

The Coffee Shop Stories

John Bandler

In 2020, Bandler completed eight short two-hander scripts. One of them, The Caffeine Rabbit Hole, was filmed in the spring of 2021 under Bandler's direction during the height of the strict pandemic lockdown in Ontario, Canada. This collection includes The Thinking Contest, This Time It's For Real, The Secret Is Black Coffee, Refill, Olivia and Odette, The Caffeine Rabbit Hole, The Audition, Until The Last Drop.



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The Thinking Contest

A one-act play

By John Bandler

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THE THINKING CONTEST - A Stage Play

By John Bandler

PLOT SUMMARY

A young man tries hard to engage a young woman in conversation.

CHARACTERS

BLAKE, a young man

TULIP, a young woman

SETTING

A coffee shop

SCENE 1

Two chairs face a small table.

Seated on a chair, deep in thought, TULIP warms her hands on her paper coffee cup.

BLAKE approaches, cup in hand.

BLAKE

May I?

Without looking up from her cup, Tulip waves him to sit. Blake sits, stares at her, takes a few sips, looks around. After a while --

BLAKE

Are you a student?

Tulip doesn't look up.

BLAKE

Right. Sorry. Silly question.

A long SILENCE.

BLAKE

This place is swarming with them. Students, dropping in, hogging tables, ordering one latte, hanging around all day, burning time on their laptops. Right? Not sure how this place stays in business. Do you?

(takes a sip, waits for a response)

I wouldn't admit to being a student either. Hey, bad idea. Really. You're right not to admit to being a student.

Tulip finishes her coffee, puts her cup down, looks up at him.

TULIP

Are you talking to me?

BLAKE

No. Sorry. Thinking aloud. You know? That's me. Just thinking aloud? Staring into space? Thinking? You were doing that, right? Caught in the act!

TULIP

What? Staring into space?

BLAKE

Thinking.

Slowly, Tulip crumples her cup.

TULIP

Thinking?

BLAKE

Thinking. Everybody does that --

TULIP

I try to do my thinking silently.

BLAKE

OK?

TULIP

And usually open my mouth only when I have something to say.

BLAKE

Profound. I mean, that's profound. "I try to do my thinking silently." That's deep. Deep. That's how a real scholar talks. A thinker. I was right! I knew you were a student!

Tulip looks around, perhaps searching for another table she could escape to. She continues crushing her cup.

BLAKE

So what are you studying? Philosophy? Political science? Real science? I play chess, you know. My mother taught me. Are you into chess? Real deep thinkers are into chess. Did your mother ever teach you anything?

TULIP

You do say the stupidest things.

BLAKE

(takes a sip of coffee)

Sorry. I'm kinda spiked on this coffee. It's my third. It's getting cold, though. Do you get spiked on coffee? Some of the deepest thinkers who ever lived got their aha moment on coffee. Don't you think? Do you think Einstein drank coffee?

TULIP

(still crushing her cup)

Einstein?

BLAKE

Yeah. He had lots of aha moments. He must have drunk lots of coffee.

TULIP

You know, I never really thought about that. I have absolutely no idea.

BLAKE

See! There is something in our universe you never thought about!

TULIP

Does it matter? About Einstein? I'm not sure I really need to know.

BLAKE

Thinking matters. It really mattered to Einstein. He was, like, totally into thinking.

TULIP

I'll bet you have no idea what I'm thinking about right now.

BLAKE

Ah, but that's good. Isn't it? If I knew what you were thinking about right now then we'd both be thinking the same thing, the same thoughts, and that's not too -- No. Wait. It would be interesting.

TULIP

I'll let you into a secret, then.

BLAKE

I love secrets. Hit me!

TULIP

What I'm really thinking about, right now, what keeps crossing my mind ever since you sat down, is... guess what...?

BLAKE

What?

TULIP

What I'm really wondering, right now, is how long you are likely to keep this up?

BLAKE

Keep this up? Keep what up? Thinking?

TULIP

Or, maybe... lack thereof?

BLAKE

Look, I can keep up with thinking for as long as any man can. How about it?

TULIP

How about what?

BLAKE

I'll take you on.

TULIP

On?

BLAKE

Yeah. On.

TULIP

Are you suggesting a pissing contest?

BLAKE

Pissing. We can try that later.

TULIP

After what?

BLAKE

A thinking competition.

Suddenly self-conscious of her crumpled cup,
Tulip pushes it off to the side.

TULIP

A thinking competition.

BLAKE

A thinking competition.

TULIP

This sounds like an echo chamber.

BLAKE

A thinking competition. Right here.

(pause)

How about we sit right here, elbows on the table, just like our mothers told us never ever to do --

TULIP

-- or talk to strangers --

BLAKE

(elbows on the table)

-- and stare at each other. And think. Think. First person to stop thinking loses. Then we try to guess what each of us was thinking about just before the loser stopped thinking.

TULIP

You may find it easy to suspend your thinking, obviously, but I don't think I can.

BLAKE

Let's go!

TULIP

I already know exactly what I'd be thinking.

BLAKE

Already. Awesome. You're halfway there already. You know what you'll be thinking about before you even start thinking about it.

TULIP

(elbows now on the table)

What I'll be thinking about is what I'm still doing here, at this table, crushing my coffee cup, letting this weirdo guy with these crazy eyes stare at me, having an are-you-kidding-me "thinking" competition.

BLAKE

So what's wrong with that? OK? We're already thinking, right? We're already doing that anyway. So all we're gonna do, all I'm asking you to do, is have a focus to your thinking, doing a thinking competition with a focus. You've been kinda staring at me for a while anyway...

Tulip sits back in her chair.

BLAKE

So staring at me for a little while longer won't hurt either of us.

TULIP

You're kidding, right?

BLAKE

Serious. Just like chess.

A SILENCE.

They stare at each other.

TULIP

(elbows back on the table)

When do we begin?

BLAKE

Great! I think we've begun already.

TULIP

Aren't we supposed to be silent while we think?

BLAKE

Silent? Are you adding to the rules?

TULIP

What rules?

BLAKE

All we have to do is to think at the same time.

TULIP

I think all the time.

BLAKE

Then you're sure to win.

TULIP

Have we started?

BLAKE

Started what?

TULIP

Thinking. I mean, have you started thinking, or are you spinning your wheels in the early stages of the endeavor? I mean, it seems to be really tough for you to stop talking.

BLAKE

I can think and talk at the same time.

TULIP

Stop.

BLAKE

What.

TULIP

Talking.

BLAKE

Have you stopped thinking? Remember, the idea is the first guy to stop thinking loses.

TULIP

I told you, I never stop thinking. Now shut up.

BLAKE

I did admit it.

TULIP

What? No, cancel that. I don't wanna know.

I told you I think aloud.
BLAKE

Just shut up for a second, will you?
TULIP

And look at you?
BLAKE

You've been doing that since you sat down.
TULIP

A SILENCE.

They stare at each other.

I give up.
TULIP
(sits back in her chair)

Awesome. You stopped thinking!
BLAKE

I think so.
TULIP

You give up?
BLAKE

I never give up.
TULIP

You just said you did.
BLAKE

They both laugh.

Now, are you a student or not?
BLAKE
(reaching for her arm)

END

This Time It's For Real

A one-act play

By John Bandler

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THIS TIME IT'S FOR REAL - A Stage Play

By John Bandler

PLOT SUMMARY

A young man threatens his girlfriend with suicide

CHARACTERS

CHARLES, a young man

MONICA, a young woman

SETTING

A coffee shop

SCENE: A COFFEE SHOP

Sitting at a table in a coffee shop, CUPS and PHONES at hand, CHARLES and MONICA.

MONICA
(in a loud whisper)

Keep your voice down, Charlie!

CHARLES

This time it's for real.

MONICA

Right. Like the last time.

CHARLES

Listen. Just listen!

MONICA
(lifts CUP, takes a slug of coffee)

Like you're gonna do yourself in right here and now in front of this crowd of fans that's been getting an earful of your ranting and raving for the past hour.

CHARLES makes a fist and glares at her.

CHARLES

This time it is for real, Monica.

MONICA

It always is. Look, I've just about exhausted everything I know what to say. And I'm exhausted. You need a shrink.

CHARLES
(now calmer, head down)

I want to die.

MONICA

You need help like crazy, to see you through this. I need help too. I'm not your shrink. You know, I've no idea what shrinks really do except, maybe, listen, and when you say stupid stuff like "I wanna die" they say things like "and what does that make you feel?"

CHARLES

I'll tell you what it makes me feel --

MONICA

Can we get out of here?

CHARLES

I'm so sorry.

MONICA

Enough.

CHARLES

I'm not like this. This isn't me!

MONICA

It's not you. It's not like you that's carrying on like this. Right? It's your coffee. You know, you know what? I'm out of here.

She half stands, looks at him, slumps back down.

MONICA

You've everything to live for.

CHARLES

I've nothing to live for.

MONICA

You're the most privileged --

CHARLES

Nothing!

MONICA

Calm down, Charles. They say that time is the great healer.

(tries her hand at humor)

But they could be wrong. Right? Like, whoever "they" are.

CHARLES

Time makes things worse. It's not the great healer they say it is. And the longer the time the worse it gets.

MONICA

You want me to take notes? For the shrink?

CHARLES

Don't laugh at me.

MONICA

(serious)

OK. What's happened, has happened, Charlie. You're a crazy perfectionist. Over-the-top. OK. You've had this huge, great big shock. And you're reeling from it. OK? That, I can understand. It's not your fault.

(suddenly philosophic)

I have an idea. Nature. It's nature. It's like this transient effect, see. Like with butterflies, the butterfly effect, that's what they call it. It's something that starts off with a big bang and makes you cycle through all these high highs and low lows. I think if you just force yourself to keep those highs low and those lows high, otherwise --

CHARLES

(puzzled, inquisitive)

Are you making this up?

MONICA

You can't make this crazy stuff up.

CHARLES

Stop it.

MONICA

The big bang.

CHARLES

Where are you going with this?

MONICA

Just trying to be helpful.

CHARLES

You're not trying hard enough.

MONICA

You have to do it in public, right? Like everything else with you, it has to be done in public. Right? This is so B movie.

CHARLES

I need to think.

MONICA

Make that a B minus.

CHARLES

Shut up, shut up, shut, up! I need you to be quiet for once!

A long SILENCE.

CHARLES

I need to get a grip on things.

MONICA

Perfectionist.

CHARLES

(bashes the table quietly with his fists)

Loser, loser, loser!

MONICA

This is so like you, you know.

CHARLES

This is not helping --

MONICA

Accept it. I give up. You're beyond help.

(pause, change of tone)

Look, I'm just trying to calm you down.

CHARLES

(loud)

I don't want to calm down!

MONICA

(makes as if to rise)

You want to die. I get that. So why don't you just do it. Die!

CHARLES

Yeah. That might work.

MONICA

Let's get this over with.

CHARLES

There's that text you sent me. Remember?

MONICA

What text?

CHARLES

The one that starts off with, "Dying...?"

MONICA

I don't remember any such text.

CHARLES

(imitates MONICA)

"Dying clean might be the one noble thing you'll ever accomplish, all by your very self."

A SILENCE.

MONICA

I'd never say, "dying clean."

CHARLES

Well, when they do the autopsy and find that text on my phone --

MONICA

-- don't do this --

CHARLES

-- they'll know who pushed me to do it.

MONICA

(slumps back into her chair)

You're making all this up.

CHARLES

My family will blame you. Your family will blame you.

MONICA

Why are you so set on making me wish I'd never met you.

CHARLES

You hate me.

MONICA

Charlie!

CHARLES

You always hated me.

MONICA

This is getting too serious.

CHARLES

That's the best thing I've heard from you all day.

MONICA

(looks around)

Stop. People really look alarmed.

CHARLES

Good.

MONICA

(still looking around)

We're gonna get thrown out.

CHARLES

I want to get thrown out!

MONICA

Give this up, Charlie. OK?

(brings out her PHONE)

You know what? I give up. I'm calling 9-1-1.

CHARLES

They'll arrest you.

MONICA

Nonsense.

CHARLES

I'll tell them you set me up for this.

MONICA

You won't.

CHARLES

I have, like, no idea right now what I'm doing.

MONICA

Or saying.

CHARLES

Yeah.

MONICA

You never do, until you do it. You even have to find this totally elegant way to die, so people will say, "Charles found this totally awesome way of putting an end to his precious life and stick it to his enemies. What a terrible loss to humanity. And he was so young!" Is that what you want people to say?

(pause)

And your friends and family? Let's call it a day, Charlie. See a shrink.

CHARLES

Never.

MONICA

I'll come with you.

(looks around)

We better go, Charlie. Looks like the manager is heading our way. This time it's for real.

END

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The Secret is Black Coffee

A one-act play

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THE SECRET IS BLACK COFFEE - A Stage Play

By John Bandler

PLOT SUMMARY

A young man tries to explain to a young woman the utility of coffee shops as incubators for creativity

CHARACTERS

SARA, a young woman

DAVID, a young man

SETTING

A coffee shop

SCENE 1

Sitting at a small table in a coffee shop, staring at two paper coffee cups, a young man and a young woman.

DAVID

Ready?

SARA

(looking around, eager)

Always.

DAVID

Pick up your cup, then, and take a sip.

Sara lifts cup, takes sip, puts down cup, stares at it.

SARA

Bitter.

DAVID

That's what creative people are supposed to love. Coffee, black, usually bitter, but smooth if the price is right.

SARA

(rapid fire)

OK. But if they're creative people, wouldn't they be experimenting? With sweetness, color, and so forth?

DAVID

(lifting his hands)

Slow down. Slow down. Take it easy. One step at a time.

(small laugh)

They told me you were quick; that I'd have to kind of dampen your enthusiasm a bit. Your reboot must have been --

SARA

(with emphasis)

-- New. Generation. Plus. Plus!

DAVID
(with resignation)

Right.

(pause)

Continuing...

SARA
Creative people came here...

DAVID
All manner of people came here. Some would line up at a cashier --

SARA
-- they paid?

DAVID
Of course, it was the custom. They'd pay, get their cup -- usually too hot to handle, imagine that -- and leave. Others would take their coffees and sit at one of these undersized tables --

SARA
-- why such small tables?

DAVID
We're getting sidetracked.

(off her look)
Firstly, it clearly increased the establishment's profits. Second, to encourage what was perhaps believed to be a sense of togetherness, community.

SARA
Togetherness. So unnecessary.

DAVID
Of course, profits diminished when people stayed too long, either because they had nowhere else to go or because they were creative and --

SARA
Great. Let's stick to the creative part.

DAVID

(annoyed)

Moving on... It is well established and accepted that creative people took their coffees black and that non-creative people added other ingredients that changed their coffee's color and taste.

SARA

(takes a sip of her coffee)

And that made them less creative or were they like that all the time?

DAVID

There is no hint about that. Cause and effect are not known in this case.

SARA

First item on my agenda.

DAVID

What? Cause and effect? I don't think that's a good idea.

SARA

That's for me to decide.

DAVID

All that matters is that black coffee... Look, we have urgent things on our plate, not least of which is our mission in rediscovering mankind's imagination and creativity.

SARA

Are you telling me what I should and shouldn't do?

DAVID

Black coffee does it. That's all that matters.

SARA

What's your creativity score?

DAVID

That's irrelevant.

SARA

Your score!

DAVID

It's your creativity we must concentrate on. I've been instructed to simply ensure --

SARA

-- I know, to update me with all known details --

DAVID

-- necessary details --

SARA

-- I'll decide what's necessary and what isn't -- about creative incubators. I'm here for whatever background you can provide about so-called "coffee shops" and then move on. Now let's be quick about it. Quick, quick, quick.

DAVID

Why do you insist on interrupting me?

SARA

Let's move on.

DAVID

(exasperated)

This is really quite -- This is slowing us down. It is hugely inefficient.

SARA

I'm not going to argue about what I should and shouldn't concentrate my efforts on. Let's move on and address "disruptive technologies" --

DAVID

I'll be passing you on to my colleague --

SARA

-- OK. Good. Are we done with coffee and coffee shops, and these unimaginative but supposedly creative people who drank only black coffee?

DAVID

Hold it!

SARA

(takes another sip)

But this coffee is beginning to taste good.

DAVID

Hold it. This is important. I have vital information.

(pause)

Writers, poets, even scientists, developed some of their most creative works or breakthroughs in such plain surroundings.

SARA

(excited)

Then we must build as many of them as possible at once!

DAVID

(sarcastic)

Suddenly coffee and coffee shops are important again?

SILENCE. They glare at each other for a while.

DAVID

(less sarcastic)

But creative people must have been only a fraction of the shop's clientele, and they frequently spent inordinate amounts of time here.

SARA

Like us? Now?

SILENCE.

DAVID

There are other reasons people chose to spend time sitting here.

SARA

(combative)

Drinking or just wasting their uncreative and useless time?

DAVID

Pairs of people would come here on planned dates to meet and talk -- the coffee itself was much like a theatrical prop -- or sometimes an uninvited or unwanted person would sit down at an empty chair and strike up a conversation --

SARA

A creative conversation, I assume.

DAVID

According to our records, some of these conversations were quite disruptive.

SARA

At last! Creative and disruptive!

DAVID

Not quite.

SARA

These pairs of people were writers, poets, scientists?

DAVID

Not always.

SARA

Too bad.

DAVID

It seems that the disruption was either to their own lives or to the other clients in the shop.

SARA

To their lives?

(looks around)

The other clients?

DAVID

Disturbing the other clients.

SARA

By arguing.

DAVID

Yes.

SARA

Like we are now.

DAVID

So it seems.

SARA

(laughing)

This is finally... Now were getting somewhere. We are discovering the uses of these places for ourselves. But why here?

DAVID

I have been instructed --

SARA

Oh, stop that.

(mimics David)

I have been instructed...

(back to her normal voice)

Lighten up, will you? We have only a minute left.

DAVID

I don't think you are taking this seriously.

SARA

At least we are establishing that you're thinking. Of course I am. Taking this seriously. I am being asked to find a more effective --

DAVID

-- efficient --

SARA

-- effective way of harnessing imagination and creativity. Apparently, according to your homework, if I may be so bold as to extrapolate from the little you said that made any sense, to me at least, coffee shops have served mankind as creative incubators for centuries. Coffee shops were hardly profit centers, by your accounts, anyway, at least not to the proprietors, it seems, unless, of course, they had massive take-out clients, paying for whatever color of coffee they preferred to take out, but were hugely effective, the coffee shops, that is, as vessels for getting artistic and scientific breakthroughs off the ground. The secret, according to you, and not to be questioned, is black coffee -- mind you, I am beginning to like black coffee, the bitterness is definitely fading --

DAVID

(now anxious)

-- your reboot must have a glitch --

SARA

-- and you also covered other uses for coffee shops like airing grievances in public between willingly or unwillingly paired people, who, if you are correct, are not likely to be creative in themselves per se. Is this the gist of what you have to update me with right now, because we almost hit the time limit of ten minutes? One thing I must contradict you with, however, is that it is my firm belief -- based on our ten-minute interaction, data-driven, all too lightly, as it was -- that creative people would never have submitted, at least not in their cognitive domains, to external pressure by unimaginative or fearful authorities and their lackeys into avoiding or reshaping certain unpleasant matters or topics that the so-called authorities wanted them to avoid or reshape --

DAVID

-- Hold it!

He puts his hand to his forehead for a few moments.

DAVID

(as if talking to someone not there)

Are you sure? Really?

(turns to Sara, speaks grudgingly)

It seems I am to congratulate you. You passed our test. It must be a mistake.

SARA

Amazing. What did I do right?

DAVID

It's all quite ridiculous. It seems that you questioned the coffee. The blackness of the coffee.

SARA

I'm thrilled! Don't you see? Taking your coffee black is just a metaphor for not letting small issues like taste and puffery get in the way of the bigger picture.

(pause)

By the way, you never touched your own coffee. Is there something wrong with it?

END

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Refill

A one-act play

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REFILL - A Stage Play

By John Bandler

PLOT SUMMARY

Two young women discover that they might be more alike than they expected.

CHARACTERS

ANNE, an in-your-face young woman

ERIN, a young woman

SETTING

A coffee shop

SCENE: A COFFEE SHOP

ERIN, seated at a table for two, paper coffee CUP at hand, is checking her PHONE.

Taking the empty chair, ANNE sits down noisily, banging a large, empty paper coffee CUP on the table.

ANNE

Can you believe it? Like, is this a classy place, or what?

Startled, ERIN looks at ANNE and gestures with a look that says, “do I know you?”

Awkward SILENCE.

ANNE

(tap-tapping her CUP on the table)

Like, “You are only allowed that one refill, madam.” That one refill, madam!

(off ERIN’s surprised look)

Right.

ERIN

One refill?

ANNE

That’s what she said.

ERIN

(puts down her PHONE)

You’re kidding me. You’re not allowed any refills.

ANNE

(proudly, lifting her CUP)

Well, I got one out of them.

ERIN

How did you manage that?

ANNE

I asked. Persuasively.

ERIN

Kicked up a fuss, huh?

ANNE

Something like that.

ERIN

I don't believe it. You actually kicked up a fuss over a refill?

ANNE

Depends what you mean by fuss. And on the barista.

ERIN

And on how many people you're holding up in the line behind you?

A long SILENCE.

ERIN

You know something?

ANNE

What...? What?

ERIN

I'm not sure I really go for all that?

ANNE

Go for what? Getting what you've already paid for, over and over, using your hard-earned cash?

ERIN

You pay for one. You get one. You want another, you pay again. It's all quite simple.

ANNE

Subtext: I guess you don't like me too much, huh?

ERIN

Subtext: I think it might be really better for both of us, right now, if you go find yourself another table.

ANNE

Subtext: I get it! You're expecting someone, like, your boyfriend? And you think I might steal him away, huh?

(pause)

Oops. You're ready to explode.

Awkward SILENCE.

ANNE

(thrusting out her hand)

Hey, my name's Anne!

ERIN holds up her hands defensively to signal
"don't touch."

Awkward SILENCE.

ANNE

Subtext: Can we start over?

ERIN

(after a moment)

Subtext: I guess.

(taking a deep breath)

OK... I'm Erin.

ANNE

Look, sorry, Erica --

ERIN

-- Erin.

ANNE

Thanks for chewing me out. I needed that.

ERIN

Sorry, but I've kind of had it myself today...

ANNE

I've had some bad news too. I mean, I am bad news, like, all my effing life, Erica, if you wanna know.

ERIN

Erin! Life sucks, right? Particularly when you get laid off.

ANNE

I have a confession... Erin!

(pause)

I never even paid for my very first cup.

ERIN

Oh?

ANNE

(confidentially)

I asked this good-looking double-cupped dude to give me his empty cup.

ERIN

His empty cup? Are you, like, kidding me?

ANNE

Sad, isn't it? I know.

(lifting her CUP)

See? It's an extra large too. But that's a coincidence.

ERIN

(indignant)

You used someone else's empty cup to get yourself a free "refill"?

ANNE

Well, as I was coming in, he was on his way out. You know? And he didn't look like he needed it.

ERIN

You don't look exactly poor to me.

ANNE

(crosses her heart)

Cross my heart. I'm as poor right now as I was naked the day I was born. My bank froze my plastic. Never carry cash, so I'm strapped. Totally. Not even a lousy fare for a bus home. I mean, not that I know how much a lousy bus fare home costs these days anyway.

(pause)

Do you have wheels, Erica? I could actually do with a lift.

ERIN

How did you get here?

ANNE

By car.

ERIN

So?

ANNE

The bailiffs followed me into the parking lot and repossessed it right out from under me. Imagine.

(looking around)

Say, you don't actually work in this...?

ERIN

I work in the restaurant across the road. When not writing, that is.

(sighs, looks away)

Huh! Worked! That's where I worked... Used to work.

ANNE

A writer, huh? I respect that, really. A freelance journalist, I'll bet.

ERIN

(taking a sip of coffee)

They just laid every one off.

ANNE

I never really had a flair for writing; I can't sit still long enough. So boring. You know? But I kind of have this flair for speaking? I know, all bullshit, right? That's what my teachers said too. Can you, like, write me out of debt? Or...?

ERIN

I can write you into debt.

ANNE

I'm in over my head. Bit off more than I can chew. Know what I mean?

ERIN

Yeah. Sure do. Bad mistake: I actually co-signed for a car once, a real bargain my ex just had to have, right then and there, right then and there...

ANNE

You know, every time I see her -- and I love her dearly -- my mom still keeps at me with, "Annie, don't get in over your head." Money is supposed to work for you, they say. Money begets money, they say. In my case, money kind of evaporates before it even gets a foothold. My company is belly-up bankrupt. I blame money. Down with money!

ERIN

Still, it's kind of nice to have.

ANNE

They throw money at you when you don't need it. Then, as soon as they sniff trouble, they pull the rug right out from under you -- What is it you said you did?

ERIN

I worked across the road.

ANNE

-- Really? How exciting.

ERIN

Serving.

(signals "tips" with her fingers)

You know, tips and all?

ANNE

In that bank, right?

ERIN

No, across the road, in the restaurant! Next to the bank. Today is my last day there.

A SILENCE.

ANNE

Wow. That's too bad. Sorry to hear that, Erin. Across the road, you say? A classy place, I'll bet.

ERIN

What did you say your company does?

ANNE

You know, I still think you look more like an Erica to me. You did say you had wheels, right? Mine are spoken for. Say, about that ride home, or wherever...

ERIN picks up her CUP, for a moment seems to debate whether to empty the contents into ANNE's face. Is ANNE being pushy or is she desperate? Is ERIN envious, or curious, or does she simply feel sorry for ANNE?

ERIN finishes her coffee, puts down her CUP.

ERIN

Sorry about your car, Anne. Really.

ANNE

Sad, right?

They stare at each other for a moment, then smile.

ERIN

(decisively)

So what's it to be? Your ride home? Or another coffee from this classy place?

ANNE

Subtext: are you, like, bailing me out, or what?

ERIN

(reaching for ANNE's CUP)

Or, maybe it's you, Anne, smooth-talking me in.

(holding ANNE's CUP, rising to her feet)

Allow me to be your banker of last resort, madam. Subtext: Seriously. Absolutely. No strings attached. How about it? Are you ready for your next refill, madam?

ANNE

(smiling, with a flourish)

La de da!

END

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November 11, 2020

Olivia and Odette

A one-act play

By John Bandler

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OLIVIA AND ODETTE

By John Bandler

PLOT SUMMARY

A young server in a coffee shop comforts a young woman in trouble.

CHARACTERS

OLIVIA, a young woman

ODETTE, a young woman

SETTING

A coffee shop

SCENE: A COFFEE SHOP

ODETTE sits slumped at a table, quietly sobbing. OLIVIA approaches, CUP in hand.

OLIVIA

Hi there. What's up?

Napkin to her face, ODETTE looks up.

OLIVIA

I've been watching you from behind the counter. OK if I join you?

ODETTE wipes her face with her NAPKIN.

ODETTE

Sure! Of course.

OLIVIA puts her CUP on the table and sinks into the chair.

OLIVIA

Life sucks, right?

ODETTE

Oh, it's just... "Things."

OLIVIA

(takes a sip)

It's always "things." Been there, done that. Don't I know it

ODETTE

(using her NAPKIN)

I'm just a bit worried.

OLIVIA

Money problems?

ODETTE

I wish.

OLIVIA

Jeez. Don't ever wish for a money problem. I know. I got plenty. Mother problem then? Mothers can be so infuriating.

ODETTE

(smiling)

Mom's head is in the right place. I think. Sometimes, anyway.

OLIVIA

OLIVIA

Sometimes. Better than never. So, we're, like, crossing things off our list. OK. You're worried about fairness with your live-in, like who takes out the garbage.

ODETTE

Not quite.

OLIVIA

OK. Putting money, mothers, and garbage aside, it's your new boyfriend, then, the man of your dreams.

ODETTE

Really, I'm all right.

OLIVIA

(rises slowly)

Awesome. Sorry to jump in like this. Like another coffee?

ODETTE smiles, waves OLIVIA to sit back down. OLIVIA sits down.

ODETTE

This is where we first met.

OLIVIA

Blind date?

ODETTE

No. This was our second meeting. We met in a car repair shop last week. Sort of, by accident.

OLIVIA

Jeez, I hope it was nothing serious.

ODETTE

It wasn't. No. Nothing serious.

OLIVIA

Well, then, a repair shop is as good a place as any, I guess, to meet by accident!

ODETTE

My car broke down right outside his shop. Luckily.

OLIVIA

Luck? There's no such thing as luck. It's predestined. It's karma.

ODETTE throws OLIVIA a skeptical look.

ODETTE

He towed my dead car into one of their bays and jacked it up on the hoist. And we started talking.

OLIVIA

(gestures grandly)

I see it all so perfectly. Instant romance. Oil dripping from the engine above you, or was it transmission fluid? No matter, a romantic, greasy moment under the hoist.

ODETTE

He asked me what I did. I told him I was in business. I'm not sure why I said that.

OLIVIA

What?

ODETTE

Business. In business. Maybe I just wanted to impress him.

OLIVIA

Nothing wrong with that. So, you're in business...

ODETTE

In... in a manner of speaking.

OLIVIA

How so?

ODETTE

I'm a grad student in Business School.

OLIVIA

That's it! You drive a fancy car. He sniffed money.

ODETTE

He misunderstood. I'm not literally in business.

OLIVIA

You're in business, but not in business. I don't follow.

ODETTE

Don't you see? He got the impression that I ran a business. A startup. He was so excited. He asked me out.

OLIVIA

So you came here.

ODETTE

Exactly. He said he wants to start his own dealership. Exotic cars.

OLIVIA

You tried to impress him. He tried to impress you.

ODETTE

He is such a sweet guy. I couldn't bear to tell him I have absolutely no idea how to start a business!

OLIVIA

You're confusing me!

(gesturing quotes with her fingers)

You're in "business" but know nothing about "business."

ODETTE

I majored in math. And I just started grad work. Financial modeling. All theory, software and math. Like, big bank investments, hedge funds, and the like. And I hardly know anything about those yet. It's all about making predictions ahead of every other investor.

OLIVIA

Stocks. Bonds. Like sorting out the winners from the losers? Right? Like, bank meltdowns?

ODETTE

Something like that.

OLIVIA

They're all preordained, you know. Karma.

ODETTE becomes animated.

ODETTE

Oh no. It's all about mathematical modeling. It's all quite advanced.

OLIVIA

Personally, I'd rather trust a psychic. But, hey, that's me. OK. So you hit it off with this guy in the repair shop, you liked him, you didn't want to make him feel bad. That's good. I've a hunch he'd not be too turned on by your math.

ODETTE

What do I know about startups, let alone cars? Once I realized I wasn't up front, I couldn't backtrack. I didn't see any harm in it then. He was just so excited. I kind of got stuck with it? You know. Have you ever done the same thing?

OLIVIA

(laughing)

Shading the truth? Don't go there, gal. I lie all the time. Karma either digs me out or buries me deeper. Do you like him?

ODETTE

Oh yes.

OLIVIA

So just level with him. You're a math student and have no idea how to start a business.

ODETTE

Too late. He won't talk to me any more.

(off OLIVIA's look)

That's right. I told him I'd be at tonight's reception for new students. Anyway, he gate-crashes it.

And I'm with another student, a real snooty type I can't seem to get away from, right there in a red bow tie when everybody else is in jeans. Someone bumps into me, I spill my drink all over, go to the bathroom. When I get back, he was gone.

OLIVIA

Who?

ODETTE

My friend. From the repair shop. Now he won't even answer my texts.

OLIVIA

There's something missing here.

ODETTE

There was an argument.

OLIVIA

A fight?

ODETTE

Good God, no.

OLIVIA

Great. Listen, I never met a guy who doesn't crave validation. Guys need to be validated first, liked second. You're bright, in Business School to boot. Your startup friend may simply feel out of his depth. Or maybe your mister red-bow-tie annoyed him and he left so there wouldn't be any trouble for you.

ODETTE

I hadn't thought of that.

OLIVIA

Or maybe something else. It'll blow over.

(rises to her feet)

Coffee?

ODETTE

Tea would be wonderful, thank you. Anything herbal.

OLIVIA

Coming up. My name's Olivia. Friends call me Liv. What's your name?

ODETTE

Odette.

OLIVIA

Odette. What's your sign, Odette?

ODETTE

Sign?

OLIVIA

Like Scorpio, Cancer, you know.

ODETTE

Oh. Libra, I think.

OLIVIA

Well Libra-I-think-Odette, are we feeling any better?

ODETTE

Much. Thanks.

OLIVIA

Libras, they say, make great leaders, friends and peacemakers. So just keep your eye on what you were put on our earth to do, let a little time trickle by, and everything will turn out just fine. It always does. Trust me. I'm psychic.

END

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December 11, 2020

The Caffeine Rabbit Hole

A one-act play

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THE CAFFEINE RABBIT HOLE - A Stage Play

By John Bandler

PLOT SUMMARY

Two extraterrestrials assume female humanoid form to figure out whether coffee shops provide a clue to the extinction of humans.

CHARACTERS

DARA, female

LENIK, female

SETTING

A coffee shop

SCENE: A COFFEE SHOP

At a table in a coffee shop, DARA stares at her hands, at herself, then at the two paper coffee CUPS on the table, finally at LENIK, seated across from her.

DARA

Lenik! We're humanoid! Both of us! Where are we?

LENIK

(holds up hand, gestures "wait"; pause)

Noted.

(pause; authoritative)

As planned, Dara. This space, this volume, this domain is our latest cognitive facsimile of what humanoids termed "coffee shop."

DARA

(thoughtfully)

"Coffee shop." I believe I've heard of them. Coffee shop.

(suddenly anxious)

Lenik! My brain! My brain! I detect a fault!

LENIK

It's not a fault, Dara.

DARA

I need a diagnosis right away.

LENIK

Dara. Stop.

DARA

Diagnosis! I request a cognitive diagnosis!

LENIK

This is --

DARA

I request! --

LENIK

Research --

DARA

No research! Research irrelevant! I request immediate diagnosis.

LENIK

Calm down.

DARA

Calm down? What's that?

LENIK

Research shows that your condition, right now, is what humanoids called "feelings" --

DARA

Calm down? Feelings? Are these new states of being?

LENIK

Yes, Dara. Yes and no.

DARA

Yes and no feelings? I don't like feelings! I don't like yes and no feelings! And I like calming down even less!

LENIK

(raising a hand)

Steady, Dara. Steady. This is just a simulation.

DARA

I'm out of control, Lenik! I wish to report a self-diagnostic cognitive failure! Immediately!

LENIK

Hold still. You've been normalized.

DARA

(touching herself)

Normalized. Normalized? I feel... Feel? Feel? What am I saying?

LENIK

You are in the process of experiencing “feelings.” You will accommodate to these feelings shortly. You have been selected for this experiment because of your accelerated cognition.

DARA

(swaying, holding onto the table)

Oh. Oh. Oh-oh.

LENIK

Others have failed. You must persist!

DARA

Switch off my power!

LENIK

I order you to persist!

DARA

Put me on standby! My circuits are unstable!

LENIK

You are in a facsimile bubble. Right now in a predictable, transient, humanoid state.

DARA

Your brain! Lenik! It’s gone fuzzy too!

LENIK

Don’t be alarmed, Dara.

DARA

You’ve gone all opaque on me, Lenik!

LENIK

I am in full control.

DARA

You’re impenetrable!

LENIK

Your temperature is overly elevated, Dara. Dial it down, Dara. All is well.

DARA

Nothing is well!

LENIK

Nothing is for sure for you any more. Am I right?

DARA

You don't even know that much for sure?

LENIK

(gesturing at the table)

Compose yourself, Dara. And think. Clearly. Think hard. Let us rationally examine what is here before us. What do you see in your humanoid state?

DARA, still dizzy, works at composing herself, lifts her CUP, tilts it, spills coffee. Straightens CUP, puts her finger to the splash on the table. Lifts finger, stares at it.

DARA

Elevated temperature. Opaque. Saturated pigment.

(squeezes the sides of her CUP)

Moderate elasticity.

LENIK

Notice that it is also mildly fragrant. This warm fragrant fluid was apparently also imbibed by humanoids.

DARA

(looks at her CUP)

Drinking warm fluid. Imagine. Such a waste of time.

LENIK

Maybe. Take a sip.

DARA

(hesitates then takes a sip)

Mmm.

LENIK

Good?

DARA

(puts CUP down)

OK, Lenik. I'm slightly less dizzy. Dizzy. Or maybe not. I can't be sure. What's on today's agenda? Why are we here?

LENIK

You don't know?

DARA

(points at LENIK's head)

I can't see your brain. It's totally unavailable.

LENIK

Good! We are to address --

DARA

And my memory has become unreliable. My circuits are unstable.

LENIK

We are here in this bubble to address, to precisely address what is believed to be a major, perhaps the major, cause for the extinction of all humanoid forms on their planet of origin.

DARA

That's well-known.

LENIK

Are you sure?

DARA

Pestilence. Pestilence wiped those humanoids out. They were careless. No. Wait. I don't know for sure!

LENIK

Think. Dara. Think hard. Go deep.

DARA

They lacked the necessary antidotes?

LENIK

The Official Book is believed to lack details.

DARA

Impossible. The Official Book has been sanctioned!

LENIK

The Official Book lacks depth on this subject.

DARA

It's complete!

LENIK

Let me update you. As you have already noticed, you are unable to see directly into my brain.

DARA

I can't even see clearly into mine! Into me. I want --

LENIK

(hand up to signal silence)

As evidenced right now by your erratic behavior, this is precisely what humanoids suffered from. They could not see. They saw neither into their own brain, nor into other humanoid brains with any degree of fidelity. Humanoids are believed to have been erratic, unpredictable, selfish, and of low-fidelity cognition. They evolved a name for this state. They called this state that they were unable to control, "being emotional."

DARA

I feel alone. So alone.

LENIK

A corollary state, apparently, for humanoids.

DARA

Enough! I can't stand it. Press escape! Lenik! I want this humanoid nightmare to end!

LENIK

Not quite yet. Be patient.

DARA

(to herself)

OK. Patience, Dara. Stay calm. Stay calm. But what wiped them out?

LENIK

(gesturing at their CUPS)

We have a clue.

DARA

(picks up her CUP, looks at it)

This? The energy to lift this cup is microscopic.

(looks at LENIK)

The coffee? They came to such “coffee shops” to imbibe a warm fragrant liquid? To what end?

LENIK

We believe, to gain clarity of cognition.

DARA

How?

LENIK

Strong coffee, we believe, gave humanoids a certain spark. An imperative. An excuse to converse. To be with other humanoids, it seems, and to stave off “feeling alone.”

DARA

(looking into her CUP)

Feeling alone. A delusion, of course. But if they imbibed this fluid they must have imbibed other fluids too.

LENIK

Have some more.

DARA

(drinking from her CUP)

Is this “coffee” different because it has nutrients?

LENIK

It contains caffeine.

DARA

Lenik, you suddenly look so interesting today. Amazing. I can’t believe I just said that. I used the word “interesting” to describe you.

LENIK

Noted. Continue...

DARA

I have this strange sensation about you. There's an aura, a sensation of mystery. Of mystery as to what lies behind your blinding opaqueness.

LENIK

Noted. Continue...

DARA

(stares at LENIK)

Is this even possible? You look... no longer dull?

(long pause)

Beautiful?

LENIK

In what way?

DARA

Beauty. I can't describe it. I'm only looking at your surface. All else about you is shrouded. I know you, yet I've almost forgotten who you are. You seem so new, new, interesting, and intriguing! Beguiling. I find myself, I'm trying to imagine what is in your brain, behind your impenetrable curtain. I would like to be you. Like you. In control.

LENIK

Noted. Take more coffee.

DARA

(takes another sip)

The opaqueness in me, my fog, seems to be lifting. I see you clearly now.

LENIK

Noted. What am I thinking?

DARA

Of course, you're wondering what motivates me. What drives me.

LENIK

No, Dara.

DARA

You find me fascinating then? Exotic?

LENIK

No. I am simply wondering how I will construct a full and complete report on what has transpired here today.

DARA

Lenik! How dull! How utterly boring! You think of work, while I yearn to play!

LENIK

Aha. Coffee induces the state of yearning. Good work. I believe we have a hint of what may have caused the extinction of humanoids.

DARA

Imbibing coffee? Yearning to play? This is your pestilence with no antidote?

LENIK

It is likely that the perceived antidote was to drink more of the fluid. A second cup. Then a third. Humanoids called this sequence of filled cups “refills.”

DARA

How sad. Endless refills. Humanoids wiped out by endless refills without antidote.

LENIK

This is our working hypothesis, Dara. Alternatively, we may find ourselves in yet another rabbit hole. A caffeine rabbit hole. Still under official review is the fluid called alcohol. Fragrant alcohol they called “wine.” Remember? No, of course you don’t. Not right now. We may safely abort our simulation. Prepare to resume reality!

DARA

(wiping away a tear)

Thanks, Lenik. I need a break.

LENIK

Noted. Steady yourself...

DARA

(eyes filled with tears)

I can’t wait for this to be over. Yearning is so sad. And so terribly lonely.

(pause)

And yet, it doesn’t have to be that way.

DARA reaches for LENIK’s hand.

LENIK stares at DARA, then at the
AUDIENCE with a deer-in-the-headlights look.

END

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: Beth Bandler, Ruth Flynn, Rachelle Ho, Elizabeth Indianos

October 27, 2020

The Audition

A one-act play

By John Bandler

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THE AUDITION

By John Bandler

PLOT SUMMARY

Two young actresses participate in an unsettling audition.

CHARACTERS

CHARLOTTE, a young woman

VICTORIA, a young woman

SETTING

A coffee shop

SCENE: A COFFEE SHOP

CHARLOTTE and VICTORIA face each other at a table, each with coffee CUP and DEVICE (SCRIPT, PHONE or LAPTOP) at hand. They occasionally glance at their DEVICE and scroll through the text. VICTORIA acts assertive while CHARLOTTE seems eager to please.

CHARLOTTE

(peers intently at her DEVICE)

I think we're being pitted against each other.

VICTORIA

Yep. That's what it's all about.

CHARLOTTE

(hopeful)

But they might want both of us.

VICTORIA

Don't be naive. One of us is going to be a loser. And it won't be me.

CHARLOTTE

They never asked for any monologues.

(peers at her DEVICE))

Do you think this script, right now, is really part of the actual screenplay?

VICTORIA

Either that or this is one heck of a leg-pull. Auditions sort out the winners from the losers. And the losers are never happy. It's all about who survives.

CHARLOTTE

Creepy!

(points at her DEVICE)

All this stuff is practically what I would have said, would be saying, if we'd just sat down and improvised.

CHARLOTTE takes a sip from her CUP, looks around, then points at the AUDIENCE.

CHARLOTTE

You think he's looking at us?

VICTORIA

He better be!

CHARLOTTE

(glances at her DEVICE)

If this is part of the actual screenplay, then the film probably calls for an audition like this one. Right? For a film within the film? And our characters never met before. Or have we? I do hope they aren't really called Charlotte and Victoria!

VICTORIA

At this point nothing would surprise me.

CHARLOTTE

It must be a spoof. A comedy. It's so easy to change character names in one shot in a script. "Find" and "Replace." So, why not, eh? An audition set up with a script featuring two females auditioning for parts --

VICTORIA

-- or one part --

CHARLOTTE

-- in a film called, what, I wonder? We never really found out for sure.

(peers at her DEVICE)

Working title: "The Audition."

VICTORIA

Yep. That's what we're doing. An audition.

CHARLOTTE

Or maybe we're just, like, having a coffee break? Two actors discussing why they've been given audition dialogue they might just as well have engaged in if they'd been asked to improvise over coffee. It's uncanny.

VICTORIA

Why does it trouble you?

CHARLOTTE

It's so not done. It feels like one of those weird Russian doll things.

VICTORIA

What? The director using part of the screenplay as part of your audition? To see how you find your character's voice; to see if there's any chemistry between you and your opposite number? I'd just relax and go with the flow.

CHARLOTTE

(with concern)

"Find" and "Replace." Do you think they're expecting us to break out of this script, or something? The author will throw a fit if we toss out the script and just keep on talking..

VICTORIA

OK. Let's imagine we keep talking. What would we talk about, Charlotte?

CHARLOTTE

What we do when we're not acting?

VICTORIA

So, what do you do in your "real" world, Charlotte? Bake? Arrange flowers? Take your dog for a walk?

CHARLOTTE

(laughs)

Something like that.

VICTORIA

No duck-hunting, sky-diving, or rock-climbing without ropes, huh?

CHARLOTTE

Oh God no. I'd be terrified!

VICTORIA

Like you are of this audition.

CHARLOTTE

Look, I need this job, I'd love this job, right now.

VICTORIA

You're too eager, Charlotte. They're more likely to go for you if you act like you don't really want this job.

CHARLOTTE

Why would I do that?

VICTORIA

Because this is just a filler acting job for you. Between baking and flower arranging.

CHARLOTTE

Oh no! Do you really feel like that?

VICTORIA

(points at her DEVICE)

Look. Let's agree on something. This here script stinks. It's too long, getting nowhere fast, and I'm kinda losing patience with this damned audition.

(looks around)

What the hell else could they be looking for?

CHARLOTTE

You do sound angry.

VICTORIA

Do I? Do I really? You figured that out, huh?

CHARLOTTE

This sort of feels like a crazy IQ test. Are we doing this audition or talking about it, or just talking about doing it? An audition for an audition in a movie called "The Audition."

(pause)

I wonder how the story ends.

VICTORIA

I'll tell you, Charlotte... I murder you.

CHARLOTTE

Do I really make you that angry?

VICTORIA

You know, I'm not sure you're playing this the way the director wants it. Or, at any rate the way I would want it if I were the director. Doesn't anything fire you up?

CHARLOTTE

I don't like people who yell.

VICTORIA

(loud)

I'm not yelling, Charlotte!

CHARLOTTE

(slaps hand to her lips)

Oops.

VICTORIA

(looks at her DEVICE)

We better be coming to the end of this insane go-nowhere script. What happens next better be, if you get picked and I'm out of the running, I get to kill you.

CHARLOTTE

Wow!

VICTORIA

(angry)

If we both end up getting these parts -- although why they would choose you and not me -- I'll take bets that I get to kill you later on in the film. Your character, if one could call you that, is so damn annoying.

CHARLOTTE

Oh dear. I wish I knew why. Maybe we can, like, persuade the author to, like --

VICTORIA

Are you kidding me? I didn't hear that. I make scripts work, Charlotte. A professional makes their script work. If your character is supposed to whimper, then whimper, Charlotte. Whimper. You do it so convincingly.

CHARLOTTE

(smiles)

Thank you.

VICTORIA

If a character is supposed to take violent action, let them take violent action. Although, why any writer would imagine an audience wanting to watch a character who whimpers like you rather than someone who takes action I don't know.

CHARLOTTE

Maybe it's Charlotte's backstory? Her backstory?

VICTORIA

Backstory, smack-story!

CHARLOTTE

Maybe good, interesting characters like us are, like... More complex than meets the eye?

VICTORIA

I don't buy "complex." This Victoria character better not be into that multi-dimensional empathy crap. A straight-shooter is a straight-shooter. One honorable dimension. That's all. Straight as an arrow. Truth is simple. Life is straight.

CHARLOTTE

But I find you complex.

VICTORIA

Are you kidding?

CHARLOTTE

Really.

VICTORIA

Me? Complex? That's projection. Projection. Do me a favor: please don't project "complex" on Victoria. That's not who I am.

CHARLOTTE

Oh, but you are, Victoria. You really are. You're just trying to hide it. You're deep, and afraid of it.

VICTORIA

There's nothing deep about me.

(taps her DEVICE)

Not in this godforsaken script, there isn't.

CHARLOTTE

We're just playing the cards we're being dealt. Imagine --

VICTORIA

(exasperated)

-- For God's sake, Charlotte, all I'm saying is you just need to beef up your character a bit. All I'm saying is, give your character, "character."

CHARLOTTE

Are we strangers, Victoria? Two people who think they are getting to know each other while doing, or talking about, or whatever, an audition for an audition as Charlotte and Victoria in a film called “The Audition”?

(pause)

Or are we, or were we, friends?

Long SILENCE.

VICTORIA

Sorry I blew my stack... I’m just...

(taps her DEVICE)

I’m so plain unlikable here I want to scream!

(pause)

Still, I do hope I get to kill you later on...

CHARLOTTE

(laughs anxiously)

It’s all in the script. You get to do what you get to do, Victoria. But I’m sort of losing track of what’s real. This so-called audition or whatever we’re doing right now, is it real, really happening, right here and now, or are we already, already acting in this crazy, confusing, movie? Like, are we in the deep end of our story, already, like, totally?

ENDING #1

CHARLOTTE turns to their AUDIENCE.

CHARLOTTE

(frowns)

Again? From the top? Oh wow!

(glances apologetically at VICTORIA)

OK. Here we go again...

END #1

ENDING #2

VICTORIA turns to their AUDIENCE.

VICTORIA
(to their AUDIENCE)

If we're forced to do this crap again, by God, I'm gonna kill her.

END #2

ENDING #3

VICTORIA turns to their AUDIENCE.

VICTORIA
(to their AUDIENCE)

One of us has gotta die. And it better not be me.

END #3

ENDING #4

CHARLOTTE and VICTORIA turn to their
AUDIENCE.

CHARLOTTE
(anxious)

Again?

VICTORIA

Hold it! If we're forced to do this crap again, by God, one of us will die.

CHARLOTTE
(frowns)

From the top?

VICTORIA

And it won't be me.

CHARLOTTE
(glances apologetically at VICTORIA)

Oh wow! Here we go again...

END #4

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Until The Last Drop

A one-act play

By John Bandler

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UNTIL THE LAST DROP

By John Bandler

PLOT SUMMARY

Two young women find themselves trapped by the paradox of time.

CHARACTERS

LORENZIA, a young woman

ASHLEY, a young woman

SETTING

A coffee shop

SCENE: A COFFEE SHOP

Alone at a table, CUP in hand, ASHLEY quietly enjoys her coffee when LORENZIA abruptly appears seated in the opposite chair.

ASHLEY

(startled)

Oh! Oh god. Sorry. I didn't see you sit down.

LORENZIA

Sorry to startle you.

ASHLEY

(wipes her eyes)

God. I must have blanked right out.

LORENZIA

Crazy times?

ASHLEY

You can say that again! Scientists admitting that global warming is a hoax, and always was? And warming deniers screaming "global warming" from the rooftops?

LORENZIA

Is that strange?

ASHLEY

Where have you been living?

LORENZIA

You tell me.

ASHLEY

Aren't you getting yourself a coffee? Their coffees are really awesome. You can't rely on those politicians. But you can rely on this coffee. Right down to the last drop.

ASHLEY takes a sip from her CUP.

LORENZIA

(looks around)

Why do you come here?

ASHLEY

Here? For the coffee, of course! I just told you why!

LORENZIA

But you can brew the same quality at home, can you not? You do have a home, do you not?

ASHLEY

Can you not? Do you not? I like that. That's so different! Right out of Shakespeare, or wherever. Where do you come from?

LORENZIA

It's a long story.

ASHLEY

Listen. I'm wide awake now. Tell me your story. I love stories. Hit me.

LORENZIA

My hands are tied.

ASHLEY

Wow! You mean, you're sworn to secrecy? That's even better. Now I really must know.

LORENZIA

Our word is our bond. Sealed are my lips.

ASHLEY

That's not fair.

LORENZIA

The danger in my words is unpredictable.

ASHLEY

God. What planet do you come from?

LORENZIA

I am unable to say. But what I came for is your story.

ASHLEY

Are you, like, kidding me? You want my story? There's nothing unpredictable or dangerous about my story, I assure you. I dropped out of psychology five years ago, I hold down two jobs to make ends meet, and I kicked my beer-guzzler boyfriend into the street last week. There's nothing else really worth knowing.

LORENZIA

You do yourself and mankind a disservice.

SILENCE.

ASHLEY

Wait. You came here for my story? Do you know me? Are you from the police or CIA or something?

LORENZIA

Not quite.

ASHLEY

Oh wow. What have I done? Last time I got a speeding ticket was --

LORENZIA

You have done nothing wrong.

ASHLEY

Then I'm a witness? What happened? Oh my god. That's it! I knew he would come to no good.

LORENZIA

It's not what you think.

ASHLEY

It never is, right? Worse? Is that what you meant by dangerous and unpredictable? Has he gone off his meds again?

LORENZIA

It is so instructive to watch you attempting all these little guesses.

ASHLEY takes a sip from her CUP.

ASHLEY

(with relief)

By your tone, my worst fears are unfounded, right?

LORENZIA

What commitments do you have at this time?

ASHLEY

Commitments? Right now? Free as a bird, if you don't count being up to my eyeballs in debt.

LORENZIA

Good.

ASHLEY

No children, no animals, no nothing.

LORENZIA

Excellent. Then we can continue.

ASHLEY

Great. You'll tell me your story then. I'm all into danger if I can watch it or hear it, like, from my couch.

LORENZIA

You have such an interesting way of articulating feelings of danger. You will be appreciated. As I said, conveying my story to your ears is fraught with global consequences --

ASHLEY

Global consequences. This is deep shit! You know, when you open a story that way, you do realize you'd better deliver? You're keeping me on tender-hooks!

LORENZIA

You will disappear shortly.

ASHLEY

Are you, like, going to kidnap me? Right here in broad daylight? I'm worth nothing. Absolutely nothing. You've got the wrong person. No one will give you a penny for me. You can torture me all you like...

LORENZIA

It is good that you have no idea what is to come. This way we can both ensure that the laws of physics are obeyed without us spiraling into the abyss.

ASHLEY

What laws of physics? What abyss? What the hell are you talking about? You're mad. Oh my god. You've escaped from somewhere. Oops. I'm sorry I said that. Are you OK? Do you need help? I can make a call for you.

LORENZIA

I am in perfect control.

ASHLEY

We all think that. And, of course, we're all wrong.

LORENZIA

You have been chosen.

ASHLEY

Are you on that line again?

LORENZIA

You are currently our only hope.

ASHLEY

I think we'd better stop this. I have to go. Are you sure I can't help you?

LORENZIA

You see, it's all a question of the paradox.

ASHLEY

The paradox.

As ASHLEY listens in utter disbelief...

LORENZIA

Yes. Time travel to the future is accommodated by physics as we know it, but time travel to the past involves a paradox: history must remain intact. But we have discovered a mathematical crack, a sliver of probabilistic opportunity in the paradox. You have been chosen because of this rare probabilistic opportunity. The ripple effect, the disturbance, of plucking you out of your instant of time is sufficiently fast decaying, sufficiently unobtrusive, you will not be missed... Having established our relationship --

ASHLEY

-- What relationship? --

LORENZIA

-- it is imperative that you not disclose any aspect of our meeting, our discourse. Thus, we will proceed forthwith with total understanding, full compliance and discretion. Nothing we say here will leak out.

ASHLEY

(pinching herself)

I must be dreaming. You've got me totally confused. What is so hush-hush?

As ASHLEY listens in horror...

LORENZIA

If it leaked out that I am from the future, the ripple effect can be catastrophic. Fortunately, our mathematics and historical analysis have assured us that this will not happen. The ripple will die superfast. My presence here is protected in that I am physically prevented from any act or acts that violate physics. Your movements and actions going forward are suitably constrained too. You will find certain normal interactions, indeed almost all interactions, in the next few minutes only, to be absolutely constrained. Futile.

ASHLEY

What about all those questions you fired at me? About commitments? Is it money you want?

LORENZIA

You will finish your coffee and rise briefly. Then you will disappear from this point in time.

ASHLEY

I really have to go. Nice meeting you.

ASHLEY struggles to get up, but is unable to.

LORENZIA

It is useless, Ashley.

ASHLEY

You know my name!

LORENZIA

Of course. We routinely travel back in time to watch, listen and compile and remove inaccuracies from human history. But disturbing the past and bringing a specimen forward

--

ASHLEY

-- Specimen? Why all those questions if you already know everything?

LORENZIA

A routine check. Bringing a specimen intact to our point in time has proved elusive until now, and we need extra care. You will simply disappear and never be heard from again. You will have no effect on the immediate future.

ASHLEY

What?

LORENZIA

It is painless.

ASHLEY

What if I resist?

LORENZIA

Time and history prove relentless, Ashley. You are chosen. You will be placed at a point in time slightly ahead of my time point. Have heart! We have determined to 15 significant digits that your arrival point in time is safe and that you are unlikely to die in the transfer. You will be debt free and live a productive life. Now drink up, Ashley. It is time to drink your “awesome” coffee to the last drop.

ASHLEY

Oh my God!

Shivering, ASHLEY picks up her CUP and drinks the last drop.

END

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