

BUG RESCUING

A Play in One Act

By Judy Klass

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Cast of Characters

JOAN: In her twenties to forties, attractive but intense, with some dark depths that announce themselves around very sunny people.

MICHAEL: Around the same age. Attractive, generous and pleasant, and trying to acquire some dark depths of his own - or to dispel the need for them with laughter.

Scene

Poolside, at the Sandbar Resort and Spa. On a beautiful tropic isle.

Time

The present.

NOTE: The edge of the stage can work perfectly as the edge of the pool. Even if the playing space has no raised stage, a platform or table edge can work fine. Sound effects to indicate the outdoors, and when the characters splash, can be added -- or not, as the director wishes.

"La Cucaracha" can be sung or hummed by one or both characters at the end, instead of playing in the wings.

AT RISE: JOAN sits by the pool in a one-piece dark bathing suit. Near her are dead or half-drowned bugs SHE has rescued, drying on the cement. SHE spots a new bug in the water. SHE dips a long, dry branch carefully into the water, fishes out the bug, and gently deposits it on the cement. SHE uses a twig or blade of grass to turn the bug right-side-up.

MICHAEL enters in swim shorts, carrying a beach towel, and watches her. SHE is intent on the new bug. At last, HE addresses her.

MICHAEL

Hey.

JOAN

(Not looking up)

Hey.

MICHAEL

I couldn't find you in the room, or the lobby, or out on the courts. I figured you were sick of the beach. So, I suited up, and hoped you were here.

(A beat)

What'cha doin'?

JOAN

Rescuing bugs.

MICHAEL

Oh yeah?

JOAN

Yeah. It's something I used to do when I was a little kid. We didn't have a pool, but my parents' best friends did. But I didn't really like their kids -- they were older than I was, and obnoxious. So, when we went there, I'd rescue drowning bugs from the pool, before the filter got them, and dry them out on the patio. It made me feel like a god.

MICHAEL

How so?

(HE sits down a few feet away from her.
SHE shrugs)

JOAN

The basic sense that I was reanimating them and returning them to life. Like Dr. Frankenstein. That life was mine to bestow and take away. The sun would beat down on the insects, and they'd lie completely still, but then they'd dry out and breathe, and at last they'd extend their feelers and move their legs -- and I'd take the credit for it. It was me, not the sun, that was filling them with energy.

MICHAEL

Lazarus bugs.

JOAN

Yeah. I enjoyed bringing them back.

MICHAEL

Mmm. You must have been a pretty strange kid.

JOAN

I was as nerdy as they come. I warned you when you first met me. I know how to present myself socially now, when I want to. It's entirely an illusion. I'm still a hard-core nerd at heart.

MICHAEL

You're so proud of that. It's a crucial part of your identity.

JOAN

In this place it is.

MICHAEL

Why this place in particular?

(At last SHE looks up at him)

JOAN

I knew we shouldn't have come here together, Michael. I warned you not to take me.

MICHAEL

Look. I told you how it would be. The first couple of days we've got those meetings, the presentations, we have to look busy -- and now comes the time people get to relax.

JOAN

That's not it.

MICHAEL

You don't like the Caribbean?

JOAN

I love the Caribbean. And I'm grateful to you for bringing me for free. But I should have trusted my niggling sense of --

MICHAEL

Anti-corporate snobbery?

JOAN

I was going to say foreboding.

MICHAEL

You know, this resort is not where I necessarily would have chosen to come. But I had to be here, it's not just some tax write-off nonsense, we've gotten some good work done -- and in the down time, I wanted to be with you.

JOAN

But you're -- happy. In this culture. I feel that you're at home here.

MICHAEL

I seem to be enjoying it more than you.

JOAN

Yeah.

MICHAEL

Should I feel guilty about that? Should I hang my head in shame?

JOAN

No. It's nobody's fault. It is what it is.

MICHAEL

What is what what is?

JOAN

If two people are incompatible and they realize it, there doesn't have to be a bad guy.

MICHAEL

How are we not compatible? We'll never come to this place again. Next conference that comes up, I'll go off alone, and send you a postcard. But since we're here now, why can't I enjoy it?

JOAN

You enjoy the squash, and the tennis and the swimming, and the gym, and the lazing at the beach, and the golf --

MICHAEL

Yes.

JOAN

And the guys from the office, the new people you're meeting, the couples. You're having fun with them, the people we meet in the dining hall, and the seedy lounge singer, you want to dance, you want to play the party games --

MICHAEL

Some of it. I like some of the people. Some of the stuff is tacky, but what the hell.

JOAN

You enjoyed lobster night. And luau night.

MICHAEL

Yes.

JOAN

I feel like I'm trapped on the Love Boat, but it's on land.

MICHAEL

I used to like to watch the Love Boat when I was a kid.

JOAN

Okay.

MICHAEL

And Fantasy Island. So there.

JOAN

You're entitled.

MICHAEL

And I used to enjoy the Beautiful Mount Airy Lodge commercials. I thought it looked like a wonderful place. I wanted to be grown up, and in love with somebody, and go there.

JOAN

Don't believe the hype.

MICHAEL

So, Joan -- do you just not believe in being happy? Having fun?

JOAN

I find this place -- obscene, somehow. It's like -- going to Haiti Club Med, or something.

MICHAEL

No, it's not. Even I would never do that.

JOAN

Okay, whatever.

MICHAEL

I don't understand why you have to go through life sneering and being sour about everything. Getting disgusted with me if I happen to be conventional in some ways, and I like to have a good time.

JOAN

Come on, Michael. You lose patience with me too.

MICHAEL

When we're meeting new people, or having lunch with the vice president, and you're all grumpy and anti-social --

JOAN

If I excuse myself and say I want to lie down. If I don't want to enter the limbo contest, or do the stupid pet tricks or whatever that cheesy MC was trying to get us to do last night --

MICHAEL

I just think you could be a little more gracious about it. Smile a little, make your voice less harsh, take the sting out of what you say to people. Including me.

JOAN

Michael. You're in a fast-growing business.

MICHAEL

True.

JOAN

To have the career you want to have, you're going to need -- a Wife. With a capital W. To host dinner parties for you --

MICHAEL

Not necessarily.

JOAN

To go to lunch with the vice president, yes, and the client, and laugh a tinkly little laugh, and bond with the client's wife --

MICHAEL

Where do you get this stuff?

JOAN

You're going to need a woman all the other guys feel comfortable with, right? To show them you're a regular guy, you're a team player, you've passed all the personality profile standardized tests --

MICHAEL

You have such a caricatured view of the world I live in.

JOAN

Okay, maybe. Maybe I do. But what you definitely do not need is a certified freak like myself, okay? Because there's just too much sunshine here, and the drinks are too pastel, and everything tastes like coconuts or pineapples, and the luxuries are too luxurious, and everybody is warm and carefree and friendly -- and right now all I want is to be back in my studio, spattered with paint, with lots of clutter, no sunlight, working on the series I'm doing --

MICHAEL

You're in art withdrawal, we knew that might happen.

JOAN

A series of paintings which, when you see them, will strike you as pointless and grotesque and utterly unhealthy. Now, what am I doing here, and what am I doing with you? It's *mean* of me, to be here with you.

MICHAEL

I like your unhealthy art. It's made me interested in art the way I never was in college.

JOAN

But you wouldn't want the people around you to see it.

MICHAEL

You're wrong. Completely wrong. I'm proud of it. Well, maybe there are a few pieces --

JOAN

You see?

MICHAEL

That it took me time to get used to. So, we don't start people off with those. People from my world. But I am proud of you, Joan, proud of what you do, and maybe a little intimidated and envious.

JOAN

I don't want to intimidate you. You make me feel like this snob, like you say, and it's not like I think either my way or your way is better. I know you think I do...

MICHAEL

Show me the bugs.

JOAN

What?

(MICHAEL gets on his hands and knees,
and crawls over to where her bugs are)

MICHAEL

Introduce me. And tell me what they are.

JOAN

People will be weirded out. This woman came by and when she saw what I was doing she let out a scream. And the staff are giving me dirty looks when --

MICHAEL

If they kick us out then they kick us out. Show me your bugs.

JOAN

Well -- the giant ant is self-explanatory.

MICHAEL

I see what you mean about them extending their feelers.

JOAN

Yeah, she's going to be okay. I like how they clean and polish up their antennae, like a mouse washing its face and whiskers, or something.

MICHAEL

She?

JOAN

Of course. Most ants you run into are females. Soldiers, workers. Same with bees. It's only in animated movies that they make them all male, because they figure boys can't identify with female characters, but girls had better start early and learn to identify with male ones --

MICHAEL

Okay, bypassing the feminist rage, what's that over there?

JOAN

Some kind of lace-wing. It's pretty, isn't it?

MICHAEL

Yeah.

JOAN

But it's had it.

MICHAEL

Yeah, you can tell. It's just limp. Wilted.

JOAN

Sometimes they start out that way and then they rally and surprise you. But sometimes, dead is dead.

MICHAEL

(Pointing)

And that one?

JOAN

That's the one I just fished out. Some kind of beetle.

MICHAEL

So, they got cockroaches at the Sandbar Resort and Spa. Charming.

JOAN

I don't think it's a cockroach. It crawled out of the grass, probably. There are a lot of black beetles out there, Michael, and they're not all cockroaches.

MICHAEL

How does it look to you?

JOAN

Well, I had hopes. But it's lookin' to me like it's gonna stay dead also.

MICHAEL

Like our love. Right?

(SHE shrugs. HE moves away, dandles his feet in the water.)

MICHAEL (CONT'D)

Or maybe it'll be like that O'Henry story. What's the one where the ivy leaf stays alive, through the storm? One last leaf of ivy on the wall, so the sick girl looking out the window doesn't die?

JOAN

It's not real ivy. The starving artist, who likes to do abstract work nobody buys, paints it on the wall, his one realistic painting, and then he dies in the cold, but the sick girl thinks the ivy leaf is real, and it saves her. That's the twist ending.

MICHAEL

That's right.

JOAN

That's why it's an O'Henry story.

MICHAEL

Okay. Now, what were the odds we would both know about that arcane little number? I mean, would you concede that that's a reasonably obscure thing for us both to know about?

JOAN

Yes. It's reasonably obscure.

MICHAEL

And does that or does that not keep happening to us? That it turns out that we both know about, or care about, these bizarre-o, obscure things?

JOAN

It happens sometimes.

MICHAEL

And what does that say to you? I mean, even if I do like this resort, guilty as charged, if I enjoy the company of some of my colleagues, even if I am a Love Boat-watching, Fantasy Island-watching whore, even if I do spend my days back in the city in the evil, boring corporate world, and I happen to be good at what I do -- what if I want to spend my free time with you?

JOAN

But you were never anti-social. You were never a nerd.

MICHAEL

But what if I like nerds? Could I maybe be an honorary nerd?

JOAN

Michael, I spent years at that bratty prep school. And they polished me up against my will. I learned to smile warmly, and have a firm handshake, and all these pleasant little social skills -- and I still hate them. It's not me.

MICHAEL

So, I'll try not to make you act that way.

JOAN

But just being around all this pollyanna, forced happiness -- makes me grouchy, makes me withdraw. And that will only hurt you.

MICHAEL

What if I'm a masochist? Ever think of that?

JOAN

You're sweet, and you try to be good to me. But I embarrass you, I can feel myself doing it. And my messy apartment and studio horrify you. You're neat, and you're practical, and you're punctual, you're organized --

MICHAEL

But I make corny, nerdy jokes. And I never liked Baywatch! Do I get points for that?

JOAN

We need to think ahead.

MICHAEL

Not at all. You're being too practical and organized. Come stick your feet in the pool.

JOAN

What?

MICHAEL

Come sit next to me, and dandle your feet in the water. Come on. You can be miserable the whole time, I promise.

(HE pats the edge of the pool, continues to coax her. SHE sighs and sits next to him)

JOAN

I do like you, but --

MICHAEL

Shhh. That's it.

(HE wraps the towel around both their shoulders)

Now, the thing for you to keep in mind is that you hate this. It sickens you. I'm behaving like a frivolous frat boy, here. You must not have fun.

(HE makes a silly, grim face)

Do you hear me, Joanie? Don't smile! There's mayhem and destruction all over the world, and we're all going to die someday, and it's going to be painful and horrible, so do not have fun.

(SHE almost smiles, looks away)

MICHAEL

Aaah, watch that, you almost smiled there. You gotta be careful. Now, look in the water. See those feet down there?

JOAN

Yes.

MICHAEL

Okay now, watch out, 'cause my big old feet are going to nibble on your puny little feet, and try to eat them. But life is very sad and serious, so don't smile!

(His feet move through the water and go after hers. HE makes chomping noises.)

MICHAEL

Mmmmm. Munch, munch, munch. Lovely little feetfish, mmmmm.

(SHE laughs, wriggles, moves away.)

JOAN

Ow, get off!

MICHAEL

Okay, now, let's really embarrass ourselves. Let's see how much we can splash.

(HE splashes her with some water. SHE puts her hands up.)

JOAN

Stop it.

MICHAEL

(Imitating her, high-pitched voice)

Stop it! That's undignified, what do you think this is, a spring break movie?

(Regular voice)

Okay, so let's look like idiots in front of everyone at the pool, we're hard core-nerds now, come on. Let's really splash.

(HE starts thrashing his legs in the water)

MICHAEL (CONT'D)

What, are you embarrassed, are you *that* hung up on convention? Pull your weight here, Joan!

(SHE begins to splash too. HE makes a series of silly noises as they drench themselves and get water all around them)

MICHAEL (CONT'D)

(Silly voice)

Oh, no, I've lost control, I'll never win the yuppie of the year award now!

JOAN

Wait. Michael, wait, wait.

MICHAEL

What? It's too late to turn back!

JOAN

No seriously, the bugs. I think we're getting them.

(MICHAEL stops kicking. JOAN takes the towel)

JOAN

Lemme just dry off so I don't drip on them.

(SHE crawls over to the bugs, and inspects them.)

MICHAEL

How are they?

JOAN

They're doing okay.

MICHAEL

How's the black beetle doing?

JOAN

Okay.

MICHAEL

Okay?

(HE crawls over to see)

He's moving?

JOAN

Yeah. It's moving a leg.

MICHAEL

But I probably painted that leg on, right? Like an ivy leaf? To fool you?

JOAN

No, he's gonna be okay.

MICHAEL

Well, there you go. You see?

JOAN

No.

MICHAEL

That means there's hope for us.

JOAN

(Skeptical)

Because a cockroach moved its leg.

MICHAEL

You said it wasn't a cockroach.

JOAN

Because a bug moved its leg.

MICHAEL

I think you should paint these guys. Do another unhealthy series.

JOAN

I've thought about that. I loved books about bugs when I was a kid. Entomology. I used to study the drawings of them.

MICHAEL

You could have this giant ant washing its feelers, facing off against this mouse. Or, that's too healthy -- facing off against a giant rat, washing its face. On the other side of the canvas. Just saying hello to each other.

JOAN

I don't think so.

MICHAEL

Or you do a series. A person putting on makeup, maybe brushing her hair in a mirror. An ant primping its feelers in a mirror. A rat cleaning its whiskers in a mirror -- same pose each time.

JOAN

I wouldn't paint that.

MICHAEL

Well, I would. And I can't. So, you paint it for me.

JOAN

(Reflective, sad)

What is it you think you see when you look at me, Michael?

MICHAEL

Hey. Now, don't you patronize me, Madame Grumpy. What say we put your friends back in the grass, the live ones, and then go back to the room. And take a nap -- or whatever comes up.

JOAN

(Mildly amused at the pass)

Uh huh.

MICHAEL

And if I'm very good, maybe you'll dance with me a little tonight? And then later, we can stay up and discuss global warming, or land mines, or refugee camps, or anything you like. Okay?

JOAN

I'm some kind of rebellion for you, I guess.

MICHAEL

You're a bug-rescuer. You're a powerful goddess. You're right that my world can be kind of dull. I need someone who can look past all that when they look at me. If you can do that, then we've got a chance. Hmmm?

JOAN

Hmmm.

MICHAEL

(Carefully picking up bug
with his fingers)

I've got the beetle. You can move the ant.

JOAN

(Surprised)

With your fingers?

MICHAEL

(Lofty)

Real nerds always pick up bugs with our fingers.

(HE waves it in her face for a moment,
and deposits it in the grass. SHE picks
up hers with her fingers also, and does
the same. Then SHE goes back for the
lace-wing)

JOAN

I feel the lace-wing should go in the grass too.

MICHAEL

That's right. Let's show a little respect for the dead.

JOAN

Maybe you're a stranger guy than I thought, Michael.

MICHAEL

Hard-won praise. Have we got a deal about tonight?

JOAN

(Hesitating)

About the dancing?

MICHAEL

(Seductive)

I'll ask them to play "La Cucaracha."

(SHE shakes her head as they go
off)

JOAN

Yup. Getting stranger all the time...

(As the LIGHTS GO DOWN, we hear a few
furious bars of music: "La Cucaracha.")

END OF PLAY