

A Dish of Food

A Play

by

Alan David Perkins

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A DISH OF FOOD
The Tragedy of Duncan Ferguson

CHARACTERS

MARY LYNN - Female, early 30's. Attractive, dynamic, articulate and very business-like.

ROLAND THOMAS - Male, late 30's - early 40's. Straight-laced and also business-like.

JARED OGLETHORPE - Male, early 30's. Rugged, energetic, impeccable comic timing, very obnoxious.

DUNCAN FERGUSON - Male, early 30's. Very withdrawn, obviously insecure and needy.

LILLY SPRINKLE - Female, late 20's - mid 30's. Offbeat good looks.

A DISH OF FOOD is a tragedy presented in two acts. The sets vary from scene to scene and may be represented minimalistically and modularly.

SCENE BREAKDOWN

ACT 1

SCENE 1 - The office of Roland Thomas.

SCENE 2 - Later that day, Duncan Ferguson's room.

SCENE 3 - A few days later, Mary Lynn's new apartment.

SCENE 4 - A few days later, Duncan's room.

SCENE 5 - Later that day, a bar.

SCENE 6 - A few days later, Mary's apartment.

SCENE 7 - Later that evening, Duncan's room.

ACT 2

SCENE 1 - Morning, two days later, Lilly Sprinkle's apartment.

SCENE 2 - A few minutes later, Mary's apartment.

SCENE 3 - A half-hour later, restaurant.

SCENE 4 - A few days later, Roland's office.

SCENE 5 - A week later, an empty theatre stage.

SCENE 6 - A week later, same empty stage.

SCENE 7 - A few weeks later, Duncan's new apartment.

EPILOGUE - A year later, Mary's apartment.

ACT I, SCENE 1

(The office of ROLAND THOMAS. Desk, chairs, a plant or two. ROLAND sits behind the desk, MARY sits in front, laughing.)

ROLAND

. . . and the part at the end when Calvin gets shot . . .
. and everybody crowds around . . . and Calvin, he says
. . .

ROLAND & MARY

(Unison) I've been shot. This is cool!

ROLAND

I tell you, Ms. Lynn, I was in stitches. Anyway . . .

MARY

It's okay . . . you can call me "Mary."

ROLAND

Okay . . . Mary. I think by now you've figured out why I asked you here.

MARY

(Flirting) Is it my stunning good looks?

ROLAND

(Nervous) What? Oh, no! It's not that you don't have stunning good looks or anything, but . . .

MARY

(Interrupting) You want to talk about the play.

ROLAND

Ms. Lynn . . . Mary . . . in all my years of producing plays I can honestly say that I've never seen anything quite like . . . the bite . . . the humanity . . . the humor . . .

MARY

I take it you liked it.

ROLAND

Liked it?! Mary, "Death and Taxes in 3D" should be on Broadway.

MARY

You're gonna put us on Broadway?!

ROLAND

What? No, no . . . but I can help you get there.

(beat)

How does Off-Broadway sound? Major house . . . two hundred and ninety nine seats . . .

MARY

(Giddy) You're gonna produce us?!

ROLAND

I'm gonna produce you.

(MARY jumps out of her chair and gives ROLAND a big hug and a kiss.)

ROLAND (cont'd)

Uh . . . Mary . . . we can . . .

MARY

(Interrupting) I'm sorry, Mr. Thomas, but that sentence is something I've been DREAMING about for years . . . ever since Duncan, Jared and I formed our theatre group.

ROLAND

I hope I said it just like in your dream. And please call me "Roland."

MARY

You did . . . Roland . . . you did. I always imagined it in an office . . . just like this one, actually . . . just after a tough run of something daring . . . something I had to put a lot of sweat into . . . lost a lot of sleep over . . . and just when I thought we'd done another brilliant but dead-end production some maverick will . . . well, just like you said it.

ROLAND

I take it you're pleased.

MARY

You take it right.

ROLAND

There are many things to discuss, I'm sure you know.

MARY

Can I ask you something?

ROLAND

(Nervously) Uh . . . well . . .

MARY

It's about the play.

ROLAND

Oh! Of course! Ask me anything you like.

MARY

Did you like it?

ROLAND

Oh, "like" isn't quite the word . . .

MARY

Yes or no - nothing else. Did you like it?

ROLAND

Uh . . . yes?

MARY

What did you like about it?

ROLAND

What? Oh . . . everything, I suppose . . .

MARY

I'm not letting you off that easy, Roland.

ROLAND

What did I like . . . what did I like . . . The angles. Definitely the angles -- the way it looked at everyday common things with that better angle. I liked . . . I liked the poetry behind the words -- the rhythm . . . how it told a story about modern day with modern people who talk like anyone else, but with so much poetry.

MARY

We have a lot in common.

ROLAND

We do?

MARY

Not a lot of people saw the poetry . . . not at least without SEEING the play. Do you know how many regional theatres REJECTED "Death and Taxes in 3D" before we got to mount it?

ROLAND

Uh . . . I don't know . . . five? Six?

MARY

Forty.

ROLAND
Forty?!

MARY
Forty two, actually.

ROLAND
That's a lot of return postage . . .

MARY
It's hard to believe that a script so brilliant is brushed under the rug with yesterday's trash.

ROLAND
So, what makes us so special that we were the only ones to see this?

MARY
I knew it was there all along. I would have mounted it sooner but we'd already committed ourself to the season.

ROLAND
So I take it your group has an exclusive contract with the playwright . . .
(looks at a script on his desk)
. . . Mr. . . . Ferguson?

MARY
Sort of. Tell me more about what you liked about the play. What about the acting? What about the directing?

ROLAND
The direction was fine, of course.

MARY
So I get to stay on as director?

ROLAND
As far as I'm concerned. It'll all be in the contract.

MARY
What about Jared's performance?

ROLAND
Who?

MARY
Jared . . . the actor who played the lead . . .

ROLAND

Oh, yes. A . . . unique talent. Does he study?

MARY

Not really.

ROLAND

It shows . . . no offense.

MARY

None taken.

ROLAND

Again, his staying with the show will be worked out in the contracts.

MARY

You may not have a say in the matter.

ROLAND

Oh? If I'm going to be the producer then I'd definitely have a say in the matter.

MARY

Jared is an integral part of the company and the play -
- as integral as myself or Duncan.

ROLAND

Duncan?

MARY

(Indicates the script) The playwright.

ROLAND

Oh.

MARY

We're almost a package deal.

ROLAND

Yes. I see. Well, I guess we'll work it all out in the contracts. Speaking of which, could you give me the name of Mr. Ferguson's . . . Duncan's agent? We'll need to work through this exclusive contract of yours .
. . .

MARY

It's really not necessary.

ROLAND

I'm afraid it is, Mary. I don't want the Dramatists' Guild coming down on me for breach of contract . . .

MARY

You don't understand. Duncan doesn't have an agent. He doesn't have a contract.

ROLAND

He what . . . ?!

MARY

Duncan is . . . well . . . a special case.

ROLAND

I don't care if he's a trained seal. Get him in here and put his name on a contract fast! I thought I was dealing with professionals . . .

MARY

Roland . . . it's not like it sounds. Duncan needs to be nurtured . . . respected . . . understood. He's a consummate artist . . . he writes for me.

ROLAND

What?

(beat)

Oh! I see. So, you and he . . .

MARY

Friends. Just friends. Between you and me, I think if I stripped naked in front of him and said "Let's go" he'd look at me like I had two heads.

ROLAND

Then . . .

MARY

He trusts me. I understand his writing. I know how to talk to him. He lets me develop his plays and eventually produce and direct them.

ROLAND

Approximately how many of his plays have you . . .

MARY

I've produced and directed six. I've helped develop eighteen.

ROLAND

EIGHTEEN?!

MARY

We can only produce them so fast. Right now we're backed up until the year two-thousand . . .

ROLAND

He's written eighteen plays?!

MARY

No, I've helped DEVELOP eighteen plays. Lord knows how many more there are that I haven't read yet.

ROLAND

And this man doesn't have an agent?

MARY

Nope. Go figure.

ROLAND

Look, Mary, we can go on for days about this man, but I need to talk to him. When is he supposed to get here? I DID send for him . . .

MARY

Uh . . . Roland . . . getting Duncan to cooperate with something he's written isn't the easiest thing.

ROLAND

That's ridiculous. You know, this is why I hate dealing with writers. I want to produce his play. It's pay day. It's time for the dreams to come true. SURELY he wants to be a part of it.

MARY

I don't think he does. No.

ROLAND

Mary, I have no choice. I need Duncan's cooperation with this project. I need his signature on a contract, I need for him to have an agent, I need to clear things with the Dramatists' Guild, I need HIM . . . HERE . . . NOW.

(JARED bursts in.)

JARED

Hi, kids. Sorry I'm late. Public transportation. What'cha gonna do.

(grabs ROLAND's hand and shakes)

Hi, Jared Oglethorpe.

(to MARY)

YOU know who I am.

(kisses her on the cheek and sits)

So, wha'd I miss?

MARY

I was just telling him about Duncan.

JARED

A brilliant writer and a stunning human being. The man literally pisses dialogue . . .

ROLAND

I need to meet with him.

JARED

(Beat; to MARY) I thought you were gonna get him to come.

MARY

I tried.

JARED

(Sighs) Don't tell me he's at it again.

MARY

I'm afraid so.

ROLAND

What? Do what again?

JARED

How long has he been in this time?

MARY

I'm not sure. What month is this?

ROLAND

What are you talking about?

JARED

Look . . . uh . . .

MARY

Roland . . .

ROLAND

Mr. Thomas . . .

JARED

Whatever. It's apparent that any negotiations on Duncan's behalf will be made by me and Mary.

ROLAND

Mr. Oglethorpe, unless you're his agent, I'm afraid we have nothing to discuss.

JARED

Yeah? Well, I'm MORE than his agent . . . I'm his editor.

ROLAND

Am I supposed to be impressed?

JARED

Duncan trusts me implicitly with his work. Look, you don't NEED him. He's done all he's gonna do. He wrote the script. There it is. If it needs fixing, any rewriting, I'll do it.

ROLAND

(Examines the script for a moment) I don't see your name on the script as having any authorship.

MARY

Jared and Duncan have an agreement. Jared edits his plays as long as he gets to act in them.

ROLAND

This is the package deal you told me about.

MARY

You catch on fast.

(JARED grins sheepishly.)

ROLAND

So I guess we're stuck with each other.

JARED

I guess so.

(to MARY)

So, did'ja ask him?

ROLAND

Ask what?

MARY

I asked him.

ROLAND

Asked me what?!

MARY

If you liked the play.

ROLAND

Why is it so important to you two if I like the play?

JARED

It doesn't matter to me.

MARY

It matters to Duncan.

ROLAND

Well he isn't here, is he.

JARED

Mary, just let me deal with the ol' manic depressive.

MARY

Why? YOU don't help matters any.

ROLAND

Mary, I have to insist . . .

MARY

I'm sorry, Roland. You see, Duncan is a brilliant artist an all, but he tends to pull himself into a shell. Sometimes he can stay in it for a long time. The best we can do is leave him alone, lay out a dish of food and maybe he'll come out. In the mean time, he writes . . .

JARED

. . . and writes, and writes, and writes, and writes, and writes . . .

ROLAND

(Interrupting) I get the picture. But you don't get the contract until I get a writer. Availability is pending on this house. If I don't have an author's signature within a week, I can't book the house.

JARED

No problem.

ROLAND

Then you can get me the author's cooperation?

MARY

His name is Duncan.

JARED

Yeah, we can get the author's cooperation. No problem.

ROLAND

Fine. Mr. Oglethorpe, it was a pleasure meeting with you. Mary, I'll be in touch.

(starts leafing through papers on his desk)

MARY

(Long pause) Is that it?

ROLAND

Yes, it is. Call me when your writer comes out of his shell.

MARY

Roland, it just isn't that easy.

JARED

C'mon Mary, we can do this.

MARY

(Stands) Two weeks.

ROLAND

(Sighs) Ten days. No more.

MARY

A deal. Come on, Jared.

(MARY pulls JARED by his ear.)

JARED

Hey! Ow! That hurts!

MARY

Be glad I'm pulling you by just your ear . . .

Fadeout.

SCENE 2

(Later that day - DUNCAN's studio apartment. It is extremely small and cluttered. Piles of books, newspapers and comic books cover a small bed. A small television is on. A sit-com plays. Opposite the bed is a computer. DUNCAN sits in a corner, covered completely with a sheet. After a long pause, he pulls the sheet off and goes to the computer. He is dressed shabbily. He types madly, pauses, types, pauses and types. He begins mouthing a dialogue, complete with gestures. He types, pauses, types, etc. A knock on the door. He does not answer. Knocks again.)

JARED

(Voice through the door) We know you're in there. Come out with your pants up.

MARY

(Voice through the door) Jared, stop it. Come on, Duncan. Let us in.

DUNCAN

I'm not home.

JARED

You just blew your cover, cowboy. Open up, buttercup.

DUNCAN

It's open.

(JARED and MARY enter.
JARED carries a script.)

MARY

You really shouldn't leave your door unlocked. This city isn't safe.

JARED

He's right. Smell alone may not be a deterrent, but this place looks perpetually tossed.

DUNCAN

Nobody'll bother me.

MARY

How are you, Duncan?

(MARY kisses DUNCAN on the cheek.)

DUNCAN

The same.

JARED

We tried to call for the past two hours! Do you have some secret life we don't know about?

DUNCAN

Huh? Oh, no. I was just on the modem.

JARED

Captain Download, the Modem Master, strikes again.

MARY

If you keep tying up your phone with the modem, how do you expect to receive calls?

DUNCAN

No point. No one calls.

(All stand awkwardly.)

JARED

(A beat) I finished editing your latest.

DUNCAN

Good. Did you like it?

JARED

I had a few problems with it. It's kind of wordy. The first act was a little slow, but it was easy to tighten. Also, the character of Clifford seemed a little flat and needed some fleshing out . . .

DUNCAN

But did you like it?

JARED

Some of the stuff in Act 2 is absolutely brilliant.

DUNCAN

But did you like it?

JARED

(Annoyed) Yes. Yes, I liked it.

(DUNCAN holds out his hand
to take the script. JARED
hands it to him.)

DUNCAN

I'll have the re-writes tomorrow.

JARED

Deadline?

DUNCAN

What?

MARY

Duncan, we have to talk.

DUNCAN

Sure.

(DUNCAN leafs through the
script, paying little
attention to MARY.)

MARY

It's about our last production.

DUNCAN

Which one?

MARY

"Death and Taxes in 3D."

DUNCAN

Which one? (a beat) Oh!

JARED

At last, a response! Doctor, the patient lives!

MARY

Jared, cut it out! Duncan, a producer wants to pick it
up. Off-Broadway.

DUNCAN

Did he like it?

MARY

He thought it was brilliant.

DUNCAN

But did he . . .

JARED

(Interrupting) Yes, he liked it. He LOVED it. He came in his pants over it. He stood RIGHT over the script and masturbated on it.

MARY

Do I have to make you wait outside?

DUNCAN

As long as he liked it.

MARY

Duncan, we need you to help us out with this.

DUNCAN

Why? I already did my part.

MARY

I know, sweetie. We need you to help get things rolling.

DUNCAN

(Long pause)

You two do it. I have other things to do.

(goes back to his computer, types, pause)

MARY

Duncan? (pause) Duncan, honey?

JARED

He's gone bye-bye.

MARY

Duncan, don't do this to me.

DUNCAN

Look, Mary, I'm sorry. I just can't right now. I can't meet with a producer, I can't call anyone on the phone, I can't leave my apartment, I can't talk to you. Please understand.

JARED

Look, you wimp . . . there's a lot riding on this and I'm not about to let Mister Temperamental here fuck it up for everybody . . .

MARY

(Interrupting) Jared. Outside.

JARED

Mary, it's an act! It's an attention-getting act!

MARY

Jared. Outside.

JARED

(To DUNCAN) You write too much. Get a life. (exits)

MARY

I'm sorry about Jared . . .

DUNCAN

Why?

MARY

He shouldn't be so mean to you.

DUNCAN

I don't know what you're talking about.

MARY

Duncan, where are you? He's being a dick!

DUNCAN

That's how Jared is. I don't expect anything different from him. He came here, didn't he? He edited my script. He said he liked it.

MARY

Duncan, sweetheart, this isn't about someone liking one of your scripts. This is about making your dreams come true. Do you want to live in this tiny little room forever?

(beat)

Do you?

DUNCAN

No. Of course not.

MARY

Do you want to slave all day in that stupid accounts payable job for the rest of your life? Don't you want to live off your art?

DUNCAN

I can't.

MARY

I know what you're afraid of. Duncan, you're a talented artist. Eventually you'll realize that and it'll change your life, but it'll change for the better. You'll still be able to write. Every play you've ever written has reflected your life. Every little change in your life somehow gets integrated into a script. Why would this be any different? So, your characters will be a little more successful . . . a little less angry . . .

DUNCAN

No. I'll become what I despise.

MARY

You'll always be you. Why can't you see how brilliant you are?

DUNCAN

I wish you'd stop saying that.

MARY

It's true.

DUNCAN

No it's not. If I were brilliant would I have this stupid job that barely pays for food? Would I live in this shoe box? Would I be alone?

MARY

You do that to yourself.

DUNCAN

Mary, I don't write because I want to be a famous writer. It's a need -- it's my only connection to the world. It's a reason to be a part of the human race. Sever the connection and I won't write.

MARY

Then what does it matter?

DUNCAN

I need to write. If I don't, I'll die.

MARY

Duncan . . .

DUNCAN

You know how I was before I figured out I was a writer, don't you?

MARY

I didn't know you back then.

DUNCAN

I've showed you the scars. You've seen the bullets I put those notches in. I have a whole file of notes.

MARY

I thought the suicidal days were over.

DUNCAN

I don't know if they'll ever be over. You know, "one day at a time"? But as long as I write I'm alive -- I'm part of the world -- I'm connected to mankind. The second I stop I'll lose my contact and my reason to live.

MARY

I never knew you were so melodramatic.

DUNCAN

It rubs off after a while.

MARY

But you've come so far since then.

DUNCAN

No, I haven't. I'm still the same Duncan . . . the fat little bassoon player from Pensacola with the pimples and the stigmatism who sits in the back of the classroom, gets average grades and stays home alone on Saturday nights with a bowl of popcorn and "Saturday Night Live."

MARY

So, if you don't write to be famous, why do you ask everybody if they like your plays?

DUNCAN

I don't do that . . .

MARY

Oh, yes you do. It's the only thing you care about.

DUNCAN

No it isn't.

MARY

Duncan, dear sweet Duncan, some day you'll tell me where all this pain is coming from.

DUNCAN

I'm fine, Mary.

MARY

Me and Jared, we like your plays, Duncan. We like YOU.

DUNCAN

Thanks. I like you, too.

MARY

Then you'll help us?

DUNCAN

Please Mary, you don't need me. I've done my part.

MARY

What if the play needs rewriting?

DUNCAN

Jared will do it. He'll do it anyway.

MARY

But Jared isn't the author.

DUNCAN

So? I'll okay it. Besides, do you know how many plays I've written since "Death and Taxes in 3D"? I'm too detached to deal with it anymore.

MARY

You can't do this to me! I've worked to fucking hard on your stupid scripts to throw it all away because of your immature depressions! I deserve success! You're not gonna ruin it!

(DUNCAN goes back to typing.
MARY realizes the damage she
just did.)

MARY (cont'd)

Duncan, I'm sorry . . .

DUNCAN

It's okay. I'll think about it. Please go.

(DUNCAN wipes his nose.
MARY kisses him on the
cheek.)

MARY

I'm sorry, honey. Call me.

(MARY starts to leave.
DUNCAN picks up a script
form his desk.)

DUNCAN

Give this to Jared.

MARY

(Takes script) What is it?

DUNCAN

My latest.

MARY

Duncan, you're not running a race.

(beat)

How many does this make this year? Three? Four?
Nobody's judging you on volume.

DUNCAN

I can't help it. They just keep coming.

MARY

Do you know what infuriates me, Duncan Ferguson? Each
one is better than the last.

DUNCAN

Mary, please . . .

MARY

I'm going. I'm going. (a beat) Duncan?

DUNCAN

Hmm?

(MARY unbuttons the top
button of her blouse,
attempting to be a little
provocative. DUNCAN looks
at her, waiting for her to
say something. She looks at
her chest for a beat.
DUNCAN is oblivious to her
attempt.)

MARY

Nothing. Call me, okay?

DUNCAN

Okay.

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(MARY exits. DUNCAN
continues to type. When she
is gone he goes back to his
bed and pulls the sheet back
over his head.)

Fadeout.

SCENE 3

(A few days later - MARY's apartment. It is big, fancy and full of wardrobe boxes. JARED bursts in, carrying another wardrobe box. Behind him is MARY and LILLY, both carrying wardrobe boxes.)

JARED

How many more of them are there?

MARY

Only six.

LILLY

Six?!

MARY

I have a lot of clothes.

LILLY

How can you wear them all?

MARY

I don't know. I guess I just like clothes.

JARED

Beer break.

(All put their boxes down. JARED goes off to the kitchen and returns with three beers. He tosses one to MARY and one to LILLY. They all start drinking.)

MARY

So, what do you think?

LILLY

It's nice . . .

JARED

It's a little gaudy, don't you think?

MARY

Do you know how many people from work live here? I had to take the place when it came available. I want to go somewhere in the firm.

JARED

Mary, the yuppie thing is out. It died in October, 1987.

LILLY

How much is the rent?

MARY

You don't want to know. I'm gonna have to put in overtime for the rest of my life. (to herself) I'm thinking of putting the sofa over there.

LILLY

Unless the play is a success.

JARED

Lilly, darling, it's another pipe dream.

MARY

(To herself) What about over here? I could hang a tapestry . . .

LILLY

But Mary said someone wanted to produce us again.

JARED

Did she tell you about our little complication?

MARY

Yeah, a tapestry . . .

LILLY

Mary?

MARY

What? Oh, Duncan won't cooperate.

LILLY

Who?

MARY

Duncan. The playwright.

LILLY

Oh, him. You know, I always got the feeling Jared wrote the play under a pseudonym. I mean, he made all those changes . . .

JARED

They were just line changes. Duncan is the real genius of the family.

MARY

Speaking of the genius, did you read his new play yet?

JARED

Yes, I did.

MARY

And?

JARED

Look, why do you care about him? He's the most insecure person I've ever met.

MARY

He trusts me. I think that involves a modicum of responsibility.

LILLY

But what about us?

MARY

Look at it this way. Duncan's gonna win a Pulitzer some day, and he's gonna win us all Tonys and make us all rich. And that means you, too. (to LILLY) And you. Did we bring the cleaning supplies up yet?

LILLY

Wow. Tonys.

JARED

What about me? I can write too, ya know. My stuff is good.

MARY

Have you finished your FIRST play yet?

JARED

I think I've got the first act about where I want it.

MARY

You know, in the time it'll take you to write one play, Duncan will write twenty.

JARED

Yeah, but mine will be THE great American play. You've read it so far. What did you think?

MARY

I think it sounds like five Jareds babbling aimlessly with no structure or plot. You should let Duncan take a look at it.

JARED

Are you crazy? He'll either spare my feelings and say it's fine or ramble on about stakes and conflict and all that boring playwright mumbo-jumbo.

MARY

He knows what he's doing.

JARED

And I know what he's NOT doing -- he's NOT sinking his teeth into MY play.

MARY

But it's okay for you to tinker with HIS work.

JARED

It's different.

MARY

No, it's not.

JARED

Okay, okay, you want me to say it? I'm a frustrated writer who gets his jollies by writing vicariously through Duncan Ferguson, playwright of the Western World. There. I said it. Happy?

MARY

Ecstatic.

LILLY

I always thought Duncan was your friend.

MARY

He looks up to you.

JARED

Yeah, well he shouldn't. I don't like being put on a pedestal.

LILLY

I feel kind of left out. Did I ever meet him?

MARY

Once. At your audition.

JARED

He thought you were pretty hot. He insisted on casting you right then and there.

LILLY

Really?

MARY

Oh, he gushed about you for weeks.

LILLY

I still don't remember him.

JARED

You're not missing much.

MARY

Jared . . .

JARED

Sorry.

LILLY

I want to keep doing this play. We have to get it produced.

JARED

(Sits on a box) Give it up. Duncan's so far into his shell that nothing can pull him out.

MARY

What are you doing?

JARED

Drinking a beer.

MARY

Get off that box.

JARED

Why? It's only clothes. I'm pressing them.

MARY

Get off the box or I'll have you castrated.

JARED

(Gets up) Okay, okay, I'm up.

LILLY

I wish there was something I could do.

MARY

Well, we do have more boxes to bring up.

LILLY

No, I meant about Duncan.

JARED

You could honk on his johnson.

LILLY

What?

MARY

Jared!

LILLY

(Realizing what he meant) Oh!

JARED

Hey, it's not so far-fetched.

MARY

You know, you may have the right idea.

LILLY

Hey, don't I have a say-so in this?

MARY

No, we're not talking about having sex with him . . .

JARED

Besides, I think he's a virgin.

MARY

Sorry, he's not.

JARED

Oh? How do you know?

MARY

I just do.

JARED

You didn't . . . did you?

MARY

Relax. Just call it intuition.

LILLY

So, what's your idea?

MARY

Think of him as a kitten hiding under the sofa. All you can really do is lay out a dish of food and maybe he'll come out. You could be that dish. Now, you don't really have to DO anything . . . just talk to him. He likes you. Be alluring, be aloof, be attentive . . . he'll come out of his shell.

JARED

And if it doesn't work, honk on his johnson.

MARY

Jared . . . castration.

JARED

Why do you have this bizarre obsession with mutilating my genitalia?

LILLY

He isn't . . . well, disturbed or anything?

JARED

Go with the "anything."

MARY

Duncan is sweet, harmless and passionate. He's just a little needy and thinks he needs to live in perpetual depression so he can write. You have nothing to worry about.

JARED

Think of your Tony Award.

LILLY

Okay, so what do we do now?

MARY

I'll set things up. You just be you.

JARED

More boxes?

MARY

More boxes.

(They all get up to leave.)

JARED

You own a lot of clothes.

Fadeout.

SCENE 4

(A few days later - DUNCAN's apartment. He sits at his computer. JARED is pacing wildly. DUNCAN leafs through a script and holds up a few pages.)

DUNCAN

What's this?

JARED

Some extra dialogue.

DUNCAN

Why?

JARED

It's funny.

DUNCAN

It's a tangent. It doesn't advance the plot and it disrupts the rhythm.

JARED

Fine. You don't have to use it. It's JUST a suggestion.

(Pause as DUNCAN leafs through more of the script.)

DUNCAN

You seem to go through a lot of trouble to change almost every line, only to wind up exactly where you started. (a beat) Why did you take out the words "for you" here? (shows him)

JARED

It was unnecessary.

DUNCAN

It's dialect.

JARED

It's still unnecessary.

DUNCAN

Have you ever been to the South?

JARED

That has nothing to do with it . . .

DUNCAN

A southerner would say "we've prepared for you this little demonstration," not "we've prepared this demonstration." I know what I'm talking about.

JARED

Fine. Don't take the cut. Look, we have to talk about "Death and Taxes in 3D."

DUNCAN

All these line changes are pointless. Changing unimportant words? Reversing sentence order? What's with you these days?

JARED

I want co-authorship on "Death and Taxes in 3D."

DUNCAN

(Unsurprised) No.

JARED

I'm gonna fight you on this one. Were YOU there at rehearsals? Did YOU do the re-writes?

DUNCAN

You did nothing to change the structure, you did nothing to change the plot. All you did was line changes. Mary showed me the latest script.

JARED

Forty percent.

DUNCAN

What?

JARED

I want forty percent of authorship.

DUNCAN

(Goes back to typing) No.

JARED

Why not? And stop typing, goddamnit!

DUNCAN

Because you're not the author. I expect you to get credit as editor, but that's it. If I had money you'd get your editing fee and that's that. Besides, you have everything to gain as an actor. People are gonna see you. You're up front. All I have is authorship. Why do you want to take that away from me?

JARED

Because I deserve it.

(DUNCAN resumes typing.
JARED pounds on the
keyboard.)

JARED (cont'd)

You know, I've had just about enough of you. Mister temperamental artist. I can out-temperamental you any day of the week. You want editing? Your plays are wordy and preachy. Nobody wants to be brought down by your stupid little regurgitations. You know why I want authorship? Because I'm there. I'm part of it. All YOU care about is if anyone likes your meanderings or not. (mocking) "Do you like it." "Do you like it." Well, no, we don't like it. And we don't like you.

(DUNCAN goes back to
typing.)

JARED (cont'd)

Well?

DUNCAN

Look, I'm real busy. You should go.

JARED

Oh, did I hurt your feelings? Well, here's some news for ya . . . you're hurting ALL of our feelings. Me, and Mary, and Lilly, and Tom, and everybody. Why? Because you're too FUCKED UP to get involved in this stupid production. We WORK while you hole yourself up in that stupid self-inflicted depression. We've all got a lot at stake here, buddy boy, and YOU'RE preventing it from happening.

DUNCAN

Just go.

JARED

Okay, okay, I'm going. But if you ever want me to edit your crap again, you're gonna have to re-think this partnership.

DUNCAN

Please . . .

(JARED starts to leave.)

JARED

. . . fucking pathetic . . .

(JARED leaves. DUNCAN
types.)

Fadeout.

SCENE 5

(Later that day - Bar. MARY and ROLAND sit at a small table, each with a drink. MARY is studying a contract.)

MARY

Roland . . . (she continues to read)

ROLAND

Look, I . . .

MARY

Roland . . . (continues to read)

ROLAND

I did all I could . . .

MARY

Roland . . . (continues to read)

ROLAND

Look, Mary . . .

MARY

(Stops reading) I'm not a happy camper, Roland.

ROLAND

Look, Mary, you have to understand. This is no "dog-and-pony" show. This is the real thing. This is an Equity contract.

MARY

Jared is going to shit a brick.

ROLAND

I can't help it.

MARY

What am I gonna do about my actors? What about Lilly? Or Tom? Or Jared . . . ?

ROLAND

They'll have to audition.

MARY

Against Equity actors? Tom may survive, but I don't think Lilly will . . . and I KNOW Jared won't.

ROLAND

He'll get a credit in the program.

MARY

You don't understand. Jared is hands-on. If he can't be part of the production and be free to make his little line changes he'll go nuts.

ROLAND

Then let him go nuts. Only the author can make changes at this point, and only if they're deemed necessary by the director.

MARY

You might as well put him in a straightjacket. That's how we got through our last production . . .

ROLAND

But, like the contract says, at least he can re-audition for the role. If he really wants it he'll work for it. You might want to suggest he take an acting class . . .

MARY

Duncan wrote that role for him.

ROLAND

And Duncan has a major say in the casting. If you can get his ass involved in the production you may save Jared. How's that coming . . . getting Duncan involved?

MARY

We have some ideas. Don't worry, he'll cooperate.

ROLAND

Hey, at least I was able to give you first right of refusal.

MARY

Am I supposed to thank you? You threaten the existence of our whole company and you want gratitude for sparing MY life?

ROLAND

Welcome to professional theatre. Roles don't go to buddies, they go to the best actor for the role. If we're going to play in an equity house we have to open the doors to Equity actors. My hands are tied.

MARY

Who else gets to play God with the actors aside for Duncan?

ROLAND

The director and myself. And if it goes to a bigger venue we'll have to involve the backers.

MARY

And how does the vote go?

ROLAND

It'll be fine, Mary. I think Tom is fine. He should get the part hands down. Besides, he's already Equity.

MARY

What about Lilly and Jared? I have to think of my actors.

ROLAND

Mary, look . . . I'm sure if they want the part . . .

MARY

(Interrupting) They're out, aren't they. You can tell me.

ROLAND

That's all up to the three of us now, isn't it?

MARY

I know where my vote goes.

ROLAND

But what about Duncan?

MARY

There's nothing to worry about.

ROLAND

Even with Jared?

MARY

I told you, Duncan loves Jared. He'll be just fine with it.

ROLAND

Then there really IS nothing to worry about. The production will go fine. Once we get the author involved we'll be home free. (a beat) Mary?

MARY

Yes?

ROLAND

Look, I don't want to get off on the wrong foot. I'm really trying to be careful.

MARY

I'm sorry. I know you're doing all you can.

ROLAND

I am. I think this could really be the start of a great partnership.

MARY

Like producing more of our plays and stuff?

ROLAND

(Touches her hand) Well, that's really not what I had in mind by a "partnership."

MARY

Oh. Look, Roland, I think you're sweet and all, but do you really think we should be getting involved?

ROLAND

I never bought into that "don't shit where you eat" addage. I always thought that a cheap rationalization for people who don't get any. Besides, a little fun in the workplace tends to keep morale high and make the day go faster.

MARY

But what about fallout?

ROLAND

I try to avoid it. I also never burn bridges. I mean, hey, if it doesn't work it doesn't mean we can't still produce great plays, does it? Art goes on . . .

MARY

You sound like you have some experience at this.

ROLAND

A little -- I won't lie to you. But face it, Mary. You're author is a basket case, your actors are second rate and arrogant . . . you don't exactly represent an appealing company.

MARY

So you're saying . . .

ROLAND

How many producer's offices have you been kicked out of after having first meetings like ours?

MARY

(Stammers) Oh . . . I . . . uh . . .

ROLAND

Four. I've checked. You fumbled the ball four times, each time because of your amateurish operation, weirdo writer and obnoxious actor.

MARY

But I thought you saw something different.

ROLAND

Not really. The talent is definitely there. Duncan is a gifted writer and you're a . . . competent director.

MARY

But you thought I'd put out.

ROLAND

I hate being so blunt, but "yes." It's no secret that I find you attractive.

MARY

I think I'd better be going.

ROLAND

Your name is quickly becoming poison in the industry. Any company who was even considering picking you up is having doubts.

MARY

You'd stoop to blackmail?

ROLAND

No. You're doing it on your own by working with misfits. We can change all that. I'm offering you your chance to prove them all wrong -- misfits and all. But you can't fault me for looking out for number one. You'd do the same.

MARY

(A beat) Not only would I, but I have on a few occasions.

ROLAND

So you understand. What's the verdict.

MARY

Why do I all of a sudden feel cheap.

ROLAND

Oh, please don't. I know you, Mary Lynn. You and I are a lot alike. There's no line between business and pleasure. For us, business IS pleasure. Tell me . . . in your wildest dream what are you doing; closing a multi-million dollar deal or having a nuclear orgasm?

MARY

Usually one leads to the other.

ROLAND

So . . .

MARY

Oh, my God. Roland, you're right.

ROLAND

The truth isn't always pretty.

MARY

Suddenly I'm very horny.

ROLAND

I have a few contracts for you to sign.

MARY

Are there figures involved?

ROLAND

(Eyes MARY up and down) There might be.

MARY

Let's go.

(MARY grabs ROLAND's arm and they exit -- quickly.)

Fadeout.

SCENE 6

(A few days later - MARY's apartment. Sofa, a few boxes. JARED paces wildly.)

JARED

Why did you invite me to this?

MARY

Shouldn't I have?

JARED

Look, Mare, there are a few things you don't know about.

MARY

You stepped on Duncan again.

JARED

Can I help it that he's hypersensitive? I fart and he takes it personally.

MARY

What did you do this time?

JARED

I don't believe this guy. He wants me to edit, so I edit. Then he gets all defensive and says I'm looking for authorship. Aww, it got all messy.

MARY

Why can't you be patient with him? You know, YOU'RE no prize to work with either.

JARED

I just don't want to be here.

MARY

Come on, I need you for this.

JARED

Playing "matchmaker" was never one of my strong suits.

MARY

We're not playing "matchmaker." We're helping Duncan.

(Doorbell.)

MARY (cont'd)

Go be a doll and check on the turkey. I'll baste the guests.

(JARED exits quickly. MARY opens the door, DUNCAN enters.)

MARY (cont'd)
Duncan, honey, you made it. (kisses him on the cheek)

DUNCAN
Mary, we have to talk.

MARY
Jared is here. I hope you don't mind.

DUNCAN
Uh . . . no. I don't mind.

MARY
So, come in . . . sit down.

(DUNCAN looks around.)

MARY
You've never seen my new place. What do you think?

DUNCAN
It's a little . . . gaudy?

MARY
(Ponders) Hmm . . . maybe you're right. But look at the size of this living room! It'll be a great rehearsal space.

DUNCAN
Hmm.

MARY
Look, Duncan sweetheart, about this producer . . .

DUNCAN
Mary, please.

MARY
I'm sorry. It's just so important to me.

DUNCAN
And it's important to me. Look, do we have to get into this now?

MARY
I'm sorry, sweetie. (calls) Jaaaa-reeeed! (giggles nervously) Jared, how's the turkey coming along?

JARED

(Off-stage) I hope you have plenty of gravy.

MARY

(Laughs nervously) I'll go see how he's doing.

(MARY darts off stage. We hear MARY and JARED bicker quietly but don't exactly understand anything they say. After a few moments of this the doorbell rings. MARY does not come out so DUNCAN opens the door. LILLY hesitantly enters.)

DUNCAN

Uh . . . come in . . .

LILLY

Huh? Oh. Hi. Is Mary here?

DUNCAN

Uh . . . yeah . . . she's in the kitchen with Jared.
Can I tell her you're here?

LILLY

Uh . . . yeah. Tell her Lilly is here. Lilly Sprinkle.

DUNCAN

I know.

(DUNCAN exits, leaving LILLY to stand awkwardly for a moment. He returns.)

LILLY

Did you tell her?

DUNCAN

Mmm hmm.

LILLY

And . . . ?

DUNCAN

She said I should introduce myself. (a beat) Duncan Ferguson. (extends his hand)

(DUNCAN extends his hand.
LILLY, appearing a little
deflated, shakes his hand
reluctantly.)

LILLY

Oh. YOU'RE Duncan Ferguson?

DUNCAN

Mmm hmm.

LILLY

Oh. I love your play.

DUNCAN

Thank you. (a beat) Which one?

LILLY

"Death and Taxes in 3D."

DUNCAN

Oh.

LILLY

I'm in it, you know.

DUNCAN

In 3D? (smiles)

LILLY

(Giggles nervously) No, I'm in the play. I'm an
actress in the play.

DUNCAN

I know. I saw your audition.

LILLY

That's what they tell me. It's funny -- I don't
remember seeing you there.

DUNCAN

I was there. Mary introduced us. You shook my hand
then, too. You were nervous.

LILLY

I just had an audition.

DUNCAN

Yeah.

(Awkward pause. MARY and JARED return from the kitchen.)

JARED

Ahh, the lovebirds . . .

MARY

Hi, kids. Sorry about abandoning you like that.

JARED

We almost had a major turkey crisis. Who knew that if you cook it upside down you can't see the thermostat pop.

LILLY

It's okay. Duncan and I were just . . . uh . . .

DUNCAN

. . . talking.

JARED

Yeah, I'll bet. So, Duncan, is she a babe or what?

DUNCAN

Jared, please . . .

JARED

Come on, big guy - don't wimp out. You're reputation's on the line here. If you don't score you'll lose face and I'm out fifty bucks!

LILLY

Duncan, I had nothing to do with this . . .

MARY

That's okay, Jared is only kidding. Right?

JARED

Yeah, I'm just jerkin' around. No harm meant, no harm done.

MARY

(After an awkward pause) You know, Duncan, Lilly just LOVES your play.

DUNCAN

I know, she told me. Thank you.

JARED

So Lil, is he everything you've ever imagined?

MARY
JARED!

LILLY
Uh . . . Mary, I don't think this . . .

DUNCAN
(Interrupting) Look, I think I have to go. Thanks for the invitation and all. (heads for the door)

JARED
Not yet, big fellah. We got a bird to devour.

DUNCAN
I'm not very hungry.

MARY
Duncan, honey, it's alright. Stay.

LILLY
Look, Duncan, I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings . . .

DUNCAN
There's nothing to apologize for. I wish everybody would stop apologizing to me all the time.

MARY
Duncan . . .

DUNCAN
I'm sorry, Mary. I tried. I just can't do this sort of thing. Please understand.

(DUNCAN quickly exits. Long pause.)

MARY
Jared, do something.

JARED
I'll carve.

LILLY
I feel like this is all my fault.

JARED
It is.

MARY
(Scolding) Jared! (a beat) What happened?

LILLY

I don't know -- we talked . . . we TRIED to talk . . .
but it's just so hard with him . . .

MARY

(Comforting her) I know.

JARED

I say we kill him.

MARY

(Scolding) Jared . . .

LILLY

Is he always so cold?

MARY

Let me tell you something about Duncan Ferguson. He
can feel the grass grow -- and it kills him.

LILLY

I have to do something. I just don't know how.

JARED

You're an actress. Try acting.

MARY

Jared, how can you be so cold?

LILLY

No, he's right. I can do this. I HAVE to do this.

(LILLY exits. MARY pouts
for a moment.)

JARED

I told you it was a pipe dream.

MARY

No. We can break through.

JARED

Can I get you a drink?

MARY

No. Yes. Scotch and soda. A big one.

JARED

Sure. Maybe later we can get naked and howl at the
moon.

MARY

Sure. Why not.

Blackout.

SCENE 7

(Later that evening -
DUNCAN's apartment. He
types at his computer
furiously with his sheet
wrapped around his
shoulders. Pound at the
door. DUNCAN does not
flinch. Pound again. This
time he grimaces as though
he has just heard something
horrible.)

DUNCAN
GO AWAY!

LILLY
(Off-stage) Please, Duncan. Let me in.

(DUNCAN takes off the sheet,
slowly moves across the room
and opens the door. He sees
LILLY and he goes back to
his computer. She carries a
plate covered with aluminum
foil.)

LILLY (cont'd)
Aren't you going to ask me in?

DUNCAN
(Typing) No.

(Pause.)

LILLY
May I come in?

DUNCAN
Why?

LILLY
Because I want to.

DUNCAN
Suit yourself.

(DUNCAN types. LILLY walks
carefully through the
clutter.)

LILLY

This is an interesting room . . .

DUNCAN

(Interrupting) Why are you here? Did Jared manipulate you into it? He's good at manipulating.

LILLY

I brought you some turkey.

DUNCAN

I'm not hungry.

LILLY

(A beat) Look, I'm here because I want to be. I feel like I screwed things up. I just wanted to get to know the genius behind that wonderful play.

DUNCAN

I'm not a genius.

LILLY

Yes, you are. Certified, bonified . . . a real genius. Mary tells me that ALL your plays are as good as "Death and Taxes in 3D."

DUNCAN

She hasn't read them all. Though Mary is a good friend, I sometimes question her taste.

LILLY

A classic case of disqualifying the positive. Why don't you think you're good?

DUNCAN

You don't hold back, do you.

LILLY

No, I don't.

(LILLY reaches to DUNCAN.
He pulls back.)

LILLY (cont'd)

(Firm) Oh, come on. Stop it. You don't have to be such a pain in the ass all the time.

DUNCAN

I'm not a pain in the ass ALL the time . . .

LILLY

Yeah, you have to sleep sometime.

(reaches out again)

I don't bite.

(finally is able to put her hand on his shoulder)

There now. That doesn't hurt, does it?

DUNCAN

No. Not much.

LILLY

Where does all this pain come from?

DUNCAN

I don't know, where are the usual sources?

(LILLY touches his arm and notices the scars on his wrists.)

LILLY

What happened.

DUNCAN

Nothing.

(DUNCAN tries to pull away. LILLY tightens her grip on his arm.)

LILLY

No games. If you tell me what happened I'll show you my scars.

DUNCAN

You, too?

LILLY

Not exactly. Let's just say I'll never be able to have children.

DUNCAN

I'm sorry.

LILLY

Why'd you do it?

DUNCAN

It's a long story.

LILLY

I have time.

DUNCAN

(Chuckles to himself) Usually when I say that it means that I just don't want to talk about it.

LILLY

Tough. Spill it. Why'd you do it?

DUNCAN

(Sighs) Because. I had nothing. I WAS nothing. It was like being in a hole . . . oh, never mind. It's complicated and I really don't want to stir up old garbage.

LILLY

You know, you weren't nothing then and you aren't now.

DUNCAN

Yes, I am.

LILLY

That wasn't a question. Duncan, you create wonderful things in that troubled mind of yours and you communicate them to everyone within the sound of your theatrical voice. You do things I never dreamed of, and have the courage to let people share in your pain and triumphs and feel their own feelings. That's a gift.

DUNCAN

It's a curse.

LILLY

Are you always this cheerful?

DUNCAN

You caught me on a good day. Yesterday I was pretty depressed.

LILLY

You shouldn't have run out on Mary and Jared.

DUNCAN

I know. But I had to. I was suffocating.

LILLY

Are you better now?

DUNCAN

I think so.

LILLY

Take a few deep breaths. We want to be sure.

(DUNCAN takes a few deep breaths.)

DUNCAN

Thanks for coming over.

LILLY

It was my pleasure.

DUNCAN

Can I tell you something?

LILLY

Anything.

DUNCAN

Well, not that it means anything -- it's just how I felt one day.

LILLY

You don't have to qualify it. Just tell me.

DUNCAN

Well -- the first time I saw you . . . well . . .

LILLY

You had a little crush on me?

DUNCAN

Keep in mind that it was a long time ago. I didn't know you at all . . .

LILLY

It's okay. I think it's sweet.

DUNCAN

Oh.

LILLY

You know, we MUST do something about your attitude.

DUNCAN

What's wrong with it?

LILLY

Are you kidding? You're a mess! Have you ever heard of Rational Emotive Therapy?

(DUNCAN shrugs.)

LILLY (cont'd)
I think you'll like it.

DUNCAN
I've seen a therapist.

LILLY
Just because you're in a room with a therapist doesn't mean you've gotten therapy. Now listen. You have a tendency to twist all the images and thoughts that come into your mind. They're called Cognitive Distortions. They look and feel very real but they're not. It's like your feelings are lying to you. (a beat while DUNCAN fidgets) Listen to me - I've been through this. Now, in order to figure out what is real and what isn't you rationalize the feeling. Understand?

DUNCAN
Lilly, I really don't feel like doing this . . .

LILLY
Though noogies. Now, tell me EXACTLY how you feel right this very minute.

DUNCAN
I don't want to do this . . .

LILLY
(Interrupting) Do it. Right this very minute.

DUNCAN
I feel worthless.

LILLY
Good. That's called "labeling" - a form of "overgeneralization." Now, let's look at it. Are you really worthless?

DUNCAN
I FEEL worthless . . .

LILLY
But ARE you worthless? (a beat) Look at you . . . you have a job, you have friends, you write wonderful plays that people love and want to produce. And besides, human worth really doesn't exist. Who's to say who's worth more or less? Are we all God juniors? Huh?

DUNCAN
(Amused) No . . .

LILLY

So, answer me. Are you REALLY worthless?

DUNCAN

. . . no. I guess not.

LILLY

Of course you aren't. Here, I want to try something I concocted that I call "Positive Mental Imagery." Have you ever looked in the mirror and said "I'm wonderful"?

DUNCAN

I have trouble looking in the mirror and not vomiting.

LILLY

"Emotional reasoning" and "disqualifying the positive." Come on, Pokey. Action begets motivation.

DUNCAN

Don't you have that backwards?

LILLY

One would think. Now, let's try it. (She stand and pulls DUNCAN with her) You DO have a mirror around here, don't you?

(DUNCAN pulls a towel off of a lump in the wall, which conceals a mirror.)

LILLY (cont'd)

Now. Look in the mirror and tell me what you see.

DUNCAN

Is this necessary?

LILLY

Crucial. Tell me, and no games.

DUNCAN

I see me.

LILLY

Very good. Now, tell yourself that you're wonderful.

DUNCAN

(Into the mirror) You're . . . you're . . . uh . . .

LILLY

Come on, it isn't that hard.

DUNCAN

Yes it is.

LILLY

Okay, okay. Close your eyes and just say the words.

DUNCAN

(Closes his eyes) You're wonderful.

LILLY

There. Now open your eyes and say it again.

DUNCAN

You're (opens eyes slowly) wonderful . . .

LILLY

(After a pause) Good. How did that feel?

DUNCAN

Weird. I don't know. Funny.

LILLY

Funny ha-ha or funny strange?

DUNCAN

A . . . a little of both I think.

LILLY

Congratulations. You've taken your first step toward positive mental health. I have some books you may want to read.

DUNCAN

(After an awkward beat) Lilly, I just want to . . .

LILLY

(Interrupting) Shhh. Don't say anything. Let's just enjoy the moment.

(LILLY slowly puts her hand behind DUNCAN's neck and kisses him on the cheek.)

DUNCAN

What was that for?

LILLY

For being wonderful.

Fadeout.

* END OF ACT 1 *