

(Beginning part way through Act 1, Scene 2)

VALENTINE

My mind was spinning. I couldn't think. Everything was haywire. All of a sudden the world stopped making sense. Everything was black...cold.

(Catching his breath.)

Was this it? Is this what it's like – danger behind every corner – something ready to jump out at you when you least expected it and throw your world into chaos? If it was, I'd been woefully ill-equipped for it. The nightly news and my mother's eleventh-hour warnings aside, my expectations of life on planet earth had clearly and egregiously been sensationalized out of all recognition. I resolved, then and there, to bring my parents to account for this misleading impression and to hold their feet to the fire in determining just why I'd been force-fed a diet of misinformation for so long.

(Beat.)

That would have to wait until tomorrow, however. In the here and now I was lost, frightened, far from home, and in need of shelter. I settled upon a dubious-looking bed and breakfast establishment named – rather unnervingly – 'The End of the World.'

(The sound of a doorbell is heard. The lights come up to reveal a drab but clean and orderly looking kitchen, with a table and chairs located stage C. MRS. ANNA, the landlady, is found leaning against the door L., arms folded, a dour expression on her face. She speaks with an accent that is indefinable but at times is suggestive of being Scandinavian in origin.)

VALENTINE

It was exactly the kind of place I'd been looking for – cheap.

(Crossing upstage to MRS. ANNA.)

The premises were owned and operated by a gloomy-looking woman named Mrs. Anna. Her haunted expression notwithstanding, I found her to be quite fair and agreeable.

MRS. ANNA

Rent's due every Friday by 7:00pm at the latest, no excuses. If you have excuses, you can relay them to me as you're walking out the door with your bags. A traditional English breakfast is served every morning, Monday through Friday, at 7:30am sharp. It will consist of – though by no means restricted to, and subject to change – bacon, scrambled eggs, fried tomatoes, sausages – when in season–

VALENTINE

In season?

MRS. ANNA

Toast, marmalade, a variety of jams – country of origin not specified due to international sanctions – tea, freshly squeezed orange juice or artificial substitute – which in some cases may induce headaches, nausea, stomach cramps, or intestinal bleeding, and should be followed up by a consultation with your primary care giver – and, last but not least, a bottomless coffee pot.

VALENTINE

Bottomless?

MRS. ANNA

Yes. It's our hook. It's what sets us apart.

VALENTINE

But surely that defies the laws of physics?

MRS. ANNA

Not if you pay your rent on time.

VALENTINE

(Cautiously.)

Yes.

MRS. ANNA

I don't care what you do behind the closed doors of your room because it's none of my business. Practice whatever religion makes you feel more complete and comfortable in your skin, and have sexual relations with whomever or whatever satiates your desires. I do, however, draw the line at white supremacy rituals, cults that involve human or animal sacrifice, kiddie porn, the importing of sex slaves from Eastern Europe and the Philippines, and unhygienic personal habits that could endanger the health and well-being of your fellow residents.

VALENTINE

Yes, that, um...that seems quite fair and agreeable.

(The sound of someone emitting a deep, resonating sigh of satisfaction echoes loudly around the house.)

MRS. ANNA

I've had allsorts here over the years – every type, shape, colour you could possibly imagine – and they've all been welcome. But I won't stand for any nonsense. This is The End of the World. If this isn't good enough then you shouldn't be here.

VALENTINE

No, I...I think this is very suited to my needs at this particular juncture in my life. Thank you very much, Mrs. Anna.

MRS. ANNA

Very good, then.
(Holding out her hand.)
Two weeks rent in advance.

VALENTINE

Two weeks! But that's...that's almost all I-

MRS. ANNA

That's the rules. House rules. If you don't want to play by them you can go it alone.

VALENTINE

(Reaching into his pocket for his wallet.)
No, no, I just...it just that that's...that's almost all I have.

MRS. ANNA

That's life.

(Beat.)

VALENTINE

Yes...yes, of course, here's my...
(Offering the money.)
Here, take it.

MRS. ANNA

(After taking the money and counting it.)
Very well, then. But you can take that short-changed expression off your face. This place is cheap – that's why you're here. If you expected something for nothing you were mistaken. Everything has a price.

VALENTINE

(Sitting at one of the chairs, somewhat dejectedly.)
Yes...yes, thank you.

(MRS. ANNA crosses to exit through the door L., but then stops and looks back at VALENTINE.)

MRS. ANNA

One more thing.

VALENTINE

Yes?

MRS. ANNA

Now that you're here – and for what it's worth – welcome to The End of the World.

(MRS. ANNA exits as the lights fade to BLACK.)

Scene 3

The stage is dark. A spotlight illuminates VALENTINE'S face somewhere close to stage C.

VALENTINE

(Outward.)

The next morning I awoke refreshed from sleep and ready to face any challenge my new life placed before me. At least, that's what I'd tried to tell myself. In reality the mattress was thin and hard, I woke up countless times throughout the night consumed by thoughts of worst-case scenarios, and, unless I'm very much mistaken, the person occupying the room adjacent to mine is prone to fits of manic hysteria.

(As the sound of a childlike giggle is heard echoing around the house, the lights come up to reveal VALENTINE sitting at the kitchen table in the chair L.)

VALENTINE

I arrived at the breakfast table at 7:30a.m. sharp, as had been so stringently requested by Mrs. Anna. To my surprise, however, I discovered that not only was I the only person in attendance, there was also no food on display. Just as I began to wonder whether my time-keeping regimen had been disrupted by the foreign nature of my present circumstances, the door suddenly opened.

(A woman, LUKA, enters from the door R. Her hair is long, dark, and unkempt, almost covering her face. Her clothes are worn and tattered, and her deportment is that of one whose will has been broken. She stands in the doorway staring out ahead for some time before at last speaking, her voice monotone, her accent clearly of Eastern European origin.)

LUKA

They say it's going to rain.

VALENTINE

(Brightly.)

Well, good morning to you. I'm Valentine – I'm new here.

(LUKA does not speak, but walks despondently to the kitchen table and sits in the chair C., her expression unmoved.)

VALENTINE

What's your name?

(Pause.)

LUKA

I detest the rain.

VALENTINE

Do you really? I find it quite comforting. There's nothing I like better than lying in bed and hearing the sweet, melancholic sound of raindrops gently tapping against the windowpane.

LUKA

It is an accursed noise. An indictment of us all. The tears and cries of countless butchered souls, the nameless, faceless dead throughout history come back to haunt us...to remind us.

VALENTINE

Yes, well that's...that's certainly another way of looking at it, I suppose. And a very valid one.

(Beat.)

Did I miss breakfast?

LUKA

Hah! How typical of your Western mentality – more concerned with your gut than your conscience.

VALENTINE

Well, no, I just...it's just that Mrs. Anna was very specific about breakfast time. If I've missed it, it doesn't really matter. I'm never that hungry first thing anyway.

LUKA

So what? What are you trying to say? That Mrs. Anna is a liar?

VALENTINE

No, no, of course not. I was simply...I was just trying to abide by the rules.

LUKA

Hah! Rules. What do you know of rules? You're just a baby.

VALENTINE

Well...without wishing to sound disagreeable, I am actually a fully-grown adult and I do believe in playing by them.

LUKA

You're an arrested child – it's plain for any fool to see. You know not rules. Rules are tools and only as worthy as the hands they're placed in.

VALENTINE

Be that as it may, I distinctly remember being told quite categorically that breakfast would be served at 7:30a.m. on the dot, and so here I am.

LUKA

And if someone told you that you were a cow you would squeeze your breasts and offer me milk, I suppose?

VALENTINE

I...I don't know that that's–

LUKA

Words! What are words? Words are not important; it's deeds that matter.

VALENTINE

Indeed. And serving breakfast is a deed.

LUKA

There is no food. You must go hungry, like the hordes of wretched souls you never gave a second thought to – except for the few guilt-ridden seconds when reading your newspapers and chewing your toast, only to turn the page to smaller tales of smaller pains that caused you smaller sadness. Here you must go hungry. No matter how you saw yourself before, here...here you are nothing...nothing special.

VALENTINE

I'm sorry, I've no desire to appear difficult, but I paid good money to retain the services of this establishment and I think I have a right to expect what I was promised.

LUKA

You can expect what you want but you'll get what you're given. Your money doesn't talk here. The only thing you will get here is what you deserve. Everybody does eventually – at The End of the World.

VALENTINE

(Outward.)

Her combative tone triggered an aggressive aspect of my personality that I rarely gave public voice to. I decided to vigorously express my displeasure.

(To LUKA.)

First of all, "what I deserve" has a judgmental tone to it that I find wholly displeasing, especially from someone who has known me for all of five minutes. Secondly, my money is as good as anyone else's and when I part with it I expect something in return. Now, I was promised a full English breakfast and that is what I intend to receive. However, if you are some sort of agent of Mrs. Anna, sent here to dissuade me from expecting what is rightfully mine, I would respectfully ask that you identify yourself as such now so that we can draw a halt to this ridiculous charade.

LUKA

Strong words from such a small child.

VALENTINE

I will ask you one more time and I expect to receive a straightforward answer: To the best of your knowledge, have I or have I not missed breakfast?

LUKA

(With a dismissive wave of her hand.)

How should I know? I just arrived.

(Beat.)

VALENTINE

Oh. Oh, I...I just assumed that-

LUKA

Of course you did. You people always *assume* you know so much about those around you when the truth is you know nothing.

VALENTINE

I think it's you that's doing the assuming, but no matter. Anyway, it looks like we've both missed breakfast.

LUKA

(With a fixed stare.)

I am not missing breakfast. I am not missing food. How can I miss breakfast when I am missing my stomach?

VALENTINE

You're missing...I'm sorry, what was that?

LUKA

I have no stomach for food. I have no stomach. You understand, yes? It was blown apart by a 12-gauge shotgun.

VALENTINE

Your...your stomach?

LUKA

A man from a neighbouring village – a man I had known since I was a child – he blew it to pieces in search of a Greater Serbia. Overnight I changed from being a fellow resident to a filthy rodent. People can be so fickle, no? And grudges run so deep. Then he turned his gun on my daughter – my screaming, petrified little girl. So, yes, now I am missing my stomach...and my child.

(Beat.)

VALENTINE

I...I don't know what to say, I'm...I'm quite speechless.

LUKA

And I am quite stomachless.

VALENTINE

But...but doesn't it...hurt?

LUKA

What's to hurt? There's nothing there.

VALENTINE

But how...how could anyone...do such a thing?

LUKA

Why not? People can be dead and living at the same time, no? Don't you know that by now? He was living but feeling nothing – nothing but resentment and suspicion and anger. There are those that are dead inside but still take breath. You would do well to remember this, little boy.

VALENTINE

But it makes no sense. It's senseless – cruel and senseless.

LUKA

You ask for reason from such people? I was Muslim – that was all that mattered. He saw my faith as skin deep. So he thought if he destroyed the skin he destroyed the faith. But as you can see...he was mistaken.

VALENTINE

I can't...I cannot believe someone could be so...I mean, how could they? How could that happen? Why didn't someone stop him?

LUKA

What, you don't have television? All your Western advancements don't include the television set? You see, you hear, you know. Don't pretend you don't.

VALENTINE

Yes, but...

LUKA

What, you don't like reality TV? Or it's not reality until you find yourself sitting face to face with it at the breakfast table, is that it? Well, who can blame you really, sitting there in your comfortable home, looking at the terrible images and feeling so bad? It's not your fault. You didn't cause it, after all – who can blame you?

(Beat.)

Except me...looking at you – all of the power and asleep at the wheel. Do we intervene or don't we? What will it cost us? Will we be re-elected if we act? It's a human catastrophe. It's abhorrent. We deplore it. We condemn it. We do nothing. Better to wait...wait until the killing is done. East Timor, Rwanda, Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo, Sudan...so many conflicts, so many conflicting opinions, so much talk, and so much death. So they pick and choose their humanitarian gestures with the steely eye of a seasoned gambler. The scales of power are laden with guilt, cleansed by a moral cause, and replenished by a lucrative book deal upon retirement. And on it goes. But I am too tired for this. I've had enough.

(Rising from her chair.)

I will go to my room now.

VALENTINE

It's...it's a miracle you're alive...to have gotten here...to be able to tell your story.

LUKA

Where? Here? It's The End of the World – we all get here eventually.

VALENTINE

Be as modest as you like, I think you're...I'm in awe.

LUKA

You're in shock. You have no idea, do you? You are like a canvass half started – the rudiments are there but it will remain forever incomplete.

(Eyeing him up and down.)

And yet I find you unconventionally attractive. Perhaps you want to have sex with me?

(Beat.)

VALENTINE

Oh, I-I...um...

LUKA

Yes?

VALENTINE

Nothing, it's just that I...I...

LUKA

What? You don't have the stomach for it?

VALENTINE

No, no, I-I-I just...

LUKA

Forget it. It wasn't important. I don't care for the sex anyway – just the connection, you understand.

(LUKA crosses to the door R.)

VALENTINE

I'm sorry, it's not that I'm...or that you're...I mean, you're very...

(LUKA stops in the doorway and turns.)

LUKA

Little boy, when I was 6-years old I was raped by my uncle. When I was all grown up I was raped by seven drunken Serbs at gunpoint, then with a gunpoint, then later with an empty vodka bottle – so don't try to spare my feelings...they're long gone.

(With a half smile.)

Another time, perhaps?

(LUKA makes to exit but VALENTINE abruptly stands and calls out to her.)

VALENTINE

Wait! You...I don't even know your name.

(LUKA stops and looks back at VALENTINE from the doorway.)

LUKA

Names? What good are names? We all have the same one eventually.

VALENTINE

Yes, but...but even so.

LUKA

Very well...if it makes such a difference to you. My name is Luka – I live on the second floor.

(LUKA exits. VALENTINE sits back down in his chair.)

VALENTINE

(Outward.)

Why did that ring a bell? Had I met her before? It seemed unlikely given the limited contact with the outside world my parents had permitted me. Nevertheless, it was all beginning to feel like a bad dream with no alarm clock to draw it to a halt. I considered going back to sleep and trying to wake up again, but the thought of that mattress quickly undermined what little motivation I had for the idea. Despite my lack of appetite, I concluded that food deprivation must surely be the root cause of my mental disorientation. I decided to raid the refrigerator.