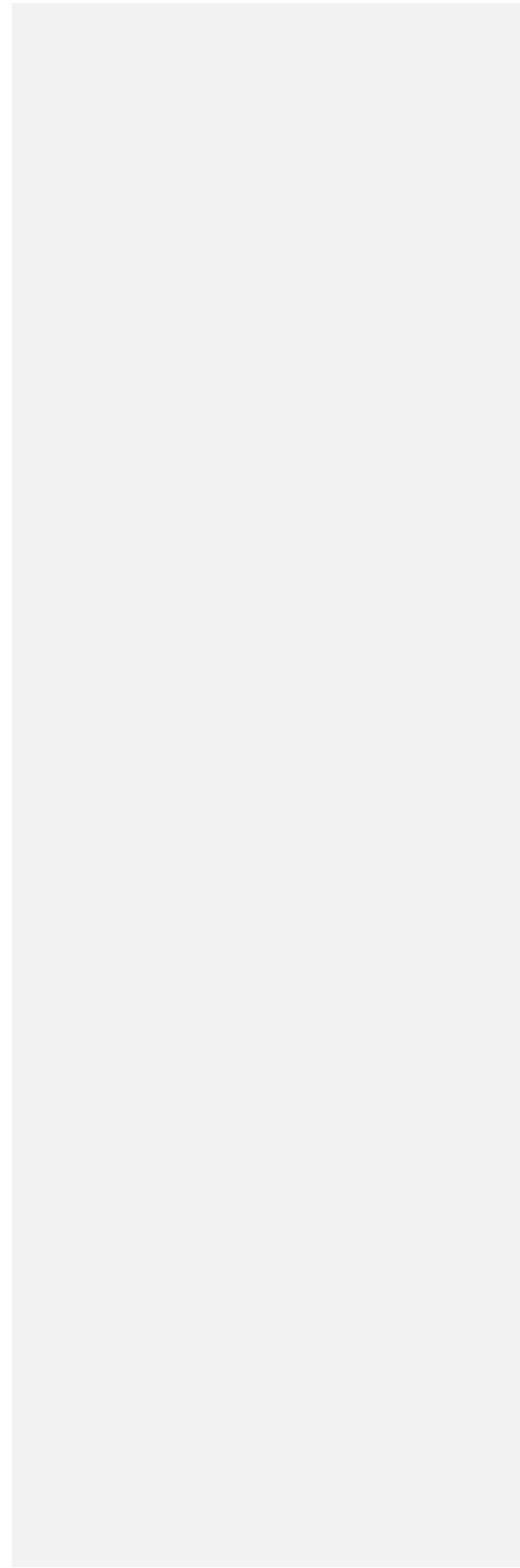


THE WOUND DRESSER

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**THE WOUND DRESSER
CAST OF CHARACTERS**

WALT WHITMAN

Forty-five years old/Seventy-two years old

CHARLOTTE ASHLAND

Thirty-six years old.

ETHAN CARTER

Nineteen years old.

SCENE

A Union military hospital during the Civil War, somewhere near Washington D.C.

TIME

Approximately 1864

ACT I – SCENE 1

We begin with an AUDIO-VISUAL presentation.

We see a montage of soldiers, both Union and Confederate, formally posing when they first entered the military, many with their weapons.

All of them are eager to fight. All of them are young. Some of them are very young.

Interspersed between the portraits are newspaper headlines that read “To Arms! To Arms! The War Has Begun” and “Lincoln Calls for Volunteers”.

These images, edited to the upbeat marches of the era (“Tramp, Tramp, Tramp”, “Battle Cry of Freedom”), should make us want to enlist immediately.

SPOTLIGHT ON:

WALT WHITMAN, dressed in a wine-colored suit, addresses the audience.

WALT

Beat! beat! drums!—blow! bugles! blow!
Through the windows—through doors—burst like a ruthless force,
Into the solemn church, and scatter the congregation,
Into the school where the scholar is studying,
Leave not the bridegroom quiet—no happiness must he have now with his bride,
Nor the peaceful farmer any peace, ploughing his field or gathering his grain,
So fierce you whirr and pound you drums—so shrill you bugles blow.

Beat! beat! drums!—blow! bugles! blow!
Make no parley—stop for no expostulation,
Mind not the timid—mind not the weeper or prayer,
Mind not the old man beseeching the young man,
Let not the child’s voice be heard, nor the mother’s entreaties,
Make even the trestles to shake the dead where they lie awaiting the hearse,
So strong you thump O terrible drums—so loud you bugles blow.

BLACK OUT.

ACT I – SCENE 2

LIGHTS UP - WARD:

A military hospital ward: hospital bed, a small table, two chairs.

There is a line of windows to the left and right, one side facing “east”, the other “west”.

Off to the side is a rest area separate from the ward. It includes a table, two more chairs, and a wood burning stove, presently cold. A pitcher of water and two glasses sit upon the table. A metal pail is also there.

Somewhere hangs a portrait of Abraham Lincoln.

Characters enter through twin doors set far downstage, so that we get the impression that they must pass several beds to reach Ethan’s bed upstage.

The set can be very realistic or stylized, but there should be some sense that this is more than a hospital. It is a sanctuary.

WALT, now in simple homespun, is removing bandages from the leg of a soldier, ETHAN CARTER, lying comatose on the bed, wearing a hospital-issued gown.

Preoccupied with his duties, he does not notice CHARLOTTE ASHCROFT entering through the twin doors.

While the doors are open, we hear the general hubbub of the adjoining ward – voices, conversations, etc.

CHARLOTTE’S is nervous and lost. She wears the latest fashion of the day.

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At last, she spots WALT.

CHARLOTTE

Oh! There you are. Good afternoon.

WALT turns, sees her - and all but sighs. He rises reluctantly.

WALT

Good afternoon, madam.

CHARLOTTE

Sister Jovita sent me here. I'm supposed to report to a Mister Walt Whitman.

WALT

You have found him, madam.

CHARLOTTE

Oh! How do you do? I'm Mrs. Charlotte Ashcroft.

WALT

How do you do, madam?

CHARLOTTE

I am so...oh....

As she steps farther into the room to greet WALT, she starts gagging. She holds a handkerchief over her mouth and nose.

WALT

Mrs. Ashcroft, are you all right?

CHARLOTTE

Yes, yes....No. Oh, my God, what is that?

WALT

What is what?

CHARLOTTE

That smell! Oh, my God....

WALT

Oh. That's probably the lime.

CHARLOTTE

Lime? Why do they use lime if it smells like that?

WALT

It disguises the smell of the shit.

CHARLOTTE

Oh, my God....

WALT

Pardon me, madam. I meant it disguises the smell of the "excrement". Along with the smell of rotting flesh. Or it might be the chloroform -

CHARLOTTE

Chloro - ?

WALT

It disguises the smell of the lime.

CHARLOTTE

Oh, oh....

WALT

I'm sorry. I...I no longer smell anything.

CHARLOTTE

How fortunate for you. May I sit down....for a moment?

WALT

Oh, of course. I'm sorry.

WALT escorts her to the table and chairs in the rest area. She appears so feeble, he helps her take a seat.

CHARLOTTE

I'll be fine. I'll be....I just need to catch my breath....My God....I'm so sorry....

WALT

Oh, please don't be sorry. It took me some time to - I don't want to say "get used to it" - but it took me some time to become "accustomed" to it. To become accustomed to everything - and much more. Yes, I think that's the word: "Accustom." I'm not sure you ever get "used to it." Nor should you.

CHARLOTTE

My husband's serving with the Loyal First Virginia Volunteer Infantry Regiment. He's a brigadier general.

WALT

My congratulations.

CHARLOTTE

He is one of the most gallant men I know. My General would surely not want me doing this.

WALT

Your general?

(understanding)

Oh, yes. Uh, doing what?

CHARLOTTE

Being here. While our men are away, it is enough for the women to hold down the homestead. That is a woman's first duty. Cooking, cleaning, taking care of the children.

(pause)

We don't have any.

WALT

Any?

CHARLOTTE

Children.

WALT

Oh.

CHARLOTTE

During such times, we all have a duty to our God, our government, and ourselves. Many of us without children - those women not yet married or those whose children have already left home, and those of us who are, well....many of us have volunteered. There are a great number of Christian societies.

.

WALT

Yes, I know. I've met those women. A great number of those women.

CHARLOTTE

Indeed? I'm looking forward to meeting such Christian women. Of course, if they are ladies of society, I might have already met them.

WALT

Oh, they're very much ladies of society. But....you won't meet them here.

CHARLOTTE

Why not?

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None of them stay.

WALT

The smell?

CHARLOTTE

CHARLOTTE falls silent. She looks over the hospital, doing her utmost to subdue her panic.

CHARLOTTE

But as you said, one becomes accustomed to it.

WALT

Usually.

CHARLOTTE

Eventually?

WALT

Usually.

CHARLOTTE

I shall stay.

WALT

(trying to stir up enthusiasm)

Oh. Well, splendid. But now, Mrs. Ashcroft, if you'll excuse me. I must finish up here.

CHARLOTTE

Of course, of course.

(beat)

I should assist you.

WALT

Uh, yes. Yes. If you'd like.....

WALT and CHARLOTTE walk over to ETHAN lying on the cot. WALT remembers something and hurries back to the table.

WALT

Just a moment.

While he's gone, CHARLOTTE stares at ETHAN. She appears to be making some kind of connection. As if she knows him. She touches his face – then pulls back her hand as if she's doing something wrong.

Meanwhile, WALT pours a glass of water from the pitcher; he places the glass upon the table. He then picks up the pail and returns to Ethan's beside. Setting the pail beside him, he continues unwrapping the soiled, bloody bandages from Ethan's leg.

WALT

Madame, I don't want to discourage you before we even start, but as I said, every man – and every woman - must find the best way for him or her to serve. For men, there is, of course, enlistment. For women, there are sewing circles, food drives. They sew blankets – always appreciated – and mend uniforms –

CHARLOTTE

Do those women work...here?

WALT

Well, no. Not many anyway. But remember, one needs only the desire to help, and, I believe, a way will present itself. Whether that is here, at the hospital, or at home, or at church.

CHARLOTTE

(indicating ETHAN)
Is he hurt...badly?

WALT

He arrived more than a week, ago, conscious, talking, but three days ago, he fell into a coma. He has never gained consciousness. When the infection sets in....well....

CHARLOTTE

Is he suffering?

WALT

But by the way he cries at night, I would say yes. Fortunately, it shouldn't be much longer.

CHARLOTTE

“Fortunately”?

WALT
The doctors believe he shall...pass...soon.

CHARLOTTE
When?

WALT
Tonight.

CHARLOTTE
Do you believe that?

WALT
With their considerable experience, the doctors have become very....knowledgeable.

CHARLOTTE
But he's so....so young....

WALT
Nearly all of them are.
(a beat, WALT settles into the job)
Now, once the bandages are removed, the wound must be cleaned. Some nurses believe you should pick out the maggots -

CHARLOTTE
The...maggots?

WALT
Say what you will about those little wiggly things, but they do a particularly good job of eating dead flesh. I, for one, believe they benefit the wounded as well as -

As soon as WALT removes the last clotted bandage, the rising stench overtakes CHARLOTTE.

CHARLOTTE
Oh! Oh, oh....

CHARLOTTE gags. WALT calmly hands her the pail into which she vomits.

After she has completely emptied her stomach – which stretches on for a comedically long time - WALT gently leads her by the arm back to the table. She can barely stand.

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He hands her the glass of water which he had previously poured.

WALT

I'm sorry. I forgot to mention...gangrene does have a particular odor that -

CHARLOTTE

No, I'm...I'm fine now. It passed over me like a wave.

WALT

Madam, I don't believe you are well.

CHARLOTTE

Something...no, no, I'm sure it's nothing. But perhaps you're right. Perhaps I had better return home. I do want to thank you so much for the...the tour.

WALT helps CHARLOTTE out of her chair and leads her to the door, anxious to get rid of her so he can resume his duties.

WALT

Despite everything, it was a pleasure meeting you, Mrs. Ashcroft.

CHARLOTTE

I know it is your duty, Mister...oh, I'm sorry -

WALT

Whitman. Walt Whitman.

CHARLOTTE

Thank you. I know it is your duty, Mr. Whitman, to greet volunteers, just as it's the duty for men of all ages to engage the enemy on countless battlefields.

WALT

I would hardly compare greeting volunteers to engaging the enemy.

CHARLOTTE

I didn't quite mean that.

WALT

I'm sure. Come, I'll escort you out.

CHARLOTTE

Thank you, Mr. Whitman, but I will manage. You have your duties here. I'm so sorry. Oh, my God, I'm so ashamed. My General is possessed of such a noble spirit. When I think what he must experience...I'm so ashamed.

WALT

Oh, no, no, no. My dear lady, you have been incredibly brave. How few women – especially of your station - would ever think about coming to a hell hole as this. But you have. You have come - and with the kindest and most noble intentions, which I know are considerable.

CHARLOTTE

Yes, yes....thank you. Thank you, sir.

WALT

There are sewing circles. God knows we need blankets.

CHARLOTTE

Yes...blankets....

As WALT escorts her to the door, she pauses to glance once more at the still form of ETHAN, then goes out the door.

SPOTLIGHT ON:

WALT faces the audience.

WALT

Oh me! Oh life! of the questions of these recurring,
Of the endless trains of the faithless, of cities fill'd with the foolish,
Of myself forever reproaching myself, (for who more foolish than I, and who more
faithless?)
Of eyes that vainly crave the light, of the objects mean, of the struggle ever renew'd,
Of the poor results of all, of the plodding and sordid crowds I see around me,
Of the empty and useless years of the rest, with the rest me intertwined,
The question, O me! so sad, recurring—What good amid these, O me, O life?
Answer.
That you are here—that life exists and identity,
That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse.

BLACKOUT.

ACT I - SCENE 3

LIGHTS UP - WARD:

The hospital, quiet as a church, is bathed in early light filtering through the eastern windows.

WALT enters to start his shift. A haversack hangs from his shoulder.

Suddenly, from the floor behind ETHAN's bed, CHARLOTTE sleepily rises, startling WALT. She's still wearing her fashionable clothes from the day before.

Madam!

WALT

Good morning, Mr. Whitman.

CHARLOTTE

Recovering from his surprise, WALT steps over to the bed and pulls back the covers. He feels Ethan's neck for a pulse.

Is he...?

CHARLOTTE

No. I mean, yes: he's alive....Thanks to you.

WALT

Please, do not say such a thing. I did not do anything.

CHARLOTTE

And yet...?

WALT

I simply knelt beside him. And prayed.

CHARLOTTE

The entire night?

WALT

CHARLOTTE

Well...I'm sure I must have fallen asleep but...but never for very long. I know, because all through the night, he cried out. He cried all the time.

WALT

I'm afraid that's not unusual for many of these fellows. You spent the entire night on your knees, in prayer?

She nods.

WALT (CONTINUED)

Ah, prayer. I'm sure that saved him.

CHARLOTTE

You don't believe in prayer, Mr. Whitman?

WALT

I believe your presence – and your prayers – have indeed saved him.

CHARLOTTE

But do you pray?

WALT

Oh, madam, it's too early in the morning for such questions.

CHARLOTTE

But that is when you should pray, in the morning, so you may start the day properly.

WALT

From hence forth, I shall endeavor to do so.

CHARLOTTE

In times like these, everyone in the country is praying – mothers, fathers, wives....

WALT

Yes, they're all praying. And the war is now in its third year. But you came back, and you spent the night on the floor. And this poor boy lives still.

CHARLOTTE

I couldn't leave. He reminds me...of a friend.

WALT

I believe friendship has cured many a fever, and affection has cured the festering wound.

CHARLOTTE

When I saw him last night, I thought of....

WALT
You thought of....?

CHARLOTTE
(shaking her head, changing the subject)
....of this boy's mother, his father....and if he had a wife.

WALT
Oh, I believe he's too young for a wife though that's not always true. I know many young couples who hurried to tie the knot before the husband left to...fulfill his duty.

WALT escorts CHARLOTTE to the table and chair. WALT scrounges through his haversack.

WALT (CONTINUED)
You need something to eat. I've some apples here, some cheese. My boys enjoy these treats so much, you'd think I had brought a feast.

They sit.

WALT
Just so you are prepared, our dear soldier may still pass on to his reward – sometime today. Or tonight. Despite your prayers.

CHARLOTTE
Yes, I know. You said that yesterday. I do believe in miracles, but I also know they are very rare. At the very least, I hope I am here when he does....pass on. Should I wish for something like that? Is that proper? Do you think that my presence might help?

WALT
Oh, yes. Yes, I do. I believe that your presence would ease his soul tremendously. So many pass alone and abandoned.

BLACKOUT.

ACT II - SCENE 1

Interstitial AUDIO-VISUAL
PRESENTATION:

To more upbeat martial music, we see more portraits of soldiers.

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These are interspersed with Currier and Ives prints of the period depicting the glory and romance of war: the gallant charges, the fiery horses, the waving battle flags. The dead, in such depictions, are posed as if merely resting.

The last portrait of the wounded is of our young soldier, Ethan Carter, taken when he first enlisted, looking very determined. And young.

LIGHTS UP - WARD:

A few days later.

CHARLOTTE, now wearing a nurse's uniform, stands beside Ethan's bedside. The table holds a basin of water, a washrag, a towel, and a clean hospital gown.

She speaks quickly and rapidly to disguise her anxiety.

CHARLOTTE

Good afternoon, sir. Oh, the good sisters told me your name. Ethan. Ethan Carter, isn't that it? That's a very nice name. Very...manly. Hmm. Well, since the doctors seem to believe that you may live – at least a few more days - and since you...well, I'm afraid, my good sir, you stink. Oh, yes, you really do stink. There's no other word for it. Ladies are not accustomed to such, uh... "odors", shall we call them? The chloroform, the ammonia, the...the many – many - other things. So the dear sisters have asked me – I'm a married woman, but of course, the nuns also perform such duties – so the dear sisters have asked me to give you a bath.

She nervously glances over Ethan's body. She has no idea how to begin. First, she thoroughly cleans Ethan's forehead. She washes his cheeks, his chin.

CHARLOTTE (CONTINUED)

I wonder if.... one can wear clothes while bathing? No, I suppose one can't. Not really anyway. No one wears clothes when they bathe. Well, I suppose nuns do. So, uh....well, maybe a person can wear clothes. Everyone takes baths. The body manufactures all manner of malodorous smells. It is our Creator's daily reminder that the flesh is rotten. I know some who bathe once a week - which I'm sure has a negative effect on their health.

No matter. Bathing is a common experience among mankind. Most mankind. I've read that ancient Egyptians bathed in the Nile. But aren't there alligators in the Nile? They must have had special protected areas. Like a fence or something. Because I'm sure the alligators....I'm sorry. I'm just prattling on and on now. Excuse me.

She spends a lot of time washing his neck until she feels almost "forced" to unfasten the top button of his gown. She meekly pulls open the collar. She washes the patch of exposed chest.

CHARLOTTE (CONTINUED)

You...you've been here a week, and when you were with your unit, well, who knows how often soldiers in the field bathe. I've heard there are only two seasons on the battlefield: dust and mud. My General was always clean. *Is* always clean. In peace times, women – and men - take baths. I like a light sponge bath in the morning. And here's a secret: I put perfume in the water. Not the perfume that my General gives me, of course. The cheaper sort. I mean, the less expensive. Of course, a bath can apply to a wide spectrum of ...cleanliness. But dear Sister Henrietta asked me to bathe you. To cleanse your body of....

(looking over his body)

...of filth. Oh, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. You're not filthy, you're.....well....

CHARLOTTE squeezes a rag into a bucket, pauses, as if frozen.

CHARLOTTE (CONTINUED)

I would be so concerned with alligators....

She catches herself, stops.

Frustrated, sighing, she manages to lift him slightly and pull the gown past his shoulders to his stomach. She washes the exposed abdomen, all the time averting her gaze as much as possible.

His chest and abdomen are washed over and over again. The patient is sparkling clean – at least from head to belly button.

She hesitates, not sure how to proceed. Then she has the brilliant idea of starting at the other end: his feet.

CHARLOTTE (CONTINUED)

Has no one taken off your socks? That does not seem very healthy –

As she removes a sock, the smell overcomes her. She gags, temporarily incapacitated. She gets herself under control again. She continues to talk as she removes the second sock, gagging every sentence or so -

CHARLOTTE (CONTINUED)

“After that he poureth water into a bason, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel wherewith he was girded.

“Then cometh he to Simon Peter: and Peter saith unto him, Lord, dost thou wash my feet?

“Jesus answered and said unto him, What I do thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter....”

This time, she works steadily upward.

When she reaches his knees, she feels she has gone far enough. She begins washing his abdomen again - without ever looking at ETHAN.

Back and forth - ankles to stomach, knees to stomach - until there is no more room to negotiate.

Finally, without looking, she pulls off the gown.

(For modesty's sake, the lower portion of ETHAN might be hidden by a pile of blankets, pillows, whatever.)

Keeping her eyes heavenward, she clumps her bath rag upon Ethan's privates. If he were conscious, he would yelp.

Tentatively, slowly, blindly, she begins to gently run the rag over his private parts.

Then, startled by something beneath her rag, she stops rubbing.

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She looks about the hospital. She is alone.

Slowly, she looks down at the rag. Slowly, she lifts the rag. Slowly, she looks.

She is rather fascinated by what she sees, so fascinated that she doesn't notice Ethan blinking his eyes, waking up.

ETHAN

Hello....

CHARLOTTE yelps, nearly falls over, as if she were caught indulging in perversity. Or worse.

CHARLOTTE

Oh, oh. Oh, my God....

ETHAN

Are you all right?

CHARLOTTE

(recovering)

Me? Am I - ? Yes, yes, I am fine. How are you?

ETHAN

I'm not sure. I'm not sure what happened....

He gazes down the length of his naked body. Then he looks at CHARLOTTE. She's mortally embarrassed. She immediately covers him with the gown.

CHARLOTTE

Sister Henrietta – a nun - she's the one who ordered me to, uh – I am a married woman!

ETHAN attempts to sit up, but he's struck with a sinking spell.

CHARLOTTE forces herself to grab him around his naked chest. She lowers him to bed, and then hurriedly covers him with a clean sheet.

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He looks up at CHARLOTTE, then at his body. He nearly swoons in despair.

ETHAN

Oh, God...why can't it be over?

BLACKOUT.

ACT II - SCENE 2

LIGHTS UP - REST AREA:

Evening. The end of the day shift. A soft reddish light in the west.

CHARLOTTE, bucket in hand, towel over her shoulder, wearily collapses upon a chair. WALT joins her.

WALT

Well, Madam, I do believe our ward smells much better this evening.

CHARLOTTE

At least the men do. Twenty-seven. I bathed twenty-seven men...head to toe.

WALT

Head to toe? Oh, my!

CHARLOTTE laughs out of embarrassment. Seeing her embarrassment, WALT joins in.

CHARLOTTE

The nuns told me that "matronly" women – not young and attractive girls – make the better nurses.

WALT

No matter, madam - you are the better nurse.

CHARLOTTE

Thank you, Mr. Whitman.

WALT

Getting some of those fellows to bathe is a battle in itself. You have single-handedly killed platoons of lice – no doubt, all of them Confederates. I have seen uniforms so stiff with sweat and mud that once removed, they stood up by themselves, ready for battle.

CHARLOTTE

But unlike a battle, no one has died from bathing.

WALT

How is your husband? I'm sorry. I didn't mean to appear as if I connect your husband to dying.

CHARLOTTE

But that is what he does, doesn't he? Make other men die? That is a soldier's duty.

WALT

Have you received any news? Letters?

CHARLOTTE

Oh, yes, yes. Thank God, I just received a letter yesterday. I write him every day, but I never know if he receives them. I'm not sure I could bear not hearing from him. The letter indeed provides such keen solace, but I noted the day and realized he wrote it three weeks ago.

She hands him the letter. As WALT reads it, she carefully studies his face, interested in what he might make of her General.

WALT

"My Dearest Wife,

I trust this letter finds you in good health, though I know your days must be trying without me there to guide and support you. The weight of responsibility rests heavily upon me, yet my thoughts often stray to you, managing the household in my absence. I can only hope you have not found yourself too overwhelmed."

CHARLOTTE

He is always so worried about me. I hope to convince him that I am ready for the challenge.

WALT

"The men under my command look to me for strength, and I have risen to the challenge. We have seen victory on a number of occasions, and I believe my leadership to be a deciding factor."

CHARLOTTE

It's his duty to the Union, that is what drove him onto those fields of battle. I believe he thinks he personally shoulders the entire weight of this war alone.

WALT

Has the military always been your husband's career?

CHARLOTTE

Oh, no. He owns a bank. His partner is running the enterprise while the General is in the field. He was given his post by President Lincoln.

WALT

He is a good man, the president.

CHARLOTTE

My General does not always think so. Nonetheless, he sought a position, and it was granted by the president. Lincoln is a crafty man.

WALT

Why do you believe him to be crafty?

CHARLOTTE

He solicits men from both parties to lead his armies. Thus, they are all responsible.

WALT

(continues reading)

“Do not trouble yourself with the more complicated affairs of the household; I will attend to them upon my return. For now, your concern should be to keep yourself well and ensure things are in reasonable order for my arrival.

I remain, as ever,

Your devoted husband....”

WALT hands back the letter.

CHARLOTTE

As I'm sure you know, he can't tell me where he is, and he isn't the kind of man to tell me *how* he is. But the letter itself proves he's alive - at least he was three weeks ago. His handwriting doesn't appear shaky, does it?

WALT

No, it looks like a fine, practiced hand to me, but then I don't have a comparison.

CHARLOTTE

Neither do I. Married people seldom exchange letters. Anyway, his tone leads me to conclude he's well and healthy, whatever that might mean in times like these.

WALT

And how are you? After these past few days at our establishment?

CHARLOTTE

Considering the sacrifice of my General and men like him on the battlefield, I would be too ashamed to complain. I believe in my General. I believe in this war – if that is such a thing to say. I am a wilting flower.

WALT

A wilting flower? Madam, you are a morning glory.

CHARLOTTE

Thank you. That is a beautiful flower.

WALT

More than beautiful. It is tenacious. A few years ago, a friend gave me morning glory seeds for my garden. I planted them. To my regret.

CHARLOTTE

Why your regret?

WALT

Because morning glory vines are incredibly vital. In no time, they took over my entire garden. All I could do was hack away at the ever-encroaching vines. Now I have neglected my garden for so long that if I should ever return home, I will face another war against the armies of morning glory.

CHARLOTTE

You will return home, Mr. Whitman. We shall all return home.

WALT

Some shall return home. But not all.

BLACKOUT.

ACT II - SCENE 3

Late at night.

The hospital ward is dark except for a single lantern upon a bedside table. WALT sits beside ETHAN, who sits up in bed.

WALT reads a letter by the light of the lantern.

WALT

“Dear Mr. President,

I hope this letter finds you in good health and strength amidst the heavy burdens you carry for our beloved Union. Over the course of this terrible war, I have spent many hours at the hospitals, offering what little comfort I can to the wounded and dying, and have come to know many of these young men as if they were my own brothers.

It is with one such young man in mind that I humbly address you today. Ethan Carter, a soldier barely out of boyhood, stands condemned for the crime of desertion. In the face of the battle’s horrors and the constant strain of duty, his heart wavered. He acted not from malice, nor from disloyalty to the Union, but from fear and exhaustion — weaknesses we all, in some measure, share. As he left the scene of the battle, he was shot in the leg. He is still recovering from this wound.

The burdens of war weigh heavily on these tender souls, Mr. Lincoln, and it is with the deepest respect for your justice and humanity that I ask you to consider a pardon for this youth.

I know your heart has room for mercy, as well as duty, and I know this young man, once spared, will offer much to our nation, whether on the battlefield or in the years to come as a citizen of our restored Union. We ask so much of our soldiers, and sometimes they falter, but by your hand, may this boy find redemption.

I trust in your judgment, and with deep admiration for your leadership in these dire times, I remain,

Yours faithfully,

Walt Whitman”

Neither says anything for a while.

ETHAN

My commanding officer shot me as I was running from the battle.

WALT

For the purposes of this letter, I don’t believe we need mention that.

ETHAN

He said he was trying to kill me. Oh, I wish he had. Or I wish Johnny Reb had. Now, they can’t wait until I can walk, so they can march me in front of a regular firing squad. I know so many who have died in places like this. Yet I live.

WALT

I saw Mr. Lincoln just after he was elected. A carriage pulled up in front of the White House, and he got out. A crowd had gathered, but no one said a word. So I called out, "Good morning, Mr. President."

ETHAN

Did he hear you?

WALT

I believe he did, for he looked right at me and nodded. I've seen him a few times after that. Such a deep, almost overwhelming sadness in his eyes.

ETHAN

His first will be his only inauguration, I'm afraid. He will never be re-elected. People are tired of war. McClellan will defeat him.

WALT

There is no predicting anything in this war. At one time, we believed it wouldn't last more than a month.

ETHAN

That's why I enlisted right away: I was afraid it would be over before I saw action.

WALT

My brother George thought the same. He signed up for one-hundred days. He's still serving.

ETHAN

I saw enough action in my first fight to last me all my life. Then I fought twelve more. Twelve. I'll never forget the first man that I saw killed. He was talking to me, telling me to get ready for the charge, and then came a single shot. I hardly noticed it, but he looked at me with a confused expression on his face, and fell over, dead. He was here, and then he wasn't. That happened over and over. But never to me. And so now I am here.

WALT

My son, you must not give up hope.

ETHAN

Why must they make my death even harder? I thought that being in battle would make me harder; instead, it made me weaker. And then the last battle....I swear to God, I couldn't make myself move. My legs just wouldn't work.

WALT

Our president's a good man. In the middle of such a brutal war, he has retained kindness. In times like these, we need to trust in the goodness and kindness of such men who possess such strength as that.

ETHAN

No matter what happens, Mr. Whitman, thank you. Thank you for the letter. Thank you for everything.

WALT kisses ETHAN on the forehead.

The lantern burns out.

The hospital fills with afternoon light.
WALT rises from the chair and is almost immediately replaced by CHARLOTTE –

ACT II - SCENE 4

LIGHTS UP - WARD:

- who reads to ETHAN from a book of poetry. Her recitation, most of it from memory, is quite dramatic.

CHARLOTTE

“How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
For the ends of being and ideal grace.
I love thee to the level of every day's
Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light.
I love thee freely, as men strive for right.
I love thee purely, as they turn from praise.
I love thee with the passion put to use
In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
With my lost saints. I love thee with the breath,
Smiles, tears, of all my life; and, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after death.”

ETHAN looks lost, doesn't respond.

CHARLOTTE waits for his response, and then rereads the last line as if he hadn't heard it.

CHARLOTTE

"I love thee with the breath,
Smiles, tears, of all my life; and, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after death."

ETHAN

Miss Charlotte....is that possible?

CHARLOTTE

What is?

ETHAN

Can people love like that?

CHARLOTTE

Oh, yes. Yes, they can.

ETHAN

I don't believe that....

CHARLOTTE

I can very much assure you that a man and a woman can love like that.

ETHAN

I must admit....whether it's true or not, it's a very nice idea.

CHARLOTTE

It was written by Ellizabeth Barrett Browning. One of my favorites. The General also likes poetry but mainly odes and such as composed by Sir Walter Scott.

(she rises)

I had better continue my rounds.

ETHAN

One more poem, please. Just one more.

CHARLOTTE

Very well. One more.

She dramatically clears her throat.

CHARLOTTE

The title is, "To My Beloved".

She addresses an unseen audience.
Again, her recitation is melodramatic and
intense, becoming increasingly emotional.

CHARLOTTE

“In the tender light of morning’s hue,
Where softest winds in meadow blew,
Two hearts entwined, a love was born,
As day’s first breath adorned the morn.

She, with eyes like twilight’s gleam,
A vision of a poet’s dream,
He, a youth both fair and bright,
Whose laugh could chase the deepest night.

They wandered fields of golden green,
Where flowers kissed the sky serene,
And whispered vows, so soft and true,
Of love eternal, ever new.

But time, alas, with cruel hand,
Spun threads they could not understand.
For in the bloom of love’s sweet spring,
Fate’s dark shadow took its wing.

He fell, a pale and fragile form,
Crushed beneath the mill’s alarm,
All alone, with fading sigh,
He whispered soft, his last goodbye.

Each night she weeps beneath the moon,
And hums their long-forgotten tune,
For though the world may pass her by,
Her heart belongs to him on high.

For love endures beyond the grave,
A beacon to the souls who brave.

And in the places, where angels sing,
She knows he waits, her love, her king,
Until the day, hand in hand,
They’ll walk again in heaven’s land.”

By poem’s end, both ETHAN and
CHARLOTTE are almost in tears.

I'm sorry....

CHARLOTTE

Who wrote that?

ETHAN

CHARLOTTE wipes away her tears,
composes herself before answering.

Charlotte Ashcroft.

CHARLOTTE

It takes him a moment....

You? You wrote that!

ETHAN

She nods bashfully but proudly.

ETHAN

“And in the heavens, where angels sing,
She knows he waits, her love, her king.”
Oh, Miss Charlotte, that is the most beautiful line of poetry ever written.

Oh,well....thank you, Ethan.

CHARLOTTE

Did you know Mr. Whitman is also a poet?

ETHAN

Our Mr. Whitman?

CHARLOTTE

I heard the guys in the next ward talking about him.

ETHAN

Mr. Whitman! That is a surprise.

CHARLOTTE

BLACKOUT.

ACT II - SCENE 5

SPOT LIGHT ON WALT:

He addresses the audience.

WALT

“...I do, therefore, invite my fellow-citizens in every part of the United States, and also those who are at sea and those who are sojourning in foreign lands, to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next as a Day of Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the heavens.

“In testimony whereof, I have hereunto set my hand and caused the seal of the United States to be affixed

Abraham Lincoln”

LIGHTS UP - WARD:

ETHAN is seated upright in his bed.

CHARLOTTE pours wine into their coffee mugs while WALT reads from a newspaper.

Scattered about the bed are the remains of a Thanksgiving feast.

ETHAN, CHARLOTTE, and WALT raise their glasses of wine in toast.

ALL

To Thanksgiving !

They drink.

WALT

I cannot help but think that in these dire times, Fortune has sent us this humble man, this Abraham Lincoln whose light will lead us out of this darkness.

CHARLOTTE

My General might disagree, but I hope you are right.

ETHAN

To Abraham Lincoln. May he grant me – us - mercy.

ALL

(toasting)
To Abraham Lincoln. May he grant us mercy.

As they toast and drink, ETHAN and WALT trade looks that CHARLOTTE does not see, nor would she understand.

WALT

I, for one, am thankful for so many things.

CHARLOTTE

Such as?

WALT

First, for the meal served today by our dear hospital staff. I believe I could identify the meat as belonging to some kind of mammal – raccoon or possum – or maybe both were generously included.

ETHAN

I grew up on possum.

CHARLOTTE

What does possum taste like?

ETHAN

It tastes exactly like squirrel - a little more soapy maybe - but better!

CHARLOTTE starts to laugh, then realizes he's not joking.

CHARLOTTE

Ahh.

ETHAN

I saw a soldier take some crackers off a dead rebel. He chipped off the bloody edges and started eating them.

CHARLOTTE

What happened?

ETHAN

When he saw me watching, he offered a piece to me.

Both WALT and CHARLOTTE are too polite to ask –

ETHAN
(a bit embarrassed)
I ate them.

WALT
I heard crackers go well with squirrel.

ETHAN
Mr. Whitman, did you know Miss Charlotte is also a poet?

WALT
A poet? I did not know! But knowing her acute vivacity, I should have.

ETHAN
Have you heard of Elizabeth Brown? Miss Charlotte is even better.

CHARLOTE
Oh, Ethan, no, no, no -

ETHAN
Oh, yes, you are! I like Elizabeth Brown enough, but Miss Charlotte is the possum to Mrs. Brown's squirrel. Miss Charlotte, you are my favorite poet! Recite one of your poems, Miss Charlotte. I would be so....thankful!

WALT
Yes, yes, let's hear it.

CHARLOTTE
No, no, I....

She humbly bows her head. WALT and ETHAN wait in silence. Then she removes a piece of paper from her person.

CHARLOTTE
Just by coincidence, I have written a poem for this occasion of the first Thanksgiving.

WALT/ETHAN
Let's hear it. Read! A poem! A poem!

CHARLOTTE takes a moment to compose herself. WALT and ETHAN fall silent. She clears her throat.

CHARLOTTE

“A Thanksgiving Hymn” by Mrs. Charlotte Ashcroft

WALT and ETHAN clap.

CHARLOTTE

“O Lord, in times of grief and fear,
We bow our heads, for Thou art near.
Amidst the strife and cannon's roar,
Thy mercy holds us evermore.
Our men in battle, brave and bold,
Defend our land, their story told.
Yet, even as the blood may spill,
We trust, dear Lord, Thy perfect will.
For every meal, for every breath,
We thank Thee, Lord, in life and death.
Thou givest light in darkest night,
And hope within the endless fight.
Though sorrow walks with us each day,
We trust in Thee, Thy holy way.
For every tear, Thou dost provide,
Thy peace, O Lord, will still abide.
So here we gather, hearts as one,
To praise Thee for Thy blessings won.
In war, in peace, in joy, in pain,
We thank Thee, Lord, and still proclaim.

Amen.”

ETHAN

Oh, Miss Charlotte. Everything rhymes!

WALT

(doing his best to be supportive)

Oh, yes, yes, such...rhyming. And everything! And so...heartfelt.

CHARLOTTE

Thank you, my dear friends. My dearest friends! But wait! Mr. Whitman, Ethan has told me that you, too, are a writer.

WALT

I have had a few articles published in our hospital's own gazette.

CHARLOTTE

I meant you also write poetry.

I'll admit I have tried my hand. WALT

Then please - CHARLOTTE

Oh, no, no. I am no good at reciting poetry. WALT

Mr. Whitman - CHARLOTTE

No, no. Not today. WALT

All right. If you won't recite them, I should like to read your poems. Are they in print? CHARLOTTE

You must be careful. WALT

Why? CHARLOTTE

Poetry can be dangerous. WALT

Dangerous? Then I must be living a very dangerous life because I read poetry all the time. CHARLOTTE

Let us have another toast. WALT

WALT replenishes their glasses, which they raise in toast.

We give thanks to dangerous poetry. WALT

Hurrah! ALL

BLACKOUT.

ACT II - SCENE 6

LIGHTS UP - WARD:

CHARLOTTE finishes dressing Ethan's legs then helps him dress.

They banter back and forth as they go along, no longer embarrassed by their close proximity. They end up facing each other, his arms around her shoulders, her hands pulling up his pants.

CHARLOTTE

There! And now for your boots.

He falls/sits upon the bed.

ETHAN

I don't need boots.

CHARLOTTE

Of course, you do! Every gentleman must wear boots. It is only proper.

ETHAN

But why should I wear boots? I can't walk.

CHARLOTTE

But you shall.

ETHAN

But I can't.

CHARLOTTE

But I will insist!

ETHAN

No....

CHARLOTE

Yes, yes, you will walk. Where are your boots?

ETHAN

I don't have any.

CHARLOTTE

No boots? How did you get here?

ETHAN

They didn't think I'd have any more use for them, so they pulled them off my feet and gave them to someone who did.

CHARLOTTE

You need your boots! No matter. On second thought, one doesn't need boots to walk. Adam and Eve walked about Eden in bare feet! Come on. Stand. I'll be right beside you.

ETHAN

No, ma'am. I can't. I'm too feeble.

CHARLOTTE

Oh, Ethan... please. Won't you try? For me?

ETHAN begins to protest, then quiets. He nods reluctantly. He will try – for her. She takes his hands.

CHARLOTTE

I know you can do it, Ethan.

ETHAN

It's not use, Miss Charlotte. None of this is any –

CHARLOTTE

I know you can.

ETHAN

Yes, ma'am.

CHARLOTTE

There you go. I know you can do this, Ethan. Do you know why I know?

ETHAN

No, ma'am.

CHARLOTE

Because I've been praying for you. Every night, before I go to bed, I ask God for you to walk. As the Bible says, "The blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them."

ETHAN

"Lepers"? I don't have leprosy, do - ?

CHARLOTTE
No, no, I was just –

ETHAN
And I can see just fine, Miss Charlotte.

CHARLOTTE
I know you can see. And I know you can hear, my handsome boy.

ETHAN
It's no use –

CHARLOTTE
And if we ask our Lord to help you, I know you can walk.

ETHAN swallows, gathers strength. He
grabs her arms, steadying himself until they
both find their balance.

Then, with CHARLOTTE'S support,
ETHAN rises from the bed until he's
standing on his own two feet.

CHARLOTTE
Oh, Ethan! Ethan!

Her confidence gives him confidence.

Grimacing, he tries to put one foot forward
– and instantly crumples onto the bed,
inadvertently hauling CHARLOTTE atop
him.

CHARLOTTE'S mortified to suddenly find
herself in such an intimate position.

Scrambling off ETHAN and the bed, she
falls hard on the floor, pulling ETHAN after
her.

ETHAN
Miss Charlotte!

The Wound Dresser - 37

Fearful of someone entering the ward,
CHARLOTTE struggles to her feet.

She then helps ETHAN onto the bed, a
considerable undertaking.

CHARLOTTE

I'm fine, Ethan. I'm fine. How are you?

ETHAN

Oh, Miss Charlotte, I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry.

CHARLOTTE

There is nothing to be sorry about.

ETHAN

It's no use. Please, I don't want to walk

CHARLOTTE

You will walk! Do you hear me? You will walk. We're not giving up. We shall never give up.

BLACKOUT

ACT II – SCENE 7

LIGHTS UP - REST AREA:

CHARLOTTE and WALT share a simple
meal.

CHARLOTTE

So! You've been published.

WALT

Well, I -

CHARLOTTE

John Meyers in C ward told me!

WALT

Yes, I have been published. At least, I have published a book. At my own expense. Which I'm not sure means the same thing as having "been published."

CHARLOTTE

I should tell you, I've already bought your book.

Oh, no. WALT

CHARLOTTE
"Leaves of Grass?" I look forward to reading it.

WALT
Be careful. You may not survive.

CHARLOTTE
I have spent this morning emptying slop buckets. I think I can survive your poems.

WALT
If only my critics were so kind.

CHARLOTTE
How have you been well received? By the critics, I mean?

WALT
My fiercest critic proclaimed me "An American bard at last."

CHARLOTTE
"An American bard?" That certainly sounds laudatory.

WALT
It should. I wrote it. After all, I am my fiercest critic.

CHARLOTTE
You wrote your own review?

WALT
Several of them, as a matter of fact. All very "laudatory".

CHARLOTTE
Oh...

WALT
"Man's fancy could not have conceived such a mass of stupid flesh unless he were possessed of the soul of a sentimental donkey that had died of disappointed love."

CHARLOTTE
Oh...

WALT

"Is it possible that the most prudish nation in the world will adopt a poet whose indecencies stink in the nostrils?"

CHARLOTTE

Oh....

WALT

Those are the ones I did not write.

CHARLOTTE

Oh. I see....Mr. Whitman, you must not be discouraged. I'm sure if you committed yourself to reading to some of our most popular poets, someone like Philip Pendleton Cooke, you could imitate his style.

WALT

Philip Pendleton....? What has he written?

CHARLOTTE

(reciting from memory, her usual dramatic style)

"The lilies of the valley
By young graves weep,
The pansies love to dally
Where maidens sleep;
May their bloom, in beauty vying,
Never wane
Where thine earthly part is lying,
Florence Vane!"

WALT

Everything rhymed!

CHARLOTTE

Poets write about death without fear!

WALT

(making fun)

Especially when death is like sleep.

CHARLOTTE

(not quite hearing him)

I'm sorry. Death is like - ?

WALT

(changing the subject)

What about this Poe fellow? Have you read him?

CHARLOTTE

I have. But I must warn you, his poems are not for you.

WALT

Why is that?

CHARLOTTE

Mr. Whitman, you are nearly as old as my General.

WALT

I didn't know your general was so decrepit!

CHARLOTTE

Mr. Poe's poems are too fevered for those of conservative leanings. My advice: sharpen your pencil and keep writing.

WALT

I shall do so. Thank you for your encouragement.

CHARLOTTE

Of course. Poets must support one another. May I ask a personal question?

WALT

You may.

CHARLOTTE

Have you ever married?

WALT

No. But once, I was close.

CHARLOTTE

Well, you should.

WALT

Marry? Me?

CHARLOTTE

There's a lid for every pot.

WALT

Thank you. But I'm curious: how would marriage help me write poetry?

CHARLOTTE

A wife's purpose is to encourage her husband in all his endeavors.

WALT

I am sure the General must be very thankful to you.

CHARLOTTE

He knows so many things. It is he who encourages me.

WALT

He encourages your poetry?

CHARLOTTE

He allows me my hobbies.

WALT

Poetry is your hobby?

CHARLOTTE

And he encourages me to be a good Christian and a good wife. That, of course, should be no one's hobby.

WALT

I would think not.

CHARLOTTE

How successful he has been, I cannot say.

WALT

I can assure you, your General has much to be thankful for.

BLACKOUT.

ACT II – SCENE 8

LIGHTS UP – REST AREA

CHARLOTTE enters. She makes her way to the table, almost staggering. She pours herself a cup of coffee, then pulls a small blue bottle from her work dress and, using the bottle's stopper, drips several drops of the bottle's liquid content into the coffee cup.

She holds the coffee cup before her mouth for a moment, drinks. She makes a horrible face.

WALT enters – and sees her making the face.

WALT

Mrs. Ashcroft, what is the matter?

CHARLOTTE

I just came back from surgery.

WALT

Surgery? What are they - ? No, they should not have allowed you. You are not here for that.

CHARLOTTE

Doctor Hughes nabbed me in the hall. “Quick!” he said, “I need you.” I had no idea.

WALT

I’m so sorry.

CHARLOTTE

We – he - amputated a young man’s arm. As a poet, I think “amputation” is much too polite a word to express what we did. Dr. Hughes “sawed” off a young man’s arm, not unlike how a farmer might prune a diseased branch from a tree. Except trees do not thrash, and they do not scream.

WALT

On the first day I arrived here, I saw feet, legs, arms, hands heaped up beside the rear door, a full load for a cart.

CHARLOTTE

I feel so sorry for that young man. The rest of his life, he’ll have only....if he lives.

WALT

Doctor Hughes does not look well. He has spent the past five days with a squadron of surgeons sawing off legs and arms, hour after hour.

CHARLOTTE

The cut was below the elbow, so not so bad. “Below the elbow, not so bad.” I never imagined I’d ever say something like that. Oh, the poor boy....

WALT

(indicating the bottle)
And that helps?

CHARLOTTE

Oh, God, yes. Doctor Hughes takes it, too, and so do many of the nurses. As they say, it doesn't cure anything, but it relieves everything.

WALT

Sort of like prayer?

CHARLOTTE

Mr. Whitman! Hah. The wife of my pastor gave me this when she found out about my – my service here. Would you like....?

WALT

Thank you. Alcohol remains my source of solace.

CHARLOTTE

It goes well with rye. Otherwise, it's bitter medicine.

WALT

Be careful. Before you can care for others, you must take care of yourself.

CHARLOTTE

Oh, I know. So many of the doctors and nurses....they break under the load. Who can blame them? For days beforehand, you can see it happening. They become quiet, solemn, quiet. And then one day....Two days ago, a nurse fell to her knees just outside Ward D, sobbing uncontrollably. She couldn't stop. They finally sent her home. They told her not to come back.

WALT

And yet you keep coming back.

CHARLOTTE

And so do you.

WALT

I come back. For now. But who knows...."
(beat)

I have a confession to make.

CHARLOTTE

To me?

WALT

I waited.

CHARLOTTE

You waited? For what?

WALT

So many men and women volunteer. When I first began working here, I welcomed them with open arms – so enthusiastic, so ready to sacrifice for our common cause. But many – no, most - most never returned the second day. If they stayed, they became more of a nuisance than help. I was here to help the young men, the wounded and the dying; I didn't want to take the time to make these healthy - and oftentimes well-to-do - volunteers feel welcome. I believed you were the same.

CHARLOTTE

You might have been a bit premature with your assessment. Every day, I'm still not sure I'm coming back.

WALT

You've already done a great deal.

CHARLOTTE

Then I also have a confession to make.

WALT

About me?

CHARLOTTE

When I first came here and made your acquaintance, I wondered why you hadn't joined the army. You are so hale and healthy. But now I realize that someone like you could never use a gun, not to mention shoot someone. Seeing your work here, I also realize how much more good you are doing for "our" common cause.

WALT

Young and old, rich and poor, we all can serve in different ways.

CHARLOTTE

Yes, I think so. Except I'm not very good at sewing.

WALT

You have so many other skills.

CHARLOTTE

"Praying"?

WALT

You are indeed very good at praying. But Sister Henrietta told me a few days ago that she can always tell when you've bathed one of our boys. They're so pink and rosy, she said.

CHARLOTTE

Well, thank Sister Henrietta for her kind words. It's an acquired skill. I had never bathed a man before.

WALT

You've never taken a bath with your husband?

CHARLOTTE

My General? At the same time?! Whatever for?

WALT

For fun.

CHARLOTTE

Fun! Oh my, Mr. Whitman! Is that even done?

WALT

If not, it should be. In my "Manly Healthy" columns, I stressed the importance of skinny-dipping. Maybe you could introduce the notion to your ladies of society.

CHARLOTTE

Oh, no, no, I could never... You're making fun of me.

No longer able to withhold his laughter,
WALT busts out. CHARLOTTE tries to act
offended but then joins his laughter.

CHARLOTTE

Oh, oh, oh - I can just see the expression on my General's face. He'd be sitting in the tub, smoking one of his cigars, and I'd slide in behind him.

CHARLOTTE laughs along with WALT.
Then she begins to cry.

WALT

Oh, Mrs. Ashcroft, what's wrong? I'm sorry. I shouldn't have laughed.

CHARLOTTE

He's missing.

WALT

Who? Your general? Oh, God, no.

CHARLOTTE

I found his name on that list, the one they print in the newspaper. The one they print every day.

WALT

How long has he been missing?

CHARLOTTE

At least since last week. That's when I saw his name. I don't know if he was in a battle. I don't know what happened.

WALT

Oh, Mrs. Ashcroft, why didn't you say anything sooner?

CHARLOTTE

I don't know. It's funny, but when I saw his name there –so stark in a newspaper column – the first thing I thought about was coming here. If I couldn't come here, I don't know what I would have done. Isn't that strange?

WALT

I'm so sorry to hear this. I should tell you my own brother, George, is also missing in action.

CHARLOTTE hugs him.

CHARLOTTE

I'm sorry. We both must keep hope. I pray all the time.

WALT

How long have you been married?

CHARLOTTE

Four years this October.

WALT

You're newlyweds.

CHARLOTTE

I am the General's second wife. He is fifty-seven years old. He became a widower six years ago. His wife died of consumption.

WALT

I'm so sorry to hear that though I know he has chosen a most wonderful woman as his second wife.

CHARLOTTE

I didn't know what to expect when I married him. I should have. Mr. Whitman, I'm quite a few years past thirty.

WALT
This is your first marriage?

CHARLOTTE
Yes.
(drying her eyes)
I must get back to the wards. The men will make me feel better.

WALT
They do the same for me.

CHARLOTTE
These poor boys. All of them were once so beautiful.

WALT
Yes. Yes, they were.

BLACKOUT.

ACT II – SCENE 9

LIGHTS UP – WARD:

WALT produces an apple from his haversack
and hands it to ETHAN.

ETHAN
Oh, that is beautiful. Thank you, Mr. Whitman. I never much enjoyed apples on the farm,
but now I believe they're the tastiest fruit on earth.

WALT
Mrs. Ashcroft told me about...well, she said she's helping you to walk.

ETHAN
She is the kindest, noblest woman in creation.

WALT watches ETHAN munch on his
apple.

WALT
Does she know what that might mean? Walking?

ETHAN munches on his apple for a good
long time before answering.

ETHAN

I do not think I can tell her. And please, you won't....?

WALT

Oh, no, no. I believe only Sister Jovita knows. I wouldn't have known unless you had told me.

ETHAN

I'm sorry I did.

WALT

You shouldn't be! I'm thankful that you did. I'm thankful that I can help you.

ETHAN

You've heard nothing?

WALT

Not yet. It will take some time, but I tell you, I have the greatest belief in our president.

ETHAN

I suppose I must have more trust.

WALT

Trust and hope. He has pardoned others, I've heard.

ETHAN

Have you ever seen one?

WALT

Seen what?

ETHAN

An execution.

WALT

No. It's hard enough seeing so many poor boys die slowly.

ETHAN

I have.

WALT

God bless you, Ethan.

ETHAN

I helped dig his grave. The captain...he made the boy sit on a wagon while me and two other guys dug the hole. It was last winter, the ground frozen. That boy just sat there, brushing back his hair, watching us. I tell you, Mr. Whitman, I didn't know whether I should dig faster or slower. That's a strange choice, isn't it? Should I give the poor sap a few more minutes here on Earth or should I help get it over with. I was thankful at least I wasn't one of them who had to tie him to the tree. He didn't fight though. He knew there was no use. He just gave up. One of them tried to tie a handkerchief over his eyes, but he shook his head and would not allow it. He was looking right back at them when they picked up their rifles and aimed. It was over so quickly; there was no lingering. He was there, and then he wasn't. And then me and the others dropped him in a hole we dug. It wasn't deep because the ground was so hard and cold. It felt...it felt like we were committing a sin to put a body still so warm into such a cold place. And then we covered him up, and when it was all over, there wasn't a trace of him except for the blood on the tree trunk. The captain had made everyone watch. It was supposed to stop us from running, but it never did any good. We would run just the same. I can attest to that. But some....some don't wait for a firing squad. I've seen men simply climb out of a trench and stand there until a dozen bullets tore them apart. Mr. Whitman...if it comes to it, will you be there?

WALT nods, momentarily unable to speak.

WALT

I have faith in our president.

ETHAN

If it comes to it, I'm going to think on that boy sitting on the wagon. I hope I can be as brave. He didn't say a peep. Except, just before it happened, he said, "Mother." He said it low, but I heard him.

WALT rises, kisses ETHAN on the top of his head.

WALT

Don't give up hope, my dear boy. Hold on tight.

BLACKOUT.

ACT II – SCENE 10

LIGHTS UP – REST AREA:

CHARLOTTE is placing small logs into the wood burning stove as WALT enters.

WALT

Oh, thank you, Mrs. Ashcroft. I was going to do that.

CHARLOTTE merely nods.

WALT

Ah, the glorious progression of the seasons. First, burning Hell. And now frigid Hell.

CHARLOTTE doesn't answer, seemingly preoccupied with building the fire.

WALT watches, waits.

WALT

Mrs. Ashcroft...have I offended you in some way?

CHARLOTTE

No, Mr. Whitman. Not at all.

WALT

Any word about your general?

CHARLOTTE

I go to the War Office every day. No one knows anything. I am making myself believe that is a good thing.

WALT

Your household? Everything is fine there?

CHARLOTTE

Everything is fine. Why?

WALT

You seem quieter this morning.

CHARLOTTE

Am I usually not quiet in the morning?

WALT

No, madam, you are not. One more reason you are a morning glory.

They laugh. Then, sobering up....

CHARLOTTE

I've started reading your poems.

WALT

Oh.

CHARLOTTE

I haven't read all of them, of course.

WALT

Now I did warn you....

CHARLOTTE

I wonder if your poems are meant for everybody.

WALT

Who, then, would you say they are for?

CHARLOTTE

I should hope you would know.

WALT

I will say I've written these leaves for all those who can see, for they can read them. And for all those who can hear, for they can listen while another reads.

CHARLOTTE

Even ladies?

WALT

If a lady can see and if she can hear, then, yes, I am writing those poems for her.

CHARLOTTE

(suddenly, agitated and excited)

Oh, sir, I've never read anything like them. Ever.

WALT

Does that mean you like them?

WALT

I don't believe anything like your poems has been written in the history of the English language.

WALT

Does that mean you don't like them?

CHARLOTTE

I don't know! Hah! I don't know if they're bad or good because I have nothing to compare them with. I almost believe you had written them for me. But how could that be? We've only met.

WALT

And yet, dear lady, I believe I do know who you are.

LIGHTS TIGHTEN UPON WALT AND CHARLOTTE:

WALT

I believe in the flesh and the appetites,
Seeing, hearing, feeling are miracles, and each part and
tag of me is a miracle

CHARLOTTE

Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I
touch and am touched from....
You my rich blood! Your milk stream pale strippings of
my life!

WALT

Breast that presses against other breasts
It shall be you.

CHARLOTTE

Root of washed sweet-flag! Timorous pond-snipe! Nest of
Guarded duplicate eggs!
It shall be you!

CHARLOTTE

Mixed tussled hay of head, beard, brawn...
Ticking sap of maple, fibre of manly wheat,
It shall be you!

Sun so generous...
Winds whose soft-tickling genitals rub against me...
Broad muscular fields, branches of live oak, loving lounge
In my winding paths
It shall be you.

WALT

Hands I have taken, face I have kissed, mortal I have ever
Touched

WALT/CHARLOTTE

It shall be you.

LIGHTS DIM UNTIL WE SEE ONLY THE GLOW OF THE WOOD STOVE.

ACT II – SCENE 11

LIGHTS UP – WARD:

Morning. CHARLOTTE again helps
ETHAN dress.

CHARLOTTE

Now for your boots.

ETHAN

Miss Charlotte, you know I don't have -

CHARLOTTE

Yes, you do!

From her haversack, she pulls up a pair of
brogans. ETHAN stares, astonished.

ETHAN

Boots? Brand new boots? You bought them?

CHARLOTTE

Let's try them on.

ETHAN

I've never worn boots that somebody else ain't already worn.

She kneels before ETHAN to help him with
the boots.

CHARLOTTE

I don't know much about boots. Which is the left and which is the right?

ETHAN

Whatever foot you put them on, that determines it.

CHARLOTTE

Whatever foot? Well, then, at least you can't put them on the wrong foot. Let's start with your left.

She keeps talking, but her willingness to help him, the fact that she "humbles" herself to kneel before him and put on his shoes, leaves him unable to talk.

CHARLOTTE

My General went off to the war with a pair of top boots. The finest leather. His valet shined and dressed them every time the General wore them. I wonder if he's able to continue that custom. I do know that the uniform given to him by the army was much too large. Before he left, he had his tailor fit it for him. He cuts a fine figure in his uniform.

ETHAN

Uh, how long has he been in the military?

CHARLOTTE

Oh, he never was until now. The president appointed him.

ETHAN

Oh....

She notices ETHAN does not speak.

CHARLOTTE

Cat got your tongue? You all right?

He's too emotional to reply. Instead, he gently pushes her back. She stands.

Adjusting his hands, he pushes himself upward into a standing position. She's awestruck. For a long time, all he does is stand there, his eyes on her.

She understands. She steps back with one foot. And another. And then another. She slowly raises her arms.

He takes a step toward her. He looks as if he may tumble over, but he remains upright. Then he takes another step, and another, until he reaches her. They embrace.

CHARLOTTE

Oh, my God! Oh, my God. You can walk! You can walk!

ETHAN

(trying to share Charlotte's joy but not quite succeeding)
Yes. Yes, I can walk.

With ETHAN leaning upon her for support,
CHARLOTTE takes his hand and slowly
dances with him.

CHARLOTTE

Look, you're even dancing.

ETHAN

Yes, yes, I'm dancing. With you.

CHARLOTTE

Every day, we'll practice. Soon you'll be the best dancer in all Washington.

They continue dancing as

LIGHTS SLOWLY DIM – THEN OUT.

ACT III – SCENE 1

AUDIO-VISUAL PRESENTATION -
Currier and Ives and other scenes of
Christmas during the Civil War, including
Thomas Nast's drawings of Saint Nick, etc.

"I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day" plays.
The lyrics of beautiful song are so fitting
that this audio-visual presentation might be
extended more than usual –

*I heard the bells on Christmas day
Their old familiar carols play
And mild and sweet their songs repeat
Of peace on Earth, good will to men.*

*And the bells are ringing (peace on Earth)
Like a choir they're singing (peace on Earth)
In my heart I hear them (peace on Earth)
Peace on Earth, good will to men.*

The Wound Dresser - 56

*And in despair I bowed my head
"There is no peace on Earth, " I said
For hate is strong and mocks the song
Of peace on Earth, good will to men.*

LIGHTS UP - WARD:

CHARLOTTE shows up at Ethan's bed with her haversack..

ETHAN

Merry Christmas, Miss Charlotte.

CHARLOTTE

Merry Christmas, dear Ethan. I've got something....
(rummaging through her satchel)

Oh, no....I'm afraid I've run out. I've given away all my trinkets.

ETHAN

No gift or trinket could compare with the pleasure of your company on this holy day.

CHARLOTTE

Oh, wait.

She pulls out a small bag and hands it to
ETHAN.

CHARLOTTE

Merry Christmas!

ETHAN

Hub wafers! Thank you so much, Miss Charlotte.

CHARLOTTE

Did you think I wouldn't save anything for you?

WALT next enters, carrying his own
haversack.

WALT

Merry Christmas, my boy.

ETHAN

Merry Christmas, Mr. Whitman.

WALT

(rummaging through his haversack)
I've got a little something for you here....oh, wait, it seems have I given everything away....?

CHARLOTTE and ETHAN share an amused look. Finally, WALT pulls out a small paper bag.

WALT

Oh, wait, I do have something....

ETHAN

Hub wafers! Thank you, Walt! Merry Christmas.

WALT

Merry Christmas to both of you. Yesterday, I wrote a letter for one of the men. He wanted me to tell his children not to expect any presents this year: the Rebels had shot Santa Claus.

CHARLOTTE

Oh, that's a horrible thing to tell children.

WALT

I convinced him to write that Santa merely couldn't get through the Rebel lines, but surely he will return next year. The war must be over by next year.

ETHAN

It seems strange that Johnny Reb celebrates Christmas exactly as we do.

WALT

Just as they read the same Bible.

CHARLOTTE

I have some wonderful news.

WALT

What is it?

CHARLOTTE

Yesterday, I received the sweetest Christmas gift I could ever imagine.

ETHAN

Better than hub wafers?

CHARLOTTE

My prayers have been answered: my General has been found!

WALT hugs CHARLOTTE.

WALT

That is indeed wonderful news, Mrs. Ashcroft.

ETHAN

Yes, Miss Charlotte. Wonderful.

WALT

Where is he? When is he coming home?

CHARLOTTE

No one quite knows. The army is a mess. It's a wonder we've achieved a single victory on the battlefield. But yesterday I visited the War Department building. I went from office to office, up and down stairs. No one knows if any records are being kept, and if they are being kept, no one knows where they are. However, I refused to give up. Now this is why this is such a miracle. When I went to the very last office to inquire about my General's status, a man in another line overheard me. He knew the General from the bank and said he had heard that the General is safe and sound. There is some confusion to where he is – exactly - but he is safe and sound. For now, that's all that matters.

WALT

That indeed makes this a very merry Christmas.

ETHAN

Merry Christmas!

CHARLOTTE

We must count our blessings, all of us.

BLACKOUT.

ACT III – SCENE 2

SPOTLIGHT ON WALT AND CHARLOTTE:

They face the audience.

WALT

I sing the body electric,
The armies of those I love engirth me and I engirth them,

CHARLOTTE

The love of the body of man

WALT

or woman balks account,

CHARLOTTE

That of the male is perfect,

WALT

and that of the female is perfect.

CHARLOTTE

The strong sweet quality he has strikes through the cotton and broadcloth,
To see him pass conveys as much as the best poem, perhaps more,
You linger to see his back, and the back of his neck and shoulder-side.

WALT

The sprawl and fulness of babes, the bosoms and heads of women, the folds of their
dress, their style as we pass in the street, the contour of their shape downwards,

CHARLOTTE

The swimmer naked in the swimming-bath, seen as he swims through the transparent
green-shine, or lies with his face up and rolls silently to and fro in the heave of the water,
The bending forward and backward of rowers in row-boats, the horseman in his saddle,

WALT

To pass among them or touch any one, or rest my arm ever so lightly round his or her
neck for a moment, what is this then?
I do not ask any more delight, I swim in it as in a sea.

CHARLOTTE

There is something in staying close to men and women and looking on them, and in the
contact and odor of them, that pleases the soul well,
All things please the soul, but these please the soul well.

WALT

This is the female form,
A divine nimbus exhales from it from head to foot,
It attracts with fierce undeniable attraction,
Hair, bosom, hips, bend of legs, negligent falling hands all diffused, mine too diffused,
Ebb stung by the flow and flow stung by the ebb, love-flesh swelling and deliciously
aching,
Limitless limpid jets of love hot and enormous, quivering jelly of love, white-blow and
delirious juice,

CHARLOTTE

The male is not less the soul nor more, he too is in his place,
He too is all qualities, he is action and power,
The flush of the known universe is in him....
The man's body is sacred

WALT

And the woman's body is sacred....
If any thing is sacred the human body is sacred,

WALT

Womanhood, and all that is a woman, and the man that comes from woman,
The womb, the teats, nipples, breast-milk, tears, laughter, weeping, love-looks, love-
perturbations and risings,

CHARLOTTE

The curious sympathy one feels when feeling with the hand the naked meat of the body,
The circling rivers the breath, and breathing it in and out,

WALT

The beauty of the waist, and thence of the hips, and thence downward toward the knees,
The thin red jellies within you or within me, the bones and the marrow in the bones,
The exquisite realization of health;

WALT/CHARLOTTE

O I say these are not the parts and poems of the body only, but of the soul,
O I say now these are the soul!

BLACKOUT.

ACT III – SCENE 3

LIGHTS UP – WARD:

WALT sits next to ETHAN, who sits up in
bed.

WALT

I have talked to a friend who works for the administration – about our petition.

ETHAN

What is the word?

WALT

Nothing as of yet. But that, I believe, is a good sign.

ETHAN sinks back to his bed. WALT affectionately pets his head.

WALT

Do not despair, my dear boy. You will live long, and you will continue to love. I'm one of the finest letters writers in the world.

ETHAN

Miss Charlotte has inspired me in so many ways.

WALT

Yes, I'm inspired by her, too.

ETHAN

And, as Miss Charlotte says, Jesus loves us, all of us, even the dirty Rebs.

WALT

Jesus has filled Miss Charlotte with so much love that it overflows upon us lesser types.

ETHAN

Miss Charlotte says the soul is immortal. That means it cannot die. Knowing that I will live again...I don't fear death quite so much.

WALT

Considering your youth, I believe, if nature follows its form, I will be the first to cross over by several years. If possible, I promise I will wait for you.

ETHAN

That is a wonderful thought, isn't it? It makes me feel better. These are not the times for many wonderful thoughts. But it depends on what you mean by "wonderful." After my first battle, I told myself that I would get used to war. For a time, I was consoled by that "wonderful thought." Once we were marched across a field towards a woods which we suspected was full of Rebs. I was terrified. With every step I grew more terrified until I didn't think I could go on. The Rebs didn't open up until we could nearly touch their rifle muzzles. After the battle, I found that I had shit myself. So I sought a place in the woods where I could clean up – and found six or seven other guys doing the same thing.

Both ETHAN and WALT laugh.

WALT

This is quite a natural response to fear.

ETHAN

Now that I had seen the elephant, I thought would ever feel such terror again. But the next time we attacked, I was even more terrified. And that is why, eventually.....

WALT

You've shown courage in so many battles, who could dare question your honor? Our president will consider all these things, I'm sure.

ETHAN

(lost in his thoughts)

Maybe I never became used to it because it was never the same. Sometimes, the man right beside me would fall; other times, a large group of us would overrun the Rebs' lines without a single casualty. It never made sense. Men can die in so many different ways. Some scream, some spit blood, some call for their mothers, others for Jesus, some take several steps forward even though their arm is missing and when they fall, their mouths are still open in a scream, but they make no noise. Others look as if they're merely taking a nap from which they'll soon wake.

BLACKOUT.

ACT III – SCENE 4

LIGHTS UP – WARD:

CHARLOTTE deals cards to ETHAN.

She is seated on the chair; he is dressed and seated upright on the bed, his leg bandaged, his feet clad in new boots. Each have a pile of dried fruit beside them.

ETHAN expertly arranges the cards in his hand while CHARLOTTE stares at hers.

ETHAN chooses one of his "chips" to nibble upon.

CHARLOTTE

Don't eat all of your winnings at one time.

ETHAN

Dried fruit is delicious, isn't it? I haven't had any since the time I sneaked into the kitchen and ate an entire bowl.

CHARLOTTE

Here at the hospital?

ETHAN

No, no, at home. When I was just a kid. That's all I ever wanted: dried fruit. And a pony.

CHARLOTTE

When I was young, all I ever wanted was children. Three to be exact. Two boys. One girl.
(looking over her cards)

How come I never get any ones?

ETHAN

Any what?

CHARLOTTE

Ones. I've gotten twos and threes, but no –

WALT

Are you talking about aces?

CHARLOTTE

No. "Ones".

ETHAN glances at Charlotte's hand.

CHARLOTTE

Hey! That's cheating!

ETHAN

I was just seeing if I might help you.

CHARLOTTE

Why would you want to help me?

ETHAN

Because you said you knew how to play poker, but just now you just asked me why you never get any "ones".

CHARLOTTE

So?

ETHAN

So –

CHARLOTTE

Do you have all the "ones"?

ETHAN

No, ma'am. I don't believe I've ever been dealt a "one" in my life. We don't have much choice about how many, do we? I mean, how many children.

CHARLOTTE

That was just my ideal number. And we would live in town.

ETHAN

Good. I hate farming.

CHARLOTTE

I admit, I like living in town.

ETHAN

Miss Charlotte, I have a feeling you haven't played much poker.

CHARLOTTE

Because I asked a few questions?

ETHAN

From what I glimpsed, you have a fair enough hand. If I were you, I'd bet... maybe a couple apricots and a raisin.

CHARLOTTE

I wouldn't want to live in the business areas. A little two-story house, just off the main street, but with a fence so that the children would be safe from carriages and wagons.

ETHAN

(wiggling his boots)

I want to live in town, too; I mean if I...

CHARLOTTE

"If"? My young man, you are getting better every day. Doctor Hughes told me the very same thing.

ETHAN

It is all thanks to your ministrations.

CHARLOTTE

If you can survive my ministrations, you can survive gangrene.

(back to the poker game)

Are you helping me because you're worried a woman might beat you?

ETHAN

No. I'm helping because you don't know how to play. It's also more fun if we're both in the game, isn't it?

CHARLOTTE

Poker is not believed to be a woman's game. I don't know why because....well, it is thrilling.

ETHAN

Maybe that's the very reason. The thing about the Army is, except for the times when someone is trying to shoot your head off, it isn't at all thrilling. In fact, it's awfully boring. Sometimes we'd spend the entire day playing cards, morning to night. There weren't always enough decks, however. I heard a story about a guy who traded his Bible to another soldier for a deck of cards. The next day, both of them were shot, but the first guy lived because the musket ball hit the deck of cards in his chest pocket.

CHARLOTTE

(regarding ETHAN suspiciously)

Are you sure it wasn't the other way around? That the guy with the Bible - ?

ETHAN

(shrugs)

I like my version better.

CHARLOTTE

I now see the Baptists are right.

ETHAN

About what?

CHARLOTTE

How playing cards can lead to sin.

ETHAN

And how do they do that?

CHARLOTTE

Don't you see? It has already led you into making up false stories. Who knows what's next?

ETHAN

More sin, I would hope.

CHARLOTTE

(playfully slapping his thigh)

Oh, don't say that. Do you know a trade?

ETHAN

I'm a good carpenter.

CHARLOTTE

Ahh. They'll certainly need carpenters after the war to rebuild the cities.

ETHAN

And since we're going to have six children –

CHARLOTTE

Six!

ETHAN

– I'll have to build a large home, one that's just outside the town limits, so I'll have land for all our horses.

CHARLOTTE

Six children and horses?

ETHAN

Six horses, one for each of our children. But maybe we should start them with ponies.
(back to the game)
So what's your bet?

CHARLOTTE

(pushing forward the dried fruit)
Okay....five raisins and one apricot.

ETHAN

I'll see that. And I'll raise an apple slice. Apples are Walt's favorite.

CHARLOTTE

They also have a history of leading to sinfulness.

ETHAN

Who did apples ever lead to sin?

CHARLOTTE

For one, Adam

ETHAN

You mean Eve.

CHARLOTTE

I prefer my version. All right, I'll see your apple and add three currants.

She pushes her fruit into the pile. They both discard and draw a few more cards.

(adding to the fruit pile)
Two apricots.

ETHAN

(likewise adding)
I'll meet that.

CHARLOTTE

ETHAN stares at CHARLOTTE, chuckling.

Another apple.

ETHAN

And another!

CHARLOTTE

ETHAN shakes his head, laughing.

(patronizingly)
Oh, Miss Charlotte.

ETHAN

(not having it)
Oh, Mister Ethan.

CHARLOTTE

All right. One last hurrah?

ETHAN

Yes! Two apples! Hurrah!

CHARLOTTE

Oh, Miss Charlotte!

ETHAN

Oh, Mister Ethan. What about your wife? What would she ride?

CHARLOTTE

Wouldn't you like a matched pair with a carriage?

ETHAN

Oh, yes! That would be high fashion. I should like a Brougham. I've been told they're everywhere in London.

CHARLOTTE

ETHAN

And when we take the carriage into town, everyone will stop and say, "There goes that carpenter and his beautiful wife."

CHARLOTTE

"There goes that handsome carpenter and his beautiful wife."

ETHAN

And the girls – three of them – will be as beautiful as their mother. And the three boys as rugged as their father.

CHARLOTTE

What about the horses?

ETHAN

A matched pair!

CHARLOTTE

I cannot wait to visit one day.

ETHAN

Yes, one day.

CHARLOTTE

One day this war will be over. Can you imagine that, Ethan?

ETHAN

I imagine it all the time.

(back to the game)

In the meantime, let this be a good lesson to you. What do you have?

CHARLOTTE timidly looks at her hand, makes a face of defeat, almost as if she's about to burst into tears.

And then, she slaps down her hand with an air of supreme confidence.

CHARLOTTE

Only this.

ETHAN stares first at CHARLOTTE, then at the hand, incredulous, dumbfounded. He slowly looks back up at CHARLOTTE, who can barely hide her delight.

A full house?
ETHAN

Kings over eights.
CHARLOTTE

I've been hustled!
ETHAN

CHARLOTTE
(raking in her winnings)
Yes, sir, you have. And by one of the best. Did I forget to mention my granny started me playing when I was seven.

(separating the currants from her winnings)
Would you like the currants? I really don't care for them.

BLACKOUT.

ACT III – SCENE 5

LIGHTS ON – REST AREA:

CHARLOTTE removes various items from a wood box – dried fruit, books, pads of paper – and places them in two haversacks.

WALT enters.

WALT
Thank you, Mrs. Ashcroft. I was running low on my own supplies.

CHARLOTTE
You're welcome, Mr. Whitman.

WALT
Any word on your general?

CHARLOTTE
I don't think anyone knows anything about what is going on with this entire war. Who is dead, who is wounded, who is missing? Who is still alive? I worry about him so much. He is not a young man. I think that if only old men could wage war, we would not have so many.

WALT
Speaking as someone well-seasoned, I would agree with you on that.

CHARLOTTE

(suddenly)
I have finished your book.

WALT

Congratulations. I think. If the book did not satisfy you, I must add that it is a work in progress. In fact, it will always be a work in progress.

CHARLOTTE

Oh, it satisfied me. It satisfied me as nothing else.

WALT

I have been told my poetry is shocking. To some. Maybe to “most.”

CHARLOTTE

Oh, indeed, it is very much shocking.

WALT

You did not care for my poems?

CHARLOTTE

I cared for them too much.

WALT

“Too much?”

CHARLOTTE

When you told me that you did not pray, I took you for a generous but godless man. Just the opposite is true. You have fused the soul within the body. My body. Our bodies.

WALT

You’ve never suspected such a thing?

CHARLOTTE

(a long beat)
Once, a long time ago, I knew it. Body and soul as one. When I read your poems ... I—I was taken aback. Your words stirred me. It wasn’t just that I was moved emotionally or intellectually, though I was—more than I can explain.

She dares to glance up, half-expecting to see disapproval or even amusement in his face. But instead, she sees a quiet understanding there, as if he’d known all along.

CHARLOTTE (CONTINUED)

I had never thought of the body in that way before. Not, anyway, as you described it—with reverence, with such... such joy. You spoke of the body not something to be ashamed of but as if it were divine. As a woman, I was always taught the opposite. “The desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh.” Your poems didn’t just speak to my mind—they spoke to my flesh. I was shocked at first, but then I felt... liberated.

WALT

And why should it not be so, Mrs. Ashcroft. Why should the body, and all that comes with it, be anything but holy? The soul and the body are not separate—they are one, intertwined, as much as the sky is with the earth.

CHARLOTTE

Your words made me feel alive—more alive than I’ve ever felt. They made me see myself differently. To feel desire... not just in some distant, abstract sense, but here (she places her hand on her chest).

WALT

I believe divinity is manifested in many forms. There is no shame in the hunger of the body, nor in the yearning of the soul. They are two rivers, flowing from the same source.

CHARLOTTE

There was a time when I was very popular with the boys. I know, looking at me now, you may find that hard to believe.

WALT

Not at all. I would think a woman like you has been in love several times, and I know several men must have been in love with you.

CHARLOTTE

No....only one. Danny Killeen.

WALT

Ahh.

CHARLOTTE falls silent. WALT waits patiently.

CHARLOTTE

I was very young. We were both young. We met at a dance held by my church. For most of the evening, he was so shy, he just stared at me. And every time I worked up the courage to return his stare, he’d look away. In the meantime, one boy after another asked me to dance. Then came the final dance of the night. Still, he did not ask. And so when another boy asked me to dance, I did. That was that, I thought: some handsome boy had looked at me during a dance. I might have forgotten all about him.

CHARLOTTE is momentarily lost in memory. A waltz begins to play.

CHARLOTTE (CONTINUED)

But after the song ends, someone asks the band to play one more song, and the band knew it and agreed. I don't know what is happening: there he is, the shy young man in front of me, his hand held out for me to dance. I don't know if I said "yes" because I don't think he asked. He knows. I know. He leads me out onto the dance floor, and when we pause for the music to begin, he places his hand on my waist. My body is shaking. And then we are circling the dance floor. There are those who hold the waltz to be a scandalous dance: a man and a woman face each other, they touch each other, they gaze into each other's eyes. At the time, it was thought that only married woman should be allowed to dance, and then only seldom, and then only with their husbands or, at the very least, men of their long acquaintance.

WALT

I believe it was assumed that young woman might be harmed by the excitement of whirling about in the arms of a man.

CHARLOTTE

I was not harmed, but I was certainly caught up in the excitement. I was surprised that such a shy man was so excellent a dancer. Oh, Walt, it was like your poems, it was electric. He later told me that he had read a manual on the proper steps, "The Viennese Waltz", and for the entire week before the dance, he rehearsed by himself in the barn, the cows his only audience. The cows, he said, were not impressed.

WALT

I understand completely. When I think of my own critics, I hear nothing but mooing.

CHARLOTTE

(reciting one of Walt's poems from memory)

"But the expression of a well-made man appears not only in his face,
It is in his limbs and joints also, it is curiously in the joints of his hips and wrists,
It is in his walk, the carriage of his neck, the flex of his waist and knees, dress does not
hide him,
The strong sweet quality he has strikes through the cotton and broadcloth,
To see him pass conveys as much as the best poem, perhaps more,
You linger to see his back, and the back of his neck and shoulder-side."

When I read your poem, I thought you had met Danny, for there have never been better words to describe him.

BLACKOUT.

ACT III – SCENE 6

LIGHTS ON – THE WARD:

The hospital is softened by the warm light of evening in the western windows.

CHARLOTTE and ETHAN enter through the rear doors together, laughing. We briefly hear the general hubbub of the adjoining ward.

Though he keeps his hand upon her shoulder, ETHAN can walk independently, albeit stiffly.

CHARLOTTE

There, there, look at you! Look how far you've come.

ETHAN

(laughing at himself)
Twice around the ward!

CHARLOTTE

And how quickly.

ETHAN

Yes, and it only took an hour.

CHARLOTTE

You are literally back on your feet.

ETHAN

I owe it all to you, Miss Charlotte. You didn't give up on me. Even when I was ready to.

CHARLOTTE

No, you've done this on your own. I've only given you encouragement.

ETHAN

You've given me more than you could ever know.

ETHAN takes Charlotte's hand and faces her.

ETHAN (CONTINUED)

Madam, may I have this dance?

CHARLOTTE curtsies.

CHARLOTTE

I would be delighted, kind sir.

The same waltz music from the scene when Charlotte described dancing with Danny begins to play.

Slowly, they begin dancing about the ward, ETHAN awkwardly doing his best to lead.

The music weaves a spell of its own, and while ETHAN keeps his eyes on CHARLOTTE, her gaze is in the distant past.

As the waltz plays out its final notes, ETHAN kisses CHARLOTTE on the lips.

She accepts the kiss; in fact, she blossoms and appears she might even kiss him back, but when he tries to kiss her once more, she awakens from her trance and jolts back as if trying to recognize the stranger holding her in his arms.

CHARLOTTE

Danny....?

ETHAN kisses her again, more forcefully this time. CHARLOTTE, now fully aware of the situation, pushes back.

CHARLOTTE

Oh, no, Ethan, no –

Again he presses his mouth to hers, but this time she pushes back with enough force that ETHAN totters backwards, struggles to stay on his feet, and finally collapses to the floor.

CHARLOTTE stares at him as if she has no idea what this man is doing on the floor.

Ethan? Ethan!

CHARLOTTE

ETHAN quickly tries to get to his feet, but this sudden action only sends him tumbling back again.

Recovering, CHARLOTTE grabs him beneath the arms, but he shakes her off.

Please, let me help you.

CHARLOTTE

Humiliated, ETHAN tries to hold back tears as he crawls over to his bed.

I love you, Miss Charlotte.

ETHAN

On, Ethan, no....

CHARLOTTE

I love you, Miss Charlotte. I love you, I love you -

ETHAN

CHARLOTTE tries to help him sit on his bed.

ETHAN again refuses her help, but CHARLOTTE ignores his resistance and drags him onto the bed.

(angry, commanding)
Ethan!

CHARLOTTE

Once he's on the bed, they both pause to catch their breath.

You love me, too.

ETHAN

Ethan, I'm so much older.

CHARLOTTE

ETHAN

And you're not just beautiful but smart. You know so much. And you write beautiful poetry. And most of all, you're kind. You're the kindest person in the world. If...things work out....if this war ends, and I'm still here, I will marry you.

CHARLOTTE takes deep breath to restore her composure.

CHARLOTTE

Ethan, that can never happen. I'm already married to my General. You know that.

ETHAN

You don't love your husband.

CHARLOTTE

Whatever did I say to make you think that? You don't know me.

ETHAN

Then how glorious it would be to spend a lifetime finding out more about you. You and Walt have helped me see that I might live, that I might have a future. I have faith in Walt. And President Lincoln. He is a good man. I will invite him to the wedding.

CHARLOTTE

I'm sure the president will come to your wedding but not mine.

ETHAN

Miss Charlotte, I will never love anyone as much as I love you.

CHARLOTTE has found her way back to being a nurse. She cannot remain angry with him. Though he has seen more than most men, he is still a boy.

CHARLOTTE

Oh, Ethan, you, too, are kind. And beautiful. But you are so young.

ETHAN

No, Miss Charlotte -

CHARLOTTE

You will understand this when you get older.

ETHAN

I don't think I will get older.

CHARLOTTE

Oh, yes, you will. You will grow older, and you'll grow wiser. And you'll meet a girl your age. And she'll bear you children. Your six children. And you'll live in a splendid home at the town limits. And you'll have six horses and six ponies and -

ETHAN

I'll never have that!

CHARLOTTE

Of course you'll have that. You'll have that and more.

She steps away to leave, then returns to Ethan. She gives him a chaste kiss atop his head and leaves.

Alone, ETHAN pulls the covers over him and begins sobbing.

BLACKOUT.

ACT III – SCENE 7

AUDIO-VISUAL PRESENTATION. Again, the sounds of battle: cannons, horses, commands, rifle barrages.

We see a montage of photos taken of the wounded on stretchers, men on crutches, and of military hospitals, both interiors and exterior, in particular Armory Square Hospital, Washington D.C.

LIGHTS UP - WARD:

Noon. Even so, a lantern still burns beside Ethan's bed.

CHARLOTTE enters downstage, carrying a quilt.

CHARLOTTE

Good morning, Ethan. The good ladies from the Christian Commission have made some wonderful and beautiful quilts. Just looking at them will make you feel better -

A body stirs in the bed. CHARLOTTE pulls down the cover.

Ethan?

CHARLOTTE (CONTINUED)

WALT – not ETHAN – lies there.

Mr. Whitman?

CHARLOTTE

WALT does not respond until CHARLOTTE jostles his shoulders.

He slowly raises his head, disoriented, confused. He sits up, staring at CHARLOTTE until at last he gets his bearings.

Mrs. Ashcroft....

WALT

CHARLOTTE

Are you all right? What's happened? Where is Ethan?

WALT tries to respond, but he's overwhelmed by emotion and cannot speak lest he break down completely.

He has left us.

WALT

CHARLOTTE stares at WALT as if she expects to see Ethan.

CHARLOTTE

Where did he....?
(understanding)
Oh, no....oh, my God...oh, he was getting better, so much better, but I was worried....Sepsis? Infection is always here....

WALT

Sepsis? Yes...It took poor Tommy Auden in a matter of hours....

CHARLOTTE

Oh, God, God, God....I wasn't there with him....

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She collapses on the bed next to Walt, hands over her face, sobbing.

CHARLOTTE (CONTINUED)

I wasn't there. I wasn't there. I wasn't there....

WALT

No one was there.

CHARLOTTE

No one?

WALT

There is one more thing I need to tell you –

CHARLOTTE

No, please. I can't take anything more.

WALT

It wasn't sepsis.

CHARLOTTE

No, no, I don't want -

WALT

You will hear it from others. I need to be the one to tell you.

(a long pause)

Sometime during the night, Ethan tied a strip of his shirt around his neck and fastened it to his bed. He strangled himself. One of the sisters found him. They tried to revive him, but....

CHARLOTTE

It was an accident. I know it was. His shirt got caught, these beds are so old and rotten, and he....and he just....No....oh, please, God, no....

WALT arranges the quilt about her shoulders, so that the two of them huddle beneath it.

CHARLOTTE

I know that you loved Ethan.

WALT

Yes, I did. And you did, too.

CHARLOTTE

You must know that I did this to him.

WALT

I know no such thing.

CHARLOTTE

I killed him.

WALT

Oh, my God. What are you saying? You saved him. You brought him back from the dead. You encouraged him. Step by step.

CHARLOTTE

I should have been more aware of his feelings. I had no idea...they were so deep. Last night, after our usual walk around the ward, he....he tried to kiss me.

WALT

He was in love with you.

CHARLOTTE

I loved him, too, but as a friend, an older sister....I pushed him away. I....

WALT

He was only nineteen. At that age, the passions are often at their strongest and most intemperate.

CHARLOTTE

I told him I was married. I....

WALT

He had been hanging on to hope for a long time....

CHARLOTTE

Oh, I know. Oh, God forgive me. How could I have been so blind?

WALT

That's not what I meant. I meant Ethan Carter was a condemned man.

CHARLOTTE

What do you mean?

WALT

During a battle, he ran away from his company. He was condemned to die for desertion. We wrote to the president, asking for a pardon. President Lincoln has done this before, granted pardons, and given the dear boy's youth, given his experiences, I believed we had a good chance, more than a good chance. God, they just wanted to make an example of him. What an example of a fine young man he was, but those fools could never see that. But I think the waiting – the uncertainty each day whether he was going to live or die – that anticipation poisoned him more than sepsis ever could.

CHARLOTTE swoons at this information.
WALT hugs her tightly.

CHARLOTTE

Oh, Mr. Whitman, what will become of us?

WALT

I don't know, Mrs. Ashcroft. I don't know.

WALT turns off the lantern and settles back next to CHARLOTTE.

BLACKOUT.

ACT IV – SCENE 1

LIGHTS UP – REST AREA:

Finishing her shift, CHARLOTTE enters, carrying a mop and bucket, exhausted.

WALT sits with his head upon his arms that rest on the table. An ink bottle and quill pen are also present.

As she approaches him, she sees a piece of paper on the table and picks it up. As she reads, WALT gradually sits up.

CHARLOTTE

“Dear Mr. and Mrs. Carter,

I write to you both with a heart full of sorrow to inform you of your son’s passing. Ethan was among the many brave souls I had the honor of caring for. He bore his suffering with great dignity. He had been gravely wounded in the leg, but in the midst of his suffering, he displayed a quiet strength that deeply moved all who knew him

I visited and sat by him frequently, as he was fond of having me. Even as his body weakened, he spoke of his hopes for the future. Know that he was at peace in his final moments.

The nation mourns the loss of such a fine young man, and I share in your sorrow as one who has seen many brave men pass from this world far too soon. Your son’s sacrifice will not be forgotten, and his memory will live forever in our hearts.

I thought perhaps a few words, though from a stranger, about your son, from one who was with him, might be worthwhile—for I loved the young man.

Walt Whitman”

CHARLOTTE briefly pauses to recover herself. WALT, also quiet, shrugs as if what else can be said or done.

CHARLOTTE

By now, Mr. Whitman, I don’t believe it would not be improper for you to call me “Charlotte.”

WALT

By now, I think it is only proper. And, please, call me “Walt.”

CHARLOTTE

I love you, Walt. I hope you know that.

WALT

And I love you, Charlotte.

CHARLOTTE

To be loved by a man like you.

WALT

I feel equally honored by your love.

CHARLOTTE

I know that you loved Ethan.

WALT

Oh, yes. Yes, I did.

CHARLOTTE

(with a deeper understanding)
You loved him very much.

WALT

You loved him, too.

CHARLOTTE

I loved him more than I could tell him. He was the same age when Danny died.

WALT

Oh, God.

WALT waits. As CHARLOTTE tells this story, she laughs and cries, often at the same time.

CHARLOTTE

Danny Killeen was nineteen. He lived in town, so it took him nearly two hours by horseback to reach our farm. He would sometimes come just in time for dinner, then get back on his horse and ride back to town. My parents felt sorry – not for him – but for his horse. And so one evening my father told him that he could spend the night - in the barn. Danny eagerly accepted. I, of course, would bring out the blankets and help him prepare a “nest” – that’s what we called it. My visits lasted longer and longer. My parents never said anything, which was not like them. One morning, my mother caught me sneaking into the house – she surely knew I had not spent the night in my own bed – but all she said, in the same voice she would use to tell me to feed the chickens, “Now you’ve got to marry the boy.”

WALT

Did you?

CHARLOTTE

He was a manager for a Virginia mill where he had started working at the age of fourteen. Just before his shift was about to end, a section of the mill collapsed. It simply fell down: five stories of bricks, lumber, heavy machinery. Hundreds were buried. And so was Danny, too. Some were fortunate enough to die instantly. Some were so mangled, they were never identified. Most of them had just come from Ireland to find work. Danny was rescued, but three days later he died. He never regained consciousness. I never was able to tell him good-bye. He was buried from Saint Aloysius. The priest talked about God’s inscrutable wrath. God’s wrath is brought forth in justified anger. Such tragedies are

CHARLOTTE (CONTINUED)

beyond our human understanding. He did not mention that the building was made cheaply, from brittle iron, and the brick walls were without support. The mill was making more than a million dollars a year in profit, yet the owners brought in more machines, loading the floors with hundreds of heavy machines. We were going to get married. I was already with child. My parents inquired – through indirect means – whether our pastor would baptize my “bastard.” They found out- also through indirect means – that he would not baptize any child born out of wedlock. Before I began to show, I left the farm for the House of the Good Shepherd, a house for...fallen women. But within a month, I miscarried. And so that was that. When I returned home, my parents had made the usual stories about me visiting relatives. Everyone would politely ask about my trip, but no one was fooled. And who would marry me? I was indeed a fallen woman. More than ten years later, when I was thirty-four years old, Charles Ashcroft made my acquaintance. Six months later, he asked for my hand. He was wealthy, respected, too old to entertain scandal. I did not hesitate.

(She laughs)

I thought I had found a home at last. I thought I had found some refuge from scandal. I can never be sure, however. No one will say anything in front of Mrs. Charles Ashcroft.

WALT

But you found love.

CHARLOTTE

That would make a nice poem, wouldn't it? My General loves God, he knows his duty to his country, and, I fervently believe, he loves me.

WALT

But...you don't love him.

CHARLOTTE

I do....as an idea.

WALT

An idea?

CHARLOTTE

(plainly)

We have never consummated our union.

WALT

Oh....And now he is coming home.

BLACKOUT.

ACT IV – SCENE 2

LIGHTS UP – REST AREA:

CHARLOTTE and WALT enter through the rear doors, both with their haversacks of goods, in good spirits.

Once more, CHARLOTTE wears a fashionable dress, something similar to what she wore on her first day at the hospital.

WALT

Our boys were so excited to see you again. I'm very jealous.

CHARLOTTE

I always liked making the rounds with you. The men love you.

As they pass by Ethan's empty bed,
CHARLOTTE gently strokes the cover.

WALT

The great flood has become merely a steady stream. "Merely!" When a patient leaves us, there are less and less to replace him.

CHARLOTTE

I didn't see Christopher Kennedy.

WALT

Ah. He looked as if he was going to recover, then in two days succumbed to dysentery.. A week later, Michael Mahon died the same way. I was with them both when the end came.

CHARLOTTE

I'm sure you helped their passing immeasurably, Walt. Christopher always said he would play his guitar for me when he got back on his feet. I asked Sister Henrietta about Doctor Hughes, but she would only tell me that he retired.

WALT

He did retire. He had to. The stress. After all these years, it was too much. I found him shuffling around C Ward as if he were blind, mumbling, shouting - no one knew what he was saying. They say he had a stroke. He went home for a few days and then came back, ready to work...he was still in his pajamas. Doctor Kellet finally sent him home.

CHARLOTTE

In my opinion, he was the best surgeon we had. I helped him many times, both me and Mrs. Baker.

WALT

Mrs. Baker – she’s now at Douglas Hospital.

CHARLOTTE

I’m sure they need nurses.

WALT

Except she’s now a patient. She contracted erysipelas. She has a hard time breathing. Nurses there must keep her face covered with wet cloths.

CHARLOTTE

Oh, dear God. I will visit. She was such an excellent nurse, Dr. Hughes always insisted she would assist him.

WALT

Here’s a happy story: Brian Hook was released.

CHARLOTTE

Oh, that is indeed a happy story. He improved that much?

WALT

I’m not sure about that, but I do feel returning to his wife and children might have restorative qualities.

CHARLOTTE

I wasn’t sure you’d still be here. I thought you might have gone home.

WALT

The war isn’t over yet.

CHARLOTTE

But soon. Many people believe Lee will surrender any day now. This must be the end if for no other reason than it cannot possibly continue.

WALT

I believe it will be over soon, too.

CHARLOTTE

And yet, I also believe it will continue for years, in ways we don’t know yet.

WALT

Oh! Last week, I attended the president’s inauguration. I wrote a piece for The New York Times.

CHARLOTTE

The New York Times! I missed it!

WALT

Charlotte, how could you? They included my byline.

CHARLOTTE

I will find it at the library!

WALT

Oh, the whole thing was spectacular. After all that rain of the previous week, while President Lincoln was speaking, the sun suddenly broke through the clouds. I took that as a divine sign.

CHARLOTTE

So now you're becoming religious?

WALT shrugs, noncommittal.

WALT

He arrived by carriage, surrounded by a troop of civilians on horseback, with huge yellow scarves over their shoulders. At his first inauguration, there were armed cavalry men, eight deep, their drawn, and at every corner of the route, a sharpshooter was stationed, but now, there were no soldiers. There were no soldiers! The speech he gave, I can't imagine there will ever be a finer one given by any president.

CHARLOTTE

And I know you must have attended the ball.

WALT

Hah! Indeed, you know me. Crowds of country people, some very funny. Fine music from the Marine Band. Mr. Lincoln, dressed all in black, shook hands in a long receiving line. However, he looked very disconsolate, as if he would give anything to be somewhere else. Ironically, the festivities were held in the very same hall that served as a hospital, the one I first attended. I saw the amputations and blue faces; I smelled the iron odor of blood and the putrid odor of gangrene; I heard the groans of the dying.

CHARLOTTE

Oh, Walt, that is so –

WALT

No, no, no. I pushed those thoughts aside. I made myself gaze upon the beautiful women, I inhaled the sweet perfumes, I listened to the fine waltzes.

CHARLOTTE

My General was invited. But, of course, he couldn't go.

WALT
How is he?

CHARLOTTE
He is healthy.

WALT
I'm so glad to hear that.

CHARLOTTE
But he is not the same.

WALT
None of us are. How could we be?

CHARLOTTE
He can move his arms, yet he will not feed himself. He cannot bathe himself. He asks me constantly what he should do next. He cannot sleep. He tosses and turns, and cries. I...I've taken the room next to his otherwise I would get even less sleep than I do. But in the middle of the night, I wake to hear him screaming. I brought him a book to read – no, not yours – a simple, happy book, *Morning Glories and Queen Astor* by Louisa May Alcott. He read the same page over and over, and so I read it for him. He kept asking if fairies were real. A squirrel ran outside the window; he fell to the floor and began to whimper. I see him looking at me as if he's trying to remember who is this strange woman. It does not help any that night and day, we hear “death marches” going up and down the boulevard before our home.

WALT
Oh, my dear Charlotte.

CHARLOTTE
I always wanted a child. Now I have one.

WALT
You have your soldier-boys.

CHARLOTTE
Yes, they are my sons, too.

WALT
“Our” sons.

CHARLOTTE smiles, nods, taken back by a sudden emotion. A beat.

I wanted to come earlier, but...

CHARLOTTE

I know.

WALT

The laudanum does help.

CHARLOTTE

For you or him?

WALT

For us both.

CHARLOTTE

Have you hired any help?

WALT

We have a maid; Miss Roisin has been with him since he married his first wife. She's watching him while I came here. On my first day here at the hospital, we spoke of duty.

CHARLOTTE

Yes, yes, I remember that well.

WALT

They both laugh – until they cry. WALT produces a handkerchief for CHARLOTTE to wipe her eyes. When she hands it back, he wipes his.

It is now my duty to take care of my husband. I must honor the words spoken at our wedding, "to honor and love till death do us part."

CHARLOTTE

(sighing, shaking her head, looking about the ward)

Were it not for my work here, however, I do not think I could bear what has happened to my General.

It happened to you as well.

WALT

Strange how that worked out. I should write a poem about that. Would you call it irony or a paradox?

CHARLOTTE

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WALT

I think it is simply fate. Or simply life. But I am glad to hear you will keep writing poems.

CHARLOTTE

Even those will not be the same.

WALT

Every boy in this hospital is grateful for your work and your love. For the rest of their lives, they will remember you.

CHARLOTTE

But I cannot come back.

(handing her haversack to WALT)

My General needs me.

WALT

I suspected as much. But there is one more thing you must know.

(removing an envelope from his suit pocket)

We received this yesterday.

CHARLOTTE

(glancing at the address)

“The War Department?”

WALT

(opening the envelope, then reading)

“Executive Mansion,

Washington, D.C.

Concerning Private Ethan Carter

1st Rhode Island Volunteer Infantry

The United States Army

To Whom It May Concern,

I have been made aware of the case of Private Ethan Carter, a soldier aged not quite twenty years, who, in a moment of fear and weakness, abandoned his post in the service of the Union.

WALT falters. He cannot continue reading.
CHARLOTTE gently takes the letter from him and continues.

CHARLOTTE

“While desertion is a serious offense under the law and military conduct, I am mindful that war often imposes great strain on the young, many of whom have scarcely begun their journey into manhood.

“It is not uncommon for the pressures of such an extraordinary conflict to weigh heavily on the hearts and minds of our soldiers, particularly those as youthful as Private Carter’s. I understand that he acted not out of disloyalty to his country but rather out of an overwhelming sense of fear, brought on by circumstances that would challenge even the bravest among us.”

CHARLOTTE, too, has a hard time reading the letter, summarizing some parts, but pressing on to the end.

CHARLOTTE

“Therefore, in consideration of his youth, his prior service, and the testimony of his comrades, I do hereby pardon Private Ethan Carter for the crime of desertion. It is my hope that he will be given the opportunity to return to his duties, if he so chooses, and prove his loyalty and courage once more in the service of our great Union.

Yours sincerely,

Abraham Lincoln
President of the United States”
(A beat)
Can God really be so cruel?

WALT

I don’t know.

CHARLOTTE

Again, how are we to bear this?

WALT

Perhaps only with the solace of good men and women, people of compassion.

CHARLOTTE

I am trying to find my way back to God.

WALT

You’ve returned to church?

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WALT does not move. He bows his head as if trying to decide what to do next.

Raising his head at last, he surveys the empty ward.

Then, with a deep breath, he transfers Charlotte's foods and treats into his own haversacks, then heads to the rear door to continue his rounds.

BLACKOUT.

ACT V – SCENE ~~XX~~

AUDIO-VISUAL PRESENTATION:

“Weeping, Sad and Lonely, or, When this Cruel War is Over” plays over iconic photos of “America” - endless prairies, green pastures, blue mountains, majestic forests.

SPOTLIGHT ON:

WALT, now 72 years old, white beard and hair, wheels himself onstage in a wheelchair. He slowly stands and addresses the audience.

WALT

“An old man bending I come among new faces,
Years looking backward resuming in answer to children,
Come tell us old man, as from young men and maidens that love me,
(Arous'd and angry, I'd thought to beat the alarum, and urge relentless war,
But soon my fingers fail'd me, my face droop'd and I resign'd myself,
To sit by the wounded and soothe them, or silently watch the dead;

“Bearing the bandages, water and sponge,
Straight and swift to my wounded I go,
Where they lie on the ground after the battle brought in,
Where their priceless blood reddens the grass, the ground,
Or to the rows of the hospital tent, or under the roof'd hospital,
To the long rows of cots up and down each side I return,
To each and all one after another I draw near, not one do I miss,
An attendant follows holding a tray, he carries a refuse pail,
Soon to be fill'd with clotted rags and blood, emptied, and fill'd again.

WALT (CONTINUED)

Thus in silence in dreams' projections,
Returning, resuming, I thread my way through the hospitals,
The hurt and wounded I pacify with soothing hand,
I sit by the restless all the dark night, some are so young,
Some suffer so much, I recall the experience sweet and sad,
(Many a soldier's loving arms about this neck have cross'd and rested,
Many a soldier's kiss dwells on these bearded lips.)"

BLACKOUT

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