

The Weekend People

by Tom Rowan

Synopsis

Walter Burgess, president of a mammoth oil and energy company named after his father, has recently passed away. His widow, the elegant if slightly daffy Claire Burgess, is spending the summer where she usually does: on her mother's picturesque farm in the Catskill Mountains of New York State.

With plenty of time on her hands and a need to find a creative outlet, Claire is trying to learn how to paint. Her old friend Henry Whitcombe, the artistic director of the nearby Catskill Playhouse, comes by to find out why the Burgesses haven't made their usual annual donation; Claire tells him her son Trip has placed a moratorium on philanthropy until Walt's will has gone through probate. Still, Claire has agreed to house two of the Playhouse's actors for the summer season.

The two youngsters are Melissa, a recent college grad who has been hired to play Juliet, and Brett, a younger friend of hers who is working for the theatre as an apprentice. Melissa is serious about the work they are there to do, while Brett seems more interested in pursuing sight-seeing and summer adventures, romantic and otherwise. The two compare notes on rumors they've heard about the eccentric, and wildly wealthy, Burgess family, until they are interrupted by the arrival of Lucas, the good-looking but sometimes surly neighbor who works for Claire as a hired hand around the property. Lucas avoids Brett, sensing that he's gay, but seems to take an interest in Melissa.

Tensions heat up with the arrival of Claire's younger son, Colin Burgess, a sensitive and troubled young man who has prematurely left the rehab center in Philadelphia where he was being treated for drug addiction. He tells Trip, who stops by the property after dropping his kids off at a nearby summer camp, that he wants to have a family meeting to discuss their late father's will. Trip, assuming Colin is upset about the terms of his trust fund, which severely limits his access to cash due to his drug problem, dismisses his brother's concerns and heads back to the city.

Trip's wife Stephanie, however, stays around. Sexually frustrated and secretly drinking, the bored, restless young woman embarks on a witty and sometimes adversarial flirtation with Lucas.

When Claire's eighty-four-year-old mother, Jean Holt, finally comes down from her room in the attic for a chat, Melissa is astonished to learn that Ms. Holt is the author of her favorite novel. The book, *Shoot the Messenger* is a modern classic, a perennial top seller since its publication in the 1970s. But Jean shrugs off the adulation, claiming she's no longer proud of the work. An outspoken eccentric, she is notoriously reclusive and generally tries to keep her identity a secret, preferring to be referred to simply as "The Witch." Left alone with her grandson Colin—himself a frustrated would-be writer—she confides that he's the person in the family she identifies with most strongly.

When the actress playing Lady Capulet in the Playhouse's *Romeo and Juliet* departs suddenly for a film job, Claire, still hungry for a creative outlet and frustrated with her painting, connives to get Henry to cast her in the show. Summer romances seem to be brewing as Lucas grows closer with Melissa and Brett pursues his strong attraction to Colin—despite the latter's assertion that he's damaged goods and in no shape for a relationship.

When Trip is finally able to escape temporarily from the intense demands of running the family conglomerate in Manhattan, he comes back up to the farm for a weekend to see his mother in the play. Colin seizes the opportunity to call for a serious family meeting. He and Trip finally sit down at opposite sides of the picnic table, with Claire, Stephanie, and Jean nearby, and Colin presents his case against his father's will. Having had plenty of time for research when he was confined to the rehab center, Colin has uncovered the truth about Walter Burgess's philanthropy: The late tycoon had established a foundation to fund in perpetuity a couple of nonprofits, which are really shell organizations designed to funnel money to ultraconservative political candidates and fight any legislation that could impact the profitability of Burgess Oil and Gas, or the rest of the fuel industry. Trip asserts his late father's right to use his hard-earned fortune to support the causes he believed in, while Colin fights to unmask Walt's history of self-serving pseudo-philanthropy and urges the family to move forward as a newly progressive force for change, taking responsibility for the health of the planet and moving to undo some of the damage they have done.

Trip lashes out at Colin, whom he sees as a naïve and lazy parasite who has squandered opportunities and lived off the charity of his family for years. As the others go off to the theatre to see Claire and Melissa in the play, Colin is left alone and broken, acknowledging the truth of much of what Trip has said about him. He's on the phone with his old dealer when Brett comes out of the house and overhears the conversation. In love with Colin and determined to keep him from a relapse, Brett throws the phone into the woods, then abandons his own role in the play and drives off in his car with Colin.

The crisis that ensues over that night and the next morning forces each of the family members to do some soul-searching and confront deeply-entrenched family truths they've been avoiding for years. All their relationships are tested, and as the sun comes up on a new day, they face each other once again, trying their best to reach a new understanding of what it means to be a family.