

Rent Co\$\$ Sector

By

Roger Brookfield

WHY I LIKE IT: *Acting Drama Editor EZRA NEIGHBORS writes...Any Top Dog in the customer service industry knows that its not the product you sell, but the relationships you build with your customers.*

Much akin to proverb; Rent Collector boasts a powerful story in ordinary circumstances.

Ordinary circumstance that feel all to real in today's day and age. It's a story that is atomic in size but dropped with the deftness of a single pin. What "Rent Collector" achieves so swiftly is the building of this relationship between two friends stricken within their given circumstances.

Ordinary people expressing the woes of the world; will anything be done about it? (Spacing is playwright's own.)

Rent Collector

By

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Rent Collector

SETTING

A small restaurant in a medium-sized city.

CHARACTERS

OONA: restaurant owner in her mid-forties but aging maybe too fast because of her business

ARCHIE: in his mid-forties, a rent collector for a slumlord, a ferocious-looking man

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(Lights up to reveal ARCHIE at a table in OONA's restaurant, staring out a window. OONA enters and goes to ARCHIE's table.)

OONA

Got your sandwich when you're ready for it. When'd you start takin' a lunch with you?

ARCHIE

Today.

OONA

(As she sits opposite him)

A lunch, but no breakfast. 'Smatter with my breakfasts?

ARCHIE

Nothin'.

OONA

Oh. Well, I'm glad to know I make "nothin'" to perfection. Got a five-star rating on the way I make nothin'. Ahhh . . . God, that feels sooo good to sit down. Been on the go since four—Ow! My back.

ARCHIE

Sit up straight.

OONA

Yeah, there, that's better. I need an operation, but it's fifty-fifty whether I'd end up paralyzed. What would I do with this place?

(She has a sip of her coffee.)

Yow!

ARCHIE

Blow on it.

OONA

You're full of advice today, arencha? Ha, ha, that's the Archie I know; always a wiseass.

(She has another sip; it's still too hot.)

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ARCHIE

Blow on it.

OONA

You want to?

ARCHIE

Once upon a time I would've.

OONA

Yeah, I know; once upon a time. So--Who ya lookin' at? Is Blondie out there?

ARCHIE

Blondie who?

OONA

Blondie short-shorts at the gas station. 'Cause if she's out there, I'll be wipin' nose prints off my window—

ARCHIE

Aw, come on, Oona!

OONA

I'm just yankin' your chain's all I'm doin'. I haven't got more'n a hi outa you this morning. Sittin' here all mummied up—You got somethin' on your mind? 'Cause if you do an' you want to be left alone . . .

(She starts to get up from her seat. ARCHIE puts a hand on hers.)

ARCHIE

It's okay. It's just-- . . . I was thinking about how safe it is in here.

OONA

Safe?

ARCHIE

An' how much I don't want to leave.

OONA

You afraid of somethin'?

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(ARCHIE closes his eyes and squeezes OONA's hand.)

OONA

Hey, I gotta use that hand!

ARCHIE

I'm sorry, Oona.

(Taking her hand and kissing it.)

OONA

Look, Archie, I'm sorry if I said somethin'--

ARCHIE

You asked me if was I afraid, an' that cut right to the quick.

OONA

What's goin' on with you? You were the guy they were scared shitless of when we were growin' up. There was a guy from the bank here about one of my loans, an' when he saw you, he knew you collected rents an' wanted to know was I in hock to you. An' I told him we're old friends an' you were one of my regulars. He said he was glad because he wouldn't want to owe anything to anybody who looked like you.

(No response from ARCHIE.)

OONA

So? What is it?

ARCHIE

I am afraid.

OONA

Of what?

ARCHIE

Of where I have to go this morning. I never used to get this way. I dunno, I must be gettin' too old for it.

OONA

We're both gettin' too old.

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ARCHIE

It's the booze—not having it, I mean. I didn't know how much it helped. It gave me insulation.

OONA

Insulation?

ARCHIE

Or distance. Distance: like this; I was drinking an' it put me here . . .

(He moves his cup to a corner of the table.)

An' the rest of what I was goin' through was over here.

(He motions to the sugar, salt, pepper, and napkins.)

An' it worked real good. You have that drink an' you go, ahh, an' you're happy. You can deal with anything; nothin'll get you down: a little of Mr. Walker or Mr. Beam gave me the distance to get me through things. Or the insulation so I didn't feel them.

OONA

You're not drinkin' again, are you?

ARCHIE

No, an' so I don't have insulation anymore--or distance: nothin' to put between me an' what I gotta go an' do. You remember I was gone for a while?

OONA

Yeah, a year.

ARCHIE

A year to dry out. I had to. An' it worked. Felt better'n I had in a long time. I lost weight, I slept better: the whole nine yards. Only, I didn't quit my job. An' that's where I fucked up. 'Cause one of the things they tell you in rehab is to cut out the situations that lead you to have to have a drink.

OONA

Why didn't you quit your job, then?

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ARCHIE

They let me take off for all the time I was in rehab, an' paid me for it, an' gave me my old job back. . . So, I felt like I owed 'em. I mean, what was I gonna do? The Army didn't train me to do much more'n I do now. An' where would I go? Over to the airport to load cargo for Amazon? Or flip burgers? No, the money's too, too good--I still had to make a living; I got alimony to pay. An' one of my kids needs braces, another needs a winter coat, the ex needs her furnace to be replaced—you know what I mean?

OONA

Same when I gotta get somethin' fixed or bought for here. Or for Earl.

ARCHIE

He's still in the wheelchair?

OONA

An' never gonna get out of it. This place is my business now; I gotta run it.

ARCHIE

We're both us in way too far. An' so I gotta go down an' collect the Health Commissioner's money.

OONA

What's she got to do with it?

ARCHIE

They're her places. She doesn't like anybody to know; she wants to keep her skirts clean, an' so she owns 'em under separate names. An' it's an easy job—they tell me don't let it get personal; they're nothin' but trash. Just go in, collect the money, an' get the hell out. Only, be careful, that's all. Make sure you got somethin' in case one of 'em comes up on you. And I am careful. I got Misters Smith an' Wesson.

OONA

You carry? When'd that start?

ARCHIE

When I started this job. You never see it under my jacket. I never take it off because of that. I gotta carry it 'cause I'm the one who has to go into those places an' see all the shit. They're routine, most of 'em. Some go, "Oh, today the day man? 'Cause I forgot an' I'm a little short this week." An' there's the woman with the two little ones in the next

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ARCHIE (CONT'D.)

room an' she's gonna give me a good time in exchange for the rent. The fucking inhumanity! And it's not supposed to affect me?! So, yeah, I'm afraid.

(OONA tries to sit beside him, but he motions to where she'd been sitting.)

ARCHIE

There's one place I gotta go down there. Medina's. I put her off 'til last, even though I shouldn't because it's no good for me. Medina—only she goes by Dina, with the M and the E missing: the ME. She'll open the door an' tell me she'll get the money right away. She's watching TV—Sesame Street or Word Girl. An' she'll come back with a teddy bear an' pull it open an' hand me the money. She'll tell me it's all there, it's always all there. She counts it herself. . . She's only six years old!

OONA

Six? Where's her family?

ARCHIE

She doesn't know; they come an' go, so . . .

OONA

An' her mom?

ARCHIE

Off cokin' up somewhere or doin' somebody so she can. Dina's gotta sneak into her mama's purse to get the money to pay the rent before she can piss it all away. Only, she told me . . . She told me she's afraid one day her mama's gonna catch her at it an' whup the hide off her.

OONA

Jesus. You tell your boss?

ARCHIE

I tell her people; she's never there.

OONA

They tell Children's Services?

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ARCHIE

Not when there's money involved.

OONA

Then you have to.

ARCHIE

After she gets somethin' to eat. Last month I was there, she had an empty box of Trix on the floor. I took a look in the fridge an' there was a quart of milk all curdled an' stinky, a couple pieces of moldy bread, a leftover hamburger, an' two six-packs of Miller. And that's it.

OONA

Oh my God, what kind of animals would do that to a child?

ARCHIE

An' every time I go into that place, it's a tomb. Only places there's light are the TV an' the stove; she's got all four burners goin'. An' so I tell Dina to open the blinds an' let some light in, an' she tells me her mama doesn't want the blinds open, an' if she does, her mama'll whup her. I was about to open 'em anyway one day, an' she grabbed hold of me an' begged me not to do it. She said she'd shoot me.

OONA

She's got a gun?

ARCHIE

Her mom or one of the ones she lays up with left it there. I gotta get goin'. You got my sandwich?

(OONA goes to get the sandwich. ARCHIE gets up from the table, takes off his jacket, removes his shoulder holster, and hands it to OONA when she returns.)

ARCHIE

Take this.

OONA

No! I don't want it!

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ARCHIE

Please, Oona. I can't do it with this on me. If I bring it with me, I'll sit there an' wait 'til one of 'em comes home.

OONA

Let me go with you. We can go to Children's Services--

ARCHIE

This is on me, Oona, not you. You got your responsibilities here. Earl's countin' on you. An' you got no help here. You need to be here. An' I need to be down there. Dina needs somethin' to eat, needs to have the blinds open an' have some light in her life. Thanks for the sandwich, Oona. I love you.

(He leaves the restaurant. OONA stands by the table. Then she starts picking up the chairs to put them on the table.)

OONA

I gotta get the place ready for supper. I got a business to run.

(As she works.)

Archie went down there. He gave Dina somethin' to eat. He opened the blinds. He brought light into the room. An' she had the gun. 'Cause her mama didn't want light in her life.

(She's finished with her task.)

Nobody else is gonna sit here.

BLACKOUT

END OF PLAY

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *I like good stories; hearing them and telling them. Many years ago, I read a story of a rent collector having to take payments from a six-year-old girl and wrote and saved it for the future. I came across it again last year and was so moved by it, I had to tell it in a play that would address how afraid the rent collector was of having to face the girl and that he had to do something about her living condition.*

AUTHOR BIO: Roger is from New Jersey, a U.S. Air Force veteran, a graduate of the U. of Wisconsin- Milwaukee, and retired from the City of Cincinnati Ohio Sewer District. His plays have been performed in Wisconsin, Texas, Ohio, Minnesota, Washington, Florida, New York, and California. His one-minute plays "Colonoscopy" and "The Most Powerful Doppler in the Tristate" have been performed at Gone In 60 festivals. His one-act "Thank You" won awards at North Park Vaudeville & Candy Shoppe in San Diego CA, and at the Hand to Mouth Players in Montrose NY, and is available through Art Age Senior Theatre Resource Center.