

ACT ISCENE 1

SETTING: A college lecture hall.

AT RISE: MICHAEL addresses a freshman class on the first day of the fall semester.

MICHAEL

(confident, just shy of arrogant)

Hello everyone, and welcome. I am Dr. Michael Pierce, known in some circles as the Devil Incarnate, and you are seated in Bio-110, otherwise known as "Introduction to Evolutionary Biology." If you signed up for some other class and do not sense that the winds of Fate have blown you in here as part of some larger plan for your life, please take this opportunity to leave. The longer you wait, the more embarrassing your departure will be for all of us.

(HE looks to see if anyone is leaving and checks his watch.)

MICHAEL (Continued)

Okay, then, I shall proceed. And let me start by saying that my mission here is to lead you out of the Land of Duh when it comes to evolution -- and its operational mechanism, "natural selection." I am the Pied Piper, and you are the rats -- no offense. You are free to question the pitch of my flute, but you are not allowed to stop listening or scurrying forward. And I promise you this -- that when we reach the outskirts of town, I will not lead you off a cliff. Instead, the Goddess of Reason will wave her magic wand and you will be transformed into beings who think clearly about the origins of species. There is a shining city on a hill where such beings live, and I'm here to give you your parking pass.

Now, before I hold forth on practical matters, the syllabus and whatnot, I want to lay the groundwork for the semester-long journey we're about to undertake -- so that we understand each other from the start. Item One: I am a curmudgeon. I know that I am a curmudgeon; the fact does not bother me.

(MORE)

MICHAEL

I think you're extrapolating there.

CLAIRE

Am I right or wrong about this. Anything I might have been born with -- any trait or gift -- encoded in my DNA dies with me. The gene stops here, as it were, like Truman's buck.

MICHAEL

That is correct.

CLAIRE

So as far as our species goes, I don't make a difference.

MICHAEL

In the gene pool, that's true.

CLAIRE

In fact, if I understand correctly, the only traits that matter are the ones that appear before a woman gives birth. Those that hide until middle-age and then create disease or whatever -- they get passed right along, simply because they did their thing too late. But since I've never given birth, and can't, I'm outside the process. So as far as evolution goes, I'm dead weight. What happens outside of childbirth and rearing doesn't matter. Am I wrong?

MICHAEL

No, actually. Your grasp is impressive.

CLAIRE

So if that's the case, in your world of evolution, where is the meaning, you see? A man, as long as he's potent, could be of some use. But a woman--

(The telephone rings. SHE checks the number and answers.)

CLAIRE (Continued)

(phone)

Yes, hello... Of course, he's here; he's always here. We're discussing evolution... with our clothes off, yes. Where are you?... Fine, we'll see you then.

(hanging up)

You see what I mean?

MICHAEL

Of course, I see. And you're right in the mechanics. Traits that don't show up until after procreation get passed on.

CLAIRE

And once you're past that point -- or unable, in my case...

MICHAEL

But some traits do get passed on, by inference. For example, to parent -- to nurture a child. That trait can't show up until the child is already born, and yet it exists. Why? Because those of our ancestors who had it stood a better chance of having their children survive. And those children, too, possessed the trait, and passed it to theirs, and so on. Evolution selected for good parenting even though the trait doesn't matter until after it's already passed on.

CLAIRE

What about me, though, and my "kind." Middle-aged women. We still have no purpose, do we. It even struck me the other day that maybe that's why there aren't more roles for actresses past their sexual prime. People are genetically programmed not to care. Even Lifetime, what Hollywood calls the "Kotex Channel." Its demographic is 18 to 49. It's as if once you stop needing tampons, you might as well slit your wrists.

MICHAEL

You can't look to evolution for purpose -- any more than you look to gravity. They're natural forces.

CLAIRE

(driving home the point)

Gravity didn't make us what we are, and there's the difference. Natural selection, as you call it, is special. And therein lies the rub. I'm not religious, you know that. But I can see the allure. You get to believe that the process of your creation gave you meaning. Handed down from on high.

MICHAEL

Do you believe that?

CLAIRE

Of course not. That's why I'm looking for help. I want you to help me find meaning in a world where I showed up by chance. Can you do that? If not, then I think your theory is lacking. It might well be true, but it's lacking nonetheless. Either that or it's cruel. Here our genes impose these needs of ours to survive -- these desires for food and shelter and sex. All of which only exist, if I'm right, to pass those very genes to the next generation.

(MORE)

CLAIRE

(quickly)
Not a word of this, please.

MICHAEL

To Simon?

CLAIRE

Yes. I don't want him knowing. Not that he'd care. But I care, so let it remain between us, all right?

MICHAEL

(curiously)
As you wish.

(SIMON appears at the patio door. HE seems cheery but forcefully so -- as if masking a potent fear.)

SIMON

I'm back.

CLAIRE

We know. We heard you coming.

SIMON

(noticing MICHAEL)
He's here again. I told you we should buy a large dog.

CLAIRE

What's the point? He'd reason it to death.

SIMON

Sorry for my tardiness. I had to stick around and stroke egos.

CLAIRE

Including your own?

SIMON

(to MICHAEL)
You've given her wine again, haven't you. I warned you about that.

CLAIRE

He hasn't "given me" wine; I gave it to him. I allowed him to pour because he's a man, and I know how important it is to be the provider. Or feel that way, at least.

MICHAEL

I poured because I'm a guest and was asked to do so.

CLAIRE
For whatever reason. You poured.
(to SIMON)
He poured, yes. And what of it.

SIMON
I was going to make a joke of it is all. I've changed my mind.

CLAIRE
And you came home to change it. How nice.

MICHAEL
(getting up)
I should be going.

CLAIRE
How brave of you.

SIMON
Are you sure you won't stay? I brought steaks.

CLAIRE
(to herself)
How marvelous. I'll notify the press.

MICHAEL
(to SIMON)
I can't. Really. I'm sorry.

SIMON
Well, come by my office in the morning, would you please?
There's something we need to discuss.

CLAIRE
Really? Is she blonde or brunette?

SIMON
(sharply)
What the hell is the matter with you.

CLAIRE
Nothing's the matter. Things are righting themselves,
that's all. I've stopped listing.

MICHAEL
Good night, Claire.

CLAIRE
(waving him off)
Yes, I know. And good luck.