

ICE BOX CAKE
AND THE MAN FROM LIMA:
A 10-12 Minute Monologue

by
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10-12 MINUTE MONOLOGUE. Velma, a White woman "of a certain age" is shocked to see a person of color walking into her neighbors' house. Turns out the daughter of the White family next door encountered him in Peru during her junior year abroad and now she's brought him home to meet her parents. What if he comes peeking into Velma's windows? And what if he's out in the yard when "the girls" show up for bunco that afternoon? They'll be afraid to get out of their cars! And here she's gone to the trouble of making a special ice box cake for refreshments! The monologue uses gossipy humor to illustrate the casual racism of the 1950s and to demonstrate that fear of young Black men is nothing new in American society.

CHARACTERS (1W)

VELMA, age 60+, white, widowed housewife

SETTING

A living room in a small town in the Midwest

TIME

The 1950s

PRODUCTION

Ice Box Cake and the Man from Lima was produced as part of Masterpiece Monologues: New Works by Stage Left Theatre, Spokane, Washington, and presented on Facebook and Vimeo on October 8, 2021, with Susan Hardie directing and Lynn Noel as Velma.

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ICE BOX CAKE AND THE MAN FROM LIMA

Author's Note: Racism is in the DNA of the woman in this play. She was raised to assume that any Black man is a threat to any White woman. She takes it for granted.

The play is set in the Midwest because that is where the playwright is originally from and also because presenting racism with a Southern accent lets Northerners off the hook. Unless the actor naturally has a Southern accent, please do not default to one.

Since we are only hearing “Velma’s” side of a telephone conversation, the audience must rely on the actor’s reactions to infer what “Laverne” is interpolating. The gist of what Laverne would be saying is indicated in brackets during the pauses.

SETTING: A living room implied by a chair and a side table holding a rotary phone.

AT RISE: VELMA, a white woman in her sixties or seventies, is on the phone. She is very agitated.

VELMA

Laverne? Is that you? Thank God! I got two wrong numbers trying to call you. I swear I can't get ahold of anybody since they started making us use these rotary dial phones. My fingers don't seem to work right in those little holes. If this is what passes for progress in the 1950's, I'll take vanilla.

[Listens while Laverne says she sounds upset.]

Well, if I sound upset I've got a right to be. You know those Ellerbees next door to me? Have you seen the man Rosemary Ellerbee brought home for her parents to meet? I just happened to be looking out my front window—

[Listens as Laverne doubts that. She knows what a busybody Velma is.]

Yes. Just happened to be. You think I've got time to be standing in my window all day spying on the neighborhood? *[Self-righteously.]* I have always believed I should mind my own business and let other people mind theirs. I heard a car door slam and thought it might be Sharon bringing the cookies for this afternoon's bunco club. But when I looked out, there was Rosemary Ellerbee arm-in-arm with—

[Listens. The existence of a club she's not part of is news to Laverne.]

We play bunco every other Wednesday afternoon. I'm sure I must have told you about it. It's great fun. The competition can get real cutthroat. Today's my turn to be hostess.

[Listens as Laverne asks whether she is serving refreshments.]

Of *course* I'm doing homemade refreshments. I wouldn't give the girls something store-bought. I made a lemon ice box cake yesterday so it could sit in the Frigidaire over night. It is out of this world if I do say so myself. I got the recipe out of the newspaper three Sundays ago. Naturally I put my own little touch on it. I add Dream Whip on top to dress it up a little. And you know their slogan: "Dream Whip cuts the calories in half."

[Listens as Laverne questions Velma's idea of the power of Dream Whip.]

I *know* they don't mean it takes half the calories out of the whole dessert. What kind of a dumb cluck do you think I am? They just mean it's half the calories of real whipped cream.

[Listens. Laverne doesn't think Dream Whip tastes anything like real whipped cream.]

Well it tastes just the same to *me*. And you know some of the girls. They can use all the help they can get in the calorie department. Anyway, I couldn't believe I was seeing a man like that in *this* neighborhood.

[Listens as Laverne wonders where Velma's daughter's cookies come in.]

Sharon? Oh the cookies! I always like to serve shortbread cookies on the side of a frozen dessert. Shortbread makes an elegant addition without overshadowing the star of the show. And this ice box cake is a real star for sure. But when I turned on the Mixmaster it blew a fuse and there was this awful burnt-electric smell. I had to air out the house all afternoon yesterday and sometimes I think I can still get a little whiff of it now and again. I just hope the girls don't notice. But you know Berenice. She's got a nose like a bloodhound. Well, with the mixer out of commission I had to call Sharon in a panic and volunteer her to make the cookies.

[Listens as Laverne compliments Sharon's daughtering skills.]

I know. I couldn't ask for a better daughter than Sharon. I love all three of them, but just between you and me, Sharon's worth more than both the other two put together. But I was trying to tell you about Rosemary Ellerbee's boyfriend. Laverne he's colored! I mean it! Black as the ace of spades! You can imagine how stunned I was. A colored man standing right there in my street big as life.

[Listens as Laverne asks, weren't you afraid?]

I tell you I was scared to death. I watched ‘til he and Rosemary went on into the Ellerbees’ house then I ran around to make sure all my doors and windows were locked up tight. You ought to do the same as soon as we hang up.

[Listens as Laverne notes she doesn’t live anywhere close.]

I know you live clear on the other side of town. But what if he was to see you out somewhere and took a fancy to you and followed you home? My daddy always said no white woman is safe when one of *them’s* around. He drummed that into my head from the day I was born till the day he died. That’s what makes me so uneasy. Living here alone all by myself, an old woman like me.

[Listens as Laverne takes issue with Velma calling herself old.]

Well aren’t you sweet! That means a lot coming from someone who knows what my age really is. ‘Course with a little Helena Rubinstein and Maybelline it’s no trick at all to take ten years off your age. You should try it.

[Listens as Laverne tells her she does use those products. Velma thinks they aren’t working then.]

Oh you do. Well, I suppose you could switch to Revlon. That seems to work for some people. So as soon as I could get out of my housedress and into something respectable—

[Listens as Laverne makes sure Velma had her shades down.]

Of *course*. I had the shades down and the curtains closed. You know how close these two houses are to each other. If he happened to be standing at the Ellerbees’ kitchen sink getting a glass of water he could look through their window and right into my bedroom. The whole idea just gives me the creeps. Once I was presentable I looked out all four sides of the house to make sure the coast was clear and then I hotfooted it down to the diner. I knew it was likely somebody there’d know what was going on.

[Velma finally gets to tell her story uninterrupted.]

Sure enough. Elmer and Dorcas Bonner were sitting there having breakfast. Dorcas’s mother was an Ellerbee so she’s Chester Ellerbee’s cousin. At first she didn’t want to talk about it, but I finally got the whole story out of her. She *claims* the man isn’t really a Negro. She *says* he’s

from South America and they're all dark-complected down there. Let me tell you Laverne. I saw that man with my two own eyes and you can't get much more dark-complected than he is.

Rosemary met this guy when she did her junior year abroad. I can't imagine what the Ellerbees were thinking letting their daughter go traipsing off to some foreign country with no supervision whatsoever. This is just the kind of thing that can happen. Well. That was over a year ago. In all that time her parents have never said one word about him. They were probably hoping the whole thing'd blow over before the town gossips got wind of it. You know how some people will talk.

His name's José something-something-something Gonzalez. Or maybe it's Rodriguez. I can never get those weird names straight. His parents are supposed to be really wealthy. Got their money from growing coffee or something. No, it's cocoa. *White* cocoa of all things. And apparently they sell it in powder form.

[Listens as Laverne says she never heard of that kind of cocoa. Neither woman knows they're discussing cocaine.]

Yes! White. Powdered. Cocoa! I never heard of such a thing either, but they must sell a lot of it. Dorcas says they've got a plantation away out in the jungle and a great big mansion in LEEma.

[Listens as Laverne asks where LYma is.]

No, not LYma. LEEma. LYma is in Ohio. LEEma is in Peru. Really, Laverne. Everything you know about geography would fit on the head of a pin. *[Beat.]* Well, once I got the lowdown about this so-called South American, I thought I should start calling around warning people so they wouldn't be as shocked as I was if they saw a colored man strutting around like he owned the place. I'm going to let them know down to the police station too. Until he leaves town it wouldn't hurt one bit for them to send a patrol car down this street once in a while. Especially this afternoon when the bunco girls'll be coming and going.

Of course you were the very first one I called. But I just this minute got home from the diner. Elmer and Dorcas left and I was just finishing my poached egg when old Mrs. Weber came in and sat down right across from me. You ever try to have a conversation with that old bat?

[The next long sentence is done with hardly a breath.]

She is one of those women who can talk your ear off about everything and nothing and you can't ever get a word in edgeways and once she gets going it takes her forever to wind down enough so you can make your excuses and get away—

[Listens, as Laverne, herself desperate to get away, comes up with an excuse.]

Well why didn't you tell me you had to get to the hairdresser? You go to Dolores Billings, don't you? I heard tell she gets real upset if people are late for their appointments. You better get a move on. Me, I still go to Ruby Thomas. I've worn my hair the exact same way the last thirty years and Ruby can 'bout do it in her sleep. Plus she's deaf as a post so you know whatever you say to her won't get spread around all over town.

Uh oh. I think I hear Sharon with the cookies. Why don't you just come on to bunco this afternoon. You can sit in my place and play a few rounds, see how you like it. *And* you can try my lemon ice box cake.

[Listens as Laverne says she wants to try the cake but is still not liking the Dream Whip.]

No, if you do not want the Dream Whip on it you do not have to have it.

[Listens as Laverne asks if Velma really wants her to come.]

Of course I really want you. Why wouldn't I?

[Listens as Laverne agrees to be there.]

Great! I'll see you about two o'clock then. I'll be watching for you. Now you be sure you have your car door locked, and if you see that man hanging around out in the Ellerbees' yard you should just drive around the block a few times until you're sure he's gone back inside. And bring your game face. We're playing against Mae and Jeanette. When it comes to bunco those two take no prisoners.

VELMA hangs up the phone.

END OF PLAY