

EXTRACT

ACTS OF DECEIT (BETWEEN STRANGERS IN A ROOM)

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ACTS OF DECEIT
(Between Strangers In A Room)

by

Gary Abrahams

Based on and freely adapted from

GIOVANNI'S ROOM

by James Baldwin

CHARACTERS

DAVID AMERICAN, LATE 20'S TO EARLY 30'S
KU-JEAN WEST AFRICAN, LATE 20'S, AN ILLEGAL IMMIGRANT
HELLA AMERICAN, LATE 20'S, DAVID'S FIANCÉE
SUE AMERICAN, EARLY 30'S OR POSSIBLY OLDER
JACQUES BRITISH, LATE 50'S OR OLDER

SETTING:

*THE STORY TAKES PLACE IN THE CITY OF PARIS, IN THE YEAR
1953*

AN INEXPENSIVE HOTEL ROOM IN THE LE MARAIS QUARTER
KU-JEANS ROOM, AN OLD MAIDS ROOM ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF PARIS
HELLA'S HOTEL ROOM IN SPAIN
SUE'S ROOM
GUILLAUME'S BAR (AN UNDERGROUND GAY BAR)
A TOURIST BAR

PARIS, 1953. THE END OF SUMMER TO THE BEGINNING OF WINTER.

NOTES

THE PLAY SHIFTS CONTINUOUSLY BETWEEN THE THEATRICAL PRESENT (WINTER) - IN WHICH DAVID IS ALONE IN A ROOM DURING HIS CONFESSIONS- AND HIS REMEMBERED PAST (SUMMER) -THROUGH WHICH THE STORY PLAYS OUT CULMINATING IN OUR ARRIVAL BACK AT THE PRESENT.

IT IS INTENDED THAT THE SCENES FLOW SEAMLESSLY INTO EACH OTHER WITH NO BLACKOUTS OR OBVIOUS SCENE CHANGES.

WRITERS NOTES

This work is in part a faithful adaptation of James Baldwin's novella 'Giovanni's Room' and in part a complete re-imagining of this popular work. Most significant are the changes I have made to the original character of Giovanni. In Baldwin's version Giovanni is a young Italian living illegally in Paris. In this version I have altered the character to become Ku-Jean, a West African illegal immigrant struggling to create a life for himself in this romantic yet cruel city. The reasons for this change are numerous. I felt strongly that a contemporary audience would relate better to the situation of an African illegal immigrant than they might to a European and that this characters situation might appear more desperate if he were from a completely foreign culture. I was also intrigued with the possibility of somehow placing Baldwin himself into the world of the play.I felt by altering the race of the protagonist Giovanni I might somehow serve to highlight some of the themes of Baldwin's other works. I also felt it was a change that would work particularly well within the play's Parisian setting. Paris has long been home to many African immigrants and refugees. Its relative close proximity to many of France's West African colonies meant there has been a steady influx of African immigrants throughout the last century seeking a better life. Our contemporary social understanding of refugees and illegal immigrants might allow an audience to now read this character in a way similar to how an audience encountering the novel for the first time in the 1950's might have read the original character of Giovanni.

The name Ku-Jean comes from the amalgamation of the common West African name Kujo and the common French name Jean (or John).

ACT ONE

PROLOGUE: BEGINNING OF WINTER: PRESENT-1953

An inexpensive hotel room in Le Marais quarter, late at night.

An unmade bed, a bedside table, a closed window, a section of room that is curtained off, or in shadow. Not much else.

DAVID is in the room. He holds a bottle of bourbon. He has been drinking. Heavily. His speech and body rhythms are wet, soaked, weighted.

There is someone else in the room who cannot be seen.

DAVID

Did I ever tell you how we met?
Not Ku-Jean, I'm not talking about him.
I mean my girl. Hella.
It was in a bar in Montmartre about a year after I came to Paris. Fucking bars. They're all the same, all full of smoke, and dull music and rotting walls. And strangers. Everyone so full of expectation. Everyone wanting - what? Money?
Blood?
Love?

He swigs from the bottle.

Someone to come along rescue them.
Well there she was and she was smiling and laughing and drinking and watching, and that is why I liked her. Because she watched everyone the same way I did. Disdain. Revulsion. I could see it in her sparkling little eyes. I knew she would be someone fun to have fun with. And we did. I loved her. That's why I asked her to marry me. I wanted to get married and have babies and go back home and be happy.

He swigs again.

And now...
Right now, right this minute, Hella is alone on some lonely ship in the middle of the lonely ocean trying to get back home.
And Ku-Jean....

He pauses. Takes a long drink.

How long does he have? You said it will happen at 6
O'clock? What time is it now?

DAVID picks up an alarm clock from
the beside table and looks at it.

DAVID

Oh god. Jesus.
Do you think it will happen- I mean, do you think he will
actually die on the second? As soon as the clock strikes 6
that the blade will fall and...
Oh god. Jesus.

DAVID swigs from the bottle. He
considers the clock. He winds it up.

DAVID

There. All set. For 6 o'clock.

The clock ticks.

DAVID

There is nothing I can do now.

SCENE ONE: PAST: END OF SUMMER: GUILLAUMES BAR

An underground gay bar in the Marais
Quarter.

JACQUES sits at a table, DAVID hovers
nearby.

Music plays.

JACQUES

David? David? David!

DAVID looks at him.

JACQUES

What are you thinking?

DAVID

That I hate this place. All these men flapping about like
peacocks, squawking at each other, it's ridiculous. It's
like some bizarre jungle.

JACQUES

One mans jungle is another mans Eden.

DAVID

It can't be an Eden. It's godless.

JACQUES

In this Eden, Guillaume is our God.

DAVID

Guillaume is a devil. But he certainly has created a sanctuary for acquired tastes. Squawk, squawk, flap, flap. It's revolting. Don't they know how ridiculous they are?

JACQUES

I didn't realize you were so uncomfortable here. We can leave if you want. But I'm quite sure the first time I met you was in this very bar.

DAVID

I'm quite sure you're mistaken.

JACQUES

I'm quite sure I'm not. You were alone. And you were very drunk. You caused a minor commotion by flirting with a young soldier.

DAVID

I like to play games with the peacocks. Keep them guessing. Perhaps we could get them to take bets.

JACQUES

I doubt they have the money to spare. Though one can never be sure if they're after money, or blood, or love.

DAVID

I can't see how they get either. A man who's after a woman would certainly choose a real one-

JACQUES

-And a man who's after a man would certainly not want one of them. Well, I suppose you are the perfect judge of what a man wants. We need another drink.

KU-JEAN can be seen behind the bar; polishing glasses, wiping the bar, lighting a cigarette.

JACQUES

Look at him.

DAVID

Who?

JACQUES

The barman. Just look at him. He's magnificent.

DAVID

Sure. If only he had a sister.

JACQUES

He's not a peacock, that's for certain.

DAVID

Maybe not to look at, but I'm sure he squawks just the same.

JACQUES

He's new here. I haven't seen him before. I wonder where Guillaume found him.

DAVID

He does look like something only Guillaume could dream up. If you want to get to know him better I'll vanish anytime you like.

JACQUES

You'll do no such thing! I'll satisfy myself with looking at him while talking to you. I'll save money that way.

DAVID

And stay happy too.

JACQUES

Exactly.

DAVID

But faint of heart never won fair athlete. Go on. Get us some drinks and see if he chats to you. He looks quite friendly.

JACQUES

They always do from a distance.

JACQUES sucks up his courage and moves over to the bar.

DAVID watches.

Music plays.

DAVID sees KU_JEAN hand JACQUES the drinks and JACQUES move to touch KU-JEAN, who pulls away sharply.

DAVID bursts out laughing.

JACQUES returns with the drinks.

JACQUES

You can stop laughing now. My humiliation is complete.

DAVID

Oh, but you read it all wrong! He was mad for you. He just doesn't want to appear desperate. Buy him a drink. Find out where he likes to shop and buy him some clothes. Or, wait, I know! Tell him about that spare Alpha Romeo you have just waiting to be given to some deserving bartender!

JACQUES

Very funny. Besides, I'm sure he sleeps with girls.

DAVID

Yes, I've heard about boys who do that. Nasty little beasts.

Quite.

JACQUES

They drink.

JACQUES
You know, I was quite surprised to hear from you. I haven't in ages, and then out of the blue, a phone call.

DAVID
I called because I wanted to see you.

JACQUES
And I wish you would call more often. But you don't. Now tell me what's wrong.

DAVID
Why should you think that something's wrong?

JACQUES
Because I know you better than you think I do.

DAVID
I don't think you know me very well at all.

JACQUES
Try me.

DAVID
Fine. My hotel is threatening to turn me out of my room.

JACQUES
Ah. I see. And how much do you owe this time?

DAVID
Not much. About 6000 francs. But it seems Parisian hotel keepers have a way of smelling poverty.

JACQUES
And they must do what anybody does with a bad smell—throw it out.

JACQUES pulls out a bundle of notes. He flicks through them, before choosing a few.

DAVID watches.

JACQUES
Will 10 000 francs be enough?

JACQUES holds the notes out to DAVID who does not take them.

DAVID
I will pay you back. I promise. I do have some money that my father keeps for me back in New York.

He just refuses to send it because he wants me to return home and settle down.

JACQUES

Settle down. That phrase always makes me think of sediment at the bottom of a stagnant pond. Tell me, your girl- what's her name?-

DAVID

You know her name. Hella-

JACQUES

Yes, Hella. Is she being thrown out of the hotel with you?

DAVID

No. Hella is in Spain. She will be for sometime I think.

JACQUES

Ah. Poor David. Broke and alone on the streets of Paris.

JACQUES still holds the money.

JACQUES

Why don't you go and buy him a drink?

DAVID

Who?

JACQUES

The barman.

DAVID

The barman?

JACQUES

Yes.

DAVID

Well, I know you find this hard to believe, but I'm rather queer on girls myself. I don't spend money on men.

JACQUES

But you don't mind them spending money on you.

DAVID

That's not fair.

JACQUES

No-one likes to be teased by the truth. I'm not for a moment suggesting that you jeopardize that immaculate manhood that is your pride and joy. I only suggested you should buy it because he will no doubt refuse it if I do. And he is working hard. He deserves a drink.

DAVID

I hope he has the nerve to order the most expensive glass of champagne.

JACQUES

I would buy him the bottle if he so wanted. Go on. If there is any confusion I shall be happy to clear it up.

DAVID

There will be no confusion. And don't you be getting confused either.

JACQUES

At the risk of losing your remarkably candid friendship, let me say that confusion is a luxury that only the very young can afford. And you, my friend, are no longer that young.

How old are you? Twenty-eight? Twenty-nine? I'm almost twice that. What ever may happen to you, let it happen now, before it's too late.

DAVID takes the money out of JACQUES hand.

DAVID

I'm not like you Jacques. And I'm not like them. I'm not a peacock. I despise peacocks.

JACQUES

It's alarming how often one becomes the thing one most despises.

SCENE TWO: END OF SUMMER: GUILLAUMES BAR

At **the bar**.

DAVID approaches KU-JEAN. KU-JEAN notices him.

JACQUES watches.

KU-JEAN

What can I get for you?

DAVID

Bourbon. With a hellava lotta ice.

KU-JEAN pulls out the bottle and shows off, flipping and spinning the bottle, before pouring the drink.

DAVID

(Glancing at JACQUES)

Those are some moves you have there. Let me buy you a drink.

KU-JEAN

You buy me a drink?

DAVID
I buy you a drink.

KU-JEAN
I drink no alcohol while I work. But perhaps I will have a coke.

DAVID
You can have what ever you like.

DAVID hands over a large note from the money JACQUES has just given him.

KU-JEAN
You are rich.

DAVID
Oh, god no. Not at all. I just don't have any change.

KU-JEAN places a multitude of notes on the bar.

KU-JEAN
Now you have lots of change.

*

DAVID
Thank you.

DAVID pockets the change and raises his glass.

DAVID
Cheers.

KU-JEAN grabs a small glass bottle of coke and flips the lid off.

KU-JEAN
Cheers.

They drink.

They look at each other.

DAVID gets embarrassed and moves off.

KU-JEAN
I have not seen you here before.

DAVID hesitates.

DAVID
It's not a place I choose to frequent.

KU-JEAN
Not enough women? You are American?

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