

A BRIEF CRACK OF LIGHT

by

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Draft 10.2 (November 2022)

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In memory of

Charles Nolte

Actor

Director

Playwright

Educator

Friend

TIME

The present

PLACE

The Penley, a rooming house in a major American city

CHARACTERS

Mae, the Penley's resident manager, 65 to 70

James, a long-time resident, 70 to 75

Alex, a new resident, 60 to 65

NOTE

Whatever else it may be, this is a play about old people on fixed incomes with nowhere to go and a great deal of time on their hands, much of which they fill in silence. The stage direction "beat" means a silence of about one second; "pause" a silence of about three seconds; "silence" a silence of ten seconds or more.

ACT I

SCENE 1

The lounge of the Penley, a shabby, tired rooming house inhabited by elderly people on fixed incomes.

There are three doorways. The largest leads to the front lobby and a stairway to the second floor; another to a bathroom; the third, which has a swinging door, to the kitchen. A window looks out on the building next door. Along the upstage wall are a built-in hutch containing a portable radio, a framed photograph of a young woman, and other items; a coat rack; a wastebasket; and a small table with a vase of artificial flowers and a telephone. A crucifix hangs on the wall above the table. There is a thermostat on the wall near the main doorway, a mirror on the kitchen wall. The furniture consists of a small desk and chair under the mirror; a wood table with two or three straight-backed chairs; two old, very worn and sagging, mismatched stuffed chairs that face a television set (the set itself is unseen); a small, very cluttered table between the chairs; and two threadbare area rugs.

It is late afternoon on a rainy day at the end of October. The radio is on, playing classical music at low volume. Otherwise, all is quiet except for the sound of rain and an occasional street noise.

At rise, JAMES is in one of the stuffed chairs reading a newspaper. He is a clean-shaven man wearing a threadbare sweater over a flannel shirt and nondescript pants and shoes. Setting the paper aside, he stares off into space. Rising, he goes to the thermostat and turns it up. He then crosses to the mirror, turning off the radio as he passes, and strikes several poses. Finally he takes out a nearly empty pack of cigarettes, lights up, and inhales.

At that moment, he hears the building's front door open and close. Quickly he stubs out the cigarette under a corner of a rug, steps on it, hides the butt in his chair, and tries to disperse the smoke by waving his hands as MAE, carrying an umbrella and a plastic bag, enters from the lobby. She is wearing a wet raincoat over trousers and a shirt. Weary and lost in thought, she sets the plastic bag on the table. Suddenly catching a whiff of cigarette smoke, she snaps to attention and marches directly over to James.

No smoking!

MAE

I wasn't smoking.

(defensively)

JAMES

God damn it, James, don't lie to me.

MAE

I only took one puff.

JAMES

MAE gives the umbrella a vicious shake.

Where'd you put it?

MAE

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

JAMES

Damn it, James, I know it's around here somewhere. Now where is it?

MAE

I threw it away.

JAMES

Bullshit! Give it to me.

MAE

JAMES reluctantly reaches into the chair and produces the cigarette.

Are you out of your goddamn mind?

MAE (cont.)

I made sure it was out.

JAMES

Don't you ever learn? Last time you nearly burned down the fucking building.

MAE

It was only smoldering.

JAMES

MAE

(livid)

It was on fire! On fire! Now hand it over.

JAMES obeys in sullen silence. MAE touches the end to make sure it's cool, then disposes of it in the wastebasket.

JAMES

(an anguished outburst)

That was my last cigarette!

MAE

(right in his face)

Good!

It's over. MAE peels off her raincoat and sags into a chair.

MAE (cont.)

(more tired than angry)

For god's sake, James, if you've got to smoke, go outside.

JAMES

It's raining.

MAE

Tell me about it. I walked all the way to K-Mart to get my prescription filled.

JAMES

Why didn't you go to Walgreens?

MAE

I did, and they wanted thirty-four bucks for a one-month supply. That's more than a buck a pill! So I told them to shove it and walked all the way to K-Mart. And all the way back. In the rain. (pause) I saved six bucks.

JAMES

You should have called a taxi.

MAE

It'd have to be raining ball bearings to get me into a taxi. I'd sooner flush my money down the toilet. Which reminds me, when you use the toilet on this floor, put the seat back down when you're done.

JAMES

Whatever for?

MAE

Because it's a rule of the Penley. Don't you ever sit down when you pee?

JAMES

Certainly not.

MAE

Well, you should. It's much easier on the prostate.

JAMES

When did you become an authority on the prostate?

MAE

I saw it on TV. You empty the bladder. None of that drip-drip-drip for the next ten minutes.

JAMES

When I need your advice about pissing, I will ask for it.

MAE uses the remote to turn on the TV. It's "Wheel of Fortune." They watch in silence. The sound should be just loud enough for the audience to hear the clicking of the wheel.

MAE

(to the contestant)

Buy an "o," you dummy.

Silence.

JAMES

(contemptuously)

"The Owl and the Pussycat."

MAE

(annoyed)

Goddamn it, James.

JAMES

(incredulous)

You really couldn't see that?

MAE

It must be great to be a genius.

The front door bell rings.

MAE (to herself)

Shit.

MAE gets up and exits to the lobby. During her absence, JAMES retrieves the remains of his cigarette from the wastebasket. After inspecting it for damage, he puts it back in the pack just as MAE returns.

JAMES

Who was at the door?

MAE

(shaking her head)

Stinking of booze and not a nickel to her name. I gave her directions to the shelter, but I don't think she'll make it. I hate to think where she'll spend the night.

JAMES

Has it stopped raining?

MAE

Not for her it hasn't. (suspiciously) Is it hot in here?

JAMES

(emphatically)

No.

MAE goes to the thermostat and turns it down.

JAMES (cont.)

I was freezing.

MAE

Put on another sweater.

JAMES

This place is a dump. A frigid dump.

MAE

(deliberately)

Nobody's forcing you to live here.

JAMES

This morning I could see my breath in my bedroom.

MAE

That's because you sleep with the goddamn window open.

JAMES

I have to. The whole floor stinks.

MAE

Don't blame me, I'm not the one who died up there.

She crosses to the desk.

JAMES

There's another letter for Eddie.

MAE returns to her chair with a small stack of mail.

MAE

I swear he gets more mail now than when he was alive.

JAMES

His room still smells like Lysol.

MAE

Better than last week.

JAMES

Poor Eddie. Dead for three days, and nobody knew it.

MAE

I don't think I saw him at all last month. I should have made him go to a nursing home.

JAMES

Why didn't you?

MAE

He paid the rent on time.

JAMES

Ah.

MAE begins to open the mail.

JAMES (cont.)

(after a beat, conversationally)

And in answer to your next question, no, I don't have the rent money yet. Tomorrow, maybe.

Monday is the first.

MAE

I know.

JAMES

Are you broke?

MAE

(straightening up)
“Poverty is a great radiance from within.” Rainer Maria Rilke. Famous poet.

JAMES

Not around here. Not at the end of the month.

MAE

The fourth letter makes MAE gasp. After reading it twice, she lowers her hands to her lap and stares into space.

Bad news?

JAMES

At first MAE doesn't respond. Then she passes the letter to JAMES.

The Harland Management Company. Very official-looking. “We regret to inform you...”

JAMES (cont.)

He reads the rest in silence.

(softly)
Oh, my. Oh, my. Oh, my.

JAMES (cont.)

JAMES gets to his feet and begins to pace. MAE is stricken and does not move.

(in shock)
Thirty-one days. I'll be out on the street in thirty-one days.

JAMES (cont.)

(angrily)
How can they do that? They have no right.

(despairingly)
Where do they expect us to go?

MAE

I should have known when they closed off the third floor.

JAMES

My god, where will I go?

MAE

(flaring)

What difference does it make? It's their fucking building.

ALEX appears in the main doorway. He is a handsome African American man in his early sixties. He is elegantly dressed in a bespoke sport coat, a silk tie, and stylish slacks, and he carries an expensive-looking black suitcase of moderate size. JAMES and MAE are lost in their thoughts and do not see him.

JAMES

(distraught)

What am I supposed to do?

MAE

(to herself)

I feel like I've been kicked in the gut.

ALEX takes in the scene for five to ten seconds, then very deliberately lifts up his suitcase and lets it drop to the floor. The noise should be loud enough to startle the audience. JAMES and MAE turn in astonishment.

ALEX

Anybody home?

Silence.

ALEX (cont.)

I saw the sign in the window. Is the room still available?

MAE

(visibly pulling herself together)

That depends. How long are you planning to stay?

ALEX

I don't know yet. A few weeks, maybe. Does it matter?

The Penley's closing on December first. MAE

They're going to tear it down. JAMES

Looks like I got here just in time. ALEX

Come over here where I can look at you. MAE

ALEX comes over.

What's your name? MAE

Alex. ALEX

Where are you from, Alex? MAE

Here and there. I travel a good deal. ALEX

What do you do for a living? MAE

I'm a man of business. ALEX

What kind of business? MAE

My own. ALEX

You mean you own it? JAMES

ALEX
(giving nothing away)

You might say that.

MAE

Oh shit, who cares?

ALEX

Tell me about the room.

MAE

It's got a bed with a brand new mattress. Clean sheets and towels once a week. Desk, chair, chest of drawers. Nice chest of drawers with a mirror on top. (hopefully) It's just been repainted.

JAMES

(wickedly)

And the odor. Don't forget the odor.

MAE throws JAMES a vicious look.

MAE

The previous occupant passed away. We had to do a little fumigation.

ALEX

Any other rooms?

MAE

Just the one. It's ninety bucks a week, payable in advance. Rent is due on Monday, (with emphasis for JAMES' benefit:) *no exceptions*. On Tuesday, you're late; on Wednesday, you're out.

ALEX

(with a smile)

Stern, yet practical.

MAE

No pets, no kids, no drugs, no hookers. You a smoker?

ALEX

No.

MAE

Good, because there's (raising her voice and glaring in JAMES' direction) *no smoking* either. (beat) God damn it, now I forgot what I was going to say.

JAMES

(reciting a litany he knows by heart)

No loud music. No TV after eleven. No long-distance calls.

MAE

Right. This is the lounge, and it's for the use of the residents. If you want to entertain someone, do it here. There's the phone: local calls only.

ALEX

A land line. How fitting.

MAE

The kitchen and laundry room are through that doorway. You can use them all you want as long as you keep them clean. Any questions?

ALEX

How many residents are there?

MAE

You're looking at them.

ALEX

Might I actually see the room?

MAE

Sure thing.

MAE leads the way out. ALEX starts to follow her but stops at the window and gazes out.

MAE (cont.)

This way.

ALEX crosses to where she's standing.

MAE (cont.)

Not much of a view, is it?

ALEX

(smiling)

It will do. It will do.

They exit. JAMES is left alone, watching the TV as the lights fade.

JAMES

Do I detect a flutter of interest in our new resident?

MAE

My fluttering days are over.

Silence.

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