

ALMOST TRUE

by Dennis Bush

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ALMOST TRUE

A Dramatic Ensemble One Act Play

by **Dennis Bush**

SYNOPSIS: Cooper and Lark could be the perfect couple, if Lark's home life wasn't so horrific and if Cooper didn't idealize their relationship. Their friends' ideas of what constitutes a relationship, what we can expect of friends, and what is normal all collide as *Almost True* flashes back from Lark's apparent disappearance through the nearly 11 months that lead up to it. The play offers actors challenging and varied characters to play and allows directors to be creative with staging.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(4 females, 6 males; 0-5 extras)

COOPER (m).....	18, charismatic, almost heroic. <i>(129 lines)</i>
DEVON (f).....	17, almost kind. <i>(17 lines)</i>
JENSEN (f).....	18, almost friendly. <i>(13 lines)</i>
LUCAS (m).....	17, almost brave. <i>(43 lines)</i>
ETHAN (m).....	17, almost honest. <i>(56 lines)</i>
ZANE (m).....	18, almost understanding. <i>(57 lines)</i>
VERONICA (f).....	18, almost aware. <i>(29 lines)</i>
SHAKIR (m).....	18, almost single. <i>(33 lines)</i>
NICO (m).....	18, almost insightful. <i>(36 lines)</i>
LARK (f).....	Almost 18, almost hopeful. <i>(107 lines)</i>
EXTRAS (m/f).....	Characters of similar ages, may be added at the director's discretion. <i>(Non-Speaking.)</i>

DURATION: 45 minutes.

TIME: Present and recent past.

SETTING: Set in various locations; a gym, outside a café.

SET: A bare stage or a very simple set.

PROPS: Phone, backpack, iced beverages.

DIRECTOR'S NOTES

Directors are encouraged to be creative with casting and staging, and to avoid literal use of inferred props or to group actors together so it appears that conversations are happening in places where a character may be speaking directly to the audience.

SOUND EFFECTS

- phone alarm
- clock alarm
- school bell

PREMIERE PRODUCTION

Almost True premiered at Dr. Norman Bethune Collegiate Institute in Toronto, Canada with the following cast and crew:

COOPER	Matthew Hernandez
DEVON	Gayathiri Suweenthiran
JENSEN	Nilab Popal
LUCAS	Norman Liang
ETHAN	Rayyan Rahman, Wader Zheng (US)
ZANE	Alexis Chen
VERONICA	Anika Edward
SHAKIR	Akram Nadeem, Gilbert Chen (US)
NICO	Illyas Abdallah
LARK	Phoebe Shabo

DIRECTOR: Monika Rzezniczek

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR: Ruba Elyamani

PRODUCTION TEAM: Wader Zheng, Gilbert Chen, Henry But, Connie Chiu, Yasamin Osmani, William Li, Harrison Yu, Aaron Chu, Alex Shen, Emily Li, Jensen Ong, Ken Li, Michael Zheng, and Xiaoting Su.

The playwright offers special thanks to Karen Brown, Logan Umbanhowar, Meggy Lykins, and Veronica Thompson for their kind assistance and inspiration, during the creation of *Almost True*.

DEDICATION

The playwright dedicates this commissioned play to the extraordinary, inspiring theatre students, recent graduates (in 2018 and 2019), theatre director Monika Rzezniczek, and principal Sandy Kaskens of Dr. Norman Bethune Collegiate Institute, with very special thanks to Anthia Barboutsis and the remarkable cast and crew of the 2017 Bethune production of my play *Drift*, which was the beginning of this wonderful journey.

AT START: *Lights up, slowly, on ALL scattered around the playing space. They face upstage and their bodies resemble shadowed trees in a forest. As the lights continue to rise, COOPER steps into a bright spotlight downstage center.*

COOPER: *(After a silent beat.)* I had a dream... It was one of those dreams that seem so real that, when you wake up, you can't believe it didn't really happen. *(A beat, as he begins to describe the dream.)* I was walking in the snow. I was with my girlfriend Lark. It's not a name you hear a lot. A lark's a bird, but it's also my girlfriend's name. *(Back to his story.)* Anyway, we were holding hands as we walked. *(A beat.)* When I looked back over my shoulder, I could see a trail of our footsteps behind us. But, when I looked ahead, I saw footsteps that weren't mine. They couldn't be mine, because I hadn't gotten there yet. Lark must've gone ahead of me. I must've let go of her hand, when I looked back over my shoulder. *(A beat.)* But she wasn't ahead of me. She wasn't... anywhere. And the footsteps stopped about five or six feet in front of me.

A beat.

COOPER: That's when I woke up.

SFX: The strident sounds of alarm clocks, phone alarms, and school bells all go off loudly and simultaneously, as the other actors move downstage. They are strident and confrontational.

The next nine lines are all spoken simultaneously.

COOPER: *(Desperately.)* I didn't know she was missing. Nobody told me. I didn't know! How could I know? I couldn't. I didn't.

DEVON: What did you say to her? You must've said something to her. You know you said something to her!

JENSEN: People don't just disappear. They don't. They absolutely don't. If you think I'm going to believe you, you're wrong!

LUCAS: I was at the gym, so I'm out of the loop. But I heard things. I definitely heard things. And they weren't good.

ETHAN: What'd you do? Seriously, what did you do? 'Cause your innocent face isn't as innocent as you think.

ZANE: Her mother is freaking out. Freaking out! You can understand why. Because nobody's telling her anything.

VERONICA: You can tell when something's not right. You know... a little off. Weird. Strange. I can always tell when something isn't right.

SHAKIR: Everybody's talking about it. Not just a few people. Everybody. Absolutely everybody.

NICO: You must've done something. Or said something. Or you said something and did something. What did you say? What'd you do?

A beat, silent and still.

COOPER: *(With tears running down his cheeks.)* I didn't know she was missing. Nobody told me. I didn't know! How could I know? I couldn't. I didn't.

ALL move counterclockwise (from the audience's perspective.). As they do, the next section of dialogue takes place. The words come quickly, one after the other—almost overlapping.

DEVON: January.

LUCAS: December.

ZANE and NICO: November.

JENSEN: October.

ETHAN: September.

VERONICA and SHAKIR: August.

NICO: July.

ETHAN: June.

LUCAS and ZANE: May.

DEVON: April.

The counterclockwise movement stops, as COOPER and ETHAN move toward each other.

ETHAN: I saw you with that girl.

COOPER: You've seen me with a lot of girls.

ETHAN: This was a new one.

COOPER: *(A statement, not a question.)* A new girl.

ETHAN: Somebody I haven't seen you with before.

COOPER: *(A statement.)* So, new to you.

ETHAN: And new to you, too, or I'd have seen her with you before today.

COOPER: You're sure about that?

ETHAN: I thought I was, but, maybe I was wrong.

COOPER: *(With a grin.)* She's relatively new.

ETHAN: That's still new.

COOPER: Relatively... We've been kind of hanging out for about a week.

ETHAN: That's definitely new. *(A quick beat.)* She's cute.

COOPER: She's beautiful.

ETHAN: She got a name? Or are we just gonna call her "relatively new girl" till you find somebody you like better?

COOPER: Lark. *(A quick beat, then, sharply.)* And that's not gonna happen.

ETHAN: I've heard that before.

COOPER: This time's different... Lark is special.

COOPER crosses away from ETHAN.

ETHAN: *(After COOPER has crossed away.)* Until she's not.

Transition to LUCAS and LARK.

LUCAS: *(To LARK, as he shows her a video of himself.)* It's not what you think. It's not just jumping.

LARK: But that's what you're doing.

LUCAS: It's jumping with a purpose—a goal. I try to jump on a box, fifty inches high, from a fully squatted position. I do it every day. *(Clarifying.)* I try to do it every day. *(Explaining.)* If I'm jumping on a box, then I can't be in a box. I can't be boxed in. I can't be limited by who people think I am and what they think I can do.

LARK: Does the box have to be that high? I don't like the idea of jumping and falling down, because the box is too tall.

LUCAS: If you never fall down, you never get up.

LARK: If you don't fall down, you're already up, so you don't have to get up.

Transition to SHAKIR and NICO.

SHAKIR: "I can't make you wanna do something you should already want to do." That's what she told me.

NICO: Out of the blue? She just said that to you, out of the blue?

SHAKIR: I asked her if she needed me to go with her. To some... thing. Some... event. Some... whatever.

NICO: But you didn't go.

SHAKIR: Right. Because she said, "I don't need you to be there." So, I was like, "Fine... cool. I'll catch you, later."

NICO: That's what I would've said.

SHAKIR: But she was like, "I don't need you to be there. But you should want to be there. It's important to me, so it should be important to you."

NICO: That's not how it works.

SHAKIR: So, I said, "Make up your damn mind!" I might've yelled it. I probably did, but I was pretty triggered. You start talkin' about needs and wants like I'm supposed to understand how things work in your head, and I'm gonna be pretty damn triggered. That's all I'm saying.

NICO: No way not to feel that way.

SHAKIR: That's when she got really quiet, but really intense, and said, "I can't make you wanna do something you should already wanna do."

NICO: She doesn't deserve you.

SHAKIR: Right?

NICO: Hundred percent.

Transition to ETHAN and ZANE.

ETHAN: *(To ZANE.)* You're moving in with her?

ZANE: My dad and I. We're moving in with her and her mom.

ETHAN: Pretty convenient. You tried to go out with her...

ZANE: *(Cutting him off.)* At the same time my dad was making a move on her mom.

ETHAN: He had more skill than you did.

ZANE: Luck, not skill.

ETHAN: You're moving in with her, so it seems like you got all the luck.

ZANE: But she's my stepsister, now.

ETHAN: You didn't have a chance with her, anyway.

ZANE: You don't know anything.

ETHAN: I know she's dating Cooper.

ZANE: (*Shoving ETHAN.*) No way!

ETHAN: They've been going out for like two weeks. (*A beat, as he steps toward ZANE.*) Looks like you're the one who doesn't know anything.

DEVON, JENSEN, and VERONICA: April.

LUCAS, SHAKIR, and NICO: May.

DEVON, JENSEN, and VERONICA: April.

LUCAS, SHAKIR, and NICO: May.

COOPER and LARK move downstage, with COOPER slightly ahead of LARK. COOPER looks up, as if at the sky.

COOPER: (*Awkwardly trying to think of something to say.*) It's a nice night.

LARK: It is.

COOPER: (*Even more awkwardly.*) The movie was good.

LARK: It was.

COOPER: (*Sweetly, with a genuine smile.*) You don't have to agree with me.

LARK: But I do—agree with you. (*Quickly clarifying.*) Not about everything. But the movie was good and it is a nice night.

COOPER: We could walk a little, if you want, before I take you back to your house.

LARK: Okay.

COOPER: I'd say we could go back to my house and hang out for a while, but... home is kinda weird right now. (*With an awkward laugh.*) It's been weird pretty much as long as I can remember. I don't know why I said, "right now," when it definitely hasn't just been right now or even recently. It's been always. But, I guess I didn't know that till a friend of mine asked if I wanted to sleep over at his house, a couple weekends ago. It was gonna be me and him and two or three other guys. We were gonna eat pizza and play video

games all night, so I guess it wasn't really a sleepover so much as it was a not-planning-to-sleep sleepover. (*A quick beat.*) When he asked, I was like, "Yeah, sure, okay," even though I'd never slept at anybody else's house before. My parents wouldn't have allowed it, even if somebody had asked me—which nobody had, until this particular invitation. So, when Liam asked, I decided to tell my parents, instead of asking. "I'm sleeping over at Liam's house, tonight. His parents'll be home, so it's not like anything crazy is gonna happen." That's what I told my parents. And I put a change of clothes and some deodorant into my gym bag and just sauntered out the door like it was something I did every day.

LARK: (*With a giggle.*) You sauntered?

COOPER: That's what you got outta the whole story? That I sauntered?

LARK: It's not a word a guy like you uses very often. Or ever.

COOPER: Well, maybe I'm not the guy you thought I was, because, hell, yeah, I sauntered.

A beat.

COOPER: But Liam's room was weird. Like happy and peaceful.

LARK: No holes in the walls?

COOPER: (*With a laugh.*) No... why would there be holes in the walls?

LARK: (*After a very quick beat, making light of it.*) No reason. Just you know, sometimes, there are holes in the walls at people's houses.

COOPER: There definitely weren't any holes in the walls. (*Takes a few steps away from LARK, looking up at the sky.*) On nights like this, I think it'd be cool to have a telescope.

COOPER reaches back and takes LARK'S hand. She pulls it back from him.

COOPER: Why'd you do that?

LARK: I don't know... I guess I just don't feel like holding hands.

COOPER: My hands aren't sweaty or anything.

LARK: I didn't say they were.

COOPER: But you don't wanna hold hands?

LARK: No.

COOPER: It's what people do on a date. You know that, right?

LARK: There's no law requiring hand-holding as part of the dating experience.

COOPER: *(Crossing back to LARK.)* But there's an expectation. It's like the good-night kiss. There's an expectation that people will hold hands and have a good-night kiss on a date. Anything else is a bonus. *(Quickly clarifying.)* But I wasn't suggesting anything except holding hands.

LARK: We've been on dates before and we didn't hold hands.

COOPER: I've been working up to it.

LARK: *(Clearly frustrated.)* Can't we just sit here and talk and not hold hands?

COOPER: *(His anger rising.)* You know I'm a good guy, right?

LARK: Yeah.

COOPER: And you know most guys wouldn't put up with this.

LARK: Put up with what?

COOPER: *(Indicating his un-held hand.)* This.

LARK: Not holding hands? How is that something to put up with?

COOPER: *(Getting louder as the argument continues.)* It's unnecessary rejection.

LARK: Or maybe holding hands is an unnecessary expectation. Maybe you can like somebody and like to spend time with them without having to hold onto 'em like a little kid you're afraid is gonna run off.

COOPER: And, maybe, you're the only person who's ever thought that.

LARK: I doubt it.

COOPER: Centuries of courtship rituals would say you're wrong.

LARK: Courtship rituals?

COOPER: Yeah, they're a thing. Ever heard of sociology?

LARK: Centuries of sane people would say you're making too much out of this. Way too much.

COOPER: *(Shouting.)* You're the one who doesn't wanna hold hands. You're the one who took a really nice moment in the middle of a really nice date and turned it into an unnecessary rejection.

LARK: It's feeling more and more necessary.

COOPER: I should just take you back to your house.

LARK: Sure. That's what a good guy does.

COOPER: I know that's right.

LARK: *(With tears welling up.)* Anything else would be a bonus.

Transition to ETHAN and LUCAS at the gym.

ETHAN: I could've been hurt. You were supposed to be spotting me.

LUCAS: I got distracted by your face.

ETHAN: A barbell almost crushes my throat and you're making jokes.

LUCAS: It wasn't a joke. Your face wasn't a joke.

ETHAN: It's the last time I ever ask you to spot me. That's for damn sure.

LUCAS: Have you seen your face?

ETHAN: I see it every day. I look in the mirror, when I brush my teeth, and shave, and, sometimes, just to remind myself how good I look.

LUCAS: I'm talking about when you're lifting. Have you ever seen your face when you're lifting weights?

ETHAN: No way. *(Quick beat.)* I look at myself after I'm done working out. To appreciate the results.

LUCAS: Then, you're clueless about the level of distraction your face creates.

ETHAN: *(Clarifying.)* When I'm lifting?

LUCAS: Before and during.

ETHAN: It's before, too?

LUCAS: It's iconic, before. It's seriously impressive how bizarre it is. I mean, during the lifting, you make this face like a constipated toddler desperately trying to be... not constipated. But, before you lift—right when you grip the bar—your eyes kind of bug out and your lips quiver, like you've seen something scary but, also, like you're really sad, and you might cry.

ETHAN: You're crazy.

LUCAS: I wish I was. Because that's what people are dealing with, when you ask 'em to spot you, buddy. That's what I was dealing with.

Transition to DEVON, JENSEN, VERONICA, and LARK, moving toward a seating area outside a cafe, laughing, and sipping iced beverages. The laughter should begin immediately at the end of LUCAS'S line, so the laughter bleeds from the end of that scene into the start of this one.

VERONICA: *(Raising her beverage cup.)* Here's to the start of summer!

JENSEN: Summer doesn't actually start till like the 20th or the 21st.

VERONICA: When June starts, summer starts. That's what I think.

DEVON: *(Dancing a bit in her seat, with her beverage held high.)*
Right, so... hello, summer!

VERONICA: I've already bought two really cute swimsuits. I'll send you the pics so you don't buy anything even remotely similar.

DEVON: No twinning allowed at the pool!

VERONICA, JENSEN, and DEVON laugh. LARK looks down, as she sips her beverage.

VERONICA: *(To LARK.)* You don't contribute much to a conversation, do you?

With her mouth still on her straw, LARK looks at VERONICA. A beat.

VERONICA: *(A very clear directive.)* Say something!

LARK: *(With an awkward laugh, blurting it out.)* Every time I think of something to say, somebody else says it before I get a chance. Or somebody changes the subject, so saying what I was going to say wouldn't fit into the conversation, because you're already talking about something—or somebody—else.

JENSEN: *(As if she's witnessed something unpleasant.)* Wow. So much information.

VERONICA: *(To LARK.)* You could smile more. Just in general, but when you've got all that awkward stuff going on in your head, if you smile—a really pretty, sweet smile—people won't care what you have to say, but they'll like having you around. And that's really the important thing.

COOPER approaches VERONICA, DEVON, JENSEN, and LARK. He's got a backpack slung over one shoulder and is carrying an iced beverage.

COOPER: *(A bit sheepishly to ALL, but especially LARK.)* Hey!

JENSEN: Wow. So much charm.

COOPER: I wasn't trying to be charming. I was just saying hello.

DEVON: *(To JENSEN.)* That's how it starts. Then, he makes a move on you and, when you turn him down, he yells at you like a crazy person. *(Her official diagnosis.)* He has anger issues.

JENSEN, DEVON and VERONICA laugh.

COOPER: Listen, I don't know what Lark told you, but that's—

DEVON: *(Cutting him off.)* She didn't tell us anything.

JENSEN: She didn't have to.

VERONICA: Other people go to the movies. Other people look up at the stars. Other people can hear you when you yell at somebody.

An awkward beat.

COOPER: *(Mortified and struggling to express himself.)* It's... not what you think.

VERONICA: You don't know what I think.

A beat.

VERONICA: *(Standing; to DEVON, JENSEN and LARK.)* Let's go. This place is trash. *(A quick beat, then, to COOPER.)* And you fit right in. *(A quick beat.)* That's what I think.

VERONICA begins to exit. DEVON and JENSEN follow closely behind, with LARK a few steps behind them.

COOPER: *(To LARK, desperately.)* I'm sorry...

LARK turns back to look at COOPER.

COOPER: (*With complete sincerity.*) I'm so sorry.

LARK: Sorry about what?

COOPER: How I acted... the stuff I said.

LARK: It was pretty awful.

COOPER: I don't know what happened. One minute, everything was fine and I was so happy. Like everything was perfect. And, then, when you didn't wanna hold my hand, I just—I don't know—I got ticked off, and I said stupid stuff and I didn't treat you right... and I am totally and completely sorry.

LARK: I got in trouble when I got home a couple minutes past my curfew, too.

COOPER: I thought your curfew was midnight.

LARK: It was, but my stepdad changed it to 11:30, without telling me.

COOPER: So, how could he be mad if you didn't know?

LARK: He said it was my responsibility to ask what time my mom and him expected me home. I was supposed to "confirm the curfew."

COOPER: (*Like he, alone, can solve the problem.*) I could talk to him.

LARK: And say what?

COOPER: I don't know. Tell him it was my fault you were later than the curfew he changed without telling anybody.

LARK: He said my mom knew. He said they discussed it.

COOPER: Do you need me to talk to your mom?

LARK: (*A little more sharply than she intends.*) I don't need you to do anything!

A beat.

LARK: (*Softening.*) It's really sweet of you to offer, but it'd do more harm than good.

COOPER: Whatever you want. (*A quick beat.*) Or don't want. Just tell me what to do—or not do—and I'll do it—or not do it. (*With a laugh.*) You know what I mean.

LARK: (*Extending her hand.*) I wanna hold hands.

COOPER takes her hand, kisses it, gallantly, then has a moment of awkwardness.

COOPER: *(As he holds LARK'S hand.)* People are gonna talk. Holding hands, right here in the middle of the afternoon, and not even on a real date.

LARK: We could be on a date.

COOPER: When?

LARK: Right now. This can be a date.

COOPER: All right, then. We're on a date.

A beat, as COOPER smiles and looks at LARK.

COOPER: So, does this mean we're back together?

LARK: I guess it does.

COOPER: *(With a smile.)* People are gonna talk.

LARK: *(The simple truth.)* They always do.

LARK kisses him sweetly on the cheek. They cross away from each other, as we transition to ETHAN and COOPER on one side of the playing space and LUCAS and LARK on the other side.

ETHAN: I saw you with Lark.

COOPER: So?

ETHAN: You back together?

COOPER: We weren't ever really apart.

ETHAN: That's not how it looked.

COOPER: We just kinda took a break. It was stupid, really. A misunderstanding that turned into something it shouldn't have.

ETHAN: It happens.

COOPER: My fault. Totally.

ETHAN: You didn't tell her that, did you?

COOPER: Of course. When you do something stupid, you have to own up to it.

ETHAN: So you say, "Maybe I was wrong." That's still being generous with how much blame you accept.

COOPER: I'm not donating to a charity. Being generous doesn't have anything to do with it. I was wrong. And I admitted it.

ETHAN: You're setting a dangerous precedent for the assessment of blame in the relationship.

COOPER: How many of those have you had?

ETHAN: How many what?

COOPER: Relationships. How many relationships have you had?

ETHAN: That's not really germane to the discussion.

COOPER: (*With a laugh.*) Oh, it's "not really germane." Whenever you say something like it's an absolute fact—even though you have no clue what you're talking about—you toss in a word that nobody ever uses.

ETHAN: People use "germane." People who know what they're talking about use "germane."

COOPER: Not people who've actually had a relationship.

ETHAN: I've had a relationship.

COOPER: And here I was thinking you were just saying something stupid, and that you should own up to it. (*A quick beat.*) But maybe I was wrong.

Transition to LUCAS and LARK.

LUCAS: You missed Veronica's party, last weekend.

LARK: I had other plans.

LUCAS: Which is pretty much the same thing as saying, "I'm choosing to ignore the kindness of your invitation and, in doing so, I acknowledge that everybody who is at the party will be talking about me. And not in a good way."

LARK: Maybe that's what it means to you, but I had actual other plans.

LUCAS: That were more important than Veronica's pool party?

LARK: It was my friend Maya's birthday. She invited me to her house like two months before Veronica said anything about having a party.

LUCAS: (*Like an interrogation.*) If she's your friend, why don't I know her? Is she a real person? Did you go to an imaginary friend's birthday party?

LARK: She's real. We've known each other since we were little. But she moved. She lives about three hours away.

LUCAS: (*In disbelief.*) So you took a road trip to an allegedly real childhood friend's birthday party?

LARK: Her mom came and picked me up and, then, brought me back home after the party.

LUCAS: That was nice of her mom.

LARK: Maya's nice and so's her mom.

LUCAS: What about her dad?

LARK: He's not in the picture.

LUCAS: That must be hard. I think it'd be really difficult for my mom and me, if my dad wasn't around.

LARK: *(A rare moment of unfiltered truth.)* Sometimes, it's easier.

LUCAS: *(Missing LARK'S moment of vulnerable candor.)* But, still, you shouldn't miss important social events.

LARK: Because people will talk about me and not in a good way?

LUCAS: Yes!

LARK: They'll do that anyway—whether I'm at a pool party or not.

LUCAS: You're brave.

LARK: *(With a genuine laugh.)* I'm so far away from brave. *(A quick beat.)* And you're the one who said you can't be limited by who people think you are or what they think you can do.

LUCAS: That's what I say. Reality isn't the same thing.

LARK: Shouldn't it be?

LUCAS: In a perfect world, sure. What a person says is what they wanna do and how they wanna act, but reality definitely gets in the way, sometimes. *(A quick beat.)* A lot of times. *(A quick beat.)* So, yeah, you're brave.

LARK: Just because I didn't go to Veronica's party?

LUCAS: Because you don't care what people say about you.

LARK: There's way more important stuff to care about.

Transition to SHAKIR and NICO.

SHAKIR: And she yelled at me, right in front of like sixteen people!

NICO: How did I miss that?

SHAKIR: You were probably inside getting something to eat.

NICO: Swimming makes me hungry.

SHAKIR: That ain't no lie.

NICO: So, while I was getting something to eat, she just started yelling at you?

SHAKIR: Pretty much.

NICO: Just yelling for no reason?

SHAKIR: One person's reason is another person's no reason.

NICO: So she had a reason.

SHAKIR: She didn't appreciate a comment I made.

NICO: They never do.

SHAKIR: I was getting out of the pool, and I looked across the patio and I saw her standing with her back to me. And she looked good, so I yelled, "Hey, babe, you're lookin' real good!"

NICO: Nothing wrong with pointing that out.

SHAKIR: And, she turned around, and it wasn't Veronica.

NICO: So you called some other girl, "Babe," and told her she was lookin' real good?

SHAKIR: Apparently. And, then, Veronica—who was like five feet to the right of where the other girl was standing—asked me if I had chlorine in my eyes or something, because how else would I not recognize my own girlfriend from across the patio?! And I said, from the back, they looked the same.

NICO: (*Trying to stifle a laugh.*) Oh, damn.

SHAKIR: But I didn't mean like their bodies were the same. They were wearing the same swimsuit. And, to be totally honest, their bodies did look pretty much the same—and I may have mentioned that. But it wasn't what Veronica wanted to hear.

NICO: So she started yelling at you.

SHAKIR: Yelling like she had lost her damn mind. And she did this air-slap thing. Like she was standing all the way across the patio and she pulled her arm back, then, took a step forward and swatted the air, as if I was standing in front of her and she was slapping me across the face.

NICO: She's got a violent streak.

SHAKIR: That's what I'm sayin'.

NICO: You'd never guess it, 'cause she's pretty and all.

SHAKIR: I got her some flowers, so she'll stop being mad at me.

NICO: How's that workin'?

SHAKIR: So far, so good. (*A quick beat.*) But, she told me, if something like that happens, again, she'll knee me in the groin really hard.

NICO: No guy wants that.

SHAKIR: Nope. Not ever.

Transition to VERONICA, ZANE, NICO, COOPER, and ETHAN, scattered around the playing space.

VERONICA: (*Standing; a pronouncement.*) I have a theory!

ZANE: Pigs. (*Clarifying.*) Mother pigs. (*Clarifying.*) Sows... make humming, pulsating sounds to encourage their babies—their little piglets—to nurse. The sounds the sows make encourage the babies to nurse for longer periods of time. It's a trick, but it's important. And it's supposed to be instinctive for all sows to trick the piglets. It's dinner and a show. It's making mother pig milk seem like a Happy Meal.

NICO: I have a tortoise. (*Clarifying.*) A desert tortoise. Everybody that sees him calls him a turtle, but he's a tortoise. They're different things—turtles and tortoises. And my desert tortoise is a desert tortoise because that's the kind of tortoise he is, not because we live in a desert. Because, obviously, we don't. He lives with me and my family and we don't live in a desert. We live pretty close to a forest, and deserts and forests aren't ever that close together. At least, I don't think so.

VERONICA: (*Insistent.*) I have a theory!

ZANE: Pigs are smart. Smarter than dogs. They can do tricks, if you train them. They have complex inner lives. Sure, they love to roll around in the mud and they'll eat human body parts if they're tossed into their pen, but they're smart. Pigs are smarter than most other animals and they're curious, so they'd rather be digging around in the pen or doing other pig stuff. Baby pigs have a lot of things on their pig to-do lists, so they have to be tricked into nursing for longer periods of time. The longer they nurse and the more mother pig milk they get, the healthier they'll be and the less susceptible they'll be to the kind of germs and diseases that make pigs sick. Keeping them healthy and safe is the most important thing a mother pig does for her baby pigs.

COOPER: I had a dream that Lark and I were in the forest. Just her and I and the trees and sky, and we were holding hands as we were walking. And it was kind of cold, so I asked her if she wanted to wear my jacket. Except I wasn't wearing a jacket. She turned and looked at me. She could see I wasn't wearing a jacket. And she disappeared right in front of my eyes. Like her body just turned into little particles of dust the color of the trees and the sky, and she was gone.

NICO: Sometimes, the tortoise gets stuck in the doggie door. It's a little smaller than a typical doggie door, because our dog is more puppy-sized. (*Clarifying.*) Permanently puppy-sized because of the kind of dog he is. He won't get much bigger than he is, now, so the smaller-than-usual doggie door will be fine for him, even when he gets older. But the tortoise gets stuck in the doggie door once or twice a week. It's probably a highlight of the week for him. Pretty much all he does is eat and sleep. So, getting stuck in the doggie door is probably like a big adventure. His head pokes out of his shell when he eats, but not when he sleeps. Sometimes, when he's stuck in the doggie door, his head is poking out and, sometimes, it's back in his shell.

VERONICA: (*Even more insistent.*) I have a theory!

NICO: Maybe, my tortoise pulls his head back into his shell when he the dog tries to lick his head. I've seen him do that, when the dog tries to lick his head, while he has it poked out of his shell to eat, so that could be the reason that, sometimes, his head is pulled back into his shell, when he's stuck in the doggie door.

ZANE: But maybe it's just a theory. Maybe the mother pigs aren't consciously tricking the baby pigs into nursing longer. Maybe they're just making random pig noises and there's no connection to any kind of innate desire to take care of their babies. Some mothers don't take care of their babies. That's just a fact. They trick them... they manipulate them, but it's not to keep their babies safe and healthy. Maybe, they just do what they have to do to get what they want. Pigs are smart. They know what they're doing. Some of us know, too. And we wish we didn't.

VERONICA: Maybe it's more of an observation than a theory. Maybe it's just something that's really nothing.

COOPER: Like little particles of dust the color of the trees and the sky.

VERONICA: I was driving past Lark's house. Lark and Zane's house, now, since their parents got married. And I saw Lark sitting on the curb in front of the house. She looked like she was crying. Or getting ready to throw up. Sometimes, crying and getting ready to throw up look the same, and it's hard to tell which it is. Or if it's neither of them. It's hard to tell. Especially, when you're driving by. (*A quick beat.*) I didn't stop. I just kept driving.

ZANE: It's hard to talk to somebody—even if it's a friend—about something they couldn't possibly understand. So, you try telling them a story. You figure, people are pigs. (*A quick beat, then, defensively.*) A lot of them are. So, you tell him about pigs and, as you hear the words come out of your mouth, you think, "This isn't helping." And he's definitely confused—that's pretty clear.

COOPER: (*Turing to ZANE.*) What are you talking about? Mother pigs manipulating the pig babies?

ZANE: (*Awkwardly defensive.*) It was a metaphor.

COOPER: A pig manipulation metaphor?

ZANE: Pretty much.

COOPER: And what the hell was that about pigs eating human body parts?

ZANE: That's a straight-up fact. A farmer got half his face eaten off by his own pigs, when he fell in their pen.

COOPER: That's disgusting.

ZANE: Baby pigs get their two front teeth removed so they won't bite the other piglets. And they get their tails cut off. I don't know why they do that, but they do. And they get all of it done without anesthesia. I mean, they're pigs, but, damn, getting their front teeth and tail removed without anesthesia has gotta hurt.

COOPER: If the pigs are so smart, they should train 'em not to bite each other. And not to eat farmer faces or body parts.

ZANE: I don't know if that's something they can train. They're like primal instincts. You know how it is when you're really hungry for a burger, you gotta get a burger.

COOPER: For sure.

An awkward beat.

ZANE: So, I kinda wanna talk to you about Lark.

COOPER: (*With a laugh.*) Like, "Oh, hey, I'm her stepbrother, now, so I gotta be all protective?"

ZANE: (*Firmly.*) Like a friend. (*A quick beat.*) Man to man.

COOPER: (*With an edge.*) Oh, cool, 'cause I thought, maybe, it was like, "Hey, I'm the guy who was trying to get with Lark before my dad married her mom, but now she's my stepsister, so we're cool, right?"

ZANE: It's not like that.

COOPER puts his hand on ZANE'S shoulder.

COOPER: Look... you don't have anything to worry about.

ZANE: You don't know that.

COOPER: I sure as hell do. I'm a good guy, and I'm good to Lark. I know what I'm doing. I know how to treat her right.

ZANE: *(With a clenched jaw; sarcastically.)* Guess you know it all.

COOPER: I know enough.

ZANE: If you say so.

ZANE crosses away from COOPER.

COOPER: *(To audience.)* I know things with Lark were really good. I know that for sure. But stuff at home wasn't good. Not even close to good. It's like I can't ever have everything all going right at the same time. It's like just when I'm moving forward in a really good way, my parents start pulling me back. So, it's like a little forward, a little back, and a little stuck in the middle.

COOPER turns to ETHAN, continuing as a conversation.

COOPER: When I asked my dad if I could borrow his car to take Lark to a nice restaurant, he said, "Dial it back." And I didn't even know what he was talking about. So, I was like, "Is that some kind of reference to back in the day when you had phones that you had to dial to call somebody?" And he said, "It's an expression. It means, 'Put on the breaks. Slow your roll.'" And I stood there looking at him like, "Could we, please, have a conversation without a bunch of phrases that people don't actually use?" So, he said, "No, you can't borrow my car. Your mother and I think you're getting too serious too soon."

ETHAN: Too serious with Lark?

COOPER: Yeah, and, then, as he started walking into the kitchen, he said, "We're not comfortable with it."

ETHAN: With you borrowing the car?

COOPER: (*Dismissively.*) With how serious I am about Lark. (*A quick beat.*) So, I followed him into the kitchen. And him and my mom were sitting at the table, like, "Oh, what a perfect little Saturday lunch we're having," and I said, "You brag about me having a girlfriend. I've heard you tell people, 'Cooper has a girlfriend!'" Like you thought it would never happen. But, when you think it's getting too serious—that I'm getting too serious—you say you're not comfortable with it. My relationship isn't some kind of recliner for you to be comfortable in or comfortable with. You think it's one thing to have a girlfriend, but it's something else altogether when things get too serious. And you say you want me to dial it back, put on the breaks? You don't get to decide that. You don't even know what we do. If you did, you'd probably tell me I needed to be more aggressive. (*A very quick beat.*) Serious doesn't have to mean what you think it means!"

ETHAN: Damn. You said all that to them?

COOPER: Kind of. (*A quick beat.*) But I thought it really hard. And they could probably figure it out from the look on my face. I had a really serious face.

ETHAN: (*With a playful jab and a laugh.*) Maybe you oughtta dial that back. I'm not comfortable with it.

The actors move in a loosely formed circle in a clockwise direction. VERONICA moves downstage as the other actors continue moving.

VERONICA: I'm not comfortable having a boyfriend who can't recognize me from behind in social situations. (*A quick beat.*) I'm not comfortable having a boyfriend who's deficient in social skills, in general. (*A quick beat.*) I'd rather not have a boyfriend who's deficient in any kind of way. But that kind of boyfriend doesn't exist. (*A quick beat.*) You have to have a boyfriend, though. You absolutely have to. Because if you don't, people wonder what's wrong with you. They wonder if you're deficient.

The clockwise movement slowly fades and the actors all slowly turn upstage, as LARK moves to the center.

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