

Celebrating Australian Playwriting



Australian Script Centre



Relative Comfort

by Gina Schien

EXTRACT

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Characters

Jackie

Cat

Sally

Des

Lorna

Andy

waiter

bounced man/ abusive man

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ACT ONE
SCENE 1

The middle of the night in a garden in Leichhardt. We see the side wall of the house , a small table , chairs and a back fence. There is a loud crash offstage.

JACKIE: *(off)* Fuck!!

JACKIE appears in the garden and looks up at the house, holding a bundled set of pages and a beer

Cat!! Cat! You home?

a light comes on in the upstairs window

CAT: *(off)* Who's that?

JACKIE: It's Jackie.

CAT: Jackie who?

JACKIE: Jackie Onassis.

CAT: I'm asleep, you inconsiderate little shit.

JACKIE: No you're not.

CAT: What do you want?

JACKIE: I want to talk to you.

CAT: Jackie I'm not talking to you now.

JACKIE: I want to ask you something.

CAT: Call me in the morning.

JACKIE: No! Come down here where I am.

CAT: Will you shut up? Sally's asleep.

JACKIE: Come out here then. I don't want to screech up at you and wake your shiny new girlfriend. I want to ask you in a quiet...civilised...unrushed... manner.

CAT: Are you drunk?

JACKIE: Come down now or I'll scream.

CAT: You're the biggest pain in the arsel!

JACKIE: Thank you.

CAT appears in the garden in just a t-shirt.

It's hard being nasty about someone I've never met. Don't you think it's time I met her?

CAT: Is that your question?

JACKIE: That was just a warmup.

CAT: You've got a minute and then I'm going back to bed.

JACKIE: Did you miss me at the Fruitwhip last night?

CAT: I thought you weren't at your usual perch.

JACKIE: I missed *you*.

runs a hand down Cat's arm. Cat throws it off.

CAT: Minute's up.

JACKIE: That was 30 seconds!

CAT: I'm going back to bed.

JACKIE: No Cat I really have to talk to you.

CAT: You keep saying that without saying anything. What's wrong?

JACKIE: Nothing's wrong.

CAT: So you need something.

JACKIE: Sort of.

CAT: Just yes or no, do you need something?

JACKIE: No...yeah.

CAT: You *are* pissed.

JACKIE: No...maybe just a bit. Want some?

she holds up the bottle

CAT: You still have a time lag with the truth, don't you? Two minutes after your first answer, I get the real one.

JACKIE: It's nice you remember.

CAT: You've improved. It used to be two months. So what do you want?

JACKIE: I need you to arrange an introduction.

CAT: Who to? Don't chuck that cigarette in the garden.

Jackie puts it on the ground at her feet, about to grind it out

No! you bloody idiot.

JACKIE: What's wrong. It's just concrete.

swaying, looking down

It used to be. What have you done to it?

CAT: It's terracotta. I don't want burn marks on it. Use your boot.

JACKIE: *(does so, with difficulty)* When did you get posh all of a sudden?

CAT: Come on. Who to? Is this for a job or what?

JACKIE: Sort of.

straightening up, becomes more business like

Your new girlfriend has a rich father. Bloody rich. I suppose you know that already.

CAT: So?

JACKIE: So he has a publishing company. He's the managing director or something.

CAT: Yes I know. So what?

JACKIE: *(in reciting mode, holding up the pages)*

"Some fancy night of a speech gone wrong. Dark streets are the only comfort on the long walk home."

CAT: Oh God no.

JACKIE: Oh yes.

CAT: I feel sick.

JACKIE: I'd like him to look at it.

CAT: Whose misery is it this time?

JACKIE: Just mine. But nothing specific, just the general angst of a dumpee. So what do you think?

CAT: No.

JACKIE: I've spent the last eighteen months writing this stuff. Best thing that happened, you leaving me. It gave me focus.

CAT: That's nice.

JACKIE: I'm ready to get it out there.

CAT: And you want me to help you.

JACKIE: It's good, Cat, I know it is. I just need a legup with it.

CAT: You're unbelievable. You think you can come in here pissed – sorry, break in here –

JACKIE: (*pointing*) The gate was open!

CAT: ...abuse me and then ask Sally's father to get your poems published.

JACKIE: I didn't abuse you.

CAT: It's like you've chucked it all in. You've decided not to behave like a decent human being any more.

JACKIE: Decent! I'm sorry but you don't have a license to drive that word. You lost all your points when you fucked Princess Sally
a quick curtsy to the bedroom window

may she sleep in peace.

CAT: I'm not going to cop your anger any more.

JACKIE: When should I have stopped being angry? What's my cutoff date, Cat? I didn't know I had one.

pause

(*chattily*) Nice moon tonight, have you noticed? I used to watch it rise from our bedroom. All big and yellow. Do you remember?

CAT: No.

JACKIE: By the time you got home it was setting. But I forgive you. You want a drink?

Jackie offers her bottle to Cat, who takes it from her.

CAT: Oh for fuck's sake, Jackie.

She puts the bottle on the ground.

All this wandering around with a bottle. It's bullshit. When are you going to pull yourself together?

JACKIE: You rescuing me?

CAT: I want you off my back. You could easily get a job with a decent income.

JACKIE: There's that decent word again. What does it mean? Nice?
Or just big?

CAT: What are you going to do when you're 40? Or when you're 50?
What are you going to live on?

JACKIE: Let me tell you something. Every day now I visualise myself
as a poet - a successful poet. Not for long. Just ten minutes every
morning, and ten minutes every night. I see it happen in my head
- it's like a news reel. I'm winning an award, I'm making a speech
at a book launch. Successful, respected. Did you know that if
you write down your heart's desire, you can bring it closer? You
should try it.

CAT: Well you can scrap the picture of Sally's father. You're not going
to meet him.

JACKIE: If I want to succeed, I will. You're not going to stop me.

CAT: Then what are you doing here, Jackie?

turns to go

JACKIE: Have you even met him?

CAT: Course I've met him.

JACKIE: Does he know about you two? Does he know you're a
couple?

CAT: Yes.

JACKIE: So if I ring him and I say I'm a friend of yours, that should
open a few doors, is that right? 'Come in, Miss Menton, a friend
of Cat's is a friend of mine.' Is that how it'll go?

CAT: You've really changed.

JACKIE: So what's it like to be closeted in your own house?

CAT: It's none of your business. We have a strong relationship, me
and Sal.

JACKIE: Hello Mr Stewart, I'm a friend of Cat's. Oh. You don't know
Cat? She's the door bitch at the Fruitwhip in Oxford St. You
should know her. She's having a strong relationship with your
daughter.

lights a cigarette

CAT: What's happened to you? You're -

JACKIE: *(suddenly fierce)* You happened to me. Shit happened to me.
Everything's happened to me. I've changed because you kicked
me out. I've changed because I'm on my own. You should try
being on your own. You get a very different perspective.
(conciliatory) Of course I wouldn't tell him, you know that, don't
you?

CAT: You know what, Jackie?

takes the cigarette out of Jackie's hand and drops it

I don't really care.

JACKIE: Hey, the terracotta!

she stamps it out

CAT: I don't care about *you* any more. So you can stop the midnight visits with the stupid excuses. I can't cure you of whatever's going wrong in your life. And you can stop hanging around the Fruitwhip as well. I'm sick of people asking me what you want.

JACKIE: What do you tell them?

CAT: I tell them I'm not your keeper. I tell them you have a drinking problem. I don't know. Anything. Whatever comes into my head.

JACKIE: I'm going to leave these poems near this little border of ...what are these? They're very pretty.

CAT: Primulas. If you leave them there I'll chuck them out.

JACKIE: Primulas hey?

she puts the poems down

When I lived here all we grew was...what did we grow?

CAT: We didn't grow anything.

JACKIE: You were too butch to plant flowers.

CAT: And you only ever came out here with a cigarette and a drink. This garden was one big ashtray.

JACKIE: That's true. I watered it with beer and fed it with ash. No wonder nothing grew.

she notices the small table and two chairs

How sweet. A breakfast nook!

she sits down at it and looks at Cat

This would have come in handy when I lived here. I spent hours out here on my own. I wrote some good poetry waiting for my big tough bouncer to finish her lateral raises and her squats and her private little jaunts around Leichhardt.

CAT: Close the back gate when you go.

JACKIE: But it's all on the outside, isn't it? Inside there's a soft seething mass. They say it's the things we like about people that eventually drive us away from them. So what did you like about me?

CAT: You knew when it was time to leave.

JACKIE: You going to show me inside? If there's terracotta out here you must have marble columns in the lounge room.

CAT: Yeah. Waterfalls too. But you can just form pictures in your head.

JACKIE: *stands up, suddenly speedy and panicked.* Hey, why don't you bounce me out!

Pretend we're at the Fruitwhip. I'm drunk and obnoxious. I'm perving at women. I'm standing at the bar reciting poetry. I did that one night 'member that? And I got a bourbon and coke from that woman with the new girlfriend. It took three poems before she bought it. What were they? The Charge of the Heavy Brigade,

Watching You Sleep, they liked that one. And The Raft Away from Pain. You were so embarrassed. So now you're watching me and getting worried. Are you worried about the quality of my poetry? Not likely. Are you worried you'll look useless in front of everyone? Maybe. Or do you feel upstaged? Yep! I think so! So what are you gunna do? You're looking pretty silly just standing there. Look I'm shouting and upsetting customers, *(shouts)* Hey my glass is empty! Watch out, I'm about to chuck it across at the barmaid!!

CAT moves in and forces Jackie's hands behind her back.

Oh my God yes! Physical contact!

CAT gags her with a hand.

SALLY: *(offstage)* Cat? Is that you down there?

CAT: Yeah.

SALLY: What's wrong?

CAT: Nothing.

JACKIE struggles and kicks her

Ow shit!

SALLY: Are you in trouble? I'm coming down.

CAT: No, no. I'm coming in now. Go back to sleep honey!

Walks JACKIE over to the gate, kicks it open, pushes her out

JACKIE: You know what I think honey? I think you don't want me to succeed. You're scared of what I could do. Poetry is the great unknown.

CAT: That's right Jack. I'm terrified.

JACKIE: So will you look at them?

CAT: I'll look at them right now.

CAT picks up the poems and tips them over the fence.

Sorry. Didn't like them.

She goes back inside the house. A beat later JACKIE tiptoes back in and sets the poems down quickly. They scatter over the ground.

JACKIE: *(reciting)*

When the lights went down on our little circus
there was just one golden flame and it was yours
you are so careless with it,
so unburdened by its power,
your audience waits for your fall.
But you fly weightless above the net
balanced in warm ignorance,
curled by cold grace.

Neighbour's voice: Shut up over there!!!

The upstairs light goes out. Then the same crash as earlier, of tins or something outside the fence, as Jackie walks off

JACKIE: *(off)* Shit!!

SCENE 2

Cat and Sally at breakfast in the garden.

SALLY: Who were they?

CAT: Kids.

SALLY: You were gone a while. What did they want?

CAT: Oh, they left stuff here.

SALLY: What stuff?

CAT: I'm not sure. Hot stuff, I think.

SALLY: Hot stuff?

CAT: Stolen stuff that they'd chucked over our fence. They were coming back to collect it when I heard them.

SALLY: Jesus, Cat! That's appalling.

CAT: I said to them 'keep your crap out of my yard'.

SALLY: Ah my big tough bouncer. *(leans over to kiss her)* If it keeps on like this though, honey, maybe we should move out of here and buy something together.

CAT: Why?

SALLY: Cat, it's what people do. They buy houses together.

CAT: But *this* is my house!

SALLY: Well maybe I'd like to own a house too. I've got my own money.

CAT: Then buy a house.

SALLY: I want to buy something with you. We could get something closer to town so you could get to the club faster, get home to me faster. What about Newtown?

CAT: You can't get a garden this size in Newtown.

SALLY: You never garden! Look at it. There's bits of paper all over it. That flower bed's just weeds.

CAT: I'm going to clean it before I go to the gym.

glances over and sees the poems all over the garden, double takes.

SALLY: I'm just asking you to think about it.

CAT: Why don't you have a shower while I clean up out here a bit?

SALLY hugs Cat from behind, runs her hands along her arms

SALLY: Who loves you?

CAT: You do.

kisses her neck

SALLY: Are you happy?

CAT: Yes.

SALLY: With me?