

THE WHITE PAGES

One-Act Comedy

by
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SCENE 1

The Book Traders Book Store. A sign advertises, "Used Books Bought and Traded." A slightly smaller sign invites, "Browsers Welcome." An even smaller sign, virtually invisible to the audience, says, among other things, "No Refunds." TOTO, the quintessential empty young man, endlessly stacks books on one end of a counter, then restacks them on the other side. Lining the store walls are locked, glass bookcases. NANCY, the store owner and TOTO's aunt, stands behind the counter by the cash register. ROBERT, a CUSTOMER and the kind of guy who looks like an avid reader without being nerdy about it, tentatively reaches out to make sure the books are really glassed-in.

NANCY: Would you like a piece of fruit?

ROBERT: What?

NANCY: A piece of fruit. With your book.

ROBERT: Do people usually -

NANCY: Yes. Yes, they do.

ROBERT: Oh. Okay.

NANCY: Be right back.

(NANCY exits. Enter FIRST CUSTOMER carrying three books. ROBERT reads the spines to see what SHE has.)

FIRST CUSTOMER: *(a friendly smile for ROBERT)* Dubliners. Joyce? I found it both a vivid and unflinching portrait of dear, dirty Dublin at the turn of the century and a moral history of a nation and a people whose golden age has passed.

ROBERT: Ah yes. "The Dead."

FIRST CUSTOMER: The dead what?

ROBERT: "The Dead?" The last story - isn't it? I remember all that beautiful imagery with the snow blanketing the living and the dead.

FIRST CUSTOMER: *(no idea what HE's talking about)* Oh. Yes. It was a vivid and unflinching portrait.

(NANCY returns with a small basket containing an apple, an orange, a peach and a pear. FIRST CUSTOMER browses the locked bookcases.)

NANCY: There we are. Which would you like?

(ROBERT points at the orange.)

NANCY: There you are.

ROBERT: I'll bet normally the fruit basket's ready and waiting.

NANCY: Oh - I just hadn't put it out yet.

ROBERT: You were probably shocked when I walked in.

NANCY: Why would I -

ROBERT: Oh. I thought... I work at the insurance company on the corner. Golden Eagle? I thought maybe you knew I worked there and figured an insurance guy wouldn't read books. I'm an insurance adjuster. We're not exactly known for being bookish.

NANCY: What sort of insurance...

ROBERT: Homeowner's *et al.* Fire mostly.

NANCY: Oh.

ROBERT: Childhood habit - I liked to fix things for the neighbors, so now I clean up their accidents. Sort of. *(beat)* Is that glass fireproof?

NANCY: I don't know.

ROBERT: Last thing you probably need is more insurance. Don't worry. I'm an adjuster, not a salesman. *(checks his watch)* An adjuster who's about to be late for work.

NANCY: *(smiles and opens one of the locked cabinets and pulls out a book)* And here's your book. Receipt's stuck inside.

ROBERT: Thank you. *(ROBERT starts to exit, scanning the bookcases for a moment before HE goes. FIRST CUSTOMER approaches NANCY.)*

NANCY: Molly, I didn't even see you come in.

FIRST CUSTOMER: *(hands NANCY the three books SHE brought)* Dubliners was absolutely stunning. It was both a vivid and unflinching portrait of dear, dirty Dublin at the turn of the century and a moral history of a nation and a people whose golden age has passed.

NANCY: What can I get for you today?

(ROBERT, now at the door, opens the book to take out the receipt and stops short.)

FIRST CUSTOMER: Surprise me. If you have something with a blue cover, that would be wonderful. We're having a dinner party tonight, and I think the tablecloth is going to be blue.

NANCY: Let me see what I have in the back.

(Exit NANCY. ROBERT approaches TOTO who continues to sort books back and forth.)

ROBERT: I think there's been a mistake. This book -

TOTO: Looks like a nice one.

ROBERT: It has nothing in it.

TOTO: What? **(ROBERT hands it to him. TOTO fans the pages.)** What are you talking about? There's zillions of pages.

ROBERT: They're blank.

TOTO: Really.

ROBERT: Look.

(TOTO examines the pages very slowly. ROBERT looks to FIRST CUSTOMER for support. SHE smiles rapidly and turns away, occupying herself with her fingernails.)

TOTO: There's different shades of white. That's cool.

ROBERT: What!

TOTO: Look - that's kind of creamy white, and that part over there - in the corner - is... white white.

ROBERT: Where's the writing?

TOTO: Right here. **(points to the front and back covers)** Thomas Hardy's Return of the Native is a masterpiece of tragic passion, a tale that perfectly epitomizes the author's own unique and melancholy genius. It's the forerunner of the twentieth century psychological novel - okay?

ROBERT: Inside. Where's the writing inside? **(beat)**

TOTO: Aunt Nancy! **(to ROBERT)** Aunt Nancy's coming.

NANCY: **(enters carrying three books; to FIRST CUSTOMER)** I have a blue, a white and a black. They should match fine.

FIRST CUSTOMER: You're a lifesaver. Take care now. Bye, Toto.

TOTO: **(almost drooling)** Bye. **(FIRST CUSTOMER exits.)**

NANCY: **(to ROBERT)** Can I help you?

ROBERT: This book is blank.

NANCY: Yes? **(checks the covers as TOTO did)**

ROBERT: You really should check the books more carefully before you resell them.

NANCY: Would you like another piece of fruit?

ROBERT: I'd like another book.

NANCY: Would you like to look at our catalogue? **(SHE shoves a large pile of pictures at him. HE holds it at arm's length, not looking at it.)**

ROBERT: I really should get to work. Do you have anything else by Hardy? Tess of the D'Urbervilles? Jude the Obscure?

NANCY: I loved the movie. Tess. According to the catalogue **(flips through the pictures)** we should have one copy.

ROBERT: Of the movie or the book?

NANCY: **(smiling, thinks HE's made a joke)** The book, silly. **(scans one of the locked cabinets and finds what SHE's looking for)**

ROBERT: Why do you keep the books in locked cabinets?

NANCY: People are greedy. They try to read the books without paying for them.

ROBERT: Not because of fire then.

NANCY: **(shakes her head and unlocks the cabinet, pulls Tess, then relocks the cabinet)** Here we go. **(reading the jacket)** From what I understand, Tess Durbeyfield is Hardy's most striking and tragic heroine.

ROBERT: I've always wanted to read it.

NANCY: The novel builds to a tragic climax that makes Tess of the D'Urbervilles one of the most poignant and heartbreaking novels in all of English literature.

ROBERT: Oh. **(beat)** Have you ever read Last of the Mohicans?

NANCY: Loved it. Even gave it to Toto to read.

TOTO: Yeah. It was this unforgettable portrait of fierce individualism, deep moral courage, and profound friendship. It's rich with insight into our national character and consciousness.

NANCY: When I saw you walk in with the Cooper, I said to myself, "someone will snap that right up."

TOTO: I heard you. You said, "someone will snap that right up."

NANCY: That and the... uh, Pyn... Pun...

ROBERT: Pynchon. Thomas Pynchon. Gravity's Rainbow.

NANCY: Don't know that one.

ROBERT: Wonderful.

NANCY: I'm sure it's lovely. **(beat)** Don't you worry. We'll make sure the books you brought us go to good owners. **(beat)** Would you have any interest in joining our Book Traders club? For a seventy-five dollar annual membership, you can trade for any book in the store, and when you're done with it - assuming you haven't ripped off the cover or peed on it - you can trade your book for another one.

ROBERT: For free?

NANCY: Of course for free. Once you get your membership, you can keep on trading all year long. You could even start with this book.

ROBERT: **(considering)** Hmmmm...

NANCY: I don't remember - did you want another piece of fruit?

ROBERT: Just the book. Thanks. I should go...

NANCY: Wrapped?

ROBERT: What's that?

NANCY: Would you like your book wrapped?

ROBERT: In wrapping paper?

NANCY: Or a bag.

ROBERT: No - thanks. **(NANCY hands him Tess.)** Thank you.

NANCY: Come back soon.

(SHE exits, leaving TOTO at the counter. ROBERT begins to exit, but eager to get a start on reading Tess, HE opens the book and realizes it is also empty. Enter grandly SECOND CUSTOMER, female and a contemporary of FIRST CUSTOMER, brandishing Hemingway's For Whom the Bell Tolls.)

SECOND CUSTOMER: This Hemingway was greater in power, broader in scope and more intensely emotional than any of the author's previous works. One of the best war novels of all time.

ROBERT: May I see that for a second? **(SECOND CUSTOMER hands the book to ROBERT.)** Blank. The pages are blank.

SECOND CUSTOMER: But Hemingway was greater in power, broader in scope and more intensely emotional than in any of his previous works. It was one of the best war novels of all time.

ROBERT: Excuse me. **(turns his attention to TOTO who continues to stack and restack books mindlessly; shoves Tess in TOTO's face)** This book has no writing in it. And neither does this book. **(waves For Whom the Bell Tolls at TOTO)** And neither does the book I had before. **(brief pause)** I gave you three classics - a Cooper, a Pynchon and a Singer. An *Isaac Bashevis Singer*. And the books you've given me - there's nothing in them. Empty pages. Creamy white pages. Tan white pages. Yellow white pages, and *white* white pages. Where the hell's the text?

TOTO: Aunt Nancy?

SECOND CUSTOMER: **(rips her book away from ROBERT, to TOTO)** My friend Molly says that William Faulkner's Light in August features some of Faulkner's most memorable characters. Could I trade the Hemingway for the Faulkner?

TOTO: Faulkner?

ROBERT: **(to TOTO)** Do you work here?

TOTO: Aunt Nancy?

(Enter NANCY, wearing a soot-stained apron and clutching the cover of Gravity's Rainbow.)

SECOND CUSTOMER: What's that one? Is it new? It looks so interesting: Gravity's Rainbow. I'd like that one.

ROBERT: **(recognizes his book; beat)** That's my book!

NANCY: Oh. Excuse me. **(removes the apron; to SECOND CUSTOMER)** Would you like a piece of fruit with that?

SECOND CUSTOMER: Do you have any plums?

NANCY: I can check in the back.

SECOND CUSTOMER: Would you?

NANCY: **(starts to exit, leaving the copy of Gravity's Rainbow on the counter)** New crate came in this morning. So busy I haven't had time to check it.

ROBERT: But -

NANCY: With you in a minute. **(exits)**

ROBERT: **(turns back to TOTO)** Excuse me.

TOTO: She'll be back in a minute.

ROBERT: **(picks up the copy of Gravity's Rainbow to inspect)** What did you do to the pages?! You tore out all the pages!

SECOND CUSTOMER: **(tugging on Gravity's Rainbow)** Excuse me. I'm taking that.

ROBERT: It doesn't have any pages!

SECOND CUSTOMER: No pages?

ROBERT: Look. **(shows SECOND CUSTOMER the empty cover)**

SECOND CUSTOMER: Toto, where are the pages?

TOTO: *(shrugs)* I can get some. *(TOTO fumbles under the counter and grabs a bunch of unevenly sized, empty sheets of paper, and a bottle of glue. TOTO takes the book back from ROBERT, slops some glue inside the cover and attaches some of the pages.)*

ROBERT: What are you doing?

TOTO: There's no pages.

NANCY: *(returns with a nectarine)* I have nectarines. I also have figs. And what's in the basket.

ROBERT: *(to NANCY)* Excuse me, but I need to get to work. I want a refund on Gravity's Rainbow, and I want my other two books back.

NANCY: Be with you in a moment. *(hurriedly finishing TOTO's glue job and handing Gravity's Rainbow to SECOND CUSTOMER)* Gravity's Rainbow by Thomas Pynchon. And here's your nectarine.

SECOND CUSTOMER: I know Molly will just drop dead from envy when she finds out I've read the Pynchon. I'm seeing her tonight. She's throwing a dinner party. *(smells the nectarine)* Mmm... *(exits)*

NANCY: Can I help you?

ROBERT: I want my other books back and a refund on Gravity's Rainbow.

NANCY: Polly - the woman who just left - she's in our book club, so I'm sure I can get Gravity's Rainbow back for you. Good as new - she doesn't even open them. We don't actually give refunds. And the other two books, they haven't even left the store yet. All better?

ROBERT: I want my book the way it was.

NANCY: The way it was.

ROBERT: Where are my old pages? Where's Gravity's Rainbow?

NANCY: *(beat)* Toto, go clean out the furnace.

TOTO: Aw, do I hafta? You hardly pay me anything -

NANCY: You're my nephew.

END OF FREE PREVIEW