

THE HOURGLASS

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FORWARD

A Note on Science

The brain is a chemical battery producing billions of electrical charges each second. Our thoughts, our dreams, our perceptions and our memories consist of countless millions of these “sparks.” Some of these sparks perceive the moment of existence we call the present. The present lasts a billion billionth of a second and then is gone. Other sparks in the brain store that experience as a memory.

Memories of past events are not real. We change them. They are altered by other experiences, fluctuations of electricity in the brain, and sometimes because we want to. Everyone has said, “I thought that’s what happened,” or “That’s not how I remember it.” A memory of a past event is not the event itself. The event is fixed as it occurred, the memory of it may be different from what really happened.

Every event in the future is also going to occur. It is fixed, and will happen just as an event in the past is fixed as it happened. We think we can determine the future, but in reality what ever is going to happen will happen. If a man goes to school, improves his skills and gets a better job, that sequence of events can’t be changed. If he chooses to not attend school and stays in the same job, *that* is the sequence of future events and it will not change. Every event that *will* occur is as fixed and unalterable as every event that *has* occurred.

Our brains are designed to remember the past and not the future. This may be because prehistoric forms of life survived by learning more from their mistakes than from their foresight. Some people, however, may have brains that can remember future events to some degree. We call them “psychics.”

If a man’s memory process could be inverted, he would remember the future instead of remembering the past.

A Note on Madness

Chris Markham in *The Hourglass* is a man who remembers the future rather than remembering the past. This “inversion” has occurred a few hours before the events of the play begin, and he struggles to understand it. The character of Old John was similarly inverted many years in the past. He has learned to understand what has happened by interpreting what will happen.

The years of being changed have taken their toll on Old John. Many of his comments are made to a person who is not there -- something we all do when we “talk to ourselves.” He also has a form of dyslexia, and he will use a word or phrase other than the one needed to convey his thoughts. There is also a mental condition called “echolalia,” where a person will repeat words or phrases spoken to them, and Old John is also afflicted with that. In moments of extreme emotion, Old John’s various afflictions grow more pronounced. Music, with its mathematical precision of rhythm and harmonic interval, can help his order his thoughts and bring him peace and lucidity.

A Note on Music

Music is very important in this play, not only as a medium of sanity for the character of Old John, but also as a means of nonverbal communication. The musical cues in the text are suggestions. Existing music can be used; even better would be finding a composer to create original music.

A Note on Time and Place

During the “space boom” of the 1960’s, West Highway 50 in Central Florida was the main route between Orlando and the Kennedy Space Center. After Disney World opened in 1974, new highways were constructed and West 50 became far less used. There are still stretches of West 50 today where there is nothing but raw pine forest and Florida jungle, occasionally broken by a small community, a junkyard or an old country store. It is here in this road out of time where I have placed Pickle’s Diner. It is better that a specific date is not established for this play, rather, the events exists in an imaginary world with a time of its own.

About 40 miles north of this location is the actual town of Cassadega, Florida. Many years ago a group of psychics and fortunetellers from the Ringling Brother’s Circus bought retirement homes in Cassadega, and today their descendants and disciples still live there.

It is important that the diner and its environs be portrayed realistically. There is much in this play that will be difficult for an audience to understand, especially the popular notion that one can change the future by “time-traveling” into the past. To have the physical set for this play grounded in realism will help the audience grasp the concepts

THE HOURGLASS

CHARACTERS:

Molly Logan (20's)

Chris Markham (late 20's, early 30's)

Pickles Beason (30's or older)

Old John (over 70)

Bobby Logan (20's)

SCENE:

Pickle's Diner, an old country restaurant "halfway between nothing and nowhere." In the center stands an old jukebox -- a central metaphor for the music that dominates Old John's life. Above the diner is an apartment consisting of a single, dingy room.

The diner should be portrayed realistically, to give validity to the fantastic nature of the story.

TIME:

Tonight. 2 AM.

PROLOGUE

Darkness.

In the darkness, eerie MUSIC begins, discordant and unworldly. Yet something in the music is orderly, with the precision of a Bach prelude.

CHIRS MARKHAM enters. He has an air of intelligence, but is disheveled and confused.

OLD JOHN appears in shadow.

We are not in the diner, although it can be seen in the shadows. We are in Chris Markham's mind, and Old John is communicating with him telepathically.

OLD JOHN

I have waited so long for you to come.

CHRIS

I know you, but I don't know you.

OLD JOHN

Remember what is to be and you will see me there.

CHRIS

This place, where we are...

OLD JOHN

Physically we are very far apart. You must come to me. I cannot come to you.

CHRIS

Why can't you come to me?

OLD JOHN

Because I don't. Everything that will happen, happens as you remember it.

CHRIS

Don't speak to me in riddles.

OLD JOHN

I speak to you as plainly as I can.

CHRIS

Then tell me how to find you.

OLD JOHN

If I tell you, you will not remember it. You no longer remember things that have happened. You are instead remembering the future. Look at the memories in your mind. They tell you what will be.

CHRIS

What I see I don't understand. Images come rushing at me. Things happen then disappear.

OLD JOHN

Concentrate. See me there, where I am.

CHRIS

I remember a diner. I met you in a diner. I met you, but it hasn't happened yet. My God...

OLD JOHN

No use calling for Him. We are still within His natural order, but outside the way He would have us know it.

CHRIS

It hasn't happened yet. I remember meeting you but it hasn't happened yet.

OLD JOHN

You remember the future even as you forget the past.

CHRIS

How did this happen to me?

OLD JOHN

To us. We have been changed, like magnetic poles switched from positive to negative.

CHRIS

My job, as a scientist. I conducted experiments in atomic polarity. We tried to create particles of anti-matter, suspended in an electromagnetic field.

OLD JOHN

I never understood what happened to me. I was only a soldier, a lowly volunteer. For more than sixty years I have seen the future coming at me in dream-like fragments. The images rush toward me, like a train speeding down a tunnel. I have lived with it, and to understand the past, after a fashion.

Old John grows weary.

OLD JOHN (cont)

Everyone thought I had gone mad. No one understood. But now you have come. Now I won't be so alone any more. I have been so terribly alone.

Old John drops further into shadow.

CHRIS

Wait. You can't leave me. I don't understand.

OLD JOHN

I am not here. Come to me.

CHRIS

How do I find you?

OLD JOHN

Follow the images in your mind. Seek the place where it will all be.

CHRIS

I can hardly hear you.

OLD JOHN

The music can only do so much.

CHRIS

Wait...

OLD JOHN

Look elsewhere in your mind, your memory of what is to come.

CHRIS

Yes. I see you, in a diner with two women.

OLD JOHN

Yes.

CHRIS

The girl... Molly. Oh, no. Good Christ in heaven.

OLD JOHN

Come to me.

Old John exits.

CHRIS

I have to stop her. I have to stop her before it's too late.

Chris exits.

The MUSIC changes, transforming to a recognizable melody.

END PROLOGUE

ACT ONE

LIGHTS RISE on the diner. The MUSIC is coming from the jukebox, a mournful country ballad of lost love.

OLD JOHN sits in a booth, sprawled asleep or unconscious.

PICKLES BEASON enters with a ladder, and removes a dirty filter from and air conditioner.

MOLLY LOGAN enters carrying a clean filter.

PICKLES
Black as death.

MOLLY
Give it to me.

PICKLES
Haven't been up here since I took over this place. Don't know how long it was before then.

MOLLY
Here.

PICKLES
Hold the ladder, I'll put her in. *(pause)* Your song's done.

MOLLY
I've heard it enough for now.

PICKLES
Only four times tonight.

MOLLY
Three.

PICKLES
Maybe you're finally coming to your senses.

Suddenly Old John snaps awake.

OLD JOHN

Ah! Tell no one. Loose lips sink ships.

MOLLY

Pickles...

PICKLES

Oh, he's harmless.

MOLLY

He looks strong for an old guy.

PICKLES

He comes in once a week or so, long as I can remember. Talks to himself all night long, but never hurt nobody. Just one of them old boys.

Old John bangs his coffee mug on the table.

MOLLY

He's making a racket.

PICKLES

He wants a refill.

MOLLY

I can get it.

PICKLES

No you don't. Not while I am up here swinging in the wind.

MOLLY

He keeps banging.

PICKLES

Let him bang. You hold the ladder. *(to Old John)* And you! Hold your pee.

OLD JOHN

He comes. A great night. A great night indeed.

Old John rises, crosses and speaks directly to Molly.

OLD JOHN (cont)

He comes for you, too.

MOLLY

That's it. I'm out of here.

PICKLES

Come back here. Wait 'till I get down off this ladder. Molly!

Molly comes back and holds the ladder, eyeing Old John cautiously. Pickles descends.

MOLLY

I am going to find another job tomorrow.

PICKLES

Don't pay him no mind. He won't hurt you.

MOLLY

I'm not afraid of him. He's the only one who's been in here all night.

PICKLES

Just a slow week. It'll pick up by and by.

MOLLY

When you sell it I won't have a job at all.

PICKLES

Usually takes two, three months for these things to happen.

Pickles pour Old John coffee.

PICKLES (cont)

There. Now sit and hush.

MOLLY

A friend of mine had this feed and saddle place in Kissemmee. Somebody bought it to build a motel, and in one month they had it torn down to the ground. One month. So much can change so fast.

PICKLES

I know that. Over on the other side of town, Highway 436 used to be a two-lane road through an orange grove. Now it's eight lanes and a mall. But out here, nobody wants this. I've had this place on the market for years and years.

MOLLY

Somebody wants it now.

PICKLES

Hallelujah. Maybe I finally can sell, and all my dreams will come true. Looky here.

Pickles hands Molly a photograph.

MOLLY

Oh, wow.

PICKLES

Had my eye on this for years. Sleeps four, with a kitchen and a bathroom. Take it anywhere, hook it up to an outlet and water, and I got my home on the road. Gas mileage sucks, but what the hell.

MOLLY

Where would you go?

PICKLES

California's my first stop. Figure to take a month or so, see New Orleans, Texas, the Grand Canyon. Then lie in the sun and eat oranges.

MOLLY

We have oranges here.

PICKLES

The oranges out there are any different. They wear little sunglasses and have agents. Maybe you should come with me.

MOLLY

I don't think so.

PICKLES

Give me a hand. I'll do these watcha callem's next.

Molly and Pickles move the ladder. Pickles resumes cleaning.

MOLLY

Bobby and I were supposed to go to California.

PICKLES

Go without him.

MOLLY

He wanted to buy a boat and sail through the Panama Canal. Then on to California and Hawaii.

PICKLES

It never would have happened. That's the way men are made. They spin all sorts of wild dreams and get you caught up in them like a spider. Then when they got you, they don't do nothing. Don't care about nothing but their urges. It's in their genes.

MOLLY

Not all men are like that.

PICKLES

(laughs) After what you been through, you can say that?

MOLLY

Bobby's not all bad.

PICKLES

Nature played us a dirty trick. Right down there in our D-N-A women all got a program, just like a computer. It makes us think this next guy's gonna stick around awhile. So we trust them, and they do their thing and they go their way. And we get stuck with the baby and all alone. If it wasn't for that program in our D-N-A, we wouldn't have nothing to do with them.

MOLLY

You've let a few bad apples spoil it for you.

PICKLES

I've had the whole damn barrel, right down to where Lincoln found his law books.

Old John bangs his mug again.

OLD JOHN

A field. An electromagnetic field.

PICKLES

All right. I'm coming.

OLD JOHN

My job was to measure the rads in the field.

MOLLY

He's a strange old bird.

PICKLES

Always pays in cash, and always leaves a tip. Something in his mind is working, it just ain't working right. Hey, old John. How'd you like the meatloaf?

OLD JOHN

They called them mushrooms, but they were huge and frightening.

PICKLES

I don't put mushrooms in the meatloaf.

OLD JOHN

No, they were clouds.

PICKLES

(to Molly) He can go on like that...

OLD JOHN

Clouds of death.

PICKLES

Go on like that sundown to sunup.

OLD JOHN

Death in New Mexico. Death in the desert.

PICKLES

There ain't nothing wrong with my dessert.

OLD JOHN

The purple sage isn't for cowboys anymore.

MOLLY

In ancient times people thought that madmen could see the future.

PICKLES

Where'd you hear that?

MOLLY

In school.

PICKLES

I hated school. Skipped out more than I stayed.

MOLLY

I never made less than a B.

PICKLES

Really. You ought to go back, now that the scum is out of your life.

MOLLY

He's not scum.

PICKLES

What ever you say.

MOLLY

It just didn't work out, that's all.

PICKLES

He stuck you with a baby and dumped you like a load of dirt.

MOLLY

I am not stuck with a baby. I love Ashley and Bobby loves her, too.

PICKLES

If he loved her so much he'd be a proper father to that little girl. (*indicating a cleaning bucket*) This water's filthy. Dump her out and get some fresh.

MOLLY

Where's the soap?

PICKLES

Under the sink to the left.

Molly exits.

OLD JOHN

Darkness drops into the saddle like an inky gunslinger.

Old John pulls out a harmonica and plays a mournful song.

PICKLES

Hey, he must like you, Molly. He's playing you a tune.

Molly renters putting on a jacket.

MOLLY

I'm sorry, Pickles. I hate doing this to you, but I have to quit.

PICKLES

Molly, I'm telling you, it's just a slow week.

MOLLY

I need to get a good night's sleep and look for a job in the morning.

PICKLES

When things pick up at the Martin plant, they'll put on two shifts. We'll be packed with production line cowboys wanting breakfast.

MOLLY

You don't even know when that's going to be. I can't wait around for then.

PICKLES

Just stay until I can find somebody else.

MOLLY

As crazy as he is, you could have let me wait on him.

PICKLES

It's Old John. I'm the only one who understands him.

MOLLY

Ashley broke her tooth on the playground and I don't know how I'm going to pay the dentist bill.

PICKLES

Get your husband to pay for that.

MOLLY

He sends what he can.

PICKLES

When you get your divorce, be sure he pays alimony and child support.

MOLLY

Bobby works construction. You know how that is.

PICKLES

It ain't an excuse to leave your wife and ignore your child.

MOLLY

He doesn't ignore her. He cares about her very much. Look.

Molly produces a picture.

OLD JOHN

I had a mother and a sister, once. The hazardous duty pay was for them.

MOLLY

That's not a man who ignores his daughter.

PICKLES

How old is she?

MOLLY

Two and a half now.

PICKLES

They sure are cute at that age. I wish I had seen my little girl then.

MOLLY

I didn't know you had a baby.

PICKLES

Had to give her up. Ain't seen her since.

MOLLY

I'm sorry.

PICKLES

At sixteen, I didn't have nobody or no place to go.

MOLLY

When Bobby moved out I felt the same way.

PICKLES

Ba-bing and goodbye.

MOLLY

Pickles, stop it. I'm the one who screwed up.

PICKLES

How did you screw up?

Molly heads for the door.

MOLLY

I've got to find a good job, something I can count on.

PICKLES

Molly, my night cook was a drunk. I had to fire him. As soon as I can replace him, I'll put you on the day shift and I'll wait tables nights.

MOLLY

When will that be?

PICKLES

Don't know. It's tough to find people to work out here, halfway between nothing and nowhere.

OLD JOHN

Between Saturn and the dark side of the moon.

PICKLES

You can make good money on the weekends, if you want to work that. Stay, please, just through tonight. I'll make you breakfast, anything you want. You hungry?

MOLLY

You have to stop bad-mouthing Bobby.

PICKLES

Pancakes, with blueberries. I know you like that.

MOLLY

Promise me. Not another word.

PICKLES

Cross my heart.

MOLLY

Eggs, over easy. With the little sausages.

Pickles exits to the kitchen. Molly pours herself a cup of coffee.

MOLLY (cont)

So tell me, Old John. Am I ever getting out of this mess?

OLD JOHN

Signs and portends. Planets moving into alignment.

MOLLY

Can madmen really see the future?

OLD JOHN

As the past has always been, the future shall always be.

MOLLY

Gaze into your crystal ball. Tell me what's going to happen to me.

OLD JOHN

Out there I see black holes, from which neither light, nor matter, nor gravity can escape.

MOLLY

That's my life, a black hole. I thought Bobby and I would be together forever.

OLD JOHN

They pull everything in. No escape. No escape.

MOLLY

After Ashley came I just didn't have time for him.

OLD JOHN

The clockwork of the universe ceases to have meaning.

MOLLY

All I ever wanted was someone to love me, someone I could count on to always be there.

OLD JOHN

There is not time enough for love. You must make time. Grasp it as you can.

MOLLY

Oh, what's the use? I'm a woman without a husband, in a diner without a customer, talking to a village idiot without a village.

OLD JOHN

Let me show you something.

Old John reaches into a backpack beside him and pulls out an ornate hourglass.

MOLLY

Oh, that's beautiful.

OLD JOHN

This is a life, self-contained and immaculate. Each grain of sand inside is a moment of that life. This is the Future, this the Past. The center is the Now. As each moment travels from the Future into the Past, it must pass through the Now. It passes with the speed of light, then it is done. The moment does not exist any more. It is only Memory, and Memory isn't real. *(pause)* A man is coming who remembers the moments of the Future and not the Past.

MOLLY

He sees the future?

OLD JOHN

No, he remembers it.

MOLLY

I don't see the difference.

OLD JOHN

Memories aren't real. We change them to suit our fancy. We change them to live with the past as we think it should have been. This is how he knows the future.

MOLLY

I had my fortune told once. Nothing happened like she said it would.

OLD JOHN

Each moment is. As each moment that was cannot be changed, the moments to be cannot be changed.

MOLLY

People change their future all the time.

OLD JOHN

No! They change their plans. The future will be and you can't change it. Each grain of sand falls and affects the next to follow. There is no way to change the way they fall.

Old John turns the hourglass over and the sand begins to run through.

OLD JOHN (cont)

He is here.

The bell over the door rings as CHRIS MARKHAM enters. He looks confused and disheveled as before.