

MINDED ABSENCE

A Play in Ten Minutes

SETTING: a dining area within a restaurant. TIME: the evening.

(Lights rise on a small dining area. There is a table for two, in which HAROLD is seated. He is an elderly gentleman, well dressed. He is eating from his plate, while another rests opposite him, untouched. There is a bar, but no one is at it. There is only HAROLD.)

(After a moment, CHERYL enters. She looks about the room, sees HAROLD, but chooses to ignore him. She sits at the bar.

(A couple moments pass. She looks about the space again.)

CHERYL

Did the staff go home?

HAROLD

(Chuckling)

Most of them. Henry should be in soon enough.

(Silence.)

CHERYL

Is there anyone else here?

HAROLD

Afraid not.

(Silence.)

CHERYL

What was his name, again?

HAROLD

Henry.

CHERYL

Oh.

HAROLD

What do you want his name to be?

CHERYL

What? Nothing. I don't know. "Henry" is fine.

HAROLD

But not the name you're looking for.

CHERYL

No. Was there anyone else in here before?

HAROLD

Only me.

CHERYL

Of course. Just my luck.

HAROLD

Who are you looking for?

CHERYL

A date.

HAROLD

Maybe he got lost.

CHERYL

He said it was his usual spot.

HAROLD

It's many a young man's usual spot.

CHERYL

Then where are all the young men?

HAROLD

In unusual places, I imagine.

CHERYL

Forget him. I don't deserve this.

HAROLD

Now hold on.

(He rises, crossing to the bar.)

At least have a drink.

CHERYL

I'm not sticking around for him.

HAROLD
Don't. Stick around for me.

CHERYL
Aren't you here with someone?

HAROLD
She didn't show either. What would you like?

CHERYL
Can you really be back there?

HAROLD
Henry and I go way back. What would you like?

CHERYL
Just a beer. Any beer.

HAROLD
Simple. I like it.
(He hands her a beer, and heads back to his seat.)
You hungry? Come sit with me.

CHERYL
I couldn't.

HAROLD
It's getting cold. Your call.

(Silence.)

CHERYL
Your name isn't Henry, is it?

HAROLD
(Laughing)
No, no. Don't you worry about that. I'm just an old man who'd like some company.

CHERYL
What kind of "company?"

HAROLD
Not like that. Though I'm flattered you think I still could.

CHERYL

I don't know.

HAROLD

I understand. Have a good night. Get home safe.

(HAROLD resumes eating. CHERYL goes to exit, but stops. After a moment, she approaches the table.)

CHERYL

Did you get stood up, too?

HAROLD

Something like that.

CHERYL

No shellfish, is there?

HAROLD

Allergic?

CHERYL

Yeah.

HAROLD

She was, too. Kismet. Please, sit.

(She sits.)

How'd you and what's his name meet?

CHERYL

His name is—

HAROLD

If he doesn't show up to the date, his name doesn't matter.

(She laughs.)

CHERYL

Online.

HAROLD

Of course.

CHERYL

I can't meet people out and about. They see me and they only want one thing. Online, at least I can try to meet people who don't just fish around at the bars.

HAROLD

At least the other men show up at the bars.

CHERYL

But I want to meet a nice guy! Maybe a doctor.

HAROLD

Pretend you broke your arm, and find one in the ER.

CHERYL

Or a lawyer.

HAROLD

Sue someone over something stupid, and take your pick between the prosecution and the defense.

CHERYL

Really, though! Where would I find them? They're all in different circles and in different places.

HAROLD

Then stop worrying about them. What is something tangible that you want and think you can get?

CHERYL

I don't know. I guess an ordinary guy. A nice guy. You know, who has a steady job. A good family life. A place of his own that he takes care of.

HAROLD

They come to places like this.

CHERYL

Not the ones I want.

HAROLD

Then why did you come here?

CHERYL

My date said he liked it.

HAROLD

That should have been your first clue.

CHERYL

I didn't think about it!

Why not?
HAROLD

Because I liked the attention!
(*Beat.*)
I'm sorry.
CHERYL

Don't be sorry for honesty.
HAROLD

I shouldn't have shouted.
CHERYL

I don't mind shouting.
HAROLD

You're sweet.
CHERYL

I try.
HAROLD

No, really. You are. You seem nice.
CHERYL

I'm too old for you.
HAROLD

(*Chuckling*)
No, I mean... You got me a beer, invited me to eat with you, asked about my problems...
CHERYL

I never said I was paying for it.
HAROLD

And you're funny! Where are people like you?
CHERYL

I'm here with all the other guys.
HAROLD

But you're an exception.
CHERYL

HAROLD

Maybe that's what you're looking for.

CHERYL

That is what I'm looking for. But I can't find it!

HAROLD

You found me.

CHERYL

I wasn't looking for you.

(HAROLD shrugs, knowingly.)

Cute. How Hallmark of you.

HAROLD

It's only as difficult as you make it.

CHERYL

So this is my fault? Being stood up is my fault?

HAROLD

That's not what I said.

CHERYL

I'm trying, all right? I'm working a fifty hour work week, so I don't have time. I'm still paying off student loans, so I don't have money.

HAROLD

So you're giving up on a social life?

CHERYL

I'm trying to save it!

HAROLD

By going places you already determined won't get you what you want?

CHERYL

Look! You're no better off than I am! If anything, you're worse. You're like four times as old, and eating alone.

HAROLD

I wasn't saying—

CHERYL

You were stood up, too! What's worse is that you didn't even know it until after you bought her meal.

HAROLD
I knew she wouldn't be here.

CHERYL
Then why are you—

HAROLD
She died. Today is our anniversary.

(CHERYL looks at him, confused.)

CHERYL
I'm... sorry, I didn't know.

HAROLD
We have eaten here on this day every year for the last thirty years, ever since I opened it.

CHERYL
So, you're—

HAROLD
I own it. Henry, my son, runs it. Business isn't so good anymore, but it'll stay open as long as I'm here.

CHERYL
This was your place.

HAROLD
This is our place.

(Beat.)

CHERYL
How did you meet?

HAROLD
High school sweethearts. The whole nine yards and all of the clichés.

CHERYL
Wish I had that.

HAROLD
I didn't. Not at first. When we started dating, it was just because it seemed like the thing to do. Didn't think it'd last the month. By the end of our high school graduation, she was set on going

to college out east. I wanted to go west, but just couldn't do it. So I followed her. It was a few years until we were married.

CHERYL

Doesn't sound like you were head over heels.

HAROLD

Not at first. I wasn't looking for that. But then when I thought about her not being there, well...

CHERYL

I'm sorry.

HAROLD

I'm not. It was worth it.

(CHERYL smiles.)

CHERYL

I'd like that for myself.

HAROLD

Well, let me get us two more beers and let's chat a bit more about you and your date.

CHERYL

His name is—

HAROLD

It doesn't matter. What would you like?

CHERYL

Whatever you're having.

(They share a moment together as the lights fade to black.)

END OF PLAY