

Books & Bridges

by

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a play

CHARACTERS

JULIA DOUGLAS, 32, a writer, sarcastic, more awkward than she'd like to be

DANE RYAN, 32, easy-going, a low-level hipster, owns a vinyl record store

BETSY HOLMES, 38, owner of a bookstore down the street, self-proclaimed beatnik, well-read, high-minded, but not rude

SETTING

A bookstore, 2011
Then, Julia's apartment

1.

A small bookstore. There are no frills, just basics: shelves and books, a counter, and a couple of comfy-looking chairs. Next to the front door, there is a nice bay window. The store is almost clean, but still feels out of order.

Julia enters, followed by Dane. She carries a worn and soaked cardboard box full of assorted, equally worn and soaked books. She plops the box on the floor.

JULIA

First impressions?

DANE

Gotta change your name.

JULIA

To what?

DANE

Something better.

JULIA

Better than "Drunken Bibliophile?" I don't know if that's possible.

DANE

It's not you. It's Chuck. You gotta be you.

She pulls one or two of the books out of the box, thinks about salvaging them.

JULIA

I put a sign out there that says very clearly, "Books are only accepted during hours of operation." Then I conveniently listed said hours of operation. But here we are.

(To the books)

Left like orphans in a basket. Who'll be your mother? Don't look at me like that. I'm not the one who left you in a box, in the rain, outside a bookstore, which has, mind you, a very clear sign that says, "Books are only accepted during hours of operation."

DANE

Throw 'em out. You can't sell them.

JULIA

I'll let them sit for now, enjoy their last few moments before they face the inevitable.

(Beat)

Other than the name, what do you think?

DANE

Quaint. That's what people say, right? Quaint.

JULIA

Is it nicer than "A Novel Idea?"

DANE

Place down the street? Never been inside.

JULIA

It's nice. Homey. Like your grandma threw up all over it. In a good way.

DANE

Your store's nice, too.

JULIA

Don't sugar coat it, this place sucks.

DANE

You got this poor man's Barnes & Noble vibe going. It's not you. It's Chuck: generic and trying too hard.

JULIA

That's Chuck.

DANE

But, hey, now the place is yours.

JULIA

Yay.

DANE

Do whatever you want with it.

JULIA

A dangerous proposition.

DANE

Where'd Chuck ship off to?

JULIA

Montana.

DANE

Mountain man.

(Long beat)

How's business?

JULIA

You're the first person in this week. No, wait, there was a woman who walked in and shouted at me and then left.

DANE

What did she shout?

JULIA

I'd rather not repeat it.

DANE

That bad?

JULIA

How are you at math?

DANE

Okay, but don't ask me about fractals because I don't know what the hell they are. Why?

JULIA

Wait here.

Julia exits. Dane checks out the store, maybe a book catches his fancy. Julia re-enters with a box that is almost too big for her to carry on her own.

DANE

What is that?

JULIA

I have four others just like this in back. I can't make sense of them. Here are bills, order invoices, has this been paid? Is this late? I don't know-- and this-- Is that a bank account? It's definitely an account number. Maybe. But at what bank?

DANE

That's a shit storm.

JULIA

Chuck left it in the office, all over the floor. "The floor's my desk, Douglas. No desk is big enough for my ideas."

DANE

He was as brilliant as he was batshit crazy.

JULIA

He gave me this, saying it would answer all my questions.

She hands him a huge binder.

JULIA (CONT'D)

It reads more like one of his novels than business advice, a handwritten mess of metaphors and quotes from "The Communist Manifesto."

DANE

You didn't ask for some kind of clarification? Like, "Hey Chuck. What the hell is all this? Where's the money?"

JULIA

I thought I could figure it out.

DANE

You have to call him.

JULIA

Can't.

DANE

No phones in Montana?

JULIA

Not where he is. No phone, no TV, no computer, one pot, one plate, one fork, one knife, one spoon.

DANE

What?

She pulls a folded piece of paper from the binder and hands it to him.

DANE (CONT'D)

(Reading)

"Don't try to contact me. You can't. You can't find my house. There's no address. You can't look it up on the Google Maps. I only know how to get here with a compass and my sense of smell."

(To himself)

Can't read that. Something about surfing, something about "A Novel Idea sucks donkey--" something, something.

(Reading)

(MORE)

DANE (CONT'D)

"I have no phone or computer or anything. I'm gone. I don't exist. Good luck to you. With love, Chuck." Shit. What are you going to do?

She shrugs.

DANE (CONT'D)

Let me take you to lunch, maybe we can talk this out.

JULIA

I can't leave.

DANE

Just put up a sign, "Out to lunch." People do that, right? It's not like you'll be missing out on any business.

JULIA

I can't afford to eat out. I have to pay rent. And buy gas for my car.

DANE

Gas, man. Seriously. This morning, I drove by this place-- 3.79 a gallon. I go into Starbucks for a coffee, I come out? 4.15. I don't know how much time passed while I was in that Starbucks that gas would jump thirty-some cents. Felt like a minute, but maybe it was some kind of time vortex and I actually spent hours, days, months in there. I don't pretend to understand time, where was I when time was invented? What would Carl make of this magical, time-defying Starbucks?

JULIA

Carl?

DANE

Sagan. Unreal. Just unreal. Time. Existence. It's like those times when you become aware of time passing and you look in the mirror and feel that little ball of your true self floating inside your head, like a glowing, vibrating mass of vapor inside a shell. And you wonder, should I really be aware of this? Am I supposed to feel this? I try to have that feeling at least once a day.

JULIA

I bet the drugs help.

DANE

They don't hurt. We going to lunch?

JULIA

I have a nice polenta thing I made last night, ricotta, really looking forward to it.

I'm going to Chelsea's.

DANE

Today's Tuesday?

JULIA

Fried chicken special.

DANE

I can't go.

JULIA

Fried chicken special.

DANE

Bring me back some.

JULIA

You have to come with.

DANE

Can't.

JULIA

Come on, Julia.

DANE

What's a vegetarian care about a fried chicken special anyway?

JULIA

Beat.

It's Chelsea's fried chicken special.

DANE

How 'bout this. When things get more... Together, I'll take you to lunch. But you can grab me some coffee while you're out.

JULIA

From?

DANE

House of Beans.

JULIA

DANE

Their coffee tastes like dick. Not that I'd know anything about that.

He looks to her as if asking for confirmation. She stares him down.

JULIA

Why don't you take what's her name to lunch?

DANE

Lauren?

JULIA

I thought it was Megan?

DANE

Megan? That was over a month ago.

JULIA

It hasn't been a month since we talked.

DANE

It's been two, but who's counting?

JULIA

It can't be two. I just got back two months ago.

DANE

That's the last time we talked.

JULIA

No, we talked about the bookstore.

DANE

We did.

JULIA

And I only took over a month ago.

DANE

I stand corrected.

JULIA

So, it's Lauren now.

DANE

She's cool. She came in the shop and bought a record player I rebuilt, so I asked her out. We get along, but the conversations are like trying to drive a stick without having the feel of a clutch. Over dinner, I'm trying to steer us into some interesting first date material, nothing personal, just seeing how she engages with the world. Talked painters.

JULIA

Why painters?

DANE

We're waiting for bread and drinks and she pulls out a marker, not a pen, but an actual Crayola-like, red marker from her pocket and starts drawing on the tablecloth. I'm a little disturbed by this, but, you know, I'm cool with things. So, I ask, "You draw?" "I paint." "What do you paint?" "Life."

JULIA

She said "Life?"

DANE

I bring up Van Gogh, because you're supposed to talk Van Gogh, right? Mentioned that awesome episode of "Doctor Who" where The Doctor meets Van Gogh and how I cried like a baby. She brings up Pollock. I say, "Pollock's supposed to be good. You're supposed to like him because he's good. I like him because every woman I date likes him. But really I think he's crap."

JULIA

And she said?

DANE

Nothing. The appetizer came and we ate in awkward silence until she starts talking about her ex-es.

JULIA

Never ends well.

DANE

She goes on about this guy, how he was addicted to porn and she found all these videos on his computer, and I say, "Can't they just stream porn now? Aren't we technologically advanced enough for that? There's no need to keep it on your computer." But I figure if you found that one thing that strikes your fancy, you know, you might have the desire to hold onto it.

JULIA

Did it get better?

After the sex.
DANE

Ah.
JULIA

And the dope.
DANE

Of course. Glad you two hit it off.
JULIA

She definitely won't be a "two and a halfer."
DANE

A what?
JULIA

She won't last two and a half years.
DANE

That's a pretty specific time frame.
JULIA

This is based on past experience, not just my own, mind you, but a relationship should only last two and a half years.
DANE

That doesn't seem right. How long did we--?
JULIA

Long enough. It's an average. Two and a half years is ample time to suck the life out of someone. By the time two years rolls around, you've consumed all you can, there's nothing interesting left to say or do. It's done. As it should be.
DANE

So, no marriage?
JULIA

Sure, marriage, but short ones. When you spend your life with one person, you're denying yourself a multiplicity of new perspectives, emotions, and experiences. Like watching only one news channel. Why should you be constrained to a single lover for the rest of your life? Two and a half years.
DANE

Dane travels around the store, pulling books off the shelves here and there, flipping through some pages, putting them back.

JULIA

That makes marriage a practice in futility. Divorces every two and a half years.

DANE

No. If the societal understanding is that marriage is transient, and that the maximum time together will be two and a half years, you wouldn't need divorce, things would be easy. Just let go.

JULIA

So, every relationship would have to end after two and a half years?

DANE

It's not a requirement. If you like the person, stay with the person, but you gotta know that, if it's past the two and a half year mark, then it's like a lease, you're going day by day, and you have to accept that the other person could break it off any day, at any point, and be cool with that.

JULIA

Then you've succeeded in making marriage transactional.

DANE

That's a terrible thing to say.

JULIA

I thought that was your point.

DANE

My point is not that there isn't emotion in a relationship, be it--

(air quotes)

--"love" or something. I'm not removing meaning and purpose from the equation of "marriage."

JULIA

Then I must have misinterpreted.

DANE

With temporary marriages, marriage retains its meaning, its inherent emotion and preciousness, perhaps becoming even more meaningful than a lifetime with a person.

JULIA

But you'd lose the preciousness because of the mere fact that you could simply end one marriage on Monday and begin another one on Tuesday.