

HE'S A NERVOUS NELLIE

A One Act Farce

By

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THE CHARACTERS

LISA CRANE, A precocious 14 year old

NELSON (NELLIE) GOODMAN, A psychiatrist, 40

MARYANNE CRANE, Lisa's mother, 38

LORRAINE HUBBELL, Nelson's wife, 30s

NORBERT CRANE, Lisa's father, a professor of philosophy, 40s

THE SCENE

The Crane home

THE TIME

Recently

HE'S A NERVOUS NELLIE

(In the dark, we hear haunting flute music. When it stops, lights come up on the Crane home. There is an entrance door rear center, and there is also a door stage left. At lights up, LISA is holding her flute, and NELSON is standing nervously by the door)

LISA

Did you know that in primitive societies the flute was a ritualistic instrument, which was played at tribal festivals?

NELSON

I've often suspected that.

LISA

Did you know that they played the flute for hours and hours until the playing became almost orgiastic, and the dancers grew wilder and wilder, tearing off their clothes, until eventually everyone collapsed in a naked, frenzied, sweating heap?

NELSON

(Pause) I'm rather surprised you know it.

LISA

(She laughs) You're funny, I think I like you.

NELSON

Thank you, Lisa.

LISA

How do you know my name?

NELSON

I know a lot about you.

LISA

I truly doubt that.

NELSON

(Pause) You could be right there.

LISA

Of course I'm right here. You're looking at me, aren't you? I can see you're not an English teacher. Let me guess. You look like a psychology nerd, am I right?

NELSON

You're very precocious, aren't you, Lisa?

LISA

Yes, I am. But I don't know you're name.

NELSON

My name is Nelson. But my friends call me Nellie.

LISA

I wouldn't think your *friends* would call you Nellie. That's a girl's name. How do you like having a girl's name?

NELSON

(Pause) You're the first person who's ever asked me that.

LISA

I don't beat around the bush.

NELLIE

Well now, it's certainly been a lot of fun getting to know you, Lisa, but I'm afraid I'm the bearer of unpleasant news. Where's your mother?

LISA

Look, Nellie, let me relieve your anxiety. If you've come to tell me that my father has left us, I know it already. Before he abandoned the ship, so to speak, he told me the whole story. In fact, he probably didn't tell you half as much. If you'd like, I could fill in some of the detail for you.

NELLIE

That might not relieve my anxiety.

LISA

(Laughs) You're really great, Nellie.

NELLIE

You're something of a surprise to me, too.

LISA

(Laughs) I can see we're going to have a lot of fun. Father told me he asked someone to keep any eye on mother and me. I assume that was you. Well, I want you to know he couldn't have made a better choice. You're priceless.

NELLIE

I'm don't like to say this, Lisa, but some of your compliments feel like a kick in the pants, no pun intended.

LISA

Pun? Wow, I can't wait to tell mother that one!

NELLIE

Speaking of your mother—

LISA

That's exactly what *I* want to speak about. Of course I briefed mother on father's departure, and she took it pretty well on the surface. But coming out of the blue, I think you can understand how it came as a shock—

NELLIE

I *am* a psychiatrist.

LISA

Nothing personal, but I've known a few of those creatures who were, to put it kindly, off their rockers *big time*—

NELLIE

Thanks for putting it kindly.

LISA

This is no joking matter, Nellie. Mother puts on a good act, but I know she's hurt. After all, she understandably thinks of this as a rejection. She could even be close to a breakdown. The point is she's going to need a lot of consoling to get through this. I hope you're up to the job.

NELLIE

May I say that you seem to be taking it rather well?

(Then MARYANNE enters. She's carrying a bag of groceries)

NELLIE

Hello, Mrs. Crane. Let me take those for you.

MARYANNE

I can handle it, Nelson. Thanks, anyway—

LISA

I think you should let Nellie take them, Mother. He's going to be helping out around here a lot. (NELLIE takes the groceries and simply puts them on the table).

MARYANNE

I see you've gotten to know our Lisa, Nelson.

LISA

Call him Nellie. I do.

NELLIE

She's quite a talented young lady, Mrs. Crane.

LISA

Call her Maryanne.

MARYANNE

Has she played the flue for you—Nellie? That's just one of her incredible talents. She's a wizard at calculus. She can recite reams of Keats and Shelley verbatim, and her essay on Nietzsche won first place in the Young Philosopher's Competition last year. Frankly, there's not much she can't do!

LISA

I don't get high marks on modesty. But I don't consider that one of the more admirable virtues.

NELLIE

I can believe that.

LISA

(Laughs) Don't you love him already, Mother? Nellie, do you want to tell her your so-called pun, or do you want me to.

NELLIE

Lisa, I think your mother and I have other things to discuss.

MARYANNE

Oh, Nellie! (She suddenly breaks into tears).

LISA

(To NELLIE) Nice play, Shakespeare!

NELLIE

I understand your feelings, Maryanne. They do you great credit—

LISA

Skip the clichés, Nellie, and get to the meaningful part.

NELLIE

Well, I just want you to know that I'll do anything I can to see you through this unpleasant time in your life.

MARYANNE

Thank you, Nellie. You don't know how much that means to me.

LISA

(To NELLIE) But are you ready to put your money where your mouth is?

NELLIE

(With an uneasy smile, To MARYANNE) I wonder what she has up her sleeve now?

LISA

It's obvious. I think you should waste no time moving in with us.

MARYANNE

Now Lisa, that's probably too much of an imposition. Isn't it, Nellie?

LISA

Mother, *he* opened that can of worms—

NELLIE

She has a point. Of course—

LISA

And I'm sure he's not going to try to back out of his commitment.

MARYANNE

Then I don't know how I can ever thank you! (She gives him a kiss).

NELLIE

I'm just not sure how my wife will take it.

LISA

(Pause) Is she an incredibly selfish woman?

NELLIE

I wouldn't want to use the word incredibly.

LISA

(Laughing) Mother, he's so quaint. Don't you just love him?

MARYANNE

Well, dear, I'm certainly becoming very fond of him.

NELLIE

The feeling is mutual, Maryanne. The truth is I've never felt so welcomed into a strange household. Nevertheless, I am a little nervous—

LISA

This is too important for pussy-footing. Let's get your wife out of the way immediately.

NELLIE

(Pause) Would you happen to have a bottle of Dutch courage in the house?

LISA

Nellie! I'm disappointed in this wimpy streak. Maybe it would be better if I called her and explained the situation.

MARYANNE

Lisa, don't you think you're being a bit bossy?

LISA

Do you think I'm happy about that, but if it's going to get done, somebody has to do it, and it looks like I'm nominated.

NELLIE

That suits me. (He takes a card from his wallet and hands it to LISA). That's our home phone, Lisa. Lorraine was doing rescue work at the Salvation Army Mission this afternoon, but she should be home by now.

MARYANNE

She sounds like a wonderful person, Nellie.

LISA

Let's reserve judgment, Mother. Sometimes these goody two-shoes are phony as the proverbial three dollar bill. (She dials the number) Hello? Is this Lorraine Goodman? Hi, Mrs. Goodman, you probably don't know me. My name is Lisa Crane. (Pause) Yes, he is! (To MARYANNE) Father was at the mission this afternoon.

MARYANNE

(To NELLIE) That's odd. He's usually at the bar in the afternoon.

LISA

(To phone) Actually, that might help me explain our situation, Mrs. Goodman. Thank you, Lorraine, I'll do that. The fact is father has abandoned mother and me. I hope you can understand how devastating something like that can be. (Pause) I appreciate the compliment, Lorraine. I'm doing my best, for mother's sake.

MARYANNE

(To NELLIE) She's a godsend.

LISA

(To the phone) Yes, he's right here. I'll ask him. (To NELLIE) She wants to know what she can bring for you.

NELLIE

(Pause) I could return home for my things.

LISA

I don't think that's a good idea. (To the phone) I'm sure you're not an idiot. Why don't you just bring over what you think he'll need? (Pause) My mother and I look forward to it—au revoir. (Pause) Basically, it means goodbye. (She hangs up) She's not very well educated, is she, Nellie?

NELLIE

I've been trying to correct that.

MARYANNE

Try to make allowances, Lisa. She seems a very kind person.

LISA

I think she took it pretty well.

NELLIE

I think this has been rather a surprise to everyone.

MARYANNE

As a matter of fact, there's something I'm a bit worried about.

NELLIE

Is there anything I can do about it, Maryanne?

MARYANNE

It sounds a little rude of me to ask—

NELLIE

Naturally, I'm at your service.

MARYANNE

I don't know what the neighbors might think about things, so I'm wondering if you'd mind coming and leaving by the cellar door.

LISA

Mother, don't be a retard! What do you care if our neighbors are a bunch of quidnuncs?

MARYANNE

(Pause) Are they? I don't think I know what that means? (She looks at NELLIE).

NELLIE

That one stumps me, too.

MARYANNE

I forgot to mention among Lisa's other accomplishments. She continually wins every vocabulary bee.

LISA

The other contestants are all morons, so it's not much of an accomplishment.

NELLIE

That almost sounds like modesty, Lisa.

LISA

(Laughs) You really crack me up, Nellie. It is wonderful to have you here, isn't it, Mother.

MARYANNE

(Smiling) Now don't be naughty, Lisa.

