

LITMUS TEST

By Craig J. Clark

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ISBN: 1-931000-93-X

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

JILL: A young, single woman sharing an apartment with her roommate, CATHERINE.

MARTIN: A young, single man. He has known JILL for some time, but this is the first time he has come to her place to pick her up for a date.

CATHERINE: Must be younger looking than JILL.

SETTING: The entire play is set in the living room of JILL and CATHERINE's apartment. The only necessary set pieces are a couch and a table with a lamp and a magazine on it. Also present on stage is the front door. There are also exits to the kitchen and the bedroom (which may or may not have a door).

NOTE TO ACTORS

Litmus Test is a gimmick play, but is one in which the gimmick is hidden from the audience for as long as possible. The gimmick is that the character of CATHERINE is a cat. This is not revealed in the dialogue until the end of the play, and should be kept from the audience until then.

To this end, the actress playing CATHERINE should not, in any way, act like or emulate the behaviors of a cat. Nor should she dress in any way that resembles a cat. (Tiger prints are out—although a single, uniform color costume would not be inappropriate.) She should walk and talk like a normal person and thus appear to the audience to be nothing more than JILL's disapproving (and possibly jealous) roommate.

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The other characters, however, should treat CATHERINE the same way they would a cat. All of her lines are to be taken as mere meows, for that is how they hear them. Reading the play with this in mind, it is easy to see how JILL and MARTIN never respond to what CATHERINE “says,” just the urgency with which she says it.

AT RISE: Sound of a hair dryer off stage in the bedroom. There is a polite knock at the front door. The hair dryer stops for a few seconds, then resumes. The knock comes again, louder and longer this time. The hair dryer stops again. Silence. The hair dryer resumes, as does the knocking, which is still louder and more insistent. In the middle of this, there is a cry from the kitchen.

CATHERINE’S VOICE: Hey, will you answer the door already?

(The hair dryer turns off, just as the knocking ceases. JILL’s head pops out of the bedroom, looking at the kitchen. Her hair is damp.)

JILL: Oh, what do you want? You have your dinner. Now leave me alone so I can finish getting ready.

CATHERINE: Getting ready for what?

JILL: Now don’t be like that. I already told you I’m going out tonight.

(SHE retracts her head and starts the hair dryer again.)

CATHERINE: Hey, you won’t be going anywhere if you don’t answer the door.

(JILL stops the hair dryer and sticks her head out again.)

JILL: What? ***(The knocking resumes, only now it’s more like pounding.)*** Oh, my goodness. He’s here.

(SHE sprints over to the door, clad in a bathrobe.)

CATHERINE: It’s about time you noticed.

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JILL: *(at door, hisses)* You be quiet. *(SHE opens the door and MARTIN practically falls into the room, HE's banging so hard. They immediately begin talking at the same time.)* Hi, I'm sorry.

Have you been knocking—

MARTIN: Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to—

(They pause for a second and then commence speaking again at the same time.)

JILL: I was just drying my hair and I didn't hear the door and so...

MARTIN: It's just that I knocked and no one answered, so...

(They both stop again and add, slightly out of sync.)

JILL: Yeah.

MARTIN: Yeah.

(They stand there for a few seconds.)

JILL: Won't you come in?

MARTIN: Only if you're sure it won't sully your reputation.

JILL: I'm sure.

(HE enters and JILL closes the door.)

MARTIN: So, you don't have a doorbell?

JILL: I used to, but it was more like a door buzzer and it made me jump out of my skin every time it went off, so I had it disconnected.

MARTIN: I see.

(HE looks around.)

MARTIN: Nice place. Roomy.

JILL: Yes, thanks. Look, I'm sorry I'm not ready, but—

MARTIN: No, it's my fault. I got here earlier than I expected.

JILL: Oh. Well, make yourself comfortable then. I'll just be a couple of minutes. *(SHE starts to head for the bedroom, but pauses.)*

Oh, would you like something to drink while you wait?

MARTIN: No, I'm fine. You just finish getting ready.

JILL: Okay. Won't be a moment.

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(SHE exits. MARTIN goes to the couch and gingerly sits. HE looks around and then picks up the magazine on the table. The hair dryer off stage left resumes, continuing over the action. As MARTIN thumbs through the magazine, CATHERINE enters from the kitchen and slowly sneaks up behind him. SHE does a half-circle around the apartment, checking him out without being seen. SHE then leans on the back of the couch right by his head and stares at him. HE goes on reading, oblivious. Then, as the hair dryer is turned off for the last time, CATHERINE reaches forward and slaps the magazine out of MARTIN's hand. HE jumps, then looks at her.)

MARTIN: Whoa! Oh, I'm sorry. You startled me. You must be Catherine. I'm Martin. *(HE moves to shake her hand, but CATHERINE gets up and walks around the couch, sitting on the arm and facing away from him. MARTIN self-consciously retracts his hand.)* Okay...*(HE absently picks the magazine up off the floor and anxiously rolls and unrolls it.)* So, you're the roommate. *(pause - no response)* Jill's told me a lot about you. *(pause - no response)* Has she told you a lot about me? *(pause - no response)* It's a nice place. Roomy.

CATHERINE: *(turning on him suddenly)* Okay, mister date. Let's get one thing straight here. I don't give a whit about you or anyone else who walks through that door. Got it?

MARTIN: Oh, so you do speak. I was worried for a minute there.

CATHERINE: I'd stay worried if I were you, buddy.

MARTIN: I see, I see. *(leaning in conspiratorially)* Listen, is there any advice you can give me? Because I'd really like this evening to go smoothly.

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