

Epigraph

The leading feature of this case is its improbability. A physician who holds in his hand a crowbar, three and a half feet long and more than thirteen pounds in weight, will not readily believe that it has been driven with a crash through the brain of a man who is still able to walk off, talking with composure and equanimity of the hole in his head.

This is the sort of accident that happens in the pantomime at the theatre, but not elsewhere. Yet there is every reason for supposing it is in this case literally true. Taking all the circumstances into consideration, it may be doubted whether the present is not the most remarkable history of injury to the brain which has been recorded.

—Dr. Henry J. Bigelow, MD, Professor of Surgery at Harvard University, *The American Journal of the Medical Sciences*, July 1850

Characters & Setting

...today—a contemporary college town and Harvard Medical School

Dr. Helen Harlow
Phyl Adams
Finlay
Wendy
Jack
Brian
Dr. Sizer
Hamlet

...in 1848—Cavendish, Vermont, and Harvard Medical School

Phineas Gage
Jack Kirwin
Sophie Kirwin
Dr. John Harlow
Dr. Sizer
Mrs. Phyllis Adams

Doubling

Sizer/Sizer
Phyl/Phyllis Adams
Hamlet/Phineas
Wendy/Sophie
Brian/Dr. John Harlow
Jack/Jack

Helen and Finlay do not double.

Act 1

Loud music, off. Thumping bass.

A tiny basement suite in Phyllis Adams's boarding house. PHYL lights a smoke, switches on a low-watt bare bulb with a chain.

PHYL Watch your head.

HELEN enters, carrying a sports bag. They shout over the volume of the music.

Two hundred and eighty, first of the month. No cooking in your room. No loud music after midnight. Bathroom's down the hall. Baseboard heat. You won't need it. There's a window up there. Doesn't open. Looks onto a brick wall ever since they built that condo next door.

HELEN I'll be out during the day.

PHYL They're buying up all these old dumps where the college kids live, tearing 'em down and building condos. I'm holding out for a million. Where you from?

HELEN Winnipeg.

PHYL Where?

HELEN Win-ni-peg.

PHYL Jesus! Finlay! Finlay! Keep it down!

HELEN I'll take it.

PHYL I'll need references. Real references, not "character" references.

HELEN Okay.

PHYL And a month's deposit, and first month's rent.

HELEN Okay.

PHYL It's not very quiet, you know. The boys just come and go all hours. You a student?

HELEN Uh, no.

PHYL You're not on the run? Last fellow I had in this one was on the run. 'Scaped from the mental. That's why I ask for references. Real references, not character references.

HELEN I'm going to be teaching. At the college. Look, here's my faculty ID.

HELEN hands her a laminated card.

PHYL Dr. Harlow. You a *real* doctor?

HELEN Ph.D. Neuropsychology. I study consciousness.

PHYL Consciousness.

HELEN The mind?

PHYL Like ESP? I'm a bit psychic, you know.

HELEN Is that right? Look, I really, really need to find a place.

PHYL Smart young gal like you with a good job could find a real nice rental closer to town. Might suit you better; no offence. My boarders, they're all good boys, don't get me wrong. But you got to trust your instincts, know what I mean? I know right away in my gut if they belong here, or if they're going to run into trouble.

HELEN I won't be any trouble. I promise. This is fine for me.

PHYL All I'm saying is, it's hard to make good choices when you're on the run from yourself.

HELEN Look, I'm just not myself right now. I've been driving for three days. I haven't slept; I just have to sleep. Please let me stay here. Even just for one night, a couple of hours. Then you can size me up and decide. Just—please. Please.

PHYL Oh, hon. Okay. I'll get you the keys. You meet me up in the office, first

floor, by the laundry. Take your time.

HELEN Thank you.

PHYL Phyllis Adams. Boys call me Phyl.

HELEN Helen.

PHYL You should get one of 'em to help bring in your things, Helen.

HELEN I don't have much. Thanks. I'll be fine.

PHYL exits, yelling to her boarders.

PHYL What did I tell you about those pizza boxes—get them out of here. I'm not your mother. Do I smell pot? Finlay! Keep it down! Finlay! Finlay!

HELEN falls onto the bed. Pause. She tosses and turns. Pause. She opens her bag and pulls out a rolled-up sweater. She unrolls the sweater and removes a human skull. She refolds the sweater into a pillow. Lying down and pulling her coat over herself, she falls asleep with the skull in her arms.

An autumn morning at a railroad construction site in Cavendish, Vermont, 1848. PHINEAS Gage, twenty-five, is preparing a drill hole for a blast. He holds a heavy iron bar, pointed at one end about an inch and a half in diameter, three and a half feet long. He scratches calculations on the ground with a small rock.

PHINEAS Kirwin! Where's the fuse, Kirwin?

JACK jumps in off a rock. He's sixteen. He has a pack on his back and carries a reel of safety fuse.

Watch it, Jack! Go slow and keep your mind on what you're doing and nobody will get hurt. Take a tumble with a sack of black powder and I'll be docking your pay for the time you spend up in the sky.

PHINEAS helps JACK take the pack off.

JACK Thing is, I probably can't help it. Sophie says I have a underdeveloped faculty of cautiousness, but a pronounced faculty of destructiveness.

PHINEAS A what?

JACK She's been reading up on the New Science before the lecture tonight. You going, Phin?

PHINEAS I'm not much a one for travelling lectures.

JACK Sophie's going. She's been making pie all day.

PHINEAS I'll take that into consideration.

PHINEAS measures a long fuse and cuts it with a knife, slipping it down into the drill hole.

JACK You like her, right, Phin?

PHINEAS Your sister? Sure. I like her fine.

JACK You should get married. Just sayin'.

PHINEAS pours sand into the hole, then carefully packs it down with the blunt end of the tamping iron, removing the iron smoothly without scraping the sides.

One day? You could settle here for good, move outta Mrs. Adams's. Then you and Sophie'd get married, maybe start a stable—she always says she wants to marry a man who raises horses. Then I was just thinkin', they'd need somebody for this job, so you could train me to be foreman.

PHINEAS Sounds like you got it all planned out.

JACK I'm just sayin', it'd be a good life.

PHINEAS Listen, I'll make you a deal. If we blast four more yards of the cut today—

JACK Four yards!

PHINEAS I'll come to the lecture—for some pie.

They shake hands.

Now pack it up.

JACK packs up the kit.

(yelling off) Murphy! Two more to drill beyant the bend 'fore end of day. Go take cover, Jack. Way back this time.

JACK exits. PHINEAS calls after him.

Farther. More.

JACK Here?

PHINEAS Keep going.

JACK I can't see anything from here!

PHINEAS Keep going!

JACK Aw!

PHINEAS Now stay there. Take cover! *(pause)* Fire!

The fuse is lit. PHINEAS exits. Explosion.

HELEN wakes and suddenly sits upright.

FINLAY Hey.

HELEN jumps. FINLAY is sitting on the end of the bed with a couple of cans of beer on a plastic six-pack ring and an open can in his hand.

Made you jump.

HELEN Were you watching me sleep?

FINLAY No. Five minutes tops.

HELEN I was just—what time is it?

FINLAY Time is an illusion.

HELEN What?

FINLAY Time is a human construct—

HELEN Look, do you know what time it is or what?

FINLAY Ten after eleven. Finlay.

He holds out a beer.

This is where you're supposed to say who you are.

HELEN Sorry. Helen.

FINLAY Phyl says I should help you with your stuff.

HELEN This is it. No baggage.

FINLAY Huh. So, who's your friend?

HELEN Friend?

FINLAY Skeletor.

HELEN Oh. It was my dad's.

FINLAY No shit.

HELEN Not *his*. It belonged to him. It's a memento mori?

FINLAY Right. Huh.

HELEN A reminder of one's mortality?

Pause.

FINLAY Why would you want that?

HELEN Contemplation?

FINLAY Interesting. He really adds to the atmosphere down here. We call this one the crypt. Mine's the cell. We're the only rooms in the sub-basement. Beer?

HELEN That's okay, thanks.

FINLAY Go ahead.

HELEN I can't.

FINLAY Pregnant?

HELEN No.

FINLAY AA? Meds?

HELEN No, look, I just— I've been trying to get some sleep. I'm starting class tomorrow and—

FINLAY Okay. Okay. I get it.

HELEN —get some rest. Sorry. It's nothing personal. Maybe later.

FINLAY Understood. So what are you taking?

HELEN I'm teaching. Psych 101.

FINLAY Sorry. I mean, I thought you were a student.

HELEN I may as well be. I'm totally unprepared. I'm normally a very prepared person. I was thinking I might just try to wing it. Not overthink it.

FINLAY How hard can it be, right?

FINLAY finishes his beer and opens another. HELEN opens the last beer, knocking back most of it in one gulp.

Whoa there, shotgun. You okay?

HELEN I'm fine. Fine. Fine. I've been sleeping in my car.

FINLAY You have a car? Sweet.

HELEN So, anyway.

HELEN looks at the exit. FINLAY makes himself comfortable.

FINLAY I'm studying Biochem. Finishing my masters. Course I said that last year.

And the year before. I guess I got stuck, and now I don't like to think about it.

HELEN I know what you mean.

FINLAY Oh yeah?

HELEN Sure. You have a subject that interests you, and the more you get into it, the more it starts to feel like you're on the verge of finding the key to the secret of life, and you start to see clues everywhere, but then it starts to consume you, mock you. And years go by, but it won't leave you alone. And the only thing you can do to kill it is finish the work, which is a disappointment to everyone, but mostly to yourself, and then it's over and you're just empty.

FINLAY Yeah, I should get going.

HELEN I'm sorry. What are you studying?

FINLAY Eukaryotes.

HELEN That's—yeast?

FINLAY Very good. Yeast. Brewer's yeast.

HELEN That for genetics?

FINLAY Yep. Don't remember why I thought it was interesting. I was sort of drifting around, didn't know what I wanted to do. For some reason I kind of glommed on to yeast.

They're good-natured little guys. Uncomplicated.

HELEN Here's to yeast.

They drink.

FINLAY So, I told you mine.

HELEN My thesis was called *The Recovery from the Passage of an Iron Bar through the Head*.

FINLAY Nice.

HELEN My great-great-great grandfather was a country doctor in Vermont who kept a journal to document the case of one of his patients, Phineas Gage? No? Who had this freak accident illustrating how the brain—

FINLAY What?

HELEN The school asked me to give a public lecture on it. My dad taught here years ago, and they've named the new visiting lecturer series after him, and they thought... I don't know what they were thinking. It's going to be a train wreck.

FINLAY I'll come and cheer you on.

HELEN No! It'll be all donors and Dad's colleagues and the faculty.

HELEN vomits a little in her mouth and washes it down with beer.

FINLAY I'll take you out to the pub after.

HELEN No, no, no, no. No, really. Don't.

FINLAY Come on, I bet you're great.

HELEN No. No, I am not. I get...

FINLAY Will your dad be there?

HELEN No. He's um...

She looks at the skull.

FINLAY Sorry. Like recent, or?

HELEN Pretty recent. It's okay. Alan Harlow? No? He won the—oh, never mind.

FINLAY What did he teach?

HELEN *Hamlet*.

FINLAY Just *Hamlet*?

HELEN He said he found everything he needed in there.

They drink. HELEN closes her eyes.

So, what are your plans for the future? When you've finished your degree?

FINLAY Maybe travel. Start a band. Find a cure for cancer. I don't have a fucking clue.

I don't like to think about the future, or the past. My strategy is to live in the present. What's weird is I can imagine the future, robots and that, right? But I can't picture myself in it. Walking around in it, being a future person, what kind of me I would be then. Sounds stupid, right? Yeah. I know, I know.

HELEN is asleep.

Hey. Hey. You should lie down. Hey.

FINLAY gently takes the beer can from her hand and tiptoes out.

A church hall in Cavendish, Vermont, 1848, set with a podium for a lecture. Dr. John HARLOW paces nervously. SOPHIE Kirwin sits with MRS. ADAMS. JACK and PHINEAS stand near the back.

HARLOW Are there no more chairs? No?

MRS. ADAMS whispers to HARLOW.

Oh, very good. Ladies and gentlemen, while we await the—I'm certain—

JACK Speak up!

HARLOW —imminent arrival of our distinguished lecturer, Miss Sophie Kirwin will treat us to a song. Miss Kirwin.

Applause.

SOPHIE How should I your true love know
From another one?
By his cockle hat and staff
And his sandal shoon.

And will he not come again?
And will he not come again?
No, no, he is dead,
Go to thy deathbed.
He never will come again.

JACK He's here!

HARLOW He's here? Excellent.