

# TOTEM and TABOO

By Larry Smith

**WHY I LIKE IT: FOTD Editor JANET EHRlich COLSON writes:**

*As it happens, the fiction editors at FOTD sent this “fiction as meta-theatre kind of thing” the way of their depraved drama editor (yours truly) because they thought it would be right up my ally. As always, the fiction editors are BANG ON correct and I am thrilled to be able to rave about Larry Smith’s brilliant Totem and Taboo, a mesmerizing work of cinematic fiction written in the form of a screenplay. This sophisticated (and sexy!) piece takes us on a deconstructed journey through the production of two films produced in tandem, **Bobby at Work** and **Force Majeure**, that both tangle with the theme of cuckoldry – you know, where the wife screws someone other than her husband - and in both films these marital indiscretions become the subjects of eroticism and arousal.*

*The psychology of sexuality vis-à-vis breaking social boundaries and cultural mores is further explored in production meetings, a hypnotic barrage of auditions and a yet-to-be cast character espousing the ideas of the godfather of modern psychotherapy, none other than the Oedipally-obsessed Dr. Sigmund Freud.*

*There are so many fascinating angles to this piece it’s hard to know where to begin, but one of my faves is the power dynamic between the director and the actors auditioning for the roles. The director is exacting, running his auditions much like a clinical trial while revealing a voyeuristic and somewhat abusive aspect to the process that I promise will make even non-actors squirm. But don’t skip the auditions. They are part of the cinema of the psyche that makes this piece work better in your head than on Netflix.*

CUT TO BLACK SCREEN

The voices of three different men are heard in succession.

Man: I wonder if Frank Abrams is going to come.

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*Note that the repetition of lines creates an unnerving tension as well as adding to the theatrical construct of the piece, in which the director is already in rehearsal, re-hearing, and framing specific moments. The lines from each of the auditions will come up in following scenes,*

*although, as in real-life, the characters are not necessarily portrayed by the men and women who auditioned for the roles.*

*Totem and Taboo is fiction as mental performance art. It's a self-conscious lesson in on-camera acting. It's Freudian filmmaking. It's hot, it's heady, and it's overwhelming. You may have to read it more than once – it's that guilty of a pleasure! (Spacing and font size are author's own.)*

*Five Stars.*

**Senior Editor Charles writes:** *This story, together with **Gag and May Gag**, also in this issue are from Larry Smith's latest collection of short fiction **Floodlands** published by Adelaide Books, New York/Lisbon 2019. See Larry's work and more at [adelaidebooks.org](http://adelaidebooks.org)*

**QUALITY QUOTABLE** *(for love of the language):*

You know, one thing that occurs to me...one thing we could do...everybody in both films, they're all played by unknowns and that's the way we want it. Wouldn't it be a stark contrast and full of significance of some sort if the lecturer were played by a big star? I mean, a really big one? Man or woman, either way. De Niro or Streep.

(Spacing and font size are author's own.)

## **Totem and Taboo**

A Short Story in the Form of a Screenplay

TITLE ON BLACK SCREEN:

**Auditions for Part of *Jill, Bobby at Work***

MEDIUM SHOT

Woman sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind her.

Male Voice: I want you to say the line with no context and no direction from me as to emotion or emphasis.

Woman (whatever manner of presentation the performer chooses): Oh, how you've cuckolded my husband!

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT WOMAN

Woman sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind her.

Male Voice: I want you to say the line with no context and no direction from me as to emotion or emphasis.

Woman (whatever manner of presentation the performer chooses): Oh, how you've cuckolded my husband!

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT WOMAN

Woman sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind her.

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Woman (whatever manner of presentation the performer chooses): Oh, how you've cuckolded my husband!

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT WOMAN

Woman sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind her.

Male Voice: I want you to say the line with no context and no direction from me as to emotion or emphasis.

Woman (whatever manner of presentation the performer chooses): Oh, how you've cuckolded my husband!

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT WOMAN

Woman sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind her.

Male Voice: I want you to say the line with no context and no direction from me as to emotion or emphasis.

Woman (whatever manner of presentation the performer chooses): Oh, how you've cuckolded my husband!

CUT TO BLACK SCREEN

The voices of three different women are heard in succession.

Woman: Oh, how you've cuckolded my husband!

Woman: Oh, how you've cuckolded my husband!

Woman: Oh, how you've cuckolded my husband!

TITLE ON BLACK SCREEN:  
***Force Majeure, Scene Three***

MEDIUM SHOT

Sal, Jerry, and Sam at a table in a moderately busy restaurant. Background movements of customers and restaurant staff are out of focus. The background noise is muted. There is a fourth empty chair at the table. Sal and Jerry are average height, average weight; Jerry has a tattoo visible on one arm. Sam is a burly sort. The actors portraying these men may or may not be men who audition for the parts.

Jerry: Besides you guys and Ralph, I'm only in touch with a few people. For all I know, some of the others could have turned out to be serial killers, or Senators, if that's not the same thing.

Sal: These kinds of parties can wind up being very interesting or a complete disaster. You know, once you've satisfied your curiosity about whatever happened to so-and-so, you might just have to stand around and stare at each other with nothing to say.

Jerry: Yeah, and with nothing in common except what's past.

Sam: Yeah, so everybody sits around bullshitting about old stuff that isn't worth remembering.

Jerry: Maybe somebody turned out to be a real success.

Sam: So then what? We supposed to spend all night sitting around and praising the lucky fuck?

Sal: Still, I'm kind of looking forward to going.

Sam: Well Jinny sure is. Women really love this kind of shit.

Sam: We're the only guys who married girls from the class.

Jerry: No, Chuck D'Allesandro married Vicki Tims...you remember Vicki Tims?

Sal: Yeah, wonder what those two wound up doing with their lives.

Jerry: I wonder if Frank Abrams is going to come...Remember him?

Sam: You bet I do. (with self-confident candor) Jinny went out with him before me.

Ralph: (as he approaches the table and sits in the fourth chair) Hey guys...

TITLE ON BLACK SCREEN:  
**Auditions for Part of Jerry, *Force Majeure***

MEDIUM SHOT

Man sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind him.

Male Voice: I want you to say the line as if Frank Abrams is someone you really don't want to see.

Man: I wonder if Frank Abrams is going to come.

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT MAN

Man sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind him.

Male Voice: I want you to say the line as if Frank Abrams is someone you really don't want to see.

Man: I wonder if Frank Abrams is going to come.

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT MAN

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Male Voice: I want you to say the line as if Frank Abrams is someone you really don't want to see.

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CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT MAN

Man sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind him.

Male Voice: I want you to say the line as if Frank Abrams is someone you really don't want to see.

Man: I wonder if Frank Abrams is going to come.

CUT TO BLACK SCREEN

The voices of three different men are heard in succession.

Man: I wonder if Frank Abrams is going to come.

Man: I wonder if Frank Abrams is going to come.

Man: I wonder if Frank Abrams is going to come.

TITLE ON BLACK SCREEN:

**Production Meeting. *Bobby at Work and Force Majeure***

MEDIUM SHOT

Office, modestly furnished. A window on the far wall. Two sofas facing each other in the immediate foreground. Kate and Jackson on one sofa. Steve and Jason on the other. The camera faces whichever sofa the speaker sits on.

Steve: So Jason's idea is to release both films at the same time, maybe show them together at the same festival.

Kate: I think it's a good idea, it will drive the message home.

Jason: Yeah but it's not really a message, it's more like an overriding theme. Or a kind of implicit threat in both.

Jackson: Male humiliation, or at least the undermining of male power.

Jason: We reach two kinds of audiences, the one who will see both films as a reflection on the undermining of male power, as you put it, and the other audiences which, quite frankly, just get off on the cuckolding of your average husband.

Jackson: Well, the guys in *Force Majeure* aren't exactly cuckolded. Frank Abrams happened before they hooked up with their wives.

Kate: Same thing, or close. He is a force majeure. The way he's occupied the consciousness of the four women all these years, it cancels the wedding contract.

Jason: Right. And both films are well-timed, what with the @MeToo movement and all.

Steve: But neither film is about toppling abusive men from seats of power.

Kate: But power is what they're about in any case. The assumed power that comes with position, with being a husband and family head and leader and all that. That's what makes it so...so...

Jason: Right. All men are vulnerable to being toppled. All men are terrified by how the world will pity them.

Steve: I don't have a sense of who these people are, I mean I know the *Bobby at Work* characters are pretty sophisticated, and the *Force Majeure* guys are working class or maybe white collar. But I don't have a really good sense of what they look like or any of the fine points of their personalities.

Jason: Neither do I, for the most part, and that's one of the things that excites me about the directing. I'm going to leave it to chance, I'm going to see what the auditions turn up, and whoever and whatever captures my imagination during the auditions, and then take it from there.

Jackson: Ok. (chuckles) I wish I understood why so many men get off on their wives cheating.

Steve: It's a sperm contest. Or maybe they just love their wives so much, they want to make the sacrifice to see them in ecstasy.

Kate (amused): Right. The noble impulses that actuate pornography!

Jackson: But the guys in *Force Majeure* aren't the least aroused by the idea of Frank Abrams devirginizing their wives.

Jason: The audience will be.

Kate: Yeah, I think men long to be toppled from power. Power is too much for men.

TITLE ON BLACK SCREEN

*Force Majeure*, Scene Six

LONG SHOT

The restaurant is now more dimly lit. Sal, Jerry, Sam, and Ralph are sitting at their table, eight empty bottles of beer on the table. The waitress enters with four more beers, which she serves and then collects the empties and exits. There is a prolonged silence as the men sit very still. Sal's head is bent. There are only one or two couples sitting at other tables in the background.

CUT TO CLOSE-UP OF RALPH

Ralph: Well, I just don't think I want to go.

CUT TO CLOSE-UP OF SAL AS HE LIFTS HIS HEAD

Sal: So what are you going to tell her? She's going to think you're a...you're a...I mean Sam's gonna go and Jinny actually dated him.

CUT TO CLOSE-UP OF RALPH

Ralph: It's different. I mean, they dated, they had a relationship, there was a relationship. It wasn't just, you know, a one-time-thing...

CUT TO CLOSE-UP OF SAL

Sal: So it was a one-time thing, so what? He might not even remember...I mean...

CUT TO CLOSE-UP OF RALPH GLARING AT SAL. CUT TO MEDIUM SHOT OF TABLE

Sam: What are you guys worrying about, him or your wives? So what if he remembers, so what if he doesn't? Maybe he doesn't even remember Jinny, and yet they dated...How would that be? You just don't want to come face to face with Frank.

Ralph: Maybe I don't want to see the two of them together.

Sal: What do you mean "together?"

Jerry (getting up to go to the bathroom): He doesn't want to see the way they look at each other.

The three men sit in a prolonged silence after Jerry leaves.

Sal: So which is it, you're afraid he won't remember her or you're afraid he will?

Sam: I mean, what the fuck, he busted half the goddamn high school.

Sal: Yeah, for sure.

All three men drink down their beers. Ralph signals with four fingers to the waitress off-screen.

Sam: Yours too, Sal.

Sal: I know.

Ralph: Jesus, that right?

Sal: Yeah, I asked her once who it was, so she told me.

Ralph: Jesus.

Sam: I mean, listen guys, I'm not saying I'm all that anxious to see him.

Ralph: Or see the way Jinny and him greet each other. I bet you're not. (to Sal) So you're ok, you're copacetic with it?

The waitress brings four more beers and carts off the empties. A silence of around thirty seconds.

Sal: To tell you the truth, I imagine the look on her face as he gets on top of her.

Ralph: Inside of her. Mounts your wife.

Sal: Fuck you. Yours too.

Ralph: Imagine you're him. Imagine what he's thinking when he sees us with our wives.

Sam: Fuck him.

CUT TO CLOSE-UP OF JERRY'S FACE AS HE RETURNS TO THE TABLE

Jerry: I'm not sure I want to see him.

TITLE ON BLACK SCREEN:

**Production Meeting. *Bobby at Work and Force Majeure***

Kate, Jackson, Steve, and Jason as before. Camera shifts from sofa to sofa, as before.

Jackson: The one thing we really wonder about is Fisher...this interpolation – is that the right word? – of...what is he, a psychiatrist? A professor?

Kate: Jason, the very fact that you don't know which film to stick him in proves that it's not called for from a dramatic standpoint.

Steve: Even if it were, it's pretentious. Like you want to prove the stuff we're doing has profound significations.

Kate: And you don't want people seeing either film from a Freudian point of view. That would only dilute the other themes.

Jackson: And Freud is so yesterday.

Jason: I think it would add to the other themes. That the power games by which male authority is rudely snatched (no pun intended) have a primal concomitant in the human psyche, at its developmental...uhh...at a psychodynamic as well as a social level.

Steve: Way too much, Jason!

Jason: From a dramatic perspective, I was thinking of the old professor in *Crimes and Misdemeanors* who lectures into the camera from time to time. It worked there.

Kate: I remember that movie, but there the old lecturer is integral to the plot because he's part of the Woody Allen character's developing angst...and he commits suicide at the end, which is part of Woody's character development as he tries to grapple with, uh, everything.

Jackson: Actually, he says he's "out the window," which makes it ambiguous. Yeah, he's jumped to his death but he's also free from a great constraint, and he's outside, out the window, out amongst us, with the world.

Kate: You're right! Yeah.

Jason: Let me shoot it and stick it somewhere in both films. We can make a decision later to cut it if we want. I'll be easy to persuade if you're still strongly against it and you're all unanimous.

Steve: You know, one thing that occurs to me...one thing we could do...everybody in both films, they're all played by unknowns and that's the way we want it. Wouldn't it be a stark contrast and full of significance of some sort if the lecturer were played by a big star? I mean, a really big one? Man or woman, either way. De Niro or Streep.

Jackson (smiling): Interesting.

Kate: Jason, go ahead and shoot it with yourself as a placeholder. We'll make some calls.

Jason: I love it.

TITLE ON BLACK SCREEN:

**Auditions for part of Elisabeth, *Bobby at Work***

MEDIUM SHOT

Woman sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind her.

Male Voice: Feel free to use your body in whatever way you feel comfortable as you say the line.

Woman (whatever manner of presentation the performer chooses): Any time my husband turns his back, just pull my pants down and take your pleasure.

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT WOMAN

Woman sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind her.

Male Voice: Feel free to use your body in whatever way you feel comfortable as you say the line.

Woman (whatever manner of presentation the performer chooses): Any time my husband turns his back, just pull my pants down and take your pleasure.

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT WOMAN

Woman sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind her.

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Male Voice: Feel free to use your body in whatever way you feel comfortable as you say the line.

Woman (whatever manner of presentation the performer chooses): Any time my husband turns his back, just pull my pants down and take your pleasure.

CUT TO BLACK SCREEN

The voices of three different women are heard in succession.

Woman: Any time my husband turns his back, just pull my pants down and take your pleasure.

Woman: Any time my husband turns his back, just pull my pants down and take your pleasure.

Woman: Any time my husband turns his back, just pull my pants down and take your pleasure.

TITLE ON BLACK SCREEN  
***Force Majeure, Scene Eleven***

A saloon. Scene is shot tight, so the bar and other tables do not intrude on the picture plane. Sal, Jerry, Sam, and Ralph at a table, four beers.

Sam: Do we have to keep talking?

Ralph: Naw, let's just sit here in silence until someone wants to opine on who's going to win the Final Four this year.

Sam: "Opine"?

Sal: Ohhhhh pine!

Ralph: So Jerry, good old Frank Abrams cleared a path for you too. A real trailblazer, that one.

Sal: Ohhhhh pine!

Ralph: I'll never be able to look at Sandy the same way again.

Jerry: (really angry) Fuck you, dammit!

Sam: Easy, easy.

Jerry: You guys make me sick.

Ralph: Just because you're the same as us.

Sal: Ohhhhh pine!

Sam (looking at Sal): He's as drunk as he wants to be.

Sal: Her face as he mounts her...

Ralph: Shut up.

Sal: The way she grunts. Grunted.

Sam (putting his hand on Sal's arm): I gotta get him home.

Jerry starts to cry. Ralph and Sam look at him incredulously.

Ralph: Jesus Christ.

Jerry (recovers) She didn't know me yet. No harm, no foul...

Sal: Maybe she said thank you.

Ralph: Shut him up.

Jerry: ...except...

Sam: His face. He'll smile.

Jerry: ...if he remembers.

Sam: Jinny and him, it was a relationship.

TITLE ON BLACK SCREEN:  
**Auditions for Part of Sal, *Force Majeure***

MEDIUM SHOT

Man sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind him.

Male Voice: I want you to think about your mother as you say the line.

Man: Her face as he mounts her...

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT MAN

Man sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind him.

Male Voice: I want you to think about your mother as you say the line.

Man: Her face as he mounts her...

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT MAN

Man sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind him.

Male Voice: I want you to think about your mother as you say the line.

Man: Her face as he mounts her...

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT MAN

Man sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind him.

Male Voice: I want you to think about your mother as you say the line.

Man: Her face as he mounts her...

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT MAN

Man sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind him.

Male Voice: I want you to think about your mother as you say the line.

Man: Her face as he mounts her...

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT MAN

Man sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind him.

Male Voice: I want you to think about your mother as you say the line.

Man: Her face as he mounts her...

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT MAN

Man sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind him.

Male Voice: I want you to think about your mother as you say the line.

Man: Her face as he mounts her...

CUT TO BLACK SCREEN

The voices of three different men are heard in succession.

Man: Her face as he mounts her...

Man: Her face as he mounts her...

Man: Her face as he mounts her...

TITLE ON BLACK SCREEN:

***Bobby at Work, Scene Three***

Living room. Entrance to kitchen on the right. In the foreground, three men sit in three comfortable chairs, their backs to the camera. Their wives are on a sumptuous couch facing them. In the background, a dining area with dirty dishes and utensils, recently used.

Left to right are Matt, Mike, and Lenny. Matt's wife Elisabeth opposite him; Mike's wife Kathryn opposite him; Lenny's wife Jill opposite him. Camera remains on the wives. The actors portraying the wives may or may not be women who audition for the parts.

Matt: Do you like the older English ones?

Lenny: Not nearly as much. Even *The Thirty-Nine Steps* seems just a work-up for *North By Northwest* twenty years later.

Kathryn: Funny, I was just having this conversation with Bobby at work. I don't remember what started it, but I asked him, "What's your favorite Hitchcock?"

Elisabeth: What did he say?

Kathryn: *Rear Window*. He just absolutely adores *Rear Window*.

Elisabeth bows her head slightly, smiling. Jill also bow her head, but with an uncomfortable expression.

Kathryn: So Lenny, what did you think of the people you met at the Christmas party?

Lenny: I thought the ones I spoke to were great.

Elisabeth: Who did you speak to?

Lenny: John, the slim older guy...

Elisabeth: From accounts payable. Very nice man. He doesn't really need to work. His wife has a lot of family money. But I'm glad he does. I agree with you, he's a great guy.

Jill: Lenny was entranced by Susan, the stories she told.

Elisabeth: I don't blame him. Jill, you know, is always stopping by her office to hear her stories.

Kathryn: I am too.

CUT TO THE BACKS OF THE WOMEN AND THE FACES OF THE MEN

A lush weaving, vaguely Near-Eastern, takes up the entire wall behind them.

Mike (good-naturedly): She's too intellectual for me.

Kathryn: So are Marge and Lisa. That's why he doesn't watch *The Simpsons* anymore.

Everyone laughs, including Mike.

Lenny: I enjoyed talking to Phyllis Armstrong too, she seemed very well-rounded for an IT person. No offense to IT people.

Matt: There aren't any in the room, thank God.

Kathryn: Bobby is in IT. He's also very rounded.

Lenny: I didn't meet him.

Mike: Neither have me or Matt. Kathryn says he's a great guy.

Jill (almost hurriedly): It's a great place to work.

Matt: How long have you been there?

Jill: Nine months or so.

Matt: And Lenny, you work where?

Lenny: I work for the Barnett Foundation.

Mike: So you give away money all day long?

Lenny: Something like that.

Mike: I'd like to do that kind of work, but it's hard to walk away from my job.

Elisabeth (without malice): They pay Mike a lot of money to write talking points for crooked bankers.

Mike (with false humility): Well, it's a living. Sure, I'd like to walk away, but, you know, responsibilities, responsibilities.

Kathryn: Yeah, my poor husband is torn between conflicting responsibilities.

Elisabeth: Matt too, in a way. He makes good money but...you know. Uhhh, the horns of a dilemma.

CUT TO CLOSE-UP OF MATT. THEN CUT TO MEDIUM SHOT OF ELISABETH.

Elisabeth is stretched naked on a bed, her arms extended to her sides.

Elisabeth: Any time my husband turns his back, just pull my pants down and take your pleasure.

TITLE ON BLACK SCREEN:  
**Fisher, Lecture**

Jason as Fisher: The way in which we interpret Freud is itself a stunning indication of how Freudian dynamics operate within us. Or, the fact that we reject Freud altogether, and how we reject him – either peremptorily or after much presumably disinterested reflection – offers further such indication. In that sense, his is a closed system: it traps you within its own terms no matter what you say or think or do. Actually, the only way to absolve ourselves is by rejecting Freudianism only because it is a closed system, not because of anything he specifically postulates about human nature and motive. If we offer no opinion as to, say, dream interpretation, or oral fixation, or the death wish, but simply disclaim any system, any system whatsoever that is so closed, be it pseudo-scientific or religious, then at least we are relatively clear of any reductionist imputations.

However, most people who reject Freud do so defensively or even angrily. Most are like the young man I knew (a rather brilliant young man, a great admirer of Shestov and Hanna Arendt). When I merely suggested to him that there is still much to learn from Freud's essay on Dostoevsky despite all the scholarly "disproof" of that psychohistory, he put his hand on his forehead in a rather dramatic fashion as if to say, "No, no, I won't hear it!"

And then the proverbial devil in the details...Perhaps we don't quite reject the Freudian vision but seek to tame it via the kind of bland ego psychology that arose in later decades, the Gertrude and Rubin Blanck pabulum. What would that say about us in terms of our posture toward the dark forces that Freud's tragic sensibility disclosed? Or, conversely, do we bathe a la Leo Bersani in a subversive "wild psychoanalysis," interpreting Da Vinci's narcissism or neo-Assyrian ferocity as a kind of creative sanity in which the life and death instincts are intertwined and combustive, all the more so as they are never psychically consummated? What does it say about Freud himself that he sought so persistently to disembarrass his system of such "wild" thinking, such radical affect? To be sure, his greatness could never lay within the respectable trappings of actual science, but rather in the final poetry of a pitiable species.

TITLE ON BLACK SCREEN:

**Production Meeting. *Bobby at Work and Force Majeure***

Kate, Jackson, Steve, and Jason as before. Camera shifts from sofa to sofa, as before.

Kate: Wait, I almost forgot something important. There's a French film called *Force Majeure*.

Steve: A joint venture with Swedes and Norwegians, actually.

Kate: It's just a few years old and was very popular. Critically acclaimed.

Jackson: That could be a problem.

Jason: I'm pretty much married to the title.

Jackson: Yeah, I suppose. Let's think it over.

Steve: What about *Bobby at Work*?

Kate: The title? I love it.

Jackson: Do we ever show the guy? I mean, I know we don't. But do we want to think about it?

Kate: No, no. Jason's vision demands that Bobby remains an abstract force, like Frank Abrams.

Steve: We do see his hand pluck the flower.

Kate: Yeah, that might be an inconsistency but it's so damn sexy.

Steve: Actually, it adds to the sense of abstraction. The unseen hand, except it's seen. But it's still...uhhh...

Kate: Abstract.

Steve: Right.

Kate: Just to raise the point...do the scenes where the women are seen naked dissipate the tension? Could it be better to leave it to the imagination?

Jason: No, I'm sure not. The film is as much about the husbands as it is the wives...The revealing scenes will make the audience really feel their...their cuckoldry...

Kate (chuckles): Great word!

Jackson: (also amused) My wife and I once went to the theater with another couple...the wife was having an affair, and everyone knew it...Guess what? The play we were seeing had a steamy adulterous storyline...the female character was doing a job on her husband...Well, the tension among us and our friends, if you can call it that, or the kind of unsettled feeling that was...well, you know, an elephant in the room while we were sitting there and at dinner afterward.

Kate: Sounds like a very sexy evening, Jackson.

Jackson: It was.

Steve: Would it have been as sexy if your friend had been clueless?

Jackson: Good question. The fact that Marty, Marty was our friend's name, the fact that he knew about it made for unbearable tension.

Jason: Like a sexual excitation that can never be resolved.

Kate: The guys in *Bobby at Work* are clueless.

Jackson: It would be a whole different story otherwise.

Kate: Cluelessness is hot too.

Jason: Yes. The fact that they're clueless adds to a sense that our lives are subject to primal forces of which we can never be aware.

Kate (With some amusement): Jason has really thought this through, hasn't he?

TITLE ON BLACK SCREEN:

***Bobby at Work*, Scene 14**

MEDIUM SHOT

Scene opens with all six as before. Camera is on the sofa. Then Kathryn rises and heads for the dining area.

Elisabeth (rising): I'll help you.

Jill starts to get up too.

Elisabeth: Sit. Sit, Jill. Relax.

Jill remains seated as Elisabeth joins Kathryn in the background.

Matt: So Lenny tells us you enjoy watching the games with him. I wish Elisabeth did.

Jill: Just World Cup games, really. I love rooting for underdog teams.

Matt: So you must have loved it when Mexico beat Germany the other day.

Elisabeth and Kathryn in mid-shot, carrying trays to the kitchen on the left, which is not visible from the living room where Jill and the men are sitting.

Jill: Yes indeed.

CUT TO KITCHEN

Elisabeth and Kathryn are scraping the dishes and putting them into the dishwasher.

Elisabeth: She seems a little nervous, stand-offish.

Kathryn (smiling sympathetically). I tried to have lunch with her the other day but she put me off. Nicely, but she put me off. She has to deal with it eventually.

Elisabeth: I watch at the office for when she looks at Bobby. If faces could talk! So much crisscrossing conflicting emotion!

Kathryn: You were a little confused at first yourself, as I recall.

Elisabeth: That day you told me that we...when you said that we shared so much, that when you look at me and...

Kathryn: ...and I feel you feeling what I've felt. I still do. Oh that man!  
(laughs)

Elisabeth (very affectionately): And he told me the things you say.

Kathryn: And he told me the things you say.

Elisabeth: Are you feeling the same way about Jill?

Kathryn: I'm very close to doing so.

Elisabeth: What did Bobby tell you?

Kathryn: (giggles, momentarily ignoring the question): Lenny seems to be such a sensitive sort. He'd be crushed if he knew.

Elisabeth: Matt would just clam up.

Kathryn: I loved your little crack about the horns of a dilemma.

Elisabeth: (with good-humored persistence) What has Bobby told you, Kathryn? He told me she had a huge orgasm and cried afterward.

Kathryn: He told me that she covered her sex organs with her hands afterward. (smiles) Seems a little pointless.

Elisabeth: The horse already left the barn, as they say.

Kathryn: Imagine her hearing whatever he told her!

CUT TO MEDIUM SHOT OF LIVING ROOM

Jill and the men as before. Elisabeth and Kathryn enter and take their seats on the sofa as before. The women face the camera.

Elisabeth: We were just talking about going upstate now that the weather has gotten so nice. We figure to stop off at the sculpture garden. I haven't been there in years.

Kathryn: You Philistines can join us if you want. Otherwise it will be just us girls.

Elisabeth: Lenny's no Philistine!

Kathryn: I'm sure of that.

CUT TO MEDIUM SHOT OF THE MEN FACING THE CAMERA

Mike (winking): These ladies know a cultured gentleman when they see one.

CUT TO MEDIUM SHOT OF THE WOMEN FACING THE CAMERA

Elisabeth: Versus cavemen like you!

CUT TO MEDIUM SHOT OF THE MEN FACING THE CAMERA

Lenny: (good-humoredly) I feel like I'm on the spot.

CUT TO MEDIUM SHOT OF THE WOMEN FACING THE CAMERA

Kathryn: Well, there's something to be said for cavemen.

CUT TO CLOSE-UP OF MIKE. THEN CUT TO MEDIUM SHOT OF KATHRYN

Kathryn is standing nude, her hands clasped behind her head.

Kathryn: Oh your thing!

TITLE ON BLACK SCREEN:

**Auditions for Part of Sam, *Force Majeure***

MEDIUM SHOT

Man sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind him.

Male Voice: You're feeling very insecure as you say the line.

Man: His face. He'll smile.

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT MAN

Man sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind him.

Male Voice: You're feeling very insecure as you say the line.

Man: His face. He'll smile.

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT MAN

Man sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind him.

Male Voice: You're feeling very insecure as you say the line.

Man: His face. He'll smile.

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT MAN

Man sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind him.

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CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT MAN

Man sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind him.

Male Voice: You're feeling very insecure as you say the line.

Man: His face. He'll smile.

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT MAN

Man sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind him.

Male Voice: You're feeling very insecure as you say the line.

Man: His face. He'll smile.

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT MAN

Man sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind him.

Male Voice: You're feeling very insecure as you say the line.

Man: His face. He'll smile.

CUT TO BLACK SCREEN.

The voices of three different men are heard in succession.

Man: His face. He'll smile.

Man: His face. He'll smile.

Man: His face. He'll smile.

TITLE ON BLACK SCREEN:  
**Auditions for Part of Ralph, *Force Majeure***

MEDIUM SHOT

Man sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind him.

Male Voice: You're feeling bitter as you say the line.

Man: Imagine what he's thinking when he sees us with our wives.

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT MAN

Man sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind him.

Male Voice: You're feeling bitter as you say the line.

Man: Imagine what he's thinking when he sees us with our wives.

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT MAN

Man sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind him.

Male Voice: You're feeling bitter as you say the line.

Man: Imagine what he's thinking when he sees us with our wives.

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT MAN

Man sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind him.

Male Voice: You're feeling bitter as you say the line.

Man: Imagine what he's thinking when he sees us with our wives.

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT MAN

Man sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind him.

Male Voice: You're feeling bitter as you say the line.

Man: Imagine what he's thinking when he sees us with our wives.

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT MAN

Man sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind him.

Male Voice: You're feeling bitter as you say the line.

Man: Imagine what he's thinking when he sees us with our wives.

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT MAN

Man sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind him.

Male Voice: You're feeling bitter as you say the line.

Man: Imagine what he's thinking when he sees us with our wives.

CUT TO BLACK SCREEN.

The voices of three different men are heard in succession.

Man: Imagine what he's thinking when he sees us with our wives.

Man: Imagine what he's thinking when he sees us with our wives.

Man: Imagine what he's thinking when he sees us with our wives.

TITLE ON BLACK SCREEN:

**Fisher, Lecture**

Jason as Fisher: Whatever posture we assume in relationship to Freud, and all he stands for, that in itself constitutes a superego of sorts. Freud himself, when we understand him in the most traditional light, constitutes a superego of sorts. Anything normative, anything determinative, anything authoritarian constitutes a superego of sorts, compounded one way or another from the devious cathexes of the Oedipal experience. And yet Freud himself mistrusted the superego so, mistrusted it for its lacerations of the ego, its unholy alliance with the id, and, indeed, the thrashing and thrashing of the superego itself against itself. So where does it all leave us?

We must, of course, seek the moral agency of rebellion lest the superego so achieve its suzerainty that we become easy pickings for any Hitler or Stalin with a code to ordain. The strongest men must resist the death wish to which the superego exposes both ourselves and the world we live in. But then we have a whirligig of superegos as each act of resistance is itself an act of conscience, and conscience itself is just another form of superego in alliance with the id to once again sacrifice the ego in a welter of unachievable cathexes. This, to be sure, has to be what Freud was getting at in *The Ego and the Id*. What might be further inferred is the decision reached by the superego when, instead of taking up arms against the parental tyranny, rather assumes that role of authority, of propriety, in order to possess the mother, punish itself, and become the punishing father. In sum, the dynamic presupposes multiple superegos: the one we get from our parents, and the one we use against our parents; the one that commands us to wield power, and the one that ultimately fates the ego to grovel in penitential ritual after penitential ritual.

TITLE ON BLACK SCREEN:

***Bobby at Work, Scene 16***

Elisabeth, Kathryn, and Jill are in the kitchen. The camera is viewing them from the back wall of the kitchen so that we see Matt, Mike, and Lenny in the living room, an animated background to the shot. Matt and Lenny are still on the sofa. Mike has moved to one of the chairs on the left side, so that we see him in profile. They remain in sight throughout the scene.

Jill: That was a wonderful dinner, Kathryn.

Kathryn (putting her hand on Jill's arms): It was my pleasure.

Elisabeth: We thought you might be uncomfortable with all of us gathered.

Silence for a moment. Elisabeth and Kathryn are smiling.

Jill: I guess it is kind of strange.

Kathryn: Can you imagine if Bobby were here? The sublime sense of conquest he'd have as he looks on all three of us...

Kathryn takes her hand off Jill's arm.

Elisabeth: And our husbands.

Kathryn: To be sure.

Elisabeth veers her head to look at the men conversing in the other room.

Jill: I'm uncomfortable with that.

Elisabeth: It's understandable.

Kathryn: I was uncomfortable after I found out about him and Elisabeth. Now I feel very different...as if part of the pleasure is in my knowing just how much of a conquest he's made...Especially now, with you added to the picture. It's kind of nice to be part of...of a...Not sure I can find words for it. (laughs)

Silence for two or three moments.

Elisabeth: Look at them.

The three women look at their husbands in the distance. A prolonged silence as they do.

Kathryn: You know, Jill, after I got over my initial jealousy, I began to feel very close to Elisabeth...because I began to think of her as someone who's known exactly what I've known...

Elisabeth: Exactly what and exactly where...

Kathryn: Oh yes.

Silence for a moment.

Kathryn: And I know I'm feeling close to you now for the same reasons.

Jill (smiles, embarrassed): I'm not sure I know what I've gotten into.

Kathryn: Well, we know *exactly* what's gotten into you.

Jill bows her head, purses her lips. The three women stare out at their husbands. Again, some moments of silence as they do so.

Kathryn: Horns of plenty.

Elisabeth: I'll bet Bobby has told you things about us. I'll bet he has.

Kathryn: He has, hasn't he?

Elisabeth (gently): Don't you think that, if he's told you those kinds of things about us, that there's a very good chance that he's told us the same sorts of things about you?

Jill's eyes open wide. Her expression is neutral. Her body is rigid at this moment.

Kathryn (puts her hand back on Jill's arm): What has he told you?

Silence.

Elisabeth: We know you cried afterward.

Jill closes her eyes for a moment and opens them again.

Kathryn: What has he told you?

Jill: That you gave him your panties for a souvenir.

Kathryn: I did do that.

Another silence as the sounds of their husbands' conversation get momentarily louder. Two phrases from their conversation drift in: Matt saying the words "fake news" and Mike saying the words "goddamn disgrace."

Jill: That you did it with him in your office while Matt was waiting for you in the reception area.

Elisabeth: It did happen like that.

Kathryn: You can tell us everything.

Jill: Not everything.

CUT TO CLOSE-UP OF LENNY. THEN CUT TO LONG SHOT OF JILL

Jill is leaning forward, her hands balanced on a table top. She is naked and bent around twenty degrees. A gardenia is inserted in her rear. The camera tracks forward, slowly, until her body takes up most of the frame. A man's hand reaches forward and plucks the gardenia.

CUT TO CLOSE-UP OF JILL'S FACE IN PROFILE

Jill's eyes clamp shut. She clenches her jaw. Then she lets out a yelp, then another one. Then she opens her eyes.

Jill: Oh, how you've cuckolded my husband!

TITLE ON BLACK SCREEN

**Fisher, Lecture**

Jason as Fisher: What these psychosocial dynamics do not quite encompass is the role of women. Women as the tenders of the garden, or cave, or what have you, would seem to be enablers of the superego and its value system; indeed, jealously protective of it. On the other hand, the system-making to which the fiercest superegos are destined to devote themselves is, at least in an archetypal sense, not the province of the mother. To the contrary; in her matrix, all things merge, all lovers converge, all unities diverge. Indeed, as the primal cathexis, the mother sets off the whole round of father-son sympathies and antipathies. She is the cause of the first superego and, indirectly, of the endless round of superego v. superego hostilities.

So, when Freud famously asked, “What do women want?”, he was doing more than acknowledging his own perplexity as to their psychodynamic specifics. He was, in fact, defining those psychodynamics as intrinsically murky. I need only compare my visits to the Kalighat or other Kali shrines in West Bengal to even the temples of Siva elsewhere in India. I saw how simultaneously confusing are her demands and how ferociously assiduous the acolytes are to fulfill them. Once I was even shoved away when I tried to worship, and it wasn’t just because I’m white. I don’t know what Kali wants, and I’m not sure I’m all that eager to find out. But she chews up one male regime after another, be it the Third Reich or the happiest nuclear family in all of Nebraska.

Jason sighs, as if exhausted. He looks off to the left, and laughs.

Jason: Huh? Say again? Oh yeah, yeah, for sure... Yeah, I’m definitely out the window. (shakes his head)

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TITLE ON BLACK SCREEN

**Auditions for Part of Kathryn, *Bobby at Work***

MEDIUM SHOT

Woman sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind her.

Male Voice: The line is to be said in a sexual context.

Woman: Oh your thing!

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT MAN

Woman sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind her.

Male Voice: The line is to be said in a sexual context.

Woman: Oh your thing!

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT MAN

Woman sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind her.

Male Voice: The line is to be said in a sexual context.

Woman: Oh your thing!

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT MAN

Woman sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind her.

Male Voice: The line is to be said in a sexual context.

Woman: Oh your thing!

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT MAN

Woman sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind her.

Male Voice: The line is to be said in a sexual context.

Woman: Oh your thing!

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT MAN

Woman sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind her.

Male Voice: You're feeling very insecure as you say the line.

Woman: Oh your thing!

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT MAN

Woman sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind her.

Male Voice: You're feeling very insecure as you say the line.

Woman: Oh your thing!

CUT TO BLACK SCREEN.

The voices of three different women are heard in succession.

Woman: Oh your thing!

Woman: Oh your thing!

Woman: Oh your thing!

A few seconds of silence. Then the voices of two different women in succession.

Woman: Thing.

Woman: Thing.

#### **AUTHOR'S NOTE:**

*“Totem and Taboo” is one of two “stories in the form of a screenplay” that appear in my book Floodlands; the other, “Civilization and Its Discontents,” also has an ironic Freudian title. It’s a format that offers intriguing possibilities for the erotic, for both visualizations and verbalizations.*

*As to “Totem and Taboo’s” focus, I think cuckoldry is our current world’s most interesting sexual obsession, both for the theatricality of the fetish itself, and for what its popularity says about the collective psyche. In S&M circles they have a term, “TPE” for “Total Power Exchange,” that seems relevant. I wanted to explore that dynamic along with the myriad of ways in which a veritably pornographic lust underscores social positioning. I wanted to achieve a fairly disinterested perspective and discussion (by including the filmmakers themselves as part of the story). But, to be sure, I also want readers to feel the TPE tangibly enough to at least be a little unsettled if not aroused.*

*Again, for all of that, this screenplay format was really serviceable.*

**AUTHOR'S BIO:** Larry Smith’s writings have appeared in literary journals throughout the world. His 2016 novella *Patrick Fitzmike and Mike Fitzpatrick* (Outlook 19) traverses the political, sexual and spiritual alcoves of the modern Catholic Church. He is currently compiling a third collection of stories called *High and Dry* as well as a collection of hybrid nonfictions called: *Nicole Simpson: The Untold Story*. His story **Gag and May Gag** also appears in this issue. His story **Heaven Starts Here** was published in Issue 3.

**EDITOR'S BIO:** Janet Erlich Colson is the Drama Editor at Fleas on the Dog when she isn’t serving federal time for crimes against politics.

