

The Weekend People

a play in two acts
by Tom Rowan

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[OPENING SCENE ONLY]

Elaine Devlin Literary, Inc.
411 Lafayette Street - 6th floor
New York, NY 10003
212-842-9030
edevlinlit@aol.com

Tom Rowan
403 W. 40th Street
Apt. 3RE
New York, NY 10018
212-398-2389
TLRowan@hotmail.com
www.tomrowan.net

CAST OF CHARACTERS

CLAIRE BURGESS, late 50s, widow of a recently deceased oil and gas tycoon

JEAN HOLT, mid 80s, Claire's mother and a celebrated author

TRIP BURGESS, 31, Claire's elder son, now running his late father's company

STEPHANIE BURGESS, 30, Trip's wife

COLIN BURGESS, 29, Claire's younger son

HENRY WHITCOMBE, 50s, the director of a summer theatre company

MELISSA, 22, an actress, Asian-American

BRET, 21, an actor

LUCAS, 24, a hired hand

SETTING:

The porch and yard in front of Jean Holt's farmhouse in the Catskill Mountains, New York State

TIME:

The present; early summer

ACT ONE

Scene One

(The porch and front yard of a farmhouse in the Catskill Mountains; mid-morning. The house has been maintained with a mixture of love and laziness. It's cozy and comfortable but there are fixtures that need to be repaired and curtains that should have been replaced by now; the exterior siding and shutters haven't been painted in at least ten years.)

We see the front entrance; the heavy door is wide open but the screen door is shut to keep out flies and mosquitoes. There are also a couple of windows on the porch, and through the curtains a bit of the dimly lit front room is visible. An artist's easel sits at one end of the porch, the canvas facing upstage and covered by a light drop cloth; nearby are a glider long enough to seat two and a small, low wooden table.

A short flight of wooden steps leads down off the porch to the yard, where there is a large maple tree; hanging from a low branch is a simple swing made of ropes with a plank of wood for the seat. A redwood picnic table with two benches, a tree stump, and an Adirondack chair provide places to sit in the yard—as of course does the grass. The lawn has been recently mowed, though a couple of flower beds up against the porch don't look to be well-maintained at present. Still, the overall impression is that of an inviting place to spend a lazy summer day.

CLAIRE BURGESS opens the screen door and comes out on the porch, followed by HENRY WHITCOMBE, with whom she is in mid-conversation. Looking younger than her years, CLAIRE is svelte and fit in linen slacks, a tube top, and a flowing, open cotton tunic that looks a little too chic to be an artist's smock, though there are a few colorful paint stains on it. HENRY is also dapper in an Oxford-cloth shirt and light summer blazer.)

HENRY

It's so generous of you to help out with this again, Claire.

CLAIRE

Oh, it's our pleasure. I only wish we had space for a third, but I have to keep a couple rooms open for the family when they come up on weekends. Trip's schedule is so unpredictable now that he's running the company. Won't you sit for a moment? *(She gestures to the glider.)*

HENRY

(Looks at his watch) Oh, I think I can spare a few more minutes. Rehearsal doesn't start till eleven. *(He sits on the glider, which shifts and groans squeakily.)*

CLAIRE

(Seating herself beside him) Walt was always telling me to replace this creaky old thing but I think it has character.

HENRY

It's still hard to believe he's gone. How long has it been since...

CLAIRE

Last fall. It was just before Thanksgiving.

HENRY

Oh, Claire. I can only imagine how much you must miss him.

CLAIRE

Indeed. (*She nods.*) But I'd been missing him for a long time, if truth be told. Years, actually.

HENRY

(*Taken aback*) Okay...?

CLAIRE

(*Smiling suddenly*) Can I offer you anything? Carlotta made iced tea.

HENRY

I really only have a few minutes. As I said, it's lovely of you to take the kids in. Now that the company has gotten so large, it's harder than ever to find housing for everybody.

CLAIRE

Say no more: It's our pleasure! The Witch enjoys having young people in the house. And they're gone most of the day anyway so it's really no trouble.

HENRY

Melissa and Bret are old friends; they overlapped at Middlebury. Normally we wouldn't put an intern in with one of the leading actresses, but since they know each other so well they asked to be together.

CLAIRE

Melissa's one of the leads? In which show?

HENRY

She's our Juliet. I'm directing.

CLAIRE

Well aren't we getting cutting edge?

HENRY

How do you mean?

CLAIRE

Well, I know that sort of casting is all the rage down in the city. But Juliet wasn't really oriental, was she?

HENRY

(*Winces politely*) Please say "Asian" if you don't mind; "Oriental" is considered...

CLAIRE

Old fashioned? Politically incorrect?

HENRY

Let's say "culturally insensitive," these days.

CLAIRE

Oh goodness, I could never keep up with all those rules! And Walt as you probably remember had no patience for it.

HENRY

I do remember. Anyway, she's terrific. Bret's a year or two younger; he's a member of our intern program, understudy roles and such.

CLAIRE

You know I always look forward to opening night.

HENRY

I'm afraid when you come you'll notice the Playhouse is looking pretty... ramshackle these days.

CLAIRE

Oh, but that's always been part of its charm! It still looks a little bit like the barn we played in as kids.

HENRY

It needs to be renovated again, desperately. For safety purposes. And you know it's my dream to winterize too, so we can do a full-year season.

CLAIRE

I don't know who you think would show up in the winter, Henry. It's mainly the weekend people who are your patrons now, isn't it? The locals couldn't care less about the arts and most of them can't afford tickets anyway.

HENRY

Well there are "weekends" all year round, aren't there? Some families drive up from the city every Friday. And we draw audience from a pretty wide radius these days.

CLAIRE

I hope it all works out the way you want it to, Henry. I've always believed in the work you do.

HENRY

Naming rights are available of course, if someone were to give enough for a thorough renovation, or better yet a new theatre.

CLAIRE

Oh dear, Henry. I love helping out with the housing, but I'm afraid we didn't even make our

annual contribution this year.

HENRY

You haven't yet.

CLAIRE

It's all still so soon. Walt's Will is going to be tied up in probate for I don't know how long. His evil brother out in California, who hasn't even spoken to us in almost fifteen years, is one of several people challenging it. He claims Walt undervalued the oil company when they were dividing up Walter Senior's estate back in the early nineties, and therefore his side of the family didn't get their due. So he's using Walt's death as an opportunity to try to, as he calls it, "rectify" that, which Trip thinks is just reprehensible and I agree. It's all such a mess. So my hands are tied at the moment, I'm afraid; Trip says we have to hold off on most of the philanthropy until we find out just what we're going to be up against. (*HENRY nods.*) Can I show you something though?

HENRY

Of course.

CLAIRE

(*She stands and moves hesitantly to the easel.*) I've been doing some... creative work of my own and I'd just love to get your thoughts. (*She starts to remove the drop cloth.*)

HENRY

(*He rises and follows her.*) You've been painting?

CLAIRE

(*Playing it shy*) I took a couple classes in the city this winter, and I've been ordering books on acrylic technique. It's so new but... (*She uncovers the painting.*) Anyway, this is my latest. Not nearly finished, of course. I call it "The Barn at Dawn."

HENRY

Oh Claire, it's lovely. (*Looking out downstage where he sees the real barn*) You've really captured the charm of the building.

CLAIRE

I need to finish it, but the angle of the light has to be the same. Six in the morning, like the day I started it last week.

HENRY

There's a wonderful freshness to it.

CLAIRE

I'm just an amateur of course. But "amateur"—that word really means someone who does it for love, right?

HENRY

(Gazing at the painting and nodding) I can see the love in it. Love for the old barn, for this farm.

CLAIRE

Oh, stop! You're too generous. I'm scared to show it to Trip and Colin; what if they make fun of me?

HENRY

Make fun of their talented mother? They wouldn't dare! I really have to get back for rehearsal.

CLAIRE

It's been so lovely seeing you. Do come for lunch one day next week.

HENRY

I'll take you up on that.

CLAIRE

Should I call Melissa and... what's the boy's name again?

HENRY

Bret. No, give them time to finish unpacking. We're rehearsing the Agatha Christie play this afternoon; neither of them is in it.

CLAIRE

All right, my dear. We'll take good care of them for you. Have a nice rehearsal.

HENRY

And do please consider what we talked about?

CLAIRE

You know I'll do what I can. Call me about next week!

HENRY

Bye, Claire.

(She sends him off with a peck on the cheek, then goes back to the easel and surveys her painting critically. She turns and calls offstage:)

CLAIRE

Lucas!

LUCAS'S VOICE

(Off) Yeah?

CLAIRE

Be a dear and come talk to me for a minute please.

(LUCAS, the young handyman, comes around from behind the house. Tall and broad-shouldered, he wears jeans and a dirty T-shirt.)

LUCAS

Yes ma'am; what can I do for you?

CLAIRE

How is it going in the flower beds?

LUCAS

Okay... I think. Tough to say. I can't quite tell if I'm pulling up weeds or... something I shouldn't be pulling up...

CLAIRE

(With a laugh) Don't worry about it then.

LUCAS

I mean you hired me as a handyman, right? Never claimed I was a gardener.

CLAIRE

Right you are. I just thought if you wanted to put in a few hours a week in the garden, the extra pay might come in handy.

LUCAS

It would.

CLAIRE

And of course it's always lovely having you around. I'd keep you all day if there was enough to do.

LUCAS

Okay... It's just that, if you need somebody who really knows his way around a flower garden, I might not be your guy.

CLAIRE

Understood. You know I've done the gardening myself almost every summer for the past, I don't know, it must be more than twenty years! I always enjoyed it. Except of course there were years when we weren't here as much. When we'd spend part of the summer in Colorado, or in DC... wherever Walt needed to be for business really. So sometimes I'd have to hire someone to fill in the gaps. But I'd have been on my knees in the flower beds every morning if I'd had my way, I did love it so.

LUCAS

But not this year?

CLAIRE

I can't face it this year, isn't that funny? Strange! I still want to be outdoors, but I need to be painting. Or... something. I don't know; I need to be creating something!

LUCAS

Sure. Thing is, I'm going to start tending bar three nights a week in the hotel. Stan Barkley, he was a couple years ahead of me at the high school, he said he needs somebody reliable.

CLAIRE

Oh, dear, I'd hate to see you have to take that on, on top of everything else. You'll barely get any sleep.

LUCAS

It's not that big a deal. The bar's dead by ten most nights.

CLAIRE

But won't that change when the Playhouse season opens?

LUCAS

Maybe. Anyways, I've got to get home and drive my dad to a doctor's appointment. It's clear over to Liberty.

CLAIRE

All right. Just show me what you got done in the garden before you go?

(He nods and the two of them exit stage left and behind the house. After a brief moment, MELISSA and BRET come out of the screen door onto the porch. She looks fetching in a short, flowered sundress; he is lithe in shorts and a tank top.)

MELISSA

You got the better room I think.

BRET

Nuh-uh. Yours is bigger. And nicer antiques.

MELISSA

I'm just afraid it's going to be noisy.

BRET

Noisy? Why?

MELISSA

They put me right above the kitchen. I could hear people talking.

BRET

Wanna trade? I'd love to be able to eavesdrop on the juicy family conversations.

MELISSA

You're terrible.

BRET

I'm serious. I googled the Burgess family and they're actually very famous and kind of unbelievable.

MELISSA

Local celebrities?

BRET

Not just local. The dad, who just died last year, was this huge oil and gas tycoon. He was on the list of the richest men in the state, like number nine or something.

MELISSA

Hmm. "The one percent."

BRET

But not only that, they're like super-influential like *politically*. They have this family foundation that gives millions of dollars to different like, political action groups or something.

MELISSA

Staunch Democrats I assume.

BRET

Nope, that's the thing. They're known for putting huge amounts of money behind ultra-conservative Republican candidates and shit.

MELISSA

Are you sure? Mrs. Burgess seems so nice.

BRET

The wives always do. They have to be gracious hostesses and entertain all the shady politicians and Russian oligarchs their husbands do business with. She probably had no idea what he was really involved with.

MELISSA

(*Dubious*) But you're going to find out.

BRET

Maybe. I'm hoping the sons put in an appearance at some point. The older son is some kind of business whiz and people think he has aspirations to run for office.

MELISSA

Great.

BRET

And the younger son is supposed to be *hot*.

MELISSA

And you know this how?

BRET

Margie, from the costume shop? She told me he was around part of last summer. Never came to the shows or met anybody but they used to see him taking his rowboat out across the lake early in the morning, all by himself, in a billowy white shirt.

MELISSA

(*Dubious*) “Billowy”?

BRET

The girls would spy on him from the terrace outside the Playhouse. She said he looked sad and lonely and romantic, like a character out of E.M. Forster or Emily Wall.

MELISSA

(*Gives him a look*) I’m guessing that was *Evelyn Waugh*?

BRET

Sure. What did she write?

MELISSA

Bret, don’t get distracted. You’ve never done summer stock before; I have.

BRET

Your point being?

MELISSA

We have three plays to do! Demanding plays. You’ll barely have time to eat, not to mention study your lines and try to get maybe four hours of sleep a night.

BRET

Yeah, what lines? I’m playing servants.

MELISSA

You’re understudying Romeo!

BRET

Steve won’t ever call out.

MELISSA

He might.

BRET

No way. He's like the healthiest person I've ever met.

MELISSA

But what if he gets called back to LA to do reshoots on his series or something?

BRET

(Shrugs) Then I'll cram it the night before.

MELISSA

You are going to get in so much trouble if you don't take this seriously.

BRET

“Seriously”? It's summer stock! In the Catskills! We owe it to ourselves to have adventures, romantic or otherwise.

MELISSA

This role is enough of an adventure for me, thank you very much.

BRET

But there's a lake; we can go sailing. And mountains! I haven't been rock climbing since high school. And nightlife!—kinda sorta. There's a bar in the hotel where the directors and the guest artists are staying. And you know I love to go dancing!

MELISSA

It's a small bar with a TV. They watch sports. I don't think they have dancing.

BRET

They will when I show up. Come on, Mel. You're playing Juliet for gosh sake! You owe it to yourself to fall in love and get your heart broken. I've already been in love twice, and I'm almost two years younger than you!

MELISSA

In case you've forgotten I have a very nice boyfriend in the city.

BRET

Which is like, two hundred miles away. And cell phones barely work up here! What he doesn't know won't hurt... anybody.

(LUCAS comes back, putting on a knapsack.)

BRET

And as if on cue! *(He gives MELISSA a mischievous look, then back to LUCAS.)* Hello there; who are you?

LUCAS

(*Wary*) Um, I'm Lucas. I do work around the place for Mrs. Burgess.

BRET

Hi, Lucas.

LUCAS

You guys must be the actors.

BRET

That's right. This is Melissa. And I'm Bret—with one T. (*Beat*) Some people spell it with two...

LUCAS

Um, okay. I don't think I'll probably be writing to you but thanks for the info.

BRET

(*Taken aback*) No problem...

LUCAS

(*Holding out his hand*) Nice to meet you, Melissa.

MELISSA

Same here, Lucas.

LUCAS

Don't let the family freak you out. They're nice enough when you get to know them.

MELISSA

That's great! We have been hearing some... (*She glances at BRET*) rumors and things.

LUCAS

Well if they told you there's a witch who lives in the attic...

MELISSA

(*Laughs*) No no, nothing that crazy.

LUCAS

Actually that one's true.

MELISSA

(*Beat*) Okay.

LUCAS

I've gotta split, but I'm sure I'll be seeing you around.

BRET

I'm sure you will. (*LUCAS goes.*) What's his problem?

MELISSA

He seemed nice enough.

BRET

To you maybe. (*Intrigued, he grins.*) A witch who lives in the attic!

MELISSA

He was probably just playing with us.

BRET

Not necessarily! You know the Catskill Mountains and the Hudson River Valley have always been just full of witches and ghosts. Elves, and talking bears... headless people on horseback!

MELISSA

Oh, please.

BRET

No no; there's books! I've done the research.

MELISSA

Okay. Well while you're wasting your time on that nonsense, I'm going to go to the Playhouse and work on my *lines*. I think the small rehearsal studio's free for an hour or so.

BRET

I'll drive you. Just let me get my backpack.

(He turns to go back into the house just as JEAN HOLT enters from left. She is wearing a long denim skirt and a baggy black sweater with a hood, thrown back to show her full head of long, snow-white hair, and is carrying a basket of fresh-picked blackberries. BRET stops cold and stares at her for a moment.)

JEAN

Good morning.

BRET

Hey, uh... Good morning! (*Beat*) Are you the witch?

JEAN

(Deadpan) However did you guess? (*Without another word she turns, climbs the steps to the porch, and goes into the house with her blackberries. BRET turns back to MELISSA, wide-eyed.*)

BRET

Told ya.

END OF EXCERPT