



*‘Every glorious minute you waste thinking is a minute you could be drinking, loving, fighting or dancing. Think about that. But not for too long.’*

As a young, struggling playwright, you have to feel grateful when anyone wants to do your work. Which was why, when a somewhat intense guy gave me a call and said he went to theatre camp with one of my college friends and he’d read one of my plays and gee, he really felt like he had a handle on it . . . I said I’d meet him for coffee. His name was Will Atherton. He was a second-year grad student in a highly regarded MFA program and we had agreed to meet at one of the myriad Starbucks cafés in Union Square.

Getting through the door was a struggle, but I pressed through the thronging caffeine addicts and took a moment to wonder how all these people had so much free time in the middle of the day. I was squeezing this meeting in on my teeny temp’s lunch break. I scanned the horde of turtlenecks hunched over iBooks, and realized I had no idea how to pick Will out. I must have looked lost and annoyed, because he spotted me within moments.

‘You must be Liza!’ a voice barked behind me. I turned

to see a shortish, blondish fellow with thinning, unwashed hair and a slightly soft physique.

'Will?' I questioned. Obviously Will. Unfortunately, he had a turtleneck *and* a wallet-chain.

'You got it!' He laughed, though nothing was funny. He pumped my hand like he was trying to bring up oil and I tried not to decide that he'd only matriculated because his family had single-handedly endowed a third of the buildings on his campus.

'It's *so* great to meet you!' Will gushed. He was weirdly energetic and bent over while he was talking. 'I actually found a table!' he said, as though this merited congratulations.

'So how goes it?' he asked as we sat.

'Great, and you?' I replied, thinking that I really didn't have time for small talk.

'Good, good,' he cooed. 'I'm really juiced that you're meeting with me.'

'Oh, yeah . . .' I said. 'So how exactly did you happen to read the play?'

'Oh, you know, I make it a habit to read everything coming out of Yale.'

'Oh,' I said, thinking this was sort of odd as I'd left undergrad seven years ago.

'So, your work!' Will began. 'I'm really into it, really feel connected to your vision.'

Admittedly, I grew up around one of America's theatrical treasures, my great aunt Fran, so I should be well-used to meaningless showbiz chatter. I went to my first Oscar ceremony when I was eight. But I'm still uncomfortable with the entertainment industry's habitual self-congratulation. I'm not old enough to have 'work.' According to Will, however, I was someone who 'could really make a dent in the landscape of contemporary American theatre.'

‘So here’s the dealy –’ Will leaned in closer, and I drew my Frappuccino back a little. ‘I get to direct one main-stage per semester, use the undergrad actors (great kids!) and I wanna do nothing this winter if I can’t do *Georgia Allen’s Window*.’

The play in question was my pithy portrait of neighborhood politics in the suburbs, and I must admit I smiled at the thought that it might see the lights of a stage.

‘Wow,’ I said, ‘I’m really flattered—’

‘You prolly wanna know, like, what I’m about: totally valid. Here’s my thing – very into the Theatre of Cruelty, Artaud, Grotowski, very physically oriented.’ Visions of shrieking drama students in unitards writhed in my head.

Immediately I wondered why Will was drawn to my naturalistic drama, but I was trying to be open-minded. Exposure is everything. Unlike acting or dancing or wrapping the Reichstag, writing is one of the few artistic pursuits you don’t need permission to do. But if my plays weren’t being performed, I might as well stop writing them. I let Will continue and I tried to seem enthusiastic, but a small pebble of fear formed in my stomach as he explained that he wanted to add a character who moved through the audience poking people with a stick and telling them to sit up straight. He seemed to think it would strengthen the feeling of confinement within the play’s oppressive neighborhood. I tittered uneasily.

‘Thing is, Liza,’ he explained, tugging on his wallet-chain, ‘you have to be willing to take risks. You have to make people uncomfortable.’

‘Hey, go with your strengths.’ I mustered another laugh so he wouldn’t realize I was being a bitch.

‘Right, right, exactly,’ he replied. ‘So tell me what you think? Where are we? Where do we stand?’

I tried to phrase my answer carefully. ‘Gee, um . . . here’s the thing, Will . . . I’m really excited that you’re

interested in the piece. It just sounds to me like you and I have very different . . . aesthetics. I'm not sure I see the same things in this play that you do.'

'But that's great!' he cried. 'That's energy! That's art! Conflict!' He slammed the rest of his caramel macchiato and pushed a hand through his greasy hair.

I wanted to say, 'Sorry, I don't think this is going to work.' But the idea of turning down an opportunity, any opportunity, made me want to go home and pore over the stack of law school brochures I keep in my desk drawer. It was just too depressing.

So instead I said, 'I'll want to sit in on rehearsals.'

'YES!' Will shouted, jumping up and knocking into the table, nearly upsetting my beverage. 'That's what I want! I want you in there! Let's make some THEATRE!!'

People were looking. 'Okay,' I said, very quietly. 'Let's.'

Will laid out the rehearsal schedule for me, and in a few minutes I was scuttling back to my temp job. Panicking. Afraid that I'd just signed myself up for a horror show, I used the nine-block walk to call Aunt Fran, who can always be relied upon for sound advice.

'You're telling me I've been away three weeks and you haven't scored once?!' Unfortunately, on this particular day she was more concerned with my love life.

'This is not the point!' I told her. 'I am having a professional crisis!'

'Sometimes I think you have no priorities!' she erupted.

Fran is decidedly the crazy old bat of our family and my idol. Aged somewhere between sixty-five and three hundred, Aunt Fran is a hard-drinking, trash-talking goddess of the stage and screen. I think she knows secret passageways under the streets of New York, every maître d' between Manhattan and Malay, and the sexual predilections of every mayoral candidate for the last

seventy-five years. There are rumors in our family that she made some explicit films for distribution to the boys overseas during WWII, at the behest of some serious higher-ups in the Treasury Department. She has two Tonys, three very large Dobermans, a stunning prewar apartment on the Upper West Side and, as far as I can tell, the heart of every man she's ever met. Since I was a small child I've wanted to grow up to be Aunt Fran.

I think most of the time she'd say I'm doing a pretty poor job of it. Ever the generous tutor, she consistently works overtime trying to spice up my frankly undramatic life. Our current dispute stemmed from the fact that Aunt Fran had departed for Chicago three weeks earlier, to do a production of *A Delicate Balance* (that was getting raves), admonishing me to use her place as the exotic headquarters for all the trysting I was supposed to do in her absence. I'd done nothing of the kind. Nothing.

'Well, thank God you've rewritten the second act, Liza. It gives me something to live for.'

'Right.' I tried to get her back on track. 'I've rewritten it, for now, but I think the production I just agreed to might really suck. I'm wondering whether I'm making a terrible mistake.'

I could hear Aunt Fran's stage manager in the background calling 'places' for the matinee, and she told me we could talk more later.

'I have to go and be brilliant now, Niece,' she rasped, 'but this conversation is not over. You need to take more risks. Go sleep with a stranger; you'll feel better. If I don't see a new notch in your bedpost when I come back, heads will roll.'

Little did Aunt Fran understand that I barely had a bedpost, let alone notches. Believe me, I would love to have more sex, but it's not as easy as ordering takeout. I find it nearly impossible to sleep with people I barely

know, as they could very well give me a disease, steal my credit cards while I'm dozing or chop me up and leave me strewn in various garbage bags throughout the five boroughs. Acquaintances are even worse, because inevitably they end up interviewing you for a job or married to your good friend and then you have to sit through a lifetime of awkward dinners thinking, 'I've seen you naked.' Frankly, I don't have time to do the kind of leg-work that goes into finding an appropriate partner.

It's not my fault that I'm like this. My mother is a very tense person.