

ROAD TOLL

one act drama

by Sarah Tighe

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One Act Play – Road Toll

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SCENE

A living room, modestly decorated in Christmas paraphernalia. Delma, in her early 70's is glued to 'Carols by Candlelight', which is playing on television. There is a knock at the door.

DELMA: *(hollering)* it's open.

There is another knock

DELMA: I said it's open.

There is yet another knock. Sighing, Delma gets up, turns down the television, then limps slightly to the front door, and opens it.

DELMA: *(as she opens the door)* I've still got my bad foot. The doctor –

Delma is surprised to see Constable Sam De Angelo and Constable Lisa Worthington, both in their early 20's. They have removed their hats.

DELMA: I thought you were someone else.

SAM: I'm Constable Sam De Angelo; this is my partner Constable Lisa Worthington. Are you a relative of William Andrew Cross?

DELMA: I'm Willy's mother. I'm Delma.

LISA: Do you mind if we come in?

DELMA: (*Concerned*) why?

LISA: Mrs Cross...we'd prefer it, I mean... it would be much easier, if we're all sitting down.

Lisa takes Delma's arm and attempts to gently guide Delma to the couch. Delma pulls her arm away.

DELMA: I won't sit down! Tell me why you're here.

SAM: I'm sorry Mrs. Cross. Your son was in a car accident this morning. He passed away.

Delma stares at Sam for a moment.

DELMA: I don't understand – Willy?

LISA: let's sit down.

SAM: He died at the scene. There was nothing anyone could do.

LISA: I know how much of a shock it must –

DELMA: A shock?

LISA: We can arrange for a grief counsellor to talk to you.

DELMA: It was a shock the first time.

LISA: Is there someone we can call for you? A loved one who can come over?

Delma stares at the police officers for a moment.

DELMA: Dear, I don't you who put you up to this, but you've got it all wrong.

LISA: We're sorry for your loss, Mrs Cross but –

DELMA: *(interrupting)* My Willy has been dead eight years.

Silence

LISA: pardon?

DELMA: What part do I need to make clearer, dear?

LISA: We identified your son by his driver's licence. It was found –

DELMA: Willy's been dead almost a decade.

LISA: William?

DELMA: I've only got one son. (Pause) *Had* one son.

The oven dings

DELMA: that's the gingerbread.

She shuffles out. Both Lisa and Sam are stunned.

SAM: (*annoyed*) Great.

LISA: What?

SAM: A dementia case. Trust my luck getting one on Christmas Eve.

Lisa picks up a family photo from the table and examines it

SAM: I bet she still thinks Menzies in the prime minister. That people travel to work on penny-farthings.

LISA: Don't be awful. She must be in shock.

SAM: the woman is nuts.

LISA: show some compassion. Her son has just died.

SAM: He was drink-driving.

LISA: (*sharply*) what's that got to do with it?

SAM: The idiot got what he deserved.

LISA: Don't call him an idiot.

SAM: He was an idiot. He actually managed to go through the windscreen and land ten foot from his car without letting go of the opened bottle of Jim Beam. As far as I'm concerned, it's lucky he only killed himself.

LISA: *(Staring at the photo)* I wonder if this is him. He's good looking. Nice smile.

SAM: His nice smile got wiped the length of Boundary Street.

A pause. Lisa picks up a figurine on the bench, a small porcelain boy

LISA: My grandmother had one of these. It sat on top of her television. I think it reminded her of my dad when he was a little boy.

SAM: what's the point of being reminded of someone who's already dead?

LISA: *(surprised)* my dad isn't dead.

A pause

SAM: *(checks watch)* don't know about you, but I'm going to the pub.

LISA: *(surprised)* now?

SAM: my shift is over.

LISA: But Willy Cross –

SAM: (*puts hat back on head*) is dead. His mother knows he's dead. She knew before we did. According to her, she knew way back in the late 1990's.

LISA: She's confused.

SAM: She's a psychic. Maybe I should ask her to read my palm.

LISA: I'm going to stay with her.

SAM: Why?

LISA: Because it's our job.

SAM: It's not our job to cram tragedy down her throat. Let her believe what she wants.

Delma reenters, holding plate of enormous gingerbread biscuits in one hand and a photo album in the other.

DELMA: I found some pictures of Willy's funeral we can all look at. (*To Sam*) Sit down.

SAM: I'm sorry for your loss, but I have to (*leave*)

DELMA: (*flash of anger*) Sit down and shut up.

Sam and Lisa exchange a glance, but Sam sighs and sits on the other side of Lisa (furthest from Delma). Delma sits down next to Lisa and opens the album.

DELMA: (*gently*) have you tried the biscuits? I use real ginger. (*Turning to the first page of the photo album*) This is the outside of the casket. Carol said poor Willy was too (*she pauses for a word*) damaged for an open casket.

SAM: who's Carol?

DELMA: my daughter. (*Turning pages*) The service was held in the Chapel at the funeral home (*To Sam*) you're not looking.

SAM: I don't like funerals.

DELMA: (*Gently*) Lost someone close to you, did you dear? Have a biscuit. It'll make you feel better.

LISA: It looks like it was a beautiful service.

DELMA: I never knew Willy had so many friends. So many loved ones. (*Pointing*) I never even met this woman. Such sad eyes. And this boy. His face'd break your heart. (*a pause*) lovely photos. Almost makes me feel like I was there.

SAM: Is there someone we can call for you?

DELMA: What for?

SAM: Do you know what year this is?

DELMA: why are you asking me that?

LISA: (*warning*) Sam.

SAM: Who is the prime minister?

DELMA: (*sharply*) are you being cheeky?

SAM: labor or liberal?

DELMA: I don't stand cheek in this house. Willy and Carol know that.

The phone rings. Delma gets up

DELMA: That'll be Carol. Have a biscuit Constable De Angelo.

She picks up the phone.

DELMA: (phone) hello? This is Delma speaking.....

LISA: (*hissing*) Why are you berating her?

SAM: I'm just asking questions.

DELMA: ... (Phone) my long distance provider... ?

SAM: I have a theory. I'm testing it out.

LISA: what kind of theory?

DELMA: (phone) it does sound like an awfully good deal, but I don't know anyone in Queensland. (*Slight pause*) my husband? He won't be calling anyone soon

SAM: That maybe she isn't nuts after all. Maybe Willy really did die eight years ago. Maybe it was someone pretending to be Willy that was killed in that car accident.

LISA: pretending to be Willy?

DELMA: ...(phone) Because he's dead, dear. (a pause) I don't know anyone in Perth either...they're a bit strange in Perth....

SAM: it's called identity theft.

DELMA: (*phone*) No. It's just me. My daughter keeps telling me to get a dog. But you have to clean up after them, and with my foot....

LISA: (*annoyed*) I know what identity theft is. I just think you're theory is daft.

SAM: Hear me out – we might have stumbled onto some actual police work here.

LISA: (*incredulous*) I doubt it...who'd steal his identity? He was just an ordinary guy.

SAM: a criminal. An illegal. An obsessed fan. A weirdo needing a new identity. Who knows? It's the fastest growing crime in Australia.

DELMA: (*Phone*)...I don't know anyone in Melbourne either. It's not proper to know people in Melbourne at my age...

LISA: The accident victim was identified as Willy Cross.

SAM: its Christmas Eve. You know as well as I do that only it's only grad students working tonight. And there was that bus crash in Mosman. Eight dead. They've probably all concentrating on that. Identifying Willy was probably an afterthought.

LISA: seems unlikely.

SAM: but not impossible.

Lisa sighs.

LISA: I'll radio the station. See if the dentals were checked properly.

She goes to leave

SAM: I'm going to interview Delma, try and get more information.

LISA: (*bemused*) what could she possibly know?

SAM: Maybe she knows something. Maybe someone went through her mail and came across some old letters for Willy. That's how they do it – they steal mail – bank notices, letters, personal stuff like that. Once they have enough information, they convince some idiot at the RTA to give them a new driver's license. Once that happens, it's just a short step to a passport, bank account, medicare card – the works.

LISA: Stop looking so happy.

SAM: I didn't join the police to spend my days pulling over speeding drivers and telling parents their children have wrapped their cars around trees. This is interesting stuff (*on her face*). Call it my 'cop-intuition'.

LISA: we've been cops for six months. We don't have 'cop intuition'. We're just amateurs in blue.

SAM: just call the station, ok?

Lisa makes a face and steps outside.

DELMA: (*phone*) Bye for now.

Delma hangs up phone. Sam stands up.

SAM: (*pulling out notebook*) Mrs. Cross, I need to ask you some questions.

DELMA: have you tried my biscuits yet?

Sam hesitates

DELMA: before my phone call, I asked you to have a biscuit. I don't want to have to ask you again.

Reluctantly, Sam picks up a biscuit and takes a bite.

DELMA: well?

SAM: *(half-heartedly)* delicious.

DELMA: have another bite. A bigger one.

SAM: I really need to ask you some questions.

DELMA: not until you've finished that whole biscuit.

SAM: please Mrs. Cross, I don't have time – *(for this)*

DELMA: *(flash of anger, banging fit on table)* I'm not answering any of your fucking questions until you finish the biscuit.

Sam stares at her, stunned for a moment, but finally finishes the biscuit.

DELMA: I use real ginger. I prefer the taste. Don't you?

A pause

DELMA: *(expectantly)* well?

SAM: You say your son has been dead for eight years.

DELMA: I *know* my son has been dead for eight years.

SAM: Someone with your son's identification was killed earlier today in an automobile accident. Is there any reason you can think why someone would have a drivers licence in your son's name?

DELMA: Maybe it was a friend of Willy's. They might have kept it as a keepsake.

SAM: The drivers licence was brand new. Issued by the RTA five days ago.

DELMA: It must be another William Cross.

SAM: The address on the drivers licence is this address – your address, Mrs Cross.

DELMA: (*confused*) no one lives here but me. (*A pause*) Does this have anything to do with the man who came over last week?

SAM: A man?

DELMA: He knocked at the door. Nice man in a white shirt.

SAM: (*interested*) What was his name?

DELMA: He sat on the couch and asked if the couch was new. I've had it five years.

SAM: what did he look like?

DELMA: After Willy died, Carol said they put up sign that says 'Federally funded black spot' by the side of the road.

SAM: Focus, Mrs Cross. Who was the man who came to the door?

DELMA: *(remembering)* Carol also said she put a little white cross by the tree that Willy crashed into. He was hit by a man that'd been drinking all day long *(Noticing the television)* Oh! I love this one.

She turns up the TV. The end of 'God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen' is playing. Delma sings along to the last few bars of the song.

DELMA: This holy tide of Christmas, All other doth deface. O tidings of comfort and joy, Comfort and joy, O tidings of comfort and joy.

She turns down television again.

DELMA: what time is it?

SAM: *(checks watch)* six-fifteen. You were telling me about the man at the door...?

DELMA: Carol should have been here hours ago.

SAM: *(impatiently)* it's Christmas Eve. The traffic is terrible.

DELMA: I want you to find Carol.

SAM: I just need you to answer some questions first.

DELMA: I'm not answering anything until Carol gets here. She's never late. Why isn't she here yet?

The door opens. Delma sits up in anticipation, but is disappointed to see only Lisa. Lisa motions Sam to the door. They speak in hushed tones.

LISA: You were right – they ID'd the Vic with the drivers licence. Terry is furious. He's ordered them to do a dental record check now.

SAM: How long will that take?

LISA: A couple of hours.

SAM: Delma said a man came by last week. She didn't know him but it sounds like he was scouting out the place.

LISA: what for?

SAM: Kill her. Then move in. Collect her pension.

LISA: (*exasperated*) Seriously Sam. I know you're bored with Rookie work, so am I. But Delma's confused...The flashes of anger. Its just shock.

SAM: I think it's something more.

LISA: my grandma was exactly the same when my grandfather died. She started to talk about lamingtons and a picnic she'd had back in the 1960's. The loss of granddad was too much. Her mind just shut down for a while.

SAM: What about the man who came and visited her. ..You think Delma's just making him up?

LISA: It was probably one of those door-to-door Mormons.

SAM: She's a lonely old lady. If some creep wanted to come in here, kill her and bury her remains in the garden... She wouldn't be missed for months. Maybe she'd never be missed.

LISA: Carol would miss her.

SAM: It's Christmas Eve. If her daughter Carol cares about her mother so much, why isn't she here?

The stage blacks out. When the stage lights up again, its several hours later. Lisa, Sam and Delma are halfway through a game of scrabble.

DELMA: vacillate.

SAM: I've never heard that word before.

DELMA: it means hesitate. Waver.

SAM: use it in a sentence.

DELMA: Shadows seemed to come and go in them as if the steady flame of her soul had been made to vacillate at last in the cross-currents of poisoned air from the corrupted dark immensity claiming her for its own, where virtues themselves fester into crimes in the cynicism of oppression and revolt.

SAM: (*impressed*) did you make that up?

DELMA: It's Joseph Conrad.

LISA: is he a local writer?

DELMA: Don't they teach kids these days anything in school? Joseph Conrad was one of the greatest writers of the 20th century. My father would've hit me across the head if I didn't know Joseph Conrad at your age.

SAM: (*a bit too aggressively*) in this century, hit a kid across the head, you end up on assault charges.

DELMA: You've got a chip on your shoulder Constable De Angelo - didn't you get enough attention as a boy?

SAM: My dad tried, but I guess he found it difficult being six feet underground. My mum was great on the days she wasn't drunk.

DELMA: what time is it?

SAM: eleven-fifty.

LISA: (*filling in tiles on the scrabble board*) I made the word 'Like'. How many points does that give me?

DELMA (*checking scoresheet*) five.

LISA: (*affectionately*) I used to play scrabble with my grandmother. She'd always win. I've never been very good at English.

DELMA: (*worried*) where's Carol? Did she leave without saying goodbye?

LISA: (*gently*) Carol isn't here, Mrs Cross. She hasn't come yet.

DELMA: Something must have happened to her. We should call the police.

Sam and Lisa stare at each other with concern.

SAM: We are the police, Mrs Cross. Remember?

DELMA: (*anxious*) are you looking for my Carol?

LISA: What's her mobile number?

DELMA: She doesn't carry one. Says they cause brain tumours. Which is so silly because I never used a mobile phone and I still got one.

LISA: (*surprised*) What - a brain tumour?

DELMA: Everything started to smell like burning meat, so I went to the doctor and they said it was a tumour – it'd ruined my sense of smell. They gave me three months. When Carol found out, she promised to take care of me. She said 'Mum. I'm going to make sure you're as comfortable as possible' (*Delma chuckles*) there's nothing comfortable about brain cancer. But I didn't have the heart to tell her that.

Lisa puts her hand over Delma's

LISA: You were in hospital when you found out Willy had died?

DELMA: I remember lying in the hospital, Easter morning, wires and tubes sticking out of everywhere. Carol came and stood beside my bed. Her eyes were so red. She said 'Mum, its Willy'. (*A pause*) You know what my first words to her were?

(Long pause)

DELMA: He's finally killed someone, hasn't he?

Lisa and Sam are surprised. Suddenly, Lisa's mobile phone rings. She goes to the corner of the room to answer it, and speaks quietly, unintelligibly, into it.

SAM: (*interested*) Why did you think he'd killed someone, Mrs Cross?

DELMA: Do you have kids?

SAM: I'm only twenty.

DELMA: I had Willy at nineteen. I was over the moon when I found out I was pregnant. (*a pause*) but you don't know what you're signing up for when you have kids.

SAM: Did Willy say he was going to kill someone?

DELMA: Willy *was* bad. You try your best, but you can't discipline a kid like Willy, no matter how hard you try.

SAM: If your son did something wrong, you have to tell the police.

DELMA: He used to kill cats. He'd beat up his sister. I found a gun in his room, years ago. It was under his washing.

SAM: it's a criminal offence not to tell the police.

DELMA: He once smashed a glass into a woman's face. Carol was there. She said the woman's boyfriend promised to kill Willy. Willy just laughed.

SAM: Did Willy do something to this man? Did something happen to him? If you know something, and you don't tell the police, you may be charged as an accessory after the fact.

DELMA: have you ever lost anyone close to you?

SAM: (*hesitant*) my father died in a motorcycle accident when I was 12. They locked the drunk sonavbitch who smashed into him in jail.

DELMA: I lost my Willy eight years ago. He was such a beautiful looking boy, but he was a dark man.

Lisa gets off the phone. Her face is dark with concern and stress.

LISA: Mrs Cross. I need to tell you that car that crashed was registered to a Carol Marie Cross. Is that your daughter? Birth date 12. 12. 65.

DELMA: Where's Carol?

LISA: we don't know. We're investigating the possibility

DELMA: the possibility of what?

LISA: that a mistake was made –

DELMA: (*more anxious*) Why haven't you found Carol yet?

LISA: Constable De Angelo and I are going to stay here a little bit longer. Just until we get some answers.

DELMA: (*becoming distressed*) I never even offered you tea. Did you take sugar?

She limps into the kitchen

SAM: *(to Lisa)* what's going on? What's Carol got to do with the accident?

LISA: The car was registered to a Carol Cross.

SAM: It was a bloke who died. What? Do they think Carol had a sex change?

LISA: there's probably a simpler explanation.

SAM: Maybe she missed Willy so much, she wanted to become him. I saw this on TV once – a woman started taking loads of hormones and grew this massive beard –

LISA: *(interrupting)* Shut up, Sam. I'm sick of your stupid theories. Whoever died in that accident, someone has lost someone they love.

Delmar re-enters, carrying a tray with a teapot and tea cups. She sets them on the table.

DELMA: Carol's not coming tonight, is she?

LISA: *(upset)* I'm so sorry –

DELMA: After my operation, they said I wouldn't be able to remember as well as I once did. But I can still do the crossword every Saturday.

LISA: Is there someone we can call for you? A loved one?

DELMA: There's no one left now. No one but me *(a pause)* me and Willy.

Sharp knock at the door, then the door opens, Carol, in her Mid 40's, enters. She looks exhausted but is holding a small Christmas present.

DELMA: Carol!

Delma grabs Carol and embraces her.

DELMA: I thought you were gone. That you were – *(she stops herself)*

LISA: *(shocked)* You're Ms Carol Cross? Delma's daughter?

CAROL: What's happened? It's Willy, isn't it? My car was gone. I wanted to report it stolen, but he's my brother and he's been through so much –

SAM: Your car was involved in a fatal accident earlier today. As a consequence, a man is deceased.

CAROL *(starting to cry)*: Not again. Not again Willy.

LISA: Carol – I mean, Ms Cross – we're having some issues identifying the victim.

SAM: your brother's driver's licence was in the pocket of the deceased. But your mother has told us –

CAROL: *(interrupting)* it was Willy who died this time?

LISA: Mrs Cross, did your brother die eight years ago?

CAROL: Willy was in an accident. He'd been smoking dope all afternoon and was high. He never even saw the motorcyclist. Because he had so many priors, he got the maximum. He got out three weeks ago. Mum - he said he came over to see you last week, but that you didn't recognise him.

SAM: the man in the white shirt.

DELMA: Why are you saying this about Willy?

CAROL: Mum, you were so sick. Willy didn't want you to know. He didn't want you to die thinking he was a bad person. He preferred that you thought he'd died, that he was waiting for you....

DELMA: waiting for me where?

LISA: *(softly)* on the other side.

CAROL: Willy made me go to the dead man's funeral. Of the man. So many people loved him. So many people heartbroken. I remember just staring at that poor man's son. He was only about 12. The same age as Willy when Dad died.

SAM: Wait a second - Willy killed a motorcyclist with a 12 year old son? My dad was killed eight years ago.

CAROL: *(wearily)* I wondered what would become of that boy, losing his father like that. Whether he'd end up a petty crook, a loser, just like Willy.

SAM: *(frantically)* where was the crash?

CAROL: The corner of Challis and Warner Street, Rockdale.

Sam makes a face, then grabs the photo album from the table and starts flicking frantically though it

SAM: *(stunned)* This picture – it's me. This is my father's funeral.

CAROL: This is you?

SAM: It was Willy. Willy crashed into my dad's motorcycle. Willy killed my dad.

CAROL: Willy was sorry. I promise you, he was sorry every day of his life. When he came out of prison, he said he was going to meet you

SAM: I guess I met him first.

Delma turns up the television as Christmas music fills the stage

DELMA: A bit of quiet, the Carols by Candlelight are back on.

The end.