

BOOKENDS
Jonathan Dorf

List of Characters

ERIC, a college freshman

JANE, middle-aged ex-librarian

POLICE CAPTAIN

SUSAN HARRIS, Eric's English professor, preferably played by the actress who plays
Jane

Notes

Since the play exists largely in Eric's head, it is not necessary—and may not even be desirable—for the set to be completely realistic.

PROLOGUE

(A small, quiet university library. ERIC, college freshman dressed in a sweater and a button-down shirt, can't find what he's looking for, so he waits for the reference librarian to return to the desk. JANE, middle-aged, stares at him from behind a copy of American Libraries. Eric, becoming conscious that he's being watched, varies his posture while he waits for the missing librarian.)

JANE

I killed the reference librarian.

(Eric smiles politely at her.)

You looked like you were waiting for him, and I didn't want you to waste your time. He's split between anthropology and sociology—over in the corner.

(She points offstage.)

If you step this way—

(Eric humors her.)

a little more to your right . . .

(Blackout.)

SCENE 1

(Shortly afterward. Lights up to reveal Eric at the left study table, his head in his hands. Jane, a package of dynamite in front of her, sits at the librarian's desk.)

JANE

Two thirds of Americans are going to be illiterate either by two-thousand ten or two-thousand fifty, I forget which. It might even have been two-thousand eight, only I think I saw it on a television commercial, and they tend to use round numbers. They all sound frightening to me. Have you seen the commercial I'm talking about?

(Eric shakes his head.)

Are you all right? I don't know you—so maybe this is the way you carry yourself all the time—but you look awfully down.

(beat)

You're not having a fight with your parents?

(No reaction from Eric.)

Parents? What am I thinking? It's your girlfriend, isn't it.

(beat)

Do you have a girlfriend?

ERIC

We're seeing other people.

JANE

(to herself)

I knew it.

(louder)

Was it her idea? If you'd like to talk about it . . . I'm not a professional, but I could give you a woman's point of view.

(The POLICE CAPTAIN should begin as just as voice and become visible—and even enter the library—during the course of the play, but it's important to make it clear that he is actually outside.)

POLICE CAPTAIN

This is the police. We have the building surrounded. You have one hour to surrender or we will storm the building. I repeat—we will storm the building.

JANE

I thought they always negotiated first and then stormed. The police and the criminal enter into negotiations in good faith, and invariably it's the criminal who loses faith first. Which in this case would make the police the criminals. Anyway, we were talking about your girlfriend.

ERIC

Am I going to die?

JANE

Do you worry about death? I think when we're dead we won't be able to talk anymore. We'll have to listen. I expect it will be a learning experience.

(The lights flicker. Jane exits. Enter PROFESSOR SUSAN HARRIS, slightly younger than Jane and with a briefcase, about to give a lecture. It is strongly recommended that Jane and Susan be played by the same actress, in which case, Jane may simply change into Susan. Instead of facing the class, Susan faces the other way, as if talking to someone.)

SUSAN

Honey, do you know if your lacrosse player would be available when you're finished with him? I need someone to walk Brutus. I need a man. He needs a male influence.
(turns around, to the class)

Good morning. I am Professor Susan Harris, and the name of this course
(Eric, looking like he's overslept, enters. Susan pauses to watch him.)

is Shakespeare. It should be called Shakespeare's plays, because we don't study his poetry. I don't like all that sissy sonnet crap. Shakespeare, ladies and gentlemen, is about winners and losers. And whatever happens is always the loser's fault. Richard II, consummate loser. Loses his kingdom because he's too slow and pathetic to do anything. It's his fault. Think about it. Why do we care about Richard? It's ludicrous. In fact, I would propose that Richard is actually the usurper and that Henry Bullingbrook was king all along. Richard is therefore filler, and since there are already two plays named after Henry IV, Richard II should be eliminated entirely. However, the department is strongly against eliminating Richard II from the syllabus, so as a compromise we will be reading only Henry's lines.

(beat)

Give me a loser, ladies and gentlemen, and I will give you a place to lay the blame. Did Richard III cry? Of course not. But all those cowardly dukes and princes who committed suicide and tried to frame him did. Richard III met death the way he met life. With confidence. He went out a winner. Study his speeches with care. Memorize them. You will be tested on them. You will not be asked to remember the losers. You may discard them in literature as you should in life.

(Susan exits. The lights flicker and then come up full. We are back in the library. Jane returns to her original position.)

JANE

I wonder if the police will toss tear gas cannisters into the library when they lose faith.
(beat)

Do you think I'm a horrible person because I killed the reference librarian?
(He shrugs, eyes lowered.)

I didn't want him to die painfully. Of course I have no idea, but he did die quietly since you were in the room at the time and you didn't hear it. I think it'd be truly horrible to die painfully. Do you believe in the deity?

ERIC

The deity?

JANE

It's a semantic question, but I've always felt that "God" was too totalitarian, that if we called He or She "God" we were ceding too much control. I think it may be the hard "g" sound. Deity undulates—see,

(making "deity" sound like a smooth wave)

deity—so it sounds more like an office manager.

ERIC

I don't believe in God.

JANE

I don't either, at least not precisely. But I think you'll find the deity a pleasant alternative. Most people find it easier to maintain at least one foot in agnosticism just to keep the wolves at bay.

ERIC

There's no God.

JANE

And the wonderful thing about a deity is that he doesn't take offense and make it a personal thing, he just clicks the meter; so whereas with a God, saying you don't believe in Him could get you walloped in very private places, with a deity you can make up for it in other areas. So don't deny yourself a deity if it's convenient in a crisis situation.

POLICE CAPTAIN

How are you doing in there? If it's all the same to you, ma'am, we'd like to talk to the hostage.

JANE

They've changed their tone. Conciliatory. A SWAT team must be on the roof.

POLICE CAPTAIN

What do you say in there? Let us talk to the kid.

JANE

No.

POLICE CAPTAIN

Lady, you killed the librarian and the circulation clerk. So one more body doesn't make a whole lot of difference. Two choices. Either kill the kid, or don't. You want to kill him because you get off on it? OK. I can relate. But make up your mind. Fifty minutes and we come in. And if you think you're gonna' blow us up, we'll blow you up first and let the deity sort it out.

JANE

Terrorist.

(beat)

Do you have the time?

ERIC

(looks at his watch)

Four-twenty-five.

JANE

I don't have a watch. I feel so naked. Educated people wear watches, but—can you believe this?—I was mugged on my way here. In the middle of a subway car. In broad daylight. The man took my watch. He had no idea I was wearing enough explosives to blow up the entire subway system, and I didn't think it was fair to penalize him for something he couldn't possibly have known.

(beat)

I don't want to say that people are cowardly, but no one came to my aid. It was very disappointing.

ERIC

He got away?

JANE

Not quite. The mugger ran out of the train and was immediately grabbed by three beefy men, who raped him with—I can't swear by it because I was wearing my reading glasses at the time—but it looked like a fish spoon . . . all this in plain view before the train even left the station.

(beat)

JANE (cont'd)

Perhaps it was retribution and I was receiving a clear message that what happened to me mattered. Something was out there being punitive, and if this man mugged me, at least he'd be made to pay for it. But I couldn't help thinking that the punishment was out of line with the crime. It made me wonder if he was being punished for what he'd done to me in the subway car, or whether there was a whole string of me's. Maybe I *didn't* matter, because how many times can you be raped with a fish spoon anyway, and maybe other people were waiting on this guy with the kind of crimes that required a fish spoon, and my mugging couldn't have contributed anything over and above that. Are you hungry?

(beat)

All that talk about the fish spoon made me realize I'm starving.

ERIC

I'm not hungry.

JANE

Do you think it's depression or stress?

(Eric shrugs.)

Normally, when I'm depressed, I *do* eat; I consider food a positive.

POLICE CAPTAIN

Hello in there. Anyone want to surrender? Somebody in there better persuade whoever's in charge to give it up, because when we go in we won't pitter-patter around. None of that "take a bullet to save the hostage" bullshit.

ERIC

Is he blaming me?

POLICE CAPTAIN

I can't afford the overtime to wait this out, so I'm seriously considering going back on my word and storming the building before the hour's up.

ERIC

I don't get this. Why is he blaming me?

POLICE CAPTAIN

You like explosives? I hope so. We've rigged the building with lots of them. So if you don't blow it up by the end of the hour, we very well might.

(Jane and Eric may overlap each other during the next exchange.)

ERIC

I didn't do this.

JANE

We're in a decline. Morally. They know it.

ERIC

I came here to get Cliff's Notes for my Shakespeare paper.

JANE

Twenty years ago they might have demurred. Blowing up a library would have mattered.

ERIC

I know it was wrong. But she wouldn't give me an extension. I feel so dirty, but what can I do. She wants to fail me.

JANE

I'm a government documents librarian. So I think I understand the problem better than most. I read what I file. People don't want to know anymore.

POLICE CAPTAIN

Isn't that *ex*-government documents librarian?

ERIC

Nobody in my family ever went to college before.

(The lights flicker. Jane exits. Eric sits in a chair and stares at an open notebook. Susan stands behind him.)

SUSAN

Class is over.

ERIC

Yeah right. Thanks.

(He does not move.)

SUSAN

You can leave now. That's what you do when class is over. You walk out.

ERIC

I'm sure the woman is a great professor, but everything she said went right over my head.

SUSAN

I'm right behind you.

ERIC

(doesn't realize that he's talking to his professor)

I don't even understand the syllabus.

(beat)

I shouldn't have taken this. I think I'm the only freshman.

SUSAN

Ask for help.

ERIC

Maybe I could still drop it.

(beat)

God, I can't stand this. I only took one note and now I can't even read it. I should drop.

SUSAN

Give it a chance. Have you done any of the reading yet?

ERIC

(shakes his head)

Econ had a paper due first thing, and I didn't want to fall behind.

SUSAN

The lectures make more sense if you do the reading beforehand.

ERIC

I'm always behind. I've been here three weeks and I've already pulled five all-nighters.

SUSAN

That doesn't do anyone any good.

ERIC

That's what my Mom said.

SUSAN

She was right.

ERIC

She was drunk.

(beat)

Look at this: one note. Not even a note. A word. And I can't even read it.

SUSAN

Let me see that.

(She leans over his shoulder to examine the notebook.)

Is that first letter an S?

ERIC

I think so. Or maybe a G.

SUSAN

And after that's an H?

ERIC

Shamrock?

SUSAN

No, there's no K at the end, but there is one sort of in the middle . . . I know—it's Shakespeare.

ERIC

Shakespeare. Yeah.

SUSAN

That's good. The name of the course. That's a good note.

ERIC

See? It's hopeless.

SUSAN

You have to apply yourself.

ERIC

Oh, great. Now you sound like my fourth grade teacher.

SUSAN

Did she grade on effort? I suppose I could do that.

(She steps in front of him. Eric gasps.)

I said I was behind you.

ERIC

I didn't say your lectures were bad—

SUSAN

Only that you didn't understand a word I said, or for that matter the syllabus, which is *written*, and that my class takes a distant second to *econ*.

ERIC

Oh my God.

SUSAN

The drop deadline was yesterday.

ERIC

Oh my God.

SUSAN

I guess we're stuck with each other.

ERIC

I can't pass. I can't do it. And now I can't get out.

SUSAN

I can pass you.

ERIC

(not hearing her)

I'm dead. I'm dead.

SUSAN

You *are* the only freshman—except for that girl with the rolodex. Being the only freshman ought to count for something.

ERIC

But you just said—

SUSAN

We're not counting her.

ERIC

We're not?

SUSAN

No. We're not. We're only counting you.

ERIC

Me.

SUSAN

For personal attention.

(Lights flicker back as Susan exits.)

POLICE CAPTAIN

Was it Sigmund Freud who said that once you identify your fears you won't be afraid of them anymore? No. I don't think so. Thirty-five minutes to go in the game.

(Eric moves closer to the door.)

Actually, I have just one word for you: liquid.

(Eric is about to leave when Jane stalks in.)

Let me iterate: liquid.

JANE

Sadistic cretins backed up the toilets.

POLICE CAPTAIN

Reiterate: liquid. Are we having fun yet? Anyone care for some coffee? We have an endorsement deal with a donut vendor and we get it for free. We'd be glad to *flush* your system with it.

JANE

I don't have to go to the bathroom. I don't have to go, etc.

POLICE CAPTAIN

I'd hate to have you wallowing around in there knee-deep in your own muck.

JANE

You and your backed-up toilets! You've drowned the microfiche in sewage! Do you hear me? The Times is covered in sewage!

POLICE CAPTAIN

Kind of apropos, wouldn't you say?

JANE

He's calling for help.

ERIC

Help? What are you talking about? He's being a jerk. He wants to kill us. You.

JANE

Events are spinning out of his control. He's being *forced* into action. Panic is looming. Mentally, he's breathing very heavily.

POLICE CAPTAIN

(purrs)

Ummm . . . coffee.

ERIC

I don't think so.

JANE

(strains of polka music from outside)

Listen outside. We have their complete attention. Dress is formal, speech is measured and traffic isn't moving. The microfiche may be awash in doody, but we are back in the game.

ERIC

I want to go home.

JANE

They're cracking.

ERIC

I want to go.

JANE

You can't. We're winning.

ERIC

We're not winning. Jesus, there are a bunch of guys out there with guns and bombs . . . I'm scared of them, I'm scared of you . . .

POLICE CAPTAIN

(in the background of Eric's sentence, savors it like coffee)

Scared.

ERIC

. . . and God, what the hell stinks so bad?

JANE

I brought the microfiche upstairs to dry. That, or the reference librarian is still between sociology and anthropology.

(beat)

You may be scared of them, but they are scared of you. You are what we are fighting over.

ERIC

No—I'm not. I'm Eric Drew, I live with my parents in a cheap apartment in New Jersey, my Dad smokes too much, my Mom drinks too much, my little brother's in juvenile hall for stealing cars, my grandparents are dead and all our bills get sent to me at school 'cause I'm the only one who can read.

JANE

New Jersey. I'm sorry. I had no idea.

(The lights flicker as Jane exits. Enter Susan and Eric sit at a table—perhaps the converted library table—in a fancy restaurant. The Police Captain might be a waiter, and either he or Susan should throw a white tablecloth on the table. There may or may not be any other silverware, but there should be at minimum a fish spoon at Eric’s place. Eric holds up the fish spoon, examines it.)

SUSAN

Don’t play with your utensils.

(Eric puts it down.)

ERIC

Sorry.

(pause)

I’m not sure what we should talk about.

(pause)

Do you have any suggestions for what I should write my paper about?

SUSAN

Don’t talk about your paper at dinner.

ERIC

Sorry.

SUSAN

No need to apologize.

ERIC

I want to do well.

SUSAN

I know. And I know you’ll be just fine.

ERIC

Thanks. And thanks for this.

SUSAN

You’re very welcome.

ERIC

(pause)

We only get tablecloths in my family when somebody dies.

(Long pause. Eric can't help but pick up the fish spoon.)

I'm sorry, but what *is* this?

SUSAN

It's a fish spoon.

ERIC

I don't know what that is.

SUSAN

Don't worry—I'll show you what it's for when the time comes.

(The lights flicker, and we're back in the library. The Police Captain is the most likely candidate to pack up the restaurant setting if Susan and Jane are the same actress.)

POLICE CAPTAIN

Surrender immediately, or I'll kill this dog.

JANE

I keep cats. They shed, and they don't ever recognize you, but they will rub against your leg in a figure-eight and you never have to wash them.

POLICE CAPTAIN

I'm not kidding. I'll kill this dog. A lot.

JANE

Cats are safer emotionally. They don't need intimacy. Dogs always want you to scrub their genitals.

(beat)

Ferdinand and Isabella. Little dears couldn't care less if I was dismembered without anesthetic as long as their dishes stay full.

(to the Police Captain)

Go ahead! Kill the dog!

POLICE CAPTAIN

I'm killing the dog!

JANE

Go ahead.

POLICE CAPTAIN

Fine.

JANE

Fine.

POLICE CAPTAIN

All right. Wringing its neck right now.

JANE

Good. I'm happy.

POLICE CAPTAIN

Me too. Very happy.

JANE

Great.

POLICE CAPTAIN

Life is, isn't it.

ERIC

Stop!

POLICE CAPTAIN

Too late. Tune in again tomorrow.

ERIC

I think I'm gonna' be sick.

JANE

Please, if you have to, I'm trying to keep it confined to the microfiche.

(Eric gets up.)

By the librarian. The reference librarian.

(Eric exits. To the Police Captain)

You're losing points with the deity.

POLICE CAPTAIN

Look at the mess *you've* made. Just how are you expecting *that* to be scored.

JANE

It's a running total.

POLICE CAPTAIN

And I'm so much worse than you? I haven't killed any reference librarians.

JANE

It's not any one thing.

POLICE CAPTAIN

Literature has not suffered any blows during my watch. You're the one with the holier-than-my-other-personality-who-runs-around-killing-reference librarians complex. And how is that clerk decomposing? Stinking up all the poor, helpless books.

JANE

The poor, helpless dog.

POLICE CAPTAIN

How do you know the dog is dead? How do you know I really did it?

ERIC (off)

Please, no more dogs.

JANE

I have your word.

POLICE CAPTAIN

Seems like a pretty flimsy basis for an argument.

JANE

Did you kill the dog?

POLICE CAPTAIN

Consider it dead.

JANE

Is it?

ERIC (off)

Just shut up! I'm tired of listening to this . . . bullshit. In twenty . . .

POLICE CAPTAIN

(helps him out)

five . . .

ERIC (off)

. . . thank you . . . twenty-five minutes, if we're not out of here, what are you going to do?

POLICE CAPTAIN

Well, we're still debating the exact method, but—

ERIC (off)

How are we going to be at the end?

POLICE CAPTAIN

Don't press me!

(beat)

Very, very afraid.