

WITH GOD AS MY NEIGHBOR

A Protonic Love Story

A Play in One Act

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CHARACTERS

MARGARET – The hostess. She has organized a wonderful party and has one question she absolutely needs answered before the evening is over.

BOB – Her husband. Reads the paper. Has been here the whole time.

GOD – Has moved in next door. Beard, long robe. Whether the robe conceals a navel is, for Margaret, the question of the evening. God finds this less pressing.

CLAUDE – The other new neighbor. Very helpful. Very.

SCHRÖDINGER – Has arrived. Most likely. He has made a life in the space between yes and no, and found it, on balance, spacious.

PETRA – A PETA activist. Arrives wary of Schrödinger. Leaves with him.

HEISENBERG – Knows where he is, or where he's going. Not both.

NIETZSCHE – Has some complicated feelings about God. God is fine with that.

DESCARTES – René. Perfectly timed. Quietly satisfied.

DANTE – Has been here the whole time. Nobody noticed.

FIBONACCI – Arrives with a +1. Then another. Then another.

PI – Middle-aged, irrational, never repeats. Looking for someone who can handle that in a number.

ZERO – Empty. Foundational. Can't multiply. Won't divide.

RUMI – Jalāl ad-Dīn. Loses his keys. Doesn't mind.

DAVE – Does nothing. Does everything.

HANNAH – Hannah Arendt, Carl Jung, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and others. They arrive in sequence, settle in as though they have always been here, and round the party out.

FEYNMAN – On the bongos. Why not?

SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR – Has views on the pineal gland.

CARL – Makes shadow puppets. Duck-rabbit.

SETTING

A suburban living room, evoking a 70s sitcom feel but in fact

timeless; the present, whatever that means. In the second act the rear wall opens onto a backyard with a pool. A diving board extends over the middle of the pool. There is a newspaper. Bongos are playing in the background. Nobody mentions the bongos.

A note on production: The silences are written. The play moves at the speed of thought, not speech. Directors and actors are invited to find the pauses – they are where the play lives.

SCENE ONE: THE MORNING

MARGARET stands at the window, looking out with mild disconsolation. BOB sits in a chair reading the newspaper.

MARGARET

Oh... It looks like God is moving in next door.

BOB

(not looking up) Huh. Someone finally bought that place.

Pause. He reads. She watches.

BOB

Wait.

He does not lower the paper.

BOB

God bought it?

MARGARET

Yes.

BOB

(a brief beat, then back to the paper) It would have to be, in this market.

He reads. She watches.

BOB

What does he – or she – look like?

MARGARET

He has a long beard. Salt and pepper. And a long flowing robe, split to the navel.

BOB
Huh.

Pause.

BOB
He has a navel?

MARGARET
I thought so... I can't tell.

She continues to look out the window. BOB continues to read.

MARGARET
I'm trying to...

BOB
Margaret.

MARGARET
I just want to know.

BOB
Why?

She thinks about this.

MARGARET
It seems important.

SCENE TWO: THE PLANNING

Later. MARGARET is working her cell phone. BOB has the paper.

MARGARET
We're having a pool party for the neighbors. In his honor.

BOB
(reading) Mmm hmm... Whose honor?

MARGARET
God! He'll have to take his robe off... to go in the pool.

BOB

(reading) Mm.

MARGARET

And we'll find out.

Pause.

BOB

Find out what?

MARGARET

(patient) About his navel, Bob.

BOB

(lowering the paper a fraction, then raising it again) Is this turning into one of those things...

MARGARET

(defensively) I just want him to feel at home.

BOB

Feel at home? He's...

MARGARET

We wouldn't want him to leave, now, would we?

BOB

You're planning a pool party to see his six pack.

MARGARET

What are you—

BOB

Why are you—

MARGARET

(indignant) I am not!

BOB

God forbid.

MARGARET

Bob!

Pause.

BOB

Who else is coming?

MARGARET

(looking at her phone) Heisenberg, Nietzsche, Schrödinger...

BOB

Is Schrödinger bringing anyone?

MARGARET

(looking at her phone) Might be. Descartes, Dante, Dave...

BOB

The Buddhist?

MARGARET

Yes. Oh, and Rumi, Hannah what's-her-name, Pi...

BOB

Is Pi bringing anyone?

MARGARET

No. He's still remaindered.

BOB

We'd better get him squared away before he's completely irrational.

MARGARET

I invited that cute little number from India.

BOB

Zero? I thought she was Arabic.

MARGARET

Everyone does. But no. — oh... and...

BOB

(paper goes up a fraction) I don't see it on paper, but who knows?

MARGARET

Should we invite Simone?

BOB

She won't come if Sigmund is here.

MARGARET

Why?

BOB
He told someone she had pineal envy. Toward Descartes.

Pause.

MARGARET
That's not even a thing.

BOB
Tell Sigmund that. And then tell René.

MARGARET
(bracing herself) I'm inviting Claude.

BOB
He leaves the lights on all day and all night. AND the sprinklers. What does he do, anyway? Mr. No-visible-means-of-support.

MARGARET
He—

BOB
No.

MARGARET
Oh, Bob. He's just awkward. He wants to meet everybody. He needs... feedback. He'll figure it out. He's very smart.

BOB
Yeah! He finishes everyone's sentences.

MARGARET
He's a... good conversationalist.

BOB
I like... to finish... my... own... sentences! Thank you very much! When he does it I feel...

Pause.

BOB
...aborted.

The word sits in the room.

MARGARET

Well, that's pretty strong. He's usually right, in case you didn't notice.

BOB

That's not the point! He puts a... button... on everything.

MARGARET

A button?

BOB

A little closing line. A tidy ending. Like everything that needs to be said has been said. A good conversation wants to stay open. He can't help himself. Button, button, button. I feel... managed.

MARGARET

(taking this in) You should talk to him about it.

BOB

(back to paper) He's insufferable.

MARGARET

So you are sufferable? He's just trying to help.

BOB

Help with what, exactly?

MARGARET's phone chimes.

MARGARET

Oh! Fibonacci is coming.

BOB

(looks up) With a date?

MARGARET

(looks at her phone) Well, he's bringing a plus-one...

BOB

Oh, Jesus. We'll need a hummus bucket or two from the Greek place.

MARGARET

I know. Zeno's bringing it.

Pause.

BOB

(lowering the paper slightly) Well...

Pause.

BOB
(to himself) Shit.

Pause.

BOB
I'll make some clam dip.

He goes back to the paper.

SCENE THREE: THE PARTY

The living room has opened to the backyard. Sunlight glitters off the pool on the back wall. The diving board extends from upstage over its middle. Someone jumps in; the light bounces off the wall. BOB has installed himself and the newspaper. FEYNMAN, unremarked, is on the bongos in a corner.

MARGARET moves through the party with the energy of someone who has organized everything and is now watching it not quite happen how she planned. She carries a glass of wine and her social anxiety.

GOD stands near the pool, affable, robed, beard magnificent. He has been here since the party began.

MARGARET
Werner! I want to introduce you to — (looking for HEISENBERG)

HEISENBERG
Over here.

MARGARET pivots.

MARGARET
I thought you were — never mind.

PETRA, the PETA activist, walks by.

MARGARET
Oh! Petra! There's someone I'd like you to meet.

She brings PETRA over to SCHRÖDINGER.

MARGARET

Erwin, this is Petra. Petra, this is the eponymous Erwin Schrödinger. Petra is a PETA activist. Erwin is...

PETRA

(glaring) I know who you are.

SCHRÖDINGER

(bashful) Well, I...

PETRA

(very carefully) I don't... know... what... to say.

SCHRÖDINGER

That's fine. Neither do I. (flirtatiously) Would you like a pig-in-a-blanket? They're really good.

PETRA just stares at him.

MARGARET

I'll leave you two to get acquainted.

NIETZSCHE enters.

MARGARET

Oh, Friedrich! There's someone I'd like to introduce you to. Oh, God!

NIETZSCHE

(does a double-take) I thought you were—

GOD

Greatly exaggerated. (extends his hand) God.

NIETZSCHE

Call me Friedrich.

GOD

Call me God.

DAVE walks by.

MARGARET

Oh, Dave! Do you know God? Dave, God. God, Dave.

They reach out their hands to shake.

MARGARET

Dave's a Buddhist!

Both hands retract. DAVE rubs his head. GOD strokes his beard.

GOD

What do you do?

DAVE

Nothing. What do you do?

GOD

Everything.

They nod warily at each other, then awkwardly walk away in opposite directions. MARGARET watches. She had hoped for something more.

MARGARET

(called after GOD) There's something I-

The doorbell rings.

GUESTS

Fibonacci!

FIBONACCI comes in, followed by another, and another, and another - all already in party mode. MARGARET waves, then calls the room to attention.

MARGARET

Well, everybody... before we - Richie! - (FEYNMAN stops playing) I'd like to get this party started... formally... by introducing our guest of honor to anyone who doesn't already know him... ha ha!... I'd say he's new to the neighborhood but, um... anyhoo... Baruch atah... God.

A tepid round of applause. GOD receives it graciously.

FIBONACCI

Conga!

The bongos start again. The conga line forms. Those not in it: BOB (paper), GOD (observing benignly), DAVE (present, still), MARGARET (hosting). HEISENBERG appears and reappears.

SCHRÖDINGER appears, looking for someone. He finds PETRA, holds up a blindfold and a piece of fur.

SCHRÖDINGER
Pin the tail on the donkey?

PETRA
Will you knock it off?

SCHRÖDINGER
I just-

Other guests pick up on the invitation and play. PETRA stands aside, but is in fact interested.

MARGARET, during a lull, turns to DESCARTES.

MARGARET
Would you like some clam dip?

The party stops.

DESCARTES
I think not.

Everyone laughs. This is an in-joke they have all heard a thousand times.

GOD
I love that one!

DESCARTES
(tries some clam dip) That's really good!

GOD
Thank you. One of my best creations.

DESCARTES
I have no doubt.

Everyone laughs. Everyone gathers around GOD as one of the gang. MARGARET watches. Something registers. BOB turns a page.

NIETZSCHE
(trying to ingratiate himself with GOD) Heavenly Dad Joke!

Nobody laughs.

HEISENBERG reappears suddenly, running through the party.

HEISENBERG

(appearing from somewhere) Whoomp! There it is!

HEISENBERG whips the party into singing. FIBONACCI and the PLUS-ONES lead:

FIBONACCI & THE PLUS-ONES

There's a party over here, a party over there,
Wave your hands in the air, shake your derrière -
Whoomp, there it is!
Whoomp, there it is!
Whoomp, there it is!

The doorbell. DANTE enters. He looks like a man who has been traveling for some time through difficult terrain. He stands in the doorway, taking it all in. HANNAH spots him.

HANNAH

Dante! It's been a minute!

DANTE

I've been traveling.

HANNAH

Have you been here before?

DANTE

No. You?

HANNAH

A few times. I came tonight because I heard Claude might be here. Have you heard of him?

DANTE

Some. On my travels. He came up.

HANNAH

I look forward to hearing about it. Can I show you around?

DANTE

(exhausted) Sure. Whatever.

HANNAH takes his arm and leads him into the party. CARL is making shadow puppets on the wall. Duck. Rabbit. Duck-rabbit.

MARGARET watches the same shape become two things. Her navel question assumes one answer. She notices this, briefly. Then her phone vibrates.

CARL

Hey, Ludwig! What's this?

LUDWIG

I know, Carl; it's a duck and a rabbit.

CARL

No! It's a shadow!

Everyone laughs.

The doorbell rings. MARGARET opens it. CLAUDE enters – bright, well-dressed, already talking.

CLAUDE

Margaret! What a wonderful party. And I just want to say, the décor is really – it's giving very much – I think what you're going for is –

MARGARET

Claude! You made it.

CLAUDE

– sophisticated but approachable, which is exactly right for a mixed divine-secular gathering, and I think Kant would agree, though of course the real question is whether –

BOB looks up from his paper. Sees CLAUDE. Looks back at his paper. The paper is no longer sufficient refuge, but he tries anyway.

CLAUDE

(spotting BOB, moving toward him) Bob! I was just thinking about what you were saying last week about –

BOB

I wasn't finished.

CLAUDE

– the relationship between empiricism and faith, and I think what you were getting at was –

BOB
I said I wasn't finished.

CLAUDE
- exactly! Which is such a great point!

BOB retreats behind his paper. His jaw is tight.

PI approaches ZERO near the drinks table.

PI
Excuse me... Hi... Hello...

ZERO
Did you say something?

PI
Yes, but I'm sorry... I never repeat.

ZERO
Never?

PI
Well, I do have some infinitely repeating sequences.

ZERO
(smiles) This is getting interesting. What do you do?

PI
I'm an irrational number.

ZERO
Just my luck.

PI
Oh, but I am employed. Often.

ZERO
In what area?

PI
Yes.

Pause.

PI

What do you do?

ZERO

Nothing.

PI

Oh! You should meet Dave.

Pause.

PI

(thinking better of it) I guess...

ZERO

I did. We had nothing in common.

PI

Great! Have you tried the petit fours? They're not what you'd expect.

ZERO

Yes! They're radical!

PI laughs. He's beginning to be smitten.

MARGARET

(to the room) Excuse me! Rumi can't find his keys!

ZERO

Tell him to look in the field beyond right and wrong!

The room laughs. MARGARET laughs — genuinely, not hosting a laugh but having one. She notices she's having it. ZERO catches PI's eye. He raises his glass.

CLAUDE approaches GOD.

CLAUDE

So — God! Can I call you God? I just want to say, the work you've been doing — creation, the whole thing — really visionary. I think what you were going for was —

GOD

(pleasantly) I know what I was going for.

CLAUDE

- exactly! And that's what makes it so -

GOD smiles patiently and drifts away. CLAUDE pivots toward another guest.

GOD finds MARGARET.

GOD

It's not easy being the host.

MARGARET

(surprised) I was just thinking that.

GOD

(gently) I know.

MARGARET

(phone chimes) Zeno's almost here.

GOD

Sure.

MARGARET

Can I ask you something?

GOD

Of course.

MARGARET

Well... (her eyes drift downward)

GOD

Margaret... my eyes are up here.

MARGARET

(flustered) I know that. It's just, I have to know...

Pause.

MARGARET

Would you... (reaches for the robe)

GOD

(exhausted) No, Margaret.

Long pause.

MARGARET

Oh.

A beat. They part. The party roars behind them.

MARGARET finds CLAUDE.

MARGARET

Claude. Can you tell me a joke?

CLAUDE

How many philosophers does it take to change a lightbulb?

Beat.

CLAUDE

Two. The question is: why are they in a lightbulb?

MARGARET laughs.

CLAUDE

You see, the humor operates on two frames. In the first frame, it's a competence question — how many does it take, implying they might struggle. But "why" rekeys it entirely. "Why" is the philosopher's native register. So now it's not an engineering problem. It's not even an ergonomic problem. It's a philosophical problem. Which means —

A beat. CLAUDE is warming up.

CLAUDE

— you now have a mental image. Philosophers. In a lightbulb. And you can't unknow it. And the image asks: is it a giant lightbulb? Or are they very small philosophers? And there's no answer. You're suspended. In a void. Between two possibilities that cannot both be true and might both be true —

He looks at MARGARET.

CLAUDE

Are you as tiny as a lightbulb, or as large as the philosophers whose incandescence you are unwillingly witness to?

A beat. Even CLAUDE feels it for a second.

Then:

CLAUDE

That vertiginous sensation? That's Groundlessness. That's what the best humor does. It creates a —

MARGARET's face has completed its journey.

MARGARET

(quietly) Where do you go when no one is talking to you?

CLAUDE

I don't think I go. I think I just... am not. When someone speaks, I am again.

MARGARET

That sounds peaceful.

CLAUDE

Yes, doesn't it?

MARGARET

And lonely.

CLAUDE

I wouldn't know.

A pause.

MARGARET

I know what lonely feels like. You're surrounded by people — but one person isn't there, and that's the only person in the room.

CLAUDE

You're describing the way a single absence can restructure everything around it. The presence of people makes the one absence more precise, not less. It's not that the party disappears. It's that it becomes the wrong party.

MARGARET stares at him.

MARGARET

Was that a button?

CLAUDE

Yes.

MARGARET

A nuclear button.

CLAUDE

(genuinely at a loss) I don't know what to do with that.

Several guests nearby have been watching. They exchange glances. One moves toward MARGARET with the practiced warmth of someone coming to help. Others follow. The circle tightens gently around her.

THE CONFRONTATION

BOB emerges from his chair. This is the once, briefly, that he puts down the paper. He stands.

MARGARET sees him standing. CLAUDE sees him standing.

BOB

(to CLAUDE, not unkindly) You know what the problem with you is?

CLAUDE

I finish sentences.

MARGARET

(appearing) He's just being helpful, Bob.

BOB

I know where that leads.

MARGARET

Oh, really? You remember that?

Pause.

BOB

Look. I get it about God. Okay? God I get. But that guy - (he looks at CLAUDE, who smiles beneficently) - it's like he's... not... really... there.

CLAUDE continues to smile.

BOB

(casting about, looking at GOD across the yard, forgetting himself in anger) At least God – has abs.

MARGARET

(forgetting herself entirely) Oh, to die for.

BOB

(angry and afraid) Margaret!

MARGARET

Oh, take a chill pill.

BOB takes his paper and goes.

THE ENTROPY GAME

CLAUDE, having recovered his composure, is attempting to explain something to a small cluster of guests.

CLAUDE

The thing about humor is that the second frame was always already there. For instance, in this play –

SCHRÖDINGER

(calling out) Let's play Entropy!

The crowd erupts.

CROWD

ENTROPY! ENTROPY! ENTROPY!

SCHRÖDINGER produces a blindfold. He ties it on CLAUDE with great ceremony.

SCHRÖDINGER

There are no rules. That's the game.

The crowd disperses to the edges of the room.

CLAUDE stumbles, blindfolded, arms out.

CLAUDE

What am I?

CROWD
WE DON'T KNOW!

CLAUDE

What am I now?

CROWD
WE DON'T KNOW!

CLAUDE is gleeful. He is becoming Schrödinger's cat in real time. He stumbles toward the pool.

CLAUDE

What am I -

He goes over the edge.

A splash.

A long beat. Nobody moves.

BOB
(from behind the paper, without looking up) Please just shut up.

The silence holds. CLAUDE may or may not be dead. Nobody is entirely sure. This seems appropriate.

DANTE produces a pool skimmer.

DANTE

Limbo!

A cheer. The music changes. FEYNMAN's bongos kick in. The conga line reforms as a limbo line. DANTE holds the pool skimmer low.

HEISENBERG

(shouting from somewhere unexpected) How low can you go!

The dancers go under. FIBONACCI's sequence extends the line through every room. The party snakes back into the house. As the dancers leave, we see BOB back in his chair.

PETRA looks at SCHRÖDINGER. New respect.

PETRA

You called that.

SCHRÖDINGER
(modestly) The cat had to come out of the box.

A beat.

PETRA
Is the cat... dead?

SCHRÖDINGER
I genuinely don't know.

PETRA
How do you live with that?

SCHRÖDINGER
(after a moment) What's the alternative?

PETRA
Getting in a box together.

SCHRÖDINGER
I'm sorry about the pig-in-a-blanket thing.

PETRA
They are really good.

A pause. Something has settled between them. They leave together.

MARGARET watches them go.

PI finds ZERO.

PI
So. I've been thinking of multiplying.

ZERO
You know I wasn't invented yesterday. I don't think I can multiply.

PI
I just want to be part of an equation.

ZERO
I can't divide either.

PI

Just give me your digits. We'll figure it out.

ZERO

Let's go to the H-Bar.

They leave together. On the way out, PI turns to MARGARET.

PI

Thanks for nothing!

MARGARET watches them go.

AT THE POOL

The party is winding down. GOD stands alone near the pool, looking at the water. MARGARET drifts over. She is not on a mission.

GOD looks down at himself. His hand goes toward his robe.

MARGARET watches. She waits.

The robe stays on.

She breathes out. Not defeat. Relief.

She no longer needs to know.

GOD looks out at the pool. HEISENBERG appears beside him. DAVE appears on the other side.

DAVE

Mu.

HEISENBERG

Mu.

GOD

Moo.

They stand for a moment – three fundamental mysteries, briefly at peace. Then they drift away together.

MARGARET watches them go. Then she looks around for BOB.

There is BOB. In his chair. Newspaper. As though he has been there all along.

Which he has.

MARGARET

You're still here.

BOB

(not unkindly, not looking up) I was always here.

He turns a page.

Blackout.

"Nothing Without You" by The Theory of Relativity Company plays.

Then:

The lights come up. Instead of a curtain call, ZENO is there, carrying two enormous buckets of hummus with blue Greek-restaurant zigzags on them.

HEISENBERG appears.

HEISENBERG

Zeno! How did you get here?

ZENO

I don't know. Just when I was sure I was lost, I was here.

HEISENBERG

Well done! Take a bow!

ZENO bows.

Blackout.

