

Acting Edition

The Ask

by Matthew Freeman

|| SAMUEL FRENCH ||

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ISBN 978-0-573-71162-6

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THE ASK was originally co-produced by Theater Accident (Kyle Ancowitz and Matthew Freeman, Co-Founders and Artistic Directors); Rose Colored Productions LLC (Natalie Rose Ibarra, Founder) and Moira Stone; in association with The Flying Carpet Theatre Company. It premiered at The Wild Project (Ana Mari de Quesada, Producing Artistic Director; Tom Escovar, Producing Director) in New York, NY, on September 6th, 2024. The production was directed by Jessi D. Hill with scenic design by Craig Napoliello, lighting design by Daisy Long, sound design by Cody Hom, costume design by Nicole Wee, and prop design by Moira Stone. The Wardrobe Supervisor was Peter Chan. The Production Stage Manager was Karen “Curly” Schleifer, and the Assistant Stage Manager was Daren A.C. Carollo. The cast was as follows:

GRETA Betsy Aidem
TANNER Colleen Litchfield

CHARACTERS

GRETA – (she/her) A woman in her early 70s. A liberal feminist who financially supports the causes we all care about.

TANNER – (they/them) Late 20s. Non-binary, assigned female at birth. Tanner is a Gift Planning Officer at the American Civil Liberties Union.

SETTING

Greta's study/apartment.

Tasteful art, a couch you wouldn't want to spill your coffee on, a coffee table that definitely requires coasters.

NOTE ON SET

The stage directions describe Greta's apartment as including an attached kitchenette and living room. Productions with a smaller budget may set the play in Greta's Study, but productions should include the full apartment if the budget allows.

TIME

December 2022. I won't say post-pandemic. Let's say when we all agreed to pretend the pandemic was over.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Although this play draws heavily on my work as a fundraiser at the ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union), *The Ask* is an imagining – a work of fiction. Neither of these characters is drawn from a real person I have met or an individual I work with at the ACLU. Even the “ACLU” in the play is the subject of dramatic license: the ACLU did not experience mass layoffs in the fall/winter of 2022, for example. I do here what so many writers have done before: employ my experience of employment to talk about something that goes, I hope, beyond it.

I also hope *The Ask* displays my admiration and reverence for those that work at the ACLU – and the thousands of non-profits, big and small, that help shape our country. And I hope it shows my empathy for, and love of, those individuals that are privileged to, and tasked with, keeping the lights on at those organizations.

Among its thicket of themes, *The Ask* is about money. Money provides the outline (sometimes the chalk outline) of our lives. Even the institutions that seem to rise above the values of the marketplace wouldn't exist without money: museums, theaters, poetry foundations, human rights organizations, food banks. People work at those places, in those fields, the work they do costs money, and that money has to come from somewhere. And so, there is an exchange of energy, of earnings, of intention, and yes, a transfer from the privileged to the less so.

Money, as much as experience, seems to define this generation's divide. It has ever been thus, maybe, but I'm intrigued by the shape that divide takes today. There's something stubborn and painful about it: self-defeating, and heartbreaking, and energizing. I hope that in the "*private-made-public*" in which theater excels, we can let the stage lights illuminate how we stumble through ego, emotion, duty and doubt as we try to do good in this world.

Thank you for experiencing *The Ask*. And for the good you do in this world.

For Ellen Moncure Wong, who hired me.

*(**TANNER**, a Gift Planning Officer from the American Civil Liberties Union [ACLU], sits in Greta's Upper West Side apartment.)*

(The apartment is laid out with an open living room and kitchen combination. There is a single hallway leading upstage left, leading to the single bedroom, single bathroom. Tasteful art and books are strewn about. This is a lived-in place, but well loved. Imagine Fran Lebowitz's apartment. Lots of books but only good ones.)

(On Greta's wall are fine art photographs. Many of them of New York City, some are Greta's own work. And, in the mix, a black and white image of a dinosaur.)*

*(**TANNER** is smiling and affable but professional. They're dressed like an unthreatening activist: Brooklyn-y, the most expensive version of dressed down. Very nice sneakers.)*

*(**GRETA** is playing hostess. It comes naturally to her. She does this all the time. She's not dressed up. She just threw this on. I mean, she didn't, but she did, you know?)*

*(**TANNER** is on the couch, **GRETA** is in the kitchen, speaking to **TANNER**. Throughout*

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the play, GRETA moves throughout her apartment as she sees fit, fiddling with books, getting a snack, whatever suits her. TANNER does not leave their seat unless absolutely necessary.)

GRETA. Do you drink coffee?

TANNER. *(It makes them jittery.)* Of course.

GRETA. I made some coffee.

TANNER. Thank you.

GRETA. Anything in it?

TANNER. Black, thanks.

GRETA. Lately I'm filling up my coffee halfway to the brim with sugar. Cuban style.

TANNER. Are you Cuban?

GRETA. No, dear I'm not Cuban. Do I look Cuban?

TANNER. I don't know.

GRETA. I'm not Cuban, for heaven's sake. I just like sugar. Where are you from?

TANNER. I live in Brooklyn.

GRETA. Where's your family from?

TANNER. I'm adopted.

GRETA. Well there you go, right there. You can't tell that by looking, can you?

TANNER. But my birth mother...

GRETA. I probably shouldn't have even asked.

(GRETA puts Tanner's coffee on a coaster in front of them.)

TANNER. It's all right. I don't mind.

GRETA. I honestly can't tell what's all right to ask.

TANNER. I asked if you were Cuban.

GRETA. Either way, the reason I drink my coffee Cuban style is because I'm officially spending half the year in Florida and I think I just picked it up, turning Floridian.

TANNER. Can I ask you a question about your photographs?

GRETA. Of course!

TANNER. Is that a Cindy Sherman?

GRETA. Good eye, it's a little print of one of the film stills. Do you know her?

TANNER. I love her.

GRETA. I love her too; I think she's a scream.

TANNER. I think she's terrifying.

GRETA. But that's what makes it funny. But you're right, scary too. Grotesque, but that always made me laugh.

TANNER. And, I'm sorry, is that a photo of a dinosaur? Because that's too funny.

GRETA. Yes it is.

TANNER. I love it.

GRETA. I'm glad! Not everyone gets it. I had this book for my nephew when he was little, it was called the *Dinosaur Dictionary*. It had a green cover, and it was filled with these photographs of models they mocked up to look like black-and-white nature photos of dinosaurs. So I took out this page with the Brontosaurus and framed it for when my nephew would visit. Now, I just call it my self-portrait. A dinosaur, surrounded by real life.

TANNER. Except for Cindy Sherman. She's not real life.

GRETA. She's a little more real than a Brontosaurus.

TANNER. That's true, that's true. And are any of the other ones yours?

GRETA. A few of my own sprinkled in, but a lot of those are on loan.

TANNER. Well, I love Cindy Sherman. And I love your work, of course. And I also have a soft spot for dinosaurs. I had a dinosaur stuffed animal. A triceratops named Sara.

GRETA. That's adorable. Well, we're going to get along just fine.

(She sips her coffee.)

That might be too sweet. I used to drink it black when I was coming up in the Village, but back then everything I did was bitter. Bitter men, bitter coffee, bitter cold winters, bitter tea. It made me feel very tough. Now, I don't know, I have a second act sweet tooth. I spent all my time when I was young fighting the world and now, I don't know, that's your job thank you very much. Now I just want a little sugar in my coffee.

TANNER. You do plenty of good in the world.

GRETA. Thank you, you're the one who does good. I just write proverbial checks.

TANNER. Well they matter.

GRETA. Yes yes you have to say that.

TANNER. Thank you for meeting me. I haven't been out the door in almost two years. It's been Zoom, only Zoom, every day Zoom.

GRETA. I know, I'm so Zoomed out.

TANNER. And you're okay with my mask off?

GRETA. I'm vaccinated to the gills. I am vaccinated to the moon.

TANNER. As long as you're comfortable.

GRETA. I am, I am. And yes no more Zoom. I'm on the board of JNF and they're still on Zoom for every meeting.

(A fake whisper.) Because everyone is so old.

TANNER. Better safe than sorry.

GRETA. Or dead, I suppose.

TANNER. Right. Better safe than dead.

GRETA. Unless, you know, I'm worth more dead than alive.

TANNER. That would make meeting rather challenging.

GRETA. Ouija Board. You could bring it right up here. I'll be haunting the place. Anything to keep them from selling it to my neighbor.

TANNER. Séances aren't in the budget.

GRETA. The halcyon days of having a budget.

TANNER. Barring that, I guess we'll have to make do with talking with the living.

GRETA. True, true. At least you get coffee out of it. Although I guess they do serve coffee at funerals too.

(They sip their coffee.)

So, Tanner, I know you're here to ask me questions, but is it okay if I ask a question first?

TANNER. Of course. What can I tell you?

GRETA. I hope this doesn't offend you.

TANNER. Nothing offends me. Or, at least, it's hard to offend me.

GRETA. Why aren't you Carol?

TANNER. *(Because half the team was let go, Carol included.)*

I know, I'm sorry I'm not Carol. Everyone loved Carol.

GRETA. Is Carol all right?

TANNER. She's at the Brennan Center now.

GRETA. Well, I wish she would have let me know. I was surprised she didn't call me to let me know.

TANNER. She didn't?

GRETA. No, nothing. Hearing from you and not Carol was my first clue.

TANNER. I'm sorry I'm not sure what happened there.

GRETA. I'm sure she has bigger fish to fry than me.

TANNER. I don't imagine that's the reason.

GRETA. Was she a part of all these layoffs?

TANNER. *(It was a terrible day. Carol cried.)*

You know, I couldn't say.

GRETA. Do you not know or are you not supposed to say?

TANNER. I don't know and if I did, I probably shouldn't say. We have an overall smaller team now, but Carol's new role, as far as I can tell, is a great one so I think it all worked out? Carol did tell me to make sure you were my first phone call when I came into this role.

GRETA. Was I the first person you called?

TANNER. *(No.)* Yes. I always listen to Carol.

GRETA. Carol's wonderful.

TANNER. Carol hired me actually.

(About the coffee.) This is good.

GRETA. It's my secret recipe: the cheap stuff. It's like wine, you know, no one can tell the difference after a certain point.

TANNER. I've read that.

GRETA. Have you?

TANNER. I think so.

GRETA. Well, have you or haven't you?

(A moment.)

TANNER. I don't really drink wine, honestly.

GRETA. Are you allergic?

TANNER. *(I had a serious alcohol problem.)* It's just not for me.

GRETA. You're too young to swear things off. You should try everything when you're young. You do hit a point, though, when you realize which of your friends has a problem. People start to say things like they don't want to go to a restaurant if you can't get a drink there, things like that. You notice them, functional alcoholics, because they're doing it right in front of you.

Really, it's the people with serious problems that keep them the best hidden. My nephew died of alcoholism just tragically, found in his home, and had explained the whole thing away for years as medical problems, in and out of the hospital, sickly, accident prone, whatever, but it was vodka, really, it was all just one thing, vodka, and it killed him. None of us had any idea.

People who just like to drink too much, or more than they should, those people just normalize it for themselves, it's all right out in the open. Karen drinks, John drinks, John likes his scotch, whatever. But you're too young for all that. That's for old people like me.

TANNER. You're not old.

GRETA. Oh shut up, come on. Anyway, black coffee, no alcohol, what vices do you have?

TANNER. I do buy lots of shoes.

GRETA. Oh really? Fashion.

TANNER. I line up for sneakers. I have been known to line up for a sneaker or two.

GRETA. Is that what you do with the money you raise?

TANNER. With my salary?

GRETA. I have a closetful of shoes. Do you want to look at my shoes? I don't think anything would fit you.

TANNER. I mean, it's mostly sneakers.

GRETA. Oh I don't think I have any sneakers. Anyway, I'm being too personal.

TANNER. I don't mind.

GRETA. So that's your vice. Shoes?

TANNER. It's more like a hobby than a vice. Maybe it's a vice.

GRETA. Your generation doesn't do vices, though, you're all healthy. You glow like Mormons.

TANNER. I don't think I've ever been described as glowing.

GRETA. Your skin? You glow. You're a vegan?

TANNER. No, actually, I'm not a vegan.

GRETA. Of course, you are.

TANNER. I'm not vegan.

GRETA. Vegan, no drinking, black coffee. I mean, when did we lose the libertine part of being liberal? The Right used to be the prudes, now it's our side.

TANNER. Well...our organization isn't partisan. So, I wouldn't want to say our side.

GRETA. Now it's us. Funny how that works.

TANNER. We like to say we're political but not partisan.

GRETA. Carol said that to me all the time, but I never understood it.

TANNER. No?

GRETA. What's the difference?

TANNER. I understand it's a gray area for some. I understand some of our membership is a little skeptical of...

GRETA. Of bullshit?

TANNER. I would say...

GRETA. Of creating PACs and then saying you're non-partisan?

(A moment.)

TANNER. Is that something you and Carol talked about?

GRETA. Carol agreed with me.

TANNER. I guess I could tell you what I think.

GRETA. I'm all ears.

TANNER. But what I think isn't important. I can say that the ACLU's position is that we're raising awareness about issue areas. It's Voter Education. And we'll work with whomever supports our positions, we're giving ourselves the most agility possible when it comes to advocacy and PACs provide that kind of agility. But before I get into it, I really haven't even said "thank you" yet! So I just want to say, you know, thank you. For supporting us. I intended to say that before we even started talking about all this but...

GRETA. You did actually say thank you.

TANNER. I did? I hope I did.

GRETA. You did.

TANNER. Well thank you again.

GRETA. You're welcome.

TANNER. Especially now.

GRETA. You're welcome.

TANNER. It means a lot to get a chance to say just that. To say thank you in person.

GRETA. You're welcome.

TANNER. You've really helped make our work possible.

GRETA. Thank you for the work you've historically done.

TANNER. You're welcome.

(TANNER sips their coffee.)

So obviously you and Carol haven't met in person since...

GRETA. 2019. Right before. We actually met in the place I just sold. That was a bear.

TANNER. Your home in Florida?

GRETA. No, selling that place is a total disaster. The insurance market in Florida is now this maze, apparently. No, we met at the Maine house. I mean, I've had this place forever, and the Maine house was just getting hard for me to get to, to maintain, the size of it. Plus, the market blew up. Everyone was evacuating the cities. It wound up being a good time to sell it, but you know, it's a process, a huge process, even getting rid of something that beautiful is a nightmare. I don't want it, I say, please, take this beautiful house on the ocean and you can't imagine the questions and requests and all the things you forgot you never fixed.

TANNER. Even so.

GRETA. It's one less thing, but yes, that's where we met. Round Pond, Maine.

TANNER. So it was a summer home.