

PLAY THE GAME

by Dennis Bush

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PLAY THE GAME

A Full Length Ensemble Drama

by Dennis Bush

SYNOPSIS: *Play the Game*, explores the games we play with each other and with ourselves. Through a series of interwoven monologues and scenes, the characters will take audiences on their life journeys, providing a front-row-center-court-50-yard-line view, as the characters' adventures unfold.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(5-10 females, 5-10 males; doubling possible)

NOAH (m).....	18; passionate; holds a lot of anger. <i>(29 lines)</i>
LESLIE (f).....	31; harried stay-at-home mother. <i>(12 lines)</i>
BOBBY (m).....	28; loudmouth baseball fan. <i>(2 lines)</i>
STEVE (m).....	26; loudmouth baseball fan. <i>(2 lines)</i>
PHILIP (m).....	21; quirky; has had trust issues with the girls he's dated. <i>(23 lines)</i>
SHARON (f).....	35; wealthy; opinionated; polished. <i>(16 lines)</i>
NORMA (f).....	27; dedicated, deep-thinking, passionate 2nd grade teacher. <i>(28 lines)</i>
JOHN (m).....	19; finds comfort in escaping his own personality. <i>(51 lines)</i>
BRETT (m).....	23; very single; has been in jail; has very strong opinions. <i>(26 lines)</i>
CASSIE (f).....	19; outgoing; funny; an active participant in life. <i>(20 lines)</i>

TODD (m).....	26; a fire eater; wants to be – and tries to be – a ladies’ man. (39 lines)
SARAH (f).....	25; young businesswoman; nice; wary of guys. (34 lines)
CHUCK (m).....	35; mild-mannered; works at an electronics store. (2 lines)
SHERRY (f).....	35; Chuck’s perky wife; they often wear matching outfits. (2 lines)
ROBBIN (f).....	23; bright, aware. (9 lines)
KRISTIN (f).....	19; sweet; sad; searching for strength. (50 lines)
SHEILA (f).....	33; has a drinking problem. (2 lines)
ANGELA (f).....	9; a little girl who didn’t like summer camp. (10 lines)
COLE (m).....	17; the star running back on his high school football team. (5 lines)
LYLE (m).....	33; gives lectures on his YouTube channel. (2 lines)

CAST DOUBLING: Suggested cast doubling is listed below.

NORMA/SARAH
 NOAH/LYLE
 SHARON/ROBBIN
 BRETT/CHUCK
 LESLIE/ANGELA
 PHILIP/BOBBY
 CASSIE/SHEILA
 JOHN/COLE
 TODD/STEVE
 KRISTIN/SHERRY

DURATION: 65 minutes

TIME: Game time

SETTING: Where games are played

SET

Play the Game can be presented with a very simple set. 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. There are many staging options that would work effectively and directors are encouraged to be creative with their staging.

COSTUMES AND PROPS

When doubling, it's recommended that each character have a defining/identifying prop or costume element that can be added or removed simply and quickly. For example, Norma may have a clipboard. Cole may have a football. Sheila could have a wine or cocktail glass. Sarah should have a phone and a purse. Kristin and John should each have cups from the coffee place where their scene takes place. Robbin could have a small notebook. The actor playing Actor 1 should have a coach's whistle, unless the director prefers to have that whistle be an offstage or recorded sound.

PRODUCTION NOTE: *Play the Game* may be presented with an optional intermission.

PRODUCTION HISTORY

Play the Game had its World Premiere Production, September 2017, in Phoenix, AZ. Directed by the playwright, with the following cast:

NORMA and SARAH Alexis Zimmerman
 JOHN and COLE Ryan Bernardino
 NOAH and LYLE Ben Collison
 BOBBY and PHILIP Kaveh Moasser
 KRISTIN and SHERRY Alayna Shepard
 SHARON and ROBBIN Carolina Quintero
 LESLIE and ANGELA Kimberly Garcia
 CASSIE and SHEILA Rachel Campbell
 BRETT and CHUCK Derek Scott
 STEVE and TODD Andrew Urban

The playwright offers special thanks to

Kelsey Torstveit, Emily White, Alex Knerr, Scott McGown, Meggy Lykins, Nick Petrovich, Joe Pascale,

Hailey Araza, Karen Brown, Pam Eckert, Melissa Ganas and Martin W. Scott

for their kind assistance and inspiration, during the creation and development of *Play the Game*.

AT RISE: *A whistle is blown, as if by a referee at the start of a game. Lights up on a playing space with the actors scattered around the stage.*

NORMA: *(Immediately after the whistle.) Let's play!*

The actors move downstage into a line across the front of the playing space. In this opening section, they are more "actors" than the "characters", with line readings related to the dialogue and energy of the opening, rather than related to the character's personalities and behavior in the rest of the play. Their initial lines are an overlapping cacophony, giving the audience a feel of walking down a carnival midway and having all the vendors and barkers making their sales pitch.

NOAH: Wanna play?

PHILIP: You wanna play?

SHARON: Everybody plays!

TODD: You gotta play to win!

BRETT: You know you wanna play!

CASSIE: Come out and play!

LESLIE: You have to play!

KRISTIN: C'mon, let's play!

JOHN: Let's play!

NORMA: It's time to play!

A whistle is blown. The actors shift into characters.

PHILIP: Can Molly come out and play?

NOAH: Play dead!

PHILIP: Can she?

NOAH: Lay down!

PHILIP: Come out?

NOAH: Roll over!

PHILIP: *(Aggressively.)* And play!

NOAH: Play dead!

KRISTIN: You're it.

BRETT: Play with me!

KRISTIN: You're it!

BRETT: Play with me!

SHARON: You're out!

JOHN: Play ball!

NORMA: Give it a try.

TODD: What've you got to lose?

LESLIE: Everybody plays.

CASSIE: Everybody wins.

ALL: *(Except ACTOR SEVEN.)* A few people win.

LESLIE: But ya gotta play.

All the actors move downstage into a line, again, though in different order from the initial line. There is a more aggressive edge to their lines and there is some overlapping in delivery.

NORMA: Watcha gonna do?

NOAH: Watcha gonna do?

SHARON: Play the game.

BRETT: Play the game

LESLIE: Play the game.

PHILIP: You want to.

CASSIE: You want to.

JOHN: Do it!

TODD: Do it!

KRISTIN: Do it!

ALL: Do it!

A whistle is blown. The actors move to various positions in the playing space and shift into their characters.

NOAH: *(Shouted.)* Never!

A quick beat. NOAH, LESLIE and PHILIP'S dialogue has the feel of banter, but is not a connected conversation. They are in two separate places, having separate conversations.

NOAH: I will never again allow people to make fun of me for refusing to put my wallet in my back pocket.

LESLIE: (*Sarcastically.*) Goody! That's what I said, when my husband did another painting.

NOAH: It's more than a personal idiosyncrasy.

LESLIE: It's hideous.

NOAH: It's more than just the fact that it destroys the aesthetic appeal of my natural butt shape by making it look like I have a giant tumor on it.

LESLIE: It really is hideous. I'm going to hang it in the garage.

NOAH: There are safety reasons. There are proven safety reasons.

LESLIE: All the crappy art goes in the garage.

NOAH: There are verified, factual reasons... but you don't want to know how I know. (*Continues to work up to his pronouncement.*)

LESLIE: I told him the garage is his own personal gallery. I put a mini fridge out there and keep it stocked with expensive imported beer. He loves it. He's as happy as a pig sloshing around in crap.

NOAH: But I can't tell you because the visuals that accompany the knowledge are too vivid.

LESLIE: (*With a zing.*) He's a pig surrounded by crappy art.

NOAH: Okay, so sometimes having a vivid image of something is the only way to truly understand it, but, trust me, you don't want to visualize this.

BOBBY and STEVE are in a separate part of the playing space. Their initial dialogue is shouted, as if from the cheap seats at a baseball game. They are not connected to NOAH or PHILIP in any way. They are each in separate spaces.

BOBBY: I could see it all the way up here! He was out!

NOAH: People are predisposed to want to do something, if somebody tells 'em not to.

STEVE: (*Shouted.*) He was out!

NOAH: That's a proven fact.

BOBBY: I could see it from here.

NOAH: (*A confession.*) I was in the restroom. I was in the *stall*, in the restroom. At Mama Nicoletta's Italian Restaurant on the corner of

Roosevelt and Radnor. And I was doing what you do when you're in a stall in a restroom. And I was trying to be quiet because that's what I do when I'm in a stall in a restroom.

PHILIP: It's hard to know when something is right.

NOAH: I don't like to go to the bathroom in public restrooms, so I try to be as quiet as possible, so nobody knows I'm in there.

PHILIP: With a relationship, I mean. It's hard to know when you find the right person or when they find you.

NOAH: Well, other than the fact that they can see my feet and the bottom part of my legs, they wouldn't know I was in there. I'm that quiet.

STEVE: (*Shouted.*) That's what I'm talkin' about!

NOAH: So, this guy comes into the restroom and he goes into the stall right next to mine and he does what you do when you're in a stall in a restroom. And he does it very fast and very loud – which both impressed and unnerved me. He didn't care if anybody heard him. (*Quick pause.*) And, then, he stood up and started to pull his pants up and I heard a loud plop and he yelled, "Oh my God! Oh my God! My wallet flipped out of my pants pocket into the toilet." (*Quick pause.*) That's exactly what he said. At full volume. It echoed in the restroom. (*Pause.*) He had to put his hand into the toilet – before he flushed – and fish out his wallet. Wallets are not designed to go in the toilet. Money and credit cards and pictures and fortunes from cookies at Chinese restaurants and everything else you keep in your wallet – none of that stuff is supposed to go in the toilet. (*Quick pause.*) And he cried. He got on his hands and knees and reached into the unflushed toilet and got his wallet out and, while he was doing it, he cried. The sound of a man crying in a stall in a restroom is not something you can easily forget. It lives in your memory. It takes over your memory. It *is* your memory. (*Pause.*) So, I will never – *never* – allow anyone to make fun of me for not putting my wallet in my back pocket. I refuse to end up crying on my hands and knees in a men's room stall. Not me. Not ever.

PHILIP: When you do – when you find the right person or when they find you – it's like, "Winner, winner, chicken dinner!"

SHARON is in a separate part of the playing space. She is not connected to PHILIP in any way. The same is true for NORMA, BRETT, JOHN and CASSIE, when they appear.

SHARON: It's not enough to win the game.

PHILIP: I heard that at a county fair once. It stuck in my head.

SHARON: *(Repeating herself for emphasis.)* It's not. It's not enough to win the game.

PHILIP: There was an actual winner and an actual chicken dinner. *(Quick pause, clarifying.)* At the county fair.

SHARON: You have to win the set and the match, too.

PHILIP: *(With a laugh.)* Maybe I should keep an actual chicken dinner in my car. For when I meet my perfect match.

SHARON: Otherwise, you haven't really won.

PHILIP: I mean, I wouldn't, but...

SHARON: Winning the game is a temporary victory. And temporary victories are hollow. They're useless. *(Pause; her thesis statement.)* Tennis is exactly like life.

PHILIP: It's something to think about.

SHARON: Sometimes, you're dealing with things that are close to you... in your space... like when you play up at the net. And, other times, big problems plop down in your lap and you have to scramble to figure out how to handle them. They're like lobs that land in the back court, when you've just been up at the net. *(A beat.)* I prefer to play singles, though doubles works with my tennis-equals-life theory, too. With doubles, it's like that you-and-me-against-whatever-life-throws-at-us feeling you get when you're married. When it's a good marriage. When your husband isn't off cheating on you with someone in a shorter tennis skirt. *(Pause.)* Even when your partner is really good, you can't always count on them to get the shots they should. Sometimes, they're tired... or lazy... or just not as passionate about the game as you are. And every conflict in life really comes down to one-on-one, anyway. *(Quick pause.)* Mano-A-Mano. Well, you have a racquet, but your hand is still crucially involved in the process, so I think it still counts as hand-to-hand. Even things that seem like one person against a lot of other people can be broken down into a series of conflicts or negotiations

that are one person against one person. Trying to return a blouse to Lands End after you've taken the tags off and worn it isn't me against a whole company. It's me against the customer service operator named Gypsy. The idea of doing business with someone named Gypsy seemed utterly ludicrous to begin with but I didn't let that stop me from going one-on-one with her and getting them to take back the blouse and give me bonus credit to my account for all the inconvenience I had to put up with. Game, set, match.

NORMA: She's not in favor of tag.

JOHN: Whenever I go into a fast food restaurant or a coffee place, where they ask me for my name – I mean, seriously, *whenever* I go into a place like that – I never use my real name.

BRETT: I've been incarcerated.

NORMA: Imagine that.

JOHN: I give them a different name.

BRETT: I don't say "in jail" or "in prison." Incarcerated sounds classier. And you gotta be classy when you've been incarcerated. Nobody expects that.

JOHN: I've been Chris, Jim, Bill, Mike, Tim and Tom (*Explaining.*) I was on a one-syllable-name streak for a while... Lately, I've been getting more creative. Yesterday, at the Big-Man Burger down on 2nd Avenue, when they asked for my name, I told 'em I was Afsheen. You have to say it with confidence, like there's no doubt. Like there's no way I could be an ybody *but* Afsheen. When it's a name like that, it helps if you spell it for 'em. It adds that extra level of certainty. So, I was like, A-F-S-H-E-E-N. Like, I dare you to think my name's not Afsheen. I dare you. I *am* Afsheen. I'm Afsheen and you're not. (*Cocky.*) The guy at Big-Man Burger totally believed that I was Afsheen. He totally believed it. (*Pause.*) I'm digging the A's. I feel a run of A names coming on. I may go way out there, next time. I may go all Egyptian. I may be Ahmenhotep. You have to seriously own that name. You can't just mumble it. You have to be like, "Heck, yeah, I am Ahmenhotep."

BRETT: Nobody expects that. Once people find out you've been on the losing end of the judicial system, they expect that you're gonna be some low life. I refuse to be who or what they expect.

NORMA: I mean, seriously, imagine that.

BRETT: The judicial system is all a big game. When I was incarcerated, I made it my business to learn how to play the game and play it well. I got out early for good behavior. I've got a lady parole officer. She's like Playdoh in my hands. She flirts with me sometimes. I encourage it. It makes things easier. I tell her that being incarcerated was good for me. It gave me a chance to change my ways. I've been reformed. (*Quick pause.*) Not really, but it sounds good. The only thing that's changed is my ability to make people believe things they shouldn't believe. (*Pause.*) I lie much more convincingly, now, than before I was incarcerated. (*Quick pause, then, devilish smile.*) It's good to learn a skill. It's good to be classy.

SHARON: (*An afterthought.*) Otherwise, you haven't really won.

CASSIE: (*To audience.*) Hey! How you doin', today?

NORMA: She's "not in favor of tag." So, I asked her, "What do you mean, not in favor of tag?" And she said, "I'm not a fan." (*A quick beat*) I'm not asking her to be a fan. Nobody's asking her to be a fan. She's not in favor of the 6th Grade Dance, either. She doesn't think it's appropriate for the boys. She says, "They just run around." (*A quick, indignant beat.*) Which is what sixth grade boys do. Which leads me to think that she's not in favor of running around at all, whether it's on the playground or at a dance in the cafeterinasium.

JOHN: It doesn't work in sit-down restaurants.

NORMA: But I wasn't going to be deterred.

JOHN: It doesn't work in nice restaurants. (*A simple fact.*) I generally avoid nice restaurants.

NORMA: So, I asked her, "Which kind of tag?"

JOHN: The last time I was in a really nice sit-down restaurant, it was traumatic.

NORMA: "Exactly which kind of tag are you not in favor of?"

JOHN: There was a moth flying around the curtains near our table when the waiter was taking our order.

NORMA: And she looked at me like she had no idea that there was more than one kind of tag.

JOHN: And he stopped. (*Clarifying.*) The waiter. Before all of us had told him what we wanted. And he grabbed a napkin off the table and tried to trap the moth in it.

NORMA: So I pressed her on the issue. (*Recreating the confrontation.*) "Traditional run-and-catch tag? Freeze tag? Stick tag? Slap tag? Which kind of tag are you not in favor of? Or is it another kind? There are several different kinds of tag. *Many* different kinds. But, I'm sure you knew that."

JOHN: He said he didn't want to hurt the moth.

NORMA: She didn't answer. She didn't have a clue. (*The ultimate insult.*) She wouldn't know a Lego from a Duplo.

JOHN: For ten minutes, he tried to trap it. *Ten minutes.* And the moth kept escaping and flying around. At one point, he dive-bombed my sister. I think the moth was having fun. It was like he was playing a game, like how a dog can fetch a ball for hours. I think keeping from being trapped in the napkin was the moth's version of fetch. (*Pause.*) I'm sure it was a male moth. You could just tell by the way it was flying. It was very male. No female moth would do the dive bomb thing. At first, I was frustrated with the whole moth trapping-and-escaping-and-trapping-and-escaping thing. I was hungry. I wanted the waiter to take my order and bring us some bread while we waited for the food. Even one saltine cracker would have helped. If I was the waiter, I'd just have squished the moth against the window, wiped off the moth guts and gotten back to doing my job. (*Pause.*) But then, I got to wondering... Can moths experience pain? Is the ability to play and have fun limited to mammals? If I believed that the moth was having fun and playing a game with the waiter – and I *did* believe that – then, didn't I also have to believe that a moth could experience pain? Things that can experience joy have to be able to feel pain. (*Pause; reflecting.*) It doesn't always work the other way around, though. (*Explaining.*) I can feel pain. (*Pause.*) I need to work on experiencing joy. I'm not very good at that. I try. But I never feel very joyful. If I'm acting like I'm having fun, I'm usually pretending because that's what I feel like everybody expects me to do. (*Pause.*) I'm trapped and, unlike the moth, I don't know how to escape.

TODD spots SARAH and approaches her.

TODD: You're not from around here, are you?

SARAH: *(Not wanting to get into a conversation with him.)* No. No, I'm not.

TODD: *(Interrupting her.)* ... 'cause if you were from around here, I'd already know you. *(Quick pause.)* I make it a point to know all the beautiful women.

SARAH: Oh. *(Quick pause.)* I'm here with a friend.

TODD: And you're a beautiful woman, so I would definitely already know you, if you were from around here. I'd already have your number in my phone. *(Pause.)* So... you in town on business or pleasure.

SARAH: Business.

TODD: I could do something about that.

SARAH rolls her eyes and looks away.

TODD: Where are you staying?

SARAH: *(Reluctantly.)* In a hotel.

TODD: Which one? I've been to all of 'em.

SARAH: The Fiesta.

TODD: Nice. Nice choice. Fiesta means party, you know.

SARAH: Yeah, I knew that.

TODD: I'm pretty much the life of the party.

SARAH: That's cute, but I'm really not...

TODD: *(Cutting her off.)* C'mon, baby, don't shut me down like that. Gimme a chance. Don't hate the player; hate the game.

SARAH: I'm really not...

TODD: *(Cutting her off.)* 'Cause I'm a great guy.

SARAH: *(Trying to be nice, but still trying to get rid of him.)* I'm sure you are.

TODD: Maybe you're heard of me?

SARAH: *(Slightly curious.)* How would I have heard of you? I told you I'm not from around here.

TODD: I've been on TV. I did *The Tonight Show* once. *(Officially introducing himself.)* Todd Playmun... The Flamin' Playmun. *(Quick pause, explaining.)* I'm a fire eater.

SARAH: *(Genuinely curious.)* Really? A fire eater?

TODD: That's right. There aren't many of us left. I guess you could say we're a dying breed.

SARAH: Can eating fire kill you?

TODD: Ingesting the chemicals isn't the best for your insides. But, by dying breed, I meant that there aren't many new guys coming up who know how to do it. Aside from some Vegas acts and a couple side shows, there aren't as many opportunities as there used to be. It's still pretty big in Europe. They have more respect for the circus arts. I was a huge hit, when I did my act in Bulgaria, last year. The ladies were lining up to kiss me.

SARAH: You've been to Europe?

TODD: Yeah, and like I said, the ladies were lining up to kiss me. *(Quick pause.)* They tell me there's nothing like kissing a fire eater.

SARAH: And we're back to the hard sell.

TODD: No, no such thing. But you know what they say... When you play with fire, you can get burned. Well, when you play with Todd Playmun, you are guaranteed to have a hot time.

SARAH: Fire... burned... hot time. *(Quick pause.)* Got it. *(Pause.)* Are you really a fire eater or do you just tell people that so you can use the "play with fire" line?

TODD: *(A little wounded that she doesn't believe him.)* I'm really a fire eater. And I was really on *The Tonight Show*. And I've really been to Europe. So, how 'bout you letting me show you around town. Talk about an en fuego fiesta.

SARAH: I really don't think so.

TODD: *(Figuring this must be the excuse because it couldn't be him.)* Oh, right, your friend.

SARAH: *(Figuring that excuse is as good as any.)* Yeah. She's in the ladies room.

TODD: She's been in there a long time. Maybe she met somebody and went out the back way? It happens.

SARAH: She wouldn't leave without letting me know.

TODD: You sure about that?

SARAH: Sure I'm sure.

TODD: 'Cause we've been talking for a while and unless she's puking or completely redoing her hair and makeup, it doesn't usually take a woman that long in the bathroom.

SARAH: You're an expert on how long women take in the bathroom?

TODD: I've timed plenty of 'em. *(Pause; explaining.)* I needed a baseline number.

SARAH: A baseline number?

TODD: Yeah. When a few ladies I was talking to disappeared after saying they were going to the bathroom, I decided I needed to have a baseline number – an amount of time that it took the average woman in the bathroom. So, if she says she's going to the bathroom and doesn't come back in six and a half minutes, I know I can move on to the next lucky lady.

SARAH: And Brenda has been gone longer than six and a half minutes?

TODD: Definitely.

SARAH: I should go check the ladies room to...

SARAH'S phone vibrates.

TODD: *(Checking his phone.)* It's not my phone, so it must be yours.

SARAH: *(Answering her phone.)* Hey... Where are you? *(Pause) Where? (Pause.)* Why didn't you tell me you were leaving? *(Pause.)* No, it's not a *problem*. *(Pause.)* Okay, I'll see ya later. *(She hangs up.)*

TODD: I'm guessing I was right about your friend.

SARAH: She ran into a guy we met at our conference, today.

TODD: It happens.

SARAH: Looks that way. *(A beat.)* Would you show me how to eat fire?

TODD: I could.

SARAH: Would you?

TODD: We'd have to go back to my place. That's where I keep my equipment.

SARAH: And this is just so you can show me how to eat fire. Nothing else.

TODD: Whatever you say.

SARAH: Do you live far from here?

TODD: Half a mile or so.

SARAH: I'll follow you in my rental car.

TODD: Suit yourself, though you'd be passing up a chance to ride in a bright red Corvette with flames painted on the sides.

SARAH: I'm sure it's nice, but I'd rather follow you.

TODD: Let's go, then. Let's light a fire under this fiesta.

SARAH and TODD exit. CHUCK, SHERRY, CASSIE, NORMA, PHILIP, ROBBIN, BRETT, KRISTIN, ANGELA, LYLE and NOAH are all in separate areas of the playing space. They are not connected to each other in any way. They are not speaking to each other or interacting with each other in any way.

CHUCK: We call it the "fiesta combo."

CASSIE: I say, "Hey, how ya doin', today?"

SHERRY: It's our own creation. It's not on the menu.

CASSIE: It's kind of a statement-and-question combination.

CHUCK: It's an order of chicken wings with spicy jalapeño dipping sauce and a scoop of mint chocolate chip ice cream. On the same plate.

CASSIE: Starting with "hey" sets the tone. It's more edgy than "hi" or "hello."

SHERRY: We like putting together things that you wouldn't think of as... together... It's our way of living dangerously.

NORMA: *(Continuing as if uninterrupted.)* So, I told her, "Tag is an important tool for teaching socialization skills."

PHILIP: She smelled like cotton candy.

CASSIE: And I always say "ya," not "you" and "doin'" not "doing." And "how ya doin'" not "How are you doing?"

PHILIP: I was right behind her. Up close, so there was no mistaking the smell.

ROBBIN: My boyfriend and I have this thing we do...

CASSIE: Adding the "today" makes it more specific, so it's not just how ya doin' in general or how ya doin' in the grand scheme of things, but how ya doing, today. How ya doin', now... It's a little casual and a little aggressive, all at the same time. I love that... that mix of, yeah, I'm laid back but I'm also getting in your business. I'm not all up in your face but I could be.... I *might* be... I kinda wanna be. *(Pause)* So, I slow down, when I'm getting ready to pass somebody

whose walking toward me. You know, like we're going in opposite directions. I'm going this way and the other person is going the opposite way but we're heading toward each other – almost like playing chicken. Usually, if I slow down, so do they. It's instinctive. It must be rooted in animal behavior. I slow down and when we're at that moment of making eye contact just before we pass each other, I say, "Hey, how ya doin', today?" (*Pause.*) Some people answer. Those are my kind of people. They're playing the game. They're not afraid to put themselves out there.

ROBBIN: When we're at a party or any kind of social event where there are people we don't know or who don't know us, we do a kind of experiment.

CASSIE: "I'm good. How you doin'?" That's what a guy in New York said to me. With the accent and everything. I loved it! One lady, last week, had a real disturbed look on her face. Like she was already disturbed before I said anything to her. So, I toned it down a little. I pulled back. I don't usually smile but, for her, I did. "Hey, how ya doin' today?" I asked her. And this flash of panic crossed her face and she said, "I don't know... I really don't know." (*Pause.*) Oh my God, it broke my heart. I wanted to hug her, but I was afraid she'd scream or freak out. It was way more sad than the people who say, "I'm not good" or "It's not going well" or "Life sucks and so do you." Actually, that last one wasn't sad at all. I remember that woman. (*Quick pause.*) Yeah, a woman. You'd think some young guy would say that, but it was a middle-aged woman dressed up like she was somebody. (*Pause.*) "Life sucks and so do you." That's exactly what she said. (*Quick pause.*) It's one thing to assess your own life and determine that it sucks but it's another thing entirely to turn it into an insult. In the few seconds that we were passing each other, she couldn't sum up my degree of suckage and, then, announce it to the world. She couldn't. She *shouldn't*. She can suck all she wants to but she can't make me suck. I'm the only one who can really know if I suck. Me! And I *don't*. I don't suck. I absolutely do not suck.

PHILIP: No doubt about it. (*Pause.*) It was cotton candy. Cotton candy, for sure.

ROBBIN: When somebody asks me, "What do you do?" I say, "I'm a receptionist." (*A quick beat.*) I'm not a fan of the whole "What do you

do?" line of questioning at parties or anywhere. I'd rather somebody ask me who I am or what I'm passionate about or how I'd like to change the world. But nobody asks those questions. They ask, "What do you do?" And when I say, "I'm a receptionist," they smile. Or smile and nod. Or they say, "Oh, that's nice," while they nod and smile.

NORMA: So, I told her, if she'd like some insight, she's welcome to join us on the playground between 11: 03 and 11: 33, any day. Because we could use the help! We're understaffed and she knows it.

PHILIP: (*Setting the scene.*) She was listening to music. She had headphones on. It sounded like a country song. She was kind of swaying to the beat and moving her head a little. I leaned in closer to her. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath of that cotton-candy smell. And, as I leaned toward her, my hand brushed against her butt. (*Quick pause.*) I don't think she noticed, because she kept grooving to her music. So, I let my hand brush against her butt on purpose. I was prepared to say, "Sorry" with my most innocent face. Like this. (*He demonstrates.*) Sorry! But she didn't turn around. She didn't say anything. She didn't do anything. She just kept swaying to the music, without even the slightest acknowledgment that my hand had brushed against her butt twice. (*Quick beat.*) And nobody in line behind me said anything, either. I know a couple of them saw my hand brush against her butt, but nobody said a word. Nobody even gave me a judgmental look. Nothing. I was almost afraid that the lady behind me would start brushing *her* hand against *my* butt. I was concerned that *she* would feel emboldened to do it, after seeing that *I'd* done it to the woman in front of me. For all I knew, everybody in line could have been thinking about brushing their hand against the butt of the person in front of them. *Everybody* could have been emboldened by my actions! (*Pause.*) But, then, I started to get resentful that the lady behind me *wasn't* brushing her hand against my butt. I knew I didn't smell like cotton candy, but what was wrong with my butt that she didn't want to at least casually brush her hand against it? Was that too much for her to manage? (*Acting out the scene, loudly.*) "Come on, lady. Brush your hand against my butt!" That's what I shouted at her. I turned around and

yelled, "Come on, lady, brush your hand against my butt!" (*Pause; dejected.*) She didn't want to. Nobody did. There had been seven people in line behind me and, after I shouted at the lady to brush her hand against my butt, they all disappeared. Fast... Running. Like running away 'cause they thought my butt would come after them and demand to be brushed against, I guess. (*Pause; sigh.*) It was a blow to my ego, in any case. (*Quick pause.*) But even during the shouting and the running, the woman in front of me never said a word. (*Pause; speaking the truth he has discovered.*) That's how you get strangers to brush their hand against your butt: Play it cool. Act like it's nothing. Pretend like you wouldn't even notice if they did it... And smell like cotton candy.

NORMA: I offered to show her the rubric. (*Clarifying.*) The tag rubric. (*Clarifying further.*) We have a rubric, so we can properly assess the tag. (*Cheerfully.*) The same rubric works for all the variations. (*Quick pause.*) It's simple and easy to use. (*Quick pause.*) And we've been able to generate some really good data.

KRISTIN: I move slowly. When I'm walking, I move slowly.

NORMA: I offered to show her our data. I said, "When you join us on the playground, I'll be happy to show you the binder full of our data."

KRISTIN: I feel the air moving around me as I walk. Not like when you're next to an air conditioner or a fan and you feel the air blowing on you. This is different.

SHEILA: (*With a drink in her hand; the most recent of several drinks.*) I don't think so. (*Shaking her head.*) I don't think so. (*Sloppily sipping her drink.*) So, you better watch yourself, mister. And, if you think I'm gonna be watching you back, I have a little something to say to you: I don't think so.

NORMA: Not surprisingly, she hasn't taken me up on my offer. Maybe she's "not in favor" of taking people up on their offers. Maybe she's "not in favor" of the playground.

KRISTIN: Sometimes, I can see the air, too. Air comes in different colors. Really good colors like aquamarine and seafoam and azure. Azure-colored air floats by so softly... like aaaaaaaaaaaaaa-zhur. (*Pause.*) Seafoam-colored air smells – but not like sea – at least it doesn't smell like that to me. (*Pause, then with a bit of pride.*) Not everyone sees and feels the air. Most people don't. Most people

aren't that sensitive. *(Pause, as if a dark, melancholy mist overcomes her.)* I feel the air right now. *(She begins to cry.)* And I see it, too. *(Pause to let it waft over her.)* It's green. Forest green. Like in a dark part of the forest where only a little sunlight reaches. *(The crying intensifies, then gradually subsides.)* I need more sunlight in my forest.

BRETT: I took this girl I was dating on a camping trip. *(Pause.)* Mistake. *(Quick pause.)* Big mistake. *(Quick pause.)* Giant mistake.

ROBBIN: When somebody asks my boyfriend what he does, he says, "I'm a receptionist." Just like me. We've practiced saying it the same way, so it doesn't impact the results of the experiment. Neither of us is actually a receptionist. We just say we are – for the experiment. So, picture this...

BRETT: She was out of her element and, just between you and me, so was I. See, I'm the Umpire of Love. If it's not working with a woman, I just say, "You're outta here" and either she goes or I go. But somebody definitely leaves the area where we were previously involved in an attempt at a relationship.

ROBBIN: Like two seconds before, I said, "I'm a receptionist," and the person who asked what I did just smiled and nodded. But, now, like two seconds later, when the same person asks Ernie – that's my boyfriend – the same question, and Ernie says, "I'm a receptionist," the person asked, "While you're in college?"

BRETT: When you're camping, usually you're out in the woods – you know, a big forest with hiking trails or somewhere in a national park. And civilization isn't right around the corner. In the case of the girl I was tellin' you about, the two of us were in a secluded spot way up in the mountains. We pitched a tent, we dug a hole for the bathroom. This wasn't the kind of let's-pretend camping that some people do. *(Quick pause, then, mockingly.)* You know, with an RV or a trailer that pops up into a little tent with a mattress and storage space for the girl's make up and six pairs of shoes. *(Quick pause.)* That's not who I am. That's not the way I roll and it's not the way I camp. *(Pause)* So, there we were, me and the girl... a very nice woman who would turn a lot of heads. *(Quick pause.)* I don't date anyone who my buddies would bark at or ask me if I got her at the pound. No way. I date hot ladies and I return the favor by giving

them a top-draft-pick kind of a guy like me to be with. I am right up front with the ladies. The Umpire of Love is in it to win it.

ROBBIN: "Or do you play in a band?" That was the follow-up question. He said, "I'm a receptionist." And they asked, "While you're in college? Or do you play in a band?"

BRETT: So, I let 'em know, right up front that, just like a batter in a baseball game, all they get is three strikes. Three strikes and they're out. So, they gotta step up and show me what they got and don't do anything to tick me off or they'll be thrown out of the game like a coach who freaks out about a bad call.

ROBBIN: One lady said, "Saving money so you can buy a house. Good for you."

BRETT: So, this woman tells me that she doesn't like camping. She's not sure she can sleep on the ground, and she doesn't really like red meat – which means that she isn't getting any dinner, because all I brought to cook over the open fire is two steaks. (*Quick pause.*) And, anyway, where was all that information when I asked her if she wanted to go camping with me for the weekend? (*Imitating her.*) "Oh, that sounds romantic. I'd love to go camping with you!"

ROBBIN: (*Disgusted.*) Good for you.

BRETT: She discovered pretty quick that there's not a lot of romance in using a hole in the ground for a bathroom. (*Pause.*) "What did you think camping meant?" I asked her, while she was sitting on a rock crying like a whiny baby.

ROBBIN: We did the experiment with at least twenty people at a housewarming party we went to, last week, and nobody – *not a single person* – asked a follow-up question or made an assumption that I was doing something else besides being a receptionist.

BRETT: Women who cry are not attractive. It's not like in the movies when they have those pretty tears that run down their cheeks. In real life, they have snot running out their nose and their eyes get puffy. (*Quick pause.*) And the sound they make is like a deer after you shoot it but before you shoot it again to put it out of its misery. (*Pause.*) I thought about shooting her. (*Quick pause.*) But I wouldn't do anything that would send me back to jail. No way. Especially not because of some woman I shouldn't have taken camping with me in the first place. (*Pause.*) The problem is, the women who like

camping – the ones who really, seriously like camping – aren't the women that I want to spend time with making the moves around the bases, if you get what I'm sayin'. And the women I wanna take out into the woods aren't the kind of women who want to be too far from indoor plumbing and a restaurant that has organic produce and free-range chicken.

CASSIE: Playing the game is a choice. You can choose to play or not. Most people don't see it that way and they end up falling somewhere in between play and not play.

BRETT: So, I looked at the woman sitting on the rock with her puffy face smeared with snot and her eyes looking all sad and helpless and I asked, "What do you want me to do? Build a lodge with a restaurant and a spa? We're out in nature. That was the plan. It's not like it's a surprise. It may not be what you expected, but it's exactly what I thought it would be – except in my vision, you wouldn't be crying and looking like ten miles of bad road."

CASSIE: People get stuck in a kind of passive, too-afraid-to-make-a-choice place. I like to put 'em in a position where they have to make a choice. Choose or lose.

BRETT: What I wanted to say was, "You're outta here." I wanted her to leave. But she couldn't call a cab up there in the mountains. She couldn't call anybody. We were off the grid. That's the goal. You can't get away from everything, if everything is close by.

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