

WHAT YOU'RE MISSING

A short play

by John Levine

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John Levine
1215 Ward Street
Berkeley, CA 94702
(510) 204-0670
jblevine@berkeley.edu

CHARACTERS:

CASSIE, late 20s-30s

PLACE:

A supermarket

TIME:

Morning

(CASSIE enters and heads straight for her sample table. She carries a large, grease-stained gym bag.

She hurriedly sets up her station, ties on her apron, pulls out the sample packages and pops samples into the microwave oven.

Although she could do all this with her eyes closed, she is flustered and finds the simplest of tasks tripping her up. She catches her reflection in the chrome of the toaster oven and tries to adjust her hair, which could use a good brushing. Traces of soot smudge her face.

For the most part, she presents a calm exterior, but she becomes increasingly irritated at the littlest thing.)

CASSIE

Good morning! Be with you in just a minute. Two minutes, forty-five seconds, to be exact. That's how long these chicken apple sausages take to cook. That's right, just three minutes and you've got yourself some delicious chicken apple sausages—Original or Spicy Cajun style. There's no point in hovering. They won't cook any faster with you standing there! I'm sorry. I didn't mean to snap at you. It's been a rough morning.

While we're waiting for the sausages, you can nibble on a piece of seven-grain balsamic rosemary olive focaccia bread. Focaccia. F-O-C-A-C-C-I-A. It's like an Italian bread. The seven grains are: wheat, oats, rye, corn, sesame, barley, and wheat. Did I say wheat twice? Did I? Rye, corn, oats, wheat, barley, rye, and sesame. That's seven. Oats, rye, corn...rice...? Maybe the seventh one is rice. Wheat, sesame...Is sesame even a grain? Maybe it's not seven-grain at all. Hang on.

(She takes out her glasses, which she seldom wears, except in extreme emergencies, and reads the ingredients on the package.)

I never wear these, I don't really need them. I just carry them in case of emergency.

One minute, fifteen...fourteen...thirteen...Aren't microwave ovens the greatest thing? I resisted them for the longest time—as a cook I mean. I thought, how can you cook

something using molecules? 'Cause that's the basic idea behind microwaves. It's all about the molecules. But then I realized, life's too short. Why wait an hour for a baked potato when you can have one in six minutes? And besides, you don't have to worry about forgetting. I forget things sometimes. Doesn't everybody? Or sometimes I can't remember if I turned something off. Does that ever happen to you? You leave for work and halfway there, you think: Did I turn off the oven? Did I leave the bath running? Did I lock the door? And so you go back to make sure the heat is off, the water's not running, the door is locked—and when you get there everything is always off and locked—but what are you supposed to do? NOT go back and check? So you're a little late to work once in a while. That's a small price to pay for a little peace of mind.

You're probably wondering why I'm late. But the fact that you're waiting for me, that you even noticed that I wasn't here, says more about you than it does about me. Maybe you should eat a more substantial breakfast. Technically speaking, I'm not really late. I don't have to have samples ready until 10:45, but I always make it a point to be ready at 10:30, 10:35 the latest. Because those extra fifteen minutes could mean the difference between you experiencing a brand-new taste sensation and not....Experiencing a brand-new taste sensation. Because I'll tell you what: if you don't try something new, you'll never know what you're missing. And that's what life's all about, isn't it?

So who am I to tell you you should try new things? I live at home, yeah, with my parents, but why shouldn't I? They're gone a lot. Ever since my father retired, they've been on the road, traveling, seeing the sights. My mother says she spent twenty-five years scrimping and saving and taking care of me and my father and now she wants to see the world. So they traded in the Rabbit and the Oldsmobile and they bought an RV and hit the road. They're so funny. They're like kids. In some ways, I feel like I'm the parent, they're the kids, always going going going. They're away right now. Going to visit my Aunt Lillian in Tucson, Arizona. So I watch the house for them while they're away. I'm not just watching the house, I live there. It's my house. It's where I grew up. It's familiar.

Okay, step right up. Chicken apple sausage—PLEASE use a toothpick, miss. Thank you. I'm not being critical, it's just a rule. And we have to play by the rules, right?

Would you care for a sample, sir? Mr. Kay? Is that you? It's me, Cassandra, Cassie I used to go by. Class of Eighty-Five. I was in your musical theatre class and you convinced me to join the chorus for "H.M.S. Pinafore." Remember?

(singing) "And so do his sisters, and his cousins, and his aunts!

And so do his sisters, and his cousins, and his aunts!

His sisters and his cousins, Whom he reckons up by dozens, And his aunts!"

I love that song. Being in that play was one of the highlights of my life. I know you probably hear that all the time, but I really mean it. Hey, do you remember David Haas? He played the Captain. Everyone said he looked so great in that uniform. And you know what I heard? He became a cop after he graduated. You think it was because of the uniform?

(Pause.)

Oh. I'm sorry. You look just like...Are you sure? Your name's not Mr. Kay? You didn't teach high school chorus at East Ridgeview? Really. Well, you have a double, then.

You ever have one of those days where everybody looks familiar? You know what I'm talking about? EVERYbody. The trouble is you can't remember where or when you know that person from. But you're sure you know them. And you rack your brain thinking, do I know this person from high school or summer camp or is that my two-doors-down neighbor, the one who always waves even though we've never had a real conversation to speak of? So I'm having one of those days today. And that's why I thought you were Mr. Kay. (beat) You sure you're not...? 'Cause you look just like—okay, you say so. Well, nice to talking to you anyways. Have a nice day.

Funniest thing, huh? If that was Mr. Kay I would've told him how taking his History of Musical Theatre class changed my life. I should make a mental note to get in touch with him, tell him how much that meant to me. 'Cause after taking his class and being in the chorus of "H.M.S. Pinafore," I ended up pursuing a career in the theatre. After high school, and after those two semesters of community college, I decided to follow my bliss—like they say on public TV—and I enrolled in an acting class in New York City. I took the train into Penn Station every Thursday afternoon after work and then I took two subways to get down to that acting school. But it was worth the trip. I learned a lot and I made some great friends. I even ended up working as a scene partner with somebody who got to be kind of famous. I won't mention any names, but she's on a soap opera. I won't say which one, either, just in case you happen to be a fan. I haven't actually talked to Stacy in—oops. Well, that's not the name she goes by now, anyways, so it doesn't really

matter. We were more than just acting partners; we were good friends. That is until she got that part on the soap and started acting all weird on me. I would call her and leave sometimes three or four messages, and she wouldn't return my calls and then one day after I waited for her outside her apartment building for something like three hours, a policeman drives up and tells me I have to leave. You know, now that I think about it, he kind of looked like David Haas. It wasn't him, of course; he would've recognized me. Okay, Stacy's busy, she's got things to do, I can understand that. But don't you think a restraining order is overdoing it a little bit?

So what I do now is kind of an extension of my acting career. Actually, it covers all my interests and talents: acting, talking...cooking...meeting people. Which is why I'm applying to the Institute. The Garden State Institute of Culinary Arts. GEE-SICKA. I'm up for a scholarship, which is the only way I can afford to attend. You know what they charge for the three-year program? I could go to Harvard for what they charge. Course, why would I want to go to Harvard? That's where Stacy went and look where it got her.

(Pause.)

Uh-uh-uh. One per person, please. Hey! Put that down. One Per Person! I've got a photographic memory, mister, and your face is burned into my memory, so drop it. Now! Thank you.

I had my initial interview at the Institute last month and today—yup, today—I have to go for my audition. They don't call it an audition, but that's what it is. They call it a "cooking demonstration," but I can see past that. They want to see how I handle myself in the kitchen. See, anybody can say they want to be a chef, but if you don't have the natural gift, if you don't know your way around the kitchen, then what's the point? I won't say that everything's riding on this audition, but after today, they make their decision about scholarships. So...No, I'm not nervous. Not really.

I have to choose a dish to prepare and then present it for the admissions committee. I don't have to do the whole thing right in front of them. 'Cause that could take hours. I can bring the finished product and explain to them how I prepared it. My dish is Ragout of Chicken and Onions in Red Wine Sauce—it's one of my favorites. Have you ever had it? Oh, My, God. I stayed up late last night working on it. I'm glad I had time to practice because if there's one thing a good cook knows, it's that things don't always go as planned.

(Lights change:

CASSIE, in bathrobe and slippers is in the kitchen at home.)

So there I am, making my favorite chicken recipe. Everything was going great. I'd gotten a little bit of a late start cause I didn't get home until after seven, and then I went to the gym, cause I have to stay in shape physically AND mentally, right? I ate dinner and finished by ten-thirty and then I was so exhausted from my step class I had to take a nap. I set the alarm for two, but by the time I hit the snooze button a few times and got up and washed my face and got down to the kitchen, it was almost four-thirty. Where does the time go? So I'm chopping onions...

(She chops onions.)

and peeling garlic...

(She peels garlic.)

and measuring the red wine...

(She measures the red wine, then takes a big sip...)

...and everything is going fine, until I stop to read the Gee-Sicka Course Bulletin, you know, just to be up on their policies...

(She holds a booklet up to read it, and moves it closer and closer until it is almost touching her face.)

...just to make sure I'm up to date on everything I need to know.

(She attempts to read without her glasses, then starts searching the room for her glasses.)

So there I am cooking my chicken, trying to keep everything going at once, trying to keep everything together. I had the chicken in the oven, the onions sautéing on the stove, the rice steaming, the sauce simmering, and I turn around to get the thyme from the spice rack, and the next thing I know, the onions are on fire. So I look around for something to put out the fire with and I grab the bottle—I figure liquid is liquid, right?—wrong! and the next thing I know, the whole stovetop is in flames.

(Lights change, maybe some yellow and orange to suggest a small fire.)

So I reach behind me for the fire extinguisher—sure it’s going to ruin the onions, but a good cook is a safe cook—and...the fire extinguisher isn’t there. I always keep it on the wall next to the refrigerator, but for some reason—for some goddamn inexplicable, unexplainable?, UNEXPLICABLE reason—the fucking fire extinguisher is gone! And then I remember last week my mother asking me if she could borrow it, cause the one that came with the RV was empty and they were leaving on their trip to Arizona, and would I mind? And I said sure, go ahead, and I made a mental note to buy a new extinguisher for the kitchen and just when I needed it most, it’s gone. So I run outside to my car—I keep one in my car, too—a good driver is a safe driver...

(She exits. While she is gone, the lights change again: more reds and oranges perhaps to suggest a fire out of control. She reenters, wearing her glasses.)

...and when I get back inside, the curtains are on fire and the flames are climbing up the wallpaper and I can barely see through all the smoke. At this point I am completely at a loss for what to do and all I can think about is my Ragout of Chicken and Onions in Red Wine Sauce. I mean, that’s my future, my meal ticket, if you know what I mean. It’s 5:45 by the kitchen clock and I have to finish preparing this dish if I’m going to have it ready for my interview at Geesicka this afternoon. Where can I go to finish cooking my chicken? And then it hits me: The Store. I’ve got keys to the store and I can use the microwave there.

(She reacts to the smoke, which at this point is getting pretty thick.)

And I have to act fast because the smoke is getting pretty thick at this point. So I gather up my chicken and my onions and my red wine, and various other assorted stuff and I throw it in my gym bag and I drive over here. The one bright spot is that traffic at that hour isn’t too bad. What usually takes me an hour and a half only took me fifty-five minutes this morning, which made me consider driving to work at six every morning, even though I don’t technically have to be here until ten. But then the question is what would I do for three hours every day? So, anyways, I got here before seven and, between the microwave and the toaster oven, I finished cooking the Ragout of Chicken and Onions in

Red Wine Sauce, put it back in the bag, cleaned up my station, and went out to my car for a little nap. So that was my morning.

Oh, but there was one thing that I left out. As I started driving over here I heard these loud wailing sounds; they started out softly and then got gradually louder and louder almost like they were coming right towards me. We live in a pretty quiet neighborhood, so any kind of noise, especially at six in the morning, is pretty unusual.

(Sound of sirens, very softly, gradually getting louder.)

I looked in my rearview mirror but I couldn't see anything. And then I started thinking: did I remember to lock the door? Did I leave the faucet in the bathroom sink running? Did I turn off the radio?

(The sirens reach their peak volume and stop.)

Business is slow this morning, isn't it? I usually have a lot more customers at this hour. Good thing, though. I can mentally prepare for my audition.

Oh. Look who it is. David? David Haas? Is that you? You really did become a police officer. Would you like to try a piece of seven-grain focaccia bread?

(Blackout.)

END OF PLAY