

The Tree of Knowledge
A fifteen-minute play
by Adam Webster

CHARACTERS:

Lizzie: Woman, late 20s

Elle: Woman, late 20s

Beth: Woman, late 20s

SETTING:

A grove with a tree, littered by oranges

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The Tree of Knowledge

[AT RISE: Leonard Cohen's "Suzanne" plays. ELLE, mid-20s, dressed as a hayseed sleeps SL at the base of a gnarled tree, littered around are freshly fallen oranges. The tree is a printout of the rightmost third of the Odilon Redon painting "The Buddha" hanging on a dowel from the grid: the other two thirds of the painting hang on two other dowels, one CS, and the leftmost portion (the Buddha) hangs SR, unscrolled. ELLE snores in. Music fades. She exhales, music rises again, until it's established she's snoring the music. LIZZIE, mid-20s, enters, studying a map. She trips over ELLE.]

ELLE:

(Waking with a start) Huh? What? Hmmm? (Sees LIZZIE and immediately closes her eyes and chants): "Ommmmm."

LIZZIE:

Oh, hey, sorry. I. Uh. Is this the tree of knowledge?

ELLE:

(Peers open w/ one eye) Ommmmmmmm. (Closes her eye) Ommmmmmmmmmmm.

LIZZIE:

Hello? (Nothing) Hey! (Nothing) Pardon me; I'm sorry to bother you, but quick question?

(ELLE finishes her chant with a bang.)

ELLE:

OMMM! Proceed.

(LIZZIE shoves map toward her and points to it and then the tree.)

LIZZIE:

Tree of knowledge – this it?

ELLE:

Where are you trying to get?

LIZZIE:

Eurheart. (Pronounced "your heart")

ELLE:

And what takes you to Eurheart?

LIZZIE:

I have some business there.

ELLE:

What type of business?

LIZZIE:

Unfinished.

ELLE:

It's always that. Or none of mine.

LIZZIE:

It's private.

ELLE:

Well, don't let me meddle. [Goes back to chanting] Ommmmmm.

LIZZIE:

But I need your help.

ELLE:

You have a map to Eurheart.

LIZZIE:

Yes.

ELLE:

Then follow it.

LIZZIE:

But I need to know if this is the tree of knowledge.

ELLE:

This?

LIZZIE:

Yes.

ELLE:

The Tree?

LIZZIE:

Yes.

ELLE:

Of Knowledge.

LIZZIE:

That's right.

ELLE:

I wouldn't know.

LIZZIE:

You wouldn't know?

ELLE:

No.

[Beat]

LIZZIE:

(Pushes ahead, map in hand, thrusting it at ELLE) See, it looks like the tree. And here (points) I'm supposed to make a right. Take a right at the Tree of Knowledge, they said.

ELLE:

(Sparks interest) They who?

LIZZIE:

(Tries to remember, then gives up) I'm not exactly sure.

ELLE:
What did they look like?

LIZZIE:
They walked... hunched. Pointed a lot. And barked.

ELLE:
Yelled?

LIZZIE:
No, actually barked. But somehow it made sense.

ELLE:
(Correcting) Not really.

LIZZIE:
Oh, (remembers and instantly wonders if she remembers right) and they didn't have faces.

ELLE:
And yet you took their bark at face value. And ended up barking your own self. But up the wrong tree. Your loss.

LIZZIE:
What do you mean?

ELLE:
There are no right turns at the Tree of Knowledge.

LIZZIE:
But... (Points offstage right with a question mark shrug)

ELLE:
There are no right turns! There are no right turns, there are no wrong turns. Mainly just a lot of meanderings. At the Tree of Knowledge.

LIZZIE:
Are you serious?

[Long pause]

ELLE:

Naw, I'm just shittin' ya.

[LIZZIE gives a puzzled look.]

ELLE (continued)

Dude, I just fell asleep. Meandering my own self. Came by this tree. Took a load off.

LIZZIE:

En route to?

ELLE:

En route?

LIZZIE:

Where were you headed?

ELLE:

Judgement. Next town over, I thought. But it didn't look right. Completely changed; totally different landscape. Been there?

LIZZIE:

No.

ELLE:

I'll bet.

LIZZIE:

Not that I know of.

ELLE:

Not a pretty place. I've spent quite a few days sitting in Judgement. Waiting. I go to the mall there. The haberdashery? Always end up waitin' for my ride. (over enunciates): Late.

LIZZIE:

I don't understand.

ELLE:

Oh, but those faceless barks, they somehow did the trick?

[BETH, a third lady, mid-20s/early 30s, enters, led by a pack of imaginary dogs. She holds their reins in one hand, and her hat on her head with the other. It is a Chinese peasant's hat. In that hat-holding hand, she also has a map.]

BETH:

Whoa, goddammit. Hold up. Brake! [They, apparently, do.] Whew! [Notices ELLE and LIZZIE]
How's it going?

BETH:

(To one dog) Riley, I swear, you piss on that tree – Tree of knowledge, am I right? – Riley, STEP. BACK. RIGHT. NOW. (To another) Charlie? What did I just tell Riley? If he can't piss, you can't piss. [To ELLE and LIZZIE] Dogs! Right?

ELLE:

(Aside to LIZZIE) Not really.

BETH:

Riley. You already went! You just went! [waits for dog's reaction.] Well, shit elsewhere. Charlie! Not right at the base of the Tree of Knowledge. (turns to ELLE and LIZZIE) Tree of Knowledge, am I right? [Quickly turns back to where the dogs were.] Charlie! Riley! Hey! Get back here! Hey! Dammit. Stranded. Yet again.

[ELLE and LIZZIE stand dumbfounded.]

BETH (cont.)

Hello? Can a girl get a hand? I'm not from these parts.

ELLE:

Which "parts" are you from?

BETH:

Broken parts. Left over parts. The extra screw on a do-it-yourself kit.

LIZZIE:

Some assembly required?

BETH:

(Suddenly hurt) If you think so.

LIZZIE:

(apologetic) No! I don't think so. I thought you were ... I was only playing along.

BETH:

Well, play along on the game we call "Deciphering Mr. Google Maps" (Thrusts the map out) That looks just like this tree, right?

ELLE:

I don't know.

BETH:

You don't know?

ELLE:

No.

BETH:

Is this the Tree of Knowledge?

LIZZIE:

We don't know.

BETH:

Well, then, I'll take that as a no. (pause) Get it?

ELLE:

(Blank)

BETH:

Well, see, if it was the tree of knowledge, you'd know. See?

(Beat)

Knowledge. (Shakes head: no?) It'll come to you later.

LIZZIE:

Where are you headed?

BETH:
Nowhere.

ELLE:
And where is that?

BETH:
In Particular.

LIZZIE:
Particular County?

BETH:
Yes, heard of it?

ELLE:
You're there.

BETH:
In Particular? Or Nowhere?

LIZZIE:
It sure feels like Nowhere.

BETH:
But is it the right Nowhere? Nowhere in Particular?

ELLE:
Well, it doesn't seem all that specific.

BETH:
Nonsense. That Tree. That tree looks very particular. Here (shoves map in their faces) Does that not look like this tree. The Tree of Knowledge. At that tree, I'm supposed to take a wrong turn.

LIZZIE:
There are no wrong turns at the Tree of Knowledge. Only meanderings. [nods to ELLE: *Did I get that right?*]

ELLE:
And naps.

BETH:
No, look. Clearly, my directions say, Head West on Beaten Path 4.5 miles; Bypass Judgement, .1 miles, Wrong turn, Tree of Knowledge, 20 miles, Follow Particular signs. End: Nowhere.

LIZZIE:
Well, I haven't seen any Particular signs.

ELLE:
No one sees any Particular signs.

LIZZIE:
Or signs for anything in Particular.

BETH:
Well, I need to find signs for Nowhere.

ELLE:
Those, I have seen. All over. Just not when I'm looking for them.

BETH:
Yeah, well, I need to find them soon; night's coming.

[Lights fade, rapidly into nighttime. BETH and LIZZIE confused and fearful. ELLE nodding: *This always happens.*]

BETH:
Look, it's getting so dark.

LIZZIE:
Does the night always come so quickly around here?

ELLE:
Yes.

BETH:
Does the dawn do the same?

ELLE:

If only. It just sorta creeps up on ya. Little by little.

LIZZIE:

Sorta like the waxing moon.

BETH:

Oh, yeah, Like how inch by inch by inch, night by night, it reveals a little more and more of itself?

LIZZIE:

Exactly. At the beginning of its cycle, I call it thumbnail moon. The tip.

BETH:

(understanding) How it's only a sliver of its possibilities.

ELLE:

And on the nights you forget to mark its progress, when you next take note of it, it's completely changed. Full, blossomed.

BETH:

Or, when it's a grapefruit moon, and you forget to take note.

LIZZIE:

And it's back to thumbnail.

ELLE:

Sliver.

LIZZIE:

Of its possibilities.

BETH:

What's with the sadness all of a sudden?

ELLE:

Well, it is mournful, the passing of the time.

BETH:

For you, maybe?

LIZZIE:

And me.

BETH:

And you, then.

ELLE:

Not you?

BETH:

No.

ELLE:

Just us, then?

LIZZIE:

And the moon!

BETH:

No, not for the moon.

LIZZIE:

How not?

BETH:

The moon is always full. It's only showing us a sliver. It doesn't mean it's not full.

LIZZIE:

But why would it hide from us?

ELLE:

Hide its beauty?

BETH:

It's showing it to someone else.

LIZZIE:

It can't be –

ELLE:
– all things to all people.

BETH:
No, that's exactly what it can be. What it is.

[All three look again to the sky, and start scouring it for the Moon. They cannot locate it.]

LIZZIE:
It's moved!

ELLE:
It's escaped!

LIZZIE:
(notices the dowel) What is that?

BETH:
I don't know.

ELLE:
Has that been here the whole time?

LIZZIE:
It can't have been. We would have noticed it.

ELLE:
Surely, in the daylight.

LIZZIE:
And definitely by the moonlight.

BETH:
And yet, no. Only now, in the darkness.

ELLE:
But it has been here?

BETH:

Well, it didn't just spring up.

LIZZIE:

On second thought, maybe I did notice it.

BETH:

Yeah, I think I did see it when my dogs were sniffing around.

ELLE:

Now that I remember rightly, I thought it was an errant branch.

BETH:

Perhaps that's what it is.

[They go to it and unscroll it, revealing the Buddha portion. They clip it to the ground so it remains unfurled.]

ELLE:

What is it?

BETH:

Who is it?

LIZZIE:

It looks like my dad.

ELLE:

Really?

LIZZIE:

No!

ELLE:

Wait, there's something written on the back.

[She goes to the back and reads it. It comes out as a voiceover of the Buddha.]

VOICEOVER:

Enlightenment is like the moon reflected on the water. /

The moon does not get wet, nor is the water broken.

Although its light is wide and great, / The moon is reflected even in a puddle an inch wide.

The whole moon and the entire sky / Are reflected in one dewdrop on the grass. – *Dogen*

LIZZIE:

Much better than we said it.

ELLE:

Do you think he was listening?

BETH:

Who?

ELLE:

Whoever that is!

LIZZIE:

I don't think he necessarily said it.

BETH:

It was more like the wind.

ELLE:

Well, then the wind. Was he listening?

BETH:

The wind is male?

ELLE:

It's more disturbing to you the wind's a male than the fact that we just heard it speak?

LIZZIE:

Well, gender, and vocalizations aside, does it not seem odd to have this shrine in the middle of
Nowhere?

BETH:

Have we established that this is Nowhere?

ELLE:

Shrine? Is this all some shrine?

[LIZZIE goes to the back of the centerstage panel.]

LIZZIE:

Look! It's just another scroll.

ELLE:

Anything on the back?

LIZZIE:

Yeah. Another poem. (reading) Whether you are going or staying or sitting or lying down, / the whole world is your own self. / You must find out / whether the mountains, rivers, grass, and forests / exist in your own mind or exist outside it. / Analyze the ten thousand things, / dissect them minutely, / and when you take this to the limit / you will come to the limitless, / when you search into it you come to the end of search, / where thinking goes no further and distinctions vanish. / When you smash the citadel of doubt, / then the Buddha is simply yourself. – *Daikaku*

BETH:

Is nothing here real?

LIZZIE:

Define real.

ELLE:

Everything's real. It just isn't what it appears to be.

LIZZIE:

Well, the tree is. Whether it's the tree of knowledge or not, it's still real.

BETH:

(scrutinizes it) Uh, no.

ELLE:

It has to be, I was leaning against it.

LIZZIE:

She's right. When I came, it was propping her up.

BETH:

Well, I don't know what to tell ya. Paper. (flicks at it) Merely paper.

LIZZIE:

Well, yeah, technically, that's all a tree is as well.

ELLE:

To an extent.

BETH:

Thumbnail moon.

[ELLE goes to the back of the tree panel.]

LIZZIE:

Well?

ELLE:

More words.

(reading): *Where beauty is, then there is ugliness; / where right is, also there is wrong. /
Knowledge and ignorance are interdependent; / delusion and enlightenment
condition each other. /
Since olden times it has been so. / How could it be otherwise now? /
Wanting to get rid of one and grab the other / is merely realizing a scene of
stupidity. /
Even if you speak of the wonder of it all, / how do you deal with each thing changing?
– Ryokan*

LIZZIE:

Like the moon.

ELLE:

Like the landscape.

BETH

Like the directions.

ELLE:

(realizing) We haven't even introduced ourselves. How do you go through the most profound

understanding without even knowing who you're going through it with? Isn't that crazy?

[They move together to sit at the base of the Tree. In a row.]

ELLE:

A Spanish haiku:

LIZZIE:

the black night is the sea the cloud a shell the moon a pearl

[José Juan Tablada, 1920; Trans. Ty Hadman, 2001]

BETH:

A Jewish haiku:

ELLE:

Five thousand years a

Wandering people, then we

found the cabanas. [David M. Bader, 1999]

LIZZIE:

The human haiku:

BETH:

Shadows lengthen on the walls. / I walk and watch three Buddhas Sit. / Behind them oranges slowly ripen. /

(Note: these last three lines can be said by Beth; distributed to all three, one each; or said in unison.)

Moonlight is flooding the darkness. /

My slow breath scrapes away old thoughts. /

Outside wind's clearing dead leaves.

-- [Sashi, 2001; buoy.antville.org]

[LIGHTS FADE. END OF PLAY]