

EXCERPT ONLY

DIGGING IN THE MARGINS

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Digging in the Margins:  
A Play in Two Acts – Running Time: Two Hours

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SETTING  
The Utah deserts, in and around the Douglass Cabin.

TIME  
The present, also the period of 1910-1930, with all time periods interwoven.

\*

SEVEN ACTORS REQUIRED:

Three Women / Four Men

Character List:

(in order of appearance)

EARL DOUGLASS:	Male, white, sixty. Handsome, strongly built; a professional paleontologist.
LAURA ACREE:	Female, mid-forties. A math professor.
NIKKI ACREE:	Female, entering ninth grade. Laura and Martin's daughter.
MARTIN ACREE:	Male, mid-forties. A chef. Laura's husband.
PEARL DOUGLASS:	Female, white, early thirties. Earl's wife.
CAROLINA SMITH:	Male, black, thirties or forties.
GEORGE "DAD" GOODRICH:	Male, white. Older, white hair, white beard or goatee. Dad Goodrich is also THE NEPHITE (NEE-fite), a cross between folklore and an angel, a sort of Mormon Wandering Jew.

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Act One, Scene One:

*Night. The interior of a half-built settler's cabin dominates the stage. It's beautiful in a rustic way, precise but asymmetrical, and clearly under construction. It contains one interior doorway. An exterior door is optional. Surrounding the cabin, a near-vertical wall of rock: the cliff wall. Playing areas exist along the cliffs on both sides of the cabin, one larger than the other. Peeking from behind the cabin's walls, we see a rock-like object, brownish-gray: the tip of a huge dinosaur leg bone.*

*EARL DOUGLASS crouches by the cliff. He's a fine specimen of a man, nearly sixty, with flattened hair parted in the middle and a prodigious moustache worn in the fashion of his day. At present, none of these traits is evident: the year is 1910, and it's winter. Earl Douglass is bundled up in enough warm clothes to sink a ship.*

*An oil lantern burns at his feet, and every so often he taps at the rock with a small geologist's hammer. Frowning, he taps again, peers closer...*

EARL

Eureka!

*Earl rises and exits. The rock wall dims as the lights come up on the cabin. It's summer, the present day.*

*Within the cabin, there's enough of a roof to shelter some furniture: a bed behind a burlap curtain strung on a line, also a primitive (and stubborn) wood-burning stove. Wooden packing crates hold notes, papers, and bent photographs. Of prime importance: many of the boards and even a few of the objects in the cabin show a tangle of mathematical symbols carved/engraved/written on them, all very incomplete and sketchy—not unlike a beech tree carved to shreds on a lover's lane.*

*As LAURA ACREE enters, mid-forties, we hear a beautiful bird call, the long trilling cry of the canyon wren. Laura removes her shoes, leaves them by the door. She's a woman of hesitations, of fits and starts, a tad over-dressed. Slowly, cautiously, she touches every silence the cabin has to offer.*

MARTIN

(*Offstage*) Hey! Nikki! If you're going in, make yourself useful! Bring a suitcase or something!

*Just as Laura notices some of the odd markings on the cabin walls, the door flies open and in bursts NIKKI ACREE, an energetic teenager, no older than fourteen. She takes in the cabin with a connoisseur's ferocity.*

NIKKI

Twenty-nine hours in the car for this? This place is a dump.

LAURA

Nikki!

NIKKI

Our garage is better built than this. But whatever. Here we are. You. Me. Dad. Are you two going to play nice? Wave the white flag and all that?

MARTIN ACREE (*mid-forties*) enters last, dragging a suitcase and other bags. Martin wears shorts and a t-shirt, sloppy and informal, together with modern, rubberized sandals.

MARTIN

Well. Welcome to the authentic Douglass Cabin.

NIKKI

How come we couldn't get one of the totally fake really nice cabins like everybody else?

MARTIN

Because we aren't like everybody else—

NIKKI

—But they had decks and hot tubs!—

MARTIN

—and we don't want to be like everybody else, do we? Besides, the other cabins were already taken. This way we get an authentic back-to-the-basics fossil hunting experience.

NIKKI

Fossils or no fossils, we should have gone somewhere else.

LAURA

Wait—Martin, Nikki, shoes, off with the shoes, when we leave, we have to clean—let's not make things messy.

NIKKI

We're going to make a mess no matter what we do.

MARTIN

No, your mother's right, let's not add to the initial mess. (*Removing his own shoes too*) You had a chance to look around?

LAURA

Yes. It's...well. Did you know it was going to be this bad?

MARTIN

No. If I had, we'd be at the Best Western in Vernal. But we'll be fine, I'm sure there's a microwave under the bed. (*There isn't*) Well, we may not have our usual fare, but I suppose I can whip up macaroni and cheese. Or something.

LAURA

It does smell nice, anyway. Outside, especially.

MARTIN

Heat and pinyon pines.

NIKKI

I bet we've got snakes under the floor and spiders in the bathroom. Tell me there's a bathroom.

MARTIN

I'm sure the spiders in the outhouse will give you plenty of room.

NIKKI

How come there's only one bed?

MARTIN

The guy at the desk swears there's a separate bedroom (*indicating the interior doorway*) right through there.

*Nikki pokes her head in, withdraws.*

NIKKI

It's a closet.

MARTIN

Is there a bed?

NIKKI

There's a sort of floppy thing to lie down on, yeah.

MARTIN

Okay, I admit, this is not the Ritz. I even admit it is a reassembled antique and I wouldn't ask a peccary to live here long-term, but for now, for the next couple of weeks, this place is right on top of the best seam of bones you have ever laid eyes on. Who knows what we'll uncover?

NIKKI

Then we might as well get started. 'Cos if you think I'm gonna hang out in there...

MARTIN

The hammers are in the car. Waiting only for you.

*Nikki exits out the door leaving Martin and Laura in...peace?*

MARTIN (cont'd)

Well. Will this do?

LAURA

It's hot—but that's good, we won't freeze to death. We can always go to McDonald's.

MARTIN

Seventeen miles of dirt road, each way.

LAURA

Good, then. This'll be the adventure we need.

MARTIN

And Nikki, too. She's been dreaming about a chance like this since she was three.

LAURA

And we'll have—for ourselves—time. The space to talk.

MARTIN

I haven't forgotten. But I do want to do some unpacking. Cookware, at least the basics for dinner.

LAURA

That's my Martin. Practical, to the hilt.

MARTIN

Careful. You resemble that remark.

LAURA

Do you want help?

MARTIN

No. I'll be fine.

*Martin puts on his sandals, heads for the door.*

LAURA

Are those even comfortable?

MARTIN

You should try a pair. They're loose, relaxed. The essence of vacation reduced to black rubber. Hang on.

*Martin darts out the door. Laura removes a stack of crossword puzzle books from Martin's bags and repairs to the table. Then, hardly done with the first clue, she takes a closer look at the table itself, which is covered with numbers and equations. Laura looks up, takes a good hard look at the whole cabin—and in the distance, we hear again the call of the canyon wren. Laura does not hear it. Martin returns carrying a chef's trove of cooking supplies.*

MARTIN

What?

LAURA

I'm not sure—but this table—the walls, they're...well, I thought it was just graffiti, but now—

MARTIN

—I think we've all been in the car too long. Let's get out and find Nikki and do some digging. You don't even have to dig, you could just look around, relax. It's not even digging, it's chipping, tapping—it's delicate work, precise. You're good with precise.

LAURA

Is that a compliment?

MARTIN

For Nikki, we should both go.

LAURA

Did you know, she asked me, just the other day, if I thought we were "workaholics."

MARTIN

I am not a workaholic. Here, proof. (*He picks up a crossword*) Who starred in *Bringing Up Baby*?

LAURA

I told her we work hard, and when we do, we do it for her. And I told her we could stop any time.

MARTIN

No, that's too many letters.

LAURA

Cary Grant and Katherine Hepburn. Which do you want?

MARTIN

Grant. Thank you.

LAURA

What happened to doing those on Sunday mornings? Together.

MARTIN

Champagne-and-crossword brunches.

LAURA

Salsa and eggs. Spots everywhere.

MARTIN

Champagne in the morning, it made you very...friendly.

LAURA

It still might.

MARTIN

So what did happen? Other than Nikki.

LAURA

I don't know. I do know that someone has, well, just about covered this cabin with some very odd formulae.



MARTIN

No, no, no. Come on, out we go.

LAURA

What?

MARTIN

We're switching cabins.

LAURA

Martin!

MARTIN

Laura, you are my all-time favorite math professor, but I am not going to lose you, on day one of our vacation, to some fresh blaze of mathematical glory. I would, normally, but here, we have homework to do. Remember? (*He dumps a bag-load of books onto the table, reads titles*) "You Just Don't Understand: Men and Women in Conversation." "Gender and Conversational Interactions."

LAURA

That tone—

MARTIN

—Is all about the titles. I'm sure the content is miles better. Now seriously. I grant you, we'll be lucky to find a proper bone, but we stand a very good chance of finding some Jurassic algae, or maybe a bug.

LAURA

Algae. A bug. (*Off Martin's obvious displeasure*) Okay, yes, I know, fossils are cool, fossils are "wack," it's just—can we maybe look for something other than algae?

MARTIN

I predict a fabulous fairy-tale sunset.

LAURA

Very clever. Mr. Douglass—was that his name?

*Laura, having acquiesced, heads to the door, puts on her shoes; Martin does the same.*

MARTIN

Earl Douglass, yes. The man who built this place.

LAURA

Did he have a wife? Someone he could torture?

MARTIN

As a matter of fact, Earl Douglass did have a wife. Her name was Pearl.

LAURA

Earl and Pearl?

MARTIN

I swear on the grave of my mother. Pearl was with him virtually from the beginning. Earl tried to stop her, begged her not to come, but she showed up in the dead of winter, crossed the country all by herself—well, with the baby...

*As Laura and Martin exit on their way to join Nikki, we hear a baby squeal. PEARL DOUGLASS enters from the interior doorway, bringing with her a roundish bundle—the baby. Pearl's in her early thirties, wearing a mix of flannels, deerskins and wool, also oversize boots with burlap lining sticks out of the tops.*

*Pearl takes the bundled infant to the stove, sets him on top, and begins stoking the fire. Finished, she pauses, pulls a stubby pencil from her pockets and scribbles a quick equation on a nearby section of wall. Earl enters and silently hangs a triangular dinner bell from an available beam. Finished, he peeks inside the cabin, then leans too far and knocks a beam to the floor. Pearl jumps.*

EARL

Sorry.

PEARL

For goodness sake, Earl. Where have you been all night?

EARL

I couldn't sleep, I wound up at the dig—it was very strange—from the top of the draw, I could see the Green River. It was peaceful up there—in the moonlight, all that barren rock—cold, certainly, but peaceful—the limestone turns almost white. At least for a time, all was right with the world. Those rocks have such potential. Is this writing on the walls a new habit?

PEARL

If we had proper wallpaper, I might be less willing, but, as it is, ideas strike me and I commit them to the best available surface.

EARL

The walls.

PEARL

I have sewn an equation or two into our bed sheets. As a diversion.

EARL

I will order more paper. Notebooks.

PEARL

And more oatmeal, please. This batch will be ready in five minutes, if we're lucky with the coals, but after that...

*Earl, never still for long, begins to pace.*

EARL

I think I've got it figured. It's bent back, underneath. There's a fold in the rock. I think the beast is intact after all. Isn't Matthew going to burn up, sitting there?

PEARL

He's only quiet when he's on the stove. Or in it.

EARL

You put Matthew in the stove?

PEARL

Only midday, when nothing's cooking.

EARL

No wonder he's always black. (*Returning to his subject*) Some clever fellow should invent a sort of new bifocal, with special properties such that one could see through solid rock. A true spyglass! Of course, I'd be unemployed directly. So would all speculators, we'd be replaced by certainty, dull and boring.

PEARL

When will you know?

EARL

Know what?

PEARL

Earl, for goodness sake! When will you know whether the neck is intact?

EARL

Oh, that! If I can get these layabouts up the ridge before eight, we might have an answer by noon. Just one good cut and a little delicate blasting—we've already got the shoulder free. We have to find that neck, Pearl. Everything is in jeopardy if we don't.

PEARL

Are you coming in?

EARL

I fail to see the difference.

PEARL

As long as you've got one foot outside these floorboards, I risk losing you to the next migrating goldfinch. Come in.

EARL

You seem to be—today, at least—regretting this.

PEARL

Define your pronouns, please.

EARL

Joining me. Utah.

PEARL

Utah could stand a stiff dose of civilization. Light opera, a critic's circle, ballet, even a burlesque would be something.

EARL

It now has you.

PEARL

Sycophant. What do you want me to say? That I love you dearly but hate Utah? (*Off Earl's forlorn look*) There are bright sides. You did say spring was just around the corner. So the hard part is over.

EARL

Well. If the weather cooperates, yes. Two weeks. Four, at most.

PEARL

You're guessing, then? The same way you are guessing about the neck?

EARL

No, they're completely different.

PEARL

I shall count on eight weeks. At the earliest. I'm sorry. I have bad moments.

EARL

Please. Don't apologize.

PEARL

No, I insist. This is not at all an appropriate way to treat one's husband. I will do better. I will try to live up to this...this place.

EARL

That smells good.

PEARL

Nothing but dried sage and salt. And brown sugar, for once. Carolina brought a sack with the supplies.

EARL

You're a wizard with even the worst of ingredients. Will you write down the recipe, the ratios?

PEARL

As if anyone will ever care.

EARL

One never knows. (*Picking up a metal ladle*) May I?

*Pearl nods. Earl clangs the dinner bell.*

EARL (cont'd)

Up, gentlemen! On your feet! The morning miracle of breakfast has arrived!

CAROLINA (off-stage)

Someday that bell and me are gonna have a discussion.

*Two men make their appearance, stumbling into wakefulness: CAROLINA SMITH first, then GEORGE "DAD" GOODRICH. Carolina is black, mid-thirties, and has great numbers of pockets.*

*Dad Goodrich is white, white-haired, white-bearded, older. All this is hard to see due to the improvised layers of coats, scarves, hats, mittens, boot linings, etc.*

DAD GOODRICH

I like to think that I know something of miracles, but this bell—this bell is no miracle.

EARL

I apologize, but we have a great deal to do today.

CAROLINA

We had that yesterday.

DAD GOODRICH

And the day before. When are we going to have a great deal, with nothing to do?

CAROLINA

I tell you what, the God I had in Charleston, He'd at least have made it sun and shine, do His best to keep ol' Carolina warm. But it seems like He's done left, got some kind of substitute God workin' out here.

EARL

*(Staring pointedly at Pearl)* You should have stayed, if this is so unbearable.

CAROLINA

Couldn't. Cotton made me sneeze, flower-dust set my whole skin to itching, I never done once got a whole night's sleep on account of worryin' over hurricanes.

DAD GOODRICH

You make South Carolina sound worse than a cholera epidemic.

CAROLINA

I lost me nine hats to hurricanes, and another six here. Which just goes to show, things is tough pretty much everywhere.

EARL

Gentlemen, gentlemen! We have digging to do. I believe I've found our missing neck.

CAROLINA

Where?

EARL

Under the body. Curled back, like this.

DAD GOODRICH

And in your estimation, this neck will be...how long?

EARL

Oh, no more than thirty-five feet.

CAROLINA

Thirty-five feet? How come we never dig something small—a chipmunk, maybe?

DAD GOODRICH

(*To Earl*) If you're correct, your total animal would be some eighty feet long, from tip to tail.

EARL

Brontosaurus, at its finest. And we must pray there's a skull atop that mighty neck, or we will all be out of a job.

CAROLINA

Are we in one?

PEARL

Breakfast is served!

*The men line up at the stove as Pearl ladles oatmeal into bowls. Not just any bowls: fine china. They eat with proper silver flatware. Each man takes a bowl, Earl last.*

CAROLINA

Oh, thank you Miss Pearl.

PEARL

It's only oatmeal.

DAD GOODRICH

Thanks be to God. With the blessing of Job, I grant the gift of patience.

PEARL

Where I grew up, a formal grace made clear English sense, and was always reserved for the supper table.

DAD GOODRICH

Now Pearl, don't you think grace is that rare commodity where one can never have enough?

*As the group begins to eat—with difficulty, given the layers of clothes—Pearl brings out a tray of coffee served in fancy teacups with dainty silver teaspoons.*

PEARL

(To Carolina) Coffee?

CAROLINA

Yes and please, thank you.

DAD GOODRICH

As always: no.

*Pearl suddenly notices that Earl, bowl filled, spoon in hand, has just spotted a bird in the distance.*

PEARL

Earl!

EARL

Hmm?

CAROLINA

Too late: he's seen him a bird.

EARL

A shrike, if I'm not mistaken.

PEARL

You've seen it twice this week already. Sit down.

EARL

It's very agitated. Look at it, jumping around!

PEARL

The perfect mirror of a certain paleontologist I know.

EARL

There's something in that juniper that it doesn't like.

PEARL

Perhaps it's a dinosaur.



EARL

Where are my binoculars?

CAROLINA

I got 'em, Mr. Douglass.

EARL

Why do you have my binoculars?

CAROLINA

You gave 'em over yesterday, after you was done looking at that Sharp-shit hawk.

EARL

Sharp-shinned hawk.

CAROLINA

That's the one exactly.

EARL

I'll only be a moment.

PEARL

Earl!

*Too late. Earl hurries offstage, never letting the shriek out of his sight.*

DAD GOODRICH

Don't fret. He'll eat.

PEARL

Not unless I spoon it into him myself, he won't. It's like having two babies at once.

CAROLINA

What you gonna do today, Miss Pearl?

PEARL

Let's see. I shall take a stab at organizing Earl's files. Matthew needs a bath. I'll have to get supper ready. And there's the laundry. Mostly yours, I might add.

CAROLINA

I only got six shirts, and I'm wearing five of 'em!

PEARL

Perhaps I exaggerate.

CAROLINA

Perhaps and damn straight. Begging your pardon.

DAD GOODRICH

We would be a meager lot indeed if we did not offer to help.

CAROLINA

When are you gonna learn to talk in a straight line? "Meager lot," "rare commodities"...

DAD GOODRICH

Perhaps there is something we can do to assist?

PEARL

I could use a laundry line. Earl took my rope for a paddle-wheel.

CAROLINA

I know something just as good. And we got extra rope.

DAD GOODRICH

Carolina!

CAROLINA

What? You know he'll bust a gut laughin'.

DAD GOODRICH

Lord have mercy, let us hope so.

*As Pearl clears bowls and helps Matthew settle, the two men rush to heave the enormous dinosaur leg bone into view and then into a standing position. Carolina loops rope over the upper end of the bone, ties it off. Plenty of ad-libbed cries of "Watch my foot!" etc., followed by sudden disappointment:*

CAROLINA

This ain't gonna stand.

DAD GOODRICH

Not on its own, no. It's too heavy.

CAROLINA

Okay. Here. We'll lean it on the wall. There!

*The bone now rests buttress-like against the cabin, the hypotenuse of a longish triangle. Pearl assesses the work.*

PEARL

This is not what I had in mind.

CAROLINA

*(To Dad Goodrich)* Aren't we supposed to be at the dig?

DAD GOODRICH

We do not know where Mr. Douglass wants us to look.

CAROLINA

Down, down and under! The neck is under, so we go under.

DAD GOODRICH

If you lead, I will follow.

PEARL

I'll bring lunch by later!

*The two men hurry out of camp and Pearl exits, too, just as Laura, Martin and Nikki (none of whom pay the least attention to the newly visible leg-bone) return. Nikki proudly carries a good-sized rock. She points to one face of the stone.*

NIKKI

Now I dare you to tell me that isn't some kind of amphibian.

LAURA

That?

NIKKI

Sure. I know it's a little hard to follow, but look.

MARTIN

Well. If I'd known it would be this easy.

NIKKI

There's nothing else right next to it, but I know if I dig deeper...

*Laura suddenly notices another swath of writing on the walls. She moves away, studies it closer.*

MARTIN

Yes, it's definitely a very small animal, possibly a frog.

NIKKI

I forgive you about this nasty cabin.

MARTIN

Thank you. Where are you going?

NIKKI

Out. Walking. I don't know.

MARTIN

Take your tools. Just in case.

NIKKI

I won't be long. I mean, isn't it dinner time?

MARTIN

Hey, I've got it! I'll bring you dinner at the dig.

NIKKI

"The dig."

MARTIN

The cliff, the rock, wherever it was you found this. It'll be like a real expedition. The Douglass Expedition Mach II.

END EXCERPT

FOR A COMPLETE COPY OF THIS SCRIPT, CONTACT MARK RIGNEY

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