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The Light in Washington

A Live Radio-Theatre Drama in Three Short Acts
By Mitchell Santine Gould

Setting: Brooklyn & Washington, D.C. — December 1868
Format: Live staged radio play (standing microphones, script stands, visible acoustic Foley)
Cast: 6 Actors (4M, 1F, 1 Any)
Running Time: 25–30 minutes across three continuous acts:
Act I: The Parlor (Brooklyn)
Act II: The Transit & Arrival (Washington Depot to 15th Street)
Act III: The Turnaround at 15th Street

The Premise & Dramatic Hook

In December 1868, outside the U.S. Treasury, municipal police stopped Walt Whitman and commanded him to remove his "false face" — mistaking the poet's flowing white beard and ruddy cheeks for a *papier-mâché* Santa Claus mask.

The Light in Washington uses this documented incident to launch an imagined pilgrimage. Fred Vaughan — the young Brooklyn omnibus driver whose romance with Whitman inspired *Leaves of Grass* a decade earlier — travels south with his six-year-old son, ostensibly on a "Masonic errand." In truth, he hopes to present his first-born to his former lover.

Structural Breakdown: Three Short Acts

• **ACT I: THE ERRAND** (Home in Brooklyn)
Six-year-old Freddie finds his father, Fred (30), sleeping off whiskey while clutching an old locket. Mistaking the portrait inside for Santa Claus, Freddie wakes him. Seized by a sudden desire to bring the boy along, Fred coaches him to beg his mother, Frances, for permission to join a "Masonic errand" — a cover for Fred's bid to see Walt once more.

• **ACT II: THE STREETCAR** (Washington Arrival)
Father and son board a Washington horsecar whose kindly conductor takes a shine to the boy. Neither man knows who the other is: the conductor is Peter Doyle, the great love of Whitman's postwar life.

• **ACT III: THE TURNAROUND** (U.S. Treasury Grounds)
When Fred finally sees Whitman, it is in the company of his new love, Pete, and Fred understands that time cannot be turned back. Fred's hope for reconnection is dashed, and he can't speak. His boy runs forward without him. And yet a gift is delivered to them both. A brief coda aboard the returning horsecar shows father and son as the day has left them.

Casting Tracks & Vocal Profiles

• **TRACK 1: WALT WHITMAN** (M, playing 49)
Vocal Profile: High, husky baritone; warm, unhurried, intimate conversational tone (think rocker Bob Seger speaking — no oratorical boom). Walt's stillness anchors the emotional climax. *No doubling.*

• **TRACK 2: FRED VAUGHAN** (M, playing 30)
Vocal Profile: Tenor. Canadian-Irish cadence with natural working-class phrasing ("t'ink," "meself"). A blue-collar philosopher carrying grief and faded youth, but clinging to hope. *No doubling.*

• **TRACK 3: FREDDIE VAUGHAN** (Any, playing 6)
Vocal Profile: Clear, nimble treble or youthful mezzo (cast with a young actor or an adult woman specializing in youth voice work). Innocent, spirited, echoing his father's Irish lilt. Delivers misheard adult phrases with total earnestness. *No doubling.*

• **TRACK 4: PETER DOYLE & ENSEMBLE** (M, playing 25)
Vocal Profile: High agility and regional range.
◦ Primary (Pete Doyle, 25): Warm, lyrical Southern-Irish blend (Richmond by way of Limerick); easy humor and physical confidence.
◦ Doubled Utility Roles: Depot Ticket Agent and ambient street voices. (Does not double the Policeman, who shares Pete's scene in Act III.)

• **TRACK 5: FRANCES VAUGHAN** (F, playing 22)
Vocal Profile: Middle-class Brooklynite with a touch of Victorian elocution; warm, loving, and harried. Appears in Act I; free to assist with Foley thereafter.

• **TRACK 6: MUNICIPAL POLICEMAN & FOLEY** (M, any age)
Vocal Profile: Brusque, officious Washington beat cop, more bewildered than menacing. A small speaking role in Act III; otherwise serves as primary Foley operator.

Practical Foley & Acoustic Design
Operated at a side table by Track 6, assisted by Track 5 after Act I.
• **Apparatus:** Manual ratchet hand-brake, leather harness and traces, slate/wooden hoof-blocks on stone, heavy copper coin drop, metal turn-crank, pocket-watch clasp.
• **Function:** Not ambient background but a live metronome for the journey — every hoofbeat and turn of the brake carries Fred closer to Walt.

Playwright Bio
Mitchell Santine Gould is a novelist, public historian, and Whitman scholar whose research on Walt Whitman has appeared in *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia* and scholarly journals. He is the author of KELSON OF THE CREATION, an acclaimed trilogy tracing the lives of Whitman and Fred Vaughan against the backdrop of 19th-century New York. He produced the audiobook edition of *Lover* and the documentary *Sailors: The Wheels on Melville's Coach*. Gould holds graduate degrees from Georgia Tech and Emory University and writes from the Oregon Coast.