

THE ESCAPE ARTIST'S CHILDREN

by
Steve Harper

Chris Till
Creative Artists Agency
ctill@caa.com
212-277-9000

(c) 2007

THE MEETING

Lights up on Grayson sitting in a chair. Others are seated around her. They are mostly in shadow.

GRAYSON

Hi. I'm Grayson and - I'm - depressed.

ALL

Hi Grayson.

GRAYSON

Thank you for calling on me. (sigh) I'm feeling really miserable today. It's my first time. Here. I've been miserable before. But I'm not a group - person. I mean I was really good at resisting peer pressure and I never hung out with anyone - not that I spent all my time alone. I didn't really think this would be a good idea - coming to something like this. Seems all right though. I've always thought my misery should be private. You know? But I really needed to do - something. So - this seems - something, for now. (beat) I'm here because my therapist suggested it. She's new - to me - just a few weeks. And I'm not seeing her right now, because she's - away. She's in the hospital. The receptionist said her appendix burst - but I keep thinking it's something else. Like she got hit by a bus - like she walked out in front of a bus. Because of me. Because I depressed her. Not that there's any reason to think that - but - you know - it's a thought. She told me she knows what it's like to be depressed. So maybe I like to think that she knows what it's like to be that depressed. Maybe that's why I like her. (beat) So - I dropped my new cell phone. But it's fine. (beat) What else? I'm trying to get pregnant. Getting pregnant - that's a whole story. (beat) And I'm looking for work. That's depressing. (beat) No - it's adventurous! No - it's depressing! (beat) I think I'm in the right place. You guys seem really sad. I relate! I know, I'm supposed to talk about myself, not mention 'you sad people' like I just did. Sorry. I'm usually really good with rules. My father was depressed a lot. Maybe I get it from him. He just died. (Beat) That's depressing. (Beat) My mother thinks he's faking even though we buried him. (A buzzer sounds.) Does that mean I stop? Do I pick the next person?

Lights.

AFTER THE MEETING

The street. Grayson stands looking through her purse somewhat frantically. Jason, tall, white with glasses and grey hair comes up to her.

He has a backpack and an endearing awkwardness about him.

JASON

Hi. (beat) 'scuse me. I was just - in there -

GRAYSON

Oh! Hi.

JASON

Didn't get to share, but I related. I'm Jason.

GRAYSON

Grayson.

JASON

I remember. I always try to speak to people whose name rhymes with mine.

GRAYSON

Can't find my cell phone -

JASON

The one you dropped. The new one. "But it's ok."

GRAYSON

Yeah -

JASON

I'm a good listener. I remember people too, even if I've only seen them once - I remember people I've seen on the subway. That can be weird - but.

Grayson nods, keeps looking.

GRAYSON

Have you seen me on the subway?

JASON

No. But -

GRAYSON

Ah. Here it is!

She pulls out the cell phone, holds it up.

GRAYSON

It was the cutest one they had - Glad I didn't lose it. I worry about that. You know? Like the way I used to worry about my car keys - when I had a car. Sometimes I have to affirm that I have everything. That nothing's missing, you know? (She puts it back.)

JASON

Yeah!

GRAYSON

You were saying?

JASON

I wasn't really. Just - introductory "hello, I saw you in there" stuff. (Beat.) Do you want to get a cup of coffee?

GRAYSON

Uh -

JASON

I just - some people go for coffee after the meeting and - I - don't really like those people. But I like coffee. I'm probably addicted. In fact I am. I know I am. I get such a rush! And - I'd like to go - get some coffee - with you. If you would -

GRAYSON

I don't drink coffee.

JASON

OK. I can roll with that. Tea?

GRAYSON

And I'm a lesbian.

JASON

Oh - OK. OK. (beat) I had a testicle removed - Cancer, but I'm fine now.

GRAYSON

Oh.

JASON

I just - thought I should share something personal. (beat) Do you drink tea?

GRAYSON

No caffeine. Gives me headaches. Juice.

JASON

Juice. Yeah, we can - find some juice for you and coffee for me. Would you mind that?

GRAYSON

Um. No - I wouldn't mind.

JASON

Great. There's a place over there. (beat) How does that look to you?

GRAYSON

Fine. It looks ok.

JASON

Great.

Jason starts off. Lights up on Spencer, sitting up in his bed in another space. Grayson notices.

SPENCER

The Upstanding Negress also has the ability to summon tremendous feelings of guilt and the awareness of impending disaster. You like sensing disaster - it helps you feel safe. But the line between sensing disaster and causing it can get blurry.

GRAYSON

I'm busy.

SPENCER

You can confuse yourself when there's no reason to be confused. Doubt yourself when there's no reason to doubt. This meeting, this guy - that's not what you need.

GRAYSON

Shut up!

SPENCER

Make me.

Grayson starts to respond, stops and heads off in Jason's direction.

Lights.

JUICE/NOW

Upstairs seating at a deli with a salad bar. Muzak is playing. Grayson and Jason are at a small table with drinks.

JASON

It's a great help to me: the meetings. I'm in three other programs but this one really gets to my core issues. I'm powerless over my depression - and admitting that - my whole life changed. I'm much happier - things roll right off me. I can talk to my parents now without screaming or hyperventilating. (An awkward phrase as if out of a book:) I used to be a danger to myself and others. (beat) I almost killed my wife. (beat)

GRAYSON

By accident?

JASON

No. Completely planned. I fantasized about it - knew all the ins and outs: I have the kind of OCD where I get these fantasies in my brain and I can't get them out. Really the whole thing was misplaced aggression. I never would have hurt her or done anything - I'm not capable of that. I just needed to tell her that she was a bitch - when she was. Anyway, someone heard me share about it and pointed me toward an OCD specialist. It really helped.

GRAYSON

Your wife must be relieved.

JASON

She was. (beat) She still left me though. (beat) But I'm talking too much.

GRAYSON

That's part of what I liked about the meeting. Honesty.

Beat.

JASON

My mother was a lesbian. Not always, but eventually -

GRAYSON

My mother was a math professor. She left us. She left my father I should say, but I think it's all the same equation ultimately: Abandonment. Before my father died - for example - not that I want to talk about him - but before he died - we hadn't really been in touch. We - stopped being in touch. More abandonment. How do I move ahead when people keep leaving me? (beat) Now I'm talking too much.

JASON

No. (beat) No you're not.

GRAYSON

Angie, my partner, says I should try to undo that. With my family. Be closer. Have us all be - more connected. But I don't think I could get it back: the way it used to feel on Christmas morning - when I was - say - 8. When we were all connected. And it was all about unpeeling wrapping paper from some mystery package. We'd take turns, my brother and I, and I'd tear into the paper, holding my breath - and it felt like the whole family was - invested to the same degree in the same - essential revelation. Surprised together. Delighted together. Discovering. I guess that couldn't really have been the way it was - since Mom and Dad knew what we were getting anyway. I don't really believe in that anymore - that we're - united somehow. I'm out here alone - that's how it feels. I don't think it's possible - that kind of - magical feeling, that kind of shared quest.

JASON

When I first got the cancer, I thought my ex-wife would be so supportive. That she might want to - take care of me, even that we'd get back together. Not that I would have - summoned it up for that reason - or anything. But I thought that might be a bonus of my condition. (Beat). But she never even - seemed all that worried about me. Found out later she started seeing some guy - Roger - just around that time. So she was busy. Busy. For a while I started to wonder if we were ever really that close. But I think we were. I think we had some - pretty excellent times. I think we had some - I think she loved me. (beat) I support you in keeping those memories of - that - magic when you were 8. Just because you're not 8 now - doesn't mean that connection wasn't - isn't somehow true.

GRAYSON

I read this article recently - by a black woman - about the magic that happens after kissing a white woman: like literal magic. Things transforming. Lives changing.

Beat.

JASON

I'm not sure what you want me to say. (beat) I don't think I've ever experienced anything like that. And, you know, I've kissed people - white women. My ex-wife. But I can't speak to the magic part. Not in that way - unless you count Beth leaving me as a mystical act. (beat) I should be working now. I should be out on appointments - or calling people. Something. Not that this isn't fun, but.

GRAYSON

You have guilt.

JASON

And shame. Often.

GRAYSON

Me too. (beat) Thanks for what you said. I need to keep being honest - hearing honesty.

JASON

What do you do?

GRAYSON

Lawyer. Unemployed. You?

JASON

Real Estate. Unenthused. (beat) I used to be in advertising. Hated it. I have difficulty being enthusiastic about things - so I never wanted to be that positive about hand cleaner or potato chips. Seemed dishonest somehow. Well - got laid off - so - real estate - for now. (beat) But sometimes I feel like I'll never sell anything. Or rent anything.

Not that I want to do rentals, but - Sometimes I feel like if I look at another listing my head will explode. (beat) You looking for a place to live?

GRAYSON

No.

JASON

Can I give you a card anyway? That way if you know someone who could use an ambivalent broker...

Beat. He hands her a card.

GRAYSON

Thanks. It's a good card.

JASON

Is it? I mean, thanks. I went to a place. They had a special. Actually, I got a deal - someone from the meeting works there. (beat) I find it kind of comforting - you know - a network of depressed people - out there in the world - to lend a hand. Kind of like being in a really moody fraternity. (beat) That's a good meeting. One of the better ones: Small enough that you can usually share if you want to but big enough to seem - well - like a - a - sort of big but not too big meeting. (beat) You think you'll come back?

Beat.

GRAYSON

I might.

Jason lifts his coffee cup.

JASON

Cheers.

They smile at each other awkwardly. Grayson lifts her juice bottle. They 'clink' beverages. Lights.