

WILLIAM HEYEN

THE NOVELIST: A PLAY IN ONE ACT

Cast:

Rosamund: 55-60 years old; thin & tall; long & frizzy brownblack hair; moves gracefully; long fingers. She is wearing a plain, nondescript graygreen short-sleeved dress & tennis shoes. . . . She is at the height of her considerable fame as novelist, but projects character & substance, is always aware of the difference between the vagaries of reputation & the solidities of selfhood. . . . Her most important quality: she is *here* during the action, within her life, & is not seeing herself selfconsciously as though from somewhere else. . . .

Bill: He is wearing shorts, a teeshirt with a picture of Che Guevara on it, & the same style tennis shoes as the novelist, his wife. . . . He may be two or three years younger than her. . . . He is tall, angular. . . . He is today especially anxious, protective. . . . We're not sure what he does for a living, but he may be a teacher-poet.

John: Apparently John — Bill will call him “Doc” — is a retired dentist, dental surgeon. He is older than his visitors, who are indeed his guests here. He seems to be a man of good humor & of wide experience, as though little could now, at his age, surprise him. . . . He is dressed casually, even carelessly. . . .

Setting:

The whole stage is what appears to be what was once one of John's offices, perhaps his first one, perhaps at the back of his apartment, before he moved to more modern quarters. It may be that he has not been here for weeks, months — a sense of mustiness. Stage left is a wall of books intercepted by photographs, pottery — pre-Columbian? — diplomas. . . . Stage center finds focus in an antique dentist's chair, but one whose effect is softened by a white lab-coat draped over its back & an afghan folded on its seat. We see a floor lamp next to it, not yet lit. Beside the chair is a tall stand with a shelf that can be swiveled to be in front of the chair's occupant. . . . Stage right is a jumble of teak or mahogany cabinets, with countless drawers; more books stuffed here & there; & an almost-hidden model of a human skull (real? model?).

When the curtains rise or part, from out of this jumble a door that we almost didn't notice will open, & John will precede the couple, Rosamund in front of her husband who guides her into this room gently, by one elbow. The dentist, as lights rise to a more comfortable intensity, will turn on two other floor lamps at the back of the room & then the lamp beside his chair, which should also be spot-lit from above. Finally, he will light a stick of forest incense in a brass burner at the front of the stage.

For a full minute, the couple have had their backs to us as they've been looking at various *objet d'art* & books — most of the books are antiquarian, but those with bright jackets, about 30-40 of them placed together but piled haphazardly, seem to be by Rosamund herself.

While Rosamund & Bill are looking at books & various curiosities, John removes the lab coat from the chair, shakes it out, & puts it on. As he's buttoning it up, because his friends have not yet come into the center of the room, he says:

John: Rose, if I didn't know you better, I could swear you were nervous. This doesn't mean you don't trust me, does it?

Rosamund: (*She & her husband have turned around, are now moving toward the chair.*) John, of course I'm nervous. Yes, and you I trust, . . . but Bill?

John: I assured Bill I could take care of this even if it's not exactly some thing I've done before. I recommended a hospital, but he said that you insisted on this old horse-doctor.

Bill: Actually, Doc, she said "horse-fly doctor." . . .

(John takes a sealed pair of rubber gloves from the pocket of his coat, opens the package, & pulls them on.)

Rosamund: Oh, John, it's not *you* that I'm worried about. (*She removes the afghan & jumps like a schoolgirl into the chair. She unfolds the afghan, pulls it completely over herself, & mock-trembles.*)

Bill: Joyce is apparently hiding from her critics, Doc.

John: If any show up here, Rose, I've got some nitrous oxide left over. That should dispel their gloom.

(Rose peeps out from her cover with one eye.)

Bill: (Wanting to disguise his impatience) Rose, you can stay under there, but show Doc your arm.

Rosamund: (She has gone back under.) NO.

Bill: Rose?

(The fingers of Rose's right hand poke out from the afghan — an exaggerated trembling. John takes her hand and draws it out. A few seconds more, & the tomfoolery is done. Rose sits up, folds the afghan down to below her waist. John lets go of her hand & swings the stand's shelf over, adjusts its height, then lifts the novelist's arm again & places it on this shelf. For the first time, the audience is aware of a very large & grotesque red bump on her forearm.)

John: So, here we are, here we are. *(Even while strapping on his forehead light, he keeps his eye on the red bump.)* . . . How long ago was it that you and Rose got home, Bill?

Rosamund: (a bit irritably) I'm still here, John.

Bill: Twelve days ago, Doc. . . . I don't like this at all. She's making me nuts. I couldn't sleep, couldn't work. She's got her nerve, don't you think? I wanted to take her to emergency a week ago. She wouldn't budge. This would be a new dictionary for her, she said. . . . Doc, maybe there's another parasite hatching in her brain.

John: Aah, these artist types, Bill, these . . . *artistes*. . . . You have to handle them with rubber gloves and asbestos tongs.

Rosamund: (her voice more pleasant but arch) Still here, John . . .

(John has his thumbs on either side of the bump on his patient's arm.)

John: Bill, tell me again, slowly, what you told me on the phone. Rose, you stay out of this. You didn't even want to be here, so you've got nothing to do with this, from here on in, hear me. Why don't you do us a favor now and just go into one of your infamous trances? *(John is now intent, all business, professional.)*

Rosamund: I'll humor you two chauvinists.

Bill: I'd guess it was Guatemala where it happened, Doc, a nature excursion after Rose's talk in the morning and then an embassy luncheon. . . .

(John is staring at the bump intently, oscillating his patient's arm. Bill gazes off into space as he walks to the front of the stage. He'll look over the audience's heads as he recites what he has learned. He speaks slowly, in monotone, almost chants, & seems to see his own description as he speaks.)

Apparently, it happens like this.
A botfly will capture a mosquito,
will force its own gluey eggs
onto the mosquito's abdomen and legs,
then let the mosquito go. . . .
The mosquito will seek blood
will rub these eggs off
onto an animal's fur or skin. . . .
The botfly's eggs
will hatch within minutes . . .
and the infinitesimal larvae
immediately burrow
into the host-victim's flesh. . . .
Once inside, hidden,
it grows in proportion
to the considerable volume
of flesh it consumes. . . .

(He returns to his wife's side, bends toward her, now speaks in his normal tone.)

It is a *very* busy worker. It works overtime. It never stops.

Rosamund: (wearily, for she has heard this criticism, this accusation, all too often before) Indefatigable. . . . Obsessed. . . . Compulsive. . . . (She winces from John's pressure on her arm.) Otherworldly in its single-mindedness. . . . Gluttonous in its appetite for violence, for gore. . . .

Bill: Now, now, Rose, let's not take this personally.

(John straightens up, crosses the stage — walking behind the chair — goes to one of his cabinets stage right.)

Rosamund: (speaking earnestly to John across the room, fervently) I almost hate to lose it. It has kept me good company. I've become quite proud of it, even hubristic. I've told Bill that I could certainly survive until it decides to vacate me for its next metamorphosis. . . .

(John has found what he has been looking for — a hypodermic, a syringe of what is probably novocaine, a scalpel, a pair of long-stemmed tweezers. He returns to the arm. . . . Bill has been shaking his head at his wife's words.)

John, you've retired now, have come full circle. How would you have liked it if someone had . . . excised you in mid-career . . . before you could fulfill yourself . . . before you could become . . . the angel you are, you beautiful winged creature!

(John is drawing novocaine into his syringe. Rosamund sees him.) No, no, John, only rubbing alcohol, I don't want any other anaesthetic. I'm good with pain. Nausea I'm not good at — vomiting, sea-sickness, rheum and flu — but I've always been good with pain. *(determined)* Only an antiseptic or I'm out of here with my little hitchhiker.

Bill: Goddamnit, Rose!

John: Here we are in the Old West. Want a slug of snakebite, podnuh?

Rosamund: I mean it. *(melancholy)* I'm not going to have my little botfly larva inundated with a nerve deadener. I've enjoyed its wiggle, its shifts, its painless burrowing. It has meant me no harm.

Bill: Yeah, the fever, the shakes . . .

Rosamund: Bill, you've always accused me of wanting to be the perfect host. And this has been no work at all. All I've had to do is to do nothing . . . but that isn't possible, it seems, not with you two heartless abortionists.

Bill: God damn it, wife, you're mixing your metaphors, and will you just shut up for once in your life so Doc can concentrate? This isn't one of your fucking romances. You're not at Balmoral with the royals. You've got this carnivorous insect in your forearm, and you're acting like it's a little goldfish out for a swim. *(pause, then as though in afterthought:)* Even the cats hate the goddamn thing and have tried to scratch it out of you.

Rosamund: *(quietly now, subdued, but firm)* Whatever. But no novocaine. *(Her forehead is wet enough so that Bill wipes it with his handkerchief.)*

John: No problem, soldier. *(John goes back to his cabinets, returns with a jar of astringent. Tense quiet time goes by as he opens it and soaks a gauze pad in it.)*

I'd suggest you drink some of this, too, soldier.

Rosamund: Give a gallon to Bill.

(Now, velocity: John rubs the astringent onto the novelist's forearm, blows on it, rubs more. He picks up his scalpel, slides a magnifying lens down from his headpiece, holds Rose's arm down with his left hand, his grip strong from years of surgery, and makes a quick decisive incision below the bump. His patient has been still, but now her leg movements suggest pain. John drops the scalpel onto the shelf. He is bending over her now, grunting slightly, has her in the vice of his two-handed grip. Bill looks away, Rose stares at the site of invasion.)

John: There, I can get it now, Rose, hold on. Bill, I need the long tweezers, I don't want to let go, come around and be ready to hand me the tweezers.

Bill: Jesus, Doc. *(He rushes around the front of the chair, gets the tweezers from the stand.)*

Rosamund: *(concerned for Bill)* You asked for it, husband. Did you think you'd just have to boil some water?

John: Bill, even better, I'll just hold on. Now, when I squeeze, you'll see its head, I've got its head facing us, maybe lucky for us. . . .

Bill: Jesus, Doc.

Rosamund: You wanted this, Bill. I could have waited. . . . Countless others have gone through with this.

John: Wouldn't that be an experience better saved for one of your imaginative ruminations, Rose? . . . And now it is time to be . . . *(his voice trails off as he concentrates)* . . . quiet.

Bill: Okay, Doc, show me, good thing I've got good eyes.

Rosamund: And nerves of tungsten. Or spaghetti.

(Intensest quiet now except for the novelist's labored breathing. Doc must be squeezing, making sure that the larva does not back down out of sight. We sense that he and Bill can now see the beast.)

John: Can you get it?

Bill: I'll get the son-of-a-bitch.

Rosamund: Son-of-a-botfly, of the common order *Diptera*, and, in fact, regarding its sexual apparatus . . .

Bill: Shut up!

John: Yes, there, look at the fellow squirm. . . .

(Rose, in rhythmic pain now, unb, unb, her body lifting up, but her arm still.)

There, don't pull it out too fast, don't pull off its head, persuade it, make it uncomfortable, ease it out.

(Maybe ten seconds pass. . . .)

Bill: Got it, got the son-of-a-bitch!

(John lets go of Rose's arm, quickly wipes an antiseptic over her wound, presses a gauze pad over it and tapes it. Bill has the larva — large & bluish green & wet — in the tweezers. He holds it to the lamplight for Rose to see. She flinches, then steadies Bill's wrist & moves the larva close to her face.)

(a bit shaky) Jesus, it's ugly. Head pincers like a bloodworm, and I hated every one of those things I dug when I was a kid.

(He's relieved & proud of himself now. He & Rose stare at the larva as he turns it in the light. John has gone, & returned with a glass tray. Bill drops the larva into the tray & hands the tray to his wife. . . . Now, quietly, some kind of ritualistic music, very low, something vaguely of jungle wind & flute, as Rose gets up from the dentist's chair & moves to center stage front, holding the tray out in front of her as though it were a sacrificial offering to the audience . . . but she does not know, of course, that anyone is watching her, or even hearing her, not even her husband & the surgeon. She speaks to the presence in the glass tray, croons to it, slowly, as incense drifts up under them.)

Rosamund: O poor little thief of flesh
O poor little orchid
O poor little tropical angel
O poor little slimed greenblack orphan
O poor little eyeless swimmer that needed me I saw you in my
dreams I said sip I said take, eat, I said won't you stanch me
like a leech
O poor little word

O poor little phrase
O poor little story
O poor beautiful little grotesque so far from home little
 wanderer all vicious idea all teeth and belly
I could not birth you little being
O poor little theme I carried with me who would not rest who
 would not sleep who would swallow the milk of me my
 eternity
O diminutive cherub
O my lost wings
Skate, then, little one

*(She holds the glass tray in her left hand now, & with the fingernail of the pointer
finger of her other hand — hand of the bandaged arm — pushes the larva along.)*

Skate then, little athlete, breathe deeply and skate!

*(She pushes the larva faster, but stays in control of it, of herself. . . . Her husband
& John come up to stand behind her. Each places a hand on one of her shoulders.)*

O I loved you so. . . .

*(She is still pushing the larva around in the tray. Is she beginning to slice into it with
her fingernail?)*

Show us how fast you are, how lithe, little skater, I could kiss
 you, should I kiss you? . . .

Should I keep you? . . . *(long pause)*

O my happiness I loved you so. . . .

(Together, the three players bow their heads.)

LIGHTS DIM. CURTAINFALL.