

OUR LADY OF BROAD STREET

A One-Act Play

By Jane Denitz Smith

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CHARACTERS

ALICE (ARCHITECT, LATE 20S)

VICTOR (SENIOR ARCHITECT, 60-ISH)

ROSIE (SECURITY GUARD, EARLY 20S)

*\*With the exception of ALICE,  
characters can be any gender*

*Projection of young girl, legs splayed.  
She is building a tower of blocks and  
carefully considering their placement*

PROLOGUE

*ALICE, giving a Power Point presentation. At her corporate best.*

First, this hotel's extraordinary  
backstory:

It was a brothel

*(vintage image)*

A bootlegging operation

*(vintage image)*

And in 1969, in a suite of rooms on the  
9th floor

Four iconoclastic architects drafted the  
first plans for the World Trade Center.

*(image)*

*(pause)*

I don't have to tell you: there is  
power in a structure. Whether it is  
destroyed or resurrected, buildings are—  
sacred spaces.

*(pause)*

So.

Our proposal

In its most generic terms

Begins with archival photographs and

General consideration of circulation.

Remove existing plaster

Eradicate dropped ceilings

Lighting fixtures

Strip moldings and trim.

Replace doors as required.

Relocate reception and waiting area,

Bag storage,

Office,

Toilet rooms,

Farewell, faux cornices,

Rabbit warren of upstairs guest quarters  
and

Desecrated lobby.

Restore the patterned mosaic,

*(image)*

Bring to the light the marble columns,

*(image)*

The artful integration of limestone and  
granite,

*(image)*

The illuminated clock.

*(image)*

Pare it down.

Down to the bone,

To the original façade,

Now obscured by  
Thai Garden,  
Santore's Dry Cleaning,  
And a no-name bodega-slash-bookie joint.

And when we're done,  
When we leave this work behind,  
We'll know we have raised the dead,  
In a matter of speaking,  
By breathing life into,  
This grand old dame.  
And the effect will be...transcendent.  
*(image of hotel in its original glory)*

SCENE 1

*Office building, Monday morning. Enter ALICE, rolled architectural plans under one arm, hard hat in the other.*

*(Enter Victor, hands her paper)*

VICTOR

Read it and weep.

ALICE

All work has to cease?

VICTOR

Temporarily.

ALICE

Because—

VICTOR

The head electrician was checking the outlets and what can I say--

ALICE

He saw Jesus. In a water stain on the wall to the right of the reception desk.

VICTOR

Mary. As in The Virgin.

ALICE

Oh boy.

VICTOR

Or, to be precise, Our Lady of Guadalupe.

ALICE

What does Nina say?

VICTOR

She's pretty sure it has something to do with this new solvent they've been using.

ALICE

Okay. That makes sense. Problem solved.

VICTOR

Except the archdiocese has to sign off on its authenticity.

ALICE

You're joking. Because some electrician had a "vision"?

VICTOR

There's a whole protocol you have to follow.

ALICE

It's a water stain, Victor!

VICTOR

Don't shoot the messenger.

ALICE

Did you see it?

VICTOR

I did.

ALICE

And? What did you think?

VICTOR

Hard to say.

ALICE

Hard to say?!

VICTOR

Could be chemicals. Salt, perhaps. Air pockets in the original construction. But—

ALICE

But what?

VICTOR

I don't know. Something that's not there Thursday suddenly appears on Friday. It's—weird.

ALICE

Or maybe it was always there and nobody noticed?

VICTOR

True. Anything's possible, I guess.

ALICE

In the meantime, we have a deadline. What are we supposed to do??

VICTOR

We wait. And pray. *(pause)* That was a joke.

ALICE

Hahahaha...

SCENE 2

*ROSIE behind desk. Enter ALICE.*

ALICE  
*(turns on light switch)* And God said "Let there be light, and there was light!"

ROSIE  
Amen!

ALICE  
What do you make of all this?

ROSIE  
I never even noticed until they told me.

ALICE  
It's a water stain, by the way.

ROSIE  
Okay.

ALICE  
OR they used solvent on the walls.

ROSIE  
Right.

ALICE

Please tell me you don't think it's the Virgin of Guadalupe.

ROSIE

That would be pretty weird. But very cool.

ALICE

Sorry. I'm a pragmatist. I rely on empirical evidence.

ROSIE

Still, you have to admit, it's—weird.

ALICE

Are you and Victor in cahoots? That's exactly what he said.

ROSIE

Who's Victor?

ALICE

Forget it. (noticing velvet rope in front of wall) What's with the fancy rope?

ROSIE

Oh. Apparently, there was too much touching. That contractor—

ALICE

Marty?

ROSIE

The lady with the big glasses--

ALICE

Nina. Head of historic preservation—

ROSIE

Right. She flipped out on me. Something about detected residue and dirt from too many fingerprints. She said it damages the art.

ALICE

Ah, so now it's been elevated to "Art"! That's so "Nina".

ROSIE

Good thing I didn't tell her about the nuns who drove down from Springfield. She would've gone ballistic.

ALICE

Nuns from Springfield.

ROSIE

Yep.

ALICE

Well, Nina and the Catholic Church can Kiss. My. Ass.

ROSIE

Even as we speak, there's a tour bus coming, all the way from Toledo!

ALICE

Stop. You're killing me.

ROSIE

Toledo as in Ohio—We're freakin' famous!

ALICE

Aw-some.

ROSIE

Sorry about that. I try to keep up. It's mostly coffee cups. From the Starbucks next door. But I did find a dirty diaper in one of the planters.

*(pause)*

Can I ask you a question?

ALICE

Shoot.

ROSIE

So. In your expert opinion. Assuming it is water. I'm wondering. Why doesn't it evaporate?

ALICE

Poor patching? *(quoting Victor)* Or it could be chemicals. Salt. Air pockets in the original construction.

*(Pause)*

I'm sensing a little kernel of doubt—

ROSIE

You're the expert. I'm just the guard behind the desk. But it doesn't go away. Which is—weird. In my opinion. Which means nothing. Except it's—weird.

ALICE

So you think it might be something.

ROSIE

No. But you never know--

ALICE

Go on. I challenge you! Make me a believer.

ROSIE

Sorry?

ALICE

Convince me that this water stain, or salt deposit, or whatever the fuck it is, is the Virgin of Guadalupe. I'm listening.

ROSIE

*(approaches stain)*

Well, it looks like it's crying?

ALICE

Condensation. Jesus!

ROSIE

Right. It's just a theory. Not mine, necessarily, but you asked me to convince you, so--

*pause*

ALICE

Sorry. (bends over) I think I'm losing my mind. (looking closer at stain; she's joking but her tone is faux serious) Am I dreaming, or is her robe looking a little-wider?

ROSIE

There's a lot of--weirdness out there.

ALICE

Spoooooky!

ROSIE

Not spooky. But definitely weird.

ALICE

You have my rapt attention.

ROSIE

Okay. So take the Grand Canyon, for instance. It's so BIG. Like you're looking at a whole other universe. We went there when I was 8 and I still dream about it. And don't get me going on Black Holes, which are insane. The smallest ones are called primordial black holes but you probably knew that.

ALICE

Nope.

ROSIE

They're as small as an atom but they have the mass of a mountain! A MOUNTAIN! That's the kind of shit that makes me wonder... You know what I mean?

ALICE

Sure. Except I have a hard time "wondering" when things are quantifiable. As in the Ice Age. Tectonic Plates. I deal in mortar. I-beams. (pause) Which isn't to say I can't appreciate the aesthetics of the Grand Canyon.

ROSIE

Have you ever gone there? You should definitely go. I'm telling you, it's-wild.

*(ALICE is already done with this conversation. She's checking out the water stain)*

ALICE

From this angle, she could be a penguin. Don't you think?

*(ROSIE stands next to ALICE)*

ROSIE

Or an ice cream cone?

*(pause)*

You know what's really weird, when you think about it?

ALICE

What?

ROSIE

To you, she looks like a penguin and to me--an ice cream cone.

ALICE

The moral of the story is: everybody sees what they want to see.

SCENE 3

*Late morning, office*

ALICE

I ran into one of the tenants on the twelfth floor. This guy was ancient. Totally bent over.

VICTOR

There's five of them left, I think. A critical mass went for the buy-out. I used to think everybody had a price--

ALICE

Not him. And why should he? A rent-stabilized apartment in a renovated building. He looked at me with pure hatred, by the way.

VICTOR

You're too sensitive--

ALICE

When we got in the elevator, he informed me that he has lived here for 70 years and that according to the tenant contract, workers have to use the elevator on the east wing.

VICTOR

This is true. Sorry. I thought you knew that.

ALICE

He actually wouldn't push the button until I got out. Like I was contaminating it.

VICTOR

Seventy years in this building. *(pause)* Jeez. They're going to have to carry him out feet first.

ALICE

I wonder how many people have dropped dead in this piece of real estate.

VICTOR

Many.

ALICE

Hundreds? Thousands? I bet there are records somewhere.

VICTOR

All those molecules, swirling around us-- Pinging us with invisible final breaths--

ALICE

I think those molecules would have dissipated by now.

VICTOR

You never know.

ALICE

Please don't go all metaphysical on me, Victor.

VICTOR

I read somewhere that we're all stardust.

ALICE

Well ain't that poetic.

VICTOR

Scientific fact. This is a building with a history. Which may include molecules. And apparitions—

ALICE

You're serious.

VICTOR

Breathe. *(pause)* In a day or two everything will settle down.

ALICE

They're not settling down, Victor. You saw that line out the door. And the tent city across the street.

VICTOR

Six tents do not a city make.

ALICE

Just you wait. That's only the beginning.

VICTOR

I'm pretty sure the mayor's office will issue a variance.

ALICE

We theoretically open in one week, Victor!

VICTOR

And I've never been on a project that didn't have a last-minute snag. Everything will work itself out. We're right on schedule.

ALICE

For now.

VICTOR

All will be well. I never properly congratulated you, Alice. When you proposed the bar flowing into the lobby, I voiced my doubts. But you were on the money. The continuity is breathtaking. You retained the period integrity and gave it a contemporary flair.

ALICE

Except for the water stain next to the reception area! Can't Marty just get rid of it?

VICTOR

Too late. With the foot traffic we have now, can you imagine the negative publicity?

ALICE

They're sitting on the Eames chairs, by the way.

VICTOR

Who?

ALICE

The pilgrims. Thought you'd like to know.

VICTOR

Oh well. That's what the chairs are there for. Might as well break them in.

ALICE

And they're leaving offerings. Marigolds. Letters asking for favors. Every night the guard throws them away and the following night, there they are again.

VICTOR

Our very own altar.

ALICE

You think this is funny.

VICTOR

Not funny funny. But remarkable. There's something--humbling--about belief in something that is so--I guess that's what they mean by "blind faith."

ALICE

Great. Now you drank the Kool-Aid! Why don't we just convert the hotel into a house of worship?? At least we'll have some real work to do!

VICTOR

Patience. A) I'm waiting to hear back from the archdiocese, to authenticate, and B) even if they do, which is so infinitesimally unlikely, there's a whole process. Only bishops have the authority to approve apparitions in their diocese.

ALICE

How to you know all this?

VICTOR

I'm a lapsed Catholic.

ALICE

Get out.

VICTOR

This stuff is in my DNA. Believe it or not, I used to be an altar boy. Five lost years of my youth. I remember the dress code. The Cassock--

ALICE

Cossack?

VICTOR

Cassock. The white vestment. Collared shirts. Black socks. Black shoes. Dockers-style pants.

ALICE

Dockers. You're joking.

VICTOR

Nope.

ALICE

Isn't that branding?

VICTOR

Read the altar boy handbook.

ALICE

There's an actual handbook?

VICTOR

We even had our very own saint. John something or other? The Patron Saint of Altar Boys. (pause) Stop looking so agonized. We just have to wait it out.

ALICE

Tell that to every crackpot in the Tri-State area. Not to mention Toledo.

VICTOR

Do you remember the Jesus in the grilled cheese sandwich?

ALICE

The one that sold for, like, a million dollars on eBay.

VICTOR

There was also a tortilla somewhere in the Midwest. But I think that disintegrated. I always wondered how they preserved the grilled cheese, being dairy and all. Religion does strange things to people.

ALICE

How did a nice Jewish girl like me get mixed up in this?

VICTOR

You're Jewish?

ALICE

Culturally-speaking.

VICTOR

I didn't know you were Jewish.

ALICE

I didn't know you were Catholic.

VICTOR

Point taken. But—you don't look--

ALICE

Sorry, Victor. I forgot to sew on my Jewish star before I left for work this morning!

VICTOR

You know me, Alice. I was making idle conversation—

ALICE

But the implication—

VICTOR

Judaism is a beautiful religion. In fact, this is something I've rarely shared. But a large part of me has always longed to be Jewish. The way you're encouraged to question customs, Biblical text, even the very existence of God. You might be surprised..

ALICE

STOP!! I haven't set foot in a temple since my cousin Sammy's bar mitzvah, and that was almost 20 years ago. My family worshipped Sunday brunch. And watching Jeopardy. Oh, and fighting. We fight all the time.

VICTOR

That's beautiful. That's so-Jewish.

ALICE

OH GOD!! Please don't make me the representative of the Jewish people!

VICTOR

Apologies. I never intended to be offensive.

ALICE

(attempting to lighten the mood a little) And for your information, Victor, Santa made a pit stop and dropped a few gifts under our miniature tree. ALSO: I happen to love Marshmallow Peeps! Not to mention Cadbury Crème Eggs.

VICTOR

What's not to love?

ALICE

We don't practice. But we never really did.

*(lights dim)*

ALICE

Yes. We hid in plain sight, like the Spanish conversos.

Buried our faith in the backyard along  
with the squirrel bones and the  
petrified dog shit and the rusty Slinky.

But just you wait.

All will be revealed!

Millennia of blizzards!

Seas receding and the drowned city  
exposing its skyline.

Typhoons and earthquakes of monstrous  
proportion!

A befuddled and wayward Stegosaurus  
jaywalking on an undulating four-lane  
highway.

*(lights up—ALICE and VICTOR as before)*

VICTOR

Even though I no longer practice my faith, I still consider  
myself spiritual. Nature, for example. The soul transcending  
death--You?

ALICE  
ME? What do you think?

VICTOR  
That's what I figured. (pause) You're so-pragmatic.

ALICE  
You say that like it's a problem.

VICTOR  
No. But when you gave your Power Point, maybe I missed something--

ALICE  
Like what?

VICTOR  
This is awkward--

ALICE  
Yes?

VICTOR  
I wasn't going to mention it. But. There was a little blow-back--

ALICE  
Excuse me?

VICTOR  
Just a little. You spoke about structures as if they were--  
alive. I appreciate the passion, Alice, don't misunderstand me.

ALICE

It's more than passion--

VICTOR

The "synergy of a skyline", for example.

ALICE

Okay. Go on.

VICTOR

When you referenced the Twin Towers.

ALICE

Uh huh--

VICTOR

Some people felt that you--how shall I put this?--left out the human element--

ALICE

Oh for fuck's sake, Victor, I was highlighting the magnitude of structure.

VICTOR

--the thousands of lives that were lost.

ALICE

Surely that was in my subtext!

VICTOR

But the presentation of your message was a bit--understated.

ALICE

Listen, Victor: when the Towers fell, I was devastated by the loss of life. Of course I was. But also—I'm being honest here-- for the brick and mortar. Those mangled steel rods and loosened bolts. I felt sorry for the building. Guilty as charged!

VICTOR

It's a building. A building has a shelf life. Not counting the pyramids, or--

ALICE

Count the pyramids! Walkways, suspension bridges, elevator shafts. Who knows how much human error puts structures at risk--

VICTOR

--And people...

ALICE

Of course, "and people". Duh.

VICTOR

Random accidents happen all the time.

ALICE

I call it human error. (pause) Buildings are so much easier to like than people.

VICTOR

"Blasphemous"!

ALICE

Excuse me?

VICTOR

That was the word someone used!

ALICE

Context! Intention! (pause) Fine. If it'll make everybody happy, I'll send a group clarification!

VICTOR

Thank you. That would be helpful.

ALICE

I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. How's that?

*(VICTOR gives "thumbs up", exits)*

*(Lights dim)*

Let the great excavations resume!

Let earth movers release the glorious  
and metallic stench of construction--  
beams and frames and scaffolding--

Hallelujah!

Here, I find reverence.

I find wonder.

*(Lights up)*

ALICE

Would somebody please tell me: what exactly is it I'm apologizing for??

SCENE 4

The turn of a key. Darkness except for desk light where ROSIE sits reading. A utility light aimed at the water stain. ALICE enters, eating. ROSIE jumps.

ALICE

Sorry. I didn't mean to scare you. Want some of my bagel?

ROSIE

No thanks. I packed a turkey sandwich.

ALICE

*(jokey-suggestive)* We have to stop meeting like this.

ROSIE

Sorry?

ALICE

Me stopping by every night after work. *(pause)* Never mind. *(referencing water stain)* It's irresistible, in an anthropological sort of way. You're reading. I'll shut up.

ROSIE

Studying for mid-terms.

ALICE

You're in college?

ROSIE

Hence, this job. Every little bit helps.

ALICE

Good for you! (walks up to water stain) I think our girl's face has developed a new crack. She's looking a little long in the tooth.

ROSIE

Looks the same to me. Tony said there were over 400 visitors today.

ALICE

He keeps count?

ROSIE

Boss's orders. There was a group of kids from a Catholic school in Queens. Holy Rosary or something.

ALICE

Great. School groups.

ROSIE

Tony said they were very well behaved.

ALICE

Is that so? I want to know what happens when the hotel opens for business. These "pilgrims" just keep trudging through?

ROSIE

I had an idea, actually.

ALICE

Yeah?

ROSIE  
You're gonna think it's crazy.

ALICE  
Try me.

ROSIE  
I was thinking we should open a gift shop!

ALICE  
Because...

ROSIE  
The #1 most frequently asked question: Where's the gift shop?

ALICE  
Please tell me you're joking.

ROSIE  
People love their medallions. But I've heard requests for post cards, coin purses, wallet. And t-shirts. I HEART GUADALUPE!  
Think of the revenue--

ALICE  
This isn't a church! It's a hotel!

ROSIE  
Picture something tiny. Tucked into the corner. It would hardly take up any space.

ALICE

Great. And who's gonna run this hypothetical gift shop?

ROSIE

I would, if they paid me extra—If you guys decide, keep me in mind, okay?

ALICE

Not to worry. You'll be first on my list.

*(ALICE in front of water stain. In addition to offerings, the floor is sprinkled with red votive candles)*

The fire department will love these.

ROSIE

I never let anybody light them. Not that they don't try. Oh, and by the way, I stored a bunch of crutches in the utility closet. I hope that's okay.

ALICE

Fantastic. Now we have miraculous healings.

ROSIE

A few.

*(Lights dim)*

VOICES

Blessed Virgin restore my grandson's broken femur

Heal my left lung

My cracked ribs

My slipped disc

Provide me with a day's employment  
Deliver my missing daughter to my arms.  
*(Lights down)*

SCENE 5

*Next day.*

ALICE  
HALLELUJAH! Are you ready for some miraculous news?

ROSIE  
Ready.

ALICE  
As of 5 p.m., the Church decided not to authenticate the water stain.

ROSIE  
No shit!

ALICE  
No shit.

ROSIE  
What about the tents across the street?

ALICE  
Eviction notice. Signed, sealed, delivered.

ROSIE

They won't be happy.

ALICE

They don't have a choice.

ROSIE

I guess my gift shop idea is a bust.

ALICE

Afraid so.

ROSIE

I just hope the cops are prepared for resistance.

ALICE

I don't think they're overly concerned. (pause) What do you think our pilgrims would say if they knew this building used to be a whore house?

*(ROSIE shrugs)*

And then it was a bootlegging operation.

And here's another Fun Fact: Bet you didn't know that a team of architects drafted the first plans for the World Trade Center right here, in a suite on the 9th floor.

ROSIE

Get the fuck out!

*(pause, ALICE gathering her things,  
starts to leave, turns around)*

ALICE

Yep.

ALICE

Don't worry, I'll make sure you get an invitation to the soft opening.

ROSIE

Thanks. That's really nice of you.

ALICE

Well, you've been great. Really great. You deserve to be on the list.

ROSIE

Is it okay if I bring somebody?

ALICE

Long as they don't eat or drink too much.

ROSIE

I'll make sure.

ALICE

That was a joke. It's catered. Eat and drink as much as you want. Take home a doggie bag!

ROSIE

Cool.

*(pause; they've run out of words)*

ALICE

So. This is how it ends. "Not with a bang, but a whimper."

*(She starts to leave)*

*(Lights down. Lights up. Ambient  
cocktail party chatter at soft opening)*

ALICE

Please be assured that Nina Brundage and her topnotch crew will follow, to the letter, the same protocol used to extricate a serpent goddess bas relief discovered in a vintner's cellar several years ago in Corsica. After extrication, our fragment will be transported to the estate of a private collector of religious icons.

In truth, its absence leaves a void. Like the layers of sediment that constitute the Grand Canyon, it is now part of the collective memory of this building.

*Barely detectible lowering of lights*

Though I still resist, I must conclude

That this apparently random appearance  
has opened

Even the most pragmatic among us to the  
possibility that the unexplainable  
exists:

The jogger taking her evening jaunt  
around the park, watched carefully by  
the psychopath crouched in the bushes.

The birthday girl and her scooter out on  
a maiden voyage, never anticipating the  
loosening bolt.

The cat eying a mouse who is nearly  
hidden by a discarded candy wrapper.

The deadly virus that will fell the  
heartiest among us.

The rusty nail that penetrates a shoe.

The air conditioner 30 stories above  
that loses its grip

In a particular building

At a particular time.

And yet.

Do not discount the ten-dollar bill  
loosened by a breeze and delivered into  
the hands of a hungry man.

The disappearance and re-discovery of a  
baby, spirited away in the night.

The cancer cells that are no longer  
visible.

The healed broken rib.

The apprehension of the thugs who were  
riding Metro North in White Plains and  
about to assault the widower at knife  
point.

The unexpected and genial phone call  
between parent and child.

The trauma of what we know and what we  
will never know.

The collateral damage of being alive.

*Lights up. Cocktail party noise resumes,  
louder.*

*Lights dim, fade to beatific image of  
Guadalupe, arms outstretched.*

END

