

NIGHT AND THE PROOFREADER

By Ronald Micci

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CHARACTERS

THE PROOFREADER, a fiend who will stop at nothing to achieve grammatical perfection
NARRATOR, of this sordid tale
POLICE COMMANDER, an Irish cop with the brogue to prove it, intent on bringing the maniac to justice
SERGEANT, his second-in-command and brogue-worthy as well
NEWSPAPER PUBLISHER, who runs afoul of the lunatic and pays a dear price
RITA O'SHAUGHNESSY, whose night school paper becomes the object of the fiend's ridicule
BILL, her husband
WOMAN IN BAR, a bit of a floozy who makes advances to the comma freak
BARTENDER
ABRAHAM WHIFFLEAPPLE, best-selling author of *How to Pick Up Women Using Bad Grammar*
GRAMMAR COP #1
GRAMMAR COP #2
GERTA, a middle-aged woman
HER HUSBAND

SETTING

The action takes place in and around the Big City on a spring night of the present.

NOTES ON STAGING

This play was originally staged in a relatively small black-box space as part of the Turnip Theatre Company's 2nd Annual 15-Minute Play Festival in New York.

Requirements in terms of props are minimal and there are no scene changes required. A desk at center can serve as both the proofreader's desk and a desk in the police squad room. It can also provide the chair Whiffleapple uses when he is conversing on the phone.

Chairs along the rear can accommodate actors waiting to come forth and do their turns. And a makeshift bar with stools stage right or left would be helpful.

Other than that, a gun, a dictionary and a red pen are all that is required to have fun with this play.

Another possibility: two or three actors could act all of the parts in front of microphones, simulating a radio broadcast, perhaps making minor costume changes – a hat doffed and donned here or there, for example – using various gadgets to create sound effects. Strive to be as imaginative and innovative with the staging as you can be.

SYNOPSIS

There's a fiend on the loose in the Big City. A grammar freak armed with .38-caliber revolver and Webster's dictionary who will stop at nothing -- not even murder -- to make the world a safe place for series commas. So okay, maybe he takes his grammar just a little too seriously.

The police have been mobilized. A plot has been hatched. But time is running out.

A newspaper publisher and reference librarian who breached grammar etiquette have already fallen victim to the maniac's wrath. Now the fiend has his sights set on the author of a book called *How to Pick Up Women Using Bad Grammar*.

Lock your doors and bar the windows, my friends, for the night is young and each and every one of us may be only one misplaced modifier away from the wrath of this grammar-obsessed freak.

Here's an excellent tool for teaching grammar to students and also a whale of a clever police melodrama.

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(Dark stage. Lights come up on NARRATOR dressed in trench coat and fedora hat. HE pauses to light a cigarette or pantomimes lighting one.)

NARRATOR: Night – *(drags on cigarette, exhales)* -- ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! *(a woman's scream! three gunshots – blam! blam! blam! police sirens wail!)* ...and the Proofreader. Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! *(HE crosses to THE PROOFREADER, who is hunched over his desk scribbling in a notebook, with the tools of his trade at his side – Webster's dictionary and a loaded .38-caliber revolver.)* Meet the proofreader. By day, a mild-mannered though meticulous idiot savant picking his way through manuscripts and page proofs with a sharp pair of tweezers. An overzealous egghead, if you will, possessed of an uncontrollable urge to ferret out and strike down civilization's unending parade of punctilios, peccadilloes and perfectly preposterous bad grammar. *(a beat)* By night, a frustrated schoolmarm, face pressed close under failing lamplight, working in a ledger book, keeping a tally of mankind's ever burgeoning legion of grammatical blunders and faux pas. And then one night it happens. The proofreader has had about all he can take, and armed with Webster's Collegiate Dictionary and a loaded .38-caliber revolver, he stalks off angry and wild-eyed into the night, intent on making the world a safe place for series commas. Down at the local precinct house, things had already begun to get ugly.

(THE PROOFREADER stalks off. Enter POLICE COMMANDER and SERGEANT, who surround his desk.)

SERGEANT: Pinned to the dead woman's lapel was a note, Commander. It was a copy of a letter she had written to the local newspaper, only the spelling and punctuation had been tampered with. Five'll get you ten the killer had it in for this woman's grammar. What we've got on our hands is a case of death by red pencil.

NARRATOR: The police were mobilized. Task forces were set up. Libraries and schools were staked out. But two days later, the maniac struck again.

(Enter RITA O'SHAUGHNESSY and husband BILL. RITA is holding a term paper.)

RITA: I'll just finish up this paper I've been working on for night school, then I'll get that quart of milk for you. You okay for cigarettes?

BILL: Yeah.

(RITA scribbles momentarily in the margins of her term paper, shrugs, and starts off on her errand. SHE hums merrily as she goes about her way, term paper in hand, strolling along the sidewalk.)

RITA: La-di-da-di-da... **(THE PROOFREADER emerges from the shadows, gun poised, with an evil smirk on his lips. HE lets out with a laugh – ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!)** That laugh. **(spies THE PROOFREADER)** Who are you?

PROOFREADER: Never mind. Over there, against the wall.

RITA: You must be crazy.

PROOFREADER: Do as I say. **(a beat)** Yeah, I'm crazy all right.

RITA: What is this, anyway?

PROOFREADER: What is it? This is what it is. **(snatches paper from her)** Before I give it to you, I want to point out a couple of things. First, in *either/or* constructions, the subject after the last *or* determines the number of the verb. You missed a couple of commas around this parenthetical expression and your spelling is downright atrocious. What do you have to say for yourself?

RITA: Holy spit! **(SHE hurries away and heads straight for the police station)** Commander, I saw him clear as day. He had the crazed look of a maniac in his eyes and he was spouting all of this nonsense about grammar.

COMMANDER: There's nothing a lunatic of that ilk won't stoop to, Mrs. O'Shaughnessy. I've known these grammar freaks to kill for less. Well, at least we know what we're up against. If we're going to get him, we'll have to use all our ingenuity. **(a beat)** All right, here's what we're gonna do. We contact one of the newspapers, have them plant a front page story that's chock full of bad grammar. The maniac sees the story and goes after the guy who wrote it, and we've got our man.

NARRATOR: Only the killer proved more shrewd and resourceful than they had bargained for, and instead of targeting the name on the byline, he took revenge on the newspaper publisher himself, who was laid up in the hospital for weeks with painful multiple fractures.

(NEWSPAPER PUBLISHER appears with his arm in a sling.)

NEWSPAPER PUBLISHER: You idiots. I'm going to sue you for every dime you're worth. Trying to use me as bait for some lunatic. And what am I going to do about the reporter who wrote the story, keep him under 24-hour surveillance? **(beat)** You can just tell this nut for me that we have our own rewrite people, to leave us alone. Stop sending me corrected copies of my newspaper. If you ask me, some people need to get a life.

NARRATOR: Several nights later, under cover of darkness, the proofreader struck again. This time the victim was a middle-aged reference librarian who dared lip off to him when confronted with a series of bizarre grammatical questions. The authorities were growing frustrated and restless.

COMMANDER: You see, with a nut like this, enough is never enough. If you put in a comma, he decides you didn't need one. If you leave it out, he wants you to put one in. You can't win with these kooks. They simply fail to understand that life is full of gray areas. What worries me is, what if he gets restless and decides to take his act on the road?

SERGEANT: Meaning?

COMMANDER: What if he gets bored with the local papers, decides to go for bigger fish? What if he decides to target the book publishers? **(beat)** Better contact the book houses, get a list of all recently published grammar titles and put the authors on alert.

NARRATOR: As fate would have it, four new grammar titles had been released that spring – two of them were rehashes of earlier works, but the other two were quite provocative – How to Pick Up Women Using Bad Grammar and Give Me Apostrophes or Give Me Death. Meanwhile, in a rented flat down by the railroad tracks under glare of lamplight, the proofreader's fiendish eyes pored over a grammar text with the aid of a magnifying glass, looking to pick up pointers.

(THE PROOFREADER is hunched over his desk.)

PROOFREADER: A number *have*, but *the* number *has*. Hmm... Commas inside quotes – yes, yes – double negatives a no-no... **(beginning to lose control)** I before e except after c, a stitch in time saves nine – help me, help me, somebody please help me, before I kill again!

NARRATOR: But it was already too late for that as now the fiend donned hat and overcoat and armed with a revolver and lurid red pencil, stalked off yet again into the night. But before he would seek to kill again, he would stop by his friendly local neighborhood bar for a drink.

(THE PROOFREADER enters the bar, pounds his fist on the countertop.)

PROOFREADER: Hey, how about some service around here?

(BARTENDER comes over.)

BARTENDER: Take it easy, buddy, take it easy. **(gives him the once over)** Ain't seen you around here before.

PROOFREADER: You mean you *haven't* seen me around here.

BARTENDER: Yeah, yeah, whatever. So what's it gonna be?

PROOFREADER: Three fingers of the raw stuff, and I mean really give it to me.

BARTENDER: Oh, we got a drinker on our hands, huh? All right, three blasts of the raw stuff coming right up.

(As HE tends to his duties, several bars of sultry, sexy music play. A shapely, albeit tough-looking, WOMAN emerges from the shadows of the bar and cozies up to THE PROOFREADER.)

WOMAN: Hiya, baby. What's new in the big town? **(THE PROOFREADER eyes her suspiciously)** Mind if I slide in? **(SHE sits next to him.)** I was beginning to get a little lonely in here all by myself, but by the look of things, my days of loneliness are over. **(SHE runs her hand along his forearm.)** Now this is what I call a real man.

PROOFREADER: You're pretty ambitious, aren't you, baby? What do you say we take this outside?

WOMAN: **(eagerly)** Sure. **(They exit the bar and find themselves in a dark alley.)** Pretty dark out here, huh?

PROOFREADER: Yeah, it's dark all right. How about a kiss?

(HE takes her in his arms; they kiss.)

WOMAN: You're pretty virile, aren't you? I've been waiting a long time for a man like you, someone who likes to play rough, someone who's not afraid to split his infinitives. How's about a little more of that and something extra to go on top? **(They kiss passionately.)** Another one like that and I could forget about my old man real fast.

PROOFREADER: Your old man?

WOMAN: You don't have to worry about him; he don't care about nothing. He's a jerk.

PROOFREADER: He *doesn't* care about *anything*, and apparently neither do you. So long, baby.

(HE lunges for her throat; chokes her.)

WOMAN: Help, help! It's him, it's the grammar freak! Somebody, help!

NARRATOR: But her cries fell on deaf ears as now the fiend gripped her firmly by the throat, bringing to bear the thunderous force of hands that had corrected more than their fair share of bad grammar. In a moment, she slumped to the ground.

(WOMAN collapses.)

PROOFREADER: I before e, baby. Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!

NARRATOR: But this poor, unsuspecting creature had only been the table setter for the evening's course of events, as now the grammar fiend boarded a bus that would transport him into the Big City and deposit him at the doorstep of one Abraham Whiffleapple, author of the best-selling How to Pick Up Women Using Bad Grammar. ***(beat)*** Meanwhile, downtown, news of the comma freak's latest misdeed slapped the chief in the face like a wet piece of halibut.

COMMANDER: He won't get away with it. I'll put a stop to that fiend if it's the last thing I do. If there's anything that really gets my goat, that sticks in my craw, it's the acts of a perpetrator.

NARRATOR: A perpetrator who even now laughed out loud as he thumped along through the sinister night.

(COMMANDER paces the squad room floor.)

COMMANDER: All right, what about the book houses?

SERGEANT: Aw, they said I was crazy.

COMMANDER: Better check up on those authors anyway. Come on.

(They exit.)

NARRATOR: Meanwhile, a dark figure steps off the bus. A crazed maniac. In the New World Order, he imagines a society policed by grammar cops where no grammatical misdeed goes unpunished.

(Melodramatic "Dragnet" theme music plays – dum-de-dum-dum, dum-de-dum-dum-dahhh! A couple of GRAMMAR COPS wearing aviator sunglasses rap on the door to GERTA's apartment. GERTA, a middle-aged housewife, responds.)

GERTA: Yes?

GRAMMAR COP #1: Grammar police, ma'am. Open up.

GERTA'S HUSBAND: Gerta – who is it?

GERTA: I don't know, I think it's the police, dear.

GERTA'S HUSBAND: What do they want?

GRAMMAR COP #1: We don't like this any more than you do, ma'am.
We could be home playing canasta.

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