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The Play About The Menu At Simon's Coffee Shop **By D.T. Arcieri**

Characters

Ray
Vicky
Anne
Simon

Ray addresses the audience. He is wearing a conservative suit and paisley tie.

RAY

If you think about something, the *same* thing, all the time, does that mean you're obsessed? (beat) I mean, what is the technical, clinical definition of an "obsession"? If other important thoughts are displaced by one intense interest or concern, does that mean you have some form of OCD? If by default your train of thought goes directly to that... that idea or subject or *one thing*... does that indicate, in fact, that you have a problem?

Lights down on Ray and up on Vicky. She is wearing a conservative suit and blouse.

VICKY

Scientists have recently stated that cats do not have the ability to taste sweetness. They have no sweet receptors on their tongues. But this recent scientific discovery comes as a surprise to those of us who feed our cats ice cream. (beat) My cat *Oswald* likes ice cream. So do the other two, Brutus and Booth. They like chocolate, vanilla... *every* flavor. But not Oswald. He's peculiar. Oswald only eats butter pecan. Of course, I take all the little nut bits out before I give it to him. (beat) But if cats can't taste sugar or sweetness, why do they like ice cream?

Lights down on Vicky and up on Anne. She is wearing a waitress apron.

ANNE

Here's a trick I've learned waitressing at the coffee shop. Right after I take their order, I say to customers things like, "I like your glasses!" or "Nice jacket!", and inevitably at the end of my shift I make twice the tips. I know this to be a fact

because I did a scientific study. Every other day for ten days I complimented people when they ordered. And on the days in between I just smiled. *Insincerely*. Then I averaged my tips on the compliment days and compared them to the average smile day tips. (beat) *Yup*, a one hundred percent increase in my profit margin. Twice the tips! (beat) I should publish this research.

Lights down on Anne and up on Simon. He is wearing greasy diner cook apparel.

SIMON

My Mom fried liver for us when we were kids. She said it was healthy. But the truth is that the liver is an organ of detoxification and is full of poisonous chemicals, including the pesticides in the grass that cows eat. And, of course, the liver is the gland that secretes cholesterol. And stores copper. So what she presented as a very *good* thing was in fact a very *bad* thing. And I'm not down on my Mom. Her intentions were good. Oh, did I tell you she fried the liver in margarine and served it with bacon? (beat) I would *never* put liver on the menu.

Lights down on Simon and up on Ray and Anne. He is seated. She is taking his order on a pad.

ANNE

What are you having today?

RAY

I'm not very hungry.

ANNE

This is a coffee shop.

RAY

I know that.

ANNE

People wait. Sometimes for ten or fifteen minutes to get a seat here.

RAY

Yes. It's a popular coffee shop.

ANNE

I think there's a line out front right now.

RAY

Oh, really? I came in the back door and just sat down.

ANNE

I know.

RAY

Should I get up and get on line?

ANNE

No. You should order some food.

RAY

I'm not that hungry.

ANNE

Have something small.

RAY

Like what?

ANNE

How about the cheeseburger platter deluxe? It's a pound of beef with a huge chunk of cheddar, served with french fries, onion rings, cole slaw and a half sour pickle.

RAY

That doesn't sound very small.

ANNE

You're right. How about a muffin?

RAY

What kind of muffin?

ANNE

Looking at you, I would say the bran muffin deluxe.

RAY

Is it small?

ANNE

No. Not really. But it's the smallest thing I can think of.

RAY

Okay. I'll have that.

ANNE

And coffee?

RAY

Yes. A coffee.

Deluxe? ANNE

Sure. RAY

I love your tie. ANNE

Thank you. RAY

Lights down on Ray and Anne. Lights up on Vicky.
She holds a shoe box.

VICKY
It's a mouse. A dead mouse. I know I should use a smaller box, but I don't have one. And I can't just flush it down the toilet, can I?

Lights up on Simon.

SIMON
Sure you can! Why not? It's just a mouse.

VICKY
Mice are people, too.

SIMON
You mean that mice are living creatures and have rights we should respect.
(beat) Is that what you mean?

VICKY
Yes. That's what I just said.

SIMON
I'll bury him.

VICKY
Oswald has *killed* again.

SIMON
Cats are carnivores. That's what they do. They kill things.

VICKY
Their wild ancestors, fourteen thousand years ago, you know, before cats were domesticated, *they* were carnivores.

SIMON

Cats have never been domesticated. They just pretend to be.

VICKY

What's in the freezer?

SIMON

Rocky road and chunky monkey. Gallons of each.

VICKY

Good! Oswald *hates* those.

SIMON

But if he's hungry he'll kill again.

She dismisses his statement and hands him the box.

VICKY

Here. Don't let me find this one in the dumpster.

He stands looking at the box for a moment and then sighs.

SIMON

I'm going to work now.

VICKY

You work *all* the time.

SIMON

I have a strong work ethic. (beat) That's admirable.

VICKY

I'm going to work, too.

Lights down on Vicky and Simon. Lights up on Ray behind a desk.

RAY

I bought this neck tie at a thrift shop. I liked it. I didn't *love* it. I'm not sure it's even lovable. Can a piece of clothing be loved? Can *any* possession be loved?

Lights up on Vicky.

RAY (CONT'D)

Can a *person* be loved? Truly loved? (beat) What *is* love?

Vicky seems to ponder these questions.

VICKY

A *thrift* shop? You mean, a used clothing kind of, funny smelling, like mildewy kind of...

RAY

(interrupting)

You seem to know the place.

VICKY

I know the *type* of place. But why would you shop there?

RAY

Why not?

VICKY

You're the CEO. The boss. The big man. (beat) You've got lots and lots of money.

RAY

So?

VICKY

So how much did that tie cost?

RAY

Four dollars, but...

VICKY

But *what*?

RAY

But there was a half price sale, so I got it for two.

VICKY

You can afford a two hundred dollar tie.

RAY

So?

VICKY

So why are you wearing some old dead guy's tie?

RAY

Dead guy?

VICKY

Of course. That's how ties get in thrift shops. People *die*.

RAY

What about suits?

VICKY

Did you buy that suit in a thrift store?

RAY

Not *this* suit.

VICKY

I don't understand you.

RAY

What's old to some people is vintage to others. And it's not about the money. I would have paid two hundred dollars for it. I like this tie. How do you know this wasn't the dead guy's favorite tie?

VICKY

Because he wasn't buried in it.

RAY

That only mean's it wasn't his *wife's* favorite tie.

VICKY

No one would like that tie. It's extremely... *unlikable*. Who would like that tie? *Really*.

RAY

A waitress said she did.

VICKY

What waitress?

RAY

A waitress at the coffee shop.

VICKY

She liked that tie?

RAY

Actually, no. She said she *loved* it.

VICKY

What does a coffee shop waitress know? (beat) Her opinion on cole slaw or potato salad or... or *today's special* I might listen to. But fashion? *Fuck* her!

RAY

What's wrong, Vicky? *Really*.

VICKY

I hate your tie. I... I hate... *paisley*.

RAY

Can we have sex on my desk?

VICKY

No.

RAY

Please.

She thinks for a moment.

VICKY

No.

Lights down on Vicky and Ray, and up on Anne and Simon. They are kissing. After a moment they stop and look deeply at each other.

SIMON

You taste like buttered toast and scrambled eggs.

ANNE

You smell like home fries and bacon.

They embrace again even more passionately. Lights up on Ray. The lights slowly fade on Anne and Simon during Ray's monologue.

RAY

People have needs. Like, say, the need for air. *Oxygen*. A fundamental physiological need. But we don't think about it usually. We just breathe. Unless there's a problem. Like all of a sudden there's, say, *no air*. Then we think about it. A lot. In fact, if you stop breathing, that's all you think about. (beat) But if other important thoughts are displaced by this one intense interest or concern, you know, the need for air... does that mean you're *obsessed* with breathing? (beat) I think so. The important point here being that an obsession can be legitimate.

Lights down on Ray and up on Vicky.

VICKY

Question: Why would a meat eater, a true carnivore, need to taste sweetness?
Answer: It wouldn't. If it could taste sweetness, *enjoy sugar*, a carnivorous animal would be less motivated to kill. Leopards would be hunting for mangoes and honey. It would fuck up the whole food chain. I understand *that*. (beat) But those

are mean *wild* cats, not soft and cuddly *house* cats. They're much more evolved.
(beat) *They* can taste sugar.

Lights down on Vicky, and up on Simon and Anne.
She is straightening her skirt and apron. He is
adjusting his pants, and chef hat. They just had sex.

SIMON

I wonder what the Health Department would say about *that*.

ANNE

We'd probably get a citation.

SIMON

Yeah, there's got to be a few laws against it.

ANNE

A few hundred.

SIMON

I think I have mustard on my ass.

ANNE

We should stop doing that.

SIMON

Really?

ANNE

I mean here. We should stop doing it here in the kitchen.

SIMON

Juan the busboy walked in.

ANNE

Yeah. That was unfortunate.

SIMON

We *should* stop doing it in the kitchen.

ANNE

But we only see each other at work.

SIMON

Thank God we work all the time.

ANNE

Yeah. Thank God.

Let's go out. SIMON

Out? ANNE

Tonight. SIMON

All right. ANNE

Okay then. About today's menu... SIMON

What about it? You changed it? We've had the same menu for sixteen years. ANNE

The special. I'm going to tell you today's special. SIMON

Oh. Okay. What is it? ANNE

Liver. SIMON

Liver? ANNE

Fried liver with bacon. SIMON

Sounds awful. ANNE

It is. SIMON

Who would order that? ANNE

No one. That's the point. Because we don't *have* liver. We don't have *anything* for a special today. But, ah, we have to write something on the special board, so I'm thinking it should be something that no one will order. No sane person, anyway. SIMON

ANNE

Smart.

SIMON

And don't just write "liver and bacon", write "liver and bacon fried in margarine".

ANNE

Do we have margarine?

SIMON

No.

ANNE

Perfect!

She kisses him and turns. He pats her on the ass. She exits. He then looks at his fingers, tastes them and calls after her.

SIMON

There's ketchup on your ass!

She re-enters.

ANNE

A little louder. I don't think Juan heard that.

She exits.

SIMON

Hay salsa de tomate en tu extremo!

Lights down on Simon, and up on Ray.

RAY

In terms of the hierarchy of needs, *food* would come right after air. Food is another one of those things that you're not always thinking about, unless you don't get any. Like when there's no lunch at lunch time. By dinner time you're obsessing about the thing you don't have. *Food*. Because you're *hungry!*

Lights up on Vicky.

RAY (CONT'D)

Is hunger an obsession for food?

VICKY

What kind of a question is that?

RAY

It's a fundamental question about human behavior.

VICKY

I don't obsess about food.

RAY

You would if you were hungry. I mean *really* hungry.

VICKY

If I was hungry right now I'd go to a good restaurant.

RAY

What if they wouldn't serve you?

VICKY

Why wouldn't they serve me?

RAY

Maybe you forgot your money. Or maybe they ran out of food. Or maybe the line is too long out front and you have to wait two hours for a table or maybe...

VICKY

(interrupting)

Got it! (beat) I understand what you're saying.

RAY

Do you understand *why* I'm saying it?

VICKY

No. (beat) I don't have a fucking clue.

RAY

I'm talking about appetite.

VICKY

Of course.

RAY

But I'm *not* talking about food.

VICKY

I think that's where I'm losing you.

RAY

Can we have sex on the file cabinet?

VICKY

That would be dangerous.

RAY

How about sex in the desk chair?

VICKY

That would be uncomfortable.

RAY

How about sex *anywhere* in this office?

VICKY

No.

RAY

What about in a soft bed back at my place?

VICKY

No.

He thinks for a moment.

RAY

What about in the presidential suite at the Plaza Hotel in a bath tub full of champagne and strawberries?

She thinks for a moment.

VICKY

No.

Lights down on Vicky and Ray, and up on Simon.

SIMON

You see, the thing is, Booth and Brutus, they're killers, too. Just like Oswald. So, really, who knows who killed that mouse? And what does it really matter? Sure it's rodenticide - but that's not a crime. Not for a cat.

Lights up on Vicky.

SIMON (CONT'D)

Because cats are *predators* and mice are *prey*. A mouse tastes good. To a cat.

VICKY

That is disgusting.

SIMON

It's not the sugar in ice cream that cat's like, it's the fat. (beat) *Fat.* (beat) Cats can't taste sweetness.

VICKY

I don't believe that.

SIMON

I saw it on Animal Planet last night.

VICKY

Cats are not predacious. Not house cats and kitty cats.

SIMON

Oswald is a *killer*. So are Booth and Brutus. All cats are killers. That's how they eat. In nature mice are cat food.

VICKY

There's something wrong with Oswald, granted. He's mentally ill. He would murder a butterfly. Just for fun. He has emotional problems. (beat) And we're not talking about nature here. We're talking about a fifth floor walk-up in the East Village where we live with three cats. (beat) And for the record, Booth and Brutus are *good* pets. They eat 'seafood medley' and 'captains grill' out of small, expensive cans. And they also like ice cream. The sweeter the better. They are *highly* evolved beings. (beat) Oh, and pets aren't animals, technically. They're... *pets*.

SIMON

Vicky, there are *three* types of animals on this planet: wild animals and domesticated animals.

VICKY

What's the third type?

SIMON

Cats!

VICKY

What is *wrong* with you?

SIMON

I'm hungry.

VICKY

Didn't you just spend the entire day in a restaurant?

SIMON

I don't eat when I cook.

VICKY

I don't blame you. It's all grease and sugar in that dirty little diner of yours.

SIMON

It's a coffee shop. But, yes, we do serve a classic dineresque cuisine.

VICKY

But why? You could be so much more creative. You've had the same menu for sixteen years. (beat) You're a little man with a little job in a little kitchen. You have to think bigger, Simon.

SIMON

I'll see you later.

VICKY

Where are you going?

SIMON

Out.

VICKY

Out?

He exits. She watches and calls after him.

VICKY (CONT'D)

There's mustard on your ass! (beat) *Again.*

Lights down on Vicky and up on Anne. A large sake decanter and two cups sit next to her.

ANNE

Sushi. Sashimi. *Raw* fish. So basic. Almost primeval. *Primitive.* But clean. Soft. *Beautiful.*

Lights up on Simon. He smiles.

ANNE (CONT'D)

Sensual. (beat) *Sexual.*

SIMON

Really?

They kiss for a moment.

ANNE

You taste like a crashing wave. Like the ocean itself.

SIMON

You smell like a sea breeze... across a grassy dune... speckled with beach plums.

They kiss again. More deeply.

ANNE

But is it good for you?

SIMON

What?

ANNE

Sushi.

SIMON

When it's fresh. And it's always fresh here. It's almost alive.

ANNE

Living food? That's an interesting concept.

SIMON

Plants are alive when you eat them. Leaves and roots and seeds and fruits. Right? (beat) And some animals we eat alive.

ANNE

No we don't.

SIMON

What about clams and oysters? Did you ever eat them on the half shell? They're alive.

ANNE

Seriously?

SIMON

Sure. But they're mollusks. They don't have mouths. They can't scream.

ANNE

You're freaking me out, Simon.

SIMON

Here. This will help.

He pours sake into the cups.

ANNE

Do you think it's good that we are out... in public?

SIMON

This is a business dinner, Anne.

ANNE

It is?

SIMON

Ah, no. This is a date. But I do want to talk to you about the coffee shop. So, that's business, right?

ANNE

I'm on a date with a married man!

SIMON

I'm only married technically.

ANNE

Do you love her?

SIMON

No. (beat) I don't even like her.

ANNE

Where does Vicky think you are right now?

SIMON

She doesn't care.

ANNE

She's your wife. I'm sure she cares.

He thinks about that for a moment.

SIMON

I want to make changes. *Big* changes.

ANNE

Changes?

SIMON

In the menu at the coffee shop.

Lights down on Simon and Anne, and up on Vicky and Ray.

VICKY

He had mustard on his pants. On the *seat* of his pants.

RAY

A good Caesar has a bit of Dijon. He's a chef in a restaurant. He works with mustard.

VICKY

He's a cook at a coffee shop. Their mustard is a very bright yellow and goes on hot dogs. (beat) And yesterday he had *mayonnaise* on his ass.

RAY

Condiments are big at coffee shops. Mustard, mayonnaise, green relish...

VICKY

Relish, all over his back on Monday! Ground into his tee shirt. As if he was laying on his back on a kitchen counter.

RAY

While having sexual intercourse with a waitress.

VICKY

What?

RAY

Well isn't that what you mean?

VICKY

Sexual intercourse? Why did you say that?

RAY

I thought that's what you meant.

VICKY

I was just talking about what a mess he is. And how horrible it is to do his laundry. The stains, they're unbelievable. I have to bleach *everything* all the time! Have you ever spent an hour trying to get a mustard stain out of a tee shirt?

RAY

No.

VICKY

What did you think I was talking about?

RAY

Oh, well... I... you know...

VICKY

No, I don't know. That's why I'm asking. (beat) Do you think that Simon has been banging a waitress in the kitchen of the coffee shop?

RAY

I didn't say that.

VICKY

Yes, you did.

RAY

I didn't *mean* that.

VICKY

What *did* you mean?

RAY

Well, I thought I was distilling down your commentary. I was connecting the dots. Analyzing the data. Making an inference.

VICKY

Sometimes I think you're retarded. How did *you* get to be *my* boss? (beat) And besides, Simon wouldn't do that. (beat) It can't be. (beat) That's crazy talk.

RAY

You're right, that's nuts. I'm sorry. I don't know what I was thinking.

She reflects for a moment.

VICKY

He works *all* the time.

RAY

He has a strong work ethic. (beat) That's admirable.

That comment sounds familiar to her.

VICKY

That place is so busy. How would he find time at the coffee shop to have an affair?

He ponders the question.

RAY

By getting laid in the kitchen?

VICKY

Ahhhhhhhhh! That son of bitch is cheating on me!

RAY
But *you're* cheating on *him*.

VICKY
With who?

RAY
With me!

VICKY
We're not having an affair.

RAY
What *are* we having?

VICKY
We're having a... a *relationship*. But it's not based on sex.

RAY
That's true enough.

VICKY
We have a deep and meaningful relationship. Something Simon would never understand. (beat) So sex is, you know, sex is... *unnecessary*.

RAY
Well, that's certainly an interesting point of view. (beat) Do I have time for a rebuttal?

She's not listening to him.

VICKY
How's the food at the coffee shop? I haven't been to that dump in years. What are they serving lately?

Lights up on Simon and Anne. Anne seems to be answering Vicky's question.

ANNE
Prune danish. (beat) Tuna fish sandwiches on white, lightly toasted, and pancakes with *fake* maple syrup, but *real* butter. (beat) Strawberry jello with banana slices.

Lights down on Vicky and Ray. Simon is shaking his head 'no'.

SIMON
Seafood! That's what we need. Good seafood. No, *great* seafood.

ANNE

But it's a ham and eggs crowd at the coffee shop. It's just a little neighborhood restaurant.

SIMON

You see, that's the thing. It's *not* little. It doesn't have to be, anyway. Little isn't about size. Little is about attitude. We've been thinking small for a long time. (beat) And the clientele is really a function of the menu. Don't you think? If we upgrade, the crowd will upgrade.

ANNE

I like our crowd, Simon.

SIMON

I like them, too, Anne.

ANNE

There's always a line out front.

SIMON

I'm just trying to think bigger! (beat) *Better*.

ANNE

Better than what?

SIMON

Better than a cheeseburger... *deluxe*.

ANNE

Monkfish stuffed with lobster? Blackened bluefish? Grilled sea scallops in a vanilla ginger sauce?

SIMON

Not bad. (beat) Where have *you* been eating?

ANNE

I watch the Food Network.

SIMON

What channel is that on?

ANNE

You can't fix the coffee shop! It's *not* broken!

He reflects for a moment.

SIMON

Maybe it's not the coffee shop that's broken.

Lights down on Anne and Simon, and up on Ray.

RAY

Air, food and... *sex*. That's the sequence in terms of the hierarchy of physiological needs. The operative word here being "needs". We *need* air. We *need* food. And we need *sex*. It's not... *unnecessary*. That's absurd! (beat) And I'm not talking about procreation, which is clearly a necessity. Of course we need to reproduce! I'm talking about sex, the *act* itself. The *sex act*! You can't go without it. For too long, anyway. A normal person can't. Sex is a physiological *need*. To go without it would be... *unhealthy*. (beat) *Mentally*. (beat) It might even make you *obsess* about it!

Lights up on Vicky.

VICKY

You seem stressed, Ray.

RAY

I'm horny, Vicky.

VICKY

Horny? How vulgar!

RAY

I masturbate regularly.

VICKY

Don't talk like that.

RAY

Why?

VICKY

Because that's not true.

RAY

Oh, it's true.

VICKY

You're a grown man. Grown men shouldn't masturbate regularly.

Ray starts off slowly, but this turns into a rant.

RAY

I'm not embarrassed by the things I do; by the way I indulge myself. (beat) If it wasn't for internet pornography, masturbation and the occasional martini I would go out of my mind. I would go crazy. I think some people who don't indulge themselves sexually *do* go insane. And then they hurt other people. You know, rape and fights and murder. Or if they're a king of a country or president they start a war, a disastrous, unjust, trumped up war, based on faulty intelligence and imperialist ideals, that kills hundreds of thousands of people! I bet that's happened. You know, I bet, if everyone had regular, normal sex lives there would be less crime and alcoholism and wars and... and this planet might be...

VICKY

(interrupting)

Got it! (beat) I understand what you're saying.

RAY

Do you understand *why* I'm saying it?

VICKY

Does it have to do with me personally?

RAY

Yes it does.

VICKY

Is it about our relationship?

RAY

Yes it is.

She takes a deep breath.

VICKY

Okay. I'm ready for you to tell me what you're *really* saying. But please, I would appreciate brevity and clarity.

He takes a deep breath.

RAY

We're breaking up.

VICKY

We can't break up.

RAY

Why?

VICKY

Because we're not together. We've never been together.

RAY

You're right.

VICKY

Is there anything else you'd like to say?

RAY

Yes.

VICKY

Be succinct.

RAY

You're fired.

Lights down on Ray and Vicky, and up on Simon.

SIMON

She ate her sushi with a fork. *Proudly.* (beat) It was at that moment I knew. I knew that she was not for me. We were just too different. I knew that we were done.

Lights up on Anne.

ANNE

How long ago was that?

SIMON

Ten years ago.

ANNE

You loved her once?

SIMON

There was a time when Vicky's idiosyncracies were charming. That was before they morphed into a full blown clinical neurosis.

ANNE

Why have you stayed with her?

SIMON

I don't know. Inertia. Laziness. Fear of being alone. I don't know. (beat) But I hardly saw her. I was always working. And so was she. So it didn't matter. (beat) She's been having an affair with her boss for the last ten years, anyway.

ANNE

Really?

SIMON

I think so. I just never cared enough to do anything about it.

ANNE

What are you going to do now?

SIMON

I'm going to make changes. *Serious* changes.

ANNE

In the menu?

SIMON

No. I've decided not to change that. The coffee shop is perfect the way it is.

They kiss for a moment.

SIMON (CONT'D)

You smell like cinnamon on hot French toast.

ANNE

You taste like a delicious meatloaf with creamy mashed potatoes and a rich gravy.

They kiss even more passionately.

Lights up on Vicky. She is sitting at the coffee shop table. The lights slowly fade on Anne and Simon during this monologue. Very slowly.

VICKY

Human beings are not animals. They're... *people*. If they were animals, then they would be motivated by things like food or even... *sex*. (beat) Clearly we're more highly evolved than that. Men and women have higher needs, and much more in common than just complimentary genitalia.

Vicky peruses the menu. Anne enters straightening her dress and apron. She takes Vicky's order.

ANNE

What are you having?

VICKY

I'm not very hungry today.

ANNE

This is a coffee shop.

VICKY

Why would you state the obvious?

ANNE

Why would you come to a restaurant if you weren't hungry?

VICKY

I'll have the duck a la orange.

ANNE

We don't serve duck.

VICKY

Then I'll have the filet mignon. Well done.

ANNE

There's no steak on the menu.

VICKY

Veal marsala? Braised pork loin? Lamb chops with garlic and rosemary?

ANNE

No.

There is a pause here.

VICKY

Seafood?

ANNE

Tuna fish.

VICKY

What's today's special?

ANNE

Liver and bacon, fried in margarine.

VICKY

That sounds wonderful. I'll have that.

ANNE

Nice jacket!

Lights up on Ray. Anne and Vicky look at him, then lights down on them.

RAY

Relationships. (beat) Achievement. (beat) Creativity. (beat) Morality. (beat) I need them all. But first... I want to have lunch. (beat) Because I'm *hungry*.

THE END

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