

Maybe Tomorrow

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

ELLEN – Mid-forties, tenured college literature professor. Fit, quick-witted, occasionally brusque, but also capable of great tenderness and vulnerability. She is very strong-willed, and although usually very reserved, she can express herself with a violent temper, which she almost immediately feels remorseful about expressing. She has never married.

MICHAEL – Early fifties, also a tenured college literature professor. Perhaps overly solicitous of others at times and also possesses the capacity for great tenderness and vulnerability. There is a sweetness about him, although he's not above the occasional ironic remark. He is like an animal coming out of a long hibernation, ready for a change or a new chapter in his life. He is a widower. He wears glasses.

SETTING: A bench in a clearing in the woods overlooking a lake. The bench should not have a backrest.

TIME: The Fourth of July. Late evening with the last remains of a sunset to the west.

NOTE ON BEATS, PAUSES, AND SILENCES: Throughout the script, I've indicated in the stage directions the uses of beats, pauses, and silences. Take a beat – a moment, really – in order to introduce a new thought, new idea, or change of subject. Use a pause when your character may want to say more but chooses not to say more, or he or she needs a moment to choose what to say or do next. Use a silence when the dialogue has come to a standstill because your character senses that their next utterance may have an impact upon the other person.

NOTE ON CREATING FIREWORKS EFFECT: There are various internet sites where you can download a variety of sound effects for the fireworks, and you can also purchase a fireworks gobo for less than \$15. Ideally, by the end of the play, the actors should be dimly lit, so that the light from the fireworks should register on their faces.

At rise of curtain, the lights come up on ELLEN sitting on the bench, reading once again an email on her cell phone. She is visibly upset and has come to this spot overlooking the lake to process a flurry of sudden emotions.

ELLEN

Oh, Phil, you stupid, selfish, son-of-a-bitch!

After a moment, MICHAEL enters, watches her looking at her cellphone. Pauses before speaking.

MICHAEL

So, there you are. We all wondered when you just sort of disappeared. *(Beat)* Are you all right? Everyone was concerned about you –

ELLEN quickly puts her cellphone back in her pocket.

ELLEN

(Overlapping) No, yes... I just needed some time to myself.

Crossing to her and standing at a slight remove.

MICHAEL

Oh, no problem. They can all be a little overwhelming *en masse*, believe me. I've known them all my life, and there are times I need space.

ELLEN

(Overlapping) Oh, no, no – you're family's wonderful, Michael.

MICHAEL

Your room at the cabin's okay?

ELLEN

It's fine, it's fine –

MICHAEL

You're sure?

ELLEN

It's fine.

MICHAEL

Good, it's important that you're comfortable. You have enough pillows and blankets?

ELLEN

The room is fine, Michael.

MICHAEL

Right. Good. I'm glad you're comfortable. Everyone wants you to feel comfortable and welcomed. You're a guest. I'd never hear the end of it if you were uncomfortable.

ELLEN

I am... comfortable. Thank you. *(Beat)* Will you please quit standing there? Why don't you sit down? Sorry.

Crossing to the bench and sitting, allowing for a polite, physical distance on the bench.

MICHAEL

Oh, okay.

ELLEN

Hi.

MICHAEL

Hi. *(Beat)* When you said hadn't any plans for the Fourth, well, I just couldn't see you staying in the city all alone –

ELLEN

I do have friends!

MICHAEL

I know that, I know that you have friends.

ELLEN

Sorry, it was very considerate of you to invite me.

MICHAEL

What are friends for?

ELLEN

We are friends, aren't we?

MICHAEL

We are... we are. *(Beat)* Listen, I hope that my family hasn't been too intrusive or invasive with all their questions –

ELLEN

No, well, it's natural that when a relative stranger shows up at an annual family gathering –

MICHAEL

You get peppered with all sorts of questions, like “Where are you from, Ellen? And where did you say you got your PhD?”

ELLEN

Oh, when your sister-in-law Cara asked me, “So, Ellen, you’re a colleague of Michael’s? And you live in the city, where? Oh, I love the Upper West Side! Have you lived there long? Do you live alone? Don’t you find it challenging living alone?” – I think I got a pause in edgewise.

MICHAEL

She more than holds her own in any conversation. But your true moment of glory was your incomparable unflappability, grace, and aplomb with my brother Teddy –

ELLEN

The self-professed “child of the universe” who was flirting with me –

MICHAEL

One and the same! – when he asked, his eyes twinkling, “So you’re a literature professor, Ellen? Can I call you Ellie? Who are your favorite authors? Have you read any V.S. Naipaul?”

ELLEN

“Not in the last half hour, Teddy!” I cooed.

MICHAEL

Yeah, he did a little too much peyote in his day. (*Beat*) We’re very big V.S. Naipaul readers in my family, by the way.

ELLEN

Really?

MICHAEL

No.

ELLEN

Smart ass! I like your youngest brother, Colin, the cute one with the goatee. He’s very sweet. He asked me about my “political affiliations...” He’s very progressive, you know.

MICHAEL

He is. Demonstrably so! And, of course, the question on everyone’s mind, “How do you know Michael? Oh, right, right, you’re colleagues.”

Pause.

MICHAEL

It’s been a while since... I usually come to these family get-togethers here at the lake by myself.

ELLEN

I gathered that. (*Beat*) But they know that we’re just friends, right?

MICHAEL

Yes, just friends. I emailed everyone that I had invited a colleague, who's also a *friend*.

ELLEN

They want more for your life obviously.

MICHAEL

They do – and they're not always subtle or shy about expressing it!

ELLEN

I imagine not.

MICHAEL

No!

ELLEN

It's touching, really, having people care about you, wanting more for you...

MICHAEL

It is, actually.

Pause.

MICHAEL

Shall we head back before it gets dark?

ELLEN

Do you mind if we stay a little while longer? I love this view of the lake.

MICHAEL

You won't want to miss the fireworks. It won't be the Fourth of July without seeing the fireworks with Isabel and Madeline and saying "ooh" and "ahh"!

ELLEN

Oh, God, your great-nieces are adorable! I'm falling in love with them!

MICHAEL

I am in love with them! You know, there's something about these five-year-old girls that melts your heart, that levels you, when they smile. And the twins' individual personalities are just now becoming more clearly defined. You get these glimpses of what each of them is going to be like when they get older. Izzy's going to be a ball-buster, and Maddie is going to break hearts, many hearts I'm afraid... You're a big hit with them, you know!

ELLEN

They're darling. Fraternal twins, right?

MICHAEL

Their mother, my niece, prefers “sororal twins.”

ELLEN

Oh, well! Down with the patriarchy!

MICHAEL

Kids these days with kids with these days!

Pause.

ELLEN

Did you ever want children, Michael?

Pause.

MICHAEL

Yes, but I – we – waited until it was too late in life to conceive – Janice and I... We got married in our late thirties, you know, and we were both so focused, too focused, on our individual careers. Traveling to conferences, serving on committees, applying for research grants, getting published, getting tenure... And then that window of time shrank to nothing, and it was too late for Janice to conceive. Missed our due date. Biological clock and all that.

ELLEN

I’m sorry, I didn’t know.

MICHAEL

It’s okay... We did explore an international adoption, but, well, other things happened. So...

Pause.

MICHAEL

Oh, look, there’s Venus!

ELLEN

Where?

MICHAEL

There. The evening star... *(Beat)* This is my favorite spot here when I need a respite from my family. Probably a good spot to watch the fireworks.

ELLEN

Really? You won’t mind not watching them with everyone else?

MICHAEL

No, but I'll expect you to produce some obligatory "oohs" and "ahs". Besides, from here the fireworks will be reflected off the lake's surface. Could be quite a show!

ELLEN

Okay, for you I'll muster an "ooh," maybe even an "ah."

MICHAEL

I'll hold you to it. Maddie, Izzy, and I will have plenty more Fourth of Julys... Fourths of July?

ELLEN

Fourths of Julys?

MICHAEL

I don't know.

ELLEN

Neither do I!

MICHAEL

Does it matter?

ELLEN

No, it doesn't.

MICHAEL

No, it doesn't. Although as literature professors...

Pause.

ELLEN

Thank you for inviting me, Michael.

MICHAEL

You're welcome, Ellie. What are friends for?

ELLEN

We are friends, aren't we?

MICHAEL

You betcha!

ELLEN

What was it like growing up in a large family?

MICHAEL

In a word, LOUD. There was always a minimum of three ongoing conversations at the supper table. When I was growing up, where I grew up, which was a small town in the rural Midwest, we could only get two television channels. In the summer – no one had air conditioning then – everyone opened the windows and their front doors to let in a breeze or the fresh air. The television in our house was always at full volume, and you could walk across the street to our neighbors, tune their TV to the same channel, and watch with the volume off.

ELLEN

Must have saved your neighbors a lot of wear and tear on their Motorolas.

MICHAEL

Yeah! I think that's why I've always been such a reader. A good book is a refuge from the noise and the hubbub, a world to retreat into.

ELLEN

Same here.

MICHAEL

What about your family?

ELLEN

Just my sister and me now. My family moved around a lot when I was growing up. My dad was in the military. We never really settled in one place.

MICHAEL

There's something about coming from a certain place that you don't appreciate until you meet someone who didn't come from a certain place.

Silence. Then simultaneously.

MICHAEL

Ellen, there's something I should –

ELLEN

Michael, I need to ask –

MICHAEL

Sorry, please, you first.

ELLEN rises from the bench, an undercurrent of emotions coming to the surface. After a moment to collect herself.

ELLEN

I left the gathering because I got an email from Phil –

MICHAEL

Oh. Phil Bredeson, from Archaeology?

ELLEN

You probably know that we've been "seeing each other," on and off, for the last few years...

MICHAEL

I've noticed the two of you together on occasion, yeah...

ELLEN

I like Phil, he's fun. We agreed that our "relationship," if you want to call it that, was never to be exclusive – at least, for him it wasn't. I know that he saw other women –

MICHAEL

Ellen, I'm really not comfortable –

ELLEN

Michael, right now, I need a friend. We're friends, aren't we?

MICHAEL

We are, we are.

ELLEN

So, anyway, I'm checking my phone after playing "airplane" with Isabel and Madeline, and there's an email from Phil... letting me know that he'd left his dig in Montana and flew to Vegas, where he got married! On a whim.

MICHAEL

In matters of the heart, Phil's always been an on-a-whim kinda guy.

ELLEN

That's not funny.

MICHAEL

Sorry.

Beat.

ELLEN

So, you're a man –

MICHAEL

Apparently so –

ELLEN

And as a man, a possessor of the X/Y chromosome pairing, a representative of the male species, please tell me, am I an attractive woman?

MICHAEL

Yes –

ELLEN

Am I articulate, intelligent, witty, well-spoken, a literate person, gainfully employed?

MICHAEL

Yes –

ELLEN

Fun to be with, good with other people's children, easy on the eyes?

MICHAEL

Yes –

ELLEN sits on the bench next to him, looking at MICHAEL with great intensity.

ELLEN

Then, why Phil? Why do I become involved with men who are afraid of making a commitment to me? Answer me that one, will you?

Silence.

MICHAEL

Years ago, when I was in therapy, I asked that same question – about women, that is – and my therapist said that maybe the reason that I was attracted to women who were afraid of making a commitment was because I was afraid of making a commitment.

ELLEN

So, you're suggesting that I'm afraid of commitment. Am I understanding you correctly?

MICHAEL

Well, I'm just sharing –

ELLEN

Well, fuck you!

MICHAEL

Ellen, you wouldn't react this way, unless there was some truth to what I just said...

ELLEN

Fuck you and fuck your sharing!

MICHAEL

Ellen, Phil was never going to spend the rest of his life with you, much less marry you. It's not in his temperament or DNA. He's been married three times, for Christ's sake – well, four now. I mean, he's a great guy, fun to be with, but when it comes to being in, much less staying in, a committed relationship, he's got a spotty track record.

ELLEN

Well, it meant something to me!

MICHAEL

I know...

ELLEN rises suddenly from the bench and begins to walk away. MICHAEL follows her and grabs her by the arm.

MICHAEL

Ellen! Ellie! Wait!

She spins around and threatens to slap him across the face.

ELLEN

Let go of me! So help me God, Michael!

MICHAEL lets go of her arm. ELLEN composes herself, breathes in deeply in order to steady her nerves.

MICHAEL

I'm sorry.

ELLEN

I'd like a ride to the train station. I need to leave now. Now!

MICHAEL

Ellen, it's the Fourth of July. The trains are running a very irregular schedule. You could be waiting for hours.

ELLEN

(Overlapping) Fine – don't laugh at me! – then I'll call a taxi or I'll walk!

MICHAEL

There are no taxis, and it's at least 15 miles to the nearest train station. Please, don't be upset with me.

ELLEN

Wait a minute, you already knew.

MICHAEL

Yeah –

ELLEN

You knew he was thinking of eloping with his doctoral candidate advisee, “Kerri with an I”?

MICHAEL

Yeah –

ELLEN

He spoke with you recently?

MICHAEL

Yeah –

ELLEN

And you invited me here because – what? – you wanted to divert my attention–

MICHAEL

Yes. But, Ellen –

ELLEN

From Phil’s imminent nuptials with “Kerri with an I,” a woman young enough to be his daughter! You took pity on me. That’s why you invited me! You took pity on me! Poor, lonely, unwed Ellen who has no family! I will not be condescended to! Do you understand me!

MICHAEL

Ellen, I would never do that.

ELLEN

Then why? *(Beat)* Why?

MICHAEL

Because I’m in love with you...

ELLEN

What?

MICHAEL

I think...

Pause. They are both stunned by his revelation.

MICHAEL

Oh, shit.

ELLEN

Michael... How long ...?

MICHAEL crosses and sits on the bench.

MICHAEL

I first really knew when we served together on the curriculum revision committee...

ELLEN

That was seven, eight years ago. *(Beat)* Michael...

MICHAEL

What can I say? I loved the way that you championed the inclusion of diversity and equity in the English major curriculum. You were marvelous, resplendent, relentless, defiant in your passion. I linger in my office on Friday afternoons, hoping you'll pop your head through the open doorway, and even the briefest of chats will brighten my day and get me through the weekend until Monday morning when I see you again. Sometimes you do this thing where you run your hand through your hair, and it's distracting in the nicest possible, slightly erotic way.

Beat. She crosses to him and sits on the bench.

ELLEN

You silly man! You silly, silly man!

MICHAEL

And I couldn't bear the thought of you being alone this weekend.

ELLEN

Why haven't you ever said anything?

MICHAEL

I was married, remember.

ELLEN

Right, of course, I'm sorry. Stupid. Sorry.

MICHAEL

Not that, in the last few years, I didn't consider... Janice was having –

ELLEN

I know. I knew. Everyone knew. The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences is a small town unto itself. There are no secrets in small towns.

MICHAEL

That's so comforting to someone who comes from a small town.

ELLEN

You're being ironic?

MICHAEL

I hope so... Of course, what only I know is that we were going to get a divorce... and then she got sick.

ELLEN

And you stayed.

MICHAEL

I was married, remember.

ELLEN

I do.

MICHAEL

And now I'm not.

ELLEN

And here we are – two single, middle-aged, tenured literature professors.

MICHAEL

It would appear so.

Pause.

ELLEN

Do you find me attractive?

MICHAEL

(Overlapping) Do you find me attractive?

ELLEN

I asked you first.

MICHAEL

Am I answering as a representative of the male species or just for myself?

ELLEN

Are *you* attracted to *me*?

MICHAEL

I think that's a given. Yes, very much so. (*Beat*) And... you say –

ELLEN

Don't rush me! (*Assessing him for a moment*) You could use a haircut –

MICHAEL

Oh, "Where mercy, love, and pity dwell, there is God dwelling too!"

ELLEN

Don't tease me by quoting Blake! God, you Romantics!

MICHAEL

Sorry, I should know better than to curry irony with a Post-Modernist!

ELLEN

Don't be snarky. (*Taking him in, as though for the first time, then removing his glasses, gently*) You have the most beautiful eyes! They're mesmerizing!

MICHAEL

Thank you.

ELLEN

I noticed them when I met you at my job interview. And you have the most appealing upper lip. (*Gently running her index finger along the curve of his lip*) It's very... sensuous... I've always secretly rejoiced when you've shaved your winter beard during spring term.

MICHAEL

I love the sound of your voice, even when you're scaring the shit out of me.

Pause.

MICHAEL

(*Blurting*) I'd like to kiss you. May I kiss you?

ELLEN

(*Tentatively*) All right.

With a great deal of uncertainty, they engage in a rather clumsy, awkward kiss, each not knowing how to engage the other's lips.

MICHAEL

Well, that was uninspiring!

ELLEN

That's putting it mildly.

Sorry, I'm a bit out of practice.

MICHAEL

Evidently.

ELLEN

Can I have a do-over?

MICHAEL

Yes, please!

ELLEN

They both inhale, center themselves. This time they slowly and patiently engage in a kiss, which is longer, more sustained, and more passionate. When they separate, they linger closely to each other, looking into each other's eyes for a moment.

Wow.

ELLEN

Well said. *(Moving to kiss her again)* May I kiss you again?

MICHAEL

No.

ELLEN

Oh.

MICHAEL

(Smiling) Maybe tomorrow?

ELLEN

Okay, I'll hold you to it. We're friends, aren't we?

MICHAEL

Yes, we're friends, good friends... I don't know how we're going to navigate this...

ELLEN

Nor do I.

MICHAEL

She touches her hand to his face, which he takes and kisses. It begins to grow perceptibly darker, and they are bathed in the last light of twilight.

To think that all this time you've been right in front of me... I'm scared.

ELLEN

MICHAEL

So am I. Maybe we should head back, join the others. The fireworks will be starting soon.

ELLEN

No, please, let's watch the fireworks from here, just you and I.

MICHAEL

Okay. It'll be a Fourth of Julys to remember.

She moves closer to him on the bench, and he gingerly puts his arm around her shoulder. Suddenly, the sound of a fireworks shooting up into the sky, followed by an explosion of a burst of color.

MICHAEL

Ooh...

ELLEN

Ah...

She lays her head on his shoulder. He rests his head against hers. Another fireworks with a burst of color. Lights slowly fade to black, as we hear The Pretenders' "Talk of the Town."

BLACKOUT. END OF PLAY.