

L'ESPRIT D'ESCALIER

Or: The Spirit of the Stairway.

A Monodrama memory play by Jeffrey Wills. | jeffwills@gmail.com

The following is a performance piece for two actors, conceived as male and female, but conceivably of any sex with a little pronoun adjustment. The primary actor, designated here as “Actor” or “MAN”, tells the story, while the second primary actor or “WOMAN” mostly sleeps (in aid of the story) or embodies aspects of it without waking up. The action takes place in the mind of “MAN” and his process of sharing it with us is actually an embodiment of the way in which he dreams or retells this episode of his life over and over to himself. He exists in the now, but all the action of the story takes place in various phases of his past, and in some cases exclusively in his mind. In this way, the bedroom from which “MAN” tells us the story is the interior of his own mind.

The setting should be absolutely simple. There must be a mattress fitted with pale green sheets. Next to it should be a short stack of books, the top of which will represent Douglas Coupland’s in the action. Obscured behind the bed is a covered ashtray with an already-lit slim cigarette in it and a pair of sunglasses. When he enters, “Man” brings a red comforter with him that then becomes the mentioned red carpet.

The show begins with Jeff Buckley’s Mojo Pin as performed live at the Siné. His guitar is plucked softly twice, and he says: This is a song about a dream...

The guitar begins with a sharp, reverberating chord, on which the lights fall suddenly. The song begins with a few measures of instrumental music and simple tonal singing, during which the actors take their places on stage. The music fades into the voice-over as the lights gradually come up, revealing a woman asleep and tangled up in green sheets on the mattress and a man huddled under a red comforter in a far corner from her—

TEXT	ACTION
<p><u>Voice-over:</u> <i>Pallid and pale, Her calves idly rubbed one another Amidst my sheets While I watched enchanted By my distance from her From the other side of our red room.</i></p> <p><u>Actor:</u> The apartment had come with this immovable, blood-red carpeting in the main bedroom. At first it had been a difficult scar on an otherwise perfect lease, but a cluster of furniture with cheap wooden veneer and a healthy assortment of dulled green linens had soothed the damage. She fixed it up. She stirred. ↵</p>	<p>The VO may be the voice of the actor or a singer if one is used to cover the songs mentioned in the text.</p> <p>W is asleep with her calves revealed, but her face hidden, as it generally should be for the extent of the show. M is huddled under the red comforter away from her, watching and biting his nails. Gradually he rises, leaving the comforter spread on the floor, and addresses the audience.</p> <p>↵ W stirs after M tells us.</p>
<p><u>MAN:</u> “Are you awake?”</p>	
<p><u>WOMAN:</u> “Yes. I am.”</p>	
<p><u>Actor:</u> The sentence was too formed and even. She</p>	

wasn't awake, despite her claim. I continued to watch the intercourse of her legs, and how it articulated and punctuated itself through her twitching toes. It didn't surprise me, but she rose up quickly from my tangled pea-green sheets and spoke with less clarity and more panic.

W: "Did you just touch me?"

M: "No, sweetheart. You can go back to sleep. Sleep."

Actor:

She wavered, then gave in to the gravity and her pillow. The bitings of my fingernails lay scattered about me like dandruff in the thick, red fabric of the floor. It's a terrible habit, so bad as to be physically painful to me most of the time, and she is trying to get me to quit. Certainly this would be a more romantic moment if I had taken up smoking instead. I would smoke a dark, sweet brand of cigarette right now if I could, something European.

A myoclonic twitch erupted from her left elbow, but it only roused her briefly and quickly simmered down to a light bubbling motion. Maybe she was juggling tiny objects in some dream to be forgotten by 9:00. Can all our sleep be this restless, or active? How then do we ever feel rested? I winced as a bit of the corner cuticle tore off with my latest nibbling. It wouldn't stop me; I'd keep going and maybe move on to another digit if I struck blood.

I don't get insomnia very often. It comes to me maybe once a year, if that. I suppose I'm lucky. This night marked the third night in a row that I was unquestionably awake past 2:30. Each of those nights I watched her sleep and play out her subconscious circus. That night it occurred to me that the last time I had been privy to such a performance was way back when we first began to spend the nights with one another.

W wavers slightly and falls back into bed.

W's left elbow jerks involuntarily, rousing her slightly.

M bites nail to close to the quick and reacts.

M walks up closer to the audience to explain.

↪ I'm not sure when exactly it ended, but for months I would wake before her, sometimes by as much as an hour, and just lie still and watch her twitch and breathe. Some of it was a fear of waking her, or disturbing her delusion that we woke together to strands of Mozart floating on the air from nowhere, but a lot of it was something else. Something in the way she moves. She loves that song. Sometimes it's her favorite Beatles song.

↪ An inability to sleep makes me blur my realities. It loosens my grasp on distinction, and is like a drunkenness. I compose to forget, I sing in my head out loud. That night I was an insomned DJ, and the records were Bob Dylan. I had some strange merge of "Tangled Up In Blue" and "Shelter From the Storm" mingling about. It strikes me now that they couldn't be mixed, being as they are on the same album: Blood On the Tracks. Blood in between the toes of my bare feet, flecked with ragged, tiny crescent moons.

VO:

*When we first came together
In this bed,
She had bled.
My sheets were then
An untempered white pallet ↪
For her pain and my crimson shame.*

Actor:

How could I know it would be her first time? She gave no sign, no warning, and there was no hesitation in her coming to me. One night she was simply at my door, and the meaning was clear. All that was years ago, though. Why think of that now? Why watch her sleep?

She sighed. Something inside my chest floated high and glided gradually back down.

The woman I was with before her was my image of New York. ↪ She was an

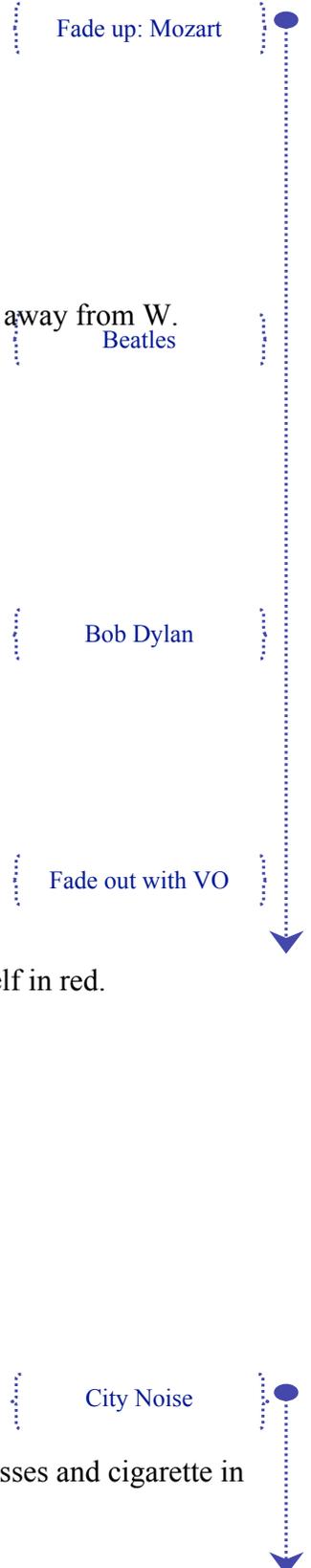
↪ M gradually travels back toward W and bed as he speaks.

↪ M abruptly breaks away from W.
Beatles

↪ M re-wraps him self in red.

↪ Acro: angel.

↪ W stands with glasses and cigarette in place.

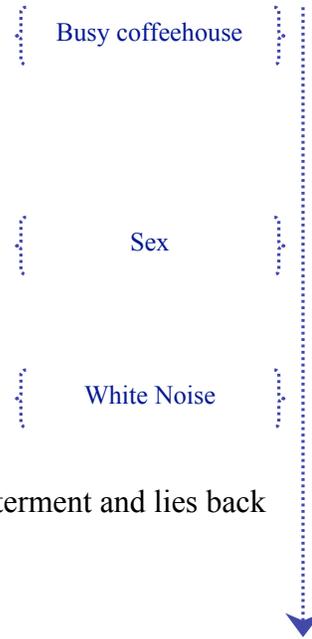


incarnation of all the bounty and echo-space of the urban sprawl, all twigs and breasts and heroin eyes. We used to meet at coffeehouses and stare into the spaces around one another, sipping and flirting with the possibility of eye contact. It was almost as if to regard one another directly would have been offensive. When we would come together in bed, at her place or on my mattress (the one now beneath her legs and my green sheets) there would be much less kissing than I was used to. It would be all frantic rubbing and the dialogue of unnaturally quick breaths. Afterwards ↻ my drugged-eye beauty would eventually pass out after smoking a cigarette, and when she slept it made her fifteen pounds heavier. She moved that little and rested that assuredly. She smoked some slim, “lite” brand. Strange to think of her, then, too.

She sighed again, ↻ and it felt like she was saying goodbye to something. I was getting progressively farther and farther away, each night I stayed awake. The first night this happened, in all its strangeness, I lay petrified next to her still. ↻ The fear shook me somehow, a fear of waking her perhaps, or perhaps it was just of being awake when I knew I shouldn't have been. Sometime after that I gathered the will to at least give in to the compulsion of my nails, which led me step by step to where I ↻ stood across the room, where it seemed to me I might stay, forever ever. It was impossible to imagine taking my eyes off of her for a moment, much less letting a door divide her from me. Where would I find myself if I did? Where would I be without her tender quivering?

VO:

*Dylan quaked around my mind
When I dared
A few steps aside and away,
Diving into deep red
From her tangled legs and sheets
And up in blue.*



↻ W removes accouterment and lies back down.

↻ W turns halfway to ceiling and exhales smoke in a sigh.

↻ M lays with his back to her, facing the audience.

↻ M moves from biting nails to across room as he speaks.

Actor:

In a year, in less than a year, we would be living in different cities. She and I would listen to different music and sleep in different beds. I didn't know that then, though, especially that late at night with my mind awash in insomniac torpor. All I knew was that amazing fear I felt. It's a temptation to call it a prophetic moment, like Juliet's vision of Romeo beneath the water, but I've never believed in that kind of thing. Douglas Coupland suggests ↻ in his book Life After God that our sense of irony "is the price we paid for the loss of God." Irony doesn't come naturally to me. Neither does God. Nothing does, really, except maybe my compulsions. Nail-biting, ↻ book-stacking, line walking: these are the rituals and ceremonies of my religious experiences. At some point in this night of watching her sleep it occurs to me that perhaps God does exist after all and that He's trying to get at me through my senseless channels. Perhaps he was just punishing me with these rituals, though, punishing me for my compulsive blindness and distraction.

It can be difficult to distinguish punishment from reward. I still love her. I still think every day of this night of frantic observance. Punishment or reward? The memory is pleasant, full though it is of fear, and regret, and unrelenting longing. It's like going through old letters or photos; ↻ it's that kind of stimulation.

↻ Things may have been different if I had woken her one of those nights. If I had gone to her sleeping side, the curve of her back, and slid myself into it and broken the spell...who knows? In my mind I try to wake her up, I make love to her or just smooth the subtle lines forming in her face. It is always an effort, though. I am always aware that these things did not happen, that I never woke her or even went to her in my

Y' Acro: ?

↻ M scoops up top book from stack.

↻ M replaces book on stack.

↻ M flips the pages of a book; photographs fly out and litter the floor.

↻ M gets in bed and does these things. W doesn't "wake."

solitude of consciousness. She danced on her sleeping dance and I did nothing but watch and be amazed and fearful.

Can you see how beautiful she is, just from this, from what I've told you? Her beauty made me completely vulnerable; I don't know if I ever showed her that, but it did. It washed away all my efforts, all my irony, and so maybe that was it. Maybe her beauty is what wouldn't allow me to sleep, what flung me desperately into biting my nails and inching away from her. She showed me what was real, and it was intolerable. Like God, what's real needed a filter and mediation or it would happily destroy me. I couldn't understand it, but I could feel it. Without some wall, some barrier or window, I would be destroyed. The feeling, the intuition pushed me on and, that night, I edged my way past the door and out of that room. ↵

W: "Take me ↵
If you go!
I'll leave
Forever ever!"

Actor:
I rushed back to her, ↵ a tide, just as natural and uncontrollable.
I held her face, and it smoothed under my touch, and she didn't wake, not once. She rubbed her calves together and her slumber deepened again. I spoke to her in a whisper.

M: "It's all too much, but thank you for it all.
I need your touch, and even when I fall
For you over and over and we cry and scream,
Ever and ever you and I are my best dream."

↵
VO:
I love you.

↵M exits.

↵W extends an arm to the door.

↵M enters and goes to W.

↵M & W fall back into bed in an embrace.
Lights fade down as "Asleep & Dreaming"
by Magnetic Fields fades up.

