

A BRIEF CRACK OF LIGHT

by

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In memory of
Charles Nolte

Actor

Director

Playwright

Educator

Friend

TIME

Now, more or less

PLACE

The Penley, a rooming house in an American city

CHARACTERS

Mae, the Penley's resident manager

James, a long-time resident

Alex, a new resident

NOTE

This draft (12.4) of "A Brief Crack of Light" represents the current thinking of director Michael Lindsay-Hogg and playwright Roy M. Close as of December 2025, and we hereby authorize members of the UK production team to distribute copies as they see fit. That said, there remain places in the script where we still have work to do, and we reserve the right to do so.

ACT I

SCENE 1

The parlor of the Penley, once the home of a prosperous family, now a shabby rooming house inhabited by people of retirement age, on a rainy afternoon in late October.

Stage right, a staircase to the floor above. Upstage, a hutch holding a mantel clock, a boombox, a framed photo of a young woman, and not much else. Upstage left, a swinging door to the kitchen; near it, a full-length wall mirror and an old wood table with unmatching chairs. Downstage left, the main doorway to the lobby; there is a thermostat on a nearby wall. Downstage right, a window facing the street. Downstage center, two ancient easy chairs facing a TV (the set itself is unseen).

JAMES, wearing old slacks and a cardigan, enters backwards from the kitchen, using his backside to push the door open. He carries a plastic tray bearing the makings of a spartan afternoon tea: battered teapot, mismatched cup and saucer, saltine cracker on a paper napkin. Taking the tray to the table, he prepares a cup of tea in what is clearly a daily ritual.

Cup in hand, he ambles upstage to the hutch, where he examines the mail and turns on the boombox and changes its station from Willie Nelson to Vivaldi, then to the thermostat, which he turns up. Satisfied, he starts for the kitchen but is distracted by the mirror, where he admires himself while striking poses. Finally, he takes out a nearly empty pack of cigarettes, lights up, and inhales.

Tinny chimes are heard: the front door has opened. JAMES immediately stubs out the cigarette, hides it in his easy chair, and tries to disperse the smoke as MAE, carrying an umbrella and a plastic bag, enters. Wet, weary, lost in thought, she sets the bag on the table. Suddenly catching a whiff of smoke, she snaps to attention and marches over to James.

MAE

No smoking!

JAMES

(defensively)

I wasn't smoking.

MAE

Damn it, James, don't lie to me.

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

God 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 mind?

MAE (cont.)

I made sure it was out.

JAMES

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

MAE

It was only smoldering.

JAMES

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

MAE

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

JAMES

(an anguished outburst)

That was my last cigarette!

MAE

Good!

It's over. MAE peels off her raincoat and sags into her easy 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 Walmart 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 Walmart. And all the way back. In the rain. (pause) I saved six bucks.

JAMES

I would 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. (beat) Which reminds me, when you use the toilet on this floor, put the seat back down when you're done.

JAMES

Sorry. Some days it's all I can do to zip up my fly.

MAE

It's a rule of the Penley, and you know it. (beat) Don't you ever sit down when you pee?

JAMES

Not if I don't have to.

MAE

You really should. It's much easier on the prostate.

JAMES

And 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

(wryly)

When I need your advice about micturition, 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 A, you dummy.

Silence.

JAMES

"Flying Fish and Chips."

MAE

(annoyed)

Goddamn it, James.

JAMES

(genuinely surprised)

You really couldn't see that?

MAE

It must be wonderful to be a genius.

The tinny chimes sound.

MAE (to herself)

Shit.

MAE gets up and exits to the lobby. During her absence, JAMES retrieves his cigarette from the wastebasket. After inspecting it for damage, he puts it back in the pack and sits back down in his chair 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. 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)

Certainly not.

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

Nobody's forcing you to live here.

JAMES

This morning I could see my breath in my bedroom.

MAE

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

JAMES

I had to. The whole upstairs smells like Lysol.

MAE

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

She goes to the hutch and picks up the mail—half a dozen letters.

JAMES

There's another letter for Eddie.

MAE returns to her chair and opens mail as the conversation continues.
She works slowly and methodically, examining each envelope front and
back before opening it by hand and extracting its contents.

MAE

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

JAMES

His room still stinks.

MAE

Better than last week.

JAMES

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

MAE

It's my own damn fault. I should have made him go to a nursing home.

JAMES

Why didn't you?

MAE

He paid the rent on time.

JAMES

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

MAE

Monday is the first.

JAMES

I know.

MAE

Are you broke again?

JAMES

(straightening up)

"Poverty is a great radiance from within." Rainer Maria Rilke. Famous poet.

MAE

Not around here, it's not. Not at the end of the month.

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

JAMES

Bad news?

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

JAMES (cont.)

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

He reads the rest in silence.

JAMES (cont.)

(softly)

Oh, my. Oh, my. Oh, my.

JAMES gets to his feet and begins to pace. MAE is stricken and does not move. The tinny chimes sound, but they are too preoccupied to hear.

JAMES (cont.)

(in shock)

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

Nobody cares where you go, and that's a fact.

ALEX appears in the main doorway. He is a handsome black man of about fifty, elegantly dressed in a bespoke sport coat, silk tie, and slacks, and he carries an expensive-looking black suitcase. 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, then very deliberately lifts up his suitcase and lets it drop to the floor. JAMES and MAE turn in astonishment.

ALEX

Anybody home?

Pause.

ALEX (cont.)

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

MAE

(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?

MAE

The Penley's closing at the end of next month.

JAMES

They're going to tear it down.

ALEX

Looks like I got here just in time.

MAE, with an audible grunt, gets out of her chair, goes to where ALEX is standing, and sizes him up.

MAE

What's your name?

ALEX

Alex.

MAE

Where you from, Alex?

ALEX

Oh, here and there. I travel a good deal.

What do you do for a living? MAE

I'm a man of business. ALEX

What kind of business? MAE

My own business. ALEX

He's a salesman. JAMES
(to MAE, dismissively)

You might say that. ALEX
(giving nothing away)

What do you sell? JAMES

That depends. What do you need? ALEX

Oh shit, who cares? MAE

Tell me about the room. ALEX

It's got a twin 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. It's just been repainted. MAE

And the odor. Don't forget the odor. JAMES
(wickedly)

MAE throws JAMES a vicious look.

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

Any other rooms?
ALEX

MAE
Just the one. 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.

(smiling)
ALEX
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
No loud music. No TV after eleven. No long-distance calls.

MAE
Right. This is the parlor, and it's for the use of the residents. If you want to entertain someone, do it here. (indicating a touch-tone telephone on a small table on the upstage wall:) There's the phone: local calls only.

ALEX
A landline. How fitting.

MAE
The kitchen and laundry room are through that door. 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 to the staircase. ALEX starts to follow her but stops at the window and gazes out.

MAE (cont.)

Not much of a view, is it?

ALEX

(smiling)

Oh, it will do. It will do.

He follows her up the stairs. JAMES gathers up the remains of his tea and exits to the kitchen as the lights fade.