

TRANSCENDENTAL EXERCISES

(A Play in Four Scenes)

by

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## TRANSCENDENTAL EXERCISES

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### THE CHARACTERS

HAROLD, A Surgeon, 40s

LOUISE, His wife, 40

ALBERT, Their son, 20s

JENNIFER, Albert's wife, 20s

HANK, Non-speaking role, 20s

A YOUNG MAN, 20s

(HANK and THE YOUNG MAN may be played by the same actor)

### THE PLACE

HAROLD and LOUISE'S LIVING-ROOM

A MIDWESTERN CITY OF 160, 000

### THE TIME

RECENTLY

Scene 1

1, i

(LOUISE sits on the sofa, looking through a pile of black and white photos. On the wall, there is an oil painting of a midwestern landscape, a la Andrew Wyeth. She looks at them for a moment, then HAROLD enters. He sighs)

HAROLD

Oh boy. What a day! (He kisses LOUISE).

LOUISE

You look tired.

HAROLD

Six hours in the operating room. Let me tell you. That is a day.

LOUISE

Was it successful?

HAROLD

She might have another year.

LOUISE

I'm sorry.

HAROLD

We had to cut out most of her stomach.

LOUISE

I hope she appreciates that.

HAROLD

You're not being sarcastic, are you?

LOUISE

Good god no. I hope, after all these years, you know me better than that.

HAROLD

There are times I wonder.

LOUISE

I suppose I should be flattered by that remark. But I'm simply Louise Goodall: Your wife, a farm girl who made good.

HAROLD

And how did you do that?

LOUISE

I married a doctor.

HAROLD

I thought farm girls were born good. They didn't have to be made so.

LOUISE

You can become pretty cynical raised on a farm.

HAROLD

Listen, Louise. This woman I operated on today. She thinks she knew you from high school.

LOUISE

Really! What is her name?

HAROLD

Gilchrist... Elaine Gilchrist...

LOUISE

I don't recall the name. She must have been mistaken.

HAROLD

She seemed pretty certain. She told me all about you.

LOUISE

That sounds scary.

HAROLD

She said you used to drop your books a lot. She remembered that.

LOUISE

That's a strange thing to remember about someone.

HAROLD

Well, you still drop things a lot.

LOUISE

Let me think. You said Gilchrist? Now, wait a minute, there was a Bunny Gilchrist.

HAROLD

This is Elaine.

LOUISE

But don't you think Bunny might have been a nickname?

HAROLD

I don't imagine Bunny is a very common name.

LOUISE

My god! Bunny Gilchrist! A tiny girl: cute, very cute. Maybe a little too much on the merely cute side... She was a cheerleader and she went with the captain of the football team. Everybody's ideal. You know the type.

HAROLD

She said she liked you.

LOUISE

Oh heavens no. She never knew I was alive.

HAROLD

Something else she remembered. You got very good grades.

LOUISE

That I did. All I ever did was study. So naturally the popular kids used to make fun of me, and I didn't drop my books, Harold. They used to knock them out of my hands.

HAROLD

That was probably a courtship ritual. They were trying to make dates with you.

LOUISE

The girls, too? (He looks at her) And they used to steal my books, then when I found them again, they'd written things in them. I think they're called limericks. Very dirty. Bunny and her friends used to do that.

HAROLD

(Now rather uncomfortable with this) You're sure this is the same girl?

LOUISE

They probably never even realized how cruel they were being.

HAROLD  
No, probably not...

LOUISE  
Half her stomach, did you say?

HAROLD  
I'd say she has six months. If she's lucky, maybe she has a year.

LOUISE  
It's strange. People like Bunny seem so lucky, as if they're specially blessed. But you know I never really got over the torment they put me through. I mean the way it made me feel. I hated myself.

HAROLD  
I'm really sorry brought it all back! Is there any coffee?

LOUISE  
You want to change the subject.

HAROLD  
I thought we were done with that one, but finish what you want to say.

LOUISE  
It's not important. It was years ago. But they made me feel so insignificant, and everybody admired them so much, so I assumed they must be right. I was insignificant. Does she have a lot of pain?

HAROLD  
I understand she tried to kill herself at one point.

LOUISE  
Who would have imagined? Bunny Gilchrist...

HAROLD  
She goes by Elaine now.

LOUISE  
I'm not surprised, but what I really wanted to say, in spite of everything, they did me a favor.

HAROLD  
How so?

LOUISE

All that abuse motivated me. So I got the good grades and I got the scholarship and I went to college and I met you and we got married. In a way, you could almost say I owe all that to Bunny Gilchrist and her cruel, vicious friends.

HAROLD

Look, um... can I remind you she *is* dying?

LOUISE

And you're right. I think I'll take her something at the hospital.

HAROLD

That would be nice. You know there is something I sometimes forget.

LOUISE

What is that?

HAROLD

Basically, you are a good person.

LOUISE

Thank you, but it worries me that you sometimes forget it.

HAROLD

(Pause) Is Albert home?

LOUISE

I believe so.

HAROLD

Is he all right?

LOUISE

Is there any reason he wouldn't be?

HAROLD

What I mean is did he do anything today. Did he leave the house, go anywhere? Did he do anything at all?

LOUISE

Well, since you're asking so nicely, there's one thing I can tell you. That girl called for him today.

HAROLD

I suppose you mean his wife, Jennifer?

LOUISE

You'll probably be angry about it, but I said he was out. I know, I know. I'm interfering. But Harold, why in the world did they ever get married?

HAROLD

Well, they're getting a divorce.

LOUISE

I hope so. But then why does she need to talk to him all the time?

HAROLD

I'm surprised you didn't ask her that.

LOUISE

She gives me the creeps, Harold! What do you suppose she wanted?

HAROLD

How would I know?

LOUISE

Well, before she moved out, you talked to her.

HAROLD

What does that mean? We all talked to her! She lived here!

LOUISE

I just thought she might have confided in you.

HAROLD

People don't tend to confide in me.

LOUISE

That's odd, don't you think? I mean you are a doctor.

HAROLD

I'm not that kind of doctor.

LOUISE

I want to ask you something personal, Harold. Do you find her attractive?



HAROLD  
Do you mean Jennifer?

LOUISE  
That's who we're talking about.

HAROLD  
What kind of question is that, Louise?

LOUISE  
A normal question, I think. You know I think you do.

HAROLD  
What the hell is this all about?

LOUISE  
Now, now, I wouldn't blame you if you had. She is very attractive, in her way. Did you ever notice her teeth?

HAROLD  
I couldn't help noticing them, could I?

LOUISE  
They were beautiful. And so was her skin. That skin was every woman's envy. Did you ever imagine going to bed with her? I mean just feel the impulse to lie beside that beautiful soft skin... If you had, I honestly wouldn't blame you.

HAROLD  
For God's sake, Louise, you are talking about our son's wife!

LOUISE  
But she didn't treat Albert very nicely.

HAROLD  
No? What exactly did she do to Albert?

LOUISE  
I don't think she ever touched him. I mean physically.

HAROLD  
How would you know that?

LOUISE

I sensed it.

HAROLD

All right. Now, will you tell me your point?

LOUISE

I don't know. I'm just saying that sometimes it's hard for me to believe they were ever married. In a way, they seemed more like some eerie brother and sister. Didn't you ever notice that?

HAROLD

No. And I never noticed her skin, either! You know why? Because I cut up skin like that every day, like a butcher slicing a side of bacon!

LOUISE

Have I said something wrong?

HAROLD

I'm sorry. You know what. I'd like a cup of coffee... or a scotch.

LOUISE

Heavens, I'm afraid I've upset you.

HAROLD

I cut out somebody's stomach today.

LOUISE

Oh my God, poor Bunny!

HAROLD

Louise, her name is Elaine.

LOUISE

Oh yes.

HAROLD

Look. Do we have any scotch?

LOUISE

I'm not being very sympathetic, am I?

HAROLD

I think she's forgotten all that Bunny shit by now.

LOUISE

I don't think so. She was everybody's idol. How could you ever forget that, Harold? I think she'd be pleased if I called her Bunny. It would probably bring back many wonderful memories for her.

HAROLD

Louise, try to remember something. She's dying.

LOUISE

But when you are dying, aren't wonderful memories what you need most. You're not going to make many more of them. Maybe I could help bring all that back for her.

HAROLD

I'll tell you something. I didn't really enjoy school that much either.

LOUISE

You didn't? Why was that?

HAROLD

It was partly because of my hands. They were so big, the other kids used to make fun of me. They called me 'Paws.' Then again, maybe it's because of those hands my mom always thought I'd become a surgeon.

LOUISE

Tell me, my dear. When it's our turn to go, you know, like Bunny... What will we have to hold onto? What will we have to remember?

HAROLD

We might be surprised.

LOUISE

That hardly seems like an appropriate time for surprises.

HAROLD

What I am saying is I guess you don't know what's important to you, until the time comes.

LOUISE

You mean you don't know what's important to you until you're dying? That sounds unfair.

HAROLD

I'm afraid that's true for some people.

LOUISE

Well, we've had a child. We've done that.

HAROLD

I hope you're not saying that's all!

LOUISE

Well, it's something, anyway.

HAROLD

(He grunts) I suppose so.

LOUISE

(Pause) Did Bunny have any children?

HAROLD

She hasn't mentioned any.

LOUISE

So then it all dies with her, all her attributes. There is no one to pass them on to.

HAROLD

(He picks up the photos, looks at them) What the devil are these?

LOUISE

Those are photographs, Harold.

HAROLD

Ha ha! But who are they? I don't recognize anyone in these photos. Do you?

LOUISE

I don't think so.

HAROLD

No? Well, don't you find that a bit odd? What are they doing here?

LOUISE

Well, they're old photos. Maybe we've forgotten who those people were.

HAROLD

Come on. We couldn't have forgotten every one of these people.

(They at each other for a moment, and then, ALBERT enters the room)

ALBERT

Those are mine.

HAROLD

They're yours?

ALBERT

You mind if I have them back.

HAROLD

Do you know these people?

ALBERT

No.

HAROLD

(To LOUISE) He doesn't know them?

LOUISE

That's what he said, Harold.

HAROLD

(To LOUISE) Well, do you mind if I ask what he's doing with photos of people he doesn't even know?

ALBERT

(To LOUISE) I just bought them.

LOUISE

(To HAROLD) He bought them.

HAROLD

(To LOUISE) All right, damn it! But why?

LOUISE

Why not ask him?

ALBERT

(To LOUISE) I'll tell you how it happened. I was in this junk shop, you know, looking through a lot of stuff and I came across these photos. They just looked interesting to me, so I bought them.

LOUISE

(To HAROLD) They are rather interesting. Don't you think?

HAROLD

I find them eerie. I mean here are all these strange faces, smiling at us, and we don't know any one of them. It's like an invasion of privacy!

ALBERT

It's the same people in all the photos.

HAROLD

But who the hell are they?

ALBERT

That's what I'm trying to figure out.

LOUISE

Oh my goodness. This fat one looks like an uncle of mine. My brother Jack and I used to call him uncle Dodo.

HAROLD

Oh yeah? Do you think that's uncle Dodo?

LOUISE

I don't think so. He had a tuft of hair on top of his head and Jack and I sort of thought that's what a dodo bird might look like. I'm pretty sure that isn't him.

ALBERT

What I'm trying to do is figure out who they all are.

HAROLD

How can you do that?

ALBERT

What I do is I go by what each one looks like and then I try to decide, you know, what was his profession was and who was married to who. Things like that.

LOUISE

Now you have to admit that sounds fascinating. Don't you, Harold?

HAROLD

I'm not sure what I think.

ALBERT

They're just interesting to think about. That's all.

LOUISE

You know what. They all look sad, and sort of bored. I'll bet the lives you invent for them are more interesting than the lives they actually led.

HAROLD

That seems depressing. They were real people. They may still be alive.

LOUISE

But seeing them in these photos, it's as if they don't seem like real people.

HAROLD

That's because we don't know who they were. I mean who they *are*.

ALBERT

To tell you the truth, I'm not that interested in them any longer. As a matter of fact, I found something else in that shop. I found this. (He takes a small piece of curved pipe from his pocket).

HAROLD

What the hell is that?

LOUISE

It's a piece of pipe, isn't it?

ALBERT

I thought I might make something out of it.

HAROLD

Out of that?

ALBERT

What I think is interesting is that it's a piece of pipe. But for what? I mean it's out of context. We don't know what it was used for. So it could be turned into something else, a lot of things really. You could completely change its identity.

LOUISE

That IS interesting.

HAROLD

It is? Listen, we're just looking at a piece of pipe here, aren't we?

LOUISE

You have to use your imagination, my sweet.

ALBERT

How I happened to buy it is I felt drawn to it. See, it was on this table, surrounded by a lot of other junk, but it seemed out of place, if you know what I mean. Anyway, I just felt like I had to buy it.

LOUISE

I can understand that.

HAROLD

Then maybe you can explain it to me.

LOUISE

Actually, I did something like that myself one time.

HAROLD

Great! At least now we know where he came by that habit.

LOUISE

I bought this saucer. No dishes, no cup, just the saucer.

HAROLD

Okay. You liked it.

LOUISE

No, I found it disgusting. It was cheap and ugly. Why did I buy it? Did I feel pity for it? A cheap, lonely saucer? I can't explain it. Maybe I'd rather not even try. Anyway, the thing is, after I bought it, I took it outside and smashed it to smithereens.

HAROLD

Good God, I hope you never pity me.

ALBERT

(About the piece of pipe) Maybe I could turn it into an ashtray.



HAROLD

Listen, I honestly think you two ought to try and control this impulse to buy anything that grabs your fancy.

LOUISE

I haven't done it for years, Harold, not since we've been married.

ALBERT

Maybe I'll just throw this away.

HAROLD

By the way, Al, I'm not busy Saturday. How about some golf, if you don't have any other plans.

ALBERT

I don't have any clubs.

HAROLD

We could rent some.

LOUISE

(To ALBERT) You realize you don't have to play golf if you don't want to.

HAROLD

You think I meant he HAS to play golf simply because I asked him?

LOUISE

I only wanted him to know if he didn't want to, it wouldn't hurt your feelings.

HAROLD

I hope he knows that, for Christ's sake.

LOUISE

You're right. I'm interfering. I'm sorry.

HAROLD

All right, look. Nobody meant that.

LOUISE

You know I've often wondered why people play golf.

HAROLD

I think people play it because they can't think of anything less boring to do at that particular moment. Look, I would like a drink. Isn't there a bottle of scotch around here somewhere? (He starts looking for it).

ALBERT

I could go Saturday, if I can get some clubs.

HAROLD

Well see.

LOUISE

(Goes to the window) It gets dark early now, doesn't it?

HAROLD

(To ALBERT) Look, we're not talking about an OBLIGATION here. I just thought maybe we could play a round of golf.

LOUISE

(At the window) Jennifer! (They look at her) She called earlier and said she was coming back.

HAROLD

Coming back? Why is she doing that?

LOUISE

She said to see Albert.

HAROLD

She just wants to LOOK at him?

ALBERT

She's seen me.

LOUISE

(Looks at him) Recently?

ALBERT

She walked over the other night. We had a talk.

LOUISE

I know it's none of my business. But what is she doing walking over here in the middle of the night. Look, I want to say something. I hope I'm not out of line. She could have stayed here. WE didn't TELL her to leave. It was *her* choice. So why is she coming back?

ALBERT

You know what. Maybe it was just a dream.

HAROLD

Oh come on. You don't know?

ALBERT

Not always. I mean last night I had a dream and it seemed like it was real.

LOUISE

What was it?

ALBERT

Well, I dreamed somebody wanted me. I didn't know who, but I thought they wanted me to do something. So, in my dream, you know, I get out of bed and climb down my window and I start walking. I don't know where I'm even supposed to go, but all of a sudden I'm in the middle of this big field—

HAROLD

What kind of field?

ALBERT

(He points to the painting on the wall) Actually, it seems like it is that one. I'm alone in the middle of that field, with the moon shining down on me and then I find I have a shovel in my hand—

HAROLD

What are you doing with a shovel?

ALBERT

I'm using it to dig.

HAROLD

I guess that makes sense.

ALBERT

So I dig and dig, until I come to this enormous rock and that stops me. I can't dig around it and I can't get under it.

LOUISE

So what do you do?

ALBERT

I became frightened.

HAROLD

Frightened of what?

ALBERT

I don't know. That's the problem, because if I knew what I was afraid of, then maybe I could get over being afraid of it.

HAROLD

You know, I've never liked that painting. I find it too empty. There should be people in it.

LOUISE

I've always thought we were the people: the ones looking at it.

HAROLD

But I mean we're not really in it, are we? (Pause)

ALBERT

Did Jennifer say she was coming here tonight?

LOUISE

You don't have to talk to her. You know that.

HAROLD

Do you want to see her?

LOUISE

I've always found her cold. You can't get close to her.

HAROLD

She's young. She doesn't know what she wants.

LOUISE

Oh, she knows exactly what she wants. And besides, what's wrong with not knowing what you want.

HAROLD

I never said that. But let me ask you. What is wrong with knowing *what* you want?

LOUISE

Maybe that depends on what you want.

ALBERT

Maybe she just wants somebody to talk to.

(And then, suddenly, the doorbell rings, and they all look surprised)

ALBERT

I'll get that. (They watch him exit to answer the door).

LOUISE

(A Pause) Harold, what do you think about begonias?

HAROLD

(He starts rummaging again) I'd rather find that bottle of scotch.

LOUISE

I mean for Bunny. I'll take her some begonias.

HAROLD

That would be very considerate.

LOUISE

I hope Bunny will think so.

(And then ALBERT returns to the room. But he is now followed by HANK.  
HANK looks rather uneasy, as HAROLD and LOUISE gape at them)

ALBERT

This is Hank, a friend of mine. I'm going to show him my plants. (He picks up the photos and He and HANK exit).

LOUISE

(Softly, as HANK and ALBERT exit) How do you do?

HAROLD

Who's that? Do you have any idea who the hell that is? (HAROLD and LOUISE stare at each other. There is A BLACKOUT, and...)

THE SCENE IS OVER

Scene 2

(HAROLD sits, reading the newspaper, as JENNIFER enters and looks at him)

HAROLD

Jennifer! I didn't hear you come in!

JENNIFER

Didn't you?

HAROLD

It's late. Why did you come so late?

JENNIFER

My car is in the shop. I had to walk over.

HAROLD

You shouldn't have done that. Something might have happened to you.

JENNIFER

It's a beautiful night. Have you been out?

HAROLD

No. Why would I be out?

JENNIFER

Should I know why you do what you do or don't do?

HAROLD

Why don't you tell me why you're here? Is something wrong?

JENNIFER

Something strange did happen to me on the way over.

HAROLD

What was strange about it?

JENNIFER

On the way over, I got a little tired. I mean it's a pretty long walk. So I stopped for a minute to rest on a bench in the park. And as I sat there, this older man came along—

HAROLD

He didn't harm you in any way, did he?

JENNIFER

He did, in a way.

HAROLD

In what way?

JENNIFER

He made me sad. Or maybe I should say lonely. I felt sorry for him.

HAROLD

Listen, Jennifer, may I say something?

JENNIFER

You usually do say something, Harold. Go ahead.

HAROLD

You should go away from here.

JENNIFER

I want to talk to Albert.

HAROLD

I mean from this town. What I'm saying is you should go somewhere new, some place where you can think, where you can find out who you are.

JENNIFER

Do people really want to know who they are?

HAROLD

Up to a point.

JENNIFER

Then what does it matter where you are?

HAROLD

You don't understand. It's lousy around here. What is it? People mowing their lawns and planting flowers that never grow, and then the leaves die and the snow falls, while the streets are turning into rubble. Is that what you want, for Christ's sake?

JENNIFER  
Is it what you wanted?

HAROLD  
Forget about me.

JENNIFER  
But I couldn't do that, Harold.

HAROLD  
What I'm telling you is that nobody around here knows what is going on, and if they do start to figure it out, *when* they start to figure it out, bang! They have a coronary!

(And then, LOUISE suddenly appears. She is unnoticed by them)

JENNIFER  
Isn't that just life?

HAROLD  
You're too young to know that. I mean really know it. Okay, Jennifer, I'll loan you the money, if that's a problem. And it probably is. I understand that. So I'll do what I can to help you. How does that sound to you?

JENNIFER  
You'd do that out of kindness, would you?

HAROLD  
Think it over. Think about the prospect of being some place where you can meet new people. Discuss new ideas. You'd be free to do whatever the hell you wanted to do. You could create yourself and find a new life.

JENNIFER  
I don't think I could do that.

HAROLD  
I am only telling you to think about it.

(And then, LOUISE suddenly disappears once more)



