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SF PERUSALS

When the Reaper Calls

A comedy thriller

Peter Colley

Samuel French — London
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WHEN THE REAPER CALLS

First presented at the Gryphon Theatre in Barrie, Ontario, Canada, with the following cast:

Colleen Brandstater	Marguerite Pigott
Professor Victor Pierce	James Carroll
Dora Pierce	Carol Coltman
Professor Harlan Brandstater	Marvin Karon
Officer McGuire	Michael McKeever

Directed by James Douglas
Set designed by Irena and Adam Kolodziej
Costumes designed by Jill Thompson
Lighting designed by James Milburn
Fights directed by John Stead
Sound designed by Laird Fenwick

A revised version was presented at the Upper Canada Playhouse in Morrisburg, Ontario, Canada, with the following cast:

Colleen Brandstater	Stephanie Knight Thomas
Professor Victor Pierce	Stanley Katz
Dora Pierce	Catherine O'Brien
Professor Harlan Brandstater	K. Scott Malcolm
Officer McGuire	Jennifer Fawcett

Directed by Gregson Winkfield
Set designed by Chris Brown and Maggi Macaulay
Costumes designed by Ann Miller
Lighting designed by Rosanne Hicks
Sound designed by Daniel Herridge

CHARACTERS

Professor Victor Pierce, late 20s to early 40s
Dora Pierce, his wife; the same age as Victor
Professor Harlan Brandstater, the same age as Victor
Colleen Brandstater, his wife, early 20s
Officer McGuire, female police officer, early 20s

The action of the play takes place in an old hunting lodge converted to a summer cottage, on the coast of British Columbia, Canada.

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

ACT I

SCENE 1 Early afternoon on a Friday in summer
SCENE 2 Late evening, the same day

ACT II

That night

Time — the present

"There are only two topics that can be of the least interest
to the serious and studious mind — sex and death."

W. B. Yeats

Also by Peter Colley,
published by Samuel French

I'll Be Back Before Midnight

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The initial idea for the play was prompted by the turn of the Millennium — such a notable milestone in the passage of time naturally provokes a long look back at our primitive past, and speculation about our uncertain future.

The two madcap academics in this play have wildly divergent opinions about the future, and especially about the likelihood of life beyond the grave. I wanted their arguments to be a reflection of the hopes and fears we all grapple with, but I have attempted to present their dilemmas in the hopefully entertaining form of a comic mystery.

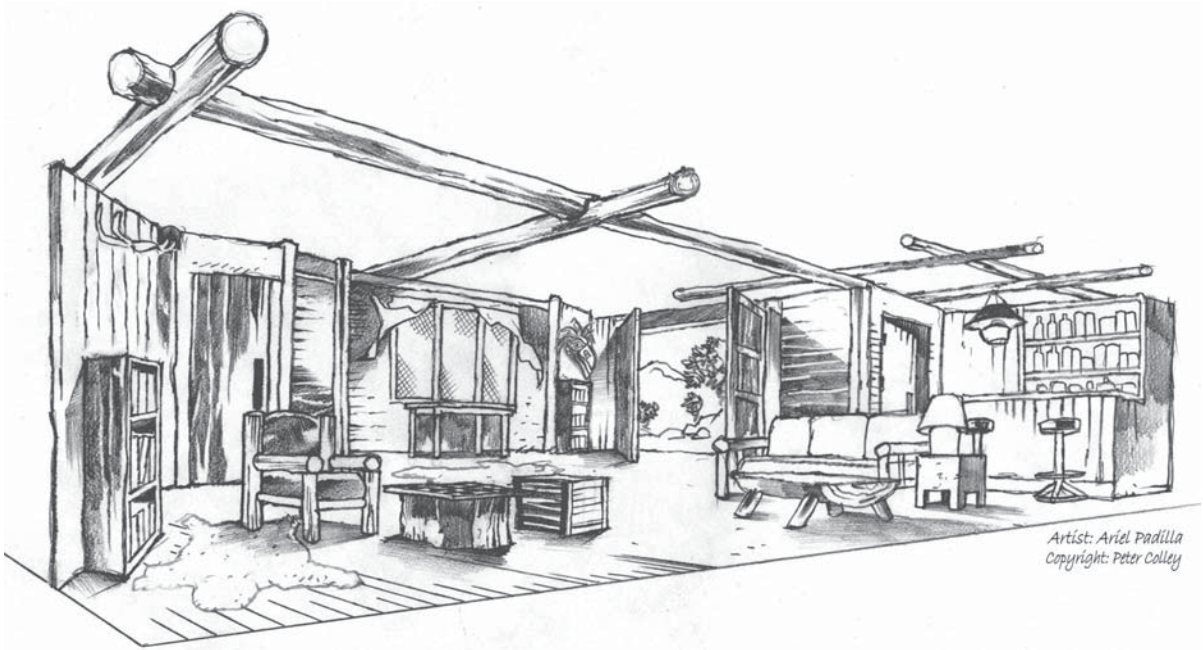
I also wanted the characters to be a reflection of their past — to show how little the human condition has really changed in the last few thousand years. Despite their high-falutin' chatter, the professors' emotions are still locked into their caveman roots, just as capable of fear, rage, lust, jealousy and revenge as their barbarian ancestors, and quite ready to club each other to death given enough provocation. There's no doubt that mankind has come a long way as architects, builders and scientists — but a quick look at any daily newspaper will reveal that our hearts still live in the dark and dangerous caves of our past.

Peter Colley

For media reviews, playwright's biography and photo
for theatre programmes go to:

www.petercolley.com

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Artist: Ariel Padilla
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ACT I

SCENE 1

The living-room of a rough hunting lodge on a remote inlet on the wild and rugged coastline of British Columbia, Canada. Summer. Early afternoon

The lodge has been constructed out of the ruins of an ancient Indian "house", of the type built by the Haida and Nootka of the Pacific Northwest, so the frame is made of irregular logs, and the walls of weathered planking. The lodge was thrown crudely together many years ago as a hunter's shelter and has been converted to a very spartan summer cottage. A primitive kitchen and bathroom have been added (both off stage), but apart from that little has changed. The wind still whistles through the place like the old dried bones of a whale

US*, if possible, a cyclorama should show the changing moods of the sky. Clouds, sunsets, storms and stars can be dramatically evident through the living-room window. Alternatively, a painted backdrop can show the inlet as it winds out to sea, surrounded by distant tree-covered hills*

The living-room is dominated by its large window which overlooks the water, but it has no glass, only an insect screen (the window would be shuttered during bad weather). Large rough-hewn double doors lead out on to a deck. The deck continues under the window, and through the window can be seen the backs of some wooden deckchairs, facing out towards the inlet. Some shrubs are visible through the window and door. A path leads to the deck through the shrubs. The door to a bedroom (Harlan's and Colleen's) is visible R*, and also* R *is a hallway which leads to the offstage kitchen.* L *is a door which leads to Victor's and Dora's bedroom. In the room are a beaten-up sofa and coffee table.* DR *is a small table made out of a tree stump or a wooden crate on which a half-finished chess game is set up, with an easy chair and a wooden crate for the chess players to sit on.* DL *is a crude bar with some bottles, glasses, an old telephone, newspapers, bar stools, and a wastebasket; a list of telephone numbers is pinned up nearby. A light hangs down over the bar. Also in the room are a pile of firewood and a large woodchopper's axe, some more books still in half-unpacked cardboard boxes, and some suitcases which have also not been unpacked; also, a fly-swatter and, by the door, umbrellas*

The walls are adorned with primitive Indian artefacts including a bow with arrows, an Aleutian Indian harpoon, a wall map of the coastline, and a large

mercury thermometer on a wooden backing and shelves made from old wooden crates displaying stacks of academic books. A collection of freshly picked herbs stick out of jam jars (used as vases) on a shelf along with some diffusing pots for making herbal tea, etc.

Before the play begins, music plays; this should evoke the songs of the Pacific Northwest Indians and enhance the mood of the cottage as remote and foreboding

When the play begins, summer sunlight pours into the room. The pre-show music fades to be replaced by the sound of gentle wavelets. The cry of a loon echoes across the bay

Professor Victor Pierce enters US *and can be seen through the window coming across the deck towards the double doors. He can be between his late twenties and early forties in age, quite handsome and stylishly dressed in the latest backwoods fashions, including a multi-pocketed fisherman's vest/ waistcoat. Victor is a lovable rogue. He has the kind of delivery that makes it very hard to tell when he's joking, and he carries off his various escapades with great conviction. His nature is basically playful and mischievous, except when interrupted by brief flashes of sadness. He is carrying a fishing tackle box. He looks back to see if anyone is behind him, and then furtively comes into the room through the double doors. He opens the box and takes from it a large silver-coloured pistol (a revolver). He checks the chamber and spins it to make sure it's in working order. He chuckles to himself*

Colleen Brandstater enters through the double doors. She is a very pretty woman in her early twenties, tussle-haired and a little sunburned after a day outside. She is dressed in a casual summer outfit of shorts and T-shirt and carries an old partially-painted wooden Indian mask and a box of paints. She has an endearing innocence about her. Since she never tells lies herself, she assumes that nobody else does either — a dangerous assumption in the company she's presently keeping

Colleen takes Victor by surprise

Colleen Hello, Victor!

Victor jams the pistol back in the tackle box, but he's too late

(*Seeing the gun*) Good heavens!
Victor Oh, hi, Colleen!
Colleen Was that — what I thought it was?
Victor Ah — what did you think it was?
Colleen A gun.

Victor A gun?
Colleen Yes! The thing you just put in the box! It looked like — well — a gun!
Victor Oh, *that*! Why, yes. Now that you ask. It is a gun. A point 44 Magnum.
Colleen Oh! (*Beat*) Are you worried about bears?
Victor Bears! No, no ... The gun is for Harlan.
Colleen Harlan?
Victor Yes. You see, he's going to shoot me tonight.
Colleen I beg your pardon?
Victor Harlan — your darling husband — is going to murder me tonight. That's what the gun's for. Promise me you won't tell him — it's sort of a surprise.
Colleen Harlan is going to murder you ... ?
Victor Yes. A crime of passion. It's quite tragic really. (*He sees something through the window*) Damn it! He's doing it again! (*Shouting out of the window*) Don't you dare touch that fish! (*He runs through the double doors and sprints across the deck*) Put that fish back into the net, Harlan!

Victor exits

Colleen is left looking very bewildered

Dora Pierce enters from the hallway. Dora is an austere woman the same age as Victor. She is dressed in dour, "sensible" clothes of drab tweeds and browns. She was once an attractive woman, but several years of unrelieved surliness have prematurely aged her. Her mood is a simmering, barely-controlled anger — mainly directed against Victor. She is carrying a doctor's bag and some big medical books

The sounds of an argument between Victor and Harlan can be heard from off stage

Victor (*off*) Put it back! I'm warning you, Harlan!

There is an incomprehensible reply from Harlan, off

I intend to eat it, whether it has a soul or not!

The sound of a struggle comes from off stage

Dora (*giving a weary look in the direction of the sound*) What is it this time?
Colleen (*still thinking about Victor; distractedly*) What? I'm sorry ... (*She looks out of the window*) Oh, it's that fish Victor caught. I think Harlan's letting it go.

Dora (*wearily*) Oh no. I can see that this is going to end up as a major debate on the metaphysics of trout. (*She puts down her doctor's bag and places the medical books on a shelf*)

The offstage scuffle heats up

Victor (*off*) I was saving it for my supper, Harlan! Don't ... don't ...

There is the sound of a splash off stage

Oh, damn you!

Dora Amazing, isn't it? They come up here to escape the pressures of university life, and spend most of their time trying to throttle each other.

Professor Harlan Brandstater enters US *and is visible through the window coming across the deck towards the double doors. He is a staid-looking man the same age as Victor, not unattractive, but terminally bland. He wears bifocal glasses, oversize khaki shorts, a dull knit shirt, black shoes, black socks, and a strip of white sunscreen on his nose. He is a soft-spoken academic who studiously avoids displays of violent emotion. Victor follows close behind, splattered with water*

Victor What about yogurt? I've seen you eating that! That's an organism, isn't it? Does that have a soul? Can you hear it scream as it goes down your throat?

Harlan and Victor come into the room through the double doors

Harlan That's not the same, Victor. That's a primitive organism!

Victor Oh, yeah? Well, that fish didn't look so smart to me! (*He sees Dora*) Hello, sweetheart! Did you get some studying done? (*He moves to give Dora a kiss on the cheek*)

Dora Don't come near me! You're soaking! I'll get you a towel.

Dora exits down the hallway

Victor seems a bit hurt by the rebuff at first. Colleen looks at him questioningly, still confused about his talk of murder. Victor sees Colleen looking at him and quickly returns to his usual self, winking at her mischievously

Colleen (*flustered*) Herbal tea, anyone? (*She goes to her jars of herbs and picks some*) I just collected some wild fireweed this morning.

Silence

Harlan?

Harlan (*evasively*) What was that, dear?
Colleen (*waving a soggy sprig at him*) Some wild fireweed tea? It's your favourite.
Harlan (*clearly hating the stuff*) Ah ... fireweed ...
Victor (*bailing him out*) How about some coffee, Colleen? I could really use a cup.
Harlan Yes — a cup of coffee. That would be nice.
Colleen (*realizing she's fighting a losing battle*) OK. I'll make some coffee! But fireweed's a lot healthier.

Colleen waits, but there are no converts. She reluctantly exits to the kitchen

Harlan (*to Victor*) Thanks. I think those herbal teas are rotting my intestines. (*He sits at the unfinished game of chess and stares at the pieces*)
Victor I don't know why I help you at all — the louse who threw away my trout! It was a perfect pan size.
Harlan Don't you think it was cruel keeping it in that net?
Victor Cruel! It's a fish!
Harlan Well, I just couldn't watch it swimming around that little condemned cell, ready to be bludgeoned to death to satisfy your brutish instincts.

Dora enters with a towel

Victor Harlan, hunger is not a brutish instinct. We can't even come up to the cottage without being followed around by your idiotic theories! I hope, when you are reincarnated, that you come back as a trout, and I come back as a bear, and I shall eat you without an ounce of remorse!
Harlan Aha! So you admit to the possibility of reincarnation!
Victor No, I don't!
Harlan You just said it!
Victor I said "if"... "If"! (*To Dora*) Didn't I say "if"?
Dora No.

Dora throws the towel at Victor and heads towards the hallway

Victor (*to Harlan*) Isn't wifely support a wonderful thing?

Victor playfully flicks the towel at Dora as she leaves, but she turns and catches him in the act

Dora If you were reincarnated, Victor, you'd come back as a rat.

Dora exits through the hallway

Victor Well, at least I'm moving up the food chain! Last week I was a cockroach. (*He reacts to seeing a mosquito flying around and picks up the fly swatter*) Harlan, your philosophy is pure superstition.

Harlan Today's superstitions are tomorrow's science.

Victor There's nothing scientific about thinking a fish has a soul! (*He stalks the mosquito during the following*)

Harlan It's never been proved that they don't have one.

Victor I suppose they all have little fish churches down at the bottom of the ocean. Minister Mackerel and the Church Of The Holy Bottom-Feeders. (*In a parson's voice*) "And today's sermon is called: 'Turning The Other Gill'."

Harlan Go on, mock away ...

Victor OK, Harlan, what if it was a thirty-foot shark coming at you? Would you kill it then?

Harlan No. As a Stoic, I'd take my chances.

Victor What about a thirty-foot shark about to attack your lovely young wife? (*He swats at the mosquito and misses, then searches for it again*)

Harlan Victor, a principle's a principle.

Victor You're wrong, Harlan! Everyone is capable of killing in the right circumstances! And not just in self-defence, either.

Harlan If you believe in a soul — as some of us still do — you can't kill anyone. If you believe that there's a time and place where your actions are judged — how can you possibly kill any creature? (*He instinctively slaps his cheek as if squashing the mosquito that has bitten him*)

Victor does not see Harlan killing the mosquito. When Harlan realizes what he's done, he guiltily smears the carcass under the chair arm

Victor There's one thing missing in your argument, Harlan. Passion! In a moment of passion our natural instincts take over and we can do anything — no matter how horrible! All of us are capable of murder! All of us!

Harlan I don't believe that. As Zeno of Citium once said ——

Victor Forget about Zeno — don't you have anything more modern? What about Wittgenstein?

Harlan What about Wittgenstein?

Victor A little case of a red-hot poker.

Harlan Oh, you're not going to bring that up?

Victor Why not? The leading ethics philosopher of the day attacks a rival professor at Cambridge with a red-hot poker. And where did this violent assault take place? The Moral Sciences Club! Proves my point perfectly.

Harlan Wittgenstein didn't attack him. He waved the poker in his general direction. Some say it was more of a toasting fork.

Victor Ah, suddenly you've become a relativist!

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