

## EDWARD DOUGHTIE

# PERFORMANCE

NO ONE SPOKE. THE ROOM WAS SILENT except for the scrape of a fork or the click of a cup on a saucer. The young American couple were afraid to whisper, and focused on their pot of instant coffee, fried tomatoes, sausages, and limp toast cooling in little wire racks. The woman, Lisa, looked around at their fellow lodgers at the Oxford bed-and-breakfast: two middle-aged couples, a pair of plump, white-haired women, and one lean older man with neatly brushed grey hair and a tweed jacket who read *The Guardian* as he sipped his tea. Each group had its own small table covered with vinyl. A plastic flower stood in a small vase near the salt, pepper, and bottle of malt vinegar. None of these condiments improved the food.

Back in their room, Lisa whispered to her husband, "Is it safe to talk now?"

He smiled and spoke in a normal voice. "No one wanted to talk because no one wanted to be heard."

"You would have thought we were in church." She laughed softly. "They were quieter than a theatre audience. Has there ever been breakfast theatre?"

Jon, her husband, smiled and shook his head. She liked his smile; it lightened his normally heavy, square face.

"Maybe we could start a breakfast theatre when we get home."

"Maybe you could," he said, glancing at the papers stacked on the dresser.

Lisa could tell that his mind was already turning to his research. She changed the subject. "Where shall we meet for lunch?"

"How about that pub across from that bookstore, Blackwell's?"

"Okay."

"What are you going to do?" He sorted papers and stuffed them into a green bookbag.

"I guess I'll look into the Ashmolean Museum. Poke around, be a tourist."

“I don’t think this will take more than a few days,” he said, with an apologetic note. “I really need to see these manuscripts. Then we can get back to London.”

“Don’t worry about me.”

Lisa worried about herself, a little. Jon had the Fulbright, the work on his dissertation. Her visa wouldn’t allow her to work. She was at leisure. She read, but their bedsitter in London was often too cold to sit still in. It had a gas heater with a meter, and she never had enough 10p coins. When she bundled up in a coat and quilt, she went to sleep. So she walked, visited museums, went to movies, plays. She even took up making rubbings of the brass images on tombstones in the churches. Not that you could rub the real brasses: you had to use the polymer copies. Still, the exercise kept her warm.

The Oxford B&B was even less inviting than the bedsitter. The room was colder, and there was no heater. When the landlady, a stately fifty-year-old in a bun and grey cardigan, came in to clean, she strongly suggested that Lisa spend her time in the lounge, where there was a colour television. Lisa joined the two white-haired women there and watched an awful English game show for about fifteen minutes. The women chuckled occasionally, but didn’t speak. She grabbed her coat and umbrella and hurried out into the drizzle, among the antique stones and the laughing students in their eclectic costumes. Although she was not much older than the students, she was a respectable married woman in a wool skirt, black tights, Burberry. She bought a guidebook at Blackwell’s.

The Ashmolean had a few brass rubbings on display, knights in armor with swords by their sides, hands clasped piously. She lingered over the rubbing of a fourteenth-century woman, envying her slim waist and neck, and thinking that her enormous headdress was pulling the hair away from her forehead. She thought her own rubbings were neater. After wandering among plaster copies of Roman statues, collections of coins and musical instruments, she plopped down on a bench in front of Uccello’s “*Hunt in the Forest*.” So much stuff—it was overwhelming. It tired her, trying to take it all in. If Jon had been there, she could have made funny comments.

She strolled down the High and stopped on Magdalen Bridge. In spite of the cold, two students, a boy and girl, were punting on the Cherwell. She waved at them as they drifted under the bridge.

The next morning the guests sat in silence, waiting for breakfast. A harried, skinny girl with spiky purple hair rolled out a cart with pots of tea and coffee, and the landlady, an apron over her cardigan, asked if they preferred eggs or sausage. One of the middle-aged couples was stout, the man bald with a moustache, the woman with dyed blonde hair; the other couple was thin and prim, grey-haired, and wore glasses. The single older man was in a pin-stripe suit today. He opened his *Guardian* with a crack and lifted his bushy eyebrows as he read the top of the page. The girl hurried in with steaming plates, and the group settled in to sipping and munching. The brief words, “coffee, please,” or “eggs, please,” had done their duty, and no more were wasted.

Lisa raised her cup and looked around. Then she leaned forward and asked Jon in a soft but perfectly audible voice, “Did you sleep all right?”

He looked up. “Fine. You?”

“Well, I did when you finally let me.” She smiled. Jon looked puzzled, blank. The small eating noises had stopped. Lisa rolled her eyes toward the room and smiled again.

Jon frowned. “Was I snoring?”

“No, dear.” She drank her watery coffee. The sounds of eating gradually resumed.

That day Lisa visited colleges. She learned that Balliol was one of the first colleges to be established in Oxford, but that it was largely rebuilt in the nineteenth century. At Exeter College she learned that the roof of the entrance lodge was built in 1702, and the stones were fixed in place by melted lead poured from above. She heard a bit of a rehearsal on the Christ Church organ, the same passage repeated many times.

She met Jon for lunch at another pub on Corn Market. He was excited about some things he’d found in a seventeenth-century manuscript. She was pleased that he was pleased.

“There’s a play on tonight,” she said. “*School for Scandal*. Want to go?”

Jon looked up from the abstracted gaze at his cheese and chutney sandwich. He’s really looking at one of his manuscripts, she thought.

“Didn’t we see that in London?”

“Yes, but this is a different director, different cast. I’d like to see how they do it.”

“I’d like to,” he said. “but I ought to go over this stuff so I can make good use of my time in the library tomorrow.”

“But that room is so cold. And you can’t work in the lounge, with that TV.”

“I can work in the undergraduate library. But why don’t you go?”

“Maybe I will.”

He focused on her, touched her hand. “I’m sorry. I wish things were better for you here.”

“I’m all right.”

“I know you like plays.”

“You don’t much, do you?”

He looked down for a moment. “I like plays, but I’m not crazy about theatre. I think I’d rather read plays than see them. Me and Charles Lamb. I’d rather stage them in my imagination than see what someone else thinks.” He smiled. “My Hamlet is a lot smarter and better-looking than what’s-his-name at the Old Vic.”

“Well, I like to see how different people do the same script. I learn a lot about the play that my imagination doesn’t tell me.”

He picked up his bag and coat. “This is an interesting conversation, but I’ve got to go. We could continue it at breakfast. Astonish the silent Brits with our literary acumen.”

She kissed his cheek. “I’ll tell you what I learned from tonight’s performance.”

Lisa sat in excited anticipation waiting for the curtain to rise. The *Guardian* reader from breakfast squeezed by her and took a seat further down the row. He looked back, recognized her, and gave a little nod and smile. She smiled back. He was not as old as she first thought, maybe late fifties. He still had a lot of hair, brushed back on the sides; he was really rather elegant, with that long nose and wide mouth. At the interval, they happened to be side-by-side going up the aisle. Lisa said, “Good evening.”

“Good evening, fellow lodger. Are you enjoying the play?”

“Very much. Don’t you have any bad actors in England?”

He smiled. “Oh, too many. But we have so many trying that those who get to perform seem pretty competent. And we try to hide our failings under our veddy proper diction.” He wagged his eyebrows up and down.

“Are you an actor?”

“Heavens, no, though I seem to be playing Polonius of late.” They both smiled. “Where’s your young man?”

“Working.”

“Pity.” They moved to their separate restrooms.

The clinks and scrapes in the breakfast room accentuated the silence.

“Well, you were certainly a tiger last night,” Lisa said, just loud enough.

Jon’s eyes opened wide. “What?”

“Three times!” She whispered loudly. Lisa noted with satisfaction that the sounds of cutlery and crockery had ceased. She winked at Jon with the eye least visible to the others.

Jon frowned and shook his head. “What are you doing?” She could barely hear him.

“Never mind.”

“I thought we were going to talk about the play. How was it?”

She smiled and whispered lasciviously. “Gooood.”

“And did you learn something new?”

“Mmm hmm.” Her intonation was still suggestive.

Jon frowned and stood. “I’ve got to get to the Bodleian.”

Lisa looked at him with a smile and an appeal in her eyes that she hoped would say lighten up, play the game. Jon only looked puzzled and impatient, shaking his head as he left.

The not-so-old man rattled the pages of his *Guardian*, and the eating resumed.

After brushing her teeth, Lisa gathered her coat, purse, and umbrella. On the way to the door, she looked into the lounge. It was empty and the television was silent. The window was streaked with rain. She sighed with relief, sat down in one of the lumpy easy chairs, and took out the paperback she carried in her coat. She had found several Thurber collections in Penguin paperbacks at Blackwell’s, and was enjoying the return to America, even with the British spelling. But then the *Guardian* reader came in, sat, and opened a large hardcover volume. He hesitated, then smiled at Lisa. “It’s a rare blessing to find the telly off.”

“Yes.” She smiled back, but returned to her book. They read in silence for a while.

He looked up, cleared his throat. “Your young man. An academic?”

“Yes. My husband is here on a Fulbright. He’s in grad school in Boston.”

“Ah.” He paused. “Never been to the States myself. You finding something to do here?”

“I’ve been visiting the colleges. Very interesting.” She looked at his tweed jacket. “Are you a professor?”

“Reader, actually. At Manchester. Classics. Doing a spot of research here. I seem to find myself here every March.”

“A reader is like what we call an associate professor—is that right?”

“I suppose so.” He smiled hesitantly. “Look here. You’re having us on a bit at breakfast, aren’t you?”

Lisa blushed. She looked at the light blue eyes under the bushy grey eyebrows, dancing with amusement. “You caught me.” He smiled more broadly, and Lisa leaned forward conspiratorially. “Everyone is so quiet!”

“Oh dear me yes.” He shook his head.

“If they won’t talk, I thought I’d at least give them something to think about, or talk about later.”

“Jolly good.” He looked off toward the window and smiled thoughtfully. “Ever done any theatre?”

“A little. In college, I was Irena in *Three Sisters*. And—” She broke off.

“Great play. I can see you as Irena. I was Firs in *The Cherry Orchard* once. Some time ago.” He smiled at the memory. Then he leaned forward and stuck out his hand. “I’m Cameron Armstrong. But call me Camel. It’s a name I got at school, when I was all legs and elbows.”

“And I’m Lisa Brock. Nice to meet you.” His grip was firm but not crushing.

They spoke of other plays Lisa had seen in London, and plays he had seen in Manchester. This led to Shakespeare.

“That reminds me of a story Olivier used to tell,” Camel said. “An old actor laddie was touring in the provinces, and had a drop too much in the interval. He was Richard Third.” Camel raised his hand and wagged his head woozily. “Came out and said, ‘The shons of Edward shleep in Abrahamsh bosom.’ A man in the audience shouted out, ‘You’re drunk!’ Richard reeled toward the footlights and said, ‘If you think I’m pissed, wait till you see the Duke of Buckingham.’”

Lisa laughed. “That reminds me of a Brando story. When he was filming ‘Mutiny on the Bounty,’ he was having such a weight problem that he split fifty pairs of pants.” Camel smiled but looked puzzled. Lisa quickly understood. “I should say trousers.” They both laughed.

After a pause Camel asked, “How long are you here?”

“My husband thinks he might be finished today; we go back to London tomorrow.”

“I’m done as well.” He chuckled. “I have an idea. Let me treat you two to dinner tonight. It is possible to find a better meal in this town than these wretched breakfasts. Hate to see you leave believing in the old canard about English food.”

Lisa hesitated. “I’ll have to ask Jon. Thanks for the invitation.”

“Do come. It’ll be fun. I’ll talk a little shop with your husband, but not enough to bore you.”

When Jon returned, Lisa told him about the invitation. He agreed, but without enthusiasm. Then he asked, “What was all that about at breakfast? Are you making some sort of dig about my—my performance?”

“No, that’s not it.” For a second she considered that it might have been. Jon did tend toward routine. But she said, “I was just trying to shake up those stuffy guests. Are you worried about what those people thought?”

He hesitated. “Not really, now that I think about it. But I guess I was embarrassed as a kind of reflex.”

“It was so quiet—I was just having some fun.”

Jon gave an uncertain smile. “You’re an imp.”

Cameron Armstrong—Camel—and Jon shook hands at Lisa’s introduction. Jon was polite but reserved. Camel took them to a restaurant that was unpretentious but solid, with old wood paneling, a fire in the fireplace, white linen tablecloths, and delicious lamb curry. Camel asked Jon about his topic, the tenuous presence or absence of the author in seventeenth-century manuscript collections of verse. He mentioned some aspects of the Greek anthology that had Jon pulling out a note card and scribbling references. Then he turned to Lisa and talked about the theatre, her ambitions, her work back in the States.

“So you did work in the theatre after all.”

“Only in management. I could run the computer and sweet-talk the contributors and soothe the patrons when there was a screw-up about reservations.”

“Never get to tread the boards?” Camel asked.

“Once in a while, when they needed a crowd or a walk-on, or a maid with two lines. But it was great to just be a part of it all.”

“Don’t you want to do more?”

“God, yes. Theatre is addictive.”

They chatted away, smiling at theatrical in-jokes. He really is flirting, Lisa thought. She knew she was. She noticed that Jon was watching them thoughtfully.

Camel turned to Jon. "And you, Jon. Ever do any acting?"

"Not really."

"Never too late. Great fun, if you don't get stage fright."

"Listen." Lisa said. They were quiet, and heard the steady rumble of conversation among the other diners, occasionally punctuated by laughter. "We're talking."

"Yes," Camel said, "must be something about breakfast. Of course Oscar Wilde said only dull people were brilliant at breakfast. So maybe our fellow lodgers are not as dull as they seem."

"Or maybe Oscar was wrong," Lisa said.

Camel smiled and waggled his shaggy eyebrows. "I have a naughty idea. But it will involve Jon's acting debut."

Jon drew back in his chair. "I don't know about that."

Camel described his idea. Jon looked doubtful, but Lisa chortled.

"You could do it, Jon," Lisa said.

"Maybe you could persuade him," Camel said with what Lisa could only have described as a leer.

"Are you going to get us in trouble?" Jon asked.

"Isn't fun worth a little trouble?" Lisa squeezed his arm.

"Theatre is always subversive," Camel said.

Back in their room, Jon grasped Lisa by the shoulders. "I really don't want to do this."

"But why not? You'll never see any of these people again. Think of what a great story it'll make."

"I'm not an actor. I get uncomfortable just thinking about it."

He released her, but Lisa put her arms around his neck and whispered, "Let me persuade you."

At breakfast, the pots went round, the orders were given, the plates brought in, the clinking silence fell. Three packed suitcases stood in the hall.

Jon spoke, a little stiffly. "This has been very enjoyable. You're way better than any of those Soho girls." The clinking stopped. Lisa nodded encouragement.

"Well, I should hope so. I'm worth it."

"I guess it's time for the bill."

“Cash only.”

Jon pulled out his wallet and started piling up pound notes. Lisa looked at them and said loudly, “It’s not enough.”

“It’s all I’ve got.” Heads began to turn warily. “I just paid for our room.”

“You lying bastard.” Lisa stood.

“Calm down, you’re making a scene,” Jon said. Lisa thought he was especially convincing with this line.

Cameron Armstrong stood and approached the table. “My dear young lady,” he said to Lisa. “May I help you?”

“I don’t know.”

“I assure you,” Camel said, “I know how to treat a lady. And I have enough.”

“Do you now?”

“Yes. Why don’t you come along with me to Manchester?”

“Well, all right.” She tossed her head at Jon and took the arm Camel gallantly held out for her. “I’ve always relied on the kindness of strangers,” she said, in a melting southern accent. They made their exit.

In the hall, Camel held the hand that held his arm, and said softly, “I wish you could come with me.”

She was surprised at his tone. Was he still just flirting? She was also surprised at the flash of pleasure she felt at the invitation. But she patted his hand and said, “Not this time.” She smiled and pointed to Jon, who rose from the table, looked at the now frankly staring eyes and open mouths, and made an awkward bow. *Exeunt omnes.*

On the sidewalk, Lisa put her hands on Camel’s shoulders and kissed his cheek. He gave her a hug, then held out his hand to Jon. “Stars, both of you. Thanks for giving an old man a giggle.”

In the cab, Jon exhaled loudly. “Glad that’s over. I’m not a performer.”

“You could be.” She hugged his arm. “We’ll get a lot of laughs out of that little bit of guerilla theatre.”

Jon turned away and spoke with an edge in his voice. “Well, get all you can out of it, because you won’t get me into anything like that again.”

Six years later, in March, Lisa entered the breakfast room of the same Oxford bed-and-breakfast. She was alone, her hair was shorter, and fine lines around her mouth suggested determination. Much was as she had remembered it. The landlady was a bit greyer and heavier, and a stout girl with thick glasses and short brown hair had replaced the spike-haired waitress.

There was a younger couple, French or Canadian, chattering in defiance of the custom of silence, and oblivious to the disapproving stares of an older couple who were clearly British. A single man at a corner table was hidden behind *The Guardian*. He lowered the paper and raised his eyebrows to read the top of the page.

“Camel?”

The paper crumpled down. “Lisa?” He stood, touching the table for a second, and held out his arms. She could feel the bones in his shoulders as they embraced. “How wonderful to see you again!”

“You look just the same,” she said.

He shook his head and waved her to a chair at his table. “You look even better than in my memory, and I’m no mean fantasist.”

They sat, and Lisa gave her breakfast order to the waitress. Camel looked at her steadily, smiling. “Another Fulbright?”

“No. Believe it or not, I’m here with the Brattle Players. Acting.”

“Marvelous. Aren’t you the group doing Chekhov? Are you Irena?”

“No, Masha in *Three Sisters*. And Nina in *The Seagull*.”

“Ah. I’ll book my tickets this morning.”

“I can’t believe we’re here. When our manager told us we were playing England, I told him that was bearing coals to Newcastle. He said we weren’t playing Newcastle.” They both laughed.

Camel looked over her shoulder. “Where’s your young man? I’ve forgotten his name.”

“Jon. He’s in Kansas. He got a job at the university there.” She hesitated. “I didn’t go with him. When he got the job, I got a part. It was Viola in *Twelfth Night*. I’m ashamed at how easy the decision to stay was.” She looked away, recalling Jon’s resigned look when she told him of her decision. “We tried commuting for a while, but it wasn’t working.” Her voice dropped. “Then we both found other people—or I guess other people found us.” On her last trip to Kansas, Jon introduced her to an intense young woman with long dark hair and tinted glasses, Jon’s graduate assistant. When Jon told her over the phone that he had “found someone,” she knew who it was. Soon afterward, Lisa found herself responding to the urgings of Bob, who played Orsino to her Viola. She thought about Camel a lot at the time: she remembered feeling a kind of steadiness in him as well as fun.

Lisa’s breakfast arrived. They were silent. Camel watched her thoughtfully as she ate. Lisa sipped her coffee. The French couple laughed.

Lisa smiled and nodded toward them. “I’m glad they’re here—otherwise I couldn’t talk to you.”

“So you’re on your own now? No children?”

“Yes and no. Yes, I’m on my own and there are no kids.”

Camel leaned forward and frowned. “Are you all right? Happy with your decision?”

Lisa took advantage of a mouthful of toast before answering. “Sometimes.” Camel’s look of concern deepened. “Oh, I’m all right. I stay busy, and I enjoy the theatre work. It’s what I wanted. How about you?”

Camel had partly retired, but still did some research. “Wanted to finish up a paper I’ve been diddling with for years. Get it off my plate. And it’s March, and I seem to be like an old migrating bird, coming here every year.” He smiled. “And I really did play Polonius last year at the college. Quite a lark.”

They continued to talk until Lisa became aware that they were alone in the room except for the waitress, who was noisily cleaning the other tables.

“I must go,” she said, rising. “Listen. Come backstage after the play tonight and join the cast for a pub crawl. They’ll love you.”

“My crawling days are over, but I’ll have one small sherry with you. I know I’ll want to congratulate you on your performance. But may I take you to dinner before the play?”

“I’d love it, but it will have to be early and very light. I don’t want to throw up on stage with you watching.”

They walked down the High together, her hand resting lightly on his arm. She parted with him at the theater and he headed toward the Bodleian.

They had dinner in the same restaurant as six years before. Lisa thought its elegance was fraying a bit at the edges, but her soup and salad were adequate. Camel had a single lamb chop, potatoes, and asparagus, no wine. She had hot tea. Camel kept up his end with stories about the theatre in Manchester. Lisa felt herself yearning for something, something she thought she saw behind Camel’s blue eyes. She had a vision of Camel in a cozy apartment in Manchester, wearing a navy cardigan, reading a thick book, sipping sherry. He would look up from his book and smile at her, as he was smiling now across the table. She would look for his slippers, like Eliza. She sang silently, “Ow, wouldn’t it be lovely.”

That night she played Nina in *The Seagull*. It wasn’t the largest part, but she liked it because she played a naïve stage-struck girl in the first acts and a woman matured by experience in the last. In the first act, Nina delivers a pretentiously symbolic speech written by the ambitious young writer,

Konstantin. His mother, a self-centered actress, interrupts and Konstantin stops the play. The challenge was not to make the speech effective in the first act, but to give it feeling and significance when Nina repeats part of it in the last act, when she returns as a real actress, an artist. That night Lisa hesitated over a line when she repeated the speech, a barely noticeable pause. Yet Lisa felt it as a slip, and knew she had been distracted. After the curtain calls, she began to weep as she hurried to the dressing room. Bob, the actor who played Trigorin to her Nina, and who she had been sleeping with, grabbed her in a hug and asked her what was wrong. She shook her head and slipped away. She managed to stop crying by the time she had removed her makeup and dressed.

Camel met her backstage, and praised her warmly.

“Oh, but I flubbed a line in my speech in the last act.”

“Oh no, that was perfectly appropriate. Very method. Amazing that Nina remembered any of that.”

“But I didn’t intend it. It wasn’t real acting.”

“Ah, but you used something you were feeling. You made it work in the service of the play.”

She smiled and touched his cheek. “Thank you.”

The cast welcomed Camel, and amid much noise and laughter, poured into a neighbouring pub. As he promised, Camel confined himself to one small sherry. Lisa threw back a double whisky. Camel charmed her colleagues with theatre stories while Lisa watched Bob flirt with Heather, the ingénue Irena of *Three Sisters*. Lisa had another double. When the cast rose to move to another pub, Camel excused himself. Lisa insisted on seeing him home. As she stepped off the curb, it seemed to waver, and Camel caught her arm. They walked in silence to the bed and breakfast, Camel still holding her. At the door, Lisa turned to him, draped her arms around his neck and kissed him on the lips. “Is your offer still open? Do you still have enough for a lady in distress?”

Camel held her close and patted her back. “Oh, my dear Lisa, how I wish I did. But I think my wife might object.”

“Oh. I didn’t think you were married. You never mentioned her.” She dropped her arms.

“What a rotter I am. We’ve been married so long I sometimes think everyone must know. She has her own interests, which don’t include the theatre, so she just didn’t come up in our conversations. I’m so old and married that I suppose I thought it safe to flirt with a pretty young woman like

you, especially since you were married too at the time. I am so very sorry, for I am indeed fond of you.”

“So am I. Sorry.” She took a deep breath to clear her head. What was she thinking, springing such a proposition on poor Camel. But she felt a sharp pang of disappointment.

They met for breakfast the next morning, but the French couple was gone, so they spoke little. The usual silence reigned. “We’re off to York today,” she said.

“Give me your address in the States,” he said. “I’d like to keep in touch.”

Lisa wrote down her address, rose, and gave Camel a chaste parting kiss.

Months later, back in Boston, Lisa pulled her mail from her apartment mailbox and found a small package from England among the bills and catalogues. She dropped the mail on the table under the row of boxes and tore open the package. It was the collected plays of Chekhov, from the library of Cameron Armstrong. Then she noticed a thin blue air letter. It was not from Camel, but from a solicitor. The letter informed her that Camel had died of cancer; he had been diagnosed three months before their last meeting in Oxford. His wife had died of the same type of cancer eight years earlier. He had wanted her to have this particular book.

Lisa hugged the book and wept in tribute to his fine performance.