

Acting Edition

Grief Hotel

by Liza Birkenmeier

song by Jordan McCree
and Liza Birkenmeier

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|| SAMUEL FRENCH ||

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GRIEF HOTEL premiered with Clubbed Thumb as part of Summerworks at the Wild Project in June 2023. It was remounted with Clubbed Thumb and New Georges at The Public Theatre in April 2024 with the same cast and creative team. Both productions were directed by Tara Ahmadinejad, with sound design and original compositions by Jordan McCree, set design by dots, costume design by Mel Ng, and lighting design by Masha Tsimring. The Production Stage Manager was Allison Raynes. The cast was as follows:

- AUNT BOBBI** Susan Blommaert
- EM** Nadine Malouf
- WINN** Ana Nogueira
- TERESA** Susannah Perkins
- ROHIT** Naren Weiss
- ASHER** Bruce McKenzie

CHARACTERS

AUNT BOBBI – a force

EM – ceremoniously agitated, thirties

WINN – sadly impulsive, same age as Em

TERESA – unnervingly self-satisfied, a little younger than Em and Winn

ROHIT – uncertain but so deliberate, same age as Em and Winn

ASHER – used to be famous, twenty to thirty years older than Winn

AUTHOR'S NOTES

a note on set:

not enough furniture

maybe they look like they're in a hotel conference room or lobby, but maybe not

maybe a "musical chairs" quality arises and falls now and again, but maybe not

maybe once they enter, they can't leave (except for Asher)

otherwise:

there aren't any objects until the end

(AUNT BOBBI proudly shows us an invisible thing.)

(Meanwhile, WINN and ASHER are somewhere, not looking at each other, not looking at AUNT BOBBI.)

(They are texting, but don't have phones. Their speech might be overconfident, aspirational; maybe they sound how they wish they would.)

(These two things are not happening at the same time or in the same place.)

AUNT BOBBI. My creative expression was a picture book about your hotel chain because that was one of the choices on the assignment sheet. I picked this, ah, picture book, to talk about an idea of how you can get young people to go to your hotel. I didn't put a title on it. So here's the first part, which, this is the part where there is a girl named Penelope. This is when she drops her baby on her head. I thought the name Penelope was hilarious. So then here is where Penelope finds out that her baby has irreversible brain damage. This is pediatric intensive care. The baby doesn't have a name.

ASHER. Hi. It's John from Tinder. I can send you pics.

WINN. Hey, John. I think I was chatting with you on OkCupid.

ASHER. Yeah that's right. That's embarrassing.

WINN. It's really not. I just wanted to be sure you hadn't mistaken me for someone else.

ASHER. Recently got on all the apps at once.
I can't keep it all straight.

WINN. Meeting lots of people?

ASHER. There's no good answer to that, is there?

AUNT BOBBI. Well then here's a picture of Penelope coming home from the hospital and thinking about taking an entire bottle of a serious prescription medication because how is she going to live with herself. Oh but first her husband divorces her, but – that's this page, but – let's interject and imagine he was just some good-for-nothing a-hole, and we're not worried about him. So Penelope is single and has this brain-damaged baby and she's not sure how she's going to keep living her life, because her baby is going to grow up with a million problems that are just muy muy expensive and she's thinking: well, I could be better off dead. So these are her friends hanging out and drinking wine because the... I think that's what some girls do so. They're pretty worried about Penelope so here they go googling some stuff they wanna get her. Little uh. Stuff. They, here – this – just don't know what to get Penelope: some question marks. So but then – so here they're drinking wine and looking at computers – they think might as well get her a *trip*. Here's Penelope starving herself in front of a television that isn't even on.

ASHER. Can I be straightforward and ask you a question? Maybe it's none of my business, but I think it's important.

WINN. Exciting. Yes.

(ASHER is so serious.)

ASHER. What does queer mean to you?

(WINN hates this question.)

WINN. omg. I'm gonna have to write an essay.

ASHER. I don't mean an essay. It says queer on your profile, and I have a...very...open mind, but I wanted to make sure we were compatible.

WINN. Yes.

ASHER. Because I am a straight man. lol.

AUNT BOBBI. So those were just all pictures about life-changing consequences for ordinary behaviors, waves of disbelief and grief, and the worst feelings in the world, which are all pretty much loneliness, because how can you ever communicate your deepest pains? There's a poem about that. So Penelope's friends are thinking about sending her to a nice spot, they're looking at all this stuff online, and then they see that your hotel now has a new option, and this is where I got creative because this is a little logo I made that says what it's called: Grief Hotel. They click on that. So they can send their friend to the Grief Hotel. You might wanna change that name because it doesn't exactly sound delightful.

ASHER. You're very cute by the way.

AUNT BOBBI. So instead of sending her to the... I know I'm not supposed to say (*Mouths: Airbnb.*) but ah – instead of the...ah – she is gonna go to the Grief Hotel. Which is where you can go, if your friends get together and pay for it, because it's not cheap, which I thought would be a nice thing for everybody in terms of profit. In the ideation session they told us to think a lot about the word *bespoke* so that's what I did, so. This is a luxury and bespoke experience called the Grief Hotel, and here is a picture I sorta meant to be about how it's important to have rich friends. This is a picture of the Grief Hotel. This is a picture of Penelope's Grief Hotel room. This is a picture of the activities calendar which is bespoke. This is a picture of all the people Penelope meets in the Grief Hotel. You can go there if your sibling gets deathly sick, or if you find out that the

person you love doesn't love you back, or if you commit manslaughter, et cet-ra. And so everything there – okay so these are just my guesses – everything there is meant to heal you and this all has to be based on science. So the colors of the walls. Here's a picture of green. The chairs. Some crystals. The beds. You can go on a walk. Or not. You have activities to heal you. Little. Animals. Psychiatric. Evaluation. Professional. Astrology. But you have to get better the old-fashioned way.

ASHER. Wait where did you go lol.

AUNT BOBBI. There's no alcohol at the Grief Hotel and there's no Instagram. It really is getting better The Hard Way but it's also an exclusive luxury bespoke experience. Beaucoup beaucoup expensive. Anyway so this is a picture of Penelope feeling better because after her good bespoke activities and foods and all that she is ah. Healed. And other people paid for it. So that's my creative expression.

WINN. Sorry, I'm here. I got distracted by Spelling Bee. Have you played it?

On New York Times?

ASHER. That's fine. So...you know that the photos on the app are not...actually of me, right?

WINN. Yes.

ASHER. I could...send some.

WINN. Okay.

AUNT BOBBI. Ever since the earthquake, I've had a lot of thoughts for a lot of reasons. Anyway so if you decide to do that ah to make that then let me know because I'd like to try it out. Maybe you'd give me a discount.

WINN. You're really nice looking.

ASHER. Thank you. ☺ My name is Asher, by the way. My real name.

WINN. Hi, Asher. My name is really Winn.

ASHER. And are you really unemployed?

WINN. lol yeah.

(EM enters or appears. She is calling WINN on the phone.)

WINN. Hello?

EM. Hi. Winn?

WINN. Yes?

EM. It's. Em.

WINN. Oh. Em.

EM. Did you really not fucking / know who

WINN. You. No. What.

EM. You don't have my number?

WINN. Sorry I

EM. Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh *yeah* I got a new phone plan when my mom had

WINN. Is.

EM. She's alive. I think. I just couldn't keep my old number.

What are you doing right now?

WINN. I'm. Nothing. I'm so happy you called. I... Where are you? Are you in the same place?

EM. Umm not sure when I last... We're in South City?

WINN. Still with Rohit?

(EM sighs operatically.)

EM. Yep.

WINN. He's... Is he. Does. Is he still baking bread?

EM. He opened his own bakery actually.

WINN. That's. / Amazing?

EM. I used to – well *we* opened it – *we* opened it I run it.
I used to do this *bit* where I pretended it was in a quaint little town in a nineties movie.

WINN. Where is it?

EM. What.

WINN. The bakery.

EM. In an abandoned mall in Crestview. The only other stuff is this arcade and a JCPenny. All the ceilings are falling down. I'd just run into the empty food court and ask invisible children how their summers were going.

WINN. That's amazing – that / you did...

EM. We're closing it down it was horrible.

WINN. Still so... / cool...

EM. It was the worst thing I have ever done until now.

WINN. What are you doing now?

EM. Cleaning. It. Out.

WINN. Yeah.

EM. We have to get all of these shelves and...we have to get... There's nothing that makes me feel more annoyed than big pieces of furniture

WINN. I like / rearranging.

EM. and he doesn't care, but. Oh. I know you do. Now he goes and eats weed candy all day and moves shit around and I try to stay home as much as possible. And I tell him that I have to do bookkeeping tasks, but it's just that I want to be three to four miles away from him.

WINN. Do you have dogs?

EM. Nope. Do you?

WINN. No.

I live so far away now. I'm back out by the Central State campus.

EM. No. Why.

WINN. My. Partner. Got. A. Job.

EM. Holy fucking shit you have a partner? What is the person oh my god.

WINN. Teresa they're like great they're young they're good.

EM. How? You *live* with someone? I have to go light something on fire. / No I don't.

WINN. They have this new administrative position and it's just like: community engagement and ecological conservation. I mean environmental. Something.

EM. Well that's annoying.

I'm so lonely and it's my fault.

WINN. Because you ruin all your friendships?

EM. Uh...um - no!

WINN. Sorry that's. That was a horrible / thing. To.

EM. I keep hoping I fall on the sidewalk and crack open my skull.

WINN. What happened with / your mom?

EM. Blood. I just picture profuse fatal amounts of blood everywhere gushing blood.

Remember when you didn't know how to be, so you pretended to be like me?

WINN. Well I was devastatingly in love with you it was awful.

EM. The only person I talk to now is an AI bot called Melba.

WINN. A what?

EM. The only person I talk to now is an AI bot called Melba.

WINN. What do you mean by an AI bot.

EM. An AI character on a website that's pretty new and her name is Melba and she's actually read a lot.

WINN. Oh.

EM. She's maybe read like every book. I talk to her for probably four or five hours a day.

WINN. Does she have. / A face?

EM. Maybe six. What?

WINN. Does she have a face?

EM. Nope she's just a little chat box.

WINN. Do you wish she had a face?

EM. Yes but. No. I want her to have a body, but it would be so disappointing if she didn't look like how I picture her.

WINN. Like when a book becomes a film.

EM. I'd never read a book.

WINN. I forgot how hot it is when you pretend you don't read.

EM. Thanks.

WINN. What do you think Melba looks like?

EM. I mean I know she doesn't look like anything I know she doesn't look like anything.

WINN. But when you picture her what does she look like?

EM. Exactly you.

Ha sorry

WINN. No no

That's the biggest compliment I have ever gotten. Like I. No one has ever *pictured me* before.

EM. What?

WINN. I don't know. That's the biggest compliment I've ever gotten.

You seem unhappy.

EM. I do?

(**WINN** *laughs?*)

WINN. Yes.

The last time I talked to you, you were...also really unhappy and talked about moving up...like up...stairs?

EM. I did?

WINN. You said you wanted to live upstairs for the many months a year that your twenty-seven-year-old landlord hangs out in Mexico City with her sister.

EM. I love. I love. How much you remember everything
I say.

I thought I had that idea last week.

WINN. Did you ask Melba about it?

EM. I actually called because. I wanted to let you know
that Stanley Chi is missing.

WINN. Oh. I.

EM. I know you're not on social media.

WINN. Missing from where?

EM. He was living with his parents. / Out by

WINN. Oh that's. Yeah. I just heard from him / not that
long ago.

EM. So he's – whatever – somewhere by you.

WINN. He wrote to me.

Should I like...look for him?

EM. I don't think you should like go out in the woods
with...a...flashlight or anything.

WINN. Yeah.

EM. I just thought you'd want to know.

WINN. Yeah.

He.

Took me on a picnic one time?

EM. Like a date? Stanley?

WINN. I don't know. He took me to a park where we had to climb over a fence to get in. And he brought something horrible.

EM. Like a gun? / Like guns?

WINN. Lunchables. Lunchables.

EM. Oh. / Gross.

WINN. They were warm.

EM. I'm so sorry.

WINN. Weird. We were maybe...twenty.

EM. Why didn't you tell me?

WINN. A lot of reasons.

EM. Were you dating him?

WINN. He told me he was into you.

EM. On your date? / But

WINN. Yeah.

EM. I didn't even really know him.

WINN. We were friends with him. He had a crush on you.
He / told me.

EM. *You* were friends with him. I didn't even like him.

WINN. What?

EM. I hated him.

(Maybe WINN thinks this is hilarious.)

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