

An Oblation
by
TAYLOR MAC

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Characters

Holly: A society woman whose age is somewhere between forty and seventy. An actor of any gender or age can play her.

Jackie: A society woman whose age is also somewhere between forty and seventy. It's hard to tell with society ladies. An actor of any gender or age can also play her.

Setting

An upper east side three star restaurant. Lunch. A table the size of The Last Supper, but only set for two, with as much food as you can squeeze onto it.

Two upper-class society women sit at a restaurant. HOLLY picks at her food throughout the scene. Jackie eats politely at first but eventually (as the scene goes on) with her mouth open, slurping and sucking fingers with disturbing voraciousness. Plates of food are lowered down from the heavens periodically throughout the entire play. It should look like a last supper banquet for two. The food should be goopy, messy, and finger smacking. Ribs, lobster, dips, and sauces. The more ridiculous and disgusting, the better. During the play perhaps Jackie shares food with the audience members. Perhaps she brings two audience members down to the table to eat with her. Holly continues to talk through any action Jackie performs.

HOLLY
(To the audience)

Did you hear about Carl Connor?

JACKIE
(To Holly)

No.

HOLLY
(To Jackie)

He died.

JACKIE

No.

HOLLY

A heart attack.

JACKIE

At his age.

HOLLY

He was forty.

JACKIE

Isn't that young?

HOLLY

Old enough.

JACKIE

But young too.

HOLLY

Old enough to not exaggerate the surprise.

JACKIE

I don't think that's true.

HOLLY

(To the audience)

At forty you've been honored in life. You've been given enough time to find yourself and if you haven't done so, if you've squander your time, you've been selfish enough to not earn the surprise of others when you die.

From here on out the actors may choose when to speak directly to audience members and when to each other.

JACKIE

Was that what he did?

HOLLY

No. He had found himself. He knew who he was. But he wasn't always happy with that person.

JACKIE

No?

HOLLY

He was in the kitchen. Making peppermint tea for his aches. He'd been having aches. He was wrapping the tea cozy around the pot. He was thinking about a tweet he sent out. He was regretting sending it. It seemed bombastic. Did he always have to be at the center of the debate. Couldn't he listen.

JACKIE

(Correcting her)

Read.

HOLLY

It was that ignorant twitter thread about religion. Religion always got him in a fluster of know-it-all reaction. Religious people infuriated him. Couldn't they see their religious institutions were governing bodies instead of the tools of society they were pretending to be.

(MORE)

HOLLY (cont'd)

To him, religions were the largest governments around. And everyone agreed governments were the problem. They must be reduced. Kept in control. Why didn't people understand this. He found he wanted everyone to agree with his ideas but when they did he felt no satisfaction from it. An emptiness pursued him after his long debates. The kind that made him want to do his grocery shopping at the Duane Reade. And then a disappointment set in. A disappointment for engaging in the first place. He was too self-involved. He knew. He must ask people about themselves more, listen to their response and then ask a follow up question. He must sincerely care about others. He would make tea. It would settle his stomach. He'd get over it. Until the next time. Then it would repeat. He would repeat it. There was no stopping. He decided to send a tweet apologizing for monopolizing the debate. He dismissed this decision, almost immediately. Why should he apologize for ideas? Why should he be nice and liked? He resigned himself to caring about ideas more than the feelings of others. He stewed and held the tea pot against his heart. The tea cozy and his favorite winter sweater, slowly disintegrating into little lint balls, protected him from the pot's burn but letting the comfort of heat seep through. He waited for the right time. He was supposed to brew it for five minutes. The Argentinian woman at the tea shop had instructed him. He had an inherent trust of women from foreign countries. The men, with their constant five o'clock shadows, machismo and swagger, he held suspect. But the women. They knew best. Their manipulations and agendas were often see through but agenda and manipulation weren't as important to him as the trust he felt from their innate cultural sophistication. He would always be willing to sacrifice his truth for a foreign woman's hunch. American women were different. They were a grainy mush to him. A stew with too much flour. An American woman he would always second guess. He felt guilt about this but no true urge to right the wrong. He decided his trust of foreign women would outweigh the inherent sexism he had towards their American counterparts. The foreign women would agree with him. They would laugh with him about his American sisters. Foreign women understood everything. And the Argentinian tea lady said wait five minutes and so he would. He'd wait. Waiting brought out the pattern in the thoughts of him. Ever since he was a child, when waiting, he'd whisper the words, "I want to go home". Always when waiting.

(MORE)

HOLLY (cont'd)

During commercials, in line at the supermarket, for a response, a reply. While waiting, inevitable his breath would push through his body and his lips would form the words, "I want to go home". At times... he would get caught. The listener would laugh or give him a look of concern or roll their eyes or empathize or think of him as a baby or all of the above. He would smile and bob his head back and forth, as if to say, "You caught my inner thinking." He knew why he did this. He was a smart man if not a relaxed intellectual. He understood it came from a traumatic experience. His single mother always being the last to pick her child up from day-care. He knew it could be fixed. Therapy. Discipline. Concentration. Forgiveness. He'd ask the Argentinian woman what tea one should drink for "involuntary longing" but he did not want to be a boy in her eyes. A person to be coddled. Besides, he enjoyed longing. Just a little bit of it. Not too much. A cookie of longing. A treat. Ever so often. It hadn't been bad for him. His goals were still met. His life productive. His love happy. Must he always be healthy? And as tics go, he could certainly have worse. And it only happened when waiting. Always when waiting. And so, standing in his home, waiting for his tea to brew, holding the heat of it to his heart, he spoke the words, "I want to go home". That's when his heart gave out. His final words. He fell.

They eat in silence for a while.

HOLLY (cont'd)

Did you hear Emerald Van Steiner died.

JACKIE

No.

HOLLY

Gangrene.

JACKIE

No!

HOLLY

He was walking in the woods. An escape from the sickness in his home. His lover, twenty-six years his senior closing in on death, convalescing, sucking his life from Emerald, ringing his bells, calling out to him in night, soiling the sheets, melting into sag. A lump of sag. Like molded bread his lover's skin. And the smell.

(MORE)

HOLLY (cont'd)

Spores infiltrating, decimating him. He knew he was next. The infectious disease called old age was out to get him. His lover would pass it on to him and it would corrode his inside. Slowly though. Emerald spent the last fifteen years watching his lover decay. It had become his job. Once he made things. He was a bright shinning maker. Now he shuffled sheets, medicine, schedules, and a performing comfort. He knew how long it would take. When his time came, he thought, he would speed death along. He too was a smart man. He knew death is no great marker of intellectualism.

JACKIE

Everyone is smart enough to die except Walt Disney.

A pause.

HOLLY

But unlike others, he was smart enough to know death would be the piece of cake but dying was the problem. He resolved to tackle the problem later. Now it was his time. To stroll. He'd asked for verbs for Christmas. He had enough of nouns. He'd been attracted to his lover partially because his lover was the kind of man who thrived on caring for nouns. So Emerald wouldn't have to. He could be a doer and his lover would be the caretaker of things. But now, his lover couldn't get down the stairs. And Emerald learned what it was like to manage objects for a living. He felt infested by nouns. Occupied and diminished by their constant need. He told everyone he knew to send verbs for Christmas. Absolutely no nouns. And economic crisis in hand, they were pleased. A card arrived from his sister. On it was the word, "Stroll". So he did. He left the house, the smell, the schedules and nouns to collect dust. And he strolled. It was a beautiful winter day. Not beauty from clear skies or crisp white snow, though that too. Beauty from freedom. He was out in the world. Away. Doing something completely unconnected with the care of things. His nose hairs crackled as he breathed. The cold was right. Invigorating. He decided to follow a frozen stream to its source. He could hear water rushing underneath the hard ice. Here and there, icicles clung. Holes of water gurgled. He tried standing with one foot on a sheet of ice to see if it was sturdy enough. It was. Would it hold his full weight? It did. He would continue on top of the stream. Taking care not to slip.

(MORE)

HOLLY (cont'd)

Always aware that at any moment he could fall through to the numbing water below. It would be fun to add a little danger into his life. Not too much. Enough to feel something other than duty for a little while. He was in no danger of falling through the ice and freezing to death. The stream was in fact, a stream. Only about four inches deep. At worst his feet would get cold, he'd be uncomfortable and have to go back to the house. That was the true danger. Having to go back to the weight of nouns. No. Not before he was ready. The ice cracked but did not break through. His heart beating faster brought a smile to his face. Laughter bubbled. Not the stale kind of laughter he'd gotten used to expressing: Laughter gotten from sitting and watching a DVD or from listening to a story someone told him. No. This was laughter from participating with the world, from the possibility of being humiliated by nature, from being the lead in the pratfall rather than the observer of it. He strolled on. Up the stream, grabbing at frozen branches to help him through slopes and slippery surfaces, risking hands-free glides, pretending to be a ballerina the wood nymphs would applaud. He slipped. He caught his balance. He laughed. Tears tempted to freeze on his cheeks. He continued his perilous journey. He'd just about made it to the source of the stream when, in a sunny patch of light his foot pressed through the ice into the free water below. He yanked his foot out as quickly as possible and, on the way, the side of his calf was cut, through his pant leg and long underwear, by a shard of ice. His foot wasn't even soaked. A little damp. The waterproof boot had done its job. "Well", he thought with the diminished spirit of one who dreams of surviving a humiliation but then fails, "It's time to go back". The cut wasn't deep, it didn't bleed much and, in the cold, he could hardly feel the sting of it. Though the weight of it turned his return stroll into a drudge: the joy of his adventure slipping and falling behind him on the uphill climb to home. Once he got back to the house, he took his boots off, looked at the cut, cleaned it, maybe not as good as he should have, and went about tending to the other nouns. That night his lover died. Though it wasn't a surprise, it certainly wasn't expected. He gave no sign of the approaching end. He simply left. After fifteen years of caring for him in an enfeebled state, he left this plain without so much as a goodbye. Emerald tried not to resent this. He understood it wasn't personal. But all the same it made him weep.

(MORE)

HOLLY (cont'd)

When the weeping subsided he made the phone calls, ordered the services and organized his lover like a UPS package. He wondered, would they return the body if he didn't properly tape the edges. It was the kind of humor that makes the sophisticated sorrowful laugh. An escape valve for the sadness. But its crassness failed Emerald. They accepted the package. His leg had begun to truly bother him on the day of the funeral. He resigned to have it looked at the next day or the day after that but when the guests had all left and the refrigerator packed with half eaten packages of hummus, he found some left-over painkillers, popped a couple and laid down on the couch. By the time the bottle of painkillers had been used up, he was too delirious with fever to make the emergency phone call. They found him on the couch with the menu of a DVD rom-com playing on relentless repeat.

(A slight pause)

Did *you* hear about Dolores Shadbolt?

JACKIE

No.

HOLLY

She built her own death.

JACKIE

What?

HOLLY

Ninety years old, laying in the hospital bed, drugs and death making her foggy she thought she was giving birth. The actual birth of her children, over sixty years earlier, had been so easy. Almost embarrassingly. All three had simply popped out. Her first came accompanied by her water breaking. A whoosh and a baby was born. There was no pain. No struggle or time to fear. Merely a wonder and gratitude. It was as if the baby had the ability to teleport from womb to arms. Her second she had as easily, while cleaning the kitchen floor, the baby popped out, skirted across the floor and landed softly into the dog bed. Her third child she had in her sleep. She'd been reading a particularly mysterious and difficult passage in "Splendor in the Grass" and had drifted away with the book on her belly. The baby's cry is what woke her up. Her husband complained about the sheets but sang the baby a lullaby all the same.

(MORE)

HOLLY (cont'd)

Hildegard interpreted the births in two ways: 1) the children were meant to be and 2) a lack of suffering now meant some pain would be necessary at a future date. The God of pain insisted on his toll. A rite of passage was a necessity and not something to be had with ease. A sacrifice would be called for. Hildegard spent her life wondering when it would come. She'd recognized in the world around her the need to eradicate the rite of passage. Mother's often felt no pain when giving birth because they were often drugged into numbness. Men worked office jobs shuffling money instead of toiling the land, children could stay at home into their thirties, losing weight meant surgery with more pain killers, everything from back support mattresses to arch support shoes seemed to be about killing pain. Conquering it with as little effort as possible. She remembered a time when her parents conquered pain by experiencing it. Now we conquered it with capitalism. She saw symptoms of this everywhere she looked: politicians who ran their campaigns and country like a fraternity rush; grown women who used the word "like" and "awesome" more than they seemed to breath; a mass consumption while complaining of having nothing. Everyone always complaining. Everyone saying they aren't complaining while complaining. The world was overrun by grown children forever unhappy and not knowing why. She knew they would never grow to adulthood without a true rite of passage. If her children's births had been so easy, how could she ever truly know she had deserved them. She wondered if she would forever be a girl, not having experienced the true battle that earned her the title woman. Sixty years later, she found herself in the hospital, dieing, on pain killers that were woefully inadequate and she understood her time had come. Day after day she seemed to labored at her death. Until she realized... it was a labor. The laboring she had escaped all those years earlier. So she began to push. She pushed and pushed. With all her strength and dignity. With all her love for the world, her desire to win her place in it and participate in the responsibility of it. To know she had earned what she had sowed. She pushed. Her eldest son held her hand. He cried and told her it wouldn't be long. Could he see the head, she asked. Not knowing what to do he said, yes. "Yes mama, I can see the head." The doctor said a burst blood vessel from all the pushing is what ultimately caused her death.

JACKIE

(Quietly and sadly. Truly hurt.)

That's not yours.

HOLLY

What?

JACKIE

I told you that story.

HOLLY

You did?

JACKIE

That didn't happen to Hildegard Shadbolt. It happened to my mother-in-law.

HOLLY

It did?

JACKIE

You know that.

HOLLY

I guess I forgot.

JACKIE

You didn't forget.

HOLLY

Well I'm sorry.

JACKIE

You're not sorry. People who say, "*Well*, I'm sorry", aren't sorry. How many times have you told *my* story?

HOLLY

Your story?

JACKIE

Enough times that it sounds like a routine you've practiced.

HOLLY

People tell things. There's no ownership.

JACKIE

It only happened a month ago.

HOLLY

So?

JACKIE

It's insensitive of you to flop it around like a plastic chew toy.

HOLLY

Excuse me?

JACKIE

Getting all your saliva on it.

HOLLY

I was relating an interesting tale to you, that I found moving, in hopes you would find it moving as well.

JACKIE

It was my story.

HOLLY

It was your mother-in-law's story.

JACKIE

My mother-in-law who is no longer with us.

HOLLY

Is there a copyright on communicating events of the world?

JACKIE

My husband still has trouble getting out of bed.

HOLLY

I know. I'm sorry. I was-

JACKIE

You had no right. You have no right. It's greedy. Selfish greed. You didn't find her suffering moving, you saw her emotional turmoil as entertaining fodder.

HOLLY

That's not fair.

JACKIE

You embellished.

HOLLY

I was honoring her.

JACKIE

You changed her name.

HOLLY

I got things mixed up.

JACKIE

One day you'll die. You'll die lonely. Having immolated all your friends to idle anecdotes. It will be cancer. You will have asked for it. All those years of almost living truthfully but never being able to fully embrace truth. They will catch up to you. Grow. Eat you. You'll be afraid to go alone to your chemo. Friends, who pretend to be friends, will go with you so they can tell others what good friends they are. You'll thank them. Expect a call. A follow up. It won't come. Not for a week. They'll have forgotten. Too many things to do. And only out of guilt, when they remember they haven't checked in, will they call. They will never call because they want to. They will only call because they feel they should. You will sit by the toilet vomiting, knowing, no one truly cares. You will know you are finished. The world has moved on. You will hope it will come fast. It won't. It will hurt. It will be days and weeks and months of hurting and the weight of other people's obligation. In the final days, well wishes will descend. People whose names you can't grasp. You'll ask these so-called friends to lie in bed with you. To share time with you. They'll make jokes and cry and be done with you already. They'll be looking for the exit. You'll die surrounded by a house full of strangers, orange plastic medicine bottles and the smell of yesterdays vomit stuck to your teeth.

Jackie exits. The bill is lowered down from the heavens. Holly puts her credit card in the "bill folder", pulls on the string, and it is raised back into the heavens. She sits. Playing with crumbs. The bill returns. She takes out another credit card and puts it in the "bill folder", yanks, and the bill returns to the heavens. She sits. The bill returns with her credit card slip. She calculates the tip. Signs. Sits.

The end.