

CONTESTABLE

A Play in One Act

by

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CHARACTERS

LORNA PRUITT — Early 50s. Dennis's widow. A dental-office receptionist who cannot hold a lie long enough to tell it.

RAY KISTLER — Early 50s. An insurance salesman. He sold Dennis his policy.

WADE PRUITT — Late 50s. Dennis's older brother. Teaches the hunter-safety course on weekends.

DENNIS PRUITT — Heard only, on a voicemail.

SETTING

The Pruitt kitchen, in a small town somewhere in the Rust Belt.

TIME

Real time. A weekday afternoon in late November, the first week of buck season, from about ten after four until five o'clock.

PRODUCTION NOTE

The rifle must be a non-firing replica, and the shot a sound effect. The handling of the rifle, and especially the final moments, should be staged under the supervision of a qualified fight director or armorer.

The Pruitt kitchen. Funeral food on every surface: foil pans, a spiral ham under plastic wrap, a pound cake with one slice gone, a plate of cookies nobody has touched. Sympathy cards stand open along the windowsill. A back door with a window onto the driveway. A clock on the wall reads ten after four.

On the kitchen table: an accordion folder, a legal pad, a shoebox of papers, and a cell phone in a clear plastic evidence bag, face down.

At rise: LORNA PRUITT, still in her funeral dress, sits at the table. RAY KISTLER, in a dark suit, stands over her with the legal pad.

RAY

Again.

LORNA

Ray.

RAY

From the top. She asks, you answer, and it sounds like you've said it before, because you have. Go.

LORNA

(Eyes closed.)

Dennis left the house at one-thirty to pick up a part for a customer's snowblower. He was in good spirits. He had no history of —

RAY

Of.

LORNA

Despondency.

RAY

Good.

LORNA

Nobody says despondency.

RAY

Insurance people say despondency. Keep going.

LORNA

The road was wet —

RAY

No. "Conditions."

LORNA

You wrote wet.

RAY

I crossed out wet. It's "Conditions may have been a factor."

LORNA

It hasn't rained in nine days. The hydrangeas are dead.

RAY

Which is why we say conditions. Nobody can argue with conditions.

LORNA

He didn't brake.

A beat.

RAY

Don't say that.

LORNA

The trooper said it. No skid marks. He said it twice, like he thought I might want to write it down.

RAY

Lorna. At five o'clock, Carol Yost is going to sit in that chair with a clipboard. Carol is very nice. She's going to ask you very nice questions. Everything you say goes in a file, and the file goes to a man in an office park who has never met Dennis and gets a bonus every time he doesn't pay.

LORNA

Is that true?

RAY

It's true enough. So you don't volunteer. You answer what she asks, in order, the way we practiced. Say it in order and you can't go wrong.

LORNA

Say it in order.

RAY

And you can't go wrong.

He picks up the accordion folder and works through it like a checklist.

Claimant's statement, we're doing. Death certificate.

LORNA

Certified. Three copies. The lady at the courthouse said most people get five, so I got three. Who are the other two for?

RAY

(Reading.)

"Manner of death: pending."

LORNA

She said that's normal.

RAY

It is normal. It's completely normal. Policy.

LORNA

Front pocket. In the plastic sleeve. I put mine in too, I didn't know if —

RAY

You don't need yours. Yours is fine. Yours is old. Nothing to do with today.

He pulls out a thick envelope.

What's this?

LORNA

His tax returns. The last two years. She asked for them.

RAY

She asked for them "if available."

LORNA

They're available. They're right there.

RAY

It's a standard list. Everybody gets the list. Nobody brings everything on the list. You bring everything on the list, they think you're nervous.

He sets the envelope aside. She takes it back and returns it to the folder.

LORNA

I'm not nervous. I'm organized.

RAY

Those aren't different things to Carol.

He picks up the legal pad again. Lorna pulls the shoebox toward her and goes through it, a receipt at a time.

"Occupation of the insured." That should match the application.

LORNA

Small engine repair.

RAY

(Writing.)

Self-employed equipment consultant.

LORNA

What's that?

RAY

That's what he was.

LORNA

He fixed lawnmowers, Ray.

RAY

He consulted on lawnmowers.

LORNA

People brought him lawnmowers and he fixed them in the garage and they paid him in cash. Sometimes in venison.

RAY

Which is consulting. We go with the application. Carol loves consistency. Consistency is the whole game.

He drifts toward the counter, lifts the foil from a pan, and takes a polite forkful to fill the pause. He chews. He keeps chewing.

What is this?

LORNA

Dennis's mother's chicken and rice. She brought it to every funeral in the county for forty years. I found her card.

RAY

It's very —

LORNA

It's terrible. I know.

She finds the recipe card in the shoebox and holds it out. He reads it.

There. "One cup salt."

RAY

That's a teaspoon. That's supposed to say teaspoon.

LORNA

Probably.

RAY

You put in a cup of salt.

LORNA

It's what it says. It's her handwriting. Forty years. Who am I to decide she didn't mean it?

She takes the card back and returns it to the box, carefully.

Fourteen people came back to the house. Not one of them ate any. They all said it looked wonderful.

RAY

It does look wonderful.

LORNA

It's the only thing I made.

Ray sets the fork down with great respect. Lorna goes back to the shoebox.

RAY

What are you looking for?

LORNA

I don't know. Anything with his handwriting on it.

RAY

Lorna.

LORNA

Twenty-six years, he left me a note to go to the hardware store. "Gone to Lowe's. Back by three." Every time. On the back of an envelope, right there, under the salt and pepper.

She looks at the spot under the salt and pepper. Nothing there.

Tuesday, nothing.

Ray says nothing. Lorna glances at the phone in its plastic bag.

RAY

Is that his?

LORNA

The police gave it back. In a bag. Like a goldfish.

RAY

Have you looked at it?

LORNA

I looked at it.

She turns it face down again, though it already was.

RAY

Okay. Let's do "state of mind." She's going to ask about his state of mind. You say "good spirits." You don't elaborate.

LORNA

What if she asks me to elaborate?

RAY

Then you say "very good spirits."

LORNA

He was in good spirits. That part's not a lie, Ray. He was in a wonderful mood all week. He was funny. He did the thing about you.

RAY

What thing about me?

LORNA

You know.

(Fondly.)

"Ray says I'm worth more dead than alive."

Ray stops writing.

He thought that was the funniest thing anybody ever said to him. He told it at Thanksgiving. He told it at the Ruckers' anniversary. He did your voice.

RAY

When did he — that was a joke.

LORNA

I know it was a joke. That's what I'm saying. He thought you were hilarious.

RAY

Okay. Well. That's not something we need to share with Carol.

LORNA

Why would I tell Carol a joke?

RAY

I'm just saying. What she asks. In order.

LORNA

I know. In order.

She rises.

I want the other copies of the death certificate in there. In case. They're in my purse.

RAY

Three's plenty.

LORNA

Then what are the other two for?

(She exits.)

Ray waits until she's gone. He slides the tax-return envelope out of the folder, opens it, and finds the line he's looking for. He closes his eyes briefly. He looks for a place to put the envelope: the cookie plate, the windowsill, the cards. He lifts the plastic wrap from the ham, slides the envelope underneath, and smooths the wrap back down.

Lorna returns with two more certified copies.

LORNA

(Filing them.)

Five. Now we have the full set.

She looks at the folder. She looks at Ray. She crosses to the ham, lifts the plastic wrap, takes out the envelope, and puts it back in the folder without a word.

RAY

I was keeping it clean.

LORNA

Under the ham.

RAY

Away from the casserole.

Outside, the sound of a truck pulling into the driveway. Lorna looks out the window over the back door.

LORNA

That's Wade.

RAY

He's early.

LORNA

He's going to deer camp tonight. He was supposed to leave Tuesday. The truck's been packed all week. He told the priest at the graveside: "Dennis would've wanted me to go."

RAY

Would he?

LORNA

Dennis hated deer camp. He went every year so Wade wouldn't have to sit in the cold by himself.

A truck door slams. Footsteps on the back steps. The door opens, and WADE PRUITT comes in, still in his funeral suit under a blaze-orange hunting jacket. He carries a rifle in a soft case.

WADE

I'm not leaving it in the truck.

RAY

Wade. I'm so sorry. It was a beautiful service.

WADE

It was forty minutes. Father Dunn talked about Dennis's bowling for twelve of them. Dennis didn't bowl.

LORNA

He bowled once. At the Ruckers' thing.

WADE

He didn't bowl.

Wade sets the case on the table, among the casseroles, and unzips it.

RAY

Wade, maybe not on the —

WADE

You never leave a firearm unattended in a vehicle. Somebody breaks a window, now it's their firearm. Now it's a kid's firearm.

He takes out the rifle. Before anything else, he opens the action and looks into it. He turns it so Lorna and Ray can see too.

Empty. You check it when you pick it up. You check it when somebody hands it to you. You check it when you put it down. You check it when you watched yourself unload it thirty seconds ago. Every time.

LORNA

Every time.

WADE

Every time.

He closes the action and lays the rifle across the table, muzzle toward the wall. He folds the empty case and leaves it by the back door. Lorna watches all of it closely.

RAY

Here's the thing. Carol Yost from the company is coming at five.

WADE

I know. You told me at the cemetery. You told me at the luncheon.

RAY

And Carol needs to walk into a calm house. A grieving house.
Casseroles. Cards. Not —

(The rifle.)

That.

WADE

It stays where I can see it.

RAY

It could stay where you can see it in the truck.

WADE

Then I'd be in the truck.

Wade crosses to the casserole, picks up Ray's abandoned fork, and takes a bite. He chews. He takes another.

That's Mom's.

LORNA

I followed the card.

WADE

It's exactly right. She always put in too much salt. Tastes like every funeral I ever went to.

Lorna looks at Ray. Ray looks at the ceiling. Wade eats standing up.

So what does she want? Carol.

RAY

It's routine. She takes a statement from the beneficiary, she collects the documents, she looks around, she goes home. Any death in the first two years, they send somebody out. It's a formality.

WADE

What happens if it wasn't an accident?

A small pause. Lorna stops going through the shoebox.

RAY

It was ruled —

LORNA

It's pending.

RAY

It's pending, which is normal. But hypothetically, there's a clause. Most policies, if the insured takes his own life within the first two years, the policy doesn't pay the death benefit. It's called the suicide exclusion. It's standard language. Dennis was at twenty months.

WADE

It doesn't pay anything?

RAY

They'd refund the premiums.

LORNA

How much is that?

RAY

About eleven hundred dollars.

LORNA

Out of five hundred thousand.

RAY

Hypothetically.

Wade puts the fork down.

WADE

So a note would be bad.

RAY

There's no note.

WADE

I didn't say there was. I said it would be bad.

RAY

It would be — it would complicate things. Yes.

Wade looks at Lorna. He looks at her a little too long.

LORNA

Did he say anything to you? Before?

WADE

Like what?

LORNA

Anything. You talked to him more than anybody.

WADE

Dennis didn't talk to anybody.

LORNA

He talked to you.

WADE

He talked at me. That's different.

LORNA

(To Ray.)

Did he say anything to you?

RAY

Me? No. Just — business. Policy stuff. Nothing.

LORNA

So nobody. Nothing.

RAY

Lorna, I think that's — honestly, I think that's a mercy. Nothing for Carol to read. Nothing for anybody to argue about. He just went to get a part and it was a terrible —

LORNA

Conditions.

RAY

It was a terrible accident.

Ray's phone buzzes. He checks it.

Carol. "Running on time!" With an exclamation point.

WADE

Ray. How long have you known Dennis?

RAY

Since high school. You know that.

WADE

You ever see his handwriting?

RAY

I suppose. On forms. Why?

Wade reaches into the inside pocket of his suit coat, under the orange jacket, and takes out a folded envelope. He holds it a moment. Then he holds it out to Ray.

WADE

Read it.

RAY

What is that?

WADE

Out loud.

Ray takes it. It's been folded small, more than once. He unfolds it partway and looks at it. He doesn't read it out loud.

LORNA

Where did you get that?

WADE

It was on the table when I came by for the big cooler. Tuesday, for camp. Before you got home.

LORNA

What table?

WADE

This one.

He nods at the salt and pepper shakers.

Under there.

Lorna looks at the spot under the salt and pepper. For a moment, she can't say anything at all.

Out loud, Ray.

RAY

(Reading.)

"Ray told me to wait two years. I couldn't."

Silence.

That's it. That's all it says.

WADE

That's all you read.

RAY

It was a joke. Wade. It was a joke. We were at the Elks. He was two beers in, he was complaining about money, and I

said something stupid about the policy. Like you say. Like anybody says.

LORNA

“Worth more dead than alive.”

RAY

As a joke.

LORNA

He did your voice.

Wade takes a small box of cartridges and an empty magazine from the pocket of the orange jacket and sets them on the table, beside the ham.

RAY

What are you doing?

Wade begins to load the magazine, one cartridge at a time, slowly, the way he would in front of a class.

WADE

You load at the firing line, or in the field. Never in a vehicle.

RAY

Then don't —

WADE

Cartridge goes in like so. Bullet forward. Press down, slide back. You feel it seat.

RAY

Wade, there are things you don't understand about how a policy —

WADE

One.

LORNA

Wade.

WADE

Two.

RAY

This is not a calm house.

WADE

Three.

He seats the magazine in the rifle. It clicks. He doesn't chamber a round. He doesn't pick the rifle up. He leaves it on the table between them, and sits.

Now. Tell me about the joke.

End of excerpt