

POET'S CHOICE

Cast of Characters

<u>GOD</u>	Voice in the dark.
<u>SATAN</u>	Voice in the dark.
<u>PEM:</u>	A fallen Angel of ambiguous gender.
<u>MARGARET FOSTER:</u>	English professor, poet, middle-aged female.
<u>ANNA:</u>	Philosophy professor, middle-aged female.
<u>FELIX:</u>	Composer, professor of music, middle-aged male.
<u>BARRIE:</u>	Conceptual artist, art professor, middle-aged, either gender.

After first entrance, Pem is always present, though often “invisible.”

SETTING

An edge from which God and Satan speak.

A university campus. In the beginning and at the end, a table in a college coffee shop.

Margaret's office: a door, left. A desk, a bookcase, a shabby armchair. On the desk, a computer, stack of papers and books. A small table with a coffee maker and fixings. The office is neat, but not compulsively so.

TIME

The present.

PROLOGUE

AT RISE: Total darkness.

GOD

Penemue! Penemue! Now where can that annoyance be?

SATAN

Oh, who knows? It always shows up. Sometimes when you least expect it.

(Spot on PEM, who enters at very edge of stage.)

GOD

Ah, there you are.

PEM

You called?

GOD

I did indeed. We have a task for you.

PEM

A task. For me.

SATAN

Yes. God and I have been talking about the human condition, as we often do, and we have made a little wager.

PEM

A wager?

GOD

Yes. A wager. My devilish colleague here believes that given a choice between happiness and art, any given artist would choose happiness. I believe they would choose art, because art is creation, and in the act of creation they most resemble me. And so. . .

PEM

Well, I would think that. . .

GOD

AND SO. . . we have decided to do an experiment. You are to appear to an artist and offer it a choice between happiness and the kind of brilliant artistic accomplishment that leads to fame and fortune. If it chooses art, you will be readmitted to heaven.

SATAN

And if it chooses happiness, need I say, you will be deeply honored in hell. Glory in the lowest, you know, with your very own flame thrower.

PEM

You are assuming that I want to be back in heaven? Or admitted to hell? I mean. . .

GOD

SILENCE, angel! Every created being aspires to heaven and fears hell. That is well-known.

SATAN

Or desires glory and power on Earth, and to hell with heaven. That, too, is well-known.

PEM

Right. Could I have wings again? That is, if I get back into heaven? That would be nice.

GOD

Perhaps. Do not presume.

PEM

Or my own flame thrower in hell? Really?

SATAN

For sure, dear thing, of course. Would I lie to you?

PEM

Now that's the question, isn't it?

GOD

My colleague is well known to be the Father of Lies. I, however, keep my promises.

SATAN

Sure you do.

GOD

The problem with you, Satan, is that you just don't know how to wait. You want everything right away. Including happiness, which, as you may recall, is the matter at hand.

SATAN

Uh-huh. Happiness. Versus art. Instant reward versus delayed gratification which, by the way, may be delayed indefinitely, or so it seems to me.

GOD

To you, Prince of Darkness. To you. So, angel, that's the deal. Happiness or art for the human, Hell or Heaven for you.

PEM

Okay. So if I've got to do this—assuming I've got to. . .

GOD

SATAN

(In unison.)

You have no choice.

PEM

Right. You've put your finger on it. Or would, if you had fingers.

GOD

SATAN

(Unison.)

Silence!

PEM

Okay, okay. But—who is this artist and what do I do? It's not like we can just pop in on just anybody. Besides, if either one of you picks the artist, it isn't random, right?

SATAN

Ah. Good point, angel. Good point.

GOD

Ah. Okay then. First of all, you are to listen. When you hear a summons, you will appear, in whatever way seems best to you and offer the choice.

PEM

A summons?

SATAN

Good idea, God, good idea. You know, as in "Heaven help me," or "Damn them to hell," or some such.

GOD

Yes, yes. That's the idea.

SATAN

And then, basically, it's up to you. How do you want to tweak it? Which way do you want to go?

GOD

Is that clear?

PEM

I guess. As clear as anything you've ever dreamed up. But why me? I mean, why can't you do it directly, like you did with what's-his-name? The guy with the boils. Job. Why do I have to do it?

GOD

Because you caused humans great grief and despair, and simultaneously you gave them great joy and relief, which is why you have been sentenced to your own peculiar purgatory. Whether you rise above or fall below is now entirely up to you as my colleague says. But while it's been nice as always to chat with you, it's time for you to get started. So go. Pay attention. Go, with all the blessings of Heaven.

SATAN

And may the Forces of Darkness go with you.

PEM

(Resigned.)

Okay. Whatever. Your wish is my command.

(Blackout.)

ACT I

Scene 1

(The Coffee shop. MARGARET, FELIX, ANNA and BARRIE are seated, already talking.)

MARGARET

It's a royal pain. You know the racket. This whole publishing thing is for the birds. All about the market, right? Anyhow, Brett said that the order of the poems in the last section has to be revised by the end of the week because he wants the ending to be more optimistic.

ANNA

How long has he been your editor now?

MARGARET

This is book number three. So, what? ten years maybe? Twelve?

ANNA

So he should know by now that you don't exactly major in cheer.

MARGARET

How can I when the world is basically falling apart? I mean, look at the students. Illiterate, screen-addicted. . .

BARRIE

Hey! Not all of them. Not mine anyhow. I'm getting some of the best work ever. Funny stuff, even. I mean funny as in amusing. Really comical shit.

MARGARET

You mean ironic.

BARRIE

No, Mags. I do NOT mean "i-ron-ick." I mean funny. Do you remember funny?

FELIX

Poor old Margaret. I bet you've never been funny.

MARGARET

Oh come on. I have a sense of humor.

BARRIE

That's different from funny. That's just laughing at jokes. I'm funny. I *make* jokes. I *am* a fucking joke. I'm the only one at this table who *is* funny. You and Anna have a sense of humor but you aren't funny. Felix isn't funny *and* he doesn't have a sense of humor, do you, Feely?

FELIX

Of course not. Barrie, what's your point? And don't call me Feely.

BARRIE

Oh, come on, Fee-LIX. So much of life is just too ridiculous. It's a bitch not to acknowledge that. Lighten the load, right?

FELIX

And what's the point of that? The load is heavy, and we might as well admit it. If we pretend it isn't, well. . .

BARRIE

Oh, pretending! Pretending? I didn't say it wasn't heavy, I said let's lighten it. But as I see it, you have a choice: either admit the shit and laugh, or admit it and crawl into a hole. I'd rather laugh. Clearly you'd rather crawl.

FELIX

I'm not crawling. I just want to express the world's grief and fear in my music.

BARRIE

And I'm trying to express the flip side. Because it's there. It *is*. If you look for it. Right, Annio? (Sings) "Keep on the sunny side/Always on the sunny side. . ."

ANNA

Sure. It's all there. Best of all possible worlds, doom and gloom, realism, idealism, nihilism, utilitarianism. . . Plato, Kant, Midgley, Davis—. It's all there. You can back up any world view you like.

MARGARET

So what do you think is the best philosophy?

ANNA

Whatever works in the moment. I don't know. I only teach the stuff. And speaking of which—gotta run. See you all later. And good luck with the revision, Margaret. Keep me posted.

(Exits.)

BARRIE

I gotta go, too. Studio time. Gotta go *play*. With. Art! See ya.

(BARRIE Exits.)

FELIX

So you claim to have a sense of humor? I've never noticed. Not that I'm criticizing, mind.

MARGARET

Well, by Barrie's definition. I do laugh at jokes. At least, at witty ones. You don't, do you?

FELIX

No. I suppose I can manage a wry smile now and then, but that's about it. I just don't think there's much to laugh at any more. If there ever was much.

MARGARET

I know what you mean.

FELIX

And, Margaret, I think you've gotta fight for your book.

MARGARET

Oh, I will. You know me.

FELIX

What's Brett's rationale for an "optimistic" ending?

MARGARET

He says readers nowadays want to be uplifted. He never used to say that, so who knows what's up with him? Maybe he's getting old. Maybe he's depressed himself.

FELIX

Who isn't?

MARGARET

Ugh. Well, I don't care what readers want. This is art. And right now I want to get the damned thing published—and I don't want to sell out.

FELIX

Then don't.

MARGARET

I may agree to writing a penultimate poem that's not as heavy as the rest, but that's as far as I'll go. And oh, look at the time. I've gotta call him in fifteen minutes. I'll keep you posted. Thanks, Felix.

FELIX

Hang in there.

MARGARET

I will. You, too. 'Bye.

(MARGARET exits to her office as lights fade.)

Scene 2

(Margaret's office. MARGARET sits at desk, takes out phone, punches in a number.)

MARGARET

“Your call is important.” Like hell it is. No, I don't want to leave a goddamn voicemail.

(Puts phone down.)

You wanted me to call *you*. What is the matter with people? Technology, bad music, bad manners, false cheer. Stupidity! O God, if you're out there somewhere, all I want is a little relief. Some happiness. Or maybe at least some success. Just a little, before I die. Is that too much to ask? Save me from this. . . this tedium!

(Turns to the computer, begins to work.)

(PEM enters, left. Stops center, addresses audience.)

PEM

Hi again. Well, this is the gig. I have been invited. You heard her. There she sits, working away. You humans are always so adorable when you're working. So earnest. Look at her. Critical articles in learned journals, poetry in *The New Yorker*. But, as you just heard in that little rant, she's not happy, nor does she consider herself successful. Poor thing. Because of her rant, she has just volunteered to be the subject of that little wager. Hell of a choice, happiness or art. So what shall it be? And how shall I begin? Might as well be traditional. Here goes.

(Stands before the desk.)

Fear not!

MARGARET

Oh my god! Who the hell are you? How did you get in? Where did you come from?

PEM

Oh, come on. By definition, you're very well-read. What else would appear suddenly and say “Fear not” in such an imposing way? I'm an angel.

MARGARET

Right. Of course you are. Get out of here. Right now. I don't know who you are, but you can't be here. I'm calling security, see?

PEM

Oh, don't bother calling them. Nobody sees me unless I want to be seen. Regard.

(Disappears and appears several times.)

See? I can come and go just like that. I won't hurt you, I promise. So you don't need to be afraid. I really am an angel. And you, in fact, summoned me.

MARGARET

I most certainly did not.

PEM

Oh yes, you did. I believe the formula you used was “O God, if you’re out there somewhere, all I want is a little happiness, blah, blah,blah. . .” I am, of course, not God. God doesn’t do personal appearances. At least, hardly ever. Not these days. And if he did, well, he wouldn’t look like this. And he wouldn’t say “Fear not.” Trust me on that one.

MARGARET

I’m dreaming. I must be dreaming.

PEM

I assure you that you are awake. And this is your lucky day! I’m here to offer you a really interesting choice—happiness, which you claim to want, or—the ability to write absolutely, mind-bogglingly brilliant stuff, and the fame and fortune that come with that. Which you also claim to want.

MARGARET

Okay. I’m dreaming. I’m hallucinating. This is ridiculous. I have to be dreaming. I am Margaret Foster, assistant professor of English. I am a poet. I am sane. When I open my eyes, I will be awake. There.

PEM

You’re awake, and I’m still here.

MARGARET

All right. I can’t wake myself up, so it’s one of those dreams. I’ve had them before. Lucid dreaming, Margaret. Lucid dreaming. Take control. This is rather Faustian, after all. I know where this comes from.

PEM

While you sort yourself out, I’m going to sit, if you don’t mind. It doesn’t matter to me, of course, but if I appear to sit, well, I look friendlier, true? (Sits.) There. That’s better, isn’t it? I did remember to say “Fear not,” didn’t I? In case I didn’t, do that. Fear not, I mean.

MARGARET

Wake up, Margaret, wake up. Gotta wake up. I need coffee. Do you want some? Why am I asking a dream if it wants coffee?

(Goes to table and pours coffee from the pot.)

PEM

Angels don’t drink coffee. We’re immaterial. No digestion, and so on.

MARGARET

Of course not. Okay. Coffee. (Sits, drinks.) Dream coffee. Blah. It's been in the pot too long. It might even be last night's. A bit too real. Okay. Lucid dreaming, lucid dreaming. Okay. Okay. Let's try it again. Who are you really?

PEM

I. Am. An. Angel. A messenger from God—and Satan, as a matter of fact.

MARGARET

I don't believe in angels. Or God. Or Satan.

PEM

Well, we believe in you, and that's all that matters, isn't it?

MARGARET

Oh, wait! I might be having a stroke. I should call an ambulance.

PEM

Suit yourself. They'll do a bunch of tests and keep you in the hospital for awhile and tell you you're fine and then I'll come see you again. Besides, you know you aren't having a stroke, don't you? You know I'm real. This is the kind of thing you've always wanted to have happen.

MARGARET

Wait a minute. I never. . .

PEM

Since you were a little kid and imagined there was a door to another world under that oak tree in the field behind your house. You dug a pretty deep hole there as I recall, with a little red beach shovel. And you were so disappointed that it was just dirt and roots. Well, sweetie, this is it—your door to another world. The wardrobe, the rabbit hole. Only it's three doors. I came through one and you get to pick one of the other two. Happiness or art.

MARGARET

How did you know about the oak tree?

PEM

Angel. You'd be amazed at what I know.

MARGARET

All right then. Maybe this is real. I can do the script. Faust and Mephistopheles. You'll give me happiness in exchange for my immortal soul.

PEM

Wrong. That's so passé, don't you think? No. You get art if you give up happiness or happiness in exchange for art. In any case, you can keep your soul. If you have one, that is.

GOD

Hold on, there. Of course she has a . . .

SATAN

Shut up. This is interesting.

MARGARET

All right. If you're really an angel and not some figment of my brain, I want proof.

PEM

You can't have it. You can't have proof of reality. Drink your coffee.

MARGARET

All right. I'll pretend you're real.

PEM

Works for me.

MARGARET

So now I'll pretend that you go away because no matter what you say I didn't ask for this and I can't stand it and besides I have work to do. In fact I have a deadline. So in either case, why don't you just go away.

PEM

I have work to do, too. This. But unlike you, I have all the time I need. So I'll just come and go until you decide. But hey—how do you know life itself is not a dream? Some of your famous thinkers seem to think it is, some of those old guys Anna teaches about. (Sings.) 'Merrily, merrily, down the stream' or whatever.

MARGARET

Because I wake up from dreams, and so far I haven't awakened from life. This life. And unlike a dream, there's a kind of continuity about life. At least so far.

PEM

At least so far. And thus, you may think of me as a discontinuity.

MARGARET

What *are* you?

PEM

Ah, a much better question than “who are you?” As I have been trying to tell you since I appeared, I am an angel, a spirit, a deva, a guardian, a guide. I am a messenger.

MARGARET

This is nuts.

PEM

Yes. Precisely. Your philosophy doesn't allow things like me. Clearly. Now if you were medieval. . .

MARGARET

If you were medieval you'd be easier to take. Or renaissance. Their representations of heavenly messengers are always winged. You don't have. . .

PEM

Oh, I know, I know. I don't. I could have done that, but, well, I never appear with wings nowadays. It's so passé, and anyway, what good would that have done?

MARGARET

Maybe it would be easier for me to believe in you.

PEM

I'm not a matter for belief. Belief is for things you can't prove, and here I am, so Q.E.D. Besides, what if I looked like something from Giotto or one of those sentimental Christmas or sympathy cards you people send?

MARGARET

I don't send Christmas cards.

PEM

Of course you don't. I did, however, say “Fear not,” which should have been a clue, since you are clearly biblically literate. Unusual these days.

MARGARET

My grandma told me the stories.

PEM

I know. Interesting woman, your grandma. I wonder what she would have done if I'd shown up in her kitchen?

MARGARET

You knew Grandma?

PEM

Sure. I'm an angel. And her mythology would have allowed for me. But no matter what I look like, your brand of mythology doesn't allow for angels, so why should you believe in me? It's hard to see what you're not looking for.

MARGARET

Our mythology? I didn't know we had one.

PEM

Of course you have one. You people can never see your own. Right now your myths are about science and economics. A rehash of what you called the Enlightenment with the usual Romantic reactions. Haven't you noticed that despite all the science and technology going on now, people are becoming far more credulous?

MARGARET

Don't you mean less?

PEM

Oh, I always mean what I say. People are way more gullible nowadays. Not since Europe's Dark Ages have you been more susceptible to. . .

MARGARET

But lots of people don't believe in God anymore.

PEM

Any more? What else is new?

MARGARET

Angels. Biblical. Representations—I've got to find my dictionary of angels. It's got to be here somewhere, unless I loaned it out.

(MARGARET goes to bookcase and peruses books while PEM has a strange interlude.)

PEM

Dictionary of angels? Huh. Well, whatever. (Addresses audience.) And they thought this would be easy. A simple choice. They have no idea how *complicated* you people are.

GOD

Of course I know how complicated they are. That's why they can make art. That's why she'll choose. . .

SATAN

Oh no. It's why she'll choose happiness. It's simple, happiness is. Her life is too complicated and it's driving her crazy. . .

PEM

If you two don't mind, I'm trying to do my job here. People are complicated in ways you can't imagine. They don't even know what they think half the time. For instance—
(Pointing toward audience) You—what do you believe in? Do you even know? Love? Power? The Tooth Fairy? Chocolate cake?

GOD

Penemue—is this relevant?

PEM

You'd be surprised, what's relevant. Ah. She speaks.

MARGARET

I can't find it. Okay. What if I assume you are what my grandma would have called an angel.

PEM

(Joins her at the bookcase.)

Right. Sounds good to me. It's all labels, anyway. Look! All these books. Just words, you know, just names. It's all fluid, it's all contingent. Even this choice I'm offering you is. .

MARGARET

What? Is what?

SATAN and GOD

Is what, angel?

PEM

Nothing. Nothing. Beside the point. But for some reason, you people keep making names. Poets, philosophers, theologians, little kids—

(Takes a book from the shelf, ruffles the pages.)

Straw dogs. Shadows on the wall. All of it. Every single word written on every single parchment or clay tablet or page or—whatever. Which is why I got kicked out of heaven.

GOD

Damned right.

MARGARET

What was that? Why you were kicked out?

PEM

Nothing. Nothing important. It's just that words aren't things.

MARGARET

But words have power. Names have power. . .

PEM

(Closes the book shut and drops it on the floor.)

Nothing like real power. You have no idea.

SATAN

Ah. There you go.

MARGARET

Wait a minute. You handled a book. I thought you were immaterial.

PEM

Well, not exactly immaterial. I'm energy. There's a continuum, right? But books, sure. I can handle them. They're mine. Because of me, that is.

MARGARET

Because of you?

PEM

I invented writing, okay?

MARGARET

You invented. . .

PEM

But that's beside the point.

SATAN

Ah yes. Writing. One of the most evil inventions of all time.

GOD

Then why isn't that angel down in hell with you? No wait, I know. Writing has had some *good* consequences, hasn't it? Hasn't it?

SATAN

Well, it's complicated. But still. . .

MARGARET

(Picks up the book and shelves it.)

You keep talking about the point. What is the point?

PEM

The choice you get. Happiness or art.

MARGARET

But an angel who invented writing? I need to know . .

PEM

Okay, okay. All this speculation is very interesting, I suppose, at least to you, but I am not here to discuss myself, or even what you please to call “God” even though you don’t believe.

MARGARET

You’re the one who keeps discussing things.

PEM

Yeah, well. It worked, didn’t it? You seem to have overcome your hysteria, at least enough to be having the kind of academic discussion that you use to avoid the important things. So, the choice. Happiness or art?

MARGARET

No. No, no, no. Even if you are an angel, I just want you to go away. I don’t like this. I’ve never liked the whole idea of angels. They’re creepy, the way they pop in on people.

PEM

Well, you summoned me.

MARGARET

I did not. I would never. . .

PEM

And liking or not liking is neither here nor there. (To audience.) I don’t think anyone *likes* angels. We are creepy. Even believers don’t exactly *like* us. I mean, who’d invite us over for a beer? We’re not too fond of one another, come to think of it.

GOD

I like them.

SATAN

Well, you would, since they do everything you tell them to. At least, the good ones do.

MARGARET

Please. I want you to go away so I can work. I don’t want to deal with any of this right now—whatever it is. I have a deadline.

PEM

I know, I know. The dead-line. So decide, and I'll go away. Say "art" and you'll have a Pulitzer. Say "happiness" and you will be utterly, completely, and everlastingly happy.

MARGARET

I need to think.

PEM

I can wait.

MARGARET

Wait somewhere else.

PEM

Why does it matter where I am? (Singing.) "I know you when you're sleeping; I know when you're awake. . ."

MARGARET

Oh, for heaven's sake. . .

PEM

Or hell's.

MARGARET

What?

PEM

Oh, nothing.

MARGARET

Okay. I want to talk this over with some people. Some friends of mine. Will you go away so I can do that?

PEM

If you like. As I say, I have lots of time. But you don't, oh mortal poet. You don't.

MARGARET

All right then. I'll let you know. So now, you can go. Please. Just go.

PEM

All right, all right, I'm outta here. When you need me, I'll be around. "If you want me, just whistle. You know how to whistle, don't you? Just. . ."

MARGARET

Go! Go! Go!

PEM

Your wish is my command.

(Disappears, moves downstage center, sits on the edge.)

MARGARET

What is happening? Am I going mad? Anna. I need Anna. . . But first I gotta try Brett again, and now I'm late and he'll be all snarky. Damn.

(Picks up phone, makes a call, mimes a conversation to editor while PEM talks.)

PEM

(To audience.)

Okay. That bit is over. The big question for me now is which way I want to go. Up or down, heaven or hell. Heaven is—at least it was when I was there last—rather lovely. But the problem I had was that it could be tedious at times. No edginess, if you know what I mean. All the questions answered. Really. Heaven's no place for those who like a little drama now and then. Which is why I first came down here and did some fiddling around. Invented writing, yeah. That stirred things up. But do I want hell? I'm not sure. Down there, everything is edgy all the time, drama all the time. But there's power, too, lots of it, and Satan says I could get some. So which way do I want to go? And how much does my fate depend on—her?

(Exit, while MARGARET finishes her mimed call and calls Anna.)

MARGARET

Anna? . . .are you free? . . .No. . .I'm all right, at least I think so. . .No, it isn't the book. . .I just need to talk. . . Something weird just happened. . . I don't know. . .Can you come? . . .Of course, as soon as your office hour is over. . . . Yeah, I'm okay. I just need a reality check. . . Thanks. Yeah. See you soon.

(Blackout.)

Scene 3

(MARGARET is sitting at her desk. ANNA knocks and enters.)

MARGARET

Anna, thanks for coming.

ANNA

So what's going on? You sounded really scared, or something. Rattled.

MARGARET

I don't know. I wish life were simpler, that's all. Not scared, no. It's just all so confusing. God and Satan and all names are straw dogs. I mean, what about happiness and art. What do I want? Happiness or art. They want to know which.

ANNA

What? Margaret, you're not making sense. Happiness or art? They? Who are they?

MARGARET

Nobody. I mean, nobody, really. I guess. Happiness or art. Angels or something. It's just on my mind.

ANNA

Okay, what's going on, Margaret? You're still not making sense..

MARGARET

Oh, Anna, I'm just not getting anywhere. The book isn't going to amount to much, even though I've been working on it for ages. Maybe I'm getting menopausal. I don't know. Maybe that's why.

ANNA

Yeah, right. I get that. But you didn't call me to talk about menopause. You were pretty much your normal irritable self earlier, and now—well—you're acting weird. You never write about angels or happiness. What's going on?

MARGARET

Okay. Okay. Anna, do you—do you believe in angels?

ANNA

Angels? I don't know; I've never really thought about it. The Christmas things, or the silly premonitions people have, or weird coincidences—like guardian angels, or whatever, who keep you from stepping in front of the bus—no. I guess not. Not those anyway. No.

MARGARET

But—manifestations? Things from other dimensions, or something?

ANNA

You mean disembodied intelligences? Or divine messengers, like in religions?

MARGARET

Yes. Things like that.

ANNA

Maybe. Lots of things are possible, but not very probable. And they certainly could represent something, some very real aspect of culture or consciousness. Why? What does this have to do with anything?

MARGARET

What about God?

ANNA

You mean do I believe in God?

MARGARET

Yes.

ANNA

No. Of course not. You know that. Not like the one in religions anyhow. But something like, well, something like the Force, I guess, maybe. I could entertain that possibility. Or Plato's Form of the Good? Or something like what the Deists thought? Maybe a kind of Animism. All that stuff about trees and fungi. I haven't really considered it in a personal way for years. You're not being converted to something weird, are you? You're not going religious on me? Is that what this is about?

MARGARET

Good heavens, no. At least—Anna? Do you promise not to laugh?

ANNA

Yes. At least not on purpose. Margaret, tell me.

MARGARET

All right. I might have seen something, someone, claiming to be what some people might call—
an angel. At least, that's what it says it is.

ANNA

What?

MARGARET

I know it sounds ridiculous. I keep thinking I was dreaming, but I never sleep during the day. I
hardly even sleep at night. And besides, I can always wake myself up if I have to, and I couldn't.

ANNA

Are you still taking that pain killer for your back? Are you hallucinating?

MARGARET

That was two months ago. No. I'm not taking anything.

ANNA

Okay. Start at the beginning. Tell me what happened. Do you have any herb tea? I've had enough
coffee. Maybe you have, too.

MARGARET

In that tin. I don't know how old it is. There should still be water in the jug there. Is there a clean
cup? I really ought to clean up that mess.

ANNA

(Prepares tea.)

Yup. Got it. So, tell me about this angel thing.

MARGARET

It just appeared. Right there, right by my desk. And it said "Fear not" the way they do in the
Bible stories. And it said it was an angel.

ANNA

What did it look like?

MARGARET

Human shaped.

MARGARET

Clothes?

MARGARET

I don't know. I didn't notice. Something nondescript. Not a white robe or anything.

ANNA

Wings?

MARGARET

No. It didn't have wings. Definitely no wings. We talked about that.

ANNA

You talked about that?

MARGARET

Yes. We did. A little bit. But it was still an angel, only not medieval.

ANNA

Not medieval, eh? Okay . . . It appeared. And then what happened?

MARGARET

Well, we talked, a lot. It was really chatty.

ANNA

You talked. It was chatty.

MARGARET

Stop sounding like my therapist. If I wanted him, I'd have called him.

ANNA

Sorry. I don't know how else to sound. I've never known anybody who claimed to see an angel before.

MARGARET

Okay. It's just that this is—it's really hard to explain. Or even admit, right? This is a reality check. I told you I need a reality check.

ANNA

Got it. I'm taking this very seriously.

MARGARET

Thank you.

ANNA

You're welcome. So it said "Fear not."

MARGARET

That's traditional.

ANNA

I know. And. . .

MARGARET

And it was kind of, I don't know, sarcastic. I wouldn't expect an angel to be sarcastic.

ANNA

Insofar as I have expectations of angels, I don't think I'd expect that either. Okay. So. . . ?

MARGARET

It offered me happiness.

ANNA

All right, happiness. That doesn't sound too bad.

MARGARET

But it gets more complicated. It was more like a choice between happiness and poetry.

ANNA

One or the other?

MARGARET

Yes.

ANNA

So what did you choose? Did you say you'd like to try being happy? That would be a new experience for you.

MARGARET

This isn't a joke. It's real, and it's confusing and weird.

ANNA

Sorry. Go ahead. What did you decide?

MARGARET

I didn't decide. I said I had to think. So it left. At least, you can see it. I can't see it. It might still be here. It probably is. It knows a lot about me, like Santa Claus.

ANNA

Santa Claus?

MARGARET

Anna, I'm okay. I'm fairly certain I'm not going crazy.

ANNA

All right. I'll suspend disbelief. And then what?

MARGARET

Anyway, after it left, or whatever it did, I called you because I need a philosopher. I need clear thinking here.

ANNA

All right. Clear thinking. I can do that. So. Premise: You've had a vision of an angel. . .

MARGARET

Vision? That's not the same as saying there was an angel here. In that chair.

ANNA

Okay, okay. Like I said, it's just hard to know what to say. There's not much call these days for me to be philosophical about angels. Now if it were a Zombie. . .

MARGARET

Anna!

ANNA

Sorry, sorry. So we presume that you've seen an angel, and it offered you a choice between happiness and poetry.

MARGARET

Yes. It's what happened, but if you want to call it a premise, go ahead. Fine. So now I need to know what you think.

ANNA

About seeing an angel?

MARGARET

Yes. First of all, yes.

ANNA

Well, for one thing, it seems that other-worldly, extrasensory, so-called "spiritual" things happen, to some people anyhow. Artists, scientists—you know, creative people—write about revelations—ah, revelation's the word I want, better than vision— that appear out of nowhere. The brain is a funny thing, you know? So yeah, okay. Revelation happens.

MARGARET

Okay. Good. I'm a creative person who had a revelation.

ANNA

There you go.

MARGARET

And now I want to know what you think—clear thinking—about that choice it gave me. Art or happiness.

ANNA

This really sounds like a great thought experiment. I could even use it in the intro aesthetics class. About the necessity of suffering for art. Empathy, for example, feeling the pain of another, or the difference between empathy and compassion. Is suffering necessary for good art or right living, or . . .

MARGARET

Anna, damn it!

ANNA

Sorry, sorry, sorry.

MARGARET

I don't know what to do.

ANNA

Okay, let's focus on the choice. So. What's your initial take on it? Your first emotional, unguarded reaction.

MARGARET

Emotional?

ANNA

Yeah. Emotions can be wise.

MARGARET

What? Come on. I want reason.

ANNA

Hey, you can reason yourself into almost anything, and people do. But the body doesn't lie, or so they say. So. Emotional reaction. To the choice, not the angel.

MARGARET

Right. Hard to leave out the angel.

ANNA

I'm sure. But give it a try. Giving up poetry. Emotional reaction.

MARGARET

Okay. Well, first of all, poetry is what I do. I don't know what I'd do if I didn't write. So, giving it up? Hm.

ANNA

Don't analyze, just react.

MARGARET

Okay. Give up poetry. I feel kinda shaky, I guess.

ANNA

All right. Shaky. So is happy the opposite of shaky? I mean, if the idea of quitting makes you shaky, does writing make you happy?

MARGARET

Well, it must, right? Why else would I do it?

ANNA

Only your therapist knows for sure, but it's certainly possible to keep doing something that doesn't make you happy over and over and over, or that only makes you happy for a little while. People do it all the time.

MARGARET

Like drugs, right. Addiction.

ANNA

Yeah, among other things. So think about writing. Have you ever stopped for any appreciable length of time? Like, oh, on vacation or something?

MARGARET

Hm. I don't think so. It always seems to go on in my head.

ANNA

Okay. So. It's something you don't stop doing, or maybe can't. For some reason.

MARGARET

An addiction? Huh.

ANNA

Just a thought. Why else do you write?

MARGARET

Well, it's my job. I've gotta publish now and then or they won't keep me on, you know. Or maybe you don't, since you're tenured.

ANNA

I remember, though. Right. So you've gotta get that book out. But anyway, does the job itself make you happy? I'm pretty sure I know what you're going to say, but say it anyway.

MARGARET

Are you kidding? If I were rich, or even comfortable, I wouldn't do this job. It supports my writing, my real life. Is that what you figured?

ANNA

Yes indeed. Okay. So if you had another way of making a living, would you be happier? What's your ideal life, I guess I'm asking.

MARGARET

Sounds like therapy again, but okay. Ideal life. Not having to do anything but write, I'd say. Basically living like I do now, except for the teaching part.

ANNA

Okay then. It's possible that writing makes you happy. But how's this? If you were already perfectly happy—even here, with students and the editor from hell and all, would it be worth giving up writing for?

MARGARET

Well, see, that doesn't make sense. I mean, if I gave up writing, I wouldn't have this job anyway so I wouldn't . . .

ANNA

. . . be able to make a living writing. I see what you mean.

MARGARET

Arg. This is getting convoluted and way too philosophical.

ANNA

I'm a philosopher, remember?

MARGARET

Right.

ANNA

So. If you choose happiness, you can get a job you like. One without the pressure of academia, right?

MARGARET

But who would hire me? What could I do? I'm not a very nice person.

ANNA

True. No offense meant.

MARGARET

And none taken. But still.

ANNA

Think about this: If you were happy, it's likely you'd be nicer. There are philosophers who believe that virtue goes hand in hand with happiness. I mean, if you're happy, it's easy to be relaxed and kind and generous, and all that. So if you chose happiness you could, oh, I don't know, get a job in a library. Or maybe you could be a kindly cheerful editor. And that would make the world a better place.

MARGARET

No kidding. But—would I be myself if I were happy?

ANNA

Well, that's another whole question, isn't it? Okay. Let's try this: Why do you see a therapist?

MARGARET

Damn it, Anna. So I can get over some of my problems. . .

ANNA

. . . and then you would be. . . ?

MARGARET

Oh. Happier. I see what you mean. I think.

ANNA

So there you have it. I'd say if you were happy, you'd be yourself the way you'd like to be. Except for the writing part.

MARGARET

That's a big part. It's been my whole life.

ANNA

I know. It would be a big change, wouldn't it? But then, so would big time fame, which we're assuming you'd get if you were brilliant. Book tours, speaking engagements. . .

MARGARET

Shit. Do I want more of *that*? I hate book tours. One question just leads to another.

ANNA

What a surprise.

MARGARET

Anna, are you happy? You seem to be.

ANNA

Yeah. I am. I think I was born that way. Oh, I get the miseries now and then, and I've got a few regrets, but they don't haunt me. Yeah, I'm happy.

MARGARET

So how do you define it? For yourself?

ANNA

Like the Greeks. According to Aristotle, happiness is flourishing—having a meaningful life. I think I do, in my simple way. I like this job, I like my little house and my cats and my friends. I get enough excited students and enough recognition in my field so that I think my work is worthwhile. So yeah, I'm happy. And you ought to be, really, but you aren't, are you?

MARGARET

Of course not.

ANNA

All you do is write, isn't it? Teach and write.

MARGARET

Pretty much. Would you give up philosophy for happiness?

ANNA

If I were miserable, sure. There's other things I could do.

MARGARET

Yeah. You don't just do philosophy, do you? You paint, right?

ANNA

I do, yeah. You've seen my funky stuff. But I'm no artist, just a dabbler. So the answer to your unspoken question is that I have nothing like poetry to lose. For me, painting is a nice change from words. It rests my brain.

MARGARET

Funny. I can't imagine writing "resting my brain."

ANNA

Well if you can't imagine it, why don't you choose happiness and find out? You could still write, I bet, in a dabbly kind of way. Does dabbling count as Art for that angel of yours?

MARGARET

Terrific, another question. Thank you *so* much.

ANNA

You're welcome. I tell my students my job is to clarify the questions, and that also means showing them how many more there are. To be a philosopher, you've gotta love the tangles.

MARGARET

Ha. So here's another one. If most of us are just slogging along being neither happy or brilliant, what's the whole point of life anyhow?

ANNA

Oh now, that's the biggy. Get that angel back and see if it will answer that one. Good luck. The universe so far doesn't seem to have an opinion that it wants to share with mere mortals. Okay. I've got first year seminar so I've gotta go. Some of those kids claim to know the meaning of life already, but if I do my job, they won't by the time I'm done with them. I'm pretty sure my cats know, by the way. Anyhow, keep me posted about that angel of yours.

MARGARET

Mine? Ha. I will. Anna, thanks for coming by, though I'm not sure the clear thinking business worked. I'm more confused than I was.

ANNA

Of course you are. The more you think, the more complicated things get. Good luck. See you later.

(Exit.)

MARGARET

Okay. Questions for the angel. . .

PEM

(Appears.)

You didn't whistle, but here I am. Do I need to say "Fear not" or are we done with that bit?

MARGARET

Oh, I'm done with it. What the hell.

PEM

That's the spirit. So, what's up?

MARGARET

You know perfectly well. You were here.

PEM

Ah yes. Question: Will you be able to dabble? Sure. You just won't be able to write your usual angst-ridden stuff because you won't be miserable any more.

MARGARET

So I'd be disconnected from the reality of life.

PEM

You're assuming that only misery is real? You people can be so pathetic. There's more to reality than that, you know. Or do you know?

MARGARET

Do I know? Oh, crap. Between you and Anna, I'm really confused.

PEM

Of course you are.

MARGARET

All right, angel. If there is suffering in the world, I have to confront it. I have to pay attention to it, don't I?

PEM

Do you? There are lots of people who don't.

MARGARET

Oh, come on. If you aren't paying attention to suffering, you're not paying attention at all.

PEM

Ah, but. You can pay attention to happiness. And you can pay attention to suffering without being unhappy yourself.

MARGARET

Without being unhappy? If you're a psychopath, maybe.

PEM

Not necessarily. If you were happy, you could look at suffering, and say "Aw, too bad," and maybe help somebody out instead of agonizing over it and using it as material, which is what you do, isn't it? Isn't it?

MARGARET

Well, yes. Words are my art.

PEM

Well, excuse me. How could I forget? But if you didn't need to put suffering into words. . .

MARGARET

So you're saying that if I were truly happy I wouldn't need to write about the suffering of the world? Or if I didn't do that, I would be happy?

PEM

Now I'm confused.

MARGARET

All right, all right. I'll try it again: I write in order to make sense of things, including suffering. So if I didn't try to make sense of things, I'd be happy and I wouldn't need to write. Is that what you mean?

PEM

Oh, I didn't say that.

MARGARET

Yes, you did. Damn it! You've been saying that all along! You said that the deal was I could be happy in exchange for my art, which was basically a simple thing, but now it looks like I wouldn't be *able* to write because I'd be happy.

PEM

Ah, if you put it that way. Sure. You've really added far too many layers to what was indeed a simple thing. No angst, like I said. But you could dabble—write cheerful, unintellectual things, those things you see all the time on the internet. Memes. Greeting cards. People like things like that. You could be bacterial or whatever.

MARGARET

Viral. But kittens and rainbows and unicorns? Jesus Christ!

GOD

Please leave him out of this.

MARGARET

What would be the point of writing like that?

PEM

Sharing and caring! Wouldn't that be nice? All your poetry does is makes people feel—oh—like they aren't the only ones with miserable lives. And Margaret, when you come right down to it, who reads your poetry? Depressed, angst-ridden intellectuals, right?

MARGARET

Damn it!

PEM

Ah, see? I'm right. I know I am. All you're doing is putting your stamp of approval on the suffering. Life is suffering, sure, but do we have to go on and on about it? Poor sensitive artists, see how we bleed! So. Now's your chance to stop writing depressing poetry and be happy and share happiness with ordinary people who don't read the kind of rags your poems are published in anyhow. Wouldn't that make your life worth living?

MARGARET

Oh, who knows? Meaning, happiness, virtue. . . all that stuff Anna talked about. Who knows?

PEM

What's wrong with feel-good stuff, pray tell?

MARGARET

Well, for one thing, the critics don't like it.

PEM

Ah. The critics. Lions and tigers and critics, oh my. But didn't I hear that your editor—even he—would like you to lighten up just a bit?

MARGARET

Oh screw him.

PEM

Ha! Maybe you should.

MARGARET

Pah!

PEM

Oh, Margaret. You clearly don't enjoy your life much, do you? The pleasures of the flesh. Food, clothes, coziness. I mean, look at you. Look at this ugly room. It's all so very dull. And your sex life is . . .

MARGARET

That's none of your business.

PEM

. . . non-existent. But if you choose happiness, that could change.

MARGARET

So I'd get to be a gourmand, a fashion plate and a sex maniac who could write cheery greeting cards?

PEM

That's one way of putting it, and I can't see what's wrong with that. Margaret, have you ever been happy? Really? Have you always been such a grind? Can you remember? When you were a kid, or a callow youth?

MARGARET

I never was a kid. And when I was a youth—that I try not to think about.

PEM

Of course you don't. It was pretty awful, wasn't it?

MARGARET

You know that.

PEM

Of course. But when you were a kid, you put flowers in your hair and danced around that old oak tree, trying to find a magic door.

MARGARET

But most of the time I wasn't happy. That's why I wanted to find a door to another place.

PEM

And deep inside, you knew there was another place, another way, right? A real one. Because a couple of times you found it. That room at the high school where you could sit and listen to jazz, records. That camp at the lake where you stayed with your mother's old friend. Remember that? You must have been about nine or ten.

MARGARET

Ten. With Eleanor. She was a writer and she actually encouraged me. Of course I remember. She could make a stone skip ten times. She taught me how, and I can still do it pretty well.

PEM

And that, dear Margaret, was happiness. Your whole troubled family faded into the background of the lake and the gulls, and Eleanor, who wrote humorous. . .

SATAN

Good, good.

MARGARET

I didn't have to deal with my parents for a whole week. I could just relax and enjoy things. Eleanor used to make popcorn for breakfast, and let me stay up late and we went down to the shore and looked at the stars. I haven't thought about that for years.

GOD

Cheating. That's just hedonism, not happiness.

SATAN

So what? Just be quiet and listen.

PEM

That's what happiness is like. The other place that you've always known about. That's what I'm offering you.

MARGARET

I must admit that it's tempting.

PEM

Tempting. Well, hey. I'm doing my job, then.

MARGARET

However—if a state like that were permanent, I'd just get used to it, wouldn't I? It wouldn't be special anymore. Like eating chocolate cake every day.

PEM

What's wrong with that? Cake, I mean.

MARGARET

Nothing, but it could become routine. If you always have it, the pleasure diminishes.

PEM

Oh. I hadn't thought of that, having no digestion and all.

SATAN

Wait a minute. . .

GOD

Now you shut up and listen.

PEM

So glad I'm not human. And I thought angels had it rough. Just be glad you're not immortal.

MARGARET

Oh, this is too hard. What is the point of all this? What is this really about? What's going on, angel? You, the choice, the whole deal—it's—just too weird.

PEM

Okay, okay. I'll level with you. It's an experiment. One of God's.

MARGARET

An experiment? So you're saying that—this God—does experiments?

PEM

How do you think all this came about? "Let there be light, and there was light," at least, sort of like that. And then "Let us make humans in our image!" "Why?" we angels asked. "Oh, no reason," said God. "Let's just do it and see what happens!"

GOD

Angel! It's not allowed. . .

SATAN

Of course it's allowed. And it's good.

GOD

But that's a secret. The angel wasn't supposed to tell.

SATAN

Hey, this is a temptation. Anything goes.

MARGARET

It's an experiment? An experiment? This whole thing? The whole world is some kind of—fucking experiment? And now you want to—I mean some God-thing wants to—do an

MARGARET (Cont.)

experiment on, on *me*? I'm just, just part of an *experiment*? What? Why? Why me? What have I done to deserve this, this. . . hassle? This disruption? Why me?

PEM

Oh, that question—. You people always ask that. Sickness, health, riches, poverty, war, death, falling in love—always, always, always—why me? Why not you? Why not any of you? Every philosophical system you've ever invented goes on and on about it. God's will. Karma. Rebirth. Determinism. Predestination. The luck of the draw. Just the way it is. Genetics. Evolution. The Relentless March of History. And so, divine experiment—that's as good an explanation as any, isn't it? Everything, everyone—is a random experiment.

MARGARET

We're random subjects for divine experiments? Is that the answer? Is that what this is all about?

PEM

Hold on. I didn't say it was the answer. I said it was as good an explanation as any. Everything is a story. Even what you people call science is stories. And no matter what you tell, things go on anyway, they always have. With you or without you, any of you. Which is another reason you might experiment on yourself. This is your chance to play God.

MARGARET

I hate this. I really, really hate this.

GOD

So do I.

PEM

How sad.

MARGARET

If it's all stories, why—what are you—? Oh, don't bother answering. It won't make sense anyway. And besides, I don't even know the question.

PEM

Yes! By George, she's got it! The rain in Spain. . .

MARGARET

Ugh. Do you get something out of this, by the way? Some reward?

PEM

None of your business.

MARGARET

Well, I disagree. I like to know the consequences of my actions.

PEM

As if you can.

MARGARET

Wait a minute. What's the point of doing anything if I can't know?

PEM

Margaret, all joking aside: You can never, ever, ever know the consequences of your actions. Oh sure, a few immediate ones, smiles and frowns here and there. But real ones—nah. Something you said or wrote maybe changed somebody's life and that changed somebody else's and so on. And maybe changes the course of history.

MARGARET

Well, that's a comforting thought. Maybe writing isn't so meaningless. Maybe my poetry, somewhere along the line, made something good for someone. Maybe. . .

PEM

. . . Unless of course it was the final word that drove someone to suicide or murder or something like that. Unless it gave a tyrant exactly the words they needed to rationalize dropping a bomb. Unless. . .

MARGARET

No. Really. I wouldn't write anything like that.

PEM

Maybe you already have.

MARGARET

Wait. Do you know?

PEM

If I do I certainly would not tell you.

MARGARET

Of course you wouldn't. Why should I expect anything like full disclosure from you. I don't even know which side you're on. Are you a good angel or a bad angel?

PEM

Cliché.

MARGARET

And a good one, too. So. What's your name?

PEM

My name? Why do you ask my name?

MARGARET

Speaking of clichés. . .

PEM

Well of course you know that story.

MARGARET

One of Grandma's favorites. Jacob at the ford of Jabbok wrestled with an angel all night long. And when he asked its name. . .

PEM

. . . I didn't—I mean, the angel—didn't say. It doesn't matter.

MARGARET

I'm a poet, at least so far. I'm a goddam writer. Words matter to me, despite what you say. So what is your name? I will not let you go—that is, I will not decide—unless you tell me your name.

PEM

I tell you it doesn't. . .

MARGARET

It matters to me. What is your name?

PEM

All right, all right. One of my names is Tamuel. Some call me Tam-e, or Penemu'e, but you can call me Pem.

MARGARET

Pem.

PEM

Catchy, isn't it?

MARGARET

I've never heard any of those names.

PEM

No surprise. Told you it wouldn't matter. Hardly anyone knows our names.

MARGARET

Ah well. If you're unknown, you're unknown. Welcome to the club.

PEM

Ah yes, the biggest club in the universe. But still. Here we are. And what is your decision, now that you have something to call me. Happiness or art?

MARGARET

Don't rush me, angel. Pem. I need more time. For one thing, I want to—do some research. And there's another friend I want to talk with. But now, well, happiness at least seems like a possibility.

SATAN

Yes!

GOD

A possibility, she said. That's all she said.

PEM

Ah, interesting.

MARGARET

Pem, why can't happiness be the universal human condition?

PEM

Ah, that. That's what you think it is.

MARGARET

What? That I think what is?

PEM

The human condition. It's what you think it is.

MARGARET

Oh stop it. I can't deal with more philosophizing right now. And in the meantime, I really do have work to do—besides this, I mean. I do have a deadline.

PEM

Ah. Well, I'll just disappear then, shall I? When you're ready, or if you have any further questions, just (sings) yell out my name, and know, whoever I am . . .

MARGARET

Oh, for heaven's sake.

SATAN

Or hell's.

PEM

In the mean time, good luck with the dead line.

(Exits.)

(MARGARET makes a phone call while PEM talks.)

PEM

(Goes to edge of stage and addresses audience.)

So, what do you think? Did Anna and I talk her into happiness?

SATAN

Well, it certainly seems that way to me. The little bit about the lake was brilliant.

PEM

I didn't know you were listening.

SATAN

Oh, everywhere and always. Just like your Santa Claus. Too bad she's going to talk to someone else, though. You should stop that.

PEM

Stop it? Right. It's not over yet.

GOD

I'll say it isn't. Get with it, angel.

SATAN

Worried, aren't you? Told you so. Already I'm winning.

(Long, loud laughter, fading out.)

GOD

That remains to be seen. I know you'll come through for me, Penemue. Think about heaven, about music, about wings. . .

(Fades out.)

PEM

(To audience.)

Satan sounds so sure. But then—do I want a place in the great enterprise of hell? Penemue, Prince of Darkness! Fire and tongs! But then—no music. I don't know. I've grown accustomed to music. I even rather like it. (Sings) "The streets are alive with. . ." I don't know. But then, it's not my decision, is it? Is it? Maybe I should just let it happen. When she calls me back, I'll lean the other way. Should I? And who is really the subject of this experiment? Who'd have thought all those eons ago that my fate would depend on a human.

(Exits.)

(Blackout.)

ACT II

Scene 1

(MARGARET standing, looking out the window. Knock on the door.)

MARGARET

Come in.

FELIX

(Enters.)

Margaret? Are you all right? You sounded so strange.

MARGARET

I'm sorry, Felix, I'm really sorry. Thank you for coming. I find myself in a strange situation. Would you like tea? The coffee's awful. I could make more.

FELIX

Neither, thanks. Water would be good. Water is always good. You look like you could use some, too. No, you sit. I'll get it.

(Gets water for both of them.)

Here you go.

MARGARET

(Sits.)

Thanks. I did need some.

FELIX

(Sits.)

Good. Now what's going on?

MARGARET

Felix, do you believe in angels?

FELIX

Angels? Well. I certainly believe in the muse, so why not?

MARGARET

You do? In the muse? Really?

FELIX

Yes. Really. You sound surprised.

MARGARET

I guess I am. Do you—do you call on her, or anything?

FELIX

Well. Yes. I do. In a way, I do.

MARGARET

How do you. . . ?

FELIX

Oh, I have my ways. Inspiration is mysterious, right? It comes from someplace. So yes, I invoke the muse.

MARGARET

But it's not real, right? It's mythology.

FELIX

Yeah. I know it's mythology, but—well, yeah. Mythology works. You're a poet so you should know that. So what's with the angels?

MARGARET

Angel. Just one. I saw—an angel. Anna calls it a revelation, but in any case, I saw one. And it spoke to me.

FELIX

And where was this?

MARGARET

Here. In this very room. Just a little while ago.

FELIX

Okay, okay. And you're okay otherwise, right? No concussion or anything?

MARGARET

No, no. I'm fine. Physically fine. Just rattled.

FELIX

What did this—angel— look like?

MARGARET

Felix, thank you for trying to believe me.

FELIX

You're welcome. So keep going.

MARGARET

Hard to describe. Human, but something weird about it. No wings. It was hard to focus on it. Have you ever seen your muse?

FELIX

I can't say that I have. Not seen as such. But—well—I have felt her presence. So what did the angel do? Did they give you a message of some kind? Did they tell you to go somewhere or do something? Like in the bible stories?

MARGARET

Not per se. It—no, they—I like that better—offered me a choice.

FELIX

Oh! Like selling your soul?

MARGARET

No. It's not about my soul, or so they said. They might not even believe in souls.

FELIX

Okay. What then? What's the choice?

MARGARET

It's a choice between art and happiness.

FELIX

Art and happiness?

MARGARET

Art and happiness. The angel said I'd be able to write brilliant poems in exchange for happiness.

FELIX

Well as long as it's not your soul, that sounds like a no-brainer to me.

MARGARET

Really? Which way?

FELIX

Come on, Margaret. Art, of course. You have serious doubts about that?

MARGARET

Well, Anna said. . .

FELIX

. . . to take happiness, right? Of course she did.

MARGARET

Yes. She did. She went on about how maybe I could be a better person if I was happy. I'm nearly convinced that being a cranky depressed poet isn't virtuous.

FELIX

Oh, don't be convinced by philosophy, Margaret. You're already a fine poet, on your way to big things. You're touching lots of lives and could touch more. Think about the great poets—oh, Heaney, or Eliot or Bishop. Plath of course. Emily Dickinson, even. Were they happy? What's a little personal happiness in comparison with genius?

MARGARET

I don't know, Felix, I really don't, but I wouldn't mind finding out. I don't think I've ever been happy for more than a day or so at a time. At least not since I was a child.

FELIX

Who is?

MARGARET

Anna. At least, that's what she claims, but she says she was born that way.

FELIX

And she isn't an artist. So there you have it.

MARGARET

She does paint.

FELIX

Yeah, but. Not seriously. Not what you'd call serious art.

MARGARET

Well, she enjoys it anyhow. Felix, are you happy?

FELIX

Happy? Good heavens no. Well, but it depends, right? I'm mostly happy with Jess and the kids, but work? No. I'd say no. I'm okay, not depressed or anything, but not especially happy.

MARGARET

Not even when you're making music? Composing?

FELIX

Oh, when I play the piano sometimes, when it's Bach or somebody else's stuff. But when I'm composing? No. Not happy. Focused. Or there's a flow sort of thing. But never happy. And a lot of the time, I'm sad. Or anxious. You know, about the state of the world.

MARGARET

I know.

FELIX

That's where my best stuff comes from, I think. The tears within, the pounding heart. But when I'm composing I'm really basically just present. Nothing else matters.

MARGARET

You're in the moment, like they say? Mindful?

FELIX

Right. That's what's they call it now. Mindful.

MARGARET

There are gurus out there who consider that to be happiness, or the key to happiness.

FELIX

Oh, I suppose. I don't keep up with the gurus de jour. But you're a poet so you know about that, don't you? Focus, flow, intensity. . .

MARGARET

Not really. I don't have that.

FELIX

You don't?

MARGARET

No. When I'm writing I'm all over the place. Literally, even. I get up and pace, I go for a walk, I make coffee. My brain flits from thought to thought, association to association to meaning to image—if it's flow, it's flow like a brook over a rocky bed, with backwaters. I write a few lines, or a few words, and then I have to do something else for awhile. Certainly not what you call focus. It's more like scatter.

FELIX

Huh. Yeah, that's not what I'd call focus. How weird to be in a head like yours. But why would you want so-called "happiness" instead of—whatever your writing state is?

MARGARET

Because I get exhausted and frustrated and jittery and I can't sleep and I forget to eat. Because I'm never sure it's worth it anyway. Because I always think that every good poem is my last and I'll never have another idea. Because when I'm really working, when I really do have something spinning around in my head, I ignore my friends.

FELIX

As we know. But still, we like you the way you are. We like fussing over you and making you go to lunch with us and listening to you agonize and scolding you about not taking care of yourself—and drinking too much bad coffee.

MARGARET

Really? You like me?

FELIX

Sure. We all take care of each other, don't we? It's what friends do.

MARGARET

But if I choose art, wouldn't I be even more scattered? And if I got really famous, would you finally get tired of me? I could ask the angel, but I bet the answer will be "try it and find out." They're not all that good at specifics.

FELIX

Well, first of all, if you got really famous, I know we'd be proud of you. And we'd still take care of you, right? Shepherd you around on book tours, even. But yeah. You can't know until you try. It would be a leap of faith. "We take leap after leap in the dark."

MARGARET

What?

FELIX

The choreographer Agnes de Mille. "The artist never entirely knows. We guess. We may be wrong, but we take leap after leap in the dark." I got Barrie to paint that on the wall above the piano in my studio. It's about risk. Think about Glass and Oliveros and Reich, think about all the jazz greats.

MARGARET

How many jazz greats died of drugs and alcohol?

FELIX

Oh, that's beside the point. They made great art. Art is all about risk. Always, always.

MARGARET

What if I'm tired of risking? What if I'm tired of doing art? And not just the writing. The submitting, the fighting with editors, the stupid publicity stuff, even at my level of notoriety.

FELIX

Then stop doing it.

MARGARET

But . . .

FELIX

That "but" says it right there. You can't, can you? You're an artist. You have to keep writing or you'll die. It's that simple.

MARGARET

But maybe I could stop if I were happy. I could see what it's like just to, oh, I don't know. Just go somewhere nice, and sit and look at things without having to make poems about them. Just skip stones, or look at the stars, or . . .

FELIX

Ha. It would be the end of you. The end. You'd be happy, but so what? And what would you do when you weren't skipping stones?

MARGARET

Well, I could, oh, be a librarian or something.

FELIX

Now there's a thought. . .

MARGARET

And there's always editing. I've done a little bit of that already. I could be a cheerful editor, Anna says. . .

FELIX

Oh, Anna says. It would be a waste, Margaret. A cheerful editor for a serious publication? You?

MARGARET

I don't know, Felix. Maybe I could. Maybe it's worth a try.

FELIX

No. You couldn't. Margaret, don't be an idiot. Take the art. Live for art. Every great artist lives for art. Sacrifices everything else.

MARGARET

You don't. You've got a spouse and kids and a nice house and a garden.

FELIX

Ah, but I said "great artist." I'm not one. Adequate, sometimes maybe good, but not great. And you're right, I went right to the academy without paying any dues, so I'll never know what I could have been if I'd suffered. But all you have to think about is you.

MARGARET

All I have to think about is me.

FELIX

Right. And, you've already made sacrifices.

MARGARET

What do you mean by that?

FELIX

Well, it was obvious to all of us that you and Robert could have. . .

MARGARET

No. We couldn't have. That's over. I didn't want to be tied down. I'd rather live alone. I couldn't write if I. . .

FELIX

Well, see? You've already made a decision for art.

MARGARET

But that wasn't just about art. I have seen how crappy marriage and family life can be and I wanted no part of it. Sorry—I don't mean yours, of course.

FELIX

Of course. So you don't want to leap anywhere into the dark, right? You don't want to risk anything.

MARGARET

Well, since you put it that way. . .

FELIX

I do. Because that's what you're saying. You didn't want to risk having a serious relationship. You don't want to risk being brilliant and famous. You even have doubts about being happy. So what do you want? If you choose art, you get—art! Art! If you choose happiness, what do you get? An ordinary, cheery life. Which is fine, but when you could have genius? Why?

MARGARET

Oh stop it, Felix. I thought I knew what I wanted. I don't. I've never known, and that's the problem. You're right—the risk of being a great artist scares me, so maybe I ought to be braver and—This is so fucking complicated.

FELIX

You really see it that way? Complicated?

MARGARET

I do. I'm back to where I started. Not knowing. Maybe talking to friends wasn't a good plan.

FELIX

Of course it was. We're going to have to live with the consequences, too. So far, just Anna and me, right?

MARGARET

Right.

FELIX

Now you need Barrie.

MARGARET

Oh dear god. Anna says happiness, you say art—Barrie'd just confuse me even more.

FELIX

And maybe that's what you need.

MARGARET

More confusion? Whatever for?

FELIX

Okay. It's like this. When I compose a long piece, sometimes I do confusion on purpose. Like a Bach fugue, you know? Everything is a tangle with little glimpses here and there of clarity. And then, an untangling, at first so gradual you don't realize it's happening. And then the finale is as simple as can be, and very very very satisfying. So, call Barrie. The ultimate tangler.

MARGARET

Okay. Maybe. I'll think about it.

FELIX

What are friends for?

MARGARET

Good question. But thanks.

FELIX

You're welcome. Call Barrie. I'll see you later.

MARGARET

Yeah, see you.

(FELIX exits.)

(MARGARET freezes, PEM appears, addresses audience.)

PEM

Good old Felix. And, oh the splendid question: can you make great art if you don't live for art? You know, I think God and Satan didn't think this through very well. It reminds me of that tree in Eden with forbidden fruit that gave the humans knowledge of good and evil. Does knowledge make you happy? Or does it kill you? Is ignorance bliss?

GOD

Ahem. It's not your job to judge the mysteries of Heaven. You're only an angel, and a fallen one at that.

SATAN

I second that. What do you know about the knowledge of good and evil?

PEM

Well, I certainly know something about them. I cured stupidity after all, or at least I tried to. Was I right? Was I wrong? Who knows? Do you?

GOD

Don't be fresh. I am God, you're a fallen angel, they are silly humans.

PEM

At least they're good at asking questions. How about it: Can you be an artist if you're stupid? Or hey, this one: does doing art *make* you unhappy? Down the rabbit hole.

SATAN

You've lived on earth so long you're starting to sound like one of them.

GOD

My colleague here is right. So get back to work, angel. We leave you to your task.

PEM

(To audience.)

What do I want? Either way might be a nice change for me—the clarity of heaven or the clarity of hell.

(MARGARET stands and whistles.)

PEM

(Appears.)

Well done. You do know how. Have you made up your mind?

MARGARET

No. I have not. As you well know, Felix was here. I thought he'd help, but it made things worse.

PEM

I do know. He's a lot like Anna, isn't he?

MARGARET

I never thought of that, but yeah. They're both so clear. I mean, not just about this happiness or art thing, but they've both always been sure of what they want. Felix maintains he always wanted to be a composer—and a family man, and Anna—well, she just never tires of the intricacies of argument and it doesn't seem to complicate her life.

PEM

Well, there you have it. So. Has Felix talked you into art? Is that your decision?

MARGARET

Wait a minute here. I thought you wanted me to choose happiness.

PEM

Oh well, that. It's up to you, you know.

MARGARET

I thought you were trying to influence me.

PEM

Nope. Just laying out the options. Devil's advocate, and so on. We're both just pawns in the game, you know.

MARGARET

Subjects in their experiment.

PEM

Yup.

MARGARET

So do they know what I'll do? Is determinism true? Or predestination?

PEM

Who knows? Maybe Anna.

MARGARET

All right, all right, we're at it again. And now I don't remember why I called you back here.

PEM

Well, let's see. When I was here last, you asked for my name, and I told you. . .

MARGARET

Oh. Yes. Pem or Penemue or whatever. I haven't had time to look you up. And I really want to know what you get out of this.

PEM

Would it make a difference if you knew?

MARGARET

Maybe. I don't know. I'd just like to know whose side you're on.

PEM

Maybe I'm just on my own side.

MARGARET

All right. Answer me this: Since this experiment is being conducted by both God and Satan—which one wants me to choose which thing?

PEM

Do you really think I'd tell you that?

MARGARET

No. Of course not. This is useless. Go away. Maybe I will call Barrie.

PEM

'You will be visited by three spirits. . .'

MARGARET

Give me a break.

PEM

Okay. I'm outta here. See you around.

(Disappears.)

(Blackout.)

Scene 2

(BARRIE is sitting on the edge of the stage studying the audience.)

FELIX

(Enters, right. sees BARRIE, stops.)

Barrie!

BARRIE

Apollo!

FELIX

What?

BARRIE

Oh, I saw you there for a minute with a lyre and a crown of laurels. Join me?

FELIX

That's what I'm here for. I have an assignment for you.

(Sits.)

BARRIE

Cool. If I should choose to accept it. Spy stuff. But first of all, check them out.

(Indicates audience.)

FELIX

Who?

BARRIE

(Still looking at audience.)

Them. Or is it they? Look at they? No. Them. Right the first time. Check them out. The potential viewers of—whatever. Whatever we want to make. They—or is it those? I think they this time, but those works too, maybe. Margaret would know. They who will regard with delight your next symphony, or those who will wonder at my installation featuring two washing machines and a pile of over-ripe peaches, and five armless mannequins dressed in Roman togas and Easter bonnets, and. . .

FELIX

Okay, okay. Must you always be so weird?

BARRIE

Huh. Am I being weird? Maybe you can't see them? Ah well. I don't usually see you in this part of the campus. What's up?

FELIX

I've just come from Margaret. She's having a crisis.

BARRIE

The realm of Hecate. Oh great one! Come with your howling hounds and. . .

FELIX

Who? What? Barrie. . .

BARRIE

Creepy old goddess of the crossroad. Which way to go? Left, right, up, down—so that's where poor old Maggie is, eh? About time.

FELIX

She says she saw an angel.

BARRIE

Cool.

FELIX

I'm not sure that it is. She says it offered her a choice between happiness and art. She's pretty confused. I don't think she's gone off the deep end, but who knows? Anna's already talked to her, and so have I. I told her she should talk to you, but she says you. . .

BARRIE

Oh joy! Oh rapture! I'm on my way, my merry merry way.

(Rises, kisses FELIX on the top of his head, and exits, right.)

FELIX

(Calling.)

Barrie. . . Oh well.

(As FELIX turns toward the audience, ANNA enters.)

ANNA

I just passed Barrie, going off to see Margaret.

FELIX

I know. My idea. Can you sit?

ANNA

Yup. (Sits.) A good idea, I think, to sic Barrie on her. Barrie's good at truth.

FELIX

And confusion. I think Margaret could use a good dose of that and I told her so.

ANNA

Confusion, truth, same thing. So how did Margaret seem to you?

FELIX

Rattled. Anxious. Almost scared.

ANNA

Did she see an angel, do you think?

FELIX

Who knows? I'm inclined to think she did. There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in your philosophy, right?

ANNA

Sure. As I'd be the first to admit. But she's been stressed lately.

FELIX

Margaret's always stressed.

ANNA

I know. It's why I told her I thought she should try happiness. If it is a choice, I mean. Real or imagined. Maybe even if she's imagining it would be a good idea for her to try it. But I bet you said art, right?

FELIX

Of course I did. She's ambitious. I think being recognized beyond the little academic circle would do her good, and if this whole angel business is real, it could happen. She could even be poet laureate, or something.

ANNA

Our Margaret? Hard to imagine trying to interview her for The Times, especially if she's even crankier than she is now.

FELIX

Well, if she does choose art, we can try to talk her out of being the poet laureate, right? She can just get her Pulitzer or Book Award or whatever and leave the college and become the hermit that maybe she wants to be.

ANNA

But you know, I can't imagine her as a hermit, either. Really. She likes people, in her way. She can be kind. She's a good listener.

FELIX

And—and here's a reason for her not to choose happiness, by the way—she's empathetic. She really feels for the suffering of the world.

ANNA

True. But one can be empathetic without actually *feeling* the pain of others. That can get complicated, right? Because maybe what you're doing is wallowing in your own pain. "Look at me, see how *sensitive* I am." Huh. Wish I'd gone on about that when I was talking with her. But it probably wouldn't have helped. She was a wreck.

FELIX

I know. Anna, do you think she's delusional?

ANNA

I honestly don't know. Stress does weird things to people, and Margaret has always been on the edge of something. She's reactive, to put it mildly. I think most artists are.

FELIX

Am I? Is Barrie?

ANNA

Well, yeah, you are somewhat. But you can focus. And you've got a family, and that modifies things. You don't have the luxury of freaking out like she does.

FELIX

This is true.

ANNA

And Barrie? Barrie's probably certifiable. Beyond reactive.

FELIX

Barrie lives in another dimension.

ANNA

Ha. Good description. Funny that Barrie wasn't the one to see this angel. But then, she probably sees things all the time.

FELIX

Well, Margaret's in there now, dealing with Barrie. I expect that fairly soon we'll find out what happened.

ANNA

Oh yeah, for sure.

FELIX

Well, I'm on my way. Carry on.

ANNA.

I shall. You too. What else can we do?

(FELIX exits, ANNA remains. Blackout)

Scene 3

(MARGARET, seated at her computer. She doesn't notice when BARRIE bursts in.)

BARRIE

“Hail to thee, blithe spirit! Bird thou never wert! Who from heaven or near it. . .”

MARGARET

Barrie! You scared the shit out of me!

BARRIE

Maybe I should have said “Fear not!”

MARGARET

Very funny. I was just thinking about calling you.

BARRIE

I just bet you were.

MARGARET

I gather Felix told you. Or Anna.

BARRIE

Yup. The mills of the gods grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly small.

MARGARET

That makes no sense at all in this context.

BARRIE

Cool, huh?

MARGARET

Barrie. . .

BARRIE

So, I hear you've been visited by an angel. Excellent. It's about time somebody around here was. Yup. I was sitting in the sunshine outside the museum trying to think of something I could do to set the rock garden on fire when old Felix twizzled by and hailed me. An angel. And it has set before you two brick roads in a yellow wood, one leading to genius and one to joy.

MARGARET

Barrie, it's a little more complicated than that. You see, the angel said that God and. . .

BARRIE

Wow. I think I saw an angel once. Out of the corner of my eye. In a cornfield. So maybe it wasn't an angel. Maybe it was Demeter. She was big anyway, sort of caressing the corn as she passed. I fled. I guess back then I didn't want her to catch me. But that was a long time ago. Now I'd stay and check it out, invite her over for a beer or something. Do goddesses drink beer? What do angels drink?

MARGARET

Barrie. . .

BARRIE

So anyhow. Tell me, tell me. Cherub or Seraph? Dominion or Throne? Principality or. . .

MARGARET

(Indicating her screen.)

This one. I just looked them up. They told me their name. Penemue, from the Hebrew word for "inside." Look at this. It's from an esoteric text called the Book of Enoch.

BARRIE

Cool. Something I've never heard of. The book of what?

MARGARET

Enoch. It's really old, apocalyptic. Not in the official Hebrew or Christian bibles. Stuff about fallen angels. Listen:

(Reads from screen.)

The name of the fourth is Penemue: he discovered to the children of men bitterness and sweetness; And pointed out to them every secret of their wisdom. He taught men to understand writing, and the use of ink and paper. . . blah blah. . . Since they were not created, except that, like the angels, they might remain righteous and pure. Nor would death, which destroys everything, have effected them; But by this their knowledge—I guess the knowledge of writing. . . they perish, and by this also its power consumes them.

BARRIE

Cool. Give me writing or give me death! Sorta like happiness or art, right?

MARGARET

Looks that way, doesn't it? At least back in the—what?—(Checks screen.) maybe 3rd century B.C.E. they were thinking about it.

BARRIE

Wow. So. I bet Anna says happiness and Felix says art.

MARGARET

How did you guess?

BARRIE

Well, duh. No surprises there. I bet they magnified your inner conflicts, or some such crap, didn't they?

MARGARET

That's one way of putting it.

BARRIE

Tell me, tell me—what can I do to smallify them?

MARGARET

I have absolutely no idea. But, Barrie, I really still want to be as rational about this as possible.

BARRIE

Shades of Anna. Whatever. Gotcha. Rational. Go for it. So what can I tell you?

MARGARET

All right. Anna reads and weighs things and she says she's happy. Felix focuses and flows and says he isn't especially happy but he doesn't care. What about you? Are you happy? Does doing art make you happy?

BARRIE

Stupid questions. Come on, girl.

MARGARET

Come on yourself. I'm doing the best I can. I don't even know what to ask you. Do you analyze? Do you focus? Do you scatter like I do? Do you care about happiness? How do you work?

BARRIE

Why the hell should that matter?

MARGARET

I don't know. I don't know anything any more. Maybe because you always seem so free of—
angst or misery or whatever.

BARRIE

Free? That's me. (Sings) "Life is just a bowl of berries. Don't take it serious, it's too mysterious."
.."

MARGARET

Barrie. Help. Just talk, okay? Pretend you're normal. Just tell me about happiness and art. How you balance things, how you feel, how you work.

BARRIE

Okay. Here goes. I don't know how this will help because you and I are as different as a pea in a pod and a rhinoceros, but okay. Here goes. Ready? I don't work. Not what you'd call *work*. I've never worked, and I never will work. The day I start to *work* will be the day they put me in a home. There is absolutely no separation between, among, within—whatever the word is—the art I make and everything else I do.

MARGARET

But your art is conceptual, ephemeral. You don't make things that last. You. . .

BARRIE

Come on, Mag. Nothing lasts, and that means it's all art, right? Getting up in the morning is art. Taking a shit is art. Reading while I eat breakfast. Arguing with the clan about whose turn it is to buy groceries. Making dinner. Eating dinner. Walking the dog. Teaching. All of it. It's all art. It's all making something out of something, or out of nothing, but usually it's something. Life, feelings, whatever. Remaking, unmaking, starting over, turning around. Everything is raw material and everything is already finished before I begin. And. . .

MARGARET

But are you happy, Barrie? Does making art make you happy?

BARRIE

Yeah. I'm happy. Except when I don't want to be. Except I have to answer stupid questions. How's that?

MARGARET

Well, okay. Thanks. But I don't think the way you do it works for poetry. At least, well, the business about everything being already finished doesn't. It works for you, I can see that, but not for me.

BARRIE

Why not?

MARGARET

Because it's about choosing words. They have to be right.

BARRIE

Oh, well. I get that. Finished stuff, sure, like if you want it in a magazine or something. That's gotta take a little tweaking. Like, one more brush stroke, one more bucket of sand. But the first

BARRIE (Cont.)

burst of a poem, and the second and maybe the third? The energy of it? The way it flirts around and settles? Is that work?

MARGARET

You know what? It is. Wow. That was a good question, a really good question. It is work. It is.

BARRIE

Yeah? Oh, Maggo.

MARGARET

And Barrie, it didn't used to be. I used to carry a notebook all the time, and poetry was everywhere. Raw material everywhere. Art and life. Yes, it was. Words were a delight. And now. .

BARRIE

Now?

MARGARET

Now I don't carry a notebook. It's been so long since I've found a poem, since I've *felt* a poem. I'm so scared I'll never find one again.

BARRIE

Scared. Wow. No wonder you're so bitchy. How do you keep going?

MARGARET

I give myself these assignments now, just to get something on paper. Like this book. . .

BARRIE

Assignments.

MARGARET

Yeah. Like "Write a poem about what it's like to be an academic in an anti-intellectual world." Or "Write a poem about the political situation in Venezuela," or. . .

BARRIE

Jesus H. Christ. Holy crap. If that's where you are, you might as well hang it up and get happy. That isn't art. That's—I don't know what it is. Prison food. Floor sweepings. The crud in the bottom of the drain basket. Margaret, darling, come to Mama. I had no idea it was so bad. How long has this been going on?

MARGARET

I don't know. Since the second book, maybe. I don't know. I'm tired of it. So happiness is appealing. But so is brilliance. Reinspiration. I used to like writing. At least I think I did. I see that now. But maybe I just liked the idea of being a poet. I don't know, Barrie. I just don't know any more.

BARRIE

Ah, now you're getting someplace. The big one. Would you rather write poems or "be a poet"?

MARGARET

I never thought of it like that.

BARRIE

Of course not. Look at you. You look like—a poet. Right? There's no way in hell Shelley or Wordsworth would look like you do, all dour and solemn. They hung out with the birds, right? Or daffodils or bridges, or some damn thing.

MARGARET

Well, the Romantics did have a . . .

BARRIE

Stop being academic! Margaret! Snap out of it! You've forgotten how to fool around. You've gone all Plathy.

MARGARET

She was brilliant.

BARRIE

Yeah, but. What the fuck was the point of that?

MARGARET

So, you go with Anna. I should choose happiness.

BARRIE

No, no, no. No. Come on, girl! Life isn't all sunshine and coconuts and it isn't all dungeons and septic tanks either. Remember what that German guy said? "Let everything happen to you: Beauty and terror."

MARGARET

Rilke. "Just keep going. No feeling is final."

BARRIE

Right? See? You get all of it. You use all of it. Suffering and joy and rage and despair and silliness and grief and regret and play and fucking around and spring and seasonal affective disorder and weddings and funerals and champagne and your bottomless pot of terrible ancient coffee and bat mitzvahs and graduations with those awful boring speeches and bad television and good theater and philosophy and dance and hippopotamussus-us. And comic books. And Moby Dick. And everything ever written by everybody in the world, even the shit stuff. And all the art ever made including paintings of the Last Supper on tree funguses and crocheted-doll toilet paper covers. All of it, all of it, all of it. You gotta let it all happen. To you. Let all of it happen to you. Get out there. Get out of this ugly little room and get a life. Take it in, chew it up. Hate it, love it, savor it, puke it out, make art. It's all there. Everything you need. What art comes from. And the joy or happiness or, or, or, boredom. Even being bored shitless. Or—hell—even emptiness. All of it— whatever comes. So there's no either-or. Art or happiness! Pah! That angel of yours is full of crap.

MARGARET

It's a messenger. From god. .

BARRIE

Then that god is full of crap. No real god would—

MARGARET

. . .and Satan.

BARRIE

Yeah, well. That explains it. Get a grip, Maggo. Get a grip. Nobody can make you choose if you don't want to. You're in charge here. It's your life, not mine or Anna's or Felix's or the angel's or God's or your Aunt Minnie's. Quit agonizing over this stuff and tell that angel to go to hell, or back to heaven, or fuck itself, or whatever. You've got work to do. And so do I. I got things to see and things to feel and things to ponder and things to make and things to take apart and make again and tears to shed and, and rants to—well—to finish. So I'm outta here. Good luck and don't come crying to me if you screw this up.

(Exits, slamming the door.)

MARGARET

Barrie?

(Opens the door and looks out, then closes door and goes to the window. Blackout.)

Scene 4

(ANNA is sitting in the coffee shop. BARRIE enters and joins her.)

BARRIE

Anna, Anna, banana bofanna, or whatever. I come from haunt of coot and fern and Margaret.
(Sits.)

ANNA

Felix told me he sent you on a mission. So, what happened?

BARRIE

What do you think? There's a blue moon and the wind is in the southeast, so the times they are a changin.'

ANNA

Barrie? Tell me something. I've known you for what? Seven years or so?

BARRIE

Or so, I believe. Six years and eleven months, thirteen days, twelve hours, eight minutes, thirty-six seconds, thirty-seven, thirty-eight. . .

ANNA

Barrie. Is this really what you're like? Are you really this—weird?

BARRIE

Yup. This is me. What you see is what you get. Ever since I've known who I am this is the way I've been.

ANNA

It's unusual, you know. Most people don't reveal what's going on inside them, the way you do.

BARRIE

(Very serious.)

Anna, my dear old philosopher, let me tell you something. I don't have anything going on inside me the way most people do. I have no inner life. No in or out or up or down or sideways. I think what I say, I say what I think—it's all one thing. I make what I imagine and imagine what I make. I was just trying to explain that to the poet. I'm not sure she understood.

ANNA

I'm not sure I do, Barrie. But you know what? I'm glad you're my friend. I like knowing you. You have a way of turning everything inside-out.

BARRIE

That would be me. Because guess what? There is no inside or outside. There's only (Gesture.) this!

ANNA

This.

BARRIE

Yeah. And there's more of it than anyone can possibly imagine. See ya.

(Exits.)

(Fade out.)

Scene 5

(MARGARET, in her office.)

MARGARET

Pem, I'm ready. I've decided.

PEM
(Appears.)

So. Barrie.

MARGARET

Yes. Barrie.

PEM

That was something, wasn't it?

MARGARET

Something. Yes. Barrie is always something. It never occurred to me that I don't have to choose.

PEM

It never does occur to people. Offer them a choice and they always seem to take it. One or the other. Yes or no. Now or later. Right or wrong, conservative or liberal, individuality or community, magic or reason, male or female. . .

MARGARET

Oh stop. We have two hands, in case you hadn't noticed. It's natural for us to think in pairs. And so, angel, what happens if I don't choose?

PEM

Nothing. At least, I expect nothing happens.

SATAN and GOD

That's what you think.

PEM

Well, not to you, anyway. I guess you go on as usual. But to be honest, God and Satan didn't specify what would happen if you didn't choose—they just assumed you would: Art or happiness is all they said. They think in pairs, too. Heaven or hell. Good or evil. . .

GOD

Yes! Good or evil. If you had done your job. . .

SATAN

Right. There is no Prince of wishy-washy, you know.

MARGARET

Are experimental subjects supposed to come up with their own solutions?

PEM

I don't know if they ever have. Let me think: Adam and Eve—take the apple or not? Well, that was pretty straight forward, I guess. Noah? Nah, that was a command. Abraham? Joseph? Jonah tried to run away, but it didn't work. Huh. Well, I guess in the mythology I come from, originality isn't especially a thing.

GOD and SATAN

Of course it isn't.

MARGARET

Barrie's beyond mythology, it would seem. And I think she's right.

PEM

Beyond mythology. Or she has her own.

MARGARET

A personal mythology. I'll have to think about that. I don't know if mythology can be purely personal. Can it?

PEM

I have no idea.

SATAN

Really? You seem to be developing one of your own. .

GOD

Get with it, angel. This is your last chance. Don't blow it.

PEM

So, speaking of thinking. Is that your answer? Neither? You don't want to be brilliant? You don't want to be happy?

MARGARET

I want to be both, now and then, but it's on me, as I guess it's always been. If I get brilliant, it will be due to myself, not some kind of—possession. And if I'm happy now and then, well, there it is. The human condition.

PEM

Yup. That's it. The human condition. Well, I hope you don't regret it.

GOD

Oh, come *on!*

SATAN

If that's the best you can do, there's no place for you in hell.

MARGARET

Of course I'll regret it. And if I chose either way, I'd regret that, too. Trust me. Humans are really, really good at regret. Except, possibly, Barrie.

PEM

I've noticed that. Well, okay then. For the record—neither?

MARGARET

Yes. Neither.

PEM

All right then.

GOD and SATAN

(Expressions of disappointment and irritation.)

MARGARET

But—what about you? What happens to you? If this was between God and Satan. . .

PEM

Well, it's complicated. Tempters come up from hell, guardian angels down from heaven, right? You know the stories.

MARGARET

Yes, but where do you come from then? If they both sent you?

PEM

Here. Right here. This little planet. I've been here ever since—ever since you people became—shall we say—discerning. It was supposed to be a temporary punishment, but I like it here, and that's a problem for both Satan and God. It's probably the reason they sent me on this gig.

MARGARET

Of course. It's untidy. Earth is neither heaven nor hell.

PEM

Or it's both at the same time.

MARGARET

But what if. . . ?

PEM

No. No, we're not going to do that game. Whatiffery is stupid. The human condition isn't about conditionals. It's this, and then this, and then that. . . no redos. You can rethink it, sure, get some perspective, fix things up a bit, have your regrets if you like, but no do-overs. It's the angelic condition, too, at least for angels like me.

MARGARET

Yes. But I want to know. . .

GOD & SATAN

Penemue! Penemue!

PEM

Well, you can't. So, then. I'll be on my way.

MARGARET

Pem? Will I ever see you again?

PEM

Why do you want to know?

MARGARET

Well, let's just say "I've grown accustomed to your face."

PEM

Aw shucks. That sounds like something Barrie would say.

MARGARET

It does, doesn't it? But will I see you? Where will you be? What will happen to. . .

PEM

I don't know.

MARGARET

You really don't know?

PEM

Yes. I really really don't know. And they're calling me so I have to. . .

MARGARET

Calling you?

PEM

I'm on my way (sings) "with my rucksack on my back. Twinkle-y, twinkle-a. . ."
(Waves and disappears/exits.)

MARGARET

Pem? Pem! Fear not! Fear not!

(Blackout.)

Scene 6

(Darkness, as at the beginning.)

GOD

Penemue! Penemue!

SATAN

Maybe ir won't come.

GOD

It has to. I'm God. It has to do what I say.

SATAN

The worm.

GOD

It's not a worm. It's an angel. At least, so far. It won't be when I . . .

(PEM enters.)

GOD

You certainly took your sweet time.

SATAN

You poor excuse for a . . .

GOD

Shut up, Satan. This isn't about you. This is between me and . . .

SATAN

You're just cranky because you lost.

GOD

Well, so did you, in case you hadn't noticed. You think you're so . . .

PEM

Ahem. You called, I think?

GOD

I did. Penemue, Tamuel, Fallen angel and failed messenger, what do you have to say for yourself?

PEM

Nothing, really. You know what happened.

GOD

You allowed the human to choose.

PEM

Yes. I did. You and Satan had a bet that . . .

GOD

Silence!

(Silence.)

SATAN

For once, I agree with God. You had the golden opportunity to manipulate a human mind.

PEM

You don't know much about them, do you? For one thing, they talk to their friends. . .

GOD

Oh, friends. Friends! The opinions of friends rather than the promptings of angels?

PEM

They're humans, you know? They don't often get visited by. . .

GOD

Never mind, never mind. The point is you failed. Since you have made it abundantly clear that you are not on the side of Heaven, I hereby condemn you to. . .

SATAN

No, no, no. Not Hell. I don't want it. It's not on my side, either, despite my. . .

GOD

Shut up, Satan. Penemue, I hereby condemn you to Earth, where you will live out the rest of your days as a mortal. Not as a manifestation, but in the flesh.

PEM

Mortal. You mean I'll die?

SATAN

That's what mortal means.

PEM

Like them. Like Margaret and all.

SATAN

Yes. Like them. Those pathetic little. . .

PEM

No, wait.

GOD

It's too late, Penemue. You have been condemned. I'm not changing my. . .

PEM

I know, I know. And you know what? That's fine.

GOD

It's fine? Don't you understand? You are doomed.

SATAN

Don't you care?

PEM

You say I'll be mortal like them. Like Margaret and Anna and Felix and Barrie.

GOD

Yes. Barrie. If it hadn't been for Barrie, maybe you'd be. . .

PEM

Ah. Barrie. If it hadn't been for Barrie, I'd really be doomed.

SATAN

But you are. . .

PEM

No. Don't you see? Now *I* get both, too. All of it, really.

GOD

Both. . .

PEM

Heaven and hell and happiness and misery and—uncertainty. Yeah, that, too. From now on, it's all music and edges for me.

GOD

But this is supposed to be a punishment for your. . .

PEM

Whatever. And now, if that's all you've got to say, I'm out of here. (Sings.) "Be it ever so bumbling, there's no place like. . ."

GOD and SATAN

(Expressions of frustration and dismay.)

PEM

Oh. I nearly forgot. Fear not!
(Exits.)

EPILOGUE

(Six months later. Coffee shop table. MARGARET, FELIX, ANNA AND BARRIE are seated in same seats as before, talking. PEM has joined them, dressed distinctively.)

(Fade in to conversation.)

MARGARET

. . . so it won't be much of a book tour. Just around New England to the usual bookshops. Flying me out to the west coast isn't worth it, I guess.

FELIX

Well, at least you don't have to do all that jet-lag business you hate.

MARGARET

True. Oh well, I'll never be on the best-seller list no matter what.

PEM

Oh, I don't know. You're still young.

MARGARET

Ha! Maybe by your standards.

PEM

Sorry. I keep forgetting.

BARRIE

I love it. How weird is that—to have an eternity of perspective.

PEM

Not exactly an eternity. And it's no weirder than your linear viewpoint.

BARRIE

Sorry, sweetie, I don't have a linear viewpoint. Anna does, however. At least, it's one of her many.

ANNA

Pem, I should invite you to seminar someday to talk to the students about that.

MARGARET

As if they'd listen.

PEM

As if I'd come.

FELIX

So, Margaret. The book. Preliminary reviews yet?

MARGARET

Haven't seen any but I think I know what they'll say. "Margaret Foster has outdone herself this time with her usual general pessimism and gloom about the human condition. With the exception of the penultimate poem, which provides a tiny glimmer of possibility. . . ."

ANNA

Huh.

MARGARET

Don't you dare say 'I told you so.'

ANNA

Wouldn't dream of it.

FELIX

Of course you wouldn't, Anna, darling. Just like I wouldn't say a thing about Margaret not being shortlisted for a Pulitzer.

BARRIE

And who the hell cares either way?

MARGARET

For once I agree with Barrie. Life goes on. Beauty and terror.

ANNA

I like that. Is it original?

MARGARET

Don't I wish. One who knew.

FELIX

Well, you could have. . .

MARGARET

No. I couldn't. That is done. Behind me, speaking of linear. But in other news, did Barrie tell you that we've started a collaboration?

FELIX

You two? Are you kidding?

BARRIE

Nope. Words and a mural kinda thing, in the quad if they'll let us. Maybe even if they won't let us. Collage-y, maybe. Paint, glue, found shit, who knows? Wads of clay even. Do you guys want to play, too?

FELIX

How would that work?

MARGARET

You could do the music, while I read some experimental stuff.

BARRIE

. . . while I make the art.

ANNA

Wow. A performance piece. That would be a big step for you, Margaret.

MARGARET

A leap in the dark, actually.

FELIX

Ha!

ANNA

What?

FELIX

Oh, just a private joke.

BARRIE

A joke! A joke! You must stand and proclaim! You must. . .

FELIX

Barrie, put a sock in it.

BARRIE

A sock! A sock! My kingdom for a sock! But yeah, Mags is on board with the weirdness.

ANNA

But what happens to the piece when it's finished? They won't let you leave it on the quad, for sure. Especially if it's unauthorized.

BARRIE

Oh, philosopher, you should know! We'll destroy it. That will be part of the deal. The impermanence of art, you know. Or life, or whatever. The impermanence of impermanence of impermanence. I like that word. We'll have to use it. Impermanence, impermanence, impermanence.

FELIX

I could work with that rhythm, I think.

MARGARET

And I'll burn the poems after I'm done with them.

ANNA

Wow again. Burn poems?

BARRIE

Yup, no photos, no filming. You gotta be there.

FELIX

What if nobody comes?

BARRIE

We'll do it anyway.

MARGARET

Huh. Maybe we should do it at some ungodly hour, like 2 a.m., so nobody *will* be there.

FELIX

2 a.m.? Are you kidding? Students will be there.

MARGARET

Then 6 a.m. on a Sunday morning.

ANNA

I love it. A real one-off.

BARRIE

Hey, we could call it that. One off, One off. Or, even better, how's this: "One off, Two on?" Or "One Off, Three On," or four, or whatever, depending on if any of you come along.

FELIX

That would work, too. Da'-da, da'-da, da'-da.

PEM

Or five.

FELIX

One off, five on? That keeps the rhythm but changes the sound.

BARRIE

Oh, Feely, so what? Having Penny on board would be so cool. (To PEM.) Can you get wings?

MARGARET

Barrie, that was insensitive.

PEM

(To BARRIE.) Not organic ones. I mean, I can't grow any. (To MARGARET) It wasn't insensitive, by the way. Since I'm a permanent resident now, I wouldn't want wings. Too conspicuous. And besides, they'd get in the way.

ANNA

Permanent?

PEM

Well, you know. As permanent as any of you.

FELIX

Hey, let's not get all philosophical. Back to plans for the show. I haven't done any improvisation for awhile. Could I do improv?

BARRIE

Of course. Whatever makes your socks roll up and down. You'll have to use your own. I don't have any on me. Socks, I mean. So I couldn't have put one in anyhow.

FELIX

I could bring my violin maybe. I haven't fooled with that for awhile.

ANNA

Okay, okay, I want in, too. What can I do?

BARRIE

Hm. Wait! I know! I know! You can dress up like a philosopher and direct the destruction part!

ANNA

Dress up like a philosopher? Meaning. . . ?

PEM

A toga, right? Definitely a toga. And a long white beard, obviously fake, pasted on crooked. And I will get some tacky wings at a costume shop and. . .

ANNA

How cynical can you get?

PEM

You'd be surprised.

(Fade out as conversation continues. . .)

ANNA

Can I use a hammer, or just my nails and teeth?

BARRIE

Ooo, I like nails and teeth.

ANNA

Wait, wait. Maybe just nails. To start with anyhow.

FELIX

You'll wreck your manicure.

ANNA

As if. Better than chipping teeth.

FELIX

We could let the audience help.

MARGARET

Assuming we have an audience.

BARRIE

Oh we'll have one all right. Four professors . . .

PEM

and a former angel. . .

BARRIE

. . . at the bang of dawn, creating and destroying a great big whatever. . .

PEM

Been there. . .

FELIX

What?

PEM

Oh, long story. For another time.

End of Play