

Acting Edition

Nan and the Lower Body

by Jessica Dickey

|| SAMUEL FRENCH ||

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DR. GEORGE PAPANICOLAOU Christopher Daftsiotis
NAN DAY Elissa Beth Stebbins
MACHE PAPANICOLAOU Lisa Ramirez
TED DAY Jeffrey Brian Adams

CHARACTERS

DR. GEORGE PAPANICOLAOU – (aka **DR. PAP**) – Mid-60s, short, Greek, handsome in an odd way, in a way that grows on you. A truly unique scientific mind. Mischievous, good-humored, perceptive, charismatic, subversive, more tenacious than most.

NAN DAY – 20s/30s, tall, New England, pretty in a quiet way, in a way that grows on you. Extremely bright, very reserved and buttoned-up, but more emotional than she lets on. Not good at small talk or meaningless jokes. Trying to hide symptoms of a serious health crisis.

MACHE PAPANICOLAOU – Wife of George. Late 50s to early 60s, short, even stout, not attractive but not unappealing, built with an unusual amount of discipline, blunt, has worked long and hard with her husband, but is recently losing her place at his side.

TED DAY – Husband of Nan. 20s/30s. Liberal New England minister, incredibly earnest and socially forward-thinking, perhaps easily shocked, his ideals make him miss the subtler things sometimes. He became a minister to hug the world. A positive extrovert.

Nan also plays The Playwright.

Mache also plays Older Nan.

Ted also plays Older Ted.

Please cast as diversely as possible.

SETTING

A lab at Cornell, the Papanicolaous' living room,
and other locations.

TIME

1952.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The smell of Jergens lotion. Her yellow and white shawl. Cranberry juice mixed with orange juice. The vroom vroom of her motorized wheelchair. The gaspy wheeze of her laugh. Her trembly signature.

My maternal grandmother Nan lived with my family from the time I was five until her death, nineteen years later. Due to multiple sclerosis (MS), she was in a wheelchair, paralyzed from the waist down. I resemble her – strawberry hair and cheeks, a crooked front tooth. She and my grandfather lived in the room off our kitchen, and that meant every morning the downstairs smelled of powder and urine, a combination I came to associate with decay. I knew my grandparents were going to die, so I kept them at a distance, sometimes tiptoeing past their room so they wouldn't hear me. We ate at the same table every night, but I failed to really know them.

For example, many years after her death, I learned that Nan worked as a cytologist, pioneering the identification of cervical cancer. My Uncle Mark believed her boss had been none other than Dr. George Papanicolaou, the creator of the Pap smear. We know for sure that Nan was a good cytologist, when her multiple sclerosis made it impossible to commute, the hospital installed a lab in her home so she could continue working. My uncle remembered coming from school and finding her bent over the microscope, crying, because the cells before her were from a young mother who had stage four. At a time when most women did not work, let alone have a career, Nan was carving an unusual legacy in her field against the ticking clock of a debilitating disease.

I don't know if Nan really worked for Dr. Papanicolaou. I wrote this play as a way to dream that possibility into existence. To step inside that dream and sit with her again. But better this time. More deeply this time. To take her hand and ask questions. To share my life with her in a way that I couldn't bear back then. To tell her that I'm sorry. And that I see her now.

Jessica Dickey

For Nan

One

(Cornell University. 1952.)

(DR. GEORGE PAPANICOLAOU – 60s, Greek, handsome in an odd way, in a way that grows on you – is there before his audience.)

DR. PAP. I love the sound of pencils.

Bss bss bss bss bss

Just now I was closing my eyes, listening to your pencils go

bss bss bss

and it was like a magic spell was gathering its strength.

(He likes this idea.)

Or even better –

Like some secret part of ourselves is whispering to the secret selves around us,

“Bss bss bss – Hey! Hey there!

I’m here, you’re here – let’s

do something,

eh?”

(He is very charming in his style, his manner – masculine, commanding, clearly brilliant, but also mischievous and winning. He continues –)

“Bss bss bss.”

– this is the sound of our secret selves conspiring, you got that, right? –

“Bss bss bss – Let’s *do something!*”

What should we do?

I know! –:

Let’s talk about something most people never talk about.

Let’s see a world most people never see.

Let’s go *inside the female body!*”

I’m not drunk I swear.

Well maybe I’m a little drunk.

haha no I’m not.

Let’s go inside the female body!

– bss bss bss! –

Let’s prostrate ourselves before the mystery of the reproductive galaxy!

And let’s ARM ourselves against anything

that might *harm* that strange and precious space.

Boy, are you sorry you signed up for this.

You came here to learn about the Pap smear! –

The new technique for identifying cancers in the female reproductive system! Far less invasive than the current biopsy procedure – and FAR more *effective...* Just a simple sample of the vaginal fluid and everything can be seen...

(And just like that, he has effortlessly entered his spiel.)

According to the most recent analysis, released just last year in 1951, cancer of the lower body and reproductive

system is currently *the number one killer of women*. Think about that. Women, mothers, sisters, are dying every day. But with the vaginal smear, early detection is possible, this is a fact. Today I –

(He stops.)

Wait a minute – where’s my new assistant? What’s her name again? Nan Day. Where is Nan?! Is she late? SHE’S FIRED! No that’s a joke. *(Very sad.)* Oh Nan is late! Well, we need to forgive her. She departed very early this morning to begin her training with me. I know, you’re thinking “Poor her” – well you’re right! – but don’t worry – if her application is any indication it is ME you should be worried about because I can tell you, she is quite formidable.

She was the only woman to apply. Imagine that! A position for women’s health and only men applied! The female sex is not exactly prized in the medical sciences, are they? Shame on us.

Ah, which reminds me – yes, let’s just get this out of the way –:

Vagina.

Vagina.

(Making them get used to the word.)

Vagina vagina vaginal fluid.

Vagina.

Okay? Good? Okay. I’ve done this many times you know, and I’ve learned it’s good to just – get that over with. Now –

(NAN suddenly bursts through an upstage door. She is attractive in a quiet way, in a way that grows on you. She is mortified to find an audience staring at her.)

NAN. Oh God!

DR. PAP. Ah! You must be Nan!

(Perhaps from the shock, her leg gives out and she falls. He immediately goes to help her up. Intending to lighten the mood -)

Are you alright?

NAN. Yes, thank you.

DR. PAP. Well – now I can say you fell for me. That’s just a joke. We were just talking about you! Well, vaginas actually, but also you.

(She looks at him; there’ll be no more humor of that sort. He gently bows a little, extends his hand, his demeanor suddenly that of a great scientific mind and leader.)

I am Dr. George Papanicolaou. You can call me Dr. Pap. I am immensely pleased to make your acquaintance.

NAN. Dr. Papanicolaou, forgive the, we had train trouble, and. Anyway. Not exactly the first impression I prefer to make.

DR. PAP. Good thing it wasn’t then. Your first impression was your unusually moving cover letter, and your high marks and qualifications. Do you remember the part of your application where you described the flowers? What was the example you used?

NAN. Phlox.

DR. PAP. Yes, Phlox! Tell them.

(She looks at the audience.)

NAN. Uh – people often confuse Phlox with Dame’s Rocket. They look almost identical, both are a showy, erect, branching plant, about four feet high, same colors. But if you look carefully, Dame’s Rocket has four

petals in its flower, whereas Phlox has five. Which you can remember by the fact that Phlox has five letters – p-h-l-o-x.

DR. PAP. Isn't that wonderful? I loved that part of your application. I couldn't think of a better perspective with which to approach this work. *(To continue his lecture.)* Now if you don't mind...

NAN. *(Relieved.)* Yes of course.

(She exits off the stage toward the back of the house.)

DR. PAP. *(Returning to the audience.)* You didn't think I'd forgotten about you...? No such luck! I was just giving you time to recover from the word VAGINA.

Now:

(With great aplomb.) How To Spot Squamous Cell Carcinoma With The Vaginal Smear Technique!

(Blackout.)

Two

(DR. PAP trains NAN in the lab. Beakers, materials, microscopes, in the corner an examination table with stirrups. He clips right along. She is nervous, but focused.)

DR. PAP. Now once material has been accumulated from both the outside and the inside of the cervix, we *smear* the material – hence the name – onto a slide, and voila. You are ready for the stains. Come.

(He leads her to a series of little containers of different colored fluids.)

First we must prepare the cells for the staining sequence. We rinse the slide in different graduated alcohols like so – 95 percent alcohol, 70 percent alcohol. Then we dip it in water to rehydrate the cells before the hematoxilyn, that's the purple reddish fluid there. Ready?

NAN. Oh. Yes.

(She takes the slide and dips in each fluid.)

DR. PAP. Good – yes – and now put it in the hematoxilyn. Good, and now we set the timer for five minutes and we wait.

(He sets the timer.)

So. What about your husband?

NAN. What about him?

DR. PAP. Well, let's start with his name.

NAN. Theodore. But he goes by Ted.

DR. PAP. And he just took a new job as well, correct?

NAN. At a charity organization, but that's just until he gets a parish.

DR. PAP. A parish. So he is a...?

NAN. A minister, yes.

DR. PAP. And how is that for you?

NAN. How is what for me?

DR. PAP. Theodore-who-goes-by-Ted being a minister.

NAN. Oh. Uh. *(She checks the timer. Not even close.)* It's fine. It's uh, well, it's a *calling*. So.

DR. PAP. Being the spouse of a minster is not so easy, no?

NAN. I'm not sure it's much harder than being the spouse of a scientist.

DR. PAP. *(He chuckles.)* Touché. So you understand my line of inquiry.

NAN. I'm not sure I do actually.

(There's something in his familiarity, and probably her nerves, that makes her prickly, and she's the kind of person who prickles when she's prickly.)

DR. PAP. Does he support your work, Ted née Theodore?

NAN. Meaning...

DR. PAP. Does he expect you to pop out a baby as soon as he feels settled in his post despite your promising new position as the assistant of Dr. George Papanicolaou, the creator of a technique that will revolutionize women's health around the world...?

(He smiles. She doesn't.)

NAN. No.

DR. PAP. No what?

NAN. No I don't believe "Ted née Theodore" thinks me the sort of person to "pop out" anything, let alone a baby, and I am quite certain he respects my considerable mind and what I choose to *do* with it, including my current post.

(Quick beat.)

DR. PAP. Good.

NAN. What is good, Dr. Papanicolaou?

DR. PAP. Your anger. I see you have goals for your life.

NAN. Oh, we're talking about my *goals*? I thought we were talking about my husband. If we're talking about my goals, then yes I want a family. And I want to be an exceptional cytologist. I would like, very much, to do good work. Work that affects lives for the better... I'm not particularly talented. I seem to only be good at patience. And detail. And being myself. But that'll have to do.

(Did she just blow that? Then the timer dings.)

DR. PAP. Now we use an acid alcohol to remove any excess hematoxylin from the cytoplasm. Then a submersion in tap water substitute, go ahead. Then we stain with OG-6, named for its orange color, you see – go ahead – And then we set the timer for two minutes.

(He sets the timer for two minutes.)

Your family must be very excited for you.

(It's like a game – strict instruction, then over personal questions. He enjoys it. She doesn't.)

NAN. To be married?

DR. PAP. Of course not, everyone gets married, it's not an accomplishment. I mean to be working on the Pap smear.

NAN. No one's really heard of the Pap smear.

DR. PAP. Not yet, but they *will*. The whole world will have heard of the Pap smear by the time I'm through. And then your job will be easier.

NAN. My job?

DR. PAP. Someone has to carry on this work when I'm a hunk of dead meat. It should be a woman. Cervical cancer is a crisis in the medical community; women are dying and we don't know what to do about it. And yet they scorn me! "Oh Dr. Pap and his fixation with female anatomy!" Malakismeni. (*Greek for "fucking idiots."*)

But the fact is – the world is very very *funny* about women.

Just like the world is very funny about ethnicity. You might be thinking what does he know? – He's white – but before I am white I am *Greek*. And believe me, that's a distinction for some people. Here at Cornell, the Pathology Department wouldn't hire me, did you know that? But you're thinking, he created the Pap smear! No matter; I was a dirty Greek. So here we are: In the *Anatomy* Department.

(*A dark, conspiratorial twinkle.*)

But you know what? I say these people are smart.

NAN. Smart?

DR. PAP. The status quo know a threat when they see one. They took one look at my work and they *knew*. It will be the same with women like you, Nan. They will sense that something is on the verge of breaking, and that they are on the losing side. So they will fight you, just as they fight me. And they are quite right to fear you,

just as the Pathology Department was smart to block me. For I'm going to *annihilate them all*.

(The timer dings.)

(Immediately returning to a chipper tone.) This next step is quite quick, we just rehydrate the cells. Like so.

(They put the slide in water.)

And now we wait. Just one minute.

(Timer. Back to the game.)

So you want children.

NAN. I do.

DR. PAP. Mache and I agreed very early there would be no children. I wanted to make a serious contribution to science, you see. Have you considered that?

NAN. Dr. Papanicolaou –

DR. PAP. Dr. Pap.

NAN. – Dr. Pap –

DR. PAP. Everyone calls me Dr. Pap. I like it. It's like *(À la a hip person.)* – Hey! Dr. Pap! *(Back to himself.)* It's good.

NAN. Dr. Pap. Perhaps we could save the personal questions for another occasion.

DR. PAP. Ah.

NAN. If you wouldn't mind.

(He regards her.)

DR. PAP. You're quite strict.

NAN. I'm quite –?

DR. PAP. Strict, you're quite strict. Was your father strict?