

Selective Memory

A One Act Impromptu Discussion

Mark S.P. Turvin

Characters:

Jeff Klein--46. Tall, dark, wears a formal tuxedo.

Matt Klein--21. Tall, dark, also wearing a tux. Jeff's son.

Setting:

A dim stage. Center is a seven foot long platform, set as a table with a starched white tablecloth, almost floor length. On the center of the table is a single candle in a beautiful silver holder. At each end of the table is a chair.

Time:

Any spring after January 20th, 1981.

THE CURTAIN RISES--to find Jeff Klein seated in the SL chair, hands folded on the table. There is impatience in his stature, which is conveyed with an economy of movement. A door is heard to open off SR with difficulty, then shut. He stands expectantly, straightening his cuffs. His son, Matt Klein, enters, carrying two bone china coffee cups.

Jeff

Do you need any help?

MARK S.P. TURVIN

Matt

I've got it, thanks dad.

(He puts a cup down at each end of the table; there is an awkward pause)

It's hot chocolate. I remembered--not coffee.

Jeff

Thank you.

(Pause)

Uhh, congratulations.

(Sounding rehearsed)

A cause for celebration. Another college graduate for the Klein family.

(Offers his hand to shake)

Matt

Thank you.

(They shake hands stiffly)

Jeff

Onto graduate school, hmm?

Matt

Mmm-hmm.

(Pause. Matt goes to sit down. Jeff does so, too)

Jeff

English?

Matt

Theatre, too.

Jeff

Oh.

(Pause)

Jeff (cont.)

You're not staying at Syracuse?

(Matt shakes his head)

Where to?

Matt

Boston University. Haven't I told you this already?

Jeff

I don't remember you telling me that they accepted you. That's good. Scholarships?

Matt

Mmm-hmm. I won't be needing them now, though. Not with the money I'll be getting from this--

Jeff

(Interrupting, not wanting to bring up the subject)

Use it to find a nice apartment up there.

Matt

Right.

(Silence)

I just found out about my summer job. I'll be a floater at IBM. I'll be making about fifteen dollars an hour.

Jeff

Good. Maybe you'll like it there. It's a good company.

Matt

And it's only a ten minute subway ride away from B.U.

Jeff

Maybe you could stay there during the semester.

Matt

Well, it's not like I'm really going to need the cash.

Jeff

(Nods)

But it still would be nice. Make connections up there.

Matt

What am I going to need connections at IBM for? I'm in an M.A./Ph.D. program for Theatre and Writing.

Jeff

You never know--good recommendations, that sort of thing.

Matt

(Brusquely)

Right, right, yes dad.

ALABAMA LITERARY REVIEW

Jeff

What's wrong?

Matt

Nothing. Forget it.

(Pause, sighs)

Jeff

You were out on Thursday when your mom called you about this.

Matt

Yeah.

(Pause)

Jeff

Where were you?

Matt

Ingrid and I went to the Mets game.

Jeff

Oh, that's interesting.

(Beat)

Who won?

Matt

San Francisco.

MARK S.P. TURVIN

Jeff

Good game?

Matt

The Mets lost, you tell me.

(Pause)

Why were you surprised?

Jeff

About what?

Matt

When I told you that I was at the game.

Jeff

I didn't know you like baseball, that's all. It must've been something you picked up at Syracuse.

Matt

Oh, Jesus, right. Right.

(Beat)

At Syracuse.

Jeff

Now what?

Matt

Nothing, nothing. This isn't the time or the place to get into this. Can we try to

find something we both can talk about?

Jeff

You're always pushing things off. Let's talk, here and now. It's the perfect moment to. We can talk about things from when you were growing up. We can talk about how you're feeling right now. Maybe compare notes about some things.

(Pause, softly)

People will be coming in soon, taking this moment away. Let's just talk to each other, straight. Please.

Matt

(Sarcastically)

Sounds great, dad. About what? I think the weather is the only thing we can agree on, if that much.

Jeff

Did I say we had to agree?

Matt

Good thing, too.

(Silence)

Jeff

(Launching into a new subject)

What do you want to do after grad school?

Matt

What *kind* of want?

Jeff

What do you mean?

Matt

Realistic want, or hope want?

Jeff

Realistic might be a welcome change of pace.

Matt

What does *that* mean?

Jeff

It doesn't *mean* anything.

Matt

Sounded like a crack to me.

Jeff

Do you have to act paranoid here, now?

Matt

I use what I'm given.

(Pause)

Listen, I'm just . . .

(Beat)

a little tense.

Jeff

I understand.

(Pause)

When did you make your decision? About which grad school.

Matt

You really don't remember me telling you how I got into B.U.?

Jeff

I knew that you had applied to B.U., Syracuse, and another--

Matt

Yale Drama--

Jeff

(A little too excited)

That's right, an Ivy League school. Very impressive.

(Beat, offering an explanation)

We haven't talked in a while. You've been busy with graduation, and I was setting up the income comparison data for Stanton.

Matt

Well, I decided to be daring, played a hunch. I sent in a copy of a one act play to Boston University instead of writing the essay that they had asked for.

(He pauses, looking to see if his father is interested)

You listening?

Jeff

Of course.

Matt

I mean, you're the one who wanted to know--

Jeff

I'm listening, Matt.

Matt

(Quickly, brusquely)

Okay.

(Beat, goes on)

So, the essay was supposed to be about what you just asked, what I wanted to do with my degree when I was done. So instead of the essay, I sent them the play I wrote at the beginning of the year; the one that mom came to see at Syracuse Stage. It's about this mother and daughter who have to care for the physically abusive grandfather who's had an accident and is now wheelchair-bound.

Jeff

(Quickly jumping in, trying to impress his son)

Conscious Kindness. I would've come up to see it, but the fourth quarter numbers were due for ProTech--

Matt

(Interrupting)

No, it's called *Conspiracy of Kindness*.

Jeff

(Warily)

Close--

(Silence, prompting)

Go on, Matt--Please--

Matt

(Pause, a little hurt)

Right. Well, I sent it to them, and they *called* me. It was the Chair of the Theatre Department. He called me on a Friday afternoon, and asked me to meet with him in Boston the next Tuesday morning. I canceled rehearsals for that Monday and Tuesday night, and we drove into Boston in the--

Jeff

(Interrupting)

We who?

Matt

Ingrid and I.

(Pause, seeing if he remembers)

My girlfriend.

(Jeff nods his head)

She's the one with the car.

Jeff

Ingrid has a car?

MARK S.P. TURVIN

Matt

Yes, a restored vintage Beetle. What does this have to do with the story, dad?

Jeff

I just didn't know, okay.

(Pause)

I'm sorry, go on.

Matt

(Standoffishly)

Some of my friends are respectable people. I mean, Ingrid's--

Jeff

(Talking over his son)

I said I was sorry, go on with your story--

Matt

Ingrid's not even in theatre, she's getting *her* degree in Elementary Education.

Jeff

(Quietly, when he's finished)

Please. I'm interested. Tell me your story. I didn't mean to digress.

Matt

(Testing)

Where was I?

Jeff

Ingrid drove you from Syracuse to Boston on Monday.

(Quickly)

See, I *was* listening.

Matt

(Smiles slightly, tells the story with little dramatic pauses, fully aware that he's playing storyteller)

Okay. She drove me into Boston through this freak late April snowstorm. I'm expecting that I'm going to get an interview, and that I'll have to defend my writing and come up with all this technical jargon to B.S. this guy with, right.

(Beat)

So I go in, dressed up in the Armani suit you and mom gave me for Christmas, and he looks me over and says, "Why'dja send a play?" I told him because if he wanted to know about me, he'd find out more by reading my writing.

(Beat)

He sat quietly for a minute, nodded his head, and said, "You know, Mister Klein, you could've gotten in a lot of trouble if you'd tried a stunt like that and you weren't a good writer." He shook my hand and took me on a tour of their Equity House on Huntington Street and their Playwright's Theatre on campus.

(Excitedly)

Oh, and I met Derek Wolcott. He's B.U.'s playwright-in-residence. He just won a Pulitzer Prize. I was introduced to him as the first in their next crop of graduate playwrights.

Jeff

That's great.

MARK S.P. TURVIN

Matt

Do you know what kind of a pleasure it is to get an acceptance call from Yale University and reject *them*?

(He smiles)

Jeff

(Concerned)

You don't think you might have been too hasty? Yale's a great school--

Matt

Dad, Yale's only good for its connections. I want to learn how to write, not how to network. The big joke about actors that come out of Yale Drama is that they know how to audition better than anyone, but couldn't *act* to save their lives.

Jeff

It's just that it's an *Ivy League* school--

Matt

Ivy League, bullshit. I don't want to buy a name, I want an education.

Jeff

If that's what you think is best.

Matt

(Perturbed, he sighs, then they both fall into a silence. Motions to the empty cups)

Do you want anymore?

(Jeff shakes his head)

Wasn't very good, anyway. You'd think with the money this place charges, you'd get real hot chocolate, not the packaged stuff.

(Beat)

And you need whipped cream in it every time.

Jeff

(With a knowing smile)

Or marshmallows.

Matt

Oh, yeah. The mini ones that mom always threw into the mug.

(Smiles, pause)

Jeff

How is she?

Matt

She'll be in later.

(Silence)

Shit, is that the only thing we agree on?

Jeff

It's a start.

Matt

Well, a start isn't good enough. Not now.

Jeff

(Slowly, deliberately)

Yes, it is. It can be.

MARK S.P. TURVIN

Matt

I'm twenty-one years old. A start isn't good enough.

Jeff

Please, calm down, not right now--

Matt

If I don't start now, when?

Jeff

I wanted to keep this pleasant.

Matt

The others will be here soon.

(Pause)

Now that I think of it, this is the perfect time. This isn't a time for pleasantries. Not anymore.

Jeff

Please, Matt. For God's sake, let's just leave this alone.

(Matt stops, leans back in his chair, fuming. Silence)

What *exactly* are you going to get your Masters in?

Matt

Creative Writing with an emphasis in Playwrighting, and Directing.

Jeff

There's Publishing in there somewhere, isn't there?

ALABAMA LITERARY REVIEW

Matt

Why should there be?

Jeff

Don't take this the wrong way. I just think it would be good to have something to fall back on.

Matt

If I need to fall back, I'll teach. I don't want to work for some magazine as layout. The classes would be wasted on me. And I don't want to be an editor of other people's work. I want my own to be read.

Jeff

Don't get upset again, I'm just trying to make sure that you're doing the right thing.

Matt

It's what I *want* to be doing.

(Silence)

Jeff

(More to himself)

Okay, that's all right. You're still young enough to do that.

Matt

I'm glad that I have your approval.

Jeff

You do, Matt

Matt

Oh, do I? Every time I mention something about theatre, you get this look on your face like you're smelling shit.

Jeff

Matt, please, you have to understand, the world that you've grown up in, and moved into is--

(Searches for words)

it's a little alien to me. When your mother and I were growing up, we didn't have the choices that you have. Everything was more cut and dried. Money was tight, so we had only one way to do things.

(Pause, hesitant)

There was a time, though.

(Allowing himself to reminisce)

When I was six, I remember that I had this crazy dream. I wanted to be a journalist. I'd seen this movie about a foreign correspondent, and it seemed so glamorous. Dangerous. Here was this man who was able to dig beneath the surface and find the truth. He was always going to these exotic places and doing exciting things.

(Smiles)

I used to write up this little newspaper for the block we lived on in Brooklyn. I called it *The Flatbush Times*. I'd find out all the local events, the happenings, and the gossip. I'd collect it and write it all up once a week, and then Mr. Von Dreele would let me use his ditto machine to print about twenty copies. I'd sell them for a penny a piece.

(Pause, proudly)

I'll bet you didn't know I was the Assistant Editor of my high school newspaper.

Matt

I don't remember hearing about that.

Jeff

(Softly)

Maybe it was more than a dream. I guess I really wanted to go to school for journalism.

(Harder, hiding the hurt)

When I was sixteen, though, and graduated high school, I went to Syracuse for a *business* degree. There was no choice. It *had* to be a business degree. I supported myself through college with academic scholarships and by working the night shift at McDonnell/Douglas. My father knew what he wanted, and I did it. And when I graduated college, I went to work for him. He needed me to take over what was left of the accounting firm then. He'd named it Klein and Klein for a reason.

(Pause)

And when your mother graduated from City College, we got married. We didn't,

(Beat, just a hint of disdain)

we *couldn't* live together, first. We squeaked out a living, until the firm started making some money and we were earning enough to move to the suburbs. I commuted to New York City every day, six days a week, eight to six. We had you. There was a path, and it had to be followed. And we did all of this so that we could make sure that you had the opportunity to have it better than we did.

(Beat)

And I guess we did.

(Pause)

MARK S.P. TURVIN

How funny. I guess we really did succeed with our wishes. It's just that we never expected that if you *were* given every opportunity, that you wouldn't follow me into the business. You had everything you needed. We never spoiled you, we just wanted you to be happy. It was a complete shock to your mother and I that what you wanted, more than anything else, was to become a writer--

Matt

(Interrupting)

Don't you mean a disappointment--

Jeff

No, no, *really*, a shock. We never had the chance to try anything besides the vocations that we were given. I was expected to take over the business from my father since the very beginning.

(Pause)

And, who knows, if my father had been able to give me the chances that we gave to you, maybe I would have done something else. Maybe I would have become a journalist. But even if it was what I wanted, it couldn't be.

(Pause)

These days, though, things are much more open, permissible than they were when I was growing up.

(Beat, justifying)

The arts were for the Bohemians, the ones who lived in hovels and cold water flats in Greenwich Village. Unshaven beatniks and drug addicts. You just didn't *do* that sort of thing for a profession back then, it was just an excuse to avoid work.

(Trying to make it seem pleasant)

But now, it's honorable. Writing for television, or the movies--

Matt

You see, there you go again. Movies and television. Dad, I want to write for *theatre*. You can't seem to get that into your head. Don't you see, I may *not* make truckloads of money. I may be respected by my peers, even have some plays produced on Broadway, but that's not going to be good enough for you. I have to make more money than you before I can earn your respect . . .

Jeff

(Interrupting)

Listen, I understand that you're upset--

Matt

Upset? Classic understatement. You know what's pissed me off since I first got here? You and your fucking bad memory. Where the hell were you when I was growing up?

Jeff

What does that mean--

Matt

I've *loved* baseball since mom took me to my first Mets game. I used to play ball in the front yard with Marc and John and Steve. I collected baseball cards. Don't you remember that I once ruined one of your t-shirts with a magic marker trying to make it into a Mets jersey?

Jeff

That was more than ten years ago--

Matt

(Cruelly)

Is that an excuse or an explanation?

MARK S.P. TURVIN

Jeff

Just fact.

Matt

And meanwhile, you're surprised that I went to a ballgame with my girlfriend. I thought I was *worth* a little more than that to you.

(Long silence)

Jeff

(Hurt)

That was uncalled for.

Matt

(Quickly)

No dad, that was very called for. You *never* showed up for my childhood. Every memory that I have has my mother, or my friends in it. I don't see *you* fitting anywhere in it.

Jeff

No, now there's something wrong with that.

Matt

It's true. I would play baseball with my friends, and sometimes *their* fathers, and I'd go places with mom.

Jeff

And who the hell do you think was driving the car to those places?

ALABAMA LITERARY REVIEW

Matt

I--

(Falls silent)

Jeff

What, did you forget that there were two people in the front seat?

Matt

I don't remember you--

Jeff

To use your phrase, is that an excuse, or an explanation?

(Pause)

Matt

But you weren't there when I was playing ball, or running around with my friends in the front yard. You were never home, then.

Jeff

That's not true, too. I was home at quarter to seven every workday.

Matt

But you never came outside. You were never out there with me and my other friends' fathers.

Jeff

You don't remember it.

Matt

No, I swear to God you weren't.

MARK S.P. TURVIN

Jeff

You were the one who demanded I buy the Nerf football. You had me throw that thing to you wherever we were.

(Beat, remembering)

Once we knocked over that porcelain cat that your mother loved. Doesn't any of this ring a bell? We were both scolded for weeks after that.

Matt

(Shaking his head)

But you never did anything. I mean, you don't remember what I liked. And on those long drives

Jeff

(Interrupts)

You were always in the backseat playing with your Matchbox cars.

Matt

(Stopped, realizing)

Oh, Jesus, my cars. I used to love those things.

Jeff

Your allowance was one dollar and four cents a week, the cost of each of those cars with tax.

Matt

Oh, shit. When they raised the price to a dollar nine, I had a fit.

Jeff

We let you do the dishes for money.

ALABAMA LITERARY REVIEW

Matt

Oh, come on, I used to get those things and not have to do any work. You corrupted my childhood with those stupid work ethics you introduced.

Jeff

Corrupted, hmm? Taught you high finance, now didn't I?

Matt

(Begrudgingly)

Yeah, I suppose.

(There is a pause, the first pleasant one)

Still, I swear to God that I don't remember you there a lot of the time.

Jeff

In a way, I wasn't. You were so introverted, always playing games by yourself and creating imaginary friends. I didn't get much time in there.

Matt

But I remember everyone else.

Jeff

I guess you remember everyone in descending order. I was never quite as popular with you as your mother. I was always very jealous of the way you two were. I felt left out a lot. It's not surprising that you forgot that I was there. If it didn't involve your imaginary friends, your real friends, or your mom, there wasn't much room left for me.

Matt

(Pause, thinking about this)

Makes me sound like a complete ass.

MARK S.P. TURVIN

Jeff

Considering the circumstances, I guess it was a natural enough thing for you to do.

Matt

Why didn't you remember my obsession with baseball?

Jeff

Because I *hate* the game. I hate most sports. I used to like it when the Dodgers were still in Brooklyn, but when they deserted us, I lost my interest.

Matt

Very self-centered of both of us to do that.

Jeff

(Nods)

That's true. It's a real shame. When I was growing up, I could never talk to my father, either. Nothing was spoken, just understood. I knew what he wanted me to do, and I did it.

(Pause)

He never understood--no, I think he *chose* not to understand that all I ever wanted to do, from the age of six, was to be a journalist. To write, like you want to. Long before I had my dream, though, he had his expectations.

(Pause)

And I swore to myself that I would not be the kind of father that my father was.

(Pause, this is hard for him)

I guess I failed--

(Matt is about to say something, Jeff cuts him off)

We failed.

(Matt looks down, nodding slightly)

I started to think of limits and expectations, and you became defensive.

Matt

I feel like a jerk.

(Pause, hoping for more)

I wonder what else we did that I've forgotten.

(No response)

Shit. It sucks.

Jeff

Look at it this way, you might not have remembered this much. I would have gone to my grave and you still wouldn't have figured out who that guy was driving the car during vacations.

(Matt looks down)

That was a joke.

Matt

No, it wasn't. I guess there's a lot I'm going to miss, now.

(Pause)

I don't want this to end.

Jeff

You know it has to.

Matt

I was just starting to talk to you. It's been a while since we've really done that.

MARK S.P. TURVIN

Jeff

Better late than never.

Matt

(Loudly, angered)

Oh, stop it with your fucking lame clichés, dad!

Jeff

Forgive me for saying this, but clichés are clichés because they're so true.

Matt

Oh, God, spare me, please. Shit. This is almost worse in a way. I may as well not know that you were around and how you were feeling for all the good it does now.

Jeff

It can give you a lot of things. You can remember things, use this as a lesson.

(Pause)

Try living it.

(Short pause)

Try *changing* it.

(Beat)

Maybe even write about it.

Matt

Dad, stop this, please. I needed more time.

Jeff

(Quietly)

But we can't. Live with that. Live with what you've been given.

(Silence, looks away from Matt)

I'm sorry.

Matt

(To Jeff)

No, I'm sorry.

*Jeff looks at Matt after he has said the last line. They stand, and Matt seems to wait for a hug. Instead, Jeff offers to shake hands. They do so, and there is a feeling that there would have been some kind of connection other than this had things been different, but there can't be. Without showing emotion, they stand looking at each other for a few seconds, then Jeff gathers up the cups from the table and puts them on one of the chairs. Matt gets the candle and holder and puts it on the floor beside the platform/table. They move to opposite ends of the table, and lift the tablecloth and fold it, revealing a flat-topped coffin underneath. Matt takes the folded tablecloth, and opens the coffin for Jeff. Jeff climbs in, and lies down. Matt closes the lid, and replaces the candle and holder and folded tablecloth on the top of the coffin. He moves the chairs in front of the coffin for kneeling, and takes up the two coffee cups. Without looking back, he exits to--**Blackout**.*

END OF PLAY