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AISLE 17B
by John Walch

Cast of Characters

MICHAEL

and

CONRAD, recent college graduates and current roommates,
well fed.

MAN, a recent refugee from a collage of distant lands, gaunt
and malnourished. Roughly the same age as Michael and Con-
rad.

Acknowledgments

Aisle 17B was first presented in a showcase production by Austin Script Works—a playwrights’ service organization—as a part of their annual festival of short plays. The production was directed by Robi Polgar and featured: Damian Gillen, Flordelino Lagundino, and Derek Mudd. For information on Austin Script Works visit: www.scriptworks.org.

“Food comes first, then morals.”

— Bertolt Brecht

AISLE 17B

by John Walch

(A narrow strip of light rises on MICHAEL looking out into the audience. He is in Aisle 17B of a large grocery store. A pole stands near the end of the aisle. MICHAEL holds several tins of cat food in his hand and ponders a selection. CONRAD stands beside him with a half full grocery basket.)

MICHAEL. Giblets... What are giblets?

CONRAD. They're like organic Chicklets, what's it matter?

MICHAEL. And where, exactly, is the giblet? On the body, I mean.

CONRAD. Michael, just pick.

MICHAEL. *(Indicating the cans:)* And what's the difference between the *Turkey & Giblets Dinner* and *Fisherman's Catch Banquet*? Taste-wise?

CONRAD. One's a dinner, one's a banquet? Listen, the cat's not going to care, it can't taste the difference.

MICHAEL. She, it's a she. And I'm sure she can. "*Finicky.*" That's what the note says. "*She's very finicky: feed her a half a can per day mixed with warm water.*"

CONRAD. I don't even know why you're taking care of that old lady's cat.

MICHAEL. She's our neighbor.

CONRAD. So we have to be nice? She's not nice to us. Calls the cops every time we have a party, and I see her going in the management office all the time. I know she's the one who got us written up for the "grilling incident."

MICHAEL. We shouldn't have been barbequing on the balcony, it's in our lease.

CONRAD. Which we almost lost thanks to that old bat. She's trying to get us evicted and here you are taking care of her cat.

MICHAEL. We live in a complex, Conrad, what we do affects everybody.

CONRAD. It was a hibachi, not a bonfire. It's like grilling with five Bic lighters turned up on high flame, we weren't going to burn the place down.

MICHAEL. We have to consider the consequences of our actions.

CONRAD. We're out of college now, every decision doesn't have to involve Wittgenstein or be framed by some big ethical choice. I want to start living and doing what makes sense for me.

MICHAEL. And you don't think it makes sense for me to take care of the cat even though I made a commitment?

CONRAD. I think we're having a party tonight and we gotta get home. Now, pick.

MICHAEL. But which brand? Whiskas grinds their *Chicken GIBLETS Dinner* in gravy and Fancy Feast says their *Chicken and Rice* is slow cooked in broth.

CONRAD. It's an animal, it'll eat whatever the fuck you drop in its bowl.

MICHAEL. So just drop some rat poison in there?

CONRAD. Fine by me.

MICHAEL. I want to get something the cat will like.

(CONRAD grabs a Fancy Feast can from MICHAEL and pops it open.)

MICHAEL. What are you... Ugh... Smell that. What is it floating in?

CONRAD. It's the broth or the gravy, taste it and find out.

MICHAEL. I'm not tasting it.

CONRAD. Chicken? Give you five bucks.

MICHAEL. NO, it's disgusting.

CONRAD. Ten.

MICHAEL. Conrad, I'm not eating the food.

CONRAD. Then how are you ever gonna make a decision, now taste it.

(CONRAD shoves can in MICHAEL's nose. MICHAEL reacts from the smell, knocks the can free, and it falls to the ground – spilling the mysterious liquid. As soon as it hits the floor, a voice on the intercom:)

INTERCOM. Spill on Aisle 17B.

CONRAD. Great, quick, pick something and let's get out of here.

MICHAEL. Now we have to wait for somebody to come clean it up.

CONRAD. Oh, for God's sake, Michael, why do you always have to be so fucking responsible? I'll meet you in meat.

(CONRAD exits. MICHAEL bends down and starts cleaning the mess as well as he can. He notices that some of the liquid has spilled on his shirt, roughly over his heart. He smells it.)

MICHAEL. *Shit.*

(The moment he says this, the pole comes to life and turns into the MAN. The MAN is malnourished and speaks with an unidentifiable accent.)

MAN. Heart, gizzard, liver.

MICHAEL. Pardon?

MAN. Giblets, the stuff inside. Good. I take care of.

(The MAN pulls a yellow pouch from his coat. The pouch is emblazoned with an American flag and other writing. He pulls a spoon from the pouch and starts cleaning the mess, transferring the food from the floor back into the cat food can. He does this with efficiency and singular focus.)

MICHAEL. That was quick. Usually, you spill something and it takes an hour for some high school kid to show up...

(Beat.)

You're not from the store, are you? ...Hello? Sir? You don't have to do that.

MAN. You dropped, I pick up.

MICHAEL. No, they'll send someone by with a mop.

MAN. No mop! I mop... you hold.

(MAN gives MICHAEL yellow pouch to hold and continues cleaning. MICHAEL reads printing on yellow pouch.)

MICHAEL. "This food is a gift from the people of the United States." ...Oh my god, you're from that place...

MAN. That place.

MICHAEL. With all the fighting.

MAN. Yes, that place with all the fighting and where food falls from sky.

MICHAEL. *(Indicating magazine in basket:)* How'd you get here?

MAN. You dropped, here I am.

(MAN continues to scoop cat food back into can.)

MICHAEL. I read an article in the magazine section that says the food drops aren't helping and that they're dangerous.

MAN. Empty stomach is danger.

MICHAEL. So it helps?

MAN. Me it helped, my Princess it did not...

MICHAEL. Your Princess? The cat?

MAN. *(Carefully spooning up the last of the liquid from the floor:)* ...Broth. Good, yes?

MICHAEL. No, that's not broth. Not real broth.

MAN. Looks real.

(MAN wipes droplet of liquid from MICHAEL's shirt and tastes it.)

MAN. Mmmm...good. Broth.

MICHAEL. Oh, don't eat that, it's for the cat.

MAN. Cat?

MICHAEL. Cat. You know, *meow*.

MAN. Meow, cat. Yes, I understand. Food for cat, I do not understand. You say...

(Indicating the aisle of food.)

...all this, food for cat?

MICHAEL. Well, not one cat, but, yes, this whole aisle is food for our cats.

MAN. *(Indicating row on the other side of the light:)* And this? Cat food?

MICHAEL. Dogs. That's food for our dogs. You're in the pet food aisle.

MAN. I see. And what if you do not feed cat and dog?

MICHAEL. They'll die.

MAN. Same is true of me.

(MAN takes pouch back from MICHAEL. He reaches into it and pulls out a small package, opens it, and sprinkles it on cat food.)

MAN. Pepper, make cat food taste better.

MICHAEL. We put pepper in the packets?

MAN. Pepper, salt, 2300 calorie food ration, match, napkin.

(MAN pulls out napkin and prepares to eat cat food. MICHAEL takes can from him.)

MICHAEL. No, you can't eat this.

MAN. But you dropped.

MICHAEL. I'll get you some people food. Just another aisle over.

MAN. I can only eat what you drop. Please.

(CONRAD reenters. His basket is full of meat. MAN becomes pole again.)

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THE PLAY CONTINUES ON THE NEXT PAGE.**

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