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By

Steven Schatzman

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JOHN SULLIVAN writes...A young, gifted but emotionally erratic singer visits the rhythm guitarist/back-up singer in her brother's band determined to get exactly what she wants; but this piece takes another turn. Or*

maybe Laurie really wants the stable, calming comfort of being with someone who won't exploit her talent or her relative inexperience. Someone she actually trusts. Eli is that steady heartbeat at the core of every band that survives: creative in his own quiet way, but willing to give the stars their lion's share of space and acclaim while he manages the business end, tends to equipment, remembers the play-list and keeps the group's volatile constellation of talent from plummeting to earth in flames. I can hear tonal qualities of Jason Isbell and Rickie Lee Jones (Night Train) in this script. The texture of The Weight truly reads authentic. (Spacing is playwright's own.)

Five stars

The Weight
a play in one act
by Steven Schutzman

Time: The not too distant past.

Setting: Eli's apartment. Early afternoon.

Characters:

Eli – 20, a rhythm guitar player and back-up singer

Laurie - 16, a talented singer

(ELI, sitting on couch, playing guitar, listlessly, things on his mind. A knock at the door. ELI rises and opens it. LAURIE comes inside, without a word, dragging backpack behind her across the floor. She leaves pack, goes back out and reenters with a guitar case which she leans against the backpack. She goes out and a second or two later a rolled sleeping bag flies through the doorway to land next to the pack and guitar.)

ELI: This can't be good.

(LAURIE appears in doorway, holding a six pack of beer, two bottles short, one of which is in her hand. LAURIE is dressed in a sexy dress she doesn't fill out, maybe someday. She slugs on beer. She is never drunk in the play but gets tipsier as the action proceeds.)

LAURIE: I have made four decisions, Eli. One, that I will not live at my Mom's house one day more or at my Dad's house one day more.

ELI: You're not staying here. I've just about had it with your family.

LAURIE: Two, that I am dropping out of high school. Living in two stupid houses and going to stupid high school is so played out. Three that, look at me...

ELI: Why?

LAURIE: Just look at me.

ELI: No. I have a question for you.

LAURIE: The answer is yes.

ELI: What? Jesus. Have you seen your crazy brother? Because early this morning, he drives off in his truck. No note, nothing. And his cell phone's turned off. Maybe he tossed it in the river like last time.

LAURIE: No. But I did get a text message from him, just two words, "The weight", W-E-I-...

ELI: I know what weight it is. The band's covering it.

LAURIE: *(Singing)* 'Take a load off, Annie/Take a load for free/Take a load off Annie, And put your load right on me'

ELI: You sound just like your mother. Look like her too in that dress.

LAURIE: Do not and do not.

ELI: Spittin' image.

LAURIE: Stop it.

ELI: What's with the dress, Laurie?

LAURIE: Four, that I am going out on my own as a singer and I need a dress like this to audition for certain, you know, night clubs.

ELI: You skipped number three.

LAURIE: I know. Three that... *(She comes close to him but he avoids her and walks around the room as he talks.)* Three that I...*(She slugs on beer.)*

ELI: Damn that brother of yours. I had to cancel band rehearsal today and we really need the practice. Been trying to keep the guys organized, stay on top of the business end of things, professional, booking gigs, and we can't have this nonsense anymore. We have to be reliable, if we're going to make a living as a band. We're headlining at the Dell this weekend and don't even have our play list yet.

LAURIE: Headlining at the Dell. Nice.

ELI: It's a big deal for us but without our lead singer, I mean, damn, if your brother bails again, we'll be banned from every club in the city. I thought we were all done with that nonsense. What is with your family?

LAURIE: Wanderlust. *(She flops onto couch.)* Wander and lust. Sit down so I can tell you my third decision. *(He stays put.)* New couch, huh?

ELI: Yeah, I just bought it, based on the money from this weekend's gig. Fix the place up, finally.

LAURIE: Does it fold out?

ELI: For some people.

LAURIE: If I sleep here, it won't be on any couch.

ELI: That's real funny, girl *(Beat)* God, your family is like an albatross around my neck.

LAURIE: The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.

ELI: What?

LAURIE: Rime of the Ancient Mariner by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, British poet. That's where the expression comes from.

ELI: What expression?

LAURIE: Albatross. Neck. 'Water, water, everywhere and all the boards did shrink. Water, water, everywhere and not a drop to drink.'

ELI: And you're gonna drop out of school. Smart as you are.

LAURIE: This is a real comfortable couch. You can just sink right down, heavy and weightless at the same time, and never move again.

ELI: Oh no, you can't.

LAURIE: Everyone needs a place that'll take them in no matter what.

ELI: Normal people call that home.

LAURIE: Home is where the heart is, Sir, and you have mine.

ELI: I give up.

LAURIE: You give up? Surrender, finally, to fated love? Just like in Jane Austen, British novelist.

ELI: Like I don't know who Jane Austen is. You have always read way too many books for a girl with such an impressionable mind.

LAURIE: I will dress in white for you, my dress a piece of the moon on a moonless night. I will sweep my dark heavy curls slowly down your chest. Thomas Hardy, British novelist.

ELI: Sounds like a bodice ripper.

LAURIE: Wrong. It's British Lit.

ELI: What's with this British kick, all of a sudden?

LAURIE: I'm taking a British Lit. course over at the community college.

ELI: Yeah, I believe it. You were always smart as a whip, a pain in the ass but smart as a whip.

LAURIE: Eli, did you ever read Lady Chatterley's Lover by D.H. Lawrence?

ELI: No, but I bet it's a British novel.

LAURIE: It's great. Hot and smart at the same time. Like in this scene I just read: After the gamekeeper, Mellors, makes love to Lady Constance Chatterley like she's never been made love to before, D.H. Lawrence writes, 'Connie thought a woman would have died of shame. Instead, shame died.' 'Instead, shame died.' In other words...

ELI: I get it. That's pretty good.

LAURIE: Good? It's better than good. It's deep, profound. Hey, I'll read the passage to you.

(She gets up, fetches book and bottle from six pack and sits back down on couch.)

LAURIE: Come and sit down. Come on, I won't bite.

ELI: Okay. Sure. Why not? If you want to read something. *(He sits but not too close.)* Don't you bite me.

LAURIE: Drink?

ELI: No. Put that thing away, Laurie. It's two o'clock in the afternoon.

LAURIE: Eli, I have made four decisions. One, that I'm not going to live with my parents anymore. Two, that I am dropping out of high school. Three, that I am going to lose my virginity to you this afternoon.

(She unpins her hair and shakes it out.)

ELI: Way, way too many books.

LAURIE: I remember the summer I decided you'd be the one.

ELI: You see, those are your problems, right there, right there, you read way too many books and make way too many decisions.

LAURIE: I remember the summer I decided you'd be the one. My Mom was whaling on my brother, with her fists, something awful, really smacking him, over some crack he made about her drinking probably, but he wouldn't defend himself, as usual, and you came in and lifted her off the ground from behind, arms pinned, legs kicking, and carried her out of the room. Remember that?

ELI: Sort of.

LAURIE: You were just fifteen but more of a man than anyone I knew. A real man. Handsome outside, good inside. Noble.

ELI: And you were eleven years old with a schoolgirl crush.

LAURIE: Twelve, just about. Compared to my crazy family and all the drama, you were so calm, so good, shining with the pure light of nobility.

ELI: Normality, more like.

LAURIE: Your awkward goodness and shy eyes, your kind voice and those clever, funny words you made up. It happened in late summer and that night, that night, after I knew I loved you and would always love you, the sheets felt alive against my skin. I didn't

know where I ended and where the world began. The frogs were croaking in the woods so loud they could drive a person out of her mind, remember how they get in late August and what you called it, croakophony?

ELI: Don't remind me.

LAURIE: Croakophony. It was clever. Like a frog cacophony. My love feelings were so intense I just knew you were out there in the dark feeling them too, feeling this love with me like you were hearing the frogs with me, in the hot, croakophonous night.

ELI: Give me a break, girl.

LAURIE: My love thoughts were like a riot of frogs in my head. Our bedrooms like twenty yards apart. You in yours, me in mine. Where did I end? Where did you begin? It was torture and kept on being torture the whole time you lived next door to us. That's why I crept across the yards into your room, the night before your family moved away. But you'd never take advantage. Not you, shining with the pure light of nobility.

ELI: Because you were a mixed up thirteen year old kid looking for love in all the wrong places, after your parents' divorce.

LAURIE: I just wanted you to kiss me and to feel my brand new parts. That's all.

ELI: I should've done it, just to scare you out of the idea.

LAURIE: Come on and try to scare me out of it now. Come on.

(She stands, pulls the dress over her head and sits down on couch, awkwardly trying to find a seductive position, looking strangely fragile in her bra and panties.)

LAURIE: Come on. It might work this time. Because I'm real scared.

(He feints toward her. She flinches, cries out then composes herself.)

ELI: Ha! See, you are scared. You can't fool me. Put your dress back on, girl.

LAURIE: Take me now, Sir, take me now. That's Shakespeare, I think.

ELI: I don't know why you need to read so much because it's like you've got whole books happening right in your own head.

LAURIE: Look at me and tell me you don't want me.

ELI: Don't you know any boys your own age?

LAURIE: Yuck.

ELI: Let's go get an Italian ice or something. My treat.

LAURIE: Nope.

ELI: Wait, I think, I think, yeah, ain't that your brother's truck pulling up?

LAURIE: You're still too nice. Too nice to do anything or too nice to tell me you don't want to do anything.

ELI: I don't want to do anything.

LAURIE: Too nice. Too nice to my crazy brother.

ELI: That is very true.

LAURIE: Too nice to my mother.

ELI: I like your mother. I got no problems with your mother.

LAURIE: That's because she's not your mother.

ELI: She's a great singer, one of a kind. I like your father too and he's the best alto sax player I ever heard play live. I like your whole family, god help me, messed up as you are, but I been too nice to every single one of you in your turn, and paid the price.

LAURIE: Stop being nice to me, Eli, and be nice to me

ELI: Suppose your brother came in right now?

LAURIE: I wouldn't care and neither would he.

ELI: See? You're all freaking nut jobs but I put up with you because of your talent, the musical genius that comes along with the craziness, each one of you so damn talented. It must be kind of a linked genetic thing like blue eyes and blonde hair. Genius and insanity. I've always been in awe of your talent because mine isn't anywhere close to it. Music is hard work for me, but growing up next door to you guys, hearing the beautiful sounds you made...

LAURIE: And the yelling and screaming.

ELI: Growing up next door to you guys was pretty damn great, and pretty damn awful too because it made me love beautiful music and need to make beautiful music without having the talent to make the music as beautiful as you all could, can. I learned what extraordinary talent was and that I was ordinary, normal. At first, I was jealous but I learned accept it and to put up with your carrying on.

LAURIE: You're a good musician, Eli, and noble and good and not in the least bit ordinary but saying you are makes me love you even more. If that's your plan to keep me loving you, it's a good plan. If it's not your plan and you just want my body, come and take me now. *(Beat)* Please. *(Beat Beat)* Five...

ELI: Five? What? You said four.

LAURIE: I have made five decisions, Eli. Five, that I am splitting this place for good so if we go to bed it'll be just this one time and the absolutely right sendoff into my new life. *(Beat Beat)* Well, then, maybe I'll just go visit my British Lit. professor whose moustache is so big you can't see his mouth.

ELI: Come on, Laurie. You don't have to do that.

LAURIE: *(Singing)* '...looking for love in all the wrong places. Looking for love in too many faces. Searching their eyes, looking for traces of what I'm dreaming of...'

ELI: You've come to the right place but for the wrong kind of love.

LAURIE: Oh, Eli. You're just so good and sweet and kind. Someone I knew I could trust with my gift. Shining with the pure light of nobility.

ELI: Normality.

LAURIE: Whatever you want to call it. You'd never hurt me. My heart sent me here first and my heart wasn't wrong, was it?

ELI: No, you're heart wasn't wrong but I'm your friend and...

LAURIE: *(Interrupting)* Shhh. You don't have to say anything more. Well, how about a kiss, Eli. Just one kiss. *(Beat)* You have to kiss me, before I leave for good. On account of all the nights I spent dreaming of it.

ELI: Will you put your dress back on?

LAURIE: Sure.

ELI: Here you go.

(He hands her the dress and she starts to put it back on but stops.)

LAURIE: It's her dress anyway, one of the ones she wears when she's planning to go out after a gig and pick up guys half her age, guys your age, Eli, almost my age. Like she did just last night. The two of 'em coming in all wasted and stupid and loud on the stairs and him there all puffed up and stupid and leering at me in the morning before going off to work at the slaughterhouse or somewhere. *(She almost breaks down.)*

ELI: I'm sorry you had to go through that.

LAURIE: Again. Again and again. Shame must die, Eli, shame must die.

ELI: I know. But it's not like in those books. It takes time. Time heals all wounds, and that ain't British Lit. *(Beat Beat)* You know, you don't really look much like your mother or sound like her either. I just said that to get to you. Works every time.

LAURIE: I guess I brought it on my own self with the dress and the drinking and the drama.

ELI: Everybody's entitled to freak out once in a while...just not on a regular basis!
(Beat) Hey, I have an idea. Why don't you sing with us this weekend, if your brother doesn't come back or even if he does, you should sit in with us. It'll be great and, at this point, a family obligation.

LAURIE: Sure. I'd be honored, Sir. And now for your obligation...That kiss I've been dreaming on.

(They approach each other and kiss, softly, awkwardly, and when it ends, they laugh at weirdness of it. She snuggles next to him, more like a younger person now.)

LAURIE: Remember them frogs croaking so loud?

ELI: How could I forget? It was only like the main sound of my childhood.

LAURIE: Croakophony.

ELI: I guess.

LAURIE: Croakophony. Say it. Come on. Say it.

ELI: Croakophony.

LAURIE: You felt me, didn't you?

ELI: Huh?

LAURIE: Out there in the night? Longing for you in the night? Just twenty yards away in our separate bedrooms?

ELI: Sure I did.

LAURIE: I knew it. I felt you feeling me. This moment had to be, Eli, it just had to be and you know it. *(Singing)* 'Take a load off, Annie. Take a load for free. Take a load off, Annie. *(He does the harmony.)* And, and, and, put your load, put your load, put your load, right on me.' *(Beat)* Nice. That was nice. You're a good singer.

ELI: I guess. If you say so.

(LAURIE: hums "The Weight" and, after she closes her eyes, her humming fades away.)

ELI: Knowing I'm kind of ordinary is good for me, Laurie, so I accept my part, my portion, sing the harmonies, play rhythm guitar, take care of the business end, work hard and practice hard at the music. What you have in you, hard work and practice can't put in a person like me and you should save yourself for someone who can keep up with you. You're going places, Laurie, just not yet, girl, just not yet.

(Eli sits with his arm around Laurie as she drifts off. Fade to black. End of play.)

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *No issues, no themes, no stylistic or literary influences except, now that I think of it, I love Chekhov's short plays where a character, having made a life changing decision, enters in a fever to reveal it. I really love precocious, theatrical, complex, quick young women like Laurie, on fire with life and imagination, impatient and unafraid to make things happen. I really love self-aware, grounded, fundamentally decent young men like Eli who can be trusted to do the right thing and to recognize what's important. Laurie knows that about him; her longtime feeling for him is based on it, as a welcome harbor from her own troubled family. There are cautious people and there are reckless people. I threw these two together at a moment of great potential and watched them do a timeless dance.*

AUTHOR BIO: I am a fiction writer, poet and playwright whose work has appeared in such journals as Fleas on the Dog, The Pushcart Prize, Alaska Quarterly Review, Defenestration, Swamp Ape Review, Painted Bride Quarterly, TriQuarterly, Third Coast, Post Road, Sand and Gargoyle among many others. My novella "The Runts" was just named a finalist for The Gateway Literary Press Novella Contest 2022. I am also a seven-time recipient of a Maryland State Arts Council Individual Artist Grant, awarded for creative writing excellence.