

birds

by Jennifer Maisel

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THE CAST

JORIE

JAMES

RHEA

A.

GUS

In the darkness...the sound of a baby girl's wail. The rustle of a million wings flying into the edges of cages. Underneath, the sound of traffic, as if it is from a distant world.

Lights begin to flicker on, fade in, in small squares. The squares are windows seen from a distance, windows of tall apartment buildings, vicarious snapshots into lives: a woman paces with her baby, an old man plays with himself in front of the television, a teenage boy sobs in the shower, a girl creeps out of bed to the beckoning screen of her computer.

Rhea stands in the rain, face raised to the storm. The baby's wail turns beautiful and melodic.

The sun rises to reveal a cityscape of gargoyle-like buildings, the light squares fading against the day. Tanksized gargoyles grow from the edges. Grotesque bird statues fly against the sky fading to night.

The insistent sound of desperate wings continues.

Gus flies on the back of one of the statues. It lands and cracks open to reveal A. Another lands to crack open and reveal Jorie.

The square lights of other buildings, the gargoyles and statues shadowing the stage remain.

A light on James in an overcoat.

JAMES

I wasn't happy. I was not unhappy. I had a life and it worked. It progressed. It was just like anyone else's. It was just like anyone else's. It was OK.

I wanted it to change. Somehow. I thought it could change for me. I thought it could change me. That is what I wished for. Change. Change in the form of some life-altering someone. Spare a little change? Could you? Would you?

This isn't all my story, but maybe I'm the only left who could tell it the way it should be told. I have to tell you now because I know that soon the memory will escape me, the same way belief in magic seeps out of a child drip by drip until some day only practicality is left behind. Even now, the street address won't come back to me but I still do remember when I looked up there were gargoyles there, frozen, gruesome, and later I found she had the power to do that to me too.

So it isn't just my story, or their stories, and I may be wrong about some things - I know that, but those were the days I lived a dream and that was something good to do, because now, for the first time, I am...I am me.

(LIGHT SHIFT The sound of breathing.

RHEA stands in the shadows of her monolithic U-STORE warehouse building in the Bronx. Her castle. Dark - with a pulsating sense of many breaths being exchanged. She speaks to someone we can't see.

JORIE watches from another part of the stage. This is the Rhea of her mind, talking to Jorie's childhood self.)

RHEA

I collect little girls... You asked me to tell you a story. I started before you can remember and at this point I have amassed quite an assortment.
Dirty blonde ringlets and red braids. Deep eyes and fearless complexions.
I collect their sweet thighs and lust for running through sprinklers.
And for some reason they trust me. They are the squirrel sitting on the serpent's acorned tongue.
Delighted in the moist cavern of good tastes
Never assuming further than the moment surrounding them.
Never comprehending their impending role in life until it's too late.
Some would say to be shown off in such a gilded cage is not such a bad life.
They would. You will.

(Light shift)

(SUPERMARKET.

Upper East Side. New York City. Shiny and bright lights. The noodle aisle)

(James contemplates various pasta. Shopping basket. Picks up fusilli - puts it back. Picks up rotini - puts it back. Picks up linguini - puts it back. Jorie rolls by with cart, indiscriminately picks up a bag of pasta wheels and tosses them in.)

JAMES

How did you do that?

JORIE

Excuse me?

JAMES

How did you choose wagon wheels?

JORIE

It's pasta.

JAMES

Yeah.

JORIE

Pasta is pasta.

JAMES

That's kid pasta. Those are noodles. In three colors. In shapes like wheels.

JORIE

Thanks, you're right.
(picks up different bag)
I like the dinosaurs better.

JAMES

You're an adult.

JORIE

Right.

JAMES

No kids.

JORIE

How do you know that? No kids.

JAMES

No ring? I know that shouldn't mean anything any more. You give off a no kids vibe. Compliment. Take it as one. You're eating dinosaurs alone.

JORIE

Oh, don't even start.
(They take each other in.)
Look, I've had a life that can't be boiled down.

JAMES

I'm not really into pasts.

JORIE

I worked my way up.

JAMES

I'm not into personal history and how that made me who I am today. I don't want to know what devastated you at age three. We get so caught up in that. We get so caught - as if that matters. As if the past makes a difference about the present.

JORIE

You have no idea what you're saying. Sounded really good though. I've had a life that can't be boiled down. There's who I am now. That's what matters.

JAMES

This could be our beginning-

JORIE

If you know enough to not ask any questions -

JAMES

I told you.

JORIE

You'll change your mind about that.

JAMES

This will be our beginning. I'll tell you what I want you to know. You tell me what you want me to know. Make it up.

JORIE

I suppose you want dinosaurs for dinner?

(The cart, basket and pastas are transported away. James and Jorie bring a couch onto the stage.)

JAMES/JORIE

First date. Pasta.

JAMES

Dinosaurs.

JAMES/JORIE

A little groping about the waist. Deep kiss.

JORIE

His place. When was the last time I had a date? A real date. Nice.

JAMES

Nice.

JORIE

Nice. What am I doing with this guy? He calls. I call.

(James and Jorie bring a standing lamp onto the stage.)

JAMES

God, we work in the same business. Same triumphant roar over the electronic ticker tape. Same code. Same rush.

JORIE

What am I doing with this guy? No. Things like this can't possibly last.

JAMES

God her place is nice. Dinner for 2. Dinner for 2. She meets my friends - well y'know the gang from work. I meet her gang from work. She meets my old college buddies. She doesn't have any. I find it...refreshing, this not dredging up any of the past thing. No family to deal with except mine. No fuss over where to have Thanksgiving and Christmas - mine. I can't hate her childhood friends. Don't have any. God she looks at me with those eyes and a mouth that doesn't expect me to remember her humiliating experience from the sixth grade and my dick becomes steel. She whispers to me the day's figures - Dow over 11,000, NASDAQ up 40 points and we come with gale force. She knows.

JORIE

What if he finds out? This - this...normalcy. It'll never last. I should have moved away from this city a long time ago. Flown the coop. Left it all behind. If I could have - But now...

JAMES

Three months in we put a bid on a coop and get it for slightly under market. Her days on the street - god she's brilliant with numbers, she's a sweet talking whiz with the clients - and still she brings home just slightly less than me. Or that's what she tells me. I like this.

JORIE

My big strong smart breadwinner.

JAMES

And here we are three years later in lives that couldn't be more city fairytale perfect.

JORIE

What?

JAMES

And here we are, three years later in lives that couldn't be more city fairytale perfect.

JORIE

Don't say that.

If you only knew...life is more fragile than that, James. It is -

You could be inviting something -

(James adjusts something on her clothes -)

JAMES

And here we are.

(LIGHT SHIFT. The sound of a million rustling wings)

(BUS STOP. THREE YEARS AFTER JORIE AND JAMES FIRST MET)

(Gus rolls the bench onto the stage -

Gus SITS, Jorie STANDS, moves away under the pretext of looking for the bus. She doesn't sit again. If possible she looks not only older but even more sophisticated and together since we last saw her. Polished. Gus couldn't be more than a couple of years older than her but we'd never know it.)

GUS

Do I smell young lady? Do I offend? You girly - what's your damage?

I was at the VA yesterday. Got washed up, new toothbrush. Clean undies.

Chica, you sit back down on the bench and you won't catch anything.

JORIE

I was just looking for the bus.

GUS

It won't come while you look. You should know that. You're old enough. It won't come while you're jonesing for the strange man to leave you alone.

(She peers out)

I told you - the more you look, the more it don't come.

Sit down.

JORIE

I wanted to stand. I did. I'm fine.

GUS

Sit down. The bus won't come til you sit down next to me like I'm some human being. Like I'm a man in a suit or a lady with her kid. That's when the bus will come, when you sit your ass down down down - and relax your little tight shoulders and breathe like I'm not some terrible monster who is going to pounce on your neck - take your purse, rape your little sweet ass.

(light shift - eerie)

You know me. You know my kind. I'm not far gone enough to miss that. I can see it in your eyes. You may have lost your edge, but that suits my purposes just fine. It's not buried so deep below the surface that you can fully escape who you are.

Here you come.

(Jorie takes a reluctant step to the bench)

(light shifts back)

The skin thing isn't catching. Just the toxins they infused me with coming up into my pores. Looks bad. Tastes nasty. But it won't leap off me to you I promise.

Here you come.

Here you come.

Here you come.

Sit on down.

Sit on down.

There.

There. That's nicer, right? That's civilized.

JORIE

Yes, thanks.

GUS

Good.

Good.

We'll just sit here then. You and me - citizens of the world together on one bench with an ad for baldness under our asses.

Hah!

Hah!

(Quiet. Quiet)

You got anything I could have in that bag?

JORIE

Not really.

GUS

What's in there? What you got?

JORIE

I don't know. Stuff. Books.

GUS

Books. You got books. I like books. I read. Fucking take me away. Give me one.

JORIE

They're for my classes.

GUS

Dickens. You got Dickens in there? Give me Dickens.

JORIE

I've got statistics.

GUS

You give me Dickens. You don't appreciate the classics. You can't. Give it up. My mother she was into Pip. She liked Pip. I had a mother. Surprise. Surprise. Whacko man came through the birth canal.

JORIE

Jesus.

GUS

Nope, no virgins involved. I'm sure of that. You had a hymen, I bet, all intact and sturdy and ready for some slick little jock to go storming the gate. Long gone.

You gave it up too soon, missy. I know what's right for you and you won't listen because I'm a man, a whacko man you're certain has no place on the food chain, a man without a future telling you you should have stayed pure. But I know what evil lurks.

Books for school. You a teacher or some adult-education-improving-my mind-through-how-to-flirt-and-astrology-for-your-pet-seminars? You a teacher? No. You don't give off teacher. Old $e=mc^2$. $x^2 + 2xy + y^2 = (x + y)^2$. Abraham Lincoln died in 1865. WorldWar II isn't really over it's just on a break. And where-ever young girls grow they can't wait to be women and that is the downfall of Western Civilization, letting a man love you. That is the end of time.

Give me a lock of your hair.

JORIE

Right.

GUS

It'll keep me safe. It'll keep me safe it will.

JORIE

I know all about voodoo spells so you're not getting any of my hair. I know all about ways they take the hair and some salt and boil them into a paste they dab behind their ears and then suddenly I'm in love with your rashy little face and all my friends are laughing at me because with a few thumbtacks and my hair you stab me in the heart over and over again.

GUS

What do they teach you in those adult education classes?

JORIE

Nothing.

GUS

I'd like to sleep but people like you keep hogging my bench. You go now. GUS
You go on. I know you need me but leave!
(Jorie rises and walks away, looking back)
You go on.

(She's gone)

Pretty little thing.

(Gus holds up a silver-backed hairbrush he obviously lifted from her handbag)

Such pretty hair.

(LIGHT SHIFT. The sound of traffic.)

(THE STREET. A. claims her piece of the street, assailing passers-by. JAMES walks by in his suit, in a rush, briefcase. A. gets him.)

A.

You want a date?

JAMES

Busy.

A.

You so want a date..

JAMES

Girlfriend.

A.

Just a little taste.

JAMES

Late for a meeting.

A.

Free sample.

(flashes him)

Don't you even look? Don't you say thank you? Don't you know how to be polite? Why do you take this street if you don't want some part of me?

Walk some other block tomorrow busy man. Walk some other block.

Give me a respite from your lying face.

(James escapes)

Yes, I know the word respite! Think about that all day, why don't you? And walk some other block tomorrow!

(LIGHT SHIFT. The sound of a baby girl's wail. A heightened moment - as we see Jorie handing Gus James' overcoat. Gus puts it on. A single feather floats out of the sky and into Jorie's outstretched hand.)

(LIGHT SHIFT. The baby's wail cuts off precipitously.)

(THEIR UPPER EAST SIDE APARTMENT. Jorie and James come in in full swing, throwing off their coats and putting down their bags while they argue.)

JAMES

I don't want to hear any of that white liberal crap nonsense.

JORIE

Everybody on the floor can't hear you, James, why don't you speak a little clearer?

JAMES

I am allowed to be upset about this. I am allowed to be bothered by it.

JORIE

I didn't think you would take it - experience it as an affront, James.

JAMES

It's disconcerting.

JORIE

This is not the reaction of a disconcerted man.

JAMES

This is my reaction. Don't devalue it.

JORIE

Devalue it?

JAMES

What?

JORIE

Leave it to you to give your feelings a pricetag word.

JAMES

You did this on purpose, didn't you? You knew - you knew it would bother me.

JORIE

Don't be an ass, if I'd known it would bother you I'd have given him a coat you actually liked.

JAMES

Thanks.

JORIE

And one you didn't have stuffed in a bag I thought was for Goodwill. A coat you hadn't worn once in the past three years and you have three other brand new coats in the closet.

JAMES

Now it's a crime to buy things.

JORIE

I thought you were giving it away. I don't understand. Make me understand.

JAMES

The first time I kissed you I was wearing that coat.

JORIE

Don't even try to make me believe you're sentimental about that!

JAMES

I don't want to pass him every day knowing he's in my coat. I might get O.K. with donating it - maybe - somewhere. I am. And I truly believe it shouldn't got to waste sitting in my closet. To give it away to someone who needs it.

JORIE

He needs it.

JAMES

It's just the theory of someone who needs it is so much better than the actual person who needs it. The actual every-day person who snarls at me for change and keeps that mangy dog and smells.

JORIE

God this is pathetic. We are actually having this fight.

JAMES

Maybe he can't help it. Maybe he's down on his luck or travelled or fucked in the head. Maybe this is just the way he's supposed to live. Scrounging from trashcans and sleeping on cardboard. And I give him my change - a lot of the time, I do, and I thought about buying the dog from him, y'know, taking it to the vet, grooming her, she's such a sweet thing, but the co-op board still hasn't voted down the no pet rule though we were close and I really think he loves that dog, Jorie, I do. Maybe that dog is what keeps him going on the bad days. Maybe. And I gave him change and bought him a latte one day and I smile at his unwashed smell without breathing in and I face up to the fact that this is part of what it is to live in the world being surrounded by the nice things I've earned and the not so nice things that just come with the territory. But I don't have to like it. And I don't have to want to see it every day, wearing my father's coat.

JORIE

Oh god.

JAMES

What?

JORIE

Your dad's.

JAMES

You knew that.

JORIE

Well I didn't remember. He's so abstract to me, your dad. Don't take that the wrong way but...not having met him. Not having known him. Things don't stick in my brain. I didn't think, I just, I was so cold walking from the subway - it sliced through me - and I saw him and I thought about cleaning out our closets and all the good things we didn't need anymore. You and he are just about the same size. You must have been your dad's size.

I could ask for it back.

JAMES

You can't do that.

JORIE

I can.

He'll understand.

JAMES

You can't ask a homeless man to give you something back. Not when we live like this.

JORIE

Sentimental value.

JAMES

I'd be the biggest schmuck in the world. It's ok.

JORIE

It's not ok.

JAMES

It'll be ok.

JORIE

Gus.

JAMES

What?

JORIE

That's his name. Gus. And Daisy.

JAMES

The dog.

It'll be ok.

(silence)

dinner or sex?

JORIE

I'll order. You see if you can beat the delivery boy.

(picks up phone)

Your dad's coat.

God.

(teasingly)

You want something of mine? If I had something that had any kind of sentimental value I'd give it to you and then we'd be even. JORIE

(silence)

Hi - 280 East...yes....14 B ...yes, yes...

Yes...on hold....

JAMES

OK.

JORIE

What?

JAMES

OK. Your grandmother's brooch. I'll take that.

JORIE

What?

JAMES

OK.

JORIE

Funny.

JAMES

Not kidding.

JORIE

You can't - That was my - it was my grandmother's.

JAMES

I'll take it.

JORIE

James!

JAMES

You offered. It's in the vault, isn't it?

JORIE

Not that. James don't touch it - I'm warning you. You can't.
(into phone)

Yes, yes I'm here....

JAMES

(starts taking off clothes)

Order.

JORIE

Steamed dumplings.

Hot and sour - yeah, yeah -

Yeah, I know. Some day we'll try something else. (hangs up)

I think we have 15 minutes at the most.

(He pulls off her clothes. Embraces her - kissing her for a long moment.)

JAMES

We'll go to the bank vault tomorrow...

(she pulls away from him a little. He pulls her back.)

Jesus Jorie, I wouldn't do that. I might revel in the concept of payback but I don't believe, I don't believe in tit for tat bullshit. Coat for brooch. Jesus, just trust me.

(He kisses her. Slow response. LIGHT SHIFT. The sound of dogs barking in the night.)

(THE SIDE OF JAMES and JORIE'S BUILDING. NIGHT. GUS sleeps against the building, sitting surrounded by his belongings. He has James' coat draped over him like a blanket. James

approaches, watches Gus, watches the coat...despite himself he reaches out to grab a corner of it. Gus rolls over and grabs it back in sleep.)

JAMES

Daisy? Daisy...

(Gus bolts upright -)

Sorry. The dog. I was looking for the dog.

(holds up a bag)

Treats.

GUS

Gourmet?

JAMES

I just saw them at Dean and DeLuca and...and I thought she might like them.

(Gus grabs the bag. Peers in.)

GUS

She just might like these.

JAMES

Where is she?

GUS

She's mad at me today. She ran off. But she always comes back. Just like a woman. She always comes back. You miss your coat.

JAMES

Oh.

GUS

You come visit it any time. If I gave it back to you now you'd be pissed off. If I gave it back to you- it'd smell like me by now. She told me you needed it back.

JAMES

Jorie? I told her -

GUS

It doesn't matter what you told her. It doesn't matter what you said. She knows you better than that.

You made up some bullshit about the past not mattering didn't you? You made up some honey words you'd like to take back now. You need your history more now that you're getting older, you need your strength and that comes from your past and would come from hers only you probably stupidly told her it doesn't matter though I think you always knew it really did.

You miss your daddy.

JAMES

I just -

GUS

I miss mine. I miss his heartbeat and the way he'd know what I was thinking before the thought formed in my head. Don't look don't look don't look so surprised. We all come from some sperm some where. I'd give you back the coat, I would, but you'd be disappointed. You'd have

to have it cleaned and then the tobacco wool smell would be gone and it wouldn't be his, it would just be a coat and that would be worse than seeing it on me for the next fifty years.

You want to buy something? I have stuff for sale.

JAMES

No I - - huh, Jorie has the same brush, silver back. It was a gift. (sees it) Her initials. She gave you that too?

GUS

She's sweet. She's sweet. So sweet.

You come visit your coat any old time. Any time. I know how much you want it back. I know how much you need it back. It's a power coat - you know that. Any time. Any time.

(James backs away from him. He almost slams directly into A.)