

Touching Down

by

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DESCRIPTION

Thomas Touch-Fire, old, crippled, exhausted, wants a permanent exit. But son-in-law Lindbergh, remembering the Seneca legends his father-in-law has taught him, offers Thomas another road.

CHARACTERS

- THOMAS TOUCH-FIRE, elderly man, Seneca Indian. Physically weak, frail-looking, needs a cane. He wears a headband.
- LINDBERGH, his son-in-law, Anglo, speaks with an Irish accent

SETTING

- Park, with a river and a bridge—early morning on a spring day, just before sunrise in upstate New York.

MISCELLANEOUS

- Bench
- Cane for THOMAS
- Small beer cooler, with some beer in it
- Two empties
- Birdsong, river sounds

* * * * *

The audience discovers THOMAS and LINDBERGH sitting on the bench drinking beer. Two empties are next to the cooler. The light is soft and lambent, a half hour or so before sunrise. Throughout the play, it will gradually brighten, with birdsong underscoring, until full dawn. There is also a constant purling of water underscoring. LINDBERGH belches.

LINDBERGH

Sorry.

THOMAS

It's fine.

LINDBERGH

Not used to beer for breakfast. We're not all poetizing drunkards, you know.

THOMAS

It's made from grain—it's a cereal of sorts.

LINDBERGH

But I don't think I'll be adding it to my breakfast menu.

They toast each other.

THOMAS

Eructation.

LINDBERGH

What?

THOMAS

That's what you did—eruct. You eructed. An eructation.

LINDBERGH

Sounds vaguely sexual, heh? "He could feel himself getting eruct."

THOMAS

Eruct. What a difference a letter makes, hey? Hard-on. Mouth fart.

THOMAS works up a belch.

LINDBERGH

Ah, to the morning songbirds.

THOMAS

Feels good.

LINDBERGH

(indicating the beer)

Given what's on our agenda this morning, I didn't bring this for refreshment, did I?

THOMAS

No.

LINDBERGH

Then why did I bring this, hahnii [my father]?

THOMAS

When you and number one daughter visit, this is where I sneak the beer you bring me.

LINDBERGH

Your little biergarten.

THOMAS

I can sit here, by the water, unwitnessed because nobody on this reservation moves from their soaps or beds. I'm safe.

LINDBERGH

From the marauding nurses.

THOMAS

(shakes his head)

Thomas Touch-Fire, 74 years old, of the once-proud Seneca nation, the People of Stone—

LINDBERGH

Here, here!

THOMAS

Member of the Iroquois confederation—

LINDBERGH

Double here, here! Here, here, here, here!

THOMAS

Ben Franklin stole it—

LINDBERGH

I know.

THOMAS

—to write the Constitution that murdered us—How the mighty have fallen.

LINDBERGH

'Tis a sad world, indeed.

THOMAS

Usually have to drink it warm. It feels good to drink it so cold.
What I actually want is that: I want to feel this last coldness.

THOMAS tries to burp again but gets nothing.

THOMAS

This shell—

(indicating his own body)

—this bag, is ridiculous, don't you think?

LINDBERGH

Depends.

THOMAS

Gases, slimes, squeals, splats, hisses, explosions—

LINDBERGH

Remember, two of these "shells" produced you.

THOMAS

That's a plus?

LINDBERGH

I happen to think so. As does number one daughter.

THOMAS

Well, you two like all those ancient meaningful tribal stories about
Haweniyo [Great Spirit] mixing up some dirt with spit or piss or
dried sperm or whatever—

LINDBERGH

(pours out a small libation of beer)

Don't forget the waters of creation!

THOMAS

Oops, first man. Oops, first woman. You know what they were?
The first leftovers. Afterthoughts!

LINDBERGH

And he's off.

THOMAS

Don't mock.

LINDBERGH

Not when you've got a head up.

THOMAS

Intact bastard. "I breathe the breath of life into you"—

(Bronx cheer)

—now get the fuck out of here! Dismissed! Dissed! Is that right?
Dissed?

(LINDBERGH nods yes)

Dissed! Into the world wit cha [with you], ya clueless and flimsy
beast! Ya brittle bastard! Go get yerself conquered! Now I'm
sounding like you. It will be good to get away from all of it.

LINDBERGH

The litany of despair still flows.

THOMAS

But—today is different. Isn't it?

LINDBERGH

Yes it is.

THOMAS

It will be different today.

LINDBERGH

Yes it will.

THOMAS

After today, you won't have to hear the litany any more.

They both finish their beer.

THOMAS

Let's start.

They take a beat by putting down their beer bottles. Then LINDBERGH and THOMAS with his cane walk to the bridge railing in a measured manner. The light gets brighter at this point and will continue to full dawn by the end of the scene. Birdsong and purling water.

THOMAS

When I escape, it's to here. Water, stone arch—slip out of this wreck and remember. Well, to start. Lift me over.

THOMAS holds his hand out to LINDBERGH. LINDBERGH does not take it.

THOMAS

What are you doing?

LINDBERGH

I'm not doing anything.

THOMAS

That's not what you promised.

LINDBERGH

I know what I promised.

THOMAS

Then why aren't you keeping it?

LINDBERGH

I've promised something else.

THOMAS

You've thought about it.

LINDBERGH

You can hardly fault me.

THOMAS

I told you not to! Makes cowards of us all!

THOMAS turns away in disgust.

THOMAS

You betray me. Like everyone else. Everything else. Why did your parents give you such a God-awful first name?

LINDBERGH

Take your hits.

THOMAS

Lind-bergh. Lind-burger—

LINDBERGH

Read 'em off.

THOMAS

Lind-boig, Lind-booger, Lind-bunghole—

LINDBERGH

(as if said a hundred times)

An uncle, mother's side, her favorite brother—

THOMAS

Lind-boozer, Lind-bugger—

LINDBERGH

For Charles Lindbergh—

THOMAS

Lind-burp, Lind-barf—

LINDBERGH

The uncle was hatched the year Charles crossed the pond.
C'mon, more.

THOMAS

Are you called Lindbergh because you want to "take flight"?

LINDBERGH

C'mon.

THOMAS

Fly, fly away at the least little storm!

LINDBERGH

I'm bruising up nicely.

THOMAS

You promised!

LINDBERGH

I promised, yes—I promised to help you. Subject to interpretation.

THOMAS

I have been at 27,000 sunrises. Of all, I don't know how many I've really noticed. But this sunrise—this one, this one—

LINDBERGH

Because—

THOMAS

Because I have decided.

LINDBERGH

Thomas—

THOMAS

Look at me!

LINDBERGH goes to say something, but THOMAS stops him.

THOMAS

The litany? I hear it, I smell it, every day. Every subtraction. You should sit in the rec room of the Shady Grove Retirement Community—you'd be sore amazed at the noises and smells. There comes a time when, héawak [my son]—and you know it is done: No more reservation! And to need a fellow bastard like you to help me get over this railing, something I could have flowed over! This high—and I can't get over it myself!

THOMAS puts his hand out.

THOMAS

Now do your part.

LINDBERGH comes to THOMAS and, in one smooth motion, picks up him and gently but firmly sits him on the bench. He takes THOMAS' cane and uses it in a variety of ways through his lines: a rapier, a pointer, and so on.

No! No! No! THOMAS

En garde! LINDBERGH

No! THOMAS

Sit down. LINDBERGH

I would kill you if I could. THOMAS

I believe you believe that. LINDBERGH

THOMAS picks up an empty and makes to throw it. LINDBERGH takes up a batter's stance.

Right down the middle. LINDBERGH
(he points)
Right field, upper deck.

THOMAS does throw it, but it's not hard; LINDBERGH easily catches it.

Strike three. LINDBERGH

I want out. THOMAS

No you don't. LINDBERGH

Fake-tosses the bottle to THOMAS, who reacts to catch it. Having gotten his attention, LINDBERGH very softly tosses the bottle back to THOMAS.

LINDBERGH

If you had wanted out so bad, you could have just walked into the river. Right around there. Or there. Then down to the ocean, Thomas Touch-Fire Hamlet's Ophelia bobbing like a fishing bob. You didn't need me. But here you wanted me. Obvious question, then, Thomas. Number one daughter and I figured it out, so so can you. C'mon, what would that question be?

THOMAS

I want out.

LINDBERGH

And I—we—don't want you out.

THOMAS

You don't get to say.

LINDBERGH does a little sloppy soft shoe holding the cane, somewhat to "Tea for Two."

LINDBERGH

"No—more talk—of ending—things / Now—let's talk—of mending—things." Raise high the roofbeam, carpenter. Now comes the new generation. Sounding prophetic enough, Thomas? Getting into that storyteller zone? Because that's right where we are at the moment. I have a story to tell you. Eh, put it down!

(points with the handle of the cane)

Put it down—or I'll give ya the hook! Now, listen!

THOMAS

Why should I?

LINDBERGH

Listen!

LINDBERGH undergoes some kind of small but clear physical transformation into the storyteller.

LINDBERGH

Haweniyo decided that something was missing in the world he'd made.

THOMAS

I know this story.

LINDBERGH

Too quick on the draw. Old version—but now new generation, the re-generation, Thomas. Haweniyo decided that something was missing in the world he'd made. What comes next?

THOMAS

I don't want to.

LINDBERGH

You have to give something to the teller for the story.

THOMAS

No.

LINDBERGH

Contribute, damn it! Contribute! Be in powerful voice again!

THOMAS

He created a man and a boy.

LINDBERGH

Good.

THOMAS

"Walk like human beings," he told them, and they were perfect. They followed Haweniyo down to the river, where he gave them speech.

LINDBERGH

Like us, palavering. C'mon.

THOMAS

"What state are we in?"

LINDBERGH

"This is life," said Haweniyo . "Before, you were mud. Now, you live."

THOMAS

From dust and shit—

LINDBERGH

"When we were mud, were we alive?" Come on, Thomas.

THOMAS

“No.”

LINDBERGH

“What is that called?”

THOMAS

“Death.”

LINDBERGH

“Will we be alive always?” Look at me, Thomas. Haweniyo pondered. Follow me. “I didn’t think about that. Let’s decide it right now. Here’s a chip of bear dung. If it floats, then people will die and come back to life four days later.”

THOMAS

“No.”

LINDBERGH

“No” said the man in his brutal innocence.

THOMAS

“The chip will dissolve in the water. I’ll throw this stone, which will not melt. If it floats, we’ll live forever. If it sinks, then we’ll die.”

LINDBERGH

He didn’t know about stones and water, having only been alive for a few hours.

THOMAS

He threw the stone.

LINDBERGH

Yes.

THOMAS

Haweniyo watched it flash in the sun, and he could have had Raven come down and snatch it away. But he let it fall—

LINDBERGH

Stop.

THOMAS

You can't—

LINDBERGH

Rewind. New generation.

THOMAS

The stone falls, we die—that's the story.

LINDBERGH

We have more choices than you dream of, Thomas. Listen: Haweniyo with a bam of his cane summoned Raven, Gáqga, to catch it. Which Raven did, and brought the stone to Haweniyo, who gave it to the man and said, "Take more time to learn." Then the man tossed the stone to his son and said, "You hold on to the future."

THOMAS

No, no, no! Haweniyo lets it sink because that's how it has to be!

LINDBERGH

No.

THOMAS

"You made a choice there," said Haweniyo. "Now nothing can be done about it. Now people will die." That's how it ends!

LINDBERGH

The son has the stone, Thomas. And, yes, at some point he must throw it, and, yes, it will sink, and Raven will not always catch it. But—but, Thomas Touch-Fire—there are an infinite number of ways, and an infinite number of appointed times, to throw it.

THOMAS

And you have the stone.

LINDBERGH

Right in my pocket.

THOMAS

What are you offering?

LINDBERGH

You know I love you. That we love you. Do you know that? We have watched you be a restless shade at Shady Grove for so long—a stone in mid-flight, that's what you were—

THOMAS

Are.

LINDBERGH

Lusting for the water—

THOMAS

Just to sink. No more gravity on my bones. There's a ledger book in me. Accounts receivable.

LINDBERGH

Accounts payable.

THOMAS

When my spirit is over-run with visions of "can not"—

LINDBERGH

Ah!

THOMAS

I can't pay—

LINDBERGH

And hope tastes like warm beer!

THOMAS

These knees push, gravity—pulls—

LINDBERGH

—the stone to water. But that's in the old story. I have the stone in my pocket. Remember—infinite ways. Thomas Touch-Fire, you are not in mid-arc any longer.

THOMAS

What do you mean?

A few soft shoe steps, ending with a button.

LINDBERGH

Raven, at your service. You are coming home with us.

THOMAS

You can't afford that!

LINDBERGH

We will.

THOMAS

You can't!

LINDBERGH

You're not the only one who knows how to read a ledger book.
Home with us.

THOMAS

Really?

LINDBERGH

(looking at his watch)

Number one daughter is getting the papers ready right now.

THOMAS

Can I drink beer?

LINDBERGH

We'll graduate you from macrobrew to microbrew.

THOMAS

(gesturing vaguely)

All of them—they all have families—

LINDBERGH

Well, that's the problem, isn't it? We've made everything so
convenient and disposable. We're not disposed toward that with
you.

LINDBERGH points toward the water.

LINDBERGH

I would never have done it, you know. Nope. Like Anchises, I
would have strapped you to my back.

THOMAS
May I ask one thing?

LINDBERGH
Unlimited menu.

THOMAS
Pick me up. Pick me up.

LINDBERGH cradles THOMAS.

THOMAS
Bring me there. Hold me over the water, like you would have.

LINDBERGH
Why?

THOMAS
Because I need to remember.

LINDBERGH
What?

THOMAS
Just do it.

LINDBERGH holds him over the water.

THOMAS
Do you know what the stone said to the man, but the man didn't hear? "I do not want to leave your hand and sink in darkness alone. Bring me back." Bring me back. Neither had a second chance. You can put me down.

LINDBERGH sits him down.

THOMAS
I wanted to remember that. Thank you, Raven.

LINDBERGH
(gathering up bottles and cooler)
Let's go. You have some papers to sign.

THOMAS puts his arm through LINDBERGH's.

THOMAS

What's a microbrew?

They walk.

LINDBERGH

We'll line 'em up and try 'em all!

THOMAS

I could live for another 20 years.

LINDBERGH

It'll take us that long to drink 'em.

THOMAS

Good.

They exit.