

A LIKELY STORY

By Robert Alexander Wray

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS:

A Likely Story, inspired by a real experience of having to check on a girl who might have committed suicide, started off as a traditionally structured short story. As it was heavy on dialogue though, I decided it might work better as a meta-theatrical play of sorts. (Judging from the one reading it's had, at the New Circle Theatre Company in New York, it works indeed.) In terms of influences, Chekhov is the main one, which can be detected most clearly by the ambiguity of the Narrator's point of view. That said, I wanted to explore the vampiric ways in which people use each other to get what they want. Thus, the crime of passion air that permeates all of the characters. (Spacing is author's own.)

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CHARACTERS

Narrator

Gerald

Wesley

Sarah/Zoe

TIME

The past

PLACE

A world of impure imagination

NARRATOR

There was the gradual rattling of the yellow Audi as he hit ninety miles an hour on the speedometer; then the hard stare at the road, one hand choking the wheel, the other thumbing numbers on a phone; then the interminable wait...

GERALD

“Even Shakespeare working at his desk,”

NARRATOR

muttered Gerald,

GERALD

“would’ve answered his cellphone by now.”

NARRATOR

Wesley finally answered.

WESLEY

“Hello, the Wesley.”

GERALD

“Wes, it’s Gerald. Listen: For mysterious reasons I need you to go check on Sarah as quickly as possible. I’m on my way there. About twenty minutes away. You’ll make it to her before I do.”

WESLEY

“Things bad?”

GERALD

“Worse than ever. We had a major spat last night. Major.”

WESLEY

“Really.”

GERALD

“Look, I know it’s two in the afternoon and this must be precious writing time to you since you’re only now waking up from a fucking alcoholic stupor, but could you do this favor for me?”

NARRATOR

True as it was about the alcoholic stupor--two days of substantial intoxication and counting--Wesley felt the hostility unmerited.

WESLEY

“You could try calling her, ya bastard.”

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GERALD

“I’ve been trying her all day but she won’t pick up. She’s having some serious doubts, Wes. Doubts about life. I think she may be verging on the suicidal. She’s suicidal.”

NARRATOR

Gerald speeded faster, and passed a truck carrying, what seemed to him, a load of unsecured lumber.

WESLEY

“All right, I have to throw on some clothes.”

GERALD

“Enter my house from the back, via the kitchen. The door doesn’t lock. If you don’t see any sign of her, check the basement. ‘Cause that’s where she might do something to herself. It’d be a likely place. Hurry!”

NARRATOR

Gerald hung up, and like a fugitive, shot a glance in his rearview mirror for any hint of a cop’s flashing lights. He tried Sarah again.

NARRATOR

Even through the residual fog of cheap Scotch, Wesley took in that it was a cloudy day, drizzling a little, and that he merely walked fast, and didn't run to the house. Walking, he figured, had to do with denial, a denial that Sarah would be withering away on some noose; running had to do with an admittance of it. (Gerald told him once, not long ago, about having to remove a rope from around her neck.)

He ambled by a coffee shop, and the hair-cutting place, and stopped next to the always closed--at least to him--luncheonette. A recollection of what happened the previous evening overtook him:

ZOE

"You shouldn't be here. You're a writer, right?"

NARRATOR

asked the girl with the super-thick glasses and lioness hair as she approached him. Wesley mumbled something in response.

ZOE

"You should be writing,"

NARRATOR

she continued,

ZOE

"not hanging out at a college bar. You're only here to get laid."

WESLEY

"Well. Yeah."

ZOE

“You taught at the university. I bet you don’t remember who I am...I’m Zoe. I took your fiction class.”

NARRATOR

He didn’t remember, but, assuming as true her ex-student status, he backtracked a bit, and attempted a dignified explanation as to why he was spending his time among a bunch of coeds.

WESLEY

“I’m doing research. For a story. A short story. And, um...yep.”

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ZOE

“You’re degrading your art, and yourself. These girls are simple and stupid. You’re not. Leave.”

NARRATOR

She kept scolding and scolding, and he kept thinking, ‘There is not enough drink in my drink, and I am SO. FUCKING. LONELY.’

The rain came pelting down, snapping Wesley out of his reverie. He found refuge under the awning of a grocery store, and registered a world caught unawares: Two girls skipping barefoot through quick-forming puddles, giggling “Oh my Gods”; others yelling and rushing to nearby porches for protection; a hawk in a tree, taking off like a branch suddenly breaking away and floating adrift in the wind...

WESLEY

“Mystifying,”

NARRATOR

he said to himself,

WESLEY

“how some cataclysmic downpour, coupled with a possibly tragic agenda, can make one feel so alive.”

NARRATOR

The rain stopped almost as dramatically as it started, and he ran the rest of the way to the house.

NARRATOR

Gerald rocketed onwards, darting another glance at the umpteenth “Authorized Vehicles Only” clearing where the cops often lay in wait.

GERALD

“Okay, ten minutes till I get there. Ten minutes to either a sigh of relief, or to heartbreak.”

NARRATOR

Despite the fallout from the night before, he could still feel that connection, that almost umbilical connection with Sarah which kept her presence near. He thought of her beauty, and how she could suck the air out of your lungs as she walked by. Then he recalled their

GERALD

“Spat.”

NARRATOR

She wanted to fuck, or as she liked to put it:

GERALD

“Play with me, play with me.”

NARRATOR

He wanted to finish reading Albert Camus’ “Caligula.” After being pestered one too many times, he threw the book, kicked his chair over, then lifted her by the hips and carried her outside, into the dark. Her legs wrapped around him while her eyes glowed with a horrifying mix of love and hate. She moved her head towards his neck, and like an animal, sunk her teeth into his flesh. He howled in pain. His hands went to her lips, aiming to peel them away, but he couldn’t release the jaw. Gerald didn’t normally condone domestic violence. However,

GERALD

“When a girl’s trying to literally eat you, all bets are off.”

NARRATOR

So he struck her in the head. She careened backwards, stumbling to the ground. He called her

GERALD

“A lot of bad names.”

NARRATOR

She just sat, watched the blood drip down his shoulder, and laughed. He decided to leave and grabbed the keys to his car. She threatened to do things to herself. It mattered nothing to him then.

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NARRATOR (cont’d)

He sped away to his mother’s estate out in the countryside, his habitual oasis...

Gerald’s hometown classical music station started coming in with less static; to the best of his knowledge, it sounded like one of Beethoven’s late quartets. He pictured Wesley passed out on a pile of empty Scotch bottles. It wouldn’t be the first time he was let down by him, or betrayed even. (Wesley’s fiction brimmed full of disreputable details from Gerald’s life.)

GERALD

“Wes, you couldn’t write the blurb on the back of a Danielle Steel novel.”

NARRATOR

Gerald told him this once after being asked, “Do you think I wrote this crime of passion story with too many shifting points of view?”

NARRATOR

Wesley knocked a number of times on the kitchen door, calling out her name. He gazed through the window and felt the first pangs of trepidation about seeing Sarah's body dangling from a ceiling. He knocked louder. No answer. He turned the knob on the door, opened it, and saw on the floor what seemed to be drops of blood. Peering closer, he realized they were tiny red rose petals. (Remnants of a 'He loves me, he loves me not' scenario?) He looked around, caught sight of Gerald's single malt Scotch collection, then he valiantly disregarded it, and poked his head into the livingroom.

WESLEY

"Sarah?"

NARRATOR

He proceeded slowly, trying to sense the presence of death...

WESLEY

"Sarah? Hello?"

NARRATOR

He took double and triple notice of everything--the original art, the marble fireplace, the Oriental divan, and so on--and wondered aloud:

WESLEY

"Should I call nine-one-one FIRST if she's dead from hanging? Or, take the body down, THEN call?"

NARRATOR

He shuddered at the thought of her dead body, of touching it, and became aware of how horrible this was to do to someone: Leaving a lifeless corpse behind for a person to chance upon. How scary and gruesome and, well, downright rude.

WESLEY

“Sarah?”

NARRATOR

He noticed, splayed out on a tiger skin rug, an odd assortment of facial creams and suntan lotion. A macabre joke occurred to him as he considered the possibility of her overdosing on Coppertone.

WESLEY

“All right,”

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NARRATOR

he uttered to himself, gathering his courage.

WESLEY

“The basement.”

NARRATOR

A flood of movie memories with grisly finales in basements swept through him as he flicked the switch at the basement entryway. A solitary light illuminated a washing machine and dryer, but not much else. While he snail-paced his way down the steps, he tried to erase the image in his head of her dead suspended body. Once he made it to the ominous bottom, he heard an unexpected sound:

SARAH

“Who’s down there?”

NARRATOR

Wesley immediately went into shock.

SARAH

“That you, Wes?”

NARRATOR

said Sarah, hovering in silhouette at the top of the stairs. Her abrupt presence and voice and ‘aliveness’ wreaked havoc with his internal state of shifting emotions. Wesley’s instinct was to

run away, but deeming that impossible, and not wanting to appear totally dumbfounded forever, he held up his end of the conversation.

WESLEY

“...It’s raining...again.”

SARAH

“What you doing in the basement, scouting for liquor?”

WESLEY

“Well...”

SARAH

“Are you drunk? Wasted? All loosey-goosey?”

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NARRATOR

Playing up his drunkenness in order to get away with not being quite mentally fit, he fashioned an excuse using a nearby object.

WESLEY

“Bike. I wanted to, um, borrow Gerald’s bike and um, ride around. The town. See some stuff. In the area...The bike.”

SARAH

“Silly, why would you want to bike in the pouring rain?”

NARRATOR

Wesley had no response to such a logical question.

SARAH

“Well, come on up. I’d like to talk and get your advice, your deep insight on something.”

WESLEY

“Oh?”

SARAH

“Me and Gerald parted company for the last time, I think. We’re on drastic terms in any event, and I’m probably leaving him. Today.”

WESLEY

“Really.”

NARRATOR

A kiss on the cheek and a prolonged holding of hands ensued after he made it back to the top. (‘Funky sexy Sarah,’ mused Wesley, ‘with the gorgeous eyes and Cheshire Cat smile.’) She led him to the livingroom, explaining along the way how she’d been out to

SARAH

“get a pack of cigs”

NARRATOR

and buy some luggage to

SARAH

“shove my shit in, although the mess of moisturizers on the rug are all I truly own,”

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NARRATOR

or so she said, and then she went on about how she’d been

SARAH

“plagued by Gerald’s calls all day”

NARRATOR

and simply refused to pick up. A light band of glitter sparkled on her eyelids as she spoke, and Wesley couldn’t help feeling an urge, a hunger really, to make love to her. She talked about Gerald, and

SARAH

“his constant judgment, his aggression,”

NARRATOR

and about her eight months living off his trust fund, doing

SARAH

“nothing!”

NARRATOR

She discussed his never-ending need for solitude, how she

SARAH

“can’t stand the relentless isolation,”

NARRATOR

and how she continually wept and cried.

SARAH

“I have to wear sunglasses for days.”

NARRATOR

And so on and so forth.

SARAH

“I’m better now, though. I’m feeling sad, but lighter, freer. I’m back on my four-year plan.”

WESLEY

“Four-year plan?”

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SARAH

“Yeah, the plan where four years from now I travel to France alone and work in a bakery, smelling like dough and butter, and come home to a different lover every week.”

NARRATOR

Through all this, Wesley maintained a cool and amicable distance, sensing she only wanted--as she usually did in these situations--friendship and a lending ear. So it surprised him when she leaned in close and whispered,

SARAH

“Maybe I should take a lover this very minute.”

NARRATOR

A charged silence hung in the air.

SARAH

“Let’s continue this conversation over two glasses of Scotch,”

NARRATOR

she said, and disappeared into the kitchen. Her unmistakable, yet unspoken question (‘Do you want to sleep with me?’), left Wesley torn in two directions: Yes, he wanted to, desperately, but what about Gerald? And wasn’t he on his way? Due to arrive any second? Sarah walked in with two glasses of Macallan, passed one to Wesley, then sat on the coffee table, or straddled it rather, as if she were posing for a magazine spread. He instantly forgot the threat of Gerald’s “any second” arrival.

SARAH

“You know, despite Gerald’s gruffness and need to reign superior over you, he really does like you. It’s not often he gets to talk to people who he can be ironic and clever with. You’re sort of a brother to him. You’re like the brother he never had, the brother he lost when he was young.”

NARRATOR

She downed the Scotch in one fell swoop.

WESLEY

“Well, if Gerald and I are brothers, it’s definitely of the Cain and Abel variety. And I know exactly who Cain is in this story.”

SARAH

“By the way, Gerald’s got some weed stuffed in the couch. Shall we try it?”

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WESLEY

“Yeah, sure.”

NARRATOR

Sarah threw off a cushion, revealing a small bag of pot, a pipe, and a revolver. She contemplated the revolver and said,

SARAH

“You don’t know how many times I thought of using it.”

WESLEY

“The pipe?”

SARAH

“Not the pipe, baby, the gun. Isn’t it a beautiful pipe though?”

NARRATOR

She sprinkled the pot into the pipe and directed Wesley to check next to a nearby lamp for a lighter. After doing this, he turned back and inadvertently knocked over one of the glasses, breaking it.

WESLEY

“Whoops.”

SARAH

“Don’t worry about it. It’s his.”

NARRATOR

They smoked, they mellowed, and got really, really high...

SARAH

“Did you know my dad used to wrestle alligators?”

NARRATOR

Wesley laughed, and laughed.

SARAH

“No, for real. Back when I was growing up in Florida, he used to wrestle alligators at a local theme park. The alligator that he usually wrestled though was so old and pathetic. It had no teeth and would basically roll over when it was supposed to. The alligator would be like, ‘All right, this again? All right, let’s go, give ‘em a show. Here, I’ll roll over for you.’ Only danger involved with the alligator was its breath. Stunk something fierce. It’d make you sick. So sad.”

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WESLEY

“Hm.”

SARAH

“You know how to hunt an alligator?”

WESLEY

“No.”

SARAH

“What you do is, you take a wire about this long, fasten a hook to one end of it, slap some meat onto it, throw it out to one of them--they’re easy to spot ‘cause they have pink eyes that glow in the dark--and since they don’t chew, they’ll swallow the hook right into their stomach. Then you YANK that bitch, and they’re like, ‘Ooh, fuck, that hurts.’ And you drag ‘em in like dragging a baby. No fight whatsoever. The gator’s like, ‘Oh, I guess I’m going THIS way. Not the way I WANTED to go, but, OUCH!’ Then you have that bitch and you shoot it between the eyes and skin it.”

NARRATOR

It struck Wesley, after hearing this, that an alligator gulping down a chunk of meat to its own demise was a perfect metaphor for

WESLEY

“Lust...That’s what it is, isn’t it: A ravenous beast devouring a piece of flesh...and then being led by some...invisible force that pulls it towards parts unknown, to a...”

SARAH

“Sweet and tender executioner.”

WESLEY

“Yes, to where death lives.”

NARRATOR

Sarah smiled, and then she asked him point-blank:

SARAH

“Would you like to play with me?”

WESLEY

“You mean, sexually?”

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SARAH

“Duh.”

WESLEY

“I’d like to, but um...”

SARAH

“You know when you were down in the basement earlier? I had this image flash of you fucking me from behind...C’mon Wes, play. You can’t go anywhere anyhow. It’s raining still.”

WESLEY

“Umm...”

NARRATOR

As Gerald turned off onto the exit ramp and headed home, he looked up at the massive gray blanket of cloud above, covering, seemingly, the entire earth.

GERALD

“Like a field of upside-down headless sheep...An ill omen,”

NARRATOR

he said to himself.

NARRATOR

Sarah, positioning herself on top of Wesley, guided his hands to her body. He caressed her breasts, her stomach, her hips, and so forth. She angled towards his face.

SARAH

“Penny for your thoughts.”

WESLEY

“Um, have you ever seen the movie “In Too Deep?””

NARRATOR

She laughed and murmured carnal language into his ear while the rain came down with full fury.

The front door burst open, and Gerald, towering just outside the portal, stood deathly quiet. Sarah and Wesley, momentarily dumbstruck, stared blankly at him.

GERALD

“Sarah...”

SARAH

“Gerald.”

WESLEY

“...Hey bro, you’re back!”

NARRATOR

Gerald slowly moved in their direction and said in a menacing tone

GERALD

“How far up the asshole scale can you go, Wes, without leaving behind disasters of human wreckage?”

NARRATOR

Wesley thought about this, and felt that there was probably some profound lesson going on here, vis-à-vis the whole situation, which hopefully he’d learn and profit artistically from. He also thought, however, that not everyone SURVIVES such a situation...And not everyone did.

THE END

AUTHOR’S BIO: *I'm a graduate of the Iowa Playwrights Workshop, have won awards, and been produced in New York, regionally, and abroad. I live in Charlottesville, Virginia, where my days of writing and local wine drinking are now endless.*

