

Boysenberries

A monologue by Taylor Basso

From "An Evening Free of Judgment"

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ACT I

SCENE I

The play opens in a room bare of all things except five chairs arranged roughly in a semi-circle, and a large whiteboard at the back of the stage that reads "GROUP THERAPY! EVERYBODY WELCOME!" There is probably a stupid drawing to accompany this sentiment. DOLORES occupies the centremost chair in the arrangement. The others chairs can be filled with silent extras who react to her statements, she can deliver her monologue directly to the audience, or (my favourite) she can address her speech to the empty chairs as though there are people sitting in them.

DOLORES

As much as I was hoping it wouldn't be, the funeral was really awkward. I mean, I was kind of expecting it to be, for obvious reasons. In order to combat that, I stopped by the Shopper's on the way, and bought a book of Sudoku at the till. I figured if I just sat in the back row and wore a floppy hat, no one would notice that I wasn't really paying attention to the services. I should have counted on the fact that more people would be paying attention to me than to the actual funeral. Have you ever tried to complete a Sudoku of moderate difficulty with a hundred fifty pairs of angry eyes boring holes through your downturned head? I had half a mind to just pick up and leave right there in the middle of the eulogy. I couldn't focus anyway; the guy whistled his esses and it was distracting me.

I only met Reggie about a week before he died. We were at the check-out and he reached over and grabbed the last copy of Archie's Pals 'n' Gals Double Digest. It was appropriate, right, because his name was Reggie, like the character in the comic. But whereas the Reggie in the comics is vain, materialistic, and malicious, the Reggie from the check-out counter

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DOLORES (cont'd)

was sweet, amiable, and courteous, albeit with some of the worst B.O. you've ever smelled on a person who wasn't dead -- well, not yet. He smelled like chicken soup poured out of a human colon. It didn't dull his charm, though. Definitely a handsome guy. I mean, he was no Usher, but there was an obvious... sparkle in the eye. I feel guilty describing him in the past tense so soon after the funeral, when he's practically warm in the ground, but I feel like we're even after the shoddy way I was treated at that particular event.

I could tell he was smitten by the way he eyed my pumpkin -- oh, that's not a euphemism. I was purchasing a pumpkin on that late October afternoon. It may seem odd to buy that kind of thing at a grocery store, but I really have no patience to go to a pumpkin patch or whatever rural thing, slosh around in galoshes, get mosquito bites on my knees... as a rule, I eschew activities where I need to tuck my pants into my socks. I've long said, however, that the pumpkin is the most erotic of gourds. One dusky autumn eve, as you may remember from our previous discussion sessions, back when I was dating the Guyanese ambassador, we gutted a pumpkin together -- not a common custom in his native land, you understand. The mere act... so erotic... we made love right there on the counter amongst the seeds, which we later baked. Probably not the best idea in retrospect. Had a very odd taste. We gave them to the food bank. In any event, he eyed my pulpy fruit with an unmistakable lust, so I introduced myself.

"Dolores," I purred -- you know how I smolder -- and he said, "Reggie," and smiled. A lovely smile, incidentally. We engaged in a bit of flirtatious banter on the way

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DOLORIS (cont'd)

out to the parking lot, and he seemed like a pretty nice guy. I'm very protective of my cell phone number, so I gave him my email and we parted ways. His smell, unfortunately, lingered on the pumpkin I was carrying, so I gave that to the food bank as well.

We talked on instant messenger for a good chunk of the night, his poor typing skills not dulling an iota of his wit. I didn't dwell on his overuse of emoticons, which left me wondering if he was too much of an emotional cripple to express his innermost sentiments using mere words. Nor did I puzzle on his choice of Papyrus, the lone font more hackneyed and gauche than Comic Sans. For all I knew, he had plans to print out our conversation, burn the edges of the paper, stain it with tea, and turn it in for a class project. Instead, I focused, in the words of Dr. King, on the content of his character. The true measure of a man, right? And boy, did he measure up. I can't remember the last guy I met who was so sweet, so attentive and caring, so utterly willing to listen. Perhaps they should have asked me to do the eulogy at the funeral. At least I can say the letter S. She sells seashells by the seashore.

Our conversations lasted the better part of a week. I would arrive home from my job at the food bank and there I would find Reggie, waiting online for me, faithfully, like a loyal beast. My Bichon Frisé doesn't even wait for me like that and I paid \$600 for obedience training. The topics would run the gamut, from politics to real estate to this troubled economy of ours. Every now and again, the conversation would ebb into some territory about which I had no

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DOLORES (cont'd)

knowledge, so I would just smile and nod until it passed. Frequently, he thought I had lapsed into silence because he couldn't see me smiling and nodding through the computer monitor. We eventually remedied this by setting up a webcam chat, which proved an optimal solution because I could see and hear him but didn't have to smell him. It couldn't be permanent, alas -- he wanted an in-person date. Having been raised well, I obliged, but with a caveat. I told him I wanted a really elaborate, fancy evening-in with lots of scented candles. Brilliant, right?

His apartment was in a nice little glassy building down by the waterfront. Not the "sailors with gonorrhoea" waterfront, the classy kind. So I show up and rap the ornamental knocker and Reggie answers the door. He said something as he took my coat, but I couldn't hear him over the most gruesome smell I've ever endured. The place, I should clarify, was littered with candles -- scads of them. Hundreds of tiny scented tea lights all over the windowsills, tables, the kitchen island, everywhere. "What on Earth is that smell?" I choked, abandoning my tact and gagging on my larynx. "Boysenberries," he beamed proudly, totally oblivious. "Do you like it?" Whatever the opposite of 'like it' was, I did that. I was foolish to think any mere scented candle could best an odour like Reggie's. Instead, the B.O. had annexed the boysenberries, and the result was a horrific blend of sickly sweet and nauseatingly pungent. This unprecedented assault of reeks becomes grimly appropriate as I realise its resemblance to a funeral home: potpourri, perfume, formaldehyde, and rotting corpse.

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DOLORES (cont'd)

I excused myself to the powder room and purged my apprehensions about the evening into the sink. Wiping my mouth, I vowed to collect myself, be the consummate lady you all know me to be, suffer through the remainder of the evening and never call him again. I developed little tactics to get through the date: I doused a napkin in wine and held it over my nose at dinner. Rather than making conversation and risking breathing the stench in, I sat in silence as he spoke and amused myself by imagining the ways he may have come to smell like that, such as sleeping every night in a giant armpit. The meal, by the way, was a valiant attempt at... I guess I would call it "largesse on a budget." He decided he was going to make quiche, only it seemed suspiciously like he had just grabbed some frozen quiches from the supermarket and tossed them in the oven at the last minute. Not that I have any proof -- the smell in the apartment would have masked any kind of olfactory evidence left behind by an oven -- but I considerate my palate a fairly tuned one and I didn't find any reason to think he'd made them from scratch. Which was fine, I suppose. I don't think I'd want my boyfriend baking quiche. A little effete, *n'est-ce pas?*

The point that all of this is leading to, I suppose, is that for a decent portion of the meal Reggie had a huge piece of spinach wedged between his teeth, for which I was quite grateful as it actually provided a handy distraction. It focused me on his mouth, and ladies, I'm not gonna lie. I suspect our man Reggie was a great kisser. That train of thought took me to my next stop, which was my Guyanese ambassador, Nabeel, who was and is certainly the best

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DOLORIS (cont'd)

kisser I've ever encountered, and I've gotten around as much as a girl can, clear of getting a reputation. In fact, I once made the faux pas of suggesting to Nabeel that if the Guyanese government could sell his kisses, perhaps his country's economic infrastructure might not be so troubled, a remark that shortly preceded our break-up. I was considering calling him up to explain the misunderstanding, when I realised I was still in another man's living room and that would be tremendously poor etiquette. By that point, the combination of the wine-soaked napkin I'd been inhaling and the tea lights consuming all of the room's oxygen had made me fairly lightheaded and giddy, and I inadvertently burst out in a case of the giggles at an inappropriate moment. I clarified that no, I wasn't laughing at Reggie's childhood dialysis treatments, and then made an unfortunate joke about kidney pie, at which I subsequently laughed as well.

Thankfully, Reggie was more than gracious about my failed attempts at humour, and I made a move to reward him with a bit of a post-supper smooch. As you might imagine, this necessitated moving closer to him, which, smell-wise, was a lot like pulling a seat right up next to a pile of burning garbage. Still, I was determined to be a fun date, and an hour of huffing alcohol had gotten the better of me. I again employed several tactics to mute the smell, mostly by focusing my mind on other things. I thought of my teenaged lessons in the French horn, and how I'd just tossed my dream of becoming a French horn virtuoso, but that just led me to the thought that the smell in the room reminded

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DOLORES (cont'd)

me of someone taking a French horn, filling it with the juice that accumulates at the bottom of trash bags, and then blowing it all in my face at once. I reminisced on my childhood in Idaho, which just made me think that it smelled like every potato in the world was being boiled in this room, right now. I remembered visiting the circus as a girl with my Uncle Pablo. It made me realise that Reggie smelled like a carnie. I did my level best to come up with every possible scenario that I could use as a diversion. It wasn't enough, though. As I eyed one of the more substantial boysenberry candles, I hit my breaking point. I had to commit an act of desperation. I knocked the thing over and watched as it crashed onto the rug. "Oops, fire!" I exclaimed innocently, collected my coat and made for the door.

It was an unfortunate time for the door to have jammed. I guess it was old, and had warped or something, I dunno. Either way, it left me with multiple concerns. First, I hadn't de-tagged the dress I had bought especially for that evening, in hopes of returning it the next day. Due to a combination of B.O., boysenberry, vomit, and now smoke damage, such a return was no longer feasible. I did end up wearing it again, to the funeral; I feel like black and royal blue are close enough cousins that any claims it was disrespectful attire are gross overreactions. Besides, I wore a tank top underneath, to disguise the cleave. But the second, more pressing issue of the moment was that the fire that had begun to blaze around us had magnified the smell exponentially. I had to get out. But as I moved to the fire escape, Reggie followed me, and so did the stench. I couldn't have

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DOLORES (cont'd)

that, I just couldn't. Something had to give.

I will concede that it was a bit deceptive of me to indicate to Reggie that I had left my cell phone in the bathroom and to subsequently tip an armoire over in front of the door after he went in to retrieve it. He was such a gentleman, by the way. I want to stress that my plan was to use the outdoor escape, make it down to the streets, and ring up the fire station to call for help. I suppose it's ironic that I actually *had* left my purse, and consequently my cell phone, on the couch in the burning building. So it's not like I killed Reggie on purpose, although you wouldn't know it from the way those haughty funeral-goers acted. Rather, it was a gesture meant to save us both humiliation and discomfort that merely went horribly wrong. Say what you will about my methods and their outcomes, but Reggie died thinking that date was going really well, and I like to think I had a hand in that, if only in the death part.

I've tried hard to keep my spirits up, but it's been discouraging. I don't appreciate the angry letters or the chanting outside my house in the middle of the night. Scrawling "MURDERER" on my door in sheep's blood? Not entirely inaccurate, but extremely impolite, and if you must use such ugly language, I prefer "MURDERESS" as it adds a hint of glamour. This has been a very hard time for me, and I wish Reggie's family had the grace and diplomacy to realise that. Oh, well. At least I have you guys -- and I hope you know I adore each of you. And as you know, I'm a positive person, and I always look on the bright side: a good chunk of that building's population was immolated

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DOLORES (cont'd)
along with Reggie. Twenty-three
more funerals, twenty-three more
chances to make a good impression!
Now, I've got to be off if I want
to get to the Shopper's for a
crossword before the services at
four. Ta!

DOLORES grabs the purse she's set down next to her chair and
removes a small compact. She looks into it, pops her lips,
and smiles with satisfaction before exiting stage right.
Fade out.