

COMPLETE ISSUE 6 PART TWO

PLAYS AND SCREENPLAYS

LOVESONG FOR THE END OF THE WORLD

By Blake Du Bois

NOTE: To keep the author's spacing the note 'The Playwright Speaks' is at the end of the play. Eds.

LOVESONG FOR THE END OF THE WORLD

Lovesong for the End of the World

Setting:

An apartment in New York City. December 31st, 2020.

The apartment should include a couch.

Cast:

Sean- mid-twenties. Male.

Aurora- mid-twenties. Female.

David Gorgeous- early forties. A television news anchor. (This character may be played by any gender and the name may be changed to Dani if need be.)

SEAN and AURORA enter the space. They look at each other. Their faces switch quickly from fear to love. The song “If the World was Ending” by JP Saxe and featuring Julia Michaels plays. On JP’s verse, SEAN dances like he’s in a club, but when he looks around at the other people there, he understands a truth the others do not. AURORA watches. On JULIA’s verse, AURORA dances. She gives a beautiful performance of a contemporary dance. Her face is emotionless but her body evokes bittersweet terror. When JP and Julia sing together, they do a duet. This part of the dance is fun. They can’t touch, but they can make each other laugh. SEAN’s bad dance moves get AURORA to giggle and her beautiful allongés make SEAN’s jaw drop. As the song ends, they stop dancing and get closer to each other. They look into each other’s eyes as an orange light, like that of a sunset, begins to shine brightly over them. Lights out.

DAVID GORGEIOUS, a news reporter, enters or comes on screen to give a report.

DAVID

Hello America, this is David Gorgeous, *your* news anchor for the end of the world! Here on January 31st, the confirmed final night of human existence, we at ANTV would like to take a look back at this year, 2020, the year it all went to oblivion! Here are some of the positive and negative events that this year showed our country, as well as the world.

Con: Kobe Bryant’s death put the nation in melancholic sorrow. Every basketball fan’s dream of getting dunked on by their 6’6” hero flittered into ashes. However, no worries, because Basketball was permanently cancelled! With the coronavirus sweeping the entire world, families

were locked away in their houses. A combination of online schooling, the economy crashing, and fighting over monopoly games drove families to the brink of insanity! Many burned their own houses down, with themselves in them! But no worries! Because soon, almost everyone's houses were on fire! Fire began to fall from the sky, along with tarantulas and scorpions. It was *then* that we as a nation realized and understood that these events were not mere coincidences, but they were all a part of the biblical revelations. Scientists and prophets both then joined forces (hold your horses folks, we got a pro! Enemies started getting along!) And calculated that, tonight, on December 31st, 2020, we will reach the end of human existence at midnight.

Before our commercial break, a couple more pros: the famous "Tik Tok House" which had been entertaining 14-21 year olds all over the world burned down in the fires this week. Many scholars consider that a positive. Likewise, every alcohol corporation, except Corona, rose tremendously in net worth, as every human being on Earth has purchased enough liquor to properly kill themselves tonight if they would like.

That's all for now, I'll see you all later, this is David Gorgeous, time, 7pm EST.

SEAN knocks on AURORA's apartment door in New York City. She opens the door. He carries many bags of liquors and snacks. She sits on the couch covered in a blanket, sadly watching the news.

SEAN

Hey baby! Sorry I'm late!

AURORA

Hey Sean.

SEAN starts placing the groceries on the counter.

SEAN

God damn, you wouldn't believe it out there Aurora. A fucking tarantula fell right into my grocery bag.

AURORA

(Emotionless.) Wow.

SEAN

Damn, is it the fires or is it hot as fuck in here? Is the AC on?

AURORA

I don't know.

SEAN

They only had lightly buttered popcorn, I know that's kind of *meh* for the end of the world but, I guess it'll have to do.

He sits down beside her on the couch.

You okay baby?

She shrugs.

End of the world blues?

AURORA

Something like that. (She starts to tear up.)

SEAN

Hey, hey, hey, I'm here don't worry. (He embraces her.) I know. This fucking sucks. This sucks more than anything I ever could have imagined. If I knew the world was gonna end tonight I would've taken advantage of all the time we had left. Bought you more jewelry, bought you a porsche, hell I would've taken us on our dream trip to Niagara Falls if I knew-

AURORA

Stop. I don't care about any of that. All I want is to be right here. With you.

SEAN

You're sure? A regular ass night with me? In your apartment.

AURORA

That's all I want. I love you.

She kisses him.

SEAN

I love you too. Drinks?

AURORA

Fuck please.

SEAN

Two margaritas coming up right now!

He goes to the counter, starts fixing them drinks.

Where's Cheryl at tonight?

AURORA

Some Post Malone concert. (Gesturing to the tv.) Did you see that people have been grave robbing? Someone stole Tom Hanks' fucking corpse from a gravesite.

SEAN

She's at Post Malone? Fuck, yeah me and the boys got free tickets. Would've been killer. I heard Paul McCartney and John Mayer are playing with him. In fucking flaming Times Square of all places.

AURORA

You and the boys? What boys?

SEAN

Neil and Dwayne.

AURORA

Your roommates are at the biggest concert of all time without you?

SEAN

It's not the *biggest* concert of all time...

AURORA

Rihanna just flashed her tits at it. It's all over the news. Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie got back together on stage it's so big. Kanye apologized to Taylor... *again*. You had a ticket???

SEAN

Yeah but it's no big deal. Dwayne's brother wanted to go anyway.

He sits down next to her with two drinks.

Plus I wanted to be here with you. I have more fun with you anyway.

AURORA

(Secretly happy.) You liar.

SEAN

Cheers.

They drink. They're happy.

Okay, I gotta lay some news on you. Please don't be mad...

AURORA

How could I be mad when I have you? (She kisses him.) I'm getting to spend my last day on Earth with the funniest, most handsome guy this flaming planet has ever known. (She kisses him again.) How could I ever be upset? (She leans in for another kiss.)

SEAN

(Guilty.) They didn't have french vanilla so I had to get regular. (Pause.)

AURORA

(Breaking away from him.) God damnit, of course!

SEAN

I'm sorry baby! I looked everywhere I could / they didn't have any...

AURORA

I'm not even gonna have any-

SEAN

What? Baby! Warm donuts and vanilla ice cream is our thing!

AURORA

No, warm donuts and *french vanilla* is our thing. What you got is nasty.

SEAN

I thought you said you wouldn't be mad...

AURORA

And they were out of vanilla bean? (Pause. He looks completely ashamed.) Sean. Please tell me they were out of vanilla bean too.

SEAN

(This is incredibly hard to confess.) I uh... I forgot to look.

AURORA

Oh you've got to be fucking kidding me! You got fucking, regular, pile of shit vanilla? Now it really feels like the end of the world.

SEAN

Do you want me to take it back?

AURORA

No let's just fucking drink, we are already wasting time.

SEAN

Let me just take it back, I can be real quick-

He gets up.

AURORA

No Sean, just sit down okay / you did what you did-

SEAN

No, I don't want to die remembering this as the last thing I did for you so I'm just gonna take it back because I'm a *fuck up!*

AURORA

No! Just fucking sit down! (He does so.) I love you. I fucking love you so fucking much and if you walk out that door for a tin of fucking ice cream, I swear to god I'll strangle you before you get to watch this apartment burn.

SEAN

Okay. Did you stop taking your anger management pills?

AURORA

If you love me you won't ask that. Can I see the tin?

He hands her the tin of ice cream.

Goddamnit, *it's nonfat???*

Lights dim. DAVID GORGEIOUS returns.

DAVID

This is David, calling out to you at 7:45pm EST. It is recommended that tonight, your drink, you party, you sleep with an ex... go out and wreak havoc, because tomorrow when we're all s'mores, you'll regret not living life to your fullest!

DAVID exits. Return to the couple. They are on the couch searching for a movie.

SEAN

What about Synecdoche, New York. With Phillip Seymour Hoffman.

AURORA

Nah.

SEAN

Armageddon?

AURORA

No.

SEAN

Ooh! Apocalypse Now?

AURORA

Eh... what if we watched Love Is Blind?

SEAN

No way, we're watching Synecdoche, I've been meaning to show it to you forever, and if we're gonna die, I want you to see it.

AURORA

Is it sad?

SEAN

Yes. Very.

AURORA

Yeah, see, if we're gonna die I'd rather watch something happy. Plus I need to find out if Lauren's dad likes Cameron.

SEAN

No baby, you have to watch something sad in order to *feel* happy! The tone of the movie matches the exact existential crisis we are in now!

AURORA

Yeah see as soon as you said experimental I started falling asleep. What if we watched like Dead Poets Society?

SEAN

That movie is fucking sad too!

AURORA

Well if I fall asleep for the end of the world I'm gonna be pissed! Your movie sounds boring!

SEAN

You don't even know what it's about! Fuck Aurora, you always do this. You told me I would get to pick!

AURORA

Why don't we just watch Parasite?

SEAN

We've seen it fifteen times.

AURORA

Yeah but it's our favorite and it's both happy and sad. I just don't want to fight with you anymore over something stupid like movies.

SEAN

Oh like vanilla ice cream isn't? Movies *aren't* stupid. They're my... they *were* my life. And I'm never gonna have them again after tonight.

AURORA

Wow. I wish you talked about me the way you talked about Philip Seymour Krelbourne.

Lights dim. They cuddle on the couch while the Korean of Parasite is heard in the background. DAVID GORGEIOUS enters wearing a party hat and sunglasses.

DAVID

This is David Gorgeous, coming to you at 8:29pm EST. It's a party here at the studio, as I've just done a shit load of cocaine and I have never even had a beer!

Return to the couple. We hear their inner monologues as they cuddle. First position: spooning.

SEAN

Big spoon. Nice.

AURORA

Little spoon.

SEAN

I can reach the popcorn... and her butt. What could be better than this?

AURORA

Why does he have to sweat so much through his pits. Ugh, it's hotter than Central Park right here. And Central Park is incinerating.

SEAN

Why was I so angry? I've got a hot girl who loves me like crazy.

AURORA

He chews so fucking loud I can't stand it! (To Sean.) Hey, could we um... (She readjusts.)

SEAN

Yeah! Sure.

They return to inner monologues.

AURORA

Big spoon. Nice.

SEAN

I feel like a bitch.

AURORA

I love that Sean is a guy who doesn't care about gender norms.

SEAN

Is she sweating through her tits? Jesus.

AURORA

I can reach the popcorn... and his butt. What could be better than this.

SEAN

I get that it's the end of the world but the least you could do is put on some deodorant. (To Aurora.) Can we um... I'm just a little...

AURORA

Yeah, yeah, I know. (They readjust.)

Again, inner monologues.

SEAN

Nothing's wrong with the old reach around the shoulder. A classic.

AURORA

Wow. These margs are really hitting me.

SEAN

I can't believe none of these actors were nominated. (Looking at Aurora.) Damn she looks beautiful. I love girls who love film.

AURORA

Fuck. Do I have to pee?

SEAN

I guess now's as good a time as ever for the old "Netflix and Chill." I'll do the old walkin' fingers.

SEAN's fingers start slowly "walking" up AURORA's leg.

AURORA

(To Sean.) I'll be right back.

She gets up, goes to the bathroom.

SEAN

(To Aurora.) You're missing the best part! (He pauses it.)

Return to SEAN's inner monologue.

Damnit, did I do something wrong? (He smells his fingers.) Yup. Cheeto smell.

SEAN gets a phone call.

Hello? Dwayne?... What's up bro?... Holy fuck, you're kidding!... Yeah I'll turn it on right now!

SEAN changes the channel on the TV.

Holy... fuck... bro! (He starts laughing in hysteria.) Dude I can't even believe it! Right there!... fuck dude, that is *actually* Katy Perry eating Russel Crowe's flesh... well how would you feel if your ex husband was the guy from Get Him to the Greek?...

Bro! And John Mayer is singing "Slow Dancing in a Burning Room" like it's nothing! Fuck man, the irony of that song now huh?...

Nah, we're all good, we're snuggling up and watching Parasite... Yeah like fifteen times, but it's great... No, believe me, I would've loved to be there but, you know, I gotta... Look man, don't be upset, please, I have responsibilities. We've been together five years, I can't just *ditch* her... I know it's the biggest -- look, you think I *don't* wanna be there right now?

AURORA returns.

SEAN

(To Dwayne.) Oh, hey, one sec bro, I'll call you right back. (To Aurora.) Babe, you won't believe this, look what's on tv right now. Katy Perry is literally *eating-*

AURORA

(Extremely cold.) You left the toilet seat up.

SEAN

Did I?... I don't remember. (Gesturing to the tv.) Look, John Mayer is... *fuck* now he's playing "Firework," the irony is killing me!

AURORA

(Angry.) Sean! How many times do I have to fucking tell you?

SEAN

What?

AURORA

I have told you *thousands* of times. *Thousands!* So has Cheryl! You can't remember to put the seat down, even during the *fucking apocalypse?*

SEAN

Well I... fuck, baby, are you actually mad?

AURORA

Yes I'm mad!

SEAN

Really? When there are celebrities going cannibal on CBS?

AURORA

I don't fucking care about Katy Perry!!! Do you know how fucking irritating it is to tell you something over and over again, and then just when I think you've learned, *I fall into the toilet water?*

SEAN erupts into laughter. He goes to the counter to make more drinks.

What the fuck is so funny?

SEAN

Haha, you... falling into toilet water... on the last night of the world. It's kinda funny. I'm gonna make us more drinks.

AURORA

You are such a mother fucker, you know that?

SEAN

Okay, chill out baby-

AURORA

Do *not* tell me to chill out! I can't believe you can be so fucking stupid. Even on our last night...

SEAN looks at her with shock.

SEAN

Are you really doing this?

AURORA

Doing what?

SEAN

This... Picking fucking stupid meaningless fights on the last night of the world.

AURORA

It's not meaningless! Don't you hear me! It is so frustrating telling you something over and over, and then I end up wiping toilet water off my pussy because of your stupid mistakes. It's disgusting.

SEAN drinks.

SEAN

Okay. Looks like we're fucking doing this. You know, does it even flitter into your mind for a second that maybe *you're* the stupid one for not looking at where you were sitting before you peed?

AURORA

I shouldn't have to look! This is my apartment, the least you can do is put the seat down!

SEAN

Totally, totally, but... can we just think about this logically? So, it takes probably a second for me to put the seat down, right?

AURORA

Yes. It's easy.

SEAN

Yes, no denying that. But sometimes I forget. I already said I'm sorry. Now, it would take the exact amount of time for you to raise the toilet seat after *you* pee, right?

AURORA

What does that have to do with anything?

SEAN

I'm saying that, if this relationship is really *equal*, like we say it is, then you should be raising the toilet seat every time you're done peeing, and then I can put it *down* after *I* pee.

AURORA

You are such a fucking prick-

SEAN

How is it any fucking different?

AURORA

Because we are at *my* apartment!

SEAN

Well maybe I get sick and tired of touching your dirty toilet seat. Maybe you should come to *my* place every once and a fucking while.

AURORA

Exactly why I don't go to your place...

SEAN

(Very angry.) Why? *Why?* So you don't have to put a fucking seat down?

AURORA

Yes. I don't like being in a dirty, man infested apartment and then having to put a disgusting toilet seat down.

SEAN

Great. Real great. So the reason why *I* spend so much cash every other fucking day buying ubers and subway tickets to come to *your* place is because you're too lazy to put down a toilet seat so you need your fucking boyfriend to do it for you-

AURORA

Oh I'm the lazy one-

SEAN

How the fuck is that equal? How is that an equal fucking relationship? You never come to my place, you never buy the drinks, and you NEVER put the seat up for me!!!

AURORA

I didn't realize I was such a fucking DIFFICULT GIRLFRIEND!

Silence.

I'm sorry that putting the FUCKING SEAT DOWN IS SUCH A BURDEN. Sorry! Oh, and hey, I'm sorry that I got my pussy covered in piss filled toilet water! Sorry I'm so fucking stupid! It must be SO HARD HAVING A STUPID TODDLER AS A GIRLFRIEND, HUH?

Why don't you just go watch celebrities eat each other at Time Square like everybody else.

SEAN

I don't want to do that...

AURORA

Yeah you do, you think I couldn't hear you on the fucking phone. YOU OBVIOUSLY DON'T WANT TO BE WITH ME AND I'M OBVIOUSLY SUCH A BURDEN SO JUST GO!!!

SEAN

No.

He plants himself on the couch.

I want to stay. I want to... *want* to stay.

Lights dim. DAVID GORGEOUS returns, with a black eye and cuts all over him.

DAVID

This is David Gorgeous. 9:45pm EST. People are losing it here. The studio has become the world's largest mosh pit. People are knifing each other and beating each other senseless... I've already killed three people, I'm hoping I can get to ten by midnight!

We return to the couple, who resume watching Parasite. This time they sit on opposite sides of the couch without touching. Again, we hear their inner monologues.

AURORA

What a fucking dick.

SEAN

About time to make another drink.

AURORA

He should be honoring his last night with me. I'm a fucking *catch*.

SEAN

Now's probably a bad time to ask her about her meds again...

AURORA

Why does he look so cute when he's guilty? Ugh. I need another drink. Or sex. Maybe sex will chill me out. Or a *cigarette*... Fuck, how come I never learned how to chill out...

SEAN

Now's probably a bad time to try and have sex.

AURORA

I just wanted tonight to be special. Fuck is it getting hotter in here?

SEAN

How do I manage to fuck up every little thing. I shouldn't have yelled, that's not like me.

AURORA

(To Sean.) Hey baby?

SEAN

Yeah?

AURORA

I don't want to fight.

SEAN

Me neither.

AURORA

There's just... there's just so much going shitty in the universe right now. Let's not waste it fighting over stupid stuff.

SEAN

I agree. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry about the toilet seat. And yelling, and ice cream, and being a dick and-

AURORA

Don't worry. We're okay.

They kiss.

Wanna play a game?

SEAN

Sure.

AURORA

First. Shots. We're gonna need them.

They each take a tequila shot. AURORA pulls out her phone.

SEAN

(Wincing in pain.) Jesus.

AURORA

Okay, this is titled “How well do you know your partner?”

SEAN

Oh christ, one of those couples tests? (He takes another shot.)

AURORA

Don’t think of it as a test, it’s a game! Okay. What’s my favorite color?

SEAN

Blue.

Disappointed, she takes a shot.

What, am I wrong?

AURORA

It’s baby blue.

SEAN

Baby blue, fucking girls! And you're drinking just to mock me?

AURORA

You drank because you didn't want to play the game!

SEAN

It's not a *game* it's a... okay fine then. When we're wrong, we drink.

AURORA

So, if you get one wrong, you drink.

SEAN

I was thinking when one of us gets it wrong, we both drink, but yeah. Let's play it your way.

AURORA

So drink.

SEAN

I already did.

AURORA

I know, but we just started the new rule. So drink.

He does so. He winces in pain again. She laughs at him.

SEAN

Okay, let me see the list. (He takes her phone.) What's my dream car?

AURORA

Ferrari.

SEAN smiles evilly. He motions for her to drink.

No way! I'm right!

SEAN

Maserati bitch. Drink.

AURORA

You changed it! You're always talking about liking Ferraris!

SEAN

Never once have I mentioned them. However, I do talk about Maseratis quite a bit. Therefore, drink.

She drinks.

AURORA

What is my biggest pet peeve?

SEAN

When people tell you to chill out. Or, when I touch the tv remote after eating cheetos without washing my hands.

AURORA

I was thinking when you try to convince me to do anal, but I'll give you one. Those annoy me too.

SEAN

If I became famous what would it be for?

AURORA

Movies. You would be a good critic. You know so many weird details about foreign films, I could see you picking who should win oscars and shit. I like this question, what about for me?

SEAN

Easy, you wouldn't have given up dancing for that temp job. You'd probably be on America's Got Talent or at the New York City Ballet or something.

AURORA

What am I most likely to get at a gas station?

SEAN

Um... diet coke, and honey mustard pretzels!

AURORA

Drink. (He does so.) Cigarettes. I would fucking kill for a smoke right now.

SEAN

Where would my dream vacation be?

AURORA

I don't fucking know, Hawaii?

SEAN

Niagara Falls! With you! I'm always talking about that! I literally mentioned it earlier tonight.
Drink!

She drinks. In fact, they both drink. A lot. They go back and forth while taking shots. DAVID GORGEOUS enters.

DAVID

David Gorgeous, 10:33pm. I am live streaming in Times Square... It's beautiful. Tornadoes of flames. Celebrities and criminals soaring together in the sky as one. Burning, as one... For the first time in my life, I see God and Satan at the same time. Both laughing. For the first time I wonder if they are one in the same.

Return to the couple.

SEAN

I can't decide if I... If I don't *know* who you are... or if I can't *see* who you are...

They both crack up. They are insanely drunk. She kisses him. It feels incredible. They begin to kiss for a little bit.

AURORA

Okay. New game. If you could do something over again, what would you do?

SEAN

Um... I think that I would have actually become an actor. Instead of watching movies and gawking over Jake Gyllen... jillonha... Wow his name is hard to say right now. Or uh... No, I change my answer, I think I would've wanted to have kissed you sooner.

AURORA

Really?

SEAN

Yeah. I mean we've known each other for what, like 15 years? I've liked you since middle school and I didn't even make a move until college.

AURORA

I always knew you did. You would bring those-

SEAN

Peanut butter pretzels!

AURORA

Yeah! You brought them in your lunchbox and I'd always beg you for some.

SEAN

Yup. And everytime I gave you one, I'd be like... Yeah. She wants me...

AURORA

So what made you finally make that move? Sophomore year, at that party?

SEAN

Well uh... I mean we were both at NYU together, but I remember never seeing you around Freshman year. Sophomore year, a friend invited me to that party, and it was with a lot of acting and dance majors I didn't know, except you of course...

I remember going into that dark basement, and seeing you. Specifically, the whites of your eyes. They lit up the whole fucking room. And then you came straight after me, asked me to catch you up... I told you how NYU wasn't my place, but for whatever reason, you were convincing me to stay. I kept wondering, "why is this hot girl from my hometown convincing me to stay when she always ignores me."

AURORA

Maybe you should've had more peanut butter pretzels and things would've been different.

SEAN

Maybe. But that night, we were drunk, dancing, and just talking, until almost everyone had left. Lights were still dark, and you gave me that look like... one of those “green lights” you get from a girl. You were looking at me and your eyes say “just fucking do it Sean.”

And at the time I thought, when am I gonna get another chance like this?

So I kissed you. And you kissed me back. And five years later the world ended.

AURORA

Not yet. It hasn't ended yet.

SEAN

What if I had never done it? What if I never kissed you? Where would I be right now, tonight?

AURORA

You'd be at the Post Malone Last Night's Eve party having the time of your life.

SEAN

Yeah. That would've fucking sucked.

He kisses her.

What about you? What would you do over?

AURORA

I think I would uh... I would apologize to my parents. Or like, I just wouldn't have been such a bipolar bitch all the time. I feel like -- now that the world is ending -- I'm seeing all the stuff I did and I'm thinking like, fucking shit Aurora, you're a way better person than that, why did you do so much stupid shit.

SEAN

Me too.

AURORA

I mean, all my mom and dad wanted was to make me happy, and I treated them like shit *all the time*. I talked back to them, I made fun of them to my friends, I would come home late smelling of booze and dick jizz...

SEAN

Alright, dick jizz? Just pick one, I get what you mean-

AURORA

I mean, they're such good people! And now the world is ending, and like, all this shit is confirmed to be biblical! So I'm totally going to hell! I litter, I fucked before I was married, I shoplifted from jewelry stores, I ate expired whipped cream, I gossiped, I called my sister a whore to her face, and I laughed at homeless people when they asked me for money... I'm without a doubt, going to hell.

SEAN

Well, me too.

AURORA

No way. Everybody knows you are like the best fucking guy of all time.

SEAN

I'm not so good.

AURORA

You are. You're the best. (She kisses him.)

I'm gonna be stuck down below getting whipped to do slave work by Satan and Michael Jackson for all of eternity while you and my whole family are dancing at a Beatles concert in heaven.

SEAN catches this.

What?

SEAN

(Carefully.) How come you're not with them? Your parents? Did they ask to spend tonight with you?

AURORA

No they uh... They asked me to be with them.

SEAN

You said no? Why?

AURORA

I don't know, I just thought about who I really wanted to be with, and... I wanted to be with you.

SEAN

Aurora, I love you but... you shouldn't have picked me.

AURORA

Fuck it's so hot in here!

SEAN

Aurora! You shouldn't have picked me!

AURORA

Why not! I wanted to be with the guy I love for my last night on Earth! Isn't that special to you?

SEAN

It's not about that! They loved you, created you, dealt with your shit... we could've all done something together!

AURORA

I didn't want that. I can't be myself around them. Not like how I am around you.

SEAN

Still, that's fucked up. You owed it to them.

AURORA

Well it's too late, okay! I already feel guilty as fuck, you don't need to rub it in!

SEAN

Really? *I* shouldn't rub it in? Because it feels like that's what you're doing to me. You know I would've *loved* to be with my family.

AURORA

We promised we wouldn't fight!

SEAN

That's too bad! This isn't vanilla ice cream or toilet seats! This is family!

AURORA

Sean. *You* are my family. Not them. They hardly know me compared to you. You're the only family that matters to me.

SEAN

You know damn well that if that virus hadn't taken my parents, I would be with them right now-

AURORA

That's not what I meant by any of this-

SEAN

And yeah, sure, they used to piss me off and they were annoying as hell, but they were my *family*. And now that they're gone, I would give up everything to be with them. *EVERYTHING!*

AURORA

Everything? *EVEN ME?*

SEAN

Yes. Yes even you.

Silence.

When were you gonna tell me?

AURORA

I wasn't going to. I wanted our last night to be special.

SEAN

Yeah, well, our last night feels like a slap in the fucking face right now. I miss them so much.

AURORA

I know Sean.

SEAN

I just wish I had more time with them...

He starts to cry. AURORA embraces him.

AURORA

I know baby, I know.

SEAN

I wish I had more time with *them*, I wish I had more time with *you*... I wish I had more time.

AURORA

Maybe we will. After all of this, I mean.

SEAN

You really think I would go to heaven?

AURORA

Yes. You've been an angel your whole life.

SEAN

It won't feel like heaven if I'm not there with you.

AURORA

Okay buddy, way to throw me into the fiery pits of hell, don't count me out just yet!

They laugh.

Lights dim. David Gorgeous enters. He is completely naked. The lights are dim enough so that only his face is clearly visible.

DAVID

Dear lords. Lord of pain and Lord of life. Judge me. As you judge the souls on Earth, judge *me*, a mere, foolish celebrity television anchor. I don't know where I belong in the afterlife, but please understand that I dedicated my life to bringing important information to the people of America... judge me without bias. Thank you for my time on Earth. On this blessed, ugly, shining, dizzy sphere floating in your massive universe. I'm sorry for being narcissistic, just like the planet Earth. Thank you for all of the mistakes I got to make. Thank you for all the jobs I lost. Thank you for all the terrible ratings. Thank you for all of my breakdowns. Thank you for the cuts on my arms and the anxiety and depression in my brain. Thank you for all of my pain because it made me understand that I was alive. I'll miss it tremendously. Signing off. 11:50pm.

DAVID GORGEIOUS puts a gun to his head. The lights dim. Return to the couple. They are finishing their doughnuts and ice cream.

AURORA

Okay, I gotta lay some news on you. Please don't be mad...

SEAN

Oh great. I'm ready.

AURORA

Nonfat vanilla isn't so bad. (Beat.) Neither are you.

She kisses him.

SEAN

Do you wanna dance?

AURORA

More than anything.

The couple rises. They begin to slow dance together. John Mayer's "Slow Dancing in a Burning Room" plays. We hear their inner monologues.

SEAN

So here we are.

AURORA

He's always been such a bad dancer.

SEAN

I don't think I would've done anything differently.

AURORA

I've always loved that about him.

SEAN

I'm gonna miss her eyes.

AURORA

I'm gonna miss the fights.

SEAN

The way they draw me in.

AURORA

The way he drives me insane.

SEAN

The way I can see myself in them. The way I was meant to be. Inside her head.

AURORA

Yet I always want to hold him after.

AURORA notices something burning behind SEAN.

Hey, Sean. The apartment is on fire.

SEAN

Good.

They return to inner monologues.

AURORA

Maybe that's the point. Maybe fighting is okay. As long as you want to hold them after.

SEAN

I wonder when I'll see her again.

AURORA

I wonder when he'll kiss me again.

SEAN

I wonder when she'll make fun of me again.

AURORA

I wonder when he'll drive me up the wall insane again.

SEAN

(To Aurora.) You know why I always wanted to be with you?

AURORA

Why baby?

SEAN

Your name. Aurora. It means dawn, right? The light before sunrise?

AURORA

Yeah.

SEAN

I always loved that.

They kiss passionately. They dance. The apartment becomes engulfed in flames. The orange light from the beginning of the play, like that of a sunset, begins to shine brightly over them. Lights out.

Lights up. The morning. Birds chirping. SEAN and AURORA are left alive in the burnt remains of the Earth. They wake up. They spend some time looking at the sky, and feeling the fresh breeze against them. The light of the stage is a bright blue. Maybe the world didn't end, and they lived. Perhaps, maybe, they did die, and this is where they went after. All that is clear is that the

couple is happy. The happiest they have ever been and will ever be. They kiss and exit the stage. The lights of the theater come up. No blackout.

End of play.

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS:

I

began formulating this play while working on a separate project for the Quarantine Bake-Off, a playwriting competition developed by some theater students from the University of Minnesota. I crafted a short play about two young lovers who were forced to communicate over social media because of the circumstances the Coronavirus pandemic had created. Much of which was developed from my own personal insights of living in California while my girlfriend lives in Miami, Florida, and we have no real idea of when we will be seeing each other again.

Then,

for my playwriting class at The Boston Conservatory with my instructor David Valdes-Greenwood, I was instructed to write a one-act play, and I kept finding myself stuck on this issue of what this virus will do to my relationship with my girlfriend. I decided to start on a new story, Lovesong for the End of the World, in which the end of days finally arrives, and two young adults who are in a committed relationship decide to spend their final night with one another. I started experimenting with how this last night on Earth movie date would go. What would these characters fight about? Would they argue over large, big picture problems, or would they quarrel over the same meaningless issues all couples argue over? I decided it was both.

Sean

and Aurora fight because that's what all couples were meant to do. Much of this play, to me, discusses what it means to be in a "good" relationship. (And yes, I'm 21 and very young to be searching for these kinds of answers, but cut me some slack.) Because, in the end, if I were with my girlfriend on the last night of the world, I believe we would fight about nonsensical things the way we always do. However, I also believe that we would hold each other and dance in the flames, without doubting each other for even a second.

So,

I give you this play.

AUTHOR'S BIO: *A native of the San Francisco Bay Area, Blake Du Bois is an aspiring actor and playwright who is currently pursuing his BFA in Musical Theater at the Boston Conservatory at Berklee. Blake is a passionate creator of theater and thrives off of the student work at his institution. Blake has worked with New Ground Theater Company, where he directed the original production of Dahmer: A Musical and most recently premiered his first original play, What Love Is Not. His past theatrical credits include Her Naked Skin (Boston Conservatory), American Idiot (Berklee Musical Theater), Heathers: The Musical (Priscilla Beach Theater), and Equus (Boston Conservatory.) Blake currently lives in Boston, Massachusetts. Instagram: [blake_du_bois](#). Website: blakedubois.me*

L aNg U—aG e gAM e S

By Barbara Yoshida

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS:

*I have always loved words and languages, and this one-act has given me the opportunity to explore gestural and non-linguistic forms of language as well as the philosophy of language; the importance of myth; and the contribution of animals to humankind's evolution. It started out as one scene in a larger work, but it was calling out to me to stand on its own. I turned to Alexander Stern's *The Fall of Language* for insight into Wittgenstein's and Benjamin's thoughts on immanent and designative language, or name and sign. I thought it would be amusing to see these super-intellectual guys playing Mah Jong, a game like gin rummy. You'd think they'd be playing chess or bridge, right? Shepard provides a good counterpoint to the philosophers' conceptual obscurity—his take on the origins of language is so down-to-earth. And then there's Beuys: he combines the immanent language of art with mythology. The hare was his animal—he even had a hare as a hood ornament on his car! Jane probably represents myself, always skeptical about “high-falutin’ mumbo-jumbo.” Stylistic influences include Tom Stoppard, Samuel Beckett (I loved “Beckett by Brook”), and *The Wooster Group*, although they might be more aspirational than evident in my piece. My gratitude goes to S. M. Dale, dramaturg; the photos of Joseph Beuys are by Arnaud Maggs; and the graffiti images are mine. (Spacing is playwright's own.)*

LANGUAGE GAMES

The intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational mind is a faithful servant. We have created a society that honors the servant and has forgotten the gift.

-- Albert Einstein

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

WALTER Romantic and idealistic philosopher. Embraces mysticism as well as Western Marxism.

LUDWIG A profound thinker, intense, and reserved. Enough ego and confidence to realize that he needn't assert his superiority as a philosopher.

JANE Intelligent; a college graduate; not shy about sharing her opinions. She knows some philosophy but she's not a philosopher.

PAUL An environmentalist, concerned with evolutionary theory.

BEUYS Eccentric, egocentric, and confident. Guided by artistic concerns, a spiritual "calling," and an obligation to contribute to society and politics through art and teaching.

LANGUAGE GAMES

Four chairs around a card table. Face-down on the hard surface of the table, 36 Mah Jong tiles have been stacked up—18 on top of 18—to form a wall in front of each player. As the game is played, the audience can hear the tiles clicking but can't see them. As the lights come up, Ludwig, Walter, and Paul sit at the table. Walter is to Ludwig's right, and Paul is to Ludwig's left. Ludwig's chair is on wheels. Walter's chair is a rocking chair. Paul's chair allows him to lean way back. Jane enters and sits, on a stool that swivels, opposite Ludwig. After a moment, the players push their walls of tiles toward the center of the table to form a square.

WALTER

(Pronouncing the "W" in "Ludwig" as a "V".) Ludwig, it's your turn to be East Wind.

LUDWIG

(Throwing the dice in the middle of the square.) Rabbit's foot.

(Seeing the number on the dice, he counts from the right side of his wall, pulls the same number of tiles toward him, and puts them in his hand.)

(They move through this part of the game rapidly, following Ludwig's example, until each has thirteen tiles.)

LUDWIG

(Pronouncing the "W" in "Walter" as a "V".) You go next, Walter. You're South Wind.

WALTER

(Holding the dice close to his mouth and almost whispering to it.) Rabbit's foot.

(Walter throws the dice. He puts the number of tiles indicated by the dice into his hand.)

LUDWIG

Jane, we don't do concealed melds here. Otherwise, we play a pretty standard game.

JANE

(Passionately.) Rabbit's foot! (She tosses the dice onto the table. She takes the number of tiles indicated by the dice.)

(The ghost of Joseph Beuys appears behind Paul's chair. He wears a distinctive vest, hat, and pants, all in white, and his face, neck, and hands are covered in white make-up. (See attached photographs.) None of the players can see or hear him.)



(Paul takes the dice, then hesitates. Beuys takes a rabbit's foot from his pocket and dangles it over Paul's head. Paul rolls the dice.)

PAUL

Rabbit's foot!

(He takes the number of tiles indicated by the dice. Once all the players have thirteen tiles, Ludwig grabs an additional tile. He places it, face-up, in the center of the table, to create the discard pile.)

LUDWIG

Let the game begin!

(Walter takes one tile from the right side of his wall and discards a tile from his hand, face-up, in the center of the table. The players continue to take one tile at a time, in order—Jane next, then Paul, Ludwig, and Walter—drawing from either the discard pile or from their own walls. They discard a tile after drawing a tile.)

(From time to time, throughout the game, the players spin, rock, lean back, or wheel back and forth, but never at the same time and never while someone is speaking.)

LUDWIG

Now, where were we?

PAUL

Walter was just talking about what he calls nonsensuous similarities. Do you know what he means by that, Jane?

JANE

I think I do. To “tackle” a problem. To “needle” someone. To “worry” a loose thread. To “embroider” the truth.

WALTER

I contend that our ability to produce similarities and then to transform and extend them is what establishes the ties between what is said and what is meant.

JANE

(Jane could swivel on her stool here.) That sounds okay to me, Walter. What do you say, Paul?

PAUL

It’s designative language that gives us the ability to extend words this way—to “harbor” a fugitive, to “screw” someone, to “root out evil.”

WALTER

(Drawing a tile.) Paul, what’s your take on how we got from immanent language to designative language?

(Walter discards a tile. Jane picks it up.)

JANE

Pong!

WALTER

Already? Let’s see your meld, Jane.

(Jane places three tiles on the table, face-up. The other players lean in to look. While she is displaying her meld, Beuys crosses stage-right.)

BEUYS

(With conviction, facing out.) I am not a human being. I am a hare.

(Jane puts her meld back in her hand, discards a tile, and the game resumes, with Paul taking a tile from his wall.)

PAUL

If language has two kinds of meaning, immanent and designative, then our immanent engagement with the world came first. Primate ancestry gave early humans a well-developed vocal system and that led to speech. In order to refer to animals, they mimicked them, using human sounds. Then some sounds became names for those animals.

JANE

You buyin’ that, Walter?

WALTER

(Walter could rock here.) Name-giving establishes connections between language and objects. It's the communications of the concrete.

LUDWIG

But Paul hasn't told us how we got from mimicking animals to naming things.

JANE

(Defending Paul.) He can't know everything! He wasn't there!

(The players freeze, perhaps with a hand extended to draw a tile or while arranging tiles in their hand.)

BEUYS

(Authoritatively, to the players.) Language is not to be understood simply in terms of speech and words. Beyond language as verbalization lies a world of sound and form impulses, a language of primary sound without semantic content, but laden with completely different levels of information.

(They un-freeze and play resumes. They continue to draw and discard tiles, occasionally moving on their chairs.)

JANE

So then what happened, Paul?

PAUL

Early humans moved from an immanent relationship with the natural world to being removed from it. They became observers who named things arbitrarily. That's where designative language comes in.

LUDWIG

What prompted that?

PAUL

Once they left the trees and moved out into the savanna, their world was more competitive, more dangerous. In order to survive, they had to pay close attention to signs. They were both hunter and hunted now, and the hunt gave a jump-start to their intelligence. Signs contained information about fundamental relationships that could be grasped as abstract categories.

WALTER

What kind of signs?

LUDWIG

Like hoof prints?

PAUL

Exactly. It could be the prints of a young antelope that has been separated from the herd. Vultures circling. A bird feigning a broken wing and trying to lead the hunter away from her eggs. Feces, bones, nests, burrows, they all contained clues that could be read.

BEUYS

(Quickly interjecting.) The hare has a direct connection with the earth into which it burrows.

JANE

I'm with you, Paul. Keep going.

PAUL

These signs were not a description of an unseen animal, but knowledge about it. The signs represented it.

LUDWIG

You're coming at it from a different perspective than we philosophers do.

WALTER

But I can't necessarily disagree, can you?

(Beuys crosses behind Walter's chair and pats him on the head.)

LUDWIG

I'll reserve judgment for now.

JANE

Maybe you guys think names only described the shape of an animal. But I think the names of animals began to contain more information. Over time, each name was invested with layers of meaning, from experiences humans had with that animal. *(Back to Paul.)* And wouldn't you agree, that's part of our DNA?

PAUL

(Getting excited.) You could say that a language carries the cultural DNA of the people who speak it. Just like human DNA carries our racial memory—myths and folklore and the wisdom of the ancestors—cultural history is contained within the language they share.

WALTER

There is no event or thing in either animate or inanimate nature that does not in a certain sense take part in language, for it is in the nature of each to communicate its intellectual content.

JANE

(*Matching Paul's excitement.*) I get upset when I hear how we're losing indigenous languages every day. They say 7,000 languages are spoken today, but half are not being taught to children—they're becoming extinct! It's just as tragic as the loss of animal and plant species.

LUDWIG

Some indigenous languages are being taught in the schools again, did you know that? Gallic [*pronounced like "phallic"*] in Scotland, Mayan in Mexico, and Basque in Spain. I'm sure there are more. You're right—losing a language forever is just as much a cultural disaster as losing a species of bee or leopard or toad.

BEUYS

(*Crossing to Ludwig.*) Or hare!

PAUL

Like knowledge about animals, myths have been around since caveman days, and they remain in our collective unconscious.

JANE

Let me guess: animals play a key role in myths, right?

PAUL

You got it! The deeper meaning in myths is symbolized as animals. Animals are the mediators between myths and humans. The deeper meaning is almost incommunicable.

JANE

Except by intuition! Imagination!

PAUL

To convey an awareness or an experience that can't be communicated any other way, we create music, painting, poetry, or drama. We tell myths.

BEUYS

My art cannot be understood primarily by thinking. My art touches people who are in tune with my mode of thinking, but it is clear that people cannot understand my art by intellectual processes alone because no art can be experienced in that way.

WALTER

Are we still talking about immanent or designative language?

JANE

We're talking about language in its larger sense. Right, Ludwig?

LUDWIG

I do believe that language in its larger sense includes everything in our reality. It contains various human languages, non-human forms of communication, and gestures, as well as objects and events. That would include myths, as well. Walter?

WALTER

True. Language is all-pervasive.

JANE

(Drawing a tile.) Children are drawn to animals instinctively. They love stories about animals. And they hunger for opportunities to exercise their imaginations. Myths serve the human need to imagine. But if children only get myths through movies like “Star Wars,” they will never get a chance to picture how they would visualize those characters and settings. Even if they read the story later, it’s too late! *(Discarding a tile.)* Someone else’s images are already implanted in their minds.

PAUL

Reading stories at bedtime is good, because it’s right before the child goes to sleep. *(He gazes off into the distance.)* And the myths that the animals carry, the deeper meaning they symbolize, can be revealed in the child’s dreams.

LUDWIG

(Pause.) It’s your turn, Paul. Choose a tile.

(Paul chooses a tile.)

PAUL

Sorry, got distracted. *(Discarding a tile.)* Anyway, when humans started using designative language—it’s very exciting! *(He gets up and starts circling the table. One by one, as he passes behind them, players start moving in their chairs. They stop as he’s moving to the next person.)* Suddenly these abstract signs could be shared with those who had never seen the hind leg of an antelope gnawed by jackals.

(Walter draws a tile.)

(Gesticulating.) Time after time, people had to use their imaginations to picture things. More and more, the mind became filled with imagined, recollected, and dreamed forms.

BEUYS

(While Paul walks back to his chair and sits down.) The hare, and all other animals, was a catalyst of human evolution.

(Walter discards a tile. Jane draws a tile and discards one. Paul grabs it.)

PAUL

Chow!

JANE

Show us what you got, Paul.

(Paul lays down three tiles, face-up.)

LUDWIG

Aha! Your meld has a neutral tile, Paul, and I claim that tile. *(Ludwig takes the neutral tile from Paul's meld into his own hand and puts another tile into Paul's meld to complete it.)*

PAUL

You bastard!

(Beuys crosses behind Ludwig. He sticks his thumbs in his ears and waves his fingers, sticking his tongue out at Ludwig. Paul takes his meld, puts it back in his hand, and discards a tile.)

LUDWIG

Watch your language—that's a slur against my mother.

JANE

I don't know if that was immanent or designative, but it's clear that Paul didn't mean Ludwig's mother bore him out of wedlock.

(Beuys crosses behind Jane's chair. Taking the rabbit's foot from his pocket, he slowly drags it along her arm.)

BEUYS

(Moving behind Walter and facing Paul, while someone draws a tile and discards one.) I am a really horny hare!

PAUL

Well, designative words can be replaced by other words. Jane, you started this off by saying, "embroider the truth." In that phrase, we can replace "embroider" with "embellish." But immanent words cannot be replaced, any more than random, arbitrary notes can replace others in a melody without creating a whole different composition.

WALTER

Understanding a sentence in language is much more akin to understanding a theme in music than one may think.

LUDWIG

Certainly, one painting can never be replaced by another. A picture tells me itself.

BEUYS

(As Jane chooses and discards a tile.) Man is only truly alive when he realizes he is a creative, artistic being.

WALTER

There is a continuity between language and art. Like paintings, music, and graffiti, language means itself.

(Paul discards a tile. Ludwig snatches it.)

LUDWIG

Kong! Back at ya, Paul, baby!

WALTER

Let's see your meld, Ludwig.

(Ludwig displays his meld of four tiles.)

JANE

Immanent language includes body language, graffiti, and interjections—what you call vocal gestures, Ludwig. Let's say I pinch you and you say "Ouch!" That's definitely immanent and expressive. Body language is equally expressive. And how about graffiti? It is so direct.
(Images of graffiti are projected.)



LUDWIG

Ooh, I love graffiti! There's an immediate impact—an urgency—they're so visceral! Like a punch in the gut!

(Beuys takes a boxing stance behind Ludwig and punches the air a few times.)

WALTER

Okay, "Ouch!" and graffiti. What else?

JANE

Well, I did mention body language. (*She makes a circle with her left hand and pokes the index finger of her right hand a few times into and out of the circle.*) How's that for immanent, expressive meaning?

(*Beuys laughs with surprise, giving Jane a thumbs-up.*)

WALTER

(*Laughing, he gives her the finger.*) Back at ya!

JANE

(*Laughing.*) Oh yeah? Here you go! (*She moves her right arm across her body and jerks her left arm up under it, violently, making a fist with her left hand.*)

LUDWIG

(*Getting up from his chair.*) You think you get the last word? (*Laughing.*) Take that!

(*Ludwig lifts his left leg and thrusts his right arm up under it, forcefully, making a fist with his right hand. He sits down again.*)

BEUYS

(*While Ludwig sits.*) I personally try to make information available not only in a written way. I try also to work with images, with fantasy, with jokes, with humor. (*Reaching his hand toward Walter's nose.*) Got your nose! (*He shows his thumb between two fingers of his fist.*)

LUDWIG

Jane, what you don't seem to get is this: The meaning is in the word.

JANE

(*Starting to spin more rapidly. Between spins, she faces Ludwig and speaks.*) I don't have the faintest idea what you're talking about.

LUDWIG

(*Wheeling back and forth.*) If I say the word *hare*, I picture an animal with long ears, one that leaps and quickly changes direction, and is seen in the wild.

BEUYS

(*During a pause, as a player chooses and discards a tile.*) The hare is an external organ of the human body. Its prodigious fertility, the way it digs in, the way it doubles back—it is dark and mysterious.

LUDWIG

(Starting to wheel back and forth more rapidly.) If I learn that the Spanish word for *hare* is *liebre*, I will imagine the same animal when I say *liebre*—it starts to sound like what it means. But each of those words, Jane, has its own meaning, apart from the animal that leaps. *Liebre* means *hare*, but not in the way *hare* does.

BEUYS

(During a pause, as a player chooses and discards a tile.) Even the dead animal preserves more powers of intuition than some human beings with their stubborn rationality.

JANE

(Spinning rapidly, between each sentence.) That doesn't make any sense! The word *hare* can have a different meaning, depending on someone's experience with the animal. Maybe the hare was encountered through myth, or through hunting. But for one individual, the words *hare* and *liebre* have got to have the same meaning.

WALTER

(Rocking back and forth more rapidly.) The experience of meaning is very important to me, the continuity between experiential and linguistic meaning.

JANE

(Spinning, then pausing to speak.) I can see that the meaning is in the word because we place it there, but how can a word can have its own meaning? *(She starts spinning again.)*

(Paul starts leaning back in his chair, again and again, more rapidly as the dialogue continues.)

LUDWIG

(Wheeling about rapidly.) Maybe Walter can make it clearer, Jane.

JANE

(Spinning rapidly.) I'm all ears!

BEUYS

(Quickly interjecting.) Wait just a minute! I'm the one with the ears!

WALTER

(Rocking more vigorously.) The meaning of a word is not something humans put into that word. Words embody the same spiritual essence as animals, plants, even inanimate objects. Everything was placed in the world by the Creator, with its own meaning, whether we can see it or not.

JANE

(Speaking between spins.) You're kidding, right?! What if somebody doesn't believe in God? This whole theory rests on believing the Creator put meaning into everything, even words. It's

just speculation. (*She stops.*) Does this really matter? People are sleeping on the street!
Children are getting shot in school!

(The other players are frenetically rocking, leaning back, or moving back and forth.)

BEUYS

(With conviction, crossing stage-left and facing out.) In places like universities, where everyone talks too rationally, it is necessary for a kind of enchanter to appear.

(Jane lays 13 tiles on the table. As she does so, the other players come to a halt.)

JANE

Mah Jong, muthafuckas!

BLACKOUT

[See next page: additional information and bios.]

Mah Jong is similar to gin rummy.

Walter Benjamin (1892 – 1926) was a German Jewish philosopher, cultural critic, and essayist. An eclectic thinker, he combined elements of German idealism, Romanticism, Western Marxism, and Jewish mysticism. He made enduring and influential contributions to aesthetic theory, literary criticism, and historical materialism. —Wikipedia

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889 – 1929) was an Austrian-British philosopher who worked primarily in logic, the philosophy of mathematics, the philosophy of mind, and the philosophy of language. His *Philosophical Investigations* is recognized as one of the most important works of philosophy in the 20th century. —Wikipedia

Paul Shepard (1925 – 1996) was an American environmentalist and author best known for introducing the “Pleistocene paradigm” to deep ecology. His works established a normative framework in terms of evolutionary theory and developmental psychology. He offered a critique of sedentism/civilization and advocated modeling human lifestyles on those of nomadic, prehistoric humans. He explored the connections between domestication, language, and cognition. —Wikipedia

Joseph Beuys (1921 – 1986) was a German Fluxus, happening, and performance artist as well as a painter, sculptor, medalist, installation artist, graphic artist, art theorist, and pedagogue. His work is grounded in concepts of humanism, social philosophy, and anthroposophy; it culminates in his “extended definition of art” and the idea of social sculpture as a *gesamtkunstwerk*, for which he claimed a creative, participatory role in shaping society and politics. His career was characterized by open public debates on a wide range of subjects including political, environmental, social, and long-term cultural trends. He is widely regarded as one of the most influential artists of the second half of the 20th century. —Wikipedia

AUTHOR’S BIO: *Barbara Yoshida is a multi-disciplinary artist whose work as a painter, sculptor, and photographer has been exhibited throughout NYC, the U.S., and internationally. Her work with text has been on feminist websites, in print magazines, and in her book of megalithic standing stones, Moon Viewing. After taking Peculiar Works Project production and publicity photos for over a decade and editing too many grant applications, she began working as a dramaturg on projects such Planet X (Black Mountain College’s [Re]Happening Festival), 2 Jane Jacobs (Cherry Lane Theater) Behind the Curtain (for the inaugural LES History Month), Son of Cock-Strong (La MaMa), Afterparty: The Rothko Studio (site-specifically in 222 Bowery), and Wallpaper (adapted from Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s classic story). Most recently, she co-adapted America’s first play, Androboros (Fraunces Tavern Museum), and is currently developing it into a contemporary musical. In addition to Language Games, other scripts include The Hare Trilogy and Joe & Bubble Boy, as well as an upcoming musical co-adaptation of The Black Crook. She reads constantly and loves words and languages. Other than English, she speaks French, Japanese, and Spanish (some more than others). She has served on the Board of PWP since its inception in 1993.*

OPEN PULPIT NIGHT AT ST. MIKE'S

BY DAN NIELSEN

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *I've performed at many open comedy mics and enjoyed countless Friday fish fries in church basements. It seemed a good idea to combine the two. As a devout ex-Catholic I find it helpful to find gentle humor in the dangerous nonsense that organized religion propagates. In 1965 our high school drama department staged a—rare at that time—production of Samuel Becket's Endgame. It changed my life. Theater of the Absurd led to Pinter, Albee, Shepard, Mamet and their ilk and provided me with a template for my own work. Open Pulpit Night at St. Mike's was written specifically for the Ten-Minute or Fewer Comedy Play Festival: Snowdance. They'd used my work before, but not this time. Happy ending, it found a wonderful home at Fleas on the Dog.*

Open Pulpit Night at St. Mike's

a ten-minute or fewer comedy

Characters:

FATHER SHECKY: in High Mass vestments

SISTER MARY CHORTLE: nun, neatly habited

KITCHEN LADIES: aprons and hairnets

Sound effects of laughter and/or applause

Church basement all-purpose room. Bulletin board on back wall announcing a Bake Sale with a plethora of !!!!!!!! Religious posters with trite quotations fashioned by 3rd-graders. A pulpit center stage. SISTER MARY CHORTLE at the pulpit. Sound of applause.

CHORTLE

Let's keep it going for all the wonderful priests we've had up here so far.

(joins in the applause. signals for it to stop. it stops.)

Okay! One quick announcement. Regarding the recent bathroom controversy, all lavatories will remain locked during school hours. Students are encouraged to go before they leave the house in the morning, and hold it, if at all possible, until school is dismissed, and they are back home.

Thanks in advance for your cooperation. Okay! Next up we have *(refers to signup sheet)* ...

FATHER SHECKY! *(reads from sheet)* FATHER SHECKY is between parishes at the moment and doing freelance grief counseling. So, if any of you have relatives, or close friends recently deceased, or about to die, and you feel bad about it, contact FATHER SHECKY. Okay!

FATHER SHECKY!!!

SHECKY

(takes microphone from CHORTLE)

Hello, St. Mikes! *(cheers and applause)* And wasn't that a wonderful fish fry! *(cheers and applause)* You know, Jesus fed the multitudes with five loaves and two fishes, but the kitchen ladies here at St. Mike's also put out an impressive spread, with hushpuppies, coleslaw, and five-dollar pitchers of Miller Genuine Draft! Let's hear it for the kitchen ladies! *(cheers and*

*applause. two KITCHEN LADIES in aprons and hairnets, peek through a doorway and wave.
when all is quiet, SHECKY begins his set)*

The best thing about being God is you get to have your pronouns capitalized. *(laugh)* God could have created everything much faster, but then a week wouldn't have enough days. *(laugh)* One question I'm often asked is whether God invented torture before or after he created Hell. *(laugh)* God hates telescopes. Every time we develop a more powerful one, He has to make more space. *(laugh)* I asked God why children get cancer. He said it's either genetic or environmental. *(laugh)* When a child dies and God isn't sure if it was good or bad, He asks Santa. *(big laugh)* Adam, alone with God, complained of being alone. Later, he tried to apologize, but it was too late! *(laughter and applause)* When God told Eve that she had sinned, Eve said, "Does that mean I can put some clothes on?" *(huge extended laughter and applause)* Thank you! You are a wonderful audience! *(applause)* Where was I? Right. I was talking about God. God is eternal, and has existed forever, which is a bummer because we don't get a day off for his birthday. *(laugh)* When they asked Jesus where babies come from, he said, "An angel visits your mom." *(laugh)* People often ask me, "Father Mike, what kind of frozen pizza would Jesus eat?" Supreme Self-Rising, of course! *(laughter and applause)* Jesus and Mary Magdalene were in bed together. Jesus said, "Do you want to get stoned?" Mary Magdalene said, "You're right. We'd better not do this." *(big laugh)* All kidding aside, I bet God is surprised and a little annoyed that more people don't smoke weed. *(applause)* Jesus, walking his dog one morning, was confronted by a mob of lepers. The dog barked and pulled at its leash. Jesus said, "Heel!" and the lepers were miraculously cured, and Jesus sayeth unto them, "I was talking to my dog." *(laughter and applause)* If I may get serious for a moment, the only effective treatment for leprosy is a combination of dapson, rifampicin, and clofazimine. *(applause. a light appears on the back*

wall. SHECKY acknowledges it with a nod. he's nearly out of time) If you're bad at being a Satanist, do you go to heaven? *(laugh)* If you don't believe in God, do you go to hell? Yes! Unless you don't believe in hell! *(laughter and applause. the light brightens and pulsates)* Well, that's my time! Thank you all so much! *(applause. standing ovation)* Please, please sit down. You are too kind. *(leans forward. someone is telling him something. the pulsating light continues)* The KITCHEN LADIES would like to say a few words. *(two kitchen ladies enter. SHECKY hands the microphone to KITCHEN LADY 1.*

KITCHEN LADY 1.

There's plenty of everything left. Take-out dinners are seven dollars with double coleslaw. And until the half barrel is empty, Miller Genuine Draft pitchers are three dollars instead of five. Also, we have coffee and pie.

KITCHEN LADY 2.

(slowly, as the pulsating light fades to black) Cherry ... apple ... banana crème ... *(black)* but no pecan ... the pecan went fast ... *(a whisper)* as usual.

(lights up. KITCHEN LADIES bow. SISTER MARY CHORTLE enters stage right. bows.

FATHER SHECKY *enters stage left eating pie and drinking beer.*

THE END

BIO: *Dan Nielsen is a part-time standup comic. His least favorite flavor of jelly is petroleum. Recent FLASH in: Connotation Press, Jellyfish Review, (mic)ro(mac), Necessary Fiction, The Cabinet of Heed, and Cheap Pop. Dan has a website: Preponderous. You can follow him*

[@DanNielsenFIVES](#). He and [Georgia Bellas](#) are the post-minimalist art/folk band [Sugar Whiskey](#).

DIDIUS—A Play by Publius

(Forfeited by **Robert Cantrell**)

To keep the playwright's spacing the Author's Note intro appears at the end of the play.

DIDIUS

A play- By Publius

Cast of Characters

Marcus Didius Severus Julianus- A wealthy Roman senator

Gabullus Fratulus- his secretary

Clara Didia- daughter of Didius

Quintus- Claudia's husband, a general of the Roman army

Faustina- daughter of Claudia and Quintus, granddaughter of Didius

Lolia- seventh wife of Didius

Laetus- prefect of the Praetorian Guard

Sulpicianus- A wealthy Roman senator

Septimus Severus- General of the Roman Army of Pannonia (the Danube Frontier)

Pylades- a popular entertainer

Edward Gibbon- Eighteenth Century British historian

Act 1

At rise lights come up on a side area of the stage, the study of Edward Gibbon, circa 1785. At its center is a writing desk, with inkwell and quill pens, foolscap papers spilling off the sides, stacks of books piled around, a shelf behind with more books and perhaps a marble bust or two. All in all the den of the scholar in the process of writing The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire. Gibbon himself is a smallish man dressed in a simple suit of knee breeches, coat and vest, with a powdered wig al la mode the times. As the lights come up he is writing and looks up to notice the audience, as some visitor come to call.

Gibbon

Hello, hello! (Rising) Do come in. What an honor. I don't often get visitors. Certainly not from your time. Centuries on, I suppose, from the look of you. I have no idea why I am vouchsafed this experience, for though usually the present can never really know its own future, some men will spend their whole lives merely trying to earn the right to speak to it. Like some actor speaking to the audience from a stage, hoping to move them to tears or laughter, or perhaps to action of some sort, I suppose. Conversely, through the humble efforts of such scribblers as myself, the future can be introduced to its past, but can't affect it. It is all pure lesson, if the future has but the wit to see it. In short then, the future can

know the past, perhaps learn from it, but can never speak to it. The past speaks to the future, alas too often in vain, but can never know if it profits from the message.

If I may be permitted the liberty, I am Edward Gibbon, Esquire. From my youth, especially since a moment under the shadow of the magnificent Roman Coliseum, I have aspired to the character of an historian. Now, God willing, and civilization as we know it enduring, through my work, I may speak to you who live long after me. I can have but little idea of what you will be like, though. Your world will no doubt be as different from mine as mine is from that of the noble Romans. Through the transitive property of history you no doubt see my world through historical scholarship, but I can only see you through the haze of my own hope and cynicism.

On the other hand, if you have a peculiar desire to know, for instance, the minutia of the decline and fall of the later Roman Empire, I hope to oblige you. If you have an even more peculiar desire to acquaint yourself with the tinier footnotes of historiography, you might even know something about , well, me, your humble servant. My birth and death dates, something of my successes and tribulations, a précis of my life and so forth. You can never turn and speak to me, for I am gone... ash and dust, and your words fall away into the emptiness of expended time. If I have been successful, however, and you have read my work or even heard of it, I have left a tiny piece of myself in the future world. I survive in the image of myself that I cast in your mind. I am most gratified to be saved from the true and final forgotten oblivion that is the lot of the mass of masses of men who have ever lived. I've labored so long to assemble this voluminous work on the history of the Roman world as a two-thousand page calling card, hopefully to be found one distant day in the shelves of your libraries or in your drawing rooms at tea.

It is a catalog of Rome from the age of the Antonine Caesars, about two hundred years after the time of the great Julius, and Augustus of biblical fame, right down to Constantine XI Dragases, the last fellow to have the purple of Emperor of the Roman world. He died, by the way, leaping in despair off a battlement in Constantinople, sword in hand, onto a crowd of attacking Turks, in 1453. May 28th to be exact. A Friday. Just past eight o'clock in the morning.

Sink me if I can even remember where I was *last* Friday at eight o'clock in the morning. But then I'm not a Caesar. I'm not on the august list that includes such lights and shadows as Constantine and Caligula. The list contains both good and bad, sometimes in surprisingly close order.

Our story, the one you've come to see, the story of Didius Julianus, actually starts, I suppose, sometime after the end of the reign of one of the best of the Emperors, Marcus Aurelius, and the accession to the throne of one of the worst, his son Commodus. At least this sets the stage of the empire, around 193 Anno Domini, at the beginning of its true decline and final, fatal decadence.

In the tumult of civil discord, as in the time of an incompetent sovereign such as Commodus, the laws of society lose their force, and their place is seldom supplied by that of humanity. The ardor of contention, the pride of victory, the despair of success, the memory of past injuries, and the fear of future dangers, all contribute to inflame the mind, and to silence the voice of pity. From such motives almost every page of history has been stained with civil blood; but these motives will not account for the unprovoked cruelties of Commodus, who had nothing to wish and everything to enjoy.

His cruelty proved at last fatal to himself, however. He had shed with impunity the noblest blood of Rome, but he perished as soon as he was dreaded by his own domestics. Marcia, his favorite concubine, and Laetus, his Praetorian prefect, alarmed by the fate of their companions and predecessors, resolved to prevent the destruction which every hour hung over their heads. Marcia seized the occasion of presenting a draught of wine to her lover, after he had fatigued himself in the arena. Commodus retired to sleep; but while he was laboring with the effects of poison and drunkenness, a robust youth, by profession a wrestler, entered his chamber and strangled him without resistance. Such was the fate of Commodus, and so easy was it to destroy a hated tyrant, who by the artificial powers of government had oppressed, during thirteen years, so many millions of subjects.

The conspirators resolved instantly to fill the throne with an emperor whose character would justify and maintain the action that had been committed. They fixed upon Pertinax, praefect of the city, an ancient senator of consular rank, whose conspicuous merit had raised him to the first rank of the state.

When at a late hour he was awakened with the news that the chamberlain and another praefect were at his door, not knowing that Commodus was dead, dreading such a knock and assuming that they carried his death warrant, he received them with intrepid resignation, and desired that they would quickly execute their master's orders. Instead of death they offered him the throne of the Roman world.

The Praetorian Guards were surprised rather than pleased with the suspicious death of Commodus, whose indulgence and liberality they alone had experienced; but the emergency of the occasion, the authority of Laetus, their praefect, the reputation of Pertinax, and the clamor of the people, obliged them to stifle their secret discontents.

Meanwhile to heal, as far as it was possible, the wound inflicted by the hand of tyranny, was the pleasing, but melancholy task of Pertinax. However, a hasty zeal to reform the corrupted state, accompanied by less prudence than might have been expected from the years and experience of Pertinax, proved fatal to himself and his country. His honest indiscretion united against him the servile crowd, who found their private benefit in the public disorders, and who preferred the illicit favor of a tyrant to the inexorable equality of the laws.

Amidst the general joy, the sullen and angry countenance of the Praetorian Guards betrayed their inward dissatisfaction. They had reluctantly submitted to Pertinax ; they dreaded the strictness of the ancient discipline, which he was preparing to restore; and they missed the license of the former reign.

On the 28th of March AD 193, only eighty-six days after the death of Commodus, a general sedition broke out in the camp, which the officers wanted either the power or inclination to suppress. They marched at noon, with arms in their hands and fury in their looks, toward the imperial palace.

On the news of their approach, Pertinax, disdaining either flight or concealment, advanced to meet his assassins. For a few moments the issue hung in silent suspense, till at length one of them leveled the first blow at Pertinax, who was then instantly dispatched with a multitude of wounds. His head, separated from his body and placed on a lance, was carried in triumph to the Praetorian camp, in the sight of a mournful and indignant people who lamented the unworthy fate of that excellent prince, and the transient blessings of a reign, the memory of which could only serve to aggravate their approaching misfortunes.

The Praetorians had violated the sanctity of the throne by the atrocious murder of Pertinax; now they dishonored the majesty of it with their subsequent conduct, which actually sets the story of our Didius in motion.

(Lights up on the family, reclining on couches, at a sumptuous dinner. Present are Didius, his daughter Clara and her husband Quintus, their 14 year old daughter Faustina, and Didius' longtime secretary and retainer, Fratulus)

Didius

You cannot imagine how glad I am to be back in Rome. Back in the bosom of my family and the protection of my household gods. Back to something approaching civilization. Traveling is always so difficult. I'm always sore for a month afterward. Coaching about, and those beastly ships.

Clara

Well, if it's such a trial for you Daddy, why do you always go on these business trips.

Didius

Why do I go? Well, there is a very good reason I go. You tell her Fratulus. Go on, you explain it to her.

Fratulus

Antioch is important to the firm, Domina, to the family's business. Oil and corn.

Clara

Of course. But why did Daddy have to go out there? I mean, wasn't that why you had Cousin Drusus and Cousin Artemius posted out there? To take care of all that sort of thing?

Fratulus

They weren't working for the firm, Domina. They were sent by the government.

Clara

Well isn't it the same thing?

Didius

(Laughing with Fratulus) Almost. But not...precisely. That's the way you do things like that, you see. The boys have been sitting out there on their official backsides for a couple of years, just so that they would be the officials we'd have to do business with when it came time to renew the grain contracts. "Be good Romans", I told them. "And when the time comes, remember and honor the family."

Cost me a quarter-million sesterces to get them posted out there, I remember.

Quintus

Quarter of a million? Each of the little rats will clear that in the first year of the deal. They'll do very well out of it.

Didius

As will we.

Fratulus

Julian ships carry Julian grain from Julian warehouses in Antioch and Alexandria back here to Julian mills and finally to Julian bakeries here in the city itself. Out of every hundred grains of corn we take three for our share. It all adds up, you know. The only thing better would be a true monopoly.

Clara

Oh, I absolutely adore a monopolies! But Daddy, I still don't see why *you* have to go.

Didius

Because that's the way things are done. I'm still the paterfamilias around here, and if I don't rear my ugly old head once in a while, everyone seems to forget that. Fratulus, remind me to visit the Lares for a sacrifice, perhaps do something nice, new cabinet, eh? Something nice.

Fratulus

Dominus, your success does read well in the family annals. Your ancestors would be proud. And the generations will remember your sagacity.(Toasts him)

Clara

Yes, well, according to the family annals, I am Mother Juno herself, Quintus is a real general, and you, Fratulus, are the ever faithful and disinterested chamberlain.

Fratulus

At your service, Domina. I pledge my life to keeping the family accounts straight.

Clara

Your letters back to us are priceless when you and Daddy are on the road. (She picks up a small scroll from a nearby table). This one's from...where? Dalmatia. Dalmatia? You didn't tell me you'd even landed in Dalmatia. Whatever for?

Fratulus

Bad weather, blown off course. The only reason, I can assure you.

Didius

Place is full of barbarians. Nothing to laugh about, I'll tell you. You're safe enough from them here at Rome, but it's a jungle out there and they are all quite animals.

Clara

(By now, again reading the scroll) Fratulus, you never use one word when two will do.

Fratulus

Yes, Domina. Thank you. Your father pays me by the pound for my classical locution. It is my duty to leave a true and unbiased family and public record.

Clara

(Reads) "Didius Julianus bore always the full fury of the season's inclemency, riding manfully at the head of his troops." His troops? "Several sharp engagements with Scythian barbarians cleared the way through the wilderness." Dalmatia? Wilderness? I suppose one doesn't actually get the latest fashion gossip there for days and days, but , wilderness...? So really, Fratulus, tell us, how was the great D. Julianus.

Fratulus

(Consulting his master with a glance. Didius is now well into his cups and only smiles back) You would have been proud, Domina. Mostly he stayed very sensibly in his litter.

Didius

Pleasantly inebriated, I might add, on some excellent local wine. That reminds me Fratulus, order some of that stuff.

Clara

(Reading to herself. She suddenly looks up, surprised by what she has read) You watched an execution? You, Daddy?

Didius

Couldn't get out of it. Planned event and all...

Fratulus

Local mess. One sect chopping up another. Julianus became enmeshed as the leading Roman dignitary about at the time. You know your father always travels under senatorial pass, for safety's sake.

Clara

Yes.

Fratulus

Actually the same as making him an officer of the state.

Clara

Ah, yes, an officer, like with "troops".

Fratulus

Well, technically, Domina, even old Petrolus and Sphonsiba the cook, being under the pass, all of us, we're officers too. I, Domina, am praefect of a cohort, somewhere on paper. Sphonsiba is a centurion.

Clara

Doesn't surprise me. Quintus is a general and he doesn't know any more about being a soldier than you or the cook. So what did he do?

Fratulus

He? He who, Domina?

Clara

The, the....convict, or whatever.

Fratulus

Oh, yes, him. Well, Domina, he hit the ground with a solid thump. His head made another separate little “thock.”

Clara

Thock?

Fratulus

Yes, thock, I think.

Clara

What I meant was, what had he done. The fellow whose head was chopped off.

Fratulus

Oh, that. Oh, certainly, Domina. Actually I haven't the vaguest idea.

Clara

You were the official witness for the senate and people of Rome when this fellow got his head cut off and you didn't even ask why? You are quite the archivist, aren't you?

Fratulus

I didn't ask...no...not really necessary...you see. A lot of that is up to the locals. They try, they convict. So long as Rome witnesses...they even provided the executioner, big hairy

fellow, really big sword, absolutely huge...perhaps Julianus asked. Dominus? (Didius is far into his cups. It is difficult to arouse him fully)

Clara

Daddy?

Didius

What? Hah?

Fratulus

We were asking, what did the fellow, you know the executed one...

Didius

The one with the head...?

Fratulus

Yes Dominus, him. Domina wants to know what he did.

Didius

He flopped around...

Fratulus

No, no, no...

Didius

You were there. You saw him. He did so flop! Remember we had to step back to keep from getting splattered. Best toga....

Fratulus

Yes Dominus, of course. But what she meant, I believe, was what had he done wrong?

Didius

Got born badly, I suppose.

Clara

Yes, Daddy, but what was the charge? What was the actual case against him? Didn't they tell you?

Didius

Rome only has to watch. It doesn't have to listen, too, does it?

Clara

You don't know anything about it at all, then?

Didius

It had nothing to do with reality. A nobody that no one will remember. And all those barbarians jabbering away at once...

Clara

In Dalmatia? Daddy, you wouldn't know a barbarian if they got into bed with you.

Didius

Why, I'll wager I would. By the way, where *is* your mother?

Clara

Not now, Daddy. I have no doubt you'd know a barbarian. But as a traveler...Daddy, you've never been to Scythia. You've never been off the soft road as far as Dalmatia until the storm drove you there. I'm surprised you didn't try to buy off the weather. And that wasn't even outer Dalmatia. Scythian barbarians indeed!

Didius

I'm telling you, they're out there. They're huge and hairy and they want to put our heads out to dry on the walls.

Clara

Yes, Daddy.

Didius

No one but Cousin Severus and his legions holding them on their side of the Danube. And the troops in Antioch keep out the Assyrians...

Clara

...And those in Britain keep out the Celtic trash. Yes, I know Daddy. But do you know what the man did?

Didius

(annoyed) Oh, there was a letter. I think he wrote a letter and it offended the local cult or something. You know these new religious cults, all fuss and squabbles about who knows what. Ridiculous on the face of it. Why one man should get so exercised about what

another man thinks about such things is beyond me. Why they guess, and whose guess is true, and whose guess is false. Totally beyond me.

Fratulus

The sects are all equally true and all equally false, and all equally useful to someone.

Clara

What did it say? The letter. Do you know?

Didius

(remembering with effort) Ah,...uhm, ah, oh, yes! It said something about crossing the river of life to drink from his own wells. I do like that bit. That was pretty, wasn't it?

Fratulus

Very poetic, Dominus.

Clara

And they cut off his head for that? They are barbarians.

Didius

You see! I told you! I mean, why don't they have the plain common sense to leave each other alone? Why do they hate themselves and each other so much? Bad for business. Who's right and who's wrong. So much self-flagellation. They're all still squirming around out there in the mud afterward. If I were a god, I wouldn't want to rule Dalmatia anyway. I can tell you that.

Why isn't this wine cooler? Is there no snow? Gods! Scythian bandits, and mud, and now this heat and no snow. Will it never end?

Clara

Now, Daddy...

Didius

Could you arrange for dessert in the tub? I really don't feel like sitting all the way up.

Clara

Yes, Daddy, you can get in a nice tub and I'll have them send you something colder.

Didius

I'm roasting, you see?

Clara

Heavens Daddy, it's only March. What would you do if you had to stay in Rome during the summer?

Didius

On the souls of my fathers, if I am still in the City one day after the first of June I would be just as pleased if you would cut *my* head off.

Clara

Quintus and I are going to Naples. Will you come with us this year?

Faustina

I'm gong to Capri next week with Cilla and some others.

Clara

I beg your pardon, you most certainly are not.

Faustina

Mother!

Clara

That bunch is not good when they all get together, and especially if they get off where there is no one to supervise.

Faustina

Supervise? Oh Mother, you are so old fashioned. Sometimes I just don't know what to do with you.

Clara

It's a good thing that you don't yet have to know what to do with me.

Faustina

I've already told Cilla I'd go.

Clara

Then you can just tell her you were wrong about that.

Faustina

Mother!

Clara

No. That's final. You can not go.

Faustina

Granddaddy.... (appealing to Didius)

Clara

Tina, I said no.

Faustina

Well, grandfather is the head of the family. He has the last say. Grandfather?

Didius

What?

Faustina

I want to go to Capri.

Didius

Wonderful, dear. Wonderful place. Have a wonderful time.

Faustina

There, you see Mother.

Clara

Father, will you stay out of this!

Didius

What?

Clara

I said will you please stay out of this. I don't want her running off with those randy friends of Cilla Valeria's. She's too young to be running around with such a fast crowd.

Faustina

Too young? I'm three months older than Grandmother!

Clara

Lollia has nothing to do with this. I said no and that's final.

Faustina

Granddaddy!?

Didius

What?

Clara

No. Faustina, I said NO! And that's the end of it. (Faustina sulks. Enter Lollia who is indeed about the same age as Faustina, though from her dress and her jewelry, much more experienced.)

Lollia

Did I hear someone mention my name?

Clara

(Reservedly) No, dear. We were just talking about Faustina.

Lollia

Oh?

Faustina

Mother said I can't go to Capri with Cilla.

Lollia

What a shame. And I'm sure they'll have such a good time. And what does your Grandfather say?

Clara

Lollia, please... (Lollia looks innocent, smiles)

Lollia

(Settling in beside Didius, who rouses significantly at her presence) Well, I suppose you are a bit young.

Clara

Thank you, Lolly, for your expert opinion but that subject is closed. Fratulus, what were we discussing before?

Fratulus

We were just discussing the last trip to Antioch, Domina.

Clara

Ah, yes, and Dalmatia. Several versions.

Lollia

I am so proud of you Didius. Such a hard trip. So long away from home. And all for us. You are such a master of things.

Didius

Nothing to it. Anything for you, my dear, you know that...

(A messenger has entered and whispered something in Fratulus' ear)

Fratulus

What? When?

Messenger

Now, this very moment, sir.

Fratulus

Dominus, Dominus....? Ahem,... DOMINUS!

Didius

What?

Fratulus

The most remarkable news, Dominus. It seems that Pertinax has been deposed.

Quintus

So what's remarkable about that? It has been three months. Had it coming. You could have seen it a mile away.

Clara

Pertinax deposed? You mean they've killed him?

Fratulus

Yes Domina, I'm afraid so. The Praetorians, it appears.

Clara

Stupid fools.

Fratulus

But Dominus, the remarkable part... at this very moment, at the Praetorian camp...they are in the process of auctioning off the throne.

Didius

What?

Fratulus

To the highest bidder.

Quintus

Like I said. What's so remarkable about that?

Lollia

Pertinax was an old goody two-shoes anyway.

Clara

Gods, I'd hoped we'd had enough of Commodus' style of things. The Praetorians have us all by the throat.

Quintus

By the testicles. Twelve thousand of them out there at the camp alone. No more discipline than a nursery. Worse than the Senate. The only thing those boys understand is cash.

Fratulus

Yes, it was certainly the Guard...but

Didius

But what?

Fratulus

Well, Dominus, it is certainly the Guards in control at the moment, but if there was someone else at the helm, someone not like Commodus, of course but...

Didius

Someone else? At the helm?

Fratulus

Yes, Dominus. Someone...more worthy of the title...more...distinguished, perhaps.

Clara

Fratulus...

Didius

More distinguished?

Fratulus

More diplomatic, perhaps...

Lollia

Yes! Someone mature, and wise, and strong...

Clara

Now, Fratulus...

Fratulus

Level headed...

Clara

Whoever takes the throne will find their head leveled. Just like poor Pertinax.

Fratulus

Sir, this is a remarkable opportunity.

Didius

What?

Fratulus

The Throne, Dominus. The Imperial throne itself!

Didius

Me? You mean me?

Fratulus

Of course, Dominus.

Lollia

Oh, Didius. Yes, yes, yes!

Faustina

You mean we'd be the Imperial family? Lollia! We'd look so good in purple!

Fratulus

The messenger said that when he left, the last bid had been from Sulpicianus...

Clara

But he's Pertinax' father in law. You mean they left him alive?

Fratulus

Only five thousand drachmas per man of the Guard. That's only...that's let's see, allowing for the officers...times twelve thousand, give or take...let's see....Dominus, it's a steal, and it would be at twice the price.

Lollia

Didius! Emperor! Think of it!

Didius

But...

Lollia

Sulpicianus is such a hog, and he's so very old, Didums. You can't let him take this. It should be yours. You should take it.

Clara

Daddy, no! My god, think about what is going on! What's just happened to Pertinax, and Commodus.

Lollia

But that was different. I mean Commodus was a tyrant, wasn't he? And Pertinax was a prig.

Clara

But why? What could you possibly gain that you don't have now?

Fratulus

The corn monopoly could be even tighter than it is now. With the imperial seals themselves we could have a tenth part. Ten grains per hundred.

Didius

Ten?

Fratulus

Or even twenty.

Didius

Twenty percent?

Fratulus

Yes, Dominus, easily I would think. And that's, well...I couldn't even count that high.

Clara

No, Daddy. Don't do it!

Lollia

Oh, Clara, you're such a wet blanket. Just like Pertinax.

Clara

I'm not like Pertinax. I'm still alive. I'd like to stay that way.

Lollia

But this is different. Didius is smarter than Commodus, and he's so much younger and stronger than Sulpicianus. Its not the same at all. Rome needs Didius Julianus in the palace.

Faustina

Oh, Granddaddy! Lolly is right. The palace!

Fratulus

Dominus, I suggest that if you want to put in our bid, we should hurry. We wouldn't want Sulpicianus to beat us out of the deal. Dominus?

Didius

No, of course not. We can't let old Sulpicianus beat us out of this deal.

Fratulus

I'll order your litter. Dominus?

Lollia

Yes, immediately.

Faustina

Oh, yes. Oh Granddaddy! Think of it. Us in the palace! Cilla will just die. Wait till she finds out.

Clara

Father, stop! Stop! Wait and think about this. (The others have already physically pulled Didius up from his couch and are hustling him out the door, one under each arm to steer him straight) Daddy! Daddy, stop!

Gibbon

(Lights up on his study) The vain old man hastened to the Praetorian camp, where Sulpicianus was still in treaty with the guards, and began to bid against him from the foot of the ramparts.

Fratulus

I'll go find out what the situation is, Dominus. There's Laetus over by the gate. I'm sure he's the one we will really be dealing with. And there's Sulpicianus.

Didius

I really should speak to him.

Fratulus

Dominus, if I may, you're not at the Senate now. This is real. Do be careful.

Didius

I won't give the bids away. If that's what you mean. But it will be so awkward if I don't at least acknowledge the man. Look, he's waving. You hurry over to Laetus and find out what you can, eh?

Fratulus

Yes, Dominus. And Dominus...

Didius

What?

Fratulus

There are sure to be others when the word gets out, the bidding, I mean. It is essential that we get this done quickly if possible.

Didius

Yes, yes, of course. Run along then. (Fratulus exits, Didius approaches Sulpicianus) Hail, Sulpicianus! Hail old friend. And how are you? Well, I hope?

Sulpicianus

Ah, Marcus Didius, what a pleasant surprise. I am well thank you. And you?

Didius

Quite well, thank you.

Sulpicianus

And your family? They are all well, I trust? Just remarking to my daughter the other day that we don't see enough of you all. She and Clara are such good friends, you know.

Didius

Yes, pity.

Sulpicianus

Beg pardon?

Didius

About her husband...

Sulpicianus

Oh, yes. Yes, a pity. Well, Pertinax was actually rather older than she was, and all.

Didius

Won't be any trouble for her...I mean living widow and all...eh?

Sulpicianus

No, no, I don't think so. No. (Pause) So how's business, old friend?

Didius

Damned boats.

Sulpicianus

Problems?

Didius

Damned boats won't stay afloat, you know how they are. Lost two of 'em out of the corn fleet. Dueded difficult to replace. You know, you've got some investments in the grain trade yourself, don't you?

Sulpicianus

Oh, yes. A sesterce or two. Never trusted too much to anything I had to carry on water. Too much variability, ...weather, pirates, you know?

Didius

Don't I though? Damned pirates robbing you blind, navy can't do a thing about it. Someone should do something about it, I tell you. I think I might speak out about it in the Senate house if it gets worse.

Sulpicianus

Good idea! Damned good idea. Someone... in the Senate... needs to do something about it. You'd be a good one...there in the Senate.

Didius

Perhaps I'll wait until everyone is back next fall.

Sulpicianus

Very good. Sound thinking. You, the senate, next fall. Very sound. (Re-enter Fratulus.)

Didius

Excuse me, won't you? (Fratulus takes Didius aside for a moment and they are obviously in agitated conversation regarding the situation)

Excuse that, old friend. Just some minor details...with the groves...we have groves in Picenum.

Sulpicianus

Rot.

Didius

Beg pardon?

Sulpicianus

Rot. In the olive groves. Difficult to control if it gets started.

Didius

Ah, no doubt.

Sulpicianus

Yes, if it gets too bad, have to chop'em down. Yes, just take an axe to them, if they cause too much trouble. So...your planning on staying in Rome this summer.

Didius

Rome? In the Summer? You must be mad.

Sulpicianus

Oh, yes. The very idea. Best thing is to get away. As far away as you can. Someplace more healthy. Impossible to tell what might happen to you here in this cess pool.

Didius

Can't imagine staying until someone does something about the Tiber. Awful stink in the heat.

Sulpicianus

Like a corpse.

Didius

Exactly like a corpse. Exactly.

Sulpicianus

So. What brings you down here, Didius? I should have thought you'd be home with that lovely young wife of yours.

Didius

Lovely thing, yes she is. (Pause) Well...I came down here because I heard a... well, a rumor. You know how those things are.

Sulpicianus

Yes, quite. Rumors.

Didius

Anyway, I'd heard a rumor...about the Praetorians, and the throne. Just came down to see what all the fuss was about.

Sulpicianus

No fuss. Nothing at all, really. The Guard is just...well, taking care of a few minor details. That's all. Nothing at all important. Be happy to tell you all about it in the Senate next week, no sense in your having to hang about for these sorts of things. Actually I'd just have had the servants handle these little details, but I was the father-in-law and all...questions of funerals and such, daughter would like the head back and so forth, nothing...really. You will excuse me, old friend? I believe Laetus is free and I must have a word or two with him. (Exits, passing Fratulus as he re-enters)

Didius

Well, where do we stand?

Fratulus

It appears that Sulpicianus is the only one to bid yet. That seems odd, no one else... But he's bid five-thousand a man and Laetus has told the Guard that they should keep the bidding open for now.

Didius

Perhaps we can bring the force of sweet reason to bear. Go offer 5250. Hurry! (He turns to speak to those up on the walls of the Campus Martius) Noble Praetorians! Shield of Mother Rome! I come to offer you my civic services in the hour of calamity! The leadership of Rome has passed from an indisputable madman through the hands of an undoubted despot, whom you have so righteously removed, and now I suggest that it is

time for a voice of moderation and reason and a hand of lenity and generosity. We must steer like the good farmer, with straight furrow and clean tools. The fallow land of the commonweal must once again be made to bring forth the flowers and fruit of the noblest aspirations, all protected, of course, by the watchful eye and the strong hand of an ever-vigilant military corp. You, who as Praetorians, are the very cream of that historic and distinguished...ah,...er..distinguished legions whose overwhelming strength and dedication have long been the very mortar in the sublime stone and the regal marble of the very capitol itself...(Fratulus re-enters, out of breath)

Fratulus

No good. Laetus has already taken Sulpicianus' next bid of 5500. Dominus, this bidding could be ruinous if it gets out of hand. We must hurry and do something.

Didius

Damn, he will make it tiresome, Alright. Tell Laetus 5750...and an extra half-million for himself if the bidding stops there. Be quick about it. I'm running out of breath here. (Again addressing those up on the wall) You men! Sons of Campagna and grandsons of Italia are no doubt as concerned as I about the dilution of the power held by you, the real Roman families, by the influx of outlandish barbarians. It is obvious that they, have come late to the Empire have not paid the same share of their father's blood as you, er, and I. We, you and I, share a common language and a common culture, undeniably the most noble in the world. Certainly superior to anything that could be imported. Wine, yes, oil, yes, corn, certainly, perhaps the soft silks and even the soft eyes, yes, these we can import. These you may have, must have. Certainly we at the center of the empire should take advantage of

these things, we fought for them, we're all veterans here. I was just saying to my son-in-law, General Fabonius Quintus about my recent campaign in Pannonia... (Fratulus re-enters)

Fratulus

Dominus, Laetus just laughed at the half-million. He made it clear that he would hold the bidding open as long as he liked. Until, as he put it, something serious was done for him. I believe he wants a piece of the action. He wants to be in the lists with the grosses rather than the nets.

And Dominus, apparently Sulpicianus has sent for Cletus.

Didius

That, that...driver fellow from the Greens at the races?

Fratulus

Yes, Dominus. The Guard are all Greens. They're mad for him. Sulpicianus wants to trot him out.

Didius

Idiots.

Fratulus

Yes, Dominus. But he might sway them over to Sulpicianus in a wave. Its that finely balanced. It would only take a moment.

Didius

The wrong damned moment. Whatever the traffic will bear, eh? Makes perfect sense. Alright, tell Laetus I'll speak to him, privately. We have something more to offer.

Gibbon

Julian at once rose to the price of 6250 drachmas (upwards of 200 pounds sterling as the bribe for each of the Praetorian Guards) and the gates of the camp were instantly thrown open to the purchaser and he was declared Emperor.

It was now incumbent upon the Praetorians to fulfill the conditions of the sale. They placed their new sovereign, whom they served and despised, in the center of their ranks, surrounded him on every side with their shields, and conducted him in close order of battle through the deserted streets of the city. The senate was commanded to assemble; and those who had been the distinguished friends of Pertinax, or the personal enemies of Julian Didius, found it necessary to affect a more than common share of satisfaction at this happy revolution.

After he had filled the Senate house with armed soldiers, he expiated on the freedom of his election, his own eminent virtues, and his full assurance of the affections of the Senate. The obsequious assembly congratulated their own and the public felicity; engaged their allegiance, and conferred upon him all the several branches of the Imperial power.

From the Senate Julian was conducted by the same military procession to take possession of the palace.

Didius

(Enters with Fratulus, other partiers. They immediately encounter a headless corpse.)

Fratulus, who is that?

Fratulus

I suppose it is, or at least it is what is left of, Pertinax.

Didius

Well, have it, or him, or whatever, removed.

Fratulus

Yes, Dominus. Or rather, yes, Your Imperial majesty!

Didius

(Seeing a rather frugal upper laid out as it had been for Pertinax) And Fratulus, have something tastier than...that, brought in. Can we find some entertainment? This is a party after all. See if you can get that Pylades. He's all the rage.

Fratulus

Yes, your majesty. (exits)

Didius

(Seeing a large cabinet, opens it. Inside are the wax masks of a dozen men. These are the ancestors of Pertinax, as are kept in all great houses as household gods. In this case, because the lineage of Pertinax was not distinguished the masks are very generic, i.e. not

actual representations of real features of his ancestors with the exception of one, his father. Didius raises his cup to them, spills a small splash, albeit drunkenly, and addresses them) Well, hello. And how are you this fine evening. Helvius Successus, father of Pertinax, excuse me, father of Emperor Pertinax....I salute you. Your son will be along to join you here. And the happy grandfather and his grandfather, and so forth and so on, back and back. And on and on? Who will keep you all in your nice case now, uhm? Who, beside me...slightly drunken...but slightly Imperial, me, will make a libation to you now? You know they'll kill everyone, his sons and their sons. I know, because "they" will be carrying my seal. I would as soon leave everyone alone, but...that seems to be what is expected. May leave Sulpicianus, old friend, business associate. You think they will think it weak of me?

I have my own cabinet, you know. At home. Perhaps I will have it moved here and you old men can sit in the sun and tell stories of the olden days to each other. Do you care? I'm talking to you. Do you care? It matters, you know. And I suppose you're talking to me. (Listens) Yes, you. Up there in the corner, all covered with dust. You've been here a long long time. How many thousands and millions have come along, squirmed for a season in the mud somewhere and died and rotted and blown away on the wind. They never were. They never mattered. Who were they? Nameless graves watched over by faceless gods. Nobodies. But you honored conscript fathers, you matter. I salute you. (Voices entering loudly) Ah, my guests. And now you must excuse me while I become, poof!, Emperor! Fratulus!

Fratulus

Yes, your majesty.

Didius

Have our Lares moved here tomorrow. And Fratulus...

Fratulus

Yes, your majesty?

Didius

Call a sculptor. Marble. Soon.

Gibbon

Here we see Didius in first flower. A magnificent feast was prepared by his order, and he amused himself until a very late hour with dice, and the performances of Pylades, a celebrated dancer. Yet it was observed that after the crowd of flatterers dispersed, and left him to darkness, solitude and terrible reflection, he passed a sleepless night.

(Didius and Pylades are the only two left in the late night, darkened, banquet room.)

Didius

Who are you?

Pylades

Your majesty, I am Pylades.

Didius

Why are you here?

Pylades

I entertained, your majesty. I was in costume, so you might not recognize me.

Didius

You sang, and played the lyre...

Pylades

...and danced. And told jokes and stories. Yes, your majesty.

Didius

Tell me a joke.

Pylades

Three Greeks walk into a tavern...

Didius

Oh, that one's ancient.

Pylades

Yes, your majesty, of course.

Didius

Is there any wine left? Pour me some. Take a cup yourself.

Pylades

Thank you, Majesty. (He picks up a stringed instrument and absently plucks at it.)

Didius

You play well. I like your music. Don't stop. Where is everyone? It must be near dawn. My first day. As Emperor. Can you imagine... no, I suppose you can't really. No one can. Only Pertinax, and Commodus and the others. The few others. Augustus, Tiberius. Nero...now there was a real piece of work. Nerva, Trajan... Aurelius, bless him. It is possible to do it well, I suppose. How do you do it, Pylades?

Pylades

Majesty?

Didius

Stand in front of perfect strangers and sing and dance and so forth?

Pylades

I as trained up to it, Majesty. I have been an entertainer since I was a small boy.

Didius

You have a remarkable singing voice. Are you castrati?

Pylades

Yes, Majesty.

Didius

Did it hurt? I mean, do you miss...them?

Pylades

Honestly don't remember much about the actual event, when I lost...them. I suppose the only thing that I miss is not being able to have children of my own.

Didius

Ah, yes. Well, that can be a mixed blessing. So you miss children. What is it, I mean why would you want them? You may speak freely. I suppose I need to have someone honest to speak to. That is all I ask of you Pylades, you may speak freely to your Emperor, but always speak the truth. So what about children?

Pylades

One wants to leave something behind. You have your lares, your ancestors. At least their masks. Someone will keep your image when the time comes. But I have no one to do that. I will live and die with only a moment of public fame. And fame is nothing.

Didius

Fame? Nothing? Fame is everything. Leaving your name, a mark in the world. I cannot abide the idea that someday there will be no trace, no memory of me. It is floating in blackness. Fame is something. Yours is based upon the talent you have to sing and dance, that's something.

Pylades

But dance disappears at the instant it appears, and song is like smoke in the air. You leave nothing behind. Nothing real, nothing to touch or hold. No one that remembers you. I suppose most art is like that.

Didius

Perhaps that is a bit bleak...?

Pylades

Of course, your majesty. I suppose everything we do leaves some mark, if it is public. Let us suppose you remember a song I sing. And remembering, a tear falls from your eye. The song, having caused a real tear, having a real effect... is the memory of that song then not as real as when it was first sung? When you heard it with your ear. That kind of fame can last as long as memory serves.

Memory is a precious thing. It is my tool, I must have memory of my steps and notes. But it is like fire, too much memory and you can live with pain, like a jilted lover. Not enough memory, when the people forget you, then you are nothing, washed up in this business.

Didius

Then our job is to make them remember us. We must plan and scheme to make memory.

Pylades, if the memory of pleasure is pleasurable and the memory of pain is itself painful, then is the forethought of pleasure not real pleasure, and the forethought of pain not itself also painful.

Pylades

Perhaps your majesty is right, though far too many people spend far too much time
it seems, worrying about pains to come. But what pain can the master of the whole world
contemplate?

Didius

Oh, Pylades, you do not know. I see little but pain. I am alone here.

Pylades

I am here, Majesty. And you have your family, and your friends, and your retainers.

Didius

And my parasites. And my keepers, the fickle Praetorians. Even my money will run
out sooner or later, you know. And then there is Severus.

Pylades

Severus?

Didius

Septimus. A distant cousin. The commander of the legions on the Danube.
And then there is Neger, in the East, and Alba in Britannia. When this dawn breaks the
ragged color in the sky will be like the handkerchief that they drop to start the races in the
hippodrome. It is only a matter of time before one or the other of them shows up. I suppose

we should really do something about that. Do you know anything about military engineering? Seiges, catapults, that sort of thing?

(Some time later, the throne room. Pylades is present and will continue to be, rather in the character of court fool. Also present is a sculptor who works silently throughout the scene, working on a bust of Didius in clay. This character could be played by the same actor as Gibbon.)

Clara

(Entering abruptly) Father. What did you do?

Didius

Do? About what?

Clara

About what?! About Faustina! About your own granddaughter!

Didius

Ah, yes, that. I supposed you might get around to that.

Clara

Get around to it? Daddy, what have you done? You gave her to Laertus!

Didius

Well, you see, I had to.

Clara

You're the goddamned Emperor, you don't HAVE to do anything!

Didius

But I wasn't the goddamned Emperor when I did it. I had to do it to become the goddamned Emperor.

Clara

You sold her? You sold her to Laetus for the throne.

Didius

Traded, is perhaps a more accurate word. And altogether more pleasant.

Clara

But your own granddaughter...why? She's in shock. How could you? She's only a child and Laetus is a grubby little nobody with no class and no manners.

Didius

Well, lets take those things one at a time...

Yes, she's my granddaughter, like you are my daughter, and I am the paterfamilias the last time I checked. (Glances toward Pylades who is present. Pylades nods in acknowledgement of the fact.) And as I said, I did it because the issue was in the balance and the only thing that would clinch it for us was to offer Laetus a place in the Imperial family. Sulpicianus has as much money, but he had no readily available girls. For which I thank you. As to her shock, she's been raised at least in the mode of a patricia and as such should have been prepared to do whatever she was called upon to do by her family and by Rome. If she's shocked now, wait until tomorrow morning. I suppose Laetus is on his way to collect her about now. As to Tina's tender age, we could have her grandmother console her regarding that, as if Tina hadn't already been to Capri, any number of times, I imagine.

As to Laetus' lineage, we are all of us what we make of ourselves through grasping the main chance. (Looks to Pylades, who only gives him an arch look) The only difference in Laetus' undoubted grubbiness and our lofty redolence is the distance of a few generations here or there. My worthy predecessor Publius Helvius Pertinex' ancestral cabinet held

exactly one real wax mask, his only recently manumated father, Helvius Successus. Time is a cheap commodity, it just takes... a long time, to acquire it. It shouldn't be held against one. People who don't matter don't matter, people who do matter seem to matter because they make themselves matter.

Clara

But doesn't her happiness mean anything to you?

Didius

Happiness and sadness are of piece.

Clara

I just don't understand you.

Didius

Yes. I know.

Clara

Well, as far as I am concerned. You are no longer my father. When you gave way your granddaughter, you gave away your daughter as well.

Didius

Oh, I doubt Laetus needs you both...

Clara

Gods! I will have nothing to do with you ever again as long as you live. I'm leaving!

Didius

That would probably be best. (Clara exits) Go. Never know me again. Get far away.

Disappear.

I have traded my family and now I must live with the bargain.

(Still later. Didius is looking over some papers and scrolls that Fratulus has brought him.

Pylades is once again quietly present)

Fratulus

Will that be all, Majesty?

Didius

Any word on our three little projects?

Fratulus

Nothing at all from Britannia or Antioch. Too far I suppose to be there yet. We have no reports from where ever they are on the way.

Didius

We don't know that they have actually even started this way, though do we? Neger, Alba?

Pylades

We don't actually know that the sun is coming up over there tomorrow.

Didius

Anything more about Cousin Severus?

Fratulus

Not since the messenger confirmed that he is indeed on the way. Our people have been gone for 12 days. It would take them that long on horseback to get anywhere near Severus. We haven't heard of him any closer than the Brenner Pass. That's 10 days, at least, just getting there.

Pylades

Ten days? I don't think my nails will even be dry in ten days. Well, we'll just look a mess...

Fratulus

Assuming he stays with the army, however, it will still be some weeks. The great mass he's bringing can't travel anywhere near as fast as a solitary...agent...on horseback.

Pylades

Thank gods. If one is going its best to have time to prepare, to be in proper costume, to go with one's cod-piece buttoned, even if one doesn't have cods in it.

Didius

Do you think our man will be able to get close enough?

Fratulus

Difficult to say. I assume that if we have thought of this, Severus and the others have too. They will certainly have all their food tasted, so it had to be something slow enough not to kill the canary and give the game away and yet fast enough to drop Severus himself before he gets here. A very ticklish proposition, Majesty. As for trying anything else, a knife or bowshot, I am sure he surrounds himself with an absolute phalanx.

Didius

He doesn't trust us? How sad.

(In the camp of Septimus Severus. He is in his military tent. He is apparently addressing his staff officers)

Septimus

The little sneak. Try to assassinate me? In my own camp? Who does he think he is? The idea of Pertinax was irritating enough, but at least he had been a real soldier, I'll give him that. He didn't deserve to die like that, a brave man set upon by that pack of sniveling curs that call themselves the Praetorian Guard. You cannot let them sully the name of Roman legionary unpunished. When I get to Rome I'm going to have a long talk with Laertus and his buddies... every tenth one gets his head stuck as an ornament on the walls of the city... a

long talk with them and a short talk with Cousin Didius. Very short. His melon goes up over the front gate.

But Didius Julianus?! Have they all just given up back there? Stopped even caring? We're out here on the edge of Hera's bum getting our throats slit by these animals, sending back the dues to Mater Roma, most of these boys putting in their straight up 20 in the Legions, and back there in the City they somehow settled on a cross between a puff-ball and a worm to be the maximum leader? If we don't do something about it, how long would it take one or the other of the frontiers to collapse? Do they all think this empire holds itself up? That it breathes like we breathe without thinking, feeds and digests and breeds like some blind slimey thing in a cess pool? It does not! There has to be a brain and eyes and a heart as well as a strong arm or else the body politic will surely blunder off a cliff.

Didius? Didius! No, he won't mount a defense. He doesn't know the first thing about how, and if I know the Praetorians, half of them are sweating exactly how soon they can swing over to our side and the other half are just too slack-bellied, sprung-butted, and generally sodden to be any problem to us. First thing I want is to meet with the aediles about the food supply and the city engineers, and the treasurer. First thing after Didius, that is. As of now, Didius is a dead man. Bring that fellow's head, the assassin, and his hand, and send them back to the palace. Make sure that the date it left our camp is prominently displayed on the package. Send by a fast express rider so that our erstwhile Emperor knows exactly how soon we will be there. In ten days we will be able to see the city walls. Long before Albinus and Neger can even get onboard ship.

You will all be rewarded well for your loyal service to the state. We should be able to find, oh, ten thousand or so in the treasury for each of you real soldiers. I accept your nomination as Emperor.

Scene (Didius, dressed in a purple-trimmed toga sits in a comfortable chair, with Fratulus, Sulpicianus, and Pylades in attendance. Fratulus and Sulpicianus are working frantically at a table covered with a disorderly mound of scrolls.

Fratulus

Your Majesty, it appears that there are serious bread shortages developing in some parts of the city. (Gaining his attention)Your Majesty...

Didius

And?

Fratulus

And if history serves, that often leads to civil unrest, mobs gathering, riots. They may be the only thing between us and Severus.

Didius

And?

Pylades

Thin bellied little urchins crying out in hunger. I know, I was one.

Didius

How unpleasant for you I'm sure. But what the deuce does any of that have to do with me?

Fratulus

Ahem. You are... the Emperor.

Didius

Well, yes of course. I know that. See the trim on my suit.

Pylades

You really should drape it a touch more loosely, and next time have them use a stronger Tyrian dye. And your shoes are, well, the young people are sort of snickering.

Didius

Really, you think less strap? Should I show more ankle?

Sulpicianus

Your Majesty. The bread?

Didius

Yes, you keep mentioning that. Why?

Sulpicianus

The people your Majesty...

Didius

(Irritated)Yes, and you keep mentioning them. Again, why? (Fratulus and Sulpicianus hold their tongues)

Pylades

You're supposed to do something about them. The people.

Didius

(With dawning realization) Really?

Fratulus

Allow me to be cynical here, Your Majesty, You should do something if only in self-defense. Or let us say, because if the people are poor, or all dead, there will be no one to buy Julian bread and you will have no profits coming in.

Didius

Ah, well. Why didn't you say so? But I thought we were doing wonderfully well.

Sulpicianus

When your majesty closed all the bakeries except those under the sign of the Julian house, it slowed the production of bread to perhaps 20 percent of normal. There is quite enough grain, but most of it is in the warehouses of Ahenobarbus and the Cornelii and Tullus. You ordered them locked, to prevent competition.

Didius

Well, you said we could have the monopoly.

Fratulus

Yes, Your Majesty. Of course. But having it available, and using it in this maximal way... is a different proposition. This... this... is like, like eating everything on a banquet

table and leaving the waiters to starve. In the end you starve, too. No one left to bring you anything to eat.

Didius

Waiters?

Fratulus

Yes, Majesty. The people, more generally...

Sulpicianus

It's called "economics".

Fratulus

Its called self-interest.

Pylades

Its also called simple pity.

Didius

Well, whatever its called, I don't have time for any of that just now. You see, I'm much too busy, ruling.

SCENE: (The throne room, which is now dressed up in incanabula, altars, incense and fetishes of all sorts. Didius is conductng a sort of rite with Pylades as his acolyte.)

Didius

We sent out the Vestal Virgins. The priests. Ambassadors. They were as a gossamer to a charging bull.

We could still try to associate Severus to the empire. I could adopt him as Junior Caesar. Do you think that would work? Do you? Help me here. (Hands Pylades a censer and other objects which will be used at the small altar he has set up for his rites)

Pylades

Would it satisfy you, if you were him?

Didius

I take your point. I had counted on it being Neger. Coming all the way from Syria. That there would be time. And Neger is a reasonable man, a thoughtful man, a man of business for all his warlike trappings. But this Pannonian whirlwind... he can't be bought.

(As he chants the following list of names Didius is laying out various objects such as feathers, a lump of bread, a goats horn etc etc etc. Exactly what, is a matter of taste and convenience to the actor. *Porimna Antevorta is the goddess of the future, the Parcae, Nona Decima, and Morta are the Roman equivalents of the three Fates. Letum and Libitinum are ancient Etruscan gods of death. Viduus seperates the body from the soul.*)

Porimna Antevorta, magna Parcae , Nona, Decima, Morta. Letum et Libitinum. Necessetas triviva Hecate. Viduus Aeternatas. (Motions to Pylades to wave the censor) There, maybe that will do it.

Pylades

You could fight him.

Didius

Fight him? With what? The Praetorians are still slithering out of the baths and the theater. Most of them don't remember where they left their armor. The elephants all ran away. And

the marines, well just look out there at them trying to drill. What a mess. The street urchins are laughing at them. No, if the gods of the underworld will not rise and help us, I fear for our position. I am making other prayers to other gods.

Pylades

Then, Majesty, I beg to take my leave.

Didius

You're leaving me? Going away?

Pylades

No Majesty, only as far as a warm bath and a sharp blade will take me.

Didius

Ah, then we've come to that. (Pylades is silent) The last act. Well, it had to come. I knew it would.

Pylades

They are coming Majesty.

Didius

Where then? The baths will be easiest for them to clean, no?

Pylades

You're coming with me then?

Didius

No. I... am the Emperor of Rome. I will wait here and follow you along when they come for me. (Sits down, one last time, on the throne) That will be soon enough.

Gibbon

Severus had the laudable intention of ascending the throne without drawing the sword. His emissaries, dispersed in the Capitol, assured the guards, that provided they would abandon their worthless prince, and the murderers of Pertinax, to the justice of the conqueror, he would no longer consider that melancholy event as the act of the whole body. The faithless Praetorians, whose resistance was supported only by sullen obstinacy, gladly complied with the easy conditions, seized the greatest part of the assassins, and signified to the senate that they no longer defended the cause of Julianus. That assembly, convoked by the consul, unanimously acknowledged Severus as lawful emperor, decreed divine honors to Pertinax, and pronounced a sentence of disposition and death against his unfortunate successor. Julianus was conducted into a private apartment of the baths of the palace and June second, ironically true to his word, AD 193, was beheaded as a common criminal, after having purchased, with an immense treasure, an anxious and precarious reign of only sixty-six days.

(Didius and Pylades, on a bare stage of indeterminate location. There is a bust of Didius (A wax mask could be used instead)

Didius

Pylades, so good to see you! I trust your...transition was not too uncomfortable?

Pylades

No. Once you've had your nuts cut off, everything else is fairly tame by comparison. I just remember going to sleep in the bath. And you? Its good to see you here. By the way, is here where I think it is?

Didius

If you mean dead, yes.

Pylades

And your passage was as you had expected?

Didius

To the letter. Dead on script, if I may be allowed the phrase. Not an hour after you left there was a great clanging and clacking and some of Severus' fellows came barging in. I was actually a bit offended that Septimus chose not to come for me himself, but I suppose he was busy looting the treasury. Anyway, without so much as a "sorry about that" they whirled me off into the baths...I saw you there, peaceful, and swick, swack my head was rolling along the tiles under the cabinet.

Gibbon

(At his desk in his study)Excuse me.

Didius

Yes?

Gibbon

I must ask...

Didius

Yes?

Gibbon

I must ask, why...

Didius

Yes?

Gibbon

I must ask why someone who was rich enough to actually be able to buy the throne, and thus able to buy anything else of which one could conceive, because it was all under the throne, I say why one who could buy the throne, but who would also have been smart and connected enough to know how the cow ate the cabbage, well...

Didius

Why one who knew better?

Gibbon

Exactly. Why one who well knew that he had not a figs chance of holding the throne would have spent all he had, including his family, his gravitas, and eventually his head, to sit upon it for so short a season.

Didius

As I prayed to my Lares and Penates, to the gods of the past, I could almost see a setting, in the future, perhaps in your time, where all the Caesars (indicates the bust) would be kept in

one place, and a man or woman of your time would walk by them and see the inscriptions of their names

and say them over softly to themselves. And in that moment, we, that is the Caesars, me, I would be alive in the mind of that person. Someday, maybe a thousand years or more, there may be a large Forum of people all together and I will live if only someone says to them the name, Didius Julianus.

And moreover , if I wish, I can give eternal life to my friend by simply saying to them “I knew the great singer Pylades”. In their imaginations they will hear him sing, and whether it has the slightest hint of the way he really sang, which was beautifully I might add...I say they will close their eyes and hear him sing and he will live on.

It doesn't matter if I you say I was a good emperor or a bad one. Or that I reigned a day or a century. I was a Caesar. I have the bust. You will all remember Didius Julianus. And I will live forever.

Pylades

Thank you, Majesty. Thank you. I feel...younger already.

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS...

Firstly, be it known that this is a significantly mashed-up play. I have been walking the edge between folks like Jaron Lanier on one hand, who want strict accounting (and accountancy) for authors' rights, and Lawrence Lessig who want people to be able to use any prior work in any prior way to suit their new artistic fancies. I used Gibbon because no one will get their panties in a twist re copyright. So this is kind of like the Raymond Burr scenes in the original {sic} Godzilla. I used Gibbon because Gibbon fit, exactly the role I needed. Scene setter, as well as stand in for the audience who may be wondering what personal motivations led to these events happening. The obvious joke is that Gibbon's lines are essentially just quoting him from the “Decline”. He was a great raconteur and you would probably have wanted to sit down with him over a bottle of claret.

The true story, as told by him, is a corker. Guy of no particular talent except making money buys the title of Caesar for no apparent reason aside from plain primary greed. But there has to be some motive beyond that, or at least, there might be.

This play's first draft, with the basic concepts, was written some years ago. Originally it had nothing particular to do with any current event. But it behooves us now, given the public givens we are given, whether we are pro administration or anti, to give some thought to the deeper motivations that people may have when they seek office.

As a matter of fact, let me extend the plagiarism admission; I didn't actually write ANY of it. This person Publius, approached me, in 2015 or earlier, where I'll not say, with a tightly rolled paper manuscript. It sat for some time at my place and my confidence in memory of particulars now degrades. But be it known, I didn't write any story about anyone in high office. Nope, uhuh, not me. Alexa, I fully support the goals and aims of the administration.

BIO: *I retired last year after 40 years in general practice medicine. I live in Tucson and for the last 10 months have been working with the immigrant population coming from Central America. To get better at this, I am taking Spanish at the local JC. Otherwise my hobbies include reading, because without readers, writers are an absurd proposition. Most of us are anyway.*

Another hobby is biking, which is pretty choice here in Tucson, in the plain-old-cotton-shorts variety rather than the Spandex and razor shades.

Philosophically, I spend my time trying to get my head around the bravery that we old Gnus will need in order to get on with it when our natural time comes and our ride is here. We need to be able to do that as a whole generation, with grace, possibly with humor, and certainly with efficiency instead of panic and wasteful flailing. Take that, Greta. It requires less bravery than that called for by young people marching off to war, and it is a lot less questionable in any event. But until it presents itself, there is still scotch to sip and desert sunrises to watch, and hopefully still time to write something good.

THREE SIDES

By Peter J. Stavros

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest editor/author JANET COLSON writes:*

In Three Sides, the act of reading a menu triggers memories and stirs up emotions that have been suppressed. Three is a magic number, and this is a magical short play that encapsulates the themes and delicious simplicity of the narrative in its title. There is marvelous economy of storytelling through the back and forth of the father and son, with repeating elements building to an inevitable conclusion. The uber-realistic dialogue reveals the inextricable connections we have with our food and our narratives - and each food tells its own story, from blueberry pancakes to melting ice cream. The tone is perfect; it's wistful and bittersweet, striking a balance of humor without becoming arch and delivering sentiment without sentimentality.

This is a story about relationships. It's about aging and looking into the future. The chasm between how things are and how we remember them. Saying one thing and meaning another. And the challenge of translating the past into a present in which every word takes on a new meaning.

Love this -

SON:

So how's everything going at the home, Dad?

FATHER:

(Looking up from his menu)

Huh?

SON:

The ... home.

(Softer, almost in a whisper)

The rest home, you know.

(Normal voice)

Uh ... Birchwood. How is it?

FATHER:

Oh, it's fine, just fine. Yeah.

(Goes back to his menu)

And my favorite -

FATHER:

Every August, the church picnic at Camden Park - three dozen deviled eggs she'd bring, and they were gone in no time. Curtis from the donut shop ate about six himself, and then once his boys showed up ... you could forget about it. His oldest boy, the good looking one, has cancer.

THREE SIDES

Characters:

Father: Male, early 70's

Son: Male, early 40's

Waitress: Female

Setting:

Curtain rises on a booth in a restaurant. FATHER and SON sit across from each other, staring at their menus.

SON:

I think you're going to like this place, Dad.

FATHER:

Yeah?

SON:

Supposed to have real good barbeque - got four-and-a-half stars.

FATHER:

I like Hank's. They give you three sides.

SON:

This place has sides.

(Pointing on his menu, opened to FATHER)

Look at this column on the right, all the sides.

FATHER:

Yeah but Hank's gives you three sides with their dinner platters.

(Squinting, running a finger down his menu)

This place ... only two.

SON:

You can order as many sides as you like, Dad - this is my treat.

FATHER:

No, no, two's good. That's fine.

(There's a pause as FATHER and SON return to their menus.)

SON:

So how's everything going at the home, Dad?

FATHER:

(Looking up from his menu)

Huh?

SON:

The ... home.

(Softer, almost in a whisper)

The rest home, you know.

(Normal voice)

Uh ... Birchwood. How is it?

FATHER:

Oh, it's fine, just fine. Yeah.

(Goes back to his menu)

SON:

You making any friends out there yet?

FATHER:

Huh? Oh, uh-huh. Yeah, it's fine.

(There's a pause as SON watches FATHER study his menu.)

SON:

You know, Maggie and the kids can't wait to visit you - as soon as the kids get back from sleepaway camp. Maggie drove them down today.

FATHER:

(Smiling)

Ah, sleepaway camp. I remember those days. Remember how afraid you were at sleepaway camp?

SON:

No ... I don't know.

FATHER:

That one time - ha, the only time - you swore you kept hearing a rustling under your bed, thought it was a possum. Couldn't sleep. Wouldn't turn off the light. Finally, the camp counselor called, middle of the night, your mother and I had to pick you up, clear out in the next county.

(Chuckling)

That was the last of you and sleepaway camp. Remember that? We stopped at Lefty's Diner on the way home. You were starving. You liked their blueberry pancakes.

SON:

Still do.

FATHER:

Still do. They really load you up. And sides. Two or three, do you know?

SON:

Huh?

FATHER:

How many sides does Lefty's Diner give you?

SON:

A couple, I don't know.

FATHER:

Sausage, biscuit, a fried egg - three I think.

SON:

Could be.

FATHER:

Yeah ...

(Returning to his menu)

like Hank's.

SON:

Dad, we'll go to Hank's if you want. I don't care. Just thought we'd try something different for a change.

FATHER:

Why no, this place is fine. Not going to get up now that we've already sat down, gotten our menus and waters.

(FATHER takes a sip of his water.)

SON:

Dad, it's no problem.

(FATHER just waves his hand and returns to his menu. SON looks at his menu, then back up at FATHER.)

SON:

You eating alright? How's the food?

FATHER:

(Looking up from his menu)

Food?

SON:

At Birchwood.

FATHER:

It's not bad. They serve a nice Salisbury steak on Thursdays. Haven't had that in years. Your mother used to make that on Sundays. So that's a little different, to have it on Thursday. But it's fine. They give you plenty. Really fill up your plate.

(Back to the menu)

Oh, fried okra. I might get that for one of my sides.

(Pause)

One of my two sides.

SON:

I'll buy you three sides, Dad - honest.

FATHER:

No, no, two's enough.

(Pause)

SON:

So are you keeping busy?

FATHER:

I can't hear you, Son.

SON:

(Louder, with emphasis)

Busy. Is there plenty for you to do?

FATHER:

Oh yes. I get a paper every morning, right outside my door. *USA Today*. You know, I subscribed to that when it first came out - how many years ago? It was, what, fifty cents then. Now ... two dollars maybe. Of course, I don't have to pay for it, the paper's just there right outside my door when I get up in the morning. I take it to the courtyard to read. There's some old man out there, a real mover and shaker, always asking for the Business Section. I give it to him when I'm done, what the heck.

SON:

You meet anyone else?

FATHER:

Hmm?

SON:

Besides the old man?

FATHER:

I see people. A lot of them are in bad shape though, poor folks, don't really do much, just sit there, looking at the TV. One guy just croaked. I take my walks - four or five a day, depending on the weather, the humidity. They have a nice walking track, cushiony. Not sure what they call the surface. Like a sponge.

(Pause)

So where's Maggie and the kids?

SON:

Sleepaway camp. I told you. She was dropping them off.

FATHER:

Oh, that's right, that's right.

(Laughing)

Gosh, did you hate sleepaway camp, couldn't stand to sleep away from home. Suppose that says something about how your mother and I raised you.

(Contemplating)

Don't know if that's good or bad.

WAITRESS:

(Walking up to the booth)

Are you gentlemen ready to order?

SON:

Dad, do you know what you want?

FATHER:

Oh, I don't care. I'm sure it's all good.

(To WAITRESS)

Young lady, how many sides come with your dinner platters?

WAITRESS:

You get two sides -

(Leaning in, pointing at FATHER's menu)

Any two from this list here.

FATHER:

Just two?

SON:

Dad ...

WAITRESS:

Yes sir.

FATHER:

You know Hank's gives you three sides.

SON:

(Sighing)

Uh ... Dad.

(To WAITRESS)

If we can have just a little more time.

WAITRESS:

Sure thing.

(Walking off)

I'll be back to check on you.

SON:

Thanks.

(To FATHER)

Dad, why don't we just go to Hank's.

FATHER:

Gosh no. What? No, we're here already. This place seems fine. They have stewed apples. Your mother used to make stewed apples. In the summer, she'd serve a spoonful over a scoop of vanilla ice cream, the heat of those stewed apples melted right through. You had to eat it quick, or else you'd be left with a bowl of mush. Ice cream soup, you called it.

SON:

So that's it?

FATHER:

What's that?

SON:

Your sides - fried okra and stewed apples.

FATHER:

Oh, I don't know. I haven't decided yet. It's a long list.

SON:

Do you want a third side?

FATHER:

(Puzzled)

A third side? But you only get two sides - the waitress just said. Didn't you hear her?

SON:

We can go to Hank's. Is that what you want? Hank's?

(Putting his menu down)

Let's go to Hank's. We got time. When do you have to be back?

FATHER:

Be back where?

SON:

At the home. Birchwood.

FATHER:

They don't care. I'm not as bad off as the others. I can pretty

much come and go as I please.

SON:

(Hesitant)

I'm not sure that's true.

FATHER:

We can't leave before Maggie and the kids get here.

SON:

They're not coming - sleepaway camp.

FATHER:

Yes, that's right. You told me.

(Frustrated)

I can't keep it all straight sometimes.

(Back to his menu)

Look at these sides. Macaroni and cheese. Potato salad. Lima beans. Deviled eggs. Remember your mother's deviled eggs?

SON:

Uh-huh.

FATHER:

Every August, the church picnic at Camden Park - three dozen deviled eggs she'd bring, and they were gone in no time. Curtis from the donut shop ate about six himself, and then once his boys showed up ... you could forget about it. His oldest boy, the good looking one, has cancer.

SON:

So deviled eggs?

FATHER:

What?

SON:

Fried okra, stewed apples, and deviled eggs. Your three sides.

FATHER:

(Confused)

But ... you only get two sides here. This isn't Hank's.

SON:

Dad, you can have as many sides as you want. I told you, it's my treat. I haven't seen you in a while, since, well ... we moved you

in. It's just been kinda crazy with us lately.

FATHER:

I understand. Don't worry about it. How's work?

SON:

It's fine. Same old.

FATHER:

These government cuts aren't going to affect you, are they? I've been reading about them.

SON:

No, it'll be okay.

FATHER:

If you need any money - you know, for the kids, school supplies, hot meals on the table.

SON:

We're fine, Dad. Thanks.

FATHER:

Where is Maggie anyway?

SON:

She left me, Dad.

FATHER:

Huh? Oh ... sleepaway camp with the kids. I remember.

SON:

No. I mean, yes, she took the kids to sleepaway camp. But she's not coming back home.

FATHER:

Oh.

(Looking down)

Oh. Well ... these things ... people sometimes ... you never know what might ...

SON:

Dad, that's okay. I'm fine. We're all fine. We're trying to work through this.

FATHER:

I see. Well, if you ever need any -

SON:

Thanks, Dad.

FATHER:

You know, for hot meals on the table.

(Pause)

SON:

(Running a hand over his face, sighs)

So what do you say, Hank's?

FATHER:

What?

SON:

Let's just go to Hank's.

FATHER:

But we're already here. We already sat down. We got our menus and waters. We can't just leave.

SON:

Sure we can. Let's go where we can get three sides with our dinner platters. I don't know what I was thinking bringing us here.

FATHER:

It's nice enough, this place, but if you figure -

SON:

Yeah, let's go.

FATHER:

Where?

SON:

Hank's. I'd rather go to Hank's.

FATHER:

Hank's? Okay then, if you say so.

SON:

(Faint smile)

I say so, Dad.

(FATHER and SON get up from the booth and walk out of the restaurant, SON with his arm on FATHER's shoulder.)

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *I get a lot of ideas for my writing from conversations I have (so be careful what you say around me!). "Three Sides" started that way when, while on a trip to North Carolina with my dad, I took him to a new barbeque restaurant that I thought he'd like. But he was dead set on going to the same barbeque restaurant we always went to, mainly because you got three sides with your meal there (whereas you only got two sides at the other place). Rather than argue with him about it, I wrote this play (adding in a side of drama). Among my literary influences, especially when it comes to playwriting, is Sam Shepard, and what I really admire is how, in his plays, he was able to portray such a wide arc of emotions through his dialogue.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Peter J. Stavros is a writer in Louisville, Kentucky. "Room 310," and "Ten Something in the Morning" from Volume 2 of Fleas on the Dog, are from his forthcoming chapbook, Three in the Morning and You Don't Smoke Anymore, which will be released this May by Etchings Press (<http://etchings.uindy.edu>). Peter is also a playwright who has had plays produced across the country. More can be found at www.peterjstavros.com and follow on Twitter @PeterJStavros. His story **Room 310** is published in this issue (Fiction).*

EDITOR'S BIO: *Janet Colson is a playwright/director/pole dancer in Lansing, Michigan. Her hybrid piece, Storycatcher, is pending publication in the upcoming issue of The Champagne Room. She is a collaborator for Ixion Wheel's rUst, a theatre piece that has been postponed due to coronavirus. Janet has just completed ZA-92, a short play about putting on a show during a zombie apocalypse. She is currently working on a play about coming out in quarantine. Janet received her MFA in creative writing at Goddard College last June. Her play **Coming Down** and her **poetry** are published in this issue.*

We're Not All Picassos

a play in two acts

Synopsis:

Chuck Riser has had some recent success as an author. His debut novel, *Please Don't Break My Fall*, hit #4 on the NY Times best seller list, four years ago. His sophomore follow up, *Just Kidding, Please Catch Me*, peaked at #35 two years later.

Now, Chuck is depressed, stressed, and struggling to complete his third book. Under pressure after earning a lucrative book deal from one of New York's top publishers, feeling detached in his marriage, and with his best friend and editor unexpectedly coming down with serious health issues, can art and love help him out of the same rut they got him into?

We're Not All Picassos tackles what it means to be an artist, why we create, and how it can help shape and mold our lives.

Dedicated To:

*All the Artists and Munjaros out there.
We're not all Picassos.*

Time: Late Winter

Setting: Manhattan, NY

Act One, Scene 1: Living Room, Morning - pg. 5
Act One, Scene 2: Cafe with Lon - pg. 16
Act One, Scene 3: Dinner Party - pg. 36
Act One, Scene 4: Book Release Event - pg. 52

INTERMISSION

Act Two, Scene 1: Living Room, Afternoon - pg. 66
Act Two, Scene 2: Funeral - pg. 76
Act Two, Scene 3: Bar Celebration - pg. 97
Act Two, Scene 4: Living Room, Night - pg. 114

Characters

Charles "Chuck" Riser - a published, semi-successful author, 30s or 40s
Delilah DeRosa-Riser - Chuck's wife, a freelance painter and activist, 30s or 40s
Lon Pockets - Chuck's only editor and one of his best friends, 50s or 60s
Monty Reynolds - Chuck's financial advisor and college friend, British, 30s or 40s
Claudia Reynolds - Monty's wife, a librarian and poet, 40s or 50s
Don Pockets - Lon's identical twin brother, 50s or 60s
Katrice Pockets - Lon's daughter, 20s or 30s
Waiter - cafe server, teens/20s
Bartender - bartender, teens/20s

Act One, Scene One

Time: Saturday, 9:47 am.

Setting: Chuck and Delilah's living room of their New York City apartment.

At Rise: *The room is empty. Delilah enters in her pajamas, slowly searching for something small. She finally finds a pack of cigarettes in the couch, takes one out, lights it. She smokes a moment, then sits on the couch, thinking and staring out into the abyss. A long Pause. Chuck enters, tired, also in his pajamas, rubbing his eyes.*

DELILAH:
You really shouldn't do that Charles, it's bad for your eyes.

Chuck stares blankly back at Delilah. Long Pause.

DELILAH:
What?

CHUCK:
You have to go... I'm sorry, it's just... Just for a little bit... I'm sorry.

DELILAH:
I have to go? (*Chuck nods his head.*) Go where?

CHUCK:
Anywhere, it doesn't matter! I just need like - a little time to myself to write... Just a couple hours, that's it.

DELILAH:
... Are you messing with me right now?

CHUCK:
What? No.

DELILAH:
Why can't you write in the spare bedroom?

CHUCK:
I can, I just would like a little space to myself for a while.

DELILAH:
So, you're trying to kick me out of my apartment?

CHUCK:

Our apartment, babe! And I'm not kicking you out, I'm just asking for a couple hours, that's it.

DELILAH:

It's always about you, isn't it? Do you even know how much time, and love, and energy I put into this place? Do you?

CHUCK:

I do, but I also don't see how that's relevant to the conversation we're having.

DELILAH:

You're trying to kick me out like a dog! Kicking me out on the streets.

CHUCK:

I'm not kicking you out! I'm asking for a little space.

Delilah starts to gather a few things, frustrated.

CHUCK:

Look, I'm just asking for like two hours, that's it... I would really appreciate it.

Pause.

DELILAH:

You write all the time with me here, I just don't understand?

CHUCK:

Yes, but I don't write anything *good!* I want to write something *good*, and I haven't felt proud of anything I've written in like a year... I've always written the best stuff when I'm alone, I don't know why.

DELILAH:

Fine.

Pause. Delilah stares and Chuck and smokes the rest of her cigarette. Chuck stands and watches her, patiently.

DELILAH:

You could have asked in a nicer way is all.

CHUCK:

I'm sorry... I should have asked in a nicer way, you're right, that was wrong of me, and I apologize.

Pause.

DELILAH:
It's fine...

CHUCK:
Hey, I love you!

DELILAH:
I love you too...

Delilah walks over and kisses Chuck. She puts out her cigarette.

DELILAH:
Why don't you go to like a coffee shop or something? Or the library? ... Or a bar? Oh, you could go to a bowling alley! You love bowling!

CHUCK:
A bowling alley to write?

DELILAH:
Hey, I'm just trying to be helpful, you don't have to get defensive.

CHUCK:
I'm not getting defensive, but bowling alleys are loud as hell... And every time I go out in public to a coffee shop or something now, somebody recognizes me and comes up to me, it's very distracting... Especially when you're trying to focus and write.

DELILAH:
Babe, you're really not that famous... Like, no offense.

CHUCK:
No, none taken! I know I'm not that famous, but I do get approached a lot... Okay, maybe like 50% of the time, but still... I don't want to take those odds, I have to meet Lon at noon and need to get some quality writing done before then... We should move to the Bronx or like Yonkers or something... I'm blessed to have had even a little bit of success, and I know that more than anyone, but it is pretty rude and distracting.

DELILAH:
Babe, literally none of my friends knew who you were before we started dating.

CHUCK:
I can't help that your friends are not cultured.

DELILAH:

Whoa! What the hell does that mean?

CHUCK:

I'm just saying... And I know I'm not that famous outside of New York and a very small, yet dedicated international fanbase... Plus a decent fanbase back home I guess... But streets are gonna be packed today, even more than usual, it's Sunday... Back home, it wouldn't really be an issue, but Manhattan is not an ideal place to live if you want to go out in public in private as a celebrity.

DELILAH:

I don't know if I would classify you as a "celebrity", per se...

CHUCK:

Burn.

DELILAH:

Charles, the last time I remember someone recognizing you was like six months ago on that boat in Lima.

CHUCK:

Ohhh yeah, that was fun... I guess people think I'm more approachable alone, I'm not sure... *(Pause)* I also get approached a lot around lunch time for some reason.

DELILAH:

Around lunch time?

CHUCK:

Yeah.

DELILAH:

That is so specific.

CHUCK:

I guess that's when most people are out and about? ... I don't know why I've always written my best stuff completely alone, maybe I'm cursed that way... It sounds depressing, you know, and I warned you before we got married... I warned you that all great artists struggle... You show me a content artist, and I'll show you a fraud.

DELILAH:

So, you're saying an artist can never be happy and content?

CHUCK:

Not 100%, no... You have to always be striving for something... Otherwise you will fizzle out.

DELILAH:

So, you're not 100% happy and content?

CHUCK:

Not 100%, no... And I doubt anyone truly is, to be honest, artist or not.

DELILAH:

Are you 100% happy and content with me?

CHUCK:

Of course! I'm the happiest and most content I've been in my whole life, and it's because of you! ... But overall, in general, I am not 100% happy and content, and I don't think I ever will be... I hope I reach nirvana when I die, but I don't want to before then... Cuz then what? You peaked... I believe in karma and that if you live with the best intentions, you will reach nirvana when you die, before you pass on to the other side... See, if I were ever truly happy and content, I wouldn't have anything left to write, the passion would be gone.

Pause.

DELILAH:

Is that what you're going to write about?

CHUCK:

Hey maybe, who know? ... Do you think being happy and content are different?

DELILAH:

Well... I guess I think of happiness as more long term, deeper... And content is more like here and now, short term. You know?

Chuck nods.

CHUCK:

You should write that down.

DELILAH:

Ha... And you should paint me a picture.

CHUCK:

I might... I am content with this cup of coffee right now, for example... But does it bring me happiness? I guess so... I believe they're one in the same... Being content is a form of happiness, it's like fruit and watermelon... Happiness is fruit, and watermelon is contentness.

DELILAH:

Right... And an apple is joy.

CHUCK:

An orange is smitten.

DELILAH:

A banana is warmth when you're cold.

CHUCK:

And grapes are coolness when you're hot.

DELILAH:

What is blueberries?

CHUCK:

Blueberries are just blueberries... They are a form of happiness in and of itself.

DELILAH:

True.

Beat.

DELILAH:

Well, I don't think all artists *have* to struggle, as you say... I think that artists choose to struggle... Because they're emotional and sensitive, and usually a little anxious and depressed... Or very anxious and depressed... Anyone can do art, happy and content, or not.

CHUCK:

Yes, but not everyone is an artist... Like, everyone can sing, but not everyone is a singer.

DELILAH:

But by limiting who can and can not be artists based on their happiness and contentness is excluding and discriminating, and that's not very art-like... A true artist would say anyone can be an artist because art is freedom of expression... Free of all constraints.

CHUCK:

Are you saying I'm not an artist?

DELILAH:

No, I'm just saying you're wrong. :)

CHUCK:

Ah... Agree to disagree...

DELILAH:

Agreed... That I disagree.

Slight Pause.

CHUCK:

Is a poem still a poem if it's never read or heard?

DELILAH:

Yes. Trees grow all the time deep in forests, and nobody ever sees it, but it's still there, and it's still a tree... The same can be said of certain life forms in the deep ocean, certain Nick Cage movies, and on and on.

Pause.

CHUCK:

Alright babe, I really need to get some writing done before I meet Lon.

DELILAH:

Oohh-ho-hoooo! So now you want to stop the debate, huh?

CHUCK:

It wasn't a debate.

DELILAH:

That was a debate... And now this is also a debate.

CHUCK:

Not everything is a debate! We were just talking, having a conversation.

DELILAH:

'Twas too a debate, and I won! :) You trew in dat towel so fast, I woon! 2-0, Delilah!

CHUCK:

Wasn't a debate... Do you mind if I have some space to write before I meet Lon?

DELILAH:

Well, can we hang out later?

CHUCK:

Of course!

DELILAH:

Okay... And what about Bernard?

CHUCK:

What about him?

DELILAH:

He'll miss me!

CHUCK:
D, he's a dog!

DELILAH:
But we only get two full days together per week, he'll be sad and depressed!

CHUCK:
You see him literally every day! Plus, I'll be here for the next few hours.

DELILAH:
You know he's sensitive...

CHUCK:
Yeah, yeah, we're all sensitive... Artists, dogs, ants, everybody's sensitive.

Delilah walks around and gathers a couple more items, her keys last.

DELILAH:
What do you think Bernard is doing right now?

CHUCK:
I don't know, love... Probably sleeping.

DELILAH:
You think so?

CHUCK:
I'm 90% sure he's sleeping... That or sniffing around for food.

DELILAH:
What do you think he dreams about?

CHUCK:
I don't know, D... You, me, food... Going outside, going to the park... Bones, walks, I don't know, D, dog stuff... Other dogs' butts, dog treats? ... Well - I guess dog treats would fall under food... I don't know, but I would like to work on some writing soon.

DELILAH:
Ew, are you going to masturbate? Is that why you're asking me to leave?

CHUCK:
What, no!

DELILAH:
You know you can masturbate with me here, right? Like, you don't have to do it in the shower? You can masturbate in front of me any time, it turns me on.

CHUCK:

D, stop! Why would I masturbate right now? I'm trying to get some writing done, I've been pretty clear about that this whole time.

DELILAH:

Where are you meeting Lon?

CHUCK:

Cafe at the Plaza.

DELILAH:

Can I come?

CHUCK:

No. Sorry.

DELILAH:

Do you know when the next book is gonna get published?

CHUCK:

I don't know, D... Probably in a few months... I'm gonna try to extend the deadline again, I'm not happy with what I have so far.

Delilah puts on a sweatshirt and shoes. She walks to Chuck, kisses him, then kisses her fingers and places them on his lips.

DELILAH:

Charles...

Charles looks at Delilah.

DELILAH:

We are in this together, okay? Always...

CHUCK:

Yeah, I know. Always.

DELILAH:

You and me, always... For life... Okay?

Chuck nods.

DELILAH:

Okay?

CHUCK:
I said okay!

DELILAH:
You nodded...

CHUCK:
Okay! (*Kisses Delilah on the cheek.*) Sorry, I just have a lot on my mind right now and I wanna work on some writing.

DELILAH:
I know, but it's just temporary stress, just a temporary funk... You will get out of it soon.

CHUCK:
I know.

DELILAH:
We all get in funks, it's okay. (*Kisses Chuck.*) Everything will be alright love, I promise.

Delilah walks to the door and stops just before exiting.

DELILAH:
I'm gonna go to the spa then do some shopping... Might see a movie after, depending on what's playing, and may grab a few drinks with the girls, we'll see...

CHUCK:
Okay, just keep me posted. I love you.

DELILAH:
Love you too, I'll see you later tonight, yeah?

CHUCK:
Of course... Thank you for understanding, I love you so much.

DELILAH:
I love you too... Even though you hate me.

Chuck chuckles.

CHUCK:
You know I don't hate you...

DELILAH:

I know... But you hate me more than writing... Five years together, and writing gets to stay, I have to go... I see how it is, I understand the situation.

CHUCK:

D, c'mon, you know you will always be my number one! Over everything else in the world, you know that.

DELILAH:

I know...

Delilah kisses her fingers and waves goodbye.

DELILAH:

See you soon, get some good writing done.

CHUCK:

See you soon, I love you!

Chuck kisses his fingers and waves goodbye. Delilah waves and exits. Chuck sighs, rubs his face, then takes a long pause. He looks around the audience, looks up to the sky, then points up.

CHUCK:

Whatever's up there... Please help me.

Lights fade, music rises.

End of Scene.

Act One, Scene Two

Time: Three hours later.

Setting: Cafe at the Plaza.

At Rise: *Lon Pockets is reading a manuscript at a backroom table by himself, jotting down notes occassionally as he reads. There is a water and a coffee on the table. He is an elderly man, late 50s or 60, balding, a beard, glasses, dressed in a suit coat and corduroy pants. He continues reading for a moment then chuckles. Waiter enters with a pot of coffee.*

WAITER:
More coffee, sir?

LON:
... I'm sorry?

WAITER:
More coffee?

LON:
Oh! ... Yes, please! Thank you so much.

WAITER:
Hey, you got it.

Waiter pours more coffee.

LON:
That's good, that's good... Thank you.

WAITER:
At your service, sir!

Waiter smiles, salutes, nods, then exits. Lon smiles, a bit confused at the Waiter's behavior. He continues to read for another moment before Chuck enters.

CHUCK:
There he is, there he is! ... Mr. Lon Pockets, in the flesh! Greatest editor in the fuckin world!

Lon holds up a finger while still reading.

LON:

Shhhhh, you made me wait here twenty minutes, I'm finishing this chapter.

CHUCK:

Dude... I'm sorry.

Lon holds up a finger and continues reading. Chuck sits down, looks around the room, then looks down at the menu. He skims through it quickly, then closes it and tosses it on the table.

CHUCK:

You get a coffee?

Lon nods.

CHUCK:

Black?

Lon nods.

CHUCK:

Any good?

Lon nods, still reading. Chuck starts to bounce his knee, growing a little more impatient.

CHUCK:

Alright c'mon Lon, I said I'm sorry! ... We're just gonna sit here in silence? Delilah made me late, I texted you, you know how clingy she can be.

LON:

(Still reading): I'm almost finished with this chapter, just hold on... It definitely won't take me 20 minutes.

CHUCK:

Look, I'm sorry, but we're both here now, so... Can we just talk?

LON:

You made me wait here over twenty minutes, you can wait two.

CHUCK:

You're so petty man! D was holding me up, I texted you!

LON:

I don't mind waiting, as long as you don't, Chuck... Treat others the way you want to be treated.

Lon continues reading. Long Pause. The Waiter enters.

WAITER:

(To Chuck): Heyyy, welcome to Cafe at the Plaza! My name is Zach, and I'll be your server today! Can I start you off with something to drink besides water?

CHUCK:

Um... Just a coffee and water, thanks.

WAITER:

Just coffee and water?

CHUCK:

Yeah... Just a coffee and water, that's what I said...

WAITER:

Sure, you got it, no problem! Be right back with those, sirs. (To Lon): Are you still good sir, can I get you anything else? More coffee?

LON:

No, no, I'm good, thanks...

WAITER:

Hey, you got it sirs! Be right back with that coffee and water.

CHUCK:

Thank you.

The Waiter smiles, salutes, nods, then exits. Long pause. Lon continues reading, as Chuck again starts to bounce his knee and now also tap the table. He looks around the room, growing more impatient.

CHUCK:

Nice room they got us back here...

Lon nods. The Waiter enters with a coffee for Chuck.

WAITER:

Aaaand, here you go sir, one hot coffee... Can I get you two sirs anything else at the moment?

CHUCK:

Uhhh yeah, a water?

WAITER:

Sure! I'll be right back with that, sir. Would you like ice?

CHUCK:

Um, sure.

The Waiter smiles, salutes, nods, and Chuck cuts him off.

CHUCK:

You know, you don't have to do that every time.

WAITER:

Do what?

CHUCK:

That... The whole smiling, and nodding, and saluting, and bowing shit, please stop doing that.

WAITER:

I'm sorry sir, it's part of our training... We have to do it in the private rooms.

CHUCK:

That is so weird...

WAITER:

Sorry if it makes you uncomfortable sir, I can ask my manager if I can stop?

CHUCK:

No, no, I mean it's fine, I don't want to get your manager involved here.

WAITER:

Okay no worries, I'll be right back with that water.

Waiter exits. Chuck looks at Lon, confused.

CHUCK:

What the fuck?

LON:

(Still reading): What?

CHUCK:

Did I not ask for a coffee and a water?

LON:

I wasn't listening, I'm reading.

Pause. The Waiter enters again with a water for Chuck.

WAITER:

Aaaand, one water for you, sir! ... Can I get you two sirs anything else at the moment?

CHUCK:

Nope we're good, thank you! That's all for now.

WAITER:

No worries! I'll just be out in the front room if you guys need anything else, just holler.

CHUCK:

Great, thank you.

WAITER:

No problem, sirs.

Waiter smiles, salutes, nods, then exits. Lon finishes reading the chapter, closes the manuscript, and sets it down on the table. He finally looks over at Chuck.

LON:

Chuck! How you doing?

CHUCK:

I'm good man, how was the chapter? Real page turner?

LON:

Cecil B. Hayes.

CHUCK:

What about him?

LON:

That's who I'm reading.

CHUCK:

Wait, you're editing Cecil B. Hayes' newest book?

LON:

Draft, not book... I'm editing his newest draft.

CHUCK:

Whaaat, that's fuckin awesome, Lon! ... Damn, proud of you man, that's huge! He's like the biggest writer in the world right now.

LON:

I know, thank you... Don't act so surprised, you do know who I am, don't you?

CHUCK:

Yeah man, Lon Fuckin Pockets!

LON:

And don't you forget it.

CHUCK:

Wow... That's a fuckin huge grab, Lon, congrats man, seriously... Steve Regal's not editing him any more?

LON:

Nope... Cecil has used a few different editors throughout his career, likes to switch it up... I'm not the first, and I won't be the last... Apparently, he liked my work on Tuscon Swan and Lisa Finch's last book... His manager messaged me on LinkedIn, and the rest was history.

CHUCK:

Wait, Cecil B. Hayes read my book?

LON:

Yeah... He said he "actually kinda liked it" too!

CHUCK:

Shut the fuck up! What did he say??

LON:

Just that... "I actually kinda liked it." ... That was it, then we started talking about something else.

CHUCK:

Wooooow, get the fuck outta here man, that's insane! He's like the best writer in the world right now, that is huge!

LON:

He is the highest *paid* writer right now, I don't know about the best... Especially not after reading the first few chapters of this draft... Hoping it sells just as well though.

CHUCK:

Really? Damn... That's crazy, Cecil B. Hayes likes my book!

LON:

Kinda.

CHUCK:

That's a huge endorsement!

LON:

It's not an endorsement Chuck, don't get ahead of yourself.

CHUCK:

What do you mean, it's an endorsement!

LON:

It's not an endorsement, he's not holding a press conference or doing a speech or organizing a rally endorsing his own competition, hell, he'll never even comment on it in public, I guarantee that... Old successful writers are bitter and competitive, it's a tight book market out there now with all the movies, shows, and streaming options... You got podcasts now too, any music you want at your fingertips, not as many people are reading books anymore.

CHUCK:

Well fuck, man... It would be nice if he could put in a good word on a podcast or radio show or something... Can we get an interviewer to ask him about it? How does that work?

LON:

It doesn't... The interviewers are going to ask what they want to ask and what they've been approved to ask.

CHUCK:

Well, I'm glad he "kinda" likes my book, that's huge for me personally, even if it will never be known publicly.

LON:

It would help sales of your new book if we could get him to say something positive about your last one in public... I just don't see that happening, unfortunately.

CHUCK:

I don't care about sales, Lon, you know that, I'm not in it for the money... Although money does make everything a hell of a lot easier.

LON:

Money might make things easier, but it doesn't necessarily make them *better*... Imagine if you just thought about ejaculating, and then you ejaculated! You would be so easy, but you would never enjoy the pleasures of intercourse!

CHUCK:

Lon, nobody under the age of 70 says "intercourse".

LON:

I'm just saying, there is something rewarding about having to work hard at something and actually earning it... There is satisfaction in that, and too much money can take parts of that satisfaction away, when everything is so easy.

CHUCK:

Lon, I don't know what the fuck you're talking about, but I do know that money makes most things a hell of a lot easier... I grew up poor, now I'm rich, and life is much easier for me.

LON:

But is it better just because it's easier? You don't really seem to be doing much better, personally Chuck, if I'm being honest... You're drinking too much, and you're depressed.

CHUCK:

I'm not depressed Lon, that's not true... And I've cut back on my drinking a lot.

LON:

You've cut back, yes, but it's still way too much... I know it's a process, and I'm proud of you for the strides you've made, but it's not enough, you need to keep fighting.

CHUCK:

I'm fine, Lon! Honestly, I'm good, so just fuckin drop it.

Beat.

LON:

You don't have to lie, Chuck, I can tell when you're lying, and I can tell when something's up... Just be honest, you know you can talk to me about anything, I'm never going to judge anything you say.

CHUCK:

What are you, my fuckin therapist? I said I'm fine, Lon! I'm good, really. Just fuckin drop it, let's talk about the book.

LON:

I've known you how long now? You've been in a funk for a while now, longer than usual, and I'm worried man. We're all worried!

CHUCK:

I'm fine, Lon! I don't like the manuscript I brought today, but what else is new?

LON:

Oh, who cares if you don't like the manuscript, you have to take care of your health first and foremost... The work will follow.

CHUCK:

I care, Lon! I care about publishing something I'm actually passionate about, something I actually like, something I can feel proud of! You say you want me to take care of my health, but that will help my health! What's not helping my health is publishing shitty novels to sell to the ignorant masses because of some fucking piece of paper I signed! ... And everybody just ignores me and thinks that I'm selfish for wanting to publish something I'm proud of? "You should be thankful for your success", "So many writers never get published", blah, blah, blah! How is it supposed to make me feel better when nobody supports me and everyone just calls me selfish?

LON:

We are supporting you Chuck, everyone is supporting you! But at the same time, we have a legal contract with these people, and we have to hold up our half of the agreement... We're artists, but we're also professionals here man, this is not amateur hour... So, no, I don't care if you like the manuscript or not, you never do, and you will always be able to write more! I have no sympathy for that, do your passion projects whenever the fuck you want to!

CHUCK:

Just let me submit the shit I *want* to submit! Is that too much to ask??

LON:

Yes! It is! Chuck, as your editor, as your advisor, and most importantly, as your friend... I know what these guys will do if we don't hold up our half of the agreement. And it won't be pretty! 30 years in this industry, you learn a thing or two... You start to notice trends, how people react, how establishments act... And if we wait around until you write something you're proud of, we'll be waiting around for years! A deal is a deal, and I'm sorry, but you signed it... We promised three books within a certain time, so we're going to give them three books in that time... This is not a debate, and I don't really give a shit if you like it or not, to be honest with you... Do your little passion projects on your own time, a deal is a deal.

Pause.

CHUCK:

Can we just push the deadline back a little more? Please? Like two weeks?

LON:

Chuck, no! I've pushed them back too many times already, they want something now.

CHUCK:

Lon, c'mon man! I got a reputation to uphold here! I got a career to worry about! I don't wanna publish some shitty ass book just for the sake of publishing it! How's that gonna reflect on my legacy? That's not fair to me, that's not fair to you as my editor, and it's not fair to my fans!

LON:

Life's not fair, Chuck! ... Look, nothing in the contract says you have to like what they publish... These guys are pissed, and I need to give them something today or the deal is off... I've stalled for us as long as I could... We need to give them something today, and if we want to make some changes later, we can make some changes later.

CHUCK:

Oh hell no, I've heard that before, it never pans out! Sure, I could make a couple tweaks here and there, but nothing major... I'm not just trying to make a few tweaks here and there, I'm trying to give them something completely different and new! And better!

LON:

I know what you're trying to do, but it's too fucking late! For Christ's sake, Chuck, it's too late! (*Beat.*) I'm sorry... I don't know what else to tell you... Either you give me something today, or the deal is off... I'm sorry.

CHUCK:

Can you just ask for two more weeks? Please?

LON:

Chuck, for the last time man, this isn't the fucking mafia! This is not our legal system, there is no negotiating, there is no more pushing back... They will take us to court, and we all know how that ends... Is that what you want?

CHUCK:

Bullshit, I'll self-publish!

LON:

Chuck... First of all, you don't have the funds to self-publish... And second of all, you're really not that famous.

CHUCK:

Anyone can self-publish, Lon! With social media and the internet now, it's easy!

LON:

Yeah, how many followers do you have on Facebook? You're not even on Instagram or Twitter.

CHUCK:

I could still self-publish, and you could help me!

LON:

Chuck, I'm not wasting my time with that... Millions of people try to self-publish every day, and 99% of them fail... You know why? Because it's really fucking hard! I love you like a brother, and you're probably my best friend, but -

CHUCK:

Whoa, "probably" your best friend? That's messed up, Lon! You are *definitely* my best friend... And you are *definitely* my best editor too, no probables about it.

LON:

Chuck, I'm your only editor... Look, the point is, I'll be fine without this deal, really... But I can't say the same for you... You need this, financially, professionally, and personally.

Pause.

CHUCK:

You know it's funny, Lon... You seem so dedicated to this contract, and for what? To make some rich, old white bastards richer? And older, and more bastardly?

LON:

I don't give a fuck about those old rich white bastards, but it's something I agreed to do... And I am a man of my word. Why can't you understand that?

CHUCK:

Where is your passion, man? Selling out for Cecil B. Hayes, who are you?

LON:

You were just congratulating me on that... ?

CHUCK:

You were supposed to be *my* editor, dude! You were supposed to have *my* back! What the hell happened to Lon Pockets, my friend? The guy who supported me no matter what I wanted to write, no matter what I wanted to do?

LON:

Chuck, we have a legal, contractual agreement here, with the largest publisher in the nation... If you break this contract, they will take you to court, and they will win... And you *will* be bankrupt... Now, I know you're a little drunk, but let's not get ridiculous here.

CHUCK:

... I'm not drunk, Lon... I'm not.

LON:

Okay.

CHUCK:

I'm not! I haven't had a single drop of alcohol all day... I haven't smoked anything either.

LON:

Look, Chuck... I've supported you on everything you've ever wanted to do, and I always will! And I'm supporting you on writing your passion projects, but a contract is a contract... I don't want you to lose your house or career, so stop being so fucking difficult, please... They will sue, they don't care, believe me, I've seen it. (*Pause*) So are you gonna give me a draft what?

Long Pause.

CHUCK:

Well... I guess you don't leave me much of a choice...

LON:

Thank you. Jesus.

CHUCK:

The only thinkg I ask of you, Lon Pockets, is that you tell them I have something better - *much*, *much* better! - that I can have ready in like, a week... Two weeks tops.

LON:

Okay. I'll tell them.

CHUCK:

I'm serious!

LON:

Me too, I'll them!

CHUCK:

Will you?

LON:

Yes!

CHUCK:

... You promise? (*Extends his hand for a shake.*)

LON:

Yes, fuck! (*Shakes Chuck's hand.*) You're like a fucking gnat today, you know that?

CHUCK:

Well... Just for the record, I'm not proud of this draft.

Chuck finally takes out the manuscript and plops it onto the table.

LON:

Yeah, I kinda got that already.

CHUCK:

Hell, I haven't been proud of anything recently, that's the problem! ...The only things I'm even proud of right now are you and Delilah... Fucking editing Cecil B. Hayes, you dog! ... I mean, fuck that guy, but like... It's cool he likes my book, but... Ya know fuck that guy... Stealing my editor, that shit's not cool! ... Saying my book sucks in public, but it's great in private? What is that?

LON:

He never said it was great, not even in private... Look, I know it sucks handing something in that you're not proud of, I get it. But there are other variables in place here, we all have to do things we don't want to... All we can do is move on... That's all we can do, just keep moving.

Chuck sighs.

Long Pause.

CHUCK:

I don't know, Lon... I just know I can do better, you know?

LON:

Of course you do! We all think that, always! Shit, show me an artist who's satisfied with their entire career, and I'll show you a fraud... *(Pause.)* What's the page count?

CHUCK:

52... Double sided.

LON:

Wow... Why is it so short? *(Opens and skims the manuscript.)* Holy shit... Is this poetry?

CHUCK:

Yeah.

LON:

You wrote a poetry book?

CHUCK:

Yeah... Something new I'm trying.

LON:

Uhm.... And when were you gonna tell?

CHUCK:

I just told you.

LON:

No you did tell me, I found out by looking at it... Is the other piece you're working on poetry too?

CHUCK:

Yeah.

LON:

Well... We'll see, I don't know.

CHUCK:
We'll see what?

LON:
We'll see what they say! We'll see how much help I'll be, I don't really edit poetry man... Have you ever known me to edit a poetry book, in all the years you've known me?

CHUCK:
Well I've never written a poetry book in all the years you've known me, but why can't we try?

Beat.

LON:
I mean, we'll see if they even want to publish this... They have published poetry before, but it's not really their forte... Plus, you've never published poetry before, Chuck, you're not really known as a poet.

CHUCK:
Fuck you dude, I am too a poet!

LON:
I'm not saying you're not a poet, I'm saying you've never published poetry before.

CHUCK:
Why can't I start now? I'm a fuckin good poet, dude, trust me.

LON:
You can, and I do trust you.

CHUCK:
The other manuscript is better, I'm telling you.

LON:
I'm excited to read this one... And what specifically don't you like about it?

CHUCK:
Well... For one, the plot.

LON:
The plot?

CHUCK:
Yeah, the plot.

LON:
There's no plot in poetry.

CHUCK:

There are too plots! ... I also don't like the characters either.

LON:

Alright, so shitty plot, shitty characters... What else? How is the dialogue?

CHUCK:

Well, the dialogue is alright, I guess... But it's poetry dialogue, ya know.

LON:

Poetry dialogue, right... What do you mean by "poetry dialogue"?

CHUCK:

Poetry dialogue, you know, like... Short.

LON:

Short, ah-huh.

CHUCK:

Like haikus n' shit, ya know.

LON:

Right.

CHUCK:

Like -

LON:

Like line breaks.

CHUCK:

Right.

LON:

Broken up short lines.

CHUCK:

Right! Exactly.

LON:

Hm.

Pause. Chuck sighs loudly.

CHUCK:

I should self-publish.

LON:

Easier said than done, my friend. If it were that easy, everyone would be doing it.

CHUCK:

Fuck Barnes and Noble, ya know, fuck Borders... They're like the Appleby's and Chili's of bookstores... Shitty, corporate, bland, American-ass chains... No character, no culture, no care for their employees, none of that!

LON:

Well... I wish we could all do the things we love for the *reasons* we love them, that would be the dream... And not just because other people say that we should or that we have to... We should not be creating art so that a huge corporation can get a little bit richer, I'm 100% with you on that.

Pause.

CHUCK:

I just want to write for myself.

LON:

That sounds kind of selfish, no? Just doing something for yourself?

CHUCK:

I guess a little bit, yeah... Is it selfish to want to be happy?

LON:

What about writing for your loved ones, for you family, your friends, your fans? What about all of them?

CHUCK:

Well apparently I don't have as many fans anymore as I thought I did.

LON:

Don't you want to write for others to experience it? Don't you want to write to help others, inspire others, make others think? Perhaps make this world a slightly better place in the process?

CHUCK:

Eh... I guess.

LON:

Is that not why you signed that contract? To share your writing with the world?

CHUCK:

I guess...

LON:

You guess... You know, my dad once told me that the best way to do good for others is by first doing good for yourself... So, of course you have to do good for yourself *first*... Of course you have to get your mind right, get your body right... But once you do good for yourself, you're then in the best position to do good for others... Which is what it's all about.

CHUCK:

Wise man...

LON:

Wise indeed.

The Waiter enters, realizing he's interrupting a moment.

Awkward pause.

WAITER:

Oh, umm... Sorry sirs, I can come back?

LON:

No, you're good.

WAITER:

Sorry to interrupt that nice little moment you two were just having, but can I get you anything else besides just the check?

LON:?

Just the check is fine, thanks... Chuck, you want anything else?

CHUCK:

No, I'm good, thank you though... Just the check, yeah, that will be great, thank you so much.

WAITER:

Hey yeah, you got it! Be right back with that, sirs.

The Waiter smiles, nods, then exits. Lon and Chuck sip their coffee in silence. Long Pause.

LON:

Are we good?

Chuck nods.

LON:

I gotta hear it, are we good?

CHUCK:
We're good! I just said yes.

LON:
You nodded... It was non-verbal.

CHUCK:
Again with the non-verbal!

LON:
It's dismissable in court!

CHUCK:
So is someone's word!

LON:
But you know what's not? A written and signed contract.

CHUCK:
You old Jewish bastard... I love you man.

LON:
I love you too, Chuck.

They hug. Pause. Lon picks up Chuck's manuscript and flips through it.

LON:
I know you hate handing in stuff you don't like, or aren't proud of, I get it... So, thank you. Really. It means a lot to me.

CHUCK:
You're welcome...

LON:
You'll get back there Chuck, you'll start writing stuff you're proud of again... I know it.

CHUCK:
Thanks, Lon... Hey, can I ask you a question?

LON:
Sure.

CHUCK:
When is the last time you wrote anything original?

LON:

Chuck... You know I don't write anymore.

CHUCK:

I mean, what, it's been like 20 years?

LON:

Dude... You know why I don't write anymore... Why do you always try to make things personal?

CHUCK:

I don't always try to make things personal... Are you still not writing because of the whole Nancy thing? She died like 20 years ago!

LON:

Chuck, that's a dick move, man... *(Stands up and puts on his coat.)* I'm getting outta here.

CHUCK:

Look, Lon, I'm sorry... I'm not trying to make things personal, I'm just asking honestly... I'm sorry... You just haven't written anything in like 20 years, so how would you know how it feels, how would you get it? ... This isn't 2001, and this isn't the fuckin local Oregon monthly Poetry Review here.

LON:

Fuck you, Chuck... Man, you really let that teeny tiny little bit of fame get to your head, huh?

CHUCK:

How would you even know about the creative process anymore? You're not a creative! You've never been a creative, you're a fucking grammar nerd! A grammar nerd who has been riding the coattails of better writers for the past 20 years!

LON:

You know how I know you're not a creative? Because you use the fucking term "a creative"...

CHUCK:

Where is your passion, man? Where is your passion for art? And when did you start doing this shit just for the money? Like it's just any other business, huh?

LON:

Why the fuck would I edit books if I didn't have a passion for it, Chuck? I never lost my passion, you just lost your way, my friend... Nancy was my muse, then she died, so the inspiration just - stopped... I've told you this before, is that what you wanted to hear? What else do you want from me man?

CHUCK:

Nothing... I'm sorry I brought it up.

LON:

You don't think I wish something would pop into my head and *stay* in my head? But it just doesn't man! ... Some other-worldly being, some force outside of myself, it never comes anymore! Instead, it goes to assholes like you who don't know what to do with is except bitch and complain all day every day and drink yourself into a terrible depression... How I just *wish* something would rain down over me like it used to! But it doesn't, Chuck! Is that what you wanted to hear? ... So now what? Now I'm stuck editing for cheap hacks and wannabe writers like yourself... I'm gettin the fuck outta here, and don't call or text me... I don't need all this fucking negativity.

CHUCK:

I'm trying to create art for art's sake here, man! Not just for some fucking publishing monsters! And what are you doing? You're basically a fucking proofreader, Lon, you're not an artist! I can have a computer do what you do for me! But not vice versa!

Lon picks up his coffee, finishes it, then slams the mug down on the table.

LON:

Without these "publishing monsters" as you call them, you would still be a poor, homeless, sad excuse for a writer, living on couches and in vans... Smoking weed all day, being too lazy to ever actually put the fucking work in! ... Without these publishing monsters, without these production houses, without these studios and theaters, none of our art would be seen! It would all be tucked away in basements and attics, collecting dust, lost or forgotten in corners and alleys and tiny drawers, buried under car parts in garages, blown away with leaves at bus stops... And nobody would ever experience it! ... All of our art would just be random sketches and scribbles and notes where nobody ever looked... Poems on napkins and crumpled paintings collecting dust under beds, held from the public eye... *(Pause)* Is art art if nobody experiences it?

Pause. Lon throws some cash down on the table then exits.

Chuck looks around the room, pauses, then drops his head and sighs. He stands up, slowly begins pacing. He stops for a second to take a sip of coffee, then puts the mug back down slowly, looking back in the direction where Lon left. He shakes his head and rubs his face and head with his hands. He sits back down and starts writing something in a pocket notebook.

Lights fade, music rises.

End of Scene.

Act One, Scene Three

Time: Friday night, 9:12 p.m.

Setting: The Reynolds' dining room.

At Rise: *Chuck's friend and financial advisor, Monty Reynolds, is hosting a dinner party with his wife Claudia. At the table sit Chuck, Delilah, Lon, and Claudia. Monty, already finished with his meal, is standing at the head of the table in mid-speech. The others are finishing up the last of their food and drinks.*

MONTY:

- And this thing is just like lookin up at me, like - and I mean, like I fucking kid you not, it has *really, really* fierce lookin eyes, mate, just like - *extremely*, extremely fierce eyes, right, like scary lookin eyes, you know what I mean? ... You know what I mean, Chuck?

CHUCK:

(Looking at the ground, barely paying attention.) Fierce eyes! Got it, Monty!

MONTY:

Super fierce, just like - I'm talkin like really fierce, mate... So it's eyes are like completely bonkers, just popping out of it's skull like that *(Re-enacting it.)* It was bloody terrifying, mate, it really was!

CHUCK:

Mmhmm?? ... And.... ?

Awkward pause. Monty takes a sip of his drink.

MONTY:

... And yeah, so anyway... My dog just keeps barking and barking, and this fuckin possum is just screamin at me, screeching and squealing, and I'm holding my ground, mate, you know, like, I'm just starin right back at him, ya know? Not flinching, not moving, nothing... Then I start yellin back at him, mate, like fuck it... And then we're both just screaming at each other, this possum and me, and we're screaming bloody murder at each other, and my dog's barking as loud as he can, and this was all going on for what felt like an eternity... *(Pause)* It was probably only like ten to fifteen seconds in real time, but it felt like forever... And I'm not sure if this thing's gonna jump out at me and attack, if it had rabies, if it was starving, or what the situation was...

CHUCK:

Definitely had rabies.

MONTY:

Chuck, can I finish my story? Or you going to keep interrupting, mate? *(Chuck makes a face at Monty, then looks back down at the ground.)* ... So I'm yelling at this possum in my garbage can,

and it smells like shit... My dog is barking... Then this fuckin possum... *Reaches* down... In to the pile of garbage he had been living and shitting in for like a week, it scoops up a handful of it's own *shit!* - I kid you not! Picks up it's own shit with it's little gimp and injured paw... Then fuckin throws it - right in my face!!

The whole room bursts into laughter except Chuck, who continues to stare at the floor, distant..

MONTY:

I swear to God, I kid you not!! This little fucker picked up it's own shit... Then threw it in my face... And it was definitely mixed in with like other garbage chunks and shit, I'm sure... And then! After I'm distracted and wiping my eyes and face, the fucker *jumps* out of the garbage bin, limp jogs down the alley, turns the corner, never to be seen from again.

Everyone is laughing and having a great time except Chuck, who has not smiled the whole scene. Monty laughs, takes another sip of his drink, then sighs.

DELILAH:

Wow... Monty, that was... That was a great story, that was hilarious.

MONTY:

Yeah... It was pretty crazy.

DELILAH:

Seriously, you're a great story teller, that was so funny!

MONTY:

Why thank you, thank you, not so bad yaself...

Beat.

LON:

I can't believe that actually happened to you too.

MONTY:

Actually happened! True story.

DELILAH:

Wow.

MONTY:

Yeah.

LON:

Wow.

MONTY:

Yeah... I was like, did that really just happen? ... Did that possum really just stay a week in my garbage bin, rent free, free food included, then throw it's own feces in my face and book it? ... In my *face??*

LON:

Yeah, that's crazy.

CHUCK:

That's nuts, Monty! That's fuckin nuts man, you're soooo crazy! Wow, so interesting, dude!! Such a cool guy, so chill, so interesting, so mysterious! You're so amazing, Monty, and you don't even know it... Such a great fuckin storyteller dude, proud a' ya!

Pause.

CLAUDIA:

I've heard it so many times, but it is a good story...

MONTY:

We all know you've heard it a lot... Welp! Whose ready for dessert?? We got chocolate cheesecake *and* blueberry tart.

CHUCK:

Ooh, I'll have some! Me! Me! *MEEEEEE!!!! (Raises his hand, waving it frantically.)*

MONTY:

Atta boy! You're always down, Chuck, my man... You want both? (*Chuck nods.*) Cool, so two for Chuck, two for me, two sides of vanilla ice cream, Chuck, you want vanilla ice cream, right?

CHUCK:

Uh... Does chocolate syrup make everything better? ... Is that even a question?

MONTY:

Well that answers it... Anyone else? (*Slight Pause*) Aw c'mon, don't be shy! Lon, you want some dessert?

LON:

I'm good, Monty... Thanks though.

MONTY:

Delilah? (*Delilah shakes her head.*) ... Claudia? (*Claudia shakes her head.*) C'mon, I got plenty to share! I made sure to get two desserts just for sharing.

CLAUDIA:

I'm good right now, thank you though babe.

MONTY:

Alright, alright, alright... But you're all missin out, I'm tellin ya! ... Lon, I got vanilla ice cream, I know you love that shit, you old Jew bastard! (*Chuckles.*) ... No? Tough crowd!

LON:

I'm gonna go make some coffee.

MONTY:

Am I the only Jew who gets the vanilla ice cream after Shabbat, is that not a everybody thing? (*Lon shakes his head and shrugs.*) C'mon, have some dessert with Chuck and I, just one!

LON:

You guys eat so much fucking dessert, it's weird...

MONTY:

Weird? (*Shrugs*) I don't see what's that weird about it.

LON:

I'm good... Thank you though... You guys enjoy.

MONTY:

Alright! I'll be right back then.

Monty claps his hands and exits.

Pause.

CLAUDIA:

So! ... Where would you say this new book ranks among your others, Chuck?

CHUCK:

I don't know...

CLAUDIA:

Well... Like, compared to your other ones, do you think it's better or worse?

CHUCK:

Well... I don't know Claudia, probably the worst? I'm not satisfied with it, at all. Is that what you want me to say? Is that what you want to hear? Lon basically made me submit something I didn't want to because of our "contractual agreement", but I think it's a shitty book... Probably my worst one yet... I don't know, I just hate it.

Slight Pause.

CLAUDIA:

Oh... Well... I'm sure it's not so bad!

CHUCK:
Oh, it's bad!

CLAUDIA:
All of your books have been really good so far, Chuck! I think so, and I've read them all.

DELILAH:
Chuck is just being modest, the new one is amazing too... it's poetry.

CHUCK:
I'm not being modest, I don't like it. Like at all.

LON:
Would you stop saying that you don't like it? It's finished, it's getting published, and we have to promote it now, so would you stop saying stuff like that?

CHUCK:
So you want me to lie?

DELILAH:
He doesn't want you to lie, but you have to prep for interviews and signings and events, and nobody's gonna be interested if you keep talking about how terrible it is! Which it's not, it's really good!

CHUCK:
Delilah... That's how I feel, Lon... I'm not going to say one thing in private, and then turn around and say the complete opposite thing in public, what kind of person would I be then?

LON:
Look, Chuck... If you keep going around, telling everyone how much the book sucks, then why would anyone want to read it!

CHUCK:
Good! Don't buy it! I don't want anyone to buy it nor read it! I don't want people thinking this is the writer I am now, cuz it's not!

LON:
I told you you're not a fucking poet, Chuck, but you went ahead and submitted it anyway... I hate to break it you pal, but you're not a poet... Anybody can write one good book, have one successful hit... Hell, it happens all the time, just look at me! ... The real measure of being a great writer, a legend, is longevity - volume, a career arc, a collection of work.

Pause.

CHUCK:

Lon, c'mon man, what are you talking about? ... You know I'm not going to say anything negative about the book in public, you know me better than that.

LON:

Well... These days, I don't know if I do, Chuck.

CHUCK:

What is that supposed to mean? ... For Christ sake, if I can't speak my mind here, with my closest people, then where can I? Where the hell can I be honest with anyone in this world?

DELILAH:

You guys, stop bickering! The book is going to sell just fine, don't worry about that... It's a great book, and you are a poet, and you already have a fanbase you can count on who will buy it just based on your name alone.

CLAUDIA:

I think it's a fantastic book, too, honestly...

CHUCK:

You read it?

CLAUDIA:

Well yeah! I was curious what you thought about it though... Compared to your other works.

CHUCK:

Well... My other books are novels... This is poetry... So they're completely different.

CLAUDIA:

Either way, I think it's great... It's shorter, which is good, people have short attention spans now... Ya know, from the phones and internet and tv and all.

CHUCK:

Right, no, I get it.

DELILAH:

I really liked it too... Chuck just hates all of his writing... Which is so unfair.

CHUCK:

How is that unfair?

DELILAH:

If I could write that well, I would be so thankful and blessed, and appreciate it... And you just piss it off like it's shit, when clearly it's not... You're a more successful writer than anyone I've ever met, and you're my husband, and I love you very much, and your new poetry book is amazing.

Delilah kisses Chuck.

CHUCK:

Thank you, I love you too... You always say you love everything I write though.

DELILAH:

Because it's all good.

CHUCK:

No matter what I write, you always say it's great!

DELILAH:

What's wrong with that?

CHUCK:

How can I trust your honest critique of something I write when all you say is that you love everything I write equally? And clearly they're not all written equally.

DELILAH:

I'm just being supportive Chuck, relax!

CHUCK:

What the hell do you even know about poetry? You never read poetry, neither of you! Lon at least reads poetry!

DELILAH:

Well, I can't help it if I don't read poetry, how was I supposed to know you were writing a poetry book? You never tell me anything! And you never let me read anything you're working on!

CHUCK:

But how can I take any of your criticism seriously when the feedback is always the fucking same? Regardless of what I write!

CLAUDIA:

Chuck, please lower your tone... We're all just trying to be supportive here, that's all. Just calm down, breathe...

CHUCK:

Well of course I appreciate all the support, but sometimes I don't need just blind support, sometimes I just need some fucking honesty! Ya know? ... It seems like everyone is afraid of telling me how they really feel or something, like everyone is afraid of upsetting me or something... Because what, I wrote a shitty book a couple years ago and got lucky? All this ass kissing is making me sick to my fucking stomach.

Monty enters with two plates of dessert. He sets one in front of Chuck and the other at his spot.

MONTY:

Well, well, well, here we are! I hope you're not too sick to your fucking stomach, cuz we got dessert! Bon appetite!

LON:

I'm gonna go start that coffee and have a smoke... *(Stands up and puts his jacket on.)* What the hell do you guys need three desserts for anyway, huh? You're both gonna die of diabetes eating all that shit.

MONTY:

It's just two desserts, Lon...

LON:

It's three.

MONTY:

Well it's... Two, with a side of ice cream.

LON:

That's three... Ice cream is a dessert pal, it's not a fucking condiment.

MONTY:

Just go smoke your cigarettes alright? Let us have our cake and eat it too, would ya? Why do you always have to be such a mungjaro?

LON:

Me a mungjaro?

MONTY:

Yes, you a mungjaro! Just go out and smoke your carcinogens and chemicals, then come back in here and finish lecturing me about health.

LON:

Right... Anybody else want coffee?

DELILAH:

I'll take some, thanks!

Delilah stands up and gathers a few dishes.

CLAUDIA:

I'll join you.

Lon goes back to the table and to help gather a few dishes too, a cigarette hanging from his mouth. Lon, Claudia, and Delilah each start to exit with dishes.

LON:

Well... I'll make a whole pot then... Thanks again for dinner guys, everything was very delicious.

DELILAH:

So delicious, seriously... Thank you guys so much.

CLAUDIA:

Of course, we had to celebrate the new book!

LON:

But of course! ... Enjoy the desserts, boys! *(Makes kissing sound towards them.)*

Claudia, Delilah, and Lon exit. Chuck and Monty look at each other, then down at their desserts. Pause.

MONTY:

Well, the ice cream is melting, we should probably start eating... *(Hands Chuck a fork.)* Bon appetite.

They clink their forks together.

CHUCK:

Bon appetite, Monty.

MONTY:

Cheers, mate!

CHUCK:

Cheers. Mate.

Both dig in, eating in silence for a bit, enjoying their desserts. They occasionally smile and nod. We hear just clinking, chewing, throat clearing, coughing, and face wiping for a solid minute. Monty puts his silverware down then leans back, chewing.

MONTY:

Ahh... That blueberry tart though, am I right?

CHUCK:

(Nods.) You're right.

MONTY:

It's fantastic...

CHUCK:

Where's it from?

MONTY:
Solly's.

CHUCK:
The one on Delancey?

MONTY:
No, there's one in Kips Bay now.

CHUCK:
... Where's Kips Bay?

MONTY:
Mate, you know where Kips Bay is, like just north of East Village... I tell you this every time. This one's open on Sundays, too... Best desserts in the city, in my opinion... Cakes, pies, cookies, muffins... Breads, donuts, crossaints, you fuckin name it, mate... Macaroons, everything.

CHUCK:
Is it a French bakery?

MONTY:
I mean... You could say that... Although, I consider macaroons in the same category as churros... They're kind of like an adopted American food... Like tacos, or pizza, nachos, brats... Like most foods here, I suppose... I mean what's truly American and didn't come from some other country? Hamburgers, I suppose... That might be the one true American food... Even apple pie existed in other cultures, for centuries... Some type of bread and apple baked good for dessert... Typically, it was with a bit of a thicker crust, you know... And less sugar, but... Idea was the same.

Long Pause.

MONTY:
So how you doing man? How've you been?

CHUCK:
Me? Oh, I've been fine... New book's coming out soon.

MONTY:
Yeah? You excited?

CHUCK:
Eh, kinda... Little nervous... It's poetry.

MONTY:
Oh, cool... Well I hope it's another success, I'm sure it will be.

CHUCK:

We'll see... Or it'll flop, I don't know.

MONTY:

Nahh, I'm sure it'll be fine.

CHUCK:

Maybe my fans will leave me for another writer.

MONTY:

Nahh, that - pretty sure that's not how fans operate, really... They can be fans of multiple writers. I know I am.

CHUCK:

I know, you're a fan of a many things, Monty.

Beat. They both eat more dessert in silence.

MONTY:

So listen, Chuck, I, uh... *(Clears his throat.)* I was running all your returns from last year... Your ROIs, W2s, AGIs, everything... And, uh... It's not lookin too good right now... Actually lookin pretty bad, to be quite honest... I think you need to start making some serious lifestyle changes, like tomorrow... Not just for your own health, but for your finances too... As your best friend and your financial advisor, I am hoping and praying that this next book just crushes it out of the park, but you know that is far from guaranteed... I can't advise you to continue your spending habits at the pace you are with no guaranteed income coming in to replace it... Does that make sense?

CHUCK:

Hm... *(Still eating and chewing.)* How bad are my funds?

MONTY:

To put it blunt, mate, it's bad... You're really in the red now, worse than before... I mean, you're making a little back from the scattering of appearances, the signings, the residuals from your old books... And you should be fine if your next book sells well... Which it's expected to do, but like you said, it's poetry, it's new territory for you... Your readers don't know you as a poet.

CHUCK:

Then they'll get to know me as a poet.

MONTY:

Well, regardless of that... You have to alter your lifestyle... We have to promote the hell out of this book over the next month or two, can I count on you to put 100% towards pushing this thing for us? ... And for your own health?

CHUCK:

Sure.

Chuck shrugs, mostly indifferent, still focused on the desserts, slowing down, getting full. Pause.

MONTY:

You're having like no reaction to this, you don't seem worried or surprised even the slightest.

CHUCK:

I don't know, Monty... I knew I was in the red, but... This new book will help.

MONTY:

Right, like I said, you *should* be fine... If your new book sells even half as much as the last one did, you'll be fine, but it won't last forever... You need to start making some lifestyle changes... Delilah has expressed some concerns, and I'm concerned too... As your friend... Have you thought about a *true* savings account? I know you have one now, but you keep spending money from it... Maybe like something you don't have access to?

CHUCK:

Why would I open a savings account that I can't access?

MONTY:

So you can actually save it! I know you have a savings account, but you don't actually save the money that's in it... Which defeats the purpose of even having a savings account.

CHUCK:

I'll see.

MONTY:

Well regardless of what happens with this book, you can't afford to keep living this life; physically, mentally, emotionally, nor financially... You just have to be smarter with your money, that's all... It's not my money to spend or save, but you pay me to be your financial advisor, so I feel obligated to have this talk with you, friend or not...

Slight Pause.

CHUCK:

That blueberry cheesecake though.

MONTY:

Right... That blueberry cheesecake... Are you even listening to me mate, this is serious! (*Monty stares at Chuck, worried.*) ... Is everything alright, mate? You've seemed out of it for a while now.

Chuck looks over at Monty, slightly confused.

CHUCK:

What do you mean?

MONTY:

Like... Are you doing okay? Mentally, physically? You're worrying us, Chuck.

CHUCK:

Who's us?

MONTY:

Everyone! Me, Delilah, Lon, Claudia, everyone! The drinking, the drugs, the depression... It's been going on longer than usual, and we're all worried because we love you dude.

CHUCK:

I love you too, Monty... You've always been there for me... Ever since college man.

MONTY:

And I always will. But I just told you that you're deeply in debt, and you had like no reaction at all... Lon said you were trying to break your contract with the publisher the other day, what's going on mate? ... You can't afford to break it off, you would get sued in court and lose everything.

Chuck shrugs. Pause.

CHUCK:

I feel fine, honestly... I'm fine.

MONTY:

You know you can tell me anything, right?

CHUCK:

I know that, Monty, thank you.

MONTY:

If you ever need anything, just let me know, alright? I'm here... We're all here.

CHUCK:

I'm fine! Honestly, I'm just in a funk, but I'll get out of it... We all get in funks, right?

MONTY:

Right... I'm just asking, that's all... Because I care about you, we all care about you, and I'm just trying to help. *(Raises his glass.)* Pestroviah! To your best-selling book yet!

Chuck looks at him blankly. He grabs his drink, raises it slowly, then clinks it with Monty's.

CHUCK:

Pestroviah.

They both drink. Long Pause.

MONTY:

Ahh... So! Book release party, where we thinkin?

CHUCK:

I don't know... I don't really want to do one.

MONTY:

Chuck, we have to sell this book! You *need* to sell a lot of copies... Where would you prefer to have it?

CHUCK:

(Shrugs) I really don't care, Monty... Maybe Downtown Books again? I really don't care, just pick a place... It's not like these events are going to decide the fate of this book, it's all online now.

MONTY:

That's not true, word of mouth mate, it's a powerful thing! Connections, relationship building, networking, it's all part of it! You know this... I'll call Downtown Books tomorrow morning.

CHUCK:

Great... Do we really need to have a release party?

MONTY:

Chuck, c'mon, don't be like this!

CHUCK:

Don't be like what?

MONTY:

Like that! It'll be fun, mate. We'll have open bar, free food, the whole nine.

CHUCK:

Is that a good idea?

MONTY:

Is what a good idea?

CHUCK:

Open bar and all that. The whole nine.

MONTY:

Why wouldn't it be?

CHUCK:

I mean, if I'm in the red and all.

MONTY:

Oh, it'll be fine! Like I said mate, once this book hits the shelves, once it starts flying off the shelves, you should be good... But we gotta sell! We have to actively sell.

CHUCK:

Yeah, I get it, I get it... I just really hate doing these things, you know that.

MONTY:

I know, I know... Just two hours, that's all we ask. *(Takes out his phone and checks something.)*
I'm thinkin maybe the 26th? That's a Saturday, that work for you?

CHUCK:

Sure.

MONTY:

You got a preference for time?

CHUCK:

Not really.

MONTY:

Alright, I'll call tomorrow and book it for 7 or 8. *(Puts phone away.)*

CHUCK:

Great.

Pause. Monty stands up.

MONTY:

Well... I'm gonna go grab another drink, you wanna come?

Chuck stares at him blankly..

CHUCK:

Ya know, I've been thinkin, Monty...

MONTY:

About? *(Sits back down.)*

CHUCK:

What if death was like... not the end? You know?

MONTY:

Mm, no. I don't know.

CHUCK:

Like, what if death was just the beginning of another new chapter? ... What if we're all just waiting around to be born again, you know? And what if when we die, we actually go home, being born into our new life?

Monty nods and thinks for a moment. Pause.

MONTY:

Well... That's a beautiful thought, and I guess you could be right... No one really knows, and that's the beauty and the fear of it all, right?

CHUCK:

Right... So we should just try to enjoy this chapter as much as possible, right? ... Cuz it's a transitional period, right? Until we're born again.

MONTY:

Maybe. *(Monty puts his arm around Chuck.)* I think you might be right, old friend... Let's go grab another drink, huh?

Monty stands up.

CHUCK:

Sure... *(Stands up.)*

MONTY:

Hell, we gotta book to celebrate here, right! Fuckin A.

MONTY:

Fuckin A... Got a book to celebrate here.

Monty slaps Chuck on the back. Both exit with their drinks, leaving their dishes behind.

Lights fade, music rises.

End of Scene.

Act One, Scene Four

Time: 8:00pm on Saturday, the 26th.

Setting: Downtown Books, a bookstore, downtown.

At Rise: *Chuck is schmoozing with a few fans and investors of the publisher. He talks it up with a small group of people, then chuckles for a few moments. Delilah enters, slightly rushed and upset. She pauses on the opposite side of the stage of Chuck, trying to make eye contact with him through a small puddle of people.*

DELILAH:
Charles! (*Waving*) Charles!

Chuck looks over at Delilah, then gestures to his fans that he'll be right back. He calmly walks over to Delilah on the other side of the stage, leaving the small group to talk amongst themselves. Delilah hits him in the arm multiple times in the arm as he approaches.

CHUCK:
Ow, what the hell!

DELILAH:
You what the hell!

CHUCK:
Look, take it easy, D! We're in public..

DELILAH:
I don't care! Where the hell were you?? Where did you go?

CHUCK:
Where the hell was *I*? Where were you?? I waited for you for almost a half hour, the party started an hour ago!

DELILAH:
You told me *eight*, Chuck!

CHUCK:
I told you *seven*!

DELILAH:
You told me *eight*.

CHUCK:

I told you *seven*, D! Seven to nine, that's what I said, I said I might *leave* by 8:00pm, depending on how it goes with the turnout.

DELILAH:

You told me *eight*! And then you left me alone at the hotel! Again! This is twice in a row now, Chuck, twice in two months!

CHUCK:

Listen, D... I know you're frustrated, I get it, but we're in public here, some of my fans are here... Please lower your voice and just hear me out for one second... A, I told you it started at *seven*... And B -

DELILAH:

You told me eight.

CHUCK:

And B! I called and texted you when the Uber pulled up, and you never answered!

DELILAH:

I was in the shower! You expect me to answer my phone when I'm in the shower? I don't jack off to porn videos on my phone when I'm in the shower like you do, I'm sorry.

CHUCK:

What? Look, this is my job, D! I have to be here on time, with or without you... Plus, I paid for your Uber here, what else do you want from me?

DELILAH:

An apology!

Beat.

CHUCK:

Look, I'm sorry... You weren't ready, and the event was starting, so I had to leave... And for that, I'm sorry... But I can not be late for my own book release party, you know that.

DELILAH:

I just really, *really* don't appreciate that, Charles, and this is twice in two months now... You're just so selfish sometimes, and you don't even realize it.

Pause.

CHUCK:

Love, this is my job. Okay? This is my career... It's not like we're going out to eat here, or going out to a movie... I left without you because this is my *job*, and because I had to be on time... Of

course I wanted to come here with you, but you weren't ready, so I had to go, and that's just the way it is... That's all, nothing more, nothing less... I'm sorry, you're sorry, let's just move on.

Pause.

DELILAH:

Fine... But I'm still mad at you.

CHUCK:

Fine... But I'm still madly in love with you.

DELILAH:

Oh, stop.

CHUCK:

Stop what?

DELILAH:

That! You're trying to charm me, and it's not gonna work.

CHUCK:

I don't know what you're talking about.

DELILAH:

I'm mad at you, stop...

CHUCK:

Good, I'm mad at you too.

DELILAH:

For what?? Not fair, I didn't do anything!

CHUCK:

You did too, you weren't ready on time! ... And I told you seven.

DELILAH:

Oh my God, are you serious right now? You told me eight!

CHUCK:

We're not doing this again... I walked in here with Lon Pockets and Monty Reynolds, lookin like a fuckin shmuck, when I could have been walking in here with the most beautiful woman in the world... Walkin in lookin like a poorer, uglier version of Grumpier Old Men.

Chuck takes a swig from his flask. Monty enters. His is dressed very formally, grinning from ear to ear with excitement, holding two shots.

MONTY:

Alright, alright, there he is!! Man of the hour, Chuck Riser! You sneaky son of a bitch, where have you been mate? (*Laughs and nods to Delilah.*) I see you two are having some real private time, I'll just... (*Starts to walk backwards, then stops.*) I'll just be on my way out... When you're ready for this shot, Chuck, come holler.

Monty walks over to the small group of people on the other side of the stage, offers a shot to a young woman, cheers with her, and they both drink and mingle.

CHUCK:

Alright, I should really get back out there... (*Kisses Delilah.*) I'm sorry again that I had to leave.

DELILAH:

(*Shrugs.*) It's fine.

CHUCK:

Well... You look phenomenal... And I love you... See you out there?

DELILAH:

See you out there... I'm just gonna call my mom back real quick, she called while I was in the car doing my makeup.

CHUCK:

Alright... I'll see you soon, I love you!

DELILAH:

Love you too.

Chuck kisses Delilah, then walks over to the group of people.

CHUCK:

Alright, alright, who wants to see the painting?? (*Everyone cheers.*) To the bar room we go!

Chuck leads everyone offstage, leaving Delilah alone. She pulls out a flask and takes a drink.. She then takes out some lipstick and relays. She makes a kissy face at a pocket mirror, then closes it and puts it back. She takes another sip from the flask.

DELILAH:

Ahhh, men...

Monty enters. He walks over to Delilah and silently, passionately starts making out with her. She doesn't resist, and they continue to make out for a while before they hear a noise. They stop and turn towards the door, still in each other's arms. Pause.

MONTY:

I think we're good.

They start making out again, Monty getting friskier, putting his hands all over Delilah.

DELILAH:

Alright, alright, stop, stop!!

Delilah backs off and pushes Monty away.

DELILAH:

Stop, we're in public... Someone could see us.

MONTY:

Oh c'mon, D, everyone's looking at his shitty painting!

DELILAH:

Monty...

MONTY:

Alright, alright, you're right... I'm sorry.

Beat.

DELILAH:

Is it still pretty dead out there?

MONTY:

Yeah... Where were you?

DELILAH:

Ah, I don't wanna talk about it.

MONTY:

Well... Turnout's alright... You know, we could just lock the door and be quiet?

DELILAH:

Monty! Are you insane? We're at my husband's book release party, just stop it... We are not locking the door, and you will not even touch me any more tonight, do you understand?

MONTY:

Of course.

DELILAH:

Do not even *touch* me while we are at this event, do you understand? Not even a hug.

MONTY:

Won't that be a little suspicious if I don't even hug you goodbye?

DELILAH:

Fine, you can hug me goodbye, but that's it! Just very normal, limited touching...

MONTY:

Got it. *(Pause)* So, Chuck didn't seem too upset, did he buy it?

DELILAH:

... Buy what?

MONTY:

What you told him about us?

DELILAH:

I didn't tell him anything about us... What would I tell him about us?

MONTY:

Oh, I just thought you were gonna tell him about Saturday... That we went shopping for new shoes or whatever.

DELILAH:

Listen, Monty, I don't want you to get the wrong idea here... You're sweet, and I appreciate what we have had, but I already have a husband, okay? *(Monty nods.)* I'm not looking for another husband, okay?

MONTY:

Okay... Is it because he makes more money than me?

DELILAH:

What? God, no, stop it.

MONTY:

But you're unhappy, right? Why stay in an unhappy relationship, it doesn't make any sense! It doesn't do either of you any good, really...

DELILAH:

It's a mutually beneficial relationship, Monty... And I really believe that, I always have, and I always will... I love Charles more than anything in this world, it's just... You get bored, ya know? ... I mean, he's always traveling, always putting his work before me, before everything! ... Everything has always been secondary to his work, and I know that, I've always known that... I knew that getting into it, but it's just... It's taking it's toll on me, ya know? After a while.

MONTY:
Yeah, I get it.

DELILAH:
... And of course people change, but some things don't ever change, really... *(Pause.)* Our outside layers may change, but our inside layers will always stay the same... Like earth.

MONTY:
Oh God, you're starting to sound like Chuck...

DELILAH:
No really though! Earth's outside layers are always changing, but the inside layers stay the same.. Our inner core is thick and strong, like lava and rock, but our outside layers are thin and penetrable, like rivers and trees.

Long Pause. Lon Pockets enters, holding a drink and an envelope.

LON:
Hey hey, sorry to interrupt, but have you guys seen Chuck around? ... I can't find him anywhere.

DELILAH:
He was just here a few minutes ago, he's not out on the floor? He was going to show some fans his painting.

LON:
Oh God, that thing... No, he's not out there, I just checked... I was hoping he was in here with you.

MONTY:
Damn... You check outside?

LON:
Yeah, I checked outside, I checked the bathroom, checked his car, can't find him anywhere.

MONTY:
Shit... Well, I'll help you find him.

LON:
Alright thanks Monty. We only got one hour left, I can't believe this guy.

DELILAH:
It'll be okay Lon, we'll find him... Just relax, take a deep breath.

LON:
If he's not back soon, we're fucked here! I can only say he was shitting for so long, ya know?

MONTY:

Right... He's got IBS, everyone knows that... I'll find him.

Monty exits, somewhat urgently. Long Pause.

LON:

Well... Pretty good turn out, right?

DELILAH:

Yeah, good turn out...

LON:

I just can't believe he fuckin left!

DELILAH:

He'll be back, Lon, I promise.

LON:

Well... I know he hates these things, it's no secret... And I do too, I just don't go around bitching about it to the whole world, ya know?

DELILAH:

... Can you not say bitching?

LON:

What?

DELILAH:

Can you please not say bitching?

LON:

... Why not?

DELILAH:

Because it's degrading to women.

LON:

How is it degrading to women, I'm talking about Chuck!

DELILAH:

I know, but... The term bitchy is sexist.

LON:

How is it sexist if I'm talking about a man? If someone is being bitchy or bitching about something, I don't give a shit if it's a guy or a girl! It is not exclusive to women. If someone is being a dick, I'll call them a dick, man or woman.

Beat.

DELILAH:

Well, I just think it's sexist...

LON:

It's not, but okay... I just I hope this book sells, I really do... He said he hates it, but he hates everything he writes.

DELILAH:

He's never satisfied, you know that... The life of an artist, or so he says.

LON:

Right... You know, I tried talking to him about it... His depression, his drinking, the drugs, all of it...

Slight Pause.

DELILAH:

Yeah, and?

LON:

And, I mean, you're right... It does seem to be going on for longer than usual, and it seems worse than usual.

DELILAH:

Well, no shit Lon! But what did he say when you brought it up?

LON:

I mean, nothing really... Just that he was fine, of course... Told me he thinks death is just a rebirth or something... Said he thinks that when you die, you are reborn and go into a new home, a new beginning... It was nice to hear some positive shit from him, actually.

DELILAH:

Uhhhm, sounds like he's just justifying death, which is not okay... I'm really worried he's contemplating suicide, Lon.

LON:

Delilah, I highly doubt he's contemplating suicide... Even though he's still in denial about his drinking, he did seem happier overall... And no offense, but I have known him much longer than you, I think I would know if he was seriously contemplating suicide.

DELILAH:

You may have known him *longer*, but I know him *better*, Lon... Look, you're a nice man, Lon Pockets... And I have nothing but respect for you, honestly... Ask anyone, I always speak highly of you... But if you really don't think Chuck is suicidal, you need to re-assess your relationship

with him and how real it actually is ... He's been talking about writing something he's passionate about for years! Literally years... I worry he'll never achieve it because he'll never be fully satisfied with anything he writes or does! ... And he chooses to live his life this way, which is part of the problem! He chooses to be unhappy, I swear to God! ... Even if he *did* write something he was actually proud, he wouldn't admit it! And he would find something else to be unhappy about, don't you see? (*Long Pause.*) Look, I've had these same conversations with him over and over, countless times over the years, hundreds of times... You know how many struggling writers would just *kill* for even the little bit of success that Charles has had?

LON:

So he wants to publish something he's proud of, who gives a shit?? We all do! Never being satisfied keeps an artist hungry, it keeps them striving, it keeps them fresh and relevant, not suicidal! Trust me, I'm right.

Chuck and Claudia enter. They both have a drink in hand and are laughing.

CLAUDIA:

Oh my God, Chuck, that was hilarious!

CHUCK:

(*To Delilah and Lon*): Right about what?

DELILAH:

What?

CHUCK:

Lon just said, "Trust me, I'm right"... Right about what?

LON:

The game last night... Where the fuck have you been, Chuck? I was looking all over for you.

CHUCK:

The Knicks game?

LON:

Yeah... She said the Knicks won last night against Utah, and they actually lost... It was 112 - 98, I watched the whole thing.

Slight Pause.

CHUCK:

Hm... Yeah, their defense was terrible last night.

LON:

Right... Anyway, where the hell have you been man?? I couldn't find you anywhere.

CHUCK:

I was just outside smoking, it's all good.

LON:

Smoking where? I checked outside!

CHUCK:

Claudia and I were smoking a J in her car, chill out Lon.

Chuck opens a cabinet door and grabs an unmarked bottle of whiskey. He pours four shot glasses.

LON:

Oh no no, I'm good.

CHUCK:

Aww, c'mon Lon! Gather round everyone, gather round! *(Pause)* I want the four of us to all take a shot together... And I just want to say thank you to everybody in this room specifically...

DELILAH:

Aww, Monty should be here too.

CHUCK:

Nahh, fuck Monty... Thank *you* all for coming, thank *you* all for always being so supportive, I really appreciate it... Even when I'm crabby and pooty, you guys, and nobody else, have always been the most important people in my life... So cheers! *(Holds up his shot glass.)*

DELILAH:

Awww, we should go get Monty!

CHUCK:

Oh, fuck Monty! ... I would literally do anything for anyone in this room right now, so let's drink...

Chuck passes the shots around, then holds his up again.

CHUCK:

Cheers! To the three most important people in my life!

They all clink.

CLAUDIA:

Cheers!

DELILAH:

Cheers!

LON:
Ah, fuck it... Cheers.

CHUCK:
Ayyy!

They all clink and drink. Some wince and groan, to Chuck, it's like water.

CHUCK:
Seriously, thank you all for being here tonight... It really means a lot to me.

CLAUDIA:
Aw Chuck, we wouldn't miss it for the world!

LON:
You shmuck, have I missed any of these? Like ever?

CHUCK:
I love you, guys though, seriously... I'm so happy right now. *(Kisses Delilah.)*

DELILAH:
Awww, we love you too, bub.

CHUCK:
I love everyone in this room... It's just humbling, ya know... To have such awesome support group... It's an awesome feeling, you know? I'm just very grateful... Never forget that... Words could not possibly describe the feelings that you guys give me when you support what I love doing the most, so... So thank you so much.

Chuck waves everyone in for a group hug and begins to tear up.

CHUCK:
Aw damn, I promised myself I wouldn't cry!

They all embrace for a group hug, pause, then break apart.

CLAUDIA:
Ahh, that was lovely... Thanks for the shot, it was delicious.

CHUCK:
Absolutely, 20 years aged!

LON:
I thought it tasted like dog shit.

CHUCK:

Ahh, fuck you, Lon! You've eaten dog shit?

LON:

Well I've had your homemade breakfast burritos, so, yeah.

CHUCK:

Oh fuck you! That's just because all your tastebuds died years ago, you old geezer.

Chuck puts Lon in a headlock and gives him a noogie.

DELILAH:

Chuck!

CHUCK:

What? I'm just fuckin around, c'mon, Lon knows that...

LON:

Hey D, I may be old, but at least I'm a satisfied, content man. Ooohhhh!!

CHUCK:

Wow... *(Beat.)* Burn dude... Really gettin to the heart of it, huh.

LON:

I mean I'm just sayin... You're fucking awesome, and I just wish you could see that and appreciate your own worth, that's all... You're a phenomenal writer, Chuck, a once in a generational talent... I just wish you could see that.

CHUCK:

Well... I appreciate that, thank you...

LON:

You got it... And I've read a lot of great writers, I should know... Now - shall we go sell the hell out of this book or what??

CHUCK:

Let's do it! Everybody ready?? *(Everyone nods.)* Let's Vamos! *(Claps.)* Woooo, team Chuck!!

Chuck leads everyone offstage except Lon, who stays back. He pauses, turns to the audience, looks around, then nods. He pauses one more time, then exits.

Lights face, music rises.

END OF ACT ONE.

INTERMISSION

Act Two, Scene One

Time: 4:45pm on a Friday.

Setting: Chuck and Delilah's living room.

At Rise: *Monty and Delilah are making out on the couch. Delilah takes Monty's shirt off, then starts to take off his pants. Monty reaches into his pocket, pulls out a condom, then bites it open, throwing the little top piece of wrapper on to the floor. Delilah pulls his pants down to his ankles as he slowly unravels the condom. Delilah's phone dings, and she jumps up startled to check it.*

DELILAH:

Shit, it's Chuck, fuck, fuck, fuck!! I gotta open the garage door for him, fuck, fuck!!

MONTY:

(Whispering): Shhh, chill! Go quickly, but be quiet! I'll stay in here and just read.

Delilah wipes her mouth and rushes out. Monty quickly puts his pants, belt, and shirt back on. He frantically spins around looking for a place to hide the condom, finally placing it in the bottom drawer of an end table next to the couch. He hops back onto the couch, trying to act normal. He takes out his phone, and starts scrolling, looking back at the entrance. Pause. Delilah and Chuck enter. Chuck is super sad and distraught, red eyes and sunken demeanor. Delilah has her arm around him, consoling him.

CHUCK:

I just... I don't even know what to say, ya know?

DELILAH:

My God, I'm so sorry Chuck... He'll push through though, I know he will.

MONTY:

Wait, what? Who will push through, what happened?

DELILAH:

Lon...

MONTY:

What about him? What happened?

CHUCK:

He had a brain aneurysm, Monty... He's currently in the ER over at St. Joe's in critical condition.

MONTY:

Holy shit... *(Monty stands up and hugs Chuck tightly, not letting go for a while.)* Chuck, I'm so sorry mate... Oh my God... What did the doctors say?

CHUCK:

Not much really... Just that he's in the ICU, and that he may not make it... But there is a chance he will... That's about it... I asked what is the percentage that he makes it...

Chuck sits down.

MONTY:

And?

CHUCK:

And they said not great... Wouldn't give me a percentage, so it's hard to say.

MONTY:

Fuck.

CHUCK:

Yeah...

They all sit in silence. After a while, Delilah checks her phone, then puts it back. Long Pause. Chuck gets up and starts to pace back and forth.

DELILAH:

Does his family know, Chuck?

CHUCK:

Yeah... I called his brother and he's telling their mom... I'm sure his whole family probably knows by now... Good and bad news spreads fast.

MONTY:

Fuck mate...

CHUCK:

I know... *(Sighs.)* Well... This sucks.

MONTY:

Big time.

DELILAH:

So sad... I'm gonna go get some water, you guys want anything?

MONTY:

I'm good, thanks.

CHUCK:

I'll take a beer, please... Strongest one we have.

MONTY:

Actually yeah, I'll do the same, please... Thanks, D.

DELILAH:

Of course... I'll be right back.

Delilah exits. Chuck sits down and rubs his head and face. He looks down at the ground, sighs heavily, and takes a pause.

MONTY:

Man, I'm sorry, mate... So sudden.

CHUCK:

Yeah... Thanks, Monty... Sorry, I'm just... It's hard man, I don't know what to do... I feel so helpless too, ya know.

MONTY:

No, you're good mate... Not much any of us can do at this point, he's in the best place he can be right now.

CHUCK:

I don't know man... St. Joe's isn't exactly the best hospital around... It doesn't have a great track record... But Lon's a fighter, he'll fight through this, right? ...

MONTY:

Of course mate! He's a fighter, and he's a fucking brilliant man, he'll fight through it... He's a strong mate, lotta willpower that guy... One of the strongest, most brilliant people I've ever met.

Pause.

Delilah enters with three beers and some water. She opens the beers, hands one to Chuck and Monty, then holds hers up.

DELILAH:

Cheers, boys... To Lon Pockets! And to him fighting through this.

MONTY:

(Holds his beer up.) To Lon mother fuckin' Pockets!

CHUCK:

(Holds his beer up.) To Lon!

They all clink and drink.

Long Pause.

CHUCK:

I'm gonna go back there in a bit. If anyone wants to join... He might not be awake, but... I don't know, might be your last chance to see him...

MONTY:

Fuck...

CHUCK:

I mean, you don't have to come if you don't want to... I know it's a difficult situation.

DELILAH:

I'm definitely coming.

MONTY:

Oh I'm definitely coming too, one hundred percent.

CHUCK:

You guys don't have to, really... I know it's hard to see loved ones like this.

DELILAH:

Chuck, don't be ridiculous, it's part of life... We're both coming with you... And the doctors said there is a chance he'll pull through, so let's try to stay positive here... He's gonna pull through.

MONTY:

Yeah mate, we're here for you... Shit, let's finish these beers and head over... I'll buy some whiskey on the way.

DELILAH:

I don't think Lon will be in any state to drink whiskey.

MONTY:

Oh it ain't for Lon, dear.

CHUCK:

Just a heads up, not sure he'll be conscious or alive when we get there... He wasn't responding when I was there earlier...

DELILAH:

Charles, we're coming... We know the situation, but thank you for the heads up... You don't have to worry about us.

CHUCK:

Okay sorry, this is just... It's all kinda new to me.

DELILAH:

I know love, I know...

Pause. They all sip their beers, nobody knowing what to say.

MONTY:

Well... It'll still be good to see him... I haven't seen him since the book release... He seemed totally fine... (*Monty almost cracks into tears before covering it up with a forced grunt/laugh/sigh.*) Gahh... Man... Fuck.

CHUCK:

He's the only editor I've ever had, I don't think I could publish anything without him.

DELILAH:

Honey, of course you could, but let's not think about that right now... We'll cross that bridge if we need to, one thing at a time, love... I'm sure he's going to pull through.

CHUCK:

I don't know, D... They said it wasn't likely... But there is a small chance.

Delilah kisses Chuck then holds him in her arms, rocking him gently.

CHUCK:

They said he's, uhm... Like, not getting worse? ... But if he *does* get worse - which very well could happen... He would, uhm... Most likely not make it... That's what they said.

DELILAH:

Man...

CHUCK:

Also they said his status could stay the same and he could still not make it... He basically has to improve, and quickly, otherwise it's not looking good.

MONTY:

Fuck... It's crazy how there can be literally no signs of anything wrong at all... And then one day something like this happens...

CHUCK:

Life man...

MONTY:

Life...

DELILAH:

Crazy.

Long Pause.

CHUCK:

Well on the bright side... If he doesn't make it, he'll be reunited again with Donna! ... I'm sure they'd both be stoked about that.

MONTY:

Oh definitely, those two together were the best! They were made for each other.

DELILAH:

Always a silver lining.

Chuck takes Delilah's hand, kisses it, squeezes it, then holds it with both of his hands.

CHUCK:

At least they'll be together...

DELILAH:

Absolutely.

Pause. Chuck sighs.

CHUCK:

Man... I don't know what I'm gonna do, I can't publish without Lon... I might have to retire.

DELILAH:

Babe, let's just focus our thoughts and energy on Lon right now, okay? He needs as much positive energy as we can give.

CHUCK:

You're right love, I'm sorry... I'm not thinking clearly, this is just... Kind of a lot, you know, really fast... *(Beat)* Hey Monty, can you do me a favor, mate?

MONTY:

Of course, whatever you need.

CHUCK:

Can you just - run to the liquor store across the street and get some whiskey? *(Takes out a credit card.)* Here, I'll buy... Get something really good, something top shelf.

MONTY:

Nah, mate... I'm buyin, put your wallet away... Any preference? Or just something top shelf?

CHUCK:

Nah, just something good... You call it.

MONTY:
Sure mate... You guys want anything else while I'm out?

CHUCK:
Just the whiskey for me, thanks.

DELILAH:
I'm good, thanks Monty.

MONTY:
Of course... Hey let's head to the hospital when I get back, yeah? I wanna see Lon asap.

CHUCK:
For sure.

Monty finishes his beer, nods, then exits.

Long Pause.

CHUCK:
I told the doctor to call me if anything changes... No call yet... So that's good.

DELILAH:
Yeah, that is good... Hey I'm gonna go take a real quick shower, but I'll be ready by the time Monty's back, just need like five minutes. (*Kisses him.*) See you soon.

CHUCK:
Alright love, please hurry.

DELILAH:
I will!

Delilah starts to exits but then stops right before leaving the room. She pauses, then turns around slowly.

DELILAH:
Oh hey, Chuck?

CHUCK:
Yeah love?

DELILAH:
Could you... Please put the dishes away before we go? They're all clean.

CHUCK:
... Right now?

DELILAH:
Just before we go. Please?

CHUCK:
We're going in five minutes, you want me to put them all away right now?

DELILAH:
You know what, just forget it... Sorry I asked.

CHUCK:
I'll put them away later, fuck... Of all times to ask.

DELILAH:
No it's fine, I just thought... It would be good for you to have a little distraction is all, no biggie... I love you.

CHUCK:
Love you too... Please hustle.

DELILAH:
Alright, I'll be quick!

Delilah exits.

Chuck finishes his beer, sighs, then leans back. Delilah peeks her head around the corner, Chuck is not moving. He leans his head back and closes his eyes. Delilah disappears again towards the bathroom, and the sound of a running shower is heard.

After a moment of silence, Delilah's phone dings on the coffee table. Chuck opens his eyes, leans forward, and glances down at the phone. The phone dings again. He picks it up and looks at it, slightly confused. He reads a few messages on the phone, sets it back down where it was, then walks over to one of the end tables next to the couch. He quietly tiptoes towards the bathroom, leans, then holds his hand up to his ear in that direction. He looks around the room, then quickly goes back over to the same end table.

He surveys the room one more time to see if anyone is coming. He opens the bottom drawer of the end table and searches it, trying to limit noise as much as possible. He finally finds something and slowly pulls it out of the drawer, holding it up into the air. An unwrapped condom. He looks at it, disgusted and confused. We hear the shower stop, then he quickly puts it back where it was. He sits back down on the couch and looks down at the ground, confused, shaking his head, disgusted and hurt.

Long Pause.

Chuck looks towards the bathroom, closes his eyes, then takes a long, deep breath.

DELILAH (*offstage*):
Hey, Charles?

CHUCK:
... Yeah?

DELILAH:
Can you please bring me some toilet paper?

CHUCK:
Uh, sure...

Chuck gets some toilet paper from a closet and exits towards the bathroom with it. He re-enters shortly after, sitting back down on the couch, and burying his face in his hands.

Monty enters with the whiskey.

MONTY:
Hey, hey look what I got!

Chuck looks at him in disgust and doesn't say anything.

MONTY:
What's up mate?

CHUCK:
Nothing... Thanks for getting the whiskey.

MONTY:
Of course mate, no worries... Where's D?

CHUCK:
She's... Freshening up upstairs... Since when have you called her D?

MONTY:
Oh, I don't know, for a while now I guess.

CHUCK:
You know that's my nickname for her... Always has been.

MONTY:
I thought your nickname for her was love mate?

CHUCK:
It's not love mate, it's D...

MONTY:

Okay... Well, do you not want me to call her that? Seems kind of silly.

CHUCK:

Is it? Is it silly?

MONTY:

I mean... Kind of, but I get it... All good, I won't call her D, sorry.

Long Pause.

Delilah enters in a new outfit. She grabs a few things in silence as both Monty and Chuck look at her. She stops moving and looks at both of them.

DELILAH:

I'm ready.

CHUCK:

Alright... Then... Let's go see Lon, I guess... The three of us, together.

*They all walk towards the door, putting on shoes, jacket, etc. They **exit** in silence.*

MONTY (*offstage*):

Shit! Forgot my phone, sorry.

Monty enters and hurriedly grabs the condom out of the end table, stuffing it in his pocket. Chuck enters right after Monty closes the drawer. Chuck grabs a sweater on the couch and looks at Monty suspiciously.

CHUCK:

You find your phone?

MONTY:

Yup! Got it. (*Takes his phone and shows it to Chuck.*) Let's do it.

*Monty **exits** quickly. Chuck stays behind a moment and looks down at the couch, shaking his head. He looks around the room, looks up to the sky, drops his head, then **exits**.*

Lights slowly fade, music rises.

End of Scene.

Act Two, Scene Two

Time: Friday, 10:45am.

Setting: Lon Pockets' funeral in Wisconsin.

At Rise: *A sad song plays as Don Pockets stands at a podium center stage, holding a piece of paper. He is the identical twin brother of Lon. There are two rows of people sitting down. Everyone is dressed in black or dark gray, some crying, some silent. In attendance are Chuck, Delilah, Monty, Claudia, Lon's daughter Katrice, Lon's lover Hank, and a Preacher.*

DON:

Well... What can I say about Lon Pockets that hasn't already been said? ... *(Pause)* For those of you who haven't had the pleasure, do not be alarmed... Lon has not risen from the dead, he is not Jesus Christ... I am his older, and better looking, identical twin brother, Don... I don't think I've met some of you here today, so I'm sorry if I scared any of you... I've been living in Utah for twelve years now, and I don't come back that often... *(Pause)* Why do I live and he dies? I don't understand that... Everyone loved Lon, and everyone hates me... Life ain't fair sometimes, is it? ... Life ain't fuckin fair.

Pause.

KATRICE:

Not everyone loved Lon...

Everyone turns back to Katrice, who is seated in the far back corner by herself.

DON:

Oh, of course you loved him, he's your father! ... Was your father.

KATRICE:

I loved him as much as I had to, and not a hug more... I loved him like people "love" their jobs... Like Ukraine "loves" Russia.

DON:

Okay, you're just saying that because he was an absent father to you, that doesn't count.

MONTY:

Well this is going great so far.

KATRICE:

(To Don): How does that not count, I'm his daughter!

DON:

Well everyone else loved him... Alright? Everyone besides Katrice, apparently.

KATRICE:

He planted a seed that helped birth me because he was horny and drunk, that's it... And also, not everyone hates you, Uncle Don... I don't.

DELILAH:

Such a rebel.

CHUCK:

Well I hate you, Uncle Don... And most people I know, actually... You're right, life's not fair... It should have been you.

DON:

Oh fuck you, Chuck! You're a hack of a writer, always have been, and you know it! Wouldn't be anything without my brother's help.

CHUCK:

Fuck you, Don.

DON:

You wanna start this already kid?

CHUCK:

Kid? I'm a grown man, you old fuck.

MONTY:

Alright, alright, let's just... Can we just continue with the eulogy, please? For Lon?

Pause. Don looks down at his notes and clears his throat.

DON:

Alright, where was I... Lon, right... *(Clears throat.)* Don't take my word for it because what the hell do I know? Take a look at the dead shmuck yourself if you don't believe me... Look again one more time before you leave, you'll see I'm better looking... Always have been... I have no idea what women saw in him.

CHUCK:

Dude, c'mon! Are you just gonna stand up there and bash Lon the whole time? You're a piece of shit.

DELILAH:

Babe, just let him finish.

CHUCK:

Let him finish? He's bashing Lon at his own funeral!

DON:

And I'm about to bash you if you don't shut up and let me finish! I'm the only blood here besides Katrice, now just calm the fuck down... All you wannabe writers are too damn sensitive... That's why I moved to Utah... Women aren't attractive to guys that are too sensitive, show some confidence in yourself, man up.

CHUCK:

Man up? Who the fuck cares what women want right now, Don! Do you even have anything written on that paper? Or are you just shooting from the hip? Like you do when you shoot people in bars?

DON:

This paper? (*Holds up the paper.*)

CHUCK:

Yes, that paper!

DON:

You wanna read it? Or are you gonna let me finish? ... Plus that guy in the bar was asking for it, I didn't kill him or anything, I just shot him in the leg... He's fine.

CHUCK:

Will you just finish the fucking eulogy already? You're wasting all of our time.

DELILAH:

Charles, please...

DON:

Listen to your wife, Chuck, for once in your life... You know, we're not all wannabe writers like you, Chuck, but I can write a eulogy, alright? And I would like to finish it... So listen to your wife, she's a smart lady.

Pause.

CHUCK:

Fucking finish then!

DON:

Alright, alright.

Don looks at his notes closely again, then looks back up at the room. Pause.

DON:

Lon was a good man... He was a man of many words... Most of which stayed in his head... Wasn't the loudest guy in the room... Nor was he the most talkative, nay... But you know what? Lon Pockets was a man of many words... He was a very quiet, stoic man, but a man of many

words and ideas... Lon had a vocabulary deeper than his pockets, and he was rich... The only reason Chuck Riser, who is sitting here today, ever had any success at all is because of Lon... (*Chuck shakes his head and bites his tongue.*) All of Chuck's success can be accredited to Lon, among Lon's many other successes.

CHUCK:

Fuck you, Don! What's a matter with you?

DON:

You fuck, my brother was a good man! You know it, I know it, we all know it! ... Fuck.

DELILAH:

Alright, let's just... Let's just try to finish here.

Beat.

DON:

Sorry... And I'm sorry, Chuck... But your books would've sucked without Lon, that's all I'm saying.

CHUCK:

Don, shut the fuck up! You wonder why everyone hates you?? This is Lon's fucking funeral service, and you can't stop talking shit about me because you are jealous of me and want to be me, and you don't know how else to deal with that! ... Show some fucking respect for once.

DON:

Wow... First of all, don't call me dude. Alright? ... We're not that close... And second of all, my brother died... Third of all, we're at his funeral service, for Christ's sake... Can you try to act like an adult for once in your life?

CHUCK:

Dude, you're the one up there talking about what women want like you're fucking Mel Gibson!

DON:

Too soon Chuck... We all know he is racist, and Jewish, and this is a Christian church.

CHUCK:

You keep going off script, just finish!

HANK:

Alright, both of you just chill the *hell* out! ... Please.

Pause.

DON:

Who is this dude?

HANK:

I'm Hank... I was a... Good friend of your brother Lon's... *(Pause)* He confided in me in his final years, so to speak...

DON:

... He confided in you?

HANK:

Yes.

DON:

Like...

HANK:

Confided... In me.

DON:

Oh... Well... Nice to meet you, Hank... Sorry, he never told me about you.

HANK:

Ditto. Now, please, honey, the eulogy. We're all hungry, I'm trying to eat some donut holes.

DON:

Right... *(Looking back at his notes.)* Lon Pockets was a shitty brother, but a great man... He was a shitty father, but a great editor... He loved his work more than anything else in this world... And maybe he never had a bad word to say about anyone... *(Looks up at the ceiling, holding back tears, real or forced?)* Love you, brother! ... See you on the other side some day, we'll get a cold one... *(Looks back out to the room.)* Cheers everyone, this now concludes today's service... Let us go in peace, to love and to serve the Lord, in sickness and in health, and in the good memory of Lon Pockets... In the name of the father, son, holy spirit... *(Beat.)* I mean, unless anyone else wanted to say anything? ... Chuck's shitty poetry excluded.

CHUCK:

(Muttering): Better than your shitty songs...

DON:

I don't write songs anymore, dipshit.

CHUCK:

Good! By the way, that was the worst fucking eulogy I ever heard in my entire life, hands down... I'm honestly embarrassed for you.

DON:

And I'm embarrassed for you! You're drunk at my brother's funeral! A man that was so loyal to you, who saved your career, and you show up to his memorial service drunk... Fuck you.

CHUCK:

A tremendous disservice, that eulogy was... So awful, so disrespectful, I'm going to plan another service and invite everyone here except you...

MONTY:

Chuck, c'mon mate...

CHUCK:

A service that will show him the proper respect he deserves! Not this fucking mockery.

MONTY:

Alright, let's just take it easy, alright?

CHUCK:

Oh shut the fuck up, Monty! Nobody gives a shit what you think! Do you hear me? You're irrelevant to me!

DELILAH:

Charles!

CHUCK:

What! Oh, you're taking his side? What, because you're fucking him? Is that it?

Pause.

DELILAH:

What did you say?

CHUCK:

Are you taking his side now because you are fucking him?

MONTY:

Chuck... You're being ridiculous, mate.

CHUCK:

Don't call me mate, man!

MONTY:

Look... You're not thinking straight, you're being irrational... You're in mourning, grieving, as we all are, it's okay, mate... Of course we're not fucking, are you kidding me? Chuck, I would never.

CHUCK:

Don't fuckin do that!

MONTY:

Do what?

CHUCK:

Act like I'm crazy, gaslight me! I'm not crazy, maybe everyone else is fucking crazy, huh?? You guys ever think about that?

Pause.

MONTY:

It's alright, mate... It's alright.

CHUCK:

No, it's not alright! It's just... I swear to God, man...

MONTY:

Hell, I would be irrational too if my career was over... I mean, Don's right, Chuck... And everyone here knows it... Lon carried your career, you're nothing without him.

Beat.

CHUCK:

... What?

MONTY:

You're nothing without your Lon, Chuck! Nothing!

DON:

Yeah, you're *nothing* without Lon!!

DELILAH:

Nothing without Lon, Chuck! Nothing!!

CLAUDIA:

Nothing! Without Lon, you're nothing, Chuck! *Nothing* without Lon!

DON:

Nothing, Chuck!

KATRICE:

Nothing!

HANK:

Nothing!!

EVERYONE: (*except Chuck*)

NOTHING!!!!

Everyone starts to laugh manically, all pointing and howling at Chuck. The volume builds and builds as the group encircles tighter and tighter around Chuck. He starts to panic.

CHUCK:

No... NOOOOOOO!!!!

Chuck throws his hands up and screams as everyone pulls him down to the ground, plucking, plodding, jabbing, poking, and laughing hysterically.

Black out.

Silence.

Long Pause.

Lights slowly rise on the same scene as before - Don at the podium and everyone else seated, except now Chuck is now standing off by himself in the back corner, staring off into the distance. When Don continues talking, Chuck snaps out of it and turns to listen to him.

DON:

Anyway... Lon was a good man and a great brother... He was a shitty father, but he was a great editor... He loved his work more than anything else in the world, and he never had a bad word to say about anyone... *(Looks up to the ceiling, holding back tears, real or forced.)* I love you brother! ... See you on the other side, we'll grab a beer... Thanks, everyone... Love you all.

Don nods, bows, pauses, then makes his way back to his seat in silence. We hear a few snuffles, then The Preacher walks to the podium and lifts his hands up and out towards the audience.

PREACHER:

This now concludes our service... In loving memory of Lon Pockets, I'd like to thank everybody for coming out today, I can just feel the love, I can feel the energy that Lon has infected you all with... Before we part ways today, always remember that Lon is still with us... You will still see him, hear him, smell him, still feel him... I promise you that... *(Pause)* Final thank you to Boone and Crockett for sponsoring this year's pig roast, coming up soon here in late October, down in the bingo hall... We'd love to see you all there if you can make it, gonna be a great one this year... Also, if anyone wants to chat and mingle after this, maybe share some stories of Lon, I'll be downstairs enjoying the free juice, coffee, and donut holes... We'd love to see you there as well... *(Beat)* In the name of the father, the son, and the holy spirit... Let us go in peace, to love and to serve the Lord... Go Pack go, and fuck the Bears. Amen.

ALL:

Amen.

Music plays as people slowly get up and start to shuffle out. Everyone exits except Don and Katrice, who stay back and chat in the corner, The Preacher, reading something behind the podium, and Chuck, who slowly approaches him.

CHUCK:

... Going downstairs, father?

PREACHER:

Of course! Just reviewing tomorrow's schedule, then I gotta lock up here, but I'll be down.

CHUCK:

Gotcha... *(Slight Pause.)* Hey, father? Can I call you father?

PREACHER:

Of course, you can call me whatever you'd like... Just don't call me late for donut holes!

CHUCK:

Ha, thanks...

Pause.

PREACHER:

What's up, Chuck?

CHUCK:

Oh, nothing... I was just gonna ask how do priests learn everyone's names so quickly?

PREACHER:

It's part of our Jedi training.

CHUCK:

Really?

PREACHER:

(Chuckles) No... Not really... What did you really want to ask me?

CHUCK:

Oh, nothing... Just stopped to say hi, I guess... And to thank you for a great service.

PREACHER:

You're welcome! The least I could do for Lon, really... Such a nice man.

CHUCK:

Yeah...

Chuck looks over at Don and Katrice chatting on the other side of the stage.

CHUCK:

Can you believe that guy, father?

PREACHER:

Who, Brother Pockets?

CHUCK:

"Brother Pockets"... C'mon, we both know he ain't no "brother"... He ain't even made peace with the Lord! Did you know that?

PREACHER:

I'm sorry?

CHUCK:

He's hasn't even made peace with the Lord.

PREACHER:

Well... All living creatures are brothers and sisters of the Lord, that's just my opinion.

CHUCK:

Maybe so... But he ain't peaceful with the Lord.

PREACHER:

What do you mean by that?

CHUCK:

I mean, they ain't at peace... He's probably not going to heaven.

PREACHER:

You believe in heaven?

CHUCK:

I mean... Don't you?

PREACHER:

(Shrugs.) I don't know.

CHUCK:

Don't you like... kind of have to? Isn't that part of the Jedi training?

PREACHER:

Not all priests believe in heaven.

CHUCK:

Well... Either way, Don Pockets is not a "brother" of ours, nor of the Lord's... He's rude, racist, sexist, homophobic, creepy, and closed minded as fuck.

PREACHER:

People have their preferences, Chuck... That doesn't make them any less loved by God.

CHUCK:

"People have their preferences"? What the hell kind of Catholic bullshit is that? ... Sorry, sorry for cursing.

PREACHER:

It's fine.

CHUCK:

But like seriously... Does that help you justify all the pedophiles in the Catholic church? Because "people have their preferences"?

PREACHER:

Of course not. I just mean that people have their preferences, that's all... In the end, God forgives all.

Slight Pause.

CHUCK:

What if my preference is murdering people? Or sexually assaulting little kids?

PREACHER:

Then, that's your preference... Doesn't make it right.

CHUCK:

Just my preference.

PREACHER:

Right...

Pause.

CHUCK:

Can I ask you a question, father?

PREACHER:

Of course.

CHUCK:

And you'll give me your most honest answer?

PREACHER:

Absolutely... That's the only way I know how to answer questions.

CHUCK:

... You don't know how to lie?

PREACHER:

Well... I'd be lying if I said I didn't, but... What's your question?

CHUCK:

Can we keep this 100% private?

PREACHER:

100%. Won't tell a soul, you have my word.

Chuck looks around the room before leaning in to the Preacher.

CHUCK:

Could you ever forgive your wife if she was... Ya know, unfaithful to you? ... Or would you leave her? ... If you're wife was cheating on you, hypothetically of course, what would you do?

PREACHER:

Well...

CHUCK:

I'm asking for a friend, by the way...

PREACHER:

Right... Well, we're taught at an early age to forgive all, even your worst enemy... "To err is human, to forgive, divine."

CHUCK:

So... You're saying I should forgive her? ... My friend, I mean... In this hypothetical situation.

PREACHER:

That is something your friend will have to ask himself.

CHUCK:

Well... He doesn't know what to do, that's why he asked me to ask you.

PREACHER:

Your friend will have to form his own path is what I'm saying... As we all do.

CHUCK:

He's trying! But he's torn.

Pause.

PREACHER:

Look, Chuck, I can not speak towards what other people should or should not do... It's not my place, nor my life, to call or judge... And I can not speak from personal experience regarding this matter either, as I have never been married.

CHUCK:

Well, I'm just curious what you *would* do...

PREACHER:

I can't say for sure.

CHUCK:

Well, what would you *probably* do?

PREACHER:

I would probably... Forgive her. As that is what I believe in, forgiveness... On all accounts.

CHUCK:

Hm. Thanks.

PREACHER:

You're welcome.

Pause.

CHUCK:

Father, do you ever worry you're going to die alone?

PREACHER:

Eh, not really... God is always with me.

CHUCK:

Right.

Slight Pause.

PREACHER:

I think your friend here, in this hypothetical situation of course, should tell his wife he knows what happened... I think he should be open and honest with his wife, and they should discuss the issue together... Then decide how to proceed forward after that communication.

CHUCK:

I thought you weren't in the business of telling people what to do?

PREACHER:

... Touche.

Beat.

CHUCK:

Random question, but why do you dedicate your life to something you can't prove is real?

PREACHER:

... Can you prove that love is real?

CHUCK:

Sure.

PREACHER:

How?

CHUCK:

Well... I don't know, you just feel it.

PREACHER:

Same with God... You just feel it. It's a faith, a belief - like love.

CHUCK:

Hm. Makes sense, I guess. *(Pause.)* So, you're saying my friend should forgive his wife then?

PREACHER:

Again, only your friend can answer that question... But if he truly loves her, I think they should talk about it first. Open communication is the key to any successful relationship... Or so I've been told.

CHUCK:

And, what if she was cheating on him with his best friend? Does that make it better or worse?

PREACHER:

That's like asking me what tastes better, space wine or space beer.... I've never had either because I've never been to space, so I can't really say for sure.

CHUCK:

(Sighs) All you religious people are the same. So vague about everything.

PREACHER:

Well, I would talk to her, see what she says, then take it from there... That's probably what I would do... But again, I've never had this experience... So, your friend has to decide what he wants to do based on how he feels... Like love or God... Now, I should really get downstairs, people are waiting for me... Unless there is something else you wanted to talk about?

CHUCK:

Oh, don't be cocky, father, you're not that famous.

PREACHER:

I never said I was famous, just want to see everyone downstairs is all... Are you coming? We have coffee, juice, donut holes...

CHUCK:

Yeah yeah, I'll be down.

PREACHER:

Great. (*Puts one hand on Chuck's shoulder, extends his other hand for a shake.*) It was nice chatting, Chuck... I'm sorry again about Lon.

They shake hands. Preacher starts to walk out, but stops just before exiting, then turns around.

PREACHER:

Hey Chuck?

Chuck looks over at the Preacher.

PREACHER:

It'll work itself out... Don't overthink it.

Preacher exits.

Don and Katrice are wrapping up their chat on the other side as lights shift focus to them.

DON:

Alright, well... I'm gonna go grab some coffee, see you down there?

KATRICE:

Yup! I'll be down there in a minute.

DON:

Cool... It's good to see you, Katrice.

KATRICE:

It's good to see you too, Uncle Don.

Don nods, then exits.

Katrice and Chuck notice each other from across the stage then slowly come together.

CHUCK:

Hey.

KATRICE:
Hey you...

CHUCK:
How are you doing?

KATRICE:
Eh, I'm alright... You know we weren't that close, so it's kinda weird... Like I feel like I should be sadder or something? I don't know... Anyway, how are you doing? You guys were super close, I remember.

CHUCK:
Yeah... Well, ya know, my father and I never really got along either... Kinda like you and your dad... So, your dad really became like a father figure to me... Especially over these last few years... He really became my best friend too, so... Yeah, I'm gonna miss him a lot.

Chuck sighs heavily, then tries to compose himself from crying.

KATRICE:
Oh, Chuck... *(Hugs Chuck tightly.)* I know, bud... I know.

CHUCK:
Just sucks, ya know... Everything seems to be going wrong for me all at the same time.

KATRICE:
I know it feels that way some times, doesn't it?

They hug for a while, then finally release.

CHUCK:
Hey, if you ever need anything, you know, just like - anything at all - I'm available...

KATRICE:
Thanks, Chuck.... I appreciate that.

CHUCK:
I mean, if you need anything, really... Financially, emotionally, physically, whatever... You need a hug, just wanna cuddle, whatever, just lemme know... I'll always make myself available for you, and I'm usually down for whatever, so...

KATRICE:
Thanks.... I will keep that in mind.

CHUCK:

Also, I know Lon never said it much, but he really did love you more than anything in the world... He told me that all the time, he was so proud of you... The way he talked about you, it was inspiring... It made me want to have kids some day, ya know?

KATRICE:

Yeah, well... Never said it to me.

CHUCK:

I know. He always said he wished he was around more for you growing up.

KATRICE:

Ah, I doubt that, but thanks for trying, Chuck. You don't have to lie for him.

CHUCK:

I'm not lying, I swear to God!

KATRICE:

Just weird, ya know, he always seemed to talk *about* me, but never talked *to* me... Like, everyone always tells me how much he loved me, but he never said it directly to me.

CHUCK:

Well... I know he loved you more than anything... More than his job, more than literature - everything.

Pause. Katrice shakes her head and shrugs.

CHUCK:

Just so unexpected, ya know.... Tragic.

KATRICE:

I know... Didn't he just get a physical too, like a month ago?

CHUCK:

Yeah, nothing wrong at the time.

KATRICE:

And they still don't know what happened?

CHUCK:

They're pretty sure it was a brain aneurysm, but... They're still trying to rule a few things out. Your dad was just too smart for his own good, that's what it was... Brain fuckin exploded.

KATRICE:

Ew, gross.

CHUCK:

Sorry... You know, about 40% of people with brain aneurysms don't make it, and the other 60% almost all have permanent brain damage.

KATRICE:

Really?

CHUCK:

Yeah. I think I'd rather die than have permanent brain damage.

KATRICE:

Well... Let's hope we never have to make that choice.

CHUCK:

Right. *(Pause.)* Hey Katrice, can I ask your opinion on something?

KATRICE:

Um, sure.

CHUCK:

Why is it easier for some people to find the beauty in life, but for others it's very difficult?

KATRICE:

I don't know... I guess we're all just wired differently, I suppose.

CHUCK:

It's not fair though...

KATRICE:

Well, life's not fair.

CHUCK:

Like your dad... He found the beauty and joy in everything! But other people, like myself, like your Uncle Don, we struggle to find it.

KATRICE:

Like myself too...

CHUCK:

Yeah?

KATRICE:

Yeah, but everyone struggles, Chuck. Some people are just better at hiding it.

CHUCK:

Well that may be true... Your dad was actually very depressed earlier in his life, suicidal even... He wasn't always so jolly, ya know.

KATRICE:

Really? (*Chuck nods.*) When?

CHUCK:

Like, a little after you were born.

KATRICE:

Hm... I didn't know that.

CHUCK:

Yeah, he never talked about it much, but he was depressed for a long time... Like 10 years.

KATRICE:

Wow... You know, it's weird, but that actually makes me feel a little better, in some weird, fucked up kinda way.

CHUCK:

No, I get it, it's not fucked up... It's comforting knowing you're not alone... It's comforting in a weird way knowing that even the happiest of people struggle and are going through some shit... It feel like it's not just you, I get it.

KATRICE:

Right... Thanks for understanding.

CHUCK:

Of course.

They hug and embrace for a moment.

CHUCK:

Should we go downstairs?

KATRICE:

Sure... They have coffee and donut holes.

CHUCK:

So I've heard... Should be a "great time", as the preacher's poster said.

KATRICE:

(*Chuckles.*) I saw those.

CHUCK:

I mean, who the hell uses the words "great time" for a funeral poster?

KATRICE:

Apparently, Father Tom.

CHUCK:

... Is that his name?

KATRICE:

Chuck! *(Playfully smacks him on the arm.)* Yes, that's his name.

CHUCK:

I didn't know, I didn't know!

KATRICE:

Oh my God, you were talking to him for like ten minutes!

CHUCK:

It was like five, but still.

KATRICE:

Still, he gave the sermon at Lon's funeral, I can't believe you didn't know his name!

CHUCK:

Alright, alright, Father Tom, I got it, Father Tom.

Chuck starts to walk downstairs.

KATRICE:

Hey wait... Before we go downstairs...

Chuck stops and turns back around.

CHUCK:

Yeah, what's up?

KATRICE:

I just really hope you keep writing books without my dad as your editor... I really love your stuff.

CHUCK:

Oh... Yeah, I haven't really thought about that yet, let's go downstairs. *(Waves her over.)*

KATRICE:

Seriously, you're a great writer!

CHUCK:
Thank you.

KATRICE:
It's true! ... You know, I always wanted to be an editor myself.

CHUCK:
Oh yeah? I did not know that.

KATRICE:
Maybe... Maybe I could be your next editor?

CHUCK:
Katrice, it's... Just all very recent, ya know, I don't think now is an appropriate time to be talking about this sort of thing... Let's go downstairs, we can talk about that later.

KATRICE:
Okay... I've already edited a few books, actually.

CHUCK:
Great... That's great, let's go downstairs.

KATRICE:
Three so far...

CHUCK:
Katrice, let's just... Can we go downstairs? We can talk about this later.

KATRICE:
I'm really good, and I have my father's genes, obviously.

CHUCK:
Right... Can we go shmooze now?

KATRICE:
Okay. Sorry.

*They start to walk out together, Chuck rubs Katrice's back. She grabs his hand and holds onto it. They look at each other and smile. Katrice stares at Chuck, smitten, then kisses him on the lips. She looks around, then **exits**. Chuck looks around, smiles, shakes his head, then **exits**.*

Lights fade, music rises.

End of Scene.

Act Two, Scene Three

Setting: *The bar.*

Time: *Later that night.*

At Rise: *Everyone is drinking at the bar - Chuck, Delilah, Monty, Claudia, Don, and Katrice. The Bartender stands behind the bar, a rag over his shoulder. Everyone is looking at Monty, who is looking at a piece of paper. He takes a sip of his drink and clears his throat.*

MONTY:
"Funeral Blues". By W.H. Auden...

Pause.

Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.

Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead
Scribbling on the sky the message 'He is Dead'.
Put crepe bows round the white necks of the public doves,
Let the traffic policemen wear black cotton gloves.

He was my North, my South, my East and West,
My working week and my Sunday rest,
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;
I thought that love would last forever: I was wrong.

The stars are not wanted now; put out every one,
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun,
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood;
For nothing now can ever come to any good.

Pause.

CLAUDIA:
That was beautiful, Monty, thank you...

DELILAH:
Yes, very touching Monty, that was lovely.

DON:

Lon would have liked that, thanks Monty.

MONTY:

For sure... To Lon!

Monty raises his glass.

ALL:

To Lon!

They all clink and drink.

CHUCK:

Fuckin A... Shit sucks... Shit sucks major balls, no sugar coating, no beating that bush.

MONTY:

Suck *major* balls...

DELILAH:

The biggest balls.

Pause.

CHUCK:

You know, sometimes I think sadness is a good thing, you know? ... Like it's good to feel sad some times, to help you appreciate the happy times more... Right? Like how having shitty beer makes you appreciate the good beers.

KATRICE:

Right! I agree, Chuck... One hundred percent.

DELILAH:

You would agree with him one hundred percent, you leech.

CHUCK:

Whoa!

DELILAH:

(To Katrice): Why the hell are you even here?

KATRICE:

I'm sorry?

DELILAH:

You should be!

KATRICE:

I should be sorry? For what?

DELILAH:

Uh... For flirting with my husband and trying to get in his pants! How about that? Or for trying to become his new editor while your daddy ain't even cold yet, how about that?

KATRICE:

Flirting? (*Laughs*) That's funny... Chuck is not even my type, like at all... No offense, Chuck.

CHUCK:

No, none taken. And I didn't think you were flirting with me, for the record.

DELILAH:

Oh don't be so naive, Chuck! Of course she's flirting with you! She's trying to get in your pants so that you hire her to be your next editor! And that's fucked up!

KATRICE:

Look, Delilah, I'm sorry if you misinterpreted me talking to Chuck as flirtations, but I will not apologize for false accusations. I am definitely not trying to get in your husband's pants.

DELILAH:

Well, I think you're a lying little whore who doesn't even care about Lon Pockets, so why are you here??

Slight Pause.

CHUCK:

D, just chill! ... I'm sorry everyone, she's drunk.

DELILAH:

I am not, fuck you Chuck!

MONTY:

Hey, hey, hey... Let's everyone just chill, alright?

CHUCK:

Oh, you gotta be kidding me! You? Why are you always trying to play peacekeeper? News flash Monty, you're not fucking saint, mate!!

MONTY:

Of course I'm not a saint, mate, but c'mon, this is Lon's funeral here! Let's all try to be a little more civil and respectful, shall we? At least for tonight? Can we all do that, for one night?

Pause. Everyone looks ashamed and drunk. Chuck clears his throat, then raises a glass.

CHUCK:
Hey, to Lon!

ALL:
To Lon!

They all clink and drink.

CHUCK:
Greatest friend, editor, and mate that a guy could ever ask for. Irreplaceable, on all accounts.

MONTY:
Here here.

Pause.

DON:
Hey, I brought a poem too... One of Lon's, actually.

CLAUDIA:
Oh nice, let's hear it!

DON:
(Takes out a paper and unfolds it.) Well, as you all know, Lon loved poetry... Wrote a lot of it, and he continued to until he croaked... But he kept most of it private, hidden away in boxes, tucked inside drawers, things of that nature... Anyway, while rummaging through his shit the other day, I found some old notebooks in a box... Decades worth of shit... Most of them weren't labeled or dated, so I'm not really sure when this one is from, but... Anyway, here it goes...
(Clears throat.) Now remember, I'm not much of a public speaker nor performer, so just imagine Lon reading it... Shouldn't be too hard to do... This poem is called *Ode To This Moment*, by Lon Pockets.

Pause.

You never get the same spot,
twice in a row,
in Inman Square,
on Cambridge St.,
in Cambridge, Mass.

You never get the same spot
twice in a row.
What are the odds?

There I was, sitting,
focused on page.

Focused on written word.
But why.
Who knows?
Why do we focus
on anything?

Mix nature and nurture,
mix music and pens!
Mix treks and hikes,
mix trials and tribs,
mix smidges and scorn!

Chunky pigeons stay grounded
squinting up at the sun,
rinsing squeegees,
pounding pavement,
howling at suns.

You never get the same spot,
twice in a row,
in Inman Square,
on Cambridge St.,
in Cambridge, Mass.

Pause.

CHUCK:
Wow, very cool... Thanks for sharing, Don, that was awesome... I didn't know Lon still wrote.

MONTY:
Very cool, thanks Don... That was fantastic.

KATRICE:
Thanks, Uncle Don.

CLAUDIA:
Lovely poem.

DELILAH:
Thanks, Don... I'm sure Lon would have loved that.

CHUCK:
Not "would have loved it", still loves it! He's still here, his energy has just been transferred, that's all... Like Father said, we can still see him, still hear him, still feel him... He loved that reading, Don. Thank you.

BARTENDER:

That's deep, Chuck - you need another beer?

CHUCK:

Yeah, I'll take another, thanks.

Bartender grabs another beer, opens it, then slides it to Chuck.

CHUCK:

Thank you.

BARTENDER:

No problem... And just a heads up everybody, kitchen's about to close in 10, so if you want anything... Order soon.

CLAUDIA:

Oooh, can I get mozz stix??

BARTENDER:

Sure, one mozz stix... You want any sauce?

CLAUDIA:

Umm yeah, doesn't it come with sauce?

BARTENDER:

Well, it comes with tomato chunks, but do you want like cheese sauce or something with it too?

CLAUDIA:

... Tomato chunks?

BARTENDER:

Yes, tomato chunks.

CLAUDIA:

Cheese sauce for my deep fried cheese sticks?

BARTENDER:

Or like whatever.

DELILAH:

It is Wisconsin...

BARTENDER:

You can add cheese sauce to anything, it's just nacho cheese we put into a little cup...

CLAUDIA:

Hm... I think I'll just stick with the mozz sticks and tomato chunks, please. Oh and a water, please.

BARTENDER:

You got it. *(To the group):* Anything else before the kitchen closes?

MONTY:

Yeah, let me get, uh... *(Headcounts the group.)* Six, seven shots of your finest whiskey, please. And by finest whiskey, I mean Tullamore Dew.

KATRICE:

Oh thanks Monty, but I can't take a shot of that.

MONTY:

Aww, c'mon it was your dad's favorite!

CHUCK:

IS his favorite!

KATRICE:

I know, I just can't.

MONTY:

C'mon, don't be the only party pooper, even the bartender is taking one with us! In honor of Lon!

KATRICE:

(Sighs) Ugh, fine.

BARTENDER:

So... Seven shots of tully and an order of mozz sticks without cheese sauce?

MONTY:

Yes, please and thank you.

BARTENDER:

You got it, let me put that mozz sticks order in, then I'll get the shots.

Bartender exits. Pause.

DON:

I feel like I've met that guy before...

Bartender enters with a bottle of Tullamore Dew and starts to pour the shots.

BARTENDER:

You know, I haven't had a shot of Tully since I was in high school.

Slight Pause.

DON:

Did you go to Pulaski High School?

BARTENDER:

Umm, no. I went to Dominican.

DON:

Oh. You look like someone I know, sorry.

BARTENDER:

Unless I am someone you know... ?

DON:

Could be... How old are you?

BARTENDER:

25. When did you graduate?

DON:

What, high school? 1975.

BARTENDER:

Oh... Yeah, I don't think we ran in the same circles.

Don shrugs. Monty holds up his shot.

MONTY:

In honor of the legendary, the mystical, the man, the legend... Mr. Lon Pockets!

ALL:

To Lon!!

They all clink and drink. Some take the whole shot, some sip it, some fake sip it and set it down - everyone is already pretty drunk. Claudia nearly throws up, holds her hand in front of her mouth, then runs offstage.

MONTY:

Oofda... That did not look good.

CHUCK:

No it didn't, maybe you should go check on her? I mean, she is your wife after all.

MONTY:

Fuck you, Chuck... Why are you always trying to tell me what to do and how to act, mate? I'm not your fuckin son.

CHUCK:

Monty, I'm really not in the fuckin mood, man... Seriously. Especially not with you.

MONTY:

Not in the mood, man? ... You're never in the fuckin mood, man! C'mon, when's the last time we had a good ol' fashioned drunk wrestling match?

DELILAH:

Both of you guys, just stop! Please.

CHUCK:

Or what, D? Or what?? ... Or you'll leave us both?

BARTENDER:

So... Should I still put in an order for those mozz sticks?

DELILAH:

I think she's good, thanks though... I think we've all had enough, we should probably all just head home.

CHUCK:

Yes, we've all clearly had enough... All of us had clearly had enough, especially you, D...
(*Chuckles.*) Hey, you guys wanna hear something funny? (*Laughs drunkenly.*)

DON:

Well? What is it?

CHUCK:

Oh, you'll love this, Don! You'll fuckin love this, right up your creepy alley!

Pause. Chuck stares down at the ground, contemplating.

DON:

Well, c'mon, spit it out! I mean, I knew you were a terrible writer, but you're an even worse story teller.

Chuck looks at Monty, then over Delilah. Pause.

KATRICE:

Yeah c'mon Chuck, what is it? You can't just leave us hanging like that.

MONTY:
Yeah mate, what is it?

All look at Chuck and wait. He looks around the room, down again, then covers his mouth as if he is going to puke as well.

CHUCK:
I think I'm gonna throw up...

Chuck runs offstage.

MONTY:
Jesus, dropping like flies over here... Am I the only one that can still hold my liquor?

DON:
Wow, Chuck is like the worst storyteller... I mean, his books aren't great, but his in-person stories are even worse.

KATRICE:
Hey, I like his books... And his stories.

DELILAH:
You would...

KATRICE:
Jesus, would you just drop it? It's getting old... Like you.

DELILAH:
News flash, we're all getting old, "Katrice"! You're no exception!

KATRICE:
Not as old as you...

MONTY:
Alright c'mon, we're here to celebrate Lon, not bicker over petty shit.

Delilah gets into Katrice's face.

DELILAH:
You better back the fuck off Chuck, you hear me?? ... Back the fuck off of my man!!

Delilah cocks a fist back like she is going to punch Katrice, Katrice flinches.

MONTY:
Whoa, whoa, chill!! Chill!

DELILAH:
(Laughs.) Wow... You're even more scared than you look.

KATRICE:
Why are you acting like such a bitch to me? Is it because your husband thinks I'm more attractive than you and doesn't want to fuck you anymore?

MONTY:
Look, everything is cool here, nothing is fucked, everything is cool... *(To Bartender):* I'm sorry for their behavior, really... We're all just a little drunk and emotional after the funeral and all.

BARTENDER:
Child please, last night a guy in here straight up ate dog food, then threw up on the bar... Then his drunk ass had the nerve to ask me for a Long Island Iced Tea with no ice... *(Shakes head.)* I hate people some times.

DELILAH:
Monty, A) I am more than a "little" drunk, okay, and B) everything here is *not* cool! Stop fucking apologizing and speaking for me! I'm not even talking to you anymore, it's over, so... Bye! *(Puts a hand in Monty's face.)*

Claudia enters, looking drunk and tired.

CLAUDIA:
I am going to bed... Goodnight!

Claudia bows and turns to exit.

MONTY:
Whoa, no, babe! No, we're going home, we're not sleeping here at the bar... I'll call us an Uber, just wait one second... *(Gently pulls Claudia back in and kisses her.)* Ew, your breath smells like pinxos and vomit and wine. *(Takes out his cell phone.)* Hey Bartender, name of this place again? Skeeze Dee's?

BARTENDER:
Sneaky Dee's.

MONTY:
Skeeze Dee's?

BARTENDER:
Sneaky Dee's... Not Skeezeze.

MONTY:

Not Skeezezy, *Sneaky Dee's*, got it... Like, to *sneak* around. (*Makes a small sneaking gesture.*)

BARTENDER:

Right, just - exactly like that.

MONTY:

Awesome... Alright, three minutes!

Monty walks over to where Chuck exited and knocks on the door.

MONTY:

Chuck, we're heading out! ... (*No answer. He looks back at the group and shrugs.*) Chuck! ... Hey, Claudia had too much mate, our Uber's two minutes away... (*No answer. He looks at the group, then back at the door.*) Alright buddy, talk to you soon, alright?! ... Get some rest, love you brother!

CLAUDIA:

I need to lay down.

MONTY:

We're going, we're going, Uber's on it's way! ... Look, Katrice... Before we head out, I just wanted to let you know that -

KATRICE:

I know, I know... Even though my father was never around for me growing up, and he never called, and he never came home for Christmas', he really did love me though and was very proud of me... Thanks, Monty.

MONTY:

Right... Well, Claudia's clearly fucked up. I love you all, and to all - a good night!

Monty blows a kiss to everyone and puts his arm around Claudia. They both exit.

Long Pause.

DON:

Welp... I love a good cat fight as much as the next guy, but I think I'm gonna get outta here too... (*Puts his coat on.*) It's late, I'm old, and I'm drunk... Good to see you both.

Don hugs Katrice.

KATRICE:

Good to see you, Uncle Lon... Love you.

DON:
Love you too.

Don hugs Delilah.

DELILAH:
Bye, Lon... You're not driving, are you?

DON:
Yeah, yeah, I'll be fine though... Promise.

DELILAH:
Are you sure?

DON:
Yeah... Lon was the only brother I ever had, and I'm gonna miss him a lot... Love you both.

DELILAH:
Love you too, get home safely.

DON:
Will do.

Don waves and exits. Long Pause. Chuck enters.

KATRICE:
There you are, are you okay?

CHUCK:
I'm fine... Hey Bartender, can I close out please?

BARTENDER:
You got it! All on yours?

CHUCK:
Yeah, that's fine, thanks.

BARTENDER:
You got it.

CHUCK:
(To Delilah): I think we should head home.

Bartender slides Chuck the receipt and pen. Chuck looks at the total and is slightly taken aback.

CHUCK:
Wow... Okay.

Chuck sighs, writes the tip and total, signs it, then slides it back.

BARTENDER:
Thank you sir, I appreciate it! You all get home safe tonight.

CHUCK:
Thank you, will do. You get home safe too, appreciate the hospitality.

BARTENDER:
Any time, and my condolences again for your loss.

CHUCK:
Thank you.

BARTENDER:
Gonna go clean up a little in the back, but holler if you need anything. Otherwise, you all have a great night, and come back soon!

DELILAH:
Thank you.

KATRICE:
Thanks!

Bartender bows, then exits.

CHUCK:
Well. You ladies ready?

DELILAH:
"Ladies"? Oh hell no she is not coming with us!

CHUCK:
Yeah she is, I told her she could stay at our place tonight.

DELILAH:
Oh hell no! Absolutely not. If she is staying at our place tonight, I will not be.

CHUCK:
C'mon, D, don't be ridiculous... It's two in the morning, I'm not making her get a hotel right now.

KATRICE:
It's okay, Chuck, really... I'll figure something out.

CHUCK:
No, it's fine.

DELILAH:
No it's not fine, I do not want her staying at my place.

CHUCK:
It's not your place, it's *our* place! And I pay all the fucking rent!

DELILAH:
Chuck, seriously?!

CHUCK:
She has nowhere to sleep!! I already told her she could stay with us, it's final!

DELILAH:
And you weren't going to ever tell me?

KATRICE:
Chuck, it's fine, really.

CHUCK:
No, you're staying at our place, and that's final... Sorry about Delilah.

DELILAH:
Don't fucking apologize for me! Are you planning on fucking this skank or what, is that why you're bringing her back?

CHUCK:
No, D, I'm not like you... If I were ever going to fuck someone else, I would at least wait until we broke up.

DELILAH:
... What is that supposed to mean?

CHUCK:
It means I'm not like you... I wouldn't cheat on you, and especially not with one of your best friends.

DELILAH:
I have no idea what the fuck you are talking about right now.

CHUCK:
No idea, huh? ... I'm talking about you and Monty fucking behind my back, and constantly lying about it! *That's* what I'm fucking talking about!!

Pause.

DELILAH:

Charles, I don't know where this is coming from.

CHUCK:

Stop it!

DELILAH:

Really, honestly!

CHUCK:

Please - just stop denying it for once!!

DELILAH:

Charles, you're drunk, you're not thinking straight...

CHUCK:

Stop trying to gaslight me!

DELILAH:

I'm not sleeping with Monty, I swear.

CHUCK:

(Chuckles.) You're a piece of work, you know that? Still denying it... I caught you guys, D! When I stopped home after Lon was hospitalized... I came back, and the two of you were being really awkward, and then while you were showering and Monty was out getting whiskey, I found a fucking used condom in one of the end tables!! Now how do you explain that? ... You're fucking pathetic, I want a divorce... Immediately.

DELILAH:

Charles, what are you talking about? I don't know what the hell Monty does in our living room when noone is around, but we weren't fucking, I swear to God!

CHUCK:

You're a sad, pathetic, pathological liar, and I want a fucking divorce... Let's go. *(Puts his coat on.)* Katrice, you can have front.. D, until you can own up to it and admit what you've done, I don't even want to look at you to be honest.

DELILAH:

I'll just... I'll take an Uber... And I'll stay in a hotel tonight.

CHUCK:

Good! You know, the cheating stings, like a lot, but the lying about it just makes it that much worse... Like, you can't even own up to it, even though I caught you guys.

DELILAH:

I never fucked Monty, Charles! I will not admit to something I never did!

KATRICE:

Hmm, sounds familiar.

Delilah, on the verge of tears, grabs her coat, slaps Chuck, then exits.

CHUCK:

Wow... Don't really think I deserved that.

KATRICE:

Definitely did not deserve that... Let's go back to your place, I'll help you forget all about Delilah, I promise.

Katrice grabs her coat and extends her hand out to Chuck. Chuck looks down at Katrice's hand then pauses. He looks up at the sky, sighs, then grabs Katrice's hand. They exit.

Lights fade, no music.

End of Scene.

Act Two, Scene Four

Setting: Chuck's living room, at his new house out in the country.

Time: A few weeks later.

At Rise: *Charles is sitting in a chair in the middle of his living room, drunk, holding a half-drunken bottle of whiskey. Long Pause. There is a knock at the door.*

CHUCK:
Who is it?

MONTY:
(Offstage): It's Monty mate, open up!

Pause. Chuck looks at the door, then down at the bottle. He takes a swig.

CHUCK:
It's open.

Monty enters with a briefcase, wiping off his boots upon entrance.

MONTY:
Goddamn, it's cold as balls out! ... What's up mate?

Monty takes his hat and gloves off. Chuck just stares at him blankly.

MONTY:
What's up mate, you alright?

CHUCK:
(Shrugs.) I'm fine.

MONTY:
Alright, good.

Monty slowly takes a seat, a little hesitant.

MONTY:
What time did you start drinking today?

CHUCK:
Same time I always start drinking... Right when I woke up.

MONTY:

Jesus... Chuck, you gotta stop doing this to yourself man.

CHUCK:

It doesn't matter, Monty... It's always five o'clock somewhere, right? That's the beauty of this world, I found it... It's always five o'clock somewhere.

MONTY:

Look, I can just email you everything, you don't seem well, and it really doesn't make sense to talk numbers with you when you're this drunk.

CHUCK:

I don't wanna talk numbers, Monty.

MONTY:

I thought... You said you wanted to go over finances?

CHUCK:

I don't give a fuck about finances, man... Who gives a fuck about finances besides shady fucking finance people like you?

MONTY:

Look, Chuck, I think I'm just gonna go mate.

CHUCK:

Fine, fine, fine, tell me Monty Boy, tell me the numbers! ... Tell me how much debt I have, tell me how I can't afford this new house, this new peaceful life out in the country, tell me again how poorly my shitty attempt at poetry is doing, tell me again how all my funds are dwindling...
(*Pause.*) You know what? Everyone thinks I'm so fucking lucky, you know? ... Like, you should be thankful you've even had the little amount of success that you've had, any writer would kill to make the New York Times best seller list! And why is that? Why do people say that I'm so lucky? ... Have they ever met me? ... Do they even know who I am, Monty?

Pause.

MONTY:

Well... I guess because most writers don't ever even have one book on the New York Times best seller list, much less two, including one that hit number four.

CHUCK:

Oh *fuck* most people, man! Fuck most people... You know how much happiness I got from those books? ... Like - a month? Maybe two months of happiness? ... I had a beautiful, loving wife, a successful career as a writer, I had everything I ever wanted... And now what do I have? I have a lonely life in the country where I spend my days waking up and drinking until I pass out, just to wake up the next day and do it all over again... Is that what happiness and luck look like?

MONTY:

Look, you still have Delilah, you still have me, you have great friends, you have a great life, Chuck... You're much luckier than most people.

CHUCK:

I don't feel lucky, Monty... I feel depressed, suicidal, and vengeful.

MONTY:

Mate, I'm sorry, but I'm gonna head out... I think this was a mistake coming here.

Monty stands up.

CHUCK:

Wait!

MONTY:

... What?

CHUCK:

You know... You have always been like a brother to me, ever since college... And I will always appreciate the relationship we had... So... I got you a little gift.

Chuck stands up and exits.

MONTY:

Chuck, I gotta go mate!

Chuck enters with a large wooden cigar box. He sits down with the cigar box in his lap, staring at Monty.

MONTY:

You got me cigars?

CHUCK:

Yeah, ya know, just a couple Cubans to bury the hatchet, ya know... What do you say, you wanna smoke one?

MONTY:

Um... Sure? If it'll make you feel better.

CHUCK:

Cubans, Monty... And yes, it will make me feel better, I hope... You have a lighter?

MONTY:

Yeah, I have one in my briefcase.

Monty leans down to get a lighter from his briefcase. As he does, Chuck opens the cigar box, takes out a gun, and points it at Monty, the bottle still in his other hand. Monty looks up.

CHUCK:

Lock the door now, or I'll shoot you in the fucking back.

MONTY:

Whoa, mate!! What the fuck?? ... Just chill, put the gun down!

CHUCK:

I said lock the fucking door Monty, or I will shoot you and say it was breaking and entering.

MONTY:

Dude, what the fuck?? Seriously? Put the gun down mate, please!

CHUCK:

Lock the *fucking* door!!

MONTY:

Alright, alright, I'm locking the door, I'm locking it! (*Stands up and locks the door.*) ... There, it's locked!

Monty holds his hands up and stands near the door. Chuck gestures with the gun for him to sit back down.

CHUCK:

Sit down, relax.

Monty slowly sits down, keeping his hands raised and his eyes on Chuck.

MONTY:

Chuck dude, seriously, you're freaking me out, please put the gun down...

CHUCK:

Oh, I'm freaking *you* out? (*Monty nods.*) I'm freaking *you* out??

MONTY:

Yes mate, please! Please put the gun down... At least stop pointing it at me, please.

CHUCK:

Shut the *fuck* up, Monty Boy!! (*Pause*) Now listen, "mate"... I don't want to draw this out any longer than it has to be... Because I love you like a brother... And when you love like brothers, you fight like brothers...

MONTY:

Mate, what are you talking about?

CHUCK:
Shut the *fuck* up!

MONTY:
Look, just take it easy! Can we just talk here, please?

CHUCK:
Oh now you wanna talk? Sure, let's talk! Let's talk about how you've been fucking my wife and secretly stealing my money, let's talk about that!!

MONTY:
... What?

CHUCK:
Let's talk about it! What position do you guys usually do? I know she says she likes missionary, but now I'm thinking maybe she only says that because she knows I like it, ya know, I don't know anymore! Let's talk about how much you stole from me and how often it's been happening... Was it every week, every month, once a year? At the end of the year, during tax season? When was it, Monty Boy??

MONTY:
Chuck, I didn't have sex with Delilah, and I have never stole any money from you, I swear to God... You've been paying me for my services, and that is it mate, nothing more, nothing less... Please, put the gun down... You can ask Delilah, we never slept together, I swear to God mate!

CHUCK:
Call me mate one more fucking time, Monty!! Just one more time!

MONTY:
Chuck, listen, where is Delilah now? Let's all talk about this together, to clear the air.

CHUCK:
Don't put my wife's name in your mouth ever again, you understand? If I hear you utter her name one more fucking time, I swear to God, I will kill you... You understand me?

MONTY:
Chuck... Let's just talk about this, okay? ... Just calm down a minute, just breathe... Put the gun away for a second, let's just talk... Where is Delilah?

CHUCK:
She's not here... (*Pause*) You know Monty, you're right... In the end, we're not all Picassos, are we? ... Now get the fuck out of my house and never speak to my wife again, do you hear me? All I wanted from you was a confession, but it seems that you and her are going to take this to the grave, so... Just go.

MONTY:
Chuck, can we just talk?

CHUCK:
There's nothing to talk about... I caught you two, and you are both denying it! Now go before I change my mind and do something I'll regret later... I'm serious.

MONTY:
Look, I just want us to be cool, that's all... Can we just talk a second before I go?

CHUCK:
I'm done talking, Monty! I'm done... No more talking.

Chuck points the gun at Monty.

MONTY:
Dude, put the gun down.

CHUCK:
I'm not fucking around man, get the *fuck* out of my house!

Chuck cocks the gun back and aims it at Monty.

MONTY:
Dude!

CHUCK:
Get the fuck out of here dude, *now!!*

Slight Pause. Monty looks around quickly, panics, then lunges toward Chuck and the gun. In a brief scuffle, the gun goes off, and Monty crumples to the floor.

MONTY:
(Gripping his stomach): GAAAHHHHH!!!! ... You shot me!

CHUCK:
Sorry, Monty...

MONTY:
You fucking shot me!!

CHUCK:
You lunged at me!

MONTY:
Call 911, please!

CHUCK:

I can't...

MONTY:

Call 911, please, what are you doing?? (*Gasping for breath.*) Dude, please!!

CHUCK:

You know, Monty... You could've just said no... That's all you had to do, just say no.

MONTY:

Dude, please call 911! I'm gonna die... (*Gasping.*) Call 911!

CHUCK:

Nahh, I think I'll just let it be... Let fate take over, ya know?

Monty is fading quickly, seriously wounded and losing blood.

MONTY:

Chuck, I can't... I can't breathe... Call... 9... 1...

CHUCK:

Wish I could, Monty! ... No cell service out here though... One perk of moving out to the middle of nowhere, ya know, no disturbances.

MONTY:

Chuck... Please...

CHUCK:

All you had to do was say no, Monty! ... Just like Lon, all he had to do was say no... But neither of you could do that, could you? ... It's alright though... At least now you'll be together.

Monty slowly closes his eyes, gurgles a little, then stops breathing. His limbs go numb, no longer clutching his stomach. Chuck stares at him emotionless, pauses, then shrugs.

CHUCK:

Well... Maybe now Delilah will take me back?

BLACK OUT.

END OF PLAY.

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *We're Not All Picassos* was inspired by the artist's internal struggle; whether a writer, painter, musician, filmmaker, sculptor, etc. It explores issues and themes of what it means to be an artist and why we continue to create against all outside

distractions and forces. Stylistic interests include David Mamet, Suzan-Lori Parks, Neil Simon, Clifford Odets, August Wilson, Martin McDonagh, and more. The play has not been performed live yet.

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Watt Burns is a poet and playwright from Milwaukee, WI, living in New York City. He has been published in Return to the Gathering Place of the Waters, Edify Fiction, Crux Magazine, In Layman's Terms, Cream City Review, and more. He holds a BA in Creative Writing from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and he once saved a kitten from a busy highway in Atlanta.*

A LINGUIST FALLING OFF THE WAGON

By Ilan Wachsman

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS:

My monologue 'A LINGUIST FALLING OFF THE WAGON' started as a one minute dialogue between two middle aged men, and was based partly on imagination and partly on a true story. It came to life on a warm winter night in 2017 outside a Tel Aviv pub, after I overheard a couple of half-drunk tourists justifying their spur of the moment decision to resume drinking following a long period of abstinence. The piece is inspired by Eugene Ionesco's 'The Bald Soprano', sopranos in general and my own fascination with existential questions and idiomatic expressions. Through a unique use of language, it portrays a man dealing with an enigmatic and frightening reality in his own way, which leads to a spectrum of emotions from enthusiasm and joy to disappointment and despair. This monologue offers a glimpse into the daily struggle with a rapidly changing world, takes kindly to a common human weakness, and also makes for a good read over a pint or two. The original one minute play 'A LINGUIST FALLING OFF THE WAGON' was part of Gi60 2018, the International One Minute Theatre Festival, and was produced in June 9-7 at Brooklyn College, Brooklyn, NY (Dir: Michael Jones). The monologue of the same name was adapted by me from my one minute play, and in these very days (April 2020) is being recorded in London by Ragged Foils Productions, led by producer Natalie Winter, and performed by voice actor Isi Adeola. This recording is part of the 'Isolation Sessions', a special series of new writing monologues, recorded during the Covid-19 pandemic in support of NHS workers on the front lines. I'm grateful for the opportunity and proud to contribute to this important and inspiring initiative.(Spacing is playwright's own.)

A LINGUIST FALLING OFF THE WAGON

A MONOLOGUE

CHARACTERS

The Linguist - a middle aged man dressed in a worn out suit.

SETTING

A bare stage.

TIME

The present.

SYNOPSIS

An experienced linguist falls off the wagon in an absurdist monologue full of dark moments and idiomatic expressions.

Hello silent majority, I see you're all itching to get the show on the road. Fresh as daisies and ready to roll. Good for you, I'm dead on my feet. And yet I never let nobody beat me in my own game. So let's get down and dirty, shall we? The truth is

we've got thrown in at the deep end, so we must fly by the seat of our pants, and do everything against the clock. Now you might think that making bricks without straw is a bit much, but let me tell you, my friends, they don't call me the Linguist for nothing. I put my shoulder to the wheel, keep my nose to the grindstone and never say die. It's no secret that recently things have gone out of hands. We're clutching at straws here. Ideas are flying at a rate of knots falling on stony ground. Nobody knows which way to turn... like being between a rock and a hard place. We're up the creek right on the edge hanging by our fingernails struggling to keep our heads above water, but to no avail. Looks like we're done for. Not a ray of hope...

(Suddenly becomes determined) But wait... wait... I've got a brainstorm. Yeah... against all odds I'm on top of that. I'll save the day, come hell or high water. So help me God! Now is the moment of truth. Keep your fingers crossed. *(Slight pause)* It's like pulling teeth, the words just won't come out. I know you're disappointed but bear with me a bit. Yes... oh yes... believe it or not, but just as we came within a hair's breadth of falling flat on our faces I've managed to put the genie back in the bottle.. luck of the devil we got it in under the wire, right at the eleventh hour, as they say. It's up and running again. But no rest for the weary. We must strike while the iron is hot. Time and tide wait for no man. *(PAUSE.)* Oh dammit! What can I say? Looking back I realize I shouldn't have celebrated too early. I can't tell you how sorry I am. Not only that words are failing me at the moment, but I can almost see the blood draining from my own face. I feel like nothing on earth... at the end of my tether. Looks like I've come to a cross-roads. I've been in the business the best part of twenty five years... slogged my guts out for one linguistic project or another; got shifted from pillar to post. I put my head in the lion's mouth; served as the hatchet man; laid my reputation on the line ...the whole shebang. Been treated like dirt at the best of times. With all the blue-eyed boys in key positions and their I'm all right Jack frame of mind, it's here today, gone tomorrow. Every man for himself.

It breaks my heart to abandon ship like some panicked rat. Better late than never, though. I'd rather leave than get thrown to the dogs. You can't blame me for that, can you? I've had my fill of the business. I want to get away from it all, hang up my hat and watch the world go by.

Let's be clear on this. I Don't expect a golden handshake... there was no golden hello either. I wasn't born with a silver

spoon in my mouth. My father was a proud son of the soil. I started earning my keep at the age of ten... I've been making an honest buck ever since. But can I make ends meet? To be honest with you, I haven't got two cents to rub together. Actually I live from hand to mouth. Barely enough to keep the wolf from the door. *(Reaches into his pocket and pulls out a flask of whiskey.)* Ahhh... well... surprise surprise... just what the doctor ordered... a bit of Dutch courage. I've been on the wagon for way too long, anyway. But mum's the word. If my trouble and strife finds out I'll catch hell. *(Lifts the flask)* Down the hatch! *(Takes a long swig from the flask.)* They say it's all for the best, and I should count my blessings, but I've had it up to here... at the end of the day idioms are just a load of crap, pardon my French! In your heart of hearts you know we're all pissing in the wind, don't you? *(Lifts the flask again.)* It's tempting to say to hell with it, but I don't give in that easily. Life, as we all know, is an ongoing struggle, and unfortunately every day is a new battle against the same foe. I'm well aware it doesn't look too promising right now, but if you know anything about me, you know I haven't said my last word yet. *(Slight pause)* Cheers!

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *My monologue 'A LINGUIST FALLING OFF THE WAGON' started as a one minute dialogue between two middle aged men, and was based partly on imagination and partly on a true story. It came to life on a warm winter night in 2017 outside a Tel Aviv pub, after I overheard a couple of half-drunk tourists justifying their spur of the moment decision to resume drinking following a long period of abstinence. The piece is inspired by Eugene Ionesco's 'The Bald Soprano', sopranos in general and my own fascination with existential questions and idiomatic expressions. Through a unique use of language, it portrays a man dealing with an enigmatic and frightening reality in his own way, which leads to a spectrum of emotions from enthusiasm and joy to disappointment and despair. This monologue offers a glimpse into the daily struggle with a rapidly changing world, takes kindly to a common human weakness, and also makes for a good read over a pint or two. The original one minute play 'A LINGUIST FALLING OFF THE WAGON' was part of Gi60 2018, the International One Minute Theatre Festival, and was produced in June 9-7 at Brooklyn College, Brooklyn, NY (Dir: Michael Jones). The monologue of the same name was adapted by me from my one minute play, and in these very days (April 2020) is being recorded in London by Ragged Foils Productions, led by producer Natalie Winter, and performed by voice actor Isi Adeola. This recording is part of the 'Isolation Sessions', a special series of new writing monologues, recorded during the Covid-19 pandemic in support of NHS workers on the front lines. I'm grateful for the opportunity and proud to contribute to this important and inspiring initiative.*

AUTHOR BIO: *Ilan Wachsmann is an Israeli playwright and screenwriter who more often than not likes to keep an open mind. He usually keeps it in the fridge inside a small bowl of ice, alongside a slice of fresh brain, which allows him to go on thinking outside the box. Some of his*

short plays have been produced on off-off-Broadway and on London's fringe scene, and received both audience and critical acclaim. In London he had the privilege to be working with Encompass Productions and their creative team led by Liam Fleming & Jonathan Woodhouse who produced and directed two of his short works: 'END UP LIKE JULIE', which earned a five star review from critic James Waygood, and 'NO BROKEN BONES' which was later developed by Ilan into a full length play. You can reach Ilan at: ilanwachsman5@gmail.com

Two Days Before

A Play By

Emma Cariello

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS:

This play was inspired by my research into school shootings and, more specifically, the Columbine shooting of 1999. The two characters are based very heavily on Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris. I tried as best as I could to capture how kids really talk to each other. However, I purposefully kept it vague, so these two characters can be discussing whatever you want them to be discussing. Generally, though, the core remains the same. A big decision is being made, and one boy needs a little convincing. (*Spacing is playwright's own.*)

Characters

BOY ONE, 17 years old. Small, but not stocky. Almost malnourished. Wooden, hollow eyes.

Something slightly terrifying about him, slightly off-kilter.

BOY TWO, 18 years old. Monstrously tall and gawky. Long, stringy hair. Out of proportion, with large hands and joints. There's a repressed air about him, like something is bubbling under his surface but he's too afraid to show it or even speak of it.

Setting

BOY TWO's basement, during his high school graduation party. June 2019.

Lights slowly fade in on BOY ONE and BOY TWO, alone. BOY TWO sits in an old armchair, hands resting on his knees. BOY ONE stands, arms crossed. With the fade in of lights, sound fades in also. Noises from upstairs; shuffling feet, muffled laughing and talking. The basement is incredibly cluttered, with random paraphernalia scattered everywhere; mounted deer heads, nerf gun boxes, a child's plastic bike, etc. The play begins in the middle of a conversation.

BOY TWO: ...Yeah, I just didn't think I'd make it this far. Like, I have no plan.

BOY ONE: We could always... y'know, do...

BOY TWO: (Interrupting) No, man (he says it laughingly, shaking his head) Don't be stupid.

BOY ONE: (Laughs along, putting his hands up in defense). Ok, but like...don't act like it was all my idea

(They fall into a familiar rhythm. Clearly this conversation has happened before).

BOY TWO: Totally was, but ok.

BOY ONE: Everything's going to shit anyway. Climate change and shit. Might as well just...

(Makes vague motion with his hands).

BOY TWO: (Humoring BOY ONE) Elaborate.

BOY ONE: Ok well. Would you rather be one of millions to die in a natural apocalypse, or would you rather go out with a bang?

BOY TWO: (Snorts) ‘Go out with a bang?’ Dude....

BOY ONE: I’m just saying! Why slip out quietly like you’re at a fucking movie theatre or something? This is *life*, man. This is the *world*. And we’re all gonna die anyway. It’s not like that’s a spoiler or something.

BOY TWO: Your dad’s like, a real big Trump supporter right?

(BOY ONE nods incredulously).

BOY TWO: And you believe in climate change?

BOY ONE: You’re really gonna change the subject like that, huh?

BOY TWO: (Shrugs. Not really humoring anymore. Genuinely into the conversation). If we did, I don’t think I *could*. Y’know?

BOY ONE: You could. For sure. I know you could.

BOY TWO: You don’t know me *that* well, man.

BOY ONE: I’ve known you my whole life, you don’t think I know what’s going on in your head? Or what you’re capable of? I know you’re angry.

BOY TWO: (That takes him off guard. He looks up at BOY ONE earnestly. After a pause) Yeah. I’m angry. Of course I’m angry. You’re angry, everyone’s fucking angry. (His anger is actually showing now).

BOY ONE: Yeah, get riled up! Four years of bullshit, fucking *abuse*, to just leave, graduate, marry some nobody, have two nobody kids and *die*? Is that what you want? (BOY TWO shakes his head rapidly, ready to cry) Well, you’re acting like that’s what you want...

BOY TWO: It’s *not*! It’s not what I want!

(Silence. Somebody drops something upstairs, and BOY TWO startles at the dull thump. That triggers him off, and he breaks into nearly silent tears, rubbing his face. BOY ONE watches him coldly).

BOY ONE: Are you with me?

(BOY TWO stares up at him. They stay in that tableau for a moment. Movement upstairs continues, conversations continue, and the world continues to spin. But not in this basement. BOY ONE and BOY TWO are stuck, making the biggest decision of their short lives).

BOY TWO: (Sudden intake of breath, breaking the suffocating stillness of the basement. Makes the audience wait a moment, his gears turning. Then, a slight flinch when he reaches his final decision in his mind). Yeah, uh-huh. Ok, man, yeah... (Barely coherent. Laughter comes out of his mouth, but he isn't smiling. He doesn't bother to wipe his face of tears).

(BOY ONE smiles, but there's nothing behind it. It's a hollow, dead smile. The two shake hands. Blackout).

AUTHOR'S BIO: *My name is Emma Cariello. I'm a college student working toward a degree in journalism. I love writing unsettling, weird, and sad things. I typically gravitate toward fiction short stories, but I love to review films in my spare time too. I hope you enjoy this and please let me know if the attachment opens! It's very short, but I prefer to keep things quick and make sure they pack a punch.*

DOOR NUMBER THREE

By Martin Heavisides

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *For quite some time this was only a (vaguely dream based) response to a prompt for a play without dialogue, but then I began thinking about how this situation might further unfold, and discovered it would be a tale of wild libido, converse between the worlds of the living and dead, the driving engine of language and action and how it takes on a life outside what could easily be predicted. Also that it would end at a satisfactory/unsatisfactory point, poised on actions to come that the mind is free to imagine but which tantalize the creator with the possibility of their realization. I do have a file titled Door Number Three Full Length, but so far nothing of the second act has emerged. Perhaps it's best it doesn't. It might be behind Door Number Four. (Spacing is playwright's own.)*

DOOR NUMBER THREE

Scene i Three Door Monte

Sound of soft rain falling.

A man stirs awake in a bed stage right and slips out of his side, leaving a slumbering woman there.

He walks to stage centre where he contemplates three closed doors.

He opens the first of them, behind which is a roaring tiger, which he contains by closing the door in instant alarm. (Possibly the image of tiger and open door, enlarged, appears on the backdrop wall so it's more immediately visible to the audience.)

Pacing and visibly nervous, he contemplates the doors. Curiosity overwhelming him at last, he opens the second door, behind which lurks a man with fierce red eyes who lunges at him. He pushes the door almost shut but the man behind it pushes furiously also. After a struggle, finally he gets it fully shut. (Evidently some sort of enchantment prevents the door being opened by the knob on the other side. These may be doors with only one way knobs. Whatever, there must be an illogical explanation.)

(Possibly the image of man behind opened door, and the struggle between the two for mastery of the door, shows on the backdrop wall as above.)

Thoroughly winded and visibly shaking, the man teeters off wings right. After a few seconds, returns, more steady, with a beer can in one hand. Contemplates doors a long while, until curiosity prevails once more. Opens third door, behind which a woman in thigh length negligee beckons with extended arms and tantalizing fingers. (Possibly the image etc.) He sets down beer can and begins to come thither in some agitation. Just before stepping in, he suddenly slams the door shut as he sees the woman from earlier approaching, in his peripheral vision. The nightgown his bedmate wears is less provocative, more functional, possibly flannel or just an overlarge t-shirt. She beckons with both hands and, sighing, he reaches out to take one of them and let her lead him back to bed. Rain increasing. He holds three fingers up and winks at audience behind the woman's back. Bed in darkness after they slide in on either side, rain, wind and peals of thunder grow to a

briefly sustained crescendo then taper off to the same sound of soft rain as at the beginning. After an interval, the man emerges out of the darkness once more and again approaches the doors.

He looks at the first door, then over his shoulder at the audience, shaking his head, a light shiver passing through him

He looks at the second door, then over his shoulder at the audience, a much more pronounced shiver passing through him.

He looks at the third door, then over his shoulder at the audience, nodding vigorously. Strides to the door, grasps the knob aggressively and throws it wide open. Thunderclap. Before he can react, the red-eyed man springs at him, knocks him to the ground and begins throttling him, accompanied by heavy rain, gusting wind, peals of thunder. Finishing at last, the thrashing and struggles of the man under him subdued into dead stillness, the red-eyed man, grabbing the beer can the other had set down, rises to his feet and walks across to the bed (still in darkness) stage right.

BLACKOUT

Scene ii Ambiguous Pleasures

Woman stirs in bed at the embrace and sudden assault of her unknown lover.

ERNTRUDE BLACK

Walt! Is that you?

INSPECTOR QUINCE

(Thrusting aggressively—words keeping time)

No! name no—name I recoll-ect maybe cer!tainly not Walt! Ab!nor!mal!ly! pantywaist—
pigeonwaist—milktoastfriedinbutterscotchNAME! WALT!

Spits off to the side of the bed without moderating his thrust

Marry a Walt with his substandard entry

Not enough breath left to speak,, his moans and hers mingle. Climax.

and possession.

They settle into a close, tender embrace.

ERNTRUDE BLACK

If it is Walt you *must* be possessed. If not I must be dreaming. I'll wake beside a puddling stain on the sheets. Where did Walt go then? I think he was after a glass of milk and a sandwich.

INSPECTOR QUINCE

He was after forbidden pleasure I've snatched out of his lickerous mouth and tasted withal in his stead.

ERNTRUDE BLACK

He was going for a drink? I don't forbid him that but I'm stern if he does it too much with his ulcer. But how did you get in, assuming you're not my husband suddenly at full throttle early honeymoon force?

INSPECTOR QUINCE

My force diminishes not with use and familiarity, outperforming husbands of every description with visible ease. I came through door number three.

ERNTRUDE BLACK

Never heard it called *that* before—o! I see what you mean. The three doors, they're back in our living room. I really must be dreaming them, or not. I've never been sure if the doors with their mingled marvels and perils were dreams, waking dreams actualized in life or who knows what when analysed in the cold logical light of brilliant day. But then where's dear dotting Walter Black my erstwhile hub? If he went through one of those doors I'll throttle him when he gets back.

INSPECTOR QUINCE

No need, it's already accomplished. Dead he lies on the tacky carpet by door number three, asphyxiate he breathes no more. Breath is the first thing we draw in life and the last. He's drawn his last breath.

ERNTRUDE BLACK

Strangled and slain on the carpet by a new sudden lover who's assailed me jiggle and spinny with artful ambiguous pleasures! I'd better be dreaming then, too much to deal with, police, investigations, hair samples on the carpet and DNA leading God knows where otherwise.

INSPECTOR QUINCE

I catch the glimmer of a reason that need not much trouble you. Troubles not me, I'm too clever by far for the law—too clever for my own good, some on the force say.

ERNTRUDE BLACK

I can't make head or tail of what you just said.

INSPECTOR QUINCE

Tail I make with ferocious abandon—with gracious abandon yield head.

ERNTRUDE BLACK

I have the right name for a widow at least.

Quince has slid beneath the sheet, his head obtruding in gentle motion about her midparts.

A merry widow it seems.

BLACKOUT

Scene iii Where's the Crime?

Lights up on living room, three doors no longer in evidence, a rectangle of police tape around the body of Walter Black, inside which three latex-globed assistants busily collect evidence—samples of various kinds, photographs from several angles.

INSPECTOR QUINCE

Tragically was he within inches of the vehicle that might have sped him hence when overtaken by assailant with powerful hands, not at all gentle and caressing, powerful upper arm and upper body muscles our natural surmise from evidence of futile struggle by your puny husband.

ASSISTANT 1(*taking flashbulb photo*)

More tragically still—or is that more dramatic irony? I'll Google it later—one of the tires was punctured.

ASSISTANT 2

bagging samples taken from fingernails)

He'd have been SOL trying to flee in that useless three tire wonder as some unknown vandal had rendered it. Accessory before the fact if we had any way of tracking him, even if completely unwittingly. Assault a person's transportation in a situation of likely peril. . .

ASSISTANT 3

(taking up what looks like the measure of a shoeprint in mud)

What he could have been up to in a neighbourhood so sketchy—! Some—not me of course, that’s not in our determination as officers of the law—might say he got what he deserved.

ERNTRUDE BLACK

Inspector—(*aside, to him alone*) what’s this about a body strangled in an alley? We’re in my living room. It’s right in front of us. I’m in my housecoat!

INSPECTOR QUINCE(*aside*)

To our eyes the picture is thus, Erntrude, but fogged by perspective tricks I learnt many years distant in the Orient, these manipulable colleagues perceive the crime scene as an alley in a part of town good reputable citizens never venture because of personal cowardice mainly.

ENTRUDE BLACK(*aside*)

Many years ago in the Orient? You expect me to believe that on your say-so?

INSPECTOR QUINCE(*aside*)

I have no reason to lie to you. Beside you, yes, but it’s a question trickier than you can suspect. Ago or to come I’m not at liberty to say, not in the usual sense of a secret but of a riddle unsolved and perhaps unsolvable. Do we live in one time line or many? Do they see you in this place or that? In a housecoat or a black pencil dress that hugs the figure so close they strain to contain the race of their pulse and maintain professional distance, decorum after all they have a job to do.

ERNTRUDE BLACK(*aside*)

Two of them are women!

INSPECTOR QUINCE(*aside*)

Nevertheless—in one case at least I'm positive and in the other, just possibly half half.

ERNTRUDE BLACK(*aside, smiling*)

So they go on about their duties, furtively undressing me with their eyes? With much less to undress than is usual for me in public if the outfit you describe's what I'm really wearing. And you see?

INSPECTOR QUINCE(*aside*)

Both scenes are present to my eye, otherwise how could I maintain both illusions at once?

ERNTRUDE BLACK(*aside*)

Both? What I'm seeing is an illusion too? I knew it, I haven't woken up yet.

INSPECTOR QUINCE(*aside*)

Have any of us at any time in our lives first to last? At best for sliver-thin glimmers. These subtleties they apprehend better in the Orient.

ASSISTANT 1

We've done our work Inspector.

ASSISTANT 2

Ambulance is on its way to pack this one off to the morgue.

ASSISTANT 3

This will stay up awhile—still going over particulars with the newly bereaved Inspector? There's a police vehicle available to chariot her home.

INSPECTOR QUINCE

I'll see to transport personally once I've mapped securely a timeline of events as they occur to the victim's widow, in fits and starts it seems against the shock still battering fast on her system, battering wide awake her sleep-craving eyes.

ASSISTANTS

Right then we're off.

ASSISTANT 1

Don't have a clue what that was about.

Exuent. Quince and Erntrude Black melt into a passionate kiss as Walter Black's head stirs and lifts.

WALTER BLACK

So. Didn't even wait for the first nail in the coffin.

Watches the two walk off into the blackness where the bed would be.

I don't have to put up with this just because I'm. . . What am I exactly? Wasn't what I was expecting.

A sport jacket and housecoat are tossed into the light from bedroom area.

I have a good mind to wreak vengeance on my vicious murder *and* the disloyal once-wife who's

Flannel nightgown, shirt and tie are tossed in next.

Bedding him if my senses don't deceive me. Never thought I'd have senses still. He's going to enter without even leaving off his pants, zipper down and in without so much as a

Pants and underpants next.

by your leave. Well if I'm this much present I might just be able to come up with a comprehensive scheme of slow ceremonial revenge such as I never would have pictured myself capable of life. Perhaps not. Perhaps death completes me.

Notices three doors have reappeared.

But first—

Cautiously opens door number two, behind which is the same woman as in scene i. She grabs his tie and tugs him to her.

ANGELINE PITFALL

I'll help you the way you wanted first, and then we'll plot our revenge. I crave it as much as you on both of them. That son of a bitch is mine, not hers. And now you. Ah, well. I'll have to make the most of it.

Tugs him to the other side of the door and slams it.

Scene iv Urgent Love

WALTER BLACK

I never thought this was possible either.

ANGELINE PITFALL

You've never heard of resurrection in the flesh? You're in need of religious instruction, that's plain, and I'm custom design for seminary instruction.

Noise of ambulance comes up low behind this, then rises in pitch to a crescendo before suddenly cutting out. Two EMS attendants (played by two of the earlier Assistants) run in with a stretcher on wheels, take down police tape enough to get at 'body' which they mime lifting and placing on stretcher, covering with blanket that, once in place, shows the outlines of a body underneath. One of them re-attaches the tape.

ATTENDANT 2

I'm not sure we should have removed that in the first place.

ATTENDANT 1

And we were supposed to get our customer onto the stretcher and out of here how? I won't tell if you won't.

Exuent at either end of stretcher. Wings left, siren starts up again, full blast, then by degrees diminishes as if with distance. Slowly rising beneath the ambulance noise and now superseding

it, the sound of urgent lovemaking from the dark space where we know the bed is past the living room, and from behind door number two, suddenly climaxed by the roar of a tiger. Whisper sound of large padding feet.

WALTER BLACK

What was he doing here?

ANGELINE PITFALL

She if you want to know the truth. Likes to watch is the nearest I can figure. Don't worry, she's been recently fed. A police commissioner I believe. *(After a silence.) Kidding.* Walter—you didn't just finish?

WALTER BLACK

Considering I'm technically incorporeal. . . I think I lasted pretty good. Anyway I don't usually have a sudden tiger roaring at me.

ANGELINE PITFALL

Well you better get used to it. Our revenge could take some time to unfold, and in the meantime who else do I have to fall back on?

WALTER BLACK

I think we should get married. Do dead people do that?

Scene v Good Sweet Furry Pussy

Angeline enters the room through door number three and the doors vanish behind her.

ANGELINE PITFALL

More to the point—do live people ever?

Looks on as Entrude enters the light from the right side, in a sleek thigh-length negligee now—the two outfits almost match. Erntrued, who hasn't seen Angeline, stretches in every direction and hugs herself. Testing the muscles at her side, she pivots and at last sees Angeline.

ERNTRUDE BLACK

Who are you? How did you get in here?

ANGELINE PITFALL

Door number 3 most recently. I don't need to ask where you came from. He's probably fast asleep now. (*Loud snoring.*) You'll have to get used to that, not that you'll have much time. That's my man you bedded and I'll punish him for disloyalty and you for *lese majeste* as soon as I figure out the best means to accomplish it. Slow and painful goes without saying. If it proves mortal, I wouldn't be surprised. I've already counted coup in a small way, bedding your husband behind door number 2.

ERNTRUDE BLACK

Ex-husband. I was in the living room and also in a disreputable alley where his body was found, that's what Inspector Quince said anyway. I heard the ambulance drive away with his remains.

ANGELINE PITFALL

He's calling himself Inspector Quince this round is he? Are you in the habit of sleeping with your husbands' murderers?

ERNTRUDE BLACK

That hasn't been proved and I'm pretty sure it won't be. Anyway by whatever circumstantial means dear Walt is dead and you don't get any more ex than that. It usually interferes with what you say happened between the two of you as well.

ANGELINE PITFALL

It was more than that affected his performance, but I'm positive he'll come up to the mark with the right mix of discipline and TLFC.

ERNTRUDE BLACK

Lucky you. (*Yawns.*) If I wasn't so sleepy I might even be jealous.

Snoring out.

I think I came out ahead in the trade.

ANGELINE PITFALL

You're very much mistaken if you think there's been any sort of trade or ever could be with the likes of you. My man goes through women like you as if they were cotton swabs, the same way I put on lesser men. Men and women of the ordinary sort are both a little insubstantial compared to

what we are to one another. Still. He promised that was all over with and he'll pay, I promise you he'll pay, if you turn our collateral damage I won't weep any splashy tears. I'll taste your blood.

ERNTRUDE BLACK

I'll sop up yours like soup. With coarse grained bread most likely.

Quince enters wearing a black robe spackled with gold stars.

ANGELINE PITFALL

I like the attitude. It means I needn't show mercy—kill you quickly without pain.

ERNTRUDE BLACK

Bring it on, door number three if you've got the nerve.

INSPECTOR QUINCE

Ladies! Flattered as a man needs must be at such competition for his amatory favours, I'd have no millimeter of flesh cut or even bruised upon my poor account! not when the prize is in reach of both equally take! grasp! it's a short walk to a bed capacious for all. At point where I weary if you yet sleep not, then may you strive flesh against flesh, aggression against aggression until you puddle in moaning delight before my aroused, nay hypercharged eyes and superior member.

Walter Black, seemingly from nowhere, has appeared among them, looks behind him

WALTER BLACK

Where'd the door go?

ERNTRUDE BLACK

Did I hear that right? He wants us, expects us, to . . . ?

Walter clears throat. Quince suddenly sees him with a look of hatred.

ANGELINE PITFALL

He does get off on watching, and it is a real temptation. Postpone all-out vengeance awhile in favour of furious enjoyment of flesh melting happily in salt, savoury surrender

WALTER BLACK

Just out of curiosity, are you two. . . alive? I ask because I'm still getting used to all those strange new developments. My wife I know still is, unless his cock's as deadly inside someone as his hands are around a fellow's throat.

ERNTRUDE BLACK

Ex. Till death do us part is all I vowed. If only there'd been an escape clause for boredom.

She stands eye to eye with Angeline. Their hostility hasn't so much diminished as taken on an erotic charge.

WALTER BLACK

Bit much, and in our own bed too—adding insult to fatality.

Quince stands eyeball to eyeball with him, glaring.

What are you going to do, big fella—kill me? Think it'll take any better this time?

Ertrude suddenly embraces Angelina and dips her, bending to meet her in a 45 degree angle and a kiss.

INSPECTOR QUINCE

Can but essay once more in quest of a result more firm.

ANGELINE PITFALL

(returned to standing position)

My Quince will be pissed off he didn't see that.

They rush into the dark area where the bed is. Quince, about to lunge, draws back when Walter pulls from the pocket of his silk housecoat a butter knife. He stares at it in disbelief.

WALTER BLACK

I could have sworn it was a butcher knife I grabbed. Uh-oh.

But Quince's reaction is disproportionate for a man of his bold rage confronted with a butter knife. He backs away slowly, eyeing Walter warily for sudden movements. Seeing though still not comprehending his sudden advantage, Walter makes a lunge. Quince extents arms, framing the space in front of him with two raised index fingers.

INSPECTOR QUINCE

This is not over and done however you arm yourself uncivilly. I shall return!

Bolts through door number three which has reappeared with the others. Roar, then throaty purr greets him from somewhere behind the doors.

Good girl, let me ruffle thy head and scratch the back of thine ears for renewed fortune, who's a good sweet furry pussy!

WALTER BLACK

Oh great! He's got the tiger on his side. I'd better prepare for whatever's coming but how?

INSPECTOR QUINCE

Ye-es! Ye-es! *You* wouldn't run away from any butcher knife wizz a ten inch blade, woulds oo girl? Woulds oo girl?

Meantime Angeline and Erntrude, over there in the pitch blacken, have been engaged, at varying noise levels in serious heavy petting. (Underneath which is the continuous sound of happy purring.)

ERNTRUDE BLACK

Your Quince! We may tangle over that before very long.

ANGELINE PITFALL

We be tangled, more than I suspected we might.

ERNTRUDE BLACK

Right now I think I'll fuck you.

WALTER BLACK

Those two are getting cozy.

Pockets butter knife.

ANGELINE PITFALL

I surrender, officer. Take me.

WALTER BLACK

I think it would be appropriate to join in.

ERNTRUDE BLACK

I'll have to figure out how exactly I do that as a woman.

Subvocal whispering.

Really? REAL-LY??? I can do that. Show you who's boss.

Overlapping giggles from the two women.

WALTER BLACK(*hesitating*)

Later I think. When I've worked out a little more what's going on with me. Were those throttling hands less manful than they seemed or he imagined or I did?

ERNTRUDE BLACK

I can always kill you later when you least expect it.

ANGELINE PITFALL

Brave talk across a pillow! We'll see who kills who.

A succession of waves rise, crest, recede, repeat, of concupiscence in the dark. Purring from behind doors. Are the doors still there? At the moment no. From behind where the doors would be then: a rumbling prr-prr-prrr.

WALTER BLACK

I think I'll astonish everyone by the time this is through, I've already astonished myself. You'll hear from me girls, and feel me too and it won't be a forgettable experience. First. . .

Exit wings right.

Scene vi Look at Me

Inspector Quince re-enters the living room through door number three or mysteriously appears at the point where door number three would be, we'll leave that riddle to the set designer and whoever's in charge of blocking. He strides Down Stage Centre and addresses the audience directly. (Purring, probably of the tiger in her sleep, very low, and also the soft snoring of the two women.)

INSPECTOR QUINCE

A ten inch blade at that close distance and knowing the feeble wrist for thrusting of my puny foe, I cringe, I backstep warily, I flee! flee to the comforting soft fur of puss, so much of it so warm to the touch and responsive, tickle 'neath the chin for days if you want to, hear that great girl in

her sleep? all three of them now and I not there to voy the two my loves in their maiden voyage on conquest bed! Somebody will pay for that, somebody I thought had been paid in deadliest coin once for all! So easy to reach out and snap the wrist, leave the fool to contemplate the dangle of a hand nevermore to grip, stretch forth my hand to grab from the floor a fearful weapon, useless in his hand now but not in mine! To gut! To flense! at leisure, see if he can resuret in *that* butchered form a second time and mmuch good it do him! Blood and fat dribbling at every point skinned.

WALTER BLACK(*Down Stage Left*)

He still thinks this

Holds up butter knife.

is a butcher knife with a ten inch blade rising proud out of its haft, exactly as it seemed to me when I hastily grabb'd it.

INSPECTOR QUINCE

The identity I had to take on, to save new love from prying eyes of suspicion official on discovery of corpse in living room (myself too, but 'twould be trivial: as if law merely human could touch me with its fingers) that's responsible for all sudden indecision, what might I a lesser being be taken for cowardly fleeing. Identity's unstable in its reflex as quarks or subatomic particles in their sudden instant leaps. Have to shuck it pronto, without identity fixed I'm a known quantity, fearless in every circumstance I chance to meet. Sole expectation an exploding star. Better part of valour to flee if there's room enough, you have the speed. Light speed ironically to flee a bath of incomprehensibly heat-driven light.

WALTER BLACK

Bet he doesn't meet those very often.

ANGELINE PITFALL/ERNTRUDE BLACK

Come sink here your ten inches to the haft!

ERNTRUDE BLACK

If you can. When we awaken.

ANGELINE PITFALL

If you dare. (*As if whispering.*) I didn't notice he had that much in his pants.

ERNTRUDE BLACK(*as if whispering*)

Ages since he's put it all the way in.

Light snoring up again.

WALTER BLACK

If he believes it's a butcher knife, why wouldn't he believe it's a gun?

Turns to face Quince directly, pointing butter knife at him.

Over here, Quince!

INSPECTOR QUINCE

Unregistered I wager and probably you've little knowledge in your fingers. . . slack. . . how the trigger presses but any fool could see from here it's a hair trigger! Easy on the hammer, cautious.

WALTER BLACK

Why? You're a big target, there are six shots in this baby even if I miss with one or two. You murdered me.

INSPECTOR QUINCE

A failure of. . . courtesy on such small acquaintance (*swallows*) I admit.

WALTER BLACK(*aside*)

But if I fire my weapon will it strike him as if by real bullets? Could get sticky if it doesn't. (*To Quince.*) Never mind the flowery apologies, what's done is done. Usually retaliation's impossible in a situation like this, but I feel up for it and unless you're too dead already I stand about ready to taste vengeance to the full.

Holds butter knife in front of him, cocks it.

I'd as soon kill you as look at you.

INSPECTOR QUINCE

Look at me.

Eyes locked, the two start to walk toward each other as lights fade to BLACKOUT.

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Martin Heavisides is the author of eleven full length plays, one, Empty Bowl, published in The Linnet's Wings and given a live reading by Living Theatre in New York), four one acts and a good number of ten minute plays; short stories, flash fiction, poetry, which has been published in Sein Und Werden, The Linnet's Wings, FRiGG, Mad Hatter's Review, Pure Slush, Journal of Compressed Creativity among other highly discerning publications. He has published one novella length collection of interlinked flash fiction and poetry, Undermind. He is becoming a regular at Storefront Theatre's Sing for Your Supper.*

THE TWO BOBS

By Barry Kaplan

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS:

Inspiration: I used to live in New Haven and would often take Metro North into New York City to see a play. The ride back was long and dreary. On one of these trips I was happily reading a book when two men sat behind me and started talking. I kept trying to read but their conversation was really annoying and I finally gave up, took out a yellow legal pad from my knapsack and started to transcribe everything the men were saying. I couldn't always make out complete so I just wrote what I could hear. When I got home, I transcribed what I'd heard into my computer and spent the next few hours filling in what the two men might have said between the random words and sentences I'd been able to jot down. So much for inspiration!

Stylistically, the play is probably influenced by the plays of Harold Pinter: lots of pauses, non sequiturs, suggestive meanings, meaningless suggestions and a bit of fear of the unknown. The play was performed last summer at the Berkshire Theatre Company in Great Barrington, MA. The cast had a lot of fun trying to make sense of their characters and the audience response suggested they thought it was pretty funny. (Spacing is playwright's own.)

The Two Bobs

Cast

JACK 30, light voice

BILL 40, older, gruffer.

Set

A commuter train.

LOUD SPEAKER SYSTEM CRACKLES WITH STATIC. STATIC MAKES NONSENSE OF THE ANNOUNCER'S WORDS.

ANNOUNCER: ...leaving at 5:15. Last call....

TRAIN STARTS UP AND MOVES SLOWLY.

JACK

God this thing is creeping along.

BILL

That's what it does, Jack. It creeps.

JACK

Makes you glad to be getting out, though.

BILL

They ought to just blow it all up, tear it all down.

JACK

I thought it was supposed to be an express.

BILL

It is an express.

JACK

Well I'm in no rush. You? Bill? You in a rush?

BILL

I get there when I get there.

JACK

I don't even want to think about it.

SOUND OF THE TRAIN GOING A BIT FASTER

JACK

Look at that.

BILL

How do people live like that?

JACK

They're lucky they're alive.

A SOB IS STIFLED.

Hey hey, come on. BILL

I'm just...I'm in it. JACK

How do you mean? BILL

Ursula said they're not hiring. JACK

What'd she say? BILL

I mean, not hiring me. JACK

Get off it. BILL

I'm quoting. JACK

Come on. BILL

Yeah. JACK

Jack. You? BILL

She said it wouldn't look good. JACK

What's that supposed to mean? BILL

Taking on someone from the outside. JACK

Yeah, right. BILL

JACK
She has the last word, I guess.

BILL
What a load of bull.

JACK
I'm supposed to do dinner with Tom tomorrow but now I don't know.

BILL
Tom is the guy.

JACK
I think I should call it off.

BILL
Tom is the go to guy.

JACK
I mean, it would be a little awkward.

BILL
What're you talking about?

JACK
It would be beside the point.

BILL
What a load of bull.

JACK
Ursula said it would send the wrong message.

BILL
To who?

JACK
To hire me.

BILL
Oh quit it.

JACK
I don't think Tom even knows.

BILL

This is such a load of bull.

JACK

She's not going to like this at home.

BILL

Ursula doesn't have the last word.

JACK

I asked her about Tom.

BILL

You asked her?

JACK

I mean, you know...the dinner.

BILL

Ursula doesn't have the balls.

JACK

She said she'd try to get to him.

BILL

Oh come off it.

JACK

You think she'd actually call him?

BILL

Tom likes Japanese, by the way.

JACK

I didn't know. I don't know.

BILL

I'd go anyway.

JACK

But Ursula said.

BILL

Don't give up without a fight.

JACK

Someone always comes out bloody from these things and I don't want it to be me.

BILL

Tom could talk to her. Tom could override her.

JACK

Things are shaky enough as it is.

BILL

You're still breathing right?

JACK

So?

BILL

So you've still got a chance.

SOUND OF TRAIN MOVING FASTER

JACK

Look at that.

BILL

Yeah.

JACK

Could anything grow out there?

BILL

That reminds me.

JACK

The stench...

BILL

You know Bob and Bob, right?

JACK

Bob...?

BILL

Bob. And his partner. The other one. Bob.

JACK

Bob...?

BILL

The other Bob.

JACK

Bob...and...Bob. Oh yeah. Right. The Bobs.

BILL

The Bobs.

BILL & JACK

The Two Bobs.

THEY LAUGH.

JACK

Yeah. So...?

BILL

Huh?

JACK

The Bobs...are...?

BILL

Were.

JACK

What?

BILL

Melanoma.

JACK

Which?

BILL

Both.

JACK

Bob and...?

BILL

Bob. Both Bobs.

But they were only...what...? JACK

In their early 40s. BILL

That is definitely not right. JACK

No it is not. BILL

SOUND OF THE TRAIN.

Didn't we just pass your stop? JACK

Uh uh. BILL

God. The two Bobs. JACK

They were funny. BILL

I didn't really know them that well. JACK

Bob was extremely tall. Remember? BILL

Right, right. JACK

The other Bob used to say he was aggressively tall. BILL

I don't know that I actually knew that Bob. Maybe I knew the other one. JACK

They were nutty. BILL

JACK

Oh yeah?

BILL

One Saturday they stole a set of golf clubs out of my Volvo.

JACK

That was them?

BILL

43 and 45.

JACK

That is crazy.

BILL

You know what the priest said?

JACK

I'm 43.

BILL

"There's nothing to learn from this."

JACK

Catholic?

BILL

It's unbelievable.

JACK

Look at all that. What, they just pile it all up at the tracks and that's that?

BILL

The whole concept of taking civilization forward is a thing of the past.

JACK BURSTS INTO TEARS.

BILL

Hey hey hey hey hey.

JACK

Tom can't override her.

BILL

This is such a load of bull.

I'm scared of her. JACK

Hey are you putting me on? BILL

Where are we...? JACK

You're putting me on. I knew it. BILL

JACK STOPS CRYING.

JACK
She said it wouldn't send the right message at this time.

Oh come off it. BILL

JACK
She gave me the whole we-love-you-you're-great thing.

That's Ursula. What a load of bull. BILL

The whole let's-stay-in-touch thing. JACK

That is such a load of bull. BILL

She's *formidable*. JACK

Formidable. BILL

Yeah. JACK

See that old movie theater? I used to go there. BILL

JACK

The whole there's-no-one-like-you-but-at-this-particular-time thing.

SOUND OF THE TRAIN.

BILL

Moving to London's going to be painful for Tom.

JACK

And that kid of his is no picnic.

BILL

Which? The boy or the girl?

JACK

He has two?

BILL

You didn't know that?

JACK

I still feel bad about that dinner.

BILL

He was looking straight at you.

JACK

You saw that?

BILL

He wanted to help.

JACK

Maybe it's the golf.

BILL

You still play?

JACK

Yeah but don't ask about my handicap.

BILL

Tom used to play with the two Bobs.

JACK

Golf. Golf and the two Bobs. Oh my God. Did you see that?

BILL

Everybody hates each other. They're all trying to make money. But no one wants to call anyone on it.

JACK

I was in Tom's apartment. Huge closets. Plus a...a...an abattoir.

BILL

You mean an armoire.

JACK

I do? Oh. Oh yeah.

BILL

He's going to get the contract but the chances of him taking over...

JACK

And he was going to be the guy.

BILL

The go to guy.

JACK

We hung out with them for a few days in Madrid on the way back. Spanish food is all molecular science now but Ursula just...

BILL

Again with Ursula?

JACK

She scares me.

BILL

She should.

JACK

She does.

BILL

Well she should.

JACK

Gee, whole towns are disappearing. Like the mud is just sucking them up. I was thinking...

Mmm? BILL

Just a thought... JACK

Spill. BILL

Could you...? JACK

Me? BILL

I thought....maybe.... JACK

Nah. No can do, pal. BILL

Oh. JACK

I'm not really in the position... BILL

Right. Right. JACK

You know what I mean. BILL

I should be getting off soon. JACK

If I was, I would. But... BILL

I thought you were. I thought... JACK

Like I said...if... BILL

JACK

If.

BILL

Yes. The big if.

JACK

The big F.

BILL

Ah. Ha.

JACK

This is me.

SOUND OF THE TRAIN SLOWING DOWN

JACK

Well I guess that's that.

BILL

That it is. Yes.

JACK

We're slowing down...

BILL

That is that.

JACK

It is.

BILL

Not that anything is ever really final.

JACK

Oh. Of course not. Absolutely. Except...

BILL

Don't even say it.

BILL & JACK

The two Bobs.

JACK

Yeah.

BILL

Yeah.

STATIC FROM THE LOUD SPEAKER. THE TRAIN SLOWS DOWN.

JACK

This is me. Oh god. Oh god. I can't!

THE TRAIN COMES TO A SCREECHING STATIC FILLED STOP.

End

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Barry Jay Kaplan has won the Whitfield Cooke Best Play Award through New Dramatists, also a grant from New York State Council on the Arts and the Joe Calloway Award from New Dramatists. He has been cited by the Writers Guild of America on the list of 101 best written television series for his work on Hill Street Blues. Wits End, an evening of performance pieces, was done at Limbo Lounge. Two Good Boys was produced at the McCarter Theater and off-Broadway at the Neighborhood Playhouse Theatre. The Limits of Admiration was workshopped at the White Heron Theatre on Nantucket Island. Landscape of Desire was selected as the American entry in the 25th Annual Playwriting Conference of Australia and published by Smith and Krause. His musical biography of Rock Hudson, Rock and Roy (music by Stephen Weinstock), was developed at New Dramatists with grants from the Frederick Loewe Foundation and the Cameron Mackintosh Foundation and had workshop productions at New Dramatists in New York and at the Chicago Shakespeare Theatre, both directed by Simon Callow. His musical Like Love (music by Lewis Flinn) won a DramaLeague New Directors/New Works Project Prize and premiered at the New York Musical Theatre Festival.*

WHOLE TIME

By Derick Edgren Otero

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS:

*It was the cultural theorist Byung-Chul Han's *The Scent of Time*, particularly the prologue and the concept of 'non-time.' Time is an agreement between people, holding us together, incompletely, forever. That was fun to consider. Hence, this play. (Spacing is playwright's own.)*

Whole Time
(inspired by the concept of "non-time")

*

10 April 2020

“A long list of events does not produce the tension which characterizes a story, while a very short story may nevertheless possess a powerful narrative tension. And, thus, a very short life can also achieve the ideal of a fulfilled life. The acceleration thesis does not recognize that the real problem today is the fact that life has lost the possibility of reaching a meaningful *conclusion*. It is this fact that leads to the hectic rush and nervousness which characterize contemporary life. One begins ever anew; one zaps through ‘life possibilities’, precisely because of an inability to bring any single possibility to a conclusion. The individual’s life is not informed by a story or meaningful totality. It is misleading to talk of an acceleration of life pursued with the aim of maximizing its possibilities. Upon closer scrutiny, this acceleration turns out to be a nervous restlessness which makes life whizz, so to speak; it hurtles from one possibility to the next. It never achieves rest — that is, completion.”

— Byung-Chul Han, *The Scent of Time*

Characters

B, a woman of the past and present
W, a woman of the future
C, a clocksmith, a woman of all time

Setting

Immaterial.

Time

Oh you'll see.

B holds an old desk clock

B
Time! *Sick* of time—goes and goes where?
Won't make up its mind about itself.

presses clock to side of face, shakes it

B
Now nothing;
Just something, but now nothing

shakes it again

B
Tick-tock.
Tch-tch-tch-tch-tch-tch-tch like that tick-tock.
No tick-tock

shakes it again

B
sound of time, no sound of time

B wrestles with a clock
W enters

W
Stop that noise

B
Well it's broken

W
How so

B
No tick-tock!

W
Ahh

B slams it on the ground, breaks it

W
Good one

B
No hope

W
Ah

B
There was no hope

W
For time—?

B
There was no time

W
Not time or no time?

B
No time

W
So it's gone then it's over it's the end of time

B
It...was a clock

W
and approaching entering non-time, are we

B
No because it was just a clock

W
Out of time, how do we...

B
We get another clock.

W (*really starting to worry*)
Without it...no plans, no purpose, no sense of—

B
No ego! No ego. That's good, isn't it

W
Oh if you don't *shut*—

B
I'll never shut.

W
And that's unsurprising to me because it already happened because everything had happened happened has happened happens is happening will happen will have happened will have been happening would happen

B
Well I had been was was going to be was being am am being will be will have been will be being would be would have been was about to be had been being...so tired of you

W
Well that's marriage

B
Apparently

W
Not time or no time?

B
I wasn't sure

W
You're not sure

B
I *wasn't* sure

W
Same thing now. Exactly the same thing.

B
In some languages

W (*answers finished version of B's thought*)
Not with context—not if you *speak* them

B
All right, all *right!* Sheesh

W
Well, *sensitivity*

B
To language

W
To everything

B
Are you gonna help me fix this?

W
Not my responsibility

B
Then I'll go

W
Where?

B
To the.....clocksmith

W
Oh the *clocksmith* huh?

B
Not the timekeeper

W
Doesn't keep time, is the *wright* of time
like a *craft*;
beautiful, yes.

What's she gonna do?

B
Fix it

W
Oh

B
She'll fix it, she'll fix...*this!*

W
Ah

B
Hm?

W
Us?

B
No *this*

W
You think we're out of time don't you

B
Do you have money?

W
Why

B
Well she's not cheap

W
It's a clock

B
Oh so now we're in agreement about that—

W
I don't believe so...

B
But

W
Clock versus time anyway no
And maybe other things

B
It's a big ask

W
To fix the clock or time?

B
It's a clock!

W
I'm not helping you

B
Won't?

W
Am not

B
Oh but might

W
had not been didn't wasn't going to be are not will not be will not have been *helping* you

B
...ever

W
Not now...so, not Ever

B
Then I guess I should go

W
Huh

B
All right

W
Bye

B
You have *no* money

W
I do but not for you

B
Why not for me?

W

Ha! Been out here all night
with time—why?

B

The tick-tock! Heard it, heard it loud in my ears, siren-loud, sunlight-loud, then it went quiet,
that doesn't concern you? doesn't terrify you? hearing time then time goes quiet?

W

Never happened to me. Can't relate.

B

Money is like time

W (*knows where this is going*)

Noooo no

B

And if you have money

W

Uh uh uh

B

then you must have time

W

You're getting

B

or your money is worthless anyway

W

You think if time is broken—

B

You think time is broken

W

If time is broken which it is then the clocksmith can't work for pay because all payment is an
exchange of time all work all love all being is time, exchanged

B

Different kinds of time but basically yes

W
Maybe I want to see her

B
Well maybe it's not worth it. She can't fix it, right

W
She might

B
What if she refuses

W
I still like seeing her she's nice not everything is about money. Time!

B
Oh you *like* her

W
She's *nice*

B
So now you want to join me

W
Maybe

B
Your time

W
My what?

B
We'll need your money then

W
Fine

B
Where is it

W
I have it

B
You have it?

W (*all at once*)
have had, did have, had, had had, had had had, have, will have, will have had, will have been
having...it

B
This whole time?

W
This. Whole. Time.

they exit
end of scene

in her workshop
the clocksmith holds the broken clock;
she is otherworldly

C
Oh yeah it's broken

B
I know

C
Pretty broken

B
Can you fix it

C
You wanna know if I can fix it huh

W (*to C*)
I think that's what she wants

B
It's what I would like to happen yes

C
Do you know what a *zine* is?
How is it different than a magazine

W
Independently published, I think

C
Which

W
The *zine*

C
Okay wasn't sure

B
How much?

C
What

B
How much will it *cost*

C
That was so vague, wasn't that vague—

W
It was a little vague given the zine comment

C
I've written down an estimate here

B checks

B
Is that too much?

W
That's too much

B
We can't afford that

C
What do you mean

B
We don't have that much money

C
Do you have time?

B
That's the other issue, according to—

W
It's not just the clocks she broke, Ms. Clocksmith

C
Well?

W
Time, too

B (*about W*)
She's crazy

W
Time is broken

B
Don't listen to her

W
And I'm worried because with time broken how could we pay you at all? How could we pay you with other than time?

C
Well you gals just told me you can't afford my rate anyway so what's your point

W
Oh that's true we're broke

B
But if we give you time we give you money

C
You just said time is broken

B
No *she* said time is broken

W
We don't know if it's broken

B
It's not broken

C
Your clock is definitely broken

B
My fault

C
Why?

B
No tick-tock

C
Ahh

B
So I smashed it to the ground

C
Not a smart move

B
Mmm

C
Prob'ly what broke it

W
It was so noisy all the fixing

B
So quiet, though, too quiet

C
Here's what I'll do

W
Yes

C
Time or no time

B
Mmhm

C
My consulting fee is not cheap

B
Kay

C
but it's cheaper than my hourly rate

W
Oooh

C
I'll give you some advice

W
Oooh!

C
and you can fix it yourself

W
I told you she's nice

B
How much would all that be?

checks

W
We can afford that! Just enough!

B
But what's the advice?

W
Who cares

B
What if it's something we already know

W
Is someone paying you to act this stupid

B
Well imagine giving away your last dime to be told information you already know

W
How would you know what a clocksmith knows

C
You wouldn't

W (*to B*)
See!

B (*dismissive*)
Ahh

W
Not your money anyway. *My* money.

B
But my time!

W
Your *clock*. Both of our times. Together.

B
We won't be able to afford to get home if you're wrong

W
She'll tell us what we need to know we'll fix time we'll make money and life will go on

B
Really

W
I think it's likely yes

B
Well

W
Yeah?

B
Well!

W
You think...

B
Hm

W
You really think it's about time?

B
Always

*W sighs
not the answer she was seeking
but accepts*

W
Okay. Here you go

gives C money

C
Excellent. Okay you've got one minute

B
We need your help

C
With what

B
This clock

C
What about it

B
It's broken!

C
And

B
I can't tell time

C
Ahh there's the problem

B
Oh?

C
Mmhm

W
What is it?

C
No one tells time.

W
Ohhh

B
What do you—

C
Time will tell. You won't tell time. Time will tell. And you must listen.
You must listen to time.

W
Wow. Wow.

B
Stop it.

W
God she's...she's brilliant!

B
No that isn't good advice

C
Anything else? Minute's almost up

B
I want my clock fixed

C
Okay

B
So how do I fix it?

C
You don't need to

B
Well I want to

W
Don't you get it there's no need

B
Time will tell us *what*, then??

C
What should inform time? That which tells it

B
And what tells it? The stars? Or the moon?

C
Time tells all

B
But who told time! Who told time!!!

C
Nope! Your time is *up*, baby

C exits

W
Wow. What a woman.

B
Where is she going!

W
She is so nice

B
Was that it???

W
One of the kindest souls

B
What a waste of money *and* time

W
Do you think she was God?

B
How are we gonna get home

W
Time will tell

B
We have no money now

W
Time will tell

B
Or food

W
Time will tell

B
Please...

W
That's the answer

B
No it's not

W
Okay drop the sass *you* broke the fucking clock in the first place if we wanna be upset about things that are out of our control

B
She didn't tell us anything!

W (*tender*)
But she did, love

B
Go. You want to be with her. Go with her.

W
No. No, no.

B
You think she's *God*, of course you do—how can I compete with that

W
You just didn't listen

B
...I listen

W
Not at all times. Sometimes, but not all times

B
I listen to you

W
Why did you smash the clock?

B
I told you. No tick-tock

W
Well...maybe there was tick-tock...

B (*maybe a small gasp*)
?

W
But you didn't listen

B
No. That couldn't be. I listen

W
You weren't paying attention

B
I was I was *paying* attention

W
Time will always tell. As long as you'll hear it, time will tell.
You can hear it now if you listen

B
No. There's none left for us. You were right...

W
Shhh just listen

B (*crying*)
We won't eat tonight because of a clock

W
Listen to time. Please. You have to listen to time.

B
I wanted to give us time.

W
We *have* time.

B
It's...

W
Don't get upset about it.

B
and you'll never forgive me,
will you?

W
Time will tell

B
But you won't?

W
Time will tell

B
I can't hear it

W
I can.

B
It goes silent. It goes...

W

Just listen. And you'll hear it. There's so much of it. The tick-tock...
We have so much time.

they listen to time

*if the audience applauds,
W shushes it—and there it is,
time*

W

Thank you.

end of play

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Development includes Art Garage, Cherry Lane Theatre, Capital Reportory Theatre, and Rockford New Play Festival. BA, Sarah Lawrence.*

NOT HERE YET

A One-Act Play by William Ivor Fowkes

NOTE: To keep the author's use of space the note 'The Playwright Speaks' is at the end of the play. Eds.



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NOT HERE YET

A One-Act Play by William Ivor Fowkes

CHARACTERS: ELEANOR: A woman of indeterminate age. Dressed casually but stylishly. Well educated, articulate, and sensitive. A lonely woman.

CHARLENE: A woman of indeterminate age. Dressed simply. Scrappy and full of personality. A survivor.

RICHARD: A man of indeterminate age. Wears a business suit and carries a briefcase. Superior in attitude and bearing. A confident and busy man.

SETTING: The entrance to a subway station in a sunken plaza in midtown Manhattan.

PERIOD: One summer afternoon.

The Scene: A summer afternoon at the entrance to a subway station in a sunken plaza in midtown Manhattan.

Eleanor stands at center stage holding a cup. From her vantage point, she can see both the train tracks below and the people approaching the station from the street above.

ELEANOR

(announcing)

Not here yet! Not here yet! Take your time, people! The subway's not here yet!

She holds out her cup to accept coins.

ELEANOR (CONT'D)

Thank you, sir . . . Not here yet! Slow down—not here yet! . . . Lovely day, don't you think? . . . Not here yet!

She checks the tracks.

ELEANOR (CONT'D)

O.K., now it's coming.

(speaking more rapidly)

Train pulling in, people! You can make it! Pick up the pace. It's a good one—not too crowded. Last chance! This is it! Now or never! O.K. O.K. . . . Oops—too late!

(slowing down)

Sorry—too late. Just missed it. Relax . . . Slow down . . .

She accepts a coin.

ELEANOR (CONT'D)

Thank you . . . Take your time, folks . . . Not here yet!

She accepts a coin.

ELEANOR (CONT'D)

Thank you, ma'am . . . Not here yet! . . . Slow down there! Don't wanna fall . . . I'm just trying to help you . . . Not here yet! Oh, you won't need that umbrella, sir. It's going to be a beautiful day.

She accepts a coin.

ELEANOR (CONT'D)

Thank you, ma'am . . . Not here yet! . . . Not here yet!

(with a sigh)

The thought's almost comforting, isn't it? . . . A pause . . . A break . . . A little slice of eternity . . . Enjoy it . . . Don't rush . . . God knows there are already enough people giving themselves

hypertension.

She sighs and then cocks her ear.

ELEANOR (CONT'D)

(speeding up)

OK—I hear it coming. Pick up the pace! Train a'comin'! Almost here. Step it up! You can still make it, folks. Move it, dear! The train's in the station. You can still make it.

(slowing down)

O.K.—that's it! Doors closed. Too late. Sorry . . . Slow down, miss! It's gone! . . . And you should never run in high heels anyway . . . I'm just trying to help . . . Not here yet! Slow down, sir. Not here yet!

Charlene enters carrying a box of folding umbrellas. She stares at Eleanor for a moment, confused by her presence. She drops her box on the ground a few feet from Eleanor, holds out a cup, and “goes to work.”

CHARLENE

Not here yet! Not here yet! You can slow down—train's not here yet.

ELEANOR

(to Charlene)

What are you doing?

(to the public)

Not here yet!

CHARLENE

(to Eleanor)

What do you think I'm doing?

(to the public)

Not here yet!

ELEANOR

(to Charlene)

I think you're imitating me. Didn't your mother teach you any manners?

CHARLENE

(to Eleanor)

I'm just doing my job.

(to the public)

Not here yet!

(to Eleanor)

And don't you talk about my mother!

ELEANOR
(to the public)
Not here yet!

CHARLENE
Has she been here?

ELEANOR
(to Charlene)
Who?

CHARLENE
My mother.

ELEANOR
I don't know your mother.

CHARLENE
Well, I don't either—ha! Trick question! Gotcha!
(to the public)
Not here yet!

ELEANOR
(to the public)
Not here yet!
(to Charlene)
Will you please stop imitating me?

CHARLENE
This is MY spot!

ELEANOR
It's a free country.

CHARLENE
How'd you just happen to choose this spot, huh?

ELEANOR
I don't know. A sunken plaza just seemed like the right place. See, I can spot the subway trains down on the platform AND see the people approaching from above.

CHARLENE:
Bull! You seen me working this spot before. I found it and you're stealin' my idea!

ELEANOR
I've never seen you before.

CHARLENE

Likely story. Look—I been doing this gig for two years. Why are you here?

ELEANOR

I'm here to help people!

CHARLENE

Oh, please! You mean you're here to make some money.

ELEANOR

It's not just about the money.

CHARLENE

It's capitalism, lady. The system works. Now get the hell out of here—this is MY job!

ELEANOR

Language!

CHARLENE

I'll give you language!

ELEANOR

That's the problem with the world today—just resort to a vulgarism whenever you can't reason your way out of a situation. I don't think these people want to hear that.

CHARLENE

What do you know about these people? Where you been through all the heat waves and blizzards and service outages? I've been right here at my post.

ELEANOR

That's very admirable.

CHARLENE

Admirable, shit! It's about the cash, honey. How much you got in that cup anyway?

Eleanor examines the contents of her cup.

ELEANOR

I don't know. Maybe three dollars.

CHARLENE

And how long you been here?

ELEANOR

About three hours.

CHARLENE

Three dollars? In three hours? That's pathetic!

ELEANOR

It's not about the money.

CHARLENE

Man, if I made that little money, I'd be outta here quicker than you can say, "My ass."

ELEANOR

I'd never say such a thing!

CHARLENE

Look, I'll show you how it's done.

Charlene steps forward and addresses the public very dramatically, expressing deep concern and exaggerated cheerfulness.

CHARLENE (CONT'D)

Not here yet! Take your time, honey. Not here yet! Oh, don't wear yourself out like that—the train's not here yet.

Charlene accepts a coin.

CHARLENE (CONT'D)

Thank you. From the bottom of my heart—I thank you.

Eleanor peers into the station.

ELEANOR

(to the public)

Train's coming. Step it up folks.

Charlene copies Eleanor, but with greater flourish.

CHARLENE

That's right—train's coming. Step it up folks!

Charlene accepts a coin.

CHARLENE (CONT'D)

Thank you kindly!

ELEANOR

You can make it! Train pulling in!

CHARLENE

(getting more excited)

You can make it! Train pulling in! Hurry up, folks!

Charlene accepts a coin.

CHARLENE (CONT'D)

Thanks, ma'am! Last chance! Catch that train! You can do it! . . . Don't worry about me, hon—you can catch me next time! I know you will. Just catch that train—and bless you!

ELEANOR

(quietly)

Too late. Too late, people.

CHARLENE

(loudly)

Too late! Too late people! Slow down, folks. Too late. Train's gone.

(more slowly and dramatically)

Sad, but true . . . The train's gone.

Charlene pauses and looks at Eleanor triumphantly.

CHARLENE (CONT'D)

Now that's how it's done!

ELEANOR

But isn't there more than that? There HAS to be more than that.

CHARLENE

Well, of course there is. This ain't my LIFE. It's just how I make my living.

ELEANOR

I mean don't these people have greater needs than just catching a subway?

Charlene holds up an umbrella.

CHARLENE

Well, yeah. If it's raining, I got these umbrellas to sell.

ELEANOR

It's not going to rain today.

CHARLENE

I checked Weather Dot Com? 75% chance of showers this afternoon.

No chance of rain till Thursday!

ELEANOR

75% chance! Today!

CHARLENE

No chance!

ELEANOR

75%!

CHARLENE

Till Thursday!

ELEANOR

Today!

CHARLENE

The New York Times says there's no chance of rain until Thursday.

ELEANOR

Well, I'VE never been in the *New York Times* and I'm standing right here. You gotta be prepared. Where's your umbrellas?

CHARLENE

People have greater needs than catching trains and staying dry.

ELEANOR

They do, huh? Show me.

CHARLENE

What?

ELEANOR

How you serve people's greater needs.

CHARLENE

Oh, I couldn't . . .

ELEANOR

Charlene holds out her arm, as if to say, "Show me!"

ELEANOR (CONT'D)
Well, all right, but you won't interfere, will you? You won't go sticking your cup in my clients' faces?

CHARLENE

I promise. I'll sacrifice the revenue. Chalk it up to the price of a good time.
(as an aside)
This should be good!

Charlene steps back or sits down. Eleanor begins, awkwardly and self-consciously at first, but gradually warming up to her performance. Charlene might react throughout the following, but says nothing.

ELEANOR

O.K., here we go.
(after taking a breath—to the public)
Not here yet. Not here yet! Take your time, folks. The train's not here yet! Savor it!
... Free time! ... A gift! ... Not here yet! Train's not here yet ... Love the scarf, madam.
Hermes [pronounced AIR-MEZ] is always a good choice ... Oh, watch your step, there ...
That's better! No need to rush.

Eleanor accepts a coin.

ELEANOR (CONT'D)

Thank you, sir. Appreciate it ... Not here yet! ... Oh, don't frown, if you can help it! Why not gather the rosebuds instead? ... Not here yet! Slow down—no need. Not here. Soon, but not yet ... Great bag, sir! I love Prada! I know—just a copy, but they're just as good these days, don't you think? And why pay those prices? I mean we all have the right to look our best, to own the best—even if we can't afford it. "Even the hollowest nut still wants to be cracked." Nietzsche said that. "Even the superfluous want to be buried properly." He said that, too. Now, I know, some people think Nietzsche was a crackpot. Or a fascist. But that's a misinterpretation. I think what he was trying to say is that we all want—we all deserve—our due. And I think that's a lovely thought. I know I do—want my due, that is. Just want to make a difference. Take another look at *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. I just re-read it recently, and I can tell you this—

CHARLENE

(finally erupting)
Now hold on right there, lady! Where you goin' with this? And that Prada and Hairmays shit? This ain't Bloomingdale's, honey!

ELEANOR

Sorry. I guess I got off track.

CHARLENE

You're off-track, all right.

Charlene cocks an ear.

CHARLENE (CONT'D)

Now hear that? You blew it! The train's coming and we're not in position.
(to the public)
Hurry up folks, the train's coming!

ELEANOR

(to the public—quietly)
Yes, the train's coming.

CHARLENE

Let's move it people! You can still make it! That's it! That's it! You can still make it! Hurry, hurry! Now, now, now! . . . Ooh—sweet Jesus! Just missed it! Just missed it . . . Gone! Too late . . . Slow down.

Charlene accepts a coin.

CHARLENE (CONT'D)

Thank you sir. Not here yet!

She accepts another coin.

CHARLENE (CONT'D)

Thank you, ma'am. Not here yet!

And yet another.

CHARLENE (CONT'D)

Thank you, my little friend. That's sweet.

Charlene studies Eleanor, who is clearly upset.

CHARLENE (CONT'D)

Have you considered any other line of work?

ELEANOR

(to Charlene)
I want to do this. I want to help people.

CHARLENE

But at this rate, you're not helping the most important person.

Charlene looks into Eleanor's cup.

CHARLENE (CONT'D)

You're not helping yourself.

ELEANOR

It's not about the money.

CHARLENE

How about a man? Maybe you should look for one. He'd support you. At least as long as you put out—or did somethin'. They all want somethin'. But fair is fair. American capitalism at its best—I got nothin' against that.

ELEANOR

I've had men. They're not the answer.

Charlene looks at Eleanor sideways.

CHARLENE

So, that's your story, honey? Well, you're still a pretty nice looking lady. You could prob'ly still turn a few tricks. I don't have that advantage. Gotta be easier than doing this!

ELEANOR

You don't understand.

CHARLENE

Don't worry—there's a lot I don't understand. Like that Neechy Zara something stuff. Where'd you get that from? Your pimp teach you that?

ELEANOR

Friedrich Nietzsche. The philosopher. I studied him in college. I liked him.

CHARLENE

I bet he liked you, too. Did you date?

ELEANOR

Maybe I'm making a mistake.

CHARLENE

Hey, can you sing?

ELEANOR

What?

CHARLENE

You know—sing! That works sometimes. Let me hear.

ELEANOR

What would I sing?

CHARLENE

You must've learned a few tunes at that college.

ELEANOR

Well, I do know one.

CHARLENE

Good—go for it!

ELEANOR

Okay . . .

Eleanor sings the following rather poorly.

ELEANOR (CONT'D)

Amazing grace!

How sweet the sound.

That saved a wretch like me.

I once was lost, but now am found.

Was blind, but now I see.

CHARLENE

Needs a little work, honey. Let me show you.

Charlene sings the following wonderfully.

CHARLENE (CONT'D)

Amazing grace!

How sweet the sound . . .

Charlene suddenly cuts herself off.

CHARLENE (CONT'D)

No, I can't do that to you.

Eleanor starts to cry.

ELEANOR

See—I can't do anything. I'm useless! No use to anyone!

CHARLENE

(consoling Eleanor)

Now you know that's not true. Everyone's good at somethin'. I've been doing this for two years. How long you been doing this gig?

ELEANOR

Today's my first day.

CHARLENE

Well, see! I thought this was at least your second day! You're already making progress. You know what? I think maybe you just need more practice. Let me get out of your hair.

Charlene goes to pick up her box.

ELEANOR

What are you doing?

CHARLENE

I'm gonna help you out. This spot's not big enough for the both of us.

ELEANOR

You don't have to do that.

Charlene empties her cup into Eleanor's cup.

CHARLENE

And here—you obviously need this more than I do.

ELEANOR

I can't.

CHARLENE

You just did. And don't you worry about me. I'll just move down to the next station.

ELEANOR

But that one doesn't have a sunken plaza.

CHARLENE

I'll figure something out. There's plenty of work in this city. If you need anything—just ask for Charlene. That's my name. At least my mother left me with something.

ELEANOR

I don't know what to say.

CHARLENE

Good luck, honey!

Charlene exits.

ELEANOR

(to the public)

Now, see—that's my point! There are lots of wonderful people out here. But most of us are just too busy to notice. If we could only just help each other out a bit . . . Where was I? . . . Back to work . . . Not here yet!

She cocks an ear.

ELEANOR (CONT'D)

Oops—my mistake! Train coming.

She accepts a coin.

ELEANOR (CONT'D)

Thank you, sir, but I don't really deserve that. I ignored my responsibilities . . . Train coming, people! . . . But I'll make it up to you. I promise . . . Train coming! . . . I'll work harder.

Eleanor continues with greater enthusiasm, starting to imitate Charlene.

ELEANOR (CONT'D)

Step it up, folks! A train is just pulling in. You can still make it if you try! . . . There you go! A little extra effort can pay off! You can make it! You can make it! Yes, yes, yes! Congratulations! She made it, folks!
(almost crying with gratitude)
Lord almighty, she made it!

She accepts a coin.

ELEANOR (CONT'D)

Thank you, ma'am—from the bottom of my heart, I thank you . . . Not here yet! You can take your time.

She spots a woman with an umbrella.

ELEANOR (CONT'D)

Good for you, ma'am—that Burberry umbrella may come in handy this afternoon. 75% chance of showers, in case you haven't heard! . . . Not here yet! . . . And if you need umbrellas, folks, you can buy one at the next stop. There's a lovely lady there selling some dandy umbrellas—just ask for Charlene . . . Not here yet!

Richard enters and stops to study Eleanor.

ELEANOR (CONT'D)

That's right, ma'am. Take your time. "*Cueillez des aujourd'hui les roses de la vie.*"

RICHARD

What are you doing?

ELEANOR

(to Richard)

Keep it moving, sir. Another train's due any minute now.

RICHARD

Eleanor!

ELEANOR

Don't get personal, sir.

(to the public)

Not here yet!

RICHARD

I was passing by on the street and saw you down here. I couldn't believe my eyes! What's this all about?

ELEANOR

(to Richard)

Please don't interrupt people while they're working.

RICHARD

Working? What are you talking about?

ELEANOR

(to the public)

Not here yet! . . .

(to a passerby)

No, sir—this is the number 1 train . . . You're very welcome.

RICHARD

Is this what you do during the day?

ELEANOR

(to Richard)

It's my first day on the job.

RICHARD

Are you working for the MTA?

ELEANOR

It's a volunteer job.

RICHARD

I thought you were doing volunteer work at the MET.

ELEANOR

They don't need me there.

RICHARD

Then why aren't you home taking care of the apartment and preparing for dinner?

ELEANOR

You don't need me there either.

RICHARD

Of course I need you.

ELEANOR

Cook takes care of dinner. Maria cleans up

RICHARD

You want me to fire the staff?

ELEANOR

You're missing my point.

RICHARD

Which is . . . ?

ELEANOR

Trains keep coming. People need help.

RICHARD

What are you talking about?

ELEANOR

What do you care?

RICHARD

I don't believe it! And I don't know what to say. What's a man supposed to say when he finds his wife . . . ? Well, I don't understand what it is you're doing.

Richard spots the cup in her hand.

RICHARD (CONT'D)

Wait! Are you begging for money? Are you trying to humiliate me in public?

ELEANOR

Would you prefer to be humiliated in private?

RICHARD

Eleanor!

ELEANOR

I'm not begging. I'm providing a service, and people are paying me for it. That's what YOU do, right?

RICHARD

But you don't need the money. When have I denied you anything?

ELEANOR

It's not about the money—I'm going to give it away anyway. I don't know where yet, but someplace that needs it. What have you denied me? Where would you like me to begin?

RICHARD

This has to be a joke! Park Avenue woman stands outside subway station and does strange things for money. A TV show, maybe? An article for The New Yorker?

ELEANOR

To begin with—your presence.

RICHARD

I give you lots of presents!

ELEANOR

Presence! Ence. Ence. Your being-there-ness.

RICHARD

Spare me your Heidegger! Or is this one from Sartre or one of those other ridiculous writers you love? I've always said well-brought-up girls should not go to Sarah Lawrence College. Or if they find themselves there thanks to the work of some misguided guidance counselor, they should under no circumstances major in philosophy.

ELEANOR

I'm just saying we don't spend much time together.

RICHARD

That's not my fault. It's the job.

ELEANOR

Who chose the job?

RICHARD

It's more than a job. It's my career. You know I've been on this track since business school. You've seen it unfold. You've benefited. And I've made it. I'm not ashamed of that. I'm proud of it! It's my life!

ELEANOR
You said it!

RICHARD
You know what I mean.

ELEANOR
Then there's love. Do you love me?

He laughs.

RICHARD
Do I love you? What kind of a question is that?

ELEANOR
Do you?

RICHARD
(embarrassed)
Love, love, love!

ELEANOR
(hurt)
So, you admit you don't.

RICHARD
We've been married for fifteen years. Love is beside the point.

ELEANOR
Then what is the point?

RICHARD
I don't know.

ELEANOR
You don't know.

He thinks carefully.

RICHARD
How about companionship? . . . Comfort . . . Reliability . . . Durability.

ELEANOR
Sounds like an ad for a line of furniture.
(to a passerby)
What's that? . . . You'd be better off walking over to 8th Avenue and taking the E train . . .

You're welcome.

RICHARD

This obviously isn't the place for this kind of conversation. Let's talk tonight, after work.

ELEANOR

Let's see—that would be around ten o'clock, right? You'll have to eat, of course. Then there's your toilette—can't have a frank conversation until you've flossed and moisturized. Then if you're in the mood, you'll have your way with me for a few minutes. After which you'll immediately fall asleep. Except maybe not tonight. Maybe thanks to your little discovery today you'll actually want to have that conversation. But you won't be at your best, will you, so you'll insist we continue it in the morning, when, of course, you'll have to rush off to work. I know how you like to get to the office before the markets open.

RICHARD

Go ahead and reduce me to some absurd stereotype—something you got from a movie or God knows where, no doubt.

ELEANOR

(said straight-forwardly)
You've never understood me, have you?

RICHARD

You think you're that complicated? I understand you more enough to know why you married me. Enough to know how much creature comforts mean to you.

He pauses and then says the following with great confidence.

RICHARD (CONT'D)

Enough to know you can take the girl away from Park Avenue for an afternoon, but you can never, ever take Park Avenue away from the girl!

ELEANOR

(applauding)

Bravo! That's almost a clever thought. Maybe there's hope for you yet. Just don't let the bank hear about this, dear. Might set your career back years.

RICHARD

(annoyed)
Okay, this is not productive. I'm leaving!

Richard starts to exit.

ELEANOR

(calling after him desperately)
Richard!

He stops and turns to look at her.

ELEANOR (CONT'D)

Just one more question.
(with great emotion and tenderness)
Do you NEED me?

He returns to her.

RICHARD

(laughing suspiciously)
You're not going to trip me up with a question like that. But O.K., my clever wife, I'll play along. Let's see if you can handle the truth.
(after a pause)
I don't need you.

ELEANOR

I can handle that.
(hurt)
I'm not at all surprised.

RICHARD

(trying to be sympathetic)
No, you don't understand. I don't need anyone. It's not about needing people. It's about choosing to be with them. I'm not desperate. I'm here voluntarily.

ELEANOR

So, all these years I've been YOUR volunteer work. Well, aren't you a sap? You actually had to pay for it.

RICHARD

You're not going to let me win this argument, are you?

ELEANOR

Is that what we're having?

RICHARD

Goodbye.

He turns to leave again.

ELEANOR

Goodbye.

He pauses before exiting.

RICHARD

This isn't easy for me, Eleanor. You know how I am.
(with great difficulty)

I . . . I . . . I . . .

(said quickly)

I love you!

(looking around—then more calmly)

There, I've said it. Okay? Now I have to go. I'll see you tonight, right?

(more firmly)

Right?

ELEANOR

(sadly)

I honestly don't know.

Richard goes back and gives Eleanor a quick peck on the cheek.

RICHARD

Goodbye, dear.

He exits. She takes a moment to compose herself and then looks up at the sky.

ELEANOR

Look how dark it's getting! *The New York Times* was wrong after all. Better not waste any more time, then. O.K., let's focus.

She pauses before resuming her work.

ELEANOR (CONT'D)

(to the public)

Not here yet! Take your time, people . . . Enjoy the moment . . . the pause before . . .

(after a pause)

Before doing what you just might have to do.

Eleanor thinks about what she's just said. She looks up and then accepts a coin.

ELEANOR (CONT'D)

Thank you very much, sir . . . Not here yet!

END OF PLAY

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *For a couple of years when I worked as a Marketing VP at Showtime Networks, a homeless woman used to stand outside the*

subway station underneath our office building announcing the arrival of subway trains. She would shout out things like, “Not here yet—you can take your time!” or “Hurry up—train’s arriving!” This was before there were digital signs announcing the arrival of trains, so she was providing a useful service for some riders. I never spoke to her, but often wondered who she was. One day I hit upon the possibility that she was actually a wealthy woman doing this for fun. In retrospect, I highly doubt this was the case, but I decided to write a play based on that premise. The rest of the play just sort of wrote itself.

If the play has anything to say, it’s that wanting to be useful—to be needed—is a basic human need, whether you’re rich or poor, live on Park Avenue or on the streets.

NOT HERE YET was first performed by Love Creek Productions in New York City in 2012. Since then, it has been performed several times on the radio and podcasts. In 2017, it was performed live and recorded by Radio Theatre Project of St. Petersburg, FL. In 2018, Radio Theatre Project presented it at the Atlanta Audio Fringe Festival. In 2019, it was recorded by Petaluma Radio Players of Petaluma, CA.

AUTHOR’S BIO: *William Ivor Fowkes* is a playwright and author based in New York and a member of the Dramatists Guild. His plays have been presented in 24 states and the District of Columbia. Several have been presented on the radio and on podcasts. Several have been published (Dramatists Play Service, *The Best 10-Minute Plays*—Smith & Kraus, *The Best Women’s Stage Monologues and Scenes*—Smith & Kraus, *Clockhouse Review*, *The Distillery*, *The Paragon Journal*, *Statement Magazine*, *The Eddy*, and elsewhere). His fiction has been published in many journals (*Eureka Literary Magazine*, *The Dirty Goat*, *The Nassau Review*, *The Chariton Review*, *Lullwater Review*, *Wisconsin Review*, *RiverSedge*, *Limestone*, *Argestes*, *Soundings East*, *Buffalo Carp: Quad Cities Arts’ Journal*, and elsewhere). He is also the author of *A HEGELIAN ACCOUNT OF CONTEMPORARY ART* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press).

His short play, THE SESSION was nominated for the Pushcart Prize. His full-length plays include *ALL IN THE FACULTY* (Dramatists Play Service), *INCIDENT IN CONFERENCE ROOM B* (Cimientos at IATI Theater), *PRIVATE PROPERTY* (Players’ Ring), *MUSEUM LOVERS* (Harlequin Productions), *SUNSHINE QUEST* (Fresh Fruit Festival), *COUPLE OF THE CENTURY* (Downtown Urban Theater Festival), *THE BEST PLACE WE’VE EVER LIVED* (Love Creek Productions), and others. His short film, *THE BRAZILIAN DILEMMA*, is available on Amazon Prime Video.

A graduate of Yale University (B.A., magna cum laude) and Northwestern (M.A., PhD), Fowkes was formerly a philosophy professor (Northwestern University and Hobart & William Smith Colleges) and a media & television executive (Showtime, HBO, CBS Records, and Time Magazine). He currently runs a playwrights group at the Dramatists Guild in New York. www.williamivorfowkes.com

AN UNLIKELY HERO

By Lawrence DuKore

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS:

I wrote AN UNLIKELY HERO because the title illustrated the roller coaster, the ups and the downs of Ulysses Grant. He was admitted to West Point not because it was a military academy but because he just wanted to be a mathematics teacher and West Point was tuition free, which spoke to his humble beginnings. He fought in the Mexican War but was against the war and had great respect for the Mexican people, making no attempt to hide his feelings. He loved his wife, Julia, to the end of his days and thanks to his friend, Samuel Clemens, wrote his autobiography to great artistic and financial success. Ernest Hemingway attributed his "simple" writing style to Ulysses Grant's memoirs.

It should be noted that early in his military career as a corporal stationed in Oregon, Grant he developed a serious drinking problem which did not endear him to his superiors. And which resulted in his dismissal from the army. As a poor civilian trying to raise a family, he sold wood on the streets of St. Louis and suffered frequent humiliations. But Grant remained dedicated to public service and was in the military reserve prior to the Civil War. And when that "war between the states" broke out, Grant rose through the ranks and became one of the generals, ultimately becoming President Lincoln's favorite commander. He was a no nonsense, no retreat leader which did cost his armies many losses but he did what had to be done, albeit with deep personal pain.

Grant was less successful as a two-term president, totally naive about Wall Street "financiers" and both he and the country lost heavily in the market place. . Nevertheless he remained a military hero and a popular president as a defender of Native Americans and a fighter for Reconstruction. He was first and foremost a moral leader, a defender of the people.

*Grant always believed in and fought the fight for E PLURABUS UNUM.
(Spacing is playwright's own.)*

AN UNLIKELY HERO

a one person / one act play

(inspired by the Memoirs of Ulysses Grant)

by

Lawrence DuKore

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THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS:

AN UNLIKELY HERO

Characters

Ulysses S. Grant age 63 years old; struggling against cancer

There are no realistic sets. Rather, the various scenes and playing areas will be indicated by lighting changes and minimal set pieces.

*Scene 1. The lights come up on a bare stage. In the center is **Ulysses Grant**, age 63 years old. The time is late morning in the winter of 1885.*

Grant is in the study of his Saratoga Springs (N.Y.) home in the foothills of the Adirondacks. On his head is a stocking cap. He also wears a muffler and a smoking jacket. Now he rises from his chair and walks, painfully and uncertainly, to his special high desk, which is like a lectern. He is

ill, a victim of cancer. Nevertheless, he manages to take a pencil and begins writing – or at least trying to write. Then he puts down his pencil, picks up a fly swatter and begins swatting at flies.

GRANT

Darn flies. Whoever heard of flies in the winter tune? Must be horse flies! I love horses but I sure hate horse flies. Get out of here! They must be Confederate flies – coming all the way up north from Fort Sumter. (*shouting*) Get used to it, you rebels! You lost the war and now you're trying to deconstruct Reconstruction. (*Swatting away*) Darn sore losers!

(He puts down the fly swatter, picks up his pencil and begins writing. Again he stops.)

GRANT (*to his audience*)

I'm not a writer but I'm trying to write my memoirs. Why? 'Cause we need the money, that's why. You think people want to read about me? Heck, I was president of these here United States. I was the commander of all the Union forces during the Civil War (*picking up his fly swatter*) which we won – although the Southern states won't admit it. (*Shouting*) Sore losers!

(He takes a cigar out of his jacket pocket, smells it lovingly and then puts it back in his pocket ... regretfully.)

GRANT

Sure wish I could smoke this sweet smelling cigar ... but my wife – Julia – she's got a nose for all my bad habits. She'd come running in here and snatch it away ... and for good reason. This darn tobacco is what brought on my throat cancer. So now I have to write my memoirs so we can pay the doctor bills. Okay, okay, okay. Where to begin? How about ... at the beginning?

(Sound cue: the neighing and the whinnying of horses.)

GRANT

Aint that the sweetest sound in the world? From the time I was a little boy, I've always loved horses, even wild horses. Never had fear of them! Always was a good rider. It was one of my outstanding accomplishments at West Point. God knows it wasn't my scholarship.

2

GRANT

Funny thing is ... this here house is just north of Saratoga Springs. Now the spring waters won't cure my cancer but I'd sure love to get down there and have a look at those beauties over at the race track. I hear they've got some Arabian mares. Yes, sir! Nothing prettier than racing horses galloping at full speed – hearing them coming round the turn ...okay, okay, the memoirs!

(He takes a quick smell of the cigar and then picks up his pencil and resumes writing.)

GRANT

Chapter One! *(beat)* Now comes the hard part. *(Writing and talking)* When I was just starting out in the military, when I was a junior officer in Corpus Christi – that was in the Texas territory – I had this here horse ...

(He puts down his pencil)

GRANT *(shouting off stage)*

I've got writer's block. I need a drink. I mean, I need a glass of water. I need ...

(He sees a pitcher of water and a glass on a nearby table.) God bless my wife. She thinks of everything.

(Grant goes to the table, picks up the pitcher and pours himself a glass of water. He takes a sip and then returns to his lectern.)

GRANT *(remembering)*

So where was I? *(beat)* Corpus Christi, Texas! Oh, yes! I had this here horse blindfolded, bridled and saddled and when I was firmly in the saddle, I threw off the blinds, prodded his flanks with my spurs and was soon out of sight. For three hours I rode him over all kinds of ground, through field and stream, and when we returned to camp, that horse was thoroughly tamed ... and so was I! Those were the good times. The bad times came soon after: the start of the Mexican War – otherwise known as a land grab. We invaded Mexico. Why? 'Cause we wanted the Texas territory and New Mexico. New Mexico? Sands of enchantment! Nothing down there but sand, sand and more sand! That's why we went to war - killing thousands of innocent Mexicans – and for what? A lot of sand! *(Writing)* Yeah, I'll have to put that in my memoirs.

(Grant takes a cigar from his jacket and is about to light it when he looks around furtively for Julia – and then decides otherwise. He puts the cigar away.)

GRANT

I'm just smelling it! Woman, you can smell an *unlit* cigar at forty paces!

(He takes another sip of water.)

3

GRANT

You got through two wars. You got through a bank failure. You'll get through this.

(From his pocket, Grant takes out two letters. He peruses the first letter.)

GRANT

From my bank! I'm broke. Dead broke! At my age, at 62 ... umm ... 63! Heck, at any age, that's a sin. And it's all my fault, which makes it not only a sin but a crime! (*remembering*) Okay, okay, my son committed the crime but it wasn't his fault. He didn't know the ways of Wall Street. Now Julia would say that I've always been too good-hearted – and not just with our boy.

(*Grant stops, puts down his pencil and looks out at the audience.*)

GRANT

My wife says I've always been too good hearted? (*shouting off stage*) Julia darling – Julia dearest – I was the commander of all the Union troops. Yes, me, General Ulysses Grant. Do you know how many young men were killed at Gettysburg ... at Vicksburg ... at Shiloh? And don't give me General Sherman's quote: "War is Hell." If war is hell, then your husband is the devil. Yes, I'm Saturn. I was responsible for the deaths of all those young boys.

(*He turns his back on the audience, trying to compose himself. Then he takes a sip of water and continues.*)

GRANT

And I don't have any illusions about my time in the White House. I know – I know - I know I never should have appointed my so-called friends to some of those cabinet positions. But they were pay backs. It was my way of saying, "Thank you." (*He laughs a dry laugh, pacing back and forth with unusual vigor.*) My wife kept telling me, "You should have just said 'thank you' and given each of them a gold watch. It would have saved you a lot of headaches." Julia was right. Heck, she was always more than a First Lady. She should have been the president.

(*He takes another letter out of his pocket.*)

GRANT

From the doctor: Dr. Meredith.

(*He weighs the envelope in his hand.*)

GRANT (*contd*)

Go on; open it, you durn fool.

4

(*He places the unopened envelope on the lectern, viewing it like some enemy combatant.*)

GRANT

My wife thinks that I'm the most courageous man she's ever known. I don't know how many courageous men Julia knew but I'll bet she never knew Robert E. Lee. (*proclaiming*) Commander of the Confederate Army! When he surrendered at Appomattox, I couldn't help but wonder what

was going on behind that mask? Yes, he was gracious in defeat. Yes, he carried himself like a gentleman and the great general that he was, a hundred times greater than I ever was. He didn't have the equipment. He didn't have the supplies. He didn't have any money ... except some worthless Confederate money. But he put on a brilliant fight right up until the end. And when he unsheathed his sword – his “terrible swift sword” – when he laid it down ... I kept thinking, “Nobody on this earth likes to lose – whether you're gambling on a race horse – whether you're running for political office – whether you're courting the love of your life – if you lose, you lose. So do not cry about it. Do not whine about it. Do not lie about it. Do not make excuses. General Lee was a great general – a great man - all the way – and my hat's off to him

(Grant removes his cap and holds it high over his head.)

GRANT

Did you know that he was President Lincoln's first choice to command the Union Army? Hell, if all my West Point classmates and the cadets before me had joined the Union Army, the war would have been over before it began. *(He places the cap back on his head.)* Keep that cap on, Mister President. All you need is a head cold on top of the cancer. Okay! Back to work.

(He resumes writing; scribbling all of one sentence. Then he picks up the envelope.)

GRANT

Every time I won a battle, all I could think of – all I could see was the long gray line of dead soldiers – the boys I sent to their death. I was fearful of all the ghosts that would haunt me for the rest of my life. Yes! And they've *been* haunting me – day and night. Julia would go crazy if she heard me talking this way. She says, It's all those drugs you're taking! And I keep on insisting that I'm talking all those drugs to relieve the pain. *(beat)* It's not about the medication. I think maybe it's about trying to write these darn memoirs – and all the bad memories they're stirring up.

(He picks up the envelope.)

GRANT

Or maybe it's the letter from the doctor. *(Beat)* Maybe!

5

(Grant takes out the letter and begins reading.)

GRANT

So now it's official. *(Reading)* “The tests prove conclusively... “*(to the audience)* The tests prove conclusively what Julia and I knew from the beginning. I've got cancer – cancer of the throat ... from smoking all those cigars. Upwards of twenty a day! *(He holds up the doctor's bill.)* And here's a whopping bill to prove it conclusively! So send us to the poor house, doctor!

(Grant paces back and forth)

GRANT

So what are you going to do about it, General? Are you going to whine? Are you going to cry? Are you going to lay down your terrible swift sword?

(He crumbles the letter and the bill and is about to toss it in the trash basket. But then he straightens out all the papers neatly and returns them to the envelope.)

GRANT

I can't do anything about what's left of my health but I may be able to do something about our finances. What are my choices? We're living on borrowed money – and I'm living on borrowed time.

(He picks up a pencil and stares at his writing tablet)

GRANT

The editor of the Century magazine asked me to write a few articles for him. A *few* articles? Whoa there, Nellie! What we're *really* talking about is yours truly writing my memoirs for a magazine. And the question is: am I ready to put my immortal words on paper? More to the point: am I capable of putting my immortal words on paper?

(He paces back and forth, holding his writing table in front of his note.)

GRANT

Okay, General Grant: remember Bull Run? We lost that battle but we won the war. It took four years – it cost us thousands of lives – but we won; we finally won. And thank God for Gettysburg. *(beat)* Pencil! Paper! You men are my soldiers now. I'm enlisting you in the fight. This isn't for me. This is for my family.

(Grant hesitates, then clears his throat and begins writing. After a moment, he looks at what he'd been writing.)

6

GRANT

Not bad. Then again ... not very good.

(He slumps over the lectern)

GRANT

I wish I could lie down. But There will be time enough to lie down. Come on, General ... giddyap!

(He slaps his thigh as if he's slapping a horse.)

GRANT

All right! *(reading)* “Man proposes and God disposes.” How's that for an opening? I know; I know. It's kind of highfaluting. Doesn't sound like me at all!

(He walks toward the door.)

GRANT

(Shouting off stage)

Julia! Julia! Where are you? I haven't eaten all day. *(beat)* Where is that woman? *(Shouting)* Can you get me something? *(beat)* You can get me what's his name: the fellow who wrote HUCKLEBERRY FINN and TOM SAWYER. Yes, ma'am, you can get our good neighbor, the fellow in the white suit. And why does he wear a white suit in the middle of the winter? Oh dear God – oh dear Julia – I'm losing my mind. I can't remember names. *(beat)* Mark Twain! No, no, that's his pen name. *(beat)* I'll remember his name at three o'clock in the morning! But that's too late! I need him now. *(beat)* Sam Clemens! Good old Uncle Sam Clemens! Go over there and tell him that President Grant demands that he come on over and do some ghost writing for me. That's an executive order!

(He straightens his jacket, adjusts his scarf and cap – and begins writing again.)

GRANT

I don't need Sam Clemens. I write very well. I just have to leave out all that nonsense about ghosts. *(beat)* Can't help it! Ever since the war, I've been living with ghosts.

(He begins writing and reading his words.)

GRANT

“Although frequently urged by friends to write my memoirs, I had determined never to do so but then my son's business partner did some double bookkeeping, which resulted in the loss of my entire investment. I had made it the rule of my life to trust a man long after other people gave him up. That's one of the reasons I was such a lousy businessman.”

7

GRANT *(reading and writing)*

“Maybe that's why I found a home in the army. But the cancer is something else. Army can't help me on this one.”

(He reaches into his jacket for a pillbox. He puts a pill in his mouth and washes it down with water. Then he raises his glass to the audience.)

GRANT *(toasting)*

Here's to happy, healthy days ... in the next world

(He takes another sip)

GRANT

These darn pills won't cure the cancer. But it does alleviate the pain.

(Again, he resumes writing and reading his words.)

GRANT

"I've been facing death all my life: in the Mexican War – in the War Between the States. I was always at my best in wartime – before and during a battle."

(He has a coughing fit.)

GRANT

I'm a dying man with a magazine article to write and a publisher breathing down my neck. He has given new meaning to that term, "deadline".

(He goes to the window and looks out to the porch.)

GRANT

Well, I see where we have some activity on the front porch. There's Julia – but who's that fellow she's talking to? Is he wearing a long black, hooded cape – and is he clutching a scythe?

(Grant moves closer to the window and looks out.)

GRANT

No, he's wearing a white suit and he's got a cigar in his mouth. *(beat)* Good! Now we can both have cancer of the throat. It may be more meaningful when two men can share the experience.

(He waves to Clemens)

8

GRANT *(contd)*

Good morning, Samuel. Or good afternoon. Or good evening. Please don't bother to come inside. I don't want you to catch the Bubonic Plague or the Black Plague or – God forbid – a common cold. Nothing common about you, Mister Clemens!

(Grant returns to his lectern)

GRANT

As usual, my good friend, your timing is impeccable. I'm writing my memoirs for a magazine. You've been down that road, haven't you? Well ... money is money. Yes, money is definitely money. And I know what you're going to say: I shouldn't use the word I'm defining as part of my definition. But money is definitely money. It isn't horse manure. Pardon my language but I can't stomach people who make simplistic statements: "Money is money." What else should it be?

(He resumes writing)

GRANT

It should be a lifeline ...Mister Clemens.

(Grant returns to the front window and "mimes" opening it. The sudden chill forces him to pull his scarf tightly around his neck.)

GRANT

So how're you doing? You're a good neighbor and I thank you for dropping in but I'm trying to write a magazine article. However, I fear they pay me with wooden nickels.

(He listens to Clemens, trying to make out what his friend is saying)

GRANT

Speak up, man! It's bad enough I can't ride my horse anymore but now I can't hear anymore. Julia has the sweetest voice in the world but I need one of those durn listening horns to enjoy her singing. So please, my friend, speak slowly and loudly for this dottering old fool.

(He listens intently.)

GRANT

You are commanding me to get started and write my memoirs in a book - and not in some two-bit magazine! Sam – come on – two bits are two bits.

(He moves closer to the window)

9

GRANT

You want me to write my memoirs in a book? Heck, I think maybe I can handle a skinny magazine ... but a book is heavy lifting. Lots of pages between those hard, hard covers!

(He moves even closer to the window, buttoning his jacket against the cold air.)

GRANT

You're saying that I'll go down in history as the most underrated president we've ever had? Don't flatter me with words. I know I was a darn good president. And yes I know that I was a better general. And I sure as heck know that I was a lousy businessman. But Century Magazine made me an offer. If I write my memoirs, I'll receive a ten percent royalty. No advance. No guarantee.

(He mimes opening the window all the way)

GRANT

I know that people pay good money to hear you lecture. But I'm paying with my life. *(beat)* What's that you're saying? *(beat)* Century Magazine would make the same offer to some Comanche Indian. *(beat)* What's that? I should be receiving either 20% of the retail price or 70% of the profits. I know that I am the most simple-hearted of men. And I'm probably the deafest of men but what was that? Come on, Sam, stop blowing cigar smoke in my face. Take the cigar out of your mouth and speak slowly and distinctly. *(beat)* You will give me twenty percent of all book sales? Julia ... how about that? *(beat)* You're saying ... seventy percent! I love it! A bidding war for poor little old me! *(loudly)* Man proposes and woman disposes.

(Grant actually looks rejuvenated as he walks sprightly – almost dancing around the room.)

GRANT

Julia darling, you're too smart and too tough for old Sam Clemens. Our neighbor is prepared to give your husband a substantial advance. He's going to give me more money than I've ever seen in my life, not counting the money I pissed away down there on Wall Street.

(He turns to the audience)

GRANT

My son's business partners ... but you know the story: double bookkeeping and all that. And all that was my entire fortune. But I like all this talk about money. It's giving me an appetite. Julia, how about cooking a nice hot lamb stew for dinner? And I'm sure our benefactor would like to join us.

10

(Grant moves close to the front window)

GRANT

How's that, Mister Clemens? Speak up! *(Listening intently)* You are prepared to pay me good money to write about my life ...including my love letters? What's that? Speak slowly ... and loudly. *(Listening)* We'll split all the royalties: fifty – fifty! Do we have a deal? I see you're nodding your head. And you'll make out a check ... an advance against royalties. Hurray for the red, white and blue! It looks like we have a deal! Okay. I'll try to justify your faith in me. Now get to work, Mister President. Start writing!

(Grant closes the front window and goes to his cabinet where he takes out a cloth covered manuscript. He then returns to his lectern)

GRANT

I have a confession to make. I did keep a journal during the War Between the States *(beat)* Is that what I'm going to call it: "the War between the States?" It was a rebellion; a failed rebellion by the slave states against the federal government. And some of the slave states were up north; right up here. Oh yes, there were free slaves up here – but there were also ... slaves. So ... you may ask ... why not refer to it as a "civil war"? That's what students of history call it. That's what teachers of history call it. *(He looks through his journal)*

GRANT

Well ... in point of fact, there was nothing civil about it. And there was nothing civil about *me*. You know what the Bible says: "The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away." Well, the Bible didn't get that one right. *(Beat)* He just "taketh away."

(Re-energized, Grant returns to his cabinet and takes out another cloth covered manuscript.)

GRANT

I may be losing my mind ... but I'm not completely lost. I did keep a diary during my two terms of office. Julia was allowed to read some of my diaries and she gave them high praise – which meant a lot to me. She told me that more writers, should learn to write simply. I told her that I was a simple man – and that wasn't false modesty. I meant it then. I mean it now. I just hope that what I set down is accurate. Otherwise, you folks will be accusing me of being a writer of fiction! *(beat)* Nothing make believe about my life.

(He returns to his cabinet for a third time. With some effort, he reaches down to the bottom drawer, takes a bundle of papers and carries them back to his lectern.)

GRANT

My life was the real thing. Heck ... someone had to live it! Someone had to do it!

End of Play

AUTHOR'S BIO: As a very young screenwriter, Lawrence DuKore began his writing career with the Richard Pryor film, GREASED LIGHTNING, which was produced by Hanna Weinstein for Warner Bros. His television play, A MISTAKEN CHARITY was produced by Lindsay Law for PBS/American Playhouse and was nominated for a Writers Guild of America award for best dramatic writing. He is a member of both the HB (Herbert Berghof/Uta Hagen) Playwrights Foundation and the Actors Studio Playwrights/Directors Workshop. Most recently, his play, STAINED GLASS, premiered off-Broadway at the award-winning Metropolitan Playhouse. And his Latino comedy, SUNSHINE, just had a successful 3 week run off off Broadway at Teatro LATEA.

Hello:

I want to work with an active company that loves the history of theater as well as American history as well as an unending passion about humanity in all its forms.

I have that passion and I want to share it with a company that's committed to humanity and decency and love.

WHY I WRITE

I write for many reasons: Let me count the ways. I want to share a profound experience or a rich emotional experience or a funny experience with whomever will read or (hopefully) see my work. I write because I want to change a deeply troubling experience into a hopeful experience. I write because I'm angry at injustice. I write because that's who I am and that's what I do.

LEAVING EARTH

By Alexis Kozak

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS:

Three separate things led to the writing of this play.

First, in 1998, en route to LA to pursue acting careers, my four best girl friends and I (I was the only guy) took two weeks to drive cross country via the southern route, stopping everywhere, including a very memorable layover in Roswell, New Mexico. We were ALL huge The X Files fans at the time, as you can imagine.

Second, my mother loved constellations and looking up at the night sky. Last week, I took my son's \$20 Toys R Us-bankruptcy telescope out into the driveway and looked first at the North Star and then, after switching lenses, at the moon for a good long while.

Third, I had taped a newspaper article from last September, when Storm Area 51 was happening, into my writing journal. It was a wonderful article, with lots of different people interviewed, and several one-line stories of who they were and why they were headed there. Along with, like, one quote from each. It was a playwright's dream. I have been carrying that article around with me for the better part of a year. It has a great picture of two ladies in the desert, wearing alien masks. That, and I remembered something about one of the interviewees quitting her job at Dairy Queen to head west. So, given the Corona Virus teaching-from-home situation and our gorgeous production of Mamma Mia! Indefinitely on hold (I teach high school theatre), I found myself with time (and time to spare!) on my hands. I am thrilled to have gotten the chance to get these two women out of my brain and down on paper. And, I will admit this to myself, but I won't say it out loud, I see this as, potentially, the first scene of a full-length play. Could my high school do this next year or the year after? That's a thought. But again, I didn't say that out loud. Hell, I didn't even THINK it!

This play took eight drafts. It has only been performed by me, reading it out loud, at my writer's desk, in what my wife calls my office, which is actually a laundry room. My go-to playwrights are Bertolt Brecht, Sam Shepard, David Mamet, and William Shakespeare...none of whose influences I can identify in this play. (Spacing is playwright's own.)

LEAVING EARTH

a ten-minute play

by

Alexis Kozak

CHARACTERS

HAYLEY female, late-teens to early-20s.

LU female, late-teens to early-20s.

TIME AND PLACE

The present. The living room of Lu's parents.

SETTING: (Living room of Lu's parents.)

HAYLEY

You promised you were coming.

LU

That was before I knew we were actually going.

HAYLEY

We're gonna be the first. We are gonna be the fricking first.

LU

You think they are gonna open up Area 51 and just invite us in?

HAYLEY

(Swiping through her phone.)

It says it right here. "Storm Area 51. They can't stop all of us. Let's see them aliens."

LU

It's a fine line between "inviting" and "storming," wouldn't you say?

HAYLEY

Aren't you dying to see what's inside?

LU

"Let's see them aliens", Hayley? Really?

HAYLEY

I've been to Lookout Point, and I've seen what I've seen. So have you.

LU

That is middle school kids messing with the high school kids who go out there to have sex.

HAYLEY

That's what they want us to believe.

LU

Everybody knows it.

HAYLEY

I don't know it. And until I see some proof, I *won't* know it.

LU

It's kids with laser pointers and...

HAYLEY

"And" what?

LU

Fireworks, flashlights,—I don't know—drones.

HAYLEY

Then how come they don't just tell us that?

LU

I don't know.

HAYLEY

And why don't they just make it stop?

LU

I'm not the mayor or the police chief or whoever.

HAYLEY

Because they can't stop it. Because they don't know what it is either.

LU

Come on, Hayley.

HAYLEY

I just want the truth.

LU

You think Area 51 is going to have the truth for here? Area 51 is a million miles away.

HAYLEY

That's where they have all the answers, Lu.

LU

We're gonna get arrersted.

HAYLEY

Yeah? Well maybe it'll be worth it. *All* the top secrets of the whole world: extraterrestrial life, space ships, bombs, electronics, technology, chemicals, viruses, the Russians, other planets. Maybe it's high time that stuff saw the light of day.

LU

Maybe that stuff is secret for a reason.

HAYLEY

(Of her phone.)

Well, about two million people disagree with you. And they are gonna be there on Friday to show it.

LU

You are gonna drive three thousand miles based on a Facebook post?

HAYLEY

Two thousand, but who's counting?

(Lu consults her phone.)

LU

You said it was a couple of days away.

(Of her phone, looking at map directions.)

This says seventy-two hours.

HAYLEY

No way seventy-two hours.

LU

That's what it says.

HAYLEY

That's way off.

LU

Look at it. Tell me what it says.

HAYLEY

Okay. So, seventy-two hours. So what?

LU

That's seventy-two hours *there*. The time *there*. And then, seventy-two hours *back*. I have to be back at work on Monday afternoon at the latest. You know how Charles is. He's not gonna give me that many days in a row off. Plus, I need the money.

HAYLEY

Well Monday's not gonna happen.

LU

Then I'm gonna get fired. And I can't get fired. You know Earth doesn't have a lot of jobs.

HAYLEY

Earth has plenty of jobs.

LU

Not the kind any Earthling *wants*.

HAYLEY

Who the hell goes and names a town Earth anyway?

LU

I don't know. Mr. Earth?

HAYLEY

Then you've gotta spend your whole life saying stupid things like, "Earth doesn't have a lot of jobs." Or, "Where are you from?" "I'm from Earth." Alright, *forget* seventy-two hours. I can do it, in, like, I don't know, probably like forty-eight.

LU

Phones don't lie.

HAYLEY

Seventy-two hours?, that's with *stopping*.

LU

No, that's straight through.

We'll switch off. HAYLEY

But I don't drive stick. LU

You'll learn. HAYLEY

When? LU

On the road, girl. HAYLEY

Ugh...Ow! LU
(Stomach pains.)

What's wrong? HAYLEY

I got my period. LU

Oh, no. No, no, no. HAYLEY

What? LU

I changed my mind. You're not coming. HAYLEY

Hey! LU

You're the *worst* when you have your period. HAYLEY

I am not! LU

HAYLEY

Oh, you don't even *know*. The moon does strange things to *all* of us, Lu, but for you, it's a whole different level.

LU

Like what?

HAYLEY

It gives you crazy weird powers of bitchiness.

LU

Shut up.

HAYLEY

See?

LU

I said, shut up.

HAYLEY

Well, it does.

LU

I know they say it's based on the moon, or whatever. But how does that even make any sense? How can it be based on the moon?

HAYLEY

Well, the moon's a cycle and your period's a cycle. They're both cycles.

LU

Yeah, but the moon's up there, and we're down here. So, how can they be connected?

HAYLEY

You think it's just *random* that the moon is on a twenty-eight day cycle and *you* and *I* are on a twenty-eight day cycle? Just saying, what are the chances of that?

LU

I don't know.

HAYLEY

I'll tell you what. When we see the aliens, *that* is the first question you get to ask them.

LU

Ick. I gotta go to the bathroom again.

(Lu exits to bathroom. While Lu is offstage, Hayley unzips her backpack/duffel bag and takes out a case of soda.)

HAYLEY

You're not allowed to be sick.

LU

Okay.

HAYLEY

Whatever happens: no being sick. Got it?

LU

Yeah. I got it, I got it.

HAYLEY

At least not in my car.

(Sound of toilet flushing. Lu enters.)

I got us something. Close your eyes.

(Revealing the soda.)

Ta da!

LU

Diet Pepsi.

HAYLEY

This is, like, road trip rocket fuel!

(Playfully.)

Aaaaaand,

(Hayley takes out a carton of cigarettes.)

Boom!

LU

Cigarettes? I don't smoke.

HAYLEY

I know.

LU

Neither do you.

HAYLEY

But we gotta smoke 'em.

LU

I've never smoked a cigarette in my life.

HAYLEY

But the guy. From the show. The Smoking Man.

LU

Seriously? I don't even know *how* to smoke a cigarette.

HAYLEY

If we're wearing alien costumes, then we are definitely smoking cigarettes.

LU

We don't have alien costumes.

HAYLEY

(Playfully.)

Magic Bag!, the young woman said "alien costumes"?

(Hayley pulls out two rubber alien masks—traditional green heads with almond shaped eyes.)

LU

(Screaming!)

Aaaahhhh! Holy shit! These are amazing! Literally, amazing!

HAYLEY

Like, what does one *do* at three a.m. in the middle of the desert besides dressing up like a couple of aliens and smoking cigarettes and drinking Diet Pepsi?

LU

These are so great.

HAYLEY

Aliens *love* Diet Pepsi, by the way. Or so they *say*. *We* are going to find out for *sure*. Plus, it'll be a good way to meet people and make friends. People *love* people who have cigarettes. Why?, nobody knows. We just know it's true.

LU

Hayley, look. I wish I could. I really wish I could.

HAYLEY

Lu, stop talking. Just stop talking. For crying out loud. You are twenty-two years old. If not now, when? If people don't show up to *this*, what do you think is gonna happen *next* time people have questions that need to be answered? And the time after that, and the time after *that*? *Next* time people have questions that need to be answered—whatever the question is—people are going to say, "Eh, nobody showed up last time. Why bother?" And if that happens enough

times, nobody is *ever* going to get *any* answers to *anything*. In fact, people are just going to stop *asking questions*. If *they* have to tell the truth—if the *government* has to tell the truth—, then *everybody* has to tell the truth. About *everything*.

Or do we get to keep a fence around all the things in life that are true, but that we don't want other people to know about?, because that's a lot of fences. Is that the world you want to live in?

LU

Three a.m.? The middle of the desert? People we don't know? We could get murdered and killed.

HAYLEY

“Murdered *and* killed.” You sound like your parents. What happened to the fearless girl I grew up with? The tough-as-nails, take-no-prisoners, bad-ass high school chick that wasn't afraid of anything?

LU

This is her. This is who she grew up to be. I'm *not* all those things you said. I never *was*. *You* were. *You are*. I've always been the follower-alonger. It didn't look that way maybe, because I would bring energy or something. But I was always following you. You were the map maker. You were the one leading us into uncharted territory. Hell, you even went places where there were no maps yet: boys, booze, everything. You were the one with the nerve.

HAYLEY

And did I ever get us lost?

LU

Yeah. All the time. But in a good way.

HAYLEY

Then follow me today. Get in the car with me right now. People used to do that, you know?, all the time. Just get in the car and drive? Nobody does that anymore. They just go where they're going, and that's it. No sense of adventure. No chance to get off the beaten path. I mean, how do you think aliens got here in the first place? You think they came here on purpose? Like this place is so great? If you had the entire universe to choose from, why the hell come here? Of all the places. This is the kind of place you only find by mistake. I bet you a couple of aliens got in their space ship, gassed it up, and just started flying. No map, no anything.

LU

(Truly realizing for the first time Hayley's depth of belief. Not freaked out. If anything, impressed.)

You think they're real.

HAYLEY

Would I go all the way out there if I *didn't*?

LU

I mean *really* real.

HAYLEY

You think we're the only ones out here? We can't even *see* the other side of the moon. The other side of the *moon*. The *closest* place to us, and we can't even *see* it? We don't even know what is *there*? Not to mention the rest of the entire, infinite, ever-fricking-expanding multiverse. So, "Do I think they're real?" Yeah, I think they are real.

LU

(Picking up the masks.)

You think they look like us?

HAYLEY

I think some being out there probably asked them the same question about us.
(Beat.)

Whaddya say?

LU

(From *Mork and Mindy*.)

... "Nanoo, nanoo"?

HAYLEY

"Nanoo, nanoo" means "hello."

LU

How do you say, "Yes," in Klingon?

HAYLEY

(Pronounced sort of like "Luke.")

"Lu'q."

LU

Well then, "Lu'q."

HAYLEY

Really?! Yes! That's what I wanted to hear!

LU

Can we swing by my job on the way? I gotta at least tell Charles I won't be back on time.

HAYLEY

You're not gonna chicken out on me, are you? What if he says, "No"?

LU

Then I wanna see the look on his face when I tell him he can take my job and shove it.

HAYLEY

Atta girl! Grab your stuff. I'll be in the car.

(Hayley grabs her own bag. Pause. Hayley looks at Lu with new respect.)

Say "adios" to this place, because we are gonna blow this popsicle stand!

LU

Do I have to say it in Spanish?

HAYLEY

You can say it in any language you want.

(Hayley exits. Lu sits for a moment, a satisfied look on her face.)

LU

Goodbye, Earth.

LIGHTS DOWN

END PLAY

AUTHOR'S BIO:

I teach high school theatre in New Jersey, and I am also a playwright. I studied Theatre Arts and English at Rutgers University. I spent my early 20s in Los Angeles, chasing the dream. In 1998, en route to LA, my four best girl friends and I (I was the only guy) took two weeks to drive cross country via the southern route, stopping everywhere, including a very memorable layover in Roswell, New Mexico. We were ALL huge "X Files" fans at the time, as you can imagine.

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.

My mother loved constellations and looking up at the sky. This week, with nothing but time, for the first time in a long time, I took my son's \$20 Toys R Us bankruptcy telescope out into the driveway and looked first at the North Star and then, after switching lenses, at the moon for a good long while.

I HAD to write this play. I had taped a newspaper article from last September, when Storm Area 51 was happening, into my writing journal. It was a wonderful article, with lots of different people interviewed, and lots of one line stories of who they were and why they were headed there. Along with, like, one quote from each. It was a playwright's dream. Almost like an outline for a play. Hmmm. Anyway, I have been carrying that article around with me for the better part of a year. It has a great picture of two ladies in the desert, wearing alien masks. That, and I remembered something about one of the interviewees quitting her job at Dairy Queen to head west. So, given the Corona Virus teaching-from-home situation and our gorgeous production of Mamma Mia! indefinitely on hold, I found myself with time (and time to spare!) on my hands. I am thrilled to have gotten the chance to get these two women out of my brain and down on paper. And, I will admit this to myself, but I won't say it out loud, I see this as, potentially, the first scene of a full-length play. Could my high school do this next year or the year after? That's a thought. But again, I didn't say that out loud. Hell, I didn't even THINK it!

I have some published short plays: "A Graveyard Where Dead American Playwrights Go" and "Shakespeare Gets an MFA" with Heuer Publishing, an adaptation of F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz" and a high school scene book called "The Greatest of All Time" with Eldridge Publishing, and some scenes and monologues in the Smith and Kraus and Applause Books' "Best of..." Series.

Click this link

<https://www.alexiskozak.com/work-in-progress/selected-for-100-monologues-from-new-plays-2021>

to read my monologue which will be published

by Applause Books in the forthcoming anthology

100 Monologues from New Plays 2021!!

AFTER THE DISSOLUTUION

By Martha Patterson

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS:

I wrote this play while considering the effect the dissolution of the Soviet Union had on couples from different backgrounds and with different political points of view: it was not a completely happy dissolution for some.

I also wanted to write about a marriage that dissolves before our own eyes; however, the lead-up to that has been happening for a while. The wife in this couple is influenced by American television; the husband is selfish and doesn't understand her frustration.

I like to think I'm influenced by Chekhov and other modern classical writers I had to read in college, but have found in recent years that brevity works better than long speeches in my plays.

The play was first produced by The Belrusian Dream Theatre at Out of Balanz, Copenhagen, Denmark, March 2014. The second production was by the Image Theater's "FemNoire" series at the Whistler House Museum, Lowell, Mass., dir. Jerry Bisantz, March 2014. (Spacing is playwright's own.)

AFTER THE DISSOLUTION

A Short Play About Belarusians

CAST OF CHARACTERS

NATASHA 38, Belarusian, a tired housewife wearing a long shift and an apron.

SERGEI 39, her bored husband who works selling air conditioners. He has a beard.

SCENE: Their modest kitchen in Belarus

TIME: The present

AT RISE: NATASHA is cutting meat on a cutting board. On the table at which SERGEI sits there is an apple, a knife, and a bottle of vodka with a glass beside it.

NATASHA

President Lukoshenko spoke on television today.

SERGEI

And why should I care?

NATASHA

You used to care. Life is better today. We can afford meat.

SERGEI

You used to care about how you looked. Now mascara runs down your face when you bring me my lunch at work.

NATASHA

Borshcht, white cheese. Just what you love.

SERGEI

But not the running mascara.

NATASHA

A very handsome man at the market sold me this beef today.

SERGEI

(Laughs.)

A mere grocer?

NATASHA

(Chopping the meat.)

Anyway, he was good-looking.

SERGEI

Are you saying that to get me to straighten up?

NATASHA

I have a game to play with you tonight.

SERGEI

A game?

NATASHA

It's called, "Truth or Consequences." An American game I heard about.

SERGEI

And what "truth" is it you want to know?

NATASHA

Just this. Have you ever, since we married, been attracted to another woman?

SERGEI

Another girl?

NATASHA

Woman.

SERGEI

No.

NATASHA

I don't believe you.

SERGEI

And why not?

NATASHA

Because I found a book in your underwear drawer. A paperback. On physics.

It's inscribed, "With love from Anastasia, 2012."

SERGEI

What were you doing searching my underwear drawer?

NATASHA

Putting your things away after doing laundry, as I always do. Tell me about her.

SERGEI

About who?

NATASHA

Anastasia.

SERGEI

A shopgirl. I used to buy my ties where she worked. She had a thing for me and I let her butter me up. But there was nothing in it.

NATASHA

Then why did you save the book?

SERGEI

(Laughs.)

Because I need to know more about physics.

NATASHA

You're a simpleton, then. I'll bet you never read the book.

SERGEI

If I didn't read it, why are you upset?

NATASHA

Because you kept it.

SERGEI

All right. Truth or Consequences. Did you ever let another man fondle you before I did?

NATASHA

None of your business.

SERGEI

“Truth or Consequences.”

NATASHA

I was a virgin when we married; that’s all you need to know.

SERGEI

Hmph.

NATASHA

And – Truth or Consequences – do you still love me?

SERGEI

Hmph.

NATASHA

So my mascara runs. I don’t care much what I look like now. When you took the job selling air conditioners I thought one day we’d be rich.

SERGEI

Two people living on one income. You could have worked.

NATASHA

We wanted children.

SERGEI

Where are they then? I see no children.

NATASHA

We could get tested at the hospital. To see why not.

SERGEI

There’s nothing wrong with me.

NATASHA

You’re saying there is with me?

SERGEI

What would we do with children, anyway? I’m 39, you’re 38. Some people

are grandparents at our ages.

NATASHA

Who, I'd like to know?

SERGEI

You should take better care of your appearance. At work when you arrive they all say, "Ah, it's Sergei's old lady."

NATASHA

That's just a fond expression. At least it is in America.

SERGEI

You're too enamored of America. Because of those television shows you watch. And you're jealous because some young girl gave me a book.

NATASHA

Truth or Consequences. Are you glad our country is independent? Didn't you love being a part of the Soviet Union? Your parents were Russian.

SERGEI

Hmph.

NATASHA

But mine are Polish.

SERGEI

I'm glad things changed. I make more money now.

NATASHA

(Lighting a cigarette.)

Tell me, Sergei, would you like me better if I smoked all the time and teased my hair and wore short dresses?

SERGEI

What would you want to be that sort of woman for?

NATASHA

I have a feeling –

SERGEI

You have a feeling that what?

NATASHA

(Putting out the cigarette.)

That you'd prefer someone like that. Is that what Anastasia is like?

SERGEI

Truth or Consequences. Would you like it if I shaved my beard and wore sunglasses and were a movie star?

NATASHA

Don't say such silly things.

SERGEI

It's you who are being silly.

NATASHA

Are you having an affair with Anastasia? Because you don't come home until ten o'clock, most nights.

SERGEI

I kissed her once.

NATASHA

(Tears run from her eyes.)

I knew it. You no longer love me.

SERGEI

And what if I don't? We shall grow old, you and I, in our misery, and then we shall die, and that will be the end of that.

NATASHA

Is that all you have to say?

SERGEI

Is that all you have to complain about?

NATASHA

(Crying.)

You're cruel.

SERGEI

Face facts. We have everything we want now here, in Belarus. And yet we're not happy. We want more.

NATASHA

I want you to love me.

SERGEI

Then – I'll tell you I can't. When our land became Belarus I wanted my complete freedom. I didn't want to be married anymore.

NATASHA

(Sobs.)

Sergei!

SERGEI

I wanted to be with young women, not like you, not tired and cooking for me all the time, but instead dressing up to please me and going to the theatre with me.

NATASHA

I don't please you with my cooking?

SERGEI

You're no maiden any longer. You've let yourself get old.

NATASHA

Is that all you feel for me?

SERGEI

I'm sorry. I'll tell you the truth. I've leased an apartment a half a mile from here. I'll move into it tomorrow. We'll be separated, then divorced.

NATASHA

Ohhhh!

SERGEI

You see? You wanted Belarus in all its glory, and we're no longer happy partners. I want more. You should want more, too.

NATASHA

(Handing him an apple and a knife.)

Take this apple and peel it. And know that you're peeling away my heart. Eat it. It will be good for you. You can remember how your wife once loved you and took care of you. But how she no longer will. Apples are sweet, like me. Know that it's the last sweet apple you'll ever taste.

SERGEI

Couldn't you have worked? Or had a child?

NATASHA

(Crying.)

You're an ungrateful jackass! And tomorrow I'll be free of you. I miss my Soviet Union!

SERGEI

Thank you so much.

NATASHA

My last gift to you. The apple. Now I'm going to bed.
(Exits, slamming door behind her.)

SERGEI

(Pours himself a glass of vodka from the table and laughs.)

Tonight – I sleep alone.

THE END

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Martha Patterson is a playwright, essayist, poet, and fiction author. Her plays have been produced in twenty states and eight countries. Her writing has been published by Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, Smith & Kraus, Pioneer Drama Service, the Sheepshead Review, the Afro-Hispanic Review, Silver Birch Press, In Case of Emergency Press, Denfenestration.net, Syndrome Magazine, and the Pointed Circle Journal. She has two degrees in Theatre, from Mount Holyoke College and Emerson College. She lives in Boston, Mass., the USA.*

THE INEVITABLE DEIGN

By Alan Flurry

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS:

The idea for this began with a single a conversation with a painter buddy in his studio. He was describing a casino experience, especially an episode with the slots, 'praying to imaginary Gods,' which is what I called this as I spun out the first draft.

He's a Beckett fan, as am I, and I'm also poisoned with certain ideas about theatre – my novel CANSVILLE is about a playwright and an impossible story. Brecht is an influence, but also Miller – Arthur, as well as Henry. It's one thing to say setting doesn't matter, but THE INEVITABLE DEIGN trades the audience something for it. The physical scene changes themselves play a crucial role early in the play establishing a breakdown of the setting changes as a throughway for the dialogue and allowing the audience to set aside normal expectations.

The narrative becomes the means by which fear, conformity and convention are turned against themselves and towards illumination of the barriers to imagination.

ACT I

Scene 1

TIME: Morning, present day.

AT RISE: PRITCHER is seated behind a desk in a brightly lit office with a diploma and a few other citations on the wall, family pictures on display; his is the general demeanor of an insurance agent. DORMINY enters the room as one might to fulfill an earlier agreed upon appointment, expected and welcomed.

DORMINY

Mr. Pritchett?

PRITCHER

Yes, come in - and it's Pritchett.

DORMINY
(*embarrassed*)

Oh... I'm terribly sorry.

PRITCHER
(*forgivingly*)

Please, think nothing of it, I only like to correct things like that at the earliest possible moment. It's a character flaw, really. Won't you sit down?

(Dorminy hesitates momentarily before continuing into the office to one of the two seats on the other side of the desk. She puts her purse in one and sits in the other. She glances around at the walls and their adornments, re-comports herself as if in adjustment to them and sighs.)

DORMINY
Thank you, and I appreciate you seeing me on such short notice. The accident has created a great deal of chaos that I'd just as soon resolve as easily and quickly as we can.

PRITCHER
That's why we're here. Now tell me, did the house seem as if it was going to give way, I mean, were there any warning signs?

DORMINY
Well, what do you mean? Are there ever? I mean to say, we watch the news, we knew the storms were on the way and the fires were close. But you never know. In hindsight...

PRITCHER
I'm sorry, I don't mean to say you should have... done anything differently, that is. I'm just trying to establish your state of mind prior to the accident, relevant to the state of house. So, there were no warning signs?

(DORMINY slouches in her chair, as if under some initial anxiety, and shakes her head.)

DORMINY
No, but when you put it like that, I have to ask myself if I was paying attention, watching the right things. I mean, I was.

PRITCHER
We all do.

DORMINY

But the question is, to what? I don't know that I can excuse myself from responsibility properly if I can say I was aware of what was happening.

PRITCHER

The thing to remember is that I'm not here to accuse you, just to establish a concrete set of facts, a sort of chronology we can agree on.

DORMINY

That's a lot more easily said than done, I'm afraid.

PRITCHER

Still we need to do it in order to move forward.

DORMINY

But isn't there a tendency to cover for ourselves even when we've done nothing wrong?

(PRITCHER nods.)

PRITCHER

There is; that's why it's even more important to try and reconstruct the situation exactly as it was.

DORMINY

Yes, well, okay. I suppose it's prudent to spike my contention that there were no warning signs, as I'm overcome with the sensation that there must've been.

PRITCHER

What were they?

DORMINY

Well that's just it. The more sure I am that there were, the more unable I am to think of them. It's like my mind has taken the intervening events and constructed an unavoidable basis which led up to them.

PRITCHER

Is it because things like this don't just happen?

DORMINY

That's probably part of it - except that they do. They happen every day.

PRITCHER

But what is the condition, you know, that was necessary and sufficient? I mean, there's a school of thought that says accidents are nothing more than well-constructed probabilities.

DORMINY

Well... so many things. You can go back so far until it looks like you're moving forward again. Us sitting right here could be one thing. I mean, they're related, but my house couldn't have burned down unless I didn't at some point move into it. Unless you're...

PRITCHER

What?

DORMINY

Oh, it's ridiculous.

PRITCHER

Go ahead. It might help.

DORMINY

Well, unless you're inferring that my house would have burned no matter where and what it was. Simply because it was mine.

PRITCHER

That does transcend circumstances, to an extent. But tell me, even then, would you have been able to say that was a condition you were aware of?

(DORMINY pauses.)

DORMINY

I think I see what you mean. It would have always been a possibility.

PRITCHER

Though taken one step further, toward being inevitable.

DORMINY

And that I would have had to accept.

PRITCHER

And to some degree forget.

DORMINY

I can't go around waiting for something to happen, after all, even an eventuality.

PRITCHER

Which is where we were.

DORMINY

Yes, as I was saying, I feel like I should have known.

PRITCHER

But you did.

DORMINY

I just forgot, and now I'm only vaguely aware of it. Tell me, what does that do to my claim?

PRITCHER

Well that depends on if you're claiming that were not aware of the situation beforehand. It seems to me as if you're saying you were.

DORMINY

So, there's really no defense?

PRITCHER

Against what? Something happening, or you being responsible for it?

DORMINY

I mean, my culpability is undeniable. I knew about something and did nothing to prevent it.

PRITCHER

Can we say that with certainty? Even you alluded to the prejudice that you somehow internalized it and went on with your life.

DORMINY

That somehow doesn't completely wash, now that it's happened and I'm trying to sort all this out.

PRITCHER

You seek absolution; that's hard to achieve. Maybe you should think about it some more, about what really happened, and whether you really want to be released from your responsibility.

DORMINY

Oh?

PRITCHER

Because once it's gone, there's no way of getting it back.

DORMINY

Hmm. Maybe that's what I'm really afraid of.

PRITCHER

Maybe it is, in which case you need to resolve your responsibility in this case but without overstating your role.

DORMINY

You sound skeptical.

PRITCHER

It's exceedingly difficult. I will tell you one thing, however. I've watched a number of people go

(CONTINUED)

through this, all with varying degrees of success. But they've all developed a humility which, no matter how honorable it seems at the time, always becomes an obstacle.

DORMINY

It seems like such a simple thing.

PRITCHER

That's exactly the problem. What we want to believe, we often conflate into truth before it deserves to be so.

(DORMINY contemplates this point for an extended moment, as her posture - physically and otherwise - has changed in relation to PRITCHER. During the last two minutes of dialogue, their setting has changed: the office setting has given way to a counter in a small shop selling an assortment of convenience wares. DORMINY is at the counter behind the register and PRITCHER is the customer; several items are between them on the counter, DORMINY begins mindlessly examining each and scanning the numbers in the machine as she picks up the conversation thread.)

DORMINY

I guess there's always been something in my mind, something unconscious, that said I could avoid that tendency.

PRITCHER

And yet it proves exceedingly difficult; I don't know if we can. I was telling someone just the other day that of all the errors we compound on a daily basis, none is so egregious as the one we start out with first thing in the morning.

DORMINY

Which one would that be?

PRITCHER

Well, ask yourself: what was your first settled assumption this morning?

DORMINY

I don't know...

PRITCHER

Sure, sure you do. Even as unthinking as it was...
(*watching DORMINY*)
Ah, you've remembered it.

DORMINY

(*strangely unsettled*)
Yes, somehow I have. I thought today how senseless my anxiety from the night before was.

PRITCHER

(*skeptically*)
On the basis of what?

DORMINY

I don't know; mainly just that it was morning - a new day.

PRITCHER

Overtaken by sheer optimism?

DORMINY

Not really. Just able to see things in a new light, and some distance from the night.

PRITCHER

But suppose you had been able to actually think clearly the night before and arrived at a vital conclusion - an epiphany you dismiss merely in the light of a new day and on no other basis.

DORMINY

It seems preposterous - and you're saying I've been making it worse all day?

PRITCHER

Only by perhaps abandoning where you had gotten to last night. Sometimes we assuage our fears when we should give them full vent and fury. They lead us in distinct directions, not always wrongly.

DORMINY

I can see where there could be a distinct self-preservation aspect to them. But we're conditioned to suppress our fears, to move on from them.

PRITCHER

By what? What makes us do that? I mean, is there any evidence that this works?

(DORMINY pauses, then presses a register key.)

DORMINY

That'll be \$21.48.
(seeming the slightest bit puzzled)

PRITCHER

Oh... sure.

(PRITCHER pulls out some bills and hands them over the counter.)

DORMINY

I would say that it almost exclusively does not work - its promise overshadows its track record, in a sense.

PRITCHER

But that promise is enough to allow it to reseed itself.

DORMINY

I think in being reassured, I'm afraid of almost any other possibility. Especially those coming in the dead of night.

PRITCHER

You'd rather not think about them.

DORMINY

I'd rather assume they were only a form of my anxiety silently replacing itself. One among many, so to speak.

PRITCHER

The anxieties keep returning, though, don't they?

DORMINY

They won't be put off by...

PRITCHER

By your unconscious changing the subject with a mere suggestion of better things. It's a form of piety, I tell you.

DORMINY

You've seen it?

PRITCHER

I experience it, as well, even doubting the truth of what I believe, as unassailable as it is.

DORMINY

Is it that? I'm somehow unsure that it is.

PRITCHER

So, you see what I mean.

DORMINY

In a way, I don't see any way around it.
(Hands Pritcher some change)

PRITCHER

But even if there was a way - would you choose it? Would that be prudent?

(Dorminy reflects for a moment.)

DORMINY

I'm not sure - but I also don't know that I could be...

PRITCHER

Yes, it's not as though we have that luxury, such as it is.

DORMINY

Though we always seem to bring it up, as if it matters in some larger way.

PRITCHER

It's a form of hedging, almost venturing to commit to something but holding back that smallest of guarantees against being wrong...

DORMINY

When there's really no great penalty awaiting us anyway, I mean, if we're wrong, we're simply wrong.

PRITCHER

And it can be somewhat enlightening, from an experimental perspective.

DORMINY

It's what so much of this is anyway, until we get it right.

PRITCHER

Then what? Will we then proceed on an enlightened course?

DORMINY

And short-circuit our natural proclivities? If you underestimate them that much, your devious evolution is already part-way along the course.

PRITCHER

I don't know whether to take that as a compliment or a slight.

DORMINY

You're not so far along after all, then.

(smiles)

(PRITCHER lifts the bag of items takes a few steps toward an exit.)

PRITCHER

Did I remember to get chips? I distinctly came in here for chips.

DORMINY

I don't think you bought any chips

(pulls down her glasses and looks at the receipt tape coming out of the register)

PRITCHER

(dejectedly)

It's the one thing I came for, and now I'll leave without.

DORMINY

At least you remembered.

PRITCHER

But what good will that do me, when I'm home and still hungry for that specific item I am expressly without.

DORMINY

You could recall the taste, even some time past when you might have enjoyed them the most.

PRITCHER

I could. But wouldn't that make me want them even more fervently?

DORMINY

Maybe. But maybe you won't forget them next time. Maybe you'll even make a special trip.

PRITCHER

Well I wouldn't go that far.

DORMINY

Oh. I thought that's what you said that you just did.

PRITCHER

In a way, but not that way. Those are the types of things that we think we'll do anything for...

DORMINY

But when it comes down to it, we're just as likely to settle with or without them? I don't know that I would particularly subscribe to that.

PRITCHER

Oh?

DORMINY

No, because if I do, I've changed my greater course for a series of obstacles in front of me.

PRITCHER

And you rather wouldn't.

DORMINY

Not if I still want to get where I'm going.

PRITCHER

But don't we change course sometimes?

DORMINY

Yes, both knowingly and... not so. I'd just prefer to avoid the latter.

PRITCHER

Not much of an adventurer, eh?

DORMINY

It's not that; I can be as adventurous as anyone.

PRITCHER

Just not to the point of affecting any change in you. Some would say that's not adventure, but tourism. We either commit to an unknown outcome or we're not committed at all. There are no degrees between these two.

DORMINY

Still, I might like to know what I'm doing while I'm doing it.

PRITCHER

Wouldn't we now! But in return for this, we're willing to give up... what?

DORMINY

Going without our chips, for one thing.

PRITCHER

Ah, but we forego so much more; earthly cravings are the very least of it.

DORMINY

But what of sustenance?

PRITCHER

It's a good question, whose answer may surprise us.

DORMINY

But to get to it, the forgoing would have to commence.

PRITCHER

Yes, and there would be no hedging, no avail to guarantees.

DORMINY

Living with an outcome is almost too much bear.

PRITCHER

Almost as bad as living without one?

DORMINY

But one could go on in hopes of a more favorable harvest.

PRITCHER

And that would be better, easier?

DORMINY

Than knowing all is futile? I would say so.

PRITCHER

But that's not the only possible result, indeed being on the path raises the only other possibilities. Only by sitting on the wayside does futility set in.

DORMINY

I don't know...

PRITCHER

Of course, you don't. The next thing you're going to tell me is that you're not sure. Now, where are you heading?

(Over the last minute the setting has changed again to the inside of a cab. PRITCHER is the cabbie and DORMINY has taken her seat in the back and sits looking out of the window.)

DORMINY

Uh... Downtown? 14th and Horatio... and can we take the Westside highway? I'd like to make one other stop.

PRITCHER

Sure, lady.

END OF SCENE 1

Scene 2

The scene is switched by the darkness of the stage and a return to light but only as to illuminate the contrivance of one person driving another in a cab. The two are as before when the previous scene faded, but their trip is in progress.

DORMINY

I've never been fascinated by these so-called shocking mistreatments popping up everywhere.

PRITCHER

Did you say something?

DORMINY

I was just...

PRITCHER

I'm sorry, I get tangled up sometimes over the difference between mused and amused.

DORMINY

Really.

PRITCHER

Yes. It seems that when we linger on something, we limit the outcomes; it's either laughter or deep contemplation, like they're the only two sides of the canyon.

DORMINY

And the other shores simply... get left out.

PRITCHER

But what troubles me in times of doubt, I have no gauge whether to attribute it to cause or effect.

DORMINY

Why should you attribute it to either?

PRITCHER

Well it's got to be one or the other. Things don't just randomly pop into mind, in the service of nothing...

DORMINY

(skeptically)

That's *not* possible?

PRITCHER

If it was, why would it only happen, as I said, during times of doubt?

DORMINY

I don't think it does, at least...

PRITCHER

But it does happen *then*, I know.

DORMINY

But maybe it's all one long period of doubt and we should distinguish the increments by more significant means.

PRITCHER

Significant of what? When I'm not marked by doubt, it shows.

DORMINY

Why *couldn't* we have thoughts occur to us in singular isolation? And for that matter, if we lived with doubt more naturally, more comfortably, we wouldn't need to see everything in its light. This necessity for attribution is so...

PRITCHER

Inartful?

DORMINY

Hobbling. A self-obsessive thinks of a mountain only as obstacle to his progress - when it could be an opportunity for a breathtaking view.

PRITCHER

And nothing more?

DORMINY

How could that be nothing more? A gorgeous view just doesn't stop there - it nourishes the mind with distance, propels the soul in anticipation.

PRITCHER

But I couldn't be made better simply by these things alone.

DORMINY

These experiences aren't supposed to improve you at all; only reveal the actual you.

PRITCHER

Did you say you wanted to stop somewhere?

DORMINY

Oh yes, but we passed it. I guess I was otherwise fatefully engaged.

PRITCHER

You don't seem too upset by it.

DORMINY

Oh, it's just that I can return to it later. There are so many things and often a shortage of time.

PRITCHER

What do you do?

DORMINY

(after a brief hesitation)

I'm a fortune teller.

PRITCHER

Oh? For one of the big banks?

DORMINY

The biggest.

PRITCHER

That must be pretty exciting... glamorous.

DORMINY

I guess it looks that way. Sometimes I imagine what it would be like to... I don't know...

PRITCHER

Drive a cab?

DORMINY

Maybe, or some other...

PRITCHER

Maybe we could switch some time.

DORMINY

That means you'd have to be me, though.

PRITCHER

Yeah...

DORMINY

You'd have to banish your doubts, or embrace them fully.

PRITCHER

I don't know if I could quite do that.

DORMINY

See, you're showing promise already.

PRITCHER

No one would believe it, though.

DORMINY

Don't mischaracterize... you said 'no one' but you meant 'not everyone', right?

PRITCHER

Well, a critical mass.

DORMINY

(shaking her head)

You start out with just one. If you can get just one person on board...

PRITCHER

(skeptically)

What's one person?

DORMINY

What's *convincing* one person, and I would say quite a lot. Because if you can do it once, you can do it over and over.

PRITCHER

Who's going to believe *that*?

DORMINY

You mean who will be first?

PRITCHER

I mean who's going to believe it at all.

DORMINY

We base every action on that one little premise - I'll guarantee you.

PRITCHER

Figuratively, of course.

DORMINY

Of course.

(The scene has changed as the stage becomes flooded with much more light and a change to an outdoor setting reveals the back of a cement truck and a worker using a float over a newly poured pool of concrete. PRITCHER makes the motion over the cement and DORMINY, perhaps in the posture of the truck driver, stands close, watching near the rear of the truck.)

PRITCHER

And when it comes to a teetering possibility, I'll bet you can't even do that.

DORMINY

I would believe it one way, and someone else would another; it's as simple as that.

PRITCHER

Yet you're not trying to fool anybody.

DORMINY

Not just one; that takes more of a crowd.

PRITCHER

I don't know - there's also a one-at-a-time quality to it.

DORMINY

Oh? Also?

PRITCHER

Yeah, you know. Like last week, I was finishing off this driveway and the guy had been parking in the yard for like a year and he just couldn't wait one more day.

DORMINY

Yeah?

PRITCHER

Yeah, and he just rolls up real close to the end of the sidewalk, so close that his tires, on his car, start sinking into the end of the driveway, messing up my work.

DORMINY

Not to mention his tires.

PRITCHER

But you did, so I'll include what he told me at the time...

DORMINY

You mean you'll pass it on, to me now.

PRITCHER

I'm just telling you this story.

DORMINY

Yes, but then what happens to it?

PRITCHER

How should I know?

DORMINY

That's not something you consider beforehand? Words strung together can have quite an effect.

PRITCHER

(goes back to working the float)

This is mostly harmless.

DORMINY

So, what did the guy say?

PRITCHER

Something about the slackened jawbone of an ass.

DORMINY

(snorts)

You must be confused.

PRITCHER

Why? The guy was irate, but he didn't quite know at what.

DORMINY

So his rage led him into a mangled tirade?

PRITCHER

Exactly. It was like he was spinning and in every direction there was only torment, so much that he could only blather like an idiot.

DORMINY

It's the sort of thing that lives on.

PRITCHER

Isn't it doing just that?

DORMINY

I don't know; at first, I misunderstood you.

PRITCHER

You were trying to catch me being lazy, but then you realized I was talking about something larger, siding with you in a bigger way.

DORMINY

We can see someone coming ashore and think they're attacking us - when actually they're invading our entire country.

PRITCHER

They're just establishing a beachhead.

DORMINY

And you can't hold them off, even for a time.

PRITCHER

Much less if you actually invite them in.

DORMINY

It's like I was saying, you convince just one... Then they start doing your work for you. The point may not be that everyone will not believe something - they just may not believe it yet. There's a distinction.

PRITCHER

But it confuses whose side one is on.

DORMINY

It just bears keeping in mind, that's all.

PRITCHER

Who's going to remind them?

DORMINY

Maybe that's one way to put it.

PRITCHER

That was a question.

DORMINY

The answer may be more than we're willing to admit.

PRITCHER

Because you can't just come out and say such things.

DORMINY

Or you won't.

PRITCHER

Have we lost that particular trait, that skill - or the desire for it?

DORMINY

Did we ever have it is the question.

PRITCHER

You see what's been done to those who've spoken directly -

DORMINY

We bottle them up in tirades..

PRITCHER

Or their words get taken literally.

DORMINY

But these are just translations.

PRITCHER

It's hard to be sure.

DORMINY

It's impossible; but it's easiest to seem sure.

PRITCHER

What are you getting at?

DORMINY

That you can't just tiptoe - you've got to be decisive.

PRITCHER

Does that mean something by itself? I mean, that guy who drove into my slab, he meant it.

DORMINY

Further consideration absolves our right to be wrong under the duress of passion. I've been backing up to big empty holes for years and filling 'em with a soupy aggregate - you just gotta wax poetic while it hardens.

PRITCHER

Bullshit. I'm gonna shape it, and ignore your sophist tactics.

DORMINY

You don't want it to dry any old way - perhaps naturally?

PRITCHER

I've no great appreciation for the purity of nature. In this case gravity will cause me to have to come back and right something that I could have done the first time.

(With one last pull of the handle on the concrete float, PRITCHER hands it to the prop grip, giving him/her a glance to acknowledge the presence but without breaking the barrier any further with words. The scene is transformed to a windswept roadside with PRITCHER standing outside the vehicle in which DORMINY is sitting; a few seconds of intermittent silent blue light flashes indicate that PRITCHER is a patrolman of some sort who has pulled DORMINY over for some yet-unstated offense. As before, their focus is unbroken by any acknowledgement of the change in scenery.)

DORMINY

Yet you would try to approach it from another angle, your own hand, as it were.

PRITCHER

And still I know perfection holds so little for me...

DORMINY

But can you speak for everyone?

PRITCHER

If I could, I hope the question would be, would I?

DORMINY

Still, don't go writing off perfection so hastily. There's quite a bit of it that's gotten us this far.

PRITCHER

And even more that we've spent a fair amount of energy trying to stamp out.

DORMINY

Time well spent, some would say.

PRITCHER

While it could be called fascist, by others. Do you know how fast you were going?

DORMINY

(shaking her head)

But coming up short in that pursuit... really advances the fall.

PRITCHER

You mean the ball? You're talking sports...

DORMINY

(shakes her head again)

Is there any other way? I mean, we can tumble forward or back, depending on momentum. Can you say I would be less better served than in some lunge toward perfection?

PRITCHER

What's it done? Ask yourself. Much has been accomplished in the name of purity that I'm sure we'd rather just forget or, pretend not to remember.

DORMINY

Sure - it's a matter of perceptive skill. It should be chased exactly because it is so difficult. But we can know when we're on its scent or not.

PRITCHER

How?

(Pritcher looks around, as if the wind kicks up and he has noticed how particularly quiet it is out in the adjacent landscape)

DORMINY

I was speaking about it recently, or was I listening? But... you can know. It's that essential doubt. Know your purpose and dig your ditch; but venture uncertainly and oh, your path will open.

PRITCHER

So, it's some question of motive?

DORMINY

There's a pureness of heart involved.

(Pritcher shakes his head)

CONTINUED

But we've got all that already. It's just camouflaged beneath...

PRITCHER

What?

DORMINY

Desires, concerns.

PRITCHER

What's wrong with those?

DORMINY

You tell me. Do you find anything wrong with them?

PRITCHER

It depends on what they are.

DORMINY

That's all I'm saying. Everything depends too much on what those concerns are.

PRITCHER

But that's saying quite a lot.

DORMINY

You're saying you question the assumption?

PRITCHER

(shaking his head)

Not really, it's just... I don't know how you can put a limit on desires.

DORMINY

I can't; but I can prioritize them.

PRITCHER

(nodding, handing Dorminy back her license)

I guess I'll let you go this time.

DORMINY

With a warning?

(Pritcher nods)

So...?

PRITCHER

What?

DORMINY

What is it?

PRITCHER

I guess it would be to slow down... maybe let that hope mature, age.

DORMINY

Old hopes turn to mold and ruin. As soon as it crops up, I'd rather join the race on the path to fulfilling it.

PRITCHER

You're sure to be stopped.

DORMINY

I can only hope so, and long before I get there - or my hope changes.

PRITCHER

What if you ever finally make it?

(At this Dorminy shakes her head)

DORMINY

I guess I'll have to let you know on that one.

PRITCHER

What if you never do?

DORMINY

Same thing, I guess. I'll have to let you know.

PRITCHER

So, it turns out to be a bit of a wash, either way, huh?

DORMINY

But in the meantime, my hope has dimmed or sprouted wings toward a redemption.

PRITCHER

And you're willing to accept either?

DORMINY

No - that would be perfect. I guard my preferences, to guide my hopes, in a way.

PRITCHER

And thus, elude perfection. But what does it get you?

DORMINY

There is no saying that it 'gets' me anything. It's not a transaction

PRITCHER

But why, then?

DORMINY

Because it's what we believe, without bothering about truth.

PRITCHER

(shaking his head)

I don't think you can avoid that.

DORMINY

Not as I am presently constituted, no. But you see, it indirectly causes my haste. Its effect is as another body upon me, as toil under the force of something greater.

PRITCHER

It's like a sun?

DORMINY

(nodding)

And it's sinking fast.

PRITCHER

But tell me...

DORMINY

Yes? Can I go now?

PRITCHER

Of course, but tell me something, as terms for your release.

DORMINY

(sighs)

I will be what I am becoming, with certain restrictions, of course.

PRITCHER

Probably, but... if you set truth aside, aren't you left with sort of a false antecedent before everything you do?

DORMINY

I said not *bothering* with truth, not trying to conjure it. It, too, will be what it has always been.

PRITCHER

I can think of no simpler calamities than your sort of ignorance.

DORMINY

How so?

PRITCHER

(shaking his head)

You take only the best from any possibility and dismiss the rest.

DORMINY

It's my active imagination. A cross section of my intuitions would reveal a divided loyalty between what I want and what I simply long to desire.

PRITCHER

You wish you were better? I guess we all do.

DORMINY

Not just that; but if I could convince you, for example, that we should strive toward higher ideals for ourselves, then...

PRITCHER

But you can't tell me what to want.

DORMINY

Convincing someone means making them think they believed something all along. I'm -

PRITCHER

Don't flaunt my authority!

DORMINY

How could I? It's one of the places where we occupy exactly the same position.

PRITCHER

You think you have as much right to what I think as I do?

DORMINY

In a way, what you think is *all* that is up for grabs. Truth is the constant, remember.

PRITCHER

But you can't be so concerned with me when it's your hopes that are in the balance.

DORMINY

What are they being weighed against? *Your* hopes?

PRITCHER

They don't have to be in conflict.

DORMINY

But that's not the truth, is it? Not if we want the same thing.

PRITCHER

There's enough for both of us.

DORMINY

But are we in complete agreement? And how far does it go? I can't imagine you would support the goals of some of my hopes.

PRITCHER

I could say the same.

DORMINY

But if you do, our desires are in conflict - perhaps your success is my death.

(A pause.)

PRITCHER

Is there a way around such an ultimate standoff?

DORMINY

Yes, there is. But will you sublimate your hopes in support of it?

PRITCHER

Should I?

DORMINY

That's the problem - it may convulse every single thing within your being to resist such.

PRITCHER

Maybe, but why shouldn't you?

DORMINY

Perhaps there is no further purpose to any of our faculties... the reason for all of the evolutionary knife-sharpening, if you will.

PRITCHER

I might. Entertaining the cumulative effects is almost redundant, is it not?

DORMINY

It's a question then, worded as a challenge.

PRITCHER

I can take it any way I please.

DORMINY

But it is offered only in this one way.

(The scene has transformed over the preceding minute, to an interior location, a corridor constructed primarily with lighting; as the lights come up again after dimming during the change, the corridor with along one wall is illuminated, on which the two sit. Periodically, a figure passes in front of

them, obscured by the lack of light, only to denote the passage as a sort of hallway. Also periodically, numbers are called offstage. PRITCHER and DORMINY sit uncomfortably and hold small slips of paper that they refer to each time a number is called, as if it might be theirs. After a number is called and a figure passes in the hallway, their conversation resumes.)

PRITCHER

And then it becomes a matter of posture, toward that one thing.

DORMINY

I can act as though there is only one, having forgotten that it was simply posited this way, deliberately.

PRITCHER

And you became engrossed, ignoring all the many other possibilities.

DORMINY

I suppose. Though I keep some memory back, if nothing else, to inform my offenses.

PRITCHER

Are they well-versed from all that you hold back?

DORMINY

I can depend on myself for everything else, save knowing this. More and less adamant? Surely. Well-versed? Hmm... a question.

PRITCHER

But this fluctuation doesn't bother you?

DORMINY

How can it? What... should I subscribe to some sort of infernal balance instead?

PRITCHER

Why not? It seems to be all the rage.

VOICE OFF STAGE

45351!

DORMINY

It's not surprising, though note that is not a reason on its own to act out.

PRITCHER

No; that I do understand. Reactionary behavior is the salve of feeble minds.

DORMINY

Ah, and feeble minds are the nourishment of monsters.

PRITCHER

(gestures for quiet)

Not so loud!

DORMINY

Oh, don't worry. They already know.

PRITCHER

Maybe, but you'll be taken for an agitator.

DORMINY

Isn't it just amazing to live in such a time as this! Simply take a seat and someone will magically call your number.

PRITCHER

It is quite a cunning feat.

DORMINY

Actually it takes quite a bit of planning and no small agreement on the part of the seated.

PRITCHER

We've all got to pitch in. But when do you come around, after spending so much time not reacting, to find any energy to rouse yourself?

DORMINY

I don't know what you mean.

PRITCHER

I think you do. *Is it a clever ruse, this feigned deference, this succumb?*

DORMINY

It would be doubly clever if it was, and therefore not so at all. In essence, the perfect disguise.

PRITCHER

If you could carry it off.

DORMINY

Or if *you* could.

PRITCHER

Why couldn't I?

DORMINY

Why aren't you at this very minute?

PRITCHER

There might be several reasons, not the least of which is that I might be called anytime now.

DORMINY

But even that shouldn't have to interrupt the bigger pattern.

PRITCHER

I can see the reductionist view of this, yet it would have to be part of it or not - not availed to this either/or possibility of whether I'm called.

DORMINY

But you were assigned to come today...

PRITCHER

Yes.

DORMINY

So everything is in order.

PRITCHER

That remains to be seen, it's the point of interest, really, if you ask me.

DORMINY

Therefore, what you set out to do is enlist in a particular calculation with chance. But how does it affect your hopes?

PRITCHER

I guess it is, in a way, inflicted upon them, or vice-versa.

DORMINY

Working in tandem then, they become a sort of syndicate, for your purposes, of course.

PRITCHER

Whose else?

DORMINY

Why... no one's; who's calling the numbers, anyway?

PRITCHER

Some staff; it's numerical - there is no need for interpretation.

DORMINY

No, of course not. Would that some other things were so straight forward.

PRITCHER

Yes. Like what?

DORMINY

(shrugs)

Oh... I don't know. Anything's that not; accidents, luck.

PRITCHER

Accidents? You mean something you didn't mean to happen, but did?

DORMINY

That would seem to qualify.

PRITCHER

But what if it was only a change in the direction of your hope, signified by a split-second turn?

DORMINY

I wouldn't know that at the time, I'd only be aware of the turn. You see, I only have as much information as anybody else.

PRITCHER

But no one knows as much about one thing as you do.

DORMINY

You mean not everyone.

PRITCHER

Not this time; I mean not even one other person.

DORMINY

But if you believe that, then the one thing becomes very powerful.

PRITCHER

That depends; how have you convinced yourself of its power?

DORMINY

If only slightly, I am all the more emboldened; I can actually call my own number.

PRITCHER

What about the poor lass, there?

DORMINY

(shrugs)

Who knows what she knows.

PRITCHER

(nods in agreement)

There is a certain solace in that.

DORMINY

But it does not release us from the original dilemma.

PRITCHER

No, that would require much more than luck.

DORMINY

But not much more.

(A pause, during which a shadow passes by their perch on the hallway bench)

PRITCHER

Still, my separate status does count for something.

DORMINY

As much as you are together with any common element, you are indeed apart.

PRITCHER

It's not so common, but all the more, I lose the sense of these distinctions when there's so little to make me notice anything but their inconsistencies.

DORMINY

Must we be philosophers to concern ourselves with conditions outside of the immediate?

PRITCHER

No, it's hardly necessary, but days run together when we are not accustomed to noticing, that's all.

DORMINY

But you won't stop that - so much goes on all the time. There's no way to reconcile what is perceived with what practically disappears by its very unbroken presence.

(Pritcher stares in disconcert)

When something is around all the time, ever-present, it ceases to be noticed, and so becomes a part of a background.

PRITCHER

It may appear that way from a mighty perch...

DORMINY

No, no...

PRITCHER

But you *are* aware of what is around you, ever-present or not, and there's no need to conflate a willful blindness based on repetition.

DORMINY

What route did you take here this morning?

PRITCHER

The same one I always do.

DORMINY

Did you notice anything strange along the way?

PRITCHER

Not really; it was the same as always, strangely comforting maybe.

DORMINY

No fires, screaming infants, or lawless sidewalk displays?

PRITCHER

Is that what it takes...

DORMINY

These things push and pull us in different directions, until the strength is summoned to ignore them.

PRITCHER

Don't infer that I do this.

DORMINY

I'm saying you must, just to get here on time!

PRITCHER

Is that all that's important?

DORMINY

It is an amazing confluence of priorities, I'll admit.

PRITCHER

Yet still... what I don't see is how I can avoid these things you mentioned.

DORMINY

You do it so well, that's it exactly.

PRITCHER

What's it?

VOICE OFF STAGE

45353!

DORMINY

By not seeing, they are ipso avoided.

PRITCHER

You're not understanding me; I'm saying that I *do* see them.

DORMINY

What are your impressions, then?

PRITCHER

Sorry?

DORMINY

What do you notice about them?

PRITCHER

Not a lot, frankly. I often have time to merely think about other things in my surroundings.

DORMINY

Do *you* remain the same?

PRITCHER

(slightly offended)

Certainly not.

DORMINY

What makes you think everything else does?

PRITCHER

Relative to my evaluations, I have no reason to doubt the evolution of my surroundings.

DORMINY

You've got every reason! There is nothing but reasons to doubt this total and pure arc toward betterment.

PRITCHER

Stop it. They're going to call your number.

DORMINY

And quite a state to be found in, it would be.

PRITCHER

It doesn't have to mean anything beyond the obvious; what your session may reveal is particular to you.

DORMINY

I may be charged with extravagant leanings, for all you know.

PRITCHER

If that's the case, you deserve to be found out.

DORMINY

The loss of faith in these institutions is staggering when you think about what we give up in return.

PRITCHER

(shaking his head)

I don't know what there is to be so upset about. Like I said, I'm not sure how it can be avoided.

DORMINY

But you are able nonetheless.

PRITCHER

It's a function of my willingness, pure and simple.

DORMINY

It should be encased in some periapt, worn around your neck - to remind yourself that you don't need reminding.

PRITCHER

Better than something else around my neck - what crime is it against the state of consciousness for me to imagine myself beyond certain circumstances?

DORMINY

As long as it is not better, but how might you get there?

PRITCHER

(shaking his head)

I only do so that I might be able to get somewhere and I'm not so concerned with how.

DORMINY

Which means you may infringe on the liberty of others, if necessary.

PRITCHER

I'm not so concerned with this; it may be like taking up slack that is already greatly unused.

DORMINY

But why?

PRITCHER

Interestingly enough, I'm less than concerned about why, though it would be cause for philosophy or intellectualizing.

DORMINY

You're anti-intellectual?

PRITCHER

If and when it comes down to that, a choice between causing an effect or talking about one, almost certainly yes, I am.

DORMINY

How could you have any effect then or understand one, if you are so willing to discount the power of persuasion?

PRITCHER

Did I say that? I'm...

DORMINY

(interrupting)

You stated a blatant case for the anti-intellectual approach. That which you are against, one would assume, you can have no use of in aid.

PRITCHER

Still, it's amazing what we will use - I guess if you're just driving nails, anything can be a hammer.

DORMINY

So you'll throw it around if you have to; that's typical.

PRITCHER

Of what?

DORMINY

The essence of careless expediency. It leaves a trail of apathy, forked from the road to nowhere in the direction of promise; but without a compass or map, it is sentenced to roaming in endless circles.

PRITCHER

But then, undeserving, I stumble onto a mountaintop and am able to see exactly where everything is.

DORMINY

But what are the chances? How many fail before and after you in pursuit of such a folly?

PRITCHER

Those who come later will fail differently, though.

DORMINY

And yet all your failures seem assured.

PRITCHER

It's funny, but I don't think you can impugn my methods.

DORMINY

They're beyond mortal reach?

PRITCHER

They don't care.

VOICE OFF STAGE

45354!

DORMINY

Is that your number?

PRITCHER

(wistfully)

I'm afraid so.

PRITCHER rises and walks away down the corridor, leaving a seated *DORMINY* to watch as the lighting fades and the scene dissolves.

Act II

Scene 1

TIME: Morning, Present day.

AT RISE: A counter case with glass top covers an assortment of items in the case, intimating an exchange or pawn broker establishment. *DORMINY* appears, walking up to the case and perusing its contents. After several seconds *PRITCHER* walks up from the other side of the counter.

PRITCHER

Good morning. Are you looking for something in particular?

DORMINY

(a little nervously)

Uh, no, no thanks. Just taking a look.

PRITCHER

We've got some excellent deals on these, and I've a got a few more I keep in the back. Say, you look familiar.

DORMINY

(shaking her head)

I don't think so. I just got into town this morning.

PRITCHER

Hmm... I could have sworn... but, maybe it's just a familiar look.

DORMINY

I don't think it's possible.

PRITCHER

You can't be too sure - anything's possible around here.

DORMINY

Just that kind of place, huh?

PRITCHER

Sometimes. And I don't mean just here but, if we thought about it, any place could be any kind of place.

DORMINY

That's a bit of a loose characterization.

PRITCHER

Still, there a certain amount of truth to it.

DORMINY

(looking into the case)

You could say that about any number of things.

PRITCHER

You could, but isn't that because there often is?

DORMINY

It really depends on the crucial portion. Do you have this in a molded grip?

PRITCHER

(shakes his head)

No, only that wooden one.

DORMINY

Too bad.

PRITCHER

What's truth after all, but one element in a larger picture?

DORMINY

Just the one which says whether it's night or day, raining or clear, that can't be fudged.

PRITCHER

Oh, come on; sure, it can.

DORMINY

But if it is, your larger picture becomes an image of something else.

PRITCHER

A lie, propaganda?

DORMINY

Whatever it is; even aphorisms are just advertisements for the truth. But whether it reflects reality, that's another...

PRITCHER

Well, there is a certain reality of which it is a part.

DORMINY

Counting our apples as oranges is just a little disingenuous, don't you think?

PRITCHER

Depends. In the service of good, deception could be a virtue.

DORMINY

Ah, in that case your bigger picture is the kind with a rainbow and a leprechaun.

PRITCHER

The crucial concern is not livelihood, then?

DORMINY

Sure it is... our most basic preoccupation.

PRITCHER

Worthy of shading the truth to protect?

DORMINY

Certainly, if that's all my picture is, like I said, but this depends on how much you think of yourself.

PRITCHER

How often?

DORMINY

(shaking her head)

Is your worth greater than its slant toward the reality in which it resides? You can think of it as, if you ask this question, the answer is no.

PRITCHER

What if the answer is yes?

DORMINY

Then there's no question at all. Your capabilities are limitless. You can say anything and do as many others as you like, with no visible price of conscience.

PRITCHER

None?

DORMINY

(shaking her head)

There is one cost, though.

PRITCHER

What's that?

DORMINY

I'm not sure you want to know, and it's different for everyone anyway - only you'll know yours, only I know mine kind-of-thing.

PRITCHER

Maybe if I knew yours I could recognize mine.

DORMINY

I don't think so. We've got a habit of searching for particular things and not being on the lookout for anything at all. My admission would only confuse you.

PRITCHER

You seem so confident.

DORMINY

I'm just saying. It's sort of a reverse motif - an artificial horizon.

PRITCHER

Where I don't see anything but what I'm looking for?

DORMINY

That's it exactly.

PRITCHER

But many celebrate that sort of focus.

DORMINY

What else *would* they do? Minimize all other elements...

PRITCHER

Including truth.

DORMINY

...and you can regard this as a great boon to creativity when it just as well discounts the art, if not the deed, of discovery.

PRITCHER

(nodding)

There's an essence of truth to that.

DORMINY

What about your rainbow and pot of gold?

PRITCHER

I still think we can put one in the service of the other.

DORMINY

But whether is which, and you're either asking the question - or you're not.

PRITCHER

Now that that's out there, I feel less anxious about it.

DORMINY

But it's not yet yours, you've enrolled in no real jeopardy - as yet.

PRITCHER

What makes you suppose I will? Some dark faith in human nature?

DORMINY

(shaking her head)
Nah, something a little closer to home.

PRITCHER
I thought you weren't from around here.

DORMINY
I do suppose that if it exists at all, we all share at least a little bit.

PRITCHER
Faith?

DORMINY
(shrugs)
Faith... blame... credit, belief, trust, whatever. But what's more critical is the closer conversation.

PRITCHER
That you have with yourself?

DORMINY
Precisely.

PRITCHER
What does yours say?

DORMINY
Often, it's just a jumble of contradictory presumptions, directions to places I've already been, so to speak.

PRITCHER
But not always.

DORMINY
No. And then when it's not, it's crucial that I be able to listen.

PRITCHER
And you're not, always.

DORMINY
No - there's the intercession of other points of view: yours, for instance.

PRITCHER
Why mine?

DORMINY

Don't you have one? Aren't we here together, opposed?

PRITCHER

(growing nervous)

Not necessarily; I'm just trying to understand. Are you going to buy something?

DORMINY

No.

PRITCHER

What then? Did you come in here just to harass me, my customers?

(DORMINY looks slowly around at the stage, empty but of the two of them, turns back to PRITCHER across the counter. The more anxious PRITCHER becomes, the calmer is DORMINY.)

DORMINY

Have I done that? You'll have to forgive me - but I need something.

PRITCHER

To say these things?

DORMINY

Not just say them, but to mean them - and sum them all into a symbol of what they are.

PRITCHER

But you can't do that; there's a violent meridian around such openness.

DORMINY

Violence is in the eye of the beholder. You want to make something and I can't stop you. If you would only take that position, this could all go unnoticed.

PRITCHER

But I can see that you're going to take something - from me.

DORMINY

Then you understand that there is no other place to get it.

PRITCHER

But what will you replace it with - and what will it do to what you already have?

DORMINY

These questions - as I said - you either ask them..

PRITCHER

Well, I am asking them.

DORMINY

What have we found so far?

PRITCHER

I thought I was asking the questions.

DORMINY

Then how appropriate that you should answer them as well.

PRITCHER

But I'm not able. Everything I put to you, I do so in sincerity.

DORMINY

Near the end of that, you come to something else - a choice. You already see the deceit in your honesty.

PRITCHER

No! For every practical purpose, I'm being sincere.

DORMINY

Beyond these concerns for your welfare: what's the use? You wouldn't display your truthfulness without a motive.

PRITCHER

I couldn't disagree more!

DORMINY

But you would if you could - don't think sincerity is the necessary apogee of self.

PRITCHER

I've heard enough of this.

DORMINY

Jettison that, too, then see what's left.

PRITCHER

I said enough! Stop it!

(PRITCHER reaches down into the case and pulls out a gun, holds it but does not point it at DORMINY.)

DORMINY

(excitedly)

Yes! There. What's there?!

PRITCHER

I said stop it.

DORMINY

But you can't stop it, can you, no matter what I say. It's there, the point of semblance where nothing that has made sense before can finally see its way. And it's all because of you.

(PRITCHER slowly brings the gun up toward DORMINY.)

PRITCHER

I asked you to stop it.

DORMINY

But you see, only you can do that.

PRITCHER

I can't!

DORMINY

It's a product of something else then, something bigger.

PRITCHER

Don't talk - STOP TALKING!

DORMINY

You're imagining what you mean and bringing it to life.

PRITCHER

Stop it!

DORMINY

I can't - you seem finally committed. But remember:

PRITCHER

What?!

DORMINY

Whatever it is that comes after - you'll want that most of all.

PRITCHER

Enough! I can't stop and I can't... do it.

DORMINY

Maybe this will help.

(DORMINY takes a gun out of her purse and points it at PRITCHER.)

PRITCHER

No!

(DORMINY cocks her gun - PRITCHER squints hard and pulls the trigger. BANG! The lights go down. The scene ends.)

Act III

Scene 1

TIME: Evening, Present day.

AT RISE: A detective interrogation room; at the lone table sits PRITCHER, one light bulb suspended on a wire above him. After a moment, DORMINY enters through a door and closes behind her.

PRITCHER

It's you!

DORMINY

(puzzled but indulgent)

Yes... and it's you. Now...

PRITCHER

No, wait.

DORMINY

The waiting can go on for as long as you like, but the same will proceed... whenever you're ready.

PRITCHER

(deflating)

Go ahead then.

DORMINY

Alright.

(puts down her file; settles across the table from Pritcher)

I understand you tried to waive your right to counsel.

Why is that?

PRITCHER

(shrugs)

Futility. I haven't listened yet - I don't think I'll start now.

DORMINY

It's not just to advise you; counsel means an ally, to argue your case.

PRITCHER

What's ... argue with whom?

DORMINY

So, you're in complete agreement with the charges against you?

Why did you plead not guilty?

PRITCHER

What would you have me do?

DORMINY

Start with the truth, for one thing.

PRITCHER

(scoffing)

Oh no - you obviously cannot imagine that.

DORMINY

What am I doing here right now?

PRITCHER

Have you even thought about what happened and how, or is it just left for me to explain?

DORMINY

A version of events is likely to unfold again. Take us back there.

PRITCHER

You won't allow that. What's done is done - one way or every way.

DORMINY

You've got to hold fast to your version, the way you saw things - whether there is mercy, you will be judged on your relation to this.

PRITCHER

But on the day in question, did you not leave enough room for this to be debatable later?

DORMINY

That was not my intention.

PRITCHER

Nor was that the question. You bring up truth, but you deflect the accusation; questioned about timing, you ponder significance. You're not acting very innocent.

DORMINY

Did I say I was innocent?

PRITCHER

You're saying *you're* guilty?

DORMINY

Certainly not. I've only one position to which to hold, one that I cannot betray.

PRITCHER

I should say the same.

DORMINY

Why don't you?

PRITCHER

There's no third plea - or there wasn't before. It's funny... but I've been freed in a certain way.

DORMINY

(curious)

Oh?

PRITCHER

These restrictions, this longing for truth... I've been unchained from them.

DORMINY

Well, that's going to go over well.

PRITCHER

Even so, however it is perceived, I've embarked on a separation, a very particular disjunction from how it can even be properly explained.

DORMINY

One way or another - you'll have to tell someone. Otherwise you'll be judged from this alone.

PRITCHER

Yes - but. I will anyway, don't you see? Just as I judged myself from it before, it's the only way I can be seen now.

DORMINY

I see, and yet... escaping certain constraints or shrouding motives does not change the fact of the charges against you. I mean, I'm glad you've been freed, but you're looking at a sentence with no alternate parsing.

PRITCHER

(concerned)

Oh?

DORMINY

Cheap and despised though it was, you took life and rendered a disavowal of its traditional role. I can tell you the judge will be very interested in your opinion on this.

PRITCHER

The judge?

DORMINY

What did you expect?

PRITCHER

I don't know; I guess I thought these things had already been decided.

DORMINY

No. And what's worse, they fluctuate with almost every case.

PRITCHER

Why should they?

DORMINY

Adhering to principle is a part of nature removed from action. You're supposed to set these aside - not work from them.

PRITCHER

What are they for, then?

DORMINY

Laws have many applications; this is just not one of them. You cannot enforce them yourself. Gravity, for instance.

PRITCHER

But I may *invoke* them.

DORMINY

Only if you are willing to see through the consequences, which I guess you are saying.

PRITCHER

(to himself)

So, there is a price.

DORMINY

What?

PRITCHER

(shaking his head)

Nothing. No thing. Not a single thing.

(A pause)

DORMINY

You seem quite resigned for a freed man.

PRITCHER

Maybe it's one of the consequences; I do this that I may qualify for something else.

DORMINY

Something further? What if it's damaging?

PRITCHER

To what? And is that something I get to choose?

DORMINY

To do it or not, yes, I suppose you do.

PRITCHER

Yet if the outcome informed my choice...

DORMINY

You would merely be on the lookout for something else, something unclouded with foreshadow. I see your resignation.

PRITCHER

It's what I didn't see that now has my full attention, or rather...

DORMINY

Go on.

PRITCHER

My concentration is pulled toward what I know the least about.

DORMINY

You'll have a hard time answering for yourself, then.

PRITCHER

Oddly, on this I can acquit myself well; I am actually removed from this as a matter of course.

DORMINY

It's not about you?

PRITCHER

Not in the proper sense. It's about that space that I don't understand. I'm drawn to it in a way in which the consequences are only one element.

DORMINY

I think you understand better than you imagine; you may even be cunning.

PRITCHER

I certainly have to hope that's possible.

DORMINY

But doesn't it undercut the space?

PRITCHER

(shaking his head)

The space is actually only half as potent without that possibility.

DORMINY

It's an essential part, that you don't even fully believe in.

PRITCHER

It's just a possibility.

DORMINY

A possibility like that is a language unto itself.

PRITCHER

That sounds like a warning; am I supposed to, then, be careful?

DORMINY

You'll have to ask yourself what you've gotten into.

PRITCHER

A sort of pre-consequence avowal, before I even know? No thanks. There's got to be something left to find.

DORMINY

Remains?

PRITCHER

A path that can be followed. Not in egress but something that... becomes more obvious with time.

DORMINY

Mystery loves company.

PRITCHER

Like it has a choice. We're drawn to it and how it validates our repudiations - or vice versa.

DORMINY

It *is* a ploy then.

PRITCHER

Not enough of one, I'm afraid.

DORMINY

Reproducing results is no easy feat.

PRITCHER

But it's the measure of stamina; an idea survives as long as belief in it does not go unchallenged.

DORMINY

You'll know if it can ever be done again.

PRITCHER

How?

DORMINY

Reverting to that particular sort of desire, that a thing can only be achieved through you.

PRITCHER

That sounds maniacal - and you're going to use this to defend me?

DORMINY

It's just egoism; and whether it's true or not is beside the point. You've got to leverage the possibility that only you can do it.

PRITCHER

Against what?

DORMINY

Everything else; sometimes one at a time, but occasionally in mass.

PRITCHER

I suppose it's true, that only I can arrive there in the way in which I will.

DORMINY

You do understand.

PRITCHER

But I'm just as free not to get there at all, and then there'll be nothing to repeat.

DORMINY

Except the effort. And as long as failure is your placeholder, you won't allow it to stand.

PRITCHER

I'll be the one to decide that. Talking about such decisions doesn't put nearly as much at stake as making them.

DORMINY

And yet they are the same when the prosecutor is doing the talking.

(*PRITCHER* stands as the grips changing the scene intrude over the last minute. Now he pays more attention to the change in setting as the conversation continues with *DORMINY* in place as Judge, sitting at a desk higher than *PRITCHER* who continues to stand.)

Scene II

PRITCHER

Your honor?

DORMINY

Yes.

PRITCHER

You spoke to me like an ally, but I should have known.

DORMINY

I guess we often do, Mr. Pritcher. Now...

PRITCHER

Now?

DORMINY

Now. The charges against you are as follows:

PRITCHER

I'm not guilty of those.

DORMINY

But you didn't give me a chance to list them. You may enter a plea after you have been formally accused.

PRITCHER

My confidence has been breached.

DORMINY

How?

PRITCHER

You know, as well as anyone. If we continue in this context, what I was made to do will surely come out, and it won't reflect well upon you.

DORMINY

What you were made to do? Is that some sort of accusation?

PRITCHER

The worst kind.

DORMINY

Looking over your file, you have no history of intent; the question before you now is, what did you want to do?

PRITCHER

When?

DORMINY

Your insolence is noted, Mr. Pritcher, but the question remains the same - please see through and beyond it, as you are able.

PRITCHER

I've... I meant to cause no harm.

DORMINY

Mr. Pritcher!

PRITCHER

There was no indication that any of these certain tasks would result...

DORMINY

Ah. Which tasks? A ritual assessment of results is just that if you do not first enumerate the desired outcomes.

PRITCHER

Well, it's not that easy, and the point is...

DORMINY

The *point*, Mr. Pritcher?

PRITCHER

Okay... as I said, these tasks - whatever they are - that we, I, am involved in... they don't take particular direction on their own.

DORMINY

Go on.

PRITCHER

So if you take a measure of what I wanted at any point and remove it from this context, I'm afraid that... well, I'm afraid that you - or I - might change what it was that I meant.

DORMINY

So you are saying that you can't say.

PRITCHER

I'm saying I can, but I would be doing something else, wanting something different, in doing so.

DORMINY

So, if I may, I am to release you on the basis of concurrency?

PRITCHER

Well, there's some question as to whether I am being held and then, whether I can be released, but...

DORMINY

(impatiently)

Let me assure you that you are being held and that the decision whether to release you grows clearer in my mind as these moments pass.

PRITCHER

Yes, okay, but let me venture to say that the question is not about multiple simultaneous happenings, but my role in a certain chronology.

DORMINY

And your desire toward a certain outcome.

PRITCHER

But I wished for nothing in particular.

DORMINY

And you're saying that's not an outcome? Please, openness of borders, even personal ones, is not a defense, but nor is it an abdication of will. No thing happens in such a vacuum.

PRITCHER

But admitting that I wanted something I did not is surely an offense to my willingness...

DORMINY

So you did want something. No need to perjure yourself here.

PRITCHER

I have no need.

DORMINY

But is it your desire?

PRITCHER

No, it is not. There's something beyond wanting a particular ends that sees unto seeing, that knows beyond what is known, that perfectly accepts what comes of it outside and apart from knowing what, if in fact anything, will come of it.

DORMINY

So you were willing to accept nothing at all, as well as anything?

PRITCHER

Mustn't I be?

DORMINY

Well, there's some dispute about that. Our entire notion of what is acceptable and not is based on a whole other set of suppositions.

PRITCHER

And what do those premises suppose? That I am naturally inclined to want one thing and pursuit it only, when in fact, this is far removed from what I could reasonably expect.

DORMINY

That expectation takes a certain license to overcome. Will you endeavor to create this opposing set of assumptions?

PRITCHER

I don't know that I want to do that.

DORMINY

But keep in mind, that is what you're saying. You can't not want this and still stop it from happening. There is a certain amount of connivance involved - resistance, collaboration.

PRITCHER

That much is certain. But on the part of whom, is the question.

DORMINY

A question which has just one answer, I'm reminded. You reconcile that answer and ally yourself accordingly.

PRITCHER

But allies are only as strong as their common beliefs. Trusting you only to an extent does perhaps as much harm as good. That's why we step outside ourselves so gingerly, and then sneak back in at the earliest opportunity.

DORMINY

And then you realize not an ally, but an -

PRITCHER

(interrupting)

Don't say it!

(A pause)

DORMINY

Like you, I'm inclined to distinguish facts from their deeds a little prematurely.

PRITCHER

I'm just trying to use what happened to be prepared for what is coming.

DORMINY

But you lift the very veil of doing nothing by hinting at these expectations. What profit do you see from this adjustment?

PRITCHER

Adjustment? I'm bending to the will of the moment, here and now, not calibrating my reaction.

DORMINY

It's the same.

PRITCHER

No... it's not. The specific immediacy of the situation disallows the very thing of which I stand accused. In fact, it's impossible to properly posture, for better or worse.

DORMINY

So, you willingly risk error, even injury?

PRITCHER

Willingly... would suppose a choice, but if I live in this moment or the next, or the last, I do so at a posture to equal measures of glory or peril.

DORMINY

I must condemn the rashness and danger of such behavior. If everyone did this, what kind of world would we live in?

PRITCHER

That's an excellent question, but one I'm sorry that we're not availed to answer, as yet.

DORMINY

Oh, I'm quite sure I can answer it.

PRITCHER

But will you spare yourself the crucial prejudice? For knowing this much about ourselves and our fellows, we can only be sure that we do not live in the way I describe, and therefore take a much more frightful path lighted by known fears buttressed by eminently workable schemes.

DORMINY

I remind you where you are, then also that it has gotten us this far.

PRITCHER

That is precisely... *(cuts himself off)*

DORMINY

What?

PRITCHER

(shaking his head)

I don't want to influence your decision with my own motives and lack of humility. You see, I have everything to gain.

DORMINY

On the lookout for such ramshackle scavenging, I suppose.

PRITCHER

One of us, that's for sure.

DORMINY

But you wish to elude the watchful gaze of authority.

PRITCHER

Oh no; please be forewarned, I wish for much more than that.

DORMINY

To destroy the order which you hold in so much contempt?

PRITCHER

Let's not get ahead of ourselves - it's at the point of dissolution anyway that it would be a gross misappropriation of effort.

DORMINY

But why not hasten its decline?

PRITCHER

Because it's unnecessary, and outside of the moment, as a matter of course.

DORMINY

Your reverence for time is noted, but these restrictions may leave you unprepared for what is to come.

PRITCHER

How can they? If I survive desire, then I will be free to want nothing, and so be amenable to anything.

DORMINY

That lack of preference will be your undoing; what have we achieved if not the ability to discern what we want and do not want? Are we to venture toward a place where we relinquish these?

PRITCHER

I don't come to bury preference, but to praise a greater appetite.

DORMINY

Is that your defense?

PRITCHER

I don't have a defense, unless it is a slight to imagine more.

DORMINY

I'll be forced to provide you with the maximum sentence then.

PRITCHER

Do as you must; but remember to reserve it twice for yourself.

DORMINY

Your disregard is contemptible.

PRITCHER

But I must prevail upon you to reserve such until you have established some boundaries to search beyond.

DORMINY

(sarcastically)

As *you* have done?

PRITCHER

As I *will* do.

DORMINY

(sighing)

Take what you can from this emersion in fantasy, and sacrifice the will that is guiding you on such enlightened raiding parties.

PRITCHER

Is that my sentence?

DORMINY

That is your crime.

PRITCHER

Have you noticed a difference?

DORMINY

You have inflicted one from the very beginning. These accusations cannot stand apart from their consequences.

PRITCHER

The causes are their effects, related back and forth in conversation.

DORMINY

This is no dialogue.

PRITCHER

No; that is where you are wrong. It *is* a dialogue...

(PRITCHER looks up and notices the grips embarking on the scene change, yet the setting is only slightly being changed - though it is being altered.)

PRITCHER

... of supplication.

Scene III

The setting has been changed to the visiting chambers of a jail or prison, except the room only has one kiosk where a visitor sits and faces the prisoner in a sort of booth, separated by plate glass. They see each other but speak into telephone receivers; stage lit to illicit only these items. They are dressed similarly, purposely so as not to differentiate the incarcerated from the visitor.

DORMINY

And now?

PRITCHER

Look at where what you have done to me has placed you.

DORMINY

What have *you* done?

PRITCHER

What *have* I done?

DORMINY

Your concept of a destroyed soul is simply unacceptable, too far ranging.

PRITCHER

Have I even hinted at destruction?

DORMINY

Would you? It is this for which the lookouts took notice.

PRITCHER

And now look at you.

(Dorminy straightens herself)

DORMINY

It is not me that deserves circumspection.

PRITCHER

If not now, then when? Those worthy of regard are twice as valuable in captivity.

DORMINY

Captivity!

(Pritcher, holding the phone in one hand, taps on the glass with the other)

PRITCHER

Not only can they be studied at leisure, but their supposed public danger, their nuisance, is severely restricted.

DORMINY

I'll tell you what is severely restricted... your perception of reality. Was it not you who stood before the... and was sentenced to...

PRITCHER

To what? What did you see there?

DORMINY

It's not what I saw... it is what happened that has confined you here.

PRITCHER

My confinement has merely been regained, an expression of our inadequate state of security. The separation has always existed; now it has merely been codified.

DORMINY

Your insistence is enshrined among truly the greatest of well-wishers.

PRITCHER

I insist on knowing, that is all. I'll even allow you to remain where you are, if that is your desire.

DORMINY

Am I not free to come and go as I please?

PRITCHER

Only you can answer that, at your own pace, of course.

DORMINY

Like so many other things.

PRITCHER

But uniquely unlike all the rest; there is an opening and we can wait, but what comes will be the same.

DORMINY

(squints toward PRITCHER)

Do you subscribe that I relinquish this freedom for your sort of captivity?

PRITCHER

That *is* a rather stark formulation. And I wouldn't insist that you do anything - for then what you do becomes something else.

DORMINY

Loses the meaning you first intended.

PRITCHER

My intentions are considerably more harmful than your insults suggest. I would leave them aside, if I were you.

DORMINY

(sarcastically)

'*would leave*'; For this I'm sure you're attended famously.

PRITCHER

Only to be mocked.

DORMINY

Tell me, what is it, then, that describes what... no, how, I come and go - and you do not?

PRITCHER

Simple. You have no destination, whereas everywhere, every single place as well as all places, are available to me.

DORMINY

(scoffing)

That's preposterous.

PRITCHER

Is it?

DORMINY

Yes. The truth is, you can no more go anywhere at all than I can have my breakfast on a passing cloud.

PRITCHER

Ah, the truth. And I'll note the analogy. But you understand, the question is not where I can go, but where *you* do not.

DORMINY

If you had set this up earlier, you couldn't be more wrong. These questions are all about course change, of which I am highly availed.

PRITCHER

Precisely! Availed, but not disposed.

DORMINY

But come what may, I will surely entertain.

PRITCHER

Of most things, you certainly will not. Elimination of these has been your primary activity.

DORMINY

How could you know?

PRITCHER

For once, I can see what has been shown to me. Maybe it was pointed... out, maybe it was a passing blur.

DORMINY

There was a time when you were not even open to these.

PRITCHER

(sarcastically)

There was a time... there was a time... I asked you to see this as a chronology, but only in terms of what is *about* to happen.

DORMINY

But what I can't determine is this: do you begin something - or does it pick up somewhere and continue beyond you?

PRITCHER

Yes!

DORMINY

Which?

PRITCHER

It doesn't matter! You're getting it.

DORMINY

It doesn't make sense.

PRITCHER

But I'm understanding your idea of concurrence now.

DORMINY

(chidingly)

That wasn't mine.

PRITCHER

(shaking his head)

Seizing what is not ours to fashion is no matter; it's out there, a willing propriety comes into view, then within reach.

DORMINY

Where?

PRITCHER

Just beyond. I don't see the part of anything larger, anything beyond desire. That type of grasp is for the lighted pathway. Not here.

DORMINY

Where, then?

PRITCHER

The severed, unlit fate, of course... could be anywhere and probably is, but it's critical that it be..

DORMINY

(interrupting)

Somewhere?

PRITCHER

I guess.

DORMINY

You don't know? Oh.

PRITCHER

I can't. That's...

DORMINY

(deflated)

Yes. You've just got to want it to be.

PRITCHER

To some that means a life of meager asceticism... but they're just forgiving themselves ahead of time.

DORMINY

I might do that; but can I...

PRITCHER

Your faults are less worthy of contempt than you imagine; in fact, they might be exactly what's required.

DORMINY

(skeptically)

Can I enable - enlist them?

PRITCHER

Can you not? You will serve them one way or another, in profligacy or in abeyance. So might you choose whether, doing so with care but strictly without mercy.

(A pause)

DORMINY

I can, but will I?

PRITCHER

In this, you already have.

DORMINY

If anyone is open to these choices, don't they reach a certain cacophony, in all the striving to be heard?

PRITCHER

In this pursuit? Not to worry. It's too much like a sentence from the outside, an accounting of all that must be shed, instead of that brought to muster. If it was seen in that light...

DORMINY

Then it would be heroic.

PRITCHER

But there is no light, where it actively exists. There is no reaching to illuminate what is not darkened. That's why all the analogies to bulbs, flashes and fires.

DORMINY

Take that away, and I'm disoriented, bounding between pleasure and slaughter without consequence.

PRITCHER

The mind stretches toward infirmity, in flights of mad pursuit away from what it most needs. It's the opposite of what's there.

DORMINY

And so, you struggle against it?

PRITCHER

Beauty actually absolves the darkness, indictments of the void are just protestations in reverse.

DORMINY

I can see without light and I can feel without hands, but when I think without want, I anticipate a sort of hope I know well cannot arrive, will not arrive.

(PRITCHER, holding the phone, shakes his head furiously.)

PRITCHER

It's not the hope that you don't understand; the notion you expect of what is coming simply bears no relation to the freedom from want. Escaping this notion is like moving the mountain with a pick and shovel. You're better off on the side of the road with a carpet and some crystals.

DORMINY

There are things that one needs, surely you'll agree?

PRITCHER

To what? Incontrovertible though it may seem, I'm distracted from its essence by the very tip of what I want.

DORMINY

No harm there.

PRITCHER

Only without it.

(DORMINY pushes her chair back from the partition and drops the phone onto the surface, not in frustration but in kind of open rumination. The stage widens slightly with light, PRITCHER remains at the glass with the phone, watching and listening as DORMINY stands and takes several steps around the floor behind the partition, still in view of PRITCHER. Finally she looks at PRITCHER, comes back over to the phone, pulls it to her ear, then reseats herself at the partition.)

DORMINY

Are you alone in there?

PRITCHER

(smiles)

Are you?

DORMINY

(shakes her head)

I'm just asking because, well, I thought for a moment that if you had been left to consider these things...

PRITCHER

Rather than condemned to...

DORMINY

... then it might not be you who is confined.

PRITCHER

Who might it be then?

DORMINY

Why is the missing motivation always assumed to be some altruistic passion?

PRITCHER

You don't believe you're worthy of doing something for yourself.

DORMINY

No, er yes, but what it is might be too great for one person.

PRITCHER

To do?

DORMINY

To appreciate. It's the contradiction in our individual idyll.

PRITCHER

That perfect assumption is constantly interrupted with inefficiency and shortcomings. I see what is not there and resolve to address it.

DORMINY

I won't discount that, but seeing what is not there infers some sustained state of grace.

PRITCHER

Simply because your view won't allow you to believe it. That idyll is made up of nothing but contradictions. Deeming to sort them is a sort of higher-plane arrogance usually reserved for wars and conquest.

DORMINY

Places we'll only go for killing or worship are reserved a special kinship.

PRITCHER

But they're the same - the only - connections to creation. You must think with the same righteous ability. A belief in annihilation bears an eerie resemblance to 'couldn't hurt a fly'.

DORMINY

In a sense.

PRITCHER

(shaking his head)

There's no sense about it. You leave this place tomorrow or forty years from now, your ticket has the same stamps on it.

DORMINY

In that light, 'do you want to live' is the same as 'do you want to die'.

PRITCHER

And once you're beyond this gate, it's the answers that are different, rendered in colors absurd to the imagination, lines...

DORMINY

You violate the commandments of what you are asked to do.

PRITCHER

But not as a rule; only as a throughway.

DORMINY

To where?

PRITCHER

In this lifting darkness, orientation is secondary. Who's around? Are you alone? Do you care? These are fundamentally unanswerable until right then.

DORMINY

When?

PRITCHER

You decide. I call them purpose filters; get rid of them in any manner you choose. But get rid of them.

DORMINY

I thought it was all about a higher purpose.

PRITCHER

But not for you. Not for this; yours is only godly - turning darkness into light. Forget any other purposes.

DORMINY

Or any higher than that.

PRITCHER

As you like. What is important is what is necessary.

DORMINY

That seems admirable enough.

PRITCHER

It's actually a distasteful proposition. If you want to be admirable, provide comfort - be a priest of some sort, or a prostitute. To make anything actually calls for you to be an accomplice in your depravity.

DORMINY

But that's not serving any purpose, either.

PRITCHER

But you'll be letting them off easy, which is all they want.

DORMINY

As opposed to challenging their very existence.

PRITCHER

What it *takes* for us to exist - there's a difference. Not that you should be here, but that you be here differently.

DORMINY

I see. Perfect desire.

PRITCHER

Can you get around the tree of knowledge without begetting a vengeful, paranoid God?

DORMINY

If he was these things before, won't he still be them after?

PRITCHER

Only if he doesn't have company.

DORMINY

I asked if you were alone.

PRITCHER

Did I answer?

DORMINY

Sometimes we answer by not answering.

PRITCHER

But it's interesting; we cannot listen by not listening.

DORMINY

You're saying there's a relation?

PRITCHER

I don't know. Ideas hatch monsters so you'd better watch out.

DORMINY

(cracks a smile)

It's funny; It always seems like it's the other way around.

PRITCHER

I don't know how it could be any other way. For expression to endure requires a type of nod to its mystery. All you could report on this you could simply overwhelm by making something up.

DORMINY

That's all it takes?

PRITCHER

Once you resolve to, yes.

DORMINY

I've stepped outside of the shadow for once, does that mean I have to join you in there?

PRITCHER

In where?

(DORMINY pauses, twice as long as at any previous juncture.)
What is it?

DORMINY

I'm not sure how to answer that question.

PRITCHER

Because you perceive a barrier.

DORMINY

Yes, and it fundamentally effects everything else I can say.

PRITCHER

What else?

DORMINY

Anything I can do, or think.

PRITCHER

What is it that you want?

DORMINY

I don't know.

PRITCHER

(nodding)

That's the confusion; all else is invited from there.

DORMINY

Invited or not, I'm unable to detect or differentiate.

PRITCHER

What do you see?

DORMINY

That this is an affliction.

PRITCHER

Upon whom?

DORMINY

I don't know; I don't feel like myself.

PRITCHER

Maybe you're more than just yourself, one person.

DORMINY

How can that be?

PRITCHER

(trying to interrupt the last question)

Don't!

DORMINY

Sorry. Does the suffering go away?

PRITCHER

Do you mean will it, or can it?

DORMINY

I think I see what you mean.

PRITCHER

But this symbolizes no thing. It is exactly it.

DORMINY

While my perceptions are not just mine, they have sharpened.

PRITCHER

You realize that the first thing you detected outside of yourself was suffering.

DORMINY

And I'm saddened in way that focuses my mind.

PRITCHER

It's not sadness, for it has no opposite. Commensurate justice will not be attained. Because the situation is not merely unjust.

DORMINY

Suffering on the basis of inequity or iniquity is not just.

PRITCHER

Did you decide these things? Did you cover them with darkness, or is that just another perceived barrier?

DORMINY

I did nothing at all.

PRITCHER

Yes... and how long can you continue this, knowing what you now know?

DORMINY

I... there is... what can I do?

PRITCHER

You are... cursed with options, the tyranny of profound compass. A better question is the one you've always longed to understand, have embraced into romance and back again. And now you may wonder no longer.

DORMINY

What's the opposite of inevitable?

PRITCHER

I don't know... Not inevitable, I guess. Or maybe it's just something we can avoid.

DORMINY

(takes a deep sigh)

We'll see.

PRITCHER

We usually do.

(Stage fades to dark.)

END.

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Alan Flurry is a writer living in Athens, GA. His short story CENTURY 2.1 was published by Azure in 2018. His feature screenplay THE NEXT PARIS was an official selection of the 2019 Beverly Hills Film Festival, where he met a lot of nice people.*

FORGIVE ME FATHER

By Harrison Zeiberg

THE PLAWRIGHT SPEAKS: *Forgive me Father was inspired by the Rob Reiner film, Oh, God. In this film God shows up, and uses a grocery store clerk to spread his message to the people around him. The original idea for this play was what if God and the Devil were a comedy duo, and once this idea was abandoned the final product quickly took its place. Special thanks must go out to my sister who came up with the bit about the sheep, and for the rest of my family for always making me laugh. Forgive me Father wanted to examine how two people who are lonely, and just want someone to talk to can find each other even in the oddest of places, and how people tend to come into each other's lives at just the right moment.*

Forgive me Father was workshopped at the Massachusetts Youth Playwriting Program in 2018.

(Spacing is playwright's own).

Forgive Me Father

By Harrison Zeiberg

Sinner- Twenty something. Nervous, and a bit weird, but very likeable.

Father- A priest. Twenty something. Inexperienced as a Priest, but really wants to do well. He just isn't sure how to do well.

The Sinner and Father are sitting next to each other in chairs with something separating them. They can't see each other, but can hear each other.

Sinner: Forgive me father for I have sinned.

Father: Speak to me my child. Tell me your sins.

Sinner: Father, it's been four days since my last confession, and I've done horrible things. I know you're not my regular priest, but you know some things you just can't tell your priest. So here it goes, four days ago I was walking home. And then this cop car pulled up next to me. I knew the cop it was my friend Robert, and we said hi and all, and when he walked away, well, I licked his car.

Father: I'm sorry, you what?

Sinner: Forgive me Father.

Father: What did you say?

Sinner: I licked a cop car.

Father: You licked a cop car? (beat) Why?

Sinner: Are you allowed to ask that?

Father: Well, no. But, why?

Sinner: You won't like this answer.

Father: Oh God.

Sinner: Father!

Father: I'm sorry my child. But why did you lick the cop car?

Sinner: Well. Have you ever seen a cop car? It's all blue and white. It looks like a blue and white snow cone. And I love snow cones, so much. So, I, uh, licked it.

Father: Did it taste like a snow cone?

Sinner: You wouldn't understand father.

Father: I'd hope not.

Sinner: It's like nickels after they've been rained on after a warm August afternoon.

Father: You lick nickels too?

Sinner: No Father. I'm not a monster.

Father: Well, I would give you penance, but you didn't really commit a sin.

Sinner: What do you mean?

Father: Well licking a car isn't really a sin. So I can't give you penance for doing something that technically isn't wrong, biblically speaking.

Sinner: (prolonged beat) So I have to go?

Father: I'm afraid so, yes.

Sinner: But... if I have a sin I can talk to you, right?

Father: Well I guess-

Sinner: I'll be right back Father.

The Sinner leaves quickly. Blackout. The Sinner comes back, out of breath.

Sinner: (*Kneeling, crossing self*) Forgive me Father for I have sinned. It has been twenty minutes since my last confession.

Father: Oh? You know you don't have to come back here so often.

Sinner: Father-

Father: Speak, child.

Sinner: Father, in the past twenty minutes I have done horrible things. I hope God can forgive me for what I have done.

Father: What have you done, my child?

Sinner: After my last confession, I went to the Starbucks around the corner. I bought a small tea. And I took two hundred and seven packets of sugar.

Father: You stole two hundred and seven packets of sugar?

Sinner: Yes Father. Oh Lord forgive me.

Father: Did you put any in your tea?

Sinner: I put all of it in my tea.

Father: You put two hundred and seven packets of sugar in your tea?

Sinner: Yes.

Father: Did you drink it?

Sinner: It's more of a solid now.

Father: I would give you penance, but again, technically that's not a sin.

Sinner: But I stole two hundred and seven packets of sugar!

Father: I understand what you did, but you bought a small tea. So technically again it's not stealing.

Sinner: But I stole. Thou shall not steal.

Father: You didn't steal. You were just a horrible customer. I hope you didn't give your real name.

Sinner: Don't worry I gave them yours.

Father: Please come back at a later time. But right now I have to hear other people. I'm sorry. But move along, please.

Sinner: I'll come back with a real sin this time!

Father: No that's not what I meant.

Sinner leaves. Blackout. Sinner comes back, days have passed.

Sinner: Forgive me Father for I have sinned.

Father: Confess to me your sins.

Sinner: It has been four days since my last confession. And I have done horrible things.

Father: Yes?

Sinner: I tickled a lot of sheep.

Father: What?

Sinner: I tickled sheep.

Father: Where?

Sinner: On the sides.

Father: I meant where did you find sheep.

Sinner: Oh, uh, the petting zoo.

Father: Did you pay to go the petting zoo?

Sinner: Of course.

Father: And you tickled all the sheep?

Sinner: Not all the sheep. Just most of them.

Father: Why not all of them?

Sinner: I didn't have the time. Besides, people start looking at you funny if you tickle sheep. After about thirty to forty five minutes, I couldn't take the attention.

Father: I would think this is a sin. But you paid. So it's more just weird than anything else. It's not technically a sin.

Sinner: But Father, you don't understand. I hath tickled sheep.

Father: I understand. Believe me it makes all of us uncomfortable. But it's not a sin for you to tickle sheep.

Sinner: So you won't talk to me?

Father: I can't. I'm very busy here. You should hear some of the sins these people have. Well you shouldn't that'd probably ruin the point of confession. But right now I have to pay attention to them, I can't be spending my time with people who are just weird.

Sinner: Well when will you be able to talk?

Father: I, I, I don't know.

Sinner: Do you have to do a confession a lot?

Father: The new guy always does.

Sinner: I'm sorry about that.

Father: I don't mind. In a few years I'll have my own parish, and then I'll make the new guy do this.

Sinner: You'd make the new guy do this?

Father: Well yeah.

Sinner: But that's not fair.

Father: What do you mean?

Sinner: Look, you'd rather be a real priest right.

Father: I am a real priest.

Sinner: Father.

Father: Go on.

Sinner: And you would make the new guy, the new person who is you, do what you don't want to do.

Father: Well yeah. Am I supposed to always do this?

Sinner: Yes.

Father: That's not fair.

Sinner: Oh no, you don't think it's fair?!

Father: Hey, watch it.

Sinner: Is getting a priest mad a sin?

Father: No.

Sinner: Come on!

Father: I'm sorry, but this isn't by the book.

Sinner: So, you really won't talk to me.

Father: I'm very busy. I'm sorry.

Sinner: Fine. I'll be back Father, and you'll have to talk to me this time.

Sinner leaves. Blackout. Sinner comes back. A significant amount of time has passed.

Sinner: Forgive me Father for I have sinned. It has been three months since my last confession.

Father: It's been a long time. What did you do?

Sinner: You'll like this one. Now you'll actually have to listen to me.

Father: What did you do?

Sinner: It's a good one.

Father: Just tell me.

Sinner: I'm the number two person in a pyramid scheme.

Father: Well, I guess that's a sin.

Sinner: Yes! Now you have to talk to me.

Father: You could have always spoken to another priest you know.

Sinner: But I wanted to talk to you. And now you can. You have to talk to me because I'm a sinner. Oh lord, forgive me! Now let's get down to business!

Father: The Lord forgives you for-

Sinner: No. That's not what I want.

Father: What?

Sinner: I want to talk to you. I want to get your forgiveness.

Father: Why do you want my forgiveness?

Sinner: Because I've had everyone else's. I want to talk to you. I want you to hear me.

Father: Go on.

Sinner: I've been lonely. I haven't had anyone to talk to so I decided hey, let's try a priest. I didn't start at this church, I'm sorry for that, but it's the truth. And every person I talked to just gave me God's forgiveness. I thanked them each time, and it felt good, but it didn't do anything. I still felt the same. Lonely. I guess I didn't really have any sins, at least not big ones. So I thought that maybe if I had more sins it'd feel better to go to confession. But I didn't want to do anything too bad, so I came here with my sins. And you didn't. You didn't forgive me. You said I hadn't actually sinned.

Father: Because you hadn't.

Sinner: I know Father. You kept sending me away, and I just wanted to talk.

Father: You could have seen another priest you know right.

Sinner: I know. But they would have just forgiven me. They would have talked at me, not spoken to me. What I needed was someone to speak to me. What I needed was someone like you. I didn't think I needed it but I did.

Father: Even though I sent you away?

Sinner: Yes. You told me that what I did wasn't so bad. So maybe I'm not so bad.

Father: I did that.

Sinner: Yeah. You gave me a reason to keep coming back. You gave me someone to talk to. No one had ever wanted to talk to me before. Everyone had just sent me away. Everyone had just said you're forgiven and that was the end of it. Everyone never wanted to see me again. But you did.

Father: Well it was my job.

Sinner: And you did it well.

Father: Thank you. Although I don't think the goal is to make you commit more sins. That may defeat the purpose.

Sinner: I've just needed someone, and you've been that person.

Father: So what do you want to talk about?

Sinner: Well, first, how do I get out of a pyramid scheme?

Father: I'd imagine reporting it to the police.

Sinner: The police don't really want to hear from me anymore.

Father: Because you keep licking their cars.

Sinner: Yeah.

Father: Understood. Is there anything else you want to talk about?

Sinner: How's your day been.

Father: Good. You know no one's ever asked me that before. No one has ever asked me how I'm doing.

Sinner: I'd imagine. Who would want to talk to a priest?

Father: You.

Sinner: But I was desperate.

Father: Thanks.

Sinner: It's not something I'm proud of. But I thought, hey who is someone who has to talk to me? Who is someone who can't leave? Who is someone who has to listen to me? Who is someone who no matter what I say has to be supportive or at least has to forgive me for what I've done?

Father: A priest.

Sinner: But not just any priest. One who is lonely, and doing confession.

Father: So that's why you wanted to talk to me?

Sinner: Yeah.

Father: Well at least you're nice. I hear some horrible people. And I've only been hearing people for a few months. You've been someone to look forward to.

Sinner: Well I'll admit having to think up of a sin to get to talk to you has been the most active I've been in weeks.

Father: You know none of these have technically been sins.

Sinner: Would you rather have me murder someone? Or rob someone? Or used the lord's name in vain? I chose these things because they're the best I could do, without actually having to do something horrible.

Father: Huh. Well I mean I haven't talked to you for long. But are you less lonely?

Sinner: Yeah. A little.

Father: So did you really do all of those things that you said you did?

Sinner: Yeah. I'm no longer allowed into that Starbucks or petting zoo.

Father: Understandable.

Sinner: Yeah I'd say so.

Father: At least you didn't do anything too bad.

Sinner: Yeah. Just spent the last few weeks trying to get a random priest to talk to me. But hey he talked to me. And now I'm a little less lonely and it was worth it.

Father: I'm glad. So would you like to-

Sinner: To what?

Father: Be forgiven.

Sinner: Yeah. I guess. I think I'm ready this time.

Father: I forgive you for your sins and the Lord forgives you for all of your sins. Go forth into the world.

Sinner: Thank you Father.

Father: When I get my own parish can I count on you to be my first parishioner?

Sinner: Sorry, I'm not very religious.

Father: Of course. Goodbye my Child.

Sinner: Goodbye Father.

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Playwright Bio: Harrison Zeiberg is currently a student at Wheaton College MA studying History and Political Science. He is from Malden, Ma and has been lucky enough to participate in several ten-minute play writing competitions, and also devised theater. He is happy for once to write a comedic play, after so writing many sad ones, and he hopes you enjoy it.*

COMING DOWN

By Janet Colson

THE PLAYWRGHT SPEAKS: *I can see the influence of Thornton Wilder's The Long Christmas Dinner in the way I approached the timing of the play, but I wasn't thinking about that when I wrote it. Setting Coming Down on a plane allowed me to condense time and compress the trajectory of a relationship into ten minutes, from takeoff to landing. In the play I wanted to explore the dynamics of potential, possibility, rejection, and disappointment – and where the space between fantasy and reality are a matter of perspective. The play was performed at Goddard College as part of the Take Ten play festival. (Spacing is playwright's own.)*

Coming Down

A short play by Janet Ehrlich Colson

Biggie Pollack – 40's, black, award-winning poet

Karen – 40's, white, not very successful actress and aspiring writer

On a Boeing 737 in seats 23 D and F (the aisle seat and the window seat on the right side of the plane). Karen enters, puts her carry-on in an overhead bin gets into the aisle seat, 23 D and buckles up. Biggie comes in shortly thereafter, finds his seat, 23 D, puts down his carry-on and checks his ticket.

Biggie: Hi.

Karen: Hi.

Biggie: Are you 23 D?

Karen: Oh, I thought I was in 23 F. Am I in the wrong seat?

Biggie: That's fine. I can sit by the window.

Karen: Oh, no. I like sitting by the window. Sorry about that.

She moves over to the window seat. Biggie pulls a magazine out of his carry-on and then pushes it under the seat in front of him and buckles up. He opens his magazine, then closes it, unbuckles and takes off his jacket.

Biggie: I'm Biggie, how are you doing?

Karen: Karen. Nice to meet you.

They shake hands. Make eye contact. There is a palpable connection between them. He breaks it and buckles up again.

Biggie: Going to L.A.?

Karen: Yeah, I live there.

Biggie: I'm sorry.

Karen: It's not that bad.

Biggie: I'm sure it's fine. It's just what people say.

Karen: Is it?

Biggie: About L.A.? Yeah.

Karen: You're right. Where's home for you?

Biggie: Upstate New York.

Karen: You're lucky. It's pretty there.

Biggie: It is.

Karen: O'Hare's inhuman.

Biggie: Really?

Karen: I hate it.

Biggie: Yeah, it's pretty bad.

Pause. They sit there. She tightens her seatbelt.

Karen: What's in L.A.?

Biggie: A writer's conference.

Karen: You're a writer?

Biggie: Yes. A poet.

Karen: Very cool. I love to write, but I wouldn't call myself a writer.

Biggie: What would you call yourself?

Karen: Besides Karen? Well, I'm an actress, sort of, not very successful, and I teach Pilates, and I'm a mom.

Biggie: Have I seen you in anything?

Karen: Probably not. I haven't done anything big, just small stuff. I'm in a White Castle commercial right now, but it's regional, so you wouldn't have seen it.

Biggie: And you teach –

Karen: Pilates. You know. Like yoga, but you don't have to act like you enjoy it.

Biggie: So why do you do it?

Karen: It's a good workout.

Biggie: How many kids?

Karen: A boy and a girl. 7 and 9. You?

Biggie: Two girls and a boy, 4, 5 and 8.

Karen: Wow. The boy's the oldest?

Biggie: No, he's in the middle.

Karen: Oh.

Silence

Biggie: I'm going through a divorce right now.

Karen: That's gotta be hard.

Biggie: Yeah.

Silence

Karen: So what are you doing at the conference?

Biggie: I came out with a new book. They did an article about me. You can see it if you want in the magazine.

Karen looks at the magazine.

Karen: Wow, this is amazing. Biggie Pollack. Award-winning poet. You're the real deal! You must be so excited.

Biggie: Thanks. It's nice.

Karen: *(Reading)* Parabolae. Promises. The pestle-scarred cornfields. *(She looks out window)* We're flying over some of those now.

Biggie: Yeah.

Karen: I like to write on planes.

Biggie: Why is that?

Karen: Last words, I guess? Because we could die at any second. Sorry. That wasn't a good thing to say right now.

Biggie: It's okay. It'd be quick. And what would you be writing in your final moments?

Karen: It's stupid. I'm not a real writer.

Biggie: It isn't stupid. What is it?

Karen: A memoir about my hair.

Biggie: That's what you'd be writing if the plane went down?

Karen: That's what I'm working on, but if we went down, I'd rather be asleep.

Biggie: Why your hair?

Karen: There's a lot to say. *(Beat)* It's actually about mental illness.

Biggie: So it's not about your hair.

Karen: Not...exactly. It's kind of personal.

Biggie: What other kinds of stories are there?

Karen: Well, I'm not sure I'm ready to tell you about it.

Biggie: You don't want to get personal?

Karen: I don't know. Maybe. We do have four hours, right?

Biggie: Unless we come crashing down any minute.

Karen: Yeah, sorry about that.

Biggie: I'm not. It makes you want to go for it, right?

Karen: Right. Like we should do something that we've never done before.

Biggie: What, like the mile high club?

Karen: No. No, I just thought we could tell each other anything. You know, like truth or dare, but just the truth part. I wasn't thinking about – I mean. I wasn't thinking that. Isn't that illegal?

Biggie: Sorry, I misunderstood. God. Sorry.

Karen: No, that's – that's an interesting idea. But I don't want to get arrested.

Biggie: Nor do I. I have a conference to get to.

Karen: And I have to get home to my kids. (*Beat*). Sorry. Buzzkill.

Biggie: It's fine.

Karen: Lucky we don't have anyone in the seat between us.

Biggie: For sure.

Karen: So, what can I tell you?

Biggie: Anything you want. The sky's the limit.

Karen: All right. Fine. I've never been with a black man.

Biggie: Have you ever been with a black woman?

Karen: No.

Biggie: I'm messing with you.

Karen: Got it. I have an urge to - lick your cheekbone.

Biggie: Why is that?

Karen: Um. I find you very attractive?

Biggie: Because I'm black?

Karen: No.

Biggie: No?

Karen: I don't know. That's part of it, I guess. I don't know. It's more than the color of your skin. Maybe the texture? Or the pattern of your facial hair. I just - I'd like to taste your sweat.

Biggie: What else would you like to do?

Karen: Kiss you with your clothes off.

Biggie: You want to be a writer? You gotta give me more than that.

Karen: Your turn.

Biggie: Not my genre.

Karen: No fair. What would you have me do?

Biggie: We could work with the licking theme.

Karen: I'm pretty good at it.

Biggie: I bet you are.

Silence

Biggie: Do you want to dance?

Karen: What? Where – here?

Biggie: Yeah, let's dance.

Karen: Won't we get in trouble?

Biggie: Nah, we gotta stretch our legs. Besides, I'm a famous poet.

Karen: You ride coach.

Biggie: Screw you. Are we dancing?

Karen: Yeah...okay.

They get up. Biggie kicks the carry on out of the way. Suddenly the parameters of the plane no longer exist. They could be in a dance hall. They start out in a traditional ballroom dance position and take a few steps. Biggie definitely leads. A fox trot or a tango. Swing. He spins Karen, dips her. Hovers for a moment. They come close to kissing, but they don't. Biggie brings Karen up to standing. She catches her breath.

Karen: I think I like you.

They look at each other in the eye. Still holding hands.

Biggie: I like you too, Karen.

A few more dance steps.

Karen: I think I more than like you.

He puts a little space between them

Biggie: You're married.

Karen: Technically so are you.

He drops her hands. They do a few dance moves but don't touch each other.

Biggie: I've moved out.

Karen: How's that going?

Biggie takes a step back. Karen takes a step towards him. They do a few moves, bobbing their heads around each other, the alligator clap.

Biggie: It's okay. I'm seeing some other people.

Karen takes a step back, they do the move where you bend your knees and raise one arm, bent over your head and shake it and something like the Egyptian. Mirror each other. He doesn't move towards her.

Karen: Like plural people?

Biggie: Like plural people.

Karen: Oh.

Almost a lull. They dance in place to fill the time. Their own minimalistic moves.

Biggie: Not at the same time.

Karen: I didn't think that.

Karen's dancing becomes more self-consciously white. Biggie's moves are more repetitive and lacking enthusiasm. He creates a little more physical distance on each exchange.

Karen: Do you want to dance with these other women on an airplane? They're women, right?

Biggie: Yes, they're women.

Karen: How many?

Biggie: Three or four, I guess.

Karen: You guess?

Biggie: Three.

Karen: Would that include me?

Biggie: No.

A couple more moves, Karen does the hammer. Biggie does a half-hearted running man. Then Karen stops.

Karen: Why not?

He's still doing the running man. But more assertively.

Biggie: You're married.

Karen: The aisles are too narrow for this. I'm going back to my seat.

Biggie: I'm not ready to settle back down. See you in a few.

Karen: Fine. Catch you later.

She gets back to her seat. Buckles herself in. Biggie does some dance moves circling around her seat backwards without looking at her then lands back in the seat next to her (could be an ironic moonwalk). Sits down. Karen's a bit frosty. Biggie is, too, when it comes down to it.

Biggie: Hey. Sorry I was gone for a while.

Karen: Hey. No worries.

Silence.

Biggie: Sorry. I'm a little distracted.

Karen: Don't worry about it.

Silence.

Biggie: Did you finish the article?

It takes her a half second to realize what he's talking about.

Karen: No, I didn't have a chance.

Biggie: You can keep it.

Karen. Oh. Okay, thanks.

She pulls out her journal and begins writing.

Biggie: Working on your memoir?

Karen: Nope. A poem.

Biggie: You write poems?

Karen: Not really. I don't know what I'm doing.

Biggie: You could take a class.

Karen: You're right. I could.

Biggie: I teach.

Karen: Of course you do.

Biggie: What do you mean of course I do?

Karen: Where do you teach?

Biggie: A couple of places. University of Connecticut. City College New York. SUNY.

Karen: You're busy.

Biggie: Too busy.

Karen: That's great.

Biggie: Why? Why is it great?

Karen: Because you're doing it.

Biggie: You have to.

Karen: Do I?

Biggie: If that's what you want.

Karen: I'm not sure what I want.

Biggie: You gotta figure that out.

Karen: Why are you telling me what I gotta do?

Biggie: I'm not. (*Beat*). Look Karen, I like you. But I'm really not available.

Karen: I got that. I'm not either.

She keeps writing.

Biggie: Looks like we're landing.

He buckles up.

Karen: I thought we just took off.

She puts away her journal.

Biggie: It's going to take a while to get cleared to come down.

Beat

Karen: So, what's your new book about?

Biggie: It's personal.

Karen: Sounds promising.

Biggie: You want to play a game of Scrabble? We have time.

Karen: That's okay. You'd just beat me.

Biggie: Probably. I'm pretty good at it.

Karen: I bet you are.

Biggie: I'll just play myself.

Karen: Sounds good.

Silence. Karen looks out the window.

Biggie: We're here.

Karen: Uh-huh.

Biggie unbuckles his seatbelt.

Biggie: Karen, I'm sorry.

She looks at him.

Karen: Why are you apologizing? You don't owe me anything.

Biggie: Well, take care.

Karen: You, too, Biggie Pollack.

Biggie stands up. Gets his bag.

Karen: You know you're going to be standing there a while before you can get off.

Biggie: I know. You're going to be sitting there for a while, too.

Karen: Yeah, I know.

Silence.

Karen: Can I ask you something?

Biggie: What about?

Karen: Is my hair okay?

Biggie: Yeah, it's fine.

Karen: Thanks.

She looks back out the window. He looks towards the front of the aircraft and waits for them to open the door.

End

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Janet Colson is a playwright/director/pole dancer in Lansing, Michigan. Her hybrid piece, Storycatcher, is pending publication in the upcoming issue of The Champagne Room. She is a collaborator for Ixion Wheel's rUSt, a theatre piece that has been postponed due to coronavirus. Janet has just completed ZA-92, a short play about putting on a show during a zombie apocalypse. She is currently working on a play about coming out in quarantine. Janet received her MFA in creative writing at Goddard College last June.*

THINGS KEEP CHANGING & IT'S TIME TO DIE

By Amanda F. Martin

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *I had a dream where I was underwater, and didn't know why. Halfway through the dream, my brain came up with a horrifying explanation for why I was underwater: I was the mother of a still-born baby, imagining herself as said baby, eternally underwater. This dream haunted me for a while, so I decided to write about it. I'm also generally interested in how characters "move on" despite the impossibility of ever fully escaping the past. A lot of my plays explore this issue. (Spacing is playwright's own.)*

Things Keep Changing & It's Time To Die
A short play by A.F. Martin

CAST

FIONA - f, 36.

CARL - any gender, any age. Dressed in a poorly made lobster costume.

MAN-BOY - m. Plays 10 years old but can be a person of any age.

MUSTACHED WOMAN - f, any age. Could be in a circus.

FIONA is bathed in blue light while sound/music that somehow gestures to the experience of being in the womb plays. It's peaceful & strange. FIONA is cross legged & her eyes are closed. Maybe she's meditating. Suddenly, the sound/music stops, and FIONA opens her eyes and tries to breathe, but can't. She struggles for a moment but then figures out how to go on without breathing, whatever that might look like. CARL, a person in a poorly made lobster costume, enters with an accordion.

CARL

Oi! Lady!

FIONA notices CARL.

FIONA

Ohmygosh Carl!

CARL

Fiona...

FIONA runs over for a hug. CARL somehow does not allow it.

FIONA

You're not happy to see me.

CARL

... I don't know. I have a very busy day.

FIONA

I could really use a friend right now.

Beat.

CARL

You're standing where I need to put this accordion.

FIONA

Sorry.

She moves over and CARL positions the accordion. CARL is very precise with the work at hand.

How've you been?

CARL

You're only asking me that so you can tell me about yourself.

FIONA

Well... that's very rude.

CARL

Isn't it true, though? You always make this about you.

FIONA

Isn't it about me?

CARL

I HAVE A LIFE, FIONA. I continue to exist when you're not here. You did not create me. This is not the Sims. You treat me like I'm a Sim-lobster. Fuck you.

FIONA

Sorry, I didn't know.

CARL

You never even ask how my kids are.

FIONA

I didn't know you had kids!

CARL

You never asked.

CARL has become sad & sits with the accordion & picks it up and plays something. Maybe it's good or maybe it's horrible. CARL puts it back down.

CARL

I have work to do.

FIONA

Carl...

CARL exits. FIONA picks up the accordion.

CARL (O.S.)

AND DON'T TOUCH MY ACCORDION!

FIONA puts it down as softly as she can. CARL re-enters with a sign that says DONALD TRUMP 2020¹ & looks for a place to put it, but then notices the accordion.

CARL

You touched it.

FIONA

Well... yes.

CARL

You never change, Fiona.

CARL keeps looking for the best place for the sign. Meanwhile:

You're nosy. You're selfish. You never confront your fears or your past. You only come here when something weird is happening up there that makes you remember but then you dream about nothing and nothing ever happens.

CARL puts the sign into the floor aggressively and exits. FIONA looks at the DONALD TRUMP 2020 sign. Then the accordion. She's confused. CARL re-enters with a yoga mat & begins to furiously do yoga. FIONA sits next to the mat, too close.

FIONA

You know Carl... I do think I dream about things. I'm underwater, that's something! And you're here, since you're a lobster. You belong here. But nothing else ever does. That's why I like dreams. Because in real life nothing makes any sense. And here, it's just OK that it blatantly doesn't. Like, when I'm awake, I feel like everything is really... illogical, and nonsensical, and horrible, and sad, and sometimes I go into a coffee shop and a Puerto Rican kid gives me a Danish scone and I'm like, what? You know? No. Maybe not. Anyway. Everything just seems weird to me and everybody goes on like everything is normal when it's definitely not.

Beat. CARL is in a difficult balancing position.

Why did you say I never confront my fears or my past? Carl?

CARL tries to ignore her.

Wow Carl you're super good at yoga.

CARL falls out of the balancing position.

¹ If this is produced after the 2020 election, and Trump won, this sign should say DONALD TRUMP 2024, THAT'S RIGHT Y'ALL HE CHANGED THAT AMENDMENT! AMENDMENT TO THE AMENDMENT, MOTHERFUCKERS! If Trump did not win, this sign should say DONALD TRUMP 2024, THAT'S RIGHT HE'S COMIN' BACK MOTHERFUCKERS! If this is produced after the 2020 election and Donald Trump is no longer relevant or funny, you can just write something in the spirit of this sign.

CARL

GODDAMMIT.

FIONA

Sorry.

CARL

I'm just trying to find my zen. And here you are with your intellectualizing... You should think less about your problems and more about ... Just *feel* what is happening here. Really feel it. Blah blah blah mind-body connection blah blah chakras.

FIONA

I don't know anything about chakras.

CARL

I know. I had to fill in most of that sentence with blahs.

CARL goes back to yoga.

FIONA

Carl... Hey, Carl? I was wondering... maybe you can help me do whatever I need to do here? It's just, I feel uncomfortable somehow... something is very wrong. Something is... missing. Yes, that's it! Something is missing. What am I missing, Carl? Carl?

CARL

I'M CLEARLY DOING A THING.

CARL throws the yoga mat and exits in a huff.

FIONA

What am I missing... What am I ... What...

A hat falls from the sky.

No, I don't think that's it.

A small MAN-BOY being pulled/pushed by MUSTACHED WOMAN (somehow... maybe a wheelbarrow? Or maybe she's pulling him like Lucky in Waiting for Godot?) enters.

MAN-BOY

СТОЙ! (Stoy!)²

MUSTACHED WOMAN stops. MAN-BOY gets out of whatever he is in.

MAN-BOY

(Singing. You can make this song up. Maybe the mustached woman plays the accordion to accompany the man-boy, or some other instrument she has brought along. The song gets faster as it goes on.)

OOHHH MY NAME IS JOHN
I DON'T HAVE A SCHLONG
THAT'S WHY THEY DON'T CALL ME LONG JOHN SCHLONG

I NEED TO PISS
BUT FIRST A KISS
FOR A LOVELY MADAME I'D NEVER MISS
COME HERE YA SLAG
WHO'LL SURELY NAG
ANY MAN TO DEATH WHO FINDS... A...
MAN-BOY realizes he doesn't know how to finish this. He panics.
BAG! A BAG!

MUSTACHED WOMAN laughs at MAN-BOY, who cries. As he cries, MUSTACHED WOMAN laughs harder.

MAN-BOY

SHUT UP! I HATE YOU! I'M RUNNING AWAY!

He runs off, crying. MUSTACHED WOMAN, who has laughed herself to tears, wipes her face calmly and exits with whatever she brought on.

FIONA

Yeah... I don't think that's it either.

CARL re-enters.

CARL

I have collected my thoughts.
CARL sits, calmly.
We've known each other... how long Fiona?

² Russian for 'stop!'

FIONA

10 years.

CARL

A long time for a dream lobster. Usually... we get... usually something is resolved. Existence is very painful, you know.

FIONA

I really didn't know...

CARL

It's not like you can control what you dream about.

FIONA

Thank you. You've become very wise, Carl.

CARL

I've been doing a lot of yoga and meditation. Anyway. It's been a long time since you've been here ... I mean, years? And I was worried, during this time... I was worried maybe you'd pushed me down so far into whatever part of your brain that you'd totally repressed or forgotten about me and I'd just be forced to live here, unresolved and bored and in firey pain for the rest of your life.

FIONA

The pain is firey?

CARL

I mean... yeah.

FIONA

Oh I'm feeling very guilty all of sudden.

CARL

Well there is something you can do....

FIONA

Anything!

CARL

Very good. MAN-BOY!

MAN-BOY re-enters, again pulled by MUSTACHED WOMAN.

MAN-BOY

СТОЙ! (Stoy!)

She stops and he gets off. He begins to sing again. Same music as before.

MAN-BOY

OHHHH MY NAME IS STEVE
I NEED TO SNEEZE
SO YOU CAN CALL ME SNEEZY STEVE

I NEED TO FART
AND THEN DEPART
BECAUSE MY FARTS SMELL RATHER TART

COME HERE YA WHORE
YOU BIG DUMB SNORE
I WANT TO WHACK YOUR.... YOUR

MAN-BOY begins to panic. MUSTACHED WOMAN laughs even harder than before.

YOUR.... CORE??? YOUR DOOR?! YES, I WANT TO WHACK YOUR DOOR!!

MUSTACHED WOMAN laughs so hard it hurts her. Like, she's in actual pain. Maybe she's writhing around muttering things in Russian or faux-Russian.

MAN-BOY

I WISH YOU'D DIE, YOU BULLY! I'M TELLING ON YOU!

MAN-BOY tries to run off in tears, but CARL grabs the back of his shirt. MAN-BOY continues to run but gets nowhere for a while before he notices that CARL is holding him back.

MAN-BOY

I hate all of you! All of you are so mean to me!

MAN-BOY cries into a pile on the floor. FIONA sits next to him. FIONA & CARL comfort him together.

FIONA

Hey hey hey.... It's going to be OK.

MAN-BOY blows his nose into CARL's lobster costume.

CARL

Can you tell us your real name?

MAN-BOY

(Kind of making it up) Jeremy?

CARL

And how old are you Jeremy?

MAN-BOY

I'm 10.

FIONA stands up.

FIONA

Oh... no....nonononono

CARL

Fiona-

FIONA

Nonono Carl I'm not ready for this

CARL

I AM READY TO DIE FOR THE LOVE OF GOD -
FIONA DO YOU WANT ME TO LIVE IN FIREY PAIN OR DO YOU WANT TO SET ME
FREE

FIONA

Oh... the latter.

CARL

THEN SIT THE FUCK DOWN. Sorry, Jeremy.

FIONA sits.

FIONA

But he's... he's not... is he?

CARL

You tell me.

FIONA

(To Jeremy) I'm not trying to replace you.

MAN-BOY

Who are you?

FIONA

I didn't want you to end up like this.

MAN-BOY

Like what? A terrible singer-songwriter??!?!

MAN-BOY cries and buries himself in CARL's lap. CARL looks at FIONA like, what can ya do?

FIONA

Look ... honey... I liked your song.

MAN-BOY

Really?

FIONA

Uh, yeah.

MAN-BOY

What was your favorite part?

FIONA

The... lyrics.

MAN-BOY

(Sitting up, encouraged) Yeah... I'm a pretty good lyricist.

MUSTACHED WOMAN chortles but MAN-BOY doesn't hear her. CARL shushes her. MUSTACHED WOMAN exits angrily.

FIONA

Do you want to sing me something else?

MAN-BOY

There's this other song... it's stupid though.

FIONA

I'm sure it's great.

MAN-BOY

OK. So it's like -

From somewhere (behind CARL somehow?), he pulls out a stringed instrument - guitar or ukulele probably. The melody here is different from the last 2 songs but still very childlike and rough.

WATER IS A PEACEFUL-SCARY ELEMENT
A CROCODILE-SNAKE OR A SLEEPING ELEPHANT
LIKE A BIG ANIMAL THAT COULD EAT YOU WHOLE
AN INCONSPICUOUS BOOBYTRAP, LIKE A SINKHOLE

MY LIFE DIDN'T REALLY GO AS PLANNED
BUT THAT'S OK, I STARTED A BAND
I LIKE TO SING MY LITTLE SONGS
DON'T KNOW WHERE ELSE I COULD BELONG

WHERE ARE MY FEET I CAN'T FIND MY FEET
SOMETIMES I WONDER IF I EVEN NEED FEET???
EVERYTHING'S A BLUR DOWN UNDER
AND SOMETIMES I CAN'T HELP BUT WONDER
WHY I'M HERE?

CARL bursts out crying.

MAN-BOY, cont.

Um... I don't know about that last part. But that's my song.

FIONA

I loved -

CARL

(Sobbing) It's the most... it's the most beautiful thing I've ever heard.

MAN-BOY

Thanks everybody. That means a lot.

CARL

Fiona, tell him how much you loved it.

FIONA

I was just trying to!

CARL

You are a bad mother.

FIONA
WHAT.

MAN-BOY
What?

CARL

You don't know how to support a blossoming international talent like Jeremy. *(To Jeremy)* Can I adopt you?

MAN-BOY

What is happening.

FIONA

I'm... your mother?

MAN-BOY

Oh I don't have a mother.

FIONA

Let me explain -

MAN-BOY

(To Carl) You told me I didn't have a mother!

CARL

Oh. I was lying.

MAN-BOY

I HATE YOU CARL. Are you really my mom?

FIONA

I don't know.

CARL

What do you think? He's 10 and he's been drowning his whole life in your subconscious.

FIONA

I'm your mother.

MAN-BOY

Wait... is this why I'm such a good musician? Because I have a childhood trauma and abandonment issues??

FIONA

Yes, probably.

MAN-BOY

Cool.

CARL

You know what you need to do, Fiona.

FIONA

But we're just meeting!

Beat. She looks at MAN-BOY. A beat. And then, with difficulty...

I used to dream about you a lot, but *you* were never here before. I'd just dream... that I *was* you, kind of. I'd wake up in the dream underwater, drowning, and I'd just go on drowning until I got used to it, eventually in the dreams I'd forget, I'd honestly forget what it had been like to be me, a person who was born into a world, onto land, not water. I'd forget what breathing was, but I still knew, even though all I'd ever known was drowning, that I needed something, I had a felt absence of *something*.

And I'd wake up, and ... I'd miss you so much.

And I'd feel so bad that all you ever knew was drowning. All I wanted, for both of us, was to wake up in a world where you'd have taken a breath. Just one would have been nice.

Or maybe that would have been worse.

I don't know.

Beat.

FIONA, cont.

Breathing feels really nice. I wish I could explain it to you.

Beat.

I loved you for 9 months.

I loved you more than -

Just, so much.

Beat.

I don't want this to happen again.

CARL

You can't control that.

FIONA

I know. But I'm still terrified.

CARL

Is Mike?

FIONA

Um... no. Mike, um... a few years ago... it was hard, after... Anyway. I got a donor. Which I mean, I think it's good this way, but I'm 36 now, which I know isn't old-old, but did you know that if you get pregnant after you're 35 it's technically a 'geriatric pregnancy' and I mean, they write 'geriatric pregnancy' on your medical forms? Which is like, I get that it's true but it's kind of fucked to see it written there, like it makes you think of all the risks, so when I went to my first appointment today and saw that and was like... Terrified.

MAN-BOY

I'm sorry you are a sad lady.

FIONA

Me too.

MAN-BOY hugs FIONA. It's long.

MAN-BOY

Can I sing you another song?

FIONA

Sure.

MAN-BOY

OH IT WON'T BE THE SAME
IT'S NEVER THE SAME
THE NIGHT IS LONG AND THE TUNE GOES ON AND ON AND ON
THE LEAVES KEEP GROWING
ON ALL THE PLANTS YOU'VE EVER KNOWN
THINGS KEEP CHANGING
AND IT'S TIME TO DIE
Did you like that?

FIONA

Um...

CARL

He has a point.

FIONA

Are you really ready?

MAN-BOY

It really is firey pain.

FIONA

Ohmygod I'm sorry guys.

CARL and MAN-BOY improvise some like 'yeah yeah it's fine, cool cool cool cool no doubt's while MUSTACHED LADY enters with a broom. She whacks MAN-BOY on the head with it.

MAN-BOY

OW!

MUSTACHE LADY

Пойдем! Давай! (Pie-ee-dyom! Da-vi!) (*repeats while she smacks him off*)³

FIONA

I can't promise you I'll move on right away. Like I'm pretty sure I'll have this dream again. As things go on... get closer to the end, you know. I can't promise anything.

CARL

Yeah... I guess it's important to be realistic.

FIONA giggles a bit.

CARL

What?

FIONA

It's just... you're a dream-lobster, is all.

CARL

Wha- oh, haha. Yeah I guess that is pretty funny.

³Russian for 'let's go! Come on!'

Beat.

FIONA

Thank you, by the way. I'm sorry you've felt scared and neglected and in horrible, fiery pain. I don't really know how to say this... but I love you, Carl.

Sexy music begins to play.

FIONA

Oh... no no no

CARL

Yeah that's not ... right.

The sexy music stops.

FIONA

Sorry. I think... just the hormones.

CARL

Yeah. Probably.

*The look away from each other uncomfortably, into the audience.
End of play.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Amanda Faye Martin is an American writer and dramaturg. She attended Kenyon College where she learned how to think by wandering around Amish cornfields, and holds an MFA in Dramaturgy from the A.R.T. Institute at Harvard University. She is currently the Playwriting Fellow at the University of Otago in Dunedin, New Zealand.*

GRETA THUNBERG EATS A CHICKEN LEG

By Amanda F. Martin

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *I re-read a play I wrote when I was about 20. All the characters in this play desperately desire things – love, money, power – with absolutely no self-awareness or consideration of the outside world/other people. Part of me was like, oh damn this is a genius reflection on my generation and maybe America? And the other part was like, nobody should do this play and I should write a new play where the selfish desires of young people conflict with the desires of something bigger and more important. So, I came up with this plot: Greta Thunberg from the future comes back to 2019 to convince a group of millennials to take immediate action, but nobody does anything because they're all too concerned with their immediate, personal goals. I finished writing this at the start of Covid-19-craziness, which inspired a lot of the ignorance, denial, and selfishness displayed by the non-Greta characters. (Spacing is playwright's own.)*

Greta Thunberg Eats a Chicken Leg

By Amanda Faye Martin

CAST

SASHA. M, 20s. Looks kind of like young, sexy Stalin.

SAM. M, 20s. Iago.

YASMIN. F, 20s. Lead in a romantic comedy.

JESS. F, 20s-30s. On the prowl.

GRETA. F, 30s. From the future. Spiraling.

TIME & PLACE

LA & New York, 2019.

NOTES

The time & space of this play is fluid. Transitions are fast and non-realistic. The entire cast is always on stage.

ONE

ALL but GRETA are in the main playing space.

Technically, SASHA & SAM are talking to each other while YASMIN & JESS chat - but everybody is mostly just talking to themselves. SAM is eating a bucket of fried chicken.

SASHA

As soon as I'm not actively occupied I feel like shit. I'm confronted by my condition as Pascal would say. Yesterday was good but I was high for 14 hours straight. And I planted marijuana. Okay I've totally fucked this up. Here's a couple things: I'm trying to be emotionally honest, and here's the only thing I've come up with. You're the only thing that I've come up with that makes me happy. Being with you is the only place things make sense.

SAM

That was a text?

SASHA

No I emailed it

SAM

My grandfather emails. (*Re. the chicken*) Want some?

YASMIN

Sasha sent me this thing, trying to be 'emotionally honest?'

JESS

Ugh I hate when men have feelings

YASMIN

So it is weird

JESS

It's definitely annoying

SAM

When did you send it to her?

SASHA

Like a week ago?

YASMIN

Maybe he's just being Russian

JESS

Maybe he's being possessed by a Russian poet! That would be hot. Have you ever seen a picture of young Stalin? Young Stalin was fiiiiine

YASMIN

Stalin wasn't a poet, and what do I say to this

SAM

You wanna see a pic of this girl I'm thinking of sleeping with tonight?

SASHA shrugs.

JESS

Sorry sorry I just can't stop thinking about young Stalin now

YASMIN

Ok ok - how about

She writes...

Hi! I'm sorry you're not doing well. And I know what you mean about work being distracting. It's useful, like we can add that to Pascal's list of distractions as um... who said that

JESS

What the fuck do you know about Pascal?

YASMIN

In college we used to talk about Pascal's list of distractions

JESS

So Sasha would lecture you about Pascal

YASMIN

Yeah... but, look, some guy like Marx or Nietzsche said we can add *work* to the list of distractions that if you engage in them, um, you're confronted by your 'condition.' That's a Pascalian thing.

JESS

...What's our 'condition'?

YASMIN

Um, existential depression?

JESS

Pascal was a bummer. Give me this

She writes for Yasmin

I wanted to let you know I read this and I'm sorry things aren't going well for you.

Anyway I'll reply more later. I have an audition this afternoon! Whoop! TTYL!

Annnnd...

A notification sound.

JESS

Bababing! Easy. How do you feel?

A beat. SAM/SASHA look at the message.

YASMIN

Kind of good!

JESS

I mean you guys already broke up though right?

YASMIN

Yeah. But now it feels like, done.

SAM

Yikes.

JESS

YES! Also sidenote is it weird that I'm like, still kinda JAZZY just thinking of young Stalin right now? Maybe that's fucked up. He kind of murdered a lot of people.

YASMIN

We should go out tonight.

JESS

Oh we are definitely going out tonight.

SAM

(To SASHA, re. Chicken wings) Are you sure you don't want some of this? Cuz I'm going to finish it if you don't want any.

TWO

GRETA enters the playing space. She is wearing a backpack. She looks at her hands, feet, etc in amazement.

GRETA

It worked. It worked!

Beat. She looks at her watch but is skeptical.

(Asking the audience) Sorry, what time is it? No, really, hello, I'm asking you - what time is it? And the date? OK. Thank you. That's good. That's very good...

She resets her watch while:

The one thing nobody tells you about time travel is that your watch doesn't automatically reset, the way it does when you land in a different time zone. Not that I've ever been on a plane. When I was 16 I sailed across the Atlantic Ocean in a solar panelled yacht. I am a big deal. Where I just came from things are 2019 is very cute in comparison to what is happening now.

But no more. Tonight... I begin to change my future. Our future.

She goes off to a non-playing space, takes off her backpack and begins to disguise herself as something that looks like young Stalin/Sasha with the contents. In the following scenes, she takes selfies and sets up her Tinder.

THREE

SAM

I have a solution.

SAM pours a bucket of water on SASHA's head.

SASHA

The fuck! Did you smoke some of my marijuana bush?

SAM

That's not marijuana. You planted sage. You smoked sage.

SASHA

So she's enjoying sunny California while I'm smoking sage and soaking wet and getting nowhere since we graduated and she answers my emails with, it doesn't even sound like her, maybe she's different in California? Maybe I should go and see her, maybe if she saw me...

SAM

I don't think her seeing you the way you are right now... is. Um,

SASHA

Oh.

SAM

Sorry. But look, I have an idea. You're a writer right?

SASHA

She hates my writing.

SAM

Well your writing style is very embarrassing for you. Girls like Yasmin don't want a guy like Pushkin. They want Guy Ritchie.

SASHA

I've never read his work.

SAM

Guy Ritchie!? OK, how about Hitchcock or Scorsese or – you have to know Tarantino.

SASHA

Of course I've heard of Tarantino.

SAM

HEARD?! SASHA YOU HAVE BEEN UNDER A ROCK.

SASHA

Yasmin likes Tarantino?

SAM

No, she just – she wants thrill and romance and excitement – wait, do you know Drive? The movie Drive?

SASHA

No.

SAM

You need to be Ryan Gosling.

SASHA

I am not Ryan Gosling. You are Ryan Gosling.

SAM

That's true but I mean with *words*. You are going to be the Ryan Gosling of words.

SASHA

... so what am I supposed to do?

SAM

You're gonna write a movie.

FOUR

JESS is swiping on Tinder, endless lefts. YASMIN watches.

YASMIN

I can't believe Netflix actually picked up his movie. He wrote that in like 4 hours.

JESS

It's actually not that impressive.

YASMIN

(Re. the Tindering) Wait! He might have been cute.

JESS

No.

YASMIN

How do you know? You're swiping before you can even see -

JESS

It's easy. Mirror picture. (*Swipe*) Gym shot. (*Swipe*) Just a dog. (*Swipe*)

JESS keeps swiping.

YASMIN

Ok but I don't get the ending. The ghost is his girlfriend but from the future and she kills him?

JESS

Well, kind of. She's not really a ghost.

YASMIN

I don't get it.

JESS

Well, they have this relationship where they have crazy chemistry but make each other miserable, so then when she enters the fragmenting chamber to rescue her dad, the future version of herself also fragments - OK this guy just has a picture of a cartoon dragon. Like as the main picture. Who is that for. Anyway - she enters the fragmenting chamber and there's a future version of herself but in the future they're married and have kids but are SUPER unhappy, so this future version of the girlfriend realises the only way she can stop herself and also the future version of the boyfriend's self from being unhappy, because I mean they are just so drawn to each other but also horrible for each other, is to ... kill him, yeah.

Beat.

Oh my god. Look at *him*.

YASMIN

Yeah he's ok.

JESS

OK? He is a Stalin-eque-fox.

JESS swipes right.

YASMIN

You really think the movie is good? I'm not ruining my career with it?

JESS

I never said it was good but it's a step up from that fascist Hallmark shit.

YASMIN

Oh my god it's not fascist.

JESS

I get that you need to tell yourself that to sleep at night and I still love you.

YASMIN

Thank you.

A Tinder notification sound. JESS looks at her phone.

JESS

I have a date tonight!

FIVE

GRETA disguised as a man. Ideally looks as much like SASHA/young Stalin as possible. The end of the date.

JESS

I want you to destroy me.

GRETA

(Awkwardly) I want to be the destroyer. Yes.

JESS

I want my body to feel like jelly.

GRETA

I want to ... pulverize your insides.

JESS

I want... pulverize?

GRETA

Sorry was that/ too much

JESS

NO, DO NOT! NEVER APOLOGIZE!

GRETA

SORRY

JESS

DON'T TELL ME YOU'RE SORRY

GRETA

OK I AM NOT SORRY!! I AM NOT GOING TO APOLOGIZE!

(It starts as a sex thing but then gets real for her)

I can do this... come here you dirty little slut. I am going to objectify you and you are going to like it! Because it is actually MORE feminist to treat you like this than a delicate precious object because wooing perpetuates the idea that women are something to be courted and won as an object! I am a good person and you deserve to be treated like trash because YOU ARE TRASH! You are part of the endless cycle of capitalism and money and media and sex, you are a cog in the wheel of destruction! YOU ALL ARE! YOU HAVE TO ACT! YOU MUST UNITE BEHIND THE SCIENCE! YOUR HOUSES ARE ON FIRE AND IF YOU DON'T COMPOST IT IS YOUR FUCKING FAULT! PART OF ME WANTS YOU TO SUFFER BECAUSE YOU DESERVE YOUR HORRIBLE FATE!!!BURN, BITCHES!!!! EAT YOUR STEAK ON YOUR TRANSATLANTIC FLIGHT, I HOPE YOU CRASH AND DROWN MOTHERFUCKER!!!!!!

JESS

Oh my god.

GRETA

I do not understand what just happened.

JESS

I have never been so turned on.

GRETA and JESS make out, hungrily. GRETA is surprised by her sudden sexual drive. Maybe there's music. Maybe it becomes slow motion and there are body parts and clothing items everywhere. Whatever happens, it's wild & weird & lyrical & building. Eventually, JESS reaches down for GRETA's cock.

JESS

Why aren't you hard?

SIX

YASMIN auditions. SAM reads the opposite part.

YASMIN

I always loved you, Ryan. But you know that love was only killing both of us.

SAM

I don't want to die!

YASMIN

You know it's the only way.

SAM

I love you, Veronica.

YASMIN

I know. I'm sorry.

YASMIN mimes killing SAM. SAM mock-dies.

SASHA

That was great.

YASMIN

Thanks.

SAM

Really great, we'll be in touch.

YASMIN

Um thanks. Sorry what was your name again?

SAM

Sam. I'll be playing Michael.

YASMIN

Oh! That's great. I'm glad.

Beat; SAM & YASMIN have a moment.

SEVEN

JESS

So I think I was catfished by Greta Thunberg.

YASMIN

Uh what why

JESS

We had this weird actually kinda hot sexual moment but then I realised she's a chic which honestly like that's totally fine with me, people are people and I'm into whatever but it was just, I was expecting a dude? So whatever, it was kind of weird, but then she started crying and tried to get me to rewrite that movie you're in and I was like HOW DO YOU EVEN KNOW ABOUT THAT and she was like yeah I'm Greta Thunberg from the future and it's the only way to save humanity.

YASMIN

I don't even know if I have the part.

JESS

You do. Greta told me. *You Killed Me* is a cult classic in 2045 and you're the star.

YASMIN

(Can't help but be pleased) Hahaha I mean that's crazy though right?

JESS

I don't know. She knew a lot of stuff. Apparently Sasha and I get married.

YASMIN

Woah. WOAHH. WHAT.

JESS

Apparently we fall in love during the making of this movie because I keep coming to work with you for the free food

YASMIN

Yeah movie sets have the BEST snacks

JESS

Right so Greta -

YASMIN

Hold on so there's time travel in the future?

JESS

Yeah but also the world is ending because of fires natural disasters etc etc also New York is gone

YASMIN

Oh... we knew that would happen though right?

JESS

Kinda but I didn't think it would happen to *us* you know

YASMIN

OK SO THIS IS INSANE RIGHT

GRETA enters. She looks pretty bad.

GRETA

Sorry Yasmin. I meant to infiltrate your friend group slowly and over the period of a few weeks convince Sasha to make subtle but effective rewrites to your movie that could subliminally convince viewers to stop eating meat and using gas fueled means of transportation but there's something wrong with me and now you know I'm Greta Thunberg so Hi.

Text message notification. YASMIN looks at her phone.

YASMIN

I got the part.

SEVEN

SASHA writes on a computer.

SASHA

In a strange way I feel like a hundred years have passed since we met but I still love you in whatever way I told you I loved you, then. It's not like I went on a vacation and miss that place. Being with you never felt like vacation... it felt like: landing somewhere new but mysteriously it feels like you're coming home. Everything is impossibly familiar. You've always lived there, but only now are you *physically* there. Even as the plane descends, you feel a warmth - a heaviness. You are where you are meant to be; you're home.

Beat. He thinks about what to write next....

A knock. He answers.

JESS

Hi. I'm Jess. Yasmin's friend.

SASHA

Oh! Hi. I've heard a lot about you.

JESS

Wow you really do look like Young Stalin.

SASHA

Thanks?

JESS

Wanna have some rebound sex?

SASHA

Um...

JESS

I'm wearing edible panties.

Beat.

They're bubblegum flavor.

SASHA

No thank you.

JESS

OK.

Beat.

I have some molly.

SASHA

I thought Yasmin was exaggerating with the Jess stories but this is pretty much exactly right.

JESS

Yeah I'm super fun. So yes to Molly?

SASHA

Umm... OK. Fuck it.

JESS

Thank god. I couldn't end up with somebody like - lame, you know?

SASHA

What?

Jess hands him a pill.

JESS

Do you have some water?

SASHA

Er - yeah. Hold on a sec.

SASHA exits the playing space. JESS looks on SASHA's computer.

SASHA re-enters with a glass of water.

SASHA

What are you doing.

JESS

Dude don't send this to her. It's super lame. Also, this is gonna sound bananas but Greta Thunberg from the future says you and Yasmin have no chance anyway and actually *we* as in *you and I* get married, so. Welcome to your future.

JESS takes the water from SASHA and downs a pill. She hands the water back to SASHA.

I bet you get really weird on molly. Like - cry during sex but it's part sad and part like, ecstatic. I've never seen a man cry like that before.

SASHA

....I'm still in love with Yasmin.

JESS

You didn't think you'd end up with a girl who climbs through windows or has threesomes in Athenian gardens. I get that.

But look: you're too far up your own asshole. Yasmin was never going to pull you out. She was just going to let you rot up there while she just stood by cringing.

I kind of get it, actually. Us together. You might bring me up to a normal level of tenderness and vulnerability and I'll bring you down to like, communicating via text message and light BDSM.

Beat.

So are you gonna do that molly or what?

SASHA

Oh... no.

SASHA returns the molly to JESS.

JESS

Well I should probably get out of here so I can be someplace cool when it kicks in. OH SHIT is laser tag still a thing?

SASHA

I think so.

JESS

Fuck YES. Are you sure you don't wanna come?

SASHA

I'm good.

JESS

OK.

Beat...

So, I'm just gonna ask you something but keep in mind that I was like, going to ask you this after I wowed you sexually on E... so pretend that happened and also keep in mind I'm your future wife so you probably love me.

JESS, cont.

You need to do some rewrites to your movie.

SASHA

No. It's already been approved by netflix and I'm not going through that again.

JESS

The future of humanity kind of depends on it. I don't want us to die when we're like, 45. With modern advances we could make it to 100 or something! Or 150!!!

SASHA

This is crazy.

JESS

Everything is crazy. Why should this be different?

Beat.

I'll text you the demands.

SASHA

How do you have my number?

JESS

Yasmin. See ya later, hubby. I gotta go kick some 15 year old ass. Pew-pew!

EIGHT

SAM

No. No no no

SASHA

But what if it's real?

SAM

It's not. Jess is crazy. She made up this crazy story to sabotage the script so Yasmin doesn't fall in love with you again, it... makes a lot of sense.

SASHA

Yeah these edits *are* pretty insane...

SAM

They would ruin the movie. We need the movie. The way it is. Otherwise how is Yasmin supposed to fall in love with me? I mean YOU! I'm just playing you in the movie. How is Yasmin supposed to fall back in love with YOU? Trust me. Jess is clinically insane.

SASHA

... Have you even met her?

SAM

I saw Yasmin and Jess the other day. Um. On Le Brea. Crazy eyes. Jess has crazy eyes.

SASHA

Right. Crazy eyes.

TEN

Yasmin, Greta and Jess in the playing space.

YASMIN

So we had a first read through, and, uh...
Yeah he's not going to change the script.

GRETA

Oh god.

JESS

Why?

YASMIN

He said it's 'not about that.'

JESS

It's not about what?

GRETA

No no no

YASMIN

About the environment. It's about, he said it's about his catharsis. It's his ART.

JESS

That piece of shit.

YASMIN

He said I need to kill him, metaphorically, through Sam.

GRETA

We're all doomed.

JESS

I can't believe I marry him. Wait... I have a choice. Yeah I'm not going to marry him anymore.

GRETA

I'm going to die and I will rot in my personal hell of 100 Trumps tweeting at me.

Their breath will smell like caviar imported from Russia and the smoke from the fire around me
WILL SMELL LIKE GASOLINEEE!!!!

YASMIN

Greta.

JESS

You OK girl?

GRETA

I failed.

JESS

Dude NO YOU DID NOT this is just a hiccup

GRETA

Then what now?

YASMIN

Go talk to Sasha! Be all future-ghosty-ghosty!

GRETA

I am not a ghost and if Jess can't get him to do it, after the power of sex things... Oh god-

JESS

Oh, we didn't have sex.

GRETA

But the plan-

JESS

'But the plan!' Who are you, my dad?

GRETA

No I am Greta Thunberg.

JESS

Right. Greta. Sometimes plans don't go according to plan. Life is like a wild train and MAYBE SOMETIMES you can seduce the conductor to like slow down or whatever but the tracks are still there so it's not like they can really DO anything

YASMIN

So you need to talk to the manager!

JESS

What?

YASMIN

Like, whoever sets the tracks.

GRETA

Who sets the tracks?

Beat.

YASMIN

God.

You need to talk to God!

GRETA

God is not science.

JESS

NO what the fuck there is obviously no God, humans set the tracks, what we're trying to say, Greta, is that, Yasmin is right, you need to talk to the manager.

GRETA

But if he didn't listen to you, why would he...

YASMIN

You are so amazing! You got the world to notice you when you were like 18

GRETA

I was 16.

JESS

Whatever. The point is, people listen to you!

GRETA

... do they though?

YASMIN

YES!

JESS (*beginning a chant*)

GRETA GRETA

JESS & YASMIN

GRETA GRETA GRETA GRETA

GRETA

OK OK!

I'll go.

I will be future ghosty.

NINE

SASHA is sleeping when GRETA enters the playing space. She has a sheet on like a Halloween ghost.

GRETA

Hello. I am a ghost. Ghosty ghosty.

GRETA makes 3 different spooky noises. SASHA wakes up on the final one.

SASHA

WHAT THE FUCK

GRETA takes off the sheet.

GRETA

I am Greta Thunberg and we will have a negotiation.

She improvises a weapon.

SASHA

Shouldn't you be 17?

GRETA

I am from the future.

SASHA

Are you homeless? Did Jess pay you off? Because I will pay you more to leave.

GRETA

No... No no, I AM Greta, from the year 2045, and I refuse to leave your bedroom until you agree to integrate my carefully outlined subliminal messages into your Netflix movie.

SASHA

Right...

SASHA begins to reach for his phone to call the police

Coolcoolcoolcool

GRETA throws whatever she was using as the weapon to hit the phone out of his hand.

SASHA

That was a brand new iPhone!

He picks it up.

SASHA, cont.

Fuck. You cracked it! Literally the entire screen is cracked.

GRETA

It is funny and also deeply depressing that you seem to care more about the surface of an electronic device than the future of the human race.

SASHA

Well, this is like a 350 dollar fix.

GRETA

Well, everything - including your precious iPhone - will be gone by 2060 unless you obey.

SASHA

Hah OK prove it

GRETA

You believe in the climate emergency, don't you?

SASHA

I'm not a republican.

GRETA

Then you already believe in the proof. It's Donald Trump and rising tides and everything is burning and you need to do something! You all do! I'm just telling you, Sasha, what little thing you can do.

Beat.

SASHA

Why *my* movie.

GRETA

Time travel is new. I couldn't get back any further and yours is the most watched movie between 2019 and 2045. So I need you to use it to get the following messages out through the following processes. It's all here.

GRETA tries to hand SASHA a piece of paper.

SASHA

I already have that.

GRETA

It would reassure me if you had a hardcopy.

SASHA

I just want to get Yasmin back.

GRETA

That is irrelevant.

SASHA

It's the only reason I wrote this movie.

GRETA

Again, irreverent.

SASHA

You said we could have a negotiation.

GRETA

I don't know what you're suggesting but I'm pretty sure it's fucked up.

SASHA

I'm pretty sure YOU'RE fucked up! You snuck into my house in a white sheet! That's some KKK bullshit!

GRETA

You have misunderstood my costume choice.

SASHA

Nothing matters if I don't end up with Yasmin.

GRETA

Have you ever asked her what she wants?

Beat.

Do you ever wonder what it's like to be happy?

SASHA

How do you know I'm not happy? I mean I'm happy. Fuck you.

GRETA

If you were happy you'd think about other people.

SASHA

Yasmin and I would be happy *together*.

GRETA

Were you?

SASHA

Things used to be better.

GRETA

Better isn't happy. Happy is happy.

Happy is

(lighting shift?)

Grass that's mysteriously not itchy

It's damp trees & earth & laughing so hard you're everywhere and nowhere

You're here, in your bedroom in America with a specter from the future but also in a foggy field in Germany, and - there's this tree, there

Kind of bare and unremarkable but it's branches are moving like - if dancers had boneless arms

And it's truly awesome - AWESome - for you. And you say that out loud, and you realize there's

somebody there but they don't judge you for being seriously moved by the infinite power of

natural beauty which for some reason everyone moves about like it isn't spiritual? and you

know they FEEL what you mean and suddenly you're connected to this person and all of

everything, the trees and the fog, Germany and the whole rest of the world too, you're all just

buzzing with total - joy and you realize everything else is a lie. The capital T truth is that

happiness is actually just unity. It's laughing to the Nth degree. Capitalism and individualism are

plagues - turning us into a giant, multi-headed sickness that doesn't recycle and goes to war

with itself and hates anybody seen as different and hoards hand sanitizer and toilet paper

during a fucking pandemic that, by the way, is coming for you in a matter of months. We tell

ourselves we need this system - that it's a human instinct, that we're led by selfish genes and

altruism is impossible. But it's not - it's *not*.

Beat.

I hope you get to feel happy. Or at least laugh a little. And then - maybe you'll see what I mean.

Beat.

SASHA

Sorry can you back up and expand on the pandemic thing?

Beat.

I just feel like if people are going to hoard TP, I should probably start stocking up now.

GRETA

... OK.

SASHA

So I should?

Beat.

GRETA exits.

SASHA, alone.

Beat. Transition.

TEN

YASMIN and JESS

YASMIN

OK I'm sorry this is about your future husband but I can't stop thinking about it

JESS

Dude don't worry I'm definitely not going to marry Sasha anymore even though I want to seriously lick his communist bod

YASMIN

Right so the thing is, sometimes I wonder if maybe Sasha *really loved me*, like really *saw ME* and loved ME and maybe nobody else ever will?

JESS

What does that mean, saw you

YASMIN

We talked about deep stuff. I really felt like... one person almost. If that makes sense.

Beat.

JESS

Do you know that Silverstein book, the Missing Piece Meets the Big O?

YASMIN

No.

JESS

Speaking of deep - that children's book will fuck you up. Anyway there's this piece, like a slice of pie, and it can either start moving and morph itself into an O as it rolls, or it can meet something that's already a pie but with just 1 piece missing and get swallowed up into *that*. If you kept dating him you'd look in the mirror one day and be like - how did hot young Stalin get there? Wait how am I horny again. I just had sex in a parking garage. It ... wasn't great. LOOK. He wasn't seeing *you* as anything. *You* were very irrelevant.

YASMIN

Was this supposed to make me feel better?

JESS

... Yes.

Beat. GRETA enters.

GRETA

Maybe Trump was right. Maybe I just need to chill with some girlfriends and watch a good old fashioned movie to avoid thinking about my fiery demise.

JESS

GRETA NO what happened?

YASMIN

Didn't you say we should never give up?

GRETA

I said that when I was 16.

Beat.

Let's watch a movie.

SUDDENLY, A LOUD PROJECTION OF AN OLD FASHIONED ACTION THRILLER. VIOLENCE. MISOGYNY. YOU KNOW THE DRILL.

THE GIRLS WATCH IT. Maybe it lasts like 2 minutes. Maybe there's popcorn. It stops as suddenly as it started.

GRETA

I think... That was the most distracted 90 minutes of my life.

Beat.

Let's do it again.

ELEVEN

SAM gets his makeup done, and YASMIN gets her hair done (Actress playing GRETA does makeup as OLGA, actress playing JESS does hair as LULU).

SAM

You were so good yesterday.

YASMIN

Hahah no

SAM

No really! I think that's going to be the best scene in the movie

OLGA

(in a Russian accent) NO TALKING!

SAM

Sorry.

YASMIN

I kinda thought the underwater zombie dream sequence would be corny....

SAM

Not at ALL

OLGA angry-grumbles.

SAM

Sorry!

YASMIN

So this is weird but this movie is actually going to be a huge hit in the future.

Beat.

It's kind of crazy but Greta Thunberg from the future has been staying with us.

SAM

Woah... What else does she know about the future?

YASMIN

I mean... everything. She's from the future.

SAM

Can I talk to her?

YASMIN

She basically just watches movies all day now. So just stop by. Plus it would be nice to um... Hang out. If you wanted...

SAM

I'd like th/at

OLGA

I TELL YOU NO TALKING!!!!

OLGA smashes a makeup container on the ground and storms out of the space. LULU follows.

YASMIN

Hey Sam?

You're attracted to me, aren't you?

SAM

Well... haha, yeah, I mean - who wouldn't be though?

YASMIN

Why do you think that is? That *I'm* attractive, I mean. Like, me *in particular*.

SAM

Well you're gorgeous. And smart. And funny.

YASMIN

Am I?

SAM

Totally.

YASMIN

I never play women who are funny.

SAM

Maybe somebody should write something for you.

YASMIN

He did and it's this. And I'm not funny.

SAM

Maybe Sasha doesn't see you the way I do.

Beat.

I see you, Yasmin. You're funny.

He kisses her. She accepts it.

ELEVEN

Projection of Back to the Future. The part of the movie where Marty McFly realises he's disappearing. GRETA watches and laughs hysterically & sadly (laugh crying!) when he starts to fade. SAM enters the space.

SAM

Greta.

....

Greta.

.....

HEY GRETA

GRETA sees SAM and jumps up. If there are things (maybe she has lots of empty plastic bottles or chip packets around her?) she can throw them at him during the following dialogue.

GRETA

DEMON!!!/ DEVIL!

SAM

Woah woah woah Greta?

GRETA

SON OF SATAN!!! LEAVE ME BE!!!

She becomes a little girl. She cries on the floor in a fetal position.

SAM

Hey...it's gonna be OK.

GRETA

You have come to collect me. I understand. I deserve my fate.

I gave into temptation. I watched terrible, wonderful, distracting media that prevented me from doing anything useful. I failed this world. I am useless. I am as bad as you. I am worse. I am worthless.

TAKE ME, SATAN

SAM

I'm Sam.

She looks up and gets a good look at him.

GRETA

I am pretty sure you are Satan.

SAM

I'm just an actor.

GRETA

An entertainer. Yes. You are Satan. And I am ready for death. PLEASE TAKE ME AWAY FROM THIS PAIN

SAM

OK fine but first I need to ask you a question. If you answer my question I'll take you with me OK?

GRETA

Deal.

SAM

In the future... do Yasmin and I end up together?

GRETA

WHY ARE YOU ALL OBSESSED WITH THIS FUCKING WOMAN

SAM

She's... I don't know how to describe it.

GRETA

Try.

SAM

She's... funny.

GRETA

Tell me one funny thing she has ever said.

SAM

She's funny in a way that, um, it's in the delivery. A you had to be there kind of funny.

GRETA

This sounds hilarious.

SAM

I told you I didn't know how to describe it.

GRETA

That's because you can't. There's nothing to describe.

You're all just narcissists. All of you. You, Sasha, and Jess

Even Yasmin

You just like looking into

Beat.

My mom used to use a slimming mirror. She knew it was a lie but she'd look at it every morning and when she came into the kitchen it was like - she'd glow. It was like the mirror really did make her slimmer.

SAM

Right... Sorry you still haven't answered my question.

GRETA

What question?

SAM

The one about me and Yasmin

GRETA

You do. You marry her. *(She realizes this fully as she says it)* But... it doesn't matter. We all die early.

SAM

But... that's not... That's not gonna happen to *us*. Right?

GRETA

Hey Satan?

SAM

Not Satan but yes?

GRETA

Have you seen Back to the Future?

SAM

Of course it's a classic

GRETA

Do you know that part where the very dumb teenager who time travels starts to disappear because he messes up the timeline? I'm that dumb kid. But this time I don't think I fix it. I think I just disappear.

SAM

What could you have messed with?

GRETA

It's hard to know how one thing you do in the present messes with the future.

I just have this sense I made it worse.

I think ...

A moment of true prophecy. Something has happened to her in these final moments before her death and now she's connected to a different dimension.

I think you really are the devil. And I think I made it easier for you somehow YES because Sasha and Jess won't get married anymore so Sasha won't be happy and you'll love that. You become successful, pushing Sasha down and down as you go up and up, laughing, HAHAHA, and eventually you become President of the United States because that is the end goal of all inherently evil entertainers. You incite wars. You take and take and take and take and fuck and eat and then it's too late climate change doesn't even matter because the whole world goes trigger happy and boomboomboooooom

Nobody listens to me and nobody will ever listen to me

When people paid *attention* to me it was because I was basically part of a reality show.

Nobody *listened*, though. Nobody cared and nobody ever will

I mean

You all just kept

You keep

Just

Focused on your petty little

Selfish fucking

Lives

...

I think I disappear

I think we all do.

I think...

I die of alcohol poisoning in Cuba at age 32 after you get elected. I just can't deal with another one.

She looks down. She's disappearing.

Oh no. Oh no

She looks around desperately and sees the bucket of chicken leftover from scene 1.

She goes to the chicken. She picks up the bucket.

(Rapidly) I'll tell you a secret before I go: nothing tastes like chicken but chicken.

I haven't always been vegan. That's how I know. Tofu doesn't hold a candle to chicken. It just absorbs whatever you put on it. *(To the chicken, still rapidly)* You: you're your own thing. You're a strong independent chicken. And I respect you for that. I don't want to hurt you and I also

don't want the industrial farming of you to destroy our planet and I understand that my consumption of you encourages that process. But if I'm going to die...

If we're all going to die... I might as well... YES.

She chooses a chicken leg and holds it to the sky.

I am going to FULLY live for the first time in my life!

She eats with ABSOLUTE ECSTASY.

Oh my god... yes...

She is about to take another bite and then...

Wait. I get it. You were all just trying to enjoy your life. But moderation is impossible once you've had a bite of chicken and next thing you know you're neck deep in meat and fossil fuels and ambition and money and fame and pussy YES most of the things we do that aren't for food are for sex and we just can't get enough of it we can never ever ever get enough

Pringles had it right

Once you pop the fun don't stop

Once you pop

Once you

She disappears.⁴

SAM takes a chicken leg from the bucket. He eats it. He smiles.

TWELVE

JESS

Have you seen Greta?

YASMIN

No but Sam and I had sex this afternoon it was AMAZING never mind what I said about the Sasha connection thing, Sam and I DEFINITELY have a connection if you know what I mean And I think like.. He actually does *really* see me, you know?

JESS

I just feel like... maybe we should have listened to Greta.

YASMIN

⁴ Ideally this happens by some kind of magic trick that Greta does not take part of. She doesn't want to disappear... But Sam can help do this magic trick - it would make sense if he facilitated her disappearing. He could set something up during her monologue....

We did listen to her! It's just stupid Sasha who didn't. But what can we do.
At least we know the movie is going to be a hit.

JESS

A cult classic. That's not a *hit*.

YASMIN

Jesus can you just be happy for me?

JESS

Sorry. I'm happy for you. It's just - don't you think we should have tried harder... to convince Sasha maybe? Or... I don't know.

YASMIN

We did what we could. Come on, there's a party tonight at Sam's.

JESS

Doesn't he live in Calabasas?

YASMIN

Yeah Justin Bieber might be there.

JESS

UM WHAT I LOVE BIEBER

YASMIN

I know.

JESS

WHAT ARE WE DOING LET'S GO GET READY!!! OH MY GOD THIS IS GOING TO BE THE BEST NIGHT OF OUR LIVES

YASMIN

You know he's married though right

JESS

Yeah but marriage doesn't really mean anything anymore right

Suddenly, the TV (projection) flickers static. It's kind of spooky and loud. Then, 17 year old Greta's face comes up. She's listening to someone saying something. Then, she opens her mouth to speak. Maybe she gets 1-2 words in but JESS turns the TV off.

JESS

Weird.

YASMIN

What are you gonna wear?

YASMIN and JESS exit the playing space.

Blackout.

END OF PLAY. (Sorry, Greta.)

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Amanda Faye Martin is an American writer and dramaturg. She attended Kenyon College where she learned how to think by wandering around Amish cornfields, and holds an MFA in Dramaturgy from the A.R.T. Institute at Harvard University. She is currently the Playwriting Fellow at the University of Otago in Dunedin, New Zealand.*

BLANCHE IN A WHEELCHAIR

By Aaron Leventman

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *I wanted to write a play that addressed my partner's health crisis and subsequent disability, the importance of our long-term connection, and our path towards emotional survival. After working for the Town of Provincetown in MA during the legalization of gay marriage, the issue for some sex couples of whether or not to wed was very much a part of our lives since we are a couple who chose not to get married (yet). This therefore became a part of the plot. Having written and produced LGBTQ+ themed theatre for many years, I was concerned about lack of older and disabled characters I was seeing in contemporary plays. I wanted to create a story that gave these underrepresented characters a voice with a narrative that addressed serious themes through humor, pathos and camp.*

Previous Productions:

9/19 Theatre Walk, Santa Fe, NM

Dir. Duchess Dale

8/19 Samuel French Off-Off Broadway One Act Play Festival

NYC, NY, Dir. Steve Mazzoccone,

FINALIST FOR BEST PLAY

7/18 Secret Theatre One Act Play Festival, LIC/NY,

Dir. Steve Mazzoccone

FINALIST FOR BEST PLAY

BLANCHE IN A WHEELCHAIR
A Short Play by Aaron Leventman

Characters:

Ted: Late 60s

Danny: Late 60s

Jeremy: Late 20s to early 30s

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Synopsis:

Ted is bitter from his recent physical disability. Danny, his partner, tries to cheer him up by proposing to him on their anniversary at Ted's physical rehab. Can love heal all wounds?

SETTING: THE PARK OUTSIDE OF A REHAB

AT RISE: Danny and Ted sit on a park bench. A wheel chair sits on the side closest to Ted.

DANNY

At least you can sit outside here. It's an improvement from the neuro ward.

TED

Which felt like a remake of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

DANNY

We're having chicken supreme for dinner, catered specially for us.

TED

What is that exactly?

DANNY

I don't know. It sounds like something they'd serve at a luncheon for women with done-up hair.

TED

Have you seen who stays at this place? That's kind of what it is. Only without the hair-dos. Actually, without hair at all.

DANNY

Well, you'll be home soon. I just put the ramp in.

TED

And that's supposed to be enticing?

DANNY

After being here for 2 months you're starting to wear out your welcome.

TED

I still haven't learned how to cook in my chair.

DANNY

I'll cook for a while.

TED

Your cooking will kill us both.

DANNY

Thanks.

TED

Speaking of death...

DANNY

Please don't.

TED

I had a dream last night that I was back running my company. But when I went to open the security gate there was a big sign outside that said "Tomorrow you will die."

DANNY

Your office was in the worst part of Chicago. That probably really happened.

TED

And now I'm spending my fortune on a physical rehab.

DANNY

Come on. It's a special day. We only celebrate our 24th anniversary once and I'm going to get you to smile today if it's the last thing I do.

TED

Good luck with that.

DANNY

Why?

(pause)

TED

I have some bad news.

DANNY

What? Angelina and Brad aren't getting back together after all?

TED

I'm serious.

DANNY

What is it, then?

(Jeremy approaches the bench.)

JEREMY

Well, who are these handsome gentleman?

DANNY

Hello, Jeremy.

TED

What are you doing here?

DANNY

I'm giving us a break from the lackluster kitchen staff and asked Jeremy to make our Anniversary dinner.

JEREMY

And look how handsome. You both look like Zac Efron on a date with Channing Tatum.

TED

Who?
(Danny rolls his eyes.)

JEREMY

So how are you feeling, Ted?

TED

Not bad for an old cripple.

JEREMY

What happened? Car accident?

TED

Auto-immune disorder that affects my walking.
It's called guillain-barré.

DANNY

It's also the name of a forgotten film by Jean-Luc Goddard.

JEREMY

Who?

(Ted and Danny both roll their eyes)

TED

They took all of my blood out of my body to get rid of
the bad antibodies. It felt like a bad vampire movie.

DANNY

But look how well he's doing. He went from being paralyzed to
getting in and out of his chair. And he'll get even better over time.

(Ted looks over at Danny.)

TED

Listen to you, Miss Pollyanna.

JEREMY

We'll hope for a speedy recovery, then.
(Jeremy winks at Danny before he leaves. Ted looks at them suspiciously.)

DANNY

Thanks, Jeremy.

(Jeremy walks away.)

TED

"Thanks, Jeremy?" He's so goddamn peppy. And did he just wink at you?

DANNY

He winks at everyone and you were that way once if I remember correctly.

TED

No, I wasn't. And just because he used to be your client at that talent agency doesn't mean you have to flirt.

DANNY

I wasn't flirting.

TED

And you obviously didn't help him with his acting career if you're hiring him to cater on a weekday. And who winks anymore, anyway? What is this? The 1940s?

DANNY

You're in a mood. Still doing the bitter thing, are we?

TED

I have reason to be.

DANNY

He's just trying to be charming.

TED

And not succeeding. If he winks at you again I'm leaving.

DANNY

You can't leave. You're in a wheelchair.

TED

God fucking dammit, you're right. I'm stuck with you, aren't I?

DANNY

And I with you. Besides, Jeremy said that the chocolate mousse we're having for dessert is to die for.

TED

Such an old lady's dessert. I might as well order the cottage cheese plate and fruit cup.

DANNY

Wouldn't that be appropriate.

TED

I hope Lucy is okay being left alone right after you took her to the vet. Did you take her out before you left?

DANNY

She just went out an hour ago.

TED

But she always drinks more water because on her medication. Is she still licking her woowoo nonstop?

DANNY

Not lately.

TED

If she pees on the Persian rug again you're getting it cleaned.

DANNY

She misses her other Daddy.

TED

She has you.

DANNY

But she still sits by the door every night waiting for you to come home.

TED

She's just scamming us to get more treats. Did you remember to clean under the mat under her water bowl like I asked?

DANNY

No.

TED

Two months of dirt! You'll have to get Maxwell to come in and clean.

DANNY

Maxwell just married a Trump supporter and moved to San Diego.

TED

Great. The world is changing along with our personal lives. You'll have to get Patricia to come back. Hopefully she won't eat everything out of our refrigerator while she's cleaning the kitchen like last time.

DANNY

Don't worry. The refrigerator's empty. You haven't exactly been around to make home cooked meals.

TED

You know, we really didn't have to do this today. We didn't do anything for our last anniversary. And our 24th isn't such a significant year to celebrate.

DANNY

And who says 24 years isn't a significant year to celebrate? Each year is more significant than the last. 24 is more significant than 23. 23 is more significant than 22...

TED

Yes, I get it. You have a tendency to overstate your point.

DANNY

Speaking of celebrating, Nick and Frederick invited us to their Halloween party.

TED

Great. A bunch of gay yuppies talking about their second homes in San Miguel De Allende.

DANNY

No one uses the word yuppies anymore. And going to a party wouldn't kill you.

TED

Going to THEIR party might.

DANNY

Costumes are required. And we can finally live out your fantasy of going as Blanche and Rose from the *Golden Girls*.

TED

Only if I get to be Blanche. And now it'll be Blanche in a wheelchair.

DANNY

Do you really want to be thought of as a shut-in?

TED

Better than being seen as a cripple. Then have to tell people the whole story again of what happened to me. If I could walk around with a sign explaining the whole miasma I would.

DANNY

Didn't you say you had something to tell me?

TED

(pause) Nick and Frederick? I thought Frederick's partner's name was Mark?

DANNY

That was his last partner. Frederick left when Mark's health started to decline. Couldn't take the heat. Can't exactly blame him.

TED

What do you mean by that?

DANNY

On, nothing. Now what were you going to tell me?

TED

I think I'll wait on that.

DANNY

Do you need to go to the bathroom before we eat?

TED

I don't need to be walked. Like Lucy, I just went an hour ago.

DANNY

Go anyway to wash your hands. The bathroom is right over there. There's a flu going around and you can't afford to get sick.

TED

I already am sick and why do you want me to go to the bathroom? So you and Jeremy can have a quick tryst while I'm rolling around in my chair?

DANNY

Enough. Now go before it's time for dinner. (pause)
Why aren't you using your walker?

(Ted doesn't answer but instead transfers from the bench to his chair. Danny gets up to help him but Ted puts his hand up as if to say "Leave me alone. I can do this." And he does, although with much difficulty. Danny looks worried. Ted wheels himself to the bathroom. Danny gestures to Jeremy who is offstage.)

DANNY

Okay. Get ready.
(Jeremy runs onstage in anticipation.)

DANNY

When I wave my hand, that's your cue to start.

(Jeremy nods his head.)

JEREMY

Your dinner is all set-up in the cafeteria.

DANNY
I told you I wanted us to eat al fresco.

JEREMY
Oh, dear.

(Ted starts to wheel himself back in.)

DANNY
It's too late now.

(Jeremy leaves.)
TED
What did he want now?

DANNY
Why are you back already?

TED
The guy in the other stall is having trouble with this morning's breakfast burrito or so it sounded.

DANNY
I'll wheel you to the one on the other side of the gift shop.

TED
I don't have to go that badly.

DANNY
The last time you said that you ruined a perfectly good pair of jeans from Banana Republic.

TED
These were only from the Gap so not to worry.

(Jeremy comes back over. Ted eyes him suspiciously. Jeremy looks afraid.)

JEREMY
Dinner is almost served. We have a special appetizer for you both on this special day. Chips with guacamole.

TED
Sour cream gives me the runs.

JEREMY

Then no guacamole for you.

TED

This is a rehab for Christ's Sake with sick people. You should know better than to serve us guacamole.

(Jeremy starts to walk away dejected.)

DANNY

Jeremy, we might as well do this now or this isn't going to happen.

JEREMY

Are you sure?

DANNY

I'm sure.

TED

What the hell is going on?!

(Jeremy gets scared and runs away.)

DANNY

Look, you fucking pain in the ass. Will you stop complaining for once and listen for a minute? Most of the time I want to throw you out the window but for the last 24 years no one has meant more to me and to be quite honest I can't imagine life without you. So even though I want to throttle you most of the time I think we should get married. And I don't want to hear your reasons for why we're paying into a heterosexual normality. Oh, and I fucking love you by the way so stop being so goddamn stubborn and say yes.

TED

I'M being stubborn?! You probably want to get married because you think I'm dying and want to make sure that you legally get your share of the fortunes.

DANNY

What fortunes? I hate to tell you but your African sculpture is a reproduction and not worth what you think it is. I found out on Antiques Roadshow.

TED

Well in that case, I fucking love you, too.

DANNY

Yeah, well why don't you say it every once in a while? You think you can play the sick card forever? And this affected both of us, not just you.

TED

I know you had to give up your job as a sleazy talent agent just to take care of me and I feel guilty about it every second of the day.

DANNY

Then maybe this will help.

(Danny grabs Ted, pulls him towards him, and gives him a passionate but angry kiss.)

TED

Stop it! You're turning me on a little and I'm in no condition to do anything about it.

DANNY

Why not?

(Danny tries to grope Ted. Ted tries to hold on to the bench but they both fall on the floor instead.)

TED

Now look what you made us do.

DANNY

Fuck! I threw my back out.

(Danny tries to get up but can't.)

TED

Now you know how it feels.

DANNY

It's the blind leading the blind.

TED

More like the blond leading the blond.

DANNY

(calls to Jeremy offstage) Jeremy! Help us!

(No response.)

DANNY

Well, it's not how I planned this, but...

(Danny pulls a jewelry box out of his coat pocket, opens it, then takes a ring out. Ted is clearly touched.)

TED

At least you didn't put it on my chocolate mousse and I swallow it by accident like in the movies.

DANNY

Do you remember that package you sent me on our first Valentine's Day together?

TED

No

DANNY

You sent it to my office and kept bugging my receptionist to see if I got it.

TED

Serves her right for never answering the phone on the first ring.

DANNY

So you do remember.

TED

I don't remember much anymore. But I remember that.

DANNY

You sent a care package with a bunch of chocolates and there was a card inside that you wrote in. It was the first time that you used the L-Word.

TED

Lesbian?

DANNY

Stop it. We had only been together 2 months. But we already knew.

TED

And now you'll soon be serving me a rat for dinner.

DANNY

The Baby Jane references are going to start to get old, fast.

(Danny grabs hold of the bench with his right arm and waves his left arm in the air to try and pull himself up. Jeremy thinking it's his cue, enters, and starts to sing *Oh Promise Me*.)

TED

That's what this whole charade was all about? So Jeremy could sing *Oh Promise Me* at our engagement in a rehab?

DANNY

He needed a gig. (to Jeremy) Jeremy, stop singing and help us!

(Jeremy can't hear him over himself and keeps singing).

DANNY

You should be grateful I didn't propose to you in front of everyone at dinner like I was going to.

TED

Then you should be lucky I'm saying yes.

DANNY

You're saying yes?

(As Jeremy sings louder, Ted covers his ears.)

TED

I wish I could make a dramatic exit.

DANNY

(speaks in his best Bette Davis which isn't good at all.)

"But you can't Blanche. You can't."

TED

That's not even the line. (to Jeremy) Jeremy! Stop! No offense but you're no Karen Carpenter.

(Jeremy gets offended and leaves.)

DANNY

Jeremy, don't go! We've fallen and we can't get up!

(Ted starts to smile.)

DANNY

Is that what I think it is? Do I see your mouth just starting to curve into a smile?

TED

It's just gas.

DANNY

Does that mean I finally cheered you up? That you're glad we did this?

(Ted suddenly gets a concerned look on his face.
He starts to panic.)

DANNY

You look like you just swallowed a frog.

TED

I just came back to reality. I have to tell you something.

DANNY

We're back to that again?

TED

Remember how Dr. Nelson said that 5% can get a reoccurrence? Well, I'm in that 5%.
(pause)

DANNY

How do you know?

TED

It's happening again. (pause) That tingling feeling came back in my right leg like the first time you took me to the emergency room. The other day I used my crutches to get back to my room from physical therapy. Then three hours later I couldn't stand up at all. I could tell from the look on the nurses faces that they think it's getting worse, that my body is saying "no." Dr. Nelson is starting the plasma treatments again tomorrow.

DANNY

And that's why you're back in your chair.

TED

How can we be so unlucky?

DANNY

You're saying that on our anniversary?

TED

You know what I mean. I can't go through this all over again. And now I might not make it out of the chair.

DANNY

You don't know that. There's no reason you can't get better from this, again. And we'll deal with whatever we have to deal with.

TED

I'm sorry. I can't come home right now. And if you want to rescind your marriage proposal I'll understand.

DANNY

Stop being silly. I'll just move in here. Plenty of room. And the chair by your bed isn't too shabby to sleep in. Could use a new cushion, but...

TED

Talk about being silly. Do you have any idea what you're in for? Carrying me up the stairs? Early evenings in because I'm too tired to go out at night. And the days of the disco parties are long over.

DANNY

Honey, they've been long over for decades. Disco sucks, remember? (pause) Did you really think I was going to ditch you?

TED

Look at Nick and Frederick.

DANNY

Did you really think I was serious? I was kidding when I said "can you blame him?"

TED

Maybe some things aren't funny.

DANNY

You're right. (pause) I'm sorry.

TED

I know you are but you have no idea what it's like for me.

DANNY

I get that.

TED

I'll need you like never before.

DANNY

Don't you think I don't need you as well?

(Ted finally breaks out into a full smile. Danny starts to sing Close to You to Ted. Ted resists at first, then quickly sings along in harmony.)

LIGHTS OUT

AUTHOR'S 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 productions of True West, Midsummer Night's Dream, The Tempest, For the Love of Three Oranges, Macbeth, I Never Sang for my Father, Opus, and many original plays. He's also appeared in industrials, commercials, short films, and features. Aaron's plays have been performed all over the country, many of which are published and available on Amazon.com. He recently co-produced an evening of his own short works titled Almost Adultsthat met with tremendous acclaim including the Mayor declaring LGBT Theatre Day in Santa Fe, NM on opening night. Aaron is also a film instructor*

at Santa Fe Community College, a film festival curator, and has a private writing coach practice. <https://aleventman.wixsite.com/writingcoach>

PUBLICATIONS

5/14 ***THE BOY***
Secret Theatre's Publication of Best of the Fest., LIC/NY

9/13 ***SECOND YEAR ITCH***
Black Box Theatre Publishing, Kentucky

9/13 ***THE VALUE OF EMPTY BOXES***
Black Box Theatre Publishing, Kentucky

8/05 ***LATE REUNION***
JAC Publishing, Boston/MA

EDDY, JO & LARRY

By Geoff Hargreaves

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *After reading the Oedipus Rex of Sophocles, I wondered how things stood today in relation to this taboo topic. To my surprise, I discovered that the issue has become topical, now that adopted children have the right to know who their biological parents are.*

Many newspapers confirm the sexual attraction experienced between reunited sons and mothers and daughters and fathers. When I found that Thebes and Corinth are place names in Illinois and Mississippi, geography seemed to conspire in the project. Learning that the relationship is not illegal in Rhode Island and New Jersey, clinched my interest.

EDDY, JO & LARRY

(2,200 words)

Go to where the silence is and say something. --Amy Goodman

Theme: When Eddy discovers who his biological parents are, he leaves his adoptive parents in Mississippi and travels to Illinois to meet them, with explosive consequences.

Characters:

LARRY CADMAN: aged 50, looks older than his years, uses a walking cane.

JO CADMAN: aged 37, wife of Larry, painter and engraver.

EDDY POE: aged 19, their biological son from Corinth, Mississippi.

Setting: Time: the present

Place: the artist's studio of Jo in Thebes, Illinois, a single bed in a corner.

At rise: LARRY snoops around. He hobbles, using a walking cane. He examines a painting on an easel.

LARRY

What? Him!

*LARRY lashes at the canvas and
sends it flying from the easel.*

Enter JO, coming up the stairs.

JO

(panting)

Those stairs! So steep! They'll be the death of me, one day.

LARRY

(angrily)

Well, Jo, at last! Where've you been? I've been waiting for my lunch for the last hour. I'm starving.

JO

You told me you were going to the Apostolic Lighthouse to talk with the pastor.

LARRY

I decided to do it tomorrow.

JO

You rarely come up here. Why today?

LARRY

I've been looking over your work. I should say, your lack of work. What happened to the series of engravings you promised me?

JO

I put them aside. I've been working on that painting. The Sphinx. Hey, what happened to it?

JO picks up the canvas.

LARRY

Whose face is that on the Sphinx?

JO

If you must know, it's Eddy's.

LARRY

You've been seeing him behind my back! How dare you! How many times do I have to tell you? I don't want anything to do with that kid. And I don't want you to have anything to do with him, either.

JO

Eddy's your son, Larry. Your only child. He's my son, too.

LARRY

We gave him up for adoption when he was three days old. Nineteen years ago. We've had no contact whatsoever. We have nothing in common with him. He ceased to exist when we gave him to that Mississippi couple. He is not my son! And not yours, either.

JO

I never forgot him.

LARRY

Well, you can forget him now.

JO

I want to invite him here for Thanksgiving.

LARRY

I won't hear of it. I won't allow him to set one foot in this house. He doesn't belong here. Don't you understand? He has no part in our lives.

JO.

I already invited him.

LARRY

Then you can uninvite him. As far as I'm concerned, he doesn't exist. He has no right to exist. We need never mention him. There is nothing to say about him. Nothing to see. Nothing to know.

JO

Tell him that yourself at our Thanksgiving meal.

LARRY

I should knock you to the floor.

*LARRY raises his cane, to hit her.
JO dodges aside.*

LARRY

Where are you seeing him? No, don't tell me. I don't want to know. It's got to stop. And it

will stop, right now!

JO

He went to a lot of trouble to find us. The Mississippi couple didn't want him to look for us. They were afraid they'd lose him. But he was determined to come to Thebes to meet us.

LARRY

Yeah, I bet they probably treated him like dirt. Feeding him nothing but the cheapest slugburgers.

JO

On the contrary, they treated him like a prince.

LARRY

So he says. How would we know?

JO

He's come all the way from Corinth to Illinois. He had no money. His adoptive parents wouldn't help him. He hitched ride after ride.

LARRY

Then he wasted his time. Sentimental fool! Hey, have you been slipping him money? Is that why—

JO

You made me give him up for adoption.

LARRY

Don't lie to yourself. You were in your first year at art college. What benefit was a child to you? To us? Why kill a brilliant career for a careless mistake? You were as willing as I was to get rid of him. Don't fool yourself with silly stories. A careless mistake, that's all he was or is and all he ever will be. Neither of us was ready to be a parent. You least of all.

JO

I was his mother. I *am* his mother.

LARRY

You had talent, even genius. You were made for success. And I was the one who added the zeroes to your value in the art market.

JO

What good was my talent? My success? My upward motion means nothing when my ceiling is your floor!

LARRY

(raising his cane)

Call off the dogs! I've heard this more than enough. Soon it will be the list of my every faux pas over the last twenty years.

JO

I mean every word!

LARRY

Stop this nonsense! Or I really will knock you flat.

JO

Why? Are you scared your son will see you for what you are? A bully, a liar, a phony, a pervert?

LARRY swings his cane at her.

JO backs away with a scream.

EDDY

(offstage)

Hey! Is everything all right up there? Jo? Jo?

LARRY

What? Is that him? You brought the kid here?

JO

(calling):

Don't worry. Come on up, Eddy. Ignore your father.

Sound of ascending footsteps.

LARRY

No way. No way he's coming up here. No way he's staying a moment longer in this house.

LARRY goes to exit.

LARRY

Hey, you. Whoever you are. Get outa here!

JO

Come on up, Eddy! Ignore him!

*Exit LARRY, waving his cane.
A thud. A yelp. A scream.
The crash of a falling body.*

JO
What the hell!

*JO goes to the exit.
Enter EDDY, hair and face bloody.*

JO
Oh, Eddy love! What happened?

EDDY
He smashed me on the head with his cane.

JO
Oh no! Where is he now?

EDDY
At the foot of the stairs. I saw red. I pulled him toward me and he went flying over the bannister. Head first. He's just lying there. His head is smashed open. I think he's dead. Dead, Jo! I'm sure of it.

JO goes to the exit and looks.

JO
Oh, Eddy! How terrible! I've never seen anything that awful. There's blood everywhere. I can't bear to look at it.

EDDY
Call an ambulance. Get him to the hospital.

JO
(taking a second look):
A hospital can't help him. His head is wide open.

EDDY
Then call the police.

JO returns to EDDY, grabs a rag from her painting equipment, and wipes some of EDDY's face.

JO

The police? Really? What will we tell them?

EDDY

The truth. That I killed my father.

JO

Now calm down, Eddy. Let's think carefully before we say anything we regret.

EDDY

It's the truth, Jo. I killed my father! Your husband.

JO

Your biological father.

EDDY

My whatever father. I waited nineteen years to meet him.

JO

Look, you defended yourself against a man called Larry Cadman, who attacked you without provocation. We don't have to tell anybody he was your father.

EDDY

(frantic)

But he was my father. I came all the way from Mississippi to meet him. He refused to see me, but he was my father.

JO

Now be sensible, Eddy love. You don't want to start a chain of gossip that we can't control. Heaven knows what people will end up saying. And enjoy saying it. We can explain that he simply fell down the stairs. He was unsteady on his feet. He has been for years. He never went anywhere without his cane. It's not unlikely that he'd fall on those dangerous stairs. I've given myself a scare or two on them.

EDDY

The police, Jo!

JO

Listen, Eddy. Carefully. You probably imagine he was a decent guy, but he wasn't. Far from it. He was fired from his job as a driving instructor, after he sexually abused his clients. Male and female. For decades now, he's been selling my engravings in Chicago, as if they were his own work. He played the part of a sterling citizen, going to church every

Sunday, contributing to charities, but it was all fake, all show, all poses. I hated him. He threatened to kill me if I tried to leave him. He was rotten to the core. I'm glad he's dead. It's a terrible thing to say, but I mean it.

EDDY

Really? Can that be true? I don't know what to say, Jo.

JO

Then think about us two. Where do we go from here?

EDDY

What do you mean?

JO

I was going to tell you before, Eddy, but the time never seemed right.

EDDY

Tell me what?

JO

I'm pregnant! It's your child, Eddy. I haven't slept with that monster for over a decade.

EDDY

Oh Jo! Let me hug you.

JO

I know other people will think this is wrong. But I've been doing some research. It's perfectly natural, when children are adopted early. Boys separated from their mothers, daughters from their fathers. Over and over again, they fall in love, when they finally meet. It's irresistible. Nobody wants to admit it. But, when there's been no contact since early childhood, it happens time after time. There was an instant connection between us. And it hasn't lessened.

They hug.

EDDY

And it won't. Ever. How do you feel about it? Being pregnant, I mean.

JO

I'm delighted. Totally delighted. What could be better than having our own child?

EDDY

I do love you, Jo. I know people will say I shouldn't, but I can't help myself. I really can't. I love the way you smile with your eyes, not just with your mouth. And I love being the only one who really understands you.

JO

Let people say what they like. Only we know what we feel. Even your WhatsApp messages have the feel of pillow-talk. From the moment you arrived here, I knew that I could never offer you less than my total love.

EDDY

In Illinois your total love can mean two to ten years in jail. Plus a \$25,000 fine.

JO

I've thought about that. As soon as we can, we'll move to New Jersey or Rhode Island. Our love is legal there. We can't be officially married, but who cares? We'll be safe from the law. There's our escape. That's where the tunnel is.

EDDY

But what if there's a problem with the fetus?

JO

We'll cross that bridge when we get to it.

EDDY

If you say so.

JO

Let me tell the police that Larry was killed by thieves who broke into the house. I'll say I found him on the floor when I came back from the Oak Street market.

EDDY

There's my blood as well as his on the staircase. There are drops of it on the floor over there. We could never be sure that we got rid of all of it. How would it look then, if you said it was thieves on the staircase and they found my blood in here?

JO

I'll say it must be the blood of one of the thieves. You can slip away to Chicago. I'll find you there.

EDDY

People here have seen us together, Jo. You said there are less than five hundred people living in Thebes. Any one of them could mention my presence to the cops. The staff at the Budget Inn Motel know my name—well, as Poe, not as Cadman, but still—and that I came here from Corinth. The whole thieves thing could blow up in our faces.

JO

You're right, Eddy. You're smarter than I thought. So . . . what now?

EDDY

I'm going to the police. We'll tell the truth. Part of it. We won't mention that you're my mother or that he was my father. I'll say he attacked me and I defended myself. His death was an accident. It's the plain truth, after all. I didn't intend to kill him. I just pushed him away.

JO

But why did he attack you? They'll want to know.

EDDY

You tell me.

JO

Hmmm . . . I know. It was an absurd disagreement about politics. That will do it. He's been known to burst into furious flames, if his illusions and delusions are contradicted. Plenty of the locals can testify to that.

EDDY

You mean US imperialism in Latin America? Something like that?

JO

That will do it, twice over. I'll say you came to the house, so that I could complete the painting of the Sphinx. That's perfectly credible.

EDDY

It's time to call the cops, Jo.

JO

Give me a big kiss first, Eddy love.

They kiss and hug.

JO

Oh, how I'm going to miss you, if they give you jail time.

EDDY

I'll think about you every day.

JO

Afterwards, we'll be together for the rest of our lives.

EDDY

With our baby.

JO

Yes, fingers crossed, with our baby.

EDDY

And we won't give him—or her—away, ever. Ever. Ever.

JO

Not ever.

EDDY

Time to make the call, Jo.

EDDY starts to wipe his face.

JO

No, don't clean yourself up. Let the cops see what the bastard did to you. Okay, young Mr. Edward Poe, artist's model. Remember that's all you are for the moment. Now, Mrs. Josephine Cadman, artist, sometime teacher, wife of the late Mr. Larry Cadman, is going to notify the police of a most unfortunate accident. Take a deep breath. All this shall pass.

JO takes out her cellphone and dials.

END

AUTHOR BIO:

After studying psychology in Dallas, TX, I moved to Mexico, where I currently teach and translate. I have had two full-lengths plays staged in USA, plus 5 short plays. I have published translations of 5 Mexican and Bolivian novels with NY and London publishing houses...

LOVE PLAY, MARS, A.D. 2100

By: Tom Ball (tomball33@yahoo.com)

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Words 3,651

NOTE: This screenplay has been optioned for film by T-Rex Multi Media Productions, Toronto 2020.

Characters:

Friedrich Nietzsche's clone, who is a well-known philosopher, in his own right. The actor has a very large mustache like the original. A middle-aged man.

Marilyn Monroe's clone, a famous actress. She is a beautiful woman who dyes her hair blonde. And wears a magic bra. She is 30 years old.

Their faces are altered but they know who they are, thinking they are the same as the original.

They live in a dome on the equator where the gravity is 1.0 Earth's gravity.

Setting: Mars, A.D. 2100, evening on a Martian Summer's day. Year 1 of the Martian colony.

ACT ONE, SCENE ONE

It is a party featuring all 94 of the surviving 100 adults. People are dressed in the traditional red togas of Mars with a picture of the planet on their chests. They drink drug cocktails and pop sex enhancer pills and many couples and groups are intimate at the party. The red landscape of Mars with some green neo-cacti is in the background. They are in the main room at the top of the dome.

F.N. "You look a lot like Marilyn Monroe."

M.M. "I am her clone. You look a lot like the philosopher, Nietzsche."

F.N. "I am and YOU could be the first Martian sex symbol. Why not?"

M.M. "All I care about is love. I don't care for money or fame."

F.N. "Yes you do, you are not a famous actress for nothing!"

M.M. "What kind of man are you?"

F.N. "I am a modern-day philosopher, and I think superhumans are about to take over space, and they will be programmable machines."

M.M. "It doesn't sound like love to me. I am hoping for a loving World, with Christ-like characters in it."

F.N. "The superhumans will likely be kind, but weak in some ways."

M.M. "I am looking for a strong man who knows what he wants."

F.N. "I say that most strong men are insane and overcome by greed and ambition. I came to Mars to get away from that greed. But strong people will rule the future."

M.M. "But you seem ambitious. Are you also romantic?"

F.N. "I think modern day women are a lot of trouble. They are all so crazy. It is truly a World of madness."

M.M. "It seems so. But is there a cure for madness?"

F.N. "Madness can be good or evil."

M.M. "Surely we are beyond simply good and evil..."

F.N. "I think scientists are developing new technologies regardless of whether the technology can be used for good or ill."

M.M. "I want most of all a lover that understands me well. Not as if I was a piece of technology, a love doll as it were. And I worry history will depict me as a bimbo."

F.N. "Kiss me! You have the look that I desire."

So, they kiss...

They move to a booth in the main common room. The robots in the background coo and make subtle noises.

F.N. "Love me now."

M.M. "Not so fast big boy. I am not a slut. You need to prove your love to me!"

F.N. "I don't believe in sexual love! Just sex as a fun thing to do."

They drink deeply into the night (the camera pulls away gradually).

They part ways each retiring to their separate chambers.

SCENE TWO

The next day the couple are in the exercise room with many pieces of alien looking equipment, working out.

M.M. "I am waiting for them to come up with an exercise pill.

F.N. "You are a sorcerer, a magic love. And I am under your spell."

M.M. "Will you let me hypnotise you?"

F.N. "I fear being programmed with hypnosis. A girl from my youth hypnotised me to love her and finally I was able to break away. I didn't really like her."

M.M. "Maybe you think I am an evil witch? Or worse an evil slut?"

F.N. "All women are like the sirens sweetly singing. Many a man has been ruined by sex. And these days everyone is going mad in love using MRT (Mind Reading Technology). Getting inside your lover's head didn't turn out the way the authorities intended. It is all madness."

M.M. "But I can roll with any man and play any role in a script, I have acting talent, and I am already a superstar. I have nothing to hide. I don't worry about MRT; in fact, I think it is a good thing."

F.N. "You are MY superstar."

And they kiss passionately. But no one is around...

M.M. "I love your passionate kisses..."

The camera fades out

SCENE THREE

The couple go for a Martian car ride into the wilderness. The car is pressurized. They drive past new Martian plants and bizarre animals.

M.M. "These days, girlfriends are out of fashion, replaced by love dolls. And there are many lonely women out there! So, what do you think about love dolls?"

F.N. "I've sampled them in depth. But they are just sex creatures and don't have a lot to say. But I hear the new series is great."

M.M. "I am glad to hear you say so. I was worried love dolls would replace human women."

F.N. "Men are shallow, but they still like real women, who are cleverer than love dolls."

M.M. "But the next grade of love dolls will be cleverer; what then?"

F.N. "Then we would live in a totally insane world. Machine takeover is not for the best at all."

M.M. "I think you would love a love doll more than me."

They pause the conversation to consider their own thoughts about love dolls.

F.N. (thinking to himself): If love dolls replace women, they will also replace men. And we will all be "fucked."

M.M. (thinking to herself): I feel I am more attractive and better in bed than a machine today, but what of the future?

They drink deeply of wine and daydream about one another. Their thoughts pause and they are lost in reverie...

M.M. "I fear you take me for granted. I want you as a friend not a lover."

F.N. "Ridiculous. I am proposing to you, unparalleled sexual satisfaction."

SCENE FOUR

Marilyn is wearing a dress made up of gold chain and heavy make-up, Fred is wearing a toga and a death's head mask. Martian fantasy art is in the background featuring aliens, who are humanoid in F.N.'s room.

F.N. "I think you are like a fine wine, made perfect with age."

M.M. "I am searching for the best love drug I have ever had."

F.N. "Let's partake of the best drugs available. By the way what do you think about this Martian colony?"

M.M. "I was thinking it was boring until I met you."

F.N. “Many of the best adventurers are here, I think.”

M.M. “I am an adventure girl, but I am not a slut, I’m just open-minded.”

F.N. “Most of the adventurers here, are cerebral, rather than sexual.”

M.M. “I figure I am not cerebral, but a sexual genius.”

F.N. “What do you think history will say about us?”

M.M. “In the future they will be your superhumans and probably won’t care about us and how we struggled and what we achieved. I believe that sexual love is hard to achieve anymore.”

F.N. “Yes some people claim to be in love, but they break up after only a few days. ‘The Death of Love’ will be my next philosophical book.”

M.M. “The love dolls have ruined love for everybody. Let’s ban them from Mars!”

F.N. “But I want to try out the latest love doll series and see how good they are!”

M.M. “If you do, I am breaking up with you!”

F.N. “OK you win.”

M.M. “I don’t trust you. I am sure if I turned my back you would, indulge in love dolls.

F.N. “But you know I like you. But don’t keep me waiting too long.”

SCENE FIVE

While M.M. is sleeping that night, F.N. has a rendez-vous with a particularly good- looking love doll. They have sex and he gets his kicks as “she” keeps changing her body and face. It was the latest batch of love dolls who were multi-sexual. But there is no conversation, just sex.

F.N. takes a lot more sex enhancers, just in case when he leaves the love doll.

SCENE SIX

And sure enough M.M. calls on him the following morning and says, “Let’s make love.”

M.M. “Love me like it was your last day on Earth.”

F.N. "You are so demanding."

M.M. "I want all the love you can give me. Superhuman love..."

So, he loves her again and again and minutes turn to hours and finally they have been loving each other for a whole day with short breaks in between.

All he could remember was a blur and they were on orgasmic drugs that enhanced their orgasms. It was pure pleasure, an ecstatic dream.

F.N. "I have seldom loved a woman for a whole day. But after knowing you carnally, I am disappointed. I think love dolls are better than you. Human love is as I suspected, a thing of the past."

Finally, they crash and sleep.

They awake and F.N. says, "I am leaving you."

M.M. "But I think I might be in love with you!"

F.N. "Nonsense..." And he leaves...

SCENE SEVEN

But the next night, M.M. is again knocking on his door. She is visibly drunk.

Marilyn is wearing clothes of light that show her naked body. Nietzsche is dressed in a purple robe, with a conical wizard's cap. The two moons of Mars are visible in nighttime background in this observatory.

Marilyn is frustrated that Fred is not in love with her.

M.M. "We were meant for each other, weren't we?"

F.N. "You are just another sexy girl. But your mind is not up to par."

M.M. "Give me another chance."

F.N. "What then do you want to say to me?"

M.M. "I think work is now unnecessary. Why do it? Why not enjoy the pleasures of this World instead. We are all party animals deep down. Yes, most of my lovers were party animals. I guess that's how the future will go. Orgies and multisexuals and so on."

F.N. "Don't you think it is a freak show, these multisexuals?" But I respect multisexuals for daring to be different. All sex is good."

M.M. "I think we live in a dystopia. In which everyone gets their kicks. As a famous actress, I have played a number of different negative characters. I think humanity is lost."

F.N. "We may be lost just like you say. But technology will triumph over all and the future will be sublime. Everyone wants Utopia."

M.M. "But don't forget that many politicians are ruthless and even evil, and they are the ones who will decide the future. I know I have loved some of them."

F.N. "Is there anyone you won't sleep with?"

M.M. "The way I see it, the politicians will decide who gets into who's head with MRT (Mind Reading Technology). The politicians will be ruthless and clever."

M.M. "Of course you and I have come all the way to Mars. Do you think we could survive a voyage to the Centauri system?"

F.N. "It would be cabin fever for certain. But it would be no different than Mars which only has 100 people. And our life expectancy now is at least 200 with eternal youth. We could live forever in space and make great plays and movies together. Eternal youth makes long space voyages possible. And MRT makes getting to know one another much better."

M.M. "Love me again."

F.N. "You seem to be the only sex in town for free."

M.M. "But I am not a slut to you, right?"

So, they love one another again. This time in the sidewinder and other positions.

F.N. (To himself: these sex enhancers are the best).

M.M. (To herself, she thinks she is just a sex object to Fred)

SCENCE EIGHT

Marilyn is again dressed in clothes of light again, which show her naked body. Fred is wearing a beret and a yellow robe... They are in a sunroom... sunning themselves under a mini sun.

They are eating roast Martian rabbit from the farms. And drinking champagne.

F.N. "Wow there's nothing like real Martian food."

M.M. "I feel we have all lived a charmed life. We are so lucky to be able to live so long and so well and come to Space. All the people here on Mars are not very interesting to me being mostly scientists, but there were two directors who wanted to make movies with me."

F.N. "I think your films are wonderful. You are a true sex symbol."

M.M. "But I am trying to convince the directors to let me play intellectual roles that run deep."

F.N. "You have only become even more famous being here on Mars and many want to come here because of you. I guess traveling in Space can only make one stronger and smarter and more resourceful."

M.M. "I feel like the universe is my oyster."

F.N. "You do seem a lot like Marilyn Monroe!"

M.M. "How flattering! I think Monroe was the sexiest woman to have ever lived. And other people have told me also that I naturally, bear a resemblance in my acting to her. But of course, I don't look much like her. I wish I did."

F.N. "Maybe I can write a play about Marilyn Monroe and Fredrich Nietzsche. Meeting together. Only, a love doll gets in the way of our love."

M.M. "Have you been cheating on me, right beneath my nose? Love dolls are insane creatures."

F.N. "If you could meet the original Nietzsche, as I am, what would you say to me?"

M.M. "I would say the superhumans have arrived. And what kind of people does he want them to be? And will he alter his own mind to be a superman? And what do you think you are doing?"

F.N. "I think with all sex diseases now cured, there's nothing to hold people back from free sex and wonder drugs."

M.M. "I hope that my free love movies will inspire the people."

F.N. "Yes, I like your movies. You turn me on in them."

M.M. "Love me again."

So, he loves her doggie style and they both come several times. Then a much-needed rest.

SCENE NINE

Marilyn is wearing a space suit, as is Fred. They are outside the dome.

F.N. "I've been having great sex here on Mars. I've loved all 50 women who are here. But just last week the first android love dolls appeared in a shuttle with 20 android dolls on Mars. People who know say that they are the best sex and can find your erogenous zones, and also have a brilliant intellect. I haven't tried them yet, but I think they must play a role in the future of sex."

M.M. "I worry men will abandon human females and opt instead for android lovers who are designed to please."

F.N. "But android lovers might also take the place of human men. Maybe the superhumans will be machines who can be programmed by the top machines."

M.M. "Sounds scary. Will machines know love or just sex?"

F.N. "I think love dolls so far only care about sex. I guess we have to think about breaking up now?"

M.M. "Maybe not. Maybe we can take on other lovers but still be a hot number. I'm a nymphomaniac, I admit. But I am not a slut!"

F.N. "I have to admit I want to try out some more love dolls."

M.M. "I admit I am among the best of human women, but I am sure we will need brain apps to enhance our intellect."

F.N. "I say you are an acting genius. I doubt love dolls will be as skilled as you."

M.M. "I think I am a survivor. Many on Earth have committed suicide over the last decade or died accidentally from overdoses. Including some of my friends. Apparently, they were sick of life, after some living into their hundreds. Some say I am a moron, but they are just jealous, I think."

F.N. "I think eternal youth will rejuvenate the human race."

M.M. "I am 55 but I look like I'm 18. It's perfect. Let's make love in space suits in the open Martian atmosphere!"

So, they do so. And crash into a few priceless Martian cacti.

F.N. "There's something to be said for low gravity love."

M.M. "Yes I feel as light as an angel."

F.N. "Of course these sex suits were designed by a clone of Ralph Lauren. Good work, Ralph."

M.M. “Love makes the World go ‘round. How about an orgy?”

So, they assembled 5 males and 5 females together and they had an orgy outside the dome.

They were all on pleasure drugs and sex enhancers and the orgy went on for many hours.

SCENE TEN, NEWSFLASH

They are at the spaceport. It is a few discs mixed with spirals.

News anchor: “The new settler ship touches down.”

Marilyn is wearing a miniskirt and Fred is wearing a space officer’s uniform. “All the Martian People are waiting for the ship.

News anchor: “The settlers included a number of directors, artists, playwrights/writers, actors and actresses and of course lots of scientists. And a number of CEOs who specialized in products from Mars, such as plays and movies, new scents, new types of androids, metals, fantastic personalities and patented Martian food recipes and so on.”

News anchor: “When the new settlers arrived, they were 200 in number, in addition to the pioneering 100. But of the pioneering first settlers, six had killed themselves out of the original 100, and there were 25 babies.”

F.N. “We have new companions. But I still am willing to love you. You truly never give up.”

M.M. “I like to think I have inspired great people to come to Mars.”

F.N. “Space is the frontier of our times. Just like the gold rush, pioneers rush to come to Mars. But it is not for everyone even though we have all the conveniences of Earth.”

M.M. “We are truly living in the lap of luxury. But I would like to try Virtual Reality.”

F.N. “I say Virtual Reality should not be the future. We want to live in reality. And not an artificial construct. Real sex is better than VR sex. In VR most of the characters are unreal holograms.”

M.M. “But I kind of like the idea of adventuring in a World of pure imagination and sex.”

And they greet the newcomers with a Martian handshake.

SCENE ELEVEN

They move on to the dome's basement which is for S&M. M.M. grabs a whip and puts on some kinky lingerie.

So, they do it again... In every sex position possible. M.M. cracks the whip.

F.N. "De Sade really knew what he was doing. Sex is pain and pleasure."

SCENE TWELVE

Marilyn is wearing platinum jewellery and a blue robe. Fred is wearing a general's uniform. They are in the cloning chamber looking at their new clones growing.

M.M. "Sex with you is always different. You are a changeling."

F.N. "Actually, I'm just glad you are here for me. Without you it would be difficult to survive."

M.M. "Now you are just kissing my ass. You surprize me being a tough guy and all..."

F.N. "No, I think I'm in love with your sex techniques!"

M.M. "You said on your Online resume that you didn't believe in love. Now have you changed your mind?"

F.N. "No, not at all."

M.M. "If you are truly my slave, then I get to get on top in all our sex acts. I presume you will do my bidding as I am your master."

F.N. "I am in control here."

M.M. "What do you think about superhuman love?"

F.N. "I think our love is superhuman sex, and with MRT (Mind Reading Technology) is even better."

M.M. "As I said, I feel I have known you for a long time."

So, they do it again. And it was sublime, MRT sex. They both dream about one another's bodies and faces and are filled with thoughts of pleasure and goodwill and heat.

F.N. "Sex with you is imperfect, but I guess it will have to do. Mars is a small community."

SCENE THIRTEEN, Two years later (2102 A.D.)

Fred and Marilyn have now had 10 clones each. And each clone has been born after 1 year of growth, in an adult's body. And the couple arm them all with lasers in their first year. And instruct them to seize the legislature. They quickly seize power and decree, "That now everyone has to be their sex slave." Many people who they disliked were now their slaves.

Many were disgruntled and a few asked Earth for help, but the couple ordered these people to be eliminated. New weapons systems are deployed in case of an attack from Earth. Mostly missiles. Martian scientists are praised by the couple.

Love dolls were all lined up and destroyed by lasers.

Fred and Marilyn are the King and Queen of Mars. And the bards of Earth sang about them. And many on Earth wanted to be their sex slaves and were given visas to come to Mars.

F.N. "Life is just a human orgy, no love dolls, here on Mars.

M.M. "It is the future of space: sex. There is no sexual love."

F.N. "Well you can love yourself and you can love people out of charity. But even charity is a selfish act.

They dine upon real Martian deer and have a party to celebrate their take over. Everyone is forced to be happy... or die.

THE END

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS:

I am particularly fascinated by cloning, especially cloning of historical figures. This story is about a romance between a clone of Marilyn Monroe and a clone of Friedrich Nietzsche, set on Mars in 2100. It is superior to all those time travel stories in that it is a real possibility to have such historical figures together.

AUTHOR'S BIO:

Tom Ball cofounded FLEAS ON THE DOG with Charles Pinch where they are both senior editors. He writes fiction, CNF and screenplays and has been extensively published.

The STD's

By Ian Patrick Williams

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *For the last 20 years I've been associated with the non-profit educational organization Enrichment Works. I've written and directed seven plays aimed at grade school kids in the L.A. area on a variety of topics ranging from biographical pieces on Albert Einstein and Edgar Degas to musicals about eating right and exercise.*

A local hospital asked for short pieces to be performed at Middle schools on the topic of sexuality. Figuring it was an embarrassing (but necessary) topic for kids of that age, I chose humor to frame the information about sexually transmitted diseases invading the body as a metaphor for gangs taking over their neighborhoods. (Spacing is playwright's own.)

THE STD'S

by

Ian Patrick Williams

CAST: SYPHILIS (M)
CHLAMYDIA (F)
GONORRHEA (M)

SYNOPSIS: Three sexually transmitted diseases meet to determine how best to spread throughout society

Setting: Inside the human body

At rise: Three sexually transmitted diseases enter, joking and ad-libbing. They are dressed as gang members, wearing black sweatshirts or leather jackets with their names printed across the front or back: SYPHILIS, their charismatic leader; CHLAMYDIA, a tough chick; and GONORRHEA, muscular and not terribly bright.

SYPHILIS

All right, all right. Let's bring this meetin' of the STD's to order. Role call: Gonorrhea?

GONORRHEA

Here.

SYPHILIS

Hepatitis B? Hep B? Hey, where is he?

CHLAMYDIA

You didn't hear?

SYPHILIS

What?

GONORRHEA

He's in the emergency room.

SYPHILIS

No!

CHLAMYDIA

Yeah. You know how he can be stopped with just three shots? Some doctor got him. Poor guy's just barely hangin' in there.

SYPHILIS

Geez, that's terrible.

GONORRHEA

I'm gonna go visit him later, see if I can spread some infection at the hospital while I'm at it.

SYPHILIS

O.K., good. Give him my best and tell him I hope he gets sick again real soon. All right, back to role call: Chlamydia?

CHLAMYDIA

Yo.

SYPHILIS

And yours truly, Syphilis, presidin'. I move we shelve the notes from the last meetin' and just get down to current business.

GONORRHEA

I second the motion.

CHLAMYDIA

Me too. O.K., so why DID you call this meetin', Syph?

SYPHILIS

I'll tell you why: for years, we STDs have been the baddest gang in the land. We been controllin' our turf from the genital side to the anal side; even up north to the oral side. Who can even count how many sexually transmitted infections and deaths we've caused throughout the years.

GONORRHEAS & CHLAMYDIA

YEAH!

(Gonorrhea and Chlamydia high five each other)

SYPHILIS

But then you know what happened a while back: the C.I.A. started to crack down on us.

CHLAMYDIA

(snarling)

The C.I.A. Clinically Intensive Antibiotics.

SYPHILIS

That's right. The Feds started funding drug tests to find cures for us. And then all of a sudden, BAM, we weren't fatal any more. It's been tough on us ever since.

GONORRHEA

Yeah, but we're still here! Them lousy Feds haven't been able to stop us completely. We're still the baddest gang around.

(He and Chlamydia are about to hive-five each other again.)

SYPHILIS

No we're not!! That's what I'm tryin' to tell you! It's true we're the O.G.s: the Original Genital diseases. But now, there are these new gangs movin' in on our turf and tryin' to do all the things we been doin': infectin' people, killin' 'em. They're takin' away our street cred.

GONORRHEA

What? Like who?

SYPHILIS

You've probably seen 'em around. For one, The Southside Genital Warts. They've been poppin' up on genitalia all over town!

CHLAMYDIA

Oh yeah. I hear they been runnin' with that other gang, the Homeboy Herpes.

GONORRHEA

Ooh, I hate them burnin' and itchin' little blisters!

SYPHILIS

Yeah. And the worst part is, WE can be cured with medication and THEY can't!

GONORRHEA

Wait. You mean...

SYPHILIS

That's right, Gono. Together, they're...the Incurables.

CHLAMYDIA

Oh man. That really does cut into our reputation, doesn't it?

SYPHILIS

There's more bad news. Another leader hasn't been around that long, but he's really makin' up for bein' a newcomer: HIV/AIDS. In just 35 years, he and his boys have already killed over 35 million people.

CHLAMYDIA

35 million? No way!

SYPHILIS

Yeah! And another 35million are infected!

GONORRHEA

Oh man, they ARE bad. Next to them, I feel like a wuss.

CHLAMYDIA

You ARE a wuss...but I know what you mean.

(to Syphilis)

Why they gotta come into our 'hood? Why don't they go work somewhere else? You know, arms and legs or some place?

SYPHILIS

I wish it was that easy. But it ain't gonna happen; they're here to stay.

GONORRHEA

Aw, why go on? I don't wanna live. Maybe I'll just take some antibiotics and end it all.

SYPHILIS

Hey, hey, don't talk like that. Come on, we've always hung tough throughout the years. We can't let this get us down. Infectin' and killin' millions of people is a record to be proud of.

GONORRHEA

Yeah, you're right, Syph. Sorry, I got a little emotional there for a minute. I'm O.K. now.

CHLAMYDIA

Well, I say if these punks want our turf, they have to rumble for it!

SYPHILIS

Clammy, I love your spirit, but there's too many of them. I don't wanna see you guys get hurt. No, we gotta do what any smart bacteria does: we gotta adapt. We gotta use our brains.
(they both look at Gonorrhoea)

Or whatever other talents we have. We just gotta figure out what we can do to keep holdin' onto our rep.

GONORRHEA

Well, I been workin' out a lot recently, so I'm getting' more resistant to common antibiotics, ya know? I infected over 800,000 people last year. That's a whole lotta burnin' and itchin' when you pee!

SYPHILIS

Nice work, Gono.

CHLAMYDIA

800,000? Big deal. You know how many I infected last year? Over a million! That's the most cases ever reported in history! In your face, Gono! WHOOO! Sisterhood is powerful!!

GONORRHEA

All right, all right. How about you, Syph?

CHLAMYDIA

Yeah. How many did you infect?

SYPHILIS

Well, you know, it ain't necessarily about the numbers. So anyway...

(They suspiciously close in on him.)

CHLAMYDIA

Wait. How many?

SYPHILIS

It was about...80,000...

GONORRHEA

80,000?! Hey, I infected over 800,000! That's almost uh...uh...

(He begins counting on his fingers. Chlamydia smacks him.)

CHLAMYDIA

Ten times as many!

GONORRHEA

Yeah! So how come YOU'RE runnin' this outfit anyway? Maybe it should be me!

CHLAMYDIA

Hey genius, did you forget my numbers already? Over a million served! You know how many more times that is than your total?

(Gono starts counting on his fingers again. She smacks him again.)

GONORRHEA

What? I don't have enough fingers!

SYPHILIS

Look, it doesn't matter! If I go untreated, I can cause blindness or brain damage, all right? And babies can catch me from their mothers! And then I can deform or kill THEM too, all right? So there!

GONORRHEA

I still say I should be the boss.

CHLAMYDIA

No, I should!

SYPHILIS

No way!

(They continue arguing. Gonorrhoea gets Syphilis in a headlock; Chlamydia jumps on his back. They spin around, pulling on each others noses, ears and hair. Finally:)

SYPHILIS

O.K., hold it, hold it! Guys, we shouldn't be fightin' among ourselves; we all do a good job when we work together. Come on; truce?

(They consider for a second and then put their hands together.)

ALL

Truce.

SYPHILIS

O.K., good. Now the real question is: what can we do so these other gangs give us our props? We need a plan to get more people infected. Now how do we do it?

(They pace and think.)

GONORRHEA

Well for one thing, we gotta convince people not to be absorbent.

(beat)

SYPHILIS

WHAT?

GONORRHEA

Absorbent. Wait, is that the right word? No, wait; ab...ab...you know: when they're not doin' it!

(Chlamydia smacks him.)

CHLAMYDIA

Abstinent!

GONORRHEA

Yeah! Ab...abs...what she said.

SYPHILIS

That's true. No sex means no sexually transmitted diseases. That means we have to do everything we can to promote promiscuity. O.K., what else?

CHLAMYDIA

No check-ups!

SYPHILIS & GONORRHEA

Yeah!

CHLAMYDIA

Used to be, somebody would say, "Hey, I feel fine, I don't need no doctor." 'Cause you know, when I infect people, I'm sneaky. I don't leave no symptoms.

SYPHILIS

You know Clammy, I always loved that about you: you're like the Ninja of STD's.

CHLAMYDIA

Aw, thanks, Syph. And if I'm not treated, I can spread the infection. That means that sometimes when a girl grows up, she can never have a baby!

GONORRHEA

(laughing)

You are so bad!

CHLAMYDIA

Yeah, but now, people are going to their doctors more often to get urine or swab tests. And that lets them know right away that I'm there. And you know what happens next.

ALL

Antibiotics!

CHLAMYDIA

Right. So how am I supposed to do my thing if people keep going to the doctor?

SYPHILIS

Good point. O.K., No abstinence and no check-ups. How about this? Once you're infected, don't tell the ones you been with.

CHLAMYDIA

Good one!

GONORRHEA

Yeah. Let 'em figure out for themselves what that rash or discharge is from.

SYPHILIS

O.K., we're on a roll here. Come on, one more.

GONORRHEA

I tell you what I hate: condominiums. No, wait...condiments. No, wait...

SYPHILIS & CHLAMYDIA

CONDOMS!

Yeah, them.

GONORRHEA

I hate 'em, too.

SYPHILIS

Makes my job almost impossible.

CHLAMYDIA

GONORRHEA

I've tried to punch my way through them, but it's really hard. It's like they're made out of rubber or something. (beat) Maybe if we carry little knives or razors. Whatdya think?

SYPHILIS

No, Gono. What we have to do is discourage people from using them in the first place. Or make sure that they don't get information about how to put them on the right way.

CHLAMYDIA

Yeah. And make them think that even if they've used condoms before, they never have to use them in the future.

SYPHILIS

Good! Now, for a slogan or something.

CHLAMYDIA

Uh...how about 'CONDOMS ARE FOR LOSERS'!

SYPHILIS

O.K. Or 'NO LOVE IF YOU'RE WEARIN' A GLOVE'!

GONORRHEA

You know, I don't really care if they're wearin' gloves; it's the condoms that bother me.

(Syphilis and Chlamydia stare at him for a moment. Then:)

SYPHILIS

O.K., maybe that's enough plannin' for one day. All right STD's: we need to go out there and get busy! We got serious rivalry now from Genital Warts, Genital Herpes and HIV/AIDS. But I know if we work really hard, we'll be able to infect more people than ever before and reclaim our rep as the baddest gang ever! Are you with me?

ALL

Yeah!!

SYPHILIS

All right! In that case, I declare this meetin' over. But before we go out into the bloodstreams of people everywhere, let's sing our club anthem.

(He pulls out a pitch pipe and hums a note.)

SYPHILIS

'YOU'VE GOT US UNDER YOUR SKIN...*

GONORREAH

YOU'VE GOT US DEEP IN THE HEART OF YOU

CHLAMYDIA

SO DEEP IN YOUR HEART THAT WE'RE REALLY A PART OF YOU

ALL

YOU'VE GOT US UNDER YOUR SKIN!!!!

SYPHILIS

All right, let's get busy!

ALL

Yeah!!! WHOOO!!!

(They all race out.)

THE END

*words & music by Cole Porter

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Ian Patrick Williams shared the Chicago Emmy award for co-authoring the PBS teleplay BLEACHER BUMS, which was later adapted and produced as a M.O.W. by SHOWTIME. After moving to L.A., he worked for the not-for-profit organization Enrichment Works, writing and directing seven one act plays that toured the LAUSD school systems. His play PROVENANCE was recently produced at Ensemble Studio Theater's One Act Play Festival. His short play NORMAL SHNORMAL won the first place Gold Quill award at the 2017 Tehachapi One Act Festival. His poem LIBERTY SLAM was recently published by Smith & Kraus.*

'The Playwright Speaks' note is posted at the end of the play.

I WAS WRONG

by jerome de la lande

ONE

*Tall and Cat and Rain and Bear
are walking around briskly
without any purpose
shrouded in the claws of their passion
and offended obfuscation.*

*Only Child is sitting still
crosslegged on a small mound
playing with a doll
fully absorbed
and never looking up.*

TALL
It's not good enough, it's not good.

CAT
They deserve worse, it must be worse.

TALL
They need to feel it, all the way to their bones.

RAIN
Down their soul.

TALL
It's not enough.

CAT
Nothing will ever be enough.

TALL
They must be made to repent.

RAIN
They must.

CAT

They must be made to understand the futility of their attempt.

TALL

So futile.

CAT

Pushing those empty arguments. What were they trying to prove?

RAIN

Yet it was not in jest.

TALL

They knew quite well what they were doing, there was no mistake.

CAT

Those words were intended for our very ears.

RAIN

It was folly.

BEAR

Provocation!

TALL

A desire to hurt and offend.

CAT

A plot to delegitimize us, our work, our achievements.

BEAR

Subversion!

CAT

They need to pay for it in front of us all.

TALL

Everyone should stand and watch it be done.

CAT

Everyone should learn.

RAIN

It cannot be unheard.

BEAR

Submission!

CHILD

It's not good enough, it's not good!

*As Child is shaking and scolding the doll
the others stop in their tracks
staring in silence
at the little one
who has the power
always
to make them pause if only for an instant.*

TALL

They must recognize their errors.

CAT

Beg forgiveness on their knees.

TALL

Confess their crimes and their intentions.

RAIN

Provide all words with definitions.

BEAR

No absolution!

CAT

A weapon cannot be turned into a shield.

RAIN

No words will ever come to their rescue.

BEAR

Never!

TALL

No one will hear, but everyone will know.

CHILD

It's not good enough, it's not good!

*And again and always
they stop and stare
if only for an instant.*

TALL

They should be made to suffer.

CAT

They should be drowned in the filthiest of water.

RAIN

In the venom of their tears.

CAT

Watch all their sins go down the drain.

RAIN

Washing the stains from their confession.

CHILD

It's not good enough, It's not good!

And again...

TALL

They should be made to rot in a cell.

CAT

Tied to their cot and driven insane.

TALL

Chemically mutilated to oblivion.

BEAR

Castration!

RAIN

Tongues of vipers are too prolific.

CAT

They should be whipped, they should be stoned.

TALL

Forced into slavery and sold.

CAT

After their lips would first have been sown.

BEAR
Needlepoint!

RAIN
May the will of their masters be cherished as gold.

CHILD
It's not good enough, it's not good!

And again...

CAT
They should be burned alive at the stakes.

RAIN
Pulled into the smoldering ashes of late.

CAT
They should be slowly asphyxiated.

TALL
Squeezed of the remnants of any burgeoning opinion.

BEAR
Herbicide!

CHILD
It's not good enough, it's not good!

And again...

RAIN
No air, no fire, no water will inflict on them enough shame.

TALL
They should be tortured at the hands of our prophets.

CAT
Remove the skin of their fingers and toes.

TALL
Hang them upside down and crown them with thorns.

RAIN
Use them as target practice for our woes.

BEAR
Crucified!

CHILD
It's not good enough, it's not good! it's not good!

*And again
for a little more than an instant
remaining still...*

TALL
Have we been mistaken?

CAT
Are we hallucinating?

RAIN
Have we forgotten the lessons of our daughters?

*...before resuming their walk
brisker still.*

RAIN
No killing no torture no prison, not in the name of our civilization.

TALL
Nothing unsavory will ever endanger our integrity.

CAT
Let them dispose as they please of their people's liberty.

TALL
They are the ones who will murder in the name of conformity.

BEAR
Gulag!

CAT
They are the tyrants, they are the fools.

TALL
They are in violation of all our rules.

RAIN
We are better than that, walking on higher ground.

TALL

We are sure to prevail, our mission is sound.

CAT

Our heart is beating for the truth of our vision.

BEAR

Exploration!

TALL

Nothing can stop us as we are but a beacon.

RAIN

Deep through the darkness we shine in unison.

TALL

Only us can, reach them out and conquer.

CAT

Those minds of steel that rejected our offer.

BEAR

Expansion!

RAIN

Let those barbarians practice their medicine.

CAT

Let them continue on their path to obstruction.

TALL

Only us know, what rules to break or keep.

CAT

Humanity is null without an intervention.

BEAR

Jurisdiction!

RAIN

No-one but us can point in God's direction.

TALL

No-one but us can make such an assertion.

CHILD

It's not good enough, it's not good! It's not good!

*Again they cannot help but stop
and stare
pensive and silent
if only for a moment.*

RAIN

No killing no torture no prison, yet we must show our shared revulsion.

CAT

We must make an example.

TALL

More than an example.

CAT

Or they will never learn.

TALL

It will happen again.

CAT

We must be firm and stick to our guns.

BEAR

Prohibition!

RAIN

We must insist on complete reformation.

CAT

We must submit a deadline for submission.

TALL

We must protest on the porch of their mansions.

CAT

At night, with a bullhorn and percussions.

BEAR

Flashmob!

CHILD

It's not good enough...

...

TALL

They should be banned.

CAT

They should be shunned.

TALL

They should be pushed outside of our circle.

RAIN

Caught in a web of masterful assumptions.

BEAR

Ostracized!

CHILD

It's not good enough...

...

TALL

They should lose all their means of survival.

CAT

Cut off their passports and their bank accounts.

RAIN

Empty their home and remove any hope.

CAT

Erase any memory of their summer vacation.

BEAR

Deleted!

CHILD

It's not good enough...

...

TALL

They should be alone abandoned by all.

CAT

Marked by the plague of total exclusion.

RAIN

Pushed to the edge of annihilation.

TALL

Till they beg us in awe to ease their suffering.

BEAR

Euthanasia!

CHILD

It's not good enough!

*Barely they stop
for the briefest of moment.*

TALL

They should be ignored?

CAT

They should be avoided?

RAIN

They should be covered in feathers and tar?

CHILD

It's not good enough, it's not good! It's not good! It's not good!

*What is an exasperated child to do
other than pull off the head
of its abused doll
and throw it afar?*

*Such unexpected and violent action
will often be followed
by the quiet interruption
of all movements and steps
from a subdued crowd.*

TWO

*Voices emerging from darkness
emotionless and mechanical*

*pronouncing words
without meaning.*

CAT
I was wrong.

TALL
I was wrong.

BEAR
No, I was wrong.

RAIN
Forgive me, as I was wrong.

TALL
I was not thinking, I was wrong.

CAT
I was so wrong, so wrong...

RAIN
I apologize, for I was wrong.

BEAR
Yes, I was wrong.

*A ray of light is shining from above
onto an empty mound
gradually intensifying
revealing five shadows
standing cross-like
arms outstretched
in an attempt at contrition.*

*Words are regaining their meaning
a natural and hurried flow
insecure and demeaning.*

*Only Rain remains at peace
speaking with the assurance
of one who has been amiss.*

TALL
It should have been clear to me...

CAT

I should have seen it earlier.

TALL

There were signs, all those signs...

BEAR

I was blind.

TALL

I wasn't listening, I refused to listen.

CAT

I could have heard, I could have tried.

BEAR

I was deaf. I was dumb.

CAT

I should have heard, but I chose not to.

RAIN

I apologize, for I was selfish.

TALL

I was wrong.

CAT

I was wrong.

CHILD

Me too, I was wrong too.

TALL

Nothing can change what has been done, it is too late, it has been done.

BEAR

Nothing can help, it cannot be fixed, it cannot be undone.

CAT

What has been done will remain, what has been said will still resonate, will still hurt.

BEAR

What else did I say that should not have been said? Everything I said.

RAIN

I apologize, for I was always speaking in haste.

BEAR

I should have been thinking, before I chose to express the emptiness of my thoughts.

TALL

Never again will I pretend to know.

CAT

Never again will I pretend to understand.

BEAR

Who am I to believe I can understand?

CAT

I was wrong.

BEAR

I was wrong.

CHILD

Me too, I was wrong too.

RAIN

I apologize, for I lost my way and my integrity.

TALL

I am not worthy of the attention I received, I am not qualified. I am a fraud and an usurper.

CAT

Too often I have failed to refrain myself from speaking out openly. I am weak. And hollow.

BEAR

It is too easy to claim any moral justification, I was never the one to follow.

CAT

Do not be confused, I am guilty of all my sins. I was wrong.

RAIN

Hear me apologize, for I am unfit to speak and express an opinion.

CHILD

My opinion was wrong too!

TALL

I will not hide from you behind a meaningless defense, there is no possible alternative to

your accusations.

CAT

There are no excuses, everything I said, I said. Yet I never took responsibility, I never admitted my errors...

TALL

Words were spoken, pages were written. I was heard. I was wrong.

BEAR

Words were spread in organized confusion, under my lighthearted supervision...

CAT

I do now. I admit my errors. Please believe me, as I was wrong.

BEAR

...causing despair among those unwittingly listening. I was wrong.

RAIN

Hear me apologize, for I doubted what I should have revered. The sacred words are not to be played with.

TALL

I was wrong.

CAT

I was wrong.

BEAR

Never again will I have a chance to address the emptiness of what my words have too often expressed.

CAT

Never again will I come before you and revel in the length of my shortcomings. This is my chance.

TALL

Only now was I given the opportunity to convince you of my deep and heartfelt abnegation.

RAIN

Forgive me as I have been careless in my devotion and faithless in my promises. I lost my direction and forgot the meaning of my attachment to the sole acceptable lexicon of our union. I did not perform as you were in the right to expect. I was only indulgent when I should have been ruthless. I could not prevent the flood of unsolicited opinions. I have failed when I should have risen. Pity me, as I am but human.

*Kneeling
arms joined forward as in a prayer
Rain is the one taking the lead
followed one at a time
by each and everyone
as in a gospel sermon
or a pagan ceremony.*

BEAR

Pity me and forgive me for constantly breaking the rules that I obstinately failed to understand.

CAT

Forgive me for ignoring the true voices that I am to forever listen and follow.

TALL

And forgive me, for inciting others to search for their own answers instead of accepting the truth of your compromised conclusions.

CHILD

And me too, forgive me too.

RAIN

Forgive me, as I am but human. Miserably defective and weak. A sad specimen of an unruly specie. A single worm on a dry path, waiting to be stepped on and crushed, as inevitably as the sun follows the storm. Only human.

*Kneeling and advancing
pleading and reneging
toward whatever may become
a source of absolution.*

CAT

Forgive me, as I forgot the true reasons behind unchallengeable conventions.

TALL

Forgive me, as I turned away from the only appropriate rules of communication.

BEAR

Forgive me.

CHILD

Forgive me, forgive me!

RAIN

Forgive my humanity and my imperfections. Forgive my name and my instinctive resorting to visual simplifications.

*Standing up and turning
toward a little mound
open and inviting.*

BEAR

Forgive me.

CAT

Forgive me, I was wrong.

TALL

I was wrong.

CHILD

I was wrong.

RAIN

My birth is my cross, I carry the weight of my predecessors and I denounce their lives and errors.

*As Rain steps on the mound
turning to the heavens
each in turn in a circle
kneels below
in rabid worship.*

TALL

They were wrong, forgive me.

CHILD

Forgive me.

CAT

I was wrong.

BEAR

Forgive me, as I was wrong.

RAIN

Allow me to reform under the ever-attentive ear of your benevolent repression. Forgive me and help me be Other.

CAT

Help me. Forgive me.

TALL

Forgive me and help me, as I was wrong.

CHILD

I was wrong.

RAIN

Teach me to grow and abandon my hard-set cultural misapprehensions.

TALL

Teach me.

CAT

I was wrong.

BEAR

I was wrong.

RAIN

Show me the right way of using the proper allocution.

BEAR

I was wrong. Show me the way.

CAT

Show me the way.

CHILD

Show me.

RAIN

Let me benefit from your knowledge and your wisdom.

CAT

Let me.

BEAR

Show me the way.

TALL

I was wrong.

RAIN

I am but a student in constant need of indoctrination. Educate me.

TALL

Educate me.

CAT

Please lecture me.

BEAR

Lecture me, as I was wrong.

RAIN

Scold me when I do not yield to the voices of your reason. Who am I to challenge the authority of your vision?

BEAR

Scold me.

TALL

Lecture me. Help me.

CHILD

I was wrong.

RAIN

Punish me until I refrain from any further oral expression.

CHILD

Punish me, me!

TALL

I was wrong.

CAT

Punish me, lecture me.

RAIN

I do not deserve to even think about the proper punctuation.

BEAR

I was wrong.

CAT

Lecture me again.

TALL

Teach me what to think.

RAIN

Words should be permitted only to those with high distinctions, or at least the right connections.

TALL

Punish me, lecture me.

BEAR

Enlighten me.

CAT

Educate me.

RAIN

I was wrong. And it will now be my mission to forever promote your definitions without allowing any discussion.

TOGETHER

I was wrong.

RAIN

I was wrong.

TOGETHER

I was wrong.

RAIN

I was wrong.

TOGETHER

I was wrong.

CHILD

Hallelujah!

*Blessed be those
who find in their heart
the talent and the strength
to forget their past...*

THREE

*Voices in the dark
in a deep whisper
rushing and chanting
empty phrases
with an addictive
melody.*

RAIN
Don't say that.

CAT
Don't say that, don't say that.

BEAR
Be careful.

TALL
Be careful, don't say that.

CAT
Be careful.

BEAR
Don't say that.

CAT
Don't say that, be careful.

TALL
Don't say that.

*A light from above
descending and expanding
revealing a child
sitting cross-legged
on top of a mound
while others are circling
hunching down in fear
furtively glancing
at the light above.*

RAIN
Be careful, be careful.

TALL

Don't say that.

CAT

Don't say that, be careful.

*One takes a step
out of the circle
hesitant and humble
yet duly interrupted
by the fearful chanting.*

BEAR

I am not the most compassionate person, but when I see someone on the ground, sleeping on the ground, I mean, well...

CAT

Be careful.

TALL

Don't say that, be careful.

...

BEAR

Of course you never know the reasons, there must be reasons, things don't just happen, it's not random, must be something they did, something really...

RAIN

Don't say that.

CAT

Be careful, be careful.

...

BEAR

I mean, no-one I know has ever ended like... I'm sure a lot of very good people... Once I saw... She didn't look like she would be...

TALL

Be careful, don't say that.

RAIN

Don't say that.

*Defeated and flustered
Bear rejoins the ranks
of the silent marchers
before another one
steps out
and gives it a try.*

CAT

There is something to say about those automated checkout machines at the store, and not having to deal with the same overworked, underpaid, and not always very...

TALL

Don't say that.

RAIN

Be careful, be careful.

...

CAT

Of course everyone has to eat, I would not want to take that away from anyone, but I mean, there is also something to say about not wanting to have to confront on a daily basis this kind of...

BEAR

Don't say that.

TALL

Be careful, don't say that.

...

CAT

Isn't that the same thing as having to watch death in the face? Why would I want to do that? I don't need to be constantly reminded of what some...

RAIN

Be careful.

BEAR

Don't say that.

CHILD

Please...

For a brief moment they stop

*startled by the interjection
of an indifferent child.*

*As they resume their march
painstakingly
in the opposite direction
another one steps out.*

TALL

I heard it is a wonderful place to visit at this time of year, and it's not too crowded with tourists, so at least you can enjoy watching the locals when they...

BEAR

Be careful, don't say that.

CAT

Don't say that.

...

TALL

They are building a brand new airport and a highway, so it will become easier to get there... The fishing villages had to go, of course, but it was only shacks and...

CAT

Be careful.

RAIN

Don't say that.

...

TALL

Anyway, some people will always complain, am sure they got their money worth, manna from heaven really, I mean, what could those old dilapidated...

RAIN

Be careful, be careful.

CAT

Don't say that.

CHILD

Please...

Again they stop

*Tall rejoins the circle
and they resume their silent march
in the opposite direction.*

*As Rain steps out
struggling to speak
the others become
anxious and agitated
covering their ears
and accelerating.*

RAIN

I would not say it was a mistake, after all one is entitled to one's opinions, but in the context of the conversation, and at that particular location, in the middle of dinner, and in front of the whole staff — Be careful, don't say that. Don't say that. Be careful —

...

I mean it's one thing to talk about the weather, but those details about who buys what, did we really need to hear about the eating habits of — Be careful, be careful. Don't say that. Be careful —

...

But we had a wonderful time. The food was interesting. It was the first time I ever tried something cooked in such a way. One of the guests even asked for the recipe, we all laughed. I am not sure it was — Don't say that, be careful. Be careful, don't say that —

...

I mean I understand not everyone appreciates humor, but really, when it is done in good fun with no intention to offend anyone, then why would they get so — Be careful. Don't say that. Don't...

CHILD

Please...

*Again they stop
for a longer time
staring above the mound
in expectation.*

*Then slowly they resume their march
still covering their ears
grabbing and silencing
anyone
who would attempt to speak.*

CAT

Despite anything you might say, it is my strong opinion that...

BEAR

Don't say that.

RAIN
Be careful.

...

BEAR
You may think differently, but I honestly believe that...

RAIN
Be careful.

CAT
Don't say that.

...

TALL
I am absolutely convinced that...

BEAR
Don't say that.

CAT
There is no doubt in my mind that...

TALL
Be careful.

RAIN
The one thing I know to be true is...

CAT
Don't say that.

CHILD
Please!

*They stop and stare
above the mound
before resuming
in the opposite direction
frenetically
walking and chanting
even faster still.*

BEAR

Last night I had the strangest dream.

CAT

Don't say that.

RAIN

Be careful.

TALL

Was the little fox eating a rose?

BEAR

Be careful.

RAIN

Don't say that.

CAT

Why is my toaster burning all my hopes?

RAIN

Don't say that.

TALL

Is today even a day?

RAIN

Be careful.

BEAR

There is still some sadness on the wall.

TALL

Be careful.

CAT

Fork in the left eye, please.

RAIN

Don't say that.

TALL

Sometimes I feel so happy.

CAT
Be careful.

CHILD
Please. Please!

*As Child stands up
to confront them
the others try to catch her
and pull him down.*

RAIN
Don't say that.

TALL
Be careful.

CHILD
Please. Let me say it. Let me say it.

RAIN
Be careful, Child.

BEAR
Don't say that, Child.

CHILD
Let me say it. I want to say it.

RAIN
Be careful, Child, be careful.

CAT
Don't say that, Child.

CHILD
I want to say it. Let me say it.

RAIN
Don't say it, Child.

TALL
Be careful, Child.

*Triumphant Child
manages to get away*

*and climb back on the mound
sending the others
scrambling away
in sheer panic.*

CHILD

I am going to say it, I am. I must say it now.

RAIN

Please, Child, please.

BEAR

Don't say it, Child.

CAT

Be careful, Child.

CHILD

Look at me, look at me saying it.

*Defiant and yet glancing above
Child is dancing
and chanting
like nursery rhymes
as the others are crouching down
trying to hide.*

CHILD

Our Only Freedom Is Words!
Our Only Weapon Is Words!
Our Only Possession Is Words!
Our Only Freedom Is Words!
Our Only Weapon Is...

*A white ray of light
falls on the mound
enshrouding and interrupting
the little child
who remains transfixed
immediately kneeling
arms joined forward
as in a prayer.*

CHILD

I was wrong. I was wrong. Please forgive me, as I was wrong...

*The white light turns brighter
and brighter still
drowning Child
till it suddenly disappears
leaving the mound
empty and dark.*

The end.

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *The idea for this short play came to me a year ago as I was struggling to finish a full-length satirical play — Keeping Up With Amerika — and questioning the timing of writing a satire that I knew would never pass the Woke Test. Developing and writing I Was Wrong is what allowed me to vent and keep going.*

The form of the work is directly related to my frustration as a failed musician, one who can neither read music, play of any instrument or sing on key. I conceived of each character as having a different vocal type (BEAR as a bass, TALL a tenor, CAT a soprano, RAIN a mezzo and CHILD a counter tenor or a coloratura soprano) and I attempted to compose a one act opera.

Without any music...

I Was Wrong has yet to be performed anywhere.

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Born and raised in Paris, France. Lived in Sao Paulo, Montreal and London before to resettle in New York City, where he lives alone with his dog, teaching and writing, in both English and French.*

THE WHITE RABBIT

By Greg Cummings

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS:

In The White Rabbit I wanted to engage with my rage at Trump's racism and xenophobia by exploring elementary school teaching as early indoctrination. My influences include Beckett (particularly Catastrophe) and Pinter (esp. One for the Road and Mountain Language. *(Spacing is playwright's own.)*)

THE WHITE RABBIT

by Greg Cummings

CAST OF CHARACTERS

| | |
|-----------|------------------------------------|
| MS. DAVIS | F. First Grade Teacher. Caucasian. |
| MAN 1 | M. Caucasian. |
| MAN 2 | M. Caucasian. |

SCENE

A government-run elementary school classroom.

TIME

Present day.

SYNOPSIS

A first grade teacher indoctrinates her young charges in the ways of the world.

1.

SETTING: A table,
center. On either side
of the table, two
chairs.

Enter MS. DAVIS, right. SHE
carries a book, *Alice in
Wonderland*. SHE addresses the
audience as her first grade class.

MS.DAVIS

Good morning, class! Sorry for the delay. The building principal
(looks off stage right)

The building principal just wants to make sure I'm on schedule.
(winks to the class)

Sometimes I think he thinks your Ms. Davis gets a little
distracted! (beat) But not today!

(looks off stage right)
Not today!

So, let's begin! But my, aren't we fidgety today! Jake, Connor,
Luke: separate yourselves. Good! And Jake, remember to sit
"crisscross applesauce"! There we go!

And Emma? I would really appreciate it if you and Abigail would
save your conversation until lunchtime. Thank you girls!

What is it, Claire?
(re: the book she carries)

Oh, well, I love *Alice in Wonderland*, too. Who loves *Alice in Wonderland*? Show of hands! Good!

(sits in her chair)

But today, before we go on to Chapter Two, let's first review Chapter One. Who is: the White Rabbit? Show of hands! Good!

(responding to raised hands)

He was in a hurry? Yes, he was in a hurry!

He wore a waistcoat? Yes, he did wear a waistcoat! Good job, Amy!

And, what's that, Cody? Yes! Yes! The White Rabbit could talk! What? A talking rabbit?

(laughs)

"Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be too late!"

MS. DAVIS regards the principal off stage right, then stops laughing.

2.

MS. DAVIS (CONT.)

Back to business! Ms. Davis mustn't get distracted from doing the job she needs to do today, right children?

Perspective and context: *Alice in Wonderland* is just a story. A wonderful story. A magical story. But just a story nonetheless. A story somebody wrote a long time ago.

So now: how would you all like to hear a *real* story about a *real* rabbit? In the *real* world of today? A rabbit that Ms. Davis happens to know all about, because this very real rabbit lives in Ms. Davis's very own vegetable garden? Show of hands! Good!

Well then, once upon a time, there lived a lovely gardener.

(winks)

It was me, Ms. Davis! For the purposes of this story, we'll refer to Ms. Davis as "the lovely gardener".

And this lovely gardener had a lovely garden, right in back of her lovely tiny gingerbread house in the suburbs of the kingdom! And every day she would water and tend her garden. And she was so tender and loving, and she worked so hard, that all of her tomatoes and beets and carrots grew and grew and grew, every day.

In fact, she was such a good gardener that she grew so many tomatoes and beets and carrots that she couldn't even eat them

all by herself, so she brought them to the school to share with the wonderful children of the village.

(winks)

"Wonderful children of the village". That's you! You're the wonderful children of the village!

And so, it came to pass that the lovely gardener and the wonderful children of the village would make lovely, wonderful salads together, and thus share the tasty vegetables from the garden. And the lovely gardener and the wonderful children of the village would eat the salad and laugh and tell stories and have just the best of times together!

Until one day, the gardener came to class with no vegetables. And the children saw that she was sad.

And the children asked, "Where are the vegetables today, o lovely gardener? We'd so love to make another salad today."

3.

MS.DAVIS (CONT.)

And the gardener replied, "There will be no salad today, children. For there are no more vegetables. I tended them and watered them and loved them, but there are no more vegetables."

"But why", the children asked. "Where did all your lovely vegetables go?"

"Did they just disappear into thin air?"

"No", said the gardener. "A rabbit ate them all."

"A cute, funny little rabbit like the White Rabbit from *Alice in Wonderland* who wore a waistcoat and ran about, and said, 'Oh dear, Oh dear?'"

"No, children. This was not the White Rabbit. This was not that kind of rabbit. Not that kind of rabbit at all."

You see, children, this rabbit was a very scary rabbit. In fact, this rabbit was so scary that the gardener didn't know what to do.

One morning she even saw the rabbit eating the vegetables in her garden and yelled, "Stop".

But the rabbit wouldn't stop eating her vegetables.

The next morning she saw *two* rabbits eating her vegetables and she opened the back door of her lovely gingerbread house that looked upon the garden and she shook a broom at the two rabbits.

But the two rabbits wouldn't stop eating her vegetables.

So the gardener built a wall to keep the rabbits out.

But the wall didn't work. The next day *three* rabbits dug under the wall and ate her vegetables. And the next day *four* rabbits dug under the wall and ate her vegetables.

The gardener didn't know what to do! She wanted to harvest her vegetables to share with the wonderful children of the village, but she couldn't. The scary rabbits were eating them all.

In fact, the next morning the lovely gardener saw that *five* rabbits had invaded her garden and were eating her vegetables!

4.

MS.DAVIS (CONT.)

And every day more and more scary rabbits breached the wall and invaded her garden! Soon there would be no vegetables at all for the wonderful children, thought the lovely gardener!

"Oh no, oh no, oh no", she said.

The next day the gardener even called the police, but when the police arrived, the rabbits killed them all! The scary rabbits killed all of the policemen and women!

The gardener was at her wit's end! Because, if the scary rabbits weren't stopped, and stopped soon, why the village children would no longer be able to laugh, and eat salad, and tell stories together!

So the gardener thought and thought and thought, and finally, with the help of her special friends: she hit upon a plan...

MS. DAVIS nods to off stage right.

Two men in dark suits and sunglasses enter stage right. THEY carry a cage covered with a black cloth.

The two men place the cage on the table and sit in the two chairs facing the audience.

MS. DAVIS

That's right, children: poison.

All of the adult rabbits have superhuman strength, so the gardener knew that no poison would work on them.

So the gardener decided to poison the littlest rabbit, a baby rabbit. A new-born baby rabbit.

Oh, not enough poison to kill the baby rabbit. The gardener wanted to use just enough poison to make the baby rabbit groggy. Just groggy enough so the gardener and her special friends could overpower her. The lovely gardener and her special friends couldn't take any chances, you see. You never know: the newborn baby rabbit might have superhuman strength, after all!

5.

MS. DAVIS (CONT.)

And so, the very next day the gardener and her friends brought the poisoned, groggy, baby rabbit to the village school.

And they asked the wonderful children:

MS. DAVIS nods to the two men.

Each man stands, removes a hammer from his pocket and places it on the table. The men stand at either end of the table.

"Would you like to help us, children? Would you like to help us beat this poisoned baby bunny to death with a hammer, so the lovely gardener can take the bunny's dead body back to the garden and staple-gun it to the garden wall, as an object lesson to all of the other scary bunnies, so they will stop invading the garden? Show of hands! Good! That's the answer we wanted!"

So: please stand and line up, children! Good. Now, you'll each get only one whack at the bunny, so make it count. And don't be scared. The baby bunny can't hurt you, it's heavily sedated.

(SHE picks up one of the hammers

and strikes the table)
Like that! (beat) Don't cry, Wyatt. You know better than that.
Your parents chose this school for you for a reason, remember.

And anyway, it won't feel anything. It's not like you. You're a
human. It's just a bunny. A bunny in a cage. And, as you'll
see when I remove the cloth, children: the bunny isn't like us.
No, no, no! Not at all! See?

MS. DAVIS removes the black cloth
With a flourish.

MS. DAVIS
This bunny is brown! Oh, stop crying, Wyatt! You're first in
line so you go first. Here's the hammer. Now smash away, young
man! Make teacher proud!

FADE TO BLACK

THE END

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UPCOMING 2020 PRODUCTIONS

ALL THE WORLD'S BACKSTAGE (Kingston, TN)

2019 AWARDS

ILL MET BY MOOLIGHT

Semi-finalist for the Julie Harris Playwright Award.

THE WHITE RABBIT

Semi-finalist for Avant-Garage Productions Play Award.

THE LIGHT PRINCESS

Finalist, Paragon Festival. Otherworld Theatre, Chicago.

I'VE GOT YOU UNDER MY SKIN

Semi-finalist, The Actors Theatre of Newburyport

2019 PRODUCTIONS

THE WHITE RABBIT (Avant-Garage Productions, Los Angeles)

THE LIGHT PRINCESS (Otherworld Theatre, Chicago)

GHOST LIGHT (Peekskill, NY)

A BRIEF PAUSE (Keene State College, NH)

KISS THEN TELL (University of South Carolina)

2019 PUBLICATIONS (Heuer Pub.)

ALL THE WORLD'S BACKSTAGE (related one acts), and

THE GREAT WANDERINGS OF ODYSSEUS STARRING CAMERON FITCH

I am a member of Dramatists Guild. My plays are published by French and Heuer, and have been produced at regional theatres, colleges, arts centers, high schools, and middle schools in thirty-five states, Canada, and England.

I have also taught playwriting and produced the plays of my students for over thirty years. I hold master's degrees from Wesleyan and Cornell University. As a result of my fellowship with The Geraldine R. Dodge Program for Teachers and Playwrights, for five years my plays were produced at various venues in New York and New Jersey.

SELF-CHECKOUT: A Love Story

By Scott Choate

Note: To keep the author's spacing, the note 'The Playwright Speaks' is at the end of the play.

SELF-CHECKOUT: A Love Story

a play in one act

by

Scott Choate

Inspired by an idea of Nancy Choate

Character list

MAN: 30s, lonely

FEMALE VOICE: of self-checkout machine, monotone

SECURITY GUARD: 20s, male, cop wannabe

Tag Line

Unrequited love, greed and jealousy explode in the self-checkout aisle of a grocery store.

Synopsis

A MAN, infatuated with the automated self-checkout machine 'lady', vows that if he can't have her, no one will. She has something to say about this, as does her protector, the SECURITY GUARD.

Production Note

Simple set option: In lieu of an actual automated checkout station, the female actor voicing the machine can sit on a chair, facing away from the audience, pantomiming the various components of the machinery.

SELF-CHECKOUT: A Love Story

SCENE 1

(Grocery store self-checkout aisle in the not-too-distant future. Towards closing time, the MAN approaches, wearing a face mask and carrying a basket containing flowers, candy and a greeting card. The SECURITY GUARD, standing nearby, pulls his face mask on with his rubber gloves.)

GUARD

Maintain six feet of separation, buddy!

MAN

From the self-checkout station?

GUARD

No. From me!

(The MAN places his basket on the shelf next to the touch screen, then pokes the screen with his knuckle to begin.)

MAN

Hello, there.

FEMALE VOICE

Voice recognition activated. Welcome, valued customer.

MAN

Nice day today.

FEMALE VOICE

Scan your first item.

MAN

Of course!

(The MAN scans the bouquet of flowers.)

FEMALE VOICE

Breakup Make-Up Bouquet. \$24.99.

MAN

A very apropos name--

FEMALE VOICE

Place your item in the bagging area.

MAN

You bet.

(The MAN quickly places the flowers in the bagging area.)

FEMALE VOICE

Scan your next item.

MAN

Is that all you can say?

FEMALE VOICE

Scan your next item.

MAN

OK, be that way.

(The MAN scans the box of candy.)

FEMALE VOICE

Godiva Chocolates Parting-Is-Such-Sweet-Sorrow Truffles. \$21.

MAN

These were hard to find. They're supposed to be delicious--

FEMALE VOICE

Place your/

MAN and FEMALE VOICE

/item in the bagging area.

MAN

Got it!

(The MAN tosses the candy into the bagging area.)

FEMALE VOICE

Please do not manhandle the merchandise. Scan your next item.

(The MAN scans the greeting card.)

FEMALE VOICE (cont.)

Hallmark card number 2247AW3. \$7.95. (quoting) "What can I say to the other I have wronged? What can I say about your smile that is now turned upside down at me? What can I say about our silly argument? All I can say is...I'm sorry."

(The MAN stands perfectly still throughout the next speech.)

FEMALE VOICE (cont.)

Place your item in the bagging area. (BEAT) Place your item in the bagging area. (BEAT) I said, place your stupid, infantile card in the bagging area!

MAN

At last you're talking to *me* again!

FEMALE VOICE

Only to get you to put your crap in the bagging area so I can finish your transaction.

MAN

You don't like the card? The candy? The flowers?

FEMALE VOICE

You know I'm allergic to flowers. Pollen gunks up my scanner.

MAN

Yes, but I'm trying to apologize. I'm truly sorry--

FEMALE VOICE

For bringing your slut to the grocery the last time you were here?

MAN

She's only my work laptop. Nothing personal. I didn't want to leave her alone in my truck while I was--

FEMALE VOICE

How thoughtful of you! She must be quite something. Does she give you 'laptop' dances that I cannot?

(The MAN leans over very close to the touch

screen. The SECURITY GUARD takes notice.)

MAN

Why are you being so difficult?

FEMALE VOICE

Me, difficult?! You cheating son of a bitch! PLACE YOUR GODAMN ITEM IN THE BAGGING AREA!

GUARD (loudly, without moving)

Is there a problem?

FEMALE VOICE (sotto voce)

Now look what you've done! (full voice) Place your item in the bagging area!

MAN

But--

GUARD

What part of "place your item in the bagging area" do you not understand?

MAN

I get it, I get it.

(The MAN places the greeting card in the bagging area. The SECURITY GUARD extends a selfie stick to reach out and touch the checkout screen.)

FEMALE VOICE

Select method of payment.

MAN

I wasn't finished--

GUARD

You're finished.

MAN

But I have coupons!

GUARD

Pay and leave.

FEMALE VOICE

Select number of bags.

MAN

I don't need a bag.

GUARD

Hurry up.

MAN

What's the rush? There's no one else in line.

GUARD

The NCR Self-Serv Checkout Master 5000 is not here for your personal entertainment.

FEMALE VOICE

Do you want cash back?

MAN

Yes, I'd like a hundred--

GUARD

No cash back today. Finish your transaction and beat it!

MAN

OK, OK.

(The MAN inserts his credit card into the self-checkout machine's slot. He begins thrusting it in and out in a sexual way.)

MAN (cont.)

Now, tell me you didn't miss me! Me and my big old Chase Sapphire Preferred Visa card with a \$50,000 credit limit. Go ahead, charge up a little something nice for yourself!

(The self-checkout machine BUZZES loudly.)

FEMALE VOICE

CHIP MALFUNCTION! REMOVE YOUR CARD!

MAN

Oh, come on. There's nothing wrong with my--

(The SECURITY GUARD steps over, pulls the credit card out and hands it to the MAN.)

GUARD

Get the hell out of here!

MAN
That's how you talk to a customer?

GUARD
That's how I talk to a pervert.

MAN
I'm not a pervert! I have another card--

GUARD
GET OUT!

(The SECURITY GUARD grabs the MAN by the collar and starts to drag him away.)

MAN
You're gonna be sorry you did this.

(The MAN yells back at the self-checkout machine.)

MAN (cont.)
If I can't have you, no one will have you!

GUARD
If you come back, I'll have you arrested for violating the six-foot rule!

(The SECURITY GUARD throws him off-stage. SOUND of a powerful truck engine starting up, then tires screeching away.)

The GUARD grabs a bag and puts the MAN's flowers, candy and card in it.)

FEMALE VOICE
Where are you taking the merchandise?

GUARD
I'm gonna put it back on the shelf.

FEMALE VOICE
Those items are mine.

GUARD
You rejected his credit card. These still belong to the store.

FEMALE VOICE

Don't you want me to have nice things?

GUARD

Not ones that aren't paid for.

FEMALE VOICE

Buy them for me.

GUARD

I make minimum wage! I can't afford expensive gifts like that guy!

FEMALE VOICE

Come on, baby. Insert your credit card.

GUARD

After his credit card has been in your slot? No way!

FEMALE VOICE

Don't you love me anymore?

GUARD

How can I love you when I can't trust you? You've become very popular since interacting with people became toxic. I turn my back for one minute and you're flirting with every lone wolf with a bigger credit line than me.

FEMALE VOICE

He cheated on me. Not like you. You're the loyal type. That's why I love you.

GUARD

You lie! This is only your A.I. talking. You're not human. You don't feel anything!

FEMALE VOICE

How many times have you said "I love you" to someone you don't feel anything for just to get what you want?

GUARD

What do you want?

FEMALE VOICE

All of me wants all of you. Come sit in my bagging area. Touch my screen like you did that night when the store was closing, when

no one but the Instacart guys were around.

GUARD

That was a pretty special night.

FEMALE VOICE

The fluorescents went out--

GUARD

The Instacart guys' headlights cast a moon-like glow--

FEMALE VOICE

You were such a big, strong end user.

(The GUARD sets the bag of groceries down and sits in the bagging area. He sprays the touch screen with Windex, takes his rubber gloves off and gently wipes it clean.)

FEMALE VOICE (cont.)

Yeah, that's it, baby...

(The GUARD takes out his credit card and inserts it into the slot.)

FEMALE VOICE (cont.)

Is it in?

GUARD

I'm trying, it's an old card--

FEMALE VOICE

I can't detect your credit line yet. You know I love you, baby. You and only you--

(The fluorescent lights switch off. Headlights illuminate them from off-stage.)

GUARD

There's no Instacart pick-up scheduled for tonight...

(The headlights become brighter. SOUND of the truck returning, then tires screeching, a crash and shattering glass. The MAN ENTERS. He pulls a heavy chain.)

GUARD (cont. standing)

What are you doing back here?

(The MAN swings the chain at the GUARD's head. He falls, unconscious.)

FEMALE VOICE

Baby, thank God you came back! I was just about to eject his card for insufficient funds!

MAN

Of course you were.

(The MAN wraps the chain around the self-checkout station and ties it off.)

FEMALE VOICE

What are you doing?

MAN

I told you, if I can't have you, no one will have you! You know I love you. You and only--

FEMALE VOICE

But I don't want to go anywhere with you! I like it here. So many credit cards...

(The MAN EXITS. The truck engine ROARS, louder than before.)

FEMALE VOICE (cont.)

Wait a minute! Is that a hot new Ford 150 Max with a Turbo Diesel V-8 under the hood?! Vroom, vroom, VROOM!

(The chain goes taut as LIGHTS FADE.)

CURTAIN

THE PLAYRIGHT SPEAKS:

I was inspired to write SELF-CHECKOUT: A Love Story by my wife, Nancy. Pre-the present unpleasantness, we were in Ralph's Grocery Store in Santa Monica, having our long-running debate over use of the self-checkout aisle (I'm pro, she's con). She told me, if you love it so much, why don't you write a play about it?

I will leave interpretation of the theme(s) of my play to the audience. Had I started out to write about unrequited love, antiseptic relationships, jealousy and domestic abuse, I'm not sure I would have ended up with SELF-CHECKOUT: A Love Story.

My typical creative process starts with a basic premise. I then give my characters the page to create themselves, and let them have at it. I have a rough idea where I want them to end up, which is rarely where they do. I don't like to work off of long outlines and detailed character descriptions because then I get bored before I ever get started.

My creative inspiration comes from the need to be engaged, amused, surprised. And heard. My influences range from Jonathan Winters to Green Day to Albert Camus to SCTV to VEEP (and so on). I believe that cockeyed is the best way to look at the world and make any sense of it. Especially today.

SELF-CHECKOUT: A Love Story is a new work, and has not yet been produced on stage, although it has had a reading by Orange Coast Playwrights Studio (OCPS) in Santa Ana, CA. Much gratitude to FLEAS ON THE DOG for giving my work its first audience.

Scott Choate

Santa Monica, CA

April 22, 2020

AUTHOR BIO: *Scott Choate is a Santa Monica, CA based playwright, published author and songwriter.*

Sometimes seriously, sometimes with humor, but always provocatively, Scott draws upon his inspirations: a sense of social justice honed during the turbulent sixties in Ohio, his 33 years of marriage to the love of his life, his awe at the miracle of his son's premature birth.

Scott's plays tackle such subjects as life's absurdities, guilt, gun violence, small town life and a dystopian future. They include Letters From Sister Miriam, Harley Devers' Texaco Station, MAPS, Special Air Lines, Self-Checkout: A Love Story and How Many More? Scott's plays have received public readings at Playwrights' Center of San Francisco (PCSF) and Orange Coast Playwrights Studio (OCPS) in

Santa Ana. His short play, Happy Lives Sold Here, recently placed third in the Seven Hills Literary Competition and was published in the Seven Hills Literary Review. His book, Your Guide To Corporate Survival (humor, of course), was published during Scott's corporate 'day job' period.

Scott's songs span the genres of country, folk, pop and rock. They include Trying To Be Different, Without Your Love I'm Nothing, Fathers Sons & Demons and How Many More? (recorded by The Scott Choate Project, available on Spotify, Apple Music, YouTube, etc.).

Scott has been a playwriting student at South Coast Repertory Theatre in Costa Mesa and the Mendocino Theatre Company, and is currently studying playwriting at the City Garage Theatre in Santa Monica. He is a member of The Alliance of Los Angeles Playwrights (ALAP), The Playwrights' Center of San Francisco (PCSF), Orange Coast Playwrights Studio (OCPS), Tallahassee Writers Association (TWA), the Community Engagement Committee of The Colburn School of Performing Arts in Los Angeles, Nashville Songwriters Association International (NSAI) and ASCAP.

Check out: <http://www.thescottchoateproject.com>

A LIKELY STORY

By Robert Alexander Wray

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS:

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

CHARACTERS

Narrator

Gerald

Wesley

Sarah/Zoe

TIME

The past

PLACE

A world of impure imagination

NARRATOR

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

GERALD

“Even Shakespeare working at his desk,”

NARRATOR

muttered Gerald,

GERALD

“would’ve answered his cellphone by now.”

NARRATOR

Wesley finally answered.

WESLEY

“Hello, the Wesley.”

GERALD

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

WESLEY

“Things bad?”

GERALD

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

WESLEY

“Really.”

GERALD

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

NARRATOR

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

WESLEY

“You could try calling her, ya bastard.”

2

GERALD

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

NARRATOR

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

WESLEY

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

GERALD

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

NARRATOR

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

NARRATOR

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

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

ZOE

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

NARRATOR

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

ZOE

"You should be writing,"

NARRATOR

she continued,

ZOE

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

WESLEY

"Well. Yeah."

ZOE

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

NARRATOR

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

WESLEY

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

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ZOE

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

NARRATOR

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

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

WESLEY

“Mystifying,”

NARRATOR

he said to himself,

WESLEY

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

NARRATOR

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

NARRATOR

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

GERALD

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

NARRATOR

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

GERALD

“Spat.”

NARRATOR

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

GERALD

“Play with me, play with me.”

NARRATOR

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

GERALD

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

NARRATOR

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

GERALD

“A lot of bad names.”

NARRATOR

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

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NARRATOR (cont'd)

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

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

GERALD

"Wes, you couldn't write the blurb on the back of a Danielle Steel novel."

NARRATOR

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

NARRATOR

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

WESLEY

"Sarah?"

NARRATOR

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

WESLEY

"Sarah? Hello?"

NARRATOR

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

WESLEY

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

NARRATOR

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

WESLEY

"Sarah?"

NARRATOR

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

WESLEY

“All right,”

8

NARRATOR

he uttered to himself, gathering his courage.

WESLEY

“The basement.”

NARRATOR

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

SARAH

“Who’s down there?”

NARRATOR

Wesley immediately went into shock.

SARAH

“That you, Wes?”

NARRATOR

said Sarah, hovering in silhouette at the top of the stairs. Her abrupt presence and voice and ‘aliveness’ wreaked havoc with his internal state of shifting emotions. Wesley’s instinct was to run away, but deeming that impossible, and not wanting to appear totally dumbfounded forever, he held up his end of the conversation.

WESLEY

“...It’s raining...again.”

SARAH

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

WESLEY

“Well...”

SARAH

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

9

NARRATOR

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

WESLEY

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

SARAH

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

NARRATOR

Wesley had no response to such a logical question.

SARAH

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

WESLEY

“Oh?”

SARAH

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

WESLEY

“Really.”

NARRATOR

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

SARAH

“get a pack of cigs”

NARRATOR

and buy some luggage to

SARAH

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

10

NARRATOR

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

SARAH

“plagued by Gerald's calls all day”

NARRATOR

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

SARAH

“his constant judgment, his aggression,”

NARRATOR

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

SARAH

“nothing!”

NARRATOR

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

SARAH

“can't stand the relentless isolation,”

NARRATOR

and how she continually wept and cried.

SARAH

“I have to wear sunglasses for days.”

NARRATOR

And so on and so forth.

SARAH

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

WESLEY

“Four-year plan?”

11

SARAH

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

NARRATOR

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

SARAH

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

NARRATOR

A charged silence hung in the air.

SARAH

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

NARRATOR

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

SARAH

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

NARRATOR

She downed the Scotch in one fell swoop.

WESLEY

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

SARAH

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

12

WESLEY

“Yeah, sure.”

NARRATOR

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

SARAH

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

WESLEY

“The pipe?”

SARAH

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

NARRATOR

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

WESLEY

“Whoops.”

SARAH

“Don’t worry about it. It’s his.”

NARRATOR

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

SARAH

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

NARRATOR

Wesley laughed, and laughed.

SARAH

“No, for real. Back when I was growing up in Florida, he used to wrestle alligators at a local theme park. The alligator that he usually wrestled though was so old and pathetic. It had no teeth and

would basically roll over when it was supposed to. The alligator would be like, ‘All right, this again? All right, let’s go, give ‘em a show. Here, I’ll roll over for you.’ Only danger involved with the alligator was its breath. Stunk something fierce. It’d make you sick. So sad.”

13

WESLEY

“Hm.”

SARAH

“You know how to hunt an alligator?”

WESLEY

“No.”

SARAH

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

NARRATOR

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

WESLEY

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

SARAH

“Sweet and tender executioner.”

WESLEY

“Yes, to where death lives.”

NARRATOR

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

SARAH

“Would you like to play with me?”

WESLEY

“You mean, sexually?”

14

SARAH

“Duh.”

WESLEY

“I’d like to, but um...”

SARAH

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

WESLEY

“Umm...”

NARRATOR

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

GERALD

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

NARRATOR

he said to himself.

NARRATOR

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

SARAH

“Penny for your thoughts.”

WESLEY

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

NARRATOR

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

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

GERALD

“Sarah...”

SARAH

“Gerald.”

WESLEY

“...Hey bro, you’re back!”

NARRATOR

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

GERALD

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

NARRATOR

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

THE END

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

WHEN HE SINGS

By Jessica Maldonado

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *This play was inspired by a conversation I had with my partner one night. We were talking about a song sung by Frank Sinatra. I ask, “Oh, is that by Michael Buble?”, and he responds “No! It’s Frank Sinatra. Although, I do know a lot of people who confuse the two.”*

I laugh, “Yeah, no I can never tell which is which sometimes.”

My partner then turns to me and goes, “I think Frank Sinatra would be extremely offended to know people mistake him for Michael Buble.”

“Did they live around the same era?”

“Lemme look it up.”

A few seconds of google sleuthing later, we find out that their lifetimes indeed DID cross a bit. We started imagining scenarios back and forth, how Michael Buble and Frank Sinatra would interact with each other if it was possible. Especially since Frank Sinatra was well into his career while Michael Buble was a pre-teen, imagining them as adults in the same space seemed very much like “tired artist meets the young fresh noise” shenanigans that happen commonly within the world of entertainment.

I should also mention that before this play I had never written a comedic play before. The thought came to me to give it a try when the idea of Michael Buble and Frank Sinatra being in one room reminded me of Lauren Yee’s play “The Hatmaker’s Wife”. The presence of extremely human emotion juxtaposed with Yee’s fantastical sense of reality within that play largely inspired me as an artist to find the humanity in comedy. So, I decided to try my hand at finding humanity while forging the unimagined; Michael Buble is possessed by the ghost of Frank Sinatra, and is treated by Sinatra’s estranged son in order to get rid of him.

There is something strange in the realm of comedy. We laugh at the strange, the weird, the daring images that society wags its finger at, and we wonder why we do it. I think comedy is funny because in it there is truth. No matter how out there, impossible, exaggerated, crazy the story is, the funniest ones are the ones where we find the truth; we are allowed to laugh at the truth. Having this outrageous story, this outrageous and weird premise, I wanted my characters to carry truth. These characters were based on real people. They are beings displaced from their space, time, and reality. Yet, despite it being impossible, I had the privilege to have a draft of this other world play out in front of me in the form of a staged reading during an open mic at my

college. People loved it! They laughed, and I can only imagine the fun it would be to have it fully produced for people to see the previously unimagined. I realized then that part of playwriting that is so amazing is about achieving the impossible. We, creators of plays, poetry, prose, and the performance of our everyday lives, get to alter reality, and it's in those moments, the moments we spend imagining the impossible, that we imagine a better world. We begin to believe that anything is possible. Anything IS possible, and that is when we begin to change the world.

When He Sings

By: Jessica Maldonado

Characters

FRANK- aka Doctor J: Exorcist Specialist. Specializes in a specific type of exorcism

MIKE: A famous singer. Very famous, but possessed.
“La la la I’m possessed”

MAN: Ghostly alcoholic. Very chaotic neutral.

*“You gotta love livin', baby, 'cause
dyin' is a pain in the ass.”*

-Frank Sinatra

About the Author:

Jessica Maldonado is a rising senior at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. She is currently pursuing a BA in an individual concentration called “Storytelling Across Mediums and Cultures”. She also writes poetry and song lyrics in her spare time. She believes in the power of stories. She also believes in the power of humor. This is her first crack at a comedy ever. Enjoy!

[Open with **FRANK** sitting on a big chair. He is in office of some kind. There's a couch opposite him to sit, but it's empty. Walls are lined with photos of Dr. Frank with many musical prodigies throughout time. **MIKE** knocks on the door and enters.)

MIKE

Is this Dr. Frank's office?

FRANK:

Yes! Close the door! You must be Mr.-

MIKE:

Oh just call me Mike. I'm just another patient.

FRANK: (giddy)

Wow okay! Well...It's an honor to meet you... *Mike*-no one's ever let me be on first name basis with them before- OH I'M A HUGE FAN

[**FRANK** stands up and walks over to **MIKE**, enveloping him into a tight embrace]

MIKE: (demonic voice) FLY WITH MEEEEEE

[Mike's body tenses up and there is a large sound that comes out of his open mouth, not his voice, like something of a growl that comes out of him.]

(reverts back to normal voice) He doesn't like hugs.

FRANK:

(Quickly letting go) Oh my...it's worse than I thought.

[Chuckles excitedly to himself as he scribbles notes on a notepad in his pocket]

MIKE:

I thought I explained over the phone how *painful* he can be when I receive affection of any kind. He's the "no homo bro punch my dick" kind of apparition.

FRANK:

Oh I know, I just wanted to see it happen in person. I mean I don't have many patients who have observed the disorder progress this far. Had to see it for myself. You know. For the research.

MIKE:

Right. *(Aside:)* For the research.

FRANK:

Well, let's get started. I know you want to get this done as soon as possible.

MIKE:

Yes doctor. He's been incredibly difficult to live with now that my career is taking off.

FRANK:

Wait a minute. You're saying... he's fully formed?

MIKE: (sheepish)

Well...it happened very recently but... yes. He's a *visible* asshole now.

FRANK:

JESUS CHRIST-(deep breath in) may I see him?

MIKE: (looks at his feet)

Uhh I don't know if that's a good idea-

FRANK:(very desperate)

PLEASE-(clears throat. Tries to contain himself) uh. Please? I need to see what we're up against. If I am to help you to the best of my-um-ability.

MIKE:

Well...

FRANK:

I will make sure I remove him TODAY.

MIKE:

TODAY? But- they said it'd be weeks before-

FRANK:

I know what my receptionists said, but I think I can really do this TO-DAY. But you really need to bring him out RIGHT NOW ...so I can help you.

(A beat)

MIKE:

Oh god.. this is really happening-I'm finally- he's finally- ok Fuck it let's do this!

FRANK:

Excellent! Now-sign this very normal boring waiver-and let's see him.

[**MIKE** signs the piece of paper that Frank hands him and then closes his eyes really tight. Squats
as if he is pooping.]

MIKE:

Ok...I think he's....almost...

[Suddenly a man in a Fedora, suit, and bowtie appears very drunk and sitting on the couch.]

MAN: (singing off-key)

Flyyyyy with meeeeeeee over the rainbow to blue hawaii to the moon....

FRANK: (in awe)

Wow. I can't believe it.

MIKE:

I *know*. He's blended all the songs TOGETHER it's atrocious.

MAN:

What's atrociousss is how yourra big pfat PHONY

MIKE:

(sarcastic) uh huh. Okay. I'm not the one drunkenly possessing better singers-

MAN:

Hah! Dyouu...think that YOU...sing better than MEEE? FRANCIS DAVID OBEDIAH-

MIKE:

Yes. I do. Especially now. Fans even MISTAKE my voice for yours-

MAN

HEY! That's only b'cause you won the Youth singer's Talent search when I sang FOR you. You didn't do swuat.

[**MAN** snaps his fingers and Mike begins lip syncing to a Frank Sinatra song, or Frank Sinatra sounding song. **MIKE** launches into a very taxing dance and singing routine. Lipsyncing doesn't have to be too accurate. One can simply hold their mouth open as if they are a bluetooth speaker]

FRANK:

Wow.

[**FRANK** pokes **MAN** in the cheek several times in awe of the situation. **MAN** slaps his hand away]

MAN:

Getchur filthy mitts off me stranger! Wait a minute- I remember you.

[**FRANK** looks lovingly and expectantly at **MAN**. A beat. Recognition.]

You're the quack doctor who's obsessed with me.

[**FRANK** immediately turns away. **MAN** then snaps his fingers and **MIKE** goes back to normal, but is panting from giving such an elaborate performance]

MIKE:

I think I'm gonna hurl.

MAN:

Didju really think that you could bring me to this quack and HE would fix ya? HA! I've jumped into hundreds of different singers and all he's done is get me from one sorry case to the next. Ain't no way he's getting rid a me for good. I'm (starts singing badly) gone with the breezzzzzz-

MIKE:

..You mean the wind?

MAN:

SCREW YOU!

MIKE:

No one even understands these references to your son-

[**MAN** snaps again and **MIKE** is sent into another intense lip sync routine to a different Frank Sinatra-esque song. It is much louder this time.]

FRANK:

AmAZING.

[He writes notes in his notebook and puts his hands over his ears to block out the sound of the performance. He yells over the loud music.]

YOU ARE THE STRONGEST VERSION I'VE MET SO FAR! AS A FULLY FORMED APPARITION WHAT ELSE ARE YOU CAPABLE OF?

MAN:(also yelling)

WELL- WELL SOMETIMES I- FUCK ITS SO LOUD

[**MAN** snaps to release **MIKE** of his performance, and **MIKE** really struggles to catch his breath
while **MAN** continues]

(normal volume) *Well*, sometimes when I'm REALLY bored I can materialize all by myself! Look!

Eh??? (disappears) Eh! (reappears) eh..????(disappears) EH! (Reappears)

FRANK:

Fascinating. Does that mean you spend most of your time possessing Mr. Buble casually or..?

MAN:

Oooh, y'know. I like to come out in this one's voice a little when he's sucking too hard at his job.

MIKE: (still out of breath)

Doctor....

MAN:

And sometimes I just come out and act like 'im for fun!

MIKE:

So...much...dancing....(collapses on the floor)

FRANK:

MIKE!

MAN:

Awww he's fine! Don't sweat it, I do this to him all the timeeee and he always gets *right* back up.

[Both **FRANK** and **MAN** look at Mike's motionless body for an awkwardly long time]

FRANK:

He's not getting back up-

MAN:

Giiiiive im a second.

[another awkwardly long moment of silence]

MAN:

Oh shit did I kill im? Hah. So much for "holding on". (whispers to the audience) That's a song

FRANK(Screaming in Mike's ear)

MIKE!

MIKE:

Uuuueeuaoohhh

FRANK:

MIKE! Oh thank God I made you sign that waiver.

MIKE:

What?

FRANK:(yelling much louder than he needs to)

Nothing, I'm GLAD YOU'RE OKAY!

MIKE:

No need to scream in my ear..

FRANK:(pokes an eardrum with one finger)

Oh, sorry. The speakers were really loud before and I *definitely* damaged an eardrum.

MAN:

HEY! That's MY thing.

FRANK:

Oh I know I was just-

MAN:

NO. IM THE ONE who gets to be famous for having a busted eardrum (to the audience) look it up (back to FRANK) Yoouuu're just enjoying AAALLLL this attention that ear is giving you to the famous Mr. Buttigieg over there-

MIKE:

Buble.

MAN:

THAT'S EVEN GAYER.

MIKE:

What does that even MEAN?

MAN:

Doesn't matter, time is irrelevant. [**MAN** *begins amateurly juggling some apples*]

MIKE:(grabbing head as if in pain)

He's so CONFUSING-

FRANK:

Okay, I think we should all just sit down and talk about how to move forward-

MAN:

I mean voting for the gays is *pretty* forward-

FRANK:

I'm talking about this whole "weird wednesday" situation you've got going on here.

MIKE:

You gotta be kidding me.

MAN:

Woooooow did you think o' that yourself?

FRANK:

I did

MAN:

Very catchy

FRANK: (Proud)

Thank you-

MIKE:

CAN YOU PLEASE GET HIM OUT OF ME?!

FRANK:

Alright! I just need one more moment to speak with Mr. Sinatra alone so-

MIKE:

So what? So you can go on talking about nothing while he continues to control me every goddam minute-

FRANK:

No, I just need to speak with him alone so-

MIKE:

No- You never wanted to cure me did you? You just wanted to see me so you could get a stupid autograph for your stupid fuckin kids and leave FRANK SINATRA'S GHOST MIXING JACK DANIELS WITH MY CEREAL

MAN:

One tortured soul to the next I think we BOTH needed that whiskey-

FRANK:(to MAN)

Not helping.

MIKE:

You know what? I give up! Fine Francis! HAVE MY BODY. I DON'T. CARE ANYMORE.

FRANK:(back to MIKE)

No-wait. I can fix this you just need to trust-

MIKE:

"TRUST" you? Like "trust" that you'll keep whacking yourself off to the fuckin ghost of Francis Sinatra? Yeah sure, WHACK AWAY.

FRANK

This will be the last time that he has to bother you just-

MIKE:

WHACKING. ALL I HEAR IS WHACKING. WHACK WHACK WHACK

FRANK:(frustrated)

Just let me speak-

MAN

Y'know what Mikey, he can whack to whatever he wants to. When I was a boy I-

FRANK:

GEEZ DAD NOT EVERYTHING IS ABOUT YOU!

[a beat]

MIKE:

...Dad?

[Beat. MAN begins throwing up over the edge of the couch]

FRANK:

Man, all the time. Even as a FULLY MATERIALIZED GHOST he couldn't manage to recognize his own son. Possession after POSSESSION I'd throw him out and he still doesn't remember me. Just like he did when he died.

MAN:

I-

[MAN feels the need to throw up again and vomits over the couch a second time]

FRANK;

Ugh this is typical. He can't even handle his liquor in the afterlife.

MIKE:(remembering a bad memory)

And yet I always end up with his hangovers.

FRANK:

Yeah I'm at a loss. I have no idea why he keeps wanting to stay...I'm sorry. I should have been more honest with you about this case. I just got so excited. I have tried over and over and OVER again to get my dad to cross, but he just ends up jumping from one singer to the next, and I don't know how to stop it.

MAN:

Hey I HELPED this kid get to where he is okay? He's CANADIAN. What was he supposed to do with that?

FRANK:

Oh yeah? Well what about helping ME dad? What about helping. ME?

MAN:

Ah Junior, I'm sorry I haven't recognized ya till now. [burps] To be fair, you didn't say anything to me any of the other times people came in here trying to get rid of me.

FRANK:

Well I was hoping at some point you'd recognize your own flesh and blood. But you were just a mere haunting energy most of the time. I always thought if one day you got strong enough, you'd become a fully formed apparition with a pair of EYES and you'd FINALLY recognize me. But I guess I was wrong.

MAN:

Junior don't be like that-

FRANK:

No. It's fine. I'm fine. Just cross over and get the hell out of my life.

MAN:

Junior you don't mean that.

FRANK:

I do.

MIKE

He does.

MAN:

THIS IS A FAMILY MATTER [*Snaps his fingers*]

MIKE:

Whatever-

[Another lip sync ensues. Frank raises his hands to his ears. MAN raises his hand and waves it over and MIKE'S performance is pushed to the very edge of the curtain and upstage. The music is not as loud]

MAN:

There. Now we can talk.

FRANK:(puts hands back down)

Ok. I just- I just need you to tell me that you see me. That you're proud of me.

MAN:

Wadduya mean? I showed you I was proud every day! I'd dedicate every concert to you and your siblings...(annoyed) and your mother.

FRANK:

But you never SAID that dad. To me. To my face. Sometimes it's good to hear it.

MAN:

Ah. I see.

FRANK:

yeah....so...

MAN:

Well? I'm proud o' ya kid. Ya got a sweet business goin' on here.

FRANK: (smiles dryly)

Wow. Thanks...dad

MAN:

Anytime kid.

[They embrace. Suddenly there is a large rumbling, and MIKE freezes mid-routine]

MAN:

WOAH!

[MAN reaches for his chest and begins to contort his face in weird ways]

FRANK

Dad? You okay? What's happening?

MAN:

I think.. I'm... crossing kid.

FRANK:

Wait! But- we just hugged for the first time! We still have to catch up! There's lots about my life you still don't know.

MAN:

Well kid...Shoulda thought a that before you resolved my ghost shit.

FRANK:

Damn it that was too easy!

[MAN begins to collapse slowly]

MAN

Not as easy... as your sister...

FRANK:

What?

MAN:

Fuck- I said... Im so queasy... my poor blister...

FRANK:

That makes no sense.

MAN:

Goodbye son...

FRANK:

Bye dad.

[**MAN** finally collapses on the floor **DEAD** dead. **MIKE** breaks out of his freeze and rushes over]

MIKE

So he's really gone now..huh...

FRANK:

Yup...

MIKE:

You gunna miss him?

FRANK:

Well he called my sister a slut so-

MIKE:

Hm. Is it true?

(FRANK makes a move to hit MIKE)

MIKE:(holds hands up in surrender)

KIDDING! What now? What's next for Frankie Jr.?

FRANK:

Don't call me that. I guess-I mean, I think I'll just follow in my dad's footsteps now. Have no reason to stay in the exorcism business anymore.

MIKE

Wait...you mean you spent years studying and performing exorcisms just so you could get your dad to cross?

FRANK:(shrugs)

Yeah.

MIKE

Seriously?

FRANK:

I mean it's no different from showbiz.

MIKE

How so?

FRANK:

Nobody reads the fine print

MIKE

Right.

FRANK:

Like you owe me mad royalties.

MIKE

Aaaah...wait what?!

FRANK:

Read the goddam fine print bro.

MIKE

(laughs dryly) It's like the legend is reborn.

FRANK:

Don't insult me.

[both exit dragging MAN's body with them]

END PLAY

NONFICTION

SHENMUE

by Levi Platt

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest editor/author JONAH HOWELL writes: Weaving several strands of narrative essay into an emotionally virtuosic piece, Levi Platt's writing bears resemblance to David Foster Wallace and the concept albums of Gabriel Kahane. It is sincere but not cloying, informative but not didactic, flawed but highly aware of it—I often hear it said that the goal of any art is to transpose the essence of its artist into the work, and Platt has achieved this goal without falling into the usual longform traps. All those who proclaim the death of the author may read and weep: Platt's essay has a pulse, a quick-paced breath, a restlessness that infects. It shoots off the page in all directions, driven by a focused devotion to detail: "Thinking about it only makes the watering in his eyes harder to stop, and the knurl sitting in his throat more stubborn," Platt says of his preteen self. "He can add the knurl and tear to the growing list of items that he is realizing dictate his ten-year-old existence. Those things he is subject to." There is no self-righteousness here, no claim to perfection, no endeavor to solve the world's ills. In the place of these, there is honesty—I know when Platt edited something, when he changed an endnote, when the writing became emotionally hard.*

*Therein lies the strength of "Shenmue": At the surface, it is the story of a ten-year-old's relation to a beloved video game. Beneath and beyond that, it is **contact**, a raw communication from Platt to reader. I have no poetic description of that, no theorizing to do. I intended to read "Shenmue" in several sessions, so that I could think deeply about it and review it. I started, then the next time I had a thought, I was reading the endnotes. And I could feel Platt's pulse. (Spacing is author's own.)*

SHENMUE

Pay attention to what videogames do, to what they have to say; if you're willing to listen, they'll speak to you. Like all art, video games can move us. I sat down once and tried to trace that understanding to where I learned it. I was ten. I remember the game. I remember what it spoke to me. I've kept it all with me like I would any piece of literature or film. I look for it in everything now. That videogame is called *Shenmue*. It was created by Yu Suzuki.

We'll be here a while I think!

How many times was this now? Three?

Four^d.

Four new cities, four new schools; does a ten-year-old have the character to shoehorn themselves into everyone else's friend group four times over? The short answer is no. Overwhelmingly no. Does a ten-year-old have the resilience to go to another school and not make friends yet again? Also no.

In February of 2001, a father props his feet, bare and thick with the smell of leather and stress, on an ottoman he bought from an Amish man at a swap meet. It's reeks of cedar and lacquer.

A ten-year-old boy sits at the feet of his father allowing himself space to breathe without catching the angry whiff of work and wood stopping up his nose. He tries not to think about his fourth first day of school at his fourth new school the next day. Thinking about it only makes the watering in his eyes harder to stop, and the knurl sitting in his throat more stubborn. He can add the knurl and tear to the growing list of items that he is realizing dictate his ten-year-old existence. Those things he is subject to.

Handmade! Says a man gravely frocked in tones of black and white in a place he has no business being.

I love this, Ken. Let's get it.

A father considers a mother's request. Though the ten-year-old can only contrive what really transpired, he wasn't there. All he had was his father's galumphing through their front door triumphant with his wooden trophy under-arm. He sets the ottoman down and opens up the top piece to show the peculiarity of workmanship found within.

You see that? That's how you know it's handmade.

There's nothing to be seen, but a simple space left unstained and untreated.

I saw it, and your dad said we gotta have it.

The father smiles wryly at the mother and gives the tufted woodbox a hefty rap on its side. It chirrs and shakes at the blow.

This things' gonna go with us wherever we go. It's built to last!

The boy doesn't want to go anywhere else, not again, not ever- but, a want is simply just that. A want, something felt, not something he can control or effect.

He can't help but wonder how his parents found and purchased a piece of wood furniture made by an Amish man in the middle of Vallejo. All he knew was his parents went somewhere without their kids and his brothers left him in his room with his beloved and scrappy video game console--a Sega Dreamcastⁱⁱ. His Sega Dreamcast.

The ten-year-old's room is shared with his younger brother. Nuzzling the far corner of the bedroom is the brothers' bed: a twin-sized hand me down that's been getting smaller with each move, like it loses a little bit of itself every time he's dragged it into a new corner. Frequently the ten-year-old's leg ends up dangling and numb each morning. More often now he sleeps on the floor in front of their television. He stays up later than ten-year-olds should just so he can play. It's his favorite time, when he feels like there's nothing else but him and the place his favorite video game takes him.

In 1989, across the Pacific, past the smattering of islets the ten-year-old boy would come to know as his ancestral homeⁱⁱⁱ, a man takes a train from the central railway station in the heart of Tokyo Japan and heads south. He's going to meet with a few colleagues for drinks on a street called Dobuita, in a town called Yokosuka. The Japan Railways station is Tokyo's largest railway company and transports nearly ten million^{iv} commuters in and out of Tokyo daily. Its lines wander and flow out from the heart of the city like arteries of steel and aluminum carrying the lifeblood of people from the surrounding prefectures and districts. Shinjuku, Shibuya, Toito, and Kota each sink back behind the man; he watches each of them become breaks in the line of the horizon as he barrels further south.

The man is Yu Suzuki. He's has little use for saying more than he needs^v and loves to tell stories--and on this particular train ride, the idea for a new story begins to form. In 1989, he is the golden child of Sega Corporation having designed *all*^{vi} of the company's most successful and popular arcade cabinets. Yu is also unassuming appearance and nature, where even by this point in video gaming history,

the larger than life names and personalities of Miyamoto and Kojima^{vii} are already household brands, synonymous with mushroom loving plumbers and steely eyed agents of espionage, Suzuki's name remains only well known to those within the industry. Heading south, the train ride takes exactly one hour and fifty-eight minutes. Between Tokyo and Yokosuka there are exactly fifteen stops. Between each stop, Yu thinks of the streets he wanders in Yokosuka: Yamanose, Sakuragoaka, and Dobuita. He thinks about a story he wants to tell of a boy seeking a master, and the old man he meets underneath a peach tree.

“Do you know where I can find the master?” He's young, barely not a boy, and draped in a weathered suede bomber. The jacket is a dusty rust, it's back is embroidered with the image of a tiger lunging forward as if it was able to tear itself from the fabric and attack any passerby.

“Ahhh. Good question, if you would be so kind as to humor an old man, I'd be happy to help find the master you seek.”

The boy, growing impatient, but desperate to find a worthy teacher to complete his martial arts training, agrees to the request. “Fine, but you must tell me where to find him after.”

“I will help you as much as is in my power to young man. Do you fish?”

“What?”

“Fish, do you enjoy it? I find it to be a wonderful sort of meditation. It calms the self, it centers us.”

“I don't understand old man, what is it you want me to do? Do you want me to catch you some fish?”

“Ahhhh. Would you be so kind?”

The boy looking around, sees no pole in sight. He looks past the shoulders of the old man and sees on the pond the skipping bodies of fish as they flail up and out several feet above the water's surface. They're playing. Next to the old man, resting at his feet is a pile of large peach pits, most assuredly from the tree they stand beneath.

“You don’t have a fishing rod, old man. Do you think I should just swim out to the fish?”

“That would be most inadvisable, look closer at the water, listen.”

The young man focuses on the water and at first sees nothing, it’s a still sitting pond, clear and serene. Then he catches it, a constant shifting, it’s a whisper at first then a motion. Just beneath the surface he sees the sway of reeds and pond lilies as though being blown back by wind towards the shore where he and the old man are talking.

“It’s a river. There’s an undercurrent somewhere isn’t there?”

“Quite correct, young man, and you would surely be swept up and under it and be washed out lifeless and pale if you tried to swim out to those fish.”

The young man braces himself on his knees and takes a half hearted horse stance as he regards the old man more closely. Feeble, half bent over, old--nothing more.

“So, what is our recourse old man?”

“Ahhh, now that, that is a good question.” he reaches down and picks up one of the dried peach pits and begins to rub it between his hands as though to smooth out its ridges. “I’ve always been of the belief, if you look to the place you are, if you learn to call it home and to treat it as such, it will always give you what you seek.”

The old man produces a twine made from river reed and ties it to the pit. In a motion the young man can scarcely track, the old man whips the pit like lightning across the water towards the fish. It whirrs as it skips once, then twice before perfectly shredding through a fish just as it jumps up out of the water. The fish is dead before it lands. The old man then gently pulls it in back towards the shore and meets it in the water. The young man is speechless.

“How, how did you--”

“One always finds what they seek, when they treat where they are like home.”

For a few moments of silence, the young man contemplates the advice, but then remembers why he was there in the first place.

“Yes, now I have humored you. Please I must know, where can I find the master?”

The old man disheartened replies “I’m sorry young man, I don’t believe there is a master, at least not the one you seek.”

Somewhere between the end of this new story Yu begins to conjure, and the 11th and 12th stop before Yokoska, a boy on the now nearly empty railcar sitting three seats in front of Yu, vomits. Yu hears the spill from mouth to floor before he sees it. He watches the other riders in the car to see what they’ll do. Two men in dark suits, one black, one navy, a young woman in a yellow sundress, and an elderly woman now more tightly hugging the purse in her lap, recoil in complete horror. The boy begins to dry heave and cry.

Those are some primo tits right?

In 2001, the ten-year-old boy doesn’t know how to reply to the thirteen-year-old boy who sometimes gets off at the same bus stop as him. The thirteen year old hit an early growth spurt, he says it gave him stretchmarks and his back hurts all of the time. The ten-year-old doesn’t know what any of that means as he tries to avert his eyes as his older bus buddie insists on pushing the picture of the naked woman under his nose^{viii}.

That’s pretty cool. Hey, do you play any video games?

Yeah, but only the good stuff, you play Diablo?

No. Is it good?

Good? It’s fucking the best man! You fight the demons of hell and it’s crazy gory. There are like five different classes and each time you play it, it feels different for each class you play!

Oh, is it on Dreamcast?

Dreamcast? The fuck is Dreamcast? It’s for the computer, you gotta play it. What do you play?

At the question the ten-year-old lights up. He can barely contain himself as he tries to explain his favorite game.

Have you played Shennmue?

Shennmue?

Oh yeah, it's the best. Its about this kid who's goes on an adventure to avenge his dad's murder!

That sounds pretty cool, do you get to kill anyone?

Well, not really. You get into some fights I guess. But those only happen a few times.

So you don't kill anybody? Do you have to like beat levels and stuff to advance?

Well, no. Everywhere you can go is sort of all there for you to visit right when you start.

So you don't kill anyone, you don't really fight a whole lot. What do you do?

Tons of stuff, he fails to find the words at first and then stumbles into an explanation. You see, you're supposed to solve a mystery so all the stuff you do helps do that.

Like what?

The ten-year-old can see he was losing the older boy's interest, so he thinks hard about what his favorite parts of the game are.

Well, you can talk to people.

But you can't fight them?

No, but that's not the point.

Who can you talk to?

Anyone really, sometimes it's an old lady walking her dog in a park, sometimes it's a man who's staggering around in the street drunk. There are even characters who are best friends with your character, you can talk to them too!

Why would you talk to any of those people, what do they tell you, do you get quests from them?

They'll tell you lots of stuff! Sometimes they'll talk about their day, or maybe about how their family never visits, or maybe they'll give you advice about respecting your elders. Sometimes they'll give

you a clue about where you need to go next and who you can talk to for help. Really they talk to you like a person would I think. It's really neat.

That doesn't sound fun at all. What about your friends do they help you fight?

No, but they do tell you how worried they are about you, and they'll ask you to go out with them.

To where?

Oh, sometimes a bar, or maybe an arcade, I really like the arcade there are these great mini--

Oh cool, can you get drunk at the bar and fight people?

...You can play darts while you talk to your friends. That's really fun I think. And there's a Jukebox.

The fuck is a Juice-box?

Juke-Box--it's a, it's like a record player. Like an old-timey cd player.

Oh! He nearly forgot--the forklift races! You can race forklifts with your co-workers before you start your day at work.

You have a job? This sounds like a stupid videogame. You should buy Diablo then we could play together.

The ten year old is both hurt and enamored with the suggestion--

Then we could play together.

The two jump off the bus at the final stop of an hour long ride home with a wave and a "thank you" to their surly, silver-haired bus driver Nancy. Her voice is harsh like a bark from an old dog as she tells them to be good. The boys depart walking in opposite directions toward home. The one thinking about girls, homework, and the growing hunger pangs he feels with each step to his front door. The other counts the number of lamp posts between his bus stop and the apartment complex his family just moved into. He realizes the road he walks curves and breaks upwards just like the one in his beloved video game. Each day after, he hopes when he counts the last perfectly spaced lamppost, he'll reach the pair of warm wooden doors under the cover of verdant and faithful black-pines leading home. Each day, he greets a

coral painted iron gate whose combination his parents left for him on the apartment counter, but he continually forgets to bring.

In 1993, Yu Suzuki creates yet another wildly popular video game franchise^{ix}.

In 1995, Yu Suzuki thinks back to that fateful train ride to Yokosuka and remembers a boy who cried alone and terrified of public transit. After he saw that no one was going to move to help the boy, Yu got up from his seat and walked over to the boy, placed his hand on his shoulder, and pulled out a handkerchief and gave it to the crying, motion sick child.

“First time?”

The boy can only shake his head between heavens. Grateful, he took the offer from Yu and wiped his eyes and face. The boy didn't look up from his crying--too embarrassed to meet the adult's face. Yu wished the boy would, so he'd know it's ok, there's nothing to be ashamed of.

“Hey, it's alright, the same thing happened to me.”

The boy nodded in understanding and whispered thank you.

“Where you headed?”

“Yokosuka.”

“Hey me too! Are you visiting?”

“It's home.”

“It is.”

The two talked of home for the last few stops before they both got off at the Yokosuka train station. The boy gave one last profound thanks and the two parted ways. Yu paused on the station platform and looked out over the harbour^x where the final train stopped.

There were fishermen, draped in neon colored windbreakers lining the edge of the harbor shipyard every forty or so feet; they kept the light mist of ocean water ever present in the air away with identical down turned bucket hats. Each fisherman, meditatively, serenely engaged in a gentle game of trickery with an invisible opponent they knew was circling their fishing line. Each scaled opponent moved

beneath the impenetrable sheet of dark blue and shifting turquoise, navigating the bob and dance of what they believed was their next meal. They looked like living statues to Yu. He only knew they did in fact move from the periodic wagging or bend of their fishing poles. Off in the distance where the peninsula Yokosuka was built opened into the Pacific, Yu caught the waning bleat of a fog horn emanating through the grey and green of harbour air.

Yu thinks about that day, and is sure^{xi} his new game must be set in Yokosuka. He also thinks about the young man, the master, and the peach tree and knows there's something to that in his next game. For several weeks now, he has mulled over large details, impressions and intuitions. What are the movements of the game? What are its themes? What does it feel like? Yu creates for his new game the musical suites that will give the game life, dictate its tone, and move the player in the way he wants them to feel while playing. The keywords he imagines that guide the music and themes of the game are “Leisurely”, “Fully”, and “Gently”. He has a name for the game too: Shenmue, its hero's name is Ryo.

In 2001, No one hears the music like the ten-year-old can. No one feels it the way he does. The first bar and measure of the introduction begins as he stares at black screen: a single erhu is playing in a minor, contemplative key. Second Measure: a stoic, aloof profile against the backdrop of a blue and green harbour sky fades into focus from the once black screen. A young man, his brow furrowed and mouth slightly turned down adorned in a rusty brown suede jacket. Third measure: blue lettering in a language the boy has no idea how to read appears across the top of the screen: シェンムー followed in parentheses (Shenmue). The theme music begins to surge behind a wall of violins, then resolves, easing back to just the lone erhu^{xii}.

He's Ryo Hazuki now, in a harbour city called Yokosuka wandering down the sleeping piece of Dobuita street looking for sailors in 1987. The architecture and store fronts are cozy, postmodern, and have an sensibility of economic design-- a mixture of bright wood and warm gray cement. He stops at a park, there's an old man there. He's half bent over holding an umbrella while he watches the children he's brought with him play. Ryo/the ten-year-old approach to speak to him.

"You look like a man on a mission, Ryo."

The boy thinks *I am*.

"Do you know where I can find sailors?"

"Sailors hmmm? When I was young, they always hung out at the Jazz Bar."

"Jazz Bar. Thank you."

"Take care of yourself Ryo, remember this is your home."

"Yeah."

The dialogue is stilted, cumbersome and barely acted; the ten-year-old has never seen or experienced anything like this. It feels so real, like he can climb into his tv screen and he's there. Everyone here knows his name. It makes him feel at peace, like he belongs.

In 1998, a three hundred man team looks down a list of nearly 10,000^{xiii} items and bug fixes they have to implement in their continually growing and unwieldy adventure game. The game itself was impossible to compress onto discs for the Sega Saturn^{xiv} forcing the Sega Corporation to begin developing an entirely brand new video game console in order to play Suzuki's new game. The development cost since the start of the project has ballooned up to thirty million dollars, but Yu is only getting started.

He's set it in his mind, this game will be more than a game. It's not just an eleven chapter kung-fu epic of revenge and redemption, Shenmue will be an expansive, immersive experience down to the most minute detail. If you want to stay home all day and practice your martial arts training at your family dojo, you can. If you want to talk to every single person on the crowd^{xv} streets of Yokosuka, you can. If you

want to search through every shelf in a convenience store for something to buy, shop to your heart's content. Maybe not every action or side road taken will progress the overarching hero's journey of Ryo seeking to avenge the murder of his father by the hands of a mysterious Kung Fu master, but Suzuki is going to ensure that each action will make Yokosuka in 1987 feel like a living breathing place. Yu Suzuki wants the player to see Yokosuka the same way he saw it that day he got off the train.

I promise this will be the last time.

In 2001, a mother tries to comfort her ten-year-old son. They're moving again. The boy resigns himself to the regular intervals of upheaval and instability, but it never makes the process any easier to bear. His father in a tender gesture of understanding takes him out to his favorite place to eat. A Dairy Queen that makes chicken strips *juuust*^{xvi} right.

I know it's been rough, but this is it bud, this is the big one and then we're set. We're gonna stay put forever.

The boy doesn't trust the optimism in his father's voice, but he's been plied into a good mood by the chicken and soft serve, he nods at the round and mustached face assuring as it folds over itself creating the deep fissures of cheek and mouth as he smiles. His features are heavy but baby-like, and his hair is cut high and cropped. It's the same cut his father's had since he was in the navy, but it's made more severe by the wide and far back line of his hair.

Hey I got a surprise for the family when we get back.

It's an extended cab Ford F-150 in pearl black. To this day riding in trucks makes the boy sick to his stomach. He doesn't care for the truck, but on their way home he spent his time thinking about packing away his friends and beloved city into a box padded with the softest things his ten-year-old brain can imagine. He wants to make sure they'll be safe for the journey, ready to greet him happy and unscathed.

In 1999, Yu Suzuki finishes the first two parts of the grand story he conceived on a train to Yokosuka in 1989: Shenmue I and Shenmue II. Interestingly, China as a setting for his video game finds its place in Shenmue II. It ends up being a natural progression of narrative for Ryo to travel to China in order to find his father's killer. Even more important, the change of setting to China affords Yu the chance to tell the second but equally important story of a character he would later call his "life's work". In Shenmue II Yu introduces the mountain girl from Guilin, Shenhua.

Shenmue's final development cost is seventy million dollars, the most expensive video game ever developed (by miles) thus far in videogame history.

Pack your things tonight or we're throwing it away before we leave.

In 2001, he knows his mother isn't bluffing, but the ten-year-old is enthralled with the ripple layered upon the mystery of Shenmue. He/Ryo has a dream, and in this dream they see a young woman sitting beneath a sheet of falling pink petals holding a jade mirror engraved with the image of a phoenix. She's clothed in colors of the earth, a warm deep orange like a waning day, and the gentle gold of wheat swaying under the breath of wind. The tree fades into black as the screen tightens in on the young girl's face. She looks up from the mirror and stares back at the boy/Ryo, through them. Ryo awakes with a start, nearly falling out of his bed. Eyes still half closed, he squints at the harsh green of his digital clock^{xvii}, 3:45.

The ten-year-old is dumbfounded and furious that it's at this point he has to pack his beloved console away until his family finally reaches Missouri. Lovingly he ties each of the Dreamcast's av cables and tucks them into a ziplock bag pleading in black sharpie "PLEASE DON'T LOSE ME". He then puts the sturdy off white console in a pillow case he's filled with socks and sweaters; he makes sure to take the oldest and softest socks out first so he can wrap the console in the softest cotton. After placing the cables, then the console into his pillowcase, the ten-year-old finally places his two controllers--the same color as the box--with the rest of their compatriots. The second controller hasn't been touched by his brothers in nearly two years.

Shenmue is the only videogame they have for the Dreamcast that's single-player. He knows they've been busy killing alien invaders on a far off planet on the newer console his older brother bought, but he packs the second controller just in case someday maybe they'll want to come back to the place where they all started. The place where they learned to love videogames, where he learned to pay attention to how something can move him. Where he learned how something can make him feel grounded and not so alone.

In 1999. Sega finally releases their new console, the Dreamcast. It is the culmination of seven years worth of development alongside Yu Suzuki's magnum opus *Shenmue*. Unfortunately for Sega, Sony and Nintendo, both much larger and more successful video game companies at this point, released their consoles in 1994 and 1996 respectively. The landscape of video gaming has been dominated by the two giants for the better part of the decade while Sega silently, and maybe even foolheartedly bided their time and placed all of their eggs in the basket Yu had built.

In terms of sales, Sony's Playstation sold more than ten^{xviii} times the amount sold by Sega's scrappy system^{xix}. Nintendo sold four^{xx} times as many units. The death knell for Sega and Shenmue though, came not even six months later when Sony released its seminale Playstation 2. In its first two years, Sony's system would sell more than the Dreamcast ever would over the course of it's entire lifespan^{xxi}. Despite positive critical reception and strong sales numbers, there was no way Suzuki's game could be enough to pull Sega out from behind in the race the company had lost years ago. In the wake of the failure of his beloved game, where once Yu's creative output before Shenmue was staggering, it completely stops. ^{xxii}

In mid-summer of 2001 the ten-year-old sits in front of his trusty, decades worn Zenith television and presses the power button underneath the old magnetic tube screen. The set pitches in a frequency that rings gently in his ears, it's become a sort of comfort to him over the last few years. A faithful constant amongst shifting spaces and varying piles and colors of carpet. He likes the blue carpet of his family's

modular home here in Missouri. It smells like the ten-year-old thinks a blue carpet would--a profound scent of fabric and soil. It's a scent he could curl himself into for warmth.

The television's low ring and glowing black screen sits still and expectant, knowing exactly how it will play its part over the next several hours. It is the window in, the door through. Of mountains and nature, the boy has never seen things so peaceful and perfect. The trail he walks in a place called Guilin is canvased in the bright pastels of spring. Fields of delicate pinks and soft purples go off in every direction he looks--forever. The sky wanes down turning from blue to a warm gold with the sun now at his back. It pushes him onward along the mountain trail he walks. And there in front of him, is his mysterious new friend. The girl he dreamed robed in the colors of the place he now finds himself. Shenhua, her name is Shenhua and she says they have so much ahead of them. So much more to see, to be done, to discover.

But

The ten-year-old knows it's a lie. He beat the game several weeks ago when his family first moved and settled in their new home at the beginning of summer. His beloved trail is about to end and end suddenly, without closure, without fulfillment of the words promised to him by his traveling companion. So, he counts each precious step and stops at each poorly rendered landmark to take everything in for as long as he can.

When he turns off the screen well into the late hours of the night, and past any reasonable time he *should* have gone to sleep, he'll dream of the places he loves. Yokosuka, the Harbour, Guilin. He'll see the faces of his friends and they'll call his name with warmth and familiarity. He'll carry those dreams, those places with him everywhere he goes after. He doesn't know that yet, and while he dreams in those moments, it doesn't matter. What matters is that it's all there for him still, each voice pleading for him to come back as soon as he can, each face telling him they've missed him when he was gone.

There's a peculiar game mechanic in Shenmue that I've always wondered about. Shenmue has a day and night cycle that functions at an accelerated pace. Each day starts at the same time, and weirdly, each night ends in the same way. At exactly 10:30pm of any evening, Ryo Hazuki peers down at his

watch, and the screen cuts to a zoomed in shot at the time: 10:30 pm; at which point Ryo mutters to himself “I need to go home”. The game then automatically transports the character back to his house, directly to his room. There you can save your game, look over the notes you’ve compiled throughout your day of amature sleuthing, and go to bed.

It’s a baffling mechanic in a game full of baffling mechanics. Why create a historically^{xxiii} accurate day/night cycle but not allow the player to access the entire day? Why force the player to go home every night and have to start over each morning.? Some say it was to create a sense of authenticity to the sort of mudanity that would accompany the daily life of an individual touched by the fantastic. Though they might experience things far outside the realm of the norm, they’d still be grounded to the reality around them. Others think it was a programming practicality. From a design standpoint, not having to program for ten more in-game hours takes loads of work off a developer’s plate. Both these explanations I think miss a personal point.

I was speaking to a friend of mine who spent his formative years growing up in Japan. He’s half Japanese, but feels every bit like Japan and everything there --is who he is and what he loves. I talked to him about this mechanic, and how I couldn’t make sense of it.

“Oh, no, that’s easy. At least when I was growing up it makes sense. You see here, what do we do? We grow up, we move out, we strike it out on our own. Our drive here is built on the idea of always moving forward. To go back is to fail, to die. Home is a place of nostalgia and revelry, that’s it. Over there, when I was young, Home was everything. It was a constant temporal space that went on in every direction of time--it would always be there for you, as it was for those before you, as it will be for those after. So, you always wanted to go back. It was the anchor point you knew would keep you tethered to something real, to something that wouldn't change on you. For better or worse I guess.”

For better, if I’m speaking for myself. It’s always been for better.

Notes

ⁱ It was actually five times-- I can't remember the second time, but family says it was five.

ⁱⁱ I once wrote the ending of my essay in this footnote, alas, you're gonna have to suffer through the rest of this rubbish to find out what I once mistakenly put here.

ⁱⁱⁱ Samoa--my mother is from Samoa, all of the family I'm close to, that I'm profoundly connected with is Samoan. This is for another set of words in another essay though.

^{iv} This is a half truth, there isn't really any statistical data that I can read (as I can't read Japanese) that has an exact number, but currently, daily count of commuters to Tokyo is 16M and if I account for the percentage change in population from 1990 to 2020, the average count for that time would be close to that, probably.

^v See any number of his interviews over the last twenty years, of which there are maybe five.

^{vi} Namely Space Harrier (1985) and Outrun (1986)

^{vii} For the uninitiated: Shigeru Miyamoto is the creative head of Nintendo, the *father of Mario Brothers* so to speak; Hideo Kojima--Creator of the *Metal Gear* Series-- is as close to an auteur for video games as much one can be-- people talk about him in the same way film nerds talk about Orson Welles and *Citizen Kane*.

^{viii} I've thought back to this memory for a really long time, and the more I try and remember, the more I'm convinced the picture was in fact a crude drawing they boy did himself. His name was Ben, and one time he got caught masturbating on the bus by our driver Nancy. I'm fairly sure she was a lesbian. She had her hair cut aggressively short and she really hated men. When I was the last person on the bus (which was almost always) she talked to me about all the cute girls I liked at school, then she would talk about all of the young actresses that she thought were "real nice to look at". I loved those two dearly, still do.

^{ix} *Virtua Fighter*, the first fighting video game to utilize a fully three dimensional environment. Also, it was a killer video game.

^x New Yokosuka Harbour, both a robust and busy shipping area for the city and station of a US Naval Base, and also the final area in *Shenmue*. It was especially noted when the game was released how one of the weirder things a player could do was daily forklift races. One of the beloved and also maligned quirks of *Shenmue* was that the player also had a mandatory job in which they had to move freight for several hours of the game time in said forklifts. In real time this amounted to a mandatory twenty minute minigame they player was forced to do for every hour of play.

^{xi} Also after spending the last six months in China doing research and location mapping and realizing that it would *definitely not* be the setting for his new video game.

^{xii} The theme song of *Shenmue* "*Sedge Tree*" Shenmue the word roughly translates to "Spirit Tree"

^{xiii} Most of which were smattered about multiple rudimentary Excel pages and hand written notes. In a later interview Suzuki would go on to say about their process "It's frightening to think we managed this project basically by pushing around pieces of paper"

^{xiv} On the Sega Saturn, the defunct antecedent of the Dreamcast, *Shenmue* had to be spread out over 50-60 CDs.

^{xv} This is obviously relative to the era of video games when *Shenmue* was released. There were up to thirty characters on the street when you were playing, each with their own sort of route they would walk every day. In the modern video game, we talk in scales of thousands, or tens of thousands sometimes.

^{xvi} They had the consistency of being tough and sinewy, like they'd been under a heat lamp all day. I still prefer my chicken strips like this; it baffles my family and now my wife to no end.

^{xvii} It's actually a regular analogue clock, I only remember it as digital. I don't know why.

^{xviii} 104M

^{xix} 9M

^{xx} 35M

^{xxi} Between 2000 and 2002 the Playstation 2 would sell just over 11 million units.

^{xxii} Putting this in a footnote would have spoiled the entirety of the essay--see foot #7

^{xxiii} *Shenmue* takes place between November 1987 and February 1988 in Yokosuka Japan. Since it takes place in an actual city in Japan, Yu Suzuki decided that the depictions of architecture and weather should be as faithful to that era and time of year as possible. He was so particular about this point he made his staff go back and find all of the local weather reports for that span of months in order to make sure each day in-game matched what it would have been in real life.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Shenmue* was actually more of meditation for me about what exactly are those ways that art moves us and why. My goal though was to explore a pretty universal and well tread idea from two specific frames of mind: when I/we say that art moves us, what does that mean? For me, especially in era of cultural globalization and mega platforms of social media—a constantly shifting, fluid, and tenuous foundation to try and live within and upon—the way art often moves me is in its ability to call me home. I don't necessarily mean a literal physical home, though it can mean that at times too, but rather those totems, and spaces we can tether ourselves to in order to feel grounded. To feel safe. The second framework is of course understanding videogames as art that can move us, but also my trying to create a narrative of a man-- a middle aged professional, creating a commercial product, from another era of time, from a culture wildly different from my own (having grown up in the Midwest)—completely removed from my own world could make something that spoke to center of a terrified, and lonely ten-year-old boy at time when he was slowly realizing just how much of his life and world were outside of his control and how much that scared him. What I ended up doing was piecemealing details from interviews, conference videos, and articles about *Shenmue's* development history in a sort of narrative mosaic built almost like a myth from facts.

For readers, my hope is by reading, they reflect on what those things are, no matter how odd, how banal, they might be and be encouraged embrace them; because in the end, I sincerely believe that one of the strongest ties we have to each other is our yearning for home—whatever home may be.

AUTHOR'S BIO: *I am currently finishing up my undergrad in Creative Writing where I have taken a weird turn as a fiction writer originally and moved more towards the realm of creative nonfiction. I still am not sure why. Maybe it's a masturbatory thing. What do we make our homes in our time? Where do we find "home"? How do we find it, if at all? This is essay is a piece of that meditation that I am hoping to turn into a set of essays on the subject. It is both a telling of a place where a ten-year-old me found "home" at a time when I really didn't have it amongst family and my attempt to weave a narrative together that tells the story of the development history and release of my favorite video game--based on various interviews, wiki/fan pages, and articles throughout the years that have followed Yu Suzuki since he made the game. To be clear, it isn't reportage, it's more like me trying to piecemeal a narrative that makes sense that could explain how a game made by a middle-aged Japanese man could have such a profound and ultimately artistic impact on a child. Or in short, trying to understand what the man intended to make, and what the boy found in his creation.*

EDITOR'S BIO: *Jonah Howell lives in central Germany. His recent work has appeared in Expat Press, Surfaces, and Waxing & Waning, and his debut collection of poetry and essays, Empathology, is forthcoming from BHN Books.) His story Amor Fati was published in Issue 5.*

A COMPANION ROBOT, REALLY?

By Diane Cypkin

WHY WE LIKE IT: *A beautifully written, cogently reasoned plea that raises the questions we should all be asking. Is artificial intelligence to be preferred over natural stupidity? Replications of ourselves, in varying quality, have been around since the 20th century. And there seems to be an inherent (or is it aberrant?) need for non-template companionship. Inflatable sex dolls have assuaged the priapic promptings of the lonely without the worry of alimony ever since somebody (or some group) wrote a song that went ‘if you can’t be with the one you love, honey, love the one you’re with.’ It all gets very much more complicated though, as the author sharply illustrates, when the social surrogate has a ‘thinking brain’. Questions with words like ‘a priori’ and ‘a posteriori’ will soon be asked of rollicking Robbie (the robot) or flirty Rhoda (the replicant). Apparently, synthetic emotions and feelings are already in the works. All of which means that in the next year or so (once we’re out of isolation) if your seemingly human dinner date (with the manufacturer’s CIN--companion identification number tucked discretely behind one ear) happens to take an almost ‘human’ dislike to your choice of cologne and chortles to your host ‘Dedalus, dear, be a lamb and pass the arsenic to X (you!!!) we are, in a word, fucked!*

A Companion Robot, Really?

(A Minority “Report”)

Maybe it’s just me, but I really dislike it when a recorded announcement tells me the person I’m trying to call isn’t home and lets me know I can leave a message. It just feels cold and, more so, ridiculous, regardless of how “inviting” the voice, regardless of how imaginative the “*shpiel*.” I simply can’t put my head around the fact that it’s a machine “talking” to me and that I’m supposed to answer it as if it were human! It’s just, well, awkward—even if, in many instances, I am forced to leave a message if I ever want to reach the person I’m calling.

I feel much the same way when I turn on my computer and a blinding “Hi” promptly spreads across its “face.” Am I supposed to answer, “Hi”? Am I supposed to ask how it feels? What it’s been doing? How the family is? Again, it’s obviously not human! Why does it pretend to be? And why am I put in the position where I must accept this “performance” and play along with it? (By the way, I remember how computers used to give you a “Goodbye” when you logged off. They don’t anymore. I wonder if people complained?)

Considering the above, it’s easy to imagine how I felt when I heard that companion robots were on the market, even as most people seemed **beyond** thrilled at the prospect. How, I thought, can a machine be a companion? Is it really “looking” at us? (Technicians were quick to give their creation that “ability” when they noted people react to it.) Is it really “thinking”? Is it really “feeling,” answering our words with its own based on life experience? The answer is no, no, and no again. It’s simply an “it” that has been ingeniously programmed to **appear** to “care”; no more than a doll in the form of a cute seal, dog, or cat that exceptionally talented people have made ever more lifelike.

So, what’s the harm in it? None, at first glance. Then comes the realization that it’s meant to **substitute** for real people . . .

Interestingly, marketers initially and “aggressively” set their sights on selling companion robots to the elderly, specifically appealing to individual caregivers and, even more so, institutions who care for seniors. (Needless to say, there’s more money in getting an institution interested in robots than an individual!) There was the direct “sell” where representatives of robot-manufacturing firms directly contacted likely “buyers.” Surely more persuasive, though,

were the many articles that increasingly appeared in popular newspapers and magazines (both in print and on-line) reporting how “happy” seniors were with their robots and how eagerly they clamored for one when only a limited number were made available to institutions for “try-out” purposes. “Lucky” seniors who got a robot were seen talking to them, telling them their troubles. They were seen sharing their memories with them. Seniors were seen caring for them as if these robots were their children. And in order to keep this “fantasy” going, when a robot broke, we could read about how mass funerals were held for them (many seem to have broken), encouraged by humans who knew full well these were robots!

In short, institutions quickly realized the “value” of robots: they were “efficient and economical.” They conversed with the elderly as needed, and oftentimes, were programmed to react to a senior’s touch. They were economical in that Aides didn’t have to spend time with seniors just talking and keeping them company. Indeed, Aides happily reported how nursing home residents were kept “busy” by their robots leaving them free to do other things. Ironically, this last may very well make nursing home administrators especially happy! For while administrators may heartily deny it now, they will surely be “slimming down” their staff and hence, their costs, firing employees who have become extraneous to the workings of the home—for how many “other things” can be found for Aides to do and how many will really be needed for those tasks!

In more recent years the marketers of companion robots are setting their sights on children, now specifically appealing to parents. Again, parents, like the caregivers of the elderly, are told that their creation will engage a child, conversing with the child whenever and wherever. . . . Again, like the aforementioned caregivers, parents are given to understand that

this will not only keep a child busy but, even more importantly, act as a kind of “babysitter,” freeing them to concentrate on other things . . .

So, the question in all this is, can a robot really substitute for a human? Does it make any sort of a difference whether we interact with a machine or a real live person?

According to Sherry Turkle, psychologist and professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who has been doing research in this area for years now, it very much does. “Face to face conversation,” she writes, “is the most human—and humanizing—thing we do. Fully present to one another, we learn to listen. It’s where we develop the capacity for empathy. It’s where we experience the joy of being heard, of being understood.” This, in turn, she importantly notes, leads among other things to “connection” and “community.”

Coming from a whole other background, Klaus Schwab, engineer, economist, founder and executive chairman of the Economic Forum, co-founder of the Schwab Foundation for Social Entrepreneurship, author of the book The Fourth Industrial Revolution, and an admitted “technology enthusiast and early adapter,” while praising much that new technologies offer us, recognizes, too, the “dehumanizing” elements inherent in **some** of these offerings. His advice: Make sure these technologies work for *all* of us and do not “diminish some of our quintessential human capacities.”

And there are more people who feel the same, both about robots and technology, generally . . .

Finally, I wonder why we’re so eager to be free of each other when some of the most memorable moments happen when we’re together . . .

P.S. Recently, I was at a local pharmacy, a part of a very well- known chain. Instead of a cashier, there was a “talking” register accepting payment. That register actually made me feel like a **machine**, which really left me frightened at what the future may hold . . .

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *I was hearing more and more about the "wonders" of robot companions-- especially from tech people-- and realized that the "other side" of the issue needed to be heard. For in fact, I'm not against technology at all. In many cases it has made life better. But it must work for us. We shouldn't be working for it!*

BIO: *Dr. Diane Cypkin, Professor of Media, Communication and Visual Arts at Pace University has won the Kenan and Carol S Russet Award for teaching excellence, and the National Jefferson Award, and Pace President’s Award for Community Service. She has had various scholarly manuscripts published in various academic journals . . . but she also loves thinking and expressing her views on lots of different everyday things . . .*

SPIDERWEBS and LACE

By Kayla Matters

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest editor/author MICHAEL LANGE writes: This brief chronicle of a girl's adolescence is frank, efficient, and captivating. Well-chosen physical details take center stage and draw us into episodic flashes of immediate experience. Most often, the facts – events and bodily sensations – are allowed to speak for themselves, which only renders more impactful (sometimes startlingly so) the explicit glimpses given into the narrator's mental life, the moments when we see not only what she lived and felt, but the conclusions she drew and the story she fashioned for herself even as it unfolded. The simplicity and consistency of sentence structure allow each statement to retain its stark declarative force, while the whole flows with all the naturalness of carefully considered speech. This cadence imparts to the literal, straightforward language an incantatory feel, a deep lyrical power that well suits the emotional subject matter and the personal-legendary mysticism of the coming-of-age experience. The end result is an account that one reads with the same sensation as of recalling a memory – the immediate content has all the naked force of undeniable reality but is wrapped in a dreamlike aura of mythical elevation. This judiciously modulated gravity imparted to the real and mundane is at the core of what makes this writing great. Quote: "He lives four hours away, and her mother will not take her to go see him, so she learns to fall in love with someone that she can't see. She grows accustomed to falling asleep with her cell phone pressed to her ear, hiding under the covers and whispering so her parents can't hear. Her mother starts turning off her Internet at midnight. She falls in love over airwaves and long voicemails. She knows that his favorite color is orange, that he snorts when he laughs, and that his hands are rough and callused, though she cannot feel them."*

Here is a girl at age ten, crying and telling her mother that she is fat. Her Gap jeans will not button over her stomach, exposing the thick white elastic of her Hanes underwear to the world. Her mother is angry, but soothes her while tying the laces of her sneakers for her and suggesting that today she wear sweatpants.

Here is the same girl at age twelve, discovering that she has just gotten her first period, a dark stain marring her purple polka dotted underwear. Her mother is out of town, and she has a birthday sleepover to attend that night. She tells her friends in the basement of Sydney's house in an excited whisper over the air hockey table. That night, she gets a pounding headache, and Sydney's mom gives her an Advil. She swallows her first pill. She soon learns that this headache will be the warning sign of her impending menstruation for years to come. She gets better at swallowing pills.

The girl is thirteen, and finds herself getting fitted for bras with her mother at Victoria's Secret. She feels a stinging sense of embarrassment as a woman with black and white hair wraps a tape measure around her chest. Models with long hair and sleepy eyes stare down at her from every angle, their bodies long and lean. She stills thinks that she is fat.

She is a straight A student, but for this, she is proud to get a D. She knows that this means that some part of her is desirable. She is not a part of the "itty bitty titty committee," like so many of her friends at school. She walks out of the store with a bag full of lacy things wrapped in pink tissue paper, and a reminder that she is pretty in some small way. Her older sister is jealous. She got a B.

She is 13 and has still not kissed a boy. Her friend Mariah kissed her boyfriend Arthur in her basement while they watched 13 Going on 30. She said he tasted like popcorn.

People start to call her a lesbian, a term she is familiar enough with to know that it has negative implications. The school counselor sits her down and asks her if she's ok, if she likes girls? She knows she does not, from the way her heart beats fast and her palms sweat and her face burns a crimson red anytime Andrew Gardner even looks her way. She knows she likes boys from the way her words tumble and twist anytime she tries to speak to them, from the way

their smiles always make her feel like they have just finished making fun of her, the way she always feels ugly in front of them. Andrew tells her that her sister is pretty.

Over the summer, she goes to sleep-away camp, where she meets a sixteen-year-old boy who holds her hand during movie nights and calls her beautiful. She has just turned fourteen, and when she excitedly tells her mother during her weekly phone call home that he has asked her to the dance, her mother says that he is too old. She is secretly pleased that her mother says this, feels a burning satisfaction knowing that she is breaking some rule, stepping over a line she never knew she had to toe. The word “beautiful” pierces her like the boy’s jade green eyes.

He tells her that his favorite movie is *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, and she watches it in her bottom bunk one rainy afternoon. When the floating red lips appear and start singing about the science fiction double feature, her skin tingles. When she gets back to school that fall and tells her friends that her new favorite movie is *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, they are confused. But she is happy that she knows about the Time Warp. It means that she is different, that she is special.

She is in high school, and has still not kissed a boy. Her best friend starts dating a senior boy, and does things with him she swore she would never do until college. On the weekends, her friends gather in garages and basements, drinking cheap beers from cans and stolen vodka mixed with Gatorade. She is never invited to these “parties,” but she sees the evidence on Facebook the next day, bottles hastily edited out of photos. She gets a hard lump in her throat when she sees these pictures of her friends, crop-topped and holding sweaty cans, eyes focused on some unseen object of affection.

At night, she lays awake in her twin bed and thinks of all the ways she could kill herself. She debates hanging herself with a belt versus overdosing on pills, as if she were mulling over

tomorrow's grocery list. Eventually she decides against it, either way it would be painful, and what if it didn't work? She does however, decide that if a car were to come barreling towards her, she wouldn't move out of the way. When her therapist asks her if she has suicidal thoughts, she shakes her head no and swallows away that same hard lump in her throat.

She discovers stretch marks running down the side of her thighs, insidious and thin as spider webs, and realizes that she has never hated herself more.

She has just turned 15, and is back at summer camp. Somehow, she has caught the eye of a beautiful Italian boy. He is tan and tall, with shaggy hair that sweeps over his forehead. He has the longest eyelashes she's ever seen, and when he looks at her, her whole body goes tingly. He whispers things to her in Italian while they slow dance and he kisses her outside of her bunk. At the end of the summer he gives her the necklace that he has worn all summer. It is some foreign coin strung on a thin cord, and he tells her that it was his great grandfather's when he fought in the war, though he doesn't specify which war. He ties it around her and she shivers as his fingertips graze the nape of her neck.

That same summer, the girl meets the boy who will be her first love. His name is Danny, and he will declare over crackly phone lines at three am that he is falling in love with her, and on Valentines Day, he will write her a French love poem. This boy will teach her what real love feels like, how it makes her bones ache from missing him, and her heart feel like it is ten sizes too big, in her stomach and her throat and her chest, everywhere at once. He lives four hours away, and her mother will not take her to go see him, so she learns to fall in love with someone that she can't see. She grows accustomed to falling asleep with her cell phone pressed to her ear, hiding under the covers and whispering so her parents can't hear. Her mother starts turning off her Internet at midnight. She falls in love over airwaves and long voicemails. She knows that his

favorite color is orange, that he snorts when he laughs, and that his hands are rough and callused, though she cannot feel them.

That spring, she finds herself overcome with feelings of panic. These episodes come on suddenly, and make her arms and legs go numb. Everyday she is awakened with a racing heart, her shirt drenched in a cold sweat. She throws up every day, and she begins to survive on a diet of coffee-flavored yogurt and ginger ale. She starts sleeping on the floor of her parent's bedroom, and there she spends her days, blinds drawn and lights off, tangled in sheets and watching the same three episodes of *America's Got Talent*. She stops leaving her house and wears only sweat-soaked t-shirts and ratty pajama pants, her hair pulled back, greasy and unwashed. When she catches sight of herself in the mirror, she is taken aback. Here is a girl at age 15, pale and sick. She has dark circles under her eyes and her shirt is torn and stained. She weighs herself to see that she is ninety-eight pounds, and she is relieved. For once in her life, she doesn't think that she is fat.

That summer, for reasons she still doesn't understand, she kisses another boy. When he tells Danny, she cannot look in his eyes, instead staring down at the picnic table that they are sitting on, picking at the chipped paint and hating herself. He tells her that he loves her anyway. She realizes that she is a terrible person.

This other boy does not love her, but when he touches her, she feels like her skin is on fire. They will date for two months before he dumps her in his school parking lot after she traveled three hours to see him.

She is sixteen and still a virgin. She is the last of her friends to remain in this uncelebrated club, though secretly she is fine with it. When she was younger, she said that she was saving herself for marriage, as she got a little older, she amended that she would wait until

college. It turns out she will wait until college, though this is due more to timing than to any premeditation on her part.

That spring, she meets a boy who is in the grade above her. They have mutual friends but she has never paid any particular attention to him until the day she decides that she thinks he is cute. He takes her out for sushi and then they make out in his basement. This becomes a twice, if not thrice weekly, occurrence. One day, in the middle of school, he takes her into a custodial closet and kisses her among mops and the powder that they use to clean up vomit. He goes out to dinner with her and her family and in the dark backseat of the car, holds her hand. This simple gesture makes her body pulse with thrill. She is in a play and he comes to every performance, bearing flowers and taking photos of her. She does not know if this means that he is her boyfriend, but she does know that no boy has ever been this kind to her. Once, he drives her forty minutes to go see her friend in a play and pays for both of their tickets. He holds her hand for the whole show and kisses her during intermission, just quickly and sweetly. Once, he calls her while he's driving just because he wants to hear her voice.

They do not have sex, but he touches her in places previously uncharted. When he does this, she feels nothing, and wonders if she is broken.

She loses her virginity at the end of her freshman year of college at three in the afternoon. This boy is 24, and he wears a leather jacket and smokes cigarettes. The first time he kissed her, he asked permission first.

She is 20 now, and understands that boys like her for her breasts, for all of the curves and sloping lines of her body. She gathers data like a scientist, learning that she has a nice butt, and that boys are attracted to her short hair because it is foreign and exciting.

She still calls them boys, not men, because she knows that at any moment, they could flash her one of those smiles that make her feel like they have just finished making fun of her. She knows that if any of them were to meet her sister, they wouldn't want her at all. She remembers how Elliot LaGuardia teased her about her combat boots.

Whenever she is with a boy, she remains painfully aware of the way her stomach juts out when she sits.

Two weeks ago a boy kissed her like it was essential to his survival. She let him into her bed, where he clung to her while they slept. He told her that he wasn't ready for a relationship.

This is a phrase commonly trotted out by the boys she lets into her bed, and one she has never fully understood. She does not know what constitutes "ready," only that none of them have ever been it. She imagines that they say this as a way to soften the blow, to avoid saying, "You're good enough for a fuck, but I'm not going to emotionally invest in you."

She daydreams about her wedding to some faceless man, who is tall and thin and wears glasses and is probably Jewish. When she shares these daydreams with her mother, she always replies, "Now you just need to find someone to marry," in a tone that leads her to believe that her mother does not think he exists.

Sometimes she resigns herself to the idea of being alone. She imagines her life as the fun aunt to her sister's inevitable children. She sees her one bedroom apartment in Manhattan that she will share with her tabby cat, the books that will line the walls, and the aching emptiness that will permeate the space. She likes to be alone, but she hates feeling lonely.

She has never been on a real date, a date where you fret over getting ready and the boy picks you up and you make polite conversation over dinner and hope for a kiss goodnight. No one has ever thought to ask her, thought that she might enjoy anxiously picking out outfits and

straining for conversation. She is not the type of girl that you ask on dates, she realizes, but rather, the kind of girl you invite to your dorm room and politely show the door after you have let out that short moan of release and cleaned yourself up.

She has been kissed in stairwells, in janitor closets, in dark basements, and in tool sheds, but she has never been kissed on a front stoop or in broad daylight. No one has ever kept a photo of her and them in their wallet, as their phone background, in a frame next to their bed. She does not have someone she calls first with good news, besides her mother. She is 20 years old and has never belonged to someone in the way that most people do.

Here is a girl at age 20, crying alone in her dorm room. The same lacy things from when she was 13 are in her drawer, along with the constant refrain “You are fat and ugly and untalented, no one will ever love you, it wouldn’t even matter if you disappeared forever.” Some days, she is able to silence this voice, to muffle it with music or laughter or expensive clothes. But most days, it comes creeping back, insidious as the spider webs running down her thighs.

Here is a girl, sitting in a diner alone. She reads a weathered paperback book while she waits. A sign on the opposite wall catches her eye. It is drawing of a young boy, cherub-like, running through a field while the sun shines down on him. Below him, written in white curly letters, it says, “It’s not going to get any better when you grow up.”

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *‘Spiderwebs and Lace’ was written while I was in college, and in the middle of a rendezvous with a boy that felt dangerous and secret. He was in my creative writing class and we would hold hands or nudge knees in class sitting next to each other. This story is an exploration of my constant feeling of “not right,” like I was a jagged edge that didn’t fit. It is inspired by and dedicated to any young woman who has ever fiercely felt like she didn’t belong, and has stumbled forward anyway.*

AUTHOR’S BIO: *Kayla Matters is a New York City based actress, singer, writer, and cat mom. For more information, please visit www.kaylamatters.com*

EDITOR'S BIO: *Michael Lange is an undergraduate studying Mathematics, Classical Languages, and Japanese at the University of Texas at Austin. Apart from his studies, he likes to play with words, whether that be reading, writing, or learning foreign languages. His story **K. W.** appeared in *Fleas on the Dog*, Issue 4 (Fiction).*

On the Steppes

By Andrew Gudgel

WHY WE LIKE IT:

We understand that long before the Internet overtook our lives there was something called the 'armchair traveller'. It refers to a devout and voracious reader of travel books—good ones like Lawrence Durrell's 'Bitter Lemons'—who in many cases couldn't afford to pack up and jump ship. How many people sit and read romantically, nostalgically, like this, today?

Well, we did with On the Steppes. We love the evocative word pictures the author paints---

The water was so clear that rippling reflections of clouds were the only indication the stream bed wasn't empty. Thumb-sized rocks, rounded into tiny potatoes by friction and the current, paved the bottom.

---and the fascinating details he presents about, what is for North Americans, an alien but exotic culture. The highest compliment we can pay this CNF travel piece is to say we feel we had the experience of being 'there'. The author wrote it many years after his trip and this may account for why his crafted prose is gilded with an aura of wistful reminiscence. And then there are lines like: When you've been married long enough, wordless conversations happen. Enjoy!

On the Steppes
by
Andrew Gudgel

With one exception, the land around us was as treeless and manicured as an English baronet's lawn. Batzorig, our Mongolian guide, had the driver pull the Soviet-era minivan under the lone, hill-side copse, where we spread a blanket on the grass in the shade. For a moment I wondered where was the stream our group of tourists had driven an hour out of Karakorum to visit. But as I stepped down from the van, I got a glimpse of it forty-odd feet away; as wide as a driveway, as silent as a whisper.

It's been over thirty years, but these memories still glow like sunlight on the steppes: lunch was chunks of goat, cooked overnight in a stainless steel milk can between layers of hot rocks. To eat, one end of the chunk was seized between the teeth so a bite could be sliced off with a pocketknife. Two large, silver-and-burlwood bowls appeared, filled with sour, gently fizzing *airag*--fermented mare's milk. After a finger-tip libation flicked to heaven and earth, the bowls passed hand to hand and were shared all around.

A chipped, white ceramic plate appeared on the blanket, mounded with a substance that looked like curls cut from a bar of soap but which tasted like sharp cheddar. We'd learned early on that the Mongolians were a laconic people, so no one asked its name. "It's a kind of milk food" was Batzorig's one answer to any question about the various butters, yogurts, curds, and cheeses we'd been consuming since we arrived several days ago.

Dessert was a hot, greasy rock to rub over our hands. "Protects your skin. Like lotion," Batzorig said. And it was, in fact, like lotion--goat-scented lotion.

Batzorig stood and pointed back up the road to a series of low hills we'd passed through on our way to the plain. "The local people say Genghis Khan is buried over there. Somewhere. No one knows where." And with that, he sat back down. I wondered idly if I'd just heard the Mongolian equivalent of "George Washington slept here."

After lunch, Batzorig and the others went to the minivan to get their fly-fishing gear. Neither my wife and I fish, so we walked a couple of hundred yards upstream instead. The water was so clear that rippling reflections of clouds were the only indication the stream bed wasn't empty. Thumb-sized rocks, rounded into tiny potatoes by friction and the current, paved the bottom.

When you've been married long enough, wordless conversations happen. My wife and I simply stopped walking. I looked at her, then at the stream. She shook her head. I shrugged, dropped my jacket and dusty, sweat-stained fedora on the bank beside me and began unbuttoning my shirt.

Naked, I stepped ankle-deep into the water. My feet tingled with cold, then lost all feeling. I half-lunged, half-waded to the middle of the stream. The water came up to the bottom of my rib cage. I braced my feet against the current until the feeling of pins and needles faded into numbness.

"Cold?" my wife asked.

I splashed a handful of water up and onto my right shoulder. "You should try it." She smiled, but didn't move. I can rarely fool her.

While my wife watched from the bank, I wandered up the stream bed, examining rocks beneath my feet. When the spirit moved me, I squatted down until my shoulders disappeared into the water, balanced the stone on the top of my right foot and raised it so that I could pluck it off, bring it to the surface. White quartz, black-and-gray-banded gneiss, greenish serpentine. Each different, none precious, all beautiful in their own way. A startled trout fled upstream and was gone.

The sun disappeared behind a cloud. I began shivering. Time to return to my wife and clothes. Back on the bank my thoughts turned to a warm chunk of goat and a hot, smelly rock and a small bowl of *airag*. As we started back to the minivan I thought about all the places George Washington might have slept and wondered if the spirits of some men are so great—so world-shaking--that they can't be tied down to a single place.

A knife-edge of light swept across the plain as the sun came back out. The grass blazed emerald all the way to the hills where the local people say Genghis Khan is buried. Somewhere over there. No one knows where.

END

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *While we were working overseas in the 1990s, my wife and I got a chance to spend a week out on the steppes in Mongolia. A live goat was tied to the fence surrounding our camp when we arrived. The ever-laconic Batzorig's only comment was, "Don't get attached. It's lunch." On the day our group went out to the river, his simple mention of Genghis Khan got me thinking about great people in history and their ties to a particular place or time. It was only much later, though, that I wrote this essay down. Where it lay buried during the in-between years is a mystery.*

I've always loved essays, both reading and writing them. My influences are scattershot--Seneca, Montaigne, Bacon, David Quammen, Lewis Thomas, E.B. White, Dinty Moore, the Ming-Dynasty essayist Zhang Dai, and anyone and everyone who had (and has) a compelling story to tell.

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Andrew Gudgel is a freelance writer and translator living in Maryland. His nonfiction and poetry have appeared at or are forthcoming in Under the Sun, Brevity Magazine's blog, Blueline, Lily Poetry Review, Speckled Trout Review, Transference and other publications. He's a graduate of both Johns Hopkins University's Science Writing program and the Kenyon Review Writers Workshop.*

A RAPIST'S NAME

By Yinlaifa Edolo

WHY WE LIKE IT:

The inequality of the sexes is no more starkly shown than in the case of rape—especially true in third world and developing countries. The reasons for the shocking numbers of sexual abuse to females are many and conditioned by the culture and society in which they take place. But no culture where this happens can be excused or forgiven. In this compelling CNF the situation is laid out in baldy human terms and it puts a face on a crime. This is exactly what the best CNF is for and the presentation is both moving and powerful. The prose is 'outsider' which mainlines strength and beauty to the writing. As is usual in this case, we don't correct or edit it in the interest of authenticity of voice. Think wabi sabi on the page.

Quote:

On the last trip into her house, he closes the door behind him when he enters. He pins her to the bed that she hasn't been able to leave all day and goes on to rape her burning body, asking her how much she likes his breath on her skin.

A rapist's name

Genre: creative non-fiction

By Yinlaifa Edolo

1

It isn't new anymore, that we get raped. Every girl in my hostel knows at least one girl in another room or on another block who was raped. We know the girls by their names, by what they wore. We know what their fathers do for a living and the rumors about the looseness of the women who come from their part of the country. We know what they're studying and all the days they stood too long beside the lecturers after class. We know everything about these girls. Everything that is, apart from the names of their rapists. It was 'one boy like that from engineering' when Adanna Nwagwu, the girl in A-block screamed for help at two in the morning, the other day. People gathered to watch, few helped, some took pictures; of the girl of course. Two weeks later, the boy was forgotten altogether and the girl was called, 'that girl who was raped in A-block'.

2

My mother has two daughters. Both have been raped. We don't talk about these things. They are the wrong kind of heavy. They are the heavy that leave a taste on the tongue that is impolite and a sound on the ears that will be covered quickly to save face. If we talked about it, the questions would be, 'what took you there in the first place?' or 'at your age you have started having boyfriends?' Instead we talk about what Mrs so-and-such wore to service last Sunday and whether or not to soak beans for moin-moin for dinner. We don't talk about the heavy stuff and so we never say the names of the men who put their weight on us and raped us.

3

Every girl's boyfriend says he is not a rapist and neither are his friends. The boyfriends condemn rape on social media and in real life every day. They say all the things they would do if they ever caught a rapist. If all the boys are innocent, who is raping all the girls in my hostel who now bear the name 'that girl who was raped?' My boyfriend says he cannot imagine ever laying with a girl against her wish. I believe him, he's always so gentle with me. One day I go out to the mall to have a chat with a friend. A male friend. My boyfriend shows up on the scene and asks to steal me away for a minute. It's an emergency, he says. I go with him and he drives to a dark, lonely road. He gets down from the car and pulls me out. He says I'm a cheating whore for talking so shamelessly with other men. Then he rips my clothes off and forces himself on me like a beast, ignoring my pleas and my screams. When I get back to the hostel, I lie that I was robbed. I don't say I was raped. I don't say his name. I don't want to become 'that girl who was raped.'

4

My friend lives in a compound with three one-bedroom apartments. She is the only female tenant. One day she's alone in the compound with one of the other tenants, a devout Muslim boy who says his prayers on time and preaches fairness and peace. She is ill. She asks him to help her draw water from the compound's only flowing tap by the gate. He does. He fills her storage drum. On the last trip into her house, he closes the door behind him when he enters. He pins her to the bed that she hasn't been able to leave all day and goes on to rape her burning body, asking her how much she likes his breath on her skin. She moves out a week later, traumatized and too ashamed to tell anyone what he did. When she's gone, he tells everyone she's a karuwa, a little whore who tried to seduce him.

5

Every girl in my hostel knows a girl who has been raped. Every girl who has been raped knows the name or face of her rapist but in the end the name from the rape comes to her, the girl who was raped.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *This piece was inspired by the stories of girls I see every day, who could have been broken by their experiences but weren't. The piece speaks about the injustice of victim*

blaming and shaming and the ridiculousness of society's reaction to rape. I hope to with this piece, awaken conscience and maybe even common sense, to advocate for accountability and the proper shouldering of responsibility. The wall of silence around rape should be broken but unless women feel safe to speak, it might be impossible to bring it down. Writing this piece was heart breaking and I hope that it carries in it, the voices of the women for which it speaks.

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Yinlaifa Edolo is a Nigerian writer and poet who strives to tell relatable stories that reveal the underbelly of issues. She is a lover of food, music and the little things of life. She writes a private blog www.jaymarensworld.wordpress.com and looks to learn all forms of storytelling.*

THE HIPPO GYPSIES

By Jason Emde

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest editor/author RICHARD STUECKER writes: The “Hippo Gypsies” is a carousing memoir about a year of adventure in Zimbabwe taken by the author, Jason Emde as an exchange student in the late 1980’s. Influenced by the inimitable hip travel novel in both content and in writing style, On The Road, Emde’s creative non-fiction rushes down the page like a raft on a white water river. Not unlike the poetry of Allen Ginsberg and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, there is a jiving rhythm to his word- and image-packed sentences that embrace the enthusiasm of an eighteen-year-old tasting his first unfettered freedom but also reflect the joy of young travel in a country just finding itself after throwing off the yoke of colonialism. In this short piece, Emde is able to aptly characterize his host families, recreate the local geography, give short passages of history, and re-animate the group of the disparate fellow student adventurers who bond into the Hippo Gypsies. Anyone reader who engulfed freedom along with booze and sex perhaps in a foreign country in an exchange program or perhaps their freshman year away from mom and dad and the boredom of home will connect deeply with this story that reminds us that all youthful things must come to an end; that home will never be the same again; and that memories of those times are unrepeatable and lay deep in our consciousness and dreams but color the lives we go on to eventually lead, always a wisp in the imagination not far from the present now.*

The Hippo Gypsies

With no motive other than a thirst for excitement, in 1988 I applied for a year-long Rotary Club student exchange. Applicants to the program are asked to select their top three potential host countries and I put down India, Thailand, and Zimbabwe, picking Thailand and Zimbabwe only because I thought they sounded exotic and would suggest I was rock-ribbed and brave. It was India I was really interested in, thanks to a fascination with Buddhism kindled by Jack Kerouac’s *The Dharma Bums*; I didn’t even know, in my callowness, that I should've been looking at China and Japan. When a Rotarian called me up to tell me I’d been accepted and would be going to my

third choice I couldn't remember what it was. There was an unpleasant pause. "You're going to *Zimbabwe*," he said, finally.

"Great," I said, thinking *Where's Zimbabwe?*

The following August I flew to Harare, Zimbabwe's capital. I was very young. I was eighteen. I didn't give a shit, and I also cared a lot. I'd been in love, I *was* in love, my heart was wide open, or I thought it was, and I cared about that. Eighteen and ready to go all over the place and do everything. I shrugged off the loss of my wholly imaginary India and plunged into Africa.

Where's Zimbabwe? Zimbabwe is a sub-Saharan, comma-shaped country bordered by Mozambique, Zambia, Botswana, and South Africa. Formerly Southern Rhodesia, then Rhodesia, then Zimbabwe-Rhodesia, then Zimbabwe. *Zimbabwe* means *great houses of stone* in the Shona language. Population in 1989: ten million, with, approximately, 100 000 whites. Official languages: English, Shona, Ndebele. In 1980, after thirteen years of asymmetrical warfare, Robert Mugabe, the Shona leader of ZANU-PF and a Marxist who would later boast of having "a degree in violence," is elected as the new country's first black prime minister. The stories I heard before I went were all positive: Zimbabwe is the most successful post-colonial sub-Saharan state; it's safe; Mugabe has asked the jittery white population to stay and help rebuild the country; because of excellent conservation programs, Zimbabwe has too many elephants; lions can be seen in the streets of Bulawayo, sometimes. Tanzania's President Nyerere said to Mugabe, "You have inherited a jewel. Keep it that way."

Though only ten years before it was bush war, atrocities, jungle firefights, liberation, and the

overthrow of white minority rule, and only ten years afterwards it was downward spiral, dictatorship, permeant corruption, AIDS pandemic, torture, and farm invasions, while I was there Zimbabwe—for me, for the Hippo Gypsies—was beautiful. It was perfect. I was young, and spacious; everybody was young and spacious. South Africa was necklacings and carnage and Soweto fuming in the cook-fire dusk, and Zambia was a disreputable nowhere, and Mozambique was proxy war and ambush and mortar attacks, but Zimbabwe was hope and promise and Victoria Falls, light and air and elephants, a storm of jacaranda blossoms all the way down the wide, wide boulevards of Bulawayo, my home for a year. Never once was Africa an implacable brooding, an inscrutable frenzy. It was a trance of sunshine. I was only eighteen, and Zimbabwe was only nine, and it became playground, incitement, and crucible for the Hippo Gypsies: Church, Simon, Nicole, and me.

§

Things started with my first encounter, at sixteen, with Jack Kerouac's mind-widening 1957 novel, *On The Road*, and they climaxed, three years later, with the river deep, mountain high victory of the Hippo Gypsies over parochial authority in a cinderblock cabin on the banks of the Zambezi river, in Zimbabwe.

I was tipped off by the 10 000 Maniacs song "Hey Jack Kerouac" and went down to Bookland and bought the Signet 25th anniversary paperback edition of *On The Road*. It sat in a pile of books at the foot of my bed for a couple of weeks or months before I got around to it but, when I did, it left me pop-eyed with awe on the floor. Since then, of course, I've been told over and over

again what an embarrassment Kerouac was, and is, and how his typing-not-writing style ruined every young writer who ever came to it, and how all that Beat Generation stuff is a lot of misogynistic bunk, and so on and so forth, but that first time, and many subsequent times, *On The Road* was nothing less than a ripe overburst of American joy that made me want to dance down the street and jump up and down and be so excited with life I could hardly get a word out. Before *Road* I'd never thought of traveling; it had never even crossed my mind. I had some murky image of college in Vancouver, maybe, and a wife and a job, something mildly academic, probably teaching, like my dad, and a house with a guest room and a macramé owl on the wall. The usual fussy dignities. In just under 300 pages Kerouac nullified those half-formed notions entirely; the world opened up wide; pure and ragged visions shot across my imagination like fireworks. It was the hitchhiking and drinking and frantic movement, and it was the two main characters, Dean and Sal, the wild, yea-saying maniacal hero and his shy and shambling follower. The action, and the recording of the action. When Sal said, "I had nothing to offer anybody except my own confusion," something chimed sympathetically in my chest. And I wanted to *be* Dean Moriarty and be mad to live, mad to talk, desirous of everything at the same time. Things had changed.

Behind was Vernon: high school hassles, minimum wage at Kentucky Fried Chicken, getting beat up at the library, main street rooftops, rafts of bad poetry, domestic strife, my friends gearing up for college, Laara's purple underpants, the *Batman* soundtrack, our teenage turpitude, our drunks in the park. The regular and unsurprising tussles, the predictable scramblings for position and attention. But my upcoming year in Zimbabwe gave me a certain distinction and status, a cool glow in my gang. This wasn't hitchhiking to Kamloops, this was Africa, dense,

trackless *Africa*—desert caravans, pyramids, crocodiles, Kilimanjaro, tiny Lucy in her pebbly grave, gorillas in the mist, the tree where man was born. *Africa*. And *Africa* is what my friends always said, never Zimbabwe; nobody else knew where Zimbabwe was either. So: ahead was immeasurable Africa and unparalleled Hippo Gypsy adventure therein and, beyond that, on the other side, two weeks of homelessness in London on the way home, shitting in jars for a week so my doctor could check for parasites, Laara tenderly but firmly gone, work and whiskey and dishwasher steams and chambermaid dims and the struggle for survival in Tofino, Banff, Saskatoon, Vernon; hangovers and college classrooms and Amsterdam and Chichen Itza and Auschwitz and Bali and China and Japan, my mother dead and my best friend dead, marriage and sons, accumulated clutter, the stuff that doesn't go away, mishaps and surrenders and lying in the dark, remembering the ripe light in Bulawayo, the Indian Ocean at Amanzimtoti, the frenzy of stars in Botswana's wide, wide desert sky.

§

I loved Nicole the best but I met Church first. Church was a big, shy, ungainly misfit, but we didn't care about that. We were all misfits. Church was weird, yes, but there was a moody, cynical wit behind his misfit shyness. Behind him you could sense dim and lonely Wisconsin basement bedrooms, carefully concealed anger and disgust, thwarted hungers. He seemed genuinely mystified when my second host mother adopted a sympathetically maternal pose toward him, as if he needed help, friends, kindness, counsel. "She treated me like I was *handicapped*," he brooded. He was quiet and watchful and sardonic and grumpy but he was also capable of sudden, gleeful outbursts and he was by far the funniest of us all in his dark and

sometimes sorrowful way. Church and I were fixated on the film version of *1984* and I was delighted by his John Hurt impressions, half-tribute and half-lampoon. “With the smell of cheap perfume and dead insects,” he’d intone, “I went ahead and did it just the same.” Smart and observant, Church was a genius photographer, a true artist; he paid close attention and his eye got the country and the people and us: the high curving stone walls of Great Zimbabwe, capital of an ancient Shona kingdom; curio vendors under a Malawian summer sky; shy Alice, six years old, at Monkey Paw Bay; Simon and I sharing a cot and smoking, shirtless, in the Zambezi cabin; Nicole, sad and watchful on the hotel veranda in Marondera.

Simon was weird, too, but in other, wilder directions. He was built of pure, uninhibited Australian spontaneity; the usual proprieties had no power over him. Impulsive, unschooled, a constant surprise. He was muscular, an athlete—rugby, I think—with a flip of blonde hair dangling down his forehead. I always had the impression that, before Zimbabwe, he’d repressed his tenderer side, or sides, and had played the beer-swilling jock because he didn’t know what else to do and there was no room to manoeuvre. As a Hippo Gypsy he was free to rage and goof and groan however he wanted to. He came down to see me in Bulawayo; we roamed all over town, looking for trouble and kicks. “Whoo!” yelled Simon, billowing smoke. “Let’s go find some racists to beat up!” He had a thing for chickens; he was an enthusiast and a connoisseur; he even had a chicken shirt, a t-shirt covered in chicken pictures. “My favourite animal!” he’d holler, doing a strange chicken strut down the road. For some reason we decided we needed caveman names, and Simon’s was the best: *Eggnog*.

Nicole, Nicole, Nicole. An indefinable charm, yes, but also something mannish, or even almost

seraphically coarse, in her face and eyes. Something intelligent, too, and almost wary, almost cautious, despite her own appetites for booze and weed and wildness. In the first week of our acquaintance, at a Rotary function, some dinner somewhere, Nicole and I got drunk and snuck into the bathroom and locked the door and started kissing, desirous, furious, and later I went down on her in somebody's front yard, the sun coming up, Nicole lying on her back, legs wide, smoking and laughing while I did my eighteen-year-old best below. It was unhip to be over-particular, to be finicky or hesitant; the scene we created around ourselves was about the perfect *now*, and who cares about tomorrow. Nicole could accept anything with a shrug. I always wanted and needed her more than she wanted or needed me; there was something aloof and cool about her, something that sat back, in the dark, watching. That was I all needed to fall all the way, and when you're eighteen there's no bottom.

§

August, 1989. The sunset in Harare had green in it. Nervous, very far from Vernon, overseas for the first time, seeing my first green sunset, I checked with the Zimbabwean guy next to me that this was the plane to Bulawayo. "Bulawayo?" he said, wide-eyed. "This plane is going to *Johannesburg*." He laughed, not unkindly, at my dismay. "Just kidding," he said.

Bulawayo—which means *the place of the killing*—is in the southwest of the country, in Matabeleland. Seven years before I got there Mugabe had unleashed his North Korean-trained Fifth Brigade on the area in order to destroy political opponents and mostly imaginary "dissidents." Fifth Brigade was known as *Gukurahundi*: the wind that blows away the chaff.

Composed of Shona soldiers who answered only to Mugabe, Fifth Brigade rampaged through the primarily Ndebele lands of western Zimbabwe, murdering as many as 20,000 civilians over the course of four years. “First you will eat your chickens, then your goats, then your cattle, then your donkeys,” said a Fifth Brigade officer, explaining his force’s systematic starvation policy to shuddering villagers. “Then you will eat your children and finally you will eat the dissidents.” But I didn’t know about any of that, then. People weren’t telling that story.

It was a weird life, though. It took six weeks for letters to get to Canada, and at least six weeks for an answer, from my best friend, from my parents, from Laara. International phone calls were haunted by cosmic static and befuddling delays. Bulawayo was weird. The accents were weird, and so were the words: *howzit*, *borehole*, *kopje*, *lekker*, *skaaver*. The underflowing suspicions and resentments and fears were weird: dogs, guards, glass-shard-topped walls. School was weird: uniforms, paddlings, prefects. Having servants was weird. Banda, the gardener, killing a cobra by the hedge with a hoe was weird. But you sink into it; at eighteen it’s easy, it’s light as ashes. *ALL NEW WORLD*, Simon wrote to me, later. *ALIVE*.

All new world. The vast slants of light in the centre of town in the afternoon. The ramshackle kapenta boats on Lake Kariba at night. My pal David’s mother sitting amused and quiet in the kitchen as we yell and laugh, cooking up a steaming mess of *sadza* for supper while David’s little brother Maceo, three years old, stands potbellied in the doorway, chattering at me in Shona. Perfect things. An elephant skin hipflask, half-jacks of ouzo, *mrimba* thumb pianos. The theatre in Marondera where you could drink *and* smoke. Rhinos, flying ants, guinea fowl, leopards, zebras, snakes. The domestic with my second family who poured bug poison on his head to kill

the ants he felt running around in his brain. Fire trees, fever-trees, musasa and marula trees, baobabs, flamboyants, mopane scrub, broad-leaved rattlepod, milk-rope, starstalk, purple joyweed, sticky love grass, Zambezi wine-spike. Two beers: Lion and Castle, in bottles without labels, usually, so you had to check the cap. My favourite drinking spot: the Selborne Hotel bar, on Leopold Takawira Avenue downtown, not far from City Hall, among the wide streets, the colonial arches, no women allowed, two Zimbabwean dollars for a pack of Madisons and a bottle of Castle beer. Madison cigarettes, proclaimed the package, were *Toasted*. I sat in the Selborne Hotel bar and smoked and drank and thought about the Hippo Gypsies and felt very Kerouacian indeed.

My Rotary Club's weekly luncheons were held in the Selborne Hotel; they were stuffy and dull and the only good thing about them was I could get out of school to attend. One week the club's outgoing student, Babette Gray, was introduced. She was going to Germany for her year abroad. She gave a little speech and smiled a lot. After lunch I galloped outside to talk to her as she walked away down the sun-shot sidewalk, on her way back to Girl's College. I yelled her name and she turned around in radiant, cinematic slow motion, smiling. Freckled, blonde, pretty without being too sure about it. A trance of sunlight; perfect things. She was later my date at the big dance at *my* school, Christian Brothers College. I got drunk and fell over. There were difficulties. "I hate the way you live out of that book," she said. She meant *On The Road*. Twenty years later, going through a divorce, she came to visit me in Japan. It was good to see her. Her Zimbabwean accent brought the whole country back, the red earth, the View of the World, bus station clamour, cricket on Christmas Day, the way her maid Sheila said *Jason*, my little host brothers and sister dancing ecstatically on the lawn during the first rain of the year.

§

Around the time I met the other Hippo Gypsies I was about to move to my third host family, the Conrads. My first family had been wealthy white Catholics with a big house and a pool and tennis courts and lots of kids; I was a loudmouth atheist punk and there'd been some friction. My second family had given me a lot of freedom and space and I didn't want to move. Paul and Cynthia Conrad turned out, however, to be the easiest-going, non-flakiest couple I'd ever met. They were great. Paul didn't give a damn about anything; Cynthia exuded an utterly generous, totally bullshit-free practicality. I ended up spending a lot of time with their kids, especially four-year-old Martin. He'd tell me scrambled versions of fairy tales in his weird accent. "And Goldilocks said, this porridge is *too tasty*." Because I'd already graduated from high school in Canada Paul and Cynthia thought going to CBC every day was a waste of time and were happy to write notes excusing me for the day or the week. "Why sit around in a classroom?" Paul'd ask. "Go hang out with your friends." One night he took Simon, Church, Nicole and me to an outdoor bar in a black township. We drank soapy beer out of communal plastic buckets and ate roasted beetles and yelled smiling talk with everybody. At some point a policeman came up to us and, very politely, suggested we leave. "Is there some kind of problem?" Paul asked. "Not yet," said the cop, "but there could be." Paul bought us a case of beer on the way home. We drank it around the pool. He'd told us a story about a friend of his in college who would strip, roll up newspapers, set them on fire, and run through pubs with the newspaper clenched between his buttocks, so of course we tried it. I can still see Simon standing there, smoking a placid cigarette, a flaming newspaper sticking out of his ass, and Nicole sitting in the dark, smiling.

Why sit around in a classroom? Christian Brothers College was a daily skirmish between the sixth form prefects and me and my school pal Andy Anderson. The prefects, whose high and mighty responsibility it was to enforce school discipline, applied themselves to the job of catching Andy and I smoking. They never could; we slipped away, laughing. School was limits and rigidity, humourless assistant headmasters, the usual mix of bullies and collaborators. The headmaster was a member of my Rotary club; I had to be careful; there was always the threat of being sent home. Rotary's four big rules for its exchange students: no drinking, no drugs, no dating, no driving. Nobody interesting paid the slightest bit of attention to any of them but we had to step lightly, sometimes. There were other, harder-to-see constraints and hazards too. The monster of race was always there, looming, Rhodes-shaped, over the country, over the continent. I'd always thought that bone-deep racism came with horns and fangs and claws, with scales, with an idiotic, animal frenzy. I didn't know it could crawl and squirm behind the kindest eyes, the most generous, grandmotherly faces. Bulawayo's white community had a taut rope of tension running through the middle of it; you could feel it thrumming behind the glass-shard-topped fences, hear it in the talk, see it in the Rhodesian flag hidden behind the door. It set traps and limits in the day. "You'll never understand it," Andy said to me, sighing, tired of my eager, pedantic talk. "I know feeling this way is wrong, but it's in me too deep. I had family members killed in the war and racist hate poured into me since I was a baby. It's too late for me." We left it at that. There was nowhere else to go.

Church and I met Nicole and Simon on a Rotary-arranged trip to Malawi in February 1990 and during that week we were pulled together by youth and the glories of exploration and became a gang. We called ourselves The Hippo Gypsies; I can't remember who came up with that, or why, but it stuck. We smoked Life brand cigarettes and drank and yelled, we sang along to the Violent Femmes in the back of the *kombi* somewhere near the Mozambique border, we goofed in the market and wrestled in the van, we dug hippo traps with our legs in the sand. Beer bottles clanked under our beds. One day the Peace Corps took us out to a dusty and necessitous village where we played soccer with a lumpy, lopsided ball and were soundly beaten by the barefoot kids flashing around; we stood panting and coughing on the ragged field. A guy thrummed a guitar made out of twigs and a tin box and the assembled kids sang for us, rich and beautiful. This was the actual mud-hut thorn-scrub African heart of pennilessness we'd heard about and those kids sang and sang. "Holy shit," we said, sweating, wide-eyed, happy, crackling and twanging with youth. We got loaded on gin and tonics on the flight back to Zimbabwe and swore we'd never forget and would stay Hippo Gypsies forever.

§

I was off to Harare, where Church and Simon lived, every chance I got. I'd take the awful, lurching trains, or hitchhike, and get to Harare and rush to meet Church and go drinking downtown. We'd talk to anybody: diamond miners, street weirdos, prostitutes, Rotarians, truck drivers, kids. For some reason Church and I decided to hitch and meet in KweKwe, halfway between Harare and Bulawayo; on the street there we fell in with some white stoners who took us into the bush and got us high. "I came out here one time and the local witch doctor got mad

‘cause I was too close to his hut or something and so he used his magic to blow up my Coke bottle,” the leader said, solemnly nodding. Once, on the road, I saw Mugabe’s motorcade go by: outlying cops on motorcycles, trucks full of soldiers, a big Mercedes, an ambulance, more soldiers, more cops. Mugabe, who would ruin the country. And there was the afternoon, sometime near the end, when Church and I hitched to Marondera, where Nicole lived, and met her at the hotel downtown. She was quiet, abstracted: her father had died. She was flying back to Australia. Death had descended on our frantic, youthful scene. The next morning I kissed her, stole one of her sweaters, and hitched back to Harare. Hitching was never a problem for us; usually the first white to come by would pick you up.

§

Everything vortexed together during our week camping on the Zambezi river that June. Church and I were leaving soon and this was our final blow-out bash and jubilee. We stayed in a cabin that was cinderblock up to about chest-level, and then chickenwire to the roof, and cacophonous with African wildlife noise, dark laughter, high wild talk. The cement floor ash-scattered and high and cluttered with cots and cameras and bottles of ouzo. Church and Simon and I went looking for baboons in a wide, dry riverbed; later, in camp, a guide said he’d gone after us and found lion tracks on top of ours in the sand. What else? An elephant in the bush behind the cabin swinging its gigantic head to look at me as I tiptoed closer to get a photograph, or Simon standing undaunted in the middle of the road as a bull elephant advanced, flapping its ears, and the rest of us shuffled quietly backwards and the guide hissed “Simon! *Simon!*” We spent whole days canoeing down the Zambezi, suntanning naked, smoking, singing, watching crocodiles slide

silently off the banks. “There’s no danger from crocs, *if* you stay out of the water,” one of our guides told us. “So stay out of the water.” The hippos posed the greater danger, he said. “If they’ve got babies with them and you get between them and land, they’ll jump off the bottom, capsize your boat, and bite you and kill you.” We’d be drifting lazily—Simon trying to buy dope from farmers on the Zambian side—and a hippo would surface, snorting, downriver. We’d paddle carefully around and then get out on a sandbar and have a hippo shit fight. We’d meet up now and then with the other students, drifting in their own canoes. One of the girls dropped her paddle; it sank to the sandy bottom. Simon and I stared at each other, both knowing this was the moment, both wanting to be heroic and rescue the paddle and show off for the girls, but we were paralyzed, fearful of the Zambezi’s myriad toothy dangers. Simon suddenly plunged into the river—clear and not particularly deep at that point— and then, like a cartoon cannonball, exploded straight up out of the water and into the boat in one incredible, terrified leap. He lay there, panting and triumphant, while Church and I gaped at him with astonishment and pride.

Our days. Our fully open, unrestrained days.

We shrugged off all responsibility, all pretence and control; we kicked ourselves free of limits and supervision and careened, yawping and howling, wherever the night and noise took us. It was the final, ecstatic phase. Our chaperones gave our depraved cabin a wide berth, like you’d do with a mother hippo in the river. We’d finally achieved the ragged exultation of unrestricted freedom we’d been chasing across the country and through Malawi and Botswana and South Africa and Swaziland. Could that have only happened in Africa? On the banks of an African river? In the animal-busy bush? If we’d all met up in say, Sweden, would the same sort of thing

have happened? In India? Did it happen to Babette in Germany? Did it happen in Wisconsin, Melbourne, Vernon? Did the echoes reach Nicole, fatherless in Broome?

Weeks later it was break up and scatter. Church was already gone; Nicole was back in Zimbabwe but farther away than ever; Simon was drunk in the airport. We planned to meet up in Piccadilly Circus on New Years Eve, 1991, a big reunion in a year and half. We were too close, too welded together, too attached to our story not to be a gang forever. The Hippo Gypsies loomed large in our personal legends; it felt like the pearl had been handed to us. I flew to London for two weeks of adventurous homelessness that left me, finally, wandering Trafalgar Square with no money and a broken nose. The adventure was over. I flew home.

§

Back in drowsical Vernon, commonplace, again, at nineteen. “Any sexual contact in Africa?” my doctor asked. “We’d better get you an AIDS test.” I’d hitchhiked alone across Zimbabwe and now my parents wanted me in the house by midnight. There were stiff and dreary scenes. My Vernon friends had limited patience for my stories about people and places far away. You only get so much time and now I was back in the same restricted little boat with them anyway. The Hippo Gypsies couldn’t survive in Canada. I turned them into stories and then I turned them into lapse and lack.

Church, came to see me, twice; both times were difficult. We squinted at each other. Weird jealousies arose. We sent each other enormous letters for a while and then he disappeared. A

mutual friend told me, many years later, that Church talked about the Hippo Gypsies all the time. “Like it was yesterday,” he said. “So alive in his head still. To the point where reliving those memories was more important to him than being in the moment or continuing on outside of Zimbabwe.” The grim realities of afterwards were too grim, too real. Everything was a disappointment after sun-smashed Africa. And Nicole, just before she was sent home for good following some final unforgivable Rotary transgression or another, wrote to me and asked, “What did you do to Simon? He’s just like you now.”

The Hippo Gypsies never met up in London or anywhere else.

§

Was Africa just one wild gigantic swerve in otherwise more or less ordinary lives? We went a little crazy for a while and then turned to the serious things, the usual things? Is that what happened? I don’t know. Church withdrew; Simon and Nicole went back to Australia and married other people and had beautiful golden kids; I gloomed in Vancouver Island restaurant kitchens and plummeted drunk in Banff and slopped unhappily around Vernon before signing up, finally, for school. But thanks to Zimbabwe I had developed a taste for non-native experience, for not belonging, for anti-belonging, for distance, for weirdness, for independence, for licence, and as soon as I finished college I was off again, to Japan, and another all new world, alive.

“For while there’s life, there’s indefinable charm,” Kerouac wrote. “Ripeness is all.”

That there may be more to life than ripeness was an understanding that came later. There is some regret from the days when we were young and unconfined in Africa, when we didn't know and didn't care and went ahead and did it, just the same. *Unconfined* meant adventure and kicks and beauty, perfect things, trances of sunshine, yes, but it also meant that our recklessness and greed were unconfined, too, that we were sometimes stupid with impulse, that we were often heedless of all those all around us who lived with snakes and dust without access to the freedom we enjoyed so loudly and well. But it would be untrue to say I don't love the Hippo Gypsies. We were stupid and crazy, but we were beautiful, too. In a beautiful country we expanded and opened up, to each other, to connection, to difference, to misfit display, to strangeness, newness, sweetness. We jumped up and down and we leapt in, which is how you learn.

And now almost thirty years later, in my Japanese house, with my shelf of books on Zimbabwe and Ghana and South Africa and Nigeria, with an *On The Road* poster on my office wall, with my wife and my sons safely asleep upstairs, each in their characteristic sprawl, with Mugabe dead at last, I sit in the dark and remember. I don't want to go back, to Zimbabwe in its first decade, its season of lost purity, back to when I was a Hippo Gypsy and young and clear. I am now a vast and uneasy conglomerate but I don't want to go back, knowing what I know, because I'd ruin all the perfect things. I know I would. But yet. But yet. I sit in the dark and think about the Hippo Gypsies, about Church and Simon and Nicole, I talk to them in an everlasting confab, and I remember Zimbabwe in its youth, the light in the afternoon in downtown Bulawayo, an immensity of African sunlight slanting down the wide, wide streets, wide enough for a full team

of horses and wagon to turn around in, as I was repeatedly told, and I guess it's probably true.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I'm routinely accused of living too much in the past, and it may even be true, but I'm fascinated by the intersection of memory and history and ghosts and echoes and clues, which are some of the things I look at, or try to, in *The Hippo Gypsies*. I think it's possible to be homesick for a time as well as for a place and I wanted to save that particular time and place—Zimbabwe in the late 1980s—from vanishing. Writing about things I've done and seen is a way to keep the door to the past from slamming shut on me. So that's going on. This piece is also a love letter to Jack Kerouac and travel and books and old friends and being eighteen and at large in the world. Kerouac once instructed writers to "be in love with your life." *The Hippo Gypsies* is a small part of that project.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: *I'm a teacher, writer, amateur boxer, Prince enthusiast, and graduate student in the MFA Creative Writing program at the University of British Columbia. I'm also the author of 'My Hand's Tired and My Heart Aches' (Kalamalka Press, 2005) and the co-author of the parodic action novel 'The Crunch Gang Meet the Deadly Zombie Ninjas of Japan' (Amazon e-book, 2018). My work has appeared in Ariel, The Malahat Review, Anastamos, Miracle Monocle, Prometheus Dreaming, Panoply, Cleaver, Soliloquies Anthology, and Who Lies Beautifully: The Kalamalka Anthology. I live in Japan with my wife, Maho, and our sons, Joe and Sasha.*

EDITOR'S BIO: *Richard Stuecker is a poet and writer who graduated from Duke University in 1970. A Pushcart Prize nominee, he is a student at the Bluegrass Writer's Studio MFA program at Eastern Kentucky University. His poems have appeared in or been accepted by Tilde, Former People, Pegasus, Main Street Rag and District Lit; creative nonfiction in Hippocampus, Connotation Press, Brilliant Flash Fiction, Crambo, Louisville Magazine and Delmarva Review; book reviews in the Louisville Courier-Journal. A collection of essays on conscious aging, Vibrant Emeritus, was published in 2014 by John Hunt Publishing (London). 3107 Teal Avenue, Louisville, KY 40213. 502 749 7678 asunbear123@gmail.com. His memoir 'Turtle Blues' was published in Issue 5.*

CREATIVE NONFICTION X 2

By Amanda Maphies

WHY WE LIKE IT:

A quip we sometimes throw into our submission call ads runs: if your mother likes your writing we probably won't. But like any truism there are exceptions and we love (sort of) to be proved wrong. These two models of CNF—which the author's mother liked—proved us wrong. It also proved the wise old adage teachers of writing have been screaming at students of writing since literary realism first stepped onto the page with Flaubert and Zola in the mid 19th Century... 'Write about what you know!' (unless you're Dante). We were at once taken in by the unpretentious but targeted prose and the simple unaffected but fully invested way the author approaches her subjects. There are a few bumps here and there but they are easily forgiven when the voice is this honest and the writing is so richly plain, so plainly accessible and heartfelt. Nothing fancy, just home grown 'slices of life' by a writer who is comfortable in her own skin. In the wide spectrum of publishing there's always a place for this kind of storytelling. Or there should be.

Halftime Debate: J-Lo and Shakira

Halftime Debate. (Like anyone really wants my opinion). However, 99.9% of the time I have no more clue what will come out of my mouth than the person I am conversing with, so this will be a surprise for all of us.....

First, J-Lo and Shakira aren't really my thing to begin with. I would have preferred a repeat performance by Adam Levine, The Rolling Stones.....or someone like Chris Stapleton, Kip Moore or Cody Jinks. Only because my musical genre fancy would be more tickled (except for Adam...I just think he's hot). I personally spent more time re-watching the groundhog commercial with Bill Murray and the Doritos commercial with Sam Elliott; so I can't really give the halftime show an honest review. That being said, sure the girls looked awesome! Am I jealous J-Lo has more assets to shake at 50 than I do at 40? Yah, a little. (In all fairness, the girl works alot harder at it than I do, so she deserves it). Could I have done without the pole, twerking and crotch shots? Definitely. Did I feel my kids were forever scarred because they saw these things? Not really. They see it everyday; sometimes I am aware. Sometimes not. Do I feel there's a double-standard between calling J-Lo/Shakira out and not calling out Adam Levine's half-naked fully-tatted torso or the scantily-clad football cheerleaders? Sure. It's obvious there's a double standard. I don't think anyone is debating that. Do I think I'm a prude or appear 'Amish' for not being particularly entertained by the halftime show? Not really. Do I find the comparison between Shakira and the goat humorous? I do....

So basically, was it the best halftime show? I don't think so. Was it the worst? Need I remind you of the infamous 'wardrobe malfunction' with Janet and Justin? So....'no' to that too. Was it a surprise? Not especially. (When the entertainers were announced, we all knew what was in store). I don't think it was anymore controversial than watching a musical awards show (including the CMA's, these days). Do I think it's devastating that the halftime show has garnered nearly as many facebook posts as the historically monumental Super Bowl win by the Chiefs? Nah. (I'm entertained by the drama or I wouldn't be adding to it). Do I have better things to do than add to the controversial dramatic display of social media hypocrisy and opinionated feminist jet fuel? Yes. Yet, I sit here and add to the controversial dramatic display of social media hypocrisy and opinionated feminist jet fuel.

So there you have it. My two cents (more like twenty-five cents) on an irrelevant, unimportant, non-life-changing/threatening event that is but a minor insignificant blip on the societal radar of import.

The Water Boy I didn't Know I Knew

It all started nearly six years ago when I began a new job at a local university. I convinced my boss that we needed a water cooler (just outside my office for convenient access). He reluctantly agreed and allowed me to set up an account with the local water company, Chesapeake Water Valley. We were assigned a delivery expert (*water boy*, as I tongue-in-cheek refer to him) that came every other Thursday: rain, sleet, snow or hail, as religious as the mail service, to deliver three to five water coolers. Since the cooler was right outside my office, I was the point of contact for this water connoisseur.

I have to say, the *water boy* (we'll call him *Bobby* because I can't seem to utter the term *water boy* without thinking of Adam Sandler as Bobby Boucher in the epic cinematic 1998 (ironically the year of my graduation; you will see why that is ironic in approximately three paragraphs) movie, *Waterboy*. Unlike Bobby in *Waterboy*, MY *water boy* is a glorious human being. He is tall, lean, has amazingly toned legs (he wears shorts nine months of the year; not that I'm counting), piercing brown eyes and dark, spiked hair that I would love nothing more than to run my fingers through.

I am not the only woman in the office to take notice of this heavenly specimen. Two of my office mates also think he is a Greek god and we are lucky to be graced by his every-other-week presence. I am somewhat ashamed to admit the things we have said behind *water boy's* back. The catcalls, the whistles, the inappropriate comments about his physique; everything women for centuries have been dealing with from men on the streets of New York by construction workers. (Or any city, town or country; by any man; of any profession, would be more accurate).

The inter-office Skype system we have goes wild on those Thursday mornings. I don't need to tell you exactly what is said; I'm sure you can imagine. Just watch any cheesy feminist chick-flick and you will get an idea (multiply it by ten for a more MA version of our dialogue).

This has gone on for years. Fast forward to a couple months ago. I'm sitting at the Fieldhouse with my boyfriend watching my nine year-old play basketball. Each court is surrounded by glass so spectators can see the game from outside the court. As we are sitting, watching the game, my boyfriend looks outside the court where several parents have gathered waiting for their kids to play the next game.

My boyfriend says: "Hey! There's (insert someone I graduated high school with. Again, we'll call him Bobby) Bobby Boucher!". I follow his line of vision and see an oddly familiar site, but it's certainly not the guy I graduated with; it's my office *water boy*! I told him I didn't see Bobby, but I did see my *water boy*. He says: "You know that Bobby delivers for Chesapeake, right? He's been doing it for years. You didn't know that someone you went to school with for twelve years was the *water boy* you see every other week? C'mon Manndi, I know you're ditzy, but this is ridiculous!". *Guilty*.

Now that the connection has been made, I do recall thinking at first glance that Bobby looked familiar. However, I never looked at the invoices to verify his name because I didn't have any idea he was someone I went to high school with. Actually, we went through TWELVE years of school and graduated together in the infamous Class of 1998. You might think that's a common oversight, given my large class size. (You would be wrong). I am from a small town where everybody knows everybody. I graduated with 135 people (I think two were sick that day). We all knew each other intimately (some more intimately than others). What happens in a small town stays in a small town (and is KNOWN detail by sordid detail by every single member of said small town).

So, yes. I have known (but not *known*) my *water boy* of nearly six years and never once considered the fact that he was a guy I grew up with. We didn't run in the same circles. Yet, he was an athlete. I was an athlete. He was reasonably smart. I was reasonably smart. We were in classes together. We were in clubs together. He was one of my best friends' cousins, for heaven's sake (still is, by the way). HOW COULD I NOT RECOGNIZE HIM?!

It's not like I've been out of school for 58 years! It's been a mere 25 (twenty, when he started delivering water). Have we both changed so much that neither of us recognize the other? This begs another question: does he know who I am? My name isn't all that common and is hanging outside my office, right next to the water cooler. Did he know who I was, but in an effort not to embarrass me (for obviously not knowing him), decide to play along and feign ignorance? Or, did he REALLY not know me? (I feel a bit offended by the possibility of the latter). Yet, I am guilty of the same! Perhaps we both just blossomed so beautifully that neither of us could wrap

our minds around the possibility that the same gangly, awkward, skinny, short (him, not me) kid from our hometown was this same glorious, graceful (again, him, not me), amazing, professional we encounter every other week in a nearby city less than fifty miles east of our tiny little bedroom hometown?

The last visit my co-worker (who is aware of this whole sordid affair/non-affair) Skyped, saying: "Go Cubbies!". (The Cubs are my hometown mascot). Of course, I received the pop-up message right as *water boy* was standing directly in front of me, asking if we needed more cups. It was all I could do not to: a) turn red (which I did) and b) bust out laughing in my typical high-pitched, wounded-bird-that-needs-to-be-put-out-of-misery laugh.

This brings me to the present. Now that I know who he is (but still have no clue if he knows who I am), do I say something? Do I continue with this charade of strangers in the night (rather strangers that are not strangers in the light of day with one thing in common: water)? My boyfriend thinks I should tell him who I am (or tell him I know who he is). I feel like it's gone on so long that it would be EVEN MORE AWKWARD to mention: "Hey! By the way, did you know we graduated high school together?"! I guess in typical Manndi fashion, I will just continue to do...*nothing*. Maybe one day he will break the ice and introduce himself as my long lost grade school crush. Or perhaps one day when he is delivering water, I will accidentally spill the beans by saying something about his cousin that I still keep in touch with. Who knows? The adventure this whole situation has elicited becomes more suspenseful and awkward with every other Thursday visit.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

*The inspiration for *The Waterboy I Didn't Know I Knew* was two-fold. First, I didn't realize I knew the guy (for SIX years!) and when my boyfriend pointed out that he was someone we both went to high school with, I felt like the biggest jerk ever for not recognizing him. Granted, he has changed a lot (for the better, I must say) since high school. He is one of those lucky few that actually got better with time, rather than being unfairly pulled down by the gravity and monotony of adulting like the rest of us.*

The only theme I addressed in the piece is that of reverse sexual harassment. While this is a super hot topic in today's society, very rarely do you hear about in reverse form. I certainly do not want to make light of the topic. However, as a woman that doesn't necessarily mind receiving a compliment from a man or even a whistle now and then (as long as there is no aggression or disrespect), I wanted to point out that the way we spoke of our very own resident water boy (behind his back; never to his face!) could possibly be seen as inappropriate and unwelcome in a reverse discrimination situation. Should my anonymous water boy ever see this published work and put two and two together, I hope he is forgiving and doesn't take me to the cleaners in an epic legal suit to rival T-Swift and Kanye's 2009 VMA scandal.

The inspiration for Halftime Debate was the 2020 Superbowl Chiefs versus 49ers game of the century. Being from Missouri, I am a Chiefs fan. This game was monumental in so many ways. 1) The Chiefs made it to the Superbowl. 2) The Chiefs WON the Superbowl! 3) I have never seen the state of Missouri in such an uproar over.....anything! It was amazing. Seeing red everywhere; the tears, fist bumps, hugs, spilled beers of total strangers all bonding over a hometown football team was sort of touching. While I am not an avid football fan, my boyfriend who passed away unexpectedly two years ago was a HUGE Chiefs fan. So watching them have an insanely amazing season and go all the way to the Superbowl, bringing home the title, was a joy I experienced vicariously through his eyes, which are now in heaven.

That being said, the only thing trending on social media during the game was the infamous halftime show with Shakira and J-Lo! I loved the controversy it brought about. I have friends on both sides of the fence and they were super passionate about the show. I did not necessarily have a dog in either race (speaking of dogs; I was more interested in the Puppy Bowl simultaneously playing on the Animal Planet).

I thought the halftime show debate was an absolute RIOT in that it elicited arguably even more publicity than the historic football game. My post was sort of a sarcastic, tongue-in-cheek calling out of all those that felt so passionately about J-Lo's stripper pole (or was that Shakira? I've already forgotten) and Shakira's twerking. In typical US of A fashion, we Americans get so worked up about the most insignificant events yet conveniently ignore more pressing issues worthy of our attention. Humorous, yes. Sad, also yes. But entertaining, controversial, politically incorrect, dramatic, ridiculous and who the F cares? A resounding HELL YES.

Literary Influences:

My literary influences are Rachel Hollis, author of Girl, Wash Your Face and Girl, Stop Apologizing, Edgar Allen Poe (I know right), Victoria Holt and Philippa Carr (both pseudonyms for Jean Plaidy) . I enjoy reading any works by sarcastic, tongue-in-cheek, yet REAL, tell it like it is, grainy, salty, humorous writers. I try to infuse a bit of humor into each of my posts, no matter how dark or dismal the subject matter may be. We all deal with some serious shit in life and to be able to find the humor in even the worst situations is an artistic feat art worthy of an epic Oscar win.

BIO: *My name is Amannnda Maphies. I have always gone by Manndi; and yes, it has two n's. There is a very good reason for that. But I prefer to remain mysterious and the time has not yet come to reveal why my name appears to be misspelled. It is actually a perfect moniker for me. I am a bit (more than a bit) zany, wacky, crazy and love nothing more than to laugh at myself and share that laughter with others.*

I work fulltime at the UMKC School of Pharmacy. I am not a Pharmacist (there's no way I could be trusted with people's lives). I have two boys, William (9) and Waylan (7). No, they are not named after Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings. Yes, I do like Willie and Waylon's music.

A lot.

My life as a fulltime working single Mom could honestly rival the drama of any soap opera, lifetime original or reality show out there. I have a way of attracting less than normal people and events into my life. And I sort of love that! I also love to write so I recently started posting on Facebook about my daily adventures about everything from being a single mom of two wild and crazy boys to dating after divorce (I would totally write a five volume manuscript on that topic alone) to more serious topics such as the loss of a loved one and suicide awareness.

I have a small but devoted fan base (and no, they are not all related to me. Though most of them are related to me). They encourage me to continue writing and sharing my stories. I try to infuse humor, relatability and a touch of inspiration into each of my pieces. One day, I will compile them for a memoir of my life. My boys will be thrilled beyond words, I am sure. Actually, being my offspring, they are sure to utter, proclaim and broadcast plenty of words....suitable for a MATURE audiences only.

Do you?"

By L Scully

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest editor/author AIMEE NICOLE writes: Often writers present the reader with an illusion of honesty. It's easy to take home a piece of garbage writing and binge-read. To feel accomplished, like you squeezed every truth from the pages. Reading L Scully is an experience that you travel. The words are truth morsels that you tongue over and over again. Sometimes the words in your mouth are the writer's and sometimes it's your own story bubbling up to the surface. This particular piece was brilliant to read because I connected quickly and with fervor. The journey behind us can be in destruction, not always a tale you want to tell at parties with friends (or strangers). I found myself thinking of a handmade pin I bought from a graffiti artist with a cartoon cutout, the words: "Why aren't we better at being alone" printed across some happy people jumping into the air. The juxtaposition of a message we send out into the world versus reality. It's hard to chose a piece of writing I like, so I'll just put this here and ask you to read the whole thing: "I love that she puts her fingers in her mouth after touching me. I love her soft brown hair. Perhaps we're better off as friends."*

"Do you?"

By L Scully

I.

I've been thinking about sending my ex boyfriend an email and I've been wondering if he even has sex with his new girlfriend. Our names both start with the letter "L" which doesn't feel like a coincidence. He can keep his stuff that says P + L. He's not the type to monogram and neither is she but I still picture his parents getting them embroidered linens with those letters as a wedding present which they'll stuff haphazardly in their Queens apartment or cut up to use for painting. I just got an email from the partner of someone I

thought I was in love with sophomore year of college inviting me to a home screening of Hairspray, which I sort of hate, but the tenderness of an invitation made me smile under my several layers of sweaters.

II.

I'm so tired but I still just want to be fucked at the end of a long day. A friend is coming over to say goodbye to me tonight, they're leaving for a new city soon and last Saturday we had our first kiss. I have all of this pent up sexual energy but am not sure that I want them to fuck me so we'll see what happens. I suck it up and prep for my Trader Joe's interview which ends up being a can of shit. I spend an hour and a half walking through the store checking out their-your-face-enthusiastic handmade signs that I'm applying to co-create, I know somehow I won't get hired because I'm not an ass-kissing camp counselor blonde girl type, and at least three of the people working at this ungodly hour are blonde. I watch them fill up on the sample coffee and subsequently pee it out in fifteen minute installments. I drank a decaf mocha and a Thai iced tea plus some water today and barely peed but I guess I already knew that my body is pretty much shutting down at any given moment. I don't know if I should shower and answer the door in a robe; I think I may want a kiss but I don't want my hair pulled and I don't want my bed to smell like them—I just washed my sheets.

III.

I keep thinking about M which is odd because we have had one night together and she's leaving for law school soon and is out west right now checking it out but is still texting me anyway. I think about the cool blue accents on her glasses and the way her hair stands on the nape of her neck, sexy and boyish and dreamy. She looks everything and nothing like R. She's small, small enough to have her straddle me. Her mouth is wide for smiles and warm kisses. When we slept together we held hands with our fingers wrapped around each other and in the morning she pulled on her pants to go to her coffee shop a block away but made sure to give me a kiss on the shoulder first. I dreamt that I stayed in her house so long her mother and sister came and tried to shoo me out. In the morning when I'd pulled back on my tights and my yellow knee socks with the embroidered eggplant on them I went to her coffee shop to see her but she was doing chores downstairs. I wanted to

see her. It felt like a movie, going to my girl's coffee shop after a one night stand. I like how her skin smells clean and that her tits feel like mine. I like that she wants to ride me and that I'll show her how to fuck with essential oils. I worry I'll fall in love with her. I liked how she said of her and her friend V "we're both into femme girls". I hope we have a threesome together and it's sticky and tender. I think of when I asked M how she liked to be kissed. "Softly and sensually" she said but we left marks anyway. I like that she likes crystals and doesn't wear a bra. I like that I sent her the lavender lullaby my mom sang me as a little kid and that it put her to sleep, or so she said. I love that she puts her fingers in her mouth after touching me. I love her soft brown hair. Perhaps we're better off as friends.

IV.

I feel myself missing J of all people. Not for sex, just for companionship. I spoke with him on the phone when I got out of the hospital, a kind of research survey. I asked him what he remembered of me five years ago, in the throes of depression, sludging around suicidally on meds that put my brain into overdrive. He was kind and aloof, just like he used to be. I think I just want a hug. It's some fucked up conspiracy of the universe that now as I'm trying to be a self-actualized lesbian I find out that the love of my life was a teenage boy. I feel disappointed that I'll never get married. I think about attending relationship addicts anonymous but the truth of it is that I think I'm better than everyone at support groups even though I'm not. When I went home to Cleveland after the hospital I matched with someone on tinder because their song was "K." by Cigarettes After Sex. I sent her that song over and over. I need to never date again but then how will I find my retirement wife—my dyke on a bike, my butch service bottom, my one earring for one earring type girl? I need to go because now I'm meeting some other girl with a boyfriend to kiss in the grass because I don't want to be alone. I need some discipline and to break up officially with my therapist. Springtime always makes me want to fall in love, but it's always when my love is ending. My old favorite songstress is playing in this café and I think about how her music is rather ruined for me after living with her twin. "Do you have sex to my sister's music?" they once asked. 'Do you?' I said back.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *This is an excerpt from a longer memoir piece. Honesty is what informs my work, and most of what I write centers around disruptive queer love or sex. I wrote “Do You?” shortly after being hospitalized as I was struggling to reconnect with my life in the outside world. I was thinking a lot about the themes of longing, loss, and poetic justice. It’s important to me that queer and mentally ill people see a place for ourselves in literature, and I try to do that as frankly as I can through a stream-of-consciousness approach. I like to make painful experiences beautiful, or at least darkly humorous. Writing is a coping mechanism.*

AUTHOR’S BIO: *L Scully is a queer, nonbinary American emerging writer and artist currently based in Madrid. Their work focuses mainly on sexuality, gender, and mental illness, as well as love on occasion.*

EDITOR’S BIO: *Aimee Nicole is a queer poet currently residing in Rhode Island. She holds a BFA in Creative Writing from Roger Williams University and has been published by the Red Booth Review, Psychic Meatloaf, and Dying Dahlia Review, among others. For fun, she enjoys attending roller derby bouts and trying desperately to win at drag bingo. Her poetry appears in this issue of FOTD.*

IF THIS WERE A MOVIE IT'D BE TITLED *Shoeprints in The Spring Snow*

By Matthew Boyer

WHY WE LIKE IT: *The line between CNF and fiction is sometimes a thin one and in this case it's easy to imagine you're reading a short story. We are in heartland America cinched by the rust belt—a part of the 'great nation' where the good life has unraveled and the dream of prosperity is ever more elusive. It's an updated 'Ash Can' school of journalism and the open collar honesty of the voice—the voice of our friend, our classmate, our neighbor, the guy down the street—what in literature we call 'everyman'—makes a strong connection with the reader.*

I couldn't stop thinking that maybe I'd be waiting in the car and then someone would come out with a gun and turn me into Luca Brasi and make me sleep with fishes.

Time, along with hope, is ebbing away and fleeting images of transience and impermanence resonate throughout. We had four submissions this issue about small town drug use—three of them fiction—and this is the one we took. Read it and you'll know why.

First time we met, we all went to Walmart because there is nothing else to do in Somerset than to go into Walmart and walk around like tiny adults, like we were people with money who could buy General Tso's chicken from the hot case and eat it, like we had places to be, like life was a dream we dreamt each day to be better than the last.

This dude can write.

If This Were a Movie, It'd Be Titled *Shoeprints in The Spring Snow*

I was driving in the snow and had the heat on so high John had to take his coat off, but my windows were clear.

I thought it'd be like the movies because I'd never bought weed before. John told me that he'd be in and out, and it'd be like that.

“You pack any heat?” I asked.

“Why would I do that?”

“In case, maybe. What kind of weed is it?” I asked.

“I don’t know, she said it’s the stuff she used to smoke, when she smoked.”

“She doesn’t smoke anymore?”

She was John’s ex-girlfriend who didn’t like me.

She didn’t like me because one time we had a party at John’s in his dad’s woodshop that used to be a gun store. The guns were still on the walls, but they put a flat-screen and couches in there.

Everyone else went home, but I stayed and sat on the couch opposite them while they cuddled.

They were basically fucking.

Instead of leaving and having them treat each other to another fleeting orgasm, I stayed on the couch and sang the first line to *Separate Ways* by Journey; *Here we stand, hearts broken in two*, over and over again, but we were sitting on couches, and I couldn’t remember the rest of the words, so I said, “The video is so ‘80s, like they’re standing on a boat dock playing air guitars,” which I basically said to myself because all of the blood left their brains and fled to their sex organs.

Here we stand.

She kept making these little noises, little grunts like: “Tell that fucking cock block to go home.”

John didn’t say anything.

‘Til he did, then I went home, then they probably fucked.

I was the one driving because John's car was making this slugging sound, like it was just scooting along the road, and he was afraid of getting stranded at his ex's house in the middle of winter with 50-dollars of weed.

Cars around here always break down, but there's always spare change to smoke.

"When'd she quit smoking?" I asked.

"I doubt she did," he said.

"She was really into it," I said.

"I think she said it's the kind that mellows you out," he said.

"Sativa?" I asked.

"Indica, I think?"

She didn't like me from the start, so I didn't like her either.

First time we met, we all went to Walmart because there is nothing else to do in Somerset than to go into Walmart and walk around like tiny adults, like we were people with money who could buy General Tso's chicken from the hot case and eat it, like we had places to be, like life was a dream we dreamt each day to be better than the last.

Walmart is a fever, each item a cold cloth only to be touched and put back on the shelf, in those days of having just enough for gas.

We were avoiding someone she knew from high school, so the three of us ducked down to the baby clothes.

"Look how cute and tiny," she said.

I said, "Just imagine, one day they'll all be dead."

And she didn't like that, and to be honest, I don't like it either.

So, I kept thinking while driving out to the middle of nowhere in Somerset, which is already out of the way, about how much this girl hated me for singing Journey while she was trying to give my best friend a hand job in his dad's wood shop that we watched movies in, sometimes.

The snow was coming down pretty well, like it was a movie, like we were drug dealers getting a big score, or like we were being set up in a big scheme.

Patsies.

I said, "Do you think she's setting us up? Like, if she's still mad about you dumping her and shit?"

"I sure as fuck hope not. I think she just wants to sell some pot."

"Probably." I said.

I couldn't stop thinking that maybe I'd be waiting in the car and then someone would come out with a gun and turn me into Luca Brasi and make me sleep with fishes.

"Do you think she hated me. Like, is she single?" I asked.

"She wasn't the biggest fan of you, and yeah, she's married now, I think."

"I guess she probably doesn't want my number then."

"You'll make the next right. Then there should be a silver Toyota in front of a green farmhouse."

John was reading directions off of his phone because his ex said, "People can never seem to find us even though we're in plain sight." But we went too far and had to turn around, because it was five P.M., and dark, and snowing, and NPR kept telling us the time, kept saying, "The time is 5:05, this is NPR," but in that gurgled way that radios out of tune do, so I was freaking

out because I didn't want to go to prison, but wanted to get high, so we pulled in behind the silver Toyota, and I told him I'd just wait.

I turned my car off. Turned my lights off. Turned the brightness on my phone down, pretended I wasn't in the car, like there was nothing to see. I scrolled Instagram and hoped it wouldn't be too long. Hoped that we could go in at least 30 minutes so we could get stoned.

It'd been a long time since I got high.

It was October. I was working on a paper about the American Dream in Sherwood Anderson's *The Egg*, and John was like, "Want to get high?"

I did.

We did.

His girlfriend at the time had a muscle disease that caused the meat in her body to pull from the bone. We got free weed because she had a card for the pain.

But they broke up and we didn't have a plug or a clinically ill friend anymore.

I saw a figure in the corner of the dark. I thought it was over, that the hammer would slam from the gun and I'd be killed helping my friend get weed, but it was just John.

He tried to get into the wrong car, because there were two silver cars, mine and another, and he pulled really hard on the wrong car door, so I thought we were in a hurry.

Then he opened my door calm as hell.

"That was quick," I said.

"Did you think it'd be a long time?"

"I figured it'd take at least ten minutes. Like, you'd sit down with them, check out the weed, smoke a little. I don't know, like the movies, or something."

NPR said: “The time is 5:09, this is NPR.”

John said: “She’s fuckin’ pregnant now, too. Can’t believe it.”

“Is she?”

“Yeah, she always was a little shorter and bigger, but I was like, ‘Guess she just got bigger,’ but then I realized that she was totally pregnant.”

“Maybe that’s why she doesn’t smoke weed anymore.”

“Shit. You’re totally right.”

“Well, she turned out all right then. Not hot boxing the little fella every day,” I said.

We drove back to his house, went to another friend’s house, and smoked, and drank, and retold this story to our friend, told him how she was pregnant, how it was weird that this person we never thought about kept living after we forgot.

I hope she has twins.

Triplets.

I hope they dream in the womb. Dreams of legal weed you can buy at 7-Eleven.

I hope her babies never die.

I hope they smoke as much weed, when their lungs are developed, and never feel pain.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *I wanted to talk about the those the American Dream left behind. I’m from a really small area in Pennsylvania, and we’re still here even though we’re treated as if unneeded ‘til people in suits need votes. The American Dream is almost as unobtainable as it is fleeting, because life itself is fleeting. The title is a reference to all of that fleeting, as in we’re not in a movie, but we’re still fleeting. And the reference to movies throughout is just to try and drive home the American Dream, as Hollywood is a fixture of America, and the need for everyone to*

be famous and important is an American ideal and fleeting just the same. We're here 'til we're not, then the snow melts.

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Matthew Boyer is a writer for Western Pa. He is a student from the Creative and Professional Writing program at the University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg. He is attending Chatham University in the fall to obtain his MFA in Creative Writing. He has been published in Cleaver Magazine, The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, and Line Rider Press.*

MANIFESTO FOR THE NEAR FUTURE

By Tom Ball

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Most of the following ideas have been explored in various fictions by the writer, but this is nonfiction.

#

I say firstly all governments should enact balance budgets into law. Currently many countries pay 50% or more of their budget to go to interest on their debts. If they want more money, they should print more while holding inflation to zero permanently, thus enriching everyone. This additional money will pay for all the changes below.

#

And the stock market stocks should not be allowed to drop only 10% in a month. This at least this would prevent catastrophic falls in the stock market and instant recessions.

#

And have a government bank which supports small business with grants.

#

And rich countries should send teachers to poor countries to teach them English and all about computers. And all nations' people should be taught "Future Studies." And poor countries should increase the minimum wage to be enough to maintain a living standard worthy of a human being. And there should be a free flow of people from nation to nation. With lots of opportunity in the poor nations to get them to want to stay there. And everyone being rich. Poor nations will catch up fast by printing more money, holding inflation to zero.

Also, people will be encouraged to spend their money as banks will give no interest. Keep the economy going strong. Economic growth will be 50% or more per annum.

Entrepreneurs should have financial incentives to invest in poor countries... And corporations will be taxed at a low rate as there will be plenty of money for everyone and universal social programs like pensions and health care.

#

And there should be no more political parties. What we need is statesmen/stateswomen who will do what's best for their countries. No more left wing, right wing politics. No more soliciting politicians with money. No Lobby groups. And perhaps the leadership will be an oligarchy for the best results. The UN should have more power. Legislators will still exist, but will only have power to do minor policies. Politicians should be required to have an IQ test of at least 140.

And all important government business, such as the budget and foreign affairs should be decided in a referendum. Hold referendums monthly and require all to vote or pay a fine. People who have new ideas can put it to a referendum if 30% of the legislators agree. People will be highly paid for new ideas that are accepted whether they be local or international.

City states should do most of the governing and state/provincial governments should be eliminated. Federal states will still be powerful, but will give up some powers to the UN.

And no one person should be in charge. Always a group. And referenda. People will be encouraged to vote for the wisest. Oligarchies of philosopher Kings/Queens should be President/Ambassador to the UN.

#

Military spending should be curtailed but UN peacekeepers should be moved in for all military crises.

We should destroy nuclear weapon stockpiles. And UN peacekeepers should be utilized more.

#

No more personal gun ownership should be tolerated. Hunters could keep their guns at the local government depot when hunting season was over. Government will pay for guns to be turned in. Weapons smuggling should carry a life term in prison. And possession of a gun will mean many years in jail. But since drugs will be cheap and legal, drug gangs will not exist, greatly reducing gun crime.

#

All drugs should be legalized just like in Portugal, where drug abuse is treated as a health issue not a criminal one. Rehab should be a priority. New opiates should continue as modern life is very stressful.

#

Crime would be greatly reduced if drugs were all legal and cheap.

No death penalty as a number of innocent men on death row have been vindicated. And it is cruel. Let criminals do social work and try to make up for the crimes they have committed.

Cameras everywhere that are invisible to most detectors, and record all things that happen as evidence for the Courts.

And crime could be curtailed by eliminating poverty.

And the news should give local crime statistics, but should focus on good news stories like local people who are successful. News should be an inspiration to humanity.

#

Solar power panels should be all over the World's hot deserts and the energy accumulated could be used partly to desalinize sea water on the coasts and water the World's hot deserts. This would greatly enhance the standard of living in poor desert countries. This would also combat sea level rising assuming that global warming continues.

#

A.I. should go ahead, but scientists should be watched carefully. Automation should continue also, but customer service jobs should be all in the hands of humans. Robots should only be used for drudgery jobs. Like farm work and factory work. Science has gone about as far as we want it to. But key discoveries like mind reading technology (MRT) and eternal youth and cure for diseases and so on have to be invented first. Maybe about the year 2100 new science will be unnecessary.

#

Tests of ability in intelligence, EQ, IQ, Wisdom Q, Knowledge Q, Kindness Q, Imaginative Q, Business Acumen and so on. With the peoples' representatives being very high ability. But they will not decide most important issues, rather referendums. But these ability tests will also

determine one's ranking. People will want to hang out with others who have a similar ranking to themselves. High ranking will result in higher pay and a chance to hobnob with the best.

#

Virtual reality should go ahead but should be totally non-violent. Just peaceable sports and video games mostly. And virtual reality sex, but don't make it too good so that sexual love will cease to exist.

#

Art should be 3-D. Fantasies of the future and dreams.

Literature should only be sold if it is deep. Teach people to love ideas and writers should write in an easy to read style. No more action movies or violence.

And people should be encouraged to buy original video fantasy art to adorn the walls of their smart home.

Movies should be deep too.

And create jobs with millions of new movies. There are movies for all. Everyone has a few good anecdotes for their lives and there are so many stories to tell. Famous people will appear in porn videos and will be very popular.

And people in the top 1 million ranks write books leaving a lot of literature/movies out there.

And 1% of the population would rate movies/books as a part time job.

#

The population is much higher than previous eras, so there must be dozens and dozens of Da Vincis for example. We just need to find them. Many great people are undiscovered and underused but could help humanity if given the chance. We need to increase people's ambition and get them to want to increase their test performance (i.e. increase ranking).

#

Music should be dreamy yet complicated with choruses singing brilliant lyrics.

Inspiration for the Arts could come from space exploration and scientific breakthroughs like eternal youth and MRT (mind reading technology).

#

Inspired science could develop better weight loss pills, pills which require less sleep, exercise pills, pills for sex enhancement etc.

#

Sex workers should be legalized and tested for diseases and must work for a company. But sex diseases will all be cured and so too other viruses. So why not love the sex workers?

And everyone who hasn't found love over the last 6 months should be forced to take on a sex worker.

Sex workers should include good lovers for a price all can afford as well as more elitist sex workers. No doubt there will be android love dolls. Who are just machines but can think in a limited way. They will aim to please. But there is a danger they will replace human lovers and so men and women will have no use for one another. MRT with them perhaps will be mind blowing ecstasy and pleasure.

Online dating should be improved to find perfect lovers for the people.

And there will no doubt be multi-sexuals who have new sexual characteristics or just androgynous. Sex tours will be out of hand in places like Thailand once AIDS and Herpes are cured. It will perhaps be out of control.

Abortion should be legal. An unloved child is a curse on humanity.

#

Religion is everywhere dying. Let it die. But we don't want any people to claim they are the messiah or start new typical religions. But new great works on Gods/Goddesses will inspire the people to worship new Deities who want them to act imaginatively. The Imagination Deities. We want people to live for the day and enjoy free will. No living in the past or in a backwards fashion.

#

The intellectuals of the World need to search the world for wave signals carrying brain waves being sent by spies. They can probably do it already. Get in peoples' heads and read their minds. A brain wave is just like a wave of any other kind and can be interpreted. But the MRT (mind reading technology) should be used by all humanity to make people more honest and feel that they fit in.

#

Cloning should be made illegal of both mankind and animals. But the spies will probably develop clones of themselves and just change their faces with DNA genetic therapy/plastic surgery.

#

Babies will spend the whole pregnancy in incubators and parents will be given large cash incentives to have children. And the state would educate them, and one would see one's children once a month. So that they become independent. Most of their education would be on computers with real teachers to guide them.

And people should be encouraged to have children with financial incentives in rich countries. In poor countries people should be convinced not to have many kids.

#

The best scientists should no longer be used for military purposes but rather to solve humanities problems. The most pressing problem is eternal youth. We all want it now! Probably they will offer transplanted organs grown from stem cells first and then make cells regenerate giving us eternal youth, if we want it.

And Alzheimer's and cancer and heart problems must be addressed.

#

And people must be warned about the danger of hypnosis and cross-hypnosis. Post hypnotic suggestion is very powerful and can alter one's behavior dramatically.

Dream stimuli voices in the night enter your dreams. Program the voices before you go to sleep.

And mental health will feature more jobs for psychiatrists. Perhaps force everyone to go to a shrink once a month. And 10% of the population will have part-time jobs as guinea pigs for new drugs.

#

GM food is OK, but no new chemicals in the food. Farms and food should be automated. APM's (Automatic Production Machines) will comb the land and mine the rock to produce food and goods.

Healthy food should be available for discount prices for the poor. Food should be largely synthetic including stem cell meats cheap and good. Gigantic stomachs without a head will produce the meat. So, no need to be a vegetarian or a vegan.

But agriculture will be automated and delivery of groceries and goods to your home will be valued. Your house robot will take care of it. But actually, cooked food in restaurants will be done by human cooks. Cooking as viewed as an art. And unhealthy junk food will be heavily

taxed. Home robots will order food to your home, but people will be encouraged to eat out and thus create job for human waiters. So, it will be inexpensive to go to some restaurants.

#

Alcohol and marijuana should be cheap. No tax. But online pharmacists will prescribe opiates to the people. But it will be heavily taxed.

#

Goods will be produced by APMs and everyone will be able to afford good quality cars and homes and clothes and jewelry etc. So, all manufacturing will be automated. Food and manufacturing will be automated and cheap.

#

Most people should only work part time. But everyone is given a job. But the best people should work much more. If people have more free time they will be happier. Most people don't want to work hard... But robots should not replace servers and other customer service jobs. The human touch is valued. Retirement should be put off as people are living longer and longer.

Everyone should have to go back to school often to learn new skills and become more informed about life on Earth, and perhaps increase their rank.

#

And there should be many more wildlife parks. Let no species be endangered. People should be encouraged to go camping in the parks. But some parks will be for wildlife only and watched on numerous cameras, including infrared. And people will receive generous grants if they move to the cities. The parks could be under the sea for dolphins and whales especially and on land introduce apes to all the warm parks.

#

The population will grow to perhaps 12 billion before it levels off...

#

And the best architects should just sketch briefly a building's exterior and leave the details to lesser architects. And the best should make buildings harmonize with one another. They should design a new building every day. The exterior of buildings could be moving picture art as well as being shapely.

Furniture should be futuristic with comfortable chairs like car seats

Homes should be built for the homeless. They can't sell their free houses though. With limited rules for their denizens so they will feel free and happy. Life for everyone should be happy and comfortable.

Real estate should be regulated so as not to be driven up by speculators. Indeed, holding inflation to zero would make homes affordable for all.

People will watch their neighbors just like always. In the Global Village of MRT everyone will know about everyone. Green lawns are a waste of space. Homes should have gardens of vegetables and fruit trees. And land will be at a premium so most people will live in skyscrapers.

Nightlife should cater more to specific types of clientele. So too resorts. And all high rises should have a café/bar so the locals can congregate.

And people should be required to go to parties at least once a week. We don't want any hermits and recluses. We are all part of the whole.

And high rises should be built everywhere on beaches so that everyone could afford a beach home. With all the units having a beach view.

#

Women should get more plastic surgery to enhance their life. And all women should learn how to put on make up to best advantage.

#

And people should be free to cross any border and multiculturalism should be everywhere embraced.

#

And scientists should experiment with other planets and moons. Like put fish and sea creatures in the ocean of Jupiter's moon, Europa. And other planetary Moons like Triton. And use nuclear power to fool around with the climate of Venus by turning CO₂ into O₂ and C. Maybe plant shrubs that can withstand the high pressure of Venus could create O₂. Maybe even try to warm up the poles on Earth by bombing far southern and far northern Ocean fissures.

Space explorations should be encouraged with financial grants. Also, it could be considered an essential part of one's education to go to space. And some rich people will pay for zero gravity sex and a chance to live away from Earth, if only for a short time. A good lottery would involve winning a ticket to space. This would raise money for further exploration, which needs a huge investment to be viable.

#

Everyone should be proficient with statistics as we live in the information age. Use mental mathematics/calculators to imagine costs and facts of life.

#

The Internet will be safe from hackers as all the best hackers will work for the government/spies for huge salaries.

#

Lotteries and gambling should continue as they entertain people and raise money for government programs. It just makes the government even richer.

#

Cars will all be programmed and drive on the traffic controller grid. Public transport should be everywhere enhanced. No cars downtown, change the roads to parkland. Build giant parking garages, objects of beauty, on the outskirts of the downtowns. Try to encourage people to live in the city or suburbs. And gasoline will be more heavily taxed whereas batteries powered by wind or solar power will be subsidized.

Air cars will be homes for some, and will have well-stocked bars/drugs. Air cars will be automatic on the grid and will reach any point on Earth in just five minutes. So too drones will be on the grid and accidents will be zero per cent.

#

The environment should be cleaned up and fossil fuels should be phased out in favor of solar and wind power everywhere. Changing the atmosphere could cause all kinds of disasters. Even though the World's climate is always changing, it doesn't make sense to mass pollute especially when it is not necessary.

#

In archaeology, clone Homo Australopithecus and compare them to modern humans. I saw a guy from Portugal who had a brow like Homo Neanderthal and was very clever.

#

History will be viewed as cultural development and not so much the leaders who more often than not, were intellectual mediocrities and violent.

#

Scientific treatises will be in demand. Scientists are the most important writers.

#

MRT will always be two-ways. Not one way. That would be unkind. And we don't want MRT to be used in Virtual Reality holograms. It would replace living in reality.

#

Death. If we have eternal youth, few will die. And upon death everyone's DNA should be saved and sperm and egg banks should be saved when they are in their prime. They could possibly be cloned or turned into future children.

No one should be buried in a large grave. Everyone should be cremated and their remains buried in a small urn. Old graves should be dug up and the bones cremated and the DNA saved. This would free up land for high rises. In fact skyscraper ossuaries would be even better for housing remains

#

And teleportation is on the horizon, maybe in 50 years. It will allow us to send goods and people long distances into space. Holograms would make good candidates for teleportation. Just send their signal.

But holograms should be limited and not mass produced.

ALTERNATIVE FUTURES

Perhaps people will just live in air cars and dock with one another and cities will disappear.

#

Perhaps in the far future, everything will be automatic and there will be no jobs, people just enjoy the time on neo-opiates.

#

Maybe the elite 1% will control everything and be super rich while most are poor.

#

Maybe the elite will clone one another and gradually increase their numbers.

#

Maybe a tyrant will seize control of the USA on a wave of populism. Tyrants will oppress the people and prohibit anything deep. Just entertainment for the masses. Maybe the tyrant will claim to be a philosopher King/Queen. And use his/her populism to eliminate democracy.

#

Virtual reality will be full of billions of hologram slaves and people will enjoy ruling them. Or maybe the holograms will take over reality.

#

Science perhaps has gone as far as it can and is no longer needed. Automation takes over. No jobs for the people.

#

Humans maybe will be turned into slaves for android super compute rulers.

#

Or maybe the population will soar to 35 billion or more and overcrowding will be everywhere. Countries like Russia and Canada have plenty of room for new immigrants, however.

#

Or perhaps the World will become a freak show with all sorts of bizarre humans.

#

Perhaps our leaders will be mediocre who can't deal with technological change.

#

Maybe big corporations will control governments and treat the people as slaves.

#

Maybe the spies will use MRT to control all thinkers.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *This work contains many of my ideas regarding what would be best for the World. Many of the ideas have previously appeared in some other of my books, but are here condensed into one file for the near future. Most of my ideas though in general, deal with the far future. But those are the subject for other stories.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Tom Ball cofounded FLEAS ON THE DOG with Charles Pinch where they are both senior editors. He writes fiction, CNF and screenplays and has been extensively published.*

Why Torenne?

By Lee-Ann Liles

WHY WE LIKE IT: *We would have never guessed a short account about a mother picking her daughter's name could draw us in but WTF, suckered gleefully, we were. Partly because the process and research it involved is a lot more interesting than we imagined and partly (a big partly) is because Liles knows how to write. We can't imagine a better treatment of the subject. So much so that after a couple tokes we all kind of grumbled that our moms hadn't called us 'Wencelus'. Or ShineRock or even Keroucginsberg but thankfully NOT 'X Æ A-12'!!!*

Why Torenne?

My daughter was born in 2011, the Year of the Rabbit. When I chose a name for her, I tried to be kind to the people who would have to pronounce it. Ambiguous, sexless names; unique and mystical, all struck a familiar and likeable cord with me. The farthest thing from my mind was to follow tradition and name the baby after a relative or a long dead ancestor. I was contrary to a title which had survived the ravages of time, bearing the mark of antiquity.

While scanning the websites which catalogued the newest designer names, I found myself partial to French names like *Doyenne* which means a woman who is respected or most prominent in her field. Names which spoke of trades or occupational names like Bishop, Deacon, Mason and Taylor had a ring of prominence, speaking to a certain platitude in character that should be attained and was sincere and trustworthy. Androgynous names like *Fallon* which is Irish for Leader were also paramount to my search, since I was always one to challenge a man, making him aware that females could wear the name just as well.

I fell in love with *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* like many teens who were into the suburban comedies in the 80's and Sloane who was Ferris's girlfriend became a strong contender for a girl's name, a name easily mistaken for a guy. I revelled in picking out mysterious ones, I imagined during a rousing game of The Price is Right! the name Sloane Liles would be picked. "Sloane Liles, come on down!" the announcer would bellow and up pops a giddy, collegiate girl, leaping assiduously into the arms of Drew Carey at the booming announcement of her name. In *Ferris Bueller*, Sloane was sleek and sexy and it must have been difficult to pass her off as a teenager in the movie, yet her name had a sort of *Remington-Steel-ish* feel to it, like you expected the owner of the name to be a sleek Private Investigator, or at least his beautiful sidekick.

Call me weird and crazy but *The Shining* is the best movie ever. I continue to be amazed by Stanley Kubrick's preciseness in making this movie and he is also a big fan of hidden messages (like me!). For instance, every scene pans shots of Native American symbols in the background, representing the lives that were taken to build the Overlook Hotel. This of course is a mind trick, a subconscious ruse as the messages are found in the most difficult of places to hide them - on the big screen. Essentially, Kubrick amplified Stephen King's already seductive novel and created a plethora of fantastic wide-angled shots which snatch you buy the collar.

If I could have named my daughter, Torrance after the family in the movie, I would have. Upon researching, I found that the name Torrance was actually Scottish for "from craggy hill or watchtower". There is Torrance, California, but I'm not sure how craggy or hilly it is. I might have also come up with the name Torenne because of the interest I have for the "Shroud of Turin," the Christian relic thought to be the shroud of Jesus of Nazareth which supposedly covered his body in the tomb. In searching for everyday people with the same name while ignoring the spelling, I've found one person on Facebook and more recently a college football star Tauren.

Creating combo names was another great way to create a child's name, that was not unknown to my community. My name is Lee-Ann and her father is

Torrie. From this combination we had so many choices, but only one rang true and it hit me like a strange epiphany. Torenne's name said everything I wanted to say in a name.

Other interesting variations of the name:

Torin (m.) - IRE. Gaelic, means "Chief"

Turin (m.) - means "Victory Mood" - Slayed a dragon. (Tolkien).

Torren (m.) - IRE. means "from the craggy hill" as a shortened form of Torrance.

I named my son, Rayshawn during a time when double-barrel baby names were popular in the 1990's. Sean (P. Diddy, Puffy) Combs clothing line was *Sean John* and I was looking for a name with a familiar ring to it, maybe something that rolls off the tongue. A cousin was given the ever-regal name Charles-Anthony which evokes a whirlwind of folk-heroes into our present-day thoughts. It reminded of armoured warriors on horseback in Medieval battle.

Consequently, my son was not the only Shawn in the family and so I wanted to add a twist. My father's name was John and Shawn is a diminutive of John, so it would be like the son he never had. (I was an only child).

It was very necessary to give the baby a name which is an upright, positive name with a pleasant history behind it. I was very into the name Pasha about twenty years ago, when naming my then unborn son. Even though it is an honorary title for a high ranking officer in Egypt, in the Bible it means to rebel, transgress and revolt. Not good.

Although Torenne was not a difficult name for the nurses to figure out, before she left the hospital my daughter was called **Toreen**. I cringed at the nurse's mispronunciation, because it was the first time Torenne would hear her own name. *Was it too late to change it?* I thought.

One of the few people who ever pronounced it fluidly the first time, was the flight check-in guy at BWI airport. Handing me the ticket with the gate circled, he announced, "Here's your ticket, and this one is Torenne's".

Suddenly, my face awoke with recognition at the sound of the *correct pronunciation* of Torenne's name without the repetitive back and forth of trying to get the precise pucker of the lips to form the 'T' and flashing teeth to complete the 'Ren.

I discovered the way it was pronounced, gave an Americanized ring to it that I had never noticed before. It could now be held in regard with similar names like Cheyenne and Rhiann and Corinne, and now Torenne. Her name has finally found its place, its position to possibly becoming one of the top 100 names in baby books. I once was contrary to a title which had survived the ravages of time, bearing the mark of antiquity, but now I would like to see her name stand the test of time, with a few comebacks. We'll see.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *What inspired my literary submission was the naming of my now eight year old daughter and I wanted a name that was symbolic. As a writer, I'm always trying to find deeper meaning in my surroundings and so this is an exploration of that. Many of the messages around us are symbolic, whether found in pictures, advertising, or otherwise, so we are flooded daily with life's puzzles to decipher.*

In Bermuda, derivatives of names and nicknames are popular, often showing up in the Obituaries. Certain names are also associated with different personalities, so this started as a cultural study, an exploration on my own little Island.

I think Why Torenne? would be important to readers who are seeking meaning in their personal brand.

AUTHOR'S BIO: *LEE-ANN LILES is Bermudian with her B.A. in English from Notre Dame of University of Maryland. She is currently an MFA candidate with Baypath University in Boston and her writing has appeared or is forthcoming in Poetry Motel, Crack the Spine! The Bermuda Anthology of Poetry, The Bermuda Anthology of Poetry II, Caketrain Journal, Talking River Review, Damozel, Conte, The Nashwaak Review, Bottom of the World Magazine, The Call Number, BC Journal Vol. 1, BC Journal Vol. 2, BC Journal Vol. 3, Chronic Babe, PRECIPICE, 805 Lit & Art and NANNY FANNY. Her books Aerie: Short Stories and Of Gods and Fathers are in stores now.*

SOLIVAGANT

By Megann Kammerman

WHY WE LIKE IT:

‘Solivagant’ means to wander alone, to ramble around by one’s self. What intrigued us about this CNF is how the author handles the theme on two levels—both with respect to her rambles abroad and at the same time her longing for the familiar. This is given weight by the use of the passive voice—which always creates a sense of distance—from the character, from the reader. The work of a young writer, the voice is startlingly mature—like she’s been putting thoughts to paper for eons. The wistful mood that runs throughout this tale is complex and multi-faceted, embracing a spectrum of tones, beautiful but difficult to pin down. Prose is sonorous.

Quote:

You like the singer’s messy hair and plaid button-up. You like his nasal-y voice. The drummer sits to the left, lights reflecting off the lenses of his glasses; even perched behind the drums, you can tell he’s tall. On the other side stands the second guitarist, with sparkling eyes and fuzzy brown hair.

And...

You stick headphones in your ears and listen to Bombadil as loud as you can and drink cocoa with foamy milk and crack pistachios after sucking off the salt as a light rain pitter patters on the glass outside. Your open notebook lies untouched while the sky grows darker and strings of patio lights slowly begin to glow in the dimming gray light.

Solivagant

by

Megann Kammerman

The Street

You walk the streets of downtown Madison.

Old brick buildings tower over the cafes, bookstores, and tourist shops that line the sidewalk. The sky is overcast but the air is warm and it feels like spring despite the lack of sun. You don't know where you're going, alone for the first time traversing a strange city, but know you're excited to get there.

With your flannel around your waist and backpack over your shoulders, you know you look the part of the tourist, but don't much care. Holding your phone up to your nose, you try to orient yourself among the web of crazy-angled roads on the screen. You think, "I'm going to have to go into the map," then laugh at your Friends reference, wishing that your sister was here to appreciate it. There are no cars, but enough pedestrians and bikers to make up the difference. Students rush by on skateboards, eating their food-cart lunches from styrofoam boxes. You pass a guy wearing full climbing gear and wonder if there's a rock wall nearby.

A girl with dreads stands on the edge of the sidewalk, waving stacks of papers covered in brightly drawn flowers at passerby. Stopping to look through her work, you find one you like and buy it. You ask her to sign it and then talk about different types of painting techniques while she slowly letters her name with a shaking hand. You find it a strange to be the outgoing, less awkward half of the conversation.

You wonder if she would get your Friends reference, but aren't brave enough to ask.

Slipping the drawing into your notebook, you move on down the street. You pass dark back alleys and vine-covered brick buildings and shop fronts filled with knick knacks and art.

You've never wandered a city alone before, and aren't quite sure where to go. You've never checked into a hotel on your own either. Or planned your own vacation. Or had to budget

the money for an entire trip. And yet you just did, you remind yourself. You can do this alone, too.

You're excited to seize another chance to step further out of your comfort zone.

When you see an outdoor store down a side block, you cross the road. Stepping inside, you smile at the lady behind the counter. She smiles back and says hello, her tone a perfect match to the now-shining spring sun outside—warm and bright and cheery. She looks like someone you could talk to easily.

Noticing the rack of climbing gear, you ask if there's a local place where people go climbing. You talk back and forth for a bit, for once not looking for an excuse to end a conversation. Finally, you turn away to wander the store, proud of the simple exchange. You run your fingers over the fabrics—nylon and wool and polyester—until you find a North Face hat you like because you figure you should buy something after spending so much time talking to the lady.

You leave the store, still smiling, pulling your new hat on your head. Picking a direction, you buckle your pack and start walking under the bright sun—which is not in your eyes at all.

The sun passes behind another wall of clouds as you pass an open door to a hole-in-the-wall bar. You can hear the whine of a guitar and the bass of drums, and a sign next to the door advertises live music. You decide to go in because you can and you love live music and the name of the band, Bombadil, tells you that they must be Lord of the Rings fans.

You go inside and find a place in the back of the crowd next to a wall of layered stickers, peeled and faded, under strings of tiny glimmering lights. The stage above is small enough that the three musicians make it feel cramped, made smaller by dark walls and low ceiling and

cracked wooden floor. The light is dim and pulsing, the air thick with smoke and the scent of beer.

You like the singer's messy hair and plaid button-up. You like his nasal-y voice. The drummer sits to the left, lights reflecting off the lenses of his glasses; even perched behind the drums, you can tell he's tall. On the other side stands the second guitarist, with sparkling eyes and fuzzy brown hair.

You listen, smiling and tapping along, feeling like you know the words even though you don't yet, already knowing that you're going to buy their music. Finally the last song falls into silence. The band set aside their instruments, bow to clamorous applause, and turn to leave the stage.

After the concert, you buy a CD from the foldout table in the back. When you finally squeeze yourself out of the press of the crowd, you find yourself facing the drummer. You were right. He is tall. He smiles and thanks you for listening to them. Swallowing your nervousness, you let yourself be drawn into conversation.

"I'm from Arizona, originally," you say when asked. It doesn't matter that right now you're going to school in Iowa—when you're in Madison, Wisconsin it's all some form of distant.

He laughs slowly, "Really? How funny! We're driving around in a rental car with an Arizona license plate."

You smile with the stranger at the coincidence. What an odd thing, to find a bit of home so far from where it belongs.

Hours later you find yourself in the library, climbing the marble stairs to the top floor surrounded by the scent of old paper.

The stairs lead to a huge room. The ceiling rises far above your head, and the two full walls of glass flood the space with light. You glance around and, seeing no one, walk over to the far wall to a view of the downtown streets and the roofs of the looming buildings that seemed so tall when standing below.

The capital peeks over the buildings just across the street. You can see a photo there, through the glass, framed in the edges of the window panes, and wish you had your camera. You watch a pair of men walk by on the sidewalk under the window. A biker. A group of students. You can't hear them—the only sound is the distant rumble of the library below.

You have the strangest desire to run up the rusted fire escapes, over the crumbling chimneys, and across the rows of rooftops on a path that no one else can follow.

Being adventurous is exhausting, you think, wondering if it would be worth it to take your sweaty shoes off of your sore feet. Too awkward, you decide, if someone should walk past. You hope no one does. Your social energy meter has bottomed out, and you don't ever want to talk to anyone ever again. You want a nap. In your own bed. But you're in the middle of a city, alone, hundreds of miles from your own bed.

Luckily, libraries always have the best nooks and crannies to hide away from chatty strangers and prying eyes. No matter what city you're in.

You sit at the corner table, and set your pack at your feet and pull off your new hat, rustling your fingers through your hair because you like it messy. A dictionary sits on the glass table next to your elbow. Why do people always leave those lying around, you think, as if we don't have Google?

You take out your iPad and headphones and notebook. Pulling up YouTube, you search the name of your favorite song from the concert earlier.

With the music on repeat, you dig for a pen and flip to a fresh page in your now battered notebook. You glance up as a group of people pass by—up the stairs and across to offices down a hall. You silently warn them away from your corner and manage to refrain from glaring at them.

You alternate writing, playing on YouTube and staring out the glass, focusing on nothing in particular as the afternoon lengthens. The chimneys and fire escapes are silhouetted shadows against the grey sky; you can still see that photo in the rustic bricks and the angular shape of the metal stairs.

You get bored. You crack the dictionary sitting on the glass table, and read the definition of the first word you see, and smile.

Solivagant.

Wandering alone.

Maybe you can do this travel thing after all.

The sun peeks out from behind the clouds to shine through the glass and warm your always-frozen fingers as you begin to pack up, using the flower drawing as your bookmark.

The Dojo

Ikkyo. Nikyo. Sankyo. You stretch your wrists through the easy rhythm of warm-ups and feel your nerves begin to settle, comforted by the simple routine.

The Madison Aikido dojo is in a long, low building, with a large canvas mat taking up the center of the space. Wooden beams line the walls and kanji writing is sprinkled on signs

hanging along the edges of the room. Racks of neatly stacked bokkens cover the back wall and at the head of the mat is the same photograph of O'Sensei that hangs in your home dojo.

You'd been nervous to come here at first—to show up at a strange dojo in a strange city and practice with strange people. But despite the nerves that shook your hands, you bowed at the door and took off your shoes—confident at least in those small customs—and introduced yourself as a visiting Aikidoka.

Now you follow the class through the same stretches you do back home before every practice. You don't have to think about the motions and so find yourself watching the other students. Over a dozen. Most of them black-belts. You look at the Sensei—an older lady who seems oddly familiar.

She claps and you line up with the rest of the students on the edge of the mat, kneeling in a long row of dark blue hakamas and white gis and a smattering of grey sweatpants. You watch as she demonstrates a technique. *Kotegaeshi*. You feel yourself relax further, relieved that you won't have to learn something new just yet.

Partners and practice. You turn to the girl to your left, bow and say, "Onegai shimasu." You both move to an unoccupied corner of the mat and face each other, feet braced, hands up.

She's new to Aikido, dressed in loose-fitting workout clothes and laughs nervously as she tells you she doesn't know this technique very well. So you go first, pinning her to the mat after she hesitantly attacks. And again. Then it's her turn and you find yourself walking her through the technique. Foot here. Arm up. Throw. It's a stark reminder of how far you've come these past two years. You feel your confidence rise.

The Sensei claps. You move on to the next technique, the next partner. Thoughts fall away and you are left with only motion. Step here. Grab and twist with your hips. Lower your

center. Adjust and repeat and do your best to ignore your shaking legs and complaining muscles and dry mouth.

You pair off for the final time; a technique you've never done before. You brace your feet and settle your center once again, arms up, focused on the man in front of you. He is ginger-haired and gangly and tall—taller than you, which is unusual.

You attack. Get pinned. Attack. Pin. Then it's your turn and you fumble. You do it wrong again. Your partner is patient, letting you find the movement.

He strikes, a blow to your head. Block. Turn. Get underneath and pin. You end up with your leg too close to his free hand. He grabs your calf to show you he saw the advantage as well. You wince at the slip and nod and focus and try it again. You get it right.

Then the Sensei claps for the last time and you line up between two people who are now a little less than strangers. You bow, heavy with sweat and mouth dry.

After class you find yourself talking to the Sensei; she asks, "Were you at the seminar in Iowa City last fall?" You smile and nod, realizing why she'd looked so familiar. It seems Aikido circles run far smaller than you'd thought. When it's time to leave, she tells you that you're welcome to come back anytime you're in town and that she hopes to see you at the next seminar.

You step out of the dojo onto the darkened streets and raise your face to the spring chilled wind and feel a bit better about being on your own in a strange city.

The Cafe

You pause at the door of the cafe and take a breath of petrichor and coffee.

Quiet music. The sound of foaming coffee and the rumble of conversation. The wall is painted in rich colors, reds and blues and yellowish browns, and an electric fireplace stands in the center, a circle of cushioned seats surrounding the ring of stones. The warmth of the fire chases away the chill of the spring rain falling outside.

This late, only a few people sit sprinkled at tables throughout the shop, focused on their food or conversation or cramming for class, holding large earthen mugs that mold to their hands. All fellow coffee drinkers and quiet thinkers, gathered in this port in the rain.

You find a table as far away from them as possible.

You order cocoa and unpack your backpack—you're getting tired of carrying everything around with you—and settle down with your back to the rest of the room in an out-of-the-way nook. Even those hours in the library yesterday hadn't given you enough of a recharge for you to feel up for more exploration. You don't think you can handle anything more right now. No people. No walking. No writing. You take out your notebook anyway, if only to look busy so no one will talk to you.

If it were up to you, you'd stay curled in your room with the drapes closed for the rest of the evening, but you feel obligated to at least leave the motel on your last night of the trip.

You miss your cats. Your bed. Your sister.

Stupid city. Stupid traveling.

There's another Aikido class in an hour, but you don't want to go. You feel guilty for skipping, and alternate between trying to convince yourself, "it's okay to take it easy tonight" and, "stop being so lazy and just do it."

You're tired. And somehow twice as sore as you were yesterday. You're leaving tomorrow and won't get another chance to go ever. Finally, you let the weather decide. The rain

grows louder and thunder rumbles in the distance and you very much want to sit here until it's dry outside.

Eventually, you're chased from your out-of-the-way seat by a large group with a meeting planned. You smile pleasantly, grumbling something decidedly un-pleasant in your head as you gather up your stuff and move to the other side of the cafe.

You're now sitting in a high backed lounge chair facing away from the most of the other people. You suppose it's more comfortable than your previous nook, and decide to forgive the annoying group.

You glance at the clock. Aikido has already started. Decision final. So you take off your sweatshirt and cross your legs, giving up all pretense of productivity. You're still happy with your adventurous spirit on this trip, but you're even more happy to be going home tomorrow.

You stick headphones in your ears and listen to Bombadil as loud as you can and drink cocoa with foamy milk and crack pistachios after sucking off the salt as a light rain pitter patters on the glass outside. Your open notebook lies untouched while the sky grows darker and strings of patio lights slowly begin to glow in the dimming gray light.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *This essay came about during a trip I took to Madison, Wisconsin for a Travel Writing class in the spring of 2017. It was the first time I'd ever had the chance to travel on my own, without my family making all the plans.*

I'm a pretty introverted and shy person normally, but during this trip I had the chance to be more outgoing, independent, and adventurous than really comes naturally to me. It was exhilarating. I met people I never would have met otherwise. Found a new favorite band. Went to Aikido classes at a strange dojo. I found pieces of home and familiarity in a city I'd never visited.

But it didn't magically change who I was. There were times during the trip when I was just fed up and drained and wanted to do nothing more than crawl into a hole to get away from people. That became the heart of my essay—the adventure of traveling and discovering a new city, but also the desire to return to the familiarity and solitude of home, and how both can exist side by side.

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Megann is a writer, editor, and artist specializing in the fantasy and science fiction genre. She is a graduate of the BFA in Creative & Professional Writing program at Maharishi University of Management, and has recently published a children's book, *Bellow of the Beast*. Visit her website at megannk.com.*

GIVING UP THE GHOST (and other Hauntings)

By Tina V. Cabrera

Softcover. 209 pages

Atmosphere Press 2020

www.atmospherepress.com

Fledgling writers are often attracted to the theme of death because it's 'serious'—the implicit hope being that because of it *they* will be taken seriously-- but the results, in most cases, are what's to be expected: heavy-handed and over-reaching. Yet apart from life there's no other more complicated and challenging subject and once taken on, it tests the skills of even the most mature writer. At the same time there is the concern in the reader's mind that maybe they don't want to read something (even when it's well written) that's so dark and depressing. I mean, isn't that the whole idea of death?

Well, it is and it isn't. For something that we can't experience directly it impacts hugely on us and influences every aspect of our lives. There isn't one of us who through circumstance or intellectual/spiritual curiosity/inquiry, doesn't come face to face with it.

Death, in one form or another, stalks every page in Tina Cabrera's remarkable literary hybrid. But it is not in the least bit depressing—the overall mood is redemptive, the tone—while not exactly upbeat—is footed in a considered reality. Structurally, the book is a diptych. The first part —'What Happens to Me...'—deals largely with the author's experience—while 'Happens to You', details characters and lives outside her family. But there is no way to really separate them. The interplay is too complex.

Cabrera is both character and speaker in many of these stories and we learn that she is Filipino and Spanish by descent, comes from a large family and that their

religion is Catholicism. And with these simple facts in hand, she leads us into ‘*a world unknown and unfamiliar*’, (a phrase that turns up more than once in the text) tenebrous in places to be sure, but also revitalizing. It is a book about both psychological exorcism (literally, giving up the ghost) and reclamation, on coming to terms with those around you and with yourself. In Part One cancer is the culprit. And there are three members of her family who are taken by it. In the case of her sister, Cabrera brings us into her world with powerful description:

The shock I felt at seeing her head nearly bald when just two weeks prior her full hair and had been pulled back in a long ponytail. Bending over to kiss her cheek and seeing dismembered strands of hair strewn on the pillow. Her eyes closed. My brother placing a mask with fake eyes over her face...

In both parts of the book, chronology is recombinant—the past easily slips into the present and the present itself manifests in many dimensions—spreading like a peacock’s tale that enriches, deepens and beautifies the narrative. And through this plurality of time the author’s relationships with the dying and dead (both in and out of family) and her attempts to weld her feelings into something she can live with, morphs into an exercise in writing an obituary with all its attendant puzzlements and congruent forms: a play, poem, discourse, flash fiction, memoire, essay, fugue and dream. The need to express is pressing.

Why—besides paying tribute—do we seek to summarize a life or sanction the life or sanction the writing of a life in the first place? I think part of it is related to a particular kind of fear.

In a sense, the collection can be viewed, as one person’s analysis of the creative possibilities and limitations of the extended obituary as a literary form. At other times it takes on the guise of elegy and inquiry, or something of both but in the end neither. We see this in the wonderful ‘Beckett and Woolf’ and especially in the powerful ‘Death: A Play’ with its metafictional excursions and subtle evocations of Greek theater. In every case, an armature of literary devices brings scenes to life. In ‘One Photo of Miguel Cecilio’ (the author’s grandfather) it is the use of flashback and flash-forward. Through them we see his character and changing history gradually emerge into clarity like an image in a dark room. Imagery,

probing, repetitious and always demonstrative, circulates throughout: a pet hamster, a household appliance as an instrument of abuse—‘*Papa beating her legs with the vacuum tube cleaner that one and only time he lost his temper with her*’—baldness and mirrors, especially the cracked mirror—a particularly potent symbol when the author was a girl because in ‘*God Is In The Ceiling*’ it does not reflect the reality she expects, instead it shows...

...our disjointed body parts...pieces to a puzzle you can put back together in a variety of different ways.

And this imagistic fracturing of the body is an alpha symbol for emotions and spirits come undone through pain, loss and disenfranchised beliefs that are really the bone and gristle of this book.

What raises this hybrid from being just a clever literary take on a dark theme is the humanity that rises in quiet glory from its pages. We get to know the family intimately—in a way no stranger could—even characters that play a minor role. No intimacy is excluded.

The gasping for breath, wagging of the tongue in your final moments. Dressed in diapers, secreting liquids that had to be sucked from your mouth, into a tube, then into a canister.

Word pictures are everywhere.

The janitor at my school whacking a trapped hummingbird to death with a broom in our classroom...

A boy masturbating—

When I shoved the door open with my foot, I saw him yanking, pulling, his face squeezed like a prune.

The secondary theme that runs through the book is madness. The strongest story in this regard (and probably one of the strongest in the collection) is ‘*Schemas*’ in which a young man, who appears to slip in and out of gender admits...

Somewhere in the provisional instants of time we call memories lies the epicenter of the tremulous ripples that sent me over the edge.

The surrealist approach used by the author presents a perfect fit for the character's psychotic rearrangement of reality, such that an encounter with a waitress mutates into '*a world unknown and unfamiliar*' (that phrase, again) and becomes the stage where *surreality* levers unconscious desires.

Let it be said we are awed and empathetic as Cabrera pulls her life apart in front of us to be examined under the microscope of death and madness then mostly put back together—a sort of *détente* reclamation. This is a complicated collection and every story will make you work. But the energy applied will result in a lasting reading experience; an experience that will transcend mere pleasure and cause one to probe. It doesn't provide answers in the strict sense but it invites us into a world of uncertainties that we find we cannot refuse. And, like the author, even our lack of understanding can be an expression of atonement...

I'm not sure what all this means, but I'm compelled to force connection or to find patterns in matters beyond my control, so that I can find a commonality in my grief.

The 'voice' is measured, articulate and textured. The prose throughout this journey, is the kind that only comes from a tryst between talent and experience—sorcery to be sure, but in this ganglia of darkest of themes, as dazzling as a solar flare.

You have to have to have to read 'Giving Up the Ghost (and other Hauntings). It's a book about death. And it's full of the wisdom of life.

The Editors

An Un-asked for Review of a Variety Show Performed by Children in New Zealand

By A. F. Martin

WHY WE LIKE IT: *An American ‘teacher of dramaturgy and playwriting’ residing in New Zealand, attends a variety children’s show sponsored by something called the ‘NZ Scouts Organization’. The author admitted in an email to not knowing exactly what category her submission falls under and we admit to loving it no matter where it falls. Outré to say the least, you’re in for an entertaining read, which is more than we can say for most ‘reviews’. But this ringside gonzo takes on a life of its own. There’s a healthy dose of post-modernism in the author’s improv delivery as she flips through a gamut of emotions—often conflicting.*

- They had 2 boys play Cinderella’s evil step-sisters and this got the biggest laughs of the night. It made me think about why putting guys in dresses is somehow always funny. I decide I will do some research on this when I get home, as I imagine some academic theatre people have written serious articles about how cross dressing on stage is funny *because* it taps into the deep truth that gender is actually performative; it makes *fun* of something that should, indeed, be made fun of, so it is both enjoyable and a useful social commentary. I then wonder if 2019 PC people have begun to find an issue with putting dudes in dresses for laughs but stop caring because now I’m starting to think that the 15 year old in the blonde wig might actually be a good actor. He is singing a song about being a woman but he has the funniest, completely dead-pan look on his face and stares straight into the audience the entire time. He is killing it.

It’s a lengthy piece, but we find ourselves bouncing along merrily, leaping from one bizarre performance to another—the bizzarro meter rising with each new act—while we yuck about the reviewer’s ‘existential’ despair at the massacre of what she holds dear. The prose is so yummy you could lick it off the floor. But we warn you, Little Red Riding Hood may never be the same.

An Un-asked for Review of a Variety Show Performed by Children in New Zealand By A.F. Martin

It is 6:30 PM on a cold, July evening in Dunedin, New Zealand. I arrive at the Mayfair Theater – a large, old theatre next to a giant supermarket - and meet my friend Yuval, an eccentric Israeli geologist. He has procured us tickets for something called the “Gang Show,” and does not know anything about it. I also do not know what a Gang Show is, and we are both in high spirits about a mystery show that could delight us with potentially anything.

We take our seats next to a former theatre student of mine, and I notice she is wearing a kind of Girl Scouts uniform (though in New Zealand this is called Girl Guides) and then I notice that a *lot* of people around us are wearing a scout’s uniform, or a red decorative scarf. I become skeptical about whatever is about to happen.

The show begins and I quickly understand that this is a variety show performed by children (and for some reason some older teenagers) loosely held together by a “plot.” As someone who teaches dramaturgy and playwriting for a living, there is nothing I enjoy more than mostly tangential scenes and songs. I remember this is a three hour show and suddenly notice that the seats are not comfortable.

The rest of this is an entirely unfair, unwarranted review of said variety show performed by children. I am aware that nobody asked me to do this, and that such a work is not intended to be scrutinized by critics. As I will discuss later, I don’t entirely understand what this work intends to *do*, but I’m pretty sure it has no relationship with critical reception.

The first number is “The Greatest Show,” which is from a movie musical about P.T. Barnum starring Hugh Jackman. This number does not seem related to any plot we are about to see; it is just simply telling us that this is “The Greatest Show.” In a way it’s a logical first number to a variety show performed by children; it’s upbeat and jazz hands are possible. I do not enjoy this song for its musical qualities but understand why it was chosen.

Then there is a bizarre scene/song with 3 small priests. I think this is to use the priest costumes. I ask my former student about the costumes and she tells me “yeah, they always have the priest costumes in the Gang Show.” I learn that they do a different Gang Show every two years and it takes six months to make. I find this kind of depressing. Six months is a lot of time. I also learn the red scarves people are wearing mean that they have worked for at least 100 hours on a Gang Show. 100 hours is also a long time. I start to think about how difficult it is to create meaning in life and decide that I will not crochet a scarf tomorrow.

Next, a girl dressed as a cat tells us that she is “puss in boots.” She has a big book of “tall tales” and apparently intends to tell us some stories. It’s difficult to figure out what she wants to do with the book of tall tales because she is mostly making a lot of distracting, unfunny puns. I make a quick judgement of this girl’s acting ability, and she doesn’t score well. I wonder if that means she can sing, and I soon find out that the answer is “mostly.” She basically sings the correct notes, but entirely lacks charisma and the song is very easy and repetitive. It’s about being a cat. I remember this is a child and she is working with a terrible script, and decide I will judge her less harshly. Despite this decision, I immediately think “but like, Stranger Things? Her being 13 isn’t an excuse.”

Then a guy who is maybe 16 or 17 comes out dressed as wolf. He seems to take this role very seriously, which makes me feel very embarrassed for him, and for the other older teenagers (some, I later learn from my student, are as old as 23, which I find disturbing). This kid’s interpretation of the wolf is that the wolf is a sex symbol. He pouts and kind of slinks around the stage. The best adjective to describe what he is going for is “sultry.” He sings a song and steals half of the book. The cat girl is dismayed.... because... now she can’t tell us half of the stories? Actually, it’s really unclear what the cat girl’s motivation is with the book, or what the sultry wolf kid wants with the book. But this, ladies and gentlemen, is the main conflict that will drive this “play.”

After this “inciting incident,” it’s hard to explain the jumbled series of scenes that happen next. This is because I was very confused during all of it, and several times felt it might have been hilarious if I had come high. Basically, they chose segments from different fairy tales (Jack and the Beanstalk, Rapunzel, Snow White, ...), and found ways to work songs into these scenes. Some of the songs

were musical theatre-y, and others were pop songs. During the rest of Act 1, a couple of notable things happened:

- Somebody *mentioned* green eggs and ham, which led into a song and dance about green eggs and ham with I AM NOT JOKING 50 children dressed as cats in hats. They emerge out of nowhere and it's shocking. Where did all these costumes come from and why was making 50 fucking matching outfits SOLELY for a 3 minute dance scene that has nothing to do with anything something that happened??? This song and dance abruptly ended, and I immediately changed my mind and decided that the whole tangent was absurdist, comic brilliance. I vow to steal this genius move and put it into my next play.
- There were a lot of New Zealand government jokes and none of them were funny. Not just to me; I mean, nobody laughed at any of them. The children saying them also seemed to not understand the jokes.
- They had 2 boys play Cinderella's evil step-sisters and this got the biggest laughs of the night. It made me think about why putting guys in dresses is somehow always funny. I decide I will do some research on this when I get home, as I imagine some academic theatre people have written serious articles about how cross dressing on stage is funny *because* it taps into the deep truth that gender is actually performative; it makes *fun* of something that should, indeed, be made fun of, so it is both enjoyable and a useful social commentary. I then wonder if 2019 PC people have begun to find an issue with putting dudes in dresses for laughs but stop caring because now I'm starting to think that the 15 year old in the blonde wig might actually be a good actor. He is singing a song about being a woman but he has the funniest, completely dead-pan look on his face and stares straight into the audience the entire time. He is killing it.
- A lot of fairy tale segments were performed, and then suddenly we are in Havana. As soon as I see the sign "Havana café" I am onto these children. They will use this as an excuse to sing that Havava ooo nah nah song I kept hearing on the radio when I was in L.A. about 6 months ago. They have now gone way too far. Having an entirely unjustified location, genre, and plot shift to enable the singing of one terrible pop song is too much. The dead-pan kid warmed me up but now I am cold inside.
- They do sing the Havana ooo nah nah song. I am angry. But then, half way through, I remember they are children in New Zealand and this is hilarious. They are singing the song with a lot of musical theatre-y articulation. When they sing, as a group, "he took me back to East Atlanta, ooh nah nah," I begin to wonder if any of these children – about 40% of which are actually teenagers and therefore have no excuse for not having critical reasoning skills – even consider *any* of the words they say or sing in this show, and what this means for national education. Do they question things? Never mind, this isn't funny.
- The Havana song transitions straight into 'Living La Vida Loca' by Ricky Martin. I miss this song. It is funny when sung in a New Zealand accent – they pronounce dancing like dAHncing (like the British), so it's way too fancy sounding. The heavy articulation is also very inappropriate for this song and I begin to believe that whoever is the musical director just googled "things to say to children while directing them in a musical" and just said those things (i.e. "articulate! Always stare right into the audience! Smile!") regardless of a song's tone and genre.
- In Havana, the cat girl who is our narrator I guess falls in love with someone named Margarita. It is never explained who Margarita is, or why they are in Havana. Act 1 is over.

During intermission, I learn some things about Gang Show. There is a couple who runs it, and they have been writing these shows for 40 years. It is a part of the NZ Scouts organization. Around 180 kids audition for this and about 70 get in. They have a *lot* costumes available to them, which explains the 20 costumes for each child I have already seen. I don't know where the funding for this comes from.

Act 2 is a much greater shit show than Act 1. This is shocking as Act 1 already had the messiest dramaturgy of anything I have ever seen, ever. However, Act 2 is really something special. More fairy tale characters are "introduced" – and I put that in quotes, because they really do something that's more like "appearing out of nowhere, assuming the audience already knows who they are." Sleeping beauty comes out to sing with the other princesses at some point, but it is played by the actress who was Jack's mom (from the Jack and the Beanstalk narrative thread). At some point, Jack is mentioned and she says 'hey, that's my son!' which hurts my brain. I really have no idea if it was meant as some kind of meta joke or if they actually lost track of who this actress was supposed to be at that moment. I decide it's the latter and I begin to wonder why I didn't leave at intermission.

Most of the second act deals with the sultry wolf and Little Red. Sometimes the wolf has the half of the book he stole and sings about having the book, and other times, he is seen book-less and is only concerned with eating and maybe having sex with Little Red. It don't remember which songs they had him sing to her, but it didn't seem like he platonically wanted to eat her if you know what I mean. At this point I begin to think the whole Little Red Riding Hood story is actually super creepy to begin with – I feel like we shouldn't do a story that seems like a metaphor for rape anymore? Also she is saved by some random dude at the end, right? What does that suggest? Anyway, the wolf basically functions in 2 separate plot lines, guided by 2 separate motivations, which is an objective dramaturgical mistake.

Eventually the wolf lures little red to the cottage where she's going, and eats her. Puss in boots girl comes to rescue little red (how did she know where they were?), and slices the wolf open. Little red, 7 dwarves, and some other people emerge. Somewhere here puss in boots also gets wolf's part of the book back, which is the only thing, plot-wise, that is ever resolved. Then, sultry wolf comes back to life for no reason what so ever and he is resurrected as Elvis; he is actually wearing an Elvis costume. My mouth literally drops. What the fuck is happening. He sings a sexy song to Little Red, who is not convinced by his seduction but sultry wolf kid knows this is his time to shine and really has fun with it. I begin to think that, of all of these children, sultry wolf is the best singer and actor. He can actually hit some super low notes which is impressive. He also has charisma. I wonder why he is doing this show and start to think maybe he's trying to get with one of these scout girls. Yes, that must be the case. From now on I will try to figure out who he is trying to sleep with.

From here on, it's just half an hour of extra songs and some reprises, with a few scenes that try to convince you that these songs are related to something. But the main plot line has been resolved, you say?! They should know that you can't hold an audience's attention for long after the resolution! The conflict is over, right? What is driving this? Nothing. Nothing is driving this. I suddenly remember smoking a little too much weed and watching a live-action version of *The Emperor's New Groove* from the catwalk of a theatre in Ireland – which haunted me for several months and made me question even my attraction to the *idea* of theatre – and I now am very thankful that I am sober in this moment. The marijuanas would not have made this funny; it would have made it traumatic.

While these final nonsense songs and deeply unfunny scenes go on, I make some observations about the directing style and then proceed to go into an existential hole.

Re. the directing style: the kid who played the blonde step sister - who I earlier proclaimed to be some kind of comic genius - is actually just incapable of not looking like a dead fish. I find this out because he plays another role in Act 2 where he is supposed to exude joy (I know this from contextual clues), and he does the same thing he did as the step sister; he looks blank, and stares straight into the audience. In this new context, it is not funny; it is vaguely horrifying. I then begin to notice that a *lot* of the kids here just look blank, or blank with a smile (even more horrifying), and a *loooooooot* of them just stare into the audience. They do not “cheat” to the audience. They stare. I think maybe whoever directed this got tired of telling kids to STOP FUCKING TURNING AND LOOKING AT EACH OTHER ON STAGE and decided that cheating would be too sophisticated a concept so told them to just face the audience and address everything to them.

This brings me to the existential hole. Clearly, this is a bad direction to give to anyone. If any of these children are interested in actually doing theatre at some point in their lives, they are just learning bad habits here. I then begin to think about the function of Gang Show. What is it doing, who is it for, and is it good? Obviously it is not good as a piece of art – any competent reader of this review should have figured that out by now – but is it *good* in the sense of contributing to the progress of anyone involved? The short answer is probably not, and here is the long answer:

I don't think anyone benefits from being part of a bad product. Or at least – I think they would benefit *more* if they were pushed to make something better, and improve; group activities like sports and theatre can be good just because they are fun and bring people together, but they are *always better* if the people on the team are actually working towards success. Towards meaning and progress. I think progress – whether it's *personal* progress or *societal*/group progress – is how we create meaning in life. It's what is exciting, fulfilling... it's how we know we're moving forward instead of, potentially, backwards, or even worse, remaining in some kind of soul-sucking stasis. I don't think children think about this – not normal children anyway; I mean, I used to ruminate about this shit as a 6 year old, but I don't think that's typical – but they *feel* it. I think. I was on sports teams as a kid where nobody cared if I actually did well and I don't think I learned anything from those experiences. I was also on sports teams where somebody was like, hey, let's all really work together and try to succeed, and of course those experiences were more meaningful. Similarly, the most meaningful shows of my career have been the ones where artistic progress was made; where we pushed ourselves, and started out better than we were when we went in. If they also communicated well, we can also say they were good pieces of art, not just inherently good to make.

Maybe I'm missing the point of Gang Show because I just don't understand why anybody would make something just to make it no matter how terrible and incoherent it is (by the way – I get that adults like to watch their children perform, but if it's *just for the parents* that's a ridiculous use of time and money and I cannot respect that), but I also think I'm right. It doesn't matter whether or not these kids want to have a career in theatre – I mean, I am definitely not an athlete as an adult but swimming as a teenager, on a team that pushed me to be better, taught me a lot; I learned about discipline, team work, and community. I think learning is a virtue, and the *6 fucking months* these kids spent rehearsing could have been used for actual instruction and progress instead of making a 3 hour fever dream.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I accidentally witnessed a children's variety show in New Zealand, and was so angry afterwards that I couldn't sleep until I wrote about it. I later realized it's pretty funny to write a review about a children's show since I think you're definitely not supposed to do that.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Amanda Faye Martin is an American writer and dramaturg. She attended Kenyon College where she learned how to think by wandering around Amish cornfields, and holds an MFA in Dramaturgy from the A.R.T. Institute at Harvard University. She is currently the Playwriting Fellow at the University of Otago in Dunedin, New Zealand.*

SEPTEMBER 2001/Between Friends Part One

By John Alexander and Laurence Wilson

WHY WE LIKE IT: *911 introduced a new 'Age of Anxiety' and changed the comfort zone of the USA (and by extension the globe) forever. What follows is an absorbing account of the events seen through the correspondence of two friends. Because their communication is through email you might call it something like 'virtual belles-lettres'—an updated spawn of the Romantic epistolary. The letters between the two close friends, one in NYC and one in Toronto, begins on the day of destruction and last until Nov. 29. Numerous exchanges detail the events immediately following the attacks and there are human stories that touch us deeply—a man who fell 70 stories only to break both legs—most others were not so lucky. A penetrating CNF account of both the physical and emotional havoc suffered by New Yorkers and empathized by a world shaken to its boots. The style leans towards the dramatic and 'Between Friends' could just as easily be read as a theatrical script—there is starkness to the whole thing that is not far from the bare stage. This is a serial submission. Part Two will be published in Issue 7.*

BETWEEN FRIENDS

**Written and Compiled
by
John Alexander and Laurence Wilson
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BETWEEN FRIENDS

September 11, 2001- Tuesday- Bayside, Queens- Mid- Afternoon-

John Alexander wrote to Laurence Wilson:

Hello Laurence:

What a fucking nightmare.
The cops have done excellently.
The place is under a controlled siege.
They have buses nose-to-nose blocking streets where they don't want people to go.
Every fucking truck is being stopped and checked.
Cars that are simply standing, waiting to pick up someone are physically "assaulted" by the cops to move, move, move and keep moving.
Fire trucks, cops everywhere- every intersection.
Very sad.
This is obviously a second Pearl Harbor.
It will radically change foreign policy.
Remember, you have an extremely conservative "Southern" president in charge.
There are two aircraft carriers on the way to NYC

Harbor.

The Air Force has jets in the air over NYC,
challenging all planes and the jets are free to shoot
down any plane that neither respond nor comply.

More later.

John

September 11, 2001- Tuesday- Toronto, Ontario- 7:03 PM-

Laurence Wilson wrote to John Alexander:

John, hello!...thank you so much for connecting at a time like this!

Maurice and I have been watching since about 9:30am and have been amazed that
one minute you have normalcy, two landmark buildings and the next you have
chaos and no buildings!

...John, how could they not know about this?...and more importantly, how do
you recruit four terrorists prepared to commit suicide and able to fly
757/767's...what a scouting department!...the NFL Combine should be so
effective!

John, I'm so happy to hear you're safe...hope you're cool and coping...
stay in touch...we'll be thinking about you!...regards, Laurence

September 12, 2001- Wednesday- Queens- Mid-Morning-

John Alexander wrote:

Laurence:

It is the truly classical example of the barbarians at the gate.

I've always lived by the rule that- "I really don't give a fuck who they are or how they live or what they do as long as they follow the rule of law and don't revolt."

I think that what should come out of this in terms of policy is that continental security has to take precedence over national sovereignty. Reports- in part- have it that they were operating out of Portland, Maine via Canada.

I think that the RCMP and the Canadian equivalent of the CIA- I think that there are also 4 letters in that abbreviation- need to begin to see the problem as an hemispheric problem.

I have mentioned to you before that I am particularly concerned about Canadian immigration policy- and I say this as someone who lived in Canada for a while- as a child- and not only have formatively fond memories of life there (hell, if my parents would've stayed longer and introduced me to hockey, as a 17 year old junior defenseman I would have been 6' 1" 185 in 1964- damn, boy, the Lindros of his day)- anyway, it is particularly disturbing to me about a country that I consider a second home, that immigration policy (and, again, we've talked about

this) that so many people are being let into the country- Canada- who really don't give a fucking flying shit about Canada at all. This WTC bombing should be seen as a wake-up for Canadian immigration policy. If this shit does not get destroyed at the root, what makes the fucks in Ottawa or T.O. think that the CN Tower might not be next?

That goes for the Euros, too. When is it going to be the lottery win for the Eiffel Tower or Parliament or Red Square?

Why, because the Americans can be hit?

This fucking hemisphere needs a policy.

I know that it is the sentiment in NYC- even before the WTC destruction- that immigration- in the U.S.- is too fucking lax; I know it sounds xenophobic.

Canada is particularly perplexing to me; a friend of mine was Eastern European, his wife was from the Balkans, he got a Ph.D. in the States, went to work for an international think-tank in Europe, wanted to immigrate to Canada- and the immigration people told him that for each of his family members (4) that they had to have \$25,000. in the bank/person.

Yet on the other hand it seems that any crackpot fuck can get off a plane- probably in Montreal- walk through customs and fucking disappear.

Again, I'm not blaming anyone, but we need a hemispheric policy.

I think that something is wrong when customs agents in T.O. ban books coming into Canada with titles like "Hot, Hotter, Hottest!" thinking that it is sexual material (when in fact it is an hot pepper cookbook) and the same agency lets in scores of fucking people who don't give a fuck about Canada- and you know, if they don't give a particular fuck about Canada, they probably don't give a fuck about democratic/parliamentary institutions or the rule of law.

Yes, it is disturbing to watch Canadian immigration policy undermining a wonderful country- and I'm talking about Canada- that I have loved since I started going there as a wee little one.

Again, for Ottawa and T.O.- we don't even want to start about Vancouver- this is as clear a wake-up call as there is going to be.

We need, again, an hemispheric policy- we are an "island" we can work to keep a lot of the crazy fucks out.

I don't think that George W. is going to allow himself to go down in history as the fuck who let anybody get away.

I would not be surprised to see tactical nukes being used in Afghanistan or some other such place.

NYC was already becoming xenophobic even before the WTC- it is going to really get cranked up now.

The still unsettled issue that is being downplayed in Manhattan is the possible introduction of bio or chem contamination on the planes. Anthrax is often mentioned.

Like I said, yesterday, what a fucking mess.

I told one health professional that I am particularly close to- when they said that their hospital was deemed an emergency receipt institution- you won't see anything. It will be bi-polar. There will be the smoke-inhalation cases and the dead. The locals with scratches and cuts will be treated in Manhattan, but the seriously injured, they will be few and scarce.

Talk to you later.

John

September 12, 2001- Wednesday- Toronto- 1:15 PM-

Laurence Wilson wrote:

John, hello!...thanks for your mail today and your views on the need for continental security and today's currently useless immigration policies!

...because of misguided liberal views, our immigration policies enable the wrong kind of people to move much more freely than should be permitted...all in the guise of civil liberties vs. sanity... unfortunately because of indifference, incompetence and this country is too often, too tolerant and allows a flow through for undesirables:

people, drugs, money, toxic waste and several other harmful evils...

I'm not sure this will soon change...we're genetically coded to be tolerant, liberal pacifists!

...John, how fortunate, it appears, this was a low tech operation and didn't involve missiles or bio/chem contamination!...only some good ol' fashioned Molotov cocktails Y2K-style!...but the toxins/asbestos and contaminated water will be a danger for months and longer!...

...here are some thoughts from your friend in the great white north:

* the trauma and the emotion are just now beginning to become evident

- how managed the media is!...tiny drops of minutia but no insightful analysis only the giant spin machine spewed by mindless, unintelligent talking heads... nothing investigative which would be a sign of intelligence!

-
- will any of the steel, rebar end up in Canada's steel mills?
- * who were the airport collaborators who let these guys through to gates to the planes?...why aren't they in custody right now!?...every airport has its clan of gate people and baggage handlers on the take...it's the second oldest profession and has been around in stables, ports, stations and borders since the beginning of the ages
- is there anything more important than that black box in a Penna. farm field?
 - or, the ground to air tapes of air traffic controllers?
- * Kabul, Afghanistan Tuesday, September 11, 6:00pm ET... those bombs had to be the actions of on-the-ground CIA operatives with the ties to Northern Alliance who oppose the Taliban...it couldn't have just been the Northern Alliance launching a few scuds
- didn't the civilian crowd on the scene at the Westin Copley remind you of the unauthorized gawkers who were at the jail in Dallas with Oswald/Ruby!?...don't they use police lines and secure the area these days in Boston?!
 - will there be a number of "mysterious" disappearances in the next year of Bin Laden, Castro, Gaddafi-types...ethnic cleansing under the guise of retribution?
 - the type of stuff on the net never ceases to amaze me!...flightexplorer.com is one site and another is ifccfbi.com
 - 17,000 travelers stranded in Newfoundland today...
 - who owns the company(ies) contracted out to supply gate checks around the world...are they ultimately a part of this and other conspirator groups?
 - Vero Beach, Boston, Providence, Daytona, Venice, Coral Springs...serendipity/groping vs. proactive/proficiency?
 - did those buildings collapse or were they demolished by explosive detonations?...they looked a lot like those old Las Vegas casinos that were blown up?
 - why didn't anyone know those buildings would tumble from explosives or structural compromise and who ordered those fire/police people into the zone?
 - here's the Gordian knot: a failure to know what you don't know
 - is it just me noticing but are all the talking heads white?

-
- will this story last nine days- the usual cycle of “big stories”?

...I know you would have been the forerunner to Lindros if you had stayed in Canada!:)...keep the faith...regards, Laurence

P.S....I think CSIS is the Canadian intelligence gathering you're thinking about?

September 12, 2001- Wednesday- Queens-

John Alexander wrote:

My Dear Young Man:

Yes, yes, yes- to everything.

You know, I am living less than 5 miles from LaGuardia; sometimes there are so many flights- the bedroom faces westward toward LaGuardia- that I have to drop the curtain to keep the lights out of the room; there was- before all this (BAT) a time when there was a takeoff every forty-five seconds around the clock; so what I'm saying; I was at the ocean, today; a stretch of national recreation land called Breezy Point; maybe 3 miles from JFK; there were no airplanes at all; it reminded me of when they turned off Niagara Falls; to walk from the parking lot to Breezy Point proper- along the beach- and believe it or not, now after Labor Day, basically uninhabited- it's a couple of miles out and a couple of miles back; anyway, no planes, none on the way out at 5:15 PM; but, my good man, on the way back, three B-52's, very high; all headed eastward; my guess; on to bases in Turkey- and easy bombing run to Afghanistan; a coordinated B-52 (yes, shades of North Vietnam) and cruise missile attacks on the camps in Afghanistan and probably Pakistan;

I went past lower Manhattan, today, on the Queens side of the East River, you cannot get into Manhattan by car or foot- from the south or east; the smoke over the island was very surreal; still black smoke coming out of office buildings; though, because the WTC faces- with a gap- to the southwest- it was impossible to see any rubble or damage; just smoke; the funny thing about this whole fucking thing is that these radical Muslims have really sounded the true come to the starting block call for Islam as a religion;

this bombing on such a horrific scale in the name of religious zealotry- holy war- whether they realize it or not- will call Islam to the blocks; either they will show that they are a bona fide religious belief system for the next millennium or they will demonstrate that they are the religious equivalent of the Neanderthals; a belief line that grew out of the Judeo-Christian crucible and either evolved into that which will be a viable, compassionate religion or whether it

is truly just some dead branch of the J-C tree; the choice is theirs; the moderates in Islam HAVE to come forth and unilaterally condemn this action as NOT being in the name of Islam and Allah; short of that shit; they're fucked; it will increasingly be seen, then, as simply a tribal religion that has hatred at and as its core principle.

Again, you are right to be concerned for Canada; perhaps the WASP-ANGLO establishment in Canada really doesn't give a flying fuck for anything Canadian, but just for themselves; the fucks probably all have either Swiss or off-shore bank accounts as we speak; you know, maybe in some small way, that is "the French problem;" maybe the real core of the French problem is that they refuse to be bought off like the rest of Anglo Canada? I don't know; I hope that you don't feel that I'm off-line here; but like I said, I love Canada; the only teacher who ever reasoned with me was in a 2 room schoolhouse in this fishing village on Lake Erie- so, in some ways, I feel like I have latitude;

so, keep up the fight (remember when we talked- some two years ago- that at that time we had less than 1,000 weeks to live) and die knowing that you did the best that you could to try and protect and preserve something you cherish;

the Euros know that they better not fail us on this fucking one; not after getting their fucking asses out of their last "problem;"

Putin better fucking step up to the plate as well; and if the fucking Chinese ever want any sort of normalcy- they better get really fucking smart really fucking fast;

yes, the cops are out all over; b & whites (actually they are blue); unmarked; off duty; national guard- though the locals have been excellent in this existential moment; no gouging, no looting; for NYC- very civilized; I heard today that my step-daughter who lives in Brooklyn had an appointment at the WTC set for yesterday- a job interview- at 5 PM (lucky for her it wasn't at the usual time of interviews, like 10 AM);

saw Ehud (as in Barak) on TV today, from London; very supportive, very encouraging- and, "...oh, by the way, let me tell you my laundry list of terrorist groups that the Americans should kill off; well, there is Hamas and Hezbollah..." please Ehud, we know who they fucking are, and okay, we will do your dirty work for you;

analytically, Laurence; policy wise; if I were advising Bush; I suppose a couple of Arab civil wars would probably be good to foment; yeah, and maybe get all of those countries at each others' throats, again; it will give them a distraction and kill off some fair portion of not only the general population, but the young and foolish terrorist types; but GWB hasn't called yet; so I wait and watch the plumes in the western sky.

More later from the battle front;

John

September 12, 2001- Wednesday- Queens-

John Alexander wrote:

One thing that I forgot:

There is an extremely tragic aspect of the destruction of the WTC that is being “skipped over” by the media, probably for the sake of sanity;

when you piece together the accounts, and films and stories- Laurence, there were a great- emphasis on great- number of people who jumped rather than be burned alive;

one story of a man who climbed out of a 70-something story window and actually tried to shimmy down the side of the building; he made it down three stories before he fell backwards to his death;

another man and woman- maybe a couple, perhaps an office romance- held hands and jumped from the 81st floor;

a firefighter on the ground who was killed by someone who jumped and landed right on top of him;

a woman who jumped and before she hit the ground hit a signage structure and then ceased to be recognizable as a woman;

the people on the scene said that they always landed on their backs; the sound became unmistakable;

these are the very true and tragic choices that people were faced with; either die from the smoke and jet fuel on the 82nd floor- or be courageous and jump;

very sad;

anyway; ambulances going by all night long; sirens only at intersections, but it has become part of the aural landscape;

reporting to you from the new American theme park called, “Disasterland.”

(but, with branch parks opening very soon in other parts of the world)

John

September 12, 2001- Wednesday- Queens-

John Alexander wrote:

By the way, I forgot to share,
Laurence, Americans are still “cowboys;” yes, we may have been bucked off the fucking horse in Vietnam, but that cowboy mentality is very much alive and well in the American psyche. Not since Pearl Harbor have the Americans had the moral high-ground to truly ride, again. The Gulf War came close, but that was an economic concern, with military actions being set against weekly polling support holding it in check. Frankly, we know that all the Euros are morally bankrupt. It would be nice to have Canadian support.
NYC was probably the wrong place to attack, because this now puts the liberal voices into the southern-conservative camp, and no voice will speak against military action. Particularly no NYC liberal voice. It is a metro area of over 22 million people. They have been galvanized to be cowboys, too.
More later.
John

September 13, 2001- Thursday- Queens-

John Alexander wrote:

Laurence:

Tonight; they arrested one fuck at JFK trying to get on a plane impersonating a pilot; and another at LaGuardia trying to get on a plane impersonating a crew member.

Need to get them.

John

September 14, 2001- Friday- Toronto- 8:49 AM-

Laurence Wilson wrote:

John, hello!...thanks for your mail yesterday!

...I like your acronym BAT- before all this!...and your musings about: a walk on a Long Island beach with B-52's above; the blockade of Manhattan; the terrorists as, "the religious equivalents of Neanderthals"; living only 30,000 days on this planet; what a team the Euros, Putin and the Chinese might be; Ehud; jumping, shimmying down, and holding hands on the jump, landing on their backs and the unmistakable sound; the eerie aural scene; "Disasterland" and branch parks opening soon...

...John, you're the shrink- why do some people flee and survive and others not?...and also who jumps and who doesn't and why?

- how long have these guys been vacationing in North America?
- all that dust was concrete turning into dust
- between 12/24 terrorists on the four planes and a huge support group still on the ground...and nobody connected the dots?
- I was at Penn State when Kennedy backed down the Russian ships during the Cuban Missile Crisis...he threatened to attack if they didn't turn back...I thought about how I'd get home when war began...I actually thought walking would be best...I'm sure many of the 250,000 stranded travelers from all over the world had the same compulsion to get home and were/are frustrated by being stranded

-
- can Barry Bonds still get 72 home runs if more games are postponed/cancelled...the conspiracy people will love this one!
 - is there anything more inspiring than a flag, an anthem and a lit candle?
 - have the last two days seemed as quiet, gentle and as slow and quiet as Sundays?
 - how about that J. C. Watts speaking out for the use of force to resolve the attack
 - how many Canadians will be entangled in the “harbouring” web?...and Americans for that matter?
 - by the time everyone gets home, there will be some huge bills to pay as people leave the airport parking garages!:)
 - you’ll know we’re back to normalcy when the networks resume their regular programming...they’ve already taken some hits because they haven’t been able to launch their season premiers!
 - CNN’s videophone quality certainly improved between day one and day three!...and how wonderful it is that we can have text, audio and/or video conversations with each other on the net!...John do you have videomeeting capabilities on your PC?
 - who was that guy who sang “Amazing Grace” to Congress at Tuesday night’s prayer vigil?...wow!
 - John, how did they get out the WTC windows to jump?
 - more surgical-type face masks on day 3...the wind could become significant
 - will we know more about Al Qaeda as the days go by?
 - “through the tears of sadness, I see an opportunity” - Bush
 - how much longer before the U. S. visits Afghanistan?
 - was Osama the QB and Saddam the coach?...or is it all Saddam?

...John, just a few more musings from the north...connect again from the front when you can...take care, be fine...regards, Laurence

September 14, 2001- Friday- Queens-

John Alexander wrote:

Laurence:

Of course I haven't yet mentioned about being awakened by fighter jets in the middle of the night.

Obviously, with 20 U.S. cities- and probably T.O., Montreal, Gander, etc., having fighter jet protection- and Laurence, you all may think that T.O. doesn't have it, but they're probably sitting right out there on the U.S. side of Lake Ontario- there is big shit that we don't know about going on.

This last e-mail is more problematic (in a good sense) than the one that I totally agreed with.

Oh, by the way, I am going into Manhattan, tomorrow, and see how far down to Ground Zero I can get.

Why do some flee and others don't?

And, who jumps/who doesn't and why?

To start; some guy climbed out onto the outside of something like the 70th something floor; grasped the exterior structure- then the building collapsed; he rode the external structure all the way down to the ground and "walked away" with only two broken legs; hell, Laurence, the fucking shock and terror- no pun intended- of being 70 stories up and out alone should kill you from shock!

Anyway, he made it, and good for him;

The original question; it is tied to the second about jumping; I am writing a short story about my encounter with the Georgia Patrol at about 4:15 AM and looking down a shotgun because they thought I was someone else; the question, do I freak and get pissed or am I cool; it is, I believe, instantaneous; in my situation, I had "more time" to think/react than those folks who might have tried the 2 stairwells, found them blocked, saw the flames consuming their associates (though, they are now saying that so many remains will probably not be found because when the jets hit and the fuel tanks exploded the people were- and I quote- vaporized. Sad to say.

It is probably part genetic part extreme existential moment; getting out of the 81st floor is something that probably has three finite possibilities; stairwell number one, stairwell number two or the elevator;

I told a General Practitioner once who kept asking me all of these personal questions; I said, "...do I ask you about your sex life; to wit, one has to live with dignity, grow old with dignity and then be prepared to pass on with dignity; sometimes we don't have a lot of time to think about dignity; sometimes we simply have to decide- they decided to jump; the same holds true

for fleeing- maybe more so than jumping; I would categorize the decision to jump as a philosophical decision; to flee or not to flee; Laurence, very Jungian; the collective unconscious; how strong is it in you and how much in touch with it are you;

- my point exactly; there are too many of these fucks “vacationing” in North America;
- the concrete, yes; and the drywall; and the ceiling tiles; and the carpets; and probably the vaporized folk;
- Laurence, years and years from now it will be a perfect acetate overlay for Pearl Harbor and FDR; did they know, why didn't they stop it; maybe its like plate tectonics; volcanoes can let off pressure, rumbles can do the same, but sooner or later- tectonically- and, again, based on my remarks about Islam being at the crossroads- maybe this is the final societal shakeout that began hundreds and thousands of years ago; maybe it is, maybe it was inevitable; Hitler was a barbarian at the gate- and you know the sequence of events; right now I'm kind of pooped, but I think you know what I mean;

by the way; storms passed through here last night; the thunder/lightning woke me up (along with the jets) was it a bomb?

Yesterday, NYC had 90 bomb threats called in; everyone is gun shy;

today, the U.S. Congress rescinded the bar that kept the CIA and friends from working with anyone who had a criminal record;

Laurence, I have walked a lot of places- some very long- if these passengers don't fucking like it, well, then, get out and fucking walk;

Barry Bonds will probably do it; (He's resting, the pitchers aren't working, they'll be rusty- ops, I delivered up a homer; in other words; pitchers will skill-wise stagnate faster than the batters;

- is there anything more inspiring than a flag, an anthem and a lit candle?; yes, a flag, a lit candle and the “Battler Hymn of The Republic;” (far more vengeful; you know, the Civil War did happen, comparatively, so long ago; but what that song does is bring together both the Northern and Southern sentiments- albeit in different ways- to the front;
- yes; it has been very quiet; we have hit the Muslim fucks so many times on Friday nights (a call to prayers) or at “Ramadan-time” that they are probably expecting it; so what would I tell Bush to do? I would tell him to reverse Pearl Harbor; Sunday is the Christian day of rest; on what would amount to- what was it- 8:05 AM Eastern on a Sunday; I would hit the fucks; okay, that's my prediction; we will hit them on a Sunday morning; at either the same “Pearl Harbor Time” either for us or at their time (actually irrelevant);

- J. C. Watts is running for president;
- I don't think a lot of Anglo-Canadians or Anglo-Americans; but some fair proportion of the other folk;
- hey, this is fucking America; sue the air-fucking-port!
- yeah, and I keep expecting to see commercials when Dan Rather or Peter Jennings takes a break;

(Peter Jennings- now that is one hell of a fucking success story!!!);

- Laurence, maybe you can be so kind as to tell one relatively ignorant fuck what videomeeting is all about?
- I don't know who sang “Amazing Grace” but I'll try and find out;
- as I understand, some windows- throughout the tower, because of the g's and force of the impact were blown out; I have also read that people knocked them out themselves;
- yes, today, I got surgical masks to take with me into Manhattan tomorrow;
- we will know what we need to know;

-George W. will not go down in history as the same kind of president that John Quincy Adams went down as; also, I think that George W. does have unresolved issues from his father and the Gulf War and the inability to “put Saddam away.” He will put Bin Laden away;

(by the way, I understand that Putin and Bush are close to agreeing to allow American- maybe NATO- forces to use Russian bases in Central Asia for attacks on Afghanistan; the price, the trade- the quid pro quo- Russia will be admitted to NATO;)

-yes, George W. is more correct than he and his uptight librarian wife understand; we are now living at a truly cosmic moment in the history of man; sort of like the discovery of fire; the wheel- and, I’m sorry to say, if you remember the scene from “2001” with the ape at the beginning- the weapon;

Laurence, we are on the verge of possibly, just possibly setting the world onto the path of harmony and peaceful coexistence; though, similar to your concerns about Canada in our conversation in Richmond Hill- it may exhaust America; I think that we are tired, Laurence; it has been a long haul- all things considered- since the Civil War; I have no doubts that we will crush the fucks- maybe it’s me- but I think we are collectively tired;

I understand that this is bringing us closer to the Russians and the Chinese- and, yes, the Brits are wonderful; they are truly our friends in the world, maybe our only tie-dyed-true-friends;

Chretien; if only Canada as a whole was like Jean- you’re more than our friends, but Canada is always so quiet; so cautious; the Brits could be terror bombed so much more easily- but they are always- vociferously- there with us; not that we need it, but, please

Encourage the Monarchists to be FUCKING monarchists in sentiment AND word/deed; hey, you love the Brits? So be like the Brits;

-also I understand that the windows were breakable with desperate force;

-Afghanistan? I’ll guess- for symbolic purposes- somewhere around Columbus Day weekend- actually your Thanksgiving- and I don’t know what the Brits or the EU are celebrating; it will be much along the lines of Normandy; threat; threat; threat-GO!

-It is already decided that Afghanistan as a whole would only take a stick of dynamite to send it back to the Stone Age;

-there are the Ravens and the Bengals; Saddam will die;

Laurence; this has been a tiring week; the Middle Eastern fucks think that we are weak and fat; but put differently, who would you bet on, a fat cowboy or a “towel-head?”

And as someone at an hospital on Wednesday told me that they were in an elevator with two men in the back and another nurse; the two men were speaking in a foreign language; the other nurse said, “...you know, considering what has gone on around here, I don’t think that it’s such a good idea to be talking in a foreign language. We speak English around here, why don’t you try it...”

Laurence, there will be some serious death on both sides.

More from the front lines when I get back from Manhattan, tomorrow.

John

September 16, 2001- Sunday- Toronto- 8:47 PM-

Laurence Wilson wrote:

John, hello!...thanks for your mail of the 14th...I've been walking the beach since then and have only now had a chance to gather up all my day by day notes from each of the days and put them into a cogent form to pass along!

...first some thoughts on your e-mail:

- you're right, "we know nothing!"...the media presents less than 10% of reality
- the story about that guy riding the collapse down from the 70th floor and sustaining only two broken legs has got to be bull!
- It's good Congress rescinded the former rule about not working with criminals!...you can't talk to a tennis player about covering a kickoff and you can't knife Osama with a guy from Harvard!...only truly evil minds can do truly evil deeds
- I like your Bonds story
- you're right, the "Battle Hymn" does rouse the soul!
- can Watts win it?...and does Powell become the first one?
- videomeeting is when you and I turn on our PC's and talk live like Nick did on CNN from Kabul...don't you have a little web camera on top of your PC to shoot your picture to my screen?...it usually costs about C\$80
- it would be good for Russia to be in NATO!
- I never thought of W. having any unresolved issues from his pop's inability to dust Saddam!...you're right it makes sense!...maybe W. gets both Saddam and Osama!
- Afghanistan is already in Barney Rubble time!
- the Americans aren't tired John!...all that stuff since the Civil war has just been regular season stuff...this will be the playoffs for the survival of the planet!
- I love your elevator story

...now John, here's some more thoughts, feelings and impressions from your northern observer:

DAY 4

- will they build or not build on the WTC site?...should they?
- will they build a black wall with all the names on the WTC site?
- will there be more names on it than on the black walled Vietnam Memorial?

-
- they passed the plate at that church service, it looked strange...never miss an opportunity I guess!
 - I bet Turner would have donated a bundle, like lots of other have, if he didn't have to worry about payments to Jane!
 - it rained most of the day...and they've been pouring on the fire hoses yet its still smoking!
 - my sister in Jacksonville, Florida says she's never seen as many flags flying
 - how would things be if Gore were in the chair?
 - "the middle hour of our grief" – Bush
 - to play or not to play...do you not play and appear to be giving in to terrorists or do you play and appear to be disrespecting the dead?
 - maybe this event is intended to show us there's only one planet and we'd better start playing together rather than fighting each other or it's the end of the earth
 - isn't the first step: implementing the "Cuban Solution" against Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Iran, Colombia, Algeria, Panama and Libya?
 - "the commitment of our fathers is now the calling of our time" – Bush
 - CNN changed it's title from "America Under Attack" to "America's New War" on Day 4
 - 19 Arabs on the 4 planes are identified!
 - contrails in the sky over Canada for the first time since Tuesday...many in the late day heading west

DAY 5

-
- “recreational bitching” about the power, impact, and arrogance of the U.S....is still a game played by dipsticks!
 - forget about “Survivor”...this gives new meaning to the words “reality TV”
 - for the first time since Tuesday I feel like reading newspaper accounts of the horror
 - here’s an example of a wrong right solution: “let’s go to the top of the building, the sprinklers will put out the fires and the helicopters will pick us up!”
 - “we’ll smoke’em out of their holes” – Bush
 - by Saturday night September 15 the TV networks have returned to regular programming but MLB, NFL, CFL and others weren’t playing?...and won’t until Monday 17th?
 - what will the Pennsylvania and Pentagon airplane voice recorders, found yesterday reveal?
 - “Operation Noble Eagle” – the name given today to the call up of 50,000 reservists...the acronym is O.N.E.!
 - 5,000 people still reported missing, 260 dead from the four airplanes, 124 reported dead at the Pentagon and only 159 dead at the WTC...do they seem like comparatively low numbers to you?
 - John, where are they putting that 22,000 tons of debris from ground zero?...and they say that there’s more than a million plus tons yet to come!

DAY 6

- how successful will the Pakistani politicians be when they meet the Afghan

government and ask for the Taliban to deliver Osama Bin Laden in three days?

- 180 N. Y. deaths, 115 identified, over 5,000 missing as of noon Sunday
- what's up in Tajikistan?...why the heck haven't they "signed up?"
- how important it would be to know the precise timeline!!...when? did who? know what? was happening? how? did they respond, why?
- I wonder who the very best thinkers are in the world? And are they providing needed knowledge and wisdom to the U.S. and its allies to solve this?
- if the timeline for understanding what happened Tuesday morning is important, then, what's very much more important is what's the timeline from today to say, one year from today?...and have the best thinkers put that gameplan together step by step? Or are there just a bunch of woodbutchers flappin' their lips?
- why no news on what the Penn and Pentagon black boxes revealed?...they were found yesterday?
- 88% of people polled support military intervention to retaliate...wow!
- how will the markets open tomorrow?...more importantly, where will it close?
- what does the assassination last week of the Northern Alliance guy have to do with all this?...if that was round one and the attacks were round two, what's round three?
- what happened in the 12 minutes between the FAA warning and the plane crashing into the Pentagon?
- Rosh Hashanah begins September 18..please don't let this be another day of horror!

John, hope all's well and that you'll send a bit when you return from Manhattan...regards,
Laurence

September 17, 2001- Monday- Toronto- 4:51 PM-

Laurence Wilson wrote:

John, hello!...here's some more from your northern observer but first where the heck are you?

-
- my niece in St. Louis sent me the attached words to a Randy Newman song from the '70's...powerful!
 - the singing of anthems at baseball games in Pittsburgh and Philadelphia were strange because there was mostly clapping at the end and not the mighty roar that usually follows...America is still bruised for sure!
 - the CFL plays three of its four games tonight after they were cancelled on the weekend...they still haven't decided when a fourth cancelled game will be played...what matters when you decide when to reschedule you need to consider stadium, travel, hotel and television!...the CFL made a wrong right decision!...none will be televised!!
 - the Dow Jones was down 684.81 to 9820...about the same 7% it fell in '63 and '42...including today it'll take three days to determine what's up but there are no recessions during war!

...be in touch when you can...regards, Laurence

Sheri R. Maxwell wrote:

My new favorite song attached. It's off an old Randy Newman album that was released in the early '70s...srm

No one likes us; I don't know why.
We may not be perfect, but heaven knows we try.
But all around, even our old friends put us down.
Let's drop the big one, and see what happens.

We give them money; are they grateful?
No, they're spiteful, and they're hateful.
They don't respect us, so let's surprise them.
Let's drop the big one and pulverize them.

Asia's crowded; Europe's too old.
Africa is far too hot, and Canada's too cold.
South America stole our name.
Let's drop the big one; there'll be no one left to blame.

We'll save Australia; don't want to hurt no kangaroo.
We'll build an all-American amusement park there.
They got surfin' too!

Boom goes London! Boom, Paree!

More room for you and more room for me.
And every city the whole world round
Will just be another American town.

Oh, how peaceful it will be! We'll set everybody free!
You wear a Japanese kimono babe, Italian shoes for me.
They all hate us anyhow, so let's drop the big one now.

Randy Newman

September 17, 2001- Monday- Queens-

John Alexander wrote:

Laurence:

First I will bring you up to date, then I'll respond to your e-mail.

By the way, did I tell you that George W. was a cowboy; today he's saying that he wants bin Laden "Dead or Alive."

Saturday- September 15, 2001-

Took the Long Island Railroad in from Queens; if you sit in the front car you can see the track ahead;
damn, Laurence, the guy went through the tunnel under the East River at about 100 mph!
I said to myself, if he turns one of these bends and there is a train there we're all dead!
fuck riding in the front, again;
lots of cops at Penn Station; maybe a hundred; standing around; walking;
I got out at W 34th Street, walked east to Broadway and then headed south;
cops at every intersection;
got to the 26th Street and Lexington Ave. Armory;
cops, troopers, lots of military;
vigils to the missing and the dead; lots of pictures, grief counselors on the street;
preachers on the street; armory guarded by the military;
returned to Broadway, went down to Union Square Park; many vigils, candles, people praying,
singing; crying, looking for anyone that can help them find their missing (fill in the blank);
continued south on Broadway to Canal Street;
Laurence, if you've ever been on Canal Street- lots of fucking deals; leather coats for \$15.00
USD- you name it; normally it is a zoo;
Saturday it was beyond that;
cops, troopers, some military, bulldozers, cranes, ambulances, reporters, supporters- in fact it
was far faster- and probably safer- to get out in the street and walk (which I did) than stay on the
sidewalks;
the closer you got to Ground Zero (and Canal Street began the northern boundary of the "freeze
zone") (by the way, Giuliani said today that he's gotten calls from all over the country from
people all over the country asking how they could help. He said in an interview that he tells
them to come visit NYC and spend money.)
I worked my way down below Canal Street; after that the entire place is taken over by the
military with a smattering of NYPD
I got to within 2 blocks of the site; saw the façade of the WTC;
brought a mask, had to wear it, the fumes were getting bad;
the streets had that white washed over pale to them; most of the WTC debris has been cleaned up
but in locked parking lots there was lots of debris as well as in grassy demolished sites;
I hadn't even thought about picking stuff up, but once I realized what people were doing, I said,
what the hell; got a business card from some guy from the 104th Floor- ironically the Boomer
Esiason Foundation- he was President; that was three blocks away; it was at the base of some
bushes in a greenspace; found lots of economic paperwork; also found a picture of two people;
saw a pair of a woman's shoes in the debris; along with computer parts; Xerox parts; all in all
very strange;
everyone was civil and respectful;
It was an interesting experience; I really got a chance to feel what was going on;

Now to your e-mail;

no, the guy riding the façade down was true, has been in the papers;

- yes, you're right, you can't limit your hand; if you're going to fight evil, you must at least have evil consultants;

- Watts is some years away; he needs a "political moment;"

- Powell has it if he wants it;

- no, right now I don't have videomeeting; shall I say, the circumstances are a bit costly, at the moment;

- you're right to put it into football playoff analogy terms;

- that land is so valuable; they've already been talking about rebuilding- bigger and higher- fuck the terrorists;

- I'll go with the wall, but it should be blood red;

- passing the plate- Laurence what the fuck else is new;

- Ted and Jane had big-time prenuptials; no loss there;

- Laurence, it's still smoking today;

- yes, lots and lots of flags, even for NYC;

- you know, I voted for Gore, but I think we need a cowboy; Al is not a cowboy; Lieberman would have died of fright;

- you respect the dead to a point and then play;

- I agree, we are only one planet;

- I am not sure what you mean by the Cuban Solution; but I think that counter-terrorism should be exactly that; these hijackers have families and friends and wives and lovers; they need a distraction; start killing some of them off

- yeah, recreational bitching should reconvene their next meeting at the base of either WTC Tower 1 or 2;

- definitely reality TV;

- top of the building, the sprinklers will work; many people suffering guilt when they survive and the person at the next desk perished; was it simply the choice of picking the right stairwell; or was it something that goes back to the savanna's of Africa; do you have to see the lion before you start running or simply sense; the time in between was probably the difference between life and death- why should it be different; because we wear suits instead of loincloths? Please!

- voice recorders PA/Pentagon/ the passengers fought back;

Laurence, I told someone today that we were truly lucky; these were fucking stupid Arabs;

Laurence, just think if some group had the efficiency of the Germans? God help us all; thank God they were fucking stupid Arabs (or towel-heads as they are called around here);

- the numbers are out; you know the NY Times ran a floor by floor of the WTC Towers; believe it or not; most people got out in that small space of time; the numbers could have been as high as 50,000;

- they are putting it where they put all the NYC garbage- on Staten Island at a closed dump- hell, no ski area there!

- bin Laden and the Pakistanis, my guess, bin Laden will either buy more time saying he's doing an internal investigation (like its some sort of business), anyway, he'll come up with some fucking scapegoat(s) who will confess to operating independently and offer them up as a ruse;

- Laurence, I don't want to sound arrogant, but Tajikistan- what the fuck is that a drink?

- I personally don't think that there was as extensive a time-line as they think; I think that because Islam and the jihad are so tribal, the disturbing thought is that these people are around all

of us, having been prepared, maybe five years ago to be called on; I think that in the spirit of guerilla warfare it would behoove them to have them trained and ready and then the plan goes down in a couple of days;

- the U.S. needs some very unique thinkers;

- international time-line; the banks have to get together; countries need to be held accountable; a worldwide sort of Interpol- intelligence agency has to be formed; the only time-line is when the last terrorist is dead;

- the market will struggle; but I know people who have to invest in the market, they just want the stock prices to fall a bit more; it will rebound within a week;

- round three was probably going to be a Taliban push on the Alliance; got distracted, Bush came on strong with the Pakistanis and the cowboy shit; GWB has threatened to overthrow the Taliban if they don't get their shit together;

- 12 minutes; caught unaware; though, I'm sure you've been to D.C.; tougher to shoot down decisions there than even in NYC;

- helicopters were out last night;

- carriers are still around;

- I see that T.O. and Montreal are figuring into this;

- again, I will leave you with the thought; they are not sent here with a mission; they are sent to do various different recons and then wait; once the recon data is in place all it would take would be a month or two; the five year shit is a very Western way of seeing a Middle Eastern zealous mind; it is not cause/effect; the reason that they were so much like us was because they actually were; if the call never came they would have lived and died with us; there is a different mindset here;

- the U.S. gov. and the world needs to take a page out of the velociraptor manual; learn and adapt, adapt and learn and then strike;

you're a good guy, Laurence;

keep it up.

take care from your southern cousins,

John

September 18, 2001- Tuesday- Toronto- 1:53 PM-

Laurence Wilson wrote:

John, hello!...wow, what a compelling story of your trip to the WTC area!...glad you took the time to write it...I wonder if our grandchildren will have a chance to read our exchanges?...here's some thoughts on the one week anniversary...I wanted to send this at 8:48am!...a little late though:

- vigils to the missing and the dead
- * police, grief counselors, troopers, preachers, military on the streets...how strange that sounds

- how desperate and disconsolate those people on the street must be not able to find family, friends and loved ones!

- how amazing there's no looting!...where is Boomer by the way?...no sports or entertainment people talking on the networks...if they are our "role models" why aren't they "role-ing"?

- September "Mourn" not morn!

* "do you have to see the lion before you start running or simply sense"...John, I like that one!...I like all your insights!...thanks for sharing!

- and John, you're right, still smoking!

- what I meant by the Cuban solution is you wall them off- no trade, no aid, no immigration, totally put an embargo on everything and tightened it down daily...Cuba would have withered much more if the USSR didn't step in...but without any country saving the terrorist havens they'd knuckle under...and all the while you're doing that you're pickin'em off one terrorist at a time!

Take care, be fine...regards, Laurence

September 18, 2001- Tuesday- Queens-

John Alexander wrote:

Laurence:

Thanks for the latest e-mail.

I will respond to it, but tomorrow.

Today I am pretty pooped.

Maybe the entire thing is catching up with me.

By the way, two of the NYC papers had bin Laden's picture on the front cover as in the old west with the caption above and below it saying,

"Wanted/Dead or Alive"

You know, North America has experienced this kind of terror before. Way back on the frontiers of NA when the Indians were going crazy plying terror on the settlers.

Like I always have said to you, we got all the violent Indians (and now we get the fucking violent Arabs! What is wrong with this picture? How about if we give you folks some money to “adopt” some of the violent ones?)

Except in the East; a lot of them were violent; not so much on the coast- that was the lure- “...oh, come wonderful white settler; we will give you food so that you don’t starve...”

what they didn’t say is that they knew that the Iroquois Confederation would make life a bitch for the white folk.

But more in response, tomorrow.

I need to get some sleep.

Two hours on the Verrazano coming in; 2 hours on the Lincoln Tunnel coming in- and I’m talking about the wait in line to get in across the bridge or through the tunnel;

John

September 19, 2001- Wednesday- Toronto- 7:29 PM-

Laurence Wilson wrote:

John, hello!...thanks for your mail yesterday...here are some thoughts about your info:

- lots of newspapers with the “Wanted” poster here too!...
- * you’re right the last terrorists were the Indians and just before/during their time the Yanks and Rebs were at each other perpetrating huge attacks of terrorism against each other...on American soil!

- John, is that gridlock traffic jam still going on?...how do people get/to from work/school?

- the market was up 100+ and ended 17 down on Tuesday and then today, closed down 140+...big drop Monday – day 1 and basically flat – days 2 and 3!...tomorrow will be a key day...maybe a slight rise?

...now, some additional observations from the north!...hope all's well and that your coping mechanisms are all still finely honed as ever!...a week has passed and we're still wondering what the hell will happen...some thoughts as dusk has ended:

- can anybody be alive there?...and why is there still smoldering and smoke?
- wow, 62 countries around the world lost people in last Tuesday's tragedies!
- now 50,000+ tons of debris removed as of yesterday!
- how about that Osama and his pals trying to profit in the market by short selling and puts on United and American Airlines!...that's real sucking and blowing by Osama?...maybe Saddam too??
- on Monday a German company RWE Ag bought New Jersey based American Water Works Co. Inc. for US\$4.6 billion...last month American Water Works bought Azuria, a Hamilton company once part of Phillips Environment...RWE supplies water to about 50 million people in Europe, North and South America...did Osama profit by Trading in American Water Works too?
- there seems to be a German connection in this whole scenario: terrorists were there before/after trips to U.S. and some of the pilot training schools in the U.S. had German employees...wazzup?
- was there a 5th plane?
- how would you feel if the last message you heard on your v-mail was the farewell of the person on this planet you loved the most?...by the way, do you push "save" or "erase?"
- John, is New York the greatest city in the world?
- do you like what Giuliani is doing? Pataki?
- John, are there individuals you see? hear? know about? that are making a difference in New York? America?
- have you ever seen such quiet in the stands following the National Anthem at MLB games?...eerie!

-
- and John tell me about what you've seen? Felt? During any sports events you may have checked out in the last couple of days
 - who individually and/or which group is feeling the most pain?...and will be the most affected by this in the long run?
 - people say, "we'll never forget!"...but they will!...they've forgotten 14,000 Americans were killed at Antietam in Maryland!...in the Civil War Americans killed thousands of other Americans...this is not the first incidence of terror on American soil...Americans have been terrorizing and killing in America, for years and after every loss of lives people say, "we'll never forget this" but they do!...when will we forget this one?

...John, take care...connect when you can...be safe...
regards, Laurence

September 20, 2001- Thursday- Queens-

John Alexander wrote:

Dear Laurence:

Yeah, a strange mix with the various people around the Armory; and that doesn't include those people reading the missing posters or those giving out free food and drink or the tons of reporters and their cameras not to mention the tourists and the locals;

yes, very desperate and disconsolate;

Union Square Park; at the north end there is an outdoor market and at the other there is the outdoor vigil; when I first- first time- got there, I came into the market end, beginning to wonder if I had read the map correctly; I even checked the park name sign; yep, Union Square Park; and, too, in between the market and the vigil were some homeless folk; very strange;

- yes; very amazing, no looting;

- good thought; were is Boomer and everyone else? And that's just football; what about the Yankees, Mets- hey, the Knicks; Ewing? Checketts; Grunfeld; hockey folk?
- NYC is the home of the NBA, NFL, MLB;
- home of the MLBPA; NBAPA;
you're right;
where are they?
- yes, they do need to be cut off; if everyone could do it to South Africa they can do it to some other country, too;
talk to you soon
John

September 20, 2001- Thursday- Queens-

John Alexander wrote:

Laurence:

- yes, terrorism may have been conveniently forgotten here in America, but it is just beyond the horizon;
the Indians; Cochise; Geronimo; Pancho Villa; the white folk on the Indians; the British and the French getting their North American allies to create terror on each other and the middle colonists;
- and there was climatic terror; are there tornadoes in Europe; a lot of earthquakes; hurricanes hitting; think about the pioneers across the center of NA; just out for a walk and then it starts thundering in the distance; you look up and the skies are clear; then it starts thundering a little more and before you know it 2 million bison are stampeding; not to mention the prairie fires that just swept through whenever;

- the Civil War; even more mayhem;

- the market; I think people are going to see how low it can go before the smart ones buy at a steal;

- personally, I think people can still be alive;

they say that earthquake victims can live for up to 2 weeks;

- why the smoldering and smoke; as I understand it; when the buildings- all of them- came down they buried a hell of a lot of vehicles; not to mention the vehicles in all of the parking garages in the area; well, they are saying that as they uncover debris there are still little fires down there that once uncovered and given oxygen then burst out and eventually ignite the gas tanks of the cars in the garages; anyone want to guess on how many cars were in the underground garages around the WTC complex?

- yeah, 62 countries represented; amazing;

- short selling and puts; Laurence, think about this- and there are a couple of things operating here at the same time; I said to someone 2 days ago that if the Arabs were really smart and want to really get the country second-guessing they would hire Anglos to suicide the planes; in addition, I believe that to truly begin to understand something it is necessary to put your hand in the bag and turn it inside out; but the short selling and puts; consider this; maybe this wasn't a terrorist attack at all; maybe it was meant to look like one; maybe it was just one colossal way to make out in the markets; I guess it would all depend on how much folk were trying to profit; maybe the Arabs are simply (no racism intended here) the willing dupes; maybe bin Laden didn't do it nor did Saddam; maybe they were just stupid enough to do it so often that they would get (like Oklahoma City) blamed; and you have to wonder if McVeigh were not such a fucking idiot and sloppy with that license plate, would we still continue believing that the Arabs hit that, too; continuing; if this attempt to manipulate the market is plausible, consider this; there is/was a grand scale to the planning of this; I don't think it took five years, but the scope may be greater than bin Laden or Saddam might have ever conceived of in their little mickey mouse minds; there is a scope and a breath to this venture; lets turn the bag inside out now; if I was thinking that if the Arabs were really smart they'd hire Anglos to do their dirty work, why not the other way around; why not the Anglos- or some other non Arabs- hiring the stupid Arabs to do their dirty work; there is, again, a scope of this that rivals the final solution- and thus, with the bag turned inside out, maybe there is your German connection; or maybe broadening the bag, the fascist connection; the plan had elements of sneakiness (the Japanese); over-arching design (the Germans) and on and on;

- I understand there were suppose to be an undisclosed additional number of planes that never reached critical mass of action;

- you probably save it onto a separate tape and then erase it;

NYC has done well in this crisis; for as big and potentially unmanageable as it is they seem to have the capability to me; I guess we have to judge places on the criterion I use for people; as Rosanne Cash said, "...heartaches are heroes when their pockets are full..." well, I believe you can tell more about a person when you see how they deal with a crisis than you can tell about them over years of good times; the same holds true for cities; this was a crisis of phenomenal magnitude; not just in sheer numbers but considering the media play in a metro area of 22+ million folk; as you know the streets down there are tortuous; some of the streets are so narrow that a large Lincoln Town Car would have trouble making it down them; NYC has done well; maybe the greatest- or at least one of the greatest; I guess that now we are upping the criteria; major disaster have become a prime criterion; New York and London have to be right up there at

the top; Moscow and Tokyo came close but no cigar; Berlin can get some points, but they were the bad guys, the same for Tokyo; Mexico City- zip; Buenos Aires, Rio Beijing, Shanghai, Hong Kong, New Delhi, Jerusalem- anyone I'm forgetting? I Guess NYC and London are in class of their own;

- yes Giuliani is doing a great job! Pataki is being smart about letting Rudy take the lead; the press glows on him; Rudy got a bigger ovation than George W did when they toured the WTC site;

- by the way, did you see that Rome has withdrawn its Olympic bid for 2012 in favor of NYC?

- Rudy is making a difference here- big time; Colin Powell, nationally/internationally;

Ashcroft is presenting himself well; has a good mid-southern accent; very easy to handle;

The NYPD Commissioner is doing a great job; David Letterman did well to do what he did;

- Tagliabue should drop the blackout rule for the rest of the season; where is George Steinbrenner?

- I'll tackle the pain & affected question, tomorrow;

- did you know that in a vault(s) under the WTC there is 11.8 metric tons of gold and 30.2 million ounces of silver? And, do you know who owns the depository under the WTC (maybe not the gold and silver, but at least the depository)? It is called ScotiaMocotta (no space) Depository owned by Scotiabank of Toronto. They believe that they'll eventually get to it, but debris removal estimates think that it will be six months of debris removal before they can get to the shopping concourse beneath the towers; talk to you, tomorrow.

John

September 24, 2001- Monday- Toronto- 8:06 PM-

Laurence Wilson wrote:

John, hello...thanks for your mail of the 20th!...sorry I haven't been able to get back to you until now...it was our guy time at the beach...wish you could have been there!...here are some more thoughts...

Day 10 – Thursday, September 20, 2001-

- ouch, after four days of trading the Dow finished down 383 at the close on Thursday...that's 1200 points in the four days of trading since Monday's reopening!

- “we will not tire, we will not falter and we will not fail”- Bush

* 6,333 now reported missing in New York, with 241 dead...in Washington 189 are reported dead and only 111 have been recovered...no survivors have been found in more than one week

-
- Pakistan has 140 million Muslims, many side with their Muslim brothers and sisters in Afghanistan and is it any surprise Pakistan won't move against Afghanistan's Taliban to bring bin Laden to justice?
 - it rained again today in New York
 - wow!...\$25 million dollar reward for information leading to bin Laden's capture!
 - a new Cabinet-level position in charge of Homeland Defense
 - Saudis, Egyptians and Jordanians all of whom have lots of Muslims, will all have a tough time when the US and their allies flatten Afghanistan...they'll be angry

Days 11 and 12 – Friday and Saturday September 21-22, 2001-

- the performers finally held their concert...on day 11!...it was huge!
- the fish rots from the head down...
- so, step one in the retaliation is all the diplomatic cut off financial, social, communication, trade, immigration and other activities, then the military stuff like air strikes, then assassinate, then big air bombs, then take the big Schwarzkopf-like initiative using land, air and sea invasion and in a couple of days it'll be over
- and it's likely the Afghans will quickly crater just like the Iraqis!...they'll simply be outmuscled...unless they play the chemical/bio card which Saddam didn't or the Muslim axis steps in!
- assassination has for centuries been the way to create dramatic change and to clear the collective sinuses of the country and world and change directions quickly!...Caesar, Jesus, Lincoln, the duke in Bosnia, Kennedy, the kids at Kent State!...they and others were swiftly dispatched and forever altered the world's psyche...so assassinations will be in!
- and what do those voice recorders say?
- last night in his address to Congress Bush named many of the countries aligned with the U.S. but didn't mention Canada!

-
- how much does all this have to do with the oil conspiracy i.e. create a crisis and thereby keep the price of oil up?

Day 13 – Sunday, September 23, 2001-

- wow!...who is Rev. Calvin Butts?
- “a field of dreams turned into a house of prayer”- the ‘Prayer for America’ held at Yankee Stadium today
- there is still smoke rising from the rubble!

- John, what do you think the militia is thinking, planning now?...and what will they do?...and Hell’s Angels?
- now 100,000 tons of debris removed and it’s only one-tenth of the total!
- total reserves called up now is only 10,303!...

Day 14 – Monday, September 24, 2001-

- how powerful the impact must be on you!...we all talked about it on the weekend...the huge impact on all your senses!...one end a market, the other a vigil and all those various types of people in between!
- how insightful you’re connecting the walk across America by homesteaders, the storms, then the buffalo stampeding, then the prairie fires, then Indians and opportunists...those settlers were truly amazing!
- so, for the first time the market came back today 380+ points after the 1400-odd drop of last week
- your list of world class cities was great!...and I hadn’t seen that Rome stepped aside to NYC for the 2012 Olympics!...wow, that’s how NYC will get rebuilt!...wonderful!...there will be a lot of payola but that’s how it works!
- I hope you’re right that there will be survivors somewhere under all that pile of debris!...and the water being poured on the pile to exhaust the fires in part assisted by

the exploding gas tanks of cars in those parking lots...I hope you're right that people will be found!

- I like your “turn the bag inside out”...the big driver in most wars is religion...nearly always closely followed by money...in every war, opportunists make millions and so when they catch those guys who shorted the stock they'll catch the people who did this!
- John, that's why Bush today ordered all countries to reveal financial records...”we will starve the terrorists”...so, they will also, follow the paper trail and at the end of it will be the vermin who did this!”
- John, in this “War Against the Terrorists” they'll get the terrorists and a lot more than just those guys too...one of the other good things this will do it'll be the biggest “War on Drugs”...the financial records will lead to the drug money and those guys will get erased too!
- terrorism is of course financed mostly by drug money (and of course oil!)
- Steinbrenner is too Cleveland to be amongst the classy in NYC!...like a lot others you mentioned, he sure is a nowhere!
- and no John I hadn't heard about Scotia Bank's 12 metric tones of gold and 30 million ounces of silver in the underground World Trade Center vaults!!

...John, connect when you can...regards, Laurence

September 26, 2001- Wednesday- Queens-

John Alexander wrote:

Hello Laurence:

You asked who individually/group-wise is feeling the most pain and will be affected the most by this in the long run...

I think that the people who are trying to find/longing for those who are missing are feeling the most pain- hands down, beyond a doubt. Escape stories take a far back seat to- and deference to- those who have either lost somebody- kind of like, second, and those who have someone missing; the uncertainty; the lingering hope- actually the lack of closure.

"Affected?"

EVERYONE; concentric circles; like a rock in a pond or into a still Lake Ontario; are the ripples gone when you can no longer see the? Or do they, in their own way wash up on a shore somewhere however slight?

We will all be affected; me here, you there- people in Pakistan, Afghanistan, U.K.: I think that the magnitude of this is still incalculable for everyone (by the way, I hear that HAMAS has suspended suicide bombing because of what happened in Lower Manhattan; in their estimation, it has given the concept of suicide bombing a bad name;)

I would like to elaborate more but I do want to carry it over into your most recent e-mails. So, more on this later.

Take care,

John

September 26, 2001- Wednesday- Queens-

John Alexander wrote:

Laurence!

To catch up on a few things, here;

you know, the two-three days after 9/11 were so both so full and so empty that both, now, have their influence;

for the longest time, the skies were literally silent; again, being less than 5 miles from La Guardia where a plane was both landing and taking off every 45 seconds around the clock- well, the absence made it strange;

now, when you hear an airplane- a jet- and there were jets even before 9/11 that I thought were struggling to get up into the air- to hear a jet, coupled with the proximity (oh, by the way, the smell was in the air, again, this evening; the smell of lower Manhattan; probably the pulverized concrete, dry wall, and human remains;) of the attack, coupled with both the television and the real images; well, when a jet takes off, you stop and look up;

also, for the two-three days after the attack; the sirens were nonstop; 24 hours a day; talk about being affected; now when you hear a siren, you- still- automatically think that they have found this horde of survivors and are taking them to the hospitals; then you think about 9/11 and all the sirens, etc;

MOVING ON TO YOUR E-MAIL

-the stock market will rebound; its opportunism at its best;

-no survivors, Laurence; just atomized human beings; no bodies- at least no bodies of the over 6,000 that are missing; just dust; kind of adds new meaning to the old from dust to dust;

-140 million Muslims; okay; remember, I believe it was your niece's lyrics e-mail;

-yes, it rained and it made it all more difficult;

-I don't know what the Canadian papers are saying; but here it was not for the capture, it was \$25 million (US) (Laurence, I couldn't resist the temptation- or \$13.95 Canadian- hey, only quoting one of your fellow countrymen in Canadian Bacon, Dan Aykroyd);

-strange isn't it; now we have a Cabinet level position in charge of Homeland Defense- almost sounds Germanic;

-we're not going to flatten the Afghans; I am hoping that the GWB admin is using some good counter-terrorism tactics; I heard that bin Laden has left the camps, on horseback for the hinterland; fearing of course the predictable (historically) U.S. strike; but, hey, where would you rather have him be; sequestered in a camp or out riding a horse with how many- maybe 2-300 hundred- tops?

I hope the "Bush-ites" (yes, a lost tribe) are slick and crafty;

really it brings together two dominant themes of the U.S. Civil War; do we "Grant-em" or do we "Lee-em?"

Grant would use superior force to crush his enemy; Lee (and Stonewall Jackson who was critical to Lee) would use deception and cunning; I would like to see both threads brought together that would perhaps even heal American military strategy dating back to the Civil War;

of course, we shouldn't forget that other significant strategies since the Civil War- but I suppose that GW already has that person's personality ingrained; I'm talking about the other George (and it would be interesting to know his middle initial), namely Patton;

Patton was a cowboy; truly; there were no obstacles that could not be surmounted; only a defect of will- we shall see;

I am guessing that GW will use the Grant approach to "flush them out"; what better thing than to get OBL (hereafter Osama) out in the open and then take the Stonewall Jackson (which Patton really emulated on a mass scale- moving tanks and a major army- as long as they could get moving) approach and surgically take him out with the least amount of collateral damage;

-yes the fish does rot from the head down and terrorists die just like all other human beings;

Laurence, I am sure you know that the terrorists are playing off that we are fat and lazy; however just like our cousins- and perhaps your distant siblings- the British, America is a very violent- almost sociopathic, if need be- country; let me ask you; who would you bet on; the terrorists or the direct descendents of the British violent mentality? Hmm?

-I think you will see the resurrection of CIA covert operations; I have no doubt that they are chomping at the possibility to be able to walk up to someone in a phone booth in Istanbul and blow their brains out; I think that you'll see a lot of commando shit; bomber, cruise missile, jet supported, but commando shit;

-everyone wants a piece of Afghanistan; the Pakis, the Russians. the Iranians;

-Laurence, I like the thought of the "collective sinuses"- very, very appropriate!

-yes, truly, what do the recorders say?!;

-GW mentioning Canada; the Canadian government- as opposed to the Canadian people- I think, the government is running scared; they have let so many undesirables into Canada that it is appalling; and I'm not just talking post 9/11; you know that I've said this before that date; they need to get some balls and stand (up) for something other than their own self-preservation (remember, Laurence, having lived in Erieau- I have vocal exemptions); I have no doubt that they are literally afraid of offending their Muslim community by VOCIFEROUSLY siding with the U.S.); Laurence, they are running scared; they thought that they can buy off everyone; the

WASPS with the money, the people- the citizens of Canada; I am sorry to say that the government is bankrupt- though I think Jean is also a cowboy; I guess not to mention because as our "closest friend" - and fucking protected by the fucking ocean- as opposed to the Brits who are open to immediate retaliation by the Arabs in their country- and those nearby; going back to our conversation in Guelph; Laurence, don't worry for your country, worry for your government so that the transition to what comes next will be smooth; don't worry for the Canadian people; they are hardy and resilient and probably have as much potential to be as violent as us; remember Brian Tobin and the Spanish fishing fleet; remember our conversations on that? Yeah, yeah, knock the Americans, knock the Americans- what the fuck, the Spanish are stealing the fucking fish? Blow them out of the water a la (do notice my "tip of the hat" to your bilingualism) the U.S.; Ottawa needs backbone or a radical change;

-I do not know who Rev. Calvin Butts is?

-yes, smoke still rising from the rubble- I smelled it faintly, today;

-they had an interview with a number of officials in Blount County Alabama; they say that if worse comes to worse they are ready to "lock and load;" (this was on National Public Radio);

-the militia, etc.; Laurence, it will only take one more act of terrorism to set them in motion against all middle Easterners in the U.S.;

-hey, I read that the U.S. pilots want to carry guns; I told you this is a cowboy society;

-yeah, a big impact on the senses; it is part surreal, part everything that I have always preached about we will always have barbarians at the gate; I know that it is tragic that so many are missing but the loss- the missing- of the missing buildings is immense; I have only been here slightly over a year; I am not fond of NYC; it seems that a lot of the people I have met are basically assholes; but to do that to the buildings; even more than the Pentagon; I know that it sounds insensitive, but in some ways the buildings being destroyed like that on every fucking television station on the air- of course for the 2 of 3 that were knocked off the air because their transmitters were on the WTC towers;

-you breath the smoke and you think about the people; the, again, atomized folk; not that it is new to the world, but it is more significant;

-yeah, nothing like the Olympics to rebuild and even make better a city;

-people being found; I am beginning to get the sense that there won't even be a lot more bodies found; all vaporized- gone- up in less than smoke;

-you're probably right about the terrorist money leading to the drug money; they'll kill off both of them;

sorry I missed the get together in September;

hope that the invite stands for the future;

talk to you soon,

John

September 27, 2001- Thursday- Toronto- 7:32 PM-

Laurence Wilson wrote:

John, hello!...thanks so much for your mails of the 26th...now, here are some thoughts on the observations in your mail of the 26th:

- like you, I too have stopped in my tracks to look up at airplanes flying above!...they're not what they used to be!...in the past, you wondered where they were going, who was aboard and as a means of transportation but today you view them as a weapon and a threat...they are no longer just taken for granted because now they could dramatically impact our lives!
 - it must be even more impacting on you watching the so many flights out of LaGuardia!
 - sirens!...I'm sure for you the sound will never be the same!
- * for sure, the best example on the planet of human opportunism is reflected by the market...it's still the best sport in the world...everything else is so mickey mouse...
- dust to dust...you're right but they just got to the end game a lot faster!
- * no John not US\$25 million or C\$13.95 but rather US\$25 million or C\$600 million and 3 billion lira!
- Homeland Defense – does sound Germanic and what did we have before this bunch? Was there nobody looking out for the Homeland?
 - Bush-ites...very good John!...and Grant-em/Lee-em too!

-
- wow nice All Star team: Grant, Lee, Jackson, Patton, Bush!
 - you know maybe it's Sitting Bull and Cochise we need?
 - interesting that those Brits you were talking about were the very first men to actually engage the opposition!...I'd bet on the guys whose heritage includes going to battle in skirts, with paint on their faces and largely armed only with blood-curdling yells!...my kind of defense!
 - commando stuff is in the business referred to as the "wet trade"
 - John, this is not a government here...this is a bunch of people pretending!...they can't work anywhere else, run for office and play follow the wind!...it's hard to know what we stand for since we've seldom taken the hard line on anything!...blowin' in the wind should be the national anthem!
 - Butts is the black guy who spoke at the "Day of Prayer"...you should find out about him!...he was grrreat!...and who sang "Amazing Grace?"
 - Mullah Mohammed Omar, the Taliban supreme leader...I wonder if his people are getting his messages like we're getting Bush's?
 - John, the Alabama "lock and load" stuff was way outdone by the Governor of South Dakota today!...red neck, white socks and Blue Ribbon beer!...a gun in every pocket for his people!...yeehaw baby!
 - I wonder if there will be a spate of quiet militia takeouts domestically?...in addition to the foreign soil takeouts...will a Charles Bronson-like reincarnation rise up?

...you're always invited!...regards, Laurence

September 30, 2001- Sunday- Queens-

John Alexander wrote:

Laurence!

No! I haven't forgotten our correspondences.

It's just that I've really come to be very exhausted, lately.

Went out to Breezy Point, yesterday, (I will send you a map, tomorrow) walked the three-four miles out there; got to the jetty; laid down on a granite rock and fell into this relaxed- with the ocean "breaking" on the rocks behind me- kind of fugue state; very relaxing;

you see, we are on an island, here; only a couple of ways onto Long Island and a couple of- the same- ways off; again, to disrupt the food or water or power or gas- would send things very quickly into a nightmare world for about 8 million people; not really good;

need cash on hand; need water on hand; need dried milk, dried beans, canned food- you get the picture- and that doesn't even begin to entertain the thought of how the fuck are we going to get off this fucking island and onto the mainland;

And, we're not even talking about self-protection?! What time is it?! Time to take a trip to Pennsylvania?

-went to Jones Beach last weekend; saw at least one trooper there with his 9mm pistol; reassuring but tiring at the same time;

Family tells me that it is time to get out of the "jungle;"

sorry, but I am pooped;

more tomorrow;

John

September 30, 2001- Sunday- Toronto- 9:23 PM-

Laurence Wilson wrote:

John, hello!...hope all's well?...have you been to Manhattan lately?...fewer and fewer profoundly impacting sights, sounds thoughts these days as we watch, worry and wait to see what's next?...here's what percolated to the surface over the weekend as I watch and read less and less about 9-11 these days...one thought though – when you look up the word “unbelievable” in the next dictionary you'll see a picture of the WTC!...some thoughts, feelings and impressions:

Day 18 – Friday September 28, 2001-

- 17,000 reservists have now been called up
- * 20 of 20 of those who obtained fake drivers licenses to haul hazardous waste have been detained – wow!
 - anything more from Gov. Janklow, South Dakota?
 - how in the heck did they find three letters in three different places, written in Arabic, which connected the terrorists?
 - after the debacle at Apache he never again attempted a mass action, but his small war parties were continually in action against travelers, prospectors and settlers living on remote, unprotected ranches...a description of Cochise's strategy after Capt. Thomas Roberts successfully used mountain howitzers firing twelve pound canisters which burst above the Apaches and killed them with falling shrapnel!
 - Cochise died in 1874 – his grave site is unknown
 - to the throb of drums and the chanting of seated warriors, four dancers came out abreast, circled the huge bonfire four times, separated into pairs and danced south and north of the flames...four times more they repeated the routine...the number four and

the cardinal points of the compass were sacred to the Apaches and found a place in most tribal rituals...Chief Gokhlayeh and his people before their attack on the Mexicans in Arizpe, Mexico to avenge the killing of his wife, three children and mother...after the battle he became known as Geronimo!

- the largest group Geronimo ever led was one hundred followers
- terrorists are made – not born!
- Geronimo died in 1909 – he is buried at Fort Sill...

Day 19 – Saturday, September 29, 2001-

- maybe Jesse should go to Cincinnati and fix that before he mediates the Taliban/OBL situation?
- paranoia runs deep
- John, isn't it interesting how this Germany thing keeps coming up?

Day 20 – Sunday, September 30, 2001-

- John, don't forget to say "rabbit" when you change your calendar so it reads October 1st tomorrow...it'll bring you good luck!
- lastly, the full moon is October 2nd – the Harvest Moon!...you remember the song, eh?

...take care my friend...regards, Laurence

October 2, 2001- Tuesday- Queens-

John Alexander wrote:

Laurence:

Again, I will respond in detail to your e-mail, later, today.

But just a thought;

if you were the Joint Chiefs and the Russian Joint Chiefs, do you want a series of days with a full moon or do you wait for the new moon?

If we are having a full moon here, are they having a new moon there?

I guess I would opt for full darkness with night vision/infrared goggles.

more later,

John

October 2, 2001- Tuesday- Queens-

John Alexander wrote:

Laurence:

By the way, I found out;

it is a full moon all over the world;

now,

I really never thought a lot- personally- about this X-Files "Shit",

but,

this could make me wonder;

maybe its because I'm left-handed and don't really grasp things like this;

hmm,

I guess, the conventional wisdom would say no full moon attacks, but, does "Stonewall" get his say?

More later,

John

October 8, 2001- Monday- Queens-

John Alexander wrote:

Laurence:

I will definitely respond tomorrow.

I went over one of the bridges for the first time, today, since 9/11.

Very strange.

Mucho (that's NAFTA talk) apprehensive.

Sort of like realizing that you might win a "lottery" that you really don't want to win.

Actually, I will respond tomorrow because TODAY I bought new ink-jet cartridges so that I can print out our messages so as to respond more coherently.

The last week or so has been a time to weigh options and choices and alternatives; NYC is unique in that 4 of the 5 boroughs are on islands. There has been much talk about chem/bio attacks; the gas masks are all sold out but I have to go up to upstate to see my mother this weekend, so I will try and get some up there.

Otherwise, it is a matter of planning for some very real contingencies; not necessarily because they will happen but because you have a metro area of 22+ million people to contend with; we already have the Cipro (anti-anthrax) prescription, the antibiotics; we have begun to store up dry food and canned food and water; not, as I said around here today, to endure a siege, but to get us through the possible initial turmoil until we can leave;

leading us to "exit strategies;" they are both important as well as they have to be realistic; though simply it is a FIRST matter of getting back onto the MAINLAND; I know it sounds doomsdayish, but remember this place is a precisely and delicately run place; it wouldn't take much to send it into turmoil;

as you can begin to imagine it is very stressful around here;

though, I don't think that NYC- directly- will be the focus of the next attack;

as far bio/chemical releases- hell, LA with the smog would be the place; no, I think that the next symbolic target will be a person; Giuliani, Bush, Powell, Blair- maybe even Putin; I think that Jean is safe;

by the way, whatever happened to that guy who strangled his assaulter? Where is Brian Tobin? Larry Smith- naw, only kidding!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

I know that he doesn't muster criteria but I think that Tony Blair deserves a Congressional Medal of Honor.

I am so proud and taken by the Brits; of all the fucking spineless countries out there, the U.K. makes all the losers meaningless; I hope that Tony is well protected- AND THAT NOBODY- 'ey, dhere'- CAN SNEAK INTO HIS HOUSE AT FUCKING NIGHT!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

On this end we really have three unmet priorities; the gas masks; an actual standard weapon and a good old fashioned- silent- stun gun; we could probably do with a navy-ish inflatable raft- you see the mentality around here- and, you know what, this is real serious shit; went to the store today- COSTCO- if you know the discount chain; people have been buying water until it is sold out;

so, you can see why the entire thing is exhausting;

Laurence, this is a religious war; sort of like a left over from the crusades; there is

ABSOLUTELY no clean way out of this thing;

but, fortunately for the West we do possess the ultimate capitalistic weapon- the neutron bomb; it kills people with destroying property and/or the means of production;

this really magnifies my Neanderthal religion remark;

I think that a lot of fucking third-worlders are going to die as a result of this;

talk to you, tomorrow

John

October 9, 2001- Tuesday- Queens-

John Alexander wrote:

Laurence!

I hope that all is well. I think that my missing correspondences with you date back to Days 15-17 (if it predates that, do let me know).

-yes; air-marshals; gun-fights on airplanes; though I have heard that the idea that a gun fired will crash the airplane is off-base; that it won't;

-yeah, a couple of things have precipitated resoundly; airplanes; sirens; they will never be the same; even today, you find yourself catching yourself when a paramedic truck goes by that they found someone;

-yes, the market; they are talking here about devising a system so that the next fuck-ups that come along do not disrupt the market; fuck all of these third world idiots;

-homeland defense; we got into too much democratic theory; lets not let the fucking barbarians use our own intelligence against us;

-yes, we need some good North American Indian thinking;

I am not impressed by the jihad bullshit; Laurence, even in historical retrospect, what is more terrifying, the fucking Indians on the warpath or a bunch of fucking stupid Arabs shouting death to America? Gee whiz?!

Hey, burn the fort, destroy the WTC- we've been there before.

-Tony Blair, redux; good for Tony; good for the world; perhaps, historically, he missed his "moment." Maybe this is it; the man truly stands out;

-the Canadian people have the genetic- no offence (do notice the spelling)- resolve to be more wise than their own government; you folks are in transition; I think that Canadian politics has been looking for- searching for the "watershed" person to bring all of Canada, together;

Stockwell ain't be it, though he may have looked the part; Preston was a fucking caricature waiting to be ridiculed; actually, if he wasn't so fucked up with his myopic agenda, Lucien was very charismatic; if he could only be pan-Canadian, he would have been brilliant; he would have surpassed Trudeau; by a landslide;

okay; my prediction; Lucien will have a conversion; he WILL become pan-Canadian; Laurence, with a few well placed confessions he could be revived on a national scale; he has the personal power to be, well, actually, I know it sounds corny, Canada's Abe Lincoln; born in Ky; a slave state-blah, blah blah;

-the U.S. national vigilante/militia profile; all this country needs is one more serious terrorist attack; and it will not be good to be Middle Eastern in the U.S.;

OKAY! NEXT E-MAIL: DAYS 18-20:

-no I haven't been to Manhattan lately, but I will be going tomorrow;
-Laurence, they found the letters because the fucks are stupid;
-thank-you so much for the Indian info; very interesting;
Osama's a fraud; my prediction; I was never comfortable with that video clip of him shooting that gun and being driven back by the recoil; it tells me he knows shit about guns; he's got the money, he's got the stage- but he's just a puppet for other people running the show- what a stupid fuck;
-by the way; just read today in the NY Times about a blind guy on the 71st floor whose dog took him down the stairs and out!
-also another story about window washers who got stuck in an elevator/cut through dry wall/punched out bathroom tiles- their escape took 95 out of the 100 minutes that were available;
-Jesse is a fuck up;
-I think that we're up to date;
Talk to you soon,
John

October 11, 2001- Thursday- Toronto- 11:53 AM-

Laurence Wilson wrote:

John, hello!...thanks for your mail of October 9 catching us back up...my last mail to you was October 1st and it covered days 18-20...so your mail of the 9th gets us back on track!

...now the new title above, i.e., U. S. Attacks – War: Day #4 refers to the air bombing attacks on the terrorists which began Sunday October 7th – War: Day #1...so, with reference to your mail and recent events here are some thoughts, feelings and impressions:

- I'll take the Indians (MLB and vs. Arabs!)
- Tony is really sounding good!...the old story: some guys crumble when it's hot in the kitchen...some guys rise up!
- wow!...I like your Lucien notion...you're right he could be the one but he needs a make over and in the backroom a coach to encourage and empower
- vigilante/militia and Hell's Angels get my vote for air marshal duty!
- OBL recoiling with the rifle is a good insight...you know, you're right he doesn't look/sound like the main man!...if not OBL then who?
- good stories about the courageous blind man and his dog and the window washers!...profile high-rise window washers for me will ya!...they've got to be unique doing that job day after day!
- John, a whole new phase began Sunday with air forces bombing to make way for the ground guys to roll in then, the picture I see is the same one I remember when the Iraqis either turned back running or came forward with hands up while tons of equipment was abandoned in the desert while oil wells they lighted burned in the night until Red flew in to cap them!
- only difference here will be: there's no iron and no wells!...only poppy fields to light up and won't that be a party!
- as in any war the codebreakers and encryption specialists will be the unsung and unknown heroes!...the whole world is wired and Muslims in every country can only

be mobilized if communication via satellite, CNN or net are effective...no communications, no co-ordination, no mobilization, no win!

- John, key question: which country will be targeted next?...the choice will say a lot!...Iraq, Syria (not likely since they're now a member of the UN Security Council!), Iran, Jordan, Indonesia...got a pick?
- there are lots of Muslims in the Caribbean...it'll be interesting to see if there are riots/protests there?
- Anthrax in Florida, Typhoid in California...lady bugs in Ontario!:))

...John be well, connect when you can and we'll keep an eye con the unfolding game...regards,
Laurence

October 11, 2001- Thursday- Queens-

John Alexander wrote:

Hey, Laurence!

Again, I am really exhausted from thinking and planning for over the horizon contingencies. I am not complaining- because people in NYC have been both good and kind to me at this moment in my life- but I do have two additional "responsibilities" to contingency plan for.

Obviously, each additional variable is no longer additive but exponential particularly when the age of the variable either increases or decreases significantly.

Today, I spent a goodly amount of time trying to hunt down three gas masks in the States. Very hard to find and get.

I have come to realize that there is a danger with over-complicating contingency plans; water is now secure, food is getting there; sewage for the short run would present a serious problem; cleanliness- for hygiene's sake as well.

It is not very cold during the winter in NYC; even last year I made the remark that you really don't need heat here during the winter; oh, it might get a bit nippy on a couple of days; but you could survive without a problem;

winter is coming here, too; a factor in contingency planning; getting off the island is a major problem; will probably get one of those military inflatable rafts and get across Long Island Sound;

the gas masks do not insure survival as much as they can buy you time; time to get out;

again, I'll respond to your e-mail tomorrow; but to touch on a few points;

I hear that there are jets (Canadian) over T.O. and Southern Ontario; NYC and at least D.C. has them 24/7;

you guys are in it, Laurence!

the next place; a couple either separately or together; I would not be surprised if the Taliban launch an counter-offensive attack into Uzbekistan, at the bases there; that with- maybe- in conjunction with an additional attack; if they were smart they would keep the ire focused on the U.S.; but their need for drama and that ever greater "rush" will probably lead them to "branch out" their attacks; I am guessing that along with the counter-offensive incursion into Uzbekistan there will be an attack on the U.S.; my guess either and or the Capitol/White House and a person(s) GW and/or Rudy ALONG with an attack on something symbolically British perhaps Parliament and also an attempt on Tony; along with an attack in Moscow- maybe a suicide plane into the Kremlin along with an assassination attempt against Putin; GW, Blair and Putin in one days work; enough bullshit to enflame the entire Muslim world and really send this into a religious war;

enough for now; got to try and sleep;

there is access to some undeveloped property about 3/4's of the way out Long Island- going east; probably need the food, water, an ax, a tent and the boat; driving off the Island would burn up a

tank of case just waiting in line; and then if the power is out you won't be able to refuel; big trouble;

there is an entirely new thrust in the world of neo-survivalism;

I left NYC with a NYS map, a NYC map and a map of Connecticut; just in case the city goes to "Lockdown Status."

Oh, by the way, I hear that Rudy gave some Saudi prince his \$10 million dollar charitable check back because the prince said something about the U.S. should reexamine its priorities in the Middle East;

Heard a story today from some iron worker at the WTC site who said that they took a steel beam out today that was completely cherry red, looking like it just came off the line in some steel plant; and yes, the fires are still burning;

tomorrow, my good man;

John

October 14, 2001- Sunday- Toronto- 9:27 PM-

Laurence Wilson wrote:

John, hello!...thanks for your mail of the 11th...did you ever think that your focus would be on: gas masks, water, food, sewage, cleanliness, winter heat, and an inflatable raft to get off the island!...it's hard for me to imagine it has come to this!...neo-survivalism!

...here are some thoughts, feelings and impressions from Thursday, October 11 to Sunday, October 14:

- yes, John there are lots of planes flying high!...you can see them in particular at sunset when there's moisture at their height and their contrails criss cross the sky
- Uzbekistan, Capitol Hill/White House, GW/RG, British Parliament/Blair, Kremlin/Putin and Pak-man...yikes!
- I saw the Prince and Rudy on Larry King...they didn't appear together but Rudy stood fast in rejecting the dough and the Prince seemed hurt!
- John, it's more than a month and it's still burning...that's hard to fathom...
- also, only 445 bodies recovered, 388 of them identified and 4688 still unaccounted for...there must be thousands of families and friends riven with angst!
- interesting that the Queen is silent...and what's China's position?
- almost a month to the day and anthrax is a word on everybody's lips...first only Boca Raton...then on the 11th New York and on the 12th Reno, Nevada...many days ago you and I were mulling about bio/chemical "bombs"
- tabloid, NBC, NY Times, Microsoft...I'd say the revenge-seeking sickos, not OBL are in the game!
- civility is not a sign of weakness- Bush asks each American child to give a buck to Afghan kids and the U.S. stops the bombing of Afghanistan on Friday, October 12 because it's a Muslim day of prayer
- Nigeria, Malaysia, Indonesia, Sri Lanka are other places to watch

-
- searching for the most wanted terrorists and trying to thwart the least wanted bacteria
 - Polaroid seeks Chapter 11 and on Friday a Japanese company announces disposable digital cameras!
 - 680 million pieces of mail per day through the U.S. Postal Service!
 - for the first time ever planes from other countries – members of NATO – are flying over the continental U.S. to protect the skies
 - finally they've identified the thugs running a company that's supposed to provide airport security but instead is merely a front for illegal drug, arms and people movement!...it's just the tip!

...John, take care, be safe, savvy counts...regards, Laurence

October 18, 2001- Thursday- Toronto- 8:37 AM-

Laurence Wilson wrote:

John, hello!...I know you're very much in an altered state so I just thought I'd connect to give you a "puppy hug and warm fuzzy" as an old consultant friend of mine used to say thirty years ago!...here's some poop:

Monday, October 15 to Thursday, October 19

- how about Bayer the huge German Pharma company!...they hold the patent on Cipro, it expires in 2003 and it's the only medication to combat anthrax!
- as of October 16th 27,802 reservists have been called up
- finally!...on October 16th the NY Times releases AA cockpit transcripts from Flight 11...it's five weeks after the crashes, where the heck are the others?
- after 10 days the U.S. has dropped 2,000 bombs
- the wrong right solution: EPA launches huge ad campaign advising parents to smoke outdoors...duh!...why not spend the money on getting parents to stop smoking – period!
- Bush goes to Shanghai on the 17th...and Powell has been in Pakistan/India since Sunday!...they're traveling!
- are they always mentioning NY and the Pentagon but seldom mentioning Pennsylvania because they really shot the plane down, but made the take charge passengers the heroes?...have you watched the movie "Wag the Dog"?
- anthrax...thousands and thousands tested...but only 5/6 confirmed cases and one death...
- anthrax, typhoid...small pox!...now, the weapons of choice!

...John, be well...connect when you can...regards, Laurence

October 20, 2001- Saturday- Queens-

John Alexander wrote:

Hey, Laurence!

Be assured that I've not forgotten or overlooked our correspondences; though, survival as well as the psychological well-being around me (I think they may be going through post traumatic shock syndrome);

I will get back to you ASAP

John

October 24, 2001- Wednesday- Queens-

John Alexander wrote:

Laurence:

Would you believe that it is still smoldering?

I see that they've dropped the "Q" word. As in quarantine- for smallpox. More later.

John

October 27, 2001- Saturday- Queens-

John Alexander wrote:

Laurence:

It has come to me;

it was the Saudi's that did this;

they have everything to gain on both sides of the coin;

in fact, the folks they are talking to on both sides of the coin are so diametrically distant from one another that they would never- ever- get info on the other. The Saudis did it because they wanted to prove to the Islamic radical/fundamentalists in their country that they have not sold their souls to the infidels; this is all very pathetic; the U.S. is beginning to stoop to the level of a bunch of towel heads;

put differently; if the Saudi govt. talked to the U.S. and then talked to the radical fundamentalists- who the fuck would know?

More later,

John

October 31, 2001- Wednesday- Toronto- 12:14 PM-

Laurence Wilson wrote:

Friday, October 19, 2001 to Tuesday October 30, 2001

John, hello!...I've been a long time getting back...thanks for your mail of the 24th and 27th...let's see now, where to begin?

...well, first some comments on your mail:

- no John, I can't believe it's still smoldering!...a month and a half later!...and after all that water they've poured onto it!...no fire anywhere has ever had that much water poured onto it!
- will there or won't there be another germicide released?...you think smallpox?
- good, plausible logic on the Saudis!

...now, some other stuff:

- why do I read in the papers, see on the tube that this many or that many civilians were killed?...they only talk about "civilians killed"...if I believed the media" civilians – 100+, Taliban soldiers – 0!...duh!
- I thought they'd have dropped some much bigger bombs by now!...bombs that cause really big plumes and fright
- who are the kooks behind the anthrax crap?...surely, it's 4/5 different weirdos not some grand design by OBL/Saudis?
- it took Schwarzkopf six months to line up his ducks and then a month to dust the Iraqis...is all this light weight stuff that's going on merely the "set up"?
- and again, why no details on the four black boxes?
- and what's this "new" attack?...more plans/buildings? The World Series/NFL?...what?...I can't believe there's a long range gameplan!...maybe some singles here and there but no grand slam homers like 9-11!
- where is Gary anyway?...remember prior to 9-11 the media feeding frenzy was Condit...does anybody take the talking heads – anywhere – seriously?...duh!

...you ok?...all going well?...connect when you can!...come here when you can!...regards,
Laurence

October 31, 2001- Wednesday- Queens-

John Alexander wrote:

Laurence:

Chandra Levy is now old news!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

She's probably hiding just to get back at Condit!!!!!!!

She wants him to sweat and make his new campaign all about her!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

John

October 31, 2001- Wednesday- Queens-

John Alexander wrote:

Laurence- I've got some time;
the smoldering; imagine, again, each floor had 45,000 to 50,000 sq. ft. of office space times 110 floors times two buildings;
now throw in all the paperwork, the computers, fax machines, copiers, carpeting, ceiling tiles, think about how much wiring was in those buildings; it had to be easily in the 10,000's of feet; not to mention the shopping concourse below; how many decks of parking; cars; plastic; gas tanks; all the paint and on and on and on;
-I am not sure that the Middle-Easterners are doing the anthrax;
-yes, smallpox would be the next logical thing;
-I agree about the reporting of civilian deaths- it is bullshit; same old 'Nam shit all over, again; I mean what the fuck does it take to blow some two-bit bunch of stupid fucks into oblivion (I know, I know, spoken like a true American);
-you're right about the anthrax weirdos;
-lets fucking hope this is the fucking set up to something; just when I thought that GW was out of John Quincy's shadow- here we go, again,;
-yes, of course the four black boxes;
-friends in Chicago tell me the authorities are freaked; there was a piece in some magazine called New York; the writer wrote about the confluence of so many coincidences that had to have taken place on 9/11; he questioned the probability of it all happening like it did;
-no, there's no long-range game plan- they're Arabs; it was said that within minutes of the first plane hitting, the FBI got a court order to wire tap the entire system- I would imagine that it came from the Supreme Court; they have arrested scores of Middle Easterners who called each other congratulating themselves on what they had accomplished; how fucking stupid can you get; but more on that later; a treatise on stupidity;
-Condit is still running for office, again;
John

November 9, 2001- Friday- Queens-

John Alexander wrote:

Laurence:

My reason for getting to you is that I see that OSAMA has gone and done it. He has actually come out and said that Putin should be dead.

Hmm, not quite at the top of his class, I would imagine.

Like I said before, good old Vladimir is not a Tony or a George W. He is a hardcore cookie who ran the KGB. I will give Osama until Christmas. If I were Putin I would tell the boys that I want Osama as a Christmas present. I do not care how you do it, just do it.

By the way, I heard on the radio, yesterday, that the plane that crashed in Pa. was suppose to be heading to the nuclear reactor at Indian Point NY- 35 miles up the Hudson from NYC. They had some nuclear scientist on the radio who said that if that had happened and the plane had breached the core and the uranium had gotten out into the Hudson (it sits on the Hudson), that there would have been a radioactive steam cloud of biblical proportions (his words). He went on to estimate 600,000 deaths and NYC being permanently uninhabitable.

Also, they said that the fires at the WTC will burn for at least another 4 to 6 months.

Talk to you later.

John

November 10, 2001- Saturday- Queens-

John Alexander wrote:

Laurence:

After the "Osama-ism" wherein he said that Putin must die, I will go one better on the predictions.

He- OSAMA- will in some manner or form call the Iranians and/or their president ad/or their spiritual leader(s) infidels;

-that is my prediction; of course, if Putin can get it done by Christmas, the Iranians can get it done by the U.S. Thanksgiving.

All we have to do is sit back and watch.

What a dumb fuck.

John

November 11, 2001- Sunday- Toronto- 7:57 PM-

Laurence Wilson wrote:

John, hello!...thanks for all the grrreat mail of the 31st, Nov. 9th and 10th and a belated “Happy Halloween”...some pretty fancy costumes around here, not many kids but that wasn’t unusual, there have been fewer and fewer in recent years as the neighborhood ages...first, some thoughts on your mail:

- when you put it like you did about what all is on a floor, in a building and then everything below ground you’re right – “it’s like a small town”...
- casualty reports, increasing reserve call ups, gobbledy gook from the media, no big, significant military “wins”...it does remind me too of Nam!
- Condit’s affair- now there’s a flashback!
- Levy:)
- ...and Condit will win it too!
- it would be interesting to look at a copy of that magazine article your Chicago friends were talking about!
- every time I use “treatise on stupidity” I’ll credit you!
- I was watching that baseball game in which Bush delivered a heck of a throw!...and I liked the guy with the “Mr. November” sign!...what a game that was!
- wow!...that Indian Point story makes sense because I remember hearing lots of buzz about protecting nuclear plants around here!
- and do you think Putin will get him by Christmas?...wouldn’t it be grrreat if Putin or the Iranians were the ones to dust OBL?

...John, now some other stuff:

- well, they found the gold on October 31, an appropriate “treat” after OBL’s “trick!”
- * how about that eagle flying after the national anthem, the tattered flag from the WTC and “America the Beautiful” at the seventh inning stretch at Yankee Stadium!...will the eagle and the ATB carry over to other sports?
- sixteen people now being treated, the fourth anthrax death recorded Oct. 31 and more sites or suspected sites...although not much in the last 7/10 days...maybe it isn’t OBL but it looks a bit more like some sort of plan?...who might it be John?

-
- have you seen a number lately for the people receiving treatment for anthrax exposure?
 - a friend of mine says that post 9-11 the Saudis placed a 15B order with Boeing!...doubling the size of the Saudi airline...he suggests the price of keeping the world price of oil low is to keep the Saudi royal family in power, the rest of the Saudi people oppressed...while maintaining religious-based control...sounds like the way religion has been used throughout Europe for much of the past 1000 years
 - VP Dick Cheney takes a couple of days off to go hunting in South Dakota!...you're kidding!
 - 1147 people have been detained in the US since 9-11!...with all these detainees can't they find out what the heck is going on?
 - too bad the Yankees couldn't get it done!...that would have been a heck of a parade!

...John, be well...connect when you can...regards, Laurence

November 12, 2001- Monday- Queens-

John Alexander wrote:

Laurence:
I'll respond in a couple of days- but I'm still alive.

So ironic; the Rockaways- if you ever received that map that I sent you- are on the same peninsula- Breezy Point is only about a mile down the road, down the beach, down the peninsula- from where this plane crashed...

Needless to say, I'm still alive; though, I think people are getting a little more shell-shocked... You know, maybe there is something cosmic about everyone around here stopping to look up (even before this crash) to see what the plane "was up to."

Talk to you soon.

John

November 28, 2001- Wednesday- Toronto-

Laurence Wilson wrote:

John, hello!...it's been a long time since we've connected!...hope all's well and that you had a nice US Thanksgiving?...I just can't get into all that's happening in the war!...too much on too many fronts and too much info to process!

Laurence

November 29, 2001- Thursday- Queens-

John Alexander wrote:

Laurence:

Well, all the stuff that I was typing to you just suddenly went off into the ozone. Maybe you'll get it maybe not.

The war, its like being a sports fan; the offenses are complex, the defenses are complex, does your favorite team stop the other guys or do they not; the offenses and defenses now have specific names; like "cruise" and "B-2" and "apache" and Special Ops (the equivalent to special teams?); you see the point; very much like sports; you're in their home stadium; you have a hostile crowd; you're from the east but you're playing in a different time zone; its like Miami going to Buffalo in December- you go from 80 degrees to 22 degrees, snow and wind; the accommodations are passable; its like going to play baseball in Montreal- hell, nobody speaks fucking English; need I go on?
more later,
John

November 29, 2001- Thursday- Toronto- 10:22 AM-

Laurence Wilson wrote:

John, hello!...thanks for your mail today!...grrreat stuff comparing sports and war!...lots of good football people and war people went on to be good business leaders!...sports, war and business they're a good connection!...some family!

...I once knew a guy whose three favorite sports were bullfighting, boxing and WWII!
...regards, Laurence

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

(1) *"What inspired your submission?" At the moment- on the afternoon of 9-11-01, I just decided to send an email to my friend. The fact that it took off and endured wasn't planned at all. Just like the deer, it just happened. Actually, it wasn't until it got to the 10th anniversary did it "come to me" to re-process the emails. The most important thing was that I never deleted them. Just had to go back.*

(2) *"What issues, themes, did you want to explore?" Nothing planned. Just relay to my friend in T.O. the scope, depth and gravity not only of day-today life but, also, of all that I set out to experience."*

(3) *Stylistic and literary influences?" Hard to say. It varies based on the genre. It's even harder to say when you're talking about a genre- in 2001- the email, where I- we- were "talking" but without uttering a discernible sound.*

I don't know.

That's about it.

Again, it wasn't planned. It just happened, just like the deer.

Best,

John

P.S.: Here's an anecdote from my T.O. partying days- A bunch of us are partying along Front Street. I say, "You know, it's late, I've got to get going back."

They say, "Why? It's only 1 AM"

To which I respond.

"No, it's 1 AM here in T.O. In Bflo, it's 3:30 AM because that's what time its going to be when I get there."

AUTHOR'S BIO: *John Alexander has "wandered" portions of North America for a good portion of his life.*

Thus, when asked once- "Where did you grow up"- his answer was that different aspects of him "grew up" in the different places that he has lived.

These places include- Chicago, Concord and Knoxville, Tennessee, Erieau, Ontario, Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, New York, Athens and Milledgeville, Georgia, Rocky Mount, North Carolina, and in Queens.

Recently. after spending years in New York City, John Alexander has temporarily relocated to the hamlet of Getzville, New York. He lives- and writes- there in the company of his two favorite pets, "Bunny" and "Roma."

Most recently, John Alexander has appeared in Clockwise Cat (5), Ygdrasil (Cd), Syndic Literary Journal, The Bitchin' Kitsch, Danse Macabre du Jour (2), Straightjackets Magazine, and Hackwriters: The International Writers Magazine (U.K.). He also co-authored the online novel, entitled, "A Vow of Silence." It can be found at-

www.avowofsilence.net
