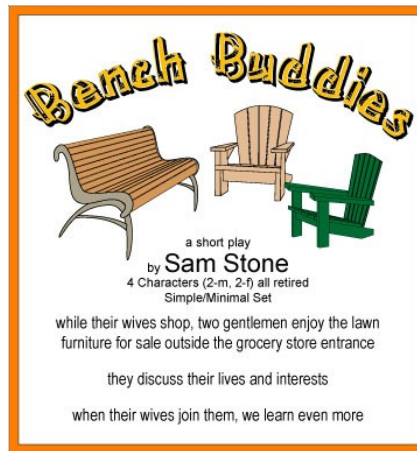


## BENCH BUDDIES

a short play  
by Sam Stone



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Setting: Minimal/suggestive. Chairs or benches (lawn style) outside a grocery store entrance.

Time: The Present.

Props: Grocery Bags.  
Bottled water.  
Plastic cups.  
Snack article, perhaps cookies or crackers.

Characters (all retirees):

Mike

Jake

Daisy - (Mike's wife)

Marge - (Jake's wife)

Author's Note:

This play may be best presented as if it were in the time and locale of the performance. Dates, names of cities, the name of the Deli, and other geographical information including distances to cities should be created at the discretion of the theatre or director.

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On Rise: MIKE enters carrying groceries. Looks back over his shoulder for a moment, examines the chairs. Shrugs, selects one and sits. He pulls a snack out of a bag and munches. Crumbs fall on his belly/lap - he unceremoniously brushes them off.

After a moment, JAKE enters in much the same manner carrying groceries including a container of water. Sees MIKE, brightens.

JAKE

Mind if I join you?

(MIKE gestures, JAKE sits. A few seconds of silence.)  
It's nice of them to put these chairs (benches) here by the entrance. Funny how guys always sit outside while the women shop. My wife says she hates shopping, but there she is... I finally ran out of patience.

MIKE

Me too! Maybe they should have a sign over these chairs, "Reserved for husbands". (Laughs.) I get the feeling this one's gonna take a while. Just as we were paying for this stuff, my wife remembered a few things she'd forgotten. Just my luck!

JAKE

You should feel lucky! My wife ran into an old friend. I'll be here all afternoon.

(Pulls plastic cups out of his bag and removes one offering it to MIKE.)

Would you like some bottled water?

MIKE

Sure. I am a little dehydrated.  
(Takes the cup.)

JAKE

(Removes another cup and pours.)

I got into the habit of drinking lots of water when I was in Phoenix. An arid climate dries you out quick. It turns out kidney failure is common in my family and water's the best medicine.

MIKE

Better watch your volume. The restroom's all the way to the back.

(Gestures.)

I hate to admit it but every time I get near the dairy section, I gotta go. Sign of old age I guess.

JAKE

(Salutes with cup.)

Forget the old age thing. Big deal! It's certainly better than the alternative. By the way, I'm Jake.

MIKE

Mike! Lived here long?

JAKE

Five years. My company moved me here to open a new outlet.

MIKE

What kind?

JAKE

Retail... clothing.

MIKE

Still working?

JAKE

Retired last April. Don't miss it a bit! Except when it comes to going shopping with the wife. (Laughs.) You?

MIKE

Retired two years ago. Moved here from (city) to be closer to the kids. It's only two hours' drive to our daughter's. We have an early breakfast, spend a few hours with the grandkids and get home before sundown. Sometimes they come for the weekend. Our son lives in (city). It's closer compared to the day-and-a-half we used to drive.

JAKE

You're lucky! My son's in sales. When he's nearby he stops in. We see him two-three times a year. Normally, he's here for a

couple of days. It's nice to catch up. I sure wish he got along better with my wife.

MIKE

Second marriage?

JAKE

Yeah. You?

MIKE

Still on my first. Forty years last month.

JAKE

Congratulations! That's some sort of record these days.

MIKE

I guess! How old was your son when yours broke up?

JAKE

Twelve. He took it hard.

MIKE

What happened? Uh... let me know if I'm prying.

JAKE

It's okay. I was in the fast lane, going nowhere in a hurry and didn't know how to behave myself. By the time I realized how foolish I'd been, it was all over and I couldn't go back.

MIKE

I know what you mean. I sure as hell made my mistakes but luckily we survived. She had tons of patience... lucky for me. But I learned to change some of my ways. It takes a long time to learn some things. (Pause.) You only have the one kid?

JAKE

Yes but my wife has two. I think Joe feels somewhat cheated. Truth is I can't blame him. I didn't even know Marge when I left his Mom. Hell, I didn't even hook up with her for another three years but that didn't seem to matter to him. I think he feels I gave too much of myself to them without leaving room for him. It's been twenty years now and I still feel guilty about the whole thing.

MIKE

You have to learn to forgive yourself whether he does or not. That's a big burden to carry for all that long. Have you talked to him about it?

JAKE

No. I'm not sure he's ready for that stuff yet. Probably too painful. For me too... or maybe I'm just a coward. Maybe someday...

MIKE

Want some advice?

(There's a long pause as MIKE examines JAKE's face.)  
Don't wait too long.

JAKE

I know I shouldn't. Life is short. I'll wait for the right opening, or maybe just bring it up gently. You ever have anything like that happen?

MIKE

Nothing that lasted that long. Our daughter Molly and I disagreed over the company she was keeping her last year of college. That guy was always running out of money. He'd take her out and then ask her for a loan to pay the bill. Sometimes he paid her back. Other times he had excuses. I couldn't stand by idly and hear those stories without saying something. But she didn't want my opinion... she'd say I was overstepping her boundaries. Imagine! So... she didn't talk to me until after she'd finished grad school. Then, one day, she just showed up at our front door crying. We never talked about it for another six months. If I had it to do over again, I'd have apologized right away regardless of whether I thought I was wrong. Those years took a lot out of me and my wife, and... (Sighs.) ...I'm sure her too.

JAKE

You know, we might just have a couple of things in common.

(MIKE nods in agreement.)  
So... what kind of degree did she go for?

MIKE

English Lit. She always talked about teaching at (name) University. We were all surprised when she took a job as editor of the Arts and Entertainment section of the (city) Chronicle. It's a tabloid with a good-sized readership. The local newspaper has offered to buy them out but she says the owner's holding out until they can assure that all the employees can keep their jobs or find work somewhere else.

JAKE

Wow! Guys like that don't come along all that often. Especially in this day of corporate buy-outs! Your daughter should feel honored.

MIKE

Actually, the owner's a woman... I don't know if that makes much difference. Molly's talking about quitting anyway. She wants to stay home and be more of a mom. The last couple of years, she's been reducing her hours.

JAKE

How old are the kids?

MIKE

Four and six. A girl and a boy and she says that's enough.

JAKE

What does your wife say about that?

MIKE

She stays out of those decisions. We agreed after that last incident we'd do our best not to meddle and, so far, we've been able to do just that.

JAKE

I'm too inclined to butt into everyone's business.

MIKE

I know what you mean!

JAKE

So, what kind of work did you retire from?

MIKE

Teaching. I worked for the (City) School system. Taught senior English and Literature. All college prep stuff.

JAKE

Sounds rewarding.

MIKE

It was... until the last few years. I finally got tired of teaching the kids just to pass a test.

JAKE

Are we talking about standardized testing? How can an assured education hurt the teaching process?

(MIKE becomes somewhat emotional during these lines.)

MIKE

There's no education assured by testing. Especially the way this series of tests were designed. There's a huge difference between giving kids an education and teaching them to pass a test. Standardized testing simply means kids get less general education and more rote memory training... AND... the tests don't really measure their knowledge or their capabilities.

JAKE

Is that why you retired?

MIKE

Well, one of the reasons... I could have stuck around a few more years but decided to get out before I completely lost it.

JAKE

Good for you! So... Uh... How 'bout them Giants?

MIKE

(Sees the humor in JAKE's line and calms immediately - may laugh.)

Sorry. I'm inclined to get a little carried away. I really cared about those kids. Maybe you don't understand

JAKE

Oh, yes I do, and have always appreciated teachers who care.

MIKE