

BASIL

Have you prepared yourself for Claire?

SIMS

What do you mean, prepared myself?

BASIL

He hesitates, as if about to say something and thinks better of it.

With her latest film over, she'll be in need of a role to play while she's between engagements. As such, when she crosses our threshold, she will immediately resume playing the role of gracious wife and occasional Oscar-winning actress. In turn, she'll expect you to enact your part: devoted husband of an international treasure. And an occasional scribbler in his own right.

SIMS

That's rather funny, Basil.

BASIL

I'm so glad you're amused.

SIMS

I've missed Claire. There is something about a woman in the house that puts things in order.

BASIL

Yes.

SIMS

Oh, I didn't mean that you're not the master of order around here. Look how you take care of things. I wouldn't have known about poor Edna Millay if it weren't for you.

BASIL

You could pick up a newspaper.

SIMS

I'm already an ink-stained wretch from putting my own thoughts to paper. Why should I add to the smut on my fingers when I have you?

BASIL

Speaking of smut, where is the dear little chap?

SIMS

Stop.

BASIL

Sorry, where is little Conrad?

SIMS

Little Conrad's name is actually Clay, as you very well know. He seems to be out for a swim.

BASIL

To bathe his own stained fingers?

SIMS

Don't be disgusting.

BASIL

May I expect *Clay* to join us for lunch?

SIMS

Clay may have other engagements.

BASIL

Good. He might return with a little pocket money of his own for a change, instead of putting out his tan and manly hand—palms up—in your direction.

SIMS

I meant that Clay may have an audition or interview somewhere.

BASIL

Really?

SIMS

God knows he's got the looks.

BASIL

Mmm.

SIMS

You were once a breathtakingly handsome boy with no visible means of support, too, as I recall.

BASIL

And along came you. Perhaps I should have your towels monogrammed “VMS” for Visible Means of Support.

SIMS

Anything further?

BASIL

Yes. Your absurdly good-looking “technical advisor” is due in an hour. Your absurdly good-natured producer in a mere twenty minutes. I couldn’t space them out any further than that. Something about a baptism for one and a script meeting for the other, I think. Since you’ve drunk breakfast, may I suggest that you ingest something solid for lunch?

SIMS

That would be divine.

BASIL

Does Mr. Grant keep, as they say, kosher?

SIMS

Mr. Grant is Jewish?

BASIL

Less Jew. More “ish.”

SIMS

(Flaring)

The Jews are still God’s Chosen!

BASIL

(Reacting to Sims’s sudden passion)

Where in the world did that come from?

SIMS

I have great regard for Mr. Grant and his people.

BASIL

Producers?

SIMS

Don't be disrespectful.

BASIL

(Flaring himself now)

And don't order me about as if I'm some hired toady!

They both take a moment.

SIMS

Will Claire be here in time for lunch?

BASIL

I haven't the vaguest idea. And for all I know, she's found some new diet out in the desert and will want nothing but cactus paddles or sagebrush or some such.

SIMS

So that everyone is accommodated, let's have a simple chef's salad. No ham. Perhaps a cold soup.

BASIL

Fine.

BASIL starts to leave.

SIMS

Basil—

BASIL

What?

SIMS

I can't seem to get that bloody film introduction into my brain. Am I going senile?

BASIL

No.

SIMS

The new play isn't coming along very well, either.

BASIL

May I be frank?

SIMS

Please.

BASIL

When I met you, lo these many, you could write a play in 28 days. You also accepted every party invitation and indulged in every sybaritic activity you could dream up. Why? You were young and the martinis hadn't quite done their damage. Now, you're in the full flower of middle age. This is a different time and a different place. What is it that Darwin said? "Adapt or die."

SIMS

(Pause.)

Darwin never said that. Christ—I mean—gosh, I hate when the great are misquoted. It happens to me all the time.

(Pause.)

In future, be less frank.

BASIL

Did you really just say "gosh"?

SIMS

What if I can't adapt?

BASIL

You can. But dig a bit deeper. Don't put your best lines into the mouths of simpering flappers and louche divorcees.

SIMS

What the hell does that mean?

BASIL

It means that you, your favorite leading ladies *and* the century are all past fifty. That doesn't have to mean decline. It actually means progress, at least where *some* things are concerned. But then I see you chasing the likes of little Clay, and well, it's...unseemly. No, it's worse than that. It's passé.

SIMS

It hasn't stopped you from moving on to younger objects of affection from time to time.

BASIL

I am not Sims Glendenning. I am “an urbane and discreet amanuensis who appears whenever the need arises for the clarification of a date or the refill of an ice bucket.” Your profile in the *New Yorker*. 1947.

SIMS

I’m really not sure this play is working. It’s a comedy, and I don’t know if it’s funny.

BASIL

When Claire arrives, we can read it and find out. Meanwhile, may I give you one last talking-to before I go inspect the food for cloven hooves?

SIMS

I can’t take too much more frankness.

BASIL

This one won’t hurt. You’ve led a fascinating life *away* from the typewriter. You once believed in saving the world. You served your country with distinction. Some of your best so-called “fiction” is in fact pretty accurate accounts of that service.

SIMS

And now that I’m no longer either behind enemy lines or dancing with Lady Astor, what do you suggest I write about?

BASIL

Just write about something that awakens the passion in you.

(Pause)

Who says we’re not behind enemy lines now?

SIMS

I’m—really scared.

BASIL

Yes, I know.

There is a moment between them. BASIL goes to comfort SIMS. A hand on the shoulder suddenly becomes emotionally and erotically charged. BASIL impulsively kisses SIMS with true love and desire, perhaps for the first time in a long time.

SIMS

Golly.

BASIL

Golly. Gosh. It's like kissing a bobby soxer!

SIMS

(Laughs. Then, concerned)

Don't do that again, please. There is a time and place---

CLAIRE is heard from the hallway.

CLAIRE'S VOICE

Woo-oooh! Hello to all!

SIMS

My point made manifest.

She enters the room "in character" as the lovable star. Looks around and sees only BASIL and SIMS.

CLAIRE

Is anyone visiting?

BASIL AND SIMS

No.

She drops the persona.

CLAIRE

Ah. Thank Christ.

BASIL

How is Nanny Snickety today?

CLAIRE

That one's already come and gone in the cinemas, darling. I just wrapped a glorious cameo in some wide-screen opus set in, Christ save us, ancient Thrace.

BASIL

Are you once again the cheery maid to Hedy Lamarr?

CLAIRE

Fuck you. I will have you know I am the reigning Empress. I rescue the hero from certain death with a rousing speech pleading mercy from my despotic husband.

SIMS

Claire, a clergyman will be arriving within the hour. In one minute you have managed to take our Lord's name in vain twice and uttered the most vile of Anglo-Saxon words.

CLAIRE

Which one is that, darling?

BASIL

"Fuck," dear.

CLAIRE

Really? Do you find that vile? Granted, I wouldn't like to see it uttered on stage – that would be truly vulgar. But what the world doesn't hear, we may whisper when the front door closes.

SIMS

Well, I am begging you to contain yourself when that front door opens and Father Theodor walks through it.

CLAIRE

Father Who? Is he going door to door for a handout to the Pagan babies or something?

SIMS

He has agreed to vet my script, serving as a kind of consultant.

CLAIRE

On what?

SIMS

It's a comedy about converting to Catholicism. I want to make sure I get the facts right.

CLAIRE

Isn't the good Father a bit concerned that you will make fun of his beliefs?

SIMS

The good Father is well versed in the ways of this latter-day Sodom and Gomorrah. However, he also has an encyclopedic knowledge of his faith. He is merely here as what the studios call a "technical advisor."

BASIL

(to CLAIRE:)

Rather like that wizened professor from UCLA who advised you on just how you should bow and scrape before Tyrone Power in that last epic.

CLAIRE

I'm familiar with the nomenclature, Basil. "Oscar" and I have been at it for quite some time.

BASIL

You said it. I didn't.

SIMS

How brilliant of you to work in your Academy Award in a totally superfluous context.

BASIL

As if we could ever forget. I believe it is bathed in eternal light on the mantel. Sims, why don't you ask Father Theodor if the Vatican can certify it as a sacred object?

SIMS

(Flaring again)

Do not mock the church! At any moment, this young man of the Lord, whom I greatly respect, will arrive for lunch. I do not want any offensive talk in his presence.

A silence.

BASIL

(To CLAIRE:)

Speaking of lunch, are you reducing these days or may I serve more than weeds?

CLAIRE

You may whip up whatever you like. I'm at liberty.

SIMS

I've already had a cocktail. Does this mean you'd like one?

CLAIRE

Mmmm....no. Yes.

SIMS

Ah, how I've missed your trademark "No/Yes."

CLAIRE

Just a microscopic gin and tonic.

SIMS fixes them both a drink.

BASIL

Excuse me.

SIMS

(Indicating that BASIL is no longer needed and  
can leave)

Call us when the guests arrive.

BASIL

Ah, my inflection was imprecise. When a *servant* says "excuse me," it means, "forgive me for having to brush against you as I ladle the soup". When *one's equal* sees another man and a woman about to have a cocktail, "excuse me" can be understood to be a polite substitute for "*what about me, you goddamn luses?*"

SIMS

You just admonished me for drinking too early. I assumed you take your own advice. And watch your language!

BASIL

Not until I've had cold gin and no tonic!

SIMS

Very well. No need to be touchy.

CLAIRE

I'm sorry, Basil. As ever. Sorry for being the grande dame. I'm home. I should be able to drop the mask more easily. Maybe if I went to my room and got out of this goddamn--er, bloody—oh, fuck it, this blasted girdle.

SIMS

*Please, dear.*

BASIL

Yes, Claire. A producer is stopping by. You'll want to stay corseted in case he offers you something.

BASIL exits.

CLAIRE

(To SIMS:)

Mr. Grant and I are acquainted. In fact, we had lunch day before yesterday.

SIMS

What was he doing on location in Tombstone, or Stonehenge, or wherever you were?

CLAIRE

(Pause.)

He met with my director on a possible project.

SIMS

He'd better damn well be paying primary attention to mine!

CLAIRE

(a propos of nothing)

He's a nice man. When was the last time you could say that about a producer?

SIMS

I don't want nice producers. No balls.

CLAIRE

I don't know about that. He was relating a story at lunch about screaming Selznick down once. That would have to be a first.

SIMS

We'll see.

CLAIRE

(Looking around)

Is Clay here?

SIMS

Clay is always here.

CLAIRE

What, do you mean like the threat of rain, or fly shit?

SIMS

I mean he has a room in this house.

CLAIRE

I'm painfully aware of Clay's current influence. I meant, is he physically present?

SIMS

No.

CLAIRE

Hm. "Clay." Is that his real name, or is it just to remind us that he is here to be molded into something more valuable?

SIMS

I gather it is a variation on his given name.

CLAIRE

Which was?

SIMS.

...Cletis. (pronounced "CLAY-tiss")

CLAIRE

What or who was Cletis?

SIMS

Thank you for asking. Father Theodor informs me that Cletis was the third Pope. Or, as Father Theodor prefers to call him, the third Bishop of Rome. He was also known as "Anacletus." He was a martyr.

CLAIRE

God, how I hate martyrs. What did he do, get eaten by a lion?

SIMS

The records are unclear. His name means “one who has been called.”

CLAIRE

Well, I can't possibly think of a less appropriate name for our little Cletus down by the sand. You can call him till you're hoarse and he won't come in until he's good and ready.

SIMS

“Clay” has no knowledge of his name's origin.

CLAIRE

(Drily)

I'm stunned. Well, perhaps our latter-day Cletis will martyr himself yet. One can only hope.

SIMS gives her a weary look.

CLAIRE

I'm sorry, darling. I don't mean to be such a bitch. Really.

SIMS

(Musing)

Perhaps it's the times we live in. They said “*fin de siècle*” to refer to the end of the last century. What is this, “*au milieu de siècle*”

CLAIRE

Ooh, I like that, Sims. Really. Put that in your play.

SIMS

Perhaps I will.

Pause. CLAIRE has something to say.

CLAIRE

Sims ---

She is interrupted by BASIL entering with JOHN.

BASIL

Mr. Grant informs me that he does not keep kosher.

SIMS

Basil, really! Mr. Grant's religion is--

BASIL

(Over SIMS)

---Honestly, Sims, I can't imagine what you're---

CLAIRE

(Interrupting)

--Hello, John.

JOHN

Hello, Claire.

They kiss socially but rather longer than expected.

JOHN

Sims.

SIMS

Mr. Grant.

JOHN

Please call me John.

SIMS

Not until we've had our first quarrel on the road in New Haven. That's my rule.

JOHN

*(Laughs.)*

So be it.

BASIL

Are we waiting lunch for "Father Flanagan"?

SIMS

Father Theodor. No, we are not.

BASIL

I'll have everything laid out in five minutes.

SIMS

And *we* will proceed to lunch at our leisure.

BASIL

Shall I set a place for Clay?

SIMS

Oh, I suppose so.

BASIL

I'll line a chair with oilcloth in case he chooses to eat before changing out of his swimsuit.

SIMS ignores him.

JOHN

Have I met Clay?

Awkward silence.

CLAIRE

I don't believe you have. He's a young actor who's bunking here for a while. Friend of the couple who own this house. He was sort of a codicil to our rental agreement.

BASIL

Well done, Claire.

BASIL exits. There is a bit of a silence.

JOHN

I'd ask how the script is coming, but I know enough not to.

SIMS

I'm duly impressed.

JOHN

I'd ask how you're doing with the intro for the film, but ---

SIMS

You won't.

JOHN

I won't. What would be a pleasant and safe opening gambit, would you say?

CLAIRE

Tell Sims how pleased the studio is with your current project.

JOHN

I'd rather not. First, I'm not sure if they're pleased or not. I think they like that it's coming in on time and on budget.

SIMS

Believe it or not, Mr. Grant, that was a splendid opening gambit. I'm relaxing by the second. Would you like a drink?

JOHN

I don't drink.

SIMS

Sadly, this has just dropped you back down a bit in my overall estimation.

JOHN

Well, look at it this way, Mr. Glendenning: you know I won't be off on a bender during that out-of-town tryout.

CLAIRE

Oh, don't count on that. Sims out of town with a play has been known to send Mormons into the nearest saloon and Christian Scientists screaming for a doctor.

SIMS

We're veering close to reviving your interest in the progress of my play. New subject, please.

CLAIRE

Well, I for one am thrilled to be unemployed for a while.

SIMS

No, you're not.

CLAIRE

No, truly. I'm curiously elated. Of course, it could also be that every casting person has decided I've pushed over from middle-aged to elderly.

JOHN

As I said the other day, that kind of talk is beneath you.

SIMS fails to register this.

SIMS

Oh, it's just a prelude to---

CLAIRE

(To JOHN:)

It may be difficult for you to believe, but right after the first war, I was cast in a rep company season out in the provinces as Jessica, Perdita and, yes, Juliet.

SIMS

(Who has heard this before, many times)

--That.

JOHN

I'm afraid only Juliet rings a bell.

CLAIRE

Sims, do you remember when I could play slim and wistful ingénues?

SIMS

If you say so, dear.

BASIL enters with FATHER THEODOR.

BASIL

Do you remember when I could do the same?

SIMS shoots him a disapproving look.

FATHER THEODOR

I'm sorry to arrive unannounced.

(To BASIL, who scares him slightly:)

I can wait in the other room if Mr. Glendenning isn't ready for me.

SIMS

Mr. Glendenning is very pleased to see you, Father. Father Theodor, may I present my wife, who probably needs no introduction, but loves one anyway?

CLAIRE

(She is the star again and will remain so until the end of the scene.)

How do you do?

FATHER THEODOR

It's a very great pleasure, Miss Morgan.

SIMS

And my producer, who is currently paying your consulting fee: Mr. Grant.

FATHER THEODOR

Mr. Grant and I have met several times on various projects.

CLAIRE

Forgive me, father—

BASIL

--For I have sinned.

CLAIRE

Father, what exactly do you mean by "projects?"

FATHER THEODOR

I've been called on by studios to provide the same kind of consulting Mr. Glendenning has requested.

CLAIRE

Such as?

FATHER THEODOR

Oh, it can be as simple as making sure that, say, Edward G. Robinson genuflects correctly –

CLAIRE

Dear Eddie. Such a fine actor—

FATHER THEODOR

And sometimes I look over a scene involving priests to make sure there are no misrepresentations.

BASIL

Heaven forbid.

SIMS

Basil! Now seems like a marvelous cue for you to set out our luncheon.

BASIL

God sayeth let it be so, and it was so.

BASIL exits.