Acting Edition

Summer, 1976

by David Auburn

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SUMMER, 1976 was originally commissioned by the Manhattan Theatre Club (Lynne Meadow, Artistic Director; Barry Grove, Executive Producer) with funds provided by Bank of America, and received its world premiere there on April 25, 2023. The performance was directed by Daniel Sullivan, with scenic design by John Lee Beatty, costume design by Linda Cho, lighting design by Japhy Weideman, sound design by Jill BC Du Boff, projection design by Hana S. Kim, and original music by Greg Pliska. The Production Stage Manager was James FitzSimmons. The cast was as follows:

DIANA . . . . . Laura Linney
ALICE . . . . . Jessica Hecht

CHARACTERS

DIANA
ALICE

1.

DIANA. We became friends, as you often do, through our children.

I didn't like her child, actually. A little girl, Holly – I hate the name Holly – her nose was always running, her mother constantly calling her over and wiping it for her whenever she came over to play with my daughter, Gretchen.

The girls would ask to use my studio for art projects. My art studio was *strictly off limits*, which Gretchen knew, so that meant Holly put her up to it: She'd certainly calculated that I wouldn't want to look unkind and controlling in front of my friend, her mother – small children are devious that way – that I'd be forced to say Of course, kids! Run amuck in my studio. And while you're at it never mind your own colored pencils and Big Chief pads, use the rapidographs that I bought in art school with the proceeds from my grandmother's savings bond! And the Strathmore Bristol Board too!

But I showed them – NO, I'd say very firmly, you may *not* use my studio, that is where I *work*, it's not a place for play, Gretchen you *know* that and Holly you'll find a box of tissues in the bathroom, why don't you carry it *with* you?

And now leave the mommys alone, we're talking. Go outside.

And they'd slink off appropriately cowed. And Alice and I would be alone to talk and sometimes share a joint she'd brought.

Parents who can't or won't control their kids aren't upset when you do it for them. They're grateful and ashamed.

ALICE. The pot came from Merle, a student who was painting our house at the time.

My husband Doug taught at Ohio State and we had a nice little house. Merle was one of his students who needed money so we hired him that summer. Despite being pretty stoned most of the time he did a good job, but he was slow.

We'd been in Columbus for three years and there were a bunch of young faculty parents with small children on tight budgets so we started this thing, it was a babysitting co-op.

Really Doug started it. He's an economist – he worked it all out, he had a rubber stamp made and he stamped out these coupons – although he called them "shares" – and distributed them to all the parents in the group.

The idea was you could trade these "shares" for babysitting, an hour or two hours or whatever at a time. That way no one had to pay cash for child care, you could just exchange these papers back and forth and around, like if you went out Wednesday night you'd spend two or three shares but you'd get them back when you sat for somebody else on Friday, and it would all work out in perpetuity somehow; Doug had proved it mathematically.

Sure, whatever.

We didn't go out that much. I was bored that summer. Doug was working and I mostly just hung around the house supervising Merle, tanning, reading paperback novels and watching Holly splash around in her little inflatable pool.

One afternoon another woman in the co-op called me up. A professor in the Art Department. She had a

project to finish and she needed sitting for her daughter, Gretchen. I told her sure, bring Gretchen over.

Both girls were about five and they played all afternoon. When she came to pick Gretchen up she tried to give me three shares for the three hours but I was like come on, this wasn't *sitting*, the kids were *playing*, they were entertaining each other. I benefitted too, I got to read *Shōgun*.

She was kind of thrown by that and annoyed, like, "But isn't there a system?" She seemed kind of uptight.

I was like, if you want to give me the shares, OK, but I really don't care, it's all sort of bullshit anyway, right? I mean, Doug just *made* these with his rubber stamp, they don't actually have *value*.

She said of course they have value because we *assign* them value, like any currency or monetary instrument.

She said "monetary instrument."

I really didn't want to get into a whole philosophical debate about it and also I sort of immediately hated her so I took the shares and she took her kid home.

The problem was Holly and Gretchen had hit it off, and soon they wanted to spend every afternoon together.

DIANA. Of course I could tell she didn't like me, this sleepy-eyed little hippie with her shorts and her coconut oil and her sun-bleached paperback copy of James Clavell's depressingly middlebrow novel *Shōgun*, which she was toting around proudly like it was *The Brothers Karamazov*.

There is no one more condescending and judgmental than a self-imagined "free spirit" smugly encountering a "square," but let me tell you I knew exactly what she was up to on I'd say it was about the third afternoon she brought her daughter over, and I had politely offered her an iced tea – it was a very hot afternoon – as we

sat on my screened-in porch watching the girls in the yard, and she said No thanks and opened up her little macramé handbag and lit up a joint instead!

When she offered it to me I knew she was expecting a shocked stammering and fluttering of hands and an opportunity to feel superior so I showed her: I took the biggest deepest hit I could and held it for an age and blew it out and didn't hand the joint back but took another *massive*, really industrial-vacuum suck before demurely relinquishing it.

The look on her face!

ALICE. Yeah, she fucking bogarted it for like five minutes, and I was like, come on lady, I only took it out because it was the only way I could imagine getting through the next ten minutes before I could make an excuse and leave. I'd already had to look at her art since four or five of her, like, pieces were scattered around on the porch – she said she worked out there sometimes – and get a mini-lecture about each one, except strike the "mini" part.

They *were* good.

I pointed out one I particularly liked.

DIANA. It's not finished.

ALICE. I still like it.

DIANA. *None* of them are.

ALICE. Why not?

DIANA. That's just how it is.

ALICE. Okay.

They weren't just one thing, one medium: they were paintings with ink drawing and things scratched away or glued on, you know, a variety of techniques in each one, sort of like Paul Klee, who I'd always liked, but by an American and a woman.

DIANA. She muttered something about Paul Klee as we talked about my work and the pot clicked in, and I was surprised.

Sorry – I was, first, briefly but keenly *chagrined*: I was no longer influenced by Klee *at all*, it was something I had worked very hard to get *away* from, actually, I'd sweat *blood* to expunge the embarrassingly jejune infatuation I'd had with his work as an art student.

But I was surprised that she knew him.

ALICE. We got hungry of course and were digging through her fridge when the kids came in for popsicles. She gave them some neon-colored store-bought ones from the freezer which Holly was *ecstatic* about since I only made the homemade orange juice kind which admittedly were kind of gross but you know, they were cheap; and the kids went back outside, and we tucked into her leftovers which were *incredible*: it turned out she was a *serious* cook, we ate cassoulet out of a Tupperware, cold (microwaves were still rare then) – God, I can still remember how fucking delicious it was, sitting on her kitchen floor stoned on a summer afternoon.

After that, yeah, we were friends.

2.

DIANA. Who was Gretchen's father? A boy I had met in art school, and gotten pregnant by on our second date – he took me to see *Beneath the Planet of the Apes*, which disheartened me, but not enough to overcome the sheer and as it turned out fleeting animal lust I felt for that lush-lipped, golden-haired, deeply not-bright glass-blower.

Smells are powerful and the erotic for me remains deeply bound up with the chemical tang of the art supplies that were always close at hand during those intense, formative sexual experiences. Oil paint; the photographic developer in the darkrooms where so many humid couplings took place; varnishes and patinas; blown-glass pigments…

But back to the boy. Two dates was enough; after that – and a third afternoon's farewell fuck when I went by his place to retrieve the case containing the diaphragm I had neglected, in a moment of madness, to use during date number two – I avoided him on campus and ignored his phone calls and eventually he got the message – he was just too dull, the poor thing.

He dropped out of school the next semester. I've no idea where he wound up.

Sometimes when I stumble onto one of those touring craft fairs they erect next to farmers markets in the summertime – you know, the ones with the candles and the leather notebook covers and the table lamps made of old typewriter parts or God knows what aesthetic atrocity – if I spot a hand-blown glass display tended by a man the right age (beard, greying ponytail, thick middle) I'll think: This could, in theory, be the father of my daughter.

Not that I care all that much.

ALICE. A couple times I wondered about Gretchen's father but never asked, figuring bad divorce, but who knows, maybe death? Since she never brought it up? At all? 'Til one day – this was after we'd been hanging out for a couple weeks maybe – she told me her art school story.

And I was kind of surprised. It was hard to square. I should describe her house so you understand. It was incredibly orderly, and incredibly nice, with all this very carefully chosen midcentury modern furniture that she knew the history of and would describe for you in *great detail* – don't get me wrong: it was really interesting, everything she said was interesting, she really knew a lot, like, *everything* about twentieth century art and design. You could see how she must have been a really good teacher.

And I mentioned her food – her kitchen was the same as the rest of the house: immaculate, and thought-out: spice jars alphabetized, copper pots hanging just so in order of size, that kind of thing.

So I couldn't quite square it. This meticulous, very controlled person. And just having a baby like that, like, kind of accidentally and randomly and what-the-hell.

And then, all the fancy gourmet food, but junky store-bought popsicles. Or seeming so uptight, but *really* enthusiastic about my grass.

So it made me think – I mean, this is obvious now but it seemed like a big revelation at the time, I was young – that people aren't just one thing.

And it made me kind of question myself.

DIANA. She thought of herself as a "free spirit" but she was in the most conventional of marriages: she wasn't working, she was essentially living like a 1950s housewife.

She just *thought* she was unconventional because her house was messy. I mean that's all it was really.

When I went over there – we alternated afternoons – I was horrified. It wasn't just the clutter, or the makeshift college-apartment furniture, the brick-and-plank bookshelves, the art exhibition posters *in no frames – just tacked up directly to the wall!* It was the whole bullshit bead-curtain-in-the-doorway gestalt of the place. The house *badly* needed a paint job and rather than hiring professionals it was being done by a graduate student, *by himself*: one shambolic goon with a roller on a rickety ladder. It was taking all summer! A job that could have been done in four days by professionals!

ALICE. We couldn't *afford* professionals!

And yeah we had shitty furniture but we'd put all our money into the house and Doug was always working – he was up for tenure the next spring and this summer was make-or-break, he was finishing three different articles and figured he had to get at least two published before the tenure committee met if he was going to have a shot; we didn't have time to, like, decorate.

She said, don't *decorate*. Just buy *one good piece*.

I said I don't know what that means!

DIANA. I will show you what it means.

ALICE. So we drove to Cleveland. To a place she knew, a gigantic dusty auction house crammed with furniture from estate sales, defunct Great Lakes resorts, bankrupt corporations, that kind of thing.

DIANA. I knew the owners, a pair of brothers, Arthur and George.

ALICE. And not just furniture. Chandeliers, carpets, mantelpieces, strips of moulding, and those wood panel wall things…

DIANA. *Wainscotting*.

ALICE. ...Whole *ceilings* that had been removed from fancy houses somehow. I'd never seen anything like it! She bargained for me when I saw what I wanted: a desk.

DIANA. I said You don't want a desk, Alice, you want something to pull a room together. Your living room sofa is a hide-a-bed, for God's sake, replace that!

ALICE. But I liked this desk.

DIANA. It *was* interesting. A 1930s tubular steel Bauhaus design, a bit banged up but the real thing; not cheap.

ALICE. No way could I afford it.

DIANA. I bought it for her.

ALICE. No WAY am I gonna let you do that, are you kidding me?

DIANA. She objected but I could see how badly she wanted it.

ALICE. I didn't even know what I'd do with it!

I just felt sure if it was in my house and I was sitting at it I'd do...*something*.

But still, she was *not* going to just buy it for me, that is just crazy! I don't even know why you'd *want* to –

DIANA. Pipe down and let me bargain.

I haggled with Arthur and George and got them down to a reasonable number.

We put the desk in the back of her station wagon; the hatch wouldn't close all the way but we secured it with twine and drove the two hours back to Columbus like that.

ALICE. This desk cost *three hundred dollars*. In 1976 that seemed like a fortune. By comparison we were paying Merle 175 dollars to paint the house and that was a stretch for us. It was bananas. I told her I'd pay her back. I *insisted* on it. She sort of shrugged, waved it off.

*(**DIANA** does this.)*

I didn't know what that meant. Was it "Shut up about it, it's done"? Or was it I *could* pay her back – even though I didn't know how I'd possibly do that. I was kind of too embarrassed to pursue it. I figured – I rationalized it really – that she must have family money.

DIANA. I did have family money.

ALICE. But still, Jesus! A three hundred dollar antique desk! Doug worked on two filing cabinets and a door.

DIANA. We set up the desk in a corner of her living room.

The room looked much worse with the desk in it. Everything else was so outclassed.

Oh well. I'd tried.

Then it was time to fetch our respective daughters. We'd spent the whole day together.

3.

ALICE. Now it's I think a couple weeks later.

Doug wanted to go to this lecture on campus by some visiting big-wig economist. Apparently he'd told me about it months earlier but I'd forgotten because why wouldn't I?

But it turned out there would be a private dinner party after and wives were "expected," for whatever reason; everybody was supposed to get dressed up and go and kiss this guy's ass, sure, fine. I didn't mind these events. I liked going out, even if the lecture itself would be a snore.

But we didn't have any shares left, you know, the sitting coupons. I'd spent *seven* on the trip to Cleveland, yikes, and I hadn't been taking any from Diana, or her from me – we'd sort of forgotten about using them.

All right, so we're just gonna have to pay a sitter, I said.

And Doug was like, *cash*?

Yeah, cash.

But that would negate the whole point of the *system*. He went to a lot of trouble to set up that system. It's a *cashless*, *self-sustaining system*!

I was like, well, but it's not. I mean it's not sustaining itself, is it?

It *would*, if we weren't spending more than we were taking in.

Sorry, that was Doug. This is getting confusing. She'll do Doug from here on, OK?

DIANA. *(As Doug.)* It *would*, if we weren't spending more than we were taking in.

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