

TRUE STORY

A one-act play

By Jason Hall

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Jane                    20s, educated, fringes of upper-class.  
Walter                 20s, educated, upwardly mobile. He and Jane  
                          are well-matched in an Albee way.  
Vera                    20s, working-class waitress. Vera has a  
                          worldliness and fatigue not found in Jane and  
                          Walter's orbit.

Setting:  
Jane and Walter's apartment living room.

Time:  
2 a.m., about an hour after the parking lot incident

Synopsis:

As Walter nurses bruises from a fight, Jane wages a verbal war to draw the story out of him. When a waitress-and witness-appears, Jane hopes to use the woman to get nearer to the truth.

Props:  
gold or silver lighter, wallet with fair amount of \$1 bills, ice pack or bag

Costumes:  
Jane - nice night robe and sleeping clothes  
Walter - button shirt and trousers, socks  
Vera - waitress uniform, such as blouse & black pants,  
          maybe nametag

Notes:

The inspirational prompt for this play was to imagine a collaboration between Edward Albee and Tom Stoppard. I'd say the one-act is 80% Albee and 20% Stoppard, though both writers are intrigued by the loving cruelty of literate, lively couples. There are moments for uncomfortable pauses and waiting, so take the moments but don't overdraw them. Also, Vera should appear disconnected from the fate of the pair and its concerns. Her final information is not given with any mischief. She really does not care.

2 a.m. Lights up on a living room.  
WALTER, in shirt and pants, reclines on  
a couch. JANE, robe and bedtime  
clothes, holds an ice pack on Walter's  
face reluctantly; a look of skepticism  
is on hers.

WALTER

...and it was then I was forcibly dragged into the alley--a  
dark, dank poorly lit one, mind, not the more respectable  
type of alley--and these five hooligans proceeded to pummel--

JANE

You said three.

WALTER

I said--?

JANE

In an earlier incarnation of the story, there were three  
hooligans. Now there are five. Were they a mixed party,  
reproducing two assailants on the spot?

WALTER

Three, five. Might have been five.

JANE

At any rate.

WALTER

At any rate, one held me and one hit me in the face to show  
me that he quote meant business. Then the other...one to  
three of them went through my pockets.

JANE

And how was that?

WALTER

How was what?

JANE

The pocket fondling. To have two to six strong, forceful male  
hands reaching inside, caressing your inner linings. It's a  
fantasy that sounds right up your...no. Too easy.

WALTER

Damn it, Jane. I've undergone a very traumatic experience,  
and you fixate on a sordid piece of ancient history.

JANE

Greek history. Not ancient. The rent boy affair was eight  
weeks ago.

WALTER

He wasn't a rent boy! He asked me for a ride. I obliged. As he wasn't one of the gaggle of hooligans who assaulted me tonight, I think he's irrelevant.

JANE

Very well. The rent boy goes back in the box. What else can I do for you?

WALTER

You might show a soupcon of sympathy.

JANE

I might. Why should I?

WALTER

I've just been physically assaulted!

JANE seems to melt, moving close for the first time. She caresses Harold's face with one hand, the other moving to his side.

JANE

You're right. You poor dear. Such an awful, awful bruise my poor little darling...

She pulls his wallet from his pocket in triumph. All sympathy is gone.

JANE (CONT'D)

Really, Walter. Three sets of hands and not a single hooligan could find your wallet?

WALTER

They—they gave it back to me...

JANE

Uh-huh.

Jane moves the ice pack to Walter's crotch. He winces at the cold.

JANE (CONT'D)

And still full of money!

Jane looks inside, counting. A pause as it dawns on her.

JANE (CONT'D)

Singles? Twenty-three singles?

WALTER

For tolls...

JANE

We don't live on toll roads. Walter, I swear to God...

WALTER

Look. That's not important right now. What's important is what happened to me.

JANE

I agree. What's important, to paraphrase, is what really happened. The truth.

WALTER

I'm telling you--

JANE

The truth.

WALTER

I.... I don't know if it was three or five...

JANE

The truth.

WALTER

I...Can't...tell you the truth. You make it impossible for me to tell you.

JANE

Why?

WALTER

Because you judge. You Judge. And anything that I say can and will be used against me in the Court of Jane. And I hate that. So I don't tell you things. Because you hold onto them. And sharpen them. And hone them. Because it's more important for you to draw blood than it is just to listen.

JANE

No.

WALTER

Yes. It's accurate. It's the truth.

A longish pause. Jane reflects.

WALTER

Well?

Pause. Finally:

JANE

(Honest)

Perhaps... perhaps there's a bit of truth to what you say. I see where it could be hard to confide in a person if you're met with resistance. Or a certain amount of argumentativeness. That wasn't my intention. I don't know why...this...

(Motions to herself)

....comes easier than sincerity.

WALTER

I don't know either, but I miss the person I fell in love with.

Pause. Walter wants to make some gesture, approaches Jane, but is unsure. He settles for touching her shoulder, and she allows it. A minor victory for both.

JANE

Will you tell me the truth?

Walter takes a breath. This is difficult for him. Pause.

WALTER

Yes. I will.

(Pause)

I was out in a parking lot....

An insistent KNOCK off stage. After the knock is a strange frisson. Walter still wants to confess.

WALTER (CONT'D)

I was in a parking lot--

Louder KNOCKING. Jane breaks the spell.

JANE

Wait.

Jane goes to the door off-stage. Dialogue off.

VERA (O.S.)

Hello.

JANE (O.S.)

Good evening.

VERA (O.S.)

Is this where I can find Walter Mann?

JANE (O.S.)

I think we have one of those. Come in.

Jane re-enters with VERA, a woman in a coat and waitress uniform. Vera is a fairly no-nonsense working woman.

JANE (CONT'D)

Is this the certain Mann you had in mind?

VERA

(Observing Walter)

How's your face?

WALTER

It only hurts when Jane laughs. I don't mean to be rude, but do I know you?

VERA

Not really. I was one of the people who saw what happened.

WALTER

Oh.

VERA

Yeah. Oh. Well, I caught the end of it. I was done with my shift at the diner across the street, went out to my car, and saw Jack hitting you. Wasn't a ringside seat, but I saw enough. It wasn't pretty.

WALTER

You saw it all...

VERA

I saw enough.

JANE

What, exactly, did you see?

WALTER

Jane, she saw enough. She saw this Jack character hitting me with no provocation, she saw me holding my head, she probably was the good Samaritan who called the police--

VERA

Naw, I didn't do that. I didn't call the cops. Probably someone on a cell phone. Cops were there in two shakes anyway.

JANE

So why are you here?

VERA

(Ignoring Jane)

Someone like you, someone not used to—that. You probably felt just as beaten up by the cops as you did by Jack.

JANE

(To Walter)

These police cops beat you??

WALTER

No, they didn't beat me.

JANE

So why are you here?

WALTER

How did you know where I lived?

VERA

I overheard when one of the cops called it in.

WALTER

You remembered my address from that?

VERA

I remember the orders of twelve different tables at a time. I can remember things.

WALTER

I wasn't implying--

JANE

I don't think she thought you were implying—and why are you here??

VERA takes out a nice lighter from her pocket.

VERA

This is yours. You're on my way home. Thought I'd do a good deed, drop it off. Samaritan act.

JANE

Where did you find it?

WALTER

Jane, I'm sure she--

VERA

Parking lot. On the ground. Cops called me over to tell 'em what happened. I told 'em. Then I found the lighter. But you were gone. So here I am. Here it is. Take it.

No one moves.

JANE

Waitress. Tell me: was there a police report?

VERA

Sure.

JANE

May I see it?

VERA

I don't have it!

JANE

You didn't have to sign anything?

WALTER

She doesn't have the police report!

VERA

I didn't sign anything. Do you want this or not?

A pause. Walter and Jane don't move.

JANE

Keep it. You keep it. That's my good Samaritan act. We both insist.

Vera sighs, keeping the lighter in her hand.

VERA

I've been on my feet for eleven hours. You look like you got hurt. You were on my way home. Take it or don't take it, I don't care. But I'm gonna go.

Vera starts to leave. Jane stops her.

JANE

Just one question. It's about provocation.

WALTER

Jane!

JANE

No, waitress please: Walter says there was no provocation. That this Jack fellow hit him out of the blue. Does that sound in line with this Jack fellow?

WALTER

She wasn't there!

JANE

(Still to Vera)

Does it?

VERA

Could be. Jack's a big guy.

JANE

(To Vera)

So what do you think happened? What truly happened?

WALTER

For God's sake! She can't tell you what she didn't see! But I can tell you. Here's what she didn't see. She didn't see me walking to the parking lot from the ATM and stopping in the doorway of a bar to light my cigarette. She didn't see this Jack person come out and she didn't smell the liquor on his breath like I did. She didn't see him sway and bump into me. She didn't hear me mumble something to him because I was in a bad mood. She didn't hear the guy ask me what I just said, and when I didn't reply she didn't see him shove me. She didn't see my cigarette go in one direction and my lighter go in another. She did, however, see him punch me in the face. And whether you call that provocation or not, that's what happened.

(To Vera, ushering her out)

Thank you, but Jane's right. Keep the lighter. And thanks for coming over. And I'll never mumble again. Goodnight, waitress.

Walter returns to the room alone.  
Pause.

JANE

Is that the truth?

WALTER

The whole and nothing but. Can we give it a rest?

JANE

I almost want to say I'm sorry.

Pause. A weird smile from Walter.

WALTER  
 Shall we kiss and make up?

JANE  
 Yes.

Walter moves toward her. At the last second she pushes his face away.

JANE (CONT'D)  
 No. No no no. There's blood right there.

Jane points it out. Walter feels under his nose. Reacts.

WALTER  
 (Holding nose)  
 Aww! I've got a nose bleed!

JANE  
 Go and lie down. I'll be in to help staunch.

Jane moves Walter, head up, toward the bedroom, an opposite exit from the door. As Jane recrosses the room to collect the ice bag, there's a single KNOCK. Before she can cross to the hall door, Vera appears again.

JANE  
 Oh. It's you.

VERA  
 It's the lighter. I don't want it.

JANE  
 Really, take it with our--

VERA  
 No, you don't understand. It was worth coming back to tell you. I really don't want your lighter.

Vera holds it out again, but Jane doesn't move to take it. Vera drops it contemptuously on the floor. She turns to leave, then stops and addresses Jane once more.

VERA (CONT'D)  
 And Jack wasn't drunk.

JANE  
 Pardon?

VERA

He wasn't drinking, he wasn't drunk. I know because he gets done with his show the same time I'm done with my shift.

JANE

Show?

VERA

Yeah. At The Foxhole. He's a stripper. Exotic dancer. Whatever. And he didn't have time to drink anything before he left.

Vera watches Jane.

JANE

Could... Hypothetically, does Jack have admirers in his audience? Male admirers?

VERA

I don't know.

JANE

And when a patron has finished...stuffing bills into a loincloth, sometimes the more ardent fans might wait for him as he leaves?

VERA

I don't know.

JANE

And if, outside, a patron makes a proposition that this Jack finds disagreeable...

VERA

I don't know. I don't care.

JANE

(Genuinely asking)

Can you tell me honestly? Waitress? Please?

Pause. Jane waits. Finally.

VERA

(Slowly, with honor)

My name...is Vera.

Vera leaves. Jane is lost in thought for a moment.

Then she moves to collect the lighter, then picks up the wallet.

She pulls the singles partway out of the wallet, and stuffs them back, snapping the wallet shut.

She picks up the ice pack last, studies it for a moment, and finally carries everything into the bedroom, leaving the stage.

Lights fade.

THE END