

Excerpt

GUIDED TOUR

A play

by

Peter Snoad

Peter Snoad
50 Dunster Road
Jamaica Plain, MA 02130
U.S.A.
(617) 522-4219
peter@petersnoad.com

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GUIDED TOUR

CHARACTERS

JOE BELL, a tour guide, African American, 33 to 64 (depending on the scene)

SUSANNA HATCH, a student, white, 23

LINDSAY PETTIGREW, an heiress, white, 40's

MARTHA MCNAB, a psychiatrist, 40's

TIME

The action of the play shifts in time within the period 1958 to 1986

SETTING

A prison psychiatric unit and a Rhode Island mansion

GUIDED TOURACT ONESCENE ONE

A bare stage. Dark. A soft light comes up on the figure of a white woman, LINDSAY PETTIGREW. She is elegantly dressed in a pale gown and she wears an African mask. After a moment, she slowly removes the mask, wraps it in her arms, and draws it close to her chest with great tenderness and affection. We hear music—the spare and haunting rhythm of an *mbira* (a Shona thumb piano). Slowly, languidly, and with a contemplative passion, LINDSAY dances around the stage. The music and the lights fade. Immediately, the lights come up on JOE BELL.

JOE is a well-groomed African American man of 46, sharply dressed—colorful cravat, blue blazer, well-polished loafers. He radiates charm and a folksy good humor. We are in the vestibule of Elmwood Hall, a mansion in Newport, Rhode Island where JOE is a guide. It is 1970. His tour party is the audience. In this and other subsequent scenes at the mansion, the stage is bare. The interiors of the rooms—the décor, fixtures, furniture—are imagined by the audience, aided by the dialogue, lighting and sound effects.

JOE

Mornin'! How we all doing?

(He elicits some audience response)

Good, that's good. My name is Joe Bell and I'm your tour guide today. Welcome to Elmwood Hall, one of the most famous, most historically significant mansions in these United States. Who's been here before? Anyone? Ok-ay. But I bet you seen it in the movies. We've had a bunch of movies made here. Know what they were?

(Beat.)

JOE (CONT.)

Oh come on now, we ain't got no movie buffs here today? What you folks do on a Saturday night? Or shouldn't I ask.

WOMAN'S VOICE

(From the auditorium)

The Great Gatsby.

JOE

Thank you, ma'am, you go to the head of the class. And High Society—Grace Kelly, Bing Crosby and all the rest, 'course that was set right here in Newport. Just last month they were here shooting The Golden Bowl, based on the Henry James novel, it'll be in your local theatres next year. But, hey, who needs celluloid, right? Today, you get to see Elmwood Hall in the flesh, up close and personal. Which is a whole different experience, let me tell you. A feast for the senses. An artistic cornucopia.

(Catching the eye of a child and explaining)

Like the biggest hot fudge sundae you ever seen. How about you go get one later, huh? Julia's Homemade on Ferry Road—that's the place to go. You gonna take her? Yeah, see, your Mom's going to take you. They got the best chocolate chip, the *best*. And say Joe sent you—they'll give you free fudge.

(To the whole group)

Now, first thing you all should know about Elmwood Hall: it's not a mansion, it's a cottage. I'm serious. Okay, so it is seven thousand square feet, and it's got thirteen bedrooms, and ten bathrooms, and a dining room that seats forty-six, and a ballroom you could play football in, and three acres of formal gardens all the way down to the beach. But this is a *cottage*, a summer cottage. Well, it was back then at the turn of the century. In So-ci-ety. A cottage was where you came for five weeks in the summer, for the social season. And the place to come was Newport, Rhode Island, *the* favorite summer playground of the rich and famous. Now you and I, we'd get by, right, a lil' ole cottage like this, we'd just grin and bear it. But maybe you would feel a teeny bit cramped if your regular old home was three times the size and covered two entire blocks of Fifth Avenue in New York City. Which happened to be the case with Althea Monroe Chase. That's her right there.

(He points at an imaginary photograph)

The creator of Elmwood Hall. Althea was the daughter of a wealthy attorney and United States Senator from Long Island, New York. And she married Cornelius Chase—

(Pointing at another photograph)

—with the mutton chop whiskers and the Irish wolfhound—kinda look alike, don't they? His daddy made a fortune in railroads and coal, and Cornelius inherited the best part of two hundred million dollars in 1893, that's about a billion and a half today, give or take, and you didn't pay no income tax back then. So Althea was what you might call well-placed. And she was a builder. Loved to

JOE (CONT.)

build things—houses, mausoleums, pleasure boats, you name it, but mostly houses, including this one. Elmwood Hall. Her dream cottage by the sea.

Blackout.

ACT ONE

SCENE TWO

The echoing sounds of a prison: shouts, buzzers, automatic doors opening and clanging shut. Lights up on the visiting room of a prison psychiatric unit. It is 1986. The room is institutional—plain and bare. A table and two facing chairs occupy center stage. Seated on one of the chairs is SUSANNA HATCH. She's dressed up, as if for an interview. JOE sits opposite her. He is now in his mid-sixties, but still with an edgy vitality. He is dressed in a prison-issue jumpsuit.

JOE

I gotta hand it to you.

SUSANNA

Excuse me?

JOE

You are persistent.

SUSANNA

Yeah, I'm sorry if I—

JOE

No, no, man my age, in this place, I get three letters from a pretty young lady in Boston, I ain't complaining.

SUSANNA

I did get a little...worried.

JOE

Worried?

SUSANNA

When you didn't respond.

JOE

And have you stop writing?

I did. For a while.

SUSANNA

You are exactly like I imagined.

JOE

Really?

SUSANNA

(Looking at her intently)
Exactly.

JOE

Well, that's surprising.

SUSANNA

Not at all.
(Beat. He realizes his gaze is making her uncomfortable)
Where's your tea?

JOE

Tea?

SUSANNA

(To a prison guard offstage who is monitoring their meeting)
Hey, Alonso, where's her tea?

JOE

Actually, I—

SUSANNA

(To the guard)
What is with you, man? We talked about this. Didn't we talk about this? You have a guest, you give 'em refreshment. This young lady here come all the way from Boston to see me, and you was going to fix her peppermint tea. Right? With honey. Right?

(To SUSANNA)
Peppermint is a carminative. Know what that is?

JOE

It helps with digestion.

SUSANNA

Keeps you clean. And not just the body, the mind, too. And you need that. They have toxins in here like you wouldn't believe.

JOE (CONT.)

(To the unseen guard)

What you waiting for? Go get the goddam tea! And honey. HONEY.

(No reaction from the guard)

Alonso, man, you disappoint me, man. How many times I gotta tell you? You can do it right. Consideration. Kindness. Respect. They got them words in every other language, Kiswahili, French, Farsi, Spanish. Bostonian. It ain't too late, brother. Ain't never too late to revitalize the language. You know what I'm talking about.

(To SUSANNA)

He knows what I'm talking about.

(To the guard)

Whaddya say, Alonso, you wanna get serious? You wanna revitalize?

(Beat. No response from the guard)

Fine. I'll go get it myself.

He rises from his seat. A warning buzzer sounds. JOE stops.

(To the guard)

The lady needs her tea.

SUSANNA

You know, I'm fine, I—

JOE

You gotta protect yourself.

SUSANNA

I don't drink tea.

JOE

You don't drink tea?

SUSANNA

No. I don't actually like it.

JOE

You don't like tea?

SUSANNA

No.

JOE

Any kind of tea?

SUSANNA

No.

JOE

Well, how about that.

(To the guard)

You hear that, Alonso? Susanna don't drink no tea. You are a lucky man, Alonso, you are one lucky sonofabitch. You are off the hook this time. This one time.

What do you drink?

SUSANNA

Juice. Water.

JOE

Good, good. You need them fluids, keep you lubricated.

SUSANNA

I try to stay healthy.

JOE

What do you do for fun?

SUSANNA

This is fun.

JOE

This is fun? Meeting with a crazy old goat like me in a shithole like this? Oh girl, you are in trouble.

SUSANNA

I meant the project.

JOE

Yeah, the project. I'd about given up you. Three letters and then nothing.

SUSANNA

I got sidetracked.

JOE

For seven months?

SUSANNA

Yes, well—

JOE

I hope he was worth it.

(Beat. Susanna's face betrays her.)

Was he?

SUSANNA

Like I said in my letters, I've always been fascinated by your case, everything, I mean, the whole controversy—

JOE

Controversy? There weren't no controversy.

SUSANNA

It was on TV, in the papers.

JOE

Yeah, but everybody knew I done it.

SUSANNA

Did you?

JOE

(Laughing heartily)

You come all the way from Boston to ask me that? Oh man.

SUSANNA

It is why I'm here.

JOE

Cut right to the chase, huh? What if I tell you? I could tell you yes, I could tell you no, then what? Whatcha gonna learn? Ain't that why you come here? To learn?

SUSANNA

Yes, but—

JOE

A thesis ain't a one word answer.

SUSANNA

No.

JOE

This is your thesis, right? For college?

SUSANNA

Yes.

JOE

So you gotta do it right. Get yourself a methodology, a structure. Chapters.

SUSANNA

Yes, and I will.

JOE

And plenty of them long words that don't appear in the biggest baddest dictionary. What else?

SUSANNA

Content.

JOE

A fancy binder. They don't give out no Master's degree without a fancy binder.

SUSANNA

Or good primary source material.

JOE

And that's me.

SUSANNA

Which is why—

JOE

How about that? I ain't never been a primary source before. Sounds kind of powerful, don't it? Deep.

(He deepens his voice.)

Primary source.

(He laughs.)

Like I'm way down in some deep dark well.

SUSANNA

Mister Bell—

JOE

The well of wisdom. The oracle of Delphi.

SUSANNA

Excuse me?

JOE

Thesis. It's Greek, a Greek word. How do I know that? Huh? How come crazy old Joe knows something like that?

SUSANNA

I don't know—

JOE

I'm a student, too. Doing my Master's in Philosophy. University of Baton Rouge.

(Quoting)

"Love does not begin and end the way we seem to think it does. Love is a battle, love is a war. Love is a growing up." Who was that?

SUSANNA

I don't know...Socrates?

JOE

Socrates! James Baldwin.

SUSANNA

Oh right.

JOE

My favorite philosopher.

SUSANNA

I thought he was a novelist.

JOE

Mister James Baldwin was a genius and a truth-teller. Every word from here.
(He slaps his heart.)

SUSANNA

That's what I'm looking for, too. The truth.

JOE

I got myself three B.A.s—Black Studies, History of Architecture, and French. Figured I do something different for my Master's, and I always been a philosophical kind of guy. Thinking, thinking, thinking all the time. Wish I could shut it down once in a while, stop asking myself so many goddam questions.

SUSANNA

I do have a lot of questions for you.

JOE

You know what the odds are?

SUSANNA

The odds?

JOE

Of being here on Planet Earth, you and me, right now, in human form, four billion years after the Big Bang? We won the lottery, girl.

SUSANNA

Mister Bell, we don't have a lot of time.

JOE

Damn right! That's the cosmic joke. We got so little TIME.

SUSANNA

To accomplish things.

JOE

To connect.

(Beat)

SUSANNA

I don't think I've heard of the University of Baton Rouge.

JOE

Correspondence course.

SUSANNA

Oh right.

JOE

I study every day. Unless, you know, they got something going on.

SUSANNA

Like what?

JOE

They got some crazy people in here. Disruptive.

SUSANNA

Well, I certainly don't want to—

JOE

But I keep busy. Got my studies, my music, my books, my masks. I make these African masks. And my lecture series.

SUSANNA

You...lecture?

JOE

Every other Thursday. "How Things Are Made". The old way, the traditional way—techniques of the master craftsmen. I done a presentation on furniture, glassware. Shoes, I done shoes. And wine. Wine was popular. I had six guys for that one, no, no, seven. Seven.

SUSANNA

Sounds great. Could we—?

JOE

What about your family? They in Boston?

SUSANNA

No, they're mostly here, in Rhode Island.

JOE

I bet your Mom and Dad are proud of you, huh? Studying criminal justice. You got brothers and sisters?

SUSANNA

Mister Bell—

JOE

Joe.

SUSANNA

We should get started.

JOE

I thought you'd never ask.

(She doesn't get the joke)

I'm kiddin', I'm kiddin'! I'm all ears. I'm all yours.

SUSANNA

Great.

JOE

But you got to promise me one thing.

SUSANNA

What's that?

Keep an open mind.

JOE

Well, sure, I—

SUSANNA

People is always jumping to conclusions. You gotta stay open.

JOE

I'll try.

SUSANNA

You promise?

JOE

I promise.

SUSANNA

Good. That's good.

JOE

SUSANNA takes a portable tape recorder from her bag and places it on the table.

SUSANNA

Okay if I tape this? I wanna make sure that—

JOE

Go right ahead. I'm used to it. All them reporters.

SUSANNA

Oh, right. When was the last time that...?

JOE

It's been years. Ain't got no interest in me now. Back then, well, they were climbing all over each other.

SUSANNA

Yeah, I can imagine.

JOE

Offered me all kinds of money. For my "story".

SUSANNA

But you didn't take it.

JOE

And have them lie and distort everything? Anyways, they'd never have believed the truth.

SUSANNA

Will I?

JOE

That depends.

SUSANNA

On what?
(Slight pause.)

JOE

I'm glad you came.

SUSANNA

Maybe we could start with your personal history.

JOE

You got all that.

SUSANNA

Not all of it.

JOE

Focus on the trial, the facts, the evidence.

SUSANNA

Of course, but—

JOE

Don't they teach you that at Suffolk? In your criminal justice program?
(Beat.)

SUSANNA

Mister Bell.

JOE

Joe.

SUSANNA

Joe. This is my thesis.

JOE

And I'm your primary source.

(Beat.)

Look, I know, I know...

(Beat.)

There are some things I don't like to talk about.

SUSANNA

I understand, and I want to respect that. I mean, I don't mean to pry.

JOE

Sure you do, that's why you're here.

(Beat. He is in emotional pain.)

And you should. You should ask me about everything.

SUSANNA

Are you sure?

JOE

No.

(Beat)

Go ahead. Shoot.

SUSANNA

Okay. I've done a ton of research. The transcript of the trial, newspaper reports, basically anything I could get my hands on, and I think I've got a pretty full picture. But there are some things that just don't make sense.

JOE

Like what?

SUSANNA

Your motivation. For one. I mean, why would you do this? No one really got into that. It was like, well, he was crazy, right? As if that was all there was to it. I mean, you worked at Elmwood Hall for twelve years, you were real good at your job, you knew all this incredible stuff about the house and the antiques, and you were entertaining, and you loved what you did. Right?

JOE

Right.

SUSANNA

And people loved you. They would call ahead to make sure you were going to be there. They wanted you, they wanted the best. It was like, why visit Elmwood

Hall unless you have Joe Bell as your tour guide? It'd be like going to a Broadway show and seeing the understudy instead of the star. And then one day you turn around and burn the place down?

The lights fade and come up on JOE downstage. We are back in Elmwood Hall, in the ballroom. It is 15 years earlier. JOE is the tour guide.

JOE

Now you know why they called it the Gilded Age. See these chandeliers? Seven thousand glass beads. Seven thousand! Every one handmade at the Cristalleries Baccarat, the most famous glassmakers in France, founded in 1765. See how the light bounces back and forth between the mirrors and the gilt surfaces? It's designed like that. Wherever you look, you're gonna see glitter and sparkle, sparkle and glitter. Like a jewel box. And this, folks, this is where it all happened. The Grand Ballroom. Party Central. I mean, they had some pretty wild times here, let me tell you, right here, right where we're standing. Listen. Shhh.....Listen. You hear that?

Distant sounds of a high-spirited party: dance music, laughter, animated conversation.

You hear the orchestra? The tinkle of the champagne glasses? How about the orchids—can you smell the orchids? Oh man, that sweet perfume. Hundreds of orchids, hundreds, in big crystal vases all over the room. And the women in their gowns, dripping diamonds. And the men in tuxedos and tails puffing their big cigars.

The sounds fade.

It always starts out formal—an elegant ten-course dinner in the dining room, servants in royal livery, the whole nine yards. But then comes the entertainment. And Althea is famous for her entertainment. She has opera singers perform here, vaudeville actors, all kinds of celebrities. One time she tells her friends she's got someone real special coming to her next party: an Italian prince. Well, everyone is just so excited—I mean, we're talking European royalty, the crème de la crème. Guess what? The prince turns out to be a pet monkey, all dressed up in formal evening wear. The other guests think it's a hoot. Althea, my dear, you did it again! Until the little critter gets drunk on champagne, climbs up onto this chandelier, and starts throwing light bulbs at 'em!

A soft light downstage illuminates the almost ghost-like figure of LINDSAY PETTIGREW. She stands alone, dressed in

a fine evening gown of the period, and holding a champagne glass. She looks directly at JOE as he continues.

JOE (CONT.)

But, you know, fun can be hard work. You shake your booty into the early hours, you stay for breakfast—you are starving after all that dancing—and finally, *finally*, you take your leave. It's six in the morning, and you are *dead*, you could sleep 'til noon, easy. But there ain't no rest for the wicked. You got midmorning cocktails and croquet at The Breakers, an art show in the afternoon, and then a special performance of "The Wild Rose" at Beaulieu. It's the best musical on Broadway right now, and the Vanderbilts have brought the whole cast and crew from New York to entertain their friends. It's one heck of a schedule, and you better keep up.

JOE turns towards LINDSAY. Their eyes meet.

After all, what choice do you have?

The lights fade to black. JOE returns to his chair and sits down. The lights come up again. We are back in the prison visiting room. SUSANNA is seated at the table.

SUSANNA

Why?

JOE

I had a psychotic break.

SUSANNA

That's what they told you.

JOE

That's what they told me.

SUSANNA

They say you're schizophrenic.

JOE

They say a lot of things.

SUSANNA

But you had no history, right? I mean, before the fire?

History? JOE

Of mental illness. SUSANNA

I been called a whole lot worse than crazy. JOE

But you weren't diagnosed? SUSANNA

I never went to no doctors. JOE

So what happened? Did you have some kind of personal crisis? Like in a relationship or...? SUSANNA

Why you wanna know? JOE

Well, sometimes a psychotic break is just that—it's a break, a break from reality, and then you recover. It's like a one-time thing. SUSANNA

So? JOE

So did something happen? SUSANNA

A lot of things happened. JOE

But was there a trigger? SUSANNA

Man, you sound like Mad Martha. JOE

Who? SUSANNA