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**A VERY, VERY, VERY FINE HOUSE**

**written by**

**Linda Chambers\***

*\* Linda Chambers, a Baltimore playwright and screenwriter, is an instructor in the Film, Video, and Theatre Department of Stevenson University. This one-act play, which was written as part of a production of one-acts set in an art museum, was first produced at Baltimore Theatre Project in Baltimore, Maryland, in 2000. "A Very, Very, Very Fine House" is included in this course with special permission from the playwright.*

CAST OF CHARACTERS

JIM: 40's

RUTH, JIM'S DAUGHTER: 17

HELEN, JIM'S WIFE, RUTH'S MOTHER: late 30's

SETTING: The Art Museum. JIM and Ruth enter. He leads her to one painting.

[Camille Pissarro, *The Banks of the Marne in Winter*, ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO]

JIM

There. What do you think?

RUTH

Well ...

JIM

Come on! First reaction! Don't even think about it!

RUTH

You *asked* me to think -

JIM

Play the game, Ruth.

RUTH

Okay, it's a farm *house*. It's just a farm *house*. Are you *happy*? Can I go look at something else?

JIM

Like what?

RUTH

Faberge eggs.

JIM

Wrong museum. What else?

RUTH

The Queen Mum's dollhouse.

JIM  
Wrong city. What else?

RUTH  
That naked guy.

JIM  
Which naked guy?

RUTH  
Big guy. Marble. Has a jockstrap in his hand.

JIM  
A *sling*. He has a *sling* in his hand. Why the hell do you know what a jockstrap looks like?

RUTH  
(a brief beat)  
Gym class.

JIM  
Alright. Wrong country, though.

RUTH  
Where is he?

JIM  
Florence. That's where they keep all the naked marble guys. He's in a garden sort of place. You walk up a winding path and turn a corner and bam! There he is.

RUTH  
Wow!

JIM  
That's just a copy, though. The real one's inside.

RUTH  
So there's two? Two big naked guys? Again, wow!

JIM  
Behave.

RUTH  
(Beat. Back to the painting.)  
Why do you like it so much?

JIM  
I'd like to be in it.

RUTH  
It's a farm house.

JIM  
I know.

RUTH  
You're a *lawyer*. What do *you* know about farms?

JIM  
Nothing. I just want to be in it.

RUTH  
It's an *old* farm house. There's no electrical wires. No TV.  
No phone. No cable.

JIM  
Heaven.

RUTH  
You'd last about a day.

JIM  
You have no confidence.

RUTH  
I'm confident you'd last about a day.  
(Beat)  
Dad? Can we talk?

JIM  
(with exaggerated fear)  
Oh, God!

RUTH  
What?

JIM  
Give it to me slowly. Wait - let me sit down.

[He looks around for a bench,  
sees one, sinks down dramatically on it.  
RUTH follows him.]

RUTH  
(hissing)

What are you doing?

JIM

Maybe I should have a drink first.

[He rises, staggers towards the exit. RUTH follows him.]

Is there a bar in here?

RUTH

(embarrassed; tugs his arm)

Would you stop?

JIM

What does that *mean* - "can we talk"? Don't you know any better? How *old* are you? How old am *I*? I could have a heart attack. My blood pressure's rising. Here -

[He holds out his arm to her.]

Feel my pulse.

[She slaps his arm away.]

RUTH

Would you please stop?

JIM

I'm feeling faint. Here.

[He pulls his cell phone out of his pocket.]

Dial 911.

[RUTH takes his cell phone, dials a number.]

RUTH

(into the phone)

Hello? Ms. Hunter? Yes, my dad would love to go out with you -

[Laughter/joking abruptly gone, JIM rises, snatches the phone away from RUTH, snaps it shut, moves away from her. RUTH hesitates, takes a few steps after him.]

RUTH

(gently)

She's pretty and she's very nice. Dark hair, blue eyes ... She teaches art. That's a good sign, isn't it? No kids. Even better, right? She's fun to talk to. I really suck at art, but she's always encouraging.

[JIM does not look at her.]

She doesn't encourage me to take it up as a profession, which is a good thing, right?

[RUTH laughs at her own joke; JIM does not respond.]

But she encourages me to ... Develop my creative side. She does these collage things. Metal and paint and paper - I don't get it, but I bet you'd like it. She's traveled a lot, too. Teachers, you know, they have that long summer vacation ...

[JIM does not respond.]

I'm going away in the fall, Dad. You'll be on your own. I don't want to worry about you.

[JIM does not respond. RUTH whirls away from him, angrily, back to the painting of the farm house.]

RUTH

She's not *in* there, Dad! She's not in the *farm house!* She's not in the *castle!* She's not in the *mansion!* She's not in the *palace!* She's not in *any* painting in *any* museum in *any* city in *any* country in the world! *She's gone!*

[JIM turns to her.]

JIM

If you look at a painting long enough, and if it's good enough, it becomes, for a brief period of time, a world you can inhabit. And since you the viewer create part of that world with your imagination - with what's over the hill or behind the gate or in the trees or through that door - then you can fill that world with whomever you want for that brief period of time.

RUTH

When I was a kid, *I* was the one who got to choose who was inside, not you.

JIM

Okay, so *you* choose. Tell me who's in the farm house.

[RUTH stares at the painting.]

RUTH

Somebody really nice. Somebody really smart. Somebody who'll keep you company in your old age.

JIM

It's not that easy. It's all a matter of luck, Ruth. I was really lucky once, I don't think I'm going to be that lucky again.

RUTH

Well, why not? You're reasonably presentable. You're in relatively good shape. You make a good appearance.

JIM

(amused)

Thanks.

RUTH

I'm only occasionally embarrassed at your jokes.

JIM

I'll work on that.

RUTH

I just think you ought to consider ... It's been five years. And I don't want to worry about you.

JIM

You said that already.

RUTH

And - well, to be perfectly honest, me looking at the farm house ... I'm starting to see - oh ...

JIM

What?

RUTH

You know, not somebody for you.

JIM

What?

RUTH

I'm starting to see ...

JIM

I don't know if I want to hear this.

RUTH

Okay, look through that window. All you see are shadows, right? But look at that one there, see that? That's his shoulders. You can't see his head because he's bent over. He's sitting down, but he's bent over.

JIM

Okay. What's he bent over?



RUTH  
His laptop.

JIM  
No electrical wires, remember?

RUTH  
He's got MyFi.

JIM  
Okay, so what's he doing?

RUTH  
He's inventing something. No, he's invented something already – so he's loaded – and now he's inventing something else.

JIM  
What's he inventing?

RUTH  
A new app.

JIM  
You're looking into the window of a farm house, with the sunset so gorgeous behind it, and the cornfields in the foreground –

RUTH  
I think that's wheat.

JIM  
And checkered curtains in the windows and you see a *computer geek*?

RUTH  
Not a geek, Dad. Entrepreneur.

JIM  
What have I raised? Where is the romance in your soul? A *geek!*

RUTH  
Well, when *Mom* looked through the windows, *she* always saw a *lawyer*.

[There is a brief pause.]  
I'm going to go look for some impressive marble naked guys.

[RUTH exits. JIM turns to watch her go. As she does, HELEN emerges from behind the painting. She is dressed

in "farm clothes". She watches RUTH exit, watches JIM. JIM turns back to the painting.]

JIM

Is that true?

[HELEN shrugs, smiles, nods.]

JIM

She wants things all tidy and neat so she can go off to school with a clear conscience. I really don't want to look for anybody else. I really don't, Helen. I'm not ready.

[HELEN tilts her head to one side, observing him.]

How long would it take you? If our positions were reversed?

[HELEN tosses her head, snaps her fingers - "that fast!"]

That's not very nice.

[HELEN covers her heart, bows her head, then extends her arms in supplication - a position of profound mourning.]

I doubt it.

[HELEN remains in supplication, but raises her head, lifts her eyes to him. He watches her. A whisper:]

People say that they forget, that they'll walk into a room expecting to see that person sitting there, but I never do, I never forget, I *know* the room is empty. I *know* the bed is empty. I don't go out with anybody because I don't want to go out with anybody. I'm not ready.

[HELEN straightens up, watches him.]

I'm not ready to *think* about it, so I'm *not ready to do it*. She wants things all tidy and neat so she can go off to school and not worry about me. Like I'm completely helpless.

[HELEN sits beside him.]

She'd do exactly the same thing if it were you, wouldn't she?

[HELEN nods.]

She is ... the best of us both.

[HELEN smiles. She turns away and goes back into the painting, disappearing. RUTH enters. She stops, stares at her father. She hesitates, then strides forward.]

RUTH

Whoa, Dad! *Lots* of big naked marble guys! Lots of big naked marble *girls*, too!

[JIM turns to look at her. She takes hold of his arm.]

I'm completely out of control. A guard made me climb down from one of them. I think I've been given first warning. What do they do, give you three and then ban you for life?

[A pause. JIM smiles.]

JIM

No warnings. One strike and you're out.

[A pause.]

I'll think about it.

[A pause. She smiles, relieved. She tugs at his arm.]

RUTH

I'm starving. I must be fed. You have all the money.

[She tugs him towards the exit. As RUTH and JIM exit, HELEN emerges once more. RUTH sees her. They smile at each other, tiny waves. RUTH and JIM exit; HELEN disappears into the painting.]

END SCENE.





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