

A Family Dinner

A 10-minute play
By Adrian Clayton

Adrian Clayton
ID 1804392
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Characters

PERCY, late 20s, male, a socially-awkward novelist who is struggling to finish their first major project, currently trying to host a dinner in his apartment for his family

MARY, mid 50s, female, PERCY's mother and a professional woman; someone who attempts a supportive interest in PERCY's projects, which she struggles to balance with what she feels is her duty to help motivate him

STEPHEN, mid 50s, male, MARY's husband and PERCY's step-father, concerned about PERCY but struggles to show it in a way that doesn't seem critical or overbearing, and worried about maintaining his own position of authority

BENJAMIN, early 30s, male, PERCY's brother, a moderately-successful corporate lawyer who considers himself close to PERCY and hasn't come to terms with how their relationship has changed since they were kids

Setting

Evening, modern day; in the dining room of an apartment which has been set up for a family dinner. The apartment does not have a ringing doorbell — when someone is at the door it gives the sound of a harsh and sudden buzzer.

Author's Note

The goal of this production should be to create a deeply uncomfortable experience of awkward and stressful interpersonal interaction, with the design working towards emphasizing the feeling of being trapped in a social situation one doesn't want to be part of.

SCENE 1

PERCY is setting the dining room table of his apartment for a family dinner. He works for a few beats — only as long as is needed to communicate the context of the scene — before the doorbell buzzer sounds.

PERCY exits stage left. PERCY and MARY remain off-stage as conversation takes place.

MARY

There's my boy! Oh, I can smell it all the way from out here. I hope you don't mind waiting a little longer — I told Stephen we should come up together, but you know him. He wanted to go find a place to park, and he said I should go up and say hi. So... "hi"!

PERCY

Hey, Mom. You want to come inside?

MARY

Oh, sure!

PERCY leads MARY in from stage left, helping her get seated as they continue speaking.

MARY

Now, I know you don't like talking about work, but you'll tell us a little bit how it's going while we're here, won't you? I won't push! I just want you to know I love hearing about all the wonderful things you're doing.

PERCY

Yeah, sure. I mean, it's going.

MARY

Well, that's just great, isn't it? That's all we can really ask, isn't it?

There is a pause of a beat or two.

MARY

I'm sorry to make you wait like this, I'm sure he'll be up in no time at all.

PERCY

Hey, that's okay. I really don't mind just spending time with you like—

PERCY is cut off by a loud, forceful knocking from stage left. He hesitates, then swallows, giving an intent nod and standing. He exits stage left.

MARY sits patiently at the table, occasionally glancing over at stage left, while PERCY and STEPHEN speak off-stage.

STEPHEN

Hey, kid! Put 'er there!

(beat)

Yeah. Hey, how's that book shaping up, huh?

PERCY

(subtly pained)

It's going.

STEPHEN

That's great. Mary didn't get lost on the way up, did she?

MARY

(calling to stage left)

I'm in here!

STEPHEN walks in from stage left, followed by PERCY, as he responds.

STEPHEN

There she is! Hey, that smells good!

PERCY helps STEPHEN get seated, then sits down himself. There is a pause of a few beats.

STEPHEN

Well, most of us are here. Should we dig in? I just don't want any of it to go cold.

MARY

Oh, stop it. Benny'll be here any minute now, I'm sure.

STEPHEN

(intently cheerful)

Alright! I'm not worried at all.

There is a pause. STEPHEN looks around at the room.

STEPHEN

This is a really tidy place, huh? I like it!

PERCY

Thanks.

STEPHEN

So, who's the interior designer, huh? 'Cause if you came to our house, I tell you, you'd think Mary was the only one who lived there! Never had a feel for that, but your mother, she really makes it feel like a home.

PERCY

It isn't anyone's job. I guess Gail does most of it?

STEPHEN

Yeah? Well that one's a keeper, for sure. You know, I'm still waiting to meet her! I know I didn't raise you, but that doesn't mean I don't want to see you and your fiancé one of these days!

MARY gives STEPHEN a reproachful look, giving him a firm pat on the arm. PERCY immediately becomes visibly uncomfortable.

PERCY

(with difficulty)

We're not engaged.

STEPHEN

Huh? Oh! Oh, I'm sorry, kid. Gah.

(chuckles)

You know my memory, huh? But hey, it's not that different, is it? I mean, you already live together! That's a big step!

PERCY

(flatly)

It's very different.

STEPHEN

Well, yeah, of course it is. I'm just saying, well, if you *wanted* to pop the question to her, you've already taken those other steps. Not that I'm rushing you! I'm not rushing anything! Just, well, I know what it's like, you know?

MARY

(to STEPHEN)

Dear...

STEPHEN

I'm just saying! When I proposed to your mom, man, I was probably the most worried I'd ever been. Trying to find the right time to do it, imagining how different it would be — I was a wreck! But when it happened — and she said “yes”, bless her — it felt like barely anything was different! Now there was just this exciting, wonderful future in front of us!

PERCY

Right...

STEPHEN

And that's all I'm saying. I know it's scary, but with how close you two are, getting married? That's just the next step, you know? And when you take that step, it's a really wonderful thing.

PERCY pauses for a second or two, then takes a breath. He opens his mouth to respond — only to be interrupted by the doorbell buzzer. A mixture of relief and frustration plays across his face, and he gets to his feet.

MARY

Oh, that'll be Benny! I told you he'd be here soon!

(to PERCY)

You'll show him in, won't you, dear?

PERCY nods, and exits stage left. Muffled and indistinct conversation comes from off stage left, while MARY and STEPHEN hold their own, audible conversation on-stage.

STEPHEN

I'm not being too hard on him, am I?

MARY

(dismissively)

Oh, of course not. You know how he is, dear.

STEPHEN

Sure, sure. I just want him to know that he can let loose around me, you know? He's so tense these days, huh?

MARY

You know he's been worrying about this dinner. He'll be just fine.

(pause, then excitedly)

Oh, I could have sworn I told you. Did I show you that draft he sent me?

STEPHEN

(visibly trying to recall)

Draft? No, I don't think you showed me.

MARY

Oh, it was great. Remind me to send it to you when we're home; you'll love it. He's so *creative!*

STEPHEN nods. PERCY follows BENJAMIN on-stage. BENJAMIN is carrying a bottle of wine.

MARY

There he is!

STEPHEN

(standing up, laughing approvingly)

Whoa-oa! Look at that! That's how you make an entrance!

BENJAMIN

(smiling modestly)

Well, you know. I thought I'd make my own little contribution.

MARY

Oh, Benny, you didn't have to.

STEPHEN

Sure he didn't! But I'm not gonna look a gift horse in the mouth! Great job, champ.

BENJAMIN takes his seat, setting the bottle down at the table. STEPHEN reaches out and turns the bottle by the stem, taking a look at the label as he sits back down. PERCY lingers at the edge of the table, staring with mild concern at the wine. The other characters do not appear to notice him.

BENJAMIN

Hey, I wanted to make this dinner special, you know? It's not every day we get to come together like this.

MARY smiles sweetly. STEPHEN reaches across the table to give BENJAMIN a firm pat on the shoulder.

STEPHEN

That's a good kid. You two really turned out alright, huh? Not that I doubted Mary for a second!

PERCY clears his throat quietly. The others notice, turning to look at him.

PERCY

(subtly strained)

I'll... be right back. Just give me a second.

The others watch PERCY in silence for a beat as he exits stage right, before turning their focus back to conversation.

STEPHEN
(to BENJAMIN)

So! Kiddo. How have you been? Put any bad guys behind bars?

BENJAMIN
(laughs good-naturedly)

I hope not. Corporate law isn't *that* exciting. It's been going good, though! We're putting the finishing touches on a pretty big merger. We're just weeding out all the little complications, now. It's not glamorous, but it's important work, and this contract has meant a lot for the company.

MARY
Well that's just wonderful, isn't it? Even if not everyone appreciates it, it's good to be doing something where the work you're doing really matters.

STEPHEN
Well, sure! Hell, if there weren't any lawyers, it'd be anarchy!
(jokingly)
You're the only thing standing between us and a... a great big wasteland!

BENJAMIN
(chuckling)
Sure. Well, that's why I wanted to bring something special. With all the good business, sometimes that means there are bonuses going around, and I guess I was one of the lucky guys.

MARY gasps excitedly, then makes a sound of supportive adoration.

STEPHEN
Ha! They must really know their stuff, then! They don't want you running off to someone else!

BENJAMIN
(matching STEPHEN's energy)
I wasn't planning on it!

PERCY returns with four highball/delmonico-style glasses. They are not wine glasses. They clink together in his hold as he starts to pass them out, replacing the drinkware he had set out.

STEPHEN

(after a moment)

These are for the wine, huh? I like it! Who says we can't be a little unconventional, huh?

PERCY

(shortly)

Gail doesn't drink.

STEPHEN opens his mouth to defend his previous statement, but stops as MARY gives him a gentle, quelling look. He nods at PERCY.

STEPHEN

Sure! I'm not complaining! Hey, these look nice!

MARY

(to PERCY)

We were just talking about Benny's work, before you got back.

PERCY sets the previously-set-out glassware to the side and sits down.

MARY

Did you want to share anything, dear? I know there was that draft you sent me—

(to BENJAMIN)

I got the most *wonderful* draft from Percy just a few weeks ago; it's really something!

(to PERCY)

So, does that mean you're getting close? I'm so excited!

The group turns their attention to PERCY, each openly broadcasting a supportive interest. PERCY is silent for a prolonged pause, visibly uncomfortable.

PERCY

Yeah, well... Uh, no. I mean, it's not really that close.

(offering a pained smile)

I mean, there's still a lot of work to do! You know how... you know books.

(taking a breath)

So many words!

The others look a little more concerned at this. MARY clears her throat.

MARY

Well, I'm glad you're making progress. And if that draft is a sign of anything, the rest is going to be something really special!

PERCY

Yeah. I, um... Well, not *that* draft specifically. I've decided that the best thing is to just... start over, for now.

MARY

Oh... Well, that's okay, too! You have, well, you have such good characters, still, and all these *wonderfully* creative ideas! I can't wait to see how the rest of it turns out!

PERCY

Yeah. I mean, yeah, I'll... I'll send you stuff, when I have it. Not... I mean, maybe not the same characters. I'm not just... I was more kinda thinking that I should just start over the whole project.

MARY becomes more deflated at this, her face showing concern. STEPHEN appears visibly confused.

STEPHEN

Start over? Well why the hell would you do that! You've got something good, kid — you gotta keep working at it!

PERCY

(increasingly uncomfortable)

Look, it's just... Sometimes it doesn't really work out, and you have to try something else. That's just how it is.

STEPHEN

But you were already getting close, weren't you? If you just throw away what you have whenever you get close to finishing you'll never get anywhere!

PERCY takes a breath.

PERCY

I'm not just—

BENJAMIN

(interrupting)

Hey, speaking of drafts! I don't think I told you guys about this new IPO we're working on. I can't say who, obviously, but it's exciting stuff.

PERCY gives BENJAMIN a grateful look.
STEPHEN looks ready to continue arguing,
but BENJAMIN barrels on.

BENJAMIN

You know, opening up to public investors is a really important step. It's not just a button you press to put out a new stock issuance. You have to get SEC approval, gauge demand, talk with private shareholders... it's really a whole thing.

MARY

(supportively)

I can't imagine how much work that must involve!

PERCY seems to be very slowly calming
down as BENJAMIN continues, fidgeting
mildly with the new glassware at his place.

BENJAMIN

(chuckling)

Yeah. We're still at the start for this contract — we're currently finalizing the underwriting agreement, but then we can really jump into the documentation.

STEPHEN

Good thing they have an expert like you on it, huh? Someone's gotta make sure everything gets done right!

BENJAMIN

Yeah! Well, we were really happy when they went with our proposal.

STEPHEN

Well hey, it's real impressive just listening to you with all of this!

(chuckling)

You've got the whole thing mapped out, and I'll tell ya, half of that goes right over my head. It's a hell of a thing to do, becoming a lawyer and all that.

BENJAMIN

Well, sure! I mean, that's what college is for. You really can't slack off, when you're studying law, because at the end none of it matters if you can't pass the bar. I'll be honest, it's probably the hardest thing I've ever had to do, but I pulled through!

STEPHEN

(with excited supportiveness)

And then you passed, hey? Just like that?

BENJAMIN

(simultaneously)

I did.

MARY

(simultaneously, excitedly)

He did!

STEPHEN

(laughing approvingly)

Hey! Well, there you go, huh kiddo? You put your nose down, do the work, and look where it gets you!

BENJAMIN

Sure! I mean, I have to say, even if it was a lot of work, it was worth it. I couldn't be happier with where I am.

STEPHEN

(to PERCY, with beseeching encouragement)

See? That's what happens when you stick to something good! You just gotta—

STEPHEN stops as PERCY stands abruptly from the table. PERCY looks back at STEPHEN for several seconds, then clears his throat.

PERCY
(*muttering*)

Excuse me.

PERCY shuffles quickly off stage right. There are several seconds of heavy, awkward silence.

STEPHEN
(*to MARY, concerned*)

Huh. Hey, uh... You think I should go talk to him?

MARY looks off stage right, considering for a moment.

MARY
He'll be fine. Let's just let him cool off a little. You know this dinner was stressful for him.

STEPHEN
Alright. And hey, if I'm ever... I mean, if I come off the wrong way, he can always just tell me!

(*chuckling*)
I don't need to be the center of attention!

MARY
Oh, he'll be fine.

The group sits in silence for another few seconds.

STEPHEN
Well, uh. We should probably get started, huh? Wouldn't want all this food to go cold.

MARY
(*disapproving*)
Stephen! We should wait; I'm sure he'll be out again in just a few minutes.

STEPHEN
Of course — you're right, of course! I'm just thinking about making sure all this food he made doesn't go to waste, you know?

There is another, longer silence. Each member is visibly uncomfortable. Finally, STEPHEN reaches for the main dish. The lights and sound begin slowly fading as STEPHEN speaks. STEPHEN begins serving himself. BENJAMIN is visibly uncomfortable, while MARY gives STEPHEN a disapproving look.

STEPHEN

Well, I'm gonna at least get my plate ready. I know Percy's worried about this whole thing, but I can't imagine it'd make him feel better if we all just sat here hungry, huh? Hey, Ben, you want me to serve you? I think this is...

STEPHEN's voice fades to inaudibility as the lights fade to black.

Central Dramatic Question

The central dramatic question for this play is largely related to how this dinner is going to go (or, as the play progresses, how badly it's going to go and if the dinner is salvageable).

Changes from the draft

There wasn't really too much that changed from the first draft as it was written; the main thing was writing the rest of the play, which was quite a lot of additional content. A few minor formatting or phrasing changes were made to the existing text. The main major changes were from the outline, which is expected. The biggest thing is I changed the context from being a Thanksgiving dinner to something with a bit lower stakes, because I didn't feel it quite made sense that Percy would be put in charge of that.