

The Ice Sculptures

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### Cast of Characters

HOPCLOVER: A man from the old country.

MILO: Another man from the old country.

TARA: A woman from the old country.

### Scene

HOPCLOVER's home on the 98th floor. The new country.

### Time

The sad future.

ACT I

Scene 1

*Lights.*

*Two men: HOPCLOVER and MILO. Old men, or not. They play a simple card game and bet cigarettes.*

HOPCLOVER

I put my beard in my oatmeal this morning, Milo.

MILO

Did you, Hopclover? Did you?

HOPCLOVER

Yes. I have a bowl of oatmeal every morning even though I do not like oatmeal because it is cheap and nutritious. I do not permit my finicky tastes and temperament to compromise my financial captainhood. Likewise, I do not use boiling water to prepare my oatmeal. I do it correctly, the water warmed just the slightest increment above room temperature, to cook the oats as slowly as my ornery unfed morning self can bear. I looked out the window while the oatmeal cooked. I thought it was snowing. But it was not snowing; it was only the wind, shaking the feathery snowdrifts from the edges of the rooftop. The flakes shook down and piled again at the base of the house. After some time all the snow was on the ground. At this same time my oatmeal was complete. I removed the pot from heat and poured the contents into a bowl. As I waited for my oatmeal to cool to room temperature I washed the pot. I do not like my oatmeal room-temperature, but these actions take the same duration, so I supplement waiting with action to prevent any waste of time. The pot is clean. The oatmeal is room-temperature. Nor time, nor money wasted. Balance reigns, serenity prevails, just like the sea calms itself between one wave and the next.

MILO

O, a hot meal in winter. What a blessing.

HOPCLOVER

Not a hot meal. A room-temperature meal, and the room was cold, therefore the meal was cold. Some of us eat room-temperature oatmeal in a cold room on a cold day, some of us were doctors and presidents and financiers and kingpins, and lawyers and statesmen and venture capitalists and board chairmen, and philanthropists and actuaries and surgeons and newspaper columnists, and railroad tycoons and managerial consultants and professional golfers in the old country.

(CONTINUED)

MILO

I remember. So was I. I had a sign in my window that said--O, what did it say?

HOPCLOVER

I think it said--was it, "Oatmeal"?

MILO

No, that wasn't it.

HOPCLOVER

No, that wasn't it at all.

MILO

Eh.

HOPCLOVER

Anyway, I took the oatmeal into my meal nook.

MILO

Your meal nook?

HOPCLOVER

Yes.

MILO

Tell me about your meal nook.

HOPCLOVER

I have a cushioned footstool in my pantry. I eat my meals there in the winter because there is the heating duct, and the warmest vent. So I sit there on my footstool, between pallets of canisters of oatmeal. I do this every day.

MILO

Do you?

HOPCLOVER

But today, just as I raised the bowl toward my mouth--I drink it, remember, I do not use a spoon because I do not wish to soil another dish--I heard a voice.

MILO

A voice?

HOPCLOVER

From the vent over my head!

MILO

It spoke?

(CONTINUED)

HOPCLOVER

In our language! I was so shocked that I mashed the bowl right onto the end of my chin! I got oatmeal all over my beard!

MILO

What did it say?

HOPCLOVER

What did what say?

MILO

The voice in your vents, what did it say?

HOPCLOVER

It said the n-word.

MILO

The n-word?

HOPCLOVER

And then several other racial slurs, some I'd never heard before in my life. Not even in the old country.

MILO

What did you do?

HOPCLOVER

I went straight to the bathroom to wash the oatmeal out of my beard.

MILO

And then?

HOPCLOVER

Well, then I came straight here to tell you all about it.

MILO

That's it?

HOPCLOVER

I decided that I'm going to move. She frightens me.

MILO

She?

HOPCLOVER

The woman in the duct. Well, I think it was a woman. Hard to say.

(CONTINUED)

MILO

Do you think she meant what she said?

HOPCLOVER

She meant something. But I don't know what, and if I tried to guess I'm sure I'd get it wrong.

MILO

Doesn't make much sense to be saying nasty things in the heating duct all by yourself.

HOPCLOVER

All by yourself. Hm.

MILO

What?

HOPCLOVER

Maybe there's more than one of them.

MILO

That's ridiculous. A heating duct is only big enough for one person.

HOPCLOVER

So I would've thought, but it's a day of surprises. I got oatmeal in my beard!

MILO

I'm glad you came straight here to tell me all about it.

HOPCLOVER

I'd have been here sooner. The elevator got stuck on seventy, but only for a moment.

MILO

Yes, it's been doing that.

HOPCLOVER

Yes. Well? How was your day?

MILO

I thought you'd never ask.

*Silence.*

HOPCLOVER

And?

MILO

I haven't thought about it because I thought you'd never ask. But I moved today, myself.

(CONTINUED)

HOPCLOVER

Up from the floor below?

MILO

Yes. That one is on fire.

HOPCLOVER

If only you had taken better care of it. That floor was so lovely too. If only you had taken better care of it.

MILO

That's the thing. Nobody wants a home this large because nobody can afford to take care of it. So the price fell and fell, like an elevator down the ninety-nine story shaft, until I could finally afford it. Now I live here, and I can't take better care of it, because I'm broke.

HOPCLOVER

It's ninety-nine stories?

MILO

Yes. Far too large. Impossible to heat. Impossible to clean. I keep warm by setting fires on the lower stories. The heat rises, I sleep soundly, the house gets smaller--which raises its value. Soon I'll sell it for a killing. You're going to move; I could even sell it to you.

HOPCLOVER

O, no. I'd never be able to make your asking price. I buy oatmeal by the pallet. There's so much of it in the world and nobody wants it, the storehouses pay me to take it away. I'm just too poor.

MILO

Never say that. Say you're broke. "Broke" means you have no money, but "poor" means that's who you are, and that's not you. Me neither. We're not poor, we're just broke.

HOPCLOVER

We didn't split hairs in the old country.

MILO

Yes, well, we're in the new country now, and we're not looking wistfully back, we're making opportunity. Look: I could make a bargain for an old friend.

HOPCLOVER

Do tell.

(CONTINUED)

MILO

At this point I've burned most of the building black. There are two floors remaining, this one and upstairs. I'll sell the building to you--at a small profit for myself--and then I'll rent the upstairs. You take my rent and pay for the mortgage, see?

HOPCLOVER

O, I do see. I like that deal.

MILO

Yes. You'll live here. I'd live on the top floor.

HOPCLOVER

What's up there?

MILO

It's a kind of luxury business palace, so you can charge me a high price, high as you need to pay for the mortgage. The elevators open on a hall of Brazilian tulipwood, filled with ice statues taller than you and me.

HOPCLOVER

Ice statues?

MILO

Huge sculptures in the shape of ocean waves. Can you imagine? Water imprisoned in water. Like the wave rose up mighty and undaunted, and never fell. You might imagine it happy that way, never having to fall, never having to retreat, never dying.

HOPCLOVER

A statue made of ice?

MILO

Yes, haven't you ever seen an ice statue?

HOPCLOVER

No.

MILO

Well, try to imagine.

*HOPCLOVER tries.*

HOPCLOVER

I can't. It seems too impossible.

MILO

Try harder.

(CONTINUED)



HOPCLOVER  
Okay.

*HOPCLOVER tries harder, then succeeds.*

HOPCLOVER  
Ah. Yes, they're quite beautiful. But won't they melt?

MILO  
They never melt. There's electrical wiring embedded.  
Circuit-cooling technology. They never melt.

HOPCLOVER  
Who would build such a thing?

MILO  
The insurance company, the insurance company that used  
to own this building. Came from the old country, had  
their ice statues shipped. Then? Market burned up, they  
sold everything they had. Sold the building too, took  
the winnings back to the old country where the markets  
were green again.

HOPCLOVER  
Maybe we ought to go back to the old country.

MILO  
No way. You and I make a deal on this property--that's  
growth, opportunity, the market in motion, both of us  
profit. We take that profit and make investments. The  
time is now, Hopclover, now is the time.

HOPCLOVER  
I don't know if I like the sound of that. If the  
insurance company ran back to the old country, perhaps  
we ought to take heed. We might end up the same as  
them, blow out our assets and have nothing to show for  
it.

MILO  
No way. No way. There's nothing back there. If there's  
any opportunity, it's here, we'll find it; if there  
isn't any, we'll make it. We will.

HOPCLOVER  
And the ice statues never melt?

MILO  
Never. That's important, because they're supposed to  
symbolize wealth. You don't want your fortune to melt,  
run, bleed through the cracks of the floor and put out  
the fires within. You want it to hold fast in one  
piece, forever, like you will.

Scene 2

*Ethereal light.*

TARA.

*She looks at the audience.*

TARA

I saw him put his beard in his oatmeal. I saw the soldiers lower their guns; I saw the photographers raise their cameras; and the stone giant with one raised hand fell before them. I saw you burning pencils and books for warmth. Then, I realized that our country was already "the old country" or it would be soon. At least the hope-insurance company was still paying out. You remember them. You paid them to make sure you had the capacity for hope. They took your monthly premium and turned it into warm chocolate chip cookies and greeting cards signed by your grandmother. We were subject to their spreadsheets. The actuaries would give you a multiple choice test while scanning your brain with magnets. They asked you to agree or disagree with the future. Do you think that the present is better than the past? Do you think the future will be better than the present? Do you believe the true journey is from nothingness, into life? Or is the true journey from life into death? There was no way to fool them. You didn't fool them. The true journey was from life, to death; and then there was only death and death, and no journey at all. You failed to hope. Everybody failed to hope. You submitted your claim. Everybody submitted their claim. They paid out. They paid and paid and paid until they couldn't anymore. The bubble burst. The bottom fell out. They failed. They were just the right size to fail. Everyone failed. The actuaries gave each other a multiple choice test and scanned themselves with magnets. Is this quarter as bad as it looks? Will next quarter be better than this quarter? They still had hope; and to justify it, they moved on to the new country, to new markets and new languages and new spreadsheets. They waved at us as they sailed away. The last books to burn were the checkbooks. The homes stood empty and the people lived in the offices. Your country stopped being a country and became itself a legend.

I will buy your hope from you. No, I won't. You don't have any. Would you sell it if you did? Would you sell your books and pencils if you didn't have to burn them? Would you keep warm living in the heating duct? Would I make room for you? Would you say cruel things to the oatmeal man? He has lids to his eyes but not his ears. But we have lids to our ears. I was heard. Sometimes I'm not. He had no hope to sell, only oatmeal, and he wasn't selling that. If you have some hope, I will give

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

TARA (cont'd)

it to you. If you have none, I will buy it from you. And you, and you, and you. They came to the new country with new spreadsheets. They used it up faster than the first one and sailed all the way back, on a life-raft of legal tender. Money floats. Hope sinks. The actuaries have gone back to the old country, just in time for us to arrive, and here we are. Here am I. You have your checkbook. You have your pencil. We keep warm in better ways now, but our hope is still subject to our economics. I don't need a spreadsheet and a machine made of magnets to put an economy in motion. There are no cookies. There are no greeting cards. If you want to deal in hopes and futures, you'll have to deal with me.

Scene 3

*MILO and HOPCLOVER signing papers, tragically.  
They finish, tragically.  
MILO looks at the papers, then looks up.*

MILO

Shall we?

HOPCLOVER

Upstairs?

MILO

To the luxury business palace. I've never seen it.

HOPCLOVER

Then how did you know all that about the Brazilian tulipwood and the ice statues?

MILO

They showed me a picture when they sold me the building. I asked to keep it, the picture, but they said no.

HOPCLOVER

Did you offer to pay?

MILO

I was broke. But I held it, and looked long, and I remember. It was something. I waited this long to see the real thing.

HOPCLOVER

Why?

(CONTINUED)

MILO

To reward my patience. Now the time is here. We're not broke anymore.

*They shake hands.*

MILO

(cont.)

Let's go up.

HOPCLOVER

Yes. Let's go up.

*They turn to go. HOPCLOVER pauses.*

HOPCLOVER

Did you hear that? A voice.

MILO

Hm? No.

*HOPCLOVER listens.*

HOPCLOVER

No, I suppose I didn't either.

MILO

I realized something, though, watching you as you listened.

HOPCLOVER

What?

MILO

You don't have a beard.

*HOPCLOVER touches his chin.*

HOPCLOVER

O, you're right.

MILO

Did you have a beard this morning?

HOPCLOVER

I think so.

*Blackout.  
End of play.*