is dead”.

Noel:

“Maybe we can pay to keep it going”?

Nerak:

“It is not about the money, Leon. It was never about the money”.

There she is her constant weeping in bitter desolation, joined by the ticking of some clock, somewhere. Loudly ticking each and every second...

Noel:

“Do you want me to drive you? I remember he always used to. I just want you to know that nothing has changed and that I would always be there”.

Nerak:

“I don’t doubt it. But Leon... Don’t delude yourself any further. Everything has changed”.

Pause

“Goodbye”.

Noel:

“Karen”?

No reply.

“Karen. Karen, answer me please”.

Without betraying another footstep or the creak of a door, Karen has exited the stage. The widow’s weeping fades and disappears too. Just the dull ticking off the clock somewhere now chimes the hour.

Fehmin:

“Noel? Where are you”?

Voice: *(like oiled cogwheels gone rusty with disuse)*

“He is not here”.

Fehmin:

“What”...?

She panics, the poor baby. His Queen. His sweet. Is so scared, the darling. It is funny.

“Noel, no. Please don’t leave me”—

Leon:

“Hef”?

Fehmin:

“Noel. Oh, Noel”.

She sobs with relief.

“I was so scared. Leon, there is someone”—

Leon:

“Hef, listen. I went to Hterag’s study. Somebody has already tried the password once. And then I tried it”...

Nimhef:

“Did it work”?

Leon:

“No. But there is another way inside. A trapdoor. But it only opens one way... as in, you can jump from up above to down below... but not from the bottom back up...”

There is a door... That opens into the back garden from the study below... I went inside it just now”...

Fehmin:

“And you found something”?

Leon:

“Yes...

But Hef... Why didn't I get it right”?

Fehmin:

“What did you put”?

Leon:

“Nerak”.

Faint hissing and the ticking gets louder, as if even the non-elemental deems it fit to mock.

Nimhef:

“Noel... that was akin to spending Apollonian gold on Dionysian wine.

Noel...

Let's get out of here. Please”.

Leon:

“Why”?

Fehmin:

“I don't like it here”.

Leon:

“It's alright, my love. Hold on. There is no need to be scared”—

Fehmin:

“Noel, I am not scared. I am”—

Leon:

“Shh...hush. Hef, listen”.

Whispering from the wings: “Noel, Noel's widow and the Nimhef... only... three people in a room since the lawyer left: Noel, Nimhef and Nerak— n and n and n, for not, never and nevertheless”.

Lights on the actors go dark and they freeze into a contorted pose while their reflections can be seen moving erratically in the mirrors, becoming pixilated blips until they too go dark.

Curtains fall.

End of Act 5. Conclusion of Part 1: Digression.

*Definition of “abridged by editor James K Beach”: concision of sentences, shortening of dialog exchanges, shortening or deletion of scenes, explication of plot points, adding necessary adaptations for the stage. To obtain unaltered versions of Acts I-V (appearing in GUNM, CPEM, LPBD, MBGS, BUDI issues) please contact *Wood Coin Magazine*, or seek out playwright Mutahira Moqueet on social media.

**This is the last act serialized in *Wood Coin*. To obtain drafts of Parts Two and Three (Acts VI-XIII) please seek out the writer on social media.