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Cast of Characters

JOE

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All production groups performing this play are required to include the following credits on the title page of every program:

Am Lit, or Hibernophilia was first commissioned by Keen Company (Carl Forsman Artistic Director), and performed by Daniel Gerroll as directed by Andrew Dickey at the José Quintero Theatre in New York City in 2001.

The play was subsequently produced in the Ensemble Studio Theatre Marathon of One-Acts (Kurt Dempster Artistic Director) in New York City in 2002, with Tom Bloom and directed by Kevin Confoy.

AM LIT
or
HIBERNOPHILIA

by Dan O'Brien

1

JOE. Katherine Sullivan, 35 Presentation Ave, Off Cathedral Road, Cork City, IRELAND:

Kate.

Remember me?

It's Joe.

I remembered you today. Going through some old box and what should I find but you? —a picture of you—you and me in Cobh. “Site of sinking of the *Lusitania*.” An Italian tourist took it. That statue of the emigrants leaving Ireland behind, pointing out across the ocean towards New York: In the picture I have my right nostril hooked onto the pointing, sculpted finger of a famine victim. You are laughing gorgeously.

What is it about that country? your country, I mean—Ireland. All these years, I can't seem to get it out of my mind ...

I remember, when I came home, with that accent and a scorching case of mononucleosis—what was it?, twenty-five, -six years ago? (Jesus Christ! Jesus!)—and the nurse was taking blood and she could see I was about to pass out from the sight of it, and she said:

“Do you think the Irish are the soul of literature?” (She knew where I'd been.)

Well I couldn't answer, you see; I'd already passed out.

But the point is I think they are: I think you are: The soul of literature.

You will say I am just being romantic. You always said I was a hopeless romantic.

—I can't believe I'm writing this.

I've wanted to write you a hundred times—thousands. But each time I got a page in I said, Now who am I writing to?

Who?

You know what I mean, Kate?

So how've you been?

Someone once told me you got married, I forget who. Connor, I think. I saw him in Boston in the snow on a street corner years ago. Do you see him much anymore?

I got married, too.

And I'm writing because I've been thinking, Kate:

About Ireland, but not all the hokey stuff, the bogs and pints and dog shite in the sidewalk, but things like the weather, like walking through Cork City like a beehive with you in a very light warm rain, or the sweet burnt smell of hops and barley lying fat like fog in the gutter off South Main; or that moon in April when we drove all the way out to Blarney Castle because I'd told you—I'd told you I liked you and you said you liked me too and what else could we do but drive out to the country, and pull over in the weeds, and kiss, and talk, and make love, your face like touching a mirror—.

I swear I'm not being romantic.

I'm not drunk, either.

I don't write poetry anymore: I'm a college professor now.

And I'm writing because I'm leaving, America, for good. And I'm coming back to Ireland. And I'd very much like to see you again, if you're free—.

2

Dear Genealogy Detectives:

I saw your ad in the *New Yorker*.

I am planning to return to my ancestral homeland of Ireland soon, and would very much like my roots dug up for me.

Here is what I have already:

My father's family starts with five brothers who came to the U.S. from God knows where—Ireland, we think—and four out of five died in the American Civil War.

Union-side. There's no proof whatsoever anyone ever lived down south, so that whole slavery thing can really just be crossed off the list.

Anyway:

My grandmother's mother was from the Alsace-Lorraine region of France, which might make her French or German, depending on the dates.

Her mother was married in Wexford, so there's Viking blood in me, no?

Her father came from England, I'm sad to say.

—But here's an interesting story:

This side of the family is descended from a famous English poet who wrote satirical verse concerning rich people with flatulence.

Yes! It's true! To this day that poet has a plaque in Westminster Abbey. I shit you not.

His son lived in New York following the American Revolution and knew Ben Franklin—who was himself quite flatulent, by most accounts.

His great-grandson (my great-grandfather) was the vaudeville comic who wrote the famous "Talking Horse" sketch of 1896, which was subsequently stolen from him and bastardized in that 1950s television show the title of which I refuse to mention.

"A horse is a horse of course of course..."

To all inexpert calculations that makes me 5/8 Irish, 1/8 Franco-Prussian, and 1/4 English. But you can make statistics say just about anything, so—.

Some other facts you might find helpful whilst digging:

I am of above-average height. My hair is thick and silver-tinged. I am newly-widowed, a professor of American Literature at

a small mid-western liberal arts college that shall remain nameless. I have been told I have a slight British accent, but I think that's only because I make a point of enunciating clearly. I have a vaguely Semitic nose, but that could be more nurture than nature. A tarot-card reader once told me I was destined for a great journey, but be careful, she said, "You have eyes that suggest a susceptibility to magic."

—What do you make of that?

I know it's confusing and I can't guarantee the "truth" of anything I've just written but I will treasure tremendously anything you can dig up. Money is no object. Just send the bill, or perhaps I will pay in person next time I'm in Dublin—.

3

Con:

Long time no email.

Hope you haven't given up your Socialism. Hope you haven't bought a front tooth to plug that charming gap of yours. "Teeth are so bourgeois!" (Sideways smiley face.)

Remember that?

"Line up all the landlords and have them shot." Aha ha— (Sideways winkie smiley face.)

Good craic, good craic.

Remember that pub with the ghost of the dead monk in it? What was it called? *The Well*?

I don't remember when last we spoke. Probably, what, that day in Boston when you were in town for the Poli Sci. You mentioned Kate. By any chance do you know if she's still hitched?

Anyway, I'm writing to you because I'm leaving America. For good. And I'm wondering if there might be a teaching position you know of somewhere in Ireland? If you're still at this e-address, you're still in Galway, and if you could ask around for me, I'd be much obliged.

Do you know where I've been?

Nowhere. Smack in the middle of it. Middle America. That is, Heartland.

It's been terrifying.

I've always been terrified of America. I've tried to be patriotic, to get hot for flags and eagles and guns and FreedomLibertyHappiness for all and all that other shit, but to quote your good friend Mr. Joyce: "I distrust those big words which make us so happy." And he was talking of patriotism, too.

Of course there's always the possibility I'm just a snob.

I remember arguing with you, years back. You were of the opinion, still quite popular, that Americans have no real culture. And that by extension American Literature, you said, has the aesthetic weight of a quilt.

I forget what my argument was in defense. Something about rugged prose: Mark Twain and Hemingway.

Well you know what? After all these years:

I think Henry James is just about the most boring thing I've ever read.

And Mark Twain? Racist. Hemingway? Gay.

Leatherstocking Tales? Don't even get me started.

(Dickinson I like; but you know how I love women.)

And it's not just the books! American students are hopeless. They come to class and can't construct a sentence. They can't finish a novel. They can't read. Even those that are semi-literate have no idea how to read—to actually read! They rent the movies of the books I assign. Do you know how difficult it is to find classics of American Literature that do not have cinematic corollaries?

Everyone's so obsessed with being fem lit or gay lit or black lit or even dead white lit for that matter because they have no idea who they really are!

But the Irish know exactly who they are!

You will say this is just Joe being romantic again.

You will say the Irish are no more cultured than Americans.

People kill people in Ireland too, you'll say. (Let's not talk of Belfast, Con—Belfast's not Ireland, and we both know it.)

I read somewhere that Limerick is called "Stab City": A man attacks a crowd with a knife and he does relatively little damage; give that man an automatic handgun—.

But no! the Irish are kind and hospitable!

The Irish are poetic, and musical

The Irish have lovely lilting tongues.

The Irish are stubborn, yes, but—.

The Irish are passionate dreamers!

The Irish are a race of children.

The Irish know the world of myth and mystery.

The Irish are entertaining liars.

The Irish are sentimental.

The Irish are big drinkers; they stay up late evenings writing old friends desperate emails if you don't get me this job Con I'm going to fucking blow my brains out.

(Sideways winkie smiley face.)

Ha ha, got you there, Con!

What do you say?

Reply A-SAP, and let me know:

I can teach anything: Yeats or Synge or Wilde or Joyce or Beckett, or Synge, or Shaw or Keene or Behan or Friel doesn't matter just somebody who's not American for fuck's sake Con please—!

4

Hello?

Hi—who's this?

This is Joe. Who's this?

—Who's this?

Oh, Aunt Josephine—I didn't recognize—. What are you doing there?

Yes, well I'm out in—

Yes, well it's hard to get away from—

Listen, can I speak to Mom?

Sure, I'll hold.

(Jesus H.—)

Hello?

Yes, Aunt Jo; still here.

Yes, I got your card.

Yes, it's a year now. One year exactly this week.

Hard to believe.

Thank you.

Thank you very much.

—Comedic, I think.

I said it's not "tragic," really, it's "comic." Tragedy implies my wife was somehow guilty of something.

I said tragedy implies—. Forget it.

—Can you put Mom on?

Hi Mom, it's Joe.

No, I'm not a black man.

No, I'm not Joe your nurse, I'm—

Your son.

Listen, I want to let you know I'm moving, and—.

To Ireland.

Yes, I know you're Irish. Your maiden name was—I remember that.

The real reason I'm calling, Mom, is I could use a little help.

Just for the transition, really.

After that, I'll be able to save again.

—What do you think? Can you help me?

...Well that's a fantastic dish, isn't it.

Who. And Barbara doesn't mind. I said your friend Barbara doesn't mind that he's sleeping with—. Oh he's not. Well that happens when you're older. Yes I agree physical love is an integral part of a healthy relationship—.

Margaret was killed, Mom. In a movie theatre, in the afternoon.

This guy walked in near the end of the movie and shot six people, then himself... He kept saying, Do you know who I am?

Mom?

No, I already spoke with Aunt Josephine—.

5

Mrs. George Boyle (née Katherine O'Sullivan), #10 Lockview Drive, Clashduv, County Cork, IRELAND:

Dear Joe,

(My God, her handwriting!)

I got your letter today by post ("by post"!) forwarded to me by my mother who is still alive if you'll believe it now and was v. suprised and read it three or four X over and still can't make heads nor tails of it but am writing you back all same and thought I'd better fax it quick.

(She never understood commas; what is it with women and commas?)

Where you lit when you wrote it? You seemed right pissed, (comma, thank you) listen I'm flattered you're thinking of me but I don't think its deserved I'm at least 47 now and you should see my arse in spandex I'm still happily married thanks.

(Why would she fax this?)

I have 8 children.

All of whom are doing well Ryall's in university and Sinead runs a dot-com if you can believe it now that does the research for lineage for the Americans with nothing better to spend their money on.

(Shit.)

And I'm sorry to say but your mistaken in your memory of that night at Blarney Castle because I've never been to Blarney Castle with you or anyone else (commas, woman, commas!) though you and I once snogged in a parking lot behind the Blarney Stone a pub in Ballincollig it's true! I remember it was v. cold in the car and I did not enjoy it one bit our kissing nothing personal you were not my type don't you wonder why we never kissed again?

(...)

At this point I think its safe to say we hardly know each other, don't you—?

6

Hey.

(Hey.)

What's up?

(Nothing.)

How's school?

(Fine.)

Listen: We've got to talk. Sit down. You know how I used to live in Ireland—

(No.)

Well I did. Twenty-six years ago—

(You never told me that.)

Well actually I have told you that. I'm sure I have.

(No. You never did.)

The point is I've been doing a lot of thinking, since your mother died—

(snorts)

—Since your mother died. And I've decided to move back.

(—?)

To Ireland.

(Are you fucking kidding me?)

Just for a while. Not for good, necessarily. For a year maybe—we'll play it by ear.

(I'm not going.)

You have to go: You're my son.

(I'm not—.)

Look, I know this is a lot to handle all at once—

(Why don't you ask me? Why don't you talk to me?)

I'm talking to you: I'm talking right now: Talk to me:

(... This is—I don't—this is so—Whatever!)

Listen, I understand how you feel—

(—Bullshit!)

This is not a big deal, James! It's like getting a job transfer, and would you please lower you—

(What am I supposed to do in Ireland? Hang around with a bunch of fucking leprechauns?)

They're not leprechauns, James—they speak English—and since when is it okay to swear in front of your father?

(Sorry, I guess I'm just speaking fucking Irish now!)

This is not open to debate! We are moving to Ireland and that's—!

(What's so great about Ireland?)

...

Fine. Stay here, see what I care.

7

Dear God,

No one seems to think this is a very good idea.

I wonder if you could make things a bit clearer for me.

Because it made perfect sense a couple weeks ago.

But now I'm doing all sorts of weird things.

Like praying.

I don't even know if I believe in God.

—Isn't that funny?

That doesn't even seem like a question that I should answer right now.

You'd think, after everything I've been through this past year, I'd want to know for sure if there was someone on the other end of this line, listening.

I know there's someone listening.

But what I really want, as long as we're talking wishes, is to be able to talk to her.

Please God protect me on my journey. Keep my son safe here with his Aunt Josephine, may he forgive his poor foolish father this his heart's whim.

Amen.

(Is that my cell phone?)

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