

# **BOSWELL'S DREAMS**

By  
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## **ACT 2**

### **Scene 2**

"The Tea Party" / "Grounded"

While having tea, Sydney Arrant, a PROFESSOR for an American Ivy League university and his assistant JOAN, are trying to interest Boswell's descendant, the LORD Auchinleck, and his wife, the LADY, in selling his ancestor's papers.

(The sound of rain.)

(Lights come up on drawing room in the ancestral Boswell home, Auchinleck House, in western rural Scotland, 1950.)

(The LADY is pouring the PROFESSOR tea.)

LADY

I'm afraid it's just too foggy. They say all the planes are grounded.

PROFESSOR

Grounded?

LADY

Yes, the airport's been closed, evidently. I just rang up.

PROFESSOR

But we just flew in there three hours ago. Everything was fine.

LORD

Rainy climate.

LADY

Things do change rather quickly here, you'll find.

PROFESSOR

Could we take a train to London and fly from there?

LADY

There's a strike.

PROFESSOR

A strike?

LADY

Yes, for two weeks now, I'm afraid.

LORD

Bloody unions.

LADY

(gently warning)

Darling...

PROFESSOR

Couldn't we drive down to London?

LORD

In this weather?

LADY

We wouldn't recommend it with the fog and all the awful lorries. I'm afraid you're stuck. (cheerfully) You'll just have to put up here with us.

JOAN

Do you mean stay here?

LADY

At least for the weekend.

PROFESSOR

Oh, that's very kind, Lady Auchinleck, but we'd just planned to have our talk, see the papers, and be on our way...

LADY

"The best laid plans of mice and men"... But we'll have a lovely time. We're having our own smoked salmon tonight at dinner — from the stream that runs through Auchinleck.

LORD

(upset)

Not my quail?

LADY

And your quail, dear. Hamish Cunningham will be joining us. So will our niece, Annabelle. We'll all have a lovely time.

JOAN

Did you say quail?

LADY

Yes, lovely little birds.

LORD

Shot them last weekend. They'll be nice and gamy.

(JOAN looks at the PROFESSOR.)

PROFESSOR

Sounds wonderful.

LORD

Do you live in the country, Professor?

PROFESSOR

No, unfortunately. We live in the city where our university is located. Joan's doing graduate work there as my assistant.

LORD

And where is that?

PROFESSOR

In New England. Connecticut, to be precise.

(The LADY leaves the stage.)

LORD

What in the world can that be like?

PROFESSOR

Oh, it's hot at this time of year, I can tell you. And very dry, this summer.

LORD

How very unpleasant. I have been there once, America. New York City.

(The LADY comes back in with a plate of tea sandwiches.)

I found it unattractive — the constant noise, all that cement.

LADY

What's that, dear?

LORD

New York City.

LADY

Oh, it was lovely! Our friends live in an apartment on Fifth Avenue, just overlooking Central Park — a "pent—house" they called it.

LORD

Pent—house. An appropriate word.

LADY

Why, dear?

LORD

I felt pent—up in it — like some poor beast.

PROFESSOR

A city can be suffocating, it's true. But at the same time somehow vibrant.

LORD

But so crass, so commercial. London, too, since the war. But it has history, which saves it in the end.

PROFESSOR

History can do that, I agree.

LORD

How old is your university?

PROFESSOR

It was founded in the 1680's.

LORD

Not old at all for us. Good LORD, not even as old as Auchinleck.

LADY

Now don't go on so about history, dear, it can be awfully boring. They can't help it if their country is young.

LORD

Yes, you're right. Just a sad state of things.

LADY

(to PROFESSOR, lightly)

Please don't pay any attention to him. He's a crank, an old curmudgeon — though I'm quite fond of him, of course.

PROFESSOR

It's quite all right. Americans are used to it. Europeans talk about our lack of history all the time.

LORD

(confused)

Europeans?

PROFESSOR

(pause)

I meant the British as well, sir.

LORD

Really?

LADY

Darling, to the Americans, we're Europeans. (to the PROFESSOR) To the Scottish, we're English — to the English, we're Scots. And to the Europeans, we're —

LORD

We're British. And we're damned proud.

PROFESSOR

As well you should be — your history, your literature, your legal system. And, of course, you fought heroically in the war.

LORD

Yes, I think we did hold out nobly. Survived all those dreadful bombings — what did we call them — that awful German—sounding word —

JOAN

Blitzes. (pause) You mean blitzes, I think.

LORD

(pause)

Blitzes, that's it. Why would anyone use that wretched sounding German word — or is it Jewish?

LADY

(smiling to smooth things over)

I don't believe so, dear.

JOAN

Lightning.

(Everyone looks at her.)

In German. (awkward pause) As in the quality of the strike.

LADY

Ah.

PROFESSOR

Did I mention Joan was one of our top graduate students?

LADY

Is she?

PROFESSOR

She's delivered some quite promising papers. She speaks five languages. She won the Young Neoclassic Scholar prize.

LADY

Lovely.

(a look between the two)

LORD

In any case, we survived the awful things. And we showed the dreadful Gerrys what iron we were made of.

LADY

Of course we did, darling. Though we did get some help from the Americans at the end.

LORD

Bloody late, I would have to say.

LADY

Dear!

LORD

I'm sorry, but it's true.

LADY

You really mustn't!

LORD

I believe in being frank.

(The LADY looks at the PROFESSOR and JOAN apologetically.)

JOAN

(pause)

But if we hadn't entered, all of Europe might have fallen —

LORD

What's that?

JOAN

All of Britain might be speaking German. (She laughs awkwardly.)

(awkward pause)

LADY

Darling, let's chat a bit about the PROFESSOR's letter, shall we?

LORD

Well. (bluntly) To strike right to the point, sir, you have told us in your letters that you were interested in some papers. Some wretched papers in our attic. Is that correct?

PROFESSOR

Yes, it is, sir, and I appreciate your frankness.

LORD

Well, sir. State your case.

(PROFESSOR nods to JOAN, who begins to pull papers out of a briefcase for him.)

PROFESSOR

As I wrote you, LORD Auchinleck, I'm a scholar of Samuel Johnson — and as a matter of related interest, of your ancestor James, who was, as you know, his most famous biographer.

LORD

Silly ridiculous ancestor, I'm afraid.

PROFESSOR

I can imagine your feelings.

(JOAN hands papers to LORD and LADY.)

LORD

Not the one we're proudest of, is he? Sullied the family name.

PROFESSOR

Of course. Recently some fragments of his journals have turned up — in France, in a fish—market, of all things.

LORD  
Not surprising.

PROFESSOR  
We've been able to read several of them. And because of his association with Johnson, my university is interested in any related material you might have — letters, journals — or of course, any Johnson you —

LORD  
Ridiculous they all thought he was.

LADY  
Who, dear?

LORD  
An embarrassment to the family.

LADY  
Not Johnson?

LORD  
No, no, James, the Blighter.

PROFESSOR  
He did have his eccentricities, I admit.

JOAN  
But it's the Johnson we're interested in, really. We've got a grant to research any papers pertaining to —

LORD  
Eccentricities?! A laughing stock the Blighter made of himself in his day — and for generations after.

PROFESSOR  
Do you think he was as bad as that?

LORD  
All the talk at social gatherings. The unattractive jokes on Boxing Day, the dinner parties... "How many times did a certain Boswell get the clap".

LADY  
Darling, he doesn't have to hear all the grim details —

LORD  
Snide insinuations when the ladies aren't about. After dinner, when the men go to the library for cognac and cigars.

PROFESSOR  
I see.

(The LADY smiles knowingly to The PROFESSOR.)

LADY  
Wouldn't want to offend our sensibilities.

PROFESSOR  
Of course not.

LADY  
Though we do have our own naughty subjects.

LORD  
Darling, really.

LADY  
Well, what do you think we talk about over tea? (to JOAN) You understand, or course, dear.

JOAN  
I'm sorry, I don't really know much about that kind of thing. (pause) But about the Johnson papers —

LORD  
I'd thought he'd dropped out of fashion, out of view —

LADY  
(to JOAN)  
He means the Blighter.

LORD  
— until your letter, anyway. We have a portrait of him above the stable. My grandfather would shoot at it for target practice.

LADY  
He really did, you know.

LORD  
And there's one of Samuel Johnson — guilt by association, I fear.

JOAN  
A portrait of Johnson? Really?

LADY  
(knowingly)  
I believe that one's a Reynolds.

PROFESSOR  
A Reynolds?

JOAN  
(with awe)  
But that's incredible.

LORD  
More's the pity; in any case, both are now turned face against the wall.

(beat)

PROFESSOR  
You did say there were some papers?

LORD  
Gad yes, boxes of them.

PROFESSOR  
Any letters?

LADY  
Bundles of them.

JOAN  
Any journals?

LORD  
Trunks of them.

LADY  
(knowingly)  
Well, not only trunks.

LORD  
Oh, that damned croquet box.

(LADY smiles at her husband)

PROFESSOR  
Croquet box?

LADY  
(coaxing)  
Darling?

LORD  
I stumbled over it when I went up to inspect the stable loft. Damned nuisance. Broke my toe.

LADY  
After we got your letter, we poked around. There's actually quite a lot up there...

LORD  
Why all this interest in James Boswell, anyway — bother! A black sheep and a fool.

JOAN  
Oh, no, it's simply anecdotal — the literary merit is all on Johnson's side —

LORD  
Literary merit!? Damned salacious, I would guess.

JOAN  
No, you misunderstand me. I'm wasn't saying that —

PROFESSOR  
Joan, please. What she meant, sir, was that Boswell is really just the background.

LORD  
What do I know about books? Awfully dry and boring. One thing to read them at university — another when one's grown. I know gardens and 18th century buildings. For a Scotsman, that's worthwhile. This house, for instance. A fine example.

JOAN  
Yes, I —

PROFESSOR  
(cutting her off)  
Yes, I recognized the architecture when we drove in. Robert Adams.

(JOAN shoots the PROFESSOR a look.)

LORD  
(to PROFESSOR)  
I see. Unusual for an American.

LADY  
(to JOAN)  
Quite impressive.

JOAN  
(looking daggers at the PROFESSOR)



Yes.

LADY

He is a Professor after all, dear. We oughtn't be surprised.

PROFESSOR

How could you know Georgian architecture was an interest of mine?

(JOAN looks away.)

LORD

Family history is my only interest. No one knows it better than I. My life's work is to protect the family name and home.

LADY

He is frightfully good at it, you know.

PROFESSOR

I'm sure he is.

LADY

Darling, let's "put all our cards on the table" as the Americans might say. Don't you think after tea we could oblige the Professor by letting him — them, I mean — have the smallest peek at our old things above the stable?

LORD

(torn)

I don't know.

LADY

It's why they're here, dear. They've traveled all this way.

LORD

Don't you think I know that?

LADY

You never know, dear, perhaps there'd be some... benefit to the family — some sort of compensation of a sort... It might help with the herbaceous border — or your beloved East walled garden — the one that's crumbling? Am I right, Professor? Or do I overstep my bounds?

PROFESSOR

No, Lady Auchinleck, I know my university would be most eager to discuss compensation with you. Absolutely.

LORD

(uncomfortable)

Well, we'll discuss that possibility later. We'll let you view the blasted papers in the stable loft before dinner and I'll listen — (warning) listen, mind you, to your terms.

PROFESSOR

That sounds perfect.

LADY

(to the two)

Lovely. Then I'll have the green guest room made up for you.

JOAN

(awkward)

And for me?

LADY

Please forgive me — I assumed you were married. (pause) Though you know, if you were a couple in the

bohemian sort of way, we shouldn't mind at all.

JOAN  
(coldly)  
No.

PROFESSOR  
No. I'm a good friend of her father's — classmates at Yale, 1920.

LADY  
I do apologize, Miss... Please excuse me, I've forgotten your family name —

JOAN  
Weinstein.

LADY  
Yes, Miss Weinstein. I remember.

LORD  
German name?

JOAN  
The name is Eastern European. (pause) I'm American.

(awkward pause)

LADY  
(to JOAN)  
I'll go prepare the lavender guest room for you.

PROFESSOR  
(compensating)  
You're very generous, Lady Auchinleck. What a marvelous opportunity for us both.

LORD  
(to PROFESSOR)  
We just have time to walk and see the gardens.

JOAN  
But — in the rain?

LORD  
We have gear. Plenty of Wellies to go around.

LADY  
And a lovely library —

PROFESSOR  
I'd like to take a glance at that.

LORD  
Excellent library, I've been assured.

LADY  
Lovely, then.

JOAN  
(to PROFESSOR)  
Shouldn't we spend some time with the Johnson—Boswell papers?

LADY  
Of course, dear. We'll send you up there with some cardigans and tea. There's no heat; it's rather chilly. By

the way, have you seen the chapel?

PROFESSOR  
Chapel?

LORD  
It's inside there your precious James is buried.

JOAN  
(intrigued)  
You mean the small chapel we saw as we drove in?

LADY  
Yes.

JOAN  
(very pleased)  
Oh, I knew it!  
(self—conscious)  
Johnson describes its architecture in his Journey to the Western Islands.

LORD  
What do you think of our Scottish weather? Damp, eh? But it's good for the gardens. When the gardens are happy, I'm happy. Isn't that right, dear?

LADY  
(happily)  
Yes, dear, that's right. Should I get the Wellies?

(They all head out.)

### **Scene 3** **"The Journey"**

(Lights come up on JOHNSON. He is dressed for travel and holds his journal open.)

JOHNSON  
(firmly, directly to the audience)  
I had desired to visit the Hebrides, or the Western Islands of Scotland, so long that I scarcely remember how the wish was originally excited. In the Autumn of the year 1773, I was induced to undertake the journey by finding in Mr. Boswell a companion whose gaiety of conversation and civility of manners were sufficient to counteract the inconveniences of travel.

On the 18th of August we began, and directed our course northward, along the eastern coast of Scotland.

The weather was — how shall I put it — the weather was Scottish.  
(pause) (dry)  
Less than ideal.

### **Scene 4** **"The Stable—Loft"**

(sound of a few sheep bleating)

(The LADY, PROFESSOR and JOAN have entered the stable loft, dimly lit, filled with boxes and trunks. They have flashlights and a lantern.)

LADY  
Well, there you have it — boxes, trunks, billet—doux... You'll find more if you go through the crawl—space

there. Have at them... Now I need to go and help get things ready for tonight.

PROFESSOR

Thank you so much, Lady Auchinleck.

JOAN

(in awe, looking around)

All these things are full of papers?

LADY

Letters, journals, manuscripts... papers, yes. All full.

PROFESSOR

You're very generous to let us look at them.

LADY

Be careful, won't you? My husband thinks it's... My husband's afraid that... (pause) Well, in any case, be careful. It's a bit dark in here. We don't want any more broken toes.

PROFESSOR

Of course, not. We'll be careful.

LADY

Alright, then, later.

PROFESSOR

Yes, thank you, later.

LADY

(somewhat apprehensive)

Ta—ta. (pause) I think you'll enjoy our guests tonight at dinner.

(LADY exits.)

JOAN

(looking around in awe)

My God.

PROFESSOR

My God indeed. Look at all this.

JOAN

This is incredible.

(JOAN squats and looks at the expanse of material. The PROFESSOR opens a trunk.)

Who would have thought it?

PROFESSOR

Let's dig in.

(He hangs the lantern.)

JOAN

There's so much, I can't believe it.

PROFESSOR

How much of this could be Johnson?

JOAN

You know, I'm almost afraid to touch it...

PROFESSOR

Don't be. Just be careful.

(JOAN starts on a box.)

JOAN

I've heard of this kind of thing in Granny's attic in New Hampshire or somewhere in the States — you know, neglected hundred—year—old letters — but here, in Scotland, where they worship the past?

PROFESSOR

People are strange, Joannie. Strange. Very unpredictable. I've found that in my life.

(looking at a bundle of letters he has picked up)

My God, this might be a real discovery...

JOAN

I'd have thought they would have valued this hugely... guarded it as if it were gold...

PROFESSOR

Hmm. Look at these.

JOAN

...instead they seem ashamed.

(JOAN finds a small, leather—bound volume.)

PROFESSOR

They won't be so ashamed when they hear how much the university might offer for it. That much I'm sure of.

(noticing what's in JOAN's hand)

What do you have there? Leather—bound... that's always promising.

(examining his bundle of letters)

PROFESSOR

These are clearly letters. But whose, I wonder?

(He starts to untie the bundle.)

JOAN

Oh, careful, they may be brittle...

PROFESSOR

(amused)

Listen to you! Suddenly an expert. I've seen my share of rare papers and books, Joan, lest you forget.

JOAN

I know, I know. Sorry, Sydney. I'm just beside myself...

(JOAN had opened the book and is trying to read it. The PROFESSOR keeps his eye on what she's doing.)

PROFESSOR

What is that you've got there?

JOAN

I don't know... I'm trying to find out. Patience is a virtue, as you're always telling me...

(She turns more pages in it.)

(with wonder)

Oh, my gosh. (examining) This handwriting... it's so clear... it hasn't faded... (pause) Sydney. (pause) I think

it's a journal.

PROFESSOR

What? Oh, Jesus! We've hit the jack—pot. I can't believe it. After all these years!

JOAN

Isn't it amazing?

PROFESSOR

But whose is it? Is it Johnson's?

(She stands near the lantern, to see.)

JOAN

I don't know ... (she turns a page, trying to read) Well, here's the word "robust" — here's "monumental", I think ... It's a different kind of script than I've ever seen from this period. It's informal. It's uneven. The ink's not faded ... the paper's bright —

PROFESSOR

Not paper — vellum, undoubtedly.

JOAN

(with wonder)

I just can't believe it. Sydney, it's as if it were written yesterday. By someone we might know.

PROFESSOR

Check the cover, Joan — check the inside of the cover.

(She turns over the leather—bound journal she's been looking at)

JOAN

(reading aloud)

"Journal. 1773 ... (pause) James Boswell."

(We hear a voice calling from offstage.)

JOHNSON

(offstage)

Boswell!

PROFESSOR

Boswell!!! Shit!!!

(Focus begins to switch to JOHNSON and BOSWELL as JOAN reads from BOSWELL's journal. Snatches of scenes become alive. BOSWELL runs out and finds a spot, looks over his shoulder, and begins writing in his journal.)

BOSWELL

"August 23, 1773."

JOHNSON

(offstage, calling)

Boswell!

BOSWELL

"He has a loud voice, and a deliberate utterance. His person is large, robust, I may say approaching to the monumental. He is now in his 64th year, and is a little dull of hearing."

JOAN

(back to JOAN, reading)

"His countenance was naturally of the cast of an ancient statue."

PROFESSOR

That's Johnson he's talking about. I recognize the figure.

JOHNSON

Where are you, Boswell?!

BOSWELL

(smiling, he talks to JOAN directly)

"Upon this tour, he wears boots, and a very wide brown cloth great—coat, with pockets which might almost hold the two volumes of his folio dictionary! (pleased with himself) Oh —— and he carries in his hand a beloved walking stick of English oak."

JOHNSON

Boswell, I say!!

(BOSWELL looks over his shoulder and hurries writing.)

JOAN

(reading)

"This imperfect sketch will have to serve of that wonderful man, whom I venerate and love —— that sincere and zealous Christian" —

JOHNSON

Where the blazes are you!?

BOSWELL

— "correct but not stern in his taste, hard to please and easily offended — at times impetuous and irritable"  
—

JOHNSON

I wish I had never come on this God—forsaken tour!

PROFESSOR

It's been a while since I read it but that sounds like the Tour to the Hebrides.

JOAN

It does, doesn't it?

PROFESSOR

(dismissively)

But that's already published.

BOSWELL

(continuing)

— "He is of a melancholy temper, but of a most humane and benevolent heart".

JOHNSON

What the devil, are you hiding from me?

BOSWELL

(to JOHNSON)

I'll be right there, sir!

JOAN

(riveted)

Could this be his private version?

BOSWELL

"With a mind stored with such a vast collection of learning and knowledge that I have ever known".

PROFESSOR

(distracted)

How can we get through all this?

JOHNSON

Where? I insist that you reveal yourself!

JOAN

Don't give up. There has to be some Johnson in here somewhere.

BOSWELL

(calling to JOHNSON)

Here, sir, I'm up here! (pause) Lord in heaven, thank you for my kind friend's voyage here.

JOHNSON

(approaching, sharply)

"Here"? Where does "here" mean?

BOSWELL

He's coming now... (fondly) ... lurching like a ship. (pause) I think I'll not tell him I'm writing notes about him...

(pause) More, later.

(BOSWELL closes his journal)

PROFESSOR

So close, so close. It's got to be around here somewhere. I can smell it.

(The PROFESSOR wanders off into the darkness.)

JOHNSON

Boswell!

JOAN

This is incredible —

### **Scene 5** **"Arthur's Seat"**

(Full light.)

(The stage belongs to JOHNSON and BOSWELL. They are on a hillside overlooking Edinburgh. JOHNSON is unsteady on the rough terrain; BOSWELL, at home, is nimble as a goat.)

(The PROFESSOR is in darkness; JOAN can be seen, reading.)

JOHNSON

There you are! At last, sir. These damnable rocks — and this endless grass—land, a veritable sea of monotonous grass. It is impossible to walk here —

BOSWELL

Oh look, sir, in the distance — there's Edinburgh! And our famous Arthur's Seat!

JOHNSON

Where sir? I cannot see it.

BOSWELL

Over the moor, there. Arthur's Seat, our venerable mountain.

JOHNSON

(squinting)

I see no mountain. I see a mound, a small swelling, a medium to large—sized hill.

BOSWELL



Well, that is it, sir.

JOHNSON

The landmark, sir, appears somewhat overrated. (looks around him) And not a tree around. How odd. (peering) And the soil looks thin and rocky, unlike England.

BOSWELL

Oh, no, sir, it's very rich country here in the Lowlands.

JOHNSON

For grazing, perhaps. But, sir, it is not a rich country for raising of crops or for the pleasing of the eye.

BOSWELL

Oh, sir, Scotland has many noble and wild prospects.

JOHNSON

Sir, I believe you have a great many noble wild prospects; Norway, too has some noble wild prospects; and Lapland is remarkable for prodigious noble wild prospects. But, sir, I believe the noblest prospect that a Scotsman ever sees is the road which leads him straight to England.

(BOSWELL laughs good humouredly.)

BOSWELL

You have often said you are not enamored of my countrymen, sir. Am I to believe you? Or are you jesting?

JOHNSON

You must not misrepresent me, sir. I have always said much can be made of a Scotchman — if he be caught young.

BOSWELL

(laughs again)

But of the countryside, many travelers here have found it bonny — Burke, Rousseau, Voltaire. Do you not agree, sir?

JOHNSON

"Bonny"?

BOSWELL

"Pretty", sir. It is a Scottish word.

JOHNSON

I know the meaning and the derivation. But I do not find this landscape "bonny" — instead severe and deeply melancholy. No wonder, sir, you are of a melancholy turn of mind.

BOSWELL

But you, too, suffer from The Melancholy, sir — and you do not come from Scotland.

JOHNSON

Thank God for that. If I am this melancholy and born in Lichfield in the heart of fertile England, only think how mad I would be if I had been born here.

BOSWELL

Sir, I won't believe it.

JOHNSON

No, I assure you. As mad as Hamlet, sir, may the Lord preserve me.