

BEGIN

62

ETHAN COEN

YOUNG WOMAN: I don't get it.

YOUNG MAN: It was, like, God.

YOUNG WOMAN: Well I know *that*.

YOUNG MAN: Like two Gods. Two ideas of God.

YOUNG WOMAN: Yeah, I know.

YOUNG MAN: *(shrugs)* Well?

They stand.

YOUNG WOMAN: It was just kinda . . . *stupid*.

YOUNG MAN: *(non-committal)* Uh-huh. You want a drink or something?

~~Blackout~~

~~Lights come up on the downstage area as a waiter sweeps in, holding high a small table and clutching two menus. The young couple follows him.~~

~~The waiter sets the table just downstage of the two straight-backed chairs and then spins the chairs from back-facing to side-on, facing each other across the table, with some cheat out to the audience. He gestures with a flourish and the couple sits.~~

~~Meanwhile the lectern is being pushed to one side—still facing away from us—by a maitre d' who then takes up his post behind it. The maitre d' should be, for reasons that will become clear, a strapping young man.~~

~~As the scene begins the maitre d' unstows from a shelf inside~~

ALMOST AN EVENING

63

~~the lectern a large reservations book and phone and maitre d' silver and small ceramic box holding toothpicks, and arranges them on the lectern's top. Finished set-dressing, he awaits arriving guests, fussing with his book. The lights on him dim slowly so that, once established, he unobtrusively fades from the scene.~~

~~The young players have been talking while following the waiter and waiting for him to plant table and arrange chairs:~~

~~YOUNG MAN: I don't know if it was really supposed to~~

YOUNG WOMAN: So you *liked* it?

YOUNG MAN: I don't know, liked it, didn't like it. It was interesting. You didn't like it.

YOUNG WOMAN: It was not my cup of tea.

YOUNG MAN: I'm sorry.

YOUNG WOMAN: No, nothing to apologize for. It was just not my cup of tea.

YOUNG MAN: Eileen thought we might like it.

YOUNG WOMAN: Eileen?

YOUNG MAN: Yeah.

YOUNG WOMAN: You still talk to Eileen?

YOUNG MAN: Mm-hmm.

YOUNG WOMAN: You still talk to her?

YOUNG MAN: Yeah.

YOUNG WOMAN: Boy. *She* liked it?

YOUNG MAN: Yeah. Eileen likes thought-provoking plays and stuff. We still talk. She recommends books and stuff.

YOUNG WOMAN: Well—I can't believe you said that.

YOUNG MAN: What?

YOUNG WOMAN: "Eileen likes thought-provoking plays." That is so uncool.

YOUNG MAN: Huh?

YOUNG WOMAN: You think I don't like thought-provoking plays? Because I didn't like *that* play? I can't believe you said that. That is so lame.

YOUNG MAN: I didn't *say* that. I didn't *say that*.

YOUNG WOMAN: Like, what, God kicks God in the ass? And then God shoots God? And then God commits suicide? Like that is real thought-provoking. Somebody doesn't find that thought-provoking they're suddenly they're a dumbbell?

YOUNG MAN: I didn't say any of that.

YOUNG WOMAN: And then, like, you compare me to Eileen, which is *so* uncool.

YOUNG MAN: I'm sorry, but I just didn't—

YOUNG WOMAN: Like I don't read books? Maybe I read books. Have you asked me what good books I've read lately? Instead of assuming I'm, like, illiterate? Maybe I read *books* about

God instead of going to stupid shows where God kicks God in the ass.

YOUNG MAN: That is really unfair.

YOUNG WOMAN: Okay, I'll tell you what's unfair: you talking to Eileen about dates you're going on. Do you talk about the dates afterward?

WAITER: Do we know what we want?

YOUNG MAN: No, I—we—need a minute.

YOUNG WOMAN: 'Cause like Eileen used to talk to me about you. I just don't think that's cool.

YOUNG MAN: What do you mean, about me? About *us*? Eileen and me?

YOUNG WOMAN: Believe me, I didn't ask her to. *I* don't want to know about your sexual problems.

YOUNG MAN: What're you talking about?

The woman picks up her menu and studies it.

YOUNG WOMAN: Oh—drop it.

YOUNG MAN: No, what did she say?

YOUNG WOMAN: Oh—just drop it. Do you know what you want?

YOUNG MAN: I don't have sexual problems.

YOUNG WOMAN: Fine. Whatever.

okay, fine, but what does it have to do with your *play*? Your stupid *play* is about *God*.

ACTOR: The play is not about *one* thing!

LADY FRIEND: Dan. Honey.

ACTOR: See, this is a mistake you make—

LADY FRIEND: Dan. Listen to me. I love you. The play. Is fuck-
ing. Inane.

ACTOR: No.

LADY FRIEND: Schtick.

ACTOR: No. No. You should understand it maybe before you dis-
miss it. Honey-bunch.

LADY FRIEND: Dan. Okay, fine. The play is a masterpiece. All its
patriarchal assumptions I thought were just almost unbeliev-
ably penetrating. But I'm just a woman and I guess some of it
went over my head, I guess the part where you kick Jerry in
the ass, just, the subtleties of the issues raised by that got by
me. So let me approach it in a different way, Dan. Dan: I
don't give a shit about your work.

ACTOR: I'm not talking about my *work*! It's not *me*! The *issues* are
relevant! All of your "feelings" shit! Who gives a fuck! We
live, we eat, we shit, we fuck! Like the nomad Hebrews in
the Middle East three thousand fucking years ago. Who
made feelings king? Feelings are fucking bullshit! Feelings
are the fruity little bow on the box! Who put feelings center-
stage, man—some *woman*? When did we get down on our
knees to our fucking FEELINGS?

~~Blackout~~

* * *

~~In black, a curtain~~

YOUNG WOMAN: I just think all the ideas were kind of phony.
You know. It was just stick figures up there preaching. Like,
literally.

*The lights come up to show that the table is once again occu-
pied by the young couple. In this scene change, and in the
next two as well, the opening speech in black should cover
the actors' traffic so that the new scene's dialogue butts up
against the old.*

YOUNG MAN: Uh-huh.

YOUNG WOMAN: A good play has characters, you know, real
people, or they *could* be real. I mean if the play just lays out
ideas without bothering to put them in the mouth of real
characters, then it's just like pretentious.

YOUNG MAN: Okay. Good. I see that. That's a good point. So
what did Eileen say about me?

YOUNG WOMAN: Oh, you know what? Forget about that. I mean
if the ideas, you know—

YOUNG MAN: There was like *one night* when we were really
drunk—

YOUNG WOMAN: —if it's not people *having* the ideas, then who
cares? Ideas aren't, you know. You have to connect them to
people. It has to be *grounded*.

YOUNG MAN: (*impatient*) Yeah yeah, I *get* it. Boy, you know. Eileen is, like—

YOUNG WOMAN: That's just lazy if you don't. That's called lazy writing.

WAITER: Do we know what we want?

YOUNG MAN: Ummm . . . Could, um . . .

YOUNG WOMAN: 'Cause otherwise, you know . . . Could I have the Cobb salad?

YOUNG MAN: I, um . . . I need a minute.

YOUNG WOMAN: You can't even say, like, this actor was good or that one was really good, because there weren't even characters. It was just a bunch of lecturing.

YOUNG MAN: Well it wasn't *just* lecturing. There was God kicking God in the ass.

YOUNG WOMAN: That didn't work for me.

Blackout.

* * *

~~*In black until indicated.*~~

~~LADY FRIEND: You fuck me in the pussy, Dan! You never fuck me in the *heart!* You never fuck me in the *head!* I feel mounted and violated! (*lights up*) Mounted and violated! You fuck my pussy, Dan! You are a shallow, shallow pussy-fucker!~~

~~WAITER: (*entering*) Madam, sir, could you please—~~

~~ACTOR: I don't know what you're talking about! *You* don't know what you're talking about! You're talking *bullshit!*~~

~~LADY FRIEND: Why no children, Dan?! Why have you NEVER had a STABLE! LONGLASTING! RELATIONSHIP!~~

~~ACTOR: Goddamnit! GODDAMNIT!~~

~~WAITER: Sir—~~

~~LADY FRIEND: YOU CANNOT RELATE TO PEOPLE IN A NORMAL WAY WHY IS THAT, DAN?!~~

~~ACTOR: ALL RIGHT!~~

~~WAITER: Madam—~~

~~LADY FRIEND: YOU THINK YOUR FEELINGS DON'T AFFECT HOW YOU *BEHAVE?*!~~

~~ACTOR: GOD FUCKIT!~~

~~*Blackout.*~~

~~*In black until indicated.*~~

YOUNG MAN: I thought the actors *were* good. Like the angry guy.

YOUNG WOMAN: How can you *say* that? He was, like, yelling. How can he be good if it's just yelling. (*lights up*) It was all meaningless. It was all stuff that wasn't real, it wasn't the real world. That's why, you know, even though it was all trying to be all deep, it just ends up . . . (*stares*) Oh my God. Oh my God, don't look. It's God.

YOUNG MAN: . . . What?

YOUNG WOMAN: It's the God guy. Over there. At that table.—
Don't turn around! It's the God guy. The God actor guy. The
God yelling God guy.—Don't look!

YOUNG MAN: He was good.

YOUNG WOMAN: Oh my God. He's yelling at the woman he's
with.—Don't! Just act natural!

YOUNG MAN: I am!

YOUNG WOMAN: —Oh my God, I can't believe he's just sitting
here having dinner, arguing!

YOUNG MAN: Well, actors have to eat too.

YOUNG WOMAN: I can't believe you *said* that! Like I'm some
hick who's never seen an actor!

YOUNG MAN: I didn't say that!

YOUNG WOMAN: I don't even think he's a *good* actor!

YOUNG MAN: Well you're the one who made the big deal!

YOUNG WOMAN: I didn't say it was a big deal! I know that actors
have to eat! Like what, they're not gonna eat! I can't believe
you said that to me!

YOUNG MAN: Look, I didn't say—It was just innocent—

YOUNG WOMAN: —God's getting up! Boy, they're really going at
it. The greeter-guy, um, host is running over. Oh my God!—
Don't look! Will you please be cool? He's shoving! God is

shoving the greeter-guy—oh God! The greeter just—
punched God! The greeter is . . . He's KICKING GOD IN
THE ASS! THE GREETER-GUY IS KICKING GOD
IN THE ASS! HE'S—

*The young man finally turns and looks. Both he and the
woman stare. After a long beat, their reactions sync as the
beating apparently escalates:*

YOUNG MAN AND WOMAN: Oh! . . . OH! . . . OH!

END

~~Blackout.~~

* * *

*A long beat, and then, in blackness, a blandly neutral voice,
amplified:*

VOICE: Welcome to "The Debate." The powers that be have
asked that we turn off our cell phones and pagers, and please
also unwrap any crinkly crackly candies before the show be-
gins. And, finally, please note that in tonight's performance
the role of God Who Judges, normally played by Daniel
Sternberger, is being played by John J. MacDonald.

Long silence.

A new voice:

VOICE: What do we call it?

*Lights come up on the familiar bare-bones set of lectern and
straightbacked chairs, upon one of which sits awaiting God
Who Loves. Behind the lectern stands a new God Who
Judges, not an imposing person; his lank and receding hair
compares poorly with the original's powerful shock of
white. Wardrobe and words may be the same and the actor*