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The Littlefield Gazette does not end Today

A dramatic comedy in two acts

By Don Zolidis

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Cast of Characters

GAYLE HELGESON, the publisher of the Littlefield Gazette, (she/her)

TRINA JONES, editor-in-chief of the Littlefield Gazette, (she/her).

BRYN, an unpaid intern (she/her)

JAMESON, an unpaid intern (he/his)

LINDA, farm reporting (she/her)

IMANI, the ad sales rep (she/her)

TONY, the sports editor, local personality (he/his)

KATE, the features editor (she/her)

SHIRLEY, Human Resources, (she/her)

LAMAR, the classified editor (he/his)

ADDISON, a sports reporter (she/her)

MIKE, the photographer (he/his)

LILY, the copyeditor (she/her)

DEE JONES, a graphics designer, Trina's child (they/them)

RACHEL, the business editor (she/her)

JADE, local politics reporter (she/her)

ELIO, a reporter (he/him)

SAMANTHA, guest columnist (she/her)

Race/Ethnicity of the Characters: Any character may be played by any person of any ethnicity or race. Name changes are acceptable.

Gender of the Characters: Most of the characters could be played a performer of any gender. Please feel free to change names and pronouns accordingly. There are a few (Addison, for instance) where this would not make sense.

Smaller cast: Some roles may be doublecast without problem. Scenes may also be cut as necessary.

The Picnic

An outdoor picnic.
A banner reads "Happy 126th birthday!"
Maybe some balloons.
It's tasteful, but a little not.

GAYLE HELGESON enters, holding a microphone in one hand and a drink in the other.

GAYLE

How's it going out there?!

She waits for an imaginary response.

Oh come on you can do better than that. Imagine your jobs are on the line. I'm gonna start over.

Gayle hides behind something. Pops up.

How's it going out there?!

Gets another response.

All right. All right. What a day. Huh? Looks like we just got this in before the clouds opened up on us. Nothing like being outside, am I right? Okay. Before the festivities begin, I have a few announcements:

She takes out a little slip of paper.

Mike, where are ya?

She finds him in the audience.

Your wife says she's not going to make it because she hates these things. I'm kidding I'm kidding your wife is a lovely person! Love her to death. She got in a bit of a fender bender on the way over – gonna be late - but seriously turn on your cellphone Mike. Which reminds me everyone else should turn off your cell phones – we're here to have fun, we're not here to watch the game on iPhone. I'm looking at you, Tony. I'm always looking at you.

TRINA enters, with her own microphone.

It's Trina! Our Editor-in-Chief everyone! Let's give her a hand!

Trina waves.

Our fearless leader!

TRINA

Thanks Gayle.

GAYLE

No problem. Do you have some words for the troops?

TRINA

Have a good time tonight.

GAYLE

Oh come on that's it?

TRINA

Make sure to have some of Samantha's pie. It is amazing.

GAYLE

Thank you. It is. Samantha I will require a supply of that delivered to my home address.

She laughs.

Little joke! Okay – I know you want me to shut up so we can get on with it. Just a few announcements.

TRINA

Gayle loves giving announcements!

GAYLE

You will pry this microphone out of my cold, dead hand.

TRINA

Don't get her going, everybody!

GAYLE

I see a microphone and it's basically just stand-up time. I missed my calling. Shoulda been on the Tonight Show. I woulda killed it.

TRINA

That's true.

GAYLE

It is.

TRINA

You get a couple of pina coladas in this woman and look out.

GAYLE

I don't even need `em, honestly. Okay – the raffle…

Trina makes a drumming sound

TRINA

Dun dun dun dun –

GAYLE

Make sure to write your name and phone number ONCE on the little slip – put it in the box up here – you have to be present to win. No one goes home until we decide this raffle.

TRINA

Tell them what they'll win!

GAYLE

Your wildest dreams. And no it's not a new job!

She laughs again.

TRINA

If your wildest dreams involve a microwave.

GAYLE

If you are out there dreaming about some day owning a microwave oven – maybe slightly used – I'm kidding I'm kidding it's not the one from the break room. I thought about it. I honestly did. What is everyone gonna want? A little piece of the office. But no seriously this is a brand-new microwave, I'm not that cheap. I'm almost that cheap.

TRINA

There are other things that can be won in the raffle!

GAYLE

A date with Trina!

TRINA

Oh gosh.

GAYLE

I'm kidding, I'm kidding! Now I'm not gonna lie: we did think about a bachelor auction. But I thought about all the money we'd get for you guys… and I realized we could afford that stapler anyway.

She cracks herself up.

TRINA

Someone get the microphone away from her.

GAYLE

Can I say that anymore? I don't even know. Men, you're all special, and I'm sure that there's a very special lucky someone out there for each and every one of you who will ignore all of your terrible, terrible problems.

TRINA

She doesn't mean it!

GAYLE

I kid, I know. Okay, is it time for the serious part of this?

TRINA

Maybe we wait for the raffle.

GAYLE

In all seriousness – I love you guys. You're family.

TRINA *(to the audience, touching heart)*

You are.

GAYLE

And me and Trina could not run this paper without you. We wouldn't even get close. We would just break for coffee the whole time. Nobody writes anything – we just drink coffee.

TRINA

We have spent a lot of late nights… getting this paper together… and –

GAYLE

Oh no she's gonna cry.

TRINA

I am not gonna cry! I told myself I wasn't gonna cry.

GAYLE

She's a crier. It's gonna happen.

TRINA

You're going to cry too.

GAYLE

I know I'm going to bawl like a baby. I'm gonna announce the winner of the microwave and then here come the waterworks.

TRINA

Thank you for this paper. Thank you for your work. Littlefield is a better town because of the Littlefield Gazette. I know that.

She's going to cry.

Okay I am going to get emotional now. But I think what we do is important… And I love what we do. And I love you guys.

Gayle hands her a tissue.

And Gayle this has been great and thank you for hiring me.

GAYLE

All right you're bringing everybody down! This is a party! We have marshmallow salad that looks like an angel's butt. Somebody brought Kentucky Fried Chicken which I'm gonna assume was one of the interns – but if it wasn't, well done, sir. We're going to have water balloon-tossing, we're going to have a three-legged race – it's gonna be lit, so to speak. You see I'm hip. I want everyone to have fun and not worry about anything because there is nothing wrong.

Trina looks down.

Gayle takes her by the shoulder.

There's gonna be a hot dog eating contest – we're going to have a blast. Mic drop.

TRINA

Don't actually drop the mic those are expensive.

GAYLE

I know I pay the bills.

TRINA

Have fun, everyone! We'll be back for the raffle at the end of the night!

They walk off. Lights change.

Noise of the party.

Balloon Animals

BRYN has a balloon.
JAMESON enters, with a balloon animal.

JAMESON

Oh hey you've got a balloon.

BRYN

I do indeed.

JAMESON

Sweet.

BRYN

I see you um –

JAMESON

They've got a clown down there. For the kids.

BRYN

For the kids.

JAMESON

And the interns.

BRYN

What kind of animal did you get?

JAMESON

Aardvark.
He looks at it.
Which looks basically the same as a dog. But I know the difference.

BRYN

Nice.

JAMESON

I was trying to stump him.

BRYN

So you're the kind of person who finds a clown doing balloon animals and tries to get them to screw up?

JAMESON

Basically.

BRYN
Good idea. That way, when you make the clown fail, all the children around can cry in despair.

JAMESON
Yeah I feel like it's a public service. Clowns aren't real, kids! Get used to disappointment!

BRYN
Actually I think clowns are real, Jameson. They're not like imaginary.

JAMESON
Yeah I'm not saying my plan makes sense. Did you put in for the microwave?

BRYN
Oh yeah. I entered four times.

JAMESON
I thought you were only supposed to enter once.

BRYN
This way I have four times the chance of winning.

JAMESON
But you're like breaking the rules. You're an outlaw.

BRYN
I figure if they catch me I just go on the run. Move to another town. Change my name. Grow a fake mustache. Standard stuff.

JAMESON
I would harbor you if you were on the run.

BRYN
Thanks. I'll keep that in mind when I go on my crime spree.

JAMESON
You're planning on a crime spree?

BRYN
I'm entering raffles all over town. I can't be stopped. I'm going to win like half a dozen microwaves.

JAMESON
Now I know who to ask when I want something heated quickly.

BRYN

Oh yeah I'm your girl.

JAMESON

If you were a Batman villain, your name would be the Raffler.

BRYN

Nice.

Short pause.

JAMESON

So um… Bryn… here.

He hands her the aardvark.

BRYN

You're giving me your aardvark?

JAMESON

I figured – you might want it. Don't put it in the microwave, though.

BRYN

Now I want to try.

She sees the look on his face

I won't. I promise. I have a strict no-murdering-balloon-animals policy.

JAMESON

Good. Because I don't think that clown is going to give me another one. I didn't tip him the first time.

BRYN

Jameson!

JAMESON

I know, I know. Can I just say that that clown made more money today than I made in my entire internship at the Gazette?

BRYN

Yeah that's part of being an unpaid intern. It's there in the name. *Unpaid.*

JAMESON

Yeah.

BRYN

We do it for the love of journalism, right?

JAMESON

Or something.

BRYN

Really? I figured this was your dream.

JAMESON

My dream? No I'm all about monster trucks.

BRYN

You want to drive a monster truck?

JAMESON

No I want to be the guy naming them. Truckasaurus Rex. Truck-a-ton bomb. Truckmageddon. Steve. That sort of thing.

BRYN

For real?

JAMESON

No I… I don't know want I want to do with my life. But it's not journalism. I think that's your thing.

BRYN

Oh no.

JAMESON

It's not?

BRYN

No I just…

JAMESON

I thought that's why you signed up to be an intern.

BRYN

No.

JAMESON

It wasn't a deep and abiding love of the Littlefield Gazette?

BRYN

Nope.

JAMESON

Well it wasn't to make money.

BRYN

That's for sure.

JAMESON

So why did you sign up?

BRYN

Why did you sign up?

JAMESON

I asked first.

BRYN

Yeah but I deflected your question and now I'm asking you the same question.

JAMESON

I mean if you're not really into journalism and you're not in this for the money then…

BRYN and JAMESON

I signed up because you signed up.
They both react.

JAMESON

What?!

BRYN

How did you not realize that?

JAMESON

I thought you were super into being a reporter!

BRYN

No! I kind of hate all of this! I did this because it was your thing!

JAMESON

My thing?! I'm like in charge of the copy machine and I get coffee! That's not my dream! Wait a minute wait a minute wait a minute – are you telling me that when I was stalking you… you were stalking me?

BRYN

You were stalking me?

JAMESON

No I mean not like – I didn't like go to your house or anything – I do happen to know where you live but that's not – don't get me wrong I was *not* stalking with you – I just really liked talking to

you and I wanted to talk to you more. Oh my gosh this is amazing. I didn't even realize you liked me I just thought you were really friendly!

BRYN

You didn't notice me flirting with you?!

JAMESON *(shocked)*

You've been flirting with me?!

BRYN

I've been flirting with you every minute you've been here!

JAMESON

Seriously?! How did I miss that?!

BRYN

I don't know! I've been pretty obvious!

JAMESON

I'VE BEEN FLIRTING WITH YOU TOO!

BRYN

NOT WELL!

JAMESON

I GAVE YOU AN AARDVARK!

BRYN

YEAH BUT THAT'S JUST WEIRD!

JAMESON

I'M A WEIRD PERSON! THAT'S HOW I FLIRT!

BRYN

With aardvark balloon animals!?

JAMESON

YES! I couldn't think of anything else!

BRYN

WELL I'VE BEEN FLIRTING WITH YOU BY MAKING JOKES!

JAMESON

I JUST THOUGHT YOU WERE FUNNY!

BRYN

I AM FUNNY BUT I LIKE YOU AND THAT'S WHY I WAS BEING FUNNY!

JAMESON

Oh my Gosh! Oh my Gosh! What do we do, what do we do, what do we do?

BRYN

I think we do this!

She kisses him.
Jameson loses his mind.

JAMESON

Yeah that's good. That's a good idea. You are a smart person.

He calms down.
She calms down.

Short pause.

JAMESON

You want a different balloon animal?

BRYN

Yes.

JAMESON

Okay.

He heads off.
Then runs back in.
Takes her hand.
They walk off together

Sack Race

We hear the action before we see it.
Lights up on an empty stage.

LINDA *(Off-stage)*

GO GO GO GO GO GO GO!

IMANI, struggling, is jumping in a sack race. She's terrible at it – tripping and nearly falling (or actually falling.)

GO GO GO GO GO GO GO!

LINDA, in another sack, charges on the stage, catching Imani and passing her. Linda is cheering for herself.

YES YES YES YOU'RE DOING IT YOU'RE DOING IT!

They both circle a point on one side of the stage and head back the other direction. Linda crushes Imani.

YES YES YES YOU'RE CRUSHING IT YOU'RE CRUSHING IT!

She reaches the finish line and cheers for herself.
Imani, perhaps crawling at this point after falling over, barely makes it to the end.

WOOO!

IMANI

Oh man… I feel like my heart is about to explode.

LINDA

Wow what a rush. Woo!

Linda gets a Gatorade out of a backpack.

Oh jeez. Whew. Gets the blood pumping.

IMANI

Do you have any other drinks?

LINDA

Oh sure.

She produces another Gatorade and hands it to Imani.

You gotta hydrate. I thought you had me to be honest there.

IMANI

Yeah I was… in the lead… only my total lack of talent and desire stopped me.

LINDA

You gotta dig deep. You're Imani, right?

IMANI

Yes.

LINDA

Ad sales?

IMANI

Good memory. Yes. I just started. Well two months ago. And you are…?

LINDA

Linda.

IMANI

And you do…?

LINDA

Farm reporting.

IMANI

Okay.

LINDA

Oh yeah. I can talk your ear off about hog prices or soybeans or the latest developments in manure. Basically if there was a Bat Signal for me, it'd be the Poop Emoji.

Imani laughs.

IMANI

Wow.

LINDA

Oh yeah. No one else wants to do it, to be honest with ya. I love it. I love everything about it.

She calls off.

HEY! NO! NO! STOP THAT!

IMANI

Is that your dog?

LINDA

One of `em.

IMANI

You have more than one?

LINDA

Three German Shepherds. They're *beasts*. Larry, Curly, and Moe.

IMANI

Don't you think you should put them on a leash or something?

LINDA

Nah that just hampers them. Some dogs gotta *roam*, know what I'm saying? Oh man I love those monsters so much. Sometimes I come home and they all jump on me at once – it's like being buried in joy. You got a dog?

IMANI

I have a chihuahua.

Linda holds her tongue.

She can't really bury me. She's basically just a neurotic mess. I don't know if she was naturally like that, or if she's just taking her cues from me.

Linda nods.

Your dogs probably poop bigger than my dog.

LINDA

Probably.

IMANI

But she's still a little unsettled from the move, I think.

LINDA

Right. How are you liking Littlefield?

IMANI

Uh… it's little.

Linda laughs.

But… it's… I was in Chicago before this?

LINDA

Mm-hm.

IMANI

And I kind of like that it's… calmer. Maybe a little too calm sometimes, but it's nice to catch your breath.

LINDA

Did you know anybody here before you moved here?

IMANI

No I am… completely alone. Just hang out in my little apartment and… cook for myself – and my dog – and –

LINDA

Well if you ever want to run your dog with mine –

IMANI

I think your dogs might eat my dog.

LINDA

I promise they have never eaten any other dogs. Yet.

She laughs.

I'm kidding! It'll be fine. I can introduce you around.

IMANI

Thanks.

LINDA

It's tough to be in a new town.

IMANI

Yeah. Can I ask you a question?

LINDA

Shoot.

IMANI

This is gonna sound a little out of left field but… is the newspaper making any money?

LINDA

I think you're the person to ask about that.

IMANI

I know, and I was brought in to pump up the ad sales and um… I just don't see how we're… in business.

LINDA

Uh-huh.

IMANI

I mean everybody I talk to is spending most of their advertising on internet stuff and – you know our main advertiser is the funeral home… and I don't think our subscriptions are going well and…

LINDA

I don't know.

IMANI

You haven't thought about it?

LINDA

I just report on the farm. And I got two other jobs.

IMANI

Oh.

LINDA
On weekends I bartend at Murphy's. And then I do a little kitchen remodeling with a friend of mine. I mean I don't – I don't make much money from the stories I do for the Gazette.

IMANI
Yeah.

LINDA
Honestly, I think you could make good money bartending. Tips? Somebody who looks like you? You'd do great.

IMANI
I didn't come here to bartend.

LINDA
Right. I know.

IMANI
I came because –

LINDA
Because you thought doing advertising for a small-town paper was the road to success?
Imani laughs.

IMANI
No I um… My ex actually got hired by Stanbecks's –

LINDA
Ohhh.

IMANI
And then – I got this job and then things happened and…

LINDA
Did he move here?

IMANI
No.

LINDA
Dodged a bullet. Although an eligible bachelor moving to town would've sent some of these ladies scrambling, know what I mean? Not a lot of candidates.

IMANI

But I got excited about it and I wanted to give it a shot and see if I could make a difference and he wasn't coming, so –

LINDA

So you took a chance. To save the paper.

IMANI

Yeah. And I am not doing a good job.

LINDA

Oh no no don't worry about that –

IMANI

I've barely sold anything, a lot of our old clients are leaving – I just –

LINDA

Hey hey hey hey. You just got here.

IMANI

The boat's sinking, Linda.

LINDA

And you're bailing water as fast as you can. And I'm sure you're doing a kick-butt job. If I was doing your job, we'd close tomorrow. I'd just be like `Hey put an ad in the paper!' And then if they didn't I would throw something at them. I did a garage sale like that and let me tell you, it doesn't work.

IMANI

I just don't want to be the reason the Gazette goes under.

LINDA

You're not. Okay? You're not. You just got here.

IMANI

I was supposed to turn things around.

LINDA

In two months? I can't even clean my bathroom in two months.

IMANI

I don't see how we make it.

LINDA

We're gonna make it. The paper's been here 126 years. It's going to be here 126 more.

IMANI

I hope so.

LINDA

In the meantime, come on down to Murphy's – might not be a bad idea to get a second job.

Lights change.

Cornhole

Elsewhere.
A cornhole game. Just one target is visible.
A sandbag is tossed across the stage.
TONY and KATE are playing, in the last frame.
KATE is about to throw.

TONY *(announcer voice)*
Local editor Kate Billings, the Big Cat, prepares her latest toss.

KATE
Do you mind?

TONY *(announcer voice)*
The pressure is beginning to get to her.

KATE
Tony.

TONY *(announcer voice)*
She has to be kicking herself right now, folks. To have the early lead and then watch it evaporate by the relentless onslaught of local hero Tony Mickens.
A different announcer voice
I've really admired Tony's game tonight, Stan. Playing within himself – not letting the early deficit get to him – I think he's shown tonight why he's the champ.

KATE
Okay, all right, seriously, that is the *most* annoying thing you could be doing.

TONY
Most annoying or highly annoying? Because I can think of some things that I could do that would be more annoying.
Announcer voice again
The crowd is really getting into it.
He starts making crowd noises
Kate glares at him.
I'll stop. I promise.
*Kate tosses the sandbag.**
***If she makes it, she can cheer and celebrate. Ad lib a reaction from Tony. (If this happens, keep the game going until Kate misses once – then she loses the whole match.)*

When she misses…

TONY
You didn't adjust for the wind –

KATE

Tony I will murder you.

TONY

Sorry, sorry.

Tony is about to throw.

KATE *(announcer voice)*

Tony Mickens, his resolve crumbling, faces the greatest test of his cornhole career. It's been an up-and-down season for Tony – the last gasp of a middle-aged man trying to reclaim his former glory. But he needs to remember that Father Time is undefeated. Sooner or later, it's all going to end. It's only a matter of time.

Tony looks at her.

I'm sorry do you have a problem?

TONY

Please continue. Haters just encourage me.

KATE

Just stating facts. I can't help it if you think that's hate.

TONY

You know what, I'm going to be merciful.

He puts one hand over his eyes.

KATE *(announcer voice again)*

I've never seen this before, Samantha. Tony Mickens is covering his eyes. This has got to be the saddest thing I've ever seen – pathetic posturing by a man facing his own mortality. This reminds me of when Billie Jean King crushed that guy in tennis – whose name is lost to history.

TONY

Bobby Riggs.

KATE *(announcer voice again)*

No one remembers his name except for a few middle-aged sports reporters in small town America.

Tony throws the beanbag. Misses.

TONY

That was pretty good, you should help me announce the football games.

KATE

And butt in on the Tony show? No thanks.

She prepares for her last throw.

TONY

Tony show? It's not the Tony show.

KATE

Okay.

TONY

It's not.

KATE

Sure.

She tosses the beanbag. Misses.

And that's game.

She offers him a handshake. He doesn't take it.

Oh come on, it was a joke.

TONY

Is that what you think?

KATE

I'm not here to cater to your insecurities, all right?

TONY

I do it because it's a service to the community.

KATE

You do it because you love it and you want to be the center of attention. That's fine – just admit it. You want to be a big personality – it's not a character flaw. I mean it's a minor character flaw, but it's not a huge one.

TONY

I think the kids love it when I announce the games –

KATE

I'm sure they do. Okay? It was a joke, Tony. Come on, you're the one making jokes all the time.

TONY

That's because I'm really funny -

KATE

There ya go. There's the relentless ego that I expect from you. Have a thick skin. This whole sad sack thing you're doing doesn't suit you.

TONY

I'm doing a sad sack thing now, huh?

KATE

I don't know what you have to be sad about. The paper is half sports these days.

TONY

The town is half sports.

Kate reacts as if she's been punched.

KATE

You did *not* just say that.

TONY

Why do you think people get the paper?

KATE

Please tell me you didn't just say that.

TONY

People get the paper for local sports coverage. They're certainly not getting it for whatever it is you do.

KATE

Whatever it is *I* do? Human interest stories –

TONY

Which are sports –

KATE

Which end when the kids are eighteen! There's a whole life to live after you graduate high school and can't play football anymore! I know that's kind of hard for you to understand because you've made it your entire life, but there are people in the Littlefield who couldn't give a crap whether the team won or lost on Friday night.

TONY

Yeah, and they don't get the paper.

KATE

Do you realize how insulting you're being?

TONY

I've been doing this twenty-seven years and I know that the thing most people turn to first is the sports –

KATE

That's the first thing emotionally stunted manchildren turn to –

TONY

And how many of those live in this town?

She laughs.

KATE

You got me there.

TONY

They want to see their kids pictures' in the paper. They want to see their grandkids in the paper. They want to cut their photos out and send them to relatives or put them in scrapbooks. That's the thing that gives people the most joy out of what we do. It's not what the city council did, it's not the police blotter, it's not the obituaries, it's seeing what the kids do. What's going to be missed the most if we go away? They're not gonna go to Facebook to find out what happened. They're not gonna print photos off some blog to keep safe. Nobody's sending a link to grandma to let them know how their kid did in the meet. If we go, that's gone – and that's the thing that's gonna be missed the most.

KATE

What do you mean, if we go?

TONY

I mean if we go.

KATE

Are we going?

TONY

Who knows?

KATE

Do you know something?

TONY

I don't know.

KATE

Are we gonna lose our jobs?

TONY

Let me give you a hypothetical: if you lost your job, what would you do?

KATE

Celebrate, probably.

He laughs.

No no um… well I'd have more time for Joanna and Sammie.

TONY

Mm-hm. And? What would you do for you?

KATE

I don't know…

TONY

You could finish your novel.
She laughs.

KATE

How do you know about that?

TONY

I've worked next to you for ten years, you think I don't know about your novel?

KATE

It's a mess.

TONY

Because you haven't had enough time. Now maybe you do.

KATE

Is this a real thing? Is this actually happening?

TONY

I bet it's phenomenal. No I've read your human interest stories, they make me really interested. I mean you take the most boring people this town has ever produced and make them *fascinating.*
She laughs.
You do. You wrote a story about a woman with eighteen cats who knits and I was hanging on every word.

KATE

She did other things.

TONY

Exactly! And I found out about them through your article! You could write an entire book about that lady and I would read it. So whatever it is you're working on, I'm sure it's miles better than that.

KATE

Thanks.

TONY

But I'm gonna give you one word of advice:

KATE

Oh okay.

TONY

Put some sports in it.

She laughs, maybe punches him in the shoulder.

KATE

Maybe a cornhole match.

TONY

Could be the climactic scene.

KATE

What are you gonna do?

TONY

Hm?

KATE

If um… if we don't have jobs anymore, what are you gonna do?

Short pause.

TONY

I'm gonna be fine.

KATE

Yeah?

TONY

Always. I got all kinds of things lined up. You know I'll announce the basketball games and… you know maybe pick up a radio thing. Probably.

KATE

Do those pay anything?

TONY

I don't know.

Pause.

She observes him.

KATE

Are you all right?

TONY

This is my whole life.

KATE

We're gonna make it through. This is hypothetical.

TONY

Yeah.

KATE

Tony it's gonna be okay.

He shakes his head.

You can find something else if you need to.

Pause.

TONY

There's um… you asked me why I was being such a sad sack –

KATE

I was kidding.

TONY

I know. Um… You know I had that doctor's appointment last week?

KATE

Yeah?

Pause.

Tony can't say anything.

Kate gives him space to say it.

He can't.

Is there something?

He nods.

Is it bad?

TONY

It's pretty bad. I mean I'm probably gonna be fine – there's like a 90% chance of survival – we caught it pretty quick but um… there's gonna be a lot of treatment – there's gonna be chemo there's gonna be…

KATE

Okay.

Does Jess know?

Tony doesn't say anything.

You haven't told her?

He shakes his head.

Oh Tony…

TONY

Kate I'm gonna lose my health insurance –

KATE

Hey hey hey you don't know that.

TONY

I don't know what I'm going to do.

KATE

Hey you're gonna be okay.

She grabs a hold of him.

You're a fighter. You win everything – and you cheat – you cheat at cards, I have seen you cheat at so many poker games… you will cheat death.

He smiles in spite of himself –

TONY

I know…

KATE

You will cheat the healthcare industry…

He laughs.

You are gonna make it. And you are gonna be fine.

Tony cries.

People love you. The whole town loves you. We're gonna find a way.

She holds on to him.

You should tell your wife.

TONY

I know. It's hard.

KATE

Yeah. But you need to. You want me to go over there with you?

He's not sure

I mean she's probably been watching us hugging over here and is having some questions.

He laughs.

TONY

Okay.

KATE

Okay let's go tell Jess together. I'm right here.

TONY

Thanks.

He takes her hand.

They walk off together.

Ice Cream

SHIRLEY relaxes in a chair, with ice cream.

Bryn darts by, with multiple balloon aardvarks now, smiling outrageously. Jameson follows a moment later, with another one.

Shirley watches them.
They exit.

LAMAR enters, eating ice cream from a bowl.
He settles in next to her.

SHIRLEY

Didja see that?

LAMAR

Where?

SHIRLEY *(pointing off-stage)*

The kids.

LAMAR *(looking off-stage)*

Oh. Oh boy.

SHIRLEY

I don't think that's company policy.
He laughs.

LAMAR

Better dock their pay.
She laughs.

SHIRLEY

I'll get right on that.
She docks some imaginary pay.

LAMAR *(as a joke, not too loud)*

Get a room!

SHIRLEY

Oh let `em have fun.

LAMAR

Nothing like not getting paid to turn your mind to other things.

SHIRLEY
I don't think either of `em need any help in that regard.

LAMAR
I don't see how they have the energy, frankly.
He goes back to his ice cream.

SHIRLEY
I thought you couldn't eat ice cream.

LAMAR
This is that lactose-free stuff.

SHIRLEY
Uh-huh. How is it?

LAMAR
Horrible. Just close enough to remind you of real ice cream.

SHIRLEY
Why are you eating it?

LAMAR
Trina brought it specifically for me. I'm not sure if that was a kindness or a hint for me to retire already.

SHIRLEY
I think to retire you'd have to be working.
Lamar laughs.

LAMAR
Good point.

SHIRLEY *(pointing now)*
Oh look at `em now.
She chuckles

LAMAR
You don't need to watch, Shirley.

SHIRLEY
Don't be silly.
She keeps watching
If I don't watch, how am I going to know what happens?

LAMAR

You'll just have to imagine it.

She giggles.

Shirley!

SHIRLEY

You have a dirty mind. I think it's sweet. I wish them the best of luck.

LAMAR

You know it was me who did this.

SHIRLEY

Really.

LAMAR

I told that boy – I said if you don't tell that girl how you feel, you're an idiot.

SHIRLEY

Practically Cupid.

LAMAR

It was a little more delicate than that.

SHIRLEY

I knew you were a softie.

LAMAR

Well he's walking around the office like a moonstruck calf all day long. The boy was walking into walls. I did it for his own health. If something didn't change he was going to wander off into traffic like a stray deer. I think I saved his life.

SHIRLEY

You know I told her to tell him.

LAMAR

You did?

SHIRLEY

I said sometimes men need a little encouragement. Because the good ones are usually a little scared of you.

He laughs.

It's true.

LAMAR

Scared?

SHIRLEY

Mm-hm. Terrified. A little bit.

LAMAR

Please explain this to me: why would a "good one" be scared?

SHIRLEY

Because it matters if they get told no.
He thinks about that.

LAMAR

So you could say we're completely responsible for that.

SHIRLEY

We are. And that's why I'm watching.

LAMAR

You gonna offer advice?

SHIRLEY

Nope.

LAMAR *(fake calling out)*

Brush her hair back gently from her face!
Shirley snorts.

SHIRLEY

That's your technique, Romeo?

LAMAR

Elaine liked that. When we were kids.

SHIRLEY

It's not a terrible move.

LAMAR

Seemed to work. Got three kids out of it.
Shirley laughs.

SHIRLEY

How many grandchildren?

LAMAR

Two. They're falling down on the job.

SHIRLEY

Makes Christmas easier.

LAMAR

It does.

Lamar takes a deep breath.

SHIRLEY

It's okay.

LAMAR

I know. Just miss her, that's all.

SHIRLEY

How long is it now?

LAMAR

Going on four years this November. Feels like yesterday.

SHIRLEY

It gets better.

LAMAR

I used to think that every day it would hurt a little less. And then some days it doesn't hurt at all. But then I just… catch a glimpse of something, or someone turns their head just the way she did, or I hear someone's laugh, and it's like she's right there again. And she's gone again. Then it's like I'm starting all over.

He looks down at his ice cream.

Could be something like ice cream.

We used to eat real ice cream all the time. Remember the Sof-T-Freeze?

SHIRLEY

I think it's still there.

LAMAR

You're kidding. That little shack on Eastman?

SHIRLEY

Yup. I drive by it every day.

LAMAR

We used to go there at least once a week in the summer. Standing date. I used to joke that we were the only thing keeping `em in business.

SHIRLEY

They're still in business.

LAMAR

Probably a front for the mafia. You should look at their books.

SHIRLEY

I got enough trouble with our books.
You don't have to make a joke, you know.

LAMAR

I miss ice cream.

SHIRLEY

I know it's not the same thing but when I got divorced, I had a heck of a time. I swear – some people – the moment the husband is out of the house, they're setting fire to everything they ever touched. Having a bonfire and a party and hanging banners –

LAMAR

Depends on the quality of the husband.

SHIRLEY

Then I definitely shoulda been having a party. But for me… it was like a little death. I know it's not the same. I'm just saying – it took me a while to get past it. But it's different, I know – I can still call him up and yell at him when I feel like it.

LAMAR

How often do you that?

SHIRLEY

These days? Barely once a week.
She laughs
I'm kidding. Almost never.

LAMAR

Did he work for the paper?

SHIRLEY

Gary? No he was a lineman for the electric company.

LAMAR

I don't know that I ever met him.

SHIRLEY

He didn't like to come around. No it's official company policy not to be romantically involved with any co-workers.

LAMAR

Smart.

Shirley looks out.

SHIRLEY

They do not seem to be following that policy.

LAMAR

They do not. No respect for policies.

SHIRLEY

Shocking.

LAMAR

They certainly seem to be pretty miserable because of it.

SHIRLEY

Just terrible. Looks like it's pretty awful to be involved with a co-worker.

LAMAR

Yup.

SHIRLEY

You can tell by their way they're kissing that they feel really bad.

LAMAR

Yup.

Short pause.

SHIRLEY

But I guess it's good they said something.

LAMAR

Otherwise…

She looks at him.

SHIRLEY

Otherwise they could spend the rest of their life not knowing.

LAMAR

Right.

Short pause.

But it would be a bad idea for someone else to say something.

SHIRLEY

Oh definitely. Never mix business and pleasure.

LAMAR

I'm not sure how much pleasure there'd be.

SHIRLEY

Well there ain't gonna be no business.

LAMAR

That too.

SHIRLEY

I mean it, Lamar.

LAMAR

What do you mean?

SHIRLEY

There ain't gonna be no business. For the paper.

LAMAR

Oh.
Catching on
Ohhhh. Who knows about that?

SHIRLEY

Gayle and Trina and me. And now you.

LAMAR

How long?

SHIRLEY

Shorter than you might think.

LAMAR

Huh.

SHIRLEY

So… that means… in the near future, you and me are no longer going to be co-workers.

LAMAR

I see.

SHIRLEY

Mm-hm.

LAMAR

I see.

SHIRLEY

So if there were any obstacles to a person telling another person their feelings, those obstacles are no longer going to exist.

LAMAR

You don't say.

SHIRLEY

I am saying.

LAMAR

Huh.

He looks out.

Look at them kids. Acting like there's no tomorrow.

SHIRLEY

Mm-hm.

LAMAR

Just saying what's on their mind…

SHIRLEY

And look where that got `em.

LAMAR

Looks pretty good.

SHIRLEY

Mm-hm.

LAMAR

Yup.

They wait.

I think I'm a little scared, Shirley.

SHIRLEY

Lamar – would you like to get ice cream with me sometime?

Short pause.

LAMAR

I would.

Shirley gets a little closer to him. Looks out.

SHIRLEY

Kids.

LAMAR

Kids.

She takes his hand.
He takes hers.

Lights fade.

End of Act One.

Act Two

Bingo

Gayle is drawing balls from a Bingo Hopper. Trina is writing down the answers.

GAYLE

B-twelve.

Trina writes it down. Gayle draws another one.

B-Nine. That's B-9, second B in a row.

Trina writes it down. Gayle draws another one.

I-twenty-one.

Trina writes it down. Gayle draws another one.

O-Sixty-four. O-Sixty-Four. I feel like this thing is making fun of my age.

(sadly)

Ohhh… Sixty-four?

TRINA

You're sixty-four?

GAYLE

Not officially.

She pulls another one.

G-fifty-three! That's more like it.

Someone shouts "Bingo" from offstage somewhere.

TRINA

I heard Bingo! I heard it!

GAYLE *(calling off-stage)*

Tony if you're cheating again you are officially banned from this bingo game!

She turns to Trina

Go check his card. You can't trust any of his lies. Okay while we're paused to make sure that Tony isn't cheating – again –

She hears something from off-stage

Yes you were, Tony. I saw you take that second card. I have eyes like a hawk with binoculars. WHILE we are waiting on Tony – some announcements. We appear to have a scofflaw in our midst – because when I check the raffle draw, we have 43 entries. And I know for a fact that there are less than 43 people here at the picnic.

Trina returns.

So if you're out there trying to game the system to win a microwave, we will find you.

TRINA

It's legit.

GAYLE

And Tony is the winner! Will wonders never cease?

TRINA

Congratulations to everyone! It's really fun to play Bingo.

GAYLE

It is.

Trina is getting emotional.

TRINA

With you people. Just seeing the joy on your little faces –

GAYLE

Okay Trina.

TRINA

Without a care in the world… Just thinking that the days are continue like this, there's always gonna be someone reading out the numbers, you're always going to have a chart in front of you – sometimes you don't have a chart. Sometimes no one reads the numbers.

GAYLE

This is true.

TRINA

And you'll remember your times playing Bingo, and you'll think: why didn't I appreciate that more?

GAYLE

It's hard to enjoy Bingo while you're playing it.

TRINA

It's like life.

GAYLE

Yeah.

TRINA

I love playing Bingo with you, Gayle.

GAYLE

And I really appreciate your note-taking.

TRINA

Whatever happens, we'll still have Bingo.

GAYLE

All right sweetie okay. We're gonna be okay.
To the rest of the employees
She's fine.

TRINA

I'm fine!
She gets it together
We're going to have more games later.
Short pause
Until there are no more games.

GAYLE

One entry for the raffle only please!

TRINA

You only get once.
She's sad about that.
There's only one chance.

GAYLE

Upbeat! We're upbeat!
She takes Trina off-stage.

Pie Baking Contest

A picnic table.

ADDISON enters, carrying a pie wrapped up in tinfoil.

She sets it carefully on the table. Places it just so. Changes its position so that it catches the light perfectly. When it's perfect she takes a step back to observe it.

She's about to take the tinfoil off when MIKE enters with another pie, also wrapped in tinfoil.

ADDISON

Oh ho.

MIKE

Another competitor enters the arena.

He sets his pie down on the table, a fair distance away from Addison's.

ADDISON

You baked a pie?

MIKE

It appears so.

He sets it just so. Adjusts it. Takes a picture of it with his camera.

ADDISON

What kind?

MIKE

That is classified information, young lady.

ADDISON

I mean I'm gonna know once you take the tinfoil off.

MIKE

Then why would I spoil the surprise of learning how you are to be defeated?

ADDISON

It's that good, huh?

MIKE

This is my grandmother's recipe. Who was well-known for being the greatest baker in the tri-county area. Richard Nixon once ate one of her pies and remarked, "holy bleeping bleep that is bleeping good." My grandmother recorded it.

Addison laughs.

You think I'm joking?

ADDISON
I can never tell, Mike. I assume you're joking whenever your mouth is moving.

MIKE
I don't joke about pies.

ADDISON
I didn't know you were a baker.

MIKE
I am full of mysteries.
She scoffs

ADDISON
The only mystery you're full of is the meat from Taco Bell. I have literally watched you eat Taco Bell on like six consecutive nights. I guess I'm a little dubious of your taste.

MIKE
When you like something, you like something.

ADDISON
So you eat it – every meal.

MIKE
Why would you want to eat something that isn't your favorite?

ADDISON
This is why I think I've got this competition in the bag.

MIKE
What kind did you make?

ADDISON
The best kind.

MIKE
Which is?

ADDISON
A mystery to you.
He goes to lift the foil from her – She slaps his hand away.
Nope!

MIKE
I'm at least taking a before and after picture.
He takes a shot of her pie.

That way I can make sure to get the difference in your face between hopeful anticipation and agonizing defeat. Let me see hopeful anticipation.

Addison shows him hopeful anticipation.

And now… agonizing defeat.

Addison looks ecstatically joyful.

That's okay I'll get it after you lose.

ADDISON

Fat chance.

MIKE

I call this photo "the false spring."

Takes another shot.

"Sports reporter Addison Brill looks confident before her humbling debacle."

ADDISON

I think the words you're looking for are "resplendent" and "certain triumph."

MIKE

You're looking resplendent?

ADDISON

Always. It's important to look resplendent at all times – it makes my haters fume and gnash their teeth.

MIKE

I'm not sure your haters have all their teeth.

ADDISON

It's from the gnashing. Did I show you my most recent fan letter?

MIKE

You have it on you?

ADDISON

Of course.

She takes a handwritten letter out of her pocket –

MIKE

They wrote it by hand?

ADDISON

They always write them by hand. "Is it too much to ask for a sports reporter who actually knows a damn thing about football? Why are you sending a girl to cover a sport played by men?"

MIKE

Nice.

ADDISON

Yeah this is the most polite one I've ever gotten. Usually there's more swear words and comments about who I had to kiss to get my job. Apparently, without a detailed knowledge of what goes on inside the men's locker room, I will never understand the true meaning of athletic struggle. Also, sports involve a lot of numbers, and we all know girls are scared of those.

MIKE

From the perspective of someone inside the men's locker room, there's a lot of higher level math that goes in there.

ADDISON

I figured.

MIKE

Did you let `em know you were valedictorian?

ADDISON

Do I write back?

MIKE

Good point. Just put it on your bio, Addison Brill, sports reporter, Littlefield High School valedictorian.

ADDISON

I'm sure that will help.

MIKE

Can I ask you a question that's always bugged me?

ADDISON

Yes the team that scores more points usually wins.

MIKE

I covered your graduation – you had that scholarship – then you went off to that fancy school in Minnesota… then you came back. Most people who go away to college don't come back.

ADDISON

Is there a question in there?

MIKE

I think you know it.

ADDISON

I like it here. Most of the time.

MIKE
I don't know… we all thought you were going off to change the world.

ADDISON
You don't think reporting on the football team is changing the world?

MIKE
I mean… it's close.

ADDISON
You haven't had my pie.

MIKE
I have not.

ADDISON
Any one of those things could fundamentally change the world for the better.

MIKE
You know what I mean.

ADDISON
Okay. My Dad was sick; I wanted to be near him.

MIKE
Lots of people's parents get sick and they don't come back.

ADDISON
What does it matter to you?

MIKE
Because I think there's a big bright beautiful future for you outside of this place. Maybe you could work for a real paper.

ADDISON
This is a real paper.

MIKE
We got one photographer – if two things in town are happening at the same time, only one of them is getting in the paper. You're the best writer I've ever seen, and you're covering girls' tennis.

ADDISON
I love girls' tennis.

MIKE

And you make it sound like the most exciting thing that has ever happened on this planet. I swear I have gotten chills from reading about a match that got called because of darkness.

ADDISON

It was pretty exciting.

MIKE

And you're here. Instead of out there.

ADDISON

And why is out there so much better? I gotta tell you – the reason I came back here? Because I wanted to. And I stopped caring about other people's expectations of me.

MIKE

All right.

ADDISON

I don't care when some idiot writes a letter complaining about my coverage of boys' soccer, and I don't care when someone looks down on me for being here.

MIKE

Fair enough. I've seen this town break a lot of people's hearts.

ADDISON

Other places break hearts too.

MIKE

Think about it.

ADDISON

I'm fine, Mike.

Pause.

MIKE

Speaking of breaking hearts, are you ready?

ADDISON

I was born ready.

MIKE

Doesn't look like anyone else was brave enough to join the competition.

ADDISON

Cowards.

MIKE

All right then.

He takes hold of the tinfoil on his pie.
She takes the tinfoil on her pie.

ADDISON

May the best baker win.

They both remove their tinfoil at the same time.
Their pies are practically identical.
They look at them.

Blueberry?

MIKE

Yeah. Blueberry?

ADDISON

Right.

Mike examines her pie.
Addison examines his pie.
They look at each other.

Grandmother's recipe?

MIKE

Of course. And yours?

ADDISON

My grandmother brought this from the old country.

Addison snatches his pie and lifts into the air, looking underneath it.

The price tag is still on it!

He lifts hers.

MIKE

I can see where you took yours off!

ADDISON

You went to Martha's Bakery!

MIKE

So did you!

ADDISON

She makes really good pies!

MIKE

I can't believe that you would try to pass off someone else's pie as yours!

She's outraged.

ADDISON

So did you!

MIKE

I'm expected to lie! You're a role model!

ADDISON

That's why I needed to win!

MIKE

By cheating?!

ADDISON

If necessary, yes!

MIKE

This is insane! I'm going to the judges!

ADDISON

Go for it! I will burn you to the ground! I'll tell everything I know about your pie!

MIKE

You wouldn't dare!

ADDISON

Watch me.

MIKE

I bought my pie from Martha's first.

ADDISON

And I bet the pie I bought was still better, because I have a better eye for choosing store-bought pies.

MIKE

Oh really?!

ADDISON

You don't think so? I bet my pie from Martha's is better than your pie from Martha's.

MIKE

Not a chance. My grandmother taught me how to choose pies from bakeries. I followed her methodology.

ADDISON

And I followed my mother's advice which was always, "just buy it from somewhere."

MIKE

You want to find out? Take the sticker off my pie.

ADDISON

Fine.

She takes the sticker off his pie.

I have to say it doesn't bode well for your eye for detail that you forgot to take this off.

MIKE

Because I was concerned with the subtle differences that make one pie superior to another.

ADDISON

If you're really so sure, let's make a pact.

MIKE

What kind of pact?

ADDISON

We lie.

MIKE

Our grandmothers are the same person.

ADDISON

No. We just happened to make very similar blueberry pies, but there are subtle differences if you have a really strong sense of taste…

MIKE

You have to really be good at tasting.

ADDISON

Only the best people can tell the difference.

MIKE

Very true.

ADDISON

And whoever gets the most votes wins, and we go to the grave and never speak of this day.

MIKE

Agreed.

They shake hands.

ADDISON

Now let's back away from the pies slowly and exit in opposite directions so as not to arouse suspicions.

MIKE

Yes.

They back away slowly from the pies and head in opposite directions.

Lights change.

Hot Dog Eating Contest

Near a garbage can.
LILY is steadying it. She's nervous.
DEE enters, stuffed, about to throw up.

LILY

You okay?

Dee shakes their head and heads for the garbage can.
Waits.

I told you not to do it.

Dee breathes heavily, stares into the abyss.

DEE

I think I'm gonna live.

LILY

If you need to puke, be my guest.

Dee walks it off.

I think you won, by the way.

Dee shakes their head again.

DEE

I might have won, but I definitely lost.

LILY

How many did you eat?

DEE

You weren't watching?

LILY

I tried but – I found it childish and incomprehensible, I hope that's not a problem for you. Just curious: how many did you eat?

DEE

Six.

LILY

That's it?

DEE

What do you mean that's it? That's a lot. That's an extreme amount.

LILY

The world record is like 71.

Dee looks at Lily.

I did some research.

Dee takes another walk in a circle.

Did you know that there's actually a Major League Eating league?

DEE

No I didn't know that.

LILY

They have sponsors. You can sign a deal. This could be your ticket to stardom.

DEE

I don't think so.

LILY

Neither do I. Not with eating six. You're going to need to train a lot harder to make it to the big leagues. But I think with a little effort and me as a tough but fair coach we can probably make it.

DEE

Oh man I feel like they're trying to escape.

LILY

Probably.

DEE

Are you enjoying this?

LILY

Immensely.

DEE

If it makes you feel any worse, I was trying to impress you.

LILY

With six? You're saying with the goal of impressing me, you were only able to summon the intestinal fortitude to manage six measly hot dogs?

Dee groans.

You know what that is in your stomach? Karma.
Karma is pushing its way into your intestines right now.

DEE

That's a lovely image.

LILY

Karma, which is jostling around with other karma, is resisting being digested by your stomach acids – karma is squeezing and oozing and –

Dee rushes to the garbage can. Almost throws up.

Sorry that wasn't kind.
You want to sit?

DEE

I think sitting just encourages the hot dogs to conspire with each other.

LILY

I thought you were trying to be vegetarian anyway.

DEE

Trying.

LILY

You probably just devoured an entire pig – or were they turkey dogs, which would still be a problem for a vegetarian, but maybe less of a problem than pigs, because turkeys seem like they're jerks and kind of deserve what they get. Pigs seem innocent and sweet and don't deserve to end up in hot dogs.

DEE

I think they were grown in vats. Probably some kind of turkey shaped like a dachshund. Living a brief and monstrous life. Waiting until the day it can be consumed in an orgy of competitive eating. Oh I feel really bad.

LILY

Yeah - Ethically, it's pretty bad.

DEE

I'm glad that my girlfriend has so much sympathy for me.

LILY

I try. Just like your vegetarianism.

Dee tries to sit, holding their stomach.

DEE

Ohhhh…

To their stomach

You'll never escape.

Lily is fidgeting.

LILY

Did you mean that?

DEE

Yes they will never escape.

LILY

The part about me being your girlfriend.

DEE

Oh.

LILY

You haven't called me that before.

DEE

Is that okay?

LILY

Yes. I'm your girlfriend. Wow. That's something I didn't expect to hear after the hot dog eating contest.

DEE

What did you expect to hear?

LILY

More of what happened earlier – you groaning and moaning and wishing to die. But I'll take the girlfriend thing, that's much better. So if I'm your – girlfriend, that makes you my…

DEE

Sweetheart.

LILY

Sweetheart. Hi sweetheart.

DEE

Hi girlfriend.

LILY

How was your day, Sweetheart. Oh my gosh that sounds weird. That sounds like you just came in from a hard day at work and I've spent all afternoon preparing a dinner for you, but you were late and now the dinner is cold and I'm saying everything with a kind of icy irony which is not at all what I intended. Sweetheart.

DEE

You could change it to Lover if you want.

LILY

Hello, Lover. Oh. Oh that's a problem. That one feels a little weird. Lover. Oh I just said it again. I'm going to go back to sweetheart, I think that's less problematic.

DEE

Whatever you want, girlfriend.

LILY

Now it sounds like we're in a buddy movie.

DEE

We're not.

LILY

We're on a road trip to get someone's groove back.

DEE

We could do that. I would go get someone's groove back with you.

LILY

You mean it?

DEE

I would go anywhere with you.

LILY

What if I wanted to go someplace terrible? Like I had a burning desire to go to St. Charles Louisiana and suck in oil fumes?

DEE

I would go with you to St. Charles, Louisiana.

LILY

You wouldn't try to talk me out of it?

DEE

I would first try to talk you out of it. But if you wouldn't change your mind, and it was important to you to inhale fumes, I would go with you.

LILY

Wow. That's pretty intense. Not terribly smart.

DEE

Well – I just competed in a hot dog eating contest, which was both intense – and not terribly smart.

LILY

Right.

Lily fidgets.

I don't know that I can do this, Dee.

DEE

Lily it's okay I know that sometimes your mind starts going off –

LILY

But what if that's a problem?

DEE

It's going to be okay.

LILY

But what if you change your mind? What if you find out everything about me and decide that I'm too much trouble?

DEE

What could I find out about you?

LILY

That's a massive question. A lot.

DEE

A lot?

LILY

So many things. I mean – I have to be right, there's that. I mean you could call me detail-oriented, which is a really good thing in a copyeditor and a really terrible thing in a girlfriend/lover. Like when I told you the world record for eating hot dogs was 71? I'm kicking myself now because I know for a fact that it's 75 and I said the wrong thing just then, and I just want to go back and correct the record, because I don't want it out there that I don't know the precise number of hot dogs Joey Chestnut ate. Which is stupid, because before today, I didn't even know that Joey Chestnut existed, but now my head is full of facts about him – some of which are entirely irrelevant. All of which are, actually.

DEE

I think I can handle that.

LILY

But can you handle that sometimes I need to be alone and have a hard time talking to people and just don't have the energy to be around people, and in a place like this, I kind of see everyone and maybe that's a little panic-inducing? So sometimes you might want to go out with your friends and I can't go, not because I don't like your friends – I don't actually have an opinion on your friends one way or the other, but because I find people exhausting. And maybe if I'm being completely honest with you, other people find me exhausting, and maybe they don't want to be around me for long.

DEE

Whoah whoah whoah other people like you a lot.

LILY

Do they?

DEE

Yes! But I don't really care what other people think, because I like you a lot.

LILY

Why?

DEE

Because you're awesome.

LILY

That's a terrible reason. I might be awesome today because I'm having a good day, but there are other days where I am legitimately not awesome, and if your love is predicated on my awesomeness, then it follows that there are days you won't love me. And think about the pressure on me: If I have to be awesome or you won't love me, how can I ever live up to that? You're asking the impossible of me. How am I going to be awesome every day?

DEE

You manage.

LILY

I'm sorry I'm getting all crazy – I do this when I get nervous and then I feel things and then I start talking about then there are words coming out of my mouth and I can't stop them –

DEE

Hey. I see you.

LILY

What does that mean?

DEE

That means I see you. And I really like what I see. But that's not with my eyes, okay? I see you with everything. And I think you're glorious, and so unique –

LILY

Weird –

DEE

Maybe – but that just means you're you and you're not trying to be anyone else. And that is the rarest thing in the world. I've spent so much of my life trying to figure who I am, and I look at you, and you are so magnificently perfectly uniquely you – effortlessly – it's like everyone is in

black and white and you're in like high-definition 4D 8 billion pixels clarity. And that's why I want you to be my girlfriend, and I want to be your sweetheart.

LILY

But not lover cause that sounds a little gross.

DEE

Agreed.

LILY

Did you mean all of that?

DEE

I don't say things I don't mean.

LILY

I want to add that I don't like cats.

DEE

Sure.

LILY

In case you were planning on getting a cat. You know they eat your eyeballs first if you die.

DEE

Only because those are the tastiest part.

LILY

I suppose that makes sense.

DEE

I think if I died and I had a cat I would be happy if they consumed my body to sustain themselves.

LILY

That's a good point.

DEE

It would probably be karma anyway. After what I did with those hot dogs.

LILY

Terrible choice.

DEE

I think the six of them are fighting for dominance in my stomach right now.

LILY
There's probably an alpha hot dog that will bend the others to its will.

DEE
Yeah I can feel them. There's probably a legend. Sort of a sword in the stone kinda thing. Whoever can draw the gallstone from this bladder will rule the stomach.

LILY
That could be your next graphic novel.

DEE
Takes place in a stomach. Hot Dogs. Nightmare fuel. It checks all the boxes.

LILY
It could be a tragic romance. Some of the dogs could fall in love with other dogs before they're digested. Kind of like Titanic. There's one hot dog on top of a cracker or other insoluble wheat-based conveyance, as their lover is slowly dissolved by gastric acid.

DEE
Now lover is okay?

LILY
I think it's okay if it's in reference to romantic hot dogs facing their inevitable digestion.

DEE
Yeah that makes it less gross.

LILY
I make mistakes, Dee.

DEE
I do too.

LILY
Sometimes you won't always understand me because I don't always understand myself.

DEE
That's part of the fun.

LILY
And we're probably going to need to get new jobs.

DEE
Definitely.

LILY

But I want to try this with you. See what happens. Wherever we go. Maybe Antarctica.

DEE

Antarctica?

LILY

There are penguins there that are incredibly fascinating.

DEE

Then let's go.

LILY

Now?

DEE

Maybe after we save some money.

LILY

Sure.

Short pause.

Sweetheart.

Lights change.

Free-Range Children

RACHEL stands looking off-stage. She calls out.

RACHEL *(calling off-stage)*
Arthur! Arthur! You need to give it back, sweetie! We're sharing now. We are sharing with our friends. We're sharing. We're sharing. That's not sharing, Arthur! Arthur!
JADE enters, also calling off to an unseen child.

JADE *(calling off-stage)*
NO YOU DID NOT JUST DO THAT, SIR. NO, SIR. THAT IS NOT WHAT WE DO. I WILL PUT YOU IN THE CAR. I WILL PICK YOU UP I WILL HOIST YOU OVER MY SHOULDER LIKE A BAG OF CEMENT AND I WILL LOCK YOU IN THE CAR.
She hears something back.
GOOD LUCK FINDING THE POLICE. THEY KNOW ALL ABOUT YOU.
Hears something again
Fine I'll crack a window, how about that?! I'LL CRACK A WINDOW AND YOU'LL SURVIVE, YOU LIKE THAT? TRY IT AND SEE WHAT HAPPENS. TRY IT. GO FOR IT. I'M WAITING. I GOT ALL DAY.
She waits for a second
Yeah I thought so.
She turns to Rachel.
Some days I feel like Pandora.

RACHEL
The streaming service?

JADE
The woman who gave birth to monsters. I produced three of those creatures. Nicholas is the best one. The other two already would've started something on fire by now. Remember five years ago when somebody slashed Trina's tires?

RACHEL
I thought that was local hooligans.

JADE
Yeah. Local hooligans I created.

RACHEL
I think Nicholas is sweet. He's always nice to Arthur.
Jade spots something.

JADE
WE DO NOT EAT THAT.

RACHEL

Where are Thomas and Gaines?

JADE

They didn't want to come. They're playing video games at home.

RACHEL

Oh.

JADE

They put their earbuds in? I could drive a bulldozer through the living room and they wouldn't notice. It's great. I mean they don't think to feed themselves or move or anything, but it really gives me hope I can take a vacation without them one of these days.

RACHEL

You'd probably come back to find them starving to death.

JADE

Yeah.

She thinks about it.

I guess that would probably be bad. Oh man I love those little behemoths. They're eating my entire house. I think they get up in the middle of the night to scavenge food. You gotta love `em when they're little cause once the hunger sets in… it's just survival.

RACHEL

Yeah.

JADE

Oh I didn't mean to –

RACHEL

No I'm fine. He's doing great.

JADE

I'm so glad about that. That's fantastic. He looks great.

RACHEL

The doctors said he was going to make a full recovery.

JADE

That's amazing. Think about a year ago and…

RACHEL

Yeah. Now look at him.

JADE

Hopefully my kid doesn't murder him. HEY. HEY YOU NEED TO BE CAREFUL NICHOLAS. YOU BE CAREFUL OR I WILL STUFF YOU INTO A SACK FILLED WITH BEES. I CAN DO IT. I KNOW A LOT OF BEEKEEPERS WHO OWE ME FAVORS.

To Rachel

Say you own bees.

RACHEL

I don't –

JADE

Just say it it will help me with my parenting.

RACHEL

I have bees.

JADE

YOU HEAR THAT? ARTHUR'S MOMMY OWNS HALF THE BEES IN TOWN. MEAN BIG ONES WITH TWO STINGERS EACH.

Back to Rachel

You ever dream about just getting in a car, maybe buying a fake ID, staging your own death, and then just driving until you hit the mountains?

RACHEL

Constantly.

JADE

Yes. I knew it! We should do it. Just Thelma and Louise this thing.

RACHEL

I think Thelma and Louise died.

JADE

Right. Well we can adjust that plan a little bit. What would Andrew do if you just took off for a week?

RACHEL

I think he would be okay.

JADE

Really?

RACHEL

Yeah he's so good with Arthur. I think he spends just as much time with him as I do.

JADE

He does?

RACHEL

Yeah.

Jade is stunned.

JADE

Wow.

RACHEL

You don't think Brent would be fine?

JADE

Would they be alive? Probably. Would there be a multi-state manhunt for all of them? Definitely. You're lucky. You got a good one, Rach.

RACHEL

He is. And I think Brent is a good one too.

JADE

I could walk up to him right now and ask him to a name a single teacher of one of our kids. One. Just gone. Give me one name. The man can name the exact batting average and home run totals from the entire 1987 Kansas City Royals and he can't name a single teacher.

RACHEL

Maybe your boys will need that information.

JADE

Yeah maybe.

RACHEL

I think he could surprise you.

JADE

You have a lot of faith in someone else's husband.

RACHEL

You're being tough on him.

JADE

That's my job.

RACHEL

He was so good with Arthur last year – he put those posters up – he put stuff on the website – he was all over it. He came and visited him in the Hospital – somehow he got that guy from the triple A team to come? Remember that?

JADE

I know. He's a good one too. Sometimes I talk a lot of trash. I wouldn't skip town either.

RACHEL

I mean I would do that.

JADE

Okay then I would.

RACHEL

What would your fake name be?

JADE

Lola.

RACHEL

Oh that's good. I like that. I would be… Storm.

Jade gives her a look

It's mysterious and cool. I might've just escaped prison.

JADE

Okay, "Storm."

RACHEL

Storm O'Hara.

JADE

You could get a tattoo of a tear on your cheek.

RACHEL

Definitely. From my year in the big house.

JADE

Probably beats motherhood.

RACHEL

Prison?

JADE

Yeah.

RACHEL

It puts you through the ringer, doesn't it? All your heart living in that fragile little body. I didn't think he was gonna make it, you know.

JADE

Yeah you did.

Rachel shakes her head.

You had faith.

RACHEL

I said I had faith.

Short pause

You know when I was a kid I was really unlucky. I broke the same arm twice in one year. Things would fall on me from the sky. Wherever I went, something… my Dad said I was like a magnet for disasters. Went on the ski trip – I broke my ankle the first run down. But that was nothing, wasn't it? That was all just like… surface stuff. And when Artie got diagnosed… I thought I had passed it on to him. You know when I went to see him in the Hospital and he'd lost his hair and he was so pale and you could see the blood vessels under his skin… like he was shrinking – and he wasn't that big to start with.

Jade stays close to Rachel.

I don't think I slept for like three weeks. When he was home I used to slip in his room in the middle of the night – I laid on his floor and listened to him breathe. And I just kept praying that I would hear the next breath, and the next one, and the one after that. I couldn't even imagine what it would be like without him; like my soul was a skyscraper that had collapsed – acres of rubble and steel beams sticking into the air into like air like exposed ribs – and down inside, under it all, buried, was my heart, trying to hold on to life.

JADE

Aw honey.

RACHEL

You guys helped me pull through. Everyone at the Gazette. The article Trina put in the paper – the fundraiser that you did – the way you kept me together – it was like we were all at war together.

JADE

Of course. That's what we do for each other.

End of Excerpt.
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