

CUPCAKE

Joe Green@yan

A Play in Two Scenes

CHARACTERS

TWIG – frail, self-conscious, careful in her movements.
Wears a loose white dress.

BUCK – large, extravagant, magnetic. Wears loose black
layers.

SETTING

Scene One: A party, in memory – smoke, chatter, half-light.

Scene Two: TWIG's apartment – present day.

SCENE ONE

(Downstage left, at the edge of the stage, TWIG stands, arms crossed, self-conscious. Behind her, upstage, the party assembles in shadow: the murmur of a crowd, the clink of glasses, low laughter.)

TWIG

(to the audience)

That day. I first spotted her at a party filled with smoke, chatter, the clinking of glasses – everyone there so ultra-thin and fabulous.

(TWIG smooths her dress, glances down at it.)

I was invited by the sister of a friend. Days before, she came down with a rare case of adult measles – spotty, bed-ridden – and told me to go without her. Said to mention her name whenever I could. It seemed rude to say no.

(She moves slightly upstage, into the party's edge, holding a glass of pale wine.)

So there I found myself. In what I thought was a pretty dress – loose, white, edged with lace – though, as it turned out, a little out of place, since everyone else had opted for form-fitting black. They drank red wine from great goblets, or colorful cocktails poured into martini shapes. I went with chardonnay. For fear of spills.

(She sips, looks around, uncertain. Center Stage Right, a pool of light comes up to reveal BUCK, seated at a small end-table, bent over a display, utterly absorbed.)

In the corner, a small end-table, covered in shadow. There she was – an oversized woman bent over a spindly antique, staring at something so intently it was as if there wasn't another soul in the room.

I made my way through the crowd. Wondered what could be so enthralling.

(TWIG arrives at the table. BUCK, without looking up, plucks a cupcake topped with chocolate icing and purple sprinkles, and pops it in her mouth. Still chewing, she snatches a yellow-dotted vanilla one. Beaming with delight, she looks up and sees TWIG. She

gestures at the display – an invitation. TWIG hesitates, then chooses one – vanilla, chocolate frosting, green sprinkles. BUCK nods her approval. They chew together in silence.)

TWIG

(to the audience, watching BUCK)

I remember thinking that there, amidst a world filled with stick-figure dolls, I had discovered the last of the true rebels – doing as she pleased, without shame or explanation.

(TWIG checks her own face for crumbs. Glances at BUCK, who has crumbs on hers and doesn't care.)

I thought she was wonderful, then.

(Lights narrow on TWIG alone. BUCK and the party fade into darkness upstage. TWIG walks carefully around, cleaning and straightening invisible objects.)

Later, when she began to isolate – to create friction where it could have been smooth – I tried to appease her. She pushed away. Still, our friendship stayed.

(BUCK's voice, from the dark, sudden and booming.)

BUCK

(offstage, sharp)

What are you tiptoeing around in your own house for?

TWIG

(to the audience)

I hadn't noticed.

BUCK

(offstage)

How can you not notice a thing like that?

(TWIG tidies – an invisible bowl of fruit, ordered.)

BUCK

(offstage)

And this constant re-ordering you do. Neatening and cleaning and arranging. Like you'd just fall to pieces if you missed a crumb.

(TWIG looks around herself, alarmed, as if searching for the crumb in question.)

BUCK

(offstage)

Are you looking for a crumb?

(TWIG swallows, looks down. A beat. Then a huge, rolling laugh from the dark – BUCK's anger dissolving into it.)

BUCK

(offstage, still laughing)

That is too much. You ought to get some help.

TWIG

(straightening her skirt, to the dark)

I can clean perfectly well on my own, thank you.

(The laugh comes again, louder – the walls seem to shake with it. TWIG holds her ground, glaring into the dark, but there's a small, helpless smile at the corner of her mouth.)

TWIG

(to the audience)

And so it went. Her stuffing constantly breaking out. Me, pushing mine down, quiet and away.

We made a funny balance. Not in the way I walked with softest steps, in hopes to hush her thunderous stride – none of that really mattered. It was that I... woke up, because she embarrassed and thrilled me. Felt somehow safe to come alive, inside the shelter of her appetites.

I learned to weather her flights and crashes – the threat, at any moment, that her nerves might split and send her on a terrifying swerve, without warning. I honed my skills.

(A shift in light – colder.)

Our downfall was uncovered the moment she discovered my willingness to help.

When she saw that she could show weakness – that she could fall apart and I would scramble to hold her together – she let herself go to pieces. I rushed to bolster her. She only crumbled more. She delighted to chip away at herself, watching me as I raced to contain her, to patch her multiplying cracks. But

she was, of course, insatiable. She grew a dilapidation far greater than I could afford to fix.

Eventually – I exhausted.

(TWIG sags, just slightly.)

I fell into a hazy kind of fatigue. I started watching each new disintegration as if from afar.

We sat in our corners and looked at each other a while. When she understood I hadn't the reserves to prop her up – she tsked. Snorted. Pulled together. Turned away.

(A door closes, offstage – a single sharp sound.)

I felt more relief than hurt, when I heard that door close.

It was a long time before I remembered enough to miss her.

(TWIG turns and looks out, as if hearing something.)

Years later – when she called – I recognized her voice immediately.

(Lights shift. Blackout.)

SCENE TWO

(TWIG's apartment. Small, tidy. A buzzer sounds. TWIG – thinner, hoarse, nursing a bad cough – crosses to answer it. She is visibly shaking.)

TWIG

(to the audience, aside, before opening the door)
I had a cough, could barely talk. But she was coming through town. Asked to stay a few nights. I couldn't see saying no.

(She opens the door. BUCK fills the doorway – white, big, quivering, damp – the frame seems flimsy around her as she lumbers through into the small hall. They eye each other, awkward.)

TWIG

It's good to see you.

(TWIG gestures around the apartment – a small tour. BUCK sees a chair, sets down her bag, sits heavily. TWIG brings a tray with tea, cups, a plate of sweets.)

TWIG (CONT'D)

(to the audience) Cakes. Little ones. Cream and berries.

(BUCK takes one, settles further into the chair, exhausted. Her hands begin to move against each other, slow, constant – stroking, twirling, a tic more than a wringing. It goes on. TWIG notices, tries not to look, sits in another chair. BUCK lights a cigarette, unbothered.)

TWIG

(rasping)

Can I get you some tea?

BUCK

That voice. I've got vitamins – no less than miraculous. In my toiletry case.

(TWIG moves discreetly aside, away from the smoke. BUCK turns, reaches behind her chair – a pudgy white hand emerging from black layers to drag a suitcase forward. She pulls out a large mesh bag, bulging with vials, and sets it on the table with ceremony. She unzips it slowly, hunching over it eagerly, and begins

to dig. TWIG pulls her knees in, curls small in her chair, watching. BUCK gasps, finds a brilliant blue glass jar, holds it up like a relic before setting it down. Then another find – a masque that smells of the sea. She beckons TWIG closer.)

TWIG

(to the audience, an aside, as BUCK keeps digging)
I didn't quite understand the rapture. I wondered if she knew.

(BUCK continues pulling out treasure after treasure – an oil for behind her ears, pills, a salve, tea leaves, shower gels, a perfume bottle wrapped in old silk. BUCK gives each one a stroke, a pat, a parting glance before she sets it down. TWIG quietly moves the cake plate aside to make room. BUCK's search halts. A small smile. She slaps a foil packet down on the table.)

BUCK

These don't work. I can't work them. You? Ever tried them?

(TWIG leans in – a female condom. She shakes her head, laughing, embarrassed.)

BUCK (CONT'D)

Hadn't had sex for three years. That's a long time to go dry, right? Can you imagine? Just happens, though. Didn't even realize the signals I must've been sending off. Protection, I guess. Then habit. You get into your own world – your own smells, tastes, sounds. Didn't even recognize it was happening until it had already gone pretty far.

(She takes a drag. TWIG coughs. BUCK doesn't notice.)

BUCK (CONT'D)

Things like the phone ringing when I was busy – so I ignored it, figured I'd call back when it was convenient. You ever do that?

TWIG

(a small nod)

BUCK

Pretty soon I stopped answering at all. Didn't like the interruption. Even if I was just looking out my

window — that was *my* time. Didn't want it broken up. Started to resent the very sound of that ring. Wondered who felt they had the right to bother me right then. You ever feel that way?

TWIG

(quiet, it costs her to speak)
Sometimes. A little. It scares me.

(TWIG wants to say more but the effort hurts her throat. She stops. BUCK doesn't quite hear the confession underneath it.)

BUCK

Scared, huh. Well — I guess that's a point. Not such a good idea, getting mad at people for calling. 'Course I came to realize there was no harm meant. Even got to calling folks back, when I felt okay about it. But then that time just seemed to come around less often than it once had...

(Her voice trails off. The cigarette burns down.)

BUCK (CONT'D)

Funny how things creep up, isn't it?

(She stubs the cigarette out. A beat. TWIG smiles, relieved. BUCK smiles back — and for a moment TWIG really looks at her.)

TWIG

(to the audience)
As always, her beauty came as some surprise. Buried in all that flesh and anxiety.

(BUCK reaches for a pill bottle, taps out too many, stuffs most back, swallows one dry. Takes a sip of tea. Looks at TWIG and smiles — bright, sudden, like sun filling the room. TWIG sets her knees down carefully. Presses her hands together, rubs her own knuckles, one and then the other — a small, private comfort she seems surprised by.)

BUCK (CONT'D)

'Course something always swoops in, doesn't it. Pulls you right out. Gives you something new to chomp on.

(She smooths her hair.)

BUCK (CONT'D)

That's about where Joe comes in. Upstairs neighbor. Big guy. Military. You know how I hated the army, from my political days — didn't know it at first, and when I found out, well — I did feel safer, having him in the building. Used to see him crossing the parking lot. Handsome man. Didn't think much of it.

Then one evening — I'm in my doorway, paying the delivery person — he walks by with a lady friend. Smiles hello on his way up the stairs.

(Her leg begins to shake the table, slow then quick. TWIG looks down at her own hands, focuses on their rhythm.)

BUCK (CONT'D)

After that we kept running into each other. On the stairs. Coming and going. Felt good. Made the building feel like home.

(She looks at her own hands — they're shaking slightly now, with the leg's rhythm.)

BUCK (CONT'D)

Then the downstairs neighbor — Marva — her cousin passed. Passed. Do other people say that? Some folks do.

(A small grin. She bites a dirty edge off her pinky nail. TWIG looks away, gives her own hands a squeeze.)

BUCK (CONT'D)

Anyway — I think she took it on herself to cook for the mourners. Carts of groceries. More food than her place could hold. Knocked on my door, asked could I keep some in my fridge. Next day I didn't leave the house, waiting on her to get back from the funeral. Five o'clock, still not back, so I went out front for some air. Joe's just coming in. We say hello. Talk. Trade stories of the day, laugh some. After a while I think to ask if he wants a drink at my place. Hadn't really occurred to me before that moment — or if it had, well... Neighbor. Army. Too complicated, right? But I just did it. Seemed okay to. And he looked pleased. Said yes, right then.

So we climb those creaky stairs, both of us grinning a little, not knowing what happens next. Next thing, we're at my kitchen table, surrounded by Marva's wake-food, talking and talking. Hours pass. Everything changed, you know? Really nice time. He's a good guy, Joe.

(She pushes the pile aside, reaches back into the case, pulls out a second bag – just as full.)

BUCK (CONT'D)

Look at this – another one. I guess I brought too much. And still no vitamins for you. Okay – let's see what's in here.

(She digs with mounting impatience now – sighing, tutting, banging bottles down: pills, lipsticks, lip balm, mints, conditioner, hand serum, eye cream, nail files, a comb, mascara, powders, bath milk, foot lotion, a pumice stone. She finds a second female condom, tosses it onto the pile.)

BUCK (CONT'D)

You've really never tried these, huh? I can't see how anyone manages. Pull it out like the instructions say and it dissolves on your finger before you get it anywhere. When I had that night with Joe – he told me condoms make him lose it, can't feel much with them. Heard that before, right? Still. He's a good guy, Joe.

(She glances at TWIG – checking.)

BUCK (CONT'D)

Anyway – next day I go to the drugstore. Find myself walking down the contraception aisle.

(She smiles, remembering.)

BUCK (CONT'D)

And that's when I found these. Thought – hey, I could try that. Felt great, being in that aisle, getting in line with my birth control. Felt like I was back in the world. Felt like a woman – attractive, feminine, strong, juicy. Hadn't felt that way in a long time. Looked at people and smiled easy, thought maybe they sensed something too. Three years is too long to go.

(beat)

Mind if I have another smoke?

(She lights it before TWIG can answer.)

TWIG

(rasping)

Actually — I think it's pretty bad for me to breathe that in right now. Could you hold off a while?

(BUCK's eyes spark — a flash of anger — then soften almost at once.)

BUCK

No problem.

(She stubs it out, wipes her hands on her skirt, reaches down to untie her shoes.)

BUCK (CONT'D)

My feet are killing me. Swollen — the flight, all that walking; probably stink too.

(A beat. TWIG gestures toward the hall.)

TWIG

You're welcome to use the shower, if you want to freshen up.

BUCK

(rising, gathering herself)

That would be great. Thanks.

(BUCK exits toward the shower. TWIG is left alone onstage, surrounded by the spread of bottles and jars covering her small table. She looks at it all a long moment. Lights fade slowly to black.)

END OF PLAY