

PICKING UP

By Nathan Christopher

SYNOPSIS

It's the 90s – when everyone still relied on the landline telephone. That landline is a lifeline to four women who have been brought together and are anxiously awaiting a phone call. As the hours slip away, tensions run high, friendships are tested and secrets are exposed. PICKING UP is a story about relationships, family, and what happens when everything is on the line.

BIOGRAPHY

Nathan Christopher (www.thenathanchristopher.com) writes plays about the universal truths of everyday life. Through the exploration of familiar moments—falling in (and out of) love, the death of a loved one, an act of violence, the slow decline of age—his work offers new perspectives, questions the conventional, provides comfort, allows us to laugh and, most of all, ask us to look inward rather than outward because that's how we start changing the world.

Christopher is the author of six plays: PICKING UP, TO REMAIN SILENT, A MAN WALKS INTO A BAR, SORRY (NOT SORRY), CLAIREVOYANT, and EVE: A PALINDROME PLAY.

PICKING UP was a winner in the “Script” category of the 86th annual *Writer's Digest* Writing Competition. A musical version of the show, created with lauded singer-songwriter [Gregory Douglass](#), made its off-off-Broadway workshop debut to a sold-out house as part of the Emerging Artists Theatre's Fall 2019 New Work Series. It was also featured in Undiscovered Works at Dixon Place's Monthly Storytelling Series (NYC) in April 2020, and celebrated in a special broadcast on [Musical Theatre Radio](#) in October 2020 to mark the one-year anniversary of the show's creation.

Christopher is a member of the Dramatists Guild, and has supported the Atlantic Theater Company, founded by David Mamet and William H. Macy, since 1999. Follow him on [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#), and read his work on [National New Play Exchange \(NPX\)](#).

30 Provost Street
Apartment B4
Jersey City, NJ 07302
973-650-8792
arcadianj007@gmail.com

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

<u>MARGOT LOW:</u>	Grandmother/Mother.
<u>LEIGH TUCKER:</u>	Mom/Daughter.
<u>LUCY TUCKER:</u>	Daughter/Granddaughter, in law school.
<u>ELLA DENVER:</u>	Lucy Tucker's childhood friend, never left town.

THE TIME

The late 1990s. Autumn.

THE PLACE

A farmhouse in Ohio.

THE SETTING

A rambling, spacious kitchen with a door that leads outside. A large, rustic table at center stage is littered with magazines and games, including a chess set and a deck of cards. A game of Scrabble is in progress at the moment. Unicorn-themed items are present throughout the kitchen, incorporated into the décor as tastefully as possible – a wall calendar, salt and pepper shakers, magnets holding family photos on the refrigerator, a napkin holder, a blanket over the back of one of the chairs, etc. Floral arrangements and “Get Well Soon” cards have been placed around the room without too much thought. If the circumstances were different, the room would appear warm and welcoming. Although that’s not the case, it still looks very lived-in.

AT RISE: Evening is approaching. Light rain and a low rumble of thunder are heard.

Three women sit at the table. LUCY TUCKER is playing Scrabble with ELLA DENVER. They are both drinking bottles of beer. MARGOT LOW is reading the *Weekly World News*, a tabloid newspaper, humming and mumbling quietly to herself about the articles.

ELLA

(Plays tiles and counts up the points.)

So with a double-letter score, that's fifteen. Your turn.

(Picks up new tiles to replace those she played.)

LUCY

(Arranges and rearranges her tiles. Frustrated, she dumps them all and picks out new ones.)

Go.

ELLA

(Lays down more tiles and smiles triumphantly.)

There. And on a *triple*-word score, that's...

(Points to the tiles as she adds their values, counting under her breath.)

Seventy points.

(Starts to write down the total.)

LUCY

Wait a minute. Just hold on. That's not a real word.

ELLA

Yes, it –

LUCY

I read a lot. And I do a *ton* of crossword puzzles – those hard ones in *The New York Times*. And I've never seen *that* word before. Cheater! You just made it up.

ELLA

I did not.

LUCY

Admit it! You *did*. You just made it up. You're trying to cheat *again*! Every time we play –
(Moves to take the tiles off the board. ELLA reaches out a hand to stop her.)

ELLA

Hey! It *is* a word.

(Smugly.)

It's a biology term.

LUCY

Bullshit. You think you can just pull out these smart-sounding words and I'm going to let them slide? No way. If you have crappy letters, dump them. I just did. Go fish.

ELLA

It's not –

LUCY

Look, there are like *four* words in the entire English language that start with “x”:

(Counts them off as she says them.)

Xylophone, Xerox, *X*-ray, and *X*-mas, and the last three don't count. Just because you got stuck with it is no reason to –

ELLA

Xenophobia.

(Picks up a pocket dictionary and throws it across the table to LUCY.)

Look it up.

LUCY

Okay, *five* words...

ELLA

And *xylem*.

(Points to each tile on the board as she spells it out.)

X-Y-L-E-M. A biology term. It's the woody tissue of a plant. Trust me. Or look it up if you don't. I have a –

LUCY

You have a biology degree. I know. Fine.

(Touches MARGOT's arm and leans toward her.)

Grandma, I think Ella cheats.

ELLA

I'm not cheating!

LUCY

Help me think up a word so I can beat her.

(Dumps her tiles again and begins replacing them, one by one.)

My letters *still* suck.

MARGOT

(Looks up absently at the girls, then back at her paper, points to a headline and reads aloud to them.)

“Wolfman of Tokyo loose in the US!” Twenty-three American women missing so far. All of them redheads.

(Touches her own hair and sighs with relief.)

ELLA

I can't imagine she really believes all that stuff. You think?

LUCY

I'm not sure.

ELLA

(Moves to the refrigerator.)

That's the only thing she ever reads. We have subscriptions for the residents to *Reader's Digest*, *TIME*, *National Geographic* – all of those, even in the large-print format. And she won't touch anything but those tabloids. Want another beer?

LUCY

Sure, thanks.

ELLA

Takes the edge off a bit, doesn't it?

LUCY

Yeah. That was a little tough today. But I think she looked a little better, don't you? She has a little more color.

MARGOT

She did look better, honey. But she was just too weak to talk.

LUCY

She was trying.

MARGOT

I don't know about that.

LUCY

Joanie's the toughest person I know.

ELLA

(Opens both beer bottles.)

She was able to yesterday. She just seemed so much more tired today.

LUCY

But Dan said she was talking this morning.

ELLA

Dan said he was talking to *her*, not that she was answering.

LUCY

She hasn't even been there 48 hours yet. People can't go downhill that quickly, can they?

ELLA

Maybe there was too much excitement. With Dan and the three of us there –

MARGOT

Four soon, once Leigh gets here.

LUCY

Right. Four.

ELLA

(Hands a beer bottle to LUCY.)

Here you go.

LUCY

Thanks.

ELLA

It's tough to say. Depends on the person and how hard they fight.

MARGOT

Did you make up Leigh's room, Lucy?

LUCY

Not yet, Gram.

ELLA

Slacker.

LUCY

We haven't had the time –

ELLA

I'm kidding, Luce. I can help you. I'm the queen of hospital-bed corners.

LUCY

Mom can make up her own bed. Plus, it's not going to matter because she'll want my room anyway.

(Indicates the Scrabble board.)

It's your turn, Ella.

MARGOT

Leigh always stays in the front room when she's here.

LUCY

Which isn't often, as we know.

ELLA

Luce –

LUCY

I'm just pointing it out. It's a fact.

(ELLA puts down more tiles and adds up the score.)

MARGOT

She should have been here by now.

LUCY

Years ago, I'd say.

MARGOT

Maybe the weather slowed her down.

ELLA

Or she stopped at the hospital.

(Headlights sweep the room.)

MARGOT

Oh, maybe this is her.

LUCY

Speak of the devil. Christ, the bedroom isn't ready. *I'm* not ready –

ELLA

(Looks out the window.)

Nope. Not her. Wow, it's getting pretty ominous out.

LUCY

It's supposed to get worse.

MARGOT

(Goes back to her newspaper.)

Well, I hope she gets here soon.

(Indicates her tabloid.)

I have so much *news* to tell her.

ELLA

(Gets new letter tiles.)

That's not news, Margot. Remember? We talked about that.

(To LUCY.)

Your turn.

LUCY

I know.

(Intensely scrutinizes her letter tiles.)

She can take her time. I'm not ready yet.

ELLA

It won't be too bad, Luce. It really won't be.

LUCY

Thanks. I'm not making up her bed yet. It'll be an issue, trust me.

MARGOT

OK, Lucy. We can wait a bit.

ELLA

Margot, can I get you anything?

MARGOT

Not right now, Ella. Thanks.

ELLA

Alright.

MARGOT

I'll take my nightcap in a bit.

LUCY

Nightcap?

ELLA

She always says that.

LUCY

(Indicates the beer bottle.)

Where did you pick these up? I can't find them at home.

ELLA

The Rubber Tree, believe it or not.

LUCY

That place is still open? No way.

ELLA

Yeah, and it hasn't changed at all for, like, 30 years – dumpy liquor store in the front, burnouts hanging out at the bar in the back.

LUCY

Well, they have my favorite beer there – which I actually can't believe – so that's a win for them.

ELLA

And for us.

LUCY

Absolutely. The one time – the only one – I was ever in there was with you, remember?

ELLA

How could I forget? On your birthday.

MARGOT

Happy birthday, Lucy.

LUCY

Oh, it's not today, Gram.

MARGOT

One year older!

ELLA

You don't celebrate turning twenty-one without a shot of Wild Turkey at The Rubber Tree. Town rule, you know.

LUCY

One and done, in and out. That was it. And it still scarred me for life!

ELLA

Didn't some guy offer you a bite of pickled deer heart or something?

LUCY

That's what I mean! And *that* was his pick-up line: "Here, baby, take a little piece of my heart." I honestly don't know how you can still live here when that place is your only option. I'll pass, thanks.

ELLA

Why do you think I'm still single? My advice: Avoid the Rubber Tree.

LUCY

That's the smartest thing you've ever said.

ELLA

(Holds up her beer.)

Except in emergencies.

LUCY
(Clinks her bottle with ELLA's.)
I owe you one.
(Looks down at the Scrabble board.)
Ah-ha!
(Starts laying down her tiles, slowly and deliberately.)
There. Read 'em and weep.

ELLA
Excuse me?

LUCY
What?

ELLA
What's *that*?

LUCY
Phlgmn.
(Pronounced "FLEDGE-a-men.")

ELLA
You mean *phlegm*? As in snot?

MARGOT
There are tissues in the powder room.

LUCY
Nope.

ELLA
"Phlgmn?"
(Pronounced "FLEDGE-a-men.")

MARGOT
Oh! And there are some in my handbag.

ELLA
P-H-L-G-M-N?

MARGOT
(Looks around her chair.)
Where *is* my handbag?

LUCY
Yep. That's a *law* term, Ella. I don't need a tissue, Gram.

ELLA

With a “P-H”?

MARGOT

Are you sure? My bag –

LUCY

Yep. “P-H” without the “D,” just like me. And you, actually.

ELLA

Not much longer for you.

LUCY

Maybe.

ELLA

Do your parents know that?

LUCY

Of course not.

ELLA

Your purse is hanging up by the door, Margot. Do you need it?

MARGOT

Oh, thanks. I’m fine.

(Goes back to reading.)

ELLA

All right. Let me know if you need anything.

LUCY

(Starts counting up her points.)

Let’s see here...

ELLA

You didn’t? Don’t you think you should? And, I’m telling you, that’s not a word.

LUCY

How do you know it’s not? And telling my parents? Well, it’s a gray area.

ELLA

“It’s a gray area?” What do you mean, “It’s a gray area?”

LUCY

Well –

LUCY (Cont.)

(Still trying to count up her points.)

Hold on, let me add these –

ELLA

Don't you dare add anything up yet!

LUCY

You want to challenge it?

ELLA

I just might.

MARGOT

“*Great* area.”

ELLA

What was that, Margot?

MARGOT

Lucy used to think it was “great area” when she was little.

ELLA

Did you?

LUCY

I forgot about that, Gram! You're right. I would hear my dad say, “It's a gray area” when he was talking about a case and I used to think he said, “It's a *great* area.”

ELLA

“Great,” as in good?

LUCY

Yeah, a great area.

MARGOT

Talking like a little lawyer, even back then.

LUCY

I really used it to my advantage, too. I figured if it's not wrong and it's not right, I would go in the direction that benefited me the most, you know? I'd always win that way. It was always *great*. A *great* area.

ELLA

Well, that doesn't apply in this case, because phlgmn [pronounced “*FLEDGE*-a-men”] isn't a word.