Can You or Can't You?

SETH: A 35-year old man who has just lost his girl and his job.

SALLY: The girl who is getting away.

MITCH: Seth's oldest friend.

ARLENE: The mother.

CHUCK: The father.

DOC: On duty in the ER.

(The action takes place in five short scenes set in a restaurant, a bar, a home, and an emergency room, all of which can be suggested simply with chairs, stools, etc. All costumes are simple casual clothing, except for the DOC, who is wearing scrubs.)

(SETH and SALLY are seated at a restaurant.)

SETH

(Looking around.) Well, this place is worn out.

SALLY

Sad, isn't it?

SETH

Been a long time.

SALLY

Long time. Look … I'm not being cruel…

SETH

But you don't love me anymore.

SALLY

That's not …

SETH

Why do I make you so angry, Sally?

SALLY

I’m not angry. It’s hard for me to stay mad at you.

SETH

What about counseling?

SALLY

We’re not married.

SETH

We’ve lived together for five years. Let me tell you about my day. I always like telling you about my day.

SALLY

I’m tired, I don’t want to hear about your day. Seth, Sethy, also, I need you to pay the money you borrowed last month. Zelle?

SETH

You want to end things because I asked for a loan? Ok, I’m embarrassed. Isn’t that enough?

SALLY

It’s not the money, you should know that. But I do need it.

SETH

Well, who's going to move? And where? And when? I guess soon, sounds like. And speaking of financial issues, I was laid off today.

SALLY

Yeah, soon. Ugh, sorry about losing another job. You've always got your folks. I'll give you a few days.

SETH

A few days. *(Accusatory.)* Got someone moving in? I can sleep in my car.

SALLY

Not suggesting that. Don't blame me for that. But I can't have you hanging around forever with excuses.

SETH

I'll be an adult.

SALLY

I know. God, I'm not hungry, not sure why I thought about coming here.

SETH

I'm starving.

SALLY

We have soup at home.

(Blackout. Lights come up on SETH and MITCH seated in a bar.)

MITCH

Move in with your parents.

SETH

God no, this is temporary.

MITCH

Well where are you going to live, man? I mean, the car idea's a joke. They gotta let you back. Your room is still there. It's their fault, ultimately.

SETH

No, it's her fault. I can't think about it.

MITCH

You've done it before.

SETH

When I was 25. I need a job.

MITCH

Something always comes along.

SETH

Can’t I drive a forklift in the warehouse?

MITCH

Well, yeah, but that’s a goddamn union thing, you know.

SETH

I’m not putting you on the spot.

MITCH

I would. I’ve tried to get you on before, you know that. Now is just a shitty time.

SETH

I know. Sorry.

MITCH

Thanks. Sorry, too. Go home, take a break.

SETH

You can’t go home again.

MITCH

Why the hell not?

SETH

No, it’s a story I think I read in high school. Don’t remember even what it was about. The title’s just stuck with me. Speaking of that, how's your new house?

MITCH

It's fine. It's too small, but what am I going to do?

SETH

What about that little unit attached to your garage. I'm not serious, just asking, but kind of serious, just in case.

MITCH

I would, no question. But you remember, as part of the agreement with my father for lending me the down payment I said I'd keep it available for him.

SETH

He’s still … How can he do that at your house?

MITCH

I guess it's not really my house. And there's an entrance on the alley so no one sees anything.

SETH

Amazing.

MITCH

Disgusting. Any wonder I'm screwing with the books at the company. I'm rearranging a few things so I can take my wife to Tahiti.

SETH

Mitch, what are you saying?

MITCH

It's crazy, and I might get in trouble down the line. But I really need a vacation. And if they catch me, my father will bail me out. That asshole. Can't your folks afford to buy you a condo? With all their equity?

SETH

Oh, that’s beyond comprehension.

MITCH

Then … just get a leg up.

SETH

I'm 35.

MITCH

Me too. So?

SETH

I gotta be on my own.

MITCH

None of us are. We're all surfing, baby. Remember when we used to hit Huntington every weekend? It'll be your house one day. Lucky you're an only child. My brother's trying to rewrite the family trust. That fucker.

SETH

I guess. I guess.

(Blackout. Lights up on SETH'S parents' living room.)

CHUCK

What’s he doing here? It’s three in the afternoon on a Thursday.

ARLENE

Does it matter? Isn’t it nice to have him around for a change?

CHUCK

Something stinks, Arlene, to high heaven.

ARLENE

Chuck, he goes off with these women, never gets married, never shares. So any time he stops by is a chance to find out.

(SETH enters from the hallway.)

SETH

Hiya.

CHUCK

How's my boy?

ARLENE

Did you wash your hands?

CHUCK

Here for dinner?

SETH

It’s three in the afternoon, dad. And yes, mom, I always wash my hands.

CHUCK

Then lunch. But I think you’ve missed lunch.

ARLENE

You never answer my calls.

SETH

I don’t always have the phone with me.

ARLENE

You kids always have your phones. And voice mail? Why don’t kids believe in voice mail?

CHUCK

Voice mail. What a pleasure! The modern conveniences.

SETH

I tend to text more.

ARLENE

Text? That’s so impersonal.

CHUCK

Anyway, you usually show up for dinner. Thank God for dinner, eh Arlene? Here's to dinner.

SETH

I’m not here for a meal.

CHUCK

Hey, what about grabbing breakfast some time?

ARLENE

He’s never up in time for breakfast. How you enjoyed sleeping in. Was hard to roust you for school most days.

CHUCK

Brunch? I adore the concept of brunch. Regardless, your mother's fixing her famous sauerbraten tonight, so everything should work out fine, dinner-wise.

ARLENE

We have a few hours. So … why did you and Sally break up? Did she want to get married and you didn't, or vice versa? Whose idea was it to end things?

SETH

First of all, I do wake up in the morning. I've held jobs for many years. And I probably shouldn't have mentioned the split with Sally first thing inside the house. But there was kind of a reason.

CHUCK

We thought she was swell. She was the right age, she was fertile.

SETH

Fertile?

CHUCK

We're not getting any younger.

SETH

Oh, Christ.

ARLENE

Your language, Seth, please.

SETH

Yes, mom, sorry. These things just end. You drift apart, become different people.

ARLENE

I don't believe that for a minute, such an avant-garde idea.

SETH

All I can say is Sally and I are done. And, ah, I've lost my job.

CHUCK

You've what?

SETH

I was let go, dad.

CHUCK

How'd you cause that?

SETH

I didn't. They cut me loose.

CHUCK

Why would they cut you loose? What's this, the fourth, fifth time?

SETH

They don't have to tell you. We're cattle. The irony is that we beef them up before they slaughter our asses.

ARLENE

Please, Seth, so graphic.

SETH

Sorry, mom, but it's the ugly truth. And, well … it's obvious that I need to move out because of the collapse of our relationship.

CHUCK

Sally? We loved her. But why can't you tell her to hit the damn road?

SETH

I don't have an income. It seemed the obvious choice.

ARLENE

We're here to help, sweetheart. We have plenty of room, if that's what you're getting at.

CHUCK

And plenty of food. If that's what you're getting at.

SETH

I'll give you most of my unemployment. And I can probably get food stamps.

CHUCK

My god! We didn't raise you do go on the public dole.

SETH

It won't be long before I find another job and get back on my own. This is not easy for me.

CHUCK

Sure, sure. Everything on your schedule.

SETH

You won't even know I'm here.

ARLENE

Nonsense. It'll be great spending time together.

CHUCK

Okie dokie. Whatever. Off to watch my shows. *Cheers* is on, if you want to join, Seth.

(Blackout. Lights up on SETH in a hospital bed, waking with a start.)

SETH

Where am I? What happened?

DOC

Hey, calm down. A little spell. Coronary occlusion, or, as some like to say, an old fashioned heart attack.

SETH

No. I … yeah, I thought I was having a heart attack. Dizzy, scared. Then I drove here.

DOC

Never drive when you're having a heart attack, or a coronary occlusion. Call the paramedics. That's my firm medical advice.

SETH

I couldn't do that. My parents would've asked questions. They would've followed me here.

DOC

Live at home? At your age? Kinda young for heart troubles. Kinda old to live at home. But no judgement. I'm just a doctor, not a shrink. And we're a crack team. Put in a stent, now you're good as new. Well, nobody's good as new, huh?

SETH

You put in a stent?

DOC

Um, did I say that? Because it's confidential. HIPPA rules.

SETH

HIPPA? I'm the patient.

DOC

Sure, but certain things are private even from you. See, you're disoriented. It's normal. And you have lots of questions. So we need to be careful. *(DOC's phone pings. He checks the text.)* Hey. Hold on there, sailor. Guess what?

SETH

What?

DOC

Just got the final report. Was a panic attack. Our tests were all wrong. No heart attack.

SETH

And the stent?

DOC

Um … yeah. We did the stent. But that'll only help down the road. In the meantime, cut out caffeine and get rid of stress.

SETH

How do you get rid of stress?

DOC

Pills, man, pills.

SETH

Can I sit up?

DOC

You can throw a frigging javelin, that's how good you are. Oh, and you might have gonorrhea. Check with your primary physician.

SETH

My what?

(Blackout. Lights up on SETH entering the living room.)

SETH

Hello? I'm back. Went out for an early job interview.

ARLENE

(Entering.) Dressed like that?

SETH

Good morning.

ARLENE

Afternoon. Seth, we think you should go back to school. We'll pay.

SETH

Ok. School? Really? Where, for what?

ARLENE

Does it matter? We want to help.

SETH

You are helping. I'm not a student.

ARLENE

You need to become an adult.

SETH

I am an adult. Just hitting some rough spots. Didn't you two?

ARLENE

Not like this. Your father has been a great provider with the artificial fruit company.

CHUCK

(Off stage.) The plastic kumquat? That was my baby!

SETH

(Calling back.) Oh I remember that milestone. Parents day at middle school. Plastic fruit embarrassment. *(Back to Arlene.)* Hey, mom, how about this? An adult suggestion. Instead of community college, give me the tuition money and I'll buy a fucking ostrich farm.

ARLENE

(Pause.) That language. How did we fail you?

SETH

I'm just tired. Can I sleep? Or eat something?

ARLENE

I think we're done here. It was a grand experiment.

SETH

What does that mean? Are you social workers? You kicking me out?

ARLENE

No, we can't do that. And we don't have to do that. Mitch called. His father died. Sudden stroke, it seems. He mentioned a room at a very reasonable rent, which we'll cover, along with your tuition. A win-win!

SETH

That's horrible, about his dad. Why'd he call you?

ARLENE

I assume he knew we'd be writing the check every month. Such a sweet boy, Mitch. This is for the best, don't you think?

SETH

It's hard to think sometimes. Life is strange. Maybe you can't go home again after all.

ARLENE

Life isn’t strange, Seth. Most of us know that. And you can go home again.

SETH

Yeah?

ARLENE

Yes. But sometimes maybe you shouldn’t.

(Final blackout.)