

THE LAST STRAW

By Jim Gustafson

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COMMENTS ABOUT THE PLAY AND THE CHARACTERS

This script is often misinterpreted as a wild, frenetic “Shouting Match” with Janet being an aggressive, screaming harpy. However, that not the intention because it makes her come across as a completely unsympathetic character... If she's mean and demanding the audience will hate her... When she's calm and a little ditzy the audience will bond with her. This is a young woman that endures what everybody has to put up with but finally she says, “Enough is Enough”... I'm not going to be pushed around anymore... She does what everyone in the audience would like to do.

The play is a comedy... This comes out through the character's demeanor and the delivery of the dialogue... Everything is “understated”... There's no yelling or screaming... Neither character is a “bad person”... The story line is very simple... Just an inept burglar, Bill... And a nice young woman who unexpectedly finds herself in control of situation she'd normally be a “victim” in.... It's a “Character Study.”

BILL'S CHARACTER

Bill is what would be considered “harmless.” Sure he robs houses but he never expects to actually confront the homeowners... He's not an angry or violent person. He's a nerd... People push him around because they can... He's not going to fight back... He certainly would never hurt anyone. He lets people walk all over him and if somebody's looking to poke fun they'll do at Bill's expense because he's not going to make a fuss or fight back. He's basically a born loser... A “Sad Sack... Certainly not the sharpest knife in the drawer. He's most definitely NOT the criminal type or even a bad guy deep down.... To him this “burglary business” is like his secret life... He's not looking to steal jewelry or anything of real value... He just takes what's available “because it's there.” This is something he can do alone with nobody to boss him around, criticize him or pick on him. The last thing he wants is to actually have a homeowner show up in the house... He knows he's short on courage and even shorter on any skills to defend himself if anybody chose to get confrontational. When Janet shows up he's ready to wet his pants. His body language and demeanor pretty well announce he is not someone Janet needs to be afraid of.

JANET'S CHARACTER

Janet is hardly an action hero type. She's just nice girl with an ordinary job and lives life without making waves or making a scene. She's generally very accepting of the rude things people do without thinking. She doesn't take tactless, insensitive people personally. It's just that today there were too many things that went wrong... Too many people tried to take advantage of her good nature. When Bill appears she's simply fed up... Not particularly angry or mad but just tired of the hassles. With Bill's nerdy, unimposing look she's not afraid of him... She immediately realizes he's no threat to her and, in fact, he's more afraid of her than she of him. She recognizes that (in this situation) she has the kind of power a big sister has over a little brother. Knowing this, she takes command of the moment. Her unexpected power over the situation... and Bill's frightened little boy demeanor... amuses her... She enjoys it and gets a kick out of surprisingly being in control of things for once in her life.

It's important to remember that she not a nasty, mean or militant person... She's not a screamer... She's always in control... Bill is just such an easy target she has fun with him. It's obvious that everyone in his life picks on him so this is her chance to be an uncharacteristic "mean girl." It's a new role for her... and while she wouldn't want to admit it... She kind of relishes it ...

Note: The script calls for semi-realistic SQUIRT GUN. This may hard to find. To remove the stigma of a gun on stage you could us a plastic model of a **PIRATE FLINTLOCK**... This would add a sight gag since it's such an unlikely weapon for a woman. It can be made into a "Squirt gun" by using small "squeeze bulb" filled with water with a plastic tube through the barrel. Adding BLUE vegetable dye to the water will make the "squirt" more visible to the audience. (One of many places to find a FlintLock (#8001 Pirate Flintlock Pistol) is by contacting Lindberg Models 319-365-58427. You can also Google "Plastic Model Flintlocks" for more options.

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SET

Simple living room of an apartment. It is sparsely decorated in keeping with Janet's age and financial situation. It should have a couch, coffee table and floor lamp since they are important to the action.

PROPS

Tape... While the script mentions Duct tape Masking tape is a more practical choice. The wide rolls are sold as "Painter's Tape" and come in a variety of colors.

Squirt gun (Or reasonable facsimile)

Cub Scout knife

Cartoon character pillowcase (**Note:** Change copy to match the cartoon character on case)

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LS- Dark Stage. Man with flashlight moves around. Lights go on with young woman in PJs and a robe by switch. A young man is stealing things and putting them in a cloth bag. He freezes.

JANET: What do you think you're doing?

BILL: What?

JANET: What do you think you're doing?

BILL: Look, lady you cooperate and nobody gets hurt...

JANET: Oh, yeah.

BILL: Shut up and sit down... I gotta knife..

(SHE takes a pistol out of the robe pocket.)

JANET: And I have a gun... I win... Kind of like "Scissors, Rock, Paper," huh? Now what do you think you're doing?

BILL: I don't want to hurt you...

JANET: Duh??? I'm the one with the gun, remember? And I really don't care if I have to hurt you.

BILL: Easy, Lady... I'm just robbing you.

JANET: I don't think so.

BILL: Like you're actually gonna shoot me.

JANET: Yeah... Want to try me?.

(SHE holds the pistol in both hands.)

BILL: O.K. O.K. relax... Let's be calm. Don't get excited!

JANET: I'm not excited, I'm armed... Why don't you toss that knife over in the corner so I don't feel threatened and shoot you.

(HE tosses away the knife into a corner of the room.)

Now why are you robbing me?

BILL: What?

JANET: Are you deaf or just stupid? Why are you robbing me?

BILL: I need the money.

JANET: Like you're going to find enough money here to make it worth your while... You are stupid. I don't keep money here I just get it from an ATM. You do know what an AMT is?

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BILL: They're bank money machines.

JANET: Hey, Einstein.. Why don't you break into them?

BILL: I'd get caught.

JANET: And that would never happen in an apartment? Hellooooo!...

What did you put in the bag?

BILL: I don't know whatever was loose...

JANET: Let me see that bag.

(HE holds up the bag all bunched up.)

Hold it out so I can see all of it.

BILL: Huh?

JANET: You heard me.

(HE holds the bag and it hangs so it reveals it is a pillow case with a cartoon character. JANET stifles a laugh when SHE sees the cartoon figure.)

JANET: That's a Bugs Bunny Pillowcase... You rob houses with a Bugs Bunny pillowcase as your loot bag? I don't believe it. Is this some kind of club initiation stunt?... Or Trick or Treat?

(BILL is noticeably embarrassed.)

BILL: It's not what I planned on using.

(JANET finds this very funny and tries to refrain from laughing.)

JANET: I hope not... You know you're making it hard for me to take you seriously. Come on, empty out Bugs Bunny... Let's see what you took.

(HE empties bag on couch.)

Step back... Go stand in the corner...

(HE goes to the corner with the knife.)

Not the corner with the knife, you idiot. The other corner...

(HE goes to the other corner. SHE looks at the contents of the bag.)

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You're not much of thief are you?

BILL: What do you mean?...

JANET: Look what you took... A Payton Manning bauble head?...

That'll fetch a pretty penny... Some pens... A note book... Were you robbing me or planning to catch up on your correspondence.

BILL: Hey, I was just getting started when you walked in.

JANET: Right, you hadn't gotten to the bathroom yet... That's the real treasure vault for feminine hygiene products..

(SHE picks up a pad of Post-It notes and stops short...)

I ought to shoot you right now...

BILL: Why? You said nothing was worth anything...

JANET: You were gonna take my post-its...

(SHE holds the gun with both hands again.)

BILL: Wait... Wait... You got 'em back... What are you doing?

JANET: I just bought those... Look... The cellophane's still on them...

BILL: What's with you and Post-It Notes...

JANET: It's the principle... I just bought them and you were gonna to take them.

BILL: You gonna call the cops?

JANET: Haven't decided...

BILL: You mean you might let me go?

JANET: No, that's not really a choice.

BILL: But if you don't call the cops...

JANET: I might shoot you. ... Yeah, that's the other choice.

BILL: You'd really kill me?

JANET: Don't jump to conclusions. I never said I'd kill you... I said I'd shoot you... I haven't decided where.

BILL: Are you crazy?

JANET: No, I'm fed up... Listen, I had a bad day and you aren't making it any better.

BILL: Why take it out on me?...

JANET: Why not! Darn it, why not?!!! You're here... You're convenient and I'm having a really bad day. You know how my day started?... My new hair conditioner wouldn't rinse out in the shower so I went to work with my hair looking like a plate of pasta... My boss yelled at me about something that was his own fault... He blamed me for the Foster Report in front of everyone in the staff meeting and he was the one who screwed it up. That's

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how my day started... Then the deli was out of spinach salad at lunch so I had to have iceberg lettuce... I hate iceberg lettuce... The elastic broke in my pantyhose and they slipped down to my knees whenever I walked... Then on the way home some jerk cut me off and flipped me the bird. .. Now you!... You picked a bad day to break into my apartment.

BILL: Calm down...

JANET: That's everybody said today... No, I don't want to calm down... I always calm down... Calm down and get stepped on. I'm done being calm... You, mister, are the straw that broke this camel's back.

(SHE reaches in the bag and finds a roll of duct tape.)

What's this? Duct tape? What were you planning on doing with Duct Tape?

BILL: I thought I should have it case...

JANET: In case of what? In case you found open boxes that needed to be taped up. If you caught me asleep what were gonna do with this tape?

BILL: Nothing.

JANET: NOTHING ? Oh, sure... What was the tape for?

BILL: Well, you know...

JANET: Yeah, I do... And once I was taped up, then what?

BILL: I hadn't thought that far ahead.

JANET: Good Grief... You're a nut case...(Pause) Wait a minute...

You hadn't thought that far ahead? How dumb are you? Was this a spur of the moment thing or are you really that stupid?

BILL: I'm not stupid.

JANET: I've got the gun so I'll be the judge of that. Here...

(SHE tosses him the tape.)

Tape your ankles together... Better yet, tape them together with the floor lamp.

BILL: Do what?

JANET: Are you hearing impaired or am I just talking too fast for your pea brain to understand. *(SHE speaks very slowly)* I said, "Tape your ankles together with the floor lamp."

BILL: With the floor lamp? Why are you doing this?

(SHE aims the gun at him.)

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JANET: Tape... Now... I want to be sure you're immobile in case you decide to try something we'll both regret... This gun is getting heavy. Tape your ankles to the lamp... Now...

(HE starts wrapping tape around his ankles and the floor lamp. HE pauses.)

BILL: This is nuts.

(SHE aims the gun at him.)

JANET: I heard that! Maybe I'll just shoot you so I can get back to bed.

(HE resumes taping.)

BILL: Wait... Wait... I'm taping... See I got the floor lamp...

JANET: Scoot over and tape the leg of the coffee table in there, too...

BILL: The coffee table?

JANET: It'll keep you from doing anything funny... I'm giving you another anchor.... Now do it.. Tape!

(HE hops over to the coffee table and sits on it. Then HE tapes the table leg to his legs with the floor lamp. As HE does that SHE goes to the corner and gets the knife. SHE looks at it. JANET laughs about the knife because it seems in keeping with a guy that would rob a house with a Bugs Bunny pillowcase.)

This is a Cub Scout knife... You're too much. You come here with a Bugs Bunny bag and a Cub Scout Knife. Did you earn an Arrowhead for "Rob Your Neighborhood?"

(SHE looks out the door. Now she's making fun of him and it's obvious in her inflection.)

Is your Schwinn out on the sidewalk? Shouldn't you be home now? The streetlights are on.

(SHE folds the knife and puts in her pocket.)

Your scoutmaster must be so proud... Keep taping.

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(BILL is getting tired of her picking on him.)

BILL: You are crazy...

(Note: This passage is not delivered in an angry tone... It's frustration and almost pushes her to tears.)

JANET: No, I'm not... I've just had it... I'm tired of being pushed around... Tired of people taking advantage of me... Don't you get sick of it, too?... The cable guy who's supposed to be here between 8 and 10 but doesn't show up 'til noon... Coming home from the grocery and finding the milk they sold you was sour... Ordering Extra Crispy and getting Original... Having somebody cut in line because she has friend ahead of you... Why do people think they can get away with that? *(Composing herself. Pause and sniffle)* And you... What made you think you could just come in here and rob me blind?... With your tape!... Listen, Buster..., If you caught me in bed and pulled out the tape I'd have scratched your eyes out before you found where the tape started on the roll. So tell me, did I look like some easy mark to you? Some defenseless little girl that was gonna be so afraid I freeze so you could get away with anything.

BILL: Lady, I didn't even know who lived here... I just looked for a patio door I could open... I honestly didn't know whose place I was breaking into.

JANET: Really?

BILL: Swear to God.... This was a random break-in...

JANET: Not your lucky day, huh? You're not very good at his are you?

BILL: At what?

JANET: At breaking in... Burglary... There's a lot more to it than you figured. Have you done this before?

BILL: Yeah, a few times.

JANET: So why here?... Why now?

BILL: Seemed like good idea at the time.

JANET: Bet it doesn't seem that way anymore.

BILL: What's with you, lady?.

JANET: What? What do you mean, "What's with me?" If you had any brains or ambition you'd be doing something besides breaking into apartments, right?

BILL: Leave me out of this... This is your problem.

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JANET: My problem?... Who's taped to a coffee table? Do you have a job?

BILL: I did.

JANET: Did?

BILL: I quit.

JANET: Quit?

BILL: O.K. I got fired.

JANET: First time?

BILL: No.

JANET: I'm starting to get the picture? You had a boss come down on you and you're tired of being the victim... Am I right or am I right?

BILL: Something like that.

JANET: So you break in into a house with your little knife and your duct tape to scare the daylights out of women. Suddenly you get the nerve to push around somebody who won't fight back... You get to be in charge. Us poor little "burglarees" are supposed to be afraid of you because your knife makes you feel like a Big Man..

BILL: Are you a psychiatrist?

JANET: No, I'm just "Jane Everybody"... One of all the little people who don't have enough backbone to stand up to abusive bosses, rude waiters and smart aleck drivers.

BILL: So what's with the attitude now?

JANET: You were just too much for one day... You came here at the wrong time, like I said. Timing's everything and yours was lousy. Get over it.

BILL: So now what?

JANET: I don't know... I really don't. Let's see if you can move when you're taped up like that.

BILL: You're kidding...

JANET: Think so?... Try to move across the room or I'll drop you in your tracks.

(HE tries and can move a bit with great difficulty.)

BILL: Let's be reasonable... You got your stuff back... You humiliated me... You had your moment in the sun. Why don't you just let me go? That's an option.

JANET: How do I know you won't come back?... With more duct tape!

BILL: I won't... Believe me, I don't ever want to see you again.

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(SHE gets angry and pulls the gun out of her robe again.)

JANET: Oh, yeah? Are you saying there's something wrong with me?... Don't you find me attractive? Are you telling me I'm not good enough for you to come back?

(SHE holds the gun with both hands. HE panics.)

BILL: Whoa... Calm down... I... I... I was just saying.

JANET: *(Laughing)* I'm just pulling your chain... God, you're easy!

(SHE puts the gun away.)

BILL: How about it? How about just lettin' me' go out the door and you'll never see me again?

JANET: What about my lamp and coffee table?

BILL: I'll leave them in the parking lot.

JANET: And you promise you won't come back.

BILL: Swear to God.

JANET: But you also have to promise to quit breaking into houses... That you'll go straight and give up this life crime..

BILL: I will, I will.. I swear I will.

JANET: *(Thoughtful and amazed)* Wow, this is like one of those stories in Reader's Digest... A thwarted crime turning into a moment of redemption.

BILL: Yeah, yeah. That's it... I see the light, lady... The past is past... I swear I'll turn my life around.

JANET: *(Softly and pensively)* What's your name?

BILL: Bill... Bill Turner.

JANET: *(Choking back tears of emotion....Sweetly)* Oh Billy... Billy Turner. I knew you weren't bad... You just had a few bum breaks and needed a another chance.. Somebody to believe in you!.

(SHE pauses dramatically. Then SHE break in to hysterical laughter.)

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