

**BUI-DOI: THE DUST OF LIFE**

A Drama in Two Acts

by

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(BUI-DOI: THE DUST OF LIFE)

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David W. Christner

CAST OF CHARACTERS (2 women, 3 men)

TAYLOR MUNROE.....53, a mystery writer and Vietnam veteran

CLAIRE JAMES.....50, Taylor's wife, a successful illustrator

NICK ADAMS.....53, a cop, Taylor's life-long friend and a Vietnam veteran

WEI CHAN.....29, Taylor's Amerasian son

MING CHAN.....48, Wei's Chinese mother

The Setting

Simple area set. Use lights to concentrate action in a particular area. Realism is not as important as mood. Scenes take place at various locations in San Francisco, including a the living room and bedroom of a comfortable downtown apartment or condo, a park bench in the Lafayette Park, a bar frequented by off-duty cops, and wedding "chapel" in Las Vegas.

The Time

San Francisco, CA. Summer 1998.

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ACT I, SCENE I

SCENE: LIGHTS COME UP ON TAYLOR MUNROE, 53, and his wife, CLAIRE JAMES, 50, in the bedroom of a fashionable apartment or condo in downtown San Francisco. CLAIRE is a successful graphics artist at the pinnacle of her career, and Taylor is a hack writer who manages to stay afloat writing detective novels and advertising copy. This is the second marriage for Claire and the third for Taylor. This marriage was a mistake from the beginning. The twin beds in the room are an indication of how bad things have gotten. Taylor is sitting up in a bed reading the Chronicle; Claire is at her dressing table brushing her hair, studying her image appreciatively in the mirror, and sipping from a glass of scotch.

Elliott called today.

CLAIRE

(No response from Taylor.)

Taylor, I'm talking to you.

CLAIRE

I know. I'm listening.

TAYLOR

CLAIRE

No you're not.

TAYLOR

Yes I am—with one ear. And I have the other one to the grindstone.

CLAIRE

It's your nose that you put to the grindstone, not your ears.

TAYLOR

That depends on what you're grinding. Take corn for example.

CLAIRE

In any case, what I said was: "Elliott called today!"

TAYLOR (absently)

Elliott—Ness?

CLAIRE

No! Elliott Ness is dead! But if he weren't, now just why would he call me?

TAYLOR

Well I think Mr. Ness just might be interested in the copious amounts of bootleg scotch you evidently have squirreled away somewhere.

CLAIRE

What are you talking about? I don't have any bootleg scotch squirreled away.

TAYLOR

I've never seen you *buy* a bottle, and yet—the well never runs dry.

CLAIRE

I have it delivered.

TAYLOR

Delivered? Somebody actually *delivers* scotch?

CLAIRE

You have dog food delivered!

TAYLOR

That's different. I buy in bulk.

CLAIRE

Well, so do . . . never mind!

TAYLOR

Maybe we should trade Black Dog in on a Scotch terrier.

CLAIRE

How did Marilyn ever manage to stay married to you for 20 odd years?

TAYLOR

They were odd all right. And she drank.

CLAIRE

Scotch?

TAYLOR

Gin.

(She pauses and takes a few strokes of the brush through her long hair. Then she sips her scotch.)

CLAIRE

As I was saying, Elliott—my son—called today.

TAYLOR

Why did Elliott—your son—call?

CLAIRE

Not for money if that's what you're implying.

(He stops reading.)

TAYLOR

I'm not implying *anything*. I'm just sitting here peacefully in my very own twin bed trying to get caught up *on* with out getting caught up *in* current world events. (A beat.) How much does want?

CLAIRE

Five thousand dollars, but he didn't *ask* me for it.

TAYLOR

No?

CLAIRE

No. He just mentioned that they might have to down scale some if . . . I can't help them in their time of need.

TAYLOR

What? No skiing the Swiss Alps this winter! Life is *so* unfair.

(She gives him a hard look.)

CLAIRE

I have worked very hard to give my children everything they need.

TAYLOR

Of course you have. So have I.

CLAIRE

You've never given my children anything.

TAYLOR

I've tried to give *my* children everything they've needed.

(She sips her scotch.)

CLAIRE

He's off to New York next week.

TAYLOR

New York?

CLAIRE

Yes, but New York is beside the point. *He* is who it is that is important.

TAYLOR

He?

CLAIRE (irritated)

*Elliott*, dammit! He's presenting a paper at a national conference as a matter of fact, not that you care anything about my children.

TAYLOR

I care! But with your children's needs, my children's needs, your needs, my needs . . . there's a lot of needy people in this world let me tell you.

CLAIRE

In any case, he—*Elliott*—has become quite an authority on ground water pollution.

TAYLOR

Good for Elliott, watching out for his mother like that.

CLAIRE

What do you mean by that?

TAYLOR

I mean it's good to have a son so concerned with the quality of the water that gets mixed with his mother's scotch that he makes it his life's work.

CLAIRE

I mix bottled water with my scotch, not *ground* water.

TAYLOR

Oh. Well, what the hell—ground water. Ground hogs. Ground beef. It really doesn't matter now does it?

CLAIRE

Don't be so cynical, Taylor. Of course it *matters*. Elliott is doing quite well in ground water.

TAYLOR

Compared to whom?

CLAIRE

Not compared to *anybody*! I'm simply pleased that he is doing so well. As is Cynthia.

TAYLOR

Great! You're kids are doing well; my kids are doing well. The only question that remains then is: are they doing any *good*?

CLAIRE

For whom?

TAYLOR (thinks, then)

*Anybody* . . . other than themselves.

CLAIRE

*What* are you talking about?

TAYLOR

I mean, in a philosophical sense. You see the underlying principle on which my world view is constructed is that the world doesn't work right.

CLAIRE

If it did, you wouldn't have anything to write about.

TAYLOR

Which just illustrates how screwed up things really are.

CLAIRE (irritated)

Are you taking your medication?

TAYLOR

Medication? You call it medication. I call it happy pills!

CLAIRE

That's not what it is!

TAYLOR

No?

CLAIRE (insistent)

No! Are you taking it?

TAYLOR

Haven't taken it for a long time. I'm through with it.

CLAIRE

No you're not!

TAYLOR

Yes, I am. You're the one it makes happy, not me!

CLAIRE

That's not true.

TAYLOR

Yes, it is. You get depressed when I don't take Prozac. Not me. I never should have taken it in the first place. All it does is hide the truth so you don't have to deal with it. When I'm miserable I want to know it, so *I* can do something about it.

CLAIRE

You'll get in that black hole of . . . cosmic loneliness. I *know* you, and I won't have it! I'm the one that suffers when you're unhappy.

TAYLOR

I don't get in any black hole. I just get a little *blue*, that's all. Right now I feel great! No headaches; sleeping okay; creative juices are flowing, and I feel like I can do anything I want from writing a new book to healing some of the world's ills. But for your sake, I'll start with the book.

CLAIRE

Ha! You think you can change the world? You have trouble changing a flat tire. (A beat.)  
And, Taylor, you cannot single-handedly do anything about the misery in the world.

TAYLOR

Maybe I'll start with some misery closer to home then.

CLAIRE

Don't do this, Taylor. Please!

TAYLOR

Don't what? Express my displeasure over our discontent!

CLAIRE

Things aren't that bad.

TAYLOR

Can you even remember the last time you touched me?

CLAIRE

Yes!

TAYLOR

When?

CLAIRE

I don't remember . . . exactly.

TAYLOR

How about the last time you let me touch you?

CLAIRE

I'm going through menopause Taylor, and it's no picnic I can assure you; you have no conception of what it's like—you can't understand what I'm going through because you're a man. And men don't have menopause; men just keep having children.

TAYLOR

Well I understand this much: if it weren't menopause, it would be cystitis or a yeast infection or a migraine or some other damn thing to prevent me from touching you. And you know something . . . I don't even care anymore. By trying to accommodate your endless string of female maladies, I've managed to kill my sexual desire for you and maybe even for any other woman. Now *that* is something that I do find depressing.

CLAIRE

Just give me some time, Taylor. I'll get through this female malady if you'll give me a chance, and things will be better. You'll see.

TAYLOR

Better for whom?

CLAIRE

Both of us.

TAYLOR

How do you know?

CLAIRE

I don't *know* for crying out loud! Just take my word for it. Things will be better . . .

TAYLOR

Because they couldn't get much worse?

CLAIRE

Yes. No! Just wait. Things are going to change for the better . . . for *both* of us.

TAYLOR

Okay, that's cool. I'll just bide my time then and lay off the Viagra since I don't have anybody to lay on.

(She gives him a look, turns back to the mirror and continues brushing her hair and sipping her scotch.)

CLAIRE

Did you see the mail?

TAYLOR

You know I never look at the mail. The newspaper has all the bad new I can take; the mail is just bills and personal bad tidings of great woe.

CLAIRE

You have a letter from Hong Kong.

TAYLOR

China?

CLAIRE

Denmark!

TAYLOR

A letter from Hong Kong? Now that's definitely an intriguing turn of events. (A beat.) Undoubtedly it's from one of my adoring fans in the far-flung reaches of the former British colonial empire.

CLAIRE

Undoubtedly. (A beat.) It's on the dresser.

(He continues reading the paper. She finally turns to him.)

CLAIRE

Aren't you going to read it?

TAYLOR

Didn't you?

CLAIRE

It's addressed to *you* . . . from a publisher in Hong Kong.

TAYLOR

Thought you didn't read it.

CLAIRE

The name is on the return address—World Books or something.

TAYLOR

World Books or something. Never heard of them. (A beat.) Do you think the Chinese are taking to reading American detective novels?

CLAIRE

I wouldn't know anything about that.

TAYLOR

I think the Chinese would have better taste than that.

CLAIRE

This man isn't interested in your detective novels.

TAYLOR

No?

CLAIRE (straining)

You're doing it again.

TAYLOR

I am. What?

CLAIRE

Responding to me in inane incomplete interrogative utterances.

TAYLOR

So what's wrong with that? Tarzan communicated with Jane in just that manner, and their relationship was one of the most stable in the jungle.

CLAIRE

Had Jane tried one of the other apes, she might have found it to her liking. Certainly the level of communication wouldn't have differed significantly.

TAYLOR

So what is this Chinese publisher from Hong Kong interested in if he's not interested in my detective novels? What else is there?

CLAIRE

Why don't you read the letter to find out?

TAYLOR

Because it's on the dresser and I'm situated here quite comfortably in my very own twin bed with the Chronicle and all the world's and San Francisco's ills spread out in front of me. Besides, I'd rather you tell me about it.

CLAIRE (turning to him)

All right, I'll tell you what this . . . Mr. Chan—

TAYLOR

Chan! My God! Not *Charlie*?

CLAIRE

No . . . Wei.

TAYLOR (disappointed)

I can understand why Charlie Chan would be interested in detective novels. You're sure it's not Charlie?

CLAIRE

No, it's *not*, Charlie! It Wei—W-e-i. Wei Chan, not Charlie Chan.

TAYLOR

Damn!

CLAIRE

I'm sorry. I'm sure that the fictitious Charlie Chan and the fictional Philip Wright, PI, would have gotten along famously.

TAYLOR

Charlie Chan.

CLAIRE

Anyway, here's the strange part.

TAYLOR

Strange part? You didn't say anything about a strange part.

CLAIRE

The book that Mr. *Wei* Chan is interested in is what constitutes the strange part.

TAYLOR

"What constitutes the strange part." God I love it when you talk like that. (A beat.) What book is it?

CLAIRE

Your Vietnam novel—*War No More*. Remember *that* one?

TAYLOR (surprised)

Of course I do; it's impossible to forget what you don't want to remember, and it's probably the best thing I ever wrote. (A beat.) How did he get his hands on *War No More*? It isn't even published.

CLAIRE

You posted it on the Web?

TAYLOR

For Vietnam veterans and other soldiers of misfortune, not Chinese publishers.

CLAIRE

Maybe he's a refugee or something—one of those boat people. What difference does it make anyway? Nobody has shown an iota of interest in it until now.

TAYLOR

Don't remind me.

CLAIRE

So you should be pleased.

TAYLOR

Of course I should be pleased.

But you're not?  
CLAIRE

I don't think so. I'm a little . . . wary.  
TAYLOR

Take your medication.  
CLAIRE

It's not that.  
TAYLOR

Is something wrong?  
CLAIRE

What could be wrong?  
TAYLOR

(He finally puts the paper aside.)

CLAIRE  
I don't have any idea. A publisher, and by all accounts a very successful one, is interested in your most important book, and you look like . . . Billy Budd at Captain's mast. Have you got something against the Chinese?

Not that I know of.  
TAYLOR

Then what's wrong?  
CLAIRE

I think you need a Prozac.  
TAYLOR

Then take one.  
CLAIRE

(He gets up and exits.)

CLAIRE  
He'll be in town Wednesday. He's setting up his editorial department here, and he wants to meet with you.

TAYLOR (off)

Meet with me!

CLAIRE

To talk about the book! He's going to call tomorrow to confirm. Will you see him?  
(Silence.) Taylor . . .will you see him?

TAYLOR (off)

I'll think about it.

CLAIRE

What's there to think about. (A beat.) Get Nick to check him out. What harm could it do?  
(Silence.) Taylor . . .

TAYLOR (off)

Good idea. I'll have Nick check him out. (A beat.) I thought you said you didn't read the  
letter . . .

CLAIRE

I just scanned it. You're not mad are you . . . Taylor?

(She starts brushing again. LIGHTS COME  
DOWN SLOWLY TO END THE SCENE.)

ACT I, SCENE II

SCENE: LIGHTS COME UP on NICK ADAMS, 54, a cop, and Taylor. They're seated at a table in a bar frequented by off-duty cops. Nick is dressed a little carelessly in a cheap suit; he's a big guy, sincere, honest and completely dedicated to Taylor, who he claims saved his life in Vietnam 30 years ago. He's a little tipsy, sipping a Dewar's and water, but is very aware of what's going on around him. Taylor is drinking some kind of bottled spring water.

NICK

How can you drink that swill?

TAYLOR

The principle is exactly the same as drinking good scotch or bad for that matter . . . you just lift the glass, tilt your head back a little, put the glass to your mouth, and . . .

NICK

All right. All right. Don't start. (A beat.) Remember Tiger beer?

TAYLOR

I try not to.

NICK

Hard thing to forget.

TAYLOR

I think I still have a *slight* hangover.

NICK

Naw, it's a touch of the malaria that you still have. You never get rid of it completely.

TAYLOR

I can verify that fact.

NICK

Tiger beer was in a glass all by itself.

TAYLOR

Class.

NICK

What?

TAYLOR

In a *class* all by itself.

NICK

Not if you're having just one.

TAYLOR

Fine! But it had all that sediment floating around in the bottom of the bottle.

NICK

That was the best part.

TAYLOR

For you maybe.

NICK

No siree, the best part for me was really the *service*.

TAYLOR

So you brought the service home with you.

NICK

And I haven't regretted it for a second in 30 years.

TAYLOR

I should have married so well . . . at least once.

NICK

You keep trying, Buddy, you'll get it right. (A beat.) The thing about Kai is—

TAYLOR

You told me the thing about Kai.

NICK

—that she isn't some subservient Vietnamese; she's the strongest person I've ever known, and I'm confident that she could get by just fine without me. But I don't think I'd last a week without her. (A beat.) So how are things with you and Claire baby?

TAYLOR

Claire baby and I are getting on just fine.

NICK

Don't jerk me around, Pal. I pulled shrapnel out of your ass in Nam.

TAYLOR

You got it backwards, Pal. *I* pulled shrapnel out of *your* ass.

NICK

Yeah, yeah, I got it. And I appreciate the hell out of it.

TAYLOR

It was just a little piece of tin in a very large ass, and it was a long time ago and far away.

NICK

Carried me on your shoulders out of harm's way.

TAYLOR

*I dragged* you all of eight feet, maybe nine.

NICK

Under heavy VC fire.

TAYLOR

That was on the perimeter.

NICK

In coming, by god! The rockets red glare; bombs bursting in air.

TAYLOR

Nick, we were heating K-rations with some C4. Something set it off; the can blew, and you caught a piece of it in your ass while the VC drop a few rounds on the perimeter. There was no fire fight. There wasn't even a firefly!

NICK

The hell ya say! We got medals to prove it—Purple Hearts. Bronze stars. Heroes we are!

NICK

The Navy *needed* heroes. I got a Purple Heart for catching malaria—

NICK

During a VC rocket attack, by god! And saved my ass to boot. You're my best buddy, Man, next to Kai.

TAYLOR

You're my best buddy too, Nick, my *only* buddy.

NICK

Tell me how it is between us Buddy.

TAYLOR

You know how it is between us, Nick.

NICK

No, no I forgot. Tell me again. Refresh my memory.

TAYLOR

I'm not going to tell you again.

NICK

Tell me one more time. Just one. Come on.

TAYLOR

I'm not going to tell you here. Hell you'll get all emotional on me and make fools out of both of us.

NICK

You tell me what good buddies we are you son-of-a-bitch or I'll take out my .38 Special and put a bullet through your foot.

TAYLOR

You'd do that for me Buddy?

NICK

In a heartbeat.

TAYLOR

All right! I'll tell you how it is between us.

NICK

Say it like you mean it.

TAYLOR

I *do* mean it.

NICK

I know you do, but sometimes when you say it like you mean it, it comes across like you're acting like you're saying that you mean it without really meaning it.

TAYLOR

So you want me to *act* like I really mean it rather than to really mean it?

NICK

No, I want you to really mean it without *acting* like you really mean it.

TAYLOR

Fine! I'll give it a shot.

NICK

I knew you would.

TAYLOR (acting)

Nick, Buddy, you're my best buddy, my only buddy, the only guy in the world that I can look in the eye and say, "How 'bout them Giants?" and know that you know that I don't give a shit about the Giants . . .

NICK

No, no. Not "shit." Rat's ass. Say it again, Taylor. Say it right.

TAYLOR (patiently)

Nick, Buddy, you're my best buddy, my *only* buddy, the only guy in the world that I can look in the eye and say, "How 'bout them Giants?" and know that you know that I don't give a—rat's ass—about the Giants or any other professional sports team.

(Nick is moved.)

NICK (a little drunk)

I love you Buddy.

TAYLOR

I wish you wouldn't do this.

NICK (standing)

Hey, hey! I love this guy. (Pulls Taylor up beside him.) Saved my ass in Nam, and there's nothing in this world I wouldn't do for him.

TAYLOR

Would you sit down and shut up?

NICK

'Cept that. I'd go to second base, third base, hell I'd even go home for this guy—my best buddy!

TAYLOR

You know, I think I will be heading home . . .

NICK (taking his seat)

The hell you are. Neither one of us has gotten what we came for.

TAYLOR

I, for one, don't remember what it is that I came for.

NICK

Background information on Mr. Chan.

TAYLOR

That's right. Have you got it?

(Nick takes some documents from his inside jacket pocket.)

NICK

I've collected a little information.

TAYLOR

Thank you Buddy. (A beat.) Now what did *you* come for?

NICK

Foreground information . . . on your marriage.

TAYLOR

Oh, good! (A beat.) You go first.

NICK

Why are you interested in this Chan character?

TAYLOR

He's not a character; he's a real person. And I'm not interested in him. He's interested in me—or in one of my books.

NICK

Well don't forget to tell him whose life the great private dick Philip Wright is based on.

TAYLOR

Any similarities between my characters and any persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

NICK

Yeah, right, and I'm packing a water pistol.

TAYLOR

Mr. Chan isn't interested in my detective novels.

NICK

Why not?

TAYLOR

I don't have any idea.

NICK

What is he interested in?

TAYLOR

*War No More.*

NICK

Then don't forget to tell him on whom the great Lieutenant JG Armstrong Goodman, Naval Intelligence Liaison Officer, is based.

TAYLOR

Did you ever consider the possibility, however remote, that I really don't base all my characters on your life.

NICK

Yeah, I considered it, but I dismissed the idea outright. Who else did all that shit happen to?

TAYLOR

Yeah, right. Who the hell else?

NICK

So you finally got a publisher interested in . . . *your Vietnam experience.*

TAYLOR

It wasn't just my experience.

NICK

I know that. (A beat.) So what's the matter?

TAYLOR

I don't know if the guy is legit.

NICK

He's legit. Read the report. Citizen of Hong Kong. Educated at UCLA, graduate work at Stanford. Went back home and made a fortune, first printing color brochures and then books for customers all over the world. Then he starts publishing books in English and

NICK (continuing)

Chinese with a political slant, and a couple of novels that raise some eyebrows on Mainland China. By the time they take over Hong Kong, he's pushing hard on the human rights issue, and he has to get out. It's all in there.

(Taylor studies the report for a moment.)

TAYLOR

This is all business and education and politics. There's nothing personal here.

NICK

That's from the State Department. Want me to put a tail on him? Talk to him myself?

TAYLOR

No, it's just that . . .

NICK

What?

TAYLOR

I don't know. How old is the guy . . . has he got a family, what?

NICK

You gonna marry him or do you want him to publish a book?

TAYLOR

No! I just . . . don't know . . . anything about him.

NICK

I'm waiting on a Fax with more personal data. I'll give you a call. (A beat.) You know what's wrong with you, Buddy?

TAYLOR

Just give me a call when you get the personal data.

NICK

The vitals we call 'em.

TAYLOR

I *know* what you call them!

NICK

Taylor?

TAYLOR

What?

NICK

What's really going on?

TAYLOR

Nothing's really going on!

NICK

Is it Claire baby?

TAYLOR

Claire baby is just fine!

NICK

Oh, I know that. You're fine. Claire baby is fine. But you and Claire baby together aren't so fine, if you know what I mean.

TAYLOR

I *don't* know what you mean.

NICK

What do you mean, you don't now what I mean? (A beat.) Of course, you do. You write about it all the time.

TAYLOR

You don't know what you're talking about.

NICK

Can't you recognize it in your own marriage?

TAYLOR

Claire's not having an affair!

NICK

You said it yourself: "The spouse is always the first to know and the last to find out."

(Taylor thinks about it.)

TAYLOR

How do you know?

NICK

Because I'm a cop. (A beat.) How long has it been going on?

TAYLOR (woodenly)

About six months.

NICK

That's some sorry shit! (A beat.) Why didn't you say something?

TAYLOR

Why didn't you?

NICK

Your business, not mine. Figured you'd bring it up sooner or later. When I saw you weren't likely to say anything before the 21<sup>st</sup> century, I figured it was time for me to bring it up.

TAYLOR

You don't know how much I appreciate it. (A beat.) To tell you the truth I don't give a damn. That's why I didn't say anything. Shrink had me feeling mighty fine, so it didn't bother me that she was screwing around. And I suppose I just didn't want to admit it. Hard on a guy's ego you know?

NICK

Yeah, your shrink had you feeling fine all right, but there's more to it than that.

TAYLOR

More what?

NICK

Underhanded, double-dealing, scum-sucking, typical male behavior. You now: Guy stuff.

TAYLOR

I'm into it, keep going.

NICK

Let's just say the good doctor had a direct interest in keeping you seeing the world through rose colored glasses.

TAYLOR (thinks, then)

That son-of-a-bitch! He's screwing with my life *and* my wife. And charging me a 125 bucks an hour! I'll kill him.

NICK

Can't let you do that.

TAYLOR

In my next book. I'll extract an awful price for his betrayal and leave him thinking I just might be waiting for him around the next dark corner for the rest of his life.

NICK

Justice, far from pure but very simple. What about Claire baby?

TAYLOR

I don't know about Claire baby. What do you think?

NICK

Maybe you can work things out.

TAYLOR

Yeah, with enough Prozac. (A beat.) I need some time.

(A few beats.)

NICK

Well, hell, you got somebody interested in the book. Life's not all bad.

TAYLOR

I never said it was *all* bad.

NICK

So when are you meeting with this Chan character?

TAYLOR

Tomorrow. In Lafayette Park.

NICK

On a bench?

TAYLOR

I'm going to wear a trench coat.

NICK

Sounds a little subversive to me.

TAYLOR

Just a little?

NICK

All right—subversive as hell—an anti-war American meeting with a Chinese dissident on a park bench in the city that was the hotbed of the 60s revolution. I'd better let the Feds in on this one.

TAYLOR

Yeah, right, get the Feds involved. They'd give us both a gun and a wire.

NICK

I should probably tell you: the Feds are *already* involved.

TAYLOR

Why?

NICK

Politics. This guy's a high visibility dissident. It's in the report.

TAYLOR

I'll read it.

NICK

Let me know how things go with Chan.

TAYLOR

You'll be the first to know.

NICK

The third is the earliest I could possibly be.

TAYLOR

You know what I mean.

NICK

Like hell! I *never* know what you mean, Buddy. Because you never say it.

TAYLOR

Oh, I always say it; I just don't say it directly.

NICK

But I don't have an interpreter.

TAYLOR

You have Kai.

NICK

She understands Vietnamese, not double-speak, hide behind my clever phrases language. Maybe this Chan can make some sense of it . . . read between the lines.

TAYLOR

If there's anything there to read.

NICK

You'll find out tomorrow.

TAYLOR (poetic)

Right. In the park—on a bench—with a Chinese dis-si-dent.

NICK

Kiss my ass.

TAYLOR

It's full of shrapnel.

NICK

Yeah, and we both know what you're full of.

TAYLOR

What's that?

NICK

You really want to know?

TAYLOR

No.

NICK

I didn't think so.

TAYLOR (thinks, then)

I'll call you tomorrow then . . . after I have a chat with Mr. Chan.

NICK

You do that. I'll have his vitals by then.

(Taylor rises to go.)

NICK

Take care, Buddy.

TAYLOR

I always do.

Of yourself.

NICK

(Taylor smiles, nods, and exits. LIGHTS  
COME DOWN SLOWLY to end the scene.)

ACT I, SCENE III

SCENE: LIGHTS COME UP ON WEI CHAN, 29, an Amerasian, businessman. He is seated on a bench in the Lafayette Park and dressed in an expensive suit and groomed immaculately. He is reading a Chinese newspaper; a briefcase is on the ground next to him. Taylor enters, sees Wei, and watches him for a moment before approaching.

Mr. Chan?

TAYLOR

Ah, yes, Mr. Munroe, I presume.

WEI (stands)

(They stare at each other a little awkwardly for a moment, then Wei extends his hand.)

My pleasure I'm sure.

TAYLOR

So, we finally meet.

WEI

Finally?

TAYLOR

I have anticipated this meeting for a long time . . . as a great admirer of your work, Mr. Munroe.

WEI

I see. Well . . . we finally meet then.

TAYLOR (lacking conviction)

WEI

Please have a seat on this bench so graciously provided by the great state of California for the welfare of her citizens.

TAYLOR

Oh yes, the welfare of her citizens is foremost in the mind of the State.

(He sits on the opposite end of the bench.)

WEI

You have no idea of what a pleasure it is for me to meet such a venerable American novelist.

TAYLOR

Mr. Chan, you got the American and the novelist parts right, but venerable is not a word that accurately describes my position in the arena of American literature. Outside a small following of die-hard mystery fanatics, a handful of hard-core insomniacs, and my own children, I'm afraid the names of Taylor Munroe and Philip Wright, PI, are known by precious few American readers.

WEI

And yet your publisher continues to publish your books.

TAYLOR

My publisher has managed to break even so far, and he continues to publish me because he thinks, in spite of the evidence to the contrary, someday I might write a book that manages to make some real money for him.

WEI

And you.

TAYLOR

Mr. Chan, if I was in this racket for money, I'd have quit a long time ago. I'm what a Hong Kong entrepreneur might call an "adventure capitalist."

WEI

I don't know the term.

TAYLOR

Well, it's like this. For me it's a real adventure for my capital to last from paycheck to paycheck. If it weren't for writing ad copy and a very supportive wife, I might very well be flipping burgers under the Golden Arches.

WEI

You're married then?

TAYLOR (curiously)

That's right.

WEI

Happily, I presume.

TAYLOR

Happy is a relative term.

WEI

Then do you consider your marriage—*relatively*—happy?

TAYLOR

Why are you interested in my marital happiness, Mr. Chan?

WEI

I am interested in Western love marriages, Mr. Munroe, because they so often end in causing great pain. Whereas in China, arranged marriages, which often are initiated as a convenience or to solidify a family or perhaps even to pay a family debt, seem to be much more durable. In the beginning of such marriages, there may be no love at all. Indeed the bride and groom may not even know one another, however, love grows out of a common bond of tradition or perhaps even adversity.

TAYLOR

Perhaps you should publish a book on the subject. I'm sure you'd find a market here; Eastern medicine, thinking, spirituality, healing—they're all very big here now. Why not arranged marriages?

WEI

Indeed. But that's not the book I'm presently interested in.

TAYLOR

Is there a market for American detective novels in China, Mr. Chan?

WEI

Not since Charlie Chan.

TAYLOR

Just as I suspected. (A beat.) Then what is it that you want?

WEI

Many things, Mr. Munroe.

TAYLOR

We all want many things, Mr. Chan. (A beat.) What do you want right now?

WEI

To speak with you about *War No More*.

TAYLOR

*War No More*. It was a very early work—my first novel, maybe my best.

WEI

Your detective novels are all very well constructed, Mr. Munore. Engaging characters, crisp dialogue, well plotted, still they all characteristically lack a certain . . . passion.

TAYLOR

Philip Wright is a hard-boiled passionless kind of guy in a no-nonsense business. There isn't much room in his life for passion.

WEI

This is not the case, however, with the Vietnam piece. Lieutenant Goodman's whole existence is fired by passion. (A beat.) How do you account for that?

TAYLOR

Inexperience. I was very young.

WEI

And not so hard-boiled perhaps? (A beat.) Would you say *War No More* is largely an autobiographical piece relating your experience in Asia?

TAYLOR

No, I wouldn't say that.

WEI

Perhaps then the experience of a close friend?

TAYLOR

It's not based on anybody; it's a work of fiction. I made the whole thing up.

WEI

Of course. Even so, you portray these fictional events and characters with a great deal of passion.

TAYLOR

I had—have—strong feelings about the war.

WEI

Which is exactly why this book in particular interests me. (A beat.) I think many casualties of the war didn't actually die in Vietnam but continue to live on as broken men; or men with broken dreams or spirits; men whose lives have been shattered with drugs and alcohol and memories. And then too, there are the children of the war.

TAYLOR

The Bu Doi as the Vietnamese call them.

WEI

The dust of life.

TAYLOR

Your interest then is in the living casualties of the war?

WEI

My interest is in seeing that justice is done, Mr. Munroe.

TAYLOR

Justice for whom?

WEI

For *all* those who suffered as a consequence of the war.

TAYLOR

Where does a 25-year-old unpublished anti-war novel fit into your scheme of justice, Mr. Chan?

WEI

That remains to be seen.

TAYLOR

*And* articulated.

WEI

Did your travels in Asia ever take you to Hong Kong, Mr. Munroe?

TAYLOR

Ever so briefly.

WEI

Why so briefly?

TAYLOR

TET.

(Taylor is showing some real signs of discomfort for the direction this conversation is taking.)

WEI

If you care to elaborate, I won't stop you.

TAYLOR

I went to Hong Kong for R&R in 1968. The TET Offensive broke out, so all leaves were canceled, and I was back in-country in less than 36 hours.

WEI

Then the book *is* autobiographical. The same thing happened to Lieutenant Goodman.

TAYLOR

Some of the events in the book are historically accurate but characters are totally fictitious.

WEI

I see. Then the events happened, but they didn't happen to the people described in the book?

TAYLOR

Some of the events actually happened. The TET Offensive began in January of '68; leaves *were* canceled; soldiers *were* called back to Vietnam.

WEI

You?

TAYLOR

I already told you I was called back after being in Hong Kong for one day.

WEI

And night?

TAYLOR

What?

WEI

You said 36 hours; that would be one day and one night.

TAYLOR

That's right. One day and one night!

WEI

Any you never returned?

TAYLOR

That's right, I never returned . . . just like poor ole Charlie on the MTA. I'm the man who never returned.

WEI

I don't understand.

TAYLOR

Neither did Charlie. (A beat.) Forget it. It's just an old folk song.

WEI

Why didn't you ever go back?

TAYLOR

You read the book.

WEI

But the book isn't about you.

(Taylor thinks about this.)

TAYLOR

What do you really want, Mr. Chan?

(Wei opens his briefcase, takes out a photograph, and hands it to Taylor. Taylor looks at it for a long time.)

WEI

Is the man in the photograph you or Lieutenant Goodman?

TAYLOR (quietly)

Where did get this?

WEI

Please answer my question?

TAYLOR

Answer mine!

WEI

From my mother.

(Taylor continues studying the photo.)

WEI

She's not in the picture. (A beat.) She took it.

TAYLOR

This was a long time ago.

WEI

And far away. So who is this young lion in the photograph . . . you? Lieutenant Goodman? Some other anonymous freedom fighter spreading good will and who know what the hell else among the friendly natives?

TAYLOR

Let me see your hands, Mr. Chan.

WEI

What?

TAYLOR

Hold up your hands; I want to see your hands.

(Wei reluctantly holds out his hands. Taylor examines them, and then looks into his face.)

TAYLOR

Jesus Christ! What are you doing here?

WEI (quietly)

I've come . . . to make some arrangements.

(LIGHTS COME DOWN SLOWLY to end the scene.)

ACT I, SCENE IV

SCENE: LIGHTS COME UP on Taylor and Claire in their bedroom. Claire is sitting up in bed reading the Globe and nursing a glass of scotch; Taylor is at Claire's dressing table looking in the mirror, studying his image.

CLAIRE

If you figure out who that is in there, let me know.

TAYLOR

What, and take all the fun out of this relationship?

CLAIRE

Is that what you call it?

TAYLOR

Fun?

CLAIRE

Relationship.

TAYLOR

I don't know what to call it anymore. (A beat.) What do you call it?

CLAIRE

I don't want to call it anything right now. I'd rather you tell me about your meeting with the mysterious Mr. Chan, but since you haven't volunteered any information, I feel compelled to ask.

TAYLOR

What makes you think he's mysterious?

CLAIRE

Well, I don't, or at least I didn't until you started questioning his motives for showing an interest in your Vietnam novel. It all seems so secretive, and the fact that you haven't told me anything makes it even more so. *Something* is certainly very mysterious.

TAYLOR

You're a very perceptive woman, Claire baby.

CLAIRE

Yes, and I know how you hate that.

TAYLOR

You have *no* idea.

CLAIRE

So how'd it go, and don't say, "Just fine." I want the details.

TAYLOR

I don't think that's what you want.

CLAIRE

Then paint me a picture in broad strokes, and I'll fill in the details.

TAYLOR

Well, the meeting *didn't* go just fine—far from it.

CLAIRE (interested)

Really?

TAYLOR

Really.

CLAIRE

He's *not* interested in the book then?

TAYLOR

Oh, he's interested in the book all right, but I don't know that he's interested in *publishing* the book.

CLAIRE

You lost me.

TAYLOR

I know. By all indications—quite some time ago.

CLAIRE

One thing at a time, please. (A beat.) What do you mean he's interested in the book but not interested in publishing the book?

TAYLOR

I think he is here to find out something about me personally.

CLAIRE

Well, I wish him luck.

TAYLOR

About my history, not my psychological make-up.

CLAIRE

You don't think the two are related?

TAYLOR

Personal history and psychological make-up?

CLAIRE

Yes.

TAYLOR

I think they are as a matter of fact. But, the mysterious Mr. Chan didn't inquire about my psychology, only my history.

CLAIRE

Then he *is* mysterious?

TAYLOR

Yes! I have to admit, he's a little on the mysterious side all right. Right again, Claire baby. You're always right.

CLAIRE

Nobody is *always* right.

TAYLOR

Well, you *are* right about that—and Mr. Chan's somewhat mysterious appearance.

CLAIRE

Would I be probing too deeply into your personal affairs if I were to inquire into why the mysterious Mr. Chan is interested in your personal history?

TAYLOR (thinks, then)

I think Mr. Chan may be looking for—his father.

CLAIRE

His father?

TAYLOR

That's right. His old man, Papa, Pop, Pappy, the patriarch, Big Daddy. (A beat.) That's what I think.

CLAIRE (thinks, then)

Two questions come immediately to mind: One, what makes you think that? And, two, how could you possibly have any information about his father?

TAYLOR

Now there's the rub.

CLAIRE

I don't like the sound of that one bit.

(Taylor walks over and hands her a photograph. It's the one Wei gave to him. Claire studies it for a long time.)

CLAIRE

And this appears to be the rub-a-dub-dub, three women in a tub with a very young and apparently very tipsy defender of American democracy. Do my eyes deceive me or is this young Taylor baby single-handedly—

TAYLOR

I was using both hands.

CLAIRE (continuing)

—double-handedly then, washing the stain of Communism from these lovely . . . ladies?

TAYLOR

The camera does not lie.

CLAIRE

Which is a lot more than I can say for you.

TAYLOR

I didn't lie. I didn't . . . *know!*

CLAIRE

When was this taken?

TAYLOR

January 1968.

CLAIRE

In Hong Kong?

TAYLOR

The usual backdrop of Victoria Peak is missing, however I'm reasonably sure that picture was snapped in Hong Kong.

CLAIRE

Well, aside from the famed Victoria, there is no shortage of other lesser peaks in the picture. (A beat.) You were in Hong Kong when this was taken?

TAYLOR (pointing to picture)

Apparently.

CLAIRE

I mean do you remember it? Were you officially on R&R in Hong Kong when this picture was taken?

TAYLOR

I was in Hong Kong . . . for something like 36 hours.

CLAIRE (think, then)

Wait! I know this story. You were there for 36 hours. Then the TET Offensive broke out, and you got called back to Nha Trang. It's all in your book. You met this girl—Angel—in a bar: she took you home and . . . you made love to her. It's all there. This is all *true*, Taylor? It *really* happened?

TAYLOR

Well . . . I embellished it some.

CLAIRE

And you never returned because you got malaria?

TAYLOR

No, wounded.

CLAIRE

No, Lieutenant Goodman got wounded. *You* got malaria.

TAYLOR

I forget who got what!

CLAIRE

You got laid is what you got. Did you forget that? (Silence.) I don't know what to say, Taylor. I have no idea of what to say.

TAYLOR (innocently)

You knew I had children.

CLAIRE

I knew you had *two*! I didn't know anything about any Amerasian offspring you had with a Chinese bar girl.

TAYLOR

I didn't either.

CLAIRE

But you knew it was *possible*?

TAYLOR

Well it certainly wasn't probable.

CLAIRE

Damn you!

TAYLOR

This has nothing to do with you.

CLAIRE

Tell me about Lieutenant Goodman's *wife*? Did he have one? Did you? Am I your *third* wife? Taylor?

TAYLOR

No! Goodman needed some motivation to get drunk and make love to Angel. His wife's telegram him gave him the motivation he needed.

CLAIRE

Since when does a red-blooded American sailor need any motivation to go out and get drunk and laid?

TAYLOR

You're right; it didn't work. Maybe that's why the book didn't sell.

CLAIRE

I don't believe you. I think you were married before and just didn't tell me.

TAYLOR

I wasn't married before!

CLAIRE

Don't lie to me, Taylor.

TAYLOR

I wasn't married before! Jesus!

CLAIRE (angry)

Okay . . . but you'd *better* not have been.

TAYLOR

Claire cut me some slack here; I have an active imagination. I make stuff up; that's what I do for a living . . . if that's what you call it.

CLAIRE

You know what's wrong with you, Taylor?

TAYLOR

Don't start telling me what's wrong with me, Claire. I'll walk right out of room and maybe just keep going?

CLAIRE (backing off)

Okay, I'm sorry. Let's remain rational and think about this for a moment.

(A few beats.)

TAYLOR

I've been thinking about it for a very long time.

CLAIRE

Has Mr. Chan claimed to be your son?

TAYLOR

Not yet.

CLAIRE

But you think he's going to.

TAYLOR

If I suit his purposes.

CLAIRE

What purposes?

TAYLOR

I don't know. But I have the impression he's evaluating me for some reason that I don't know about. Maybe he just wants to know what kind of man I am before claiming me as his father.

CLAIRE

Does he look Amerasian?

TAYLOR

He's not a blue-eyed blond if that's what you mean.

CLAIRE

I mean does he *look* like he could be your son.

TAYLOR

He's looks more Chinese than American, but that's just the gene mix. Could have just as easily gone the other way. And he has my hands.

CLAIRE

Jesus. How old is he?

TAYLOR

Thirty in November.

CLAIRE

So he was conceived in late January, early February of 68—when you were in Hong Kong.

TAYLOR

January 30<sup>th</sup> to be exact.

CLAIRE

Nick confirmed his date and place of birth.

TAYLOR

Yeah, through the State Department. They have a file on him because he's a dissident seeking asylum.

CLAIRE

That is more than likely what he wants then. As the son of an American citizen, he can probably stay in the country without needing to be granted asylum or a visa or any other damn thing.

TAYLOR

Maybe, but I'm not sure that's what he wants. The State Department probably *wants* him here because of his stand on human rights.

CLAIRE

Then what else would he want?

TAYLOR

My money?

CLAIRE (looking at photo)

What money? (A beat.) So which of these—ladies—is the alleged mother of the mysterious Mr. Chan.

TAYLOR

None of them. She's not in the picture. She took it

CLAIRE

Oh, I see. She's a photographer. (A beat.) Do you remember what she looked like?

TAYLOR

No.

CLAIRE

Yes, you do. It's in the black hole. (A beat.) Surely "Angel" isn't her real name?

TAYLOR

I doubt it. But that's what she said to call her.

CLAIRE

Said to whom . . . you, or Lieutenant Goodman?

TAYLOR

Does it matter?

CLAIRE

To whom?

TAYLOR

To you.

CLAIRE

Yes it matters a great deal, but I don't expect it does to you. I'll just let it remain one of those little secrets you have hidden in the dark recesses of your soul. (A beat.) You're not the only one with secrets, you know.

TAYLOR

Is that so?

CLAIRE

Yes, I might have a few myself.

TAYLOR

If you're referring to *your*—relationship—with *my* psychiatrist, it's no secret.

CLAIRE (surprised, then covering)

So . . . since you know, I wasn't keeping anything from you.

TAYLOR

Yes, you were. Because you didn't know that I knew. *And* you've been withholding sex.

CLAIRE

My relationship with Howard isn't about sex.

TAYLOR

Oh, please! (A beat.) I know; it's about . . . *emotional intimacy*, something you don't get from me.

CLAIRE

Don't mock me, Taylor.

TAYLOR

What is the good Doctor doing to me? Filling me with Prozac while he having an affair with my wife!

CLAIRE

So what are you going to do—"nail" the bastard?

TAYLOR

What? For doing me a favor?

CLAIRE (stung, breaking)

You can be very cruel, Taylor. I know you don't think that's true of yourself, but you have no idea how you hurt people with what you say and the things you leave unsaid.

TAYLOR

Can't I ever get angry too!

CLAIRE

No, you can't. Not until you know how to fight fairly. You so seldom express your anger that when you do, you do it cruelly and with malice. That's not right! I'd rather have you come home roaring drunk once a week screaming at me and not meaning it, than driving a dagger into my heart once a year and mean it. (Taylor reaches for her.) Don't touch me!

TAYLOR

It wasn't supposed to be like this, Claire. (A beat.) I don't know . . .

CLAIRE

It seemed so perfect when we got married. I don't know what happened?

TAYLOR

I think we married a vision, a perfect image reflected in a still pool. When the first rock hit the water, the ripples blurred the image and we never got it back.

CLAIRE

In plain language, you think we made a mistake?

TAYLOR

When the ripples recede, the image will be clear again.

CLAIRE

Taylor, the goddamn Rock of Gibraltar just hit the reflecting pool!

(LIGHTS COME DOWN RAPIDLY TO  
END THE SCENE.)

ACT I, SCENE V

SCENE: LIGHTS COME UP ON Nick sitting on a bench in the park. He's reading a paper and looking over the top of it, waiting for someone. Wei enters, sees Nick, and watches him for a moment before approaching.

Detective Adams? WEI

Mr. Chan I presume. NICK

Yes. I am Wei Chan. WEI

Have a seat Mr. Chan. NICK

Thank you. WEI

Don't thank me. Thank the great state of California. NICK

I already have. WEI

If you settle here, you'll keep on thanking her . . . with your tax dollars. NICK

Freedom is never cheap, Detective Adams. WEI

I'll grant you that, Mr. Chan, but it's considerably cheaper in Nevada. (A beat.) So . . . you have an interest in Mr. Taylor Munroe. NICK

WEI

Yes, I believe that's why we're here today—a common interest in Mr. Munroe. Unless, I'm mistaken, I believe you are rather well acquainted with him.

NICK

That's right. So I naturally take an interest in his—well being.

WEI

I'm sure it is gratifying to have such a friend.

NICK

What is your interest in Mr. Munroe?

WEI

Are you asking as a detective or a friend?

NICK

If I were asking as a detective we'd be downtown.

WEI (looking around)

We are downtown.

NICK

In my office.

WEI

Ah, I see. So I'll assume then that you're asking as a friend who just happens to be a detective.

NICK

Whatever works for you, Mr. Chan. Now, what gives?

WEI

I assume too that I can speak frankly and in confidence.

NICK

If that's the way you want it.

WEI

It's a necessity.

NICK

You have my word, Mr. Chan, unless it involves national security. Now what's this all about?

WEI

Justice, Mr. Adams. Accountability. Passion. Betrayal. And promises not kept.

NICK

Sounds to me like you ought to be talking to the novelist, not the cop.

WEI

But this meeting is at *your* request.

NICK

So it is. Go on.

WEI

You're aware that Mr. Munroe spent an abbreviated R&R period in Hong Kong in 1968, are you not?

NICK

I'm aware of that, yes.

WEI

And that he spent the night with a young Chinese woman?

NICK

He wouldn't have been the first American officer to do that.

WEI

But he would have been the first one to spend the night with *this* young woman.

NICK

I wouldn't know anything about that.

WEI

But it's in his book—*War No More*.

NICK

There are a number of incidents in the book that never happened. It's a work of fiction.

WEI

Yes, a work of fiction. I almost forgot. Still . . . there are many incidents in the book that actually *did* take place.

NICK

What's your point, Mr. Chan?

WEI

Do you know the Vietnamese phrase Bui Doi?

NICK

My wife is Vietnamese, Mr. Chan. I know this and a good many other Vietnamese phrases.

WEI

Then you must realize as well that not all the children of US servicemen were left in Vietnam . . . they can be found in Thailand, the Philippines, Taiwan, Malaysia . . .

NICK

And Hong Kong?

WEI

Yes, and Hong Kong.

NICK

Are you implying that Taylor Munroe is your father?

WEI

He *is* my father, Detective Adams.

NICK

Yeah, and my long lost papa is Bill Gates.

WEI

I have no reason to lie.

NICK

I don't know that. Do you have any proof, any documentation?

WEI

He will not deny it.

NICK

How do you know?

WEI

Because he knows it's true.

(Nick reaches out and grabs one of Wei's hands and examines it closely. Then he puts it down slowly. Wei looks at him curiously.)

WEI

He examined my hands too. Why?

NICK

Your little finger is crooked . . . just like his and his . . . other son's.

WEI

Then he already knows who I am.

NICK

You didn't tell him?

WEI

Not yet.

NICK

I can't believe he didn't tell me about you.

WEI

He didn't know about me.

NICK

Look, Chan, son or not, I won't let you take him for a ride. I know people; I have contacts at Immigration, the State Department, and your Embassy.

WEI

I have no Embassy, Detective Adams. I am *truly* a man without a country.

NICK

Who is evidently looking for one; and if you think you can appeal to Taylor's generous nature to get a visa, a green card, the whole kit and caboodle. I won't let you get away with it.

WEI

What is this "kit and caboodle?"

NICK

Skip it.

WEI

Detective Adams, surely you realize I have already been granted political asylum in your country.

NICK

Then what do you want?

WEI

To find out what kind of man Taylor Munroe really is.

NICK

Then you came to the right place. I know him better than anyone.

WEI

Is that so?

NICK

I've known him all my life.

WEI

But you didn't know about his night in Hong Kong with this young Chinese woman—my mother.

NICK

He doesn't tell me everything! And I know better than to ask about everything. Taylor a very private person. Besides that was just a brief interlude—ships that pass in the night. It didn't . . .

WEI

Didn't matter? Didn't mean anything to him?

NICK

That's not what I meant. (A few beats.) Look, Taylor's the kind of guy that would do anything for a friend. He saved my life over there.

WEI

And gave me mine . . . over there, and then left. Took a hike! Hit the road!

NICK

He didn't know. You said so yourself.

WEI

Or didn't care?

NICK

If he had known, he would have cared. I know Taylor. (A beat.) Anyway, he contracted malaria; the fever made him a little crazy; his wife had just dumped him. He had problems with what was going on in-country. We both did; we were stressed; nothing seemed to mean anything to anybody. We weren't immune to what the Navy wanted us to be immune to.

WEI

That may be so. But he never even attempted to find out . . . the consequences of his night of passion, the outcome of these ships passing in the night as you call it.

NICK (thinks, then)

Maybe he did.

WEI

How?

NICK

How did you find him?

WEI

My mother found him. I gave up looking and hoping years ago—decided he had either been killed in Vietnam or was just impossible to trace. Your government wasn't the least bit cooperative, and all I had to go on was a first name and a branch of the service.

NICK

So how'd your mother find him?

WEI

The book. He posted it on the Web.

NICK

*War No More.*

WEI

Out of nowhere, there it was the whole story told in details that only he and my mother could possibly know. Posted on a Vietnam veteran's Web site for all to see.

NICK (thinks, then)

No, nor all. For *her* to see.

WEI

An interesting observation, but what makes you think that?

NICK

It fits a pattern of unremitting guilt.

WEI

About the war?

NICK

The war and . . . other demons.

WEI

Like what happened between him and my mother?

NICK

*Something* has been bothering him for the last 30 years. This possibility had to have been on his mind. (A beat.) I suppose . . . before you made such a success of yourself, she—you—*both* of you had some rough times.

WEI

My mother saw to it that *I* never did. But to achieve that, she . . . had to suffer—a great many humiliations.

NICK

You don't have to explain. (A beat.) That's all behind you now.

WEI

Not far enough.

NICK

What do you mean?

WEI

I need a favor from your friend.

NICK

He's never turned me down.

WEI

This is a rather large one, I'm afraid, and by its nature, it involves other people.

NICK

What other people?

WEI

Most significantly, Mrs. Munroe.

NICK

Ms. *James*, Claire baby kept her name from her first marriage.

WEI

Your tone indicates that you do not hold —Claire baby—in particularly high esteem.

NICK

Claire baby and I were never that close, and lately . . .

WEI

Lately what?

NICK

Doesn't matter to you.

WEI

It could matter very much if it has to do with his marriage. It might—simplify things.

NICK

This is just between us. (A beat.) They're having some marital problems.

WEI

Yes, I got the impression from Taylor Munroe that his marriage was less than ideal.

NICK

Look, Chan, *all* marriages are less than ideal; but this one is *totally* screwed up. She's on the sauce, sleeping with his shrink; he knows it and doesn't care enough to do anything about it. (A beat.) What does that have to do with anything anyway?

WEI

It might help to expedite the favor. Time, you see, is crucial.

NICK

What's the favor?

WEI

I want to arrange a marriage, a marriage between my father and my mother.

NICK

Right. Arrange a marriage between your father and mother? Taylor will go for that.

WEI

We Chinese are firmly committed to such arrangements. You have eased my mind somewhat about his character and confirmed the state of his marriage, so I don't see why I can't make some sort of an arrangement. *That* is what I'm here for.

NICK

Well, that *is* a big favor, but to tell you the truth . . . I *like* the idea. I think your mother might be just what Taylor needs.

WEI

Detective. Adams . . .

(Nick slides over next to and throws an arm across Wei's shoulder.)

NICK

Call me Nick. And I'll call you . . . I don't know. What the hell you want me to call you?

WEI

Call me . . . Wei.

NICK

Whatever you say, Wei.

WEI

Detective—Nick. *Nick*, this marriage has nothing to do with my *father's* needs.

NICK

Of course not. But, if things work out between them to his advantage, what harm will it do?

WEI

What advantage do you mean?

NICK

For Taylor to finally find happiness in a relationship.

WEI

There is no *relationship*; this marriage is being arranged to pay an old debt; it is at best, a marriage of expedience. As you probably suspect, my mother harbors a great deal of ill will toward your friend.

NICK

That's because she doesn't know him.

WEI

That is *precisely* why.

NICK

If she doesn't know him, why does she want to marry him?

WEI

Detective Adams—

NICK

Nick!

WEI

Nick! It is a necessity for her to do so for other reasons, reasons that I trust you will hold in confidence.

NICK

I already gave you my word.

WEI

While I was welcomed into your country as a Chinese dissident, I'm sorry to say that because of her background, that no such welcome was extended to my mother. (A beat.) You probably don't have to ask why.

NICK

I know that what soldiers and sailors do with foreign women is fine with our government just so long as we don't bring them home. I assume that . . . her former employment makes your mother undesirable as an immigrant.

WEI

That is a valid assumption.

NICK

They wouldn't let Kai, my wife, in either until we were married. I had to marry her in Canada and then bring her across the border as my wife. (A beat.) So you can't get your mother in the country?

WEI

She *is* in your country already. I brought her in using my executive assistant's passport and visa. You know how we all look alike.

NICK

Immigration will catch up with her sooner or later. Probably sooner because they already have a special agent assigned to your case. Under ordinary circumstances, your mother wouldn't have a problem, but, as you well know, there are some politics involved here. You'll need to keep her—out of sight for a while.

WEI

I know that. But it is also important that my mother not be forced into a kind of existence she doesn't want; she had a lifetime of that. (A beat.) If she was married to an American citizen—a war hero at that—

NICK

Who just happened to be the father of their Chinese dissident son, she wouldn't be deported.

WEI

It isn't likely, unless she commits subversive acts against the government. Which I cannot guarantee. She is very strong willed.

NICK

You don't have to tell me about strong willed Asian women. (A beat.) So that's all you want . . . for your mother to be settled in the land of the free and the home of the brave. (Wei nods.) *You* don't want anything from Taylor?

WEI (bitterly)

Of course I do. I want to play catch in the backyard, fly kites and build models with—my old man. Then maybe go down to the barroom to hit on some of the local babes! Maybe I can father a little bastard myself.

NICK

I thought so. I'll let you work that out with Taylor. (A beat.) Wei . . .

WEI

Yes, Nick?

NICK

None of us were perfect over there.

WEI

No, but some, like you, were willing to . . . do something to make up for some of the collateral damage.

(Nick thinks about this as the LIGHTS COME DOWN SLOWLY to end the scene.)

ACT I, SCENE VI

SCENE: LIGHTS COME UP on Claire seated on a couch in her living room. She is drinking a scotch, and trying unsuccessfully to light a cigarette when there is a KNOCK at the door. She gulps down the scotch, hides the cigarettes, rises, straightens her dress and goes to the door. Wei appears when she opens the door.

CLAIRE

Mr. Chan . . . come in, please. (He enters a little uncomfortably). Taylor will be right in. Please—sit.

(He extends his hand.)

WEI

Mrs. Munroe—

CLAIRE

No. It's Ms. James actually.

WEI

Forgive me.

CLAIRE

I don't think that's so serious an affront that it calls for forgiveness, Mr. Chan. In fact, you don't have to apologize at all. It's a common error.

WEI

What is? Not taking your husband's name?

CLAIRE

No, the error is in assuming that we women so willingly give up our own names to take on the name of . . . some stranger we may have met in a bar.

WEI

I see. (A beat.) Then James is your maiden name?

CLAIRE

No. James is actually the name of my husband from my first marriage, but then, since I didn't know who I really was, I *did* take the name of my husband—in that case, who I did meet in a bar, but that's another story entirely.

WEI

I see. So, you know who you are as your former husband's first wife, but not as the wife of Taylor Munroe in your second marriage?

CLAIRE

No, no, no. You don't understand at all. By the time I had established my own identity as a woman and as an individual, in my first marriage, it was too late to go back. I couldn't revert to my *maiden* name then. My entire new identity as a woman was connected to the last name of my first husband, which it still is, so taking on my maiden name, either then or now, was and is out of the question.

WEI (curiously)

What *is* your maiden name?

CLAIRE (waits, then)

Finkleheimer.

WEI (straight)

Why didn't you just say so?

CLAIRE

Would you like a drink, Mr. Chan? I could use a drink.

(He glances at his watch.)

CLAIRE

The sun is well below the yardarm, Mr. Chan. If not here then it must be in Hong Kong.

WEI

Haven't you heard? The sun never sets on the British Empire.

CLAIRE

It did last July. Hong Kong is no longer part of the Empire, Mr. Chan.

WEI

So it isn't.

CLAIRE

"So it isn't." Taylor would like that, Mr. Chan. You seem to have a way with words. (A beat.) Now, how about that drink?

WEI

Perhaps just a glass of water.

CLAIRE

Domestic? Imported? Or tap?

WEI

Life is very complicated in your country, Ms. James.

CLAIRE

Call me Claire. In fact, call me Claire *baby*. Everybody does.

WEI

I think I'd prefer to call you Ms. James.

CLAIRE

That's fine then too. Ms. James—baby. (A beat.) So, what can I do for you, Mr. Chan?

WEI

You were getting me some water.

CLAIRE

Jesus, I almost forgot. In fact, I *did* forget.

(She crosses to wet bar.)

CLAIRE

I'm going with the imported—Canadian Springs. The domestic stuff is a little bit on the flat side—I think it's because they take the fluoride out and then have to put it back in—and as for tap water: I never touch the stuff . . . although I suppose it touches me. In the bath I mean. It—tap water—is one of the few things I *don't* drink.

WEI

Are you all right?

CLAIRE

Oh, god, am I going on and on? I get nervous in unfamiliar situations, which this is, and when people make demands on me, which they are. First there's *this* situation, and then there's Taylor, and my gentleman friend Howard and then . . . oh, I don't know anymore. Everything just seems so . . . overwhelming.

WEI

I'm sorry.

CLAIRE

You don't have to be sorry. Not for me. You have a lot more to be sorry for than I do.

WEI

I have a great deal to be grateful for as well.

CLAIRE

Like having a father who didn't even know you existed until yesterday? (Wei is stung.) Oh, *God!* I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that; what a disaster. (A beat.) Oh, yes, Taylor knows who your are and he told me; Taylor has a cop friend who knows *everything*. I wouldn't have believed it just by your appearance . . .that you're Taylor's son. You don't look at all like Taylor.

WEI

It's the gene mix. Could have just as easily gone the other way.

CLAIRE

Oh my god! He said *exactly* the same thing. It's really true; it's just dawning on me that Taylor has this whole other life that I know absolutely nothing about.

WEI

Neither does he.

CLAIRE

Oh, yes, he does. He lives in his mind, you see. He *knows*. Maybe he doesn't know on a conscious level that he knows, but he knows all right. And I know absolutely nothing! He says nothing; he shares nothing. Of himself, I mean. Otherwise, he overly generous, but that's to compensate for the other. It's all so . . .

WEI

Depressing?

CLAIRE

No, not depressing. I'm not depressed, Mr. Chan, just a little—distraught. I get this way when Taylor won't take his Prozac.

WEI

Taylor Munroe is taking Prozac?

CLAIRE

Yes! No! He's *supposed* to be, but he won't take it.

WEI

So you're depressed?

CLAIRE

Distraught! But don't tell him I told you so.

WEI

Why should I tell him?

CLAIRE

Because he's your father. And because he's a *guy* and you're a guy and guys of all races and ages and nationalities and creeds and ethnic groups and intellects stick together to maintain the upper hand. Don't tell me you don't either! It's a guy's world, and you aim to keep it that way.

(A few beats.)

WEI

Will you tell me one thing?

CLAIRE

Why should I?

WEI

Because I am your half-step son.

CLAIRE

Oh my god!

WEI

Why does Taylor Munroe need Prozac?

CLAIRE

To make me feel better. I get very—distraught—to see him go off into that black cosmic hole of despair because of me.

WEI

Black cosmic hole of despair?

CLAIRE

It's a very dark place he goes sometimes.

WEI

You drive him there?

CLAIRE

No, you can't *drive* there! It's in his head.

WEI

By making him unhappy, I mean.

CLAIRE

Nobody has to *make* Taylor unhappy, Mr. Chan. It's in his nature, his past, the war, his view of how the world works and his inability to do anything about it.

WEI

So *that's* why he takes Prozac?

CLAIRE

That's why he's *supposed* to take it, but he won't because he doesn't care a twit about how *I* feel.

WEI

How do you feel?

CLAIRE

Distraught! I already told you!

WEI

Is it your relationship with Taylor that makes you distraught?

CLAIRE

No, it's my *lack* of a relationship with Taylor that makes me distraught. (A beat.) Why am I telling you this?

WEI

I don't know. Maybe you need someone to talk to.

CLAIRE

Of course I need someone to talk to; everybody does. And I have someone. I just . . . it's really not my fault, you know.

WEI

Of course not.

CLAIRE

Taylor is just so . . . remote and inaccessible. And when he goes "in there" and leaves me out here . . . well, it's very lonely, and I need someone.

WEI

Remoteness then is one of his strong points, would you say?

CLAIRE

Oh, yes. Maybe his strongest! Can you imagine *wanting* to live like that?

WEI

What makes you think he wants to?

CLAIRE

Because he chooses to do it. Mr. Chan, and if you can penetrate the wall of isolation that Taylor has constructed around himself, you will have accomplished something that neither of his wives nor any of his children have been able to do.

WEI

I didn't come here to solve my father's personal problems, Ms. James.

CLAIRE

An intelligent choice, Mr. Chan, I assure you. Now where the hell is he? (She crosses to a doorway.) Taylor, your . . . (Looks to Wei.)

WEI

Guest.

CLAIRE

Guest is here. Come out and say hello.

(Taylor enters, goes to Wei and shakes his hand.)

TAYLOR

Mr. Chan, I'm sorry. I didn't know you were here. (To Claire.) Why didn't you tell me?

CLAIRE

I wanted to have a little chat with Mr. Chan myself.

TAYLOR

Did you?

CLAIRE

Oh, yes, Mr. Chan and I had quite a lot to share as you can probably imagine.

TAYLOR

I'd prefer not to. (A beat.) So, Mr. Chan . . . what can we do for you?

WEI (crossing to outside door)

There's someone I want you to meet.

(He opens the door, speaks to someone in muffled tones then stands aside to let MING CHAN, 48, his mother enter. She is tall and slender, very attractive. She's wearing a dark skirt and a high collared silk blouse. Her long hair is up and neatly fastened, and she is wearing expensive accessories, including Mikimoto pearls and a lady's Rolex. She stands just inside the room, looking at Taylor but showing no sign of any emotions. Taylor stares at her and has no idea whatsoever of what to do or say.)

WEI

Mr. Munroe, I believe you're acquainted with my mother . . .

(BLACK OUT)

(END ACT I.)

**BUI-DOI: THE DUST OF LIFE**

by

David W. Christner

ACT II, SCENE I

SCENE: LIGHTS COME UP with Taylor, Ming, Wei, and Claire in exactly the same positions they were in at the end of Act I. Throughout this act, Ming will change her manner of speaking from that of a sophisticated Chinese professional business woman to that of a bar girl.

WEI

Mother, I'm sure you remember Taylor Munroe.

(Taylor is stunned. He can't speak.)

MING

How could I forget the gallant Lieutenant JG Munroe? Ming Chan, Lieutenant Munroe. It's been . . . such a long time.

(Taylor still can't speak.)

CLAIRE

Taylor, some kind of response is in order here.

MING

Perhaps the Lieutenant remembers me as a young Chinese girl called Angel, if he remembers anything at all. (A beat. Then as bar girl.) Maybe sailor buy Angel drink, take Angel upstairs! (Now back.) Remember that, Lieutenant?

WEI

Mother!

MING (bar girl)

You not remember Angel?

TAYLOR (woodenly)

It wasn't like that. And I'm not a lieutenant anymore.

MING (now back)

Angel was my professional name, not that I was a professional at the time. That came much later. But not much later—since I had a child to support.

(Claire moves to Ming and extends her hand.)

CLAIRE (forcing a smile)

I'm Claire James, Taylor's wife. I'm a—professional woman as well, a professional *illustrator*. I do some freelance work for the ad agency where Taylor writes copy between novels. That's where we met. I've always enjoyed a good mystery, and . . . Taylor is certainly that.

MING

Ming Chan, Ms. James. It's always a pleasure to meet another woman of the world, although I should think there's quite a distinction between the professional worlds we've inhabited. I do wish we were meeting under different circumstances, however since I have only recently immigrated to your country, I am in the market for new friends.

CLAIRE

Let me pour you a drink then. A scotch for my new best friend—Ming.

MING (as bar girl)

You have Saigon tea? Maybe Taylor like buy Angel Saigon tea?

WEI (straining)

Mother, you said you wouldn't do this.

MING

I don't care what I said!

CLAIRE

Well, I'm afraid I'm fresh out of Saigon tea. If you'd like a nice herb tea, I have Celestial Seasonings.

MING

Dewar's then please, with a splash of soda.

(Claire goes over to bar.)

CLAIRE

Taylor, your . . . old friend reminds me very much of Eliza Doolittle the way she keeps switching—back and forth from . . . well, you know. (A beat.) Do you know *My Fair Lady*, Ms. Chan?

MING

My friends call me "Ming."

CLAIRE

And mine call me "Claire baby." So—Ming—do you know of Eliza Doolittle?

MING

Yes—Claire baby, I am acquainted with Miss Doolittle.

CLAIRE

Hear that Taylor? I think they could even be related. (A beat.) Taylor, I'll pour you a scotch too. Since you can't seem to speak, you might just as well use your mouth for something else. Now, please, everyone—come—sit.

(They take seats in the living room with Taylor seated across a coffee table from Ming. Claire begins mixing and serving drinks.)

CLAIRE

Mr. Chan, how about you?

WEI

Spring water—domestic—with a twist.

(Claire serves everyone a drink and then sits.)

CLAIRE

Well, this is just about the most fascinating set of circumstances that I, for one, could ever possibly imagine. In fact, I don't think I *could* imagine them . . . sitting here on a contemporary American sofa with my second husband's first son, a Chinese dissident and prominent Hong Kong publisher, the beautiful and mysterious Ming or Angel or whoever with whom my husband spent a single night of bliss some thirty years ago, and my own adoring little novelist husband. (A beat.) Taylor you're not holding up your end of the conversation here.

TAYLOR

Claire baby, I'm surprised I'm holding up at all.

CLAIRE

Taylor, as you may or may not recall, is a man of *many* words, however, he chooses to *speak* only a precious few of them and then only under the most extraordinary circumstances—which these are. (A beat.) Taylor, say *something!* You can start with something like: "So, Ming, how have you been?" Or, "Long time no see." Or better yet: "Not a—bad looking kid." John Wayne said that to Patricia Neal about his son, Brandon De Wilde, in Otto Preminger's production of *In Harm's Way*. He, John Wayne, is this Naval Officer during World War II and hasn't even seen his son for *years*, and . . . oh my god! Why can't I just shut up?

(Taylor looks at Ming while he addresses the other.)

TAYLOR

Could you give us a few minutes?

CLAIRE

Alone?

TAYLOR

No, I though maybe you could have the neighbors in. Have your folks come over! Call Oprah?

CLAIRE (nodding at Wei)

Alone? I don't know, Taylor. Look what happened the last time you two were alone.

WEI

Mother, do you mind?

MING (as bar girl)

I big girl; I take care of self.

TAYLOR (burying his head in his hands)

Jesus!

CLAIRE

Well, I suppose you two *do* have some catching up to do. I'll show Mr. Chan the family album, and see if we can figure out exactly where to put him and my new best friend, Ming, in it.

(They exit. Taylor is still nervous as hell; Ming is keeping her cool and staying very aloof for the time being anyway.)

MING (back to sophisticated lady)

My son tells me you are a defective novelist, Mr. Munroe.

TAYLOR

Defective? Yeah, a lot of people would probably agree with him. But what I actually write are *detective* novels.

MING

I know what you write. My son means that your novels are defective in the sense that you don't write from the heart.

TAYLOR

I'm afraid when it comes to the heart, I don't much of anything right.

MING

Perhaps from the heart of darkness?

TAYLOR

You know Conrad?

MING

Wei saw to it that I got an education the same time that he got his. He insisted. Said an education would enrich my life. (A beat.) The Conrad story was adapted to film as *Apocalypse Now*. You must have seen it.

TAYLOR

No, I didn't.

MING

I'm surprised—a warrior such as yourself.

TAYLOR

One thing the war showed me is that I'm not a warrior.

MING

Poor Taylor. It must have been awful for such a sensitive soul to be exposed to such cruelty and violence.

TAYLOR

Yeah, poor Taylor.

MING

Those were difficult times . . . for *all* of us actually. (A beat.) But you seem to have survived in a rather fine fashion. Here you are situated in a lovely apartment on . . . where is this exactly?

TAYLOR

Geary Street.

MING

Of course, on Geary Street in the City by the Bay with a lovely new wife and career. Children too I should think. I mean . . . *other* children.

TAYLOR

Yes, all those things. (A beat.) You seem to have prospered as well. I know for a fact that—your son has established something of a publishing empire, not just in Asia but on a world scale.

MING

An empire which necessitated his fleeing Hong Kong. And I prospered on my own. Even a stupid girl can go far in Hong Kong if she's attractive and willing to make some—sacrifices.

TAYLOR

Look . . . ah . . .

MING

You don't even know what to call me, do you?

TAYLOR

No.

MING (bar girl)

Angel! You want call me Angel?

TAYLOR

I don't know what else to call you.

MING

That cause you not call me at all—ever! Not for 30 year you not call!

TAYLOR

What are you doing?

MING (back)

Refreshing your memory.

TAYLOR

My memory is fine.

MING (bar girl)

You not remember Angel. You not remember come back, not remember what you say to young Chinese girl who give herself to you.

TAYLOR

Okay! You made your point. You can quit now.

(A few beats.)

MING (back)

Call me Ming, and I'll call you Taylor. I can't stand this veneer of formality. It's much too British for my taste. And I just don't fit the angel mold any longer, haven't for quite some time. And I certainly don't want you to think that I'm something I'm not.

TAYLOR

Ming is lovely. I rather like it.

MING (hard)

I really don't care whether you like it or not.

TAYLOR

You like Taylor all right?

MING

I'm totally indifferent to Taylor.

TAYLOR (thinks, then)

That doesn't surprise me. (A beat.) So did your education enrich your life?

MING

Enrich, I don't know about that, but it certainly gave me a different perspective on . . . what shall I call it—man's inhumanity to . . . women?

TAYLOR

That puts a different twist on it.

MING

And if I hadn't become computer literate, I never would have found your novel on the Web and ultimately been able to have this touching reunion with my Lieutenant.

TAYLOR

So maybe your education will enrich *my* life.

MING

Don't count on it. (A beat.) Is that why you posted it—for me to find?

TAYLOR

I . . . don't know.

MING

Yes you do.

TAYLOR (thinks, then)

I think I put it there to rid myself of some guilt by giving you the *opportunity* to find me.

MING

Feel better now? Guilt all washed away?

TAYLOR

After I posted it, I realized this might happen some day; I mean, I knew it was *possible* for it to happen, however improbable. And I've been through a thousand different scenarios of how to deal with just this situation—with you, a child, Claire, all of it, but, believe me, none of them went like this.

MING

You *knew* about me and your son?

TAYLOR

No. I knew this *situation* was possible; I didn't know it was true.

MING

Isn't it a tenant of your profession that truth is stranger than fiction?

TAYLOR

Especially when it happens to you.

MING

The truth happened to both of us in this case.

TAYLOR

I'm aware of that, and I would like to—

MING

Don't apologize, Taylor. Don't you dare apologize to me. Not now!

TAYLOR

For what? The war? My country? My behavior? The waste? What shouldn't I apologize for, Ming? What? I didn't screw up the world!



Clever boy. Of course, how can I deny the night without denying its outcome?

TAYLOR

Offspring we call them.

MING (reflectively)

I hated you for a long time you know. (A few beats.) Because you didn't come back. (Suddenly screams as Angel and pounds on his chest.) You say you come back, and you not come! Never come! Never! Never!

(Taylor lets her hit him until she stops as suddenly as she had begun. She crosses to a far corner of the room, turns away and tries to regain her composure. Taylor doesn't know what to do; he reaches for her, falters, takes a few steps towards her, and she stops.)

TAYLOR

I am well aware of the fact that I didn't come back.

MING (back now)

Of course I heard the TET Offensive had started, and that explained your absence. Then TET was over, and you still didn't come. Then the year was over, and you hadn't come. In November Wei *had* come, but there was still no sign of what I hoped would be my white knight, just long dark intolerable nights that somehow had to be tolerated so I could provide for my son. Then I just got too busy to hate you anymore, so I just quit and let indifference replace the hate, and finally I became indifferent to the indifference and felt nothing at all.

TAYLOR

And yet here you are . . . after all these years.

MING

Wei brought me. I never would have come here.

TAYLOR

Why?

MING

Because I feel nothing for you.

TAYLOR

I mean, why did *he* bring you?

MING (surprised)

You don't know?

TAYLOR

Old times sake?

MING

I can't believe one of your wives hasn't killed you for saying things like that.

TAYLOR

I'm sorry. I use humor as a defense. It's just one of many faults. (A beat.) So why did Wei bring you here?

MING

I'll let him explain. You had better get him in here—Claire baby too because she's involved.

TAYLOR

Tell me one thing first?

MING

I don't have to tell you anything.

TAYLOR

That morning—did you feel anything for me?

MING

Maybe pity. Nothing else.

TAYLOR

Then why did you make love with me?

MING (bar girl)

Angle not make love with you. You just screw Angle big time!

TAYLOR

You were so beautiful; your hair was spread across the pillow; the morning light had turned the room a kind of muted gold; your breathing was steady and somehow comforting. You took me in when the others would have thrown me into the street, and at that moment . . . I felt connected to someone on this planet for the first and maybe the only time in my life.

MING

So you screw Angel, make her pregnant!

TAYLOR

No, I kissed you, looked into your eyes and without saying a word, *you* took me inside you. You felt something for me; I could see it in your eyes.

MING

They why you not come back?

(He doesn't have an answer.)

MING

Angel pity you cause you so sad. That all. I not feel *anything* for you.

TAYLOR

I want to thank you for your kindness—regardless of the reason for it.

MING (back)

Taylor, I made a small fortune with such acts of kindness.

TAYLOR

I didn't mean that.

MING

I did! (A beat.) You tell *me* something now. How many women have you been with, Taylor?

TAYLOR

Hundreds.

MING

Taylor, I *know* men, and you're not the type. How many?

TAYLOR (thinking)

You, my wives, and a couple of women I went out with between wives.

MING

Seven?

TAYLOR

Eight.

MING

In your life?

TAYLOR

I'm not big on . . .

MING

Casual sex? One night stands? (A beat.) I've had eight men in a single night.

TAYLOR

What? On a slow night?

MING

Yes. On a slow night.

TAYLOR

I shouldn't have said that. I'm sorry.

MING

I didn't have to tell you that either. I guess I wanted you to know . . . something of what that part of my life was like.

TAYLOR

I have a friend whose wife was a hostess in Nha Trang before he married her.

MING

Hostess? And your friend didn't mind marrying a . . . hostess?

TAYLOR

He loved her.

MING

After the first few years it wasn't so bad. I was careful, lucky; I met the right people; bought my own bar in time and started seeing a cross section of Hong Kong's finest fornicators—British, Chinese, Swiss, American, German. I listened carefully, learned how and where to invest my earnings, and did quite well for a long time. I got out with my health and I have to admit a sense of empowerment. Wei has a first class education, and I have money, a dedicated son—what else could I possibly want?

TAYLOR

A friend maybe? (A beat.) You never . . . met anyone?

MING

Taylor, I had a son fathered by an American serviceman. If women had known that you had a son born of a Chinese bar girl, would you have met someone?

TAYLOR

Probably. I'm a man, and I think Americans in general are more forgiving of . . . this kind of indiscretion.

MING

The Chinese aren't. A mistress was the best I could hope to become. (A beat.) Enough history. Call them back in before Claire baby actually does find a place for us in the family album.

TAYLOR (goes to door)

Claire! We're through in here for the time being.

(Claire and Wei emerge from a room off stage.)

CLAIRE

Well, is everything all sorted out?

MING

I wouldn't say—*everything* is sorted out.

TAYLOR

We actually didn't get past the first night. We've still got some 29 years to go.

CLAIRE

Taylor, Mr. Chan needs a favor from you.

WEI

Both of you actually.

TAYLOR

Name it.

CLAIRE

You haven't heard it yet, Taylor.

TAYLOR

Have you?

CLAIRE

No, but I have sense enough not to agree to something before I know what it is I'm agreeing to.

TAYLOR

I think we can safely assume that I owe you and your mother a favor, Mr. Chan.

WEI

I was hoping you would feel that way. (A beat.) I don't know how much you know about my background, but when the British surrendered Hong Kong to the Chinese, I was

WEI (continuing)

forced to flee because of my stand on human rights. My essays and works of fiction were being circulated on the Mainland where my ideas as you can probably imagine are not popular with China's leadership. Had I not fled, I would have lost everything.

CLAIRE

*Everything, everything?*

MING

He would have been imprisoned at the very least.

WEI

Friends are helping me set up editorial offices here and in San Francisco. I will still have access to my printing facilities in Hong Kong through a limited partnership, but I obviously will not be able to publish and distribute my political agenda from Hong Kong.

CLAIRE

So you need Taylor to help you get established here. Is that the favor?

WEI

No. The favor I seek is of a more personal nature, and it will require a great deal of trust, cooperation, and understanding.

CLAIRE

You need a place to stay?

WEI

No, we have a place to stay. I have many contacts here, but thank you.

MING

Claire, Wei was welcomed into your country with open arms for the very reason that he had to flee Hong Kong. But because of my past, I'm considered an undesirable alien and cannot be get a visa even to visit your country. I entered illegally using one of Wei's assistant's passport and visa. When Immigration finds out, and they will because officials in China will tell them, I'll be deported.

WEI

And the Communists will use my mother to get to me.

CLAIRE

That's awful. Taylor you have to do something.

TAYLOR (mulling it)

I think that's the idea.

WEI

Family is very important to Chinese people, and my mother is particularly important to me. The only way she will be able to stay in your country permanently is for her to marry an American citizen.

CLAIRE

That's all you want—for us to help find a suitable husband for your mother. (Looks at Ming.) My god, I know a half a dozen men who would marry her tonight!

WEI

Ms. James, you don't understand, my mother has a great deal to lose if she makes a mistake. The law here is such that she could lose half of her wealth in a subsequent divorce. She must marry someone I can trust not to take advantage of her.

(He looks at Taylor.)

TAYLOR

Don't look at me; I *already* took advantage of her.

CLAIRE

Taylor? Taylor! You're kidding?

WEI (strictly business)

No, I am very serious. I have come to arrange a marriage between my mother and my father.

CLAIRE

Fine, except for the fact that your father happens to be my *husband*!

TAYLOR

Kids don't arrange marriages for their parents! (To Ming.) Tell him.

MING

In a traditional Chinese family, of course you are right. I or we would normally be making arrangements for his marriage; however, the family represented by this gathering is as far away from the traditional Chinese family as it is from China herself.

TAYLOR

You'd go along with this?

MING

Only as a necessity to stay near my son.

CLAIRE

I'm afraid we can't be best friends under these circumstances.

TAYLOR

This is totally nuts. Where did you come up with an idea like this?

WEI

I've been blessed with a creative mind. I have *lots* of good ideas.

TAYLOR

Well, this isn't one of them!

WEI

It is a marriage of convenience only, an accommodation to protect my mother. My mother doesn't want to live with you. Nothing would have to change except appearances.

TAYLOR

Except I'd be a bigamist.

WEI

I don't expect that. I will fly Claire baby—

CLAIRE

Ms. James to you! No! Mrs. Munroe!

WEI

I will fly Mrs. Munroe to Reno for a divorce which you, of course, would have to agree to. Then you would marry my mother, go through the motions of setting up a residence here in Boston to satisfy Immigration, and continue your relationship with—her.

CLAIRE

Oh, now we're down to—"her!"

MING

Taylor a fourth marriage isn't going to ruin you.

(Taylor winces.)

CLAIRE

What? What did you say?

MING

That another marriage wouldn't ruin him.

CLAIRE

No, you said "*fourth*" marriage. Why did she say "fourth" Taylor?

TAYLOR

She made a mistake.

MING (to Claire)

I didn't make a mistake. There's you; the mother of his children, and the woman who dumped him when he was in Vietnam. I would make four.

CLAIRE

What woman who dumped him in Vietnam?

MING

Taylor? Did you lie to me that night?

CLAIRE

Taylor, did you lie to me *last* night?

TAYLOR (to Wei)

You don't have any positions open in Hong Kong do you?

WEI

You wouldn't last 24 hours in Hong Kong.

TAYLOR

Right now, 24 hours is looking pretty good.

MING AND CLAIRE

Taylor!

TAYLOR

Okay . . . here's the deal. The truth is . . . that is to say; the fact is . . . I could use a Prozac.

CLAIRE

No, I don't feel bad.

MING (puzzled, to Taylor)

You take Prozac when *she* feels bad?

WEI

You don't want to hear it.

CLAIRE

I want the truth, Taylor.

TAYLOR

I'm going to make this short and not to sweet because believe me, it wasn't. (A beat.) I got involved with this woman in Newport when I was an Officer Candidate. I slept with her, ) married her when I got commissioned and left her in San Francisco when I went to Vietnam for a year. Ming, she was supposed to meet me in Hong Kong that day; but I was

met with a Dear Taylor telegram instead. That's why I got drunk. She had moved into a commune with a guy called "Potash." Potash for Chrisake! It wasn't the best day I'd ever had.

CLAIRE

So you *were* married before, Marilyn?

TAYLOR

Just once! Technically I guess you'd call it a marriage.

CLAIRE

What did the state call it?

TAYLOR

You know how the state is about paperwork.

CLAIRE

I can't believe you didn't tell me.

TAYLOR

It didn't matter.

CLAIRE

It matters that you didn't tell me, Taylor. That you wouldn't or couldn't or didn't want to. *That* matters!

MING

You should have told her. You told me.

TAYLOR

That was different.

CLAIRE

Oh, I see. Since she was a complete stranger you told her!

TAYLOR

Yes—no! I was going to tell you.

CLAIRE

When?

TAYLOR

When . . . the time was right.

CLAIRE

When the time was right. (A few beats.) I'm outta here!

TAYLOR

Where are you going?

CLAIRE

Reno!

TAYLOR

Nevada?

CLAIRE

Denmark!

TAYLOR

What's this with you and Denmark lately?

CLAIRE (rushing out)

I'll send a post card . . . with my lawyer's address.

TAYLOR

Oh, Claire for God's sake!

MING

You should have told her, Taylor.

(She rushes out after Claire.)

TAYLOR (looks to Wei)

Women.

WEI

You know it's your responsibility to tell me all about them

TAYLOR

Well don't plan on it taking up a big block of your time. I better go after them—to prove that I care.

WEI

Meet me tomorrow.

TAYLOR (exiting after them)

In the park. On the bench.

WEI (to himself)

With the Chinese, dissident.

BUI-DOI: THE DUST OF LIFE

(LIGHTS COME DOWN SLOWLY.)

END ACT II, SCENE I

ACT II, SCENE II

SCENE: LIGHTS COME UP on Wei and Taylor seated at opposite ends of a bench in Lafayette Park the following day.

WEI

I guess I got you in some hot water.

TAYLOR

Hot water? Boiling oil is more like it.

WEI

And what's the current temperature of this cauldron?

TAYLOR

The two primary ingredients are in a cab on the way to the airport where Claire baby has booked a flight to Reno.

WEI

Is my mother trying to stop her?

TAYLOR

Not exactly. I think your mother wants to provide some support to a woman going through a difficult period. And I believe she's attempting to soothe the transition by explaining the many merits of your proposed arrangement to my once but no longer future wife.

WEI

Not all the merits of the plan are obvious at the surface level.

TAYLOR

Nor are they all that plentiful.

WEI

I could compensate her rather generously.

TAYLOR

Buy her off?

WEI

If you look at this . . . arrangement in terms of business venture, it simplifies the whole process.

TAYLOR

No feelings to get in the way.

WEI

Isn't that the way you prefer things? No feelings to muck things up.

TAYLOR

Look, Mr. Chan—

WEI

Call me Wei. Dammit, man! I'm your son!

TAYLOR

Okay . . . Wei. Call me . . . Pop.

WEI

Pop. Right. (A beat.) I'll call you Taylor.

TAYLOR

So, look . . . Wei, here's how it is: I don't have time for feelings. They get in the way of me doing what needs to be done, so I just *do* now and feel later.

WEI

Thirty years later?

TAYLOR

Not always.

WEI

And you can live like that?

TAYLOR

I've done all right so far.

WEI

Have you?

TAYLOR

I can't complain.

WEI

I can.

TAYLOR

Well, I can't. What difference does it make? I haven't noticed anybody listening if I do.

(A few beats.)

WEI

Taylor . . . do you know an attorney in Hong Kong named Michael Fong?

TAYLOR (looks at him suspiciously)

No.

WEI

How about a Priest named John Macguire?

TAYLOR

Never heard of him.

WEI

Do you know the reason you don't make any money on your books is because all your royalties go to Mr. Fong, who routes the money to a children's' relief organization in Hong Kong run by Father John?

TAYLOR

I thought I'd been coming up a little short lately. I'll have to talk to my publisher. There must be some mistake.

WEI

Yeah, the mistake is sitting in front of you, and you've been trying to make up for it ever since. So don't tell me you don't *feel* anything. I think you feel a great deal, even if it is only guilt.

TAYLOR

That's the *one* thing I got out of my early religious education. I feel *so* blessed.

WEI

Has this been an attempt on your part to somehow rescue a child you might or might not have had? Or something to soothe your conscience for taking my mother in as a young girl and then leaving her pregnant and alone?

TAYLOR

I didn't know any of that.

WEI

And I didn't know I had a father, but I knew from my earliest memories that *something* was missing; I knew that my "family" consisted of an ever-changing brood of young women and transient "uncles" of every description. Bearing the child of a foreign devil resulted in my mother being an outcast in her own family.

TAYLOR

I have nothing to do with how Chinese society defines family.

WEI

So you bear no responsibility?

TAYLOR

I accept responsible for my behavior, not Chinese society.

WEI

By the time I was old enough to recognize what it was that I was missing, what I didn't have that children around me *did* have, there were plenty of "father figures" on the scene, most of them kind to me and generous to my mother, but my family then consisted of my mother, the men and women who worked in the bar she owned, an accountant, and a lawyer, a stock-broke and my tutor. *That* is what you're responsible for.

TAYLOR (thinks, then)

Wei, this arrangement you have in mind is not the way to get the family you want. That's just not the way the world works.

WEI (hard)

Then tell me how the world works. What would you have me do? Sit back and wait another 30 years for my daddy to find me?

TAYLOR

I though the purpose of this arrangement was to keep your mother from being deported and protect her assets, not find you a father.

WEI

Of course, you're right. I'm confusing old business with new.

TAYLOR

So you don't want anything from me?

WEI

What I want is of no concern to you.

TAYLOR

So, who's hiding their feelings now?

WEI (angry)

You won't like it if I tell you what I want, Taylor.

TAYLOR

I'm a big boy, Wei. Try me.

WEI (breaking)

I do . . . want a father. Good. Bad. Indifferent. I don't care! I just want some identifiable human being that I can say is: "my old man." You don't even have to do anything other than to *acknowledge my existence*; I know better than to expect anything from you. You lousy son-of-a-bitch!

TAYLOR (touching Wei's shoulder)

Okay. You want a father? You got one! And a terrific half-brother and half-sister in the deal. I'll give you more damn family than you'll know what to do with. Half aunts, half uncles. Alcoholics. Addicts. Writers. Thinkers. Musicians. Laborers. The Munroe's have them all, and if you want them, they're all yours.

WEI

I'll settle for the father and siblings.

TAYLOR

They'll be . . . surprised.

WEI

So you *will* marry my mother?

TAYLOR

I'm your father whether I marry your mother or not.

WEI

My mother needs protection, and you *owe* her.

TAYLOR

There's got to be another way.

WEI

There isn't time to find another way. If she's arrested, she'll be incarcerated, and then you won't have a chance to marry her.

TAYLOR

Wei, I'm married! Even if Claire goes through with this divorce, I have to wait until it's final before I'll be free to marry anybody. And choice is important to a guy looking for a wife.

WEI

I expect you to take some risks and make some accommodations on behalf of my mother.

TAYLOR

The risk aside, I can't just walk out on one woman just because someone else comes along. I have strong feelings for Claire.

WEI

Taylor, Claire baby is on her way to Reno to get a divorce.

TAYLOR

She's just in one of her moods. She's going through menopause. You know about menopause?

WEI

Yes, I *know* about menopause! I've been surrounded by women all my life.

TAYLOR

Okay! Don't get sore. (A beat.) So the Claire baby you met was not the real Claire. She has her good points.

WEI

Why do you want to be with a woman who doesn't love you?

TAYLOR (surprised)

What makes you think she doesn't love me?

WEI (evasively)

Because . . . you told me that your marriage was only *relatively* happy.

TAYLOR

I didn't tell you that. And if I did, it doesn't mean that I don't love Claire.

WEI

Do you?

TAYLOR

In my own way.

WEI

What does that mean?

TAYLOR

It means I don't screw around on her.

WEI

And what does it mean to her? Same thing. That *you* don't screw around?

(Taylor thinks about this.)

WEI

Face it, Taylor, she's not flying to Reno to get a divorce because you didn't tell her about your first marriage. Something else is going on, and this just gave her the excuse she needed to leave without looking like the one who wants out. She gets what she wants and looks just fine.

TAYLOR

And what does she want?

WEI

Maybe to be with . . . somebody else.

TAYLOR

Wait a minute! What is going on here? (A beat.) Have you spoken with a detective named Nick Adams?

WEI

There really is a *Nick Adams*?

TAYLOR

Have you?

WEI

I spoke with Detective Adams a few minutes . . . at his request.

TAYLOR

Oh, I see it now. You and Nick—together. (A beat.) Did it ever occur to either of you that maybe, *just maybe*, Taylor knows what the hell is best for Taylor?

WEI

I'm not the least bit interested in what's best for Taylor. My only concern is for the needs of my mother. If I get a father out of the deal, that's fine too, but I'm sure as hell not counting on it.

TAYLOR

Fine! Go ahead then: destroy my marriage, resurrect my past, and force me into a position where I have to assault my best friend You're a one-man wrecking crew, Wei.

WEI

A regular Chinese fire drill.

(Taylor gets up to leave.)

WEI

Where are you going?

TAYLOR

To strangle my best friend!

WEI

What about my mother?

TAYLOR

I'll strangle her later. Bring her down to O'Brien's Pub on Washington. Meet me there; I want to get this whole thing straightened out before this day ends.

WEI

Are you going to marry her?

TAYLOR

If I'm not in jail for assaulting a police officer, or dead from trying, I'll *think* about it.

(Taylor exits. The LIGHTS COME DOWN to END THE SCENE as Wei quickly gathers up his things and starts out after him.)

ACT II, SCENE III

SCENE: LIGHTS COME UP on Nick seated in the bar at the same table as before. He's sipping a scotch. Taylor rushes in and stands over him.

NICK

Taylor! How 'bout them Giants?

TAYLOR

Screw the Giants! You set me up you son-of-a-bitch!

NICK

Hold on, Buddy. You're *way* ahead of me.

TAYLOR

You and Wei.

NICK

You told me to talk to the kid.

TAYLOR

Yeah, and you two evidently had one *hell* of a conversation.

NICK

Sit down. I'll buy you a drink.

TAYLOR

To toast my nuptials?

NICK

Sit down or it will be more than your nuptials that get toasted.

TAYLOR (sitting)

I don't like the sound of that.

NICK

What'll it be?

TAYLOR

Hell, you decide. You're trying to run every other aspect of my life!

NICK

Is that all this is about?

TAYLOR

*All!* What else is there? What else have I got besides my life?

NICK

Your wife.

TAYLOR

Not anymore!

NICK

Relax your among friends.

TAYLOR

*That's* what worries me!

NICK

How old are you Taylor?

TAYLOR (confused)

What?

NICK

How old are you?

TAYLOR

Fifty-three. Same as you. You going to play that number?

NICK

And how many of those 53 years have we known each other?

TAYLOR

All of them, but probably for the first few, we didn't know we knew each other. We probably just drooled and spit-up while our mothers tried to convince everyone in the neighborhood how bright we were.

NICK

Contrary to the physical evidence in front of them.

(They both laugh at this.)

NICK

What's your earliest memory of us—once we got past the drooling stage?

TAYLOR (thinks, then fondly)

The neighborhood bully . . . what was his name?

NICK

Manny Mendez.

TAYLOR

Yeah, yeah, Manny Mendez, the little prick. We showed him a thing or two. We couldn't have been more than four, and we high-logged the son-of-a-bitch before anyone even knew what that was.

NICK

We were neighborhood heroes!

TAYLOR

And Manny was a changed kid; a true transformation took place. I think we took the pressure off of him to be a bully, and he was grateful to us for it.

NICK

You thought that when you were four?

TAYLOR

No, in retrospect. Back then, I was afraid he was going to catch me by myself and beat the shit out of me.

NICK

Me too!

TAYLOR

*That's* why we became inseparable!

NICK

I think you're right. I never really liked you.

TAYLOR

I know. I didn't like you either..

NICK

Those were the days, eh?

TAYLOR

Those were the days all right. Thank god they're past us now.

NICK

Water over the damn.

TAYLOR

Down the river.

NICK

Through the drain.

TAYLOR

Under the bridge.

NICK

That's enough. Jesus! (A beat.) The point I'm trying to make here is: there's my wife, my kids and you. Those are the things that are most important to me, Taylor. You're right up, there, you see. Now do you really think I would do anything to make you unhappy?

TAYLOR

Not intentionally. But you're taking steps that influence my life because you assume you know what's good for me.

NICK

Only because you sure as hell don't know.

TAYLOR

You don't know what I care about!

NICK

You know, you're right. I don't know what you care about; all I know is what you don't give a shit about. And you know why I don't know? Because you never tell me. You never told me about your night in Hong Kong with this Chinese girl. You never told me you and Marilyn were all washed up. You never told me about Claire baby having an affair. I've been here for you, Taylor; I've been here for a lifetime. Lighten the hell up, and share your life with someone! Me! The kid! This woman! Claire! Someone! You don't have to go through life all by yourself.

TAYLOR

Nick, I don't have to tell you. You know what's wrong with me.

(Nick forces a sad smile and shakes his head. Taylor stares into his face. Nick finally reaches out and grabs Taylor's shoulders.)

NICK

Vietnam. Jesus Christ, 30 years later it's still, Vietnam. (A beat.) They gave us Purple Hearts for blowing a can of K-rations with some C-4. That about says it all.

TAYLOR

Not quite.

NICK

Taylor, I know we wax nostalgically about . . . Christ sometimes I can hardly say it myself—Vietnam, but I know how you really feel, not because you ever told me, but because I feel the same way. (A few beats.) How'd we go over there Buddy?

TAYLOR

What do you mean?

NICK

I mean, how did we go over there? What were we like? (A beat.) Young?

TAYLOR

Yeah.

NICK

Innocent?

TAYLOR

Yeah.

NICK

Idealistic? Determined to keep the yellow peril from becoming the red peril?

TAYLOR

Willing to die to make the world safe for democracy?

NICK

Damn right. Going to stop those damn dominoes from falling.

TAYLOR

Had never killed anybody.

NICK

All those things. (A few beats.) And how'd we come back?

TAYLOR (breaking)

Lost.

NICK

Broken.

TAYLOR

Screwed up.

NICK

Hardened.

TAYLOR

Changed.

NICK (looking at his hands)

Our hands stained with blood that wouldn't wash away.

(They embrace and try to keep from weeping.)

NICK

I think that's why I took a Vietnamese wife. Not consciously, but underneath . . . I thought if I could somehow just save one Vietnamese from the madness that we and the French brought to those beautiful people, it would somehow make up for some of the damage. But do you know what happened? She ended up saving me--from what you've been going through for 30 years. Do you understand me, Taylor.

TAYLOR

Yeah, but you loved Kai before you were aware of any of the damage. You married her for love.

NICK

The love is what was visible. I was driven by something else . . . something I certainly didn't understand then and don't even fully comprehend now. Deep inside I know I somehow wanted to make things right.

TAYLOR

So even without love, you think that my marrying this Asian woman will somehow appease my conscience for what we did?

NICK

I don't know that anything will ever appease your conscience or mine for that, but marrying the mother of your son to keep her from being deported is a step toward some kind of reconciliation. You'll never get over what we did over there, Taylor. The best you can hope for is to get past it, so you can live your life. Some kind of a relationship with this woman and your son just might help you do that.

TAYLOR

Maybe it would. But I'm already married, Nick.

NICK

You have a piece of paper issued by the state saying that you and Claire baby are bound by a legal contract. What the hell does the state or this country know about love or war? *Nothing!* We both know that you and Claire were never married in your hearts.

TAYLOR

I can't just desert her!

NICK

Taylor, in case you haven't heard: Claire baby's on a plane to Reno right now.

TAYLOR (thinks, then)

Can't you call some people at Immigration? Make some arrangements so she can stay?

NICK

Too late. We got a bulletin on her last night. Immigration knows she's in the country illegally. The authorities in China want her back very badly.

TAYLOR

We've got to warn them!

NICK

I'll take care of it. And Immigration doesn't work weekends, so we're good until Monday. What difference does it make to you anyway?

TAYLOR

Just because I'm uncomfortable with the idea of marrying her doesn't mean I want to see her deported.

NICK

Oh, right.

TAYLOR

I mean, she's the mother of my son.

NICK

That too.

TAYLOR

And I . . . owe her . . . a favor.

NICK

How 'bout because you know in the depths of your soul that you should have returned to her 30 years ago?

TAYLOR

What makes you think that?

NICK

Your book you idiot. You want me to show you the passage?

TAYLOR

I know the passage. But even if what I wrote is true, why would she want to marry me?

NICK

She needs a visa.

TAYLOR

So I should marry a woman I don't even know so she can have a visa?

NICK

What's worse: being married to a woman you don't know or being married to one you don't love?

TAYLOR

I loved Claire.

NICK

Loved? The use of the past tense is duly noted. And even if you do love her now, it's pretty clear that she holds no such feelings for you. And with this other woman, who knows? Anything is possible.

TAYLOR

Nick, this woman has a lot of money, and I have nothing to offer her.

NICK

But yourself.

TAYLOR

That's no bargain.

NICK

Taylor, you're just not the despicable guy you make yourself out to be. You can be loved like all the rest of us; you need love like all the rest of us, but before anyone else is going to love you, you've got to learn to love yourself. Give yourself a break; forgive yourself

NICK (continuing)

for all your transgressions against humanity. You're just a guy in a screwed up world doing the best you can with what you got. And you're doing okay.

TAYLOR

Just okay?

NICK

Okay is better than most. Now you have a chance to make a real difference, to influence some lives positively. Those of your son and his mother. Neither of them really has any reason whatsoever to expect anything from you. What the hell: surprise them. What harm can it do?

TAYLOR

What I am doing sure as hell isn't working.

NICK

So take the leap.

TAYLOR

You help me beat a bigamy rap?

NICK

I'll call my friend at the Chronicle. You'll be a hero all over again for rescuing the mother of your Chinese dissident son who you didn't even know you had. How the hell is Immigration going to fight that?

TAYLOR

They could talk to Claire.

NICK

Yeah, Claire baby and your shrink's grieving wife. I don't think Claire baby is going to be granting any interviews.

TAYLOR

Okay, I'll do it, but because I'm obligated to do it. I sure as hell don't have any romantic notions about this union.

NICK

Of course not. (A beat.) Hey?

TAYLOR

What?

NICK

What's she like.

TAYLOR

You mean, what does she *look* like?

NICK

Not that it matters. I'm just curious.

TAYLOR (shaking his head)

Well, she's . . . been through a lot.

NICK

Oh, yeah, . . . I understand.

TAYLOR

And the Chinese aren't into physical fitness like we are.

NICK

Yeah, no, I mean . . .

TAYLOR

We haven't had . . . *that* kind of life either.

NICK

That's some sorry shit.

TAYLOR

And I don't think their dental care is on par with ours.

NICK

Shit. (A beat.) That's enough! I get the picture. You're doing a fine thing Buddy.

TAYLOR

Duty.

NICK

Doing the right thing is never easy.

TAYLOR

If it was easy, *everybody* would do it.

NICK

You're a hell of a guy, Taylor.

(Wei and Claire enter upstage and come down to the table. Ming looks stunning dressed in jeans and T-shirt. Taylor and Nick both rise and stumble over one another to offer her a seat.)

WEI

Detective Adams, you haven't met my mother.

NICK (gives Taylor a look)

My pleasure. I had no idea that . . . I mean, Taylor had . . . this is your *mother*?

MING

Ming Chan, Detective Adams. Please sit. Hello, Taylor.

TAYLOR

Hello Ming.

WEI

My service said you called Detective Adams.

NICK

Call me Nick.

WEI

Of course. Nick.

NICK (to Ming)

You can call me Nick too.

MING

Hello, Nick.

NICK (staring at Ming, glaring at Taylor)

Hello.

WEI

You called?

NICK

That's right. We need to move on this . . . arrangement fairly rapidly. Immigration got a message from the State Department. They know your mother entered the country illegally. By Monday, every cop in San Francisco will be looking for her.

TAYLOR

And we'll be in Las Vegas.

WEI

Las Vegas?

NICK

The marriage capitol of the world.

WEI

Then you're going to do it?

TAYLOR

Yes, I'm going to do it, but you have to understand I'm going through with it as much for myself as for my obligation to you and your mother.

MING

Please stop referring to me as his mother. I am Ming Chan.

TAYLOR

Ming, I expect nothing from you in this arrangement nor do I expect anything from Wei. What I will get from this arrangement is relief from a burden that I have carried with me for . . .

WEI

Thirty years.

TAYLOR

Yes, thirty years. (A beat.) I cannot be the father that was missing from your life, Wei; nor can I be the husband that was missing from yours, Ming. At this point, all I can be . . . is *here*. If you want me or need me. That much I can promise you. I will be here for you. If you can live with that, then I can too.

WEI

I can try.

MING (bar girl)

I have no choice. I'm just poor Chinese girl submitting to marriage arrangement.

NICK

What's *that* all about?

TAYLOR

It's a long story.

MING (back)

As well as a very sad one.

TAYLOR

Which we don't have time to get into.

NICK

Okay, then. You need a best man Buddy?

TAYLOR (grabs his shoulder)

Got one.

WEI

I have a plane at my disposal. We can leave immediately.

NICK

Plane at your disposal?

WEI

Some investors I am acquainted with have made it available.

NICK

So what are we waiting for?

TAYLOR

I need to pack a few things.

MING (impulsively)

No! You not go away.

TAYLOR

Okay. I not go.

(Ming turns then and rushes out as the  
LIGHTS COME DOWN to END THE  
SCENE.)

ACT II, SCENE IV

SCENE: LIGHTS COME UP on Ming and Taylor seated in folding chairs in a wedding "chapel" in Las Vegas. There is an empty chair between them; they are both clearly apprehensive about the forthcoming nuptials.

MING

What is the name of this city again?

TAYLOR

Nevada—Las Vegas.

MING

I've read of a Los Alamos, not Vegas.

TAYLOR

That's New Mexico. Explosions of a different kind started there.

MING

What do you mean, Taylor?

TAYLOR

It's a joke. Los Alamos is where we developed the A-bomb.

MING

So . . . you're saying Las Vegas is where marriages explode—like a bomb.

TAYLOR

Something like that. The marriage starts a chain-reaction that ends in a huge explosion—like the bomb.

MING

Do you find that humorous?

TAYLOR

It was just a failed attempt to make small talk.

MING

Maybe you make too much small talk, Taylor. Maybe it's time for you to start making some big talk.

TAYLOR

Big talk?

MING

Don't mock me. I mean maybe you should speak the truth instead of making everything into a joke.

TAYLOR

Maybe I should.

MING

No maybe about it.

TAYLOR

All right. From now on, I'll do just that.

MING

I'm serious.

TAYLOR

So am I.

MING

Okay, then.

TAYLOR

Okay.

MING

Okay. So you tell me this truth . . . why did you agree to marry me?

TAYLOR (thinks, then)

A sense of obligation. Some long-standing guilt . . . the desire to right a wrong.

MING

You don't love me?

TAYLOR

I don't even know you.

MING

Good answer. I don't know or love you either. And I know better than to expect love from anyone.

TAYLOR

This is an arranged marriage, a marriage of convenience. Love is not a part of the arrangement. This marriage will give you refuge. That is all.

MING

What will it give you?

TAYLOR

Probably nightmares.

MING

Seriously.

TAYLOR

I'm sorry, Ming. But making jokes has been a way of life for me; I'll need time to change.

MING

I'm afraid we don't have as much time to change as we once had.

TAYLOR

Do you know the expression . . . sense of closure, that something is complete?

MING

Yes, I understand the concept. Complete. Finished. All the loose ends getting tied up. Something like the end of a Charles Dickens novel.

TAYLOR

Yes. This marriage will give me that . . . for better or for worse.

MING

Richer or poorer?

TAYLOR

A whole lot richer. (She manages to laugh at this.) See, sometimes jokes can be a good thing.

MING

Sometimes.

TAYLOR

But also in terms of—big talk—I mean something else. (A beat.) In the book, you know how I described waking up next to you with the morning sun pouring in the window on  
TAYLOR (continuing)

your skin. Your warmth. Your softness. The quiet rhythm of your breathing. Your hair spread across the pillow, and how in that one brief instant of time I felt connected to you through your act of kindness.

MING

Yes, I remember. But you didn't mean it.

TAYLOR

Yes, I did! At the time, and I sense that there's something here, even now, something between us, that will make my *life* richer.

MING

There is nothing between us.

TAYLOR

Are you sure?

MING

Only this matter of necessity. I am only marrying you so I can stay here with my son, not you. I love my son, Taylor. I have no feelings for you.

TAYLOR

I know . . . even so, Wei and I are connected. He is my son too.

MING

Wei thinks he can make everything okay; he's always trying to make the world right. He fights for justice in China; he tries to change what can not be changed. (Taylor smiles at this.) Me? I know better. I know how the world really works.

TAYLOR

I think you hold on to your past . . . to keep from connecting with someone.

MING

You?

TAYLOR

Anyone! I think you won't allow yourself to be loved because you don't feel you deserve to be loved because of what . . . circumstances made you do. I felt the same way for a very long time. You and Wei and Nick have made me see the world a little differently.

MING (angry)

Circumstances didn't dictate my life. You did!

TAYLOR

Come on, Ming. Maybe you weren't a hostess when you took me home, but you were only a step away. So was I solely responsible for what you chose to become?

MING

You left me. You said you would come back . . . and you didn't! You lied.

TAYLOR

Circumstances took me away; I couldn't come back, but . . . I'm here now. And not because I have to be.

MING (thinks, then)

Okay. I can see that you are.

(Wei and Nick enter. Nick slaps Taylor a high five. Then he prompts Wei into doing the same. Then Nick nudges Wei.)

WEI (not knowing what he's doing)

How 'bout them Giants!

(Taylor catches his breath and then pulls both of them close to him.)

TAYLOR (breaking a little)

Yeah, how 'bout them Giants.

NICK

Okay, so you two ready?

TAYLOR (composing himself)

As ready as we're going to get.

WEI

Then let's go . . . Pop!

(They start toward a small white arch covered with plastic flowers.)

NICK (examining one of the flowers)

Plastic. Made in Hong Kong.

WEI

Not exactly heaven.

NICK

But they'll last forever.

(Ming takes Taylor's arm and turns him to her.)

MING

Taylor, just tell me one thing before we do this . . . if the TET Offensive hadn't started, would you have come back for me?

(Taylor looks at her, slowly lifts a hand to touch her cheek, and attempts to pull her against him. At first she resists, then softens, allowing him to pull her tight against him. She begins to cry softly and closes her eyes. The LIGHTS COME DOWN SLOWLY to end the play.)

CURTAIN.