

Cherie Vogelstein

DATE WITH A STRANGER

SCENE:

A typical Manhattan diner. PAULA, 29, nibbles at a muffin as she furtively glances over at CLARK, 31, seated two stools away. CLARK self-consciously reads MY MOTHER, MY SELF, steals a look at PAULA whenever he can. At the end of the counter, a business man, early 40's, impassively reads THE WALL STREET JOURNAL throughout the action of the play.

Note: PAULA and CLARK must swing furiously from emotion to emotion without missing a beat. They experience life as it is: fast, big, and unscored.

PAULA: [Reaches across CLARK for sugar.] Sorry.

CLARK: [Smiles graciously, slides it to her.] No, no, please.

PAULA: [Giggles, pours sugar steadily into cup.] I really, really like sugar in my coffee.

CLARK: [Explodes in laughter.] HAHAAHAA! Hello!

PAULA: [Also laughs nervously as she continues to pour.] And now I'm ruining it!

CLARK: [This is even funnier.] OH WOW...

PAULA: Anyway...

CLARK: Hmm... yeah... [Beat. He reluctantly returns to book.]

PAULA: [Plunges back in.] You know, I was watching you turn those pages. And I was wondering to myself, "Is he really reading the words of that book?" I was wondering that so much.

CLARK: Oh, well, what I always say is, when you're reading... why fake it, right?

PAULA: [Nodding contemplatively.] Hmm, that's what they say about orgasms, but...

CLARK: [Moves quickly to stool next to her.] But?

PAULA: Oh my God! How did that... I'm so embarrassed... I can't say another word!

CLARK: Yes you can... come on... who am I? A stranger, nobody, nothing. [Urgently.] TELL ME!

PAULA: Okay but what if we went out to dinner or something, you know, say to Ernie's where we'd get salad, bread, spinach pasta with almonds and—

CLARK: Whoa, whoa, whoa! I'm allergic to almonds.

PAULA: Really?! I'm lactose intolerant! That is so funny! Anyway, there we'd be, taking a cab home, waltzing into the apartment, French kissing like teenagers, maybe you'd have a tough time getting my bra

undone—

CLARK: [Amazed.] How did you know that?!

PAULA: [Nods, points knowingly to her head.] Anyway, if we, you know, DID it, and I had told you now that I, you know, fake my orgasms, you'd be worrying I was faking it the whole time.

CLARK: No way! What would I care?

PAULA: [Upset.] You don't care?

CLARK: [Confidentially.] Well no, I care. I care A LOT, but see, if I told you I cared, it would inhibit you from faking it and I want you to feel free to fake it, I want you to have a really good time faking it, see?

PAULA: [Touched.] Yes. I do. [Almost touches his hand.] You're not bisexual, are you?

CLARK: Who, me? [Macho.] Come on, do I seem it? Ha...

PAULA: No, it's just—

CLARK: [Tense.] Because I'm not—

PAULA: It's just... you're so sensitive—

CLARK: Well, I really like the way you took the initiative with me—

PAULA: [Horried.] What?! Is that what you thought I was doing?

CLARK: Oh well I uh... isn't that what you meant to be doing? [Nervous laugh.]

PAULA: Not so that it would seem like I was doing it—

CLARK: Oh, well it didn't. That was just my women's intuition talking.

PAULA: [Suspicious.] What are you doing with women's intuition, Mister?

CLARK: [Quickly.] Nothing. I just meant... I have a strong feminine side to my personality.

PAULA: [Relieved and happy.] Hey! So do I!

CLARK: Which is not to say I'm not all man which I am [Flexes muscle.] but I still read books like MY MOTHER, MY SELF [Beat.] because I care.

PAULA: [Staring deep into his eyes.] Are you... are you attracted to me?

CLARK: Why? Are you attracted to me?

PAULA: I asked you first.

CLARK: But I asked you right after, very quickly.

PAULA: Yes but it's very important for you to perceive yourself as the pursuer, otherwise—puh, puh, puh—God I love P's and things that begin with P. Can you think of some? Porch, ping-pong, penis, pumpkin—I'm stalling—I feel vulnerable because of the attractive issue you

didn't answer me you don't want to answer me—police, pigeon, PUTZ—

CLARK: Look, I do want to answer you, and believe me, I will, but before I do, I first want to say, and I'll say it now—there are a lot of things I perceive myself as, but not being the pursuer is definitely not one of them, okay?

PAULA: *[Great sigh of relief.]* Thanks, that really helped. *[She swallows some pills, smiles.]*

CLARK: You look pretty when you smile.

PAULA: *[Unsmiling.]* And when I don't smile?

CLARK: You still look pretty.

PAULA: *[Sweet smile.]* How pretty?

CLARK: Very pretty.

PAULA: *[Still playful.]* Prettier than say, your last girlfriend?

CLARK: Hmm, yeah, I'd say that.

PAULA: *[Dead serious.]* Say it.

CLARK: Uh, you're prettier than my last girlfriend.

PAULA: *[Playful again.]* Oh, you're just saying that. *[Bashful beat.]* Anyway, it's not like I think my looks are the most important thing in the world, you know.

CLARK: Good for you!

PAULA: How so?

CLARK: Well, beauty is only skin deep.

PAULA: Bullshit, Mister. Swear on your mother's life I'm prettier.

CLARK: Gladly. I hate my mother.

PAULA: Just what the hell are you trying to say?

CLARK: That she really knows how to get me mad—you know, in a funny way, you kind of remind me of her.

PAULA: *[Horried.]* Your mother?

CLARK: *[Thinking he's off the book.]* No, no, my ex-girlfriend.

PAULA: *[With relief.]* Oh! *[Frenzied.]* That's even worse!

CLARK: Wh-why?

PAULA: Well I mean did you want to marry this woman? I don't get it—

CLARK: Not really.

PAULA: *[Shaking with fury.]* Not really?

CLARK: Well...

PAULA: Look: did you break up with her or did she break up with you?

CLARK: I don't know how to put it really—

PAULA: How about she dumped you like a plate of hot, steaming shit?

CLARK: Yeah! That's it exactly!

PAULA: *[Starts eating ferociously.]* Terrific. Just terrific.

CLARK: What—I don't understand!

PAULA: *[Starts to sob.]* How am I supposed to feel here? You're still carrying this torch, for Christ's sake—

CLARK: No, no, no, no—

PAULA: *[Devouring food.]* I hate feeling like second best. Like if she had wanted you, you'd still be with her instead of me. I mean, THIS IS ALL I NEED!

CLARK: Listen, please, don't worry about that, really—I was dying to break up with her myself, I mean... her rates were going through the roof!

PAULA: Her rates?

CLARK: *[Nods.]* She was my therapist.

PAULA: You had sex with your therapist?

CLARK: Well sure. I mean, eventually you run out of things to say, right?

PAULA: *[Turning indignantly away.]* I'm certain I don't know.

CLARK: *[Trying to recover.]* Oh, oh of course not, how could you? Because the truth is, you're really not like her at all—you're... you're much prettier and... you never look at your watch, and you're really special! I promise!

PAULA: *[Mollified.]* And when you first saw me, you got the jolt?

CLARK: The jolt?

PAULA: You know. That feeling of all your energies dropping right into your underpants—you... you got that with me?

CLARK: Oh yeah, I got that. I'm still getting it. *[Beat, moves in closer.]* Hi, I'm Clark.

PAULA: *[Sipping coffee.]* That's your name? Clark? I LOVE IT—"Clark." I never met a Clark before. That's so wild. *[Sips.]* "Clark." I love saying it: "Clark, Clark." It's like wearing dentures in a beautiful kind of way. "Clark." I could just go on saying it all day. "Clark, Clark, Clark, Clark, Clark, Clark—"

CLARK: Yeah, you've really got it down—but listen, can I be frank with you for a second?

PAULA: Oh God, I was so enjoying you as Clark—

CLARK: No, no I mean about the coffee—you... you've got to give it up.

PAULA: *[Wide-eyed.]* I do? *[He nods, she makes a decision.]* Alright. *[She throws cup over her shoulder.]*

BUSINESS MAN: *[Momentarily looking up.]* What the hell—?

CLARK: *[Shakes his fist in victory.]* Now that's what it's all about—sacrifice!

PAULA: *[Intensely.]* Yes! Are you Jewish?

CLARK: Now you ask? No. Are you?

PAULA: *[Haughty.]* As a matter of fact, I am. And a pretty committed one at that.

CLARK: *[Happy.]* Oh! How committed are you?

PAULA: Well, I'm so committed that I would never marry out of the faith.

CLARK: *[Deeply disappointed.]* Really? That's too bad.

PAULA: Alright look. Maybe I would. I'm not a fanatic, you know.

CLARK: Good for you!

PAULA: Oh Clark, wouldn't it be great if we could just skip all the formalities and automatically be living in the same apartment, really committed to making it work?

CLARK: Yes, but you never told me your name.

PAULA: Guess.

CLARK: Hmm. I like it. It's different.

PAULA: No, I mean guess my name.

CLARK: Oh okay. *[Thinks hard.]* Debbie?

PAULA: Right!

CLARK: Really? That's right? I can't believe I guessed it on the first guess, that's amazing! But I knew it, you know? *[She nods.]* You look like a Debbie, I just knew you had to be a Debbie.

PAULA: That's funny because I'm not. I was just testing you. My name's Paula.

CLARK: Wow. You're a very complicated person, aren't you Paula?

PAULA: Michelle, and it's funny you should say I'm complicated since all my life, people have gone on and on about how incredibly shallow I am.

CLARK: *[Laughs.]* That is funny but I guess I meant that you're so deeply shallow that that's something I find complicated because I'm very complicated myself in a way.

PAULA: Are you? Or are you just a big buffoon with delusions of grandeur?

CLARK: Gee, wow—

PAULA: Stop it Annette! I'm so mad at myself. I mean this is how I destroy all of my relationships—why? Why do I have to protect myself at your expense, Ken?

CLARK: Clark.

PAULA: Exactly! Why am I so terrified of commitment, you know? I mean, why can't I just let my hair down with you and get naked with you and love you my God, body and soul?

CLARK: *[Thinks.]* You're asking some good questions.

PAULA: Sometimes I dream I'm in a shirt in Warsaw and life is so simple. I know my place, I know my chickens, I'm at peace. *[Scared.]* Until of course the Cossacks come and knock my father into a ditch, raping my sisters over and over and over—*[She's spent.]*—Yes! That felt good.

CLARK: Wow, you're really real, aren't you? You're all out there.

PAULA: Where?

CLARK: Here. You're really here.

PAULA: God, you really know where I am.

CLARK: Okay, look: I sell health club memberships at the Paris. That's what I do.

PAULA: Oh.

CLARK: That turned you off.

PAULA: Oh, now you're going to say we Jewish girls only care about money and success, aren't you? It's just like my mother warned, that's always what it comes down to in the end, isn't it? The Goy always ends up calling the Yid a dirty Jew.

CLARK: Believe me, there are alot of repulsive, heinous, disgusting, putrid, ugly, gross things I'm going to call you, but dirty Jew is not one of them.

PAULA: Oh Clark, tell me all of your faults.

CLARK: Why?

PAULA: So I can feel superior to you.

CLARK: *[Angry.]* Is that really what you want?

CLARK: I shouldn't have said— PAULA: More than anything, darling—

CLARK: Sorry I accused you, I— PAULA: I'm sorry I said that, I—

[They laugh.]

CLARK: Our first fight! It was inevitable!

PAULA: I enjoyed it!

- CLARK: *[He moves in close.]* It brought us closer together.
- PAULA: *[She moves back.]* You have something in your nose.
- CLARK: *[Shaking his finger at her.]* Unh uh uh, you're trying to distance yourself—you're not being who you are, Michelle—
- PAULA: Annette.
- CLARK: Susan.
- PAULA: Janet.
- CLARK: Paula.
- PAULA: Yes! God, you know me like a piano.
- CLARK: A book.
- PAULA: A piano book—Clark! New York is so scary! Here we are, intimate as two poppyseed humentaschen and you might be plotting my murder as we speak.
- CLARK: Believe me, that's not what I'm plotting.
- PAULA: Really? What are you plotting?
- CLARK: You don't want to know.
- PAULA: Yes I do.
- CLARK: I've been fantasizing crazy things.
- PAULA: Sick things?
- CLARK: Stupid things.
- PAULA: Dirty things?
- CLARK: Unrealistic things.
- PAULA: Does it involve animals?
- CLARK: No.
- PAULA: Then tell me.
- CLARK: I've been fantasizing about you in this soft, billowing white gown.
- PAULA: *[Worried.]* A hospital gown?
- CLARK: No, it's a... a wedding gown.
- PAULA: Oh, Clarky, yes!
- CLARK: And I'm wearing a black, fur hat and those long, curly sideburns the Hassidim wear, what are they called?
- PAULA: CHassidim.
- CLARK: What?
- PAULA: Not Hassidim, CHassidim.
- CLARK: No, I mean the sideburns, what are they called?

- PAULA: Look, I'm not a mind reader.
- CLARK: I'm not a Jew.
- PAULA: I'm not a therapist.
- CLARK: I'm not a kleptomaniac!
- PAULA: Touché. *[She removes salt-shaker from her purse, returns it to counter.]* Go on.
- CLARK: That's as far as I got.
- PAULA: Okay: I was just thinking of mine while you were talking.
- CLARK: That's alright, I thought of mine while you were talking.
- PAULA: Oh well please try not to do that anymore, it really hurts my feelings. *[Pouting.]* I mean, here we are on the threshold of marriage and—Clark, wait! Are you circumcized?
- CLARK: *[Embarrassed smile.]* Well...
- PAULA: *[Horrified.]* You mean you still have your foreskin?!
- CLARK: Not with me.
- PAULA: Then convert! Convert for me!
- CLARK: Wow. That's a big step.
- PAULA: Then do it for the baby.
- CLARK: The baby?
- PAULA: I'm pregnant.
- CLARK: *[Whispers.]* Really?
- PAULA: *[Also whispers.]* In the fantasy.
- CLARK: *[Whispers.]* Is it my child?
- PAULA: *[Indignant, loud.]* Of course, my God, what do you think I am?
- CLARK: Look. I'm not good with children. You might as well know that.
- PAULA: I don't believe you.
- CLARK: Believe me.
- PAULA: How do you know?
- CLARK: I know.
- PAULA: How do you know?
- CLARK: *[Angry.]* I just know. Paula, I don't want to discuss it!
- PAULA: Hey! I think this merits a little conversation, don't you? I mean it's not some insignificant, little matter you just brought up, Clark, you dropped a bombshell on me—I think I have a right to know!
- CLARK: O.K., O.K., O.K. I'm not good at hiding things. Ten years of therapy, seven days a week, including holidays, has destroyed my

capacity to hide things. I can't hide it from you. It seems I can't hide anything from you. I'm sterile, Paula. I'm half a man. Not even. Three sevenths.

PAULA: Oh my God, Clark. I'm shocked. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to—
 CLARK: *[A pressure cooker.]* To what? To get turned off? To look at me differently? To stop loving me? Is that what you're trying to say? Then just say it. Let's not play games. Let's not beat around the bush. Let's not NOT tell it like it is, Paula, shall we not? You just lost your jolt, now didn't you? Didn't you? *[He leans close to her face.]* DIDN'T YOU?
[He pulls back with a disgusted sneer.]

PAULA: *[Quickly covers her mouth.]* Is my breath bad?

CLARK: *[Also covers his.]* Why? Is mine?

PAULA: *[Shaking her head, sympathetically.]* Listen, I'm sorry about your... impotency.

CLARK: *[Shouts.]* I'm not impotent, I'm sterile!

[MAN WITH NEWSPAPER looks up with interest, turns page.]

CLARK: *[Deeply morose.]* And I'm not really sterile... I was just kidding.

PAULA: *[Reaches out to him.]* Oh Clark—

CLARK: *[Grabs her hand.]* Oh Paula! Most people are so bitter—but not me, I can't be. I sit here listening to so many sob stories, I can't help but feel my life is better than it really is. Much better. *[Beat.]* God! I wish it was half that good. *[Beat.]* Because it stinks, my life stinks! Oh, it's not so bad, it's really—

PAULA: —I know how you feel. My husband treats a lot of people like you.

CLARK: Your husband?! You're married?

PAULA: To a doctor!

CLARK: My God... well... good for you.

PAULA: What's so good about it?

CLARK: If you're happy then it's good. It's great—

PAULA: Do I seem happy?

CLARK: I've discovered that people are not always what they seem, Annette. For instance, you seemed single.

PAULA: Now what the hell does that mean?

CLARK: Why did you go on and on about what I thought of your looks if you're married?

PAULA: I still treasure your opinion, Clark. You're a very important person in my life.

CLARK: Why did you let me go on and on about our marriage? Why did

you tell me you were pregnant with our child?

PAULA: I was making small talk.

CLARK: My God, I thought... I thought...

PAULA: I know.

CLARK: I feel used. I feel foolish.

PAULA: I feel bad, I feel rotten.

CLARK: Do you?

PAULA: Not really. I feel powerful, I feel sexy. I feel like I got you to love me so fast.

CLARK: Fast? You call three hundred and ten years fast?! Why, I was just remembering how we drew water from the old town well together. I saw us crossing Iowa in a covered, shitty wagon. One of our horses broke his leg and we had to shoot him.

PAULA: Oh Clark—

CLARK: *[Choked up.]* I loved that horse—*[Notices her hand.]*—hey! If you're married, where's your ring?!

PAULA: I'm not married.

CLARK: Oh thank God!

PAULA: I only said that because I thought it would be less painful for you than being rejected for your sterility.

CLARK: Paula, I lied.

PAULA: *[Hopeful.]* You mean... you're really not sterile?

CLARK: No I lied when I said I was kidding. I am sterile.

[MAN WITH NEWSPAPER looks up again, he screams.]

THAT'S RIGHT, ALRIGHT?—I'M STERILE! I'M STERILE, I'M STERILE, I'M STERILE!

[MAN shakes his head, turns back to paper.]

PAULA: *[Tries to quiet CLARK.]* Well don't brag about it. Look: I need children. I can't live my life with a man who... *[Warning to him.]*... but then I look into your dilated pupils and bulging member and I think... he deserves more.

CLARK: So then maybe you could live with a sterile man?

PAULA: No. But at least I think you deserve more. *[She hangs her head.]*

CLARK: *[In agony.]* My God, my God, I feel like I'm seeing you for the first time.

PAULA: And what do you see?

CLARK: I see that your nose is big—

PAULA: Clark! *[She rises, he rises with her.]*

CLARK: —and you're overweight—

PAULA: *[Big gasp.]*

CLARK: —and you're a cheap, sadistic, manipulating whore!

PAULA: *[Calmly.]* That's true. *[Sits.]*

CLARK: *[Begins circling her.]* There she sits so high and mighty downing the sugar from her muffin and the fat from her cheesecake and the cholesterol from her butter my God! I thought I had problems, but I'm a model of health compared to you!

PAULA: *[Indignant.]* Name somebody who isn't.

CLARK: And to think... I thought...

PAULA: It was just the jolt.

CLARK: *[Bangs fist on table.]* NO! I thought it was MORE than the jolt! Much more!

PAULA: What could be more than the jolt?

CLARK: The mighty, mighty jolt!

PAULA: *[Relenting.]* Alright, there's that, but still—

CLARK: No, no I'll do the but-stilling, lady, because I've learned a lot about myself through you. I've learned that I don't need women who only need children, and I don't need children who only need those kind of women and I don't need Prozac but most of all, Margaret, I don't need you!

PAULA: I'm sensing a little hostility here, Mister.

CLARK: That's the way things usually end, you spread-eagled slut.

PAULA: Oh! So you're telling me it's over?

CLARK: *[Venomously.]* Don't be stupid. We never had anything to begin with but your fake orgasms.

PAULA: *[Thrilled by the memory.]* Ahh, they were something else, weren't they? *[Goes to him.]* Oh Clark, we had some good times, didn't we?

CLARK: *[Nods, sits broken-hearted.]* It just goes to show you. You never know somebody till...

PAULA: Till what?

CLARK: Till after you meet 'em. *[He holds his bread in his hands.]*

PAULA: *[Softly, painfully.]* I... I can't believe this is happening to us.

CLARK: *[Agonized.]* I know. *[Beat.]* I know.

PAULA: We're like... strangers—*[CLARK looks up at her with desperate love.]*

CLARK: *[Reaching out to her.]* Oh Paula—

PAULA: *[Completely recovered, she turns to man with newspaper.]* Excuse me, are you reading that paper?

MAN: You mean the one in my hand?

CLARK: *[To PAULA, shocked.]* What are you doing?

PAULA: *[To MAN.]* Yes, I was wondering if—

CLARK: *[Approaches.]* What are you trying to pull here?

PAULA: *[Through clenched teeth.]* Do you mind? *[To MAN.]* I was won—

CLARK: You're acting like you don't even know me.

PAULA: *[To MAN.]*—if I might borrow a section of—

CLARK: *[Incredulous.]* In front of me? You do this right in front of me?

PAULA: *[Hisses to CLARK.]* I'm trying to get on with my life! *[To MAN, adorably.]* Could you please pass the salt?

CLARK: *[Muttering to himself.]* That's the same way we—*[To MAN.]* Don't do it, man, don't do it! She'll take your heart and—

PAULA: *[To CLARK, furious.]* STAY OUT OF MY LIFE!

MAN: I'm not reading the Metro section. You want that?

CLARK: *[Staggering about.]* I can't take this! I won't, I can't, I won't.

[He takes his soda and book and goes to stool at end of counter. The MAN then moves to CLARK's original seat.]

PAULA: *[To MAN.]* I used to just read the News Summary but...

MAN: But? *[He moves closer as the lights fade to black.]*