

Minnie Mitzman's Amazing One-Woman Balancing Act

A monologue by Taylor Basso

From "An Evening Free of Judgment"

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ACT I

SCENE IV

MINNIE is dressed down, and mousily so. She is wearing a cardigan done up to the top button and a skirt that would be fashionable in the hands of someone more capable but on her just looks poorly judged. She speaks in a sort of quiet, smug drawl -- think a more likeable Nancy Grace. She is naïve but tries to be open-minded. Her attempts at political correctness are well-meant but ultimately misguided. She delivers her monologue directly to the audience.

MINNIE

Ladies and gentlemen, I have found the balance. And I am going to tell you how to find the balance as well.

Now I don't mean physical balance, like some kind of Wallenda or something. That sort of thing is much more heavily reliant on a low centre of gravity and a great deal of patience, and unfortunately for some of you out there, the way your body's built means you'll never quite be able to strike up that kind of balance. It's what did in my poor Aunt Glo, God rest her soul, who as more of a Bonnie Grape kind of beauty was never going to be able to stick that handstand the way she wanted to but darned if she didn't try anyhow. I mean the kind of balance that's attained when you reach a kind of spiritual satisfaction, when you look outside and the snow has been perfectly shoveled off the walk, or when you look in the mirror and there's nary a glimmer on your usually abnormally oily T-zone. The kind of balance you get when you've vanquished your personal gremlins and come to a sort of accord with the things you dislike about yourself. I'd like to take you on that journey with me, if I may.

Oh! Before we go on such a personal journey together, it occurs to me

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MINNIE (cont'd)

that I haven't introduced myself to you. My name is Minnie Mitzman. It's alliterative, I know. My friend Marcia-Topaz always jokes that I should find a husband with an M name like Morrison, so I could be Minnie Mitzman-Morrison, but I would never marry someone because of their last name because I feel it perverts the institution of marriage. I was born in Ackley, Iowa, population 1,809. I grew up there for most of my young life, but I craved the hustle and bustle of the big city so I moved to Des Moines when I was nineteen. I give workshops on sexism and sexual harassment in high schools and workplaces, or at least I used to. Now I'm more of a secretary, which is kind of a return to form for me. I'll explain why in a couple of minutes. My favourite television shows are *Spin City* (taken from us too soon, may it rest in peace) and *Law & Order*, but only the early seasons before S. Epatha Merkerson came in and fouled everything up. I wear my hair in a side ponytail. It's kind of my trademark, but then I've always been something of a wild child. My nickname growing up was "Wild Child." That was Marcia-Topaz's idea. She's such a madcap. You know her nickname?

MINNIE stifles a chuckle, clearly proud of herself.

MINNIE

"Madcap." That one was mine. Anywhatsit, this story takes place I'd say about last fall. I remember because the trees were that shade of red they get about the time the deciduous trees are doing their deciding. I, like many others you will hear from tonight, was in something of a career quagmire. I'd just been fired from my job at the rectory for wearing a prairie skirt that was too revealing. The vicar said my ankles were tempting the

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MINNIE (cont'd)

altar boys. So I sought work wherever I could find it. I tried the newspapers for a while but I kept getting caught up by those Sudoku puzzles and never getting anything done. They tell me the Japanese are brilliant and darn it, I believe it. I eventually turned to the internet, which I'd heard about but never really tried because I've seen those shows on the T.V. with Chris Hansen where the predators just snatch ya right through the computer screen and I was thinking, "no, sir, not me." But the internet people proved much more friendly than I could have ever expected. I ran into one website where the people liked to dress up in big furry mascot costumes and I thought it was absolutely precious. I would send the link to my Granny Mitzman back in Ackley but she distrusts computers on account of the war. I'm not sure which war.

So I came across this one job wanted application that... oh, here I printed it out.

MINNIE pulls the printed sheet of paper out of her purse, a large lacquered red number that could never conceivably match anything.

MINNIE

"WANTED: Administrative assistant..." -- that's a secretary, if you're not following along -- "must have clerical experience, strong organizational skills, for women's centre downtown." I thought that was perfect because I have both a knack for and an interest in extremely tedious busywork. Sometimes, when I get bored, I'll just go through the house and redo all of the earthquake kits. I get bored fairly often, which results in the earthquake kits getting refreshed usually twice a week. I did some

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MINNIE (cont'd)

calculations once and that's roughly a hundred ten times more often than the earthquake kit is supposed to be refreshed, but I figure the last thing you want after a devastating natural disaster is eight-year-old fruit leather giving everybody diarrhea. Sometimes I'll categorize my unused AOL promotional CDs by year, so I can give them out for gifts during the holidays. One time I decided to arrange all of my kitchen appliances in alphabetical order, but I got tired of using my blender to prepare every meal. That kind of thing.

So I called them up and I got an interview with Janna, the lady who ran the women's centre. I can't say for sure but I got the feeling she was one of those ladies who liked other ladies. When I was young we called them "lesbians," but Marcia-Topaz told me she got in trouble for wishing a Muslim lady a Merry Christmas at the bank the other evening so now I just hedge my bets on everything. I made a lot of eye contact, because I've heard that potential employers like that, but then I stopped because I didn't want the poor dear to feel led on. I'm sure if I were that way inclined, she'd be right near the top of my list. The kind of woman you can tell was pretty, once. She told me about how the Des Moines Women's Association -- that's what the organization was called, the Des Moines Women's Association -- did all of this outreach work for battered ladies, which I think is just great because when you grew up the way I did the idea of empowering women is a very novel concept. She also told me about the workshops they facilitate in schools and offices and whatnot, the ones I'd end up doing later on. They had a rotating staff of

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MINNIE (cont'd)

workers that did them, but there's only a few that are important to this story -- you know, about my balance. Janna did the workshops herself, and then there was Amy and Floyd and Lavinnia. Lavinnia was this woman who wore white eye shadow, every day, and it made her eyelids look slightly larger than a normal person's eyelids would be. Isn't that just the silliest thing you've ever heard? That's pretty much the only relevance she has to this story; I just think it's humourous.

Now Floyd didn't join the team 'til later on, so when I was first working at the DMWA it was pretty much Janna doing most of the heavy lifting and I was her secretary, but not like a Maggie Gyllenhaal kind of secretary, because I don't do that. Every now and then I'd see Amy around the office, and she was one of those miserable women who can't stand anyone around her and just walked around with her snoot up in the air. She thought she was fancy because she went to college in Wyoming, but I saw her slink around the office in those tiny skirts and I can tell you one time she crossed her legs and she was just blatantly not wearing underwear, and I don't know how you all were brought up but I don't think that's any kind of fancy at all. I asked her about it and she said that they did it in Europe all the time. I thought that they have universal health care in Europe, too, but here in America you bleed out on the sidewalk so put some darn drawers on. I didn't say it because that would be rude, so I just said it in my mind and asked God for forgiveness when I got back to my desk.

I did this and that around the office, but mostly a whole lotta

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nothin'. I'd talk to the Sparkletts man when he came to refill the water jugs. Sometimes I'd take the fire extinguisher at the end of the hall, move it to the bracket in the waiting room, and then I'd take the fire extinguisher that used to be in the bracket in the waiting room, and move it to the end of the hall. I tried listening to classical music but I gave up because I feel like any piece of music that utilizes the celesta as an instrument is probably sinful, even if I don't know how. I prefer to stick to God's instrument, or as it's perhaps better known, the autoharp. The first few months were like that. And then, something awful happened. One day when I was driving into the parking garage, Lavinnia just darted in front of my Prius. (Yes, I have a Prius. I know they're trendy now, but they weren't when it was 1998 and I only had \$750 to buy a car.) Anyway, I didn't see her coming -- I swear, with that white eye shadow, the woman is like a ghost. Poor thing broke both her legs; she was wailing all the way into the office. She agreed not to press a lawsuit, but since her mobility was severely hindered she wasn't going to be able to get around to do the workshops. Eventually, we struck a compromise: she would take over my duties as a secretary/receptionist, and I'd take her place in the workshops until her legs healed and they could unwire her jaw.

Well! Let me tell you I severely underestimated the task ahead of me. I thought I'd be fine doing public speaking since I'd been the lead in my high school's production of Mary Laswell's *Suds in Your Eye*, and in the yearbook I got voted "Most Likely to Win a People's Choice Award." Well, I'm still waiting, Hollywood.

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MINNIE laughs at her own joke.

MINNIE

Incidentally, I also won "Best Side Ponytail." It was a landslide. So I thought I had the whole thing made. Well, for my first workshop, which was at a high school, I was set up with Amy as my partner, and I shoulda known from the way she strutted in wearing that smug grin and that Western Wyoming Community College hooded sweatshirt that she'd be trouble. And of course, she was. She undermined me the whole time, like she wanted to make sure I couldn't possibly have a good workshop. She ruined my chances at greatness like I was an episode of *Law & Order* and she was S. Epatha Merkerson. She talked right over me, and there were times when I was tempted to unleash a torrent of expletives that would make Phyllis Diller say "whoa, there," but I didn't because I brought up to believe you never turn a harsh word against anyone. So I crumpled all of those swears up and pushed them into a little pit at the bottom of my heart, the one I usually reserve for people who cut me off in traffic and those deadbeats on *Maury* who refuse to pay child support.

And the kids! Let me tell you, high school is nothing like I remember it. Now, maybe it's because I was never the type to go to the parties and whatnot that would happen down at the old quarry, but I remember it being a friendly place where everyone got along and we were friendly to everyone, even Graham, the kid who smelled like ant killer and all of his shirts were missing buttons in the middle so you could see his belly button no matter what he was wearing. And this wasn't just any belly button, it was one of those gnarly outies so bad that it looks like his lower intestine's

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spilling out of his gut. And we were even nice to him, or if not nice then at least politely indifferent. But these kids were awful. They were saying the M.F. word right in front of the teacher and he didn't even care! You can't just throw the M.F. word around willy-nilly like it's a Frisbee. That's what got Alexander Hamilton shot. And they kept making lewd gestures at me -- during a workshop about sexual harassment. It's like they weren't even listening to us at all.

To say I was disheartened would be a massive understatement. I went home, put on "Candle in the Wind" -- the version he did when Dale Earnhardt died, not the version he did when Anna Nicole died, got out a pint of heavenly hash and just ate my tears away. Nothing could cheer me up, not even my photo collection of babies dressed as grown-ups. I had another workshop the next day and I was so nervous, I didn't even want to go in. The only thing that made it better was knowing I wouldn't be presenting with Amy, I'd be presenting with Floyd, a new guy Janna had hired. He was the first man who'd ever worked for the centre. He was also Janna's brother-in-law, and an ex-convict who couldn't find a job in Polk, Guthrie, or anywhere else in the Des Moines metropolitan area. That made me a bit antsy because I'd never met a convict, except for one time when Marcia-Topaz got hauled off to county jail for the night after throwing a fit because the Subway had validated her free sandwich card improperly. I actually called Marcia-Topaz on my car phone on the way to the workshop the next morning, and she told me I needed to go with more of an aura of seriousness, and darn it if she

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wasn't right like always. I turned around and went home, and changed out of my "Kitties are the Paw-fect Pets" Bedazzled sweatshirt and into a crisp blouse I'd bought years ago from Banana Republic but never had anywhere dressy enough to wear it. I even smoothed down my hair with an Alice band, because some people just can't deal with the side ponytail. Makes 'em rowdy.

Floyd did not go to the same effort I did. I don't think he'd shaved the entire time he was in prison. Or bathed. He was one of those people who just look creepy. You know, creepy. Which can be fine, but there's regular creepy and then there's that twitchy kind of "cicada emerging from the exoskeleton" creepy, and Floyd tended toward the latter. I thought at first that he might be alright, but he was even worse than Amy. He'd go on off-topic tangents about how the government was stealing his hats, and how this workshop thing was only a temporary gig until he set up his Alfa Romeo dealership. He'd say incredibly sexist things, like how he'd learned in Hawaii that if your wife gets out of line you should just crack her in the temple with a coconut. His hygiene... became a distraction. The one thing he did really well, though, was keeping the disruptive teenagers in line. One time, when a kid was acting up, chucking spitwads at the board, Floyd threatened to give him "the Colombian knuckle." I don't know what that is and I don't think the kid did either, but he stifled right quick.

One day, we were doing a workshop at an office supply manufacturer and distributor, and it was me and Floyd and Amy, and this one gentleman was leering at my

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MINNIE (cont'd)

buttocks. While under normal circumstances I wouldn't blame him because I do have very nice buttocks, I was there in a professional capacity and I expect the people to whom I'm presenting the workshop to understand and respect that. Well, you should have seen Floyd's reaction to the ogler. He told him to straighten up and fly right or he'd be sorry, mister, only in far more vulgar terms, and repeatedly invoking the male genitalia. Amy was very put-out and told Janna all about the whole thing when we got back to the office, arguing that it was particularly unfair because the gentleman had a lazy eye and probably had no idea where he was staring, but I couldn't help but see Floyd as my knight in shining body odor. I thought that under all of that body hair and track marks and chinos from the Goodwill, there beat a heart of gold, or at least a very convincing gold-like synthetic.

In spite of Floyd's apparent emotional and literal physical bristliness, I developed a little bit of a crush on him. I think it was because he was so assertive and I wasn't, and I admired that. It got to the point where I would bring in little things for him, to see if he'd notice. One time I brought in my tape copy of Bonnie Tyler's album, "Faster Than the Speed of Night," so we could listen to it on my Walkman together, but he said he distrusted any kind of technology that required an open pathway to his brain. I think he and Granny Mitzman would get along well in that regard. I'd try to chat about little things, like how I believe in giving out Cepacol instead of candy on Hallowe'en because it keeps the kids healthy and less hopped up on sugar, or my

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idea for a combination Italian caffè and nightclub called the Biscottheque, but it seemed like he wasn't even listening. Of course, that just intrigued me even more -- you ladies know what I'm talking about -- so I started asking Janna to pair me with Floyd more and more often. I have to think she figured out what was going on; the lesbians are the wisest of the sexual minorities.

The whole thing came to a head one day at the centre. We'd spent the day at a workshop and we were sitting in the break room, and I'd brought my collection of *American Gladiators* tapes from the early nineties for us to watch. I was just about to comment that I was envious of the ladies, with their physical prowess and Princess Diana hair, when it became clear he had no interest in anything I was saying. I was sad, but mostly I was mad, mad about years of silence and stuffing away hurt feelings and letting people walk all over me. So I just snapped, and I told him that if he couldn't see I liked him then he was a fool, and I was too good for him anyhow, mister, and he could put that in his pipe and smoke it. I expected him to be contrite or angry or something other than he was, which was lustful. He got that unmistakable look in his eyes -- you know, the one boys get when they're thinkin' about your bra straps. I was wearing my prairie skirt that night, and I have to tell you, I don't think it was a coincidence. He made his move, and well... I think it impolite to describe what happened next. So I will just say that there upon that couch, under the watchful gaze of God, *American Gladiators* correspondent Mike Adamle, and for a brief moment, a very surprised Sparkletts deliveryman, I was made a woman.

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I don't need to explain to you how profound even the simplest of love-making sessions can be, and I shudder to be too familiar with an unprepared group such as yourselves, but I feel I need to lend context to the situation, to better explain why this event was so monumental for me and bore the fruit it ended up bearing. My lone sensual encounter prior to this point was with a foreign exchange student in the eleventh grade, and by foreign exchange student I mean the Iowa version of a foreign exchange student, a boy named Calvin from Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin. It was an ecstasy of fumbled thumbs and unskillfully administered butterfly kisses and this heavy-lidded look with my eyes that I thought was sexy at the time but really made me look like I was far-sighted and smelling something bad at the same time. He kissed my neck and I kissed his chest and then Mr. Adler came in and said I'd need to leave because the Arby's was about to close and Calvin still hadn't mopped the floors yet. And I collected my underwear off the floor, threw on some Old Spice to cover my shame, and slunk out of the restaurant insecure in my womanhood. One more example of my doing as I was told. My tryst with Floyd, though... it broke all the rules. It gave me back my voice. Talk about empowering women; I had done the Des Moines Women's Association proud.

I didn't see Floyd again after that. That night, after he left the office, he was arrested for carjacking a Suzuki Sidekick and driving into a post office. I guess we were destined to be ships passing in the night. I thought I'd be disappointed, but you know, it was like I'd reclaimed something that night. Like his rough assertiveness had ebbed through him

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into me. There was a spring in my step that next morning as I stepped out to my car and dropped my feet onto my Garfield "I hate Mondays" floormats. I felt sassy. Not just regular sassy but Jackée Harry sassy, the kind of sass so pronounced my mother wouldn't let me watch *Sister, Sister* growing up, both because it set a bad example and because she had an irrational fear of identical twins. I entered the office that day and I felt the wind blow my hair back and for the first time in ages, I felt alive.

Amy sauntered up to me in that way she does, some college-girl barb on the tip of her tongue, and I tell you what, I just let her have it. I said she was a no-good stinker, and that I didn't care for her very much, and that I thought she was no kind of lady. She gasped and patted her décolletage, and I knew I'd struck a nerve, so I went on that her breath smelled like a cadaver and her breasts looked like a deflated football. Janna overheard and seemed pretty shocked, so I went off on her, too. I told her it was irresponsible to put me doing workshops with a convict and that I didn't appreciate the nepotism that had led to him getting the job in the first place when the rest of us had to apply fair and square. Again, I knew I was getting results, so I went on that her eyes were so close together they looked like they were going to merge into one big cyclops eye, and her mustache made her look like the child of Lech Wałęsa and Tom Selleck. For good measure, I turned to poor desk-ridden Lavinnia and told her that she was a grown woman but her makeup made her look like a child whore.

What a triumph. Like Edwin Moses, I had jumped the hurdles laid out

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MINNIE (cont'd)

before me and sprinted to the finish line of my true self. Of course, Janna didn't quite see it that way; I believe she used the words "insubordination" and "being a bitch." She put me on probation, which I had to imagine put her at an awful disadvantage with Floyd and I gone and Lavinnia, you know, handicapable. Still, it was better than being fired like I would have been anywhere else, so I'm thankful for Janna's merciful heart. I took the probation time to sit at home, practise my autoharp, put my small Tupperware inside of my bigger Tupperware, and think about what I did wrong. When I was too meek, I never got what I wanted, but when I was too assertive, I ended up hurting the people around me. That's when I realised what I'm telling you all tonight: you have to find a balance. You can't be too much of a doormat because you'll never be happy, but you can't go around calling your co-workers whores because you'll never hold a job. You've gotta land somewhere smack-dab in the middle, like me. If too much is Norway and too little is Finland, then I'm Sweden: right in between, the perfect amount of both. By the way, I would love to go to Sweden sometime; I have this really lovely blue and yellow handbag I feel like they would really appreciate there.

I'm back to work in the women's centre now. Lavinnia's legs are all healed up and so is my attitude, and I'm ready to be a member of the team again. Just this morning, Amy made a snide remark about my *Pinky and the Brain* desk plaque, and I just firmly told her that I didn't appreciate her jibes but that God still loved her. It makes me feel better to stand up for myself. Also, I've started putting laxatives in her coffee. She thinks

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MINNIE (cont'd)

she's just sick from the donuts in the break room, which could be true because I put laxatives in those also. That's my lone act of rebellion, though. Beyond that, I'm back on the straight and narrow. The only barbs around me now are on the wire on the fence surrounding my self-esteem. Now no one can touch it without my permission, and that's the greatest gift I could ever give myself. (Just to clarify, that was a metaphor. I don't actually have a barbed wire fence surrounding my self-esteem. That would be very expensive, and very silly.)

I hope I taught you all something about finding your own balances that you'll be able to take home and use. The best part is I'm not a big fancy Hollywood celebrity, like Jennifer Aniston or S. Epatha Merkerson. I'm a regular working-class Betty, like you and your friends. If I can do it, you certainly can do it. Just try it. When you leave this auditorium tonight, try it. Catch a fish. Plant a tree. Live your life. You have the Minnie Mitzman guarantee.

Thank you.

Fade out.