

ACT TWO

SCENE ONE

The projection screen as before, this time with an eighteenth century slide of young lovers, romantic, moving and full of joy.

HOWARD

Before the Industrial Age, love stories either revolve around an idealized beloved, or they are tragic tales of couples whose demise occurs because they become fascinated with infatuation itself. (1) Then comes the brutal super-rationality of industrialism. An extreme action creates its Newtonian reaction and Sentimental Love is born. Infatuation becomes the ideal. (2) Great quantities of maudlin stories with happy endings drown the public mind, spewed forth as if from fiction factories. Tragic plays lose their sting (3) Romeo lives, Hamlet and his uncle are reconciled, Othello changes his mood just in time. Pictures of flower draped semi-nudes, gawking at one another in dewy-eyed intoxication are mass-produced and hung in bedrooms everywhere. (4) You think I'm being cynical, do you? Look at this. (5) In a more respectable vein, but equally maudlin – stories of home-grown misfortunes are vaunted as tragic, (6) pictures of entire families, fully dressed and pretending not to look at one another (7) invade the parlor walls. Isolated families. Ideal consumers. Families that real families strain – and usually fail – to emulate. And this species of... dare I call it... art, forms the basis of most of what you see on television and read in magazines today. Of course, our manner of expression has become more sophisticated, and I use the word with reservations. (8) Grave reservations. Don't believe the hype about our living in the Space Age or Information Age and so forth. Those are flash-in-the-pan monikers invented by an image-hungry press. This is the Industrial Age – refined. (9) Check my web site for assignments. Next week!

1. An etching of a tragic couple in literature, such as Romeo and in the tomb
2. Rural scene with country lads and lasses sporting
3. Nineteenth century etchings or photos of Baldlerized Shakespeare
4. "Classic" engravings and paintings from the early 19th century
5. Similar slides
6. Morality pictures of domestic tragedies
7. The same, often from ads and magazines
8. Similar views as from the 19th century, updated to the present
9. An ad of a man seated before an enormous sound system

SCENE TWO

Barbara is at her table listening to her iPod, and packing for a departure. Michael comes in with refilled sugars and creamers which he trades for the ones on the tables. He and Barbara make eye contact on his entrance and hardly break it. She moves to the music. Michael's attention to tableware is severely challenged by this. At the table furthest away from Barbara, he drops the tray. Millie enters to see this.

She storms over, grabs the tray from him, throws the fallen items onto it, glares at Michael and exits without cleaning up. Michael stands awkwardly for awhile, then performs a quick cleanup with his bar wipe and follows her out.

Howard enters. There is no sign of Grace's having arrived, so he stops, completely at a loss. He and Barbara exchange friendly nods.

Howard stands, not quite knowing where to go. Barbara shifts uncomfortably on her feet. Howard moves in the direction of the counter, looking for Grace. Barbara takes off her iPod, nervously smooths her hair and clothes and moves towards Howard. The move catches Howard's attention. They exchange nods again. Barbara returns to her bag. Howard turns his attention towards the counter and exits. He soon returns, now a bit flustered. Once again Howard and Barbara make eye contact, once again they nod.

Barbara takes a deep breath.

BARBARA

Hi.

HOWARD

Yes. Have you... have you seen Gr... my wife? You know, about this tall and with...

BARBARA

Yeah, I know. No. I haven't.

HOWARD

Oh. I wonder what could have...? Well, don't mean to disturb you. Thanks.

BARBARA

Um. Sorry again. About... um... yesterday!

HOWARD

No, no, no. Well, I am, too. Not to be helped, unfortunately. Heh?

BARBARA

Sure. What I was... was trying... trying to say (*she has to stop, that was too much effort*)

HOWARD

Yes?

BARBARA

Yesterday?

HOWARD

You were trying to say?

BARBARA

Yesterday.

HOWARD

Yesterday?

BARBARA

Yeah. I am... You are... We... Do you know me?

HOWARD

I'm told your name is Barbara?

BARBARA

Right. No. You know that...? Well, it's large, but... I'm still... (*rests*) I'm sorry. I'm your student. (*a sigh of relief*)

HOWARD

You are?

BARBARA

Labor Movements.

HOWARD

Oh? Well, there are... it's a full hall of faces. What is your last name?

Stepanich.

BARBARA

HOWARD

Stepanich. Hm. Well, once Grace is here and I can set up shop, as it were, I will check my records.

BARBARA

No it's... I want to talk... to you.

HOWARD

Regards a grade?

BARBARA

Sort of.

HOWARD

It's always grades.

BARBARA

Sort of.

HOWARD

Well, no time like the present. What's the issue?

BARBARA

A paper. That paper. The one on... orphanages in Vic... Victorian... you know.

HOWARD

Two weeks ago. Yes. Is it late?

BARBARA

No.

HOWARD

Oh. Well, good.

BARBARA

Remember?

HOWARD

Yours? Among the 163 I had to grade. Probably not.

BARBARA

I do.

HOWARD

I think that would be easier for you, yes. Have you a question about the orphanages?

BARBARA

Not specifically. No. Not about... (*sighs*) I got a... got a... D.

HOWARD

Ah. Well, there are a variety of considerations that determine...

BARBARA

No! I agree! It... well, stunk.

HOWARD

Oh, yes. Stepanich.

BARBARA

Yeah.

HOWARD

You write... well, sorry, but you write in a style similar to the way you... express yourself in speech. I'm afraid.

BARBARA

Yeah! I know!

HOWARD

Oh, good. Well, it's good that you know.

BARBARA

I'm... words are not... It's not like... a medical thing? You know? It's just... me and words... we're sworn enemies.

HOWARD

I don't believe you.

BARBARA

You don't?

HOWARD

No. That last phrase was quite lovely.

BARBARA

Last...?

HOWARD

You and words are sworn enemies. That's a remarkable phrase, not credibly to have come from the person who said it.

BARBARA

Oh? Well, thank you.

HOWARD

Perhaps words are not so hostile as you believe them to be.

BARBARA

No, not hostile... it's me! They like me. I don't like them. Much.

HOWARD

Words are your thoughts made living, functioning, social beings!

BARBARA

Well, my thoughts die young.

HOWARD

There it is again. That was wonderful! What do you mean you don't like words?

BARBARA

I'm gonna flunk, right?

HOWARD

What has been your highest grade so far?

BARBARA

That was it.

HOWARD

The D? (*she nods*) Well, yes, I believe that's an accurate assessment of your academic progress. Flunking, as you say.

BARBARA

But I've learned so much, and I really... what I want to say is... anyway. I have.

HOWARD

I'm very glad.

BARBARA

So why? I mean if it's only that... you know what I mean? Flunk?

HOWARD

I must have some evidence of that learning in order to justify a passing grade.

BARBARA

Well, about orphanages, I actually began to understand how... and the book we were required to... you know. And the research. Three weeks... what I'm trying to say is, I never... so as you see, I have... anyway. I really feel that... So what do you think?

HOWARD

Quite.

BARBARA

That's just it, I... I read, I understand, I know, that's it. It comes out someplace... well not in words and... else, but not on... not in... not at all in, I mean, I really cannot... anyway. Not on paper!

HOWARD

Unfortunately for you, you will continue to fail unless your verbal expression can choose paper as a nesting place. I am sorry to have to tell you this, but that is the way of the ivory-towered world. How are your other courses?

BARBARA

Wonderful. Everything else is... all the other... you know. I'm passing everything else, but with that it's... and so it's easier because that's where... I'm interested, you know? Mostly A's.

HOWARD

(incredulous) A's?

BARBARA

Mostly.

HOWARD

I see. Do you speak to others of your professors about this?

BARBARA

I do... But with them... well, we have this relationship, you know. You know? Special? So, I thought maybe you could...

HOWARD

Um... no. No! No, that's not... Um... I wonder where Grace is? Let me check the... um... counter again? Just a moment. We can... we can continue this, perhaps, in a location more suitable, more conducive, such as the lecture hall immediately after class next week, would that be convenient? Yes. Well, nice chatting, do take care, pardon me I have to see if... Grace... she's never late and it concerns me. Excuse me.

Howard dashes off leaving Barbara very puzzled. She tries for a moment to figure out what just happened, can't, then takes her bag and exits.

Grace appears with an arm load of her

own, new, books. She is wearing a sweater of many colors. She goes to a different table than the one Howard has put his things at, and spreads her books across it. Then she sits down and strokes the dust covers, savoring each one, riffling some pages, and generally enjoying them as objects.

Howard comes back cautiously, peering around the corner first to see that Barbara has left. Grace doesn't see him yet. He sees her and is about to speak when it hits him that she is at a different table from his. He tries to solve this conundrum by himself, but can't. He decides to ignore the anomaly, and go to his table where, trembling with excitement, he puts his things in order.

GRACE

Caffeine withdrawals?

HOWARD

Heh, heh. No coffee yet! Waiting for you.

GRACE

That's what I meant.

HOWARD

Oh! *Withdrawals*. Yes. Yes, indeed. Feeling a bit shaky, here.

GRACE

You know where to order it.

HOWARD

Yes. And as a matter of fact, I just now returned from there. Nobody at the counter! No one! Not the Gorgon nor any of her little associates. Vacant for as far as the eye can see.

Michael enters to collect the flower vases.

GRACE

Hi Michael.

HOWARD

Except for... well, there was... Hello.

MICHAEL

Feeling better?

HOWARD

What...? Oh, that. Yesterday. Yes, thanks.

GRACE

And how about today, Howard?

HOWARD

Hm?

GRACE

How about today? I haven't really seen you.

HOWARD

(whispering) I can't tell you now.

GRACE

(whispering back) Okay. After you've gotten our lunch, tell me all about it.

MICHAEL

Want me to leave?

HOWARD

No! No, no, no. Don't be silly.

MICHAEL

There, I'm done. Talk about me all you like.

He exits.

HOWARD

That was awkward.

GRACE

Something happened.

HOWARD

Oh, it was only... well, yes. Yes! *(privately)* That girl? You know, the one over there.

GRACE

(turns to see where he's pointing) Over there?

HOWARD

Who sits over there and... has encounters with the young man?

GRACE

Barbara?

HOWARD

Yes, yes, her. Well. You were late...

GRACE

I was not. I arrived in my own time.

HOWARD

However you wish to interpret it, you weren't here when I came in and she *was* here, also alone.

GRACE

So?

HOWARD

We talked.

GRACE

How nice.

HOWARD

She had a concern about her grade for Labor Movements.

GRACE

Okay.

HOWARD

(whispering) I think she's a grades whore.

GRACE

(pause) You need some coffee.

HOWARD

No, really! She... she's winning a D. Deservedly, too. Her command of the language and analysis is on par with a four year old. Sad, really. Anyway, she tells me about how "all her other professors give her A's" Not only that, when pressed she admitted that she has a "relationship" with them. And she was trying to do the same with me!

GRACE

That's the most unlikely conclusion you could possibly draw even if all the rest is true.

HOWARD

I beg your pardon?

GRACE

Why would she hit up on you?

HOWARD

To get a better grade.

GRACE

There are some things that aren't worth doing no matter how desperate you are, and that is one of them.

HOWARD

You'll hurt my feelings.

GRACE

I don't believe she would use those tactics, anyway.

HOWARD

Grace, if you'd been here, you would have seen. It was so obvious. And the way she behaves anyway... I mean it's logical! It's all of a piece!

GRACE

I still don't believe it.

HOWARD

You watch. Watch her behavior knowing what you do now. See if you don't see the telltale signs.

GRACE

Get your coffee.

HOWARD

This is not my imagination!

GRACE

She's young and beautiful, you're reading the rest into it out of sheer infatuation.

HOWARD

Who?

GRACE

You. I've seen how you look at her.

HOWARD

Don't be ridiculous.

GRACE

I don't blame you. She's the most beautiful woman I have ever laid eyes on. You have every right. Makes me hopeful, in fact. But don't go extrapolating it into a university-wide scandal.