



Your Name Here:
An Actor's Guide To Developing
Your Own Solo Play

by Susan Merson

LOIS MITCHELL

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The woman I worked for on that February winter road assignment had dull hyena eyes. She locked me into the aging Weyerhaeuser mansion on the snowy campus every night, cautioning me not to go out. Security refused to give me a key. She closed the door firmly, gleeful at having trapped her very own Rapunzel. She jumped into her idling convertible and cackled as she drove away to her jagged tri-level on the muddy banks of the icy Mississippi.

The main sport here was mud wrestling. The main industry, a rickety college of chiropractic that mangled Midwestern backs at five bucks a crack. One bar cloned from a nationwide chain, storefront Baptist churches. Cars rusting in the brutal winter lounged on street corners along with many a disappointed and wildly self-righteous eye.

Lois kept me as her very own. I was her gift to the community and she followed my moves with anxious self-satisfaction. When I was naughty with an outspoken “hell” or “damn” her glee was paramount for she got the joy of a vicarious “fuck you” aimed at this slushy hell without having to bear any of the responsibility for uttering it.

Across the river from Lois, I slept in a tired antique bed under eaves that sighed every hour. An exclusive Lutheran college held me captive and when I was not performing in church basements, I stared out the frosty windows of my Victorian tower or took long, deep baths in the ancient tub. I thought about the kids on the campus all so blond and white and clammy. I thought of clam chowder and why I hated it. And then the wind blew, branches broke and icicles clattered to the ground.

For lunch at the “Dairy Belle”, Lois ordered me Campbell’s soup with a plastic spoon. I asked her for some supplies for my confinement. I pleaded lack of moral fiber, requesting a television or radio to pass the midnight hours. She gave me a deprecating smile.

“I never watch it myself. It’s takes me off my game. But I’ll cater to your weakness. I’ve one or two myself, they tell me.” Her wan smile traveled to the dreary eyes reflected back at her in the mirror above and behind my head.

“I’ve been hospitalized once. In Chicago. A grand town. I seem to have gone crazy here. Something about the sun. I seem to have gone crazy. Twice once. Now I do this. I employ you. Though I’m really much more interested in the visual arts.” She stared at me, deeply regretting the fact that I looked back at her and blinked. She flung her disdain my way with her left glove. “I prefer things that don’t move. Or dirty.” Lois giggled at her own joke and the door of the Dairy Belle swung open with a huff.

Lois had two kids away at Ivy League colleges and a husband, Tom, at the office most of the time. She dressed nicely and regularly went into Chicago to shop, never staying 'til sundown.

“Do you have someone who comes home to dinner?” she asked me.

“Cronkite. Seven every night.”

“Cronkite. Quite right.”

And the scanning of her dead grey eyes over my forehead.

Just before midnight one endless day, after two shopping malls and a Rotary meeting, I was pondering the similarity of my current life to that of Miss America. I didn't get very far. Mary Tyler Moore was throwing her hat into the air on the snowy television screen in front of me. When the phone rang I ignored it. At midnight it rang twice more. At this time of night, prayer messages for the infidels flashed on the tube. I was beyond salvation, so I picked up the phone. The snow on the screen, and out the window and now on the phonenumber sent a chill deep through me.

“Who's calling?”

“Accept Jesus as your savior and you will gladly be our neighbor at the Christ Arms, Lilly Dale Home” sang the television. And the receiver on the other end of the line clicked down.

There are no late night shows after midnight in the prairies and they say even the Baptist ministers sleep soundly through the hours of sin 'til sun up.

At 1:30 AM the television hissed and sizzled but the picture tube had given up trying to grab enough signals to create a clear picture. It was company. I dropped in and out of dreams. At three, the phone crackled and rattled. I shot up, the current running the fuse of my spine.

“Hello. It's Lois. You may find it strange for me to call at this hour but Tom's not home from the office yet and I was just wondering if you might know where my tennis racket is.”

“It's a bit chilly to use your court.”

“New York wit. Jew wit. Shit wit, nit wit!” she laughed on the other end of the line. The cubes in her scotch shivered.

“Are you alright, Lois?”

“I am absolutely fine. I have a fine home on the banks of the Mississippi and I'm sure I'll find my tennis racket before spring. You artists are so sensitive.

Clairvoyant. Don't let me disturb your beauty sleep.” Click.

I laid the receiver down on my pillow and covered it with a blanket but it refused to go silent.

Next morning we went to our last gig together, Lois and I. The Jimmy Dean Pork Sausage Plant.

From New York I sent her a tennis racket and a thank you note. I got it back with a preprinted note from Tom.

“LOIS MITCHELL PASSED QUIETLY IN HER SLEEP THE 15TH DAY OF MARCH. THE FAMILY ACCEPTS YOUR SYMPATHY”.

And a handwritten scrawl. “Lois never played tennis. Lois never played at all.”
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