

**Or Any Other Reason Why**

Characters:

Girl, 17

Man, 40s

Setting:

Girl: a therapist's office, present day

Man: a police interrogation room, three years previous

ACT IScene 1

*There are two delineated areas of the stage, one containing a MAN and the other a GIRL. They can cross into each other's sections at various times during the play, but they remain unaware of each other. The MAN is in a police interrogation room at the time of the events spoken about in the play. The GIRL is in a psychiatrist's office some three years later. There are no stage trappings of either place, only chairs and perhaps a table. The focus should always be on the character speaking.*

GIRL

I think those first few weeks were the happiest time of my life until then. Maybe since then too. I know I'm not supposed to say that. Believe me it would be so much easier if I didn't feel that way. Do you get now why this whole thing is so Goddamn confusing?

All we did was meet at the diner. And talk. God, we talked until we were hoarse and then we talked some more. Lauren thought that was weird--like it would be okay if he just wanted to sleep with me, but actually being *interested* in what I had to say, *that* was perverse. I said to her, who else wants to hear what I have to say? My Mom who's at work all the time? My Dad, wherever he is? If he wants to hear what I think about The Scarlett Letter at least *somebody* does.

Sofia said she would have talked to me about The Scarlett Letter, which made me feel bad because she really was a good friend and I didn't mean it as a put-down. I told her it's different than talking to a friend, that talking to him made me feel more...sure of myself. Like I had the right to a real opinion, about books, about music, about the world. Talking to him made me feel like I was important to somebody. Anybody.

Maybe he got what he wanted from me, and those nights at the diner sharing fries with gravy and chocolate pudding were a means to an end. I get that. I can see that. But I got something too.

MAN

You know how my wife met the guy she left me for? Online dating service. Yeah. E Harmony dot com. Thirty cross-sections of compatibility, or whatever the commercial says. Whenever I see that guy on TV, I just want to...

She hadn't even met him when she left. They just talked online. For over a year. For thirteen months she put our kids to sleep, got into our bed with her laptop and chatted with loverboy while I watched baseball games. And I was so stupid, I thought... I was convinced she'd settled down. That her discontent wasn't there anymore. I thought she was finally digging the whole wife and mother thing. That we were in some beautiful, predictable, domestic bliss. Are you married? Then you know what I'm talking about. Just that sitting in the car holding hands while you're driving kind of happy.

But no. She was in the bed right next to me, *our* bed, falling in love with some other guy. I was just happy she wasn't complaining that I was watching Sportscenter. And I'm a bad guy. She lies and deceives and connives and breaks up a family and she gets to walk away with my children. And I'm here. Because I wanted something better than that for myself. Something pure and good.

It's some world.

GIRL

He told me he loved me. And then he asked if I loved him too. I said to him, how would I know. How could I possibly know.

MAN

Oh, she does. She absolutely does. She told me of her own free will, and I don't care if you believe me or don't. I would have never have said another word if she didn't feel the same way. Whatever she says now, or is being *forced* to say, I never would have acted without a sign from her. I'm not a monster. I'm not some... I wasn't searching for this, I wasn't... rooting around like some animal. She came to me. I didn't... She came to me.

## GIRL

Lauren noticed first. She said, look at that guy, he's totally leering at you. Of course I looked, I mean, who wouldn't look? He was at lane nine with his boy and girl. I was at the snack bar with Lauren and Sofia, which is a little behind and to the left if you're facing the pins. We were all three sharing a fry, 'cause Lauren was trying to hook up with the guy at the shoe rental and Sofia just didn't want to be home alone with her stepfather. I just wanted to be somewhere, somewhere that wasn't home trying to stay awake until my Mom got home from work.

He wasn't really leering. He was definitely sneaking peeks, in between trying to keep his little girl from dropping her bowling ball on her foot. She almost did, once. She lost her grip while she was bringing the ball back and the ball rolled, like, three lanes down with the guy chasing after it and apologizing. When he finally caught up with it he stood straight up with this tiny pink ball in his hand and he looked right at me by mistake. He was embarrassed, but he smiled in that whattya-gonna-do-with-kids-these-days way. And I looked back like how-the-hell-should-I-know? and he just kind of laughed and shook his head.

I don't remember feeling any way about him, positive or negative. He was just some Dad. Some normal, suburban, bowling with his two kids Dad. Whatever that is.

I knew he "liked" me. I mean I was young, but I wasn't ignorant. Even if you've never been looked at like that before--and believe me, I hadn't--you can feel it when a man's look is boring into you. It's not even a little bit subtle. It reaches the back of your skull. It's nearly like pain.

## MAN

Love is a curious thing. You don't know where it will come from. Or when. You don't know if what you've been settling for is really it, until you've glimpsed something more.

Once it hits you, it hits you from everywhere at once. Your head, your heart, your skin. It's like... it's like you're exploding from the inside. The sun shines brighter. Food tastes better. You think about crazy things, like diving naked into the ocean, or staying outside all night to watch a meteor shower. Everything

MAN (con't)

seems more possible.

Yeah, keep laughing. You have a badge so you know better than me? I know what I feel. Who are you to tell me otherwise?

GIRL

I know my Mom wants me to be here, but seriously this was all like three years ago. It's ancient history as far as I'm concerned. I'm not dating anyone because *I don't want to*. All the boys who are "interested" just want to be with the girl who had the affair. I had to change schools, and still it followed me. What's the healthy way to react to something like that, start sleeping around? I don't get it.

I know what this is really about. She thinks I'm going to turn eighteen and go running to him. Like I'm some brainless robot whose whole world revolves around this one guy. She's freaked out, so here I am being forced to talk to you for an hour every week. My Mom should be the one here, not me.

(Pause)

I'm fine. Really. I don't have any "lingering effects" from this "devastating" thing that happened. No it's not my word, devastating is what everybody else calls it, as if they know better than me about my own life.

I'm not devastated. I'm careful. What happened happened. I had an experience and I'm a different person and I've moved on. What choice did I have?

MAN

I honestly don't care whether or not you believe me. *I did not sleep with her*. I wanted to...I'm not going to deny that and I'm not going to apologize for it either.

We kissed. On occasion. When it felt right. I never let it go any further and no, before you ask, I don't think I deserve a medal.

She wanted to do more. You can go wherever you have her stowed away and ask her yourself. She was even worried that I wasn't attracted to her, if you can believe that. I know *I* couldn't.

I just explained that it had to be this way until...yes,

MAN (con't)

until she was legal, is that what you want to hear? It's not the truth, but why should we let that get in the way? What's the truth? The truth is...I wanted her to be ready. I wanted her to come to me freely, without a shred of doubt in her mind. She's something out of a dream. I would have waited for her forever.

GIRL

No, he never forced... God! I'm so sick of explaining this! He asked permission to hold my freakin' hand. You get it? When Lauren heard that she nearly laughed herself off her chair. She was like, are you kidding me? What is this the 1950s, going to the sock-hop? She said just grab him one night and stick your tongue as far down his throat as it will go. But that was Lauren, that wasn't me.

Lauren? Lauren just...*lives*, you know? She doesn't stop to think about anything. People say she must act that way because she has low self esteem or something, but she's got to be the most self-assured person I ever met. I wish I was more like her...but I'm just not. I have a hard enough time just figuring out what it is I want without grabbing it by the back of the neck and making it mine.

(Pause)

Sofia didn't like him from the start. In a weird way I think she was jealous. But like, not of me but of him. Not that she's gay or anything, although maybe she is, it doesn't matter. I think she wanted me to be around more, like I used to be. Pretty soon I was at his place every day from the time he got home from work until my Mom was due home.

I'd cook. Sometimes we'd get a movie on Netflix and have a picnic on the floor. It was...easy.

That's what bothered Sofia, I think, because it used to be her I'd be watching that movie with. So she'd start saying stuff like he's just using me, or he just wants to get into my pants. Hurtful stuff. She said that's what men do, they just lie to you and then they hurt you. Though how would she know?

I told her over and over that it wasn't like that, but she wouldn't let up. Finally I just said to her, he's not your stepfather you know. I shouldn't have said that. Saying

GIRL (con't)

that is one of the worst things I've ever done.

MAN

Yes, I did go back to the bowling alley to seek her out, but it's not like you're making it out to be. It wasn't...predatory. Look I've seen that molester show on TV and I read Lolita and I've seen all two thousand *Law & Orders*. I am not that guy. That's what I can't get you to understand. I didn't go back intending to...take advantage of her. I just had to know. If what I saw was real. (*Frustrated*) How can I explain what I don't even have the words to describe?

I just needed to look her in the eyes and see it again. That's all I was after, I swear. I don't expect you to understand it, you'll say it's "inappropriate" or "morally wrong". But just because you can't understand it *doesn't mean I don't feel it*. You don't want to get what I'm talking about, but you do. If you're a living, breathing human being, you do.

GIRL

How am I supposed to answer that?

I don't know...I was flattered, I guess. Empowered. All the other girls at school with their flirting and sexting and touching--they knew something I didn't, they could reach something that was always beyond me. You could see it in their eyes, that they knew their power already. Knew it and enjoyed it, through their whole bodies, to their toes.

I had no idea about what they knew. And I suppose part of me wanted to, desperately. Wanted to be inside that shining place where the girls smiled and winked at each other and the boys knew your name and you had...value.

This...man...somehow saw something in me that no one had ever seen. No one, not even myself. How could I not be...overwhelmed? Plain old me in my jeans and hoodie. He really wanted *me*. What an aphrodisiac. Even if I wasn't old enough to know what that word meant.

MAN

No, you're misunderstanding me. I have no illusions that I'm in any way...worthy of her. I mean, I'm good looking enough for my age, but she... She's radiant. Not just beautiful, not just attractive. She glows. Her skin. Her eyes.

Have you ever seen someone glow. You can't look away. You can pretend you don't see it, but you can't ignore it. She's the purest soul I'll ever know. What could I ever do but corrupt her? To utter a word to her was a corruption.

GIRL

He told me all the time how beautiful he thought I was. I told him to stop it, that I didn't want to hear it. But he wouldn't stop.

I'd look at myself in the mirror in the morning and wonder what is he seeing? My eyes are saggy and I have blackheads on my nose. I told him I wasn't anything special. He just said my feeling that way is what *made* me special. I didn't know how to argue with that. Truth be told, I didn't know if I even wanted to.

MAN

Don't drag my kids into this, okay? It's bad enough I'll probably never see them again no matter how this turns out. How did I do wrong by them, tell me how? By introducing them to a sweet, loving, responsible person? My ex-wife has them living with a guy she met on the internet for Chrissake! A complete stranger from nowhere! And *he's* raising my son and daughter. That girl wouldn't hurt a soul and I'm glad my kids got to know her.

*(Pause)*

That's sick. Really, you're a disgusting person. That's my daughter you're talking about. Man, you people...

GIRL

My biggest regret is getting to know Annie and Jake. Not that I don't love them with all my heart. The most meaningful moments I had were watching Spongebob and doing Annie's hair in pigtails while Jake laid his head on my lap. I know it wasn't like being a real Mom or anything,



GIRL (con't)

but it was just...nice. Comfortable. Like a real family. Not my family, but still.

We'd get pizza and play "Chutes & Ladders" and Annie would put her little, soft hands on my face... I never had a little brother or sister, it was always just me and my Mom. It was only every other weekend, but I felt like...they loved me. And I loved them.

Now I wish it had never happened. We'll never be able to see each other again.

(Pause)

Look, I know my Mom is worried about me, but she really shouldn't be. She raised me to make my own decisions since I was nine--what to wear for school, what to make myself for dinner, when to go to sleep. It's not her fault she had to work all the time. I'm sure it wasn't her childhood dream to be a single Mom with two jobs.

I just had to grow up faster, that's all. When there's no one there to tell you to do your homework, or... whatever, do the dishes, you realize you have to choose to do it yourself. Stop being a baby and take some responsibility.

None of this was her fault. She's a good person. She does what she does to keep a roof over our heads. It's been me and her against the world. She shouldn't blame herself just because I was lonely.

MAN

What could I possibly have in common with her, that's what your trying to say, right? All that *stuff*, that pop culture crap we're riddled with from birth, that ties people of the same age together by songs and TV shows and movies, it's all just trash. You don't even have a choice in the matter--you grow up in the 80s and you're stuck with *The Breakfast Club* and Adam Ant and *The Cosby Show* your whole life. Who cares if she never read Bonfire of the Vanities? Not me. There's enough going on *right now*.

(Short pause)

Although to be truthful, I can't stand that pop radio "music" she listens to. Especially the women. Pink and Ke\$ha and Lady Gaga...they don't leave enough to the imagination, you know.

MAN (con't)

Listen to me, I sound like an old man.

GIRL

All I wanted...all I really wanted...

MAN

Why can't I...deserve someone like her? Someone innocent. Not ruined. Someone who doesn't look through me through a glaze in her eyes. Like I'm some big disappointment.

(Pause)

Maybe I'm not the richest man, or the most successful man...but I know how to love somebody. I know how to listen.

Yeah that's funny, that's hysterical isn't it? Why are you so much better than me?

(Pause)

Well I haven't committed a crime either. I managed to find someone in this horrific, decrepit world who makes me want to hold my head up high and call myself a man. I'm not giving that back. I'm not giving that to you because you think I'm a bad person. What *she* thinks matters, not you! What do you have? What do you have besides a gun?

GIRL

I just wanted...someone. My own someone. I saw Lauren with her boys and they looked so...*knowing*...and *present*. I mean they were just hooking up, but there was something unspoken between them too. A connection.

I wanted that. I didn't necessarily want to sleep with anybody...but I did want somebody to look at me that way. I know what you're going to say, I'm seeking male approval because I never knew my father, but I think that's such a crock. Who *doesn't* want approval from the opposite sex?

I was practically invisible for the first fourteen years of my life, and then he... He didn't just want to sleep with me. He was...proud to be with me. I made him proud. Just by being myself.

MAN

She told you that? What did you do to that poor girl? No, you had to do something, 'cause she never would have said anything if you hadn't. Did you make her feel guilty? You did, didn't you? Goddamit, she's just a kid.

GIRL

Why do I need to talk about this? What good is it going to do to speak the words? What miracle is going to occur?

MAN

I think it's time for me to stop talking. You guys have my side of the story. I don't need to prove anything more to you.

GIRL

Saying it out loud isn't going to *change* anything. It won't. All it's going to do is put it right smack in front of me again. Why would I want to do that?

MAN

No. No, no, no, no, no, no, no. This can't be happening. I've got kids.

GIRL

Fine.

*(Pause)*

It was one time. It wasn't even important. It just happened one Friday night after we put his kids to bed. That was it.

*(Short pause)*

What more? There is no more. No, he didn't *hurt* me, he treated me like I was made of glass. It's not even the part of this whole thing I remember and it's all everyone wants to talk about. The detectives and my Mom and every *single* person in my school and now you.

*(Short pause)*

No I don't. I don't "understand everyone's concern". It

GIRL (con't)

was nothing. It was just sex. I didn't think the clouds were supposed to part and the angels start singing. I'm not that girl.

*(Short pause)*

I'm the kind of girl who doesn't cry "rape" after making a conscious choice to sleep with somebody. I started it, or at least I didn't stop it when I could have. And I *could* have.

I don't know how old "old enough" is. Actions have consequences. So maybe I wasn't...mature enough to realize that. And now a man is in jail because of me...

*(Pause as GIRL collects herself)*

Maybe you're right. Maybe I'm not "responsible". But I *feel* responsible. Nothing would have happened if I didn't *let* it happen. Sure you can say he should have known better, he was the "adult" or whatever. But he wasn't the responsible one. I was. Whether that should be true or shouldn't be true makes no difference. It *was*.

Do you get why I don't want to talk about this? It just goes round and round and round...

MAN

You know a friend of mine...a guy I work with... I come into the office one morning and the guy sees something about me, a look on my face or the way I'm walking, whatever it is. And the guy says, "You must be happy!" He knew me through the whole thing with my ex...losing my kids...so he...had seen me at my worst, you know? So I must have looked as if a weight had been lifted off me.

So I say to the guy, my friend...I say, "You know, I think I am." Stupid, huh? That I convinced myself that she could make me happy. That I really *was* happy.

*(Short pause)*

You're right, I'm just feeling sorry for myself. If I don't who will?

GIRL

Love? You're kidding, right? okay, what do you want me to

GIRL (con't)

say about love?

*(Short pause)*

Does it exist? (beat) Yeah, I'm sure it exists somewhere. How should I know where?

*(Short pause)*

No, I'm not in love with him. I'm 17 years old, what I know about anything wouldn't fill up the first chapter of a book.

And you know what, he wasn't really in love with me either. He was in love with whatever fantasy he had going on his head about who I was. His illusion.

So that's what I learned about love. You can build it around anybody if you're desperate enough. Even me. Even a pimply-faced, 14-year-old nothing.

*(Pause)*

No. That's not how I think of myself. I'm *something*. I have no idea what. Maybe I was trying to find out. I won't be making that mistake again anytime soon. I'm closed for renovations.

MAN

I love her. If I thought for one second I had hurt that girl... It's the last thing in the world I would ever, ever do.

GIRL

My Mom, she...she used to get off every Christmas Eve. It was like her personal holiday. We had these plastic cookie cutters, with, you know, a star and a reindeer and Santa's face in profile. Snowflake. And me and my Mom we'd make up batter for sugar cookies--not the pre-made one, the one from scratch--and we'd cut out the shapes from the cookie dough and decorate them with colored sprinkles and pieces of Maraschino cherries. Every year since I can remember. Until three years ago.

When I was little we'd keep a few cookies for Santa and put them out with a glass of milk. Even after I knew about Santa, she used to take the cookies and leave some crumbs on the plate so I'd see he'd been there in the morning.

GIRL (con't)

God, do I miss that. I think that's love.

*BLACKOUT*