Twilight Time

A One-Act Play

By Chris Callard

John.....A husband and father

Marsha.....A wife and mother

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(John and Marsha, mid-50s, are in their bedroom. There is a queen-size bed and two bedside tables, each table holding a lamp. Off to one side is a door leading into the hall, on the other side is a door leading to the bathroom. There is one window looking down from the second story into the backyard. John is trudging back and forth around the bed, dressed in his underwear and a sports shirt, waving a fly swatter, occasionally slapping it against the wall or the headboard. Marsha is in bed, in her night clothes, reading the newspaper, which is propped against her raised knees.)

JOHN

Eleven-thirty at night and I'm chasing a goddamn housefly with a stupid fly swatter. What am I doing? What have I become?

MARSHA

Just kill the fly, John. I can't concentrate with that buzzing back and forth.

JOHN

It won't work. Fly swatters are useless against young flies. Young flies are fast, vibrant, smart. They see it coming. And this is a very young, fast, smart fly.

(He swats the wall, to no avail.)

MARSHA

The fly's age has nothing to do with this. They only live 24 hours. It's your age. Your reflexes are shot.

JOHN

I'm wasting my time.

MARSHA

You're draining my life.

(John watches the fly's pattern along the wall, near the headboard, as it lands on the lampshade. He raises the swatter as the fly takes off again only to return to the lampshade. Again, John lifts the swatter and sees the fly take off.)

JOHN

The fly keeps landing on the lampshade. Do you want me to smash the lamp?

MARSHA

You haven't got the strength. How did it get inside the house, anyway? Did you leave the door open again?

JOHN

I had to feed the cat.

MARSHA

You feed the cat on the porch. Why do you leave the door open for all sorts of vermin to flock in?

JOHN

A fly is not vermin. You obviously don't know what proper vermin is.

MARSHA

Oh I certainly think I do.

JOHN

Then speak like it, woman. The reason I leave the door open for all types of *pests* to enter is that I don't want to be locked out of the house.

MARSHA

Then carry a key.

JOHN

I don't have a key for the dead bolt.

MARSHA

The dead bolt doesn't lock when the door closes.

JOHN

But every time I'm feeding the cat and the door closes you walk by and lock the bolt.

MARSHA

I need to feel safe. How do I know it's you out there and not some thug with a big night stick?

JOHN

That's absurd.

MARSHA

Ridiculous.

JOHN

That's what I say.

MARSHA

I've never locked you out.

JOHN

It's happened many times.

MARSHA

You never tell me when you're going outside. I just turn around and you're gone, the door's open. I don't like being left alone, unprotected.

JOHN

I need some kind of privacy. Why should I tell you every single thing I'm doing? That I'm out feeding the cat?

(Slapping the swatter hard against the wall.)

You bastard!

(Turning to Marsha.)

Marsha, I need to put my pants on.

MARSHA

They're in the hamper.

JOHN

That's so typical. Pants prematurely put in the hamper. Why are my pants in the hamper?

MARSHA

You acted as though you were through with them.

JOHN

What type of action did I take to give that impression?

MARSHA

You removed them.

JOHN

Before taking a shower.

MARSHA

Rarely do people re-don the trousers they've worn all day after an 11:00 p.m. shower.

JOHN

But that decision should be left to the owner of the trousers, don't you think? Excuse me.

(He exits into the bathroom, Marsha returns to the paper, waving her hand about whenever the fly passes by.)

MARSHA

(Calling.)

And where are you going?

JOHN

(Offstage)

Nowhere. Why?

MARSHA

Putting on your pants, of course.

JOHN

(Re-entering, holding his pants.)

Can't I just wear my dirty pants if I want to?

MARSHA

Of course, if you want to.

(Back to her paper.)

Although why anyone would want to wear a pair of dirty pants is beyond me. Now look at this, John - on this single page of the newspaper there are stories about Lakewood, Hollywood, Lynwood, and Westwood. Why in the world are so many places named for woods when we're in the middle of a goddamn desert?

JOHN

That's Los Angeles for you. It's amazing when you think about it.

MARSHA

Do you think about it?

JOHN

All the time.

MARSHA

Remarkable.

JOHN

Speaking of dirty pants, why do you continue to wear white shorts when doing yard work?

MARSHA

Good god, pants again.

JOHN

Dirty pants, specifically.

MARSHA

Why the sudden interest in *my* pants, John?

JOHN

Well, Marsha –

MARSHA

And how do you know which pants I wear out in the yard?

JOHN

As I was digging, just now, through your frayed bras and soiled underthings looking for my trousers I came upon a pair of white shorts with fresh green stains on the rump. And I know that when you weed the flower beds, instead of rising and moving forward to cover new ground, you insist on scooting your bottom along, like a dog with worms, smearing chlorophyll into the polyester/cotton blend.

MARSHA

I don't do that. But what if I did?

JOHN

One day you'll wander out of our yard after a sensational session of weeding and find yourself in the public eye, perhaps purchasing bromo seltzer or Pepto Bismal

at the corner druggist, and you won't realize why people are staring and laughing at you.

MARSHA

There hasn't been a corner druggist in this neighborhood for 30 years. Even so, do you really think I need to concern myself with the off chance that my shorts might be somewhat smudged?

JOHN

I'm only looking out for your dignity, dear. It's imperative to be aware of things, something you've never understood.

MARSHA

Don't make me laugh.

JOHN

How could I possibly do that?

MARSHA

It would be embarrassing, that’s for sure. By the way, is Ronnie coming to dinner tomorrow?

JOHN

Doesn't he always come for Thanksgiving?

MARSHA

Not if he's out of town.

JOHN

When does he ever go out of town?

MARSHA

He has.

JOHN

Not over the holidays.

MARSHA

When else would he?

JOHN

His family is here.

MARSHA

He hasn't got any more family, not since the divorces.

JOHN

Well he's got us.

MARSHA

That's obvious, and beside the point. Why does he drive those women away?

JOHN

Who says the women aren’t in the driver's seat?

MARSHA

We know Ronnie.

JOHN

I think about that boy a lot. He's a good kid, isn't he?

MARSHA

Yes, he's a good kid.

JOHN

We were good to him, weren't we?

MARSHA

Yes, we were. We tried our best.

JOHN

I know we've had good times with him, over the years, when he was small. But I can't think of the times I yelled at him without great regret.

MARSHA

Sometimes he needed it.

JOHN

Still.

MARSHA

Of course, you did ride the boy. Maybe that's the problem.

JOHN

That's not the problem. You drive him away with your quirks.

MARSHA

Nonsense. Don't get me started.

JOHN

I know what it would take to get you started, and believe me, I'm not up to it.

MARSHA

Not up to much these days, are you?

JOHN

I have enough on my mind these days.

MARSHA

Like what?

JOHN

My lawsuit is coming to a head.

MARSHA

And a pointed head, at that. I can't believe you're still pursuing that boondoggle.

JOHN

I'll bring that company to its knees. Their humiliations will not stand.

MARSHA

How much are you asking for?

JOHN

Thirty million. But that's all gravy and not the goal. I will force a complete redesign of their product. And our courts can impose that, thank god for this country.

MARSHA

You’re so patriotic all of a sudden. Why should you care what a goddamn box of Kleenex looks like?

JOHN

(Pointing his finger sharply.)

It's not Kleenex. I’ve told you that, over and over again.

MARSHA

Oh, I guess you have. Over and over and over. Ho hum.

JOHN

It's one of their lesser competitors. I adore Kleenex. I even hope to gain an endorsement deal, if this works out, as I'm sure it will. And it's not the look of the box, it's the strength of the tissue. They must be stronger! What they sell now is simply not hefty enough to get the job done.

MARSHA

So you blow your nose and get a little snot on your fingers. So what?

JOHN

Nine times out of ten my discharge explodes right through that flimsy sheet. That's hardly a little snot. My hands end up completely coated, shining with mucous. And this happens at business meetings, in front of important people.

MARSHA

If you didn't have hay fever.

JOHN

It has cost me dearly in lost financial gain and shredded dignity. I've had enough.

MARSHA

Those lawyers will tear you apart a helluva lot worse than any two-bit tissue. They'll claim your nose spews more air, with greater force, than the average nose. They'll buy a psychologist to claim you've got issues with public nasal eruptions. They'll get you under oath and wonder why you don't just use a cotton handkerchief, unless you have an ulterior motive like a nuisance lawsuit aimed at soaking their company. Soaking it far more than any seepage of slime ever could. You haven't got a chance.

JOHN

I have the truth on my side.

MARSHA

Blowing smoke. Too much blowing, period. Hey, where's that fly swatter?

JOHN

I have no idea.

MARSHA

You had it!

(Swats at the air with her hands.)

I can't stand the buzzing! It's rattling my brain!

JOHN

And what about my socks?

MARSHA

No more articles of clothing, please!

JOHN

Half my socks are unraveling. They have threads everywhere, scratching my ankles. Whatever happened to darning?

(A loud noise is heard offstage.)

MARSHA

What was that? John?

JOHN

Don't know. My socks!

MARSHA

Go see.

JOHN

Go see where?

MARSHA

Downstairs.

JOHN

That was outside. Fruit dropping off trees. I'm not going downstairs. You go see.

MARSHA

I'm in bed. I'm frightened.

JOHN

(Softening.)

It was just a noise. Outside. Don’t overreact. Always overreacting. It used to be adorable, now it's tiresome.

MARSHA

Then look out the window.

JOHN

(Abruptly.)

Why should I?

(After a pause, he walks to the window and peers into the yard.)

Oh, Christ. Look at that.

MARSHA

A man? Was I right?

JOHN

The cat.

MARSHA

What about the cat?

JOHN

Well it's slaughtered another possum, that’s what. Jesus, what a mess. Entrails scattered all over the place. Do we have any of those 33-gallon trash bags left? Because when you made me clean up the last one with that 13-gallon job I had to take three showers.

MARSHA

How would I know about trash bags?

JOHN

Don't you run this household?

(Shaking his head.)

That's the fourth possum this month. Don't they learn anything?

MARSHA

Don't be an idiot. As soon as they learn something they're dead.

JOHN

The others! The whole possum brigade! Haven't they figured out this is the death yard? The first victim sat out there for three days.

MARSHA

Is that why you left that rotting corpse? As a warning sign to the neighborhood marsupials?

JOHN

I didn't leave it. No one told me it was there.

MARSHA

Oh, my fault. You don't patrol your yard, perform proper maintenance. Dead bodies can lie stinking on your dichondra for days before you notice anything amiss? Rather go out on the town with your pals.

JOHN

Pals? I never go out anymore, not with an invalid in the house.

MARSHA

I've never been sick a day in my life.

JOHN

Well I’m sick of this 25-year constant harangue. It’s more than any man can take.

MARSHA

So why don't you do what any man would do - desert me, abandon the family.

JOHN

It's what I should have done years ago. It's what I should do today.

MARSHA

You wouldn't make it out there. You should be thankful for what you have – a beautiful home, health, bank account, a child, stability.

JOHN

All of which have been turned against me by your machinations.

(He stomps out into the hall.)

MARSHA

Screw you.

(She gets out of bed, goes to the bathroom, and comes back with the fly swatter, slapping it over and over into the palm of her hand, like a 1930s strikebreaker with a bat.)

Now it's your turn.

(She slams it against the lamp, knocking it over.)

Shit.

JOHN

(Stepping back into the room.)

But I won't let you off the hook that easily.

(Notices the swatter in her palm.)

Good god, how can you let that filthy thing come into contact with your skin?

MARSHA

This swatter hasn’t touch the fly so it’s clean as a whistle.

JOHN

Do you know how much spit ends up in the mouthpiece of a whistle? You should select your cliches with a bit more discrimination. But you've never been very literate, have you?

MARSHA

Lit this.

(She slaps his face with the swatter.)

JOHN

Dammit! Don't slap me with filth. Use your hands, if that's what you're after.

MARSHA

You’d love me to throw the first punch. Give you an excuse to beat me black and blue again.

JOHN

Again? I've rarely had the desire for any physical contact with your flesh, violent or otherwise.

MARSHA

Your skewered version of history would astound Stalin. For an entire week I couldn't leave this house. Bruises and blotches. I had to avoid Ronnie and call to him from other rooms, tell him how to pour his own breakfast cereal. And you brought flowers home. As if the bouquet were a balm.

JOHN

You've never sported a bruise in your life. I never struck you! I'm incapable of violence. I can't spank a dog, squash a bug, slap a mosquito that's sucking my blood. That’s why the fly is still alive.

MARSHA

(Smacking at the fly on the headboard with her open hand.)

But you could shame your grandmother with a flick of your tongue.

JOHN

Maybe I should have slapped you upside the head years ago. Then you would have kicked me out, and everything would have been right.

MARSHA

I've always refused to act for you.

JOHN

What good was I hanging around?

MARSHA

A woman needs a man for the little things - plumbing, garbage, sweeping, hosing.

JOHN

Which I excel at. You couldn't have asked for better, cleaner surroundings.

MARSHA

I've been no fool.

(A crash.)

John? What's that noise?

JOHN

Didn't hear a thing. It’s your ear wax. I warned you about the Q-tips. You keep using those swaps to wipe out your ears, but they're packing the wax tighter and tighter. Little sounds inside your head become catastrophes outside it.

MARSHA

I demand that you go downstairs and check the windows and doors. We have a prowler.

JOHN

I'm tired of your demands. Anyway, we've nothing to steal.

MARSHA

We have china, silver, electronics, cash, valuables.

JOHN

Nonsense. Besides, the lights are on downstairs. No one is going to bust into a bright house.

MARSHA

Please!

JOHN

Oh . . . oh . . .

(He walks to the door and reaches for the knob.)

MARSHA

I knew it.

(Approaching tenderness.)

I knew you would.

JOHN

I might not.

MARSHA

You will. Won't you?

JOHN

Why should I?

MARSHA

For us? For yourself, dammit.

JOHN

I have other things on my mind and fear no phantom bumps in the night, no creaking house.

MARSHA

You're head is full of bumps! You'd die - and kill me - trying to prove some little boy point about phantoms.

JOHN

I never had a chance to be a little boy!

MARSHA

Oh don't go down that road again.

JOHN

My parents never let me be a little boy. Talking to me like an adult from age four. Lashing me emotionally when I used a knife to eat soup! I have no concept of your "little-boy points." I'm adrift!

MARSHA

You’re a dummy. Your parents were the most loving, over-the-top coddlers. They took away your drive.

JOHN

How have we been able to afford this two-story house and send one child through college three times if I lacked drive? He hasn't used even one of those degrees, you know?

MARSHA

Oh, we've bumbled through okay. And he's finding himself.

JOHN

Three universities and two wives. When does the found part come into play? And this has been a better standard of living than you were ever exposed to. Sorry I didn't buy that double-wide you were thirsting for.

MARSHA

Standard of living? I wanted standing in the community, to make a difference, to be a force in this town. But you crushed that impulse. "Keep to ourselves" was your mantra. I cringe when I think what might have been.

JOHN

What might have been?

MARSHA

We could have been nabobs. PTA. Symphony Association. Planning Commission.

JOHN

We could be dead too.

MARSHA

Non-sequiturs. We will be dead if you don't defend us against that force out there.

JOHN

(Drooping.)

We'd probably be better off dead. Who can continue with this struggle? Is this why we're breathing?

MARSHA

How can you talk that way? Anything is better than nothing.

JOHN

I used to think that. But for so long now, I've been melancholy as a sick monkey.

MARSHA

You're just old. Maybe your time to die has come.

JOHN

Oh, don’t worry, I won’t give you the satisfaction that my passing would provide.

MARSHA

Nonsense. John, I don't want you to die.

JOHN

Don't get all sentimental on me now.

MARSHA

I want you to grow up!

JOHN

So I can eventually die!

(The stairs creak loudly.)

MARSHA

(Getting quickly into bed and pulling the covers up.)

Don't tell me you didn't hear that.

JOHN

(Casually.)

Hm?

(Opening the door, looking down the hall, closing the door.)

Mice.

MARSHA

Mice? Don't be a nut.

JOHN

I’m nutty, for you, dear. There's no one there there. I just looked. Must just be mice.

MARSHA

Hordes of mice streaming up the stairs? Fanning throughout the house? Is this what you're telling me?

JOHN

What I'm telling you is I want a legal separation.

MARSHA

Now you're telling me this? With intruders in our home?

JOHN

I've been packing my bags and arranged for a room.

MARSHA

Packing your bags? When?

JOHN

On the sly.

MARSHA

You're such a liar. And why tell me now?

JOHN

Timing seemed right.

MARSHA

You're a coward. Where would you go?

JOHN

I won't tell you, but you have my cell number.

MARSHA

You're running to someone else. You and your philandering ways.

JOHN

I've never so much as glanced at another woman, to my lasting regret. And there have been opportunities, believe me.

MARSHA

Never looked and never laid a hand on me. Like the time I caught you with that little drum majorette under the bleachers at our son's graduation. A lisping lass is good to kiss. Wasn't that right, John?

JOHN

My God, I was helping her find a broken necklace. Do you think I would embarrass our son and you and me before all those parents? You were completely irrational, pointing at me, yelling, "A lisping lass is good to kiss." Your words echoing throughout the campus. Destroying our son. He was never the same, could never have a normal relationship after that.

(He pulls the suitcase from the closet and sets it next to the door.)

MARSHA

No, don't do this, not so suddenly. Oh, John, I . . . I couldn't bear it. Don't leave. Let's talk about the good times. Our trips to the cabin in the mountains. The fresh air, the scent of pine. And Christmas, sipping your warm wonderful wassail while

Ronnie unwrapped his gifts. And then our special holiday roast beef and pudding after Ronnie went to sleep, just you and I. Just you and I, John.

JOHN

I've never been to the mountains with you, I don't like roast beef, and I have no idea what wassail is.

MARSHA

Don't throw our lives away. We have an investment!

JOHN

And the market has gone bust. Face reality.

MARSHA

We make our own reality.

(A knock at the door.)

Someone really is there, in the hallway. You heard the knocking.

JOHN

That's the wind. Go to sleep. Leave me be.

MARSHA

Stop it you stupid man.

(Goes to the door.)

Who's there? Who is out there?

(Only silence.)

I have to know!

JOHN

You see. Imagination. Your life is full of imagination. Get into bed, read your paper, play with your fly, or your fly swatter.

MARSHA

So you and your cohort can murder me? You've had this planned for a long time.

JOHN

I don't have a plan, that's the problem. And kill you to what end?

MARSHA

The insurance money, to sell the house, disinherit my child, run away with the lisping drum majorette. If you kill me I'll haunt you to till the day you die, and after.

JOHN

You haunt me now, every sleeping and waking moment. But I will soon be done with it, not by criminal means but by finally exerting my free will. And I'm leaving you everything. I am walking away empty handed and clearheaded.

MARSHA

And you'll wither up and fall flat.

JOHN

I'll thrive.

MARSHA

Christ, I wish you were in an urn for what you've done to me.

JOHN

I've been very good to you.

MARSHA

I don't believe it.

JOHN

(Realizing.)

You don't, do you? Hm, maybe I'll admit to a little bit of your truth.

MARSHA

How could you not? Our truth is entangled. You don’t untangle easily.

JOHN

We’re a couple of shoelaces. What a farce.

MARSHA

Facts don't lie.

JOHN

Facts are relative. That’s the basic truth.

MARSHA

Here's what I do know: You’re a miserable, depressive person. A real downer to live with.

JOHN

And you?

MARSHA

(Surprised.)

Me? Am I …?

JOHN

Bingo! And therein lies our insurmountable dilemma.

MARSHA

But we met and dated and got married almost 40 years ago and have lasted for some reason.

JOHN

(Exhausted.)

Beats me. If you despise me why not let me go? Or go yourself?

MARSHA

And be alone?

(A derisive snort.)

Is that what you want?

JOHN

I don't want this, that's for sure.

MARSHA

I think you do.

JOHN

I think I don't.

MARSHA

What, then?

JOHN

Freedom? The chance to follow myself?

MARSHA

You mean selfishness.

JOHN

Oh stop with the one liners.

MARSHA

No one wants to be alone, John.

JOHN

It's been done.

MARSHA

Not happily.

JOHN

Baloney.

MARSHA

People die younger when they're alone. Loneliness kills. Make love to me.

JOHN

(Uncomprehending.)

Pardon?

MARSHA

Make mad, passionate . . . or listless, boring . . . love to me.

JOHN

(Thinking, then very slowly.)

E-gads.

MARSHA

Or just sit here on the same bed. Look at the wall, if you must, but sit here.

JOHN

(He slowly sits.)

How much longer?

MARSHA

We're still young.

JOHN

In a way.

MARSHA

I pray I'm the first to go. But you would never really leave, would you?

JOHN

I've thought about it.

MARSHA

I couldn't bear going on by myself. And I can't believe you don't feel the same.

JOHN

I wonder. I wonder.

MARSHA

Oh, pish posh. Pish posh, John. Pish posh.

JOHN

(Smiling against his will.)

Pish posh. What a wonderful phrase.

(John picks up the fly swatter, sees that the fly has landed on the headboard, and smacks it. He looks at the carcass, stuck to the swatter, and flicks it away, onto the floor.)

Well, I've killed the fly.

MARSHA

My man.

JOHN

What about that other corpse? Should I go toss the possum in the trash?

MARSHA

Oh, leave it for now. What can a dead possum do to us?

(They sit on the bed. Marsha reaches over and rubs John's back. The lights fade out.)