

FROM *The Period of Adjustment* by Tennessee Williams

ISABEL. My philosophy professor at the Baptist college I went to, he said one day, “We are all of us born, live and die in the shadow of a giant question mark that refers to three questions: Where do we come from? Why? And where, oh where, are we going?”

RALPH. When did you say you got married?

ISABEL. Yesterday. Yesterday morning.

RALPH. That lately? Well, he’ll be back before you say — Joe Blow.

[He appreciates her neat figure again]

ISABEL. What?

RALPH. Nothing.

ISABEL. Well!

RALPH. D’you like Christmas music?

ISABEL. Everything but “White Christmas”.

[As she extends her palms to the imaginary fireplace, Ralph is standing a little behind her, still looking her up and down with solemn appreciation]

RALPH. Aw, y’don’t like “White Christmas”?

ISABEL. The radio in that car is practically the only thing in it that works! We had it on all the time. [She gives a tired laugh] Conversation was impossible, even if there had been a desire to talk! It kept playing “White Christmas” because it was snowing I guess all the way down here, yesterday and — today ...

RALPH. A radio in a funeral limosine?

ISABEL. I guess they just played it on the way back from the graveyard. Anyway, once I reached over and turned the volume down. He didn’t say anything, he just reached over and turned the volume back up. Isn’t it funny how a little thing like that can be so insulting to you? Then I started crying and still haven’t stopped! I pretended to be looking out the car window till it got dark.

RALPH. You’re just going through a little period of adjustment to each other.

ISABEL. What do you do with a bride left on your doorstep, Mr. Bates?

RALPH. Well, I, ha ha! — never had that experience!

ISABEL. Before? Well, now you're faced with it, I hope you know how to handle it. You know why I know he's left me? He only took in my bags, he left his own in the car, he brought in all of mine except my little blue zipper overnight bag, that he kept for some reason. Perhaps he intends to pick up another female companion who could use its contents.

RALPH. Little lady, you're in a bad state of nerves.

ISABEL. Have you ever been so tired that you don't know what you're doing or saying?

RALPH. Yes. Often.

ISABEL. That's my condition, so make allowances for it. Yes, indeed, that sure is a mighty far drugstore ...

[She wanders back to the window, and parts the curtains to peer out]

RALPH. He seems gone twice as long because you're thinking about it.

ISABEL. I don't know why I should care except for my overnight bag with my toilet articles in it.

RALPH. [obliquely investigating] Where did you spend last night?

ISABEL. [vaguely] Where did we spend last night?

RALPH. Yeah. Where did you stop for the night?

ISABEL. [rubbing her forehead and sighing with perplexity] In a, in a — oh, a tourist camp called the — Old Man River Motel? Yes, the Old Man River Motel.

RALPH. That's a mistake. The first night ought to be spent in a real fine place regardless of what it cost you. It's so important to get off on the right foot. [He has freshened his drink and come around to the front of the bar. She has gone back to the window at the sound of a car] If you get off on the wrong foot, it can take a long time to correct it. [She nods in slow confirmation of this opinion] Um-hmmmm. Walls are built up between people a hell of a damn sight faster than — broken down ... Y'want me to give you my word that he's coming back? I will, I'll give you my word. Hey. [He snaps his fingers] Had he bought me a Christmas present? If not, that's what he's doing. That explains where he went to. [There is a pause. She sits sadly by the fireplace] What went wrong last night?

ISABEL. Let's not talk about that.

RALPH. I don't mean to pry into such a private, intimate thing, but —

ISABEL. No, let's don't! I'll just put it this way and perhaps you will understand me. In spite of my being a student nurse, till discharged — my experience has been limited, Mr. Bates. Perhaps it's because I grew up in a small town, an only child,

too protected. I wasn't allowed to date till my last year at High and then my father insisted on meeting the boys I went out with and laid down pretty strict rules, such as when to bring me home from parties and so forth. If he smelled liquor on the breath of a boy? At the door? That boy would not enter the door! And that little rule ruled out a goodly number.

RALPH. I bet it did. They should've ate peanuts befo' they called for you, honey. [He chuckles, reflectively poking at the fire] That's what we done at the Sisters of Mercy Orphans' Home in Mobile.

ISABEL. [touched] Oh. Were you an orphan, Mr. Bates?

RALPH. Yes, I had that advantage.

[He slides off the high stool again to poke at the fire. She picks up the antique bellows and fans the flames, crouching beside him.]

ISABEL. So you were an orphan! People that grow up orphans, don't they value love more?

RALPH. Well, let's put it this way. They get it less easy. To get it, they have to give it: so yeah, they do value it more.

[He slides back onto the bar stool. She crouches at the fireplace to fan the fire with the bellows. The flickering light brightens their shy tender faces]

ISABEL. But it's also an advantage to have a parent like my daddy. [She's again very close to tears] Very strict but devoted. Opposed me going into the nursing profession but I had my heart set on it, I thought I had a vocation, I saw myself as a Florence Nightingale nurse. A lamp in her hand? Establishin' clinics in the — upper Amazon country ... [She laughs a little ruefully] Yais, I had heroic daydreams about myself as a dedicated young nurse working side by side with a —

[She pauses shyly]

RALPH. With a dedicated young doctor?

ISABEL. No, the doctor would be older, well, not too old, but — older. I saw myself passing among the pallets, you know, the straw mats, administering to the plague victims in the jungle, exposing myself to contagion ...

[She exhibits a bit of humor here]

RALPH. Catchin' it?

ISABEL. Yais, contractin' it eventually m'self ...

RALPH. What were the symptoms of it?

ISABEL. A slight blemish appearing on the — hands? [She gives him a darting smile]

RALPH. [joining in the fantasy with her] Which you'd wear gloves to conceal?

ISABEL. Yais, rubber gloves all the time.

RALPH. A crusty-lookin' blemish or more like a fungus?

[They laugh together]

ISABEL. I don't think I — yais, I did, I imagined it being like scaa-ales! Like silver fish scales appearing on my hands and then progressing gradually to the wrists and fo'-arms ...

RALPH. And the young doctor discovering you were concealing this condition?

ISABEL. The youngish middle-aged doctor, Mr. Bates! Yais, discovering I had contracted the plague myself and then a big scene in which she says, Oh, no, you musn't touch me but he seizes her passionately in his arms, of course, and — exposes himself to contagion.

[Ralph chuckles heartily getting off stool to poke at the fire again. She joins him on the floor to fan the flames with the bellows]

ISABEL. And love is stronger than death. You get the picture?

RALPH. Yep, I've seen the picture.

ISABEL. We've had a good laugh together. You're a magician, Ralph, to make me laugh tonight in my present situation. George and I never laugh, we never laugh together. Oh, he makes JOKES, YAIS! But we never have a really genuine laugh together and that's a bad sign, I think, because I don't think a married couple can go through life without laughs together any more than they can without tears.