

Peter Snoch
from *Guided Tour*

ACT ONE

SCENE 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.)

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 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 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?

SUSANNA

I did. For a while.

JOE

You are exactly like I imagined.

SUSANNA

Really?

JOE

(Looking at her intently)

Exactly.

SUSANNA

Well, that's surprising.

JOE

Not at all.

(Beat. He realizes his gaze is making her uncomfortable)

Where's your tea?

SUSANNA

Tea?

JOE

(To a prison guard offstage who is monitoring their meeting)

Hey, Alonso, where's her tea?

SUSANNA

Actually, I—

JOE

(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?

SUSANNA

It helps with digestion.

JOE

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.