

A CUT ABOVE THE REST - by Claire Demmer

Scene: The lounge of an upmarket house. There is a coffin upstage centre which should be the focal point of the play. A variety of chairs are arranged around the room - it is obvious that extra chairs have been brought in for a funeral for the guests to sit on. Tasteful pictures reflecting the decor of an octogenarian should be on the walls. People are drinking tea and eating cake.

Cast:

- Reverend Waters - the minister - can be played by a woman/man
- Mz. - the solicitor. Played as a female sexy vamp type.
- Miss Ethel Devonport - The weepy sister of the deceased
- Miss Rachel Devonport - The grim, younger sister of the deceased.
- John Smith 1 aka the snake - specialises in stealing and fencing diamonds
- John Smith 2 aka big Harry - specialises in breaking arms when they don't want to give up their diamonds
- John Smith 3 (Captain Theunis van Staden) - specializes in catching nasty diamond thieves
- John Smith 4 (Constable John Smith) - studying for his detective exams. His name actually is John Smith
- 2-4 funeral guests and family members - non speaking parts.

Harry and Snake enter the sitting room, stage right. 2 other NDS guests are already there, as well as the Reverend and the Solicitor. The Reverend and the solicitor are engaged in conversation, one other guest is seated with tea and cake and Constable John Smith is alone, standing looking at pictures on the wall.

Snake: Remember, act like you're one of the guests, right?

Harry: Like who?

Snake: Oh, I don't know - um, like a grieving relative.

Harry: Which relative?

Snake: Um, how about like a cousin? Should be distant enough that the family doesn't have to have seen you before. In fact - yes, they last saw you when you were a child but you moved to, um, to - somewhere overseas like, um, let's see - Jamaica and no one has seen you since. When you got the news of your beloved aunt's death, you rushed back home to attend her funeral. Yes, that's it.

Harry: Okay. (uncertain)

Snake: Okay. And don't say anything about the diamonds to anyone!

Harry: Say nothing about the diamonds. Why mustn't I say nothing about the diamonds?

Snake: Because that would attract attention to yourself, you idiot! Then, when they discover that the diamonds have been stolen, you'd be a suspect!

Harry: Suspect? Oh, right.

Snake: Just look at this place!! It's a goldmine! What I'd give to have even an hour here alone. I bet there's some fancy artwork just lying around somewhere they'd never miss.

Harry: I thought we were after the diamonds!

Snake: Oh we are, today, but just imagine the possibilities!

Harry: The possibilities of what?

Snake: Harry, if you want Joe to give you your own jobs, you have to start thinking for yourself.

Harry: Think for myself. Right.

Snake: Harry, you can't act stupid and expect to get somewhere.

Harry: Somewhere... Where am I going, Snake?

Snake: (sighs) Exactly the answer I expected from an Einstein like yourself. Just don't screw this one up, you hear me, Harry!

Harry: Okay, Snake.

Snake: Right, let's go over this. Repeat back to me what you say when you meet these old farts and they ask you who you are. What do you say?

Harry: I say, "Hi, I'm Harry, I'm from Jamaica, I'm um, um.....oh yes, a cousin and I miss my aunt so much I came back from Jamaica to attend her funeral. "

Snake: No, you don't.

Harry: I don't?

Snake: You don't say you're Harry.

Harry: I don't say I'm Harry. (very uncertain)

Snake: Right.

Harry: Right.

Snake: Got it?

Harry: Um

Snake: What now?

Harry: What if they ask my name?

Snake: What if they ask your name? Oh - I dunno, say something common, like Mark, Tom or John. Something every idiot is called.

Harry: Um, okay. I'll be Tom. Tom Jones.

Snake: No, you idiot! Not Tom Jones!

Harry: Jeez, Snake, you don't have to be so mean about it. It's not an unusual name.

Snake: Sorry, Harry, I'm sure your mother would have loved you to be called Tom Jones. I mean, you look just like him.

Harry: Like who?

Snake: Jeez. Just choose another name. Now, go and see if you can see the diamonds anywhere. You keep your mouth shut, unless someone talks to you, and I'll ask the questions.

Harry: Got it.

(They go to mingle. Harry casually inspects the pictures and the wall, and when he thinks no one is looking he peers behind them as if to look for a safe. If spotted he quickly turns and smiles broadly at whoever caught him. Snake joins the other guest looking very sad and sympathetic. He pats them on the arm a lot, which makes them uncomfortable and smiles at them in a conciliatory way)

(Enter Rachel Devonport. She approaches the Reverend)

Rachel: Excuse me, Reverend?

Reverend: (leaves the solicitor and stands with Rachel) Yes, my child?

Rachel: Are all the guests here? My sister is very distraught, and she'd like to get the service over with as quickly as possible.

Reverend: Yes, yes, Miss Devonport, but I believe we should wait a while. The funeral is scheduled for ten o'clock, and it's only about twenty to. People still seem to be arriving.

Rachel: Yes, of course, of course. Reverend - I believe my sister did request an open casket! (indicates closed casket)

Reverend: I know the casket is still closed. People are still having this lovely tea and cake, which (takes bite and speaks with mouth full) I feel tends to go down much better with the deceased safe and sound inside, er, a closed casket, don't you think? (pats casket fondly)

Rachel: Oh, yes, of course, but will you open it during the ceremony?

Reverend: Naturally. Miss Devonport. Now, if either you or your sister are in need of spiritual guidance, feel free to speak to me after the ceremony. Perhaps we can sit in the garden and chat. I always find the Lord seems closest to us in times of strife. (Pats her hand with sticky fingers. She takes a hanky from her bag, spits on it and wipes herself clean as they chat)

Rachel: I'll tell Ethel. Do you mind if we begin as soon as possible?

Reverend: Just a few more minutes, I promise you.

Rachel: Excuse me. I need to be with my sister. Will someone let us know when the service is about to begin?

Reverend: mmhmm (nods with mouth full. Rachel exits stage left)

Snake: (joins Reverend) Tragic, isn't it!

Reverend: mmhmm

Snake: I'll really miss her.

Reverend: Oh, yes.

Snake: Struck down in the prime of her life!

Reverend: Well, she was ninety three.

Snake: Struck down in the prime of her old age!

Reverend: It's difficult when you suffer from a prolonged illness.

Snake: Oh, illness is a terrible way to die.

Reverend: Well yes, it is, but I feel that illness is the Lord's way of preparing us for the journey ahead.

Snake: Me, I can think of better ways to go, you know what I mean! (digs Reverend in ribs with elbow as if to indicate a rude action)

Reverend: (stiffly) We do not choose the time or place. It is up to the Lord to decide.

Snake: Yes, well, um, it sounds like she was well prepared, eh? Oh, by the way, would

you say that Miss Devonport was, as well prepared with um, other things?
(nonchalant)

Reverend: Other things?

Snake: Things she was leaving behind? Worldy possessions...things she couldn't take with her, if you get my drift?

Reverend: My work only dealt with preparing her for life everlasting. I assume her other affairs were in order, but I believe her solicitor, Mz Grim would know more about that.

Snake: Mz Grim? Right. Thanks, Reverend, you've been very helpful. (Turns to leave)

Reverend: Oh, you'll need a songbook for the service. (Hands him a folded piece of paper)

Snake: Oh, yes. (Opens book and wipes eyes dramatically) This was her favourite hymn. She used to sing it to me when I was just a boy. (sighs)

Reverend: I wasn't aware that she had any younger relations?

Snake: Distant, you know, third cousin removed. Moved away to, um Jamaica when I was very young. But as she always said, it's not the quantity of time you spend with someone, it's the quality of that time.

Reverend: Well said sir, well said. In fact, I might include that in my eulogy, if I may?

Snake: Oh, no problem.

Reverend: Would you like a piece of cake? I'm quite full, actually. Why don't you take mine?

Snake: Sure, thanks (takes cake with right hand and tries to eat with left hand which is occupied with songbook, he struggles)

Reverend: Let me put that in your pocket for you (puts songbook in Snake's pocket)

Snake: Thanks again!

Reverend: May I ask your name?

Snake: Oh, it's um John. John Smith. Now if you'll excuse me, I have to check on my friend over there (Indicates Harry and goes to speak to him)

(enter guest stage right who goes to greet the Reverend. The Reverend hands them a piece of paper. At the same time, Captain Theunis van Staden enters stage right and moves to join John Smith)

Theunis: Howzit, John, see you're already here. (John has cup of tea and cake)

John: mmm. (swallows) I thought I'd come early and scope the place out.

Theunis: See anything suspicious?

John: Well, that one guest there (indicates Harry with his teaspoon) is behaving a bit strangely. But besides him, nothing seems to be unusual.

Theunis: Any sign of the diamonds?

John: Well they're certainly not on display here. I had a quick look around the rest of the house as well, and actually I can't see them anywhere.

Theunis: Well, whoever it was that gave us that tip, said that someone at the funeral today would be very interested in the Devonport diamonds.

John: Did they give us any tips as to who the interested party would be?

Theunis: As if we'd get that lucky! Nope. These guys are clever, too clever to get caught easily. It's usually one of their own guys, trying to get himself promoted by getting rid of the competition, you know how these guys work. In order to catch them, we have to blend in. We can't risk these guys knowing we're cops, otherwise they'll never reveal themselves.

John: Got it. What have you learned about the Devonports?

Theunis: Well, there were three of them, all spinsters, I believe. Their father - let's just say he dabbled in lots of small enterprises. Anyway, nothing he did was ever proved to be illegal. When he died, he left a huge fortune to the eldest daughter, most of which was tied up in a necklace containing no fewer than two hundred flawless diamonds.

John: (whistles). The Devonport Diamonds! No wonder these guys want this thing.

Theunis: There are two sisters left, Miss Ethel and Miss Rachel Devonport. Miss Ethel does charity work for the local church and Miss Rachel (checks book) breeds show Bulldogs. That's about it.

John: Okay. Got it.

Theunis: Okay - let's mingle. You keep an eye on that guy (indicates Harry) and see what you can get out of him, and I'll chat to the other guests to see if anyone knows anything about the diamonds.

John: Cool - oh - don't forget to get some cake. (takes bite and speaks with mouth full, waves fork at Theunis)

(Theunis moves off to chat to the other guests. John moves to talk to Harry.)

John: Tragic, isn't it.

Harry: Tragic.

John: How did you know her?

Harry: Who?

John: The deceased?

Harry: The deceased? Oh, I knew her when I was a small child, um.....in Jamaica.....um, my aunt, you know.

John: Oh she lived in Jamaica? I didn't know that.

Harry: We were very close. (he says it mechanically)

John: Sorry, I didn't mean to offend you.

Harry: Me and my aunt. Very close. (emphatic)

John: Really sorry.

Harry: I came back specially for the funeral.(rehearsed tone)

John: Of course you did. I would too if I were in your position.

Harry: Very close. (has run out of things to say)

John: I'm really very sorry for your loss.

Harry: Thanks. Um, I have to go. (tries to leave)

John: Oh, it's been a pleasure meeting you. John Smith. (holds out hand to shake it)

Harry: John Smith. (shakes his hand)

John: That's right, and you are?

Harry: From Jamaica, goodbye (tries to leave)

John: (doesn't release hand) These rich people, eh? I hear your aunt was very rich.

Harry: Yes. We were very close. Er, me and my, er aunt.

John: She must have looked stunning when she was younger with that diamond necklace, hey?

Harry: Diamonds! No I don't know nothing about diamonds. Nothing about diamonds.

John: Really?

Harry: Look, I have to go.

John: Oh, yes, of course.

(Harry scuttles away from John's side and moves over to Snake. John moves to get a better view of Harry and Snake)

Harry: Snake! (loud whisper)

Snake: (pulls Harry away from crowds with fake grin) Don't call me Snake! Not here!

Harry: Sorry, Snake.

Snake: (exasperated, rolls eyes) Harry, did you hit every branch of the stupid tree when you fell out of it? What!!!

Harry: That guy (indicates John) was asking about the diamonds!!

Snake: Really? (looks suspiciously at John) What did you say?

Harry: I said what you told me. That I don't know nothing about any diamonds.

Snake: Then there's no harm done.

Harry: Snake, you don't think he's also here to steal the diamonds?

Snake: Better bloody well not be! This is our turf, this place. We're the ones that got the tip off, right!! Look, Harry, I'll check him out, okay? You just look for the diamonds.

Harry: I can't see them anywhere, Snake. I looked in all the usual places.

Snake: Did you check for a hidden wall safe?

Harry: Yup. (proudly) I checked behind all the pictures. Nothing.

Snake: Loose wall panels?

Harry: Not one.

Snake: Hollow sounding floorboards?

Harry: No, I haven't checked those yet.

Snake: Go and check those. Just don't make it obvious what you're doing!

Harry: Okay, Snake. (taps the floor panel near him with his foot surreptitiously. He will continue doing this for a while, sometimes humming as if he is tapping his feet to the confused looks of the other guests. He comes across a panel that he thinks sounds hollow and drops down on his hands and knees to check it out)

Mz. Grim: Excuse me, sir but, have you lost something?

Harry: (starts and jumps up) Who, me?

Mz. Grim: Well, you were the one searching the floor?

Harry: Searching the floor....yes - my cufflink! I lost my cufflink! (throws arm behind back)

Mz Grim: Do you need any help?

Harry: Oh, no!! No help at all!

Mz Grim: Oh did you find it, then?

Harry: No, not yet, but really don't want to put you to any trouble!

Mz Grim: Honestly, no trouble at all! I mean, you'd want to find it before the service, wouldn't you? (eyes Harry as if he is really attractive). I would love to help.

Harry: Um, thanks.

Mz Grim: But before I help you, you simply must tell me your name! (flirting)

Harry: My name! Oh, er,it's John.

Mz Grim: Such a lovely masculine name. So strong! John, who??

Harry: John...Smith. That's it. John Smith

Mz Grim: Mz.Grim. The pleasure is all mine. (Shakes his hand and rubs it after. Harry doesn't know what to do) Shall we get down on our hands and knees and explore every possible angle?

Harry: Huh?

(they both kneel and pretend to search for the missing cufflink)

Snake: (approaches Theunis). Excuse me, sir, but are you a relative?

Theunis: No, I'm an - an old family friend. And you?

Snake: She was my aunt. (voice cracks) Bless her.

Theunis: Oh, I'm so sorry.

Snake: She will be sorely missed.

Theunis: I wasn't aware that she had a nephew?

Snake: Oh, it's like a distant relationship between us, like a third cousin, but I call her my, er aunt.

Theunis: Oh, I see.

Snake: We lost contact when I moved to Jamaica when I was young, but I will always

remember her kindness to me.

Theunis: Yes she was always very kind.

Snake: Then you probably knew her better than I did, after all this time.

Theunis: Well, I wouldn't say I knew the family that well....

Snake: May I ask big favour?

Theunis: Certainly.

Snake: Since you're such an old family friend, do you mind pointing out who's who around here? It's been so long (sniff) and they've all changed so much.

Theunis: I'm really not sure I'm the best one to ask.

Snake: Oh come on, old family friend! How long have you known them, hey?

Theunis: Oh, really not that long at all!! You know time, and and how it, er, flies!

Snake: No.

Theunis: The years just seem to fly by!

Snake: Well I'm sure you can point some people out to me.

Theunis: What? (desperate) Oh, well, um, well that's the Reverend Waters, who is conducting the service. (points at the Reverend)

Snake: Lovely Christian man, hey! ... And her? (Points at the Solicitor)

Theunis: I don't think she's family. I think she might be the lawyer.

Snake: Oh, I see. And him? (points at John)

Theunis: Oh, I don't know him.

Snake: Really? I could swear I saw you talking to him earlier!

Theunis: Did I? Well maybe, but I didn't catch his name.

Snake: Pity.... well if you remember it will you let me know? He just looks...so familiar, you know. I'd hate him to recognize me and feel like an idiot.

Theunis: I will.

Snake: Nice to have chatted with you sir. May I ask your name?

Theunis: Oh, I'm er, John Smith. And you?

Snake: (swallows) John Smith!

Theunis: Um, yes, and you are.....?

Snake: um, John Smith. (mumbles)

Theunis: What???

Snake: Oh I see somebody I remember, um, over there, I really should go talk to them....

Theunis: Oh, right.

