



DEAD CAT'S BOUNCE

by
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Players:

JAMES & SARAH JIMSON, a husband and wife in their late 40's

JENNY JIMSON, their teenage daughter

CARL BREEZE, their neighbor

The play takes place in a suburban cul-de-sac.

AT RISE: Four stools placed in a row, facing the audience.

Seating order, stage left to right: Sarah, James, Jenny, Carl.

Carl's stool should be slightly separated from the family grouping.

If spotlights are available, each character should have their own. The players should be illuminated simultaneously with a loud clank and a receding hum, as if an industrial light switch has been pulled.

The players do not leave their stools throughout.

JAMES

My memory is hazy now. I remember leaving the hospital with Sarah. We made a couple turns, cutting through parking lots, when an orange leaf, a large one, landed in our path.

Sarah stooped, picked it up and smiled.

Perhaps—and this is just the best justification I can offer—perhaps she was about to say something mitigating, something trite and unworthy of her brilliant mind, so I interjected.

JAMES [continued]

“If I’d known this was how it was going to end, I wouldn’t have had all that expensive dental work done.”

This isn’t something she wanted to hear.

SARAH

I didn’t respond.

JAMES

It also occurred to me that all I got from the hospital was a walker, a syringe filled with morphine and a nurse’s best wishes. Best wishes? For what?

SARAH

We got home. I still hadn’t thought of anything to say to him. I wanted to say something, but I had nothing to say. My mind was only interested in hurrying to our bedroom to fluff-up bed pillows.

I’d pounded the pillows down to nothing in his absence. They looked awful, smashed against the headboard.

This is what was on my mind: pillows and wondering if the smell of my cigarette smoke had dissipated.

It hadn’t. James caught a whiff the moment we neared the bedroom door.

“Why do you smoke in here?” he asked.

I could only shrug as we maneuvered through the doorway. The doorway was too narrow for his walker, so it took us a while...

I could just kill myself. I was so thoughtless. He was tired, wanting desperately to lie down, but I was in his way, making the bed, fluffing pillows, saying nothing, thinking about cigarettes.

JENNY

My God. You’d think somebody was dying. Mom and dad were tiptoeing around each other like they never have before. What I wouldn’t have given for one of their famous thirty-second spats.

[*Hands on hips, chest out, imitating James*] “Have you ever noticed how your mother never hangs up her blouses?”

[*Arms folded, imitating Sarah*] “Have you ever noticed that your father compulsively throws out all the dry cleaning hangers?”

JENNY [continued]

I'd add: How come neither of you ever notices that the dog stinks? Do I always have to give the damn thing a bath if I want friends over? He farts. He belches. He vomits. What are we feeding him anyway?

JAMES

Your mother's cooking.

SARAH

I'm not the one who feeds him table scraps.

JENNY

For crying out loud. It doesn't matter. He shouldn't be allowed indoors anyways. That would solve everything.

But no. Not today. Today was about tiptoeing down hallways, spraying Lysol, smoking cigarettes in the garage and ignoring the dog. Nobody saying a word.

CARL

I've known the Jimsons for twelve years now. Sarah, James, Jenny and Izzy.

Izzy is surprisingly smelly for such a little dog. I'm an exterminator by trade and I can tell you, roach bait smells better than Izzy.

He's had a good life— James, not Izzy. His daughter, Jenny, is an honors student at Roosevelt. His wife, Sarah, is an attorney. Banks, Riddle and Wreath. Downtown. A damn good lawyer too, from what I gather.

JAMES

What other husband would blindly allow his wife to draw up his will? I have no idea what's in there. When I ask, she tells me, "Don't worry, honey. You won't end up in probate."

SARAH

You wouldn't understand the details anyway. Suffice to say, Fiona won't get a dime and Jeffrey will go to a good college.

JAMES

Fiona's my ex-wife and Jeffrey's my other kid. So, I worry.

SARAH

You needn't worry. Jeffrey will be fine. He won't be going to Harvard, but neither did you. Neither did your parents, nor did anybody you know. So, he's taken care of.

JAMES

And Fiona?

SARAH

Not a dime. And Tiffany will finally take us off their mailing list.

JAMES

I assumed Fiona's debt. How was I supposed to know there'd be catalogues too?

SARAH

Every time I pull that little blue book from our mailbox.

Sarah cringes.

JAMES

And you think they'll stop hawking us baubles and decanters when I die?

SARAH

When you die, the balance will go unpaid. Why would Tiffany market to a deadbeat?

JAMES

They'll go after Fiona.

SARAH

One can hope.

You know, maybe I'll open my own account when you're gone. There's a Schlumberger bracelet on page twelve to die for.

JAMES

O?

SARAH

Costs more than my wedding ring did.

JAMES

Well then. Godspeed to you and your Schlumberger bracelet.

SARAH

Thank you, James. [*Beat*] I appreciate that.

JENNY

O! For the days of those conversations! Why can't we talk about ex-wives and Tiffany's again? Why can't we bite back and forth at each other a few more times? Isn't that living?

Listen. Last week, daddy actually took the time to read his will. He tells me I'm in it. Like I care. I may be in an Annie Hall phase, but I don't want his neckties.

JENNY [continued]

I liked it better when the will was about Fiona and Jeffrey, about keeping dad out of probate and mom's Machiavellian legal mind.

SARAH

Machiavellian? You don't know what that means.

[*With pride*] I do everything aboveboard. I graduated top of my class.

JENNY

Does that really matter?

SARAH

Do good grades matter?

JENNY

Does life matter? What have we done with it? What are we doing to it?

Put out that cigarette. He'll smell it. He'll know you're smoking.

SARAH

I'll take that chance.

JAMES

I smell it. I smell it in the pillows, in the bed sheets. It's in her suits, her blouses, her nightgowns. It's her perfume and I treasure it. But, my senses are dulling. Soon, the smell of her smoke will be gone.

JENNY

Don't you care? Your smoke could make dad sicker.

SARAH

I won't tell Jenny this, but I wish that were true. Sicker is a point on a spectrum I can see. I can see sick. I can see sicker. I can even see sickest, but I can't see the end of sickness. I can't see death.

JAMES AND JENNY

You can't?

SARAH

I can't. And no matter what I've been told, I can't see James dead. I can't see his suffering coming to an end. It will go on. It must go on... In my own selfish way, I beg for it to go on.

Suffer, James. Suffer. If the pain gets too great, take the morphine. Even with the morphine, I'll still see the anxiety in your eyes and be comforted.

SARAH [continued]

God! Why do I think this way? How sick am I? Where on the spectrum do I fall?

I search. I search that spectrum every day. Every hour.

JENNY

[*Ugh!*] They should've given the morphine to me.

Slight pause.

[*With a hand gesture indicating a phone call*] Sure, Katlin, I say on the phone. I'll come right over. I'm not doing anything tonight and mom is smoking in the house again. You know how that bothers me. I'll do anything to get away.

No, silly. I didn't mean that. You're not my last refuge.

Listen, Katlin. Really. I treasure our relationship. You're my main gal and I want to be with you. Alone again. Like last Friday.

Yes. Like a rainbow.

Yes. Through your window.

CARL

Katlin! Supper's on. I need your help setting the table.

JENNY

Dinner sounds fine. Nothing's on the grill here and dad's in the hospital again.

CARL

Katlin, I need your help and if you're going to invite your friend Jenny again, tell her to plan on spending time with the family, the entire family—in the family room. I've had enough of you two hold-up in your bedroom.

[*To himself*] Besides, Jenny needs the interaction of a family.

SARAH

Of a family?

JENNY

[*Laughing*] No, Katlin, I'm not going hungry. I just want to get away from the smelly dog and the smoke.

CARL

Why Sarah insists on smoking around Jenny, I'll never know.

JENNY

Good grief, Katlin. Why are you so sensitive? I *swear* you're not a last refuge.

CARL

And that smelly dog.

JAMES

That dog is my friend. I can't smell him any more. His perfume is spent... Smoke. I still smell smoke.

SARAH

There were times when I was glad James was in the hospital. There was less to do around the house. I could smoke where I pleased. I could sleep, knowing he was taken care of, well. I would not wake with him—

JAMES

Dead. My olfactory senses are all but dead.

JENNY

Yes, Katlin. Through your window. Like a rainbow.

CARL

I don't want to see it. My Katlin in *that* kind of relationship? No. I keep an eye on her.

SARAH

I ignore my Jenny, even more now that James is home... I mean, I want to have that conversation with her— to tell her the truth about James, but her denial gives me strength. So, I can't.

Anyway. She's shrewd enough to know. But, for my sake, she'd find life in a dead cat's bounce.

[*With pride*] That's how much she loves her mother.

JAMES

In my day, I was quite the lover. I found sugarplums in every dumpling and savored the juices of many women. Beverly, Ellen, Sissy and Chrissy, who were sisters, Tina, Addison, Marybeth, Colleen, Angie, Shelia and Jill.

Fiona was the last of my conquests. The last before Sarah.

Then again, there was Rebecca in Sarah's courtship and, later, a dalliance with Sally "the nightingale" Croft.

JAMES [continued]

Sally “the nightingale” Croft lit into my life after I sickened my wife, after my illness— my virally enhanced body— sickened our sex.

She swooped in at just the right time, when I was still healthy enough to appreciate her. Not her tits, not her ass, her flat stomach or vise-like thighs. Those things were nothing. That the nightingale *knew* nothing...*that* was something.

SARAH

I only knew one before James: a quarterback named Nick. Nick became a state senator, and I married to a man who dallied with Rebecca in our courtship and later with a nightingale named Sally Croft.

Yes, James, I knew about Sally... To this day, I thank God she did what I could not.

JENNY

Listen. I do love Katlin, her neurotic clinginess, her soft lips, her oval hips and the separation she provides from my expiring family life.

My family life is expiring because I will graduate in a couple years and go to college.

Imagine it. Mom as much a memory as dad, whether he survives or not. My life my own. I'll be rid of the suburbs, the hospitals, the leaves in mother's scrapbook. O! The hours we spent looking at dead leaves— this one from Cambridge, this one from Frost's grave. What strange passions she has, and how I won't miss them.

And listen, Katlin, really listen to what I'm saying: I love you, but I'm too young to be in love.

[*With simmering rage*] And Carl... May you *rot* in my absence. May your bug-bait kill you. May Katlin *bury* you.

CARL

Jenny's mom and I. We. Well. We—

JENNY

May your penis wriggle with worms and maggots.

CARL

Jenny!

Slight pause.

She called it an act of compassion. When a woman's husband is dying, you take her at her word.

JENNY
Benevolent worms. Maggots with morals.

SARAH
Jenny—

CARL
It was over before it began.

SARAH
And someday you'll understand.

JENNY
Someday?

JAMES
[*Nodding*] Someday.

CARL
[*Nodding*] Someday...

JENNY
[*With a huff, imitating James*] "Have you ever noticed that your mother's cigarettes smell like DDT?"

[*With a crude gesture, imitating Sarah*] "Tell your father to give himself the bird."

God, why can't we go back to that? Please, dad. Stop sleeping! Get up! Let her have it! Show some life! She's smoking in the garage. Don't you give a damn?

[*Scolding*] Mother, put that out!

SARAH
Say, Jenny, why don't you call your friend, Katlin? It might be good if you could have dinner with her family tonight. I've got to get your dad settled-in and Izzy needs a bath.

JENNY
Anything to avoid giving Izzy a bath.

Good grief, Katlin! Would you cut the last refuge bullshit?

CARL
I haven't thought about Mandy all day. Is it normal for a husband to go an entire day without thinking about his wife? It happens to me when she's away.

My wife, Mandy, came to me in a dream. No, *really*. I dreamt her before I met her, but what a nightmare she's become. [*Beat*] I called her in Philly last night, but the convention staff wouldn't page her. Her hotel room was silent, except for the sound of my calls: six p.m., eight p.m. and eleven p.m.

CARL [continued]

I may call her again today—if I remember— if I catch myself wondering about how many highballs passed her lips last night.

How many, sweetheart? I'll chuckle. You beast!

I'll tell her about James: Home from the hospital at last.

She'll mangle a joke.

O, sweetheart, don't slur.

I'll change the subject deftly: Do you think our Katlin likes girls?

She'll ignore my question and belch good night.

Good night, sweetheart. I love you. Have fun with the boys!

SARAH

I could use a drink, but, "Honey, help me to the bathroom. Honey, bring me some water. Honey, my head is splitting. Honey, I can not feel my thumbs!"

O, James, I tell him, your thumbs are still there. Try to relax. Get some rest.

I see him falling deeper and deeper into sleep, but he's not sleeping.

[*Alarmed, yelling*] Wake up, honey! Wake up!

Then calmly, as if nothing happened. Keep me company. Leno's on TV.

JENNY

Listen to this, Katlin. "There always are compensating factors." It's a line from Edward Albee. What do you suppose he means? I'd ask my mother, but I'm afraid she'd tell me the truth.

SARAH

Truth is, I can't wait to clean out this garage when she. [*Chokes-up*] When she goes to college.

JAMES

[*Softly*] Sarah.

JENNY

My roller-skates are hanging on the garage wall.

JAMES
Sarah.

SARAH
But, can I?

JAMES
O, God, I want my morphine, but if I call any louder, she'll hear.

JENNY
I used to skate up and down the streets, into cul-de-sacs. Skating-skating-skating.

SARAH
This dollhouse, this croquet set.

JAMES
Sarah.

CARL
I'll call her one more time, but only one more time.

JENNY
I used to love skating.

CARL
One ring.

JAMES
Sarah.

SARAH
This stack of National Geographic Magazines is James'. This Ouija board too.

CARL
Two rings.

JAMES
Sarah.

SARAH
The ping-pong table, our bicycle built for two.

CARL
Three rings.

JAMES
Sarah.

JENNY
But I've outgrown the cul-de-sac. I've outgrown skating.

CARL
Four rings.

JENNY
I need a break.

SARAH
I need a break.

CARL
Five...

I always hang up before the voice mail clicks-in. I have nothing to say.

There was a time when hotel operators answered unanswered calls. I never really knew what to say to them, so, I'd say things like, "Hi, could you check to see if my wife in your bar? Could you page her? Maybe I should try her room again?"

How quaint. How nostalgic.

SARAH
Nostalgia is for the nightingales.

Pause.

CARL
Say, Sarah, are you free tonight?

