

The Lesson

By

George Fieck

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes... George Fieck's The Lesson is a satisfying short play in three scenes that goes right for the jugular of the workplace with shifting power dynamics guaranteed to keep you on your toes. I love the tight three-act structure and Churchill-like (Caryl, not Winston) pacing. The dialogue is rife with humorous barbs and surprises giving us a crash course in office politics that's a bracing refresher after months of sitting in Zoom meetings without pants on (or just being unemployed). The play is every bit current and biting and yet it also somehow feels nostalgic of a time when people shook hands and poured celebratory cocktails at their desks. A time when favours - sexual or otherwise - might just pay off. A time when your partners could screw you over in person... Okay, so maybe you're not feeling all that wistful about being back at your toxic workplace. Maybe you never left. For real though, you've gotta read this play and see how the game is played. Here's to that much deserved promotion – and like that quote from Leonardo (da Vinci, not DiCaprio), Poor is the pupil who does not surpass his master.*

JOE

(Laughs) You're becoming rather nasty, Frank. But no. He was incredibly *proud* of me. He shook my hand and he actually wept tears of joy. And ultimately I hired him back, so you see I'm not a monster. Anyway, it made me feel very good to know that my old man was proud of me. And I'm sure he would be incredibly proud of me today.

(Spacing is playwright's own. Please scroll down.)

THE LESSON

(A Play in Three Scenes)

CHARACTERS

JOE MANLEY, An Executive, 40

FRANK BEAMISH, A Junior Executive, 30s

TIFFANY JONES, A secretary, 20s

MARIE MILLER, Wife of a VP, 40s

THE PLACE

JOE's office

JOE's apartment

(These locations may be sketchily defined)

THE TIME

Recently

THE LESSON

(JOE's office. He sits with his feet on his desk. He's chuckling. FRANK enters)

Scene 1

FRANK

(Good-naturedly) My, you look happy.

JOE

Is there any reason I shouldn't be?

FRANK

Well... do you know something I don't know?

JOE

I don't know what you know.

FRANK

Well I know... at least, I *think* I know... I've got that promotion wrapped up.

JOE

That's good for you.

FRANK

(Suddenly a little embarrassed) Well, I've been here longer than, say, you have.

JOE

Oh, much longer...

FRANK

I mean I wouldn't want you to resent me.

JOE

Do I *look* resentful?

FRANK

Nope, but I wouldn't want you... or anybody else... to think I'd done anything behind their back to get this promotion.

JOE

I feel you deserve it.

FRANK

Thanks. I'm glad to hear you say that, Joe.

JOE

You've worked hard for this company, Frank.

FRANK

I've been a loyal employee.

JOE

Oh yes, none better...

FRANK

I've done my work from the ground up.

JOE

You've been a true slave.

FRANK

And now I'm looking for my reward.

JOE

I'm sure you'll get exactly what you deserve.

FRANK

Thanks... (He looks uncomfortable, as if he would say more).

(However, at that moment, TIFFANY enters. She is bursting with good news)

TIFFANY

You got it.

FRANK

Whew! That's a relief.

TIFFANY

(To JOE) I heard Miller talking to the others. It's all yours.

FRANK

Wait a minute... (He stares at JOE) *You* got it?

JOE

You heard the lady.

FRANK

Yes, but...

JOE

No hard feelings, right...

FRANK

I thought you were supporting me.

JOE

Look, don't be a sore loser, my friend.

FRANK

No, I'm just taken by surprise.

JOE

All right, now listen to me, Frank. This is business and business is war. And all's fair in love and war. I'm sure you've heard that said.

FRANK

It's really a cliché.

JOE

It is. And that's because it's *true*. Now as I see it, you have two choices. You can moan about bad luck and skulk around bitching from now until doomsday...

FRANK

What's my other option?

JOE

You can come on board with me. I need someone who can be loyal.

FRANK

(He thinks) You know, I think I could probably learn something from you.

JOE

No sarcasm intended?

TIFFANY

And now it's my turn to congratulate you. (She gives JOE a long, passionate kiss).

FRANK

(Stares at her, flabbergasted) Hey! Tiffany, what gives?

TIFFANY

I'm really sorry, Frank. I've been meaning to tell you.

FRANK

I thought we had an understanding!

TIFFANY

Well, I said I was sorry.

JOE

There's an old saying, Frank

FRANK

(He stares at JOE) You really amaze me.

JOE

That's not the old saying I meant.

FRANK

All right, I'm listening.

JOE

You should never trust a woman.

TIFFANY

I hope you don't believe that one! (She laughs, sits on his lap, tries to kiss him).

JOE

But I do. (He pushes her off his lap) Get away from me!

TIFFANY

(Flabbergasted) Excuse me!

JOE

Look, you tell me something. How could I ever trust you?

TIFFANY

After the things I did for you?

JOE

If you could knife Frank in the back this way who *could* trust you? You just heard me say I appreciate loyalty!

TIFFANY

But I... I love you!

FRANK

(Amazed) You do? You *love* him?

JOE

(To TIFFANY) Don't be silly.

TIFFANY

But...I thought you cared for me! I felt like you meant it.

JOE

I cared for you like you cared for Frank! I'm human, I'm vulnerable. I see what love means to you. (He ushers her to the door).

TIFFANY

(Backs out, now in tears) Dam you! You'll live to regret this. It's not fair... (She is gone).

JOE

She wants fair! I think I gave her fair, Frank. What do you think?

FRANK

I really can't think right now!

JOE

Think of it as a lesson in human nature, Frank. I just taught you something. I don't plan to sit back with my feet on my desk and stay in this piddling job forever. So you have to make a choice. You're either for me or you're against me. Now if you're with me pull up a chair, and we'll talk or else you can get out! I don't have any time to waste. So which one will it be? (FRANK looks at JOE)

BLACKOUT

Scene 2

(The living-room of JOE's apartment. FRANK mixes drinks, brings one to JOE)

JOE

(Laughing) But I'm telling you that I *am*!

FRANK

(Shaking his head) No. No!

JOE

I'm beginning to doubt your faith in me!

FRANK

All right, I'll believe it when—

JOE

And you *will* see it. (He takes a long drink, looks at his watch) Any minute now...

FRANK

You really told the president... President Mac Gregor!

JOE

That Miller was stealing him blind.

FRANK

But Miller was his *friend!* And he believed you?

JOE

He had the evidence, Frank. He couldn't refute it.

FRANK

What evidence?

JOE

The evidence that *you* planted.

FRANK

You mean... that *envelope?*

JOE

That reminds me. Have I properly thanked you?

FRANK

(Shakes his head) That evidence must have been really good!

JOE

(Laughing) Ho, ho! It was *irrefutable*, if one isn't intimidated by a little perjury! (He finishes his drink) I think I'd like another of those. (He hands FRANK his glass)

FRANK

(Shaking his head) I guess you deserve it. (He mixes his drink).

JOE

You're learning.

FRANK

And when Mac Gregor checks into the missing money?

JOE

I was stealing him blind, numb nuts! But I covered my tracks, all the way. In fact, I was *leading* them in a different direction!

FRANK

(Handing him a drink) You're truly a marvel, Joe.

JOE

My father once gave me some advice. Frank

FRANK

What was it?

JOE

It was nonsense. But that was the lesson. Don't give a shit about advice. You only learn from experience. Trust your own intelligence and learn from your experience. It's not what he meant, but it's what I took from it. And I've always thanked him for that.

FRANK

Well, I appreciate what you've taught me. I'm learning from that. You'll go a long way, my friend.

JOE

You don't think I'm finished, do you! (He laughs, takes a drink).

(There's a knock at the door. JOE shrugs and FRANK opens it, MARIE enters)

FRANK

Um, Mrs. Miller... (He looks at JOE)?

JOE

(Hearty) Hello, Marie, Now what can I do for you?

MARIE

(Shakes her head) I wish I knew.

JOE

(Going to her, taking her hand) Well, what is your problem?

MARIE

It's my husband.

JOE

What about him?

MARIE

He's very upset.

JOE

(Suddenly a bit wary) Did he send you to me?

MARIE

Oh no! He has no idea I'm here.

JOE

But then why'd you come *here*?

MARIE

I don't really know. Aren't you his friend?

JOE

(Relaxing) Look, how would you like a drink?

MARIE

(Pause) I think I *would* like one.

JOE

Frank, make a drink for Marie.

FRANK

Would you like a martini, Mrs. Miller?

MARIE

A martini sounds fine.

JOE

We're all friends here, Frank. You can call her Marie (To MARIE) Isn't that right?

MARIE

Yes, of course.

FRANK

That's one martini, coming right up, Marie. (He mixes the drink).

JOE

Marie, I must tell you that is a very gorgeous outfit you have on.

MARIE

(She blushes) Do you really think so?

JOE

Oh, absolutely. It suits you nicely. You know you have excellent taste.

MARIE

Thank you very much, Joe.

JOE

But then I'm sure I'm not the first person who has told you that you're a very good-looking woman, am I?

MARIE

(Coyly) Oh my... and is *that* what you're telling me?

JOE

(He smiles) I am. Consider yourself told.

MARIE

Now I think you're just flattering me.

JOE

You're absolutely right, Marie. I am. But let me tell you something. I wouldn't flatter you if you didn't deserve it. If I didn't mean every word of it, I wouldn't say it. Anyway, you don't have to be coy with me. You *know* you're a beautiful woman. And I know that you know it, because you'd be blind if you *didn't* know it. (He smiles at her) Now isn't that right? (MARIE smiles a little awkwardly)

FRANK

Here's your drink, Marie.

MARIE

Thank you. But Joe, about my husband—

JOE

I think I should make something clear to you, Marie. I'm not really your husband's friend. I'm simply a fellow worker—

MARIE

But the thing is he's terribly upset, and I can't get a word out of him. In fact, he's locked himself in his room.

JOE

I'm sorry, but I still don't know why you came to see me.

MARIE

Well, I guess I just wanted to talk to somebody, Joe, and I've always felt like you were someone I could really talk to.

JOE

So then you're looking for consolation.

MARIE

I guess that's it. I mean I just don't know what's going on.

JOE

Well, you're confused.

MARIE

Oh God! Of course I am. I mean he's never behaved this way before!

JOE

Personally, Marie, I think he's being very inconsiderate.

MARIE

You really do? (To FRANK) What do you think?

FRANK

(Pause) Well, I'm sorry, but I have to agree with Joe.

JOE

Of course he does. I mean look what the man is putting you through. He's upset you.

MARIE

You're so right. He has.

JOE

Let me tell you. I would never do anything like that to you.

MARIE

You wouldn't, Joe?

JOE

No, because I think too much of you.

MARIE

(Finishes her drink) Do you really, Joe?

JOE

I'm telling you that I do.

MARIE

(A coy smile, a little tipsy) I hear you saying it. But how much do you *really* think of me?

JOE

I can show you... if you'd like.

MARIE

I think I'd like another one of these. (She hands her glass to FRANK) Do you mind?

FRANK

My pleasure... (He takes her glass).

JOE

Do you honestly want me to show you?

MARIE

(She takes a large drink of the martini) You know I don't think I'd mind.

JOE

(He smiles at her) You might even like it. (He then kisses the back of her neck).

MARIE

Mm... No, I don't mind. In fact, that's very nice.

JOE

Is it? (He continues).

MARIE

(Now getting rather turned on) Yes, Joe... Yes, it is... Oh, yes...

JOE

Look. Why don't you come with me? (He takes her hand).

MARIE

But... where are we going, Joe?

JOE

Don't you know? (He then leads her, presumably into the bedroom).

FRANK

(He watches them exit with raised eyebrows) My God! I *am* still learning.

(And then the doorbell rings again. FRANK goes to it and lets TIFFANY in)

FRANK

Tiffany! What are you doing here?

TIFFANY

Is Joe here?

FRANK

What do you want with Joe?

TIFFANY

Do you think I'm humiliating myself?

FRANK

What do you think?

TIFFANY

I... I couldn't help it.

FRANK

What does that mean?

TIFFANY

I know you think I'm a real fool, Frank.

FRANK

(Incredulous) You can't mean you're still in love with him.

TIFFANY

I know he was a bastard. He treated me like shit. But I have to know why!

FRANK

He said he was paying you back in kind.

TIFFANY

Look. I didn't think you'd want me to lie to you. I mean is that what you wanted me to do?

(And then the telephone rings. They both stare at it, then FRANK answers it)

FRANK

Hello? (Pause) Well he's... momentarily occupied. (Then FRANK looks a bit shocked) He did? Look, I'll have him get back to you, all right? (He hangs up, still somewhat shocked) That was the President...

TIFFANY

What! Of the country!

FRANK

(He stares at her, as if she were missing a few screws) No.

TIFFANY

Oh. You mean president Mac Gregor.

(JOE then enters, perhaps in undershirt. He is annoyed when he sees TIFFANY)

JOE

(To FRANK, ignoring her) Who was on the phone?

FRANK

Mac Gregor... Um, Miller has just committed suicide.

JOE

(To FRANK, about TIFFANY) What the hell is she doing here?

FRANK

(He shrugs) I guess she thinks she's still in love with you.

JOE

(Sarcastically) I'm very touched.

TIFFANY

It seems I made a huge mistake.

(And then MARIE enters from the bedroom. She's also in a state of undress)

MARIE
Joe, where are you, baby?

TIFFANY
(Shocked) Baby?

JOE
(Snaps at MARIE) Go back to bed. I'll be right there.

TIFFANY
Oh, my God!

BLACKOUT

Scene 3

(Again JOE's apartment. FRANK is speaking on the phone, as JOE is heard entering)

FRANK
I think I hear him coming now. Can you get here immediately?

JOE
(Now entering) Hang up. I have something to tell you.

FRANK
Joe is here *now*. (He hangs up).

JOE
I'm expecting a call.

FRANK
Yes? Who from...

JOE
(Smirking) From Mac Gregor...

You mean the president? FRANK

But not for much longer! JOE

Really? So you're telling me... FRANK

I'm telling you to shake hands with your new president. JOE

(Chuckling) You really think so? FRANK

I'm feeling pretty sure of it, Frank. JOE

That's how you feel, is it? FRANK

(Looks at FRANK) Yes, it is. And it was really no challenge at all. JOE

So tell me. How did you do it? FRANK

I'll tell you— JOE

(Interrupting him) I can't wait to hear it, Joe. FRANK

Good. But first, I think I'd like to tell you about my father. JOE

You mean he was involved in this? FRANK

JOE

Oh, I get it. You're developing a sense of humor. Well, that's good. Somebody should have one. But the point is that my father would have been proud of me. You see my dad was a mildly successful salesman, but he was not happy. He was unhappy because he had more ambition than that. What was he ambitious for, you ask? What is *everyone* ambitious for? He wanted to be rich. Unfortunately, and I say this with sadness, he had neither the brains nor the balls to become rich. And he also had one other flaw. He rather liked people. In his way he cared about them. You might say compassion was his down fall. But fortunately he imbued me with his ambition. And so do you know what I did?

FRANK

You wouldn't want to waste time listening to me guess.

JOE

(Trying to figure out what's going on with FRANK) I went to work for his company and I outsold him. Actually I drove my old man out of a job. But then you know what *he* did?

FRANK

This time I think I'll take a guess.

JOE

Go ahead.

FRANK

He blew his brains out?.

JOE

(Laughs) You're becoming rather nasty, Frank. But no. He was incredibly *proud* of me. He shook my hand and he actually wept tears of joy. And ultimately I hired him back, so you see I'm not a monster. Anyway, it made me feel very good to know that my old man was proud of me. And I'm sure he would be incredibly proud of me today.

FRANK

That's a very touching story?

JOE

(He chuckles again) I'm on top, for Chrissake! And it was like taking candy from a baby.

FRANK

And that baby was...

JOE

Well, you could say it was...

FRANK

(Cocky) No, wait. Let me guess again. It was Mac Gregor's daughter.

JOE

(Surprised) How did you know that?

FRANK

I've been learning from a master.

JOE

So you have.

FRANK

And isn't his daughter underage?

JOE

Yes, she is, sixteen, I think. Naturally, that was what did it. You know what teenagers are like these days. I didn't have to teach *her* a thing!

FRANK

And so when you showed Mac Gregor the photos...

JOE

He literally turned purple! And now you want to tell me how you know—

FRANK

I told you. I've been learning.

JOE

Okay, but listen to me, Frank. Don't get too big for your pants.

FRANK

Is that a warning?

JOE

I wouldn't become a smart-ass, either.

FRANK

Oh, I disagree. I mean *you* are a smart-ass, aren't you?

(JOE stares at him, as TIFFANY then enters. She's carrying a manilla folder)

JOE

(Now nervous) Not again! This is becoming monotonous, Frank.

FRANK

But if I'm right, she is the bearer of glad tidings. (To TIFFANY) Did you get it all?

TIFFANY

I have it all right here. (She holds up the folder).

JOE

And what is that?

FRANK

Well, for openers there's statutory rape—

JOE

(Shocked but controlled, to TIFFANY) What have you been up to?

TIFFANY

(She laughs) You're not going to call me names, are you, Joe? Sticks and stones may break my bones... (To FRANK) Look, why don't *you* tell him, sweetie?

FRANK

It's quite simple, Joe. Really it was like taking candy from a baby. See, while you were getting your photos she was getting *mine*. (To TIFFANY) May I see? (He looks at them) Oh yes. I think that covers everything. (To JOE) Would you like to verify that?

JOE

You know something? I deserve this. I thought I could trust you. Christ, I was an idiot.

FRANK

I'd say that covers it.

JOE

All right, Frank. Now what do you intend to do?

TIFFANY

(Laughing, to FRANK) Do you know how great, how wonderful I feel at this moment?

FRANK

(Suddenly turns on TIFFANY) Well, enjoy it. And then get out!

TIFFANY

(Looks at FRANK, shocked) What do you mean!

FRANK

You heard me! I said get out of here! Do I need to give you some help? (He makes a threatening gesture).

TIFFANY

(Backing away) But you can't—

FRANK

Shut up! You wanted revenge on Joe! Well, you got it, didn't you? Now get the hell out of here!

TIFFANY

But... My God! You're as bad as he is!

FRANK

Oh no! I'm *better* than he is! Now get out!

TIFFANY

God! You will be sorry for this! I swear to you—

FRANK

(He makes another threatening gesture) You're ridiculous! (TIFFANY exits)

JOE

Congratulations.

FRANK

Oh, man! That really felt good!

JOE

Listen for a minute, please. I asked you what you planned to do.

FRANK

Well, you realize I could take these to the police, Joe.

JOE

I'm sure you could.

FRANK

What do you think they would say?

JOE

Do you want me to beg, Frank? Is that what you're after?

FRANK

I'm not sure. Would you beg, Joe?

JOE

Go to hell, Frank.

FRANK

Well look, as I see it, Joe, you have three options. The first option is jail. The second is you could piss and moan about bad luck... until doomsday. Or the third is you can come aboard, join *my* team. I think now I can trust you. (He laughs, holding up the folder).

(Then suddenly, the telephone rings. They both turn and stare at it briefly)

FRANK

That's probably your call, Joe. You want to take it? (FRANK smiles. A BLACKOUT)

THE PLAY IS OVER

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *There are times when I become extremely pessimistic about our human natures (my own as well as everyone else!). This usually expresses itself through my poetry. However, if the mood goes deeper and lasts longer, the result is a play. Thus, The Lesson, obviously a pretty cynical script. Influences? I'm sure there's a carryover from the days when like everyone else who ever wrote a play I was strongly affected by the plays of Harold Pinter. I feel like I've outgrown that, but when I look at this play, I guess I haven't completely shaken Pinter off!*

AUTHOR BIO: Other plays are published by Playscripts; Off The Wall Plays and Lazy Bee. I've had many poems produced recently, but no reason to list various journals!

