

Taking it in the Shorts  
A Collection of One Act and Short Plays  
by Kim E. Ruyle

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## YEAH, ART FIGURES

### Cast of Characters

FRANK Male. High school math teacher. Harried. Perhaps a bit older than Joni.

JONI Female. Substitute teacher. A Renaissance person, of sorts.

BLAKE Male. Art teacher. Dramatic, a flair for fashion.

TATUM Female. Theatre teacher. Impulsive, sharp-tongued.

AVERY Female. Music teacher. Delicate, hypersensitive.

QUINN Male. Gym teacher. Crude, macho.

CASTING NOTE: 4 – 6 characters. Blake may be doubled with Quinn, and Tatum may be doubled with Avery. Genders are defined. Otherwise, the director has discretion in casting as to age and ethnicity of all characters.

TIME: About now.

SETTING: A high school teachers' lounge.

SET: A table, chairs, and a coffee station. If desired, a refrigerator and/or other furnishings.

SYNOPSIS: Frank, a math teacher distraught over the ignorance of his students, encounters and unloads on Joni, a substitute teacher, in the teachers' lounge. In conversation with Joni and other teachers, Frank discovers that his ignorance, in some ways, surpasses that of his students.

RUNTIME: ~40 Minutes.

NOTES:

- Brackets [ ] indicate sentiment expressed by unspoken words.
- Ellipses (...) at the end of a line indicate dialogue that trails off. Within a line, ellipses suggest an opportunity for the line to breathe.

*Pure mathematics is, in its way, the poetry of logical ideas.*

~ Albert Einstein

*The role of the artist is to ask questions, not answer them.*

~ Anton Chekhov

*Nothing is more intolerable than to have to admit to yourself your own errors.*

~ Ludwig von Beethoven

*There should be no such thing as boring mathematics.*

~ Edsger W. Dijkstra

## YEAH, ART FIGURES

At a table in the teachers' lounge, Joni reads a copy of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. A copy of *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* by Douglas Hofstadter sits next to her coffee cup. She sips her coffee, sighs, and leans her head back, eyes closed, deep in thought. Momentarily, Frank bursts in and shuts the door. Hard. He storms to the coffee pot without acknowledging Joni and keeps his back turned to her while speaking and filling a cup. Joni keeps her eyes closed, at peace, through Frank's rant.

## FRANK

Grab ass and texting! That's all they want to do! The girls, texting. And if they're not sleeping, the boys are playing grab ass. I can't turn my back for fear I'll be struck by a missile! This morning one of those little shits launched a sharpened pencil that stuck Euclid right between the eyes! *How the hell did he do that?!*

*Pausing, coffee cup mid-air, then sotto voce.*

*Was he aiming at me?*

Frank continues the rant as he turns and looks to Joni who remains at peace, eyes closed.

## FRANK (CONT.)

And the other day, some little prick drew horns on Pythagoras when I wasn't looking. And. *Oh, my God.* It's so hard to say this. Another. Another drew. A penis. *Can you believe it?* A penis. Pointed at the mouth. *A penis!* Pointed at the mouth of. Oh, God. A penis pointed at the mouth of Ada Lovelace.

*On the verge of tears.*

I saw that, and my heart just about stopped. *Ada Lovelace.*

*A deep breath, then clouded with confusion.*

Who are *you*?

## JONI

*Sits up, opens her eyes, and gives a smile.*

You teach math.

## FRANK

What gave it away? My pocket protector?

## JONI

Euclid. Pythagoras. Lovelace. I love your posters.

FRANK

The little shits. And it's not just the boys.

JONI

Sometimes, especially in elementary, boys don't get a fair shake/. They –

FRANK

/Oh! Ya gonna stereotype? Don't! I know. I know. Girls are supposed to be better behaved, and boys better at math, right? That's the stereotype? Well, I call bullshit. The boys in my class are all animals. *That* fits. But the girls are better at math. At least they can figure a ten percent discount when ordering crap online. They're not the ones...

*Choking.*

Not the ones drawing penises on Ada Lovelace.

*A deep breath.*

But they don't seem to give a shit about learning any math. *Really* learning. The girls don't. And tell the truth, I can't stand to call on them in class. The girls. Because the way they talk drives me nuts. Every other word is *like*.

*Adopting satiric, sing-song tone.*

I'm *like* gonna be *like* late with my homework because I *like* got stuck in *like* a big line at *like* Walgreens.

*Another deep breath.*

Are you gonna be late? Or *like* late? Were you in Walgreens? Or *like* Walgreens? I mean, the word, *like*, has many uses, but it's not intended to be a verbal pause for idiots so braindead they can't cogently string together more than three consecutive words. Drives me freakin' crazy!

*Pause.*

Whaddya mean ya love my posters?

JONI

Ada Lovelace was once a girl. Was. Once, I mean.

FRANK

Who *are* you?

JONI

*Brightly.*

It's Frank, right? Nice to meet you. Finally. I'm Joni. Also, a fan of Ada Lovelace.

FRANK

Cuz she's a girl?

JONI

A *genius* you mean. The very first computer programmer.

*Off Frank's suspicious scowl.*

A *poetical* scientist. She, um... She played the harp.

*Off Frank's shift to a disdainful grin.*

But that's got nothing to do with gender.

FRANK

No. Course not, *Joni*. What? Ya been hiding under a rock? These days, everything's about gender.

*Sotto voce.*

Or race. Gender or race.

Uncomfortable pause as *Joni* shifts in her seat.

JONI

Well, I think... The posters in your classroom? I think they're great. I especially/ like Ada –

FRANK

/For all the good they do! Yeah. I've got posters. Historical math heroes. *My* heroes. My attempt – my lame attempt – to inspire the little shits. To encourage them to reach for the stars. But what's the point? Simple algebra? Forget it! Those losers can barely manage two-digit multiplication. Our country's headed for the shitter, I tell ya. Nothing I can do to stop it. I try. Try to make math relevant. I tried using their phone bills to set the context for a problem. That got some of the girls to look up from their phones. For a couple of seconds. But then. Nothing. They don't pay their own phone bills. *Their parents do*. So. No interest. Don't they realize that those phones are designed and manufactured and distributed by people who use math?! What's the use? This country's screwed sideways. We're all screwed. And I give up...

*Pause. Takes a seat.*

Wait. You've been in my [classroom]? *You've seen my posters?*

JONI

Last week. Tuesday.

FRANK

*Taking a beat. Puzzled.*

Ah. My colonoscopy. You're the sub.

JONI

And Friday. Tuesday *and* Friday.

FRANK

Oh. Well. You know. Fridays are...

JONI

Yes.

*A knowing smile.*

Did you have a good three-day weekend?

*Awkward pause as Frank glares.*

If you want to balance out the gender representation. In your posters, I mean. You could give Ada Lovelace some company. Maryam Mirzakhani won a Fields Medal when your students were probably still in diapers. Or, how about Katherine Johnson? Lucy Cartwright? Rachel Riley? And, um, maybe you can, uh... There's always Maria Agnesi.

FRANK

Always what? *Who?* What are you/ talking [about]?

JONI

*Off Franks' confusion.*

/Agnesi. Maria Agnesi. First woman to write a mathematics textbook. Mid-eighteenth century.

FRANK

Huh. A textbook. Big deal.

JONI

No? Okay. Anyway, my vote would be for Maryam Mirzakhani/. She was –

FRANK

/So, ya think you've got a vote, do ya?

*Pause. A hard look.*

You didn't. Follow. My lesson plan.

JONI

Oh. No. I mean, in spirit but, um, but, uh, no. Not exactly. Not lockstep, I mean. I thought, um... But you don't mean... Please don't tell me the students complained.

FRANK

Said you had 'em up moving around the – (*Cont'd.*)

JONI

*Overlapping.*

Without their phones.

FRANK

*Continuous.*

Classroom. To what? Play games?

*Pause. Frank wearing a scowl. Joni a slight smile.*

JONI

How did *you* develop a love for math?

FRANK

*A shrug.*

Just did.

JONI

My dad/ was a –

FRANK

/You after my job? Ya think you're a math teacher?

JONI

Oh. Well, um, mostly English. But I/ can –

FRANK

/Okay. Okay. That makes sense.

JONI

Ohhh. You're thinking about poetry since I –

FRANK

*Poetry?* No. What?

JONI

Ada Lovelace, the daughter of Lord Byron. You know. *The poet.*

*Off Frank's confusion.*

*She walks in beauty, like the night  
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;  
And all that's best of dark and bright  
Meet in her aspect and her eyes.*

FRANK

*What?* Whatever.

JONI

*She Walks in Beauty?*

*Off Frank's confused wag of his head.*

Lord Byron. My favorite. But it was her mother who made sure Ada was educated in math and science. Still, she had, um... She had her father's heart... Hence. *A poetical* scientist.

FRANK

*Hence?* Oh, jeez. You really are an English teacher.

JONI

*Amused with her revelation.*

Guess I'm kind of a mirror image of Ada. I mean, without, you know... Her genius. My mom/ made sure –

FRANK

/Was something wrong with the [lesson plan]? You couldn't stick to my lesson plan? I *had* worksheets. Worksheets! You're a sub. There was nothing for you to [do]. Just pass out the goddamn worksheets and sit back, read your books.

JONI

No, I know. But they. The students didn't, um... Okay. But we covered the topic. Distributive property. Right? We used/ Taylor Swift to –

FRANK

/An English teacher isn't gonna – what *about* Taylor Swift?

JONI

I just had this idea to, um... Okay. The students were each assigned a value. Right? And they had to consider different ways they could combine. To pair up, you know. Not in pairs, really, but you know. *Combine?* To purchase Taylor Swift concert tickets for a small group. Using the distributive [property].

*A self-congratulatory smile.*

Jason really got into/ it.

FRANK

*Jason?* Kid always sleeping in class?

JONI

*Sleeping?* Jason? No way! He was up at the whiteboard recording the various equations we developed. I didn't even ask him. He just jumped up and took charge at/ the whiteboard.

FRANK

*Jason.* Jason did.

Frank rises, paces. An awkward pause.

JONI

Keep an eye on Jason. He's going places.

Frank stops in his tracks, a look of incredulity.

JONI (CONT.)

The distributive property was, um... Sorry, but we didn't start there. It was easy to glide through the associative property. We started with – I mean, that should have only been a review, anyway. But then. And this was really cool! After distributive, we started talking about how we'd create a model to, you know... To illustrate a *quadratic* equation!

FRANK

*The hell?*

JONI

No. Yeah, but isn't that cool? I mean, it was beautiful to see. How they got into it.

Troubled, Frank shakes his head, sits again. Picks up and studies Joni's copy of *Gödel, Escher, Bach*.

JONI (CONT.)

Gödel, Escher, Bach. Have you read it? It was my dad's/ favorite –

FRANK

/Taylor Swift is... I don't get it. Not even...

JONI

Talented, right? Like Joni. *Mitchell*? Not just a singer. A poet. I, um... I'm named for her. Named for Joni Mitchell.

FRANK

Oh, God.

JONI

Yeah.

*Animating while singing.*

*And the painted ponies go up and down.*

*Smiling. Waits, but gets no reaction from Frank.*

Oh, come on, Frank.

*Belting it out.*

*They paved paradise and put up a parking lot.*

Joni gives a silly laugh. Frank just studies her curiously. Becoming subdued, reflective, he slowly lays down the copy of *Gödel, Escher, Bach*.

FRANK

No. They didn't complain.

*Pause.*

Look. We don't introduce quadratic equations until spring quarter. End of the year.

JONI

I know that's the... There's a *syllabus* but that's, um, you know. A minimum. Right?

FRANK

Not that they'll remember anything over the summer.

JONI

I mean, you could. You could go faster if they, um. Can't you go just as fast as the students comprehend the material?

FRANK

*Pausing to glare.*

Must be nice. Substitute. Don't have to worry about [test scores]. Scores keep dropping. State average keeps dropping. We're compared, you know? Other districts. Other states.

JONI

But what I'm, uh... The thing is. There's no speed limit. On learning? The standardized tests are more to, um. They're like, uh, you know. A *minimum* speed.

FRANK

*Pausing to glare.*

Lesson. *Plan*. There's a *plan!*

*Sotto voce.*

Standardized goddamn tests.

JONI

Yeah, but if they *comprehend*, the tests are a piece/ of cake.

FRANK

I get evaluated on [test scores]. I get graded, too, ya know? My job's on the line and/ you just –

JONI

/Mine's not?

*Awkward pause.*

Okay. But how'd *you* learn math?

FRANK

Whaddya mean, how'd I learn math?

JONI

Worksheets?

FRANK

How else ya gonna [learn]? Ya gotta work the problems.

JONI

My dad was a math teacher.

FRANK

So? My old man was a drill sergeant, but I never joined the army. Yours was a math teacher. That makes it right for you step into my shoes? Take over/ my –

JONI

/No. But my dad. He used to let me, um... He taught at a community college. And even when I was pretty small, I used to, um... He let me go to his night classes. You know, sit in the back of the room.

FRANK

And that qualifies you/ to –

JONI

/No! ...Well, maybe. I don't know. But he. My dad. He made it so interesting. He'd tell these stories as he's illustrating. You know. Working out solutions on the [blackboard]. And the students. They were all, you know, really. *Leaning*. Like really leaning in.

FRANK

Like? *Like* leaning in?

JONI

*An apologetic shrug, and then getting excited.*

I remember. In one of his classes, he was –

FRANK

Heere we go with the stories.

JONI

Oh. No. I, uh. Sorry.

FRANK

No, no. He's your dad. I guess that's [understandable]. Ya liked his stories.

JONI

Not just me! I mean, um, sorry but... No, it's just I never, um, I, uh.

*Softly, almost reluctantly planting a stake.*

I never saw a student sleep in my dad's class.

Frank sighs, scowls, and goes to the coffee station, an act of avoidance. Joni studies him as he tops off his coffee. She wants to – starts to – say something, but no words come. Frank slowly returns and sits.

FRANK

So, why didn't you?

JONI

What? Sleep? No, I/ was totally–

FRANK

/Become a math teacher.

JONI

Oh. I don't know. I, um... I like subbing. The variety, you know. And I, um... I guess I get bored easily.

FRANK

No responsibility for... Must be nice. Goddamn standardized tests.

JONI

No! I feel it! The responsibility.

*Off Frank's scowling skepticism.*

My dad always... *Everyone's* responsible. That's what he/ always [said].

FRANK

/But it's not your job to –

JONI

Of course, it is! I mean. Okay. If I'm the student... *I'm responsible.* For my own learning.

FRANK

Damn right.

JONI

And if I'm a parent... *I'm responsible.* For my child's learning.

FRANK

Ditto.

JONI

But if I'm the *teacher*, and my students aren't learning. Then, um... *I am responsible!* Okay? I mean, it's all on me.

FRANK

*Smacked hard with the suggestion.*

*You're saying it's all on me?*

*Standing. Pacing. A sardonic chuckle.*

Those little shits...

JONI

Everyone is. What my dad always said. Everyone is responsible. And he took. Really. He took it seriously. And I, um, I take it seriously, too. My responsibility. I do take responsibility.

*Uncomfortable pause.*

I'm sorry if that's [hard to hear].

*A long pause, fidgeting, face screwing into a sad frown.*

He, um... He died last year.

FRANK

You're talking about... Talking about your dad?

JONI

After he retired, he decided he wanted to learn woodworking. He thought it was important to, you know, be able to... To *do* something.

FRANK

Well, that sounds. *Do* something. Yeah. No shit.

JONI

With his hands, I mean. He took some classes at the community college where he [taught]. And did the research, you know. He did. To build a wooden boat. It was a big project. Took him, uh, I don't know. A couple of years. Took up the whole garage for, you know? And my mom was kind of pissed, but she also... I think she understood that. After.

FRANK

My junior high woodshop teacher was missing two fingers. Mr. Cooper.

*Chuckling and buzzing like a saw.*

Table saw.

JONI

My dad, no, um... He was pretty safety conscious.

Frank considers. He sits again and attempts to show some empathy.

FRANK

He, uh... He finish his boat?

JONI

Well, that's the thing. He, um... Yeah. But no. He never got to [sail it].

Uncomfortable pause as Frank searches for some way to respond. Finally...

FRANK

I always wanted a boat.

JONI

His was a wooden boat, so... But I remember. Second grade. My dad was teaching me about specific gravity and explaining how a *steel* boat can float. You know, when water weighs, um –

FRANK

Eight point three four pounds.

JONI

Uh, yeah. That's a gallon. I was going to say a cubic foot weighs about 62 and a half pounds. And –

FRANK

Tomato, tomawto.

JONI

Right, um... And steel weighs 490, you know, a cubic foot of steel weighs 490 pounds.

FRANK

Gold's almost 1200 pounds. I love it when dipshit screenwriters show gold bricks that... They got no idea.

JONI

But my dad, he, um... He had me calculating how much a water a steel rowboat would displace. But it was –

FRANK

Wait. You were how old? When you/ were –

JONI

/Seven. Second grade.

FRANK

Well, that's –

JONI

No. Not a prodigy or anything. I mean, it was... He kept it simple. The calculations, you know. Rectangular and, um, yeah, a flat bottom. Even thickness. No curves, so... Not so difficult.

FRANK

Huh... That's [impressive].

*Uncomfortable pause.*

He finished his boat but he never [sailed]?

JONI

No.

*Uncomfortable pause.*

Now it's mine. The boat. Now. But I, um, I haven't, you know, [sailed it].

FRANK

*Understanding. Softening.*

Uh huh.

*Pause.*

Waiting on the weather?

JONI

I don't, you know, uh, don't have anyone to, um... And yeah. There's the weather.

Blake and Tatum enter talking and go for the coffee.

BLAKE

I mean, the kid's gotta gift. He's into patterns and geometric... Like, you know, Escher-like stuff? And I think. That's *it*. That's what he does. And I'm not being dismissive here. I mean, I'm not talking like doodling. It's really captivating. The stuff he comes up with. Interlocking, just patterns, but really interesting, like cockroaches interlocked with butterflies. Freaky but kinda beautiful when you think about it. But then he just blows me away with a *portrait*. In one class period, the kid cranks out a portrait in charcoal. And...

*Dramatically turning to Tatum, cup in hand.*

*Guess!*

TATUM

You know he and his mom were living in a car for the summer? The whole damn summer.

JONI

You're talking about Jason.

TATUM

Yeah. Hi, Joni. Yeah. Jason. I guess they got into, uh, now they're in, uh... He and his mom. In a shelter.

BLAKE

That is a pity... But guess who he drew? *The portrait?*

JONI

His favorite teacher?

BLAKE

Oh, well, I don't know about that. But yeah. Me! He did my portrait in, like, one class period. Just cranked it out like it was, like, you know? Like nothing. He's like a little genius. Like a real genius.

FRANK

*Like?*

BLAKE

Hey, Frank. The kid, Jason, says, uh... He's fascinated with *fractals*. Said they're something to do with math. What are fractals?

FRANK

Uh.

JONI

Order in randomness. Right, Frank?

FRANK

Uh.

JONI

They're repeating geometric patterns. In nature and, um –

BLAKE

Right! Right. Like Escher. That's what the kid. Jason's like *fixated* on fractals. Fractal cockroaches and butterflies. Anyway, that's like how he, what he calls them. But the portrait! My, God. It's just beautiful. All you gotta do is look at the eyes. That's the hardest part. Getting the eyes to not look like they're misshapen or cross-eyed like some kinda –

TATUM

Marty Feldman.

BLAKE

Yes! Igor! *Young Frankenstein!*

*Channeling Marty Feldman.*

What hump?

*Egged on by Tatum's laughing.*

Walk this way.

TATUM

Hey! You got some acting chops. Maybe we cast you in one of our student productions.

BLAKE

Absolutely not! No way. Can you see me? The *Hunchback of Notre Dame*. Students would love it, but I'd never live it down.

TATUM

Not *Hunchback*. But we're doing *Next to Normal*. Maybe you play the therapist. You'd get to act with Jason! Should hear him sing. He just auditioned. And, oh, my God! Kid's got talent.

FRANK

Again, with *JasonJasonJason*.

Blake, Tatum, and Joni share a look.

JONI

You're doing *Next to Normal*? The school's okay with [that]? Wow. Doesn't it have F bombs?

TATUM

Yeah. But, no, I wasn't sure. I mean, there's like *forty* songs. Like, too [many]. It's overdone. With the singing. But it gives the kids – we got kids with some lungs on 'em. So, yeah. *Next to Normal*. Jason's a shoe-in for role of Gabe. That's the kid who's like really dead. In the musical. He's like a ghost or something, but you don't really know he's a ghost until like the end.

Frank groans, wags his head, muttering. A pause.

JONI

Frank and I were just talking about Jason. Weren't we?

*Considering Frank's bewildered stare.*

Yeah... No, I'm not surprised he's into fractals. They're part of, um, they figure into Chaos Theory. I mean, Frank can probably tell us more.

They wait, but Frank only gives a puzzled stare.

TATUM

Cockroaches and butterflies. You're right. Kinda freaky. But kid's like a natural. A performer. I mean, he's not like really *in* theatre. Not in my classes, but he's, you know. Extra-curricular.

JONI

I think that's great. And I love it when I get to sub for you. Your classes.

TATUM

The tech! With the lighting! Like, you really impressed the kids with your [stuff]. Where'd you learn all that?

FRANK

*Coming to life.*

She follow your lesson plan?

JONI

Um, I guess/ I –

TATUM

/Screw the lesson plan if you've got *stuff*. Like Joni. Like stuff to share.

*Turning to Blake.*

She cover for you, yet?

Blake gives a forlorn wag of the head.

JONI

Not yet, but I'd love to! I love art.

FRANK

Yeah, well, the state doesn't test for that stuff. Math and reading. And... Math.

TATUM

Okay, but yeah, I come back and was gone like a week. And I come back, and the kids are talking about the *tableau* of a scene.

*Turning to Blake.*

That's like art. Right? The, you know, the arrangement of, uh –

BLAKE

Composition.

TATUM

Yeah! But I come back, and the kids are like speaking a new language like they're, like, now they're like physics-ists.

FRANK

*Physicists.*

*Sotto voce.*

*Like physics-ists.* Oh, my God.

TATUM

*Whatever.* But they, now they're telling me about the frequency of colors or, you know, some stuff about light waves and, I don't know, like *spectrum*. And it was all like going right over my head.

JONI

Oooh. No, it's not really that difficult.

TATUM

No. But yeah, it makes sense about how the gels we use on our lights work with different costume colors. Set dressing.

*Turning to Frank.*

It was like a science class for theatre geeks, like with math and physics and –

BLAKE

There you go! And what a they always wanna do? Cut the funding for art programs.

TATUM

Budgets keep climbing, but where's the money go? Not to teachers.

FRANK

Administration. That's where.

JONI

Spending more money doesn't necessarily correlate with/ performance.

FRANK

/Except in math!

JONI

Okay. Yes. Maybe, but –

TATUM

So, you'd cut my theatre program for math?

FRANK

You're asking *me*?

JONI

I don't think it's an either-or proposition. You need two wings to fly. Even Jason's butterflies and cockroaches have got two wings, right? What I mean –

TATUM

Cockroaches don't fly.

BLAKE

Sure, they do.

FRANK

What the hell to cockroaches have to do with [anything].

JONI

No. What I mean is, um, it takes two wings to fly and... You know, education should be broad. Comprehensive. Balanced. Not narrow or... Lopsided. Unbalanced. We don't want to turn out, um –

TATUM

One-trick ponies.

BLAKE

*Chuckling.*

Cross-eyed hunchbacks.

FRANK

Artists who can't calculate an 18 percent tip.

BLAKE

*Taking a beat before returning a dig.*

Or mathematicians can't tell a Renoir from like a Klimt.

FRANK

*Like a Klimt?* I feel like I'm in a foreign country in here.

TATUM

*Like* in a foreign country?

JONI

No. He *feels like*. I know what he – he was using the word correctly. But. Okay. The point is, we need more Ada Lovelaces... *Poetical scientists.*

FRANK

Great. I'll make sure to add harp playing to my math curriculum.

BLAKE

*Harp playing?*

TATUM

*A sardonic jab.*

You didn't know Frank's an angel? A harp-playing/ angel.

JONI

/He's not, no, just... He's being dismissive.

*Laying a hand on Frank's hand.*

But you. I know you must get my... You do get my point?

An awkward pause as everyone looks on as Frank slowly withdraws his hand.

TATUM

I'll tell ya, Frank. The magic of theatre... It allows you to become someone else.

*Another jab.*

Maybe *you* should audition for one of our productions.

*A wry smile, then checking her watch.*

And on that note. Time to drop the curtain on this... Whatever.

Blake and Tatum begin to exit.

BLAKE

*Chuckling while exiting.*

Drop the curtain.

Frank, clearly upset, watches them go, checks his watch, and stands.

JONI

Wait. You don't have to go. I know your schedule. And you've got another thirty minutes.

FRANK

Yeah. Well, I've got worksheets to correct.

JONI

That thing I, uh... Touching your hand wasn't, um, you know, it wasn't meant to be sexual.

FRANK

*Sexual?!*

JONI

I was just, um, making a [point]. And I know you understand. The point I was making. I know you do. That we're educating the whole person, and we need math and science, for sure, but, um, that doesn't mean. We also need the arts. You know?

FRANK

*Slowly retaking his seat.*

Here's what I know. After a century of steadily rising average IQ scores in this country, we're now losing ground. Scores have been falling for the past decade. That's/ because –

JONI

/I know.

FRANK

You do? You know why?

JONI

There's not a simple answer. I think –

FRANK

No! It is simple. Cell phones! The internet! We stopped asking kids to memorize! What's seven times eight?

JONI

It's fifty-six, but what –

FRANK

Right! You didn't hesitate cuz a third-grade teacher drilled multiplication tables into your head.

JONI

Actually. That was my dad, and, um, when I was about five.

FRANK

Great. Good for your dad. But any adult can't instantly give you the answer to a two-digit multiplication problem should be cursing their third-grade teacher who didn't do her job.

JONI

*Sotto voce.*

Or *his* [job].

FRANK

Memorization is critical to develop the ability to think. To solve problems. Hence – there's that word for you. *Hence*. Hence *worksheets*. You let kids substitute the internet for memorization, and you're dumbing them down!

JONI

Okay. I don't disagree, but that's not, um, complete. A complete answer. We think with words. A written language/ is –

FRANK

/Yeah. Coming from an English teacher.

JONI

*Selling it.*

But abstract concepts? Abstract reasoning? That's all language. Humans didn't evolve the ability to think abstractly, you know, until they developed an alphabet. Symbols to represent concepts. The symbols, the letters, combine to create words that represent *concepts*. And math is all symbols and conceptual, too, right? Once we got a written language, a symbolic language, humans began to think conceptually. To think abstractly. To apply formal logic. Words are important! Think you could do math without logic and abstract reasoning? And/ what about –

FRANK

/No. Not saying that. But/ you gotta –

JONI

*Now really selling it.*

/No! You can't ignore verbal intelligence. When everyone's communicating in acronyms, emojis, and incomplete sentences, I mean, that's going to... Vocabulary. *Language!* It's a proxy for intelligence. So, if you're really, really concerned about IQ, we've got to get kids to read and start writing in complete sentences!

FRANK

And to stop with the *likelikelikelikelike*.

*Heavy sigh.*

We're surrounded by ignorance.

JONI

Well, okay. That's, um... I guess there's never been a shortage of ignorance in the world. But it's not all we're... We're also surrounded by beauty. The world *is/* beautiful.

FRANK

*Beauty?* When was last time you were at the DMV? Walked through a Wal-Mart?

JONI

When was the last time you took a drive in the country? Visited an art museum? A maternity ward?

FRANK

Maternity [ward]? *What?*

JONI

*Patting his hand.*

Life. Life is beautiful.

A pause as Frank stares at Joni's hand atop his. She withdraws her hand.

JONI (CONT.)

Sorry, but people *are* beautiful. All people. In their own way.

FRANK

*All people? Beautiful? You've gotta be kidding.*

JONI

*Coy smile.*

You don't think I'm [beautiful]?

*Off Frank's shocked expression.*

Oh, my God. I'm just teasing you!

FRANK

You can't do that! Can't tease like that! Don't subs have to attend the workshops? I did that, I'd be accused of sexual harassment.

Joni leaps to her feet wringing her hands.

JONI

No, no. I didn't mean [anything]! Please don't think I was [coming on]!

Frank glares at her for a moment, then grows a grin.

FRANK

Relax. Not gonna report you.

Joni breathes a sigh of relief and slowly sinks back to her chair. Frank's warming to her, losing the confrontational tone.

FRANK (CONT.)

How's it feel? Ya gotta taste now for the minefield that guys like me have to navigate?

JONI

*Giving a sheepish shrug.*

I guess it's not... Not just guys.

FRANK

It's a different world than when I was [a kid].

FRANK (CONT.)

*Pause.*

If my old man was around today...

JONI

The drill sergeant.

FRANK

Yeah. Drill sergeant. An asshole.

*Hesitating, then deciding to share.*

Came home one day, that asshole drill sergeant, he came home early. Walked in on my mom with one of her piano students.

JONI

Ohhh. You mom was a piano/ teacher?

FRANK

/Gave lessons in our home. But thing is, she wasn't... There wasn't anything going on. But my old man saw her... I guess she was leaning over him. The kid. Reaching around him. From behind. Just to show the kid some fingering on the [keyboard]. But my old man must a got the wrong idea.

JONI

Mmhmm.

FRANK

My mom would never. But. The old man took care of the kid.

JONI

*Took care?* Oh, no! What did he do? I mean. How old was/ he?

FRANK

/The kid? Oh, he was a junior or senior in high school. Probably 17. Maybe 18.

JONI

But he didn't, um, didn't hurt him. Did he?

FRANK

The old man snatched him right off the piano bench. Threw him over his shoulder. Threw him out the front door. Threw kid's backpack after him.

JONI

Oh, my God. Was he/ hurt?

FRANK

On his ass in our front lawn. The kid. And his backpack, loaded with books sailed through the air in this big sweeping arc. Hit the kid square in the face. Kid – (*Cont'd.*)

JONI

*Overlapping.*

Oh, my god!

FRANK

*Continuous.*

Jumps up, runs off with a bloody nose. Leaving his – (*Cont'd.*)

JONI

*Overlapping.*

That's assault!

FRANK

*Continuous.*

Backpack behind.

JONI

My God.

FRANK

Mom's screaming at the old man, and she grabs the backpack and runs off after the kid.

JONI

That sounds absolutely horrific.

FRANK

I was sitting on my bike. Saw the whole thing. From the driveway. And the old man watches my mom sprinting off after the kid with that heavy backpack. And he turns to me and mumbles something about women. That no way women can be acting the tart.

JONI

Implying it's okay for/ men.

FRANK

/Acting the tart. Huh. Thing is, there's no way my mom would ever. Or I don't know. But never with a kid. Not with a student. But I'll bet the old man's radar picked up on something from that kid. You know, the kid sitting on the piano bench. My mom leaning over. Wouldn't surprise me if the kid's sitting there with a hard on. My mom wouldn't. But she was really... My mom was... No.

Frank wags his head. Silence.

JONI

Your mom was beautiful?

FRANK

Yeah, I guess.

*Pause.*

Almost said sexy. But that's too weird to say about your [mom]. No. Sounds like something a perv would say. Or something. No, I just mean she was, uh...

JONI

Attractive. She was an attractive woman.

FRANK

Was the final straw for my mom. They split up right after.

JONI

I'm sorry... And the student?

FRANK

Doubt he's still playing the piano. Never took another lesson from Mom. That I know of, anyway. We moved after that, and I was only, uh, wasn't very/ old.

JONI

/This happened when you were [how old]?

FRANK

I don't know. But let's just say that... When you were seven, your old man was teaching you about specific gravity? When I was about seven, mine was teaching me combat skills.

JONI

But your mom. I'll bet you can play the piano. Your mom must have –

FRANK

Oh, my God! She was as much of a drill sergeant as my old man. An hour. Every day. I had to practice that goddamn piano. I hated it.

JONI

Worksheets.

FRANK

*What?*

JONI

You learned the value of drill and practice. Hence.

*Warm smile.*

Hence, worksheets.

FRANK

*Pausing and getting the point.*

Aah.

JONI

But you hated the piano?

FRANK

With a passion.

JONI

And don't tell me. Math was easy for you.

FRANK

Uh, yeah, I guess it always... It makes sense.

JONI

And you weren't very good at the piano.

FRANK

Said I hated it. Didn't say I was no/ good.

JONI

The things we do well, we like. Generally. Things we don't do well, we don't like. Might even hate.

FRANK

That right? And what do you hate?

JONI

Oh. Well, you heard me. No, I don't hate to sing. I mean, I only sing to myself.

FRANK

You sang to me.

JONI

Just a line or two. Joni Mitchell. Singing makes me feel... I know I suck, but I/ don't hate –

FRANK

/Yes! You do... Well, maybe you don't *suck*, but, uh...

*A warm smile.*

Not totally...

Silence. A long silence. They study each other. There's obvious curiosity. Interest. What kind of interest, who can say?

JONI

I'll bet you had a mentor, though. Someone who nurtured your love of math.

FRANK

Had more shitty teachers than good ones. But Mrs. Geisendorf and Mr. Millard. They team-taught algebra two and trig. One week we had one [teacher]. Next week the other. Never had anything like that. Not with two teachers at the same [time], you know, alternating. And they were so different in some ways, but they were, uh... They were both good ones. It was an advanced class. Only about ten of us. And we zipped through the textbook and went way past... We were on to calculus before the end of the year.

Thoughtful silence.

JONI

How'd they make you *feel*?

*Waits, but only a puzzled look from Frank.*

I remember all my teachers. I learned something from all of them, but the best and the worst teachers stand out. I think I learned just as much from the bad ones as I did from the good.

FRANK

That doesn't make/ any –

JONI

As a teacher. I learned what *not* to do from the bad ones. And I got some ideas of what to do from the good ones. How to best teach.

FRANK

Oh. Yeah. I guess.

JONI

So...? How'd they make you *feel*? You know, Mrs. Geisendorf and Mr. Millard?

FRANK

*A moment seriously considering.*

Smart. They made me feel smart.

JONI

*Nodding, smiling.*

How'd your mom make you feel? About the piano?

A long pause. Frank, thoughtful, screws his face into a frown. The realization is painful.

JONI (CONT.)

Okay. What do you love about teaching? Besides the subject matter, I mean.

JONI (CONT.)

*Waits, but only a shrug from Frank.*

For me, it's all about how I make the students feel about, um, about themselves. Sure, about the subject matter. But about themselves. About the other students.

*A self-deprecating shrug and smile.*

Maybe that takes another kind of intelligence. Emotional intelligence.

Frank and Joni regard each other. Frank, very reflective – the wheels are turning. A long pause, then Avery and Quinn enter mid-conversation and head for the coffee.

QUINN

So, get this. I say to the kid. *What's a matter with ya? Ya got shit for brains?*

AVERY

*Gasping in shock.*

No, Quinn. You didn't. Not in front of other/ kids!

QUINN

Look, ya gonna be in my gym class, ya gotta wear a jockstrap. Otherwise, you gonna have yer nads peekin' outta yer gym shorts givin' everybody a show.

AVERY

Oh, my!

QUINN

Yeah. Look. When I was a kid, we dint have coed gym class. But now... It's a problem!

*Animated tiptoeing. A dance of sorts.*

*Oh, no! We can't be separatin' the boys and the girls.*

*Turning with coffee cup.*

We got a rope and a climbin' peg board in the gym. Think I can ask the kid to climb without a jockstrap. Yer gonna have all the other kids gathered round staring up at the kid's nut sack.

AVERY

*Mortified.*

Well, that's just uncivilized. And why do the children have to climb a rope? They're not animals.

QUINN

Ha! They're not *children*. Animals zackly what they are. Sure as hell ain't human. So, yeah. Climbin' a rope least gives the animals chance to build some arm strength.

AVERY

But we can't speak to children like [that]. We can't demean them.

QUINN

Yeah, but get this.

*Turning to Frank.*

Yer gonna love this. So, this dipshit kid. Jason. He's startin' to shinny up the rope –

JONI

*Jason?*

QUINN

Who are you?

FRANK

Joni. She's a sub.

QUINN

Whatever. But I know he ain't gotta jockstrap, and there's bunch a girls standin' over there by the rope. And I'm quick on my feet, right? And I know if he gets halfway up the rope, we're gonna have a bunch a girls gawkin', gigglin', and lookin' up to see the kid's nuts hangin' outta his gym shorts.

AVERY

*Covering her ears.*

I can't hear this.

QUINN

So, I yell, and he lets go the rope, and I know I gotta dress him down. Teach a lesson. So, I pull him aside and ask him, *Whatsa matter with ya? Ya got shit for brains?*

AVERY

*Squealing and darting to sit at the table.*

Ooooh my! Ooooh my!

QUINN

And the dipshit kid stands there. At attention. Jes stands there. Looks me in the eye and says, *Yes, sir.* And I say, *What?! Ya got shit for brains?* And the kid says it again. *Yes, sir.*

Avery wails.

QUINN (CONT.)

Well, that jes took me by surprise. So, I dint know what to say. The other kids standin' round. Shit eatin' grins. Jes holdin' their breath waitin' to see what *I'm* gonna say.

AVERY

*Our school's become a madhouse! Where's the civility? Where's the respect?*

QUINN

Ask me, the dipshit was pretty respectf'ul. *Yes, sir.* I mean/ that's –

AVERY

Shouldn't the school provide them?

QUINN

Provide who?

AVERY

If they're required as part of the uniform.

QUINN

Uniform? The hell ya talkin' 'bout?

AVERY

You know, the... Oh. Don't make me say it. You know the... Things. If they're required as part of the uniform.

QUINN

Jockstraps?! Provide jockstraps?! Ya gotta be kiddin'. Yeah. *Line up, boys, for yer free jockstrap.* Where's it gonna end? And what about the girls? Everthing's gotta be all equi-whatchamacallit... Equal. So, then what? What we gonna do? Provide the girls with support bras for their tatas?

Quinn chuckles while others look aghast. Then, silence.

QUINN (CONT.)

*What?*

JONI

Jason is living in a shelter with his mom. Did you know that? Did you think to see if he's got the resources to buy a jockstrap.

QUINN

A jockstrap ain't gonna break the bank. And, sister, that ain't my job.

FRANK

Her name's Joni.

QUINN

Yeah. Whatever. She's a sub, right?

JONI

Yes. Just a sub. Not a bully.

QUINN

*What?! You sayin' / I'm a –*

FRANK

A bully. And an ass.

Quinn, taken aback by Frank's reproach, glares. Frank sits calmly wearing a taunting smile. Joni looks on, expressionless, but Avery is terrified, eyes wide.

FRANK (CONT.)

But you do coach football.

QUINN

Winnin' football! I coach *winnin'* football.

FRANK

Bully and an ass. Maybe that's what it takes to win football games.

Quinn is at a loss for words, but he clenches his fist, clenches his jaw, and glares.

FRANK (CONT.)

*Bit of a smirk.*

Uh oh. Do we need to get the principal in here?

Quinn hesitates then turns to leave. As he's about to exit, Frank speaks up to stop him.

FRANK

Hey, Coach. I've got two questions for you.

Quinn pauses but doesn't turn around.

FRANK (CONT.)

Can Jason climb a rope?

QUINN

*Now turning.*

Like a freakin' monkey.

FRANK

What I figured. But answer me this. How'd you make him feel?

QUINN

Whaddya mean, how'd I make him feel? Probably felt like the dipshit he is. Leastwise, bet he ain't never gonna come to gym class without a jockstrap.

FRANK

I suppose not. Might never come to *your* class again.

A who-gives-a-shit shrug, and Quinn again turns to leave, but is once more stopped by Frank.

FRANK (CONT.)

Hey, Coach.

QUINN

What? Ya wanna talk feelin's, I got shit to do.

FRANK

Not feelings Coach. Just wanted to ask. What's seven times eight?

Quinn, overwhelmed with the complexity, cocks his head quizzically. Working on it, he stares blankly, lips moving to reflect his mental efforts to calculate.

JONI

Eight touchdowns with extra points.

QUINN

*Coming to life.*

Fifty-six! What we scored against Springfield! Kicked their ass!

Quinn swells up with pride and looks for a reaction from the others, but nothing. So, he shrugs, exits.

AVERY

*To Joni.*

What you did there. That was really something.

FRANK

You made him feel pretty smart there for a second.

AVERY

*Smart?* The man has the social graces of a... I'm sorry. It's not fitting to speak ill of the...

FRANK

Handicapped?

AVERY

Uh, I'm not sure...

FRANK

Socially handicapped.

AVERY

Oh. Well.

*Face twisting in agony*

My band students are supposed to play at the football games. We march on the field at halftime. I dread the home games when I have to watch him. The way he treats the players. I just... I can't understand why the district hired/ [him].

FRANK

/School board. Guy wins games.

AVERY

But it's just so wrong. And now my best musicians are refusing to play. At the games. Charlotte. Ruby. Marcelle. It's decimating my horn section. And Jazmine is my best percussionist. All those girls have refused to play on principle because of the toxic culture.

FRANK

Charlotte. Ruby. Marcelle. Jazmine. Your best musicians?

AVERY

Without a doubt. They're –

FRANK

My best math students.

JONI

Why do you think math came easily for you? All those hours practicing the piano. Music and math complement each other.

FRANK

*Thoughtful pause.*

I guess I never [considered]. Huh.

AVERY

*Pausing to look at her phone.*

Can either of you give me directions to the West Clinic? I've got an appointment, and my maps app isn't working.

FRANK

Sure. Head east on 23 to Park. South to Division. East on Division to Johnson. South on Johnson to West Avenue. Then, east on West Avenue.

AVERY

Oh, my. That's so [confusing].

FRANK

It's just a couple of blocks down on the south side of West Avenue.

AVERY

So, I head east to go to the West Clinic? Sounds like a misnomer.

*Chagrined.*

Can you give me, uh... Can you say it differently. I'm sorry. I don't, uh, I don't really do directions very well... I'm better with places and locations.

FRANK

*Unable to contain a chuckle.*

Well, yeah. It's on West Avenue so that's why it's named [West Clinic]. I guess it might be confusing. But you know which way east is, right?

AVERY

Uh... [No.]

JONI

Left out of the parking lot to the frontage road. Right on the frontage road until you get to Highway 23. Right on Highway 23 to Park.

AVERY

*Taking notes.*

Just a minute. Left on, uh...

JONI

*Slowly.*

Left out of the parking lot. Take a right on the frontage road. When you get to Highway 23, take another right.

FRANK

You'll be heading east.

AVERY

Oh. I don't need to know that.

Frank and Joni share a just a bit of a smile.

JONI

Okay. After you turn right on Highway 23, go to Park and then take another right.

FRANK

That's south.

AVERY

*Excoriating Frank with a look.*

Right on Park.

JONI

When you get to Division, turn left. When you get to Johnson, turn right. That will take you to West Avenue, and you'll turn left again.

AVERY

Oh, my. This is [confusing]. Left. Then right. Then another right. Left. Right. Left.

JONI

You got it. The clinic will be on the right.

AVERY

Oh, my.

*Pausing to study her notes.*

Okay. Wish me luck.

*Starting to exit, but then stops abruptly.*

Oh. If you know of a really good piano teacher, Mrs. Abercrombie is no longer able to give lessons, and I've got a couple of advanced students left in the lurch.

JONI

Frank! I'll bet you –

FRANK

Oh, no. No, no, no.

AVERY

Frank, I didn't know you played.

FRANK

No. Not, not for [ages]. No.

AVERY

Okay. Well, thanks for the directions.

*Mumbling on exiting.*

Left. Right. Another right...

JONI

She's better with places and locations.

FRANK

I told you. We're surrounded by ignorance. Another example of how technology is destroying our intelligence.

JONI

No, I agree. Spatial intelligence is taking a hit. Ask ten people in a room to close their eyes, spin around a couple of times, and then point north. When they open their eyes, you'll have ten people all pointing in a different direction.

FRANK

So, we agree. Technology's destroying intelligence. Quantitative. Verbal. And Spatial. But I doubt technology has anything to do with the coach's lack of emotional intelligence.

JONI

*Smiling.*

Nice to agree on something, isn't it?

FRANK

Yeah. It is.

*Pause.*

Guess I better get going. Get ready for my next class.

JONI

Yes. Me, too.

A long pause as Frank and Joni regard each other.

FRANK

I was thinking...

JONI

Yes.

FRANK

If you're looking for someone to, uh... If you want to take out your dad's boat...

JONI

Yes.

FRANK

Maybe I could, uh... Maybe *we* could, you know. Like... Go sailing.

JONI

*A warm smile.*

*Like?* Like, go sailing?

BLACKOUT

END OF PLAY

## DINKERS TAMING BANGERS

Inspired by the works of William Shakespeare with a nod to *The Taming of the Shrew*.

### Cast of Characters

<u>KATE</u>	Female. Firefighter. An avid outdoorswoman. Likes country music and the Friday night fish fry. Kate is Pete's partner in pickleball and in life. A highly skilled pickleball player. A banger.
<u>BEBE</u>	Female. Beautician. She idolizes British crooners Tom Jones and Engelbert Humperdinck. Bebe is Luke's partner in pickleball and in life. An average pickleball player. A dinker.
<u>PETE</u>	Male. A bricklayer who looks the part. Pete's an avid outdoorsman and a fan of MMA cage fighting. An aggressive, undisciplined pickleball player. A banger.
<u>LUKE</u>	Male. A preschool teacher with a penchant for Shakespearian theatre. Luke is shy, softspoken except when quoting Shakespeare. An awkward pickleball player. A dinker.
CHARACTERS	Any ethnicity and all about the same age, 40s – 60s.
SYNOPSIS	Competition on the pickleball court spills over for Kate and Bebe when they place a bet on who will be most successful in reforming their partners to play differently. Can a dinker become a banger? Even more interesting perhaps, can a banger become a dinker?
TIME	The early days of summer.
SETTING	A sun-kissed pickleball court in the fictional town of Padua, Wisconsin.
SET	A simple split, static set. To one side of the stage, a space representing the pickleball court with a net and signage for the club's court rules. Several chairs are courtside. To the other side of the stage, a cocktail table, chairs, and signage: <i>Padua Pickleball Clubhouse</i> .
RUNTIME:	~40 minutes.

## PRODUCTION NOTES:

- Lighting can be used to achieve seamless, rapid scene transitions except between Scenes 4 and 5 when there is a blackout.
- Brackets [ ] indicate sentiment expressed by unspoken words.
- Luke's quotes and paraphrases from Shakespeare are italicized and delivered dramatically.
- In pickleball, dinkers hit soft, lobbing shots; bangers drive the ball with power.
- In pickleball, "kitchen" refers to a no-volley zone near the net.

*This is a way to kill a wife with kindness, And thus I'll curb her mad and headstrong humour.*

~ William Shakespeare from *The Taming of the Shrew*

*Tis hatch'd and shall be so.*

~ William Shakespeare from *The Taming of the Shrew*

*In romance as in pickleball, there are dinkers and bangers.*

~ Anonymous Playwright

## DINKERS TAMING BANGERS

SCENE 1

A pleasant summer morning at the pickleball court. Bebe and Kate stand courtside after playing a game. Bebe has a cellphone to her ear while Kate fiddles with her paddle.

BEBE

Only five seconds?

(A big breath)

Okay. I'm ready.

(A beat, then panicking and looking to Kate)

*In what year was he knighted?*

KATE

What? Who?

BEBE

Give me a year!

KATE

(A confused shrug)

Uh, 1999.

BEBE

(Quickly into the phone)

1999!

Kate turns away and nonchalantly begins bouncing a pickleball on her paddle. A beat, then Bebe squeals and bounces with delight.

BEBE (CONT.)

Oh, my God! I won! I won!

Kate doesn't react, just continues bouncing the pickleball.

BEBE (CONT.)

(Into phone)

Yes, that's correct. You'll mail them?

(Beat)

Sure!

(Best radio voice)

*My station is radio KIMR, home of laidback hits.*

BEBE (CONT.)

(Pause)

Okay. Thank you soooo much!

Bebe sets the phone aside and grabs Kate from behind causing her to drop her paddle.

KATE

The hell you doin'?

BEBE

Thank you!

(Off Kate's blank stare)

We did it! *You* did it!

KATE

What? Did what?

BEBE

Sir Tom Jones! How did you know he was knighted in 1999? I just won – *we* just won – a pair of concert tickets! I entered a radio contest and... He's playing in Chicago in two weeks!

KATE

Tom Jones? The/ singer?

BEBE

/You'll go with me, of course.

KATE

Well, I don't –

BEBE

It's only fair. I mean, um, Luke will be disappointed. He's a/ huge fan.

KATE

/No, that's okay.

BEBE

The voice of an angel. Tom Jones and Engelbert Humperdinck. *British. Baritone. Angels.*

KATE

Humper who? And Tom Jones? Tellin' me the guy's really still [alive]? Still giving concerts?

BEBE

I saw him years ago in Vegas. Got so turned on.

KATE

All that hip action getcher your motor runnin'? Didja throw your bra on the stage?

BEBE

No, you're thinking... Hips? No. Not like Elvis, no. But...

(Swooning)

His shirt was undone to his belly button.

KATE

Pete and I are goin' to Vegas next month to see Garth Brooks. Now *there's a* singer.

BEBE

/He did make a country album! Tom Jones did. Just one, I guess. Hey, I know you're into country music, but you did help me win. And it's *Tom Jones*. Come on!

(Channeling Tom Jones)

*She's a Lady. Whoa, whoa, whoa she's a lady.*

KATE

(Pausing, amused)

Yeah but no, that's okay. You go ahead. Go with Luke. Both you guys can throw undies on the stage.

BEBE

Really? Well. If you're sure. Luke's gonna owe ya. He's got a thing for. I just mean. He's a big/ fan.

KATE

/Shall we join the guys in the clubhouse? You and Luke can buy the winners a drink.

BEBE

They're probably already swilling mimosas.

KATE

Mimosas? Not Pete. A Bloody Mary, maybe.

BEBE

(Hesitating)

Before we, um, I was gonna ask...

KATE

Yeah?

BEBE

Can you guys dial it down a bit? With the banging? I mean, the ball...

(Indicating her own cheek)

I think it left a mark.

KATE

I don't see anything.

BEBE

You're not really looking.

KATE

You gotta be quicker to back off the net. Getcher ass outta the no volley zone.

BEBE

In the face! He was. *Aiming*. Aiming for my face.

KATE

Pete? You give him too much credit. I love the dipshit. I do. But he's got no *aim*. I'm the only one of us has any accuracy.

BEBE

Overhand, too. Banging it right into my face.

KATE

Yeah, well. Maybe you should play from back a the court. Can't stand the heat, stay outta the kitchen.

BEBE

And you're no better. You say you're accurate but –

KATE

Damn straight, I am.

BEBE

So how do you explain the bruise on my left boob? You banged one right into my boob!

KATE

Better than in the face. And 'sides, you lead with your boobs. Hard to miss 'em.

BEBE

But why you guys gotta be so? So aggressive?

KATE

Competitive. Not aggressive.

BEBE

I shouldn't need a Kevlar vest to play pickleball. This is. It's just not working.

(Pause)

You and Pete are both bangers.

KATE

Yeah. Not really fair, is it? Two bangers 'gainst a couple a dinkers.

BEBE

Maybe we should switch partners.

KATE

Oh. You wanna be Pete's partner?

(Teasing, a knowing grin)

Luke into swapping, is he?

BEBE

I just mean. Each team would be better with one banger and one dinker. Hey! How about you and me? Partners. Think we could take on the men?

KATE

I'm a kickass barracuda, Girl, so, yeah. No contest. But I don't think their egos could take it.

BEBE

Luke doesn't have an ego problem. He's not like that.

KATE

No. He's not.

BEBE

What's that supposed to mean?

KATE

Uh... Luke's, uh...

BEBE

(Unconvincingly)

He's a. Man.

KATE

Yeah. Okay.

BEBE

He's sweet. Sensitive. Doesn't have to prove anything. Not like, you know, [Pete].

KATE

(Chuckling)

Oh, you think Pete's got somethin' to prove?

BEBE

He's, um, no not something to prove. But Pete's, um... He and Luke are so/ [different].

KATE

/Different. Yeah. One's a dinker. One's a banger.

BEBE

Not like he could change.

KATE

You're talking about Luke. Right? No way he'd ever become a banger.

BEBE

Not really in his nature, but he could if he wanted to. Luke could.

(Pause)

But Pete...

KATE

Not in Pete's nature either. He thinks dinkers are [pussies], you know.

BEBE

Are what?

KATE

He'd change his game, though, if he thought it would help him win. He's all about winning.

Now Bebe chuckles. Kate shoots a look which stops the chuckling, and they share an uncomfortable pause.

BEBE

It would, wouldn't it?

(Off Kate's confusion)

Make you a better team. If one of you was a dinker.

KATE

Or, one of you was a banger.

BEBE

I guess. Yeah.

KATE

So, why don't you?

(Off Bebe's confusion)

Change.

BEBE

I don't think I can... No. I'm not a banger.

KATE

But Luke. If you do think he really could, you know, [change].

BEBE

Well. He's more likely to become a banger than Pete would ever become a dinker.

KATE

(Growing a smile)

Wanna place a bet on that?

BEBE

Oh, I don't think –

KATE

Your idea. That's what you're saying, right? You think you can turn Luke into a banger? Think Pete can't learn to dink the ball?

BEBE

You're so sure of yourself, aren't you? No way you'll get Pete to dink to the ball. Not consistently, anyway. He'll never be a dinker. Not really. Not bona fide.

(Pause)

You really wanna bet?

KATE

Make it interestin'.

BEBE

But how do we, you know?

KATE

Simple. We give the boys some coachin'. Then, tomorrow mornin' we just count strokes. One point for Luke every time he bangs it and one for Pete every time he dinks it.

A pause. Both women pacing, smiling, contemplating.

BEBE

In just one day? How do we do/ that?

KATE

/If you're afraid...

BEBE

NO... Okay, but we can't tell the men. Promise me. If Pete knows it's a competition, he'll dink every shot just to win. You know how he is.

KATE

Well Pete's only in it for the competition, but yeah, okay. Just a little coachin'. Some persuasion. But no mention of our bet.

(Crossing her heart, then a pause)

What are the stakes?

BEBE

If I win, I get to take you to the Tom Jones concert.

KATE

Oh, God. But what about Luke? Won't he be –

BEBE

He'll understand when I tell him I only won concert tickets because of you. It was really you who won if you think about it. Besides, he's already got tickets to APT in Spring Green that weekend. They're doing Much Ado. You know how Luke loves his Shakespeare. Hey! If I take you to see Tom Jones, maybe Pete can go to the play with Luke.

KATE

(Laughing)

Oh, my God. I'd like to see that. Pete sitting through a play. And Shakespeare? No, not when the walleyes are biting.

BEBE

Whatever. But the bet. If you do. I mean, you're not going to. But if you do win –

KATE

Boundary waters! You, me, and a canoe. A weekend fishing trip.

BEBE

Um... Aren't there a lot of mosquitoes?

KATE

You wanna bet, or not?

Bebe hesitates a moment, then the women shake hands.

CROSSFADE TO NEXT SCENE

SCENE 2

Pete and Luke sit in the Padua Pickleball Clubhouse with drinks and pickleball paddles on the table. Pete holds out his hands, palms up, for Luke to examine.

LUKE

Ohhh, my God. Are those [scars]? It left scars?

PETE

Scars. Yeah. Faint but still show. Took the skin right off. I was bleedin' all over the place. And it's been more than four months. February. Lake Winnebago.

LUKE

You weren't wearing gloves?

PETE

Yeah. That's the thing. I'd just taken them off to take a leak when –

LUKE

On the ice? Where do you [take a leak]?

PETE

Keep a bucket and roll of shit paper in the shanty.

LUKE

Ah.

PETE

So, I'm holdin' my pecker when there it is. The monster's shadow crossing the hole.

LUKE

They look like monsters, don't they? Prehistoric.

(Dramatically)

*Fishes live in the sea, as men do a-land; the great ones eat up the little ones.*

PETE

Ya talk like that, I ain't gotta clue.

LUKE

Go on. You're caught unawares, pecker in your hands.

PETE

Just one hand. My spear in the other.

LUKE

So, you let go of your pecker and –

PETE

Not right away. Ya can't turn it off just like that. Laid a yellow line on the ice getting' over to the hole.

LUKE

(Again, dramatically)

*Boldness be my friend!*

PETE

Yeah. Whatever. I plunged the spear into the monster's back and –

LUKE

Captain Ahab!

PETE

*Who?*

LUKE

Moby Dick.

PETE

And the tines broke free from the shaft, and it took off. The frickin' fish. And the rope was hiss'n', just slidin' over the ice and into the hole at 90 miles an hour.

LUKE

Wow.

PETE

Lucky I was able to snag it.

LUKE

Both hands?

PETE

Well. Yeah. By then I let loose my pecker.

LUKE

A big one?

(Beat, grinning)

The sturgeon, I mean. Not your pecker.

PETE

169 pounds, 4 ounces. Official weight. Biggest of the tournament.

LUKE

What's it feel like? Killing a prehistoric monster with a spear?

PETE

I was hangin' on for dear life. Rope slidin' through my hands. Thought it was gonna pull me in, but I called a buddy over, and the two of us managed.

LUKE

That's what you call a real fish story.

PETE

The hell you talkin' 'bout. Ain't no *fish story*. I got pictures. Certificate from the weigh station at home. Framed. All 'fficial you wanna see it.

LUKE

Oh, no. I didn't mean. I believe you. I do. It's just. I mean, with a spear! That's something. I'm not a fisherman, but I thought maybe, I don't know, worms, not a spear.

PETE

I do gotta a big hook baited with a ball a nightcrawlers in the water. And I hang a mirror in there, too.

LUKE

In the water? A mirror?

PETE

To attract 'em. They're curious fuckers. Gotta swim up, check out any object in the water. A tin can. A coffee cup. I use a mirror. Yeah, but it's the spear that gets 'em.

LUKE

And worms.

(Again, dramatically)

*A man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king and eat of the fish that hath fed of that worm.*

Awkward pause as Pete regards Luke.  
*What's with this guy?*

LUKE (CONT.)

So, the hands. I guess they're not giving you any problem playing pickleball.

PETE

(Answers with a shrug)

Where are the ladies, anyway?

LUKE

Need their girl time, I guess. But it's nice for the two of us to, you know, enjoy a drink. I love to hear your stories. You lead an exciting life. Quite the sportsman.

PETE

Yeah, but don't compare to Kate. Except for that sturgeon, she out-fishes me every goddamn time. Out-hunts me, too. She thinks it's funny. Pisses me off.

LUKE

Well, you're a serious guy. You and Kate. Even the pickleball. Pretty intense.

PETE

Fuckin' A!

Uncomfortable pause, Luke looking around.

LUKE

(Leaning in as sharing a secret)

You know, we're in a public place. And the language...

PETE

(Chuckling)

Right. I'll tell the priest about next time I go to confession.

(Aside)

20 or 30 years from now.

LUKE

Not a regular churchgoer, I guess.

PETE

I ain't gotta problem with church. If one of my kids ever decides on getting' married, I'll go. Even put on a tie. But confession? No way.

LUKE

We're church members but don't attend as often as we should, I guess. And we don't have priests, so no confession. Only went to a Catholic church one time and it was... Different...

PETE

Bother you? Them speakin' Latin?

LUKE

No. It was more the, uh... The/ context.

PETE

/The kneelin'? What *context*?

LUKE

No, I can't...

(Hesitating as Pete waits)

It was before Bebe.

PETE

You went to church with another woman? Like a date? This I gotta hear.

LUKE

No. Not a date. Not exactly.

PETE

Yeah?

LUKE

No. It's really embarrassing.

PETE

Okay. Now I really gotta hear it.

LUKE

A theatre in Chicago was doing the Scottish play.

PETE

Yeah. Okay. So, ya went to a play and then to church.

LUKE

This woman I met... Mary. Fitting name, I guess, cause she was such a devout Catholic.

PETE

A real virgin, huh?

LUKE

No!

PETE

Ohhh.

LUKE

We shared a hotel room and –

PETE

There ya go!

LUKE

No. It was a two-room suite.

PETE

So, you didn't sleep with her?

LUKE

Well, no. Not at first. The living room had a sofa bed. So goddamn uncomfortable.

PETE

(Teasing with a grin)

Language, man.

LUKE

Right. Sorry. Anyway, all night I can't sleep on the darn pullout sofa bed because it's so uncomfortable. And...

PETE

Yeah?

LUKE

God, she was beautiful. And I was thinking –

PETE

You were horny.

LUKE

Wondering, you know? I mean, we went to the play and had a good time. And we seemed to really be getting along. But I wasn't going to be anything but a gentleman.

PETE

My, God, man. You didn't put the moves on her?

LUKE

Finally, it's early morning. And I'd finally managed to fall asleep. But then she wakes me up.

PETE

Ohhh. I bet she did.

LUKE

Yeah. Crawled in beside me and started kissing. And she told me, uh...

PETE

She wanted you.

LUKE

Told me she'd been waiting all night for me to come into the bedroom.

PETE

Course she was.

LUKE

How was I to know? Anyway, she, uh, she took me by the hand. Took me to the other room. To the good bed. The regular bed. And she pulled down my [shorts], you know, and climbed on top of me.

PETE

This is better than any goddamn fish story.

LUKE

The thing is, she was really enjoying it.

PETE

Yeah. A guy can usually tell. That thing about faking orgasms, I don't know.

LUKE

Right. I don't think she was faking the way she was, uh... But I think at the same time, she was feeling guilty.

PETE

That's a Catholic for ya.

LUKE

And I didn't have any, you know. Protection.

PETE

Yeah, but –

LUKE

No. I mean she was riding me like a rodeo cowgirl, but every time I was just about to, you know, [come], she'd throw herself off me.

PETE

Oh, man. Look. Ya gotta keep – at all times – keep a rubber in your billfold.

LUKE

Yeah. I guess. Maybe back when I was single.

PETE

Okay. That's a fair statement. Hard to explain if Bebe finds ya packin' a rubber.

LUKE

Anyway, it was the most exhilarating and, at the same time, most frustrating experience of my life.

PETE

I'd take that experience.

LUKE

After. And, I mean, this went on for about an hour.

PETE

An *hour*? My God, man. I gotta whole new level a respect for ya.

LUKE

After. She insisted on. Well, it was Sunday morning. And she insisted on taking me to church. To, you know, do her penance.

(Pause)

So, that's the only time. For me. Only time to experience a Catholic service.

Pete leans back looking at Luke in a whole new light. Kate and Bebe enter with pickleball paddles and sly grins.

KATE

How you boys doin'? Already gotcher drinks, I see.

PETE

Ya kept us waitin' and we didn't know how long [you'd be].

Bebe hugs Luke from behind and kisses his neck.

BEBE

What have you men been talking about?

LUKE

Uh...

PETE

Luke's been tellin' me all about –

LUKE

Fishing! We were talking about fishing.

KATE

Relivin' the battle on Lake Winnebago, I bet.

PETE

Don't you know it.

Baby, can I talk with you outside?

BEBE

Luke looks nervously from Bebe to a grinning Pete and back to Bebe.

Uh, sure.

LUKE

Luke stands, Bebe takes his hand, and they exit. Kate sits next to Pete. A pause.

What else you talk about? Besides the fishin' tournament.

KATE

Oh. Just guy stuff.

PETE

With Luke? You talked about guy stuff?

KATE

CROSSFADE TO NEXT SCENE

SCENE 3

Back at the pickleball court, Bebe and Luke sit courtside.

BEBE

You and Pete getting along?

LUKE

Uh, yeah. I guess. He's an interesting guy. Kind of a neanderthal, but –

BEBE

That's a bit harsh, don't you think?

LUKE

Uh, okay. Maybe a bit. But no. It's, uh, not that I dislike him.

BEBE

But you're not *like* him.

LUKE

Well, no. I mean he's –

BEBE

But neanderthal?

LUKE

The man hunts prehistoric fish with a spear, for God's sake.

BEBE

Does he? *How cool is that?*

LUKE

You think that's [cool]? *Why?*

BEBE

It's very, I don't, know... Masculine. Primal.

LUKE

(Perturbed)

Primal. Yeah. Like I said, neanderthal. But, wow, you seem to –

BEBE

So, you *don't* like him.

LUKE

What? No. I didn't say that. It's just that he's –

BEBE

Powerful. Very powerful. I mean, those arms. That chest.

Pause as Luke studies Bebe with concern.  
*What's she saying?*

LUKE

I said he was interesting. Never said anything about his masculinity or being powerful. I guess I'm just wondering why you –

BEBE

Right! You said he's interesting. I'm just agreeing. He is. A very. Interesting guy.

LUKE

Where's this coming from? All this interest in Pete?

BEBE

It's not that, um, I'm not. Interested. Not really. But Kate... Um...

LUKE

Yeah?

BEBE

There was a suggestion that you might be a better partner for her.

LUKE

Me? Partner with Kate? For pickleball? That makes no sense.

BEBE

No, I know. I guess not.

LUKE

They beat us handily every game. Why would she –

BEBE

The tournament. You know, in Milwaukee in a couple of months.

LUKE

What about it? You're not thinking –

BEBE

I guess she thinks she'll have a better chance with a partner who has... Finesse.

LUKE

Finesse? *Me?*

BEBE

Well, sure. You don't attack the ball the way Pete does, like a gorilla on crack. You have. Finesse.

LUKE

I can't believe Kate thinks I'm [any good]... Sometimes when we're playing, she gives me a look like... Kate thinks I'm a klutz.

BEBE

No! She doesn't! I think she's onto something. A team with one power player and one, um, one finesse player is going to be stronger. Overall.

LUKE

I'm just really... I'm shocked she'd want to partner with me.

BEBE

Yeah, but no, I think she be delighted. But I'm sure Pete would not want to partner with me.

LUKE

Why not? You're a great, uh, a really good player.

BEBE

But a dinker. He's a power player. A/ real banger.

LUKE

A neanderthal.

BEBE

(Fingers to temple, dreamy)

It would be something, though. Playing with a banger.

(Off Luke's look of concern)

Oh, don't look at me like that. I'm only talking about pickleball.

LUKE

You'd be up for that? Being Pete's partner?

BEBE

Well...

LUKE

Oh, my God. You and Pete?

BEBE

Don't be so sensitive. That's your problem.

LUKE

I have a *problem*?

BEBE

If you don't want to play as Kate's partner, I'm pretty sure she's going to work on Pete to get him to dink the ball more than he bangs it. To play more like you. With finesse.

LUKE

(Dismissive laughter)

Right. That's going to happen.

(Beat, sobering)

She really likes the way I play?

BEBE

Oh, I know. It's a silly thought, isn't it? But if he does, if Pete does manage to –

LUKE

Pete can't do anything but pound! Pound, pound, pound! Bang, bang, bang!

BEBE

(Hand to throat, dreamy)

Yeah. He's quite a banger.

(Getting serious)

But if he does, they'll kick our ass.

LUKE

(Confused and concerned)

They already kick our ass.

BEBE

Yeah. And it's not like you could, um, [be a banger].

Uncomfortable pause.

LUKE

(Contrite)

You don't think I can play with power.

BEBE

No, Baby. I'm sure you could if you decided to.

LUKE

With power, huh?

BEBE

Oh, my God! Can you imagine? We'd shut them down!

LUKE

That'll be the day.

BEBE

With me as the dinker and you – you Baby! – you as the banger! We'd be unstoppable!

LUKE

Hard to imagine.

BEBE

All you need is some confidence, Baby!

LUKE

You really think –

BEBE

Yes! You take it to them. Hard! Fast! Hard and fast! We'll mop the court with them!

LUKE

*Really?*

BEBE

Say it with me, Baby! Power! Say it. Power!

LUKE

(Hesitating, weakly)

Power.

BEBE

POWER!

LUKE

Power.

BEBE

SPEED!

LUKE

(A little stronger now)

Speed.

BEBE

I'M A BANGER!

LUKE  
(Standing and stronger)  
I'm a banger!

BEBE  
I'M A BANGER!

LUKE  
(Getting excited now)  
I'm a banger!

BEBE  
Like you mean it! I'M A BANGER!

LUKE  
*O, IT IS EXCELLENT TO HAVE A GIANT'S STRENGTH!*  
(Pumping a fist)  
I'M A BANGER! I'M A BANGER! I'M A BANGER!

BEBE  
(Grabbing Luke in a big hug)  
Yes, you are, Baby! Yes, you are.

CROSSFADE TO NEXT SCENE

SCENE 4

Back in the clubhouse. Kate sits with Pete.  
Drinks and pickleball paddles on the table.

PETE

*Why me?* She invited you.

KATE

Yeah, but Luke. He's got tickets to a Shakespeare play the same weekend.

PETE

So? What does that have to do with –

KATE

No. See, if *you* go to the concert with Bebe, then *I* can go to the play with Luke.

PETE

*What? Why?*

KATE

Well, yeah. Makes sense. Luke won't want to miss it. The play. You know how he loves his Shakespeare.

PETE

But why you wanna go to some dumbass play?

KATE

Not dumbass! And when do I ever get to see a play?

PETE

But with Luke?

KATE

Much Ado About Nothing. It's Shakespeare.

PETE

That's just weird. Guy's totally weird about Shakespeare.

KATE

Maybe. But I'd love to see some Shakespeare. It's about two couples. Star-crossed lovers and there's, I don't know, but it's supposed to be really funny.

PETE

(Confused, concerned)

When did you talk to Luke about the –

KATE

No. No, it was Bebe told me about the play.

Pete, uncomfortable, stands and paces.

KATE (CONT.)

She's totally fine with me going to the play with Luke. But then she needs someone to go with her [to the concert].

PETE

Tellin' me you'd rather go to a play with Luke than a concert with Bebe?

KATE

Got nuthin' to do with Luke. And the concert. It's Tom Jones. He's pretty cool.

(Coy smile)

I'm doin' this for *you*, Sweetie.

PETE

For me? We're already gonna see Garth Brooks next month.

KATE

Right. You can do both. I know Tom Jones isn't *Garth Brooks* cool. But you'll still have a good time.

PETE

Somethin' ain't right here. What ain't ya tellin' me?

KATE

No. That's the deal. Simple. And totally fine. You go to the concert, and I go to the play.

(Off Pete's skepticism)

Okay, Sweetie... Yeah. I'll admit it's for me, too. When do I ever get to see a play?

PETE

But Shakespeare? And with Luke? That pansy-ass? I don't get why you –

KATE

Not a pansy-ass! He's just... Okay, yeah. He's got a sensitive side.

(Pause)

I think you protest too much.

(Smiling)

Luke's sensitive, but you're my man. So big. So strong. So powerful.

(Reaches out to touch him)

Not a big deal if I see a play with him, Sweetie. It's not.

Pete paces. Reflects. Gives in.

PETE

Okay. If you say so, but it's just. Just weird. Guy's apeshit for Shakespeare.

KATE

(Chuckling)

Apeshit for Shakespeare. What's wrong with that?

(Pause)

You know, you could learn a lot from Luke.

PETE

(Sitting)

Yeah? Like what?

KATE

(A shrug)

For one thing, he's got a light touch.

PETE

(Chuckling)

Oh, yeah? Like he's ever touched you.

KATE

No. Don't be a dipshit. That's crazy talk. Of course, he hasn't *touched* me. I was thinking about pickleball.

PETE

*Pickleball?*

KATE

No, but think about it. Who are your favorite ball players?

PETE

*Pickleball* players?

KATE

No. Uh, baseball. Your favorite player.

PETE

Uh...

KATE

Chris Taylor, right?

PETE

Oh. Okay. Yeah. Guy can do it all. Great fielder and only ball player to hit grand slam homers in his first and his one hundredth home runs. Guy's amazing, but what's that got –

KATE  
What about football?

PETE  
Uh...

KATE  
Favorite player?

PETE  
Uh, I don't know. Aaron Rodgers is –

KATE  
Travis Kelce?

PETE  
Travis Kelce. Fuckin' A.

KATE  
What's so great about Travis Kelce? Besides his hot girlfriend.

PETE  
What's not great? Receiving. Blocking. Rushing.

KATE  
Right! Your favorite athletes can do it all. They're big and strong and fast. They play with power. Like you!

PETE  
(Self-effacing chuckle)  
Uhhh, well...

Kate rises and, from behind, wraps her arms around him and leans in.

KATE  
Know what else? They all know when to play with a light touch. Chris Taylor when he does a light underhand toss to second base so they can get the double play. Travis Kelce when he tosses back to Mahomes for a flea flicker, or he chooses to feint and then stutter step into the end zone instead of plow ahead like a bulldozer. Taylor and Kelce. They're both big and strong – like you – but they know when to use a light touch.

PETE  
Okay. But don't tell me you're comparing those guys to Luke playin' pickleball.

KATE

No. Luke is a klutz. But he has mastered a light touch.

PETE

*Mastered?* Guy hasn't mastered dick. Mosta his dinks set us up for a bang. You're right. Guy's a klutz.

KATE

But you! Can you imagine how unstoppable we'd be if you played like Taylor? Played like Kelce? What if *you* mastered the dink shot?

PETE

Not really my style.

KATE

Yeah. I guess. You're a power player and it's too much to expect that...

PETE

What? If I gotta dink a shot, you know I can do it. And better than Luke, too. When I have to.

KATE

Yeah, you're right, Sweetie... I was just thinking...

PETE

If one of us gonna be a dinker, should be you. You're the woman.

KATE

And real men can't play with a light touch...  
(Teasing smile)  
Unless you're Chris Taylor or Travis Kelce.

Pause. Pete, uncomfortable with the thinly veiled mocking.

PETE

You know I could if –

KATE

Both of us can bang the hell outta the ball, but if we're gonna have a shot at placing in the tournament in Milwaukee, *I* better bet the one to step up and work on dinking the ball. We've gotta have the third drop shot in our arsenal.

(Beat and a smile)

Dinkers gotta be *strategic*. Dinkers gotta be *smart*. No, you're right, Sweetie. I should be the one to work on the dink shot.

Pete, conflicted, hesitates as he searches for words.

PETE

Well, it doesn't have to just be one of us, I guess.

KATE

Oh?

PETE

If you think it will give us a shot in the tournament. Yeah. Maybe both of us should/ work on -

KATE

/Work on dinked shots!

PETE

Yeah. I guess.

KATE

That's a great idea, Sweetie! How about we alternate dinking and banging when we play Bebe and Luke?

PETE

So, you dink and I bang, then we switch off. I mean, when it makes sense. A guy can't dink every shot.

KATE

Right. But let's switch our focus *between* matches, not within one match.

PETE

Uh...

KATE

Let's say when we play tomorrow morning, it's your turn to practice dinked shots. I mean, just try to dink as many as you can. The next day, I'll do the same.

PETE

Gonna take me a while to get used to, you know, playing like that.

KATE

Know what I love about you, Sweetie? You can be both hard. And other times you can be soft.

(Sultry)

I love it when you use a soft touch.

PETE

Ya do, do ya?

KATE

Yeah. You know what I'm talkin' about.

Kate wraps Pete in a hug and gives a long kiss.

KATE (CONT.)

Gotta love a hard man who's got a soft touch.

Pete gently strokes her cheek.

PETE

Ya like that, do ya?

KATE

A light touch and Shakespeare. Turns a gal on.

They share a long moment, Pete studying Kate who smiles coyly. Then...

BLACKOUT

END OF SCENE

SCENE 5

The next morning at the pickleball court. Kate and Pete are on one side of the net, Bebe and Luke on the other. During the simulated pickleball game, the action should be choreographed for comedic effect.

The players will use paddles and an imaginary ball. If it's possible to time sound effects, they can be used to indicate when the imaginary ball is struck by a paddle.

During the game, Kate shows a high degree of skill; she plays with power using strong forehand and backhand strokes, maybe even an occasional overhand. Bebe plays somewhat less skillfully but makes her shots. Luke plays awkwardly with a mix of power shots and soft lobs. Pete, also playing awkwardly, attempts mostly soft, lobbing shots; at times, however, he can't help himself and bangs the ball with power.

BEBE

Zero, zero, two.

Bebe serves. Kate returns, and a volley ensues which begins slowly but builds in speed until Luke returns a wild shot that goes out. Bebe holds up a finger, and Kate wags her head and motions Bebe to the side of the court for a private convo.

KATE

You can't count that. It went out.

BEBE

Oh, come on. Just because it went out? You gotta admit that was an honest attempt to bang, and we gotta give the guys credit for trying.

Kate shrugs, nods, and the women return to the court. Kate prepares to serve.

KATE

Zero, zero, one.

Kate serves. Bebe returns, and another volley ensues as before until Luke returns another wild shot that goes out. Kate gives Pete a quick kiss and prepares for another serve while Bebe gives Luke a pat on the back and an encouraging word.

KATE

One, zero, one.

Before Kate completes the serve, there's a momentary blackout to indicate elapsed time. As lights come back up, Luke is preparing to serve.

LUKE

Ten, nine, two.

Luke serves. An extended a volley ensues, Luke mostly banging and Pete consistently dinking. Each time they do, we see the women counting with a finger. Finally, with an awkward overhand, Luke manages to bang a shot between Kate and Pete for the win.

LUKE

(Doing a victory dance)

*Sound trumpets! Let our bloody colours wave!*

Kate struts to the net, smiles, and gives a thumbs up to Bebe to indicate that, despite losing the game, she won their bet. Luke finishes his victory dance and turns to Bebe who's not so giddy.

LUKE (CONT.)

*Make the upcoming hour overflow with joy, and let pleasure drown the brim.*

(Turning to Bebe)

What's wrong? We won!

BEBE

(Forcing a smile)

Yes, we did. Well done, Baby.

Bebe gives Luke a peck on the cheek and retires to courtside with Kate. Luke waves Pete over.

LUKE

(Can't help gloating)

*Then with the losers let it sympathize, For nothing can seem foul to those that win.*

(A slap to Pete's back)

Let's go. Losers buy drinks.

A dejected Pete and jubilant Luke exit. The women watch them go before speaking.

KATE

Oh, my God. Pete's never gonna get over losing to you guys.

BEBE

What have we done? We both lost, and I'd rather have lost the game than the bet.

KATE

Yeah.

BEBE

Boundary waters, huh?

KATE

Yeah.

BEBE

Mosquitos.

KATE

Yeah.

CROSSFADE TO NEXT SCENE

SCENE 6

In the clubhouse, Pete and Luke sit, paddles and drinks on their table.

PETE

(Raising his glass)

Gotta give it to ya. You really banged that last shot.

LUKE

*The wheel is come full circle.*

(Beat)

Wasn't easy. Wasn't natural. But Bebe got me fired up.

PETE

So, this was all the women's idea.

LUKE

You, too? Kate?

PETE

Oh, yeah. Big time. She's a sneaky one,. Knew Chris Taylor and Travis Kelce would get to me.

LUKE

Who?

PETE

Convinced me we'd do better I dinked the ball. We know how that turned out.

LUKE

I don't know. *We* did. Better. First time we've ever/ beat you.

PETE

Cuz I was dinking, not cuz you were bangin'.

LUKE

Maybe. But yeah. The women. Why do you think they did it?

Pause. Both considering.

PETE

Kate told me she wants to go to some play with you. Wants *me* to go to a Tom Jones concert with Bebe.

LUKE

Oh. Really? Well, I understand Kate wanting to see *Much Ado About Nothing*. And you could do worse than Tom Jones. He's got a great voice and moves the ladies like. But Shakespeare's got the language. You'd love the play.

PETE

(Chuckling)

Uh, yeah. I don't think so.

LUKE

Oh, yeah? Listen to this.

The two men lean in as we...

CROSSFADE TO NEXT SCENE

SCENE 7

Back at the pickleball court with Kate and Bebe. The conversation continues.

BEBE

Are you serious?

KATE

I'm not letting you off the hook. You're still going to the boundary waters with me. But, yeah, I wouldn't mind seeing Tom Jones.

BEBE

So, you'll go with me?! That's great.

(Pause)

I guess... The men kind of got the short end, didn't they?

KATE

No way. Both our teams played better today than we've ever played before.

BEBE

Not saying much. Luke's never gonna be a banger. And Pete's/ never –

KATE

Never gonna be a dinker. Right. But they got out of their comfort zones which means they were learning. If you're comfortable, you're not learning anything.

BEBE

So, we're educators, not manipulators.

KATE

What's the difference?

BEBE

Wait a miuute. The guys are coming.

Pete and Luke enter.

BEBE (CONT.)

Hey, you didn't wait for us. We're still owed a drink.

LUKE

Drinks are waiting for us in the clubhouse, but first –

PETE

We wanted to tell you –

LUKE  
To thank you.

KATE  
Really?

PETE  
I'm never gonna be a dinker.

LUKE  
And I'll never be a banger.

(Beat)  
*The leopard does not change his spots.*

(Beat)  
But we are not leopards!

PETE  
And maybe it's not a bad idea to change things up once in a while. Use a lighter touch.

KATE  
Travis Kelce, stand aside!

LUKE  
(Addressing Bebe)  
Would you mind if I don't go to the Tom Jones concert with you?

BEBE  
Oh, no, Baby. That's fine. I know you have the play, and/ I've asked –

PETE  
I'm goin' to the play.

Kate and Bebe are taken aback, stunned.  
Luke wears a big grin as Pete continues.

PETE (CONT.)  
Well, yeah. Luke told me about Shakespeare. Never knew the dude was so raunchy.

LUKE  
Not raunchy. Wickedly suggestive.

Pete moves close to Kate and addresses her with dramatic flair as Luke provides the responses in affected female voice. Kate and Bebe are amazed by the performance.

PETE

*Who knows not where a wasp does wear his sting? In his tail.*

LUKE

*In his tongue.*

PETE

(Moving closer to Kate)

*Whose tongue?*

LUKE

*Yours, if you talk of tails: and so farewell.*

PETE

(Moving closer still)

*What, with my tongue in your tail?*

(Now nose to nose)

*Come on, and kiss me, Kate.*

Bebe and Luke look on as Pete and Kate wrap each other up in a passionate kiss that goes on until...

BLACKOUT

END OF PLAY

## TRUCK STOP WISDOM

## Cast of Characters

<u>JULIE</u>	Female. 30s. A university instructor and doctoral candidate. Fussy. Snooty. Any ethnicity.
<u>MIKE</u>	Male. 30s. A plumber. Amiable. Unassuming. Rumpled. Any ethnicity.
<u>AMBER</u>	Female. 30s. A truck stop massage therapist. All together. Insightful. Intelligent. Empathic. Any ethnicity.
SYNOPSIS:	When Julie and Mike arrive very late one winter evening at the cabin reserved for their anniversary weekend, they encounter Amber, an unexpected interloper. Mike and Julie's relationship is already in trouble, but will the intrusion of Amber, a truck stop massage therapist, salvage or doom the anniversary weekend?
SETTING	Whistlin' Crack Resort. Located on a mountain pass in the Cascade Mountains of the Pacific Northwest, the resort's lodge facilities include a reception area, kitchen, and dining room. There are six outlying cabins accessed by walking trails through the woods. The resort is closed November through April, but for special occasions, may allow the use of one of the cabins on the property during the off-season. It's in one of these cabins that Julie and Mike have their encounter with Amber
SET:	A modern log cabin with fireplace, table, chairs, and fitting décor.
TIME:	Mid-February.
RUNTIME:	~35 minutes
NOTES:	- Brackets [ ] indicate sentiment expressed by unspoken words.

*Every actor is somewhat mad, or else he'd be a plumber...*  
~ Béla Lugosi

*I think infidelity is difficult, monogamy is difficult, and marriage is difficult.*  
~ Maura Tierney

*In love as in sport, the amateur status must be strictly maintained.*  
~ Robert Graves

*If I had my life to live over again, I'd be a plumber.*  
~ Albert Einstein

## TRUCK STOP WISDOM

It's past midnight, Saturday morning. The main living area of a rustic but well-maintained log cabin with a fireplace, sturdy furniture, and fitting décor. A folding massage table is leaned out of the way against a wall. Amber, in tight-fitting jeans and sweater, paces impatiently. Car doors slam outside, and indistinct voices are heard. Amber gives a concerned frown, grabs a fireplace poker, turns out the lamp and exits, presumably into a bedroom. She leaves the door slightly ajar. Keys rattle the lock, and the door opens to the sound of howling wind admitting Julie, carrying a valise, and Mike, shouldering a backpack. They turn on a lamp and place their stuff on a table as they speak. Amber can be seen surreptitiously peering through the door and listening to the ensuing conversation.

JULIE

Now! We should turn around now before they close the pass.

MIKE

You don't know they're going/ to –

JULIE

/And you just had to bring the Miata.

MIKE

Yeah. A two-seater. More romantic.

JULIE

At least with your truck we could get back down the pass.

MIKE

Snowplows are already out, and we don't have to leave until Sunday afternoon. Don't sweat it.

JULIE

Oh, God. Endure a whole day – maybe more than a day! – snowed in with *you*. Or take my chance on the pass. End up another statistic. Motorist killed when sports car skids off icy road and plunges over a cliff.

(Beat)

I'll take the chance. Get me out of here.

MIKE

Do ya always gotta be so dramatic?

JULIE

Do you always have to be such a putz?

MIKE

I thought you'd like it. I mean, look at this place. Romantic, isn't it?

JULIE

*Seriously?*

MIKE

Don't ya think /it's –

JULIE

/It's almost one in the goddamn morning. If you're not willing to turn around and get us back down the pass, at least be decent enough to let me get some sleep without being molested.

MIKE

Wow. Okay. If that's what ya/ [want].

JULIE

(Removing her coat)

/Why is it so warm in here?

MIKE

It's got electric heat.

JULIE

But why is the heat on? You told me... I thought this place was supposed to be closed for the season. Don't tell me they leave the heat on in the cabins all winter.

AMBER

(Emerging from hiding)

You can thank me.

Julie shrieks and backs against a wall. Mike has a bit of a jump scare but shields Julie with a protective hand.

MIKE

Who are you?

JULIE

*What's she got in her hand?* Mike, she's got something!

AMBER

(Setting poker aside)

Sorry! It was for, uh, [protection], you know. Just in case. Don't worry. I'm not dangerous.

MIKE

(Sudden recognition)

*Amber?*

AMBER

Hi, Mike.

JULIE

*You know her?*

MIKE

What're ya doin' here?

AMBER

Dave's idea. He said he had a friend –

JULIE

*Dave? Your brother?*

Mike shrugs, confused. Awkward pause.

AMBER

Said he was sending a friend up here. Didn't tell me it was his brother. And his wife. Just a friend, he said.

JULIE

*A friend? Who the hell are you? And sending a friend up here for what?*

MIKE

Nobody *sent* me.

AMBER

I had no idea it was going to be a couple, that we'd be a threesome.

JULIE

*Threesome? What the hell is happening here? Mike. Who is she?*

Amber smiles as Mike hesitates.

MIKE

Julie, meet Amber. Amber, meet my wife.

JULIE

Who's Amber? And why is she here?

AMBER

(Extending a hand)

Nice to meet you.

Julie ignores the extended hand. Mike begins chuckling. Amber gives up on the handshake and shares Mike's amusement.

MIKE

My crazy brother.

JULIE

*You think this is funny?* What kind of setup is this? Oh, my God! Are you planning to kill me?

MIKE

*Kill you?* No. Don't be ridiculous. I didn't know she was... I had no idea.

AMBER

Are you really worried about your husband killing you?

JULIE

Who is she, Mike?

MIKE

She, uh... She works in Ellensburg.

JULIE

But how do you know/ her?

MIKE

/At the truck stop.

AMBER

I'm a massage therapist.

JULIE

At a truck stop? Right.

MIKE

No, she really –

JULIE

*Oh, my God. A hooker?* And you *know* her?

Not a hooker... Not really.

AMBER

What's that mean? *Not really.*

JULIE

Well, not anymore. Not really means –

AMBER

She and I never.

MIKE

Never what?

JULIE

I provide a service for truckers. Weary travelers. Sometimes even plumbers.

AMBER

Give me the keys!

JULIE

No way. Ya can't drive a stick shift. And in the snow, ya wouldn't even make it to the highway.

MIKE

No. But yeah, everyone should know how to drive a stick... Please relax. Dave will be back to pick me up on Sunday afternoon. And I've got groceries in the kitchen and brought plenty of wine. Please. Have a seat and I'll bring out a snack.

AMBER

Amber exits to the kitchen. Mike removes, hangs his coat, and begins to hang Julie's, but she grabs it.

Give me that! We're leaving.

JULIE

Julie moves to and opens the door to the sound of howling wind.

Can't leave until the roads are clear.

MIKE

Shit.

JULIE  
(Slamming the door)

Mike takes a seat at the table. Julie, dumbfounded, stands against a wall clutching her coat. After a moment, Amber returns with a bottle of wine, glasses, and a plate of cheese. She speaks as she pours two glasses and then takes a seat.

AMBER

Not really much of a kitchen, but there's a small refrigerator and a single-burner camp stove. The restaurant's closed in the offseason, but we'll get by. Anyway. Hope you like red.

MIKE

(Examining wine bottle)

Beaujolais. Dave tell ya to bring this? It's Julie's favorite.

(Mild mocking)

She's a regular wine *connoisseur*.

AMBER

*Really?* It's my favorite, too. Julie, you have to try this. Pairs really well with the Camembert and the Brie.

JULIE

This is a nightmare. I'm in the twilight zone.

Julie sinks to a seat away from the table, clutches her coat, and just stares, confused and shocked by the situation.

MIKE

So, this was all Dave's idea?

AMBER

He never said, uh,... He just told me it was a friend who was going through something and might need someone to talk to.

JULIE

*Going through something.* What's that supposed to mean?

(To Mike)

What are you going through?

AMBER

That usually means relationship issues. A rough patch maybe.

JULIE

*Oh, my God.* What have you told your brother?

MIKE

Never told him anything... Guess I didn't have to.

AMBER

From what I heard in the first minute, it's pretty obvious –

JULIE

Butt out, bitch!

MIKE

Hey! Ya don't have to get/ [nasty].

AMBER

/That's okay, Mike. She's upset. I get it.

(Long uncomfortable pause)

Dave told me you guys bought this place.

JULIE

*Who? What guys? Bought what?*

MIKE

(Oh, shit, not ready for this)

Okay, uh... My brother. We, uh... Invested. We're part owners.

Julie leaps up, strides to the table, and gets in Mike's face.

JULIE

*Invested? In this place? Without consulting me?*

MIKE

Wanted to surprise you. Yeah. As of ten days ago. Dave and I each own 20 percent of *Whistlin' Crack Resort*.

JULIE

You bastard. How much?

MIKE

Funny. She's the one always sayin' her money is. *Her money*. Guess it doesn't go two/ ways.

JULIE

/Don't talk to her! Talk to me!

AMBER

(Passing her a glass with a smile)

I get why you might be upset but take a sip of wine. Let's hear what the putz has to say.

Julie glares at Amber a moment before accepting and quaffing a gulp of wine. Then she turns to glare at Mike, and after a moment, picks up and quaffs most of the glass. She remains standing, glaring.

MIKE

It's like this. Zach owns 60 percent and is gonna run the place during the season. Dave and I'll help out with the maintenance.

(Turning to Amber)

Guess ya know. Dave's an electrician.

JULIE

You had no right! How much?

MIKE

Yeah, well I don't remember you checking with me before ya made that bitcoin investment.

Uncomfortable pause with Julie glaring.

AMBER

How much did you lose?

JULIE

None of your business. This is between me and him.

AMBER

You're right. You don't have to tell me. I did alright with crypto. Got in and out at the right time.

JULIE

*You?* You/ [invested]?

AMBER

/Tripled my buy and cashed out to pay tuition. Netted thirty kay.

MIKE

Tuition? You're in school?

AMBER

Going back. Spring quarter.

MIKE

That's great.

(Turning to Julie)

She's really smart.

JULIE

Shut up! We're having a conversation here. *You. And. Me.*

AMBER

Yes. Why don't you have a seat so you two can have a conversation?

MIKE

Does she want me to shut up or have a conversation?

AMBER

Good question. A conversation is not one-sided. We all know that don't we? From the Latin root, *con*, meaning *with*, and *versare*, meaning *to turn*. I think the implication is that you turn into each other to share.

MIKE

Told ya she was smart.

Uncomfortable silence, Julie's glare aimed at Mike before being directed at Amber. At a loss for words, Julie slowly sits.

AMBER

You're confused.

JULIE

No shit.

AMBER

I can step out. Let you guys talk. But first, maybe I can clear things up for you. Then you and Mike can...

(Encouraging smile)

*Con. Versate.*

(Off Julie's glare)

And you're pissed. Okay. I get that but let me explain.

(Refilling Julie's glass)

I have a trailer in a corner of the parking lot. I pay rent to the truck stop.

JULIE

To turn your tricks.

AMBER

No. To provide therapeutic massage to truck drivers. I'm licensed. I really am.

MIKE

And she's really good.

JULIE

You're an asshole.

MIKE

No, it's not like... Look. I think I know what Dave was thinkin'.

JULIE

And your brother's an asshole, too.

AMBER

No. Dave is thoughtful and generous. This is not – never was – planned to be a hookup.

JULIE

What then?

AMBER

My massage therapy practice has expanded over the past couple of years.

MIKE

She gotta reputation.

JULIE

I bet.

AMBER

The solitary truck driver lives a hard life. It's hard on their bodies and hard on relationships.

JULIE

So, rubbing them fixes their relationships? What a con.

AMBER

Only natural, I guess. When your clothes are off and a skilled masseuse is kneading your levator scapulae, your latissimus dorsi, it's natural to drop the defenses. To open up. Be vulnerable.

JULIE

And you've taken off your clothes? Let her *knead* you? Rub you? You've. *Opened up*?

MIKE

Well, a coupla times/ I –

JULIE

Asshole!

AMBER

No, Mike's never been all that talkative. But when I was, you know... On the table, he was tight. Knotted up. Dealing with lots of stress.

JULIE  
Yeah. Aren't we all?

MIKE  
Was just a massage. A couple of times...

AMBER  
I brought my massage table if you'd like to –

JULIE  
NO! Are you kidding?

AMBER  
Couples are kind of my specialty. The couples massage is very popular. Lots of couples drive trucks these days.

JULIE  
*You think I'm a truck driver?* Oh, my God. I'm going to bed. Leave me alone until it's time to leave tomorrow. You got it? Just. STAY AWAY FROM ME!

Julie gets up, grabs her coat and valise, and starts to exit.

AMBER  
Not a good idea to go to bed angry.

MIKE  
She's angry a lot.

JULIE  
(Turning)  
With good reason.

AMBER  
We've all got reasons, Julie. Everyone's behavior makes sense to *them*. You've got your reasons, your justification for being angry. I guess it makes sense for you to storm off to the bedroom.

JULIE  
I'M NOT STORMING OFF!

MIKE  
Wow.

AMBER  
What about Mike?

JULIE

What about him?

AMBER

His behavior makes sense to him, too. Do you know why he arranged to have use of this cabin during the off season? During Valentine's Day Weekend.

MIKE

Not just Valentine's Day. It's also our anniversary tomorrow.

JULIE

Not tomorrow. Today! It's past midnight... Putz.

AMBER

He planned a romantic getaway. Drove the Miata instead of his truck. Why did all that make sense to him?

JULIE

It's obvious, isn't it? He wanted to butter me up before springing his. *Investment*. On me.

AMBER

Okay. That probably would make some sense. But after all his effort, don't you think you can give him a few minutes to explain. Come. Have another glass of wine. Try to practice empathy.

JULIE

Empathy. Right.

AMBER

Just listen without judging to try to understand. Come on. One more glass of wine.

JULIE

(Eyeing the full wine glass)

That Beaujolais is nice.

(Takes a distant seat, sips wine)

One more.

AMBER

Mike, why don't tell us what's on your mind? What did you have planned for this weekend?

JULIE

(Suddenly animated)

You can start with this. *Place*. What is it, anyway? This place. Is this supposed to be a resort?

MIKE

A resort. Yeah. Get-away from the rat race in Seattle. Lotsa rich folk wanna breathe the mountain air. Enjoy the trees. And the river's real close for fishin'.

JULIE

*Rich folk?* They can do a lot better.

AMBER

But it does have potential, don't you think? There's a restaurant in the lodge and there are five other cabins like this. It's quaint. Once it's fixed up and the word gets out, could do really well.

JULIE

*Quaint?* Not what rich people are looking for. They want luxury. Quality. Better have a Michelin star chef lined up for the restaurant.

(Turning to Mike)

Well? Have you got a chef hired to blend the hollandaise for eggs Benedict? Layer the fruit parfaits? Bake fresh croissants?

MIKE

Rosie, the fry cook from the diner in Easton, is going to run the kitchen.

JULIE

Perfect. A greasy spoon.

MIKE

No! We're going to have an electric menu. Trout –

JULIE

*Electric?* You mean *eclectic*?

AMBER

(A wag of the head, chiding)

Julie.

JULIE

*Putz.*

AMBER

So, trout. What else?

MIKE

Good stuff. Yeah. Elk and pheasant. Ya know, lotsa wild game.

JULIE

A greasy spoon. A gamey. Greasy. Spoon.

Uncomfortable pause.

AMBER

Sounds like you are planning a unique menu... I'm curious about the name. *Whistlin' Crack.*

MIKE

(Hesitates, an embarrassed laugh)

Oh, it's, uh... A kinda private joke.

(Off Amber's questioning expression)

Was gonna be Whistlin' *Zach* Resort. You know, because Zach is always whistlin'.

JULIE

Clever. You boys are real marketing experts. Just a bunch of branding geniuses, aren't you?

AMBER

Did you have a problem with the resort being Zach's namesake.

MIKE

No. That wasn't it.

Amber waits for an explanation, but Mike turns away, clearly unsure about sharing.

JULIE

We're really *con versating* now. I'm going to bed.

MIKE

(Turning back, earnestly)

No! It's just... Listen. I know you were trying to do something. With the bitcoins. Something good. Something for the future. I hope you were thinking about *our* future. Not just... Yours.

AMBER

I'm sure she was.

Julie sends Amber a dismissive wag of the head and eyeroll.

MIKE

Whatever. But I do believe in this place. Yeah, I'd hate to lose the investment – like you did. But –

JULIE

You prick.

MIKE

No! I understand taking a risk. I don't want to lose the investment in Whistlin' Crack, but if I do, it won't be the end of the world. And if I didn't invest, I'd feel worse about not taking the risk than I'd feel about... You know. If things go south.

JULIE

You have any idea about the success rate of investments like this?

MIKE

No. I guess I don't. Worse than bitcoin? I don't know. Just askin'.

JULIE

Stop bringing up the bitcoin... Prick.

MIKE

Prick, putz, or asshole? Make up your mind.

Julie and Mike glare at each for a long uncomfortable pause.

AMBER

It's so good you're talking with each other. Remember. Empathy.

JULIE

This is unbelievable. A hooker who wants to be a therapist.

AMBER

I'm neither. But when having a conversation, I do try to be present. To really listen. Without judging. Shall we try that?

Mike assents with a shrug. Julie glares.

AMBER (CONT.)

Both of you made investment decisions that seemed right. Good for you. And, Mike, we'd like to hear your thoughts about this weekend. What you had planned. But first, we'd like to know how you decided to change the name from Whistlin' Zach Resort to *Whistlin' Crack* Resort.

MIKE

I don't know. Kind of embarrassin'.

AMBER

That's okay. That's good. You'll get to practice vulnerability.

Mike hesitates under the questioning looks from Amber and Julie.

MIKE

Okay. Coupla months ago. This was when Zach was showin' us the place, ya know, before we made an offer. We're just checkin' things out. And, uh, I was on my knees with my head under a sink in the restaurant doin' some inspectin'. And. Yeah. My pants were ridin' kinda. Ya know. Low. And Zach starts laughin' and says to Dave, *Look at Mike's butt crack givin' us a big ol' smile*. And I heard, 'em laughin', and I thought, what the hell? I'm really gonna give 'em somethin' to laugh about. So, yeah. I, uh... You know...

AMBER

Not really. You what?

MIKE

I tried to blast a big ol' fart at 'em.

JULIE

Oh, my God. That's disgusting.

MIKE

Yeah. But thing is, instead of lettin' loose an ass blaster, it just made kind of a squeak. Dave said it sounded like my ass was playin' a piccolo. Then Zach said my butt crack whistled.

Amber chuckles. Julie recoils in disgust.

MIKE (CONT).

Yeah. They thought it was pretty funny. Then Dave said, *should call this place Whistlin' Crack instead a Whistlin' Zach*. Well, Zach loved that idea. So, there ya go...

JULIE

Oh, my God. Yes! Get the word out! The wealthy people from Seattle will flock to hear a whistling butt crack. You guys. Bunch of barbarians. Maybe you can create the Whistling Crack Trio, play tunes from your ass to entertain your guests in the lodge on Friday evenings.

MIKE

Least we don't take ourselves so seriously. We can laugh.

AMBER

It is healthy to laugh. To laugh at ourselves. And I think it's a great story.

JULIE

That's not a great story! It's juvenile. Crude. You really think the three stooges are going to be able manage a business?

MIKE

Don't knock The Three Stooges. They were comic geniuses.

JULIE

Just look at you. You use your fingers to comb your hair. Such sophistication. If your head's not under a sink, you're outside peeing on a tree. You have to blow your nose, do you ever think about a handkerchief? Hell no. You just bend over, plug a nostril, one at a time, and blow.

MIKE

A rich man puts his snot in his pocket. An honest man, a real man, blows it on the ground.

JULIE

Wonderful! Plumber wisdom. An aphorism from a man who works everyday with hands in shit. Probably the only reason you don't chew your fingernails. You're not a philosopher. You're a philistine.

An uncomfortable pause, Amber and Mike feeling the sting of Julie's hurtful words.

MIKE

Not sure what ya mean by philistine, but why don't you have another glass of wine. Loosen up. Tell me what you really think.

AMBER

Okay. We may have some work to do on the whole empathy thing. You know. Listening. *Without judging*. The only way we can understand the perspective of others.

JULIE

Like I want a plumber's perspective.

AMBER

Well, I, for one, appreciate plumbers. If you think about it, plumbing is the bedrock of civilization. Carries clean drinking water to us and sewage away so we can live in communities, in cities if we choose to.

MIKE

Yeah. A person will spend three years of their life sitting on a toilet but never give plumbing a second thought until their crapper's plugged up and overflowin'. Least I do somethin' worthwhile with my life. Like you. We both do important work. You're goin' to school, too, and I bet it's for somethin' more useful than *theatre arts*. Not like *Miss Hoity-Toity* here.

JULIE

You hate that I'm educated, don't you?

AMBER

Are you in school, too?

JULIE

(Hesitating, glaring at Mike)

Yes.

AMBER

That's great! Good for you.

MIKE

Really? Ya think a theatre degree is gonna let ya earn enough to pay back your student loans? Maybe ya shoulda put your inheritance toward those loans instead of/ buyin' [bitcoin].

JULIE  
/Don't say it!

Uncomfortable silence.

AMBER  
How cool to be studying theatre.

JULIE  
Not just studying it. I teach it. And I'm working on my doctorate.

AMBER  
Me, too!

JULIE  
You're a theatre student?

AMBER  
No, but I'm working on my DPT.

MIKE  
*DP?* I thought that meant somethin' else.

JULIE  
Don't be an ass.

MIKE  
Like you know.

AMBER  
Doctor of Physical Therapy.

MIKE  
Wow. That is so cool.

Silence. Julie, taken aback and impressed, considers. *Who is this person?*

JULIE  
You're going to be a medical doctor?

AMBER  
Not an MD, but a doctor. It's a natural career transition for me. I've got a scholarship for medical school, but it's still a big investment of time and money.

Silence as Julie and Mike absorb this. Mike, duly impressed, and Julie stunned.

JULIE

You said, *not anymore*, when I called you a hooker. Is that [true]? *Were you... a/ [hooker]?*

AMBER

/Let's not... I, uh, I don't like to talk about myself.

JULIE

What did you say about being vulnerable?

MIKE

Well played.

JULIE

Shut up.

Amber rises, paces. She's uncomfortable and looks away as she reveals her past.

AMBER

At sixteen I was homeless and hanging around the truck stop doing what I needed to. To, you know... To survive. Rhonda, the general manager, got tired of trying to chase me off, so she offered me a job. I started washing dishes. Then, after a while, I got to waitress. I'd listen to those truck drivers complain about their hemorrhoids and stiff, aching backs. After years of that, I thought maybe I could do more for them than serve up their steaks and hashbrowns. So, I got trained in massage, and when I got licensed, Rhonda set me up with the trailer.

MIKE

What'd ya do for their hemorrhoids?

JULIE

Again! Don't be. An ass.

AMBER

Rhonda saw something in me. Got me into therapy. Took me to her book club. To the theatre. Treated me like a person. Like her daughter. She passed last year, and I think she'd be proud that I'm still... Still growing. In my profession. As a person.

MIKE

Talk about a story. Wow.

JULIE

I didn't mean to... When I called you/ [a bitch]...

AMBER

/I know.

MIKE

Goin' to be a doctor. I mean, a *real doctor*. That's somethin'. Ya can make a living. Not like/ [theatre].

JULIE

/I get so sick of you dismissing my career.

AMBER

Some people dismiss theatre... Some dismiss plumbing... They both deal with human excrement.

Julie is smacked by Amber's pointed statement. Mike is more thoughtful.

MIKE

Okay. Yeah. But no, I don't get it. She calls me a putz, but last play I got dragged to, she *played*. *Putz*.

JULIE

*What?* No/ I –

MIKE

/I tried to stay awake but [couldn't]. No way.

JULIE

Talk about a putz!

(Turning to Amber)

I got him a seat in the front row.

MIKE

Wouldn't a made a difference. There were only about ten people in the audience.

JULIE

Which made it all the more awkward! Everyone saw you sleeping.

MIKE

Waiting. Waiting. Waiting. Everybody's waiting for something to happen. And nothing happens! I just kept thinking, *kill me now*.

JULIE

When I came on stage and heard you snoring, I *wanted* to kill you. And my character was *Pozzo*. Not Putz. I wasn't a putz!

AMBER

Beckett was a genius.

JULIE

*You know the play?*

AMBER

Of course. *Waiting for Godot*. The suffering. The absurdity and futility of life. How was it playing Pozzo?

JULIE

Oh... Well, there's depth to the character. A lot to plumb.

MIKE

Oh, really. So now you're a plumber?

Silence. Julie glares at Mike.

AMBER

What do you think his blindness signified?

MIKE

*His? Putzo was a girl.*

JULIE

Oh, you've got such insight. You don't have a clue to the story. To my character. Did the gender even matter?

(To Amber)

We used gender-blind casting.

AMBER

For all the characters?

JULIE

Well... No, not for all, I guess.

AMBER

You'd know better than me. I mean, you played the character. But do you think Pozzo became blind because he didn't practice empathy?

JULIE

Empathy?

AMBER

He didn't listen. Was not sensitive to others. Very forgetful. Self-centered. I always thought his physical blindness was just symbolic of his emotional blindness.

JULIE

(Unsure)

Yes. I think you could say that.

MIKE

She *did* say that.

Long uncomfortable silence.

AMBER

(Refilling Julie's wine glass)

Julie, can I get you something else? Something else to eat?

JULIE

I'm good. Thanks.

AMBER

And I'm sorry, Mike. You haven't touched the wine, and I forgot to tell you I've also got some beer. Can I get you one?

MIKE

Oh. Thanks, but I can get it.

AMBER

In the fridge.

Mike exits.

AMBER

Thank you for hanging in there to have a conversation.

JULIE

For all the good [it does]. You see what I'm up against.

AMBER

Let me guess. You've been married... Two years?

JULIE

Four years today. What makes you say that?

AMBER

Just knowing about divorce rates –

Amber cuts off speaking as Mike enters with a beer. He stops and studies the two women who awkwardly avoid eye contact.

MIKE

Thanks for the beer. You know, I think I'm going to clean up a bit. Let you ladies talk. Maybe later I'll go outside. Piss on a tree. Blow some snot on the ground

Mike exits to the bedroom. Julie shakes her head and sighs before turning to Amber.

JULIE

What about divorce rates?

AMBER

No. It's just. How are you two still together? I'm sorry. But how did you even get together?

Julie hesitates, drinks more wine. Amber tops it off.

JULIE

In grad school. Working on my master's. A girlfriend and I used to get an itch to... She called it *slumming*. Whenever she got tired of hooking up with college guys, with other grad students, you know? So, every once in a while – I mean, this wasn't a regular thing – but sometimes we'd hangout in this redneck bar in Cle Elum.

AMBER

The Lariat. The working class. Ranch hands. Loggers. Construction workers. I know it well.

JULIE

Beer and country music. Peanut shells and sawdust on the floor. And not a frat boy in sight.

AMBER

It's not just men who crave some strange.

JULIE

Mike was at a table in a corner drinking beer with his brother. I guess you know Dave.

AMBER

They used to stop at the truck stop real early for breakfast, and I'd keep their coffee cups full. Good tippers. They're both sweethearts.

JULIE

Yeah. Sometimes too damn nice, you ask me.

AMBER

Don't know about that, but maybe there's a dark side to every good thing.

(Thoughtful pause)

So, you and Mike hooked up at the Lariat. Then what?

JULIE

No. I wasn't interested. I wanted to go home, but my friend wanted to stay and talk with Dave.

AMBER

And Mike took you home.

JULIE

I let him walk me to the door, stuck out my hand and thanked him for the ride. And then. Oh, God. You have to understand, I was in grad school and living in this shithole apartment above a funeral parlor.

AMBER

Kind of spooky.

JULIE

I walked in, shut the door. Mike left. And I turned on the kitchen light and. Oh, God. When I walked over to the sink, there was a bat. A fucking bat! Crawling out of my drain.

AMBER

Yikes! How'd a bat get in your drain?

JULIE

You can't imagine what that does to you. I let out a blood-curdling scream.

AMBER

I bet.

JULIE

And clear outside, Mike heard me scream as he's climbing into his truck. And a second later he's bursting through my door, wrapping my shaking, sobbing body in a hug, as I'm pointing at the sink.

AMBER

This is what they call a meet-cute... In the movies.

JULIE

And you're not going to believe what he did.

AMBER

I imagine he took care of the bat.

JULIE

With my garbage disposal! He walked to the sink and saw that bat's head and one huge wing coming out of the drain. Oh, my God. So terrifying. I still shiver when I think about it.

AMBER

Freaky. And living above a funeral parlor. Freaky spooky.

JULIE

He turned on the hot water and the garbage disposal and. Oh, God. The sound of that bat being sucked in and chewed to pieces. I was just shaking. Sobbing. And Mike. So gentle. He walks me to the couch and just holds me for the longest time.

AMBER

I told you. He's a sweetheart.

JULIE

But no. He got up and fixed me a cup of tea. Can you believe that? And when I told him I was going to have to move. That I'd never be able to use my sink again. To use that garbage disposal. He, uh...

AMBER

Yeah?

JULIE

He said. No problem, just happen to have one in my truck.

AMBER

A garbage disposal? You're kidding.

JULIE

I'm not. His big work truck's got all these pipe fittings and augers and special wrenches. It's like a mobile hardware store.

AMBER

(Joking)

Does he have a toilet onboard?

JULIE

I don't know for sure but wouldn't surprise me if he's got a selection. You know, the extra wide seat for big-assed people.

AMBER

After he replaced your garbage disposal. Then what?

JULIE

I got kind of turned-on watching him work with those tools.

AMBER

I get that.

JULIE

After he finished, got that godawful filthy garbage disposal out of my apartment, and washed up, I kissed him, took his hand and tried to lead him to the bedroom.

AMBER

Fitting reward for dispatching a bat.

JULIE

No, he wouldn't. He said I could repay him by. Me. *Letting him.* Take me to dinner.

AMBER

And that turned you on even more.

JULIE

He is crude. Doesn't know how to properly use a knife and fork. Wipes his mouth on his sleeve. Only drinks beer. Never wine. Never a cocktail. But he doesn't drink too much.

AMBER

I respect that. I mean, not using the sleeve as a napkin. But I do respect that he doesn't drink too much.

JULIE

That's the thing. He's not a bad boy, you know? But he's just, I don't know, a different kind of bad boy. There was something about his, uh... He's like a wild animal, but not one that's going to hurt people or hurt me. I don't know. For whatever reason, I guess developed kind of a bad boy crush on him.

AMBER

Bad boys are a magnet, aren't they?

JULIE

You, too?

AMBER

Why do we do that? Men, too. They love the bad girls as long as a ring's not involved. They'll put a ring on a good girl, but then they want her to be a bad girl. In the bedroom. A bad, bad girl in the bedroom.

JULIE

Not all men. Not Mike.

AMBER

Oh.

JULIE

Have you been married?

AMBER

Only vicariously. Listening to countless stories from my clients.

JULIE

So, you what? Give them advice? Do they pay you for just conversation?

AMBER

They pay me for massage. Not advice. Mostly I just listen. I ask questions and listen.

JULIE

And only massage, right? You don't have, you know, [sex with them]?

AMBER

I'm a professional. Nothing inappropriate, if that's what you're asking. Well, nothing like that unless you dig into my long distant past.

JULIE

Mike used to make me laugh. At first, I found his lack of refinement amusing.

AMBER

I guess that didn't last too long.

JULIE

Now it's just disgusting.

AMBER

But you didn't have to –

JULIE

*No.* See. Then. I was at dinner with Mike. I agreed to [have dinner]. And I got a call. My mom was taken to the hospital. And she lingered. For too long, she lingered. And Mike was there week after week supporting me all the way through to the end. To the funeral.

AMBER

A sweetheart.

JULIE

No sooner than my mom passed than my dad took a turn. I was a mess and not thinking clearly. But there was Mike. Steady as a rock. And I knew my dad wanted nothing more than to see me married. Before, you know, before he [died].

AMBER

So, you said yes.

JULIE

What? No.

AMBER  
You didn't?

JULIE  
He did.

AMBER  
*He did?*  
(Long thoughtful pause)  
Aaah. Now it's making sense.

JULIE  
What?

AMBER  
Your guilt.

JULIE  
What? No. I don't feel... I'm not really a bitch.

AMBER  
Okay. But this isn't about Mike, is it? It's really all about you.

JULIE  
It's about both of us.

AMBER  
But has Mike changed? Since disposing of the bat? I'm not in your head, but let me see if I understand. Do feel guilty for changing? For growing? For pursuing your doctorate?

JULIE  
You do ask a lot of questions, don't you?

AMBER  
Do you feel guilty that you *asked him* to marry you? Do you think your guilt will be compounded if you ask him to be the one to give up on the relationship?

JULIE  
No. I have. Asked him. Well, not in so many words, but I...

AMBER  
Maybe you're not really a bitch. But are you playing the part? Do you think you'll feel less guilty if you drive him over the edge? Mike's nothing if not responsible. You think he will –

JULIE  
Damn! You can stop jabbing.

AMBER

Just asking questions.

Long uncomfortable pause. Julie drinks more wine.

AMBER

How do you want this story to play out?

JULIE

I guess a happy ending is out of the question.

AMBER

Are you an actor or director or playwright?

JULIE

What? Both. An actor and a director. I guess I'm both. I'm no way a playwright.

AMBER

Maybe you should be. Write a story that ends in failure but not in regret.

JULIE

How do you fail but not have regret?

AMBER

Happens all the time.

JULIE

(A dismissive snort)

Right.

AMBER

There must be something you still like about Mike. Something you admire.

JULIE

(Thoughtful pause)

When he implied that he was a real man, couldn't be more true. Not for blowing snot on the ground, but he is real. Authentic. I love the people I run with in the theatre, but most of them fool themselves thinking they're being authentic with their dress, or hair, or piercings, or body art. But they're not authentic. Not really. They're conforming. Mike is the most authentic person I've ever met.

Amber takes Julie's wine glass, tops it off, stands, and moves around next to her. She hands her the full glass.

AMBER

Turn around.

Amber moves behind Julie and starts to massage her neck and shoulders. At first touch, Julie recoils, almost spills her wine.

JULIE

What are you doing?

AMBER

What do you think? Hold still. Relax. See if you can sip your wine without spilling it.

JULIE

I guess you know what you're doing.

AMBER

Actors, the good ones, are great at *playing* authentic. But I'm not sure how authentic they are when they're not playing a character.

JULIE

God, that feels good.

AMBER

If you're not really a bitch, why don't you stop playing that role?

JULIE

I'm not really... I don't want to be [a bitch].

AMBER

Maybe you and Mike are evidence that Einstein knew what he was talking about when he said... Men marry women thinking *they'll never change* but women marry men thinking *they will change*... And they're both wrong...

JULIE

I didn't know Einstein had a relationship theory.

AMBER

Oh, sure. An offshoot of his theory of relativity.

JULIE

You're a better masseuse than you are a comedienne.

AMBER

It's okay if you've changed. I mean, wouldn't it be tragic if we went through life without changing? You and I have changed, and we're still changing, right?

AMBER (CONT.)

People who don't change, who live in a rut... I mean, it's their decision. Their choice. But they risk living a very boring life. Becoming a very boring person. I guess that's okay if it makes them happy. But you. Do not feel guilty about changing.

JULIE

You do give advice.

AMBER

Sorry. Not trying to tell you what to do.

JULIE

No. Please do. Tell me.

AMBER

(Thoughtful pause)

If you're asking....

JULIE

I am.

AMBER

Stop being an actor and write a script that you can direct. A story that turns guilt and regrets into opportunities to learn. Embrace vulnerability and choose to be authentic like Mike is authentic.

JULIE

I'm not sure –

Mike bursts forth from the bedroom and pauses dramatically lifting his beer as the surprised women look on.

MIKE

That's me! Mister Authentic!

With that, Mike drains the last swallow of beer, belches, and wipes his mouth on his sleeve. He tosses the beer can into the fireplace, then steps over to blow his nose into the fireplace.

AMBER

Mike.

JULIE

Oh, God. You were listening.

Without judging. Whatcha call that?  
MIKE

Empathy.  
JULIE

Empathy. Right.  
MIKE

(Pulling cellphone from pocket)  
Anyway, it stopped snowin' and the plows are clearing the highway. Wanna hit the road or stay until morning. Either way, I'll help you write that story if you want.

Dear God.  
JULIE

Oh, you don't have to leave.  
AMBER

Julie?  
MIKE

Amber still has her hands on Julie's shoulders, and Julie reaches up with her free hand to place it on Amber's hand.

You have more Beaujolais?  
JULIE

Uh, sure.  
AMBER

(Turning to Mike)  
Amber offered a couple's massage... You know, if you want.

Amber scoots to grab and unfold the massage table.

That's a great idea.  
AMBER

A long uncomfortable pause and Mike just looks inscrutably at Julie and Amber.

MIKE  
Tha's okay. You stay. Enjoy the Beaujolais and a massage.

JULIE

Really? That's what you want?

MIKE

I'm sure Dave will be glad to bring you home Sunday afternoon.

With that, Mike grabs his coat and backpack and exits.

JULIE

Oh, my God. And I'm not supposed to feel guilty?

Amber approaches and places hands on Julies shoulders. She leans in.

AMBER

Tell you what. I'll open another bottle of wine while you take off your clothes and lie down on the massage table. We've got Valentine's weekend to write an ending to this story.

Julie turns to look and Amber, and they share a moment as lights fade to...

BLACKOUT

END OF PLAY

## VA-VA-VICARIOUS

## Cast of Characters

- KITTY KEEN Female. 30s – 50s, about same age as Max. Any ethnicity. Erotic romance novelist. Plainly dressed. Glasses. Hair in a bun. Little or no makeup.
- MAX STRONG Male. 30s – 50s, about same age as Kitty. Any ethnicity. An action thriller screenwriter who, ironically, exudes anti-hero qualities. Lacks any sense of fashion.
- TIME: About now.
- SETTING: An airport frequent flyer lounge.
- SET: A small table and a couple of chairs.
- SYNOPSIS: A pair of mismatched writers on a layover happen to meet in an airport frequent flyer lounge. As they discuss their approaches to living, loving, and writing, they reach a surprising conclusion.
- NOTES:
- Brackets [ ] indicate sentiment expressed by unspoken words.
  - Ellipses (...) at the end of a line indicate dialogue that trails off. Within a line, ellipses suggest an opportunity for the line to breathe.

*I've always had rock star envy. Unfortunately, writing is a pedestrian, tame occupation done while sitting in coffee-stained pajamas in front of a computer rather prowling around a huge stage in sweaty leather pants, so I have to get my kicks vicariously.*

~Kate Christensen

*In order to write about life first you must live it.*

~Ernest Hemingway

*Love is a strange emotion. It is ever evolving. Lust is transient. With time, one realizes that love and togetherness are two different things. Very few people are lucky enough to experience the two emotions simultaneously.*

~Randeep Hooda

## VA-VA-VICARIOUS

Kitty sits at table with an empty glass and types on a laptop. Max, holding a drink, tentatively approaches looking around for an available seat. His gaze settles on the vacant chair at Kitty's table.

MAX

Excuse me. Uh...

Kitty interrupts her typing, gives a big sigh before closing her laptop.

KITTY

Yeah?

MAX

I'm sorry I didn't mean to [interrupt you].

KITTY

[Riiight.] Mmhmm.

*Hesitates, then annoyed...*

Well. Go ahead. Have a seat.

Max sits with his drink.

MAX

My flight's delayed.

KITTY

Look around. Why do you think it's so packed in here? All the flights –

MAX

You look annoyed. I hope you weren't trying to write. I know how difficult it is –

KITTY

*Now really annoyed.*

Working on my laptop. What else would I be doing?

MAX

*Lightly, grinning, an attempt to break the tension.*

Yeah. Well, you don't look like a gamer, so...

Uncomfortable pause as Max continues to grin and Kitty just gives a hard stare.

MAX (CONT.)

You're not... Are you? A gamer?

KITTY

Writer.

MAX

A writer? *No shit?* Let me buy you a drink.

KITTY

I don't drink.

*Beat.*

And you know they don't charge for drinks in here, right?

MAX

Yeah, but still, I can get you – *Wait! What do you mean you don't drink?*

KITTY

Alcohol.

MAX

Holy shit. A writer who doesn't drink.

KITTY

Probably explains my failure to achieve notoriety as a novelist.

MAX

So, alcohol's a lubricant for creativity?

KITTY

Guess it was for Hemingway.

MAX

And Steinbeck.

KITTY

*A pause reconsidering, hint of a smile.*

And Patricia Highsmith.

MAX

*Grinning. Another pause, and then game on.*

Truman Capote.

KITTY

*Accepting the challenge.*

Uh, huh... Dorothy Parker.

MAX  
*Big smile.*  
 Robert B. Parker!

KITTY  
 Okay... William Faulkner!

MAX  
 Eugene O'Neill!

KITTY  
 Tennessee Williams!

MAX  
 F. Scott Fitzgerald!

KITTY  
 F. Scott Fitzgerald!

Max grins as Kitty stares in a cloud of confusion.  
*Who is this guy?*

KITTY  
 Jesus. That was /fucking [amazing].

MAX  
 /Fucking amazing!

KITTY  
 How do you know so much about –

MAX  
 Also! A writer.

KITTY  
 You? You're/ a [writer]?

Max reaches over table to shake Kitty's hand.

MAX  
 /Max Strong.

Kitty shakes and holds on to Max's hand for an awkward pause before...

KITTY  
*Yeah, right.* You're Max Strong.

Oh, you know –  
MAX

KITTY  
The screenwriter? The *Balls Out* franchise? *Balls Out to Bangkok?* *Balls Out to Berlin?*

MAX  
*Big smile.*  
Don't forget *Balls Out to Baghdad*, my favorite.

KITTY  
How do you come up with that [shit]?

MAX  
*Raising his glass.*  
Alcohol.

*Beat.*  
Guess you're not a fan.

KITTY  
I can see why you need alcohol to write that crap.

MAX  
Wow. Okay. Don't hold back.  
*Beat.*  
And what is it you write? Sorry. I didn't get your name.

KITTY  
Kitty.

MAX  
Kitty. That's cute. Wait. Kitty? Kitty –

KITTY  
Keen.

MAX  
*Kitty Keen?* No fucking way. The erotica writer. Moist lips? Sweaty bodies? Heaving breasts?  
*Sotto voce.*  
And you think *I* write crap.

KITTY  
*Romance*, not erotica. But you know my work. Aha!

MAX  
Well, I know of it. And what do you mean you haven't achieved notoriety?

KITTY

I do okay, but I'll bet my royalties don't compare to a screenwriter's.

MAX

Oh. You equate notoriety to money. Tell me, then. Your last novel. *Three Hard Men*. What'd you get for an advance?

KITTY

Oh, my God! You do read my books.

MAX

Five figures?

KITTY

High six.

MAX

No shit?!

KITTY

*No shit, Shakespeare.*

MAX

Wow, that's pretty good for –

KITTY

Don't say it.

MAX

Kitty Keen. Obviously, a pen name.

KITTY

And Max Strong isn't?

MAX

Kitty Keen. The cerebral version of Pussy Galore?

KITTY

Your fantasy.

MAX

Got me there.

KITTY

It's all a fantasy for you, isn't it?

MAX

You mean the –

KITTY

Your life, I mean. When was the last time you dove from a helicopter, caught a tree branch, flipped a double mid-air somersault that would get you an Olympic medal, and landed on a terrorist just before the fucker flicked the detonator?

MAX

*Balls out to Bangkok.* Great scene.

KITTY

In your dreams. That's your whole life, isn't it? Living out your fantasy through your characters?

MAX

And your life isn't? Tell me, when was the last time you wore out three studs in one night of passion?

Long awkward pause. The unpleasant truth smacks them between the eyes, and they drop their defense.

MAX (CONT.)

*Softly.*

You look different than your picture.

KITTY

What/ picture?

MAX

/Dust jacket.

KITTY

Oh. You bought my –

MAX

I've seen it.

KITTY

Downside of writing novels. You've got to do book signings. The way you look. People are going to know. Not like a, you know, a nondescript [screenwriter].

MAX

But I didn't recognize you. When I sat down. In your picture you're –

Yeah. Don't rub it in.

KITTY

No. I mean. I like the way you look.

MAX

What's that supposed to mean?

KITTY

No. Here. Now. The real you. Better than a glamour shot.

MAX

Oh.

KITTY

What's your real name?

MAX

Nooo...

KITTY

Mine's Alfred.

MAX

Alfred?

KITTY

Smolinski. Yeah. Alfred Smolinski.

MAX

Pause, both grinning.

KITTY

Olga.

MAX

Oh.

KITTY

Januszewski. Olga Januszewski.

MAX

Holy shit. We're both Polish.

KITTY

Channeling the greats. Tokarczuk.

Krajewski. MAX

KITTY Adam Mickiewicz. MAX Adam Mickiewicz.

Long pause as Kitty and Max share a moment.

MAX  
What's the most daring thing, the most outrageous thing you've ever done in your life?

KITTY  
Once I told a screenwriter my real name.  
*Pause.*  
Do you ever wish...

MAX  
Yeah... I do.  
*Uncomfortable pause.*  
I hate to fly.

KITTY  
Totally. Such a pain.

MAX  
No. I mean. I'm. Afraid. To fly.

KITTY  
Oh.

MAX  
Why I drink before boarding. No way in hell you'd ever get me up in a helicopter.

*Pause.*

KITTY  
It's been three years.

MAX  
Three years?

KITTY  
You know... For me... Between the sheets.

MAX  
Oh. That sucks.

Yeah  
KITTY

For me it's two.  
MAX

Two years. I would have thought –  
KITTY

Weeks. Two weeks.  
MAX

Ah. That's more like it. Bastard.  
KITTY

No, it's not like that. I mean, I wasn't trying to –  
MAX

God! I get it. You're such a chick magnet. If you weren't –  
KITTY

Used. I was used.  
MAX

*Pause.*

An intern on the Universal lot. You know, a wannabe screenwriter, and she thought I'd have some pull, I guess. Women aren't the only ones who get –

Hold on! I'm getting something here. A new character who, let's see...  
KITTY

Stop!  
MAX

What?  
KITTY

Stop writing!  
MAX

How long's your delay?  
*Beat.*

About an hour.  
KITTY

Mine, too. Boston? First class?  
MAX

KITTY

Yes. What are you –

MAX

For the next hour. Let's stop being writers. Let's –

KITTY

Become real people? Why, *Alfred!* That's a shocking idea!

MAX

Yes, *Olga*. For just an hour, we stop living vicariously.

Long serious pause as they study each other. Kitty reaches to take the hand of Max.

KITTY

Writing's easy. Living's hard. You really think –

MAX

Hell, yes. I do. Fuck the writing. Time to live.

Holding hands, they pause to consider each other.

KITTY

You know... They have showers here in the club.

MAX

*Growing a big grin.*

Yeah? Let's do it!

They eagerly stand and start to gather their stuff.

KITTY

You ever joined the mile high club?

MAX

*Chuckling.*

Sorry, *Olga*. I'm a real guy, not one of those super virile hunks you write about. You can have me in the shower or in the sky, but no way I can –

KITTY

Don't sell yourself short, *Alfred*. Let's go. *Balls out to Boston!*

Kitty and Max exit heading for the showers.

END OF PLAY

## OH, DEAR GOD, DAD IS A FEMINIST

## Cast of Characters

<u>REBECCA</u>	Female. Mid-30s. Any ethnicity. A therapist.
<u>DAD</u>	Male. ~30 years older than Rebecca. Any ethnicity. A retired consulting psychologist.
SYNOPSIS	Rebecca accompanies her injured dad to the ER. While waiting for medical attention, they engage in a wide-ranging discussion which leads Rebecca to a surprising insight.
TIME	About now.
SETTING	The waiting room in a hospital ER.
RUNTIME:	~10 minutes.
NOTES:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rebecca and Dad converse with each other but frequently break from their conversation to turn to and speak to the audience, indicated by (Out).</li> <li>• Brackets [ ] indicate sentiment expressed by unspoken words.</li> </ul>

*I love to see a young girl go out and grab the world by the lapels.  
Life's a bitch. You've got to go out and kick ass.  
~ Maya Angelou*

## OH, DEAR GOD, DAD IS A FEMINIST

A waiting room at the ER. Dad sits, perhaps in a wheelchair, an icepack on his knee. He's in a bit of distress from the pain. Rebecca sits beside him holding a book and looking at Dad with some concern. They converse, occasionally interrupting the conversation to break the fourth wall.

REBECCA

Now maybe you'll be able to find a woman.

DAD

I don't need a nurse. And –

REBECCA

There you go! Of course. You assume a nurse is going to be a female.

DAD

What? No, I was just... What do/ you [mean]?

REBECCA

/Gender stereotyping is offensive.

DAD

That's not what I was [doing]... You think I can't find a woman?

REBECCA

A woman who can keep up.

(Referring to his knee)

But maybe now...

(Out)

My dad's a fast walker. Or he was. Says he'll never be with a woman who is unable to keep up.

DAD

Damn ping pong. Wouldn't have minded so much if I'd made the shot.

REBECCA

Why do men have to be so damn competitive?

DAD

Now who's stereotyping?

(Out)

My Rebecca is such a feminist, but God, I do love her.

REBECCA

No. You're right. Women can be competitive, too.

DAD

Like you!

REBECCA

But not me!

A pause. Both amused, they share a smile.

DAD

(Lightly, a tease)

What's your book? Some treatise on female empowerment? Drivel about equity? Progressive poppycock.

REBECCA

Dostoevsky.

(Smiling, a teasing poke)

*The Idiot.*

DAD

All right! Dostoevsky. Guy was a realist. *If you turn twenty and you're not an idealist, you don't have a heart. If you turn thirty and you're still an idealist, you don't have brain.*

(Another tease)

So... How old are you?

REBECCA

I'm thirty-six. And you're misquoting Churchill, not Dostoevsky.

DAD

Ah.

REBECCA

But glad to know you think Dostoevsky was a realist. He believed in the inherent goodness of people.

DAD

(Out)

God, I love that she's so literate. So damn smart. Makes me. Proud.

REBECCA

Dostoevsky. An idealist, but that doesn't mean he wasn't realistic. Realistic about the human condition. Realistic about the need for compassion.

DAD

(Out)

But so damn liberal. I think she takes positions just to get under my skin.

REBECCA

(Off Dad's twinge, the painful knee)

Is that ice helping?

DAD

Probably just a bruise. Damn concrete. Kneecaps don't break, do they? No. Pretty sure just a bruise. And where's the doctor? How long do we have to [wait]? We're the only one's in here.

REBECCA

(A teasing but loving pat to his shoulder)

Patience old man.

(Out)

Playing ping pong with my boyfriend. Dove for a shot. Concrete floor. What was he thinking?

DAD

Are you and, uh, what's his, uh...? Are you two serious?

REBECCA

Cathal<sup>1</sup>. His name is Cathal.

DAD

Cole. Right.

REBECCA

Not Cole. It's got two syllables. *Cohhill*.

DAD

Cow-hill. Right.

REBECCA

Oh, my God. *Not Cow Hill!* I don't think you even try.

DAD

Does Cow-hill eat meat.

REBECCA

Of course, he eats meat. What –

DAD

None of your other... You know. I thought you only dated vegetarians.

REBECCA

That's not [right]. Why do you care what they eat?

---

<sup>1</sup> Pronounced "Cohhill"

DAD

But you? Still only –

REBECCA

Plants... Okay, yeah. Occasionally, I eat fish... Occasionally. Rarely.

DAD

How about turkey?

REBECCA

Is a turkey a fish?

DAD

(Hopefully)

Okay. But we're still going [hunting]?

REBECCA

(Out)

Dad's a hunter. And more than that. Licensed for concealed carry. Can you believe it?

DAD

Turkey season opens in a couple of weeks.

REBECCA

Yeah. But no, I don't... Well, I don't know.

DAD

Oh.

(A sigh, then hopefully)

Well, I've got the Remington 1100 ready to go if you want to [use it], you know. It's fully/camouflaged.

REBECCA

Camouflaged. I know. But you know that I'm not interested in hunting with a gun. Maybe with a bow. I don't know.

DAD

Yes! We can use bows!

REBECCA

You and your guns.

(Off Dad's smile and reach to his pocket)

Oh, my God! You're not packing now, are you? In a hospital?!

DAD

Matter of fact.

Dad smiles and withdraws a pack of gum from his pocket.

DAD

I am packing. Gum. Want a piece?

Rebecca rolls her eyes and declines the gum. Dad returns it to his pocket.

REBECCA

I might go with you. With bow and arrow. But Dad. I don't think I can kill a [turkey]. You know.

DAD

That's okay. When you call in a big old tom, you'll rise to the challenge. Hey! Does Cow-Hill hunt?

REBECCA

*Cohhill*. And no. Or. I don't know. We've never talked about it.

DAD

He does seem more, uh, more. You know.

REBECCA

More what?

DAD

More than the others. You know. More...

REBECCA

Competitive?

DAD

Competitive. Yes... Masculine.

REBECCA

Oh, my God!

DAD

He's polite.

REBECCA

Oh, yeah! Like masculinity and politeness go/ [hand in hand].

DAD

I saw him open a door for you.

REBECCA

So!

DAD

Does he pick up the check? At the restaurant?

Rebecca sighs and looks away as Dad grows a big smile.

DAD (CONT.)

Oooh. He does. And –

REBECCA

Not always!

DAD

But you like it when he does. When he opens doors. Picks up the check.

REBECCA

That's nothing to do with masculinity!

DAD

I might actually get to like this guy. Cow-hill. Polite. Gentlemanly. And competitive, too. Helluva ping pong player. Maybe you found a winner in this one.

REBECCA

Cow-hill is – Goddamnit! Now you've got me doing it. *Cohhill. Cohhill. Is. Masculine...*  
(A teasing poke to his ribs)

*Very* masculine, in fact.

DAD

(A knowing grin)

*Very?* Uh-huh.

REBECCA

But not toxic! He's more/ like –

DAD

Like me!

REBECCA

No! No, he's not! He's not a...

(Playful teasing)

Not a dinosaur.

(Pause, then out)

Okay. Here's the thing. And promise you won't tell him.

REBECCA (CONT.)

(Steals a look at Dad)

I've always admired him. My dad. But he's so goddamn traditional. Opens doors. Insists on paying for everything. And it drives me crazy because I know I should not like that. I mean, I can open my own doors and pay my own way. Isn't that what a modern woman is supposed to do? But shit. If I'm being honest – and remember, you can never tell him I said this – but if I'm being honest. I do like that he cares. He makes me feel safe. He's always taken care of the family. He'd donate a kidney. Give his right arm. Hell, he'd take a bullet for me without a second thought. I know he would. And I adore him for that. But still. It drives me crazy that I love his, you know, the way he... He's just so goddamn secure. Secure in who he is. What he believes.

DAD

A dinosaur, huh?

(Pause, then out)

Of all my kids, Rebecca is the most like me. You can't tell her I said that! She'd deny it. But I think she'd secretly like to hear it. That she's like me.

REBECCA

(More teasing)

That's right. You're a regular, uh... A *seniorsaurus*.

Rebecca and Dad share a smile. Their fondness for each other is palpable.

REBECCA (CONT.)

(Out)

But I'll tell you what. The guy *can* change his mind. He is able to do that. I've seen it. Intellectual honesty is his guiding light. He respects hard data. Man's a scientist. Of a sort. A consulting psychologist. If you tell him men and women are equal – no I don't mean *equal*. I mean, *the same*. Tell him there's no difference between men and women, and he'll call bullshit. He'll cite scientific evidence. Anthropometry. Physical measurements of males and females. Tons of data collected from personality assessments, 360-degree assessments, and on and on and on. Anyone who denies differences is not – according to my dad – not being intellectually honest. And yes. I do respect him for his intellectual honesty.

DAD

(Out)

She's a deep thinker. And so goddamn independent. A rebel, really. Not afraid to take a position. Stand her ground. God, I love her for that. That attitude is what I've wanted for all my kids. I mean, sure, I'd like it if they shared my viewpoints. But not at the cost of thinking independently.

(Steals a look at Rebecca)

And she's so goddamn quick. Funny. We have a very open relationship.

REBECCA

Oh! I think I just saw a doctor.

DAD

(Gives a harumph and then out)

Okay. Quick story... When she was a junior in high school, I got a job offer in another state. I wasn't going to take the job unless she was okay with changing schools for her senior year. She very agreeably told me, "No problem." She said she'd make new friends, but I had to promise to bring her back for a visit in the fall so she could attend a prom. I got her a new dress, and we made the trip. I dropped her off at a friend's house and told her I'd pick her up the next morning. I told her I wanted to know exactly where she would be at all times and with whom.

(Pausing to chuckle)

She told me that after the dance, she and her friends were gathering in a cornfield at midnight for a goat sacrifice. Playing along, I said, "Well, don't get blood on your new dress." Without missing a beat, she said, "Who said we were going to be wearing clothes?"

(Beat)

Funny. Quick. See what I mean?

A long pause as Rebecca and Dad  
awkwardly regard each other. Finally...

REBECCA

You really think I should take the plunge? Go out on my own? Start my own practice?

DAD

Why wouldn't you? What's the worst that can happen?

REBECCA

I could fail.

DAD

Yep. But ask people my age about their biggest failures and biggest regrets. They're often not the same thing. The risk of you failing, in my estimation, is miniscule. But even if you do, it's unlikely you'll look back later and regret taking the risk. And if you don't, you'll almost certainly look back and regret *not* taking the risk. I've got so much confidence in you. You know that, right?

REBECCA

(Pausing, considering Dad)

Don't think about me. If you were looking for a therapist, would be more likely to look for a man or a woman?

DAD

(Bit of a chuckle)

Gender would not be much of a consideration. It's all about competence.

REBECCA

*Much* of a consideration?

DAD

If you and I, if we weren't related, you'd be my first choice. If I was looking. You're supremely competent.

REBECCA

I'm your daughter. Easy to say.

DAD

But if gender was the only thing I knew about therapist candidates, I'd choose a female. The odds are better with a female.

(Off Rebecca's skeptical look)

Women – *on average now* – I'm not talking about individuals. But *on average*, women have higher emotional intelligence than men.

(Off Rebecca's continued skepticism)

Women – *on average* – are better at lots of things. Fine motor skills just to name one, but if you're talking about a therapist, I think emotional intelligence must be an important component of their competence.

REBECCA

(A dismissive snort)

Fine motor skills. Big deal. Women are better than men at a lot of things.

DAD

On average. Sure. But that's all just statistical averages. Men are better, *on average*, in spatial intelligence. Doesn't mean lots of women aren't expert navigators. Even if men are better at ping pong – *on average* – lots of women would kick my ass. Individuals are a lot more important than statistics. There's no such thing as an average individual. You're unique, Rebecca, and I have confidence in you as an *individual*. Not because of your gender.

REBECCA

(A thoughtful pause)

Thank you.

Rebecca takes a moment to adjust the ice pack on Dad's knee, then gives him a kiss on the forehead.

REBECCA (CONT.)

On second thought, I will take a piece of gum.

Dad gives her a piece. Rebecca opens the wrapper and stops. She takes a thoughtful pause.

REBECCA (CONT.)

(Out)

Oh, dear God, Dad is a feminist.

Rebecca pops the gum in her mouth and  
leans her head on Dad's shoulder. Lights  
slowly fade to...

BLACKOUT

END OF PLAY

## WHAT BAGGAGE

## Cast of Characters

<u>EVELYN</u>	Female, 60s - 70s. Any ethnicity.
<u>VIRGIL</u>	Male, 60s - 70s. Any ethnicity.
TIME	A recent evening.
SETTING	Evelyn's living room.
SET	Minimalist. A sofa. Other furnishings as desired.
SYNOPSIS	After their first act of intimacy, two seniors try to decide if it's possible to have a future that involves a committed, long-term relationship. Is it time for them to live together? Is that even possible when both carry personal baggage that includes exes, kids, and a cat?
NOTES:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ellipses (...) indicate an unfinished thought, dialogue that trails off.</li> <li>• Brackets [ ] indicate sentiment expressed by unspoken words.</li> </ul>

*"Being someone's first great love may be great but being their last is beyond perfect."*

~anonymous

*They say that breaking up is hard to do*

*Now I know*

*I know that it's true.*

~ Neil Sedaka and Howard Greenfield

## WHAT BAGGAGE

Evelyn enters buttoning her blouse. She walks slowly, in a dreamy state, and collapses on the sofa. She leans back, eyes closed, and wearing a smile. After a moment, Virgil enters buttoning his shirt. He approaches the sofa and pauses to rub his eyes. He sneezes.

EVELYN

*Without opening her eyes.*

Bless you.

*A beat, then opening her eyes.*

Bless you. Oh, my God! Bless you!

VIRGIL

You must have a cat.

EVELYN

My, God. That was just. Amazing.

VIRGIL

I'm allergic.

EVELYN

But you've got to tell me, I mean, it's okay to... You *can* tell me. Did you take a little blue pill?

VIRGIL

*Sitting beside her.*

For my allergy?

EVELYN

For that hickory hard. Panhandle.

VIRGIL

Uh, *what?*

EVELYN

*Taking his face in her hands.*

Oh, my God. Are you still [hard]? I think it took some wrinkles out of your face.

VIRGIL

Huh?

EVELYN

I'm traumatized.

EVELYN (CONT.)

*Off his confusion. Smiling.*

In a good way.

VIRGIL

*Rubbing his eyes.*

I'm going blind here. Where's the/ cat?

EVELYN

*Leaning back with a big smile.*

/Me, too! I've heard about it, but never [experienced it], you know? Been knackered to the nines. Sure. Screwed silly. Once or twice, maybe. But never before. Boinked. *Blind!*

*Giggling, throwing arms upward, and again closing eyes.*

It was like a total blackout!

VIRGIL

Okay. That's good. Yeah, for me, too.

*Pausing, then seriously.*

But now. What's next?

EVELYN

*In sharp contrast, breezy and light.*

Friday night. Dinner and a movie?

VIRGIL

No. I mean, now that we've, you know...

EVELYN

Sullied my sheets?

VIRGIL

I mean, is this going to be a thing?

EVELYN

*Giggling.*

It better be, Mister. And no worries. I'll get right to the laundry. Change the sheets.

VIRGIL

Yeah. No.

*Taking her hand.*

Between us, I mean. I'm trying to [understand]... Uh... Where do we go from here?

EVELYN

*More giggling.*

Ooh, there's more?

VIRGIL

We've been dating for, what? Three months?

EVELYN

Yeah, Mister. What took us so long?

*Off Virgil's serious demeanor.*

Are you thinking we should, what? You're not thinking –

VIRGIL

A toothbrush? Maybe a drawer for underwear. You know, just, uh, a small next step.

EVELYN

Oh, my God! Yes! But why stop with a toothbrush? I've got a whole closet for you.

VIRGIL

Oh. I didn't know how you'd feel about/ it.

EVELYN

/Are you kidding? You really want to move in?

VIRGIL

Oh. No, I'm not suggesting anything, you know, permanent. Not/ fulltime.

EVELYN

/Why not? You could even have your own [room]. I've got a spare bedroom.

VIRGIL

Uh, wow. That would be a big, uh... That's more than a step. That's more like a leap. But I've got to ask...

EVELYN

Yeah?

VIRGIL

Do you love me? I mean, we've never even said –

EVELYN

In the bedroom! Just now! I said it!

VIRGIL

Yeah, okay, but I'm not sure that counts when we're in the middle of, you know...

EVELYN

We're perfect for each other. Aren't we?

VIRGIL

Perfect?

*Pausing to consider.*

Uh, yeah, I guess we're kind of perfect. I mean, we laugh at the same, uh, you know, same sense of humor. I guess that's a kind of love.

EVELYN

That's part of it. Of course.

VIRGIL

I mean, you're talking about a *huge* step. I was just thinking –

EVELYN

And the sex! Who would've thought?

VIRGIL

We do like the same TV programs. That's something.

EVELYN

*Standing. Giddy.*

We'd save money once we... If we didn't have to pay, um. We'd save on/ utilities.

VIRGIL

Both like Dick Van Dyke, Bob Newhart, Murder She Wrote. Old reruns. And we hate reality TV.

EVELYN

We can keep finances separate. Share groceries. Or, no, no. I'll take care of groceries, make sure to keep on hand those fancy nuts you like.

VIRGIL

And meat.

EVELYN

I need to buy some new towels.

VIRGIL

I eat a lot of meat.

EVELYN

*Sitting and taking his hand.*

Meat. Yes, lots of meat. Maybe that explains your superhuman/ [virility].

VIRGIL

/We don't want to be hasty. If this is love, that means/ it's got to last.

EVELYN

Sacrifice. It means sacrifice.

VIRGIL

Sacrifice. Sure. But we don't have to be in a rush/ to [move in together].

EVELYN

Love! We're really doing this. We're in –

Virgil sneezes again. Violently. He pulls out a handkerchief and blows his nose. Rubs his eyes. He's suffering.

VIRGIL

Where's the goddamn cat?

EVELYN

Chester? Oh, he's locked in the/ pantry.

VIRGIL

We've got to do something about the cat.

EVELYN

He's fine. There's a litter box in there.

Awkward pause. Virgil shakes his head, stands, paces.

VIRGIL

What about my rocks?

EVELYN

Rocks?

VIRGIL

My Rock Room. The collection fills my/ third bedroom.

EVELYN

You've got an entire room for rocks?

VIRGIL

You should see them! My geodes alone fill an entire wall.

EVELYN

I had no idea. So, you're passionate about –

VIRGIL

I've got an obsidian specimen that weighs 13 pounds!

EVELYN

Is that a lot?

VIRGIL

We need special lighting and heavy-duty shelves.

EVELYN

Why have you never told me about your rock collection?

VIRGIL

I tried. A couple of times.

EVELYN

Really?

VIRGIL

Even asked you to. Remember? Asked you to go with me a couple of weeks ago to Prairie du Chien?

EVELYN

Yes, but that was Chester's birthday. He turned –

VIRGIL

Near the river. Great place for rock hounding, and I've found some great fossils.

EVELYN

My girlfriends, Amanda and Phoebe, took –

VIRGIL

Who?

EVELYN

Oh, I've told you about them. We took Chester to Panera Bread. He's so/ cute.

VIRGIL

They let you take a cat in there? Gross.

EVELYN

Chester loves their tuna salad.

VIRGIL

I found a hyolith near Prairie du Chien that was featured in Archaeology magazine!

EVELYN

Wow. I didn't know I had Indiana Jones in my bed.

VIRGIL

Got a special display for that hyolith.

EVELYN

Okay, then. You'll have to give me a tour of your, uh, your museum.

VIRGIL

We'd need to install an air-handling system.

EVELYN

For Chester?

VIRGIL

My rock saws and polishers create a lot of dust.

EVELYN

The dust doesn't bother you, but Chester does?

Virgil has another bout of sneezing and nose blowing. He moans as he rubs his eyes.

VIRGIL

I gotta find that goddamn cat.

EVELYN

What will your daughter think? Wait. What about the cat? Chester's like family.

VIRGIL

Oh, yeah, my daughter. Right. I've got to think about my daughter. She's still living with/ me.

EVELYN

/But that's temporary, right? When's she getting her own place?

VIRGIL

She's got student loans.

EVELYN

Yeah. *And?*

VIRGIL

I mean, I can't just walk away from [her]. You know? She depends on me.

She's 36 years old!

EVELYN

And she's got two kids in high school.

VIRGIL

Who live with their dad!

EVELYN

And she's not getting any alimony.

VIRGIL

What are you saying?

*Pause.*

Sometimes we've got to show tough love.

EVELYN

So, what about Chester?

VIRGIL

He's 16 years old!

EVELYN

In cat years, that's twice as old as my daughter.

VIRGIL

Virgil violently sneezes again and rubs his eyes.

I'm going blind here!

VIRGIL (CONT.)

And I'm beginning to see.

EVELYN

*Stands. Paces.*

A long awkward pause as the realization hits them.

So, no toothbrush?

VIRGIL

What about dinner and a movie on Friday?

EVELYN

BLACKOUT

END OF PLAY

## HE AIN'T NO STEPHEN ADLY GUIRGIS

## Cast of Characters

ROCKY A mature female, ideally in her 60s. Rocky is rough around the edges, not well educated. She's not formally trained as an actor, but she's a theatre aficionado and desperately wants to be an actor. As an actor, Rocky is high maintenance, very outspoken, demanding when trying to nail her role. But she's got a sensitive side when she stops playing a character. She idolizes Stephen Adly Guirgis and loves his plays for their gritty realism.

SAMMY A male, ideally younger or much younger than Rocky. Sammy is a novice director. To say he lacks confidence is a gross understatement. It doesn't help that Rocky intimidates him, scares him shitless, in fact. Sammy wears a cap or hat of some sort.

TIME: About now.

SETTING: A stage.

SET: Director's prerogative. May be a bare stage, but likely two chairs set to one side. Throw in a table if it makes sense.

SYNOPSIS: During an early rehearsal of a dark mystery-horror mashup, an actor struggles with the rotten script she's been given. She confronts her director which leads to surprising insights for both.

RUNNING TIME: 13 – 15 Minutes.

## PRODUCTION NOTES

- The only props required are a couple of scripts. Sammy's hat will also be used as a prop when need to serve as a proxy for a stuffed Pekinese.
- Ellipses (...) at the end of a line indicate an unfinished thought, dialogue that trails off. Ellipses within a line of dialogue suggest a verbal pause.
- Brackets [ ] indicate sentiment expressed by unspoken words.

*"I think anything that anyone writes that's any good is going to have a lot of autobiography."  
~ Stephen Adly Guirgis*

## HE AIN'T NO STEPHEN ADLY GUIRGIS

A rehearsal. Sammy and Rocky are on the stage.  
Both hold scripts.

ROCKY

*Referring to the script.*

I WOULD NEVER SAY THAT!

SAMMY

Okaaay. You're breaking character.

ROCKY

*My character?* Yes! My character! I'm supposed to be a bad ass! An assassin!

SAMMY

I, I, uh... I, I do love your emotion.

ROCKY

*What the hell does that even mean?*

SAMMY

Well, you have a way of expressing –

ROCKY

No! In this context! I mean, it's absurd.

SAMMY

Okay. Well, maybe the playwright is trying to show –

ROCKY

What?! Show what?! What's my motivation?

SAMMY

What do you think?

ROCKY

What do *I* think? *You're* the freakin' director! Get with the program!

SAMMY

Uh, yeah. Right. So, uh, your character...

ROCKY

Rocky.

*Beat.*

My character is Rocky. On the stage. Call me Rocky.

SAMMY

Right. Yes. Well, *Rocky*. You are – Rocky is – searching. Searching for her mark. The victim. She's being stealthy. She's cunning and –

ROCKY

Bullshit! How stealthy, how cunning is it for her to say? *To say to herself, mind you!* In the middle of stalking her victim, she says: *Pekinese are such cute little fuckers.*

Sammy breaks into hearty laughter but quickly stifles it under Rocky's wilting stare. An awkward pause.

SAMMY

I don't know. Is it supposed to be a laugh line? I guess it is kind of –

ROCKY

Laugh line?! That line sucks ass!

SAMMY

Huh. Yeah, I guess it is –

ROCKY

Let's get rid of it. Or change it.

SAMMY

Oh! No. We can't do that. It's in the Dramatists Guild Bill of Rights. You can't change even a word of dialogue without the playwright's permission.

ROCKY

Screw the playwright. He'll never know.

SAMMY

Oh, he'll know.

ROCKY

*How?* How will he know? Is he coming?

SAMMY

Well, the thing is... Uh. Okay. What about this? Maybe the playwright's trying to show that the assassin has an endearing side, that she's fond of Pekinese dogs. Maybe.

ROCKY

*Referring to the script.*

Who the hell is this playwright, anyway? Fred...

*Stumbling with it.*

Glech-tel-/schplecht.

SAMMY

*Fluently.*

/Glechtelschplecht. Fred Glechtelschplecht.

ROCKY

Well, that shit doesn't exactly roll off your tongue, does it? Just kinda. Rolls. Aroound. On the tongue. Like I threw up in my mouth and got nowhere to spit.

Pause as Sammy hesitates.

SAMMY

Fred. Is. My brother.

Now Rocky hesitates, stunned to silence. *What the hell?*

ROCKY

Wait. I thought –

SAMMY

Samuel Glechtelschplecht. My name. Was my name. But/ I [changed it].

ROCKY

*/Smith.* Your name is Sammy Smith.

SAMMY

It is now.

ROCKY

Oh, my God! You changed your name!

*Chuckling.*

Well, I wasn't gonna say nothin', but now I just gotta tell ya. I lost my virginity in the back seat of a 66 Impala, Sammi Smith on the radio singin'.

*Belting it out.*

*Help me make it through the night.*

Awkward pause.

SAMMY

Oh.

ROCKY

Yeah.

SAMMY

A 1966 Impala?

ROCKY

The car was 1966. It wasn't. I wasn't. Not in 1966. Fuck you.

Another awkward pause.

SAMMY

Okay. Maybe we can get back to the scene.

ROCKY

But what a we do with the freakin' Pekinese?

SAMMY

We're going to say the line. As it's written.

ROCKY

Wait a minute! Guy's your brother, right? Let's get him in here. I wanna hear it straight from the horse's ass.

SAMMY

Mouth.

ROCKY

*What?*

SAMMY

Straight from the horse's *mouth*. The saying is, straight from the horse's *mouth*. *Not* horse's ass.

ROCKY

Whatever. But if the shoe fits...

*Aside.*

Maybe every playwright *is* a horse's ass.

SAMMY

I'm sorry, but no. We can debate if you want to, but I have to stand my ground as a director.

ROCKY

Whaddya know? Sammy Smith grows a pair. What we really need is The Motherfucker with the Hat.

Sammy clutches his chest, falls to a chair, devastated by Rocky's comment. He groans, removes his hat and stares at it. He begins weeping, softly at first, but the weeping grows to sobbing.

Rocky throws her script to the stage and moves to his side, puts an arm around him. Speaks gently.

ROCKY (CONT.)

What the hell, man? Take it easy. I dint mean nuthin'. Not talking 'bout you.

SAMMY

I don't know how to do this.

ROCKY

I'm talking 'bout the play. *The Motherfucker with the Hat*. It's a play.

SAMMY

*Confusion through his tears.*

I don't know –

ROCKY

I dint mean *you're* the motherfucker with the hat.

SAMMY

*Wiping tears. Gaining some composure.*

No?

ROCKY

It's a play, man! Stephen Adly Guirgis! The greatest living playwright. Hell, the greatest playwright of all time!

SAMMY

So, you don't think I'm a motherfucker?

ROCKY

Shakespeare ain't got shit on Stephen Adly Guirgis.

SAMMY

Uh. So, you weren't talking about [me]?

ROCKY

Man, do ya hear what I'm sayin? I'm saying we need the script punched up. Ya getcherself a script like *The/ Motherfu* –

SAMMY

/Please! Can you stop using that word?

ROCKY

Sensitive, huh? Okay. How about *Jesus Hopped the A Train*?

Sammy wags his head. No clue.

ROCKY (CONT.)

No? *Between Riverside and Crazy*?

Sammy wags his head. No clue.

ROCKY (CONT.)

Oh, my God! Where you been, man? You're a director, ain't ya?

SAMMY

No. Not really.

ROCKY

Course ya are! Whatcha directed. Before now, I mean.

SAMMY

I assisted.

ROCKY

*He can't be serious.*

You mean this/ is [your first time]?

SAMMY

/I was assistant director for *The Princess and the Pea*. At a summer camp. Grade school kids.

ROCKY

Uh huh.

SAMMY

And Fred. My brother. He was desperate to find a director.

ROCKY

Uh huh.

SAMMY

Everyone he asked took a pass.

ROCKY

Well, yeah. Fred. He ain't no Stephen Adly Guirgis.

SAMMY

He begged me to direct. This is his first play and –

ROCKY

Okay. So, we got us a virgin director and a dog of a script. But look on the bright side.

SAMMY

There's a bright side?

ROCKY

Course there is, but only cuz... Okay. We gotta say all the lines as they're written, right?

SAMMY

Yes.

ROCKY

But yer the director. Ya can do whatever ya want with the stage directions, cantcha?

SAMMY

I guess. Within reason.

ROCKY

And we can play around with *how* we say the lines, right?

SAMMY

What are you thinking?

ROCKY

I'm thinkin' some stuff is so shitty it becomes good, ya know, campy. Ya seen *Mars Attacks*? Dint hurt Tim Burton none.

SAMMY

But my brother...

ROCKY

We make it intrestin'. Get the audience leanin' in. Laughin'. If the audience likes it, Fred's gonna be sittin' there in the back row and creamin' his jeans.

SAMMY

But I don't know/ how [to do that].

ROCKY

/We play!

SAMMY

Play?

ROCKY

Yeah. We play. Play around with the staging and how we say the lines.

SAMMY

Like. You mean –

ROCKY

Serious or silly? Sexy or stiff? I can play an uptight librarian assassin or –

SAMMY

A slut!

ROCKY

There ya go! But ya can get more creative than that, Sammy.

*Having fun. Teasing.*

Don't gotta be doin' no type castin'.

SAMMY

*Getting excited.*

Okay! Let's play! How about we take it from your first kill? I'll play the victim.

ROCKY

Okay. So, I'm gonna strangle ya.

SAMMY

Yeah! But *how* are you going to strangle me?

ROCKY

You're the director.

SAMMY

What if we... Okay, look. You don't like the line about the Pekinese, right?

ROCKY

No! I don't like it because/ it blows.

SAMMY

Because you don't get it. Don't get what's motivating you.

ROCKY

No shit.

SAMMY

But what if... What if a Pekinese is your partner in crime?

ROCKY

Uhh...

SAMMY

We give you a Pekinese that accompanies you throughout your journey as an assassin. All those times when Rocky is verbalizing her internal dialogue – I mean, I've got to agree, that's some shitty writing.

SAMMY (CONT.)

But what if Rocky is carrying on a conversation with her partner in crime? Her dog.

ROCKY

Hold on Elia Kazan. What I heard, never do a play with kids or animals.

SAMMY

But it's not a real animal.

ROCKY

You mean –

SAMMY

We give you a stuffed animal!

ROCKY

Okaaay.

SAMMY

Yeah! A partner to talk to so your monologues become conversations.

ROCKY

One-way conversations.

SAMMY

No! You animate the Peke. Make it nod its head. Cock its head. You can deliver all those ominous monologues with baby talk. You're talking to your pet. Your partner in crime.

*Off Rocky's skeptical look.*

Okay, let me play with it.

Sammy takes some time to get in character. He takes his hat and holds it to his chest stroking it like he's holding a small dog. When he speaks, he takes his time and has a cheerful tone. He uses baby talk and animates the hat so it's responding to his monologue. Rocky's skepticism fades. She gets into it, slowly at first, but by the time Sammy finishes, she's thoroughly animated.

SAMMY

Slowly... A slow kill... That's the best.

*Pause.*

What's the fun in snuffing out a life in an instant? But... To prolong the terror... To hear their pitiful pleading... To see their desperation... To cut them so they bleed out slowly. To ever so slowly choke them so you can watch the light fade from their eyes.

ROCKY

That's freakin' brilliant! And how about this? After I duct-tape the poor schmuck to a chair, I can put the Pekinese in a prime position to watch, and I kind of play to him.

SAMMY

Or her.

ROCKY

Yeah. Rocky would probably have a bitch.

SAMMY

So, you're liking this?

ROCKY

Hell, yeah!

SAMMY

You were psycho, but now you become a really *weird* psycho.

ROCKY

If my dog has a leash, I can use that to strangle [the victim].

SAMMY

We make the dog look really creepy.

ROCKY

Well, yeah. Anyways, Pekinese are freaky fuckin' dogs.

SAMMY

It's so bizarre! The poor victim staring into the eyes of a grotesquely grinning Pekinese while the monstrous assassin slowly strangles him from behind.

ROCKY

Will the audience be horrified? Or will they be laughing?

SAMMY

You play it right, there'll be *nervous* laughter.

ROCKY

Uncomfortable. Yeah.

SAMMY

Well, you don't come to the theatre to be comfortable.

ROCKY

Now yer thinkin' like a director! Maybe ya got some Stephen Adly Guirgis in ya after all.

Sammy grins and hands her the hat.

SAMMY

Here. You be the motherfucker with the hat.

Rocky takes the hat and returns the grin.

SAMMY (CONT.)

Hit your mark. Okay. From the top of the scene.

Rocky moves across the stage, holds the hat close.

SAMMY (CONT.)

When you're ready. Action.

ROCKY

*In a baby voice to the hat.*

Pekinese are such cute little fuckers.

BLACKOUT

END OF PLAY

## IT'S NOT BLOOD

## Cast of Characters

- JIMMY Male, ~22, any ethnicity. The oldest brother.
- DANNY Male, ~20, any ethnicity. The middle brother.
- TIME Saturday morning prior to a scheduled memorial service for a slain soldier.
- SETTING A backyard fort, the childhood fortress of three boys, where they played, fought, and bonded as they grew up.
- SYNOPSIS Jimmy and Danny consider the past, the future, and their obligation to the family legacy as they prepare for their younger brother's funeral.
- NOTES:
- Ellipses (...) indicate an unfinished thought, dialogue that trails off.
  - Brackets [ ] indicate sentiment expressed by unspoken words.

## IT'S NOT BLOOD

Jimmy and Danny sit on wooden apple boxes in soft, dappled lighting. They wear dark long-sleeved shirts. They are quiet. Somber. In mourning. Their pain is palpable, almost suffocating. Jimmy flips through a Playboy magazine. An old metal box sits between them. Danny digs through the box and pulls out a couple more magazines, sets them aside. Continuing to dig, he pulls out a red-stained quarter, holds it up, studies it as a projection displays the quarter. A moment, then Danny wags his head, distraught. The projection goes dark.

DANNY

Why they givin' the flag to Mom? She's – *Cont'd.*

JIMMY

*Overlapping.*

They just are. Dad didn't – *Cont'd.*

DANNY

*Continuous.*

Not the one who gave a shit about – *Cont'd.*

JIMMY

*Overlapping.*

Object. Too much of a gentleman.

DANNY

*Continuous.*

Billy. About his – *Gentleman?!*

*Pause.*

Fuck you mean?! You sayin' Mom didn't love Billy? Sayin' Dad's a fuckin' gentleman?

Silence.

JIMMY

No... Not sayin' that.

*Pause.*

How much you think these old Playboys are worth?

DANNY

Dad's an asshole. His fault that –

JIMMY

The hell it is!

*Beat.*

Billy was always gonna be a soldier. Remember he was a kid? Out huntin' grasshoppers with his BB gun when he was, what? Six years old.

DANNY

*Chuckling.*

Fuckin' grasshoppers. Yeah.

JIMMY

Remember? Killed two pheasants. One shot.

DANNY

Single-shot 22. Lined 'em up. *Who can do that?*

JIMMY

*Chuckling.*

Through head of one. Other in the neck./ Just one [shot]!

DANNY

/Fucker was helluva shot.

JIMMY

Billy... Yeah.

DANNY

Still... Didn't have to put on a uniform.

JIMMY

Not Dad's fault.

DANNY

Whatever. But Dad. No fuckin' gentleman.

Silence. Danny studies the quarter as Jimmy studies Danny.

JIMMY

*Checking his watch.*

Almost time.

DANNY

Yeah, okay.

*Turning attention to the Playboy Jimmy is holding.*

Ten bucks maybe. How the hell I know?

Each?

JIMMY

Anyway, they're not appropriate.

DANNY

No, I know... What about that quarter?

JIMMY

I think this was Grandpa's lucky quarter. Maybe... Yeah. Think he had it in Nam.

DANNY

Billy shoulda carried it with him.

JIMMY

This blood? This red shit on it?

DANNY

Don't be fuckin' ridiculous.

JIMMY

It's not ridiculous... It's probably – *Cont. 'd.*

DANNY

*Overlapping.*  
Blood doesn't dry red. If it was blood – *Cont 'd.*

JIMMY

*Continuous.*  
Nail polish from some Vietnamese hooker.

DANNY

*Overlapping.*  
Would be brown.

Pause.

DANNY

Grandpa said their pussies were on a slant. Like their eyes.

JIMMY

More they spread the legs, tighter it got.

DANNY

Yeah... So, he was a racist.

Who? Grandpa? JIMMY

[Yeah.] *A shrug.* DANNY

Insensitive. Not racist. JIMMY

Hell's the difference? DANNY

Intent. Tryin' to be funny not hurtful. JIMMY

Still... Racist. DANNY

Christ. Lighten up. It was a generational thing. JIMMY

Fuck generational. DANNY

Jimmy holds out his hand, and Danny gives him the quarter. Jimmy studies it closely.

1966. Yeah. This was Grandpa's. JIMMY

Where do we, you know...? DANNY

What? JIMMY

You know... DANNY

Top of the coffin before they throw in the dirt. JIMMY

Yeah... Okay. DANNY

JIMMY  
You wanna be the one...?

DANNY  
You do it. You're oldest.

JIMMY  
We can do it together.

DANNY  
I guess.

Silence.

JIMMY  
I'm thinkin' to enlist...

Pause as Danny tries to take it in. Then...

DANNY  
*Chuckling.*  
Yeah, right.

JIMMY  
I'm serious. Gonna do it.

Pause. As Danny goes from skepticism to anger.

DANNY  
You fuckin' crazy?! I oughtta beat shit outta ya.

JIMMY  
*Managing a grin, gives a shove.*  
Yeah? Wanna try?

DANNY  
Outta your fuckin' mind.

JIMMY  
It's the one percent keeps the 99 percent safe.

DANNY  
Men in this family're fuckin' nuts.

JIMMY  
Grandpa. Dad. Uncle Max. You got no respect for our legacy.

DANNY

Fuckin' legacy got Billy killed.

JIMMY

He sacrificed. Don't disrespect it.

DANNY

*Choking up.*

Eighteen. Whole life ahead a him.

*A pause, becoming angry.*

Legacy's a load a horseshit!

*Silence. Danny studies his brother.*

That why you're thinkin' to enlist? A goddamn legacy?

JIMMY

Not just thinkin'. Gonna do it. You should, too.

DANNY

Break Mom's heart.

JIMMY

Yeah, well... She's a mom.

DANNY

Only one in the family thinkin' straight. You're a heartless bastard.

JIMMY

A man's gotta do...

DANNY

Billy wasn't no man.

JIMMY

Hey! Respect.

Silence.

DANNY

You're serious, take it. Grandpa's lucky quarter. Take it.

JIMMY

Naw. I'm not superstitious. Not like Butch about the watch in *Pulp Fiction*.

DANNY

*Bootch.* Remember? Esmerelda. The cab driver.

*Channeling Esmerelda.*

*Meester.* You're heem. I know you're heem. What's it feel like? Keeling a man? Beating another man to death with your bare hands?

*A sad smile.*

She called him *Bootch*.

JIMMY

*Bootch...* Yeah.

DANNY

I'm serious. You really gonna enlist, might wanna wear that quarter up your ass for good luck.

JIMMY

Smaller than a gold watch, but no fuckin' way anything goes up my ass.

Danny chuckles. Jimmy tosses the quarter in the air, catches it, puts it in his pocket, and then checks his watch.

JIMMY

We gotta go.

Danny pulls a photo from the box. A projection shows three young boys. Stair steps. Cutoff jeans. No shoes. No shirts. Shoulder-to-shoulder. Wide grins. Each boy holds a bb gun. Infantrymen in the making. Danny thoughtfully studies it a long moment, then turns to his brother.

DANNY

Oh, my God. This is it. This is us.

Jimmy takes the photo and studies it with a grin.

JIMMY

Perfect!

Jimmy and Danny stand and embrace. They begin to saunter to exit, Danny's arm around Jimmy's shoulder.

DANNY

You really gonna enlist, maybe I'll go with you.

JIMMY

Yeah? You just anglin' for the lucky quarter?

DANNY

It's time... Our legacy...

Jimmy and Danny exit as lights slowly dim to...

BLACK OUT

END OF PLAY

## THALIA'S B&B

### Cast of Characters

<u>GEORGE</u>	Male, Late 30s – 40s. An engineer experiencing a mid-life renaissance and exploring his artistic side by writing plays.
<u>BETSY</u>	Female, 30s. A bundle of energy-infused intellect. Married to George, she's relegated to serving as his muse.
<u>THALIA</u>	Female, 40s – 50s. A vivacious, uninhibited theatre aficionado and the proprietress of Thalia's B&B, her namesake property.
<u>EMMITT</u>	Male, 40s – 50s. Thalia's husband. Amiable but a bit dim-witted; his lack of impulse control takes him to the edge of boorishness.
TIME	Late afternoon. The present.
SETTING	A classy bed and breakfast.
SET	Living room in an historic mansion fittingly furnished with settee, two armchairs, and coffee table. There is signage near an entrance, e.g., <i>Thalia's B&amp;B – Ring for Registration</i> .
SYNOPSIS	An emerging playwright and his wife explore the source of inspiration with the proprietors of a B&B.
NOTES:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ellipses (...) indicate an unfinished thought, dialogue that trails off.</li> <li>• Brackets [ ] indicate sentiment expressed by unspoken words.</li> </ul>

## THALIA'S B&amp;B

George, on settee, napkin in his lap, sips coffee. Betsy leans against him and appears to doze. Thalia sits in a chair reading a script; another script is on the coffee table. A moment passes as George sips coffee and observes Thalia silently weeping as she reads. Finally, Thalia closes the script, places it on the coffee table, wipes her eyes, and noisily blows her nose. The sound of nose blowing starts a chain reaction. Betsy starts, roused from her apparent slumber. George juggles the coffee and perhaps spills a drop into the napkin on his lap. Emmitt, dozing in another chair remains undisturbed.

THALIA

Oh, I'm sorry!

BETSY

What happened?

GEORGE

It's OK. I had a napkin.

THALIA

You just got me so damn emotional.

BETSY

*Ooooh.*

THALIA

He saw it coming, didn't he? But no one else did.

GEORGE

That's one interpretation. A pretty good one, actually

BETSY

You already read it? The *Legacy Derailed* script?

THALIA

I'm a fast reader, Hon. Read them both. Would have finished sooner if I wasn't all blurry-eyed. I've seen lots of theatre but haven't looked at a script since high school. We did *Plaza Suite*. Can you believe it? High school. I played Muriel. Anyway, I have to tell you, it's such a privilege to have you.

GEORGE

Well, your place is charming.

THALIA

Do you write, too? Or act, maybe?

BETSY

Can't imagine myself acting and haven't done much writing. Not really. Not yet.

GEORGE

But she's incredibly talented. A critic like you can't believe! Constructive. She reads everything. Carefully. Thoughtfully. Doesn't spare my feelings when giving feedback. Gives great story ideas. Gooses my pedestrian dialogue. She's a partner in every way.

BETSY

I'm a critic. There you have it. I live theatre vicariously.

THALIA

And that's enough?

BETSY

For now, I guess so...

*A brave face.*

We, uh, we have a... It works.

GEORGE

My muse.

Awkward pause.

BETSY

Emmitt seems to be out of it.

THALIA

Putting people to sleep. Must be the playwright's greatest fear.

GEORGE

To be boring. To be derivative. Just a couple of the fears that weigh us down as we swim in a sea of self-doubt. The shore never in sight.

THALIA

That's poetic.

BETSY

But, Jesus, it's not how people talk.

GEORGE

See what I mean? She doesn't pull any punches.

BETSY

Just be honest. It's better that people hate it than are ambivalent.

THALIA

Well, there's no danger of ambivalence with this script. My god. The old man. I felt my heart being ripped out.

BETSY

It really is a tear-jerker. Remember Providence?

George smiles and nods.

BETSY (CONT.)

I was in the lobby in a theatre in Providence and saw a young man sitting off to the side crying. This was during intermission with people moving past him staring. Staring at him while they stood in line at the concession counter.

*Getting emotional.*

And he's sitting there. So pitiful. Just sobbing.

GEORGE

And you thought he needed consoling.

BETSY

Well, I didn't know. Maybe he'd just received some terrible news or something.

THALIA

*Catching the emotions.*

But he was crying about Mark, wasn't he? Crying about the old guy in the play.

BETSY

I sat down next to him –

GEORGE

A complete stranger. She puts her arm around his shoulder.

BETSY

He wasn't a stranger. He was family. From the audience. One of our theatre family.

THALIA

Oooh. That's precious.

BETSY

So, I asked him if there was anything I could do. And the poor guy, sobbing, shoulders heaving, turns to me and says, though his tears, he says, "It's this play. It's Mark. The old man. In the play. There on the stage. *I see my dad.*"

Thalia weeps as Betsy chokes back sobs. George thoroughly enjoys the display. He pulls a notepad from his pocket, begins writing a note. Betsy notices and lightly slaps his shoulder, and makes a half-hearted, unsuccessful grab for the notebook.

BETSY

Don't put this in your notes.

THALIA

What's he doing?

BETSY

Ideas for plots and characters. Be careful or you'll end up in one of his plays.

THALIA

It's okay with me. You can immortalize me, Mr. Playwright. Tears and all.

GEORGE

It doesn't work that way. My characters might resemble facets of people, but they resemble no one person in particular. I don't write biographies.

Betsy and Thalia share a look. *Yeah, right.*

GEORGE (CONT.)

The guy crying in the theatre lobby thought one of my characters was his father. You think I planned that? You think I knew his father?

BETSY

Okay. I see your point. But we both know the character is clearly based on your Uncle Cash. We'll never know what he thinks of it since he, you know... Cashed in.

*Turning to Thalia.*

His Uncle Cash died last May.

THALIA

Uncle Cash? Well, whoever he is, the old guy and his legacy/ was an –

GEORGE

/It's not just about his legacy. It's more about –

THALIA

Yeah, yeah! But the old guy! He really got to me. The tragedy of his life. So sad....

*Indicating one of the scripts.*

It was similar to, um, I don't know. Similar to but so different from your first play. I mean, in that one the set's just a booth in a New Jersey diner and only two characters.

BETSY

George and Julie, his college girlfriend.

THALIA

Autobiographical! I love it!

GEORGE

Okay. Again, it's not about/ anyone –

THALIA

Anyone in particular! Okay, then. But that first one about the couple who – *is not you and your ex-girlfriend* – it's a laugh-your-ass-off comedy. A hoot! I love the language, when they're deciding. And he wants to see *True West*, a gritty drama, but she wants to see *Dream Girls*. And he tells her, *no way I'm going to see a flouncy musical.*

BETSY

She wins the argument, but he wins the war. I love the ending when –

THALIA

I know! About peed myself when Julie tells Greg. You named yourself Greg. And, she says...  
*Beginning to giggle.*

She says, *you would enjoy Dream Girls if you were secure in your manhood!*

Thalia stands and demonstrates using her thumb as proxy for a penis, choking back giggling to speak in affected masculine voice.

THALIA (CONT.)

And Greg... Greg says, *Julie! My manhood is securely pointing True West. And that's where I'm headed!*

BETSY

And then he walks out –

THALIA

Pecker pointed west! Best last line ever. Right up there with...

*Air quotes. Her best Bogart impression.*

*This is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.*

George can't conceal his pleasure on hearing praise and hearing laughter. Betsy's less enthusiastic.

BETSY

Well done, George.

GEORGE

But the ending, that was all you. Tying it back to *True West*. It was a partnership.

George gives a quick kiss to Betsy's annoyance.

BETSY

Yeah. Okay. A partnership.

THALIA

In the end he leaves, but I don't know. You can't help but think he'll be back.

BETSY

Or she'll follow.

THALIA

Yes! They're so perfect for each other.

BETSY

Even when they're fighting, it's like they're making love. It's aggression, but it's, um, it's closer to passion than to violence.

EMMITT

*Coming to life.*

Like horses.

BETSY

*Giggling.*

What?!

During ensuing exchange, George is visibly amused and surreptitiously removes his notebook and jots a few notes.

EMMITT

You ever seen a couple a horses gettin' it on, you'd know what I mean.

THALIA

Emmitt's got a thing about horses.

BETSY

Oh, my!

Thalia and Betsy giggle.

EMMITT

Who's gotta thing for horses, Mama? Who?

Emmitt seductively approaches Thalia, throws head back, and neighs several times before wrapping Thalia from behind and kissing her neck. Thalia, aghast, leaps to her feet and presses a finger to his lips.

THALIA

Oh, God! Oh, God! Okay, Sugar. We've got guests. Don't you have some chores to do?

Disappointed, Emmitt shrugs and saunters back to retake his seat.

EMMITT

All the chores are done, Mama.

An awkward pause before Betsy rises.

BETSY

Yes. And on that note, I would like to go change for dinner.

George smiles, scribbles a last note then returns notebook to pocket.

GEORGE

Sure, Sweetie. I'll be up in a minute. Sushi tonight?

BETSY

Sashimi for me.

Betsy slips off. Thalia scoots next to George.

THALIA

Going to Muramoto's?

GEORGE

It's got good reviews.

THALIA

If you're into raw fish.

EMMITT

Rice. Seaweed. That sort of thing. No cheese on the menu.

GEORGE

I think someone once said, *a meal without cheese is like a beautiful woman with only one eye.*

EMMITT

Cheese and a beautiful woman! Yeah! That's a meal fit for –

THALIA

Emmitt! [Shut it!]

*Turning to George.*

Uh, you were taking notes. And it's not that I care. But I guess I, um... Well, I'm just curious.

GEORGE

You want to know. Will I write/ about –

THALIA

/About me? About our B&B?

EMMITT

That would be awesome! Do it!

GEORGE

I find inspiration in lots of places.

THALIA

It's so obvious that you wrote about yourself and your girlfriend in that diner.

GEORGE

Not really. Not exactly. No one is really that interesting.

THALIA

Are you kidding? Interesting to me! It all seemed so. Like it really happened. I mean. It was crazy. Some of their conversations. But at the same time, it was so realistic. No, really. I was only reading, but it was like *I could hear you speaking. You.* I was hearing you and your girlfriend arguing. Your characters are interesting and real.

GEORGE

Not me and my girlfriend.

*Off Thalia's look of skepticism.*

No. Really. If the characters are interesting, it's because they're *not* real.

*Seeing Thalia's still skeptical.*

I know. I know. Every life is a miracle. Every person has a story. A life that's full of wonder. Full of joy and pain and sadness and deceit and kindness and on and on and on. But the sad truth is that very few people have a story that's worth telling. We all think we've lived an exciting life. But most of us. Our life stories will just bore the hell out of strangers.

THALIA

You're a helluva a writer, George. But, as a motivational speaker –

EMMITT  
You suck.

THALIA  
Emmitt! [Shut it!]

EMMITT  
No offense, man.

THALIA  
*Back to George.*  
But I think you're wrong. Everyone has a scandalous story lurking somewhere. Something really outrageous they hide away in a dark corner. I keep this place spic and span, but I don't want you shining light into every corner. People are like that. They have stories hidden in dark corners. They're just not willing to share them. People aren't really boring. They only seem boring.

EMMITT  
Damn sure they're boring. Mosta our guests will bore the hell outta you. Tell you about their niece who's so frickin' smart she *almost* got into Harvard. And I'm thinkin', why the hell you tellin' me about your niece? I don't know you. I don't know your frickin' niece. Some people, you just wanna throat punch 'em.

*Off Thalia's glare, a clear rebuke.*  
Or, uh, you know. *Smack 'em with the love of Jesus.*

GEORGE  
*Amused. Turns to Thalia.*  
Well, Thalia, that was very insightful. I think your internal writer is trying to get out.

THALIA  
You hear that, Sugar? *I'm insightful.*

GEORGE  
But if you can't shine a light into someone's dark corner, you can always find something. Something that inspires you. Maybe it's just an innocent comment. Or the way they carry themselves. Patterns of speech. Something inspiring in their appearance.

EMMITT  
Like that couple from Cleveland!  
*Turns to Thalia, gestures to indicate large breasts.*  
Remember the red-headed gal with the really tight sweaters and the big –

THALIA  
Emmitt!

GEORGE

You hear or see something and grab it and manipulate it like a mound of clay. Stretch it this way and that way so that, in the end, it bears little resemblance to the mound with which you started.

EMMITT

That red-headed gal from Cleveland really had a set a mounds!

Betsy enters the room holding a script and brings conversation to a halt. She just stands there, inscrutable, and looks to George. A pause.

THALIA

Come on, Sugar. You can help me with dinner.

EMMITT

Must be nice to have a muse. Could ya do it? The writing? Alone? Without your muse?

GEORGE

Well, I/ think –

EMMITT

*On exiting, being dragged by the hand.*

The question is, how original are you? Really?

THALIA (OFF.)

What's wrong with you? If brains were horseshit, you couldn't fertilize a single daisy!

A pause as George and Betsy stare at each other.

GEORGE

What's that?

Betsy hands the script to George.

BETSY

I've been writing, too.

GEORGE

*Reading from the script.*

*The Muse and the Charlatan. A play in two acts by...*

BETSY

Thanks for the inspiration.

END OF PLAY