

L'IMAGES

A Short One-Act Play
by Ken Love

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CHARACTERS

NICK

JENNY

HORACE

IRIS

A TRANSIENT

PLACE AND TIME

An American city. The mid 1970's.

(Nick emerges from the darkness with his camera)

NICK

I still love my wife. I always will. Which makes the thought of killing her so unbearable.

(Lights now rise on his wife, Jenny, who enters from SL, dressed in a white dress – which she wears throughout the story. She strikes a pose and Nick photographs her)

There was a thing about me that made her crazy . . .

(We see a montage of 1970's chic black & white photographs projected onto a back screen – scenes of Jenny modeling in various parts of the city, in a café, at a lake by the woods, semi-nude in a studio, etc. – each portraying the particular pose that Jenny is assuming at that moment)

. . . which impressed her as an alluring quality on my part.

(Jenny laughs)

I've never been open about my feelings. And that intrigued her.

(She continues to pose, smiling and laughing occasionally as the photos fade in and out)

She sensed multitudes within me. Yeah! That's what she said. And she had to know more . . . to get near me, break into my heart and –

JENNY

. . . and tap the wellspring of the id . . . unlocking those dark enigmas that hold a woman spellbound!

(Again, she laughs)

NICK

Yeah! Her words. *She said that.*

I'm a fashion photographer. And she'd been one of my occasional subjects. After our first date, we slept together. A month later, we married.

(The montage stops. And Jenny turns to face Horace, who has entered)

However, within a year, she'd come to the damning conclusion that that which was unknown and forbidden embodied something which she didn't want to deal with or know about at all.

(Horace and Jenny embrace and kiss as lights fade on the couple)

A week ago, one night, at about half-passed ten, I got out of bed, dressed, and went for a walk. Jenny lay on her side, her back turned to me, feigning sleep. I sensed that her eyes were open and expectant. I wanted to kiss her. But I thought better of it.

I wandered the streets through the summer night like a drunk. I stepped into a bar. Ordered a drink which I didn't touch. Paid the barkeep. Left. Walked into a porno theater. Took a seat. Then vomited all over myself as the carnal escapade flashed before me.

I ran out and into an alley and vomited again until I was dry heaving. Then I cried like a kid.

Walking further, I rented a room in a seedy hotel. I showered and washed the puke from out of my clothes. Then lay on the bed and tried to sleep. I couldn't. The need to murder my wife left me stricken.

(Lights rise on Jenny and Horace dancing close to low, sensuous music, smiling, laughing, speaking silently as they dance. Horace' hands are caressing and roaming lewdly over Jenny's body)

The movies, in my view, offer limited ways to kill a spouse. I could think of more. Many, many more. To begin, there wouldn't be anything clandestine about the act. I'd make a total event of it. And I could never satisfy myself with a mere *killing*. No . . . This would be a *murder*, in the heightened sense of it all. Yeah! An *event!*

(Fade on the dancing couple)

There'd be the set-up, preparation, even rehearsal. Then, the confrontation with the spouse. I'd spit accusations at her like poisoned darts. I'd listen to her lies, which would leave her breathless. Finally, with nowhere to hide, she'd beg to be forgiven. Taking it all in, I'd laugh – something I don't do enough . . . but, laugh I would. And in her face. Then, with the abruptness of a striking cobra, I'd commit the act – hitting her with something, stabbing or shooting her, or . . . or cutting her in a vital place, perhaps. And she'd bleed, her blood spewing in

orgasmic torrents. And I would stand over her like the . . . *the Almighty Himself* –

(Laughs at the absurdity of that)

. . . and – and watch her writhe in agony. Bleeding to death. Her eyes wide. Pleading. Terrified –

(He turns suddenly and vomits. After a few moments, he recovers. Lights rise US in the bedroom. Jenny, in bed, sits up slowly)

JENNY

Are you alright?

NICK

I'm fine.

JENNY

It's 6AM. Where did you go?

NICK

I . . . *What do you care?*

JENNY

Excuse me?

NICK

Nothing. I'm sorry.

JENNY

You look pale.

NICK

I'm not well.

JENNY

Do you want an aspirin?

(He shakes his head)

How 'bout a cup of hot tea?

NICK

No. I'm . . . I'm fine, Jenny.

JENNY

Are you sure?

(Silence)

I'll make tea.

(She rises and exits)

NICK

Just make sure there's hemlock in it!

(He laughs. Silence. Then a black-and-white portrait of Nick's mother is projected US)

This is my mother, who was sent home from the hospital when she could no longer be helped. She'd spend her final days and hours with her only child at her bedside, at the time a kid of fourteen.

(The image dissolves)

I'd been with her when she passed. She'd cough briefly, take a short, conclusive final breath, then sink deeper into the mattress, as if she'd deflated. I'd open the bay windows of her bedroom and allow the sunshine to burn the corrosion of death from her life. I removed her clothes, then motioned to shut her eyes, but thought – no. I'd photograph her, naked and dead, as she was, her eyes wide with horror and bewilderment.

I shot from many angles and positions. And I've kept those photographs to show Jenny. When the time is right.

(Jenny and Horace are sitting in a café. Nick stands in the shadows, observing and photographing)

JENNY

I think he knows.

HORACE

Are you sure?

JENNY

I – I think so.

(Silence)

Horace . . . I'm scared.

HORACE

And I've told you there's nothing to get uptight about. As long as I'm here. You're protected.

JENNY

Still –

HORACE

Don't you trust me?

JENNY

I want to trust you.

(They kiss)

If he finds out –

HORACE

What? What will he do?

JENNY

I don't know. I mean . . . Jesus! I'm married to a man whom I know so little about.

HORACE

And once upon a time, you were turned on by that.

JENNY

Sure. Now I realize how dumb I was.

HORACE

Look, he might be a walking-talking Chinese box, but please . . . rest easy with the fact that the guy is civilized.

JENNY

You're so sure.

HORACE

I know his type. He might do *himself* in, but –

JENNY

No. Stop.

(Horace takes her hand)

HORACE

Baby . . . You'll be fine.

(They embrace)

How much time do we have?

JENNY

The whole afternoon.

HORACE

Do you want to –

JENNY

Yes. I want to.

(They exit)

NICK

I will resist the need, the impulse, to kill her lover. Too easy. No. The challenge lies in taking out my adorable spouse, whom I love as life, who is as essential to my presence . . . as breathing.

(Lights rise on Jenny and Horace in bed behind a thin veneer, making love. Nick kneels outside the veneer by the bed and watches)

The thought of killing something one hates isn't foreign to me. At nineteen, I wanted to terminate the life of a young girl of fourteen who harbored an indelible crush on me.

(The lovemaking intensifies)

I hated her, yet I allowed myself to be lured into her game. Her parents were away that afternoon. And she led me downstairs to the basement . . .

(It reaches an extended, violent climax . . .)

. . . where she took off her clothes. "Take my picture," she said.

(. . . then a slow denouement. Nick then moves DS)

I did as she asked, photographing her as she posed lewdly . . .

(Jenny and Horace embrace and kiss heatedly)

. . . laughing at me through it all. Finally, she stopped.

(Horace rises from the bed and gets dressed)

She said, "Come here." I did so. She wrapped me in her arms. Her scent made me nauseous.

(He gives Jenny a kiss. He exits)

I found myself unable to tell the little bitch just how much I despised her, as if something painful and distasteful were lodged in my throat.

(Jenny slips into a robe and sits on the bed)

From then on, I could only resist her. And thereby suppress the will to choke the life from her lungs.

(He moves US, pushes the veneer aside, then addresses Jenny, still on the bed)

Where did you go today?

JENNY

What . . . ?

NICK

Didn't you go out?

JENNY

Uh . . . Yeah. I did. For a little while.

(He sits by her)

NICK

Where'd you go?

JENNY

To see a friend. We had coffee.

(He caresses her hair)

NICK
 Anyone I know?

JENNY
 I doubt it.

(He kisses her. Jenny does not respond)

NICK
 Are you alright? *You look pale.*

(Jenny rises)

What's wrong?

JENNY
 Nothing. I . . .

NICK
 Won't you sit by me?

(Silence)

Jenny . . . ?

(She exits)

For the next week or two, I'd follow her, observing and photographing every public encounter with her . . . and the new little friend.

(Lights rise on Jenny and Horace sitting on a bench in the park. Nick is behind a tree, photographing them)

JENNY
 I was right. He knows.

HORACE
 Are you sure?

JENNY
 Yes.
 The two of us are a couple of cruel and sadistic fucks, aren't we? Look at us!
 We're torturing him.

HORACE
Are we? Torturing him?

JENNY
I can feel his pain.

HORACE
In other words, after all this time, you're finally getting to know your husband.

JENNY
Yeah. And I've never felt so . . . so conflicted.

HORACE
Or tortured?

(Silence)

If you want to stop this –

JENNY
No. Please . . . I can't.

(They kiss)

HORACE
When the time comes we'll –

JENNY
What? Kill him?

(They laugh)

HORACE
We really are cruel, aren't we?

JENNY
No. Just in love.

HORACE
Madly!

(They kiss and caress with passion as lights cross
fade to another bench where a transient sleeps)

NICK

In the film “La Dolce Vita”, there was a character who feared that he would kill his children.

(Nick approaches the bench where the man sleeps)

He spoke of becoming increasingly fearful of what they would have to face . . .

(He gives the man a shake, waking him)

. . . in a world without love.

(Nick suddenly takes the man in what appears to be a half Nelson, then strangles him to death. He releases the man, who falls to the ground. Nick then photographs him from varying angles)

At night, he would commit the deed, killing his two little children as they slept. And afterward, killing himself.

(He leaves the dead man and moves DS. Lights fade on the transient)

I didn’t catch all of what they’d said that afternoon in the park. Yet I was as sure as I had reason to be that these lost souls were plotting my murder. From the shreds of their perverse communion, I put together what appeared to be the workings of a way to kill me! To take me out! . . . A feeling of sheer relief rushed through my heart as if I’d experienced a sudden epiphany. No – I wouldn’t have to suffer the agony of killing my wife at all. I’d merely sit and observe, in the best way I knew, a complete murder plot played out before my eyes – right up to when the ultimate price would be paid. By, of all people, *me!* Yes! With this discovery, I felt relief. Exhilaration. An atoning satisfaction. And a maddening anticipation as to how they would carry it out.

(Lights rise on Horace and Jenny, silhouetted while standing by the bed)

From the park, she would take him to our apartment. And they would make love in our bed. Again.

(They begin undressing one another, preparing to make love)

I wouldn't surprise them. I didn't want to walk in, startle them, then ruin everything. I'd give them as much time as they needed to construct a plot during their lovemaking – which I gathered as the only instance in which their mental faculties were most alive. And devious.

(Lights fade on the couple and rise on Iris sitting at a bar, nursing a drink, thinking)

No, I'd give them time. *I had to bear witness to this*. So . . . I'd give them room. I'd wander around the park, all night, if I had to. I'd walk through the city, in fact. The excitement of what lay in store nearly getting the better of me.

(He notices Iris, then walks into the bar, taking a seat beside her. She's a little drunk)

I needed a drink. A stiff one. I stopped by the bar and noticed what appeared to be another lonely, dark soul. Nursing a scotch and soda.

IRIS

I've come to hate 'im. I mean . . . really hate 'im, y' know? To the point where I could . . . I could kill the bastard.

NICK

Who?

IRIS

This guy I'm married to.

NICK

Your husband?

(She gives him an incredulous look)

Sorry.

(Silence. They drink)

So . . . why do you hate him? I mean, it's none of my business, but . . . Why would you want to kill him?

IRIS

Let's say it's . . . that it's come to that.

NICK

Okay.

I ordered another drink for her, as well as one for myself.

IRIS

It all started off really nice. I mean, the love was easy. And the sex was even better. And then . . . then I married him. When he asked me, I don't recall saying *yes*. I just . . . I just married him, y' know?

I fail to understand how it could all have turned so bad.

(She weeps silently, then drinks)

I'm . . . I'm sorry –

NICK

It's okay. I'm Nick, by the way.

IRIS

Hi Nick. Iris.

Early on, we . . . we talked about kids. Y' know, a family. He liked the idea at first. After a while, though, he never said anything more about it. In fact, when I'd bring it up, he'd get mad. He wouldn't yell or anything. He'd just frown . . . like, he'd scowl at me as if I called him a bad name. So, I took the hint and shut up about it.

Pretty soon, it was like that with everything. Finally, I came to realize that I was married to a man who was very difficult to figure out. I mean, I wish it could all be narrowed down to something simple, like . . . like an affair with another woman. Or a man, even. That would be easy to understand. It'd be hell to deal with but, at least it would entail something that's easy to . . . to *discern*. Black-and-White, y' know? Instead, I'm stuck, burdened with a man who is . . . complicated. *Difficult to figure out*. Who'd want that?

NICK

How long have you been married?

IRIS

I don't remember. Too long, I suppose. Too damned long.

NICK

You look tired.

IRIS

It's been long a life.

NICK

Where do you live?

IRIS

Not far.

NICK

Would you like me to walk you home?

IRIS

I – I don't think I want to go home.

(Fade on Iris)

NICK

Two nights later while taking my usual detached walk through the park, I saw Iris again, sitting on a bench. With blood all over her.

(Lights rise on Iris seated on a park bench, her hands, arms and dress stained with blood)

IRIS

I made dinner. A home cooked meal. I made what he likes. I had the table set. A bottle of chianti was on the table. Everything was ready. And I waited. He told me he'd be home at seven. So, I cooked. And waited. Dinner was prepared in the way he'd asked. I expected him at seven. And the bastard . . . the son of a bitch was late. He even yelled at me. He walked in the door close to two hours late. Then he had the nerve to yell at me.

(She weeps, then silence)

I got him in the bathroom. He was about to take a shower. He'd taken off his shirt. And was about to pull down his pants . . . when I got him. Blood was everywhere. If the door had been closed . . . it would have filled the bathroom, all that blood. He'd . . . he'd be floating in it, y' know?

NICK

Jesus . . .

IRIS

Yeah. I did it. I really did it.

NICK

Well, so . . . what are you gonna do now?

IRIS

What? *Now?*

NICK

Yeah.

IRIS

I . . . I have no idea. I – I suppose I should have planned something, or . . .
Gosh! I didn't think of anything. I – I didn't –

NICK

Alright! Just keep cool.

(Silence)

IRIS

Y' know what? I don't feel anything. I just took out my husband . . . and I feel
nothing. Not a damned thing.

NICK

Nothing?

IRIS

No. Nothing.

NICK

In that case . . . I've got an idea. Let's go back. To your place.

IRIS

What for?

NICK

I want to see your old man.

IRIS

Why? He's –

NICK

I know – I know. But I'd like to see him anyway. You see, I – I'd like to . . . to
photograph him.

IRIS

Photograph? You mean take his picture?

NICK
Yes. I would. If it's okay.

(Silence)

IRIS
Sure. Why not.

NICK
Thank you.

(Fade on Iris)

Meanwhile, there was my dilemma. Abruptly one afternoon . . . one wet, baleful afternoon in autumn, a day in which a foreboding pall hung in the air like poisoned gas . . .

(Jenny enters)

JENNY
Nick . . . There's something I need to ask. And, please, tell me the truth.

NICK
. . . Jenny would confront me.

JENNY
Have you . . . have you been –

NICK
What?

JENNY
You've been watching us, haven't you? Horace and me?

(Silence)

Well?

NICK
Okay. What if I have?

JENNY
Then . . . we should talk.

NICK

Sure. And take your time. Since I'm about to run out of it anyway.

(Jenny is baffled)

It's okay. I'm alright with this. Take as much time as you need. Please.

JENNY

Alright, then. Nick . . . Listen, I'm – I'm so sorry about all of this. I – I want you to know that none of it had anything to do with you. It, well . . . it wasn't your doing. I – Nick, I . . . this was me. If you can understand – or, at least, try to –

NICK

Is he waiting outside? Sorry to interrupt, but . . . Well, I'd just like to know if he's outside the door? Waiting?

JENNY

Waiting? . . . Who?

NICK

Be straight with me. Is he waiting beyond the door? Or is he on his way over?

JENNY

Nick . . . ?

NICK

I'm like a kid on Christmas Eve, I know. Forgive me, but I'm finding it hard to contain myself. I – I . . . I can't seem to wait, Jenny. Now tell, please! Will Horace carry out the act today? In a few minutes? Or will he wait until the end of the week? Or for another month . . . ?

JENNY

You – you stop this . . .

NICK

The truth is, I can't wait another month. Or another day. If it's got to happen, it needs to be now! Now, Jenny! *NOW!*

(She is about to leave. He grabs her arm)

JENNY

Let go of me!

NICK

I love you, Jenny. And my darling, I know you lack the temperament for this kind of thing. I suppose you can map out the plan well enough. Yet I realize that the execution should be ceded to a surer hand.

JENNY

I said let go of me.

NICK

It's okay, my love. Everything's okay.

JENNY

Goddammit! LET ME GO!

(Nick releases her. Images are being projected
US)

NICK

See, you're wrong, Jenny. I'm the one who should be sorry.

(We see a montage of black-and-white
photographs: Jenny and Horace embracing in the
park, at a café, walking together along the city
streets)

I wanted to hold off on showing you until I was sure . . .

(There are now pictures, images of Jenny and
Horace in bed, making love. Jenny cowers)

. . . that death was imminent. But . . . you've left me no choice.

(Photos of the naked teenaged girl and Nick's
dead, nude mother are shown)

JENNY

Stop.

NICK

You asked for it.

JENNY

Asked for what? Nick . . . alright, that's enough. Stop!

(Now – images of the dead transient)

NICK

Is your boyfriend man enough for this? Are you sure he knows what he's doing?

(Jenny now sees photographs of Iris' dead husband. Unlike the previous shots, these are in vivid color. We see a man lying in a deep crimson pool of blood, the gruesome images, at varying angles, flashing feverishly above her)

JENNY

Oh, dear God!

NICK

Where is your boyfriend, Jenny? I'm waiting. Why doesn't he get it over with already? WHY?

JENNY

Nick, what did – what is this?

NICK

THE TWO OF YOU WANT ME DEAD! You know it. And I now know it. So, when does it happen –

JENNY

Dear Lord, Nick – what . . . ?

NICK

Are you waiting for me to *kill myself*? Is that it? You wanna watch while I do myself in . . . ?

JENNY

STOP! SHUT UP AND STOP IT! NOW! *NOW!!*

(The images vanish. Jenny is now DS, screaming, weeping in agony)

NICK

I still love you, Jenny. You know that, right?

(He attempts to approach, but she fends him off)

JENNY

GET AWAY FROM ME! Don't you touch me!

NICK

Jenny . . .

(She then runs offstage)

Jenny.

(Silence)

Yes. I realized too late that I'd made a grave error: I'd been too . . . abrupt with her. When what was needed was patience. And, more importantly, discretion. Yeah. There was no need to make everything so obvious so soon. FUCK!

I suppose I'm left with nothing now. I am, in the truest sense of the word, alone. For a while I'd been, at the very least, a pawn in the game between my wife and her illicit lover. I, at one time, *mattered*. Now . . . there's nothing.

(Nick turns US to see an image of he and Jenny – in love and locked in a warm embrace – flash into view, then dissolve slowly)

Nothing.

(Lights fade on Nick)

(End of Play)

