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A Small Fire

by Adam Bock

A SAMUEL FRENCH ACTING EDITION



**SAMUEL
FRENCH**

FOUNDED 1830

NEW YORK HOLLYWOOD LONDON TORONTO

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**Playwrights Horizons, Inc., New York City,
produced the World Premiere of
A SMALL FIRE Off-Broadway in 2011**

**“A SMALL FIRE” was developed at New Dramatists as a part of the
PlayTime developmental studio, and also in part, with the assistance of
the Sundance Institute Theatre Program**

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A SMALL FIRE was first produced by the Playwrights Horizons in New York City on January 6, 2011. The performance was directed by Trip Cullman, with sets by Loy Arcenas, costumes by Ilona Somogyi, lighting by David Weiner, and original music and sound design by Robert Kaplowitz. The Production Stage Manager was Lori Ann Zepp. The cast was as follows:

EMILY Michelle Pawk
JOHN.....Reed Birney
JENNY.....Celia Keenan-Bolger
BILLY.....Victor Williams

CHARACTERS

EMILY BRIDGES - 58.

JOHN BRIDGES - 60. Her husband.

JENNY BRIDGES - 30. Their daughter.

BILLY FONTAINE - 41. A construction manager in **EMILY**'s construction firm.

One.

(At a construction site. Loud. The door to a trailer. EMILY is wearing a hardhat and is carrying her Blackberry. She looks up at an unfinished building. She yells to an offstage Harrison.)

EMILY. HARRISON! Get Billy! Get Billy! Get him! Down here!

(She texts.

BILLY *enters.* *He yells back to an offstage Harrison.)*

BILLY. Because I told him to, Harrison! Tell him! Just! And tell him next time I don't want to hear it!

Bridges!

EMILY. *(Big noise.)* Let's go and!

(They go into the trailer. Quieter.)

EMILY. What was that?

BILLY. Reynolds.

EMILY. Reynolds again?

BILLY. Yeah.

EMILY. Whaddy do?

BILLY. He listens to that fat douche-bag Mitch Hunter on the radio everyday and then he comes in and he spouts off as if he's thought up all that crap on his own.

EMILY. Uh huh?

BILLY. So he's working with Rafi and Jamil and Jeffy and they're sick of it and they don't want to work with him anymore. So I told Harrison "I'll talk to him." and I do I'm like "Reynolds, you know all these guys are from somewhere else right? So when you're saying all this stuff about people coming over here and taking our

jobs and, you know you're talking about them." But he's "I've got a right to my opinion!" So I'm "Not on this job you don't."

You shoulda heard Jeffy. He's fucking funny. Jeffy. He's like (*Jeffy imitating Reynolds:*) "I've got a right to my opinion!"

EMILY. I'll talk to Reynolds.

BILLY. Ok.

EMILY. Think that would help?

BILLY. Sure.

EMILY. Ok.

So why's that lift installation down at the Franklin Street job so far behind?

BILLY. It's because of that late delivery last Thursday.

EMILY. Did you call them?

BILLY. Yeah. I called Fat Ollie

He kept going, "It's not my fault! It's not my fault! Billy I don't know why you're pushing at me!" And I was "Whatdya mean it's not your fault? Who's fault would it be?" And then he gave me this long crazy story about this Taiwanese secretary who took the order number down wrong.

EMILY. Whadyou say?

BILLY. I hung up on him and called Randall Bartlett instead and he said they'd make it up to us.

EMILY. Do I need to call Randall?

BILLY. No I got it.

EMILY. Sure?

BILLY. Yeah.

EMILY. Ok. Other than that, the rest of that job going ok?

BILLY. Yeah. McGrath's got too much on his plate though. You heard the story right? about his nephew? and so he's kinda hopeless. I'm working it out.

EMILY. You gonna let him go?

BILLY. No. But I'm thinking about cutting him loose a couple of days and then I'll see how he's doing and suss it out from there.

EMILY. There are a lotta guys who need jobs Billy. It wouldn't be hard to replace him.

BILLY. Come on.

EMILY. I'm just saying.

BILLY. Bridges he's been on four jobs with us.

EMILY. It's your call.

BILLY. And the guys would be

EMILY. Ok. Ok. Ok.

(EMILY stops. She looks around. Something is different. She doesn't know what it is.

She gets ready to leave.)

EMILY. Ok. Anything else give me a call.

BILLY. There is this one other thing.

EMILY. What?

BILLY. I couldn't get them down on the carpeting.

EMILY. How much they want?

BILLY. Thirty-nine.

EMILY. What?

BILLY. I know.

EMILY. That's bullshit.

BILLY. Yeah I thought. But

EMILY. Did you sign off on that?

BILLY. I thought I

EMILY. Billy. No. I took you through this before and this is exactly what I said I didn't wanna have happen.

BILLY. I know.

EMILY. Well you don't know. Clearly. Because that's bullshit. And you know I fucking expect better from you.

BILLY. Yeah I know. I just

EMILY. Don't give me an excuse. You sound like Fat Ollie.
Thirty-nine? Fuck.

(Quiet.)

You get your invitation to the wedding?

BILLY. Yeah. I sent that little card thing back.

EMILY. Good.

(Quiet.)

BILLY. I think

(EMILY's Blackberry buzzes.)

EMILY. Just

(It is JOHN.)

Hey John.

(He wants to know if they should take a cat that the neighbor has found in her backyard. It looks a bit ragged but cute and it needs a home.)

No. John.

(He thinks it might be nice to have something around the house. It's grey with two white paws. It's cute.)

No.

(Is she sure? It's cute. Ok no. Ok no. Ok he'll tell the neighbor no.)

We don't want a cat.

(Ok.)

Ok. Bye.

(She hangs up.)

John wants a cat.

A couple of months ago every time he called me it was about "disaster preparedness." He went out and bought flashlights and batteries and this radio that you crank this little handle and a whole second set of tools that he labeled "disaster preparedness" and cans of beans and tomatoes and peas and bags of rice

and he put this whole kit and kaboodle in the pantry in the basement. With a big wad of cash. So if you're ever broke and hungry, feel free to break into my basement. You'll be set.

No one is going to bomb Connecticut.

BILLY. I do not like cats.

EMILY. What? Cause of your pigeons?

BILLY. Yeah.

EMILY. I can't believe you breed pigeons. I see 'em in the park and I

BILLY. No! Come on! Those things aren't pigeons, they're scrapple. I race homing pigeons. They're real birds. They're athletes. I'm gonna take you to a race sometime.

EMILY. How far do they race?

BILLY. Three hundred miles sometimes.

EMILY. Shut up.

BILLY. Naw it's true.

EMILY. Shut the fuck up.

BILLY. I got a new one, Mr. Buddha, he's amazing. You should see this fucking bird fly. He's gonna be a champion I know it. I'll take you sometime.

EMILY. Ok.

BILLY. Some Saturday.

EMILY. Ok.

BILLY. Don't get a cat. Those fucking things are murder machines.

EMILY. We're not getting a cat.

BILLY. That little card thing looked expensive.

EMILY. It was.

BILLY. You're dropping a lot on the wedding huh?

EMILY. Jenny wanted duck and sea bass. With red pepper coulis. I wanted prime rib.

BILLY. You getting it?

EMILY. No.

BILLY. Well. It is her wedding.

EMILY. Yup. Yup.

Ok. Gimme a call tomorrow. We'll work that carpeting
bullshit out.

(Exits.)

Two.

(EMILY and JOHN in their living-room after dinner.)

EMILY. Just

(Answers her Blackberry.)

What?

Uh huh.

Uh huh.

Harrison tell him I'm gonna run him over with my car if I have to come back down there.

No no Get him on the phone.

(Holds up a finger "Just a sec" to JOHN.)

Billy put two guys on it. Just put Just put two

Send Pearson.

Send Pearson.

Ok. And put Dempster.

Ok.

Well you coulda thought of this yourself.

(Laughs.)

You're gonna give Harrison a heart attack Billy. Jesus.

Ok.

Ok.

Yeah.

(Hangs up.)

JOHN. What was that about?

EMILY. Billy took McGrath off the Franklin Street job for a couple of days and then he forgot to put anyone else on it and so Harrison's going crazy all over Billy's ass. McGrath's nephew just got eighteen years for possession and intent to distribute.

JOHN. Eighteen years? The poor kid.

EMILY. Poor kid nothing. He beat up his own mother because she wouldn't give him the keys to her car. That's how they found the stuff. They found her and then they got him in her car and the drugs were in the trunk.

McGrath said he knew something like this was coming sooner or later. He said looked at the kid in the crib and told his sister to take him back.

JOHN. He said that to her?

EMILY. McGrath's not afraid to tell the truth.

JOHN. He said that about her baby?

EMILY. The kid's been on drugs since he was fourteen. He hit her with a bat.

JOHN. Get outa here.

EMILY. The kid's a piece of shit. But McGrath's dad is devastated about the whole thing so McGrath's not coming in for a couple of days so he can sit around with his dad and make sure he's ok. He's 78. So.

JOHN. Jesus.

(EMILY's Blackberry buzzes. She reads a text.)

EMILY. I need two of me. Sometimes it feels like if I don't do it, it won't get done. Billy's funny though. It's funny watching him He can get Harrison so worked up. Makes me laugh.

JOHN. What are we giving Jenny and Henry as their wedding present?

EMILY. Nothing.

JOHN. Do you want to just give them a check or a check and something for the house?

EMILY. Isn't it enough we're paying for the wedding? I don't want to give them anything else. I don't want her to marry him.

JOHN. Emily.

EMILY. I don't John.

JOHN. They're going to get married. So. We've got to be happy for them.

EMILY. Why? No. No. Why do I have to be happy for them?
Who says?

JOHN. They're in love, Emily.

EMILY. He's. I don't have to be happy about my daughter
marrying a man who imports cheese.

JOHN. From France.

EMILY. From France.

JOHN. And Italy and England.

EMILY. Cheese.

JOHN. She loves him.

EMILY. He has a speed boat! On a lake! He wears a necklace
with a diamond on it! You shouldn't be happy about it.

JOHN. She loves him.

EMILY. We've spoiled her and she's foolish. She's always
been foolish.

JOHN. She's allowed to be. She's in love. You were foolish
when you married me.

EMILY. Give me another splash of that.

JOHN. What's that?

EMILY. What?

JOHN. Smoke. I smell smoke.

EMILY. I can't smell anything.

JOHN. Emily did you

(Runs offstage.)

EMILY. I can't smell anything.

(Follows JOHN offstage.)

JOHN. You left the burner on.

EMILY. It's not on. It's off. It's off.

JOHN. Jesus. God damn it. It's God damn it God damn it

EMILY. Just put it Just put it Just throw it in the sink and
turn the tap on. John. Just turn on the water.

JOHN. Let

EMILY. Oh give it to me.

JOHN. (*Enters. Followed by EMILY.*) Ok That That That. You can't just leave the burner on!

EMILY. It wasn't on, John.

JOHN. It was still hot.

EMILY. It wasn't on.

JOHN. The house could have burned down.

EMILY. Don't exaggerate.

JOHN. It could have!

EMILY. It wasn't even on fire.

JOHN. It was!

EMILY. It was smoldering.

JOHN. It could have burst into flames.

EMILY. Ok.

JOHN. Jesus.

EMILY. It was just a dishcloth.

JOHN. It was a napkin!

You always do this. "It's nothing. It's nothing."

EMILY. Yeah well, it is nothing. Or not much.

JOHN. Huh. Uh huh.

(*Silence. They sit.*)

EMILY. Why can't you admit it?

JOHN. What.

EMILY. Just admit you don't like him.

JOHN. Who?

EMILY. Henry.

JOHN. I do like him.

EMILY. You do not.

JOHN. That's

EMILY. Just admit it.

JOHN. What would that do?

EMILY. He's not going to be good for her.

JOHN. Who knows who's going to be good for someone?

EMILY. Jenny'll marry him and then after a while she'll really see him for the first time and she'll be disappointed but by the time she realizes she made a mistake she'll be too far in or she'll be pregnant or And she won't be able to get out and

JOHN. Are you talking about them?

EMILY. John.

JOHN. She loves him Emily.

EMILY. I'm going to go do some work.

(Gets up.)

JOHN. Ok.

(EMILY exits.)

Three.

(JOHN and JENNY in the living-room. They are making the seating chart for the wedding.)

JOHN. There was a napkin near the stove and it caught fire It was on fire Ok it was smoldering But there was smoke in the room and your Mom

JENNY. Was she drunk?

JOHN. No. No.

JENNY. Sounds like she was.

JOHN. She stood there pretending it was no big deal. But the smell The smell of smoke was everywhere and

JENNY. She was drunk.

JOHN. I think there's something wrong.

JENNY. With Mom?

JOHN. Yes.

JENNY. We know that.

JOHN. Jenny.

JENNY. Nothing a really good therapist couldn't help. But good luck getting her to see one Dad.

JOHN. Jenny.

JENNY. *(A small sound.)*

JOHN. *(Looks at her. Then:)* Don't put Uncle Ray next to Mrs. Dundas.

JENNY. Why not?

JOHN. Because he's left-handed and she's irritable.

JENNY. Where should I put him?

JOHN. Put him between the Smoot sisters. He'll be so excited he won't know which way to look.

JENNY. *(Laughs. Then:)* Aunt Mary'll get mad.

JOHN. Yeah.

But she's gonna get mad at some point anyway so we might as well make him happy.

JENNY. *(Laughs.)*

JOHN. Right?

Steve Carmozzi's coming?

JENNY. Yeah. But Mrs. Carmozzi isn't. I think she's going to divorce him. Mom said.

JOHN. That's a shame.

JENNY. Because of money.

JOHN. He's crazy with his money. He buys lottery tickets by the stack.

JENNY. Yeah if you're gonna win you're gonna win with one ticket.

JOHN. Don't put him near our table. His company owes Mom a lot of money. She didn't really want him to come. She doesn't want to have to say anything.

JENNY. She could have told me that. I wouldn't have invited him.

JOHN. He's an old friend.

JENNY. Still.

JOHN. You gotta do some things.

JENNY. Part of me doesn't want Mom to come to the wedding.

JOHN. Oh c'mon. Don't.

JENNY. I don't like it when she just says things. I know I'm going to be on pins and needles. And I don't want Henry's family to think that I'm

JOHN. Let's get something straight. If you make it hard for your Mom to come to the wedding I'm not coming.

JENNY. I'm already nervous Dad.

(Silence.)

I don't know how you put up with her.

JOHN. She puts up with me too.

JENNY. Oh right Dad.

(Silence.)

JOHN. Put Sam Panday and Juan Pujadas at Alex McCready's table. Alex's daughter What's her name?

JENNY. Molly.

JOHN. She'd get a kick out of Sam and Juan.

JENNY. What about the Williamses?

JOHN. The Williamses. Put 'm there.

JENNY. That's a good idea.

(They work on the seating chart.)

JOHN. I'm not the easiest person to live with you know.

JENNY. You are too.

JOHN. No one is.

There was one time When you were at college Your
mom got fed up She talked about getting an apart-
ment. She wanted to leave me.

JENNY. You should have left her.

JOHN. I

JENNY. No Dad. You. You. No. You should have gone and
gotten your own apartment. Let her live on her own
and Let her see how. Because you She.

You might have found out you were better off.

JOHN. Jenny

JENNY. She called me and said these things about Henry.

JOHN. She didn't mean them.

JENNY. She said them though didn't she.

JOHN. She says some stupid things sometimes. She doesn't
mean to.

JENNY. They're worse than stupid.

They are.

JOHN. Jenny She's just worried about you.

JENNY. Doesn't feel like worry. Feels like

(Silence.)

And it's not like this is the first time this has happened
either.

(Silence.)

JOHN. I did go. I spent three nights at the Courtyard Inn.

I was so

You're gonna I know you're gonna understand this
with Henry. Your Mom is tough.

JENNY. Yeah.

JOHN. She is I know she is. But. I don't know how it happens but somehow you can get tied to each other. You're gonna see with Henry. Your Mom and I we're different about some things but I'm lucky she didn't like being alone because I can't. I can't be.

I missed her like

(A small breath pushed out of thin lips.)

Be terrible for me if she left.

Four.

(JOHN sits in the doctor's waiting room. JENNY enters.)

JENNY. Where is she?

JOHN. She's in with the doctor. She doesn't want me in there with them. You know how she is.

JENNY. So what's wrong?

JOHN. She's lost her sense of smell.

JENNY. What?

JOHN. She can't smell anything.

JENNY. I ran down here because

(*She texts.*)

JOHN. What are you doing?

JENNY. I'm texting Henry. He's worried because I thought it was something serious.

JOHN. It is serious.

JENNY. She can't smell anything?

JOHN. No.

JENNY. She can't smell anything at all? Really?

JOHN. It's not funny.

JENNY. Well kinda. Is she like "I can see that big pile of poop over there but I can't smell it"? Because that might be good actually. Sometimes.

JOHN. Jenny.

JENNY. Even if she sniffs really hard?

JOHN. Down at one of the construction sites there was a gas leak and she didn't smell it. And one of her guys was about to light up a cigarette when he did.

JENNY. Oh my god.

JOHN. So it's not funny. It's not.

JENNY. Can she get it back?

JOHN. I was so hard on her when she didn't smell the smoke in the kitchen. Remember?

JENNY. How were you supposed to know?

JOHN. Sometimes it's temporary. From a cold or the flu.
But they seem to think that your Mom's

JENNY. Dad. Does she have a tumor?

JOHN. No.

JENNY. Are you just not telling me?

JOHN. No. She doesn't.

JENNY. You promise?

JOHN. Yes.

JENNY. Did they check?

JOHN. Of course. First. They

JENNY. Did you ask another doctor?

JOHN. She's already had a CAT scan and we've checked
the house for mold, she's been to acupuncture. Now
they're talking about trying a course of steroids so

JENNY. When did you do all this?

JOHN. Your mom didn't want you to worry.

She's going crazy. She's embarrassed. She doesn't know
how to mention it to people or if she should. And she
is taking so many baths. I don't know why. But she's in
the bathroom all the time.

JENNY. She's afraid she might not smell right.

JOHN. Oh. Oh. Of course. Oh.

JENNY. She's gonna be okay Dad.

JOHN. It's weird. Ever since she lost her sense of smell I've
been smelling the most amazing things. I was in a
Staples Store and the new office supplies Markers and
Sharpies and I was smelling gluesticks
And at Rite Aid I opened a can of tennis balls and a
mint chapstick and a nail polish and Johnson's baby
shampoo and a box of crayons
That thunderstorm last week The rain was And I was
outside on the cement sidewalk outside our house and
the cement smelled so gorgeous.
And your mom's coat

JOHN. (*cont.*) And the Johnson girl Little Lisa Johnson had a baby and the baby had this toy a little pony A “My Little Pony” pony toy And the plastic smelled so good. It smelled amazing.

(**EMILY** enters.)

What’d he say?

EMILY. Let’s go. Hi Jenny.

JENNY. What’d he say, Mom?

EMILY. He can’t do anything.

(*She exits. They follow her.*)

Five.

EMILY. Does this shirt smell?

JOHN. It was dry-cleaned.

EMILY. But does it smell?

JOHN. No.

EMILY. That's what I wanted to know.

JOHN. Ok.

EMILY. I just

JOHN. Ok. I'm sorry.

(EMILY purses lips.)

I had to tell her.

EMILY. It's ok.

JOHN. I did.

EMILY. I said ok.

JOHN. I don't want you to be mad.

EMILY. I told you last week that I didn't care that you told her. Some things could be private but I get that you needed to tell her.

JOHN. Ok.

EMILY. The whole thing is It's nothing.

JOHN. Well it's not nothing. It's worrying.

EMILY. You be worried. I'm not going to.

JOHN. I

EMILY. In the scheme of things it's nothing. McGrath's sister? The one whose son hit her with the bat? Died.

JOHN. Oh no. That's.

EMILY. So that kid. He's in real trouble now. And McGrath is crazy from it And his father And so McGrath is He's worried and he should be. This is nothing.

JOHN. Ok.

EMILY. So this is nothing. I'm not going to let it overwhelm me or ruin my life. I'm not.

JOHN. Ok. Good.

EMILY. Because everywhere there are things that happen.
To people everywhere.

(JENNY enters. She has a small cake box.)

JENNY. Hi Mom. Hi Dad.

EMILY. Hi Jenny.

JOHN. That the cake?

JENNY. It is! It is! It's a sample. They want us to make sure
it's exactly right. I'm just gonna

(JENNY exits into the kitchen.)

EMILY. Don't make a fuss in front of her.

JOHN. I'm not.

EMILY. Don't. I mean it.

(They stand.)

*JENNY enters with a small plate with cake and three
forks.)*

JENNY. Try a bite of this.

EMILY. I can't.

JENNY. What? I want you to tell

JOHN. It looks good!

EMILY. I

JOHN. It looks good Jenny!

JENNY. Oh c'mon Mom. Just take a little taste of it.

EMILY. I CAN'T. Not "I won't." I can't.

It's idiotic. But the doctor says

Because I lost my sense of smell, I can't taste things
properly. I can taste stuff but it's just bitter or sweet or
That's about as interesting as it gets.

JENNY. I didn't know.

JOHN. This tastes amazing.

EMILY. Fine. Look.

(Takes a bite.)

Happy?

JENNY. No Mom it's ok.

JOHN. I like it. I think it's great.

JENNY. I'm sorry.

EMILY. Nothing to be sorry about.

JENNY. No I am.

I didn't know about the food but I get that your sense of smell is really important. I did some research. It said your sense of smell can influence your mood. That even your memory can be affected because memory's connected to smells so your memory might be So I get it Mom and I'm sorry. I am.

EMILY. You think it's kind of you to say things like that to me?

JENNY. What?

JOHN. Emily.

EMILY. I didn't ask you to find all that out. How do you think that makes me feel?

JOHN. Jenny.

(JENNY *exits.*)

JOHN. Why'd you do that?

EMILY. That cake tasted like chalk.

JOHN. What?

EMILY. It had no taste. Neither does this coffee. I can't taste anything.

Six.

EMILY. I can't see anything.

(Blackout.)

John. John. John.

Seven.

(In blackout.)

Eight.

(In blackout.)

EMILY VOICE OVER. This is a horror story. I can feel the devil crouching next to me but I can't see him. He's whispering to this thing inside me that's slowly eating away at me and he's whispering encouragements.

(Lights very slowly come up as JOHN and EMILY talk. EMILY is sitting up in bed. She is in a nightgown. JOHN sits on the edge of the bed.)

JOHN. Can I get you some breakfast or some lunch?

EMILY. No thanks.

JOHN. Henry dropped by and brought you some bearclaws.
You want one?

EMILY. No.

JOHN. You want anything?

EMILY. I'm not hungry.

JOHN. Do you want to get up?

EMILY. No.

JOHN. Ok.

Aunt Mary called. She said, "Tell her I'm worried."

EMILY. Uh huh.

(Silence.)

JOHN. Ok. She also sent a bunch of websites with information on all different kinds of vitamins and minerals and vitamins with minerals and. Do you want me to say anything to her?

EMILY. No.

JOHN. I'll thank her. Or you can thank her tonight at the rehearsal dinner. If you want to.

EMILY. Ok.

JOHN. If you want to.

EMILY. Did she want me to read them?

JOHN. (*Laughs.*) I don't know.

EMILY. Tell her I read them. See what she says.

JOHN. Ok.

EMILY. No. Just tell her thank you. Tell her some of what we've been doing about it all and tell her not to worry. And tell her I'm looking forward to seeing her.

JOHN. Ok.

Jenny thinks we should postpone it.

EMILY. The wedding? No. No. On my account?

JOHN. She just thinks it might be too much for everyone.

EMILY. That's a stupid idea. Don't say that to her. But it is. Everything's ready. Everything's done. So tell her from me "no it's ok." I'll tell her.

JOHN. Ok.

EMILY. People've bought plane tickets.

JOHN. Ok.

EMILY. Let's just get through this wedding.

JOHN. Ok.

EMILY. She's getting married. I'm not stopping her from getting married.

JOHN. Ok.

(*Silence.*)

EMILY. That was nice of Henry.

JOHN. He said he remembered you saying you liked them. Billy called too.

EMILY. When?

JOHN. You were asleep.

EMILY. Did he say what it was about?

JOHN. No.

EMILY. Can you get me my Blackberry?

JOHN. Sure. Do you remember where I put it?

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