

Burning Leaves

a play in two acts

by Tom Rowan

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

MATT LELAND, a teacher, 32

JESSE WADE, a student, 16

JANE POTTER, a counselor, 40

HALLEY POTTER, her daughter, 16

ALICIA HOGAN, a student, 17

CARL WADE, Jesse's father, 48

SETTING: Pittsville, a small midwestern town.

TIME: The present.

A rough wooden stage. A tree, mostly bare. A desk, a table, and a couple chairs and benches are available, to move in and out of the scenes as needed.

ACT ONE

(In the dark, a school bell rings. MATT appears in a pool of light, wearing a tie and a tweed jacket, and carrying a clipboard. He addresses the audience.)

MATT

(Reading from the clipboard) Tina Williams? *(He peers into the audience and sees Tina, then makes a mark on the list)* And last but not least... Tyler Young. *(Beat. He checks off another name.)* Okay. So! All... twenty-two of you--wow--are present and accounted for. Excellent. *(He smiles.)* Hi. I'm... this is Fourth Period Theatre. So... if any of you did not sign up for Fourth Period Theatre, now would be a good time to deplane. *(Pause)* That was a little... never mind. Hello. I'm Matt Leland. "Mr. Leland." Actually... you guys can call me Matt. Or not; I don't know, maybe that would be too... Sorry. Maybe you should call me Mr. Leland, for now anyway. Sorry; I should have thought that through before... never mind. Start over! I'm Mr. Leland and this is Fourth Period Theatre. You may have noticed that your class schedule says "Fourth Period Drama." But we're changing that!-- that's one thing I *did* think through. "Why?" you may ask. *Because.* Because this really isn't going to be a class in Drama. Because Drama, strictly speaking, means the written literature: scripts, of plays. So if this were a drama class we would spend the whole time reading old plays and writing essays about them, ("Oh no!" you're thinking, "Boring!") which would maybe be good for an English credit but this is supposed to get you a Performing Arts credit! An elective, as it were, in this democracy of ours. Which you *elected* to take, and not because you want to sit here all semester reading! So! We're going to learn about *theatre*. Which means not just the plays but the whole shebang. All the stuff that goes with it! The whole... schmear, as they say in New York. Acting, directing. Design, stage managing! We're gonna get our hands dirty and actually try all those things! Learn by doing; yes. *(Beat)* So we're gonna do some acting in here--I mean you will; I'm not. Although I have. In real life, acted. That's what I used to do, until about... *(Looks at his watch)* two months ago!-- almost. That's what I did *then*. When I lived in New York, I was an actor. Off Broadway, in regional theatres... a little TV--very little; don't even ask me about that. I mean you can! Of course you may. But not today, because it's just the first day and I shouldn't be talking about myself this much... So! Um, where was I going with this? Shit. Woops! Sorry. I'm not supposed to use that kind of--

(The bell rings again. Lights change. JANE is beside him.)

JANE

And. . . this is the porch. *(Smiles)* Obviously. Nothing fancy. *(Points)* And that's the garage. Only has room for the one car, I'm afraid, so...

MATT

It's okay; I don't have a car. I guess I'll have to get one.

JANE

It would probably help. Public transportation never really caught on out here. Although since we both work at the high school, it's perfect, you could ride in with me in the mornings.

MATT

Oh, that's nice of you. But I wouldn't want to be--

JANE

Really, it's no problem. Halley and I usually hit the road at about a quarter to eight. *She's* always ready; I'm the one who gets sidetracked. *(Beat. She smiles.)* So do you think this could work? At least as a temporary thing, till you find your own place? I'm sorry the room's so small.

MATT

Hey. It's bigger than my apartment in New York.

JANE

(Laughs) Well, the house is, of course. But the guest room--*your* room--is so--

MATT

No, it's bigger. That room is actually bigger than my whole apartment was.

JANE

No.

MATT

Yes. A lot of people in Manhattan have these small one-room apart--they're called studios. It's because the rents there are so--

JANE

That's what I've heard! I have a friend who moved there right after college, and she says it's almost impossible to... Wow. But I guess you make do, right? When it's just you.

MATT

Actually, there were two of us.

JANE

You're kidding.

MATT

I wish I were.

JANE

So. What other questions do you have? Washer-dryer's in the basement. I use it Saturday mornings, usually. We could come up with a schedule.

MATT

Sounds great. It's very homey. Believe me, I can't wait to move out of the Motel Six.

JANE

Oh, I'll bet. The one off the Interstate? That must be...

MATT

It is.

JANE

So, great! This is terrific. A relief, actually. I didn't know if I'd...

MATT

Hard to find boarders in this town?

JANE

To be honest I didn't look all that hard. I posted a flyer on the bulletin board at the church. And the one you saw.

MATT

Who moved out?

JANE

Pardon?

MATT

My... predecessor? Who was your last... ? If it's okay to ask.

JANE

Nobody. I mean, my husband moved out. Five years ago, almost. He got tired of us. Or actually, "sick" is the word he used. "I'm sick of this!" he said to me. In front of Halley! Can you imagine?

MATT

Breakups suck.

JANE

(Laughs a little) Well put.

MATT

(Tentatively) But I guess, if he'd been living in the guest room...

JANE

No! He didn't. *(Laughs uncomfortably)* I can see how you thought I meant that! From what I... But no! Anyway, it'll be nice to have the company. And a little extra income.

MATT

Speaking of which...

JANE

We said three hundred a month, right? Will that work?

MATT

Um, sure. (*Pause; he's uncomfortable.*) How about... How 'bout we say four hundred?

JANE

Four hund... Wait. Are you haggling to *raise* the...?

MATT

(*Laughs*) That sounds weird, right? But three hundred! Geez, compared to what I'm used to! Is that *fair*? It seems so...

JANE

Well the mortgage payment is only... so I thought, based on that... (*Beat*) But I do have Halley's college to think about, don't I? So I guess if you're willing...

MATT

Absolutely.

JANE

But it's such a small room! Why don't we say three-fifty?

(*MATT winces.*)

MATT

Three seventy-five?

JANE

Deal!

MATT

Deal. (*They laugh and shake hands.*) Okay, so...

JANE

There's just one more little... Maybe I should have mentioned this sooner.

MATT

It's okay. (*Listens*)

JANE

It's just... tell me if this is awkward. But Halley's only sixteen. And it's not that big a house, so I just... You're single, right?

MATT

Um... obviously?

JANE

Right! So I just don't think it would work to... for you to have women over. I mean overnight. You know what I'm... ?? I know

that's awkward, you're an adult of course! But it's a small place. There's just the one bathroom.

MATT

(Smiles) Don't worry about it; I won't be. That... won't be a problem.

JANE

Okay! Well, this has all been so great! (She shakes his hand again, very warmly.) I'm so pleased.

(Lights crossfade to ALICIA and HALLEY, sitting on the ground, eating sandwiches.)

ALICIA

No. Way.

HALLEY

Way.

ALICIA

The new drama teacher lives with you??

HALLEY

In our spare room.

ALICIA

Ew.

HALLEY

My mom put a notice up in the teachers' lounge. "Room for Rent."

ALICIA

Halley.

HALLEY

I know. Try not to advertise it around

ALICIA

Is he as dweeby at home as he is at school?

HALLEY

I don't find him dweeby. He's nice, actually.

ALICIA

Really?

HALLEY

He's shy, kind of. But he's interesting. Tells me crazy stories about when he lived in New York. Since I'm thinking about applying to NYU.

ALICIA

Still? Did your mom give in?

HALLEY

No, but she might if I get a scholarship. Matt says the East Village is a veritable hotbed of creative energy, and since I think I want to be... something creative--

ALICIA

Oh, you're calling him Matt now.

HALLEY

Just at home. I still call him Mr. Leland here.

ALICIA

(Beat) Stephanie O'Dell said she thought he was cute.

HALLEY

I hate it when people say things like that about teachers. It's so middle school.

ALICIA

Who else is there to look at in this town? By the time they're twenty they've got beer guts.

HALLEY

He runs. Every morning he's the first one up. Three miles before breakfast.

ALICIA

Ask him what the spring musical's going to be.

HALLEY

I don't think he wants to do a musical.

ALICIA

What?? He's the drama teacher; that's what they're paying him for.

HALLEY

I don't think he's interested in that. I'll bet we end up putting on a Shakespeare play or something.

ALICIA

Ew.

HALLEY

I think that's why he's making us do those soliloquies in class.

(JESSE WADE walks on behind them, in a separate light, and sits on a stool. He is wearing a black sweater, and a black leather band around his left wrist.)

ALICIA

(Considering the possibilities) Maybe if I played like Juliet or something. Somebody pretty who dies.

HALLEY

And I always defend you when people say you're superficial.

ALICIA
Nobody says that. (Beat) Halley! Who says that??

(They leave together. In the auditorium, MATT, holding a paperback script, walks on and watches JESSE rehearse.)

JESSE
"To die. To sleep no more. And in that sleep to say we end the heartache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to."

MATT
Good. So what do you think he's talking about there?

JESSE
Just wanting it to be over.

MATT
Wanting what to be over?

JESSE
All the crap. The stuff he can't deal with anymore. He wants to off himself.

MATT
Then why doesn't he just do it?

JESSE
Too scared?

MATT
Sure. "Thus conscience doth make cowards of us all." Does he ever talk about killing himself anywhere else in the play?

JESSE
(Shakes his head) Who would he talk about it to?

MATT
I don't know. Ophelia?

JESSE
He can't talk to Ophelia about important stuff. She's a girl.
(Offstage students laugh.)

MATT
Horatio? His best friend.

JESSE
No, Horatio's too religious. He'd freak. I don't think Hamlet has anybody he can talk to about shit like this. *(More laughter)*

MATT
Exactly. That's why he needs the audience! Share it with us, the way you're feeling. Try to get us to help you figure it out.

JESSE

"For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely..."

MATT

That means insults. "Contumely": insults.

JESSE

I know. I looked it up.

MATT

Oh; sorry. Good! (Beat) Sorry. Go on.

JESSE

"The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,
The insolence of office, and the spurns
That patient merit of th'unworthy takes,
When he himself might his quietus make
With a bare bodkin?"

(He has taken out a penknife and opened it.)

MATT

What are you doing?

JESSE

I think he wants to do it right here. He's thinking about doing
it right now. How easy it would be.

MATT

Maybe, yeah. That's a bold choice. But that looks like a real
bodkin. I mean knife. Is that a real knife?

JESSE

Pretty much.

MATT

You don't use real weapons onstage. (Turns to the audience)
That's an important thing to remember, class. You never use
anything that could really hurt somebody. It's called "illusion."

JESSE

Could I finish the speech?

MATT

Yes! By all means; you were sort of on a roll.

JESSE

"When he himself might his quietus make...(He flicks the blade of
the knife opened and closed.) With a bare bodkin."

MATT

Um, excuse me! What did I just say?? (JESSE is still playing with
the knife.) Give me that, please.

JESSE

It's my knife.

MATT

I don't think you should have that in school.

JESSE

Jeez, it's a penknife.

MATT

Hand it to me please. (*JESSE complies.*) You can get it from me after class. Sit down. Tiffany, let's do your Cleopatra. And please don't tell me you brought a real snake...

(*JESSE exits. JANE enters with a tablecloth and starts setting the table for dinner.*)

JANE

How was your day?

MATT

Oh, a little too exciting. (*He folds the knife and puts it in his pocket.*) It's been a while since I was a teenager. I'm still getting used to them.

JANE

You never will. (*Smiles*) Halley said you have them doing Shakespeare.

MATT

Yep.

JANE

Isn't that a little advanced? It's only October.

MATT

They're reading him in English class. I thought why not let them get their hands dirty. You can't really understand Bill until you say those words out loud.

JANE

"Bill?"

MATT

Mr. Shakespeare. We're on a first-name basis.

JANE

So you're having Halley work on Viola? (*Pronouncing it like the instrument*)

MATT

Viola. (*With accent on the first syllable*) From *Twelfth Night*. She's right for it: the good-hearted, quiet seeker of truth. I'm trying to get a sense of each of their personalities, so I can

assign characters they'll relate to. There's one kid who asked to do Hamlet.

JANE

Who?

MATT

His name's Jesse Wade. A junior.

(Pause)

JANE

I didn't know Jesse signed up for drama.

MATT

Theatre.

JANE

Good for him.

MATT

He seems like he's got some talent.

JANE

Jesse?

MATT

Yeah, yeah. Most of them, it's been tough just getting them to pronounce the words right and understand half of what they're saying. But he really did his homework and made some... connections.

JANE

Jesse's very bright. He gets A's and B's without even really applying himself. But it's been hard to keep him interested in anything.

MATT

He seemed interested in Hamlet. We were working on the big soliloquy today in class: "To be or not to be"? But it got a little... He pulled out an actual pocketknife.

JANE

Matt.

MATT

I mean, I didn't want to discourage him because that really is what the scene is about! But I took it away; I told him in theatre we never use real weapons.

JANE

I think you should assign him a different play. Maybe one of the comedies?

MATT

No no. He was really digging Hamlet.

JANE

Matt, there's something I need to tell you about Jesse.

MATT

What?

JANE

He actually did try to kill himself last year. It was right after Thanksgiving. As the counselor I was very involved.

MATT

Ohmygod. (*Pause. He freezes.*)

JANE

Matt? Matt, what's the matter?

MATT

(*Shakes himself out of it*) Nothing. I mean, suicide is a... That's a... (*He shakes his head.*) I've read about teens who... it's a huge problem, right?

JANE

(*Nods*) Probably not so much here as some places. But we've had our share. I had one a couple years ago that... succeeded. Don't know how we got through that. (*Beat*) That Jesse's a pretty troubled young man. His mother passed away a couple years ago: cancer. And his dad is... (*Beat*) I managed to get Jesse into the Cohen Center up in Chicago for a couple months; the doctors there said they don't think he'll try it again. (*Beat*) I have a regular meeting with him, twice a month. He never tells me much. Just don't let him do any plays about suicide.

MATT

Jesus. I'll have to figure out how to handle that.

(*HALLEY enters with a platter of food and places it on the table.*)

MATT

That looks good. My turn to do the dishes tonight.

JANE

You'll have to. I've got to woof this down and head back to the school for a meeting.

HALLEY

About the plant?

JANE

Mmm-hmm.

MATT

Doing some gardening?

HALLEY

(Laughs and shakes her head) The utility company for this whole region has been trying to get a license to build a nuclear power plant north of town.

JANE

(Nods) It's been a very drawn out process. There's a group of people who are violently opposed, mainly students and faculty from the community college in Byers.

HALLEY

And some of us from the high school.

JANE

Yes, Halley counts herself among the protesters.

MATT

And you don't?

JANE

A plant would bring in hundreds of jobs. I think it may be the only way to save this town.

MATT

Wow. Would it be safe though? The waste products—

JANE

Yeah yeah yeah. I've heard all the arguments. Come to the meeting with me if you want to find out more.

HALLEY

(As the lights start to shift.) What about the radiation, Jane? What about biology?

(Lights out on MATT and HALLEY as JANE, in her office, turns to JESSE in a chair.)

JANE

What about Advanced Chemistry?

JESSE

Maybe if we could blow something up.

JANE

Very funny. PhysEd?

JESSE

Still hate it. How long are we going to have to do this?

JANE

(Wryly) I didn't know I was such an obligation.

JESSE
I mean I'm better, right?

JANE
We just want to make sure you always have someone to talk to if anything's bothering you.

JESSE
Stuff bothers me, what else is new.

JANE
How's your dad?

JESSE
You'd have to ask him.

JANE
It's only been a month since school started. You already hate *all* your classes?

JESSE
Pretty much.

JANE
I know how smart you are, Jesse. If you'd just apply yourself and take an interest in something, maybe get involved in some extracurricular activities, you could probably get a scholarship to a good university. (*She looks at her list.*) What about math? You've always gotten A's.

JESSE
Just cause I'm good at it doesn't mean I like it.

JANE
Drama class?

JESSE
You mean theatre?

JANE
(*Smiles*) Theatre, right.

JESSE
Yes.

JANE
Yes what?

JESSE
I like it. (*Pause*) I like the new teacher.

JANE
Matt? I mean, Mr. Leland?