

The Condition

a tragicomedy in one act

by Alex Emerson Acuff

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In loving memory of
Terry Ronald Lambeth III

(The stage is almost empty, with only a bench center stage being lit. A tall man, Roger, sits on the left side as he reads from a small leather bound book. Suddenly an older gentleman, Seth, hurries on stage left. He sits. Throughout the entire play, civilians of all ages, sex, and size are seen crossing across the stage. They pay no attention to the two men, at first.)

Seth: It's been a long time.

Roger: It has.

Seth: How has life been treating you?

Roger: *(depressed.)* I've seen better days.

Seth: Haven't we all?

(Pause.)

Seth: (*defensive.*) Aren't you going to ask me how I'm doing?

Roger: I might.

Seth: (*certain.*) You won't--I know you.

(*Short pause.*)

Seth: You've always had issues with maintaining conversation.

Roger: Starting.

Seth: Come again?

Roger: I have issues with *starting*, conversation.

Seth: Well, this one is started; is it not?

Roger: Your point being?

Seth: It's not going particularly fantastic so far.

Roger: You're entitled to your opinion.

(*Pause.*)

Seth: (*gloating.*) I'm feeling remarkably well today.

Roger: (*carelessly.*) That's great.

(*Pause.*)

Seth: (offended.) You don't really mean that.

Roger: You're much smarter than I thought.

(*Seth reaches over and grabs the book from Rogers' hand.*)

Seth: You haven't changed a bit, Roger; always hiding behind the abundance of your own intelligence. Yes, we all know--you possess so much of it, you hardly know what to do with it all.

Roger: I might give some to you.

Seth: (*sarcastically.*) Such a generous gift would be most appreciated!

Roger: Sarcasm will get you nowhere.

Seth: (*again sarcastically.*) What is this *sarcasm* you speak of?

Roger: (*taking back his book.*) And yet--you continue.

(Pause.)

Seth: (*genuinely interested.*) What are you reading?

Roger: Nothing.

Seth: (*perplexed.*) Is that really the name?

Roger: Of course not.

Seth: (*confused.*) Then what is it?

Roger: You don't need to know.

Seth: I might.

Roger: (*boldly.*) You don't.

Seth: Okay--you're right. But, I would still *like* to know.

Roger: I told you the answer--nothing.

Seth: (*still confused.*) But that's not the name?

Roger: Indeed.

Seth: So you're messing with me?

Roger: You're messing with yourself, I told you the answer.

Seth: The name of the book is nothing?

Roger: (*annoyed.*) No, I am reading nothing; because of you.

Seth: Me?

Roger: Yes.

Seth: What have I done?

Roger: Talked.

Seth: Is that a problem?

Roger: With me, no. With my reading, yes.

Seth: And you still haven't answered my original question?

Roger: Which was?

Seth: The name.

Roger: Of the book?

Seth: Yes.

(Small pause.)

Roger: The road.

Seth: *(sincerely.)* What about it?

Roger: *(plainly.)* That's the name.

Seth: *(embarrassed.)* Oh, I see.

(Seth stands and begins pacing back and forth to each side of the stage, each time looking into the wings.)

Seth: *(still pacing.)* Is it well written?

Roger: *(proudly.)* I've read better.

Seth: I, for one, despise the title.

Roger: Agreed--it's much too generic, and the plot is more than miserable.

Seth: That's the worst.

Roger: And it's filled with completely un-original characters.

Seth: That is *also*, the worst.

Roger: *(turning it over.)* And the author has bad hair.

Seth: *(offended.)* Well, that has nothing to do with it.

Roger: It does--if I say it does.

Seth: That's some reasoning you got there.

Roger: Your grammar is atrocious.

(Pause.)

Seth: Is that a good thing?

Roger: Not at all. I see your vocabulary isn't much better.

Seth: I can turn a couple pages, every now and then.

Roger: It doesn't show.

Seth: That's your opinion.

(Pause, Seth is still pacing. Seth stretches, then heavily yawns. Roger is finally reading again. Suddenly, Seth rushes back to the bench.)

Seth: *(anxious.)* Will you please ask me about her already?

Roger: *(fed up.)* Who?

Seth: You know who.

Roger: I'm afraid, I don't.

Seth: Think.

Roger: What do you *think* I'm doing?

Seth: Something other than thinking.

Roger: Like you would know!

Seth: (*angrily.*) Ask me about her!

Roger: Alright! (*faking enthusiasm.*) How have you and Anna been?

Seth: (*casually.*) Absolutely terrible.

Roger: (*not sincere.*) I'm sorry to hear that.

Seth: No, you're not.

Roger: I truly am.

Seth: You are?

Roger: Of course.

(*Small pause.*)

Seth: I don't believe you.

Roger: You never do.

Seth: Well, sometimes it's hard.

Roger: Hardly ever.

Seth: Almost always!

Roger: How?

Seth: Because you don't care about anything.

Roger: You know I have a condition.

Seth: That doesn't make it excusable.

Roger: Yes, it does.

Seth: No, it doesn't.

(Small pause.)

Roger: *(coldly.)* You have no idea what it's like.

Seth: I might.

Roger: In your darkest nightmares.

Seth: I'm depressed sometimes.

Roger. *Sometimes--not all* the time.

Seth: The point is-

Roger: There is never a point with you.

Seth: That's your condition talking.

Roger: Keep telling yourself that.

Seth: I will.

(Pause, a street lamp is suddenly lit upstage. Seth stands up and walks over to examine.)

Seth: *(amazed.)* Would you look at that?

Roger: What?

Seth: That street lamp hasn't worked in months.

Roger: So?

Seth: So, it must be a sign; but from who?

Roger: No one.

Seth: It's possible that a super-natural force is at work here---no, that couldn't be it. Maybe the reason is purely scientific!

Roger: Of course it is.

Seth: How can you be sure?

Roger: Everything is science, and science is everything.

Seth: There are some people in this world that would disagree--maybe you're right.

Roger: There are some people in this world that would completely

agree. I'm not the only rational being alive.

(Small pause.)

Seth: Close to it.

Roger: What about Einstein?

Seth: I forgot about him.

Roger: Dawkins?

Seth: Him too.

Roger: And don't you dare forget Newton!

Seth: *(joyful.)* Oh yes, he was a great one. Science is not for the faint of heart.

Roger: Faint of *mind*.

Seth: *(amazed.)* I didn't know there was such a thing.

(Pause.)

Seth: *(walks back to bench.)* It's a sign, none the less.

Roger: It's a post.

Seth: I wasn't speaking literally.

Roger: You never do.

Seth: (*defensive, gets up and crosses downstage left.*) So then, why did you contradict me?

Roger: (*slightly happy.*) It's enjoyable.

Seth: For you.

Roger: Precisely.

Seth: Never for me.

Roger: It's not supposed to be.

Seth: Sometimes, I question this friendship.

Roger: As well, you should.

(*Pause. The light goes out. Roger stands and begins to cross down.*)

Roger: (*mockingly.*) What do you suppose that means?

Seth: Literally?

Roger: Metaphorically.

Seth: (*majestically.*) It means no good thing is ever good, forever.

Roger: (*hopeful.*) No bad thing is ever bad, forever.

Seth: Yin and yang.

Roger: Young and old.

Seth: Push and pull.

Roger: (*in awe.*) Alpha and omega.

Seth: Positive and negative.

Roger: Up and down.

Seth: Steak and chicken.

(Pause, Roger gives him a look.)

Roger: No!

Seth: I think that works.

Roger: Your items are too similar.

Seth: Not really, at all.

Roger: They're both very common meats.

Seth: And?

Roger: So, they're not opposites.

Seth: I wasn't aware they had to be.

Roger: In this particular listing, yes.

Seth: You confuse me.

(Pause, a loud female screech is suddenly heard offstage.)

Seth: But she confuses me more!

(Seth crosses to exit, and then turns back.)

Seth: You never saw me!

(Seth exits stage left, Roger crosses back to the bench. He stands for a bit, as if he's assessing what has just happened. He sits. The light turns back on. Roger looks up briefly, then begins reading again. Anna enters stage right. She is beauty personified, a pure knockout. She sits and lets out a sigh. Roger takes little notice. She lets out, yet another sigh. Roger puts down his book again.)

Roger: How are you, Anna?

Anna: (*ignoring him.*) Why are men always such jerks?

Roger: No one will ever know.

Anna: I have a few theories.

Roger: Theory is not enough.

Anna: How so?

Roger: You need evidence to support your hypothesis.

Anna: I have plenty.

Roger: Well then, make your case.

Anna: My case is that men are all jerks!

Roger: Now, state the facts.

Anna: Seth left me--again.

Roger: Why?

Anna: I cheated on him.

(Short pause.)

Roger: Makes sense.

Anna: But I said I was sorry.

Roger: Then he should forgive you.

Anna: He should!

Roger: Give you another chance.

Anna: Yes!

(Pause.)

Anna: I wouldn't take him back though.

Roger: Of course not.

Anna: Not after the way he's treated me.

Roger: What has he done?

Anna: What *hasn't* he done?

Roger: You tell me.

(Roger takes out a pen and pad, almost from nowhere, and begins writing as he's talking. Anna lies down, as if she was in a therapy

session. She begins to tear up.)

Anna: He never listens to me.

Roger: How awful.

Anna: He never wants to hear what I have to say.

Roger: You poor thing!

Anna: He never tries to understand me.

Roger: How do you sleep at night?

Anna: He never listens to me.

Roger: How awful!

Anna: And worst of all--he never tries to see my side of the situation.

Roger: I see.

Anna: Terrible, isn't he?

Roger: Malicious.

Anna: Ma-what?

Roger: Licious.

Anna: What does that mean?

Roger: (*mechanically.*) It means awfully violent. Having the nature of

or resulting from malice; being deliberately harmful to yourself or others.

(Pause.)

Anna: *(proudly.)* Well, he has never raised a hand to me.

Roger: That's funny--in school, we were taught to always raise our hands.

Anna: *(sitting up.)* What?

Roger: *(quietly.)* Nothing, just my attempt at humor.

(Pause.)

Anna: How are you, Roger?

Roger: I've been better.

Anna: I can see that. You look gloomy.

Roger: I am gloomy.

Anna: Why?

Roger: Because.

Anna: Because why?

Roger: I can't help it.

Anna: I'm sure you can.

Roger: (*serious.*) Not at all, the man in the white coat calls it clinical depression.

Anna: Sounds depressing.

Roger: It is.

Anna: Why are you clinically suppressed?

Roger: Depressed.

Anna: Yeah, that.

Roger: If I knew, I wouldn't be so.

Anna: How come?

Roger: Because it's not a choice. I just am.

Anna: But, everyone is depressed. That's life.

Roger: Everyone doesn't hate *everything*.

Anna: Do you hate everything?

Roger: I think so.

Anna: But, you don't hate me. Do you?

Roger: Not completely--you're one of the few.

Anna: (*delighted.*) Aw, how sweet.

(*Pause.*)

Anna: How is your kid?

Roger: I wish I knew.

Anna: Why don't you know?

Roger: I wish I knew.

Anna: Why don't you?

Roger: It's his mother, mostly.

Anna: The devil herself.

Roger: That's harsh.

Anna: But true.

Roger: Very true.

Anna: Want me to talk to her?

Roger: About?

Anna: About you. She might listen to me.

Roger: Unlikely.

Anna: She is my sister.

Roger: (*pleading.*) Please, don't bother.

Anna: I can persuade her.

Roger: There's no reason.

Anna: What about your kid?

Roger: He is no more my kid, than he is yours.

Anna: Now, *that's* harsh.

(*Pause.*)

Roger: But yet again, true. I don't know my kid anymore.

Anna: It's never too late.

Roger: Sometimes, it is.

Anna: I'm sorry you feel that way.

(*Pause.*)

Roger: It's not just him. Younger people have always made me anxious.

All that stupidity in one place, it's dangerous.

(Anna stands and crosses downstage.)

Anna: Sadly, I agree. Children are nothing less than a handful-- they're almost worse than the men who help make them.

(Pause.)

Roger: No one man is the same.

Anna: Nor woman.

Roger: Everyone is unique.

Anna: In their own unique way.

Roger: Everyone deserves to be heard.

Anna: To be served.

Roger: To be tested.

Anna: To be tried.

Roger: To be honored.

Anna: *(flapping her arms.)* To be lifted up on the wings of angels!

Roger: *(coming back.)* Now, that's a little much.

Anna: *(sitting.)* I agree, too far.

(Pause, the light turns off.)

Anna: That's my cue. Goodbye, Roger.

Roger: Goodbye, Anna.

(Anna exits. Roger picks up his book, and begins to read. After a few seconds, Seth enters, upstage center. He works his way up behind the bench. Roger is unaware of his presence.)

Seth: *(hoping over the bench.)* I thought she would never leave!

Roger: *(startled.)* Don't scare me like that! I could have had a heart attack!

Seth: At your age? Please.

Roger: It's very possible, considering the stress you give me.

Seth: Considering the stress you give yourself, indeed.

Roger: Why are you back? I would really like to finish my book.

Seth: What? The book about nothing?

Roger: About the road.

Seth: Oh yes, I thought it was awful.

Roger: It is. But, I still want to finish it.

Seth: Why on earth would you want to do that?

Roger: Because, I've already made a significant investment of my time!

Seth: Very well. Can I at least sit here in silence?

Roger: If that were possible, I'd say yes.

Seth: It very much is-

Roger: Not possible--at all.

Seth: You never know.

(Pause, Roger puts down his book.)

Roger: You never really know, do you?

Seth: I thought you were reading.

Roger: I was--but now I'm consumed in thought.

Seth: Isn't that the point?

(Pause.)

Roger: You never know.

Seth: You really don't.

Roger: Truth is just an illusion.

Seth: A trick of the mind.

Roger: There are no answers.

Seth: Only questions.

Roger: Maddening questions.

(Pause.)

Seth: Sometimes, I think it's all in your head.

Roger: What?

Seth: The madness.

Roger: What madness?

Seth: Yours.

Roger: I'm not mad.

Seth: You're not angry.

Roger: (*angry.*) I'm not insane, either.

Seth: That's what they all say.

Roger: I'm not.

Seth: Just half way there.

Roger: There is a fine line between depression, and insanity.

Seth: A *very* fine line.

Roger: (*offended.*) Don't act like you know.

Seth: Well, I am your closest friend.

Roger: Sadly.

Seth: And you do sit here, on this bench, by yourself--all day long. Do you not?

Roger: Not all day.

Seth: Darkness is upon us.

(The light goes out. Roger stands for the first time, it turns back on. He

crosses downstage.)

Seth: *(timidly.)* What do you suppose that means?

Roger: Nothing.

Seth: You have quite the imagination.

Roger: I'm not the artistic type.

Seth: That's surprising, considering how depressed you always are. In my opinion, you're one step away from cutting off your ear and sending it to one of your lady friends.

Roger: *(angrily.)* One more! Mention my condition one more time!

(Roger crosses and grabs Seth by the shirt.)

Seth: You want me to?

Roger: No! That was sarcasm.

Seth: *(teasing.)* Someone doesn't practice what they preach.

Roger: *(calming down.)* Most people don't.

Seth: Did science tell you that?

Roger: *(letting go of him.)* We've been over this, time and time again--
science tells me everything.

Seth: So you *are* crazy.

Roger: This conversation is over.

(Roger sits, then Seth. Long pause.)

Seth: I'm sorry.

Roger: No you're not.

Seth: I'm just trying to help you feel better.

Roger: Hah! Impossible!

(Short pause.)

Seth: Everything is possible.

Roger: Nothing is out of reach.

Seth: If you want something, go get it.

Roger: If you don't--don't.

Seth: Be all you can be--

Roger: --and more.

Seth: Reach for the stars.

Roger: But watch getting burnt.

Seth: Do what makes you happy.

Roger: (*sadly.*) Even if nothing makes you happy.

Seth: Be optimistic.

Roger: Be free.

Seth: Live your life--

Roger: --to the fullest.

(*Small pause.*)

Seth: I think we're both crazy.

Roger: Agreed.

(*Pause.*)

Seth: Can I try something?

Roger: No.

Seth: Come on, Mr. Pessimistic. You don't even know what I was going to say.

Roger: I don't need to.

Seth: (*childish.*) Please! Pretty please, with a cherry on top.

Roger: No!

Seth: Pretty, pretty please with whip cream and sprinkles on top!

Roger: I enjoy sprinkles.

Seth: That a boy!

Roger: Okay, fine. What is it you want to try?

Seth: I want to have a therapy session with you.

Roger: Why?

Seth: Because, I think it will help our relationship by allowing me to understand you at a more personal level.

Roger: I don't know.

Seth: Come on! You do this all the time.

Roger: Yeah, with a trained professional. Not a buffoon like you.

Seth: You said you would do it!

Roger: Fine, go ahead.

Seth: You have to lay down first, to make it official.

Roger: I'm not lying down.

Seth: You said you would!

(Roger reluctantly lies down on the bench. Seth grabs the pen and paper.)

Seth: Okay--so, Roger. Why are you such a Debby downer all the time?

Roger: *(sitting up.)* No, no! You don't start out a session by insulting me!

Seth: Roger--who is the patient, and who is the psychiatrist?

Roger: You're not even a real psychiatrist!

Seth: That's what you think.

Roger: I know!

Seth: Okay, fine Mr. Professional! How should I start out?

Roger: *(lying back down.)* Normally, you start by asking me how I'm feeling today.

Seth: Alright. So, how are you feeling today Roger?

Roger: Terrible.