

*A cafe, close to midnight.*

(In black, we hear the sound of a strong cold wind, bells on the cafe's door chime roughly, and the door slams against a wall.)

(When the lights come up, the female characters are frozen. MARY works behind the counter, cleaning dishes at a sink. MARTHA is walking back towards the counter from the cafe's front door, which is open against the wall. She has turned to look at the door because she just heard it slam open. She can't see FRED.)

(FRED sits at one of the cafe's tables alone, writing, and has a variety of novels and philosophical texts strewn around his table. His empty backpack is on a chair.)

MARTHA

(When MARTHA speaks both women unfreeze and FRED carries on writing.)

What the fuck?

(MARTHA returns to the doors and shuts it forcefully.)

How did that happen? Didn't I just lock it?

(She turns and immediately sees FRED. She shouts in shock.)

(MARY looks up in concern and stops cleaning. FRED does not seem to notice.)

(MARTHA motions to MARY to keep quiet. She creeps slowly and quietly past FRED, trying not to be noticed.)

Mary, who is that? Where did he come from?

MARY

What do you mean, Martha?

MARTHA

What do you mean, what do I mean? Where the hell did he come from? He wasn't there two seconds ago.

MARY

Of course he was.

MARTHA

Of course he was not! He was not there two seconds ago. I turned off the stereo and locked the door because no one was here.

MARY

Martha, of course, he was there. Look, his pint glass is half-full of coffee.

MARTHA

He was not! I closed and locked the door. Somehow it opened again. I went back to close it and when I turned around he was there.

MARY

What? Are you saying he appeared out of thin air?

MARTHA

Yes! That is exactly what I'm saying.

MARY

Don't be ridiculous, Martha. You probably didn't notice him. Your mind was showing you what you wanted to see. You know, wishful thinking.

MARTHA

No! He was not there. And he's there now. Are you saying I'm crazy?

MARY

No, of course not. I am saying you made a mistake. A perfectly reasonable mistake, after a long tiring shift fueled by one-too-many double espressos.

MARTHA

I did not! He wasn't there. Now he is. I swear.

MARY

Martha, he had to have been there. It's the only thing that makes any sense.

MARTHA

Did you see him before now?

MARY

To be honest, at this time of night, when I'm cleaning up, I don't pay much attention to the stragglers.

MARTHA

A-ha!

MARY

But he seems familiar.

MARTHA

So you do recognize him.

MARY

I wouldn't go that far. This cafe is always filled with guys like that, reading, writing, playing philosopher-poet-king or whatever.

MARTHA

Mary. You are my sister and I love you but I am telling you -- I am promising you -- he was not there.

MARY

Martha. You are my sister and I love you, but this wouldn't be the first time you jumped to a fantastical conclusion based on unlikely premises.

MARTHA

When the hell do I do that?

MARY

Do you remember that time we played with the Ouija board? You even admitted you were the one moving the thingie and you still managed to convince yourself that what it said was true.

MARTHA

Maybe the spirt we had channelled was working though me.

MARY

The spirt we had channeled was your dead gold fish, Mr. Bubbles! Why would he know we were meant to die at midnight?

MARTHA

Ok, fine. But we were eight! This is different! I'm older now. Wiser.

MARY

Martha, my dear. You and I. We'll always be eight.

MARTHA

No, Mary. I've grown. We've grown. And I swear he wasn't there a second ago.

MARY

Look, it doesn't matter.

(She checks the analogue clock  
on the wall. It indicates one  
minute to twelve.)

It's almost twelve. We are closing up. Just ask him to leave.

MARTHA

Are you kidding? Me! I'm not going anywhere near him.

MARY

Martha, I'm busy cleaning up. So either you can go shoo your ghost or you can run the risk of unsightly dishpan hands.

MARTHA

That's not a fair choice!

MARY

I'm sure it's not the first or only unfair choice you will face in this lifetime.

MARTHA

Fine! God. You always know how to get me to do anything.

MARY

That's what older sisters are here for. Besides, when you talk to him, you will probably remember serving him, and all your paranoid worries will disappear. The brain works in mysterious ways, you know.

MARTHA

Yours certainly does not.

MARY

Go!

MARTHA

(MARTHA approaches FRED cautiously. She looks to MARY for support. MARY has returned to cleaning and sorting dishes.)

(After much squirming and hesitation, she finally clears her throat quietly behind FRED. He does not react. She tries again, more loudly, he does react. Eventually, annoyed and frustrated, she speaks.)

Hey, buddy. Hello.

FRED

What. Oh. I'm sorry. I was concentrating on something there. Kinda lost in my train of thought.

MARTHA

Well, it's time to board your train and make like a caboose, my friend, and get out of here. We're closing up.

FRED

Closing up? You close at twelve, right? Midnight?

MARTHA

Ah. Yeah. So.

FRED

(He motions to the clock on the wall.)

It's one minute to twelve. I've got one minute left. One more minute of coffee and one more minute to finish my thought. Thanks for the head's up, though.

MARTHA

(MARTHA hesitates. Then, she notices one of the books.)

Hey, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. I love that book. Are you a philosophy major or something?

FRED

Sorry, I really need to get this idea down on paper. Don't worry, I'll be done by midnight. Excuse me.

(MARTHA, a little dumbfounded, returns to where MARY is tidying up.)

MARY

So, is he the ghost of Christmas past?

MARTHA

No. But he is a dick. A total dick.

MARY

What do you mean?

MARTHA

He wouldn't leave when I asked him to leave.

MARY

Really?

MARTHA

Yeah. He waved his glass at me and said, "I've got one more minute left." What a dick.

MARY

(She checks the clock)

He has a point. We close at twelve. Let him finish his coffee.

MARTHA

I hate those kind of guys. You know, who jump to all kinds of conclusions based on a woman's appearance. I bet you he thinks he has me all figured out because I'm a woman working the late shift at a coffee shop and I have a few tattoos. Fuck him. I bet you he would have listened if I was a man.

MARY

Not two seconds ago, you jumped to the conclusion that he was some kind of ghost-demon.

MARTHA

That's different. I've been working hard all night and what the hell has he been doing. Nothing. Reading and writing. That's all. Nothing.

MARY

You have been working hard. I'm not surprised you're a little cranky.

(She drops a damp cloth on the counter.)

Go wipe down some tables for a few minutes and then tell him to leave.

MARTHA

Fine.

(MARTHA takes the cloth and starts wiping down tables. Her attention is focussed on FRED. She starts to hum and sing, "If I Had A Million Dollars," by the Barenaked Ladies. FRED continues to work diligently. MARY continues to clean and dishes clink.)

(Eventually, after the tables are clean and cleared, MARTHA briskly approaches FRED.)

Alright, Nietzsche, time to go. We're closing up.

FRED

Closing up? You close at twelve, right. Midnight?

MARTHA

Ah. Yeah. So.

FRED

(He motions to the clock on the wall.)

It's one minute to twelve. I've got one minute left. One more minute of coffee and one more minute to finish my thought. Thanks for the head's up though.

MARTHA

(MARTHA hesitates. Then, she notices one of the books.)

Hey, *L'Etranger*. I love that book. Are you a French major or something?

FRED

Sorry, I really need to get this idea down on paper. Don't worry, I'll be done by midnight. Excuse me.

(MARTHA, a little dumbfounded, returns to where MARY is tidying up.)

MARY

So, is he the ghost of Christmas present?

MARTHA

No. But he is a dick. A total dick.

MARY

What do you mean?

MARTHA

He wouldn't leave when I asked him to leave.

MARY

Really?

MARTHA

Yeah. He waved his glass at me and said, "I've got one more minute left."

(MARTHA catches herself,  
noticing something is not quite  
right.)

What a dick.

MARY

(She checks the clock)

He has a point. We close at twelve. Let him finish his coffee.

MARTHA

Wow. I just had the strongest *deja vu* ever.

MARY

What do you mean?

MARTHA

You know. The feeling. Like I am totally sure I already asked him to leave. Like, totally sure we already had this conversation. Wow. Trippy.

MARY

You have been working hard. I'm not surprised you're a little out of sorts.

(She drops a damp cloth on the  
counter.)

Go wipe down some tables for a few minutes and then tell him to leave.

MARTHA

Fine.

(MARTHA takes the cloth, starts to hum / sing "Paranoid Android" by Radiohead. She wipes a table down and notices that it is clean and damp.)

What the fuck?

(She turns and stares at FRED who is working diligently. After a moment, she heads to MARY, never taking her eyes off FRED.)

Mary, Mary, Mary. The tables have already been wiped down. The tables have already been wiped down. And look!

(She points at the dishes she cleared on the counter.)

The dishes have already been cleared.

MARY

Really? Who did that? When?

MARTHA

I did! Like two seconds ago. Only I forgot. We both forgot. We both forgot after I asked that guy to leave. Again. I asked him before. I'm sure. Only we both forgot. And I am sure he wasn't there when I locked the door which mysteriously blew open and then he was there all of a sudden. This is really fucking weird, Mary. Really fucking weird.

MARY

Martha, have you been smoking again?

MARTHA

No!

MARY

Look, it doesn't matter.

(She checks the clock on the wall.)

It's almost twelve. We are closing up. Just ask him to leave.

MARTHA

Are you kidding? Me! I'm not going anywhere near him now.

MARY

Martha, I'm busy cleaning up. So either you can go confront your inner -- no, your "outer demons" -- or you can run the risk of unsightly dishpan hands.

MARTHA

That's not a fair choice!

MARY

I'm sure it's not the only unfair choice you will face tonight!

MARTHA

Fine! God. You know how to get me to do anything.

MARY

That's what older sisters are here for. Besides, when you talk to him, you will probably remember serving him, and all your paranoid worries will disappear. The brain works in mysterious ways, you know.

MARTHA

Wait a minute. This has happened before too! We've already had this exact same conversation. What the fuck is happening?

MARY

Go!

MARTHA

(MARTHA is dumbfounded, but eventually finds the courage to move towards FRED. MARY continues to clean.)

Alright, Mr. Camus-can-do, time to go. We're closing up.

FRED

Closing up? You close at twelve, right. Midnight?

MARTHA

(MARTHA tries to resist saying it again.)

Ah. Yeah. So.

(She is visibly annoyed when it finally escapes her lips.)

FRED

(He motions to the clock on the wall.) MARTHA physically acknowledges the clock has not yet moved.)

It's one minute to twelve. I've got one minute left --

MARTHA

Yeah I know. You've got one more minute of coffee and one more minute to finish your thought. But, hey, you appreciate the head's up.

(FRED notices and smiles at her.)

(MARTHA, without hesitation, notices one of the books.)

Hey, *Waiting For Godot*. I love that play. Are you a theatre major or something?

FRED

(Still smiling)

Sorry, I really need to get this idea down on paper. Don't worry --

MARTHA

Yeah, yeah. You will be done by midnight. Excuse me.

(MARTHA returns to where MARY is tidying up. FRED watches her go, then returns to his writing)

MARY

So, is he the ghost of Christmas future?

MARTHA

Possibly. He's still a dick. A total dick.

MARY

What do you mean?

MARTHA

Forget it.

MARY

Martha are you, OK?

MARTHA

I think so. I hope so. No. I know so.

MARY

Look, it doesn't matter.

(She checks the clock)

It's almost twelve. Give that guy a minute to finish his coffee and then tell him to leave.

MARTHA

I can hardly wait.

MARY

What do you mean?

MARTHA

Something is happening here and I don't know what it is. But I'm going to figure it out. Mr. Jones.

MARY

You have been working hard tonight. I'm not surprised your a little off kilter.

(She drops a damp cloth on the counter.)

Go wipe down some tables for a few minutes and then tell him to split.

MARTHA

Actually, I think the floor needs a bit of a sweep.

(MARTHA grabs a broom and starts sweeping, keeping an eye on the clock and on FRED, she starts singing / humming "Basketcase" by Green Day. When she is sure the clock is not moving, she sneaks up behind FRED. She winds up with the broom, getting ready to clobber him across the back of the head. Then, she notices MARY cleaning and thinks better of it. After some hesitation, she pokes him with the end of the broom handle.)

(FRED does not react. She pokes him again. This time he looks up from his work.)

FRED

Did you just poke me with a broom handle?

MARTHA

Yes. Who are you? What are you doing here?

FRED

I can't believe you poked me with the end of a broom handle. That's so awesome.

MARTHA

What the hell is happening here? What are you doing here?

FRED

I wish I had seen it. From behind. You must have looked ridiculous.

MARTHA

(She winds up to strike him with the broom.)

I will totally clock you, if you don't start giving me some straight answers.

FRED

Wait a minute.

(MARTHA hesitates.)

Of course, I can see it. What am I saying. Hold on.

(He picks up a thick, nondescript, and dog-eared book. He flips through it quickly, finds a page, and watches it a moment -- like a laptop monitor -- and then laughs.)

(MARTHA, bewildered, remains poised to swing.)

That's awesome. That's truly awesome. It was probably better to watch it live, as it happened, but, you know, it's still pretty awesome to watch -- even after the fact.

(He puts the book down.)

Who are you kidding? If you were going to hit me with that, you would have done it when I wasn't looking.

(MARTHA lowers the broom.)

OK, good. Now that we've had a chance to get to know each other, let's talk.

MARTHA

Who are you? What's happening?

FRED

Ok, Martha, you have every reason to find this unsettling. I respect that, but please, realize, I mean you no harm. In fact, I mean you good. A lot of good.

MARTHA

How do you know my name? What am I saying, of course, you know my name.

FRED

Exactly. It couldn't be any other way, right?

MARTHA

I guess not.

FRED

Good. I'm glad we agree on something.

MARTHA

Look, buddy. Either you start talking or I tell Mary to get the gun.

FRED

There's no gun, Martha. Not that it would hurt me, even if you had one.

MARTHA

A-ha! You are a ghost!

FRED

Not exactly. Sort of. I'm spirit.

MARTHA

Spirit? A spirit? Or spirit?

FRED

Technically both. At this level of abstraction the distinction kind of breaks down.

MARTHA

Right. So you are dead.

FRED

No, I'm alive. But not in your sense of alive. I mean, I'm alive, but I live outside time.

MARTHA

Ok. I think I've heard enough. I'm going to slowly back away from you, avoiding eye-contact, and talk to Mary. Please stay right there. No need to get up. Thanks.

FRED

Be my guest. You know where to find me.

MARTHA

Excuse me.

(MARTHA backs up to where MARY is tidying up. FRED watches her go, then returns to his writing)

MARY

So, is he the ghost of Christmas past?

MARTHA

What did you say?

MARY

What do you mean?

MARTHA

What do you mean, what do I mean?

MARY

Martha are you, OK?

MARTHA

Are you OK, Mary?

MARY

Look, it doesn't matter.

(She checks the clock)

It's almost twelve. Give that guy a minute to finish his coffee and then tell him to leave.

MARTHA

Mary! Is this happening? Is this really happening? Come on, snap out of it.

MARY

What do you mean?

MARTHA

I mean, you've already said that to me, like, three times. Isn't it obvious?

MARY

You have been working hard tonight. I'm not surprised your a little out of whack.

(She drops a damp cloth on the counter.)

Go wipe down some tables for a few minutes and then ask him to leave.

MARTHA

Sure thing, Mary. Sure thing.

(She does not take the cloth and walks over to FRED.)

Ok. What's happening? What's wrong with Mary?

FRED

Nothing is wrong with Mary. Only, I'm not here to talk with her. I'm here to talk with you.

MARTHA

Why does she keep saying the same thing.

FRED

She isn't. That's all you.

MARTHA

What?

FRED

It's kind of like a scratch in time. It's a metaphysical expression of your own doubts. About me. About what's happening. About what I am offering you. We actually started talking the first time you approached me.

MARTHA

Really?

FRED

Yes. You asked me to leave and I said I was here to talk to you. You were friendly at first but the whole "I'm spirit that lives outside of time" threw you for a bit of a loop. It's taking time for your brain to adjust. The repetitions you've been experiencing -- that's your brain adjusting to this new unimagined reality.

MARTHA

I can change the world -- what I experience -- with my mind?

FRED

Well, yes and no. Part of you can, part of you can't. Because you're talking with me, you are between the two worlds, between the parts of you that can and can't. That's why the replay for you is a bit choppy.

MARTHA

So what does Mary see? What is she experiencing right now?

FRED

Depending on what you decide, my best guess is she'll remember you having a quick friendly chat with a dawdling customer.

MARTHA

Quick? If we started talking when I first approached you, haven't we been talking for a while now.

FRED

Like I said, I live outside time. So long as we're having this conversation, you're also outside time. Check the clock.

(MARTHA looks. It still says  
one minute to twelve.)

Ta-dah! Welcome to my world.

MARTHA

I'm going to sit down. I need a moment. OK?

(She sits.)

Now, please don't say anything. This is important. Don't say anything. At all.

FRED

OK.

MARTHA

Sssh.

(She sits very still for a very long moment. Only the clinking of Mary's dishes is heard. Then, she blinks and lets out a deep breath.)

Ok. Now. Explain to me how it is that we're outside time.

FRED

Right. Let me think. Ok. In Catholicism, there is this notion that Mary, the mother of God, had to be free of sin in order to bear Jesus. One problem. All humans are born with original sin. That's why Jesus is born right. So he can grow up and die for our sins -- in particular, original sin. You know: the tree of knowledge and all that. So this is a problem right. So. What's the theological fix? How do we get a sin-free Mary and mother of God. Eureka! It is decided that Mary lives outside of time -- outside of the "human time" where original sin occurs -- and, for this reason, she is never stained with that sin. In fact, she is free from all sin. Oh. And she is also full of grace. Just full of it. You know, bursting with it. Hail Mary, and all that jazz. So, anyways. When she is conceived -- that is, immaculately conceived -- she is without sin. Later on, she ascends directly into heaven, without dying or any need for further last-judgment redemption, because she is one hundred per cent sin-free. She is inserted into our time sin-free and then returns to living outside of our time sin-free. Clean and simple. Just like Flynn. Only different.

MARTHA

Really? I always thought Jesus' conception -- you know inside a virgin -- was the Immaculate Conception.

FRED

Nah. Common misunderstanding. You wouldn't be the first person to make that mistake. The virgin birth -- totally different piece of dogma.

MARTHA

So, are you saying you were born outside of time?

FRED

No. But I live outside of time.

MARTHA

Is Mary with you?

FRED

What? No, no, no. That story was just for the purpose of illustration. Personally, I've got my own theories about Mary. I suspect she was one of us and the actual story got lost in translation.

MARTHA

There are more of you. Living outside of time.

FRED

No. Well, yes. Yes and no. There is only ever one of us outside of time at any one time but, over time, there have been heaps of us. And since we all live outside of time. We all kind of live here at the same time but not at the same time.

MARTHA

And that's why you're spirit and a spirit -- at the same time.

FRED

Exactly! You're a quick learner.

MARTHA

Sounds vaguely familiar. Like I've read it before.

FRED

That's entirely possible. This kind of stuff accidentally filters down into human time every now and again. You know: loose lips, incarnations of Krishna, and that sort of thing. Actually, now that I think about it. I'm sure you're read it before.

MARTHA

Really. Why do you say that?

FRED

Trust me. Call it a hunch.

MARTHA

Fair enough. I guess it's a little late in the game for me to stop taking you at your word. Ok, Mr. I-am-spirit-and-a-spirit-who-lives-outside-time, what do you with yourself out there. You know. How do you keep yourself busy. Outside. Time.

FRED

Ah. Now, that's easy to answer. I read, I write, I study.

MARTHA

You study? Marvelous. And what exactly do you study? Outside. Time.

FRED

(He picks up the nondescript book.)

This.

MARTHA

This. And what exactly is this?

FRED

It's probably easier if you take a look for yourself?

(He offers her the book. She hesitates.)

Go on. It won't hurt you. I promise.

(Using her thumb, MARTHA moves through the pages like a flip book. Her eyes fill with wonder and she reacts as if she is looking into a bright light.)

MARTHA

Oh my god. It's beautiful. It's so beautiful.

FRED

Pretty amazing, huh?

MARTHA

(She is visibly shaken, in a good way.)

Wow. That's quite the understatement. What is it?

FRED

It's everything. From start to finish. From finish to start. The whole history of everything.

MARTHA

Everything.

FRED

Yes! Every detail, every fact, every nuance. Everything. Any question you want answered. Any belief you want to test. It's all there. Everything.

MARTHA

How is that possible?

FRED

It's knowledge. It's absolute knowledge. Perfect, complete, unending knowledge. And when you read it, you will know how it's possible.

MARTHA

How did you get this? Who gave it to you? Why did he give it to you?

FRED

I have it because someone gave it to me. And she gave it to me because she thought I wanted it. And she thought I wanted it because she was ready to re-join time.

MARTHA

She? It was a she? Really?

FRED

The book always passes from a woman to a man and a man to a woman. Boy, girl; boy, girl.

MARTHA

Boy, girl; boy, girl.

FRED

That's right.

MARTHA

And you're a boy and I'm a girl.

FRED

Correct.

MARTHA

Oh my god. You're a boy and I'm a girl.

FRED

Still correct.

MARTHA

Oh my god. You're a boy and I'm a girl. You're here to offer me the book. The knowledge. Aren't you?

FRED

Bingo.

MARTHA

Because you think I want it.

FRED

Exactly.

MARTHA

Oh. My. Fucking. God.

FRED

Agreed.

MARTHA

Whoa. Whoa. Whoa. No agreed. No agreed. I didn't agree to anything. I was -- I was just emoting. I did not agree to anything. I did not agree. No agree! So, just hold your horses, mister. Hold your horses.

FRED

Sorry. It's just an expression of mine. Relax. Of course. You haven't agreed to anything. This isn't like the King's coin or anything. To accept the book, you really have to accept it. Genuinely, fully, completely. There are no tricks here.

MARTHA

Wait a minute! Why do you think I want it? What have I done? Why me?

FRED

Relax. Nothing. Look. It's not that complicated. There's a list. You're on it. And you're next. I checked your history, your background, your personality. You've got the intellectual curiosity, the active imagination, the wanderlust. So, I thought I'd give you a shot. It's not that big of a deal, really. Everyone faces this choice at some point in their lives.

MARTHA

Really?

FRED

Yep. Not everyone takes the book, but everyone who does is made better off by taking it.

MARTHA

Why? What happens?

FRED

(He brandishes the book.)

By studying this. By learning this. By knowing this. You come to know yourself.

MARTHA

I already know myself. Don't I?

FRED

There's knowing and there's knowing. You know, but you don't know.

MARTHA

And this book will help me know.

FRED

Not the book so much in itself. The book is a means to an end. Because it contains everything, because it is pure knowledge, it will allow you to know everything, and by learning and knowing that, you will come to know yourself.

MARTHA

Then what happens.

FRED

What?

MARTHA

What happens next. After I know myself.

FRED

Nothing. It's a *fait accompli*.

MARTHA

Something must come after.

FRED

No. Nothing comes after. I mean, there's no fireworks or anything, if that's what you mean. You come to know yourself. You take a moment. Then, you check the list, pass the book onto someone else, and re-join time somewhere along the stream.

MARTHA

Seems a little anti-climatic.

FRED

Yeah, well, when you get there, it won't seem that way.

MARTHA

So you're there, now. You know yourself?

FRED

Yes. Yes, I do.

MARTHA

And what's it like?

FRED

What's what like?

MARTHA

Knowing yourself.

FRED

Oh. It's nice.

MARTHA

Nice. That's it. Nice.

FRED

Oh. Well. There's more to it than that. I mean, I'm different but the only real difference is the knowledge I have of myself. And that's pretty different.

MARTHA

I don't get it.

FRED

Ok. Let me think. Ok, It's like this. It's like, if a reflection suddenly realized it wasn't a reflection but was in fact the thing causing the reflection. Everything's still the same but everything's dramatically different. From the shift in perspective.

MARTHA

The same but dramatically different. How is that possible?

FRED

It is. Trust me. And you'll appreciate it when you get there.

MARTHA

And how long does it take. To get there. To know yourself.

FRED

A long time. Although strictly speaking, we can't say a "long time" because I was living outside of time, at the time, but you know what I'm getting at.

MARTHA

Not really, but I will roll with you on this one. OK. It couldn't have been that long. You don't look very old.

FRED

Outside time, there's no aging. I'm exactly the age I was when I accepted the book even though I've already lived

forever. And yet, at the same time, I really haven't lived a single extra second.

MARTHA

Wow.

FRED

Wow, indeed.

MARTHA

(She sits still, processing for a moment.)

What's the catch? I mean, you said not everyone accepts the book and what you're saying sounds too good to be true -- not surprisingly. If I understand you properly, you've said I get to drop out of time, live an eternity of self-exploration, and then once I've figured out everything I need to figure out, I get to drop back into time like nothing has happened.

FRED

Not exactly.

MARTHA

Not exactly?

FRED

Yeah, this is usually the point where people start to second-guess their first instinct. See, you don't get to drop back into time like nothing has happened. You drop back into time somewhere along the stream -- more or less wherever the next person who takes the book happens to be.

MARTHA

So, my life now, my sister, the cafe, my friends?

FRED

Gone. Forever. For someone who takes the book -- this life, your life, the life you are living now and everyone in it. Gone. You can't ever come back.

MARTHA

Why not?

FRED

Well. Practically-speaking, because you're replaced by the person who gives you the book. But. Metaphysically speaking, think about it. Even if you could re-take your place in history, it won't be you who returns. You're going to be a completely different person after this journey. Your story and your previous story will have diverged. Forever.

MARTHA

Oh.

FRED

But the reward. Well. The reward. It's incomprehensible.

MARTHA

In exchange for my life I think I'd like a reward that's a little more tangible than "incomprehensible."

FRED

Hey, I understand where you're coming from. Honestly, this is the point in the conversation where most people decline the offer.

MARTHA

I'm not the first person you've asked.

FRED

Third time's the charm.

MARTHA

What happens if I say no?

FRED

Nothing. You go back to your life, I carry on down the list, and you'll probably remember this conversation as a kind of dream.

MARTHA

There's no consequence for saying no.

FRED

None whatsoever -- other than the missed opportunity, of course.

MARTHA

If I turn down the book, does that mean I will never really know myself?

FRED

No, not necessarily. Some folks figure it out on their own. By other means. Without the book. There are many paths to the one true God and all that.

MARTHA

Right.

(She sits very still, while she processes this.)

And when you were offered the book, when you heard the catch, what did you do?

FRED

I said, yes. I didn't hesitate for a second.

MARTHA

Regrets?

FRED

None. Not even a few.

MARTHA

If it's so good out there, why don't you carry on? Outside time. You know, forever.

FRED

Good question. I could quite happily be out here forever but I've learned everything I need to know and I'd like to give someone else the chance to do it too.

MARTHA

But if you come back, doesn't that mean you'll die. Age and die.

FRED

Yeah. But I'm cool with that now. Before, no. Now, yes.

MARTHA

Is that because you know there is a heaven and all that?

FRED

I can't answer that for you. You'll have to decide for yourself. With or without the book.

MARTHA

(She sits quietly, processing.)

Can I talk with Mary?

FRED

Of course. I can't see any reason why not. Only. I should warn you, given the situation, I suggest you go about it -- allegorically.

MARY

Ah. Yeah. Sure.

(MARTHA returns to where MARY is tidying up. FRED watches her go, then returns to his writing)

MARY

So, is he the ghost of Christmas present?

MARTHA

More like Jacob Marley.

MARY

What do you mean?

MARTHA

Forget it. I need to ask you something.

MARY

Martha are you, OK?

MARTHA

Yeah.

MARY

Look, it doesn't matter.

(She checks the clock)

It's almost twelve. Give that guy a minute to finish his coffee and then tell him to leave.

MARTHA

I will, Mary, I will. But first. Can I ask you something?

MARY

(She hesitates, as if this was unexpected.)

Sure, of course. What's up?

MARTHA

An opportunity has come up. For me. Overseas. You know that teaching job I applied for. Well. I go it. And it's a good contract. Great even. I mean I know I haven't been back very long and you don't really want me to go traveling again, but it's a really great opportunity. You know? To go find myself. And all that bullshit.

MARY

Now I get it. Now I know why you've been off-kilter all night. No wonder you've been working so hard. Stewing away on this. Worrying about what I will say.

MARTHA

Yeah. I guess.

MARY

Martha, of course, I want you to go. You're the most important person in the world to me and I want you to do whatever will make you happy. I'll be here when you get back.

MARTHA

But I'll be gone so long. It's a really long contract. So much will happen to me -- to you -- while we're apart. And when I get back, I won't be the same person. You won't be the same person. Our timelines, our histories will have diverged.

MARY

Don't be silly, Martha. We're sisters. You and I, we'll always be sisters. Together. No matter what. You can always hang your hat on that. We can always hang both our hats on that. Right?

MARTHA

Why don't you travel? Why don't you see the world, instead of running this crappy little coffee shop?

MARY

Hey now! I love this coffee shop. You love it too.

MARTHA

Sorry. You know what I mean. Maybe, it would feel less like I was running away, if you wanted to travel and explore the world too. Why don't you go somewhere for a while and I'll stay here and watch things.

MARY

Because you'd burn the place down in ten minutes. Or lose it in a poker game. Or sell it to feed the hungry. No, Martha, this is where I want to be. Seriously. It's not even tempting. Your kind of life. I don't want or need travel. I've never had that itch you have. That scratch. That always seems to be somewhere under your heels. Driving you forward. To the next big adventure. The next big exploration. The next big discovery. It's not me. You know I only went to university because Mom made such a big deal about how she had worked her whole life so her girls could go to university. I was so happy to take over this place when she couldn't handle it any more. So happy knowing that I could help you go to school, go traveling, go exploring. So happy to help you fly. So happy to be the net you can always safely fall into.

MARTHA

What if there's more, Mary? No, not what if. There is more. I've already had a glimpse of it. I've seen it. So much more than all this.

MARY

Even if there is more, I don't need it. I don't even want it. This is what I want. This place, these walls, the beans, the smell of the coffee roasting, the customer's faces -- I mean, all of it -- it's me, it's who I am, it's who I want to be. I don't need some magical mystical carpet ride to figure that out.

MARTHA

So why do I then? Why do I always have to go running off into the horizon, Mary? Am I broken? Fucked up? I don't even know what I'm looking for?

MARY

Why do you need to know what you're looking for?

MARTHA

Because. Because. Fuck, Mary, I'm scared. I'm scared, maybe, I'm too much like Dad. Always running. Never staying put. Leaving everyone and everything behind.

MARY

No worries there, Martha. Dad is a jerk and you're not a jerk. Anyways, how could you be like him. He was never around long enough to affect either of us.

MARTHA

I don't know. Maybe, that's why I keep running. Keep moving for movement's sake. Because I'm like him. Or want to be like him. Or want to find whatever it was he was looking for.

MARY

It's possible, I guess. Anything is possible when you start psychoanalyzing yourself. Personally, I think you're the same curious little kid you've always been. Martha, you and I, we're the lucky ones. Mom didn't try to beat us into any kind of mold and she made sure that whenever we were ready to take on the world, we'd have everything we need to do it -- like a sister we can always count on.

MARTHA

I don't know, Mary. I'm scared. I'm scared I'll always be rootless. Forever wandering. Always restless.

MARY

If that's what you want, that's OK. And if it's not what you want, then you can always come home and help me do the dishes. I'm not going anywhere. This cafe isn't going anywhere. No matter how far you restlessly wander, you'll never be rootless. Because I'll always be right here. You'll always have me. Remember. Whatever you choose, so long as it's what you want -- really want -- it'll be fine. I made my choice. I may change my mind, but in the

meantime, this is what I want. You get to make that choice too. That's what Mom wanted. It's what I want.

MARTHA

Mary, I love you.

MARY

I love you too, Martha.

(She drops a damp cloth on the counter.)

Now. Go wipe down some tables. And then, tell our straggler it's time to go home.

MARTHA

(She does not take the cloth and goes and sits with FRED.)

Ok, I want it. I want the book. I really want it.

FRED

You won't regret it.

MARTHA

How do you know?

FRED

I've read it, remember. I made the same choice. It wasn't easy but I have no regrets.

MARTHA

So what do I do?

FRED.

I give you the book, you accept the book, and things carry on from there.

MARTHA

What about you?

FRED

I take over where you left off. I reenter the stream, and start swimming again.

MARTHA

And Mary? My friends? My life?

FRED

They won't notice a difference.

MARTHA

Harsh.

FRED

Yeah. Definitely. But the reward is great. I promise you.

(Fred offers the book.)

You know, it's not too late to say no. There's always another person on the list.

MARTHA

You said everyone faces this choice at some point in her life. Did Mary face it? What did she choose?

FRED

Once the book is yours, you can find out for yourself. Oh!

(He indicates all the books,  
pens, etc. on the table.)

And don't forget to take all this crap. It's yours now. It'll probably confuse the shit out of me when I come to. Are you ready? Yes or no?

MARTHA

Yes.

(FRED tosses the book to her.  
She is shocked and treats it as  
if it were fragile. )

FRED

Don't worry. It's been through a lot worse than that. You'll put it through a lot worse than that. OK. Wait. Just a second. Let me sit down.

(He sits, in his original seat,  
with his back to her.)

OK. Whenever you're ready. Go for it.

MARTHA

What do I do?

FRED

Accept the book. Make it yours.

MARTHA

How? Do I need to say something special?

FRED

That's up to you. Say whatever it takes for you to make the book really yours. That's all that matters.

MARTHA

(She is still, while she processes this.)

I will remember. I will always remember.

(FRED and MARY freeze. MARTHA notices immediately. She looks to MARY and then quickly back to FRED. She hastily puts all the notebooks, books, pens, papers, etc., into the backpack.)

(She goes to the door quickly, hesitates, and then looks back.)

(She goes to MARY and studies her for a moment. Then, she has an idea, flips through the book, finds what she is looking for, smiles, and looks up at MARY. She nods, turns on her heel, walks out, and slams the door behind her.)

(When the door slams, FRED and MARY unfreeze. FRED is a little disorientated but not too much. MARY looks from the door to

FRED, she checks the clock, it  
now shows midnight.)

MARY

Hey Fred, did you lock the door? It's midnight. Closing  
time.

FRED

What? Sorry.

MARY

Never mind. I'll get it. While you pull yourself out of the  
clouds. Again.

(She crosses and locks the  
door.)

Fred, you've been a bit distracted the whole night. Is  
there anything wrong?

FRED

Ah, no, it's nothing. I don't know. I was kind of lost in  
something there. You know, like an idea. For a play. Or a  
story or something. I don't know. Shit. I think it's gone.

MARY

I'm sorry.

FRED

On no. It wasn't you. It was gone before you spoke. You  
know, like how an itch disappears, when you stop thinking  
about it.

MARY

I wouldn't know. I always scratch.

FRED

Ah well. Whatever it was, it'll come back to me if it's  
important.

MARY

(She returns to the counter and  
the dishes.)

Who was that girl you were talking to?

FRED

What girl?

MARY

What girl? The one who just left. Who slammed the door. Why so coy, Fred? Do you have a crush on her?

FRED

No. Of course, not. I barely know her. We just met.

MARY

Oh, come on Fred. I'm your big sister. I know what you're like when you like a girl. I see it before you do.

FRED

What? You think I like that girl?

MARY

Think? I know you like that girl. She's exactly the kind of girl you go for.

FRED

Oh really. Is that so? Well, please enlighten me oh wise older sister. What kind of girl do I go for?

MARY

Oh you know the type. The kind that hangs out here all the time. In their perfect dark clothing, and their perfect dark make-up, and their perfectly coordinated and highly fashionable "I'm an artistic intellectual who is beyond fashion" outfits. Honestly, I think it is the only reason you moved back home.

FRED

Excuse me.

(He moves towards the counter.)

I came home to be with my big sister, my family, and my friends. Because I was away for too long.

MARY

Whatever. You came back home for the cafe girls doodling with their fountain pens, pretending to be philosopher-queen-poets or whatever it is they're doing. If it wasn't for them, you'd still be on the other side of the planet.

FRED

Oh, Mary, my dear, you think so very little of me. You know perfectly well I only came back because I ran out of money and when the hell have you ever seen anyone in here with a fountain pen?

MARY

You know what I mean. You really should pay more attention to them too. You don't see the ga-ga eyes they make at you when you aren't looking, with your head up in the clouds. It's disgusting.

FRED

My head is not in the clouds. It's up my ass. It's a very important distinction.

MARY

Well, thankfully, you still have good taste in women. I think she kinda looks like me. We could be sisters practically. Her name's Martha, right?

FRED

(He is noticeably affected by this.)

No.

(He has a hard time remembering her name.)

It's Sophia.

MARY

Really. I thought for sure her name was Martha. We talked earlier. Oh well. Nice girl. They all kind of look the same time to me now. Hey, what's wrong? It looks like you've seen a ghost.

FRED

Ghost?

(He is visibly affected again.)

Whoa. Oh, wow. I've just had the biggest deja vu ever. Wow. Do you ever get those?

MARY

Sure. Sometimes.

FRED

Wow. So strong. Like really strong. Like we've totally had this conversation before. Trippy.

MARY

You have been working hard. I'm not surprised you're a little out of sorts. The jet-lag probably hasn't even worn off yet.

(She drops a damp cloth on the counter.)

I've got a few more dishes to clean. Why don't you go wipe down some tables for a few minutes before we leave.

FRED

Fine.

(He looks at the cloth in his hand, somewhat puzzled by it.)

Actually. You know what. Why don't you let me do the dishes?

MARY

What are you talking about? You hate doing the dishes. I don't think you've ever done the dishes in your entire life. Do you even know how?

FRED

Hey, I've learned a few things in my time away.

MARY.

Well, bless my lucky stars, I didn't know it was my birthday.

FRED

It isn't. But it is midnight. Which means: it's a new day.

(He takes her spot at the counter.)

MARY

Oooo, symbolism. I like, I like.

(Mary sits, after a moment,  
their eyes meet. They hold each  
other's gaze, while dishes  
clink and clatter.)

I'm glad you're back, Fred.

FRED

Mary, my dearest love, I'm glad to be back.

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF PLAY)