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The Most Deserving

Catherine Trieschmann

A SAMUEL FRENCH ACTING EDITION

**SAMUEL
FRENCH**
FOUNDED 1830

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THE MOST DESERVING was originally developed and produced by the Denver Center Theatre Company (Kent Thompson, Artistic Director) in Denver, Colorado on October 11, 2013. The performance was directed by Shelley Butler, with sets by David Barber, costumes by Leah Pichl, lighting by Jane Spencer, sound by Tyler Nelson, and dramaturgy by Abigail Gonda. The Production Stage Manager was Rachel Ducat. The cast was as follows:

JOLENE ATKINSON Judith Hawking
TED ATKINSON Sam Gregory
LIZ CHANG Rebecca Hirota
EDIE KELCH Jeanne Paulsen
DWAYNE DEAN Craig Bockhorn
EVERETT WHITESIDE Jonathan Earl Peck

THE MOST DESERVING was subsequently produced by the Women's Project Theater (Julie Crosby, Producing Artistic Director) at the New York City Center in New York City on March 30, 2014. The performance was directed by Shelley Butler, with sets by David Barber, costumes by Donald Sanders, lighting by Traci Klainer Polimeni, sound by Leon Rothenberg, and dramaturgy by Abigail Gonda. The Production Stage Manager was Jess Johnston. The cast was as follows:

JOLENE ATKINSON Veanne Cox
TED ATKINSON Daniel Pearce
LIZ CHANG Jennifer Lim
EDIE KELCH Kristin Griffith
DWAYNE DEAN Adam Lefevre
EVERETT WHITESIDE Ray Anthony Thomas

CHARACTERS

JOLENE ATKINSON – late 40s–50s. Head of the Ellis County Arts Council. Fit, smart, energetic and controlling. A native Kansan. Caucasian.

TED ATKINSON – early 50s. Jolene’s husband. Originally from a suburb of Manchester, England. A bit of a burn out. Reporter at the local paper.

LIZ CHANG – 30s. An assistant art professor at the local community college. Intelligent but her ambition outstrips her ability. Asian-American.

EDIE KELCH – 60s–70s. A recent widow in the midst of an identity crisis. A native Kansan. Caucasian.

DWAYNE DEAN – 50s–60s. Recently laid off from the automobile industry. An artist. A native Kansan. Caucasian.

EVERETT WHITESIDE – 40s–60s. A paraplegic, self-taught artist. A native Kansan. African American.

SETTING

Ellis County, Kansas: an art gallery, Ted and Jolene’s bedroom, Edie’s living room, and Everett’s barn studio

TIME

The Present

AUTHOR'S NOTES

“/” indicates an interruption

“*” indicates continuity when dialogue follows dialogue earlier than the line immediately preceding it

Production Note: No artwork discussed should be seen by the audience, leaving its merits or lack thereof to the imagination.

Special thanks to Peter Ellenstein for his early encouragement of the work and to Kent Thompson for directing the first reading then agreeing to produce it one year later. I worked with three amazing dramaturgs on this play: mad genius Tom Bryant, inspiration personified Liz Engleman, and the ultimate connoisseur Abigail Gonda. The brilliant and intrepid Shelley Butler directed the play in Denver and New York and the play is far, far better for it. Thanks to my agent Derek Zasky for walking beside me, even when I don't make him much money. Thanks to Hedgebrook for the best three weeks of my life, during which I was able to revise the play, and to Julie Crosby for her commitment not only to this play but to my body of work. And finally, to my husband Carl and my two girls, Sophie and Martha, thank you for giving me the time and space to write and so much more.

*For my father, Jim Trieschmann, who begged me not to go into the arts,
then gave me his full and unabashed support when I did.*

Scene One

(A small, provincial art gallery in Ellis County, Kansas.)

(EDIE, TED, DWAYNE, LIZ and JOLENE sit in a semi-circle of folding chairs. They all have packets of papers in front of them. JOLENE meticulously reads the budget aloud. DWAYNE tries to keep his eyes open. TED surreptitiously messes with his phone. EDIE has placed her mind elsewhere. LIZ looks like she wants to kill herself or someone else.)

JOLENE. Five hundred and twenty-three dollars and forty-two cents.

Posters.

Three hundred and sixty-seven dollars and sixty-nine cents.

Programs.

Three hundred and sixty-eight dollars and seventy-two cents.

Postcards.

Two hundred and eighty-six dollars and ninety-three cents.

Postage.

One hundred and thirty-three dollars and six cents.

Hardware.

Six hundred and seventy four dollars and twenty-six cents.

Framing.

Two thousand and four hundred –

LIZ. I don't mean to interrupt but –

JOLENE. Yes?

LIZ. Is this really necessary?

(Everyone looks up at LIZ, startled.)

JOLENE. You're new.

LIZ. I am.

JOLENE. Two thousand and four hundred and fifty dollars.

Prize money.

Five hundred and forty-seven dollars and ninety-eight cents.

Transportation.

Three hundred and sixty dollars and two cents.

Accommodations.

And lastly,

Five hundred dollars.

Guest Artist Stipend.

DWAYNE. And that's five hundred we can save next year.

JOLENE.

EDIE.

Here, here.

Oh yes.

(They all laugh, except LIZ.)

LIZ. What – did he do something? I thought his workshop was top notch.

TED. Yeah, it was.

JOLENE. Nothing special, mind you.

LIZ. My students adored him. They came back all flush and inspired.

DWAYNE. Maybe he was more effective with the younger crowd.

LIZ. Isn't that what we want?

TED. Yes.

JOLENE. The workshop wasn't the problem. The problem was with the adjudication.

EDIE. Oh my.

LIZ. I don't understand.

JOLENE. Were you there?

LIZ. Yes.

JOLENE. Did you see the painting he gave the blue ribbon to?

LIZ. Yes. I thought the brushwork was energetic and the colors vibrant. I wasn't surprised it won.

EDIE. Oh dear.

DWAYNE. I think it's fair to say, taste is more liberal at the college.

EDIE. Some of our supporters were offended.

LIZ. Why? Because the girl was nude? Would our supporters be offended by Michelangelo? By Leonardo Da Vinci?

JOLENE. Of course not.

TED. (*overlapping*)
Yes.

JOLENE. What? No, they wouldn't, Ted. I think I know. I'm the one who fields the complaints. And what are you doing? Are you texting?

TED. No.

JOLENE. I can see your phone. Who are you texting?

TED. I'm not texting. I'm playing scrabble.

JOLENE. Put it away, Ted, for crying out loud. The problem was not that the girl was nude. The problem was it turned out to be Heather Dinkle.

EDIE. Poor Pam.

LIZ. Pam?

EDIE. Pam Dinkle, Heather's mother. She's married to Bobby Dinkle, Dinkle's Dry Cleaning?

LIZ. So the mother was embarrassed. That's understandable, but there's no shame in modeling nude for a piece of art.

JOLENE. Heather Dinkle is fourteen.

LIZ. Oh.

JOLENE. Next order of business. Ted, do I need to confiscate your phone?

TED. Does she have that kind of power?

DWAYNE. Yes.

JOLENE. Dwayne, why don't you bring us up to date on the Living Wage Grant.

DWAYNE. Alrighty. Thanks to Edie and her late husband Vernon –

EDIE. God rest his soul.

DWAYNE. Yes. As I was saying, thanks to Edie and Vernon –

EDIE. May he rest in peace.

DWAYNE. Amen.

JOLENE. We've received a matching grant from the Living Wage Foundation to support a visual artist here in Ellis County. The award is twenty thousand dollars and a show at the gallery.

LIZ. That's terrific.

DWAYNE. We have a few candidates to consider. The guidelines provided by the Foundation are pretty narrow.

LIZ. What are they?

DWAYNE. I have them here somewhere –

JOLENE. The artist must have lived in Ellis County for five years. He must demonstrate both artistic excellence and financial need and should preferably be an underrepresented American voice.

LIZ. Oh my God – I know the perfect person!

JOLENE. The deadline has passed.

LIZ. We can extend it, can't we? I mean, we are the Council.

TED. I don't see why not.

JOLENE. Because that would be unfair to the candidates who worked hard to get their applications in on time.

DWAYNE. It's important that everyone has the same chance.

LIZ. How does extending the deadline make the process unfair? If anything, it broadens our scope. Are you familiar with Everett Whiteside?

JOLENE. Never heard of him.

EDIE. Is he related to Betsey Whiteside?

LIZ. Not that I know of.

DWAYNE. (*overlapping*)

Didn't Betsey have a brother who was lobotomized?

EDIE. Yes – is that who you're talking about?

LIZ. Everett lives just outside town. He's confined to a wheelchair and living on disability. He'd be the perfect recipient. He's African American –

EDIE. Then he's definitely not Betsey's brother. Betsey's people were Norwegian.

LIZ. And most importantly, he's a genius.

JOLENE. So what does this genius do?

LIZ. He creates these extraordinary sculptures depicting religious subjects out of trash.

TED. Huh.

LIZ. No, I'm telling you, it's profound.

TED. Are you talking about the Trash Man?

LIZ. I've never heard –

TED. Yeah, the Trash Man! He lives off old forty, and his barn is covered in all this crazy shit he makes out of trash.

LIZ. Yes, the barn, that's where he works, but I wouldn't call it crazy shit.

TED. That came out wrong.

DWAYNE. I'm not an expert, but if it looks like it came from the dump, then it ain't art.

LIZ. It's unconventional, I know, but Everett is part of this movement of outsider artists...that is, artists who haven't been formally trained...

JOLENE. We know what outsider art is.

LIZ. Well, I don't like the term, I think it "others" the artists.

JOLENE. Then why did you use it?

LIZ. The point is, the Visionary Art Museum in Kansas City is interested in Everett upon my recommendation.

JOLENE. Are you his agent?

LIZ. No, I'm a fan.

JOLENE. Well, this is all very interesting, but we aren't going to give the largest single grant this organization has

ever awarded to the Trash Man without going through a proper application process.

LIZ. But he fits all the criteria to a T!

DWAYNE. I just don't think we should be giving away twenty-thousand dollars to an "outsider" artist, when there are so many deserving artists living inside town.

LIZ. Like who?

DWAYNE. I have the applications right here: Erin Hernandez.

JOLENE. Now her quilts are lovely.

TED. Is she a minority?

DWAYNE. She's a Hernandez.

JOLENE. By marriage.

TED. Does that count?

LIZ. It shouldn't.

TED. I agree with Liz.

EDIE. It's irrelevant. She doesn't have financial need.

DWAYNE. But she's always going on about how hard it is to make a living as an artist.

EDIE. It's all a show. Her father owns half the mineral rights in Ellis County.

JOLENE. That's right. He does.

DWAYNE. Who knew? So long Erin Hernandez.

JOLENE. Who else?

DWAYNE. Rick Duffy. His need is undeniable. He's a high school teacher.

JOLENE. I just love his Iris series.

EDIE. Oh, me too. It reminds me of Van Gogh.

JOLENE. That's so insightful, Edie.

LIZ. If Van Gogh had been derivative and mediocre.

JOLENE. Now Edie has a great eye. Perhaps Rick's work is just too subtle for your taste.

LIZ. Look, Rick Duffy is a nice man and a fine artist, but a white, male oil painter does not a minority voice make.

JOLENE. Rick is Native American, part Native American.

LIZ. Which part, his spleen?

JOLENE. His grandmother was a member of the Sioux tribe.

EDIE. Great-grandmother.

JOLENE. That makes him what...one quarter.

TED. One-eighth.

EDIE. Or maybe she was half-Sioux.

TED. One-sixteenth.

DWAYNE. Either way, my ancestors would have shot his great-grandmother without pause.

JOLENE. The point is: he's a minority. Is that it?

DWAYNE. Well, I know this is a little unorthodox, but I'd like to throw my own hat into the proverbial ring. As you all know, after thirty-five years of service in the automobile industry, I got laid off last year, so the financial need is there. Trust me, it is there.

LIZ. Are you one-sixteenth Sioux too?

DWAYNE. No, no. I can't make that claim, but the grant says "preferably" an underrepresented American voice. It doesn't say it has to be. Now I know I'm new to the game of art, but I think we can all agree I've taken to it like a fish to water. I tell you what, I'd like nothing more than to take a year to finish my Vice-Presidential series. Think about it. You see portraits of the Presidents everywhere, art museums, everywhere, but not Vice-Presidents. There's a gap. I think it'd be a solid contribution to the field.

LIZ. What field?

DWAYNE. The field of art. I'd recuse myself from the selection process of course.

(Silence. Everyone is horrified.)

JOLENE. Dwayne, I just want to congratulate you for being so brave. Putting yourself out there like this, that's just super.

EDIE. Extremely brave.

DWAYNE. Thank you, ladies.

JOLENE. Why don't we do this? Since the grant says "preferably" an under-represented voice, let's table

your application for the time being, until we fully consider the minority candidates, like Rick Duffy.

LIZ. Good idea!

EDIE. (*overlapping*)

Great!

TED. (*overlapping*)

Yeah.

DWAYNE. (*disappointed*)

Alright. If you think that's best. I'll concede to the majority.

LIZ. And in the spirit of giving our minority artists full consideration, I propose we all visit Everett and view his work together.

EDIE. May I ask you something, dear?

LIZ. Of course.

EDIE. You said his work was of a religious nature?

LIZ. Yes.

EDIE. But it's made out of trash.

LIZ. That's right.

EDIE. I don't have a problem with that, I'm very open-minded, I'm a Methodist, but might it strike the Catholics in the community as sacrilegious?

LIZ. Maybe but isn't great art supposed to provoke?

JOLENE. Not in Kansas.

LIZ. What's astonishing about Everett's work, Edie, is that he finds trash and transforms it. For example, he constructed this twenty-foot angel out of smashed dog food cans. She hangs from the back wall of the barn, and when you open the door, the sun shines directly on her. I'm not a religious person, but the sight of that angel, well, she unmoored me.

EDIE. Vernon is with the angels now.

LIZ. You must see it. You must all see it.

JOLENE. Let's put it to a vote. All in favor of throwing a fair and objective application process to the wind in order to consider the Trash Man, raise your hand.

(LIZ raises her hand immediately.)

(EDIE raises her hand.)

Is that it then?

TED. No.

(TED raises his hand.)

(LIZ is surprised and pleased.)

(JOLENE is not.)

Right. Meeting adjourned. Who else wants coffee?

(TED quickly escapes. DWAYNE and EDIE are close on his heels.)

EDIE. Decaf.

DWAYNE. *(overlapping)*

Count me in.

(JOLENE eyes LIZ, as she gathers her things.)

JOLENE. Bob said you were a firecracker.

LIZ. Bob?

JOLENE. Chairman of the City Council Bob Duffy?

LIZ. Oh right. I sat beside him at the Senior Banquet.

JOLENE. That's why he recommended you?

LIZ. I did share some of my ideas for raising art awareness in our community. There's just so much potential here!

JOLENE. Such as?

LIZ. Oh you know, the usual: enrichment classes, library lectures, a National Center for Visionary Art, curated by Professor Liz Chang.

JOLENE. Let me ask you something, Liz. Do you know how hard it is to raise money for the arts in Western Kansas?

LIZ. I think I have some idea.

JOLENE. It's like trying to squeeze water from a sponge in the middle of the Serengeti.

LIZ. Okay.

JOLENE. It's taken me over a decade to get this organization up and running, including but not limited to acquiring a permanent space, attracting viable donors, and lobbying the City Council relentlessly, until they made my position full-time, since I was, after all, working sixty hours a week anyway.

LIZ. Thanks for laying all the groundwork!

JOLENE. The Board is a rubber stamp to all my hard work. Don't tread on me.

Scene Two

(TED and JOLENE's Bedroom.)

(TED turns on some music, something from the Seventies, maybe The Grateful Dead. He gets his groove on, while he pours himself some peppermint schnapps. He's wearing a thoroughly worn out undershirt with yellow stains around the armpits, tidy whiteys or boxers and black knee socks.)

(JOLENE enters, wearing an old house gown. TED flops on the bed and hides behind his football (British) magazine.)

(JOLENE turns off the music.)

(She turns on some soft jazz. He doesn't protest. She gets in bed beside him.)

(pause)

TED. Get on with it then.

JOLENE. What?

TED. If you're going to have my head, I'd just as soon get it over with.

JOLENE. I'm not in the mood.

TED. Since when?

JOLENE. It's gotten a bit old, don't cha think?

TED. Yeah.

JOLENE. Good.

TED. (*perking up*)

Cool.

JOLENE. Anything interesting at the paper today?

TED. I didn't go in.

JOLENE. Why not?

TED. No news today.

JOLENE. Nothing?

TED. Well, Burt Hoffenwenter died.

JOLENE. Isn't obituaries one of your beats?

TED. Twenty-five bucks a story does not make a beat. It makes coffee. Maybe a haircut.

JOLENE. You're right. Why bother? *(pause)* You know what?

TED. What?

JOLENE. I have an idea. Why don't you quit the paper?

TED. Really?

JOLENE. Yes, take a year off to really find yourself. You deserve it.

TED. You're joking.

JOLENE. No. Now that Joey's out of the house, why not? Take a year off. Search your soul. What do you really want to do? You used to want to be a rock journalist, remember?

TED. Yeah, imagine sitting down with Jerry Garcia and having a real heart to heart. I could still do that, you know. It's not too late.

JOLENE. Well, it is for Jerry.

TED. Yeah, not Jerry, of course. But Bobby. Is he alive?

JOLENE. I don't know, but you could do some research.

TED. *(uncertain)*

Like, at the library?

JOLENE. Or the internet.

TED. Yeah, I could do that. Good idea. Thanks.

JOLENE. You're welcome. *(pause)* It's stuffy in here. Are you warm?

TED. I'm comfortable.

JOLENE. Must be the humidity.

TED. What humidity? We live on the high plains.

JOLENE. I'm about to suffocate.

(She unbuttons her housecoat to reveal a sexy, lingerie number underneath. Stockings, snaps, corset, bustier, etc...)

(TED bursts out laughing.)

TED. What's this then?

JOLENE. Nothing for your information. I just wanted to feel feminine for a change. For myself. It's not for you.

TED. I wouldn't dream of it. It's not my taste.

(JOLENE opens her magazine and pretends to read, clearly hurt.)

(TED returns to his schnapps and his football.)

JOLENE. What do you mean, it's not your taste?

TED. I prefer fewer bells and whistles on a woman is all.

JOLENE. I make an effort in the bedroom for once, and you say, "Jolly ho – it's not my taste."

TED. You said it was for you.

JOLENE. I said that to cover, you jack-ass.

TED. How was I supposed to know that?

JOLENE. What kind of imbecile thinks his wife puts on a garter belt for herself?

TED. You took me by surprise. You look very nice all tarted up.

JOLENE. Do you find me attractive at all?

TED. You're very fit for a woman your age.

JOLENE. Why do you bother staying in this marriage?

TED. For the sake of the children, of course. Kidding! I'm only kidding!

(JOLENE smacks him with her magazine repeatedly and with real vigor.)

Oh, come here, my little fruit tart. Let me get a good look at you. Yeah, I get it. You've got this here. Lovely. *(He gives her thigh high a little snap.)* And that there. Just scrumptious. Now what does this do? I see. How inventive. And that. It pushes those up higher than they've been in a long while. Fantastic. All in all, I'd say you're a perfect peach tart.

JOLENE. Oh, for God's sake, please stop talking.

(She kisses him long and hard, and it's kind of nice for a change.)

(What a fucking surprise for them both.)

(They sit back, a little stunned.)

TED. I'll just get a re-fill then. Want one?

JOLENE. Yes.

(TED pours two glasses of peppermint schnapps, while JOLENE arranges herself on the pillows.)

TED. Here you go.

(JOLENE takes a drink and tries to hide how awful it is.)

(TED downs his.)

Alright then!

(He carefully lies down next to her. He's nervous. They sit there for a beat. He fiddles with her stocking snap. It won't give.)

Your stocking seems impervious to my charms.

(JOLENE sets down her drink.)

JOLENE. Never mind that.

(She takes charge. She sits up and authoritatively rolls him over on his stomach. She sits on his buttocks and begins to massage his back.)

TED. Oh God. Oh God. This is heaven. I'm sorry I laughed at you. I'm a cold, lazy bastard who deserves to be shot. I promise to wash up more. I promise. Oh God. That is the spot. Oh. My. Bliss.

(She massages him for awhile, then slows.)

JOLENE. You know, I've been wondering something all day.

TED. What?

JOLENE. You do know who Rick Duffy's father is, right?

TED. Hmmmmmm?

JOLENE. Rick's father is Bob Duffy, Chairman of the City Council.

TED. Mmmmmmm...what of it?

JOLENE. Our budget goes up for approval in two weeks. Now Bob Duffy is a very discrete man, but there have been hints.

TED. Hmmmm...Lower. Harder. Lower.

(She complies.)

JOLENE. I am under the impression that if Rick were to receive the Living Wage Grant, then our budget request would go unchallenged.

TED. Mmmmmmmmm.

JOLENE. And since Vernon's no longer on the City Council, we really need Bob Duffy's support.

TED. Uhhhhhhhhhhh.

JOLENE. So you see, that changes everything, and now that you have the full context, you can change your vote.

(TED sits up abruptly.)

TED. Is that what all this is about?

JOLENE. What?

TED. This seduction!

JOLENE. Don't be ridiculous.

TED. It is, isn't it?

JOLENE. If all I needed was an extra vote, I could get that with Edie in three minutes.

TED. Admit it.

JOLENE. You've had one too many, I think.

TED. Admit it.

JOLENE. It's made you paranoid.

TED. Why won't you just admit it?

JOLENE. You always get paranoid when you drink peppermint schnapps. I don't know why I allow it in the house.

TED. Admit it!

JOLENE. Fine, I admit it! Of course, I was just trying to get your vote. Why else would I want to have sex with someone who has piss on his undershirt?

TED. It's not piss; it's perspiration.

JOLENE. In that case, take me now big boy.

TED. What about my year off?

JOLENE. A year off from what?

(JOLENE climbs back into bed and opens her magazine.)

Scene Three

(EVERETT's Barn)

(EVERETT's at his worktable, working on a new piece.

LIZ enters, bringing a couple of oranges as a gift.)

EVERETT. Sister Liz!

LIZ. Hi Everett.

EVERETT. You want some tea? I just brewed some up.

LIZ. No thanks.

EVERETT. You sure? Got some rice crispy treats too. Loretta brought 'em by. She's still trying to get her some of this. I told her there ain't nothing here for her, but she don't listen. That woman is delusional.

LIZ. Certifiable. Listen, I have good news.

EVERETT. Oh yeah?

LIZ. You know how I'm on that Arts Council?

EVERETT. Uh huh.

LIZ. Well, they're considering you for a grant!

EVERETT. You sure you don't want no tea? Just the right mix of sugar and mint.

LIZ. Did you hear what I said? You're being considered for a grant.

EVERETT. Is it in the bank?

LIZ. No –

EVERETT. Then forgive me, if I don't throw you a parade.

LIZ. It's twenty thousand dollars.

EVERETT. You got my attention.

LIZ. Good. Because I told the council all about your work and how moved I was by the angel. They can't wait to see her.

EVERETT. They want to see the angel?

LIZ. Yes!

EVERETT. Well shit.

LIZ. What's the problem?

EVERETT. That angel has been reunited with her God.

LIZ. What are you talking about?

EVERETT. I took her down. She don't exist no more.

LIZ. Well put her back up.

EVERETT. I can't.

LIZ. Why not?

EVERETT. Cause Loretta took her bits and pieces to the dump.

LIZ. You threw her away?

EVERETT. Yes!

LIZ. But why would you do that? She was your masterpiece!

EVERETT. I got tired of looking at her.

LIZ. Well shit!

EVERETT. That's what I'm saying!

LIZ. I have been busting my ass all over town for you, hell, all over the state. What am I going to tell the Visionary Art Museum in Kansas City? They wanted to acquire that piece!

EVERETT. You can tell those assholes, Everett Whiteside ain't interested in them.

LIZ. What? Last time I was here you were thrilled about the museum. We looked through the catalog, we kicked back some beers.

EVERETT. I looked that place up on the inter-webs, and they don't show nothing but art by crazy people.

LIZ. No, that's not true. They show work by untrained artists –

EVERETT. Half them muthafuckers are sending their shit straight from the asylum.

LIZ. Okay, yes, but not all. Some are like you, self-taught.

EVERETT. I do not belong there, Liz. I am not crazy, and I am not ignorant, and you can quote me on that.

LIZ. Is that why you destroyed the angel, because you didn't want her shown at the museum?

EVERETT. No, I took that bitch down, cause she was looking at me funny.

LIZ. That museum is a big deal, Everett. When they buy something, people follow.

EVERETT. Wait a minute. You said buy. They wanted to buy her?

LIZ. Yes, they were very interested in buying her.

EVERETT. Now you didn't tell me that.

LIZ. I did –

EVERETT. No, you said they wanted to acquire her.

LIZ. I don't remember my exact words –

EVERETT. You said acquire. You did not say buy. I would have remembered if you had said buy.

LIZ. Well, what did you think acquire meant?

EVERETT. I thought it meant they was gonna drive down here in a pick-up truck and stick her in the back.

LIZ. No, they were going to pay you for her.

EVERETT. Well shit. I got bills to pay.

LIZ. I know. That's why I was so hopeful about the museum sale. You could pay your back taxes.

EVERETT. Shit. Shitshitshitshitshit –

LIZ. Hey, it's going to be okay.

EVERETT. No, it ain't. Uncle Sam is on my back.

LIZ. I know.

EVERETT. Trying to make me bend over and take it.

LIZ. I understand.

EVERETT. He's in there now.

LIZ. Where?

EVERETT. Inside my asshole, hammering away, bang, bang, bang

LIZ. Hey – can I have some of that tea? All of a sudden I'm parched.

EVERETT. You want some tea?

LIZ. That'd be great.

EVERETT. I got some fresh mint from the garden this morning.

LIZ. Perfect.

(EVERETT wheels over to his little refrigerator and gets her some tea.)

You know, one could argue that your willingness to destroy your work is evidence of your authenticity as an artist. It's the ultimate resistance to commodification. Art can't be bought or sold if it's destroyed.

EVERETT. What are you talking about?

LIZ. Damage control. You know that book I'm writing? I could do a whole chapter on work you've destroyed. I have pictures of the angel at least. How often do you destroy your work? I mean, was this the first time, or do you dismantle things often?

EVERETT. I don't keep track.

LIZ. Did you destroy anything else this week?

(EVERETT shrugs.)

Was anyone else looking at you funny, giving you the evil eye?

EVERETT. Sampson.

LIZ. You mean, the bust with all the hair?

(EVERETT nods.)

What did you do with it?

EVERETT. I got rid of him.

LIZ. How? Did you throw him away? Set him on fire?

EVERETT. I gave that muthafucker a makeover.

LIZ. Can I see?

(EVERETT gestures to the work. It is out of sight, either in a nook of the barn or perhaps in a box.)

Wow. Is this John the Baptist?

EVERETT. Yep.

LIZ. Why is his head covered in bees?

EVERETT. Cause he eats honey. You like him?

LIZ. Like him? I could just kiss you.

EVERETT. You ain't my type, Liz.

LIZ. Everett, this is just extraordinary. He's dirty and disgusting and holy all at the same time. You're a genius. A flat out genius, you know that?

EVERETT. Yes.

LIZ. This would make a great book cover. Please don't destroy him. At least until I come back with my camera.

EVERETT. You sold your book?

LIZ. No, I have to finish the book before I sell it.

EVERETT. But somebody's gonna buy it?

LIZ. I'm optimistic.

EVERETT. You gonna give me a piece of that?

LIZ. Oh, it's not that kind of book. People don't make money off academic books.

EVERETT. Why they publish them, then?

LIZ. Tenure.

EVERETT. Liz.

LIZ. Yeah.

EVERETT. I need money.

LIZ. I know you do, Everett.

EVERETT. I got Uncle Sam inside my asshole, hammering away, bang, bang, bang! You know what that feels like?

LIZ. Not entirely, no.

EVERETT. Try, Liz, try. Imagine Uncle Sam eating away at your – (*cunt*)

LIZ. Forget the book. Forget the museum. Let's focus on the grant. I've filled out the application, but the council wants to interview you.

EVERETT. Interview me?

LIZ. Yes. So you'll need to clean up. Do you have a suit?

EVERETT. Same suit I got married in. Tried to burn it when Jocelyn left me but that polyester wouldn't catch fire. That suit is invincible.

LIZ. The point is you need to look as professional as possible. And we'll practice interviewing.

EVERETT. Nothing to worry about, Liz. I've aced every interview I've ever had.

LIZ. We'll see. But Everett, the most important thing is, you cannot talk about Uncle Sam.

EVERETT. But he is living in my –

LIZ. I know where he is living, and I know he's been harassing you for a very long time, but the arts council isn't going to understand like I do.

EVERETT. Why? Do they work for him?

LIZ. No, but trust me, they will not understand.

EVERETT. I don't trust nobody who works for Uncle Sam.

LIZ. You don't have to trust anybody but me. Do you think you can do that?

EVERETT. You really think I'm a genius?

LIZ. Absolutely.

EVERETT. Then I trust you.

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