

**THE GOATS GATHERED
AT MIDNIGHT**

A Short Play

by

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(A tiny, dark, and filthy, but with a certain ambience, Moroccan Bar in a lonely village. ARTHUR MACBRIDE, dressed in a classic white summer suit and Panama hat, sits in a large wicker chair, sipping a drink. On the small table before him, rests an expensive leather attache'. Another chair is to the right of the table. A burly native BARTENDER stands behind the bar, eyeing MACBRIDE intently. The only light comes from underneath the door and a few unscreened windows. A ceiling fan hums overhead.)

MACBRIDE

(to the BARTENDER)

Another, please. Scotch, neat.

(The BARTENDER nods. MACBRIDE retrieves a cigarette holder from the table, places it to his mouth and lights a cigarette. Through the door, BARBARE O'BRIEN enters. She stands for a brief moment, framed in the light of midday, fanning herself with a palm frond. Her vivid red hair is in striking contrast to the flowing yellow dress that clings to her sweaty body. She carries a large manila envelope and a small purse. Momentarily surveying her surroundings, she sits quickly at the bar. The bartender approaches MACBRIDE with his drink.)

MACBRIDE

(whispers, pointing to his drink)

The lady needs one of these.

(The BARTENDER nods and returns to the bar. He pours another drink, places it before BARBARE and motions to MACBRIDE. She glances at MACBRIDE, sips nervously and then coughs. She is not used to such strong stuff. After taking her in yearningly with his eyes, MACBRIDE advances to her.)

MACBRIDE

I noticed you today.

BARBARE

I would imagine it was difficult not to.

MACBRIDE

Ah, the gown. But it was what was underneath that aroused attention.

BARBARE

Please, sit.

MACBRIDE

I had intended to.

BARBARE

And you are the writer?

MACBRIDE

What gave it away, my dear?

BARBARE

I had a friend once who was a writer and you have a certain similar brevity of speech.

MACBRIDE

Perceptive. And I notice from your accent you are Irish. Belfast, to be exact, northern end. And from the grease on the hem of your frock, I gather your family manufactures bicycle chains.

BARBARE

Quite right. Writers are ever the observers.

(She removes a cigarette from her purse. MACBRIDE takes a lighter from his pocket and seductively lights her cigarette. BARBARE brings her hands to his.)

Had your manner of speech not given away your profession, then the tell-tale ink stains on your hand, along with the calluses attached to your thumb, index and middle fingers, would. Calluses brought about from the hurried manipulation of a writing implement, no doubt in the pursuit of art.

MACBRIDE

Touche'!

BARBARE

My friend was an ardent scribe. Do your passions for the word run as deep?

MACBRIDE

(taking her hand)

My passions mine the very soul.

BARBARE

(forcing his hand away)

The writer I once knew was undone by such zeal. His passion was serious of nature, which made his undoing all the more tragic.

MACBRIDE

Arthur MacBride. Of...

BARBARE

Of Scottish decent. Yes, I know. Although it seems to be Scotland by way of the American South. I denote a bit of Tobacco Road in your discourse.

MACBRIDE

Astute.

BARBARE

My name is Barbare, as in the coast.

MACBRIDE

Yes, I know Miss O' Brien. As I said, I saw you today.

BARBARE

A good author is always an equally adept sleuth.

MACBRIDE

Quite. My brawny native barkeep friend here followed you at my bidding earlier when I viewed you in the waste land that is our local marketplace.

BARBARE

Yes, I was attempting to find lodging in this godforsaken village... this land that time forgot. I had hoped for a room with a view far from the maddening crowd, but, alas, that was not to be. For now, the Maltese will suffice as my domicile when I grow weary.

MACBRIDE

Ah, the Falcon. Such a bleak house. A den of thievery and iniquity. Well, my dear I have a large inviting room at the Casablanca you're more than welcome to share.

BARBARE

Since I am but a stranger in a strange land, I think in this brave new world, it is best that I keep a bed for one, Mr. MacBride.

MACBRIDE

Suit yourself, Miss O' Brien. The heart is a lonely hunter...

(Abruptly, MACBRIDE takes BARBARE in his arms, bends her backward and gives her a cinema worthy kiss. Upon seeing the kiss, the native bartender spits out his drink, does a double take and laughs uncontrollably. Recovering from the kiss, BARBARE wanders center.)

Something wrong, my friend?

(The bartender shakes his head no and tires to contain his laughter. MACBRIDE crosses to BARBARE.)

The natives are easily amused, Miss O' Brien. May I call you Barbare? Afterall, our age of innocence is over, is it not? Love and friendship is all we writers have in this world.

BARBARE

Perhaps, Mr. MacBride, you'd care to set your tell tale heart aside and take a look at my friend's work? It is through his stories that I came to know and love him. I would be curious to ascertain your professional opinion. Pride and prejudice prevents me from seeing his work with a clear eye.

(She removes a manuscript from the manila envelope and hands it to MACBRIDE, who sits in the wicker chair. BARBARE also sits.)

MACBRIDE

(reading from the manuscript)
"The Goats Gathered at Midnight."

BARBARE

It proved to be a very prophetic title, indeed.

MACBRIDE

(reading)

"The night traversed to an end and the hooves thundered across the plain. Goats unseen, masked by the darkness. Lightning crackled above, illuminating only wisps of things. It was midnight."

(to BARBARE)

I've read Addison Williamson's work before. His genius is in his succinctness of phrase.

BARBARE

Read on.

MACBRIDE

(reading)

"The sky grew darker still. Bawana knew that the goats suspected they would soon be turned into some of the finest leather in the northern hemisphere. Bawana was frightened."

(to BARBARE)

Such verisimilitude.

BARBARE

You were one of Addison's instructors at Chapel Hill?

MACBRIDE

Very good, Barbare. You might say his mentor. And how did you come to know Addy?

BARBARE

We were lovers by letter. Introduced by the church that sought to unite desperate souls in desperate lands. Little men and little women longing for the touch of the flesh, but satisfied with the contact of the word.

MACBRIDE

Pen pals?

(She shakes her head yes.)

Perhaps you should learn his brevity.

BARBARE

Nevertheless, I cherished his letters and the newfound love that we shared. In our magnificent obsession, we had hoped to meet one day and consummate the love that so far was limited to the page.

MACBRIDE

My God, you mean you've never met Addy?

BARBARE

Alas, no. Fate has kept us on a path of to have and have not.

MACBRIDE

What prompted you to seek me out in this lonely Moroccan village, Barbare?

BARBARE

In his last letter, Addison told of unspeakable evil here on the coast. "Something wicked this way comes," he said again and again. He was haunted by the echo of a voice wherever he went. A voice that simply said, "Mine!" A malevolence that pursued him until the day he died.

(on the verge of tears)

A death so insanely tragic that I dare not believe it!

MACBRIDE

Ah, yes. Hit by lightning and, much like his native protagonist, trampled to death by goats, wasn't he?

BARBARE

Sadly, yes. Addison feared his demise many months before it occurred. All the king's men could not keep this unseen specter from preoccupying his every waking moment. But with each letter, Addison would send me his manuscripts for safekeeping. The last arrived several months ago, just before his downfall, with this story inside.

(She points to the manuscript in MACBRIDE'S hands.)

When I learned of his disastrous death, I knew that I must travel to the continent, where angels fear to tread, and find the banshee that haunted him. Find the reason for his untimely demise.

MACBRIDE

Everyone in the literary community mourned his death, Barbare. Myself included. He was like a son to me. But I still don't understand what caused you to seek me out here and now.

BARBARE

Addison told me that if anything should happen to him, I should find his old college writing professor. For he... you... would help me learn of the sound and the fury that precipitated his death.

MACBRIDE

And you say that he sent all of his current manuscripts to you?

BARBARE

Yes. They are all here in this envelope. I carry them with me everywhere for fear that something will happen to them.

MACBRIDE

Excellent, Barbare. We must get them published posthumously. Addison Williamson's legendary voice must not be silenced by mere death.

BARBARE

My thoughts exactly, Mr. MacBride.

MACBRIDE

No more need for formality, my dear Barbare. Call me Arthur.

BARBARE

Please, Arthur, read on. This next section of Addison's manuscript I think you will find most fulfilling.

MACBRIDE

(reading)

"Bawana peered nervously at the congregating herd. Goats on a despicable mission, without thought, and only malice in their hearts. Another bolt of lightning. Then another. Thunder echoed across the plain, concealing the advance of the pack. Bawana's eyes grew wider at their approach. Though his body was frozen with foreboding, his feet had a mind of their own and quickly lurched him forward, away from the stampede of mindless horned mammals."

(MACBRIDE gazes at BARBARE)

MACBRIDE (CONT'D)

Addy could certainly turn a phrase.

BARBARE

Tell me something, Arthur, how did you know that Addison was trampled by goats?

MACBRIDE

I read it in the papers, of course. The death of such a noted writer does not go unnoticed, even in this forlorn Moroccan village. At great expense, I have all the important newspapers delivered here to me daily.

BARBARE

Ah, yes. Of course.

MACBRIDE

What troubles you, my dear?

BARBARE

In my alacrity to find you, I neglected to read of Addison's passing in any papers. I quickly traveled to Mansfield Park, jumped on a train, journeyed through Wuthering Heights, and had a layover at Howard's End, where I booked a passage to India, which brought me to you. My heart ached with the sting of loss and my mind spun from the crossing that seemed to take me around the world in eighty days. The only word I received was in a communiqué from the native manservant who traveled with him, apprising me of his death by lightning and trampling. That is the only way I knew that he had expired. Ironically, the day before the communiqué arrived, Addison's last letter came with this manuscript. It was in this letter that he spoke of you... you who was like a father to him. Telling me that should anything untoward happen, I must seek you out posthaste.

MACBRIDE

Kismet, isn't it? That Addy's death should bring us together.

(Rising, taking her hand and leading her a few steps away.)

MACBRIDE (CONT'D)

It's as if Addy wanted us to couple , Barbare. Don't you see? He knew death was upon him and he loved us both so much. Because of him and all that heaven allows, we draw closer to this side of paradise.

(He kisses her hand, gradually moving up her arm, until his lips come to her face. He lingers for a moment, his lips brushing hers. BARBARE resists his advance, but ultimately appears to melt into his arms as MACBRIDE kisses her deeply. The BARTENDER laughs again. At first quietly, then, unable to contain his laughter, he explodes in an uproarious guffaw. MACBRIDE glares at him and the BARTENDER lets one last giggle escape his lips as he disappears under the bar.)

You'd think that heathen had never seen a kiss before.

BARBARE

Perhaps he's never seen a man kiss someone like me before.

MACBRIDE

Alas, probably no. I'm sure he has never seen such a beauteous red haired creature as you anywhere in this lonely land.

BARBARE

It's a tale of two cities, really. You here in this Moroccan village and me in Belfast, pining for a love just out of my reach. A devotion that would never find fruition until we...you and I... came through the looking glass to be one. Though he is only a handful of dust now, Addison's death has caused the stars to align and join our hearts as one.

MACBRIDE

Poetically spoken, Barbare. The world has darkened a bit with Addy's passing, though the sun also rises on our new found affection. The stuff of romantic fiction is it not? What better way for a writer to fall in love? Leave her to heaven and her heart finds its way. Perhaps I should offer our story to the world in a new tome.

BARBARE

No, Mr. MacBride, I think I shall write it.

(BARBARE speedily removes a gun from her purse and places it against MACBRIDE'S stomach before he has a chance to react.)

BARBARE

And so, the tale takes a striking turn, doesn't it? You disgust me, Mr. MacBride! Do you see a scarlet letter on my breast? Do you think I'm a tramp abroad? If I were the last of the Mohicans, I wouldn't be sullied by your putrid touch once more. I'd rather lie in a field of mice and men than be joined of human bondage with you.

(She moves away from him slightly.)

Sit down, Mr. MacBride. Or shall I still call you Arthur, as you insisted earlier?

MACBRIDE

What is the meaning of this, Barbare? Has Addy's death left you completely unhinged?

BARBARE

No, my hinges are functioning properly. Keep reading, Arthur. You will find this next section most enlightening.

MACBRIDE

Really, Barbare, this is absurd...

BARBARE

(advancing on him and pointing the gun directly at his head)

Please, Arthur, don't make me ask you again. Read.

MACBRIDE

(picking up the next page of the manuscript)

"The goats were upon him, nostrils flaring, their searing exhalations of breath blistering his skin, while the gloomy heavens opened up once again, sending furious discharges from the clouds to the expansive plain below. Bawana was still frightened. The roar of thunder and the baying of the goats filled his mind. With the furious collection of ruminant beasts snapping at his heels and the angry sky delivering electric charges all around, Bawana dove for a nearby gully, fearing that death would find him one way or another. Just as he reached the ground, a flash of light and a horrendous crash caused the ground to quiver and Bawana to shudder. He knew he was dead. The goats had won.

MACBRIDE (CONT'D)

Then he noticed a horrid smell, coming from just over the ridge and he rose to find the herd stopped in its tracks...

(MACBRIDE can't bring himself to finish reading.)

BARBARE

(snatching the page from him and finishing the last few lines)

"...smoke rising from their hairy lifeless bodies. The goats had chewed their last cud. Bawana was happy."

Not quite the conclusion you expected, was it Arthur?

MACBRIDE

I haven't the foggiest idea what you are prattling on about.

BARBARE

No? Didn't you say that Addison died from being struck by lightning and trampled by goats much like the protagonist of his prose? And how would you know that Arthur?

MACBRIDE

My dear, Addison's death has clearly put your mind in a haze. Have you lost all sense and sensibility? You are seeing conspiracy where none exists. As I told you, his demise was written about in all the papers. Each story mentioned that he was found with a manuscript tucked neatly in the pocket of his jacket.

BARBARE

Ah, yes, the stories in the papers. Interestingly, though, none of the journalists mentioned the content of that manuscript.

MACBRIDE

My dear, Barbare, you, yourself, told me that you learned of Addy's death from a wire sent to you by his manservant. You never read the stories in the papers.

BARBARE

Actually, Arthur, I lied. I did read those stories in the papers. In fact I wrote them. It's amazing what one can accomplish with a little money and villagers who are desperate for work. With the help of Addison's manservant, I had your papers switched for the ones that I had printed.

BARBARE (CONT'D)

So, be truthful with me now. You knew that the protagonist in Addison's narrative died from a lightning strike and a goat trampling because you read what you thought was the only copy in existence. The one that you took from his body. You were the macabre voice, like the hound of the Baskervilles, that followed him, saying "Mine!"

MACBRIDE

You should write fiction yourself, my dear.

BARBARE

(aiming the gun squarely at his head)

Ask not for whom the bell tolls, Arthur. It tolls for you.

MACBRIDE

Really, my dear, this charade has gone on long enough. You won't shoot me. It's not your intent to kill a mockingbird. I don't think you are that kind of woman. Besides, this fanciful story you've created, albeit a highly entertaining one, is strictly conjecture on the part of a mourning mistress. It's your word against mine. And who would believe your rantings over the truth of a highly respected writer and teacher?

BARBARE

You are correct, Arthur. I'm not the kind of woman who would shoot you, but what you actually see before you is the portrait of the artist as --

(She removes her wig.)

-- a young man. I am, however, the kind of *man* who would shoot you.

MACBRIDE

Addison!

BARBARE/ADDISON

Such unseen surprises as our drama reaches its climax! You see, I didn't breathe my last breath the night of that horrendous storm, as you thought I did. I came close, but survived. As I lay dying, I saw you take the manuscript, the purloined letter, from my pocket and replace it with a poorly written imitation. Yes, all the same elements were there but it was not conceived with the same flare. Arthur, you should have finished what the goats and the lightning started.

BARBARE/ADDISON

If you had, upon his return from the village, my manservant would never have gotten me to the hospital in time. Why, Arthur? What was it in your heart of darkness that caused you to do it? How long have you played Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde? You, yourself, told me of the great expectations you had for my career. And why did you replace the manuscript? Why not just take it if you thought I was dying?

MACBRIDE

I wanted your stories to be MINE, Addy! You should never have achieved the success you did. The student should never have surpassed the teacher. In my vanity, fair, I wanted you found dead with an inferior manuscript so that the world would wonder if your other stories were just a fluke. After some time had passed, I would publish your story as my own. I would say it was an homage to your untimely end and no one would be the wiser.

(He quickly reaches under the table, pulls out a gun, and just as swiftly points it in BARBARE/ADDISON'S direction.)

MACBRIDE

The last page has not yet been written, my dear Addy! The turn of the screw takes another spin. I think I will still publish your story as my own. As well as the others in this envelope. In fact, it's what I've planned all along. The game is afoot, but it will have a quick finish. You see, in the attaché on the table before you, I've already amassed all of your works and rewritten them in my hand. My twice told tales, if you like. But now I will never have to fear that your original manuscripts will see the light of day.

BARBARE/ADDISON

That's impossible...

MACBRIDE

Nothing is impossible in a well-written plot. Don't ask me how I got the original manuscripts, Addy. Some mysteries are best left to the imagination so that the reader can fill in the blanks. Let's just say that I found them under the lilacs next to the grapes of wrath.

BARBARE/ADDISON

Clever man. Go ahead, Arthur, try to shoot me.

BARBARE/ADDISON (CONT'D)

(indicates the wig)

The red badge of courage may have been removed, but I am still a force to be reckoned with. You shoot, then I shoot and we're both dead.

MACBRIDE

Not exactly.

(The sound of another gun being cocked is heard.)

That sound you just heard is of a gun being cocked by my bartender friend. It's aimed at the back of your head.

(Indeed, the bartender has risen from his hiding place behind the bar and he has a gun pointed at BARBARE/ADDISON. BARBARE/ADDISON moves slightly upstage to view the BARTENDER, with his gun still pointed at MACBRIDE.)

MACBRIDE

When you go, you're going to get two bullets, my friend. One for each time that I kissed you.

BARBARE/ADDISON

Well, I certainly could have done without that myself! Rather incestuous, really. You who profess to be like a father to me. What would Freud say about that attraction? Sons and lovers, aren't we all? Really, Arthur, can you kill me in cold blood?

(The BARTENDER moves out from behind the bar with the gun still pointed at BARBARE/ADDISON.)

MACBRIDE

Silence! Time's up, my dear soon to be departed friend. Shortly, you will travel from here to eternity. You shuffle off this mortal coil knowing that I will continue your success...as my own. Any last requests before the moment arrives that you are gone with the wind? No? Well, I have one. Drop your gun please. Slowly.

(Just as BARBARE/ADDISON is about to drop the gun to the floor, the BARTENDER fires his gun. Amazingly, the bullet doesn't hit BARBARE/ADDISON, but sends MACBRIDE flying back into the wicker chair. He is stunned, clutches his wound and drops his gun to the floor.)

BARBARE/ADDISON

(to MACBRIDE)

Allow me to introduce my manservant. I've always been a better writer than you, Arthur, and now it seems I'm better at everything. Our story comes to the denouement that I intended all along. I hope your journey to the center of the earth is an unpleasant one.

(pause)

The postman always rings twice, my friend.

(He fires another bullet point blank into
MACBRIDE'S chest.)

That was for the tongue!

(to the BARTENDER)

Get rid of the body. I've paid off the local police, but I don't want any questions from anybody else.

BARTENDER

Yes, ma'am... sir. I mean sir.

(He moves to the left of the wicker chair, then abruptly fires the gun at BARBARE/ADDISON. BARBARE/ADDISON falls to the floor in shock, holding his chest.)

BARBARE/ADDISON

Oh my... a plot twist even I didn't see coming.

(The BARTENDER moves to BARBARE/ADDISON and kneels over him.)

BARBARE/ADDISON

(pulling himself up, grasping the BARTENDER'S
arm)

My story was so beautifully written and it already had such a great finale. Why??

BARTENDER

(standing)

Bawana wanna be a writer.

(The BARTENDER fires another bullet into BARBARE/ADDISON'S chest, then wipes his prints from the gun and places it on the floor. He moves to the table, grabs the manuscript, the envelope, and MACBRIDE'S attache' and heads for the door.)

CURTAIN