



once removed

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"How insignificant we are, with our pigmy little world! -- an atom glinting with uncounted myriads of other atom worlds in a broad shaft of light streaming from God's countenance -- & yet prating complacently of our speck as the Great World...Did Christ live 33 years in each of the millions and millions of worlds that hold their majestic courses above our heads? Or was our small globe favored one of all? Does one apple in a vast orchard think as much of itself as we do?...Verily, what is Man, that he should be considered of God?"

Mark Twain
8 January 1870

"It is often argued that religion is valuable because it makes men good, but even if this were true it would not be a proof that religion is true. That would be an extension of pragmatism beyond endurance. Santa Claus makes children good in precisely the same way, and yet no one would argue seriously that the fact proves his existence."

H.L. Mencken

T H E P L A Y E R S :

PRESIDENT (DAVID), 47

FIRST, 60

AIDE (TOM), 24

SECOND, 24

TELEVISION MONITOR, large as possible, featuring:

FEMALE NEWSCASTER (REBECCA), 36

MALE NEWSCASTER (ALAN), 39

MALE NEWSCASTER #2 (WILL), 38

MALE NEWSCASTER #3 (STEVE), 38

FEMALE NEWSCASTER #2 (JENNIFER WALKER), 31

MALE NEWSCASTER #4 (KEITH), 37

FEMALE NEWSCASTER #3 (KATHLEEN), 35

With gratitude and apologies to S.L.C. and H.L.M.

ACT I SCENE 1

DARKNESS. We see and hear the following material on TELEVISION MONITOR, upstage left or wherever most appropriate. TELEVISION MONITOR is in every scene in the play, and is never moved nor acknowledged.

FEMALE NEWSCASTER

The numbers are growing. Crowds were estimated near 25,000 yesterday in Rome, Brussels, and Madrid; today it was 50,000 people at a candlelight ceremony in New York's Central Park. The mysterious light briefly present in the Washington sky has been verified now both by astronomers and some fortunate amateur photographers; scientists have pinpointed, to within one one-hundredth of a degree, its location having been precisely over the White House itself.

(MORE)

FEMALE NEWSCASTER (cont'd)

People are coming together to both demand information and reassure one another that whatever comes of the next few days, we suddenly find ourselves united as never before, if only by a fear of the unknown. What's most caught your eye, Alan?

MALE NEWSCASTER

The streets...I've never seen anything like it, and it's apparently true around the world, Rebecca. The streets of cities everywhere are empty, as humanity gathers around hundreds of millions of televisions, waiting to learn the truth of what began as an absurd rumor, but quickly exploded into the news event of this or any other century. Scientists today also noted that the brief but remarkably intense light present over the White House could centuries ago have been visible for miles, but was muted somewhat by our more illuminated world. We've been asked not to speculate, and I know we in the media have done an end run around that governmental request by speculating on the speculation of others, but I'd like to think the media has performed a service these past days, providing an outlet that...

MALE NEWSCASTER reacts to voice in his earpiece, covering his ear with his hand.

MALE NEWSCASTER (cont'd)
(quickly)

But right now, the first definitive words are about to be delivered. We take you now to the White House.

LIGHTS RISE suddenly on a Presidential news conference. *PRESIDENT* begins speaking immediately, addressing the audience as he would a camera. This is seen live on the now silent monitor as well, interspersed with images of individuals and crowds around the world quietly staring at other monitors.

PRESIDENT
(tired, but determined)

My fellow Americans...and citizens of the nations of the world...If what I am about to say does not sound like a Presidential address, it is because I am not delivering a speech. I am instead going to relate to you in my own words the events of the past hours...hours in which there has been little sleep nor time for rest amongst those of us charged with representing the...billions of human beings viewing this broadcast.

We abruptly find ourselves in an unprecedented time in human history. The rumors are, to no small degree, true. A group of beings not of our shared origin, the planet Earth, have chosen to make themselves known to us. I know these past days have been wild with rumor and speculation, so let me first provide the answer to probably...well, probably the most widely discussed aspect of our Guests. They have made it clear from our first encounter, and have willingly allowed tests which prove this fact, that our Guests are, biologically and in physical appearance, as human as the person nearest you now. They are simply part of a more advanced human civilization. Their sudden presence obviously begs another question: that of why they are here.

PRESIDENT pauses for a moment, one last time considering the ramifications of what he will say.

PRESIDENT (cont'd)

I find myself holding a Pandora's box, of sorts, and I frankly have not had time to make up my mind as to the wisest path on which to proceed. I can tell you I firmly believe that absolutely no harm nor ill will is meant from or by our...from the men with whom I have met. In fact, and I say this bluntly and honestly in order to reassure anyone for whom what I have said so far has failed to reach -- these Guests to our world are essentially here to view the results of an experiment, one born of what I believe to be benign intent, and from which a large part of us have...actually found some comfort. The place I find myself now is...

PRESIDENT speaks more slowly, obviously searching for the perfect words, and also obviously carrying a heavy burden.

PRESIDENT (cont'd)

...potentially disallowing the reason behind that comfort for an enormous group of people...my people, as it happens. I hope you will understand when I say I am going to need some time to consult with those I have come to trust, as well with those who have appeared so suddenly to...shed some light on certain matters. As soon as I have found my way to what I believe the wisest course, I will speak to you again.

Pause

PRESIDENT (cont'd)

Make no mistake: we are not where we once were, but we are in no danger. All they ever intended to do, they have already done. Thank you, sleep well, and I...

Pause

PRESIDENT (cont'd)

I ask for your prayers.

LIGHTS dim for a moment.

OFFSTAGE VOICE

We're out. Thank you, Mr. President.

LIGHTS RISE to previous level.

TELEVISION MONITOR silently shows newscasters discussing speech.

PRESIDENT turns quickly and walks towards offstage right, now obviously shaken. AIDE hurries to catch up from offstage left, speaking when he reaches PRESIDENT.

AIDE

(uncomfortably when he sees PRESIDENT's face, but sincerely; AIDE has trouble looking PRESIDENT in the eye)

I...sir, I honestly can't see how you could have done any better.

PRESIDENT keeps moving a few steps, not hearing AIDE at all. He then stops suddenly and speaks, but does not look at AIDE.

PRESIDENT

They come down my chimney, and tell me we've all...how much we thought we knew and built ourselves upon has been based on their...

PRESIDENT resumes walking after a moment.

PRESIDENT (cont'd)
(to himself)

We're somebody's goddamned grad school experiment.

DARKNESS, but for TELEVISION MONITOR, showing more of the same.

"There has been only one Christian. They caught and crucified Him -- early."

Mark Twain

ACT I SCENE 2

Oval Office. PRESIDENT enters, to find FIRST waiting for him, seated on chair in front of desk. FIRST stands. PRESIDENT eyes FIRST darkly as he makes his way to sit behind his desk. Both sit simultaneously.

Throughout, and this is true of SECOND as well, FIRST is dressed slightly unusually. Not futuristically, in any science fiction sense, but comfortably, pragmatically formal, without ornamentation such as neckties. FIRST speaks with a trace of a British accent, and annunciates every word to an uncommon, but not overly obvious, degree.

TELEVISION MONITOR soundlessly shows scenes of quiet demonstrations, news show debates, and interviews.

PRESIDENT

Done with your reading?

FIRST
(after a moment)

I found much that was unexpected. I was quite struck.

PRESIDENT

I should think you would be. All the books of the world's...my world's great religions, the most preeminent philosophies, our literature, art, architecture, our music...I'm curious, did you work your way to the Shakespeare?

FIRST

We reviewed all the items presented.

PRESIDENT

Impressive. Actually a little alarming, given you've had 36 hours to work with...

PRESIDENT takes a pad of paper and a pen; idly taps the pen on the pad for a moment or two.

PRESIDENT (cont'd)

Tell me...what did you make of *Hamlet* -- specifically, why do you believe he behaves the way he does?

FIRST

If you are referring to his inaction, which most of the writings surrounding the work seem to focus upon, he appears to lack faith in the capacity for vengeance of his own god.

PRESIDENT nods slightly.

PRESIDENT

(pointedly)

Interesting...I've always returned to the doubting of his own sanity...where all he has come to believe as far as balance, structure, the nature and capacity of his own history, is taken from him in an unnatural fashion, and so very quickly.

(MORE)

PRESIDENT (cont'd)

It is a bit much to expect of a man, wouldn't you think? Or even a race.

FIRST nods slightly with acknowledgement and respect.

FIRST

Understand, I have read that play on other worlds, in other forms -- certain ideas have proven universal amongst our kind. And we are nothing if not resilient, David. May I refer to you by your name?

PRESIDENT

(after a moment)

At this point in our relationship, I think I would prefer my title. It reminds me of whom I represent.

FIRST nods slightly, not insulted, perhaps impressed.

PRESIDENT (cont'd)

This...telling, this version, how would it rank on its own...intrinsic merits? Where would you place it among the *Hamlets* of our...galaxy?

FIRST

(smiling slightly)

Yes, galaxy. One galaxy has proven quite enough for one kind of being.

PRESIDENT jots "Galaxy," on pad, and underlines it, his body language acknowledging the absurdity of the moment.

FIRST (cont'd)

Your Shakespeare would...in my view would stand at or near the top, but that is merely my opinion.

PRESIDENT

It's nice to hear, for whatever reason. Out of 42 worlds of humanity, we can hold our head high.

FIRST
(not without quiet irony)

Yes.

PRESIDENT takes a deep breath, and turns to more pressing matters.

PRESIDENT

I'm sorry to revisit the same ground, but I've got an Aide at work on a brief to be distributed to other governments, and I want to make sure I am absolutely clear on what I'm being told.

FIRST

It is to be expected. My Second is at your disposal as well. He will answer whatever questions you may have.

PRESIDENT

Yes...He's with my Aide as we speak...But it is not my Aide's place to be absolutely aware; that falls to me.

PRESIDENT sits up straight in his chair, and clasps his hands. He suddenly becomes a rather imposing presence. [LIGHT could be used to underscore this moment.]

PRESIDENT (cont'd)

So...Not only are we the result of your...scientific pursuits, our civilization itself has been subject to a...

FIRST
(interrupting gently)

"Subject" is I am afraid too...invasive a term.

(MORE)

FIRST (cont'd)

We merely gave you something we believed to be beneficial, something that we knew had assisted if not saved our own civilization.

PRESIDENT
(after a moment; directly)

You'll forgive me if I seem ungrateful, but I'm staring the immediate potential cost of this gift in the face, and haven't really had time to mull the possibilities of its never having been delivered.

FIRST

A large part of the reason I am here is to help you resolve those sort of conflicts.

FIRST pauses for a moment to collect his thoughts.

FIRST (cont'd)

Of the 42 worlds of which you speak, one pattern was evident in every instance: humans begin violently, and work towards peace, often at tremendous cost. My own world followed this pattern, albeit in a...less violent fashion than did your own.

PRESIDENT

But -- can't you see you took our right to find our own way? What cost could...

FIRST
(interrupting quietly)

David, we seeded 50 worlds.

Both are quiet for a moment.

FIRST (cont'd)

Forgive me, Mr. President...My people began with noble intentions, to spread our legacy and further ensure our future in a wholly harmless fashion. We took nothing from no one in seeding the worlds we chose -- they were balls of potential requiring only the building blocks we share...but we soon found those building blocks to be philosophical as well as physical...What your Rousseau termed the Social Contract can reach abrupt end if power is not tempered with a...a respect for life that is to some degree...enforced.

They are quiet for a few moments; PRESIDENT exhales.

PRESIDENT

You may call me David. So you "gave" us the only thing you knew might save our world, because it had worked for you.

FIRST

The idea we knew to function best at a certain stage of development. One we knew proven the most effective. You might have found your own way. But you will have to forgive our not being willing to take the chance you might not.

PRESIDENT stares back for a moment, then sits back in his chair.

PRESIDENT

And you choose now to tell us because...

FIRST

(slowly)

You have a right to know whom you are, and what we chose to do.

(MORE)

FIRST (cont'd)

What you do with the information is of course left to you...We believe your science and your philosophies may soon collide, and beg questions we would be...remiss to leave unanswered.

PRESIDENT
(after a moment)

You think we may soon discover evidence of what you've done.

FIRST nods once in acknowledgement.

PRESIDENT (cont'd)

And any concrete proof of what you say is...where?

FIRST
(sincerely, quietly, but
as though practised, by
rote)

I must ask you to consider what you have seen and heard and what you have not, to weigh what you know to be true, and for you to ask yourself which scenario, overall, is more plausible.

PRESIDENT is quiet for a moment.

PRESIDENT

I'm not sure you...I'm not sure you realize the enormity of what you ask.

FIRST
(more slowly; the first
time he appears at all
uneasy)

Most worlds we visit choose to not acknowledge our presence, until certain matters are fully understood...With all due respect to you and your people...I am not sure I have seen a man in your position facing a more difficult situation...

PRESIDENT
(taken aback; not what he
expected to hear)

Well, what could be harder than yanking the rug from beneath the feet of millions of people, and telling them a central aspect of their lives is a...result of someone else's influence, no matter how well-intentioned?

PRESIDENT shakes his head, slumps back in his chair.

PRESIDENT (cont'd)

Hell, this is a moot point. The majority, *like me*, would rather not believe what you're saying, and they won't. I'll be run out of office on a rail...My God, people simply are not ready to hear this.

FIRST
(quietly)

We believe you are.

PRESIDENT
(smiling at the absurdity)

So you say...So...I am to get back behind that podium, have someone point a large machine at me that will bring my wisdom to...well, probably 90 percent of the people on this planet, and I am to tell them...that Jesus Christ was *not* the Son of God, but was rather placed here, by our new friends, to serve a purpose.

FIRST
(stonefaced; after a few
moments)

You will also need to make clear we are not angry, and place no blame.

(MORE)

FIRST (cont'd)

We waited...longer than we perhaps should have to establish this contact because we were unsure...The situation is unprecedented...You must make it known it was *our* fault, not that of your forebears...We simply did not return in time.

PRESIDENT is somewhere between stunned and confused. After a few moments.

PRESIDENT
(more animated)

"Not angry?" You...you just said this is a matter of policy, that you provide biology and follow up with philosophy for the good of the civilization. How can our having a Christ be a mistake? You said yourself it worked best for you and most of the other worlds.

FIRST
(evenly)

That is true, David, but it is also true that yours is the only world that took His life.

PRESIDENT is appropriately shocked.

LIGHTS SLOWLY DIM TO DARKNESS, but for TELEVISION MONITOR, which shows more of same, but at a slightly faster pace.

"The believing mind is externally impervious to evidence. The most that can be accomplished with it is to induce it to substitute one delusion for another. It rejects all overt evidence as wicked..."

H.L. Mencken

ACT I, SCENE 3

An ornate conference room, with a long table surrounded by 12 plush leather chairs.

AIDE and SECOND sit at the table, opposite sides, both seeming exhausted but fascinated. AIDE types into a notebook computer as he speaks; SECOND holds and occasionally manipulates a Palm Pilot-type device. SECOND speaks more hesitantly than does his superior. Empty coffee cups surround AIDE.

TELEVISION MONITOR plays on as before.

AIDE
(after a few moments of
working silently)

So let me get this straight...you placed materials necessary for life on all these worlds, watched the civilizations progress, and noticed after a few went...badly...

SECOND
(interrupting quietly)

Eight.

AIDE
After eight fell to pieces, you added something that worked for you in your own history.

SECOND

Yes. Such a figure...far prior in time, spoke of peace and to value life as one's own, and it...let us last. Such ways further all humans, if all...

AIDE
(finishing SECOND's
thought, after a moment)

...Play by the same rules. And we're the only ones that killed Him...God, if it surprises me, it's going to make the President's heart skip a few beats...He's a true believer, after all, but he...melds reality with faith...So much knowledge confined to two rooms...

AIDE notices SECOND staring at him.

AIDE (cont'd)

What?

SECOND appears uncomfortable for a moment, but speaks.

SECOND

As you said, let me get this straight?

AIDE

Uh, yeah, go ahead -- you can ask me anything -- God knows I've asked enough of you today...

AIDE glances at his watch.

AIDE (cont'd)

Make that tonight. What do you want to know?

SECOND

I am to understand...not only did they mock Him, beat Him, whip Him and execute Him... but some of you eat Him?

AIDE is visibly confused for a moment, but then understands.

AIDE

Yeah, I suppose so...But not all...followers of that...branch of the religion, believe in that particular...aspect.

SECOND

Amazing. How does such a thing...grow to be?

AIDE

(sighing)

It has to do with the fact the religion that grew around the guy you sent drew heavily from different sources -- Jewish and Pagan, chiefly, but others as well. Christianity is an amalgam, but no one ever acknowledges the fact...

AIDE is quiet for a moment, then speaks more softly.

AIDE (cont'd)

It's weird, but I think that's why I'm here.

SECOND

Here...with me?

AIDE

(looking at SECOND a bit harder by end)

Brought into this situation, yes. I find myself one of two...of *my* people with information that rewrites the history of my species -- at least locally -- and mainly I think because I have a double major in religion and history...The other person who knows, and who chose to bring me in...is an uncommonly decent man, who's just had his core beliefs removed forcibly, and I guarantee you, against his will.

SECOND

You have worked with your President in the past?

AIDE
(scoffs at idea; going
back to his typing)

I have worked *for* my President in the past. This is new.

SECOND
(after a moment)

Do you beleive our bringing this information
is...inappropriate?

AIDE
(immediately, but slowly;
looking back up)

No. I think we should have access to the truth...So long as
it doesn't prove toxic...The President's question is whether
this truth should be...put into play on a large scale.

SECOND

That sounds...contradictory.

AIDE

Oh, it is...I mean that we've had access to the truth for
some time -- or at least some truth prior to your arrival...

AIDE pauses for a moment, frustrated.

AIDE (cont'd)

Some books are checked out of the library more than
others...less, I should say...

AIDE pauses again, looking for words.

AIDE (cont'd)

There are more reasons people won't want to hear this than
reasons they will, and the thing about faith...by definition,
if it ain't unshakable, you ain't got it.

Both are quiet for a few moments.

AIDE (cont'd)

What's with the English?

SECOND

What of them?

AIDE

No, the fact you...sound like you were taught English in a Swiss boarding school. Idiom trips you up occasionally, like when I said, "Let me get this straight." It seemed to confuse you when you tried to use the phrase.

SECOND

(showing an affection and respect for his leader which mirrors AIDE's for his own)

Dialect is not my foremost study. My First is known for his ability in that way -- he communicates without flaw with all we encounter.

AIDE

Why does he use a British accent?

SECOND

I do not ask. He chooses whatever he feels most... appropriate.

AIDE

(smiling to himself)

The most effective, you mean. But how did you learn our language so quickly? You're not speaking Middle English.

SECOND pauses for a moment, looking at AIDE before he continues.

SECOND

We drew in your television and radio while making our way; it allowed us to bring together a...dictionary of sorts.

AIDE

Which you then downloaded directly into your brain, I'm guessing.

SECOND'S expression is one of alarm; seeing this, AIDE is surprised, pleased.

SECOND

(after a moment;
disconcerted)

That is something we are not to...We are free to speak of all you might find useful, as long as we feel it was...in your reach before our arrival.

AIDE

(not just a little proud
of himself)

Okay my friend, it never happened. Anybody who works in government can recognize the look you just gave me. But give us some credit: the idea may be science fiction to us, but we've already had the idea. That means it's brewing to some degree...Why "First" and "Second?"

SECOND

(now clearly vetting his
response; warily)

Such is the protocol for missions as this; on other missions, other terms are used.

AIDE

(nodding)

That's what I was afraid of.

SECOND

How do you mean?

AIDE

You've clearly evolved beyond something that martial in your hierarchy. You're putting things in simplest terms so as not to confuse those of us in the sticks.

SECOND

"In the...?"

AIDE

(interrupting gently)

I'm sorry. I mean the simplicity of your names is meant for our benefit, not yours.

SECOND gives a look of tacit acknowledgement.

DARKNESS, but for TELEVISION MONITOR, showing more of same at a slightly faster pace.

"...the great artists of the world are never Puritans, and seldom respectable. No virtuous man -- that is, virtuous in the YMCA sense -- has ever painted a picture worth looking at, or written a symphony worth hearing, or a book worth reading..."

H.L. Mencken

ACT II, SCENE 1

We see and hear the following material on TELEVISION MONITOR, same format and feel as in ACT I SCENE 1.

MALE NEWSCASTER #2

I'm here to tell you Steve, people were not satisfied with what the President had to say, in what I think was in fact a rehearsed and pre-written, polished speech, and I think people saw right through it, that they know they deserve more than they are getting when it comes to information, and they aren't going to be happy until they get it. These demonstrations we see are taking on a new edge, especially as college students seem to finally be rediscovering the activism of their 1960's forerunners.

MALE NEWSCASTER #3

Will, I'm coming from a totally opposite perspective, and I can't for the life of me understand why you can't give this President time to do his job, to find the best way to relay this information of which he speaks to the people of, not just the United States, mind you, but this entire world. And by activism if you mean those kids in Berkley waving light sabers at the sky, that was just embarrassing.

MALE NEWSCASTER #2
(laughing, dismissive)

Maybe to you...

MALE NEWSCASTER #3

Think about the burden on the President right now -- this is not what he signed on for. Don't you think that responsibility entitles him to, if not all the time he wants, at least more than what he's been allowed thus far? It's only been three days since his last speech, and what have we really seen? Churches, Temples and Mosques filled to capacity, and no more violence in the entire country than occurs after professional sports championships.

MALE NEWSCASTER #2
(interrupting; hand on
earpiece)

(MORE)

MALE NEWSCASTER #2 (cont'd)

Looks like we're going to have to table this discussion for the time being, Steve, because I'm getting word that Monks in Cambodia are dousing themselves in gasoline and are preparing to immolate themselves, in what some are describing as an ultimate expression of mankind's demand to know more. We go now to Jennifer Walker in Phnom Penh...

At this point the volume begins to fade out, disappearing with the final word of the following lines, though FEMALE NEWSCASTER #2 is briefly still seen speaking.

FEMALE NEWSCASTER #2

Thanks Will and Steve. I'm standing in a marketplace where six Buddhist Monks have chained themselves to a tree and one another, apparently ready to offer themselves as sacrifices in a...

SOUND FADES OUT as LIGHTS RISE. Oval Office, as before. PRESIDENT is on phone, rubbing his temples with one hand and holding the phone in the other, as FIRST enters.

TELEVISION MONITOR shows six chanting men chained to a tree in the town square of a small village, one with a can of gasoline, the scene occasionally intercut with newscasters.

PRESIDENT

...The briefs will be finished when I believe every iota of information that can be included is included. Every nation in that Chamber will receive a copy, in English, and we'll handle any...translation miscommunications as they come. If the Secretary General doesn't accept that, he can feel free to give a speech...

PRESIDENT glances up, notices FIRST, and motions for him to enter and retake his seat.

PRESIDENT (cont'd)

I'm...I'm thinking a few more days until I've...got my brain wrapped around all this...Goddamn it, Sidney, I honestly don't know -- hose them down before they do it. Keep me informed. OK. Thanks.

PRESIDENT puts phone on its base.

PRESIDENT (cont'd)
(wearily)

Good morning. You slept well, I trust?

FIRST

Perfectly. I only...I require significantly less time for sleep than most, even of my people.

PRESIDENT
(wan smile)

Well, I hope you found a way to pass the hours.

FIRST

I did. I returned to the books you provided, as well as other materials...I must say...of all the worlds I have visited...and even of those not under my purview I am intimately acquainted...the art and literature your people have produced is staggering.

PRESIDENT
(expression unchanged;
after a few moments)

And you find this surprising?

FIRST

Surprising...no. I would prefer to say anomalous.

PRESIDENT
(choosing to be amused
rather than insulted)
(MORE)

PRESIDENT (cont'd)

Ever the scientist...These other civilizations: how did they progress in relation to this world? What have you learned of human evolution, considering you've initiated so much of it?

FIRST
(after a moment)

Time is the ranging variable.

PRESIDENT
(immediately)

Yes. It appears to be an obstacle you have...either surpassed or harnessed.

FIRST

But a step, and one I have no doubt your people will soon achieve. As I said before, the nature of humanity is to begin in violence and end in peace. If a civilization has survived, it follows that certain events have transpired. More often than not, a totalitarian system gives way to an increasingly benevolent order. This is simplest, and thus most prevalent, but is also statistically confined to worlds with equitable resources. In worlds where resources are not distributed evenly geographically, factionalization takes place, and matters can grow...infinitely complex.

PRESIDENT

Are we...is Earth considered factionalized?

FIRST
(after a moment)

I considered meeting with you or meeting with your United Nations -- the fact I had to choose indicates no small degree of factionalization.

PRESIDENT

I see...Let me ask you -- you live in a world where peace was long ago achieved. You've learned to feed and clothe your people, all have access to education and materials of learning, medical care -- you've created what we would consider Utopia, correct?

FIRST

(considers statement a moment)

All things being relative, I see nothing untrue.

PRESIDENT

Yet you come here, and find yourself fascinated by the art my people produced -- Michelangelo, Leonardo, Milton, for example: there's a thread among them, a commonality?

FIRST

(after a moment)

All created works based on religious themes, to some extent.

PRESIDENT

True. And to a great extent. Consider the origins of our architecture, how much was based upon designs commissioned for churches and cathedrals. Even the impetus behind the composition of some of our greatest music. The art you've come to admire is to no small degree predicated upon this "mistake" you say you allowed to occur. The conflicts you've moved beyond, they often breed passions which lead to art...And remember, my people rebelled in *Eden*.

FIRST nods slightly in acknowledgement.

PRESIDENT (cont'd)
(after a moment)

Now let's take a step back, regarding your generations of Utopian society: what truly brought about the initial drive to seed those worlds?

FIRST
(immediately; matter-of-fact)

The purest of intentions: to spread our legacy and further ensure our future in a wholly harmless fashion.

PRESIDENT looks at FIRST with a quizzical expression.

PRESIDENT
(after a moment)

I don't possess a photographic memory, but are not those the precise words you used the last time the topic was broached?

FIRST
(between amused and an unexpected checkmate)

I am sure it was. On occasion I use, shall we say, formalized language.

PRESIDENT
Language you've used on other worlds as well -- a handbook.

FIRST
By its nature, yes.

PRESIDENT
(smiling)
Wonderful. Sounds like God has lawyers.

FIRST
(smiling)
Pardon?

PRESIDENT

Never mind. You may have slept adequately; I don't remember when that was last true of me...The spreading of your legacy and ensuring your future aside...I suspect there was another factor involved.

FIRST

That being?

PRESIDENT

(smile fading; after a moment)

You'd won. You managed to conquer all the demons, so to speak, that both society and environment had to offer. And I'm willing to bet you found existence...not empty, but more than a little monotonous.

FIRST looks at PRESIDENT with a new respect, and a touch of wariness, before pausing to think for a moment.

FIRST

This was many generations ago, of course...but history does speak of a certain...unrest.

PRESIDENT

So having lived the play once, you decided you'd like to see it a few times more, if only to pick up details you might have missed.

FIRST

I...don't follow.

PRESIDENT

(bluntly, but not impolitely)

(MORE)

PRESIDENT (cont'd)

There was and is little else remaining for you to do with yourselves. "When Alexander saw the breadth of his domain, he wept, for there were no more worlds to conquer." You're here because your advancement, in a sense, has come full circle: you can't take the same ride again, so you gave the rest of us the same opportunity you had, but also so you might have the chance to watch, and monitor, and...care about something larger than yourselves.

FIRST

Perhaps.

As PRESIDENT speaks his next lines, TELEVISION MONITOR silently shows images of the monks pouring gasoline over their heads, chanting, and setting themselves on fire. This repeats until the end of the scene, with occasional images of somber/horrified newscasters.

PRESIDENT

But don't you see: the thing my people have chosen to care about larger than themselves is exactly what you are here to say I need to take away. And that...the way to go about that...I've honestly no idea.

The phone on PRESIDENT's desk buzzes. He looks at it with irritation for a moment, then notices which line is calling.

PRESIDENT (cont'd)

Excuse me a moment, I asked to be kept up to date on a matter.

PRESIDENT picks up phone and listens for five seconds, sagging slightly as he does so, and gently sets the phone back down.

PRESIDENT (cont'd)
(after a moment)

"Truth restrained restrains the hand of God." Six men just died to get me that message...they died chanting it...And more are lining up to enforce the point.

PRESIDENT sits back in his chair, looking down for a few moments. He then looks back up at FIRST, exhausted, with a curious expression.

PRESIDENT (cont'd)

This means my UN brief needs to be in their hands within a matter of hours. Do you know why?

FIRST
(after a moment)

No.

PRESIDENT

Because events can necessitate action, any action, even if it is not as appropriate an action as I would like it to be...I must ask you to go now; I need to write this out, and track down my Aide.

PRESIDENT picks up a pen; FIRST stands to leave, takes a step and turns back.

FIRST
(gently)

"Write this out?"

PRESIDENT looks up after a brief moment, one not without slight tension, and the sense PRESIDENT wishes he could take back what he said.

PRESIDENT

It's my way of working through an issue. I choose an... analogous bit of writing, apply my situation, and see where it leaves me.

FIRST
(after a moment)

What...which piece did you choose?

PRESIDENT smiles inscrutably, and goes back to his writing.

PRESIDENT

I've already told you.

FIRST thinks this over, and nods slightly.

FIRST

We can speak again whenever you feel...the time is right.

PRESIDENT does not respond.

FIRST turns and takes three steps away. When PRESIDENT speaks his next lines, FIRST does not turn to face him.

PRESIDENT

This is ordinarily when I would take time for a brief prayer, for wisdom and guidance...

Pause

PRESIDENT (cont'd)

You're asking me to take blankets off people standing in the cold, and when they ask me why I would do that, I'm to tell them...what exactly? Because that's the way it is?

PRESIDENT stops and shakes his head.

PRESIDENT (cont'd)

That's my whole problem: I cannot find a way to end that analogy that has any sense of balance. What have I to offer in place?

After a second or two, FIRST turns and walks to EXIT.

LIGHTS DIM TO DARKNESS as FIRST EXITS, but for TELEVISION MONITOR, showing only repeating images of burning monks until beginning of next scene.

"Most people are bothered by those passages in Scripture which they cannot understand; but as for me, I always notice that the passages in Scripture which trouble me most are those which I do understand."

Mark Twain

ACT II, SCENE 2

Conference room. As before, with different clothes, both AIDE and SECOND sit working quietly before AIDE speaks.

TELEVISION MONITOR shows previous images, as well as demonstrations and more intense interviews and debates, liberally interspersed with burning monks, the intercut images moving slightly faster.

AIDE

Second...How did your Christ figure end His life?

AIDE reconsiders his statement.

Guess I shouldn't say "figure," since He was the original.

SECOND

He lived very long, was made a king, then brought to be our first representative government -- he died while resting.

AIDE

Wow. Christ and Plato all in one...Kids?

SECOND

No, He...recognized temptations in power, so He...abstained.

AIDE

Platonic indeed...What about other worlds? What was the...range of His, or versions thereof, their influence? Where did they all end up?

SECOND

(after a moment)

Patterns are noticeable. The most viewed Him as a philosopher, others as a leader of a governmental kind, with a minority casting Him a religious figure. What happened here again has no...echo, mirror...?

AIDE

Precedent?

SECOND

Yes, as you said...yours...wove Him within the stories and expectations of other religions, as opposed to more simply beginning a new one.

AIDE

(after a moment)

It's powerful to have history to fall back on...There's something I'm trying to understand, but it won't be in the Brief...Jesus, maybe it's just if in case it comes up with the boss, I'll have something to say...Boy, that oath seems empty now.

AIDE takes a long drink of coffee. PRESIDENT walks on stage, unseen by AIDE and SECOND. PRESIDENT is about to make his presence known, but stops when he hears AIDE'S next words. He stands stoically throughout.

AIDE (cont'd)

Anyway...what I'm trying to grasp, and I don't really expect you to help me get this one, because it's...of my people. I'm wondering why He had to die.

SECOND

From what I've been exposed, to atone for the wrongs of Man...

AIDE
(interrupting, impatient)

I know that part. I mean...Even of those of us who never believed, at least since we were kids, most will acknowledge this is the greatest story ever told, in terms of impact...But what is in us that demands beating, torture, and the execution of son by father, in one of the worst ways imaginable, to earn our attention...What is it we think so wrong of ourselves that could ask...*that*, to undo *any* damage? And why would we worship a father who would even *think* of such a thing?

SECOND

It is thought an act of love.

AIDE
(immediately)

I know!

(MORE)

AIDE (cont'd)

It's considered the ultimate act of love, God help us: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son..." But were God man, this would be undeniable, unthinkable child abuse -- premeditated murder -- no matter the reason...Then there's the fact were He man, God's reasoning would leave Him acquitted by reason of insanity...Why should ultimate power absolve an unspeakable act?

AIDE is quiet for a moment.

SECOND

You used the word "worship." I've never, even among my own, in our history...understood its meaning.

AIDE almost speaks, then realizes he has to stop and think.

AIDE

(after three seconds)

Equal parts adoration and submission...Both absolute.

SECOND nods, slightly uncomfortably.

AIDE (cont'd)

Anyway...I'm not debating the mind of Jehovah; that's a metaphysical nightmare...I'm just wonder why this story...resonates so deeply.

SECOND

(after a moment)

As we've said, yours was the only world who wove your Christ within other religions'...constructions. No other world decided He was without sin nor flaw. They had no reason.

AIDE
(after a moment)

The wonder is no one, not even the harshest, most brilliant intellectual critics, can truly attack *Christ Himself* -- the character of the character. Not without...almost satirizing themselves. And *He's* our final, ultimate sacrifice...One last gory Friday so God could find religion, and not need balance innocent blood against...innate sin.

AIDE rubs his eyes; stifles a yawn.

SECOND

I saw the first of the book being used to justify the worst of the second -- all the...symbolic events?

AIDE
(tired; waving his hand to
make himself think)

Ahhh...Metaphors?

SECOND

Yes...All the metaphors of sacrifice are animal in the first, but applied to one Man in the second...The Father seems to have so little in common with the Son.

AIDE
(perking up)

Oh, absolutely. Can you picture Christ telling an army to go peacefully toward a town, proclaim friendship, wait until their guard is down, then slaughter all the men, but keep the women as whores and the children as slaves?

Pause

AIDE (cont'd)

He and His were butchering entire peoples for centuries, when His chosen weren't in chains for displeasing Him...The Angel of Death killing a nation's babies...Washing Earth almost clean of humanity, without ever acknowledging error...Building Paradise, placing tempter and temptation within the gates, then acting *surprised* when...

AIDE pauses, shaking his head in wonder.

AIDE (cont'd)

I guess even the omnipresent omniscient can have their minds elsewhere.

SECOND

(after a moment)

The blame Eve still carries.

AIDE

Oh, of course. Hell, it's worse than that. You've got the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, right? The Holy Spirit is described as the Comforter. So, given we have Dad and Son, who's missing from the picture?

SECOND

(after a moment, unsure of term; he waves his hand in imitation of AIDE)

Mom?

AIDE

(smiling for a moment at the gesture)

Mom.

(MORE)

AIDE (cont'd)

The Holy Trinity is clearly a family, but the idea of allowing the female anywhere near such power...well, she had it when Christianity was coming together, and...those in charge wanted the control such power brings. So they took it.

SECOND

How? Such change is...difficult.

AIDE

(after a moment)

You remember when I said Christianity is an amalgam? It's a...conglomeration of thoughts and metaphors from many cultures. Among those influences is Paganism, which was widespread during Christ's life, and centuries before and after.

SECOND

(after a moment)

The word has a negative...feel today.

AIDE

(nodding; using laptop as he speaks)

It revered nature and balance, with the concept of sin being equated to sex as far removed from its teachings as sex virtually equalling sin is bound to Christianity.

SECOND

You do seem rather...strained in that way.

AIDE

Same damn reason. Sex was a Pagan sacrament, as opposed to killing sheep.

(MORE)

AIDE (cont'd)

So, in order to seize influence, sex had to be made a sin...The female brings forth life, was equated with the earth and was revered. Suddenly she was the scapegoat...

AIDE stops typing; looks up at SECOND.

AIDE (cont'd)

Sex a sin. Then we're born in sin. Our origin and our existence unclean. Life itself only possible redemption. God, it's a wonder we get out of bed in the morning.

SECOND

Does not marriage...undo the idea of impurity?

AIDE

Not really. Read the Apostle Paul -- total chastity was the way. Still is, for the ones in robes.

SECOND

It seems...desperate on the part of someone.

AIDE

Well, the founders of the modern Church inherited a dying Empire. They picked stories of Christ conducive to their ends -- four Gospels out of over 80, and 325 years after Christ died -- completely fabricated other stories, metaphors; subverted some Pagan customs, and the world became a very patriarchal place...

AIDE is quiet for a few moments.

AIDE (cont'd)

The whole thing is savage at its core, it rests on oppression and embodies our better instincts in too small a degree.

(MORE)

AIDE (cont'd)

I hope we do tell the rest of the world -- we can keep the wisdom and lose the barbarism, and be better for it.

PRESIDENT slips out unnoticed, clearly affected.

SECOND

That is, I think, what we believe of you as well.

DARKNESS, but for TELEVISION MONITOR, with more of same at a slightly faster pace.

"I am the entire human race compacted together. I have found that there is no ingredient of the race which I do not possess in either a small way or a large way."

Mark Twain

ACT II, SCENE 3

A sitting room, with a bookcase and mini-bar. FIRST sits alone nursing a drink, in one of two fine leather chairs, contemplating the past hours with a newspaper in his lap. AIDE enters and heads straight for the bookcase, not noticing FIRST. AIDE stares at the shelves and removes a volume or two, until FIRST speaks. AIDE is startled, but recovers immediately. FIRST is more relaxed than we have before seen.

TELEVISION MONITOR goes on as before.

FIRST
(tapping newspaper during
second sentence)

I've come to admire your superior. He seems more than many appear to think of him.

AIDE

The press' perception is whatever they believe will sell their product. They have no idea who that man is, and they don't need to care.

AIDE takes a closer look, and smiles dimly.

AIDE (cont'd)

Did the President tell you about scotch, or did you find it on your own?

FIRST

(after a moment's look of bemused condescension)

I recognized it for what it is, but I am impressed by its flavor. Care for some?

AIDE hesitates, almost says no, then rethinks the matter.

AIDE

Why not? There's no one else who knows what I should be doing.

FIRST stands, gets another glass, and pours AIDE a drink.

FIRST

Some things are universal amongst humans, young man, and this is high among them...Have you spoken with your President recently?

AIDE politely accepts the drink FIRST hands him, and sits in chair facing FIRST.

AIDE

Not since yesterday. Is there a reason I should?

FIRST

He...received some unpleasant news, I'm afraid; when I left him he was trying to undo what damage he could.

AIDE
(after a moment, quietly)

It...wouldn't be my place. Besides, he prefers to act alone when the worst happens; says he likes to know precisely who's to blame...You're referring to the Monks?

FIRST

We can safely assume so, yes. He said six men sent him a message, and I've stopped viewing the television as it...dominates every channel.

AIDE nods slightly, and is quiet for a moment.

AIDE

Right now there are people sitting in rooms just like this one, trying to figure out the easiest and most effective ways to lay those lives at his feet, totally oblivious to...

FIRST
(after a moment; again
acknowledging the
newspaper)

Your politics are ugly, as are they everywhere, but I have the impression those working against your President could easily be working for him.

AIDE

Oh, for better money, absolutely. You don't ever sell your soul in this business; you just lease it...Has he...

AIDE takes a drink.

AIDE (cont'd)

This may sound like an odd question, but I'll explain...has the President said anything about me to you?

FIRST

Only that you are his Aide, and evidently someone he trusts.

AIDE

That's my question, or what I question -- I know things his Cabinet hasn't been told. Things the Vice-President hasn't been told...at least as far as I know, but I seriously doubt it.

FIRST

As do I.

AIDE

This building is empty, but for us and some guards...I'm simply...mystified as to why I'm here. If this were a novel -- I'm still not convinced this isn't some sort of fever dream -- but if this were a story, I'd end up poisoned in the end, to ensure my silence...Hell, it could be in this glass, only I haven't finished my job...I just have a background in history and religion...

FIRST

As well as a low-level career thus far, correct?

AIDE nods.

FIRST (cont'd)

No one knows who you are; were matters to conclude as in poor fiction, as you said, relatively few would note your loss, true?

AIDE nods, a little embarrassed, this time.

FIRST (cont'd)

So, you have the knowledge your President requires in abundance -- you were an excellent student, no doubt, highly ranked amongst your peers?

AIDE nods again, now genuinely embarrassed, sagging in chair.

FIRST (cont'd)

Yet at the same time, you are no one anyone but him, for whatever reason, would have cause to take terribly seriously, at this point in your career.

FIRST smiles and sips his drink, as AIDE offers a weak smile and nod of discomforted acknowledgement.

FIRST (cont'd)

Don't feel bad, young man. I remember what it was like to be young, and assume every situation must involve myself to a far greater degree than it actually did.

AIDE
(after a moment, with a
rueful smile)

It's very practical on his part...pragmatic...a little devious, honestly.

FIRST

In some languages, there is only one word for those concepts...That's something else which can lend you hope -- the more shades of light a language acknowledges, the greater chance people will see things as they are.

AIDE

The flip side being, if you wish to...deliberately complicate -- there's a better word; I just can't think of it...

FIRST

Obfuscate?

AIDE

Yes, thank you -- if someone wishes to obfuscate...synonyms are a godsend.

FIRST

Of course. Your President mentioned lawyers earlier; jurisprudence is steeped in the most subtle turns of phrase...

FIRST sips his drink.

FIRST (cont'd)

Tell me, when an action is brought here, is a winning defendant expected to pay his own legal fees, as opposed to the person who initiated the suit?

AIDE

(inrighed)

Yes, they are. Why?

FIRST

(musing, contemplating his glass)

Surprising.

(MORE)

FIRST (cont'd)

I would have assumed you had moved past that...So, since the lawyers need only bring suit, not win, in a legislature with a two-party system, it follows that half the representatives stand for the lawyers, and half for those they are trying to take the most from, whomever they may be?

AIDE

Insurance agencies, yes. And doctors. But one can countersue.

FIRST

(immediately)

I'm sure one can...You might do well to dedicate yourself to that end, my young friend -- histories suggest that pioneers in balancing that particular incongruence are forever held in high esteem.

AIDE

(somewhat intrigued)

Really.

FIRST

(slightly showing effects
of scotch)

I've seen statues. One epic poem...Now of course, you do not allow your candidates to personally keep money raised during campaigns. That's the recipe for...

FIRST trails off when he sees AIDE's face; AIDE offers only a slight shrug in response.

FIRST (cont'd)

(changing the subject)

Your President's education focused heavily on literature, or the arts, did it not?

AIDE
(slightly surprised)

No, his background is government and law...I think he simply makes himself familiar with anything he senses he should know.

FIRST contemplates this for a moment, then stands.

FIRST
(as he stands)

I believe we should make our way inside; our final meeting is scheduled soon.

AIDE nods, drains his glass, stands.

AIDE and FIRST begin to make their way offstage.

AIDE

Well, I suppose you wouldn't be giving me career advice if the plan was for me to disappear after you leave, so that's reassuring.

FIRST
(his hand on AIDE'S
shoulder)

I wouldn't hear of it. Besides, if you were to be done away with, we would simply take you with us as a courtesy to your superior.

AIDE

Oh.

DARKNESS, but for TELEVISION MONITOR, showing more of same.

"It is impossible to imagine the universe run by a wise, just and omnipotent God, but it is quite easy to imagine it run by a board of gods. If such a board actually exists it operates precisely like the board of a corporation that is losing money."

H.L. Mencken

ACT II, SCENE 4

Garden, outside White House.

PRESIDENT wanders outside lost in thought, drinking coffee, jotting on pad, and (literally) runs into SECOND, who is on his way back inside.

TELEVISION monitor shows same scenes, at a slightly faster pace.

PRESIDENT

Hello...Second, isn't it. Or are you only Second to your First, and go by your own name with others?

SECOND

(more embarrassed than uneasy)

With apologies, Mr. President, our true names are not something we use on other worlds.

PRESIDENT

I guess I can understand that. Words are powerful things; they once meant far more...Some say God created the universe by speaking His name...Second, on your world -- how did religion end?

SECOND
(after a moment)

You might...do better to discuss this with my First, Mr. President. I know something of the answer you require; it is my...expression I doubt.

PRESIDENT

It's all right; I'm having no problem understanding what you mean. When did your people's...religious period come to a close?

SECOND
(after a moment)

Early in our growth. With time we understood our priests came before our gods, as the priest...must see the need to create the god -- the god cannot create the priest. One then follows the need for the god to some...human interest.

PRESIDENT

I've read a similar idea.

PRESIDENT rubs a leaf between his fingers.

PRESIDENT (cont'd)

There's a great natural disaster in a small tribe -- loss of life, possessions, animals. As nature, in whatever form -- water, earthquake, fire -- creeps forward, one man loses control, as he can only watch this empty, remorseless reality sweep all he knows away.

PRESIDENT pauses for a moment, with an odd smile.

He grabs a stick and beats the ground, in front of the fire, or the water.

(MORE)

PRESIDENT (cont'd)

And lo and behold: rain puts out the fire, floodwaters recede, the earth stops trembling...and all the rest stare at this man and his stick, and tuck both away somewhere elevated, with plenty to eat, so if the threat returns, he's there to intercede...and the man knows only it could just as easily be the stick as himself.

SECOND nods.

SECOND

And when the danger comes again?

PRESIDENT

He is either dragged out or carried on the people's shoulders to the water's edge. To no avail, of course. And to save his life at the hands of an angry mob, he reflects their anger: "Of course my power still exists; it's you who displeased the water -- why else would it obey me once, but not again? I know what the water wants..." Powerful, pure empty logic.

Pause

PRESIDENT (cont'd)

Next thing you know, the water is personified, has a name, predilections, favorite sacrifices; our priest is a safely sinecured intermediary...

PRESIDENT takes a long sip of coffee.

PRESIDENT (cont'd)

A week later, he realizes he can accuse a man who insulted his sister of heresy, and...the unfeeling cruelty of nature came to justify studied, conscious vengeance: Crusades, Torquemada, Salem...

PRESIDENT takes a shorter sip of coffee.

PRESIDENT (cont'd)

But nothing changed, really...except that...people believe they possess...influence...They need the power, but fear what they don't understand, so they appease...by any and all means.

PRESIDENT pauses, drops the leaf, and watches it flutter to the ground.

PRESIDENT (cont'd)

Sanctioned sin: offering up lives to save lives, for no real reason at all...

SECOND

We believe much the same. Our...philosophies were not shaped by, as were yours, a personified god, with a name and such...human aspects. An idea found home...and it has done much towards making us what we are.

PRESIDENT

Really. What would that be?

SECOND

(slowly)

Any event, occurred because it had to -- there can be infinite possible outcomes under any circumstances, but only one...result. Once one moves past wasting thought on...possibilities left without meaning by time, and studies what took place, it is easier to understand, learn, or prevent.

PRESIDENT
(sadly, after a moment)

No ground to beat...Nothing to appease, or assuage; nothing to pray to, begging influence...No apologies for innate imperfection; no nature to deny or be taught contempt for, beyond what one does, opposed to whom one is...To not be born in shame.

PRESIDENT shakes his head slightly, sadly.

PRESIDENT (cont'd)

It is interesting when Man questions the reasons for his existence. It is fascinating when he questions the motivation for the question.

PRESIDENT is quiet for a few moments, then turns to SECOND.

PRESIDENT (cont'd)

You should probably head back inside; we're going to have one last meeting before I throw myself off whichever... direction. You just helped me a great deal. Thank you.

SECOND wears a surprised, pleased expression, and EXITS.

PRESIDENT watches him go, then walks around for four or five seconds, searching the sky for something he does not seem to find.

PRESIDENT (cont'd)
(softly, smiling sadly;
emotional, but not
overcome)

Goodbye...and in a garden, no less.

Pause

PRESIDENT (cont'd)
(quavering ironic smile;
quietly; contemplating
coffee cup)

(MORE)

PRESIDENT (cont'd)

"Let this cup pass from me..." Maybe that's why I've believed this long -- so many lovely, easy metaphors -- a thick book full, where I could compare *my* life to those written of in the Word of God...

PRESIDENT takes drink of coffee.

PRESIDENT (cont'd)

But still left looking to other books...for what I *know*, here, opposed to what I hope to know, and see...

Pause

PRESIDENT (cont'd)
(more animated, but still calm; self aware. Reading off of pad, OR heard over sound system)

Like now...

To lie or not to lie, about a lie...

That is my question...Whether hold what's here

Within these walls, inside my mind, for now;

Leave undiscovered country to itself...

Or force a choice I've no real right to make.

Awaken from a dream that need not end;

A dream which time and man co-wrote. Disturb

Dear sleep for some whose peace is found therein.

Delay for those with every right to know,

A truth as much their own as mine...Or risk

Such damage that I can't imagine. Take,

More than I give. Oh God, I'm tired...These slings

And arrows fly straight up, and fall among

My own. This truth, this sea of troubling facts,

(MORE)

PRESIDENT (cont'd)

Unnatural shocks, undoes too much of what's
Proved best -- despite its worst, and our misuse,
No hues of resolution reach my eyes...

Negating, equal...

PRESIDENT is visibly frustrated, almost enraged; he then quickly scrawls the following as he speaks it aloud.

Currents...turn awry.

PRESIDENT pauses for a moment, breathing heavily, then suddenly throws his coffee whatever direction it will travel furthest, and drops his pad.

PRESIDENT (cont'd)
(loudly, with anger)

So...what would Jesus do? Or if all the Jesuses got together, what would their consensus be towards my course of action?

Long pause.

PRESIDENT (cont'd)
(bitterly)

I'll try to be right...despite the fact I can't be. What choice do You...What choice do I have. There's no other way.

PRESIDENT exits quickly.

DARKNESS, but for TELEVISION MONITOR, showing more of same, at a slightly faster pace.

"Creator - A comedian whose audience is afraid to laugh."

H.L. Mencken

ACT III, SCENE 1

DARKNESS. We see and hear the following material on the television, same format and feel as in ACT I SCENE 1, and ACT II SCENE 1.

MALE NEWSCASTER #4

The mood has shifted dramatically over, well, it seems just over the past hours, Kathleen. Candles have turned to placards, and songs to chants aimed in one direction: the Oval Office of the United States of America. Time seems to be moving faster. People are demanding the truth, knowing beings potentially more powerful than themselves have the ear of one man, a man who is supposed to represent millions more. The Brief the White House delivered to the United Nations offered nothing substantially different than did the President's initial address to the world; there have been a number of speeches denouncing the fact one nation has evidently been chosen to represent the interests of all, and calls have been heard for our "Guests" to bring their message to the world stage, for all to hear. Protests continue to grow in size; one demonstrator managed to break past security surrounding the White House, but merely placed a copy of the US Constitution between the bars, before being led away by police.

FEMALE NEWSCASTER #3

Keith, there's no doubt what you're saying is true, but you can also look at it as something wholly to be expected. And other than the tragedy in Cambodia, not another act of violence has taken a life. I acknowledge the United Nations Brief was a rehash of the President's address, but it also underscored the need for patience and understanding, and asked again that we allow the time required for matters, whatever they may be, to be worked through. People are merely expressing their rights to free speech and public demonstration, and for the best of reasons. But as for this growing sense of frustration some are claiming exists...I'm honestly not sure it would exist if we in the media weren't telling people to feel it. It's only been six days.

MALE NEWSCASTER #4

That's...certainly a possibility, Kathleen, but I don't...

Brief pause

MALE NEWSCASTER #4 (cont'd)

I'm getting word now the President has scheduled an address to the world at 8:00 Eastern time, 7:00 Central tomorrow night. That's 8:00 PM on the East Coast, tomorrow night, where the President will hopefully finally shine some light on what has been described by some as possibly the most world-changing event in the history of Man, other than perhaps the birth of Jesus Christ. Back to you, Brent.

SILENCE

LIGHTS. Conference room. AIDE and SECOND sit on one side of the table, next to one another, both noticeably tenser -- not terribly so, but more so. They obviously expect someone.

PRESIDENT and FIRST enter; AIDE and SECOND both stand until the former have taken seats, each opposite his underling, and then retake their chairs. PRESIDENT appears far more confident and assured than when last we saw him.

The TELEVISION MONITOR shows a still faster-cut version of all we have seen so far.

PRESIDENT

(to AIDE)

Interesting few days, huh Tommy? The Chinese were right.

AIDE

(smiles slightly to
acknowledge curse)

I want to be as much help as I can, Sir, but I'm not sure...

PRESIDENT

(quietly, firmly)

I'm still not sure either, son, but all we can do is work with what we have, and decide what will bring about the best for the most, short and long term.

FIRST

(with a touch of
admiration)

This address you've scheduled: you still have not decided what will be said.

PRESIDENT

That's why we're here. The four of us are the only people...near, who know the truth of certain matters, and I want us to debate every issue until I feel there's nothing...nothing relevant left unsaid. So...let's shove the first domino, and see what it hits.

To FIRST and SECOND

Your people have, in a six day span, stepped into a role my people have previously occupied with ideas, ideas we personified into gods. True?

All nod.

PRESIDENT (cont'd)

Take our being placed here by you...

Both FIRST and SECOND sit up straight at this; FIRST interrupts gently.

FIRST

Mr. President, we only placed and nurtured the possibility, over countless generations. What you became, you became on your own.

AIDE

With one exception.

PRESIDENT
(motioning to AIDE)

You're both right, and we'll get to that soon enough.

PRESIDENT pauses for a moment or two; looks at FIRST.

PRESIDENT (cont'd)

"What we became, we became on our own."

Pause

PRESIDENT (cont'd)

I've no quarrel with nor control over what we've become. My concern, my job, regards where we go. What do you see...are we headed in the right direction? Is there anything I can do, or suggest, or...push towards, that could make a valuable difference?

FIRST

It is my duty -- my job, as you say -- not to provide certain information. I'm sorry, Mr. President.

PRESIDENT offers a quick look of acknowledgement, and appears about to move on.

PRESIDENT is cut off by AIDE.

AIDE

Unless such information is already "within our reach," correct?

FIRST

(after a moment, then
during a heavy stare at
SECOND)

Correct. That is less a stated rule than a usually unspoken principle, but yes.

AIDE winces, and gives SECOND a quick apologetic glance; SECOND stares straight ahead.

AIDE

All right.

AIDE looks to PRESIDENT.

AIDE (cont'd)

May I have the floor a moment, sir?

PRESIDENT

(shrugs, but intrigued)

Go, boy.

AIDE

Thank you.

AIDE pauses, takes deep breath.

AIDE (cont'd)

If what is "within our reach," as you say, is within our minds, there's more you could tell us than you seem to feel you can.

AIDE pauses for a moment, searching for an example.

AIDE (cont'd)

Take what Second and I discussed -- transubstantiation: the idea of a cracker and a Dixie cup of juice becoming the flesh and blood of Christ.

SECOND
(quietly to FIRST)

Which some then eat.

FIRST offers no response, but appears to be rethinking his crew manifest.

Throughout the following exchange between PRESIDENT and AIDE, FIRST sits stoically, but occasionally glances over at SECOND, who seems to grow smaller.

AIDE

So we've already conceived the notion of, simply put, one substance turning into another.

PRESIDENT

Alchemy as well.

AIDE
(faster)

Sure. Ideas conceived hundreds if not thousands of years ago. Taking this further, we can imagine a machine capable of the same thing.

(MORE)

AIDE (cont'd)

And that, I'm guessing, will be one of if not the first big steps in...I don't know how to put it...proactive evolution, a quantum leap we bring about ourselves.

PRESIDENT

Turning anything into anything -- beats fire and the wheel.

AIDE
(nodding "no" slightly)

My guess is there will be some sort of...universal substance discovered, or more likely created, one that when the machine is applied, takes on new form...like batter to cake.

PRESIDENT
(seemingly ready to move on)

Yeah, but cake batter is *designed* to be cake...

AIDE

And this...stuff I'm describing will be designed to be whatever the machine tells it to be. Obviously, the machine and the stuff will be more complicated than a package of mix and a hot metal box, but...the principle holds, I think.

PRESIDENT nods with a "Why not?" sort of shrug; PRESIDENT and AIDE turn and look at FIRST and SECOND.

There are a few moments of silence, in which FIRST is for the first time at a loss for words.

FIRST

It does.

AIDE is surprised, and does an admirable job of not seeming pleased with himself; PRESIDENT sits back in his chair after a moment, with a look of understanding.

The following lines from PRESIDENT and FIRST flow together, as though one man is speaking.

PRESIDENT

(to FIRST, his
expression/tone
acknowledging repetition
of earlier conversation
[ACT II, SCENE 1])

Inequity. That's how we'll do away with geographic
inequity...and once everyone has...food and clothes, and all
have access to education and materials of learning, medical
care...

FIRST

(quietly)

...once science accomplishes what the fundamental nature of
Man will never allow philosophy nor religion to fulfill...

PRESIDENT

(to himself, in wonder,
but aloud)

...then we can...we will have *finally* learned to care for
ourselves, *all* of ourselves...We will be *free*...free from the
curse at Eden's gate...

FIRST stoically nods once in affirmation.

AIDE

(after a few moments; to
FIRST and SECOND)

Then I bet we learn to travel really, *really* fast, right?

*FIRST involuntarily throws his head back in his chair,
hearing things he never expected to hear.*

*Seeing this, AIDE excitedly glances over at PRESIDENT, whose
weary grin tells AIDE to continue.*

AIDE (cont'd)

It only makes sense. Once we have the chance to...*relax* for
the first time -- ever -- we're going to want to take a
vacation, and see things we haven't seen before.

PRESIDENT
(after a moment, PRESIDENT
grows far more serious;
slowly to FIRST)

And once we're there, and have seen all there is to see, can make whatever we need, and have little else to do with ourselves, I wonder what we'll do next.

FIRST nods slightly, with look of a dignified man finding himself somewhere wholly unexpected, and still trying to measure ramifications.

PRESIDENT (cont'd)

You're here because you know you're going to run into us soon enough, and want to be able to say we've met.

PRESIDENT looks to AIDE.

PRESIDENT (cont'd)

What is it, 90, 95 percent of scientific discoveries we've made occurred in the past 100 years?

PRESIDENT looks back to FIRST.

PRESIDENT (cont'd)

It's exponential, isn't it.

FIRST
(after a moment)

We are here for the reasons I first stated. Though what you say is not without...merit...It is vital same mistakes not be repeated.

PRESIDENT

Two birds with one stone.

SECOND
(quietly, to AIDE)

I'm sorry?

AIDE
(quietly to SECOND)

Later.

PRESIDENT
(after a moment; to FIRST)

The machine applies parameters; the stuff reacts the only way it can, given it's nature...

FIRST
(after a moment; smiling slightly in acknowledgement)

You will find manipulation of matter pales in comparison to the complexities of abetting a culture.

Both are quiet for a moment.

PRESIDENT
Well...Let's return to the matter at hand...after one more question. The Prime Mover.

AIDE smiles. FIRST appears to immediately relax somewhat; SECOND looks questioningly at AIDE.

AIDE
(to SECOND)

He's asking since we now know where we came from, where you came from.

PRESIDENT does not respond, but looks expectantly directly into FIRST's eyes. FIRST doesn't blink.

FIRST
Some realities are consigned to antiquity. The relative savagery of our beginnings precludes verifiable proof, but...as we have just shown, histories do tend to repeat themselves. My...guess, is we are not the first, nor the last, to have...similar conversations.

PRESIDENT smiles, then looks at his watch.

PRESIDENT
(second sentence delivered
not without ironic humor)

I enjoyed that, but we need to get back on the clock, gentlemen. We were discussing the outright usurpation of countless people's most cherished beliefs.

PRESIDENT pauses and stands.

PRESIDENT (cont'd)

Despite science and despite reason, untold numbers essentially or absolutely believe the world began 4000 years ago, in a seven day span, and two people are responsible for the earth's population -- and that we know their names.

SECOND
(sincerely mystified)

Yes! You'd think the inbreeding alone would...

FIRST
(interrupting immediately)

That's enough on that...topic.

AIDE tries very hard not to laugh, and looks straight down.

PRESIDENT
(occasionally obviously
bemused throughout as he
sees AIDE struggling)

Actually, that's as astute a way to support my case as any...Some of us overlook centuries of mathematically dictated inbreeding, literal mountains of geological evidence, dinosaurs, carbon dating, the speed of light...with the point being we can.

(MORE)

PRESIDENT (cont'd)

If we want to believe something, need to believe, for whatever reason, there is nothing in this world...or out of it...to shake that faith.

AIDE
(still amused)

I...have to agree with that. It would honestly be easier, in one sense, if you gentleman had green skin, or were nine feet tall.

FIRST
(for the first time tired,
but smiling)

Why not both? I think we can all agree, it is much easier to believe than to think. But as you said, David...

AIDE reacts slightly but noticeably to the use of PRESIDENT's first name.

FIRST (cont'd)

...you are not where you once were. And I'm afraid we've reached a point where you are going to have to say something, and the amount of time we have spent together will...

FIRST searches for words.

AIDE
(after a moment)

If I may finish your sentence, necessitate what is said be of no small amount of substance?

FIRST

Precisely.

PRESIDENT

Nicely put, Tom.

PRESIDENT turns to FIRST, motioning slightly at SECOND, and retakes his seat.

PRESIDENT (cont'd)

And to think I was going to ask you to arrange a trade.

AIDE immediately shoots FIRST an "I told you so" look; FIRST stifles a smile.

PRESIDENT (cont'd)

All right. Let's look at the other end of this, before I decide what I may or may not say...

PRESIDENT takes a deep breath, looks at AIDE.

PRESIDENT (cont'd)

I step back behind my podium, and offer a perfectly detailed, accurate accounting of every moment of the past six days...What then?

AIDE

I...at first thought you should do just that, and let the chips fall...But...

AIDE glances down for a moment, smilingly slightly, self-conscious.

AIDE (cont'd)

We are still young, in a way, and...take ourselves more seriously than we should...We know we're scientifically not the center of the universe...

PRESIDENT

(darkly)

With some acknowledging that fact later than others...

AIDE nods in agreement and continues.

AIDE

...but in other ways...we still place ourselves high among the priorities of fate. We made a God in our image.

PRESIDENT
(first line directed to
SECOND; the next to AIDE;
remainder to FIRST and
SECOND)

Then decided He made us in His. Yeah...Humbling, isn't it?
But imposing that humility, this new reality all at once...it
would be the equivalent of a philosophical nuclear device, at
this point...We test such weapons from time to time, but it's
where that matters most, where and when...I can't drop this
on the world's dinner table now.

All are quiet for a few moments.

PRESIDENT (cont'd)

So...to cover all the bases...I know they'll never be happy
or satisfied, which lends a certain freedom...all this need
be is bulletproof...but that's something I'll do on my own.
Thank you all.

PRESIDENT stands suddenly.

*The others do likewise after a moment, after a moment's
surprise at the abrupt ending, and begin to move to EXIT.*

AIDE
(quietly, to FIRST)

Scotch?

FIRST nods heavily.

*AIDE nudges SECOND. We do not hear what is said. AIDE appears
to be asking SECOND if he wishes to join he and FIRST, and
they walk off miming explanation of "Two birds/one stone"
comment.*

AIDE and SECOND EXIT.

FIRST moves to follow, then turns to PRESIDENT.

FIRST

David...your Christ -- when He wanted to make something clear, absolutely clear, not always did He come out and say it.

PRESIDENT

(after a moment; sad smile)

I know...The parables were always my favorites...

DARKNESS, but for TELEVISION MONITOR, now moving at a wild, incomprehensible rate between scenes.

"The cosmos is a gigantic flywheel making 10,000 revolutions per minute. Man is a sick fly taking a dizzy ride on it."

H.L. Mencken

ACT III, SCENE 2

DARKNESS. We see and hear the following on TELEVISION MONITOR. Closely paralleling ACT I, Scene 1, we see the same newscasters.

FEMALE NEWSCASTER

It is now a matter of minutes until, we hope, all our questions will be answered. Possibly the most remarkable seven days in human history have come down to a speech the whole world will be watching.

MALE NEWSCASTER

There's certainly been nothing like it in our lives, Rebecca, no sense of...such potential for fresh knowledge, such unprecedented opportunity to learn not only about those who have visited us, but quite possibly about ourselves, and where we may be going...We haven't seen the President in public since his initial address; reports refer to him as tired but upbeat, and nothing but positive when dealing with those around him regarding the information he has, apparently, been chosen to convey.

FEMALE NEWSCASTER

I'm hearing the time may have come, Alan. We leave you now to watch, along with the rest of the world, truly historic words from the President of the United States.

LIGHTS RISE suddenly on a Presidential news conference identical to that of ACT I, SCENE 1. PRESIDENT begins speaking immediately, addressing the audience; this is again seen live on the monitor as well, again interspersed with images of individuals and crowds around the world quietly staring at other monitors.

PRESIDENT appears slightly worn, but up to the task before him. This time however, he clearly works from prepared material.

PRESIDENT

(after a moment)

Good evening, everyone. I'd first like to apologize for creating any suspense or unnecessary concern, due to the amount of time passed since you've seen me last. These seven days have been the longest of my life, but among the most fruitful, as I will explain.

Pause

PRESIDENT (cont'd)

Let me begin by saying these past days have done nothing to disprove the assertion of my first address: absolutely no harm nor ill will was meant from our Guests. You probably note I'm using the past tense; they have in fact left us, with no concrete plans to return within our lifetimes. This is a sad fact to me personally, as I...did enjoy their company.

They were here, again as I told you in my first address, to view the results of an experiment.

Pause

These men who are so far beyond us in terms of space travel and countless other areas, are still in their hearts scientists, and have been moving from planet to planet, studying the saline content of oceans throughout our galaxy, oceans which, some believe, are the source from which humanity first sprang. Long ago, their forefathers realized, through knowledge they have had far, far longer than ourselves to amass, that the oceans of our world might soon not be conducive to life -- tidal forces already apparent might soon grow too strong. They had seen it before, and chose to make a subtle change that had far-reaching repercussions. If this seems invasive, remember: they had firsthand reason to believe if no action were taken on their part, we would not be here today.

This change did not progress the way they envisioned.

(MORE)

PRESIDENT (cont'd)

An ocean is a body subject to almost infinite variations...Our variations led to what they once saw as an...anomaly, but which I now, and I hope they now, view as an inevitability, and something that with time became a strength. Our ocean is what it is; it could be no other, just as the tides it creates can effect and change only what our ocean's nature allows.

Our Guests were essentially in the neighborhood, for the first time in a long while, and realized we might ourselves soon take note of what they had done -- we have progressed that far. They were here not to take credit nor ask for our thanks, but merely to acknowledge a fact and make us aware, lest we confront an inexplicable reality and waste time on meaningless tangents, as opposed to paths which take us forward.

I found these past seven days that we, as a people, have much to look forward to in our future; I was privileged to meet men who are far beyond us in some ways, yet in others as intrigued by our world as was I by theirs. Despite the disparity in experience and subsequent knowledge, which might be thought to separate us, we found we shared...similar priorities.

They left nothing behind but the facts I have laid before you. No technology changed hands; I've no more idea how they travel so far so quickly than I did this time last week.

(MORE)

PRESIDENT (cont'd)

I wish I could be as...purely accurate as I would like to be, to pass along every detail, but this is a speech I agreed to give, one which our Guests acknowledged is an accurate reflection of the truth.

Pause

These are the last words I will ever speak on this subject. I can only hope I have earned enough faith in my character that this will not be forever held against me. Suffice it to say...I've found reason to think our oceans unique.

We are not where we once were, but we can be pleased and proud to know where we may go...with God's help, and the wisdom we earn through time. Good night, sleep well, and don't worry.

OFFSTAGE VOICE

We're out.

The TELEVISION MONITOR silently shows excited newscasters.

PRESIDENT shuffles his speech, and neatens it.

AIDE enters, holding 20 sheets of paper covered with typing.

AIDE

(genuinely concerned)

I...wish you had let me read that before you delivered it.

PRESIDENT

(unconcerned)

Really? Why's that?

AIDE

Well...remember in your first speech, where you said all that about "finding comfort," your people's comfort...How does the ocean fit into that?

PRESIDENT
(mock contemplative)

Americans love the beach, Tom. And think of the surfers.

PRESIDENT acknowledges AIDE's look of doubt, and grows more serious, and more tired.

PRESIDENT (cont'd)

I'll make it work. Or I won't, and I'll be fired...If it gets out of hand, I'll leak that they caused Katrina, something like that, and force myself to come clean...

PRESIDENT pauses, sighs.

PRESIDENT (cont'd)

Last week I had every intention of laying out the reality in its entirety, but...honesty and wisdom don't always walk arm in arm...There are no perfect lies, but this will ring true enough...People will believe anything if enough other people do and it makes them feel good, and the idea of some benevolent, wiser versions of ourselves dropping by to help us out is hardly frightening, and happens to be true.

PRESIDENT folds and places speech in his breast pocket.

PRESIDENT (cont'd)

I said nothing, but everything.

PRESIDENT and AIDE look at each other for a moment, both aware the matter is out of their hands.

PRESIDENT (cont'd)

You get it done?

AIDE

That's up to you. Read it through, and see if you can spot anything I left out...but I really don't think I could forget much.

PRESIDENT speaks as he takes papers from AIDE, quickly glancing through them.

PRESIDENT

Yeah, I wish we could, in a way...but since it's just the two of us, and I'll deny it till the day I die...you might get a bestseller out of it, but nobody would really take you seriously.

AIDE

(quick ironic smile
acknowledging similarity
to FIRST'S comments)

We're on the good side of a Catch 22 for once, if you pull this off...What are you going to do with it, anyway?

PRESIDENT gives AIDE an amused, quick "What business is it of yours?" look, but smiles when AIDE stares back, unblinking.

PRESIDENT

(after a moment)

There is a place in my office where there are codes, which should I use, at any moment I could have submarines poking out of the sea, and in thirty minutes end millions, if not billions of lives. You know that already.

AIDE nods slightly.

PRESIDENT (cont'd)

That's an obscene amount of power. And throughout history, positions of authority have been held by men who would feel genuinely compelled to use it -- they couldn't leave it alone. But not once, not once, has a man used any such power to its fullest extent who *believed* what this...

PRESIDENT twice thumps the papers with his finger.

PRESIDENT (cont'd)

...what this bit of *truth* could possibly undo. So...

PRESIDENT pauses for a moment.

PRESIDENT (cont'd)

I'll place this beneath the codes, in essence, sealed, with explicit instructions that under no circumstances is it to be opened until the day those codes are no longer in that office, and no other horror has evolved in their place. By then, maybe...

DARKNESS

We see and hear the following on TELEVISION MONITOR.

MALE NEWSCASTER #2

People are not going to be happy with what they have heard tonight. I smell editing, cover-up, conspiracy, whatever you want to call it -- I think this President has just, I'm sorry to put it this way, but I think he just dug his own political grave.

MALE NEWSCASTER #3

Will, we don't actually get paid to disagree, but it's all too clear we could. We just heard a man speak the truth.

(MORE)

MALE NEWSCASTER #3 (cont'd)

He told us what happened. He didn't provide every single detail, but the fact is...

At this point the TELEVISION MONITOR grows (as slowly as possible but noticeably) louder, and does not stop doing so until it reaches its highest level, ideally uncomfortable to hear.

MALE NEWSCASTER #2
(interrupting)

Steve, what facts? What exactly are you talking about? We don't know what actually happened, and it looks like we never will. I feel, just like I believe countless others will feel, that we were spoon-fed pablum tonight by someone who does not think we are ready for the truth. Who knows why our "Guests" were actually here, what they wanted, left behind, took away...

MALE NEWSCASTER #3
(smiling)

Well what exactly are you talking about? At least I have a point of reference. Will, your paranoia is getting to be cause for concern.

MALE NEWSCASTER #2
(smiling)

No more so than your casual acceptance of whatever you're told.

MALE NEWSCASTER #2 & MALE NEWSCASTER #3
(simultaneously)

I mean now come on/Now come on!

TELEVISION MONITOR, at its highest level of volume, suddenly shuts off.

end

*It is interesting when Man questions the reasons for his
existence. It is fascinating when he questions the
motivation for the question.*

