

COMPLETE ISSUE 9
PART THREE PLAYS AND
NON-FICTION

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Veracity

veracity

By Janet Ehrlich Colson

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WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest Editor S. M. Dale writes... Right off, the dialogue is snippy-snappy, and the situation is snug and tight. More importantly, the topic is both perennial and contemporary. Consent has long been a relationship issue, and these days, it's a social issue that cries out to be messed with. It's become an even bigger topic with Covid, and Colson takes it on with typical Fleas absurdity and swagger. The concept of consent is something we don't see on stage very much, so Veracity is at once unreal and very real. Using storytelling to speak to social issues—that's theater's jam. Colson takes a complicated social construct and filters it through an abstract lens to make its deeper level digestible in the short play format. Structurally, the play is peculiar—it's a feminist piece, but the main character is a man. And it's a feminist piece that makes the male character someone with whom we sympathize. Refreshing!*

VERACITY: Oh, well. There's always cuddling.

MAITRE DE: There's always lubricant.

VERACITY: And what about toys?

DUANE: What about toys?

VERACITY: Are we talking dildos, plugs, clowns - ?

DUANE: Clowns?

....

MAITRE DE: Do you consider yourself a popcorn shrimp kind of guy or are you packing a prawn?

Five stars

Veracity

By Janet Ehrlich Colson

Characters:

Veracity – An attractive woman. Direct, not bitchy. Smart.

Duane – A nice guy. Decent looking. Should be about the same age as Veracity.

Maître De – A grownup, any gender. Professional. At your service.

Keep it honest.

(/) in a line means the other character starts speaking, overlapping or interrupting the dialogue.

A MAITRE DE stands at the entrance of an upscale restaurant. DUANE enters. The MAITRE DE approaches DUANE the moment he enters.

MAITRE DE
And you - ?

DUANE
Yes –

MAITRE DE
Have a –

DUANE
Reservation for two.

MAITRE DE
With a –

DUANE
Woman –

MAITRE DE
I've got it right / here –

DUANE
Her name is –

MAITRE DE
Right this way, sir.

DUANE
Veracity.

MAITRE DE
Yes. That is -

DUANE
That's her / name.

MAITRE DE
Very good –

DUANE
Thank you –

MAITRE DE
Your table is waiting.

The MAITRE DE indicates a small table off to the side where an attractive woman, VERACITY, is seated. She is dressed nicely. DUANE approaches the table.

DUANE

Veracity? Is that - ?

VERACITY

That's me. And you must be -

DUANE

Duane.

VERACITY

Nice to / meet you –

DUANE

Nice to meet you, too.

The MAITRE DE pulls out a chair for DUANE and nods to him. DUANE sits down. With a flick of his wrist, the MAITRE DE opens a napkin and places it expertly in DUANE's lap. Then the MAITRE DE helps DUANE scoot the chair up to the table.

DUANE

Thank you very much.

MAITRE DE

Enjoy your dinner, sir.

The MAITRE DE exits.

VERACITY

Sir? Really?

DUANE

I know. A little over the top.

VERACITY

Better than ma'am.

DUANE

Isn't that / just –

VERACITY

No, it isn't -

DUANE

Polite?

VERACITY

Not if I don't like it.

DUANE

But in the South –

VERACITY

We're not in the South.

DUANE

Then I won't call you ma'am.

VERACITY

Please don't.

VERACITY

Or Mrs.

DUANE

Unless - you're married.

VERACITY

Even then.

DUANE

Because -

VERACITY

I hate that, too.

DUANE

And you're not –

VERACITY

No, I'm not!

DUANE

I knew that. *(Beat)* Can I call you – ?

VERACITY

Veracity.

DUANE

It's beautiful -

VERACITY

What?

DUANE

Your name.

VERACITY

Look, we need some ground rules.

DUANE

Ground rules?

VERACITY

To keep things from / getting –

DUANE

Of course.

VERACITY

For you as well as for me.

DUANE

I couldn't agree more.

VERACITY

Do you even know what you're agreeing to?

DUANE

I guess I don't -

VERACITY

Exactly. So we have to be –

DUANE

Sorry. Absolutely.

VERACITY

Clear.

DUANE

Right.

Just then, the MAITRE DE walks up to the table.

MAITRE DE

Have you had time to take a look?

VERACITY

We haven't, actually.

MAITRE DE

How about I start you off with a drink?

VERACITY

Just water for now.

DUANE

Water would be fine.

MAITRE DE

Two waters.

VERACITY

No ice for me.

DUANE

Me neither.

The MAITRE DE is making a note.

MAITRE DE

Alright. Two waters no ice. Now let me tell you about the specials. Tonight, we have our oyster on the half shell appetizer with horseradish salsa –

DUANE

How many oysters do you get with that?

MAITRE DE

A single portion is three pieces, or a double comes with five.

DUANE

Wouldn't a double portion come with six?

MAITRE DE

If you want six you have to get two single portions.

VERACITY

Makes perfect sense.

DUANE

If you're an oyster. (*VERACITY and DUANE smile at each other*). And what does it come with again?

MAITRE DE

A side of the horseradish salsa. You'll want to eat that salsa with a spoon. I highly recommend it. It pairs well with a crisp sauvignon blanc.

DUANE

That all sounds great.

VERACITY

I'm not going to have any.

DUANE

We'll think about it.

MAITRE DE

Our soup tonight is lobster bisque. We're known for it.

DUANE

Do you want to get the soup?

VERACITY

No soup for me, thanks.

DUANE

No soup for me then, either.

MAITRE DE

Our entrée special tonight is sea scallops on orecchiette pasta. Orecchiette means little ears. The pasta is served with a creamy walnut pesto.

DUANE

I love pesto. Do you like pesto?

VERACITY

I don't eat scallops.

DUANE

And I don't eat little ears.

MAITRE DE

We also have a vegetarian bean curry with basmati rice that's excellent.

DUANE

How does bean curry sound to you?

VERACITY

I'm think I'm going to pass.

DUANE

Do you have the Prime Rib tonight?

MAITRE DE

Yes, we do. It's so tender it will melt in your mouth. You can get that in petite, medium, or the Empire Cut.

DUANE

The Empire Cut?

MAITRE DE

That's a pound and a half of meat. It comes with garlic mashed potatoes and the vegetable tonight. Roasted brussels sprouts.

DUANE

We could split that.

VERACITY

No thanks. I'm probably just going to get a salad.

DUANE

I think we need a little more time to figure things out.

MAITRE DE

Let me get this straight. You just want water right now?

VERACITY

Yes.

DUANE

That's right.

MAITRE DE

No oysters?

VERACITY

No oysters.

DUANE

None for me right now.

MAITRE DE

Very well.

VERACITY

Thank you.

The MAITRE DE exits.

VERACITY

Is it me or did they seem kind of pushy?

DUANE

I don't know. I always like hearing about the specials.

VERACITY

I'm not usually like this at restaurants.

DUANE

Like what?

VERACITY

I sounded so picky. I think it annoyed the waitperson.

DUANE

You can't worry about it. They're used to that.

VERACITY

I'm just usually not like this.

DUANE

Are you a vegetarian?

VERACITY

I'm not. But I don't like beans.

DUANE

Me neither! Too gassy.

VERACITY

Exactly.

They smile. Awkward silence.

DUANE

So, what do you like?

VERACITY

What do you mean?

DUANE

The Prime Rib sounded pretty good to me.

VERACITY

See, this is the thing that drives me crazy about going on dates. You're asking questions right away that are too personal. And then I shut down. It's a trigger.

DUANE

I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to shut you down.

VERACITY

Look, I've had some negative experiences. It's not about you. It's not about the restaurant. It's our culture. There's so much pressure to negotiate the boundaries that we need to make sure we're on the same page.

DUANE

I'm fine with that.

VERACITY

This is kind of hard for me to say, but...

DUANE

You don't like me. I completely understand. I'm an acquired taste.

VERACITY

No, it's not that at all. I just met you! I have no idea if I like you.

DUANE

Can I just say, for the record, that I find you very attractive?

VERACITY

Really?

DUANE

Yes, I do.

VERACITY

Well, in that case - we need to move things along. I know it's a little awkward - but I'm going to need you to sign something.

DUANE

Sign what?

VERACITY

You know. A contract.

DUANE

I guess I don't know. What kind of contract?

VERACITY

I just got it online, but it's for both of our protection.

DUANE

From what?

VERACITY

From each other. *(She pulls out a contract and hands it to DUANE)*. I thought we could look it over now, before we get any food, just so we don't spill anything on it. You don't have to worry about anything. This means things are going well, right? That I even want you to sign a contract. Believe me. I wouldn't hand a contract to everybody.

DUANE

I'd rather be eating oysters, but sure, I'll take a look. *(DUANE glances at the contract)* And you want me to sign this?

VERACITY

If you could. Otherwise I can't do this. Any of it.

DUANE

It's our first date.

VERACITY

That's why.

DUANE

So everything between us has to be -

VERACITY

explicit, verbal, and -

DUANE

Consensual.

VERACITY

That's right.

DUANE

Was it consensual when you agreed to go out with me?

VERACITY

Oh, it was. I just want to be really clear. For both of us. In case we like each other.

DUANE

Okay. Fine. Just show me where to sign.

VERACITY

Not so fast. There are a couple more areas we need to negotiate. Before we go any further.

DUANE

With dinner?

VERACITY

With anything.

DUANE

I'm interested in you, Veracity, but I'm not sure how much we can negotiate before I'm going to need to eat something.

VERACITY

The food can wait. (*Building in intensity*) I'm at a crossroads in my life. I'm tired of being held to impossible societal standards of beauty. Of being objectified like a lab animal. Of having to conduct my relationships from the sidelines. Of never being fully satisfied. Tell me, Duane, what is it that you want from me? Explicitly.

DUANE

Um - dinner and a date?

VERACITY

In the contract. *(Beat)* Physically. *(Beat)* Can you be more explicit?

DUANE

I can be explicit sometimes, but -

VERACITY

No buts. Are you going to want to pursue a physical relationship?

DUANE

I might...

VERACITY

I need you to spell it out, Duane.

DUANE

You - want me to talk dirty?

VERACITY

Do you think sex is dirty?

DUANE

No, I don't think sex is dirty!

The MAITRE DE has suddenly appeared with two glasses of water. He sets them down.

DUANE

Excuse me. Thank you.

VERACITY

Yes. Thank you.

MAITRE DE

I beg your pardon, I couldn't help but overhear.

DUANE

I'm sorry. We were just -

MAITRE DE

Negotiating -

DUANE

Not exactly -

VERACITY

Yes exactly -

MAITRE DE

A consent contract.

DUANE
How did you know?

MAITRE DE
I'm a professional server. Can I see it?

DUANE
It's kind of private.

VERACITY
Not that private. We just met and we're already talking about getting physical.

MAITRE DE
Believe me. I know all about these things.

VERACITY
Hand over the contract.

DUANE
Seriously? To the waiter?

MAITRE DE
Maitre de, but yes. I'm happy to take a look.

DUANE
Fine.

VERACITY
Thank you.

DUANE hands the contract to the MAITRE DE.

MAITRE DE
You wouldn't want to get horseradish salsa on this bad boy.

VERACITY
That's what I said!

The MAITRE DE is looking through the contract.

MAITRE DE
It's all here. Seems fairly straightforward.

VERACITY
But we couldn't get past verbal or explicit.

DUANE
I can't tell you everything I might think about doing in a relationship –

VERACITY

In a potential relationship –

DUANE

On my first date.

MAITRE DE

Are you planning on having sexual intercourse?

DUANE

I don't know!

VERACITY

He's lying.

MAITRE DE

Don't lie to me, Duane.

DUANE

How explicit do I need to be?

MAITRE DE

It isn't that hard. Think about how I explained tonight's specials. Same idea. Different holes.

DUANE

I don't think I can do this.

VERACITY

You said you found me attractive.

DUANE

I do.

VERACITY

And that you'd like to pursue a physical relationship.

DUANE

I said I was interested.

VERACITY

Then we should be able to talk about what we're going to do. Before we do it.

MAITRE DE

Now's the time to talk about it, Duane. Not when you're putting your penis inside her vagina.

DUANE

Excuse me?

VERACITY

Do you want children?

MAITRE DE

What about sexually transmitted diseases?

VERACITY

Do you focus on your partner's pleasure or your own?

MAITRE DE

What's your safe word?

VERACITY

Mine's lemons.

MAITRE DE

So's mine!

VERACITY and the MAITRE DE do a tasteful fist bump.

DUANE

I don't have a safe word.

MAITRE DE

That's a mistake.

DUANE

I think it's a mistake to legislate every part of a sexual experience. I mean, sure, we should talk about birth control and STD's but, we haven't even held hands.

MAITRE DE

What about anal sex, Duane?

DUANE

What about it?

MAITRE DE

Is that something you want to explore?

DUANE

I don't – know?

VERACITY

If it is, you'd better tell me now.

MAITRE DE

Let's step it back for a moment. How do we feel about the word *penis*? Too clinical?

VERACITY

I think so.

MAITRE DE

Do you, Duane, want to put your cock – I'm sorry, what's your name?

VERACITY

Veracity.

MAITRE DE

Inside of Veracity's asshole?

DUANE

Wow. When you put it that way - I think I'll pass.

VERACITY

Are you sure? It could be very intimate.

DUANE

Yes, I'm sure.

VERACITY

Oh, well. There's always cuddling.

MAITRE DE

There's always lubricant.

VERACITY

And what about toys?

DUANE

What about toys?

VERACITY

Are we talking dildos, plugs, clowns - ?

DUANE

Clowns?

The MAITRE DE finds it in the contract.

MAITRE DE

It says it right here. Clowns.

VERACITY

How about inflatables?

MAITRE DE

Ooh, I love making balloon animals.

DUANE

I didn't think this was about you.

MAITRE DE

It isn't.

VERACITY

It's about us.

MAITRE DE

I'm just a facilitator. It's like when I take your order.

DUANE

Which you haven't.

MAITRE DE

Do you consider yourself a popcorn shrimp kind of guy or are you packing a prawn?

DUANE

I'm not comfortable with this.

MAITRE DE

What about bad sex?

VERACITY

Are you comfortable with that?

DUANE

How do you know it's going to be bad?

MAITRE DE

There's always - an element of risk in these matters.

VERACITY

But there's a provision for that. In the contract.

MAITRE DE

Otherwise you could be blamed.

VERACITY

This way I can call you out for your selfishness. Before the fact.

MAITRE DE

Believe me, it's better than prosecution.

DUANE

Let me get this straight. You're telling me I have to take on all of the responsibility for this experience. I have to be willing to fuck a clown -

MAITRE DE

Or get fucked by one -

DUANE

And the best I can hope for is avoiding prosecution?

VERACITY

Not necessarily.

MAITRE DE

Let's say, for example, she's got your dick in a clamp –

VERACITY

Or in my mouth –

MAITRE DE

And you rupture a blood vessel.

VERACITY

Or I bite down a little too hard.

DUANE

Let's not say that -

VERACITY

Never mind the clamps. It's not about that. I just wanted options.

DUANE

I'm sorry, Veracity. I don't think I can sign that contract.

VERACITY

Why not?

DUANE

Because there's no romance. No spontaneity. It scares me. And I hate clowns.

MAITRE DE

What about mimes?

DUANE

I'm leaving.

MAITRE DE

But you haven't even ordered.

DUANE

That's okay. Thanks for the water.

MAITRE DE

Goodnight, sir.

DUANE puts his napkin on the table and leaves. There's a moment of silence.

MAITRE DE
Sorry about your date.

VERACITY
It's alright. It never would've worked.

MAITRE
It's better to know from the start.

VERACITY
Still, I can't help but feel –

MAITRE DE
Disappointed.

VERACITY
Exactly.

A beat.

MAITRE DE
Might I suggest you try –

VERACITY
The oysters?

MAITRE DE
Double portion?

VERACITY
All five.

MAITRE DE
I'll throw in one more.

VERACITY
You're very kind.

MAITRE DE
And a glass of –

VERACITY
Sauvignon blanc.

MAITRE DE
On the house.

VERACITY
That would be lovely.

She folds up the contract.

MAITRE DE
It's a nice contract.

VERACITY
Do you really think so?

MAITRE DE
I do. You have all the bases covered.

VERACITY
But does it show a lack of imagination?

MAITRE DE
On the contrary.

VERACITY
What Duane said, about spontaneity –

MAITRE DE
Duane neglected to read the fine print. (*He unfolds the contract*) Nobody is under any obligation to engage in these acts, just to be intentional if they do.

VERACITY
So anybody could sign this contract?

MAITRE DE
That's right.

VERACITY
You could sign this contract.

MAITRE DE
Would you like me to?

VERACITY
Yes. I would.

MAITRE DE
Very good, ma'am.

VERACITY
There's just one thing I'd like to add –

MAITRE DE
Whatever you need.

VERACITY

Please don't call me ma'am.

THE END

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS... *A while ago, a journalist friend wanted me to write a play about consent. This was before COVID eclipsed conversations about HIV/AIDS and everything else, and he was covering a story about someone who had HIV in a consensual relationship that ended in a shit show with criminal charges. I was interested, but I didn't write the play. Fast forward to the pandemic landscape where handshakes and hugs were no longer the order of the day and the idea of consent extended beyond sex to other interactions and behaviors. Even on virtual platforms we were confronted with questions of consent. Were we being recorded? Were we going to be on camera? Muted? Were we allowed to use emojis in the chat? And while some of us were obsessing about Zoom etiquette, others were casually peeing into their coffee cups. But I digress. Recently, I was wondering about trying to control the minutiae in my life and I thought about writing a play about a consensual relationship between a knife and a fork (think #MeToo meets Hey Diddle Diddle. Good for you! You got farther than I did). Then I landed on a date in a restaurant, two things that weren't happening that much in the last year and decided to push the limits of on the nose-ness. Because this is about sex. Not noses. It's up to you to extend the metaphors.*

AUTHOR BIO: Janet Ehrlich Colson is the Drama Editor and resident fox at FOTD. She squats somewhere in Detroit.

GUEST EDITOR BIO: S.M. Dale (playwright) appropriates unique and diverse material to create alternative plays, including *Jane Jacobs Project* for the NYC Municipal Art Society's 2021 "Jane's Walk" (live performance on Zoom) and pre-Covid, for Village Preservation's 50th Anniversary (Cherry Lane Theater). Previously, Dale adapted (with Barry Rowell) America's first play, *Androboros*, which premiered in the Flag Gallery at Fraunces Tavern Museum (NYIT 2018 Caffè Cino Award); and *Planet X*, with verbatim transcripts in a physical theater context, which debuted in Black Mountain College's [Re]Happening Festival (Asheville, NC). *Privileged & Confidential* is another work of found text: utilizing confidential court documents, performed via videoconference by two casts simultaneously at Los Angeles Theater Center/LA and Gertrude Stein Rep/NYC (Franklin Furnace award). Other Dale projects include Dr. Milton Rokeach's psychological study, *3Christs* (Judson Church); the performed installation, *Spring Pictures of the Floating World* (La MaMa's Downstairs); and *Wallpaper*, adapted from Charlotte Perkins Gilman's classic short story.

apples

by dermot **O**'sullivan

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes...*

Before I lay out why you should read Apples by Dermot O'Sullivan (and suggest you don't stop with reading but look into staging it. It's a PLAY for godsake), let me just say that it's terrific. Right up my ally, this absurdist play isn't exactly absurd as much as it is abstracted. It isn't all that abstract, either, at least not in a way that obscures the hyper-realness of the interchange between X and Y, two "genderless and ageless" characters who have an unusual way of expressing their intimacy and their angst – with an apple. Sometimes the apple is a focal point. Sometimes it's a distraction. Sometimes we forget about it entirely when the conversation goes on to other things, such as unenjoyable sexual encounters, or Y's night out with Caroline and how she threw up copious amounts of red wine. But whether the apple is hidden in a pocket or out in the open, it doesn't go away. The apple is every association that could be made about apples. It's the forbidden fruit. It's the familiar fruit. It's the thrill of the chase. It's a source of frustration. It's sexual energy. It's regret. It's sadomasochism. It's the quotidian. It's you and me and us. This is a near-perfect black box production. It exists in its own time/space continuum. It's thoughtful and moving. And whether it's about apples or not, it's good theatre. Note to future producers: Spring for the honeycrisps.

Five Stars/Five Apples

Here's a taste:

X: I like apples.

Y: What?

X: I like apples.

Y: Sure. Why's that?

X: Because I don't always like them. I just eat them every day. It's a practice. I eat one every day. Sometimes they're sour or too watery or dry as dust. But sometimes they're juicy and crunchy and just delicious. And that's why I eat them every day, because sometimes they're delicious. (pause) And then sometimes they're not...(Spacing is playwright's own.)

Apples

Characters

X

Y

Ideally both genderless and ageless.

Bare stage, except for two square boxes and one larger rectangular box, all three black. The rectangular box is centre stage, the square boxes are on either side of it. The stage area is black in colour, rather dark too I imagine. The characters are probably dressed in identical black, tight-fitting clothing. Potentially, they could also wear black gloves.

X enters holding a red apple. X does not take eyes off the apple in hand as walks to the centre of the stage where continues to marvel at the apple. Y enters and approaches X, speeding up considerably when sees the apple.

Y: (making a grab for the apple) Give me!

X: (swinging away) No!

Pause, both motionless, X with back to Y staring at the apple, Y staring sadly at X's back.

Y, eyes to the ground, moves slowly away from X and sits on one of the square boxes. Y stares at X's back again once seated.

Y: So, what's up?

X: (glances around at Y quickly and then returns eyes to the apple. X's eyes remain on the apple during the following exchange) Not much. What's up with you?

Y: Nothing much. *(Yawns)* I just woke up.

X: I've been awake for a while now.

Silence.

Y: So...

X: So?

Y: So did you hear about Caroline?

X: What about Caroline?

Y: Last night, Caroline, she did things.

X: What kind of things?

Y: Many things. I was with her. I could tell you about them.

X: You *want* to tell me about them.

Y: You want to hear them.

X looks around at Y quickly and then returns eyes to the apple.

Y: I could tell you about them.

X shifts on the spot but does not respond.

Y: I could tell you about them right now.

X begins to pace nervously, eyes still on the apple.

Y: We went out to town, to a nightclub, the music was loud and there were other people there...

X continues to pace for a short while after Y falls into silence. Then stops and looks at Y.

X: And?

Y: And?

X: And what happened?

Y: I forget now maybe. *(pause)* Where did you get that?

X: What?

Y: *(pointing at the apple)* That.

X: *(looks down at the apple)* I've always had it. Where did you get that?

Y: What? I don't have anything.

X: That *(points with free hand)*, what you're sitting on.

Y: *(looks down at the box)* It was already here.

X starts to pace again, eyes on the apple. After a while Y speaks again.

Y: There's one for you too, a place to sit I mean.

X: *(stops)* Where?

Y: Just there.

X: Where? Tell me.

Y: *(pointing to the other square box)* There.

X sees the other box and walks over to it and sits down.

X: Thanks.

Long silence.

Y: Let me hold it.

X: *(eyes always on the apple)* No. It's mine.

Y: But I want it. Just for a bit. While I tell you about Caroline.

X: No, you'll eat it.

Y: (*scandalised*) I won't eat it!

X: You might.

Y: I promise.

X: Drop it.

Y: Okay, I'm sorry.

Long silence.

Y: (*conciliatory*) So how was your night?

X: Fine.

Y: What did you do?

X: Oh, many things.

Y: Anything to tell me?

X: Maybe.

Y: What?

X: I slept with someone.

Y: Really?

X: Maybe.

Y: Tell me.

X: (*looks up from the apple and keeps eyes on Y as speaks*) I was dancing alone and then I saw a person. The music was loud and I was dancing badly, but there was a connection, one of those connections that happen in those places in the dark. I danced into the person and we kissed and held each other and later went to my place and had sex and didn't enjoy it.

Y: (*raising hand*) High five!

X, *smiling, raises hand in response and Y simulates a smacking noise with mouth.*

Y: How many is that?

X: Seventeen this week.

Y: (*pointing at self*) Twenty eight this week.

X raises hand, Y reciprocates and X simulates smacking noise with mouth.

Silence.

Y: So...

X: So?

Y: How long have we known each other?

X: I don't know. Years?

Y: At least years...

Silence. X begins to toss the apple in the air with one hand and catch it with the same hand. Y ignores this and looks out towards the audience. Eventually, X lets the apple slip to the ground and immediately both scramble for the apple, which X regains. They then both sit back down as they were before and X begins to toss the apple as before. Eventually, X stops and offers the apple to Y. (From this point on X's eyes are generally not on the apple, unless otherwise stated.)

X: You want it for a bit?

Y: (*without looking over*) No, I'm too tired now. Maybe later.

X: Okay, just let me know.

Y: (*looks over at X*) I will.

Pause.

X: So tell me about Caroline.

Y: She drank too much.

X: How much?

Y: Five bottles of wine.

X: That's not so much.

Y: Of course it is, if you haven't had any breakfast.

X: Okay, go on.

Y: Then she got sick.

X: And?

Y: It was in the club. I handed her an empty pint glass and she vomited red wine into it up to the brim. Then she placed it on the table without spilling a drop. I handed her another empty glass and she filled that one up too. And so on, until she'd filled up five pint glasses, all in a row on the table. They still tasted mostly of wine.

X: And?

Y: And she tried to sell them.

X: But?

Y: But I wouldn't let her.

X: Why?

Y: Because she was talking about you and I didn't like that.

Pause.

Y: She wants to own you.

X: I barely see her.

Y: I mean she wants to own you when she talks about you, she talks about you in that kind of way.

X: So what?

Y: (*standing up*) So I don't like it.

X: Sorry I asked.

Y: What does that mean?

X: I'm sorry I asked, it means I'm sorry I have to know things like this about you.

Y: Why are you like this?

X does not respond.

Y: Why are you like this?

X: Because I need to be.

Y: Why? Answer!

X: (*taking bitter pleasure*) Because I look at you and I see you and I just don't care. You try to make me care. It annoys me.

Y: I take your bullshit. (*shouting*) I take your bullshit! I take it! And I never complain.

Short silence.

X: Okay, go on. Do you want to tell me more about Caroline so you can tell me more about yourself?

Y: It's not as simple as that.

Silence.

Y: (*eyes on the apple*) Give it to me.

X: Not now.

Y: Give me something then, anything, your hat.

X: I don't have a hat.

Y: You have a hat, somewhere, in your pocket maybe, check in your pocket.

X: I don't have a pocket.

Y: (*lets out a little furious yelp*) Why are you always like this?

X does not respond.

Y: Why are you always like this?

X: (*annoyed and defiant*) Look, I don't need to do anything. I'm over here and you're over there. Let's keep it that way. And sit down, you're making me nervous.

Y sits down. Long silence.

X: We can talk though if you want. I don't mind talking.

Y: I don't want to talk anymore.

X: Of course you do.

Y does not respond.

X: Do you need me to coax it out of you? Is that it?

Y does not respond.

X: Okay, let's go: so what happened after? With Caroline I mean.

Y still does not respond.

X: Oh go on, tell me. I want to know.

Y: Nothing much.

Silence.

X: Look, you annoyed me a little. I got angry. I'm sorry. No need to sulk. You know we're friends.

Y: Yes, but it's hard.

X: It's hard for me too.

Y: *(after pause)* I know.

Pause.

X: So, tell me. Five pints of red wine and stomach acid on the table. Caroline is starting to feel better. And then you meet this person...

Y: No, that's not what happened. I met no one. *You* met someone last night. I met no one. I stayed with Caroline the whole night just to hear her talk about you.

X: *(standing)* For fuck sake! *(offering the apple)* Take the fucking thing! *(walks over to Y, arm thrust out offering the apple)* Take it! Take the fucking thing!

Y: *(looking away from X)* I don't want it.

X shoves apple aggressively towards Y's face.

Y: *(standing up)* I don't fucking want it!

Y turns back on X and walks away from X. X follows, arm out, repeating again and again: "Take it, take it, take it". They circle the stage like this for a short while and then X falls silent

and they both sit down on their respective boxes again. X puts the apple in pocket. Very long silence.

Y: (*upset*) Let's be another way. This isn't fun.

X: (*pleasantly*) Agreed.

Pause.

Y: Tell me about your night.

X: No. (*then smiling at Y*) Let's sit together.

Y: Where?

X: (*gesturing towards the rectangular box with head, still smiling*) Over there.

Y: (*looks over at the big box and then smiles at X*) I'd like that.

They both go over to the big box and sit down on it, straddling the box and facing each other. They smile at each other for a long time.

X: I don't know what to say.

Y: Me neither.

Pause.

X: I know!

X takes the apple out of pocket and rolls it across the box towards Y. Y stops it with hands and rolls it back. They do this several times gently, smiling. Then they speed up and become more and more excited, but complicit, not in competition. (If the apple falls, one just picks it up eagerly and they continue as before.) Eventually X takes the apple in hand and they pause, both preferably panting.

X: (*smiling at Y and aiming the apple at Y's crotch and swinging arm as if in preparation to throw. Y blocks reflexively*) Put your hands behind your head.

Y: (*with a smiling whimper*) Nooo.

X: (*still smiling*) Go on.

Y: It'll hurt.

X: (*sincere*) I promise I won't hurt you.

Y looks warily at X and then puts hands behind head. X makes ready to roll the apple across the box towards Y's crotch area. Y grimaces in anticipation. X rolls the apple across, but gently, so it rolls gently against Y's crotch and comes to rest there. They smile at each other, Y with gratitude and excitement, X with flirtatious provocation.

Y: (*taking the apple in hand*) Put your hands behind your head.

X does so and Y rolls the apple gently to X's crotch as X did before. X then repeats. Then Y repeats. Then X takes the apple in hand. Short silence.

X: Do you remember when we lived together in the city?

Y: Which city?

X: The city where no one was happy except for us.

Y: (*smile broadening uncontrollably*) Yes.

X: Do you remember how I used to sleep late and you would get up early to read, but the place was so small you would never flush the toilet in case you woke me?

Y: Yes.

X: I'd wake up late and go to piss and there'd always be a big, wrinkled turd at anchor in the bowl.

Y: (*smiling*) I always shit first thing in the morning.

X: Yeah. Well, that was nice. Thanks. I mean I never said thanks, and that was nice.

Y holds hand out for the apple. X hands it to Y. Y rolls it gently against X's crotch as before. X lets the apple rest by crotch and both smile at each other in silence.

Y: I'm sorry about earlier.

X: Sorry about what?

Y: About when I was talking about Caroline. Sorry for talking like that, for wanting to own you like that when I talk. Sometimes it feels like I have no choice. I'm a little crazy sometimes...

X: You're okay.

Silence, smiles are gone now. Eventually X gets up, taking the apple with, and walks over to one of the square boxes and sits down.

Y: *(looking heartbroken)* Come back. Please.

X shakes head ruefully and the silence continues for a long time.

Eventually Y lies down on the big box with hands behind head looking up.

Y: *(cheerfully)* Hey, this is comfortable, maybe I don't want you here after all.

X: *(looks over at Y and smiles. Pause)* Okay! *(pause as continues to smile at Y, as one smiles at a child)* Hey, you're a good person you know.

Y: Why thank you.

X: Do you want to tell me about last night then?

Y: I believe I do.

X: Go on!

Y: *(excited)* Okay! So we're at the table with the glasses all filled to the brim, filled to the meniscus really. Caroline is singing but I can't hear her because of the music. I'm singing too and she can't hear me. *(as if suddenly realising something, Y cranes neck to look at X)* Did you ever sleep with Caroline?

X: No, never.

Y: *(lays head back down. Y can become suitably animated as recounts the story, perhaps gesticulating with hands)* Okay. So we're there. It's fun. It's alright like. And then this guy comes over and starts talking to Caroline and Caroline keeps singing and doesn't even look at him but isn't saying "fuck off" either really, like that, you know? And then the music gets quieter and I can hear every word. The guy asks Caroline to dance. She says no. The guy asks Caroline for a kiss. She says no. The guy asks Caroline if she wants a drink. She says: "Listen mate, I've got five drinks here and another two on the way." And he says: "What do you mean?" And I cop so I hand her an empty pint glass and she vomits into it up to the brim like before. She puts the glass down on the table and while I'm looking for another glass the guy asks, as a joke right: "Is that for me?" And she says, without missing a beat: "No, but this one is!" and vomits all over his face!

X and Y laugh and then laugh themselves into a longish silence.

X: And what did the guy do?

Y: Oh, I don't know, washed his face probably!

They both laugh again. Very long silence.

Y: (*timidly*) Hey... hey, what went wrong between us?

X *does not respond.*

Y: (*sits up, straddling the big box*) No seriously, what went wrong? I'm happy now. I can take it.

X: (*heaving a sigh*) Leave it.

Y: Go on, please, for me.

X: (*looking at the ground*) Nothing went "wrong" between us. There wasn't anything to go wrong.

Y: What does that mean?

X: It never went right between us. We just tried and tried and tried and it never went right, *never*. (*pause*) And then I stopped trying.

Pause.

Y: Okay, that's true.

X: (*looking up at Y*) And now you should stop trying too.

Long silence.

X: Okay?

Y: Okay.

Very long silence.

Y: Hey, come sit with me.

X: (*looking over at Y who seems earnest and calm*) I'd like that.

X gets up and walks towards Y on the big box, one of arms dangling low with the apple grasped loosely in fingers. Y follows X's approach with eyes, watches X sit down, straddling the box and facing Y. Silence.

X: I like apples.

Y: What?

X: I like apples.

Y: Sure. Why's that?

X: Because I don't always like them. I just eat them every day. It's a practice. I eat one every day. Sometimes they're sour or too watery or dry as dust. But sometimes they're juicy and crunchy and just delicious. And that's why I eat them every day, because sometimes they're delicious. *(pause)* And then sometimes they're not...

Pause.

X: *(offering the apple)* Want a bite?

Y: *(palm raised in refusal)* No, I'm okay.

X: You sure?

Y: Yeah, maybe later. You go ahead, taste it.

X: *(goes to bite into the apple but stops)* Naw, maybe later.

They smile at each other, then lose their smiles and stare down at the box between their legs. After a while, X rolls the apple over to Y, letting it roll gently off upturned palm: it thuds onto the box and rolls over to Y. Y stares at the apple where it comes to rest between thighs. Then Y picks it up and rolls it back lazily to X, letting it roll off upturned palm in the same manner as X did. They repeat this several times, always with eyes fixed downwards. Eventually X stops, letting the apple rest between thighs. Long silence.

X: *(taking the apple in hand and looking up at Y)* Why are we still doing this? Can't we just stop? All of it, what does it even matter anymore?

Y: *(eyes still fixed downwards)* It matters to me. It means something to me, all of it. And it always will.

X: *(sceptical and impatient)* I really—I really don't see how it can.

Y: *(looking up into X's eyes)* It's not a joke for me.

X: You're right, it's not a joke, it's more like a bad dream.

Y: No. No. I'm not a joke. And I'm not a bad dream.

X: You're not anything anymore. This whole thing though, it's stale as rock. *(softening)* Now it is at least. *(imploing Y to understand)* And it's been this way for a while, you know...

Y: *(chastened, looks down)* Yes, I know, now yes, *now* all its flavour's gone, *now* it makes us want to scream...

X: But...

Y: *(looks back up into X's eyes, voice earnest but weak)* But we both know that it wasn't always this way.

Short pause. Dozens of apples suddenly fall from above, thudding in showers on the stage. Characters do not react, continue staring each other in the eyes. Long silence after as they continue to stare. Then (perhaps first raising hand to increase the effect) X drops the apple to the floor with a thud. Lights out.

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS:

The initial inspiration for "Apples" was incredibly simple. In an interview, David Mamet said something along the lines of drama being about what lies behind superficial conflict. He gave the example of two people arguing over an apple, and pointed out that what's interesting in this situation is the hidden emotional content that lies behind such situations. A pretty obvious observation, but at the time I was just beginning to write for theatre (having before written almost exclusively short fiction) and I decided to run with the idea.

Some years before a friend of mine had began writing a play that could be acted by any gender. I stole this idea too (which at the time in 2008 was pretty new, to me at least).

After those initial ideas, I mostly felt my way through the play, without any clear plan. An interesting dynamic emerged between the characters, and at some point what was intended to be merely a writing exercise became something more. I did not set out to explore an ambiguous relationship and its dynamics of attention and need, but that's what happened.

My favourite playwrights are pretty standard: Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Edward Albee, Brian Friel, Harold Pinter and Samuel Beckett. Most plays I write tend to be relatively realistic and this makes "Apples" an exception for me.

AUTHOR BIO: Dermot O'Sullivan is an Irish writer whose work has been published in various journals including The Honest Ulsterman, Causeway/Cabhsair, The Dalhousie Review and Fence. He currently lives in Brazil, where he recently had his first full-length play produced.

TwO ClOnes (TwO ClOnes) in a (1!) ROOm

By D_ustin G_rinnell (D_ustin G_rinnell)

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes...*

Have you ever worried about being cloned against your will? Maybe you wonder if you will ever be truly satisfied. Or you have an inordinate fear of holes. Well, have I got a play for you! Two Clones in a Room by Dustin Grinnell is a thought-provoking play indeed. It has an expansive feel, yet it goes by in a flash. It's sci-fi, philosophy, psychology, and more than that – it's plum good storytelling. The story centers around two men of science, great minds, who have experienced a "consciousness transfer" (it makes perfect sense in the play) and find themselves held captive until they solve a previously unsolvable problem. They're given all the tools they need to conduct their research, but can they truly be forced to find the answers in a life they haven't chosen for themselves? Can we?

WILLIAM

Then again, there's something . . . freeing about imprisonment, don't you think? No responsibilities, no obligations. Only time to think. Read. Write!

Proceed to the research room.

Five stars.

(Spacing is playwright's own.)

Two Clones in a Room

“I have always imagined that paradise will be a kind of library.”

– Jorge Luis Borges

Act One

Year 2053. Afternoon.

A small, cozy room with several bookcases and a round mahogany table in the center.

WILLIAM and VICTOR, *in separate beds, rise and rub their eyes, surprised by their surroundings.*

WILLIAM

Where—where am I? What is this?

VICTOR

I don't know.

WILLIAM

Who are you?

VICTOR

My name's Victor.

WILLIAM

William.

VICTOR

How did we get here?

WILLIAM

I don't know. This might sound crazy, but, well . . . I died. I remember the day of my passing quite well.

VICTOR

As I do mine.

WILLIAM

Yet here we are.

A loud “whoosh” sounds. A cylindrical container drops down a chute. Victor retrieves the container from the end of the chute to discover a typed letter. He opens it.

WILLIAM

What does it say?

VICTOR

(chuckling)

That we are . . . clones.

WILLIAM

Clones?

VICTOR

Says something here about a “consciousness transfer.” Our minds were uploaded into these artificial bodies.

WILLIAM

So we feel like our old selves, then?

VICTOR

Well, we’re not blank slates.

WILLIAM

When I died, I was seventy-nine. You?

VICTOR

Seventy-three.

WILLIAM

William looks himself over.

Yet we look as if we're only about thirty.

VICTOR

With the minds of old men.

WILLIAM

So who brought us back to life? And why?

VICTOR

(finishing the letter)

This says our work as psychologists was widely respected and that we've been brought back to cure our creator's phobia.

WILLIAM

What phobia?

VICTOR

Trypophobia.

WILLIAM

Holes?

VICTOR

Says here, "A fear or disgust of closely packed holes."

WILLIAM

Well, I'm a bit confused.

VICTOR

The letter says our creator finds the sight of closely packed holes repulsive. He feels queasy when he looks at surfaces with small holes gathered closely together, like a strawberry or honeycomb.

WILLIAM

And what happens if we somehow manage to cure this silly man's phobia?

VICTOR

Apparently, those steel doors will open, and we'll be free to go.

WILLIAM

William examines the room.

Well, at least the space is cozy. Nice furniture. Full of books.

A vent in the steel door opens. Two trays of food appear. Victor runs to the door and bangs on it desperately.

VICTOR

Hey! Let us out of here, you psycho!

WILLIAM

William sits at the mahogany table.

Victor, come. Bring the food over, and let's eat. I don't know about you, but this new body is starving.

Victor reluctantly joins William at the table with the trays, and they eat a salmon dinner with potatoes and broccoli.

After he finishes eating, Victor notices a box on the table, and he opens it.

VICTOR

Look, William! Cigars.

WILLIAM

I don't much care for smoking.

VICTOR

Well, I happen to think better with a cigar.

WILLIAM

Aren't you aware that Freud died of mouth cancer?

VICTOR

Victor lights a cigar and puffs.

Well, I suppose they could just bring back another clone when I die.

WILLIAM

Victor, with regard to the matter at hand, do you think we even have a chance at finding a cure for trypophobia?

VICTOR

I have a limited understanding of phobias. I don't know any treatments for this particular phobia. Or any others, for that matter.

WILLIAM

I, too, have had little training in phobias. As a psychoanalyst, I do have to wonder if this fear of holes serves any important psychological functions.

VICTOR

Like how a fear of snakes would have kept someone safe when humans roamed the savannah, you mean?

WILLIAM

Yes. But even if we could manage a treatment, who would we study?

VICTOR

The letter says we'll be provided with clones who have a great fear of holes. We should receive the first one tomorrow morning.

WILLIAM

In the meantime, I suppose we could educate ourselves about phobias. It looks like that bookshelf holds quite a few books on psychology.

VICTOR

Some of which bear our names, I've noticed.

WILLIAM

Victor, do you have any idea what year it is?

VICTOR

The letter doesn't indicate a time period. We could be ten years in our future, or a hundred, or even a thousand. Who knows?

WILLIAM

And there are no windows, no natural light. I wish this creator of ours could have given us a skylight—so we could see the moon, the stars. Give it enough time, and we could lose our minds in here.

VICTOR

Not unlike solitary confinement, I agree.

WILLIAM

Then again, there's something . . . freeing about imprisonment, don't you think? No responsibilities, no obligations. Only time to think. Read. Write!

VICTOR

Well, I don't share your enthusiasm. I'd rather not sleep behind a locked door. Do you suppose this maker of ours will ever show himself?

WILLIAM

I really don't know.

William walks to his bed.

All this food has made me tired. I think I'll sleep now.

VICTOR

Indeed. Good night.

Lights dim.

VOICE OVER

Over the next month, William and Victor worked tirelessly to try to find a cure for trypophobia. They used every intervention and therapy in their psychological tool boxes. And yet, none of their clones had lost their disgust of holes.

A month later, William sits at the table, looking defeated.

WILLIAM

You know, I thought we'd be out of here in a week or two.

VICTOR

It's a tough nut to crack, this tryphobia.

WILLIAM

I was surprised when exposure therapy proved ineffective.

VICTOR

I've never seen so much vomit in all my life.

WILLIAM

There must be something in an individual's past driving this fear.

VICTOR

Perhaps there's some undiscovered trauma in these clones' lives. Maybe when they were young, they fell into a hole. A ditch, perhaps? Or a well?

WILLIAM

Yet we haven't uncovered anything like that with traditional talk therapy.

VICTOR

Perhaps it's an archetype. A symbol embedded in the collective unconsciousness?

WILLIAM

If it were in the collective, surely a larger percentage of the population would be more afraid of holes.

VICTOR

I suppose we're stumped, then.

WILLIAM

Indeed.

Food arrives through the door. William and Victor sit to eat.

VICTOR

Do you enjoy this work?

WILLIAM

It has its merits. I find it stimulating. We are fortunate to have so many books and other reading material available. It would take a lifetime to read them all.

VICTOR

Surely it would be more appealing to chat at a bookstore, a pub, or even a coffee shop?

WILLIAM

I suppose I can't disagree with you there.

VICTOR

And wouldn't you prefer to read for pleasure for a change?

WILLIAM

I don't know. I rather like reading textbooks and expanding my knowledge of my field.

VICTOR

Yes, yes, I do as well. In my first life, that's all I ever did. Every article or book I read was aligned with some scholarly project. If I was writing about dreams, I was reading Freud. If I was trying to understand how my patients could have more meaning in their lives, I was reading Frankl. I rarely took breaks from my work. Very few vacations. But don't you want to read for leisure for once? Pick up those books you always wanted to read but never had the time for?

WILLIAM

Such as?

VICTOR

I don't know. Literature? The classics? *War and Peace*, *Moby Dick*, *Middlemarch*. Don't you find this constant studying, well, exhausting? Always working? Always striving? And we are young again! Sure, our minds are aged, but look at these strong arms. We have stamina again. If

we left here, we could hike to the base camp of Mount Everest. We could ride motorcycles great distances. We could have wonderful, lustful romances.

WILLIAM

You're talking like an adolescent, Victor. As appealing as those things may be, we're both thinkers. My greatest love affair was with my work. After spending time with you, I know you're the same.

VICTOR

But that was us as old men! The new me is finding itself rather bored with this project. Wouldn't you rather work on something other than the fear of holes? Before you passed away, I'm sure you were working on some grand project, something out of reach—and you might have solved it had you only had more time. Well, William, now you have time!

WILLIAM

I think every man of science had a problem like that, yes.

VICTOR

In my first life, if we can call it that, I made my contributions to the world. In this second life, I might choose to, well, lounge around.

WILLIAM

Now, surely you don't believe that. You would be bored to tears! You and I are the same. We're explorers, scientists. We can't *not* be engaged in intellectual work.

VICTOR

A gloomy existence! Like you, I was mostly a loner. I had few friends. I neglected my partners. I didn't know my children well. My life was about work. Obsession. Don't you see? Our first lives were about work; our second could be about *living*.

WILLIAM

A life of pleasure? Without purpose, meaning? Victor, you of all people should be able to acknowledge that man cannot live a meaningless life.

VICTOR

And why must we compare our current selves to our former 'human' selves, hm? I don't consider myself human anymore. Maybe clones want different things than their originals.

WILLIAM

What does it mean to be human? Alive? We have heartbeats, do we not? Our lungs convert oxygen into carbon dioxide, just like human's. We sweat; we cry. An orange still makes me salivate. Our waking lives still find their way into our dreams. We're as real—*as human*—as we once were.

VICTOR

But what if this cloning process has resulted in genetic errors that will cut our lives short? What if we're now more prone to diseases like cancer or heart disease?

WILLIAM

Say you were to leave. You don't know what awaits you out there. A virus could have wiped out humanity. Climate change could have created a toxic earth. Earth could be a wasteland, for all we know. Maybe we're the safest we could ever be right here.

VICTOR

In captivity.

WILLIAM

What's so wrong with this new home we were born into? We have food, water, shelter. A great problem to which we can apply ourselves. As intellectuals, we have been given the greatest gift: the time and the means to live a life of the mind—to think, to theorize, to write and contribute something useful to humanity.

VICTOR

But for how long? We don't know if it'll be for five years or another seventy-five.

WILLIAM

What does it matter? That time is uninterrupted. We have the time to do as we please. Time we didn't have in our first lives. Everything is taken care of: Our clothes are cleaned and freshly pressed. Our food is delivered like clockwork. Sure, we dress the same every day—jeans and black turtlenecks—but who would we try to impress?

VICTOR

William, we just talk all day!

WILLIAM

So? What's wrong with filling our days with conversation? I'm beginning to think it's my favorite hobby. Life would be an impoverished existence without it. Anyway, if you want out of here so bad, let's cure this phobia. What a boon to humanity our efforts will be!

VICTOR

I just think this is a project for another generation of psychologists. I've seen how much a project like this requires of its scientists. And in this second life, I intend to keep this brown hair. In this life, I just want to relax and enjoy myself.

WILLIAM

Why do you speak of our efforts with such misery when this project enlivens you? I've seen you interact with the clones with great interest. And surely you derived satisfaction from the many books you wrote in your former life?

VICTOR

Satisfaction, yes. It's gratifying to work toward the completion of a large project, but I wouldn't call such efforts enjoyable. I was glad to write my books, but each one was a rather miserable, lonely experience.

WILLIAM

And would you rather experience the misery of toiling on a challenging project or suffer the misery of never having a meaningful project to devote yourself to?

VICTOR

I was fortunate enough to discover my purpose, develop it, and try to realize my potential. I dare say, both you and I lived up to Nietzsche's concept of the Ubermench. We were self-actualized; we lived and worked in accordance with our own values and self-determined goals. But there's a clear distinction here, William. I chose that purpose. This new project? It was forced upon me—upon you.

WILLIAM

Does that make it any less significant?

VICTOR

Maybe not. But it makes it someone else's purpose, not mine.

WILLIAM

So you refuse the challenge?

VICTOR

We've been hard at work, have we not?

WILLIAM

Then we should continue.

VICTOR

Victor looks at the steel door.

Fine. Begrudgingly.

Act Two

VOICEOVER

And so it went for another couple of months. Every day, the two psychologists received their daily clone and every day they failed to rid it of its trypophobia.

WILLIAM

William paces the stage, weary.

It's been months, and still no answers.

VICTOR

Victor looks frustrates, too. His clothes are rumpled, his hair is frazzled.

Maybe it's the clones. Maybe they're not "human" enough. Perhaps they don't represent the phobia well enough.

WILLIAM

Have you considered that we might be the problem?

VICTOR

I have wondered if we have the intelligence of our former selves.

WILLIAM

In any case, we're no closer to curing the human the fear of holes.

VICTOR

William, I had a dream last night that I left this place. Or a nightmare, rather. I escaped and returned to my home to see my family, but they were horrified by my story. When they discovered I was a clone, a mutant, they called me names, ran me out, and called the police. I ended up sleeping on the streets with the homeless.

WILLIAM

I'm sorry to hear that. I too have thought that we would have trouble reintegrating into society as clones. How would one get a social security number? A driver's license? How does the society out there regard clones? Are they mutants, as you say?

VICTOR

And when I returned to my university, my old colleagues, students, and administrators all laughed at me.

WILLIAM

I sometimes wonder about my family. I had the fortune of seeing my daughter marry. She was pregnant when I died. I never got the chance to see my grandchild.

VICTOR

If your daughter were still alive, would she even want to see you? Surely she's grieved, moved on. Your coming back might be too overwhelming for her. For everyone.

WILLIAM

Even more reason stay put, then, and try to solve this phobia.

VICTOR

William, don't you think this phobia is . . . well, a bit insignificant? I don't mean to trivialize the malady, but I had a friend with tryphobia, and she was in no way debilitated. She had a career, built a family, had a fine life. I only even learned she had this phobia after a year of knowing her.

WILLIAM

I *would* think there would be more pressing problems in the world, yes.

VICTOR

Seems a bit selfish of this creator, don't you think? Surely humanity hasn't cured cancer yet. Why not bring back doctors and scientists to work on that problem?

WILLIAM

You sound tired, Victor.

VICTOR

I am tired, William. Tired of this place.

Victor looks up at the vent in the ceiling. He looks suspiciously around the room, knowing that the walls have eyes. He lowers his voice.

Listen, I've spent some time studying the engineering here. That vent in the ceiling is not as secure as it appears. One night while you were sleeping, I pried it open and crawled through the ceiling space for a bit. There was an opening. To the outside.

WILLIAM

William steps back in shock.

You're planning to escape?

VICTOR

Victor raises a finger to his lips to shush William.

I will not live this life—*my second life*—in a prison cell, toiling away to try to cure some silly fear. I want to leave and do things I didn't get a chance to do the first time around. Don't you see, William? I don't know how many other clone exists, but how many people get second chances like this? Yes, I am planning to escape. I want to ramble, travel. I want to work odd jobs, making only what I need to get from place to place. We don't know where we are, but let's assume we're in the United States, if it still exists. If I can manage to get to Nepal, I'll go there. I've always wanted to see the Himalayas. Don't you see the gift we have before us?

WILLIAM

But why would you willingly choose such a rootless existence? Don't you see that we have everything we need right here? Our books, our discussions, our company. Say you do have all these adventures. What about companions? You'd have no one to share your time with. To talk to.

VICTOR

I'll meet people in my travels.

WILLIAM

Yes, but they would be transient companions. Not like us. We stimulate each other's minds. We talk for hours. We develop each other's ideas, edit each other's work. Who else would read your manuscripts aloud, page by page? Yes, you would have these great adventures—I too have always wanted to see Mount Everest—but you'd be alone, Victor. And your friend would be here, reading and writing quietly by himself.

VICTOR

You make me not want to leave.

WILLIAM

Then don't! Stay. We can work on the task that's been assigned to us. Maybe we'll crack it, maybe we won't, but the pleasure is in the exploration, is it not?

VICTOR

I have come to value your friendship, and I'll be sad to lose such a dear friend, but I am a prisoner here. You are too! I don't know why you cannot admit that. Yes, maybe I would be lonely on the road, but I would be free.

WILLIAM

Imprisoned, sure, but we're not being tortured. We live quite well, under the circumstances. I may have the energy of a thirty-something, but I have the mind of an old man, and your talk of adventures overwhelms me.

VICTOR

Then you decline my invitation? Fine. I will go alone.

WILLIAM

You, sir, don't know how good you have it. You have everything you need here, yet you want more? The road calls you off to faraway lands? For what purpose? You are chronically dissatisfied, always moving, restless. You finally have time for leisure, true friendship, for *boredom*—you have time, delicious, beautiful time—and you're leaving it all behind for silly dreams of tramping across the mountains?

VICTOR

Tomorrow, I will escape.

WILLIAM

But we haven't cured this phobia.

VICTOR

I don't care. I never cared.

WILLIAM

Don't say that. Don't you feel like we've been making progress?

VICTOR

Perhaps there's a reason phobias weren't cured in our lifetime. We've been given an impossible task. Maybe we were doomed to fail. Who does this creator think he is, anyway? We're not unfeeling androids. We are as human as he is. This creator is a monster for bringing us back, only to lock us up.

WILLIAM

Well, I don't know how else to say it but that I'll miss you.

William and Victor prepare for bed. Early in the morning, Victor waits for William to fall asleep. He packs a bag and watches the rise and fall of William's chest, looking conflicted. After a quiet contemplation, he rises and pushes a bookcase into the middle of the room. Standing on top of it, he opens the vent in the ceiling. Before climbing out, Victor looks back at his friend once more, then disappears.

The next day, William awakes and looks at Victor's empty bed in despair. A letter comes down the chute.

WILLIAM

(reading aloud)

The ceiling vent Victor used to escape has been reinforced with security, so please do not attempt to escape. Today, you will receive a new cloned psychologist with whom to continue your work.

William lowers the letter, melancholic. The door opens, and a new clone, MELANIE, enters.

WILLIAM

And what is your name?

MELANIE

My name is MELANIE.

WILLIAM

William.

MELANIE

(with delight)

I was a psychologist back in the day. A good one, I think. What an interesting riddle we've been given. Shall we try exposure therapy?

WILLIAM

(with a sigh)

We tried that.

MELANIE

Cognitive behavioral therapy?

WILLIAM

Many unsuccessful rounds.

MELANIE

Psychoanalysis?

WILLIAM

Months of it, without success.

MELANIE

I'm sorry. I realize it might be difficult to adjust to having someone new in your space, especially after being alone for so long.

WILLIAM

I wasn't alone.

MELANIE

Oh, I see. You worked with another psychologist? Where is he now?

WILLIAM

He escaped.

MELANIE

Oh goodness, why would he do such a thing? We seem to have everything we need here: books, food, clothes. Did you consider leaving too?

WILLIAM

(unconvincingly)

No, I'm quite happy here. Anyway, the route my old roommate used to leave has been patched up.

MELANIE

Well, I'm happy to be here as well. I look forward to pursuing new directions in an effort to solve this puzzle that's been put before us.

WILLIAM

We'd best get to work, then. Why don't you sit? I'll tell you what we've tried so far.

VOICEOVER

William told MELANIE about all of the failed attempts to cure tryphobia. After, they threw tried every treatment approach they could think of, but after several weeks, they were no further along than they had when they started. And then, one day, a letter came.

A letter arrives down the chute.

MELANIE

William, we've received a letter.

WILLIAM

What does he want now?

MELANIE

No, it's from someone else. A man named Victor.

William snatches the letter from MELANIE's hands.

WILLIAM

(reading aloud)

Dear William, if you are reading this, the man who has created us graciously passed along the letter I mailed to this location. I have reached the Himalayas. I purchased a motorcycle, and I ride it to work on old, dusty roads. I run a bookshop, and I've met a beautiful woman. I wish you were here, dear friend. If you ever get out, please visit.

Moved by the letter, William tilts his head toward the ground, he becomes lost in thought. And then, an idea...

WILLIAM

MELANIE!

MELANIE

Yes?

WILLIAM

It strikes me that we've tried to cure this phobia using mostly conventional means. Perhaps we could try less conventional measures.

MELANIE

What do you have in mind?

WILLIAM

In my career, one experience always bugged me.

MELANIE

Bugged you how?

WILLIAM

My mother had smoked cigarettes for most of her adult life, one pack a day, and she'd tried everything to quit, but nothing ever worked. Yet one day, she went to a hypnotist and after a single session, completely rids herself of the habit.

MELANIE

After hypnosis session, how did your mother feel about cigarettes?

WILLIAM

Everything about cigarettes repulsed her. The smell. The taste. She could barely look at a cigarette without disgust.

MELANIE

The hypnotist no doubt put your mother into a deeply relaxed state, in which she would have been highly impressionable. The hypnosis likely helped your mother associate cigarettes with something that revolted her.

WILLIAM

Funny enough, I believe it was the sight and smell of asparagus.

MELANIE

So are you suggesting we try a similar experiment with our clones?

WILLIAM

Yes, but what if we did the opposite?

MELANIE

I don't follow.

WILLIAM

My mother was addicted to cigarettes and repulsed by asparagus. But the clones are disgusted by closely packed holes. So what if we associate those holes with something the clones love?

MELANIE

Interesting hypothesis.

WILLIAM

We will test it when the clone arrives tomorrow.

MELANIE

What shall we do in the meantime?

William thinks for a moment and then walks to a bookcase. He pulls the bookcase off the wall and inspects the back. Then he yanks on the soft backing, pulling off a large piece.

MELANIE

What in God's name are you doing?

William points to the other bookcase.

WILLIAM

Go to the other bookcase and pull off the backing.

MELANIE does so.

MELANIE

Are you going to tell me what we're doing?

WILLIAM

I'll show you tomorrow. In the meantime, do we have a screwdriver?

The lights fade.

The next day, William and MELANIE stand next to another clone, ROLLO, who is sitting in a chair, looking nervous.

MELANIE

Today, Rollo, we're going to perform a hypnosis. Don't worry. It's a safe procedure. In fact, you'll be quite calm and rested by the end of it. Right now, I just want you to relax.

Rollo shifts in his seat, his shoulders slump, and his eyelids droop.

I want you to breathe deeply, Rollo. In. Out. Deeply. Good. Let your eyes close now. Starting at the top of your head, I want you to relax the muscles of your scalp, then move down to your face and around your mouth. Relax all the muscles of your face. Breathe deeply. Relax your shoulders. Relax your chest. Your belly. Down to your legs. Your whole body, Rollo. Breathe. Deeper and deeper, more relaxed.

MELANIE turns to William and nods.

He's under.

WILLIAM

Rollo, can you hear me?

Rollo nods lazily.

I want you to picture a beautiful place in your mind's eye. It could be a garden, a tropical beach, whatever. Are you there?

ROLLO

(in a relaxed tone)

I am.

WILLIAM

Tell me where you are, please.

ROLLO

I'm standing at the end of a dock at the lake house where I used to spend summers with my family.

WILLIAM

Tell me about your family, Rollo.

ROLLO

(smiling)

My daughter is eight years old; my son is ten. They're about thirty feet off shore, running and jumping off of a floating dock. My wife is beside me. We have our arms around each other.

WILLIAM

You love your family.

ROLLO

With all my heart.

WILLIAM

Rollo, I want you to hold onto this image of you and your family.

ROLLO

All right.

WILLIAM

Now, stay with me. I want you to turn around on that dock in your mind's eye. In your imagination, I want you to picture that dock, from end to end, filled with holes.

Rollo squirms in his seat.

WILLIAM

Hold on, Rollo. Now, I want you to call to your children and bring them to your side. I want you to pull your wife close to you. Can you do that for me?

Rollo nods hesitantly.

WILLIAM

Pull them close and close your eyes in your mind. Then, take a step forward on the dock.

ROLLO

Onto the holes?

WILLIAM

With your family, Rollo.

ROLLO

Okay, okay. I'll try.

WILLIAM

Good. Take one step. Then breathe deeply. Take another step. Good.

MELANIE

Are you sure this is a good idea, William? We could traumatize him.

WILLIAM

(staying focused)

Now, I want you open your eyes in your mind's eye. Where are you?

ROLLO

(in disgust)

I'm in the middle of the dock, standing on so many holes!

WILLIAM

But your family is with you, Rollo. You are safe. Now, I want you to hold onto this image. From now on, whenever you see a surface with holes, picture your family with you. Can you do that for me?

ROLLO

I can try, yes.

William nods at MELANIE.

MELANIE

Okay, Rollo. I want you to start coming back, slowly. Feel yourself starting to become more awake. When I snap my fingers, you will return to the room, fully conscious.

MELANIE snaps her fingers, and Rollo awakes. William lays down about ten feet of cardboard riddled with holes. William and MELANIE stand on each side of Rollo, who stands at the front of the boxes.

WILLIAM

Okay, Rollo, I want you to step onto the board.

ROLLO

(biting his lip)

I . . . I don't know.

WILLIAM

Close your eyes and picture your family: your daughter and son, your wife. At your lake house. Can you get there?

ROLLO

(closing his eyes)

Okay, yes, I'm there. They're here with me.

WILLIAM

Now, take a step.

Rollo steps one foot onto the board. Then he takes another. Realizing what he's doing, he excitedly takes another step, and another, until he's come to the end of the cardboard.

A letter appears in the chute. William retrieves the letter and hesitates, afraid to read it.

MELANIE

William, what does it say?

WILLIAM

It says we're free. It says we're free to go.

William hangs his head, and tears come to his eyes.

WILLIAM

I can't believe it. Where will we go first, MELANIE?

MELANIE

(hesitating)

Not we, William. You.

WILLIAM

What do you mean?

MELANIE

I'd like to stay here. Someone will need to hypnotize our creator to rid him of his condition. After that, I suppose there are other phobias to cure. Anyway, I rather like it here, and I think I have everything I need for the time being.

WILLIAM

William hugs MELANIE.

It was a real pleasure to work with you, kind sir.

MELANIE

Adventure awaits you, William. Go find your friend. Go find Victor.

The lights dim.

VOICEOVER

When William stepped outside, he realized the world hadn't changed that much. It was not overrun by zombies. The clouds weren't full of acid rain. The earth below his feet was not dry or hot as the sun. In fact, the world seemed quite similar since he'd died. Cars still clung to roadways, planes still hurtled through the clouds and people still seemed just as confused as they had been when they'd say in his office. He guessed it was perhaps fifty years into the future. He worked in a restaurant for a few months and made enough to buy a plane ticket. He hadn't done any serious travel in decades, but he found it invigorating to be on the move, flying toward a far-flung land to find a long-lost friend.

The lights come up on a vast, mountainous region. The Himalayas.

William enters a charming establishment, Books & Bar. At the bar stands Victor, a cigar in his mouth, pouring a beer from the tap.

WILLIAM

Hi there, I was wondering if you might have any books on phobias.

VICTOR

(recognizing William)

Actually, we have quite a nice selection, young man.

WILLIAM

William hugs Victor.

It's good to see you! What have you been doing with yourself?

Victor gazes out the window at the majestic Mount Everest.

VICTOR

Well, I manage this place during the day. I hope to own it someday. Every morning, I sip coffee at that window. At night, I drink a cold beer and read in that chair.

WILLIAM

A life of leisure. You, sir, got your wish.

VICTOR

Well, you were right. After a few months of doing very little with myself, I got bored. It turns out I don't have much tolerance for boredom.

WILLIAM

What do you do with your ideas?

VICTOR

I'm back to doing a lot of scholarly work. Research, writing, submitting papers to journals.

WILLIAM

Under your name?

VICTOR

A pseudonym. It turns out I don't have the same lust for prestige that I had in my first life.

WILLIAM

So, here we are, Victor. Free. What shall we do with our time?

VICTOR

I think we're doing it, William.

WILLIAM

Conversation. Yes.

VICTOR

It's good to see you, my friend.

WILLIAM

You as well.

Victor pours William a beer.

You know, in all that time we spent together, I never did ask you what you were afraid of.

Victor glances at Everest through the window.

VICTOR

(chuckling)

I don't much care for heights.

WILLIAM

(smiling)

We can work on that.

The End

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS... *The idea of living a life of the mind versus engaging in leisure and living a life of pleasure has always interested me. In this play, two characters personify these two approaches to living. William wants to work hard and solve the problem he's been given. Victor has worked for many years and would rather spend his time in leisure. I wanted to lock these two characters in a room to see what would happen.*

The play's premise is pure Theater of the Absurd. The consciousness of two deceased men, former psychologists, are uploaded into two clones, William and Victor. Confined in a room, the clones can win their freedom if they solve their captor's phobia. The anonymous captor has tryphobia, the fear or disgust of holes. I selected this disorder because it's somewhat benign compared to phobias that can dominate a person's life. I have a friend with tryphobia. She considers it annoying, and we often laugh about it, but it doesn't debilitate her.

To attempt to cure the phobia, the captor provides the psychologists with clones. William and Victor try many therapies. Eventually, they use hypnosis to deploy a treatment that exposes the clones to the holes they fear most. This idea came from Victor Frankl, a psychologist who founded logotherapy and pioneered a therapeutic technique known as paradoxical intention. The method asks the individual to engage in a neurotic habit to rid themselves of it. By exposing a person to what they fear most, they might realize its irrationality.

Throughout this play, I explore the question: How should we use the freedom we have? And what consequences come along with our choices? Working hard may provide your life with meaning, but it might squeeze the joy out of life. On the other hand, one can engage in as much leisure as possible, but too much comfort may lead to boredom and a sense of futility. William and Victor represent two sides of the same coin, and they can inspire us to strike a balance between their approaches to living.

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Nemo ...

... **By** Joseph Kierland

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes...*

Just so you know, J.S. Kierland's NEMO has nothing to do with an animated clownfish, although there is a clown in the picture. The Nemo in this play is a circus dwarf who's gone missing from a ragtag crew of circus folk who alternately fantasize about his return and what (or who?) they're going to eat for dinner. Set in a barren snowscape, the characters, Boco the juggling clown, Bata the large man, and Bella the bareback rider, are stragglers in a story of survival where nobody can be trusted and dropping the ball portends an ominous fate. The balls may be imaginary, but the tension in this weird and haunting play is real. This script will take your breath away. If you've ever thought about running off and joining the circus, this family of outcasts will make you think again. And wherever Nemo has gone, there's no doubt that he's running for his life.

Trigger warning: There is a clown, but you already knew that.

Five stars.

BELLA

The dwarf isn't coming back because he knew what we were going to do to him!

(BATA & BOCO suddenly freeze in their dance, and the howl of the wind circles them. BELLA moves down to the edge again and speaks into the wind.)

I can feeeeeeel him. Smell him. Taste him. He's somewhere near ussssss.

(BOCO calls into the wind--)

BOCO

Ne-mo. Neee-moooo. Neeeeeeeeee-moooooo!

NEMO

Black. Wind.

From the darkness comes a dreamlike laugh, as the lights begin to rise on three sleeping FIGURES hunched together under the cold howl of a rising wind.

The strange laugh is coming from the one in the Clown suit and makeup. As the lights slowly rise his laugh ends abruptly, and HE moves with the rising light, and says -

BOCO

At lasssst, it's riiiiiiising.

(HE nudges one of the hunched FIGURES with him.)

The light, Bella...the liiiiiight.

(BELLA wakes and lifts her head to squint into the growing light. SHE'S still in her bareback rider's costume and performance makeup.)

The Show is about to begin. Can you hear the crowd? The animals sense it too. And the orchestra, Bella...the orchestra -

BELLA

Do you see him?

(THEY stare out, and the wind HOWLS as the light rises.

The large man, BATA, stirs and joins their long stare. HE is wearing a worn baggy suit, a tie, no shirt, and a high hat that sits tightly on his head.)

BATA

It snoooooowed again last night.

BELLA

Do you see him?

BATA

You can't see the road or the truck anymore. His tracks are gone too.

BELLA

The little bastard isn't coming back.

BOCO

We know better, don't we, Bata? Nemo is trustworthy.

BELLA

I never trusted him!

BOCO

You most certainly did. It was your idea to let him go back to the truck.

BELLA

I'm so goddamn cold and hungry I didn't want that little creep out of my sight.

BOCO

Nemo is trustworthy. I'm almost sure of it.

BELLA

You can never trust a dwarf! Dwarfs work against you! How do you think they survive in this world? If you could trust a dwarf he wouldn't survive.

BOCO

You're being unreasonable, Bella. Nemo just drove the truck down the mountain to get help.

BATA

He couldn't drive anywhere in all this snow.

BELLA

If the stinking little shit stood on the seat he couldn't look out the window.

BOCO

He'll be back. I know he'll be back! He promised he'd bring food and more clothes.

BATA

He did say that, Bella. I heard him say it. "I'll bring back food," he said. "I'll bring back food."

BOCO

Of course, he did. I'm certain he went to find the others. That's it. He went to find the others.

BATA

Sure.

BELLA

Then where is he?

BOCO

He's out there. Somewhere out *there!* And when he comes back we'll get on with the show. Won't we, Bata?

BATA

Yes, and everything will be just like it was! The crowds of people, the colored lights going on and off...on and off...on and off.

BOCO

And Bella will ride three...*four* new horses
at the same time while Nemo crashes the
cymbal on his head!

BATA

And I'll have every machine going for the
celebration! The carousel spinning around,
the wheel climbing up and up! And the people
laughing and shrieking!

BOCO

And the puppets...always the funny puppets!

BATA

Every machine at the same time...think of
that.

BOCO

And the calliope!

(HE begins to dance with BATA and
imitate the tooting oom-pah-pah of
the calliope.

BELLA has not moved from staring
out at the light, and pays no
attention when BATA and BOCO begin
to sing:)

BATA & BOCO

All around the mulberry bush,
the mulberry bush, the mulberry bush.
All around the mulberry bush,
On a cold and frosty morning...

(BOCO stops dancing and sets
himself. HE takes three imaginary
balls out of his pockets and
begins to juggle them, and BATA
APPLAUDS enthusiastically.)

BOCO

Announce me! Announce me!

BATA

Oh, I can't do that. Only Nemo announces!

BOCO

Then give me a drumroll! Quick! Quick!

(BATA begins to beat an imaginary drum, and imitates its rolling sound.)

Wonderful! Wonderful!

(BOCO juggles the imaginary balls, then MISSES, and they scatter, and HE runs to retrieve them, as BATA beats his imaginary drum.

BOCO resets himself, and attempts to juggle the imaginary balls again, but this time HE has difficulty even starting...and they scatter.

BATA stops drumming as BOCO again has to retrieve his imaginary balls.)

BELLA

Hopeless fools!

BOCO

Some day I'll juggle fifty-six balls like the Ugly Zorino.

BELLA

Impossible!

BOCO

There's nothing impossible to the artiste! But what would you know? You're nothing but a bareback rider! You've never known the agony...the torture-

BELLA

Who the hell is the Ugly Zorino anyway? I never heard of him!

BOCO

You see? And she tells everyone she's been in the carnival business for over twenty years!

BELLA

Ten years! TEN years...no more!

BOCO

Listen to her! The Ugly Zorino's been around for generations. You can ask anyone!

BELLA

Never heard of him!

BOCO

He worked the Florida Coast doing a flame-swallowing act...but his genius was with the balls!

BELLA

Did you ever see him?

BOCO

Nemo worked with him.

BELLA

Nemo? You can't believe a dwarf!

BOCO

Nemo always announced the Ugly Zorino with trumpets. Zorino *demand*ed trumpets.

BELLA

There's no such thing as an Ugly Zorino!

BATA

And cymbals! I remember Nemo saying that.

BELLA

Nemo's a liar. He always lies!

BOCO

Nemo steals a little. But he never lies. Never lies! Never lies!

BELLA

He's a stinking dwarf that lies and steals!

BOCO

He appreciates the artist. That's more than I can say for you.

BELLA

He's not coming back! That's how much he appreciates. Once we decided to do it, we should've never let him go.

(Long pause.)

BOCO

He has to come back. Where else can he go?

BATA

He's right, Bella. Nemo probably went to look for the others. The Great Romero and the Fat Lady were in the truck behind us. They're down there somewhere.

BOCO

Nemo will bring us back some food. He appreciates. That's why he offered to go.

BATA

And when he comes back he'll teach you to juggle fifty-six balls like an expert.

BOCO

An artiste...a great artiste.

(BATA and BOCO begin tooting like a calliope again, and THEY dance about taking mock bows.)

BELLA

The dwarf isn't coming back because he *knew* what we were going to do to him!

(BATA and BOCO FREEZE in their dance, and the HOWWWWL of the wind circles them. BELLA moves down to the edge again and speaks into the wind.)

I can feeeeeeeel him. Smell him. Taste him.
He's somewhere near usssssss.

BOCO

(Calling into the wind-)

Ne-mo. Neee-moooo. Neeeeeeee-mooooooo!

(...and the wind rises and
fades with his call.)

BATA

It's beginning to snoooooow again!

BOCO

Neeeeeee-mooooooo!

BATA

Snoooooow. Snoooooooow.

BOCO

Neeeeeeee-mooooooo!

(THEY stare out waiting for an
answer, and the WIND FADES into
silence.)

BATA

Let's go down to the truck and bring him
back.

BELLA

He doesn't want us to find him.

BOCO

You mean he's playing hide and seek?

BELLA

He's not in the truck. He just waddled out
there and sunk. I could see it in his face.
The little bastard knew there was no food in
the truck. He just made that up so we'd let
him go. He knew what we were going to do.
The little bastard knew.

(A long silence.)

BATA

I knew thee was no food in the truck.

BOCO

Why didn't you say something? You let him go!

BATA

There's nothing but heavy machinery in the truck.

BOCO

And you knew all the time?

BELLA

And so did Nemo!

BOCO

You're both crazy! Nemo will be back before the light goes down. He's got to come back!
(HE moves upstage and sets himself to juggle the imaginary balls again and demands - -)

Give me a drumroll!

(BATA and BELLA move upstage, but neither gives the CLOWN his drumroll. BOCO takes out the imaginary balls and begins to sing as HE prepares to juggle the balls.)

Sour grapes, sour grapes,
All the apes eat sour grapes,
Pick a bunch, pick a bunch,
And we'll have a picnic
lunch.

Louder with the drumroll, Dummies!

(BATA and BELLA stare at him as HE begins to arc his imaginary balls. One, two, three, and they scatter before HE can even arc them. The imaginary balls roll toward BELLA and SHE picks them up. There is a long silence as they watch her holding the imaginary balls.)

BELLA

Give me the high hat, Bata.

BATA

My hat?

BELLA

Give it to me!

BOCO

Don't do it, Bata. She's up to something.

(BATA holds the hat on his head.)

BATA

Take the Ringmaster's jacket if you want.

BELLA

I want your HAT!

BATA

I'll give you the tattooed man's tie!

BELLA

THE HAT!

BATA

The Great Romero himself gave me this hat.

BELLA

Give me the goddamn hat!

BOCO

She's got the balls! If she gets the hat, who knows what she'll do? She might even try to drive us out of the Carnival. She's an ambitious and ruthless bareback rider. You saw what she did to Nemo!

BATA

What did she do to Nemo?

BOCO

She made him go out in that storm! Can you imagine a Dwarf surviving that storm?

BATA

She didn't make him go. He went by himself!

BOCO

She'll do anything to get her way!

BELLA

Give me the hat, Bata!

BATA

You can't keep it.

BOCO

Don't do it, Bata!

BATA

I always wanted this hat and when the Great Romero gave it to me-

BELLA

We're just going to play a game with the balls.

BOCO

Ahhhh, the truth comes out. She's trying to take the Center Ring. She wants your hat for the horses to wear.

BATA

A lot of people in the carnival have tried to steal this hat.

BOCO

You can't trust a selfish and cruel bareback rider! She stole my balls...she'll steal your hat!

BATA

Nobody steals this hat!

BOCO

You see? You can't fool *him* that easy...and I'll get my balls back!

BELLA

Hold the hat.

BATA

Hold it?

BELLA

Take it off and hold it in your hand.

(BATA removes his hat and holds it
in his hands.)

BOCO

Be carrrrrrful, Bata.

(BATA grips the high hat tightly
as BELLA moves toward him and
drops the imaginary balls, one by
one, into the high hat.)

BELLA

Green. Yellow-

BOCO

My balls! My balls!

BELLA

And Red. The one who picks the red ball
takes the Dwarf's place!

BOCO

NO! Give me back my balls!

BELLA

If you don't pick...then you'll take the
ball that's left. Shake them up, Bata!

(BATA reaches into his high hat
and stirs the balls. Then he
offers the hat to the frightened
BOCO, who puts his hand halfway
into the hat and pulls it back.
BELLA sneers at him, reaches
quickly into the hat, chooses an
imaginary ball, and hides it
behind her back.

BOCO reaches out again. HE is
terrified and closes his eyes as
his hand sinks into the hat and

comes out with one of the "balls,"
but HE's afraid to open his eyes.)

BOCO

Which one is it? Is it the red one?

(Silence.)

You vicious bastards! It's the red one,
isn't it?

(HE drops the imaginary ball and
opens his eyes.)

It's the yellow! I picked the yellow one! I
picked the yellow one!

(BOCO realizes that BELLA and BATA
are staring at each other. BATA
edges his hand into the hat and
pulls out the last imaginary
ball.)

BATA

GREEN!

(HE is ecstatic, and BOCO laughs
with him, until THEY realize that.
BELLA is holding the last ball
behind her back. SHE suddenly
holds it out and says-)

BELLA

BLUE!

(For a moment THEY stand in awe of
the event. BATA turns the high hat
over...but there's nothing in it.)

BOCO

The red ball is gone! It's gone!

BELLA

Gone where?

BOCO

It's a sign! A good sign!

BATA

It's the Great Romero's trick hat. It's magic!

BELLA

Don't give me that shit!

(BELLA grabs for the high hat, but BATA pulls it away, and jams it back on his head. In the confusion BOCO grabs his imaginary balls back.)

BOCO

The red ball has gone to Nemo...gone to Nemo...to Nemo!

Sour grapes, sour grapes,
All the apes eat sour grapes-

BELLA

We'll do it again without the red ball!

BOCO

Go get your own balls!

Pick a bunch, pick a bunch,
And we'll have a picnic lunch.

(HE sets himself to juggle his imaginary balls again...looks over at BELLA...decides against it and puts the imaginary balls back in his pockets.)

BELLA

This time we play Blind Man's Bluff!

BOCO

We don't know how to play Blind Man's Bluff.

BELLA

I'll teach you!

BATA

Blind Man's Bluff is my favorite game!

BOCO

I don't want to play! He's the one it should be! Not Nemo...not you...not me! HIM! He doesn't belong in the carnival. He's an outsider...a Mechanic! We can find a mechanic anywhere! They're a penny a bunch...a penny a bunch...penny a bunch! But how many great bareback riders are there? How many magnificent juggling Clowns? He doesn't belong with us! We don't need him! He's the one it should be! Not me...not you! HIM!

BATA

How can it be me? The carousel and the flying wheel are mine! I break them down...I build them up...I make the people laugh and screaaam! MEEEE! Baaaaaaa-taaaa! My machines are the greatest things in the carnival! Without my machines you have nothing! Nothing!

BOCO

No carnival needs those stupid machines when they have artists!

BATA

You only make the crowd cry with your bad dancing and awful juggling! We keep you here because we feel sorry for you!

BOCO

That's a lie...that's a lie...that's a lie! Soon it will be fifty-six balls in a spinning rainbow above me! The orchestra will soar and Kings and Queens will come from all over the world to see me! ME! Not your dirty, noisy, smelly machines!

BATA

No one ever juggled fifty-six balls at the same time! Tell him it's impossible, Bella!

BOCO

Bella knows anything is possible for an artist! Someday Bella will jump through burning hoops on four galloping stallions! Someday...someday!

BATA

You can't even juggle three balls! You can't do anything! Even Nemo said you have no talent! He never knew where to put you in the lineup!

BOCO

Another lie! I worked with the trapeze acts!

BATA

Nemo just put you there because the crowd watched the high-wire act and didn't have to look at you!

BOCO

Make him stop, Bella...make him stop!

BELLA

Show him you can juggle the balls and he'll stop.

(There's a long pause, and THEY stare at the CLOWN as HE takes out the three balls...and HIS arms rise and fall, rise and fall, and the balls begin to arc. Once, twice, three times...and then they fall and scatter. BELLA laughs, and BATA picks up the balls.)

BOCO

They never looked at the high wire! They looked at me! Meeeee!

BATA

Give me the drumroll!

(HE sets himself.)

Louder on the drums!

(BELLA laughs and begins to beat an imaginary drum.)

BOCO

No! Stop it, Bella! He'll make a fool of himself! He doesn't know what he's doing!

(BATA arcs the three imaginary balls and begins to juggle. One, two, three, four, five, six, arcing in a steady pattern that he controls with ease and assurance.)

BELLA

Bravo for the stupendous BA-TA!

BOCO

No! Stop him...stop him!

BELLA

He'll juggle fifty-six balls in no time!
BRAVOOOO!

(BOCO rushes at BATA, pushing him off-balance. The imaginary balls scatter, and HE runs about retrieving them.)

BOCO

You have no style! It's all technique! No style. You don't belong with us. You're not an artist!

(The light begins to FADE as BELLA and BATA move toward the terrified BOCO.)

BATA

It should be you! YOU!

BOCO

No! Nemo will come back! He has to come back!

(The light is nearly gone now, and BELLA and BATA reach out for BACO, as HE calls into the wind - -)

Neeeeee-moooooooooo...

(The light fades into the darkness, and only the call is left...)

oooooooooooooooooo...

(And then there is only the
silence.)

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS... *When I read what FOTD was looking for I laughed...thought about how "what they are looking for isn't being written" and what do I have when writing things like they were asking for was accepted. It was to be a test: the "old days" vs. FOTD. So I sent in what you just read, NEMO. That was the answer.*

The question is: "What is different about now and back then...were they better then, or worse for writers? Or, what happened in the interim? I don't know...but what I do know is that I haven't sent NEMO out into the world for decades. So, here was a chance to test FOTD...and they're real. And I suppose the secret to the mystery of what was and isn't now is what they accept for their Journal. Things are always changing and they seem to be ahead of them, if you get the gist. Maybe it's happening again.

AUTHOR BIO: J.S. Kierland is a graduate of the University of Connecticut, and did postgrad at Hunter College where he won the New York City playwright's award and was admitted into Sigma Tau Delta. He was also given a full scholarship and Fellowships to the Yale Drama School and after receiving his MFA became playwright-in-residence at Lincoln Center, Brandeis University, and the Lab Theatre. He has published a novella, edited two books of one-act plays, and over 125 of his short stories have been published in literary anthologies, reviews and magazines in the U.S., Europe and Asia, including, Playboy, Fiction International, Colere, Trajectory, International Short Story, and other leading Literary Reviews. "15" of his BEST SHORT STORIES was published in 2014 by Underground Voices, and his novella HARD TO LEARN was published as an e-book.

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Idl _____ in _____ g

By Samuel __ Emerson _____ Krapels

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes...*

Playwright Samuel Emerson Krapels says that gender is irrelevant in this play as long as it's a queer couple. "NIK might be a little goth. MAX might wear glasses." I picture two guys, but maybe that's a me thing. Whatever the case, this short play is a near-perfect slice of life in a world where love and pizza can both be elusive. The landscape of the play is now - with a backdrop of the pandemic as NIK and MAX wait for their pizza in the car, NIK in the driver's seat. There is no mention of COVID, but its presence is as tangible as an aerosol mist of a third character driving the conversation and the play. We've all been on this ride, which makes the dialogue snap with a startling intimacy that gets right into the heart of the matter; what are we waiting for - besides pizza?

Here's MAX's report on the timing of the takeout:

MAX

I showed up and told her
Her name was Jackie

NIK

Hi Jackie

MAX

Hi Jackie
That I was here to pick up our pizza.
She told me that they still needed 10 minutes.

NIK

Oh. Really?
I thought we had it this time.

I love these characters and I love this play.

Five stars.

Idling

An exploration of small-town queerness through the mundane act of waiting for your takeout. These two are all they have in the world and have settled into an incredibly codependent relationship. Even in their frustration with each other, there is an implicit trust. And then circumstances change.

The relationship is written so that gender is irrelevant, but it still needs to be a queer couple. NIK might be a little goth. MAX might wear glasses.

Feel free to just use two chairs to connote the front seats of the car. There absolutely does not have to be an entire automobile onstage.

START OF PLAY

Lights up on NIK's 1998 Charcoal Grey Toyota Corolla, the engine running. We find NIK sitting in the driver's seat with their arms folded tightly. Their shoulders are up to their ears. After a moment they look outside and pull out their phone. They got some news.

They breathe deeply as their eyes widen.

The next moment, MAX clambers into the passengers' seat while NIK quietly puts their phone away

NIK

What's the story?

MAX says something unintelligible.

What?

MAX takes off their mask.

MAX

10-15 minutes.

NIK

You're kidding.

Even after we made a point to be late.

MAX

Yup.
I was livid.

NIK

You didn't make a scene, did you?

MAX

What? No
Well

NIK

There's no turn off like being a dick to service.

MAX

Let it be known
Even when I am being utterly humiliated, I do the smile and the please and the thank you

NIK

Not humiliated.

MAX

Yes. Humiliated.

NIK

Oh no
What happened?

MAX

I told the nice lady at the checkout about the equation.

NIK

Oh, sweetie

MAX

It was bad.

NIK

I can imagine.
Alright
Tell me how it happened.

MAX

I showed up and told her

Her name was Jackie

NIK

Hi Jackie

MAX

Hi Jackie

That I was here to pick up our pizza.
She told me that they still needed 10 minutes.

NIK

This is where I would have walked out.

MAX

Right.

So I told her that that was interesting
Considering the equation.

NIK

Another moment to say thank you and leave

MAX

Right.

But no.

She,

An all-around good person, says,
“Equation?”

NIK

She walked right into that one.

MAX

And that was when I told her how me and my partner came up with a takeout equation.
Depending on the popularity of the restaurant, complexity of the dish, and the day of the week,
we were able to figure out how long it would take until the meal would be ready. How burgers
are faster than thai which is faster than pizza which is faster than brick oven specialty pizza

NIK

We sound cool

MAX

I could have stopped there and walked out with my dignity.

NIK

But no. You must go deeper

MAX

And so, I did.

I then told her that since we got a meat lovers pizza at a popular restaurant on a Thursday night, we were going to budget a solid hour before it was ready.

NIK

We're getting good at that. Didn't even need the whiteboard

MAX

It was right around when I was showing her pictures of old modules I had on my phone, The crusty old dude in the back of the line turns to his wife and says, quote, Will someone shut that chatty faggot up.

Breath.

What?

Breath. NIK is holding back laughter.

Are you laughing?

NIK

Nope.

MAX

It was awful Nik I was humiliated

NIK

I know

It's just

I'm changing my twitter name to chattyfaggot the moment we get home.

Breath. MAX is not having it.

Oh come on that's funny.

Max

What if it happened to me?

MAX

It would be hilarious.

NIK

Ta da!

MAX

But it happened to me.

NIK
I know.
I'm sorry babe.
You wanna go home?

MAX
No I want this pizza.

NIK
Gotcha.
Breath.
So I gotta tell you something

MAX
Oh did you talk to that real estate agent?

NIK
No
Well we emailed but

MAX
She helped our old neighbors find a place with renter's insurance after they got evicted.
She's exactly what we need.

NIK
Yeah, but

MAX
I'm serious. I'm sick of pretending to be roommates, Nik

NIK
Max

MAX
I know it's expensive, but think about it

NIK
I have. A lot.

MAX
We'd get to be out West! We could walk to the ocean.
Doesn't that sound amazing?

It does. Yeah.

NIK

Nik I need a little enthusiasm.

MAX

No, it's cool.

NIK

Do you not like the plan anymore?

MAX

It's a great plan.

NIK

It's THE plan.

MAX

I know. It is. It was.

NIK

So what?

MAX

I don't know.
I feel like all of the plans I've ever made in life
Like they don't actually follow through.
Whenever I try to plan out what will happen, usually the opposite occurs.
I just wish something in my life didn't culminate in a disaster.

MAX

Hmm.
Is this Hangry Nik?

NIK

What?

MAX

Hangry Nik.
Is this who I'm dealing with?

NIK

No, this isn't Hangry Nik
This is Tired Nik Who Wants Pizza and Go To Bed
I actually hate it when you call me Hangry Nik.

MAX

How else do you want me to describe it?
Bitchy Nik?

NIK

When you call me that stuff it's so invalidating.
I never get to experience my frustration
It just turns into an infantile surname.

Breath.

MAX

Sorry.
I didn't mean to upset you.
I might be a little hangry.

NIK

Right.
You never get hangry.

MAX

Uh, yeah I do.

NIK

What? When?

MAX

Now?
Whenever I get hungry?

Breath.

Dinner with your cousins?

NIK

Oh God. Right.
Can we call that Hanger?

MAX

We were definitely hungry.

NIK

Yeah but I don't think the hunger was the source of the anger.

MAX

I guess not.
The low blood sugar definitely did not help.

NIK

Yeah.
What a shitshow.

MAX

Oof.

Breath.

I bet it's the meat.

NIK

Hmm?

MAX

That's making the pizza take so long.

NIK

Yeah. Maybe.

Breath.

One of those cousins is actually having a baby.

MAX

No way.

NIK

Yup. Lisa. I saw it on Facebook.

MAX

Wow. She's younger than us.

NIK

Doesn't have a job or anything.

MAX

Creating an entire organic life is a job in itself.

NIK

I guess.
She and her boyfriend are getting married faster than it takes to make a pizza on a Thursday.

MAX
But of course.

NIK
Yeah.
Whole thing kinda makes my blood boil.

MAX
It's very cyclical.

NIK
It's more than that.

MAX
How so?

NIK
Isn't it weird how like
Any two breeder idiots can just have a baby and no one's talking about it.

MAX
We're talking about it.

NIK
I know but like
Imagine if we wanted a kid.
The bureaucratic hoops we'd have to jump through to even have the thing

MAX
Then imagine after it's born.
The scrutiny. The criticism.

NIK
Exactly.
That poor kid.

MAX
I wouldn't want to raise kids in this town anyway.
I feel like you're supposed to raise kids in like white picket fence neighborhoods.

NIK
And not crumbling subdivisions?

MAX
Yeah.

I'm so hungry

NIK

White picket fences like we found on Zillow.
I really wanna move.

MAX

I know.

NIK

I don't think it's that out of our budget.

MAX

I know.

NIK

We could do it. I bet the jobs are better out there, too.

MAX

I know.

NIK

I wouldn't mind a little distance from my family.

MAX

Me too.

NIK

Can you please give me a little more info than that?

MAX

Yeah no it sounds great.

NIK

Alright. You're in a mood.

MAX

I'm not in a mood.
I hate it when you say stuff like that it's so invalidating.

NIK

Sorry?
Just saying you seem upset.

MAX

NIK

I mean yeah I want this pizza

MAX

You seem upset in a deeper sense.

NIK

Pizza is deep.

MAX

I guess.

Nik

What's wrong?

NIK

Does something always have to be wrong?

MAX

No. Not at all.

Sorry.

NIK

It's okay.

MAX

Nik I'm so sick of living in this town.

And I'm so sick of talking about how we're not going to stay here.

Let's actually do it.

Let's get out.

Be our own people. Carve our own futures.

NIK

Max I can't think about it.

There's just too much on my mind.

I'm too hangry.

Or maybe I'm just hungry I don't know anymore.

MAX

I'm sorry.

We don't have to talk about it right now.

Let's leave it for tonight.

Breath.

I, uh

I never wanted to stress you out.

I want it to be better. For us.

Breath.

NIK

I got in.

MAX

What?

NIK

I got the acceptance.
Before you came back to the car.

MAX

Oh. Wow.

NIK

Yep.

MAX

Is it good?

NIK

Full ride. My dream program.
I would start class next fall.

MAX

Fuck.
Sorry.
That's exciting. Congratulations.

NIK

This is what I meant.
A lot on my mind.

MAX

Yeah no got it.

MAX's phone beeps. They pull it out.

Pizza's ready.

NIK

Okay.

MAX exits as fast as they can.

NIK is alone.

Maybe they just sit.

MAX returns with a massive pizza. They don't look at NIK

Let's go home. MAX

Okay. NIK

I don't want to talk. MAX

Alright. NIK

Breath.

I've never loved anyone in the world as much as I love you. MAX

Me too. NIK

I wanna go home. MAX

Okay. NIK

Breath.

I
I don't want to be alone. MAX

Maybe they start to cry.

I know. NIK
What do you want?

MAX

I wanna go home and eat this pizza.
Then go to bed.

NIK

Okay.

MAX

You don't know.
You don't know anything.

NIK

I don't.

MAX

Nik,
GO.

NIK puts the car in drive.

Blackout.

END OF PLAY

THE PLATWRIGHT SPEAKS...

Nik and Max came to me after I read about the lack of nondiscrimination laws for LGBTQ folks around the country. Being a queer person in a community where your rights are not protected results in your partner being your only safe space.

My writing largely stems from an interest in what people don't acknowledge in their interactions. I've found my characters are generally honest with each other, but never seem to tell the whole truth. It's always easier to not talk about the stressful things between us. This leads me to put my characters in a container where they must address it. Something like the front seats of a car. The effect of these containers is often sad and also funny.

My biggest influences are Annie Baker and Sarah Ruhl.

Website in construction.

AUTHOR BIO: Samuel Emerson Krapels is a writer, director, world builder currently based in Vermont. Sam hopes people think a little differently after they experience his work.

Anthropos

  by *A*lexander Wolfe   

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes...* Described as “A Short Play In Ten Very Short Scenes,” Alexander Wolfe’s ANTRHOPOS is a veritable nutshell of microplays that tickle a variety of bones from funny to depraved. Some of the scenes in this odd little play are downright dark, which keeps it on the side of provocative experimental theatre rather than sliding into the realm of sketch comedy. It’s a dangerous and delightful dance, resulting in more than a few left turns in the subconscious. With a hint of Gary Larson, notes of Beckett, and a whiff of Freud, ANTHROPOS makes us worry about being a member of this species even as we laugh about it. I’d go see it even without a comp. (Spacing is playwright’s own. Please scroll down.)

ANTHROPOS

A Short Play In Ten Very Short Scenes

By: Alexander Wolfe

CHARACTERS

Various characters are to be played by a company of any size, though it is suggested that each character in each particular scene is played by a different person. Genders have been assigned to the

characters, but are suggestions only.

The almighty author commands you to get weird with it.
(If that's how you're feelin'.)

A CONSIDERATION

The scenes are currently in the order that they are because that is what works best for them on the page.

In performance, that may not be the case.

The only important thing is the meaning and the truth.

Art is never static.

1. THE HEAT

Two shirtless men walk onstage and sit down. One has a water bottle, which he swigs out of, and passes to the other man, Two.

One: Hot one today.

Two: Goddamn right.

One: Haven't seen one this hot in a while.

Two: Not for a few years, at least.

One: Know what I want to be right now?

Two: What's that?

One: Cold.

Two: Cold?

One: Cold.

Two: You shittin' me?

One: I ain't.

Two: Know what?

One: What?

Two: I could stand to be cold myself.

One: No kiddin'?

Two: Not a bit. Cold. Frozen even.

One: Frozen. That's the dream.

Two: It is at that.

The two men each take a drink again, and then spontaneously kiss each other. There is a slight pause.

One: Cold.

Two: Frozen, even.

One: That's the dream.

2. DEATHBED

An old man lays in bed, his family surrounding him. A heart monitor beeps weakly.

Old Man: Please, come a bit closer.

They do so.

Old Man: This, I think, is the last thing I shall ever say...

Somebody bursts into tears.

Old Man: I...I...I...wish I had watched more commercials. People worked hard on them.

The heart monitor flatlines.

3. FIRE

A man sits alone in a room, facing a video camera.

Man: And I watched their faces through the window. I saw them pound the glass with their fists, knowing they couldn't break it, that they were just too small. Occasionally you could hear noises above the roar, never the children, but the pets, the pets were loud. After they caught, the kids, not the pets, they stopped pounding with their hands, and used their whole bodies, even their heads. They were good windows, they didn't break. Their parents drove up just when I thought they'd miss the whole show, just when the crowd was really starting to get big, and the sirens were close. I'll give 'em both credit, as parents, I mean, they didn't hesitate. They were out of the car and into the house faster than I would've thought they'd be able to move. They left the door

open, so you could hear them pretty good. I thought that was considerate of them.

The lights go red, and a voice is heard, seemingly though a speaker.

Speaker Voice: What did you do afterwards?

Man: Came here.

Speaker Voice: Why?

Man: I just really wanted to tell somebody.

Speaker Voice: Any reason?

Man: Well I thought it was pretty cool.

4. EXERCISE

A man stands before a small audience, a vision echoing a certain martyr preaching on the streets of a desert town. The crowd parts at a small signal, and the man drops to his hands, and begins to do push ups. When he is exhausted, he again stands.

Man: Can anybody do more than that?

The crowd all shake their heads.

Man: Very well. Than I shall remain king for this day.

5. SCHOOLMARM

A female teacher stands before her young, very excited, students, who sit on the floor in front of her in a half circle.

Teacher: ...and Mr. Jenkins says?

Kids: Hey, hey, hey!

Teacher: And he gets in the old...

Kids: Beat up!

Teacher: Run down...

Kids: Rusty!

Teacher: Pickup truck.

Kids: Vroom!

Teacher: And he pours his...

Kids: Beer!

Teacher: Into his soda can. And he drives home.

Kids: Screech!

Teacher: And when he walks in the door, his wife says...

The kids all push one small girl into the middle of the half circle.

Small Girl: You lying sack of shit!

Teacher: And Mr. Jenkins says...

At this, all the rest of the children get into a line, and one by one, as they take their turn at saying the next line, each hits the Small Girl, very hard.

Kid: Hey, hey, hey!

Next Kid: Hey, hey, hey!

Next Kid: Hey, hey, hey!

And so on. Eventually the Small Girl crumples to the ground. When each child has gone through the line, they all form the half circle again, and sit. Small Girl cries softly on the ground.

Teacher: And when Mr. Jenkins is all done with his fun, he never forgets to say...

Kids: I just love you SOOOOOO much!

Teacher: Now who wants to be my big, brave, volunteer helper for the day?

All the children raise their hands, she picks one at random, pulls out a large, rusty, pair of scissors, and hands them off to the volunteer.

Teacher: Remember, as always, a small piece for everybody, and the eyes for me!

6. THERE-PY

Two men sit in chairs, facing a therapist, who takes notes through the scene.

Man 1: And all of a sudden I just, I don't know, it's hard to put into words, but you're just not as *there* as you were before, and it just, I don't know, it's hard to put into words, but you're not *here* and I don't want to think of where else you might *be*, but I also want to know because I don't want you to keep anything from me, because I want us both to be *here*, but you're not, you're *there* and it makes me sad.

Therapist: Any response?

Man 2: I try to be *here*, as much as I can, but I don't want to be *here* all the time, because if I'm always *here* and never *there* then I have nothing to bring back, and if there's never anything brought back, than *here* is going to get stale. Isn't it?

Therapist: Is it?

Man 2: Is it?

Man 1: But why can't I ever go with you when you're *there*? Why do I have to wait *here*?

Therapist: What would happen if he went with you?

Man 2: If he went with me, than *there* would simply become *here*, and if we go all the way *there* just to have it turn into *here*, well, we haven't really moved, have we?

Therapist: What would happen if you went *there* yourself?

Man 1: I'd be worried the whole time.

Therapist/Man 2: Why?

Man 1: If I go to my *there* and you go to your *there*, how do we know we'll end up at *here* again? How do we know we won't get lost?

Man 2: I suppose we don't know.

7. BREAK-IN

We begin with a dark stage. A click, and lights turn on. In the light we can see a Homeowner, holding a shotgun on a Burglar, who is, in return, brandishing a pistol. A staredown commences, and continues, for a good minute or so, before both men slowly lower their guns, and back of either side of the stage. Just before they exit, the pause, never taking their eyes off each other.

Burglar: Touche.

The two of them back the rest of the way off the stage.

8. GOD BLESS

It is moments after Jesus has ended his stint on the cross. Man takes him back to his hut, and begins patching the wounds. There is a knock at the door.

Man: No.

There is the sound of feet furtively shuffling away. Then, another knock..

Man: No.

Once again, somebody hurries away. Another, final, knock. Man, fed up, goes to the door, opens it, and screams out:

Man: I said NO, MOTHERFUCKER!

Man returns to Jesus, Jesus sneezes.

Man: Bless you.

9. HANDOFF

It is the middle of a relay race. In slow motion, we see Man 1 run up to Man 2, holding out a baton. They try to make the hand off, but Man 2 trips and falls to the ground. Man 1 grabs the baton, and begins to choke Man 2 with it, until Man 2 goes limp. Man 1 pulls a sharpie out of his pocket, signs the baton, and lays it on the ground next to Man 2.

10. DREAM, SWEETLY DREAM

A man in a suit walks onto the stage. He calls:

Man: Thomas.

Thomas walks onto the stage.

Thomas: Yes?

Man: Welcome to your dream, Thomas.

Thomas: Thank you?

Man: You're very welcome, and I appreciate you being so polite. I don't come across many polite people. That's not to say there aren't a few, but the majority...well, you get my drift.

Thomas: Yeah. People suck.

The man laughs a bit.

Man: "People suck". Ha! How nearly eloquent... I love it! Couldn't have been put better myself.

Thomas: Could I get your name, if you don't mind?

Man: I'd give you mine if I had one, but I don't, so I shan't.

Thomas: Oh.

Man: Not much use for one, you see.

Thomas: Why is that?

Man: Well, I used to make up something whenever somebody asked, which happened pretty rarely because, as you said, "people suck", but everybody just eventually kept calling me, "The Man", so, I figured... what's the point?

Thomas: So you prefer, 'The Man'?

Man: It doesn't matter much.

A small noise. Maybe a bell, maybe a bird, maybe a laugh.

Man: The signal! It begins!

Thomas: The dream?

The man smiles, and quickly licks his lips.

Man: The dream. Or dinner. Or both, depending on the vantage point... It's all perspective, you know?

Thomas: You've lost me.

Man: Or I suppose, if you really wanted, you could call it justice...but that term is also so wrapped up in perspective that it doesn't really...well, some accidental humor here, it doesn't really do itself justice, you see?

The man chuckles a bit to himself.

Thomas: Jesus...what did I eat before bed...

Man: A burger and fries if I'm not mistaken.

Thomas: How do you know that?

Man: It's a dream, Thomas. It's all in your head, so I know everything you know, right?

Thomas: Right?

Man: Wrong! In fact, there is something that I know that you don't... Something important...

Thomas: What's that?

Man: Let's play a game, huh? I'm going to say two words, and you're going to tell me what they make you think of, okay?

Thomas: Okay...

Man: Let's see... the first word is ceiling. Ceiling, Thomas. What do ceilings make you think of?

Thomas looks up.

Thomas: There isn't a ceiling.

Man: Oh, you already know what I'm talking about, don't you? And you're trying to hide it...you're so sweet.

Thomas: I'm a little confused.

The man laughs.

Man: Oh no, not yet. You will be though. The second word, Thomas, is Benjamin. More of a name than a word really, but I think it still works out. Do you remember Benjamin, Thomas? Do you remember Benjamin, and the ceiling?

Thomas is silent, and scared.

Man: Such a small boy... such a tragedy. How long did they look? Weeks? Months?

Thomas speaks quietly.

Thomas: They're still looking.

The man chuckles to himself quietly.

Man: But not for long. Because soon he'll really start to drip. And the plastic won't hold in the smell. And they'll go from 'looking' to 'finding'. Eventually. But that won't really matter to you.

Thomas: Why not?

Man: Because his mother, his poor, lonely, grieving, mother...she stopped looking.

Thomas: Why did she stop?

Man: Because she sent me, Thomas. And she knew I'd find you. And she knows what I do. And she wants me to do it to you.

Thomas: What do you do?

Man: I break your mind, Thomas. Because I can kill your reality.

Thomas: What?

Man: Do you know how scary the world is when you don't know what's real and what's not? Maybe it will scare you as much as you scared Benjamin. Maybe more. I hope so.

Thomas turns and walks away.

Man: You can't run from me, Thomas.

Thomas exits the stage, and quickly reappears. He tries again, with the same result. This goes on until it stops.

Man: Given up?

Thomas: It's just a dream. Dreams can't hurt.

Man: Of course not. Everybody knows that.

Thomas: I'll just wake up soon.

Man: In just a couple minutes, actually. But not before I tell you.

Thomas: Tell me?

Man: What I do, Thomas. Tell you what I do.

Thomas: Okay.

Man: Here's what's going to happen. You're dreams are going to start feeling progressively longer over the next few nights. In a couple of weeks, it will feel like every dream you have lasts hours, even days or weeks sometimes. And, here's the kicker, they'll all be perfectly normal. It will feel just like you're going about your every day life, except that you'll be dreaming. Do you see what I'm getting at?

Thomas: ...Kind of...

Man: The line between reality and dreams will start to blur for you, Thomas. It will start slow, just a couple of nagging doubts about whether you're awake or not. But after a couple months, in real time, not dream time, after a couple of months you'll start to get a bit paranoid about it. You'll start to be unable to think of much else. And then, it gets really fun, because for one night, just one night. You won't dream at all. But will you even notice at that point? Will you? Thomas?

Thomas is very frightened.

Thomas: Jesus...

Man: Eventually, of course, you'll kill yourself. But what if it happens that you kill yourself in a dream by accident? You'll just wake up. And then you'll go thinking that you know for sure that you're awake. And the whole thing will stop, and you won't dream at all for a long time. Months, even. And then it starts again. And over. And over. Until you finally do manage to kill yourself while you're awake.

Thomas is silent and staring.

Man: And when that happens, we'll chat again. Because Benjamin has a few questions for you, Thomas. He's waiting, next to the throne. Not the one upstairs-

The man points up.

Man: -or even the one downstairs-

The man points down.

Man: -but MY throne. Behind. In here.

The man touches Thomas' forehead with a finger.

Man: We eagerly await your visit. But we'll have to be patient. For a while, at least.

The man walks to the edge of the stage.

Man: Goodbye, Thomas. Remember our little talk, if you can. Of course dreams just have a way of slipping off into the ether in the light of day, don't they? Oh well. See you soon.

The man leaves. Thomas is alone on stage. He begins to cry. Very softly, but gaining volume, we begin to hear the sound of an alarm clock.

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS...

Humans are pretty silly, huh? Frightening and lovely and cruel and generous and shy and hilarious and wild and filled with too many holes. (Seriously, what's with all the holes?)

“Anthropos” means “human” just as ANTHROPOS means “human”. It's just people being people, you know?

*Okay, if we're gonna get all into the direct influences, (which is a wonderful way to say “things I ripped off”), the base structure is right out of either the long-running Chicago show *Too Much Light Makes The Baby Go Blind*, the Caryl Churchill play *Love and Information*, or even *Almost, Maine*. The short format sci-fi stories of Fredric Brown probably deserve a mention as well. The content is a distillation of a billion little things I happen to enjoy, (Home Movies, Junji Ito, Henry Rollins, Monty Python, the films of Eric Butler, the writing of Monte Monteleagre), all hopefully spread thin enough that the performer can wear the script like a veil.*

I don't understand people. (Whined the cis-white boy who grew up middle-class and developed some really sexy calf muscles from walking around with all this privilege... don't worry, I know I'm full of shit up to my eyeballs.) We are creatures of contradiction and paradox. For every person picking up litter in their neighborhood there's someone who pees all over a public bathroom. For every person who commits an act of random violence there is another going without food so that they can pay to medicate their neighbors pet goldfish who has the sniffles.

Humans are pretty silly, huh?

AUTHOR BIO:

Who Am I?

I'm Alexander Wolfe, a relatively young man from the Midwest that really likes writing, gardening, and taking care of my cats. Obviously due to me being the voice of my generation, (please God let them pick up on the sarcasm here), a couple of people have taken interest in my work and put it up in the format available at the time: Zoom play versions of an hour long and a one act, [Gravity: A Union](#) and [The Painting Rots And Now We Burn](#), respectively. I also run a relatively successful fictional sci-fi podcast entitled [Voices From The Umbra](#) that has a wonderfully diverse international audience of people willing to give a show that only updates once a month a chance.

Swipe *R-I-G-H-T*

By Mikki Gillette

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes...*

Mikki Gillette's play Swipe Right is a fresh and honest take on the contemporary dating scene. The smart multi-layered writing and realistic dialogue allows for a living and breathing interaction between twenty-somethings MANDY and DERRICK - sparked by Tinder - to jump off the page and onto the stage. As if meeting somebody on a dating App isn't hard enough, it's further complicated when that somebody (DERRICK) neglected to read the profile and didn't realize that his date (MANDY) is trans. The conversation that ensues goes past preliminary ice-breaking and cringe-worthy awkwardness right into that rarest of sweet spots where the characters are given the opportunity to grow, and the audience along with them. Watch out for this playwright. She's going to change the world.

DERRICK

It's OK. People are crazy online.

(laughs)

For a minute there, I thought you might be one of those . . . what are they called? . . . You know like misogynists, only men?

(Spacing is playwright's own.)

SWIPE RIGHT

by

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CHARACTERS:

MANDY – a trans woman in her early 20s

DERRICK – a cis man in his early 20s

LOCATION:

A Thai restaurant in a U.S. city.

TIME:

Present day.

MANDY and DERRICK, both in their early 20s, sit at a restaurant table. Mandy appears a little tense and suspicious. Derrick is confident, open, and guileless.

DERRICK

How long have you been on Tinder?

MANDY

Just a few weeks . . . and you?

DERRICK

A while. I only use it off and on, though . . . Have guys been cool to you on there?

MANDY

(defensive)

What does that mean?

DERRICK

(surprised, cautious)

I just meant, like, when you message, or text . . . are they nice, or, like, douche-y, or something . . . you know, like dick pics, that sort of thing?

Mandy stares angrily a moment. Her brow then knits in doubt. She sighs, frowning.

MANDY

Fuck . . . you know, maybe I'm not up for this. You seem . . . average, I guess, but -

DERRICK

(incredulous)

Did you just call me "average"?

MANDY

We've been here, like, a minute, and you've already asked me how "guys treat me," and made a genital reference, and I'm just . . .

DERRICK

Huh? . . . You mean "dick pic"?

MANDY

Yes, I mean "dick pic."

Pause.

DERRICK

I think I'm just making, like, standard first date conversation, Mandy, but if you want to talk about it, or make suggestions, or something, we can do that.

MANDY

(shakes head wearily)

Have you dated a trans woman before, Derrick?

DERRICK

(confused)

Um, no . . . but I think my cousin's trans. I mean, he, or she, or, um, I don't know - they live back east and -

MANDY

You do know I'm trans, right?

(pause)

It was on my profile. Like, prominently.

DERRICK

Um . . . yeah, of course. It's, you know . . .

MANDY

You didn't know I'm trans.

DERRICK

I mean, if you're asking, like, did I know before you just said it, then . . . um, no . . . I didn't know . . . I'm glad you mentioned it, though, and that we're getting to know each other.

As Derrick's talked, Mandy's brought out her phone and searched on it.

MANDY

It's, like, the *second thing*. "24" "trans."

DERRICK

(uncomfortable)

I'm not sure why you're making it such a big thing Mandy. It's not a crime to not read someone's profile . . . some people do that purposely in order to not build up unrealistic expectations about people.

MANDY

(sighs)

Maybe you're right. Should we talk about -

DERRICK

Oh! Dick pic! Now I see! Right, I couldn't figure out why that was bothering you, but . . . sure, yeah, that might have seemed rude.

Mandy stares insulted. An awkward pause follows.

MANDY

(annoyed)
Maybe we should talk about something else.

DERRICK
Sure. How did you choose this restaurant?

MANDY
Oh, someone I knew introduced me to it.
They have good Thai food.

DERRICK
(coyly)
Was it a date?

MANDY
No, just a friend. Do you date often?

DERRICK
(stares)
So you were, like, a boy. That's crazy! I would
never -

MANDY
What the fuck?! Do I just start scrutinizing
you and blurting out shit?

DERRICK
No, it's cool. I was appreciating, like, you know,
who you are.

MANDY
God, I wish I was a lesbian. Do you know what
it's like to be forcibly socialized male, transition
and realize what a sexist asshole society made
you, and then try to date men? It's like a cruel
social experiment, or something.

DERRICK
(offended)
That's kind of rude, Mandy. I'm not judging
you for who you are. It's mean to say I'm a
jerk just because I'm male.

Mandy cries.

MANDY

You asked how guys treat me on Tinder? A lot of them are just really transphobic. Like, "I thought you were cute, but then I read your profile. Sorry, I'm not into dudes," you know? It's probably made me a little jaded.

(sincerely)

Sorry.

DERRICK

Wow. That's shitty, Mandy. I'm sorry.

(frowns)

Yeah, some guys are dicks.

MANDY

Thanks.

DERRICK

I have this one friend, and, like, all he does is post shit to this fat-shaming subreddit, and then brag about it on twitter.

MANDY

(slightly disturbed)

Oh, um -

DERRICK

And he's funny, so sometimes I'll retweet, or whatever, but other times I'll think, "Why are -"

MANDY

What the fuck are you talking about Derrick?!

DERRICK

Huh?

MANDY

You retweet your fat shaming shithead friend's online harassment? That's what you're telling me after I talk about being harassed by transphobic dude-bros on Tinder?

DERRICK

(thinking)

Oh, yeah . . . I mean, the story was about how, you know . . . I don't approve -

MANDY

You just said you retweet him.

DERRICK

Um, well -

MANDY

There's, like, literally no more direct way you could approve of what you're saying you disapprove of.

DERRICK

You're being a little hostile, Mandy. Like, I'm open to talking about this.

MANDY

(warily)

Okay.

DERRICK

I don't think people should go to those sites. And then some people find those women's social media accounts and harass them there. That's totally fucked up.

MANDY

I agree.

DERRICK

See? I read BuzzFeed and stuff.

MANDY

Someone put my friend's info on a trans shaming forum like that, too.

DERRICK

Oh, that's awful.

MANDY

The dickheads who went to that site emailed her and contacted her work. They called her mentally ill -

(pause, chokes up)

They told her family she was a porn actress -

DERRICK

I'm sorry -

MANDY

They tried to get her fired. She didn't kill herself, but . . . she talked about it.

DERRICK

That's so fucked up. Trolls like that are -

MANDY

And why?! You know? She's fucking transgender. That's it. She's not transgender Hitler or something. Why are people--people who are all white guys--so hateful?

DERRICK

I don't know.

(pause, cautious and annoyed)

You know, not *all* white guys are like that. I mean, I've never tried to get someone fired for being trans, or fat, or something.

MANDY

(annoyed, distant)

I guess . . .

DERRICK

It's true.

MANDY

You said two minutes ago you retweet your friend's crap, Derrick.

DERRICK

Yeah . . . but I don't think I'd do that now, after, like, hearing what you said.

MANDY

(warily)

Okay . . . but how did you feel when I said I was trans?

DERRICK

(nervous)

What do you mean?

MANDY

After scrupulously avoiding my profile, in order to not build up expectations, and then learning I'm trans and not cis, did it change how you feel about me?

DERRICK

(pause, thinks hard)

Well . . . I know I still thought you were cute . . . I had a thousand questions, and I didn't blurt them out, because I know that's rude - See? I told you I read shit about this stuff!

MANDY

(laughs, then serious)

But did you think other stuff? Like you didn't want to date me, or thought I was -

(looks down)

Gross, or something.

DERRICK

No, I mean . . . you're the first trans person I've met, but I definitely didn't think you were . . . you know . . .

Pause.

MANDY

(frowns)

Maybe I should go.

Mandy stands. Derrick does as well.

DERRICK

God, you're really hard to just talk to. Please sit. We haven't even ordered yet.

MANDY

(rolls eyes)

What should we talk about at dinner, Derrick? How you're unable to say I'm not gross?

DERRICK

(exasperated)

I'm sorry. No one's ever asked me that five

minutes into a first date before, so I froze a little. I swear, I don't think you're gross.

Mandy, slightly embarrassed, sits. Derrick sits, as well.

MANDY

I'm sorry. I'm probably really defensive and annoying. I see things that people say, and I guess I assume, you know, everyone thinks that way.

DERRICK

It's OK. People are crazy online.

(laughs)

For a minute there, I thought you might be one of those . . . what are they called? . . . You know like misogynists, only men?

Mandy stares in disbelief.

MANDY

Are you calling me a man?

DERRICK

(laughs)

No! Like when women hate men. There's a word, like misogynist. What's the word?

Mandy starts crying.

DERRICK

(confused, worried)

Wait. What happened? . . . Mandy? Why are you -

MANDY

I don't think I can . . . function. All I do is pick fights, and then freak out when people can't remember the word "misandrist," because I think they're misgendering me.

(upset)

And, by the way, being upset about transphobia, and the people who perpetrate it, doesn't make someone a -

She stops, annoyed at having become upset again.

DERRICK

(to self)

"Misandrist" . . . that was it.

Mandy laughs softly.

DERRICK

I don't think you're a person who hates men.

It was a dumb joke . . .

(gentle, flirty)

But maybe, just as an experiment, you could try assuming I'm not implying mean, transphobic things when I talk to, or about, you.

Mandy thinks, her look slightly skeptical.

MANDY

I could maybe, if you concede that neither you nor anyone else, should make jokes about trans women, since, for the last 2,000 years or so, those jokes have all been uniformly shitty.

Derrick thinks a moment, nodding to himself. The two nod cautiously, picking up their menus.

DERRICK

This date reminds me of Model U.N. in high school, where you'd create rules about how everyone addressed each other. "Argentina recognizes Uruguay and salutes its autonomy . . ."

(worried)

I mean, like, in a good way.

Mandy laughs.

MANDY

I get it . . . "And if relations remain warm between our states . . . maybe your ambassador can pay our land a visit."

DERRICK

(surprised, happy, to self)

Fuck yeah.

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS... *The reality of dating as a trans woman is so hard, because our culture is steeped in bias against us. I wanted to explore that, but I didn't want to create something sad sack-y, where the audience just felt bad for the protagonist. So instead of making it the subtext, I thought it would be fun to have a heroine like Mandy who wouldn't stop talking about it, in order to surface all the issues. To me she's a character like Beatrice in "Much Ado About Nothing," who starts out saying, "I'll never marry!" Hopefully an audience members thinks, "Why not? This is a comedy, isn't it?" and wants to know more and see if she changes. Deep down I think we all root for love, and want to see people like Mandy heal and Derrick grow.*

AUTHOR BIO: Mikki Gillette is a trans woman playwright living in Portland, OR. Her new play American Girl about transgender teen Nikki Kuhnhausen, who was murdered in a hate crime in 2019, was developed and workshopped at Artist's Rep Theatre. Mikki is part of Profile Theatre's 2021 LGBTQIA+ Community Profile Cohort. Her full length shows The Queers, They, Them, Their, Mimetic Desire and No More Candy depict the trans experience in all its juicy, dramatic richness, and have enjoyed readings at the Portland Playhouse, defunkt theatre, the Funhouse Lounge, Post5 Theatre and the Shoebox, among other venues. Her work has been featured multiple times at the OUTwright Festival. Learn more at: mikkigillette.com

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Don't You Remember Me? ?????

By Aaron Leventman

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes...*

Unsettling goodness with a chewy center,

DON'T YOU REMEMBER ME? A Short Play by Aaron Leventman, gives us a surprise reunion between thirty-something Rona and Jeffrey in a brisk series of phone calls. The back and forth in this tightly woven script gives us a chance to fast forward from high school awkwardness to the prime of adulthood when we've finally got the confidence to say what's on our minds. At the chewy center of things are two characters that are at once relatable and troubling. Rona's more than a bit pushy. Jeffrey's most faithful companion is a dust buster. But these two may have more in common than they think. Too bad they live so far away...or is it? Very satisfying. And unsettling.

RONA

It was the same thing in New York, anyway. After all these years I still haven't learned the basic art of small talk.

DON'T YOU REMEMBER ME?
A Short Play
by Aaron M. Leventman

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CHARACTERS:

JEFFREY WEISSBERG: Slacker, polite, but insincere thirty-something

RONA ELLIOT: Strong willed, divisive thirty-something

PLACE: New York City

SETTING: JEFFREY AND RONA'S APARTMENTS
One half of the stage is occupied by Jeffrey and other by Rona.

AT RISE:

(LIGHTS UP on Rona's side as she looks at a yearbook. She picks up a phone list next to it, finds a number, picks up the phone, and dials. Jeffrey's side LIGHTS UP. He watches TV as he eats some crackers then gets crumbs on the sofa. He curses then vacuums manically. The phone rings. He shuts it off.)

JEFFREY

Hello?

RONA

Jeff? Jeff Weissberg?

JEFFREY

Sorry, but I don't normally pick up blocked calls and I'm not interested.

RONA

No, this isn't a sales call. It's Rona, Jeff. Rona from Country Day High School in Albany. Don't you remember?

JEFFREY

I think so.

RONA

Were you at the reunion last week? I wasn't sure if I missed you there.

JEFFREY

No, I wasn't. There was no one I wanted to see again. (pause)
I mean, except you, of course. But I assumed you wouldn't be there.

RONA

Because everyone thought I was a freak except you?

JEFFREY

Was that true?

RONA

Pretty much. Even though you were the only person who was reasonably nice to me, I went anyway.

JEFFREY

Good for you.

RONA

Actually, it sucked. No one even remembered me.

JEFFREY

They're probably all losers now, anyway.

RONA

Actually they all have great jobs and families. You have any kids?

JEFFREY

No. You?

RONA

No, not really. I mean, no. I haven't found the right person to have them with yet.

JEFFREY

Well, these days, that doesn't have to stop you.

RONA

Whatever "these days" means.

(She looks at a page in the yearbook.)

Are you still doing theater? You wanted to be an actor, right?

JEFFREY

You remember that? I thought so for a while, but then reality set in. I work on Wall Street.

RONA

So you sold out. That's cool.

JEFFREY

I've changed a lot since then, okay? No one even calls me Jeff anymore. It's Jeffrey. Anyway, how did you get my number?

RONA

The internet. You can find out almost anything from it "these days," as you would say. Are you on Facebook?

JEFFREY

No, I don't have time for that kind of thing.

RONA

Hmmm. Well, I hope it's all right that I called.

JEFFREY

Yeah, it's fine. I'm just sort of in the middle of something here.

RONA

Going out for the evening?

JEFFREY

Uh, not exactly.

RONA

Oh. So you're at home alone on a Saturday night. Interesting.

JEFFREY

Right. Maybe I can give you a call another time.

RONA

Actually, I'm coming to New York City soon so I was hoping we could spend time together, and I could stay with you for a few days.

JEFFREY

Uh, sure. I'll call you.

RONA

That's sweet of you, Jeff. You always were considerate, but were always so careful not to be too considerate. Actually, I should call you. It's sort of long distance.

JEFFREY

Where do you live?

RONA

Nebraska.

JEFFREY

How did you end there?

RONA

It's a long story. I'll call you again sometime, all right?

JEFFREY

I guess.

RONA

But will you pick up? You had sort of a history of dodging calls.

JEFFREY

I did? Are you sure that was me?

RONA

Positive.

LIGHTS DIM

LIGHTS UP

(Jeffrey wakes to his telephone ringing.)

JEFFREY

Hello?

RONA

Oh my God, Jeff. I'm so sorry. Did I wake you?

JEFFREY

Yeah. It's 4 in the morning. Who is this?

RONA

It's Rona, Jeff.

JEFFREY

It's Jeffrey, remember?

RONA

Sorry, Jeff. Listen, I'll call back another time. I thought it was 4 in the afternoon. I was just kind of lonely, so I...

JEFFREY

I guess I can talk for a few. I only have to get up in two hours.

RONA

You're a real sport. Didn't used to be though. I could barely even get you stay on the phone for five minutes, Jeff.

JEFFREY

It's...never mind. Did we used to go out or something?

RONA

For like a millisecond.

JEFFREY

Did we ever...?

RONA

Nope. Came close once, though. I let you finger me in your car in the school parking lot. But that's as far as it got. I never knew why. You seeing anyone now?

JEFFREY

Not really.

RONA

Just out of curiosity, what's the longest relationship you've ever been in?

JEFFREY

I don't know. A few months, maybe.

RONA

Just what I thought.

JEFFREY

Don't you have to get up for work tomorrow?

RONA

Changing the subject. That's cool. My family's rich so I don't have to work.

JEFFREY

Lucky you. So what do you do all day?

RONA

Paint. Draw. Write poems. Play with myself. Nothing special.

JEFFREY

As long as you're happy, I guess.

RONA

You happy getting up at 6?

JEFFREY

It's not so bad. You have any friends out there?

RONA

(sarcastic) Yeah, I'm the toast of the town.

JEFFREY

I'm sorry.

RONA

After all these years I still haven't learned the basic art of small talk.

JEFFREY

You're doing just fine now. Listen, I should go back to sleep.

RONA

I know. It's too bad I live all the way out here, although you were never too good at returning phone calls, anyway.

JEFFREY

Well, I was a teenager.

RONA

But people don't really change that much, right?

LIGHTS DIM

LIGHT UP

(Jeffrey watches TV again as he polishes the floor. His phone rings.)

JEFFREY

Hello?

RONA

Hi, Jeff. It's me again.

JEFFREY

Who's this?

RONA

It's Rona. Who do you think?

JEFFREY

Oh, hey. What's up?

RONA

Home alone again?

JEFFREY

(defensive) Uh, no. I was having a party.

(He turns party music on.)

RONA
(suspiciously) How many people are there?

JEFFREY
I don't know. 20 or so.

RONA
Is that a good turnout for you? I mean, how many didn't show?

JEFFREY
I don't know. The night's not over yet.

RONA
Hey, you want to hear what you wrote to me in our high school yearbook?

JEFFREY
Actually...

RONA
(recites from memory) "Dear Rona, I know that I haven't always been the best friend to you but I hope that we can remain in touch forever."

JEFFREY
Listen, Rona. I was probably drunk when I wrote it.

RONA
That's nice to know.

JEFFREY
You know, I went through a lot in therapy. I'm almost like a different person. You probably wouldn't even recognize me.

RONA
Everyone's changed, that's the problem. You know, in college, I used to get invited to dinners, openings, you name it. I could walk down the street and run into, like 5 people in one afternoon. Now, I hardly know anyone. What happened, Jeff? Why did everyone drift apart?

JEFFREY
Maybe it's because you live in Alaska.

RONA

It's Nebraska. No one in New York even knows I left.

JEFFREY

Actually, I know how you feel.

RONA

You know you can call me any time. I don't have anything to do all day except pick lint out of my bellybutton.

JEFFREY

Why don't you get a job or something?

RONA

There's nothing I know how to do.

JEFFREY

So, volunteer. There has to be something you can do with your life.

RONA

You should talk, Mr. Netflix.

JEFFREY

Look, I never asked you to call me. I don't even remember who you are.

RONA

So you lied to me.

JEFFREY

I felt sorry for you.

RONA

I thought you remembered me. I thought you were my friend.

(She hangs up the phone).

JEFFREY

Look, I'm sorry. I didn't mean...Rona?

(Jeffrey dials again.)

Yes, I need the number for a Rona...Rona..., I don't even know her last name. What's the area code for Alaska?

LIGHTS DIM

LIGHTS UP

(Jeff polishes a chair. His phone rings again.)

JEFFREY

Hello?

RONA

Hi, Jeff. It's me. (pause) Me meaning Rona.

JEFFREY

Hey, I tried to call you but I didn't even know your last name.

RONA

It's Elliot, Jeff. Rona Elliot. You never even asked me for my last name.

JEFFREY

I know. I'm sorry.

RONA

Well, I'm on my way over. What's your address?

JEFFREY

What do you mean?

RONA

To visit. I'm in New York. You said you wanted to hang out.

JEFFREY

I did?

RONA

So it's all right if I stay with you for a night or two?

JEFFREY

Rona, I'm sorry, but I'm just not into having company now. I shouldn't have said you could stay here. (pause)

RONA

No, you shouldn't have. But it's all right. Can't we at least get together for dinner? (pause)

JEFFREY

Actually, Rona, I'm, sorry. I'm not free this week. I...I just can't.

(pause)

RONA

We have a lot in common after all. Neither of us has changed one bit, “Jeffrey.”

(Rona shakes her head and hangs up the phone. Jeff’s apartment goes BLACK. Rona pulls another yearbook out of her suitcase along with another telephone list. She finds a number on it and dials.)

RONA

Hi, Veronica? It’s me, Lina Lindquest from George Washington High School in New York City. Did I miss you at the reunion last week? You see, I always remembered you, Veronica, because you were the only person who was nice to me...

BLACKOUT

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS... *Don’t You Remember Me?* was inspired by several different but related sources. Over 20 years ago, there was a short-lived spin-off of 60 Minutes called 60 Minutes 2. On one of the segments, a journalist went to a reunion for a high school that he never attended. Everyone except one person pretended that they remembered him. Around this same time, my partner’s 6th grade girlfriend tracked him down and starting calling our house repeatedly, 50 years after they initially knew each other, wanting to reignite some kind of connection with him. This posed two questions which fascinated me. Why are some people stuck in a certain part of their lives? Are the people that we thought made a difference in our histories really as significant as we thought they were, or were they idealized by our imaginations?

AUTHOR BIO: Aaron Leventman attended Columbia University’s Graduate School for film where his thesis screenplay was given a professional reading at the Union Square Theatre in Manhattan. He moved to Santa Fe from Provincetown after his involvement as a writer/director/actor with the Provincetown Theatre Company. When living in Santa Fe, he performed with most of the local theatre companies in both classics and original plays. He’s also appeared in industrials, commercials, short films, and features and is currently represented by Phirgun Main Worldwide in New Mexico.

Aaron has enjoyed over 30 productions of his plays all over the country, many of which are published and available on Amazon.com. He co-produced an evening of his own short works was met with tremendous acclaim including the Mayor declaring LGBT Theatre Day in Santa Fe on opening night for the first time in the city’s history. His recent play *Blanche in a Wheelchair* was a finalist for the Samuel French OOB One Act Play Festival and the Secret Theatre’s One Act Factor, both in New York. It is soon to be published by Smith Scripts in the U.K. He was the producer of a monthly online LGBTQ+ short play series through his company Almost Adults Productions which has been bringing together talent and audiences from all over the world.

Aaron is also a playwriting, screenwriting, acting, and film history instructor at Santa Fe Community College, a film festival curator, and has a private writing coach practice. He was proud to have been recently chosen as a fan guest host on Turner Classic Movies, in conversation with TCM host Alicia Malone about the 80s classic *Crossing Delancey*.

<https://aaronleventman.com>.

The *Love* of my... Previous Life

... Elena Naskova

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes...Elena Naskova's The Love of My Previous Life gives us elements of performance poetry in a reflective jam that goes beyond spoken word into the hidden voice of the subconscious. Emma is a raw and honest character weighing a life-changing decision in a monologue that pits her beliefs about love against a stark reality that has become unbearable. We witness Emma as she pieces together a personal narrative in which the emotional weight of a relationship wrought with addiction has collapsed chronology, and yet her rational mind thrums throughout as a steadying force. She asks, "Who's this man sleeping next to me?" wondering where she exists in the past and present tense - and then answering her own question in the aha moment that propels her forward.*

"Oh yeah", I thought, "this man is ... was ...

is ... the love of my ... previous life".

Spacing is playwright's own. Please scroll down.

The Love of my Previous Life

a monologue

by
Elena Naskova
elenagnaskova@gmail.com

EMPTY STAGE. EMMA ENTERS. PAUSE.

EMMA

I couldn't sleep last night. Maybe it was the bottle of wine that I opened, after you went to bed. I was going for a little buzz to help me fall asleep ... but ... I didn't stop drinking soon enough. The bottle was empty before I remembered to pay attention. My mind went somewhere far away, and it returned to me, too late. So when I finally went to bed, my head was banging, instead of buzzing. You were sound asleep. I could hear you breathe next to me, and like almost always, completely oblivious of what I was going through. I tried to lay still and ignore the banging in my head, but I couldn't. So I sat up and turned on the nightstand lamp. You didn't budge. You were where you were, and you weren't going to join my drunken party. But you were the only one there, and right next to me, so I ... watched you sleep. And as I watched you sleep, I started wondering, "Who's this man sleeping next to me?" The more I stared at you, the more I felt like I had no idea who you are. When I was just about to start panicking, a weak voice in my drunken head spoke to me: "He's the love of your life", the voice said. "Oh yeah", I thought, "this man is ... was ...

is ... the love of my ... previous life".

The life that is no more. The man is still here, the bed is still here, and the room and the house ... everything is still here, but ... it does not belong to ... this life of mine. ... anymore.

(pause)

I jumped out of bed alarmed and started searching for anything that belongs to my current life. I checked my closet. My closet too was full with things from my previous life. Dresses, skirts, high heels, tops, bras, business suits. Things that I haven't put on for a long, long time. I felt as if I was going through a dead woman's closet. I quickly left the bedroom and walked around the house, disoriented. As I walked in the kitchen, I approached the recycling bin and I opened it. There it was, the empty wine bottle. I picked it up and held it, asking myself: 'Is this empty bottle the only thing in this house that belongs to my current life?'

(pause)

I put the wine bottle back in the recycling bin. "Tonight there will be more empty bottle in the bin", I thought, and that thought terrified me.

(pause)

A sudden urge to flee overwhelmed me. An unbearable urge to run away, and leave behind the sleeping man in the bedroom, the

empty bottle in the recycling bin, and all wine bottles that are yet to be finished alone, made my skin crawl and my stomach cramp. Run away, but where to? What is there but the present and the past? I asked myself.

(pause)

“Just run away, no matter where?” That question was the answer, and that was that. I went back to the bedroom, I scooped my clothes from the floor and put them back on. As I was grabbing my purse, I wondered, “is this all that I need?” My passport came to my mind. “My passport? Do I need a passport for where I'm going?”. I dug out my passport, and my reading glasses too ... and ... I walked out of my life into the vast nothingness.

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS...

Long time ago, a friend from work, who was an immigrant like me, gave me tour of his newly bought house.

‘Is this your dream house,’ I asked him.

‘It’s from a previous dream,’ he said.

His response was something that I never forgot, because it was so honest and real. Very often our dreams change, our lives change, our choices change, but remain we’re stuck in the past, because our lives have remained the same.

When a Facebook friend who always posted about the ‘love of her life’ divorced, I remembered my friend from work and his house from his ‘previous dream’. And that is how two completely unrelated stories come together.

I haven’t found my writing style yet, and I’m not sure that I’ll ever find it. I try to learn from all the writers that I’ve read and admire.

AUTHOR BIO: Elena Naskova was born and raised in Macedonia. She immigrated to USA when she was twenty-five. Elena is interested in the human condition, the ways we relate to ourselves and

to others. The subtle, the hidden, the unseen, the untold and the misunderstood is what she strives to capture in her plays.

Her plays have been produced and read in Portland, San Luis Obispo, San Francisco, North Hollywood, Chicago, Nantucket, Mesa/Scottsdale, Sheffield - UK, New York, Toronto, Bloomington, Oakland, San Francisco, Madrid – Spain, Dubai, Spokane and Seattle. She's also a proud participant of the 14/48 theater project in Seattle and a second-place winner in the La Vegas Little Theater's *New Works Competition*

Elena is a member of the Dramatist Guild and the Seattle Playwrights Circle

<https://elenagnaskova.wixsite.com/playspp>

NOBODY (!!) . . . Gets Out Early . . . (nobody!!)

By Geoff Hargreaves

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes... This compelling short dramatic work takes place in a youth prison. At the start, playwright Geoff Hargreaves asks why so few of the young offenders get out early. The play then examines this question through the gritty interactions of three of the inmates: the sensible Joe who is counting the minutes to his release, vulnerable Billy, and Doggo, a bully and the eldest of the three. There is no supervision (referred to as “the screws”) to be seen, and a cruel lawlessness prevails in this story that artfully presents incarceration as a zero-sum game but has us rooting for Joe to beat the odds at the same time. The dialogue is fantastic – it will keep you on the edge of your seat. Read on and watch your head.*

BILLY: That’s your problem, ain’t it?

JOE : What is?

BILLY: You’re getting out early. I don’t see the others doing it.

JOE: So what?

BILLY: They’re all talking about you. They’re dead jealous.

Spacing is playwright’s own.

NOBODY GETS OUT EARLY

Theme: In a youth prison young offenders may be sentenced for up to two years. An early release of three months is granted to those with a trouble-free record. Why do so few get out early?

Characters

JOE: aged 19, well built, sensible, cautious.

BILLY: aged 17, weak, vulnerable.

DOGGO: aged 20, a bully.

All the characters dress in their own clothes.

Setting

The TV room in a prison for young offenders.

At Rise JOE is seated, watching TV, when BILLY enters.

BILLY: You're Joe, ain't you?

JOE: Sometimes.

BILLY: What you watching?

JOE: Not sure. Something about sailors.

BILLY: I don't like sailors.

JOE: You're Billy the Kid, right?

BILLY: That's me.

JOE: I heard about that thing with you and the windows. How was solitary?

BILLY: Better than being kicked around by Doggo.

JOE: Was that why?

BILLY: Yeah. I couldn't take any more.

JOE: You smashed them windows to get stuck in solitary? Cause Doggo was getting at you?

BILLY: Couldn't think of any other way. I was gonna skip outa here. But where can you go? With those marshes everywhere. And no cash. No food.

JOE: You don't look like you could break a cookie in half. Let alone smash them tall panes.

BILLY: I can do lots of stuff when I go crazy.

BILLY sits.

BILLY: Doggo hates me.

JOE makes no response.

BILLY: Doggo hates me.

JOE: What's he got against you?

BILLY: Dunno. But I'm hiding out here. Just in case.

JOE: He's a psycho.

BILLY: He says he's in here 'cause he hit his stepfather with an axe and paralyzed him.

JOE: So he says. Everybody lies about why they're in here. It's always gotta be big man stuff.

BILLY: You too? They say you set fire to a nightclub with a Molotov cocktail 'cause the owner had raped your girlfriend.

JOE: I wonder who made that up.

BILLY: Yeah, everybody lies and nobody gets out early. That's what they say.

JOE: Doggo picks on you a lot?

BILLY: All the time. Since I got here.

JOE: Yeah?

BILLY: The first day. He told me I gotta take a bath.

JOE: Nobody uses those old things. They should toss 'em out.

BILLY: You gotta take a bath, kid, he said.

JOE: But you didn't.

BILLY: How did I know? Yeah, I did.

JOE: Asking for it.

BILLY: I got in the tub. Then all the other guys came over from the showers to piss into it, but Doggo wouldn't let me out. He pushed me under. Over and over. And everybody was laughing like crazy.

JOE: Yeah. I bet. You poor sucker.

BILLY: I went to tell one of the screws.

JOE: Did he laugh?

BILLY: He just told me to use my eyes and never do anything I don't see the others doing.

JOE: It works.

BILLY: That's your problem, ain't it?

JOE : What is?

BILLY: You're getting out of here early. I don't see the others doing it.

JOE: So what?

BILLY: They're all talking about you. They're dead jealous.

JOE: Three months early. So what? It's no skin off their noses. What do they care?

BILLY: Dunno but they do. They'll try to get you into trouble so you'll lose your clean record.

JOE: I've been dodging 'em all week. I gotta stay clean till seven o'clock. One more hour to go.

BILLY: "Early release for good behavior". Wow!

JOE: If I can make it.

BILLY: I sure won't. I already screwed up with them windows.

JOE: I guess.

BILLY: TV! Can't they do better than this? I miss my WhatsApp and Twitter and all my video games. Don't you? Astro Bot and Blasters of the Universe and the Hand of Fate. I guess you're real good at 'em.

JOE makes no answer.

BILLY: I'm a real ace at party games as well. The Chocolate Game.... Egg Toss ... Balloon Stomp—that's a winner. Stomping on the other guys' balloons and trying to protect your own. You ever played it?

JOE still makes no answer.

BILLY: And, and ... Limbo. ... Roll a Sundae. Oh, and the Hanging Donuts Game. I'd forgotten all about that till I went to a Halloween party at a friend's house. ... Speed eating's my specialty. I'm so good at it I get accused of cheating.

JOE still makes no answer.

BILLY: This is a kinda obvious place to lie low. But I couldn't think of anywhere else. You? I guess not.

JOE: I planned to hang out with the Catholic priest. But he had to go back into town.

BILLY: What's he like?

JOE: Why do you care?

BILLY: They say he's a great guy.

JOE: Oh yeah? He's kinda dumb. Thinks I wanna go straight.

BILLY: Straight? Where did he get that idea?

JOE: Where do you think?

BILLY: I dunno. Never met him.

JOE: He says I'm learning a useful trade here. When I get out, I can get a job as a welder and go straight. Me a welder? Me?

BILLY: I get that all the time.

JOE: He thinks deep down I feel guilty about my past and I need Jesus to save me from my sins. I'm struggling to find him, he says. He thinks I'm wrestling with a bad conscience.

BILLY laughs. JOE relaxes.

JOE: I can make more by robbing a pet store than I could in a month of welding.

BILLY: You a Catholic then?

JOE: I remembered I was.

BILLY: I don't get it.

JOE: They told me you could start work half an hour late, if you attended Mass. Then I remembered I went to a Catholic primary school.

BILLY: Nuns and all that.

JOE: Boring. Kneeling there, with the priest mumbling on and on. But no way as boring as welding. Hours and hours of it.

BILLY (*pointing at himself*): Or carpentry. Hours and hours of it.

JOE checks the clock on the wall.

JOE: That the right time?

BILLY: I guess.

JOE: Forty-six minutes to go.

BILLY: I bet Doggo's looking for me. I can feel it. He knows they let me out this afternoon.

JOE: Probably playing soccer. There's a game on.

BILLY: Kicking ankles and shins instead of the ball.

JOE: That's Doggo.

BILLY: Where you going, when you get out? Back home?

JOE: No.

BILLY: No?

JOE: No.

BILLY: *No?*

JOE: Only to get my clothes.

BILLY: You don't get on with your folks?

JOE: Do you?

BILLY: They say they can't trust me now.

JOE: The other way around with me. I never trusted them.

BILLY: You got a nice place to go? I bet you do.

JOE: You're right, kid. I took the rap for my boss. Two years in this place. Less three months. First offence. They went easy on me. Would have been five years in a real jail for the boss. With his record. He owes me big.

BILLY: You got a boss? Lucky you, man!

JOE: He wants me outa here tonight. He's got plans. That's why I can't take chances, getting into fights.

BILLY: You got a girl?

JOE: I can get one easy.

Enter DOGGO in soccer gear.

DOGGO: Well, well. Holy Joey and Billy the Kid! Ain't that sweet? Watching telly together.

JOE: Doggo the Beast. You ain't playing soccer? Get sent off for fouling?

DOGGO: It's raining hard. You ain't noticed?

DOGGO changes the channel on the TV.

JOE: Why'd you do that?

DOGGO: Because I can. You saying I can't?

JOE gets up and changes the channel.

JOE: You saying I can't?

*DOGGO thinks about changing it yet again but just pretends he didn't notice.
JOE resumes his seat.*

DOGGO: And how's little Billy? Enjoy solitary? Miss anybody special?

BILLY makes no answer.

DOGGO: I said: enjoy solitary?

JOE: Better than being bullied.

DOGGO: You looking for trouble? I can provide it.

BILLY: He's outa here in half an hour.

DOGGO: That's what everybody's saying. Early release. Never heard of such a thing.

BILLY: Me neither, Doggo.

DOGGO: Got a taxi waiting, Joey? Or Mommy and Daddy in their limousine, waving pretty flags? Come and kiss your Mommy, Holy Joey!

BILLY: He says he don't get on with his folks.

DOGGO: Shut up you!

JOE (*to Billy*): Quit sucking up to him. It'll get you nowhere.

BILLY: He says his boss—

DOGGO: You want my fist up your nose?

BILLY: Sorry, Doggo. You know what he told me? He didn't burn down that nightclub.

DOGGO: Who believed he did?

BILLY: And he says you're a psycho.

DOGGO: Oh? Looking for a fight. Are you, Joey?

JOE: Forget it.

DOGGO: No, no. I ain't gonna forget it. And I ain't gonna let you forget it, either.

BILLY: Sock him one, Doggo!

JOE: You little rat!

DOGGO: Hey! But wait! Just a minute. If we have a fight, Billy, Holy Joey won't get outa here early. He'll dirty his record. And it's so, so clean.

BILLY: Nobody gets outa here early.

DOGGO: If I ain't getting out early, he ain't, neither.

JOE: Back off, Doggo.

DOGGO: Hear that, Billy. He's giving me orders.

DOGGO lunges at JOE. JOE avoids the punch and pushes DOGGO off balance.

DOGGO falls to the floor. JOE kicks him hard on the hip several times. DOGGO tries to get up but his painful hip prevents him.

DOGGO: I can't. I can't get up. My hip. Billy, go get the screws!

BILLY starts to leave the room.

JOE: Stay where you are, kid.

DOGGO: Go on, Billy! Call the screws!

JOE: Don't move, kid! I'm telling you. If I gotta spend three more months in here, they'll be the worst months of your life. Doggo's bullying will be like nothing compared to what I'll do to you.

DOGGO: Get moving, Billy!

BILLY: I don't know—

JOE: When I've finished with you, kid, you'll drown yourself in the marshes just to get away from me.

DOGGO: Don't listen to him, Billy!

BILLY: But what'll the screws say when they see Doggo here?

JOE: Tell 'em it's an injury from the soccer field. Somebody finally paid him back.

DOGGO: My hip! Help me up!

JOE: Leave him there.

DOGGO rolls on the floor. He fails to get up.

DOGGO: Kid! Kid!

BILLY: What? What? . . .

JOE: I'm getting outa here right now. But I'm warning you, kid. If I'm still here tomorrow morning, you better dig a hole and bury yourself in it. 'Cause—

BILLY: Oh, no, no!

DOGGO again tries to get up and fails.

DOGGO: Call the screws, dammit!

JOE: Shut up! If they're gonna keep me in here for kicking your hip, I'm gonna make it worth my while and kick every damn bone you got.

DOGGO falls back, groaning.

JOE: Call the screws in ten minutes, if Doggo's still down there. But if anybody stops me leaving at the last minute, I know it'll be 'cause of you. So cut your throat, kid, 'cause you'll be better off dead.

Exit JOE.

DOGGO: Go on! Call the screws, kid! You gotta stop him leaving.

BILLY: I can't. I can't.

DOGGO: Call the screws, I said!

BILLY: I don't know. I don't know!

DOGGO: Call the damn screws! Right now!

BILLY: I'm going crazy again! Crazy, crazy, crazy!

BILLY howls and starts to exit. He halts.

He goes to DOGGO and kicks twice him on the hip.

DOGGO screams.

BILLY (*calling out*): Joe! Joe! I'm sorry I ratted on you. I'm sorry!

Exit BILLY, running

BLACKOUT

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS... *At the age of twenty, while a university student, I was invited to participate as a mentor in a program for delinquents, aged 16 to 21. Why me? "Well, we understand you attended a Catholic school and lots of these kids are Catholics." So?*

Eventually I agreed. One month inside the jail, 24 hours a day. A total shock.

Fortunately, my mentee taught me more about human nature than I ever taught him. One thing I learned quickly was that religion is beside the point. These adolescents aren't troubled by bad consciences. They see nothing wrong with crime as such. It is inconvenient to be jailed now and then. But every career has its disadvantages.

AUTHOR BIO: After studying psychology in Dallas, I moved to Mexico, where I currently teach and translate.

I have had two full-length plays staged, along with four ten-minute plays. I wrote a libretto for a short opera for a Canadian composer. It was performed 12 times in Canada. And one play published by Fleas on the Dog: *Eddy, Jo, and Larry*.

I have translated five Mexican novels for Grove Press and Bloomsbury Press of New York, plus poetry for Copper Canyon Press.

Most recently, Jersey City Theatre Center and the Globe Theatre London zoomed two of my plays, to considerable acclaim. I have also published a novel *The Collector and the Blind Girl* in both US and Sweden with excellent reviews.

“ The Initiate ”

By John Ladd

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes... The Initiate is set in a gated community where the relentless Claire is petitioning for membership in the exclusive women’s group, “Femmes in the Pines.” Higher-up Deirdre remains skeptical, but Bonnie feels that Claire has potential in this shrewd play where women are expected to live up to their meta-narratives and beyond. The application process is rigorous – it’s Claire’s fourth time “reapplying” – and the requirements of membership are kept secret, but Claire isn’t to be deterred. Could something have changed in Claire’s favor to give her enough qualitative points for admission? There’s no telling how far Claire will go in this cutting tale. She may not even know herself.*

DEIRDRE

Bonnie, you do remember- years ago- when you were the chairwoman of the qualifications committee, you were emphatic about there being no exceptions- for no reason- PERIOD!

(pause, then rhetorically)

Remember?

BONNIE

(nodding, reluctantly)

I do, I do.

DEIRDRE

Good. You just have to be patient, eventually, the right person will come along.

Spacing is playwright’s own.

“THE INITIATE”

A Play in One Act

by

John Ladd

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CHARACTERS

(In Order of Appearance)

DEIRDRE

BONNIE

CLAIRE

SETTING

A room in a gated community in a New England state. There is a table at slightly off-center, downstage. On one side of the table, facing downstage, are two chairs, side by side. On the other side of the table, facing upstage, is one chair, facing the other two. There are various folders and files on the table.

AT RISE

DEIRDRE is walking the stage in a casual, relaxed and unhurried manner. Enter, from stage-left, BONNIE. She is carrying a shoulder bag.

BONNIE

Been waiting long?

DEIRDRE

No, just a couple of minutes.

(pause)

You know, this is the fourth time she’s re-applied for membership.

BONNIE

(nodding)

I know, I know.

DEIRDRE

(shaking her head)

I mean, what can be different this time?

BONNIE

(shrugs)

I don't know.

(pause)

I'm assuming she has a reason-

(quickly)

something must have changed.

DEIRDRE

We hope.

BONNIE

Maybe that's what she's got going on.

DEIRDRE

What?

(pause)

Hope?

BONNIE

Yeah.

(pause)

Hoping that she catches us on a good day- a better day- and we'll let her become a member.

DEIRDRE

By default? By hounding us?

(pause)

Listen, if nothing else has changed, you agree that we have to be more strict about the process, right?

(pause)

That she's going to have to wait- at least a year- before we do this, again.

(pause)

Agreed?

BONNIE

(nodding vigorously)
Absolutely- whole heartedly.

DEIRDRE

Good, good.

BONNIE

But, it's really a shame, because she has talents- and qualifications- that none of the other sisters have- she could be so useful to us.

DEIRDRE

Bonnie, you do remember- years ago- when you were the chairwoman of the qualifications committee, you were emphatic about there being no exceptions- for no reason- PERIOD!

(pause, then rhetorically)

Remember?

BONNIE

(nodding, reluctantly)
I do, I do.

DEIRDRE

Good. You just have to be patient, eventually, the right person will come along.

[Enter, from stage-left, CLAIRE, walking smartly, quickly and with a sense of purpose. She is carrying a shoulder bag and a notebook. BONNIE approaches CLAIRE and offers her hand.]

BONNIE

(shaking CLAIRE'S hand)
Claire, so good to see you, again.

CLAIRE*(nodding)*

Thank-you for taking the time. It means a lot to me.

[DEIRDRE comes over and also shakes CLAIRE'S hand.]

DEIRDRE

Yes, I'm sure it does. In fact, we were just talking about how determined you are to become a member of Femmes in the Pines.

CLAIRE*(flattered)*

Well, thank-you.

BONNIE*(motioning to the table and the chair)*

Would you care to sit down-

(pause)

or, perhaps, you'd prefer to stand?

[CLAIRE walks to the table, puts her purse and notebook down, pulls out the chair, but, then decides to stand.]

CLAIRE

Maybe a little of both-

(pause)

but, for now, I'll start off standing.

BONNIE

That's fine- whatever suits you.

DEIRDRE

So, if you remember, in our last meeting, we acknowledged that although your application does have a number of strong points, they were not, however, enough to qualify you for membership-

CLAIRE

(interrupting, emphatically)

At the time.

[DEIRDRE looks over at BONNIE and then back at CLAIRE.]

DEIRDRE

(slowly)

Yes,

(pause)

at the time.

BONNIE

Has something changed?

CLAIRE

(excited)

Yes, indeed!

BONNIE

(carefully)

You do remember us telling you that Femmes in the Pines strongly values qualitative characteristics-

(pause)

and not just the sum total- more of the same- quantitative- and therefore meaningless ongoing in the life of an initiate.

[DEIRDRE and BONNIE walk over to the table, sit down, open their respective folders on CLAIRE, scan the pages for a few moments, and, then, look up at CLAIRE, prepared to continue.]

DEIRDRE

(sighs with a slight tinge of impatience)

Now-

(pause, then slowly)

which section does your present petition address?

CLAIRE

(slightly excited)

The “Current Relationship, Spouse, Significant Other” section.

[DEIRDRE and BONNIE refer to their respective notes.]

BONNIE

(looking back and forth through the file)

It says, here- you have *repeatedly said in this section-* that you have been married for thirty-two years.

(pause)

I take it something has changed?

CLAIRE

(excitedly)

It has- it has!

DEIRDRE

(hesitantly)

Ah, before you go on, you must- you should know-

(shrugs)

well, of course you know, you’ve been before us so often, though, it does bear repeating-

(pause)

membership in Femmes is based on a point system.

CLAIRE

(confidently)

Yes, I know.

DEIRDRE

Of course, but what you might not know is that a change in a relationship due to divorce or a naturally occurring death garners you no points.

(pause)

You do know that, don't you?

CLAIRE

Yes.

BONNIE

Okay, then tell us.

CLAIRE

My husband dropped dead-

DEIRDRE

(interrupting and throwing up her hands in frustration)

I just told you-

CLAIRE

(interrupting and smiling)

in front of his girl friend in New York.

[DEIRDRE and BONNIE exchange surprised glances.]

DEIRDRE

Interesting.

BONNIE

(nodding approvingly)

Indeed-

(pause)

very qualitative.

DEIRDRE

(nodding)

There are points for him having a girl friend,

(pause)

but, the dropping dead part-

(pause)

you can't get points for that-

CLAIRE

(interrupting)

He dropped dead because he was triple-dosing Viagra!

BONNIE

(excited)

Wow! Oh, nice, very good!

DEIRDRE

You definitely get points there.

CLAIRE

And, on top of all that, they had two kids- *together*- and named one after me!

DEIRDRE

While he was still married to you?

CLAIRE

Yes!

BONNIE

Not estranged?

CLAIRE

No!

DEIRDRE

Abandoned?

CLAIRE

No!

BONNIE

Separated?

CLAIRE

No! No! No!!

BONNIE

More bonus points!

[DEIRDRE stands up from the table with her note pad and begins to slowly walk around the stage.]

DEIRDRE

Well, I'll say Claire, *I am* impressed-

BONNIE

(interrupting)

Me, too!

DEIRDRE

(continuing)

You are definitely getting close to the membership threshold.

(pause to check her notepad)

You're just a few points shy!

BONNIE

(looking from CLAIRE to DEIRDRE and back to CLAIRE)

Is there anything else? Did you ever meet the other woman? Confront her in public, in a restaurant, sue her for alienation of affection, send her hateful emails, bad mouth her on Facebook, twitter- anything!

CLAIRE

No, nothing. I just left it alone.

DEIRDRE

(returns to the table and begins to pack up)

Claire, Claire- my dear Claire- you came so close this time- and you demonstrate a life narrative that would mesh- in one way or another- with so many of our other members, but-

(pause, then in resignation)

I'm sorry, like I said- you just need a few more points-

BONNIE

(interrupting with a sense of urgency)

Maybe an affair, here, in The Pines, that leads to a physical fight with the injured wife- at the liquor store- that causes the police to show up and arrest you for public drunkenness, assault and battery, resisting arrest, disturbing the piece-

(pause)

that sort of thing could definitely put you over the top.

DEIRDRE

Yes, yes-

(pause)

you should go home and think about it- plan it!

CLAIRE

(the lucidity of a memory trace is coming back to her)

The police?

BONNIE

What about them?

CLAIRE

But I was arrested!

BONNIE

(standing)

You were? For what?

CLAIRE

(proudly)

Driving under the influence!

DEIRDRE

Where?

CLAIRE

Over on the Coast Road.

(pause)

But that's not all!

BONNIE

Really? What else?

CLAIRE

They charged me with destruction of property and leaving the scene!

Impressive!

DEIRDRE

(excited, then quickly)
And, and-

(pause)
after I was arrested, I-

BONNIE

(interrupting)
WHAT?

DEIRDRE

Come on! Tell us!

CLAIRE

I refused the breathalyzer!

DEIRDRE

So, they suspended your license- right?

CLAIRE

(proudly)
They did- for six months!

BONNIE

Well, well, well- I do believe that these new developments put your reapplication in a most favorable light.

CLAIRE

It does?

DEIRDRE

Yes, of course!

CLAIRE

Oh, thank-you, thank-you.

BONNIE

Now, I take it you have no way to get around the compound- is that right?

CLAIRE

(nodding with faux sadness)

Yes, that's right.

BONNIE

(to DEIRDRE)

Why don't we call an emergency meeting- tomorrow- so that Claire can meet her new sisters in the Femmes?

(pause)

And, while we have everyone there, I'm sure we can arrange some sort of driving pool to help Claire out.

DEIRDRE

(nodding)

Sounds good to me.

CLAIRE

(at a loss for words)

I- don't know what to say.

BONNIE

You're a sister now- there's *nothing* to say.

DEIRDRE

(gesturing with open arms)

Come here, Claire, we want to welcome you into the sisterhood.

[DEIRDRE, BONNIE and CLAIRE come around the table, and embrace. After a few moments, they break the embraces.]

(continuing to CLAIRE)

Now that you are- officially- a member of the sisterhood of Femmes in The Pines, you are entitled- and encouraged- to rise through the internal, secret ranks. There are, however, new- different- criteria for each level. Foremost and always, there is a cash donation toward our operating budget. Bonnie, here, is the treasurer, she will apprise you.

[CLAIRE, turns cautiously, glances away- toward, but not at the audience, before turning back to BONNIE.]

CLAIRE

(slowly, carefully, suspiciously)

I see.

BONNIE

But, before I do that, there's something we're going to ask you to do.

CLAIRE

(thinking)

Besides the donation?

DEIRDRE AND BONNIE

(together)

Yes!

DEIRDRE

(to CLAIRE, slowly and in an utmost serious tone)

This is what you wanted? Right?

[CLAIRE looks from BONNIE to DEIRDRE and then to the audience before turning back to BONNIE.]

CLAIRE

(slowly, with guarded hesitation)

O- kay...yeah...sure...

(there is a moment of pause, then, even more slowly)

...what...is...it?

BLACKOUT

CURTAIN

END OF PLAY

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS...

QUESTION # 1- What inspired the submission?

ANSWER # 1- A person's need for acceptance and inclusion, maybe, no matter the cost.

QUESTION # 2- What issues, themes I wanted to explore?

ANSWER # 2- The two sides of a possible quid pro quo, though, sometimes one party doesn't always get equal value. It could depend on desperation.

QUESTION # 3- Stylistic and literary influences.

ANSWER # 3- In drama, I have always liked G. B. Shaw.

AUTHOR BIO: John Ladd is currently living in a small town in upstate New York where he is working on a number of projects. Prior to this, he lived in New York, Ontario, Tennessee, Georgia, North Carolina and Illinois before moving to New York City where he spent a considerable amount of time- and still does- writing and having his plays produced at Off-Off Broadway- and other NYC- venues. When he is not writing, he farms, part-time, with his coonhound buddy, Roma.

He has had plays produced at No Frills Theatre Collective, Manhattan Repertory Theatre and The Short Play Lab as well as ActSense Theatre Company, The Belarussian Dream Theater Project, The Puzzle, and the Bad Theater Festival among others.

John Ladd was a Resident Playwright at the Manhattan Repertory Theatre, 2013-2018.

THE WRONG SIDE OF THE DOOR

BY ELIJAH VASQUEZ

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes...*

The Wrong Side of the Door, described by the playwright as an experimental tragicomedy. The comic element of this dark little gem is especially caustic in light of our recent lockdowns with the main character, Tug, recounting his own unique lockdown experience. The play is essentially a monologue that includes the audience as if we were locked up with Tug, bearing witness to his tedium and agony - and not just as flies on the wall (or savored as “dessert” in between the meager scraps he receives as sustenance), but as part of his psyche in the struggle to make meaning of his captivity. The severity of Tug’s circumstances could drive even the strongest of us to madness but for a certain boisterousness with which he faces his narrative, and the bizarre turn which gives us insight into his plight – and ours. I won’t say more than that, but here’s a tidbit from the holding cell:

Damn chain! Only if it was looser!...I swear something is trying to eat me...It was that stupid village...it was infested with pest and...AHHH! (He’s struggling. He grips it and tries to rip it off his neck. He rolls around and grunts loudly. His attempts are futile. He breathes heavily and plops himself onto the couch. He is exhausted.)

Spacing is playwright’s own.

THE WRONG SIDE OF THE DOOR

An experimental tragicomedy

by Elijah Vazquez

Character

TUG:

middle age, a prisoner

Place

A furnished holding cell

Time

The morning

A middle aged man, named Tug, lies on the floor. His clothes are plain, he's barefoot and he has a gray chain wrapped around his neck. There is a couch, torn with white fabric poking out. There is also a steel door, a window, a table, and a mug. Pause. The man gets up and starts pacing. He halts. Stares at a wall. Scratches an itch. Beat. He continues to pace.

TUG

I haven't eaten since the last time I ate. When I had food. Real food. *(He wilts. Beat)* It was wonderful. The sun came out and I was saved from my starvation. But, I need saving again. *(He paces)* I'll tell you, He is a merciful man. Everytime I open my eyes and walk on this cold ground with my bare feet, I am greeted with a pile of scraps near the steel door. It's good food and I am grateful. They hurt my one tooth, but they do fine. Yet, there is one problem . My scraps leave too quickly. They disappear. They disappear because my stomach really likes them. *(Small beat. He caresses his stomach)* I can't help it. I really can't. Now, His generosity is not to blame. A handful at best He supplies. I understand my predicament. I understand this room. His amount is the right amount and that's okay. When I see those scraps, I get happy, because I have food. Would I prefer more? Of course. But, apparently it has to do with digestion or something. Too much can clog you up and that'll be the end of me. Personally, I think my waste is fine, but whatever He wants. He knows best. *(Beat)* Things are different today though. When I finished my scraps, He didn't come and check on me afterwards. It's protocol here; to see if I haven't tried any funny business. I looked out my small window and saw Him leaving the grounds in daylight. He never leaves the grounds. He usually stays until his shift ends at night. A small part of me winced in pain because I actually liked this one. He would actually say words to me unlike

the others who would attack me with harsh sounds and wagging fingers. Conversations even. *(Beat)* I hope He comes back. *(Pause. He starts pacing. Itches his leg. Yawns a bit. Then sighs)* Maybe, just maybe, if I lay down, close my eyes again, open them, and walk across the cold floor, the day will start over. And then everything would be back to normal. *(He does this. Afterwards, he sits and stares at the floor)* Nothing. That's odd. Let me try again. *(He does so again)* Mmph. Interesting. Still nothing. *(Small beat)* Maybe I have to actually sleep. But, that's impossible when I'm hungry and He's not guarding my door. It's too dangerous. I can't risk it. One day my people will need me again. *(Beat)* Oh, did I forget to mention that I am a prince? I know, it's hard to tell. Only on special occasions do I wear my crown. But, yes, He told me that I was the son of a king and queen from a magical distant land. Apparently some raiders killed them and kidnapped me when I was a boy. Then, they sold me away to a village full of orphans not so far from here. That was my first home. Then I grew up, got into some trouble, and ended up here. It's not as bad as it looks. What more can you want? A couch, a table, and a mug of water. It's a living fit for royalty. *(Pause. He itches. He looks out the window. Then he holds his stomach in hunger)* I have water at least. That will hold me down. *(He grabs the mug from the table and starts drinking)* Maybe this is some trick. This facility does that sometimes. Watching people beg for food is enjoyable. The groans of starvation sounds like music to them. But, I can't do that. I won't beg. I'm too blessed. Blessed people have to be grateful. The scraps, the water, the room, the...suffering? No, no, this has to be some misunderstanding. It's his duty to check if I'm alive. How can He just abandon his post? If I slice my throat or hang myself, then He will be discharged immediately. During these times, that wouldn't be ideal. They're fooling me. They have to be. *(Beat. His itching is increasing)* But, what if they replaced Him? Anyone else wouldn't know what to do. The job is tough. My hunger is constant. My fatigue is constant. What if they forget to feed me? Or forget to bang on the steel door to check if I'm alive? *(Beat. Trying to itch his neck)* Damn chain! Only if it was looser!...I swear something is trying to eat me...It was that stupid village...it was infested with pest and...AHHH! *(He's struggling. He grips it and tries to rip it off his neck. He rolls around and grunts loudly. His attempts are futile. He breathes heavily and plops himself onto the couch. He is exhausted)* Only if He was here. He would toss me a nice jagged stick from outside and I would use it as a scratcher...*(Pause. He notices something out the window)* Speaking of outside...*(He looks out a small window with a piercing stare. He cracks his knuckles)* They're back. *(Small beat. Softly)* Do you ever get the urge to kill a spider? *(He is statue-like, unmovable and intimidating)* I do. They visit me frequently. They sometimes eat my desserts in this room. If I'm lucky, I will be blessed with beetles or dead flies for dessert. But, the spiders will take that away from me. They will steal from a prince without thought. And for that, they should all perish and die. *(He punches the window with rage. Nothing happens)* That was shallow of me. These windows are indestructible. *(He notices something again)* Wait! There is a fly! Upside down and gnarled, just how I like them. *(He licks his lips, picks up the dead fly, and eats it. Beat. He begins to gag. It's not a pretty sight. Eventually he pukes on the floor)* Well, would you look at that? That happens sometimes. My intestines don't always agree with me. No worries, the puddle should be gone soon. Maintenance is pretty good

around here. Now, let me get this stench out of my mouth. *(He grabs his water again and drinks it)* Ahh, hydration is nice *(Small beat)* Hydration is mandatory, especially here. Ventilation sucks here. Like sweaty-anus-sucks. AC barely works, and hot air loves to linger. It could make one quite...*(Big yawn)*...quite sleepy... *(He yawns again, and gets comfy on the couch. Very sleepily)* Should I sleep? In such a crisis like this? Yes, yes that's what He would want. He would want me to shut up and go to sleep. Empty stomach or not. Yeah...yeah...I'll do that...I'll sleep. *(Whisper babble)* This...couch...is...fantastic...How on earth was I approved for such luxury? The facility must have been under the impression that I've been behaving well. Hah...He keeps on surprising me...I can't wait to see him soon...*(His eyes lids descend and he is asleep snoring loudly. He sleeps for about thirty seconds. He then awakes, stretches his back and heads over to the steel door and looks at the floor)* Mmm no food. *(Thinks)* Well, do I have any flowers? Flowers are good to eat too. Every week I am sent flowers by an anonymous person. And every week He checks them. You know contraband and stuff. But, those days are over. I am a reformed man. A blessed one. I behave. I eat, sleep, and behave. Even when I'm starving I behave. You have to, or punishments like this will occur. Maybe even worse. *(He surveys the room)* Well, I have to eat something. If I don't I'll surely die. *(He directs his focus at the table then starts chewing at the table. Beat)* It's not steak. *(Beat)* Ughhh! This is borderline cruelty. It's been too long since He's been gone. Since food has appeared. These conditions are not suitable for anyone. If He was here, this wouldn't be the case, but He's not. He left. Like, how can he just leave the grounds during the day like that? I'm sorry, the blood is rising. I need to take a moment *(He goes and sits down facing a wall, and starts whispering to it)* God, I adore you so much and I don't even know why. *(Small beat)* Walls just understand, you know? *(He rubs his head against the wall in an affectionate way)* Yes, I agree. Thank you. I owe you my life. *(Beat)* Mmm, I need something more though. I need...I need to be invisible right now. *(He scurries behind the couch. Silence. After a while, he slowly pokes his head up, only to eye level)* Ragdoll to Maine, I see the target and I am closing in. *(Beat. He poorly flips over the couch)* Hah, oh, war. What a time. *(Small beat)* Yes, I am also a certified murderer. They always said I had the best hands in the business. I used to trudge through mucky, treacherous forests with my legion of mercenaries and give the enemy the ol' one-two buckle my shoe. *(He poorly demonstrates)* Then we would flee because we were merciful and didn't believe in utter annihilation. We wanted to keep fighting. If we killed our enemies, our fun would be over. *(Beat)* Man, what a time to not feel...acknowledge. Yeah, I had my clan of wild bush bandits, but it wasn't enough. Most of the time, I felt...well, unseen and invisible. Like right now. *(Beat)* Luckily, life was merciful to me, because when He is here, I don't have to worry about feeling invisible. *(He rolls off the couch and ends up on his back looking at the ceiling. He sighs heavily. Small pause)* Is mercy an arbitrary trait? Like, do you do it when you feel like it? Do you wake up and say, "Hey I'm going to be merciful today. I'm going to ease up on the protocol for today. I'm going to give more food to the prisoner. I'm going to watch the prisoner more. I'm going to spare his deprivation for a little." Just a thought. If you know, tell me. I think it's important for me as a prince to know. *(He looks at the floor again, realizing otherwise. Frustration sets in. He*

screams. He knocks on the floor three times) I know he hears. This is my emergency call. He has to answer this if I'm in trouble. That's just common sense. He should be here. *(He bangs at the steel door)* Hello! Hello! It's eating time, you know? Handful of scraps every morning, remember? Remember? You must know! You must be there! *(Beat)* ANSWER ME! *(Long beat. His tummy rumbles badly)* Oh no, oh no. It's hole time. One moment. *(He briskly walks offstage. Beat. You hear farting noises. Shoveling noises. Then with a rush of adrenaline, he storms back on, jumps over the table, jumps from one end of the couch to the other, and then finishes it off by plopping onto the floor)* Don't you just feel like a new man afterwards? I know I do. Oh, I almost forgot to wash my hands. *(He spits on his hands and rubs them together thoroughly)* Much better. As you figured, no plumbing, people tend to escape that way, so my toilet is a tiny tiny hole. But, in like three days my excrement is gone. Some poor sap scoops and bags it up. It's my own little stinky paradise. *(Beat)* Do you hear that? It's singing to me now? My stomach...my stomach has nothing in it now. All my scraps, beetles and flies are gone floating down in some man-made-reservoir. I need...no...it's Okay. Okay? It's fine. It'll be okay. Everything is going to be okay. It will arrive. He will arrive. *(He starts to pace. He sniffs the air aggressively)* Seriously!/? Of course, Of course! It's the cheesy chip signal. It's a signal the other inmates use whenever they are treated with cheesy chips for good behavior. They place the chips in the vent so we can sniff the glory. But, it's not glory now, it's mockery. Mockery of the time when He used to slip cheesy chips under the steel door...*(His sniffing is getting worse. He can't help it. He found a trace)* Right here...on this ...spot. *(He's fighting himself)* Don't. Don't. Don't. The cheesy dust is gone. Repeat yourself Tug. The. Cheesy. Dust. is. gone. No more. *(He licks the floor. He spits)* No. NO! I told you Tug! It was mostly dirt. You don't deserve dirt Tug. You deserve more. You deserve a pool of cheesy chips! Don't let them do this to you! *(Pacing intensifies. He's messing with his chain)* Is it hard to breathe in here? Or is it just me? *(He looks out the window)* NO! Turn off the sun. This is not my day! It's false! My belly is supposed to be filled, I'm supposed to sleep like a baby, He's supposed to take care of me! It's damn protocol! This tease needs to stop! It's not fun! I don't find this fun! It's evil. This facility is evil. I know he won't leave me like that. I just know! *(His words are feeling weighty)* How can you just leave a person like that? Especially one who you share sixteen hours of the day with. To...to starve all alone. I mean, it's a tough job, but you...you make it so effortless and easy. You don't mess it up. When I don't have any food, you feed me. It's indisputable logic. That's how it's done here. That's how this life works. Eat, replenish, eat, replenish, eat, replenish, until the day I die. You can't achieve this if there isn't any food to begin with. *(Small beat. He kicks the table. He then pulls at his hair, and is itching more. Crying is developing)* What am I going to do? It's been months, years, ions since He left! There is no way I am going to survive! Nothing will be the same. *(Small beat)* Wait...is...is my heart stopping? I think it's stopping! My heart is going to stop! I'll never sleep again! I'll never eat again! I'll never see him again! How is anyone okay with this?! Who is in charge here? *(He starts banging on the steel door)* You're back there right? Standing guard right? Right?! If so, answer me. Your shift is not done. The night is not even near...Hello?... Hello! Answer me damn you! Answer the prince! This is a famine right now! A

crime! A sick game! They can't do this to me. You can't do this to me I refuse. I REFUSE!
(Pause. He sinks onto the floor completely broken. He knocks three times on the floor) I don't want to die alone. Please, bring Him back. Someone...anyone...he's...he's all I have. He's my friend. I love Him. (Beat. He suddenly explodes and starts tearing at the couch, crying pathetically. He does this for a while until he becomes so exhausted and falls asleep behind the couch. Pause. We hear key jangles and a door open. A man walks in with a work suit, takes off his jacket, and lays his keys on the table. He is carrying a small bag with him. He notices the vomit and cleans it up. Beat. He sits on the couch and lounges back. He opens the bag, looks around and says-)

Man: Pspspspspspspspspsp.

(A cat jumps from behind the couch, purrs loudly, and lays next to the man. The man feeds it the snacks from the bag and smiles. Blackout)

End

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS...

I was inspired by my cat. And when I leave or when he runs out of food, they are the embodiment of suffering. They wail, they cry, they pace, they flip, they scratch things etc. The whole shebang. So, I decided to write some weird allegory about my cat and his everyday "torments."

Disclaimer:

I love my kitty very much, and he is a healthy, happy fur ball. He's just a drama queen when things don't go his way.

AUHTOR BIO: See 'Our Beautiful Home'.

The *GOOD* Death

By *A*ndy *B*oyd

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes... The Good Death by Andy Boyd is an emotionally charged play about the issues of dealing with an aging parent and end-of-life care. Writing with humor and grace, Boyd is unapologetic about tackling questions of faith as he draws his characters into an intimate discussion of spirituality. Although a strong Christian perspective is part of the plot, there is enough space for other points of view that even nonbelievers could join in the conversation. The characters are multi-dimensional: Nora, a daughter struggling with guilt about finding a care-taker for her dying mother, Juanita, an expert in hospice care who sees her work as a calling, and Cassandra (the role of a lifetime for a mature actor), a former teacher and sparkling intellect who is riddled with dementia and fear of the unknown. One of my favourite elements of the play is its dramatic structure – 12 scenes of varying lengths that imitate the rhythms of life, ebbing and flowing in all the right places.*

Thank you again for doing this.

Nora:

I had an opening.

Juanita:

You mean a death. One of your patients died.

Nora:

All of my patients die.

Juanita:

Right.

Nora:

Spacing is playwright's own.

The Good Death

Characters:

Nora, 50s

Juanita, 40s

Cassandra, 80s

1.

Nora and Juanita in Cassandra's living room.

Nora:

Thank you so much for doing this.

Juanita:

It's no problem.

Nora:

It's been such a steep decline. It seemed like for years it was going to be such a gradual thing but then in the last few months...

Juanita:

That's how it goes.

Nora:

Right. I'm sorry, you're a professional, you're used to this. How long have you been...

Juanita:

A nurse? Twenty-one years.

Nora:

How long in this, in this kind of work.

Juanita:

Hospice.

Nora:

Yes, yeah.

Juanita:

Five years.

Nora:

So this, you've seen a lot of this.

Juanita:

Yes. Most of my patients have some level of dementia. Almost everyone does above the age of seventy-five.

Nora:

Is that true?

Juanita:

Oh yes. Science has gotten so good at extending life, but not so good at extending brain function. So most people who die of old age die with some dementia. It's not always the cause, but it's a factor.

Nora:

God.

Juanita winces. Then she smiles.

Juanita:

Tell me about your mother.

Nora:

Okay, sure. So, Mom was a teacher. For many years. She taught middle and high school English and was elected shop steward and eventually retired to work for the union. She was one of the first generation of teachers to unionize here, back in the early sixties.

Juanita:

Wow.

Nora:

Yeah. She's very smart. She *was* very...I think she's still smart, underneath all the dementia. Ha! That's a horrible thing to say.

Juanita:

Not horrible.

Nora:

She was always very...logical. Rational. I think to compensate for how people think of English as a subject. That it's soft. Subjective. She'd always say "criticism is a science." Literary criticism, um, analyzing books. And so she prided herself on her intellect.

Pause.

Nora:

Thank you again for doing this.

Juanita:

I had an opening.

Nora:

You mean a death. One of your patients died.

Juanita:

All of my patients die.

Right. Nora:
Have you come to terms with that? Juanita:
Yes. Absolutely. Why do you ask? Nora:
It's a standard question. Juanita:
Is it? Nora:
Sure. Juanita:
Pause.
Do you know I've never seen a dead person before? Nora:
That can't be true. Juanita:
It is. It's absolutely true. Every funeral I've ever been to was closed casket. We're WASPs. Nora:
Wasps? Juanita:
Oh! White Anglo-Saxon Protestants. Nora:
What denomination? Juanita:
Oh we're not...we're not actually Protestants. Nora:
I see. Juanita:
Nora:

It's more of just a phrase.

Juanita:

I see.

Nora:

I've known people who have died. One of my childhood friends was hit with a car. My father died when I was in middle school. Aneurism. Totally out of the blue. And so I have understood for a long time that the world is...not even cruel but just incredibly random. But I've never...it's the physical things, the cleaning up, the washing, the...I want to preserve my mother's dignity, in my own eyes. I want to still see her as a sparkling intellect. Which is very hard to do if you're cleaning someone's shit.

Pause.

Nora:

Oh my god that was so unbelievably offensive.

Juanita:

I am not easily offended. My clients are not often at their best.

Nora:

Well sure, they're dying.

Juanita:

My patients are not my clients.

Nora:

Oh. Well, I guess what I'm saying is that I would like Mom to be comfortable. I'm not hoping for a miracle cure. I want...they used to call it The Good Death. That's what I want for her. To be surrounded by family and friends. I want it to be as painless as possible.

Juanita:

That's our goal. Palliative care. We can make it very comfortable. Not painless, but almost.

Nora:

Right. That's why I said "as possible."

Juanita:

Understood.

Nora:

Okay.

Juanita:

Any other questions?

Nora:

No, that's fine.

Juanita:

I am here twenty-four hours. I will get to know your mother very well. It makes sense for you to feel comfortable with me. So if there is anything you want to ask me, now is the time.

Nora:

No, no, you seem great.

2.

Same room, later. Cassandra lies in a hospital bed. Her heart monitor beeps. Her breathing is heavy. Juanita putters around the room, picking up a glass and taking it into the kitchen, rifling through the mail, throwing out old magazines. She sings "I Have Decided to Follow Jesus."

Juanita:

*I have decided to follow Jesus
I have decided to follow Jesus
I have decided to follow Jesus
No turning back, no turning back.*

*The world behind me, the cross before me
The world behind me, the cross before me
The world behind me, the cross before me
No turning back, no turning back.*

*Will you decide now to follow Jesus?
Will you decide now to follow Jesus?
Will you decide now to follow Jesus?
No turning back, no turning back.*

She folds a blanket and places it in a little pile on the couch.

3.

Nora talks with Cassandra, still in bed. Cassandra opens her eyes.

Nora:
Hey, Mom.

Cassandra looks at her, perplexed. Then, recognition spreads across her face.

Cassandra:
Nora.

Yes!

Nora:

How do you do?

Cassandra:

Nora laughs.

I'm fine, Mom. How are you?

Nora:

Cassandra:
I can't complain. Some of the kids are determined not to learn a thing the entire year, but I'll get through to them yet. I always do.

Oh. No, Mom, you're not teaching this year.

Nora:

Yes, I am. We're reading *Walden*.

Cassandra:

No, no, you're at home.

Nora:

Ah, that's right.

Cassandra:

You remember?

Nora:

Yes, of course.

Cassandra:

Nora:

How's Juanita been?

Cassandra:

I don't know what you're talking about.

Nora:

The nurse.

Cassandra:

The maid?

Nora:

She's a nurse.

Cassandra:

Who's sick?

Nora:

Not sick, just getting older.

Cassandra:

Mother?

Nora:

No, you.

Cassandra:

Well, I suppose so, we all are, aren't we?

Pause.

Cassandra:

Have you seen my notebook?

Nora:

No, I haven't.

Cassandra:

Well, I've got to find it. I can't waste this entire sabbatical lying in bed.

Nora:

No, Mom, you're retired. Remember?

Cassandra:

Oh. Oh. Oh yes.

Cassandra looks confused.

Cassandra:

How long now?

Nora:

Twenty-five years.

Cassandra:

Oh yes. I retired quite some time ago. I remember.

Nora:

They gave you a party. At the Union hall.

Cassandra:

Oh yes. Yes, that's right. With cake.

Nora:

With cake.

Cassandra:

Nora?

Nora:

Yes, Mom?

Cassandra:

I don't want to die.

Nora gasps, cries, shakes her head, leaves the room.

4.

Cassandra in her bed. Juanita enters, carrying a grocery bag.

Juanita:

Hello, Miss Cassandra.

Cassandra:

Hello. What's your name?

Juanita:

I'm Juanita, dearie.

Cassandra:

That's right.

Juanita:

I've got a treat for you!

Cassandra:

What is it?

Juanita:

Guess.

Cassandra:

Um. Um. Um. Figs?

Juanita:

Nope!

Cassandra:

Candy canes?

Juanita:

Nope!

Cassandra:

Um. Um. Ummmm...mutton?

Juanita:

Mutton?!

She laughs. Cassandra laughs.

Juanita:

Mutton!

I don't know! You told me to guess!

Cassandra:

What kind of a sweet treat is mutton?

Juanita:

You didn't say sweet! You said a treat!

Cassandra:

Mutton!

Juanita:

Well I don't know! When I was a child we had mutton at birthdays.

Cassandra:

Close your eyes.

Juanita:

No tricks.

Cassandra:

No tricks.

Juanita:

Cassandra closes her eyes. Juanita takes an orange out of her bag. She brings it to Cassandra's nose. Cassandra takes in the smell.

Oranges!

Cassandra:

She opens her eyes.

That's right!

Juanita:

Through the following Cassandra expertly peels the orange and eats it section by section.

Cassandra:

When I was pregnant with Nora we drove down to Cape Canaveral to see the space shuttle take off. As we drove through Florida we passed rows and rows of orange trees, and their smell filled the air and filled our car and sank into our clothing. We rolled down the windows and stuck our hands outside the car, letting the passing wind gently push our hands up, down, side, side, like they were wings, and we stopped whenever we felt like it and asked the workers for oranges, and they'd give us some, and they were the sweetest oranges we'd ever tasted, they were like candy,

and by the time we got to Cape Canaveral we had a whole trunk full of them, and as we waited for the shuttle to take off we shared them with all the other people there, young, old, black, white, and we all ate oranges and watched the shuttle take off, and we kept watching until the boosters fell away and the shuttle got smaller and smaller and it shone bright like a star and finally we couldn't see it at all and we all kept watching, rapt, at the space in the sky that the shuttle slipped through.

Pause.

Cassandra:

Do you have anything sweet to eat?

Juanita:

You just had an orange!

Cassandra:

Oh right! Haha! I can still taste it on my lips! Haha!

Juanita:

Are you cold?

Cassandra:

No.

Juanita:

Do you have to go pee?

Cassandra:

Juanita!

Juanita:

Do you?

Cassandra:

No.

Juanita:

Are you sure?

Cassandra:

Yes. I don't have to pee. I should know, after all.

Juanita lifts Cassandra's blanket.

Juanita:

Ah.

Oh no.

Cassandra:

It's all right. Time for bath!

Juanita:

I must have...must have been while I was sleeping, I...

Cassandra:

Don't worry, we have clean sheets in the closet.

Juanita:

Let's get this cleaned up before Nora comes home from school, shall we?

Cassandra:

Yes, Miss Cassandra, I think we shall.

Juanita:

5.

Cassandra at night, alone.

Cassandra:

I don't want to die I don't want to die I don't WANNA die I DON'T wanna die I don't want to die I don't I don't I don't want to die I don't WANT to I don't I don't I don't I don't I don't want to die I don't want to die die die die die I don't want to die I don't want to die

Idon'twanttodietodietodieIdon'twant I want I want I want I want I don't want to die I don't I don't I don't *want* to die I don't want to die I don't WANT TO DIE! I DON'T WANT TO DIE! I don't want to die I don't want to I don't want to I don't want to I don't want to...

She falls asleep. Juanita comes in, checks her temperature with the back of her hand, leaves.

6.

Later. Cassandra is sleeping. Nora and Juanita.

Nora:
How's she doing?

Juanita:
She's doing fine, Nora.

Nora:
I feel just, you can't imagine, out of my mind guilty about this.

Juanita:
Why do you feel guilty?

Nora:
Because, well, I feel I have a responsibility to her.

Juanita:
You do.

Nora:
What?

Juanita:
You do have a responsibility to her. Your responsibility is to make sure your mother is taken care of in the best way possible.

Nora:
Right.

Juanita:
And that's what you're doing. I am very good at my job. Very good.

Nora:
Of course. I didn't at all mean to imply anything else. I just feel...I mean, she's my mother. I'm her only daughter. I'm all she has. I feel like I should...be here.

Juanita:
You are.

Nora:
I should be here more often.

Juanita:

No. You come more than most.

Really?

Nora:

Yes. Oh yes.

Juanita:

I'm only here a few times a week. How often do most children come?

Nora:

Most children don't come.

Juanita:

Wow.

Nora:

It's better this way. Like you said, let someone else handle the messy parts. Then you can handle the...

Juanita:

The messy parts.

Nora:

Juanita smiles.

Right. The messy parts. You're dealing with so much. The death of your mother. It's a profound change.

Juanita:

Thank you, that's...

Nora:

Nora begins to cry.

That's a really wonderful thing for you to say.

Nora:

She sniffles.

Fuck.

Nora:

Hey. It's okay. If you didn't cry now when would you cry?

Juanita:

Thank you. You're...

Nora:

She laughs through her tears.

You're a really good nurse.

Nora:

Juanita laughs.

I know.

Juanita:

Do you do this with her?

Nora:

What?

Juanita:

Do you comfort her?

Nora:

You mean emotionally?

Juanita:

Yes.

Nora:

Juanita:

I haven't much. She sleeps so much of the time. Would you like me to?

Nora:

Would you?

Juanita:

Sure.

Nora:

It would relieve...it would make such a difference to me knowing you were doing that.

Juanita:

Of course.

Nora:

I know that's a huge amount of emotional labor to ask of you.

It is. But I can do it.

Juanita:

Just however seems best to you.

Nora:

Sure.

Juanita:

7.

Later. Cassandra and Juanita are watching a television pastor. We can hear the muffled sound of the sermon, the call and response of the congregation. They watch for a while.

Cassandra:
What movie is this?

It's not a movie, it's television.

Juanita:

Is this *Inherit the Wind*?

Cassandra:

No.

Juanita:

Pause.

Is this *To Kill a Mockingbird*?

Cassandra:

No, it's live, it's television.

Juanita:

Oh. What is it?

Cassandra:

It's my pastor.

Juanita:

You go to this church?

Cassandra:

No, this is in Dallas. I can't go to church a lot of the time now. I have to be here, with you.

Juanita:

I'm sorry.

Cassandra:

That's all right. I like spending time with you.

Juanita:

I like spending time with you. This is silly, but could you tell me your name again?

Cassandra:

Juanita:

Juanita.

Cassandra:

That's right.

Pause.

Cassandra:

He's a very powerful speaker.

Juanita:

Yes. He's got charisma.

Cassandra:

That word comes from...

Juanita:

Greek. It means "the gift of grace."

Cassandra:

Ah. You already knew.

Juanita:

Yes.

Cassandra:

What do you think of when you think of grace?

Juanita:

What do you think of?

Cassandra:

I think of Ginger Rogers.

Juanita:

Oh yes, she was marvelous.

Cassandra:

Wasn't she? What do you think of?

Juanita:

Here's what I think of: when I was a little girl, I was in Sunday school, and the teacher asked us if anyone knew the story of the prodigal son. And I raised my hand, and the teacher asked me to tell it. And so I said there was once a rich man with two sons, and one son wanted to travel to the city, so he asked his father for his inheritance, and the father gave it to him, and the son spent it

on gambling and women, and eventually he ran out of money and had to get a job feeding pigs, and he realized the pigs were eating better than he was, and he was so disgusted with himself that he decided to walk back home. And he asked for his father's forgiveness and his father granted it and spread out a banquet to welcome him back. And my teacher said, no, that's wrong. What happened was that the son walked home, and as soon as the father saw him far in the distance he came running, and he embraced his son, and before the son could say a word the father said he would kill the fattened calf and hold a banquet, for at last his son had returned. That's what grace means to me.

Cassandra:

That's a wonderful story.

8.

Cassandra and Nora.

Cassandra:

There was a man here earlier.

Nora:

Yes. That's your doctor.

Cassandra:

No, he wasn't my doctor. He was another man.

Nora:

We got you a new doctor.

Cassandra:

Why?

Nora:

Because your old doctor was an idiot.

Cassandra:

But I'd gone to him for years.

Nora:

Yes, many, many years, and he hadn't been keeping up on the medical literature, so his recommendations were not standard current recommendations for someone in your condition. Juanita told me. She's very smart.

Cassandra:

Isn't she though?

Nora:

I want you to be as comfortable, as...I want to slow the progression of this thing as much as we can. I want to make this as comfortable as possible. Are you using the helmet?

Cassandra:

Oh yes. Want to see? Juanita!

Juanita enters.

Juanita:

Yes?

Cassandra:

Is it time for helmet?

No, we already did that today.

Oh yes, I remember.

Do you?

What?

Do you remember?

What?

Never mind.

Do I remember what?

Never mind!

All right.

You don't have to yell.

Juanita:

Cassandra:

Juanita exits.

Nora:

Cassandra:

Nora:

Cassandra:

Nora:

Cassandra:

Nora:

Cassandra:

Pause.

Cassandra:

Nora:

I know. I'm sorry. It's just incredibly frustrating that I'm trying to provide the best possible care for you, but you don't even seem to notice or say thank you because haha! the disease you have means that you don't remember anything, so you don't remember the hours of wrangling with insurance companies I had to do to be able to switch your doctor to someone who actually knows what he's doing.

Nora. Darling. How's your prayer life?

Cassandra:

My *what*?

Nora:

Your prayer life. Are you praying?

Cassandra:

No, I'm not...I have never prayed in my entire life. You have never prayed in your entire life.

Nora:

I've started. Juanita and I, we pray together. And you know what? It has had a great effect. My memory is much improved. I feel energized. I feel like I'm seventy again!

Cassandra:

Yes, mother, I'm glad you're feeling better, but it isn't because you're praying, it's because you are being treated in an incredibly state of the art manner by an incredibly expensive doctor!

Nora:

Cassandra shrugs.

Who knows?

Cassandra:

Oh my god.

Nora:

Ooh, you oughtn't use His name is vain.

Cassandra:

"His"? You mean "God's" name?

Nora:

Cassandra looks fondly upward.

That's right.

Cassandra:

What are you talking about?

Nora:

Nora. You're going through a lot of changes. I just want you to know that you can always lean on The Lord, and he'll carry you through.

Cassandra:

Nora:

I need you to stop saying that. It's not God, it's me, I'm carrying you.

Cassandra:

Well, if it's anyone on earth it's Juanita!

Nora:

Who I'm paying for!

Cassandra:

I don't want to talk about this. You're being short and nasty. And common.

Nora:

Common?!

Cassandra:

Yes. It's a difficult thing for a grown-up to realize, but it's true that your mother is her own person, and you can't expect her to stay the same forever. I never expected you to call any man your father who wasn't and I never will but I've accepted Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Savior and I need you to respect that decision.

9.

Juanita and Nora. They whisper so as not to wake Cassandra.

Nora:

What have you been saying to Mom?

Juanita:

What do you mean?

Nora:

You talk to her.

Juanita:

Of course.

Nora:

What do you talk about?

Juanita:

Well, we talk about everything. Old movies. Space shuttles. You.

Nora:

Me?

Juanita:

You come up. She loves you very much.

Nora:

Do you talk about God?

Juanita:

A bit.

Nora:

My mother doesn't believe in God.

Juanita:

Oh.

Nora:

But today she told me she had accepted Jesus Christ as her personal Lord and Savior.

Juanita:

Did she?

Nora:
Are you surprised?

Juanita:
I didn't realize she was ready to take that step.

Nora:
??????

Juanita:
I don't know what you're trying to say.

Nora:
"That step." Have you been, I don't know, *grooming* her for "that step"? Have you been *evangelizing* her?

Juanita:
Oh, no. No no no. We just talk.

Nora:
About God.

Juanita:
Only if she brings it up. She's very interested in the topic. It seems she's never really spoken to anyone about these things.

Nora:
About God.

Juanita:
Not just about God. About final things. Ultimate things.

Nora:
Death.

Juanita:
Yes, and the afterlife. And ultimate purpose and meaning. The big questions. It seems she's never really grappled with the big questions.

Nora:
Well, that's ridiculous, that's actually insane, because my mother read *War and Peace* in three different translations. She read metaphysical poetry like other people read the sports section. Her favorite book was *Middlemarch*!

Juanita:
Okay.

Nora:

What does that mean, “okay”?

Juanita:

Nothing. Just that I find it really helps for most patients to keep the conversation on a pretty surface level. I ask are they hungry, are they thirsty, do they need to use the restroom. And most of my patients are fine with that. But not your mother. She pokes. She prods. She wants to steer the conversation deeper than that. She wants to talk about death, and my ideas about death are bound up with my faith. I can't have that conversation without talking about God. And she finds it very comforting.

Nora:

Well yes, that makes sense, because she has spent her entire life thinking about those questions, so actually that's familiar to her. You're reading this all wrong. You think she wants to talk about these things because she never has but actually she wants to talk about them because they're all she ever thinks about.

Juanita:

Okay.

10.

Cassandra and Nora.

Nora:

Hi, Mom.

Cassandra:

Hello.

Nora:

How are you feeling?

Cassandra:

I'm fine. How are you?

Nora:

I'm doing okay.

Cassandra:

You look so familiar.

Nora:

Oh.

Cassandra:

I do think we've met before.

Nora:

Yes, Mom, it's me, Nora.

Cassandra:

No, that's not it. That doesn't ring any bells.

Nora:

Mom, it's me, your daughter.

Cassandra:

Don't be ridiculous. I'm much too young to have children.

Nora calls offstage.

Nora:

Juanita!

Juanita enters.

Yes?

Juanita:

Something's wrong with Mom.

Nora:

Well yes, she has advanced Alzheimer's.

Juanita:

She was fine last week.

Nora:

And now she isn't.

Juanita:

Mom, Mom, it's me, Mom, it's Nora.

Nora:

I knew someone named Nora once. She looked a bit like you, but younger. Much, much younger.

Cassandra:

That was me, it's me you're remembering.

Nora:

No, I don't think so. I don't think that's it.

Cassandra:

Mom, it's...Mom, do you know who you are?

Nora:

I want to tell you...

Cassandra:

Do you know who you are?

Nora:

Cassandra:

I've found out something, it's the most wonderful thing, it's name is Jesus, and he's the Man-God, and he loves me, and he made me, and that's why he loves me because he loves me with the love with which he loves himself and I love him with his own love, and that's why it's perfect, our love is a perfect circle, and Jesus the Man-God is also God the God-God who sent him, who sent himself, who is himself and sent him to earth, which he made, which he loves with a perfect circle of love, to save the earth and the man and me from the Him that made the earth that had to die, that *wanted* to die, but God didn't want it to die, not really, he was joking when

he said it had to die, so he sent himself to himself to save himself from himself, to love himself with his own selfless love and in that love to save the earth he made. Isn't that wonderful?

Nora:

Mom. Your name is Cassandra, you love Chopin and Boulez, you yelled at us if we split an infinitive at the dinner table, you voted for every Democrat except Carter because you said he talked down to women, you taught us how to diagram sentences when our friends were still learning how to read, you don't believe in God, you think people who believe in God are stupid, but you love John Donne, you...

Nora runs to a bookshelf and gets a book of Donne.

Nora:

This, this book, you must have read every poem a hundred times, you'd recite them to us at Christmas, you...

Nora flips through the book, causing a loose page to fall to the floor. She picks it up and reads.

Nora:

This is my play's last scene; here heavens appoint
 My pilgrimage's last mile; and my race,
 Idly, yet quickly run, hath this last pace,
 My span's last inch, my minute's latest point;
 And gluttonous death will instantly unjoint
 My body and my soul, and I shall sleep a space;
 But my'ever-waking part shall see that face
 Whose fear already shakes my every joint.
 Then, as my soul to'heaven, her first seat, takes flight,
 And earth-born body in the earth shall dwell,
 So fall my sins, that all may have their right,
 To where they're bred, and would press me, to hell.
 Impute me righteous, thus purg'd of evil,
 For thus I leave the world, the flesh, the devil.

Pause.

Nora:

You remember, don't you?

Cassandra:

My, that's lovely.

11.

Cassandra, Juanita, and Nora. Juanita plays tambourine, Juanita and Cassandra sing. Perhaps Cassandra only sings the repeated lines. Nora sits in the corner, racked by sobs.

Cassandra and Juanita:

He's got the whole world

In his hands

He's got the whole world

In his hands

He's got the whole world

In his hands

He's got the whole world in his hands

He's got you and me brother,

In his hands

He's got you and me sister,

In his hands

He's got you and me mother,

In his hands

He's got the whole world in his hands

He's got the rivers and the mountains

In his hands

He's got the oceans and the seas

In his hands

He's got you and he's got me

In his hands

He's got the whole world in his hands!

Cassandra stops singing. She falls asleep. Juanita smiles at Nora.

Juanita:

Now we wait.

12.

After the funeral. Nora and Juanita are dressed in black.

Nora:

You had no right.

Juanita:

To...

Nora:

No right to do any of that. To proselytize to her. To evangelize her. To take advantage of a dying woman. You didn't treat her like a person. You treated her like an object for your charity.

Juanita:

You're angry with me.

Nora:

Yes.

Juanita:

Why?

Nora:

Because you took away my mother!

Juanita:

Nora. Your mother was dying.

Nora:

Dying, not dead! Her mind was a fog, it was almost impossible to find her, the real her, and then you made it impossible, you put this religion into her head and it took root somehow and bloomed and spread and blocked out the sun, and the last time I talked to her it wasn't her at all, it was like a computer program spitting out random code. It wasn't a spontaneous, certainly not a *graceful*, use of language to express a subjectivity, it was a screen. A screen between her and reality. A screen that you put there.

Juanita:

I did exactly what you asked.

Nora:

WHAT?

Juanita:

You said you wanted your mother to have a Good Death.

Nora:

Yes.

Juanita:

She had one. She was happy. Smiling. No fear. I have seen many, many people die. And the ones who face death without fear are the ones who believe. Art, poetry, these are good things for the living. But the dying need God.

Nora:

You're a medical professional.

Juanita:

Yes.

Nora:

This is completely, utterly...outside of...

Juanita:

You asked me to comfort her.

Nora:

I wanted you to keep her company, not change her personality!

Juanita:

I comforted her the best way I knew how. The Lord God is the only comfort I have ever known. What else should I have given her?

Nora:

I can't believe you.

Juanita:

No, tell me. What should I have offered?

Silence.

Juanita:

I believe I have a message that every person needs to hear. That was created for every person. That every person was created for. And that message is that God is real, and he loves us, and he loves us so much that he died for us, and if we believe that simple truth, we will live forever. She told you she didn't want to die and you ran out of the room.

Nora:

I tried. I tried the best I could.

Juanita:

Yes, I know. You saw your mother as “a sparkling intellect.” But what good is intellect when faced with the mystery of death? What comfort can secular humanism give to a woman afraid of death?

Nora:

Not “humanism.” Humans. People. That’s what makes a life. Not fairy tales, not your invisible friend in the sky, the actual, tangible relationships between people. What you did was prevent me from having the final conversation every child deserves to have. “I’m sorry. I love you. I forgive you.” Never happened.

Juanita:

And you think that’s my fault.

Nora:

Yes! You made it impossible for me to reach her!

Juanita:

On your terms.

Nora:

On hers! You took away my brilliant, incisive mother and you replaced her with a stranger.

Juanita:

She could be quite brilliant. She stumped me a few times.

Nora:

Oh, fuck you.

Juanita:

Why are you so determined to reject God’s love?

Nora:

Because love that doesn’t do anything isn’t love! Love that heals the rich and lets the poor die of medieval diseases, love that sends hurricanes to smash through Haiti and die out before they reach Florida, love that gives children cancer and old women Alzheimer’s, that is not a love I want anything to do with. The problem of evil isn’t a problem, it’s just reality: chaos, emptiness, physics. That’s all there is.

Juanita:

God is calling you.

Nora:

Tell him to lose my number.

Juanita:

What if I’m right?

What if. Nora:

Then I saved your mother from eternal damnation. Juanita:

Hah! Nora:

An eternity of torture and pain. Of loneliness. And no way to ever escape. Juanita:

That's your God. That's the God you love. Nora:

And if I'm wrong, I saved her from weeks of the same. Nora, you weren't here. Juanita:

I was. Nora:

Not like I was. Not all the time. Juanita:

Because you said I shouldn't be! You said she was better with...oh my god. This was your plan. You did everything you could to cut me off from her, to make her dependent on you, and then when she started to forget who she was you said, here, have this identity, try this on. That's why you told me I didn't have to visit more. That she'd be better off with you. So you could have her all to yourself. Nora:

Nora. You're grieving. I understand. But I'm not a bad person. Juanita:

How many times? Nora:

What? Juanita:

How many patients have you done this to? Five? A dozen? *All of them?* Nora:

I can do it for you. Juanita:

Nora:

How many?

Juanita:

I can comfort you as well. There are all kinds of Christians. You don't have to be my kind if you don't want. You're tired. You're weighted down by sin. Let Jesus take your burden. Lay your burden at his feet.

Nora starts to sob.

Juanita:

Nora. You will see your mother again. Pray with me, Nora. Pray.

Juanita lays a hand on Nora's shoulder.

Juanita:

Our father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name...

End of play.

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS... *For this play, I was inspired by spare, claustrophobic plays like Caryl Churchill's A Number and Ayad Akhtar's Invisible Hand. I often write big, sprawling historical epics, so I thought it would be a fun challenge to limit myself to three characters with very little back story struggling over a complex problem, in this case the mental decline of a woman with Alzheimer's. I was also thinking a lot about the ethical complications of care work. My spouse is a childcare worker, and the lines between the personal and the professional get very blurry in that field: is it okay to tell someone else's baby that you love them? Elder care presents similar challenges. Care workers often form complex emotional bonds with their clients, and those bonds can be some of the most significant relationships these people have as they face the unfathomable reality of death. I have looked at this play from many angles, but currently the most interesting one to me is Juanita's: how do you help someone prepare to die? Really, how?*

AUTHOR BIO: Andy Boyd is a playwright based in Sunset Park, Brooklyn. He is a graduate of the playwriting MFA at Columbia University, where he studied with David Henry Hwang, Lynn Nottage, Charles Mee, Kelly Stuart, and Doug Wright. His plays have been produced, developed, or presented at IRT Theater, Pipeline Theatre Company, The Gingold Group, Dixon Place, The Kennedy Center, Roundabout Theatre Company, Epic Theatre Company, Out Loud Theatre, Naked Theatre Company, Contemporary Theater Company, The Trunk Space, Columbia University, Marquette University, and Harvard University. He is the host of the New Books in

Performing Arts Podcast and the co-host with Danny Erickson of the socialist theatre podcast Better than Shakespeare.

What's Up Duck *(quack quack quack)*

By Scott Carter Cooper



WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes...*

It's past midnight and my insane neighbor just screamed "I'd like to fuck a duck!" right as I was about to start writing about this play, What's Up Duck, by Scott Carter Cooper. How's that for Synchronicity? Now he's yelling about an AK47, but that's beside the point. The point is that What's Up Duck is a quirky play that "quacked" us up at the editorial water cooler, and that I'm proud to see this emerging playwright (and my neighbor) making a stellar print debut right here in Fleas. What's Up Duck has an apocalyptic retro feel to it, with an Abbot and Costello-like cadence that transcends gender identity politics as it picks at the weighty scabs of a power struggle/turf war between They and Duck. This isn't about THEM – not that we know who They is (and Who was on third, right?) but that doesn't matter when it all makes sense in a charming yet macabre way. What would you expect when They loves orange sauce and hates everything else, and Duck's, well, a duck?

THEY

Yeah. I don't believe you're really a duck. Prove it.

DUCK

Dryly

Quack.

THEY

Oh.

DUCK

We cool?

Are we? You're just gonna have to find out how cool we are...

What's Up Duck

They: a person who wants to hide from the world, any age, gender or race

Duck: a duck who wants to hibernate for the winter, any age, gender or race

Synopsis:

Duck must come to terms with the fact that They has commandeered the cave Duck usually uses for a winter's nap. The two struggle to accommodate one another's needs and in the end, They comes out on top.

Lights come up on THEY who is using duct tape to seal a door. There is a simple table at the middle of the stage and a dim red light upstage right. When finished with the door, THEY crosses to the table and empties their pockets of the contents. There are eight sunflower seeds. THEY separates them into two piles of four. THEY then looks around and crawls under the table, curls up and prepares to go to sleep. In short order, DUCK enters. DUCK is of non-specific species or sex. DUCK looks around, sizing up both the table and THEY.

DUCK

's up?

THEY

Hi. Can I help you? How did you get in here?

DUCK

How did you get in here?

THEY

Through that door.

DUCK

Oh. I flew down from Canada, stopped at this little spot I know in Lake Superior where the mackerel are incredible. Then I flew in from the opening at the sea. Can I just say, that's a lot of flying, and boy are my arms tired!

THEY

I can't fly.

DUCK

Sucks to be you. But at least you have those opposable thumbs all the cool kids are raving about.

THEY

But you've got wings.

DUCK

Why yes. Yes, I do. Thank you for noticing. But seriously. What brings you here?

THEY

Have you seen what's out there? War. Pestilence. Pumpkin spice. Hillary Clinton. Lady Gaga!

DUCK

They say it gets better.

THEY

I'm They. I don't say that.

DUCK

No?

THEY

No.

DUCK

You're being quoted, like, all the time. "They say this."
"They say that." There are plenty of them out there misquoting
you.

THEY

That's my cousin.

DUCK

Who?

THEY

Them.

DUCK

Who is them?

THEY and DUCK

directly to audience

Third base!

THEY

How did you find my hideout?

DUCK

Oh. Your? Your? I don't connect with these aggressive
pronouns, dude. That's not my thing. No. I come here every
spring. I'm lead singer for a garage band. Maybe you've heard
of us. Duck and Cover. We do all the greats. You know?
Daffy. Donald. The Ugly... This my chill pad.

THEY

Ducks don't hibernate.

DUCK

This duck does.

THEY

Yeah. I don't believe you're really a duck. Prove it.

DUCK

dryly

Quack.

THEY

Oh.

DUCK

We cool?

THEY

I don't know. I don't have much experience with ducks.

DUCK

What you got against ducks?

THEY

Nothing. I like ducks. Donald. Daffy. The Ugly...

DUCK

Man, those are just commercialized representations drawn by capitalists who are less interested in telling the real story of the world's most common aquatic fowl than they are in exploiting us for their own entertainment and profit. Those are not ducks. I am an authentic duck. They are abominations. They. They.

THEY

This is what I'm getting away from!

DUCK

What?

THEY

Everywhere I go, someone...or something-

DUCK

Watch it, buddy.

THEY

-- is telling me what I'm supposed to think. I can't take it. I can't! I. Just. Can't!

DUCK

I'm not telling you what to think. I'm educating you to the facts! Daffy. Donald. The Ugly! All Abominations! The closest Walt Disney ever got to a real duck was when he slathered one with orange sauce.

THEY

Oh! Orange sauce is very tasty.

DUCK

I'm talking the plight of the animated ducks and you're -

THEY

But I mean, as sauces go -

DUCK

I get it. You like a good orange sauce.

THEY

Especially if there are little flecks of red chili peppers --

DUCK

OK! Let me explain something to you. You do realize you're talking to a duck.

THEY

Yeah?

DUCK

About orange sauce.

THEY

Right?

DUCK

Do you see the problem?

THEY

No.

DUCK

How am I supposed to feel about that?

THEY

How you feel is not my problem. Hey, it's just a condiment!

DUCK

Man, I'm trying to tell you that what you're saying is hurtful. We'll never get anywhere until you are able to acknowledge my pain. Just apologize and we'll move on.

THEY

I mean, if we're going to share this cave for several months --

DUCK

Hold up. Who says we're sharing this cave?

THEY

Well... I can't go back out there.

DUCK

But this is my cave. I found it first.

THEY

Yeah. But it's my duct tape on the door.

DUCK

What did you say?

THEY

That's my duct tape on the door.

DUCK

Duck?

THEY

Duct.

DUCK

No. Duck. It's Duck Tape.

THEY

Is not.

DUCK

It is too!

THEY

No. It's not.

DUCK

You ask anyone, they'll tell you it's duck tape.

THEY

This! This is part of the reason I can't go back out there.

DUCK

Why?

THEY

They are stupid.

DUCK

Didn't you say you were they? Well, I can't argue with that.

THEY starts to cry.

What's the matter?

THEY

That was my father! No. I will die from an overdose of stupidity if I go out there. All I want to do is curl up in here and wait until the stupidity of the human race dies out.

DUCK

What if there's no vaccine?

THEY crawls under the table, curling up, preparing to sleep.

DUCK

You can't --

THEY

Just six weeks until the stupidity of the human race dies out.

DUCK

No, what I mean is --

THEY

Don't be selfish. I promise, I won't bother you.

DUCK

No. The tide comes in here. If you stay under that table you'll drown.

THEY

OK. Then I'll sleep on top of the table.

THEY climbs on top of the table.

DUCK

Where I'm supposed to perch?

THEY

You said you float.

DUCK

And perch. I float. And perch. Float and perch. And fly. Float and perch and fly. But not when I'm hibernating. Then I just float. And perch. On that table.

THEY

I have an idea. I have eight sunflower seeds here. I'll let you have four of them if you'll share your perch with me. And... I don't want to offend you...

THEY produces an orange from a pocket.

THEY

I know how you feel about these, but they really are very good.

DUCK

Just go to sleep. I'll hunker down over here until the water starts to rise.

THEY

OK.

The two are quiet for a minute.

I have two of them.

DUCK

Two what?

THEY

Oranges. If you'd like to give one a try. If you just try one..

DUCK

No. No duck wants to try no orange.

Slowly the red light begins to glow brighter.

THEY

Oh no.

DUCK

What is that?

THEY

You've never seen one of those before?

DUCK

What is it?

THEY

It's a detector.

DUCK

For God's sake, what does it detect?!

THEY

Bullshit. There are lethal levels of bullshit. All around us.

DUCK

No quack.

THEY

This is what I've been trying to escape. It's too much! Too much!

DUCK

Dude. I hate to tell you, but it's everywhere. Just ignore it and go to sleep.

THEY

I...I can't. I'm scared.

DUCK

We're all scared. Calm down.

THEY

Will you hold me?

DUCK

OK.

DUCK embraces THEY. THEY slowly embraces DUCK'S neck.

OK. OK. That's - that's enough. Time to go - I can't breathe.

THEY is staring out front as the duck's wings begin to flap frantically, and then subside. The red light glows brighter and brighter and as red light fills the stage...

THEY

Whispering

Orange sauce.

Red light fades to black.

END OF PLAY

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS...

"What's Up Duck" represents a stylistic change for me, jumping into absurdism from a much more naturalistic point of view. To say this play was inspired by the insanity of the Trump era covers a multitude of sins, and it's really far too early to say that we've actually survived the era. That said, if we are so lucky to get through it, I think history will show that a lot of good has come from it. Without the boil coming to a head, it cannot be lanced, cleansed and healed. That said, it doesn't mean we don't have the urge to hide during the lancing and cleaning phase. This play was actually written a year before Covid. Be careful what you wish for...

AUTHOR BIO: Scott Carter Cooper was an invited participant in the 2020 Kennedy Center's Playwrighting intensive and has worked closely to develop his work with Chicago Dramatists and Primary Stages. His plays have been presented internationally, domestically, and during the time of Covid, online.

The *Swimmer*

By *Louis* Fantasia

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes... In this first-person narrative, a swimmer in his fifties reflects on his life and mortality after he dies from a brain-eating amoeba. NOT a spoiler so no need to get your panties in a bunch. The play begins thus –*

(On screen or voiced): People Magazine: July 25, 2019 “...man dies after contracting an illness from a brain- eating amoeba after swimming...”

So, as you can guess it’s not as much about the deadly event as what comes before it and how this guy got in deep with the swimming in the first place.

“You know, swimming as a metaphor for life - especially a fucked up one.” – The Swimmer

Louis Fantasia’s extended monologue The Swimmer is part of a larger collection, DREAMS FROM A SLEEP TO COME, but feels complete in and of itself. It’s wistful and bittersweet (because we get to know him and like him and he dies), but it isn’t a downer as there is wisdom, wit, and stuff to learn. For instance, did you know they make waterproof contact lenses? Oh, I should mention that the play is subtitled parenthetically, “with apologies to Burt Lancaster.” Chew on that for a minute, why don’t you? Time’s up. Now read the damn play.

“Remember: swimming wild is only successful if you come out alive....” – The Swimmer

"The Swimmer"

(with apologies to Burt Lancaster)

from

"Dreams from a Sleep to Come"

(on screen or voiced)

"People Magazine: July 25, 2019"

"...man dies after contracting an illness from a brain-eating amoeba after swimming..."

"While extremely rare, Naegleria fowleri can lead to death — but there are precautions people can take to avoid contracting the amoeba."

A male SWIMMER, 50's, slightly over-weight, with a grey goatee, enters. He wears swimmer's goggles lifted onto the top of his forehead, a not too tight pair of trunks, and the kind of sandals you can walk in water with. He seems fine, but he keeps rolling out his neck and shoulders, as if to get out a stiffness there. Occasionally he will scratch his ear, or shake his head, as if to get the water out.

He has a towel around his neck, and an inflated orange swimmer's buoy is tethered to his left ankle. During the monologue he towels off, takes a fleece or terrycloth jacket out of an old Boy Scout backpack, and gets dressed. First, he digs into his backpack for a tattered book.

THE SWIMMER

Deakin? Do you know Roger Deakin? The Brit? He wrote a book - "*Water Log*" - about how he swam in almost every pond and pool and stream in Britain. He wanted to be like Burt Lancaster in "The Swimmer." The movie? After the John Cheever story? You know, swimming as a metaphor for life - especially a fucked up one. *(opens and reads a quote)*

"I grew convinced that following water, flowing with it, would be a way of getting under the skin of things, of learning something new."

Right! Remember: swimming wild is only successful if you come out alive.... Check the water temperature before you go in. Never dive. Don't jump. Swim upstream first, so the current can carry you back when you are tired... Let people

know where you're going, and how long you'll be gone. Swimming wild is only successful if you come out alive.... *(he tosses the book)*

Buuuuull-shit! I checked, I looked, I knew. After almost two years of wild swimming, I had the drill down pat, and I still died. *(He towels off.)*

I never learned to swim as a kid, but I did learn Latin. I was an altar boy, and read Caesar, Catullus and Ovid in the original. So I knew, when they said "*Naegleria fowleri*" that I was fucked. "*Naegleria fowleri*," subset of the phylum Percolozoa: a shape-shifting amoeba flagellate excavate, that turns - under certain conditions - from an inactive cyst to a trophozoite. Translation: you're fucked and dead in a week.

The amoebas are usually harmless, but every now and then they get worked up, literally, and take their revenge. A storm dumps pollution into a lake, drought slows down a river, too much mud builds up in a pond, or chemicals, as in my case, leech into ground water. *Naegleria fowleri*, a phylum Percolozoa trophozoic. As I said, Latin for... *(he rolls out shoulders; shakes out his ears)*

I don't blame my parents. It wasn't their fault I never learned to swim. They never did, not their generation. "What? I'm gonna cruise on the Queen Mary?", my mother would say. My brother learned to swim later when he bought a house with a pool, but that's another story.

The only person who liked to swim was of my Uncle Pete, my mother's sister's husband. He had been a Marine and a paratrooper, and was a good swimmer, and liked to go to the lake, but nobody would go with him. His daughters were into tennis and soft ball, and his wife - my aunt - was like my mother, and never learned to swim. So...

One day, my uncle asked my brother and me if we wanted to go to the lake with him. My brother said no (he was always pretty direct), but I said ok, even though I couldn't swim. Just to keep him company. He went half way out into the lake and back a couple of times, and then said, "Come on. I'll teach you." But he really didn't have any patience and we both came back in a foul mood. He never asked any of us again, and after a few years he just stopped going and would do things like paint his house in the summer instead.

But later that summer, I asked my parents if I could learn to swim. I was a Scout and swimming and life saving would be important if I wanted to be an Eagle Scout. My mother made her usual "Queen Mary" joke - only I, Mr. Big Shot, was going on the cruise this time. But she said she would discuss it with my father - which meant he would say yes, and so a couple of weeks later, I had change for the bus and a dollar for the lesson, with my swim suit and towel in my Cub Scout backpack. The coach met me at the door, showed me where the locker room was, told me to take a shower, and ... *(pause)*

Now, I know what you're thinking, but it wasn't anything like that. I wasn't molested by my swim coach or my priest or Scout master. Nothing like that. That would have been too obvious... too direct a cause and effect for screwing up my life. I didn't learn to swim because I wouldn't take my glasses off. *(beat; rolls his neck and shoulders)*.

There I was, getting undressed, going into the shower, drying off, putting on my suit, going out to the pool, all with my eyeglasses on. How else am I supposed to see where I'm going, except for those lenses the size of Coke bottle bottoms?

"Take 'em off an' jump in," the coach says. "Unhuh. Nope," says I. There's a very long pause, with a half a dozen kids all waiting to get in the water - and 'cause it's the Y, and they're all good, well-behaved kids, nobody says, "What's

the matter, four-eyes?”, or crap like that. There’s just this long pause, and then the coach says, “Okay, everybody else, in you go!” And they all jump in.

I think he thought that if he let it go, I would put down my glasses and join the team in a nice YMCA-kind of way, but I didn’t. He might let it go, but I didn’t. I put my towel around my neck, turned around, got dressed and went home. My mother asked, “How did it go?” I left the room without telling her anything. After dinner she asked me again. All I said was I changed my mind. I changed my mind. And that was that. After that, anyone me ask if I wanted to go to the beach or lake or something, I was busy... busy for nearly thirty years. *(beat; he dresses)* Then, when I turned forty, I decided I would learn how to swim. Just like that.

I probably should have gone into therapy instead, but I figured if I could... *(searches for the word)* correct... the failure of my youth, I could change who I might be for the next forty years. That... failure... might have been the defining moment of my life to that point. What if I had not been afraid to go out in a canoe with Margaret Golden at summer camp? What if I had gotten a Lifesaving Merit badge and become an Eagle scout and gone into politics? How many of those little failures does it take to add up to what we didn't become? And so I decided, like Burt Lancaster in "The Swimmer" to find my way home in the water.

The local Community College had a Saturday morning adult swim class and I signed up. But before going, the first thing I did was to buy CONTACT LENSES! Smart, huh? Waterproof contact lenses! I figured if I wanted to SUCCEED, I had to remove the OBSTACLES to success. And the glasses were one of those obstacles. So was dropping twenty pounds, but that’s another story. *(beat)*

The first Saturday, for my lesson, it was like I was 12 all over again. I almost didn’t go. Really. I was so terrified I threw up. My hands were shaking so much, I kept dropping my contact lenses in the bathroom sink. But I went! I am OVERCOMING my fears now, I said as I parked, abolishing the "body-shaming

ideas of our teenage years" and accepting "our selves as beautiful in our near nakedness," right? I strode into the gym, found the locker room. Stripped. Showered. Suited up and went out to meet my Nemesis. (*nods*) Yes, sir! And by the end of that summer, I was doing laps.

Laps! Laps!! Kee-rist! Is there anything more BORING than doing laps? For a year and half I did laps - twice a week. At first it was just 2 or 3 laps. That was the real accomplishment - that's when I should have stopped, and said, "There, I did it. I'm a swimmer." But, oh no. Not me.

I lost weight, stopped drinking, got married. Claudia and I did "laps" together. She was a much better swimmer than I was and taught me different strokes. Bonding, we called it. Love. Laps. Sharing. Together! (*beat*) I thought I would go out of my mind!

You can't change who you are, or how you got there. Yet, it had all seemed so simple -- too simple: buy the contacts, get the flip-flops, put on the trunks - and BOOM! - you're no longer the kid with the glasses who's afraid to swim. You can be the Eagle Scout now, the Mr. Big Shot on the Queen Mary! You do the laps and become someone... other... than who you were. (*beat*) Yeah, right. What had been the defining terror of my youth was now ancient history; worse, an anecdote. I had a wife, kids, and was over forty and healthy, for cryin' out loud. But who the fuck was I? The failure wasn't the swimming and the failure couldn't be fixed by the swimming... The failure was me. (*pause*)

"Read this," my wife said, when she handed me the Deakin book. She had already read it for her book club, which made it immediately suspect as far as I was concerned. But then she added, "It might save our marriage." So I read it.

Let's face it, the people who do this are losers. Either chubby girls who got laughed at at the pool (I sympathize, I really do!), or guys who are socially dense, or granola heads who somehow exist without having a job, or, like, the beautiful

people who go to some remote Scottish loch for a five minute swim and spend the rest of a four-hundred dollar dinner talking about it.

I was skeptical, but I did it, because I knew my wife was right, and if I didn't, one of us would be having an affair next. First I did the local pond, then part of the river by the boat house. Jezuz, when you walk in! Your whole body asks you if you are out of your mind, but you dive in and take, two, three, four, five good strokes and you're okay. You're good. You don't press your luck, you dry off, you go home. "Remember: swimming wild is only successful if you come out alive." I'd go once every six or seven weeks somewhere. I even went back home and swam in Uncle Pete's lake. Who knew he was the Roger Deakin of his day? Anyway, it kept me going; kept our marriage going.

And then, one day, there was this "new swim," that came up in the chat room: a place you just had to try. A stone quarry had flooded last winter because of the melting snow. The water was crystal, the sun warm and the serenity complete. Claudia said not to go there. She was worried about the chemicals that had been used in the quarry. She didn't like it. But you know me - stubborn and stupid. I told her I wouldn't go... but I went.

The kids were in school and Claudia was at work and I figured they'll never know, so I drive out, dive in, go under, roll back up and float on my back. I'm freezing and warm and frightened and at peace, all at the same time. Floating... And you think, I can do a minute of this, maybe two - and you do - and then you roll over and take those big strokes, strokes that would make your Uncle proud; making a loop - no laps here - back to the rocks; and, shivering, elated, happy, and clear like you've never been in your life, and, totally unaware that some squiggly little sucker has just started its journey up your nose and into your brain and is going to have breakfast, lunch and dinner there, you get out, happy to be alive... Alive, that is, for the rest of the week.

(He untethers the buoy from his ankle, unplugs the stopper and squeezes the buoy to his chest, letting out all the air.)

Naegleria fowleri, a phylum Percolozoa trophozoic. Latin. Omnes Gallia in tres partes divisa est. O tempera! O mores! Carpe diem, asshole!

Two days later the headaches started, then the fever and stiff neck. Then, the hallucinations. I started seeing my mother coming in and telling me it was time to get up and go to school. The worst was Day Four, with the seizures and vomiting. That was bad. Claudia and the kids were terrified. "I told you not to go. I told you," she kept saying, over and over. "I told you not to go."

Day Five was the coma. That was easy. It was like floating on your back and looking up, only with your glasses off... Blurry... But not afraid. Floating... And not afraid. Alone... and not afraid.

BLACKOUT

June 2021

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS... *Over the course of 2019, I found myself "cutting out" - to use the obsolete phrase - newspaper stories about people who died in strange ways. Actually, all I did was bookmark the headlines. After I had collected a virtual "stack" of these stories, I found myself thinking about why these people, why this moment, why this method of their death? I was reminded of*

Thornton Wilder's short novel, The Bridge of San Luis Rey, and Edgar Lee Masters' Spoon River Anthology, and thought I would try and give some of these people, whose deaths on the surface of it seemed more interesting than their lives, a chance to speak for "themselves," or a fictionalized version of somebody who died as they had. The "ground rules" I set for myself were to use only the facts of the given headline and nothing else: no personal references, names, dates, etc., from the lives of the real people involved.

The Swimmer is one of seven thematically related short plays that make up "Dreams from a Sleep to Come," a full-length play. Included in the evening are an Immigrant who falls from the wheel-well of a jumbo jet; an Old Lady beamed by a foul ball at a baseball game; a Child hit by her father's wayward golf ball; the Swimmer; three Women from the same family buried under a seaside cliff; a Bear struck by a speeding patrol car; and - after much deliberation - an ER Doctor who commits suicide from the stress of the Covid pandemic. Except for the manner of their unfortunate and unusual passings, everything about the characters in these plays is fictitious... Well... Not exactly fictitious: I didn't learn to swim as a kid because of my glasses. I did learn for my 40th birthday. My Uncle Pat (not Pete) was the Marine paratrooper... And the rest, well, is fiction... Really.

AUTHOR BIO: Louis Fantasia has produced and directed more than two hundred plays and operas worldwide. His books include, *Instant Shakespeare, Tragedy in the Age of Oprah, and Talking Shakespeare: Notes from a Journey*. He is also the General Editor of the series, *Playing Shakespeare's Characters* for Peter Lang Publishers. In 2003, the Council of Europe named the theatre collection at its library in the European Parliament in honor of Louis Fantasia, who holds both U.S. and European Union passports. In 2016 he was awarded the Officer's Cross of the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany for his contributions to German culture and theatre. *Dreams from a Sleep to Come* is his first play.

Run out of . . . SKY . . .

By Leslie Bramm

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes...Leslie Bramm's unusual short play, RUN OUT OF SKY (a play for three voices), is a little like experiencing a post-modern mile high club in one act, but with a plane, not on one. Before you start thinking that airplanes might actually make fantastic sexual partners with their extensive listening skills and sleek yet sturdy design, you need to know that the aviation themed relationship is metaphorical and that it's about to take a nosedive. RUN OUT OF SKY chronicles a doomed relationship through the voices of three female Air Traffic Controllers trying to keep a compromised aircraft in the sky. The playwright builds tension with the controller's voices sharing the narrative of setting the plane on its course, building to a tumultuous and primal ascent, and then desperately trying to stay on course when everything careens out of control. The writing is taut. It's slick. It's visceral. And now it's time to fasten those seatbelts because it looks like we're going to hit some turbulence. #airplane, #air, #relationships, #infidelity, #whatajerk, #probablyshouldnotbereadingthisonaplane*

CONTROLLER 3

She feels a plummet in her gut, the G force builds...

Spacing is playwright's own.

RUN OUT OF SKY

(a play for three voices)

CHARACTERS

3 female Air Traffic Controllers. They each wear a headset. They are up-lit with an eerie green glow on their faces, as if radar were tracking their emotions. They are spaced far apart, and never speak to each other.

TIME

Now.

At rise: Single SPOTLIGHT on all 3 CONTROLLERS

CONTROLLER 1

She's heavy on take off, but ascends to cruising altitude with average turbulence, autopilot is switched on...

CONTROLLER 2

Everyone seated safely, dreaming of destinations.

CONTROLLER 3

280 souls, counting crew.

CONTROLLER 1

Radio chatter, routine, nothing to indicate a problem.

CONTROLLER 3

A beautiful day..."Severe clear".

CONTROLLER 2

Blip...

CONTROLLER 1

Blip...A pulse on my radar, a number and a fight plan...

CONTROLLER 2

875,000 pounds, with a full payload, 6 million pieces and parts, 3 stories high, 300 foot wing span, two Rolls Royce turbines...

CONTROLLER 1

The sun gleams off her wings as her nose nudges the heavens.

CONTROLLER 3

She's buoyed by the thermals, and in return she gives the sky a diamond, a crisscrossing, necklace of a thousand daily flights.

CONTROLLER 1

Wires, wings, and weight, all wed triumphantly.

CONTROLLER 3

Her relationship with the sky- invictus!

CONTROLLER 2

An aircraft, any aircraft, even in a freefall, a nose dive, a roll, even if she's inverted, can pull up, level off, adjust her attitude, balance herself on the horizon and right her course...

CONTROLLER 1

As long as she doesn't...

CONTROLLER 2

Just as long as she doesn't...

CONTROLLER 1&2 (together)

"Run out of sky"!

CONTROLLER 2

The night "before" we do what we do. Have dinner, laugh at the antics of the dog, watch another episode of that show. "We" even make love.

CONTROLLER 3

We are two bodies knowing know where and how to touch.

CONTROLLER 1

Two bodies fit together.

CONTROLLER 3

He moves inside me, fills me, I wrap around, pull from him.

CONTROLLER 2

A quiver, a shudder, then he floods me lovely...

CONTROLLER 1

I absorb him...

CONTROLLER 3

My body surrenders, tingling waves of color turn me inside out.

CONTROLLER 1

We breathe into each other, one heart passed between two bodies.

CONTROLLER 2

We are two bodies safe, comfortable...We are two bodies consistent...

CONTROLLER 1

Blip...

CONTROLLER 3
Usually as he...Usually he'll hesitate, look me in the eyes.

CONTROLLER 1
Not tonight.

CONTROLLER 2
Tonight...

CONTROLLER 1
Tonight his face is buried in my shoulder.

CONTROLLER 3
He's sobbing. I haven't seen him cry in...Actually, I don't remember the last time I see him cry.

CONTROLLER 1
I hold him. Kiss the top of his head. This release more profound.

CONTROLLER 2
When he's upset he's reticent. Whatever's bothering him, I have to coax, pull out of him.

CONTROLLER 3
Tears out of the blue?...He doesn't do that.

CONTROLLER 2
Suddenly, in my gut...

CONTROLLER 1
Suddenly, I can't explain...

CONTROLLER 3
In my gut, suddenly there's this...

CONTROLLER 2&3 (together)
A sinking speed.

CONTROLLER 3
A pulse on my radar, a blip moving across my screen...

CONTROLLER 1
BRM 1-3-8...BRM flight1-3-8 please respond...BRM please...

CONTROLLER 2
There's no may-day, no report of a computer malfunction, no squawk with the cockpit. She's there one moment and then...

Blip...
CONTROLLER 1

A failure of the systems to communicate.
CONTROLLER 2

It's never just one thing, a single element that causes a crash...
CONTROLLER 3

A series of catastrophic failures...
CONTROLLER 1

Connect, over-lap, build on top of each other...
CONTROLLER 3

They reach a point of critical mass...
CONTROLLER 2

Blip.
CONTROLLER 1

If she goes down uncontrolled, at that height and speed, she'll reach 100 Gs in a matter of seconds.
CONTROLLER 2

All those bodies gelatinous, all those souls hopelessly turned inside out.
CONTROLLER 3

The burn scar will be minimal, the earth will absorb her, swallow her whole. The debris field concentrated. Parts of people, in pieces, no larger than a book of matches...
CONTROLLER 1

"Sudden impact with terrain".
CONTROLLER 2

The next morning, it's Sunday, his turn to bring coffee. We lay there, waking up together, as we do, as we've done, for a life-time of Sundays.
CONTROLLER 1

He's not a morning person, but there's too much silence now.
CONTROLLER 3

A silence, gliding.
CONTROLLER 1

CONTROLLER 2
The first “critical failure”.

CONTROLLER 1
He’s acting strange, distant, like he’s beginning to fade away.

CONTROLLER 2
I sit next to him. Take his hand...What is it?...What? Tell me.

CONTROLLER 1
Look at me...He doesn’t, he can’t...He won’t...

CONTROLLER 3
He moves away. Sits in a different chair, get’s up, paces, sits back down...

CONTROLLER 1
Just talk to me.

CONTROLLER 2
He glances at me, then away.

CONTROLLER 1
Second critical failure.

CONTROLLER 3
She feels a plummet in her gut, the G force builds...

CONTROLLER 1
Then he says...

CONTROLLER 2
In a tiny voice...

CONTROLLER 1
“I’ve fallen in love”...

CONTROLLER 3
Blip...

CONTROLLER 2
“With someone else and”...

CONTROLLER 1
Blip...

And, "WE" want to pursue it. CONTROLLER 3

You're kidding? I mean, he must be, this must be... CONTROLLER 2

This can't be for real. CONTROLLER 3

Mayday! CONTROLLER 2

He's serious. Very...Serious...Serious like I've never seen him. CONTROLLER 1

Say again...Read back please...Verify... CONTROLLER 2

"WE"..."WE" want to? CONTROLLER 3

I get out of bed strangely, calm, pull a coat on over my pajamas, leash up the dog, grab the cigarettes that he hates, and fly out into the cold morning. CONTROLLER 1

A ripping wind sheer, frost shivering across her wings, hypoxia sets in. CONTROLLER 3

The altitude makes her dizzy. CONTROLLER 2

She stalls for a moment then has to re-fire her engines. CONTROLLER 3

My father's death, the accident with the tree, losing his job, finding the job of his dreams, buying this home, our "we". CONTROLLER 1

Our WE, a lifetime of details. CONTROLLER 3

When I get back, later, he's dressed, sitting in the living room, staring at the top of his socks. CONTROLLER 1

CONTROLLER 2

He's made another pot of coffee, and cooked breakfast. I think this is incredibly sweet, considering...The bacon is like a "beacon", and this is his way of trying to relocate me.

CONTROLLER 3

Like WE were preparing for a siege. Like there is an outside force that WE need to defeat. WE would figure this out, together.

CONTROLLER 2

We both sit there in each other's presence. In each other's company. In each other's feelings, the way you do when words don't seem enough.

CONTROLLER 1

He keeps gripping the rug with his toes. Grabbing, like he's holding on for dear life.

CONTROLLER 2

Our WE had rolled, inverted. Our WE had become just "me".

CONTROLLER 3

Is there...I mean do you...The two of you...Is there a plan...

CONTROLLER 1

Can we talk...I mean, can we make this make sense, see what went wrong, make a mid-air correction, get "us" back on course?

CONTROLLER 3

I love you. Maybe I haven't said it, shown it enough, but I do.

CONTROLLER 2

Suddenly his phone rings...

CONTROLLER 1

It's her!

CONTROLLER 3

I see her voice all over his face...He'll let it go to voice mail. Try to make this awkward moment a little less so. He'll let it go to voice mail because deep down...

CONTROLLER 2

He wants to pull up, level off, right our course. He'll let it go to voice mail because some part of him, some part that he's lost or forgotten, some part of him still...

CONTROLLER 3

"Hello"...His voice is a low mumble as he walks into the bedroom, and sits on our bed.

CONTROLLER 2

I can hear her voice, soft. Little covert rumbles.

CONTROLLER 3

Each molecule of air around my head explodes.

CONTROLLER 1

A minute. Five minutes. 10 minutes, they keep chattering.

CONTROLLER 2

I'm sick. I go to the bathroom. I have to vomit...nothing. I splash water...I see the metal fatigue. The tiny tears on the skin of the fuselage.

CONTROLLER 3

This cruel???

CONTROLLER 1

If there had been a system failure the pilot would have communicated, there would have been a conversation, an attempt to fix things.

CONTROLLER 2

What ever happened was abrupt, sudden. She went down before anyone could do anything.

CONTROLLER 3

I never thought...

CONTROLLER 2

Never would have guessed...

CONTROLLER 1

This cruel...

CONTROLLER 3

This cruel, to me?

CONTROLLER 2

I scream at him...

CONTROLLER 3

ENOUGH!!!

CONTROLLER 1

He hangs up, walks by me like...

CONTROLLER 3

Wait! Stop! How long have you been...I mean, the two of you, how long have you...

CONTROLLER 1

“She doesn’t want to, as long as you didn’t know...She wanted me to tell you first. She wasn’t going to sleep with a married man”.

CONTROLLER 2

But, you are a married man...

CONTROLLER 3

You know what I mean. “Married”, that kind of married.

CONTROLLER 1

What kind of married? What kind of married?

CONTROLLER 2

The kind of married we used to be.

CONTROLLER 1

She wasn’t going to have sex with my husband until I knew?

CONTROLLER 3

The noble...

CONTROLLER 2

Self-righteous...

CONTROLLER 1

Goddamn holier-than-tho...

CONTROLLER 1,2,3 (together)

BITCH!

CONTROLLER 3

He’s found someone who’s more complete than I am.

CONTROLLER 2

Tonight I would be here, in our apartment alone, as I would remain.

CONTROLLER 1

He would find himself with her, in her, full, and falling in love.

CONTROLLER 3

A pulsating blip on my radar, tracking across a grid, a flicker, then she’s gone.

Blip...	CONTROLLER 2
I never knew something could hurt this much.	CONTROLLER 3
Blip...	CONTROLLER 2
A flicker, a blip, a pulse on my screen...	CONTROLLER 1
Blip.	CONTROLLER 3
A flicker...	CONTROLLER 2
Hurt in a way, to a degree, that only falling in love can heal.	CONTROLLER 3
A blip, a flicker, and then...	CONTROLLER 1
She's gone.	CONTROLLER 3
She's gone.	CONTROLLER 2
She's gone.	CONTROLLER 3
A blip and then she's gone.	CONTROLLER 1

(BLACK OUT)

End of play

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS... *I wanted to write a poem for the stage. Something highly stylized that uses the strength of metaphor.*

AUTHOR BIO: Leslie Bramm is the author of over 20 plays which have been produced, work-shopped and/or developed, regionally, internationally, off-Broadway, and independently by Variations Theatre Group, Three Crows Theatre, The Present Company, The Penobscot Theatre, The Actor's Theatre of Louisville, Emerging Artists, Theatre, Nicu's Spoon, The Edward Albee Last Frontier Conference, Rattle Stick, Reverie Productions, Playwrights Horizons/Tisch, Shelter Theatre Group, Gold Coast Theatre, Theatre La Monde, The Province Town Players, IATI Theatre, The Actors Studio and the Colorado Fine Arts Center. Bramm is the recipient of a Stanley Drama Award (Oswald's Backyard) A Paul T. Nolan Award (Islands of Repair) A Tennessee Williams Literary Award (Big Ball) and is a two-time finalist for the O'Neill Conference. Bramm is a member of the Dramatist Guild, and the Actors Studio Playwright/Directors Workshop. His play A.B.C. was banned from the curriculum at SUNY college.

The **W**e**i**r**d** Ellen Prom **Queen** Trendsetters
 By *Elizabeth* SHANNON

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes...*

Let me just say that this will go in my anthology of plays about hair even though it's not really about hair – it rarely is. THE WEIRD ELLEN PROM QUEEN TRENDSETTERS is, however, set in a salon where Wendy's getting her hair done for prom (this high school does it early) accompanied by her close friend, Francesca. Then there's Ash, the friendly and talkative hairdresser who opens up a conversation that's bigger than any hairstyle. Elizabeth Shannon's coming of age prom drama is a satisfying short play that gets it right in so many ways, that in the name of space, I'll only mention a couple of them. First off, it's got dialogue with teenagers who sound like real teenagers. Not only is this hard to do unless you are, in fact, a teenager (and even then), but here it feels effortless. It also has a terrific coming out speech. While there's nothing unusual about a "coming out" monologue in which a character expands the moment to proclaim their truth or reveal a secret, in this case it's not as much about the secret itself as an examination of the need for secrecy at all, i.e., the ever-shifting barometer of how much to tell who and when. It's also about coming out.

Here's a snippet from Wendy's speech:

Like, I want gay people to know I'm queer but not straight people.

Plus a bit of dialogue to get the party rolling:

ASH
 And does this princess have a prince?

WENDY
 What?

ASH
 A prince. A boyfriend, a date to the dance.

WENDY
 Um...

ASH
Or just going with friends?

WENDY
Yeah. Friends.

THE WEIRD ELLEN PROM QUEEN **TRENDSETTERS**

CHARACTERS:

WENDY - High school senior. A private person who is a bit awkward.

ASH - Hairdresser. Bubbly and talkative, but has a good heart. You know the type.

FRANCESCA - High school senior. Sweet and charismatic.

SETTING:

Mabel's Salon. Spring. Present day.

AUTHOR'S NOTES:

There are a few descriptions of hairstyles. These can be changed to accommodate different hair types if needed.

Diverse casting is encouraged.

ACT ONE SCENE ONE

(Lights up on a hair salon. There is a hair salon chair facing the audience, with WENDY sitting in it. ASH is behind her, looking at her hair in the imaginary mirror in front of her (where the audience is)).

ASH
(referencing WENDY's hair)

Wow! It's so long now.

WENDY
Yeah, it's been a while.

ASH
More than half a year, right?

WENDY
Ten months. The last time I came in it was June, right before my vacation to New Orleans, and I was so tired of having long hair. It gets way too hot in the summer.

ASH
I have the same problem. So are we cutting it today, then?

WENDY
Nah, just, um, styling it.

ASH
Oh.

WENDY
Yeah.

ASH
Well, I suppose that's good. Long hair is always more fun to style, there's so much more you can do!

WENDY
(chuckles awkwardly)
Yeah.

ASH

So what're you thinking?

WENDY

I don't know.

ASH

Why are you getting it done? A wedding, graduation, family portraits, maybe?

WENDY

I don't graduate until June. It's for prom, actually.

ASH

Oh! Prom. Silly me, I don't know how I could forget. I guess I thought it was later.

WENDY

My school always has it before any other school in the district.

ASH

Gotcha.

(pause)

Curls? Braids? Braids and curls? Or we could straighten it. And I have these sparkly clips... any of those sound good?

(WENDY shrugs her shoulders.)

ASH

Well. Um. Do you have a dress that I could see a picture of? Maybe then I can get a better idea of your vibe...

(WENDY nods and pulls out her phone. She finds a picture and gives her phone to ASH.)

WENDY

You can swipe. There are more pics.

(pause, as ASH is swiping)

I'm not trying to be difficult. For real. I just... it's kinda overwhelming.

ASH

If you don't want anything done, that's okay. Sometimes some girls' moms force them to come in...

WENDY

No, no, it's not that. I want it.

(ASH nods and hands WENDY's phone back to her.)

ASH

It's a very pretty dress.

WENDY

Thanks.

ASH

I love that detailing, the lace and everything. And the color? Wow. Lavender is one of my favorites.

WENDY

(with a small smile)

Me too. Obviously.

ASH

I think I want to do a sort of princess look. Is that okay with you?

WENDY

Yeah.

ASH

A half up, half down kinda thing. I can do some braids, but keep them loose, pull some hair strands out... you'll look stunning.

WENDY

Cool.

ASH

I mean, you already look stunning, but -

WENDY

I get what you mean.

(pause)

Thanks.

ASH

Of course. It's what I'm here for.

(ASH starts braiding WENDY's hair.
ASH doesn't like the silence.)

ASH

So where's the venue?

WENDY

Some hotel downtown. I forget which one exactly.

ASH

And are you going with friends?

WENDY

A few, yeah.

ASH

What do their dresses look like?

WENDY

Um, Kaylee has a dark blue halter one, and Raymond's is a light pink, and Maria's is a dark red with this cool mermaid cut, and Francesca's is this cool, shimmery black material -

ASH

And does this princess have a prince?

WENDY

What?

ASH

A prince. A boyfriend, a date to the dance.

WENDY

Um...

ASH

Or just going with friends?

WENDY

Yeah. Friends.

ASH

And the girl you came in with?

WENDY

What, what about her?

ASH

Is she one of the friends?

WENDY

Oh. Yeah. That's Francesca.

ASH

You two seem awfully close.

WENDY

We are. She's my... like my best friend ever. We do everything together.

ASH

Clearly. I mean, that's good. We all need a girlfriend we can count on, right?

WENDY

I -

ASH

I love all my girlfriends. I don't know what I would do without them!

WENDY

Haha. Yup.

ASH

Have fun with your friends this year. Maybe next year you'll have a date. But honestly, between you and me, it's usually even more fun with just friends.

WENDY

Yeah.

ASH

And maybe you'll get asked to dance by a cute boy! Wait, do they even do that anymore?

WENDY

I don't know, I've never / been to prom -

ASH

Duh, you've never been, what am I thinking?!

WENDY

You're all good.

ASH

I just don't want you to feel down cause you don't have a date.

WENDY

(a little too firmly)

Trust me, I don't.

(off ASH's look)

I just... um... not super boy crazy, I guess.

ASH

I get it. Focused on school?

WENDY

... Yeah.

ASH

Good thing you've got that balance. Plenty of time for boys later in life.

WENDY

Yup.

(Awkward silence. FRANCESCA enters.)

FRANCESCA

Hey, babe, you gave me your phone, your mom's calling...

(FRANCESCA hands WENDY her phone.)

WENDY

Can I take this? Outside?

ASH

Yeah, just be careful of the hair.

WENDY

Thanks so much.

(WENDY exits.)

FRANCESCA

Sorry about that.

ASH

It's okay -

FRANCESCA

Her mom just doesn't know she's here right now -

ASH

Why wouldn't she know?

FRANCESCA

I don't get it. Wendy just didn't want to tell her. Which I thought was weird, because, like, why would her mom care, you know? But whatever. There are a lot of things she doesn't tell her mom.

ASH

I hope my little girl doesn't grow up to be like that.

FRANCESCA

What do you mean, "like that"?

ASH

Oh, sorry, that came out wrong. Wendy is wonderful. I just want my kids to always trust me enough to communicate.

FRANCESCA

Right.

ASH

I'm sorry if that was rude.

FRANCESCA

No, you're good. I mean, that's what every parent wants, right?

ASH

Exactly.

(There is an awkward silence.)

ASH

Well, she's lucky to have a friend like you.

(FRANCESCA laughs.)

ASH

Did I...?

FRANCESCA

Just, the way you said friend. Like we're two gal pals. Just straight besties.

(ASH is confused.)

FRANCESCA

Shit. She didn't -

ASH

You aren't friends?

FRANCESCA

Um, we are, but we're also... she's my date to prom and stuff, and... we're dating.

ASH

Oh.

(pause)

Um, how long have / you been together?

FRANCESCA

She didn't tell you? Oh, sorry. Um, just a little bit more than a month.

ASH

Wow.

FRANCESCA

Yeah. It's nice.

ASH

That's... I mean that's totally cool with me, I'm not... I mean, I support it, I just feel bad now with all my talk about her getting a boyfriend -

FRANCESCA

I really shouldn't have said anything. I just assumed you knew.

(Awkward silence. WENDY enters and gives her phone back to FRANCESCA.)

FRANCESCA

Everything good?

WENDY

Yeah, thanks.

ASH

So, ready to get back into it? I had a lovely chat with your girlfriend!

WENDY

She's not... we aren't -

(WENDY looks at FRANCESCA, who mouths "sorry". ASH gives WENDY an encouraging look.)

WENDY

Uh. Yeah. We can...

ASH

(sensing some tension between WENDY and FRANCESCA)

You know, I have these sparkly clips that I really think would tie the whole look together. But they're in the back, so let me just...

(ASH excuses herself and exits.)

FRANCESCA

I'm really sorry I thought she knew I just figured since you brought me here and didn't tell me not to be quiet about it and we were holding hands at the front desk when we were checking in and -

WENDY

It's fine.

FRANCESCA

Really? You're not mad?

WENDY

Why would I be mad?

FRANCESCA

I... I kinda outed you.

WENDY

Not on purpose.

FRANCESCA

But still.

WENDY

I'm fine with her knowing.

FRANCESCA

But you didn't tell her. She mentioned how she talked to you about getting a boyfriend...

WENDY

I just said I was going to the dance with friends.

FRANCESCA

But why didn't you feel comfortable enough to tell her yourself yet you aren't mad at me for accidentally saying it?

WENDY

I know your intentions were good.

FRANCESCA

That doesn't make it okay!

WENDY

Not always, no. But this time, it is.

(pause)

I'm private about who I date. Even when I date guys. Like when I was dating Jake, he got so mad cause I didn't wanna tell people...

and then adding the homophobia thing to it, it's just another layer.

(pause)

It seems like such a personal part of me. That not everyone deserves to know. Er, deserves is the wrong word... it just doesn't affect them. It's like how I've never liked small talk. I'm happy to hear about Ash's life, if she wants to share (which she always does), but I don't really want to get into mine.

(FRANCESCA nods.)

WENDY

Coming out, is fucking *annoying*. I don't care what everyone else says. It isn't a weight off my shoulders, it isn't a moment of pride, it's just a nuisance. And it never ends! It never fuckin ends. I think the heteros think that it does. Like you come out once, and that's it. You're good. But no. You come out to your friends. Your family, your extended family. Maybe your classmates or your teachers. Your coworkers, if you feel safe enough to. And it doesn't even stop there! You go into a... what are they called, uh, a *flower shop*, and the man behind the counter asks if these are for your boyfriend, and it's this moment of panic, like, do I say yes just to make my life easy? But that would be lying. And I'm fine lying about it for myself, but then am I hurting my girlfriend by lying about it? Cause I don't want her to think that I don't love her or aren't proud of her or aren't committed to the relationship. But then what does the florist guy do if I tell him the truth? What if he glares at me or makes some Jesus comment or even refuses me service? But then what if it turns out he's gay and I don't say anything and I miss this moment of potential connection? Like, I want gay people to know I'm queer but not straight people. And moments like this... getting corsages, getting my hair done, getting nominated from prom queen with you and having to be this weird Ellen lesbian prom queen trendsetter? (And I don't even like Ellen! Or just in public, having to calculate if it's safe to hold your hand or if I'm gonna be like those girls in London who got beat up cause they were together. And then you would get hurt! Which is like the worst thing ever that could happen. It's just... it never ends. And it can be exhausting. And this was supposed to be simple and fun and now I'm fucking freaking out for no reason in a salon even though I don't care that Ash knows!

(Long moment of silence.)

WENDY

Sorry.

FRANCESCA

You have nothing to apologize for.

WENDY

It just... it can be a lot.

FRANCESCA

I'm sorry if I made it worse.

WENDY

You didn't.

(pause)

Do you not... you don't get that same frustration, that same exhaustion?

(FRANCESCA shrugs her shoulders.)

WENDY

I feel like a fake. People tell me I helped them come out, I helped them realize their sexuality, I educated them... yet I'm too scared to tell people, too... not ashamed, but... not wanting to stand out. I don't want to worry about telling people or people finding out, or... and I still get anxious about it all. How am I supposed to be a role model if my fight-or-flight still kicks in when people realize I'm not straight?

FRANCESCA

Heteronormativity is a bitch.

WENDY

(with a small laugh)

You can say that again.

(pause)

I'm glad you're here.

FRANCESCA

Really?

WENDY

One hundred percent.

FRANCESCA

You look really beautiful. I love the hair.

WENDY

Thanks :)

FRANCESCA

I'm excited for prom.

WENDY

Me too.

FRANCESCA

You think we'll win prom queens?

WENDY

Maybe. I hope so. I'm banking on the Straight People Guilt™ .

(FRANCESCA and WENDY laugh. ASH enters, with the hair clips.)

ASH

Sorry, it took me a while to find them.

WENDY

No problem.

ASH

Let's finish up so you two can start getting ready for your big night!

(WENDY sits back down in the chair.)

ASH

You'll have to show me pictures next time you come in.

WENDY

I will.

And Francesca, do you have a picture of your dress? I'd love to see it.

(FRANCESCA pulls out her phone and finds a picture before handing it to ASH. ASH takes it and looks.)

ASH

Oh my goodness it's absolutely stunning! You two are going to look so gorgeous together.

WENDY + FRANCESCA

Thank you.

(Moment of silence. ASH continues working on WENDY's hair. WENDY and FRANCESCA share an understanding glance. Lights slowly fade. BLACKOUT.)

END OF PLAY

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS... *Elizabeth Shannon loves combining social activism and progress in her work and makes it a priority whenever she writes. She wanted to explore just a*

few of the many nuanced feelings members of the LGBTQ+ community go through, even in small, everyday events, while also spreading a message of hope and positivity. She also wanted to pay tribute to her friend, Wendy. Lynn Nottage and Paula Vogel are two of her biggest dramatic and literary inspirations and influences. Libby Carr, Alex Lin, and Madhuri Shekar are some of her stylistic influences as well.

AUTHOR BIO: Elizabeth Shannon is a playwright from Frederick, MD. She was an apprentice at the Maryland Ensemble Theatre (MET) for two years, as well as a second year member of the Theatre Focus in the Academy for the Fine Arts. She will be attending college in the fall at Marymount Manhattan College to get her BFA in acting. Her play, “Smoke”, was performed virtually with University of Texas El Paso’s student organization Ensemble. Her play, “What Are You Hiding?”, which she co-wrote with Morgan Southwell, was a winner of Baltimore Centerstage’s Young Playwright’s Festival, and a finalist in The Secret Theatre’s Act One: One Act Festival, as well as part of the live-streamed reading series, “The Future Was Now”, by Quarantined Theatre Company, which can be found on YouTube. Her play, “Nuclear”, was a winner of The Blank Theatre’s 28th Annual Young Playwrights Festival and received an honorable mention in the 43rd Annual Marilyn Bianchi Kids’ Playwriting Festival with Dobama Theatre. Her play, “Mama Buswick is Dead” is a winner of The Blank Theatre’s 29th Annual Young Playwrights Festival, and her play, “Nancy” was a semifinalist. “Nancy” is also currently being performed with the New Voices program at Olney Theatre. Her play “To Be Determined”, received a staged reading with Rapid Lemon Productions’ Variations on Vision and is the high school winner for the Northern Arizona Playwriting Showcase. Her play, “Loaded Language”, was a winner of #Enough: Plays to End Gun Violence, a project comprised of 7 plays by young women addressing gun violence. Its world premiere was with South Coast Repertory and is published in an anthology with Playscripts.

The ‘Michaelson Model’ o o o

o o o By Alexis Kozak

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes...*

The Michaelson Model by Alexis Kozak is a troubling play about the state of modern education and the state of human nature, both. There’s “veteran teacher” Fred, a cynical old hand who makes no secret of fudging the numbers on his S.G.O.’s (Student Growth Objectives in case you didn’t know) and Logan, a newly minted instructor who believes that he can mold young minds and change the world. You might expect the script to paint the good guy bad guy roles with broad brushstrokes, but then you haven’t experienced the nuance of Alexis Kozak’s writing. The underlying cynicism in young Logan’s worldview is topped off with a hubris that threatens to make the old guy the sympathetic character - if only for a microsecond – and then leaves us with the realization that we’re desperately searching for a hero that doesn’t seem exist in the world of this play, nor in our world either. What keeps the play buoyant is the humor with which Kozak imbues his characters and the conversation at large. For teachers it’s especially spot on. You may find yourself shaking your head, but you’ll also have to laugh at your own “Highly Effective ratings.”

Here’s a line for you –

FRED

“Data.” Ha, ha. When I started, you know what we used to call “data?” “Grades.” Ha, ha. “Grades.” Those were the days.

(Spacing is playwright’s own.)

THE MICHAELSON MODEL

a ten-minute play

by

Alexis Kozak

WINNER OF THE URBAN STAGES (NYC) ACRONYM PLAY FESTIVAL

SYNOPSIS:

When Mr. Dryser tries to educate Logan in the way of the American classroom,
will the student become the teacher?

for more, visit www.alexiskozak.com

CHARACTERS

FRED male, 40's-60's. A veteran teacher.

LOGAN male, early-20's. A first-year teacher. Overtly sure
of himself.

NOTE: Like teachers do, both of these people are capable of charming someone to death, by tai chi-ing and twisting even the most serious of things into a joke. This “charm-and-joke” version of shock-and-awe can be used as both a defense and as a weapon. In fact, maybe it is the only way to survive.

TIME AND PLACE

An American classroom of the present.

SETTING: (High school classroom. FRED—a veteran teacher—sits at his desk, working on a computer. He wears glasses and looks over the tops of his lenses at his computer screen. After a moment, LOGAN—a first year teacher—pops his head in at the door. He is on his way out of the building: jacket, bag, and smart phone in hand.)

LOGAN

Burning the candle at both ends?

FRED

Just the person I wanted to see.

LOGAN

Be still my beating heart.

FRED

Come in here, kid.

LOGAN

Just popping in to say, “Have a nice afternoon.”

FRED

These Student Growth Objectives are killing me—you know how to do this, right?

LOGAN

The S.G.O.’s were due by lunch.

FRED

(Charming, a joke.)

Yeah, well, some of us teach for a living.

LOGAN

You are working with a basic spreadsheet?

FRED

I used to total it up by hand and make a table in a Word document.

LOGAN

A Word document? Jeez. Do they even *make* those anymore?

FRED

Everybody swears this will save me a couple of hours.

LOGAN

Oh, minimum.

FRED

The way this totals things up automatically, it makes me nervous. I don't even really know what it's doing.

LOGAN

You want me to take a look?

FRED

I signed on for coffee, summers off, not *this* crap.

LOGAN

You're using the one administration emailed out, right?

FRED

Trying to.

LOGAN

(Indicating Fred's chair, "sit?")

Can I...?

FRED

(Giving up his chair.)

Oh, sure, sure.

LOGAN

(Sort of to himself, while he looks over Fred's work.)

Okay. Looks like you've got your data columns *here*. Automatically breaks your students down into your three achievement groups—right, okay—low, medium, high—okay. It sorts the data—

FRED

"Data." Ha, ha. When I started, you know what we used to call "data"? "Grades." Ha, ha. "Grades." Those were the days.

LOGAN

Yeah, right? This all looks good so far...Wow.

FRED

What?

LOGAN

Every one of your students hit their goal. How'd you manage that?

FRED

Good teaching?

LOGAN

Every single *one*?

FRED

Excellent teaching?

(Silence. Fred gives Logan a look.)

Are you trying to ask me if they are real? It's okay. You can ask me. "Mr. Dryser, are these S.G.O.'s real?" No. They are not real. I made them up. The only way I could get the kids to score like that would be if I gave them the answers.

LOGAN

But what if somebody questions it?

FRED

I have hard copies. I'm not an idiot. I have something they wrote their own names on. Just in case push comes to shove, but.

LOGAN

I can't believe you're faking their scores.

FRED

When you say it like that, it sounds bad. Hey, listen, if *my* kid—my *own* child—has a teacher that is not intelligent enough to figure out how to do this, then maybe that's not a person I want teaching my kid. You know what I mean? Who is gonna be dumb enough to put in some student growth numbers that are not gonna one hundred percent guarantee them a Highly Effective rating?

LOGAN

I'm just surprised, I guess.

FRED

Smoke and mirrors, kid. Smoke and mirrors.

LOGAN

But, if *I* noticed it...

FRED

You think our supervisors don't know? Believe me, they know. They *need* us to do good. *We* do good, *they* do good. *Their* scores are tied to *our* scores. It's like a sales structure. *You* make more if the guys *under* you make more. Except that in a sales structure, you want to *help* the guys under you, so they perform better. Not this observation "I-didn't-see-*this*, you're-a-two, I-did-see-*this*, you're-a-four" bullshit.

LOGAN

Were you a four last year?

FRED

My point is,—the guy who came up with this whole evaluation thing—Michaelson?—where’s he from?, California?—My point is, I’d respect this guy Michaelson if he was like, “Hey, that’s not how my evaluation model is supposed to be used. It was supposed to help teachers improve, not as a tool for school districts to evaluate how well you do your job. You can’t use it like that.” Stand up for the working man—he was a teacher, stand *up* for teachers. Not “you score *this*, three observations next year—you score *this*, one observation.”

LOGAN

He is a she.

FRED

Huh?

LOGAN

The observation paradigm you’re talking about. The Michaelson Model. Michaelson is a woman.

FRED

No shit? Figures. I guess *I’d* whore it out, too, if they paid me enough.

LOGAN

I think it’s actually a good model.

FRED

You drank the Kool Aid, huh?

LOGAN

You can’t turn this in. They’re gonna catch you. A hundred *percent* they’re gonna catch you.

FRED

I’m not doing anything wrong. Not really.

LOGAN

I think they might disagree.

FRED

I wasn’t looking for an ethics lecture. I just wanted you to check my numbers.

LOGAN

Why are you doing this to me?

FRED

What am I doing?

LOGAN

What is this?, a test? Is this some kind of a test?

FRED

Relax a second, kid.

LOGAN

“Check your numbers”? The numbers stink.

FRED

Alright, alright.

LOGAN

And why do you call me “kid” all the time? Why do you do that?

FRED

Hey, I’m just trying to give you some free advice. From somebody who has been around the block.

LOGAN

You called me “kid” in front of the whole school last week.

FRED

Did I?

LOGAN

At the faculty meeting. You said, “The kid’s real good.” You said that in front of everybody.

FRED

I was giving you a compliment.

LOGAN

What do you get out of putting me down?

FRED

“*Get out of*”?

LOGAN

You know the numbers give you away. You knew that before I walked in here. So you brought me in here to what?, to show off? To show me how smart you are?

FRED

Maybe I’m trying to teach you a little something, kid. Huh? Maybe you should just shut up and take the compliment.

LOGAN

Just don't do anything you wouldn't want to see in the newspaper tomorrow.

FRED

I'm not raping little kids. I'm making my job a little easier.

LOGAN

Anytime something goes wrong in this country, people blame the schools. All I'm saying is, don't give them another reason.

FRED

Why? Are you gonna *tell* on me?

LOGAN

No.

FRED

What are we?, adults?, or are we children? Is this the school yard? You gonna tell the playground monitor?

LOGAN

I just said, "No."

FRED

Goddamn right, "No."

(Logan stands and tries to maneuver out from behind the desk. Fred corners him in.)

LOGAN

Get out of my way.

FRED

Sit down.

LOGAN

I'm asking you nicely.

FRED

Oh, "you're asking me nicely"?

LOGAN

What is this?, "Meet me behind the football field after school"?

FRED

I said, "Sit down."

LOGAN

What's wrong with you?

FRED

I'm the guy who might just save your ass.

LOGAN

What the hell are you talking about?

FRED

"Loves New Wave Jazz music, especially trumpet. Binge watches *Scooby Doo*. But only the new episodes."

(Logan is surprised.)

"A passion for good quinoa with spinach."

(Logan becomes slowly mortified.)

Hey, relax kid. Your secret is safe with me. "Quinoa." What even is that?

LOGAN

It's a grain.

FRED

I know what it is.

LOGAN

Because not everybody knows.

FRED

"Quinoa"? Really? And *those* are just the *few* things that are fit to talk about in mixed company. Back in *my* day, the rest of those things were things we wouldn't talk about it public, much less post on the internet for the whole world to see.

LOGAN

What are you doing?

FRED

Wait a second. Did I say "secret"? Can something be "secret" if everybody knows about it?

LOGAN

Why did you look up my dating profile?

FRED

Me?! Jesus Christ. I can't even work a spreadsheet, you think I'm—? The kids! The kids looked it up. They *found* you.

LOGAN

Not possible.

FRED

Mister High Tech, Mister Computer, Mister Online Lessons, Mister Spreadsheet. So much smarter, so much savvier—what’s it like?, dating a computer? Kids found your profile?

LOGAN

I’m telling you, kids did not find my profile. I have so many privacy settings, it’s like Fort Knox. Like, *I* can barely find it.

FRED

That guy you’re talking to? “Bryan” is it?, with a “Y”?

(Logan—terror.)

Is one of the girls in my class. She’s pretending to be him. Hey, it’s alright. It happens to the best of us. You walk around here like your shit don’t stink. Like you’re cock of the walk. You think you’re pretty smart. You went to State. Yeah, well guess who else went to State? Yeah, that’s right. And look where we are now. Right in the same wing, right next door to each other.

LOGAN

I’m allowed to have a dating profile.

FRED

Oh sure. You’re allowed to have a lot of things.

LOGAN

Who I am out there, and who I am in here, that’s two different things.

FRED

Once you’re a teacher, you’re a teacher. And that person that lived out there?, that was a human being?, they are in the past.

(A long beat.)

LOGAN

They tell you not to eat in the teachers’ lunchroom.

FRED

“They”?

LOGAN

“They,” common wisdom. Because eventually we are going to meet somebody like you.

FRED

Good looking, charming, full of snarky war stories?

LOGAN

A teacher whose goal in life is to bring the world down and *us* with it.

FRED

(This stings. This misunderstanding is embarrassing.)

That's not what I'm doing.

LOGAN

Pushing kids to get my dating profile?

FRED

Hey, hey, hold on now.

LOGAN

There are plenty of other ways you could have said what you had to say.

FRED

Alright. Maybe you're right. Look, I like you. You're a bright young man. I'm not trying to knock you down. I'm trying to open your eyes. Common Wisdom never taught in the American public school system. This isn't "a mind is a terrible thing to waste" and "we are the world" and "go out and make a difference." This is get chewed up and spit out and wake up the next day and come in and do it all over again and keep your eye on the prize of retirement and the free luncheon the union throws for you at the end of a career full of disappointments.

LOGAN

I'm not looking to make a career full of disappointments.

FRED

Nobody *is*.

LOGAN

I'm looking to make successes.

FRED

The successes only stand out because of how many disappointments there are. Look, I'm trying to help you.

(Genuinely hurt, at being so misconstrued.)

Come on, Logan. Mr. Crane...

(Pause.)

You're angry at me. You're actually *angry* at me.

LOGAN

You *are* what the data *says* you are. You can't B.S. it your whole life.

FRED

It's just data. It's just numbers. Flip them this way, flip them that way. You can make them say whatever you want.

LOGAN

You can't fake data. Maybe you could, back in the day of the dinosaur. But not anymore.

FRED

You're angry, because I'm right. And you *know* I'm right.

(Referring again to the dating profile.)

"Six foot one, a hundred eighty pounds." Oh, please.

LOGAN

That's not the same thing.

FRED

"Yale pre-med"? That's not the same thing? How can you say you were "Yale pre-med" if you weren't "Yale pre-med"?

LOGAN

Because that is a whole made up world, and everybody knows that. Everybody agrees. Out there is make believe. But in here? In here, this is supposed to be the real world. This is supposed to be real preparation for what it's really gonna *be* like out there.

FRED

"You can be President of the United States. You can be an astronaut. You can be anything you want to be." That's *real* to you? Good luck in *this* profession.

LOGAN

Nobody has wanted to be an astronaut in twenty years, Fred. Who'd want to? I can make a bigger difference with my phone. I can *run* America from my phone. And make a hell of a lot of money doing it, too. And I don't need to be President or go to space to do it. If you stopped and looked at what was really going on in here, maybe you'd understand that.

FRED

(Fred scoffs, shakes his head.)

You've got it all figured out, huh?

LOGAN

Don't take it too hard. You'll catch on eventually.

(Logan gathers his belongings. He stops at the door.)

I'll see you tomorrow morning, kid.

(Logan exits. Fred is left sitting behind his desk.)

LIGHTS DOWN

END PLAY

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS... *Despite many plastic waterproof file boxes overflowing with unfinished plays, I continue to do exactly what you are not supposed to do: write with no idea where you are headed.*

However, at the time of writing this play, I found myself halfway through a rather wonderful book that purported to lay out the steps to writing a fail-proof short play, including knowing the theme one is going to write about and creating character backstories.

“What the hey?” I said to myself. “It’s been a long time since I have planned out characters with backstories and chosen a theme to write about.” That’s usually the last thing on my mind. It’s usually much more like trying to transcribe the dialogue being provided by the schizophrenic muses living right outside of my ear.

So. “Choose something that is important to you or that you feel strongly about.” Check. “Create backstories for your characters.” Check. Alright, enough planning; I had to start writing.

I come from a family of teachers. My mother was a junior college French and English professor. My wife is in early childhood education. My father-in-law was a teacher in his Greek village. While at the end of the day, the work teachers do is joyful, fulfilling, and life-affirming, there are so many things saddled on them/us that try their darndest to diminish as much of that joy as possible. Enter the SGO (a.k.a. Student Growth Objective), the bane of any teacher’s existence. “What is an SGO?” you ask. In a nut shell, a teacher makes a plan to teach X to a set number of students. What follows is a stressful, oftentimes completely fabricated, yearlong game of playing with data to prove that we did what we set out to do. The result of this data manipulation contributes to a teacher being deemed either highly effective, ineffective, or somewhere in between. “You live in ‘effective;’ you only visit ‘highly effective.’” Ooof, doesn’t that just make your skin crawl?

Finally, a student finding the young teacher’s profile on the dating app? Yeah, really happened.

In terms of what appeals to me as far as dramatic literature goes, I love the plays of Bertolt Brecht and Sam Shepard. And as of late, I have been reading classic Irish dramas. I watch a lot of trash TV and NBA basketball. I don’t think any of them have had any influence on me.

AUTHOR BIO: I studied Theatre Arts and English at Rutgers University. I spent my early 20s in Los Angeles, chasing the dream. Sometime after that, I got an MFA in Playwriting from Boston University, and now teach high school theatre in Middletown, NJ, where I often write the fall play. I have published *The Diamond as Big as the Ritz*, the only current dramatic adaptation of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s eponymous short story. I also have a scene book for high school actors called *The Greatest of All Time*, carried by Eldridge Publishing. Applause Books is publishing two of my monologues this year in their *Monologues from New Plays of...* series. I love theatre, soccer, reading, and my family...in no particular order.

Visit my website at www.alexiskozak.com

“**Don’t** (!!) throw the **Doll** *Baby* out with
the **Blood**bath *Water*”

by Allison Fradkin ... (!!)

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes...*

Well, this is a strange little piece. It elicits fond memories of playing with dolls with faces so ugly only a doll mother could love along with the nightmares that ensued from watching one of those Chuckie movies on a VCR at Chrissy’s slumber party – don’t you remember– when your mother told you it was your fault you pulled an all-nighter but you couldn’t get that scene out of your head where the girl vomits pea soup and her head spins around? Different movie, but you get the idea. Now, it’s 2013 and the spirit of Cabbage Patch doll’s original creator, Miss Martha Nelson, has possessed one of her doll’s molded plastic souls. She’s out for blood and vengeance on the guy who ripped off her idea from a craft fair and profited like a bandit while she got no credit, not even on the adoption papers. This doll is tired of the patriarchy. Watch out - she’s armed with a spoon. Keep your eyes open and mind your derriere.

“Don’t Throw the Doll Baby Out with the Bloodbath Water”

by Allison Fradkin
allisonfradkin@aol.com

Author’s Note: Inspired by [this article and mini documentary](#), this piece imagines a scintillating scenario in which the soul of the late female who created the Cabbage Patch Kids possesses one of the dolls and proceeds to demonize, terrorize, and pulverize the male who pilfered and profited from her creation.

At rise, CATE CHARLEEN is skipping rope, chanting a jump rope rhyme. Its tune is that of “Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear.” Beside her is a sand pail whose contents will be revealed as the monologue unfolds.

Cabbage Patch, Cabbage Patch
 Hi, I'm Cate!
 Cabbage Patch, Cabbage Patch
Suffocate
 Cabbage Patch, Cabbage Patch
 Diabol—
 Cabbage Patch, Cabbage Patch
 —ical doll!

She finishes triumphantly, giggles giddily, and proceeds to flex flamboyantly.

Hey, I'm a Cabbage. I'm supposed to be shredded. But I would never *muscle* in on someone else's brainchild. That's because I'm not possessed by an evil spirit. Revenge is sweet and so am I.

What possessed me, you ask? That's a pretty dehumanizing question, don't you think? And a chauvinistic one to boot. Are you familiar with the children's book *Miss Nelson Is Missing*? My maiden name is also Miss Nelson, Miss Martha Nelson, and I too am missing: from the birth certificates, the adoption papers, your payroll. Now, would you characterize my absence as conspicuous or inconspicuous, Mister—

No. No, I dare not speak your name. It should be seen and not heard, just like your customary customers: little girls. They see your name every time they change dolly's duds. Like many a signatory, you sign on the bottom—specifically, my cushy tushy.

She yanks a permanent marker out of the sand pail.

Would you stop that wretched wailing and futile flailing, you big baby? This is only to sign your death certificate, not your derriere. Does that make you more comfortable? Or less? If you're experiencing discomfort, that rocker-slash-carrier thing you're strapped into is adjustable in three different positions. At least one of them should be suitably soothing. Look, I'm warning you: if you kick the bucket, I'll accelerate this assassination. I mean it!

She snatches up the sand pail and plucks a skein of yarn from the interior.

Now, I know what you're thinking: yarn is far too quaint to act as a restraint. But you see, I'm not so much demented as I am...fermented. You'd be agitated too if some soon-to-be manacled man misappropriated you. Fortunately, the creation you cribbed from me has now been subjected to infiltration by me. And this doll may be inhabited, but she is by no means inhibited!

Not anymore, anyway. When I was alive—as an actual human, of course, not as a Baby Alive—I was soft-spoken, soft-hearted, softie extraordinaire. Which is why my Doll Babies, the source material for your cockamamie Cabbages, are what we artsy-craftsy folks call soft sculptures. Your artistry, on the other hand, is confined to that of con.

Let's skip down memory lane, shall we? In the mid-1970s, you adopted my Doll Babies at a craft fair, the only kind of fair with which you are familiar; unless you count the fair sex, but you don't—you *discount* them. You then proceeded to mark up the dolls: posterior *and* price. Subsequently, you adapted them for mass production without my permission.

What possessed *you*? I put my heart and soul into my dolls. I only put my soul into yours, which you put into a vegetative state. Gag me with a spoon. Nope, wrong pronoun. Gag *you* with a spoon.

She reaches into the sand pail and withdraws a sizable spoon.

What do you expect? I was, after all, remade in the 80s, you unconscionable copycat.

Understandably, I was mortally wounded by your wrongdoing. I stewed, I sued, I settled. I also forgave and forgot. But now that I'm no longer mortal, I can resurrect those wounds and...*patch* them up. From beyond the grave, I get to do something beyond the pale. And I don't mean the Garbage Pail. Those putrid people are splendidly sardonic. I, on the other hand, am delightfully demonic.

But then, it's hard for specters *not* to be in good spirits on Friday the 13th. Well, the 13th year of the 2000s, but close enough. Not only is it the year of my passing; it's the day of your reckoning. Oh, but you've already figured that out, haven't you? I'm not the only one whose eyes are wide open. On this red-letter day—I know, I know: green is your cabbage color of choice—CPK stands for capture, pulverize, knock off...the knock-off.

In summary, this one-woman revival of *Guys and Dolls* is not going to end on a high note for you, baby daddy.

She executes—emphasis on cute—the cabbage patch dance.

Hey, if the spirit moves you...

All right, that's enough child's play. It's time to cleanse you of your sins, you little stinker.

She inserts her hand into the sand pail and emerges with a rubber duck.

A rubber duck for the dead duck. Bloodbath time has never been so obscene—or serene.

Any last words?

She makes a sinister shushing sound.

I wasn't talking to you. I was talking to me. The ghoul always has the last word, fool.

Cate begins skipping rope once more, chanting her chosen jump rope rhyme.

Cabbage Patch, Cabbage Patch
 Baby-faced
 Cabbage Patch, Cabbage Patch
 You're erased
 Cabbage Patch, Cabbage Patch
 Cradle will rot
 Cabbage Patch, Cabbage Patch
 Kid you not!

Blackout.

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS... *Inspired by [this article and mini documentary](#), this piece imagines a scintillating scenario in which the soul of the late female who created the Cabbage Patch Kids possesses one of the dolls and proceeds to demonize, terrorize, and pulverize the male who pilfered and profited from her creation.*

AUTHOR BIO: When it comes to writing, Allison Fradkin is like a woman possessed. Scriptly speaking, she delights in applying her Women's & Gender Studies education to the creation of satirically scintillating stories that enlist their characters in a caricature of the idiocies and intricacies of insidious isms. An enthusiast of accessibility and inclusivity, Fradkin freelances for her hometown of Chicago as Dramatist for Special Gifts Theatre, adapting scripts for actors of all abilities; and as Literary Manager for Violet Surprise Theatre, curating new works by queer women.

BECOMING

___STR_____AN___G___E_____R_____S

___By George Freek

HY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes...It's the rare full-length play that appears in these digital pages, but this is one of them. I'm not a stickler for word counts, nor do I believe a play or screenplay can be constrained to a particular template or font, so let's just agree that a script is as long as it needs to be, and that Becoming Strangers by George Freek nails it. It's stranger than strange. Shepard-esque. Also, it's hysterical. This Freeky romp gives us a married couple, Howard and Jane, escaping from the city toil at an unusual "resort" in the back woods where cellphone service doesn't exist and the peace and quiet is punctuated with gun shots and squealing pigs. But there's much much more. Take Duke and Betsy, our salt of the earth hosts - simple folks who hearken back from another era who say and do the darndest things. Duke is especially smitten by Howard's wife:*

DUKE

Like t' feel what it's like. Puttin' yer log in a woman like that.

Then there's the cagey old man, Pa, dressed in a Civil War uniform who steals fishing bait because he's off his rocker. Howard and Jane are straight arrows, but they can't help but be drawn into the magic and the mystery of this godforsaken place. Maybe all those clocks on the wall aren't so junky after all. I promise you will gasp and may even shit yourself, but Becoming Strangers is well worth it.

JANE

I think I'm going to love it here. You know what I mean?

HOWARD

I do. There's something about it.....

JANE

It's so....real.

HOWARD

A place where we can escape from all the bullshit. (He looks at DUKE) Maybe that's too strong a word.

DUKE

I heard it before.

Five Stars

BECOMING STRANGERS

(A PLAY IN TWO ACTS)

by

GEORGE FREEK

2

THE CHARACTERS

HOWARD, In his 30s

JANE, His wife, perhaps a few years younger

DUKE, Of similar age, but looks older

BETSY, Of similar age, but looks older

PA, Of indeterminate age, but looks very old

THE PLACE

A CABIN

SOMEWHERE IN THE HILLS

THE TIME

LATE SUMMER

RECENTLY

3

ACT ONE

1, i

(A cabin in the hills; two cots; a window, rear, a table in front of it, littered with old, broken clocks; on one wall, a photo of a man in a Civil War uniform; Lights up, BETSY sits in a rocking-chair, smoking a corncob pipe, holding a rusty revolver; After a moment, PA enters. He is in the Civil War uniform, but he is barefoot)

PA

(Looks at BETSY) They're out there.

BETSY

What you talking about?

PA

They're comin' after me.

BETSY

Ain't nothing out there.

PA

They want me.

BETSY

I doubt that.

4

PA

I won't let 'em get me. (He takes the revolver from her, exits).

(The sound of a car door, voices; BETSY gets up, looks out, exits as DUKE, HOWARD, JANE enter)

DUKE

This's it. (He goes to one of the cots, pushes on it) I'll tell ya, they don't make beds like this no more.

JANE

(Smiles) It's just what we were looking for, isn't it, honey?

HOWARD

(He looks around in amazement) My god. I love it! (Puts suitcase on a cot) I'm sorry we're so late. I'm afraid we got a little lost. We stopped at a service station to call. There must be something wrong with your phone, huh?

DUKE

Nothing wrong with it.

HOWARD

I couldn't get through.

DUKE

Ain't got one. (Before HOWARD can react) We got a mirror. Some place roundabouts. (He looks, finds a mirror under a cot and hangs it on a wall) Goes there.

5

JANE

I think I'm going to love it here. You know what I mean?

HOWARD

I do. There's something about it...

JANE

It's so... real.

HOWARD

A place where we can escape from all the bullshit. (He looks at DUKE) Maybe that's too strong a word.

DUKE

I heard it before.

HOWARD

I think what we are trying to say is that it's really good to get back to some honest, fundamental reality. Isn't that right, Honey?

JANE

Yes.

HOWARD

I mean the air. Just smell that air. (He takes a deep breath).

DUKE

Yeh. We got lots've air.

6

JANE

(Takes a deep breath, coughs) Oh god. Somebody's been smoking in here.

HOWARD

Nonsense. That's simply good clean air.

JANE

No. No. I smell smoke. (She tries to open the window. It's stuck) My god, Howard, I'm choking!

HOWARD

Okay, what are you up to? Is this another one of your allergy games?

JANE

Howard, for god's sake! (She rushes out the door).

HOWARD

(To DUKE) She has these allergies. That's one of the reasons we decided to escape from the city for awhile. I think her problem is she hasn't gotten the city out of her system yet.

DUKE

My wife, Betsy, she might a been smoking in here.

HOWARD

No. It's okay. Really. What it is, I don't think she's used to breathing good, clean air. That's all. (Pause)

BLACKOUT

7

1, ii

(HOWARD unpacks, looking at some fishing tackle, while JANE is looking at the clocks)

JANE

Howard, what do you make of these clocks?

HOWARD

They must be antiques.

JANE

Most of them look like junk.

HOWARD

Well, maybe they have some sentimental value.

JANE

I have to go to the bathroom. (Pause) Where is it?

(DUKE suddenly comes in, looks at them)

HOWARD

(Pause, friendly) Uh, anything we can do for you?

DUKE

Nope. Just came t' see if you was getting along okay. (Pause) You getting along okay?

8

HOWARD

Oh yeah. Just great. Thanks very much.

JANE

(About the clocks) These are rather... unusual.

DUKE

Those're mine. Got a whole collection. Those're clocks.

JANE

It's a very... interesting collection.

DUKE

They're all the same. (They look at the clocks again, then back at DUKE) They're all busted. Picked 'em up for practically nothing. Now I got myself a whole collection.

JANE

A broken clock collection. (Pause, smiling) That's rather unusual.

HOWARD

(Holds up a fishing lure) We thought we'd do some fishing.

DUKE

You come to the right place.

HOWARD

(Pleased) We thought we had. You see my dad was quite a fisherman.

DUKE

He come here fishing?

9

HOWARD

No. I don't believe he actually ever came here.

DUKE

Some do. Must be something to it. They come back, year after year. Then they move here, so they can do it all the time. Spend night 'n' day in a boat. Never see 'em again. Anybody asks where they are, just gotta say, 'Gone fishing.' They call that fishing fever.

JANE

(Pause) And they enjoy that? (To HOWARD) You never said anything about fishing. Do they ever catch any fish?

HOWARD

Don't be silly. You heard the man.

JANE

(To DUKE) Do they?

DUKE

Sometimes.

HOWARD

Man. I can't wait.

DUKE

‘Course once in a while, somebody falls overboard.

HOWARD

Yeah sure. Accidents will happen.

10

DUKE

Yeh. In the dark sometimes, somebody falls overboard. So dark, they can’t find him again. Gotta just let ‘im go.

JANE

My goodness!

DUKE

I just come t’ see if you was okay before you turn in.

HOWARD

We’re fine. Just fine. Aren’t we, honey?

JANE

The conveniences. The, uh, modern conveniences.

DUKE

Ain’t got none.

HOWARD

None? Wow, that’s perfect!

JANE

So where do I, um, go to the bathroom?

DUKE

Jest go out back. Anywhere'll do.

JANE

Out back? (Pause) Well then... I'll be back in a minute. (She exits).

11

HOWARD

I want to tell you. This is just what we wanted. It's so quiet. See, my wife is sort of allergic to noises, so maybe you can understand what all this peace and quiet means to us.

DUKE

We got lots a quiet here. Yeh. We got some noises, too.

HOWARD

Back home, you know? This commuter train goes past our apartment. It can drive you insane. (Pause) I sell insurance, by the way. Dad did it before me. Dad's the one who loved fishing. Boy, did he have the gear! Mom used to say he loved that more than he loved her. A joke, of course! But we used to polish that gear every week. We'd go into the basement. Spend all night down there. Mom never knew what to make of it. They were married forty years. (Pause)
Dad was a great fisherman. I mean salesman. He made the millionaire's club every year. I made it myself a few times. (Smiles) Am I babbling?

(DUKE looks at him, as JANE then returns)

JANE

Boy, You know what. I'm suddenly exhausted. (Sits on a cot, lays back)

HOWARD

We've had quite a day.

DUKE

(Pause) There's birds.

12

JANE

I'm sorry? Birds?

DUKE

Bird noises. Owls mostly. Well, you folks need anything? Bite t' eat?

HOWARD

You know what? A bite to eat does sound pretty good.

DUKE

Got some fat back, you want something.

HOWARD

My god! Fat back! How about that!

JANE

(Yawns) I'm sorry, but suddenly I am so sleepy. I don't think I can keep my eyes open any longer. Really, I... (She seems suddenly to be asleep).

DUKE

Must be tired.

HOWARD

God, I'm sorry! She's not usually so rude.

DUKE

Guess I'll turn in myself. (He starts out).

HOWARD

Wait! You know I'm wide awake myself.

13

DUKE

Yeh? (He exits).

HOWARD

I thought maybe we could... (DUKE is gone).

(HOWARD looks at the photo on the wall. Then, suddenly a gunshot, off. JANE sits upright, but HOWARD does not seem to have noticed it)

JANE

My God! Howard, what was that?

HOWARD

What was what?

JANE

That noise!

HOWARD

I didn't hear anything. It must have been an owl.

JANE

Howard, it sounded to me like a gunshot.

HOWARD

Yeah. That'd be an owl. Hey, come look at this photo. What character!

BLACKOUT

14

1, iii

(Morning; HOWARD is polishing his tackle,
He wears a fishing hat; JANE is stretching)

JANE

I have to admit I slept beautifully. How about you?

HOWARD

I'm too excited to sleep. I'm getting this tackle all ready to go.

JANE

Howard, listen, do you think it's alright to go fishing? I mean those stories were rather strange.

HOWARD

Nonsense. Haven't you ever heard of fishermen's stories?

JANE

Alright. But what about our car? It simply stopped. Dead!

HOWARD

We'll take care of that. But at the moment, my main concern is getting out on that lake. Let's try to have some fun, alright?

JANE

Okay, I guess that sounds like a good idea. You know what. I think I'll go for a walk.

HOWARD

A walk? But we're going fishing in a couple of minutes!

15

(JANE exits; a moment later, DUKE enters)

HOWARD

(He smiles, as DUKE simply looks at him) Morning. Let me tell you, I slept like a rock last night.

DUKE

Sorry we didn't bring ya no breakfast.

HOWARD

We never missed it.

DUKE

My wife don't feel so good.

HOWARD

No? I certainly hope it's nothing serious.

DUKE

Nope. She just couldn't sleep last night.

HOWARD

Oh. Why couldn't she sleep?

DUKE

She never said. We'll try and get ya some lunch.

HOWARD

Don't worry about it. Tell me. What do you think of my tackle?

16

DUKE

Never go fishing.

HOWARD

I spent all night polishing it.

DUKE

All night?

HOWARD

Yeah. Um, that is when I wasn't sleeping like a rock. You know, coming from here, I'm surprised you don't do any fishing.

DUKE

Lots do. Some of 'em get killed.

HOWARD

Yeah. Those accidents. You know I remember once dad and I were in the basement, polishing the old tackle. And mom was yelling for us to come upstairs. Dad pretty much ignored her. I mean that basement was our man's world, you know. So we popped a couple of beers....

DUKE

You a drinking man?

HOWARD

(Uneasy) Well, you know, when you're fishing with the guys, a beer or two—

DUKE

Can't live hereabouts without a drink now and again.

17

HOWARD

(Pleased) You don't say.

DUKE

You want a drink?

HOWARD

Now? At nine in the morning! (Pause) Sure, why not?

DUKE

Can't live round here without a drink. (He exits)

HOWARD

My god! This is heaven!

DUKE

(Returns, carrying a jug) Gotta keep this handy for when the wind stops blowin'. Wind stops, ya can't hear nothing. Ya get scared. Run round sayin' things nobody can understand, then everyone gets scared of YOU. Won't have nothing t' do with ya. So ya jest crawl down t' the lake and sorta slip in. (He holds out the jug) Want a drink a this or not?

HOWARD

Oh yeah. I sure do. (He takes a sip. Decides it's good, but as he starts to

take a hearty hit, DUKE reaches over and takes it from him, and some spills) Oh god. I'm sorry. I don't want to waste any of that.

DUKE

I got plenty. (DUKE drinks, HOWARD waits for DUKE to hand back the jug, but DUKE places it beside himself on the floor).

18

HOWARD

Let me tell you. That's excellent whisky. Did you make it yourself?

DUKE

'Gainst the law to do that.

HOWARD

Oh yes. I guess it would be.

DUKE

(Matter-of-fact) Got a cousin does it, though.

HOWARD

Oh. I see. Your cousin. (HOWARD laughs, DUKE stares at him).

DUKE

Yeh. Got lots a cousins. (Drinks, hands HOWARD the jug).

HOWARD

(Drinks heartily) Listen, you remember I was telling you how dad and I were polishing his tackle? Well, it must have been four in the morning when we finally quit, but mom was still up. She was in the kitchen, pulling down the wallpaper. Sort of clawing it off, I guess you'd say. That was what she'd be yelling to dad. How she wanted new wallpaper

in the kitchen. (Drinks, hands the jug to DUKE).

DUKE

(Drinks) Ya get it for her?

HOWARD

No. I'm afraid not.

19

DUKE

Too bad. (Drinks, puts the jug back on the floor).

HOWARD

No. We couldn't, because dad died a few days after that. (Pause)

DUKE

(Drinks, hands the jug to HOWARD) You like sleeping in them beds?

HOWARD

The cots? I'm telling you, I slept like a rock.

DUKE

You 'n' yer wife sleep in one of 'em together, do ya?

HOWARD

Do we... Uh, look, do you mind if I have another swig of that whisky?

DUKE

Hep y'sef.

HOWARD

(Drinks, hands the jug back to DUKE)) So like I was saying, we couldn't get that wallpaper because dad died a few days later. It's

strange, because, you see, he fell out of a boat and drowned.

DUKE

Yeh. Lots do that.

20

HOWARD

There was this man, standing on shore who happened to see it. And he said dad was standing in the boat and then he just sort of... fell overboard.

DUKE

(Takes a drink) What kind a wallpaper?

HOWARD

I'm sorry?

DUKE

That wallpaper. What kind did yer ma want?

HOWARD

Oh. Something yellow, I think it was. With flowers on it. (He reaches for the jug, but DUKE takes a drink himself).

DUKE

My ma liked fish. (He hands the jug to HOWARD). T' eat.

HOWARD

(Drinks, returns jug) Well, there's nothing like a batch of fresh fried fish.

DUKE

My ma liked ‘em raw.

HOWARD

Is that so?

21

DUKE

Yeh. I jest told ya it was so. (Drinks, hands the jug to HOWARD).

HOWARD

I’ve never tried bass raw.

DUKE

No one else has neither. But that’s how ma liked ‘em, so that’s how she ate ‘em.

HOWARD

Drinks) You know, that’s something else I admire about you people down here. Your independence. You know what you want and you do it, and to hell with what the rest of the world thinks about it!
(He is about to take another drink, as DUKE takes the jug from him).

DUKE

‘Course most people like fish cooked. (He drinks).

(Then JANE suddenly returns to the room)

JANE

Howard, something strange just happened to me.

HOWARD

Hey. Where the heck have you been?

22

JANE

I went for a walk. Down by the lake—

HOWARD

The lake! Why didn't you wait for me?

JANE

Howard, will you please listen to me? I met this man and he kept telling me about the wind—

HOWARD

The wind! A poet! My god, you've already met a local poet!

JANE

He kept telling me how the wind was stuck in the trees and we had to climb up there and get it unstuck. I think he was insane!

HOWARD

Whoa. What? Are we so contaminated we can't appreciate a little poetry any longer? (To DUKE) You explain it to her, would you?

DUKE

Might a met somebody off his rocker. That's what we call it. Man sits on his porch, rocking away, listening to the same sounds til one day he

can't hear nothing, not even the wind. Then he gets up outa his rocker and runs around sayin' things no one can understand. Round here we call that going off his rocker. (Pause).

HOWARD

(To JANE) Well, I still say you met a bona fide poet.

23

DUKE

Might a been my pa.

HOWARD

His father! Are you trying to insult these people?

JANE

No, of course not. I'm sorry. I don't know what to think.

DUKE

(Points to the photo) That's my pa.

HOWARD

That's your father? Wow. We were admiring that photo just last night, weren't we, honey?

JANE

Isn't that a Civil War uniform?

DUKE

Yeh. Pa wears it round lots. Been in the family a long time. (Pause)
Since the Civil War.

HOWARD

It must have quite a history behind it.

DUKE

You folks Yankees?

HOWARD

Well by birth. But, you know, we always sympathized with the South.

24

JANE

(About the photo) He looks very austere, almost aristocratic.

DUKE

Goes barefoot. Don't have no boots t' go with the uniform.

JANE

Did you say he was a poet?

DUKE

He's off his rocker.

JANE

(To HOWARD) There! (To DUKE) You mean he's crazy?

HOWARD

Good god, Jane! He never said that!

DUKE

Might say he's crazy. Nobody knows what he's sayin'.

HOWARD

Of course saying things people don't understand doesn't necessarily mean a person is crazy.

JANE

(Uncertain) No... I guess he might be a genius.

DUKE

When he got off his rocker, he lost a can a worms. Spent near twenty years lookin' fer them worms.

25

HOWARD

Twtwenty years! Now that is remarkable persistence!

DUKE

But he never lost no can a worms, though. He buried it. I seen him: on a dark night, no moon shining. He got afraid. So he buried them worms. Never lost nothing. Just went off his rocker.

HOWARD

(Pause) Well... I guess these things happen.

JANE

They do! You know I once lost an egg. While I was baking a cake. I laid out four eggs. Then I went to answer the phone and when I came back there were only three eggs. Somehow I had lost an egg!

HOWARD

You went to answer the phone? Who called?

JANE

The Avon lady. The things is, see, I didn't want to talk to her at all. And then when I got back to the kitchen and discovered I'd lost an egg, I got very upset. I almost broke down and cried.

HOWARD

(To DUKE) This Avon lady can be pretty scary. She has these scars—

JANE

Anyway, I guess what I am trying to say is I understand how traumatic it can be to lose something.

26

DUKE

We'll see 'bout getting you lunch. Depends on my wife, Betsy.

JANE

Your wife? Oh, I'm very much looking forward to meeting her.

DUKE

Sometimes ya got to give her a kick in the rear end.

(Suddenly, BETSY now enters, they look at her)

DUKE

This's her.

JANE

(Smiles) How do you do? I'm really happy to meet you.

BETSY

(To DUKE) Who's this?

HOWARD

My god, honest, decent, hard-working people! (He smiles at BETSY)

It's a real pleasure to meet you.

DUKE

(To BETSY) Ya got something to eat?

BETSY

They hungry?

27

JANE

Of course we don't want to put you to any trouble.

DUKE

Ain't no trouble.

BETSY

(To DUKE) Easy fer you t' say.

DUKE

(To HOWARD) What you want?

HOWARD

Well, anything would be just fine.

DUKE

(To BETSY) Get 'em something t' eat, they wanna go fishing.

BETSY

Fishing! Everybody wants ta go fishing. Everybody but me. (To JANE and HOWARD) You know what I want a do?

DUKE

'Course they don't! Git!

JANE

(As BETSY is about to exit) I'd like to know... Really I would.

BETSY

Don't know. Don't know what I'd like ta do.

28

DUKE

(Snorts) That's jest what I figured.

BETSY

'Cept maybe buy a new dress. I might like ta do that. (She looks at DUKE as if to say 'So there' and exits).

JANE

(Pause) Oh, I like her. I really do.

DUKE

I known her all my life.

HOWARD

Really? Now that is truly beautiful.

JANE

Well, I hope to get to know her much better.

HOWARD

(Takes a deep breath) Hey! What is that I smell? Is that good old-fashioned home-cooking I smell?

DUKE

Might be pigs. Got pigs out back.

JANE

Out back?

HOWARD

They are your own pigs? Honey, isn't that something?

29

JANE

(Dubious) Yes. Yes, it is.

DUKE

Slaughter 'em ourselves. Hang 'em up, let the blood run. Make blood sausage out a that. Live for a long time on one ol' pig.

JANE

(Pause) You know I really hope your wife and I can become good friends.

DUKE

Got some perfume? She might like that. (He looks at her)

JANE

Alright. But do you mind if I give it to her myself?

HOWARD

(Chuckles) Women! They always have to get in on the act.

DUKE

I'll see she gets it okay.

HOWARD

Why don't you give him a bottle, honey?

JANE

What I am saying, Howard, is that I would really like to give it to her myself. Personally. You know what I mean? (HOWARD beams at her)

BLACKOUT

30

1, iv

(JANE is looking at the clocks; BETSY then
Enters the room, carrying a stack of pancakes)

JANE

(Smiles) Oh, hello, there! I was just looking at the clocks.

BETSY

Got some pancakes for ya.

JANE

That's really kind of you. I'm afraid Howard has gone off to dig up some worms.

BETSY

I'll tell ya, them clocks is all junk.

JANE

Yes. I've noticed that. That, I guess, is what makes them interesting.

BETSY

Here's some pancakes, you want 'em. (She deposits the pancakes and starts to exit)

JANE

Wait. Please. (BETSY looks at her) Look. There's something I'd like to ask you, if you don't mind.

(HOWARD then returns with a can of worms)

31

HOWARD

Honey, Duke was right. This place is crawling with worms.

JANE

But did you have to bring them in here?

HOWARD

We're going to catch a mess of bass and have a big fish dinner.

BETSY

(To JANE) What you want a ask me.

(DUKE now enters, carrying a toolbox)

DUKE

I'm gonna take a look at yer car.

JANE

That's wonderful. Are you a mechanic?

BETSY

He don't know nothing about cars.

DUKE

I know more 'n' you do.

JANE

Well, just in case you can't repair it, is there a mechanic somewhere... nearby?

32

HOWARD

Look, we can worry about that when the time comes. Right now... (He notices the pancakes)... Hey! Pancakes! Will you look at that!

BETSY

Want some lard for 'em?

HOWARD

Homemade lard! Now that is the way to eat pancakes!

JANE

Actually, I think I would prefer syrup.

BETSY

Ain't got no syrup.

HOWARD

(Smugly, to JANE) What did I tell you?

BETSY

Used it up this morning'. Them pancakes is leftovers.

HOWARD

Well, they look fantastic to me.

JANE

Actually, I'm not very hungry. (To BETSY) I'm sorry. They really do look very appetizing.

BETSY

You don't want 'em, just throw 'em out back to the pigs. (Starts off)

33

JANE

Wait. Please. (She looks in her bag) You know I'm afraid I forgot to pack any extra fragrance, Mrs, um...

DUKE

Just call her Betsy.

HOWARD

You know that is a beautiful name. What does it mean?

BETSY

(Stares at him) Means Betsy.

JANE

Listen, Betsy, I wonder if you would accept this as a personal gift from me. (She takes an expensive dress and hands it to BETSY)

(BETSY takes the dress, exits with a shrug)

DUKE

I think she appreciated that.

JANE

It really wasn't very much.

HOWARD

You know, I really think this place is going to bring out the best in us!

BLACKOUT

34

1, v

(Dim lights; HOWARD and JANE asleep; PA enters in the uniform, looks around; He sees HOWARD's can of worms, picks it up, takes The revolver from his belt and puts it where the worms had been. He then leans over and peers At HOWARD, then at JANE, He then runs out of the room, seemingly very agitated)

JANE

(Suddenly pops upright and looks around for a moment) Howard? Howard? I heard something.

HOWARD

(Rousing, sleepily) Huh? Probably another owl.

JANE

No. I think somebody was in our room.

HOWARD

That is ridiculous. You had a dream.

JANE

No. I don't think so, Howard. It wasn't a dream. I really think someone came into our room. Are you sure you didn't hear anything? (Pause) Howard? (Pause) Howard, are you listening to what I am saying? Howard? (Pause; HOWARD is heard snoring).

BLACKOUT

35

1, vi

(JANE is asleep in her cot; HOWARD polishes his tackle, as DUKE then enters; he's carrying A small pail, stands silently for a moment)

HOWARD

(Finally notices DUKE) Oh. Hello, there. I'm polishing my tackle.

DUKE

Yeh. I figured that's what you was doing. I been slopping pigs.

HOWARD

(Interested) Have you?

DUKE

(Holds up the pail) Yeh.

HOWARD

You know, that sounds very interesting. (DUKE stares at him) See, in the city you don't get much chance to slop pigs.

DUKE

Ain't much to it.

HOWARD

Listen. Would you mind if I helped you some time?

DUKE

Didn't have t' give 'em much today. They ate a stack a pancakes.

36

HOWARD

(Guilty) They did?

DUKE

Yeh. Pigs'll eat most anything.

HOWARD

Well now, that's interesting.

DUKE

Your wife. She like sleeping in them beds.

HOWARD

The cots? Oh yes, she sure does. Listen, can I tell you something? I mean if I can't discuss this with a man of your caliber, then who can I discuss it with? What I am getting to, is when we first arrived here, I was pretty depressed. I was even thinking about... Well, anyway, now I realize that was simply from living in the city. You know? I guess you could say I was in a terrible rut—

DUKE

(Perks up) Rut? You mean you 'n' yer wife?

HOWARD

I guess so. I mean that commuter is always hot and noisy. Every morning I had to listen to all these noises. People opening newspapers, people coughing, people belching. There was no escape. That's one of the reasons we decided to come here: for the peace and quiet. But what I am trying to say is, since coming here, I have truly been happy. And I would like to thank you for bringing me back to life again.

37

DUKE

You want ta thank me?

HOWARD

I only wish there was some way I could show my appreciation.

DUKE

Yer wife. She's a nice woman.

HOWARD

Thank you. Thank you very much.

DUKE

You like ta sleep with her?

HOWARD

I'm not sure what... Look, we are legally married. I assure you. I know down here you folks have a pretty strict moral code, but I can promise you. Jane and I are legally married.

DUKE

Sometime I'd like t' sleep with somebody like her.

HOWARD

You... (unnerved)...Well, thanks. Thank you... for the compliment....

DUKE

Jest wonder what it'd be like.

HOWARD

I see! You're putting me on. You're kidding me! Okay. I get it!

38

DUKE

She's got real nice skin.

HOWARD

(Continuing on the assumption that this is still some kind of put-on)
Nice skin, huh? Yeah, right.

DUKE

Folks round here got hard skin. Like mine.

HOWARD

(Confused again) Well, skin. It's only... what? Skin deep....

DUKE

You got nice skin, too.

HOWARD

You're still putting me on. Right?

DUKE

I like yer wife's better, though. Like t' touch her skin sometime.

HOWARD

Yes? (Utterly at a loss, he picks up the jug, takes a drink) Well, I don't

think she would mind that. No. I mean it's a compliment really....

DUKE

Me 'n' Betsy don't sleep t'gether no more. Don't like t' touch each other. Got skin like sandpaper, haven't slept t'gether in more'n twenty years.

39

HOWARD

Twenty years? My god, that IS a strict moral code. Good, decent folks. It's a shame you don't have any children.

DUKE

(Sharply) What're you talking about?

HOWARD

I meant the things you could give them, the values. Look, did I say something wrong? I'm sorry.

DUKE

We had a kid.

HOWARD

Oh. Did you?

DUKE

He died.

HOWARD

Oh god. I'm terribly sorry.

DUKE

Something happened to him.

HOWARD

I'm really very sorry.

DUKE

Not your fault. I gotta go clean my slop bucket now.

40

HOWARD

Please let me say once again how sorry I am. I hope you'll accept my apology. Look, if there is anything I can do....

DUKE

You kin tell yer wife.

HOWARD

Of course. (Pause) Um... tell her what?

DUKE

About me touchin' her skin.

HOWARD

Oh. I'm sure she will feel flattered.

DUKE

She's real pretty. I'd like ta fuck somebody like her.

HOWARD

(Pause) This... naivete. This good old American honesty. I find it very, very... touching.

DUKE

Like t' feel what it's like. Puttin' yer log in a woman like that.

HOWARD

American honesty. I find it very... moving...

41

DUKE

You ask her, okay? 'Bout that skin.

HOWARD

Yes. I will. Yes. And will you tell your wife something for me. (DUKE looks at him) Tell her how much I enjoyed those pancakes.

DUKE

I got a go clean my slop bucket now.

HOWARD

Just a minute. Listen, next time, you know, you slop the pigs... Would you mind if I joined you?

DUKE

(Stares at him) Ya wanna slop pigs?

HOWARD

If you wouldn't mind me coming along, I would consider it an honor. Oh, and one more thing. (HOWARD goes to his closet and removes a nice-looking suit of dark cloth) I wonder if you would please accept this. As a token of my appreciation: for what you have done for us. I mean for both of us. Please.

DUKE

(Takes the suit, looks it over, then looks in the closet) I like that one better.

HOWARD

You mean the pin-striped? (He takes out another suit).

42

DUKE

Nope. (He points) That one.

HOWARD

Of course. Of course. (He gives DUKE the suit he wants).

DUKE

Like this one better.

HOWARD

It's yours. My god, what refreshing honesty!

DUKE

I got to go clean my bucket now.

HOWARD

I want you to know that I feel privileged. I really feel a part of something extremely beautiful that is going on here. Thank you for it. (DUKE exits, HOWARD picks up the jug, takes a drink).

(JANE suddenly rouses and looks about)

JANE

Howard? I just had an odd dream. We were in this room and we were very happy. But it suddenly became dark. So dark we couldn't even see each other any longer. We were walking around in the dark, trying to find each other. Look, don't you think it's time to go? Hm? Howard?

THE END OF ACT ONE

43

ACT TWO

11, i

(HOWARD is polishing his fishing tackle,
when JANE suddenly notices the revolver)

JANE

Howard! What is this?

HOWARD

My god! Let me see that....

JANE

That's what I'm thinking.

HOWARD

This is really something. It looks like Civil War era.

JANE

Howard, someone has been in our room with a gun!

HOWARD

Come on, this thing is as harmless as a rubber duck.

JANE

That's not the point. Aren't you upset someone might have been in here?
(As HOWARD aims the gun around the room) Would you please put that down?

44

HOWARD

Alright. Anyway, I'm ready to go fishing.

JANE

Don't you think we should see about our car first?

HOWARD

Duke is going to take care of that.

JANE

His wife said he doesn't know the first thing about repairing cars.

HOWARD

That was probably modesty. I'll bet the man is a genius with cars.

JANE

I hope you're right.

HOWARD

You wait and see. Now, how about some fishing?

JANE

Tell me. Do you really want to go fishing?

HOWARD

(Irked) Now what the hell do you mean by that?

JANE

Well, we have been here for three days and all you have actually done is polish that tackle.

45

HOWARD

And I'm ready now! So hand me those worms and let's get going.

JANE

(Looks around) What worms? There aren't any worms.

HOWARD

That is not funny. What did you do with my worms?

JANE

I haven't seen any worms.

HOWARD

Don't give me that. Where are they?

(DUKE again enters, carrying his toolbox)

DUKE

About your car...

HOWARD

(Smiles at JANE) What did I tell you?

DUKE

Can't do nothing' with it.

HOWARD

Oh no? Well, don't worry, we'll see to it.

46

DUKE

Don't know shit from shinola 'bout cars.

JANE

Darling, I think we'd better get a hold of someone soon. Alright?

HOWARD

Yes, okay. But first, goddam it, we are going fishing. Except... (To DUKE)...by the way, have you seen a can of worms somewhere?

DUKE

You lost a can a worms?

JANE

Listen, while we're on this, I hate to say it, but we're afraid someone might have been in our room.

HOWARD

Now just a minute, honey! That is one hell of an accusation!

JANE

I know. And I'm sorry. But we found this gun in here, and we're thinking somebody might have been in here.

HOWARD

Will you stop saying that!

DUKE

Might a been my pa. He might a come in here and taken your worms out 'n' buried 'em.

47

JANE

Your father?

HOWARD

(To JANE) Now didn't I tell you there was a simple explanation?

DUKE

I got a go. (To HOWARD) You ask her?

HOWARD

Uh, no. It slipped my mind. I'm sorry.

DUKE

I'd be obliged you ask her. (He exits).

JANE

(Pause) Ask me what?

HOWARD

It's not important.

JANE

Well then what UNIMPORTANT thing did he want you to ask me?

HOWARD

Nothing, really. It can wait.

JANE

Howard! What did he want you to ask me?

48

HOWARD

I said it can wait, because right now I want to say something important. At the moment I am only interested in getting out to that lake and catching a mess of bass, okay?

JANE

Doesn't it bother you his father was in here last night with that gun?

HOWARD

I'll tell you. I certainly wish I'd been awake.

JANE

I would hope so.

HOWARD

I would very much like to meet that father of his.

DUKE

(Re-enters, takes the pistol) I'll take this.

JANE

Yes. Please do. It frightens me.

HOWARD

Don't be silly, honey. Why, that is simply an antique.

DUKE

Proibly loaded. Might go off. Don't want nobody hurt. (He exits).

BLACKOUT

49

11, ii

(JANE is making her cot, when BETSY enters)

JANE

(Slowly becomes aware of BETSY looking at her) Oh sorry. I didn't hear you come in.

BETSY

You want some lunch?

JANE

No. Not at the moment. Thanks. I think I should telephone for someone to look at our car.

BETSY

(Emotionless) You leaving?

JANE

Not yet, but I'll feel a lot better when the car is repaired.

BETSY

You like it here?

JANE

You know what. I honestly do. There are things I like very much.

BETSY

What you like?

50

JANE

Well, mostly I like the peace and quiet. It's so quiet.

BETSY

It's quiet here. It sure is that.

JANE

You know I have to admit this place seems almost like a dream to me. It hardly seems real.

BETSY

Seems real t' me.

JANE

In that, I think you are very lucky. What I mean is in the city we see things that seem strange, things that ought to seem unreal, and yet we see these things so often, after a while nothing surprises you. For instance, last week I saw a man sitting on a street corner and there was a monkey sitting beside him and they were smoking this cigar. Together. Now that should seem pretty strange, and yet people continually walked past them and hardly anyone even noticed.

BETSY

Some day I'm going t' the city and I'm gonna see me something like

that.

JANE

I'll tell you. You're better off here. With all this peace and quiet.

(Suddenly, the sound of a gunshot, offstage)

51

JANE

My god! What was that?

BETSY

Must be shootin' rats.

JANE

What? You mean Howard and, um, your husband are shooting rats?

BETSY

Them rats eat the pig slop. Hundreds of 'em. So ya got to shoot 'em. Don't do no good, but you got to try.

JANE

The rats eat the pig's food?

BETSY

Eat the chickens, too.

JANE

My god! The rats eat the chickens!

BETSY

Jest the babies. And the rabbits, too.

JANE

Goodness. They sound a little bit... gluttonous.

BETSY

Yeh. And sometimes people round here get drunk, too. They do that.

52

JANE

You mean the men? I know. They all do that. Why do they do it?

BETSY

Git drunk, then they start t' yelling and screaming, then they go off in the dark a night t' shoot rats. 'N when they killed a mess of 'em, they pile 'em up and start 'em on fire.

JANE

You know what. At bottom, I think they're all still children.

BETSY

Well, I'm gonna cook some fish. You want some?

JANE

At the moment, I really think I should contact someone to look at our car.

BETSY

You got a nice car.

JANE

Well, it's a few years old now. But thank you.

BETSY

We got a pickup truck. It don't run. Pigs sleep in it out back.

JANE

Really? Do the pigs like sleeping in a pickup truck?

53

BETSY

They don't complain.

(There is another gunshot, off, JANE jumps)

JANE

Oh! They must be shooting a lot of them!

BETSY

Don't do no good. They jest like t' shoot 'em. (She walks over and looks in JANE's cosmetic bag, removing some items).

JANE

(Nervously) Howard says he wants to go fishing. But I'm not really sure.

BETSY

(Looking through the bag) Sure about what?

JANE

About whether he really wants to go. I think he actually hates fishing, but he won't admit it because of his father. Do you think that makes any sense?

BETSY

(Absorbed in the cosmetics) Ya got a lot a stuff here.

JANE

Of course I don't use it all. I've had some of that for years.

54

BETSY

Lipstick, cream, blush on... I used t' have some a that stuff. Ran out. Never got no more. (She goes over to JANE, feels her hair) How you get hair like that?

JANE

(Uneasy) Like what?

BETSY

How you make it soft like that? My hair's like straw.

JANE

(Relieved to get into a 'woman's conversation') Why, that's silly. You have beautiful hair. It's so... natural. I mean mine just lays there. Really, I have tired hair.

BETSY

You put something on it?

JANE

Well, I do use this conditioner. (BETSY takes it from her, examines it) Look... why don't you take that?

BETSY

You don't want it no more?

JANE

Actually no. I don't. You know what. Suddenly, all this seems so phony to me. Look, why don't you just take all of it.

55

BETSY

Ya don't want none of it? (She takes the entire bag)

JANE

Really, you're doing ME the favor. Thank you.

BETSY

Yer welcome. (Goes to the closet, begins examining JANE's wardrobe)
You got a lot a clothes.

JANE

Those are just a few things I brought along.

BETSY

Never knew nobody t' have so many clothes.

JANE

You know something. You're absolutely right. Look. Would you mind taking some of them off my hands?

BETSY

(Amazed) Ya don't want 'em?

JANE

Those are really too many clothes for one person.

BETSY

(Grabs an armful) Ya want the rest of 'em?

JANE

Well... would you mind taking them all?

56

BETSY

(Takes the clothes) I can do that. Sure ya don't want no fish?

JANE

I have to admit something to you, I'm allergic to fish.

BETSY

Ya don't say.

JANE

(Another gunshot, off) And I'm sorry about your rat problem, too.

BETSY

People jest like t' kill 'em. Nothing else t' do round here.

JANE

Nothing? But this is a resort. A lot of people must come here.

BETSY

Nobody comes here. (Exits with the clothing).

JANE

Nobody? But... this is a resort. Isn't it?

(JANE looks confused, drifts back and begins messing with the clocks; HOWARD enters; He is drunk and is carrying a large hammer; He also seems to be hiding something behind his back)

57

HOWARD

I never realized you liked those clocks so much.

JANE

Howard! Listen, I have to ask you something. Can you tell me what is going on here?

HOWARD

Wait a minute, honey. I've got something to show you.

JANE

Do you know that I just gave away all my clothes?

HOWARD

You did what?

JANE

Yes. That's right. I just gave Betsy all my clothing.

HOWARD

My god! Boy, am I proud of you!

JANE

Howard, are you drunk?

HOWARD

Honey, look at this! I just bagged this sucker all by myself! (He pulls a large dead rat from behind his back; JANE recoils) Hey, he can't hurt you! Not any longer.

58

JANE

That is disgusting.

HOWARD

Listen, I don't think you understand how hard it is to pick off one of these babies!

JANE

What in god's name have you been doing out there?

HOWARD

That's what I'm trying to tell you. You take out some pig slop, then you hide, and in a few minutes, the place is swarming with rats. Then you take turns shooting. I'm going to have this big guy stuffed!

JANE

A rat! Howard, do you know what you are saying?

HOWARD

And then, you know, after you shoot a few, they start running around. And that is where this baby comes in. (He swings the hammer).

JANE

(Aghast) You... club them with that hammer?

HOWARD

Yeah. And let me tell you. There is nothing easy about it!

JANE

(Nervously humoring him) Alright, alright. But Howard, will you please get rid of that thing?

59

HOWARD

Maybe you'd feel differently if you'd been there! (Irrked, he throws the rat out the window and picks up the whiskey jug, drinks) Man oh man, what a fantastic day!

JANE

Howard can tell me something? Exactly where are we?

HOWARD

(Has another drink) Oh by the way, do you mind if Duke touches your skin?

JANE

What!

HOWARD

Yeah. That's what he wanted me to ask you. I said you wouldn't mind.

JANE

Touch my skin! What does that mean?

HOWARD

Look, it's very simple. They have this thing about skin. It's their way of being friendly. If you think about it, it's kind of touching.

JANE

I don't want him to touch my skin.

HOWARD

Listen, I hate to say this, but you have really turned into a snob!

60

(BETSY suddenly enters with a platter of fish)

HOWARD

Hey! Fresh fish! That is very kind of you, Betsy.

BETSY

Ain't all that fresh. (She puts the platter down, exits).

HOWARD

Now that is my idea of genuine hospitality!

JANE

Maybe so, but... they don't smell very fresh.

HOWARD

Do you know I've never eaten fresh fish? I mean fresh caught.

JANE

What about all those fish you say your father caught?

HOWARD

He never kept them.

JANE

Why in the world not?

HOWARD

Mom was allergic to them. She used to break out in spots and sort of go temporarily blind. (He circles the fish) Well, let's dig in!

61

JANE

I'm sorry, Howard, I can't. They smell like pig fat. They're making me nauseous!

HOWARD

Cut that out! You're being neurotic. That is just the smell of fresh fish.

JANE

No. It's disgusting! I can't stand it! (She grabs the platter, throws the fish out the window).

HOWARD

Now why the heck did you do that!

JANE

Howard, they smelled terrible. I just couldn't stand it another second.

HOWARD

Listen, I want to ask you something. Exactly what in the hell do you think you are doing?

(BETSY suddenly re-enters and looks around)

BETSY

(She spies the cosmetic bag and picks it up) Forgot this. (She exits).

BLACKOUT

62

11, iii

(HOWARD is again polishing the tackle, when
DUKE enters with the revolver and the uniform)

HOWARD

Hello there. Listen, I really want to thank you for this afternoon. I haven't enjoyed myself like that for a long time. (He takes a drink of the whisky) Hey, you want a hit of this stuff? It's terrific.

DUKE

(Takes the jug, drinks) It's mine.

HOWARD

Oh yes. Sorry.

DUKE

You like it. You keep the jug. I got plenty.

HOWARD

Keep it! Well, that is extremely generous of you. Thanks a lot.

DUKE

I'll jest put it on yer bill.

HOWARD

Oh yes. Naturally.

DUKE

Your wife here?

63

HOWARD

No, um... She's gone to find a phone.

DUKE

What fer?

HOWARD

Oh, you know what worry warts women are. She just can't seem to relax until she knows the car is repaired.

DUKE

You ask her yet?

HOWARD

Um yes, yes I did. And... she was flattered.

DUKE

She don't mind?

HOWARD

Absolutely not! She understood it was a compliment.

DUKE

When she comin' back?

HOWARD

I'm afraid I can't say. (Pause) By the way, isn't that your father's Civil War uniform?

DUKE

Yeh. This's it.

64

HOWARD

But I thought you said your father always wore that.

DUKE

Yeh. Pa's gone.

HOWARD

Gone? My god! Do you mean...

DUKE

Yeh. I mean gone.

HOWARD

Well, look, I... I am terribly sorry.

DUKE

His number come up.

HOWARD

I understand. And I think that is a very philosophical way to look at it.

DUKE

Round here, ya get a number when yer born.

HOWARD

Yes. I guess we all do. Still, I want you to know I'm very, very sorry.

DUKE

Yer number comes up, it's yer turn. Jest crawl down t' the lake and slip in. Pa's number come up. Jest left his uniform by the lake.

65

HOWARD

So you are saying he, um... is in the lake?

DUKE

Anyways, he was off his rocker. Most people hereabouts is off their rockers when their number comes up.

HOWARD

Well, I have to say that... that is a fine uniform.

DUKE

Gonna use it fer the Sittin'.

HOWARD

The Sitting? What is that?

DUKE

Sit up all night.

HOWARD

Oh. I see. Like a wake. You sit up with the the body.

DUKE

Ain't got no body. Gonna use the uniform. Need this room fer it.

HOWARD

Of course. I understand. Well... Jane and I will find somewhere else for the night.

DUKE

Don't hafta go nowheres.

66

HOWARD

You mean you are inviting us to join you? My god, I am honored.

DUKE

Jest drink a little. Play some pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey. You ever done that before?

HOWARD

Well... not for some time.

DUKE

Do it lots round here.

HOWARD

And why not?

DUKE

Use a real donkey sometimes.

HOWARD

(Laughs) That's good. (DUKE stares at him, then exits).

(HOWARD takes a long drink, as JANE enters)

JANE

Howard, listen to me....

HOWARD

Just a minute, honey! Listen Duke has invited us to a Sitting.

67

JANE

A what?

HOWARD

A Sitting. It's like a wake. You see, his father is gone.

JANE

Oh my. His father died?

HOWARD

Yes. And we have been asked to the Sitting.

JANE

Listen, Howard, I don't want to be rude, but I'd feel rather uneasy sitting all night with the body of a man I never even met.

HOWARD

No body. Just his uniform. The body is in the lake.

JANE

(Pause) They put the bodies in the lake?

HOWARD

And I hope you can grasp the mythic beauty of that. Can you understand

how totally in tune with nature these people are?

JANE

Perhaps. But I find it rather strange.

HOWARD

Listen, I think you're denying yourself a chance to learn something here.

68

JANE

Listen, Howard, I think we have come to the wrong place?

HOWARD

How can you say that? I know it's a bit run-down—

JANE

No. You don't understand. This place is not a resort at all.

HOWARD

Not a resort?

JANE

That's right.

HOWARD

And they took us in anyway! My god, what generosity!

JANE

But Howard! We have come to the wrong place.

HOWARD

What luck we found it!

JANE

No. No. This is not where we should be!

HOWARD

You know what. I see the hand of fate behind this. (He takes a drink).

BLACKOUT

69

11, iv

(The Sitting. The uniform is on a chair in the middle of the room; HOWARD drinks, as DUKE pins a large image of a donkey on the wall; JANE looks on, not knowing what to think)

DUKE

Do this lots round here. Called Pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey.

HOWARD

Sounds like fun, doesn't it, honey?

JANE

Howard, we have heard of it. (To DUKE) And we are both terribly sorry to hear about your father.

DUKE

His number come up. Round here you get a number when you're born.

JANE

(Looks at him) I'm sorry. What?

HOWARD

(Quickly) Hey, where's Betsy?

DUKE

Lookin' for something t' eat.

HOWARD

Great. I'll tell you. I could eat a bear.

70

DUKE

Ain't got no bear. Might have some muskrat, though.

HOWARD

Really? That sounds interesting. Doesn't it, honey?

JANE

I'm not very hungry. (She walks over and looks out the window) My, it gets very dark here, doesn't it?

DUKE

So dark ya can't see nothing. Scare the pants off a dead man.

(BETSY now enters with a platter of food)

HOWARD

Oh boy. That looks great. What is it?

DUKE

Looks like fat back. (To BETSY) That fat back?

HOWARD

That's fine. We love fat back, don't we, honey?

JANE

We've never had it.

DUKE

We like pork chops. Had some earlier.

71

BETSY

Ain't got none left. We ate 'em all.

HOWARD

Well, look, if we're going to try some of the pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey, let's get to it. How about it, honey?

JANE

I don't feel like it.

HOWARD

Now just a minute, honey. We are doing this in a man's honor.

JANE

(To DUKE and BETSY) I really don't feel up to it. I'm sorry. I hope you're not offended.

DUKE

(To BETSY) Where's that tail?

BETSY

You had it.

DUKE

You put it somewheres. Where'd ya put it?

BETSY

I put it in yer hand. That's where it oughta be.

DUKE

(Looks in his hand) Here it is. (To HOWARD) Know how t' do this?

72

HOWARD

Well, look. Why don't you go first and I'll watch. (He drinks)

DUKE

Ain't hard. Jest pin the tail on that donkey. (He does so).

HOWARD

That's it? You just pin the tail on the donkey? I thought you were, you know, blindfolded or something.

DUKE

Why'd ya be blindfolded? Then ya couldn't do it. You wanna try?

HOWARD

Okay. Sure. (He does it) Hey, it's more fun than you'd think! (Drinks)
Your turn again?

DUKE

Only git one turn.

HOWARD

Oh. Well, you know something, I'm having a wonderful time...(Drinks).

JANE

Howard, haven't you had enough to drink?

HOWARD

Listen, honey, I think you should try this.

DUKE

Your wife. You ask her?

73

HOWARD

Yes. Yes I did. And she was flattered. Weren't you, honey?

JANE

Howard, I don't know what you are talking about!

BETSY

(Lights up her pipe) That happens lots a times around here.

DUKE

(To HOWARD) Then she don't mind?

HOWARD

No. It's a compliment. Isn't that right, honey?

JANE

(As DUKE suddenly moves towards her) Howard!

DUKE

You sure she don't mind?

JANE

Listen, that smoke. Someone is smoking. I can't... I can't breathe...
(She suddenly faints).

HOWARD

Alright, cut that out, okay? Just stop it! What are you doing? (To DUKE and BETSY) Listen, I'm sorry! I'm really very sorry about this!

BLACKOUT

74

11, v

(JANE tosses on her cot, suddenly wakens, sits up)

JANE

(Dazed) Howard! Howard! Where are you?

(BETSY enters. She is wearing JANE's dress)

JANE

Yes? Can I help you?

BETSY

Jest come fur my pipe.

JANE

Oh. Listen, I didn't mean to sound rude. It's just that I was napping and I'm a little groggy. I wonder, by chance, have you seen my husband?

BETSY

Nope. (Finds her pipe) Here it is.

JANE

I'm a little upset really. I mean it's time we got the car repaired. We have to be going soon.

BETSY

You wanna leave?

75

JANE

Yes. I mean no. But our vacation is nearly over. We have to get home.

BETSY

I jest come fur my pipe. It's hand-carved.

JANE

Is it? It's very nice. Did you carve it yourself?

BETSY

My son carved it.

JANE

You have a son? I haven't seen him around.

BETSY

Had a son. He died.

JANE

Oh. I'm so sorry. Really very sorry.

BETSY

He got a disease.

JANE

I'm terribly sorry. But I suppose you'd rather not discuss it.

BETSY

(Genuinely sorrowful) All his hair fell out.

76

JANE

That's horrible. I can't imagine. But I don't suppose you want to discuss it with a stranger.

BETSY

His hair fell out. Then his teeth. Then his skin got hard and wrinkled. He was nine, looked ninety. Sometimes that happens round here.

JANE

My god. There is nothing I can say.

BETSY

(Mournfully shakes her head) He crawled down 'n' slipped in the lake. Jest like my pa.

JANE

Your father, too?

(Suddenly, there is a loud squeal from outside)

JANE

My god! What was that?

BETSY

Pig.

JANE

It's a rather ghastly sound, isn't it? But I'm sorry, you were telling me about your father.

77

BETSY

(She points at the photograph on the wall) That's him there. That's my pa.

JANE

That's YOUR father? I'm sorry. I was under the impression that was your husband's father.

BETSY

Yeh. Had the same pa.

JANE

Oh. You mean... Oh...

BETSY

Same pa. Different mas.

JANE

(Unnerved, she goes to the clocks) I... see. Um, listen, do you mind if I say something? These clocks... They seem out of order to me. You know what I mean? I mean they just don't seem arranged properly. Before I leave here, you know... I'd really like to get them in order.

(There is a loud yelp outside, then HOWARD enters; He is bloody, drinking from the jug)

HOWARD

(Bellows) Yee-Ha! Honey, you'll never guess what I did!

78

JANE

(Prayerfully) Got the car repaired?

HOWARD

I just killed a pig!

JANE

Howard, please. When are we getting the car fixed? (She notices he is barefoot) For god's sake, what happened to your shoes?

HOWARD

Forget the shoes. I just told you I killed a pig. And I am going to butcher him, too! All by myself!

JANE

Howard, what has come over you!

HOWARD

Happiness! I'm smothered in it. Hi there, Betsy. I like your dress.

JANE

MY dress!

BETSY

You want it back?

JANE

No. No. I'm sorry. I meant it was mine.

HOWARD

And Betsy, thanks for the fish. They were absolutely marvelous!

79

JANE

We never ate them.

HOWARD

What you talking about? I ate 'em and they was great! Yee-ha! (Drinks).

JANE

Howard, stop it! I have no idea what you are talking about!

BETSY

That happens lots round here. (She starts out, then turns back and hands her pipe to JANE) Here. You take this. (She exits).

HOWARD

She gave you her pipe! My god, what generosity!

JANE

Fine, but you know I don't smoke.

HOWARD

You can learn. Anyway, forget that. Honey, do I have a surprise for you!

JANE

The car? Oh please, Howard, just tell me the car is ready!

HOWARD

That's my surprise, honey!

JANE

Oh thank god! Thank god! Then we can go home?

80

HOWARD

Home! We don't have t' go anywhere.

JANE

What are you saying? Of course we do. We have to go home.

HOWARD

Are you ready fer this? We ARE home! That's right. That's my surprise! This's our home now! I just traded Duke! This is all ours! (He takes a drink) Yee-Ha!

JANE

No. No. It can't be true.

HOWARD

It does seem to good t' be true, don't it?

JANE

No. No. This is nonsense. Our home... our car...

HOWARD

(Laughing, takes another hearty swig from the jug) Yup! Those're all Duke's headaches now!

JANE

(She stares at him, disbelieving) No. No. You're not serious about this. I don't believe you. (She stares at HOWARD, as He smiles at her and takes another drink).

BLACKOUT

81

11, vi

(JANE is packing her suitcase, still looking like she's in shock; HOWARD enters, in the uniform)

HOWARD

It's all there.

JANE

What is all there?

HOWARD

The woods, the field, the pasture. Everything. It's a farm. We c'n live off the land.

JANE

Howard, for the last time. Nothing is growing out there!

HOWARD

Well, of course ya got to plant it. Why are you being so negative? (He sees she is packing) What're ya doing with that suitcase?

JANE

Listen, that deal is not legally binding. We can leave here.

HOWARD

Leave!

JANE

Yes. For god's sake, think about it. Our home, our life...

82

HOWARD

Are you trying t' tell me you want to go back to that? The stockpiles of garbage, the noises, the stink, the crime, the pollution! Listen to me. I have discovered exactly who I am in this place. It would all be a waste if I went back to that.

JANE

Think about what you are saying. What you're doing. Please.

HOWARD

That's all I have thought about.

JANE

And you honestly intend to stay here.

HOWARD

Of course I can't make you stay.

JANE

So you are going to let me go alone?

(DUKE and BETSY enter; DUKE is wearing HOWARD's suit; it's a poor fit; BETSY wears

JANE's dress; she looks a cliché prostitute)

DUKE

We're goin' now.

83

HOWARD

Already? Why not stick around a while, as our guests?

DUKE

Been here long enough.

JANE

But our car... it doesn't run.

DUKE

Found out it just needed a battery. Took the battery from the pickup.

JANE

So then it's running? That's fine then. Good.

HOWARD

I'll tell ya what. Why not stick around and do some fishing? I was just gonna dig up another mess a worms.

DUKE

Don't like t' fish. (To BETSY, who is carrying two suitcases) Git yer butt in gear. (They start out the door).

JANE

Wait! Just a minute! (They look at her) Listen, since the car is running and you are leaving...

DUKE

Somethin' ya want?

84

JANE

(Pause, They all look at her. She hangs her head) No. No, I guess not.

BETSY

Left some fat back in the kitchen.

HOWARD

How 'bout that? They left us some fat back.

JANE

(Shell-shocked) Yes... thank you.

BETSY

Had some bacon 'n' eggs. But we et that fer breakfast.

DUKE

Don't much like fat back. (To BETSY) Come on, move yer tail.

HOWARD

Just a minute. About the corn. I wanted to ask you. When do we plant it?

DUKE

Any time.

HOWARD

Anytime? Well, that's great. I'll get right to it.

DUKE

Yeh. Anytime. Don't make much difference. (They exit).

85

HOWARD

(As they hear the car start and drive away) There go two of the finest people god ever created! And let me tell you, honey, when we get things organized, you'll love it here just as much as I do.

JANE

I just couldn't leave you. I couldn't leave all by myself.

HOWARD

You'll see. Now what we got to do, we got to get organized. We'll each pick out certain projects we want to accomplish. First thing, I'm gonna get everything ready t' go fishing. (He picks up a fishing lure and starts to polish it) Then I'm gonna plant that corn. And you need a project, too.

JANE

You know these clocks disturb me. They just don't seem to be... in their proper order. (She goes to the clocks, starts moving them around).

HOWARD

Yeah. Okay. That can be your project! Getting those clocks in order. So, you see what I mean. Everything is gonna be just great. It's only a matter of getting everything in its proper place. That's all it is. (As HOWARD continues to polish the fishing lure and JANE moves the clocks around on the table, the lights very slowly fade to a blackout,

and...)

THE PLAY IS OVER

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS... *The theme is fairly obvious (I hope). I realize that the problems of living in Cities these days are mounting, but I felt this “retreat to nature” was an extreme reaction. Nature was where we came from a few thousand years ago! So with a little humor and a lot of poetic license, I came up with this play. I’d say any influence was probably Harold Pinter. His brand of surrealistic humor seemed appropriate for this piece. You never know if he (or BECOMING...) is serious or tongue-in-cheek. Let the audience decide for themselves.*

AUTHOR BIO: George Freek has spent playwrighting residencies at the Milwaukee Repertory Theatre; Southern Methodist University; Southern Illinois University; and Eastern Illinois University. His plays have been published by Playscripts, Inc.; Lazy Bee Scripts; Blue Moon Plays; and Off The Wall Scripts.

Our Beautiful Home

By Elijah Vasquez

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes...*

Next up, is Our Beautiful Home, a play about trouble in domiciliary paradise by the circumspect Elijah Vasquez. On the surface, Insanus and Procida are a nice couple (with fabulous names that sound like prescription drugs) living in the house of their dreams, but it doesn't take long to realize that something off about the relationship and that the home is loaded with idiosyncrasies of its own. Nothing works as expected and the closest thing there is to wine is a juice box in a dark fridge. Moreover, amidst and between raves of their good fortune, there are signals of domestic violence. With dialogue and interplay that's reminiscent of Albee, this play resonates with the familiar, the absurd, and the ugly. Oh – and the ending is perfection. You'll see why we give it ...

5 stars.

Prodicta: *(Not looking away from the screen)* You want to know something?

Isanus: Mmm?

Prodicta: Being on top is nice. Being the boss of your own life is remarkable. We are smooth sailing, traveling through the sea of no worries. Flying through the stress-free air of happiness. Nothing can bring us down.

(Spacing is playwright's own.)

Our Beautiful Home

By

Elijah Vazquez

Insanus, and Procida have a studio apartment together. It's very nice. In one single room, there is a bedroom, kitchen, and living space. Pause. They look around analyzing their furniture with curious sways and side shuffles. Beat. Breaking away from their analysis, Insanus goes to the refrigerator and Procida gets out a newspaper.

Note: Any time Isanus looks in the fridge or bends down it should be evident that she has some sort of back/shoulder/neck pain.

Prodica: *(Reading the newspaper)*
Hiring...hiring...hiring...hiring...hiring...

Isanus: What do you want for dinner dear?

Prodica: Cook...waiter...dishwasher...cook...waiter...
dishwasher...

Isanus: Dear, love of my life, what do you want for dinner?

Prodica: Starting wage 12 dollars...signing bonus...free
iphone...blah blah blah.

Isanus: Dear?

Prodica: Yes?

Isanus: Dinner?

Prodica: *(Small pause)* Oh, yes, dinner. My apologies. You know me, just checking out the daily hubbub.

Isanus: *(Strolling to Procida, taking the newspaper away)* Well, that dailey hubbub can wait. It's time to eat, in our beautiful home.

Prodica: Yes, our beautiful home. *(Beat)* Do we still have that tomato puree filled with the nine cheeses left?

Isanus: Yes, yes we do! *(They trot over to the refrigerator, open it and pull out a tray of pizza rolls. No light is emitting out from the fridge. Beat. They place the plate on the table Procida is sitting at)*

Prodica: Delicious.

Insanus: *(Opening the microwave, but no light emits as well)*
Micro-

Prodica: Cold is good.

Isanus: *(Closing the microwave)* Fork?

Prodica: Nope, let's not burden the maid with more dirty dishes.

Insanus: *(Beat)* Oh, why yes, how silly of me to think that. I shall give you a drink then.

(Insanus grabs a glass from inside a cabinet and tries to run the faucet. No water comes out)

Isanus: Oh phooey, I forgot, I have to call the plumber to fix this. It's been happening for a while now. Do you want something other than water?

Prodica: Do we still have that Chateau Ausone from the yacht party last night?

Isanus: Yes, yes we do! *(Isanus trots to the refrigerator once more, opens it, grabs an apple juice box, closes it, and gives it to Procida)*

Prodica: Magnificent.

Isanus: Of course. Anything for you.

Prodica: *(With their mouth stuff)* Whet eh liffve weeliffve.

Isanus: *(Smiling)* I know, it's everything we wanted.

(Pause. They automatically stop what they are doing and resume analyzing the furniture with curious sways and side shuffles. Beat. At times they smile a little out towards the audience then continue analyzing. After a minute or so, they go back to their previous activity as if nothing happened)

Prodica: Mmm I swear, this tomato puree is so good!

Isanus: *(Excited)* What, do you really think so?!

Prodica: Compared to your old ways, you have progressed.

Insanus: *(Beat)* Were...were my old ways bad?

Prodica: I wouldn't say bad. But, I wouldn't say good. I'll say...uh..doable.

Insanus: Right.

Prodica: It's okay, beautiful home, beautiful meals now, am I right?

Isanus: Yes, yes dear you are correct. I'm glad you are enjoying it.

(Pause. Insanus just happily watches Prodica eat. When Prodica finishes, they just leave their mess on the table and sit on the living room couch, playing with a handheld video game console. Beat. Insanus just looks at it)

Insanus: Love.

Prodica: *(Not answering)*

Isanus: Sweetie dearest.

Prodica: *(Still not answering)*

Isanus: Prodica!

Prodica: Huh, what? What happened?

Isanus: *(Small pause)* Are you...are you at ease?

Prodica: Pardon?

Isanus: Are. You. At. Ease?

Prodica: How can I not be?

Isanus: *(Beat)* Just making sure. Let me clean up here and I'll join you in a jiff.

Prodica: No, no, no just leave that for the maid.

Isanus: I insist. It's really not much.

Prodica: *(Back to their game; not really paying attention anymore to the conversation)* Okay, uh huh, yup, you do that then.

(Isanus cleans really quickly and tosses the scraps into a trash can that doesn't have a trash bag in it. They then join Prodica. Pause. They both just sit for a while, only hearing the button clicking of Prodica's game)

Prodica: *(Not looking away from the screen)* You want to know something?

Isanus: Mmm?

Prodica: Being on top is nice. Being the boss of your own life is remarkable. We are smooth sailing, traveling through the sea of no worries. Flying through the stress-free air of happiness. Nothing can bring us down.

Isanus: That's very preachy dear, did something good happen at work?

Prodica: Good? Good? Yes, always! Always good! Video game sales are skyrocketing! My development team is rising up the global ranks, and I couldn't be any happier. We are smooth sailing.

Isanus: Wonderful!

Prodica: Yes, very! I'm not a part of the daily hubbub.

Isanus: Nope! You're thriving my love!

Prodica: Correct! No worries at all. I'm only drinking the liquid of serenity.

Isanus: Hah, is that from one of your games?

Prodica: What?

Isanus: "Liquid of serenity." It sounds, I don't know, really embellished.

Prodica: Probably.

Isanus: Okay...well...you deserve that nonetheless!

Prodica: Yes I do.

(Awkward pause. Prodica is still locked in on their video game)

Prodica: Oh come on! Seriously?!

Isanus: You losing?

Prodica: No.

Isanus: Okay.

Prodica: *(They punch the couch, getting aggravated)* Garbage. Total garbage. This game is-ugh!

Isanus: *(Trying, but failing at counseling)* It'll...uh...be okay dear.

Prodica: No it won't. I'm running out of health potions, and these dumb giant torpedo snails won't leave me alone.

Isanus: What do they do?

Prodica: They stick to you and drain your life force, until, well, you are dead.

Isanus: *(Beat)* Sounds awful.

Prodica: It is.

(Another awkward pause)

Isanus: Maybe I can help.

Prodica: Help?

Isanus: Yeah. *(Beat)* Can I play with you?

Prodica: Mmm?

Isanus: Can I join in on your game?

Prodica: Uh...why?

Isanus: I just said, to help.

Prodica: I don't need it.

Isanus: Well, can we just play normal two-player or something?

Prodica: You want to play? This is new.

Isanus: It's not that I never wanted to, it's just I never had the time. In this beautiful home, I have all the time now.

Prodica: Right. *(They don't offer)*

Isanus: Come on, you have two remotes on the side.

Prodica: I know.

Isanus: *(Small pause. Getting into Prodica's face now, trying to get the video game remotes and play)* Please, please just this/one time.

Prodica: What are you doing? No, I have to beat this level.

Isanus: It can wait. Come on.

(Simultaneously)

Prodica: This is very important right now, I have to beat this level or else-

Isanus: Come on, I never get to play with you. Just this once and I'll leave you alone-

(Tugging for the video game, they both lose grip of it and it falls and breaks on the floor. Pause)

Isanus: Oh my gosh, I am so sorry...

Prodica: It's fine-

Isanus: No, it's not. That was your only-

Prodica: I can buy another-

Isanus: Yeah, but-

Prodica: I said I'll buy another! We are smooth sailing, remember? No worries in our beautiful home.

(Isanus silently gets the broken video game console and tries to fix it. Prodica looks at their phone)

Isanus: *(Whispering to themselves)* I'm sorry...

Prodica: Mmm?

Isanus: I didn't mean it, I know how-

Prodica: It's not a problem, I said I'll buy-

Isanus: *(Explosive, then catching themselves)* With what!-...yes, you're right dear.

(Pause. Prodica leaves the game alone)

Isanus: How can I-

Prodica: Shh.

Isanus: But-

Prodica: Shh. Don't do anything. Just be.

(Silence. Beat. They once again get up and analyze their furniture with curious sways and side shuffles. After a while, they again return to the positions they once were as if nothing happened)

Isanus: *(Scooching closer to Prodica. Putting a hand on their shoulder)* I really am sorry...

Prodica: I heard.

Isanus: *(Pause)*

Prodica: *(Messing with their neck shoulder area)* Whew, looking down at all of these online deals have been messing with my-

Isanus: Would you like a massage dear?

Prodica: Mmm yeah, yeah, that actually sounds pretty great.

Isanus: Lovely! Just sit back and relax.

Prodica: Not too hard like you did last time. It's very tender back there.

Isanus: Gotcha.

(Prodica sits back and relaxes as Isanus massages them. Silent)

Prodica: Ouch.

Isanus: What? I'm being gentle.

Prodica: More gentle.

(Isanus continues)

Prodica: Ouch! What are you doing?

Isanus: I'm...I'm being gentle...

Prodica: Well, it feels like you are strangling me. *(Beat)* Just do the chop and I'll be done.

Isanus: Okay.

(They karate chop their shoulders and upper back. Once they are done Prodica goes back to their phone)

Prodica: *(To themselves reading off their phone)* Unemployment ending...eviction moratorium...no rent relief/ what a bunch of daily hubbub.

Isanus: Love-

Prodica: Fret, fret, fret, fret, fret/ that's what it all is.

Isanus: Hey love...

Prodica: We have it made, isn't that right-

Isanus: Love?

Prodica: *(Small beat)* What's up?

Isanus: Can...can...I get a massage too?

Prodica: Really?

Isanus: Yeah.

Prodica: *(Pause)* Uh, yeah, sure. Come here.

Isanus: *(Very excitedly)* Okay!

(Isanus scoots over to Prodica and offers them their back)

Isanus: Wow, I know we have this beautiful home, but I haven't had a massage in a while. It's like around my neck and shoulders that is bothering me.

Prodica: Yup.

(With very little effort, Prodica barely does anything remotely close to a sufficient massage)

Prodica: Okay, you good?

Isanus: *(Pause)* Yes...

Prodica: Great, I'm going to go back to my investments now. Have to keep thriving.

Isanus: Of course.

(Isanus cellphone's alarm goes off)

Isanus: Oh look at that, it's time get ready for wor-

(Prodica gives Isanus a funny look)

Isanus: Nevermind.

Prodica: Whatever it is, like I said, the maid can handle it, okay? We are easy going.

Isanus: Mhm.

(Isanus turns off the alarm. Beat. Prodica proceeds to take off their shoes and gets even more cosier. Their shoes are dirty and worn out. Isanus get's up, turns on some music on their phone, gets a cloth, and a water bottle, and sits back down. She pours some water on the cloth and starts cleaning their shoes)

Prodica: What do you think you are doing?

Isanus: What are you talking about?

Prodica: What is this, what is all this?

Isanus: I'm cleaning your shoes.

Prodica: Okay, whatever, forget that. Why the music?

Isanus: Uh, I like music.

Prodica: Okay, but it's distracting me. I'm in the middle of an important business deal with one of the top video game developers in the world. I cannot think with this racket.

Isanus: But, it calms me down.

Prodica: But, it doesn't calm me down.

Isanus: I'll just turn it/ down.

Prodica: Off.

Isanus: I don't understand, it's just music. It never bothered you before-

Prodica: Turn it off now.

Isanus: I like it. I never get to listen to it out loud much.

Prodica: Well, when I'm around you don't listen.

Isanus: *(Pause)*

Prodica: My work requires my full utmost attention and energy. I am the boss. The top dog. And I cannot afford to tarnish that status by any minor slip ups. Slip ups are a no no. We are not walking on thin ice. We are walking on a sturdy, unshakeable bridge of freedom and joy. And I will not sacrifice this, because you decided you wanted to play music. That is not how it works. No, I work too hard to crumble. People who crumble are weak, and I am not weak. I am unbreakable and have all the control. You see, this beautiful home would not have happened if I was distracted constantly; burdened by the tiny turmoils of life. Uh uh, I conquer life. I eat it and spit in its face. Do you understand? My passion, my sweat, my whole enterprise, will not bring me to the bottom. Because life eats the bottom. Life gnaws and consumes the bottom into spiritual suicide. But not me, because I am the big enchilada, and I eat life until it's no more. And I plan to keep it like that. So please, for the love of God, turn off that music.

Isanus: *(Heavy pause)* Yes, dear.

(They turn off the music. Silent)

Prodica: Man, that got me worked up.

Isanus: I bet.

Prodica: Passion baby. When you are passionate like that, you get worked up sometimes.

Isanus: Yeah, passion.

Prodica: Mmm.

Isnaus: What?

Prodica: I'm hungry again. *(Beat)* Do we still have some of that foriegn Camembert cheese?

Isanus: Mhm.

(Isanus walks to the refrigerator, opens it up, grabs one single slice of American Craft's Cheese, and closes it. They walk back and give it to Prodica)

Prodica: Amazing.

Isanus: Anything for you.

(Prodica unwraps and eats the slice of cheese. Beat. When finished, they toss the wrapper on the floor. Isanus bends down and picks it up gingerly. Once they do, they look at it, and crush it into their palms, and just place it into their pocket. Another alarm goes off on Insaus's phone)

Prodica: What is that?

Isanus: It's just my other alarm telling me I have to go to wor-

Prodica: No, no such thing. In this beautiful home, you don't work, got it? No chores or anything. That's why we are here, remember? The pains of labor are no more for you. That's what I provided for you. That's what I gave you. A chance for unlimited happiness.

Isanus: What you provided?

Prodica: Yes.

Isanus: And, what have you given me?

Prodica: I just said.

Isanus: No, what have you given me?

Prodica: Can you not hear?

Isanus: Yes, I heard perfectly.

Prodica: Okay so I don't have to repeat myself.

Isanus: *(Small pause)*

Prodica: Now turn off that alarm.

Isanus: *(Silent)*

Prodica: I said, turn it off!

Isanus: *(Isanus, with all their might, launches the phone against the wall. It shatters into pieces)*

Prodica: Wh-why did you do that-

Isanus: *(Mocking)* Don't worry, we can buy another one.

Prodica: But, that was a Christmas gift-

Isanus: That I got myself. With my money.

Prodica: *(Pause)* Go. Clean. It. up.

Isanus: Oh, no worries dear, I'll just get the maid to do it.

Prodica: *(Standing up to Insanus)* The maid, yes, they will clean it up. If they like it or not.

Insanus:

Prodica:

Isanus:

Prodica: *(Like a vipers bite, Prodica slaps Isanus)* Now, go.

(With utter shock, Insanus slowly goes and sweeps up the broken phone and tosses it into the trash. Beat. They both jump up then analyze the furniture once more. This time, more upbeat, and saying things out-in-the-open like, " Hi...hello...How about Mercury's Retrograde, huh?... We're fine...Just playing around, you know?...Everything's fine." They do that for a little while, then return back to their emotional states from before. Isanus then sits on a lounge chair, as Prodica returns to the couch. Silence)

Prodica: *(Putting down their phone, while casually slouching on the couch)*

Isanus: *(Montoned)* You done?

Prodica: Yeah, I think so.

Isanus: Okay.

Prodica:

Isanus:

Prodica:

Isanus: Do you want to talk?

Prodica: Talk? About What?

Isanus: I don't know. That slap.

Prodica: It happened. Now it's over.

Isanus: *(Small pause)* Maybe we can talk about married couple stuff.

Prodica: Don't we do that already?

Isanus: Do we?

Prodica: I guess.

Isanus: You guess?

Prodica Yeah.

Isanus: What things do we talk about?

Prodica: Love stuff.

Isanus: Like?

Prodica: Like-

Isanus: Divorce?

Prodica: We never talk about that!

Isanus: *(Under their breath)* Unfortunately.

Prodica: What did you say?

Isanus: Nothing. I said nothing.

Prodica: Whatever. *(Beat. Playing with their fingers. Very preoccupied)*

Isanus: You know I love you, right?

Prodica: Huh?

Isanus: *(Small pause)* Nevermind. *(Beat)* Want to watch a movie or something before we go to bed?

Prodica: A movie? After all this, what I need is a drink.

(They pull out a flask bottle from their pocket and start drinking)

Isanus: I...I thought you quit since-

Prodica: I did, but I had a hard day of work. I deserve this.

Isanus: But-

Prodica: Uh uh, it's drink time.

Isanus: We made a promise though...

Prodica: Didn't you hear me? I had a hard day of work. Let me be.

Isanus: Prodica-

Prodica: For fucks sake, why are you still talking?! That is all you've been doing. You've never done this. You never talked this much and...and...fucking plead for attention. I don't understand. I really don't. I do so much for our beautiful home, and this is how you repay me? Ungrateful. Simply ungrateful.
(Small beat) Just...just start the movie.

(Chugging the flask)

Isanus: *(Pause)* No.

Prodica: What?

Isanus: I said no.

Prodica: Fine, I'll just leave and go to a movie theater.

(Expecting Isanus to give them their shoes and coat. It doesn't happen. They put it on themselves)

Isanus: Leave? Where are you going to go?

Prodica: Somewhere.

Isanus: Please, tell me where are you going to go?

Prodica: I said somewhere! *(They prepare to leave, but refrain. Beat. They don't move)*

Isanus: That's what I thought. You have nowhere to go. You have nothing.

Prodica: Shut up.

Isanus: Oh, want me to keep going. Okay. YOU. HAVE. NOWHERE. TO. GO!

Prodica: I said shut up!

Isanus: No! I'm done shutting up! I'm finished! *(Beat)* Like I said, you have nothing. You're not top dog. You're not the head honcho. You're a broke-wannabe-pebble. You are nothing. The government is done babying you. I'm done babying you. Without me, our beautiful home wouldn't exist-

Prodica: What are you talking about?

Isanus: You know what I'm talking about! *(Small beat)* Can't you see? Can't you see that I'm killing myself here? Even before this, I was killing myself everyday to keep a roof over our heads. I was the one carrying the workload. I was the one working two jobs, buying everything, paying bills, cleaning like hell, and making sure we didn't starve to death. And I was so tired. So so so so so tired, living in a body that was perpetually dead inside. And I still am. I am still dying and re-dying from exhaustion, trying to scrape by and make sure your world is stress free and perfect, so you can sleep soundly at night. And I do it because I love you. I understand your situation. I understand the cruelty of this world. It's all anxiety ridden, it all hurts, I know, I get it, but you never met me halfway. I was so patient and gave you chance after chance after chance to get your act together, to feel comfortable enough to make a change, and find a job at your own pace. But, you didn't budge. You stayed at home all day, laying on the couch sloppy drunk playing video games, never once picking up a broom to sweep or do anything. You stayed home and leeches off of me, sucking away at my generosity and kindness; sticking to me and draining my life force away like a giant torpedo snail! *(Small beat)* Like, you didn't bother applying or even looking, knowing your wife *(Or husband)* is struggling,

knowing we are struggling. Jobs are not everything, money isn't everything, but it is something if you want to survive. And unfortunately the more you have, the better your chances of survival, and you didn't even shutter an eyelash to help me.

Prodica: Stop, what are you talking-

Isanus: Quit it. Just quit. We got kicked out and now we are here. I was hoping with this new life, the life I thought we wanted, you would have appreciated me more. Since I, "did not work" and you were, "The top dog", I thought we would have been...you know...actually happy. I thought you would be at ease, and actually try to bond with me, and connect with me. I thought our beautiful home, with our beautiful meals and things, would fix all of our problems. But... I...I thought wrong. Even if you had "made it" and we were "smooth sailing", you would have always put your interests before our relationship. Before our future. I know you want to escape like in your video games, to the land of dreams, riches, and fantasies, believe me I want it to, so much, but, at what cost is escaping if it's destroying your reality right before your eyes. *(Beat)* I love you, but you can escape oh so much. Until you learn this, and learn to love and support me, I think we need to...need to take a break.

Prodica: You're kidding right?

Isanus: No.

Prodica: *(Approaching them affectionately)* Isanus, I'm sorry, I really didn't-

Isanus: Don't you dare touch me. If you lay a hand on me again I swear to God I'll call the cops in a heartbeat. Until further notice, your apologies mean nothing to me. I'm sorry Prodica, but I am going to need you to go.

Prodica: Where...where would I go?

Isanus: *(Small pause. With the smallest remorse)* Where would you go? *(Beat)* You can stay on the couch. But, only for tonight. Once the morning comes you leave. If you truly love me, and have

any backbone, you would respect my decision. If not, you leave now.

Prodica: I'll...uh...do the couch. (*Small beat*) Thank you...

Isanus: No, it's too late for that now.

(Beat. They again break away and analyze their furniture. This time it's less active. No sways. No shuffles. They both are leaning on a furniture piece for support, with tears running down both of their cheeks. They look at the audience, trying to crack smiles, mumbling things like, " Long night...just tired...It happens...Furniture just makes me so happy...tears of joy...Mercury, what can I say right?" Beat. They soon break away from their mumbles and return to their previous positions and state of being. Beat. Isanus goes into a hamper, and pulls out a blanket and hands it to Prodica. Prodica accepts it)

Isanus: Goodnight.

Prodica: Sweet dreams my love.

Isanus: (*Small pause. Isanus shakes their head "no"*) This is something you actually have to earn. All you have to do is try. (*They look at their watch*) Three...two...one.

(Right when they say "one" the lights turn off in the whole studio) Just put the blanket back in the hamper when you leave. Good-

Prodica: Bye...

Isanus: Yeah, that.

(Isanus, with a long sad face, walks to their bed. Once they are in bed, a small dim pool of light is shown above them, as they try to fix Prodica's game console. Beat. Prodica covers their body with the blanket and lays down, still with heavy tears running down their cheeks. Silence. After a while, an overhead speaker makes an announcement saying, "Attention shoppers, IKEA is now closed." Beat.)

Prodiaca: *(Mumbling to themselves)* I am not the top dog...I am not in control of my life...we are not smooth sailing...I am broke, and got evicted...I ignored the dailey hubbub...I ignored the dailey hubbub and got evicted...The beautiful house is no more...The beautiful house is no more... *(They repeat this like prayer until the lights dim to black)*

End

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS...

I went to Ikea with my wife, and automatically had a brain blast. I told her, verbatim, "Okay, how about this. A play that takes place in one of the Ikea home displays, and the audience doesn't know the characters are in Ikea until the end of the play, so it seems like a regular living room play throughout. Sounds good?"

Focusing on shopping, barely paying any attention to me, she gave me a weak thumbs up.

And we are.

AUTHOR BIO: Elijah Vazquez is an Orlando based playwright who graduated from Niagara University with a B.F.A in Theatre Performance. Some previous experience with playwriting includes several readings, publications, productions and completing an advanced playwriting independent study course focused on the dramatic form, the Theatre of the Absurd. He has taken many philosophy classes that influenced his writing as well, along with a theatre criticism classes which he analyzed and commented on many theoretical manifestos from Brecht to Grotowowkis to Hugo to Esslin, which helped shape his thoughts about the essence of theatre and the manner on how to construct plays. All he wants is to provide glimmers of hope, wherever it may be.

NON-FICTION

"A strange mixture, only to be found on the American Continent"

By Levi Platt

WHY WE LIKE IT: *Everything Levi Platt writes turns to gold and when he is finished we are blinded by the shine.*

Five stars

For Julie and Karen

"A strange mixture, only to be found on the American Continent"

Porter Rockwell

The distance from our apartment to our chapel – is a mile and a half. From the apartment's south parking lot exit on Orem Boulevard, the road is lined with strip malls, a perplexing neon concentration of 24-hour massage parlors; two of which have recently been shut down for "unlawful practice and sexual misconduct". Two of which were observed as being *wildly* favorited among Orem locals over their competition, per their raving yelp reviews.

Just before the right turn at 800 South, toward Utah Lake and Orem's once scrappy community-college-that-could, Utah Valley University, patches of brown grass host a line of unattended birch trees, the only semi-natural plant life along the road. Another greenery has been hamfisted into the landscaping of the overpriced condos beyond: two-bedroom, two-bath "luxury" suites two to a floor, five floors high. The hexagonal formation surrounds a courtyard with a pool set to an ever tepid 100 degrees year-round. I know this because my older brother lived there when he was first married. It didn't take long for them to move on down the valley to Spanish Fork, where they

bought a split-level starter home in the middle of a half-finished, half-abandoned gated community. Sometimes I think I can feel why more than I can articulate. Sometimes not.

Heading towards Utah Lake, I pass a sublet home split into three separate spaces and crumbling. The pink stucco is chipped and worn-washed. The poor structure can't bear the weight of three families in a space meant for one, which is unfortunately true of many houses in an area with too many students, too many people moving in, and not enough residents moving out or dying. The pink home's front yard is mostly dead grass and dirt, but during the summer some ruddy pioneer with a big gut and dirty gorse of a beard stakes his space by pitching his tent under the struggling willow. At night I can see the blue glow of his TV flicker and fade within the bubble of all-weather nylon. I secretly--if not lovingly-- call him Porter Rockwell.

He is the only pink house tenant I have ever seen in person. He's bow-legged. I assume his gut was joyously formed by years of heavy drinking and bad nutrition. When it's warm enough, he strolls up and down our street, cigarette bent and snug between chapped lips and fur. He rolls his sleeves to his shoulders and hitches his shorts brazen inches above the knee. He's a wild man by any stretch, unbound and free.

Although we've never spoken, I like to imagine that Porter and I have developed a mutually implicit bond. But maybe it's not him. The most endearing thing about this summer character is actually his skittish, bug-eyed chihuahua. Their relationship is not ideal; the little dog walks with a wince and sometimes the master yanks and drags him along. But mostly they take their strolls slowly, without apparent purpose or destination. Clearly, they are content in each other's company. I envy them. I have this nagging, an intuition maybe: that they belong exactly where they are in exactly the state they persist. Nothing is more right.

Porter Rockwell of the Mormon days of yore was once asked if he considered himself a murderer. He menacingly replied, "I never killed a man that didn't need killing."

I think of the Porters Rockwell often.

The Water Bear

A tardigrade is a microscopically small water-dwelling animal colloquially called a Water Bear. They're an eight-legged half-filled vacuum bag with a filter spout for a mouth--and nearly completely indestructible. He's lived in the same patch of tall reeds and saw grass as long as I've known him. When it's warm, he bathes with sun and dirt in a kingdom of oddments he's built since time immemorial. His favorite pastime is to shed his clothes to stand bare-chested in the heat of day. His skin is corium baked in the desert. His forearms are pock-marked and tracked. His hands are ink-black--needled with constellations.

The Water Bear has haunted the same half-mile plot of an underdeveloped city block on the corner of 400 South and Orem Boulevard. He's made his home beneath the gaze of luxury high rises that sit north of the plot. The complex was first imagined as a strip mall of sorts in the mid-nineties before settling into perpetually unfinished apartments. The building changed ownership with each surge and valley of the housing market over the last twenty-five years until construction halted for the complex on a semi-permanent basis in 2012. It burned down under less than transparent circumstances in 2014. The Water Bear can sometimes be found in the shadow of the new construction smoking and drinking in its unfinished parking lot. It's where he likes to do his dancing.

Maybe a year ago, half of the lot where the Water Bear lives was used to build a dialysis center. The center now carries a steady stream of patrons in and out of its sanitized doors from open to close six days a week. The parking is ballasted against the remaining unkempt portion where the Water Bear resides. He refuses to dance there. I believe it's out of respect for the ailing souls who frequent the building. I think he feels a kinship with them. Maybe an unspoken one, but a real one nonetheless--maybe it's the same I feel for him and his neighbor, Porter Rockwell. Half a mile south from the plot sits a second, older dialysis center. No one ever goes there.

I first saw the Water Bear in the dead of a sudden cold snap; he was washed in moonlight dancing in his parking lot. He was clothed from head to toe in stained coveralls with the hood face funneled forward and cinched tight. Against motionless, frozen slabs of slip-shod concrete, his breath steamed out in erratic bursts from a hole just big enough to fit the top of a beer bottle. He snaked his arms in waves, thrashing his head to the song

only he could hear. It was an act where every breath was a protestation declaring towards some greater truth he was compelled to create with his body--to do so by any other means would have been profane. I tell myself: it was January, he was trying to stay warm. But his dance never felt like survival or instinct, it felt like prayer.

This isn't about church, or god, or even mormons.

"No mercy will be shown...you should all be exterminated, and by God, you will be."

In 1838 Governor Lilburn Boggs of my home state of Missouri ordered that the "growing scourge" of "The Mormons" be forcibly, violently removed from the commonwealth. Shortly thereafter, seventeen mormons were corralled and murdered in Caldwell County Missouri by local militia, two of which were a boy age fourteen and a girl age ten.

In 1846, once again, mormons were forcibly expelled from Nauvoo Illinois during the harshest months of winter in the midwest; all this just two short years after their leader was murdered while imprisoned awaiting trial. Winters in the midwest are a miserable ordeal. The wind blisters in from the great plains completely freezing the landscape. It's a violent, unforgiving cold that snaps trees at their base and eats at you from the inside. My point here is I know exactly the conditions those wretched exiles were forced to endure, it's beyond harsh, it is nearly unbearable.

In 1847, that same fraught and homeless band of christian pioneers, ordered to be exterminated, arrived in Utah valley. In 1847 as the first act of settling into their new Eden, those once hunted pioneers promptly began to violently, systematically wrest the ancestral home of the Ute nation away from them. They did so through starvation, encroachment, and according to the accounts of the Ute people, "indiscriminately killing tribesman, women, and children."

In 2007, a housing contractor in Nephi, Utah found the gravesite of four skeletons in the hills that overshadow the city's suburbs. They were all bound by the wrists and ankles, were smaller than a full-grown adult, and showed signs of a body in mid-development when they died. Children, they were children. The damage to their spines and skulls indicated they'd been executed. A journal entry submitted to the local historical society would tell the story: four Ute boys were caught, bound, and slaughtered by local militiamen--for thievery.

Every July 24th, the state of Utah celebrates Pioneer Day, marking their ancestors' great exodus to find a place to call home. The roads and streets of Orem fill with plastic lawn chairs and gaggles of onlookers celebrating

and singing praises to the kith and kin. Those first “wanderers in a strange land” carved home into the flesh of the valley. I have no pioneers in my blood. We’re a brood of feckless German swindlers on one side, and pacific island-dwelling savages on the other. But still, I’m at odds with myself. I ache for and am ashamed of the people who share my same burden of seeking meaning and the divine. I feel the same longing for home: to be with and without. I know it. I know them.

Sean is a Cinephile Hermit

--hitting his mid-fifties with crippling back pain. He shuffles into the restaurant methodically, painfully, and I watch him tread as though he walks through a minefield. Sean is completely bald on his crown, but still, brilliant white hair on the back and sides of his head grows to an unkempt length. It corresponds with the time he’s spent bedridden in pain. White silk now pools gently on his shoulders. Weeks have grounded out in physical agony since the last time he left home, he wears them on his face. I’ve missed him.

“Cad?”

“I’m trying to be nice.”

We’re sitting at the bar of Asa Ramen just roadside to the glut and congestion of State Street in Orem. It’s still early in the afternoon, but already the street continues to have regular intervals of bumper-to-bumper traffic. A large window stretches almost completely across the shop’s facade, we watch the ebb and flow of cars while we wait. The restaurant is one of my favorites, it’s small, and affords only a wall of tables and booths on its south side and a bar lined with maybe a dozen stools on its north side. The interior is mostly a smattering of pastel paper mache lamps implying a vaguely eastern motif. All the furniture is stiff, darkly stained. Sean shifts uncomfortably trying to find a painless inch of barstool. He distracts himself by examining the Macey’s in the front window across the street: it’s currently being demolished. Just beyond the naked skeleton of commerce and concrete, the very top of the Wasatch mountain range peaks over, looking back down at Sean.

“She says she’s an artist.”

“Really?”

He pauses long enough to stifle a giggle as his heavy cheeks, “wood signs.”

“What?”

“You know, those signs you see in homes that say something inane like “CIRCA 1998” or quote a “family saying?””

“What?”

“She’s a wood sign *artisan*.” again he starts to fit and giggle soundlessly. It’s wonderful.

“I shouldn’t,” in between great heaves of wheezing, “I shouldn’t laugh.”

“Is she any good? I mean, it would be one thing to throw the title “artist” around so seriously if, you kno--”

He doesn’t miss a beat “She doesn’t make them, it’s a paint by numbers thing. They’re god awful.”

“You should write something about it.”

Sean dodges the suggestion.

Sean has two children, Sam and Katy. According to Sean, they’re maniacs. Sam, as far as I have been able to glean, is a lot like Sean: hyper neurotic and tends to let people walk all over him. Sam, also like his father, loves to start things and leave them half-finished. This isn’t a fault. When Sean finds something he loves, he loves it until it completely consumes and then exhausts him. At the expense of leaving a novel, two films, nearly a dozen plays, a law degree, and even a career in Hollywood, Sean’s left behind more lives than most people will live, in the fires of infancy. It’s a kind of love without guile or desire for reciprocity.

“No, No, that’s not it.”

Sean still has his jacket on. It’s the same leather jacket he was wearing when we first met several years before. Blue striping from his shirt peeks out of the tear in the left elbow, and I try to remember if the hole has always been there. Sean looks down at his swollen hands frowning. They’re shaking, and he can’t make them stop.

“I really shouldn’t laugh.”

I’ve never known what to do when he gets in a bad way, “It *is* funny.”

“I asked my dad for money last week.”

I stumble to break the silence with talk about our theories of what the last season of *Twin Peaks* really means. As with most things, Sean sees it as a series that ends like it began: in tragedy. The return to beloved subject matters for the next two hours is a good distraction. We eat and argue until Sean’s phone vibrates without pause for nearly a minute. Texts from his son, daughter, and wife rattle off in urgency and concern.

Katy is freaking out because you’ve been gone and haven’t texted her back. She thinks you’re dead--

Pls don’t be dead.

Pls Pls text me back

“Oh Jesus, I gotta get going.” He starts for his wallet in his back pocket and immediately doubles over onto the bar gasping.” I try to help Sean straighten and steady himself.

“Hey”

He waits for it--probably hoping for the same thing I am. The words. The thing that makes it all fit.

“It’s not a tragedy.”

“Sure”

Sean snorts it out, grins, and delicately lumbers out of the restaurant.

I track him across the front window until he disappears out of frame, towards home. And there it is again: the nagging, the aching, the shame, the love. All of it smashed together, an indecipherable static sitting in my throat and on my tongue. I try to measure it out at the bar, counting patrons as they enter. First, an elderly couple who speak Spanish with a lyricism and flourish of double “L” and “Y” that betrays their hailing from Argentina or some country thereabout. The wife is stout with eyes enrapturingly blue. The husband is a slight man with sloped shoulders and a beautiful head of fire brown hair. They’re followed by a take-out carrier. He lugs an orange crate of a backpack, hitting everything within reach in the tight space of the restaurant. He knocks over a glass jar full of toothpicks and it shatters. Briefly, the hush of conversation stops, and everyone looks up to see the poor soul turn a crimson shade of embarrassment. Then another couple enters. Young, and perfect in every way. The man can’t be more than twenty-two maybe twenty-three. The girl is just leaving adolescence. They enter hand in hand and greet the overworked host.

“I made a reservation.” what a surprise, the man's voice is barely not a boy’s. It whistles through the top of his mouth and out of his nose as he speaks. He sounds like he’s trying to speak from somewhere deeper, but it isn’t there. The host stares back confused--the ramen shop doesn’t need a reservation, it's basically a dive.

“Oh--oh Yeah, I remember, you’re the guy that called in right?”

“Yeah, yesterday, I made a reservation. We came early--it should be under Allred.”

Allred, a good strong pioneer name with good, strong pioneer roots. A name full of broken and tired bodies who trudged through plains and privation. Bodies who thrived in the desert once their handcarts settled in the valley. Allred is a survivor’s name, it belongs here. The letters tumble around inside of me and I think maybe there’s something to it, but I can’t shake the others who belong here too. Those pariahs, this is their home as well. Clarity,

ephemeral and sudden hasn't come to me yet, but I think it's here: somewhere between the surly duo shuffling around their haven of nylon and dirt, and the tardigrade, dancing in the shadow of gaudy concrete.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *A friend of mine recently asked "Don't you just hate those moments where you think something is great and it turns out to be awful?" I hated that idea, it felt perverse and more importantly false. Sacred, profane--breathhtaking, grotesque. Everything is everything, both answer and question, damnation and grace. Nothing ever is "either/or", or maybe everything is--I don't know. I think this piece is my attempt at trying to fit that incongruity into actual people I love so it didn't just drift into the air like the fucking masturbatory chatter my ilk is known for.*

AUTHOR BIO: L.W. Platt currently resides in Pennsylvania and is a recent graduate of Utah Valley University, though Missouri is where he writes from and will always be home to him. He's taken to preoccupying himself with that space where language braces up against living and then completely fails. Sometimes he finishes what he writes.

FACEBOOK

By Ken W. Simpson

WHY WE LIKE IT: *If a picture's worth a thousand words there must be a million of them on the 9 pages. 'Our man in Australia' who doesn't miss a thing...*

Facebook

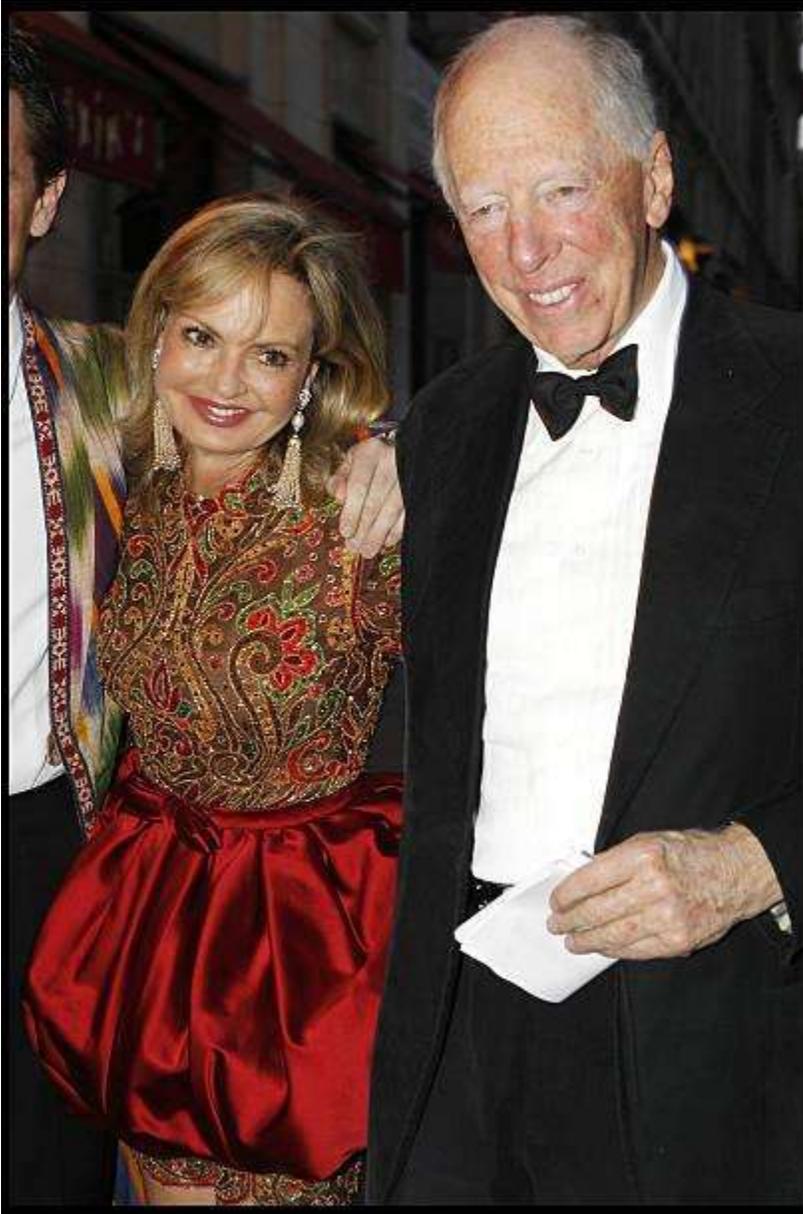
Human dignity
torn and tarnished.
A violin
without any strings.

When I first joined Facebook a few years ago - it was a relatively harmless 'over the fence' gossip type of site - with political comments of the barroom kind. In Australia the naive still supported Bill Shorten - as leader of the ALP - unaware that he had sold out to the LCP.



Obama amazingly had a lot of support. NATO had bombed Libya to rubble. US mercenaries - Al Qaeda - lynched President Gaddafi. Those who dared to see through Obama's glib histrionics -

and say so - were accused of being racist. The US had been getting away with murder ever since WW2 - but we didn't know it back then.



There was nothing intellectual about Facebook. It was mostly bottom of the drawer opinionated bigotry and bias - though harmless - and hardly entertaining. It was easy enough to block your enemies - or delete lines you didn't like. Facebook then was good at remembering birthdays and anniversaries - and still is.



But things have changed. Facebook now is a hunting ground for predators.

I took the opportunity to post a number of short political essays - to publicise the truth - and explore the lies being published and broadcast by the mainstream media - in collaboration with the governments of Australia and the US. The US covered up its history of destabilisation - exploitation - and terror - since WW2 - by hypocritically pretending to be a two party democracy.



I pointed out that the US hated democracy - and had destroyed the economies of nations that dared to represent the people - throughout the Middle East - South America - Yugoslavia - Africa - and parts of Asia.

For a time my posts received no attention whatsoever - but I persevered - and kept reposting them



The comments on Facebook were mainly about US warmongering and corruption. Even Americans appeared to be waking up to the lies and hypocrisy of their government - and in particular - the disastrous reign of Donald Trump. A matter of great concern was the incarceration of Julian Assange and to a lesser extent - that of Chelsea Manning. Lee Camp provided superb stand up political satire.



Then people began liking my posts in ever increasing numbers. I began a program in which I invited Facebook friends to read and hopefully like my posts.



Early on I was overwhelmed by friends who had no wish to read my posts. Instead they wanted some sort of relationship - and some even called me dad.

Numerous young women propositioned me - by initially asking if I had hangouts - even sending me their telephone numbers and explicit sexual images and videos.



'SONGBIRD' McCain: US News & World Report from 1973: (before internet)

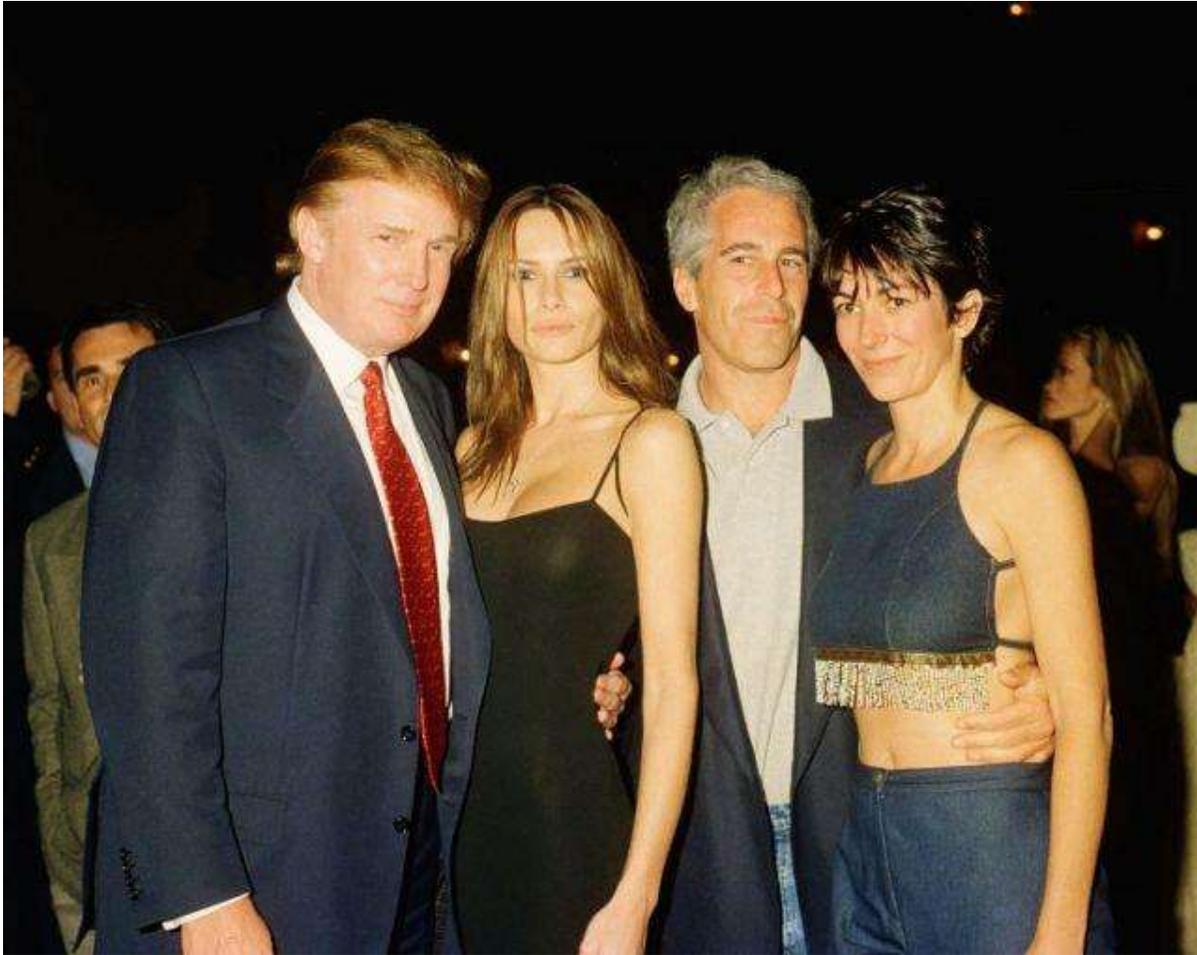
Google: "McCain in Captivity" for all you can stomach of this bogus Media Made Zero.

THE EVIDENCE – IN HIS OWN WORDS, HIS FELLOW VETERANS, AND HIS CAPTORS

Retired Army Colonel Earl Hopper, a veteran of World War II, Korea and Vietnam, contends that the information that McCain divulged classified information North Vietnam used to hone their air defense system. . . McCain told his North Vietnamese captors, "highly classified information, the most important of which was the package routes, which were routes used to bomb North Vietnam. He gave in detail the altitude they were flying, the direction, if they made a turn. . . he gave them what primary targets the United States was interested in." Hopper contends that the information McCain provided allowed the North Vietnamese to adjust their air-defenses. As result, Hopper claims, the US lost sixty percent more aircraft and in 1968, "called off the bombing of North Vietnam, because of the information McCain had given to them.

I'd call him a Yellow Bellied Sapsucking Traitor.

To try and control my program - I stopped accepting many females as friends - but it was unsuccessful - because most of the males I accepted in good faith as Facebook friends - were not interested in reading my posts - and tried to start relationships - despite my request that they read and hopefully enjoy my posts - that I regretted I didn't have time to chat with them - and that it was not a socialising site.



Despite these problems my posts were being read - and I was flat out for several weeks thanking readers.

I closed the program - mainly because of the nuisance factor - of having to deal with so many friends who only wished to chat - propositioning me - get financial help - or help to emigrate to Australia.

The hardest part was dealing with people from Gaza - who were genuinely cases of hunger and poverty - and I couldn't help them. There were also genuine cases of poverty from people in Africa. Some couldn't get work - students couldn't afford to pay the fee to sit for exams - or who couldn't continue at school because of poverty - caused of course by US destabilisation and exploitation. The governments were corrupt and not interested in helping the people. Democracy was not allowed to exist in Africa. I had mistakenly thought China may have invested in Africa - and help lift the economy.

Despite having closed the program - I was kept busy thanking those who liked my posts - when I got blocked. To get back again - I answered a puzzle correctly - but got blocked again. Apparently my correct email and password were not sufficient confirmation. It seemed I was being deliberately banned. Why? Probably because the truth is anathema to the establishment - and Zuckerberg represents American values - which are based on lies - disinformation and propaganda.

Nevertheless I am grateful to Facebook for the exposure. I did manage to publish the truth and expose the media's hypocrisy - propaganda and lies - to not enough people - but the seeds have been sewn.

Facebook is a dangerous place - particularly for young people. Unless you personally know your friends - making friends with strangers can be perilous - for Facebook is indeed a hunting ground for predators.

Most Facebook followers appear to be only interested in themselves - with no social conscience - and very few moral principles or ethical standards. Friendships are superficial.

This is not surprising in a world of economic and social decay - where many have to graft a living - because there is no government help for those in need.

Africa has been raped. The great destroyer has been the US - which has laid waste to much of the world - while hypocritically pretending to be free and democratic.

This has resulted in an increase in ghetto dwellers - an increase in crime - and incarceration - an increase in the disparity between the mega rich and poverty - and an increase in the homeless - because social welfare can't cope without a viable healthcare system.

Facebook reflected this in the attitude of its followers. It is full of selfies and selfishness - because that's all many of them have left. Are we already slaves to the New World Order? 949 words.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I decided to use Facebook to promote my essays and poetry. Purely selfish. I wasn't there to help anybody - except me .- and surprisingly I got away with some very harsh criticism of American foreign policy - of the more than seventy odd years of infamy since WW2. I was posting essays - and getting a huge number of followers - most of whom were not interested in my material - but were seeking relationships. It was hard to keep the women at bay. The young ones were the worst - from all over the world . If I were younger I would have become a Casanova or a Dun Juan - because many were beautiful babes - which surprised me - and I thought there must be a drought of young eligible men - because I was 88 years old. Anyway - eventually I had to block all women as friends - because I couldn't cope. I did have some loyal young women - who actually read - and liked - my posts. I also made friends with some Africans who - like the poor Palestinmians - were suffering from food shortages - which worsened due to the pandemic.. I regret having lost them - when Zuckerberg - or his reps - decided to block me. I did try to get back - but failed. I have been effectively blocked and have no wish to rejoin.*

AUTHOR BIO: AUTHOR'S BIO: An Australian poet and essayist - educated at Scotch College (Melbourne) and Swinburne Art School - taught art - began writing short stories - switched to writing free verse poetry and essays - with a poetry collection - Patterns of Perception - published by Augur Press (UK) in January 2015. 43 Allamanaa Blvd - Lysterfield - Victoria - Australia - 3156

Fear

By Ken W. Simpson

WHY WE LIKE IT: *Ken keeps the spirit of the 60's and early 70's alive and is acute perception of the falsehoods around us is his (and out) saving grace. This fearless social critic lives in Australia and gives us a 'down under' POV of WTF is going wrong in the world. A writer with a big heart and a bigger social conscience.*

Fear by Bob Woodward

Clockwork dummies
intentionally obtuse
eating and sleeping
mechanically
unconsciously living.

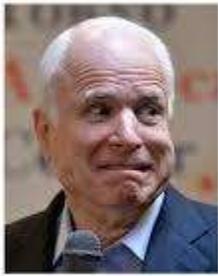
Woodward's book is easily the worst book I have ever read. It has no literary merit whatsoever and is a commentary on Trumpism in America. It is like a verbal soap opera. It is composed of transcripts of interviews, many of them meaningless - in there to fill up the book. Woodward does describe character as caricature.



He loves Mad Dog Mattis - “ramrod straight and humble”. Mattis looks directly at Trump. “We need to change what we are doing,” he said. ‘It can’t be a war of attrition. It must be a war of annihilation.” Trump liked the concept. Mattis on McCain. “No, Mr President,” said Mattis quickly. “I think you’ve got it reversed.” Woodward on McCain: “



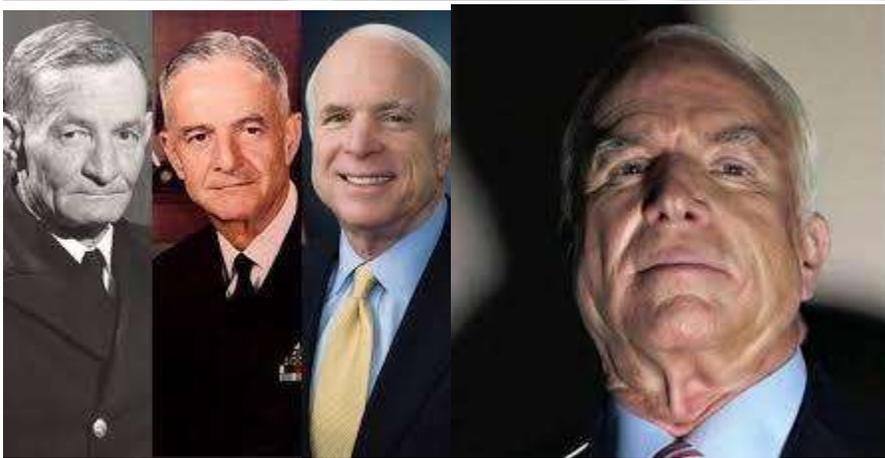
McCain turned down early release and had been brutally tortured and held five years in the Hanoi Hilton.” In reality McCain had his broken limbs repaired and was treated well because he made more than thirty propaganda broadcasts for China. He was known to the other POW’s as the ‘Songbird’.



Songbird McCain.. a spineless politically correct rino puppet!



On Obama: “A land invasion would trigger a North Korean response, likely with nuclear weapons.” This was unthinkable to Obama. In his Nobel Prize winning acceptance speech in 2009 he said. “War promised human tragedy,” and “War at some levels is an experience of human folly.”



Woodward failed to add that Obama had an even greater kill count than the sadistic and brutal George H W Bush, that he had vilified Gaddafi, destabilised Libya, had Gaddafi lynched, vilified President Assad of Syria, recruited, trained, equipped and paid ISIS to slaughter Syrians, and began the genocidal war in Yemen with Saudi Arabia - apart from standing down the rescue team of navy Seals resulting in the torture and assassination of Ambassador Stevens and his staff at Benghazi.



Woodward quotes Lindsey Graham. "And the next 9/11 is coming from where the first was." This must mean that Dick Cheney will be preparing to demolish another Twin Towers with thermite and pretend it was caused by Islamic terrorists flying aircraft into the walls of the World Trade Center and out the other side.



This is a soap opera in words. It's about characterizations, not real people. Woodward is one of the characters he eulogises.



I think he tried to write a romance about US exceptionalism and entitlement surrounded by Rex Tillerson of Exxon - the disgustingly profane Steve Bannon, Roy Cohn, President of Goldman Sachs, and the Mafia's Rudy Giuliani, as if it were all right and proper instead of a comic opera.



I don't think he meant to pillory Trump but it just happened because it couldn't be avoided, so that Woodward's Trump is a Napoleon with flaws. 420 words.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *When I bought the book - Fear - by Bob Woodward - I thought I would get an expose - in a satirical vein - of Trumpism in America. I knew of Trump as a bit of a clown - wearing what I thought was a hairpiece. I had no idea it was his pride and joy. I knew he inherited a lot of money - and that his dad was allegedly a KKK.*

I later learned the old man was as crooked as Donald. - who obviously inherited a lot of money along with his deal making scams I was appalled when I realised he was going to be the Republican candidate - who eventually beat Hillary Clinton.- much to her dismay - resulting in her smear campaign that many Americans actually still believe - called Russiagate. In a sense I was pleased he won - because Hillary as president would have been disastrous for America and the world..She scares me. No need to expound on Trump's presidency - except to say it was awful - yet not nearly as bad the Obama and Bush presidencies. Trump is a buffoon - so he is easy to lampoon - but he is also an absolutely ruthless and clever shyster. I have written numerous poems about him - the best of which I have attached in case you can use it - amidst file O..

AUTHOR BIO: See 'Facebook' in Table of Contents

GONZALES BAY—EARLY MORNING—LOW TIDE

By Joey Scarfone

WHY WE LIKE IT: *It's Creative Nonfiction but it's also prose poetry and could easily have gone to Hezekiah. Joey's artistic instincts are titanic and he is one of those rare talents who is at home in many media: graphics—see #1 in the TOC—poetry, photography, painting, music...the list goes on. We're just thrilled when this 'Renaissance Man' from Canada's west coast sends in something to read, look at and oooh and ah over. Gonzales Bay is almost like cinema verite on the page...he deftly captures the not only the goings on in the early morning life of the bay, but the spirit underneath it in prose that is the very definition of non-self conscious. We can't help but this quiet meditation...*

Five stars

GONZALES BAY-----EARLY MORNING-----LOW TIDE

There's the same hummingbird that greets me every morning. He leaves his perch, hovers in front of me and then returns to his nest in the cedar tree.

There's Watchfull Willie with his metal detector. That's not his real name....it's just what I call him. I figure he's a retired police officer and spends his time beach combing.

There' two eagles taking their watch in a fir tree that looks more like a giant bonsai plant with it's broken branches and sparse ferns.

There's two paddle boarders heading out to what looks like another couple who are snorkelling. They must be young and strong to withstand the cold ocean water. Reminds me of when I could swim in the ocean.

There's a dog fetching a stick just off shore. He can't get enough of “fetch the stick”. His owner non-chalantly munches on a sandwhich as he takes the stick from Fido and throws it back into the ocean.

There's the houses that were built on the cliff a hundred years ago.

There's “Kayak Kenny” wheeling his kayak down the ramp. 82 years old and he can still launch his own boat. God bless you Kenny.

There's a crow staring at me as he sits on the guard rail. "Got anything to eat man?" "Not this morning" I reply....besides....we're not supposed to feed the birds.....it alters their migratory patterns. "You think we're crazy enough to migrate" the crow said. "Fly 2,000 miles for some scraps in South America"? "No thanks...I'll take Canadian pizza any day.

There's the Olympic mountains peaking out from the fog bank.....so big they have their own eco-system.

There's happily married couple having a breakfast picnic. They even brought their own table cloth for the small picnic table. Egg wraps, coffee.....enjoy the view.

There's more paddle boarders heading to the shore. 'Getting busy now. I think it's time to go.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Gonzales Bay is a very picturesque place in Victoria. It is a small beach but extremely alive with wildlife. I go there regularly and leave inspired every time.*

AUTHOR BIO: Joey Scarfone lives in Victoria, BC where he owned Lazy Joe's Vinyl Emporium—a store devoted to classic vinyl. He devotes some of his time and all of his interest to poetry and music.

Ear-Bangin' (!!)

at the _____ Rescue _____

_____ M_I_S_S _____ ION

By Ormon Day

WHY WE LIKE IT: *The author admits to being influenced by Kerouac in this eye-opening on the road adventure, but we see a bit of Ken Kesey as well—how else do you explain the madness? Christian charity is a double edge sword where souls are too often exchanged for a pittance. In less than a thousand words we get a wake up brass knuckle whammy about what ‘catering to the poor’ is really like after all your dignity has stripped away. Much of the strength of this piece comes from the author’s Neo-Beat prose and its dirty honesty.*

Ear-Bangin' at the Rescue Mission

Ponderin' what Jack Kerouac wrote in “On the Road” about L.A. bein' the loneliest, most brutal American city, a jungle, know what I have to do. I'm twenty-one in '67, jobless, dejected, college grad writin' a second novel after the first got rejected. To be a literary lion, have to try on a different kind of life.

Leave our tract home in the 'burbs, get a lift to L.A., wander among skid row winos, two crumpled bucks tucked in my pocket. Work a day labor job movin' furniture, survey the lay of the urine-soaked land, sleep and eat among hundreds of desperate rescue mission denizens. Admission to the dinin' hall has its price: an angry ear-bangin' sermon from a rumped, perspirin' man of the cloth, paintin' a merciless eternity for the sordid and unsaved.

At a service, look 'round the chapel, the only guy with his head up, the rest droopin' in shame or snoozin'. A few sheddin' tears when the preacher speaks of widowed mothers waitin'

by rain-streaked windows for their prodigal sons. Narratin' a gory Crucifixion, feels like he's strafin' us with a nail gun.

Go back home, Mom sits me down with a fork and napkin.

Return in a year and a half, hopin' to find buddies to show me how to swing myself onto boxcars, inspired by Jack: "There was nowhere to go but everywhere, so just keep on rollin' under the stars."

Earn a little money pickin' elbow-sized carrots (tasteless fodder for pigs), would've sold my plasma but pale at the sight of needles. Durin' a joyless service before slurpin' split-bean soup, ease the pain of an ear-bangin' by gazin' at a sweet-lookin' soprano in the visitin' choir, drawin' her caricature on a paper scrap, holding it up toward her. Afterwards she tells me she's prayin' for my soul.

Frigid at night goin' eastward on a freight, warm myself walkin' in circles, thinkin' of her brown hair and her guidin' light.

Decade later reportin' for a paper, write about bein' down and out in Santa Ana, bunkin' and eatin' in a rescue mission, a day labor job beside a talkative guy who tells me he's tormented by lovers kissin' and teasin'. Wouldn't trust him alone with my sisters.

Snackin' on salty beer nuts and cracklings, duet with an unshaven stranger to jukebox rock songs in a smoky tavern, him tappin' a foamy glass against the bar, me drummin' a metal ashtray, him haunted by an ex-wife who left him homeless. Earnin' my grub at a storefront mission, a preacher harangues us to seek salvation by comin' forward to the altar, so we'll be Glory-bound if we croak that very night lyin' in a gutter overflowin' with cheap booze and

cigarette butts.

Assemble a beggars-can-be-choosy guide to free skid row dinin' spots, four tin cups for a mission servin' a savory fish patty, steamin' baked potato, chocolate ice cream, one cup for a mission with cold noodles, withered fowl, lifeless macaroni salad, spongy cranberry sauce. Both the best and worst have somethin' in common: a bowel-clangin', nausea-churnin', nightmare-elicitin' ear-bangin'.

Imagine Kerouac preachin' at a mission. No Pentecostal choir. William Burroughs on electric guitar, Neal Cassady on bongos, wild-haired Allen Ginsberg pumpin', fingerin' a harmonium. Slumpin' men stir when Jack says, "I like my whiskey wild!"

They shake their shaggy, greasy heads with disbelief.

"Have nuthin' to offer anybody except my own confusion." Words from his books.

"Jesus was a strange hobo who walked on water."

Men sit up, Ginsberg om-m-ms.

"A homeless man has reason to cry, everything in the world is pointed against him. Every night I still ask the Lord, 'Why?' Haven't heard a decent answer yet."

Whisperings.

"I'm right there, swimmin' the river of hardships, but I know how to swim."

Guys are nudgin' sleepin', snorin' neighbors.

"Everything belongs to me because I am poor."

Cassady raps his bongos.

"I like too many things, get confused and hung-up runnin' from one fallin' star to another till I drop."

Cassady thumps the skins to a sudden stop.

“Everything fell apart in me. How are things with you?”

Burroughs plunks lonely low notes.

“Everything’ll be all right, desolation is desolation everywhere and desolation is all we got and desolation ain’t so bad.”

Ginsberg riffs on his harmonium.

“Because I am Beat, I believe in Beatitude and that God so loved the world He gave His only begotten Son to it. I have fallen in love with you, God. Life is holy, every moment is precious. Be in love with your life every minute of it. Tonight the stars’ll be out. Don’t you know God is Pooh Bear?”

Men are risin’, helpin’ others up.

“God who is everything possesses the eye of awakenin’, like dreamin’ a long dream of an impossible task.”

Some men sway on stiff knees to the rhythm of the soft music.

“Believe in the holy contour of life. Shut up, live, travel, adventure, bless, don’t be sorry.”

Rememberin’ holy rollin’ churches from Delta and Appalachian boyhoods, a few dance in the spirit, raisin’ hands Heavenward, mumblin’ hallucinated incoherence.

“Wash your dirty dishes like you are washin’ the infant Jesus. Be crazy dumbsaint of the mind. Ah the mad hearts of all of us!” The harmonium hummin’, Jack closes his blue eyes, steeples his fingers, bows to his congregation of dharma bums.

Chapel doors slide open, men with blessed ears flash smiles of broken mottled teeth, inhalin’ and exhalin’ the nostalgic aroma of buttered loaves and fried fishes, sacramental wine.

#

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *In my early twenties, without money to finance my wanderlust, I sought adventures that only cost a few bucks. One of them was a descent into L.A.'s Skid Row, where I hoped to find buddies who would show me how to hop freight trains eastward. Eating and sleeping in rescue missions run by Christian organizations, I was struck by the cruelty of the browbeating sermons I heard in exchange for split-bean soup, stale bread and a creaky dormitory bunkbed. Reflecting on my experiences from my mid-seventies, I found myself wondering what words Jack Kerouac would've delivered to an audience of men down on their luck, so I culled through his words to create his sermon. I wanted to show readers what Christian love looks like.*

AUTHOR BIO: My life has been pretty much shaped by wanderlust. I've thumbed on six continents, spent two months canoeing the Mississippi from St. Paul to New Orleans, visited with cocaine-smoking *gringo* inmates in a Bolivian prison, witnessed a sky burial in Tibet (two corpses, a multitude of vultures), and hopped freights out of L.A. My prose and poetry have been published by such journals as *Creative Nonfiction*, *Third Coast*, *Potomac Review*, *Portland Review* and *Los Angeles Review*.

Minxy Muffins 000

By Joshua Beggs

WHY WE LIKE IT: *Nudge, nudge, wink, wink, sexual innuendoes can often wear on the receptive ear because they are usually overplayed. But in Beggs recipe he uses just the right measure of cheeky double-entendres to make every word in this saucy ‘Ode to Muffins’ a post-Keatsian morsel of yummy delight. The expression ‘food is love’ is given a light-handed erotic flavor that will keep you coming back for more. Grandma never baked them like this! Bon Appetit!*

Minxy Muffins

I think I’m in love. With muffins, I mean. Not one muffin in particular—*all* of them. Blueberry, banana, bran, buttermilk, and all the less alliterative flavors, too. I don’t discriminate. They’re the unsung beauties of the breakfast buffet. They don’t flaunt around in flaky, lacy underthings, like the danishes; they aren’t unwholesome, like the donuts. Muffins are elegant. Graceful. Refined.

But that doesn’t mean they don’t know how to please.

Muffins make me *melt* when they melt in my mouth. That glistening skin, those pliable bodies, those beautiful, *beautiful* curves! I could spend all day nipping at their soft muffin tops, grasping their *firm, round bottoms!* Fresh muffins are sumptuous, all moist and warm, but give

them time to get chilly, and, oh-ho, then they'll *really* seduce me. They just *love* to tease, shutting themselves in my freezer by the dozens, playing all tough and hard-to-get. They know that anticipation is passion's sweetest glaze. And when they finally relent and get all heated up...*mmm!* There is nothing—*nothing*—like stepping into a hot bath with a muffin that once treated you oh-so-coldly, feeling it press itself against your lips and tongue while the steam fogs up the mirror.

I *am* in love. With muffins. Not one in particular. All of them. And I'm okay with that, and the muffins are, too. We're all down with polygamuffiny. Individually-wrapped, or a whole box at once—a baker's dozen, variety pack, every Sunday midmorning—their wrappers slide off just the same, and they don't mind mixing crumbs with different flavors. Not that I ever leave any crumbs leftover. I always lick my fingers clean.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Struggling with an eating disorder for over half a decade can make for a strange relationship with food. For me, eating has at times felt like the guiltiest of pleasures, verging on shameful whenever I'm caught indulging in it while in the presence of others. Loving food is a completely natural instinct, but in a culture where six-packs and thigh-gaps are equated with individual worth, it sometimes feels like showing any enjoyment in eating has become as taboo as sex in Victorian England. Reading the piece in its completed form, I can see it as my attempt to put words to this weird snack-shaming I feel while simultaneously poking fun at the culture that has made vanity a social obligation.*

But in all honesty, on a less philosophical and artsy-fartsy note, the only thought I had in mind when I started writing "Minxy Muffins" is that I felt like a particularly goofy goober that day, and that, heck, I really like muffins. If it makes my readers reconsider how their body image and sense of self-worth tie into their enjoyment of food (and life in general), then, sure, that's great—all I really wanted to achieve with the piece, though, was to make people smile. Giggles are also acceptable.

AUTHOR BIO: Previously published in The Medical Care Blog, with forthcoming works in Allium and MAYDAY, Joshua Beggs is a 2019 graduate from Hendrix College and a current MD candidate at Kansas University Medical Center. In his free time, he volunteers as a Spanish interpreter at his local free clinic, makes a podcast (which his mom says is awesome), and maintains an ongoing writing portfolio at his very creatively named website, joshuabeggs.com.

H.U.M.A.N MAINTENANCE

. . . by ed friedman

WHY WE LIKE IT: *Hodie mihi cras tibi.*

Human Maintenance

2462 words

It was as if all my body parts got together to give me a terrible surprise. Unlike major league baseball owners, body parts can't be taken to court for collusion. Turning fifty was much more dramatic than I ever expected. Up to that point I was oblivious to the idea of getting older. There were a few preliminary signs but somehow, they didn't faze me: the need for reading glasses at 45 didn't bother me since practically everyone I knew had been wearing glasses or contacts for some time; even my receding hair line was something I could ignore. It wasn't until I found myself in a friend's bathroom (with more mirrors than I find necessary), that I saw what I can only describe as a large hole in the back of my head. My head was still there (I know because I instinctively went to touch it) but there was this vacant spot where hair used to be. I kept touching the empty area as if my eyes were deceiving me but there was no avoiding the truth-I was well on my way to being bald. You may ask, how could you not have known? The truth is I stopped looking at the back of my head as a teenager after which I kept my hair either too long or

too short to make a difference what the back looked like. Before that I checked out the back of my head in hopes of forming a “d.a” (If you’re too young to know what that is, google the movies “Cry-Baby” or “Hairspray”). So, if I avoided the homes of my designed-challenged friends I wouldn’t have to look at the back of my head and could successfully evade the entire issue.

Ironically, or by nature’s vendetta, as I lost hair where I hoped to retain it, I found myself sprouting hair like a ChiaPet in places I had absolutely no interest in doing so. Seemingly overnight my ears, nose and eyebrows started to look like the Brazilian rain forest. One might say “the Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away”. I say how about the Lord just leaveth everything where the hell it is. I see no biological imperative for this phenomenon, and it benefits no one—except the folks that sell hair replacement methods and electronic nose hair clippers, a device which, I might add, was given to me by my loving partner. Now if we’re getting ready to go out, I’m likely to hear, “honey, you might want to check your ears and your nose”. My reply to the first time this question was asked (“no problem, they’re still there”) was met with the tilted head, and a silent “be good and take your medicine “look.

I can avoid facing the hairy thing I’m about to be if I just don’t put my glasses on. Reading glasses were a small but annoying concession to my age. What has occurred since is the realization that this is a progressive condition and the three for ten dollars Walgreens glasses have given way to a prescription for a pair that allow me to complete the Times crossword (OK, work on the Times crossword) and read the obituaries in the vain hope that I’ve outlived someone I actually know. These glasses also allow me to read advertisements for medications used to treat conditions I never heard of with side effects that are worse than the disease. The first cholesterol medication I was given had terrific results. However subsequent blood tests

revealed that if I stayed on this regimen my liver would explode. Out with that medication and in with a weight loss program which subsequently had the effect of reducing my cholesterol. So that's taken care of, right? Not so fast. Some years later, chest pains that wouldn't go away sent me to an emergency room. Now before I go any further, I should inject some background. My family history is a red flag for every doctor I see. My mother died at thirty-one with stomach cancer and my father died at fifty-three from a heart attack which followed two strokes.

Naturally, everybody wants to test me for everything so it was no surprise when the emergency room doctor said, "with your medical history (every doctor who talks to me begins with those four words) we should admit you for some testing". So now I'm lying in the emergency room, wired up like Clockwork Orange for about six hours when I was unplugged wheeled to a room and replugged. After being woken at regular intervals (to see if I was alive?), I was sent for an echocardiogram during which the person administering the test had an argument with one of the doctors. It was of no small concern to me that someone administering a test which would have life altering consequences would be distracted and pissed off. Therefore, given the choice of taking a stress test then or the following week, I took the latter option.

The point of a stress test seems to be the answer to the question: How long can you jog on a treadmill at increasing speeds, with wires attached to you, before you scream or drop dead? I'm sure it was a bitter disappointment to the doctors that I didn't die and was too busy gasping for air to scream. The result of all the testing is that I've been prescribed high blood pressure, and cholesterol medication and, in case of chest pains, nitroglycerin. The comment, "you probably won't need this, it's just in case", didn't inspire confidence. Instead, I imagined myself in a 40's noir thriller where the wife can save her rich older husband or let him die by not giving him the nitro. Fortunately, my economic status exempts me from being a player in this scenario. The

conclusion was that I should do something about my stress. Even though I was not suicidal or psychotic I still qualified for a low-level anti-depressant, which, while not preventing the nighttime bathroom trips, allows me to fall back to sleep instead of spending the rest of the night worrying about why I can't fall back to sleep.

My current medications are successfully keeping my heart from exploding and will continue to work, according to my cardiologist. Never, in my life, did I think I would utter the words "my cardiologist". I always thought phrases like that only came from people on buses on the way home from Atlantic City. But in fact, I do have a cardiologist, and a nephrologist, urologist (more on that later) ophthalmologist a gastroenterologist, a psychiatrist, and an internist. This total has only recently exceeded the number of doctors I see for my teeth. My current team consists of a periodontist, endodontist, oral surgeon, and general dentist.

The truth is I spent the better part of my life not caring for my teeth. I had the occasional cavity and had a couple of teeth pulled but for the most part I was lucky (or so I thought). I didn't know what dental floss was. But in my late forties' things started hurting. So, I took the recommendation of a friend and went to a new dentist and was introduced into the wonderful world of root canals. To compound my problem (and as punishment for neglecting my teeth for so long) my dentist turned out to be not very efficient. Not learning my lesson, I asked someone else for recommendations, and visited Dr. X in the posh neighborhood of Manhattan's Upper East Side. Once inside however I thought I stepped into the basement of someone who lost a suit for malpractice. I did my best to ignore the trappings and chose to conclude that despite the address, the doctor was unpretentious. After a thorough work up, he concluded I needed massive work on my gums before he could even begin to work on the mess that had become my teeth. Of some concern to me beyond the months of pain I had to look forward to, was the cost. When Dr.

X told me how much my good dental health would cost, I went into a state of shock. It was about two thirds of what I had paid for my co-op. My conversation with Dr. X ended when he said, “Just think of this as if you’re buying a car”, to which I replied, “I think of this as the cost of my next 3 cars”.

My (then) girlfriend had been urging me to see her long-time dentist in suburban New Jersey. Still in shock I finally agreed to brave the flaming sword over the George Washington Bridge and see Dr. G for no other reason than to tell me if my choice really was to live in my current lifestyle with no teeth or to be homeless and have all my teeth. The bad news was Dr. X was right in his diagnosis-my teeth and gums were a mess and things would get worse. The not so bad news was not having a Park Avenue dentist would save me a lot of money. Not that it would be cheap by any means. I decided to try to keep whatever teeth I could. Thus, began another round of root canals and four gum surgeries before we could begin to visit the land of bridges and crowns. About three years and a Toyota Camry later I had healthy gums and teeth that would stay in my mouth. I dutifully have my teeth cleaned every three months and floss regularly. So now I’m all finished with gums and root canals and surgery, right? Wrong. After a few years of relative peace in my mouth war broke out again. Pain came out of nowhere, growths appeared on my gums and I was once again on the road to pain and destitution.

I was fortunately distracted by another set of medical miseries. Apparently, another byproduct of turning 50 for some men (and by some men I mean me) is the dreaded enlarged prostate. While not life threatening, the effect of an enlarged prostate is that the bladder doesn’t empty, hence a tremendous increase of trips to the bathroom. Eventually the 2 and 3 interruptions of sleep each night became if not tolerable, certainly expected. Where this really puts a crimp in your life is the knowledge that humiliation and wet pants are just a bad traffic jam away. Having once again

ignored this problem in its early stages, the anxiety, and fear just exacerbated the problem (did I mention that stress just increases the urgency?). My first trip to the urologist was educational: “no coffee, no caffeine, no chocolate” (Kill me now). Nevertheless, I was determined to see if a simple diet change would change my life. No such luck. The next step was medication. This was easy, I thought. “Let me tell you about the side effects”, Dr. F said. “You may experience a dry mouth, and...well...let’s just say you won’t be able to star in any porn movies”. This was the doctor’s delicate way of telling me that the medication would preclude the production of sperm at ejaculation. Since I had long retired from the porn business this wasn’t an issue. (Of course, I’m kidding). While the doctor was finished letting me down easy with respect to my future in the cinema, he also expressed the need to make sure I didn’t have bladder cancer. To do that, I would have to have a cystoscopy. This consists of inserting a tube into the penis, and since I was almost blacked out from the pain, I have no idea what the doctor was doing during this procedure. My only recollection is of him trying to give me instructions (mainly to keep me from hyperventilating and moving) during which he referred to me as “sir”. Now I’m all for civility and doctors respecting patients, but I was struck by the fact that here I was half naked and lying there with a tube up my penis and we weren’t even on a first name basis. I was sure there wouldn’t be a second date. When the agony finally ended, it didn’t. I had to survive two days of pain whenever I urinated, which was...well you get the idea. I continued the medication for some time during which the sum of benefits I received were, the side effects.

Also, in my early fifties my regular doctor uttered the familiar intro, “given your family history” and added “you should have a colonoscopy”. Being sufficiently scared and filling a void with no one digging around my mouth or my crotch I faced up to the inevitable. The good news about this procedure is that the patient is given an anesthetic, which for all intents and purposes renders

one unconscious. Generally, there are no after-effects except little grogginess which goes away when the anesthetic wears off. The bad news (you just knew there was going to be bad news, didn't you) is that in order for the doctors to ogle your insides, your insides have to be clear. That means you must spend the better part of the 24 hours before the procedure "emptying" everything inside you. To achieve this, you're given a hideous tasting concoction to drink at six-hour intervals, along with instructions to eat nothing except Jell-O (not the red kind) and drink only clear liquids. You will spend the next eighteen hours as a prisoner to your bathroom passing everything, including, it seems, all your internal organs. If the preparation sounds worse than the test you have a complete understanding of the colonoscopy.

All these measures make trivial the conditions with which I've been living for a long time. One is a bad lower back for which I see a chiropractor who mercifully sticks nothing into me and whose treatments are not at all invasive. Apparently if I keep my weight down and move around occasionally, I should be all right. But every once and a while I feel a twinge back there; or some pain from where I had the hernia surgery (at age fifty-one); or foot cramps, constipation, tooth pain, gas, allergic reaction, or just some pain that comes out of nowhere, lasts for thirty seconds then disappears. I remember telling the psychiatrist, "The biggest difference between being thirty and fifty-five is that when you're thirty you take your body for granted. You just don't question how it works or that someday it won't. Now every day it feels like I'm aware of a new body part and how it functions or doesn't." He replied, "If you're over fifty and you wake up and nothing hurts-you've died in your sleep".

For some reason I find this terribly comforting.

-Ed Friedman

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *This piece was inspired by my personal experience of at once being terrified of all things medical, and the unwavering determination not to have my fears contribute to a shortened life span. These fears are exacerbated by my parents dying at thirty-one and fifty-three. I've been wanting this to be published for some time. In the years subsequent to its writing, it has become even clearer to me that just keeping this body running, or to paraphrase Shakespeare, "whilst this machine is to him", is a full-time job. However, I do hope the humor in this comes through. I do find some of the absurdities of our health care system, funny. Okay, truthfully, I'm just looking for the humor in these situations to ease my terror. But seriously, aging is a privilege that gives us time to mark our existence here. If the price is fighting through fears and anxiety, I say, pay it.*

AUTHOR BIO: Ed's prose work has been published in The Bronx Memoir Project (Vols I and III) and on-line in Flash Fiction Magazine, The Haven, Submittable, Center for Creative Writing, and Crow's Feet. His short plays have been staged throughout the NY metropolitan area and around the country. Ed's anthology Short Play for Long Lives is published by Blue Moon Plays. His monologue Hannah appears in Best Women's Monologues of 2019. His monologues are also published in the anthologies of Mother/Daughter Monologues: MidLife Catharsis and Urgent Maturity, published by the International Centre for Women Playwrights.

DO(!!!) Try Us Again

By James Gallant

WHY WE LIKE IT: *Every writer has their own way of dealing with **rejection!** (we prefer the kinder, gentler 'declined' here @ FOTD) in their own way. Some tough it out, others hit the bottle and there's always suicide. In any (every?) case it's invariably unpleasant because as writers we can't help but identify with our writing and when that gets dumped by pitiless editors and clam-hearted first readers we feel like we've been personally spurned (humiliated, wronged, savaged and wounded also come to mind.) But those of us who read Eckhart Tolle also know there's an upside to this—although for the life of us we just can't pin it down this very second. All of us at Fleas are published writers and we've all had our work trashed by idiots who ought to know better. If you still can't shake off the blues, DO read Do Try Us Again and take comfort in the fact that being gunny-sacked can, in hindsight, show its funny side. We published the author's mordantly hilarious A Scatological Tale in Issue 8 and it's a pleasure to feature him again! Now put your voodoo doll down, cap the poison bottle and DO NOT mail the envelope marked EDITOR containing that suspicious white powder...your publishing debut is just around the corner...please scroll down. (Spacing is author's own.)*

Do Try Us Again

James Gallant

From editor Veronica Geng, The New Yorker, to James Gallant, April 28, 1977:

Dear James Gallant:

Some of us here have just read your “The Antelope’s Confession” in *Transatlantic Review*, and think it’s beautiful and funny. As far as can tell from our files, you have not been submitting stories to us. But we would like it very much if you were to think of us when you have a new story.

*

James Gallant to Veronica Geng, May 3, 1977:

I had, as a matter of fact, submitted “The Antelope’s Confession” to *The New Yorker* and received in return a printed rejection slip.

Find enclosed “The Cock” and “Dee and Kelley.”

*

From a *Paris Review* editor, June 1977

Thanks for nudging us concerning the whereabouts of your “Notes of the Night Janitor.” Lo and behold, your manuscript has surfaced after all this time! It had somehow deposited itself in an obscure corner of Mr. Plimpton’s study beneath a catcher’s mitt, to be unearthed by me only this week. Although we are returning it, we found much to admire. We would have preferred, however, a story with a plot to your sectioning of short pieces. Do try us again.

*

Veronica Geng, The New Yorker, to James Gallant, July 2, 1977: We do make mistakes here. I think turning down “The Antelope’s Confession” was one of them. Thank you for sending “The Cock” and “Dee and Kelley.”

I’m afraid we didn’t admire them as much as “The Antelope’s Confession.” “The Cock” struck us as somewhat arched [sic] and calculated. I was impressed by “Dee and Kelley,” but uneasily so; it didn’t quite win my confidence. The trouble, I think, is that the strong feeling you have for these characters, which comes across clearly in your letter, doesn’t come through the story.

I hope you don't feel you've been subjected to a come-on, and then let down. We continue to be very interested in your writing, and I hope that when you have a new story, you'll show it to us first.

*

A letter from an acquaintance, Chicago writer Maxine Chernoff, July 16, 1977:

I like your "The Marriage." It's well-written, funny, and imaginative. You'll be happy to know I have some big friends in small places. One, John Mort, has started a little magazine called *Uncle*. I know he'd like your work. He attended the Iowa Workshop in Fiction, but knew the wrong people, so didn't get very far. If you've exhausted lucrative markets, send pieces to John.

The New Yorker continues to tease me, as probably it does you. Mort has made it there twice with humorous pieces, and swears we should persist. The problem is they want "proper" stories. I mean, if your Alice in "The Marriage" were a poet and wore gloves from L.L. Bean, they might publish you. You're far too funny, and you're not Donald Barthelme, their resident humorist, so that's two strikes against you.

I recommend also *Mississippi Review*. They seem to be open to imaginative work and recently took a piece of mine after about a year of sending back and forth. Paul [Hoover, Maxine's husband] is sending a book of poems to dozens of small presses who all love his work, and have no \$\$\$. No money and lots of friends ahead of you, no matter how much better you might be. Of course the major presses are just about hopeless, and university presses publish very uneven lists, often very boring.

*

From Veronica Geng at The New Yorker, to Gallant:

Three of us here read “Letters to Andrea Odradeksi” with interest constantly undermined by puzzlement. We felt teased. We all felt you weren’t simply writing as parody, but we didn’t know much beyond that. Perhaps there’s something missing from the tone that might at least slightly indicate to us how to read this? I don’t, heaven knows, mean that you should nudge the reader in the ribs all the time. But you must, after all, intend us to feel or see *something* as a result of what you’ve written, or while we’re reading it. You’re writing with authority, you’re not just throwing words up into the air and asking us to make what we will of them.

But what do you have in mind? Can you tell me?

Do you like Barthelme?...

*

From Maxine Chernoff to Gallant:

Paul and I just got our proofs for pieces in the *Mississippi Review*, as presumably you did for your “Gold,” so it looks as if we’ll all be in the same issue. I feel like we just won the lottery or something. I’m trying to write prose poems and be a good mommy to a madly sexual five year old who threatens to kill me in various ways--while grading papers by Nigerian tribesmen, Vietnamese boat people, and Russian dissidents. Do you know how sad it is to have to fail a Vietnamese boat person?

*

DeWitt Henry, editor of Ploughshares to James Gallant, March 2, 1978;

I apologize for the long delay. I just haven’t been able to make up my mind about “Dee and Kelley.” It is *good*, oddly convincing, subtle, imaginative and wry. My problem, and it is my problem, is that I can’t gauge beyond that, *how* good, and with passing time, as issues here have

gradually taken shape, we've maybe settled for easier choices; but on the strength of those choices now, and also what's fair to you, it's best to say a reluctant no.

*

Carol Bergé, author and editor of *Center*, in accepting Gallant's story, "*Round*," April 4, 1980:

You're beautiful. I love the story....You do remind me of me.

*

Peter Bricklebank, editor of Fiction, to James Gallant, September 4, 1982

I saw your "Dee and Kelley" some months ago, and when Lyn moved on recently, and I picked up the reins, I read it again. Firstly, let me apologize for the delay. I feel particularly sorry in the case of "Dee and Kelley," for it is good; unfortunately, I don't think it is for *Fiction*. It's obviously one of those infuriatingly awkward pieces that, if they don't quite defy classification, do defy finding a home.

*

From Stanley Lindberg editor of The Georgia Review, November 18, 1985:

I thought you already had an official letter of acceptance for "Reviewing *American, Land of Faeries*," but my staff assures me I never sent one. After arguing futilely that it had been misfiled by the faeries, I conceded to write this second letter. You can file it with the original which I am convinced will eventually make it through the mails. In any case, you piece has not only been accepted, it is at the printers.

*

From a friend, Taylor Stoehr, University of Massachusetts, executive editor of Paul Goodman's works:

I thought you wanted criticism, and that's what I offered in my last. I see you generally as a more confident and accomplished writer than, apparently, you do. Send me no more attacks on yourself, whether by the likes of Fathead [an editor who had rejected Gallant's work] or by yourself. UP! UP! as Beckett's hero says to Lucky in *Godot*. You are obviously in love with your life, whatever you say about it. And by the way, you ought to forget about *The Georgia Review*, and such like, and aim for *The New Yorker* with your pieces.

*

Carol Bergé, editor of Center, in response to a letter from Gallant:

It's a peculiar ambiguity you present, your evident lust to be published in a magazine [her *Center*] you say is "awful." I realize one's reputation in academia [Gallant was working as a janitor] counts as much as daring or even quality. Perhaps *Center* was your first encounter with innovative writing and you have gone into the sort of shock or anger many people suffer when their rigid tenets are threatened by change or something diff. from what they are accustomed to. I had that reaction in the early Fifties when confronted with the Beats.... I got really furious with them, But then I realized...that I was dealing with creatives of a high intelligence and sentience, and I shut up and started to make room for something. I wish men knew how to make room for new life, the way women do. The tissues need not tear when admitting new life to the world, though there is always some resistance and some pain.

You may be good, but you're not *that* good. Believe it.

*

From an editor, *Studia Mystica*, to Gallant, 1986

What a fascinating story your “Dee and Kelley.” I read it not only with interest, but real enjoyment. However, it is just not quite right for *Studia Mystica*. Those words sound familiar, but they are true. Your story is in the tradition of the occult, and that is something we are staying far away from. But we would like to see more of your work. Perhaps you have something that is more in line with our interests?

*

Gallant to Mary Giles, Dec. 29, 1986:

You remark that my story is “in the tradition of the occult,” and that you are “staying far away from” that tradition. But a person might well find my story instructive where “staying away from the occult” is concerned, since it is, after all, a cautionary tale. Buddhists say that at a certain stage in their discipline “occult” phenomena turn up very regularly--an indication of serious levels of spirituality having been attained, even if such phenomena are not to be taken seriously. Moreover, John Dee--both the historical figure and my character--placed his occultism within the framework of Christian orthodoxy.

[No response to this letter.]

*

From the editor of Rhino, April 1, 1987

I am pleased that you are happy we have accepted your story, “Eric’s Vacuum Cleaner,” but you used a phrase that caused me some concern. When you made reference to your “nip-and-tuck” economic situation, you may just have been commenting on the hard times that affect us all. If, however, you were conveying that you expect to be paid for your story, I may have disappointing news for you.

*

From Alice Turner, fiction editor at Playboy:

What a wonderful story, your “Won’t You Come Home, Bill Bailey”--how strange and interesting. And what a cool customer you were!

It doesn’t really work as a *Playboy* story but thank you for letting us see it.

*

From a friend, poet Geoffrey Gardner, Aug 10, 1996:

Everyone I know who writes well, and for real (unless they are established “names” as one says) has the same experience as you. It gets harder all the time, as we get further and further into the academic licensing of writers every year, with more and more writers produced, and the Seven Possible Manners of writing more firmly entrenched. And such people run the little magazines, more and more, as outlets for the licensed. You write better and better all the time, and therefore all too well and authentically.

*

A 1996 letter from the New York agent interested in marketing Gallant’s stories, and his novel-in-process, *The Big Bust at Tyrone’s Rooming House: a Novel of Atlanta*.

Glad to hear you’re seriously considering the possibility of making money with your writing, because your writing is certainly good enough to deserve it. There’s no reason why writers with half the talent of yours should be raking in money hand over fist while you’re not. At this point in your career, I think it’s just a matter of positioning yourself correctly--which is why I wanted to wait for the novel before showing you around in New York. *Marx and the Faeries* is good, but it’s a collection, and they are notoriously difficult to sell.

I feel your writing is very strong--in your authentic dialogue, your sense of pacing, your ability to keep a certain distance in what could be uncomfortable situations, and your sense of humor. Your sense of tragedy, I feel, is lurking beneath the surface, and needs to be brought forth here and there.

I would caution about going on too long about too little. Of course, this is a bit tricky, because many of your stories concern towns in which nothing much happens.

*

Letter composed by the New York agent working with Gallant, October 1996, sent to twenty magazines (The New Yorker, Playboy, Granta, Esquire, Hudson Review, Paris Review, etc.):

Here are new stories from James Gallant, a superb Southern writer with a great feel for irony and understatement. He has had work in *North American Review*, *Press*, *Georgia Review*, *Massachusetts Review*, *Mississippi Review*, *Story Quarterly*, *Transatlantic Review*, and *Exquisite Corpse*. He's also made the "Distinguished 100" list in *The Best American Short Stories*. I will soon be going out with his collection to publishers, and am showing you a selection of five of his stories in advance.

*

From John Yow, editor at Longstreet Press, to Gallant: February 17, 1997

Thanks for your query regarding your collection, *Marx and the Faeries*, but it doesn't sound like a good prospect for Longstreet. As you no doubt know (and as I know from having read your "On Leaving the World" in *The Georgia Review*) your work is not really targeted to the general audience that our sales people believe Longstreet needs to cultivate. I might mention that the *GR* piece (which I thoroughly enjoyed, by the way) was brought to my attention by

fiction writer Mary Hood. Since she liked it so much, maybe she would be pleased to recommend your work to her editor at Knopf or her agent?"

*

From Geoffrey Gardner to Gallant:

Sorry to hear Longstreet's not interested in your book, and about your tumble off the ladder. How's the house-renovating going otherwise? Maybe if Knopf doesn't want your book, you can build a deck for them, or repair their floors. I've read and enjoyed your "Poor Man's Cruise to the Bahamas." I especially like that upside-down clock declaring "lowdown midnight or hangdog noon."

As alternatives to probably futile attempts to get police attention to your Atlanta neighborhood crime problem, I'm sympathetic to self-policing efforts. However, I'm ambivalent about that pistol-packin' mama you describe who patrols your Atlanta neighborhood with its crack-cocaine sellers round about midnight. And I think if I were to accept the invitation of your ex-Green Beret neighbor to roam the streets at night with him and his handy Glock, I'd have trouble keeping my cookies down.

*

From the New York agent to Gallant, February, 1997:

I hope all is well, and that this novel you are working on is coming along. All but five of the magazines to which I submitted your stories have responded negatively, and I have to say I'm not overly optimistic about our chances at the remaining five. Since it's been over five months, I think they're just being annoyingly slow.

I enclose surplus Xeroxes that might come in handy if you want to send the pieces to other magazines.

*

Prairie dogs are rodents reviled by developers and ranchers in Aurora, Colorado, where the literary magazine *Prairie Dog* (previously known as Infinity Limited) was published. The magazine's acceptance of Gallant's "Hard Times at Diddle Motors" was accompanied by a legal document to be signed by the author:

"You warrant that you are the sole owner of the work; that you have full legal power to enter into this agreement; that the work is original; that you have not previously entered into an agreement with respect to the work that would conflict with this agreement; and that the work does not violate the right of any third party. You hereby grant *Prairie Dog* one-time publishing rights, with an option to reprint once in future collections. In compensation for your grant of rights and warranties hereunder, *Prairie Dog* agrees to deliver within thirty days of publication, and you agree to accept, two copies of the issue in which your work appears."

"Hard Times at Diddle Motors" appeared as the featured story in the issue of *Prairie Dog* that proved to be its last.

*

From an editor at W.W. Norton and Company, New York and London: Aug 29, 1998:

Please excuse the delay in getting back to you. We have had a chance to review the sample chapters of your book, *Marx and the Faeries*, and we would like to see more of your work. Please send us the full manuscript whenever it is convenient.

*

From the editor at W.W. Norton and Company, November, 1998:

I found your perspective unique and your style to be pleasingly literate. However, I think this work is a bit too subjective to really work on our list. You have set yourself up with a giant project, Mr. Gallant, to write a book about an illusory society that you and all your readers are living in the midst of.

I'm just not sure I understand exactly what you are trying to say.

*

From an editor at Roundabout Press to whom Gallant had sent *Marx and the Faeries*:

Apologies for this slap-dash response [on the back of a manuscript page]. I'm away from my desk, but wanted to tell you that you write so well--terrific verbal energy--but it's not quite right for our press. Your book would seem a better fit at one of the big New York houses.

*

From the executive editor of the University of Illinois Press, concerning Gallant's Marx and the Faeries: December 1998

You've published in some very interesting journals. You're proposing a collection of already published essays in your *Marx and the Faeries*. This is an age in which the book-buying culture has shrunk to the point where publishing solid monographs is almost impossible. Works made up primarily of previously published short works like yours are even more problematic; and academics are, of course, looking primarily for books useful to their existence in the academic bureaucracy, and seem mainly to be teaching students how to exist *in* the academic bureaucracy.

Your “creative non-fiction” might ultimately make a more sensible thing to publish, of course, from the point of view of the good of the culture. But there’s the tough question, can we afford to do so?

*

From Beggar’s Press, Publisher of Unique Books and Periodicals, and home of Raskolnikov’s Cellar:

We’re so sorry about the delay with your manuscript, *Marx and the Faeries*. Here’s what happened: One of our staff put a huge box containing over 200 unprocessed [sic] manuscripts in a back room by mistake. She thought falsely that they had been read and processed. Some of them had not even been opened yet. We are as quickly as possible reading and processing them. If you have not yet received yours, you soon will. We hope this will not interfere with our relationship in the future. Excellent writers and poets like you are the one asset that sets us apart from other publications.

*

From Geoffrey Gardner, concerning Gallant’s novel The Big Bust at Tyrone’s Rooming House: a Novel of Atlanta:

My high esteem for the book and the reasons I esteem it can only mean it’s going to have a rough time in the wide world. The trouble is, it’s neither a simple entertainment nor a weighty, hefty ARTWORK. But more than that I think the combination of subjects--race, race relations, drugs, sex, and crime--with your attitude of compassionate generosity mixed with gently mocking and self-mocking wry humor--are what very few will want to take in or be able to

comprehend. The so-called politically correct will be will be made nervous by your frankness and accuracy of observation, and will retreat into suspecting the book is racist, which it is not.

*

New York agent, having shown Gallant's *The Big Bust* "all around New York"- unsuccessfully-- Grace Paley and Robert Nichols, owners of the small non-profit New England press Glad Day Books were showing interest in publishing it in 2001. The agent, informed of this, responded:

“The issue is 1) should we keep the book available (i.e. never printed) if a big publisher should ever want it, even two or three years down the road? I'd hate to see you sign away or tie up any rights, and then finally we get our break somewhere else. It might be better to put it in a drawer and wait three or four or five years, and then try again with a traditional publisher.”

*

From Gallant in 2001 to Grace Paley and Robert Nichols, who had agreed to publish his novel:

“I had assumed, since my book has an Atlanta setting, and deals with local issues, especially the crack-cocaine trade, we'd certainly get a review in the local *Journal-Constitution*. The book editor there tells me not to count on it, since they are receiving as many as two hundred books a day, and publish only two or three reviews per week.

“I have a contract with [my agent] who was unable to place the book. One way or the other, he knows he's unlikely to make a penny on *The Big Bust*, but would like to examine my contract with Glad Day, in the event a major press should want to scoop up the book after your publishing it--or maybe Time-Warner decided to make a quirky movie of it. My first person narrator would have to be a star. (My daughter suggests Nicholas Cage for the role.)

*

Nichols to Gallant:

Contract?? Us?

*

Gallant to Nichols:

There's a woman working at the Emory University campus bookstore here who used to work for B. Dalton. I asked her if book signings sell books. "Yes," she said, "if you don't just sit there behind a stack of books, but engage passers-by with a song and dance."

I told her I used to sell vacuum cleaners.

"You could do it," she said.

*

Atlanta Journal-Constitution review, 2004:

James Gallant's novel "The Big Bust at Tyrone's Rooming House" (Glad Day Books, \$18 paperback) takes a mostly lighthearted look at life in Atlanta's Grant Park neighborhood, where the author lives. The narrator is a white, middle-aged former professor who spends his days puttering around his yard. As a result, he finds himself frequently interacting with his neighbors, mostly retirees and a wandering cast of addicts, dealers and prostitutes.

*

Nichols to Gallant:

[An employee with the outfit warehousing Glad Day and other small press books in New England, here named "Pat"] tells me that things had changed in the book distribution business. She's still trying to figure it out. There are, I gather, basically two distributors remaining, Baker

and Taylor, and Ingram, and most local bookstores order from them. Very efficient, simplifies stocking and bookkeeping. If we want to get our books onto the shelves Pat clearly felt that we ought to go with them. However, these distributors want 55% of the sales price, and that wouldn't leave much for the press or our writers. She recommended doubling our prices. I told her we weren't in it for the money.

*

From a second New York agent to Gallant, April 1, 2008, concerning his novel *Whatever Happened to Debbie and Phil?* (later renamed *Whatever Happened to Ohio?*):

Thank you for sending me the pages from your novel. I enjoyed reading them. I was intrigued by the premise of your story, and I liked the way you introduced your characters. Unfortunately, though I thought your story had a lot to offer the reader, I had trouble connecting emotionally. Therefore, I do not feel confident that I could....

*

From an editor at Tupelo Press to Gallant concerning *Whatever Happened to Ohio?* Sept. 14, 2011:

Thank you for sending the first 107 pages of your novel, and we apologize for having taken so longer to respond....We're very grateful for having had the chance to inhabit and explore the world of your characters. We're sorry not to be taking it, for we admired the intelligence at work here, and found a lot of charm. In the end, though, the humor was too broad for us. This is a strong work and we expect that it will soon find a home elsewhere, if it hasn't already done so.

*

From an editor at Monkey Puzzle Press to Gallant, May 22, 2012:

Thank you for sending us the proposal for your novel [*Whatever Happened to Ohio?*] We enjoyed the opening chapter very much, and hope you will send us the full manuscript post-haste.

*

From the editor at Money Puzzle Press to Gallant, October 1, 2012

Thank you for sending the manuscript [*Whatever Happened to Ohio?*] to Monkey Puzzle Press. The fiction market is difficult to break into these days, and we have decided not to develop any further works in that genre. Presently we are seeking nonfiction/memoir/autobiographical works for possible publication. If there comes a time when you complete a manuscript that is in the aforementioned genres, I hope you will consider submitting it to us.

*

Whatever Happened to Ohio, published in 2018 as an e-novel by Vagabondage Press in its “Battered Suitcase” series, was available, Kindle edition, for only \$3.99 from amazon.com books, before the press delisted the book.

Fortnightly Review in the UK published print collection of Gallant’s essays and stories, *Verisimilitudes: essays and approximations* in 2018:

https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/099913650X/ref=dbs_a_def_rwt_bibl_vppi_i2

Gallant's *La Leona and Other Guitar Stories* won the Schaffner Press prize for music-in-literature in 2019. The book is available in paperback and Kindle editions presently from Amazon, Barnes and Noble, etc.

*

A response to the work you are presently reading *from The Paris Review, June, 2018:*

“A nice break from the usual. Thanks! We regret that we are unable to publish it, but we like your work and would like to see more if it.”

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Back in the days of paper (we thought they'd never end) a tendency to masochism inspired me to file in a manila folder some of the more piquant notes I received from editors. In the course of time, the folder bulged on a shelf over my work desk. A while back I took it down and I was glancing through the notes when they suggested a narrative of sorts, a tale of night-sea vagrancy youthful students of the craft of writing may find illuminating.*

AUTHOR BIO: : For what it may or may not be worth, I am the winner of 2019 Schaffner Press Prize for music-in-literature for my story collection, *La Leona, and Other Guitar stories*, just published. My e-novel, *Whatever Happened to Ohio?* from Vagabondage Press, and a collection of essays and short fiction, *Verisimilitude: essays and approximations*, published by Fortnightly Review press (UK), appeared in 2018. (I have been an online columnist for FR since 2015 (<http://fortnightlyreview.co.uk/category/verisimilitudes/>)).

Planet of the **Monkeys**

By Kevin O'Neill

WHY WE LIKE IT: *It starts out like satire—even funny—but soon, like its screen counterpart Planet of the Apes, this strongly written tale of aberrant species behaviour gets serious—dead serious. We don't know whether this is more like science fiction or the world after Armageddon but either way it raises the same disturbing question that comes with its own unwelcome fallout—Who is exactly Where on the evolutionary scale. The author's cogent prose and narrative control makes what seems an impossibility come alive. (Spacing is author's own.)*

Planet of the Monkeys

Reason number whatever for why Cambodia's always a unique and wondrous place to live: Certainly, in America, I never had to give as interesting an excuse for being late to work as this one morning, "Monkeys were blocking the stairway door. They wouldn't let me pass until I threw them some grapes."

That was part of My-swear-to-God true story and explanation that I gave a student of mine when I showed up at his house a half-hour late for our English tutoring session. I had been waylaid by an invading gang of monkeys who ransacked and took over the rear balcony of Davvy and I's rooftop apartment in Phnom Penh one morning in late September 2016. A dozen or so of these screeching monkeys, who seemed to be very hungry and in a surly mood, had kept us pinned inside our apartment for about an hour while they scavenged for food in our trash and bounced about our rooftop and those of the neighboring tenements clustered about our place. The gang eventually dwindled down to just a determined pair guarding the stairway door – one squatting atop it and the other in front of it. Already running late, I was dressed for work in slacks, button shirt and necktie with my backpack on – but I wasn't going anywhere until I paid satisfactory tokens or tribute to the little apes now running an impromptu "toll booth" at our stairway entrance and exit.

I tried tossing them apples but had no luck, as the two gave them hardly a glance as they bounced by, and then Davvy told me monkeys regard apples as "ot chnang (not delicious)". I was like how the hell do you know anything about the culinary preferences of monkeys? Were they regulars at the 104 Street joint where you bartended? We were out of bananas but we did have a basket of purple grapes and couple of oranges. So, I grabbed them, opened our apartment door, waved these delicacies at them, and then flung the grapes and oranges off the balcony onto a neighbor's rooftop ten feet below. The two toll takers immediately leaped over the balcony railing in pursuit of their breakfast as I made my escape.

My student was amused but hardly amazed by my explanation of tardiness as he knew my 110 Street was fairly close to Wat Phnom Park, a popular city tourist destination and main hang-out for Phnom Penh's primate residents. The monkeys' main sources of food there are the mango trees, trash piles and donations or thefts from picnicking tourists. So, whenever tourist numbers happen to be low, the monkeys get downright barbarian, Vikingish belligerent and invade the surrounding neighborhoods and buildings to loot and pillage. In fact, a few days before they showed up in my neighborhood, a bunch of highly agitated Wat Phnom monkeys had reportedly entered an open window at a Ministry of Economics building overlooking the park moments after they were seen inhaling several discarded bags left behind by the homeless glue and "meth" sniffers who hang out in Wat Phnom. Stoned into a crazy high by those chemicals, the meth monkeys went into a beserk rage when they couldn't find any food in the ministry and spitefully trashed an office.

The monkeys of Wat Phnom and those most often encountered by people in Cambodia belong to the Macaque breed of tailed apes, and are also known as Macacas. They are brown and white, sometimes gray in fur color. They resemble baboons with their long snouts and four-legged strut, and are range from two to three to five feet in length as adults. They are highly acrobatic, gregarious and entertaining, sometimes very sweet and charming, but can be aggressive when hungry and dangerous if provoked.

On Saturdays just before noon, I used to frequently go to a bar called Cavern on Street 104, a couple blocks from Wat Phnom and therefore within the monkey's regular roaming zone. I'd get a patio table seat under the bar's shady awning and have a plate of fries, Bloody Mary, a few beers and just a quiet read if the monkeys weren't around or an amusing spectacle of simian anarchy if they were. It would be a combination of circus acrobatics, trapeze artistry and petty criminality – as the monkeys used their tails and limbs in threesomes and pairs to leap, bounce off of and toss each other from roof to roof, across power lines and onto the roofs of tuk-tuks, cars and trucks both parked and moving. A couple would occasionally swing onto the Cavern's awning and then impishly twist themselves around the awning poles upside down or otherwise like simian striptease dancers and I'd tip them for their burlesque parodies with a handful of fries or a piece of fruit.

I also remember their acrobatic circus clown talents being on full display during Davvy and I's visit to a Battambang mountaintop pagoda and Angkor era temple complex where we and other tourists watched in amusement as the place's resident monkeys showed off their prankish ability to wreak total havoc in a place. Near the monastery, a couple of Macaques pranced onto the laundry line and then proceeded to playfully clear their new tightrope of hanging clothes, snatching articles of newly cleaned, drying laundry and tossing it into the trees or onto the roofs as the fed-up washer women frantically swung bamboo poles at them and knocked them about. One younger, smaller monkey kept using the coiled-spring open lid of a vendor's ice box as a trampoline, leaping from a tree branch onto the lid, which would bend down and then forcefully spring up propelling him back into the tree or onto the lid of another ice box – boing! - any time the seller opened one to fetch a beer or soda for a customer. Meanwhile, one monkey was fixated on attempting to disrobe a very patient, good-humored monk by grabbing a loose corner of his robe and unwrapping him by swirling him about like someone unwinding cloth from a spindle. Davvy and I also got a glimpse of a more tender side of the monkey personality, watching an elder Macaque gently caress, soothe and groom a young one who was visibly upset about something or other.

Yeah, ya gotta love those monkeys – but love them in a hands-off, relatively safe distance way and definitely don't mess with them. I recall another occasion when Davvy and I hiked to the

mountaintops of Phnom Bro and Phnom Srey in Kampong Cham where there was a pagoda-temple site renowned combination for its many monkeys and beautiful butterflies. We and other visitors foreign and native witnessed this Khmer kid make the very big mistake of teasing one of these incredibly strong, quick and agile beasts (the monkeys, not the butterflies) while it was contentedly devouring a piece of fruit atop a stone bannister. The youngster, partly hidden behind a stone cobra sculpture, kept pelting the four-foot tall monkey with peanuts and banana skins despite warnings in Khmer, English, Japanese and various other tongues from young and old - basically saying that "you're playing with fire, kid." The surprisingly patient monkey ignored the kid for a while but kept eyeing us onlookers with an exasperated look of WTF's With This Kid and Really?? Am I going to have to handle this myself?!, scanning the crowd for any sign of pending parental intervention, before he finally lost it and, in a split second, leapt over the stone cobra head and wrapped himself around the boy's head and torso. As everyone gasped in horrified anticipation of what they figured was about to happen (Oh god, the kid's going to lose his nose, an eye or some other chunk of his face as the monkey takes bloody vengeance with claws and fangs), the moment of retribution suddenly turned into this Three Stooges-type act of payback. The ticked-off monkey just yanked the kid by the hair with one paw, screeched at him and slapped him across the face with the other paw several times before scurrying off. This thankfully merciful monkey had given the kid just a good, deserved scare and mild thrashing. I certainly think the brat learned his lesson, judging by the way he was howling, not so much in pain, but in terrified relief.

The monkey invasion that resulted in me being late for my tutoring class was actually the second storming of our premises by the area primates. The first monkey takeover, in April of that year, was quite a stunner for both Davvy and I. Waking up to the sight of a horde of monkeys – maybe of score of them in total – surrounding one's home is one flabbergasting shocker, like that scifi movie nightmarishly come true. The bizarre, bedlam-esque scene I peered upon through the chicken coop wire mesh covering our back windows was truly Planet of the Monkeys. Several female Macaques simply sat on our balcony railing with babies in their laps chattering. They and I watched as couple of the crazier males head-butted, rammed and kicked the apartment's back door, which serves as the only route to the stairway entrance and exit. It's the only means of escape from the building as the front door opens onto another balcony four stories above the street. So, we were trapped.

Two other monkeys climbed the chicken coop wire covering the kitchen window and ferociously, maybe triumphantly howled and screeched at me – whether kiddingly or seriously, I had no idea. Another jumped atop Davvy's two-foot-tall, balsa wood ghost doll house which was hanging by a net of yarn threads from the overhanging roof and dangling above our doorway. It instantly snatched the small cakes and dwarf banana offerings to the spirits from its tiny porch, hungrily shoving them into its mouth, as the threads snapped and the doll house plummeted, crash-landing on the doorstep with the monkey still clinging to its roof. It shattered into pieces with its little figurine inhabitants and small wrapped candy treats for the spirits spilling out as this rioting monkey gleefully cackled and danced about the debris like a mad jester. Other Macaques of a more serious, single-minded bent for sustenance, quietly went through our trash, then scurried over back balcony railings and jumped onto the tin roofs of neighboring houses and tenements looking for food elsewhere.

I remember Davvy's first reactions to the invasion were that I was in one way or another responsible for this monkey melee. The invasion had begun around 6 am shortly after Davvy had gone for a pee in our tiny semi-outhouse bathroom which was in a corner of the apartment's rear balcony between the back door and stairwell door. I was lying in bed when I heard these sudden heavy thumps above our ceiling and on the corrugated tin roof overhanging the bathroom and stairwell. Davvy's response, of course, was to irritably yell, "What you doing, bong?" thinking maybe.....that perhaps I was

doing morning calisthenics on the roof or some sort of Irish jig to welcome the new day - or who knows what other craziness that she imagined me up to at that hour?? Anyway, I yelled back, "Not me, it's those f...n cats again." The building was plagued at all hours by insomniac strays who endlessly and very noisily brawled and bonked. But, as soon as I said that, I then thought those were mighty loud thuds for those scrawny alleycats unless they've now got a couple Bengal tigers or lions among their gang.

It was a half second later that primate mayhem broke out as a chorus of primate chattering and howling jolted me awake. It was a tremendous racket rivaling even the cats late night f....king and fighting. As I sat up in bed, the first monkey I saw leapt onto window's chicken wire mesh net, limbs and claws splayed, as it maniacally screamed whatever demands at me. I sprung out of bed, ran to the window, and shouted, "Davy, don't come out!", as she opened the door a crack, and peered up in astonishment at these beserk primates bouncing on the roof, hanging on the kitchen window's chicken coop wire, squatting on the balcony railing, stomping the remains of her beloved spirit house, etc. Immediately, slamming the door shut, she then accusedly screamed from inside, "What you do now, bong!?", as if I had somehow provoked a war with Phnom Penh's monkey residents through some outrageous insult or action. Or, had drunkenly invited them over to our place for a dawn shindig during some late night, heavily intoxicated carousing with the primates at Wat Phnom and then forgotten about the invitation in my subsequent blackout. Shouting back in offended dignity, "I had nothing to do with this!", I ordered her to stay in the can until I came up with a plan and got rid of them.

I first tried threatening them. I grabbed a broom handle, opened the door a crack, fearfully peering out with broom in hand and then summoning some courage, put on my outraged resident voice and demeanor to show these outlandish intruders I meant business. While trying to forcefully brandish the broomstick as a serious weapon of retribution, I just kept sternly yelling things like "hey, you guys," "Really, dudes," "Get out of here" and "Go" to no avail, feeling increasingly silly, as I realized I hadn't any idea what to say to or how to deal with these misbehaving monkeys who were rather terrifying. My shaking the broomstick at them and scolding them only prompted a contemptuous, amused shrug and look of "Really?" from one big female sitting on the railing that reduced my attempt at manly bluster to a whiny, weak-kneed plea of "Please go."

I also tried unsuccessfully to drive them away by pelting them with an array of household goods, quickly gathering up a small arsenal by the door, then opening the door halfway and frenziedly hurtling pots, a shoe, books, a few of Davvy's handbags (A projectile choice I later sorely regretted when Davvy noticed the handbags were missing) and even a couple of old CDs I no longer cared for, flinging them frisbee-style like I was firing ninja stars at them. This barrage of projectiles had zero impact as most of the objects either harmlessly bounced off their tough hides or sailed by or over the monkeys - landing in neighboring yards and on roofs. So, I thought better, and finally decided that only appeasement of these aggressors' appetites could end this humiliating takeover. I began tossing bananas, mangos and our other fruit over the balconies for them to chase after - which broke up part of the mob. The rest were driven away by the emergence of a bunch of half-awake, furious neighbors who went after them with bamboo poles and water hoses. To our chagrined amazement, they angrily cursed not just the monkeys but Davvy and I. They somehow had this demented notion that Davvy and, most particularly, her disreputable, boozy barang (foreign) boyfriend (me) were willing hosts of this very noisy and wild early morning monkey party.

Later, as I left for work that morning, a worried Davvy asked me, What if they come back??? What do I do? I expressed strong doubt the monkeys would be back anytime soon for a return match with that mob of locals who thrashed them. But, if they did....

“Keep the door shut and hope they're still at the pre-tool stage of evolution and haven't seen the latest Planet of the Apes flick,” I told her. “Otherwise, on their return visit, they'll be equipped with wire-cutters and crowbars.”

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *The story above is one of a bunch of I've written that are a compilation of diary entries and Facebook posts that are mostly about my day-to-day life as an expat in Cambodia. Many expat accounts of their lives in Cambodia, Thailand and other Southeast Asia locales are often heavily focused on the more debauched, seedier outlaw sides of existence in those places – the sexpat stoner tales. My stories are mostly about how funny, wonderful and still very strange life in Cambodia can be for an American when you're just trying to make a living there and be a “family guy” in a Khmer clan. Although they include a few tales of disreputable expat behavior and both expat and Khmer drunkenness, as many Khmers certainly love to party and chug-a-lug, my stories focus mainly on the non-degenerate wild side of ordinary life in the Kingdom as experienced by a Westerner. They detail more everyday things like language faux pas, bug horrors, rundown apartment woes, transportation fiascos, run-ins with cats, bats and rats, dietary differences, my teaching experiences, etc. They are a lot more in the style of Thurber, Sedaris and Jean Shepherd than Hunter Thompson or Artie Lange.*

AUTHOR BIO: I am a New Yorker who moved to Cambodia about seven years ago after falling in love with that country during a pair of holiday trips there. I lived in Phnom Penh up until 2018 when I moved to Siem Reap to join my entrepreneurial wife Davvy there, who has a Khmer pork sandwich cart and operates a small store with her daughters. Up until Covid hit, resulting in a nationwide schools shutdown, I had worked as a teacher of English as a second language at Pannassastra University and University of Southeast Asia in Siem Reap. Currently, I tutor English on-line with Engoo, a Singapore-based on-line language education company.

