

BUSTER'S LAST STAND
A Short Play

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BUSTER'S LAST STAND

Synopsis

An expectant couple in urgent need of a bigger apartment find themselves up against a landlord with a thing against dogs.

Characters

MARGARET VYBORG, mid-twenties, visibly pregnant

VERN VYBORG, her husband, mid-twenties

MRS. DOLLFUSS, fifties

BUSTER, a large dog (heard but not seen)

A small studio apartment in Brooklyn, shortly after World War II. A sofa, a coffee table, a chair or two, a mirror. At the rear, two closed doors, one leading to the world, the other to a closet. As the lights come up, VERN VYBORG is seated on the sofa reading a newspaper. MARGARET VYBORG, busy tidying up around him, freezes when she sees him reach into his shirt for a cigarette.

Stop! MARGARET

Huh? VERN

Don't even think about lighting that. MARGARET

No? Why not? What's the problem? VERN

I just emptied that ashtray—didn't you see me empty it? MARGARET

So? VERN

So can't you at least wait till she gets here before you make it dirty again? MARGARET

He picks up the ashtray in question and eyes it dubiously before replacing it on the coffee table.

VERN

You seriously think this Mrs. Dollpuss or Mrs. Dollhouse or whatever her name is is going to notice—much less care—if an ashtray has ashes in it?

MARGARET

It wouldn't surprise me at all. My mother was telling me about a woman she knows whose application was rejected over a couple of stains on a tabletop.

VERN

Because, if that's the case—if they're really that petty—maybe we should think twice about submitting to this invasion.

MARGARET

I can't believe you said that.

VERN

The paper today has a couple of promising ads. One of them's not far from here either. If I call now—

MARGARET

No! We've answered enough ads. As far as I'm concerned, we've found the perfect apartment for us, and there's no reason to look any further. You admit yourself it has everything we need.

VERN

With one blatant exception.

MARGARET

Vern, please. Not that again. We've been over it and over it, and we can't, you know—we can't let an animal stand in the way of our lives.

As though on cue, a sudden growl is heard from behind the closet door.

MARGARET

I thought you took Buster out.

VERN

Half an hour ago.

MARGARET

Well, hurry up and take him out again.

VERN

That's not what he wants. He hears something—your Mrs. Dollface on the stairs, probably.

MARGARET

Oh, dear, is that her already?

She gives the room a quick last inspection and, as the growling grows louder, stops in front of the mirror to fuss with her hair.

MARGARET

How do I look?

VERN

Like every landlord's dream of a dutiful hausfrau.

A sharp knock causes the growling to turn into barking. She steadies herself with a deep breath.

MARGARET

All right, now remember. Leave the talking to me. And, for God's sake, keep that animal quiet.

As she proceeds to the door, he rises and heads to the closet.

VERN

Easy, boy. Easy now.

She opens the door to reveal MRS. DOLLFUSS. Buttoned up and businesslike, with a white-gloved hand clutching a clipboard to her bosom, she's visibly spooked because the dog, in addition to barking, has begun scrabbling furiously behind the closet door, as though determined to burst through it.

MRS. DOLLFUSS

Mrs. Vyborg? I'm Mrs. Dollfuss with TNT Properties. I believe you're expecting me?

VERN

Yes, yes, of course. Come in, please. I hope you're not frightened of the dog? Don't be. He can't get out. Vern, will you please calm him down?

VERN

Damn it, Buster, shut up!

He pounds on the closet door with his fist, and the commotion abruptly ends, except for a residual whimper from time to time as a reminder of the dog's presence.

MARGARET

There. You can relax now. He's really quite harmless, only he doesn't know his own strength, so—just to be on the safe side—Vern keeps him in the closet when company comes. This is Vern, my husband.

MRS. DOLLFUSS

How do you do.

VERN

I've been better.

MARGARET

Won't you sit down, Mrs. Dollfuss? Can I offer you something? A cup of tea?

MRS. DOLLFUSS

That's very kind of you, but, as you know, this isn't a social call. I'm here on behalf of the Apartheid Apartments to make sure you're a good match for one of our few remaining vacant units. Which—judging by what I've just seen—I'm sorry to have to tell you it appears you're not.

MARGARET

What? Just like that? Did we do something? What have we done?

MRS. DOLLFUSS

It's more a question of what you haven't done. Because obviously you haven't taken the trouble to read through our specimen lease, or you'd have noticed the clause in it prohibiting dogs.

VERN

On the contrary, that clause was the first thing we noticed, and I'd be lying if I said we don't find it problematic.

MARGARET

Vern—

He shrugs off the hand she attempts to restrain him with.

VERN

What is it you've got against dogs anyway?

MRS. DOLLFUSS

Speaking for myself, I was bitten by a pit bull when I was a girl, and I still have the scar, but T.N. Tenney—the owner of TNT Properties—objects to them from a public-health standpoint. My suspicion is he's had too many unfortunate encounters with what they leave behind on the sidewalks, but, be that as it may, his policy against dogs is nonnegotiable, so—unless you're willing to part with yours—I'm afraid there's nothing further for us to discuss.

VERN

You talk as if it was a trivial matter to part with a companion you love.

MRS. DOLLFUSS

I don't make the rules, Mr. Vyborg, I'm just charged with seeing they're followed.

MARGARET

And they will be, Mrs. Dollfuss, we have every intention of following them.

MRS. DOLLFUSS

You're saying you're prepared to give your dog up?

MARGARET

A relative of ours who lives in the country has already agreed to take him.

MRS. DOLLFUSS

So you'll be able to visit him?

MARGARET

It's a two-hour drive, and we haven't got a car, but—once in a while.

MRS. DOLLFUSS

Good. That settles that then, I hope to your husband's satisfaction.

VERN

Oh, I don't doubt I'll find it very satisfying to watch Buster forget who I am.

MRS. DOLLFUSS

He'll survive. So will you, I'm quite confident. Now—if you'll step aside—I'll just have a look around to confirm your household measures up to our standards.

VERN

In the movies, isn't this where they usually ask to see your warrant?

MRS. DOLLFUSS

True enough and, since I don't have one, you're of course free to refuse to let me do my job. But you should keep in mind a refusal is certain to doom your application.

MARGARET

No, no, that's fine, we have nothing to hide, look wherever you like—though I wouldn't open the closet.

MRS. DOLLFUSS

No fear of that. Which way is the kitchen?

MARGARET

Through there. The bathroom, too. I'll show you.

MRS. DOLLFUSS

That won't be necessary. I prefer to work alone. I won't be long.

She goes offstage, whence she's immediately heard opening and closing cabinets and drawers and rattling crockery and utensils. The following exchange is conducted in stage whispers.

VERN

This is outrageous.

MARGARET

Shh! She'll hear you.

VERN

I don't care if she does. What business does she have poking around in our stuff?

MARGARET

It's not just us. They do it with everyone. And, honestly, I'm glad they do, because—think about it—would you want to move to a project that's fine with renting to slobs?

VERN

Better slobs than snobs like her.

MARGARET

Now you're just being perverse.

VERN

Not a bit. I like a little sloppiness in people. It's proof of life.

MARGARET

Well, you can be as sloppy as you want after we get the apartment, but for now just keep reminding yourself it's rent-controlled, the utilities are free, and—best of all—it has two bedrooms.

VERN

If only it had gold fixtures, it could pass for paradise.

MARGARET

I'm serious, Vern.

VERN

So am I. But for those two bedrooms, I swear to you I'd kick that busybody out on her bony behind.

MARGARET

Shh! Here she comes.

MRS. DOLLFUSS reappears and, without asking leave, begins a tour of the room, pausing to run a fastidious fingertip over every surface. She finishes by picking up the ashtray from the coffee table and holding it up to the light.

MRS. DOLLFUSS

Not a speck anywhere. I have to say I'm impressed.

VERN

Then we can break out the champagne?

MRS. DOLLFUSS

I haven't inspected the bedroom yet.

VERN

You're standing in it.

MRS. DOLLFUSS

I'm sorry?

MARGARET

We have no bedroom. We've been making do with a convertible sofa. Which is why we're so anxious to move before the baby's born.

MRS. DOLLFUSS

Ah, your baby, yes. I was coming to that. When are you due?

MARGARET

In two months.

MRS. DOLLFUSS

Well, I see no reason why we shouldn't have you in your new apartment well before that—that is, provided everything else checks out.

VERN

Everything else? Like what?

She consults her clipboard.

MRS. DOLLFUSS

It says here you're both employed by the Board of Education?

MARGARET

I teach the fourth grade, and Vern teaches history.

MRS. DOLLFUSS

History. How interesting.

VERN

It's all there on our application, including six references.

MRS. DOLLFUSS

Every one of whom I'll be contacting, you can depend on it. But—if you'll indulge me a little longer—after the blessed event, Mrs. Vyborg, do you plan to stay home with the child?

MARGARET

That would be my first choice, but I'm afraid—for financial reasons—I'll have to go right back to work.

MRS. DOLLFUSS

And how will you manage that with a newborn?

MARGARET

My parents live nearby, and my mother's more than willing to help us.

MRS. DOLLFUSS

Very good. Excellent. You seem to be just the sort of responsible young couple who'll fit right in at the ApartAparts. I do need to ask you one more thing, though—a somewhat delicate question we put to every prospective tenant.

VERN

You're worried for nothing. We go for regular delousings.

MRS. DOLLFUSS

I'm relieved to hear it, Mr. Vyborg, but this isn't a joking matter. What I need to ask you is this. Would it be a problem for you to find yourself living next door to people who may not share your—ah—personal background?

VERN

Our what?

MRS. DOLLFUSS

Come, come, sir, as I'm sure I hardly have to tell a historian like you, in this city people have always tended to settle among their own kind. You have your Little Italys, your German enclaves, your knots of Huguenots, and so on. No one thinks anything of it, but, to the Tenney family, this sort of clannishness belongs in the past. In their forty thousand units, they're committed to bringing people of different origins together. They don't care if you're Catholic, Protestant, or Jewish. It doesn't matter to them if you're Irish, Greek, or Polish. As long as you're white, well behaved, and gainfully employed, it's their deeply held conviction you can only benefit from living side by side with your fellow Americans. Is that a philosophy you'd be comfortable with?

MARGARET

I have an Italian sister-in-law.

MRS. DOLLFUSS

Do you. How nice. And you, Mr. Vyborg?

VERN

Not only wouldn't I care if the neighbors were Italian or Polish, it'd make my day if they owned a Scotch terrier or a Russian wolfhound.

MRS. DOLLFUSS

They're more likely to own a hippopotamus.

VERN

That's too bad, because my Doberman's even more open-minded than I am. He likes nothing better than a good romp with an English setter or a Labrador retriever—especially if they're good-looking bitches.

MARGARET

Vern, stop it.

VERN

I wish I could.

MARGARET

Remember those two bedrooms—

VERN

There could be ten, and it wouldn't change the way I feel. I can't do it, Margaret! I can't be complicit in a project that discriminates against dogs.

MARGARET

He doesn't mean that, Mrs. Dollfuss.

VERN

I've never meant anything more.

MARGARET

Since he got back from the army, he hasn't been himself. He doesn't see things at all clearly.

VERN

I'll tell you what I see only too clearly, and that's that I didn't spend four years fighting for my country overseas so I could come home to find my dog treated like a second-class citizen.

MRS. DOLLFUSS

So you're a veteran? Yes, here it is on your application—and it's definitely a point in your favor, because T.N. Tenney couldn't be prouder of the many veterans among his tenants. As a token of appreciation for your service, he's prepared to offer you—as he has all the others—a ten percent discount on your first month's rent.

VERN

Is that right. Well, you can tell the magnanimous Mr. Tenney for me this is one veteran who'd rather step in shit any day of the week than live in his antiseptic utopia. Now get the hell out of here before I sic Buster on you.

At the mention of his name, the dog's whimpering becomes louder. MRS. DOLLFUSS, with her nose in the air, takes a moment before departing to pat MARGARET on the shoulder.

MRS. DOLLFUSS

And I was all set to approve your application. I'm so sorry, dear.

Keeping a wary eye on the closet, she exits quickly. MARGARET, furious, turns to VERN.

MARGARET

Over a dog!

Ignoring her, he heads for the closet, in which the whimpering has become whining.

VERN

Till every mutt's assured of passing muster,
We'll soldier on for justice—won't we, Buster?

In the closet, the whining turns into a howl.

BUSTER

Ah-ooh!

VERN

Ah-ooh!

He flings open the closet door. Blackout.