

Benign Departures

By

Tony Pasqualini

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

Good golly, it's a dark world that we get to look forward to in Tony Pasqualini's unsettling play. The time is the near future in *Benign Departures*, and things are going pretty much the same way they are now with an aging population having trouble filling prescriptions, accessing decent care, and becoming homeless. In this version of the future, however, the government is benevolently trying to get people off the streets and reduce the societal strain of poverty...by enrolling "volunteers" to sign up for end-of-life care. The caveat is that the invitation to the Institute includes a recommendation to skip that last meal in order to prevent unnecessary discomfort from the inevitable send-off. Of course, the case workers, aren't supposed to spell it out, but it's not hard to glean from their questionnaires and euphemisms where the whole deal is heading. The writing is excellent, with intelligent female characters who are both real and relatable. Pasqualini's sharp dialogue and deft sense of humor keep the play from being as bleak as its premise giving us more than enough reasons to want to stick around.

Five Stars.

And here's an excerpt with a hint of what's to come:

MAGGIE:

Oh my. And here I was hoping for a spot on America's Got Talent. Still on, isn't it? Must be going on fifty years now.

ELIZABETH:

I wouldn't know.

MAGGIE:

Better things to do, I suppose.

ELIZABETH:

You know who I am?

MAGGIE:

Not hard to guess. Strangers rarely stop to chat.

ELIZABETH:

You were visited by the Institute, recently, yes?

MAGGIE:

Oh yes.

BENIGN DEPARTURES

By Tony Pasqualini

Cast:

Elizabeth Baker....40, or thereabouts, a doctor at the Institute.

Maggie Elmer.....70+, homeless.

Time:

Los Angeles. Middle of the 21st century.

(In the dark we hear the voice of an older woman, Maggie Elmer, singing.)

MAGGIE:

“I’m looking over my dead dog Rover,
Who I hit with a lawn mower.
My dog’s not eating; he no longer barks,
He hit the propeller and turned into sparks.”

(Lights up. A sidewalk in Los Angeles, fall, mid-21st century. A camping tent – the worse for wear – is set up and next to it sitting in a wheelchair is Maggie Elmer.)

“No need explaining there’s no dog remaining.
He’s part of the lawn you see.”

(Big finish, as Dr. Elizabeth Baker arrives. Note: Throughout the play we may hear traffic and street noise as befits a side street in a busy city.)

“I’m looking over my dead dog Rover,
Who I sent to eternity!”

ELIZABETH:

Morning, Mrs. Elmer.

MAGGIE:

Salutations, citizen of the world.

ELIZABETH:

You’re a singer.

MAGGIE:

Mm-hm. You like?

ELIZABETH:

Not the best judge.

MAGGIE:

Oh my. And here I was hoping for a spot on America’s Got Talent. Still on, isn’t it? Must be going on fifty years now.

ELIZABETH:

I wouldn’t know.

MAGGIE:

Better things to do, I suppose.

ELIZABETH:

You know who I am?

MAGGIE:

Not hard to guess. Strangers rarely stop to chat.

ELIZABETH:

You were visited by the Institute, recently, yes?

MAGGIE:

Oh yes.

(Elizabeth consults a small tablet she's carrying.)

ELIZABETH:

Doctor Papadopoulos.

MAGGIE:

That's right, Doctor Papa. Wasn't crazy about the name.

ELIZABETH:

No?

MAGGIE:

Too many syllables. Can't trust anyone with that many syllables in his name. What's yours, by the way?

ELIZABETH:

Elizabeth Baker.

MAGGIE:

There you go. Feel better already. Grab a crate, Doc. You are a doctor, aren't you?

ELIZABETH:

I am.

MAGGIE:

Noble profession.

(Elizabeth finds a crate to sit on.)

ELIZABETH:

Besides Doctor Papadopoulos's name was there anything else you found problematic with our visit?

MAGGIE:

Besides the fact that you and your cohorts are shooting ducks in a pond?

ELIZABETH:

If you give us a chance, you'll find everyone at the institute—

MAGGIE:

Benign Departures. That's what you should call yourselves, instead of whatever it is. Make the place sound more fun, like an amusement park. This Memorial Day weekend join us for one of our spectacularly Benign Departures.

ELIZABETH:

Mrs. Elmer, you did agree to be interviewed, correct?

MAGGIE:

Of course. How else could I prove my point?

ELIZABETH:

Your point?

MAGGIE:

That I can pass your damn test.

ELIZABETH:

There's no test, you understand, we merely—

MAGGIE:

Evaluate. I've been told.

ELIZABETH:

And you wish to prove this point to whom?

MAGGIE:

Mostly to myself. Isn't that what your evaluation evaluates – if my quality of life is worth a damn? And if not--

ELIZABETH:

A little more complicated--

MAGGIE:

--curtains for me.

ELIZABETH:

At the end of the process we suggest a course of action which you may or may not choose to take. Along with a significant financial annuity set up for your beneficiaries.

MAGGIE:

How much?

ELIZABETH:

Hm?

MAGGIE:

This 'significant annuity'. How much you folks pay out?

ELIZABETH:

It varies, of course. Lifetime limit could easily cover, say, a college education for a loved one.

MAGGIE:

Wowza! Lucky loved one. Is this *after* taxes?

(A tense smile from Elizabeth.)

ELIZABETH:

Mrs. Elmer, why did you end your last session?

(Beat.)

MAGGIE:

He wasn't giving me a chance.

ELIZABETH:

Doctor Papadopoulos?

MAGGIE:

I could see it in his eyes. His tone of voice. He made up his mind the moment he saw me. No point in even taking the *evaluation*. I'd already been evaluated, by sight.

ELIZABETH:

I'm sorry you felt that way.

MAGGIE:

Eh, we're all judged by our covers, we lions of longevity. We're used to it. And, if truth be known, not exactly at my best here. As you can see.

ELIZABETH:

Up to this point are you satisfied with me as your evaluator?

MAGGIE:

Could have worn something a little sexier, but so far so good.

ELIZABETH:

All right then. Let's get started, eh?

MAGGIE:

Eh. Yeah.

(Elizabeth studies her screen.)

ELIZABETH:

Are you currently employable?

MAGGIE:

The diner put me out to pasture when I turned sixty-seven. Dropped one too many trays. Strike my chosen career off the list. That's a joke, by the way, 'chosen career'. I stumbled into the job. Stuck with it because...oh, you know, desperate times/desperate life. I don't know about any other work. Bet I'd do fine on the Supreme Court. Is there an opening? Have any of those geezers kicked off recently?

ELIZABETH:

Any *realistic* opportunities for employment. Anything on the horizon?

MAGGIE: *(Smiles at her.)*

Only one thing on my horizon, Liz, don't you know. *(Elizabeth types something.)* Distant horizon, I mean.

ELIZABETH: *(Still looking at her tablet.)*

Have you been diagnosed with any sort of disease? Or diseases?

MAGGIE:

Of course – life. We're all terminal. Don't they teach you that at med school?

(Beat. Elizabeth waits.)

MS. Had it for years.

ELIZABETH:

That the reason for the wheelchair?

MAGGIE:

Well, I'm in and out. If I'm allowed my cocktail regimen, I'm good to go. Usually. They tend to be a little stingy with meds these days.

ELIZABETH:

They?

MAGGIE:

Your bosses -- the government, insurance companies, pharmacies, you know, *gatekeepers*. Couldn't help me with that, could you, Elizabeth? I have a list right here. Get me a year's supply, I'll take you out dancing tonight.

(She pulls a worn list out of her pocket. Hands it to Elizabeth.)

ELIZABETH:

I don't prescribe medications.

MAGGIE:

I wasn't asking for a prescription. I couldn't afford the prescription. No, I'm talking about straight out theft. Could you manage that?

ELIZABETH:

No.

(Elizabeth hands the list back.)

MAGGIE: *(Amiably.)*

What a pussy. What else you got for me?

ELIZABETH: *(Staring at the screen.)*

Husband deceased...you have a son. Any other close family members?

MAGGIE:

Who said he's close? He lives in Michigan. Frankly, even if he lived around the block wouldn't make much difference.

ELIZABETH:

Is your son not aware of your current condition?

MAGGIE:

He sent you here, didn't he?

ELIZABETH:

Then I assume he's unable to assist you in any way.

MAGGIE: *(Smiling.)*

Ipsa facto.

ELIZABETH:

All right. Other relatives -- siblings, grandchildren?

MAGGIE:

No siblings. And you know I have a grandson. Must be somewhere in those files.

ELIZABETH:

It is.

MAGGIE:

He's twelve now. *He*. Why all the boys, that's what I ask myself.

ELIZABETH:

Isn't there a daughter-in-law?

MAGGIE:

Look up narcissistic cow in the dictionary and there she'll be. Webster has an entire page devoted to her. I could write a book.

ELIZABETH:

So...not close with the daughter-in-law.

MAGGIE:

You're funny, Elizabeth. For an assassin. I like you.

ELIZABETH:

Mrs. Elmer—

MAGGIE:

Maggie.

ELIZABETH:

Maggie. My only job is to be your advocate. Your friend. I hope you appreciate that.

MAGGIE:

My friend, eh? I'll hold you to that, Lizzy.

ELIZABETH: *(Back to the tablet.)*

Would you say that you are currently, in any *meaningful* way, contributing to society?

MAGGIE: *(Looking around at her surroundings.)*

Really? That's your question. Fucking hell.

ELIZABETH: *(Not sure how to respond.)*

I hope you're not feeling...

(Maggie waits her out, then...)

MAGGIE:

Go on. You hope I'm not feeling...? *(Elizabeth can't answer.)* I am...feeling. Just so you know. But in the future, I'll try to keep it to myself. If it'll help my score that is.

ELIZABETH:

There's no score, you know... Anyway, what do you think...about the meaningful contribution business?

MAGGIE: *(With a drawl.)*

It's a bad business, pardner. And you know damn well I don't cotton to it.

(She fake spits. Elizabeth stares at her, checks her tablet, then...)

ELIZABETH: (*Abruptly changing the tone.*)

Ah. Should have fun with this one. Name five things you've most loved doing throughout your life. Your five favorites. Go.

MAGGIE:

Wow. You're right there -- fun, fun. Let's see...sex. Really enjoyed sex. Not with Mr. Elmer, though.

ELIZABETH:

Okay. Number two?

MAGGIE:

Reading. Sitting off quietly by myself on an afternoon – when I could be by myself – and reading. Yeah, that's number two. Might even be at the top of the list.

ELIZABETH:

Three more.

MAGGIE:

Oh, Christ. Well, travel. Not that I did much. Never went to Europe or anything like that, but anyplace different was good for me. Oh, then there's gambling. Looovved those horses.

ELIZABETH:

That's four.

MAGGIE: (*Thinking hard.*)

Yeah, well...I really enjoyed – think this would come more easily -- not motherhood, not marriage, I'd say booze, but that led to this sorry-ass state of affairs... I really enjoyed...giving people shit. There. I was good at it, too.

ELIZABETH:

You still are.

MAGGIE:

Bet your sweet bippy.

ELIZABETH:

Now tell me, which of these activities do you *still* enjoy? Sex?

MAGGIE:

You getting ideas, girlie? (*Elizabeth just stares at her.*) Of course I don't still enjoy sex. How could I? Who would I enjoy it with?

ELIZABETH:

How about reading?

MAGGIE:

With these eyes. Ha-ha.

ELIZABETH:

Okay... Travel?

MAGGIE:

Yeah, sometimes. Sometimes I'll wheel myself down to the 7-11, get myself a candy bar. Salvation Army serves dinner five times a week. I have a post office box -- still get a check once a month. A few days ago, I traveled to the emergency room. That was fun.

ELIZABETH:

What happens to your belongings when you travel?

MAGGIE: *(Gesturing offstage.)*

Fella in the UPS store. Looks out for things while I'm on the road. Even brings me water occasionally, lets me use the rest room.

ELIZABETH

Nice of him.

MAGGIE:

Sure. His bosses would fire his ass if they ever found out. He says I remind him of his mother. Must have had a helluva childhood that's all I can say.

ELIZABETH

The police let you stay here.

MAGGIE:

A constant battle. The fuck were we talking about? Oh yeah, things I can't do any more. I'm broke, so no more horsies. What else did I say?

ELIZABETH:

Giving people shit.

MAGGIE:

Right. Sometimes. Still. With you today. I'd tickle your ivories anytime, Lizzy.

(Elizabeth puts the tablet back in her purse.)

Finished already?

ELIZABETH:

Not quite. *(A moment.)* Was it worth it? Would you say your life has been worth living?

MAGGIE: *(Answers quickly.)*

Of course. *(Then considers the question.)* Well, who knows. I'm of two minds about the whole business. Life worth living...more yes than no. What were my options, after all?

ELIZABETH:

What about present day? After our meeting, for example, when you are here tonight, getting ready for bed...will you think life still is, as you currently experience it, worth living?

(Maggie hoists herself out of the wheelchair. As she speaks, she walks around her small campground.)

MAGGIE: *(Chuckling at first.)*

'Getting ready for bed' -- good one, Lizzy. In my tent here I have a large pot to piss in. Literally. And the other. So, if I don't want to inhale my stink all night, I have to find a dumping ground. Maybe that day I've procured a meal. Of a sort. Sleep isn't always what one might hope for. Got three or four sleeping bags piled up, but ain't nothing like a mattress. At night the junkies come out, and the whores. Of course, they're conducting business so what can you do -- everyone's got to eat. The worst are the drunks -- cause they got no good reason to be here. Except they're assholes. I've had 'em piss on my tent, steal my stuff, call me some very creative names -- stinking sack of shit, stands out -- hell, two guys even sat right over there the other night and diddled each other. They were noisy about it, too. What else...? I have no money of my own. No ability to make any choices for myself. I can't even get proper medication, so most of the time I'm stuck in this motherfucking wheelchair. Is my life still worth living? I'm working on it. *All right?*

(There's a pause. Elizabeth takes out a brochure.)

Anyone ever pass this test?

ELIZABETH:

There is no—

MAGGIE:

Do you ever say to anyone at the end of your evaluation -- hey, pal, looking good, turns out you got many happy years ahead of you, knock yourself out. Ever say anything like that?

ELIZABETH:

The possibility exists.

MAGGIE:

But have you?

(No answer. Liz hands Maggie the brochure.)

ELIZABETH:

You'll have our report in a week or so. In the meantime, read this over. Or have someone read it to you. Your UPS friend, perhaps. Instructions are quite easy for anyone who might be helping. We can also have a care assistant bring you to one of our facilities.

MAGGIE:

You? *(No answer.)* Thought so.

ELIZABETH:

Food and water.

MAGGIE:

Hm?

ELIZABETH:

If you decide. Before the injection, take plenty of food and water. Might get an upset tummy otherwise.

(Maggie stares at her.)

MAGGIE:

You really are funny, Liz. Out of curiosity, how many dead people have you been the 'advocate' for?

ELIZABETH:

I've only been with the institute a month.

MAGGIE:

Rookie season, huh?

ELIZABETH:

Something like that.

MAGGIE:

Probably need a little more time. *(Elizabeth stares at her.)* Assassins eventually develop a thick skin, I've been told.

ELIZABETH:

No one wants to kill.

MAGGIE:

If you say so.

ELIZABETH:

Any other questions? Before I leave.

MAGGIE:

You know for a moment back there I deluded myself into thinking the advocate/friend might not just be a ploy. That you might have liked me enough to want to spend a part of your day with me.

ELIZABETH:

I do like you. However, I'm encouraged to keep a certain distance from our clients. An emotional distance.

MAGGIE:

Okay then, Lizzy girl, I do have a few questions. What if I'm afraid of needles, any option we go at this a different way -- say, guillotined, or perhaps a fast-acting poison placed discreetly in a bowl of soup?

ELIZABETH: (*Growing impatient.*)

What do you say we just—

MAGGIE:

Or smothered with a pillow like poor Desdemona.

ELIZABETH:

Maggie--

MAGGIE:

Here's another question -- is this institute of yours anything like a car dealership? Is there a monthly 'leader' board, where the advocate who sends the most lost souls to an untimely demise wins a week in Hawaii? (*No answer.*) No answer? Not inclined to reveal--

ELIZABETH: *(She's had enough.)*

Fine, yes. If this is what you want to think, if you find some solace in believing that I work for an organization whose sole intent is to kill you off, then your choice. But I have to ask you then, why? Why did you agree to be interviewed in the first place? Why go through the charade if all you're going to do is mock the process? I'm sorry. I truly am sorry you're in this position. But you know what, you're not the only one. Life expectancy in this country is astronomically higher than it was even twenty-five years ago. In the 1950s there were a hundred and fifty million people living in North America, a century later, over half a billion. That's not a joke. How many destitute people can a society sustain? The institute is asking hard questions, I know, but doesn't someone have to ask them? Before we drown ourselves as a species. If we haven't already. Life is not a movie; there's no such thing as a long, beautiful death. There's a void, Maggie. You're facing it now. In my own way I'll face it someday, my husband, my friends, everyone at the institute, probably much sooner than we all think. You can deceive yourself in whatever clever, creative ways you choose -- and you're pretty good at it, I'll give you that -- but none of that changes the fact that for the vast, vast majority of us, life is a great disappointment that inevitably ends in catastrophe.

MAGGIE:

Huh. All this time I figured you folks for run amuck bureaucrats -- didn't realize I was joining the nihilists of America club.

ELIZABETH:

Maggie...

MAGGIE:

Health and Human Services, wow, what gall.

ELIZABETH:

Listen to me.

MAGGIE:

Did you ever stop to think what's on that symbol of yours?

ELIZABETH:

Symbol?

(Maggie points at the brochure.)

MAGGIE:

The seal. It's all over your stationary. You know what that symbol represents?

ELIZABETH:

No.

MAGGIE:

Wings of an eagle protecting the people. Let the irony of that one sink in for a minute.

ELIZABETH:

I'm being straight with you here.

MAGGIE:

Sure you are. Save your breath for your other clients 'facing the void', Missy. Me, I'd rather live in misery.

(Maggie hands her back the brochure. Beat.)

ELIZABETH:

Your choice.

(Elizabeth puts away the brochure. She starts to leave.)

MAGGIE:

What'd you do before becoming assassin, Liz?

ELIZABETH:

Does it matter? *(Maggie waits.)* I was a pediatrician.

MAGGIE: *(Genuinely surprised.)*

Ha. Wow. Went to the other end of the spectrum there, didn't you?

ELIZABETH:

If you'd like to think that...

MAGGIE:

Must've been hard leaving the kiddies, though.

ELIZABETH:

My practice wasn't as lucrative as you might imagine. And there were other factors.

MAGGIE:

Do tell.

ELIZABETH:

Personal factors. Things I'd rather not talk about, if you don't mind.

MAGGIE:

Your personal catastrophe.

ELIZABETH:

Something like that, yes.

MAGGIE:

Someone die? *(No answer.)* Come on, I'm not angry with you anymore. It'll be our secret – taken to the grave.

ELIZABETH:

Why are you so interested?

MAGGIE:

Because, if it isn't already obvious, I have no-fucking-one-else to talk to.

(Beat.)

ELIZABETH: *(Trying to maintain her composure.)*

A three-year-old. She'd been hospitalized. Her doctor was away for the weekend, I agreed to do his rounds. It was a Sunday, busy day, lot of patients to check on. She'd been diagnosed with gastroenteritis –treated with fluids. I checked on her, concurred with the diagnosis and treatment, moved on. Turned out she had meningitis. Died the next day.

MAGGIE:

Sorry.

ELIZABETH:

She was worried about her bear.

MAGGIE:

Hm?

ELIZABETH:

Stuffed animal, a bear. Said he wasn't feeling well, asked me to...

(Elizabeth can't go on. Maggie waits.)

MAGGIE:

You were charged, or...?

ELIZABETH:

Never went to trial. Hospital lawyers, you know.

MAGGIE:

Right. What does the hubby say?

ELIZABETH:

Same as everyone else, not my fault.

MAGGIE:

Doesn't help?

ELIZABETH:

No.

MAGGIE:

Been a while, yes? Time heals wounds...

ELIZABETH:

Not all of them.

(Beat. Maggie digs through her belongings. Eventually she pulls out a pint bottle of whiskey. Holds the bottle out to Elizabeth.)

MAGGIE:

Help yourself. Pass it on when you're done.

(Elizabeth considers, then takes a long swallow; hands Maggie the bottle.)

ELIZABETH:

Thanks.

MAGGIE: *(She drinks.)*

Ahhh -- what I've been missing all day. *(Holds the bottle back to Elizabeth.)* Have as much as you like, Liz. I have a source. If my balance wasn't for shit, I'd be self-medicating morning, noon, and night.

(Elizabeth caps the bottle and puts it away.)

ELIZABETH:

Plenty for me. You, too, I imagine.

MAGGIE:

Party pooper.

(Beat.)

ELIZABETH:

I'm sorry...what I said to you before, about life ending in catastrophe, that was cruel, and unnecessary, obviously. And not even true.

MAGGIE:

Partially true. Take a look around.

ELIZABETH:

Partially maybe. Listen...I have an acquaintance, pharmaceutical rep. I can most likely get you a supply, not for long, but a supply of what was on your list. Maybe last you a few months, if you'd like.

MAGGIE:

Like? You'd be my superhero, Liz.

ELIZABETH:

Then once we're done, we'll be done. There won't be another source. At least not from me.

MAGGIE:

You know what they say about beggars.

ELIZABETH:

All right. Hopefully, in the next few days we'll have something for you.

(Elizabeth again starts to leave.)

MAGGIE:

Hey. *(Elizabeth stops.)* Why are you helping me?

ELIZABETH:

I told you why. Because I like you.

MAGGIE:

Mickey Mouse Club – circa 1950s. “Why...because I like you!”

ELIZABETH:

About a century before my time.

MAGGIE:

When they tell us life was simple.

(Elizabeth nods and walks off. Maggie, humming, returns to her wheelchair. Sits. A long moment, then...)

MAGGIE: *(Softly singing.)*

“Who I sent to eter-ni-ty.”

(Blackout. End of play.)

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *I live here in Los Angeles, where in the last several years homeless encampments have sprung up all around the city – no facilities, no water, no toilets. No future, no hope. I know this is the same in municipalities around the country. Our world is filled with forgotten people splayed out in front of our eyes. As the character of Elizabeth points out, the problem only continues to get worse. How many destitute 90-year-olds can a society sustain before it cracks? In *Benign Departures*, I'm imagining a world where society has indeed cracked, and where our humanity is seeping away through that crack. I wrote this play because every day it gets harder to believe in a shared humanity. Hard but maybe not yet impossible. That's the idea that I try to hang onto. What I hope my characters hang onto.*

*I'm a lifelong theater rat, and an eclectic reader with an abiding love of dystopian science fiction. In my work you may detect a taste of Tom Perrotta's *The Leftovers*; Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*; Emily St. John Mandel's *Station 11*; with some *King Lear* thrown in for good measure.*

AUTHOR BIO:

A veteran of forty-five years in the theatre, Tony is a playwright, actor and director. Tony has written ten full-length plays, along with several one acts.

His play, *Loyalties*, was a winner of the Ashland New Play Festival, and was subsequently produced in an acclaimed production, which ran for over four months at the Pacific Resident Theatre in Los Angeles. Book-it Repertory in Seattle produced Tony's adaptation of *Winesburg, Ohio*. His plays *Birdbrain*, *An Idyllic Life* and *Bleeding Hearts* have received workshops and productions at The Pacific Resident Theatre, The Rogue Machine Theatre and Playwrights Studio West. Tony's short play, *In the Dark*, was a winner of the Fusion Theatre's One Act Play Contest and produced in Albuquerque; and was also the grand prizewinner in the Lowell Arts short play contest. His play, *Already Forgotten*, was a winner of Birdhouse Theatre's Edgefest, and produced as part of EST, LA's 2017 One Act Festival. His play, *Battle of Addison Island*, was work-shopped in EST's Launchpad Series, and the Last Frontier Theatre Conference. Tony returned to Last Frontier with his play, *Foreign Bodies*, which was subsequently an O'Neill Festival semi-finalist. His play, *Sweet Dreams*, was recently produced in the Silver Springs Stage One Act Festival. His play, *Life Still Is*, was a finalist for the 2019 Susan Glaspell Playwriting Festival, and a winner of the HRC National Playwriting Contest. Other recent productions include -- EST, LA, and Madlab Theatre in Columbus, Ohio producing his full length, *Lost in Time*; Actors Studio Newburyport producing his one act *The One Who Got Away*; and Warner International Play Festival producing *Sweet Dreams*. Upcoming productions: *Benign Departures* at Theatre Three, and *Guinea Pig Apocalypse* at the Little Theatre of Alexandria.

Tony is currently a member of the Playwrights Unit in Los Angeles.

