# Graduation

A 10-Minute play

By

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# Characters

**Major roles are indicated in boldface.**

**Jenn**: A doctoral student.

**Betty:** Another doctoral student.

**Christine:** A former doctoral student, now a cocktail waitress.

**Professor Peter Smith:** A young professor in their department.

Woman at gallery opening: Most likely played by the actor playing Christine.

Note to reviewer: I recognize that I need to follow standard script formatting before submitting this script to a 10-minute play festival.

# Scene 1

(A coffee shop or other location with JENN, BETTY, and CHRISTINE sitting together.)

(Lights.)

JENN: Have you heard anything about Peter? Is he doing any better?

BETTY: I know he was at the last department meeting. So, he must be better, a lot better. But people are saying that he told the chair he wants to take a leave of absence.

JENN: I really need to finish my dissertation. There’s no one else in the Department who can do human-robot interaction.

CHRISTINE: He’d probably work with you even if he went on leave.

JENN: I guess. He’s that kind of person. But it depends on where he is and how he’s feeling. And things would be difficult if his lab shut down. I have no idea what the funding situation is. I can’t imagine who would take over.

BETTY: I want to work with him too. I was going to ask him to help me plan out a dissertation topic.

CHRISTINE: The pitfalls of academia. Life is simpler when you’re a cocktail waitress. Trust me. I was never cut out to be a professor.

BETTY: The academic world wasn’t ready for you either, Christine. Best you stay clear of each other.

JENN: He’s lonely. No one has ever seen him with a woman. Or a man either. Blacksburg is not a place for a single guy. All the faculty have families. Everything is about families and kids—picnics, Little League. He just works. He’s always in the building on weekends.

BETTY: We don’t know *for sure* what his problem is.

CHRISTINE: Well, I’ll bet on the “lonely guy” hypothesis. And I believe there is a solution to his problem—and yours.

(JENN and BETTY look at each other wondering what CHRISTINE has in mind.)

(Blackout.)

# Scene 2

(Lights.)

(PETER is seated at his office desk. JENN is standing at an imagined open doorway. Near the desk is an office chair for visitors.)

PETER: Come in.

 (JENN enters.)

JENN: Hello, Professor Smith . . . Peter. How are you?

(Without any hesitation, she sits in the office chair.)

JENN: I’m not here to talk about my research. I just wanted to find out whether you’re feeling OK.

PETER: Thanks. I’m OK, Jenn. I think I’ll be ready when the new quarter begins. I’ve had a rough time of it. No secret about that. I feel terrible about not finishing my classes last quarter. All those students without final grades. And, I haven’t been much help for you and the other graduate students with their doctoral research.

JENN: There are rumors you might be leaving.

PETER: I need to be open with everyone. I’m not sure I’ll continue next year. I’ve asked for a medical leave. I don’t know what I’ll do. I’m from Minneapolis, and I have family there. I think I’ll go back, at least for a while. Fortunately, money is not a pressing concern for me. I can take my time deciding what to do next. If I leave, I’m probably burning my bridges as far as academia is concerned. I’d feel obligated to reveal my “breakdown,” and any department that looked at me would probably find out anyway. I can certainly find an interesting industry job or just consult part-time.

JENN: Betty and I were talking. Other folks too. We value you so much—as a professor, as a person, as a friend. I hope you appreciate just how much your students like and respect you.

PETER: That’s great to hear. Really it is.

JENN: Christine too. We think that—maybe—you are lonely. Living alone and . . . lonely. Blacksburg is no town for a single man. Everything is geared for families, and it’s no place for a man—unless you’re an undergraduate—to meet a woman.

PETER: That *might* describe my situation.

JENN: Peter, are you gay? It’s a rude question, an inappropriate question, but I need to know. There’s nothing wrong with being gay. That’s a given. But, still, I’m asking.

PETER: I’m not gay. I am a healthy, heterosexual man. I know why you asked. Well, I’m “shy.” Not gay, just shy. I was shy in high school, in college, and, now. I’ve had relationships, but they started in unusual ways—ways that you just can’t make happen when you want to. Do you understand what I’m trying to say?

JENN: I do, Peter. But, Peter, life is full of surprises. One just never knows what lies ahead. Maybe your life will change . . . in terms of relationships.

PETER: Maybe so. I appreciate the visit, Jenn. If I leave here, you’re one of the people I will miss most.

(Blackout.)

# Scene 3

(Lights.)

(JENN, BETTY, and CHRISTINE are at one of their apartments, but no set is called for. They are standing. CHRISTINE is holding her smart phone.)

JENN: OK, whose first?

CHRISTINE: One of *you* goes first. I’m perfectly willing to take off my clothes—for men, for women, for the camera, in the check-out line at a supermarket. But *you two* are the beneficiaries of this plan. I’m just in it to help my dear friends finish up their doctorates.

BETTY: And because you’ve been half-crazy your whole life.

CHRISTINE: Maybe so. But I’m the photographer, so one of you will be first, the other will be second, and I’ll be third. When it’s my turn, I’ll set up the shot, and all you need to do is press the button. I’m directing this photoshoot. I give the orders. . . Jenn, you’re first. Take it off, everything. Then look at me. I want you sexy, but not vulgar, not tawdry. (She is smiling. She then pronounces “Professor Smith” in a refined British accent.) Professor Smith is a very refined, genteel fellow.

BETTY: That’s right. Not vulgar. Doctoral-student sexy.

(JENN shyly does a model’s turn, does another one less shyly, strikes a sexy pose or two, and begins to undress.)

(Blackout.)

# Scene 4

(Lights.)

(PETER is at his office desk.)

PETER: Come in.

JENN: Hello, Peter. How are you?

PETER: I’m OK. A little better.

(She takes a seat.)

PETER: Jenn, I think you said something about a book you wanted me to see?

JENN: Yes, I have it right here. It’s not exactly a book. It’s a . . . photo album. It hasn’t been published. It *won’t* be published. In fact, this is the only copy, and it may be burned and in the trash by the end of the day.

PETER: I’m *quite* confused.

JENN: (Pulling up her chair closer to PETER’S.) Let me show you, Peter. Hold on to your seat.

PETER: What? What *is* this?

JENN: (Mischievously.) You know what this is, Peter. It’s *me*. (Turning the page.) And this is also me.

PETER: Why are you doing this? What’s going on?

JENN: And this is Betty. Here’s another shot of Betty. Nice butt—yes? Oh, and here’s Christine, the star of the show. We took these a week ago. We took them just for you. Christine says “hello.” She says you were one of her favorite professors.

PETER: Jenn, I thnk you should take your book and leave my office.

JENN: Here’s the deal, short and sweet. You stay at Tech for at least two more academic years—we hope it’s forever. Betty and I will both complete degrees working in your lab, with you as dissertation director. Betty is for sure a strong researcher, and she wants to work with you. During this time, we guarantee you female “companionship”—three attractive young women. Christine is in it just for “fun.” You *know* Christine. Here’s how it goes. A “date” with me one week, with Betty the next, with Christine after that, and back to me. All very, very discrete. Even Christine. She knows how high the stakes are here. They’ll need to be some adjustment in the schedule for vacations, conferences, and stuff. No guarantees for the summer months, but we’ll do our best to see you don’t get too . . . “lonely.” This book is just to demonstrate our “sincerity.”

PETER: “A”—this is crazy. “B”—this is unethical. “C”—I’d get fired for having sexual relations with students. I’d never teach again. “D” . . .

(As PETER hesitates, JENN interrupts.)

JENN: “C” is true enough. But we will be very, very discrete. Unethical? I’m not so sure. Usually, it’s the male professor who exercises power over his female students. But this is something different. For the record, we’re the “aggressors.” And all we are looking for is for you to keep your job and fulfill your regular duties. We get no special treatment. What’s wrong with that? (Extends the book.) Take another look, Peter. Christine is a good photographer, isn’t she. Don’t be shy. It’s natural for a man to want to look. And, Peter. We are really very fond of you.

PETER: Let’s get back to “D.” This seems like a Christine idea. Tell me if I’m right.

JENN: Well, yes.

PETER: I appreciate your good intentions, but this is not well thought out. I don’t like what this idea implies about men and, in particular, about me. If I get laid, my problems are solved?

JENN: I understand. I guess Betty and I got this wrong. Christine has a strong personality. It seemed like the right thing—for us and for you.

PETER: Well, Christine was good with robots, but maybe less good with actual people. Or, she’s good with the men she deals with at her cocktail bar.

JENN: OK, the idea is wrong. But was it entirely wrong? What if we go slow. Betty and me—maybe we’ll leave Christina out of it—and you will have a special relationship—based on the genuine affection we have for one another. We’ll let it go where it goes. Maybe into sex. Maybe just companionship. Maybe let it just evaporate little by little if it’s not working out. Time will tell. Can you respect this kind of arrangement? Will you go forward with it?

PETER: It’s something I’d need to think about. It’s something you and Betty need to think about as well.

 (Long blackout to suggest the passage of time.)

# Scene 5

(Lights.)

(JENN, BETTY, and CHRISTINE are sitting together at a coffee shop. Almost two years have gone by.)

JENN: I’ve got the date set for my final oral.

BETTY: Good for you. I’m not too far behind. I have all my data analyzed and written up. I’m just doing a revision on the final chapter. When do you go to Purdue?

JENN: Next week. They seem really interested.

BETTY: It’s been an unusual two years. When we began our “special relationship” with Peter, he was definitely closer to you, not me. But somehow it all moved in my direction. Sometimes I imagine that we’re married, or that we could be headed that way. But that’s not in the cards. We are caring lovers, but not quite lifetime companions. Besides, his career is here, and I have to start my own career somewhere else—with my own lab.

JENN: Betty, we need to figure out the end game. I’m sure Peter is wondering what the next phase of his life is going to be. When the time comes and he has to face up to your leaving, do you think he’ll find another woman? Do you think you. . . we. . could arrange a date for him?

BETTY: I have my doubts. He will surely want another relationship, but he’s not much better prepared to find himself a woman than when all this began. He is still very uncertain with any woman, any obviously “eligible” woman, he comes in contact with.

CHRISTINE: I think maybe I have an answer. When it comes to relationships, Peter is like some animal that’s been raised in captivity. Never had to hunt for his dinner. So . . . we teach him to hunt, so we can let him out in the wild!

JENN: What?

BETTY: Christine may in fact have a workable idea. He may not

CHRISTINE: You bet I have. We can teach him—the three of us. Like men are taught on “Queer Eye.” “Peter, first you scan the room. You’re looking for a woman who . . . Then, you walk up to her. You say . . . ” We can do a step by step . . . right to the very end. *That part* he knows. We can have If/Then scenarios: “If the woman says X, you say Y. If she does this, you do that.” Make it like a course.

JENN: Would he do it?

BETTY: I think he might. Peter’s been taking courses, designing courses, and teaching courses since he was 17. If we present this as one more “advanced degree” he needs to earn, he’ll likely give it a shot. He does trust me. He trusts *us.*

JENN: But would he succeed? Would he get past his shyness? What if he “went out on the hunt” and failed miserably? Then he’d be worse off than ever.

CHRISTINE: We could have a setup, a ringer. He *thinks* he’s picking up a woman, but she’s just waiting for him. Lots of my friends would do it.

BETTY: No. Or, only as a last resort.

(Blackout.)

# Scene 6

(Lights.)

 (An art gallery opening, which might be indicated by several real or imagined paintings hanging on a real or imagined wall and perhaps by a folding cocktail table with multiple glasses of white wine or champagne set up on it.)

 (JENN and BETTY are standing close together at the periphery. PETER approaches a woman looking at a painting.)

PETER: I really like the color palette. What do you think?

WOMAN: Judging by your tie and jacket, you have no business commenting on color palettes!

 (She walks away briskly and exits. PETER glances unhappily at JENN and BETTY. They smile back encouragingly.)

JENN: Well, he took the plunge.

BETTY: What he *did* was good. It just didn’t work out.

JENN: I have high hopes. He was very “coachable,” and he’s definitely more confident.

(PETER walks to the edge of the stage. JENN and BETTY follow him with their gaze.)

BETTY: He’s looking at another woman. The one in the yellow dress.

JENN: There he goes.

PETER: (To unseen woman.) We can certainly see a major shift in Doisneau’s aesthetic after the war years. Don’t you think so?

(Escorting the unseen woman Offstage and speaking in pantomime, PETER exits.)

 (JENN and BETTY, with their gaze directed offstage, watch closely. They watch some more.)

JENN: Yes. They are talking. Mr. Smooth. Go Peter. I think the *three* of us are on track for graduation.

(Blackout.)

## THE END