

the beginning of

I WAS FINE UNTIL YOU CAME INTO THE ROOM

a short comedy by Rich Orloff

(from **SMALL WONDERS**)

Time: Mid-afternoon, 51 years ago

Place: An art gallery

Characters: YOUNG PETE, a slightly shy and awkward man in his 20's
OLD PETE, 51 years older than Young Pete
YOUNG HELEN, a slightly shy and awkward woman in her 20's
OLD HELEN, 51 years older than Young Helen

As the play begins, OLD HELEN and OLD PETE stand on opposite sides of the stage, facing the audience. They will narrate this tale.

The center of the stage is an art gallery, which can be represented by... well, nothing if you'd like.

OLD HELEN

I know it was a, well, naughty thing to do, but I decided not to tell anyone my shrink was on vacation. I mean, in those days you didn't even tell anyone you were seeing a shrink. And you know, I worked hard in that office; there were no computers then, and every time some bozo executive wanted to change one word in a letter, I had to retype the whole thing. That hour away from work helped me get through the week. So even if my therapist was away, I knew that a break from my desk would be therapeutic.

OLD PETE

I had just finished a meeting with my lawyer. My lawyer had two clocks in his office. I think this was so regardless of where he was standing, he could talk long enough to bill you for another quarter hour. I don't even remember what the meeting was about. Yes I do. It was about fifteen minutes too long.

OLD HELEN

I drove to my therapist's neighborhood,
so that you know if someone found me
playing hooky, at least I was playing hooky
in the right neighborhood. I took a walk
and passed an art gallery I had passed
dozens of times but never had the time
to look in. Today I had the time.

YOUNG HELEN enters the art gallery.

OLD PETE

After my stupid meeting with my stupid lawyer,
I needed to blow off steam before I got into
my stupid car. It was a used Ford, and at
the time, driving a used Ford was like eating
a used hamburger. I passed by this art gallery.
I had never gone in one, probably because
they're filled with, you know, paintings.
Not sure why I went in this time. Something
inside my head just said, "Go in." And I
was tired of arguing, even with myself.

YOUNG PETE enters the art gallery.

OLD HELEN

This guy entered the room. I became anxious.
Not because I was particularly attracted to him.
Or *not* attracted to him. I had just liked being
alone, staring at paintings that made no sense
whatsoever to me. They kinda symbolized my life.

OLD PETE

There was this girl in the room. Kinda cute,
in a "I don't believe I'm cute" kind of way.
I didn't want her to think I came in the gallery
just to look at her, so I looked at one of
the paintings. I have to be honest with you.
She was much cuter than the painting.

OLD HELEN

I thought, a guy who likes art. Without
being dragged into a gallery by a woman.
He must be an art critic. Or maybe gay.
Being gay had just started being trendy then.

OLD PETE

So I'm looking at this painting, which looks like very colorful vomit. I look at the price, and suddenly I feel like producing my *own* very colorful vomit.

OLD HELEN

Look at how he stares at that painting. He looks like he's completely bored. Yep, he's an art critic. Probably a *gay* art critic.

OLD PETE

I think I'd like to talk to her. But what should I say? God, I hate having to come up with pick-up lines. Stop pressuring yourself. You'll give yourself a stroke, and your doctor charges even more than your lawyer. All you have to do is come up with something smart, witty, friendly, not forced, not clumsy, not overbearing, and totally irresistible. But what brilliant and engaging thing can I possibly say that will make her want to have a conversation with me?

Young Pete walks up to Young Helen. She notices.

YOUNG PETE

Hi.

OLD HELEN

Well, I guess he's not gay. What should I do? Should I ignore him? Should I talk to him? I need to think of something quick before he thinks I'm weird. But what should I say, what should I say, what should I say?

YOUNG HELEN

Hi.

OLD PETE

My turn already?! I don't have a follow-up! Oh God. I need to start a conversation. I need to find a conversation topic that's not dull, not pretentious, not prone to misinterpretation, and that still shows a keen perception of the world around us.

YOUNG PETE

Nice day.

OLD PETE

She must think I'm blandest guy in the universe.

OLD HELEN

I have no idea if this is a nice day or not.
The second you entered the room, I suffered
an instant lobotomy. Why can't you be like
my last boy friend, who acted like I wasn't
there. Wait, did I just think "boy friend"?
I hardly know this guy. For all I know,
he's married. Quick, find out.

Young Helen quickly glances at Young Pete's left hand.

OLD HELEN (cont'd)

Okay, he's not married. Do I want to
say something? Yes I want to say something.
Quick, think of something before it's no longer
a nice day and you have to start from scratch.
What should I say, what should I say?!

YOUNG HELEN

Very nice day.

OLD PETE

Well, we've exhausted *that* topic. Okay,
what next? I better introduce a topic where
I won't get frantic every time it's my turn to
say something, something I know something
about, something that has a bit of *spark* to it.

YOUNG PETE

So...

A long beat.

OLD PETE

Well, at least it had a good start.

OLD HELEN

He's kinda shy. I like that. Okay, it's up
to me. I have to show him I'm strong enough
to start a conversation. And I will!

YOUNG HELEN

So...

A beat.

OLD PETE

Well we're evenly matched. Think, Pete, think. You're at an art gallery. Talk about the painting. Tell her how it reminds you of that great meal you once had when you had the flu. No, no, just say something simple but smart, something that implies I'm aware of contemporary culture.

YOUNG PETE

This painting looks like vomit.

OLD PETE

That wasn't it.

OLD HELEN

Well he's not an art critic.

OLD PETE

After a statement like that, you have to show you're not an insensitive jerk. Quick, think of something non-jerky.

YOUNG PETE

What do *you* think?

OLD HELEN

Oh my God, he just asked for my opinion. Quick, have an opinion.

YOUNG HELEN

I agree.

OLD HELEN

(mostly a run-on sentence:)

I didn't sound too eager to agree, did I?
I hope I didn't sound too eager – I don't *think* I sounded too eager – maybe it's okay to sound eager – Next week I'm scheduling two sessions with my shrink I'm exhausted.

OLD PETE

I have no idea what to say next. But she sure is cute. Maybe I should propose to her, and we can fill in the rest later.

OLD HELEN

Why does he keep looking at me like he wants to hear what I have to say?
What's wrong with him?

OLD PETE

Maybe I should just leave. A lot of great men lived alone. If living alone was a *guarantee* of greatness I'd leave right now.

OLD HELEN

Move the conversation along, Helen.
"Helen" – that's it. Find out his name.
Find some clever and conniving way to force him to tell you his name.

YOUNG HELEN

Ummmm, my name's Helen.

OLD PETE

I know how to respond to that one!
Finally, I know what to do!
(beat)
What was her name again, I forget.

YOUNG PETE

Ummm, my name's Pete.

OLD HELEN

I think I'm beginning to relax.

OLD PETE

I need a drink.

YOUNG HELEN

Nice to meet you, Pete.

YOUNG PETE

Don't rush to conclusions.

OLD PETE

Where the hell did that come from?!

OLD HELEN

I think he was making a joke. Was that a joke? Should I laugh? Show you have a sense of humor; give him a laugh.

And the play continues.