

Donna Orbits the Moon

A play
By Ian August

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DONNA ORBITS THE MOON

Cast of Characters:

DONNA: Female, Late 50's – Wife, Mother, Homemaker, Occasional Environmentalist
and Baking Aficionado

VOICE: Male - Disembodied Voice (Offstage)

Place: In and around a Minnesota Suburb

Time: 2010

SECTION ONE: COUNTDOWN

DONNA:

I slapped a woman's hand.

I know, I know.

It was a few weeks ago, in the Rainbow Foods. I had been on my feet all day—there was a bake-sale at the elementary school and I have trouble getting away from those. I make a gooseberry blondie that was runner up in a competition near Maple Grove a few years ago, and ever since I became a minor celebrity to all the bake-sale planners in town. In the last two months alone I made a tray for the Shriners, a tray for the Catholics, the Girl Scouts, the Episcopalians, the Jehovah's Witnesses and the state penitentiary. I didn't even know the penitentiary had bake sales—I'm not even certain what it was benefiting, although there's really no reason that just because you're a criminal you can't enjoy a gooseberry blondie.

So aside from the elementary school, I had done the dry cleaning, the post office, reorganized some old boxes in the attic, gotten my annual eye exam—let's face it, I was just bushed. And there I was in the baking aisle of the Rainbow Foods and I'm staring at the wall of all purpose flour and I reach out for a bag, and another hand, a hand that was not my hand, was reaching for the same bag. And rather than turning to the person who owned that hand, rather than stating, politely, "Excuse me," rather than apologizing and stepping away... I slapped her. Hard. There was an audible smacking sound. Like the crack of a tiny whip.

I know, I was stunned. I turned to the woman, it was an older woman, in her mid sixties, and I could tell she was stunned. And then I grabbed my purse and I ran out. I can't really explain it beyond that. So now I shop at the Kowalski's which is much further away and I don't care for their produce, but I think I deserve the drive.

That's not exactly all.

You know Gil has been working very hard lately. Most weeknights he gets home after eleven or so, and I'm usually in bed by nine, nine-thirty. And he recently started working weekends, too, so I spend more and more time by myself. I've taken up macramé, which is healthy, and certainly there's always a tray of blondies that can go in the oven—but it gets a little... lonely, you know?

So Gil tells me that he understands, and he knows, and I know he knows, and I tell him I know he knows. And we make plans for a special dinner on a Sunday evening. Just like when Charlie and Terry still lived at home. Gil was coming home at five, we would eat at five-thirty and watch 60 Minutes at seven. A lovely Sunday. I roasted potatoes.

Green beans with almonds. I stood out in the back yard and grilled steaks. Rib eyes. \$4.99 a pound, which is a bit pricey, but that's Kowalski's.

Gil wasn't home by five. He wasn't home by six. And at seven, when 60 minutes came on, it was a repeat, so I turned the television off. I made a plate for Gil, blew out the candles and put the rest of the food in the fridge. But as I was putting Gil's plate in the microwave, I guess my hand wasn't level and his steak slipped off and landed on the floor. I bent down to pick it up... this is so embarrassing...

I felt my hand close around the meat, you know? It was still a bit warm. And I don't know why, but I just started rubbing it... against the floor. Like it was a sponge, and I was scrubbing. Tiny circles, tiny, tiny circles without even thinking. By the baker's rack, behind the oven, under the fridge. And then I put it back on his plate, put the plate in the microwave. I wrote Gil a note that said "Supper's in the microwave, see you in the morning" and went to bed.

I know what the next question is, but I don't know the answer. I didn't ask, and he didn't say. In the morning I got up and made him coffee and a sandwich and he kissed me on the cheek and flew out the door. I pulled out the bucket and the mop and cleaned the kitchen. And that was the end of that.

But that wasn't the end of that.

Cheryl and I were driving to a craft show in Duluth. You remember Cheryl—my friend who got divorced last year and then married her husband's mechanic? Well, Cheryl and I have been going to this craft show in Duluth every year for almost a decade, you know? We love little knickknacks. I love to get those little wooden cutouts that are shaped like flat Christmas ornaments, and then paint them with Christmassy colors and tie little strings around them and use them as real Christmas ornaments!

Well, we were driving up highway 35 toward Moose Lake, and Cheryl is telling me all about Sven—that's the mechanic—when I realized we were a bit low on gas. I put on my blinker to get into the exit lane. And that's when the teenager with the black hair and the sports car... cut me off.

According to Cheryl—and I have to take her word for it because my memory of these events are very fuzzy—I had a bit of a *moment* in the car. I may have used a series of obscenities unfit for mixed company, and I also may have chased after this sports car in my minivan with my arm out the window in a rather unladylike gesture. What I can remember is sitting on the shoulder of the highway with my hands sore from gripping the steering wheel, and Cheryl shouting into her cell phone to Sven to come and pick us up. Cheryl told me later that I might have caught the kid in the sportscar if we hadn't run out of gas first.

And that's the moment I realized that I might, in fact, have a little problem with my

anger.

* * *

The carpet isn't clean. The carpet isn't clean.

I stood there, with the vacuum in one hand and a can of Fresca in the other, repeating that over and over in my head as I tried, in vain, to clean the carpet. My daughter, Terry, is on the sofa reading a softball magazine she brought from her apartment. And I can see there's a crumb of something—pie crust or cracker, I'm not sure—stuck in two of the fibers of the carpet. I run the vacuum over it, but it doesn't pick up. So I repeat the motion—slower this time, as if to say: "It's time to go, little crumb." But the crumb doesn't move. So I place the head of the vacuum right on top of the spot, and I let it sit there. And when I pull back the vacuum, what do I see? That gosh-darned little crumb, staring back at me with its smug little crumb expression.

I bent down, and with my fingers, like this, I picked up the crumb. It came away as though it was waiting for my touch—easy, and free. I looked at the crumb. And I looked at Terry, sitting on the sofa. And I looked at the vacuum, still noisily grinding into my perpetually unclean carpet.

And I picked up the vacuum. And I threw it against the wall.

Terry jumped up, and I must have looked terrible, because she sat me in the easy chair and ran to get me a glass of water. I told her about the woman in the supermarket, and I told her about running out of gas on I35. I did not tell her about cleaning the floor of the kitchen with her father's supper, I'm not sure what she would have thought about that.

Terry suggested that I see a therapist. I told her that was a terrible idea. She said that she has seen three therapists since she graduated: one when she broke up with Richard, one when she broke up with Joseph, and one when she broke up with Maria. I told her that therapy is not for everyone. I also told her that if I went to see a therapist, I would feel like a failure; like I was broken. After all, my mother raised six children with an alcoholic husband—and she never saw a therapist. Terry got very angry with me. Do I think that she's a failure? Do I think that she's broken?

I thought about what the best answer would be to those questions, but at that same moment, the glass of water I had been holding shattered in my hand and shards flew everywhere. Terry screamed. I screamed. Terry accused me of trying to kill her and ran out the door.

I gingerly walked across the room, lifted up the vacuum, turned it on and tried to suck up the glass that had found its way into the carpet. A cut on my finger was bleeding down the handle. And in the back of my mind I heard the echo of a faint whisper:

The carpet isn't clean. The carpet isn't clean.

* * *

I put on my Chutch Suit. It's navy blue with a light blue pinstripe; a jacket and skirt with a yellow blouse and scarf. It's been known as my Chutch Suit since Charlie was four or so. He had great difficulty at that age to pronounce his "r"s in many words, and the word "church" was the most notorious of those. Gil and Terry and I always found this very amusing, and Charlie picked up on that, as four year olds will do. For months he would intentionally try to inject the word "church" into conversation so we could all giggle at his pronunciation. "Chutch."

"Mommy, when are we going to chutch?"

"Does the baby Jesus live in chutch?"

"Do Aunt Vera and Uncle Joe go to chutch?"

No, Charlie dear, Aunt Vera and Uncle Joe go to something called an ashram where they eat toxic mushrooms and fornicate with their neighbors. That's true—but I never said that, please don't think I said that. I said, "Yes, they do go to chutch. Every Sunday morning, just like us." This satisfied that glint of mischief in his eye, and he retreated into the daily routine of torturing his big sister until he could think of a way to use the word "chutch" again.

In the minivan on the way to St. James, Gil smoked a cigarette with his arm half out the window and the chill that swept through the minivan made my shoulders raise up. This was not easy given the snugness of the Chutch Suit jacket. Gil didn't turn to me, but he said: "Is there something on your mind?"

"No," I said. As indeed, there wasn't.

"I spoke to Terry," he said. I didn't say anything back. There wasn't much to say. "She thinks you're not yourself lately," he said.

"What gave her that impression?" I asked.

"You tried to kill her with a vacuum cleaner," he said.

"Maybe she was dirty," I said.

Gil touched my thigh. There was concern behind his gray eyes, and he spoke softly: "When something bothers me," he said, "It helps for me to come here and listen."

I was surprised by this. "You come here? Alone?"

Gil squeezed my thigh with his strong hand and smiled. "Sometimes listening is the only thing that lets us feel calm again."

“Listening to what?” I thought. But church isn’t the place to discuss one’s distress, so I didn’t say anything and we stepped out of the car.

St James is not glamorous, like some churches. It has the charm and humility of an elementary school. When Terry and Charlie used to come here I remember there were more drawings on the walls, but Pastor Olsen demanded cutbacks due to the economy, so I guess paper and glue had to go.

The greeter greeted us, the coat-taker took our coats, and the usher ushered us to our seats where we were immediately set upon by Meryl Pedersen. She was squeezed into a white dress with red polka dots that was quite a bit too small, and she had a little pill box hat to match, perched upon a tumbleweed of curly blond hair. “Oh yah,” she said before I even sat down, “Those gooseberry blondies you donated to the scouts bake sale were everyone’s favorite.”

“Aw, Thank you,” I said. She went on: “I’m trying not to eat sweets—but I had to sample a few. You wouldn’t mind passing along the recipe, would you?” I did mind—I don’t like being possessive, but I’m very proud of that recipe, and I don’t really give it out. But church isn’t the place to discuss my fragile self-esteem, so instead, I said, “Give me a call sometime this week, and we’ll talk.” Meryl shifted, and her great bulk shoved me into Gil’s arm, like a nudge from a polka dotted Holstein. “Maybe you could write it down for me today,” she said. I smiled. “I’m sorry, Meryl, I don’t have a pen handy. You have my number, though.” Meryl took the hint, but she wasn’t pleased. Her turned up nose let out a snort, and she leaned over to Borg and muttered, “Well, you should try to keep it consistent; this last tray was a little on the dry side.”

Something red flashed behind my eyes. And then I realized Gil was prying the bible from my hand. I looked over at him, and his expression spoke volumes. I was about to unconsciously use the Holy Book to bludgeon Meryl Pedersen. Gil was surprised, but church isn’t the place to discuss the potential homicide of other churchgoers, so he didn’t address the situation directly, and thankfully, Meryl hadn’t noticed. Instead, Gil leaned toward me and whispered: “Donna—try your best to listen.” I nodded. I would. I promised.

And as Pastor Olsen began his sermon, I listened. I listened hard. It was about sharing the word of Jesus with your neighbor, which was something I was very interested in. But the strange thing was after a few moments, I was listening so well that I couldn’t hear anything he was saying. His words were moving past me, around me, winding through my South Sea pearls and wrapping around Meryl’s polka dot pill box hat. It ribboned through Gil’s arm, snaked around my stockinged ankle and I began to hear the movement—the wind behind the movement. Until the words were totally drowned out by the sound, that rush of wind, like the roar of a jet engine, of a rocket blasting off. My eyes blinked and my sight was filled with flashes of color—yellow, red, green, white. The room began to spin, the pastor falling, the people in front of me were now above me, behind me, below me, and then—

Gil had his hand on my arm. I was standing in the middle of the congregation. Pastor Olsen had stopped speaking. Everyone was staring at me, mouths open. I tried to speak, but nothing came out. I was dry. I was empty.

“Donna?” Gil said quietly.

I pushed past Gil and ran up the aisle, into the hall. I grabbed my coat from its wooden peg and followed the gray carpet through the lobby until I was outside in the parking lot. With a giant moan, I proceeded to vomit violently down the front of my beautiful pinstripe Chutch Suit. And with the world still spinning, I wound my way to the minivan, where I fell forward onto the cold, hard asphalt and then everything went dark.

* * *

It was me, sitting in the blue plaid easy chair in the living room. I was looking out from the chair, but I was seeing myself in it as well—you know, the way dreams can do. I was doing some macramé with my good yarn—the gray yarn with the silver tinsel running through it—and I was weaving something. There was a smile on my face, very broad, but genuine. I was happy.

There was a parade of people marching through the living room, and I smiled as each one passed. Gil, Cheryl, Terry, my sister Vera, Pastor Olsen, Melanie Durhammer from my high school class who used to be my gymnastics partner. One by one they marched past me and out the front door, and Melanie did a cartwheel as she left.

I noticed then that my macramé was gone, replaced by a glass of water. I looked down into the water, and could see my reflection staring back at me. I was still smiling, just as broadly, but something in my eyes made it seem as though I wasn't very enthusiastic about it. I felt a rumble beneath my chair and looked around the room. Nothing happened. And then the rumble came back, and the room began to shake, lightly at first, and then more aggressively. The photograph of my mother rattled against the wall. The wooden Christmas ornaments I had placed on the mantle began to drop, one by one, to the floor. And then all of a sudden...

Crack.

The water glass cracked, the house cracked, everything at once with one big

Crack.

I threw the glass to the floor as the walls of my home seemed to break apart, pieces of the ceiling crumbling onto the carpet, clouds of dust enveloping my furniture. I caught my reflection in a picture frame before it clattered to the floor. Why was I still smiling? I was terrified—I could feel my terror, I could see it in my own eyes--but I was still smiling! My fingers began to claw my face, trying to force the corners of my mouth into

retreat, and I could see my world collapsing around my body as my nails dug deeper and deeper into my cheeks and then the entire house... disintegrated around me.

I was left in nothingness. In emptiness. Black, with tiny specks of white that lived off in the distance, so far away I could not touch them. And then I realized those specks of white were stars. I was in outer space. And then a hand in a plastic glove stretched toward me, and I reached for it, and we touched...

And then I woke up.

My eyes peered up into a dark room. I was in a strange bed, and when I craned my head to the right, I could see Terry, sitting in a metal folding chair, her eyes fluttering as she struggled to stay awake. I blinked and whispered, "Terry, honey."

She sat up straight. I said: "You should go home and go to bed, sweetie."

She smiled, reached out and took my hand in hers. "Do you feel okay?" she asked.

I shrugged. I noticed it was easier as I was no longer in my Chutch Suit. I asked if we were in the hospital, but she didn't have to answer. The scent of cleaning solution suddenly filled my nostrils, I recognized it right away. I said: "I had a moment at church, right?"

Terry nodded and told me that the doctor said it was nothing serious—he said it was vertigo, and that it was probably stress-induced, and that he had a pill I could take. That sounded ridiculous to me. How can you have vertigo if you're barely five feet tall?

"Dad was so worried," Terry said. "He's been here the whole time, but I made him go to the cafeteria to get a cup of coffee." I told her she was a good girl, and asked her to go and fetch her father. She kissed my hand before she left, and shut the door.

I was alone. Alone.

And now that I was awake, I couldn't help feeling... really angry: Angry that I put my Gil and my Terry through this aggravation; Angry at the doctors who gave me such a silly diagnosis; Angry at Meryl Pedersen and her thoughtless request for my gooseberry blondie recipe.

And then I thought of Gil, and how sweet he was in the car. And his advice: listen. Just listen.

So I shut my eyes, and blocked out the hospital smells and sounds, and I took a deep breath... and I listened.

VOICE:

Hello Donna.

DONNA:

I opened my eyes, looked around the room. But there was no one there. So I closed them again. I lay there, and took another deep breath...

VOICE:

Hello, Donna.

DONNA:

This time I was certain I heard it. A man's voice. "Who is it?" I asked. "Who's there?" But there was no one in the room. I could see every corner, the door to the little bathroom was still ajar, and though the lights were dim, I could say without a shadow of a doubt that there was absolutely no one in that—

VOICE:

Don't be frightened, Donna.

DONNA:

But I was frightened. I was terrified. I drew my hands to my face, just to see if I was smiling—still dreaming. I wasn't. I managed to ask: "Who... who are you? Are you God?"

VOICE:

No, Donna.

DONNA:

I got nervous. "Are you the devil?"

VOICE:

No, Donna.

DONNA:

"Wait, are you some celebrity? Is this one of those television shows?"

VOICE:

No, Donna.

DONNA:

I was getting frustrated. "Well, who are you then? Some ghost or something? Because I have had a pretty rough Sunday, Mister Voice, and I am in no mood. Now either tell me who the heck you are, or get out of here for good." There was a pause, and then the Voice said the strangest words I have ever heard in my life. He said:

VOICE:

My name...

DONNA:

He said:

VOICE:

My name... is Buzz Aldrin. I was the second man to walk on the moon. And I'm here to help you, Donna. I'm here to help you land.

DONNA:

And that's when Terry and Gil stepped right back into the room, where my startled expression was completely ignored in the wake of my husband's utter relief.

* * *