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GATHERING

by Jodi Gallagher

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CHARACTER NOTES.

ELLEN EAGLETON - is an anthropologist and classicist in her fifties. She has led an unconventional life, fighting for the rights of women to be educated and receive university degrees (a thing not achieved at Cambridge University until 1948). Tired of the fight, and searching for the origins of human emotion, she travels to Australia to study the Aboriginal people in the hope that they may hold the answers to her questions, following an invitation to her younger lover, James.

JAMES PRIEST - a scholar in his thirties. He was once Ellen's student. She has taught him well, and his career is beginning to be established. He is invited to Australia to investigate the apparently disappearing indigenous people. James has been living with Ellen for ten years. The relationship between James and Ellen is complex, and really driven by a clash of expectations.

ESTELLE - is in her twenties, Koori, has been in domestic service since she was quite a small child. Taken from her family and trained for domestic service, she knows little of her background, and, at the beginning of the play, has no real wish to know. Her philosophy of life is clear and simple; she must survive with a minimum of involvement with other people, especially men, and find a reasonable job where she is left alone.

MARY PENNIMAN - is late teens, a student of Ellen's - briefly. She is a fairly ordinary girl, wishes to be married and have children, likes to think of herself as different to her friends because of her intellectual interests - but they are largely a flirtation, she's not serious about her work. Intelligent and not unaware of the implications of her actions, she is determined to have her own way but means no real harm to anyone. Her admiration for Ellen is genuine.

PENNIMAN - is in his fifties, a serious scholar whose occasional flippancy leads many, including Ellen and James, to underestimate him. He encourages Mary in her intellectual pursuits, but doesn't believe that women can compete with men intellectually – or in any other field. He believes in the future of Australia as a nation, and wishes to see the end of anything that may hold that future back. His invitation to James is the catalyst for the action of the play.

THE SETTING OF THE PLAY IS MELBOURNE AND MACEDON, 1917.

ACT ONE.**SCENE ONE.**

ESTELLE ENTERS, DRESSED AS A DOMESTIC SERVANT. WHEN SHE FINDS THE ROOM EMPTY, SHE SWIFTLY SITS DOWN IN ONE OF THE CHAIRS - HEARS A NOISE AND JUMPS TO HER FEET AGAIN. SHE LISTENS, NOTHING. THERE ARE SEVERAL TRUNKS SITTING IN THE MIDDLE OF THE ROOM. SHE OPENS ONE OF THEM AND BEGINS TO UNPACK.

SCENE TWO.

A LARGE, VICTORIAN DISPLAY CASE, GLASS FRONTED, IS CENTRAL. THE DOOR IS OPEN ON SHELVES ALREADY CLUTTERED WITH A JUMBLE OF OBJECTS. ONE SHELF REMAINS BARE. TWO CHAIRS, A MAN'S AND A WOMAN'S. A PACKING CASE, NEWSPAPERS SCATTERED AROUND IT, SOME SHREDDED, SOME ALMOST WHOLE. JAMES ENTERS. HE STARES AT THE EMPTY SHELF, REACHES INTO THE DEPTHS OF THE PACKING CASE AND BRINGS OUT A SKULL. HE PLACES IT CENTRALLY ON THE SHELF, ALONE. ELLEN ENTERS, CARRYING A BOX. SHE SHOULD GIVE AN IMPRESSION OF AUSTERITY, DRESSED IN BLACK, PERIOD CLOTHES AROUND 1917. HER CLOTHING SHOULD APPEAR A LITTLE ECCENTRIC - UNUSUAL JEWELLERY, CHUNKY, TRIBAL, SLIGHTLY ANACHRONISTIC FOR THE TIME. JAMES DOES NOT TURN TO HER, BUT SITS DOWN IN THE MAN'S CHAIR, PICKS UP ONE OF THE NEWSPAPERS FROM THE FLOOR AND BEGINS READING IT, DESPITE THE FACT THAT IT'S BEEN RIPPED IN HALF. ELLEN LOOKS AT THE DISPLAY CASE.

ELLEN: You've left me no room.

JAMES APPEARS TO IGNORE HER.

ELLEN: You've filled it with your jumble-sale rubbish and left me no room. What is it all meant to signify anyway? The contents of a gentlemen's charity bazaar?

JAMES: *(FROM BEHIND THE NEWSPAPER)* Ladies hold charity bazaars.

ELLEN: There is no organising principle.

JAMES PUTS DOWN THE NEWSPAPER AND LOOKS AT HER.

ELLEN: It's chaos.

JAMES: I thought you were fond of chaos.

HE RETURNS TO THE NEWSPAPER. ELLEN STARES AT THE CABINET.

ELLEN: I am fond of chaos.

ELLEN PUTS THE BOX DOWN ON A CHAIR. SHE MOVES TO THE CABINET AND STARES AT THE SKULL.

ELLEN: There is no room.

JAMES: *(FROM BEHIND THE NEWSPAPER)* Move something.

ELLEN: Move what? Will I be disturbing anything important? Rearranging some impenetrable hierarchy?

JAMES LOOKS AT HER.

ELLEN: Or does it really not matter?

JAMES PICKS UP THE NEWSPAPER AGAIN. ELLEN REACHES FOR THE SKULL.

JAMES: Not that.

ELLEN: So there is something sacred here? One inviolable thing?

JAMES: I want room on that shelf. I want to collect other samples and grade them. On that shelf. I came here to work.

HE RETURNS TO THE NEWSPAPER.

ELLEN: What is so interesting in those scraps and shreds?

JAMES: County cricket scores.

ELLEN: They play cricket here, too. Doubtless with local adaptations. Perhaps you and your newfound friend could include those adaptations in your work. From what I heard on the boat, I gather there's more alcohol involved. The ritual shouting of slogans rather than the chink of teacups.

BEAT.

ELLEN: I thought the light would remind me of Greece, but it seems different somehow. *(BEAT)* This part of the country doesn't suffer from tropical heat, at least. Though I would have quite liked to watch you suffering tropical heat.

JAMES AGAIN APPEARS TO IGNORE HER. ELLEN TURNS BACK TO THE CABINET, SWIFTLY TAKES OUT THE SKULL, HOLDS IT IN HER HANDS AND STARES AT IT.

JAMES: No. Not that.

JAMES STANDS AND TRIES TO TAKE IT FROM HER. SHE HOLDS IT ABOVE HER HEAD AND THEY WRESTLE – JAMES INCREASINGLY FRANTIC AS THE POSSIBILITY OF ELLEN DROPPING THE SKULL INCREASES.

ELLEN: What can you expect to learn from something like this?

JAMES: Put the damn thing down, it's valuable...

HE MANAGES TO TAKE IT FROM HER, KISSING HER AS HE DOES SO. HER RETURN OF THE KISS SHOULD NOT NECESSARILY INTERRUPT THE VERBAL ARGUMENT.

ELLEN: Valuable for the brain that once inhabited it perhaps.

JAMES MOVES AWAY FROM HER AND PLACES THE SKULL BACK IN THE CABINET.

ELLEN: It can no longer speak.

JAMES: I neither want nor need it to speak. All I need to hear from it is the thickness and density of the bone, the thrust of the forehead and the jaw. That's all. You hold your séances, I prefer science. There's room for your precious Presence at the back. No doubt you'll hear it from there if it decides to speak up.

HE SITS IN HIS CHAIR WITH DELIBERATION AND TAKES UP THE NEWSPAPER. ELLEN STARES AT THE CABINET. REACHES FOR THE SKULL, THINKS BETTER OF IT. CLOSES THE CABINET DOOR WITH A SNAP. MOVES TO STAND BEHIND JAMES AND READ OVER HIS SHOULDER.

ELLEN: A gathering of learned men has invited me to speak to them.

JAMES: And doubtless you'll charm them, with a pretty dress and lantern slides.

ELLEN: Doubtless. Will you come and listen to me?

JAMES: I have to meet the man who invited me here.

PAUSE.

ELLEN: Will you come?

JAMES: As I always do.

ELLEN: You and your invitation.

JAMES: Patronise me if you will.

ELLEN: You came here for their patronage.

SCENE THREE.

ELLEN AT A LECTURE PODIUM. THE SCENE IS A MEETING OF THE MELBOURNE PHILOSOPHICAL INSTITUTE. ELLEN IS IN MID-FLIGHT.

ELLEN: Being now, as you are, in possession of a brief summary of my work, you may find yourselves asking why I came here, apart from the pleasure of your company and your kind invitation to address this gathering. Why, when my work has been centred on the cradle of our race, the crucible of our civilisation, do I travel to a place barely civilised, where imitations of the great edifices of Greece and Rome barely cling to their new foundations? Where, until very recently, the scrabblings and scratchings of savages were the only marks upon the land? Why, indeed? And so I asked myself when I first stepped from the ship and felt this alien light on my face. I looked at my companion in adventure and we experienced, as we so often do, the same thought. To where have we come? To what? I had seen the films made by my Cambridge colleague, Professor Haddon, on the Torres Expedition, and very strange and remote they seemed. But they preyed on my mind, these moving images of silent, stiffly dancing savages. I tried to imagine their singing accompaniment. They seemed to be a link to the beginnings of our own race. "What pipes and timbrels, what wild ecstasy". It is precisely that link, gentlemen, that has driven me across the sea.

SCENE FOUR.

PENNIMAN IS SITTING IN AN ARMCHAIR. JAMES STANDS AWKWARDLY THROUGHOUT THIS SCENE, PENNIMAN REMAINS VERY STILL - JAMES MOVES AROUND HIM.

PENNIMAN: How was the journey?

JAMES: Long. Thank you again for giving me this opportunity.

PENNIMAN: And your lodgings? Are they satisfactory?

JAMES: It seems adequate. I can't wait to begin.

PENNIMAN: Don't get your hopes up too high, young man. We may find nothing. Most of my colleagues think that the only real work left is in the north, but I disagree with them. We're travelling on a flight of fancy here, on the possibility that a trace of the beginnings may be left for us to find.

JAMES: When do we begin? I'm ready now.

PENNIMAN: I thought I'd give you some time to settle in...

JAMES: I don't want time. I've come a long way for this investigation, and I have no more time to waste. I was astonished when the invitation came, addressed to me. Out of the thin blue air, and only for me...

PENNIMAN: At least let's eat tonight. Your enthusiasm is welcome, but nothing will change between now and tomorrow. They're disappearing, but they'll still be there tomorrow. Time enough.

JAMES: What comes first? How do we arrange the release of the funds? Do we hire help? How much area do we have to cover? What...

PENNIMAN: Enough. Sit down. You came highly recommended, and you're certainly living up to that reputation.

JAMES: I didn't even know the recommendation had been given.

PENNIMAN: I was looking for something in particular. And I think I have found it.

JAMES: What were you looking for?

PENNIMAN: What do you think of Melbourne?

BEAT

JAMES: My feet had hardly touched land before someone was asking me what I thought of Melbourne.

PENNIMAN: We like to impress newcomers from home with our sophistication. Your family - are they all well?

JAMES: Yes. Or reasonably so – we've lost touch.

PENNIMAN: Really? How unfortunate.

JAMES: I was unaware you were acquainted with my family...

PENNIMAN: I'm not. But with a family of such distinction – it must be difficult for them to see their youngest son travel so far from home...

JAMES: They expressed no displeasure at the thought. My life has taken me far from them before.

BEAT.

PENNIMAN: You spoke before as if you'd just arrived – yet you had been here some time before I heard from you.

JAMES: I had a few other things I needed to...

PENNIMAN: I saw you at the Institute last week, but I had no time to speak to you.

Other things commanded my attention.

PAUSE.

PENNIMAN: What did you think of the lecture?

JAMES: Nothing I hadn't heard before.

PENNIMAN: It's good to have a woman of her stature here, though. A woman of any stature. Nobody enjoys a circus more than me, I can assure you.

JAMES: A circus?

PENNIMAN: Siamese twins and the bearded lady. *(BEAT)* And female scholars.

BEAT

PENNIMAN: I'm sure you agree.

JAMES: Yes. *(BEAT)* Certainly.

PENNIMAN: I spoke with her, briefly. She puts me in mind of an overwrought soprano.

JAMES DOESN'T REPLY.

PENNIMAN: Still. Attractive, I think. Did you travel on the same ship?

JAMES: We did.

PENNIMAN: Of course you did. A foolish question.

BEAT

PENNIMAN: I am a little old to be playing the ingénue. I'm pumping you for information, James. You were at the same university. You must know the woman personally.

JAMES: The university is quite large, it's easy to...

PENNIMAN: But surely, someone so conspicuous...

JAMES: I know her.

PENNIMAN: I thought you must. Do you have any idea what brings her here?

JAMES: She explained that at the lecture, I thought.

PENNIMAN: Yes. True. I'd like to meet her again.

PAUSE.

JAMES: No doubt you will.

PENNIMAN: And so. Dinner?

SCENE FIVE.

ELLEN IN HER LODGINGS. ESTELLE IS LEAVING THE ROOM WHEN JAMES ARRIVES. HE GRINS AT HER, HE'S IN A VERY GOOD MOOD. HE STOPS ESTELLE LEAVING THE ROOM BY BLOCKING HER PATH, SHE TRIES TO SIDE-STEP HIM, HE BLOCKS HER AGAIN. THEY DO A LITTLE DANCE UNTIL ESTELLE ESCAPES. JAMES SEEMS PLEASED WITH HIS LITTLE GAME. ELLEN WATCHES, IMPASSIVE.

JAMES: Tired?

ELLEN: Waiting for you.

JAMES: It went well.

ELLEN: Good. Did you ask how he found you?

JAMES: Obviously my reputation preceded me.

ELLEN: And they still asked you to come?

JAMES: Don't tease me, Ellen. I'm happy.

ELLEN: I can see that. You shouldn't have teased that girl. She seems terrified.

JAMES: Of what?

ELLEN: Everything.

JAMES: She's the first I've seen. I wanted to see how she'd react.

ELLEN: Was her reaction satisfactory?

JAMES: The results were inconclusive.

BEAT

JAMES: Did you talk to her?

ELLEN: I tried. I didn't get much back. Yes, Ma'am, no Ma'am. She's been well taught. It might take some time to make her feel comfortable enough to speak.