TWO ASSHOLES ON AN ELEPHANT

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a play in one scene

by Rick Davis

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

Zack: He’s 20’s or 30’s. He’s a painter and the estranged son of Father. He’s angry.

Father: Zack’s father. He sits in a wheelchair, desperately ill. He, too, is a painter.

Esther: A nurse. She’s young, pretty. Father flirts with her.

SCENE

A hospital room.

TIME

Present. Late afternoon.

SUMMARY

A son attempts to ease the suffering of his desperately ill father by telling him a funny story. Instead the story opens old wounds, inflicts new ones, and leads to one final joke.

Scene: A hospital room with the usual tubes and blipping apparatuses, with maybe a few flower arrangements, the kind one receives from well-wishers when one is in the hospital.

At rise: ZACK is telling what he considers a very funny joke. His FATHER lies impassive in the bed.

ZACK

So the girl says, “No, I don’t trust you. You could push me against that wall, rip off my skirt, and rape me.” And the farmer says, “I’ve got a chicken under each arm, a goose in my left hand and an anvil in a bucket in my right. How could I possibly rape you?” And the girl says, “Put the bucket over the goose, put the anvil on the bucket. I’ll hold the chickens.”

(ZACK laughs. FATHER remains impassive.)

ZACK (Finally)

Dad? … Do you get it? … Dad? … See, the idea is that the girl –

FATHER

I get it.

ZACK

You don’t think it’s funny?

FATHER

No.

ZACK

I guess I told that joke a hundred times. Got laughs every time.

FATHER

You think rape is funny?

ZACK

It’s a joke, Dad. It’s just a joke. You’re right, though. There’s nothing funny about rape.

(Uncomfortable silence.)

ZACK (Continued.)

(As HE rises.)

It’s just a joke. I certainly didn’t intend … Yeah, well. You never laugh at my jokes anyway. … This was a bad idea. I’m going to take off.

FATHER

Wait. … Don’t go. So, when are you leaving town?

ZACK

What?

FATHER

When are you --?

ZACK

I’m not. I’m staying with Aunt Maddie until …

FATHER

Until I die. Is that what you were going to say?

ZACK

No. Why would you put words in my … I don’t want you to die.

FATHER

Sorry. I’m just … I *am* dying. You know that, right?

ZACK

Oh man. Here we go. Ok, you’re not dying. Not this minute, anyway. The doctor told me you have a very good chance of living another five or six years.

FATHER

If I do get five years, I’ll spend them sitting on my ass watching *McGyver* reruns. I can’t play golf or run. I can’t walk without a fuckin’ cane! I can’t even paint.

(HE holds an arm up to reveal a tremor.)

And I sure as hell can’t make love to a woman. That’s not living, that’s existing.

ZACK

OK. It’s not going to be easy. But you have memories, a family –

FATHER

A family? Your mom’s dead. This is the first time I’ve seen you in four years. I don’t know where the hell your sister is. Maddie’s the only one who bothers to visit.

ZACK

Maddie’s the only one who -- I’m sitting right here, Dad!

FATHER

Yes you are, and I’m waiting for the other shoe to drop. What do you want?

ZACK

I don’t want a damn thing! Can’t you just accept that I came to see you?

FATHER

You disappeared. We didn’t know whether you were alive or dead. Your mother lay here desperately ill, hoping she could see you one last time. You never came. She died alone.

ZACK

Yes, she died alone! And that’s on you!

FATHER

I did my best! But she wouldn’t see me. I was there every single day, but she wouldn’t see me. So I sat in the hall hour after hour. Day after day. She … she wouldn’t let me in. Where were you? Hmmm? Where were you?

ZACK

Barcelona! I’d have gone farther, but I didn’t have the money. And I didn’t even know Mom was sick.

FATHER

That’s because nobody knew where to reach you!

ZACK

You’re not going to make me feel guilty for this … You … you …!

FATHER

There’s plenty of guilt to go around. Enough for you, for me, for your sister –

ZACK

Sandy saw you. She walked in, and she …. No twelve-year-old needs to see her father --

FATHER

Oh. You do want to talk about guilt! Sure, we can do that! How this? When you ran away from me, you also ran away from your mother and your sister! Did you know that your mother cried every single day after you -- you …!

(FATHER begins coughing desperately, unable to stop.)

ZACK

Dad! Shall I get the doctor --? Shall I --?

(FATHER gestures desperately at the call button.

ZACK rushes to HIS side, pushes button.

(Almost Immediately, ESTHER enters.)

ESTHER

(SHE rushes to his side, does some medical magic

which we can’t see until coughing subsides.)

Easy, easy. Drink this.

(SHE pours water. HE drinks it.)

ESTHER (Continued.)

What happened?

ZACK

We were talking. He began coughing --

ESTHER

He can’t get excited.

(SHE shakes a finger at FATHER.)

ESTHER (Continued.)

You can’t get excited.

FATHER

It’s the only way I can get you to come see me. I’m ok now.

ESTHER

Umm-hmm. I’m serious: You mustn’t get excited. Unless, of course, you *want* to go back to intensive care.

ZACK

I’ll wait in the hall.

(HE rises. ESTHER stops HIM.)

ESTHER

No need. He’s ok.

(To FATHER as SHE takes HIS pulse.)

Anything I can get you?

FATHER

Yeah. Some of that red jello.

ESTHER

Certainly.

FATHER

That was a joke, Esther. Grown men don’t eat jello. Do you mind me calling you “Esther”?

ESTHER

I don’t mind.

FATHER

If my pulse is racing, you shouldn’t worry. Esther. Every time I look at your beautiful face … boom! … my pulse shoots into overdrive.

ESTHER

What am I going to do with you?

FATHER

I’ve got a terrific suggestion. If you’d like to hear it.

ZACK

Dad --

ESTHER (Amused.)

I don’t need to hear it to guess what’s on your mind, mister.

(To ZACK.)

Is he always like this?

ZACK

As far back as I can remember.

ESTHER

Rest. I’ll check on you later.

(SHE pats HIS shoulder, turns to ZACK offers HER hand.)

I’m Esther. You’re the struggling artist he’s always going on about.

ZACK

I’m Zack. The art’s not a struggle. Being the son on the other hand ….

(Beat as THEY hold the handshake.)

ESTHER

(SHE gently disengages.)

Yes. Well. I’d … I’d love to see your work sometime –

ZACK

And I’d love to show it you.

ESTHER

That would be nice. … Sometime. Well … If you need me, just call.

(SHE offers hand. THEY shake again, hold it again.)

ZACK

I need you.

ESTHER

That was fast.

(Both laugh a bit.)

ZACK

No, no. I just have a few questions about him.

FATHER

Hey. I’m right here. And I’m not deaf.

ESTHER

The doctor won’t be back until morning, but I’ll tell you all I can. Stop by the desk. We can look over his chart.

(To FATHER.)

No more coughing from you.

FATHER

No problem. As long as you visit me more often. Esther.

(ESTHER smiles, shakes head, turns to ZACK.)

ESTHER

Listen, I’m going to the cafeteria this evening around seven. If you’d like to talk there …?

ZACK

Yes, I’d like that very much. May I buy you dinner?

ESTHER

I didn’t mean to …

ZACK

I know that. I just … I’d like to buy you dinner … If I may.

ESTHER

OK then. That would be lovely. First floor. Follow the signs. I’ll be in the back by the windows on the west side. See you then. … Zack.

ZACK

I look forward to it, Esther.

(ESTHER smiles, exits left, immediately reapppears.)

ESTHER (embarrassed.)

Bathroom.

(SHE exits right.)

FATHER

What the hell was that all about?

ZACK

What?

FATHER

Dinner with Esther. Is this payback?

ZACK

Payback? For what?

FATHER

My lapses, Zack. My indiscretions.

ZACK

You think dinner with a nurse is payback for what you did to me? … She’ll tell me the truth about your condition. Unlike you. And she’ll give me details. Unlike you.

FATHER

She’s pretty.

ZACK

Very. And you were trying to hit on her. Weren’t you?

(Beat.)

Weren’t you?

(Beat.)

Dad? Jesus! You’re 30 years older than she is, you’re flat on your back, you can hardly … You’re dying --!

FATHER

Oh. Changed your mind about that, did you? Well, I’m not dead yet!

ZACK

Oh for God’s sake! You know why your paintings never sell --?

FATHER

I’ve got a feeling you’re about to give an opinion, which I will ignore because you don’t know enough about art yet.

ZACK

It’s because you paint with your dick! You do everything with your dick! There’s more to life than fucking, Dad. Here you are at the end, and you still don’t understand that. In spite of the wreckage behind you.

FATHER

Art isn’t about selling. It’s about creating. How many have you sold? Hmm? How many?

ZACK

Eighteen! That’s how many. Eighteen. I’m supporting myself. As an artist.

FATHER

Why you little shit. I’ve sold pieces –

ZACK

To the women you painted naked. To the –

FATHER

They’re nudes!

ZACK

They’re naked. You can look at them and know that you fucked them, or that you’re about to –

FATHER

Shut up, Zack! … I paint nudes because I’m knocked out by the eternal beauty of the female body. Hear me? Knocked out. I paint those bodies. I touch them. I make love to them. It fills me up.

ZACK

Bodies? You make love to bodies?

FATHER

I make love to the women who live in them.

(Beat.)

I don’t want to paint commercial crap. I don’t give a damn about the galleries and the rich – and pandering – administrators who are out for the fuckin’ money. Van Gogh sold one painting in his entire life –

ZACK

You’re not comparing yourself to --?

FATHER

One! And his brother, Theo, bought it anonymously. Out of pity.

ZACK

You are! You’re comparing yourself –

FATHER

No, I’m not. And I’m also not comparing myself to that guy from Carolina – can’t think of his name – whose work hangs over sofas in virtually every house down on Park Place, who has enough admirers to have a one-man show every week-end if he wants. Realistic renderings, bright colors. And no passion. No soul. People who buy paintings like that –- and there are a lot of them -- couldn’t tell the difference between art and paint-by-numbers. … And Zack?

ZACK

Yeah?

FATHER

Don’t you ever again question my artistic impulse. Or the passions that drive me.

ZACK

The passions that drive you have destroyed – !

FATHER.

Stop right there!

ZACK

Damn you. Just damn you!

FATHER

Just stop!

(Beat.)

ZACK

Ok. I don’t want to argue.

FATHER

Sounds to me like you do.

ZACK

Ok. Ok, let’s just talk about … something else. Anything but this.

FATHER

No. Let’s get this done. This is what we need to talk about. What we should have talked about long ago.

(Beat.)

I want you to know that I’m proud you’re making a living from your work. I never had the courage to rely solely on mine.

ZACK

Well, you had mom to worry about, then me and Sandy. You never had the chance to –

FATHER

I had the chance. I didn’t take it.

ZACK

It’s not an easy life, and I couldn’t really do it if I had a family to support. But I don’t, and painting is all I care to do now. It fills me up. Every day, I get up and I paint.

(Beat.)

I saw the series you did with Maria.

FATHER

Where did you …?

ZACK

They’re stacked in the bedroom at Aunt Maddie’s.

FATHER

Those are the last pieces I did … will ever do.

ZACK

You can’t know that –

FATHER

Please.

(Beat.)

What did you think?

ZACK

They’re very … intimate.

FATHER

Did you like them?

ZACK

Don’t ask me that.

FATHER

I already asked.

ZACK

Are you crazy!? You’re living with her, not two blocks from where you and Mom --

FATHER

We’re not together any more.

ZACK

What ...? Why?

FATHER

She left me.

ZACK

Why?

FATHER

It was too intense. She couldn’t handle it. She … she cried all the time.

ZACK

Where is she?

FATHER

I don’t know. I need you to find her –

ZACK

(HE rises.)

You want *me* to find Maria?!

FATHER

I don’t have any money, but I have those paintings, which are the best I’ve ever done.

ZACK

OK. They’re … they’re good. They’re very good. But I will not –

FATHER

They’re pretty much all I have. And I need you to sell them for me.

ZACK

You know what? I’m leaving. Good to see you … I guess.

(HE crosses to door, stops.)

And Maria would never let those pieces go public.

FATHER

I have her permission. In writing.

ZACK

Mom would have –

FATHER

Your mother and I reached an understanding years ago.

ZACK

That was an impasse, not an understanding.

FATHER

Call it what you will. She understood me.

ZACK

She loved you, and you killed her. Your fuckin’ artistic impulse killed her!

FATHER

We all have to die of something. She died of love. That’s a pretty goddamn good way to go. Beats the hell out of what’s killing me!

ZACK

She died of a broken heart!

FATHER

That’s what love does to you in the end.

ZACK

You broke Sandy’s heart, too. That’s why she won’t see you. That’s not love. That’s indifference.

FATHER

I want the money for Sandy. And for Maria.

ZACK

You actually expect me to find Maria for you?

FATHER

I owe her.

ZACK

Her?! You owe me! You took her! You took her, and you didn’t give one damn who you hurt –

FATHER

I didn’t take her. She … It just happened. It was nobody’s plan!

ZACK

Goddamn you! She was my fiancé! You knew we planned to … when you … You broke my heart, too, you selfish old … Goodbye, Dad.

(ZACK crosses to door.)

FATHER

Tell me another joke.

ZACK (Incredulous.)

What?

FATHER

Tell me another joke. Maybe I’ll laugh at this one. Maybe you’ll do what I asked.

ZACK

I will never see Maria again. ... Ask Aunt Maddie to do your dirty work.

FATHER

I didn’t mean to hurt you, Zack. I didn’t mean to hurt anyone. Ever. I … I was just living my life. That encounter … that moment … was … singular. She knew it also. She lay there,

her dark eyes closing, opening, closing. I painted and I painted. All the while the pressure between us building. Then, an inevitable explosion of art and passion and … ecstasy ... I am so sorry … now. I couldn’t stop it then.

ZACK

Is that supposed to make me feel better?

(Silence.)

ZACK (Continued.)

Is it?!

FATHER

No. I wanted you to know what happened.

(Beat.)

I don’t think you and I will see each other again. Let’s don’t end like this. Tell me a joke, Zack.

(THEY stare at each other for a beat or two.

Then ZACK crosses to the bedside, sits.)

ZACK

OK. … OK … Two men – let’s say two artists --

FATHER

Already, I don’t like it.

ZACK

… decide to buy a car. The salesman asks how much they have to spend. “A hundred dollars,” one answers. The salesman says the only thing he has for $100 is an old elephant he had used in an ad campaign. “But he’s a smart elephant,” the salesman says. “He understands traffic signals.” So the painters buy the elephant –

FATHER

Painters?

ZACK

Artists. Whatever. Anyway, they climb on his back and head into traffic. Sure enough, when the light turns red, the elephant stops. Green and the elephant goes. At one red light, two girls in a convertible pull up and one says, “look at the two assholes on the elephant.” The two look at each other, their eyes widen in wonder. They get off the elephant, walk to his rear, pull up his tail, look. Light turns green, elephant walks away.

(Silence.)

ZACK (Continued.)

You have to be able to picture it.

FATHER

I can picture it. It’s very funny …

(FATHER begins chuckling, then laughing harder.

ZACK joins in. THEY laugh together. Suddenly,

FATHER’s laugh turns into a violent coughing fit.

HE gestures wildly at the call-button. ZACK just

stands there. FATHER tries to grab it, misses.

Instead, HE knocks it out of reach. ZACK doesn’t

move. Finally, FATHER stops coughing, collapses.

Zack picks up the call-button.)

ZACK

Dad? … Dad? *That* was payback.

(No response from FATHER. Beat. ZACK pushes the call-button. ESTHER enters, rushes to FATHER.)

ESTHER

What happened?

ZACK

He got excited.

(To black.)

END OF PLAY