

Clear as Clear

A one-act play

by David Greenberg

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CHARACTERS

Brett.....foreman, 60s
Art.....cowhand, 20s
Rafe.....cowhand, 40s
Clancy.....cowhand, 30s
McLeary.....owner, 60s

AT RISE

Brett is sitting near the stove in the bunkhouse, smoking a cigarette, rocking a little on his chair, absorbing the heat.

Clancy and Gordo [not seen] are lying in their bunks; Rafe and Art are sitting at the table playing cards.

A blizzard is howling outside.

ART

Brett, you gonna set there all night?

RAFE

Maybe he's dead and just don't know it yet.

ART

He don't look no different.

BRETT

Hush.

RAFE

Well he's talking, at least.

Brett gets up and goes to the door. He opens it and the wind blows some snow in. Several of the men look up but no one says anything. After a minute, he closes the door and goes back to his chair and resumes staring at the stove.

RAFE

Raise two bits.

ART

Another.

RAFE

Whyn't you join in, Brett? Art here needs some help.

BRETT

I ain't interested in joining no card game.

ART

I don't need no help. Two.

He slaps two cards face down
on the table

RAFE

Two it is.

He casually lifts the deck and
deals two cards back to Art.

Rafe (CONT'D)

I think that Injun must be out there, whadya say, Brett?

BRETT

He's out there.

RAFE

Snow don't bother no ghost; just drive right through
him.

BRETT

That's right.

CLANCY

(Sitting up in his bunk)

They say the ghost was mad at Harvey Compson cause
that was sacred water for all the dead Injuns and
buffaloes to drink in the happy hunting ground or
whatever...The way I hear it, Compson sent for a
medicine man-

RAFE

(Breaking in)

-Medicine man, hell. He paid some drunk Sioux a
hundred dollars cash money to ride down from the
Willow. Put on a hell of a show - from what I hear.
Jumping and singing and rattlin'...

CLANCY

Compson took the first dipper of water hisself and drunk
it right there. It was clear as clear.

RAFE

Well you just proved the point, entirely. Probably that Injun poisoned the well hisself in order to sell the cure at a hunderd dollars a day. I'd do it myself for that kinda money.

CLANCY

Then after McLeary bought the place, he starts a pumpin' that well and before you know it he's lost fifty head or more. He finally just covered it in. Used to be the best water in a hundred miles.

ART

That don't prove no ghost poisoned it.

RAFE

You got a better explanation?

ART

Maybe not, but that don't mean I got to listen to someone with the crawlies in his brain. No sense in that.

(Throws down his cards)

Or this.

RAFE

You quit too soon, Art. You're supposed to wait, see what happens.

ART

I don't gotta wait to see what's gonna happen.

Rising from the table, he goes to his bunk, sits down, removes his boots and lies back.

RAFE

How 'bout you Clancy?

CLANCY

(Sitting up again in his bunk)

I don't gamble.

RAFE

We won't do it for money. Just for fun.

Clancy rises, goes to the

table in his socks and sits down. He looks hung over, but he doesn't drink. It's more like a perpetual melancholy that hangs over him.

CLANCY

Gordo been sleeping like that since this afternoon. You think he's all right?

RAFE

He's all right.

(Dealing the cards)

If he ain't, what the hell are you going to do about it?

ART

He's all right. I heard him moaning a while ago. Must be dreamin on the booze. I wisht I'd done the same. Holed up here like this enough to drive you crazy, specially considering the company.

RAFE

(Grinning)

Here now, Arthur. That ain't friendly. Why you couldn't ask for a better bunch of boys to be snowed in with.

ART

I'll bet you them sombitches from the Bar 'E' got themselves all snowed in at Millie's just in time.

BRETT

You kin still make it into Grantsburg.

ART

(Sitting upright)

You think so? I expect it's blowin pretty hard.

Rafe observes him, critically.

ART (CONT'D)

Then if it really got bad, why I'd be snuggled up with that May, that blonde girl from Wisconsin, you know the one I mean?

BRETT

Ya, I know her.

RAFE

He knows 'em all, don't ya Brett? They call him the walkin stick.

ART

You figure I could make it?

BRETT

'Pends how bad you want a ride, if you get my meaning.

ART

(Flops back down)

Shit. It's ten below already and it's twelve miles on a good day.

CLANCY

Be like that time that prospector rode into Grantsburg froze dead in the saddle. They pulled him off that mule and he was froze through to the bone. They left him in the shed by Granger's livery. And then come spring they went to bury him and all they found was a puddle of dirty water, a half-chawed tobacco plug and a coat.

BRETT

You are the lieinest bunch of sombitches I ever bunked with. And I bunked with a pile of forke tongue sombitches over the last forty years.

RAFE

(Surprised by the speech))

Well listen to him talk. Next we're going to hear about buffler..

BRETT

I remember buffler, that's a fact. You ain't even seen one outside of a zoo.

RAFE

(Settling back)

Well go on; don't let nothin but fear and common sense hold you back.

CLANCY

I seen a buffalo, once.

RAFE

That was May-

ART

Shut up, Rafe.

CLANCY

I was riding fence for Maynard and them boys-

RAFE

He still owes me five dollars-

ART

Proibly say the same about you.

CLANCY

It was up on that ridge near Raintree. We run thirty or forty head out of the tangle and chased em back across the line. The fence was pushed right over, just like someone stepped on it. I hear this grunting sound and look up and there's the biggest old bull bufflo you could imagine. I figure he was two thousand pounds. He had all them heifers following him around just like a damn Marahajee.

BRETT

(Disgusted)

One bufflo.

ART

She ain't like them other whores, all skin and bone and whiskey breath. She don't drink, not even one.

RAFE

Shit. She's a gawdamn whore, you fool. She figures out what you want and gives it to you. I'll bet you anything you leave her an extra dollar every time, don't ya?

ART

(belligerently)

What if I do?

RAFE

There you go. Don't never tip a whore; that's my motto. You tip 'em and next time they expect it and they don't do what you like.

ART

I never found that to be the case.

RAFE

You ain't had my experience.

CLANCY

One of the boys said to shoot him. I didn't see no point cause we couldn't drag that big ol' carcass back with us, not with all that line fence to ride. Let 'em go, I says, we don't need it. But he shot him anyways. I tell ya, them bullets was no more than flies to that old bull. He just run off. I expect the coyotes tracked him down eventually. Never did see him again.

BRETT

One bufflo.

ART

I like the way she talks to me.

RAFE

Two bits.

CLANCY

(Looking angry)

You said this was just for fun.

RAFE

Ain't no fun without money at stake. Just pretend, that's all.

BRETT

You best drop them cards right now, Clancy.

CLANCY

Long as it ain't for real, I don't mind.

RAFE

I tried that Wisconsin girl; she don't impress me.

ART

I ain't talkin to you.

RAFE

Man falls for a whore, well I don't know. That's just believing your own lies, is all. If you start believing your own lies, I'd say you're in trouble.

ART

She come all the way out here-

RAFE

(Laughing)

Just to find someone like you!

ART

Weren't no place left to go and no place to stay where she didn't get restless.

BRETT

(sagely)

Leave it, Art.

ART

I just don't get why he's got to find fault, that's all. He's always finding fault with everyone else.

RAFE

I do believe our boy is in love.

CLANCY

I'll take three.

RAFE

Holding back a pair, are you? Okay then, here. And I'll bump you another four bits.

CLANCY

Now I told you-

RAFE

Just pretend!

ART

She come west looking for a new start, like most folks.

BRETT

More 'n likely on the run - like most folks. Or more likely yet, couldn't make a go of it back east so she come out here hoping for salvation. Well I say good luck.

RAFE

I guess I'll just have to give her another try next time I'm in Grantsburg. Soon's this storm blows over I'll just make a special trip.

ART

Hell you will.

RAFE

I got all this extra cash on me now as it is. This one's on Art, I'll tell her.

BRETT

Ain't no percentage in this.

Standing up and stretching his legs.

RAFE

Where you going?

He pulls his jacket closed and goes out the door, slamming it behind him. CLANCY and ART both stare after him.

ART

-the hell!

CLANCY

What has got into him?

RAFE

Call.

CLANCY

Huh? Oh, yeah. Here. I got three nines and a pair of fours.

RAFE

(Gaping)

What?

Rafe (CONT'D)

You drew three nines?

ART

You don't say nothing, Clancy. You let that sombitch guess.

CLANCY

(Grinning)

I beat you.

RAFE

(Shaking his head derisively)

Well I guess. Let's go again.

CLANCY

(Delighted)

Sure. Deal me in. Come on Art, it's just for fun.

ART

It ain't fun for him.

RAFE

You talk too goddamn much, loverboy.

Art turns over in his bunk and tries to sleep. Clancy carefully retrieves his next five cards and stares at them. RAFE concentrates on his hand. The sound of the wind hammering the shutters draws their attention.

RAFE

Cards?

CLANCY

I'll keep these.

RAFE

(Annoyed)

You'll what? All right then. I ain't proud; I'll take three.

CLANCY

Keepin back a pair, I guess.

The door opens and Brett returns. He stamps snow off his feet and brushes it off his coat. He hangs the coat up on a wall peg and goes back to his chair. He pours coffee into a tin cup from the stove-top pot and hunkers back down in front of the fire.

RAFE

Sounds like it's piling up out there.

CLANCY

Cold enough to freeze the nuts off a steel bridge.

BRETT

It's blowing in through the slats in the barn. That paint is nervous.

ART

Mine ya mean?

BRETT

She don't like the wind. I pulled a bale down over the corner, maybe help some.

CLANCY

You explain the order to me again, will ya. Does a full house beat four of a kind or the other way'round?

RAFE

I wisht I had yer problems.

BRETT

Clancy, put them cards down and go to your bunk.

RAFE

Hell, he's all right. Don't listen to him, Clance. He ain't won a hundred dollars in the last twenty years.

BRETT

Ain't nobody wins with him-
(sarcastically)

Clance.

Even when you win, you lose. That's what you gotta know about Rafe. He don't ever lose.

CLANCY

Can't hurt if there's no money changing hands. It's all make believe. Make believe can't hurt ya.

RAFE

Now are you gonna play poker or make a speech? Leave that peccary to himself and concentrate on this game.

CLANCY

I was just saying-

RAFE

-How many? That's what I want to hear you to say. How

many cards?

ART

I was thinking bout getting some money together, maybe taking a piece of land I seen over by the Emit River. Just a quarter section, but nice land. Good water.

BRETT

You just lost your stake, didn't you? What the hell are you going on about it for?

ART

I'll get another stake.

BRETT

I ain't no whore, Art; don't come here for sympathy.

ART

(Sitting up)

I ain't askin for sympathy from you nor anybody else.

BRETT

When you ask a man to join in like that, by Jesus...

ART

Join in? I ain't asking you to join nothing.

BRETT

I don't want to hear nothin about you and some Wisconsin whore with the melancholy settling down on a quarter section of Emit River.

ART

Jesus Brett a man can't even talk to you.

BRETT

Useless talk. Lies.

RAFE

If it weren't for lies we wouldn't have nothin at all to say most of the time. I'll bet you five dollars.

CLANCY

You don't fool me, Rafe. I got the hang of this game.

ART

You think it's better to just face every day like nothin is ever going to change?

BRETT

Things change all right; but you don't change 'em.

ART

Shit. Say I throw down on Rafe here and put a bullet in his fat gut...wyrn't you ask him if that'll change him.

RAFE

What's that?

BRETT

This morning when you got up and seen that sky crowding in like that you didn't have to come to me about them cattle down in Black Canyon; they'll be all right for a week or more in there. You might of gone off to town instead. You might of rode off to Grantsburg instead of staying here to lose your money to Rafe. You might of gone and snuggled up with that Wisconsin whore for the duration, except that you'd rather sit here and daydream about it and lose your money to Rafe to make sure you don't have to do it. And that'll give you the excuse to shoot Rafe you been looking for since you come on this outfit, anyway.

All the other men are listening intently. Art is now sitting up in his bunk. Rafe straightens up in his chair, half expecting a bullet in the back.

ART

I don't understand you.

RAFE

You ain't fixin to shoot me in the back are ya?

Twisting around in his chair.

ART

I'd want to see your face when the slug tears into yer guts.

CLANCY

Are we playin cards or not? I see your five dollars and I'll go you another five.

Art goes to the stove and pours himself a cup of coffee.

Rafe watches him suspiciously.

No!

ART

He goes to the door and opens it. Cold blows in. He slams the door shut. He looks suddenly ill.

What is it?

BRETT

ART

I thought I seen someone out there, that's all. But that's impossible. It must be twenty below and that wind!

RAFE

You just seen Brett's ghost Injun, that's all.

CLANCY

There it is!

Lays his cards on the table

RAFE

Damn! If I had your luck!

Looks down at them, shakes his head and folds.

CLANCY

I didn't even know I had it! I never been lucky before.

RAFE

(Shuffling the cards)

Once a man gets touched, it pretty well follows him everywhere. Take me for instance. I'm pretty lucky. Not as lucky as you, but I can hold my own. This one game in Waco...I drew to a pair of deuces and got it! Up till then I didn't have no steady luck at all. Ever since, I've had it pretty fair. Now you look at Brett and you'll see the same thing only the complete opposite. There's a man had the golden fingers until one day it left him and

ever since then...well you know what they say: If it wasn't for bad luck he wouldn't have no luck at all. And then there's Art: Unlucky at cards...unlucky at love, too.

ART

There's someone standing out there in that storm I tell you, I seen somebody! Jesus!

There is a loud pounding on the door. The two card players freeze.

RAFE

Jesus? You seen Jesus?!

Brett stares into the fire, unconcerned. Art stares around in an agony of uncertainty.

ART

Who is it?

Drawing his gun from its holster on the wall.

McLEARY

(Through the door)

Who is it? Why you mealy-mouthed son of a bitch, open this goddamn door before I freeze to death!

ART

Mr. McLeary?

Pulls back the slide.

McLEARY pushes open the door violently and almost falls into the room.

McLEARY

Who the hell else, Santee Claus?

(Seeing the gun)

What's got your pecker by the nose?

Art sheepishly replaces the gun.

ART
I wasn't sure...

McLEARY
You wasn't sure? Who you expecting?

Goes to the fire and warms himself.

BRETT
Afternoon Mr. McLeary

McLEARY
Well good afternoon, Mr. Brett. And how are you today? Ain't this lovely fucking weather we're having, Jesus Christ. You boys getting the fever all ready? It's only been a day.

CLANCY
The boys were just telling-

RAFE
You just pay attention here, Lucky. I'm betting you six dollars this time.

McLEARY
I thought you didn't gamble, Clancy

CLANCY
We ain't gamblin. It's just pretend.

McLEARY
Pretend?

Grunts his contempt for Clancy.

RAFE
Afternoon boss.

McLEARY
It stinks in here. When was the last time you men had a bath? What's the matter with Gordo? He dead? If he is get him the hell outside so's he'll freeze over til spring.

CLANCY
Nosir, he's just sleeping it off. He drunk himself out this afternoon when the snow started comin in. He said he

wasn't gonna participate in no blizzard. He said to wake him up when it was over.

McLEARY

Ain't that precious.

BRETT

It's as good a solution as any, I'd say.

Taking a cup, McLeary pours himself some coffee. He tastes it and grimaces.

McLEARY

What in hell do you call this?

BRETT

That's a special blend I made myself.

CLANCY

Yes sir, that'll keep you awake for a week.

RAFE

You seeing my raise or are you folding, or what?

CLANCY

I'm thinking.

McLEARY

Maybe that's the smell.

Sipping the coffee again.

McLEARY (CONT'D)

I ain't tasted this in a few years.

BRETT

You wanna come ride fence when this blows off. Might remind you of who you are - well, who you were, anyhow.

McLEARY

Don't like sleepin on the ground like I used to.

BRETT

Feather bed, clean woman, hot food; can't say I blame you.

ART

That's what a man wants, all right. You can bet on that.

McLEARY

You never struck me as the type, Art.

ART

Yessir. I've got my eye on a spread over in Raintree by the
Emit River. Soon as I get a stake together that's for me.
I might as well tell you right now, Mr. McLeary, I ain't
going to be here much longer.

McLEARY

Well that's fine, Art. Man got to have some dream to
keep going every day.

BRETT

No matter how far-fetched it might be.

ART

I knew you'd understand. That's exactly what I was
telling Brett just before you got here; but he don't see it
that way.

McLEARY

Uh huh.

ART

There's a real nice slope down to the riverbank and all
these willow trees-

McLEARY

Thing is not to get too stuck on one idea. I mean to say,
nothin much turns out like you plan it so you're better
off not gettin too specific, ain't that what you meant,
Brett?

RAFE

You only got five cards, just like me. How long you got
to think about it?

CLANCY

I was thinking about something else...

McLEARY

When we come west after the war, we didn't know

nothin about the Sioux, nor anything else, except how to march and kill. The east was all tired out, used up. The first time we seen a herd it took most of a day to pass. We just sat there and watched them sumbitches graze through. Whatever idees we had just run past with him and then there was this big old empty prairie and we had to figure out what to do.